



## Exploring the Marxist Influence on Education and Cultural Transformation in Kerala: A Historical Analysis

Bindu.P.S.

Assistant Professor  
Department of History  
M.S.M.College, Kayamkulam  
binduanilps@gmail.com

Date of Submission: 11-07-2024

Date of Acceptance: 25-07-2024

### Abstract

The nineteenth century witnessed great change and social formation in the history of Kerala. During this period an intellectual revolution took place which changed the outlook or attitude of the people. This was a period of social consciousness that led to several revolutionary changes in all spheres of life. Social Change is an inevitable factor. In this process, social institutions, beliefs, and habits are greatly changed. The advent of Europeans and the impact of colonialism led to the spread of Western education and the emergence of educated intelligentsia that brought about radical changes in the structure of our society. One of the most striking features of Kerala society was that it was not based on the principle of social equality and brotherhood. The upper section of the society enjoyed all the rights and privileges and they exploited the most downtrodden section of our state.

Education is very important and has a formative impact on the personality of an individual. The history of educational development of Kerala is the history of the struggles for emancipation and for overcoming adverse conditions. These struggles paved the way for the universalization of education in Kerala society. The most prominent and significant feature of 19th-century Kerala was the revival of education on an entirely new line which transformed the society of Kerala from medievalism to modernism. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries witnessed the emergence of a new social order in Kerala. Education liberates man from the state of inaction that is imposed by the prevailing malpractices and superstitions.

This paper is an attempt to analyze how the society of Kerala transformed through the impact of education. This study also highlights the role of missionaries and the effects of Western education. This study analyzed the Marxist influence on education and culture in Kerala. Today we have to face so many socio-cultural, religious, and political

issues that led our society into backwardness and it also affects our economic development and our unique culture. So, we must create awareness and guidelines for posterity through education. A qualitative transformation is very urgent in the cultural life of the people of Kerala.

**Keywords:** Education, Marxism, Social Transformation, Emancipation, and culture

Kerala's unique socio-political conditions led to the influence of Marxist doctrines on various aspects of Kerala society like education, culture, and way of life. During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Kerala witnessed various socio-religious movements led by Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, Chattampi Swamikal, Vagbhadananda and other social reformers. All these movements aimed to create an egalitarian society and to uplift the most oppressed sections of society. They realized that education was the only way to empower the people. K.M. Panikkar a renowned Indian historian observed: "Kerala's history is one of the most fascinating chapters in the history of India. It is a region where the interaction of various cultures—Dravidian, Aryan, Arab, and European—has resulted in a unique and vibrant society." Education was universal in Kerala and there was a high level of literacy during the Sangam epoch.<sup>1</sup>

The communist party of Kerala spread the ideas of socialism, Marxism, and equality and mobilized the peasants, workers, and other downtrodden sections of society. They used education as a medium to make them aware of their rights and created several educational opportunities. The first communist government in India was elected in Kerala in 1957 and Kerala is the only state where the communist party came into power through the election under the leadership of E.M.S.Namboodiripad. The government emphasized educational reforms and promoted public education,



Marxist doctrines, critical thinking, scientific analysis, and social justice. Social institutions are created historically and developed historically, but they are constantly tested by socialization when they are taken over and legitimated by new generations.<sup>2</sup> A prominent historian of Kerala, Sreedhara Menon wrote: "Kerala's cultural heritage is a synthesis of various elements derived from diverse sources. The state has a unique cultural identity that reflects the collective achievements of its people in literature, arts, and social reforms." The Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishad promoted scientific awareness among the people and it incorporated Marxist principles of empowerment and enlightenment through education. This geographical isolation has, however, not prevented Kerala from making its rich contribution to the cultural heritage of the country as part of the general mainstream of Indian culture.<sup>3</sup> Robin Jeffrey- an Australian historian who has written extensively on Kerala, said: - "Kerala is the part of India that has done best in terms of human development, and it has done so through public action, including education."

### Historical Background

Kerala has a rich heritage of socio-religious reform movements aimed to uplift the oppressed sections of society eradicate the evil practices of society and promote education among the lower castes. Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, and other reformers championed the role of education as a tool for the emancipation of society. They also promoted equality, justice, and brotherhood and laid the foundation stone for the later Marxist influences. Amartya Sen - Nobel laureate and economist, known for his work on welfare economics, has praised Kerala's education model: - "Kerala's commitment to education and healthcare has shown how even a poor region can achieve remarkable progress in quality of life and human development."

### Evolution of education

During the ancient period Kerala had its major centers of learning of which 'Matilakom' near Muziris was very prominent. Sanskrit and Tamil poets, Buddhist and Jain scholars, and many other men of learning adopted Matilakom as their place of residence and enriched the intellectual life of the Place.<sup>4</sup> The Panas, Vedas, Kuravas, the Parayas and others were entitled to higher education. Education was provided to all without any discrimination of caste or sex. Special attention was given to female education too. The progress of Aryanisation brought about a decline in the standards of general education and literacy. With the spread of Aryan ideology,

education became a monopoly of a privileged few. Women as well as the low castes gradually lost their high status in society and right to education. As a result, low castes and women were deprived of the right to education. Even among the superior castes, higher learning came to be restricted to Brahmins, while other castes received elementary and professional education. Next to Brahmins the Devadasis got the best type of education.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the concept of universal education, which existed in the early Sangam Age, deteriorated under the impact of the caste system and education became a monopoly of the upper castes in the Hindu society. Temples were the center of all cultural activities after the 8th century. Vedic schools within the temples known as Salais were established by the temple trustees. The reign of the Kulasekharas witnessed the growth of education and learning, along with progress in other fields such as art, architecture, trade, and commerce. The Sabha Mutts or the temple universities played an important role in education in ancient Kerala. These mutts were centers of Vedic studies and learning intended for Namboodiri youths. There were eighteen such Mutts in ancient Kerala. There were also other facilities for specialization in higher branches of learning. This was imparted by individual scholars who had distinctions in Medicine, Astrology etc. It was really a system of *Gurukula* education. More was learned by association with the *Guru* and in the light of his example than from regular teaching or pedagogic discourse. In the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries under the Kolathiri Rajas Taliparamba in North Kerala also became a center of enlightenment and culture. In the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries the native rulers continued their patronage of learning and letters. Ambalapuzha, the seat of Chempakasserri Rajas reached the heights of its greatness as a center of learning.

The Portuguese and the Dutch made some significant contributions to the cause of education and learning in Kerala. The Portuguese founded seminaries and colleges at Cochin, Cranganore and Vaipinkotta . Thus, the Portuguese made some changes in the educational system in Kerala. The socio-religious reform imposed by the Portuguese Jesuits through the Synod of Diamper for 'Christianizing' the local Christians set in the first wave of reform in Kerala. The British and Indian administrators introduced even in the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century a series of administrative and social reforms. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Kerala society was not based on the principles of social freedom and equality: The beginnings of Western or modern education in India can be traced back to the Christian missionaries who were the pioneers in



establishing schools and other educational institutions in the country. They used education, not as an end in itself, but as a means to evangelization. LMS, CMS, and BEMS made continuous efforts to popularize women's education and empowerment. In the wake of socio-economic transformation, the heterodox religious ideologies themselves underwent major changes and got reconstructed more or less in idioms of pre-existing tradition.<sup>6</sup> The missionaries imparted education to boys and girls. The missionaries provided education to all castes and they gave a new status and resource to the lower and neglected castes in Kerala for the first time<sup>7</sup>. The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the beginning of cultural renaissance in Kerala. Government has taken many measures to promote cultural development. Kerala is unique because of the historical advantage of having a very early start in the field of education and because of the matrilineal customs of a significant part of its population. Through the modern education the Kerala society had awakened from its age-long slumber and the society started showing the symptoms of social renaissances. The introduction of Western education acted as a catalytic agent.<sup>8</sup>

During the post-independence period, the Kerala government took significant steps to enhance education. They launched various programmes to promote education among the people of Kerala. They gave more importance to technical education, vocational education, and higher education. During this year (2024), the government introduced four years under graduate programme and brought many new policies and reforms in the field of higher education. Compared to other states in India, Kerala Model development is very unique and remarkable in various fields, especially in education.

### Key Impacts on Education

The most important of the social reform movements of Kerala was the agitation for the removal of untouchability. There existed three methods of transferring the *slaves Janmum* or sale, *Kanam* or mortgage, and *Pattom* or lease.<sup>9</sup> The progress of English education dissemination of liberal ideas and rapid expansion of the means of communication, the progress of industrialization, the rise of the trade union movement, and the introduction of universal adult franchises have also contributed to the breakup of caste barriers in Kerala.<sup>10</sup>

The communist government in Kerala promoted literacy campaigns to eradicate illiteracy and Kerala was the first state in India to achieve complete literacy. They applied the Marxist doctrine that education is a powerful tool to empower and

emancipate the most downtrodden sections of society. They emphasized equitable education to all sections of society through the public education system and focused on quality education. Through education, they propagated Marxist ideas like the significance of class struggles, critical and scientific thinking, social justice, and equality and encouraged the students to question the existing old structures and make them aware of their rights and the existing socio-economic conditions. Higher education also influenced Marxist ideas and emphasized so many research projects related to Marxist theory. The primitive communist society of Kerala was replaced by a system which divided the society into castes. First in to three or four then it became dozens and scores.<sup>11</sup>

Marxist doctrines deeply influenced Malayalam literature, arts, theatre, and cinema. Many poets, novelists, dramatists, and writers adopted socialist themes and depicted the miserable conditions of workers, peasants, and other oppressed sections of society. They criticized the social inequalities and raised their voices against these practices through their works. KPAC (Kerala People's Arts Club) was the best example of propagating communist ideas through their dramas. A well-known cultural historian of Kerala, Balakrishnan emphasized: "The cultural landscape of Kerala is marked by a harmonious blend of tradition and modernity. Its festivals, rituals, and art forms are testimony to a deep-rooted cultural continuity that has withstood the test of time." Marxism created a sense of political and social consciousness among the people of Kerala. So, it promoted the people to participate in political activities, trade unions, and other protest movements to acquire their rights and justice. Marxist movement in Kerala opposed caste-ridden society, and religious disparities, and promoted secularism, and tried to create a more egalitarian society. Kerala is unique because of the historical advantage of having a very early start in the field of education and because of the matrilineal customs of a significant part of its population.<sup>12</sup>

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we can see the spread of communist and socialist ideas in Kerala, inspired by Marxist doctrines. These socialist movements protested for peasants and workers who faced exploitation and oppression by the landlords and colonial governments. P. Krishna Pillai, E. M. S. Namboodiripad, A. K. Gopalan, K. Damodaran played a pivotal role in establishing the communist party in Kerala and propagated Marxist doctrines and organized various Marxist activities for the welfare of the oppressed sections of society. K. Damodaran, one of the founding leaders of the communist party



of Kerala strongly believed in Marxist ideology and promoted education and culture. He emphasized the role of education to propagate socialist values and to empower the working class. He believed that education was a tool for social transformation and that it should be accessible to all irrespective of caste, gender, or any other socio-economic status. He analyzed the significance of the preservation and promotion of indigenous culture and protests against inequality and exploitation that existed in the society. He always works hard to create a more equitable and just society. Another influential British historian, E. P. Thompson is known for his book "The Making of the English Working Class." He approached Marxism with a focus on human agency and culture, emphasizing the experiences and consciousness of ordinary people. Thompson criticized the deterministic aspects of Marxist theory, advocating for a more nuanced and human-centered approach to historical materialism.

### Impact on Culture

Marx and Engels that "The History of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles "was true of Kerala's history as well ".<sup>13</sup> Kerala has a unique culture including ancient traditions, modern innovations, and diverse religious features which make it a dynamic one. It has a rich and diverse cultural history. The Kulasekhara Age played a significant role in shaping Kerala's culture. Sangam literature provided some insights into the socio-cultural life of this period. During the early medieval period, Hinduism became predominant and numerous temples were constructed. Then Bhakti Movement flourished and it promoted devotional literature. During the Medieval period we can see the Islamic influence with the arrival of Arab traders and the Mappila Muslim community emerged in Kerala. The arrival of Europeans like Portuguese, Dutch, French, and finally the English marked a turning point in the history of Kerala. The socio-religious reform movement also brought about revolutionary changes in the history of Kerala. The 20<sup>th</sup> century marked a cultural renaissance in Kerala. After independence government formulated various policies and programmes to promote cultural developments in Kerala. According to Karl Marx "Society does not consist of individuals, but expresses the sum of interrelations, the relations within which these individuals stand." "From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs." A prominent British historian and Marxist, Hobsbawm viewed Marxism as a crucial tool for understanding historical developments and class struggles. He believed in its analytical power to

explain the dynamics of capitalism and social change. In his works, such as "The Age of Extremes," Hobsbawm defended the intellectual validity of Marxism while also critically examining the failures and excesses of its implementation in the 20th century.

### Challenges

Globalization also created new challenges and it affected the educational pattern of society. However, the government addressed these issues through its policies and tried to reduce the disparities. The government emphasized technological integration in education and ensured the benefit of underprivileged sections of society. The Marxist influence had many positive outcomes focused on critical and scientific thinking, social justice, and equality and ensured sustainable progress. But sometimes excessive political interference affected academic freedom and ideological bias also developed, limiting exposure to various viewpoints. K. N. Panikkar - an eminent Indian historian has commented: - "The literacy movement in Kerala is not just about achieving a high literacy rate; it's about creating a culture of learning and critical thinking. The focus on public education in Kerala has been instrumental in achieving social justice and economic development." Marxism was a great doctrine that influenced the whole world, especially in Kerala and the leftist political parties played a great role in the spread of Marxist ideas on education systems.

### Conclusion

The Marxist impact on education created awareness among the people to become a good citizen. It empowered the society through ideological framework and it contributed to formulating many educational policies and outcomes. The Marxist ideology had a transformative impact on the socio-economic and political landscape of Kerala. It fostered progressive ideas, political activism, and cultural exchanges and brought social and economic reforms that heightened consciousness among the people. The educational development in Kerala led to socio-economic and cultural progress and an inspiration to others for achieving similar landmarks. The effects of Marxist ideologies on education and culture in Kerala are profound transformative and progressive. The communist government in Kerala tried to make education accessible to all without any discrimination. Marxist movements aimed to uplift the oppressed sections of society and to preserve the diverse cultural heritage of Kerala. It has also faced some challenges and criticisms in the welfare of the people and economic development of the state. The



contribution of Marxist doctrines became a remarkable and unique factor in the formation of Kerala's socio-economic and cultural identity.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> . Elamkulam P.N.Kunjan Pillai, Studies in Kerala History, Trivandrum, 1970, p.267.
- <sup>2</sup> . Heine Anderson and Lars Bo Kaperson, eds. Classical and Modern Social Theory (Malden, USA, 2000), p. 185.
- <sup>3</sup> . A. Sreedhara Menon, Kerala History and its Makers, Kottayam, 1987, pp.3-4.
- <sup>4</sup> . A. Sreedhara Menon, Cultural Heritage of Kerala: An Introduction, (Cochin, 1978), p.16.
- <sup>5</sup> . Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai, op.cit. p.277.
- <sup>6</sup> . Rajan Gurukkal, M.R.Raghava Varier, eds. Cultural History of Kerala Vol.I (Trivandrum, 1991), p. 25.
- <sup>7</sup> . T.K.Gangadharan, Evolution of Kerala History and Culture, Calicut, 1997, p.-281.
- <sup>8</sup> . A. Sreedhara Menon, op.cit. p.396.
- <sup>9</sup> . Francis Buchanan, A Journey from Madras through the countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar, London, 1807, p.492.
- <sup>10</sup> . Sreedhara Menon, op.cit., p.293.
- <sup>11</sup> . E.M.S. Namboothiri pad, Kerala-Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow (Calcutta, 1967), p.28.
- <sup>12</sup> . Bipan Chandra, India since Independence, (New Delhi, 1999), P.652.
- <sup>13</sup> . Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, The Communist Manifesto, Oxford, 1992, p.2.