Art is generally considered a product of its time created by men and women. It is also essential to acknowledge the social and political backdrop of the time, in which the art is created. Art, coming from the hearts, minds, and imagination of artists is subject to and representative of the current socio-political climate. Art, therefore, can be seen as a study of human experience in juxtaposition to the world around the artists. Umberto Barbaro, a leading film theorist, Marxist, and literary critic in Italy states in his article “Materialism and Art”, “In Marxist thought, art is an aspect of the intellectual production of a given period, part of the corresponding ideology at a given time. As such, art is conditioned by the structure, by the base, that is, by the relations of production.”1

As radical ideologies, such as Communism or progressivism, rose in the consciousness of the peoples, artists no longer found themselves hanging on the fringe of society: they could now publicly assert their ideas through the various mediums of art. With this ability to fuse political thought and art many artists were commissioned to create works to promote political ideological propaganda. Politicians used art of this nature as a political tool to sway the viewing public. Then art became “a most powerful weapon for the organization of collective forces and, in a class society, of class forces.”2 In this context, the Communist says frankly: “art, an instrument in the class struggle, must be developed by the proletariat as one of its weapons.”3
As a powerful art form, theatre, like the other arts, is a type of social consciousness inseparable from the people’s life, national history, and culture. The growth of the theatre, the theatre’s development of different forms, trends and ideas, the place of the theatre in society and the theatre’s links with contemporary life are determined by a society’s social, cultural, economical and political structure. The theatre generally experiences an artistic upsurge, when permeated by contemporary progressive ideas, it seeks to achieve humanistic ideals and profoundly and truthfully, revealing man’s complex inner world and his social aspirations. The theatre is then, an important means of educating the people aesthetically, morally, and politically. Towards this end, it makes use of abundant means of artistic generalization, expressiveness, and ways of influencing a mass audience.

The role that theatre ought to play in contemporary society has been debated among artists the world over. In India, changing social and political conditions since the late nineteenth century have resulted in diverse attempts to exploit theatre as a means of reaching vast audiences for purposes of education, publicity, and propaganda. By the 1940s the political scenario, both in India and abroad, had changed. The world situation underwent a radical change. As discussed earlier the spread of Marxist ideas and people’s struggles resulted in the establishment of the hegemony of the Communist Party of India. The PWA, through its nationwide activities, had spread the message of socialism and world peace (anti-Fascist propaganda) in the wake of the outbreak of the Second World War. The struggle for left hegemony required the help of the theatre, the powerful instrument of visual arts-to supplement the literary activities of the PWA.
The Indian intelligentsia, who were already inspired by the ideas of Marxism and socialism, drew inspiration from the leftist progressive theatre groups of the world like Nuova Scena in Italy, the Worker’s Theatre Movement in Britain, the Artef (a Yiddish Theatre Group), the Workers Theatres in the United States, New Theatre in Australia and Moscow Art Theatre, which were closely associated with working class parties and movement. They also got inspiration from the progressive writers like Maxim Gorky, Vladimir Mayakovski, L.N. Tolstoy, Anton Chekhov, Pablo Neruda, Bertolt Brecht, etc. This made them conscious about the present socio-political scenario and the need for a medium to intervene into it. This resulted in the emergence of progressive theatre movements in India.

Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA)

Though the radical theatre movement in India developed in the modern times, socio-political plays of individual creations already created its impact in this land. In this context, the first significant drama of social protest in India was Nil Darpana (The Mirror of Indigo Planters) by Dinabandhu Mitra, published in 1860. The play dramatizes incidents drawn from the revolution of 1858 in which Bengali indigo cultivators were mercilessly persecuted by the British planters for refusing to sow their crops. The incident is usually cited as the first attempt of the Bengalis to challenge the colonial rule. Rev. James Long, a brave missionary, financed the printing of an English translation of Nil Darpana and distributed some copies among the English parliamentarians. His action was questioned by the white planters in the court of law and he was fined and awarded rigorous imprisonment for six months. Whatever the intentions of Dinabandhu
Mitra, the play aroused considerable public sentiment in Bengal against the British rule and paved the way for a host of patriotic works written along similar lines elsewhere in the country.

The popularity of *Nil Darpana* and subsequent works of its kind raised serious questions for the colonial government. Later, the Dramatic Performances Act No. XIX was passed in order to give strong censorship powers to local authorities throughout India.⁸

However, themes of nationalistic and patriotic fervor continued to dominate the Indian stage and the socialist and Communist philosophies began to be detected by the early 1940s in many plays and among various theatre organizations. The developments in this period arose logically out of past successes: if theatre could be used as a tool for inciting public opinion against the colonialists, it could also be used to mould public sympathy for specific political ideologies. Undoubtedly, the triumph of Socialist Realism in Russian art and literature during the previous decade stimulated sympathetic Indian playwrights and producers. Thus, in 1942, one of the most significant organizations of its type came into being, the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA). The IPTA clearly directed its messages to the masses rather than to the bourgeoisie and “took up issues of social abuse, religious bigotry, political oppression and economic exploitation.”⁹

The PWA, which was already working on the literary front, was hitherto confined primarily to middle class intellectuals and also, to some extent, to the literate and marginally to a few people from the lower middle and poor peasants and working
class sections. By and large, the major sections of the lower order were left out of its impact. Through its activities, the IPTA, tried to fill this gap.

The plays produced during the first year showed the IPTA’s purpose of elevating and instructing the common man. The May Day, 1942, production was *Dada* (Brother), written for the occasion by T.K. Salmarkar, a mill worker, which ended with an appropriate May Day speech “explaining the significance of the present war.”

Then attempts were made to intervene in the political process which came through its presentation in 1942, the year of the launching of the Quit India movement, with two one act anti-Fascist plays – *Roar China* and *Four Comrades*. Adapted from the Russian play of that name and modified according to the Indian context of 1942, *Roar China* deals with the prosecution of Chinese by the western imperialists and the subsequent anti-imperialist revolutionary feelings in small village fishermen and boatmen in China.

Written jointly by the IPTA members, *Four Comrades* dramatizes an incident in the battle of Singapore, which carried a simple anti-Fascist propaganda.

Set in the context of war and imperialism, the two plays purport to explain the phenomenon of Fascism and its hazards to the marginalized masses in India. Presented initially in English, *Roar China* and *Four Comrades* were soon translated into a dozen provincial languages and presented in the different regions of the country by the IPTA’s provincial squads. The translations of the plays into different languages suggest a collective political agenda on the part of the IPTA members: to ensure the widest possible participation of “the people” in the political process.
Launched in 1942-43 at the height of the Bengal famine and the Allied involvement in the World War II, the IPTA was at once the first national level theatre movement in India and as the cultural front of the Communist Party of India, an organization linked to anti-Fascist and anti-imperialist movements on a worldwide scale. In India it paralleled to the Progressive Writers’ Association, launched in 1936. The IPTA has been formed to co-ordinate and strengthen all the progressive tendencies that have so far manifested themselves in the nature of drama, songs and dances.

Meanwhile, the first All India Peoples’ Theatre Conference met on 25 May 1943 at Bombay and passed a Draft Resolution for IPTA and formed an All India Committee and Provincial Organizing Committees. Prof. Hiren Mukherjee chaired the Conference and the provincial reports from Bombay, Bengal Punjab, Andhra, United Provinces and Malabar were presented. The Draft Resolution described the primary aim of IPTA, is to mobilize “people’s theatre movement throughout the whole of India as the means of revitalizing the stage and traditional arts and making them at once the expression and organizer of our people’s struggle for freedom, cultural progress and economic justice.”

The organizers identified the Fascist forces as ‘enemies of freedom and culture, progress and economic justice’, and the ‘internal repression by an alien government’ to be fought against. They wanted to work for the ‘revival of the folk arts, mass singing and open air stage’ to achieve their aim. Further, it described “It stands for justice and a democratic culture. It stands for the defence of culture against imperialism and Fascism and for enlightening the masses about the causes and solution of the problems facing them. It tries to quicken their awareness of unity and their passion for creating a better and just world.”

This IPTA conference set up “squads” in eight Indian regions – Bengal, Bihar,
the United Provinces, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Malabar and Karnataka. An all India Committee was constituted, the composition of which shows that all leading mass organizations such as AITUC, All India Kisan Sabha, All India Student’s Federation and PWA were associated with it and representatives from different provinces were included. The provincial organizing Committees were also formed.

The next major play of IPTA was Bijan Bhattacharya’s *Nabanna* (New Harvest, 1944) about the Bengal famine of 1943. It presented the intensity of the famine through the starving family of a Bengal peasant, Pradhan Samaddar and made an attempt on the part the IPTA’s to expose the sordid reality that the famine was not a natural disaster but a man-made calamity. Under the dramatic Performance Act of 1876 this drama was banned and its writer, producer and actors were imprisoned on the charge of obscenity, though clearly the British authority was offended by a scene that presented an English man being kicked by an Indian. Through this, the Government certainly with the tactic support of the capitalist class and a section of the middle class, tried to control Indian literature to the extent that it should not get politicized.

In an attempt to break through the general apathy of the Indian peasantry, touring became an integral part of the IPTA’s program. Between 1942 and 1952, the IPTA, through its provincial squads, performed several plays dealt with socio-political issues. With the emergence of socialist realism as a dominant mode of “people’s theatre”, the plays such as Ali Sardar Jafri’s *Yeh Kiska Khoon Hai* (*Whose Blood is This*, 1942) Kwaja Ahmad Abbas’s *Zubaida* (1944) and *Main Kaun Hoom* (*Who Am I?*, 1947), Prithviraj Kapoor’s *Deewar* (*The Wall*, 1945) and *Patbban* (*The Frontiersman*, 1947), Balraj Sahni’s *Jadoo Ki Khursi* (*The Magical Chair*, 1948), Panu Pillai’s *Charge sheet* (1949),
Benoy Roy’s *Mein Bhookka Hoom* (*I Am Hungry*, 1943) and Ritwik Ghatak’s *Dalil* (*Argument*, 1952), etc., were produced and performed in different parts of the country.21

After 1947, the partition, heavier government control through censorship, lack of government patronage to IPTA and an ideological split among the IPTA members affected its working. Despite such problems, the IPTA continued to function as a politically committed theatre. The documents and chronicles reveal the Association’s continuing efforts to intervene in the political process.22

Through its provincial squads the IPTA disseminated its messages to a geographically and linguistically diverse population and established intimate links among the masses from various regions. Through linguistic diversification, IPTA artists used theatre as a vehicle for awakening a spirit of protest among “the people” that would merge into a collective anti-Fascist and anti-imperialist consciousness. By mobilizing plays that were constructed according to the socio-political environment, the IPTA altered the use of theatre from merely a means of entertainment to a forum for peoples’ struggles. By performing for the rural and illiterate public instead of a limited upper class audience, the IPTA made the political theatre available to those who previously had little or no access to it.23 Thus it initiated the entry of masses into active political life.

It is alleged that the IPTA was a cultural wing of the Communist Party of India, which involved primarily with Communist propaganda and rigidly followed the dictates of the Communist Party. The chronicles and documents of the IPTA reveal that most members, such as the Kisan Union leaders and cultural and student fronts, had a leftist orientation and were immensely influenced by the Marxist-Leninist principles and the
Revolution of 1917. Therefore, they also endorsed the view point of the Communist Party of India. Although IPTA was launched as the cultural front of the Communist Party of India, the organization attracted large number of writers and intellectuals who saw it not as an expanding mass organization but as the only national level forum for progressive art.

It is clear, that the IPTA’s Eighth National Conference, held in Delhi during December 1957, was its last. But through its provincial organizing committees, IPTA could spread the “people’s theatre” movement in different regions and languages. In Kerala, it is evident in the formation of Malabar Provincial Committee of IPTA and Kerala People’s Arts Club and its campaign for political mobilization.

**Pattabakki and the Emergence of Political Plays in Malayalam**

Kerala, with its high percentage of literacy, extreme poverty and unemployment, has been a variable hunting ground for politicians of every description. Even the illiterate labourer is politically conscious, unlike his counterpart in other parts of India and that is in some measure due to the way in which dramatic medium was exploited by political propagandists. Beginning as it did, in the thirties, the Indian political movement gave a special impetus in the writing of political plays. The 1930s saw the emergence of the Communist ideology in the erstwhile Malabar areas. A live culture of reading rooms, processions and performances of plays had led to the crystallization of an incipient, alternative proletarian aesthetic. In southern Kerala, the princely states of Cochin and Travancore, the struggle had been directed more against the intransient monarchy than
against the colonial state. This was reflected in the series of dramas highlighting the class conflicts embedded in the land-based economic relations among the various sections. Drama was then used as an effective medium for ideological exchange.

The early decades of the 20th century in Kerala had witnessed a qualitative change in the content of theatrical performance. Formerly, the theatre was focused on epic and puranic stories, which were mainly intended for entertainment and propagation of ethics or social morality. Now even the mythological or puranic themes were introduced with social criticism of contemporary life and patriotic sentiments. Further, secular themes and social problems were introduced under the influence of various movements generated by nationalistic fervor.²⁴ Though the social play comes into its own only after the historical play has flourished as a fashion and then began to weaken in its monopolistic hold over the theatre, the dates of the first emergence of the two types are not far apart. Social plays are written with a definite and clear-cut purpose. More often than not, there is a bias for propaganda in the socio-political plays.²⁵

These changing attitude and trends were more reflected in the theatre in 1930s. The Namboothiri social reformers like V.T. Bhattathiripad, M.R. Bhattathiripad and M.P. Bhattathiripad fully utilized the potential of the theatre in their reforming activities and thereby strengthened the cause of social reform.²⁶ The reason why for the first time in the cultural history of Kerala, the stage and performance became a highly conscious social activity in the hands of the social reformers is that theatre practice for them was a part of their social and political praxis in which they lived.
Thus the most vigorous and socially meaningful period in the history of Malayalam theatre performance began for the first time in Kerala from the last phase of the twenties. The year 1929 is the most significant in this sense that V.T. Bhattathiripad wrote his play *Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangathekkku* (From the Kitchen to the Stage). The play was written as an agitational propaganda focused on school education, protest against evil practices concerning marriage, abolition of *purdah* system, etc. It was for the first instance, not only for the Namboothiri community but in Kerala itself, that drama was used as a means of agitation. In 21 December 1929 it was staged at Edakkunni near Thrissur as part of the annual meeting of the *Namboothiri Yoga Kshema Sabha*. It is a milestone in the history of Malayalam dramatic literature in as much it broke a new ground in the field of socially purposeful plays with a message and a mission. Of the many plays of this type that followed *Marakkudakkullile Mahanarakam* (The Hell Behind the Umbrella, 1931) by M.R. Bhattathiripad and *Ritumathi* (The Pubescent, 1938) by M.P. Bhattathiripad are dramatically more effective. Mainly they dealt with the family life of the Namboothiri women, their degradation in a bigamous situation, termination of education of the girls after the attainment of puberty, etc.

Realizing the importance of propaganda, the socialists turned into theatre. In 1936, Malabar K. Damodaran, one of the pioneering leaders of the Congress Socialist and later the Communist Party, wrote *Pattabakki* (Rent Arrears), which was staged in hundreds of villages over the next ten years. The play directly took up the issue of class struggle between landlords and tenants and it was first staged in 1937 at the taluk level peasant meeting in Ponnani. It was written and performed to organize the landless agricultural labourers.
In the play Kittunni, the mainstay of the tenant family is forced by poverty became a thief. He is caught and put into jail for six months. In his absence, his mother, sister and little brother were evicted from their hut for not paying the rental arrears. His mother died on the road side due to starvation and ill health and his sister became a prostitute to earn enough for her little brother to eat. When Kittunni gets out of the jail, he realizes the circumstances and he and his sister join hands in ‘a career of fighting for their classes. Political leaders like K.P.R. Gopalan, Sardar Chandroth, E.P. Gopalan, and others had acted in this play.\(^{30}\)

Considered even by the bourgeois theoreticians as the first Communist play in Malayalam, *Pattabakki* rooted in the struggles of peasants against feudal landlordism supported by the British regime. On one occasion, Muhammad, Kittunni’s friend advises him as follows:

“To escape from all these troubles, there is only one way. Today the authority is fully concentrated in the hands of the rich. We, the peasants, workers and middle class have to capture that authority and government after organized agitation.”\(^{31}\)

In the final stage, they took a vow to work for a complete change in the social system: “If poverty is to disappear, then the government we have today must change .... We should refashion our social structure.”\(^{32}\)

C. Achutha Menon asserts that “the play was written with the express purpose of serving the revolutionary peasant movement in Malabar. By portraying the sufferings of a poor peasant family, faced with eviction from its homestead, it gave directly a ringing call for the abolition of landlordism. The play was enacted in the villages on hastily
improvised stages without the aid of sophisticated theatrical techniques.”33 Obviously, the playwright meant to imply that poverty and dependence of the poor on the upper classes breeds immorality, that only in an egalitarian society may evil be eradicated, and that revolution is the only sure means of achieving social change.

“The play, Pattabakki was an organization, which created a roar in Malabar during 1937-38.”34 It presented the socio-economic hardships of the peasants in a realistic manner inspired the class consciousness, organizational consciousness and artistic consciousness. It created much enthusiasm among the peasants when it was staged at the peasant organization meetings. It gave a new inspiration to the struggles for a new life. The Pattabakki proved the ideology that “the writer was not only the creation of his circumstances but also one who change the circumstance.”35

Through this play K. Damodaran showed how an ordinary peasant got transformed into a Communist, whose voice was against the feudal system.36 The simplicity of the story and truthfulness of its content made Pattabakki the most victorious political play in Malayalam. In Malabar it was born out of the agricultural movement. The drama was very popular as there was no village in Malabar where this play was not staged and the peasants and agricultural labourers were very much enthused by this play.

Pattabakki demanded the immediate replacement of feudal economic system by a socialist system. The objective of the playwright was to establish that both poverty and misery were the contribution of a social system that could be changed only through class conflict which would help to form a social environment of welfare and equality. In 1950,
the police of the Cochin Government confiscated all the copies of *Pattabakki* available in a press.\(^{37}\)

As the first political play in Malayalam – *Pattabakki* encouraged many dramatists and the result was the emergence of political theatre in Malayalam in the real sense of the term. This new performance pattern reached every nook and corner of Kerala and established a lasting effect upon the future development in the radical theatre practice in Kerala. Meanwhile, when the Second World War began, the socialists staged two more dramas of K. Damodaran – *Panimudakku* (the Strike) and another play which depicted the struggle of working class for the improvement of their living conditions; it had a horrible title *Rakta Panam* (Drink of Blood).\(^{38}\) It was proscribed by the Malabar Government in 1939 for its class antagonism.\(^ {39}\)

Meanwhile, the historic struggles which shook the foundation of the British Empire in India during the period 1940 to 1947 had their far reaching implications in every sphere of life of the Indian people. The anti-Fascist and anti-imperialist consciousness, which spread throughout the length and breadth of India in particular, had its repercussions in the field of culture. Ideological currents of differing perspective began to fight each other for dominance. The theatre practice during the forties in Kerala exhibits this struggle with greater clarity and precision.

The fight for responsible Government in Travancore sponsored by the Travancore State Congress reached its highest pitch during the last days of its powerful Dewan – Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Ayer. *Prathima* (Statue), a play by Ramakrishna Pillai attained social distinction in those days when the government proscribed it.\(^ {40}\) It portrays the machination
of a dictator, who wants to make the world believe that he is popular among the people of his country. He gets his statue made and instigates some persons to erect it in the name of the public interest. But the whole plan ends in chaos. The Statue is the symbol of crumbling despotism. He also wrote plays like Nizhalukal (The Shadows) and Thukku Muriyil (In the Room of the Gallows) and one act plays like Vellappokkam (Flood) and the Kamandalu in 1946. All these were written in the fire of struggle for responsible government in Travancore. His one act play Vellappokkam was also proscribed by the Government of Travancore.

In 1946, Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai wrote a play Thottilla (Not Defeated) adapting the theme of the freedom struggle in Cochin. As a play it had highlighted the conflicts in the family life of a political activist. At the end of the play, Aravindan, the mainstay of the play, gave his message in the form of a song:

“Here! Oh Comrades! The battle drum
Be ready with patience
The holy feet of Gandhi, saluted by Gods,
Bestow on the inspiration of soul.”

This drama was also proscribed by the government.

In the same period Ponkunnam Varky, a school master and a Communist, wrote Jethakkal (The Victors) and several other plays highlighting the plight and exploitation of the labourer and the wiles of the capitalists. P. Kesava Dev in 1947 narrated the political development in Travancore in the form of a drama titled Munnottu (Forward). In this, the conflict in the political ideology was described through the character Narendran. C.J.
Thomas’s *Avan Veendum Varunnu* (He is Coming Back), which thematically listen to the Second World War can also be included in this group.

In 1950, Edassery Govindan Nair wrote *Koottukrishi* (Joint Farming) and its theme was specially an attraction for the rural audience who had bitter experience of evils of caste system and tenant-landlord relationship.\(^{45}\) It seeks to impress on the audience that ultimately it is economic question which counts and not communal. In this play, Gopalan Nair, the landlord and Muhammad, the tenant, trying to experiment at farming together and they succeeded. The details are worked out in a fascinating manner. This cooperation not only removes the barrier between the landlord and tenant but also between two communities which could not have maintained matrimonial alliances.

In the play, Cherukad’s *Nammalonnu*, the mainstay – Pangan believes that, even if his *jenmi* issue orders to evict all other his rent payees, he will not evict him from his rental area because of his attachment and commitment towards his *jenmi*. Later he came to know that he also be evicted from his land and this awareness made him a revolutionary. He then came out from the restrictions, imposed by the *jenmi* system and lined up under the red flag for the struggle against the *jenmi* system and for a new socialist order.\(^{46}\) The play, *Nammalonnu* ends with the call for:

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“Gather around this Red Flag
Which surpasses the World in Revolution
Be United under this Red Flag”\(^{47}\)
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It was this theatrical background that Kerala People’s Arts Club (KPAC) formed and brought a new era in the history of Malayalam drama and performance. However, a
unit of IPTA was also founded in Kerala prior to KPAC and it created an organizational form to the theatrical movements in Kerala.

**Malabar Provincial Unit of IPTA and The Formation of KPAC**

When the Indian People’s Theatre Association was formed in Bengal to affect progressive plays, in Kerala, the Communists identified themselves with this movement. The first bulletin of the IPTA refers that K.P. Namboodiri, K.P.G. Namboodiri and Achyata Kurup represented the Malabar province in the First All India People’s Theatre Conference, met on May 25, 1949 at Bombay. K.P. Namboodiri presented the provincial report in this conference and K.P.G. Namboodiri and Achyata Kurup were elected to the Organizing Provincial Committee of IPTA. Through the Malabar Provincial Report, K.P. Namboodiri pointed “the arts forms like Kathakali, Ottamthullal, Kolkali, Poorakali, etc have been taken out of their outworn temple surroundings and have been staged before large masses of people, with new theme portraying the people’s struggle.” While considering songs, which have nationalist thought and revolutionary zeal, the Report stated that “about two hundred songs have appeared since August expressing the people’s demands. You who write in your own blood the history of modern India, Keraleyan’s Release, Release our great heroes Nehru and Gandhi, are two of the most well known songs which are sung all over Malabar…. Those songs which are printed like K.P.R. Gopalan’s Call for Battle, Unite to Defend the Mother Land and Bhattathiripad’s Strange Times have been sold in Thousands.”
On the emergence of People’s Theatre in Malabar, the Report refers to the two dramas of K. Damodaran – *Blood Sucking*, which was about the exploitation of labour and *Rent Arrears*, which deals with the problems of the tenant’s, which were being staged in Malabar before 1939. It also stated that the *Jap Agents* and *A Chinese Heroine*, the recent plays, achieved a great success in Malabar. While concluding the Report, it is stated that, “We see from all this (cultural) activity that we are witnessing a great cultural awakening which is taking place among the masses of our country. This awakening is closely linked up with the people’s struggles against the foreign aggressor and the internal foe. We see that literary and dramatic endeavors which are not so linked with the people soon die away.”52

After the formation of KPAC, it acted as the Kerala unit of IPTA and they changed the theatrical performance in Kerala as a means to socio-political and ideological mobilization.

Kerala People’s Arts Club, popularly known as KPAC was the most successful drama club which contributed very much to the socio-political transformation of Kerala society. The history of KPAC is also a part of the socio-political and cultural history of Kerala. For the writing of the early history of KPAC, there is no authentic document, apart from the memories of its early activists. It was a group of energetic young men who contributed to the formation of KPAC. They carried out the idea that the artistic output which reflects the life of the ordinary people could create social transformation.53 These people were also the student leaders and leftist political activists.
The formation of KPAC begins with a *Nizhal Natakam* (Shadow Play) performed by four students – G. Janardhana Kurup, P. Narayanan, K.K.K. Kurup and Sukumaran – of Ernakulam Government Law College. At the college teacher’s annual meeting, they performed a *Nizhal Natakam* entitled *Poruthunna Korea*, written by G. Janardhana Kurup, by adopting the theme of Korean War. Adopting the theme of this war, G. Janardhana Kurup wrote a *Nizhal Natakam* entitled *Poruthunna Koria*.\(^{54}\) Rajagopalan Nair, K.K.K. Kurup, Sukumaran and Kalyana Krishnan acted in this play. It was a tremendous victory on the stage. Rajagopalan Nair is of the opinion that the success of this shadow play paved the way for the formation of KPAC.\(^{55}\)

Regarding the formation of KPAC, G. Janardhana Kurup, the first President of KPAC, explains:

“After the coming out of the L.L.B result I and Mr. Rajan (Rajagopalan Nair) became full-time activists of the Communist Party of its propagation. The general elections in Travancore came then. Rajan became the candidate in Punaloor. The responsibility of his election campaign fell on me. After Rajan got election victory, one day he came to my house at Mararithottam. He expressed his condition that it was very difficult to live with the income that he got from his legal practice. He asked me to jointly organize an arts club and so that we could earn enough money by staging dramas. Then he worked to form a frame work of a play. After that I put forward an opinion that, our theatrical performance should be under the banner of a *samiti* or an organization. He suggested the name *Janakeeya Kala Samiti*. But I preferred its English rendering – Kerala People’s Arts Club.”\(^{56}\)
According to O. Madhavan, who was one of the best actors of the KPAC, the formation of the KPAC was due to the direct intervention of the Communist Party in the artistic sphere.\textsuperscript{57} He again stressed that after the Punnapra-Vayalar uprising, there was a multiplication of friends and foe to the Communist Party. At that time, to campaign the people towards Party Congress, Communist activists presented artistic programs.\textsuperscript{58}

To him, “under the leadership of the Communist Party and also with the patronage of Alappuzha Coir Factory Workers Union, a workers cultural and artistic club took shaped. The influence of this club over the common people inspired a young Communist, Kottayam Sreeni to prepare and submit a project report that advised the State Committee of the Communist Party to establish a state level artistic organization under the leadership of the Party. The Party approved his proposal and advised him to be the convener of that project. After consulting with his friends and artists, who were the members of the Communist Party, Kottayam Sreeni gave shape to KPAC.”\textsuperscript{59}

But most of the early activists of the KPAC were against the opinion of O. Madhavan. According to G. Janardhana Kurup, “the Communist Party had no direct role in the formation of KPAC. But it is true that the leaders of this arts club were leftist political activists.”\textsuperscript{60}

Thus we have contradictory opinion about the formation of KPAC. Its early activists and leaders gave different opinion in this matter. Whatever may be the difference of the opinion in this regard, it is agreed by all that KPAC was born in 1950.

\textbf{The First Play – En-te Makananu Sari (My Son is Right)}
The enlightenment that drama is the best medium to transact the progressive ideas and ideologies simply and deeply to the masses was the guiding force behind the formation of the KPAC and its first play-Ente Makananu Sari. G. Janardhana Kurup and Rajagopalan Nair developed the theme, which portrays the feudal lords on the one side and a proletarian society on the other. The ideological conflict between these two classes constituted the plot of the play.

A Karanavar of the bourgeois family was the main-stay of the play. Having dreamed that his son would become an officer and there by his status too better, he sent him to college for higher studies. He had a beautiful daughter also, who is in love with her cousin. He was very much interested in Communist ideology and public affairs. The Karanavar’s dreams were dashed out when he heard the news that his son was arrested by the police and put under custody on account of Travancore student’s strike. Thus the family lost peace. However his son managed to escape from the prison and came to his house to see his father and sister. But the Karanavar refused to accommodate him in that house and made it clear that he is a staunch opponent of political uproars and riots. He had a great obedience towards the legal rule and then he ousted his son from the house. Thereafter a few policemen, who were in pursuit of the escape, reached his house. The Karanavar proudly claimed that he expelled his son from the home. But the policemen, ranging over the absconding culprit severely manhandled him. After the departure of the policemen, he raised the question why the policemen severely beat him. This is the nature of the rule of the king and the Dewan – Done to death everybody, replies his nephew. This incident changed his orthodox attitude. He then began raising his voice against the ruling class and acclaimed “My Son is Right”.

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61 G. Janardhana Kurup and Rajagopalan Nair developed the theme, which portrays the feudal lords on the one side and a proletarian society on the other. The ideological conflict between these two classes constituted the plot of the play.

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Ente Makananu Sari was a play set to appeal directly to the spectators to revolt against the feudal landlordism and for social change. After finishing the first draft of the play, the KPAC activists tried to get financial assistance and searched for suitable actors. They got financial assistance from Kunjhi Raman, the then Labour Minister and later, K.S. Rajamony, a man with love of art, who was a colleague of G. Janardhana Kurup, agreed to take financial responsibility from the rehearsals to the debut of the play.

Then they found T.P. Moideen Kunju and A.P. Kuttappan as actors. But inconsistency continued over the matter of actress. Finally Rajamony mentioned a girl-Sulochana, who was a very good singer and also an actress. G. Janardhana Kurup and Rajagopalan Nair went to the residence of Sulochana at Puthenchantha. Her father was an ex-service policeman and at that time he was not there. Sulochana and her mother could not take any decision without his permission. Having understood that Rajagopalan Nair is an M.L.A and G. Janardhana Kurup is a famous advocate, Sulochana made it clear that a decision would be intimated to them after the consent of her father. As such, Sulochana, with her father, arrived at Swaraj Lodge and received the script of the play with an advance payment of Rs.25/- as remuneration.

They also could find K.G. George, a talented play-back singer and actor and Punaloor Balan to write lyrics to the play-back songs. At this time KPAC did not have an office building. Shanmugham Pillai, the owner of Swaraj Lodge, which was located at Manjalikulam in Trivandrum, by his grace granted them to use a room at free of rent which became the temporary office of KPAC. The discussions about the performance of the drama were held at this room. Through these discussions they decided the number of songs and scenes which were to be included. Meanwhile Rajagopalan Nair brought
Kottayam Sreeni, who was a Communist activist to KPAC to coordinate the activities of the KPAC.

The chief activists of KPAC assembled in the Swaraj Lodge aiming to give an organizational profile to KPAC. A committee was formed as G. Janardhana Kurup as President, Rajagopalan Nair as Secretary and Rajamony, Punaloor Balan and Kottayam Sreeni as executive members. This first committee mainly discussed the rehearsal of their first play.

For conducting rehearsals they could get a hall at M.P. Paul’s tutorial college. The rehearsals were arranged every day evening. Apart from this the visit of K.C. George to the rehearsal camp bestowed them with a feeling of political patronage. Before starting the rehearsal, actors, befitting the particular characters were also selected. G. Janardhana Kurup as the Karanavar, Rajagopalan Nair as the nephew, Kuttappan as the son of the Karanavar and Sulochana as the daughter of the Karanavar was selected to play the important roles in the drama. The rehearsal continued for one month and it was systematic, well co ordinate and was well arranged for the staging. Then the day for inauguration was finalized and the advertisement of the inauguration has given to the local news papers and notices were also printed and distributed. A list of eminent personalities was collected and invitation letters were sent to them.

There is no evidence, which shows the correct date of the first performance of the play. The early activists of KPAC did not mention it at anywhere. But G. Janardhana Kurup shares his memory about the first performance of the play. “Majority of the spectators of the play were intelligentsia. Sulochana excelled herself in acting and play
back singing. K.S. George displayed brilliant play back music. The intelligentsia and the Communist Party leaders hold the view that it was a new experience.”  

Centering on the jail breaking of M.N. Govindan Nair and the student agitation of Travancore, the play projected a challenge against the existing political condition. The brilliant victory in the debut, rendering the play be got booked at several places. The spirit of convener Kottayam Sreeni, made the play being staged on ticket basis. Besides in the Party meetings, the play had been staged among the public also. Meanwhile many eminent personalities began to contact KPAC and supported its venture.

From the very beginning, KPAC received the backing of the Communist Party in its mission. R. Sankaranarayanan Thampi, M.N. Govindan Nair, Kesavan Potti, Student Federation activist and the arts club secretary of the M.G. College, Thoppil Krishna Pillai, Veliyam Bhaskara Panikker, etc., joined hands with KPAC in its headway. The Student Federation Secretary O. Madhavan was one of the most prominent persons, who became the member of KPAC during this period.

The play *Ente Makananu Sari* had been staged on over 40 stages. Many people from Thiruvananthapuram to North Paravoor had seen the play. The founders of KPAC were not satisfied with this and they tried to forward their mission through the theatre.

**Thoppil Bhasi and KPAC:**

**Assimilation of a Revolutionary man and Platform**

Thoppil Bhasi was a person who gave a new look to the Malayalam play leading it in a revolutionary path. The reformation that he brought about in the socio-political and cultural scenario of Kerala was very inspiring. His excellence in drama later extended to
Malayalam cinema also and his dramas and films could get a number of state and national awards. Thoppil Bhasi became synonymous with the cultural productions of the KPAC. Bhasi’s plays were avowedly about social transformation and they reflected an attempt to create a new radical cultural practice founded on the lives of the “people”.74

Thoppil Bhaskara Pillai alias Thoppil Bhasi was born on 8th April 1924 at Vallikkunnam, a small village in Alappuzha district. Being a politician right from the college life, Thoppil Bhasi became a permanent member of the Student’s Union. He was the leader of a student strike in the Thiruvananthapuram Ayurveda College.75 With his friend Kambissyery Karunakaran, he organized the students and the young men of central Travancore to participate in the freedom struggle. He was in jail when India got independence.76 Posing challenge over the wrong policies of the Congress, he left the Congress Party. Then the Communist ideology attracted him and he joined in the party. The struggles headed by the Communist Party during 1940s also inspired him to join that party.

In the year 1950, which was the formative year of the KPAC, Suranadu, a small village in Kollam district witnessed a strong anti-feudal riot. The farmers, workers and students joined together under the leadership of the Communist Party. They sponsored an endless revolt against injustice. Thus during the period 1948-50, the central Travancore witnessed continuous excitement. After it came into power in 1948, Paravoor T.K. Narayana Pillai’s government took large scale repressive measures to suppress the Communist activists.77 Despite these struggles, the Communist leaders conducted secret meetings in order to prepare agitation against the brutalities of the feudal lords.
Vallikkunnam, which was the birth place of Thoppil Bhasi, had also a long history of revolt against feudal exploitation. When Sir. C.P. Ramaswamy Ayer proclaimed independent Travancore in 1946, the district committee of Kayamkulam decided to arrange a campaign meeting at Vallikkunnam. They choose this place because it was the native place of Kambissery Karunakaran, who was then the secretary of the Party and Thoppil Bhasi, who was an executive committee member.

K.K. Chellappan Pillai and Pandavathu Sankaran Pillai, the leaders of the Communist Party reached Vallikkunnam to participate in this meeting. But just before the starting of the meeting, the first class magistrate issued a prohibition on the meeting. Thus the meeting dissolved and the chief organizer Thoppil Bhasi felt shamed over this. But as restitution, they decided to conduct a meeting, without fearing the Government Order. Apart from Thoppil Bhasi and Kambissery Karunakaran, Kesavan Potti, who was then the headmaster of the Sanskrit High School and Peroor Madhavan Pillai were selected to lead the meeting. Thereafter these four people became the fore front activists of the Communist Party.

By the constant effort of these leaders, a branch of the Communist Party was formed under the secretary ship of Paramu Nair. Then they took a decision to conduct a procession under the leadership of the Democratic Youth Front. It was the first procession of its kind in Suranadu. Intercepting the procession, the gundas of the feudal lords attacked the people. The very next day they conducted a much strong procession as a reply.
It was in this situation that the feudal lords of the Thennala family through one of their servants auctioned the public pond. It was a sanctuary for the poor farmers during drought. The feudal lords interdicted the farmers from entering the pond. At this time the Communist Party gave support to the people and mobilized them. Under the leadership of the Party, on 1949 December 30, people entered into the pond by challenging the feudal lord. The feudal lord gave petition to the police against them.

On the next day a large police force came to Suranadu and then a violent struggle occurred between the people and the police. In that struggle four policemen and inspector Mathew lost their lives. With high officials, Chief Minister Paravoor T.K. Narayana Pillai visited the place on the next day. He ordered for a strong action against the Communist activists of that area. The Travancore Government banned almost 60 organizations on as they were connected with the Communist Party. For the charges of assembling, conspiracy and murder; different cases were registered against 26 persons including Thoppil Bhasi. Thereafter, with the other Communist leaders, Thoppil Bhasi absconded.

It was during this period that Thoppil Bhasi came into contact with KPAC. When he was in Kollam to escape from the police, he came to know that KPAC was staging their play at Kundara. M.N. Govindan Nair gave permission to him to watch the drama and arranged him a car to reach the destination. Besides watching the play, he wanted to know whether KPAC was ready to stage his own play. Before his departure from Kundara, he enquired G. Janardhana Kurup and R. Rajagopalan Nair whether they were ready to enact the drama, written by him under the pseudonym ‘Soman’. It was a play centering on the feudal-tenant relationship on the background of the Suranadu incident.
The final stage of *Ente Makananu Sari* was at Punaloor. After that performance, KPAC convened a meeting at the residence of Rajagopalan Nair. In that meeting some important decisions were made. Kottayam Sreeni was exempted from the post of convener because he wanted to take over the Party responsibilities at Kottayam. On his request, the committee allowed K.P. Moideen Kunju MLA to take leave from acting. Finally the committee decided to stage Thoppil Bhasi’s *Ningalenne Communistakki*, which became the masterpiece of KPAC.

**Ningalenne Communistakki (You Made Me a Communist)**

The play *Ningalenne Communistakki* which called for the revolutionary overthrow of the entrenched system of landlordism, and propaganda for an overtly Communist agenda, is the most successful political play in the history of the theatre movement in Malayalam.\(^{85}\) Through this play KPAC made the dramatic performance as a powerful weapon for the socio-political transformation of Kerala. Robin Jeffry assessed that the play grew directly from the turmoil of the Communist attempt at organized resistance at Suranadu in 1949.\(^{86}\) The drama was the result of his direct contact with the agricultural labourers. The pauperized peasantry during his underground days naturally could think of nothing else than depicting their struggles for a better life.

For the rehabilitation of the victims of Suranadu case, a Defence Committee was formed under the leadership of K. Kesavan Potti. For the financial assistance to this committee, they decided to publish Thoppil Bhasi’s *Ningalenne Communistakki* for sale. The book was released for sale in August 1952. It contained 170 pages and designated as a prose play. An advertisement of this book had been given through *Janayugam*.\(^{87}\) This
advertisement indicated that the copies of this book will be given through N. Sreedharan, CPI office, Kayamkulam and Chalanam Publications and Book Stall, Mavelikkara. It also stated that the sale of the book was for the financial assistance of Suranadu Defence Committee.  

The KPAC activists managed to get a copy of *Ningalenne Communistakki* and assessed that, the play assimilated political and social impulses of the society and they decided to choose it for KPAC. But certain alternations were needed to stage the play. The important demerit was the absence of the heroine on the stage. The play was written in a way that there was no importance to music and it became difficult to include songs. Due to the efforts of M.N. Govindan Nair and Sankara Narayanan Thampi, KPAC activists got sanction from the author to stage the play with some changes. At this time Thoppil Bhasi was arrested from Ennakkattu and locked up in Adoor. After the consent of the author, R. Rajagopalan Nair and G. Janardhana Kurup took the responsibility to reproduce the drama.

The story of the play was arranged into fourteen scenes. It mainly brought the story of three families – the ruined *tharavad* of Paramu Pillai, the feudal lord Kesavan Nair’s family and starved Karumban’s family. Through these families, the play could highlight the socio-political condition which prevailed in the society.

*Ningalenne Communistakki* is a long play with a simple plot. Paramu Pillai, the pivotal figure, who is made a Communist, stands as a classic example of an older male in a decaying matrilineal joint family. He constantly recalls the good old days and unable to cope up with the poverty and exploitation of the present. Indeed the fascination with such
intellectual men, living on declining rents and vanished glories, underlines the importance of family disruption in modern Kerala.\textsuperscript{90}

In the starting of the play, Paramu Pillai’s son Gopalan, who was a Communist with his cool comrade and mentor, Mathew, seemed to have been frustrated by the design of Kesavan Nair, who was a feudal lord, to acquire Paramu Pillai’s land. Even the capitalist’s daughter, Suman sees the righteousness of the Communist cause and joined hand with the peasants. Gopalan, in spite of his difficulties, remains true to the Party, which goes ahead with demonstrations. Eventually they could win concessions for the labourers and poor landlords. Suman stands with the Communists and she and Gopalan resolved to marry. Finally Paramu Pillai catapulted out of his lethargy by the dedicated work of the young Communists, joined the Party. ‘You have made me a Communist’ Paramu Pillai tells to the youths, ‘we haven’t’ Mathew replies, ‘experience has’.\textsuperscript{91} The play ends with the slogan shouting youths preparing to march against injustices.

In this play Thoppil Bhasi portrayed his direct experiences which he faced when he was in underground. The reproducers of the play – R. Rajagopalan Nair and G. Janardhana Kurup – shared the same thought of Thoppil Bhasi. Later Thoppil Bhasi wrote about the reproduction of his play that “they (Rajagopalan Nair and Janardhana Kurup) reproduced the drama without unharming the main plot."\textsuperscript{92} The philosophy of Communism, which taught sympathy for fellow beings was the guiding force behind Thoppil Bhasi, Janardhana Kurup and Rajagopalan Nair.
Thoppil Bhasi dedicated his drama – *Ningalenne Communistaki* – to the valiant martyrs of Suranadu.\(^{93}\) If *Ningalenne Communistaki* was the first play which hoisted the red flag in Kerala, it was also the first book dedicated to the martyrs.

After the final edition of the play, KPAC activists searched for suitable actors. Kambissery Karunakaran, who was a legislative member, journalist and a Communist activist agreed to act the role of the central figure, Paramu Pillai.\(^{94}\) G. Janardhana Kurup, who had an ancestry of feudal family was assigned the role of feudal lord-Kesavan Nair. The important roles were given to Rajagopalan Nair as Veluchar, O. Madhavan as Karumban and Sulochana as Suman, the daughter of Kesavan Nair. For the role of Mala, Kalyani Amma, Gopalan and Meenakshi, new actors Sudharma, Bhargavi, Sambasivan and Vijaya Kumari were selected.

In the meantime, Kedakulangara Vasu Pillai, a young Communist and an experienced organizer of dramatic performance came to KPAC. Having taken consideration of his Communist Party relationship and experience in the theatrical performance, he was assigned with the responsibility of the rehearsals of *Ningalenne Communistaki*.\(^{95}\) KPAC was also fortunate in having the songs for *Ningalenne Communistaki* written by O.N.V. Kurup, who was one of the famous lyricists in Malayalam language. He wrote 23 beautiful songs which included to be sung at intervals. According to O.N.V. Kurup, Thoppil Bhasi sought shelter at Kurup’s house in Trivandrum and together they composed the version.\(^{96}\) Another gifted artist G. Devarajan came to set music to these songs. In fact apart from the theme and content of the play, its tremendous popularity was to a considerable extend due to these impressive songs also.
Many of the songs were on the lips of street boys and peasants for quite a few years after this play was staged for the first time.

The play *Ningalenne Communistakki* was at first, staged on December 6, 1952 at 9 pm in the Sudarsana Theatre at Chavara. The first performance of the play was inaugurated by D.M. Pottakkadu, who was a young progressive literary. The inauguration of the play was intimated the people through an advertisement in *Janayugam* on December 4, 1952. The caption which given to this advertisement was ‘the most awaited inaugural ceremony – *Ningalenne Communistakki*’. About the playwright it was stated that ‘Soman’s most popular play’. The details of actors and characters were also given in this advertisement. Anticipating some rivalry from the opponents against the first performance at Chavara, preemptive actions were taken.

The play started with the presentation song which was sung by K.S. George. Then curtain raised and the hero entered into the stage. In spite of a handsome prince, the people saw a lean and half naked old man. Then the audience heard their language and saw their sorrows on the stage. Through the characters of the play, they heard the realities, which they feared to tell out. At the end of the play in spite of claps, audience began shouting slogans with a revolutionary spirit which they received from the stage. After the first performance, the play got booked for thirty five stages. Thus the spectators rendered the KPAC as the most busy theatre group in Kerala.

*Ningalenne Communistakki* inaugurated a revolutionary change in the dramatic performance in Kerala. “That was not merely play acting. It felt like a mirror which posses the life of the present society.” The popularity of the play swept like a storm for
months up and down in Kerala. Throughout the state it was performed before enthusiastic audience. The content of the play – the struggle of low class poor against the police and landlord – was a reality in the life of many spectators. Even for town dwellers, the subject was as topical as the daily newspapers. So great and spectacular was the success of the play that for the time being critics were silenced. Those who came to find fault with the play went back applauding. Some of the literary critics attacked the open political propaganda. But they were seldom openly expressed.

On January 1953, KPAC got an organizational form. A committee was elected with G. Janardhana Kurup as the President, R. Rajagopalan Nair as the Secretary and Kambisser Karunakaran, Thoppil Krishna Pillai and O. Madhavan as executive members. This committee was also recognized as the district level unit of the Communist Party.\(^\text{102}\)

**The Play and the Prohibition**

The Congress led Government in Travancore was intolerant with the success and the impact of *Ningalenne Communistakki* on the people. In March 1953, the District Magistrate of Trivandrum, instigated by the Travancore-Cochin State, banned the play.\(^\text{103}\) It occurred after eighty five days of its performance. The KPAC activists decided to stage the play disregarding the ban. The people who supported KPAC put strong protest against the ban.

The District Collector issued ban on staging the play at Kovalam in Thiruvananthapuram, on the ground of the spreading of chicken pox in Kovalam area.\(^\text{104}\)
After a discussion at the Communist Party office at Puthenchatha in Thiruvananthapuram, KPAC activists decided to stage the play by refuting the ban. When curtain rose for the play, KPAC President G. Janardhana Kurup came to the stage and addressed the people. “Congress Government had banned the staging of this play. But KPAC would not care this prohibition of the government.” The people shouted with applause. Until the play was over, the police could not do anything against the staging of the play. Thus the performance became a success.

Then the police brought the KPAC activists at Palayam police station. Later, the Communist Party Secretary M.N. Govindan Nair reached the police station and freed all of them on their own bail. The government ban on the play, the staging of the play by challenging the ban and the arrest of the KPAC activists made the public furious. On the next day a public meeting was arranged at Thampanoor ground under the auspices of the Communist Party and the KPAC activists received felicitations. After this public meeting, the Communist Party leaders and KPAC activists met at State Committee Office at Thiruvananthapuram. They decided to file a petition against the ban on the play.

The ban on the KPAC drama raised people’s protest throughout in Kerala. It also caused tumultuous scenes in the Travancore-Cochin Legislative Assembly. Kambissery Karunakaran, who was a Legislative Assembly member also one of the leading actors of the play Ningaleen Communistakki made staunch protest against the prohibition. Communist leader M.N. Govindan Nair also made a powerful speech in the Legislative Assembly against the ban on the play. He highlighted the conspiracy of the congressmen and the events which occurred after the prohibition of the play.
KPAC activists then decided to file a petition against the ban in the Kerala High Court. Its complete responsibility was assigned to G. Janardhana Kurup, the President of KPAC, who was also an advocate. With the former Advocate General, K.G. Kunju Krishna Pillai, G. Janardhana Kurup filed a petition in the High Court. After examined all the issues, the Honorable High Court, within two months, issued the verdict that the ban on the play *Ningalenne Communistakki* was illegal. This verdict gave a new spirit to KPAC activists to continue their mission for socio-political transformation through theatrical performance.

**KPAC and IPTA Meeting**

The ban on *Ningalenne Communistakki* gave much popularity to KPAC. After overcoming the government ban through court verdict, KPAC once again came to stage with *Ningalenne Communistakki*. At this time they received appreciations and welcome even from the other states.

In 1952, IPTA decided to organize a meeting at Bombay. As a progressive organ, IPTA could create their participation to all most every state in India. The Communist Party gave permission to KPAC to participate in this meeting. The KPAC activists could create an impression on the first day of the meeting. In the inaugural session of the meeting, K.S. George and Sulochana sung the song *Ponnrivalambiliyil*… under the leadership of Paravoor Devarajan. Though the spectators could not understand its meaning, they liked the song very much and appreciated the KPAC activists.
People from different states participated in this meeting with their artistic forms. The famous progressive writers like Prithiraj Kapoor, K.A. Abbas and Balraj Sahini participated in this meeting. But KPAC faced difficulties when they tried to perform the play *Ningalenne Communistakki*. KPAC activists submitted the script of the play to the Bombay Government for getting approval to perform it at Bombay. But they did not get approval. The reason they put forward was the name of the play ‘*Ningalenne Communistakki*’.  

After the Bombay trip KPAC received warm welcome from all over Kerala. There was no interval in their performance. With the play *Ningalenne Communistakki* they marched through the length and breadth of the State. Through its content and its beautiful presentation, KPAC could create a revolutionary spirit among the minds of agricultural labourers and working class people.

Through this play, KPAC brought the agricultural labourers and working class people very close to the Communist ideology. E.M.S. Namboodiripad observes that “through this drama, Thoppil Bhasi had an ambition to give strength to the Communist Party, which was then prohibited in several areas. Through its performance, KPAC fulfilled his ambition.”  

A close study of the play gives us the feeling that the real hero of the play was the Communist Party. It was because of this impact that KPAC and its play *Ningalenne Communistakki* could get a prominent place in the history of the Communist movement in Kerala.
KPAC and Election Campaign

As a political wing of the Communist Party, KPAC directly and indirectly intervened in the election campaigns and contributed to the success of Communist candidates. In 1954 Travancore-Cochin State Assembly elections were declared and Thoppil Bhasi became a candidate in the Bharanikkavu legislative constituency. Then he was on the bail in the Suranadu case. The contestant of Thoppil Bhasi gave spirit to KPAC activists and they decided to campaign for his victory. The Congress activists in the Bharanikkavu region campaigned against Thoppil Bhasi and they raised the slogan “No vote for a murderer”. In his election campaign, Jawaharlal Nehru also mentioned Thoppil Bhasi as a murderer and appealed the people not to give vote to him.

At this time KPAC took charge of the election campaign of Thoppil Bhasi. With their play Ningalenne Communistaki, KPAC activists, campaigned every part of the Bharanikkavu constituency. It helped to attract the people, especially the peasants and workers towards the Communist ideology. In the election Thoppil Bhasi got victory with a big margin.

Further, after the formation of the state, Kerala in 1956, when the first general elections were declared to the Kerala Legislative Assembly in February 1957, it gave impetus to the political campaign in every part of Kerala. The Communist Party decided to contest Thoppil Bhasi from the Pathanamthitta legislative constituency. At that time Thoppil Bhasi was at Ernakulam with the KPAC troop. On January 25, 1957 M.N. Govindan Nair called Thoppil Bhasi to the Party State Council office at Thiruvananthapuram and informed the Party’s decision.
The Pathanamthitta constituency was considered as one of the strongholds of the Congress Party. M.N. Govindan Nair asked Thoppil Bhasi that with this election he should make Pathanamthitta a Communist stronghold. KPAC activists considered the election candidature of Thoppil Bhasi as their own. They planned for a mass campaign in the Pathanamthitta region. KPAC team camped at Konni and started their campaign for Thoppil Bhasi. With the short plays and group song, KPAC activists reached every nook and corner of Pathanamthitta. The play *Ningalenne Communistakki* worked as a *Brahmastra* in this campaign. Through these performances, KPAC argued the people to come under the Red Flag and vote for Thoppil Bhasi. Thoppil Bhasi himself acted some of these performances of KPAC.

The people’s attitude gradually began to change. They were attracted by the Communist ideology which was simply taught by KPAC. Thus within one month campaign, KPAC could convert the Pathanamthitta constituency region from a Congress stronghold to a Communist stronghold. The process of first election to the Kerala Legislative Assembly ended on 11 March 1957. In this election Communist Party made a tremendous victory in almost every part of Kerala. In Travancore, the Party won 32 seats out of 60, in Cochin they won 9 out of 18 and in Malabar they won 19 out of 40 seats. Thus they won a total seat of 60. Five independent candidates, who were supported by the Communist Party, also got victory.

Thoppil Bhasi was elected from the Pathanamthitta constituency with a majority of 7648 votes. For the first time in the history of the world, Communist Party could capture the power through the ballets and the Party took the charge of the office on April 5, 1957. For this kind of a victory, the artistic performance of KPAC played a vital
role. Through its artistic performance, KPAC could spread the Communist ideology and revolutionary spirit to the grass root level in Kerala. The first and one of the important decisions of the Communist Government was to release the people, who were in jail in connection with the Suranad case. They were released on April 11 and the Communist activists welcomed their release with great pleasure.

Later Plays of KPAC

KPAC continued their intervention in the socio-political issues of Kerala through its powerful dramas. Each and every drama of KPAC had a social or political purpose. The victory of Ningalenne Communistakki gave inspiration to the KPAC activists to perform a new play. They decided to play Sarvekkallu (Survey Stone), which was also written by Thoppil Bhasi. Through this play KPAC invited people’s attention towards the economic problem of Kerala society. Through Sarvekkallu, Thoppil Bhasi exhibited how the peaceful situation of a family became unpeaceful because of the craze for money. He also pointed the poor economic condition of the middle class people of Kerala. The mainstream of the play is a touching life story. With this, the economic destruction, the problem of unemployment and trade union strike all these were co-related.

KPAC’s next play Mudiyanaya Puthran depicted the story of struggles between the low class workers and high class work owners. In this play the mainstay Rajan, who was a high class man joined hands with low class workers and Communists. He then fought for the better working conditions and better wages for the low class workers. In this fight, his elder brother was his main opponent. Through this play Thoppil Bhasi also portrayed the healthy relationship between the low and the high class. The drama got
much popularity and then KPAC became the undisputed masters of the dramatic performance in Kerala. The Kerala Sahitya Academy gave the award for best play to *Mudiyanaya Puthran*.  

This next play, *Puthiya Akasavum Puthiya Bhoomiyum* carried a positive message for national reconstruction, planned progress and development. It gave rise to a new phase in Malayalam dramatic performance. It was entirely a new theme and gave a new experience to the audience. Through this drama KPAC argued the people to take part in the building of our nation.

Through their next drama *Aswamedham*, KPAC led a movement against the people’s attitude towards a leper. At that time there was no effective medicines for the treatment of leprosy. Even when a leper got cured of his disease, society was not ready to accept him back to his fold. Thus it also became a serious social problem. Dr. A.R. Menon, the then Health Minister of Kerala Legislative Assembly, put forward a bill which allowed to arrest the leper who were at public place. As a member of Legislative Assembly, Thoppil Bhasi vehemently attacked the bill and raised the question “Is disease a crime?” After discussions, Dr. A.R. Menon withdrew the bill.

KPAC showed its strong resentment against the socio-political conditions of the society not only through its dramas but also through open agitations. KPAC also actively intervened in public life, taking up the people’s cause. Through the 1963 budget, the Congress led Government in Kerala imposed several taxes on the theatrical performance. With the support of other theatre groups, KPAC activists decided to organize a mass agitation against the government decision. At first KPAC activist gave a
memorandum to the Kerala Government against the anti-theatrical rules. But the government did not take any action. At the same time government increased the bus charges also.

Apart from KPAC and a few drama clubs, most of the artist clubs were closed in this situation. Then with the support of other theatre groups and Communist Party, KPAC decided to lead an open agitation against the government. On July 23, 1963, KPAC activists led by Thoppil Bhasi sat in dharna in front of the State Secretariat in Thiruvananthapuram. The police tried to remove them but they resisted. Then they were beaten up and arrested.

The Communist leaders made strong protest against the police attack on Thoppil Bhasi and other KPAC activists. Mentioning the details of the police attack, Sulochana, send an open letter to the Police Minister. But the Government did not make any change to the taxes, which were imposed on theatre performance. Later the Communist government lessened all these taxes and it gave encouragement to the dramatic performance in Kerala.

From the last months of 1960s, the Communist Party showed the signs of a division. In 1964 the Party ultimately divided into two. As a cultural wing of the Communist Party, KPAC activists did not allow this to interfere in the work of KPAC and they decided to stay with the Communist Party of India and also decide to work as a single unit. According to G. Janardhana Kurup, the partition of the Communist Party did not make any influence in the work of KPAC.
Meanwhile, KPAC staged their next play, *Sarasayya* (The Arrow Bed, 1964) and it was considered as the second part of the previous play-*Aswamedham*. But this drama could not get much popularity like the previous one. Then through their next play-*Mooladhanam* (The Capital, 1965), KPAC once again came to the forefront. The play *Mooladhanam* was a portrayal of the grime expression of the period 1948-50, which witnessed the Communist witch-hunt in Kerala. At the human level it focused the life on a hunted revolutionary. According to Thoppil Bhasi, “The sacrifices of the common people are the capital which had been invested and will sustain the revolution.”

KPAC also conducted a Delhi trip and the Communist leaders M.N. Govindan Nair, N.C. Sekhar, P.K. Vasudevan Nair and V.P. Nair were the members of the organizing committee for KPAC dramas. A.K. Gopalan, the then opposition leader of the parliament and P.T. Punnoos took interest to invite cabinet ministers to watch KPAC dramas. The organizers gave much publicity to KPAC’s new drama-*Puthiya Akasavum Puthiya Bhoomiyum*. When KPAC staged this play at Delhi fine art’s hall, it became a great success. Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, Vice President Dr. Radhakrishnan, members of the foreign embassies, IPTA activists and several Central Government Ministers came to watch the drama.

After the performance, all the spectators congratulated the KPAC activists. Jawaharlal Nehru himself came to the stage and congratulated the playwright Thoppil Bhasi and all other KPAC activists. Here it may be noted that it was this Jawaharlal Nehru who had called Thoppil Bhasi a murderer during his election campaign at Pathanamthitta constituency in Kerala.
KPAC also could create much influence on the people through its playback songs. While a number of them were exhortatory political songs speaking of a redemptive future, the majority was based on folk tunes and rhythms and represented a veritable invention of a tradition of *naadan pattu* or folk songs. From the beginning KPAC activists tried to include songs in their plays. The lyrics of these songs were in common people’s language and contained revolutionary spirit with a call for fight against social inequality and exploitation so that it could achieve much popularity among the lower class peoples.

KPAC brought the life of agricultural labourers and working class on the stage. Through the study of dramas which were staged by the KPAC, we could understand the socio-political condition and its stage of development in Kerala. In the background of the people’s revolts, which were occurred in the places like Punnapra-Vayalar, Sooranadu, Kadakkal, Kallara, Pangode and Vallikkunnam, KPAC brought a new revolt in Kerala. It was an ideological revolt through its powerful dramas. With the formation of KPAC, drama became popular as an expression of revolutionary zeal of the emerging political culture. The play *Ningalenne Communistakki* gives the Communist point of view regarding the struggle of agricultural and working class people.

KPAC is active in the dramatic performance of Kerala even today. KPAC’s plays may be no match to the spectators and “cultivated addictions” of the electronic media. But as a leftist theatre group it has a future as a conscious response to the demands of a particular historical movement. The radical legacy of KPAC-its emphasis on theatre for the people; its efforts to revitalize whatever possible the ‘traditional arts’; its efforts to
build a people’s theatre movement under the political guidance-this radical legacy continues to inspire street theatre of the Left today.

END NOTES


6. Vide, the translated copy of *Nil Darpana* as *Nil Darpana or The Indigo Planting Mirror a Drama*. C.H. Manuel Publishers, Calcutta, 1861. About the author it is stated translated from Bengali by a Native.


17. The General Secretary of the AITUC, N.M. Joshi was elected the president of the IPTA. Bankim Mukherjee, President AIKS, S.A. Dange, the President of the AITUC, Sajjad Zaheer, the General Secretary, AIPWA, Arun Bose, the General Secretary, AISF was taken as the members of the Executive Committee of the IPTA. Vide, *Ibid.*, pp.132-34.
22. Vide, the Documents and Chronicles in Sudhi Pradhan, *op.cit.*


32. *Ibid*.


59. *Ibid*.
66. *Ibid*.
70. *Ibid*.
73. For the details regarding the coming of O. Madhavan towards KPAC, Vide, O. Madhavan, *op.cit.*, n 57, pp.30-35.


79. Puthuppally Raghavan, *op.cit.*, p.34.

80. *Ibid*.


87. Vide, the Advertisement Notice in Appendix XIX.

88. Ibid.

89. G. Janardhana Kurup, Interview, Kaloor, 4 March 2007.

90. Robin Jeffery, op.cit., p.143.

91. Thoppil Bhasi, op.cit., p.66.

92. Thoppil Bhasi, op.cit., n 81, p.67.


95. O. Madhavan, op.cit., p.17.


98. Vide, the Advertisement of the first performance of the play-Ningalenne Communistakki, in Appendix XX.

99. Ibid.

100. G. Janardhana Kurup, Interview, Kaloor, 4 March 2007.

101. C. Achutha Menon, op.cit., p.15.


103. C. Achutha Menon, op.cit., p.15 also Vide, The Hindu, 28 April, 1953.

104. G. Janardhana Kurup, op.cit., p.54.

106. Ibid.


109. Ibid., Vide, the Speech of M.N. Govindan Nair on the proscription of *Ningalenne Communistakki*, in Appendix XXI.


113. E.M.S. Namboodiripad, *op.cit.*, n 36, p.22.


116. Ibid.


118. Thoppil Bhasi, *op.cit.*, n 81, p.41.

119. Ibid, p.42.


122. Ibid.

123. San Marino, a tiny Italian Principality was the first case of a democratically elected Communist Government in the world. But it was not a large state like Kerala and only a few people participated in that election.


