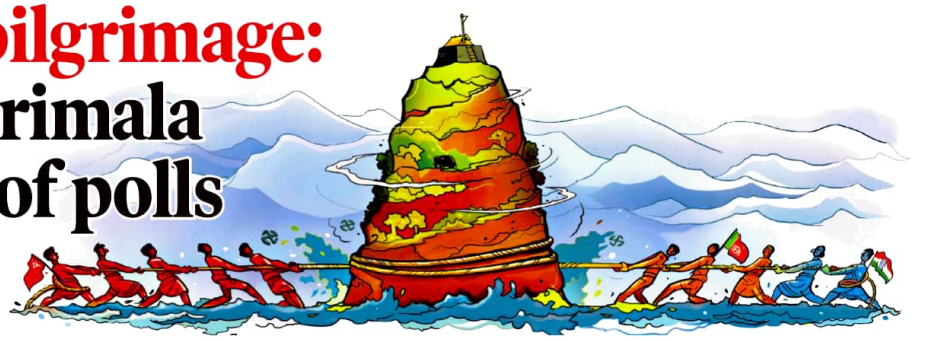
Left's new pilgrimage: CPM's Sabarimala shift ahead of polls



Their ideology has no space for religion, but as the state's CPM-led LDF govt goes all out to back an Ayyappa Swamy event, experts say it is plugging into rivals' playbooks to woo Hindu voters ahead of assembly polls next year

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In 2018, after Supreme Court struck down the practice of barring women of menstrual age from entering the Sabarimala temple in Kerala, the Pinarayi Vijayan-led LDF govt implemented the order, calling it a step towards "promoting progressive values". Despite a violent backlash and accusations from several Hindu organisations that the govt was seeking to "violate traditions," the administration held firm. Even PM Narendra Modi, during a 2019 election rally in Kollam, attacked the move: "We knew that communists do not respect Indian history, culture and spirituality but nobody imagined that they will have such hatred."

Cut to 2025, and the political landscape has shifted dramatically. With assembly elections coming up in 2026, the LDF govt has changed tack. Its stand now seems to be to align with the devotees, and that the contentious issue of women's entry into Sabarimala is a "closed matter".

Global Summit And Poll Realities

This repositioning comes as the Travancore Devaswom Board (TDB), the body that manages the hill shrine, prepares for an international summit, the 'Global Ayyappa Sangamam', on Sept 20 at Pamba, the temple's base station. Officially, the summit marks the TDB's 75th anniversary and seeks to showcase Sabarimala as a "divine, traditional, and sustainable global pilgrimage centre". CM Vijayan, his cabinet colleagues, spiritual leaders, opposition figures, and representatives of Ayyappa devotees from across the world are expected to attend the event.

But beneath the surface, many see it as CPM's first serious attempt to woo the Hindu majority vote bank. "For the first time, CPM is trying to influence the majority community and do social engineering through the Hindu community," said political scientist G Gopa Kumar.

If this U-turn has stirred a hornet's nest, it is also seen to have upset both BJP and Congress. Political observer N M Pearson calls it "a genetic variation" of CPM politics: "Being in power, they have studied society and used it to meet their needs rather than sticking to the communist ideology. The role of a good political party is to provide ideological clarity. Instead, with this move, they have created ideological confusion."

Yet, what looks like a retreat from ideology could make for a political blessing. CPM has secured support for the Sangamam from powerful community organisations like the Nair Service Society (NSS) — which spearheaded the agitation against the Vijayan govt in 2018 — along with the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP), Kerala Pulaya Maha Sabha (KPMS) and Malayaraya Mahasabha. Together, these bodies represent nearly 95% of Kerala's Hindu community — once CPM's traditional vote base though much of it has shifted to BJP and Congress after the Sabarimala agitation.

The 2019 Lok Sabha polls yielded just one seat for LDF out of Kerala's 20. In 2024, the tally remained unchanged. But in 2021, bucking the historical trend, LDF returned to office for a second consecutive term — the first time since 1977 that any govt had managed the feat. It won 99 assembly seats, eight more than in the previous election.

Still, studies suggest notable shifts. Among the Ezhava community, long seen as an LDF backbone, the vote share of the alliance dipped from 49% in 2016 to 45% in 2019. Among Nair voters, the slide was sharper: from 45% to just 20% over the same period, effectively turning them into a swing community. CPM's loss translated into BJP's gain.

Ideological Pragmatism

With assembly elections due in early 2026 and local body polls later this year, the stakes are high. "From what I hear from party workers, CPM has calculated that almost 90% of Malayalis visiting Sabarimala are its supporters. The new thinking is: 'Why should we oppose this?' That logic is now unfortunately being echoed by the party's brass," said Pearson.

"It is obvious the Left wants to regain its Hindu vote share. BJP may still win two or three seats, but their vote share could shrink from 20% in 2024 to 10-12% in 2026, with UDF being the bigger loser. Even if LDF recovers just 6% of BJP's Hindu vote share, they would have made an impact with this (Sangaman) meet. But the flip side is that LDF risks losing minority votes — both Muslims and Christians," added Gopa Kumar.

CPM appears willing to take a complex gamble. The party is sending feelers to influential community organisations, but analysts suggest its strategy goes deeper. Political analyst Sunny Kapikad says that recent rhetoric from the LDF side reflects what was "earlier BJP's tactic to consolidate Hindu votes".

That, experts say, puts a question mark on the image of Kerala as a bastion of secular politics. "It's time to admit that Hindutva has become a major force in Kerala and part of every party's political consciousness. Even the LDF is no exception. Here, Hindutva is framed as cultural legacy, not just religion," Kapikad argues.

Gains And Trade-Offs

This realignment comes at a time when the LDF govt faces anti-incumbency and has few new welfare schemes to showcase. Its only trump card is the narrative that corporatisation is happening along with welfare and any development taking place in the state is pro-poor.

LDF would also be hoping to count on certain advantages. For one, UDF remains divided and demoralised whereas the Left continues to command strong organisational networks and enjoys a reputation for handling crises — from floods to pandemics. Voters recognise that even if the Congress-led UDF returns to office in the state, it will struggle to deliver on finances or jobs with BJP entrenched at the Centre.

This context makes the CPM's latest manoeuvre look like a masterstroke. It seems to have succeeded in hitting two birds — Congress and BJP — with one stone, leaving both divided and startled. Many Hindus who leaned towards BJP in recent years are now seen to be drifting back towards LDF in response to the Sangamam.

"There is nothing wrong in convening a Sangamam of Ayyappa devotees, but CPM should be honest enough to admit that it is for political reasons," says BJP state vice-president K S Radhakrishnan, who faces over 250 criminal cases linked to the Sabarimala protests.

Pearson, though, feels the move is not without its pitfalls. "For committed CPM supporters, the concern is that, with this stand, the party is shifting from ideology to mere adjustment. While the move may help in the 2026 assembly elections, it could weaken the party in the long run. The end effect is that, unlike in the past, when CPM stood firm whether in or out of power, it will now appear strong only while governing. Once out of power, the party will face a steady exodus that will ultimately erode its strength."

Kapikad points out that while "CPM has, in different ways, used religion for political gains in the past, it has never done so this openly". "There is no record of the party ever calling affected groups to discuss their concerns... So, why extend such a favour to Ayyappa believers? What right of the Ayyappa devotee has been violated that requires redress through this meet?" asks Kapikad.

Whether it pays off in the 2026 assembly polls or not, what's becoming clear is that LDF's Sabarimala gambit will influence the course of Kerala's politics in the time to come.

STATE'S SEAT STAKES

Party	Seats	Vote Share	Gain/loss (pp)
LS 2019 (Seats: 20)			
UDF	19	47.5	5.5 ▲
LDF	1	36.3	-3.8 ▼
NDA	0	15.6	4.8 ▲
Assembly 2021 (Seats: 140)			
LDF	99	45.4	2.0 ▲
UDF	41	39.5	0.7 ▲
LS 2024 (Seats: 20)			
UDF	18	45.2	-2.3 ▼
LDF	1	33.3	-3.0 ▼
NDA	1	19.2	2.6 ▲

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>
> —G Gopa Kumar
> POLITICAL SCIENTIST

18 HILLS, 18 STEPS AND A SHRINE THAT DRAWS LAKHS

- The Sabarimala Sree Dharma Sastha Temple, dedicated to Lord Ayyappa, sits on a hilltop (Sabarimala) at about 3,000ft above sea level in Ranni-Perunad village of Kerala's Pathanamthitta district
- The temple is surrounded by 18 hills in the Periyar Tiger Reserve
- The main stairway to the temple are the 18 sacred steps known as Pathintettam Padi
- The temple is not open throughout the year, but only during the Mandala-Makaravilakku festival season, Vishu, and during the first five days of each month of the Malayalam calendar
- The main pilgrimage season runs from roughly Nov to Jan
- Pilgrims observe celibacy for 41 days before going to Sabarimala

The Ayyappa Swamy temple in Sabarimala

Meghalaya CM brings 7 new faces in cabinet

Shillong: Eight MLAs, including seven new faces, were inducted into the Meghalaya cabinet on Tuesday as chief minister Conrad K Sangma effected a reshuffle in his coalition govt.

The reshuffle took place after eight ministers were dropped from the cabinet.

NPP's Timothy D Shira, Sanbor Shullai of BJP, UDP's Metbah Lyngdoh took oath at a function at Raj Bhavan.

Wailadmiki Shylla, Sosthenes Sohtun, Brening A Sangma of NPP, HSPDP's Methodious Dkhar and former home minister Lahkmen Rymbui of UDP were also inducted into the council of ministers.

Ahead of a reshuffle in the Meghalaya cabinet, eight of the total 12 ministers had resigned from their posts, the officials said.

CM Sangma, who heads the NPP-led Meghalaya Democratic Alliance govt, met governor C H Vijayashankar at Raj Bhavan and submitted the resignations of the ministers, they said. PTI

SC seeks states' reply on anti-conversion laws

Says Some Have Made 'Draconian Changes' In Statute

New Delhi: The Supreme Court on Tuesday sought the stand of several states on pleas seeking a stay on their respective anti-conversion laws.

While issuing notices to the states, a bench of Chief Justice B R Gavai and Justice K Vinod Chandran made it clear that it will consider the prayer for staying the operation of such laws once the replies were in.

The bench then granted four weeks to the states for their responses and allowed the petitioners to file rejoinders two weeks thereafter. The matter was posted after six weeks.

The bench, in the meantime, permitted senior advocate C U Singh, appearing for one of the petitioners against the anti-conversion laws, to amend the petition keeping in mind the "more draconian" changes made by states like Uttar Pradesh in the existing statute.

The bench was hearing petitions challenging the constitutional validity of anti-conversion laws enacted by several states, including Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Haryana, Jharkhand, and Karnataka. It heard arguments from senior advocates and others on the contentious issue of religious conversions happening either through marriage or other means.

Apex court says the matter was posted after six weeks

Singh stressed on the urgency in the matter, warning "anybody who marries in an interfaith marriage, bail would become impossible".

He highlighted many states had already enacted such laws, with Rajasthan being the latest to pass a legislation in this regard.

Singh said amendments introduced in Uttar Pradesh allowed third parties to lodge complaints, leading to "huge amounts of harassment" in interfaith marriages besides church observances, where mobs intervene.

He sought the amendment applications filed in the special leave petitions to be allowed.

Senior advocate Indira Jaising, on the other hand, requested an interim stay on the law passed by Madhya Pradesh to be continued.

Advocate Vrinda Grover informed the bench of having filed intervention applications for stay on similar laws in Uttar Pradesh and Haryana.

Additional Solicitor General K M Natraj opposed the plea for interim relief on behalf of some states and said, "After three-four years, suddenly they file for stay. We will file our replies."

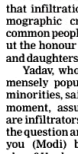
The bench also ordered de-tagging of a separate plea filed by lawyer Ashwini Upadhyay, who sought a ban on deceitful religious conversions.

"Who will find out whether it is a deceitful conversion?" the CJI asked.

The court appointed advocate Shrishti as the nodal counsel for the petitioners and advocate Ruchira as the nodal counsel for the respondent states to streamline communication in the case. PTI

PM's charge over infiltration was diversionary tactics: Tejashwi

Patna/Jehanabad: RJD leader **Tejashwi Yadav** on Tuesday alleged that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's fulminations against infiltration in Bihar were "diversionary tactics" ahead of the assembly elections in the state.



Yadav spoke to journalists in Patna ahead of leaving for the adjoining Jehanabad district to launch "Bihar Adhikar Yatra," a veritable campaign for the upcoming assembly polls.

The RJD leader was asked to comment on the PM's speech at a rally in Purnea a day ago, when the opposition party was charged with "shielding and defending" infiltrators.

The PM had also asserted that infiltration led to a "demographic crisis" and left common people "worried about the honour of their sisters and daughters".

Yadav, whose party is immensely popular among the minorities, said, "Let us, for a moment, assume that there are infiltrators in Bihar. Then the question arises, what have you (Modi) been doing all along? You have been in power for 11 years. Besides, you (BJP-led NDA) have been ruling the state for 20 years." PTI

Two die after consuming 'illicit liquor' in Chhattisgarh

Janjgir-Champa: Two men died after allegedly consuming illicit liquor in Chhattisgarh's Janjgir-Champa district, leading the administration to order a probe, police said on Tuesday.

Superintendent of Police Vijay Pandey has constituted a nine-member team headed by Sub-Divisional Officer of Police (Champa) Yadumani Sidar to probe the incident, they said.

The incident took place in Karhi village under Birra police station limits on Monday and the deceased were identified as Suraj Yadav (30) and Manoj Kashyap (38), an official said. As per information, the duo consumed liquor procured from a person who illegally sells alcohol in the village. PTI

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Sub: Schedule of E-Auction for the month of October 2025, November 2025 & December 2025. It is proposed to hold following e-auction date in the above months. Sl. No.; MONTH ; TYPE OF AUCTION; DATE; TIME are as follows : [1]; OCTOBER, 2025; e-Auction; 03/10/2025 (Friday), 13/10/2025 (Monday), 22/10/2025 (Wednesday); 10:00 hrs. [2]; NOVEMBER, 2025; e-Auction; 03/11/2025 (Monday), 10/11/2025 (Monday), 18/11/2025 (Tuesday), 25/11/2025 (Tuesday); 10:00 hrs. [3]; DECEMBER, 2025; e-Auction; 03/12/2025 (Wednesday),11/12/2025 (Thursday), 19/12/2025 (Monday), 29/12/2025 (Friday); 10.:00 hrs. On above mentioned date, time fixing for E-Auction for sale of various types of Vehicles, Crane, Machines i.e. Lathe, Drilling/ Milling/ Boring, Transformer, Rectifier, Ferrous and Non-ferrous scraps i.e. copper, aluminum etc. Non-ferrous scrap will be sold only to those who are registered by Ministry of Environment & Forest/Govt. of India/New Delhi. One-time Registration Fees will be Rupees.10,000/- for each firm (Refundable, if a purchaser deems to permanently withdrawal his registration for bidding from Indian Railways e-auction) in forms of Demand Draft in favour of PFA /CLW/Chittaranjan along with Affidavit. Catalogue of materials can be viewed in IREPS website before e-auction date.

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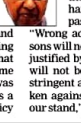
Wrongdoings by police won't be protected: Vijayan

Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala CM **Pinarayi Vijayan** on Tuesday asserted that no police officer who has committed a wrong would be protected and stringent action would be taken against such persons.



Vijayan, said the police in India and in Kerala continued the same anti-people stand that they adopted during British rule. "All that changed for the first time in Kerala after a govt was formed here. There was a major change in the policy regarding police functioning," he claimed.

The CM further said that the majority of police personnel in the state have adopted the changes in the functioning of the force, but there were still those who were hanging on to the past practices. "Wrong acts by such persons will not be accepted or justified by the govt. They will not be protected and stringent action will be taken against them. That is our stand," he said. PTI

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