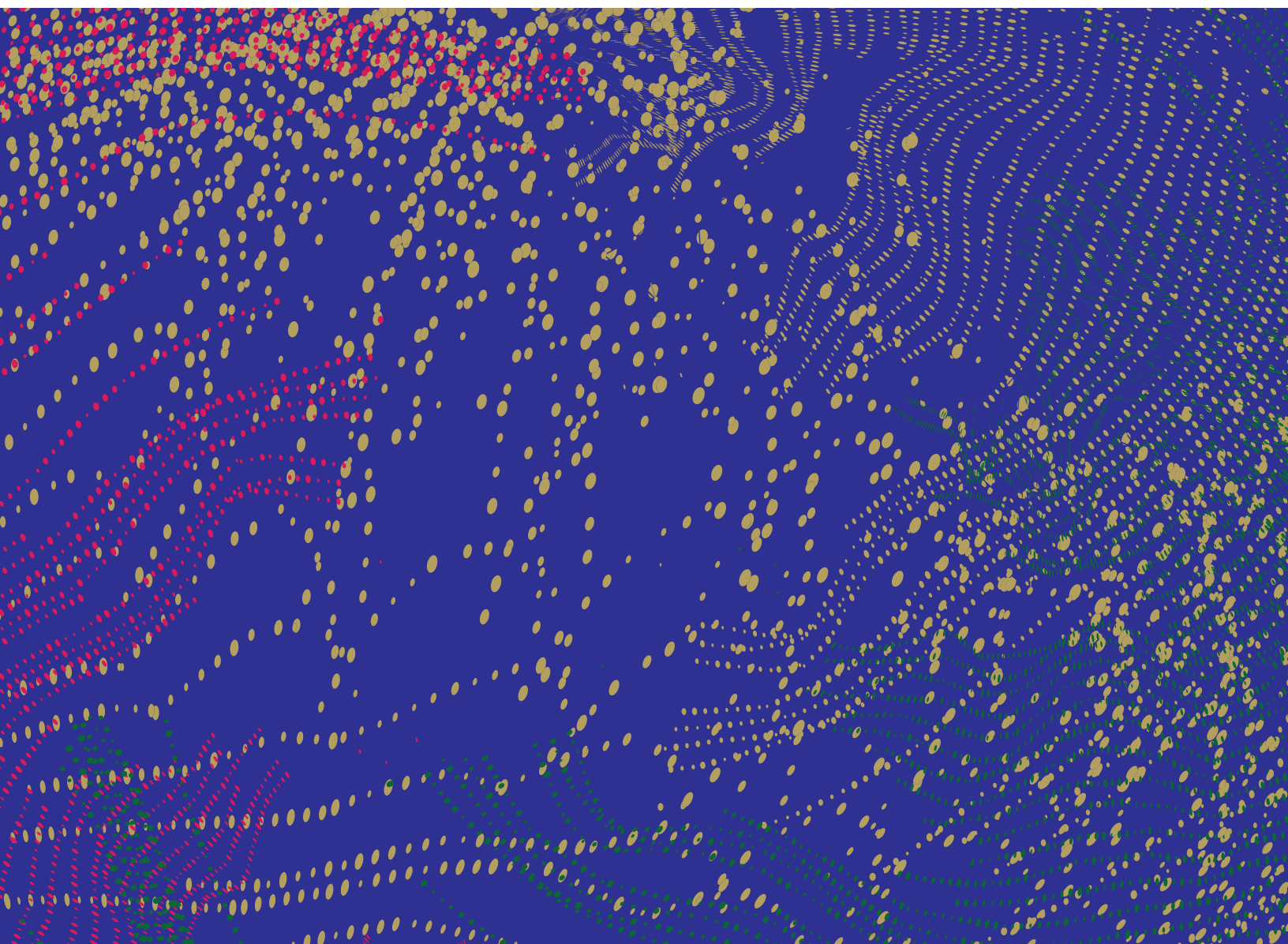


The World Humanities Report

Beyond Aesthetic Education: The Malayali Engagement with the Humanities

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Beyond Aesthetic Education: The Malayali Engagement with the Humanities

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In its academic figurations, the Indian state of Kerala has been associated more with the social sciences than with the humanities. Already an object of interest for anthropology (mainly because of the prevalence of matriliney among many Malayali communities¹) and political science (because of the state's unique experiments with communism), Kerala entered international social science discourses in the 1970s through the discipline of development studies. As the site of remarkable social development despite poor economic growth, the “Kerala Model” became an important part of global developmental discourses.² Indeed, the very idea of Kerala as a haven of social development was crucial in shaping a subnational Malayali identity in the late twentieth century. In contrast, humanities research in Kerala in the corresponding period was a far more localized and regional concern.³ However, a focus on academia, especially in mid- to late twentieth-century Kerala, prevents us from seeing how the Malayalam literary-cultural public acted as an important space for the production and circulation of the humanities. When we shift our focus to the latter, the humanities discourse of twentieth-century Kerala seems remarkably cosmopolitan. Indeed, the history of twentieth-century Kerala indicates that the ground for social

¹ The term “Malayali” refers to the speakers of the Malayalam language. The state of Kerala was formed in 1956, joining together the three Malayalam-speaking areas in the southwestern corner of the Indian peninsula—the native states of Travancore and Cochin and the district of Malabar, which was part of the erstwhile Madras State of British India.

² Robin Jeffrey, *Politics, Women and Well-Being: How Kerala Became “a Model”* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

³ This was despite the fact that early discussions about institutionalized humanities research in Kerala had held the unmistakable possibility of a cosmopolitan orientation. The University Committee of Travancore (1923–24) had recommended “a scheme of Oriental Studies, which was to accommodate the study of Sanskrit, the Dravidian Languages, and Arabic” (Government of Travancore, *Report of the University Committee, Travancore, 1923–1924* [The Superintendent, Government Press, 1925], 275). Later, in the 1940s, the idea of a “strong Faculty of Oriental Learning” was strengthened to include Sanskrit, Malayalam, and Tamil in the beginning and Hebrew, Syriac, and Arabic later, “with provision for facilities for the study of the civilisation and history of Kerala” (T. K. Pillai, *Travancore State Manual* [Trivandrum: Government of Travancore, 1940; repr., Thiruvananthapuram: Govt. of Kerala, Kerala Gazetteers Dept., 1996], 2:751–52).

development was in part prepared by a cultural and intellectual upsurge that included the growth of humanities knowledge and practices (albeit with certain important limitations, discussed below).

The Malayalam literary-cultural public expanded in the late nineteenth century alongside the modernization of the princely states of Kochi and Travancore and the rise of modern-educated “genteel” folk in Malabar (the Malayalam-speaking district of Madras Presidency). Aesthetic education, or the creation of a community of modern national subjects united through aesthetic culturing (the version deployed in Travancore, especially), was one of the many tools with which the traditional ruling groups sought to reestablish their legitimacy. The need to transform existing literary resources, produce modern literature, and craft pedagogic tools in order to produce citizens who possessed a certain cultural literacy was keenly felt by the authorities who presided over the nascent literary-cultural public at this time. Not surprisingly, most of them were men from the elite social classes already endowed with a formidable multilingual education and closely involved in government, especially in the field of education.⁴ These early intellectual patriarchs laid the foundations for a Malayalam language that diverse social groups could gain access to and that was identified with a specific cultural entity, namely, the Malayali.⁵ In the course of the twentieth century, the Malayalam literary-cultural public came to accommodate a range of political positions, which greatly expanded with the contributions of “political rebels” and “local cosmopolitans,” although they did not—or perhaps could not—really threaten the fundamental patriarchal elite caste control of the domain.⁶

The emergence of an anticaste social awakening, the development of a politics centered around social justice and anticolonialism, the rise of linguistic subnationalism centering around the formation of Kerala state, and the tremendous expansion of literacy and public education all contributed to the massive expansion of the Malayalam literary-cultural public.⁷ No doubt this was still

⁴ T. T. Prabhakaran, ed. and comp., *C. P. Achyutha Menonte niroopanangal* [C. P. Achyutha Menon's essays in literary criticism] (Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala State Institute of Languages, 1994).

⁵ G. Arunima, “Imagining Communities—Differently: Print, Language, and the ‘Public Sphere’ in Colonial Kerala,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 43, no. 1 (2006): 75.

⁶ On “political rebels,” see Udaya Kumar “The Public, the State and New Domains of Writing: On Ramakrishna Pillai’s Conception of Literary and Political Expression,” *Tapasam* 2, nos. 3–4 (2007): 413–41. On “local cosmopolitans,” see Dilip Menon, “A Local Cosmopolitan: Kesari Balakrishna Pillai and the Invention of Europe for a Modern Kerala,” *Tapasam* 2, nos. 3–4 (2007): 383–412.

⁷ P. R. Gopinathan Nair, “Education and Socio-economic Change in Kerala, 1793–1947,” *Social Scientist* 4, no. 8 (1976): 28–43; K. K. George and Parvathy Sunaina, “Dynamics of Change in Kerala’s Educational System: The Socio-economic and Political Dimensions” (Working Paper No. 12, Centre for Socio-economic and Environmental Studies, Kochi, 2005).

a hierarchical space, but it remained open nonetheless to newer articulations of social justice, freedom, and equality, and market forces held limited sway.⁸ In any case, academic institutions were few, so the shaping of literary tastes and reflections on the human condition by the humanities mostly happened in such alternative spaces as were created by intellectuals such as writer activist M. Govindan (1919–1989), who sought to shape a critical and oppositional civil society through the arts and humanities, and later by members of the post-Naxalite generation of the Malayali New Left and literary public intellectuals.⁹ During the late 1980s and after, the “literary public intellectual” became a notable presence in Kerala, including such figures as Paul Zacharia, Sarah Joseph, and several others.

The sociology of the Malayali literary-cultural public is yet to be explored fully, but it would not be off the mark to say that despite all the internal debates and challenges, it continued to be shaped by patriarchal figures endowed with many forms of cultural capital in terms of caste, gender, and higher education. Drawing on the work of Susan Winnet, I have argued elsewhere that the basic unit of this sphere could be called the homoaesthetic circle, “informal but hierarchical intellectual-cultural networks of literary communication in which (almost exclusively) male critics, authors, readers, publishers and others participate ... [and that] involve a certain form of male bonding linked to a masculinist mode of critical pleasure, which was also relentlessly heteronormative.”¹⁰ While Dalits, Muslims, and women did make their presence felt in the mid-twentieth-century Malayalam literary-cultural public, they often had to be content with being either muffled within elite-controlled homoaesthetic circles or silenced through elite patriarchal literary criticism. Besides literature, history was the other discipline often identified with the humanities that was of vital importance in shaping the new literary-cultural public. Historical writing in the early

⁸ Ajay S. Sekhar, “Neo Buddhism in Kerala: The Legacy of C. Krishnan,” *Ajay Sekhar’s Weblog* (blog), April 17, 2011, <https://ajaysekher.net/2011/04/17/neo-buddhism-kerala-legacy-mithavadi-krishnan/>; Sekhar, “Shaping a Modern Kerala: Sahodaran’s Poetry of Fraternity, Liberty, and Equality,” October 24, 2018, <https://www.sahapedia.org/shaping-modern-kerala-sahodaran%E2%80%99s-poetry-of-fraternity-liberty-and-equality>; Selwyn Jussy, “A Constitutive and Distributive Economy of Discourse: Left Movement in Kerala and the Commencement of a Literary Moment,” *Social Scientist* 33, nos. 11/12 (2005): 29–42; J. Devika, comp. and trans., *Her-Self: Early Writings on Gender of Malayalee Women* (Kolkata: Stree-Samya, 2005).

⁹ Naxalism refers to the militant Maoist leftism that rose up in India in the late 1960s. In Kerala, its heyday was in the 1970s, after which many adherents withdrew to reshape their politics, especially toward a new civil society that empowered socially marginalized groups.

¹⁰ J. Devika, *Womanwriting=Manreading?* (New Delhi: Penguin-Zubaan, 2013), 9–10. See Susan Winnet, “Coming Unstrung: Women, Men, Narrative, and the Principle of Pleasure,” *PMLA* 105, no. 3 (1990): 505–18.

decades of the twentieth century aided the formation of internally homogeneous, modern communities from preexisting social groups by organizing their memory, which often worked to refurbish existing axes of caste power.¹¹ On

A focus on academia prevents us from seeing how the Malayalam literary-cultural public acted as an important space for the production and circulation of the humanities.

the one hand, Elamkulam Kunhan Pillai's historical explorations in the 1950s opened the doors to social and cultural history writing, and mainstream historical research was decisively led away from the genealogies of local monarchies.¹² Never-

theless, in academic centers in Kerala, historical research continued to be less than exciting until the later decades of the twentieth century. On the other hand, the public debate on Kerala's history and its subnational identity was very vibrant. P. K. Balakrishnan's responses to Elamkulam and E. M. S. Namboodiripad's historical writings in the 1950s and after, as well as the work of others such as V. V. K. Valath and T. H. P. Chentharassery, who wrote pioneering works on toponymy and Dalit history and community formation in Kerala, respectively, appeared in journals outside academia.¹³ In general, the little rigorous historical research that was done in Kerala's universities until the late twentieth century was the preserve of elite and privileged, upper-caste men. And despite improved standards of rigor, it failed—inadvertently or otherwise—to move away from entrenched community and caste hierarchies.

As for academia in Kerala, the term “humanities” is a relatively recent entrant. Until about thirty years ago, languages and literature, history, and the social sciences were collectively designated as “arts” subjects and distinguished from science (mathematics was identified as part of science) and commerce. The disaggregation of the arts began in the late 1980s with the formation of the new

¹¹ On the formation of these communities, see Arunima, “Imagining Communities.” On caste power, see K. N. Sunandan, “From Acharam to Knowledge: Claims of Caste Dominance in Twentieth-Century Malabar,” *History and Sociology of South Asia* 9, no. 2 (2015): 174–92.

¹² Elamkulam Kunhan Pillai was not a historian by training. According to him, it was the need to teach the history of Kerala based on empirical records as part of the MA Malayalam (Hons.) course at the new University of Kerala in the 1930s that led him to research ancient and medieval Malayali society. See Elamkulam P. N. Kunhan Pillai, “*Keralacharithrathinte iruladanjha eedukal: Onnaam pathippinte aamugham*” [The unlit pages of Kerala history: Preface to the first edition], in *Elamkulam P. N. Kunhan Pillayude terenjhedutha kritikal* [Selected works of Elamkulam Kunhan Pillai], ed. N. Sam (Thiruvananthapuram: International Centre for Kerala Studies, University of Kerala, 2005), 1:814.

¹³ P. K. Balakrishnan, *Jaathivyavasthithium Keralacharithravum* [The caste system and history of Kerala] (Kottayam: DC Books, 1983).

Mahatma Gandhi University in Kottayam, which adopted the schools system and set up a School of Letters separate from the School of Social Sciences, both of which were meant to be interdisciplinary. In degree colleges as well as at the predegree level,¹⁴ however, “arts” continued to be the classificatory framework used until recently, when school boards brought history and the social sciences under the humanities, and higher education authorities brought languages and literature under the same banner at the college level as well. This “new humanities” has not thrived in the 1990s and after, however, at least if one goes by the number of enrollments.

In Kerala, the postliberalization higher education scenario saw a fall in demand for courses in the humanities and social sciences and a turn toward more “employable” versions of the same. For example, between 1999 and 2006, while the demand for undergraduate courses in English fell, enrollments in courses in communicative English increased. This study also showed that Other Backward Class communities had made considerable gains, while the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes had made only moderate gains in entering nontechnical degree colleges in the state, even as upper-caste dominance continued.¹⁵ The rate of growth of these colleges, compared to engineering, medical, and other technical colleges, is lower as well. The unaided private colleges in the self-financing educational sector offer various job-oriented courses and no social science courses except economics. When English is offered, it is usually clubbed with something else (communicative English, functional English, or journalism). Women students have dominated the humanities courses overwhelmingly since at least 1990.¹⁶

Even with lower enrollment rates, humanities students form a substantial share of the total numbers in higher education. According to Kerala’s *Economic Review 2017*, out of the 295,547 students attending arts and science colleges in the academic year 2016–17, as many as 117,874 were enrolled in a bachelor of

¹⁴ Predegree level refers to two years that had been part of college but are now part of secondary schooling, termed the senior secondary-level schooling after matriculation, or the Plus Two level.

¹⁵ George Zacharia, “Changing Enrolment Patterns in Arts and Science Colleges in Kerala” (Kochi: Centre for Socio-economic and Environmental Studies, 2010), 10, 22, http://14.139.60.153/bitstream/123456789/11295/1/changing_enrolment_patterns_in_arts_and_science_colleges_in_kerala.pdf. Other Backward Class (OBC), Scheduled Castes (SC), and Scheduled Tribes (ST) are categories in the official classificatory scheme of the Indian population employed by the Indian government. The OBC is a collective term that refers to numerous caste-communities which are socially deprived; the SC and ST are populations that were severely marginalized under the traditional caste order, subjected to untouchability and pollution.

¹⁶ Praveena Kodoth, “Globalisation and Higher Education in Kerala: Access, Equity, and Quality,” Report of a Study Sponsored by the Sir Ratan Tata Trust (Trivandrum: Centre for Development Studies, 2010), 12, 16, 18.

arts course.¹⁷ Research in the humanities happens in colleges with postgraduate departments and in the teaching departments of Kerala's universities, much creative work included. But the overlap between academia and the literary-cultural public is thin and sometimes fuzzy. In other words, the humanities were produced and taught in Kerala in the interlinked yet distinct spheres of academia and the literary-cultural public, the latter being more vibrant than the former. Indeed, the humanities have had much greater reach and influence in academia in Kerala, despite the fact that the sciences had a much more remarkable public presence here compared to elsewhere in India. This was made possible through the rationalist movement, which initially started with a strong anticaste thrust and later developed into an atheist movement, and the people's science movement, led by Kerala's people's science movement, the Kerala Sasthra Sahitya Parishad, which sought to popularize scientific thinking and, in the 1980s, grew into Kerala's first "development movement."¹⁸

This essay offers some preliminary reflections on the shifts and transformations that have taken place within the intellectual sphere of the humanities in Kerala, which have shaped the state's cultural ethos in recent decades. I take a broader view of the humanities, one that has recently been accepted in Kerala's academia too. By the humanities, I am referring to those disciplines, knowledges, and practices that are concerned with studying, understanding, and representing the human condition without reducing it to quantifiable and measurable numerical variables,¹⁹ including both "first order" intuitive literary creation and "second order" discursive, critical writing. As has been observed in the literature on the fortunes of the humanities in the Anglo-European academic contexts, the essential relationship of the humanities to a concern for the truth of human beings has been subjected to a great deal of internal contestation.²⁰ Addressing the putative crisis of the humanities, Sidonie Smith, for example, rejects both the call to return to the classics and the pessimism that the discipline is irretrievably mired in outdated, politically dangerous, Eurocentric humanism. Instead, she

¹⁷ Government of Kerala, *Economic Review 2017* (Thiruvananthapuram: State Planning Board, 2017), accessed August 3, 2020, https://spb.kerala.gov.in/economic-review/ER2017/web_e/ch411.php?id=41&ch=411.

¹⁸ See Mathew Zachariah and R. Sooryamoorthy, *Science for Social Revolution? Achievements and Dilemmas of a Development Movement; The Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad* (London: Zed Books, 1994).

¹⁹ Wilfred M. McClay, "The Burden of the Humanities," *Wilson Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (2008): 34–41.

²⁰ Douglas Anderson, "Humanities Education: Can We Teach without Apologizing?," *Journal of General Education* 51, no. 2 (2002): 127–43; John Frow, "The Public Humanities," *Modern Language Review* 100 (2005): 269–80; James Seaton, "Defending the Humanities," *Good Society* 17, no. 2 (2008): 76–80; Sidonie Smith, *Manifesto for the Humanities: Transforming Doctoral Education in Good Enough Times* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016).

cites Paul Jay's call for "a twenty-first century vision of humanities energized by multiple reading strategies, motivated by engagement beyond the academy, fascinated by globally distributed and heterogeneous cultural forms, and replete with usable expertise."²¹

Broadly speaking, humanities knowledge and practice in academia and in the Malayali literary-cultural public expanded in three important ways toward the close of the twentieth century and thereafter. The first of these expansions had to do with the strengthening of a range of ideas and thinking that challenged the supremacy of both liberal humanism and Stalinist Marxism. These ideas emerged from new sources of political criticism active within oppositional civil/social spaces, including European Marxism, environmentalism, the new Muslim critique of mainstream Indian liberal nationalism and the leftist national-popular in Kerala.²² Also, the growth of feminist and Dalit literary and historical writing contributed to these critical thrusts.²³ The second transformation came with the arrival of new humanities disciplines, cultural studies and film studies in particular. This was also the period in which the dominant social science discourse here came to accommodate a humanizing, methodological, and disciplinary pluralism. The third significant development was a renewed publishing industry. Collectively, these changes have reshaped the understanding of freedom and social justice in Malayali society. They also seem to have undermined the homoaesthetic circle as the major mode of organizing communicative practice. The following sections of the essay deal with each of these three transformations in turn. This essay relies a great deal on secondary literature and on interviews conducted with some important voices in the contemporary Malayalam intellectual scene.

The New Political Criticism

In the early 1980s, Kerala saw post-Naxalite cultural resistance take the form of organizations such as the Janakeeya Samskarika Vedi, attempts to use Euro-

²¹ Smith, *Manifesto for the Humanities*, 23.

²² This was part of the larger disenchantment that grew among the Indian Muslims in the 1990s and after. The flashpoint was the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992, a medieval mosque in the temple-town of Ayodhya, by Hindu fanatics who by this very act proclaimed Indian Muslims to be invaders and deserving, therefore, only of second-class citizenship or expulsion from the nation.

²³ The "national-popular" is a Gramscian term that refers to the convergence of many heterogeneous social groups facilitated by their politicization. In Kerala this formation was led by the Communist movement from the 1940s and 1950s. The late twentieth century saw the articulation of multiple critiques of the various exclusions through which this formation was constituted earlier in the mid-twentieth century.

pean Marxism in cultural analysis, and a rewriting of the Malayalam literary canon in radical ways.²⁴ But it also saw the emergence and strengthening of new discourses of radical civil society politics such as environmentalism, feminism, and others, which challenged the hegemony of communism in politics and liberal humanism and Stalinism in the literary public. Ideas central to the leftist national-popular consensus in Kerala since the 1940s, such as the dream of large-scale, capital-intensive industrial development and a class-centered understanding of social justice and equality, also came under sharper attack. The slow but steady spread of environmentalism in the 1970s, the rise of feminism on the national scene, and a spirited fishers' movement for sustainable fishing in Kerala, combined with the post-Naxalite interest in nonclass political categories, resulted in, quite expectedly, a strengthening of discourses that were critical of modernity.²⁵ Specific struggles such as the public protests against corrupt medical practitioners in the early 1980s, for example, thus formed the context for an interest in the translation and widespread discussion of the work of Catholic philosopher and social critic Ivan Illich.²⁶

The movement to preserve the ecologically unique Silent Valley rainforests also emerged in the 1980s and was the most significant struggle against the developmentalist imagination in Kerala.²⁷ It opened up more space for ecological thinking and became the context in which the works of thinkers such as E. F. Schumacher, Herbert Marcuse, and Masanobu Fukuoka were translated into Malayalam, widely read, and debated. Eminent literary figures came together to support the struggle to preserve the Silent Valley, alongside scientists and social

²⁴ K. Sreejith, "Naxalite Movement and Cultural Resistance: Experience of Janakiya Samskarika Vedi in Kerala (1980–82)," *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 10–16, 2005, 5333–37; B. Rajeevan, *Vakkukalum vasthukkalum* [Words and objects] (Kottayam: DC Books, 2013). For an example of Marxism in cultural analysis, see Ravindran, ed., *Kalavimarsam: Marxist maanadandam* [Art criticism: The Marxist measure] (Kochi: Nila Books, 1983). See also K. Satchidanandan, "Srishti, swatantryam, saundaryam: Vairuddhyatmaka niroopanathinu oru aamugham" [Creation, freedom, beauty: An introduction to dialectical criticism], in Ravindran, *Kalavimarsham*, 1–58.

²⁵ K. P. Joy, "Environmental Communication: A Case Study of Kerala" (PhD diss., Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, 2005), 211. For an account of Indian feminism in the period mentioned, see Radha Kumar, *The History of Doing: An Illustrated History of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India 1800–1990* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1993). For the mobilization of fish workers in Kerala, see G. Dietrich and N. Nayak, *Transition or Transformation? A Study of the Mobilisation, Organisation and the Emergence of Consciousness among the Fish Workers of Kerala* (Madurai: Department of Social Analysis, Tamilnadu Theological Seminary, 2002).

²⁶ For a recollection of these protests, see Amiya Meetha, "Kerala: When Activists Tried Corrupt in Public," *Deccan Chronicle*, March 23, 2016, <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/nation/in-other-news/230316/kerala-when-activists-tried-corrupt-in-public.html>.

²⁷ Rohith P., "The Silent Valley and Its Discontents: Literary Environmentalism and the Ecological Discourse in Kerala" (PhD diss., University of Hyderabad, 2012).

scientists, in the form of the Prakrithi Samrakshana Samiti (Society for the Conservation of Nature). The first petition against the proposed hydroelectric project, which would have submerged the Silent Valley, was drafted by a poet and in a style that was more poetic than legalistic.²⁸ Rohith P. notes that unlike the romantic or conservative pleas for nature, which had a longer history in Malayalam literature, the ecological vision of the late 1970s and early 1980s was sharply political and pragmatic and capable of criticizing exploitative structural conditions. Members of the conservation society were responding to greater international interest in the environment, as well as to other struggles such as the Chipko Andolan in 1970s Uttarakhand (then a part of Uttar Pradesh).²⁹ In turn, the struggle came to shape the humanities in Malayalam. In addition to *Vanaparvam*, the landmark collection of poetry brought out in support of the struggle by Malayalam's most eminent poets in 1983, the struggle provided an impetus for Malayalam ecocriticism and a flowering in popular science literature on the environment and ecology.³⁰ It also created a "public humanities," reaching out to people not necessarily connected with the literary-cultural public.³¹

The legacy of the 1980s was carried on into the 1990s, with nature becoming a prominent concern in Malayalam literature. There was sustained engagement with the intensified continuing struggle for nature against neoliberal policies and predatory capitalism, as well as other struggles such as those of Kerala's tribal people. Activists involved with these various struggles produced life writing, including, for example, Mayilamma, who described the struggle of the residents of the village of Plachimada against the local Coca-Cola plant's extraction of groundwater in 2002; Leelakumari Amma, the heroine of the struggle against the use of the pesticide endosulfan in North Kerala; C. K. Janu, the leader of the new tribal self-assertion in Wayanad; and Pallikal Bhavani, one of the many women resisting natural resource predators in Kerala on their own.³² Meanwhile, literary writing continues to have considerable power in piercing through the

²⁸ For a detailed account of writers' interventions in the struggle, see poet Sugathakumari's note titled "Silent Valley: A Case Study," appended to Rohith P., "The Silent Valley," 220–30.

²⁹ Rohith P., "The Silent Valley," 32–33. The Chipko Andolan refers to the famous nonviolent "tree-hugging" (*chipko*) movement in the Himalayan region of Uttarakhand in the 1970s by villagers, especially women, which sought to protect the trees in forests against logging by the government. It became an important inspiration for environmental struggles all over India.

³⁰ G. Madhusoodanan, *Harithanirupanam Malayalathil* [Ecocriticism in Malayalam] (Thrissur: Current Books, 2002); Rohith P., "The Silent Valley."

³¹ Rohith P., "The Silent Valley," 104.

³² R. Sreejith Varma and Swarnalatha Rangarajan, "The Politics of Land, Water, and Toxins: Reading the Life-Narratives of Three Women Oikos-Carers from Kerala," in *Women and Nature? Beyond Dualism in Gender, Body, and Environment*, ed. Douglas A. Vakoch and Sam Mickey (New York: Routledge, 2018), 167–84.

denial of environmental destruction in Kerala. Ambikasutan Mangad's novel *Enmakaje*, which is part fiction and part documentation of the struggle against endosulfan spraying in a village in Kasaragod called Enmakaje, was hugely successful in mobilizing public opinion against the practice of spraying. Not only did it bring to light an issue that adversely affected a population rendered peripheral by the Malayali mainstream, it also prompted self-reflection on humanity's place in history and nature, characteristic of the new humanities.³³

The challenges that arose toward the end of the 1980s and accelerated through the 1990s and after—from feminism, Dalit assertion, and post-Babri Masjid Muslim formations—would decisively undermine the second pillar of the Malayali leftist national-popular understanding of social justice—that is, a class-centered understanding—by demonstrating the extent to which nonstate forms of power served to buttress and bolster formal politics. The flowering of feminist and Dalit writing and historical scholarship in this period produced a body of largely humanities-based knowledge that began, by the first decade of the new millennium, to challenge the deeply entrenched developmentalist conception of Kerala as paradise of social development. In the new millennium, mobilization by sex workers and queer assertions have continued to use the space of the literary-cultural public for self-assertion, while interdisciplinary research has begun to take shape

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around gender, caste, and culture. Of these, feminism appeared in the 1980s, questioning the social and cultural consensus in Kerala, including the gendered division of labor and the patriarchal family.

Early feminism in Kerala included much literary and cultural activity, even from

women writers who did not always call themselves feminists. The self-avowal of the woman writer as feminist was evident, for example, in the work of Sarah Joseph, Malayalam's best-known feminist literary voice. The hysterics she sketched in her early work began to gain a bigger voice in her writing from the 1980s, in contrast to the work of Ashitha, a well-known writer of short stories who did not call herself a feminist and whose writing continued to be

³³ Prasad Pannian, "Climate Change and the Politics of Nature: Towards a Non-ontological Imagination," paper presented at the conference "The Enigma of Nature / The Enigma of the Non-human," IIT Gandhinagar, January 27–28, 2017.

populated with haunting descriptions of smothering patriarchal spaces and the woman's strangled voice. Antipatriarchal writing by women has a long history in modern Malayalam, and the literary-cultural public was indeed the space in which gender continued as a contested and debated topic even when the Malayalam public at large had reached a consensus about it.³⁴

However, there soon appeared a divide in the new feminist humanities in Malayalam between theorists and activists: the theorists tended to be men who were radical Left activists, and the activists were mostly women and included such eminent literary figures as Sarah Joseph. That this was in fact a power divide was made evident by a controversy that developed around the long theoretical introduction written by the radical leftist literary critic and poet K. Satchidanandan to a collection of Joseph's short stories. This controversy came to be regarded as a landmark event in Malayalam literary criticism, commonly referred to as the "*pennezhuthu* debate" of the early 1990s. Satchidanandan coined the neologism *pennezhuthu* (women's writing) to make sense of Joseph's explicitly voiced demand for a new antipatriarchal Malayalam, detecting such subversion of patriarchy in her language. This led to an extraordinary explosion of angry criticism from dominant liberal humanists, who saw emergent feminist literary production as embodying a feminist version of socialist realism and an attempt by imposters or inferiors to break into Malayalam literary culture (some read the advocacy of a feminist literary position as a "demand for reservation").³⁵ Coining the term *pennezhuthu* was an attempt on Satchidanandan's part to gesture toward French feminism's *écriture féminine* (and this attempt was indeed unsound), which ended up being interpreted in the course of the 1990s as a version of critical/socialist realism.³⁶ But the debate also exposed the power relations that structured the Malayalam literary-cultural public, with the

³⁴ Devika, *Womanwriting=Manreading?*

³⁵ By viewing the feminist demand for inclusion in the literary public as essentially a demand for "reservation," or a guaranteed quota akin to those provided to the former untouchable social groups in Indian democracy, these liberal critics were also exposing their own upper-caste moorings, from which the social justice aspect of the reservation for the oppressed castes were read in hostile terms, as a rejection of (implicitly upper-caste) "merit." Devika, *Womanwriting=Manreading?*, 49–50. The charge that the new feminist interventions in literary aesthetics were no more than a feminist version of socialist realism was, of course, to claim that their radical charge was strictly limited and indebted to socialist realism primarily. The liberal-humanist outrage was related to their suspicion that people with little "literary genius" were attempting to take over Malayalam literature.

³⁶ Also, the fascination with Western theory in Malayali feminism forms a contrast with feminist cultural production elsewhere, for example, the landmark work of Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, which offers pointed critiques of both gynocriticism and *écriture féminine* from their location in a postcolony. See Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, introduction to *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present*, ed. Tharu and Lalitha, vol. 2, *The 20th Century* (New York: Feminist Press, 1993), 1–40.

almost-always male literary critic providing readers with the reading protocols for literature that was now more frequently female authored than before.

The *pennezhuthu* controversy became a landmark event not just because of the liberal-humanist outrage but also because, after it, women writers finally overthrew the power of the male critic. Satchidanandan's coinage was vehemently rejected by women writers who did not call themselves feminists, still used literary-humanist terms to claim their freedom of expression, but nevertheless crafted powerful antipatriarchal literature in Malayalam, such as Chandramathi and Gracy.³⁷ In an interview given in 2010, Chandramathi recalled the controversy, now around twenty years old, noting that it was a time when women were

breaking the fences and coming out. The times in which [one] wrote poems on pieces of paper and hid them under the pillow, to be discovered after [one's] death and published by heirs, were gone. We had begun to publish our writings. We would have written on a large scale even if we didn't receive enough attention from the critics. Women readers were beginning to recognize [in the writings of the women authors] "This is my experience! This is my pain!" A consciousness that was more alert was slowly taking shape in those times. I feel, even if Satchidanandan hadn't downloaded such a term and introduced it, women's collectives would have formed. Maybe such a term would have been forged by a woman. If so, it would have been accepted. Welcomed.³⁸

It is important to acknowledge the force and importance of this rejection, especially when one notes that the 1990s and after saw the flowering of feminist writing in styles quite different from Joseph's, which radical Left critics such as Satchidanandan were keen to canonize. This includes, for example, K. R. Meera's sophisticated yet middlebrow, modernist, antipatriarchal writing, R. Rajasree's experiments with subversive tale-telling of/with subaltern female voices in her recent novel, *Kalyani ennum Dakshaayani ennum peraaya randu streekalude kata* (The story of two women called Kalyani and Dakshayani), the antipatriarchal critique in poetry by Malayali women poets, and the rich crop of life writings by women, from sex workers to rebel nuns, all quarrelling

³⁷ Chandramathi is the pen name of Chandrika Balan, a very well-known Malayalam author. Gracy is a noted Malayalam author who problematizes patriarchy in her writing but refuses to call herself a feminist.

³⁸ Chandramathi, "Kazhinjho pennezhuthinte kaalam?" [Has the time of *pennezhuthu* past?], interview by C. S. Chandrika, *Madhyamam Weekly*, Women's Day special issue, March 9, 2010, 48–49. Indeed, the 1990s was a time when women in Kerala were entering higher education in larger numbers. See Kodoth, "Globalisation and Higher Education," 14, table 1.35.

with patriarchy.³⁹ Joseph herself produced *Mattathi* and *Aalahayude penmakkal* (Daughters of Alaha), both departing from Satchidanandan's prescriptions for feminist aesthetics.⁴⁰

Feminist readings of Malayalam literature, the antipatriarchal literary tradition, and feminist translation all became much more available in and after the 1990s. Feminist themes and concerns were progressively "mainstreamed" (with all the ambiguities of that process) into Malayalam literature and cinema. They also appeared in the work of male writers, often as critiques of Malayali masculinity, for example, in the short stories of Santhosh Echikkanam and Unni R. The journal *Sanghaditha*, which first appeared in 2010, published by the women's group Anweshi, has had a small but growing circulation. In the early years, only radical journals such as *Patabhedam* (1987) took an explicitly feminist stance, but now it is far more general. There was also a short-lived experiment in the early years of the new millennium at starting a women's press called Women Unlimited. This flowering was not limited to literature; true to its tendency to ignore boundaries in knowledge (a trait that it shares with other emancipatory thought), feminist knowledge production proved to be interdisciplinary. It became so not only by creating new discourses in the humanities disciplines (including literature, history, cultural studies, and film studies) but also through humanizing the social sciences by introducing methodological pluralism.⁴¹ Feminist history writing grew between the 1980s and the present through the scholarship of Meera Velayudhan, G. Arunima, Praveena Kodoth, Anna Lindberg, K. Saradmoni, and myself. In the newer fields of cultural studies and film studies, a critical and intersectional analysis of gender and sexuality has been central to the work of scholars such as Ratheesh Radhakrishnan, Sharmila Sreekumar, Carmel Christy, Navaneetha Mokkal, Darshana M. Sreedhar, Muraleedharan Tharayil, Bindu M. Menon, Sherin B. S., and many others. There have also been experiments with newer modes of communicating feminist knowledge.⁴² Feminism also came to be irrevocably pluralized in the

³⁹ R. Rajasree, *Kalyaani ennum Dakshaayani ennum peraya randu streekalude kata* (Kozhikode: Mathrubhumi Books, 2019). Life writings include Nalini Jameela, *Njaan laingikatozhilaali* [I, a sex worker] (Kottayam: DC Books, 2006); Sr. Jesme, *Amen: Oru kanyasthreeyude atmakatha* [Amen: Autobiography of a nun] (Kottayam: DC Books, 2009).

⁴⁰ Sarah Joseph, *Mattathi* (Thrissur: Current Books, 2006); Joseph, *Aalahayude penmakkal* (Thrissur: Current Books, 2009).

⁴¹ J. Devika and Mini Sukumar, "Making Space for Feminist Social Critique in Contemporary Kerala," *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 21, 2006, 4469–75.

⁴² J. Devika, "Bridge-Books in Malayalam," *Café Dissensus*, June 24, 2019, <https://cafedissensus.com/2019/06/24/bridge-books-in-malayalam-the-transformative-potential-of-social-sciences-writing/>.

new millennium, with Dalit-critical perspectives becoming more prominent and Dalit feminism being articulated by a growing group of prominent Dalit feminist activist intellectuals such as Rekha Raj and Mruduladevi Sasidharan. This prompted critical reflection on the privileged-caste moorings of Malayali mainstream feminist cultural production, an engagement that continues today both online and offline.⁴³

Like feminism, queer perspectives too have a longer history in Kerala's literary-cultural public,⁴⁴ but Malayali heteronormativity began to come under serious criticism only in the new millennium. Sex workers' activism in Kerala was facilitated by the global fear of AIDS and NGO-led mobilization, but women sex workers quickly seized the opportunity to assert themselves in the literary-cultural public too.⁴⁵ Even more powerful was the publication of the memoirs of a leading sex worker activist, Nalini Jameela, which became a best-seller and led to a furious debate on sexuality and sexual morality, especially after she chose to rewrite it, claiming that the scribe of the first version had depicted her too close to his own ideal of the empowered sex worker.⁴⁶ The sex workers' interventions were crucial in provoking a reflection on patriarchal language. They proposed that derogatory words such as *veshya* (prostitute) ought to be replaced with *laingikatozhilali* (sex worker), which emphasizes labor and is gender neutral. Public assertions of the queer community in Kerala took place in a literary-cultural public deeply shaped by the expansion of access to visual media and film technology, the dismantling of the high/popular distinction in culture, the expansion of digital spaces, and the spread of social media in Malayalam.⁴⁷ Thus, transgender self-assertions happened mostly in and through public debates on the depiction of transgender people in popular movies and on TV shows, as well as the community's reshaping of popular cultural performance, including cinema-inspired group dances and fashion shows.

⁴³ Rekha Raj, "Dalit Women as Political Agents: A Kerala Experience," *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 4, 2013, 56–63; K. K. Baburaj, "Deshatheyum vamshatheyum ezhutunnathu streekalo?" [Do women write nation and race?], in *Mattoru jeevitham saadhyamaanu* [Another life is possible] (Kottayam: Subject and Language Press, 2008), 46–48.

⁴⁴ Muraleedharan Tharayil, "Shifting Paradigms: Gender and Sexuality Debates in Kerala," *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 26, 2014, 70–78.

⁴⁵ A. K. Jayasree, "Searching for Justice for Body and Self in a Coercive Environment," *Reproductive Health Matters* 12, no. 23 (2004): 58–67; Bindu M. Menon, "Identification, Desire, Otherness: Susanna and Its Public," *Deep Focus*, January–March (2005): 61–69.

⁴⁶ Prefatory note to Jameela, *Njaan laingikatozhilali*, p. i; J. Devika, "Housewife, Sex Worker, and Reformer: Controversies over Women Writing Their Lives in Kerala," *Economic and Political Weekly* 11, no. 17 (2006): 1675–83.

⁴⁷ Navaneetha Mokkil, *Unruly Figures: Queerness, Sex Work, and the Politics of Sexuality in Kerala* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019).

Even more than feminism, it is literary-critical interventions and social analyses from a Dalit perspective that have had a long and important history in twentieth-century Kerala. Having lived through communism and Naxalism, many of the leading Dalit intellectuals, including K. K. Kochu, had by the 1970s begun to raise difficult questions about the social transformation that the Left claimed to have achieved in Kerala.⁴⁸ The 1970s, for example, saw the formation of the SEEDIAN (Socially, Economically, Educationally Depressed Indian Ancient Natives) group, which explored Marxist and Ambedkarite perspectives and became a matrix of contemporary Dalit intellectuals who theorized the caste question anew. The Dalit counterpublic that had been developing since the mid-twentieth century was further strengthened from the 1980s onward by the establishment of new journals such as the *Adhasthitha navoddhana munnani bulletin* (1989) and *Soochakam* (2001); publishing ventures such as November Books and the Subject and Language Press, which was active in the first decade of the new millennium; and the web portal Utharakalam (2011). Besides this, strong Dalit voices protesting caste discrimination from within the Dalit Christian community in Kerala began to be raised through little magazines such as *Yuvalokam* (1983) and *Dynamic Action* (1988). The post-USSR waning of socialist realism, the translation of B. R. Ambedkar's collected works into Malayalam, and Ambedkar's birth centenary in 1991 provided important political-cultural moments in the rise of Ambedkarite perspectives.⁴⁹

Dalit discourses in Kerala not only provided a powerful critique of upper-caste Malayali subnationalism but also inaugurated a project of historical retrieval, of collecting and preserving Dalit cultural memories. Historical figures such as Ayyankali (1863–1941) and Poikayil Yohannan (1878–1939), who had led

⁴⁸ K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu, eds., *No Alphabet in Sight: New Dalit Writing from South India* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2011).

⁴⁹ Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956) is a towering figure in the discourse and practice of anticaste struggles in India in the twentieth century and after. Born into an untouchable caste, he braved massive discrimination and exclusion to emerge as a leading political and scholarly figure, to head the committee that drafted the constitution of India. He also served as the first law and justice minister in the first cabinet headed by Jawaharlal Nehru and is recognized to have been the driving force behind the Hindu Code Bill (1955–56) that substantially altered the power equations within the Hindu joint family. Ambedkar wrote extensively on caste oppression in India and the struggle against caste, and his status as the leading thinker of caste who exposed the elite roots of India's national movement is widely acknowledged now. Anticaste movements and discourse in India draw heavily on Ambedkarite thought, and it became highly influential in Kerala's civil society since the 1990s. Satyanarayana and Tharu, *No Alphabet in Sight*, 33.

the Dalit renaissance in Malayali society, were now reclaimed.⁵⁰ New models of history writing were proposed that went beyond the pioneering efforts of historians such as T. H. P. Chentharassery (1928–2018), Dalitbandhu N. K. Jose (b. 1929), and P. K. Balakrishnan (1925–1991), thereby taking the criticism of *savarna*-inflected historiography beyond the perspectives of its critics such as P. K. Balakrishnan.⁵¹ Sanal Mohan's work raised questions regarding the centrality of slavery in Kerala's past and the significance of spiritual transformation in the social awakening among Dalits in the early twentieth century.⁵²

The period from the late 1980s to the 2010s was very productive, with many Dalit political groups and campaigns taking shape, especially around land, in which Dalits and India's indigenous groups, known as Adivasis, joined hands. The protest against installing an 11kV electricity line that would have endangered a poor Dalit colony at Kuruchi in 1999, the tribal "hut-building" protest in the state capital in 2001 for land to Adivasis, the subsequent tribal action at Muthanga in 2003, and the Chengara land struggle of 2007–8 are just a few of the Dalit-Adivasi struggles that forced the political and cultural mainstream to pay heed.⁵³ Formations like the Dalit Human Rights Movement questioned the very foundations of liberalism and strove to shape a new political subjectivity among adherents through the institution of non-Brahmanical, Buddhism-in-

⁵⁰ Ayyankali was a pioneer social reformer and a political leader from the Dalit Pulaya community in the princely state of Travancore who paved the way for the entry of Dalits into educational institutions and for securing their right to public spaces. He was a central figure in the shaping of the modern Dalit community into an organized force capable of bargaining and negotiating with the state. Poikayil Yohannan was from central Travancore and a pioneer of Dalit spirituality who founded the faith known as the Pratyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (Society of Immediate Salvation). His songs, drawn from Dalit traditions of poetry, form an important corpus of early Dalit literature in Malayalam. For an account of the early history of the Dalit awakening in Kerala, see Satyanarayana and Tharu, *No Alphabet in Sight*.

⁵¹ T. H. P. Chentharassery was an early biographer of notable Dalit public figures such as Ayyankali, T. T. Kesavasastri, Pambady John Joseph, and others who also wrote historical works that bring to light the history of Dalit communities and their exclusions from mainstream Kerala history. N. K. Jose has produced an important series of historical works in and through which he places the Dalit communities within the mainstream of Kerala history and identifies Pulaya and Channar uprisings as crucial to the democratization of Malayali society in the twentieth century. P. K. Balakrishnan was equally well-known as a novelist, critic, and social historian whose pioneering work *Jativyavasthayum Keralacharithravum* [The caste system and the history of Kerala] (Kottayam: Sahitya Pravarthaka Sahakarana Sangam, 1983) was a powerful intervention in the *savarna*-dominated field of Kerala history, which continued to perpetuate Brahmin cultural dominance.

⁵² Sanal Mohan, *Modernity of Slavery: Struggles against Caste Inequality in Colonial Kerala* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁵³ Satyanarayana and Tharu, *No Alphabet in Sight*. It is important to note that this political-cultural development should not be considered internally homogeneous and reducible to a weak notion of "identity politics." See Devika, *Womanwriting=Manreading?*

spired practices.⁵⁴ There was significant expansion of Dalit creative writing with the appearance of Dalit women poets such as Vijila Chirappad; the rise in Dalit life writing; the increased visibility of preexisting Dalit fiction such as that of C. Ayyappan;⁵⁵ the formation of such forums as the Dalit Sahitya Vedi in 1991; flourishing Dalit social and cultural criticism from scholars such as Pradeepan Pampirikunnu, Sunny M. Kapicadu, K. K. Baburaj, and others; and the translation of powerful Dalit writing from other Indian languages into Malayalam (such as Bama's *Karukku*). This happened alongside the extension of the Dalit critiques of the "Kerala Model," audible in the work of economists such as P. Sivanandan and M. Kunhaman.⁵⁶

The novelist Arundhati Roy joined ranks with Dalit intellectuals against the Left's deafness to the Dalit critique by devoting the royalties she earned from the Malayalam translation of *The God of Small Things* to the promotion of Dalit literature.⁵⁷ Anthologies of Dalit writing in Malayalam have appeared in English translation.⁵⁸ But Dalit critical thought has been wary: scholars have also called for the rejection of interpretive frameworks that domesticate Dalit writing and thought by turning it into appendices or supplements of the mainstream, as was done by mainstream journals such as *Bhashaposhini* and *India Today* in the late 1990s.⁵⁹ The Dalit critical voice has been powerfully articulated in and through a number of debates on cinema (e.g., around the films *Papillio Buddha* and *Kammattippadam*) and popular culture (e.g., the hit film song "Lajjavathiye" and the music of the composer Jassie Gift) as well.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ Devika, *Womanwriting=Manreading?* See also Rekha Raj, "Dalit Women."

⁵⁵ M. Dasan, V. Pratibha, Pradeepan Pampirikunnu, and C. S. Chandrika, eds., *The Oxford Anthology of Malayalam Dalit Writing* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁵⁶ P. Sivanandan, "Economic Backwardness of Harijans in Kerala," *Social Scientist* 4, no. 10 (1976): 3–28; M. Kunhaman, *Keralathinte vikasana prathisandhi* [Kerala's development crisis] (Kottayam: DC Books, 1990).

⁵⁷ P. Popham, "The God Comes Home," *Independent*, April 11, 1999, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/interview-the-god-comes-home-1086558.html>.

⁵⁸ Satyanarayana and Tharu, *No Alphabet in Sight*; Dasan et al., *The Oxford Anthology*; M. R. Renukumar, ed., *Don't Want Caste: Malayalam Stories by Dalit Writers*, trans. Ravi Sanker and Abhirami G. Sriram (New Delhi: Navayana, 2017).

⁵⁹ Baburaj, "Deshatheyum vamshatheyum ezhutunnathu streekalo?"

⁶⁰ See, for instance, Ajith Kumar A. S., "Music, Body, and K. J. Jesudas," trans. Deepthi Sreeram, *Roundtable India*, October 22, 2014, https://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=7713; Ajithkumar, "Reclaiming the Cinematic Space: Countering the Liberal Speech on Caste," *Roundtable India*, February 25, 2013, https://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6270:reclaiming-the-cinematic-space-countering-the-liberal-speech-on-caste&catid=119:feature&Itemid=132; J. Devika, "Stuck between Gandhi and Cultural Crap," *Kafila*, September 24, 2012, <https://kafila.online/2012/09/24/stuck-between-gandhi-and-cultural-crap-papilio-buddha-reveals-much/>.

In the wake of the Shah Bano case⁶¹ and the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, Muslim politics joined with assertive anticaste politics from caste-communities including those who suffer the most, the Dalits. This was also a period in which the Muslims of Kerala, especially those from Malabar, were clearly reaping the economic advantages of Gulf migration, making rapid strides in education, and creating a public culture centered around community and faith. *Madhyamam Weekly* (1989) became a powerful vehicle for such perspectives, amplifying the voices of Dalit intellectuals and Islamist critiques of secularism and the Malayali claim to secularism and religious amity. The Malayalam literary-cultural public now faced pointed criticism for its othering of the Muslim as fanatical, violent, barbaric, and dangerous, to which their response was often defensive, even aggressive, and ugly. Thus, the late 1990s controversy around M. T. Ansari's critical reading of N. S. Madhavan's short story "Higuita" has

The humanities now quite explicitly shape much public critical discourse in Kerala, including critical journalism, where once the social sciences had been the privileged discourse.

continued to simmer, as have other such disputes.⁶²

Critical readings such as these have only become more common and familiar because of the vastly expanded online and offline media spaces, enabled, among other things, by

greater familiarity with and access to the critical humanities, especially postcolonial theory's critiques of secularism and Enlightenment modernity. Advocates of Islamist thinking in Kerala have described it not as simplistic identity politics but as a political intervention that "opens up new fronts" for subaltern struggles and draws upon theoretical resources that inspire critical humanities.⁶³ The entry of a large number of Muslim youths, including women, into higher education both in Kerala and in other Indian metropolises has produced a lively environ-

⁶¹ A 1985 Indian Supreme Court legal ruling over alimony payments to a Muslim woman. It resulted in the enactment of the Muslim Women's (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act of 1986. The case and subsequent legislation unleashed controversy over the extent of permitted state interference in Muslim Personal Law.

⁶² M. T. Ansari, *Islam and Nationalism in India: South Indian Contexts* (London: Routledge, 2016); Jisha Surya, "When Biryani Became Haram," *Times of India*, August 27, 2016, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/tracking-indian-communities/when-biryani-became-haram/>. In both, the authors of the short stories resisted the political readings of their text with great indignance, even attacking the critics belligerently.

⁶³ Samad Kunnakkaavu, "Islamikarashtreyam, svatvarashtreyam: Teevrathaikkum and niraakaranathinum madhye" [Islamicist politics, identity politics: Between intensity and refusal], *Islamic Academic Conference* (web magazine), December 2, 2016, <http://iac.siokerala.org/?p=470>.

ment of Islamist youth-led cultural production and critique.⁶⁴ Commenting on the post-1990 uptake of critical humanities among the younger generation of Muslims entering higher education in Kerala, historian P. K. Yasser Arafath notes:

Definitely, new scholars working on different aspects of Muslim life in Kerala and an ever-growing Islamic public sphere engage eagerly with new discourses and critically examine questions to do with “Islamophobia,” “identity,” “modernity,” “nation,” “feminism,” “gender,” “colonialism,” and “decolonialism.” The “post-Mandal Mappilas,” as I describe them, with new experiences with critical theory—from Edward Said, Michel Foucault, and Talal Asad to Amina Wadud, Fatima Mernissi, and Saba Mahmood—have been questioning the aforementioned categories/issues. The new Islamic translation industry one finds in Malabar and publishing houses of various Muslim organizations further prove this point.⁶⁵

Besides the entry of young Muslims into the humanities in higher education at a time of expanding technologies of information and communication, the rise of factions focused on Muslim religious purity and the migration of Muslim workers to Gulf countries have produced publics mediated by technologies aimed exclusively at the community, such as cassettes, DVDs, and new genres such as “home cinema.”⁶⁶ Arafath observes that the new technologies that became available to the community after the 1970s “created a rejuvenated ecology of Mappila literature in which songs and poetry from the 17th century got new lives. This also marks the acceptance of ‘Mappila literature’ in the larger ‘Malayali’ culture, though the pace was slow.”⁶⁷ Arafath also points out that a significant number of younger Muslims, often called “progressives,” who are very active in cinema, in social media interventions, and so on do not identify with the tenets of Islam.

⁶⁴ K. Ashraf, “Aikyakeralavum Muslim chodyangalum: Musliminu samsaarikkaan kazhiyumo?” [United Kerala and Muslim questions: Can the Muslim speak?], *Utharakaalam*, November 26, 2016, <http://utharakalam.com/2016/11/26/17289.html>.

⁶⁵ P. K. Yasser Arafath, email interview by author, May 9, 2020. “Mandal” refers to a government commission established in 1979 by the government of India to identify the socially and educationally backward groups. The commission used eleven social, economic, and educational indicators to identify the “Other Backward Classes” in India that deserved state support through job reservations/quotas. It recommended that 27 percent of jobs in the Union government and in public sector undertakings should be reserved for these deserving classes. Though completed in 1980, the report of the Mandal Commission languished till the 1990s, and when taken up for implementation, it led to massive anti-government protests from privileged-caste students. Despite many hitches, its implementation led to the substantial presence of the students from the “Other Backward Classes,” which included the Muslims, in higher education.

⁶⁶ M. S. Karinkurayil, “The Islamic Subject of Home Cinema in Kerala,” *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 10, no. 1 (2019): 30–51.

⁶⁷ Arafath, email interview by author.

The use of critical humanities by the proponents and opponents of important Malayali social movements of the early twenty-first century (such as the “Kiss of Love” and the “menstruation movement” of 2014–15, both directed against the regimes of control imposed upon the body, especially the female body) marks the moment in which the humanities became indispensable to the discourse of the critical public.⁶⁸ The humanities now quite explicitly shape much public critical discourse, including critical journalism, where once the social sciences had been the privileged discourse.

New Humanities Disciplines

As mentioned earlier, before the 1990s, academic spaces in Kerala rarely produced groundbreaking research in the humanities. This must be seen within a broader historical frame. As T. T. Sreekumar, a vocal public intellectual since the 1980s, notes:

Kerala has always faced the same kind of postcolonial predicaments of knowledge-production in small but culturally unique regions with scarce resources and poor demand for theoretical and heuristic localization.... However, the most important development was.... the final integration of the State as a labour-exporting unit to the Middle East and rest of the world in the emerging world economic order post-the 1973 oil shock.... Initially it reinforced the colonial and post-colonial emphasis on educational investment and universal equal opportunity in education. Later, the system began to feel the crunch of inadequate institutional and infrastructural opportunities for technical education, especially engineering and medicine.... This development had further negative impact on the already flagging morale for humanities and social science learning in the state.⁶⁹

For example, in the late 1980s, when feminist literary production was achieving revolutionary successes, the little good academic research on women in Kerala came from development studies. There, methodologies that “humanized” the object of social science research provoked tension. At the Centre for Development Studies, Kerala’s premier institute for research in development studies, anthropologist Leela Gulati was subjected to “more than a few jokes,” as she recalls, “about how I managed to ‘dress up’ the mundane details of the ‘common’ woman’s life; who really cares about things like what Jayamma ate for breakfast and how she decided to spend the days on which she didn’t find

⁶⁸ T. T. Sreekumar, “Urban Upheavals as Practices of New Sexual Ethics: ‘Kiss of Love’ Movement in India,” *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 14, no. 2 (2021): 112–27.

⁶⁹ T. T. Sreekumar, email interview by author, May 10, 2020.

work.”⁷⁰ This situation changed in the 1990s, when feminist historians located or trained outside Kerala began to produce interdisciplinary work that utilized “the productive instability” of mixed methodologies and treated women as complex agents, thereby humanizing the social sciences.⁷¹ This knowledge also appeared in Malayalam, and it thrived not so much in the academy as in the Malayalam literary-cultural public.

The boundary between the literary-cultural public and academia should not, however, be exaggerated, nor should we ignore the degree to which they both referred back to an uneven field structured by the differential accumulation of cultural capital. Clearly, most prominent critics and many literary authors writing in Malayalam were firmly positioned within Malayali academia, as well as within the system of literary awards and prizes instituted by the government and other organizations. Dalit intellectuals who started to become more audible in the 1990s were not thus positioned, and feminist intellectuals who produced academic research in the same decade were often located in academic spaces outside Kerala. Their interventions produced much tension (as discussed in the preceding section). For example, in an essay on the changing intellectual life in Kerala (first published in the late 1990s), leading Marxist intellectual B. Rajeevan drew on Michel Foucault’s work to remark that the space evacuated by liberal-humanist intellectuals was being gradually occupied by “specific intellectuals” who politicized their specific areas of expertise. He mostly meant scientists and medical professionals, but he also included feminists, claiming that they “turned their very existence as women into an instrument of struggle for freedom.” However, not only did he exclude Dalit intellectuals, who would qualify to be “specific intellectuals” by his own standards, he also denigrated them as “intellectual buffoons,” and dismissed the political effects of their critical work as simply reifying and essentializing their identities.⁷² Since he did not apply his standard evenly, Rajeevan’s gesture toward feminism can only be read as tokenism. His endorsement of “specific intellectuals,” then, would appear to assent to shifts in the Malayali intellectual domain, and yet he endorsed only shifts that did not alter its caste elitism structurally.

Amid this environment of the mid to late 1990s, the relatively new discipline of Malayalam cultural studies was an important channel through which the critical humanities of the 1980s and 1990s moved into academic spaces,

⁷⁰ Leela Gulati, “The Tyranny of Tradition,” in *A Space of Her Own: Personal Narratives of Twelve Women*, ed. Jasodhara Bagchi and Leela Gulati (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005), 105–24.

⁷¹ Marjorie Pryse, “Trans/Feminist Methodology: Bridges to Interdisciplinary Thinking,” *National Women’s Studies Journal* 12, no. 2 (2000): 105–18.

⁷² Rajeevan, *Vakkukalum vasthukkalum*, 365, 356–57.

facilitating a general critique of Malayali subnational identity. This discipline was initially welcomed in the relatively newer universities, which were open to ideas from academic metropolises regarding both the curriculum and the institutional structuring of research and pedagogy. Recalling this process in 1994 at the Sree Sankara University of Sanskrit at Kalady, Scaria Zacharia noted that the most important reason for the shift toward cultural studies was the freedom granted to the newly recruited young faculty to devise a syllabus for postgraduate courses in Malayalam. Along with regular courses on medieval and modern Malayalam, “Dalit studies, feminist studies, film studies, new short story studies, poetics, and such areas of study opened up.... The critical and social orientation and multidisciplinary released by the conceptual range of cultural studies brightened the study of Malayalam at the Sanskrit University,” he notes. It also transformed traditional subdisciplines such as Malayalam folklore studies.⁷³

However, academia remained rooted in the same the hierarchies and reward structures. The heightened interest in theory, it has been pointed out, did not necessarily produce revolutionary effects; in fact, it may have done the contrary. As T. K. A. Neesar explains, academic spaces in Kerala often functioned as “retail shops” displaying the latest fashions from France: “There were not many efforts to go beyond fashion and analyze local experiences or create a new theoretical space here.”⁷⁴ Neesar further points out that the hierarchies and reward structures of academia in Kerala were such that even the most radical social theories were readily domesticated and reduced to forms of cultural capital for the existing elite.⁷⁵ Not surprisingly, then, Dalit scholars have advanced proposals for the creation of a disciplinary field of their own that not only uses critical poststructuralist theory but also imagines a different, less hierarchical set of relations within the academic community.⁷⁶ Dalit scholarship in the 1990s made good use of poststructuralist critiques of modernity, especially outside the academy. As the “about us” statement of the Dalit web portal Utharakalam explains, “The very name Utharakalam points to the post-foundational time in which all universally sanctioned totalitarian narratives are thrown into

⁷³ Scaria Zacharia, *Malayala vazhikal: Scaria Zachariayute theranjetutha prabandhangal* [Malayalam ways: Selected essays by Scaria Zacharia] (Kottayam: Sahitya Pravarthaka Sahakarana Sangham, 2019), 1:99, 102, 64–65.

⁷⁴ T. K. A. Neesar, “Kalam ellaavarudethumaayi” [Time now belongs to everyone], interview by Dileep Raj, in *Oru samoohika kazchappaadil ninnu* [From a social point of view] (Kozhikode: Institute for Social and Ecological Studies, 2012), 595.

⁷⁵ T. K. A. Neesar, “Postmodernisathe aarkkaanu pedi?” [Who is afraid of postmodernism?], in *Oru samoohika kazchappaadil ninnu*, 158–63.

⁷⁶ T. M. Yesudasan, “Towards a Prologue to Dalit Studies,” in Satyanarayana and Tharu, *No Alphabet in Sight*, 611–30.

relief and problematically analysed for their ideological interests and politics of power.... Utharakalam aims to ... project and garner support for the individual and collective struggles of new political subjectivities, reflected in their narratives, institutions and politics of difference.”⁷⁷

The curriculum of the Muslim seminaries set up in the 1990s also included the critical humanities, and in striking measure. On post-1990s new Islamic education in Malabar, P. K. Yasser Arafath remarks:

Post-1990s Malabar witnessed a new model of Islamic educational institutions that reconfigured the traditional Islamic learning in the region by introducing curricula that gave equal importance to theological and non-religious subjects.... For example, Darul Huda Islamic University, Chemmad, devised a unique model of curriculum by which students are trained in multiple disciplines spanning the humanities and with an emphasis on language education. One of their major aims is to create a community of interdisciplinary polyglot scholars trained in Malayalam, English, Arabic, Persian, and Urdu.... And, as a matter of fact, a significant number of Muslim students (male) from Kerala who get enrolled in major Indian public universities are the products of this new Islamist pedagogy. They are trained to engage various threads of critical humanities.

Arafath also points to a new Islamist library movement under way in Malabar: “The new library culture that emerged along with such institutions [as the new Islamic colleges and universities introduced] a new experience of reading among post-Mandal Mappilas. These ‘new Islamic libraries’ in Malabar invest a lot in procuring [the] latest books on various humanities subjects.”⁷⁸

If the freer atmosphere of newly set up academic spaces provided an opening, however limited, for critical humanities, larger changes in the field of higher education that put pressure on academics to obtain doctoral degrees and publish frequently and that subjected them to stringent quantifiable metrics of academic excellence have had a decidedly negative impact. The production of knowledge in the critical humanities was thus forced to become mechanical, hurried, and watered-down. One of my interviewees, a prominent critic of the decline in academic standards in university-based research in the humanities, pointed to a system of “back-scratching” among peers that ensured that even weak dissertations were allowed to pass. The same interviewee also pointed out that the interdisciplinarity ushered in by cultural studies had been strictly limited: “Folklore was treated as another kind of literary text and the essence of folk culture was drained out of it. Had the teachers been familiar with anthropolog-

⁷⁷ “About Us,” Utharakalam, accessed August 12, 2021, <http://utharakalam.com/about-us>.

⁷⁸ Arafath, email interview by author.

ical or sociological approaches, folklore studies could have been transacted in a more appropriate way.”⁷⁹

A recent plagiarism controversy involving a well-known critic and academic is also instructive of both the pressures created by the new institutional frameworks and the hollowness of their claims of producing “quality.” This scholar’s minimal use of source citations would technically be considered plagiarism, but it was publicly supported by several leading intellectuals, who defended it as “secondary/introductory” writing.⁸⁰ The concern for plagiarism, which is recent and part of other measures of accountability imposed on academic institutions in the new millennium, has exposed an earlier mode of building scholarly reputations via free or partial “borrowing.” This episode revealed that even though the production of humanities knowledge is a highly prized form of cultural capital, it may still entail acts of plagiarism, including free or “creative” translation, paraphrasing without attribution, or minimal citation. It also showed that accountability mechanisms may well expose feet of clay, even among the most influential members of academia.

Indeed, it was the rise of radical politics and greater access to higher education for many underprivileged sections in the 1990s that pushed change. T. T. Sreekumar, whose student life spanned the 1980s and 1990s, recalls that this move toward radical anticaste politics was sometimes student-led: “It was the emergence of new social movements that deeply influenced academic priorities in Kerala. In that sense it was partially student-led too.... It took almost a decade, 1985–1995, to bridge this gap between avant-garde research and its general acceptance in the academia.”⁸¹ Since the postliberalization period of the 1990s, Malayali students have been able to migrate out of Kerala for higher education. This ability to migrate is the result of the economic upturn (especially in the early years of the twenty-first century), implementation of educational quotas in India’s central universities as recommended by the Mandal Commission in 2006, the greater flow of information enabled by new communication technologies, and increased access to Western universities. In the same period, second- and third-generation members of the Malayali diaspora also began to take up research on Kerala in Western universities. This development in turn

⁷⁹ Ravi Sankar S. Nair, email interview by author, May 1, 2020.

⁸⁰ “Sunil Pi Ilayattinetireyulla ariyapananna! adisthanarahitam: Akkadamikkukalude sanyukta prastavana” [Allegations against Sunil P. Elayidam are baseless: Academic joint statement], *Navamalayali*, December 6, 2018, <https://navamalayali.com/2018/12/06/academics-in-support-for-sunil-p-elayidom/>.

⁸¹ Sreekumar, email interview by author. My own experience as a feminist researcher in Kerala in the 1990s fits this description well.

helped to expand the disciplinary moorings of humanities research. Traditional arts such as Koodiyattam and Kathakali, which had previously figured mainly within Indological studies, were now studied utilizing frameworks from subdisciplines such as performance studies, media studies, and so on.⁸²

Often, government-sponsored “public humanities” make up for the shortcomings of universities in the form of statewide art and culture festivals for school students. One example is the Kerala State School Kalolsavam (held annually since 1956) and folk culture festivals, which includes both professional performance and scholarly discussions.⁸³ The International Film Festival of Kerala (IFFK), held annually since 1996, introduces students and the public to world cinema and now regularly includes scholarly events as well.⁸⁴ More recent initiatives that are part of government-sponsored public humanities include the International Theatre Festival of Kerala, held annually since 2008 at Thrissur, and the International Documentary and Short Film Festival of Kerala, also begun in 2008.⁸⁵

Such public humanities have also been taken up by civil society. For example, even though Kerala already had academic institutions teaching the arts, the Kochi Biennale, begun in 2012, sparked a more widespread interest in the practice of and research on art in Kerala.⁸⁶ In the major cities, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) now take an active interest in documenting heritage and organizing walks and other public events, often with the active support of historians, conservationists, and others. One such NGO is the Calicut Heritage Forum and Heritage Walk, Thiruvananthapuram.⁸⁷ The IFFK’s success also rests on the film society movement active in Kerala since the 1960s, which included more than a hundred film societies that viewed and discussed

⁸² For example, see Elizabeth M. Kuriën, “*Kutiyattam: Intangible Heritage and Transnationalism*” (PhD diss., University of California, Riverside, 2013).

⁸³ Christine Guillebaud, “Music and Politics in Kerala: Hindu Nationalists versus Marxists,” in *The Cultural Entrenchment of Hindutva: Local Mediations and Forms of Convergence*, ed. Daniela Berti, Nicolas Jaoul, and Pralay Kanungo (London: Routledge, 2011), 29–63.

⁸⁴ “Film Festivals,” Kerala State Chalachitra Academy, accessed May 11, 2020, <https://www.keralafilm.com/index.php/archive/film-festivals>.

⁸⁵ “International Theatre Festival of Kerala: About Us,” Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Akademi, accessed May 11, 2020, <http://theatrefestivalkerala.com/our-concept/>; “Film Festivals,” Kerala State Chalachitra Academy.

⁸⁶ “Mission Statement,” Kochi–Muziris Biennale, accessed May 11, 2020, <http://kochimuzirisbiennale.org/foundation/#>.

⁸⁷ “About Calicut Heritage,” Calicut Heritage, accessed May 11, 2020, http://calicutheritage.com/about_us.aspx.

world cinema.⁸⁸ The public humanities in Kerala are enmeshed in questions of subnational identity as well as its contestation.⁸⁹

Like public humanities, the digital humanities (DH) are also rooted not in universities but in civil social organizations and NGOs such as Sahapedia.⁹⁰ To my question about why university departments in Kerala have not experimented with DH, language scholar and critic Ravi Sankar S. Nair responded:

Departments of literature or linguistics in Kerala are yet to identify themselves as being situated in the wider area of humanities.... Departments that make their presence felt through work of contemporary importance define a discipline for the public. Unfortunately the humanities departments of Kerala could not send across such message to the society. For example, most of the online translation programs for Indian languages were developed by Google and such international firms. If a department of linguistics could do similar work for Malayalam, many students would be enthused to enter linguistics.⁹¹

About the failure of academic institutions to harvest the critical potential of the emerging discipline of DH, T. T. Sreekumar remarked:

If we look at the Indian scenario, the very understanding of DH as a discipline ... is one that favors and promotes digitization drives, e-government initiatives, and general techno-cultural entrepreneurship, but remains conspicuously silent about what DH stands for in principle, i.e., the politics of disrupting the channels of traditional knowledge production as such. DH initiatives in Kerala, as far as is known, have followed the same pattern—from streamlining the digitization of cadjan-leaf manuscripts to the promotion of multimedia in pedagogy. DH research is limited to a few PhD dissertations in languages, that explore the scope of literature in the digital context. The profoundly political question of digitality remains academically uncharted in the context of Kerala, even as Malayalees have a substantial online presence and a vibrantly political social media.⁹²

A Renewed Publishing Industry

Humanities publishing has been an important site of intellectual cosmopolitanism in twentieth-century Kerala. High rates of literacy, the opportunities for self-development offered to individuals by political and social movements, the

⁸⁸ C. S. Venkiteswaran, "Reflections on Film Society Movement in Keralam," *South Asian Popular Culture* 7, no. 1 (2009): 65–71.

⁸⁹ Guillebaud, "Music and Politics."

⁹⁰ "About Us," Sahapedia, accessed August 20, 2021, <https://www.sahapedia.org/about-us>.

⁹¹ Ravi Sankar S. Nair, email interview by author, May 1, 2020.

⁹² Sreekumar, email interview by author.

perception of literature as a “practice of the self,” and, most importantly, the fact that people marginalized by the bourgeois public sphere could become members of the “republic of letters” has created a demand for literature.⁹³ The publishing industry responded to this demand by making available not just Malayalam writing but also translations from other Indian languages and from world literature. The publishing industry in Kerala, however, was not entirely market driven until the 1980s. The writers’ cooperative called Sahitya Pravarthaka Sahakarana Sangham (Literary Activists’ Co-operative Society), set up in 1945; publishing houses of the Left parties such as Prabhat Books and Deshabhimani Books; and small but strikingly original publishers such as Shikha Books, Mulberry Books, and radical publisher Shelviraj constituted a prominent presence in the field.⁹⁴ From the 1950s onward, these channels delivered Malayalam a large number of translations of Bengali, Russian, Latin American literature, and other languages. Market-driven publishing houses such as DC Books (established in 1974) and Mathrubhumi Books (the publishing arm of the Malayalam newspaper *Mathrubhumi*) built their fortunes on reading tastes already shaped by these small, mission-driven publishers.

The extent to which present-day commercial publishing in Malayalam relies on literary writing cannot be underestimated. Ravi Decece, the CEO of Malayalam’s leading commercial publisher, DC Books, remarked in 2019 that while they tend to print around four thousand copies of a popular fiction title, they print five times that for literary fiction. A study published in 2015 noted that literary translations made up 70 percent of the translations published by DC Books, but half of them failed to sell well, while original Malayalam works sold better. Despite this, the company “brings out Malayalam translations of literature on a regular basis primarily because it needs to publish more literary titles if it is to be acknowledged as a serious literary publishing house.”⁹⁵

The Malayali literary-cultural public has always been an “alternate public sphere” into which marginalized people could enter and make claims.

⁹³ On the “practice of the self,” see Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derrick Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), 33–75. On the “republic of letters,” see Kevin Pask, “The Bourgeois Public Sphere and the Concept of Literature,” *Criticism* 46, no. 2 (2004): 241–56.

⁹⁴ Ganesan S., “Book Publishing in Regional Languages with Special Reference to Tamil” (PhD diss., Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirapalli, 1987), 202–12.

⁹⁵ Mini Chandran, “In the Marketplace: Publication of Translations in Indian Regional Languages,” in *Textual Travels: Theory and Practice of Translation in India*, ed. Mini Chandran and Supriya Mathur (New Delhi: Routledge, 2015), 95–96.

DC Books has also benefited from publishing hitherto excluded voices, often to the chagrin of the representatives of “high” literature. One such controversy developed around the publishing and republishing of the autobiography of sex worker activist Nalini Jameela, mentioned above. DC Books has also defended authors’ literary freedom against right-wing censorship. Right-wing Hindu extremism is now the ruling dispensation in India and has grown in strength in Kerala as well. It has had an impact on the Malayalam literary public. In 2018, right-wing Hindu forces accused the novelist S. Hareesh of insulting Brahmins after he published a serial installment from a novel in the weekly magazine *Mathrubhumi*. After the management of the magazine allegedly refused to support him, and with fear for his safety, Hareesh withdrew future installments.⁹⁶ DC Books in turn published the novel in full, and it became a bestseller, with five printings in the first week.⁹⁷

Malayalam publishing houses have also harnessed to their advantage the ready-made readership that some authors have cultivated on social media, for instance, R. Rajasree’s recent novel *Kalyaani ennum Dakshaayani ennum peraaya randu streekalude kata* (2019) and Echmukkutty’s (2019) memoir, both of which began as series of Facebook posts. The burgeoning Malayali diaspora has also greatly expanded the market for literary production since the 1990s. Successful authors now sell lakhs of copies, and second- and third-generation members of the Malayali diaspora now drive a significant advance in the translation of Malayalam literature.⁹⁸ The English translation of K. R. Meera’s *Aarachaar* as *Hangwoman* (2012) became a critically acclaimed national bestseller in India. Many other Malayalam works in English translation have won prestigious national prizes too.

Smaller radical publishers close to the New Left and emerging civil society politics met the interest in critical theory that developed in the 1980s. Commercial publishing houses began to take an active interest in this development only in the late 1990s, by which time critical theory had gained greater traction within academic circles. DC Books’ Navasiddhanthangal (Modern theories) series of the late 1990s included introductions to postmodernism, feminism, new historicism, and so on. More recently, growing interest in Dalit theory has

⁹⁶ T. Ramavarman, “Protest against Display of Novel at Book Exhibition,” *Times of India*, November 10, 2018, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/thiruvananthapuram/protest-against-display-of-novel-at-book-exhibition/articleshow/66572244.cms>.

⁹⁷ Thufail P. T., “Thus Meesha Becomes a Legend,” *Outlook*, September 6, 2018, <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/thus-meesha-becomes-a-legend/316103>.

⁹⁸ Sandip Sen, “Malayalam Literary Publishing Drives Indian Language Fiction,” *Indian Printer and Publisher* (web magazine), May 24, 2019, <https://indianprinterpublisher.com/blog/2019/05/24/malayalam-literary-fiction-drives-indian-language-publishing/>.

resulted in a book series from DC Books called *Dalitam*, which includes four books by leading Dalit intellectuals. However, it is still rare to see commercial firms publish Malayalam historical or sociological writing. Whatever exists—original or in translation—has appeared outside commercial publishing, for example, my work on the history of gender in Kerala.⁹⁹

Despite being built on the noncommercial foundations, market-driven publishing subtly changed the rules of the game. For example, the translation process at DC Books now involves its editorial team simply choosing titles from already available English translations of books in other languages and handing them over to the company's team of translators to produce Malayalam translations.¹⁰⁰ Meanwhile, the logic of the market continues to work ever more powerfully, favoring writers with a preexisting readership: for example, authors from the Latin American literary world are much favored, and this is no surprise because the taste for Latin American novels was developed here in the 1970s and 1980s in and through radical left literary circles that sought to transform the Malayali literary canon through bringing it in contact with literary writing from the Global South. This trend was extended by market forces in publishing—introducing popular authors whose literary reputations are debatable, like Paulo Coelho, in Malayalam recently. Not surprisingly, then, even as it has picked up rich material for publication from the world of social media, commercial publishing has allowed itself to be used by people with many online followers, who are perhaps more willing to forgive writing of dubious quality. Finally, despite being guided by leading intellectuals, the large, recently emerged annual literary festivals sponsored by publishers are also a powerful means by which commercial publishing is able to shape intellectual sensibilities in Kerala, making it less exclusive but also far more driven by celebrity culture and profit motive.

Conclusion

In twentieth-century Kerala, the humanities have both straddled and intertwined two vital social spaces: the Malayali literary-cultural public and academia. The productive interpenetration of humanities research and practice across these two spaces has had a significant democratizing impact. The

⁹⁹ J. Devika, *Kulasthreeyum chanthappennum undaayathengane?* [How did the family woman and market woman come into being?] (Thiruvananthapuram: Centre for Development Studies, 2010).

¹⁰⁰ Chandran, "In the Marketplace," 97.

Malayali literary-cultural public has always been an “alternate public sphere” into which marginalized people could enter and make claims. However, several important shifts have occurred. First, writers heavily endowed with cultural capital threw their weight behind the specific struggles of marginalized people seeking visibility, discourse, voice, and self-transformation in the 1980s. These marginalized groups would soon assert themselves as intellectuals in their own right from the late 1980s onward. Second, these attempts to “seize the opportunity” that literature afforded led to throwing off the yoke of the chief authority figure: the elite male literary critic.¹⁰¹ Third, the homoaesthetic circle now is far less powerful than it was, and it has transformed in character as well.¹⁰² Fourth, new disciplines such as cultural studies, film studies, gender studies, and so on have made the borders between academia and the literary-cultural public even more porous. However, this does not mean that the literary-cultural public is not shaped by power struggles—far from it. The publishing industry is now driven far more by commercial interests and influential social media personas who bring with them a considerable fan following.

Academia-based humanities too underwent a significant transformation and expansion in the post-1990s period, with more student emigration, the

Public humanities are where twentieth-century conceptions of the region are being dismantled and where the search for new forms of belonging is on.

creation of new university spaces, the rise of radical politics in the form of feminist and Dalit critiques, and the emergence of the new humanities disciplines. The shift in the syllabi that the new disciplines engendered

resembled shifts elsewhere. There was a move from focusing on the classics and the established canon to questioning them as well as paying more attention to popular culture. There was a shift from greater reliance on interpretation to methodological pluralism and interdisciplinarity, and a move toward greater

¹⁰¹ Marianne DeKoven, “Cultural Dreaming and Cultural Studies,” *New Literary History* 27, no. 1 (1996): 129–44.

¹⁰² To declare its demise may be premature, but it may be changing form. For example, the group of poets mentored by the senior poet Attoor Ravi Varma in the 1990s seemed to resemble the homoaesthetic circle yet also departed from it in important ways, including its caste and gender composition and its ability to cross linguistic borders and interact with poets from other cultures and languages. Also, new groups are taking shape in the present in digital spaces, especially social media. The women poets’ collective Poetria and the collective taking shape around the multilingual translator and poet Ravi Shankar, for instance, are changing the shape and politics of the homoaesthetic circle quite decisively.

self-reflexivity and critical thinking. However, these new academic spaces are still not free of the older power hierarchies, institutional accountability measures introduced at the national level have not been able to raise academic standards, and entrenched elements can still bypass the need for accountability in Kerala's academia. Similarly, the persistence of older hierarchies and power structures also limits the growth of digital and public humanities in Kerala. Nevertheless, the flowering of the Dalit and feminist critiques and the opening up of new political and intellectual spaces online and offline ensure that the voices of marginalized groups can no longer be ignored.

In contrast, public discourse in Kerala is no longer a monopoly of either literary intellectuals or political heavyweights entrenched in local universities. The discourse of critical theory has always exceeded academic spaces in Kerala, even more so now. All of this, however, is threatened by the growing power and reach of the security state, which censors and monitors intellectual activity as well as political subjectivities and expressions relentlessly. The Kerala government's public humanities, for example, thrive at the interface between the literary-cultural public and pedagogy via film and art festivals, but these too are shaped by the changing culture of pedagogy, which favors student surveillance and productivity, and the increasing significance of market forces. These ongoing issues and debates are, of course, situated at the very heart of the larger and unmistakably political question of a changing subnational culture and its relationship to national and global formations, which in turn touch upon the everyday experience of belonging. For public humanities are indeed where twentieth-century conceptions of the region are being dismantled and the search for new forms of belonging is on. For that reason alone, the humanities continue to be central to our intellectual life, irrespective of whether the state extends patronage or not. It is also the reason why the humanities continue to attract and retain enormous amounts of talent, even though the rewards are neither certain nor generous.

Postscript

The COVID-19 pandemic has raised new questions and issues and may entail significant changes for the humanities in Kerala in both their public and academic manifestations. The publishing industry, literary and film festivals, and academic activities have migrated online at a rapid rate; the number of webinars has increased greatly. Yet there is considerable anxiety about the institutional changes pushed through during the pandemic, especially about their

implications for humanities education. It is too early to assess the impact of the pandemic, yet the significance of digital humanities is perhaps only too conspicuous now. Most importantly, the shrinkage that democracy and rights-based discourse has suffered from the pandemic only intensifies the need for humanities education in Kerala as anywhere else.

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