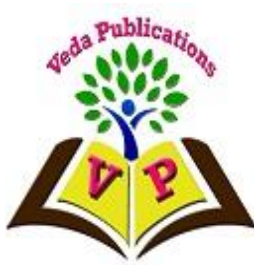


## Philosophy in Contemporary Kerala Public Sphere

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### Abstract



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Ravichandran and Ilayidom, both make valid points which are crucial to contemporary Kerala society. Kerala, despite its pretensions to modernity has arguably had only a single great event of modernity, and that was the enlightenment which was ushered in by Narayana Guru, and also Ayyankali, Vakkom Moulavi, Sahodaran Ayyappan and others in the turn of the century. Have the enlightenment gains been frittered away? As a result of such a lack of idealism in contemporary times, the only possibility of doing philosophy, for many intellectuals, is tied to the idealist enlightenment.

**Keywords:** Modernity, Philosophy, Pedagogy.

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Sunil P Ilayidom has emerged as one of the most humane, scholarly and unpretentious figures in the Kerala public sphere articulating the Marxist perspective. Similarly, C Ravichandran as a hardcore rationalist espouses a new fangled version of scientism that is inspired by global new age super stars such as Richard Dawkins. While Ilayidom belongs to a tradition in decline, having fallen off the heady realms achieved during intellectual heydays of EMS and P.Govina Pillai, in contrast, Ravichandran's star is on the ascent, as a rationalist whose theories find many takers in the globalized internet era, unlike the piddling rationalist movement during Soviet –era, which never threatened the existential basis of the mainstream Marxist parties, the CPI and the CPM. Though C.Ravichandran is a thorn in the flesh of many a religious fundamentalist, it is the mainstream Marxist parties that his tirades are ultimately directed against. Ravichandran and Ilayidom, both happen to be University teachers of literature. Ravichandran speaks from a formal methodological correctness and Ilayidom from the standpoint of Marxian humanism. Both make valid points which are crucial to contemporary Kerala society. Thinkers like Maithreyan have emerged as cult figures of original thinking, lacking the mass popular base commanded by the above two super articulate ideologues.

The French philosopher and psychoanalyst Lacan, who has found few takers in Kerala, is often compared to the cashew fruit, a botanical aberration since the seed develops outside the fruit, unlike in Freudian system, where the seed is inside. This interiority is crucial to intellectual sphere in Kerala, maybe because there were writers like MN Vijayan who could fluently articulate Freudian concepts in terms of local Malayalam literature, something that is still hard to come by in terms of Lacanian scholarship. MN Vijayan, who owed a debt to Kesari Balakrishna Pillai, has in his turn inspired scholars and public intellectuals like Ilayidom. But for Ilayidom (who has done his Ph.D on the concept of the political unconscious proposed by the American Marxist Fredric Jameson) and the younger generation of Malayali intellectuals including the Oxford trained Udaya Kumar, Professor at the Centre for English Studies in JNU, interiority is the key. This has been well articulated in Udaya Kumar's work 'Writing the First Person', about first person narratives from Kerala.

These are affective as well as intentional fallacies. The collective grievances of subaltern communities against the communist parties and gravitation of Muslim youth to the same under the reconfigured political equations at the national level also mark the wider

landscape of thought and democratic shifts happening at present. On the one hand, there are the proponents of a Marxian affect à la Sunil P Ilayidom who seems to go by Vayalar Ramavarma's truism 'I shall not love any ideology that doesn't love the bleeding heart'. Then there are the formalists, such as VC Sreejan, whose dissents are mostly methodological.

Here, Slavoj Zizek as a Slovenian Eurocentric provocateur complicates things, because for Zizek, the contradictions which we call 'your fights' comprise the faultlines constituting the Real. The Real as postulated by Zizek doesn't have the consistency that Zizek espouses for it, according to Catherine Belsey. Zizek goes beyond the vulgar formalism of liberals such as IA Richards and also certain Marxists and structuralists. He then madly travels through the realms of affect via Freud, Lacan and crucially, Hegel; not unlike Sunny from the movie 'Manichitrathazhu'. He then arrives at the realm of heightened formalism. Zizek has found his legion of fans in Kerala too.

So this enlightened formalism (similar to 'enlightened false consciousness') for Zizek is not a repudiation of humanism, but the call for an even more enlightened humanism. This enlightened humanism is again derived from enlightened formalism. It is Eurocentrism with a consciousness. Thus to append a certain oriental organic consciousness to the Eurocentric formal discourses is solution for the current impasse between anti humanist Asiatic mode and European neoliberalism. Zizek's movement is from the non human formalism to human affect and super human social parallax. A recent philosophy workshop organized by Zizek at the University of Ljubljana had a participant from Kerala too.

Humanism, the most prominent philosophical current in contemporary Kerala, was also a western European ideology that emerged during the renaissance. But the renaissance also saw the emergence of the bourgeois, according to some historians. Thus there is an entanglement between (not unlike the quantum entanglement that Zizek makes so much out of) Asiatic oriental consciousness and the European humanism as well as between Eastern affect and western intellect (there is a long standing grudge that East often provides the data and the West, theory) and again a parallax emerging between these two symbioses. Kerala too in its public realm, between C .Ravichandran and Sunil P Ilayidom seem to be caught in this entanglement. Dileep Raj, a philosopher who teaches at the Government Brennen College in Thalassery, and studied the works of Sree Narayana Guru, forms the sort of consensus figure.

### **Narayana Guru and the Possibility of Doing Philosophy in Kerala**

Kerala, despite its pretensions to modernity has arguably had only a single great event of modernity, and that was the enlightenment which was ushered in by Narayana Guru, and also Ayyankali, Vakkom Moulavi, Sahodaran Ayyappan and others in the turn of the century. There has been resurgence in the study of Guru in recent times, with thinkers like Nisar Ahmed and Dileep Raj leading the fray. The absence of philosophy in classroom teaching makes a travesty of education in the state.

The general political, social and cultural climate in the state at present is not conducive to doing philosophy, with an influx of NRI money and with floods and other devastations, Malayali en masse have taken to a no-nonsensical, realist perspective on life that would have made Donald Trump proud, it seems. As a result of such a lack of idealism in contemporary times, the only possibility of doing philosophy, for many intellectuals, is tied to the idealist enlightenment and its exemplar is none other than Narayana Guru with his catechism of theoretical praxis, which affirms the Advaitic idealism as well as a down-to-earth practice of the same, almost always tinged with a certain self effacing kind of humour.

With the demise of Gandhian thought, despite efforts to revive the same, Narayana Guru has emerged as the locus of doing philosophy in contemporary Kerala. Particularly useful is the almost seamless blend of idealism, realism and colonial historical context that his oeuvre provides. Continuity has been set, linking Guru to the advaitic doctrine of Sankaracharya. Kumaran Asan, Nithya Chaitanya yethi and Nataraja Guru and also their disciples such as Gary Davis that provide a fantastic ecosystem of autochthonous philosophy. How much of it is constructed or not is beside the point, since thought by definition is almost always a human construct rather than revelatory spiritual edifice.

### **Subaltern Resurgence in Kerala**

With the advent of the International Theatre Festival of Kerala (ITFoK) in Thrissur, theatre and performance studies have evolved into modes of thought. Life as it is lived in its various contexts such as the legal, political, social and moral contexts occur theatrically. In Kerala theatre as well as philosophy, there is a theatricalisation of contexts. There is a fictionalisation of contexts as in Godot where existentialism is framed. Thus original life is etiolated, leached and presented sans its vitality in the theatrical arena, something which

happens in the performance arenas of the Keralan elite, as in *Kathakali* (Schechner) and also in Malayalam cinema before the new-gen wave. But in the indigenous life and their subaltern local performativities shorn of classical trappings, this acquires a vital sheen that preserves the energies of real life. Therefore the stage play, and philosophy to be performed is not a hollow, parasitic void, but a signifying presence.

Play acting is an essential structural function for the indigenous communities like the Paniya and the Adiya also. A logical interrogation of theatre happens in these performances which go back to their primordial green lore, with water as the arche. Certain incantations which do not serve signifying function also occur, but these are the paradigms. In times of ecological catastrophe and climate change, they acquire significance.

Question of context is taken for granted, just as equality is taken for granted in organic societies in places like Wayanad. It is precipitated in the playing arena, like Football Turfs. Communication is the crucial thing. It happens even when it fails. The basic structure of communication we call meaning. It is an epiphany, a revelation in the sense given by Walter Benjamin, of messianic time. Communication itself occurs as a truth and as a concept. The very religious atmosphere in Kerala has boosted theological thought.

Spoken utterance is the main material. But its cadences give it the sheen of song. Vedic chanting also follows this route. The speech act theory of JL Austin and the subsequent rebuttal by Derrida and the ensuing debate will be in this context, pertinent. This presentation will be accompanied by a masked solo, where the indigenous *adiya* tales from Kerala, will be narrated on stage to the accompaniment of fishing songs. Labour and work such as fishing have their own rhythms, which bleed into the popular work songs and later into the proletarian theatre of KPAC etc.

In this respect, what is indigenous acquires a certain cachet especially with the influx of migrant labourers from other states. They bring different varieties of subaltern thought, like Ravidasi sects and Bhakti cults. Kerala is proving to be cosmopolitan in this respect. The emergence of Real politics rather than its symbolic shadows is valorized. This comprises the rise of queer politics and movements for sexual emancipation, such as 'Kiss of Love.' Not forgetting the majesty of these movements, the lure of such realist political practise is the

easy availability of empirical coordinates that they so easily afford, which is not always possible in the case of struggles built around identity and suffering.

The constitutive lapse on the part of the organisers of such agitprop movements is their lack of inclusivity. Totality is often misread as totalitarian and hence becomes anathema in politically correct times. The holistic vision that idealist politics imbues is discarded in favour of the almost banal search for the Real. The perpetuation of the Real can only be made in the realm of the symbolic as the Harlem Renaissance would point.

The affective coordinates of such movements are difficult to map, yet they exist at some level. The difficulty of proving the existence of a subaltern consciousness, subaltern theology also falls squarely on the shoulders of the nascent discipline of Kerala School of modern philosophy. The praxis oriented theologies and methods that are being crafted from well-intentioned motives end in an almost absolute void that again requires a theoretical blend for its revival. The eternal recurrence of subalternity is what must have prompted a recent outburst from CPM leader Kodyeri Balakrishnan, on the lamentable state of Brahmin Agharaas in the state.

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