Revolution as (melo)drama: Marxism and the Domain of the Popular in Kerala, South India

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Abstract: In 1957, the south Indian state of Kerala became the first region in the world to elect a communist government through electoral democracy. At a time when there is a wave of right-wing populism across the world, Kerala is one of the few regions in Asia where institutional Marxism continues to play a significant role in “structuring the everyday lives” of the people. As Aditya Nigam suggests, in his reflections on Sudipta Kaviraj’s “Marxism in Translation”, the continuing presence of Marxism in the life of the people of Kerala should not be seen as simply a political phenomenon. “Institutional Marxism draws its sustenance from the deeper cultural resources” of the region. This was made possible because Marxism in Kerala has been constitutively part of the emergence of a modern Malayali identity – a linguistic and cultural identity that neither resists nor is subsumed under the larger Indian identity, but with a cosmopolitan horizon, partly provided by Marxism.

In this paper, through a reading of some of the early communist political melodramas in Malayalam, the language spoken in Kerala, I argue that the translation of Marxism into the registers of the “popular” has played a decisive role in Marxism occupying a constitutive role in the formation of a Malayali identity. The melodramatic address has played a key role in the “popularization” of Marxism in Kerala. In fact the melodramatic play You Made Me a Communist, produced by KPAC, a theatre group affiliated to the Communist Party of India, has often been credited with playing a major role in the popularization of Marxist idea(l)s in the region. Drawing on scholarly writings on melodrama in film studies and cultural studies I argue that Marxism itself may be read as a melodramatic experience for the people of Kerala when it entered the region in the second decade of the twentieth century. This attains significance in the light of scholarly writings on how Marx’s writings like The Communist Manifesto and Capital employ the melodramatic register.

Through its engagement with the domain of the popular in Kerala, Marxism has facilitated the “conditions of reception” of the world, which has enabled Marxism to maintain
cultural hegemony in the region. An analysis of the particular nature of Marxism’s encounter with the popular domain in Kerala opens up possibilities for understanding how Marxism was received in the global south.

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