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**Citation:** During, S. 2019. Kerala: A Cultural Studies Tour. *Cultural Studies Review*, 25:2, 241-243. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/csr.v25i2.6911>

ISSN 1837-8692 | Published by UTS ePRESS | <https://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/csrj>

CULTURE REVIEW

## Kerala: A Cultural Studies Tour

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**DOI:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/csr.v25i2.6911>

**Article history:** Accepted 1/11/2019; Published 22/11/2019

On India's west coast, as far as south as you can go, bordered on the east by mountains and on the west by the Arabian sea, there's Kerala.

It's a beautiful place, which has been connected to the world for centuries. There are two simple reasons for that: because its soils, peoples and climate grow spices so abundantly and because so many people so many places like spicy foods. By the time (around 1500 BCE) that the Austronesians built the first ocean-going ships to establish the hemispheric trade routes, Kerala had already been trading spices northwards for over a millennium. That's a significant slice of history.

By the time of the Roman empire, traders travelling down the coast from Arabia brought with them not just means of exchange—precious metals and goods—but what, in the end, was more important: religions.

Christianity arrived in the first centuries after Christ: legend has it that Kerala is where the apostle St Thomas performed his sub-continental mission and today's most orthodox denominations traces their history back to St Thomas. The Franciscans and Dominicans followed in the 14thc CE and today's Catholic Latin Church follows their teachings. When the Portuguese arrived in Kerala at the very end of the 15thc, hoping to convert the locals, they were surprised to find thriving Christian communities in place.

By then Jewish and Muslim communities were in Kerala too, most likely founded by traders who had married into local communities. Hinduism's early history in Kerala is contested: it is a Northern import, part of that displacement of the indigenous people which has continued pretty much up until now. Nonetheless, Keralite Hinduism remains distinct from Northern Hinduism.

Today about a fraction over half of Kerala's population is Hindu; a quarter is Muslim and just under a fifth Christian, these last divided into competing confessions which between them contain global Christianity's history.

**DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTEREST** The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. **FUNDING** The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Religious affiliation remains probably the most important marker of identity in Kerala. And patriarchy is embedded in these religions: traditional gender relations continue to hold even though many women work. But religion and gender aren't the only substantive identities. So is caste. Although caste was of course originally a Hindu construct, similar hierarchies now organize the Christian and Muslim communities too. Marriages are still normally arranged, and for many families extra-caste marriages are difficult if not impossible. Furthermore, a deference culture, ultimately mimetic of caste hierarches, is palpable even in the academic world.

Kerala has been a pioneer in secularism too. On one level its language, Malayalam, has been important to this. Because Kerala has its own language, it also has its own literature and literary history; its own film/tv industry etc. This helps ensure that its relation to greater India is somewhat ambiguous.

The Kerala we know today began as a governmental contrivance: it was formed in 1956, cobbled together from contiguous polities which had voluntarily joined the new nation state in 1949. But today, now that the national government is controlled by BJP who wish to Hindu-ize the national culture, Kerala's Malayalam culture shapes a political identity too. The BJP has little support in Kerala. As millions of readers of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997, Indiaink) know, Kerala is governed by a Communist party. Many Keralites, and especially Christian and Hindu Keralites, are Communists. In fact, that's the reason why I was there.

I had been invited as an 'Erudite Scholar' by the government's Higher Education Council to give a lecture tour. The Communist government is committed to education. Kerala has today near 100% literacy rates of which it is justly very proud, and after school-age many students, both men and women, continue to study in one of the 19 universities or 186 colleges (some run for profit, some by the state, some by the Churches).

The humanities hold their own in Kerala, and recently cultural studies has become hip. As it turned out, two of my own books are widely used as cultural-studies texts. Hence my invitation.

Nobody could have been more generous and thoughtful hosts than Saji Mathew and Rajan Gurukkal from the Higher Education Council or the various friends roped in to look after and educate me—Akhilesh Udayabhanu, Cheri Jacob K and Manoj Kumar—you know who you are. With their help, my experience in Kerala was an exhilarating and illuminating one. But I can't say that I came away wholly understanding the place—or for that matter wholly confident that Kerala had wholly understood me.

The difficulty wasn't personal. It had little to do with the fact that the visit took place under a certain misapprehension. In fact I am not really a cultural-studies scholar but I didn't get the sense that that mattered much. My most popular lecture (I think) was on T.S. Eliot and religion to a Church of South India (i.e. Anglican) affiliated college, a lecture which began with a short ceremony in which God was invoked. A different kind of cultural studies, that.

Yet there was a real thirst to know about the most advanced streams of first-world cultural studies. I was asked about queer theory, disability studies, decolonization, Judith Butler, 'me too' and so on. It was these questions that nudged at an enigma my visit shrouded: where was such curiosity and such knowledge headed? As I say, the society, run by communists, confidently future-directed, eager to be au courant in the sciences, technology and the humanities, seemed to me, nonetheless, solidly embedded in caste, deference, ritual, religion, patriarchy. The

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Communist party had (as the Jesuits used to say) “accommodated” itself to all that, and as far as I could see, so too had academic cultural studies for practical purposes.

It was as if radical humanities as they exist in the States were available not so much as something exotic or even as theory but as something *imaginative*. It is as if cultural studies had something of the status as a myth or a cult (yet another!), open to ritualization, not quite of this world.

My friends and hosts all seemed secular in the Western sense. As far as I could tell, they believed that religion’s hold of Kerala should be dissolved not least because it buttressed the caste system. I was presented with a copy of B.R. Ambedkar’s classic, *Annihilation of Caste* just to make sure I got that message. And of course the book that has informed most people around the world about Kerala—Roy’s *The God of Small Things*—is fiercely secular and progressive as well as anti-communist. Yet I noticed, or thought I noticed, a certain ambivalence about Roy among my friends. They were proud of her (they also bought me a collection of her essays to make sure I got her message too) but there was a sense that she was not able to be accommodated.

I had the sense that for them Roy was casting her critique into a void: a void constituted by what a Kerala might be if it wasn’t in fact Kerala. Or, to put this better, if it were a Kerala that were neither Kerala as it is, nor the Hindu-ized Kerala the BJP would like to see; nor a Kerala whose communism were purer than it is; nor, of course, a Kerala which had fully embraced Anglophone neo-liberal capitalism.

If Roy’s intense and intelligence critique can be seen as pitched into a void bounded by those limits, so too can cultural studies in its more lumbering academic way. And when you get right down to it, lessons and lectures spoken into that void have the status of rituals, which is of course is just fine in a still ceremonial, if modern, culture.