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In Kerala, Gains of Social Reform Form a Wall against BJP Entry

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The rout in the Lok Sabha polls need not mark the demise of the Left in Kerala. If the Left were to draw on the power of its historical social reform movement that was rooted in a civilisational ethos, it can hold its ground against the BJP in the state.

Two months after the Lok Sabha elections of 2019, a question that is still being asked is if the decimation of the Left in Kerala in polls is a marker of a long-term and permanent decline of the Communist Party of India (CPM) in the state and the eventual rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

The BJP, of course, did not achieve anything at the polls, but was the victory of the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) also just a transition to the establishment of the BJP in the state?

There can be no denying that the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) has tapped into a yearning and a desire among Hindus nationwide. Many within the majority community yearn for a validation of their civilisational legacy and want to draw on it while marking pathways to the future. As the forces of Hindutva prepare to breach what they consider their last frontier, can their opponents offer sufficient resistance without delving into this matrix and crafting an alternative interpretation of the heritage?

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It might appear strange that Kerala should present itself as the ground for such a battle. Given the demographic mix, a left-of-centre political orientation and a culture distinct from that of the Hindi-belt, one would have thought that the state would not find itself in such a conflict. Those who think so overlook certain facets of the Malayali Hindu mind. There is a psyche among the Malayali Hindus that combines profound religious devotion with deep scepticism about, even antagonism towards, some of the beliefs, practices and customs associated with the religion. This dichotomy exists within a large number of individuals, even among die-hard supporters of the CPI(M). A long, hard and eventually successful struggle for the erasure of inequalities that had been embedded in the institutionalised forms of the creed evokes pride among almost all sections of the community. As does the demolition of the oppressive socio-economic order at the base of these iniquities.

For all that, even the classes that were once the victims of the *ancien regime* are strongly attached to the rituals of the religion; familiar with its mythologies; and keen to know at least something about its philosophy.

A peek below the surface will show that this duality was in play in the 2019 Lok Sabha election even though it was the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) that won 19 of the 20 seats in the state. Such a result would not have come about if there had not been a significant shift in the vote of the Hindus who form about 55 percent of the population. The consensus across the board is that the vote represented a backlash against the CPI(M)-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) for its government's handling of the Sabarimala issue, one incident in particular.

The Supreme Court verdict lifting the ban on the entry into the hill-shrine of females between the age of 10 and 50 was very much in the foreground when the election campaign got underway.

For the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) the judgement provided an unprecedented opportunity to demonstrate its organisational muscle and its widening presence in the state. In presenting itself as the champion of the right of the devout to preserve traditions, it launched a series of agitations for the restoration of the ban. Repeated attempts by feminist activists, whose numbers are insignificant when compared to those of devout Hindu women, provided sufficient provocation for the agitators.

While the LDF declared its support for women's entry in principle, initially its main focus was on containing the fall-out. It soon became more forceful in asserting its stand and began a counter-campaign that seemed to be gaining traction until it committed a horrendous blunder. Neither the NDA nor the LDF were the beneficiaries of the political climate so created. Instead, the Congress-led

UDF gained from the minority consolidation provoked by the Hindutva assertiveness as well as the coalescing of majoritarian sentiment caused by the Left's approach. Since the minorities generally support the UDF, the shaping of the Hindu vote should attract greater scrutiny.

This was not the first occasion on which the majority community has coalesced to a significant degree and voted against one of the two fronts that have alternatively ruled the Kerala for the past several decades.

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To illustrate, it would be useful to allude to a phenomenon that was observable in the two years or so before the 2016 assembly elections. Almost on every occasion on which Hindus gathered as a community during that period--marriages, deaths, clan get-togethers--the conversation would inevitably converge on a single topic. A consensus would also emerge in very short order that the then UDF government was "allowing the minorities to get away with whatever they wanted". This refrain would be heard irrespective of the caste-composition of the gathering and usually even the UDF-inclined would not contest the statement.

If Malayali Hindus believe that they have been let down by the UDF and LDF on separate occasions, should they not have rallied behind an NDA this time round? A primary reason behind the NDA's failure to capitalise on the anti-Left sentiment is that the public did not see it as having sufficient electoral muscle. Its organisational network, though growing, is still not potent and its talent pool is limited.

The NDA would be mistaken if it thinks that organisational and leadership deficiencies are the only factors holding it back in Kerala. Such an assessment does not take into account certain other features of the Malayali Hindu mentality. Most basic among these is the community's belief that it subscribes to and practises a form of the religion that is richer, more diverse, more vibrant and more rooted than those prevalent in other parts of the country. Malayali Hindus have a strong distaste for the monocultural Hinduism wafting down from the North with its vegetarianism, teetotalism and rigid conservatism. Theirs is a Shaktheya-based tradition that does not readily accept Brahmin-Bania restrictions and proffers a much more expansive form of the religion.

In Kerala, religiosity cannot serve as a means for stifling a subaltern upsurge as it has in parts of North India.

The prospect of a society that is broad-minded and reason-based, hence truly democratic and secular, is not something distant but eminently within reach in Kerala.

A few among the formerly dominant castes remain nostalgic for the old order, but even they know that there can be no re-establishment of the hierarchy. Reservation in higher education and jobs is about the only issue that causes friction between castes. The RSS does seek to subsume caste distinctions into a communal identity. This goal has no relevance for a people who have long since gone past this conflict and learnt to look beyond caste in their dealings with one another.

Of a similar nature is the ingraining of tolerance towards other communities through the sheer inescapability of living and working closely with Christians and Muslims. Inter-caste and inter-communal marriages no longer cause the inner family tensions that they occasioned in the past. The killing of people, within the state or outside, solely on the basis of their religion or caste, arouses universal condemnation.

Education and the concerted efforts to promote a rationalistic approach have contributed to the shaping of the Malayali Hindu mind. They are scornful when they hear talk about radars that cannot penetrate cloud cover, the transplantation of elephant heads on human bodies or the unique mating practices of peacocks. Many have Christian and Muslim friends who too believe that religion is a private affair and they are hopeful that more among the minorities will in time come to adopt such an outlook.

The prospect of a society that is broad-minded and reason-based, hence truly democratic and secular, is not something distant but eminently within reach in Kerala. Inherent resistance to the revival of medievalism, which many suspect is the Sangh Parivar's true agenda, should therefore not be a matter of surprise.

Resistance to the pull of Hindutva may not be complete and final. To go by the observable increase in attendance at temples, participation in pujas, reverence for God-men (and one particular God-woman) and the marking of foreheads with sandalwood-paste or

ash, religiosity as a component of personal identity does seem to be gaining in importance.



Pilgrims in the Sabarimala Complex | Wikipedia (Avsnarayan CC0 1.0)

As the pre-2016 mood and the reaction to the Sabarimala issue seem to indicate, there is a certain susceptibility to the suggestion that Hindus are being hard done by. This feeling hardens when evangelical enthusiasts from one section of the minorities and fundamentalists from another excoriate Hinduism. Feeding into this sentiment is a resentment at the growing prosperity of the other communities, which is often compared invidiously to their own. Unwarranted though it may be, there is a sense that the community is under pressure from the outside. When the two political formations that have traditionally been regarded as protectors are perceived as being dismissive of these concerns, a third alternative can look attractive.

Until now, this still-soft coalescing of a Hindu political identity has manifested itself in a negative manner at the polls. It has so far been *against* something, not *for* anything else. This mental state can change under the Narendra Modi dispensation. The mainstream Malayalam media, print and electronic, has been far less subservient to the central government than its counterparts elsewhere. While the formal media has a high degree of penetration, the counter-currents rippling through the digital networks cannot be ignored. Pro-Sangh sections of the vast Malayali diaspora serve as the conduits for the messaging. People in the state are hence not quarantined from the NDA's projections. The perception that Modi has found the way to lead the country to prosperity might be more blurred in these parts but it certainly exists.

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For four decades, Malayalis have availed of a route to riches that has not been so accessible to people elsewhere in the country. The tens of thousands of crores worth of remittances that have poured into Kerala from the Gulf and other parts of the world have not been mobilised in optimum fashion by governments run by either of the two Fronts. Still, the man-made landscape of Kerala has changed dramatically. Signs of change are visible in the ultra-modern buildings to be found in nooks and corners; in the outlets in panchayat centres and even beyond offering up-to-date goods and services; and in the opening of opportunities for new life experiences (food, travel etc.) to sections for whom these were once dreams.

Kerala, of course, has gone far ahead of other states in providing safety nets of various kinds to people of lower income. Political activism at the local level has been a safeguard against non-delivery of government assistance and the diversion of funds.

Prosperity does not usually evoke gratitude for past governmental work (in education for instance) that made it possible. It usually stokes a desire for more.

Qualms of conscience, if any, can be easily suppressed by the auto-suggestion that such attitudinal changes are part of the process of being aspirational. An even stronger pull is being exerted by the BJP's claims that the country has grown more powerful and assertive over the last five years; that India is about to take its rightful place in the world; and that the change has been wrought through a revival of a civilisational identity.

Post-poll analyses showed that the NDA was able to attract switchovers from sections that traditionally supported one Front or the other. Hindu voters in Kerala generally prefer the forward-looking of the two faces that the BJP presents to the public. At the same

time, the backward linkages are important to them. A message that the nation's onward march is attributable to the revival of civilisational pride has an appeal. The political formations that have dominated state politics have the potential to match the new challenger in both respects. Each can point to significant contributions they have made towards Kerala's progress, especially in the social sphere, during their separate tenures. They can also claim that the positive interventions they have made were inspired to a good part by ideas drawn from a Hindu ethos.

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The Congress to begin with and the Left after it was formed, have both served as vehicles for the propagation of the Malayali *Renaissance* that itself was brought into being by savants whose outlooks were shaped by Advaita Vedanta. Over the course of the past century, mass movements, initially inspired and led by Shree Narayana Guru, Chattampi Swami, V.T.Bhattatiripad and Ayyankali (to name only the most prominent) have shattered hoary, encrusted, and usually inhumane social institutions. So much so that a land once described by Swami Vivekananda as a "madhouse of caste" is now home to arguably the most emancipated society in the country.

A few Congressmen have drawn on the party's record of being the organisation that tweaked the civilisation's trajectory so that it came into closer alignment with progressive trends elsewhere in the world. They point to the fact that their leaders in both the pre and post-Independence decades grafted onto the country's ethos modern institutions such as democratic governance and the scientific temper after examining whether and how these fitted in.

The Congress benefited to a great extent in 2019 by taking a neutral (the party would say pragmatic) approach to the highly emotive Sabarimala issue. While the UDF's stance was certainly regarded as non-threatening by devotees, it could hardly be cited as an example of principled politics. All that the UDF had to say on the issue was that, it "must be resolved by the people". It is highly unlikely that the adoption of pusillanimous stances at moments of societal stress will serve the party when rival formations are giving hard definition to what they stand for.

In contrast, Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, his government and the LDF demonstrated a real intent to contest the Sangh Parivar's attempt to appropriate Kerala's civilisational legacy. When the fight was against a political force that seems intent on propagating distorted readings of the past, preserving illiberal social mores and resuscitating irrational ideas that are also parts of that legacy, there was no other policy that progressives could have chosen. They had to get down to the level of foundational principles. A serious effort to do so was made by the Left as it developed a counter-argument on the Sabarimala issue.

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The Left could not resort to the safest option of pandering to a sentiment shaped by commonly accepted notions about the nature and meaning of the Sabarimala experience. A course it could have taken would have been to treat the confrontation as nothing more than a law and order problem. Instead, in an admirable departure from practices usual to political parties, the LDF tried to make the people internalise an alternative conceptualisation. It marshalled a battery of intellectuals to argue that Sabarimala was a forest shrine of the Adivasis originally; that the ban was a Brahminical subversion of Adivasi traditions, which did not discriminate on basis of gender or age; that the prohibition was of fairly recent origin and had itself stemmed from a court order; and, in general, that the opposition to women's entry did not have grounding in history or tradition.

As a powerful supplement to this fact-based argument, the Left drew on the inspiring force of the *Renaissance*. The Left argued that expansion of the liberties of women in all spheres, including that of entry into places of worship, was a logical extension of the reform movement. Those opposed to women entering Sabarimala were thereby depicted as deniers or negators of the *Renaissance*. The objective clearly was to transform the campaign on the temple issue into a broader one against the orthodoxy, revanchism and illiberalism that form the core of the Hindutva project. The argument did have resonance and the physical manifestation of its appeal was the Women's Wall formed on 1 January, 2019 along the 620-kilometre stretch of the highway from one end of Kerala to the other.

In retrospect, the confidence-boost generated by that success appears to have led to the LDF's undoing. On the one hand, it caused a premature slackening of the efforts to further the *Renaissance*-centred campaign. Second, the Left did not realise that a certain tone-deafness, discernible in its pronouncements during its counter-agitation, was irritating people in the middle ground. This latent though

manageable animosity got inflamed when the government misjudged things horribly and failed to stop two women activists from entering the shrine the night after the Women's Wall. In random conversations, that single act was the one most cited as evidence of the LDF leadership's anti-Hindu mind-set.

Three months after the polling, even politically neutral sections of the community were seething at what they perceived as government collusion in an act of sacrilege.

As usually happens in such situations, contrasts were instantly drawn with the manner in which the government was pussyfooting around Christian and Muslim issues. Subliminal reservations about "Godless Communists" meshed with latent suspicions that the LDF could at any time do something to appease the minorities and the reflexive outrage could not be contained. The Left did not recalibrate its stance because it failed to comprehend the change in attitude. An echo chamber effect and undue optimism about a feminist tilt towards it, appear to have contributed to the misreading of the situation.

The Left can continue to support the lifting of the ban on entry in principle while simultaneously appealing to women to not exercise the right until the centre-mass of devotees had been brought around to the progressive point of view.

To retrieve lost political ground and revive its longer-term campaign, the Left would probably have to go further than merely acknowledge the mistakes it made in the handling of the Sabarimala situation. The insensitivity displayed at a crucial juncture appears to indicate a loss of touch with people outside the circle of the committed, especially when it comes to non-secular issues.

A beginning could perhaps be made by adopting a more nuanced approach on the Sabarimala issue. The Left can continue to support the lifting of the ban on entry in principle while simultaneously appealing to women to not exercise the right until the centre-mass of devotees had been brought around to the progressive point of view. Such a stance could invite accusations of hypocrisy, but it might go someway towards mollifying devout Hindus, especially the vast majority of women among them who consider the Court order an abomination rather than a gift.

Insensitivity or the arrogance of power has sharpened a perception that the CPI(M) cadre has a disgusting penchant for political thuggery. State leaders of the party have repeatedly warned their followers to desist from strong-arm methods and the rates of political killing are not at the level they were in earlier periods. Yet, the party's image suffers severe damage on every occasion when party members at the local level attack their rivals or office-bearers down in the hierarchy exploit the vulnerable financially and sexually.

The state unit of the CPI(M) is well aware of the fate that befell its sister units in West Bengal and Tripura. It is also under no illusion that Kerala will remain immune to these trends. There are several factors that can provide the Kerala unit with greater resilience. First, land reforms were so thoroughgoing as to have conferred a degree of empowerment on people at the bottom of the pile. That gives them reason to resist a political force with a conservative persona. Second, near universal literacy and the Left's hegemony in the intellectual sphere, has given the majority of the people a political orientation that cannot easily be changed. Third, the LDF has been out of power as often as it has been in. The need to mobilise and struggle on a regular basis has helped save the organisational structure from being afflicted by the sort of atrophy that weakened the Left in Tripura and West Bengal.

While organisational frailties need to be addressed, the LDF can draw upon its better-than-average record of performance when it faces elections to the local bodies in 2020 and to the Assembly a year after that. Improvements made to government schools can be described as near revolutionary, The public health department has acquitted itself well in dealing with monsoon period epidemics during the last three years and its suppression of the Nipah outbreak was nothing short of spectacular. Electric supply is a lot more reliable and the roads have never been better.

In stark contrast to the period of the preceding UDF regime, corruption scandals have not afflicted the LDF to any sort of debilitating degree. While the Pinarayi government won praise for its handling of the fall out of the 2018 floods, questions were subsequently raised about the systems in place for responding to disasters of the sort, especially alert protocols. To its credit, the LDF is attempting to convert a threat into opportunity by formulating an ambitious Rebuild Kerala Development Programme.

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Larger plans are unlikely to be completed before the LDF finishes its term in office. Meanwhile, it also needs to meet the challenge posed by the central government's effort to outflank it on the social welfare front by means of direct transfers. Welfare schemes have for long been the forte of Kerala governments, especially of the Left, and the new challenge is being sought to be met by linking assistance to productive work. The revival of agriculture and the boosting of industry in a densely populated and ecologically fragile state remain as problematic as ever and public finance is very much a touch and go affair. For all that, the government gives the impression that it is functioning properly and that is not something that could be said of the previous UDF regime.

Through its conceptual approach to the Sabarimala crisis, the LDF demonstrated an understanding that a mere tabulating of achievements will not suffice to meet the challenge of Hindutva. Plans for the future, programmes underway at present and benefits wrested for the masses in the past by land reforms and assertive trade unionism are important components of an effective response. They might not be sufficient to withstand an onslaught inflamed by civilisational pride. To take on the Sangh Parivar at a deeper level, the Left might need to go further and establish that its present day efforts are a continuation of a struggle waged since ancient times. That it is animated by the rationalistic, emancipatory and egalitarian civilisational spirit, which has always had to contend with the stifling power of the privileged.

Kerala's great achievement is that its people have attained equality of dignity. This is a value highlighted by the social reformers who drew on ancient writings in Hinduism itself to demonstrate the iniquities in the social order. This fact has, however, for long been suppressed and obfuscated.

The Left might be able to stop the BJP's march into Kerala if it follows up on the policy developed in the course of the Sabarimala campaign and bases its fightback on a liberating interpretation of this civilisational ethos.