

Religion, Community and Minor Subject Positions: Understanding Contemporary Populist Movements in Kerala

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Reinforcing the idea of “people” and presenting it as a morally good force against “the elites”, populism, is a set of political practices that primarily dwell on the opposition between the elites and the common people. Populism that put into question the institutional order by constructing an underdog as a historical agent is an emancipatory social force through which marginalised groups challenge dominant power structures (Laclau, 2005).

There has been a steady rise in populist politics across the world in the recent past and it has become detrimental to liberal democracies more than ever. The right-wing populism that has become so prominent in India in the recent past is largely drawn upon the claim of ownership of the Hindu majority over the nation and the subsidiary existence of Muslims and other minorities. This apparent right-wing populism which has achieved momentum in India is arguably quite different from the left-wing populism which claims to be more distributive in nature and the rhetoric of peasant populist sentiments.

The proposed study aims to critically engage with contemporary populist movements in Kerala namely, The Kiss of Love protest (2014), Amanava Sangamam (2015) and ‘People’s Hartal’ (2018) which are quite different from the national experience. Unlike the classical Marxist conceptualisation of populism as a movement driven by false consciousness, the driving force behind many populist movements took place in the Southern Indian state of Kerala in the recent past were certain events. These movements were neither held within the ambit of any political parties nor motivated by any ideological imperatives. While Kiss of Love was a non-violent protest against moral policing following the calls in a Facebook page, Amanava Sangamam was a counter response to the alleged exclusion of Muslim organizations in Manushya Sangamam (Humans Meet), a left collective of People Against Fascism. On the other hand no organization claimed responsibility of People’s Hartal, a mass strike which was called through certain WhatsApp groups to protest and seek justice for a minor girl who was

brutally raped and murdered in Kathua region of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir.

The paper will critically look at the dynamics in the return of popular political movements into Kerala social fabric quite different from the Marxist narratives of class struggle and mobility. Engaging with the dominant idea that populist movements limit democratic possibilities, the paper will look at the complexity in the relationship between populist movements and popular culture. The paper would further look at how communitarian spaces configure within the ambit of 'populist' particularly looking at the absent presence of Islam in the movements above mentioned. As populist movements denote a particular mode of articulation it is important to look at the social logics of these articulations. The paper would also try to look at how can we conceive the idea of general will as identity politics has become highly crucial in Indian context and how does general will manifest in these movements unlike the conception of general will by the social contract theorists as the condition of democracy.