

***Democracy's unfulfilled promise? 'The participatory tradition' within Kerala's Communist politics***

Lipin Ram

Nothing in the constellation of notions subsumed under the term Populism provokes divergence of thought perhaps as strongly as 'participation.' It is the source of much hope and much fear, both in theory and society. While the fear comes from sources as diverse as the anxiety about the unruly crowd to the worry of majoritarian subversion of constitutionalism, the hope usually stems from one question: could 'participation' be the modality that finally fulfils the emancipatory promise of democracy? The contentious debates centring on populism has a lot to do with this tension between fear and hope around the notion of 'participation,' for often populist movements mobilise disaffection against elites who, it is perceived, thrive by keeping the people 'out.'

This paper is based on ethnographic and historical research on the 'participatory initiatives' of the Communist Party in Kerala. It attempts to show how the idea of 'participation,' while carrying the emancipative promise of democracy, retains the potential to be incorporated into various discursive practices within a given political landscape, often resulting in digression, repetition, parody, and banality. Analysing the 'participatory tradition' within Kerala communism in three phases, it demonstrates how the modalities of 'participation' can bring about forms of political engagement that range from the truly transformative to the utterly farcical. Rather than treat them as 'ideal' or 'corrupt', the paper shows them as possibilities ingrained within democratic politics that find expression subject to the contingencies of history and politics.