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Culture, Governance, and the Divergent Political Trajectories of the Left and the RSS in Kerala: An Analysis in the Backdrop of Recent Local Self-Government Election

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ABSTRACT

Exactly a century back, in the year 1925, two ideologically divergent political projects were born in India: the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Communist Party of India (CPI). They both aimed for social change, but they had quite different perspectives on how culture, society, and political power interacted in Indian society. The society of Kerala accommodates these two ideologies in different parameters. This paper tries to argue that these two ideologies' foundational assumptions have led to a century-long imbalance in political outcomes, which is currently becoming more apparent in Kerala's local self-government elections. Based on historical analysis and political theory, the study argues that Indian communism's focus on material transformation and welfare governance, combined with its relative disregard of cultural embeddedness and which has resulted in structural exhaustion. In contrast, the RSS's long-term investment in cultural organisation and social presence has allowed for political expansion in the face of institutional and administrative exhaustion. This study places Kerala's recent electoral changes in this broader historical and cultural context.

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I. Introduction

Kerala has held a unique position in Indian politics for a long time. Its political history contrasts with that of most Indian states. It has been moulded by various contents, such as a sustained left-leaning approach, strong secular traditions, and a well-appreciated welfare model of governance. Despite having a nearly 45% non-Hindu population, comprising roughly 18% Christians and 26% Muslims, the state is well-known for its progressive, historically peaceful, and compassionate culture of tolerance, with very few communal confrontations following independence (Mannathukkaren, 2017). Kerala's political order has been characterised by a highly institutionalised two-party coalition system dominated by two competing alliances: the Left Democratic Front (LDF), led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), and the United Democratic Front (UDF), led by the Indian National Congress. This bipolarity created what could be called a somewhat "closed" competitive political system, rather than just reflecting electoral arithmetic (Sunilraj & Heath, 2017). Power shifted back and forth between these two alliances in a fairly regular pattern, yet despite their rivalry, both broadly agreed on a shared commitment to secular values and a development-oriented vision for the state. Hence, regardless of which coalition was in power, the normative core of the government comprised land reforms, welfare provisioning, public education, public health, minority accommodation, and redistribution (Heller & Isaac, 2005). As a result, Kerala produced human development indicators—literacy rates, life expectancy, and gender development indices—comparable to far wealthier societies, despite relatively modest industrial growth.

Kerala's distinctive political culture has shaped a party system that is remarkably stable and deeply in-

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-stitutionalised. For decades, politics in the state has revolved around the LDF–UDF bipolar framework, where shifts in voter preference were limited and largely cyclical. Political participation was not shallow or sporadic; it was embedded in dense networks of party cadres, community organisations, trade unions, and local self-government institutions. This tightly organised and socially rooted structure left little space for a credible third force to emerge. As a result, Kerala sustained a durable two-front political equilibrium for many years. It is within this context that the BJP remained marginal for a long time. Even though its vote share began to rise after the 1990s, those gains were not sufficient to fundamentally disrupt the entrenched bipolar party system of the state.

Against this historical backdrop, the recent Local Self-Government Elections attain particular analytical significance. In Kerala, local body elections are often seen as sensitive barometers of political change. Unlike state or national elections that may be shaped by broader ideological narratives, local elections reflect everyday governance, grassroots mobilisation, and the quality of citizen–institution interactions. They tend to reward parties that appear organizationally coherent and socially present in daily life, especially when existing systems show signs of strain. In the 2025 Local Self-Government Elections, the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) made notable breakthroughs, dislodging the Left from long-held strongholds in several municipalities and panchayats. Most strikingly, the loss of the Thiruvananthapuram Corporation—Kerala’s capital city—signals not merely an isolated electoral upset, but the visible consolidation and expanding influence of the BJP within the state’s local political arena.

On these developments, it is significant to pause and reflect more carefully on the deeper currents shaping Kerala’s political future. This paper proceeds from the recognition that recent electoral outcomes are not merely routine shifts in vote shares, but may represent a moment of structural strain within Kerala’s long-institutionalised bipolar coalition order. The result considers whether this equilibrium is beginning to loosen, potentially opening space for a more competitive triangular configuration. At the same time, the study asks whether Kerala’s historically left-leaning and redistributive governance model is undergoing a subtle but significant normative contestation, wherein cultural-traditional narratives are increasingly positioned as preceding and shaping governance priorities. Finally, this paper examines whether the BJP’s recent consolidation in Kerala’s local self-government institutions should be understood as the outcome of a dramatic ideological shift among voters, or rather as the cumulative effect of organisational expansion, localised issue-based mobilisation, and gradual vote-share accumulation. By situating these developments within Kerala’s distinctive political history, the paper seeks to assess whether we are witnessing episodic electoral fluctuation or the early contours of a deeper structural transformation.

This study employs a historically grounded and analytically layered research design to determine whether current trends in Kerala’s local self-government elections are just episodic fluctuations or the first signals of structural restructuring. Instead of isolating the 2025 poll results, the article contextualises them within Kerala’s long *durée* of institutionalised bipolar competition and Left hegemonic consolidation. In terms of methodology, it integrates qualitative political reading, election data interpretation, and historical-institutional analysis. It traces how the coalition system worked here and how socialist governance ideals became woven into public expectations over time. It then examines vote-share trends, seat distribution, and geographic expansion in recent local body elections especially in municipalities and corporations where the BJP has made noticeable gains—to assess whether these developments meaningfully depart from established patterns of alternation.

By placing contemporary electoral outcomes against this broader historical backdrop, the study tries to identify both structural continuities and emerging shifts across time. Importantly, the research remains interpretive rather than predictive; it attempts to understand how political systems sustain, adapt, or gradually renegotiate their legitimacy when facing institutional pressure. In doing so, the paper seeks to bring together institutions and ideas, numbers and narratives, and continuity and change, in order to offer a nuanced and human-centred account of Kerala’s evolving political landscape.

II. Institutional Consolidation and Marginal Mobilisation: Historical Account of the Left Politics and RSS in Kerala

In understanding Kerala's modern political culture, two ideologically contrasting yet historically enduring forces demand particular attention: the deep institutionalisation of communist politics and, conversely, the Hindu nationalist mobilisation. Since Kerala became a linguistic state in 1956, the Left has consistently been a major and inevitable force in its political landscape, rotating between positions of power and opposition but never being on the periphery of government. Hindutva, or Hindu nationalist ideology, on the other hand, developed gradually through socially rooted modes of mobilisation, cultural discourse, and long-term organisational consolidation rather than emerging as an immediate political contender. It is crucial to consider these parallel evolutions because it demonstrates how Kerala's political culture has long been shaped by ideological consolidation and incremental change in society.

III. Institutionalising Radicalism: The Rise and Consolidation of the Communist Movement in Kerala

The roots of Left politics in Kerala can be traced back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. After its inception, the left mobilisation had engaged with the region's socioeconomic hierarchy, and it took an active part in the social reform movements of the region, anti-caste movements, peasant mobilisations, labour union activism, and also the independence movement (Jeffrey, 1976; Nossiter, 1982). By the 1930s and 1940s, the Communist Party had been firmly engaged in rural issues and workers' problems, establishing thick associational networks that later translated into electoral viability. The formation of the world's first democratically elected communist government in 1957 was a significant institutional turning point for Kerala's communist party (Nossiter, 1982).

Over the years, land reforms, public provisioning, literacy drives, and decentralised administration solidified the CPI, and later the CPI (Marxist), as structurally integrated actors in the state's political landscape (Heller, 1999; Isaac & Franke, 2000). Through these initiatives, a robust cadre-based mobilisation culture and institutionalisation of communist politics restructured the social structure of the state (Mattumannil, 2024). From a Gramscian perspective, this process can be viewed as the slow establishment of hegemony. In addition to party propaganda, trade unions, student organisations, women's collectives, cultural forums, and local government institutions also spread socialist beliefs. Civic literacy and political literacy become entwined. The Left's vocabulary—rights, redistribution, secularism, and social justice—shaped the normative framework for public discussions about budgetary allocations, education policy, decentralisation, and minority rights. Through this approach, communist ideology did more than just win elections in Kerala; it nurtured socialist values, which transcended partisan lines and became rooted in institutions, local governance structures, and ingrained in Kerala's broader political consciousness.

This hegemonic embedding was further strengthened by the People's Planning Campaign of the late 1990s. The Left strengthened the idea that socialist government entailed both democratic inclusion and redistribution by instituting decentralised planning and participatory governance, which connected ideology with everyday administrative engagement (Isaac & Franke, 2000). Even when out of power, the ideological grammar of governance (public provisioning, welfare expansion, minority accommodation, and social equality) remained fundamentally intact. Successive governments, particularly those led by rival coalitions, have rarely deviated from these fundamental affirmations.

Thus, Kerala's Left shaped the moral architecture of governance. And the socialist values became synonymous with the "Kerala Model," a development paradigm distinguished by high literacy, strong public health, women empowerment, and social protection despite a lack of industrial capital.

IV. Cultural Organisation and Peripheral Mobilisation: The Emergence of the RSS in Kerala

At the same time, the gradual and socially embedded rise of Hindu nationalist mobilisation represents

a different, though equally significant, strand of political transformation. Unlike the rapid breakthroughs seen in some other Indian states, Hindutva in Kerala advanced through long-term social work, organisational penetration, and community-level engagement. It worked within civil society networks, cultural associations, and religious organisations, slowly expanding its presence in spaces that were historically resistant to it (Harikrishna, 2026). This incremental consolidation challenges the long-standing bipolar equilibrium of the state and introduces new ideological contestations around identity, nationalism, and cultural belonging.

The emergence and growth of RSS in Kerala has a long history. Humbly started in 1942, it has slowly and steadily grown into a powerful cadre organisation. Although a social and cultural organisation in outlook, it cannot be restricted to the role of a mere social actor. The evolution of the RSS in Kerala must be viewed as a prolonged, meticulous, carefully calibrated social project rather than a sudden political eruption. Despite being established nationwide in 1925, the RSS was only able to start organised operations in Kerala in 1942, and for more than 20 years, the majority of its activities were limited to the Malabar region (Jayaprasad, 1989). Its expansion was the consequence of consistent organisational work and methodical cadre-building from the beginning rather than an instant reaction to a specific crisis.

In a state already defined by high literacy and profound Left influence, the RSS adopted what K Jayaprasad describes as a "silent but calculated" approach to penetrating society's consciousness. By using a steady expansion strategy that included daily shakhas², ideological training, and local networking, it was able to create a long-lasting infrastructure as opposed to just sporadic mobilisation. With more than 2,500 volunteers spread throughout the state, it had founded about 200 shakhas by 1950, indicating the early establishment of a disciplined Hindu nationalist presence inside Kerala's intricate social structure (Jayaprasad, 1989).

With the formal establishment of the Kerala Provincial Committee in 1964, the RSS gained a provincial organisational structure. When the Communists came to power in 1957, the RSS ideologically positioned Communism as alien to Indian conditions and inimical to Hindu culture. Analytically speaking, this ideological conflict served as the foundation for what can be called a counter-hegemonic³ endeavour. The RSS presented Hindu nationalism as a corrective force and positioned Marxism as a threat to culture in a state that is known as the stronghold of communism. This was a systematic challenge to the Left's moral-intellectual hegemony in contrast to occasional community mobilisations: a cadre-based organisation facing another cadre-based formation, both of which claimed to represent genuine social change.

Following the Emergency (1975–77), the RSS underwent a dramatic transformation in the state from ad hoc activity to noticeable political prominence. After the ban was lifted in 1977, membership doubled, the number of shakhas increased, and Kerala saw its first notable increase in election campaign participation. The period also saw increased RSS-Marxist conflicts, particularly in northern areas, indicating ideological polarisation (Jayaprasad, 1991). Importantly, communities that had historically backed the CPI (M), particularly the Ezhava and Dheevara groups in Malabar, started to support the RSS. This shift disrupted established class-caste alignments and directly challenged the Left's social base (Seethi, 2017). Therefore, the contest was no longer confined to abstract ideology; it unfolded within neighbourhoods, unions, and village-level associational life.

The long-standing ideological initiative of the RSS in Kerala was formally articulated politically in 1980 with the formation of the BJP. Although RSS had focused on cadre-building and cultural consolidation for decades, its establishment marked the shift from social embeddedness to political desire. The organisation specifically honed its political approach after 1984 by making a concerted effort to create a "united Hindu vote bank"—one that could overcome long-standing caste divisions in Hindu society and oppose what it called minority communal consolidation (Jayaprasad, 1991). This was not a retreat

from cultural endeavour; rather, it reflected a structural transition in which cultural consolidation and political aggregation began to coexist. Electoral mobilisation was added to an existing extensive network of shakhas, allied groups, and civic initiatives.

In addition to this overt political strategy, the Sangh Parivar network expanded its presence in other social areas in Kerala. Hindu nationalist ideology found its way into regular public spaces through student organisations, trade unions, women's organisations, tribal outreach programs, educational institutions, magazines, and social service platforms (Paleri & Santhosh, 2023). In a state where politics has traditionally been mediated through extensive networks of unions and community organisations, this expansion into associational life was crucial. The Sangh aimed to normalise its ideological vocabulary in everyday social interactions rather than depending only on sporadic election campaigns, changing discussions about culture, identity, and belonging (Jaffrelot, 2008).

The BJP's vote share in Kerala started to steadily increase in the late 1980s and early 1990s, following its national rise. However, this gradual expansion did not result in state-level political authority, in contrast to northern and western India. And Kerala's entrenched bipolar coalition system, dominated by the LDF and UDF, continued to impede the BJP's growth. Even so, symbolic breakthroughs carried significant political weight. The party broke through the long-standing electoral barrier in 2016 when it won a single Assembly seat, marking its first-ever entry into the Kerala Legislative Assembly (Prabhash et al 2017). In the same vein, gaining one parliamentary seat in the general election of 2024 was yet another significant achievement (Thomas et al 2026). Yet, despite these gains, Kerala remains one of the few major states where the BJP has neither formed a government nor emerged as the principal opposition force.

Thus, from an analytical standpoint, the Kerala RSS may be understood as a counter-hegemonic organisation operating inside a society that has long been influenced by Left hegemony. By shifting the emphasis from redistributive politics to civilizational identity, from class to culture, and from majoritarian consolidation to secular developmental consensus, it sought to transform the terrain of legitimacy rather than immediately overturn the communist government. Its strategy combined cadre discipline, social service, cultural revivalism, and electoral projection. Instead of upending Kerala's institutional order, it gradually assimilated into the state's social structure by contesting the Left's moral authority and offering an alternative axis of political belonging.

V. Cultural Governance, Legitimacy Strain, and Counter-Hegemonic Mobilisation: The LDF–RSS Interface in Kerala

Governance is never just material; it also imparts cultural meaning. Every governmental action has symbolic significance as well. The state continuously creates meanings about recognition, identity, and belonging through its language, customs, public celebrations, institutional appointments, and reactions to controversy. Gramsci viewed the state as more than just an economic management tool; it was also an educator who shaped "common sense." Thus, normative hierarchies and cultural values are communicated through governance decisions (Gramsci, 1971). Charles Taylor's (1994) idea of the "politics of recognition" further shows how cultural acknowledgement shapes modern democratic politics. Governance activities are evaluated not only based on their distributive outcomes, but also on whether they affirm or undermine collective identities. When groups perceive misrecognition, legitimacy strain emerges—even in contexts of adequate material provision. As a result, concerns over cultural governance create questions about legitimacy, prompting counter-hegemonic forces to become increasingly active. On this point, the clash between the LDF and the RSS becomes increasingly visible in Kerala.

The LDF's approach to cultural governance has always been mediated by reformist rationalism, which prioritises constitutional morality, gender equality, and progressive social development. The state has

frequently presented itself as a modernising force in issues about minority rights, caste reform, and religious institutions. However, it simultaneously risks generating friction when some sections of society interpret state action as insufficiently attentive to devotional sentiment or majority cultural identity or faith. This produces tension, not between secularism and religion, but between two viewpoints of legitimacy: procedural-constitutional legitimacy⁴ and affective-cultural legitimacy. The happenings in Kerala over the last ten years serve as an example of how cultural issues may put pressure on a ruling regime's legitimacy and present chances for political rivals to mobilise against the hegemony. In the context of the LDF government, particular events associated with Hindu religious practices and beliefs have been widely interpreted by political opponents as indicative of a cultural insensitivity of the Left toward indigenous culture. These incidents gained political significance not just as isolated controversies but also as a matter for conflicting ideological undertakings aiming to reshape cultural authority in Kerala.

One of the most prominent examples is the controversy surrounding the implementation of the Supreme Court order, which allowed women of menstruating age to enter the Sabarimala Temple (Indian Young Lawyers Association Vs the State of Kerala, 2017). The LDF government chose to implement the verdict strictly, framing its position in terms of constitutional morality, gender equality, and the rule of law. However, sections of Hindu devotees alleged this stance as an intrusion into long-standing religious traditions. Political actors, Congress, particularly the BJP and affiliated groups such as the RSS, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) framed the issue as evidence that the Left government was indifferent—or even hostile—to Hindu beliefs⁶. Through mobilisations such as the “chanting protests” (Namajapa Yatra), they sought to consolidate a narrative that the state government was undermining indigenous religious traditions (Roopesh, 2018).

This narrative was further reinforced through other symbolic controversies. Remarks attributed to the A. N. Shamseer's speech about Lord Ganesha were widely circulated and interpreted by critics as disrespectful toward Hindu religious beliefs (Indian Express, 2023). Similarly, incidents such as the reported theft of gold ornaments associated with the Sabarimala Temple were politicised as evidence of administrative negligence and cultural disregard (The News Minute, 2025). While the LDF frequently linked these controversies with secular governance and institutional accountability, the BJP strategically presented them as part of a greater pattern of indifference toward Hindu institutions.

The BJP tried to create a counter-hegemonic narrative in Kerala within this discursive conflict. The party claimed that the Left's ideological allegiance to secularism and minority protection had resulted in “appeasement politics” that favoured religious minorities, especially Muslims and Christians. On the other hand, the BJP presented itself as the defender of Hindu customs and cultural rights. This framing attempted to undermine Kerala's established political narrative by depicting the majority category as culturally marginalised under communist rule. In a state that had previously opposed Hindutva politics, the BJP sought to create a new electoral base by appealing to religious sentiment and highlighting alleged dangers to Hindu customs and practices (Harikrishna 2026).

The greater resonance of these cultural narratives is also thought to be reflected in electoral results. The LDF suffered a severe defeat in Kerala during the 2019 and 2024 Lok Sabha elections, winning just one of 20 parliamentary seats each time. On the other hand, the BJP increased its vote share and made history when it won the state's first Lok Sabha seat in the 2024 election. The BJP's persistent mobilisation around cultural and religious concerns may have helped convert some Hindu sentiment into votes, even though several other political and socioeconomic reasons also played a role in these outcomes. Similar patterns emerged in the local self-government elections in Kerala in 2025, where questions about cultural identity continued to shape political discourse.

VI. From Cultural Contestation to Electoral Mobilisation: BJP's Performance in Kerala's 2025 Local Self-Government Elections

The 2025 LSG elections in Kerala marked a dramatic shift in the state's political landscape. While the Congress-dominated UDF saw a notable comeback at various levels of local government, the election results also showed the NDA, led by the BJP, increasing its dominance. Despite Kerala's historical bipolar rivalry between the LDF and the UDF, the poll results demonstrate the progressive construction of a tri-polar political dynamic, with the BJP emerging as an increasingly major political force (Chathukulam et al 2026). The party's successes in a few urban areas and municipalities demonstrate its increasing ability to translate issue-based politics and ideological mobilisation into quantifiable electoral support at the local level (Basheer, 2025).

Another significant aspect of the elections was the decrease in voter turnout, which stood at 73.69%, lower than the 75.95% achieved in the 2020 elections and 77.76% in 2015. 21,079,609 voters cast ballots in the elections, electing representatives for 1,199 local self-government organisations, such as district panchayats, municipal corporations, municipalities, and gram panchayats, in 23,573 wards. Despite a minor reduction in turnout, the elections continued to serve as a vital indicator of popular political sentiment. According to Mathew (2001), local government elections in India frequently serve as a "genuine barometer" of popular political legitimacy, reflecting the electorate's assessment of governance on a daily basis.

In decoding the election results and the BJP's performance in the state, one of the most notable results of the 2025 LSG election was the BJP-led NDA's unprecedented success in the Thiruvananthapuram Municipal Corporation, as the alliance emerged as the single largest front, gaining 50 of the 101 wards. For the CPI (M)-led LDF, which had maintained unbroken control over the corporation for more than thirty years, this development signals a significant symbolic and political blow. The LDF won 51 seats in the corporation during the 2020 local government elections, followed by the NDA with 35 seats and the UDF with just 10. The reversal of this tendency in 2025 demonstrates a dramatic shift in political loyalties within the state capital, particularly in urban areas where the BJP has progressively built a steady vote base (Chathukulam et al 2026; Basheer, 2025; Reghu, 2025).

The BJP-led NDA made significant progress in a number of municipalities outside of Thiruvananthapuram. The NDA won 21 seats in the 55-member council of Tripunithura municipality, just ahead of the LDF's 20 seats. This was the first time the NDA had taken control of the municipality, which had previously alternated between the LDF and UDF. In a similar vein, the NDA won 25 of the 53 seats in Palakkad municipality for a third term in a row, even though they lost a few wards from the previous election. These successes highlight the BJP's steady institutionalisation within Kerala's local political structures, especially in urban and semi-urban areas where the party has been methodically building ideological support and organisational networks through its larger Sangh Parivar ecosystem (Andersen & Damle, 2018; Jaffrelot, 2007).

Table 1: 2025 Kerala Local Government Election Results

Local Government	LDF	UDF	NDA	Others	Hung	Total
Corporations	1	4	1	0	0	6
Municipalities	28	54	2	1	1	86
District Panchayats	7	7	0	0	0	14
Block Panchayats	63	79	0	0	10	152
Gram Panchayats	340	505	26	6	64	941

Source: The Election Commission, EPW, Vol 61, 2026

Table 2: Ward-wise Results of Kerala Local Government Election 2025

Local Government	LDF (Wards)	UDF (Wards)	NDA (Wards)	Others (Wards)
Corporations	125	187	93	15
Municipalities	1,100	1,458	324	323
District Panchayats	148	196	1	1
Block Panchayats	923	1,241	54	49
Gram Panchayats	6,568	8,015	1,447	1,299

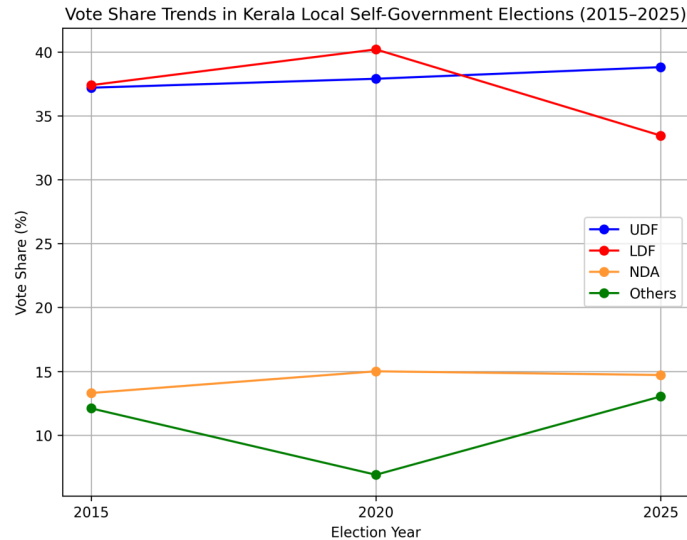
Source: The Election Commission, EPW, Vol 61, 2026

Meanwhile, the BJP's electoral performance was not uniform throughout the state. The NDA suffered an unanticipated defeat in Pandalam municipality, which had long been seen as a BJP stronghold because of its symbolic connection to the Sabarimala temple. Of the 34 wards, the LDF won 14, the UDF won 11, and the NDA was reduced to nine seats. This result suggests that issue-based mobilisation, like the campaigns surrounding the recent gold theft controversy in Sabarimala, does not always result in political success. Nonetheless, even though the BJP did not win outright, the elections revealed its ability to dominate political discourse and motivate supporters along cultural and religious narratives.

The broader electoral backdrop demonstrates how the BJP's victories were part of a bigger process of political realignment in Kerala. Four of the six municipal corporations, seven district panchayats, 54 municipalities, 79 block panchayats, and 505 gram panchayats were won by the Congress-led UDF, which was the main beneficiary of anti-incumbency sentiments against the LDF. In contrast, the LDF was limited to one Municipal Corporation, 28 municipalities, seven district panchayats, 63 block panchayats, and 340 gram panchayats. These findings show that the LDF's electoral base is significantly declining in both rural and urban areas (Basheer, 2025).

The BJP's performance in this changing political environment shows a strategic attempt to turn identity-based mobilisation and cultural concerns into electoral capital. The party and its wider ideological network have repeatedly framed some governance controversies during the last 10 years as proof of the LDF's purported animosity toward Hinduism, especially those about religious rituals, temple administration, and cultural identity. By presenting itself as the primary guardian of Hindu cultural interests, the BJP has attempted to mobilise sectors of the Hindu electorate that have hitherto supported the Left or the Congress (Jaffrelot, 2007; Andersen & Damle, 2018). The outcomes of the local government elections in 2025 indicate that this approach has started to produce noticeable electoral benefits, especially in certain municipalities and urban areas.

The graph displays the relative vote shares of Kerala's three main political parties, the UDF, LDF, and NDA, over the course of three election cycles. The LDF won 37.4% of votes in the local self-government elections in 2015, 40.2% in 2020, and 33.4% in 2025. The results of the 2025 elections indicate a sharp decline in the LDF's vote share, which peaked in 2020. In 2015, the UDF obtained 37.2%, followed by 37.9% in 2020 and 38.1% in 2025. This indicates Kerala's historically bipolar party structure is gradually giving way to a tripolar competitive tendency, as seen by the UDF's slow electoral consolidation and the NDA's consistent growth in the number of votes it receives.

Figure 1:

Data Source: The Election Commission

The progressive institutionalisation of the BJP-led NDA's electoral presence in Kerala is evident in the figure. The alliance's vote share rose from 13.3% in 2015 to 15% in 2020 and stabilised around 14.7% in 2025, indicating the consolidation of a steady ideological support base rather than sporadic electoral spikes, even though it still lags well behind the two leading fronts. This pattern lends credence to the claim that the BJP's expansion in Kerala is organisational and incremental, indicating long-term ideological and cultural mobilisation as opposed to abrupt electoral realignment.

From this point of view, the results of the 2025 LSG elections point to a larger crisis of legitimacy for the LDF, which is led by the CPI (M). The BJP used identity-based narratives and cultural contestations to increase its influence in Kerala politics, whereas the UDF mainly profited from anti-incumbency sentiment and minority consolidation. The Left's traditional base of support was weakened by several factors, including perceived centralisation of government, accusations of corruption, the decline of participatory democratic norms, and disputes over cultural and religious matters (Reghu 2025). These changes produced an advantageous political environment for both the UDF and the BJP-led NDA to extend their dominance, albeit in distinct ways. The local body results serve as gloomy signs for 2026's Assembly elections, particularly for the Left. If the pattern in the 2025 LSG election continues, the Left will fall not only in the state but also across the Indian political scene. Since the late 1960s, the CPI (M) has held power in at least one state. Kerala continued to be the party's permanent basis notwithstanding changes. If the LDF is defeated in 2026, there won't be a communist state government in India for the first time since the 1960s. The ramifications are huge (Basheer, 2025).

Thus, the BJP's expanding electoral presence in Kerala demonstrates the institutionalisation of a tri-polar political system. Kerala's historically bipolar political structure is gradually changing, as seen by the party's ability to gain strategic victories in urban centres and municipalities, even if it has not yet achieved widespread electoral domination throughout the state. This tri-polar dynamic's emergence has important ramifications for Kerala's political system's future course since it brings new forms of ideological contestation and rivalry within the democratic framework of the state. It also shows how the BJP's cultural embedment could change after a radicalised rationalist reformist spirit led the state to a religion-backed cultural nationalist favourite.

Conclusion

Kerala's political history has long been influenced by a unique kind of governance-centred politics, in which social reform, welfare extension, and development were the main themes of election campaigns. For decades, the bipolar conflict between the LDF and the UDF characterised the state's democratic setting, reinforcing a political culture that prioritised material governance outcomes and institutional development. However, the events analysed in this paper indicate that this model's underpinnings are experiencing significant but slow changes. In Kerala, governance has never been solely material; it has also had cultural and symbolic connotations that influence how legitimacy is viewed. The CPI (M)-led LDF government has had times of legitimacy strain in recent years due to disputes over religious and cultural identity. Discussions sparked by incidents related to religious sentiment, such as the 2018 Sabarimala Supreme Court ruling being implemented at the Sabarimala Temple, allowed governance disputes to be reframed as issues of identity and cultural preservation.

In order to create a counter-hegemonic narrative, the BJP and its larger ideological network strategically mobilised these controversies. Through this strategy, cultural anxieties and grievances were gradually reframed as political issues, enabling the BJP to translate identity-based concerns into electoral mobilisation. In this way, the long-term cultural groundwork of Hindutva—carefully cultivated within Kerala's largely secular social environment—appears to be slowly yielding political dividends.

Their performance in the 2025 LSG elections represents the political translation of cultural mobilisation into institutional electoral presence, signalling a new phase in the evolving relationship between cultural politics and democratic competition in Kerala.

Therefore, the two divergent political projects — the RSS and the Left — interact in Kerala's current political environment in different ways. One relied on long-term cultural organisation to mould political destiny, while the other trusted structural transformation through governance to reshape society. Kerala appeared to validate the revolutionary promise of governance-centred politics during the majority of the twentieth century. However, the progressive normalisation of alternative cultural narratives now coexists with evidence of institutional fatigue.

Therefore, the deeper question arising now is not which paradigm governed more successfully in the past. Instead, the question is which model can maintain legitimacy in the face of new social and political circumstances, such as financial constraints, demographic shifts, and the saturation of established institutional arrangements. Kerala's recent local elections thus mark not an abrupt shift, but the unfolding of a longer historical process in which different conceptions of politics operate across different temporal horizons. Governance can lead to growth, but culture may lead to a sense of belonging. When development stabilises but problems of belonging remain untouched, the political field reopens for new forms of mobilisation. In this way, Kerala's current political changes are more than just a typical electoral shift. They stand for the gradual reconfiguration of the connection between legitimacy, culture, and governance.

Notes:

- In this study, Hindutva and Hindu nationalism are used interchangeably. Literally translating to "Hinduness," Hindutva is a political and intellectual framework that aims to define Indian national identity mainly in terms of Hindu cultural and civilizational traditions.
- The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's fundamental organisational units are called shakhas. They serve as local branches where members get together on a regular basis for organisational activities, ideological debates, and physical training. Shakhas have traditionally been essential in growing the RSS's grassroots network and maintaining its long-term social and cultural mobilisation through this decentralised structure.
- The term "counter-hegemony" describes attempts by social or political organisations to subvert the prevailing cultural and intellectual order in society. The phrase first appeared in the writings of Antonio Gramsci, who asserted that consent and cultural leadership are just as important for -

maintaining power as institutions. Therefore, in order to challenge the legitimacy of dominant political ideas and develop a new ideological impact, counter-hegemonic groups aim to create alternative narratives and modes of mobilisation.

- The acceptance of political authority based on the impartiality, openness, and consistency of decision-making procedures, as opposed to only policy results, is known as procedural legitimacy.
- The acceptance of governmental authority based on shared cultural values, emotional affiliation, and symbolic resonance with a community's beliefs and traditions is known as cultural or affective legitimacy.
- Despite widespread public disapproval of the ruling, there was initially little organised opposition to it. The RSS and the BJP praised the judgment, but the Congress party had a conflicted stand (Janmabhoomi 2018). More than forty-one organizations are participating in the demonstration, including the erstwhile Panthalam royal family, the Nair Service Society (NSS), the Akhila Kerala Tantri Samajam, and the Namboothiri Yoga Kshema Sabha (NYKS).

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