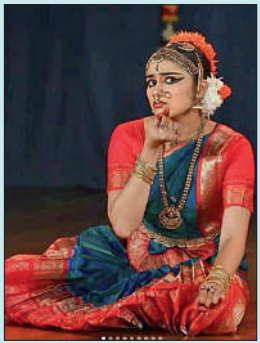


SNEAK PEEK

CLASSICAL DANCE

Bharatanatyam
by Sanjana
Krishnakumar |
April 7, 6.30pm |
In front of
Ernakulam
Gramajana
Samooaham Hall,
Ernakulathappan
Temple premises,
Ernakulam



TALK



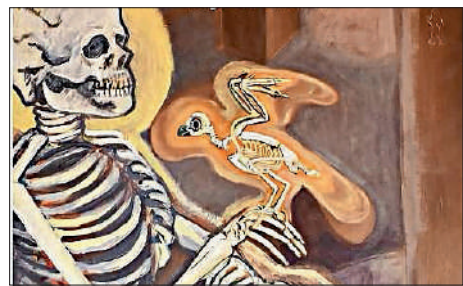
Community discussion: Let's talk cinema |
Topic of discussion: L2 Empuran-Freedom of
Expression | April 5, 5pm | Kanakakunnu Palace

CONCERT

Swathi fest
2025 |
Carnatic vocal
concert by KS
Vishnudev |
April 11, 6.30pm
| Kerala Fine
Arts Hall, Fine
Arts Avenue,
Ernakulam



ART



A trilogy of contemporary narratives | Curated by
Najeeb Marker | March 29-April 25 | Draavidia
Gallery, Calvathy, Fort Kochi

PERFORMANCE ART

Kathakali-Story-
Duryodhanavadham
| April 6, 7.30pm |
Velloothuruthy
Bhagavathy Temple,
Kottayam



BS.Anilkumar@timesofindia.com

In 1938, long before the term “freedom of expression” gained currency in this part of the world, “Dharmarajyam,” a collection of political essays by legendary writer Vaikom Mohammed Basheer, was banned by the Travancore govt. Basheer printed and sold copies of the book himself, going door to door. It was the first book to be banned in Malayalam. Later, in 1946, Ponkunnam Varkey was jailed for publishing two short stories, “Mantrikettu” and “Model.” The virulent criticism against the colonial powers and the princely state led to the banning of books and jail terms for authors in those days.

Kerala first witnessed serious debates on freedom of expression only in the 1980s when the street play “Kristuvinte Aram Thirumurivu” (The Sixth Sacred Wound of Christ) by CPI(ML) activist P M Antony attracted huge crit-

FREEDOM OR DEATH

Censorship and book bans have long shadowed Malayalam literature and cinema, but political vindictiveness has deepened the damage

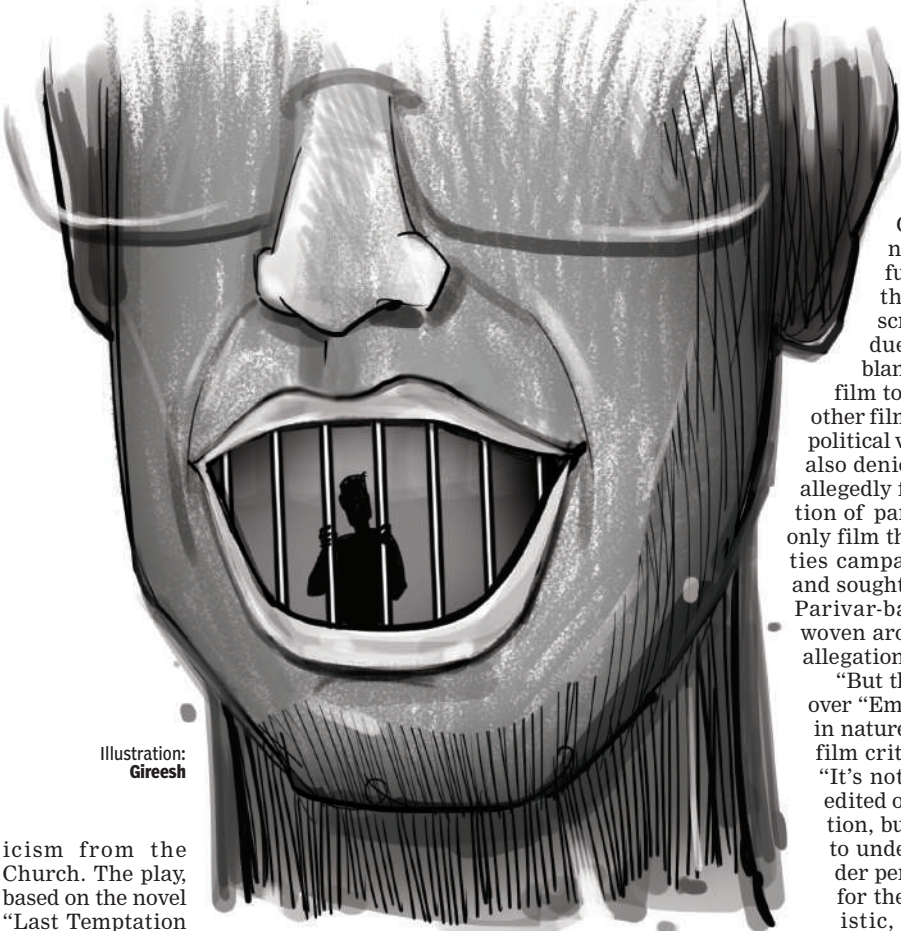


Illustration: Gireesh

icism from the Church. The play, based on the novel “Last Temptation of Christ” by Nikos Kazantzakis, presented Christ as an earthly man and Mary Magdalene as his lover. It was banned by the K Karunakaran govt, invoking provisions in the Dramatic Performance Act, another first in the state’s history. Much before that, the play “Nadugadhika” (Ritual of the Land), written and directed by K J Baby, was banned by the E K Nayanar govt for Baby’s perceived connections with the Naxal movement. The play, which later won critical acclaim, was viewed by the authorities as an attempt to turn tribal people against the establishment. Yet, the issue of freedom of expression was an idea that sparked debates in intellectual and academic circles. It was not an issue for the common man and the mass media.

“Intolerance towards criticism is not something exclusive to one govt, party, or religion. It’s the hallmark

of every establishment and power. They always try to silence criticism. Censorship is a legally devised tool for it,” said writer and critic P K Rajasekharan.

It was the content of the work and the conviction of the writers, and its plausible lingering effect on society, that agonized authorities and prompted them to ban their works in the past. Rajasekharan, however, said he did not think the current controversy over the film “Empuran” has anything to do with the term “freedom of expression” in its strict sense. “It’s nothing but a commercial thriller, a revenge drama solely driven by profit motive. To frame this debate around such films trivializes the very concept,” he said.

Compared to books, plays, and cartoons, Malayalam films have never had an open issue with the right to freedom of expression, despite some bold artistic attempts. Films by I V Sasi, Padmarajan, K G George, and Bhara- than could prick the pride, break the conventional sensibilities, and lambast the political system without raking up any serious protest. The prominence of multiple communities in Kerala society always prompted the mainstream industry to produce films that did not hurt the religious sentiments of any community. Moreover, films that seriously discussed political ideologies and society were often branded as arthouse movies that seldom gained currency among the masses. If at all there were issues, they were minor ones, like the goldsmith community protesting the title of a Sathyan Anthikad movie. Following the protests, Anthikad changed the title from “Ponmutta Idunna Thattann” (The Goldsmith Who Lays Golden Eggs) to “Ponmutta Idunna Tharavu” (The Duck That Lays Golden Eggs). This was in the late 1980s.

However, political films that targeted any political party or political leader have faced stiff, but veiled opposition in the recent past. The film “Left Right Left,” written by Murali Gopy, who wrote the script for “Empuran,” was not allowed to screen in cinemas in Kannur. Though CPM consistently denied its role, the party functionaries made sure that the film didn’t get screens in its strongholds due to the alleged resemblance of a character in the film to Pinarayi Vijayan. Another film, “Eeda,” based on the political violence in Kannur, was also denied theatres in Kannur, allegedly following the intervention of party functionaries. The only film that major political parties campaigned against openly and sought to ban was the Sangh Parivar-backed “Kerala Story,” woven around the “Love Jihad” allegations in Kerala.

“But the current controversy over “Empuran” is much graver in nature as it’s ominous,” said film critic C S Venkiteswaran. “It’s not the content that was edited out that demands attention, but the way the film had to undergo self-censoring under perceived threats. It calls for the attention of a pluralistic, civilized society,” he said.

He expressed dismay over the predicament that an artistically dud film has to be defended, as it was forced to self-edit the film cleared by the censor board. “It’s a pity that lofty ideals like freedom of expression are discussed in connection with a film that has no artistic values to boast about. But the issue cannot be discounted on that account alone,” he said.

Academic and social critic Damodar Prasad said the self-censorship was thrust upon “Empuran,” and this new strategy of coercion without a trace posed an unprecedented threat to freedom of expression. “The duplicity involved in this compelled self-censorship now gives Sangh Parivar the space to claim innocence. This could become a precedent in the future, and it’s dangerous for freedom, democracy and art,” he said.

‘Left has failed to address caste and gender issues’



Ramavarmen T | TNN

Sarah Joseph, celebrated Malayalam writer and feminist icon, has won the Sahitya Akademi, Kerala Sahitya Akademi, and Vayalar awards for her groundbreaking works that inspired generations of women and activists. She discusses her evolution as a feminist, the compromises of electoral politics and how the Left has neglected gender and caste issues in Kerala, among other things: Excerpts:

You have completed 60 years of writing. Looking back, how do you feel?

■ I’m happy that I did not remain stagnant where I started. I could definitely move forward. I think that it is evident in my writing. As a writer, I started by focusing on common issues faced by women. Like Madhavikutty had said once, a woman’s writing is like digging a well into her inner world. Her experiential world is limited but intense—family, marriage, children, frustrations in married life, extramarital relations, love affairs. My initial writings, like the first two short story collections “Kadinte Sangeetham,” “Manasile Thee Maathram” also dealt with these issues. They try to capture the inner conflicts, agonies and frustrations of women. We don’t see any signs of resistance in those works, they are filled with sorrows and lamentations.

Married at 14, you had to break your education—but you resumed studies, completed teacher training, became a schoolteacher, earned your bachelor’s and master’s degrees, and ultimately rose to the role of college lecturer. Your journey reflects a determined effort to liberate your life, which otherwise would have been confined to churches, prayers, and the narrow spheres of family life. Was it the influence of Jesus Christ and religious upbringing that sustained your struggle, or were there other propulsive forces?

■ It wasn’t life experience, but reading that led me into the world of writing. I began reading at a very young age and continued even after marriage, often spending time at the library of the school where I worked. I joined the school in 1968 and later moved to the Government college in Pattambi in 1978. During those 10 years, I juggled multiple roles—school duties, family responsibilities, academic pursuits, and most importantly, my writing. Back then, books and radio were the only resources available to us, helping us expand our vision and hone our skills. But more than anything, it was the value system of that era that profoundly shaped my perspective.

Of course, I was brought up in an intensely religious-conservative family ambience. However, it was my father and Father Joseph

Vadakkon who inspired me to question the ‘anti-Jesus’ traits dominating the Church. This spirit of questioning also contributed to writing. The life and teachings of Jesus Christ, his compassion, readiness to help those in need, standing for justice, the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, with its unique, entrancing language inspired my writing immensely. Christianity has deeply etched a spirit of love in me. I cannot sustain a quarrel with anyone for long even now.

Was it your life experience that initiated you into feminism?

■ No, it wasn’t my personal experience that initially led me to feminism. In those days, most women couldn’t even identify the specific injustices they faced or understand how they were being exploited—we were conditioned to accept our deprivations as fate. Even after I started teaching in college, I couldn’t comprehend the injustice inflicted upon me. When we formed Manushi, the pro-CPI(ML)

Noted writer Sarah Joseph reflects on 60 years of writing from women’s sorrows to systemic resistance

women’s movement in Kerala, one of our first questions was whether women faced any exclusive forms of injustice. It was the rise in dowry deaths during the 1980s that jolted us into awareness. The vibrant theatre scene at Pattambi college and the activism of groups like the Viplava Vidyarthi Sanghatana further strengthened a spirit of resistance. Many campuses in Kerala at the time were alive with radical energy. These spaces exposed students to a world outside textbooks and instilled a deep sense of social commitment in them. It was through these insights that we began to zero in on and understand the issues we faced as women.

Looking back, how do you summarise your association with the Left? You had links with both the extreme Left as well as the established Left?

■ My mindset is Leftist, meaning I strive for an equal and just world—not the violent concepts of annihilating class enemies. This perspective isn’t about a political party craving power. We can see globally how

some practical forms of this exquisite ideology have led to heinous violence and dehumanization. The Left, in my perspective, encompasses figures like Jesus, Gandhi, Ambedkar, and others who struggled for equality and justice.

Has the association with the established Left and craving for their validation led to the decimation of an independent, organic intellectual space in Kerala?

■ Certainly. Those who crave power inevitably lose autonomy, yet unfortunately, they constitute the majority and possess the power to validate and reward others. Those who fall out of favour become marginalized and invisibilized. Remaining independent is taxing and painful, and you know the price they had to pay throughout history.

Electoral politics has led to the Left’s degeneration, forcing compromises with various factions, including religious interest groups. Even veteran Marxist leader EMS Namboodiripad had to say, “We will align with any devilish forces” to defeat those who engineered the unjust dismissal of the first communist ministry he led. However, this led to alliances with groups possessing enormous bargaining power; and they dictate the terms now. Even the Aam Aadmi Party, which generated much hope, has degenerated into a party centred around an individual. Both at the national level and in Kerala, critical intellectual voices are dwindling. Liberalization, alongside the rise of corporatization and crony capitalism, has contributed to this decline. The fact that a member of the Ezhava community had to resign from Kazhakam duty at the Koodalmanikyam temple, despite so many years of interventions from social reform movements and Left organizations, sadly reflects our current pathetic state.

No doubt, some sections of women have started asserting their autonomy, especially regarding the institutions of marriage and family. There is also a strong trend of independent thinking and agitation among Dalits. However, the Left has failed to address caste and gender issues in Kerala. They are also neglecting the concerns of workers in the unorganized sector, who constitute the real working class in Kerala. This neglect is evident in their attitude toward the agitations of plantation workers (Pombilai Orumai), school cooks, shop employees, and now the ASHA workers. It is strongly reprehensible that the agitation of poor ASHA workers raising basic demands has been ignored for over 50 days, simply because those leading the protest are not affiliated with the ruling dispensation. What needs to be changed is the power structure itself, not the victims of power.

Dr Bijulal MV & Hariram S S

Palakkad has emerged as a compelling model for harmonious coexistence between local communities and interstate migrant workers. While Kerala has long enjoyed a reputation as India’s most migrant-friendly state, fieldwork reveals a more nuanced reality. Despite its progressive policies, gaps remain in ensuring equitable treatment and overall well-being for migrant workers.

Internal migration in India is often unpredictable, highlighting the need for a consistent, inclusive framework aligned with global standards such as the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), ratified by 164 countries. Domestically, the Interstate Migrant Workers Act of 1979 was designed to safeguard migrant rights, but its implementation has been inconsistent. An ANRF-funded study by Mahatma Gandhi University, covering all 14 districts of Kerala, underscores the urgent need for comprehensive administrative, social, and civic interventions—especially concerning mental health, social integration, and working conditions.

Kerala’s efforts during the pandemic were widely praised for their inclusive nature, and its positive reputation remains largely deserved. However, the study highlights ongoing deficiencies in key areas

such as hygiene, access to healthcare, inclusiveness, and the quality of living conditions. Moreover, a lingering social disconnect between local residents and migrant workers suggests that more sustained, community-level efforts are needed to build a genuinely inclusive society.

Amid these challenges, Palakkad stands out as a stronghold of inclusive practice. Since 2023, fieldwork has documented strong, respectful interactions between migrants and local residents—fuelled by collaborative efforts among bureaucrats, employers, educators, women’s groups, and civil society organizations.

Palakkad’s experience offers valuable insights for inclusive development and social innovation. A key takeaway from the ANRF-MG University study is the importance of shared responsibility, empathy, and sustainability. Successful integration hinges on dismantling stereotypes that associate the advent of migrancy to social evils or hazards—prejudices that not only hinder inclusion but also contradict Kerala’s own legacy as a state shaped by both internal and international migration.

Historically, the migration of workers from northern Indian states supported industrial growth in Palakkad’s Kanjikode region. Over time, these economic ties evolved into deeper social and cultural relationships. One of the most heartening

Inclusive by design: The Palakkad Promise



MODEL SHELTER: Community-run Apna Ghar offers migrant workers free housing with amenities

People Power—
Not Just Policy—
Upholds Migrant
Dignity and
Acceptance In
The District



developments is the bond between local and migrant women. Shared culinary interests became a cultural bridge: Local women learned to prepare North Indian dishes, while migrant women adapted to Kerala’s food habits and even embraced local attire such as nighties. These cultural exchanges led to craft training sessions and stronger inter-community bonds.

Language also played a pivotal role in promoting inclusion. Through state-run literacy mission programmes, many migrant workers earned certifications in Malayalam, enhancing workplace communication and easing their integration into local life. Schools in Palakkad have also become centres of collaboration. Employers and educators have jointly supported meal programmes for the children of mi-

grant workers—a rare and commendable initiative across Kerala. A standout example of community-led care is the Apna Ghar hostel, home to about 400 migrant workers. Fully funded and managed by local employers, the hostel provides clean, well-maintained accommodations with ample personal space, proper sanitation, a communal kitchen, a gym, and a leisure area—all free of cost. While not universally replicable, Apna Ghar demonstrates how locally tailored support systems can significantly enhance workers’ quality of life.

Notably, many migrant youth in Palakkad have thrived academically, clearing higher secondary and competitive exams. Some have even returned as instructors in literacy programs, further strengthening the district’s social fabric. This is a testament to the long-term value of investing in migrant education and empowerment. Kerala must draw from its Gulf migration legacy where millions of its citizens benefited from opportunities abroad, and apply similar strategic thinking and empathy to internal migrants. This means prioritizing the dignity, rights, and social security of all workers, as enshrined under Article 21 of the Constitution.

(Dr Bijulal is chairperson, Centre for Migration Policy and Inclusive Governance, MG University & Hariram is field worker, ANRF Project, MG University)

YOU ARE OUR SOUNDING BOARD

Email your feedback to toi.mmedium@gmail.com

Read all Malayalam Medium stories online at Roots & Wings:
<http://blogs.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/roots-wings/roots-wings-malayalam/>