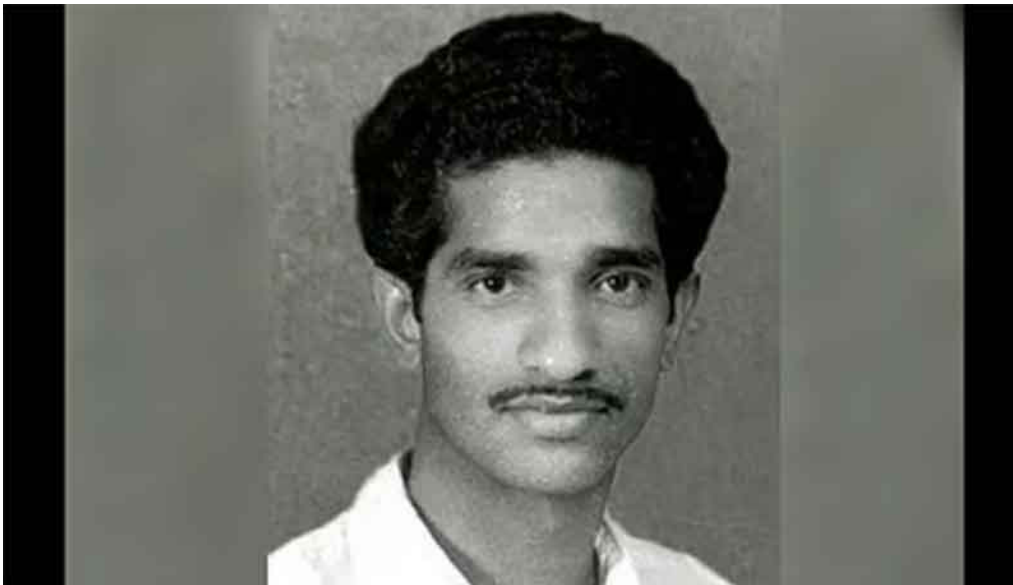


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Narivetta and the Enduring Legacy of Varghese

in Arts/Literature by Sreejith K 20/07/2025

This essay explores how Narivetta revives the memory of Naxalite Varghese by connecting his legacy to the 2003 Muthanga Adivasi struggle. It shows how the film challenges official narratives and brings subaltern resistance back into view.



Naxalite Varghese

Some political ghosts refuse to fade away. They wait in the shadows, biding their time to return to the present. Sometimes, a film reaches into the very history that tried to bury them and calls them forth once again. It dares to retell, however briefly, the stories of defiance voiced by the marginalised. *Narivetta* (Leopard Hunt), which portrays the 2003 Muthanga Adivasi struggle, is one such act of invocation.

In the film, the main protagonist is a police constable named Varghese, sent to

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suppress the Adivasi uprising in Wayanad. But as the story unfolds, he turns against the system and stands with the people. His naming is no coincidence. It marks a symbolic reversal that draws directly from history. The first Naxalite in Kerala to be killed in a staged encounter was also named Varghese. He died while fighting for the land rights of tribal communities in Wayanad. To borrow a phrase from Walter Benjamin, the film becomes a tiger's leap into Kerala's past, where history bursts into the present with revolutionary force.

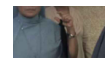
In the revolutionary life he led and the inevitable death at the hands of the state he was resisting, Varghese evokes, in some respects, the figure of Che Guevara. Though he did not come from the kind of elite background that Che did, Varghese belonged to a relatively comfortable settler-farmer family. Before breaking away from the CPI(M), he served as the party's office secretary in Kannur district, a long-standing stronghold of the Left. Even during his time within the party, Varghese had begun engaging with the Adivasi communities of Wayanad. P. K. Kariyan, who was a child at the time, remembers him as someone who shared meals and stayed in the modest homes of tribal families. Through sustained efforts, Varghese helped raise daily wages for Adivasi labourers and worked to restore their dignity in a society that had long ignored them. In his memoirs, Kariyan recounts an incident in which a landlord assaulted a young tribal shepherd. Instead of retaliating himself, Varghese instructed the boy to strike back. In that simple yet radical gesture, a long-standing hierarchy was symbolically overturned.

After the Naxalbari uprising and the split from the CPI(M), Varghese formally joined the revolutionary ranks. The early Naxalite movement was far from unified in ideology or strategy. Factions disagreed on how to define the Indian state and how best to dismantle it. Initially, Varghese aligned with Kunnikkal Narayanan's line, which involved attacking police stations. He even refused to meet Charu Mazumdar during the latter's visit to Kerala. Over time, however, he began to adopt Mazumdar's methods and led a campaign of annihilation targeting landlords and other figures seen as class oppressors. At the time of his arrest and killing on 18 February 1970, Varghese had been preparing for a journey to Bengal to finally meet Mazumdar.

The afterlives of Che Guevara and Varghese took very different trajectories. Che became a global icon. His legacy was cemented by the haunting image captured by photographer Alberto Korda and by a vast body of writing that secured his place in international memory. Varghese, in contrast, left behind only fragments. The only surviving piece of writing attributed to him is a letter sent to his family while he was in Kannur, still a member of the CPI(M). In it, he draws on the Bible to defend his revolutionary choice to his devoutly Christian family, invoking the suffering of those who labour and still die in hunger.

The 2008 Malayalam film *Thalappavu*, which revisits the story of Varghese and the policeman who killed him, opens with a painting of Christ by a street artist. The first image of Varghese appears immediately after. This quiet juxtaposition evokes the idea of martyrdom. In both the film and in real life, there is a Judas figure. Sivaraman Nair, who initially offers Varghese shelter, ultimately betrays him to the police.

Today, Varghese survives through oral testimonies and scattered recollections. Vasu, a comrade from that time, recalls the hard choices Varghese made, including killings that may have denied some individuals a second chance. But these actions, according to Vasu, do not diminish Varghese's stature. Rather,



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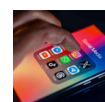
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they reflect the moral weight of leadership under extreme pressure. Ajitha, another comrade, writes about the isolation she experienced as the only woman in the group during their difficult forest journeys. She alludes to moments when some male comrades failed to rise above patriarchal attitudes. Yet she offers her deepest respect to Varghese, whose conduct, she says, remained beyond reproach.

Even Ramachandran Nair, the police officer who carried out Varghese's execution, remembered him with a mixture of admiration and remorse. In his memoir, Nair describes Varghese as eloquent, courageous, and idealistic, even in the moments before death. That memory haunted him for years. Eventually, it was Nair who came forward with a public confession, which led to the conviction of the officer who gave the fatal order. This is the twisted weight of state violence. Sometimes, even the executioner cannot escape the memory of the rebel he put to death.

Meanwhile, Adivasi communities in Kerala continue to face land alienation, poverty, and cultural erasure. The much-celebrated Kerala Model of development has left them behind. Only a few from the mainstream have stood by them over the decades. Varghese was one such figure. During the police manhunt that followed the attack on the Pulpally police station, Varghese was able to evade arrest for months. The Adivasis, who revered him as their perumon, offered him shelter and protection.

Even after his death, Varghese lived on in their collective memory. In the play *Naattugaddika* by K. G. Baby, he is reimagined as the gaddikkakaran, a ritual figure who strips communist landlords of their red flags, symbols of betrayal after they came to power following the 1957 elections. The play drew on gaddika, a ritual performance tradition of the Adiyar community, one of the most marginalised among the Adivasis. It was performed widely during the Janakiya Samskarika Vedi phase of the Naxalite movement before being banned by the Left government. The play is a reminder that even when the mainstream forgets, the memory of subaltern struggles survives in alternative cultural traditions.

It is in this context that a film like *Narivetta* resonates with urgency. The Varghese we encounter in the film is at first a disillusioned and reluctant policeman. Posted in Wayanad to suppress the Muthanga Adivasi agitation, he begins with indifference. But as he uncovers the workings of the state's machinery of deception, where even a fellow officer is sacrificed to fabricate a Maoist plot, his conscience is shaken. This betrayal compels a transformation. He switches sides, exposes the truth, and holds the real perpetrator accountable.

In this trajectory, the character of Varghese begins to resemble Ramachandran Nair, the real-life policeman who confessed to killing Varghese decades ago. *Narivetta* thus becomes a leap into Kerala's troubled past. By unearthing buried histories and challenging official narratives, it compels us to confront the state's long-standing role in silencing resistance from below.

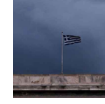
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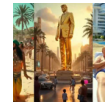
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