


## BOOK REVIEW

**Jos Chathukulam**  Centre for Rural Management(CRM), Kottayam, Kerala, India

Email: joschathukulam@gmail.com

ORCID: 0009-0007-4429-4484

**Ullekh, N.P. *Mad About Cuba: A Malayali Revisits the Revolution*. New Delhi: Penguin Random House India, 2024. 223 pp. ISBN 9780143469018**

Reviewed by Jos Chathukulam

Ullekh's *Mad About Cuba: A Malayali Revisits the Revolution* is a pertinent and ambitious inquiry into the paradox between how the Malayalis,<sup>1</sup> a particularly Left-leaning community in Kerala, have historically romanticised Cuba as a beacon of revolutionary resilience and how the economic and social realities of the Caribbean Island nation complicate this imagination. Having been fascinated by Communist Cuba over several decades, Ullekh, an author, journalist, and political commentator, had a chance to visit the country in the summer of 2023 on a journalist visa. The book is the final product of that visit, and it consists of his observations while interacting with various local people, including scientists, senior bureaucrats, students, tourists, and a handful of ordinary Cubans from both the young and old generations, among others. It draws on his first-hand observations of the present-day realities, mixing them with his historical knowledge. The book constitutes an oriented travelogue, combined with interviews, reportage, and personal narratives, and with political, historical, cultural, and economic analysis.

As a young boy in Kerala, a state in southern India, Ullekh first came across Cuba and Fidel Castro in the early 1980s. These encounters were mostly in the form of political discussions in his Marxist household and on the streets of Kannur, a district in Northern Kerala, which is considered a stronghold in the state of Communists and Communist movements. Kerala also holds the rare distinction in world politics of having democratically elected a Communist government in 1957 (more on this below). This was a very unusual occurrence back then, as Communist governments in general had come to power either by Revolution (as in the case of Russia, China, and Cuba) or through external

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1 Malayalis are the people of Kerala, a state/province in South India.

imposition, as in the case of Eastern Europe. With Cuba's strong Communist movements, high literacy rates, and better social development indicators, the intellectual Leftists in Kerala found a Messiah in Castro, and idolised the Caribbean nation as a repository of Communist values.

Ullekh grew up inspired by the Cuban Revolution that brought Castro, Che, and their fellow revolutionaries to power. Right from his childhood, he had access to countless leftist journals, documentaries, articles on Cuba penned by Malayali Marxists, and Malayalam translations of Cuban and Latin American literature. The influence of leftist politics runs deep in Kerala, and it spawned a political literary culture that familiarised people with revolutionary movements, near and far.

Since the 1960s, Latin American politics and literature have become part and parcel of the public sphere in the Left-leaning state of Kerala. If Che Guevara is a romantic revolutionary idol for young comrades, Fidel Castro is a socialist icon for Marxist scholars in Kerala. The imagery of Fidel and Che became integral parts of the iconography of the CPI (M) and its allies in the state. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Communists in the state became even more infatuated with Cuba. Castro's friend, the eminent writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez, also has a strong following in Kerala, and Marquez is very much ingrained in the Kerala literary psyche.

Fidel remains a personal favourite to Malayalis owing to many reasons besides his politics and ideology. *Moringa*<sup>2</sup> is one such element – Fidel is known to have been fond of moringa, which is perhaps consumed more in Kerala than in any other part of India. “For ‘Comandante Castro’, the drumstick was the denouement to a long search for a nutritious meal for the poor” (Ullekh 2024: 25).

Che Guevara has a cult following among Kerala youth, and even the university campuses in the state are filled with the images and posters of Che. People wearing Che T-shirts and conducting rallies with posters bearing Che's images and quotes are a common sight in the streets of Kerala, especially in youth rallies and among students. In Kerala, there are people who have named their children after Castro and Che. “I know a Kerala-born magazine editor whose first name is Che; one of my cousins has named his son Fidel; a Kerala government officer bears the name Baby Castro” (Ullekh 2024: 20). All these suggest that Cuba and its revolutionary leaders have cast an indelible imprint on Kerala's landscape.

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2 The Spanish tree “moringa” has different names in English in different places in the world, including drumstick tree, horseradish tree, ben oil tree, or simply the Spanish name moringa itself.

Regarding Che Guevara's undying spell, Ullekh writes,

But if you look closely and consult serious academic literature, it is easy to find that Che Guevara isn't losing ground at all ... Globally, decades after he became a poster boy of internationalism and guerrilla warfare and notwithstanding concerted efforts to demonize him as a sadist who mistreated his prisoners ... he continues to be revered much more than any other leader of the Cuban revolution – even inside the country, not to talk of the rest of Latin America or the Global South ... But then, Guevara alone has an international halo as a revolutionary and not head of a regime ... Guevara's early and mysterious death, aged thirty-nine, has added to the mystique around him notwithstanding the ideological setbacks to his ideals. (2024: 146)

Thus, this book is a deeply personal and reflective exploration of Cuba, particularly its revolutionary past, enduring struggles, and current socio-economic realities – told through the eyes of an Indian journalist and a great admirer of Cuba with strong emotional ties to the island nation. The book paints Cuba as a proud and resilient nation burdened by inhuman economic sanctions for over six decades (1960–present), Cold War politics, the downfall of its closest ally, the former Soviet Union, and the Special Period in Cuba in the 1990s. But it also effectively captures Cuba's exceptional achievements in biotechnology and healthcare, education and literacy, and tourism in the midst of these crises.

Ullekh points out the cost of the economic sanctions endured by Cuba:

The blockade has escalated to become the most complex, prolonged and inhuman act of economic warfare ever committed against any nation. As mentioned earlier, Cubans estimate the losses accumulated during this time at more than \$144,413,400,000 (more than \$144 billion) at current prices as of 2022. Since the sanctions are conceived to impede trading relations with other countries, it has hurt foreign investment and literally cut off most sources of revenue for Cuba, which is seeking its rightful place and dignity in a world dominated by the US. (Ullekh 2024: 198)

Such overall costs to the nation translate into costs for every sector of the economy, and every programme Cuba has built for the well-being of its people. For example, the education sector has been strongly affected by these unjust economic sanctions.

Like most segments, the education sector too feels the pinch of the embargoes. According to the Cuban foreign ministry, the damage caused by the blockade to the educational sector from March 2022 to February 2023 is higher than \$75 million. It

states that students cannot access more than 300 websites that are of interest to computer scientists since they are blocked for Cuban IP addresses. Such a policy that wickedly fuses malice and schadenfreude and is deplored by the world has no moral justification or legitimacy. (Ullekh 2024: 198).

The book offers, as a contrast to the Cuban Revolution's romantic legacy, the grim reality of contemporary Cuban life – economic hardship, generational disillusionment, and international isolation, while reflecting on the hypocrisy of American foreign policy.

Cuba is unique in more ways than one. The country has been under the longest trade embargo in modern history – since 1960. Since the Revolution, the US has seen thirteen presidents remit offices. All these American presidents have remitted office after failing to achieve regime change in the Caribbean country through what the Cubans consider as the economic asphyxiation of their homeland. (Ullekh 2024: 184)

US President Donald Trump's designation of Cuba as a 'state sponsor of terrorism' in 2021, just before leaving office, without any evidence and directly contrary to the Revolution's opposition to any form of terrorism from its inception, must be seen as a high point in such hypocrisy, coming from the US, which has consistently promoted terrorism against Cuba. And as Ullekh points out, this measure is "a step that is seen as a major cause of a severe economic crisis and concomitant shortages" (2024: 168), in conjunction with the other 242 measures Trump passed in his first administration to economically cripple Cuba.

Surprisingly, there have been calls within the US to stop these decades-long sanctions on Cuba.

Several American policymakers, economists, artists and opinion leaders have snubbed Miami based Cubanologists and rabid Cuba haters to state that it is high time that the US lifted its embargo not only because it has proved to be ineffective but also accentuated the Cuban people's hardship. (Ullekh 2024: 162)

Further reflecting the reality in Cuba today, Ullekh also recalls the July 2021 protest in Cuba.

The protests started in the San Antonio de los Baños outskirts of Havana, and in Matanzas ... The protests turned violent in many parts of the island in the face of power blackouts, medicine shortages and other grievances. (Ullekh 2024: 169)

Similar accounts of the July 2021 events were recorded by others who were in Cuba around the same time (Chathukulam 2022a; Chathukulam 2022b; Chathukulam and Accosta 2022).

Missing from Ullekh's portrayal of the reality in Cuba today, however, is any discussion of the 2022 Cuban Family Code, one of the most inclusive and progressive family codes in the world. The Cuban Family Code contains progressive provisions relating to LGBTQ rights, recognition of women's household work, and strong measures against gender violence and child protection. It has the potential to usher in an expansion of democracy within Cuban households (Chathukulam and Joseph 2022). Recognition of household work as a fundamental economic activity has been a long-standing demand of progressives around the world (Raworth 2017), and Cuba is one of the first countries to give it a major legal acceptance through its new Family Code. A discussion of the Cuban Family Code could have served to counter the attacks on Cuba of being a totalitarian and authoritarian state by governments opposed to its social system.

There are a few academic articles, essays, or works that compare Kerala and Cuba in various developmental and political dimensions. This is one of the first books to situate Cuba within Kerala's intellectual and cultural horizon, showing how Kerala, a South Indian state and Cuba, a Caribbean Island nation, forged a symbolic kinship through shared political aspirations. The book treats the Kerala–Cuba connection not just as a comparison on the basis of developmental outcomes, but also as a lived cultural, emotional, and ideological bond. It discusses how Kerala has admired (continues to admire) and absorbed the Cuban revolutionary leaders, including El Comandante Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, its Latin American literature, and its Communist ideals. The book does not dismiss Kerala's romance with Cuba as naïve, but rather effectively illustrates how romanticisation and affinity to Communism function as political and cultural resources.

Ullekh presents how at the same time that for Keralites (Malayalis) Cuba and its revolutionary leaders like Che and Fidel represent courage and pride, for an average Cuban today daily life often means negotiating scarcity, limited freedom, and resilience under pressure. While interacting with some of the nation's youth, Ullekh repeatedly encountered that, unlike the older generation much of which still is dedicated to trying to build, even under the existing very difficult conditions, the 'utopia of the revolution', many in the younger generation are focused on achieving freedom from perpetual economic uncertainties, including large numbers leaving Cuba in pursuit of well-paying jobs (in the first place going to the US and Spain).

He records an interesting conversation with a young Cuban woman, which offers some interesting yet shocking viewpoints of the new-generation Cubans.

Our leaders are blaming the American sanctions, but we young people have no interest in reasons, we want results, we want to live like people we find on Instagram and on Twitter, we have studied hard and worked hard, my mother works all the time, but she earns a pittance, 5000 pesos a month, my father earns much more, but that is their generation who is interested in the Utopia of the Revolution, we are not. We want to live life well, we think life must be easy, we don't want to wait for rations and always worry about what we eat and what we cannot eat, we want to go out and order a burger, we want to travel and earn money to travel the world, we don't want to live like this confined to the city. We see so many people come here and enjoy life and spend money and we don't want to live underpaid like our parents because we don't have their commitment, and we don't think it is needed. Our life is our life. I tell you, life is easy for you, isn't it? Then it must be easy for me too. (Ullekh 2024: 7)

These same sentiments are echoed throughout the book in many places.

It is a nation in economic turmoil largely thanks to the blockade. Although the spirit of the Revolution is alive in the minds of the older generation, the younger lot do not want to know the reasons why they are suffering, and instead they want results. (Ullekh 2024: 201)

An important part of this book presenting the present reality in Cuba is the author's inclusion throughout it of relevant pieces of the country's history. Ullekh reflects about America's pre-revolutionary remote – control rule (Cuba remained a client state of the US with a puppet government in place until the Cuban Revolution of 1959), and how successive US Presidents from that time turned the island nation into a wild holiday destination for its rich and a hub for its mafia, and how the American corporations and gangsters made enormous profits as millions of Cubans lived in abject poverty (Ullekh 2024). The author equates this to the massive plunder and looting of wealth and extraction of resources from India during British rule.

The author talks about Eduardo René Chibás's use of the broom as a symbol of anti-corruption in the 1940s to highlight the high degree of inventiveness of Cubans.

Can you imagine that decades before the Aam Admi Party (AAP) in Delhi, India, came up with their share of broom politics? Cuban politician Eduardo René Chibás, who

founded the Orthodox Party in 1947, was vehemently opposed to the corruption rampant in Cuba and the American mafia treating the island as a haven. Not only did he extensively use radio to communicate with the people, but his supporters' brandished brooms in processions to highlight his message of clean governance. (Ullekh 2024: 188)

Here, the author draws a parallel between the broom symbolism (symbolic politics) in Cuba and the Aam Aadmi Party's (AAP) adoption of the broom in the contemporary Indian political landscape. By highlighting Eduardo René Chibás's use of the broom as a symbol of anti-corruption in the 1940s, the narrative shows how Cuban leaders effectively harnessed simple, everyday objects as political metaphors to communicate with the masses. The example shows both the enduring resonance of symbolic politics and the fact that Cuba pioneered such strategies decades earlier.

The available literature on Cuba and Kerala suggests that the Caribbean Island nation has a lot of characteristics in common with Kerala. Cuba and Kerala are both widely regarded as "success stories" in the Global South for their relatively high achievements in general quality of life and social well-being, as measured by UNDP's Human Development Index (HDI) (Tharamangalam 2010). The HDI of Kerala at 0.782 is close to Cuba's at 0.784.<sup>3</sup> Though both are economies with low growth rates, they have been able to achieve exceptional social development in the health and education sectors over the years. In terms of public health delivery, for example, as illustrated by the standard indicators in child and maternal health and in life expectancy, Kerala and Cuba's health outcomes are on par with many of the world's developed countries. The influence of Cuba's acclaimed healthcare system, especially its people-centric approach and its decentralisation, can also be found in the government healthcare centres in Kerala. For instance, the concept of Family Health Centres (FHCs) in Kerala is borrowed from the family doctor system in Cuba. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI (M)), led by the Left Democratic Front (LDF) in Kerala, were the main architects who undertook the major effort to build a Cuban-inspired health system in the state.

Another aspect of the strong emotional connection between Kerala and Cuba is that the CPI (M) in the state has embraced a Socialist-Communist ideology for a long time. Kerala can claim to be one of the first "democratically elected"

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3 Studies suggest that Cuba's human development achievements are even more remarkable than Kerala's, and certainly far above Latin America's (Tharamangalam 1998, 2010, 2014).

Communist governments in the world after San Marino. On 5 April 1957, a democratically elected Communist government under the leadership of Marxist patriarch and scholar E.M.S. Namboodiripad came to power in Kerala. The fact that a Communist government came to power through free and fair elections in a state in India was a surprise and shock to many at that time, both within India and outside. While the Soviet Union welcomed the victory, the US was particularly worried. In India, while the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru did not seem to have any issue with the Communist victory in Kerala, his party, the Indian National Congress (INC), was not on the same page. The discontent against the first elected Communist government grew day by day, and finally on 31 July 1959, the government was ousted from power through what its opponents called *Vimochana Samaram* (Liberation Struggle). The alleged role of America's CIA in toppling the Communist government was widely discussed at the time, and it instigated an anti-American sentiment among the Communists in Kerala. Though anti-Communists dubbed them as fictitious and unfounded stories, history later proved that the US, the CIA, and the INC all plotted the downfall of the elected Communist government in Kerala (Moynihan 1978). And then at the same time that the Communists in Kerala faced this setback, in Cuba an armed uprising led by Fidel Castro and Che Guevara established the first Communist government in the Western Hemisphere. Castro and Che became symbols of hope not only of Cuba, but also for the comrades in Kerala.

Ullekha has constructively explored the contradictions of Cuban life after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The Special Period of the 1990s, marked by rationing, shortages, and austerity, is juxtaposed with the triumphalist images of Cuba circulating in Kerala's leftist literature. It is a refreshing take on Kerala's romanticism with Cuba, one that is infused with realities that have long been ignored by the admirers of the Caribbean Island nation. It situates Kerala's leftist imagination within the circuit of the Global South solidarity framework. For ordinary Malayalis, Cuba is less about politics and more about nostalgia, solidarity, and revolutionary romance. For the Leftists in Kerala and India, Cuba's revolutionary imagery provides moral, emotional, and ideological fuel for its political and cultural paradigm, even if it doesn't always match Cuban realities.

Though the author talks fondly about Marquez and his literary genius, he has missed the significance of the equally renowned poet and cultural icon Rabindranath Tagore, who is revered in Cuba, India, and across the world, for his universal humanism, spiritual poetry, and anti-imperialist ideologies. In 2007 to commemorate the 146th anniversary of the birth of this literary icon, Cuba unveiled a statue of him in Havana. And while the book does mention Kerala's changing political economy, it likewise fails to fully address how globalisation and neoliberal reforms have eroded the Left's political and



cultural hold on Malayali youth, potentially weakening the Cuba-Kerala symbolic bond.

Nevertheless, *Mad About Cuba: A Malayali Revisits the Revolution* makes a significant academic contribution to Cuban, Latin American, and South Asian Studies. The book illustrates how internationalism is not only about state-to-state diplomacy, but also about cultural imaginaries that travel across geographical boundaries. By intertwining Kerala's romance with Cuba and the nation's own material struggles, Ullekh challenges readers to think critically about what solidarity means in practice. The author discusses the rise of MSMEs (Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises) in Cuba, but there is no discussion on cooperatives that operate within the solidarity economy framework within Cuba (Betancourt 2018). The author could have referred to the academic works of Joseph Tharamangalam to get a more detailed understanding of how cooperatives are reshaping socialism in twenty-first-century Cuba (Tharamangalam 2019).

For scholars and academicians specialising in Cuban and Latin American politics, this book offers a valuable mirror to reflect on how the Cuban Revolution's global afterlives have been celebrated, appropriated, presented, and sometimes manipulated and distorted in unexpected places, over months and years and decades. While even before the author could make it to the island nation, many Communist Comrades and Left Intellectuals from Kerala and India have been to Cuba, none have dared to offer the lived realities of Cuba. Instead, they chose to propagate a picture-perfect portrayal of what they consider the world's last outpost of Communism: for them, Cuba is the living museum of Communism.

The book poses a fundamental question regarding how external symbols sustain local realities. It also serves as a poignant reminder that political romanticisation and lived realities are rarely identical, and at the same time that both these factors are necessary to sustain visions of change. Thus, *Mad About Cuba* offers a call to correct the tendency to idealise Cuba through a framework of constructive criticism, while also celebrating the imaginative and affective power of solidarity. The author concludes his work with the following poignant and prophetic line: "As I head home, I cannot shake off the feeling that another Revolution – this time a silent one – is in the offing" (Ullekh 2024: 201).

This book is strongly recommended reading for anyone interested in the intersections of culture, politics, and global leftist imaginaries and discourses.

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