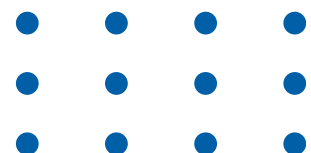


EVENT REPORT

Democracy in Focus: Assembly Elections 2026 Issues, People, and Choices

28 March 2026
Kochi, India

Organised by
Centre for Public Policy Research
Southern India Chamber of Commerce & Industry
(SICCI), Kochi



Report prepared by
Centre for Public Policy Research

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01

About the Event

Democracy in Focus: Assembly Elections 2026 - Issues, People, and Choices

The academic discussion on “Democracy in Focus: Assembly Elections 2026 - Issues, People, and Choices” was jointly organised by the Centre for Public Policy Research (CPPR), Kochi, in collaboration with the Southern India Chamber of Commerce & Industry (SICCI), Kochi, with the objective of fostering informed public dialogue on the evolving electoral landscape in India and its implications for governance and policy outcomes.

Situated within the broader context of India’s dynamic and increasingly complex democratic processes, the event sought to provide a structured platform for examining emerging electoral trends, shifting voter behaviour, and the interplay between political mandates and policy direction. With four major state assembly elections scheduled, understanding these dynamics assumes particular significance not only for political stakeholders but also for industry, academia, and civil society, given the far-reaching impact of electoral outcomes on economic policy, regulatory frameworks, and governance priorities.

The session was designed as a collaborative engagement bringing together representatives from industry and commerce, policymakers, academics, civil society organisations, and the media. By facilitating interaction between expert insights and diverse stakeholder perspectives, the event aimed to bridge the gap between electoral analysis and its real-world policy implications, thereby contributing to a more informed and participatory democratic discourse.

The event featured Dr. Sandip Shastri, a distinguished political scientist and noted election analyst, as the keynote speaker. Drawing on his extensive experience in election studies, federalism, and survey-based research, the session provided a forward-looking and analytical perspective on the key factors shaping Elections 2026. The session also hosted Prof. G. Gopakumar, whose longstanding expertise in Indian politics and psephology added depth and contextual grounding to the discussion.

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The event commenced with a welcome address by Dr. Thomas Nechupadam, who emphasised the need to reassess Kerala’s economic and industrial trajectory in the context of electoral change, followed by a special address by P. C. Cyriac, who highlighted governance challenges and the urgency of administrative and policy reforms in the state.

Through this engagement, CPPR and SICCI sought to strengthen institutional collaboration in advancing policy-oriented public discourse in Kerala. The event underscored the importance of evidence-based analysis, informed debate, and multi-stakeholder engagement in deepening democratic understanding and ensuring that electoral processes are examined not merely as political events, but as critical determinants of governance trajectories and development outcomes.

02

Fireside Chat

Democracy in Focus: Assembly Elections 2026 - Issues, People, and Choices



Guest

- **Dr. Sandip Shastri**, Vice President (Bangalore), Nitte Education Trust
- **Prof. (Dr.) Gopa Kumar**, former Vice-Chancellor of the Central University of Kerala

Moderator

- **Sreelakshmi Harilal**, Associate, Centre for Public Policy Research, Kochi

The panel discussion featured distinguished political analysts, including Dr Sandeep Shastri and Prof. (Dr) G. Gopakumar, who engaged in a wide-ranging conversation on evolving electoral trends, federal dynamics, and the specificities of Kerala’s political landscape in the run-up to the Assembly elections 2026.

1. Setting the Democratic Context

The discussion opened with Dr. Shastri situating the upcoming elections within the broader framework of Indian democracy, anchoring his remarks in a memorable personal anecdote. When asked on television after a dramatic election result who the 'hero of the election' was, he recalled his answer without hesitation:



"The voter of this state is the hero of this election."

He reaffirmed this view emphatically for Kerala, praising the wisdom, sagacity, and farsightedness of Kerala's electorate as the foundation of the state's democratic vitality.

He described elections as the most visible, transparent, and open window of Indian democracy – while acknowledging that some critics reduce India to an 'election-only democracy,' he argued that this visible democratic vitality is itself something to be valued. Both speakers situated the 2026 elections within the broader frameworks of federal democracy and constitutional change.

1.1 Significance of This Electoral Cycle

- Rare cycle – exclusively South, East, and Northeast India; no northern or western states participating.
- Dr. Shastri coined the term 'democracy dividend' to describe the unique value of this cycle, where each contest carries its own distinct character.
- Elections remain the most visible, transparent expression of Indian democracy – Kerala's electorate exemplifies this vitality.

1.2 Federalism vs. the Double Engine Argument

- Dr. Shastri challenged the 'double engine government' claim, arguing that in practice one engine leads the other rather than both running in parallel.
- He proposed that two engines on separate tracks – national and state – may actually serve a federal democracy better.
- Dr. Gopakumar firmly opposed 'One Nation, One Election', arguing each region's specificities are too complex to merge with a national election.
- State elections serve as a vital social audit of governance performance.

1.3 Census, Delimitation, and the 2029 Horizon

- Census expected in 2027, followed by a delimitation exercise that will also implement a 33% reservation for women in legislatures.
- The 2026 elections may be the last major cycle before these changes reshape political representation.
- Delimitation poses a sensitive challenge for southern states – slower population growth risks reduced parliamentary seats despite stronger economic performance.

2. Kerala in Comparative Perspective

Dr. Shastri placed Kerala within a broader comparative framework, drawing on patterns from Karnataka, Assam, and recent national election data to assess the 2026 contest.

2.1 The Revolving Door and the Karnataka Precedent

- Both Kerala (LDF) and Assam (BJP) are testing incumbents who have held power for 10 consecutive years.
- Dr. Shastri called Karnataka the 'elder brother' – it has not returned a ruling party since 1985, a 39-year streak of alternation.
- Kerala rejected the revolving door last time; the 2026 election will test whether this

break from the alternation pattern holds.

- Key difference from Assam: Kerala has had the same Chief Minister for the full 10 years; Assam used two different coalition formulas across its two terms.

2.2 Vote Share Trends – Key Data Points

- LDF–UDF gap was just 0.9% in 2011, widened to 6 percentage points in both 2016 and 2021.
- Indications suggest this gap will narrow significantly in 2026, making it a more competitive contest.
- BJP Lok Sabha 2024 vote share: 16.68% (alone), 19.21% with allies – but Dr. Shastri cautioned against using this as an assembly benchmark.
- BJP's last assembly vote share was 11.3% (up from 10.6% the election before) – the relevant baseline for 2026.

2.3 'UDF's Election to Win – and Lose'

- Dr. Shastri's sharpest observation: this election is the UDF's to win, but only the UDF can lose it.
- Risk of 'snatching defeat from the jaws of victory' as seen in previous cycles.
- Critical variables for the UDF:
 - Managing internal disputes and alliance cohesion
 - Building a credible, unified social coalition
 - Projecting a consistent public image across constituencies

3. State-Based Parties and Alliance Dynamics

Both panellists examined the role of smaller parties within Kerala's bipolar alliance structure, with particular attention to the IUML and the BJP's incremental positioning strategy.

3.1 'State-Based' Not 'Regional' – A Key Distinction

- Dr. Shastri prefers the term 'state-based parties' – these parties are not geographically peripheral; their electoral support is simply concentrated within one state.
- In Kerala, the two alliances command over 80% of the vote combined, leaving state-based parties in a supportive, secondary role within the LDF and UDF umbrellas.

3.2 The Indian Union Muslim League – A Sub-Regional Force

- Dr. Gopakumar described the IUML as a 'sub-regional party' – its organisational strength is concentrated in Malappuram, Kasaragod, Kozhikode, and Wayanad.
- Muslims constitute ~28% of Kerala's population statewide, but the League's base is limited to 3–4 northern districts.
- Despite geographic concentration, the IUML plays a unique role in the UDF:
- Quoted UDF leader: 'The Muslim League is the only party that can supply votes to UDF in all seats in Kerala.'

- Acts as a critical vote-mobilisation engine well beyond its core strongholds
- Expected to defend its strongholds strongly in 2026, with an expanding 'bandwagon' effect within UDF.

3.3 BJP's Targeted Alliance Strategy

- BJP has been making pointed critiques of state-based players within both alliances, targeting their performance, stance, and credibility.
- Long-term goal: nibble at both alliances gradually to carve out a third electoral space.
- Triangular fights are real in at least 40 of 140 constituencies; the BJP now has 40,000+ votes in over 20 constituencies.

4. The BJP in Kerala – Long Game, Structural Limits

A major discussion focused on the BJP's trajectory in Kerala – both its strategic ambitions and the structural barriers it faces.

4.1 The BJP's Strategic Sequencing

- Phase 1: Weaken the LDF; emerge as the principal opposition.
- Phase 2: In a subsequent election, challenge the Congress-led UDF for dominance.
- This explains the acceptance of incremental gains – from 10.6% to 11.3% assembly vote share – without pushing for an immediate breakthrough.
- Dr. Shastri noted: 'Their game plan seems to be to challenge the left, emerge as the second player, and then fight the bigger battle with Congress.'

4.2 Structural Demographic Constraints

- Dr. Gopakumar estimates Hindus at ~51% of Kerala's population – lower than the Census figure of 54–55%, which he argues overstates Hindu numbers due to SC/Christian overlaps.
- Community composition limits BJP's Hindutva strategy:
 - Muslims: ~28%
 - Christians: ~17%
 - Scheduled Castes/Tribes: significant overlap with claimed Hindu figures
- Kerala's deep tradition of social reform movements has moderated caste and communal mobilisation, making Hindutva ideology less resonant here than in northern states.
- The Hindu-dominant CPI(M) is itself shaped by secular and reformist values, making it a formidable barrier to BJP expansion within the Hindu social space.

4.3 Two Strategic Misfires

- 'Congress Mukt' is a non-starter in Kerala – the BJP's real challenge is the CPI(M), yet campaign messaging keeps targeting Congress.
- BJP needs to percolate into the Christian community to grow meaningfully – some incremental progress noted, but no breakthrough yet.

4.4 The CPI(M) – De Facto Strongest Regional Party

- Despite being a national party, CPI(M) functions effectively as Kerala's strongest regional force.
- CPI has lost national party status; CPI(M) is now largely concentrated in Kerala and Tamil Nadu.
- From an Election Commission standpoint, the CPI(M) is the most regionally dominant 'national' party in the country.

4.5 The BJP–CPI(M) 'Deal' Theory – Comprehensively Rejected

- Dr. Gopakumar rejected the widely circulated media theory of a BJP–CPI(M) electoral understanding, limiting any possible arrangement to a maximum of 2–3 constituencies:
- Ideological incompatibility: RSS cadres will not vote for CPI(M) and vice versa – the divide is historically embedded in physical conflict between the two movements.
- Demographic self-harm: Both parties compete within the Hindu social fold – a deal would mean fighting each other, not helping each other.
- Grassroots non-compliance: Ordinary BJP sympathisers will not vote for CPI(M) even if leadership signals a tacit understanding.
- Social engineering favours UDF: The combined weight of Muslim, Christian, and secular Hindu voters makes the social arithmetic heavily tilt toward the UDF, not a BJP–CPI(M) axis.

5. The Broader Electoral Picture – Comparative State Analysis

- Dr. Shastri categorised the five elections and offered detailed analysis of each, providing national context for the Kerala contest.

5.1 West Bengal – 'The Mother of All Battles'

- Mamata Banerjee faces 15 years of incumbency – the central question is whether she converts this into pro-incumbency or the BJP frames it as anti-incumbency.
- BJP's greatest weakness in Bengal: absence of a credible, visible, locally rooted face – national leadership alone cannot win a state-level contest.
- BJP reached 40.6% in Lok Sabha (pre-2024) and ~38% in 2024, making it a competitive but uncertain fight.
- Unlike Odisha, West Bengal's political culture does not lend itself to the same BJP breakthrough model.

5.2 Tamil Nadu – A Closer Fight Expected

- DMK alliance gap vs. opposition was ~6% last election; expected to narrow to a 2016-style close contest.
- BJP's strategy mirrors Kerala: weaken the DMK alliance, take over opposition leadership, then challenge the main force.
- Hoped-for alliance with actor Vijay fell through – he demanded the chief ministership and a high seat count that the BJP was unwilling to concede.
- Dr. Shastri predicted a very tight result; who holds the 1% margin remains an open question.

5.3 Assam – Two Different Formulas

- Two distinct governing coalitions across 10 years:
- First term: rooted in indigenous people's strength
- Second term: broader majoritarian approach under the current Chief Minister
- Congress is more focused on Kerala than Assam, as both are considered winnable.
- Key BJP vulnerability in Assam: weakening of AIUDF in the lower valley – whether Congress capitalises remains to be seen.

6. Campaign Narratives – Development, Identity, and Voter Choice

The panel examined the gap between campaign rhetoric on development and what actually drives voter decisions at the EVM, drawing on 25 years of joint survey research by both panellists.

6.1 The Development Rhetoric Gap

- Unemployment and price rise consistently rank in the top 3 voter concerns across every state and every survey over 25 years.
- Yet these issues do not straightforwardly determine electoral outcomes – emotive and identity-based factors often overtake rational policy concerns at the point of voting.



"Yes, unemployment and price rise are main problems – but who is best suited to solve the problem? The opponent may not have the skill set. So I'll go with the known devil rather than the new untested devil."

- Development narrative functions largely as a rhetorical tool; its electoral impact depends on how it is framed and communicated.
- In Kerala, high-performing public institutions set a more demanding benchmark for development claims.

6.2 Key Issues Likely to Shape Voter Behaviour in 2026

- Rising cost of living and price inflation
- Unemployment and youth migration, particularly to West Asia
- Governance concerns – corruption, law and order
- Performance of public institutions, especially healthcare
- Infrastructure development and competing credit claims between alliances
- Women and youth identified as decisive voter segments, given their direct exposure to these issues.

7. Social Media and Political Communication

Both panellists agreed on the fundamental nature of social media's electoral impact, while Dr. Gopakumar highlighted features specific to Kerala's digital political ecosystem.

7.1 The Echo Chamber Effect (Dr. Shastri)

- Core finding from research: social media does not change attitudes – it only strengthens existing ones.
- Mechanism: people save messages they agree with and pass them to like-minded

- contacts; messages they disagree with are deleted.
- Result: an echo chamber where voters hear only their own voice amplified.



"People today have a conclusion first, and then search for data to justify that conclusion. We as good researchers believed: first look at data, then draw your conclusion."

- Social media is a reinforcer, not a persuader – it intensifies pre-existing political positions.

7.2 Kerala's Organised Cyber Ecosystem (Dr. Gopakumar)

- Every major party in Kerala has a dedicated, well-resourced cyber team that actively shapes public discourse – making content 'more manipulated than organic.'
- Kerala's diaspora dimension: social media content reaches and generates reactions from Keralites across the globe, amplifying its emotional charge.
- Younger voters are more influenced by social media than traditional media – critical reading habits are declining even in Kerala.
- Conclusion: 'Social media becomes antisocial media' – conditioning public opinion at the cost of genuine critical engagement.

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Conclusion & Key Takeaways

The panel concluded that the 2026 Kerala Assembly elections are a genuinely consequential moment – for the state and as a wider marker of democratic and federal trends in India.

- Kerala's traditional LDF–UDF bipolar structure remains intact but faces new pressures from a more strategically patient BJP and shifting voter expectations.
- The contest is effectively the UDF's to win, provided it maintains internal cohesion and builds a credible social coalition.
- The BJP's long-term strategy is real but demographically and ideologically constrained; 2026 is a stepping stone, not a breakthrough moment.
- Development rhetoric, while prominent in campaign messaging, will be subordinated to emotive and identity factors at the point of voting.
- Social media will reinforce, not reshape, existing political alignments– with organised party cyber teams adding a layer of coordinated manipulation.
- Ultimately, as Dr. Shastri observed at the outset, the informed, independent judgement of Kerala's electorate remains the decisive force in every election the state holds.

04

About CPPR & SICCI

ABOUT CPPR

The Centre for Public Policy Research (CPPR) is an independent, not-for-profit, public policy think-tank dedicated to in-depth research and scientific analysis with the objective of delivering actionable ideas that could transform society. Based out of Kochi, in Kerala, our engagement in public policy that began in 2004 has initiated open dialogue, policy changes, and institutional transformation in the areas of Urban Reforms, Development Studies, Economy, Ease of Doing Business, Governance & Law, and International Relations & Foreign Policy.

Over the years, CPPR has worked with different Ministries and Departments of the Government of India, Different State Governments in India, City Corporations, Universities, Academia, and Civil Society Organisations on various projects and themes. We have also worked with Embassies and High Commissions of different nations in India, international foundations, and multi-lateral organisations. Please find more details about the people, work, and impact of CPPR at www.cppr.in

ABOUT SICCI

The Southern India Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SICCI) is a premier Regional Apex Body in the Southern Region with a national outlook. SICCI was established in 1909 under the inspiration of Mahatma Gandhi, and is one of the founder members of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), New Delhi. The Chamber is also one of the founder members of International Chamber of Commerce (ICC)-India and the Indian Council of Arbitration (ICA).

SICCI's vision is to strive for excellence in service and be a leader to protect business, facilitate its growth, ensure corporate governance and enhance the image of private enterprise in their endeavour to promote economic growth. SICCI maintains fruitful rapport with the Union and State Governments and is represented on important public bodies of the Governments. Representation on these bodies enables the Chamber to bring up important issues to official notice for timely action. SICCI networks with other Chambers, both within and outside the country.

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Agenda

Saturday, March 28, 2026

3:30 PM - 4:00 PM

Registration & High Tea

4:00 PM - 4:10 PM

Inaugural Ceremony

Welcome Remarks: Dr. Thomas Nechupadam,
Chairman, SICCI Kerala

Special Address: Shri. P.C. Cyriac, I.A.S. (Retd.)

4:10 PM - 5:10 PM

Fireside Chat (Academic Dialogue)

Moderator:

Ms. Sreelakshmi Harilal, Associate (Research & Projects), Centre for Public Policy Research

Speakers:

Dr. Sandeep Shastri, Political Scientist
Vice President, Nitte Education Trust (Bangalore)

Prof. (Dr) G Gopa Kumar, Former Vice-Chancellor
Central University of Kerala, Kasaragod.

5:10 PM - 5:30 PM

Q&A

5:30 PM - 5:40 PM

Closing Remarks

Dr. D Dhanuraj, Chairman
Centre for Public Policy Research

06

Photogallery



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Team

Event Team

- Binumol V B**, Program Lead
- Nandana Satheesh**, Global Strategy Associate
- Varsha Dev**, Global Strategy Associate
- Sreelakshmi Harilal**, Associate, Research & Projects
- Lakshmi Viswanathan**, Associate, Communications
- Darshan Deepak**, Associate, Academy
- Kalyani S K**, Associate, Research & Programs
- Chaithra Navada**, Associate, Urban
- Aishwarya M**, Associate, Urban
- Mehuli Dutta**, Election Intern
- Amrendra Pratap Singh**, Election Intern
- Saba Ruhsana**, Research Intern
- Sameer Sharif**, Research Intern
- Niya Elizabeth Paul**, Project Intern

Representatives from SICCI

- Dr Thomas Nechupadam**, Chairman, SICCI Kerala
- Mr Rajesh Nair**, Founding Member, SICCI Kerala



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