

Commentary

**Ratheesh Kumar**

## **The Battlefields in the Extracurricular: From Performance to Litigation**

### **Abstract**

This discussion traces the interfaces of education and popular culture by examining the sites of the “extracurricular” in school life. From a range of extracurricular terrains in educational institutions, the focus here is on the dynamics of cultural and artistic expressions and performance enacted in the state sponsored School Arts Festivals in Kerala, the south west coastal state of India. At the core of this account is the dialogue between popular culture and schooling—imbued by political and economic factors—and importantly, the emergent legal dimension in the conduct of the festival.

**Keywords:** Schooling, extracurricular, popular culture, arts, performance, litigation, Kerala

### **Introduction**

This account tracks the interfaces of education and popular culture through examining the sites of the “extracurricular” in school life. From a range of extracurricular terrains in educational institutions, the focus here is on the dynamics of cultural and artistic expressions and performance enacted in the state sponsored School Arts Festivals in Kerala, the south west coastal state of India. At the core of this discussion is the dialogue between popular culture and schooling, imbued by political and economic factors, and importantly the emergent legal dimension in the conduct of the festival. In doing so, it tries to make sense of the placement and deferential privileging of the art forms in the cultural context of Kerala and its transition in the time of neoliberal global mediations by the state and the market. The shifting significance of popular art forms and performances in the emerging cultures of the new visual media will be brought under discussion for making certain crucial linkages to the subject matter. Finally, it takes an account of the growing number of litigations and court cases that are fought over the judgements of different competition items during the festival, from the district level to the state level.

---

Author: Ratheesh Kumar, Centre for the Study of Social Systems, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

Email: rpkratheesh@gmail.com

While shifting the focus to the realm of the extracurricular—a relatively unmarked domain in educational studies—a set of pertinent issues can be raised towards an understanding of the entangled knowledge categories and career choices apart from conventional educational achievements. What are the cultural and political underpinnings that shape the structure and functioning of the extracurricular? What is the socioeconomic profile of those participants who build their careers and professions out of their extracurricular skills? How does the cultural evaluation and positioning of art and sport forms and performances get organised in the constitutive outside of the classroom? Though all these concerns are much relevant in creating an in-depth understanding of the informal sites of school cultures, this discussion will focus only on certain specific facets related to the School Arts Festival (School *Kalolsavam*)<sup>1</sup> in the state of Kerala.

### **School Arts Festival: A Contested Terrain of Popular Culture**

The state sponsored School Arts Festival of Kerala is acclaimed as the largest cultural festival in the Asian region as the number of contestants crosses 12,000 participants. The festival involves a large number of stakeholders and activities. This mega event of art and performance has been imagined in view of expanding the extracurricular domain of schooling. The festival becomes a platform where the extracurricular is received not only with the wide-ranging appreciation accorded to artistic expressions, but also with academic recognition. The winners of the festival are rewarded with extra credits in their matriculation examination, which are called “grace marks” This academic benefit is offered to students in addition to the cash awards, certificates, and trophies. The School Arts Festival is a mandatory extracurricular activity of the academic year. The Department of Education of the Kerala government provides directions to schools that belong to the government or are government-aided for organising Arts Festivals. The guidelines—along with the circulars of amendments—are printed in the manual released by the Department of Education. There are more than 60 competition categories, including both individual and group performances. The competitions are held at four levels; at the school level, sub-district level, district level, and finally, at the state level.<sup>2</sup>

A great variety of competitions including writing, drawing, painting, elocution, dance, music, theatre and other art forms are held at the intra-school, inter-district, and finally, at the state level.

---

<sup>1</sup>*Kalolsavam* is the Malayalam term for Arts Festival. Kerala School Arts Festival was previously known as School *Yuvajanolsavam* (School Youth Festival) until it was renamed in the recent past.

<sup>2</sup> Kerala School *Kalolsavam* Manual, published by the General Education Department, Government of Kerala. [Kerala School Kalolsavam Manual](#) (Last accessed on 12 August, 2024).

Around 12,000 students participate in this mega event when it comes to the state level. Individual and group performances are staged in different modes of cultural expressions that are classified broadly into classical, folk, and popular art forms. The winners of the festival get huge media attention (both visual and print) and many of them later build their careers in cinema and television.

On the other hand, many others close their career in arts and performances when they get into higher education, professional, or post-marital life. They consider the scope of performing music and dance as limited to school and college days. Stretching such abilities into a career does not appear to be an attractive and viable option for many who participate in the School Arts Festival. From the popular perception, careers that are built from the extracurricular are not appreciated and recognised as the conventional aims of education. They seem rather to belong to the outskirts of the “normal” goals of schooling. This sort of entry and exit to the ‘careers of the extracurricular’ appear to be determined by the socioeconomic locations of class, caste, gender, and religion, and other socioeconomic factors. The School Arts Festival offers an occasion to analyse how these socio-economic categories of identity and hierarchy are transposed and played out in the extracurricular terrain along with a focus on its immediate sociocultural setting.

In the introduction of the handbook of School Arts Festival, the government of Kerala proclaims the preservation of traditional art forms as one of the key objectives of the festival. Most of the competition items that are included in the contest have specific social profiles and identity markers pertaining to caste, religion, and gender, with reference to particular communities in the region. For instance, *Margamkali* and *Oppana* are group performances that are traditionally associated with Christian and Muslim women of Kerala respectively; *Mohiniyattom* and *Thiruvattirakali* are dance forms usually performed by Hindu upper caste women; *Duff-muttu* is ritually performed by a group of Muslim men. Apart from these “traditional” art forms another set of performances such as “mimicry”, “mono-act” and “cinematic dance” are also staged in the School Arts Festival. These performances are not socially circumscribed in the manner in which “traditional” art forms are. Some other classificatory modes categorise these different art forms as “classical” and “popular,” “traditional” and “modern,” “masculine” and “feminine,” and so on. The decree of the state and society on these art forms hierarchises them and legitimises some over others. In other words, the state and society, according to certain criteria, value the art forms as good and bad, high and low, and so on.

In recent times, the notion of purity, tradition, morality, good and bad art forms and performance are being re-inscribed through political interventions and cultural policing in the context of arts

festivals in Kerala. For instance, the ban on cinematic dance (a relatively new genre that draws from the song-and-dance sequences of popular cinema) by the Kerala state government in the year 2005, led to huge debates on the questions of obscenity, morality, good and bad art. The ban was put on cinematic dance because certain stake holders and the state found that it was obscene and vulgar, and it is against the prevailing moral code of Kerala society. The state intervention in deciding good and bad art forms on moral and aesthetic grounds can be explained through an analysis of the struggle for legitimacy in the cultural field.<sup>3</sup> Arguably, many of the new modes of performance and artistic expressions from the popular culture domain—that have often been represented against the classical and high art forms were directly or indirectly targeted on moral grounds. These art forms have been seen as relatively distant from religious and caste identities. The notions of cultural purity, regional or community identity seem to be more or less detached from such expressions. To name a few, cinematic dance, film songs, and fashion shows fit into this category. These art forms, because of their dissociation from traditional markers of gender, caste, religion etc. get labeled as “modern” and “western,” and thus “corrupt” forms of art and performance. They are frequently condemned as illegitimate and vulgar. Precisely because they are persistently plotted against the traditional high art forms, one can usefully explore strategies of resistance in these forms. This is not to say that they are cultural expressions of a radical politics or of struggles from the margins, or that they are a product of an organised political agenda or movement.

The equations between popular culture and high art in the space of arts festivals and the political interventions acquire new meanings in the backdrops of new visual media (the emergence of cable television), marketing strategies and the consumer culture that have evolved with global cultural economy. New spaces have been created for expanding the possibilities of new modes of performances. Parallel to the School Arts Festival administered by the state, private agencies like television channels, newspapers, business establishments, and other groups have begun to organise competitions of arts with attractive rewards for school and college students. Reality TV shows offer parallel avenues for participants of dance and music competitions with huge prize money and glamour. While the state’s School Arts Festival enables the students to gain academic achievements through additional marks in the matriculation examination along with their artistic attainments, arts festivals in the private sphere provide more economic benefits, glamour, and

---

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion on the ban of cinematic dance from the Kerala School Arts Festival, see Chandran, 2005; Kumar, A. S. A., 2012; and Kumar, R., 2020.

publicity. Apart from private endeavours, some of the government aided festivals are also involved with the sponsorship of multi-national companies and other business agencies and individuals. These new spaces of youth culture seem to be re-inscribing the role of non-traditional art forms and performance that bring new meanings to the political and cultural interaction with their dominant “other”.

The contested terrain of the School Arts Festival has been subjected recently to some major restructuring by the state. The new rules and regulations; the inclusions and exclusions of particular art forms; the withdrawal of the much-feted individual championships among other issues can be analysed in the context of a whole set of debates. Animated disputes and controversies have erupted on issues ranging from good and bad art, judgements and results of contests, overwhelming media intervention with live coverage, involvement of parents and of professional artists, exorbitant expenditure, judicial interventions, and authenticity of performances and logistics of organisation. These debates traverse the grounds of tradition, economy, morality, legality, the market, and the emergent global cultural mediations in neoliberal times.

### **Legal Battles and Judicial Interventions**

A deluge of court cases in the School Arts Festival in Kerala in recent years has made judicial intervention a normal affair in the final arbitration of most competition events. On the 27 December 2022, the Kerala High Court’s Single Judge Bench chaired by Justice Murali Purushothaman dismissed a batch of petitions filed by displeased student participants in the revenue district level of the School Arts Festival. As for the grievance pertaining to the appraisal of marks and candidate performance assessment, the bench further declared—in light of the rapidly increasing number of appeals—that the court cannot entertain appeals against the marks awarded by the panel of judges in a proceeding under Article 226 of the Constitution.<sup>4</sup>

The participants, who are dissatisfied with the outcome of their lack of qualification for the State-level Kerala School *Kalolsavam*, are allowed to file appeals with the revenue district level Appellate Committee, which was set up in compliance with the *Kalolsavam* Manual. There were around 800

---

<sup>4</sup> In the context of this ruling, the Court cited *Sweety v. State of Kerala* (1994) and *Rhomy Chandra Mohan v. General Convenor, Balakalotsavam and Yuvajanotsavam* (1992) in support of the argument. [The Law Advice - News - Kerala HC dismissed a batch of petitions filed by aggrieved participants of Kerala School Kalolsavam's Revenue District Level School Kalolsavam](#) (Last accessed on 18 August, 2024).

district level appeals received by the organising committee in 2013, but in 2014, the number of appeals drastically dropped. It has gone up to four digits in the year 2015 (Nair, 2017). This stark up-down-up jumble in the number of appeals was due to the court's intervention against this drift. The Kerala High Court has already indicated in the past that it does not wish to get involved in the festival's management by entertaining appeals. A single bench of the High Court dismissed a number of appeals in the year 2013, stating that it could not identify any rationale to overturn the Appeals Committee's decision, and at times there were fake claims as well.

However, in the later years, the number of appeals rapidly increased as some students received judgments in their favour to participate at the next level. The Court that the appeal committees must decide on appeals within five days or before the next stage of the *Kalolsavam* begins, whichever is earlier, because of the short timeline of the event. Even when there is very little time for the committees to consider appeals, the panels received multiple petitions. Strangely, since each participant can only file an appeal after depositing ₹5,000, the appeals have turned into a source of income for the organisers. If a participant discovers anomalies in the judging panel's verdict, the appeals process assists them in contacting a higher authority. In order to compete at the state level, participants contact District courts or the Child Rights Commission. Participants can approach a higher appeal committee at the state level to make an appeal for better grades or positions (Nair, 2017).

As per the clause 10.20 of Chapter 10 of the School Arts Festival Manual, candidates can only compete in the State School *Kalolsavam* if they achieve an A grade and the highest mark in a competition item at the revenue district level.<sup>5</sup> The petitioners often seek permission from the authorities to compete in their respective categories in the Kerala School *Kalolsavam*, in order to be awarded at the state level. The judges' mark evaluations and the decisions made by the revenue district level Appeal Committees were contested in the present petitions on a number of grounds. The state's legal apparatus has been compelled to assist the authorities in crafting new regulations that may reduce the volume of ever-increasing appeals that were causing disruptions to the *Kalolsavam*'s school calendar.

---

<sup>5</sup> This has been reiterated in a judgment by the Kerala High Court presided by Chief Justice S. Manikumar in the case of the General Convenor, Kerala State School *Kalolsavam* v. Arundhathi Krishna J. along with other concerns in the conduct of the festival (Case Citation: WP(C) 91/2018. See for details: No. 12 and 13 in the judgment.) GENERAL CONVENOR, KERALA STATE SCHOOL KALOLSAVAM v. ARUNDHATHI KRISHNA J. | Kerala High Court | Judgment | Law | CaseMine (Last accessed on 16 August, 2024.)

The court observed that the complainants in the various petitions had made claims about judges' incompetence, the organisers' shoddy stage design, audio system malfunctions and other technical issues, the absence of specialists on the panel of judges, and the use of unrelated factors when assigning grades, among other things. However, citing *Sweety v. State of Kerala*, the Court affirmed that the decision of the Appeal Committees will be recognised as final and decisive even though the committees established for specific reasons in this case could not be compared to regular judicial or quasi-judicial bodies. In response to some of the injured participants' claims that the stage's improper installation, uneven surface, holes, and the presence of broken pins, bangles, and nails on the stage floor caused them injuries and discomforts, the Court ordered the Government's General Education Department's Principal Secretary to make sure that similar accidents do not repeat at any level of the School Arts Festival ever again. It further promised that stage managers and/or other organisers accountable for such situations would face proper legal action in the event of any such mishap<sup>6</sup>:

The officers responsible for arranging the stages shall be made aware of the penal consequences that they may entail in such cases, including proceedings under the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children, Act, 2015). The Committee for Manual reforms shall make necessary provisions in the Manual in this regard. The court added in its elaboration on this argument

In another case, the Kerala High Court Bench presided by Justice Devan Ramachandran directed the organisers at the district level to permit a student who was unable to perform well at the sub-district level because of some "apparent prejudices" to compete in the Kuchipudi competition. Additionally, the court ordered that she be granted access to all ensuing advantages. She feared that the curtain would collapse on her because, according to the allegations, there were safety pins on the stage that had driven into her feet and there was an issue with the curtain's lifting. It was also mentioned that the loud speaker system had a malfunction, making it difficult for her to hear

---

<sup>6</sup> Devna Sumesh v. State of Kerala. Case Citation: WP(C) NO. 40794 OF 2022. See for details: [2157004079420226-451323.pdf \(livelaw.in\)](https://livelaw.in/cases/devna-sumesh-v-state-of-kerala-wp-c-no-40794-of-2022) (Last accessed on 20 August, 2024).

the song well, and that these factors led to a poor performance, not due to her fault, but caused by external factors.<sup>7</sup>

The Court observes that in most cases, parents' unfounded fears combined with the allure of scholarships and grace marks result in the filing of appeals. The entire balance in the time schedule set for performing the *Kalolsavam* would be upset and defeated if the appellate committee decisions are not regarded as decisive and final in situations other than those with obvious vitiating conditions. Crucially, the Court also advised the resentful minor competitors in the *Kalolsavam*, telling them that taking part in these competitions was more significant than winning in every occasion.

Justice Purushothaman, while concluding his judgement on *Devna Sumesh v. the State of Kerala*, categorically stated that insalubrious competition among the participants and parents requires an urgent and thorough redressal:

Winning is not everything and the parents shall also equip their children to accept failure.

Distorted or misplaced anxieties of parents may make the children slip into depression.

*Kalolsavams* shall not be a platform for excess luxury or unhealthy competitions. Hope the parents of minor litigants before this Court may understand that there may be more talented students in the poor strata of the society who cannot afford costly costume or bear other expenses for the competition or the festival (see *Devna Sumesh v. State of Kerala*, p. 67–68)

Citing further on this from the *Rhomy Chandra Mohan v. General Convenor* case, the Court indorses to inculcate the true spirit of the festival, viz., healthy competition, that will give little room for any grievances.

Notwithstanding organisational flaws and limitations, the aforementioned instances of legal disputes during the School Arts Festival indicate that certain sections of parents and students are becoming more fixated on achievement and are less prepared to tolerate failure. Due to the widespread practice of competitive exams in Indian education, which frequently sees these values translated into other informal educational settings as well as the domains of everyday life, the

---

<sup>7</sup> *Archa Nair v. State of Kerala*. Case Citation: 2023/KER/72768, 21 November, 2023. See for details: [Archa Nair vs State of Kerala on 21 November, 2023 \(indiankanoon.org\)](https://indiankanoon.org/cases/2023/kerala/72768/) (Last accessed on 19 August, 2023)



competitive dynamics of the classroom are reflected among the participants. Peer pressure, fear of failure, and mental stress are common side effects of intense rivalry and individualistic notions of success, often accompanied by parental anxiety that cause players to become stuck in a loop. It serves as a reminder to examine concepts of competition and competitiveness closely when they are taught and learned through specific pedagogic practices. This broader question leaves room for further probing on the notions of competition and school cultures as a separate project.

## **Conclusion**

This ever-growing litigation discourse in the extracurricular field has been an unprecedented phenomenon and unique to the schooling culture in Kerala, and may not be seen in other states and regions in India. The gravity of competition with which the school participants, including students and parents, approach the court and fight cases, poses a set of questions pertaining to the power dynamics informed by cultural and economic forces. Is this something unique to Kerala society in general or something particular to its school culture? Or is it due to a specific form of socialising in school and other institutions that makes the ideas of competition and achievement distinct from other cultural settings?

From a more general educational perspective, these questions offer possibilities of analysing the prevailing notions of curricular and extracurricular as how this division is made in specific social settings within and against the cultural and political currents (Spindler 1982, Giroux 1994, Kumar 2021). An examination of the interfaces of cultural and policy level dynamics in education would enable us to understand the complex processes of constructing and privileging knowledge categories within the moral and cultural fabric of specific social milieus. How the curricular and the extracurricular sites are imagined and structured? How do they intersect and interact in the practices of schooling, along with or against the existing structures of power and control? What are the forms of negotiation among students, teachers, parents and policy makers while responding to the functioning of curricular and extracurricular domains in relation to ethical and moral concerns? These are certain broader, and significant questions that demand further pondering. And it can be worked out through an examination of the “banal” sites such as the case of arts festival, or a school sport event, or formation of friendships, which are often undermined as trivial in the understanding of school cultures.

## References

- Chandran, K. K. (August, 2005). Cinematic dance zindabad. *Pachakuthira*, 1(8), 26–28.
- Giroux, H. A. (1994). *Disturbing pleasures: Learning popular culture*. Routledge.
- Kumar, A. S. A. (2012). *3D stereo caste*. [Documentary film].  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=djIrtfXl2rw> (Last accessed July 11, 2024).
- Kumar, R. (2020). Listening global: Sonic texts, technologies and the new listening subjects. In V. Sujatha (Ed.), *Global capital and social difference*. Routledge.
- Kumar, R. (2021). Border-crossing classrooms: Notes on critical pedagogy and cultural sites of schooling. *Tapasam: A Quarterly Journal for Kerala Studies*, XVII(1 & 2), 105–121.
- Nair, P. (2017, January 11). Kerala School Kalolsavam row: DPI seeks legal help to bring down appeals. *Deccan Chronicle*. <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/nation/current-affairs/110117/kerala-school-kalolsavam-row-dpi-seeks-legal-help-to-bring-down-appeals.html> (Last accessed August 20, 2024)
- Spindler, G. (Ed.). (1982). *Doing the ethnography of schooling: Educational anthropology in Action*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.