

Unveiling Controversies and Undeniable Realities: The Screening of ‘Kerala Story’ by Idukki Diocese in Kerala

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Amidst the controversies surrounding the screening of the film “Kerala Story,” which explores the theme of Islamic State terrorism, by the Idukki Diocese and other church associations across various dioceses in Kerala, a range of reactions have emerged through both traditional media channels and social media platforms. This explanatory note is intended to clear up some of the confusion in such responses circulated in the form of concerns and criticisms. A group of media and social workers belonging to the Christian community also published a statement strongly criticizing the screening of the film.

The influence of falsehoods and deliberately created smokescreens widely disseminated by influential groups of radical Islamic organizations is evident in many of the responses. The statement contains observations in a way that tries to completely hide the influence of Islamic extremists in Kerala society, which is pointed out by the global media, political observers and researchers in a very serious manner. *The stance of turning a blind eye to the activities of radical Islamic organisations and standing against the Sangh Parivar is unhealthy and dangerous. An enlightened society comprising intellectuals, orators, authors, and social activists must possess the capability to denounce and distance itself from all forms of extremism.*

The main critique of the film and its exhibition centres on the argument that “Kerala Story,” viewed as propaganda, promotes an extremist Hindu narrative intended to undermine Kerala’s secular ethos.

The film was produced by individuals linked to the Sangh Parivar. While their backing of the project is apparent, the film effectively presents a robust argument against terrorist organisations.

- The film’s central theme revolves around terrorism. specifically focusing on the activities of the Islamic State (IS), a globally recognised terrorist organisation. IS has garnered significant attention due to its extensive history of perpetrating acts of violence resulting in the deaths of tens of thousands of innocent individuals over the past decade. Additionally, the organisation has been implicated in the widespread sexual enslavement of women across various countries. It is an established fact that the roots of numerous terrorist organisations, including but not limited to Boko Haram, Al Qaeda, Hezbollah, Hamas, Taliban, Islamic State, and Lashkar-e-Taiba extend beyond national borders with many countries worldwide designating them as banned entities. (<https://reliefweb.int/report/world/global-terrorism-index-2023>)
- Numerous incidents in recent years have highlighted the connection between Kerala and terrorist organisations. This is underscored by the catalogue of terrorist-related cases reported in Kerala over the past decade since 2008 (<https://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/database/keralaislamist.htm>). Furthermore, a research report

has documented links between certain organisations in Kerala and terrorist movements, including the Islamic State <https://drive.google.com/file/d/11HIqYu43h5ZK5e0PKuBeae-gai0rITQXu/view>

- Recently, both the Chief Minister and the Chief of Police of Kerala made public acknowledgments regarding the presence of terrorist organisations, including the Islamic State, operating within the state. They highlighted the exodus of individuals attracted to terrorist activities, the prevalence of radicalization within the Islamic community and the existence of sleeper cells affiliated with the Islamic State in Kerala. (About 100 people from Kerala joined ISIS over the years. Police: <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/about-100-keralites-suspected-to-have-joinedisis-police-1084495-2017-11-11> ;
- Since 2018, Kerala Police's special branch has been running de-radicalisation programmes in the state for youth. Some youth who were influenced by ISIS ideas were de-radicalised & brought back to the mainstream. Counter-radicalization programmes are being run successfully. Kerala CM: <https://twitter.com/ANI/status/1440667628041768966?lang=en>,
- Kerala has emerged as a fertile recruiting ground for terrorist organizations. Outgoing DGP Loknath Behera: <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/kerala/2021/Jun/28/kerala-has-become-recruiting-ground-for-terror-outfits-outgoing-dgploknath-behera-2322376.html>
- Terrorist connections of Keralites: <https://www.marunadanmalayalee.com/news/in-depth/isis-recruitment-controversy-indepth-report-333658>)
- The Popular Front, established and headquartered in Kerala, was banned in 2022, primarily due to allegations of engaging in terrorist activities. Likewise, the Students Islamic Movement in India (SIMI), which was outlawed two decades ago, had a significant number of Malayali members. Numerous individuals associated with these organisations remain incarcerated in various prisons due to their involvement in such groups. (The Indian government has banned the Popular Front of India (PFI), a controversial Muslim group for five years for allegedly having links with terror groups: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-63004142>,
- Centre extends ban on terror group SIMI for 5 years; MHA issues notification: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/centre-extends-ban-on-terror-group-simi-for-5-years-mha-issues-notification/videoshow/107238636.cms?from=mdr>)
- Numerous Malayalam books have been prohibited due to their promotion of terrorism. Some of these books have had significant circulation and have exerted influence on many individuals. One of the latest additions to this list is "The Gate of Victory, In the Shadow of the Sword." Police investigations revealed that the book contained terrorist content. anti-national rhetoric, incitement of religious conflict, and encouragement for youth to join extremist groups. Consequently, in 2021, the Director General of Police (DGP) submitted a letter to the government requesting the ban of this book. (Ban book that can provoke extremism, cops tell Kerala government: http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/86670436.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst
- Signs of terrorist activities in Kerala have been apparent for over a decade and a half. Besides alerts from multiple investigative agencies; even the United Nations report has acknowledged this issue (26th report of the analytical support and sanctions monitor-

ing team, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/un-report-flags-islamic-state-threat-in-karnataka-kerala/article32189443.ece>). The report highlights the notable presence of Islamic State terrorists in Kerala and Karnataka.

- Riaz Abubakar, recently convicted and sentenced by the court, was implicated in the Sri Lankan Christian church bombings and spearheaded initiatives to extend similar terrorist activities to Kerala. The investigative team uncovered his ties to Malayalees who had departed Kerala and were collaborating with Islamic State terrorists (NIA court sentences Kerala man to 10-year RI) for links with IS: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kochi/nia-court-sentences-kerala-man-to-10-year-ri-for-links-with-is/article-show/107567088.cms>)

However, media outlets in Kerala hesitate to address such news with the gravity it deserves. Those who grasp reality harbour no uncertainty that ruthless terrorist organisations, with global ambitions to dominate and disrupt world peace, operate covertly within Kerala. Yet, the notion that everything is merely fiction holds sway here. The assertion that “it’s all just the machinations of a few groups” obscures many truths. Numerous news reports that once sparked significant debate have vanished from various media websites.

Concerns arise regarding the increasing number of girls ensnared by terrorist groups. The public release and subsequent retraction of the census documenting 32,000 girls have sparked criticism, with the film being accused of disseminating misinformation.

“Kerala Story” depicts the journey of a girl who embraces a new faith and finds herself in a terrorist camp alongside an extremist. This narrative closely mirrors the real-life experiences of Nimisha, the wife of IS terrorist Bexin Vincent. Another figure, Merrin Jacob Palath, now known as Mariam, is married to Bexin Vincent’s brother, Bestin Vincent. Mariam was previously married to IS terrorist Abdul Rasheed, hailing from Udumbuntala. Following Bestin’s demise in a confrontation, Rasheed was also later killed. Sonia Sebastian, a Malayali, is among Rasheed’s former spouses.

During her final year at Poinachi Century Dental College in Kasaragod, Nimisha became romantically involved with a classmate. According to police records, this relationship led her to embrace a devoutly religious lifestyle. In 2013, she underwent conversion and adopted the name Fatima. Subsequently, Nimisha Fatima actively engaged in religious propaganda meetings and educational sessions. Through connections with senior students at the college, namely Ayesha and Marya, Nimisha Fatima met and married Bexan Vincent, also known as Isa. Later, she accompanied her husband to Afghanistan and joined the IS, whereupon she was coerced into becoming a sex slave upon her arrival at the camp. Since 2019, Nimisha Fatima has been incarcerated in Kabul following her husband’s demise alongside several terrorists during clashes with US forces (Romance, religious conversion, culminating in an IS camp in Afghanistan (The journey of Malayali young women: <https://www.mathrubumi.com/news/kerala/story-of-Nimisha-Fathima-and-Merin-Joseph-1.5743823>)).

The details of Nimisha Fatima’s life were brought to light through police disclosure,

drawing parallels with the protagonist of the film “Kerala Story.” The screenplay of this movie, depicting Nimisha’s journey since her enrolment in a dental college is undeniably closely aligned with reality.

In November 2015, the superintendent of police for Kasaragod district submitted a report to the state police chief detailing the significant changes in the girl’s lifestyle, attributed to her immersion in religious studies.

Nimisha’s story is not an isolated case; she’s neither the first nor the last to tread this path. The same group that influenced Nimisha’s conversion and religious studies also led Merrin Jacob and Sonia Sebastian to the IS camp. Their experiences, extensively covered by global media, are not fabrications but stark realities. It is naive to assume that these groups haven’t targeted others in the past or won’t target others in the future. Similarly, it would be erroneous to believe that such groups are confined to a singular location or organization within Kerala. The activities of terrorist organizations are far-reaching and more pervasive than commonly perceived.

Despite these complexities, it’s illogical to blame the entire Islamic community. The experiences of the three girls mentioned earlier demonstrate that certain organizations affiliated with terrorist groups are responsible for such activities. It is noteworthy that the individual who initially professed love doesn’t necessarily end up marrying the person.

As outlined in police reports documenting the shifts in Nimisha Fatima’s life prior to her conversion, activists and counselors operating under various dioceses in Kerala have directly witnessed numerous girls undergoing analogous transformations. Several girls have found themselves ensnared in situations where counterfeit affection has led to sexual exploitation, coercion into religious indoctrination, deliberate efforts to sever familial bonds, and other forms of manipulation. Subsequent changes in behavior, demeanor, and approaches have led some parents to recognize, with apprehension, that their children have fallen prey to such traps of deceitful love.

The Kerala reality

We wish to reiterate that our stance is not against love itself, but rather, we vehemently denounce the orchestrated snares disguised as expressions of affection. When love is manipulated to coerce a girl into severing ties with her family, undergoing forced religious conversion, and subsequently living an anonymous existence, it becomes a perilous trap, exploiting the very essence of love. Such schemes are meticulously organized and often bolstered by extremist factions.

It’s crucial to acknowledge that love traps are not mere myths; many girls find it challenging to disclose details due to safety concerns and family reputation. Unfortunately, most parents hesitate to discuss such issues publicly. However, professionals working closely with youth, particularly priests in areas with diverse religious populations, have firsthand experience and are deeply aware of these realities. This isn’t mere propaganda; numerous parents

and parish priests have witnessed and understood the plight of many daughters. Consequently, many undertake awareness campaigns to protect girls from such dangers. The KCBC Vigilance Commission operates a helpline named “Karuthal” to provide support the victims of love traps and their families.

The portrayal of societal issues in films has often served as a tool for raising awareness. Discussing topics like Islamic extremism or cautioning against love traps shouldn't be misconstrued as an attack on the Islamic community. It's erroneous to label such discussions as propaganda.

Acknowledging facts presented by Sangh Parivar organisations, some of which the Christian community in Kerala recognised years ago (as highlighted by the KCBC Vigilance Commission in 2008), doesn't render them untrue. The present imperative is to view Sangh Parivar and Hindutva extremism, along with extremist Islamic organisations and Islamic extremism, as distinct entities and oppose both. Taking sides or selectively opposing one while supporting the other is untenable.

Fostering Inter-Religious Relationship

The Indian Catholic Church has consistently stood against the surge of religious extremism across the nation. Aligning with the peace-loving and secular Hindu community, the Church community stands united in opposition to the divisive ideologies propagated by the Sangh Parivar. This solidarity should also encompass efforts to address Islamic extremism. The Church must collaborate with the mainstream Islamic community to combat the covert activities of extremist organizations. This requires a nuanced understanding free from pre-conceived sectarian biases, and a rejection of any attempts to stifle discussion on these critical issues.

These efforts are not at odds with the teachings of the Catholic Church or the directives of the Pope. A harmonious societal fabric necessitates openness and comprehension. Interfaith unity should not serve as a cover for acts of violence or terrorism. In order to cultivate inter-religious harmony and societal cohesion, extremism must be unconditionally condemned, regardless of religious affiliation. Let us foster genuine unity and brotherhood among religions, guarding against the influences of extremism that sow seeds of sectarianism, communal discord and terrorism. Together, let's strive towards a future of true solidarity and understanding.