

Literature Festivals in Kerala: Commercialising Culture and Navigating Public Spheres

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Abstract

The active socio-political and cultural public spheres of Kerala witness celebratory literature festivals mushrooming amidst the intense digital anomalies of the twenty-first century. Organised by governmental or non-governmental organisations, publishing houses, political parties and clubs irrespective of gender or religious biases, the gatherings create constructive ambience beyond the business and marketing strategies.

Modeled after Jaipur Literature Festival and flavoured with regional elements, Kerala Literature Festival founded in 2016 has emerged as one of the largest annual literature festivals in Asia within a few years. The literature festivals happening annually in different districts of the state flag the cultural features of respective regions and practice inclusive social sustainability. The zest of festivals appealing to children, youth and senior citizens bridges the generation gap in the literature-bound academic and social circles of the state which continues to boast about the better indicators of literacy, health and sustainable practices.

The competitive pattern of the festivals tends to invite high profile celebrities from the field of cinema, politics and media towards ensuring increased participation. The associated book sale manifests the thriving industry of print publications at a time when gadgets and screen times are accused of savouring productive energies. The silent and reserved reading movements of twentieth

century are seen converted to loud and exhibitory readership patterns, strategically navigated by commercialisation.

Keywords: Literature Festivals, Kerala, Readership, Culture, Commerce

The literature festivals in the cultural hotspots of Kerala array active socio-political and aesthetic spaces amidst the intense digital anomalies of the twenty-first century. Methodically organised by governmental or non-governmental organisations, publishing houses, political parties and clubs, the festivals characteristically cater to inclusivity. The survey conducted among the festival visitors during Bangalore Literature Festival, September 2015, at Bangalore, Pustaka Parishe, December 2015 at Bangalore, The Hindu Lit Fest, January 2016 at Chennai and Chennai Book Fair, January 2016 at Chennai, states that “Litfests as a cultural phenomenon are getting attention in India, adding glamour and appeal to reading and writing with an increasing number of festivals planned all over the country” (Sheshagiri et al., 2017). The pattern of panel discussions scheduled with eminent writers, celebrities and politicians from outside and inside the country form the key aspect of the momentous event supportively embellished by book sales and art exhibitions.

The audience of the literary festival, however, is typically represented as a body of populist and popularizing consumers, uncritically engaging with the mass-culture produced and propagated in the festival setting. Researchers have begun to refute such claims, demonstrating that members of festival audiences exhibit a deep and critical engagement with literature; but beyond this demographic-based research, little work has been conducted capable of interrogating audience experience, or mapping the broader culture of festival attendance. (Weber 84)

Sapiro states, “The rise of literature festivals, starting in the 1980s, has coincided with globalization and with the urge to democratize culture”. The cultural connotation of the term ‘festival’ in a country like India where every socio-political and economic dynamics is

controlled by the ritualistic religiosity of diverse caste and class divisions naturally celebrate literature festivals with the same pious zest. Per Stahlberg (2019), who carried out a research on Jaipur Literature Festival as part of “World Literature; Cosmopolitan and Vernacular dynamics,” run between 2016 and 2021 supported by The Swedish Foundation for Humanities and Social Sciences says “the festivals are events where books can be studied as commodities for global consumption and writers conceptualized as cultural producers in a cosmopolitan world”. JLF established in 2006 with eighteen authors and a crowd of hundred people, within decades has emerged as a grant event of art, literature and business rightly defined as literary tourism.

According to Sanjoy Roy, Managing Director of Teamwork Arts, the entertainment company that produces and organises JLF, perhaps the biggest success of the event is the fact that since it began, over 60 literary festivals have sprung up in the country, with many of them pushing the format, trying new things, experimenting with scale, style and ideas. (Daftaur, 2024)

The popular Apeejay Kolkata Literary Festival(AKLF), The Hindu Litfest, Times Litfest, Bangalore Literature Festival, Valley of Words(VoW) Dehradun, Goa Arts and Literary Festival(GALF), Kolkata Literary Meet, Himalayan Echoes: Kumaon Festival of Literature and Arts, Khushwant Singh Literature Festival, Queensline Lit Fest Mumbai, The Ooty Literary Festival, the Crime Literature Festival Dehradun, Neev Literature Festival for children, Nagaland’s The White Owl Literature Festival & Book Fair, the Shillong Literary Festival and the Ziro Literary festival have JLF as their prototype.

The stakeholders who may enjoy private benefits from a literary festival event include writers, readers, publishers and booksellers. The public-good benefits accrue as spillovers enjoyed by residents and businesses in local and regional economies, and

more generally as a contribution to the viability of the global book industry and the advancement of literature as an art form. (Throsby et al 5)

Modeled after Jaipur Literature Festival and flavoured with regional elements, Kerala Literature Festival founded in 2016 by DC Kizhakkemuri Foundation has emerged as one of the largest annual literature festivals in Asia within a few years. Before being branded as UNESCO City of Literature, Kozhikode has been hosting frequent literary events and cultural festivals with commendable library-centred activities.

The character of some book festivals has moved noticeably towards becoming celebrity events promoted mainly or entirely on the basis of the public recognition of the speakers, who may be political figures or other prominent personalities rather than being known best for their reputation as authors. Festivals have indeed promoted the growth of a celebrity culture that yields books in a range of areas such as sport, travel and cooking. (Throsby et al 3)

The organisers of KLF might have preferred Kozhikode to the state capital Thiruvananthapuram and the cultural capital Thrissur, in light of the gathering ambience and the geographic provision of the vast beachscape. The renowned receptive nature of Kerala to pacing global transformations is evident in the establishing of literature festivals, further, in every districts of the state. Habermas writes, "The shift which produced not merely a change in the composition of the public but amounted to the very generation of the "public" as such, can be categorically grasped with even more rigor in the case of the concert-going public than in the case of the reading and theater-going public"(39).

Established in 1996, the annual International Film Festival of Kerala organized by Kerala State Chalachitra Academy on behalf of Department of Cultural Affairs, Government of Kerala has been pivotal in enlivening the cultural milieu of the state for decades. Compared to the occasional film festivals in the state, the mushrooming literature festivals

draw more audience due to the affordable nature of the later. The publishing houses sponsor, facilitate and organise theme-based literature festivals focusing on the associated book sale which manifest the thriving industry of print publications at a time when gadgets and screen times are accused of savouring productive energies. Unlike renowned International and National Literature Festivals, those of Kerala are not tickets-based and accessible to all.

The Mathrubhumi International Festival of Letters is an annual literary gathering curated by Mathrubhumi Newspaper group and held at the state capital Thiruvananthapuram since 2018. Mentioning the significant consonant sounds in Malayalam Language Ka Cha Ta Tha Pa, a Literature Fest was organized in 2022 by Olive Books spotlighting minority concerns in the public sphere. Wayanad Literature Festival, established in 2022, flags the tag-line “India’s first and largest rurally-held Literature Festival”. The cultural significance of the term ‘Malabar’ gets highlighted in Malabar Literature Festival organized by Book Plus publishers in 2023. The north of Malabar, Kadathanadu witnessed Kadathanadu Literature Festival in 2023, initiated by a group of native writers. The well-functioning Kerala Sahitya Akademi, which patrons the Malayalam literary milieu with annual awards in different genres and funded by the Government of Kerala, conducted International Literature Festival of Kerala from January 28 to February 3 in 2024. The veteran newspaper enterprise Malayala Manorama started Hortus Literature fest in 2024 with the first edition celebrated in the city of Calicut.

Of late, as part of tourism promotion Kerala’s festivals and cultural events are viewed with enthusiasm and gaiety by tourists worldwide, some of these are being performed round-the-year too. Almost every season in Kerala brings with it its own new festivals also, and each festival being a clear celebration of the bounties of the State’s rich traditions that are followed since time immemorial. (Jose et al, 2017)

Moulded by the celebration of national festivals to local temple festivals, the organisers of the events input festive ambience in the conducting of literature fests. Adorno writes, “The culture industry is not the art of the consumer but rather the projection of the will of those in control onto their victims. The automatic self-reproduction of the status quo in its established forms is itself an expression of domination”. The art exhibitions try to fall in line with the esteemed Kochi-Muziris Biennale, a signature event of art curation in Kerala since 2012. Beyond the religious significance, the traditional folk performances and related narratives have become integral part of literature festivals with the intention of attracting tourists from inside and outside India. Astonishingly juxtaposed are the crowd-puller Musical shows by celebrity singers and rappers, cinematic dances and live food courts.

As a public good for lay man, *littérateurs* and art connoisseurs help engage with people to unravel the indigenous tales, vernacular works, mythologies, juvenile literature, artworks, little-known languages/dialects and various other facets of India-centric themes or South Asia. (Kulkarni et al 2017)

Though the earlier editions of the fests were accused of exclusively paneling mainstream artists and writers, the inclusive practice of en-spacing narratives by marginalized gender communities and disabled persons has emerged as the key aspect within years. Jennifer Bridge states, “One of the most significant aspects of literary festivals is their ability to foster dialogue. In a social climate increasingly characterised by divisive rhetoric, these events present a unique opportunity for conversations that are not only engaging but also necessary”. The state which acknowledges active *écriture féminine*, steers the pattern of including women as organisers, panelists and volunteers. The gender gap in readership is evident among the student community visiting the fests as the number of girls surpasses that of boys. Joshi and Joshi(2020) observe, “the sheer number of young readers is the most heartening thing about these festivals”. The volunteer vigour of the youth in taking part in

discussions on social, anti-social, political and economic problems in the society surpasses the trends of updating social media profiles in the backdrop of festival 'selfie' frames.

The growing anxiety of young parents finds solace in visiting the fests to search for books appealing to the children towards reducing the screen time off electronic gadgets.

Majority of the respondents (84 percent) agree that there is a significant link between a family's reading habits and a child's attitude toward reading, as 48.5 per cent strongly agree and 35.7 per cent agree. This clearly gives us an insight that parents have a major role to inculcate reading habits in children. Through reading promotion campaigns, public libraries and civil society need to motivate parents to read, so that the children follow their footsteps. (Sheshagiri et al., 2017)

The screen time campaigns have prompted the creative publishers to arrange specially designed cognitive puzzle sets in separate stalls targeting the specific age group. The print generation nostalgia of senior citizens propels them to take part in literature festivals where they can meet people of similar interests. The zest of festivals appealing to children, youth and senior citizens bridges the generation gap in the literature-bound academic and social circles of the state which continues to boast about the better indicators of literacy, health and sustainable practices.

Observational data showed that participants were chatting, laughing, and socialising in and around festival venues as well as during and between festival events. The on-site interviews revealed that more than half (58%) of the respondents were attending the festival with at least another person, mainly friends or spouse/partners. Thus, the festival was an occasion to maintain and reinforce existing social connections. While for those who were attending alone (40% OS; 35% FU), the festival was an occasion to create new relationships and improve social Networking. (Giulia 9)

The debutant authors to established authors and publishing houses promote their books during the fests exposed to extreme Media coverage. Joshi and Joshi(2020) state, “there is criticism that festivals are turning authors into glamorous celebrities and thus taking away the sense of seriousness of reading culture practices”. The on stage and off stage interaction with authors and getting signed copies of their books have not lost their charm even in the era of e-readership, though the global trend of searching for first edition of famous books is not widely noted among the readers of Malayalam.

Mukund Padmanabhan says, “A lot of lit fests cater to an audience that is principally English-speaking and somewhat westernised. But at the Kerala Literature Festival held in Kozhikode, the audience diversity was phenomenal. I saw a Malayali author getting ‘mobbed’ by his fans, it was heartwarming”. (Daftaur 2024)

The festival culture in Kerala is evidently celebrating Malayalam writers and artists than English narratives unlike in JLF. The readership of prominent Malayalam authors like M T Vasudevan Nair, Vaikom Muhammed Basheer, Sara Joseph, M Mukundan, K R Meera and Subhash Chandran has not reduced as is evident from the release of the updated editions of their books. The social media marketing has impacted in the sale of young generation authors as happened in the case of writers like Akhil P Dharmajan and Nimna Vijay.

From the existing body of writing, one may trace a common feature of international festivals—a tension between the presentation of cultural productions in particular places and at the same time presenting them as belonging within a global repertoire. One of the mottos of the JLF is to “bring international literature to India and Indian literature to the world. (Ståhlberg 2019)

The decelerated haste of the people during the pandemic-induced lock down period has impacted in a significant return to printed books. The marketing and business strategies of the sponsoring enterprises reflect in the hike in the sales of books during the festivals. The

readership of the natives has not declined completely with the advancement in e-reading as turned into business by publishing houses. The widely criticized social media trend of posting the pictures of the books serves the purpose of marketing among the digital generation than the braggery.

According to the recent study by Nielsen titled 'India Book Market Report 2015,' Indian book market is worth Rs 261 billion and is the seventh largest in the world. The study estimates the market to touch Rs 739 billion by 2020. The boom in literature festivals is the testimony to the fact that the book market or publishing industry is thriving in India. These festivals not only are increasing in numbers but also slowly becoming sellable brands. (Joshi & Joshi, 2020)

The participation of the people in the festivals scheduled for three days to one month considerably reduces the dangers of extended screen time. The constructive ambience created by books and authors prompts the readership beyond the marketing and business strategies. The discounts and schemes during festivals target school, college and public libraries with bulk purchase options. The teaching learning process of the state, with highest literacy rate pertains to effective books-based activities in the curricula, depending highly on libraries.

Adopting environmentally friendly practices at literary festivals focuses on recycling, waste reduction and sustainable use of resources. These initiatives are gaining momentum due to the global ecological crisis and increasing public demand for "green" events. Many festivals are implementing recycling programmes using waste separation bins and encouraging visitors to actively participate in waste management. (Maniou & Mitoula 1409)

The maintained stability in agriculture-based food habits and life style owing to the geographic resources of the state has not completely urbanised the social practices of the Kerala society. The global ecological clarion call for sustainable habits needs furtherance

only in large-scale industrial ventures and not in individual efforts. From environmental awareness-panel discussions to eco-friendly construction of the festival sites, sustainability is effectively celebrated. The usage of cloths and accessories made from Jute and other organic fabrics, paper products and seed pens has gained popularity among the young generations in impact of festivals.

In the response survey based on the participants of Ubud Writers and Readers Festival, 72.8 % believed that the festival helped promote interest in books and writing and 72.4 % opined that it helped promote discussion about important cultural and social issues. The social political and economic investing in literature festivals in different districts of the state activates the visibility of public sphere. The peaceful provisions in the state encourage the habits of inclusive social sustainability as evident in the popularity of the package of book sales, folk performances, art exhibitions and literature festivals. The huge sums being invested in conducting is returning manifold with book sales and publicity from collaborations. Unlike Jaipur Literature Festival where tourists add nearby destinations to itineraries, the tourism-level advancement is not being associated with the festivals in Kerala.

At this year's inaugural session, Rajasthan's Deputy Chief Minister Diya Kumari, who has been associated with the festival since its inception, spoke of its impact on the city it calls home. "Five days of the JLF do more for tourism than what the State government does for attracting visitors during the entire year," she said, adding that tourists, when planning their trip to Jaipur for the event, also carve out time to take in other attractions, bringing in business for both the city and the State. (Daftaur, 2024)

The Kerala variant of Literary tourism can be considered as in its evolving stages as the majority of the participants are natives involved in Intra-state roaming. The governmental administration shall be alert to the mushrooming festivals towards focusing more on tourism prospects in the land renowned as 'God's own country'. The pattern of visiting houses and

graveyards of deceased authors is not in its full swing in the state as the cultural and economic value of the same are not spotlighted in regional tourism development.

Although it is not easy to find a definition of literary tourism that covers all its forms and dimensions, one can say that it is undoubtedly related to cultural tourism, visiting certain places, guided by literature. Literature not only creates the desire in people's perception to visit places, but also inspires people to visit places where the book may have been written, or inspired, and the homes and graves of deceased authors. (Ferreira & Villares 85)

The dominant English speaking metropolitan pattern of literature fest emerging as an elitist platform crowded by privileged middle class and upper class strata of the society has not completely impacted in the fests in Kerala. The crowd of participants irrespective of class, caste, religion and gender proves that Keralites are still 'social animals' as they sustain humane discourses in a literary domain. Stahlberg (2019) observes that there were curious locals of various ages and social classes in the audience in the sessions including celebrities from the film industry.

Buying books to adorn antique bookshelves as an urban display of elitism of prominent Indian cities has not completely invaded the avid Malayalam readers. The metanarratives on readership celebrates the public library-centred reading culture unsurprisingly from the land which witnessed the vigour of P N Panicker, the Father of the Library Movement which in turn reflects in the high rates of literacy of the state (Raju). His death anniversary, June 19 is observed as National Reading Day in India. The educational institutes, cultural societies and diverse organisations observe June as reading month with reading-based participatory activities for all the age groups.

Emerging as a cultural event, litfests not only provide a platform for reading, writing and publishing but also imply that people need libraries which can fulfill the needs of

users and positively improve the lives of public toward economic development. It is more likely that print and digital publishing will coexist embracing hybrid models, though the contours of publishing are getting more digital. The book market in India will thrive and constantly evolve, while the regional publishing covering the vernacular languages is gaining markets as well (Sheshagiri et al., 2017)

The literature festivals enrich individual reading habits to public library movements even amidst the rise of e-reading platforms. It is estimated that “Majority of the respondents agree (46.1 per cent) and strongly agree (33 per cent) that visiting litfests would influence or improve reading habits” (Sheshagiri et al., 2017)). The fests increasingly design navigate and influence the Kerala public sphere in an agile en-spacing of cultural sustenance. The time being spent for the reading of printed books to the conduct of occasional fests adds to the digital detox of the Kerala society. The festivals, though not free from political favouritisms and marginalisation, continues to negotiate within cultural spaces.

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