Journal of Contemporary Politics

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Kerala's Empirical Landscape (2015–2025) of Soft Post-Truth Politics: Linking Global Theory with National Transformations in India

Salvin Paul[1*]

[1]*School of Legal and Socio-Political Studies, Dr B. R. Ambedkar University Delhi, Delhi, India*

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 09-12-2025
Accepted 08-02-2026
Published 31-03-2026

* *Corresponding author.*
Salvin Paul
salvinpaul@gmail.com

https://doi.org/10.53989/jcp.v5i1.25.115

ABSTRACT

The global rise of post-truth politics characterised by weakened shared factual baselines and the dominance of emotionally charged, identity-driven narratives has reshaped democratic communication in profound ways. While often associated with populist regimes or fragile institutional contexts, India demonstrates that post-truth dynamics can take distinctive forms within robust yet polarised federal democracies. This article argues that Kerala, long celebrated for its literacy, welfare achievements, and progressive political culture, exhibits a unique model of soft post-truth politics that operates not through authoritarian controls or systematic fabrication but through subtler practices of narrative management, symbolic governance, and dense party–society embeddedness. Drawing on global theoretical work, Indian studies on misinformation and media capture, and Kerala-specific scholarship, the article analyses the state's informational landscape between 2015 and 2025 through core cases such as the Sabarimala misinformation wave, cyber-harassment of journalists, contested narratives surrounding the COVID-19 "Kerala model," and the Solar Scam's narrative afterlife, which is repeatedly mobilised as political ammunition despite contested factual clarity. It also examines appeasement discourses involving Muslim, Christian, and Eezhava communities, which illuminate how identity-based framings shape public perception. Together, these cases demonstrate that Kerala's post-truth politics constitutes a hybrid formation where welfare legitimacy coexists with selective transparency, ideological flexibility, and competing truth regimes within a densely mediated democracy.

Keywords: Post-truth politics; Misinformation; India; Kerala; Political communication; symbolic politics; Media; Cyber-harassment; Narrative control

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of post-truth politics has dramatically altered the nature of democratic communication across the world. Defined by the weakening of shared factual baselines and the ascendance of emotionally charged, identity-driven narratives, the post-truth condition challenges long-held assumptions that democratic publics can reliably distinguish between empirical evidence and partisan persuasion. Although initially theorised in relation to political upheavals in the West—most notably Brexit and the 2016 United States presidential election—the phenomenon has taken diverse forms in non-Western democracies. India offers one of the most revealing contexts for studying these transformations, demonstrating how misinformation, digital mobilisation and ideological polarisation interact within a large, federal, pluralistic polity. Yet within India, post-truth politics does not manifest uniformly; instead, it emerges through regionally specific political cultures, media ecologies and institutional arrangements.

Kerala, often celebrated as India's most socially advanced state, presents a compelling paradox in this regard. With its high literacy rates, expansive welfare infrastructure and long tradition of left-oriented political mobilisation, Kerala is widely regarded as a bastion of rational public discourse and participatory democratic practice. However, developments over the last decade suggest that Kerala has not been immune to the pressures of the post-truth era.

Rather than displaying overt authoritarian tendencies or extensive fabrication, Kerala exhibits a more subtle and socially embedded form of post-truth politics—what this article terms soft post-truth politics. This formation is characterised by narrative management, symbolic governance and dense party–society linkages that shape how information is interpreted, circulated and contested within public life.

The state's informational landscape between 2015 and 2025 illustrates these dynamics vividly. High-profile episodes such as the Sabarimala misinformation wave, the cyber-harassment of journalists, and the contested narratives surrounding the COVID-19 "Kerala model" reveal how emotionally resonant framings and selective truth claims can shape public perception even in a highly literate society. The political afterlife of the Solar Scam further demonstrates how scandal can be transformed into durable partisan ammunition, mobilised repeatedly despite ongoing factual disputes. Similarly, appeasement discourses involving Muslim, Christian and Eezhava communities illustrate how identity politics is negotiated through flexible, contradictory and emotionally charged narratives that frequently eclipse empirical evidence. These cases collectively reveal that Kerala's political communication is shaped not only by formal institutions or electoral competition but also by underlying cultural vocabularies, ideological repertoires and social networks that mediate the production of truth.

This intersection of welfare legitimacy, ideological flexibility and narrative contestation underscores the need to study Kerala not as an exception to post-truth trends, but as an important site for understanding how post-truth politics manifests within socially advanced and institutionally robust democracies. By examining Kerala's media ecology, political culture and digital activism, this article aims to illuminate the mechanisms through which post-truth dynamics unfold in contexts where strong public institutions coexist with intense ideological competition and deep party embeddedness.

Drawing on global theoretical frameworks, Indian scholarship on misinformation and media capture, and Kerala-specific ethnographic and journalistic accounts, the article proposes an interpretive framework for analysing Kerala's hybrid post-truth formation. Through this approach, it contributes to broader debates on democratic resilience, informational power and the changing nature of public truth in contemporary India.

GLOBAL POST-TRUTH POLITICS: CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

The emergence of post-truth politics has become one of the defining phenomena of contemporary democratic life, prompting extensive scholarly inquiry into how truth, authority and public communication are being reshaped in the twenty-first century. Although the term "post-truth" came to global prominence in 2016, the intellectual roots of the concept draw from earlier critiques of media fragmentation, the rise of digital persuasion architectures and the erosion of institutional authority. What distinguishes the post-truth era from earlier periods of propaganda or political distortion is the structural nature of the transformation. Rather than merely describing the spread of falsehoods, contemporary scholarship understands post-truth politics as the result of intertwined shifts in cognition, technology, political incentive structures and institutional trust.

Lewandowsky, Ecker and Cook's (2017)[20] work remains foundational in articulating why misinformation has become so resilient in the current era. They argue that the digital information environment undermines correction mechanisms through three channels: cognitive biases that predispose individuals toward belief-consistent information; digital echo chambers that reinforce these preferences; and deliberate manipulation by political actors seeking to exploit them. Cognitive tendencies such as motivated reasoning and identity-protective cognition—long established in psychology—are neither new nor inherently political. Yet their political significance is magnified when individuals inhabit media environments saturated with identity-affirming narratives. Digital infrastructures play an amplificatory role by enabling emotionally resonant misinformation to spread rapidly, while also making corrective information less visible or less trusted. In this way, post-truth politics emerges from the convergence of longstanding psychological inclinations with the affordances of digital platforms that reward virality over accuracy.

Suiter (2016)[33] expands this argument by situating post-truth politics within a broader crisis of epistemic authority. Historically, truth claims in liberal democracies have been anchored in institutions—journalism, scientific bodies, academic expertise—whose authority rested on norms of verification and professional autonomy. Post-truth politics takes shape when these institutions are systematically delegitimised by political actors who portray them as biased, elitist or conspiratorial. This erosion of institutional trust creates fertile conditions for alternative narratives grounded not in evidence but in emotive appeal, personal experience or ideological conviction. Truth becomes increasingly performative, less a matter of empirical coherence and more a function of political loyalty or the perceived authenticity of the speaker. Suiter's analysis highlights an important insight: post-truth politics is not simply about misinformation; it is about the weakening of the institutions historically responsible for adjudicating truth.

Waisbord (2018)[42] further deepens this line of inquiry through his concept of "tribal epistemologies." In fragmented media environments, the legitimacy of information is determined not by accuracy but by group identity. Digital platforms have facilitated the formation of epistemic tribes—communities bound not by common factual reference points but by shared narratives that reflect their worldview. In such environments, misinformation is not necessarily believed because audiences are ignorant or misled; it is believed because it affirms collective identity. Attempts to correct falsehoods are often interpreted as ideological attacks, reinforcing rather than mitigating belief persistence. Waisbord therefore reframes the crisis of truth not as a failure of journalism or evidence but as a symptom of broader social fragmentation and identity polarisation.

Alongside these cognitive and institutional explanations, scholars emphasise the political incentives that sustain post-truth dynamics. Bennett and Livingston (2018)[5] describe the emergence of "disinformation orders," in which political actors, interest groups and even foreign governments systematically deploy misinformation to achieve political ends. Their analysis reveals how contemporary political communication ecosystems create incentives for strategic distortion, particularly in electoral contexts where emotionally provocative narratives produce greater engagement. Digital capitalism intensifies these tendencies: platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are optimised for attention, not accuracy, meaning that sensational or affect-laden content—whether true or false—tends to dominate public discourse. The viral logic of digital communication thus creates an alignment between platform incentives and political incentives, jointly fuelling the circulation of misinformation.

Technological transformations have also contributed to the destabilisation of journalistic authority. The decline of traditional news organisations, the rise of algorithmically curated feeds and the proliferation of user-generated content have blurred the boundaries between professional journalism and partisan commentary. Ananny and Crawford (2018)[3] argue that the rhetoric of "platform transparency" obscures the opaque algorithmic processes that shape information flows, making it difficult for citizens to understand how content is prioritised or suppressed. Pasquale's (2015)[31] notion of the "black box society" similarly highlights the lack of accountability surrounding algorithmic decision-making in public communication. These technological conditions underpin a key feature of post-truth politics: citizens encounter information environments whose architecture they cannot see, whose logic they cannot decipher and whose influence they cannot easily resist.

Global scholars also emphasise the role of identity and affect in sustaining post-truth dynamics. Research across multiple contexts shows that misinformation spreads most effectively when it appeals to emotions such as fear, anger, nostalgia or resentment. Sunstein (2017)[34] demonstrates how digital echo chambers heighten identity-based reasoning, making individuals more likely to interpret information through ideological lenses and less likely to engage with opposing perspectives. Political entrepreneurs exploit these dynamics by framing narratives around existential threats, moral decline or cultural grievances, often using stark binaries—people versus elites, nation versus outsiders—to mobilise supporters. The rise of right-wing populist leaders in countries such as the United States, Brazil, Hungary and the Philippines illustrates how emotionally charged misinformation can be weaponised to construct persuasive but factually tenuous narratives.

Brady *et al.* (2017)[8] offer empirical evidence that moral-emotional language significantly increases the likelihood of content being shared on social media. This insight helps explain why affectively saturated narratives dominate digital spaces. The political consequences are profound: as emotions become the currency of political communication, truth claims are increasingly evaluated not for their accuracy but for their emotional resonance.

Taken together, the global literature highlights the multidimensional nature of post-truth politics. It is a structural transformation rooted in cognitive predispositions, technological architectures, declining institutional trust, identity polarisation and the emotional logics of digital communication. These mechanisms are observable across diverse political systems, though they manifest differently depending on local histories, media cultures and institutional arrangements. This global framework provides a critical foundation for analysing the evolving post-truth landscape in India—a society with its own distinctive interplay of digital innovation, ideological mobilisation and institutional contestation.

POST-TRUTH POLITICS IN INDIA: NATIONAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN A DIGITAL DEMOCRACY

The rise of post-truth politics in India must be understood against the backdrop of profound political, technological and social transitions that have reshaped the nation's democratic landscape over the last decade. India today hosts one of the world's largest digital ecosystems, with over 600 million smartphone users and nearly half a billion social-media consumers. This vast and diverse digital environment has created new opportunities for political mobilisation while simultaneously intensifying the challenges of misinformation, polarisation and institutional distrust. Although misinformation and rumour have long been features of Indian political culture,

their scale, speed and strategic organisation have transformed dramatically in the digital era.

Digital communication platforms—notably WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube—play a central role in this transformation. Scholars such as Udupa (2019) and Chandrasekharan *et al.* (2020)[10, 41] show how these platforms facilitate the diffusion of emotionally charged and identity-laden content. WhatsApp, in particular, has become India's most powerful political medium due to its encrypted structure, interpersonal intimacy and broad accessibility across urban and rural populations. Its closed-network architecture fosters rapid circulation of rumours, doctored videos and selectively framed narratives without external verification. Maitra and Guha (2020)[21] characterise this as "networked sectarianism," where digital publics become echo chambers for identity-affirming misinformation.

Political actors have quickly adapted to these new communication environments. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is widely recognised for its sophisticated digital infrastructure, but its success reflects broader national trends rather than a unique partisan innovation. Scholars such as Chaturvedi (2016) and Sen and Drèze (2020)[11, 32] describe how the BJP institutionalised digital outreach through IT cells, volunteer networks and micro-targeted messaging strategies. These systems produce narratives that are emotionally resonant and deeply tied to themes such as nationalism, historical grievance and cultural authenticity. Critics argue that such communication ecosystems normalise misinformation and blur the boundaries between propaganda and political communication, creating what Chakravartty and Roy (2017) term a "nationalist populist media regime."

However, attributing India's post-truth condition solely to any single political party would be analytically insufficient. The phenomenon reflects systemic changes in India's media and political economy. Mainstream news organisations have undergone substantial corporatisation, consolidation and political influence, reducing their editorial independence. As Thakurta (2020) argues, "media capture" by political and corporate interests has weakened journalism's ability to function as a neutral arbiter of truth. Sensationalist coverage, ideological slanting and excessive reliance on debate-style programming contribute to a media environment where emotionally provocative narratives overshadow investigative reporting and factual clarity.

Misinformation in India is also inextricably tied to its socio-cultural cleavages. Rumours often exploit religious sensitivities, caste hierarchies, regional anxieties and national-security fears. As global research predicts, falsehoods thrive when they resonate with pre-existing identity commitments. In the Indian context, misinformation frequently reinforces communal narratives or caste-based stereotypes rather than inventing entirely new beliefs. This pattern reflects the dynamics of motivated reasoning discussed in global scholarship: individuals are more likely to trust misinformation that aligns with their group identity, even when corrective information is available.

Electoral politics further intensifies these dynamics. During the 2019 general election, fact-checking organisations such as Alt News and BOOM Live documented hundreds of viral falsehoods circulating during the campaign period. Many invoked emotionally resonant themes involving national pride, religious conflict, or allegations of anti-national behaviour[1, 2, 6, 7]. These narratives were strategically deployed by various political actors, demonstrating that misinformation is not merely an accidental byproduct of digital diffusion but an integral part of contemporary political communication strategies. Waisbord's (2018)[42] concept of tribal epistemologies is particularly salient here: information is evaluated based on partisan loyalty rather than empirical accuracy.

India's post-truth politics also intersect with institutional credibility. As Jaffrelot (2021)[17] notes, the increasing politicisation of state institutions—ranging from investigative agencies to universities and cultural bodies—has eroded public trust. Institutional statements, once viewed as authoritative, are now frequently interpreted through partisan lenses. This institutional fragmentation exacerbates the epistemic instability of the post-truth environment: no single institution commands universal legitimacy, and truth claims become subject to ideological negotiation.

Importantly, India's post-truth landscape is profoundly shaped by regional specificity. The linguistic diversity, caste structures, religious histories and media cultures of India's states produce considerable variation in how misinformation circulates and how publics respond to narrative construction. While northern India's post-truth patterns often revolve around Hindu majoritarian nationalism, southern states exhibit different dynamics shaped by distinct regional identities and political histories.

Kerala provides one of the most illuminating examples of these subnational differences. With its long-standing history of left governance, high literacy, and strong welfare institutions, Kerala might appear insulated from post-truth tendencies. Yet the decade between 2015 and 2025 reveals that Kerala has developed its own distinctive variant of post-truth politics—one that blends global informational dynamics with region-specific political cultures. The state's

political communication is shaped by dense party-society linkages, ideological mobilisation, symbolic politics and emotionally charged controversies such as the Sabarimala temple-entry disputes, cyber-harassment of journalists, contestations surrounding the COVID-19 "Kerala model," the narrative afterlife of the Solar Scam, and the rise of appeasement discourses involving Muslim, Christian and Eezhava communities. These phenomena signal that Kerala participates fully in the national post-truth moment, though with its own unique hybrid features.

Thus, India's experience demonstrates that post-truth politics is not merely a technological byproduct but a structural transformation arising from the interplay of digital infrastructures, ideological mobilisation, media evolution and socio-cultural cleavages. Kerala, while distinctive in its political traditions and social indicators, mirrors many of these national tendencies while developing its own regional articulation of soft post-truth politics.

KERALA'S STRUCTURAL CONDITIONS AND INSTITUTIONAL LANDSCAPE: HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS OF A REGIONAL POST-TRUTH ECOLOGY

Kerala occupies a distinctive position within India's political and developmental imagination. Often celebrated as an exceptional case within the Global South, the state is associated with near-universal literacy, strong human development indicators, a vibrant public sphere, and a long-standing tradition of left-of-centre political mobilisation. This achievement, widely described as the "Kerala model," has contributed to the perception of Kerala as a polity characterised by rational politics, civic consciousness and deliberative engagement[12, 16]. Such narratives reinforce a belief that the state's literacy, progressive social reforms and robust welfare institutions inoculate it against the epistemic vulnerabilities typically associated with post-truth politics. Yet this celebratory framing can obscure the deeper sociopolitical dynamics that structure Kerala's informational environment. A closer examination reveals that the very features that sustain Kerala's developmental successes—dense party–society linkages, ideologically saturated civic institutions, and a highly engaged media culture—also create fertile conditions for subtle forms of post-truth political communication. Understanding these structural conditions is essential for situating the empirical cases examined later in the article.

One of the defining features of Kerala's political culture is the unusually deep entanglement between political parties and civil society institutions. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)), the most influential political actor in the state, has historically played a central role in organising not only electoral mobilisation but also everyday forms of social, cultural and economic life. Scholars describe Kerala's political system as a "party–society" formation, wherein political organisations extend into trade unions, cooperative banks, women's groups, cultural associations, student unions, neighbourhood committees and a wide range of civic institutions[12, 16]. These networks enable exceptionally high levels of political participation, facilitate welfare delivery and create pathways for political socialisation across generations. However, they also blur the boundary between party and public, binding social life to political identities in ways that elevate party narratives into authoritative explanatory frameworks.

Recent ethnographic scholarship has illuminated the depth of this embeddedness. Kaul and Kannangara's (2021)[19] study of a "party village" in north Kerala demonstrates how CPI(M) influence permeates everyday practices—from economic exchanges and land disputes to temple rituals, funeral processions and marriage negotiations. In such contexts, political allegiance is not merely ideological but constitutive of social belonging. Families often inherit political identity; workplaces and cooperatives are organised around party affiliations; and cultural institutions, including libraries and sports clubs, frequently function as ideological training grounds[19]. These formations produce what Devika (2019) calls "political enclosure," wherein access to social goods is mediated by partisan networks. While these networks have facilitated Kerala's developmental achievements, they also create an environment where political narratives—whether factual or selectively framed—gain legitimacy through embedded social channels.

Kerala's media landscape intersects powerfully with this political saturation. Although the state boasts one of the highest media consumption rates in India, it also exhibits an unusually high degree of political alignment among media outlets. Party-linked media such as the CPI(M)-affiliated daily *Deshabhimani* or Left-leaning Kairali TV remain influential in shaping public discourse[18]. These outlets do not function merely as propaganda platforms; rather, they represent long-standing political–cultural institutions with loyal readerships and deep roots in Kerala's public sphere. Their editorials, investigative pieces and cultural content often construct interpretive frameworks that shape how political events are understood. In this sense, partisan media in Kerala represents a form of epistemic authority in itself, reinforcing ideological narratives through long-established trust networks.

Yet the rise of private media since the 1990s has diversified the landscape, generating intense competition among politically aligned and commercially driven news organisations. Channels such as Asianet News, Manorama

News and Mathrubhumi News adopt editorial positions that reflect broader political contestations within the state, often aligning implicitly or explicitly with anti-Left, Congress-leaning or centrist positions. The result is a polarised media ecology in which competing truth claims circulate simultaneously, each rooted in its own epistemic community. In highly charged moments—such as the Sabarimala protests, corruption controversies or the 2020 gold-smuggling case—these media camps engage in what Udupa (2019)[41] describes nationally as "communicative warfare," amplifying narratives that align with their ideological constituencies. This competition creates an informational environment where journalism itself becomes contested, and where audiences increasingly interpret facts through partisan loyalty rather than empirical verification.

Kerala's exceptionally high digital penetration further complicates this landscape. The state has one of the highest rates of internet and smartphone access in India, with communication platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube deeply woven into daily life. The intimacy and speed of WhatsApp communication, in particular, have created dense digital publics in which political narratives—accurate or misleading—travel rapidly through familial, neighbourhood and professional networks. WhatsApp's structure aligns closely with Kerala's existing social networks, allowing party cadres, community organisations and informal groups to disseminate interpretations of events that blend fact, emotion and symbolic significance. These dynamics mirror national patterns of digital misinformation[10, 21], but Kerala's political density magnifies them. Political supporters, IT cells and sympathisers participate in real-time narrative construction, shaping public perception before journalistic verification can intervene.

Kerala's political culture also carries a deeply performative dimension. Public debate in the state has long been vibrant, with intense ideological exchanges in tea shops, libraries, public meetings and social clubs. Political rallies attract large audiences and often involve theatrical elements. This expressive political culture, while contributing to Kerala's democratic vitality, also heightens affective attachment to political identities. Emotional responses to political events—ranging from pride in welfare achievements to outrage over perceived cultural threats—circulate widely through digital media, creating fertile ground for narrative amplification. As Sunstein (2017)[34] notes globally, emotionally charged content is far more likely to spread on digital platforms. Kerala's political expressiveness ensures that such content finds a ready audience, generating rapid polarisation during major controversies.

The interaction of these structural factors—party-society linkages, partisan media, high digital penetration and expressive political culture—produces a distinctive form of regional post-truth ecology. Unlike contexts where misinformation spreads in conditions of institutional weakness or low literacy, Kerala's post-truth politics emerges through socially embedded, institutionally mediated and emotionally resonant mechanisms. The state exhibits what this article conceptualises as soft post-truth politics, characterised not by blatant fabrications or authoritarian censorship but by selective framing, delegitimisation of critics, symbolic invocation of ideological history and the circulation of partisan interpretations through trusted institutional networks.

Kerala's political institutions themselves contribute to this ecology. While the decentralised governance system—panchayats, municipalities and district planning bodies—is frequently celebrated for participatory vitality, these institutions are often aligned closely with political parties, particularly in Left-governed regions[12]. The intertwining of state and party infrastructures facilitates welfare delivery but also enables the movement of political narratives across administrative, social and cultural spaces. During politically sensitive episodes, criticisms directed at local officials or policies are often reframed as partisan attacks, and institutional communication becomes entangled with party messaging. This fluidity blurs distinctions between objective administration and political self-presentation, reinforcing the conditions under which soft post-truth politics thrives.

Moreover, Kerala's self-image as a secular, rational, egalitarian polity—shaped by the legacy of social reformers such as Sree Narayana Guru and by long-standing leftist cultural movements—constitutes a powerful symbolic repertoire. Political actors frequently mobilise this repertoire to legitimise policy decisions, deflect criticism or frame oppositional narratives as threats to Kerala's progressive ethos. The symbolic invocation of "Kerala secularism," "Kerala rationality," or the "Kerala model" reinforces ideological cohesion but can also function as a narrative barrier shielding political authority from scrutiny. This symbolic politics contributes directly to Kerala's post-truth ecology by filtering factual debates through emotionally resonant narratives of identity and historical accomplishment.

Finally, the state's caste and religious dynamics—often presumed to be less pronounced than in other regions of India—remain central to its political communication. Scholars have demonstrated that caste continues to shape access to resources, political mobilisation and social alliances, even within Kerala's egalitarian public discourse[24]. Similarly, the political salience of religious communities—Muslims, Christians and Eezhavas in

particular—remains a defining feature of electoral mobilisation and narrative framing. Appeasement discourses, whether deployed by the Left or its opponents, illustrate how identity politics is articulated through emotionally charged narratives rather than empirical assessments of welfare distribution. These discourses reveal a post-truth terrain in which truth claims about communal privilege or marginalisation are negotiated through perception, affect and political strategy rather than verifiable evidence.

These intertwined structural, institutional and sociocultural factors create an environment in which political narratives can be widely circulated, selectively framed and emotionally amplified, even in the absence of overt disinformation campaigns. The very strengths of Kerala's political system—engaged citizens, vibrant media, deep civic institutions and strong welfare networks—paradoxically create pathways for subtle forms of narrative manipulation. Political communication becomes a matter not merely of providing information but of shaping the interpretive frameworks through which information acquires meaning.

These dynamics become most visible during moments of crisis and controversy. The empirical cases examined in the next section—including the Sabarimala misinformation wave, cyber-harassment of journalists, contested narratives around the COVID-19 "Kerala model," and the gold-smuggling scandal—demonstrate how Kerala's structural conditions generate a distinctive post-truth ecology. These episodes do not arise despite Kerala's literacy and welfare achievements; they arise because of how those achievements are embedded within a dense political, social and media infrastructure that shapes the circulation, interpretation and contestation of truth claims.

TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK OF SOFT POST-TRUTH POLITICS IN KERALA

Kerala's evolving informational landscape between 2015 and 2025 demonstrates that post-truth politics can flourish even in a highly literate, institutionally robust and politically sophisticated society. Rather than mirroring the "hard post-truth" environments characterised by centralised propaganda, overt denial of facts or coercive suppression of dissent[20, 42], Kerala exhibits a subtler configuration that emerges through the interplay of long-standing party–society networks, emotionally charged political cultures, densely mediated public spheres and symbolic repertoires rooted in the state's reformist and developmental history. These conditions collectively form what may be conceptualised as soft post-truth politics: a mode of political communication that does not require authoritarian censorship or systematic fabrication but instead relies on diffuse mechanisms of narrative amplification, ideological trust, selective moral framing and mediated legitimacy.

A foundational dimension of Kerala's soft post-truth ecology lies in the persistence of politically saturated social structures. The CPI(M)'s historical embedding within unions, cooperatives, youth and cultural organisations, and local governance bodies—captured in classic analyses by Heller (1999)[12], Isaac and Franke (2000)[16], and more recently Kaul and Kannangara (2021)[19]—creates dense ideological trust networks that shape how information is received and interpreted. These networks provide socially legitimate channels through which narratives circulate, enabling political interpretations to become anchored in identity and loyalty rather than empirical verification. This phenomenon was clearly visible in public responses to the gold-smuggling scandal, where Newslaundry's reportage (2023) documented sharply bifurcated interpretations: critics framed the episode as evidence of entrenched corruption in the Chief Minister's Office, whereas supporters interpreted it as a politically engineered conspiracy orchestrated by central investigative agencies. Such epistemic divergence did not arise merely from media consumption patterns but from trust structures embedded within party-linked civic ecosystems[27, 28].

A similar mechanism underpinned the Solar Scam's narrative afterlife, which resurfaced repeatedly across electoral cycles long after judicial findings complicated earlier allegations. India Today (2016)[14, 15], Business Standard (2017)[9], and Hindustan Times (2018)[13] all documented how the scandal persisted in public discourse as a moralised narrative used to delegitimise the UDF and cast former Chief Minister Oommen Chandy as emblematic of systemic impropriety. Despite shifting factual clarity, the emotional resonance of the scandal—as a symbolic tale of betrayal, immorality and political decay—allowed it to endure within partisan imagination. This endurance exemplifies how Kerala's political culture permits certain narratives to acquire near-permanent interpretive authority, regardless of evolving evidence.

A second core dimension of Kerala's soft post-truth politics is the strategic use of moral–symbolic framing, particularly invoking the state's long-standing identity as progressive, secular and reform-oriented. This symbolic repertoire became a critical narrative resource during the Sabarimala temple-entry conflict. While Alt News (2018) and BOOM Live (2018)[1, 2, 6, 7] debunked numerous viral falsehoods circulating around the protests—including fabricated visuals of police atrocities and doctored claims of child arrests—editorials in *The Indian Express*[4] and reporting from *The News Minute* (2018)[38] showed how the state government framed its enforcement of the Supreme Court verdict through the language of constitutional morality,

gender equality and modernist rationality. Opponents countered with affectively charged narratives of religious desecration, cultural imposition and state overreach. The result was a discursive conflict wherein symbolic claims—about Kerala's legacy, culture and secular commitments—often overshadowed empirical assessment of events on the ground.

This dynamic reappeared during the COVID-19 "Kerala model" debate. Early international praise from outlets such as the BBC, widely reproduced in regional media including Onmanorama (2020)[29], bolstered a narrative of administrative exceptionalism and scientific rationality. Yet as later waves produced high case burdens, scholars and journalists including Chathukulam and Tharamangalam (2020) and Chathukulam (2022)[43, 44] noted a shift toward selective framing, opacity in data-sharing and efforts to reconcile unfavourable indicators with pre-existing narratives of state competence. The symbolic power of the "Kerala model" often outpaced empirical complexity, revealing how moralised developmental identities can serve as buffers against reputational threat, thereby stabilising political legitimacy even when contradictions emerge.

A third mechanism sustaining Kerala's soft post-truth politics involves digital mobilisation and affective amplification. Kerala's high digital penetration—and widespread adoption of WhatsApp, Facebook and YouTube—has facilitated rapid narrative dissemination and emotionally charged partisan mobilisation. The cyber-harassment of journalists stands as a telling example. Newslaundry's investigations in 2020 and 2023 revealed organised trolling, misogynistic abuse and doxxing directed against journalists who reported critically on government decisions or administrative lapses[25-28]. The News Minute (2020) documented testimonies from harassed journalists who described coordinated attacks by CPI(M)-aligned online groups[37, 39]. Subsequent reporting by Mathrubhumi[22, 23] identified structured "cyber warrior" groups and digital handbooks circulated among cadres, indicating systematic cultivation of narrative enforcement mechanisms. This climate of intimidation does not eliminate dissent, but it increases the personal and professional costs of critical reporting, thereby narrowing the epistemic space available for independent scrutiny.

A fourth structural pillar is the fragmented and ideologically polarised media landscape. While Kerala boasts one of India's most engaged reading publics, its media organisations—ranging from Deshabhimani and Kairali TV to Asianet News, Manorama News and a proliferation of digital portals—frequently adopt adversarial editorial positions aligned with political interests. Newslaundry's 2023[27, 28] analysis shows how confrontations between CPI(M) and private media escalated into raids, public denunciations and reciprocal accusations of propaganda. The Sabarimala protests, gold-smuggling scandal, and debates over Muslim, Christian and Eezhava appeasement—covered diversely by *The Hindu*, *The Indian Express*, *Onmanorama*, *The Print*[30, 35, 36, 40] and partisan platforms—illustrate how fragmented media systems produce parallel truth regimes, enabling the flourishing of what Waisbord (2018)[42] terms "tribal epistemologies."

The final dimension is the coexistence of robust governance capacity with selective transparency and narrative control. Kerala's public health architecture, welfare programmes and literacy achievements confer political actors a reservoir of legitimacy that can be strategically deployed to foreground favourable interpretations and deflect criticism. This was evident in both the COVID-19 response and in debates about appeasement discourses, where media analyses by *The Indian Express* (2021)[36] and *The Print* (2022)[40] showed political actors framing themselves as defenders of secular harmony while opponents accused them of selective appeasement for electoral gain. These narratives, often emotionally charged and historically grounded, shaped public understanding more powerfully than empirical assessments of policy outcomes.

Taken together, these intertwined forces—party-society embeddedness, moral-symbolic repertoires, digital mobilisation, media fragmentation and the strategic deployment of welfare legitimacy—constitute Kerala's distinctive configuration of soft post-truth politics. They reveal that misinformation and narrative manipulation do not require authoritarian coercion, institutional weakness or poorly educated publics. Instead, post-truth politics can thrive within socially advanced regions when ideological trust, cultural memory and symbolic identity converge to mediate the production of political truth. Kerala thus illustrates a sophisticated and regionally embedded form of post-truth politics—one that challenges prevailing assumptions about its origins and underscores the importance of subnational analysis in understanding the evolving nature of democratic communication.

CONCLUSION

Kerala's political and informational trajectory between 2015 and 2025 provides a revealing lens through which to understand the evolving contours of post-truth politics in contemporary democracies. The state's paradox—high literacy, strong welfare systems and a vibrant political culture coexisting alongside misinformation waves, narrative manipulation and contested truth regimes—demonstrates that post-truth dynamics cannot be reduced

to institutional fragility or educational deficits. Instead, Kerala illustrates how post-truth politics can take root within robust democratic infrastructures through the interaction of culturally resonant narratives, historically embedded party–society networks, media fragmentation and high digital saturation. These dynamics affirm global scholarship that locates post-truth politics in the interplay of emotion, identity and institutional distrust[20, 42], while also revealing how such mechanisms are refracted through region-specific histories and political cultures.

The comparison between global theory and Kerala's empirical cases—Sabarimala, cyber-harassment of journalists, contested interpretations of the COVID-19 "Kerala model," the narrative afterlife of the Solar Scam, the gold-smuggling scandal and the proliferation of appeasement discourses—shows that Kerala's post-truth ecology is not characterised by outright fabrication or authoritarian suppression. Rather, it reflects a soft post-truth configuration in which selective framing, symbolic mobilisation and the circulation of ideologically filtered interpretations shape public perception. Party-aligned institutions, trusted civic infrastructures and affective political loyalties function as conduits through which narratives acquire legitimacy, even when empirical clarity is lacking. These features distinguish Kerala's post-truth dynamics from more coercive or institutionally corrosive models elsewhere, underscoring the need for nuanced conceptual vocabularies capable of capturing these subtler transformations.

Future scholarship should expand the comparative horizon of post-truth studies within India's federal landscape. States such as Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Assam and Uttar Pradesh exhibit their own regionally distinct narrative ecologies shaped by linguistic identities, caste histories and partisan cultures. A systematic comparison could help determine whether Kerala represents an outlier or a broader pattern among states with entrenched party systems and dense social institutions. In addition, further research is needed on how caste, class, gender and religious identity mediate exposure to misinformation and shape truth-making processes, particularly among marginalised communities whose experiences rarely feature in mainstream political analysis.

Equally important is the study of institutional responses. Kerala's judiciary, investigative agencies, media regulators and fact-checking organisations navigate contested informational terrains that challenge their capacity to function as epistemic stabilisers. Understanding how these institutions uphold or struggle to maintain public trust will be central to evaluating Kerala's democratic resilience.

Ultimately, Kerala's experience demonstrates that post-truth politics is not a rupture from democratic norms but an evolution within them. It highlights the fragility of democratic knowledge in an era where truth is increasingly strategic, negotiated and emotionally mediated. At the same time, it underscores the possibility of resilience: through reflective governance, institutional transparency and renewed civic engagement, democratic societies can meet the challenges posed by post-truth political communication. Kerala's complex trajectory therefore offers both a cautionary tale and an analytical template for studying the future of democratic discourse in India and beyond.

REFERENCES

1. Alt News. *Fact-check: No, Kerala police did not arrest a child at Sabarimala protest*. 2018. https://www.altnews.in
2. Alt News. *Fake news: Kerala government arrested a Sabarimala child protester*. (2018, December 1). https://www.altnews.in/fake-news-kerala-government-arrested-a-sabarimala-child-protester/
3. Ananny M, Crawford K. Seeing without knowing: Limitations of the transparency ideal and its application to algorithmic accountability. *New Media & Society*. 2018; 20 (3) :973-989 . Available from: https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816676645
4. Ashley J. *Handling Sabarimala: What the Left got wrong*. The Indian Express. (2018, October 21). https://indianexpress.com
5. Bennett WL, Livingston S. The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions. *European Journal of Communication*. 2018; 33 (2) :122-139 . Available from: https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323118760317
6. BOOM Live. *BJP's hartal call amplifies misleading reports of devotee's death at Sabarimala*. 2018. https://www.boomlive.in
7. Boomlive. . *Sabarimala row: Did Kerala BJP call for a hartal based on fake news?* (2018, November 2). https://www.boomlive.in/sabarimala-row-did-kerala-bjp-call-for-a-hartal-based-on-fake-news
8. Brady WJ, Wills JA, Jost JT, Tucker JA, Van Bavel JJ. Emotion shapes the diffusion of moralized content in social networks. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. 2017; 114 (28) :7313-7318 . Available from: https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1618923114
9. Business Standard. *Solar scam: A political storm rekindled in Kerala*. (2017, November 21). https://www.business-standard.com
10. Chandrasekharan E, *et al*. Tracking and analyzing hate speech in Indian social media. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 4(CSCW),(2020). 1–27.
11. Chaturvedi S. *The Indian election machine: IT and political communication*. (2016). Routledge India.
12. Heller P. *The labor of development: Workers and the transformation of capitalism in Kerala, India*. (1999). Cornell University Press.
13. Hindustan Times. *Kerala solar scam report triggers political tussle*. (2018, January 25). https://www.hindustantimes.com
14. India Today Staff. *Sabarimala protests: Activist succumbs to injuries, Kerala on the boil*. India Today. 2019, January 3. https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/sabarimala-unrest-kerala-activist-dies-in-clash-hartal-today-1422363-2019-01-03
15. India Today. *Kerala solar scam: Political fallout intensifies amid new revelations*. (2016, July 26). https://www.indiatoday.in
16. Isaac TMT, Franke RW. (2000). *Local democracy and development: The Kerala people's campaign for decentralized planning*. LeftWord Books.
17. Jaffrelot C. (2021). *Modi's India: Hindu nationalism and the rise of ethnic democracy*. Princeton University Press.
18. Jeffrey R. (2000). *India's newspaper revolution: Capitalism, politics and the Indian-language press*, 1977–99. St. Martin's Press.
19. Kaul N, Kannangara S. Everyday party-state entanglements: Ethnographic insights from a CPI(M) village in Kerala. *Journal of South Asian Development*. 2021; 16 (1) :1-28 . Available from: https://doi.org/10.1177/09731741211001001

20. Lewandowsky S, Ecker UKH, Cook J. Beyond misinformation: Understanding and coping with the "post-truth" era.. *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*. 2017; 6 (4) :353-369 . Available from: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jarmac.2017.07.008
21. Maitra S, Guha A. WhatsApp and the formation of networked sectarian publics in India. *Media, Culture & Society*. 2020; 42 (7-8) :1288–1304 . Available from: https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443719892075
22. Mathrubhumi. (2022, March 12). *How CPI(M)'s cyber warriors shape online discourse in Kerala*. https://english.mathrubhumi.com
23. Mathrubhumi. (2025, January 5). *Internal social media guidelines reveal cadre-based digital mobilization*. https://english.mathrubhumi.com
24. Mattumannil SH. The left approach to social diversity: How the Communist Party interacted with Kerala's social landscape?. *Cogent Social Sciences*. 2023; 9 . Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2023.2292840
25. Newslaundry Team. *Three Kerala journalists approach police over online harassment by CPI(M) supporters*. (2020, August 11). https://www.newslaundry.com/2020/08/11/three-kerala-journalists-approach-police-over-online-harassment-by-cpim-supporters
26. Newslaundry. (2020, September 13). *Women journalists in Kerala face coordinated online abuse*. https://www.newslaundry.com
27. Newslaundry. *Unravelling the friction between CPI(M) and Kerala's major media houses*. (2023, December 26). https://www.newslaundry.com/2023/12/26/unravelling-the-friction-between-cpim-and-keralas-major-media-houses
28. Newslaundry. (2023, February 8). *Kerala's newsroom battles: Media raids, intimidation, and the CM's narrative war*. https://www.newslaundry.com
29. Onmanorama. (2020, April 5). *Kerala model receives global praise for early COVID-19 containment*. https://www.onmanorama.com
30. Onmanorama. *Political row over church mobilisation and community outreach*. (2023, May 10). https://www.onmanorama.com
31. Pasquale F. (2015). *The black box society: The secret algorithms that control money and information*. Harvard University Press.
32. Sen A, Drèze J. (2020). *Democracy and the public sphere in India*. Oxford University Press.
33. Suiter J. Post-truth Politics. *Political Insight*. 2016; 7 (3) :25-27 . Available from: https://doi.org/10.1177/2041905816680417
34. Sunstein CR. *#Republic: Divided democracy in the age of social media*. Princeton University Press. (2017).
35. The Hindu. (2022, July 19). Appeasement politics or secular outreach? Parties spar over minority issues in Kerala. https://www.thehindu.com
36. The Indian Express. Appeasement or progress? Kerala's political debate over minority policy. (2021, August 11). https://indianexpress.com
37. The News Minute Staff. (2020, August 10). Three Kerala journalists harassed online, complain against CPI(M) 'cyber team'. The News Minute. https://www.thenewsminute.com/kerala/three-kerala-journalists-harassed-online-complain-against-cpim-cyber-team-130470.
38. The News Minute. *How misinformation fuelled Sabarimala outrage*. (2018, October 23). https://www.thenewsminute.com
39. The News Minute. (2020, September 18). Journalists speak out on targeted online harassment in Kerala. https://www.thenewsminute.com
40. The Print. *Left, Congress and BJP battle over 'appeasement politics' in Kerala*. (2022, December 7). https://theprint.in
41. Udupa S. Nationalism in the digital age: Fun as a metapractice of extreme speech. *International Journal of Communication*, 13(2019)., 3143–3163.
42. Waisbord S. Truth is what happens to news: On journalism, fake news, and post-truth. *Journalism Studies*. 2018; 19 (13) :1866-1878 . Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670x.2018.1492881
43. Chathukulam J. (2022). Kerala's COVID-19 response: Between participatory governance and bureaucratic centralisation (UNU-WIDER Working Paper 2022/28). UNU-WIDER. https://www.wider.unu.edu
44. Chathukulam J, Tharamangalam J. The Kerala model in the time of COVID19: Rethinking state, society and democracy. *World Development*. 2021; 137 :105207 . Available from: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105207