

# Thiruvananthapuram, a crucible of identities

The constituency which has been chosen by the BJP as its launchpad in Kerala is witnessing a three-way contest of Hindutva, Hinduism, and communism. **Varghese K. George** finds that the intense churn offers newer opportunities for political mobilisation



(Clockwise from left): The UDF candidate Shashi Tharoor, the LDF candidate C. Divakaran, and the BJP candidate Kummanam Rajasekharan campaign in Thiruvananthapuram constituency. \*S. MAHINSHA

Akhilesh Babu is an unlikely dentist. At a soiree in Thiruvananthapuram, eased by single malt whiskey, he speaks of the American electoral system, Marxism, social reforms in Kerala, and contemporary politics. Though Hindu Ezhava by birth, Babu (name changed on request) even finds his way around the labyrinth of Kerala's church history. Babu describes himself as "broadly a Leftist", "a Dawkinsian" and a "neo-Atheist" and teaches dental science for a living. His adoration for Kerala's communist Chief Minister, Pinarayi Vijayan, is boundless, though his support for the party is less enthusiastic. "He is a man of scientific rationality, and decisive. Many people might even see some of these attributes in Prime Minister Narendra Modi, though I don't think Modi is scientific or rational. I like Modi too. He has a sense of purpose, conviction. Both men came up against all odds," says Babu. He wishes Modi had emphasised on the "pluralistic and inclusive" facets of Hinduism in his election campaigns. "It could be a force for good," he adds.

It is Vijayan's uncompromising stand on the entry of women into the Sabarimala shrine that reinforced Babu's loyalty to the Chief Minister, but his cousin and host of the evening, Sindhu (name changed on request), is more muted in her observations. Growing up in a Leftist family and married to a Syrian Christian, Sindhu is observing Lent ahead of Easter. She occasionally sneaks her husband into the Sree Padmanabha Swamy temple in the city, reportedly the world's richest place of worship owing to the massive gold treasure that it holds, where non-Hindus are not permitted. On this day, off alcohol, she is the victim of mansplaining, but slips this in: "Nobody should be barred from any place. But I personally do not want to go to Sabarimala as a mark of respect for the custom."

Syrian Christian Dev Thomas George, 40, who lives in the city but hails from Pathanamthitta, the constituency where the Sabarimala shrine is located, describes himself as "broadly a socialist" and, if time permits, plans to drive 100 km to vote for the BJP's K. Surendran in his home constituency. "He has 200-plus cases foisted on him by the government of Kerala. There is an element of unfairness there," he says. "I think you have a split identity," someone taunts him. "Indeed. I have discussed this with my psychiatrist and he thinks it is okay to be like this," George responds, sharing with us some private information. George goes to church and is also a devotee of Ayyappa, neither of which he is fanatic about. An engineer by training, he believes in rebirth, karma, and finds the Hindu belief system more mystical and rational than Christian certitudes. He has climbed the hill several times. "In principle, I support women going to Sabarimala, but I wish the custom had evolved gradually," he says.

Ravi Raman, a Communist Party of India (CPI) nominee of the Kerala Planning Board, says ruefully that Babu and George are representative of a new political culture in Kerala. "There is a distinction between democratic populism and authoritarian populism that is being lost," he says of Babu's comparison between Modi and Vijayan. Raman is also an ardent supporter of the Chief Minister – not for his efficiency or decisiveness, but for the politics he represents. "Efficiency and development are not politics. The question is what politics drives your development agenda," he says.

Hari Kumar, a 44-year-old in Kollam, says: "Our coming of age was marked by choosing our politics – being in the SFI [Students' Federation of India], KSU [Kerala Students Union], or whatever. Technology has replaced politics in Kerala."

"Politics used to be the vehicle for aspiration and gratification. From self-respect to sex, a Malayali seeks everything these days on the handheld, and not politics," says George, explaining how his son is more connected to American cultural trends than Kerala politics.

"The increasingly layered understanding of identity has made political mobilisation difficult in Kerala," says Raman. "Politics is about privileging one identity over others in pursuit of a common goal." From this crucible of identities, the Sangh Parivar wants to sculpt a new Kerala in the Hindutva mould, and hopes Thiruvananthapuram will be its launchpad.

## On the Rajasekharan trail

"Remember the unspeakable horror of communist regimes in Poland, Cambodia and West Bengal. See the ongoing communist brutality in China and Kerala. Wake up today, wake up now," an announcer heralds the BJP candidate, Kummanam Rajasekharan, along the narrow, snaky roads in the lumpy terrain of Kazhakoottam. "See the fake contest of the deceitful communists and the Congress who are in an embrace as soon as they cross the Western Ghats." 'Rajettan', or elder brother Rajan, is unlike all of them, the announcer reassures. The 66-year-old candidate, with his snow white hair and beard, deep eyes and feeble manner of speaking, looks and sounds more like an ideologue than a candidate fighting an election. His plea for votes is matter-of-factly. "Development, protection of faith and security – we are fighting for three issues," he says. "The constituency is neglected. Our

faith is under attack. And security involves the security of our women, our children, our community and our nation." Kanikonna, the State flower and an integral part of the Vishu festivities, and tender coconuts greet him at every point. He may not have the wider appeal of the other 'Rajettan', O. Rajagopal, who came a close second in the constituency in the 2014 Lok Sabha election, but "it is not the charisma of the candidate that is driving the BJP this time; it is ardent political support," says Ashraf Kadakkal, a professor at Kerala University. Rajasekharan stood second in the Vattiyookavu constituency in the 2016 Assembly election and Rajagopal won from Nemom.

Rajasekharan's campaign begins from a Dalit neighbourhood in Attipra. As the rickety pickup truck that functions as a moving dais for the candidate stutters forward, a man in his 30s with a saffron headband and a child in one arm does not let go of Rajasekharan's hand. Eyes welling up and at a loss for words, he finally manages to let out a scream: "Win, win, we must this time!"

A local temple is managed by the Dalit community. Suni Chandran, a leader of the Kerala Pulayar Maha Sabha (KPMS), is the councillor of the city corporation from the ward. As most politically aware Dalits in Kerala, Chandran too had started as a communist – first in the CPI and then in the Communist Marxist Party (CMP), a splinter group of the Communist Party of India (Marxist). As

## Left, Right, Congress

The contest in the temple town of Pathanamthitta

"You are here not because of me, and I know that. This land is the sacred place of Lord Ayyappa," K. Surendran, the BJP's candidate in Pathanamthitta in south Kerala, says to a gathering in Aranmula, a village famous for its temple; the Aranmula mirror, which is crafted out of a metal alloy; and an annual boat race in river Pampa.

Surendran is the face of the Sangh Parivar agitation against women entering the forest shrine of Sabarimala, located in the constituency. This is the second seat besides Thiruvananthapuram that the BJP is focussing on. Veena George, a TV anchor-turned-MLA from Aranmula, who managed to woo a significant segment of Christians to the Left in the Assembly election, is the Chief Minister's chosen candidate for the Lok Sabha. The Congress's Anto Antony is seeking a third term.

a CMP member, he was part of the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) in 2014 and had campaigned for Shashi Tharoor, who is seeking a third term in the Lok Sabha this time. In the local body elections in 2015, Chandran became one of the 35 BJP winners in the corporation. The party is now the second biggest bloc after the Left Democratic Front (LDF), pushing the UDF to the third position in the 100-member council.

"We (Dalits) are 'poster boys' in the UDF and the LDF, as in we paste posters. We are also called upon to swell the crowd in their rallies," Chandran says. "In the BJP, in the last four years, I feel more welcome," he says, explaining his transition from being a communist to an elected representative of the Hindu nationalist party.

Behind the calm demeanour of Rajasekharan is an unwavering Hindutva proponent who left his job to become a full-time activist in the early 1980s. In 1987, he contested from the Thiruvananthapuram Assembly segment as a Hindu Munnani candidate. The district has been a fertile ground for Hindutva polit-

ics for long, and he hopes to reap the harvest this time.

Wearing a black shirt in an open vehicle in Kerala's April weather is punishing, but this is symbolism that Surendran cannot forgo – devotees climb to the Sabarimala temple clad fully in black.

"Here comes a candidate who does not see religion or caste in people," the pilot vehicle introduces the candidate. How does his politics, focussed entirely on the Sabarimala issue, square with this statement? "Muslims and Christians support our stand in large numbers. In fact, they run most businesses around the pilgrimage. We are winning this time," he says.

A roadside shop along the convoy's route reads: 'Best quality beef sold here.' Women and men alike in the Hindu-dominated panchayat shower petals and sing vanchippattu – folk songs that are usually sung during boat races. The shop beckons.

## Son of the red soil

Towering a little over six feet, his voice booming over the peaking *vadyamelam*, CPI(M) MLA C.K. Hareendran waits with about 200 others for C. Divakaran, the LDF candidate, in Parasala, 50 km short of the southern tip of India. "Tharoor is trying to make this a BJP versus Congress campaign, and consolidate all the anti-BJP votes. That is how he won last time, but this time it is not going to happen," he says. Hareendran dismisses talks of an undercurrent of unhappiness among the party cadres over the LDF's strident position on women's entry into Sabarimala. "There was some mild confusion in the beginning. But once the party took a clear position and explained it, everything has fallen in place," he says. At a booth campaign committee office of the LDF in Pangode, CPI(M) leader S. Suvama Kumar says: "We get questions on Sabarimala from BJP-leaning voters. And we explain our politics. Not only on this but other issues too. We tell people that this entire

national security frenzy of the BJP is a diversionary tactic, that we cannot alienate the people of Kashmir and claim that to be an integral part of India."

CPI(M) district secretariat member N. Ratheendran takes the mic moments before 'CD', as the candidate is popularly known, arrives. "This is a fight for India's future. Hindutva is trying to destroy India's pluralism. The only credible alternative to this onslaught on our diversity is the Left. Kerala is a model of development, and it is accepted by the entire world," he says, recalling that it was under CD's watch (he was Food Minister of Kerala) that the State introduced the freshly cooked midday meal scheme in schools. "We have made progress and this election is to keep our State on the same course."

With his head full of black hair, neatly parted and set, CD has a youthful appearance that hides his 50-year-long career. His long association with Thiruvananthapuram is trumpeted in the campaign: "He belongs to this place." At 76, he needs a hand to climb on top of the contraption of the campaign vehicle. He takes garlands mostly by hand. As the sun gets harsher, he becomes a little tired and his hands, worn out by revolutionary politics of half a century, begin to slightly tremble. But his voice is firm as comrades offer him "revolutionary salutes". "Don't fall for the rumours. We are winning with a huge majority," he tells small gatherings of 50 to 100 people at every point. He says to *The Hindu*: "By the time we began participating in parliamentary politics, other parties that were early movers had captured the system. That is a historical disadvantage of the communist movement." After the radical strides in the early years of communism in the State, only incremental progress could be made within the limits of mass politics in Kerala, he thinks. But believers and the communists have made a great coalition along the way, he says. "Our comrades are active in temple festivals, their upkeep. There is no friction between believers and communists anywhere."

## Hindu against Hindutva

Shashi Tharoor spends more time giving autographs and posing for selfies than asking for votes. He wears summer colours, a breach of the Congress's tradition of wearing stiff whites. His Hindu identity, he wears on his sleeve. "Despite the flaws in some of its practices, my admiration for and pride in Hin-

duism outweighs my critical concerns, and I make no apology for this," he wrote in his recent book, *Why I Am A Hindu*. During campaigning, he ended up with a wound that required nine stitches during a *thulabharam* – the ritual of weighing oneself against temple offerings – when the heavy steel balance fell on his head. His faith does not prevent him from participating in Christian or Muslim worship – he sang 'Silent Night' at a carol service and his video went viral last year. Tharoor has aligned with the devotees on the Sabarimala controversy and questions the BJP's intentions on the issue.

In Kovalam, Tharoor presents his politics as a counter-manifesto to Hindutva. "On 23rd, your vote will decide two things – who is your MP, who is your PM. Who rules India matters, and we saw what happened in the last five years. What are our values? Our ethos? Do we want an inclusive, just country?" From then on, he just says one sentence after the photo-ops: "Vote for the hand, Jai Hind."

More than the readers of his books, it is the rural folks who drove Tharoor's victory in 2014. Tharoor scored the highest in Kovalam. In Assembly segments that are more urban – Kazhakoottam, Vattiyookavu, Thiruvananthapuram and Nemom – Tharoor trailed BJP's Rajagopal, and the CPI candidate was pushed to the third position. In the coastal segments of Parassala, Kovalam and Neyyattinkara, Tharoor won. The BJP was pushed to the third position, as the CPI candidate came second.

At Vizinjam, a communally sensitive beach village, separated by a strip of no man's land, the Latin Catholic and Muslim hamlets could potentially unite in their support for Tharoor. A new port under construction, a massive mosque and an imposing church overlook the village. If the BJP were to outperform itself in the four Assembly segments that are its strongholds, Tharoor will have to mop up more votes along the seaboard, in villages such as this.

But the BJP is not leaving that field open. Danny J. Paul, the party's minority murcha head, has been leading a special campaign in the coastal areas since the last election and focussing on minority communities. BJP campaigners have reached all 170 booths in coastal Thiruvananthapuram, and nearly 30 corner meetings have been held. The considerable number of Left cadres will vote politically, which means that they will await instruction from the party.

In the midst of this organised work of the Sangh Parivar and the LDF, Tharoor's campaign has to fight the lethargy – if not active sabotage – of the Congress apparatus before he takes on his opponents. His global persona and wider popularity in the constituency are resented by entrenched interests within the Congress, but those are his greatest assets too. After a shake-up involving a visit by AICC general secretary Mukul Wasnik to the city, there is fresh vigour in campaigning, but whether it will be sufficient to deny the BJP its first Lok Sabha victory in Kerala is an open question. "There was an initial lull in campaigning but now it is in full steam," says B.S. Shiju, Director, Rajiv Gandhi Institute for Developmental Studies, a Congress-affiliated think tank in the city.

In moments of intense churn, reading the public mood can be difficult. "The urban voters are willing to be swayed. They can change their political preferences easier than the rural folks," says Dimpi V. Divakaran, Director General of the Institute of Parliamentary Affairs in Thiruvananthapuram.

The three political streams are trying to match their understanding of the situation in a triangular contest that is unique in the country in this election.

