

Cinema and the (Re) construction of the Left Popular in Kerala

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Looking at the re-efflorescence of what may be called red films—films that thematize and celebrate the spirit of communism— and the visible presence of Left-leaning film makers in the Malayalam film industry, in this paper I argue how popular cinema has emerged as a key site in the reconstruction of a Malayali national-popular. Despite the apparent distrust the Left in Kerala shows towards popular cinema, the domain of the popular has played a significant role in the construction of a national-popular centred on the linguistic identity in Kerala. While Marxism shares a historical affinity with popular forms such as romance, opera, melodrama, etc., the Left in Kerala shows a renewed interest in the field of culture as a result of the rise of Hindu nationalism in the country which conflates culture with religion. Apart from the “cultural interventions” of the right-wing, the Left also faces serious challenges from the part of various social movements centred on the question of caste, gender and religious identities. The rise of social movements in the 1990s “brought to the fore the questions of caste and gender that were submerged under the earlier socio-cultural consensus generated by the hegemonic Malayali national popular shaped by the communists” (Devika 2013). In such a context, I argue, the domain of popular registers questions related to gender, caste, etc. which the political Left has often failed to adequately theorize. I argue that the red films and the left-leaning filmmakers undertake the construction of a new “Left popular” in the state which contributes to the imagining of a new “people”. Given the distinct nature of the relationship between cinema and Left politics in the state, this paper explores the transactions between the popular domain and popular politics in the state in the contemporary times.