



2026

8 APRIL

FREE SPEECH ASSAM, KERALA, AND PUDUCHERRY POLLS

Censorship and the Drumbeats of Hate



A REPORT BY FSC

www.freespeechcollective.in

freespeechcollectiveindia@gmail.com

Assam, Kerala, and Puducherry Polls: Censorship and the Drumbeats of Hate

On April 9, 2026, the states of Assam and Kerala and the union territory of Puducherry will go to the polls in the backdrop of the war in West Asia and its global fallout. In all three states, dissent was met with censorship, criminal cases and attacks on journalists, students, and social activists. The Special Intensive Revision (SIR) process to revise electoral rolls has been mired in controversy, while the rhetoric of hate and divisiveness will mark the electoral fortunes of political parties and the lives of the people.

In this special report, Free Speech Collective sums up the status of freedom of expression in these states and union territory for the past five years.

In Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-governed Assam, censorship, sedition cases against prominent journalists, attacks on journalists covering cases of corruption, and hate rhetoric dominated the last five years.

In Left Democratic Front-governed Kerala, there was an ominous mix of censorship of cinema and communal rhetoric, aided by crude propaganda films along with cases filed against journalists and social activists.

In the Union Territory of Puducherry, governed by an All India NR Congress (AINRC)-led coalition with the BJP and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), the censorship of student protests was an indicator of the turbulence of youth, faced with rising unemployment and an uncertain future.

The report includes special commentaries from senior journalist N P Chekutty in Kerala and journalist and social activist Anjuman Ara Begum in Assam, while noted academics and activists weigh in on the situation in Puducherry.

Assam: Politics of Polarisation A Free Speech Collective Overview

With Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma literally leading from the front with hate speech and hate rhetoric, the state goes to the polls in a climate harmful to free speech. Worsening the climate were other factors like the contentious Special Intensive Revision (SIR) process, the crackdown on social media posts and reports by journalists and citizens questioning corruption, destructive infrastructure projects and even the

threat of civil and criminal defamation over allegations of multiple passports allegedly held by Riniki Bhuyan Sarma, the wife of the chief minister.

On April 9, 2026, Assam is scheduled to elect its 16th state Legislative Assembly with 126 members. The BJP had a majority in the outgoing assembly. This time, it has joined hands with the Bodoland People's Front (BPF), splitting with the United People's Party Liberal (UPPL). The Indian National Congress (INC) has allied with the Rajjor Dal, Assam Jatiya Parishad, Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI (M)], CPI Marxist-Leninist [CPI (ML)] Liberation, and the All Party Hill Leaders Conference, while the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) is going it alone.

Barely five days before voting, the CPI (M) in Assam filed a complaint with the Assam Chief Electoral Officer, that state broadcasters All India Radio and Doordarshan had "censored substantial portions of its election broadcast speech that criticised the BJP-led state government." The party's speech had been submitted to AIR and Doordarshan in full compliance with the guidelines of the Election Commission, but entire sentences and paragraphs were removed, distorting its intended message to voters. The party's State Committee secretary Suprakash Talukdar described the edits as "brazen censorship" carried out in the name of vetting.

For the media, reporting on Assam risked police cases and arrests. In July 2025, The Wire's founding editor Siddharth Varadarajan was charged with sedition for publication of an article on the loss of Indian fighter jets to Pakistan and it was only on an order by the Supreme Court that no arrest followed the lodging of an FIR in the matter. Earlier, in 2021, journalists Sammriddhi K Sakunia and Swarna Jha, were detained by Assam police for allegedly spreading enmity on the basis of an FIR lodged in Tripura for reporting on the violence in the state.

Journalists focusing on corruption faced the ire of the state government. Last March, digital media journalist Dilwar Hussain Mozumder was arrested for allegedly abusing an unnamed Adivasi while trying to question the managing director of a cooperative bank over corruption charges. The arrest triggered outrage and protests from journalist bodies in Assam, and the reporter was finally released.

The year before, in January 2024, journalist Dipankar Medhi, chief reporter at NB News, was assaulted and forced by police to delete the recording on his camera after he asked the Nagaon deputy commissioner about the delays in processing documents for a loan waiver and the lack of access to a public toilet.

Self-censorship remained a constant. In August 2025, Assam Tribune stopped the column of veteran journalist Patricia Mukhim on the violation of human rights and 'dehumanisation' of Bengali-speaking Muslims in Assam.

But the hate rhetoric itself marked the term of Assam Chief Minister, as he constantly targeted the "Miya" Bengali-speaking Muslim community in Assam. Last May, after police arrested 58 youth for their social media posts in the wake of the Pahalgam attack, Sarma went on record to say "58 Pak sympathisers are behind bars. They will also receive special care for their anti-national activities," constantly referring to them as "traitors," though some posts were actually appeals for peace. He spoke of 'flood jihad' and advocated an economic boycott.

In February 2026, the BJP's state unit shared an AI-generated video of the Chief Minister shooting a man wearing a skull cap. The video was subsequently deleted. On February 26, the Guwahati High Court issued notice to the state government on petitions filed by various bodies and individuals seeking action against him for his discriminatory and Islamophobic speeches and comments.

Assam: Unregulated Hate Speech

By Anjuman Ara Begum

A special report on the hate mongering in Assam and its potential to tear apart the state's secular fabric.

Hate speech and communal polarisation remain the dominant poll planks in Assam, a key northeastern state. The incumbent chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma of the BJP, through his anti-Muslim rhetoric has targeted Muslims from the 'Miya' community, a pejorative term implying an unlawful immigrant from Bangladesh. Evictions though sanctioned to protect forest lands was framed as "getting rid" of these elements who were branded as 'infiltrators' or 'illegal migrants' aiming to polarize the population and to consolidate Hindu votes. The chief minister through his several speeches spread the xenophobic messages. For instance, on February 4, 2026, the Chief Minister made offensive remarks and urged the general public to harass the Miya Muslims by crushing them economically and also by telling them to cast their vote in Bangladesh, not in India.

While hate speech is often used for electoral mobilisation across India, it has reached unprecedented levels in the upcoming Assam Assembly elections. Hate speech coupled with disinformation and social media amplification of the same has proved an effective tool in Assam for the purpose of polarisation of the society along the lines of religion, ethnicity, and language. This messaging is evident in BJP's publicity material on billboards, posters, and wall graffiti, besides speeches at rallies, and memes on social media.

The incumbent Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), seeking a third consecutive term has been systematically seeding and nurturing the hate-filled election narrative with supportive media outlets and influencers for the last two years. During this period, the government carried out massive evictions in the state, rendering thousands homeless, and pushed back on 'declared foreigners' in order to protect indigenous interests. Alongside, the government has launched mega developmental projects like airports, bridges, flyovers and other infrastructure ventures and welfare schemes based on direct cash transfer aimed at the women's vote bank. The opposition, on the other hand, has suffered majorly due to party defections, fund crunch, and lack of equitable media coverage. However, the three major opposition parties were able to arrive at a consensus about nominations just before the election and relied on traditional vote banks like the minorities, leftists etc while deciding nominations.

Use of AI

This election campaign is marked by massive use of AI to generate hate-filled visuals to influence voters. Most of the AI generated videos contain hateful messaging portraying Muslims as foreigners, infiltrators, criminals, and illegal immigrants in order to dehumanize the community and to polarize voters. These videos coined and repeatedly used a term "Paijaan" a combination of Pakistan and Bhaijaan, targeting Congress leader Gaurav Gogoi to portray him as a supporter of Muslim infiltrators. One such video posted by the BJP IT Cell of Assam triggered legal action by prominent citizens of Assam. On February 7, the BJP's Assam wing posted an AI generated video showing Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma shooting Muslims and was captioned "point blank shot" and "no mercy". The video triggered outrage and was later deleted.

Court intervention

A case was filed before the Supreme Court of India by public intellectuals including Hiren Gohain, Shantanu Borthakur and H K Deka. The Supreme Court declined to entertain multiple petitions seeking the registration of an FIR and a Special Investigation Team (SIT) probe against Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma over alleged hate speech. On February 16, the court asked petitioners to approach the Gauhati High Court instead, claiming that their move to approach the apex court was a

“calculated” effort to “demoralise high courts.” the case was later filed in Gauhati High Court and on February 26, the High Court issued notice and observed that the Assam Chief Minister’s statements cited by petitioners appeared to show a “fissiparous tendency” and hence the notice.

Despite the legal action, hate speech continued. On 27 March, the Chief Minister while speaking at a rally in Bihpuria, said that in the past five years he had “broken the bones” of “Bangladeshi Miya” and claimed that in the next five years he would “break their backbone.”

Beef consumption

Beef consumption, which is in the popular perception – wrongly- confined to one religious community, remains another tool to propagate hate. ‘No Hindu can vote for a candidate whose parents eat beef,’ said the chief minister targeting the parents of Kunki Choudhury the youngest candidate in Assam who had already created a buzz through her campaigns. Consumption of beef is not illegal in the state, but the Assam Cattle Preservation Act, 2021, bans cattle slaughter and sale of beef in areas where Hindus, Jains and Sikhs are in majority, and in places within a five-km radius of a temple or ‘satra’. Sarma claimed that Kunki’s mother, academician Sujata Gurung Chowdhury, who belonged to the Gorkha community had shared posts in social media related to beef consumption and she apparently also posted supporting Sharjeel Imam and Umar Khalid, charged under counter-terror laws in Delhi.

Attack on media

The state also witnessed attacks on the media. On 25 March, bundles of a leading daily *Asomiya Pratidin* were set ablaze allegedly by BJP workers in Sivasagar triggering strong condemnation from the media fraternity and civil society. The distribution of smart phones to journalists just before the election also seems to be an attempt to control electoral narratives. On 3 January 2026, the Assam government distributed smart phones to more than 2,200 journalists registered with the state’s Directorate of Information and Public Relations (DIPR) as New Year gifts. Two senior reporters declined to accept them.

Conclusion

Hate speech coupled with disinformation can compromise the democratic process by propagating stigmatisation, discrimination and large-scale violence and creates an atmosphere where free and fair election is not guaranteed. The nature of hate speech in Assam indicates a governance issue where the head of the state is complicit and is engaged in open hateful rhetoric. The leniency towards accountability is also visible in the fact that custodian of constitution—the judiciary—has hardly taken a pro-active

action. The transfer of the case to the High Court in a state where the Chief Minister is in a politically powerful position requires rigorous scrutiny. Local media personnels too are not adequately critical of the anti-Muslim rhetoric of hate. Distribution of cell phones and the promise of other freebies compromised independence of the fourth pillar. India needs a definition of hate speech and explicit provision under Article 19 of the constitution to counter hate speech in politics.

(Anjuman Ara Begum is a freelance journalist, human rights and gender rights activist based in Guwahati, Assam)

Kerala: Clampdowns and Pushback

A Free Speech Collective Overview

A mix of censorship of cinema and state-supported corporate ventures, communal rhetoric, aided by crude propaganda films and cases filed against journalists and social activists marks the status of free speech in Kerala over the past five years.

On April 9, 2026, Kerala goes to the polls to elect 140 members to its 16th state assembly with the CPM-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) seeking a third term, challenged by the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) and the BJP-led NDA, which is aggressively making inroads into the state. The state has around 2.69 crore voters, with the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) process seeing a drop of nine lakh voters. There are around 2.23 lakh overseas voters, mostly in war-torn Gulf countries, registered to vote for this election.

Political analysts and journalists say that the climate for free speech is more conducive in Kerala than in other parts of the country. However, over the last five years, mainstream media in Kerala has taken on a more combative position vis-a-vis the ruling Left Front government. “Perhaps it is the incumbency issue, since it has been in power for ten years—two consecutive terms—which is rare in Kerala,” said Shahina K K, senior journalist and founder of Off Beat Concerns, a media training and research initiative. “The BJP has been trying its best to disrupt political equations in Kerala, but divisive politics don’t work here,” she said.

Between 2021-26, the term of the outgoing state assembly, lawfare has been used to curb dissent and censor news media, cinema, and news documentaries. From the Union government’s January 2022 ban on Malayalam television news channel Media One (and its subsequent quashing by the Supreme Court in 2025) to the mass FIRs lodged by the

state government against multiple citizens (for e.g., the 11 journalists and activists protesting the arrest of Kerala journalist Rejaz M. Sheeba Sydeek and the 31 pro-Palestine supporters of the Girls Islamic Organisation who face FIRs for a protest held in Kannur district) or the Rs 100-Crore defamation case filed by BJP President Rajeev Chandrashekar against nine journalists of Reporter TV - the attempt to silence came from all quarters.

Censorship in Cinema

Given the immense influence of cinema in Kerala's cultural and political life, the last five years have seen an intensification of battles over censorship in cinema. In October 2023, the Kerala High Court, in response to a film director's petition over a gag order on online film reviews, directed the Kerala police to ensure that the Kerala film industry is "not subjected to denigration on account of the illegal actions of a few people." As independent film reviewer Anna M M Vetticad said that the order on "review bombing" had grave implications for free speech and for the right of independent reviewers for fair comment and opinion.

More than ever, cinema has become a site for both propaganda and censorship. The ruling LDF and the Opposition UDF were ranged against the NDA over the hate-mongering film *The Kerala Story-2*, which managed to secure a release just before elections were announced in Kerala. The involvement of producers and directors of films like *Kerala Story 2* and the spate of crude propaganda films with the BJP and RSS is well documented in this report by The Quint.

The BJP-controlled Union government had earlier leaned on the 2025 International Film Festival of Kerala to block 19 films scheduled for screening, including the 100-year old classic *Battleship Potemkin*. The Kerala government, which decided to go ahead with the screening, later backed down after the Union Information and Broadcasting Ministry lifted the ban on 13 films.

Censorship took on other forms too. The redacted Justice Hema Committee report on the status of women in the Kerala film industry, formed in 2017 after the vicious sexual assault of a woman actor, was released in August 2024, four years after its submission to the government. The report revealed the extent of the sexual harassment and exploitation of women working in the industry and members of the Women in Cinema Collective, who spoke out and testified before the committee, went on record about the professional censorship and blacklisting they faced as a result.

Electoral campaigning and hate speech

Communal rhetoric has sought to change the tenor of election campaigning in Kerala, a state which celebrated religious co-existence and harmony.

The ratcheting up of hate led the Kerala High Court to question the Election Commission of India (ECI) over a petition filed to challenge the communal speeches of BJP candidate B Gopalakrishnan in Guruvayur. An FIR has been lodged against the candidate by the ECI, already under pressure over its clerical error fiasco. Forced to clarify its issuance of a letter with the BJP seal, the ECI then filed a complaint with Kerala cyber police to seek the removal of ten X accounts which posted the news.

But while the BJP clearly utilised its powers at the centre to censor and push through its political ideology, how has the LDF-led Kerala government responded to dissent?

Kerala: Civil Society Defends Free Speech *By N P Chekutty*

A breakdown of the issues before the electorate in this special analysis.

As Kerala goes to the polls on April 9, 2026, one important aspect of democratic polity where it might justifiably claim some credit is its defence of free speech, in spite of efforts on the part of some authorities to throttle such expression.

The media in Kerala remains comparatively free even today, when corporate powers have taken over control of most of our media outlets—print, electronic, and online—at the national level. The media scene in the state is still vibrant, ownership and representation widely spread, though the corporate-run mainstream newspapers, their television houses, and other outlets, dominate by way of readership, audience, and number of hits. However, this dominance does not translate into monopoly. There are media outlets from various small social groups, community organisations, and political parties, providing a space for every shade of opinion and diverse views and function as a forum for their public expression. The rise of social media has given a strong fillip to this tendency, and nowadays one can see the mainstream media following social media on a majority of issues.

There are several reasons for this comparatively comfortable situation in the state. The first is the strong democratic ethos that permeates every section of Kerala society. It might not be an egalitarian society when it comes to economic status and, in fact, in

recent years, there has been a worrying tendency of massive concentration of wealth with a few oligarchs. But when one looks at society at large there is some sort of an egalitarian ethos as one doesn't find the kind of social distinctions based on caste, class, or economic status prominent elsewhere. In the public sphere, almost every section, including Dalits and Adivasis, get a chance to voice their views and concerns.

This is the outcome of a long tradition of democratic politics where socialist ideals gained a relatively upper hand. The land reform process has not been free of blemishes -- it has generally overlooked the legitimate claims of Dalits and Adivasis to their right to own land -- but despite such problems it has empowered the majority of people to have claim land ownership and a social status and agency that it bestows. Widespread education also contributed to this situation.

But the most important factor that has contributed to a comparatively better atmosphere for free speech has been a vigilant public sphere that always defended the people's right to free expression. Any attempt by political or communal groups, to misuse their access to power and control of law enforcement agencies and browbeat vulnerable sections on any issue, has generally been pushed back by a vigilant public sphere.

Even in the contentious Sabarimala issue, when women journalists covering the temple entry were brutally attacked and trolled, civil society did come out and speak out. Timely public statements, agitations, and other methods to uphold their rights have ensured a lively and relatively free public sphere. This public vigilance is a vibrant aspect of Kerala society, and its writers, intellectuals and other opinion makers get due respect and public attention when they collectively raise their voice. Writers and public intellectuals are still held as the conscience of the people.

Many politicians and some powerful community leaders who vitiated – through words or action – these generally accepted norms, faced strong public condemnation. Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, in the early days of his first administration, realised the collective strength of public anger, when he dispersed media people who had gathered at a hotel where he planned to meet RSS leaders while negotiating an end to the decades-long violence and killings in Kannur district. His motive, he said, was to avoid media attention on sensitive talks which could have toppled the entire exercise. However, his impatient and unpalatable way of shouting at journalists to “get lost” evoked extreme reactions that still reverberate. It appears he did draw some lessons from it, going by his later efforts to remain at least partially restrained while dealing with the media.

Despite these positive steps at course correction, democratic politics and all its pillars, including the media, are facing an existential crisis today. There is growing anger especially on the part of the younger generation, towards the way things are being managed in the state. Rising corruption is a major concern. It was the media that used to bring such matters to public attention. But not any longer. The media seems to be unperturbed about corruption in public life; perhaps it might be that they too have to look for government largesse and political support for survival in an age where circulation is dropping alarmingly and advertisements going elsewhere. Things might take a different turn in the coming days. But that will be a concern for society as a whole, not only for votaries of free speech.

(N P Chekutty is a senior journalist, political analyst and author based in Kozhikode, Kerala)

Puducherry: Money, Muscle and Censorship *A Free Speech Collective Overview*

Censorship of student protests and attacks on journalists marked the run up to the elections to the Puducherry State Assembly, while the deletion of voters from electoral rolls, the entry of political party candidates with multi-crore declared assets and criminal records will define the electoral fortunes of this Union Territory.

Puducherry goes to the polls on April 9 with around nine lakh voters, at least 40 per cent of whom are young, first-time voters. The draft list put out after the Special Intensive Revision had deleted the names of around 1.03 lakh electors and the final list had 9.44 voters, a drop from the 10.21 lakh electors when the revision began. The Puducherry Chief Electoral Officer said 42,719 eligible electors were added while 16,619 ineligible electors were deleted in the one-month period for filing claims and objections on the draft roll.

With a large population of youth, unemployment is a major issue in this Union Territory currently governed by an All India NR Congress (AINRC)-led coalition that includes the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK). While tourism, drawn by its French colonial past and beaches fishing and agriculture fuel its economy, the demand for full statehood and the removal of control over the administration by the Lieutenant Governor are other issues before voters.

Free Speech Collective's record of violations of free speech over the last five years covered the attacks on journalists as well as student activists and opposition leaders. In February 2022, T Udayanarayan, the editor cum publisher of Tamil evening 'Namathu Murasu', was assaulted by a bike-borne gang while he was returning to his house in Murungapakkam while in Naam Tamilar Katchi (NTK) coordinator Seeman abused television reporter M Rajiv during a press interaction. Rajiv was asking him questions about the SIR process. Seeman was later booked for intimidation and obscenity on a complaint filed by the journalist.

In 2021, students protesting a fee hike were debarred by Pondicherry University but student activism, from both the left and right, continued. In 2024, the BJP student body the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) protested the staging of a play 'Somayanam' and sought to disrupt other plays. The fallout of the protest was the removal of the head of the department of performing arts from his post for approving the play and the filing of cases against the student director and student actors.

In May 2025, a new code of conduct governing students of the university triggered protests and in October the same year, there were protests over sexual harassment by some faculty members and the failure of the university to take cognisance of complaints.

Special Report on Puducherry: Coalition politics and Criminalisation of Peaceful Protests

Free Speech Collective spoke to a few prominent academics, rights activists, educators, and students to gauge the status of free speech and the issues before Puducherry voters.

Student activists (who chose anonymity) said that the climate of free speech on campus was already very poor. Dissent is seen with disfavour, and those who do voice their views are either isolated or penalised in different ways. With right wing appointees in key positions in campus administration, obtaining permissions for simple cultural events is difficult.

P. Joseph Victor Raj, the Puducherry Coordinator, National Election Watch, pointed out that the current climate in Puducherry has worsened partly because of coalition politics and partly because of ABVP-linked interventions due to which legitimate protests or cultural expression are treated as punishable misconduct.

He cited arrests of opposition leaders, student detentions/lathi-charge, as representing the clearest cases of violation of freedom of expression, because they involved political protest, public messaging, and state coercion.

- In March 2024, opposition leaders in Puducherry were arrested during a bandh and protest against the sexual assault and murder of a nine-year-old girl; the police also physically prevented protestors from reaching Raj Nivas and later arrested them.
- In March 2024, an ABVP protest at Pondicherry University, followed by a police case against students over a play, raised concerns about campus speech and the influence of RSS-affiliated student politics.
- In September 2024, several INDIA bloc leaders were arrested during a protest against the AINRC-BJP government over the power tariff hike.
- In October 2025, Pondicherry University escalating student protests drew police intervention, including a lathi-charge, with 24 students detained and 18 arrested and later released on bail.

All these instances indicate the clamping down on free speech in Puducherry, violating India's constitutional law that protects peaceful protest as part of free speech and assembly, said Victor Raj, pointing out that the Supreme Court has recognised that orderly, peaceful demonstration is a visible form of expression.

In Puducherry, the election scenario is clumsy and chaotic, with the breakdown of the INDIA bloc alliance, observed Dr Jerome Samraj, who is a senior faculty member of the Economics department in Pondicherry University and President of the university's SC/ST Employees Union. Elections are determined by local issues and tourism sustains the local economy but regrettably, administrators or politicians seem to have no vision beyond tourism or at the very least, for sustainable tourism, he said. The bureaucracy is more powerful than elected representatives in the union territory and the demand for statehood must be seen in this context, he said.

Given the relatively lower taxes for liquor in the union territory, Puducherry gets an influx of weekend tourists and has seen a surge in the number of guesthouses and lodges.

Salai Selvam, writer and children's educator said that the prevailing social and political culture of Puducherry has changed. "Puducherry is made up of many parts - we have the "white" town, the rural and urban cities, different religious communities, the tourist Pondy and the small city Pondy - all of these co-existed together. Earlier, the government was more sensitive to these different cultures in Pondy," she said.

But with the current NDA government in power at the Centre, it is quite clear that the NR Congress cannot operate independently. “What Delhi decides, Pondy will do and it is sad that our local politicians don’t push back. People have become submissive,” she rues. A case in point is the change in the school syllabus from the earlier Tamil Nadu syllabus to the centralised NCERT and CBSE without any preparation, leaving students and youth to bear the brunt of the change.

“Unemployment is high and we find degree holders willing to take on small jobs, any jobs. An engineering degree holder is ready to go for a security job, a B.Ed will be ready to get a Rs 5000/month job, and if she doesn’t get it, she’ll be willing to take up a housekeeping job in the hospitality industry,” Selvam said, adding that women are a major workforce but are totally invisible and unacknowledged.

Money and Muscle Power

According to the Election Watch report of the Association of Democratic Reforms, 66 of the 294 candidates in the fray have pending criminal cases against them. Of them, 28 candidates faced serious charges of murder, attempted murder, rape etc.

Jose Charles Martin, Latchiya Jananayaga Katchi (LJK) founder and son of lottery tycoon Santiago Martin, is the NDA candidate from the urban Kamaraj Nagar constituency. His declared assets are a whopping Rs 600 Crores.

The Election Watch report states that the role of “money and muscle power is evident from the fact that all major political parties in Puducherry Assembly Elections 2026 have fielded 37% to 100% candidates who are crorepatris and 14% to 50 % candidates who have declared criminal cases against themselves. This close and alarming nexus between money power and muscle power has got so ingrained in our electoral system that the citizens are left hostage to the current situation. Money and muscle power hurt the principles of 'free and fair elections', 'participatory democracy' and 'level playing field'. The present circumstances therefore demand an extensive deliberation by the voters so that sanctity of elections is not ridiculed by tenacious entry of tainted candidates and candidates with abnormal multiplication of assets.”

All the BJP candidates in the fray were declared “crorepatris” while all the AINRC’s candidates declared assets of over a million and around 92 per cent of the DMK’s candidates declared themselves millionaires.

While campaigning comes to an end in Assam, Kerala and Puducherry, it is clear that a free and fair election requires robust democratic processes including equal and fair access to the ballot, voter awareness and free and effective participation in the electoral process. Overcoming

arbitrary revision of voters' rolls, deliberate exclusion, combating misinformation and hate speech and using legal interventions where relevant are challenges facing a vigilant public in each of these states and union territory.