

Human Sciences Lab

Project

The Discourse and Political Motives Surrounding The Sabarimala Case

By

Aaryan Sharma (2020115008)
Hariharan Kalimuthu (2020115015)
Hitesh Goel (2020115003)
Radheshyam Thiagarajan (2020115009)

A Brief History



The Sabarimala Temple is a temple complex located at Sabarimala hill in Kerala. It is considered to be one of the largest annual pilgrimage sites in the world with an estimate of over 40 to 50 million devotees visiting every year. This temple is a shrine devoted to a Hindu deity called Ayyappan who is said to be the son of the Hindu Gods Shiva and the feminine incarnation of Vishnu, called Mohini. According to the legends, Lord Ayyappan went into this shrine after defeating the evil demoness Mahushasuri in order to live the life of a brahmachari (a celibate) and answer the prayers of his devotees. This legend lead to the birth of a tradition which is said to be followed since atleast 500 years wherein women of reproductive age group were barred from entering the temple. This tradition followed the belief that Ayyappan himself placed restrictions on women entering as presence of women of reproductive age group would distract him from his vow to be celibate.

Several women visited the temple occasionally until the Kerala High Court legalised this restriction on women in 1991. This decision followed a petition filed by S Mahendran in the year 1990 alleging that young women were visiting the Sabarimala Temple. The court decided to ban women from ages 10 to 50 from entering the temple and the Kerala Government was granted the use of police force in order to enact this law. The reasoning given by the court was that this practice had been there since a long time and it observed that:

“Such restriction (restriction of women entry) imposed by the Devaswom Board is not violative of Articles 15, 25 and 26 of the Constitution of India. Such restriction is also not violative of the provisions of Hindu Place of Public Worship (Authorisation of Entry) Act, 1965 since there is no restriction between one section and another section or between one class and another class among the Hindus in the matter of entry to a temple whereas the prohibition is only in respect of women of a particular age group and not women as a class.” (KHC1991, paragraph 44, (1), ["S. Mahendran vs The Secretary, Travancore ... on 5 April, 1991"](#). [indiankanoon.org](#). Retrieved 24 October 2018.)

In 2006, six women members of the Indian Young Lawyers Association filed a PIL (Public Interest Litigation) to the Supreme Court challenging the Sabarimala Temple's custom of excluding women and claiming it to be discriminatory towards women. The Association argued that the custom violates the rights to equality under Article 14 and freedom of religion under Article 25 of female worshippers. (Paraphrased from an article on the website 'Supreme Court Observer', which maintains archives of the judgments of the Supreme Court of India, <https://www.scobserver.in/court-case/sabarimala-temple-entry-case/plain-english-summary-of-judgment-ee5ae148-9597-479f-84d7-35d398ed5e68>).

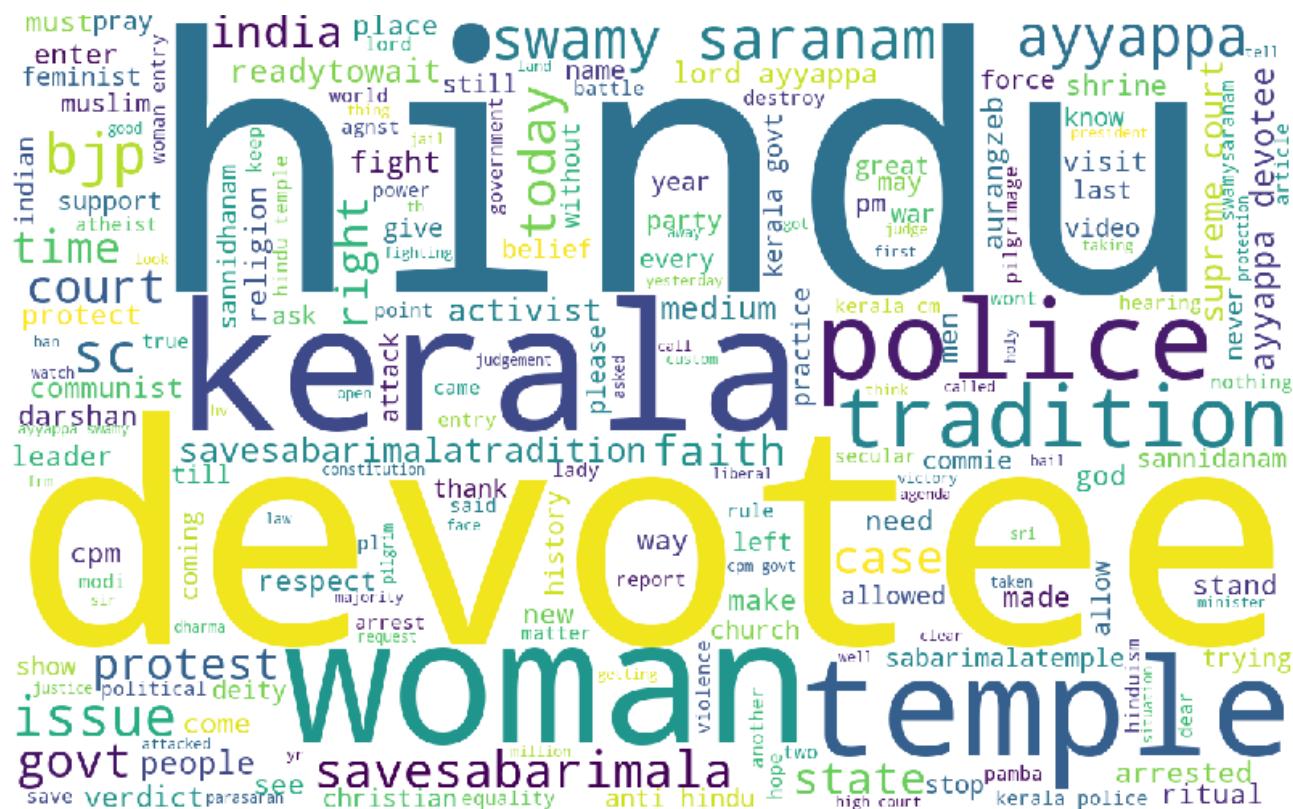
In September 2018, the Supreme Court of India passed the verdict with 4-1 majority that women of all age groups can enter Sabarimala temple and observed that “*the custom of barring women was in violation of Article 25 (Clause 1) and Rule 3(b) of Kerala Hindu Places of Worship.*” (Rautray, Samanwaya (29 September 2018). ["Women of all ages can](#)

enter Sabarimala Temple, rules Supreme Court". The Economic Times. Retrieved 20 October 2018.)

This decision sparked a huge controversy and protests/hartals emerged all across Kerala. The discourse was very well represented in social media and this issue became a huge political battleground for the BJP, LDP, CPI(M) and INC as we will discuss later.

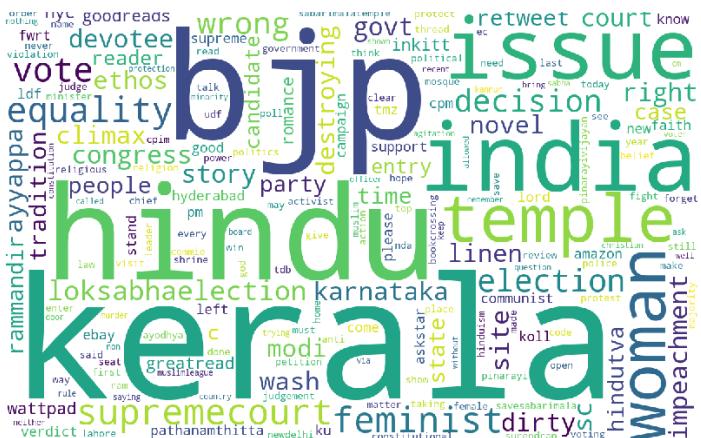
Analysing The Discourse Over Social Media (Twitter)

We managed to scrape around 5000 tweets related to the Sabarimala case during the time period the verdict was passed by the Supreme Court and the year following that in order to analyse what kind of discussion the general public was engaged in. People took to social media to express their thoughts and opinions on the verdict and the public was hugely divided both in support and against the verdict. To get a general essence of what all points each side raised, we took the help of computational tools. We ran a frequency analysis of the words used in tweets during a particular time period and made a word cloud. (A word cloud is a pictorial depiction comprising of all the words that appeared in the tweets. The size of each word is proportional to its usage frequency in the tweets). We ran twitter scraping twice with different keywords and other filters to cover as much of the discussion as possible and generated 2 word clouds.

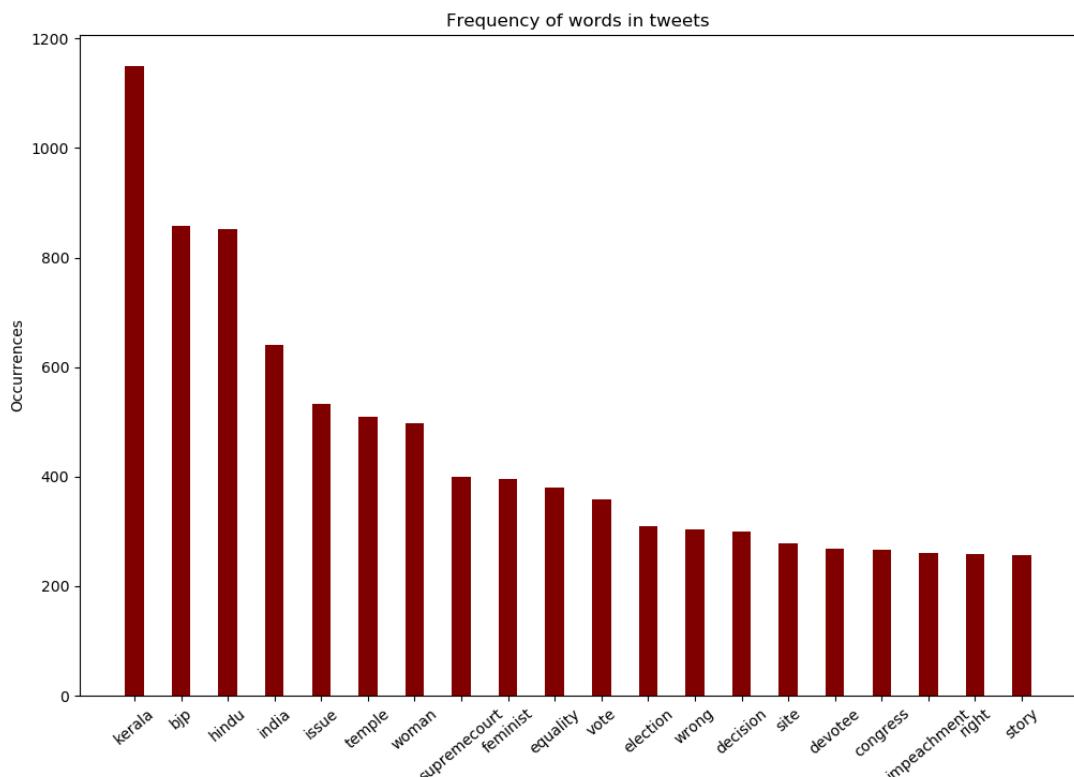


Now, we can make quite a lot of interesting observations from the wordclouds. Words like Hindu, Kerala, temple have been used quite prominently as expected. However, the fact that there is a huge usage of the word 'BJP' points to the fact that the discourse over the Sabrimala issue was heavily intervened by BJP and they probably played a major role in upscaling the issue, there were quite a lot of mentions of CPI(M) as well. The fact that political parties' names came up in this discourse along with words like 'communist'

and ‘political’ is an indicator to the fact that this verdict became yet another political tool which could be exploited by parties to gain vote-share advantage by playing a religion card. The words ‘wrong’ and ‘decision’ appearing together with the same size points to

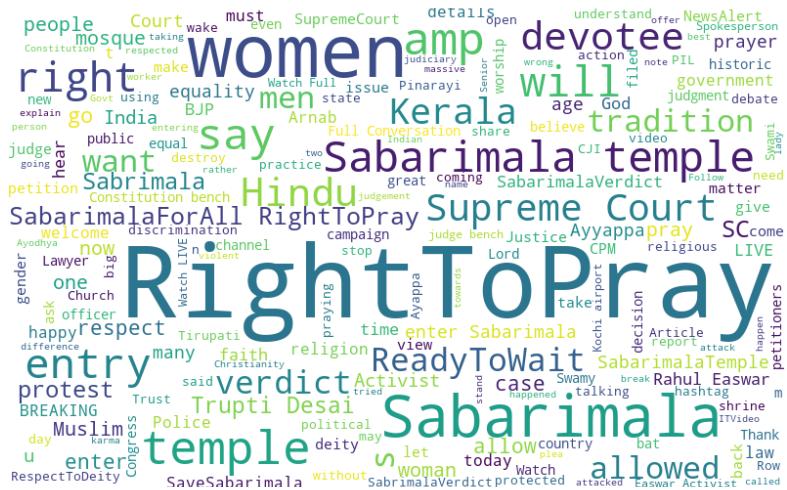


other side of the discussion which was probably used by the people who justified the verdict with the argument of equality of genders. Words like ‘anti-hindu’ have also made significant appearance suggesting that a certain section of Hindu population saw this verdict as hurting their religious sentiments. The following bar graph has been attached which shows the frequency of the twenty most used words.

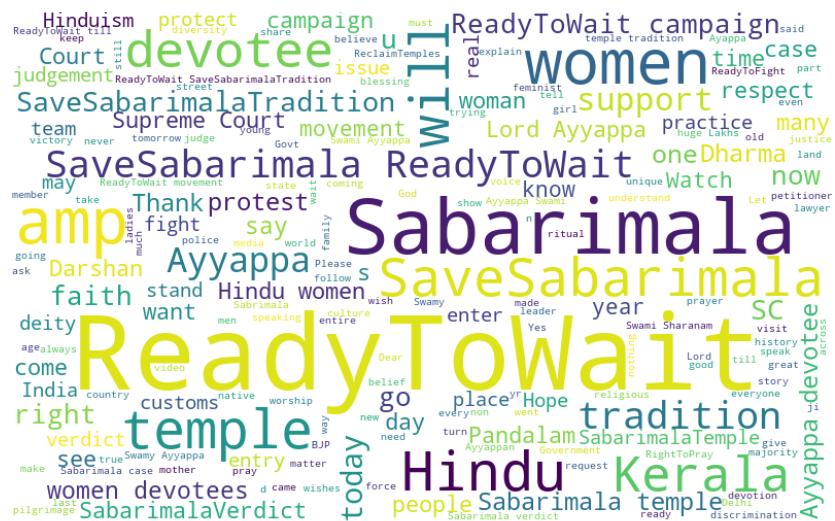


Furthermore, two popular hashtags started trending on twitter. People who supported the verdict which embraced equality between genders saw the lift of restrictions on women willing to venture on the pilgrimage as a progressive step and tweeted with the hashtag #RightToPray. This lead to the women who were opposed to the verdict tweeting with the hashtag #ReadyToWait in order to counter the supporters of the verdict.

For #RightToPray



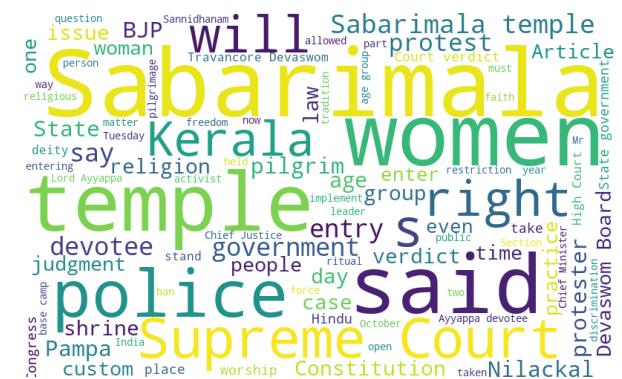
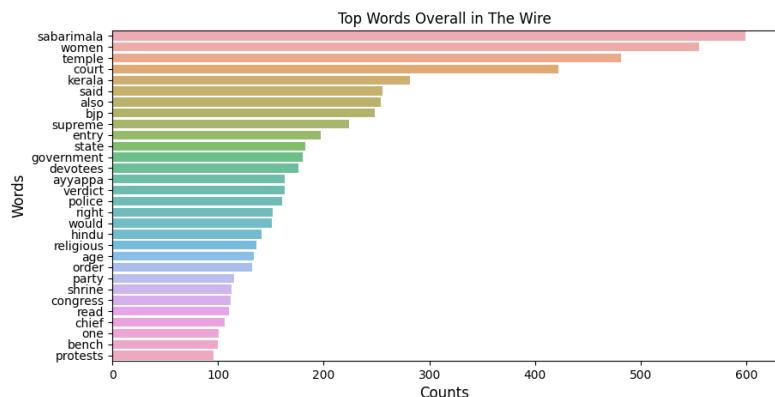
For #ReadyToWait



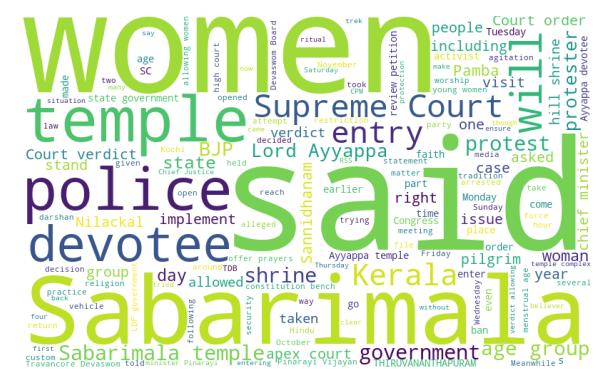
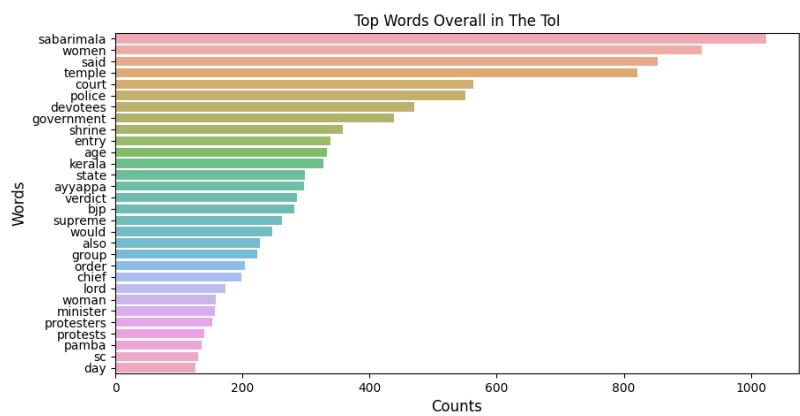
The analysis of both these wordclouds along with other newspaper articles lead us to draw out the arguments that were presented by each side of the debate and the justification of their beliefs. The conclusions drawn from these will be discussed later when we talk of the justification both sides gave in order to support or oppose the ban on menstruating women entering the shrine. We further set a filter to give us the tweets used by influential people by setting the minimum likes on a tweet to be 1000. This allowed us to have a look at what people with a social media following had to say on this issue apart from the public as a whole. We went through the tweets manually since there were only around 85 of them and we found out that these tweets were mostly either welcoming of the verdict warmly or were subtle in their disappointment to the scraping of this age old tradition.

Analysis From Article Scraping (The Wire, The Times of India and The Hindu)

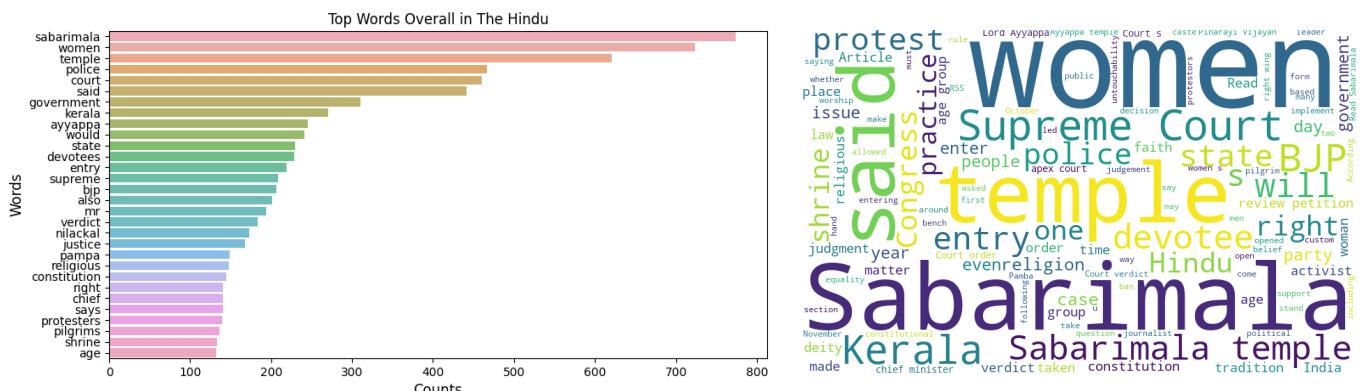
It is impossible for us to manually go through each and every article that covered the Sabarimala case but the computational tools yet again come to our aid in analysing the huge chunk of information, perspectives and opinions that was presented by popular the media houses. We collected over 194 articles from ‘The Times of India’, 130 Articles from ‘The Hindu’ and 70 articles from ‘The Wire’ and stored them into three text files using a python script. In order to analyse the 394 articles we scraped regarding the Sabarimala incident, we ran a frequency analysis yet again for each individual media. Following are the bar-graphs and word clouds generated for each of them.



(The Times of India)



(The Hindu)



(The Wire)

From these newspaper articles, we see the word protest appear with quite a decently sized font across all the newspapers. This tells us that the verdict was followed with a lot of opposition and these protests were extensively covered by the media. The mention of BJP in all the three newspapers quite significantly again indicates the heavy involvement of BJP in this matter. (Refer to the fact that majority of the protests did arise on BJP's leadership confirms this fact. The political impact of this move by the parties to demonstrate their ideologies on this matter was studied by us as well and will be discussed in the subsequent sections. Kerala police was involved in many fronts from controlling protests to providing protection to women who ventured into the pilgrimage after the supreme court ruling because they were often attacked by the opposers. The computational tools allowed us to analyse a lot more articles than we could have manually gone through and has provided us with a lot of valuable insights.

Based on the manual reading of newspaper articles, tweets and also making use of the results of the analysis drawn from using computational tools, we got to know about the major arguments raised by both sides of the population which had divided opinions on the Sabarimala case. The devotees of Lord Ayappa opposed the verdict, and the other group believed that discrimination against women based on biological differences is against the spirit of the constitution.

Both sides presented their arguments for opposing or welcoming the verdict. The devotees believed that the restrictions are part of the culture and a tradition as a mark of respect towards Lord Ayyappa. They presented the case study of the Brahma temple of Pushkar, The only temple in India dedicated to Lord Brahma, and there are similar restrictions on men In the same temple. The lawyer representing the devotee named Sangam argued in the supreme court that Lord Ayyappa should be considered a person and Article 21 of the constitution should protect Lord Ayyappa's Right to privacy.

Another group claimed that sanctity is instead a religious issue related to fundamental religious rights rather than considering it as discrimination against women.

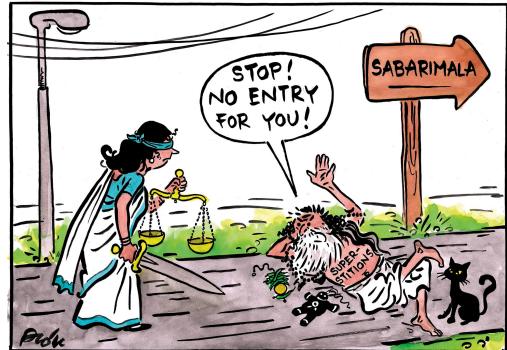
Political Outcome(s) of the Sabarimala Issue

The two major political fronts in Kerala are LDF (Left Democratic Front) and UDF (United Democratic Front). The Communist Party (Marxist) is the dominant party of LDF and the Indian National Congress is the dominant party of UDF.

Two major events occurred regarding Sabarimala.

1. Law was created to ban entry in 1991
2. Supreme Court revoked the law in 2018

In 1991, the Kerala High Court passed an order banning the entry of menstruating women (aged between 10 and 50) in accordance to the traditions. LDF was the government from 1987 to 1991. They had 3 out of 5 seats in Pathanamthitta. However, after the 1991 elections, they didn't have a single seat in the district.



In 2006, the Indian Young Lawyers Association filed a plea in the Supreme Court seeking to quash the ban on entry of women of menstruating age. LDF, the ruling party in Kerala at the time also filed an affidavit supporting PIL questioning ban on women's entry. This set the ground for the events that took place post 2016 and the subsequent ruling by the SC to allow women's entry in the Sabarimala Temple.



When the law was over turned by the Supreme court in 2018, LDF was still in power in Kerala. As mentioned before, the government was in support of the judgement. There was criticism against the government saying that it was acting very hastily by accepting the order. The judgement was opposed by BJP and widely by the UDF. The claim was that it was anti-Hindu and was going against the traditions. Among the general public too, there were many supporting it, saying it protected women rights and equality, while on the other hand, there were women too who were opposing it saying they were ready to wait. Also, LDF had held the position of power in the state for long. So BJP and the INC started to protest against this verdict in the hope that they will be able to overthrow the LDF government in the upcoming 2021 Kerala elections. The BJP was involved in inciting quite a lot of riots, hartal and protests.

However, in the legislative elections of 2021, the prime opposer of the judgement – BJP lost the only seat it had (in 2016), leaving it with no voice in the legislative assembly, while Congress didn't do very well either, only winning a minority of the votes. The LDF continued to form the government. In the district of Pathanamthitta, where Sabarimala is located, the number of seats for LDF increased from 3 to 5 out of 5 seats. Thus, it indicates that the BJP and UDF weren't able to capitalise on the Sabarimala issue despite ardent efforts to ride the tide of controversy.

On scraping the information of the candidates participating in the 2021 Kerala elections, another interesting correlation is the average criminal cases on the party candidates:

Average criminal cases for INC candidates: **7.563218390804598**

Average criminal cases for BJP candidates: **12.342592592592593**

Average criminal cases for LDF candidates: **2.526315789473684**

The INC and BJP candidates have a much higher number of criminal cases in comparison to LDF. One possible explanation to this observation is that since the BJP and LDF opposed the verdict, they organised quite a lot of hartal/protests against the government, and the supreme court's verdict, resulting in a greater number of cases filed against them. More data about each of the candidates who stood for the elections can be found in the link of the GitHub repository attached at the end of references section.

References

Information regarding Sabarimala Temple and the Sabarimala Case

- <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/sabarimala-case-supreme-court-upholds-referring-religious-questions-to-larger-bench-frames-7-questions-of-law/article30780943.ece>
- <https://indianexpress.com/article/what-is/what-is-the-sabarimala-case-5376596/>
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Entry_of_women_to_Sabarimala#CITEREFKHC1991
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Entry_of_women_to_Sabarimala
- <https://www.scobserver.in/court-case/sabarimala-temple-entry-case/plain-english-summary-of-judgment-ee5ae148-9597-479f-84d7-35d398ed5e68>
- <https://www.scobserver.in/court-case/sabarimala-temple-entry-case>
- <https://www.drishtiias.com/pdf/sc-allows-women-entry-into-sabarimala-temple.pdf>
- <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sabarimala>
- <https://www.theleaflet.in/sabarimala-verdict-a-watershed-moment-in-the-history-of-affirmative-action/>
- <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/163639357/>
- <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/1915943/>
- <http://probono-india.in/research-paper-detail.php?id=751>
- <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/sc-clarifies-on-sabarimala-review-pleas-can-refer-to-larger-bench-6405622/>
- <https://bangaloremirror.indiatimes.com/bangalore/others/24-years-after-touching-idol-jayamala-indicted/articleshow/21726157.cms>
- <https://www.scobserver.in/court-case/sabarimala-temple-entry-case/plain-english-summary-of-judgment-ee5ae148-9597-479f-84d7-35d398ed5e68>
- <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/supreme-court-allows-women-to-enter-sabarimala-temple/articleshow/65989807.cms>

Effect of Sabarimala Protests on Elections

- <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/kerala-assembly/sabarimala-did-not-become-an-electoral-issue-says-csds-lokniti-survey/article34502158.ece>
- <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/sabarimala-card-fails-again-ldfs-performance-pathanamthitta-proof-148344>
- <https://www.elections.in/kerala/assembly-constituencies/1991-election-results.html>
- <https://www.elections.in/kerala/assembly-constituencies/1987-election-results.html>
- <https://theprint.in/politics/sabarimala-shadow-on-kerala-polls-murmurs-of-bjp-only-party-for-hindus-in-pathanamthitta/629323/>
- <https://www.firstpost.com/india/supreme-court-verdict-on-sabarimala-judicial-remedy-sought-against-ban-on-women-for-first-time-in-2006-against-1991-kerala-high-court-ruling-a-timeline-7650091.html>

- <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/cong-led-udf-promises-law-protect-sabarimala-temple-customs-142941>
- <https://www.oneindia.com/list-of-chief-ministers-of-kerala/>

The pictures we used:

- https://bsmedia.business-standard.com/media-handler.php?mediaPath=https://bsmedia.business-standard.com/_media/bs/img/article/2016-12/26/full/1482748456-5874.jpg&width=1200
- <https://blog.ipleaders.in/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/sabarimala.jpg>
- <https://www.facebook.com/CartoonistAlok/photos/meanwhile-in-sabarimala/1815686541860129/>

The codes we used and the data extracted from them can be found in the following link:

- https://github.com/hitesh05/ComputationalSciences_intro/tree/main/Lab_Project

Work Division

Although each one of us was involved in contributing to each of the subtopics of the project, each subtopic was divided amongst us and spearheaded by two people each. Following are the topics each individual played a major part in designing:

- **Aaryan: History & Twitter Analysis**
- **Hariharan: Twitter & Article Analysis**
- **Hitesh: Article Analysis & Political Outcome Section**
- **Radheshyam: History & Political Outcome Section**