

## Kerala Polls 2019: Outcome Hinges on Many Factors

**By K V Thomas**

The decision of Congress President Rahul Gandhi to contest from Wayanad parliamentary constituency (PC) in Kerala, besides the Congress' traditional stronghold of Amethi in Uttar Pradesh, made Kerala one of the epicentres of the 2019 General Elections. The State went to the polls on April 23 to elect 20 members to the Lok Sabha (LS).

Rahul Gandhi's entry into the fray from Wayanad turned into a major plank of propaganda of the 2019 General Elections. Senior Congress leaders like A K Antony described the decision as a tactical move of the party to consolidate its electoral base in South India by espousing the aspirations of the people there.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the strategy of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was to capitalise the issue for the polarisation of the majority-community votes to its advantage in other states, especially in the Hindi heartland. Thus, the Prime Minister while addressing a rally in Maharashtra on April 1, 2019 took pot-shots at the Congress and its president, alleging that they were afraid of fielding candidates from majority-dominated constituencies because they had insulted Hindus by using the term "Hindu terror". "That is why they are forced to take refuge in places where the majority is in a minority".<sup>2</sup> Amit Shah, the president of the BJP also spoke on the same lines during an election rally in Nagpur on April 10, holding that Rahul was contesting in such a seat where when a procession is taken out "one cannot make out whether the place is in India or Pakistan".<sup>3</sup> He was referring to the large number of the green flags of the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML), an ally of the Congress-led United Democratic front (UDF) in the roadshow organised in Wayanad after the filing of nomination papers by Rahul on April 4, 2019. The decision also drew heavy flak from Left parties, notably the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) which wondered "if Congress hadn't got its priorities wrong by pitting its most prestigious candidate against a potential ally rather than its avowed rival".<sup>4</sup>

But, for all accounts, Wayanad was seen as one of the safest seats for Rahul Gandhi, and for that matter for any candidate fighting the elections under the banner of the UDF. That is why, before Rahul's name figuring for the contest, there was weeks-long suspense in Delhi to finalise the Congress candidate for the seat when different groups in the State unit staked the claim for this PC.

Wayanad PC that came into existence after the delimitation in 2008 was considered to be a citadel of the UDF. This PC consists of seven assembly segments from three districts namely Wayanad, Kozhikode and Malappuram. The constituency has 13,25,788 voters – 6,55,786 men and 6,70,002 women. Muslims constitute around 48 per cent of the total voters, followed by Hindus 41 per cent and Christians, 11 per cent.<sup>5</sup> Around 60 per cent of the voters belonging to the minority communities are the major source of strength of the UDF since 2009, when the party candidate (M I Shanavaz of the Congress) won the seat with a margin of more than 1.5 lakh votes over his closest opponent from the Communist Party

of India (CPI). In 2014, he was re-elected with a reduced margin (20,870). In the 2016 Assembly polls, despite a strong pro-Left Democratic Front (LDF) wave throughout the State, the UDF maintained a lead of over 19,000 votes by winning 3 out of 7 assembly segments. The UDF had the highest vote share of 47.73 per cent in the 2009 LS polls when its candidate won the seat with a margin of over 1.5 lakh votes. This time, they expect to gain a swing of around 10 per cent due to Rahul's candidature and also based on the consolidation of minority votes. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA)/BJP has no significant vote base in this PC where its vote share was below 9 per cent during the 2014 LS polls and 2016 Assembly polls (see Table 1). Tushar Vellaapally, the President of Bharat Dharma Jana Sena (BDJS), an ally of the BJP in the State, who took on Rahul in this election mainly banks on the 22 per cent vote share of the Ezhava community.

However, Rahul's entry into the election fray from Kerala will have limited impact in improving the electoral fortunes of the Congress in Southern states like Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka where the party is riding piggy back on regional or other parties like the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), Telugu Desam Party (TDP) or the Janata Dal (Secular). What matters more on the prospects of the Congress in these states is the performance of these parties or their alliance. But in the case of Kerala, "Rahul factor" considerably helped to contain the bickering within the party that had come up on the issue of selection of party candidates in a few seats. Moreover, his candidature would have further accelerated the minority consolidation, especially of Muslims, in favour of the UDF, notably in the northern Kerala. In the outgoing LS, the UDF has 12 seats and majority of the poll surveys prior to Rahul's entry into the fray indicated that the UDF is poised to capture at least 16 of the 20 seats. Thus, the UDF has to sweep all the 20 seats or bag at least 18 seats to prove that Rahul has been able to influence the voters. This is a herculean task for the UDF considering the fact that Kerala witnessed the toughest triangular contests in its poll history.

## Issues and their Impact on the Polls

### 1. Sabarimala issue

The politics and campaigns revolving around the 28 September, 2018 Supreme Court verdict allowing entry of women of all ages to the Sabarimala temple became the hottest issue during the LS elections in Kerala. Ironically, all the three fronts – the UDF, LDF and NDA/BJP – claimed that the Sabarimala issue would work to their electoral advantage. Claiming that the UDF/Congress had taken a consistent line on the issue, Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee (KPCC) held that the Congress always stood to protect the customs and rituals in temples and the faith of the devotees. The party deplored the confrontation-line of the State government with the believers and claimed that the only recourse before the State government to douse the ire of devotees is to file a review petition.

On the other hand, CPM leaders like Sitaram Yechury (General Secretary) highlighted that the LDF or the CPM is not against the believers, but the party led-State government "is implementing the Supreme Court decision, which is the job of any elected state government". As part of its strategy to counter the move of the BJP/Sangh Parivar to communalise the issue, the LDF organised a 640-km-long "woman wall" spanning the State from Kasaragod in the north to Thiruvananthapuram in the south on January 1, 2019, in which more than 31 lakh

women participated. As many as 176 organisations, including the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana (SNDP) Yogam, a community organisation of the Ezhavas and the Kerala Pulayar Maha Sabha (a prominent Dalit body) had extended support for the wall.

For the BJP, the Sabarimala issue is like the Ayodhya issue in the north. Though the BJP and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) had initially welcomed the Supreme Court judgement on September 28, soon they made a volte-face and started organised moves to make political mileage out of the issue. Over the last five or six months, they became the strong proponents of the Sabarimala devotees; spearheaded various modes of pro-temple agitation in which thousands of party/RSS workers participated. The strategy of NDA/BJP was to maintain the momentum of the Sabarimala agitation in order to woo the Hindu voters in favour of the party in the polls. Though the State election commission had warned political parties in Kerala against using the Sabarimala issue for poll gains, the NDA/BJP was bent upon using the issue to the party's electoral advantage in Kerala, as manifested in the Prime Minister's speeches at election rallies in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. Thus, while addressing rallies in Theni and Ramanathapuram in Tamil Nadu on April 13, 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had categorically asserted; "In Kerala, the Congress, Communists and Muslim League are playing a dangerous game regarding the Sabarimala temple. They are using brute force to strike at the roots of faith and expression. Sadly for them, as long as BJP is there, nobody will be able to destroy our faith and culture".<sup>6</sup>

## **2. Political Violence/Killings**

The political violence or killings, especially in the northern district of Kannur, are not new to Kerala; but such gruesome incidents on the eve of the elections have been exploited by rival political parties. The murder of two youth Congress activists in Kasaragod district on February 17, 2019 by CPM workers had been widely used by the UDF and the NDA to corner LDF/CPM for the increased incidents of political violence in the State. Citing the example of the candidature of P Jayarajan, who is accused in two political murders, from Vada kara parliamentary seat, they tried to build up a campaign that the CPM has been promoting the cult of political violence. Meanwhile, the Revolutionary Marxist Party (RMP), formed by slain CPM leader T P Chandrasekharan declared support to the UDF in Vada kara PC to ensure the defeat of Jayarajan from that seat.

## **3. 2018 Deluge – Relief, Rehabilitation and Rebuilding Kerala**

In 2018, Kerala experienced the worst ever floods in its history since 1924. The devastating floods and landslides affected 5.4 million people, displaced 1.4 million, took 483 lives and damaged property worth more than `30,000 crore. Seven districts (Alappuzha, Ernakulam, Idukki, Kottayam, Pathanamthitha, Thrissur and Wayanad) were worst affected. The LDF government tackled the tragedy on war footing and won accolades from the large segments of the population. There was unprecedented voluntary participation of people, especially the fisherfolk, in the rescue, relief and rehabilitation programmes. The State government, to some extent, could cash in on the initial indifferent attitude of the Centre in channelising the central funds to aid the

affected people and the restrictions imposed by the Centre in receiving foreign aid for relief and rehabilitation activities. However, the State government's certain decisions such as "Salary challenge" (contribution of one month's salary to the Chief Minister's Distress Relief Fund by the State government employees) and "Flood-cess on GST" created mixed responses from the people. Also, the LDF government was put in a fix ahead of the polls, when the amicus curiae appointed by the Kerala High Court in flood cases submitted a report on April 3, 2019 stating that lapses in dam management and sudden release of water caused the devastating Kerala floods.

#### **4. Anti-Modi Campaign – Consolidation of Minorities**

As the Congress is being projected as a better alternative to the BJP in the Centre than the CPM/LDF, there was a consolidation of minorities, especially Muslim voters in Kerala, in favour of the UDF. The UDF, to a great extent, succeeded to galvanise the opinion of a few sections of minorities against the NDA/BJP by highlighting the acts committed by the Sangh Parivar in Kerala and other states. The party's main focus was on Triple Talaq bill, economic reservation, citizenship bill and anti-minority policies of the NDA government.

#### **Likely Effect of Issues on the Prospects of Fronts/Parties**

Kerala witnessed the toughest triangular contests in its election history so far with the UDF, LDF and NDA engaged in a do-or-die battle. All the three fronts considered 'winnability' as the sole criterion in the selection of candidates. Nine sitting MLAs – six of the LDF and three of the UDF – were in the poll arena. Apart from Rahul Gandhi, other prominent figures in the fray were Shashi Tharoor (Congress-Thiruvananthapuram), Alphons Kannanthanam (NDA-Ernakulam), film stars Suresh Gopi (NDA-Thrissur), Innocent (LDF-Chalaky) and former Governor of Mizoram Kummanam Rajasekharan (NDA-Thiruvananthapuram).

An analysis of the last three elections (2009 and 2014 LS Polls and 2016 Assembly polls) shows that there were up and downs in the vote share of the UDF which showed a record high of 47.73 per cent in 2009, when it won 16 out of 20 LS seats (see Table 2). But the UDF's vote share had drastically come down to 38.59 per cent in the 2016 Assembly polls. Two factors led to this negative swing. The first was the marginal consolidation of upper-caste voters in favour of the BJP/NDA, especially in the urban and semi-urban areas, much to the disadvantage of the UDF. The second factor was the drifting away of a major chunk of religious minorities, notably Muslims and Christians, from the UDF camp in almost all districts. The UDF camp is optimistic that they can overcome both these factors in the just-concluded LS polls. They are confident that the UDF can recoup the lost space among the upper-caste voters by virtue of its approach on the Sabarimala issue, which has been well reciprocated by the large section of the believers and the community organisations of the upper-caste Hindus such as Nair Service Society (NSS). Similarly, the anti-Modi campaign, the consolidation of minorities and the shift in the approach of certain Muslim organisations like Jama'at-e-Islami (Jel), Welfare Party of India and Socialist Democratic Party of India (SDPI) might have improved UDF's electoral

base in all districts. At least three pre-poll surveys had shown the UDF surging ahead of the LDF in Kerala, capturing as many as 16 seats.

But, the CPM/LDF outrightly rejects such claims and surveys and maintains that the party is poised to repeat 2004 scenario, when the LDF won 18 out of 20 seats. Though such claims are exaggerated, the LDF gave a tough fight in almost all constituencies except Wayanad and two IUML bastions (Malappuram and Ponnai) where the UDF has clear upper hand. Unlike in the case of the UDF, the LDF during the last three elections maintained its vote share above 40 per cent with the highest vote share of 43.14 per cent in the 2016 Assembly polls, when the LDF bagged 91 out of 140 seats in the State Assembly (see Table 3). If we extrapolate the 2016 Assembly poll results, the LDF is better placed in 14 PCs as against 6 by the UDF (see Table 1). Perhaps, such a trend was in the air immediately after the post-deluge phase when almost all sections of the people appreciated the way the State government handled one of the greatest natural disasters of the century. But the political situation drastically changed with the Sabarimala episode, when the UDF and the NDA could successfully build up a campaign that the CPM-led LDF government, influenced by atheist ideologies, is bent upon destroying the faith/belief, culture and age-old traditions and practices. The efforts of LDF/CPM to counter such campaigns/propaganda could not meet with much success. Meanwhile, a couple of recent incidents of political violence/killings in northern districts like Kasaragod and Kannur, in which CPM workers were involved, adversely affected the image of the government.

Thus, what finally decides the outcome of the 2019 polls in Kerala may be the approach of the voters on the Sabarimala issue. The NDA/BJP which has steadily increased its vote share from 6.43 per cent in 2009 to 10.82 per cent in 2014 and 14.93 per cent in the 2016 Assembly polls pins high hopes to achieve substantial swing in its favour by exploiting the Sabarimala issue. In this connection two crucial questions arise. Was NDA/BJP able to consolidate Hindus over the Sabarimala issue? If yes, to whose cost/strength this consolidation might have gone – the UDF or LDF?

If NDA/BJP will manage a swing of 5–10 per cent, it will be better placed to open its LS account in Kerala. Moreover, with such a swing of votes, the BJP will increase its vote share in all the 20 seats and will emerge as a decisive force in Kerala. If the pro-NDA/BJP swing in the range of 5–10 per cent goes from the traditional vote share of the LDF, as indicated in the recent pre-poll surveys, the CPM/LDF would be pushed to 2009 position when they won only 4 out of 20 seats from Kerala. On the other hand, if major percentage of this swing is from the Congress/UDF camp, the dreams of Congress leaders to win maximum seats from Kerala will be shattered.

Though NSS, which was in the forefront of the Sabarimala agitation, upheld its political line of “equi-distance” from major political parties/fronts during the polls, it was opposed to the LDF, especially on the Sabarimala issue. The NSS stand may adversely affect the electoral prospects of the LDF in a couple of PCs in Central and South Kerala like Pathanamthitta, Mavelikkara and Kottayam, where Nair community has a sizeable following. But, there was also much uncertainty on the exact line of approach of the

organisation towards the UDF and the NDA/BJP. Both the Congress and the NDA/BJP were hopeful of the support of NSS in the elections.

On the other hand, the SNDP representing the Ezhava community maintained a pro-LDF line. The SNDP supremo, Vellappally Natesan openly expressed reservations on his son (Tushar Vellappally) entering into the election fray, while holding official position in the SNDP. Tushar contested against Rahul Gandhi in Wayanad PC under the banner of BDJS, an ally of the NDA in Kerala. The SNDP's stand may work to the electoral advantage of the LDF in a couple of seats in Central Kerala.

The entry of the NDA/BJP into the electoral politics of Kerala with its long-term strategy of overthrowing the UDF and the LDF has resulted in the end of bipolar politics hitherto practised in the State since the late 1960s. The Sabarimala issue had given ample opportunity for the BJP to vigorously pursue the party's agenda linking politics with religion, faith and traditions. The battle cry of the BJP that the traditional faith, culture and ethos of the majority community in the State are in danger has become a serious challenge to the communal harmony and secular credentials. The results of the 2019 general elections will be a real litmus test as how the people of the State responded to this battle cry.

**Table 1: Kerala -- 2009 and 2014 LS election results and 2016 Assembly election trends**

Name of constituency	2009 (vote-share in per cent)			Winner (margin)	2014 (vote-share in per cent)			Winner (margin)	2016-Assembly (vote share in per cent)			Lead
	UDF	LDF	NDA		UDF	LDF	NDA		UDF	LDF	NDA	
Kasaragod	37.91	45.1	14.8	CPM/LDF (64,427)	38.77	39.48	17.72	CPM/LDF (6921)	36.52	43.34	18.05	72,539 (LDF)
Kannur	50.11	45.1	3.14	INC/UDF (43,151)	44.398	45.08	5.44	CPM/LDF (6566)	39.03	49.10	8.81	1,02,176 (LDF)
Vadakkara	48.82	42.3	4.7	INC/UDF (28,186)	35.32	35.04	6.47	INC/UDF (3306)	38.41	45.84	11.02	76,991 (LDF)
Wayanad	49.88	42.3	--	INC/UDF (1,53,439)	41.20	38.92	8.62	INC/UDF (20,870)	42.93	42.93	8.85	19,053 (UDF)
Malappuram	55.64	39.9	4.6	IUML/UDF (1,15,597)	51.29	28.47	7.58	IUML/UDF	49.70	37.78	7.42	1,18,696



								(1,94,739)				(UDF)
Kozhikode	42.92	42.8	11.3	INC/UDF (838)	42.15	40.36	12.27	INC/UDF (16,883)	36.30	45.06	16.10	92,208 (LDF)
Ponnani	50.14	39.4	11.3	IUML/UDF (82,684)	43.43	40.51	8.63	IUML/UDF (25,410)	43.63	43.52	8.28	1069 (UDF)
Palakkad	42.58	42.8	8.7	CPM/LDF (1820)	33.78	45.35	15.01	CPM/LDF (1,05,300)	35.86	42.58	18.92	68,067 (LDF)
Alathur (SC)	44.22	46.7	6.5	CPM/LDF (20,960)	40.33	44.43	9.45	CPM/LDF (37,312)	36.84	45.77	14.65	91,760 (LDF)
Thrissur	47.23	44.2	6.7	INC/UDF (25,151)	38.12	42.27	11.15	CPI/LDF (38,227)	33.31	45.02	19.63	1,22,624 (LDF)
Chalakyudy	50.33	41.3	5.7	INC/UDF (71,179)	38.98	40.55	10.50	Independent/LDF (13,884)	38.79	42.97	15.20	45,091 (LDF)
Ernakulam	46.04	44.4	6.5	INC/UDF (11,790)	41.58	31.35	11.63	INC/UDF (87,047)	42.97	38.67	14.78	41,791 (UDF)
Idukki	51.98	42.5	3.5	INC/UDF (74,796)	40.41	46.57	6.15	CPM/LDF (50,542)	42.54	40.48	13.61	19,058 (UDF)

Kottayam	50.13	41.3	4.6	KCM/UD((71,570)	50.96	36.47	5.33	KCM/UD(1,20,599)	45.47	37.05	15.29	80,395 (UDF)
Alappuzha	51.62	45.3	2.2	INC/UDF(57,635)	46.31	44.37	4.31	INC/UDF(19,407)	38.11	46.71	12.80	94,363 (LDF)
Mavelikkara (SC)	49.42	43.4	5.1	INC/UDF(48,048)	45.25	41.57	8.97	INC/UDF(32,737)	32.82	45.81	18.50	1,30,290 (LDF)
Pathanamthitta	51.21	37.3	7.1	INC/UDF(1,11,266)	41.19	34.74	15.95	INC/UDF(56,191)	35.73	37.48	18.77	17,796 (LDF)
Kollam	47.52	45.2	4.4	INC/UDF(17,531)	46.46	42.18	6.67	RSP/UDF(37,649)	32.77	50.96	13.50	1,76,040 (LDF)
Attingal	42.83	45.4	6.6	CPM/LDF(18,341)	37.60	42.18	10.53	CPM/LDF(69,738)	38.09	41.20	17.77	30,651 (LDF)
Thiruvananthapuram	44.29	30.7	11.4	INC/UDF(99,998)	34.09	28.50	32.32	INC/UDF(15,470)	32.04	38.17	27.22	60,467 (LDF)

Source: Based on Election Commission of India figures.



**Table 2: Front/party-wise position in 2009 and 2014 LS polls and 2016 Assembly polls in Kerala**

<b>2009 LS polls–party position</b>	<b>2014 LS polls–party position</b>	<b>2016 Assembly polls–trends</b>
United Democratic Front (UDF)–16	UDF–12	ACs with UDF lead–47
Indian National Congress (INC)–13	INC–08	ACs with LDF lead–91
Indian Union Muslim League (IUML)–2	IUML–02	ACs with NDA lead–01
Kerala Congress (Mani)–KCM–01	KCM–01	ACs with others lead–01
	RSP–01	
Left Democratic Front (LDF)–04	LDF–08	
Communist Party of India (Marxist)–4	CPM–07	
	CPI–01	

*Source:* Based on Election Commission of India figures.

**Table 3: Seats (vote share in per cent) of political fronts in 2009 and 2014 LS polls and 2016 Assembly polls in Kerala**

<b>Political front</b>	<b>2009/LS</b>	<b>2014/LS</b>	<b>2016/Assembly</b>
United Democratic Front (UDF)	16 (47.73)	12 (41.98)	47 (38.59)
Left Democratic Front (LDF)	04 (41.89)	08 (40.12)	91 (43.14)
National Democratic Alliance (NDA)	0 (6.43)	0 (10.82)	01 (14.93)
Others	0 (3.95)	0 (7.08)	01 (3.34)

*Source:* Based on Election Commission of India figures.

*K V Thomas is Senior Fellow at CPPR and Assistant Director (Retd), Intelligence Bureau, MHA, Government of India. He can be contacted at [tomskaara@yahoo.co.in](mailto:tomskaara@yahoo.co.in)*

*Views expressed are personal and need not reflect or represent the views of Centre for Public Policy Research*

- 
1. Dance of democracy. *Times of India*, 1 April 2019, Kochi edition.
  2. Will Wayanad be a safe seat for Rahul Gandhi? *India Today*. Accessed on 12 April 2019 at <https://www.indiatoday.in/elections/lok-sabha-2019/story/will-wayanad-be-a-safe-seat-for-rahul-gandhi-india-today-does-a-demography-check-1491780-2019-04-02>
  3. The News Minute. Accessed on 13 April 2019 at <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/can-t-make-out-if-it-s-india-or-pakistan-amit-shah-rahul-gandhi-s-wayanad-roadshow-99786>
  4. From the statement of Pinarayi Vijayan, Kerala CM. *The Times of India*, 1 April 2019.
  5. Accessed on 11 April 2019 at <https://www.indiatoday.in/elections/lok-sabha-2019/story/will-wayanad-be-a-safe-seat-for-rahul-gandhi-india-today-does-a-demography-check-1491780-2019-04-02>
  6. Gloves are off, BJP to focus fully on Sabarimala Issue. *Sunday Times*, 14 April 2019