

Of Solidarity and Other Virtues: Comprehending the Kerala-Latin America Connection

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Latin America and Kerala, despite their considerable geographical distance, have developed a distinctive relationship rooted in shared historical experiences, political solidarities, and cultural affinities. While India–Latin America relations have increasingly gained scholarly attention as part of India’s expanding engagement with the Global South, the particular affinity between Kerala and Latin America remains comparatively underexamined in academic scholarship. This paper examines the historical, political, and cultural foundations of the Kerala–Latin America connection and argues that this relationship represents a distinctive form of postcolonial and transnational solidarity within the Global South. It contends that Kerala’s engagement with Latin America cannot be explained solely through diplomatic or economic interaction; rather, it has been shaped by shared experiences of colonialism, the influence of communist and leftist politics, anti-imperialist internationalism, protest cultures, and transnational cultural flows. The study adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach, combining historical analysis, political economy, comparative analysis, and cultural studies. The analysis demonstrates that Kerala’s internationalist political culture, strengthened by its communist movement, literacy and print culture, and historical exposure to global political developments, has facilitated a sustained interest in Latin American political struggles and cultural expressions. The paper further identifies parallels in anti-neoliberal struggles, protest movements, and cultural practices across Kerala and Latin America. It concludes that the Kerala–Latin America connection constitutes a Global South solidarity network shaped by shared memories of colonialism, political resistance, cultural identification, and aspirations for a more equitable international order.

Keywords: Global South, Semi-Periphery, Anti-imperialism, International Solidarity, Post-colonialism, Columbian Exchange, Kerala-Latin America Relations

Introduction

In the contemporary global order, Latin American countries have emerged as increasingly important strategic and trading partners for India, reflecting the country’s expanding engagement with the Global South and its

broader pursuit of a multipolar international order. Since India's independence in 1947, its relations with Latin American and Caribbean countries have generally been characterised by diplomatic cordiality, political solidarity, and cooperation rooted in the principles of South–South cooperation. India's growing global profile has further strengthened these relations, particularly with major regional powers such as Brazil, whose aspirations for greater influence in a multipolar international system converge with India's own global ambitions. However, India's engagement with Latin America is not confined to state-to-state diplomacy or economic relations. Within India, Kerala presents a distinctive and relatively underexplored case of sustained political and cultural engagement with Latin America.

The geographical distance between Kerala and Latin America—nearly 15,000 kilometres at their closest points—makes the intensity of this affinity particularly striking. Unlike Kerala's extensive diasporic connections with the Gulf, North America, Europe, Oceania, and Southeast Asia, its relationship with Latin America has developed largely without comparable direct people-to-people migration networks. Nevertheless, Latin American politics, literature, football, revolutionary figures, and cultural expressions have generated remarkable interest and popular identification in Kerala. This phenomenon raises an important question: what explains the enduring attraction of Latin America within Kerala despite the absence of substantial direct social and diasporic linkages? Addressing this question requires moving beyond the notion of cultural fascination to examine the historical, political, and ideological processes through which affinities between the two regions have been constructed.

One important basis for this affinity lies in their shared experiences of colonialism and their subsequent engagement with postcolonial political and social transformation. Although the historical trajectories of Latin America and Kerala differ considerably, both experienced European colonial intervention and subsequently developed strong traditions of anti-colonial, anti-imperialist, and emancipatory politics. These historical parallels created discursive spaces through which political developments in Latin America could acquire meaning within Kerala's own political imagination. The influence of the Bolshevik Revolution, the Soviet Union, the Chinese Revolution, national liberation movements, and Third World internationalism further contributed to Kerala's distinctive culture of international political solidarity. Within this wider tradition, the Cuban Revolution, Che Guevara, and Latin American leftist movements

acquired particular symbolic significance among Kerala's progressive and left-oriented political constituencies.

The political affinity, however, constitutes only one dimension of the relationship. Literature, football, popular culture, and other forms of cultural circulation have transformed political identification into a broader social fascination with Latin America. Literary works and translations introduced Kerala's reading public to Latin American social realities and literary traditions, while football created an especially powerful popular connection through the widespread admiration of Latin American teams and players. These cultural encounters have enabled Kerala to engage imaginatively with a geographically distant region and have contributed to the construction of a shared symbolic vocabulary around resistance, identity, creativity, and popular culture.

Against this background, the paper argues that the Kerala–Latin America relationship should be understood not simply as an expression of cultural admiration, but as a multidimensional form of transnational and postcolonial solidarity shaped by historical parallels, political affinities, and cultural exchange. The central argument is that Kerala's engagement with Latin America has been sustained by the interaction of colonial memory, leftist internationalism, anti-imperialist consciousness, and transnational cultural flows, through which a geographically distant region has been incorporated into Kerala's political and cultural imagination. The study therefore seeks to examine how historical experiences, political solidarities, and continuing cultural exchanges have shaped this relationship and to explore the forms of solidarity embedded in Kerala's enduring engagement with Latin America. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach, combining historical analysis, political economy, and cultural studies. The paper is organised into six sections, covering the historical, political, cultural, and contemporary dimensions of Kerala–Latin America relations, followed by a conclusion highlighting their significance for Global South solidarity.

‘The Colonial Cousins’

Latin America and Kerala can be called colonial cousins, as it was two late 15th-century expeditions by European explorers that paved the way for the colonisation of both regions. Christopher Columbus's expedition opened the vast terrain of the Americas to Europeans. Meanwhile, Vasco da Gama had reached the coast of Kerala, effectively unlocking the colonial gateway of the Indian subcontinent for the Europeans. The Colonial experience of Latin America under

Iberian powers, such as Spain and Portugal, was very harsh and unparalleled. Following Christopher Columbus's landing in the Americas in 1492, the broad landscape stretching from Mexico to Cape Horn in southern Chile was mostly colonised by the Spaniards. The Portuguese gained control over Brazil, while the British, French, and Dutch established a foothold in the Caribbean.

Like the voyage of Columbus, which led to the colonisation of the Americas, it was also a voyage by Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama that led to the discovery of the sea route from Europe to the Indian subcontinent. It was by circumventing Africa via the Cape of Good Hope, which led to the subsequent bids to colonize India. Kerala is considered an early colonial maritime gateway to India for Europeans, as most early European expeditions to India were destined for ports in South India, which are now part of the modern-day South Indian state of Kerala. In 1498, Vasco da Gama's fleet reached Kappad, near Calicut in present-day Northern Kerala. Following that, Portugal established several trading posts and eventually established zones of administration in parts of Kerala, Goa, and Bombay, among others. Spices were the main commodity that the Portuguese were interested in in Kerala (Disney, 2009). Following Vasco da Gama, the second Portuguese naval expedition to India was led by Pedro Alvares Cabral, who detoured and landed on the east coast of Brazil in 1500, two years after Vasco da Gama landed in India. Subsequently, Brazil became an important Portuguese colony in South America. After staying in Brazil for a while, Cabral continued on his voyage to India. The fleet arrived in Calicut (now Kozhikode), India, on September 13, 1500 and established a trading post in Calicut, marking the first European factory in India.

Imperial Networks and the Columbian Exchange

The integration of the Latin American economies into global markets during the colonial period has facilitated the transfer of people, goods, flora, fauna, diseases, ideas, etc between the Americas and the other parts of the world, including Europe, Africa and Asia. Such a massive transfer across the continents was called the Columbian Exchange, and it significantly influenced the evolution of the world into what we see today. As part of this, many trees and plants from Latin America were introduced to India by the Portuguese, including cashew, papaya, rubber, cocoa, and chillies. In return, Zebu (*Bos indicus*) breeds of cattle from India were introduced to Brazil during the late 19th century, marking a significant step in Brazil's later rise as a major hub of beef and milk production (Pearson, 2003).

The story of the journey of the rubber to Kerala is an interesting one worth mentioning. Rubber was native to the Amazonian forests in South America. When the Portuguese discovered that rubber had commercial value, they initiated industrial-scale production of rubber in Brazil were wary about competition from other colonial powers. But in 1876, British botanist Henry Wickham smuggled rubber seeds out of Brazil and sent them to the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, London. Following that, British colonialists imported rubber seeds to their colonies, like Ceylon and Malaya and set up large rubber plantations in the late 19th century. It was from there that rubber reached parts of India, especially the Western Ghats in Kerala, in the early 20th century. Currently, Southeast Asian countries and India lead the production of natural rubber, while Brazil, the home of rubber, is not even among the top 10 producers of natural rubber. In India, parts of the erstwhile Travancore, in Kerala, lead the production of natural rubber (Suryanarayanan & Azevedo, 2023). In 2017, a rubber trading company in the Kottayam district of Kerala, Manimalayar Rubbers Private Ltd, exported 19 metric tonnes of natural rubber to Brazil, marking the full cycle of the journey of Rubber across the continents (Thomas, 2017).

Nowadays, India is the second largest producer of cashew, way ahead of cashew's native country, Brazil. Cashew reached India, especially Goa, from Brazil through the Portuguese colonisers in the mid-16th century. Cashew was promoted by the Portuguese not only for the commercial value of its fruit and nut, but also for the cashew tree's ability to prevent soil erosion in coastal areas. It had reached Kerala in the late 16th century from the Portuguese colony of Goa (Bhat et al., 2010). Cashew fruit in the Malayalam language is also known as 'parangi manga', which colloquially refers to the Portuguese connection. These days, Quilon, aka Kollam district in Kerala, is an important hub of cashew processing and export.

Certain narratives hint that the Cardamom introduced by German planters in the Central American country of Guatemala was procured from British colonial Botanic Societies, sourced from South Asia. Cardamom is native to the Western Ghats in South India, etc. But these days, Guatemala is now the chief producer of cardamom, surpassing its South Asian counterparts. It was in 1914 that cardamom was introduced in Guatemala (Nair, 2011).

Even though not discussed commonly or in detail, many among the people of Kerala, especially the rubber and spice planters, and history buffs have a background knowledge about the above-mentioned Kerala-Latin America

connection from the colonial era through the Columbian Exchange (Crosby, 2003; Subrahmanyam, 1997).

Colonial and Post-Colonial Dependencies

The Portuguese rule (1498-1633) in Kerala ended with the capture of its strongholds by the Dutch in 1663. Later, the French had also established small footholds across the Indian peninsula during the 18th century. By the 19th century, the British emerged as the major European power in India by incorporating large parts of the region under the suzerainty of the Union Jack, and their domination continued till 1947. Over this period, the Indian peninsula remained in the imperial periphery of Colonial Europe, producing and supplying cotton, indigo, jute, rice and other crops to Europe and their other colonies. Kerala was pivotal in the supply of spices, tea, coffee, rubber and wood to Britain and other colonialists. In return, finished goods from Britain were imported to India, especially clothing and other consumer goods, effectively destroying the traditional handloom and other domestic sectors. Such a sort of colonisation of the Indian economy had led to an unchecked drain of wealth and triggered agrarian crises and peasant distress in the Indian subcontinent (Habib, 1975).

Similarly, Latin American colonies were also placed at the periphery of the European imperial world to supply metals like silver, tin, gold, copper, etc., and agricultural products like sugar, coffee, cacao, tobacco, etc. Dependency theorists like Argentine economist Raúl Prebisch (1950) have argued that the dependence of Latin American economies on single commodity production, their export to Europe and the import of the finished consumer goods from Europe has underdeveloped the region. He advocated implementing Import Substitution Industrialisation (ISI) to overcome that situation.

From the purview of the World Systems Theory propounded by Immanuel Wallerstein (2004), both India and Latin America during the colonial period served as the exploited periphery, integrated into global capitalism as exporters of commodities, dependent on the industrialised, technologically advanced core, i.e. European colonial powers. The development of domestic industries during the 20th century, and the emergence of the big business groups, have upgraded both India and several countries in Latin America, like Brazil, Argentina and Mexico, to the status of Semi-Periphery with significant industrial capacity, diversified economies, and some political influence. But now, the economic development of these countries is also being patronised by the

profiteering of Multinational Corporations (MNCs) and affected by coercive trade wars, tariffs, and embargoes imposed by core countries like the US.

The introduction of large-scale plantations and the export of primary commodities were common features of colonial-era economies in both Latin America and Kerala. It should be noted that even after attaining independence, the dependency on the export of primary commodities continues for several Latin American countries. Spices and plantation products, including Tea, Rubber, etc., still comprise a significant share of exports from Kerala even to this date. Interestingly, both Kerala and Latin America have also been experiencing another kind of dependency characterised by the large-scale emigration of their skilled/semi-skilled people to global metropolises.

Remittances from Keralites working in West Asian countries are said to be a mainstay of the economy of Kerala. These days, a large section of youth tends to migrate to Europe, Australia, and North America in search of jobs and better opportunities. In Latin America, too, people from the lower-middle class continue to migrate to the US, and the Latino community forms a major demographic group and the workforce in the US. Poorer sections from many Latin American countries, especially from Central America, who are distressed by economic and political crises, used to march as migrant caravans to the US border in Mexico to enter and settle in the US. The construction of a border wall between the US and Mexico to block illegal migrants from the south is a major proposal by US President Donald Trump.

‘Comrades in Arms’: Transnational Political Solidarities

The presence of leftist politics, coupled with the manifestations of anti-colonialism/anti-imperialism and international solidarity, is one of the political parallels that can be found in Kerala and Latin American societies. Due to the influence of communism, socialism and other variants of leftist ideologies in Kerala, major political events in Latin America got much traction in the state of Kerala, particularly among the youth and the students. It includes the Cuban Revolution led by Fidel Castro, the revolutionary heroics of Che Guevara, the electoral victory of the socialist Salvador Allende and the military coup against his parliamentary path to socialism, the experiments of ‘21st Century Socialism’ in Venezuela under the charismatic leadership of Hugo Chavez, US-led machinations for regime change in Venezuela, etc.

The rise and decline of liberation theology, guerrilla resistance to military dictatorships, austerity, and anti-privatisation protests across Latin America

during the 1990s were also discussed in Kerala's political circles. The political history of Latin America is rich with such heroic uprisings against colonialisation, elitism, imperialism, authoritarianism and globalisation. The anti-colonial/anti-imperialist mooring of the people's movements and left-leaning political parties in Latin America is rooted in the lore of indigenous resistance against the Iberian conquest, the struggles for independence from the Spanish crown and guerrilla opposition to the military coups, dictatorships and foreign interventions during the Cold War. The anti-colonial/anti-imperialist fervour of Latin American politics holds relevance and currency as the continent is still reeling under colonial-era dependencies and is frequently battered by imperialistic aggression orchestrated by the United States (Sader, 2008)

Despite attaining freedom from colonisers some 130-150 years earlier than the European colonies in Asia and Africa, the condition of Latin America improved little due to the continuation of exploitative political and economic structures imposed by the colonisers. After replacing the colonial powers like Spain and Portugal, financial and commercial powers like the UK and the US hegemonised Latin America using capital investments and oligarchies. By the end of the 19th century, the US emerged as the sole hegemon over Latin American territories. But on the other end, influenced by the ideas of republicanism, socialism, anarchism, etc., trade unions, peasant leagues, socialist political parties, etc., sprouted across the continent and reshaped the political and social landscape of Latin America in the 20th century.

Communists and trade unionists entered the political scene in Latin America, inspired by the success of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in 1917, and vigorous attempts were made to unionise peasants, indigenous people, and labourers indentured in large plantations called *haciendas*. It was under the auspices of the Communist International (Comintern) that communist parties were formed in Mexico, Chile, Argentina, Brazil, and Cuba between 1918 and 1925. From the 1950s to the 1970s, many leftist populist governments across Latin America, especially in Guatemala (1954), Chile (1973), etc., were toppled in military coups, and civil liberties in many of those countries were crushed under those military dictatorships. Communists and leftists mounted militant guerrilla resistance to those military dictatorships. Those regimes, mostly backed by the US government and MNCs-- have unleashed violent repression on the leftist guerrilla movements. Making use of the Cold War dynamics, the United States has also started direct interventions in Latin America, labelling any popular, democratic, and 'leftist' uprising as subversive and encouraging the

domestic regimes to thwart such movements with repression. It resulted in prolonged spells of violence, including mass murders and forced disappearances in many countries, including Colombia, Chile, El Salvador, Peru, Argentina, Guatemala, Brazil, etc., during the Cold War period. Meanwhile, the militant left and nationalists carried out successful revolutions in Bolivia (1952), Cuba (1959), and Nicaragua (1979) (Sader, 2011). Such political expressions of the Latin American people over many centuries were powerful manifestations of their pursuit to upset the class relations in the base structure of their society, rooted in colonial exploitation, slavery and imperialist machinations for plunder. The political consciousness of Kerala also emanated from the class dynamics in the base structure of its society. The colonial-era feudal land relations rooted in slavery, layered tenancy, etc. were valiantly challenged by working-class movements, social reform movements and government-led reforms. The history of the communist movement in Kerala and parts of Latin America also shows many parallels. It was MN Roy—a prominent Indian communist associated with the Comintern—who co-founded the Socialist Workers Party of Mexico (1919), which later evolved into the Communist Party of Mexico (*Partido Comunista Mexicano*) (Barber, 2008).

The anti-colonial zeal of the Indian communist movement originated from their ideology and militant opposition to British rule over the Indian subcontinent. Since the formation of the Communist Party of India (CPI) in the 1920s, communists were repeatedly persecuted on charges of multiple conspiracy cases, like the Peshawar Conspiracy Cases (1922–1927), Kanpur Bolshevik Conspiracy Case (1924) and the Meerut Conspiracy Case (1929–1933), etc., against British colonial authority in India. The party remained illegal and in the underground until 1942, when they gave a call to the Indian working class to join the united front with Britain and allies against Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany in World War II, following the German attack on the Soviet Union (Dutt, 1940; Namboodiripad, 1986).

The colonial experiences of India, including the drain of wealth, exploitation of the masses, and heavy repression, have hardened the communists' resolve against colonialism. They were also influenced by the Comintern, which promoted proletarian internationalism. The influence of the ideas of Vladimir Lenin, who deemed imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism, characterised by monopoly of finance capital and colonial expansion, had also urged Indian communists to support the anti-colonial, anti-imperialist camps involved in various struggles happening across the world.

Influenced by the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, in Kerala too, a significant section of progressive cadres from the anti-colonial national movement, especially the Indian National Congress (INC) party, got attracted to communism. The Communist Party of India (CPI) had vigorously organised peasants and workers across Kerala and fought against British Imperialism and feudalism. By the 1940s and 50s, the communist party became a prominent political force and led a valiant workers' struggle against the tyranny of the Travancore Diwan, which eventually culminated in the unification of Kerala and integration into the Indian Union in 1956. The Communist Party of India (CPI) under the leadership of E. M. S. Namboodiripadu won the assembly elections held in Kerala in 1957 and formed arguably the first ever democratically elected communist government in the world. Before that, in the Italian enclave of San Marino, the San Marinese Communist Party was also part of a coalition government from 1945 to 1957. Cheddi Jagan's (of Indian origin) victory as the Chief Minister of British Guyana in South America in 1953 is also regarded by some as a victory of Marxists through the ballot box.

Following the Nazi German attack on the Soviet Union in 1941, communists across the world, including from India, called to support the war efforts of the Allies, which included the UK, USA, etc. Before that, Indian communists opposed the war efforts in colonial India and deemed it an imperialist conflict between rival capitalist powers. During the initial days of the war, Indian communists were actively involved in the anti-war propaganda and organised strikes across the country (Overstreet & Windmiller, 1959).

Following the war, the Cold War dynamics pitted the Soviet Union and the US in rival political camps. Both the Soviet Union and the US were active stakeholders and at loggerheads in the anti-colonial uprisings in several countries across the world after the 1950s. The US's crusade against communism had its footprint even in Kerala, as it has been often accused that the US financially supported certain groups associated with the Liberation Struggle (Vimochana Samaram) led by anti-communist, conservative sections in Kerala, which led to the ouster of the first communist-led government in 1959. Since then, the communists in Kerala incorporated anti-imperialism, especially anti-Americanism, as a major constituent of their political program, and they extended solidarity to anti-US protests across the World.

The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) -- foreign intelligence and security agency of the United States government -- had actively supported the coups against left-leaning governments in Guatemala (1954), headed by Jacobo

Arbenz and the Popular Unity government in Chile (1973), headed by socialist leader Salvador Allende, through Operation PB Success and Project FUBELT, respectively. In Guatemala, it was the land reform initiated by Arbenz that irked the interests of US-based agricultural giants like United Fruit Company (UFC), while in Chile, Allende's nationalisation of copper mines offended US-based mining giants like Anaconda, Kennecott, etc. (Blum, 2003). Here in Kerala, too, the introduction of the Kerala Land Reforms Bill (1957) by the first communist government was one of the key triggers for launching the Vimochana Samaram by opposition parties, who got the backing of the upper caste, upper class landlords in Kerala and the alleged covert financial support from the US (Isaac & Franke, 2025).

‘Brothers in Solidarity’ and Kerala–Cuba Camaraderie

Along with Anti-colonialism/anti-imperialism, another important factor that recharges the Keralites' affinity towards Latin American politics is the internationalism and international solidarity ingrained in their society. Colonial and pre-colonial trade relations with foreign societies, exposure to foreign culture, cohabitation with several European cultures during the colonial period, experience of Keralites in serving colonial armies across the world, migration of Keralites to foreign countries in search of jobs and the subsequent diasporic linkages, etc., had inculcated a sense of internationalism among the Keralites. A significant section of Keralites are also avid readers, driven by a high literacy rate, the influence of printing and publishing cultures, and community libraries. Coupled with exposure to news and events from around the world through newspapers, magazines, and radios, the prevalence of leftist and communist ideologies had motivated the people of the state to formulate informed political opinions about various international issues and take a stand on them (Menon, 1994).

Keralites were influenced by the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, the formation of the Soviet Union, the Chinese Revolution and similar developments in the 20th century that boosted working-class internationalism. They have also expressed steadfast support and solidarity for the liberation movements in Africa, the anti-imperialist resistance of Vietnamese rebels against the French and the US, the anti-apartheid struggles by Nelson Mandela, etc. An overwhelming support for the Palestinian cause continues to exist in Kerala, and it should be noted that, despite being a dictator and anti-communist, the ouster and execution of Saddam Hussein in Iraq by the United States was vocally condemned by the

leftists in Kerala. The unwavering support by the Keralites for the communist government in Cuba and their criticism of the ongoing US embargo on the Caribbean Island nation is another important chapter in the Keralites' international solidarity. The Cuban revolution and communist regime in Cuba continue to be an inspiration for the leftists across the world, especially for the people of the Third World. The political affinity towards Cuba has been the fulcrum of the Keralites' international solidarity towards Latin America (Nakano, 2019).

India has had a very warm relationship with Fidel Castro-led Cuba ever since the Cuban Revolution. Indian communists' affinity towards Cuba and Castro peaked after Cuba became an important strategic partner of the Soviet Union against the USA. Che Guevara visited India in 1959, strengthening diplomatic ties between the two countries. As India was a founder of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) during the Cold War period, Cuba joined NAM in 1961, bringing in a radical, militant, anti-colonial, and anti-imperialist fervour to the camp. Fidel Castro attended the 1973 and 1983 NAM Summits held in India. Indian Prime Ministers Rajiv Gandhi and Manmohan Singh visited Cuba in 1985 and 2006, respectively.

Cuba has also championed the cause of international solidarity by organising the First Tricontinental Conference of African, Asian, and Latin American Peoples at Havana in 1966, in which delegates from liberation movements from third world countries from Asia, Africa and Latin America participated. Following that conference, Cuban leader Fidel Castro launched the Organisation of Solidarity with the People of Asia, Africa, and Latin America (OSPAAAL). Cuba has also sent its troops to various countries in Africa, including Algeria, Congo, Angola, Guinea-Bissau, Ethiopia, etc, to support liberation movements and to resist imperialist interventions, especially during the Cold War period (Nakano, 2019). India has also sent its soldiers to Africa as part of the UN Peacekeeping Force during this period. Both India and Cuba were staunch opponents of the Apartheid regime in South Africa and also supported Nelson Mandela's struggle for the liberation of South Africa.

The assassination of Che Guevara in Bolivia by Bolivian security forces backed by the US Military in 1967 invoked widespread protests from leftist forces across the world. Subsequently, leftists across the world, including in Kerala, have started admiring Che as a glorious martyr and as a guiding light in the fight against Imperialism.

The left movement in India, especially in Kerala, is a champion of the Cuba solidarity campaign demanding to end the more than fifty-year-old US-imposed embargo on Cuba following the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. After the fall of the Soviet Union, when Cuba was battered by the US embargo, progressive sections in India had shipped 20,000 tons of food grains to Cuba, collected from across India, including Kerala, in solidarity (“When Kerala’s communists raised tonnes of food to aid a struggling Cuba,” 2016). The medical solidarity from Cuba, extended through groups of doctors, nurses, and health staff who offer services in third-world countries in distress, is regarded as a vanguard in global health internationalism. Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan visited Cuba in June 2023, met Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel Bermudez, and agreed to cooperate in many fields, including medical research, agriculture, education, and sports, reaffirming Kerala’s solidarity with Cuba.

Generations of Keralites had admired Cuban resilience against the US-imposed embargo as a beacon of hope in the fight against imperialism. There are several young people in Kerala with the name Fidel. In 2019, Dr Aleida Guevara, daughter of Che Guevara, received a warm welcome in Kannur in a Cuban solidarity event, befitting the ardent admiration for the revolutionary heroics of Che Guevara among the Keralites. The beedi workers' collective in Kannur district holds an important position in the history of the communist movement in Kerala, especially in the Malabar region. Similarly, Cigar workers in Havana, Pinar del Río, and Tampa and their collective are also an integral part of the Cuban working-class history. During their work time, while beedi workers were rolling the beedis, one worker was entrusted with the task of reading newspapers, periodicals and other literature to them, and it was crucial in the politicisation and unionisation of beedi workers of Kannur. Similarly, the cigar workers of Pinar del Rio have deemed a worker as a *lector* who would read political texts aloud for them (Ullekh, 2024).

In Kerala, so many party offices of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and its youth wing are named after Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. Most of the books and diaries by or on Castro and Che Guevara are translated into Malayalam and published, and read widely. But these days, a significant section of Keralite youth sees Cuba as just a failed economy with a limited supply of consumer goods and limited opportunities. Even though such a perception of Cuba holds some face value, it lacks an understanding of political and historical contexts, including the ongoing US Embargo on Cuba.

Anti-Austerity Protests and the Rise of the Pink Tide

Following the Debt Crisis of the 1980s, many Latin American countries implemented Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) prescribed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Attempts to privatise natural resources and national assets as directed by the IMF triggered widespread economic and political crises across Latin America in the 1990s. At this juncture, social movements entered the mainstream with massive mobilisations against austerity, repression, privatisation, crisis in governance, corruption, etc.

In India, too, the 1990s were a watershed period that marked liberalisation of the Indian economy, prompted by the balance of payment crisis of the 1990-1991 period. Following that Indian government undertook structural economic reforms, including relaxing government control over the private sector, abolition of Licence Raj, welcoming foreign direct Investments, privatisation in key sectors, reduced import tariffs and export subsidies, etc. (Kohli, 2023).

During the 1990s, harsh neo-liberal measures were implemented in Argentina as part of the SAPs dictated by the IMF. It had resulted in decade-long austerity, job cuts, etc., and culminated in massive anti-austerity protests in the country during 2001. The *picquetro* movement, composed of unemployed people and urban poor, organised massive roadblocks in major cities across the country and brought Argentina to a standstill for many days.

In Kerala too, in the 2002-2007 period, leftist youth wing groups, trade unions of workers, etc., protested the state government's bids to secure loans from International monetary institutions like the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Both Latin America and Kerala witnessed vibrant protests against the signing of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs). In 1994, when Mexico witnessed protests led by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), campesinos, and indigenous groups against the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The protest led by leftist heads of state of Latin America held at Mar del Plata in Argentina in 2005 against the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA) is an important political event that happened in Latin America during the 21st century (Meriguet, 2025).

The protests led by the communist party and its farmers' front in Kerala during 2009 against India signing the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement gained much traction across the country. As part of the protests, the Kerala state committee of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) organised a massive 550km long state-wide human chain registering Kerala's opposition towards the Union

government's decision to integrate India into the ASEAN Free Trade Area (“CPM chain in Kerala over FTA with ASEAN - The Economic Times,” 2009).

Along with the anti-IMF protests in Argentina, the struggle against the privatisation of water in Cochabamba, Bolivia, was also featured in periodicals in Kerala, particularly in the backdrop of protests against the Coca-Cola Bottling plant in Plachimada of Kerala's Palakkad District. In Cochabamba, people protested against the overpricing of water by a privatised water utility *Agua del Tunari*, meanwhile, in Plachimada, the local people protested against the depletion and contamination of groundwater implicated by the Coca-Cola bottling plant. Both struggles are regarded by many people as valiant assertions for access to water and against corporate control over natural resources (“Water wars: Plachimada vs Coca-Cola,” 2017).

The vibrant anti-austerity, anti-privatisation protests led by radical social movements resulted in the surge of left-wing forces into power in Latin America by the end of the 1990s, starting with the election of Hugo Chavez as the President of Venezuela in 1998. That political trend almost continued till the election of Lenin Moreno as the president of Ecuador in 2017. Such a wave of the left-wing surge in Latin America has been called by several academics, political commentators, and journalists the ‘Pink Tide’. The so-called ‘Pink Tide’ or the ‘diluted red’ trend of Marxism and socialism is admittedly different from the old ‘red’ trend of communist governments in Eastern Europe and Asia in the 20th century. Most of those ‘Red Tide’ communist regimes of the 20th century captured state power through revolution and tried to implement socialism under the dictatorship of the communist party. Meanwhile, the ‘Pink Tide’ regimes gained political power through elections and advocated for the ‘Socialism of the 21st Century’, which calls to fight neo-liberal profiteering and imperialist exploitation of human and natural resources by multinational companies. The torchbearers of the ‘Pink Tide’ comprises of both Marxists and non-Marxist including communists, trade unionists, campesinos, neighbourhood groups, indigenous groups, Christian base communities, urban poor, etc. (Shabeer, 2013).

The ‘Pink Tide’ governments, especially the socialist government in Venezuela, led by Hugo Chávez, gained massive traction worldwide, including in Kerala, for its Bolivarian Revolution, which focused on the nationalisation of resources, wealth redistribution, welfare policies, new constitutionalism, international solidarity, and opposition to US hegemony. In 2005, Hugo Chávez visited India and received a heroic welcome at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in New

Delhi, a bastion of left-wing student politics in India. The name Chavez has also been bestowed on newborns in Kerala state.

Social Twins of the Global South: Transnational Cultural Flows

Centuries-long colonial rule in both Latin America and India made permanent imprints on the respective societies, which are evident in patterns of social development, culture, literature, sports etc. In South America, the European colonialists have imposed Romance languages that evolved from Latin, especially Spanish, Portuguese, etc., by displacing the indigenous languages. Gradually, Spanish and other Latin-origin languages became both official and spoken languages in the region, bestowing the name 'Latin America' on the region. But in the case of Kerala, the spreading of English hasn't displaced or substituted the native language, Malayalam. When Britain introduced English in Kerala, only an elite section of the society was able to appropriate it in the initial years, but with the advent of universal education and the evolution of a strong reading and print culture, as significant sections of Kerala got hold of the functional knowledge to articulate in English. Currently, English is thriving as a major link language in Kerala, having a semi-official status in governmental affairs, academics, etc. While Malayalam is mother tongue and official language of Kerala, the state is also home to several minority languages and numerous indigenous oral languages associated with the tribal communities, which are marginalised and on the verge of extinction.

Here in India, Portuguese colonial influence led to the formation of a community of Luso-Indians, particularly in Mumbai, Goa, Daman and Diu, Cochin, etc. They were Catholic Christians, spoke a Portuguese creole language, and followed a distinct cuisine, dress code, and traditions that have influenced the local culture. Several words from the Portuguese language also got assimilated into local languages, including Malayalam in Kerala. Later, with the retreat of the Portuguese colonial forces, the Luso-Indian community also got assimilated into other communities, especially the Anglo-Indian community. Gradually, the Portuguese creole was largely replaced by English and regional Indian languages. Even though the Luso-Indian community in India haven't disappeared, it has become fragile due to cultural assimilation, emigration and lack of institutional support to protect their culture and heritage (de Souza, 1997). During the colonial period, the diseases brought in by the Europeans killed a significant section of the indigenous people of the Americas, as they didn't have any immunity towards them. To replenish the dwindling indigenous work force,

the Europeans had brought millions of Africans to the Americas from across the Atlantic and enslaved them in plantations and mines. Brazil and the Caribbean region had hosted the lion's share of these African people. Now the descendants of those Africans emerged as strong Afro-American, Afro-Caribbean communities in Latin America and the Caribbean (Eltis & Richardson, 2010). Later, when slavery was banned, the colonial forces brought Indians, Javans and some East Asian communities to the region to work as indentured labourers in their plantations. Eventually, out of the descendants of those indentured labourers, a strong community of Indo-Caribbeans evolved in the region, standing as a testament to the centuries-old India-Latin America connection.

Three centuries of Iberian colonization of Latin America have marginalized the Indigenous, giving rise to new communities along with the white settlers, like the *criollos*; whites born in the colonies, *mestizos*; born out of the union of white and indigenous, the Afro-Americans descended from the African people brought to the colonies, the *mulatos*; born out of the union of Africans and Whites, the *zambos*; from the union of Africans and the Indigenous etc and a small community of Asians (Martinez-Echazabal, 1998). Along with that, the Latin American society also witnessed the rise of the *casta* system, characterised by racial segregation of the society into distinct layers. In the *casta* system, the white communities occupied the top positions in the social ladder, the mixed communities in the middle position and the indigenous and blacks were placed at the bottom (Katzew, 2004). Here in India, too centuries-old social stratification exists in the form of castes. The South Indian state of Kerala is also not much different from other parts of the country when it comes to the matter of caste.

Sports as a Postcolonial Arena

Sports is another front in both Latin America and India, which showcases the colonial lineage and anti-colonial resistance from both regions. Football and cricket are the most popular sports in Latin America and India, respectively, and both were introduced by colonial forces in these regions. In both football and cricket, Latin Americans and Indians attained mastery and enough competency to challenge the supremacy of the colonial powers in their own ball games.

Keralites love their football as much as the Latin Americans do. Football was introduced by Europeans in both Latin America and India. It was British soldiers and colonial officials who introduced football in India during the mid-19th century. Keralites learned football from British officers and cadets in the

cantonments and Malabar Special Police (MSP) camps in North Malabar during the late 19th century. Schools run by Christian missionaries have also introduced football as part of the physical well-being of the students (Kerala Football Association, 2015). Latin Americans learned football from the British sailors, railway workers, immigrants, and expatriates in the 19th century (Alabarces, 2016).

The national men's football teams of Argentina and Brazil got huge fanfare in Kerala. Latin American football legends, including Pelé and Maradona, inspired generations of football lovers in Kerala. Among the active players in the men's football world, Lionel Messi from Argentina and Neymar Jr. from Brazil are passionately followed and celebrated by youth across the state. Meanwhile, the public endorsement of far-right leader Jair Bolsonaro's candidacy by several Brazilian football players, including Neymar Jr., in 2022 has courted widespread criticism from fans of Brazilian football worldwide, including those in Kerala. On the other hand, the lore on the friendship between the Argentine football legend Diego Maradona and Cuban leader Fidel Castro is still celebrated by leftist fans of football across the world.

A social media post by the Argentine National Football Team (Selección Argentina) in December 2022, expressing gratitude to their fans in Bangladesh, Kerala, India, and Pakistan for their support in the Qatar World Cup 2022, evoked much frenzy and furore among Indian social media users (Praveen, 2022). A section of netizens found a problem that Kerala has got a special mention in the post along with India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, despite being a state within India. The football fanatics in Kerala retorted to this by stating that it was an overwhelming gesture of solidarity from the Argentine football team, which recognised the maddening fanfare for the Argentina team in Kerala.

Cricket is the most popular sport in India. The British introduced cricket to the subcontinent during the 18th century, and now the game is more Indian than British. In the Caribbean region in the Americas, too, cricket is very popular. The cricket-playing nations in the Caribbean constitute the West Indies cricket team. Many players with Indian ancestry are part of the West Indies cricket team. It was the West Indies team, led by Sir Clive Lloyd, that won the first two cricket World Cups in 1975 and 1979, both at Lord's Cricket Ground. London, which is regarded as the Mecca of Cricket.

South–South Literary Imaginaries

Latin American literature is another important Latin American ‘thing’ that got much traction and fanfare in Kerala. Reading culture is very strong among Keralites due to the high literacy, a vibrant library movement across Kerala -- active from the community level to the state level, and a strong literary tradition. A significant section of Keralites has also acquired proficiency in English from the period of the beginning of British missionary schools in the region. The classics and other popular books in English have been accessible to them. The Kerala state also cherishes a strong culture of printing and publishing that had prompted the birth of a strong translation movement by which popular works from other Indian languages, English and other foreign languages got translated widely to Malayalam. During the heydays of the Soviet Union, Progress Publishers in Moscow printed English translations of Russian classics and distributed them across the world. At one point, they even printed Malayalam translations of Russian works, science fiction and children's literature, and it got wide circulation and popularity across Kerala (Ramachandran, 2010).

The Latin American Novel Boom is a period during the 1960s and 70s, when popular works of Latin American writers, especially novels written in Spanish, were widely translated into English and were re-translated into other languages. The Nobel Prize feats of Pablo Neruda (1971) and Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1982) have drawn the Keralites’ attention to poetry and novels from Latin America and paved the way for serious translations of Latin American literature into the Malayalam language. Along with Pablo Neruda and Gabriel García Márquez, other prominent Latin American writers, including Jorge Luis Borges, Octavio Paz, Mario Vargas Llosa, Eduardo Galeano, Juan Rulfo, Nicolás Guillén, Carlos Fuentes, Isabel Allende, and Roberto Bolaño, have garnered immense recognition in Kerala. As of now, all of Gabriel García Márquez's books have already been translated into Malayalam. Due to the immense popularity of Marquez’s works in Kerala these days, it has often been humorously stated that he was a Malayali writer. It was MT Vasudevan Nair, the eminent Malayali novelist, who introduced Gabriel Garcia Marquez to Keralites in one of his essays, much before Marquez’s works became popular in this part of the world. Malayali writers like Madhu Nair and Benny Benyamin had even ventured to Colombia to visit Marquez’s ancestral home in Aracataca, and they published travelogues based on it.

Pablo Neruda's poems were also another sensation among the youth in Kerala. Translations of his various poems, like ‘Tonight I Can Write (Saddest

Lines)', 'Everyday You Play', were featured in Malayalam movies, including *Poomaram* (2018), *Shutter* (2012), *Pranaya Varnangal* (1998), etc. Nobel laureate Octavio Paz had also spent some time in India as a Mexican diplomat; during that time, he wrote extensively on Indian mysticism, including a poem about Cochin.

Most of the writers mentioned above were leftists and were associated with the Latin American Boom in literature during the 1960s to 1970s. Such a period in Latin American literature was characterised by the usage of literary techniques, including magical realism, non-linear storytelling, etc. Magical realism has been regarded as a major feature of the boom period novels of Latin American literature, which is a narrative technique characterised by the mixing of natural and supernatural elements or the blending of facts and fantasies and its portrayal in everyday life. Even though the discussions on Magical Realism have their origin associated with German painting, this technique was popularised by post-colonial writers from the Third World, especially from Latin America. The depiction of Latin American reality mired in hardships of day-to-day struggles and social traumas emanating from past colonial horrors, with allusions to legends, myths, folklore and indigenous traditions, had made a magnificent impression on the readers that triggered the boom in the popularity of Latin American novels in other parts of the world (Zamora & Faris, 1995). This style had courted widespread traction in Kerala too, as it is a region that has a politically conscious post-colonial society, rich in folklore, legends and oral literary tradition.

Popular boom period novels by Marquez, Llosa, Fuentes, etc. mainly depicted the social, cultural and political reality of Latin America. There also exists a genre called Dictator Novels through which Latin American writers literally and figuratively mocked the dictators and authoritarian regimes across the region. Marquez's *Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975), Llosa's *Feast of the Goat* (2000), Augusto Roa Bastos' *I the Supreme* (1974), etc., are some important works in this genre (Kristal, 2002).

In 2017, students of the Kerala Law Academy in Trivandrum organised a protest against the authoritarianism of the college management. The students named their protest against the college management as the 'Spring in Comala', a direct reference to the fictional ghost town Comala portrayed in the famous Latin American novel *Pedro Paramo* (1955), written by Juan Rulfo. In the novel, Comala symbolises a peasant village transformed into a ghost town due to the apathy and insensitiveness of the local landlord, Don Pedro, towards the

villagers. Here, in the Law Academy, a month-long protest by the students was successful in forcing the college management to agree to their demands, securing a more democratic, liberal, student-friendly campus. According to the students, it was like bringing in spring to their campus, which earlier resembled the ghost town of Comala (“Kerala Law Academy Protests end on 29th day, College to get new Principal,” 2017).

The songs, style and cult of the Jamaican Reggae artist Bob Marley continue to influence Kerala youth. The anti-imperialist and anti-racist solidarity embedded in his songs made him very popular among young people in Kerala, even though Marley didn't visit this part of the world during his lifetime. There exist many Bob Marley-themed Cafes and Music bands in Kerala these days.

In Kerala's popular culture, especially in Malayalam movies, names such as Cuba, Mexico, Bolivia, etc., are highlighted as symbols of rebellion, resistance, and revolution. Cuban-style boxing was portrayed in the movie *Daveed* (2025) released recently. Che Guevara's Motorcycle Diaries inspired the popular Malayalam movie *Neelakasham Pachakadal, Chuvanna Bhoomi* (2013). While Bollywood enjoys a decent fanfare in Latin America, New Wave movies from Latin American countries continue to be a major attraction in International Film Festivals organised in Kerala.

These days, Latin American dance forms like Salsa are getting much traction in Kerala. The Colombian-originated Zumba dance was introduced in Kerala schools recently by the state government for the physical and mental well-being of the students. Over this, there were also some concerns raised by some conservative sections in Kerala society, who accused the state government of promoting foreign culture (“How one Colombian man brought Zumba to the world, and the row over it in Kerala,” 2025). Mexican cuisine, Latin American cocktails and mocktails, Cuban Rum and Mexican Tequila have also become very popular in Kerala these days.

Conclusion

A close analysis of the above-mentioned aspects of the Latin American and Kerala societies reveals the existence of many parallels and solidarities between them. It ranges from colonial-era transactional connections, political solidarities that originated in the 20th century, and cultural exchanges during the period of globalisation. Even though both societies are post-colonial societies, many types of dependencies, including the continuation of colonial era-plantations and the modern-day exodus of youth and skilled professionals, exist

in both Latin America and Kerala. It could be also noted that in both societies, despite the presence of strong egalitarian ideas and leftist political traditions, rigid, elitist social hierarchies continue to exist in form of the *casta* system and the caste system, where indigenous people are systematically marginalised. However, the political solidarity that emerged during the 20th century, rooted in socialist/communist egalitarianism and anti-imperialism, continues to recharge the Keralites' love for Latin America to this date.

Such a shared colonial experience, political solidarity and empathy on Latin America's lived experiences had evoked a camaraderie among Keralites towards Latin America. The existence of such parallels and solidarities also signifies that modern characteristics of both Latin America and Kerala societies have evolved out of a convergence of their direct and indirect colonial-era socio-cultural transactions, their post-colonial synthesis and anti-colonial quests by political, social and cultural movements in these societies.

In the popular Malayalam movie *Moonnam Pakkam* (1988), director P. Padmarajan tells the tragic story of a grandfather's wait for the return of his grandson, who drowned in the sea, while he was on a vacation at his ancestral home. After knowing about the mishap that happened to his grandson, the character of the grandfather (Thampi), played by Thilakan, comforts his grandson's bereaved girlfriend by reminding her of the story of Velasco – from Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *The Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor* (1955) -- who fell into the Caribbean Sea from a ship, drifted in the sea for ten days and washed ashore alive. By citing the story of Velasco's survival to his grandson's bibliophile girlfriend, Thampi was trying to impart hope in her during such a difficult time. The spirit of Latin American defiance, resistance and their quest for survival manifested in their politics, sports and literature also imparts the same thing in Keralites – hope.

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