

## WILL ANTI-INCUMBENCY MATTER IN KERALA POLL?

Kerala the most literate state of all, is going to the polls on April 9, 2026. Just a week away, yet there is no clarity on voters' preferences and what they actually have in mind when they vote. Kerala has a simple electoral matrix - the United Democratic Front (UDF) and Left Democratic Front (LDF) have ruled the state, alternating each time. But this rhythm was broken in 2021 when Kerala's Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan took the oath of office for his second consecutive term and has gone on to rule the state for an unprecedented ten-year tenure. What people voted for was his strong governance credentials- welfare delivery, and crisis management during floods and the COVID-19 pandemic. But the last five years have not been very smooth for the LDF; the challenges are mounting - with ever-growing unemployment and deteriorating law and order, people are weighing their options of finding an alternative. There is little doubt that anti-incumbency sentiment exists. Independent surveys suggest that nearly half the electorate desires change. Centralised decision-making, governance lapses, and the state's financial stress have dented the government's image. Delays in welfare payments, corruption charges, and administrative inefficiencies have further eroded its image. But what goes in LDF's favour is that Kerala's voters are discerning; dissatisfaction does not automatically translate into regime change unless the opposition presents a credible alternative. For the UDF, this election is both an opportunity and a challenge. It benefits from latent anti-incumbency and has demonstrated organisational resilience, particularly in recent local body polls. However, its perennial weakness-internal factionalism-continues to undermine its prospects. Leadership tussles and disputes over candidate selection dilute its message, while the perception of lacking a coherent developmental vision persists. This time around, the presence of the BJP-led NDA, which, though limited, has the potential to split anti-LDF votes in closely contested constituencies. The issues shaping voter choices in 2026 go beyond traditional welfare politics. Economic distress is central, with youth unemployment exceeding 15 per cent and migration continuing unabated, people are looking for a change. Additionally, identity and regional issues-ranging from church disputes to human-wildlife conflicts-add layers of complexity to electoral behaviour. So this is not going to be a single-issue election on anti-incumbency but a layered one, and it is hard to predict the voters' minds. Most surveys point to a razor-close contest, with seat projections overlapping significantly between the LDF and the UDF. What emerges clearly is the absence of a decisive wave.

## Is India's electoral system losing its citizen focus?

Rajeev Kumar

As technology reshapes governance, India's electoral machinery has adopted state-of-the-art digital systems-collectively embodied in ECINet-across most electoral processes. Yet, the bureaucracy operating these systems continues to struggle with procedural inertia and outdated thinking. Modernising elections, therefore, is not merely about deploying technology, but about transforming the institutional mindset that governs it.

Not long ago, the Election Commission of India (ECI) actively promoted voter participation, even enlisting celebrities to encourage citizens to vote. Over the past year, however, this relationship appears to have been fundamentally inverted. Instead of facilitating voters, the system has compelled large sections of the electorate to queue up-often with folded hands-seeking inclusion, correction, or relief.

What is particularly striking is the breadth of those affected: from former Secretaries to the Government of India, senior civil and police officials, Director Generals, and police chiefs, to members of the judiciary, as well as professionals from science, technology, academia, and the media. This is no longer an isolated administrative inconvenience; it reflects a systemic shift in which the burden of compliance has been transferred from the institution to the citizen. Hardly any sector remains untouched, raising serious concerns about accessibility, accountability, and institu-

tional intent.

At the centre of this transformation stands the current Chief Election Commissioner (CEC), an IIT Kanpur graduate with a doctorate from Harvard, whose administrative experience across Kerala and at the national level has consolidated unprecedented authority within the ECI. Under his tenure, the institution has dominated public discourse to an extraordinary degree-occupying space across citizens' minds, the media, the higher judiciary, and the broader political-administrative landscape for nearly a year. Measures such as SIR (Special Intensive Revision), though not new in concept, have assumed a scale and intensity that have effectively reshaped electoral governance for a billion-plus electorate. This centralisation of influence, coupled with an unyielding administrative posture, raises important questions about institutional balance, accountability, and the limits of authority in a constitutional democracy.

At the heart of the current challenge lies a fundamental disconnect between a techno mindset and a bureaucratic attitude. A techno mindset treats technology as an enabler of transparency, efficiency, and real-time accountability-designed to simplify processes, empower users, and build trust through data-driven decision-making. In contrast, a bureaucratic approach often reduces technology to a superficial layer over legacy procedures, preserving opacity, control, and compliance-heavy workflows.

The result is a structural paradox: advanced platforms such

as ECINet exist, yet their potential remains underutilised, while citizens continue to face complexity and uncertainty. Bridging this gap requires more than the deployment of digital tools; it demands a cultural shift from rule-bound administration to responsive, technology-led governance that places the citizen at its core.

Seen in this context, the concerns raised here are not adversarial but principled-anchored in the doctrine of "na kaahoo se bair, na kaahoo se dostee". They reflect the lived experience of ordinary, law-abiding citizens who fulfil their constitutional duties and expect, in return, that their fundamental rights will not be disrupted without cause. Yet, for over half a year, millions have faced uncertainty and anxiety while navigating the opaque and often arbitrary processes surrounding SIR 2.0. The issue is not technology itself, but the mindset governing it: when digital systems amplify complexity rather than reduce it, they risk becoming instruments of distress-undermining both credibility and public trust in the electoral process.

Perhaps the most telling irony of the present system is the visual and behavioural contrast witnessed during nomination filings: the Election Officer remains seated, while elected representatives and candidates stand-often with folded hands-submitting their papers. This is not merely a matter of protocol; it reflects a deeper institutional attitude. Are we so bound by outdated bureaucratic customs that an official remains fixed to his chair, even as public representatives stand in deference?

In a citizen-centric democracy, such interactions should reflect mutual respect, not hierarchical distance. At the very least, institutional conduct should convey that authority flows from the people, not above them.

This posture reveals more than a procedural habit-it signals a mindset. The bureaucracy, despite operating within a democratic framework, often projects itself as a controlling authority shaped by residual colonial attitudes rather than as a facilitating service.

In a responsive system, officials would engage with stakeholders as equals, guiding and supporting them through enabling processes. Instead, such scenes reinforce an implicit hierarchy, where the system appears elevated and the citizen-represented here by candidates-appears subordinate. This is not merely optics; it reflects an administrative culture that continues to equate position with power rather than responsibility.

Equally important is the second, subtler dimension of this imagery. When candidates stand with folded hands before officials, it creates a powerful visual narrative that is later projected to the public-as if these same individuals embody humility, accessibility, and respect towards citizens. Yet, this symbolism is often illusory. The deference shown before authority is not always reflected in their engagement with the electorate. Such imagery risks becoming a tool of political signalling rather than a genuine expression of democratic conduct.

This duality-deference before

the system and assertion before the citizen-creates a misleading perception. It enables political actors to project modesty while maintaining distance from those they represent. The result is a layered illusion: a bureaucracy that appears authoritative and distant, and a political class that appears humble but may not consistently practise that humility in public life. Together, they reinforce a culture where appearances substitute for accountability. In a mature democracy, both institutions must move beyond such symbolic contradictions. Bureaucracy must shed its residual hierarchy and embrace a service-oriented ethos, while political representatives must demonstrate authenticity in their engagement with citizens-not merely through gestures, but through consistent conduct. Otherwise, what appears respectful on the surface risks becoming a carefully staged performance-reminding us that, indeed, everything that glitters is not gold.

In the decades following Independence, ECI functioned largely as a passive institution-more an observer than an enforcer-rarely assertive, seldom feared, and often ignored by the police, district administrations, and state secretariats. This institutional quietude allowed political parties considerable latitude, frequently operating in collusion with local officials and, at times, relying on muscle power to influence outcomes. Voting slips were commonly distributed by party agents or candidates themselves, reflecting the Commission's limited authority and reach.

## MODI'S WILL, SHAH'S SKILL: NAXAL ENIGMA FINALLY BROKEN

Raman Singh

For decades, Naxalism stood as one of the gravest challenges to India's internal security and development. It thrived in regions marked by isolation, underdevelopment, and a breakdown of trust between the state and its people. Today, as we stand at a defining moment, it is evident that this long-standing menace is being decisively defeated. The credit for this transformation goes to the unwavering resolve of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the determined, strategy-driven leadership of Union Home Minister Amit Shah.

Naxalism was never merely a local law-and-order issue. It was an ideologically driven movement influenced by Maoist thought, which sought to challenge India's democratic structure through violence. Early figures such as Charu Majumdar, Kanu Sanyal, and Jangal Santhal mobilised marginalised communities by raising issues of land, inequality, and justice. However, over time, this movement deviated into a violent insurgency that exploited innocent tribal populations and obstructed development.

Chhattisgarh, particularly the Bastar region, became one of the worst-affected areas. Rich in forests and mineral resources, Bastar became fertile ground for extremist expansion. Incidents that weakened public trust in governance only deepened the crisis, allowing Naxal influence to spread further.

When I had the opportunity to serve as Chief Minister, we recognised that the fight against Naxalism could not be won by force alone. We adopted a two-pronged approach - development and security. We expanded infrastructure, increased the number of districts, strengthened health-care and education systems, and implemented welfare schemes aimed at improving the lives of tribal communities. Initiatives such as forest rights distribution, affordable food schemes, and support for forest produce were designed to bring people into the mainstream.

However, despite these efforts, the absence of a strong, coordinated national strategy limited the pace of progress. The real turning point came after 2014, when, under the leadership of Narendra Modi, a comprehensive approach was adopted.

Development was taken to the last mile, and governance became more responsive and inclusive.

At the same time, Amit Shah brought a new level of clarity and determination to the security response. His zero-tolerance policy towards Naxalism, combined with improved intelligence, modernisation of forces, and close coordination between the Centre and states, fundamentally changed the dynamics of this conflict.

Security operations became more precise and effective, targeting the leadership and infrastructure of Naxal groups. Campaigns such as Operation Kagar dealt decisive blows to their command structure. Hundreds of extremists were neutralised, thousands arrested, and many more surrendered. Areas once considered inaccessible have now seen the return of governance and development.

Equally important has been the restoration of public trust. My experience has taught me that the most powerful weapon against Naxalism is the confidence of the people. When communities stand with the state, extremism loses its base. Local youth have been empowered, trained, and integrated into security forces, playing a

crucial role in this transformation.

Today, the results are visible. Violence has declined, development has accelerated, and hope has returned to regions that were once engulfed in fear. The so-called "Red Corridor" is shrinking, and the dream of a Naxal-free India is closer than ever.

The leadership of Narendra Modi and Amit Shah has demonstrated that even the most entrenched challenges can be overcome with determination, strategy, and a clear vision. Their efforts have not only strengthened internal security but also reaffirmed faith in India's democratic framework. As we move forward, it is essential to consolidate these gains. Development must continue, governance must deepen, and the trust of the people must remain at the centre of all efforts. Only then can we ensure that the shadow of Naxalism never returns.

The battle that once seemed endless is now nearing its conclusion. With sustained commitment and collective resolve, a peaceful, prosperous, and Naxal-free India is within our reach.

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## Misinformation Has a Patron: the Ego That Calls Itself Post-Truth

Acharya Prashant

Serious institutions in the world now seem engaged in fighting misinformation. Governments are regulating, platforms are fact-checking, academics are mapping how false content spreads, and journalists are building verification desks with a rigour they have not applied to anything in years. The World Economic Forum, in its Global Risks Report 2026, has ranked misinformation and disinformation the second most severe risk facing humanity over the next two years, above armed conflict and ecosystem collapse. The mobilisation is real, the alarm is genuine, and the concern is not manufactured. The question at the foundation of the entire enterprise, however, has not been asked. And it is a question prior to every debate about content, platforms, and public policy.

The fundamental question is not about platforms or algorithms or the velocity of false content. Those would come later. The fundamental question to ask, before talking of misinformation, should be: what is information? Information, at its most basic, is that which informs, that which moves a person from not-knowing toward knowing, to-

ward a more accurate picture of what is. It is not merely data. It is data received by someone, processed by someone, used by someone. Which means that before we can speak about misinformation, we must speak about the instrument through which information is received and processed. We must speak about the mind. And because there is no information except information-for someone, we must also ask: for whom is this information appearing as information at all? The mind, in its innocent biological state, is a neutral instrument: memory and intellect, a recording machine and a processing machine, neither desiring nor fearing nor choosing. Those operations belong to the ego, the felt sense of "I am this," this identity, this tribe, this ideology, this wound, which commandeers the mind's machinery and directs it not toward what is true but toward what is safe. And what is safe for the ego is not accurate information. It is confirming information, information that strengthens the positions already held, reinforces the identities already inhabited, and supplies ammunition for the stories already being told about who the enemies are and why they must be opposed.

The condition has a precise shape:

not ignorance in the sense of knowing nothing, but fragmented knowing, the accumulation of vast information about the world while remaining structurally unaware of the one doing the knowing. The known grows without limit; the knower is never examined. The question you ask always reveals more about you than about the subject you are asking about. You never seek to know everything; you seek to know something specific, chosen from an infinite field of possible subjects, and that choice is driven by an inner hunger, a fear, a loyalty not yet examined. The information sought is downstream of the identity being protected. This is the ego's operation. The information age has simply scaled it: humanity has never accumulated more knowledge about the world, nor remained more thoroughly ignorant of the one accumulating it. We call this an information crisis. At root, it is a crisis of the informer.

Who Decides What Is False?

Now, the question the entire misinformation debate has avoided can be asked with its full weight.

If the ego is always filtering information through what it has already decided to protect, then what does misinformation actually mean? The standard

definition runs as follows: misinformation is false or inaccurate information, regardless of intent; disinformation is false information spread deliberately. Both definitions assume a stable, agreed-upon baseline of truth against which the falseness of a given claim can be measured. They assume, in other words, a shared epistemic ground, a common reference point that both the person spreading the claim and the person correcting it can appeal to. They also assume a judge sufficiently outside the field to certify what counts as true in the first place.

This is the assumption that has not been examined. And it is precisely the assumption that the condition we are living through has already dissolved. The conflict now is not only over facts; it is over the authority to name them as facts.

The world that gave birth to the misinformation crisis is the same world that named itself post-truth. That naming was not accidental. Post-truth names a real condition: the condition in which facts no longer settle disputes, in which evidence no longer commands consensus across communities, in which two groups can look at the same event and inhabit incommensurable versions of

what occurred, each version internally coherent, each supported by its own sources and experts, and neither capable of producing a fact that the other is compelled to accept as decisive. The Reuters Institute's 2025 survey, cited in the same WEF report, captures the paradox precisely: 58 per cent of news consumers globally are concerned about distinguishing truth from falsehood online, while in India, where WhatsApp is identified by 53 per cent of respondents as the primary channel for false and misleading information, news consumption on that same platform continues to grow. This paradox is not a mystery; it is a demonstration. The ego that is aware of the problem and continues feeding the appetite anyway is not irrational. It is operating exactly as the ego does: the awareness exists at one level, the hunger operates at another, and the hunger is the stronger force. Knowing something is confirming content does not reduce the need for confirmation. It may even intensify it.

But here is the problem that this creates, and it is a problem so fundamental that it calls the entire enterprise into question. Misinformation, as a category, requires the existence of a shared

truth baseline. Misinformation is false relative to something true. If there is no agreed-upon truth, if the shared ground has dissolved, then calling something misinformation is not a description of a fact about the content. It is an assertion of a contested position, one party claiming that their version of reality is the authoritative one and the opposing version, therefore, illegitimate. In a post-truth world, the label 'misinformation' is itself an act of power, not an act of description.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, official bodies across the world flagged claims about the virus's origins, the efficacy of various interventions, and the appropriate policy response as misinformation, removing them from platforms and discrediting those who raised them.

Several of those claims were quietly acknowledged as plausible, or reinstated as legitimate subjects of inquiry, by the same institutions within two to three years. The scientists who had been labelled spreaders of misinformation had not changed their position. The institutions that had labelled them had shifted theirs. What the category 'misinformation' had tracked, it turned out, was not the truth.