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# Twist in Sabarimala tale: Kerala's Mala Araya Adivasi tribe claims ownership of the hill shrine

Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan has admitted that members of the tribe used to conduct the main ritual at Sabarimala decades ago.

TA Ameerudheen

Nov 04, 2018 · 10:30 am

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Devotees at the Lord Ayyappa temple at Sabarimala. | PTI

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an Adivasi tribe has staked its claim over the hill shrine in Kerala's Pathanamthitta district.

The Mala Araya community is classified as a Scheduled Tribe. Its 30,000-odd members live in Pathanamthitta, Kottayam and Idukki districts of South Kerala. The tribe has traditionally worshipped Ayyappa and claims that its members were forcibly evicted from Sabarimala and the 17 hills around it by the royal family of Pandalam in the 1800s. They say that the state government must reinstate their rights over the popular temple, whose presiding deity is Ayyappa and which attracts a few hundred thousand pilgrims every year. The temple is believed to have been established in the 12th century and has been managed by the Travancore Devaswom Board since 1950.

“The government should give the temple back to us and correct a historical wrong,” said PK Sajeer, founder general secretary of the Aikya Mala Araya Maha Sabha, a tribal organisation working for the welfare of the Mala Araya tribe. “Mala Arayas were tortured and coerced to leave Sabarimala. It is time to make amends for the atrocities. We will move court if the government fails to address the issue.”

This demand has also brought the issue of the Brahminisation of Kerala temples into the limelight. Adivasi and Dalit organisations in the state have for long claimed that Brahmins had taken control of their temples and imposed Brahminical rituals there.

## **Who are the Mala Arayas?**

Mala Araya means King of the Hills.

“Mala Arayans reside generally on the western slopes of the higher range of mountains or their spurs,” wrote Samuel Mateer in his book titled *Native Life in Travancore*, published in 1883. “Their villages consist of houses scattered all over the steep hill slides.”

Members of the tribe believe that Ayyappa was born to a tribal couple called Kandan and Karuthamma in a cave in Ponnambalamedu near the site of the Sabarimala temple.

Sajeev, who has conducted extensive research on the subject, said Mala Arayas were driven out of Sabarimala by the Pandalam king in the 1800s. “Idols of the Mala Araya community were found abandoned deep inside the forests of Karimala, Ponnambalmedu, Kothakuthithara, Nilakkal and Talaparamala,” he said. “These idols were replaced by new idols. All the temples are now being administered by the Travancore Devaswom Board.”

He said the rituals at Sabarimala turned Brahminical after the Travancore king appointed the Thazhaman family – who were Brahmins from Andhra Pradesh – as the temple’s chief priests in 1904. “The Brahmin priests replaced the most important Adivasi ritual of Thenabhishekam, bathing the Ayyappa idol with honey, with Neyyabhishekam, bathing the idol with ghee, in Sabarimala,” he said.

Sajeev said that his research showed that seven priests from the Mala Araya tribe used to conduct rituals at Sabarimala. “The first priest was Karimala Arayan who had laid the temple’s foundation stone,” he said. “The last priest was Kochukuthy Kochuraman whose relatives are now living in Mundakkayam in Kottayam district.”

He said despite facing hardships and eviction, the Mala Araya community did not lose faith in Ayyappa. “Mala Araya tribespeople built Ayyappa temples wherever they went,” he said.

At present, Mala Arayas own more than 100 places of worship and all of them follow Dravidian rituals. “We do not receive assistance from the Travancore Devaswom Board which once had harassed our community,” said

Sajeev.

## Sabarimala and entry of women

The Sabarimala temple shot into the spotlight after a Supreme Court judgment on September 28 said that women of all ages must be permitted to offer prayers at the shrine. Prior to the judgment, women between the ages of 10 and 50 were barred from entering the temple. Ayyappa's devotees believe he is an eternal celibate.

Sangh Parivar and other Hindutva organisations held violent [protests](#) in Sabarimala when the temple opened on October 17 for five days, for the first time since the Supreme Court verdict. Armed with the ruling and the Kerala government's promise to implement it, 15 women tried to enter the shrine over this period. They were forced to turn back by a mob that claimed to be preserving the purity of the temple. Its members mainly comprised supporters of the Sabarimala Karma Samithi, a recently-formed association of around 50 Hindu groups led by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. They organised protest marches, blockaded roads, intimidated women who were trying to enter the temple and attacked journalists.

Two women – Rehana Fathima and Kavitha Jakkala – reached close to the sanctum sanctorum under heavy police protection on October 20. That day, the Sabarimala head priest Kantararu Rajeevaru threatened to close the temple and hand over the key to the Pandalam family. The erstwhile royal family enjoys traditional rights over the conduct of rituals in Sabarimala.

The priest's statement prompted a sharp retort by Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, who alluded to the tribe's association with the temple. Vijayan [said](#) at a public meeting in Pathanamthitta on October 23 that the Thenabhishekam ritual was the main ritual at Sabarimala long before the appointment of Brahmin tantris or priests in the temple. "Sabarimala is not the private property of the tantris or the Pandalam family," said Vijayan. "Mala Arayas used to conduct the main rituals there. The tantris should not think that the temple would remain closed forever if he walked away with the keys."

The Mala Arayas have said that they will abide by the Supreme Court verdict. "If a woman of menstruating age goes to the Sannidhanam [sanctum sanctorum], it must be because of Ayyappa's invitation," said Sajeev. "Our community has a deep-rooted belief in Ayyappa."

## Demanding ownership of shrines

The claim by the Adivasi tribe over Sabarimala comes at a time leading Adivasi and Dalit organisations have come together to reinstate the right of these communities to run more than 100 temples in the state.

One of these organisations is the Avakasha Punasthapana Samithi or Committee for Reinstating the Rights. Dalit writer and activist Sunny Kapikkadu, one of its leaders, said that hundreds of temples owned by Dalits and Adivasis in Kerala were appropriated by Brahmins in the past. “Sabarimala is one among them,” he said. The organisation has demanded that the government hand over the ownership of Sabarimala to the Mala Araya tribe, he said.


Kapikkadu added that reclaiming ownership of temples would not be an easy task. “But we are here to fight a long legal battle,” he said. “We will announce the demand at a mass meeting at Erumely in Kottayam district on December 1.” He added that the organisation also planned to demand that the government implement the Forest Rights Act 2006 in Sabarimala as that would help the Mala Araya community live in the area without fear.

The Aikya Mala Araya Maha Sabha has already demanded that the government hand over Sabarimala to members of the tribe. It has also demanded ownership of three nearby temples – Karimala, Ponnambalamedu and the Nilakkal Mahadeva temple. “We will first approach the government,” said Sajeev. “If it fails to act, we will move the Supreme Court.”

Sajeev added that many other Adivasi and Dalit outfits are waiting to demand ownership rights of the temples appropriated by Brahmins in the past. “Our demand will open up the sluice gates,” he said. “Kerala will witness mass Adivasi and Dalit movements. It is just a matter of time.”

Kapikkadu said the protests against women’s entry at Sabarimala were a blessing in disguise. “We could establish that Pandalam family, chief priest and Travancore Devaswom Board are not the owners of Sabarimala,” he said. “Now it is time to fight to regain our rights.”

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**VIRUS ALERT**

# Mpox: The smallpox cousin that has set off a global health alarm, as explained by a microbiologist

Though usually mild, mpox can still potentially cause severe illness. Health officials are concerned that more cases will arise with increased travel.

**Rodney E Rohde, The Conversation**

40 minutes ago



[NIAID, CC BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons.](#)

On August 14, the World Health Organization declared mpox a [public health emergency of international](#)

[concern](#). There have been over 15,600 cases and over 530 deaths reported in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and neighboring countries in Africa. The disease had previously caused a global outbreak from 2022 to 2023.

Mpox – previously called monkeypox – isn't a new disease. The [first confirmed human case was in 1970](#), when the virus was isolated from a child suspected of having smallpox in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Though usually mild, mpox can still potentially cause severe illness. Health officials are concerned that more cases will arise with increased travel.

I'm [a researcher](#) who has worked in [public health and medical laboratories](#) for over three decades, especially in the realm of diseases with animal origins. What exactly is happening in the current outbreak, and what does history tell us about mpox?

## A cousin of smallpox

[Mpox](#) is caused by the monkeypox virus, which belongs to a subset of the Poxviridae family of viruses called Orthopoxvirus. This subset includes the smallpox, [vaccinia](#) and cowpox viruses. While an [animal reservoir for monkeypox virus is unknown](#), African rodents are suspected to play a part in transmission. The monkeypox virus has only been isolated twice from an animal in nature. [Diagnostic testing for mpox](#) is currently only available at Laboratory Response Network labs in the US and globally...

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THE ELECTION TRICYCLE

# Podcast: Have the Trump campaign and the British far-right begun to flounder?

A podcast by Emily Tamkin, Tom Hamilton and Rohan Venkat.

**Emily Tamkin, Tom Hamilton, Rohan Venkat**

2 hours ago



At a Donald Trump rally on July 31. | Reuters

Recent polling shows that the Democrat's shiny new candidate – Kamala Harris – is ahead in almost all the swing states. Meanwhile, the British far-right, who seemed so potent last week, have been repelled by anti-fascist campaigners and the criminal justice system. Is the tide beginning to turn in favour of reasoned debate? Emily Tamkin and Tom Hamilton report back, while Rohan Venkat, back from vacation, picks up on the turbulence in Bangladesh.

We welcome your comments at [letters@scroll.in](mailto:letters@scroll.in).

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#### REFUGEE CRISIS

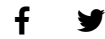
## Bangladesh: Uncertainty, fear and tentative hope among Rohingya refugees

The regime change set off violence in and around refugee camps but activists and relief organisations are looking to Muhammad

Yunus to bring change.

**Sarah Nandi, The Conversation**

3 hours ago



At the Kutupalang refugee camp in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh in June. | Reuters

Bangladesh is experiencing a seismic shift after 18 years of [Awami League rule](#) ended abruptly due to intensive student protests. This upheaval, and the [crackdowns that resulted in the deaths of more than 300 protesters](#), forced Prime Minister [Sheikh Hasina to flee the country](#) and ushered in an interim government.

But amid this recent political turmoil, the fate of the nearly [one million Rohingya refugees](#) residing in the Cox's Bazar camp in southeastern Bangladesh has grown uncertain.

For years, Bangladesh has grappled with deepening domestic challenges, most notably [increasing inequality](#), [nepotism](#) and [contested elections](#). However, the current moment offers tentative hope, as the new government seems committed to providing justice to the protesters, to reducing inequality and to adhering to human rights norms.

## Substantial challenges

The new government faces a steep challenge.

Rohingya refugees continue to languish in a deteriorating security situation. With reports of [kidnappings and forced conscription in neighbouring Myanmar](#), [the arrivals of war-wounded refugees from that country](#) have increased....

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## RESERVATIONS DEBATE

# Why the BJP has become cautious on matters of caste

Anxieties among Dalit and Adivasi voters that the ruling party is anti-reservation has forced it to take the social justice line.

**Abhik Deb**

3 hours ago



Narendra Modi is facing opposition from his own allies on matters related to reservation. | Reuters

Between 2018 and May 2023, the Narendra Modi government inducted 63 specialists as mid-level bureaucrats through lateral entry, bypassing the established recruitment system where a designated number of posts are reserved for members of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. This sparked some resentment among the Dalit and Adivasi middle classes but the Bharatiya Janata Party ignored it.

This month, however, after the Opposition and the BJP's own allies in the National Democratic Alliance criticised its decision to issue an advertisement seeking to recruit 45 bureaucrats through lateral entry, the government lost no time withdrawing it.

On Tuesday, Jitendra Singh, the minister handling the portfolio of personnel, asked the Union Public Service Commission to retract the notice. He told the recruitment body that the absence of reservations in lateral entry

appointments must be “reviewed and reformed”.

What prompted the change in the government’s position?

Political observers say this is directly connected to the outcome of the 2024 Lok Sabha election where the BJP lost ground in seats reserved for both [Scheduled Castes](#) and [Scheduled Tribes](#). Campaign speeches by BJP leaders asking voters to give the Hindutva party a large majority in Parliament so that it could amend the Constitution had sparked fears among Dalits and Adivasis that the party intended to dismantle the quotas for them in educational institutions and government jobs....

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BOOK EXCERPT

## Short fiction: The death of a couple’s young son makes them re-evaluate their relationship with him

An excerpt from ‘In Pursuit of a New Dawn: A Collection of Short Stories’, by Anirban Bhattacharyya.

**Anirban Bhattacharyya**

5 hours ago



It is two days after Holi – the vibrant festival of colour and mirth. The usually quiet lane in the leafy neighbourhood of Lokhandwala has changed, now filled with a fleet of cars, gleaming in the spring sunshine and lining the street. Parking in these parts is typically difficult on a regular day, but today has been a chaotic ordeal. At Shanti Bhavan, the two-storey whitewashed bungalow located on the corner block of the neighbourhood, there is a bustle of activity, reminiscent of a flutter of butterflies in spring. On the cool porch, sandals and shoes are littered on the steps. To the left of the main door, there is a large framed photograph of a young man. He has dark curly hair, a thin face with a strong jawline, sparkling eyes and a smile that reaches his eyes. The photograph is carefully garlanded with strings of yellow marigolds.

Inside, the living room has been cleared out. The sofas have been pushed to the corners, and chairs, rented from a nearby funeral service, are laid out neatly against the walls. A makeshift stage has been placed at one end of the room. It is not high, just a few inches off the floor. There are around twenty-five people in the room – friends and family – dressed in white and wearing sombre expressions. The news of Manan’s death came so suddenly that many close relatives are still on flights, buses and trains, making their way here. They even missed the actual funeral service, which was held the previous day. ...

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LITERARY AWARDS

## Ten-book longlist announced for NIF’s 2024 Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay Book Prize for nonfiction

The shortlist for the prize, run by New India Foundation, will be announced in September, and the winner, in November.

**Scroll Staff**

8 hours ago



The New India Foundation announced the longlist of the 2024 Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay NIF Book Prize which honours nonfiction books about modern and contemporary Indian history. The winning author will be awarded a cash prize of Rs 15 lakh.

The shortlist will be announced in September and the winner, in November. The winning author will be in conversation with an NIF Trustee at the Bangalore Literature Festival on December 14, 2024.

This year's jury is chaired by political scientist Niraja Gopal Jayal, and comprises historian Srinath Raghavan, entrepreneur Manish Sabharwal, former diplomat and author Navtej Sarna, lawyer Rahul Matthan, and public policy researcher Yamini Aiyar.

“The landscape of Indian non-fiction today is prolific, exciting and constantly pushing boundaries, and we congratulate all the nominated authors and their publishers,” said the jury about the longlist.

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Here are the longlisted books for this year's Prize:

- [\*Toward a Free Economy: Swatantra and Opposition Politics in Democratic India\*](#), Aditya Balasubramanian, Princeton University Press  
A deeply-researched book, arguing that India's free-market economic policies were homegrown, and not simply imported from the West. This fascinating account of the Swatantra Party, through its leaders, policies, and ideas, shows how economic conservatism and democracy could cohabit.
- [\*From Phansi Yard: My Year with the Women of Yerawada\*](#), Sudha Bharadwaj, Juggernaut  
This is a keenly felt autobiographical account of the author's experience in the Indian prison system – its institutional flaws, but also the individuals who manage small triumphs within it regardless.
- *Shadows at Noon: The South Asian Twentieth Century*, Joya Chatterji, Penguin India  
Ambitious in scope and extraordinary in its execution, this book weaves together personal perspective with academic authority as it illuminates the journey of the subcontinent from anti-colonial resistance to electoral democracy.
- [\*How Prime Ministers Decide...\*](#)

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BOOK EXCERPT

## A new book illustrates the ‘golden rule’ of free cash flow to keep businesses financially healthy

An excerpt from ‘Your Company Is Your Castle: How to Build a Successful Company’, by Sandeep Chennakeshu.

**Sandeep Chennakeshu**

10 hours ago



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Free cash flow determines a company’s health and financial fitness. If one thinks of a company (or a castle) as though it functioned like the human body, then cash flow would be the company’s lifeblood. Blood flows through the human body, carrying oxygen and nutrients to organs that help maintain bodily functions. When the body is starved of blood, bad things happen. The same is true with cash and a company. When a business is starved of healthy cash flow, it is difficult to invest in the company’s growth.

The important thing to remember is that free cash flow depends on several business parameters, such as revenue, gross margin, operating expenses (OPEX), capital expenses (CAPEX), working capital, debt

repayments, interest payments, and taxes.

A general manager's goal is to optimise these different parameters to maximise the resultant free cash flow. Since free cash flow is dependent on these parameters, it is a diagnostic indicator of how a business is managed. This is the reason I use it as my key indicator of the health and strength of a company. ...

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COMMON GROUND

## How the government undercut TISS over the past decade

The storied institution has made crucial contributions to social sciences research and policy. Now, faculty say, the government is choking its autonomy.

**Johanna Deeksha**

13 hours ago



Design | Rubin D'Souza

**I**n 1936, a Parsi philanthropic organisation, Sir Dorabji Tata Trust, established the Sir Dorabji Tata Graduate School of Social Work in Mumbai. It was the first institution, not just in India but in Asia, dedicated to the

study and practice of social work and the social sciences.

From the start, the institution, renamed the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in 1944, was committed to rigorous work on the ground, current and former professors said. In one of its first projects, it dispatched relief teams of students and faculty to refugee camps in the aftermath of the Partition in 1948.

Over the decades, the institute sent teams for both research and relief work to several places, including Ahmednagar in Maharashtra during a drought in 1972, Bhopal in the aftermath of the 1984 gas leak, Mumbai after riots in 1992, Gujarat after an earthquake in 2001, Nicobar Islands after the 2004 [tsunami](#), and [Uttarakhand](#) after the 2013 [cloudburst](#). It helped the government develop schemes and programmes, as well as audit and evaluate their performance....

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**BOOK EXCERPT**

## From the memoir: A former Director General of J&K Police recalls the Hazratbal siege of 1996

An excerpt from 'Kashmir Under 370: A Personal History by J&K's Former Director General of Police', by Mahendra Sabharwal and Manish Sabharwal.

**Mahendra Sabharwal** & **Manish Sabharwal**

14 hours ago



The surrender of the militants in 1993 punctured the early bluster of the Hurriyat spokesperson Abdul Ghani Lone, who said, “If armed forces storm the shrine, we will win. If they withdraw, we win.” He admitted later that “the end of the episode was not according to the wishes of the Hurriyat conference”. We knew that televising the militants’ surrender would create dissent, and predictably, the bickering soon began. The Jamait-ul-Mujahideen told local newspapers that the Hurriyat’s “coffin sellers” had let the people of Kashmir down, and the Hizbul Mujahideen said, “We gave them guns to use rather than surrender.” I observed many personal jeers and sneers in local circles about the militants’ cowardice in surrender, their inability to live up to their lofty talk, and for coming out at night with their hands above their heads. As my friend Sati Sahni wrote, “Hazratbal was a god-sent opportunity for the Hurriyat leadership, but the lack of imagination, factional rivalry, inept reflexes and incorrect appreciation of the situation meant they failed to capitalise on it.” Pakistan clearly agreed, as their proxies soon killed Hurriyat leader Abdul Ghani Lone....

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