Outlook

Read · Think · Understand

Voice Of The Electorate

Lower voter turnout, lack of issues in the biggest elections ever leave a trail of uncertainty
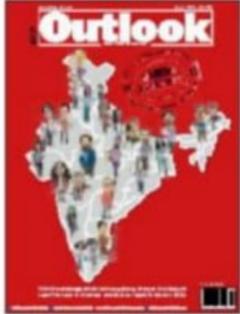
REPORTERS'
GUARANTEE

POINT AND SHARE

Now, open *Outlook* magazine on your
smartphone instantly.
Point your phone's scanner on the
code and align it in the frame.
You will be guided instantly to our
website, www.outlookindia.com
This is useful to share our stories on
social media or email them.

‹ N A V I G A T O R ›

ON THE COVER

"Installing Democracy" is part of a series of watercolour paintings, created almost daily, during the run-up to the 2024 Lok Sabha elections in India. These paintings also document the most significant election year in human history, which will seal the fate of millions of people worldwide, not only shaping geopolitics, but also the very nature of democratic rights for years to come.
The question is: when the dust settles, where will we be? Far better or worse?

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Varunika Saraf is an artist and art historian based in Hyderabad.

2024 Education **Fact File**

***Disclaimer:** An Outlook Brand Solution Initiative*

Facebook

Twitter

Try The Fish, Sam!

Satish Padmanabhan

THE entire nation knows Arvind Kejriwal's blood sugar levels. On April 21, at 7.30 am, it was 217. On April 23, at 8 pm, it had shot up to 320. There were intense debates on TV studios with panels of diabetes experts countering each other as to when insulin should be given. Should it be at 200 or at 230? Kejriwal's rivals asked why he was eating mangoes in jail if he is diabetic. His lawyer Abhishek Manu Singhvi had to tell the Rouse Avenue Court in Delhi: "Mangoes have been made to look like sugar bullets." Apparently, Kejriwal also had *halwa* and *aloo puri* on the occasion of Ram Navami. Is that what a diabetic should be eating? Newspapers and websites had 'explainers'—the go-to toolkit to bait the readers to click—where nutritionists weighed in on the molecular make-up of *halwa*, sugar content of potatoes, harmful effects of deep-fried items like *puris*. Their collective conclusion was that if eaten in moderation, it was alright.

When he finally did get the insulin shot, his party, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), posted on X: "This has been possible only due to the blessings of Lord Hanuman and the struggle of the people of Delhi. We have succeeded in delivering insulin to our Chief Minister." This could be the exact message Lord Ram could have posted during the time of the *Ramayana*: "This has been possible only due to the blessings of Lord Hanuman and the struggle of the people of Ayodhya. We succeded in delivering the Sanjeevani herb to our brother Lakshman." Outside the AAP office, a supporter was dressed as Hanuman (all this fuss about Hanuman because Kejriwal is an avowed Bajrang Bali *bhakht*, or at least in the AAP's attempt at soft-Hindutva) with two giant insulin vials cut-outs, along with the AAP leader and minister of health for Delhi, Saurabh Bharadwaj.

After Kejriwal's sugar levels somewhat stabilised, next came this bolt from Prime Minister Narendra Modi: "The royal family's prince's advisor has said that more taxes should be imposed on the middle class. Now, these people have gone one step further than this... the Congress says that it will impose an Inheritance Tax, and it will also impose tax on the inheritance received from parents. The property you have accumulated through your hard work will not be given to your children," he thundered.

All hell broke loose—what on earth is this Inheritance Tax? All the rich children caring for old parents choked on their cool, tall summer drinks. Will it all go to the government? they quaked. Many thought the nepotism controversy of Bollywood was back. Do all the star kids have to pay a tax now? Had Kangana Ranaut raked up something again, in her fervent campaigning in Mandi?

And who is this Congress advisor Modi was referring to, ushering in such groundbreaking tax reforms? It was the good old Sam Pitroda—one of the few gents who dyes his French beard jet black and leaves his hair snow white—a relic in the Congress as the STD/PCO booths he is credited with spreading all over the country, and currently leader of the Indian Overseas Congress, sitting somewhere in Illinois. Sam, who? Many in the Congress asked before they hurried to dissociate themselves with the statement. Dutifully, all the websites did explainers on 'What is Inheritance Tax?' and 'Who Is Sam Pitroda?' Is Inheritance Tax the most burning issue in these elections, will any party dare to introduce it if elected to power, least of all the Congress, with its wealth of inheritance? Just before this, the nation's eyes were glued on Tejashwi Yadav's plate of fried fish. There was righteous indignation that he was chomping on fish during the Navaratri festival, at least in what's called the cow belt region, as nobody much cares for this fasting period in the east or the south. To mend his non-*sanskari* ways, Tejashwi promptly released another video on X that showed him eating oranges. I am sure there were explainers on the importance of fasting, benefits of omega-3 acid in fish and immunity-boosting abilities of oranges.

The BJP and the INDIA bloc are fighting this election visionless. On the plus side, there is no jingoistic nationalism in the campaign speeches like there was five years ago, boosted by the Balakot airstrike. But on the negative, no party is raising the issues of unemployment, health, education, corruption, sanitation, violence against women, abysmal social indices, climate change—yes, it's a recurring lament, they are all dull and dour subjects for TV brawls, but what perhaps matter most to the voters. That's why *Outlook* will hold on to its journalistic standards and our reporters will continue to bring stories from the ground in this edition—on the changing ethos of Varanasi, red-sand mining in the Naxal areas of Gadchiroli, Adivasi identity in Maharashtra, polarisation in Karnataka, disillusionment in Bihar, water scarcity in Rajasthan, the ghettos in Gujarat, fewer voters in Kerala and political machinations in Kashmir. Ⓞ

Electoral Samples

(Left) cut-out of Hanuman with two giant insulin vials; (right) Tejashwi Yadav holding fried fish

 Facebook

 Twitter

The Muslim Question

In the time of polarisation politics and othering, how to respond to the banality of hate?

Tanvir Aeijaz

TEACHES POLITICS AND PUBLIC POLICY AT UNIVERSITY OF DELHI AND IS HON. VICE-CHAIRMAN, CENTRE FOR MULTILEVEL FEDERALISM, NEW DELHI

IN the Indian electoral democracy, the Muslim question, inescapably, is one of the most pressing questions. For the major political parties, and even for some of the regional ones, this question continually upsets their political imagination in redeeming democracy. Their perceptions about Muslim citizenry as an electorate is mired in the convoluted sense of polarisation politics, which reproduces the binary of "national—anti-national", particularly in the backdrop of the

ILLUSTRATION: ANU

Facebook

Twitter

Fighting Hate
A gathering at Jantar Mantar, Delhi to promote communal harmony and condemn hate crimes against Muslims

"us-and-them" rallying cry. During election campaigns, the acerbic speeches against Muslims, the call for their genocide, annihilation and violence, and the flagrant appeals for stripping of their dignity have become one of the leitmotifs of political mobilisation since the ascension of Hindutva politics in India. Hindutva rhetoric, and the consequent political dividends, flourish on Islamophobia. Certainly, the spectre of what is called the Muslim question haunts the political parties in their strategic electioneering course. So, is there an answer to the Muslim question? Before the answer, it is crucial to deconstruct the Muslim question.

The Marginalisation of Indian Muslims

There are three issues, among others, that lead to the marginalisation of Indian Muslims, both in terms of electoral and socio-economic aspects. These are: Muslims' high political underrepresentation, socio-economic exclusion and impoverishment, undergirded by the elements of fear, discrimination, and violence. The Muslim question, essentially, as to what needs to be done to reverse the marginalisation process and to build safeguards against the tyranny of persecution, is at the core of Muslim politics in India.

India is home to one of the world's largest Muslim populations, about two hundred million, which is significantly decisive electorally in at least one-third of the states in both Central and State elections. Despite the Muslim population share of nearly about 15%, there has been a dismal representation of Muslims in the Lok Sabha, hovering around the average of 4% since independence. Major political parties, including the Congress which is accused of 'Muslim appeasement' politics, are not only reluctant to field Muslim candidates in elections but are also skeptical about their role in electioneering and the campaign process. We hardly see any Muslim star campaigner in the lists released by national

parties during election campaigns. A couple of Muslim national spokespersons pop up during elections on TV debates, representing Muslims less and party ideology more, further contributing to the misconception that their parties support Muslim candidature. Interestingly, post-elections, these spokespersons are made to step into political oblivion.

The majoritarian impulse of Hindutva forces, evident in the slogans for a unitarian, uniform, and homogenised polity, has led to the hollowing out of the twin principles of democracy and federalism—the bedrock of Indian constitutionalism. The impulse has contributed immensely to sharpening the religious binary and deepening the widespread polarisation between Hindus and Muslims, quite evident in the hate crimes that get bolstered by the culture of impunity. The "politics of polarisation" has ghettoised the Muslim community as far as their political representation is concerned since parties consider them for nominations, hesitatingly, only in Muslim-dominated constituencies. Muslims, therefore, are in need of their representatives, leaders, and harbingers, not necessarily Muslims only, who can walk the talk on behalf of the Muslim question, and try to alleviate and assuage their poverty and exclusion in the interest of a strong India.

Hate Speeches

Recently Prime Minister Modi, in his election campaign, dubbed Muslims as "infiltrators" who would snatch away India's wealth if the Opposition is voted to power, perhaps a direct attack against the country's largest minority by any prime minister so far. This was quite a different image of him as compared to the one presented globally. He added that the gold *mangalsutras* of Hindu wives will be taken away by the Congress and handed over to Muslims. He also said that the Congress will give away the SC-ST quota to Muslims. Muslims, by now, are quite adept at stomaching invectives, incendiary

Facebook

Twitter

remarks, hate speeches and acerbic barbs and insults levelled against them. When they are forced to chant "*Jai Shri Ram*" and "*Bharat Mata ki Jai*" by vigilante groups, they do it to buy peace. To adapt from Hannah Arendt's famous title *The Banality of Evil*, the unremarkable banality is reflected a great deal in the *language* of evil. Languages are never neutral and hate speeches, in particular, are layered with interests, values, perspectives, and emotions that target a group (read Muslims) to put down and disparage its members. The very purpose of hate speech is to attune people to the practises of hate, a core part of polarisation politics. The Muslim question is how to respond to such banality of hate.

Socio-economic Exclusion

The issue of socio-economic exclusion of Muslims is germane to the practice of identity politics. The Indian State-building elites, armed with an upsurge in the demands of populism, want to homogenise identities within the nation-state they seek or claim to control. The practice of Hindutva, since a decade, has been constructing both (among others), the Hindu and the Muslim identities. The Hindu identity is carefully crafted in association with national, aspirational, and majoritarian identities and the Muslim identity with non-national, non-aspirational, and minority identities. The efforts by the conservatives to homogenise the Indian population around a single national identity under the red-letter Hindutva edition is to basically exclude competing minority claims, which are the hallmark of India's diversity in terms of religions, languages, ethnicities, and cultures. If mainstream is majoritarian-stream, then Muslims fear subjugation or losing their identities, they fear losing their "selves" in their "otherisation". They face the paradoxical crisis of inclusion and exclusion.

By all human development indicators, the socio-economic conditions of Muslims, particularly since the 1990s of Mandal, *mandir*, and market fundamentalism politics have gone from bad to worse. Scholars observe that the steps such as the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), discrediting of places of worship Act, litigations to take over other mosques, arrests of Muslims post anti-CAA protests, and hate speeches laced with violence time and again have marked a shift from marginalisation to massive exclusion. The Sachar Committee Report (2005) highlighted the dismal living conditions of Muslims, which is even worse than the country's backward communities including Dalits, if we go by a few key indicators. Its recommendations were largely shelved by different Central governments and some politicians from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) dubbed the report a biased "Muslim appeasement" toolkit. A committee headed by Professor Amitabh Kundu, appointed by the government to evaluate the recommendations of the Sachar Committee Report, asserted in its Post-Sachar Committee Report that the policy interventions to upgrade the living conditions of Muslims have been minimal, given the magnitude of their deprivation.

Indicators in the labour market outcomes, since the liberalisation era, state that Muslims are in disadvantaged and discriminated positions. Muslims are much less likely to be paid, as regular salaried workers, when compared to non-Muslims at the same levels of employment. Even the hiring

THE VERY PURPOSE OF HATE SPEECH IS TO ATTUNE PEOPLE TO THE PRACTISES OF HATE, A CORE PART OF POLARISATION POLITICS.

processes in the labour market's formal sector reflect the biases against Muslims, which scholars have termed as "ethnic penalty" in the Indian labour market. The economy's business cycle adversely affects Muslim groups in the labour market. During a boom, they benefit the least, and during a bust, they are the ones who are "last hired, first fired".

We witnessed, particularly in the last decade, some of the most pernicious attacks on self-employed Muslims in the informal sector by vigilante groups. The attacks were accompanied by the campaigns and leaflets aimed at economic boycott of Muslim traders. Under such conditions, the upfront Muslim question is their accessibility to the mainstream labour market. Do Muslims have "constricted", or perhaps, "namesake" citizenship?

Social Justice

India is a pluri-national, multicultural society, and the Indian Constitution has recognised minority rights as fundamental rights, based on their religions, languages, and cultures. Muslims *qua* religious minorities have rights to conserve their culture and manage their own religious affairs. Every Indian Muslim has the right to be governed by his/her personal laws, particularly in the matters of marriage and divorce, infants and minors, adoptions, wills, intestacy, and succession. Personal laws in India reflect what is called legal pluralism—"that state of affairs, for any social field, in which behaviour pursuant to more than one legal order occurs". Both the Central and the State governments have powers to recognise the religious and linguistic diversity of minorities in their respective regions.

The political process, however, in recent times, has been hostile and unkind to Muslims, questioning their cultural and religious practises, and asserting a sort of uniformity (euphemism for equality), in the civil code for almost all the religious-cultural groups, including Muslims. What exactly is this uniformity we are talking about? Who are the people legitimised to decide who the equals are? On the other hand, the paradigm of recognition and political accommodation concerns itself with *national/cultural* justice. Muslims are in search of social justice. They seem to be skeptical about the emancipatory potential of New India—resilient, strong, capable and *atmanirbhar* (self-reliant) as defined by Home Minister Amit Shah–because it doesn't provide many safeguards to the essential legal and institutional protections accorded to them. The upfront Muslim question, therefore, is: does New India mean the dissolution of Muslim minority rights and agency so as to render them incapable to weigh in on the political process? ⊙

(Views expressed are personal)

Facebook

Twitter
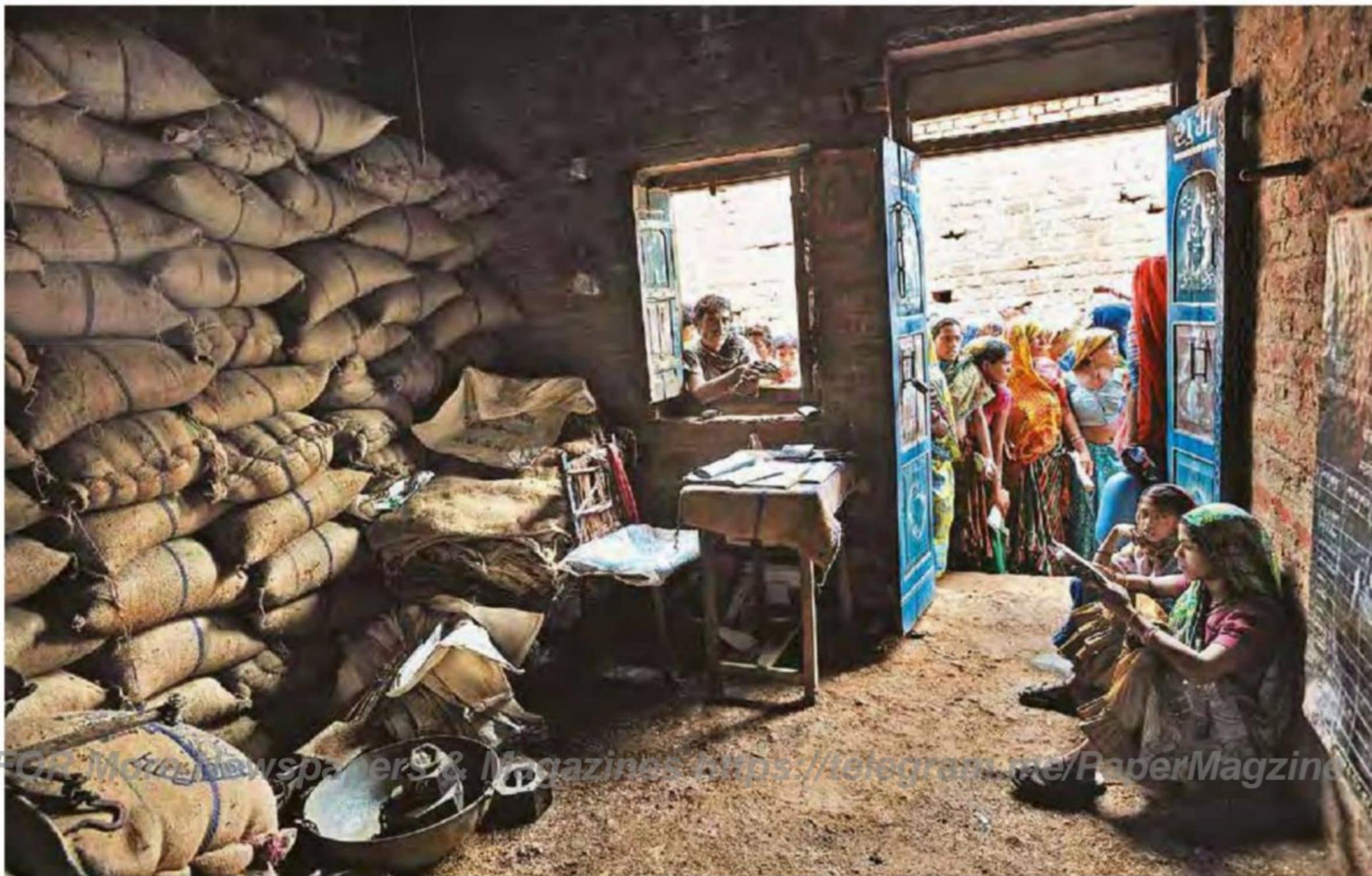
PHOTOGRAPHS: GETTY IMAGES

Voters' Cold Wave

Heat wave, voter apathy and cyclic migration are blamed for the poor voter turnout in Bihar. Political parties are clueless about what impact will it have on election results

Umesh Kumar Ray
IS A BIHAR-BASED
INDEPENDENT JOURNALIST

AS one drives away from Patna towards Alawalpur village, about 20 kms from the state capital, dusty roads and the unbearable April heat sap your energy, but there is an election buzz. As you enter the village, you start noticing something—the divide between the upper caste Rajput localities and the Dalit *bastis*. The concrete road and solar lamps dotting the Rajput pockets disappear as one drives further down. And that's when you realise why the locals are so vocal about the issues plaguing them and are looking forward to vote.

Alawalpur, that falls under the Patna Sahib constituency, made headlines in 2014 when Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) Ravi Shankar Prasad adopted the village under the Sansad Adarsh Gram Yojana. In 2019, he defeated Shatrughan Sinha, who was fighting for the Congress, and became the MP from Patna Sahib.

A quick chat with the locals reveals that they are not happy with the way development has shaped up in this 'Adarsh' village. "From 2014 until now, only a few street lights have been put up and an Anganwadi centre has opened," informs ward member Dilip Chaudhary. The overall consensus among locals is that not much progress has happened in the last 10

Facebook

Twitter

"WE ARE NOT SEEING THE ENTHUSIASM AMONG VOTERS THAT WE HAD SEEN IN 2019. THIS MEANS, THE CORE VOTERS OF THE NDA ARE DESPONDENT, AND THIS WILL CERTAINLY GO AGAINST THE NDA".

Issues Matter
(Opposite page) People say free ration provided by the Centre is helping them sail through; (top) People show their ration cards during a protest against the state and the central government; Army and Air Force aspirants protesting against the Agniveer scheme

Facebook

Twitter

years. In such a situation, they say, they are forced to lean towards other parties. "Recently, about 100 *bighas* of wheat crops were damaged in a fire. Twenty-three farmers lost everything. No one visited us. Only the Congress candidate offered to help," says another local.

Patna Sahib goes to vote in the last phase—on June 1—but the voters seem to have made up their minds. The Rajputs, who have traditionally supported the BJP, say they may not vote for the party. "This time, the BJP will not get *solah anna* (100 per cent) votes from the Rajputs. It will get 60 per cent Rajput votes and the other candidates will get 40 per cent," says a local.

The anti-incumbency witnessed here against the sitting MP was also seen in other villages in Nalanda, Rohtas, Vaishali, Bhojpur and Patna.

In the first two phases—April 19 and 26—two factors were common across all villages—poor voter turnout and an air of despondency. Some political analysts believe that the poor turnout could be the result a voter fatigue for the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). But what does this mean for the other political parties, especially for Nitish Kumar and the Janata Dal (United), largely because the party's performance in these elections will affect its position in the NDA.

Why the Poor Voter Turnout?

The surprisingly low voting turnout has caused speculations. The state—voting to elect 40 members to the Lok Sabha—voted for nine seats in the first two phases.

In the first phase, Bihar recorded just 47.5 per cent voter turnout which was the lowest in 21 states that went to polls. The second phase saw 50.1 per cent voting—5.11 per cent lower than the 2019 General Elections. In this phase, Bihar recorded the second lowest turnout after Uttar Pradesh.

Eight of the nine seats—Aurangabad, Gaya, Nawada, Jamui, Kishanganj, Katihar, Purnia, Bhagalpur and Banka—which went to polls in two phases were won by the NDA in the 2019 General Elections. While the JDU won five seats, the Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas) managed to win two seats. One seat went to the BJP. Kishanganj was the only seat in the state which was won by the Congress.

Two reasons are emerging for the low voter turnout. Many districts in the state are reeling under severe heat wave. The temperature touched 40 degree Celsius and the meteorological department had to issue an advisory. The second reason could be the large-scale migration to Punjab,

Haryana and other states where harvesting season is on. Many from the state work as labourers in these farms.

While there could be other reasons as well, but political analyst Mahendra Suman believes this time, the voters are simply disinterested. "We are not seeing the enthusiasm among voters that we had seen in 2019. This means, the core voters of the NDA are despondent, and this will certainly go against the NDA," he feels.

The Deciding Factor

The populist schemes launched by the Modi government still appeal to the voters. The one that is a hit in the state is the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana under which free ration is provided to the poor and vulnerable sections of society. This scheme, considered to be a "life saver", has been extended till 2029. Similarly, Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi, under which income support of Rs 6,000 is provided to all landholding farmer families in three equal instalments, is another scheme that people say has proven to be beneficial.

Gariban Das, a resident of Raghopur, the assembly seat won by Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) leader Tejashwi Yadav, says that he will be considering voting for the BJP as the central government is providing free ration to him.

"*Pahle katora mein milta tha, ab bora mein milta hai, to bora wala ko vote denge hi na! Pahle katora me bhi paisa lagta tha, ab to free mil raha hai* (Earlier, we used to get ration in a bowl, now we are getting in a sack, that too free of cost, so obviously we will vote for him)," says Das, 40, who is a *chamar* by caste. He is happy that ration is being provided to people cutting across classes. "I don't have any land. There are five members in my family. If we get 25 kg of free food grains every month, it helps a lot," he adds.

Umesh Tanti, a resident of Nalanda district, too, feels that the free ration and the Kisan Samman Nidhi scheme have improved his life, so he will vote for the NDA candidate. He runs a sugarcane juice stall and earns around Rs 400 a day. "The free ration and the Rs 6,000 from the Modi government help us sail through," he adds.

Mukesh Ram, a resident of Shahpur village in Vaishali district, who belongs to the chamar caste, accepts that the free ration scheme is a big help, but says: "*Sarkaar kela khud khakar chhilka hum logon ko de rahi hain* (the government is making huge profits but all it is giving us is free ration)."

He adds: "We will vote for the RJD as Chirag Paswan, the NDA candidate, has never raised our concerns. It was Lalu Prasad Yadav who empowered us."

Issues that Matter

The consecration of the Ram temple in Ayodhya just ahead of the elections was the pet project of the BJP, but in rural Bihar this does not seem to be an issue at all. "There are many temples here. We worship our sugarcane crushing machine every morning before we start work, so Ram temple is not an issue for us," says Tanti. This was the sentiment across villages.

While Ram temple was a non-issue, one scheme that touched the raw nerve was the Agniveer issue. After the scheme was announced by the government on June 14, 2022, aspiring youths protested for days in Arrah in

PATNA SAHIB GOES TO VOTE IN THE LAST PHASE BUT THE VOTERS SEEM TO HAVE MADE UP THEIR MINDS. THE RAJPUTS, WHO HAVE SUPPORTED THE BJP, SAY THEY MAY NOT VOTE FOR THE PARTY.

Facebook

Twitter

Bhojpur—informally known as the 'Army belt of Bihar'.

Ex-army havildar Chandan Pandey, who trains youths for the Army in Arrah town, says: "This scheme has demoralised the youths and now they are not interested in joining the army. Earlier, there used to be more than 1,000 youths preparing for the army but now the number has come down to 100."

Some said they are still angry about Agniveer but added that instead of voting for any other party, they would rather press on NOTA.

Unemployment is another issue. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey spanning July 2021 to June 2022, the unemployment rate in Bihar is at 6 per cent, surpassing the national average of 4.1 per cent. For those aged 15–29, this figure escalates to 20.1 per cent, higher than the national average of 12.4 per cent.

Lakhs of youths preparing for government recruitment exams suffered after several exams were cancelled after paper leaks. Just ahead of the elections, in March, the third phase of the teacher recruitment examination had to be cancelled due to a paper leak. Every year, thousands of students move to Patna to prepare for these exams. They live in tiny rooms in the narrow streets of Musallahpur Haat. Some of the youths here said they voted for the BJP in the last two General Elections, but now they are angry about the overall recruitment exam and unemployment situation. They, however, praised Tejashwi Yadav for creating jobs during his tenure as the deputy chief minister of Bihar.

In January, when Nitish Kumar severed ties with the Mahagathbandhan and formed the government with the BJP, Tejashwi took out a Jan Vishwas Yatra and said that in comparison to the 17 years of the Nitish government, many youths were given government jobs in his 17 months of the government. Most of the youths in Patna talked about *17 saal banaam 17 mahina* (17 years vs 17 months).

However, in small towns and villages, despite all the efforts that the Yadav scion has put in, the perception of the RJD has not changed. The Dalits and those from other backward communities feel that if the RJD wins, people from the Yadav community will have an upper hand.

"The Yadavs will be unfair to us if the RJD wins. Just to give you an example, right now, we are selling a glass of sugarcane juice for Rs 20, but if the RJD wins, then the Yadavs will come and give only Rs 10 for a glass of juice," says Tanti.

A similar view was expressed by the Musahars—a Dalit community—in Rohtas. "The Yadavs sometimes harass us. If we do not go to the brick kilns to work for them, they beat us up. When we go fishing, they snatch our fish," says a Musahar. "Six months ago, a health centre was built in our locality, and only Yadavs were appointed. If Dalits got jobs here, they would think about voting for the RJD," he adds.

The Future of the JDU

While people talked about the BJP and the RJD, Nitish Kumar and the JDU were missing from the election narratives. This election is crucial for the JDU and there is pressure on the party to repeat its past performance.

But there is a huge disappointment among the JDU candidates with regards to Nitish Kumar. His weak

> ## NITISH KUMAR AND THE JDU ARE MISSING FROM THE ELECTION NARRATIVES. THIS ELECTION IS CRUCIAL FOR THE JDU AND THERE IS PRESSURE ON THE PARTY TO REPEAT ITS PAST PERFORMANCE.

speeches, occasional slip of the tongue in election rallies frequent flip- flops between political parties are upsetting the candidates.

"He is still talking about the *"jungle raj"* during Lalu Prasad Yadav's tenure and the state of affairs in Bihar before 2005. In one of the rallies, he also made personal attacks on Lalu Prasad Yadav for having so many children," says a party worker.

The JDU leaders are also facing an ideological dilemma as the BJP is constantly raising the issue of infiltration in Seemanchal. Addressing a rally in Purnia on April 16, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said: "Vote bank politics has led to infiltration in the Seemanchal region, posing a serious security threat and causing harm to the poor, including Dalits, living in the region. Many times, they were attacked and their houses were set on fire." The JDU never condemned the statement and the party candidates believe it will impact the Muslim voters who have been voting for the JDU.

There are also reports of infighting within the NDA. A leader associated with Chirag Paswan's party said: "On the ground, the LJP (Ram Vilas) candidates are not getting any support from the JDU workers and leaders despite them being the alliance partner."

There is internal conflict between the JDU and the BJP as well. The BJP leaders and workers are angry because despite having fewer MLAs, Nitish Kumar is the chief minister, and the BJP is left to play the second fiddle.

A JDU leader, on the condition of anonymity, said that it is clearly visible on the ground that the BJP leaders and workers are not helping the JDU candidates, and, on the other hand, there is resentment among people due to Nitish's frequent change of alliance. "Due to the lack of support from the BJP, there is a strong challenge from the RJD to the traditional JDU seats." This time the JDU and the BJP are contesting elections on 16 seats each.

Talking about the present situation of the JDU and the future of Nitish Kumar, DM Diwakar, a Patna-based political analyst says: "Nitish has been an impediment to the BJP in its bid to have single-handed control over Bihar. So, for a long time, the BJP has been trying to diminish the JDU." He adds: "Chirag Paswan fighting against the JDU in the 2020 Assembly elections was a bid to weaken the JDU's position in the NDA. So, it is not surprising the BJP is not cooperating with the JDU candidates. Nitish should realise this." Ⓞ

Facebook

Twitter

Gangsta Rap

Did an independent candidacy elevate Pappu Yadav's stature? Voices from the ground say so

SURESH K. PANDEY

People's Person Pappu Yadav with his mother in Purnia

Md Asghar Khan in Purnia

AT around 3 pm, Pappu Yadav leaves his home to reach a programme venue. His black Fortuner is cruising down the Rajabari Road when it is overtaken on either side by young boys on bikes. Yadav slows down and extends his hand towards the boys. From the left, Aman Gian, 17, shakes his hands and says: "Sir, if you win, I will set off more than a hundred firecrackers. You've made us famous. Purnia has shot to fame during these elections because of you."

It's the day after the elections. Purnia voted on April 26, in the second phase. But even after the elections, Yadav seems to be in a campaign mode. The people in the streets still run towards his car and he still stops to shake their hands and greet them with a *namaste*.

In Purnia, Pappu Yadav has a dedicated fan base.

Gian, only 17, is full of beans about Yadav. He says that whenever he gets to cast his vote, it will go to him. When asked to explain his choice, he says: "I asked all of my friends, and even my teachers, to vote for Pappu sir. I have been his fan ever since I got to know how he helped people during the lockdown. I'm interested in politics. If I become a leader, I will emulate him."

Purnia is said to be the hottest seat among the 40 Lok Sabha seats in Bihar. Political analysts and local residents account for Purnia's prominence by referring to the fact that Yadav contested as an independent.

Manoj Mukul, a senior journalist who has been reporting on Bihar's elections for several years, believes that the particular sequence of events that unfolded with regard to the Purnia seat put the electoral fight here and Yadav in the limelight.

Notably, a month before the election, Yadav merged his Jan

Facebook

Twitter

Adhikar Party (Loktantrik) with the Congress.

Following this, it was expected that he would be the INDIA bloc's candidate from Purnia. However, before the Congress could announce his name, its ally Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) declared its own candidate, Bima Bharti, a former minister and MLA from Rupauli, Purnia. Bharti had joined the RJD after quitting the Janata Dal (United). After this, Purnia's political temperature started soaring. There were several rounds of talks between the Congress and the RJD, but the latter remained adamant about its claim on the seat. Finally, Yadav filed an independent nomination and began campaigning.

Regarding the huge crowd gathered at his nomination and the tremendous public support he received from the people, journalist Mukul says: "After everything that happened, Yadav fought the entire election riding a wave of sympathy. In his road shows and meetings, he claimed that he was cheated and that there was a bid to assassinate him politically. He broke down many times. All this earned him a lot of sympathy."

Yadav is a gangster turned politician who has been an MP from Purnia three times. Born in the Khurda village of Madhepura, he has been with various political parties. Apart from the RJD, the Samajwadi Party, and the Congress, he has been a part of many fronts and organisations too.

A five-time MP, he began his electoral journey in 1990 and joined the Bihar Assembly as an independent MLA from Sinheshwar. A year later, he contested the Lok Sabha elections for the first time from Purnia and won. He has won most of the elections as an independent.

Even those who support other parties have a soft corner for Yadav. Vishnu Chaudhary, 53, has been a cab driver for the last thirty years. A resident of Damgara, Purnia, he is a staunch supporter of the Bharatiya Janata Party and Narendra Modi but he also has a soft corner for Yadav. "The RJD forcibly grabbed this seat from the Congress. Had Yadav got the hand of the Congress, he would have been stronger. He was cheated, so he filed his nomination as an independent candidate," he says.

Chaudhary reports voting for the arrow (symbol of the JDU) at Modi's behest, but he also says that what the RJD did to Yadav was not right. He feels Yadav has people's sympathy because he stands up for the poor and helps them.

He gives an example. "When there was a fire in the nearby Bhauva village, no MLA or MP from Purnia went there, but Yadav reached the place immediately. He helped people, rebuilt their houses, and distributed rations. He has been going door to door in Purnia for the last one year. No MP from Purnia has done that."

The word on the street is that although the RJD's Bima Bharti was contesting the elections on behalf of the INDIA bloc, the real fight occurred between the scissors and the arrow. Yadav's election symbol was a pair of scissors, while Santosh Kushwaha, a two-term JDU MP, was contesting here for the third time using the arrow symbol. Kushwaha was also an NDA-supported candidate.

In politics, image matters. "Pappu Yadav is changing his *Bahubali* (gangster) image. He helped a lot of people during the Patna flood and the lockdown," says Roshan, a resident of a small town in Purnia, who works in Uttar Pradesh. At the age of 27, he cast his vote in a Lok Sabha

ACCORDING TO POLITICAL ANALYSTS, THOUGH YADAV DID NOT WIN A SINGLE ELECTION IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS, HIS INFLUENCE IN PURNIA REMAINS INTACT.

election for the first time but is politically aware. "The way he contested as an independent after his ticket was cancelled, turned Purnia into a hot seat," he says.

According to political analysts, though Yadav did not win a single election in the last five years, his influence in the area remains intact. The constituency is replete with stories of Yadav's generosity and willingness to help those in need.

There is a common perception among political analysts in Purnia that the statement given by Tejashwi Yadav against Pappu Yadav backfired for his party, the RJD, and proved beneficial for Pappu Yadav. "This is a fight between INDIA and NDA. If you are not not voting for our candidate, then you are certainly voting for the NDA. It is clear," he had said.

Journalist Adityanath Jha asserts that the RJD's campaign against Yadav caused a lot of damage to its own candidate. "Firstly, the political drama in the INDIA bloc regarding the Purnia Lok Sabha seat makes it evident that somewhere, there is some fear within the RJD. Secondly, as a result of this fear, the RJD fielded 43 party MLAs in the campaign against Yadav," he says. "Tejashwi's statement on Yadav is enough to understand the fear within the RJD," he adds.

Jha describes Yadav as a formidable leader who will dominate the scene wherever he goes. He also says that he is in the reckoning to become an MP because the Muslims here have voted for him. They have opted to vote for a Yadav and not for the RJD. Journalist Mukul, too, believes that the RJD seems troubled by the growing stature of Yadav. Not only does Yadav have clear relevance in Bihar's politics, his social popularity has also grown in the last few years. The RJD has tried to defeat him. It may even be said about Tejashwi that, on this seat, he personally contested the election against Yadav.

Mukul continues: "Up until now, it has been believed that the biggest leader of the Yadav community in Bihar is Lalu Yadav and that Tejashwi Yadav is enhancing and maintaining his legacy. Against this backdrop, Pappu Yadav contests elections against the Lalu family. If he wins, or even if he loses, by 10,000-15,000 votes, a big message will go out that a leader from the community will stand against the family and help it be defeated."

Mukul sees the possibility of Yadav winning the Purnia seat because many factors are in his favour here. Firstly, the Muslim and Yadavs could have voted for him. Secondly, people may have tried to identify and vote for the candidate most likely to defeat the sitting MP who faces anti-incumbency.

*(Translated by **Kaushika Draavid**)*

Facebook

Twitter

Raag Darbari in Dharwad

Karnataka's Hubballi has been the BJP's 'gateway to the south' and remains a hotbed for communal polarisation, as the twin cities of Hubballi-Dharwad head to Lok Sabha polls on May 7

Rakhi Bose in Hubballi-Dharwad

AASIF Yeliwad, 42, was sipping tea at his usual corner a few feet from his home in the Anandnagar area of Hubballi, the second largest city in Karnataka, on a warm March evening in 2021 when he was arrested. A carpenter by profession, Yeliwad was later booked under the Unlawful Activities and Prevention Act for what was initially a case of rioting on April 16 that year. A police station was mobbed, pelted with stones and vehicles were torched that day. Yeliwad's 18-year-old daughter, Noor Bano, claims her father is innocent. "He was not even there (at the Old Hubballi police station) at the time of the incident," she states. Noor, who is pursuing a degree in medical science from a private institute, now weaves lanterns, earning Rs 50 a day after selling around four of them.

"I want to be a doctor, but after my father's arrest, my siblings and I had to start working," she states. Her two younger brothers, 15 and 17,

PHOTOGRAPHS: VIKRAM SHARMA

AHEAD OF THE LOK SABHA ELECTIONS IN HUBBALLI, RELIGIOUS POLARISATION IS ONCE AGAIN AT THE FOREFRONT WITH THE POLITICISATION OF THE RECENT MURDER OF A COLLEGE STUDENT.

quit school and now earn about Rs 400 a day each when they find work. One lays tiles, while the older one welds.

After spending 10 months in Gulbarga Central Prison, Yeliwad suffered a paralytic attack affecting his right leg when his blood pressure spiked. He was granted bail on humanitarian grounds. Now, both his legs are paralysed, and he cannot stand without assistance. He spends his days parked on a rickety chair in a bare room in Anandnagar, the largest slum in the Hubballi-Dharwad region, which is set to vote on May 7 in the third phase of Lok Sabha elections.

"Elections make me nervous," he states. "It gets very polarised in these parts." Yeliwad was one of the 158 men eventually arrested for the Hubballi riots of April 16, 2021, when a mob attacked a nearby police station in Old Hubballi. The incident occurred during the month of Ramzan after a local man named Abhishek Hiremath made a communally offensive caricature of an Islamic religious structure and shared it on social media.

Yeliwad's family, neighbours, and residents of mixed urban poor neighbourhoods like Anandnagar and Topalgatti (Ramalingeshwarnagar) claim that in the run-up to state elections last year, instances of communal tension were on the rise.

With the Congress coming to power in the state in the 2022 legislative assembly elections in Karnataka, many, like Aasif's family, have benefited from the party's guarantees for women, namely Rs 2,000 monthly assistance to women heads of all families under the Gruhalakshmi scheme, 200 units of power to all households under the Gruhajyoti scheme, 10 kg of rice per person per month under the Annabhagya scheme, and free travel for women. The

party also offers Rs 3,000 every month for graduate youth and Rs 1,500 for diploma holders under the Yuvanidhi scheme. Despite a communally charged campaign led by the incumbent BJP government, local resident and activist MA Pathan argues that Congress was able to win because it focused on populism instead of polarisation at a time when people in the state were really suffering due to inflation.

Ahead of the Lok Sabha elections in Hubballi, religious polarisation is once again at the forefront with the politicisation of the recent murder of college student Neha Hiremath. Hiremath was stabbed by her former classmate Fayaz Khondunaik on April 18 after an alleged fallout. Her father, Niranajan Hiremath, a Congress collector, has alleged the murder is a case of "love-jihad". In Fayaz's village, the situation remains tense. His mother, Mumtaz Khandunaik, a school teacher, has publicly apologised to people at large for what her son did and has called for strict punishment for the accused. "It was not 'love-jihad' though. They were friends and had a fallout," she says. "Fayaz should not have done what he did; Islam does not allow such acts."

With over four lakh voters, Muslims form the second-largest population group in Dharwad Lok Sabha constituency. The community has come out strongly against the murder. On April 22, Anjuman-e-Islam, the local Muslim body, issued the call for a *'bandh'* in Dharwad, and Muslim protesters marched in protest, condemning the incident and demanding justice. Hindu organisations like the Jagruta Mahila Vedike (JMV), Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Shree Ram Sene also led protests in Belagavi, and they were joined by leaders like Belagavi BJP candidate Jagadish Shettar.

In Dharwad, Muslims kept their shops shut in mourning,

Facebook

Twitter

Conflict Site Idgah maidan in Hubballi

with posters seeking "justice for Neha Hiremath" stuck on the shutters. "We do not want to support violence. Neha isn't just the daughter of Hiremath, *woh hum sabki behen beti jaisi hai* (she is like a daughter to all of us). But some people are blaming the whole community for one person's crime," says Muzammil Dafedar, 29, a shop owner at the Bara Imam Gali near Noorani Masjid in Dharwad who participated in the protests. He feels that politicians are unfairly giving the incident a communal colour. "No crime against women should be tolerated, irrespective of their religion," Rehana Khanum Gurani, a social worker residing in Koppalkiri area of Dharwad, states. "But we only see such protests when the victim is a Hindu and the perpetrator is a Muslim," she adds.

On March 31, Karnataka police found the charred remains of Ruksana, who was murdered by her partner Praveen, in Mysuru. "No one made a Hindu-Muslim case out of that, nor were there such protests," Gurani, a mother of two daughters and a son, states. She claims that in her neighbourhood itself, the effects of polarisation can be felt. "They view us as different. My hijab is also viewed with suspicion, even though it's my choice to wear it," she states.

"Gateway to South"

Communal polarisation isn't new to residents of Hubballi-Dharwad. While Dharwad has been a place of education, agitation and intellectualism, its industrial counterpart, Hubballi, is not just hotter vis a vis its temperature but also in temper. While politics in Karnataka has been dominated by feudal classes and "upper caste" groups like Lingayats and Vokkaligas, Hubballi has been a seat for communal identity politics since the late 1980s, when the Ram Janmabhoomi movement became strong in the north, states Hubballi-based independent journalist and academic Amare Gowda. "Karnataka is often called the BJP's gateway to the south,

and Hubballi is an important seat for the BJP. The Eidgah Maidan issue was a turning point for the party's fortunes in Karnataka," he states.

Dubbed at the time as the 'Ayodhya of the South,' the Eidgah Maidan (recently renamed the Kittur Rani Chennamma Maidan) is a 1.5-acre piece of land that was once a playground used for playing cricket and hosting *jatras* and political rallies. The area currently doubles as a diminutive parking lot on mundane days. Twice a year, the Maidan is used for offering namaz by Muslims—on Ramzan and Bakri Eid—as per a 999-year-long lease signed between Anjuman-e-Islam and the city municipal corporation in 1921. The issue gained national spotlight on Republic Day 1992 when some BJP, RSS, and VHP leaders hoisted the national flag at the Eidgah Maidan without permission from Anjuman or the Congress government to do so. Eventually, the flag was removed by the police, leading to further politicisation and criticism of Congress' myopic handling of the incident.

"We did not give permission for the flag hoisting because it was a disputed property; no one had the right to hoist a flag on it," Yusuf Savanur, former President of Anjuman, states. Between 1992 and 1995, the BJP made five abortive attempts to hoist the flag in the controversial location, collaborating with Hindu groups like the Rashtriya Dhwaja Gaurav Sanrakshan Samiti. Many leaders of the Ayodhya movement, including Uma Bharti, reached Hubballi and were instrumental in polarising majoritarian sentiment against the Congress.

With the BJP consolidating power in Hubballi and other parts of the state, the socio-political and economic dynamics between Hindus and Muslims in the region have been in flux. In 1998, Hubballi saw major clashes on Holi when Hindu groups took out Rangapanchami processions through Muslim-majority areas. While clashes over Holi have fizzled out over the years, Ganesh Chaturthi has instead become the new

 Facebook

 Twitter

Khadri Mohammed Shah Dargah located at Bhairidevarakoppa between Hubballi-Dharwad was relocated as part of the BRTS Road project despite objections from Muslim bodies. Anjuman members allege that temples that line the same road were left untouched.

Ahead of elections in Old Hubballi and across Dharwad, streets and homes have been covered with saffron flags to mark Hanuman Jayanti. They do not represent the BJP, but the image of "angry Hanuman," as Dharwad-based rationalist Ramzan Darga calls it, is hard to assimilate with the soft, devotional image of Hanuman that was worshipped in Karnataka in the past.

He also says communal polarisation is a two-way street. "The Muslim population in urban Hubballi-Dharwad is mostly poor, working class and lives in pockets where Islamic clerics and religious groups govern social norms. The youth have no jobs or education and are often swayed by communal narratives".

Darga nevertheless highlights that, behind the religious muscle-pumping, deeper caste and class fault lines often dictate electoral moods. "The reason the BJP could enter Karnataka is not solely Hindutva. That's just one aspect. They remain in power because they enjoy total support from the Lingayats, the dominant landed group in north Karnataka, as well as support from OBCs and sections of non-Ambedkarite SC castes," Darga posits.

Alienated by Indira Gandhi's push for land reforms, the powerful and voluminous landed communities like Vokkaligas and Lingayats began to search for political alternatives. While the Gowdas were focused in the north and found political representation in leaders like HD Deve Gowda, the Lingayats in the south found representation with the BJP and BS Yediyurappa emerged as the community's face among the party. The former CM continues to exert influence in the region and was instrumental in selecting ex-CM Basavaraj Bommai, another Lingayat leader, as the BJP candidate from Haveri for the Lok Sabha polls.

Beyond complex political equations, about 30 kilometres from Hubballi is the village of Lakhmapur, which locals claim is a model of secular unity. Maktoob, whose house is located along the wall of a Hanuman temple in the village, states that communal politics work in cities but not in rural areas where ties of kinship and mutual benefits trump religious identities.

"We are all working-class people here. We live with the Lingayats as well as Madigas (SC) in harmony as we have economic ties with each other," Maktoob, who earns his daily wage by tilling a Lingayat farmer's lands, states. "We live in peace in this village. It's harmonious, and we do not hate or fear each other here," Kalapps, a Lingayat proselytiser and Maktoob's neighbour, declares.

But for voters closer to the political nerve centre of Hubballi-Dharwad, like Aasif Yeliwad and his family, identity continues to remain a decisive and divisive factor, shaped by the realities that confront them. ⓞ

arena for communal polarisation. In 2022, the Karnataka High Court granted the Hubballi-Dharwad Municipal Corporation (HDMC) permission to install a Ganesh statue on the Eidgah Maidan premises for three days to celebrate the Hindu festival, despite opposition from Muslim bodies.

While Congress' coming to power in the state has brought a degree of psychological relief to Muslim voters, many feel let down by the party's choice to field Vinod Asuti, a candidate from the Kuruba community, in Dharwad. MA Pathan states, "They could have fielded a Muslim candidate since Muslims outnumber Kurubas in this seat, but they went with Siddaharamaiah's caste." He faces the BJP heavyweight, four-time MP and Union Minister for Parliamentary Affairs, Coal, and Mines, Prahlad Joshi.

Speaking to *Outlook* amid his campaign trail in Hubballi, Joshi exuded confidence. "I had never dreamed of joining politics, let alone becoming an MP. I was just a simple social worker with the RSS," he says. The leader, who rose to prominence during the Eidgah Maidan agitations of the 90s, says that the work done by the BJP in the constituency speaks for itself. "We have a new airport now. New IITs. The roads are better than ever. We have ensured safety and harmony," he states. He accuses Congress of indulging in appeasement politics, supporting "terrorists," and "infiltrators".

Locals, however, point out that last year, the Hazarat Syed

Facebook

Twitter

Hybrid Fund Solution for Equity Benefits with Lower Risk

Hybrid funds offer a decent investment solution for individuals seeking a balanced approach to wealth creation with lower risk as they usually invest inmultiple asset classes

Many investors consider investments in equity mutual funds which invest in equities, as too high a risk for them, yet they ardently want higher returns than those of fixed income investments. But what if you had the opportunity to invest in funds which offered a higher return potential with slightly more risk? If you are keen for such an investment, then hybrid funds are for you. Hybrid funds provide you the potential for higher returns vis-à-vis fixed income by diversifying across asset classes. How is it possible? Here's how.

Take advantage of multiple asset classes Hybrid funds, as the name suggests, give you the best of the multiple worlds. They invest in multiple asset classes like equity, fixed income, silver and gold etc. While the equity component provides the power to earn market-linked returns, other asset classes like fixed income, silver and gold etc. provide stability as they are uncorrelated to equity market movements. Typically, in a bull run, hybrid funds may not appreciate as much as a pure equity funds, but in a bear phase, they don't fall as much due to presence of other uncorrelated asset classes. Within the hybrid category, there are multiple options to choose from, depending on the mix of asset classes. Hybrid funds are predominantly of seven types Conservative Hybrid Fund, Balanced Hybrid Fund, Aggressive Hybrid Fund, Dynamic Asset Allocation or Balanced Advantage Fund, Multi Asset Allocation Fund, Arbitrage Fund, Equity Savings Fund depending upon the mix of

assets and the way they are managed. Out of these seven, four of them are predominantly equity oriented fund such as Balanced Hybrid Fund, Aggressive Hybrid Fund, Arbitrage Fund and Equity Savings Fund depending on the equity allocation as they are mandated to take higher exposure in equity.

Solution for Equity Benefits with Lower Risk

Equity oriented hybrid funds aim to deliver relatively better returns than fixed income funds due to their predominant investment in equities. In a market downturn, their fall can also hurt you less, as the fixed component acts as a shock absorber. The other important advantage associated with predominantly equity oriented hybrid funds is that they are treated as equity investment for capital gains taxation.

Equity-oriented hybrid funds work well effectively for risk-averse investors across various stages, including new investors, those in their wealth preservation phase, or retirees aiming to combat inflation while having equity exposure in their portfolios. With a predominant allocation towards equities and the remaining amount in debt and money market instruments, these funds provide a balanced approach. For beginners, whose financial objectives like retirement or children's education are distant, starting with such funds offers one good way of beginning with lesser turbulence in your mutual fund investment portfolio.

The Final Word

Hybrid funds offer a decent investment solution for individuals seeking a balanced approach to wealth creation with lower risk. By combining the strengths of multiple asset classes, these funds provide diversification, risk management, and growth potential, making them a suitable choice for a wide range of investors.

TYPES OF HYBRID FUNDS AND WHERE THEY INVEST

Type	Asset Allocation (%)	
	Equity and Equity related instruments	**Debt and related instruments**
Conservative Hybrid Fund	10-25	70-90
Balanced Hybrid Fund	40-60	40-60
Aggressive Hybrid Fund	65-80	20-35
Dynamic Asset Allocation or Balanced Advantage Fund	0-100	0-100
Multi Asset Allocation Fund	Investment in at least 3 asset classes with a minimum allocation of at least 10% in each asset class	
Arbitrage Fund	Scheme following arbitrage strategy, with minimum 65% investment in equity & equity related instruments	
Equity Savings Fund	Equity and equity related instruments (minimum 65%), debt instruments (minimum10%) and derivatives (as specified in the SID)	

A Vote for Water

Parched farmers will decide who will win in the Mysuru and Mandya regions of Karnataka

Anisha Reddy in Mandya and Mysuru districts

WEARING a green shawl on his right shoulder, Chandrashekar, a 60-year-old farmer leader from Karnataka's Mandya district, arrived at the interview location in just about five minutes after a brief phone call. He stands under the shade of a large banyan tree, wiping the sweat off his forehead with the cloth. "I am never usually this free," he says, catching his breath. Chandrashekar, like most farmers in the sugarcane bowl of the state, used to spend a good part of their afternoons on the field, growing *bhatta* (paddy),

sugarcane and *ragi*. But in this scorching hot mid-April afternoon, farmers in Mandya find themselves idle. Their fields have run dry, and so have their main sources of income. A palpable sense of anger looms across the farming belt of Mysuru and Mandya, which are situated amid the tall pine trees and paddy fields in southern Karnataka. The region is also traditionally known to be the Vokkaliga heartland of the state. A predominantly rural community that is associated with farming, the Vokkaligas are key to any party's electoral performance in southern Karnataka. In the months leading up to the Lok Sabha elections, the farmers here weren't asking for a lot... they just wanted *neeru* (water).

Facebook

Twitter

Growing Anger
Farmers gather in Mysuru to discuss the ongoing water woes

The Fight for Cauvery

The Cauvery river, which many consider as sacred in south India, rises in the Western Ghats at Talakaveri, flows across the Deccan plateau in south India through the states of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Puducherry and then into the Bay of Bengal. The dispute over the river water dates back to the pre-Independence era when the then princely states of Mysore (now Karnataka) and Madras (now Tamil Nadu) contended for control over the river's waters.

Cauvery's water serves as a lifeline for farmers in both Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. After a lot of back and forth over which state should get how much water, the final water-sharing arrangement was decided on the basis of the Cauvery Water Dispute Tribunal's award in 2007 and a Supreme Court judgment in 2018. The current anger among farmers stems from the state government's decision in September 2023 to adhere to a Supreme Court order and release 5,000 cusecs of water per day to Tamil Nadu. "Our state gave water to Tamil Nadu when we ourselves were struggling," says Chandrashekar. Last year's southwest

monsoon played spoilsport, especially in south interior Karnataka. Between June 1 and September 23, the region suffered a rainfall deficit of 27 per cent, according to the India Meteorological Department (IMD).

Most of the farmers' fields are very close to the Krishnaraja Sagar (KRS) Dam, which is constructed across the Cauvery water. Many of their crops have died and they don't have enough water to grow new ones. "Even though the KRS dam had water, a play of politics led the government to give this water to the neighbouring state. We have incurred huge losses due to this," says Somashekhar, another farmer from Mandya. He claims that the Siddaramaiah-led Congress government did not want to upset their INDIA bloc partners in Tamil Nadu, and hence, provided them Cauvery water.

While the Union government has stayed away from this emotive issue, leaders of the state unit of the BJP and the JD(S)—both parties are in an alliance in this election—often use the ongoing water scarcity situation in their barbs directed at the Congress. The JD(S), which is headed by former Prime Minister H D Deve Gowda, has projected itself as a party that works for the welfare of farmers. By allying with the BJP this time, farmer leader Kuruburu Shanthakumar says, both parties could have an electoral advantage in south Karnataka amidst the farmers' anger with the Congress party.

The Angry Farmer

In Mysuru, a group of 10-15 farmers went into a huddle to air their grievances. There was one leader, Shanthakumar, who was jotting down what the farmers were complaining about: burden of debt, lack of pension, demand for Minimum Support Price, etc. Shanthakumar didn't seem to have any solution. "We are preparing our own manifesto and whichever party agrees to our demands, we will support them," he declares. They called out both the Union and state governments for remaining ambivalent on issues raised by farmers. Some of these farmers also accompanied their counterparts in Delhi and Punjab during the protests against the Centre demanding implementation of the M S Swaminathan Committee's recommendations. "Sometimes when a farmer leader from Punjab sends a pamphlet, we use Google to translate and understand what they're saying," Shanthakumar says. But we are all fighting the same fight, despite language barriers, he reiterates. They had gathered near a statue of Kuvempu, a revered Kannada poet of the 20th century. Back in 2020, when the BJP government was in power in the state, a revision committee headed by Rohith Chakrathirtha allegedly distorted facts about Kuvempu in the revised social science textbooks. The JD(S) and the Congress leaders were extremely critical of the Basavaraj Bommai-led BJP government for doing so. Four years later, the political landscape of the region looks different.

The JD(S) is supporting the BJP's activities in the state. The Congress government, riding high on its welfare-related initiatives, has now reportedly dropped the contentious textbook revisions. The grand old party, however, finds itself at a crossroads with angry farmers in the state.

Attempts to Polarise

To reach Mandya from Bengaluru, one has to use the Bengaluru-Mysuru expressway opened by the Union

Facebook
Twitter

government last March, in a bid to not just reduce the time it takes to travel between the two major cities, but also to reach the hearts of Vokkaliga voters. That road, which was constructed by cutting villages into half, seemed a bit too bumpy for the BJP. First, the saffron party made desperate attempts to polarise the community with the infamous narrative of two fictional Vokkaliga characters, Uri Gowda and Nanje Gowda—and that the two, and not the British, had killed the ruler of Mysore, Tipu Sultan, in the fourth war of Mysore in 1799. Then, it scrapped the four per cent reservation for Muslims and distributed it between the Vokkaligas and the Lingayats. However, the party didn't make any gains in the region.

Lakshman Cheeranahalli, an advocate and activist in Mandya, reiterates that the BJP's politics of polarisation does not strike a chord among the Vokkaligas who have always believed in treating everyone equally. Hailing from a farming community himself, Cheeranahalli recalls how Tipu Sultan helped them get land reforms. "But the BJP projected him as a *desh drohi*," he says.

Mandya has a long history of caste politics. So far the district has not chosen anyone other than a Vokkaliga to be its MP or MLA. But locals in the region say there has been a slow yet dangerous shift in the political narrative. "Mandya is now seeing communal tensions instead of caste conflicts," says Cheeranahalli. Communalism is always more dangerous than casteism. However, it is not going to work," he says confidently.

A renewed attempt to saffronise the region was seen early this year. Hijab, Halal was old news… this time it was about a Hanuman flag. Deep within Keragodu village in Mandya district, a 108-foot flagpole stood tall, and undisturbed, until late January this year. Gram panchayat authorities decided to replace a Hanuman flag that was hoisted atop the pole, with the Indian flag on January 28. While locals in the region say that the practice of hoisting a religious flag—in this case a Hanuman flag—dates back several decades, gram panchayat officials maintain that they had given permission only for the national flag and Karnataka/Kannada flag to be hoisted, with no allowance for other religious/political flags.

This happened around the same time the grand consecration ceremony of the Ram Mandir took place in Ayodhya, which the Congress had boycotted. The Mandya flag issue gave the BJP-JD(S) leaders more ammo; they alleged that the Siddaramaiah-led Congress government was against 'Ram' and is 'anti-Hindu', while Congress leaders accused the saffron party of inciting 'communal tensions' ahead of the elections.

Bandhs were declared. Marches were called. Chants of 'Jai Shri Ram' echoed. JD(S) leader and H D Deve Gowda's son, H D Kumaraswamy, arrived in Keragodu, sporting a saffron shawl, instead of the usual green. He made public appearances with right-wing organisations, supporting their call of hoisting saffron flags in every household. These visuals came days after Kumaraswamy attended the consecration ceremony of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya—a move that was in stark contrast to his earlier criticism of the BJP for 'misusing Ram's name for political benefits' (in February 2021).

Almost three months after the row, the divide seems clear in Keragodu village. A blanket of saffron flags with a picture of Hanuman could be spotted from miles away—something that

POLITICAL ANALYSTS SAY THAT THIS WILL BE A BATTLE FOR SURVIVAL FOR THE JD(S), WHICH ONCE DOMINATED THE POLITICAL SCENE IN THE VOKKALIGA CONSTITUENCIES OF THE STATE.

is rare in a Vokkaliga-dominated region that has been under either the Congress or the JD(S) rule. The Hanuman flag was brought down, but was still stuck on one side of the flagpole. The Indian flag was now hoisted on the top. A police van has been making its way to the spot every day since January. Around 4-5 barricades encircle the flagpole: "To protect it from people or to protect people from it?" asks a local shopkeeper in amusement. He says the situation is calm now. "It was never an issue before. We had Hanuman flag, but the Congress government made it into a big issue," a tea vendor claims.

However, farmers in the region do not mention the Mandya incident even in passing when asked about their main concerns in this election. In fact, the incident, Cheeranahalli says, was an attempt to divert the attention from the primary concerns of people in the region: drought, the Cauvery river water dispute, farmer suicides and unemployment. "My god is also Hanuman," he clarifies. "But when these political parties invoke God, it is often not just limited to one's faith," says Cheeranahalli.

Unlike the other south Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh, where regional parties have flourished, the JD(S) in Karnataka has struggled to create an identity of its own. Often touted as the 'kingmaker' of politics in the region, the JD(S) has allied with both the Congress and the BJP, despite its initial commitment to stay independent of the two dominant political parties.

On the ground, however, the JD(S) and its leaders still find resonance among some farming communities. The party usually fields a majority of its candidates from the Vokkaliga community and has been known for its focus on the rural poor and farmers' issues. Further, the grassroots appeal of Deve Gowda continues to this day. Progressive farmer Krishnappa K T recalls Gowda's lifelong commitment to the farmers' cause. "The farming community will always vote for Deve Gowda and his JD(S)," he says.

The saffron party too realises that it cannot win a majority on its own without the support of the old Mysore region. Hence, both parties have found an ally in each other this time, though they have publicly criticised each other in the past. But some farmers are equally critical of the 'family politics' that they say JD(S) indulges in. With the announcement of candidates for the ongoing elections, it became clear that at least nine members of Gowda's immediate family are or have been part of electoral politics. Political analysts say that this will be a battle for survival for the JD(S), which once dominated the political scene in the Vokkaliga constituencies of the state. ⬤

f Facebook

✗ Twitter

Soaring To New Heights

SHRI SACHIN KURVE, the Secretary of Tourism and CEO of Uttarakhand Tourism Development Board, discusses the recently launched Manaskhand Express, how the State plans to promote hidden gems, and more

Nestled in the majestic Himalayas, Uttarakhand's Kumaon region is a treasure trove of cultural and spiritual heritage. To make this hidden gem more accessible, the state's tourism department recently launched the Manaskhand Express and Heli Darshan initiatives to showcase the region's profound beauty and significance to a broader audience. To learn more, OLE interviewed **Sh. Sachin Kurve**, the Secretary of Tourism and CEO of Uttarakhand Tourism Development Board. Excerpts here.

Can you elaborate on the concept behind the Manaskhand Express and the Heli Darshan experiences for Adi Kailash and Om Parvat?

The Manaskhand Express and Adi Kailash Om Parvat Heli Darshan initiatives seek to elevate Uttarakhand's Kumaon Region's spiritual and cultural essence. Embracing the ancient texts' portrayal of Kumaon as Manaskhand, encompassing Nainital, Almora, Bageshwar, Champawat, and Pithoragarh, these projects aim to unveil the area's potential as a spiritual and cultural haven. With its natural splendour complementing its spiritual magnetism, the region boasts revered peaks like Adi Kailash and Om Parvat, linked to Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati. The Manaskhand Express, in collaboration with IRCTC, plans to whisk tourists on an air-conditioned train across the State, showcasing famous and lesser-known gems. Meanwhile, the Adi Kailash and Om Parvat Heli Darshan Yatra target winter tourism, which aligns with the Vibrant Village Program, striving for sustainable growth and local empowerment.

Previously, reaching Adi Kailash and Om Parvat involved challenging treks. How will the Manaskhand Express and Heli Darshan services improve accessibility for pilgrims and tourists?

The Adi Kailash and Om Parvat Trek Programs will persist, unaffected by the introduction of the Heli Darshan Yatra. Those drawn to adventure and spiritual exploration can still journey to Adi Kailash and Om Parvat through the established trekking routes during the summer season. On the other hand, the Heli Darshan Yatra is strategically scheduled for periods when trekking routes may be inaccessible due to weather conditions like rain or snow. This initiative extends the visitation window for pilgrims and tourists beyond the typical trekking season and accommodates individuals with physical constraints, offering them an opportunity to experience these sacred sites.

How do these initiatives contribute to Uttarakhand's goal of promoting tourism in unexplored and hidden areas of the State?

The State caters to modern travellers' diverse needs, focusing on spiritual, adventure, and nature experiences. Residents temporarily inhabit the Adi Kailash and Om Parvat regions, migrating to lower areas in winter. We aim to enhance sustainable infrastructure, balancing tourism growth with ecological preservation. We seek to boost tourist facilities through various initiatives, attracting more visitors while safeguarding the fragile environment. This influx will benefit the local economy by supporting homestays, eateries, and handicrafts managed by residents. We aim to foster economic growth by promoting responsible tourism without compromising the region's delicate ecosystem.

What specific efforts is the Uttarakhand government undertaking to attract tourists to these remote locations?

The Ministry of Tourism, the Government of India, and the Government of Uttarakhand are in the process of developing Gunji in the Pithoragarh district as a spiritual and cultural tourism centre. The plan has been finalised, and stakeholder consultations are underway to give it a final shape. Also, the Government of Uttarakhand has already announced the Manaskhand Mandir Mala Mission, under which various infrastructure development projects of 16 temples in the first phase will be undertaken. The development projects aim to provide better accessibility to tourists and pilgrims to these temples.

How will the Government ensure that the Manaskhand Express and Heli Darshan initiatives benefit and involve the local population in the Pithoragarh district?

The Manaskhand Express Train project will be able to employ local guides, for whom the tourism department has imparted training. In the Adi Kailash Om Parvat Heli Darshan Package, homestays in the local area shall also be used to create entrepreneurial opportunities for the residents. Not only this, but we have taken up the redevelopment of dilapidated houses as homestays in Jadung Village of Uttarkashi as a pilot project. The department will provide complete hand-holding of the residents, from building the homestays to marketing them and providing the requisite skill training to the residents. The department has also signed an MoU with AirBnB to provide skill development training in etiquette, cuisine, housekeeping, and aesthetics to the State's homestay owners. The first stage of this training will be organised in Almora district in May 2024.

Facebook

Twitter

Missing in the Margins

The Katkari community in Raigad district has been facing issues like cyclic migration, no rights over forest land, and a dearth of basic facilities.
But these concerns don't find mention in the high-pitched political debates

Facebook

Twitter

The Cut Off Life
Ram Vagya Pawar, a
Katkari Adivasi, at his
village in Wave Diwali
in Raigad district

Abhik Bhattacharya in Raigad

AROUND 180 km from Mumbai—the commercial capital of the country—it's a different world. Beyond the last concrete stretch of the Pradhan Mantri Grameen Sadak Yojana, there are no motorable roads. One must walk. Apart from the silence and the salty breeze of the Konkan region—a respite from the climbing heat on an April noon—there is hardly anyone on the road. For quite a long stretch, there is dried grass, sand, dust and stone. But after a few minutes, one starts spotting mud huts. A few men peep out of the doors and stare at you curiously, as if asking—who are you and why are you here?

This hamlet in Wave Diwali village in Raigad district rarely finds a mention in the electoral map of the state. The Katkari community, which has been living here for centuries, is hardly counted as a 'vote bank'. They form 11 per cent of Raigad's population, and hence do have a considerable electoral significance, but the ground reality is contrary to

Facebook

Twitter

THE KATKARI COMMUNITY IS ENLISTED AS A PARTICULARLY VULNERABLE TRIBAL GROUP (PVTG) AND THEIR POPULATION IS SPREAD ACROSS RAIGAD, THANE AND PUNE DISTRICTS OF MAHARASHTRA.

the numbers. "The leaders throw money at them just 48 hours before the polls and take them away, but no one comes here after the elections," says a local political activist.

The Katkari community is enlisted as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) and their population is spread across Raigad, Thane and Pune districts of Maharashtra. Traditionally, the community used to specialise in extracting Katha or Catechu—thickened sap of Khair wood, a thorny plant found in these regions, scientifically known as Senegalia Catechu—that has medicinal value. "However, this trade is a matter of the past now. Big players of the medical industry have taken over. So, now they have no option but to work in the farms of Marathi farmers," says Ulka Mahajan, a social activist, who has been working with this community for decades.

While most of the Katkaris don't own land, monocrop fields and forest reservations have added to their woes. "In this region, paddy is the main crop. Though ragi and wari are also cultivated, but those who don't have land have to do more for a living," adds Mahajan. Paddy is sown in June-July, and is reaped in November-December. After this, the people are left with no work, so they start working at coal and brick kilns and inadvertently get embroiled in the cycle of exploitation.

* * *

Sitting inside one of the mud houses in Wave Dilwali village that are spread across the forest and the Gani Hills, resident

Ram Vagya Pawar tells their stories—the unheard realities that never find place in the high-pitched electoral battles of Maharashtra. Pawar, now in his thirties, never went to school. He has been working and doing odd jobs for as long as he can remember. "During paddy season, my parents used to work in the lands owned by the Kunbis (one of the several castes of traditional farmers). During festivals like Diwali or Ganesh Chaturthi, they used to take money from *seths* to buy new clothes and good food. After that, it was their turn to work in *seth's bhatti* (brick kilns/ coal kilns) till the amount was repaid," says Pawar.

As a child, he used to accompany his parents to the brick kilns and the practice continued even after he became an adult. Last year, Pawar borrowed Rs 60,000 from his *seth* during Diwali. "This is when we get to buy new clothes, eat mutton and *bhakri* (roti made with rice flour)." He then went to Mangoan, the nearest tehsil headquarters, to work at a brick kiln so that he could repay the loan. For every 1,000 bricks, they get Rs 1,000. He, along with his wife, used to make 700 bricks a day. "We worked there for almost four months and came back to the village in April. From June, the paddy season will start, and we will again work on the fields of the kunbis," he adds. The cycle continues.

Just like his father, Pawar also takes his son to the kilns as the village almost remains *khaali* (empty) during this season. His son has managed to study till Class 10. Every month, they get 35 kg of grains under the Antyodaya Anna Yojana. However, till now, they have not been able to avail the benefits of the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) and have not received a cylinder under the Ujjwal Yojana.

Two houses away from Pawar lives Rajaram Babu Waghmare in his half-cemented, yet-to-complete house. Pushing his frail body against the sack of rice that he recently received from the ration counter, Waghmare says: "Our problems will never be solved unless we get ownership of the forest."

In the Konkan region, the forest land on the hills is known as Dali land. In 1887, the British government gave the rights of these lands to Adivasis. In Raigad alone, there are about 13,000 hectares of Dali land on which the Katkari Adivasis depend for their livelihood.

After Independence, the Indian government accepted their undisputed claim over these lands. In 1971, the state government asked the forest department to clear these lands for cultivation and hand them over to the Adivasis—mostly to the Katkari community. However, the locals claim that less than 10 per cent of it has been transferred so far. In 1976, the forest was brought under the concurrent list and in 1980, the Forest Conservation Act was passed. The state government said that without consulting the Centre, they would not be able to implement the earlier decision, and this led to the status quo.

The Adivasis did not sit quietly. With the support of different civil society members, Campaign for Survival with Dignity was formed. It brought multiple groups together to demand a policy to ensure the rights of forest dwellers on

forest land. This collective action led to the passing of the Forest Rights Act (FRA) in 2006. "However, the fate of the Katkari Adivasis did not change as the process of giving them their land back was repeatedly delayed," says Mahajan, who runs Sarvahara Jana Andolan—a social organisation that has been upholding the rights of marginalised communities for decades. Only recently, they received primary certificates of community ownership of Dali lands.

While showing the land certificate titled *Samuyik Banahakka Dharkanchanao* (community land ownership) that gives ownership and protection rights of 14.81 acres of forest land to 17 Katkari families in Wave Diwali, Waghmare says: "This is not enough. They wouldn't let us cut the big trees and until the lands are cleared for cultivation, it's of no use." Chandrakant, another social activist, explains: "They need separate lands, not the community holdings. They need to grow paddy, ragi or wari for survival. But the forest department is not letting it happen."

Though Waghmare owns 32 *guntha* or 0.75-acre of land, his son and daughter-in-law are working at coal kilns in Andhra Pradesh. They borrowed Rs 80,000 from their *seth* during Ganesh puja. "They have to repay the loan," he says.

These issues of the Katkari Adivasi community do not find any place in the electoral campaigns in Raigad, one of the 48 Lok Sabha constituencies of Maharashtra that votes on May 7. In this seat, the fight is quite interesting as Sunil Tatkare, the former NCP leader and an aid of Sharad Pawar, is contesting the election from the Ajit Pawar camp. Tatkare won the seat in 2019 with the blessings of the senior Pawar.

The INDIA bloc has fielded senior Shiv Sena leader—now in the Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray (UBT) faction—and former union minister Anant Geete, who is evoking the trope of 'betrayal' to corner Tatkare. Amid this political mudslinging, the concerns of the Katkari community and their rights are getting pushed to the corner. When asked if he has any plans for the community, Tatkare says: "They are not Katkaris. We call them Adivasis. Every one of them has got 2.5 acres of forest land as per the Forest Conservation Act. In my constituency, I have given them roads, schools and Anganwadis."

However, people from the Katkari community that this reporter spoke to have a different opinion. While Pawar and Waghmare asked for CC roads that can connect them to the main village, around 20 kms away, in Ratwad, another small hamlet, Katkaris seem sceptical about the works done by the MP. Village sarpanch Vaishali Gangaram Jadhav, standing at the end of the hilly and dusty lane that is flanked by mud houses, says: "Road connectivity is the real issue here. I will request the new government to give us internal CC roads towards the school and the crematorium." She also requested for disbursement of PMAY funds so that they can make *pucca ghar*. Of the 50 houses in the village, only 16 have received the funds so far. Seven houses were made under the state-sponsored Shabari Adivasi Gharkul Yojana—a targeted scheme for cementing Adivasi houses in the village hamlets.

Though there is a small school around 2 km from the Adivasi hamlet, students from the Katkari community rarely get the chance to go to school as they are constantly migrating with their parents. "My son is now in Class 5, but he still cannot write his name. Every year in November, we take him with us to the coal kiln and he is not able to attend classes for 5-6 months," says Kushana Ramajangam, who, these days, is working day in and day out to make a *pucca* house, as his daughter is going to get married soon

Ramajangam never went to school but understands the importance of education. "Because we are uneducated, the *seth* can dupe us," he says. Last year, he took Rs 30,000 from his *seth* during Diwali, and in November, with his wife and son, went to a coal kiln in Andhra Pradesh. "For every *gani* (sack) of coal produced from the woods of Babul trees, we get Rs 130. In these last four months, we produced 170 *ganis*. Yet, our *seth* told us, we still have to repay Rs 25,000," he elaborates. When he was told that he has already paid around Rs 22,000, he says: "The *seth* cuts the amount for ration and medical bills as well. We can't do basic calculations. Whatever he says, we have to accept."

* * *

The silence in the room was interrupted by Ravi Ramesh Jadhav, 14, who was searching for something beneath the calendar of Asaram Bapu whose team recently visited the village and gave them these photos and a few new clothes. As the Godman-turned-convict stares at Ravi from his large size photo—a misfit in a Katkari household, Ravi says: "The teacher is Maharashtrian, and is biased towards Adivasi students." Ravi and his friends, who now study in Class 8, can't even recite the table of five.

While basics like education, medical facilities, road connectivity and homes are in tatters, two things bind them—mobile phones and television. Looking at a few children who were watching reels on mobiles, sitting on the broken stairs of muddy courtyards, Vaishali says: "We need the mobiles as our *seth* calls us whenever there is work." Even in the interiors, the mobile network was not an issue. For Tatkare, that was something worth mentioning in his election rally. "Every single Adivasi household now has a television and mobile phone," he said.

"Among the Katkaris, it is a common practice to spend all the money as soon as they get it. So, when they take the loans from the *seths*, they spend it on things like TV or mobile phones. They don't have any savings," says an Adivasi activist. In most households, the televisions were non-functional as they couldn't afford to pay the monthly bills.

Referring to the trap of this vicious cycle of seth lending them money and the practice of the whole family shifting to coal or brick kilns for half a year, Mahajan says: "The *seths* know that the Adivasis would need cash during festivals."

While several civil society organisations are holding Adivasi conventions in small pockets and consolidating them against Tatkare, a few of them don't even know that the Shiv Sena or the NCP have split. At one point, Pawar stands up, and in the bright sunlight, one could clearly see a face on his t-shirt. It was Tatkare. On being asked whether he knows whose face it is, Pawar says: "I don't know him. I got it during Janmashtami celebrations in the village."

Raigad is going to polls on May 7. The leaders are yet to reach the margins. ⓞ

Facebook

Twitter

The Master

The Assam chief minister enjoys popularity both as an adminis

Snigdhendu Bhattacharya in Guwahati

"**H**IMANTA [Biswa Sarma] is right. All these *lungi*-clad Muslims should be kicked out of Assam," says Shibananda Talukdar, who is in his 40s. His friend Biswajit Phukan chips in. "We, Assamese, don't want to be run over by these Bangladeshis with whom we share no connection." Talukdar calls himself a self-employed professional. Phukan introduces himself as a medical representative and an avid biker.

They are sharing a table over coffee and snacks at a café in the Kahilipara neighbourhood of Guwahati, Assam's capital. Neither of them are from Guwahati. Work has brought them to the city from the suburbs. They insist that, to the best of their understanding, Guwahati and its suburbs overwhelmingly share the same sentiment–Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma "talks sense".

Such pro-Biswa Sarma voices can be heard in all parts of Assam, from Dibrugarh in the east to Barpeta in the west and Silchar in the south. It is the Parliamentary election, in which re-electing Prime Minister Narendra Modi to India's top job is the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) priority. BJP leaders are talking about Modi's development model. But in public discussions, the 55-year-old Biswa Sarma eclipses everyone else.

"In Assam, Biswa Sarma, not Modi, is the biggest polariser," says a government schoolteacher, a Bengali-speaking Muslim living in Barpeta town of western Assam. He does not wish to be named.

It has been nearly a decade since Biswa Sarma, the "Number 2" in Assam's last Congress government led by Tarun Gogoi rebelled against his party, quit the cabinet in July 2014, and joined the BJP a year later. The buzz in the state Congress is that he hoped to be Gogoi's successor. But the Congress' decimation in the 2014 Lok Sabha election

Strategist

PTI

Wooing Voters
(Left) Himanta Biswa Sharma at a rally with Suresh Bora, the BJP's candidate for the Nagaon Lok Sabha constituency; (right) Biswa Sarma at a public meeting for the Lok Sabha elections at Assam's Kamrup district

and Gogoi's son Gaurav's entry into state politics made him wary of his future. As his bargain with the Congress high command failed, he left for greener pastures.

The BJP national leadership saw his potential and high ambitions. They quickly made him the head of the North East Democratic Alliance (NEDA), the BJP-led alliance for northeast India that includes most of the region's important political parties. The party contested the 2016 assembly election with him as the convener of the election management committee.

After the formation of the BJP's Sarbananda Sonowal government, Biswa Sarma emerged as the second-most important leader, only to overshadow Sonowal soon. The BJP effectively fought the 2019 Lok Sabha election in Assam under his leadership. He eventually bagged Assam's top post in 2021.

By 2024, he has made a name for himself as Hindutva's latest poster boy, known at places far away from Assam for his "hate speeches" targeting Muslims and derogatory remarks against

Opposition leaders, especially those from the Congress.

Sentiments against Bengali-speaking Muslims, commonly referred to as "Miya" in Assam in a derogatory sense, have a long history in Assam. Changes in Assam's religious and linguistic demography with the influx of Hindus and Muslims from Bangladesh have remained a central point of politics in Assam for over four decades.

However, the BJP differentiated between these migrants on the basis of religion and Biswa Sarma took the vilification of Bengali-speaking Muslims to a different level. He has accused Bengali Muslims of driving up vegetable prices and engaging in "fertiliser-*jihad*", called their women

Facebook

Twitter

"child-producing machines", and described these Muslims as "very, very communal and fundamentalist" who were "distorting Assamese culture".

Muslims compose 34% of Assam's population according to the census of 2011. About nine-tenths of them speak Bengali.

Since 2021, Biswa Sarma's government has shut down and even demolished *madrasas*. His crackdown against child marriage saw the Miya men bearing most of the brunt. His administration even closed down a small private museum highlighting Miya culture and slapped terror charges on the founder.

In a crude attack on Badruddin Ajmal of All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF)—which enjoys significant popularity among Assam's Bengali-speaking Muslims—Biswa Sarma said in March this year that if Ajmal wishes to marry again, he should do it now, as Biswa Sarma's government is going to enact the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) once the elections are over. Then, a second marriage without nullification of the first will land anyone in jail.

The 68-year-old Ajmal is married to only one woman and has never expressed a wish to marry again. Biswa Sarma dragged Ajmal into his campaign against polygamy perceptibly because his favourite generalisation of Muslims is that they have multiple wives.

While underage marriage, teenage pregnancy, and polygamy are social evils that need to be eradicated and, indeed, have a higher prevalence in Assam than in many other parts of the country, Biswa Sarma's political campaign targets only Bengali Muslims.

"Biswa Sarma has turned us into second-class citizens and he did it brazenly," says a government schoolteacher in Barpeta town of western Assam, requesting anonymity.

Biswa Sarma's vilification of the Miyas started even before he became the chief minister. Ahead of the 2021 assembly election, he proudly said that he did not need "Miya votes". "I will not be able to sit in the Assembly if they voted for me," he had said in one of his rants against the community. He reiterated the position multiple times between October 2023 and February 2024. This turned him into a hero in the eyes of many.

"Smart" is one of the most widely-used words to describe Biswa Sarma. He is daring, say others. Some call him an able crisis-handler. He knows everything about Assam's BJP and the Congress, people point out.

There are multiple corruption charges against him, some from the time he was in the Congress, some emerged during his chief ministership. But he manages to distract people from these.

According to political analyst Abhinav Borbora, a Lokniti-CSDS researcher, Biswa Sarma's unique selling point (USP) is his exceptional grasp of the electoral pulse of the people of Assam. "He has an unmatched understanding of how and what the voters are thinking and the nuanced dynamics that prevail in every constituency. We have to credit him with the kind of meticulous planning that no other contemporary politician in Assam has shown," Borbora says.

Borbora points out that one of the obstacles that Biswa

"BISWA SARMA HAS AN UNMATCHED UNDERSTANDING OF HOW AND WHAT THE VOTERS IN ASSAM ARE THINKING AND THE NUANCED DYNAMICS THAT PREVAIL IN EVERY CONSTITUENCY."

Sarma faced towards his elevation as the chief minister was his caste Hindu identity. He is not an Ahom and does not belong to upper Assam, which has been the heartland of Assamese ethnic politics. Ahoms are Assam's dominant tribe currently listed among Other Backward Classes (OBCs).

However, after becoming the CM, Sarma recast his image as a leader with a pan-Assam appeal by focusing on the upper Assam belt, capitalising on public emotions around Ahom icons like the 17th-century military general Lachit Borphukan. Such has been the maneuvering skills of Biswa Sarma that even after his relentless vilification campaign and his government's actions, a section of Muslims may end up voting for the BJP.

"He abuses but also delivers," says Emran Hussain, a BJP supporter at Rupohihat, which is part of the Nagaon Lok Sabha constituency in central Assam where Bengali-speaking Muslims live in large numbers. He adds that under Biswa Sarma, Muslim-concentrated areas were not neglected or deprived.

A doctor at a block primary health centre in Nagaon agrees that some Muslims are likely to vote for the BJP. He says that he asked a group of young Muslim women why some of them lean towards the BJP despite Biswa Sarma's series of abuses. "They told me that they were happy with the government's women-centric schemes," he shares.

Perhaps sensing such sentiments on the ground, Biswa Sarma has changed tactics in order to get the Miyas' support. He has sensed that a portion of Miya votes could give the BJP a chance in Muslim-majority, close-contest seats such as Nagaon and Karimganj as well as Darang-Udalgiri, which has a sizeable Muslim population. The BJP expects Muslim votes in these seats to remain split between the Congress and the AIUDF.

During his repeated visits to Bengali Muslim-dominated constituencies in March and April, he declared that all his actions are aimed at bringing the community forward. "I believe that daughters, women and youths from the Miya community will vote for the BJP this time. I am fighting for Miya women so that there should not be *talaq*, child marriage, and women should get property rights as well," he said at the end of March.

Only time will tell which section of Assam's Bengali Muslims will take him to be their well-wisher. ⊘

Facebook

Twitter

KAMAT States Transcending Towards BIMARU

Vishwa Prasad Alva

The acronym for the state of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh collectively was coined as 'BIMARU' as a pejorative for sick or backward states of India because of high levels of corruption, lawlessness, and crime. The degeneration of the states was due to a small minority controlling the vast majority and a lack of justice for the common man. A miniscule minority patronized by politicians and criminals took law into their own hands and threatened people to submission; a corrupt police force colluded with the criminals refusing to file FIRs against them; and no justice was served to the victims while the courts delayed matters for decades to provide justice to the common man.

Gradually, the miniscule minority grew in percentage with the lure of wealth and patronage, leaving the law-abiding common man with only three options to choose from. First, accept the situation, get subdued, and become submissive, trading their own energy and enterprise to buy peace. Second, to leave the state and migrate to places where they could live with dignity and peace. The third was to join the criminals or the corrupt minority in the law enforcement bodies to threaten and loot others. There was large-scale migration, both in the intellectual and labour classes, to the south or abroad. The point to be noted is that everywhere, it was the miniscule minority that ruled the larger population of law-abiding citizens. The good news is that in the last few years, the so-called BIMARU states have undergone reforms because of a few decisive and responsible new leaders.

In comparison, the KAMAT States—Karnataka/Kerala, Andhra, Maharashtra, and Telangana/Tamil Nadu—were once prosperous, literate, and enterprising but are transitioning towards a similar standing that the BIMARU faced decades ago. The political parties in power nurtured corrupt leaders and corrupt police, stifled the justice system through delays, weakened prosecution, and subdued the common man into submission.

In Karnataka, the political landscape often witnesses a protracted process in forming a government, extending beyond the typical '5-year term'. This prolonged period is marked by instances of defection, trading of elected representatives, and the amplification of caste and religious divisions. Certain religious leaders have been observed leading their caste groups into confrontations, vying for reclassification as backward or minority communities. Consequently, governance has been marred by injustices, fostering an environment where criminals thrive and public funds are misappropriated. The repercussions extend to honest businesses, which face challenges such as rigged tenders, delayed payments, and a sluggish legal system.

The prevailing political landscape underscores a disconcerting moral erosion, evident in the proliferation of criminal elements and the ascendancy of corrupt caste leaders in securing candidacies, irrespective of party affiliations. Selection criteria for political candidacy increasingly emphasize financial clout, influence, and perceived electability. Consequently, law-abiding citizens find themselves with few viable alternatives: either resign to a semblance of temporary peace, consider relocating, or reluctantly navigate through the pervasive web of corruption.

While some national leaders demonstrate genuine commitment to reform and transparency in governance, the prevailing trend among the political class leans towards complacency or deterioration. Despite sporadic efforts, there remains a significant deficit in addressing systemic issues within the judiciary, resulting in prolonged legal proceedings and relatively low conviction rates. Real progress seems elusive until comprehensive reforms encompassing political, law enforcement, and judicial spheres are implemented.

The absence of swift and impartial justice undermines prospects for meaningful progress or societal well-being. A robust, impartial police force and an efficient judiciary are indispensable pillars of any functional society. Until these fundamental elements are restored, aspirations for development and prosperity remain contingent upon a foundation of justice and accountability.

Vishwa Prasad Alva : Founder, Skanray Technologies
An entrepreneur, an environmentalist, and an advocate against animal cruelty speaks on the deprivation of South Indian states

Facebook

Twitter

Under The Model Town

Muslim ghettos in Ahmedabad are dilapidated and neglected

Facebook

Twitter

Sharmita Kar in Ahmedabad

THE vast stretches of the main road of Sarkhej, Ahmedabad, become narrower, the buildings smaller and more congested as you take a detour and enter into what is known as India's largest urban Muslim ghetto. Surrounded by settlements of the riot-hit minority community, the lanes lead up to a towering brick wall with fencing on top, built with the sole purpose of separating the Muslim population from its neighbouring Hindu colony, Vejalpur. This is Juhapura, an area located just a few kilometres away from the heart of Gujarat's largest city, Ahmedabad. While it was founded as a rehabilitation project for the flood-hit victims in 1973, the area took a whole new meaning with a series of communal tensions over the next few decades.

The contrast here is stark: tall buildings lining up the Hindu colony, and waterlogged lanes, crumbling small houses and the poor economic conditions in the Muslim settlement. The streets of Juhapura are brimming with autorickshaws and cycles, lined on either side by meat shops, barber shops, mechanics and offices of travel and estate agents. It is usually at its busiest when the sun is up and shining. The bylanes open into multi-storeyed concrete structures stacked up like Lego blocks. Inside, the rooms are small and functional, housing a family of four or more and bearing the weight of an urban life amidst neglect and decay.

Shagufta Anjum, 38, lives on one of these lanes of Juhapura area. Early in the morning, as she prepares to get ready for the day, she calls out to her brother looking up to the corridor outside a cramped nine-by-nine room, "Switch off the pump. There has been no water since yesterday."

"Today is *jumma*," she turns to us and says. "But look, we don't even have water to bathe. See how much the government is doing for us."

The summer months are particularly difficult for the poorer residents of the Juhapura area of Ahmedabad, where the government turns a blind eye when it comes to setting up facilities. "The water we get is anyway dirty, and we do not even get it regularly. There are hardly any street lights. The most they (government) have done for us is send the garbage truck once in four days," she says, laughing as if she was accepting her fate, as if there is no chance their area could witness the

JUHAPURA IS THE EPITOME OF THE SEGREGATED CITY THAT AHMEDABAD IS—WHERE THE LINES BETWEEN THE NEW AND THE OLD MAY GET BLURRED, BUT WHEN IT COMES TO CLASS, CASTE, RELIGION AND ECONOMIC ACTIVITY, THE DIVIDE IS MORE STARK THAN ANYWHERE ELSE.

Facebook

Twitter

Unseen, Untouched
Women in Juhapura narrate their ordeal

'Gujarat model' of development everyone else boasts of.

Although not the only Muslim ghetto in the city, Juhapura is the epitome of the segregated city that Ahmedabad is—where the lines between the new and the old may get blurred, but when it comes to class, caste, religion and economic activity, the divide is more stark than anywhere else.

Juhapura's emergence is marked by the city's decades-old history of communal tensions as Muslim citizens moved out from the densely packed walled city on the eastern side of the Sabarmati River and rehabilitated themselves in the city's 'urban', more affluent western periphery. Initially, it was a few thousand people trying to come out of the deep-rooted Hindu-Muslim divide. But the recurring riots in Ahmedabad in 1969, 1985, 1992 and 2002 further cemented the borders. In the aftermath of the 2002 Gujarat riots, the population here grew manifold as more people were pushed out of Hindu-dominated areas like Khadia and Teen Darwaza. Juhapura became a safe zone for Muslims in Ahmedabad.

But it remains untouched, unseen by the government. It was

part of the erstwhile Sarkhej assembly constituency, which used to be Union Home Minister Amit Shah's bastion, and now falls under the Vejalpur constituency. Shah, who was seen as an undefeatable contestant in the area, was also known for leveraging the communally-torn fabric to appease the Hindu majority. In the Lok Sabha elections, on the other hand, the area falls under the larger Ahmedabad West constituency currently held by the BJP's Kiritbhai Solanki. The party has fielded Dinesh Makwana from the seat this time.

In the years following the 2002 riots, Gujarat witnessed a rapid infrastructural boom that came to be known as the 'Gujarat model'. The model was driven by the then Chief Minister Narendra Modi's neoliberal policies, which were used in the electoral campaign for the 2014 Lok Sabha polls. Modi was projected as a *Vikas Purush* even as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) promised to replicate this development on a national level after coming to power. But even within the city, this model of development has not reached everyone yet. To a large extent, the residents of Juhapura rely on their elected corporators of the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC), but even then there is very little progress.

Over the years, the people living in the ghettos of Ahmedabad have worked their way up to build a life on their own terms. "People say big things about the Gujarat model, but a few tall buildings or a riverfront will not help us fill our stomachs—employment will. And there is no employment here. The government has not done anything for us. There is clear discrimination," says Fareed Qureshi, a resident of Juhapura.

On the face of it, even Juhapura can be mistaken for a 'developed' area with its sprawling high-rises, luxurious bungalows along a widened main road. But take a look behind these buildings and you will still find concentrated communal pockets.

DESPITE DECADES OF COMMUNAL SEGREGATION, RESIDENTS OF AHMEDABAD HAVE ODDLY REMAINED SILENT ABOUT THEIR DEMANDS.

Facebook

Twitter

The scars of historical segregation, it appears, never went away. Areas within Juhapura are deprived of basic government infrastructure and public services on the basis of religion. Residents allege lack of education, transportation, water supply and sewerage. Even with the Lok Sabha elections coming up, there are no promises made for the people living in this area.

Shagufta's aunt Fatima, who has lived in the area for the past eight years, says that even sending kids to school is a struggle. "There are no municipal schools in this area because the government does not build anything here. The nearest one is several kilometres away. Every day we have to book an auto or arrange private transport to send the kids to school. It costs Rs 600 a month per auto. The buses don't enter this *gali*. Ultimately, we end up spending nearly as much as we would have if our kids were going to private schools," she laments.

Shagufta, her sisters and her family moved to Juhapura from Dariyapur in old Ahmedabad during the last 10-15 years as they could not sustain a life within the dilapidated walls of the old city. "The houses were very small there and nearly falling apart. We had to move out," she says.

* * *

The 600-year-old walled city, of which Dariyapur is a part, is on the UNESCO World Heritage List. But more and more buildings are crumbling down because of the negligence of the authorities. The negligence, residents living in the area say, stems from a similar bias seen in other Muslim-dominated parts of the city. The AMC sends a few notices to mark buildings as "dangerous and dilapidated". But here too, there is rarely any further action or aid from the authorities to prevent it from turning into an accident site.

Tasleem Malik, a beautician living in Sarkhej-Ojha area, visits her parents in Dariyapur every weekend. This is her family home where she grew up and where the family has lived through generations for over 100 years. "This house is very old, but my parents do not want to leave," she says. Tasleem's family has seen every phase of the riots in Ahmedabad. They faced curfews, saw people turn against each other, saw bloodshed, though in Dariyapur the atrocities were "not that grim", according to police records.

"It is Allah's grace that everyone in my family is safe. The things we saw happening in front of our eyes those few days are unspeakable," she says, but quickly notes that everything has been fine since then.

When nudged a little more, she says that there are a few scattered Hindu-Muslim incidents, but maintains that these are only minor issues. "*Aisa to chalta rehta hai* (These things keep happening)," she says.

Mohammad Ikrama, a *qari* at a Dariyapur mosque, says, "We always welcome people of all religions to our area. But sadly, the same doesn't happen when we go to a Hindu colony. A few days ago, four Muslim men went to Isanpur (an area on the outskirts of Ahmedabad) to have *lassi* and were attacked there. They are now hospitalised."

Ikrama feels that these tensions are created by politicians to further divide the communities on the basis of religion. He recollects the recent "*ghuspaithiyan*" remark made by Prime Minister Narendra Modi during a rally, and says, "We keep

OVER THE YEARS, THE PEOPLE LIVING IN THE GHETTOS OF AHMEDABAD HAVE WORKED THEIR WAY UP TO BUILD A LIFE ON THEIR OWN TERMS.

seeing these kinds of remarks made by our leaders. But why must there be this hatred? All we ask for is to live in peace and harmony. Whoever is our representative should ensure brotherhood amongst all communities so that people can work freely, our businesses flourish and there should be no fear within our community."

Despite decades of communal segregation, residents of Ahmedabad have oddly remained silent about their demands. The minority communities have now started taking matters into their own hands, supported by their local committees and religious trusts, because they feel they will never get any support from the government.

When asked about why there is such a silence about this pertinent issue, V Divakar, curator of Conflictorium, a museum in the heart of the walled city, says, "The idea that riots do not happen anymore in Gujarat is a false narrative. Although it may not be as violent or large-scale, there are smaller incidents happening everywhere. The right-wing has promoted the Gujarat model as something extraordinary, but such infrastructural growth happens everywhere. What is interesting here is how there have been no social movements, no opposition. The opposition has been completely terminated."

He goes on to say that the 'Gujarat model' is "just an eyewash". "You talk about development and business to take away social responsibility. There are no concerns for labour; people are being hired for as little as Rs 50 a day," he says.

Ahead of the Lok Sabha elections, the saffron-laced electoral landscape of Gujarat has once again become evident, where voting has, for years, been dominated by the aura of only one leader—Narendra Modi. But in the shadows, an opposition voice is simmering. Even among the Hindu communities, where people praise the roads, buildings and schools, they are unhappy about inflation and rising unemployment.

There is a disconnect in Gujarati society between social and economic growth. On the economic front, Gujarat has, for years, remained above the national average, powered by the dominant business fraternity. However, on social indicators, it has underperformed.

For a majority of the population, the vote may still favour the party that has ruled Gujarat for the past 25 years, but there is a strange hunch, a constant buzz that this may be the last democratic election in India. Perhaps, the quietness in Gujarat about election campaigns, just a week away from the polling date, signals a reality many still refuse to see. ⏻

Facebook

Twitter

Pilgrim's Politics

Two-time MP from Varanasi, Narendra Modi, is sculpting the eternal city in his image

Change in the Air
An Angry Hanuman flag fluttering at Dashashwamedh Ghat in Varanasi

Facebook

Twitter

A New Face The revamped road connecting Godowlia Chowk to Dashashwamedh Ghat in Varanasi

Tanul Thakur in Varanasi

LIKE a committed pilgrim, Varanasi wakes up early. At four-thirty in the morning, on the road leading to the Dashashwamedh Ghat, the owner of a food stall slaps dosa batter on a griddle; several customers stand outside a bright *paan* shop; a street vendor, selling *pooja* paraphernalia, drones on, "10 *ka*, 10 *ka*, 10 *ka*." At the Ghat, the hawk-like hawkers swoop in on foreign tourists, pitching varied services: a free locker, a boat ride, a neck massage. More than 100 people have assembled at the Ghat, and amid a cluster of boats, *diyas* and devotees bob on the Ganga. A fount of contradictory stories inundate Dashashwamedh: two men sleeping on a platform, a young woman applying a lip liner, a bare-chested man getting his head shaved, pilgrims frolicking in the river, an old man tolling the Ghat bells, and an Angry Hanuman flag fluttering on a boat. All under morning twilight—unlike Varanasi, the sun takes its time.

The city's ghats are eternal. So are the rituals around them. But less than a kilometre away, its Member of Parliament (MP), Narendra Modi, has begun to sculpt Varanasi in his own image. His passion project, a complex around the Kashi Vishwanath temple—constructed by the Maratha ruler Ahilyabai Kolkar a century after Aurganzeb had demolished it—began in early 2019. Preceding the Ram temple construction, it inverted the Hindutva war cry, "*Ayodhya toh sirf jhaanki hai, Kashi aur Mathura baaki hai*" (Ayodhya is just a glimpse, the whole view—of Kashi and Mathura—is unfinished).

Both projects have created palatial complexes, displaced residents, and imposed uniform aesthetics, right down to the shops' boards on the revamped roads, which have the same colour, design, and font. Years after the inaugural show, most boards in Varanasi, with random missing letters, refuse to pretend: "*Vastralay*" doesn't have an L; "Garment" doesn't have an N; "Store" has become "Sore", and "Gandhi" "*Gadhi*".

Like the Ram temple, the Kashi Vishwanath corridor mixes business and devotion. It has a food court, a bookstore, a multipurpose hall (available on rent for "*Upanayan, haldi*, and Vedic marriage"). HDFC Bank powers donation boxes; SBI and Canara Bank provide ATMs; LIC free drinking water. Connecting the Manikarnika Ghat to the main temple, via the riverbank steps and canopy-shaped shelters, the plush corridor can make you forget that you just crossed what used to be someone's bedroom, shop, or temple. Some signs of that destruction are still visible: adjacent to the Kashi Vishwanath complex lies a disfigured ashram and a school.

Facebook
Twitter

Glimpses of the City
(Right) Cremation at the Manikarnika Ghat; (middle) A hoarding of PM Narendra Modi at Godowlia Chowk; (extreme right) An old woman prays in front of Varanasi's Pashupatinath Mahadev temple

The neighbouring Gyanvapi mosque, with dilapidated domes, looks paler. Two cops, around 50 metres from each other, forbid me from entering the mosque, parroting the same reason: that the disputed property isn't open to Hindus. The local Muslims can pray inside, but the cops check the IDs—sometimes even Aadhar Cards—of "suspicious" Muslims, whose faces they don't recognise or who reveal signs of being an outsider, such as not knowing, or asking for, directions. I, too, asked for multiple directions to enter the temple—mostly from cops—but I never became a suspect. You can be a lost Hindu in Varanasi, not a lost Muslim.

Like the different forms of Shiva—a creator and a destroyer, a hermit and a husband, cave-dwelling and *bhang*-guzzling—his city is a paean to multiplicity. Just take the two-kilometre stretch from Dashashwamedh to Assi Ghat, where you'll find an astounding diversity of architectures, origins, regions, religions, castes, and customs. There's a Jain Ghat, a Nishad Ghat, a Tulsi Ghat, a Janki Ghat. They're quiet and clean, with toilets, dustbins, and changing rooms—including one floating on the river—at regular intervals. "Modi does what he promises [such as building the temple corridor and repairing the Ramnagar bridge]," says a 72-year-old priest at Dashashwamedh Ghat. "I haven't seen a PM like this ever in my life, son. It feels like, in the last 10 years, we've found a God."

Not far from Tiwari sits an 18-year-old boy behind a board that says "20 year experience, lifetime practitioner, Banaras Hindu University". Like his guru, Ayush Shukla is pursuing Vedic studies, hoping to be an astrologer. He praises Modi renovating the ghats—especially the "changing rooms for our mothers and sisters"—then launches into a charged monologue: about a *shivling* found in Gyanvapi; Hindus "lacking unity as compared to Muslims"; and how after Ayodhya and Varanasi, it's now "Mathura's turn". Sitting close to him, a bespectacled man, Gyan Chandra, starts singing his own tune (quite literally, comprising *shlokas* from the *Ramcharitmanas*) and explaining the etymology of the word *mandir* and calling Modi "a guide for Hindus".

The stories keep mutating on the way to Assi Ghat: a *baba* asks for Rs 1,100 for getting his photo clicked; a young blue-collar worker, swaying and slurring, asks for a cigarette; architecture students from a college in Gujarat examine the Tulsidas Ghat. The revamped Assi has a food street, wide shelters, and an LED screen displaying ads. Two guava sellers on the opposite ends of the ghat, Manab Pramanik and Chotu Biswas, admire the recent changes (and their architect, Modi): a booming business, a developing city, a fancy ghat ("which was just a drain before"). But they differ on one crucial issue. "[Gyanvapi's] existing structure should remain intact," says Pramanik. "You keep your religion, I keep mine."

Facebook

Twitter

ONE THING IN VARANASI HAS REMAINED ETERNAL: ITS GULLIES. LESS THAN TEN FEET WIDE, THEIR NARROWNESS CONTRADICTS THEIR AMBITION AND CHAOS.

Biswas: "The mosque won't stay for long—and it shouldn't." He laughs. "Modi will make it vanish; he's *dabang*."

"*Balwa ho jayega* [a riot will erupt]," interrupts a man near him. Biswas replies, "Nothing will happen." The man says, "Ayodhya is Ayodhya. But if something like that happens in Banaras, then you'll fall and so will I. If I demolish your house and make a toilet there, how will you feel?"

Less than five minutes away is the Harmony Book Shop, whose owner, Rakesh Singh, has spent five decades in the city. He, too, has witnessed recent unparalleled changes: the loss of peace, the swelling of visitors, the "pilgrims to picnic" transformation, and the age of tourists—many in their early 20s. When they come to his shop, he asks them what brings them to Varanasi. "Most of them say two things: Instagram posts and reels." One woman was more specific: "[The social media influencer] Beer Biceps." Such attention on the city, he says, "doesn't come from inside but through someone influencing your thinking. It's romanticising something out of context."

As Singh continues to talk, a few customers enter the store, take off their shoes near the entrance, and pick up books wrapped in plastic covers—all of it accompanied by the sounds of *shehnai* on the stereo. If people on the ghats, and elsewhere in the city, praise Modi and dismiss all concerns about those who lost their homes

and shops—by saying "they got twice the original amount"—then Singh responds, "But they had to leave. They didn't do it voluntarily." Development, he adds, must be inclusive and balanced and holistic—"You can't erase the past". And the Banarasis who had to leave their homes must be suffering a "haunted nostalgia", as they relocated to communities devoid of friends, ancestors, or memories. "It can't be measured in monetary terms. Those who talk about [hefty] compensations are the ones who haven't lost their own homes."

BUT at least one thing in Varanasi has remained eternal: its gullies. Less than ten feet wide, their narrowness contradicts their ambition and chaos. At most times, they hold, besides shops on both sides, pedestrians, workers, cycles, scooters, bikes, Activas, cows, dogs, and anything else that can—and must—fit in this alternate universe of spatial and temporal disconnect. What makes it better (or worse): that the traffic in gullies runs both ways. You can't walk straight for more than a few seconds. Something must distract and disorient you: You lurch left to give way to a bike, but what about the scooter coming from behind? An abrupt disturbance, such as a few dogs chasing a cow, can throw you on the wall. People race their bikes as if cruising on a six-lane highway, and amid

Past and Present
(Left) A room on the terrace of Ustad Bismillah Khan's house in Varanasi, where he lived and practised; (bottom) Two men seated at NaMo Ghat, Varanasi
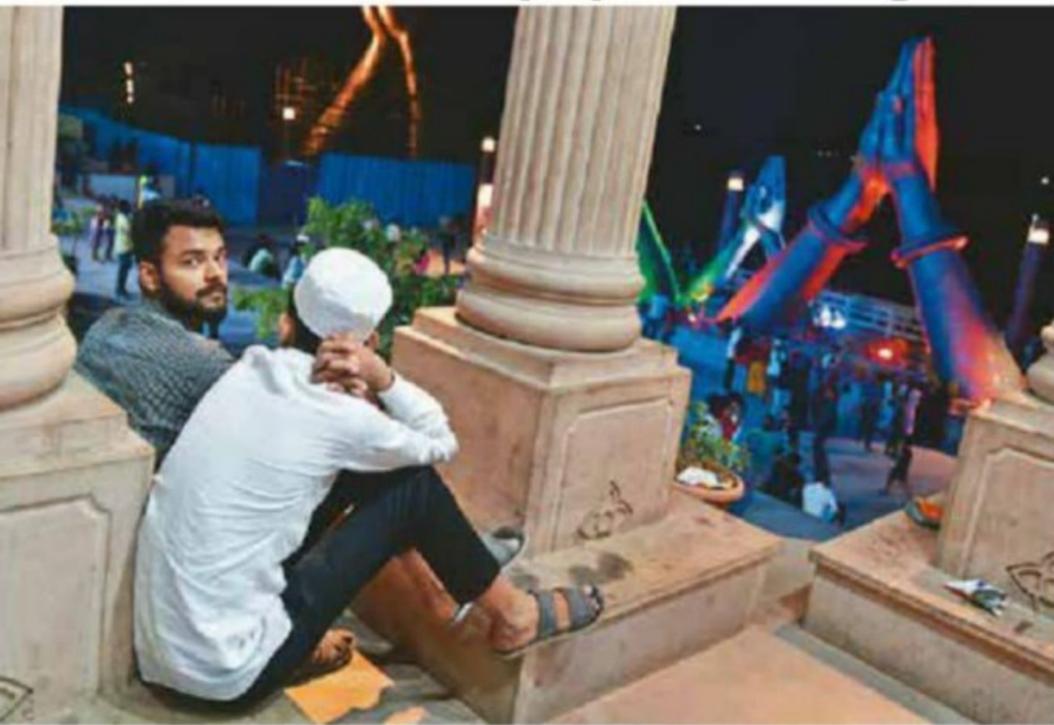
all the claustrophobic clusterfuck, the beautiful murals—depicting key mythological scenes—prod you to slow down. The rules of the normal world don't apply to Banarasis and their gullies—they're truly made for each other.

Around a kilometre away from the Kashi Vishwanath temple lies a maze of such gullies—spilling stores, markets, and shopping plazas—in a locality, Daalmandi, where bagpacks, *niqabs*, and *kurtas* hang from tarpaulins jutting out from stores. A tea seller clangs ceramic plates while he walks; hawkers strain their lungs to attract customers (*"Bees rupees mein kangan"*, *"bachchon ka kapda"*, *"make-up*

ka saamaan"—bangles for 20, clothes for kids, equipment for make-up), as a steady stream of men and women, wearing prayer caps and *burqas,* pass by. Barely any place to sit, stand, or stroll, and yet the lanes overflow with customers, business, desperation—and a message: a man covering his head with a saffron *gamcha* darts on a bike with a *Jai Shri Ram* flag.

In the decades before and after independence, according to locals, this chaos had consorts, and this market was a *mehfil*. Music rolled from the two-storey houses above the shops: an *aalaap*, a *thumri*, a *tabla*, a *shehnai*. Daalmandi produced doyennes of Hindustani classical music belonging to the Banaras *gharana*: Jaddan Bai, Husna Bai, Rasoolan Bai, Gauhar Jaan, Siddheshwari Devi, Nirmala Devi, and several others. But it all stopped by the early '70s, when the *tawaifs* fell on hard times, and the cops, equating them to sex workers, ousted them.

Today, it's difficult to even find their remnants in Daalmandi—the *haveli* of the great *tabla* player, Lachhu Maharaj, for example, is now a small shopping complex that sells mobile accessories—but one house still stands: Ustad Bismillah Khan's. But finding it is not easy. The shopkeepers point to a series of gullies narrowing with each turn. Bikes and trash clog the lane outside his house (whose nameplate reads "Bharat Ratan Ustad Bismillah Khan"), and in a city prone to power outages, a street lamp glows at 2:50 in the afternoon. Fabled performers live as if they'd never die, but this run-down residence makes you believe Khan never lived.

Adjoining it sits a 75-year-old shopkeeper, Nasibullah (*"urf* Kallu"), who, almost as old as India, talks about the

f Facebook

y Twitter

city's past and present, development and disenchantment. Like Singh, he explains how the corridor project has disrupted "*sukoon*", increased traffic, and constricted progress to a small area around the Kashi Vishwanath temple. He cites Daalmandi's decline as an example: a locality flowing with filth ("these lanes were swept twice a day—the gullies used to glow"), a market spiraling out of control ("from 100 to 2,000 shops"), and profits dwindling to a naught (leading to "*bhookhmari*").

This Banaras doesn't appear in Instagram reels or YouTube shorts. This Benaras doesn't have "I ♥ Kashi". This Banaras tried hopping on the *vikas* train and fell on the platform. On February 2, 2024, two days after the district court allowed Hindu prayers in the Gyanvapi cellar, a disconcerting stillness zipped through Daalmandi, as scores of stores remained shut. A month later, the municipal corporation shuttered 26 meat shops within the two-kilometre radius of the Kashi Vishwanath temple, including some in Daalmandi, implementing the Varanasi Nagar Nigam's new proposal. Besides the meat ban, Councillor Indresh Singh suggested two more changes (which also got approved): widening the roads in Daalmandi, which would allow the Hindu pilgrims easy access to the temple, and increasing the rents of 145 shops in the locality. "The old *tawaifs* have left," a shopkeeper said, "but the new ones have arrived."

LIKE most Indian cities, Varanasi is no stranger to contradictions—old and new, dirty and swanky, neglected and developed—whose biggest example pops on the newest ghat, inaugurated less than two years ago, NaMo. Three bronze statues of folded hands (25-feet and 15-feet high) awe the tourists who mimic the pose and get their photos clicked. A fourth statue—bigger than all of them combined, at 75-feet—is under construction.

This Ghat also compels you to think about the man making and unmaking Varanasi, Modi, and his ultimate goal and competition. No, not with Nehru. Look somewhere else, read between the lines. Start with his constituency buzzing with the chants of "*Har Har Mahadev*". For his 2019 election campaign, its MP substituted Mahadev with Modi. Even the "NaMo" Ghat works both ways: venerating Modi, via his acronym, and the Almighty via a Ganesh *mantra* (and sure enough, two vertical slabs bookending the statues read, "*Namo Namah*").

The glitzy promenade—which also has a splash pool, inflatable castles, trampolines, and toy rides—contains enough distinctive features (complemented by aesthetic lights) that could produce appealing photos, making numerous people flash their phones. It makes sense: a government that has aced the social media game would know how to create selfie points. By blending ancient tradition and modern pomp, the NaMo Ghat does something else, too: making Hinduism cool. Especially for young Indians who constitute a large share of the country's population who can be moulded by the pro-government influencers who, as an added incentive, received the National Creators Awards

LIKE MOST INDIAN CITIES, VARANASI IS NO STRANGER TO CONTRADICTIONS— OLD AND NEW, DIRTY AND SWANKY, NEGLECTED AND DEVELOPED.

presented by Modi two months ago.

Even though Banaras is considered the city of Shiva, Ram isn't absent here. You can listen to his *bhajans* playing at the ghats, see his large portraits in shops, and even hear the sporadic "*Jai Shri Ram*" chants outside the temple. What's equally striking? On April 25, at least two cops guarding the Kashi Vishwanath gate had a saffron vermillion and a *tilak* on their foreheads. Exiting the same gate, another cop raised his hands gesturing *pranaam*, facing the temple.

A gold-coloured statue of the Nandi bull stood nearby wearing a garland and a loincloth. Devotees lined up near it, whispering their wishes in its ear, hoping they'd reach Shiva. It's also believed that Nandi always faces the deity, and nothing can come between them. This Nandi, though, had its back towards the Kashi Vishwanath temple. What did it face instead? The place where many Hindus, including the Modi government, believe the actual *shivling* resides: the Gyanvapi mosque.

Right opposite Nandi, beyond the temple gate and the mosque grills, lay a Gyanvapi cellar—or "*Vyasji Ka Tehkhana*". Large bulbs lit the basement; a saffron cloth, with more than a dozen Om signs, hung on the wall, and under it, three idols sat on an elevated platform. Many devotees stood outside, pressing their palms and closing their eyes. And in that instant, it felt as if the whole mosque had ceased to exist for them—and what stood in front, and in their minds, bodies, and souls, was a temple. Several Banarasis had told me that God lived *inside* them, that true faith could turn a stone into a deity, and that the word "*mandir*" itself came from the combination of "*man*", which meant "heart", and "*dir*, a place to stay": "So where does the Lord stay? In our hearts."

As the praying continued, three burly monkeys ran outside the temple and leapt into the mosque. A cop, sporting a handlebar moustache, said, "*Kabhi bhi Hanuman-ji ka akraman ho sakta hai*" (Lord Hanuman can attack us anytime). A man wearing a saffron cap peeked into the mosque and said, "*Jai Bajrang Bali*." The monkeys glared at him, making him recoil. They kept jumping on the parapet, rippling a mini-panic among the pilgrims. Soon, they got down from the grills and ambled in the lane leading to a security checkpoint, as a *bhajan* played in the background: "*Tu hi bigaade, tu hi sanwaare, Is jag ke saare kaam/Hey Ram, Hey Ram* (You create, and you destroy this universe/Hey Ram, Hey Ram)." ⊙

Facebook

Twitter
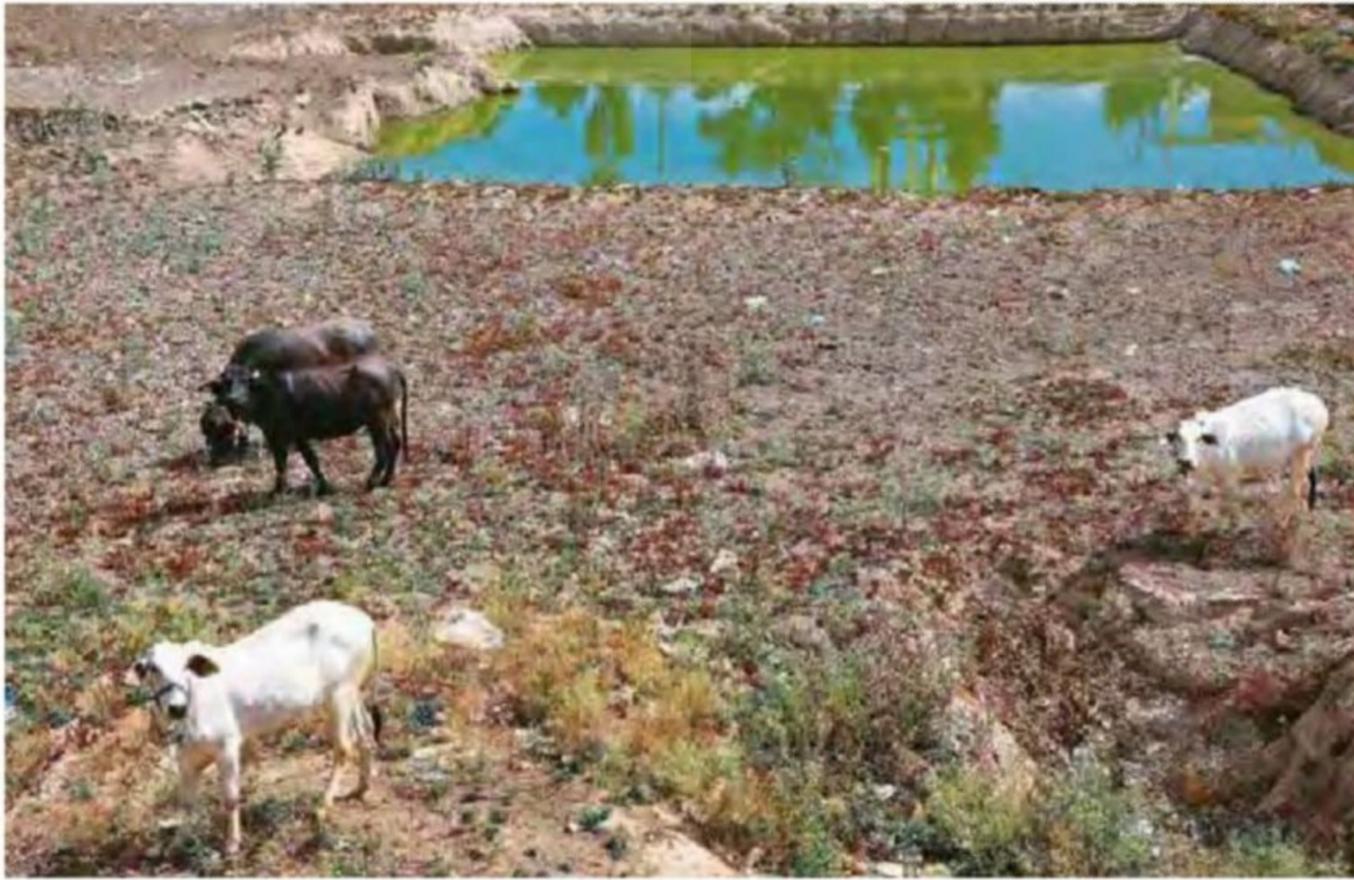
When Taps and Hope Run Dry

Peaking water scarcity and pervasive groundwater contamination have increased migration from many districts of Rajasthan.

Water Woes
(Top) The pond in the Danta village in Sikar, which used to be a source of drinking water, has now dried up; women from Rotoo village going back after filling water from the underground tank

Vikram Raj in Sikar, Bikaner, Churu and Nagaur

IN the scorching April sun, 33-year-old Ratna draws water from an underground water tank with her 11-month-old son in her lap. Merely drawing water from the manmade tank at the nondescript Rotoo village in Rajasthan's Nagaur district, does not put an end to her chore. She hurries back home, located about 300 metres away, with a water-laden bucket in one hand and the child in the other, while at the same time, supervising the whitewashing of her house.

"Last year, the state government installed taps in our homes, but we still don't have access to water. This water tank was built by my father-in-law a few years ago. We have to pay Rs 1,500 to the water vendors who fill up these tanks," she says.

Rajasthan, synonymous with deserts and an arid landscape, has historically been confronted with water shortage, but the issue has peaked over the last few years. According to Rajasthan's Disaster Management Relief and Civil Defence Department, districts like Bikaner, Churu and Nagaur are affected by drought once every four years. But more recently, a dearth of seasonal rainfall has accentuated the crisis in these northern districts. Peaking water scarcity and pervasive groundwater contamination, leading to excessive fluoride levels, have also increased the migration of human resource.

In Bikaner and neighbouring districts, many residents, particularly the elderly and children, suffer from bowed legs and stiffened joints, causing constant pain and limited mobility. Kanha Singh 'Fauji,' 82, a retired soldier from Jalabsar village, used to cultivate mustard on his land until

Facebook

Twitter

the Rabi season of 2021. However, drought and fluorosis have dealt him a double blow, leaving his fields dry for the past three years and rendering him immobile. "For cultivation, we never had enough water, but we used to irrigate our fields with the rainwater we used to save in our underground tanks. Now we don't have enough clean water to drink. We are compelled to drink fluoride-contaminated groundwater," he says.

Previously, the situation was different, according to him, when drinking water was easily accessible in the area. However, in recent years, conditions have worsened. In his village, many individuals experience mobility issues and dental problems by the age of 35-40 years and despite voicing concerns to various political leaders, no efforts have been made to address our issues, Fauji says. According to a report from the US National Library of Medicine, released in 2022, "In Rajasthan, approximately four million people suffer from fluorosis, the highest in the country."As a result, residents of the region run the risk of weakened and discoloured teeth.

To address the water problem in this area, a project worth Rs 8,000 crore was initiated some time ago. The state and union governments planned to construct an underground canal, locally known as the Shekhawati Canal, to provide clean water from the Yamuna River to 1,133 villages in this region. However, the plan remains stagnant. According to Rajasthan Patrika, a Rajasthan-based media organisation, the first phase of canal construction was completed in 2017, but the Detailed Project Report (DPR) has not progressed since then.

While water scarcity has ravaged local residents, for water suppliers like Sheopal Singh 'Dealer', the shortage represents a business opportunity for his ilk. The cost of water varies with the distance it needs to be transported across, he says. "We fill our water tankers from nearby places where water is available and supply it to the arid villages. The cost of the water ranges from Rs 700-15,000 according to the distance involved.Each day we sell five to seven tankfuls of water."

Amraram, a farmers' leader and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) candidate from Sikar, stands out for addressing unemployment and the water crisis in his manifesto. He emphasises, "As a farmer myself, I understand the severity of these issues, which is why I prioritised them in our manifesto."

Water scarcity has forced farmers like Bhikharam, a 63-year-old man from Danta village in Sikar, to switch from his traditional occupation to masonry. "I have three sons, all three moved to Surat last year to work at a snack factory. They used to help me cultivatemoth, moong, millet, jowar and mustard. Their wives and children live here with me," Bhikharam said, adding that his middle son, Dinesh, was preparing to join the army, but after the government's implementation of the Agniveer Yojana, he gave up preparing for the entrance test.

According to a 2021 study by the International Institute for Environment and Development based in the United Kingdom, at least one person in 28 per cent of households in Rajasthan has migrated to different cities due to variations in climatic conditions. Meanwhile, to add to the water shortage and fluoride excess in north Rajasthan, the scourge of unemployment is slowly taking root too, further fuelling the desire to migrate. Unemployment in districts like Sikar, Nagaur and Bikaner has reached an alarming proportion. According to a 2023 report by the Periodic Labour Force Survey, Rajasthan ranks second in

AS PER THE 2023 REPORT BY THE PERIODIC LABOUR FORCE SURVEY, RAJASTHAN RANKS 2ND IN THE COUNTRY WITH AN UNEMPLOYMENT RATE OF 30.2%.

the country with an unemployment rate of 30.2 per cent.

Sagar Kacharia, a labour activist in Sikar associated with the Communist Party of India (Marxist), estimates that over 3,000 youths in Sikar are still awaiting job opportunities even after receiving appointment letters from various armed forces. However, their hopes were disrupted upon learning about the implementation of the Agniveer Scheme. Subsequently, many of these youths shifted their focus to preparing for the Rajasthan Police and other such services, Kacharia said.

Suraj Jakhar, a 21-year-old, now working at an Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act(MNREGA) work site in Sikar's Danta village, was one of the youngsters to secure an appointment letter signing him up for an armed forces job under the Agniveer Yojna. But he did not take it up, preferring to work as an MNREGA mate instead.

"My family supports the Bharatiya Janata Party and campaigned for the party in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. However, instead of opening new opportunities, the BJP government has left us facing unemployment. Despite working under the MNREGA, I struggle to make ends meet," he said.

Unemployment has complex causes stemming from political and economic missteps, as well as longstanding policies governing industries, education and small-scale businesses.

In 2023, the Rajasthan Government, led by then Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot, launched the Indira Gandhi Sahari Rojgar Yojana with an Rs 800 crore budget, on the lines of the MNREGA, to provide 100 days of employment in urban areas. While it initially employed one lakh people, even educated local youth like Suraj are seeking a livelihood under this scheme, because of chronic unemployment.

In 2022, the Election Commission wrote a letter to all the political parties regarding their concerns about the low polling rate due to internal migration. The letter reads, "Amongst the many reasons like urban apathy and youth apathy, inability to vote due to internal migration (domestic migrants) is also one prominent reason contributing to low voter turnout."

The first phase of the elections took place on April 19. As per the data released by the ECI, in Rajasthan, only 57 per cent of the voters cast their votes in 12 constituencies, forcing speculation—in light of the ECI's communication two years ago—as to whether out-migration had led to a drop in polling numbers.

Whoever may emerge as the winner of the Lok Sabha polls, perhaps it is the time for political parties to take stock of how unemployment and the water crisis together are causing huge damage to the social and economic structure of the country and its constituents. O

Facebook

Twitter

Outlook

Read · Think · Understand

initiative

Education Fact File

Outlook Education Fact File lays a spotlight on institutions in India & Abroad
pioneering holistic, innovative learning for a knowledge driven & successful future

Facebook

Twitter

Unveiling Leaders of Educational Landscape

Education Fact File a special section lays a spotlight on institutions pioneering holistic, innovative learning for a knowledge-driven and successful future

In a groundbreaking stride towards educational reform, the Narendra Modi led BJP government unfurled a new chapter in India's academic landscape with the inauguration of the National Education Policy (NEP) in 2020. A visionary manifesto, NEP 2020 heralds a transformative era aimed at aligning education with Indian values and contemporary demands, laying the groundwork for a future fueled by knowledge and innovation.

India, a timeless bastion of ancient wisdom and erudition, has historically revered the pursuit of knowledge as the pinnacle of human endeavor. However, the colonial imprint on the country's educational framework has perpetuated a system geared more towards churning out functionaries than fostering holistic growth. The NEP 2020 seeks to redress this imbalance by instilling a holistic, flexible, and inclusive approach to education, echoing the ethos of ancient Indian traditions while embracing the imperatives of the modern age.

NEP 2020 envisages a paradigm shift in the regulatory architecture of higher education, consolidating oversight under a single regulator to empower educators

with autonomy and catalyze innovation. By introducing flexible undergraduate programs with multiple entry and exit options, the policy affords students the latitude to tailor their academic journey to suit their aspirations and aptitudes, fostering a culture of lifelong learning and skill acquisition.

Central to the NEP's vision is a renewed emphasis on research and innovation, epitomized by the establishment of the National Research Foundation (NRF) and startup incubation centers in higher educational institutions. By nurturing a vibrant ecosystem of research and entrepreneurship, the policy aims to forge synergies between academia and industry, driving transformative breakthroughs and fueling economic growth.

It is also exciting to note that as India continues its journey towards economic prowess and global leadership, the symbiotic relationship between overseas education and its economic growth emerges as a pivotal factor. The surge in Indian students pursuing education abroad not only equips them with valuable skills and knowledge but also contributes significantly to India's economic strength

through higher inward foreign remittances. Among the destinations drawing a substantial number of Indian students, the UAE stands out as a beacon of opportunity and growth. The thriving economy offers a diverse array of career prospects attracting individuals seeking enhanced career prospects and improved living standards. The availability of quality education bolsters the appeal of the UAE and other Gulf countries as a destination for Indian expatriates.

Hence, as we embark on this transformative journey, our special edition Education Fact File is proud to shine a spotlight on the pioneering institutions across India that are championing the principles of NEP 2020 and spearheading a renaissance in education. From fostering innovation and entrepreneurship to nurturing global leaders and changemakers, these institutions exemplify the promise and potential of India's educational landscape in the 21st century.

Join us as we celebrate India's educational renaissance and honor the trailblazing institutions shaping the future of our nation. Welcome to Education Fact File: Where Knowledge Meets Innovation.

Facebook

Twitter

First Private Academic Health System

The Thumbay Medicity in Al Jurf, Ajman

Thumbay Group Shaping the Future of Medical Education and Healthcare for the Greater Good

Dr Thumbay Moideen
Founder President
Thumbay Group

"I believe that if we stagnate, we die. So, we have to keep growing- we have to progress. The very fact that I held on, and continued pursuing what I wanted to do is maybe one of the reasons for my success so far. But there are other reasons too. One, I definitely feel God has been kind to us- we were blessed. Two, I got good support from the government- our business had many ministries involved in it, and the local authorities, they supported us wholeheartedly. Lastly is our team- we have a very committed team, who are as charged up [for the business] as me"

Celebrating a milestone of 25 years, Thumbay Group has evolved from its origins in 1997 as the first private medical institute to a mature conglomerate headquartered in the Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC). Establishing an extensive network comprising over 110 touchpoints across seven emirates in the United Arab Emirates and tie-ups with more than 70 institutions globally, the group has made significant strides in medical education, healthcare and research.

Transforming Healthcare with Largest Network of Private Academic Hospitals, Clinics, Labs, and Pharmacies
Thumbay Healthcare, a leading subsidiary of the Thumbay Group, has achieved significant recognition as the first healthcare entity in the country to receive the prestigious 'JCI Enterprise Accreditation,' joining an elite group of five globally recognized institutes with this distinction. With a record of treating over 10 million patients and conducting 65,000 deliveries, Thumbay Healthcare integrates cutting-edge research and modern technology to provide comprehensive care.

Among its standout facilities, the state-of-the-art 'Thumbay University Hospital's Long-Term Care Centre' emphasizes smart healthcare technologies and specialized care programs for neurodegenerative diseases and chronic conditions- especially for geriatric and long-term patients.

Gulf Medical University: Preparing the Doctors of the Future
Offering an array of 35 accredited

Biggest Medical University in the Region

Gulf Medical University

Thumbay Physical Therapy & Rehabilitation Hospital

Facebook

Twitter

programs spread across six colleges, the university serves as a magnet for a diverse student body hailing from 102 nationalities. Having graduated 4,000 students, Gulf Medical University represents a formidable 60% of the health professions workforce in the country, affirming its pivotal role in shaping the healthcare landscape.

As the pioneering private academic health system in the region, Gulf Medical University employs over 3,000 individuals, including 400 doctors and paramedics from 35 countries, showcasing its commitment to a multicultural and inclusive environment.

At the heart of the institution lie innovative training hubs like the Thumbay Research Institute for Precision Medicine, Thumbay Institute of Population Health, Thumbay Institute of Health Workforce Development, and Thumbay Institute for AI in Healthcare, driving advancements in healthcare education and research.

Moreover, Gulf Medical University distinguishes itself by offering world-class clinical training, facilitated by its extensive network of Thumbay Academic Hospitals, Clinics, Labs & Pharmacies. This hands-on experience, coupled with state-of-the-art facilities and experienced faculty, ensures that students receive a holistic education that blends theoretical knowledge with practical skills.

Central to its mission of providing a comprehensive and globally-oriented education, Gulf Medical University offers exclusive programs such as the International Foundation Program and the innovative Pathway to International Medicine Program.

Its International Foundation Programs prepare undergraduates for medicine programs, addressing academic gaps and enhancing learning skills. The Pathway to International Medicine Program involves pre-clinical sciences study at GMU followed by advanced study at selected international universities in Poland, Italy, Ghana, Malaysia, Egypt, the UK, and the Americas.

Additionally, GMU provides a range of Masters/Graduate Programs, including specialized fields like Public Health and Healthcare Management. Unique
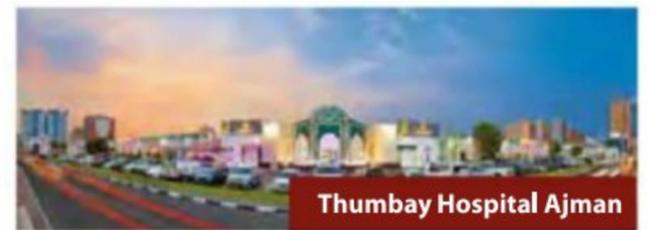
Thumbay Hospital Ajman

Healthcare Expansion and Growth

➤ Plans for a comprehensive Oncology Center focus on cutting-edge cancer treatments and research collaborations

➤ Soon launching an advanced Cosmetology Center, introducing a range of aesthetic treatments

➤ Improving long-term care through an integrated strategy between the biggest hospital for physiotherapy, Thumbay Physical Therapy & Rehabilitation Hospital and Thumbay Unversity Hospital- which has a floor set aside for long-term care

➤ Expanding the Thumbay Healthcare Brand's worldwide reach to various countries with like-minded partners and increasing its global footprint

Thumbay Hospital Fujairah

offerings include Diploma Programs in Dental Assistant and Pharmacy Technician. Bachelor/Undergraduate Programs cover Dentistry, Pharmacy, Nursing, Biomedical Sciences, and more. Aspiring medical professionals can pursue the acclaimed MD Program or opt for the Graduate Entry Doctor of Medicine Program for a streamlined pathway to success.

Vision 2028: Upcoming Institutes, Programs and Healthcare Specialties

➤ Thumbay Group collaborates with 'WHO's One Health' Vision to launch the Thumbay Institute of Veterinary Sciences, enhancing veterinary care

➤ Launched in September 2023, the Thumbay Institute of Artificial Intelligence in Healthcare, in collaboration with MITXpro USA and industry leaders, aims to revolutionize AI education for healthcare

➤ Initiatives encompass advanced Thumbay Institute of Autism, the integration of alternative medicine through the Thumbay Institute of Ayurveda, Yoga, Homeopathy, and Unani Medicine, as well as the establishment of the Thumbay Institute of Chinese Medicine, in addition to a Thumbay Institute of Insurance

➤ The Thumbay Institute of Wellness offering care plans and training for wellness related education

Thumbay University Hospital

Thumbay Dental Hospital

Facebook
Twitter

A Quarter-Century Legacy of Academic Excellence and Innovation

Godavari Global University is a beacon of academic brilliance and transformative education where a legacy of excellence spanning over 25 years continues to shape the future leaders and innovators

Godavari Global University, a beacon of academic brilliance in Andhra Pradesh, has illuminated the educational landscape for 25 years. Formerly known as GIET - Autonomous, it was established in 1998 and has since evolved significantly. From modest beginnings as the Godavari Institute of Engineering & Technology with 180 students, it has transformed into Godavari Global University in 2024, boasting an expansive campus and a diverse student body exceeding 10,000 individuals from 15 Indian states and 13 countries.

The university is committed to academic rigor and innovation, with three esteemed schools - Computing, Engineering, and Sciences, offering a diverse range of courses. Recognized for its excellence, it holds NAAC 'A++' accreditation and has been consecutively ranked by NIRF since 2019.

Godavari Global University actively fosters global collaboration through international partnerships, enriching academic experiences. It offers state-of-the-art infrastructure, including advanced laboratories, computing facilities, modern classrooms, and an extensive library. Students benefit from 15 Centers of Excellence, offering industry exposure and skill enhancement opportunities. The institution's highly qualified faculty provide mentorship and guidance. On-campus hostel facilities for both genders and robust

GIET campus

transportation services ensure convenience.

In conclusion, Godavari Global University is a testament to excellence, innovation, and academic eminence, inviting aspiring students to join its vibrant community. It's a place where success knows no bounds, and futures begin.

Pioneering Excellence in Medical Education and Healthcare Services

Explore how KIMS leads the way in medical education and healthcare with its ISO certification, global reach, and world-class facilities.
Nestled in Andhra Pradesh's tranquil landscapes, Konaseema Institute of Medical Sciences & Research Foundation (KIMS) epitomizes excellence in medical education and healthcare. Its ISO certification by the German Accreditation Society "DAKKs" across quality verticals 9001:2014, 14001:2005, and 18001:2005

sets it apart, making it the sole standalone medical institute in Asia Pacific with such recognition. Drawing students globally, including from UAE and South Africa, KIMS offers a diverse cultural mix, enriching the learning experience. Its 1050-bed KIMS Super Specialty Teaching Hospital provides ample clinical material, fostering holistic learning. With a state-of-the-art Super Specialty Hospital and expert doctors, KIMS sets high standards in healthcare. KIMS Medical College, recognized by the Medical Council of India, offers MBBS and MD/MS programs. Additionally, it provides resources for allied healthcare education, including Dental College, Physiotherapy, Nursing, and paramedical courses, promoting interdisciplinary collaboration. KIMS Dental College excels in undergraduate dentistry programs with advanced facilities.

Offering courses in MBBS, MD/MS, BDS, MDS, BPT, MPT, B.Sc in Health Sciences, Diploma in Paramedic Sciences, and nursing, KIMS caters to diverse healthcare career aspirations. Accolades like being the best medical college in Andhra Pradesh affirm its reputation. Affiliations with prestigious organizations like the World Federation Society of Anesthesiologists reflect its commitment to excellence. Equipped with modern facilities for learning and continuous medical education sessions, KIMS remains a leader in medical education and healthcare services, shaping a healthier future.

KVV Satyanarayana Raju
Chancellor, GGU
Chairman, Chaitanya
Group & KIMS

Ravi Varma K
Pro Chancellor, GGU
Managing Director,
KIMS

Sasi Varma K
Pro Chancellor, GGU
Vice Chairman,
GIET

Facebook

Twitter

GLA
UNIVERSITY
MATHURA

Narayan Das Agrawal
Chancellor
GLA University

GLA University a Way forward to Global Achievement

A Gateway to Global Success In the year 1998, the first step was taken by Shri Narayan Das Agrawal to fulfil his father's dream by establishing GLA Institute of Technology and Management. It went on to take the shape of the GLA Group of Institutions and finally became GLA University in the year of 2010 through the U.P. State Legislative Act of 2009 (UP Act 21 of 2010).

GLA University is a NAAC A+ Accredited institution with a score of 3.46 out of 4, which is the highest score in the league of NAAC A+ accredited state private universities.

It is a member of the Association of Indian Universities (AIU) and IACBE (International Assembly of Collegiate Business Education). Also, it is an educational member of the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB).

Highlights

⯈Among the Top 50 in NIRF Innovation Ranking 2023 ⯈All India Rank 44 by Times Higher Education, the UK in 2024 ⯈54th best pharmacy college in India by NIRF Ranking 2023 ⯈NEP 2020 aligned curriculum for research-based education ⯈India's 14th institution with oncampus NewGen IEDC Lab to nurture & fund student startup ideas ⯈17 faculty members featured among the World's Top 2% Scientists by Stanford University ⯈3000+ students of previous batched placed by 500+ Recruiters with packages up to 55 LPA

"At GLAU we strive to offer all our students with an allround professional development backed by a strong network of placement partner companies and plenty of opportunities to follow extra-curricular interests"

State-of-the-art Infrastructure

⯈157 highly equipped laboratories ⯈A vast central library with over 1,95,000 books ⯈227 amphitheatre-like classrooms ⯈19 hostels on-campus to accommodate 6000+ students ⯈A Wi-Fi enabled campus ⯈20-Acre sports area for indoor & outdoor sports ⯈Aarogyam - an on-campus 24*7 healthcare unit ⯈GD Subway – a shopping mall inside the campus

Era University's Multidisciplinary Education Prepares Holistic Thinkers

PROF. (DR.) ABBAS ALI MAHDI
VICE CHANCELLOR, ERA UNIVERSITY, LUCKOW

MESSAGE FROM THE VICE CHANCELLOR

Era University (EU) was established in 2016 and has since maintained its reputation as a leading educational institution. This is attributed to its commitment to providing value-based education, a future-focused curriculum, multidisciplinary and student-centred approach to learning.

EU is recognized as one of the top state private universities in the country. Our value-based curriculum aligns with the National Education Policy 2020. Through partnerships with academia and industry, we have developed innovative programs, strengthened research collaborations, enhanced curricula, and fostered experiential learning.

EU fosters an environment where bright minds converge to learn, explore, and innovate. Our diverse courses span a wide array of subjects, and our lush-green campus provides a tranquil setting for learning.

Era University, along with its constituent colleges-Era's Institute of Allied Health Sciences and Research, Era's College of Nursing, and Era's Lucknow Medical College and Hospital (ELMCH)-serves as a hub of excellence. We offer courses in biotechnology, computer science, nutrition, liberal arts and sciences, all carefully crafted to integrate the Knowledge, Skills, and Attitude (KSA) framework. Learning at Era University is not just informative; it's transformative.

Our faculty is committed to providing the best possible education, aiming to nurture leaders who embody qualities of conscientiousness, compassion, competence, and commitment. The seamless integration of technology on campus has transformed learning into a more effective and efficient process. Our in-house developed robust learning management systems, software, and online tools enhance students' skills and ensure they stay ahead in their respective fields.

The campus offers a range of essential facilities, ensuring a conducive environment for learning and personal development. These amenities include a comprehensive library, a modern fitness centre, lecture halls with air conditioning, a counselling cell, round-the-clock WiFi access, and surveillance cameras.

At Era, we provide a holistic educational experience that extends beyond traditional learning. We emphasize excellence and strive to make a positive impact on the world. Our academic and professional programs are complemented by a vibrant on-campus environment. Students participate in diverse activities that enhance intellectual curiosity, critical thinking, creativity, and professional skills. Our teaching approach focuses on integration, multidisciplinary training, and conceptuallearning.

Our alumni are industry leaders, reflecting the quality of education at Era University. Our reputation attracts top talent to our campus, creating a dynamic learning community.Era University is more than just an institution of learning; it's a place to develop, grow, and pursue excellence. We are excited to support your journey towards success!

EU ERA UNIVERSITY

For more information visit www.erauniversity.in or call +91 89579 26677, 90440 50047, 7233009955

Facebook

Twitter

Dr Syed Shah Khusro Hussaini
Chancellor
Khaja Bandanawaz University

Empowering Minds, Illuminating Futures

Khaja Bandanawaz University emerges as an institution of holistic education, fostering critical thinking, social responsibility, and research excellence

In the heart of Gulbarga, now Kalburgi, a beacon of education illuminates the path towards progress and enlightenment. Established under the visionary leadership of Padma Shri (Late) Hazrath Dr Syed Shah Mohammed Muhammad Al Hussaini Saheb in 1958, the Khaja Education Society (KES) embarked on a noble mission to educate and empower the underprivileged, particularly focusing on girls from the Muslim community. What began as a humble primary school soon blossomed into a comprehensive educational network encompassing various disciplines.

Driven by the relentless pursuit of knowledge and social upliftment, KES expanded its horizons to encompass pre-university, nursing, medical, engineering, and B.Ed. colleges. These institutions became catalysts for change, nurturing generations of skilled individuals who would shape the destiny of their communities. However, the journey didn't stop there.

In 2007, assuming the mantle of leadership, Dr Khusro Hussaini, the torchbearer of his father's legacy envisioned a new chapter in the saga of education - the Khaja Bandanawaz University (KBNU). This endeavor was born from the necessity to provide avenues for higher education, thereby fulfilling the aspirations of countless graduates yearning for academic advancement.

The fruition of his dream came in August 2018 when KBNU emerged as a fully-fledged State Private University. Consolidating all higher education institutions under the KES umbrella, KBNU became a powerhouse of learning with eight faculties housing 44 departments. With an array of 52 programs spanning from undergraduate

> **Driven by the relentless pursuit of knowledge and social upliftment, KES expanded its horizons to encompass pre-university, nursing, medical, engineering, and B.Ed. colleges**

to research levels, the university welcomes over 2500 students annually and boasts a faculty strength of 520, with a notable representation of women.

As the founder and inaugural Chancellor, the stewardship of KBNU falls upon the shoulders of Dr Khusro Hussaini, its visionary architect. Envisioning KBNU as a crucible of excellence, he espouses a philosophy of "Educating Humanity," encapsulating the essence of holistic education. Through a meticulous focus on fostering critical thinking and research acumen, KBNU endeavors to transcend conventional paradigms of learning.

At the core of KBNU's ethos lies a commitment to nurturing responsible global citizens. By instilling values of social responsibility and ethical conduct, the university aims to imbue its graduates with the transformative power to effect positive change, not just within India but across the world.

Central to this vision is the cultivation of research acumen, with a keen emphasis on pioneering disciplines such as medical science and genetics. Through innovative pedagogical approaches, including take-home examinations at the postgraduate level, KBNU seeks to revolutionize the educational landscape, setting new benchmarks for academic excellence.

Looking ahead, KBNU stands poised to shape the destiny of countless young minds, equipping them with the tools to navigate an increasingly complex world. As it marches towards the future, guided by the path of knowledge and enlightenment, Khaja Bandanawaz University remains steadfast in its commitment to empowering minds and transforming futures.

Facebook

Twitter

Dr Rajesh Kumar Gupta
Chairman, GNIOT Group of Institutions

Message from Chairman

Dear Aspirants,

Under the visionary leadership of founder Chairman Honorable Late. Shri K.L. Gupta and the continued guidance of our esteemed faculty and staff, GNIOT has established itself as a center of excellence in technical and management education. Since our inception in 2001, we have remained steadfast in our commitment to holistic development and academic excellence. Our successful attainment of NAAC A+ Accreditation in the first attempt underscores our dedication to fostering academic rigor, innovation, and societal progress.

I am delighted to share the NAAC Peer Team's Report on behalf of the Greater Noida Institute of Technology (Engineering Institute). It fills me with immense pride and gratitude as I reflect on our journey to achieving NAAC A+ Accreditation.

The NAAC Peer Team's evaluation has highlighted several key strengths of GNIOT, including our holistic educational approach, innovative teaching methodologies, cutting-edge infrastructure, and highly skilled and devoted professionals as faculty members.

Moreover, our emphasis on fostering entrepreneurship and facilitating job creation among students aligns with India's vision for a vibrant and self-reliant economy.

We are poised to remain at the forefront of technical and management education in India and beyond. With an unwavering focus on nurturing talent, fostering innovation, and advancing knowledge, GNIOT-Engineering Institute is primed to lead the way toward a brighter future.

As the Chairman of the Greater Noida Institute of Technology (Engineering Institute), I take immense pride in our past achievements and am optimistic about our future endeavors. Guided by our vision, bolstered by our NAAC A+ Accreditation, and fortified by our strengths, GNIOT-Engineering Institute is poised to make a lasting impact on society and the global stage.

Dr Davish Jain Pioneering Excellence in Education

Dr Davish Jain
Chairman Prestige Education Foundation, Chancellor, Prestige University,

Dr Davish Jain, the Chairman of Prestige Education Foundation and Chancellor of Prestige University, is widely recognized for his transformative impact on the education sector.

Through his visionary leadership, Dr Jain has established a legacy of academic excellence, innovation, and societal empowerment. Dr Jain's achievements are attributed to his unwavering commitment to research, innovation, and fostering a culture of entrepreneurship among students. He encourages the faculties of the Prestige Institute of Management and Research to pursue and conduct research, and as a result, research papers on various subjects are published in international research journals.

Dr Jain has also established Soaring Aerotech at the Prestige Institute of Engineering Management and Research to encourage research in drone technology and provide drone flying training.

The remarkable achievements of the faculty at the Prestige Institute of Management and Research and Prestige University is a clear result of Dr Jain's dynamic leadership . Through strategic investments in faculty development and research infrastructure, he has cultivated a vibrant intellectual ecosystem, attracting top talent and facilitating groundbreaking research collaborations. The result is a faculty body renowned for its expertise, innovation, and contribution to academia.

In addition to his emphasis on research and faculty development, Dr Jain has spearheaded transformative initiatives to enhance infrastructure and student amenities at Prestige University. From state-of-the-art laboratories and research facilities to modernized classrooms and student-centric amenities, his vision for holistic educational development has transformed Prestige University into a world-class institution equipped to meet the evolving needs of the 21st-century learner.

His visionary leadership and dedication to excellence have earned him numerous prestigious awards and accolades, including the Lifetime Achievement Award by ICICI Bank and the EduMaestro Award, recognizing his significant contributions to education and societal upliftment on national and international platforms.

Facebook

Twitter

Leading the Charge in Technical Education and Innovation

Explore how Visvesvaraya Technological University Belagavi, Karnataka is setting new benchmarks in technical education, research, and innovation, with impressive rankings and a legacy of excellence

In the vibrant landscape of Karnataka's educational ecosystem, Visvesvaraya Technological University (VTU) stands tall as a school of academic excellence. Established on April 1st, 1998, under the VTU Act 1994 of the Government of Karnataka, the university bears the distinguished name of Bharat Ratna Dr Sir M. Visvesvaraya, embodying a legacy of innovation and progress.

With a mandate to foster the planned and sustainable development of technical education, research, innovation, and outreach programs, VTU holds jurisdiction over the entire state. Its headquarters, nestled in the serene city of Belagavi, serves as the nerve center for administrative operations, complemented by regional offices strategically stationed in Bengaluru (Muddenahalli), Mysuru, Kalaburagi, and Belagavi.

Under its expansive umbrella, VTU shelters 212 engineering and architecture colleges across the state, including 32 autonomous colleges, 17 government engineering colleges, 26 schools of architecture, and a constituent college. Catering to the educational aspirations of over 3 lakh students, VTU offers a diverse array of 42 graduate and 94 postgraduate programs.

Distinguished by its commitment to research excellence, VTU boasts 923 recognized departments as research centers, nurturing over 9000 research scholars pursuing doctoral and M.Sc. (Engg.) by research programs. In recent years, VTU has garnered significant accolades, affirming its position as a trailblazer in the realm of technical education:

The India Institutional Ranking Framework (IIRF) 2023 further

---

In NIRF 2023, VTU impressively ranked 52nd in engineering, 63rd among universities, 92nd overall, and 95th in management

underscored VTU's prowess, ranking it as the 53rd best engineering institute nationally, the 12th best in South India, and the 2nd best in Karnataka.

Entering the Atal Ranking of Institutions on Innovation Achievements (ARIIA) in the Performer Category further solidified VTU's commitment to fostering innovation and entrepreneurship. As VTU continues to evolve and adapt to the dynamic landscape of technical education, its legacy of excellence and innovation remains unwavering. With a steadfast commitment to nurturing future leaders.

Promotion of Innovation and Research by VTU

Visvesvaraya Research and Innovation Foundation (VRIF), a research and innovation park, aims to encourage and sustain excellence in research and innovation by cultivating and promoting a culture of research among its teachers, staff and students.

- VTU Jnanayaana Doctoral Fellowship.
- Financial Assistance for BE Final Year students' innovative projects.
- Establishment of CNC Machine workshop.
- Internships to M.Tech. Students

ONLINE DEGREE PROGRAMMES

VTU has launched online degree programmes entitled by UGC and approved by AICTE, New Delhi. As Follows-

UG PROGRAMMES-
- BCA in Data Analytics
- BCA in Data Science
- BBA in Digital Marketing

PG PROGRAMMES
- MBA in Digital Marketing
- MBA in HR/MM/FM
- MBA in Business Analytics
- MCA in Artificial Intelligence & Data Science
- MCA in Cyber Security & Cloud Computing

PG DIPLOMA PROGRAMMES
- PG Diploma in Big Data Analytics
- PG Diploma in Software Testing
- PG Diploma in Financial Analytics, Marketing Analytics, HR Analytics
- PG Diploma in Investment Management, Risk Management, Financial Management, Retail Management

More Detail- Web: www.vtu-online.net ; www.onlinedegree.vtu.ac.in ; www.vtu.ac.in

Empowering Futures through Education, Skill Development and Social Impact

Devyani Jaipuria
Pro Vice Chairperson,
DPS, Sector 45, Gurgaon

In the realm of corporate social responsibility (CSR), the journey transcends beyond mere philanthropy; it is a symphony of commitment, innovation, and transformative impact. As the Pro Vice Chairperson of Schools, Healthcare, and CSR, Devyani's role has evolved into a harmonious blend of leadership, advocacy, and service, aimed at reshaping the societal landscape we inhabit.

At the heart of her CSR initiatives lies a profound dedication to education. 'Shiksha Kendra,' their flagship project, has been a beacon of hope for children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds since its inception in 2003. What began as a humble initiative with 50 students has blossomed into a thriving educational ecosystem, empowering many young minds with knowledge, empathy, and a vision for the future.

However, Devyani's commitment to societal upliftment extends far beyond the confines of educational institutions. She recognizes the multifaceted challenges faced by marginalized communities, and thus, has ventured into diverse avenues to create meaningful change.

> **"Together, let us redefine the contours of CSR, crafting a legacy of service, empathy, and enduring impact. True leadership transcends mere service; it lies in giving back, enriching lives, and shaping destinies"**

The 'Pravah' initiative exemplifies this commitment, offering skill development programs that equip the youth with essential tools for economic sustainability. Through 'Pravah,' they not only provide training but also pave the way for employment, bolstering the workforce of our nation and contributing to its emergence as a global power.

As an edupreneur, Devyani's mission transcends traditional boundaries. She aspires to be a catalyst for change, a bridge between potential and opportunity. "Every day, I am driven by the belief that I am not merely an observer of societal challenges but an active participant in crafting solutions," She signs off, committed to a journey of meaningful impact and transformative change.

Sushant University a Forerunner in the Architecture Ecosystem

In the last decade design thinking and practice in India have reached new heights with advancements in visualization, construction, materials, technology up gradation, design thematics, AI, robotics, and VR. We at SAA are standing at crossroads where architecture education is paving the path to embrace these advancements along with keeping the values intact.

Here in the heart of the School of Art & Architecture, Sushant University beats a vision pulsating with innovation, sustainability, resilience, and hands-on learning. We are not just shaping architects; we are nurturing visionaries.

Our ethos revolves around critical creativity and we nurture an environment where students are encouraged to push boundaries, challenge norms, and question conventions. Through interdisciplinary collaboration and a culture of constructive critique, we cultivate architects who dare to dream differently.

For our students at SAA, Resilience is not just a buzzword here; it's a guiding principle woven into every aspect of our curriculum. We believe in equipping our students with the skills to adapt, evolve, and thrive in the face of challenges. The college is a living laboratory for eco-conscious design, where students learn

to integrate environmental stewardship into every project whether it's designing for climate change, social equity, or economic fluctuations.

Our philosophy of hands-on learning ensures that students don't just conceptualize designs; they bring them to life. Through experiential learning, internships, and real-world projects, our students gain invaluable practical experience, honing their technical skills and refining their creative instincts. At the core of our college is a community of passionate educators, strong alumni connect, industry professionals, and forward-thinking students. SAA has positioned itself as a resource center in the NCR, providing capacity building, data management, and training opportunities for professionals in the fields.

Together, we are not just shaping the architects of tomorrow; we are fostering a movement towards a more sustainable, resilient, and creatively vibrant future. Welcome to our architecture school, where innovation knows no bounds, and the possibilities are limitless.

Facebook

Twitter

Empowering Futures

What makes the IEM-UEM Group one of the leading engineering and management education providers in India? A robust ecosystem that integrates academic discipline with practical learning, advantageous industry exposure along with an inbuilt extra-curricular system, and a commitment to excellence. An *Outlook* fact file

Prof Dr Satyajit Chakrabarti
Chancellor, IEM-UEM Group, Kolkata I Jaipur

Now in its 35th year since inception, the IEM-UEM Group has had an exciting and exhilarating journey leading up to their breaking into the Top 200 in the NIRF 2023 rankings. This has strengthened the Group's goal of breaking into the best 100 group and the committed efforts towards this are tangible.

A track record of 300 percent placement – which implies multiple placements for each student and that too in the world's best companies such as Microsoft, Oracle, and Google are sufficient indicator of their success. Add to this the pool of entrepreneurs and those who transition into government jobs through civil services cadre from the Group institutes, the 'placement' performance would probably be unmatched.

A steadily growing PhD programme with more than 200 registered scholars and supervisors numbering greater than 70 adds to the research and academic heft of the Group and is a source of pride.

A well-established system of inbuilt immersion serves to create the entrepreneurial mindset in the students – an aptitude and attitude that ensures that even when Group students take up jobs, they are intrapreneurs for their employers with their can-do and will-do attitude.

As a whole, the Group is committed to creating entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurship is integrated into the curriculum across two semesters. The ideas of budding entrepreneurs are funded. In fact, students have established companies that offer products and services ranging from coding, app building to problem solving. And once they become full-fledged entrepreneurs,

Institute of Engineering & Management (IEM), Kolkata

Year of Inception	1989
Courses Offered	B.Tech: CSE, CSE IOT, CSE AI, CSE IOT & Cyber Security, CSE AIML, CSBS, ECE, IT, ME, EE, EEE, M.Tech, BBA, BCA, MBA, MCA
Student Intake in first year	2250
Total Alumni Strength	25000+
No. of Faculty Members	349
Admission Process	JEE Mains, WBJEE, IEMJEE
Placement Record	IEM, Kolkata recorded highest placement package of Rs. 20.26 LPA for the AY 2022-23 with placement rate 92 %

they go back to their alma maters and offer internships and jobs to current students.

An average of 365 events every year – one a day – gives the students exposure that is empowering. Students engage in activities ranging from football to rowing, photography to social entrepreneurship. Efficient student councils and clubs, professional body chapters all contribute to a vibrant, energetic community. Peer motivation is facilitated by the non-academic credit point system. As a result, at the Group institutes, students embark on a lifelong journey of participation and organisation.

The definitive principles that underpin the Group's academic delivery are academic discipline and rigour and hands-on learning. A system that ensures no student can sidestep either, results in even a so-called average student becoming a

University of Engineering & Management (UEM), Kolkata

Year of Inception	2014
Courses Offered	B.Tech: CSE), CSE, IoT, CS, BC, CSE, AIML, CST, CSIT, BT, ECE, MCA, BBA LL.B. B.Sc in Hospitality & Tourism Administration (BHTA)
Student Intake in first year	1516
Total Alumni Strength	10000+
No. of Faculty Members	299
Admission Process	IEMJEE, IEMCET, JEE Mains, WBJEE, JECA
Placement Record	UEM, Kolkata recorded highest placement package of Rs. 72.96 LPA for the AY 2022-23 with placement rate 95 %

lifelong learner and doer.

Perhaps the biggest advantage of this model is as Prof Dr Satyajit Chakrabarti, Pro-Vice Chancellor, University of Engineering & Management (UEM), Kolkata and Jaipur and Director, Institute of Engineering & Management (IEM), Kolkata says, "This model has created an extremely robust alumni community nationally and internationally. From endowing crores of scholarships, to jumping in for funding of any infrastructure building to offering employment, our alumni constitute one of the Group's most important strengths. I have full belief that the alumni will power us through to achieving all our milestones."

Institute of Engineering & Management (IEM), Kolkata – Empowering futures
Institute of Engineering and Management

Facebook

Twitter

Prof Dr Satyajit Chakrabarti
Pro Vice Chancellor
IEM-UEM Group
Kolkata I Jaipur

"We boast a robust network of recruiters & a stellar placement record. Our strong ties with industry leaders enable us to offer our students diverse and rewarding career opportunities"

Dr Sajal Dasgupta
Vice Chancellor
UEM, Kolkata

"Our teaching methodology focuses on a holistic learning environment that empowers the students to become critical thinkers and lifelong learners"

Prof Dr Biswajoy Chatterjee
Vice Chancellor
UEM, Jaipur

"We create not just motivated individuals but a committed cohort. A vibrant campus life that is nurturing and inclusive fosters personal growth, collaborative ability and holistic development"

Banani Chakrabarti
Registrar
IEM-UEM Group
Kolkata | Jaipur

"At all our Group institutes, failure is not penalised or admonished. It is treated as an accepted step of the learning process. The environment of support and encouragement has built the culture of excellence we are known for"

Gopa Goswami
Director
Corporate Relation
IEM-UEM Group
Kolkata I Jaipur

"Relationships come in all forms when it comes to business. Building a business means business relationship building"

University of Engineering & Management (UEM), Jaipur

Year of Inception	2011
Courses Offered	**B.Tech** CSE, AIML, ECE, EE, ME, CE **M.Tech** CSE, ECE, EE, ME, CE **Computer Application** BCA, MCA **Management** BBA, MBA **Physiotherapy** BPT, MPT, Ph.D, CSE, ECE, ME, EE, CE, Management, Physics, Chemistry, Maths, Eng. & Humanities
Student Intake in first year	810
Total Alumni Strength	10000+
No. of Faculty Members	2692

(IEM), Kolkata is a lighthouse of brilliance in the realm of technical education.Since its inception in 1989, it has consistently upheld its commitment to providing quality education, fostering innovation, and nurturing the next generation of engineers and managers.

IEM, Kolkata is a NAAC A accredited institute with NIRF 2023 rank band of 151-200 and several NBA accredited programs.

One of the key distinguishing features of IEM is its comprehensive approach to education, offering a wide array of undergraduate and postgraduate programs in engineering, management, and computer applications.

At IEM, Kolkata, the emphasis extends beyond theoretical learning to practical application and real-world problem-solving. State-of-the-art laboratories, industry tie-ups, and internship opportunities allow students to gain hands-on experience and develop the skills required to thrive in their respective fields. Moreover, the institute's strong focus on research and development encourages students and faculty members alike to explore innovative ideas and contribute to the advancement of knowledge.

The faculty at IEM, Kolkata comprises experienced academicians and industry experts who are passionate about teaching and mentoring. Through their guidance and mentorship, students not only acquire subject knowledge but also develop critical thinking abilities, leadership qualities, and a strong ethical foundation.

University of Engineering & Management (UEM), Kolkata – Paving the Way

UEM, Kolkata is a premier engineering and management institute that has received "AAA" category in the NPTEL programme (IIT Kharagpur and IIT Chennai) – it is among the first 10 institutes nationally among all institutes of India including all IITs and NITs.

The University is a partner institution in the prestigious European Union sponsored project 'FRACTION' & 'UNNAT BHARAT ABHIYAAN' of the Govt. of India.

With its unique ethos, UEM, Kolkata has also garnered the achievement of its students being offered salaries as high as Rs 72 lakhs per annum.

University of Engineering & Management (UEM), Jaipur – Forging Ahead

Spread over an area of 46 acres, University of Engineering & Management (UEM), Jaipur is one out of the 200 mentor colleges of the country designated by AICTE, Ministry of Education, Govt of India. In 2022, UEM JAIPUR has been selected as an AICTE Mentor Institute (under AICTE Mentor-Mentee scheme), amongst 200 such mentor institutes in the country, to provide mentorship to the other institutes. The University is assigned to provide mentorship to Rukmini Devi Institute of Advanced Studies, New Delhi-Lakshmi Narain College of Technology & Science, Bhopal, MP; Kendriya Vidyalaya, Jaipur; Vidhyashram, School Jaipur.

The University ranked 1st in North India in 2023, under Institution's Innovation Council by Ministry of Education, Govt. of India. UEM, Jaipur has also been the topmost ranked University in Rajasthan for six consecutive sessions by the NPTEL examination initiative of the Ministry of HRD, Govt. of India.

End notes:

Prof Dr Satyajit Chakrabarti, Pro-Vice Chancellor says, "In a VUCA world where V stands for Volatility, U stands for Uncertainty, C stands for Complexity and A stands for Ambiguity, adaptability and flexibility are the only predictors of success. And it is in this that IEM-UEM Group has excelled, thus creating a name for itself as a trusted partner for industry."

Facebook
Twitter

PRESIDENCY
UNIVERSITY

Revolutionizing Higher Education

Presidency University Offers Industry Oriented, Skill Enhancing Programmes which are Employability-centric

Presidency University is a private university, set across a sprawling campus of 70 acres in Bengaluru, the IT capital and start-up hub of India. With a lush green spread and state-of-the-art Infrastructure, the campus ensures an active and vibrant student life.

The University presently comprises of the School of Computer Science and Engineering, School of Engineering, School of Management, School of Law, School of Design, School of Commerce, School of Information Science and School of Media Studies.

The University offers various highly specialised, industry-oriented, skill-enhancing programmes, which are employability-centric. The undergraduate and post-graduate programmes, structured on the foundation of Outcome Based Education [OBE] and a choice-based-credit-system

driven regime, equip Presidency students with the right mix of well- structured deep knowledge and industry-ready skills, backed by relevant aptitude to excel in their career.

The University also acts as a one-stop-shop for higher education, culminating its programme portfolio with the PhD programme, which is both academic and research oriented. The curriculum and pedagogy used are contemporary and integrated with two tranches of industrial internship programme.

Currently, Presidency University has nearly 17,000 students on its rolls taught by nearly 550 highly qualified faculty and subject matter experts, drawn from premier institutions across the country. The university is led by a strongly motivated, highly qualified and professional team with the right blend of academic and administrative

competence and expertise.

The university has tie-ups with more than 123 prominent foreign universities such as Drexel University, University of Texas – Arlington, University of Wisconsin – Lacrosse, Colorado School of Mines (CS Mines), Manchester Metropolitan University, University of Essex, La Trobe University, Ming Chi University Technology (MCUT), Raman Llull University and POLIMI School of Management.

The Learning, Training and Development Department and the Career Services and Industry Connect Departments create a platform for a strong corporate partnership to understand relevant skill requirements from fresh graduates. Students have been placed across all verticals in top corporate houses such as Capgemini, TCS, Deloitte, Tech Mahindra, KPMG, EY, Federal Bank, Shell etc.

Facebook

Twitter

Gashes in the Red Sand

Residents of the tribal district of Gadchiroli resist development models that destroy the environment

Shweta Desai in Gadchiroli

RED banners strung between sturdy teak tree limbs are the first visible warning signs that you have crossed over into eastern Maharashtra's 'Naxal-liberated zone'. One banner on the road to Binagunda village in Gadchiroli's southern interior sports the message, "Maoists support innocent Adivasis. Stop killing and arrests of Adivasis under Operation Kagar. Stop corporatisation and militarisation," scribbled in a smattering of the local Madiya Gondi and Hindi. Other posters ask people to boycott the ongoing Lok Sabha elections and banish what the text describes as the "Brahmin-*Hindutvawadi*" Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

The Naxal propaganda is the sole indication of the ongoing Lok Sabha polls within the isolated and largely inaccessible region of the hilly, deciduous forests of Bhamragad, which is controlled by the guerrilla army of the Communist Party of India.

"No politician ever comes here. It doesn't matter who's elected," says Brindi Rama Durva from Binagunda, a scenic village with 25 resident families. Electricity poles were set up here only last month, but the power supply hasn't started full-time. "There was electricity for one day. After that, it stopped," says a villager, mocking the State government's half-hearted attempts to provide basic amenities.

The imprint of development and democracy appears to draw to a screeching halt at the threshold of Binagunda's boundaries.

According to advocate Lalasu Nagoti, an Adivasi lawyer and a Madiya Gond activist, the secluded area is symptomatic of the conflict between the State and indigenous tribals, which stems from a lack of understanding. "Government officials speak Marathi, Hindi and English, and the tribals speak Madiya Gondi," says Nagoti. "The two don't understand each other's language or needs. For the tribals, the government's ideas of development equate to the destruction of forests and displacement and hence the opposition. The tribals have their own system of justice and administration called *gotul* and abide by it. But the government wants to impose its administration system in the area and any resistance to it is perceived with a 'criminal' view," he adds, referring to the large number of police stations in Gadchiroli—a region with one of the lowest crime rates. Tribals rarely go to the police station (to resolve disputes).

Binagonda and surrounding villages rely on solar-powered lamps, batteries, a water tank and hand pumps facilitated by the district authorities. Located 18 km uphill from the nearest Laheri village, they lack tar roads, electricity or mobile connectivity, and are inaccessible during the monsoons, leaving them in darkness since cloudy skies hinder solar battery charging.

Nagoti says the Madia Gond, a hunter-gatherer community,

Facebook

Twitter

At Polling Time
(Top) A banner of the CPI (Maoist) asking people to boycott the Lok Sabha elections hangs in a forest in south Gadchiroli; (left) CRPF personnel guard a main road in Gadchiroli ahead of the first phase of voting

lives and survives in forests with their traditional knowledge and rice and millet cultivation. "These villages are self-sustaining, but the life expectancy of the tribals here is on average 45 years. They would benefit if the government worked in consultation with them and built roads, schools and hospitals to meet their needs," he points out.

Located at the edge of the Abujmarh forest area bordering Narayanpur district in Chhattisgarh, the village clusters majorly inhabited by the Madia Gond tribe, notified as a Particular Vulnerable Tribal Group, have no police presence, nor is there any obvious government outreach effort. The forests have been a safe zone for the militant leadership of the Communist Party of India (Maoist) and the People's Liberation Guerilla Army (PLGA) waging Naxal insurgency in Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and parts of Andhra Pradesh.

Wary Binagonda's villagers refused to allow *Outlook* to photograph them. Due to the strong Naxal presence in the area, they are very suspicious and fearful of visitors and do not mingle easily.

Kuvakodi village, less than five km from the Chhattisgarh border, does not even have electric poles. "There is a fear of Naxals, but the wild bears roaming around are even more dangerous and likely to attack. In either case, we are on our own," says Devu Pandu Usandi.

Residents have collectively petitioned the local Block Development Offi-

Facebook

Twitter

Resources at Risk
(Right) Anti-mining activists Sainu Gota and his wife Sheela *bai* at their home in Gatta village; (opposite page) Trucks carrying extracted iron ore lined up on the main road in Etapalli, south Gadchiroli
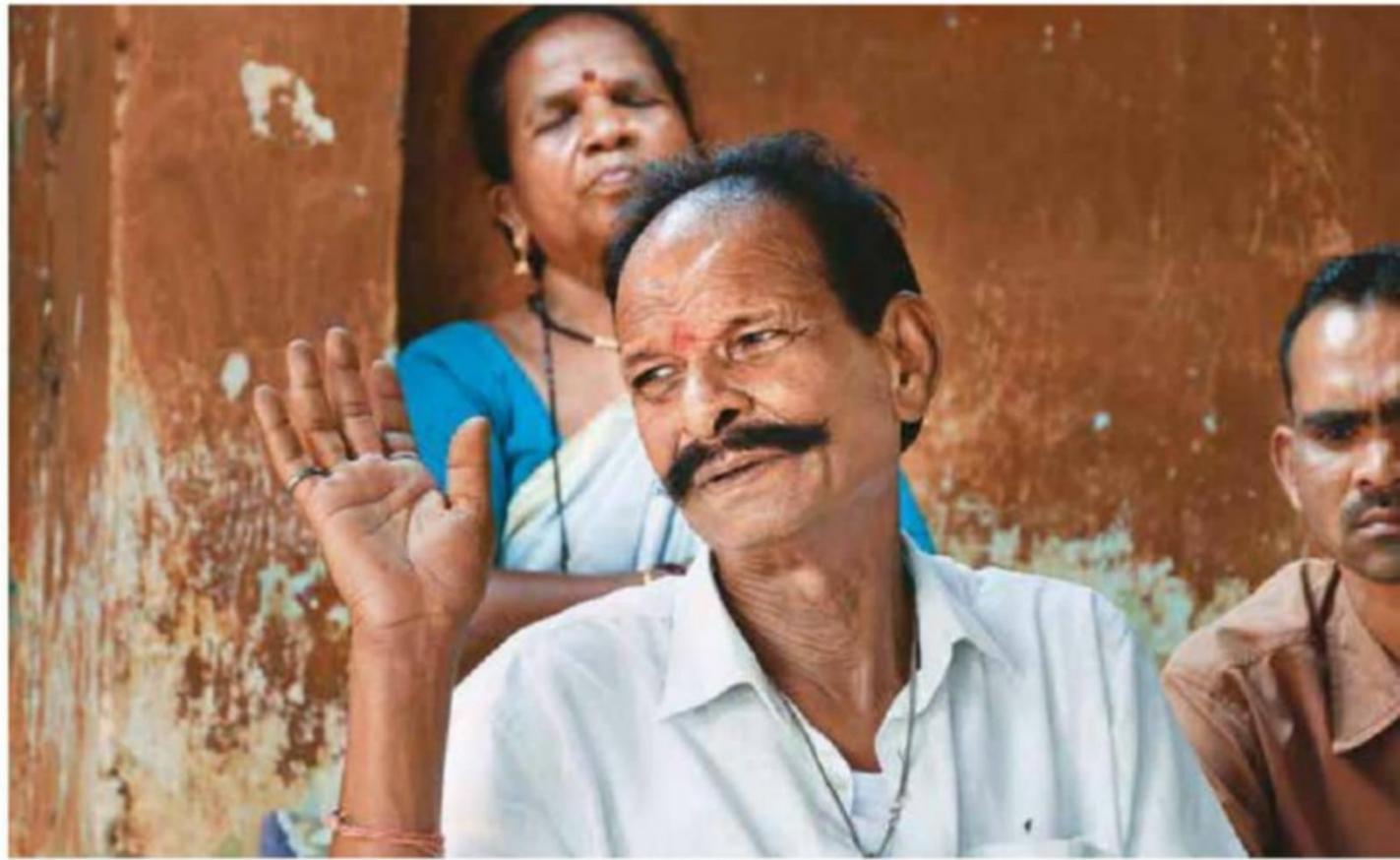
cer (BDO) for road connectivity, a functioning health clinic and a vehicle to ferry sick patients, but nothing has changed so far.

Binagonda has three ASHA workers attending to common ailments and pregnancy cases in the entire cluster spread over a 20 km radius. Snake bites and malaria cases are common here, too. In the absence of roads, there is no ambulance access, forcing villagers to carry patients on their shoulders in bamboo *dolis* (manually ferried carriages).

"There's no government at work here. There are no facilities. If we need access to education and health, then we must walk for hours and go to other villages," says Kolu Usandi, a 23-year-old reading for a Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree at an open university in Aheri, 100 km away. He is the only person in Piramal Bhatti village pursuing higher studies. Most others drop out of school after the fourth grade and have rarely ventured beyond Bhamragad taluka.

In three of the seven villages *Outlook* visited, villagers said they were not inclined to walk four hours—one way—to the voting booth 20 km away in Laheri just to cast their vote. "We used to go to Laheri for voting. It takes a day's travel and then we have to stay back there and return the next day. What did we get from voting? There is no point," says 26-year-old Ramlal Doghe Usandi.

But in the rest of Gadchiroli district, which has an electoral college of 15.69 lakh votes, villagers enthusiastically came out to vote. The Gadchiroli-Chimur Lok Sabha constituency, which was formed in 2008 following a delimitation exercise, reported the highest voting percentage at 66.3 percent. The reserved Scheduled Tribe (ST) seat was initially won in 2009 by Congress candidate Marotrao Kowase. Since 2014, the BJP's Ashok Nete has represented it in Parliament. Nete is contesting for the third time against former excise officer Namdeo Kirsan, fielded by the Congress. The BJP government promises development, while the Congress pledges to address tribal issues.

Even as Home Minister Amit Shah has promised to eradicate left-wing extremism entirely from the country within the next two years, over the past decade, Gadchiroli has seen remarkable advancements in security and development. Anti-Naxal operations targeting senior leaders and platoon members, along with the elimination of top leadership, have resulted in a notable reduction in armed conflict. Police records show that between 2017 and 2022, approximately 137 Naxalites were killed in police encounters, 196 alleged Naxalites were arrested and 91 others surrendered.

The implementation of State and Central government schemes, bolstered police presence through setting up a network of *chowkies*, enhanced telecom connectivity, expanded road networks, highway development and improved connectivity via interior roads and river bridges have effectively reduced the Naxalite presence. One of the landmark achievements in the last decade has been the construction of all-season expressways and roads, providing year-round accessibility to the remote region. The travel time from Gadchiroli to Nagpur, the largest city in east Vidarbha, has been reduced from seven to 3.5 hours. Areas like Gardewada and Bhamragad, once deeply affected and isolated by Naxalism, now have improved road and network connectivity. Vidarbha native Nitin Gadkari, Union Minister of Roads and Highways, who has won twice from Nagpur, has promised to transform the "entire face of Gadchiroli in around two years" with additional road network connectivity projects.

"At one point, people would not venture beyond Chamorshi taluka adjoining the main centre, after dark, but now things have improved. It has also become safe to travel in the region during the day," says Reena Sende, a young activist of the Peasants and Workers Party from Vasada village in Armori taluka. With almost 85.76 percent of the district covered by teak, bamboo and *mahua* forests, Gadchiroli is considered 'backward' in government parlance due to almost non-existent industrial development. The sparse tribal population scattered deep inside the forest area and threats posed by heightened

f Facebook

 Twitter

Naxal activities had kept the district secluded and cut off from the mainstream for decades.

The BJP-Sena-NCP led Mahayuti government has announced plans to lift the district out of poverty and backwardness by focusing on industrial growth and the agriculture sector. Once part of the "Naxal Red Corridor", Gadchiroli is now included in the State government's ambitious mineral transport route dedicated to transporting extracted iron ore. Plans for setting up a steel plant and an iron ore plant are underway, promising employment opportunities for over 25,000 people. While villagers appreciate connectivity measures like road and mobile network improvements, they question the government's notion of modern and industrial 'development'.

"Gadchiroli is never in the news for demanding employment. Have you ever heard us demanding jobs?" asks Sainu Masu Gota, head of the village panchayats of Surjagarh in Etapalli taluka. "Our employment and income come from the forests. We are self-made and self-sustaining indigenous tribes that have lived in these jungles for centuries. We want the government and the police to let us live and stop destroying our forests."

Gota and his wife, Sheela *bai*, were arrested in 2017 for protesting against iron ore mining. The couple is leading a people's movement in Surjagarh and surrounding villages against the mining projects, which were "destroying the environment and displacing the indigenous population".

In 2005, the Congress government proposed 25 mining projects in Gadchiroli district, of which 13 are listed in Surjagarh alone. Recently, six new mines have been leased out and infrastructure works to lay our roads, water and electricity connections are in progress to allow companies to set up their bases.

Lloyds Metals and Energy Private Limited and Thriveni Earthmovers have been the only mining operators in the Wooria hills of Surjagarh since 2007. Villagers say that despite severe opposition by local *gram panchayats*, the companies received final environmental clearance in 2022, after which they expanded their extraction capacity from three million tons per annum to 10 million tons per annum.

"The hills are sacred for us. It has our indigenous gods, whom we worship even now. Our panchayats have passed resolutions opposing ore extraction. But the government, in violation of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, has allowed mining and set up police *chowkies* on the hill. This is completely against our beliefs," says Kalpana Alam, former sarpanch of Surjagarh village.

Gadchiroli is covered under the PESA Act 1996 or PESA, which grants ownership of forests for protection and conservation to the villagers and makes it mandatory for the district authorities and the State government to take the consent of *gram sabhas* or village assemblies for any development project. It is Maharashtra's leading district in PESA implementation and since 2007, at least 1,450 villages have been granted community forest rights. Villagers are permitted to gather minor forest produce such as *tendu* leaves, *mahua* flowers, and bamboo and wood for sale or private consumption, considered an illegal activity since colonial times.

Alam stresses that the increased police presence has created an atmosphere of fear as the police brand villagers roaming in the jungles as Naxals or Naxal sympathisers. "Our women,

IN THE ABSENCE OF ROADS, THERE IS NO AMBULANCE ACCESS, FORCING VILLAGERS TO CARRY PATIENTS ON THEIR SHOULDERS IN BAMBOO *DOLIS*.

men and children go to the jungle every day," he says. "We have been living this way ancestrally. If we protest against the police, we are branded Naxals and issued warning notices."

Last year, villagers across Surjagarh's 72 *gram sabhas* converged in Todgatta to protest for more than 150 days against iron mining in Damkondawahi and Surjagarh and to demand the protection of their ancestral land. The police dismantled the protests and detained several villagers.

Ramesh Jhuga Kavdo of Damkondawahi village and organiser of the Damkondawahi Bachao Andolan Samiti, received a police notice in March last year, accusing him of being a Naxal sympathiser. "The police have labelled me and three women from my village as Naxal supporters. I am summoned to the police station frequently and my movement is restricted. All because I organised protests against the mining projects," he says. "Is it not our right to organise peaceful protests in a democracy?" Villagers claimed they were adhering to democratic processes, accusing the State government of acting in contravention of PESA rules. The ongoing conflict over mining between the villagers and district authorities has deepened distrust regarding the government's functioning, election process and democratic ideals.

Eligible tribal voters turn out to vote in large numbers, mainly because the police force them to do so. Some villagers say that visiting the polling booth and getting their fingers inked feels like an exciting novelty. In the interest of voting, the Surjagarh village council has decided to support the Congress party after local leaders assured them of addressing the opposition to mining. "But we don't trust any political party. Our fight is against displacement and oppression of tribals, which do not feature in any party's political agenda," says a disgruntled Sainu Gota. 🅞
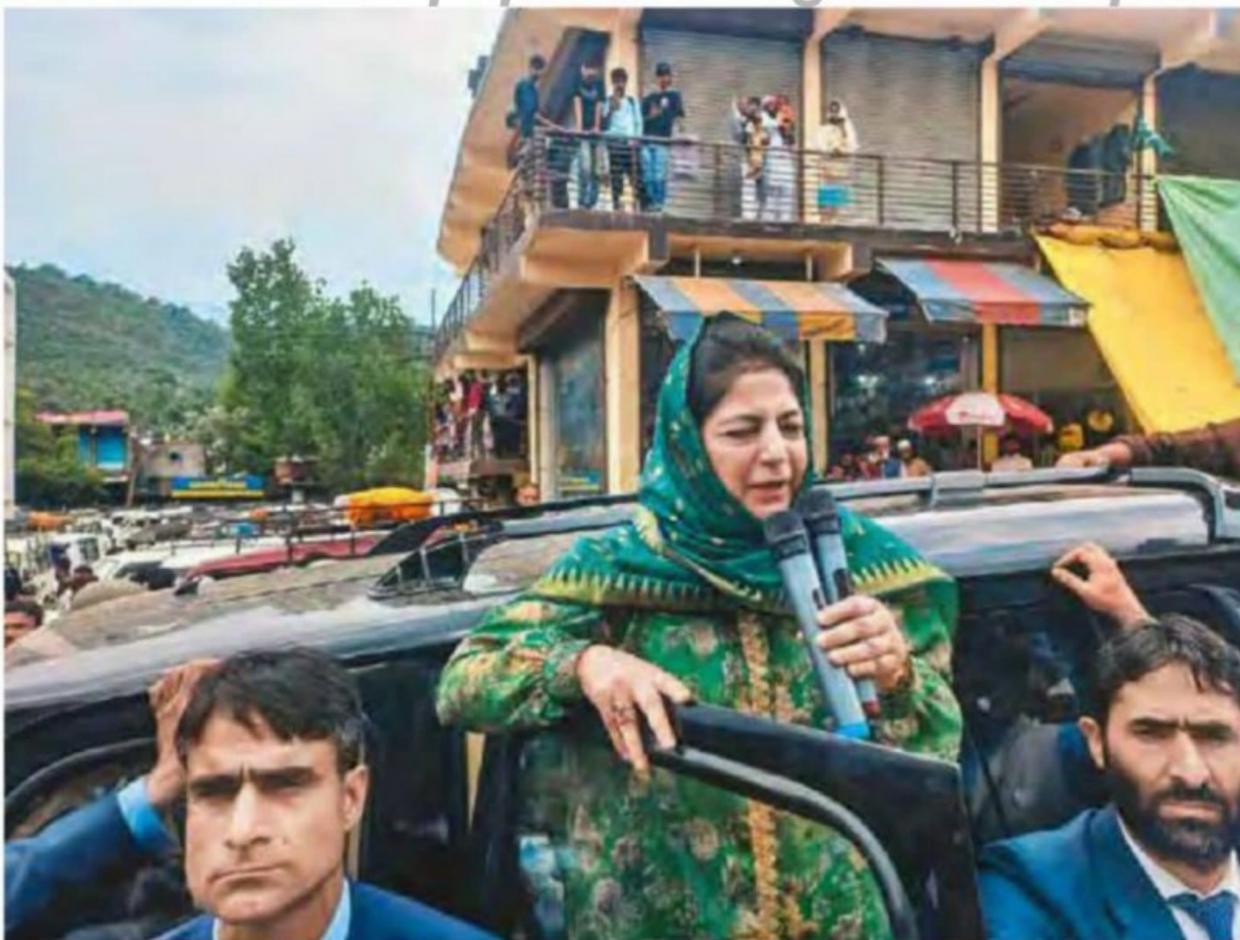
Facebook

Twitter

NASEER GANAI

PTI

Across the Pir Panjals

The newly carved-out constituency of Anantnag-Rajouri is set to witness a very close contest

Coveted Battle (From top) Omar Abdullah and National Conference candidate Mian Altaf; People's Democratic Party's Mehbooba Mufti at a roadshow; the Mughal Road in Poonch district

Facebook

Twitter

Naseer Ganai in Srinagar

ONE of the most keenly watched Lok Sabha seats in Kashmir this time is Anantnag-Rajouri. The carving of this new seat—by the Delimitation Commission in May 2022—surprised everyone and many alleged that the BJP had come up with this idea to make inroads into the Kashmir Valley. Though the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is not contesting from this seat, there is speculation that the party may lend tactical support to the Apni Party's candidate, Zaffar Iqbal Manhas, a Pahari from Shopian district of Kashmir.

The commission has included the Muslim-majority districts of Poonch and Rajouri from Jammu into Anantnag, with the exception of the Kalakote-Sunderbani assembly segment, which is Hindu-dominated. This decision seemed puzzling as these areas have distinct cultures, languages, and geography, and are separated by the formidable Pir Panjal mountain range.

So the real battle for this constituency is between the National Conference's (NC) Mian Altaf, a prominent Gujjar leader, and the president of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), Mehbooba Mufti. Former Congress leader Ghulam Nabi Azad, who declared his candidacy for the constituency, had initially brimmed with confidence. But like the BJP, he realised the challenges of making headway in this region, and took back his nomination.

NC Vice President Omar Abdullah says that Altaf has been nominated since he "possesses both political and spiritual powers". Altaf also has the support of the Congress and the CPI(M). Mufti—who has been focusing on the Rajouri-Poonch area for a long time taking up the causes of the local people—hopes that many Gujjars and Paharis will break tradition and vote for her. Despite the fact that some of her former MLAs have switched over to other parties like the Apni Party, her appeal to voters remains strong after the abrogation of Article 370.

"I see south Kashmir as a contest between Altaf and Mufti," says Shafiq Mir, president of the All Jammu and Kashmir Panchayat Conference. Mir, who hails from the Bulfiaz area of Poonch, says that the BJP had hoped to win this constituency after giving reservations to the Paharis, but like Azad, the party realised that it was better to refrain from contesting and save face. He says the delimitation has made Rajouri-Poonch a more prominent region in the electoral map of J&K. "We were not counted when we were with the Jammu constituency," he adds.

The Anantnag-Rajouri constituency is a mix of 18 assembly segments, with 11 in Kashmir and seven in Rajouri-Poonch. This blend of terrains has brought forth new dimensions, including the tussle between Paharis and Gujjars. While close to 50 per cent of the voters are Kashmiri Muslims, the remaining 28.5 per cent are Paharis and 21.5 per cent are Gujjars and Bakerwals.

The Gujjars and the Bakerwals belong to the same ethnic group. Bakerwals are pastoral nomads who travel across the region with their livestock, while the Gujjars are mostly settled in the Valley and raise cattle. While the Gujjar-Bakerwal community was officially recognised as Scheduled Tribes (ST) in 1991, the Paharis—who are a distinct social and linguistic group—were granted ST status on February 22, 2024, despite resentment and fierce opposition from the Gujjars as they describe them as an 'elite class'.

Unlike Kashmir, Rajouri-Poonch always witnesses a high voter turnout. Mufti's daughter, Iltija, has often warned the Gujjars speaking in their Gojri language that their land and homes are at risk. She says that her mother would fight for their cause and identity. Addressing the Mendhar area of Poonch on April 27, she stated that the Lok Sabha elections were not about development, but about expressing resentment against the revocation of Article 370 on August 5, 2019. "When they uproot you from your homes and forests, they don't differentiate between Gujjars and Paharis," she says. Abdullah echoes similar sentiments that this election is not about development, roads and electricity.

Author and political analyst Zafar Choudhary says the constituency is the first major change in the post-2019 political landscape. "The Pir Panjal Range separating the Jammu division from the Kashmir Valley has historically been a bulwark against politics and culture, filtering ideas and movements from one side to the other," he says.

Choudhary adds that this constituency drags a bit of Jammu into Kashmir and vice a versa to eventually create a political middle ground in this high altitude seat. "I see this region emerging as the future centre of the politics of Jammu and Kashmir which is informed of the sentiments on both sides," he adds.

However, regardless of who wins the Rajouri-Anantnag seat, it will ultimately be considered a 'Kashmiri seat' as the three prominent candidates from the constituency are from Kashmir. "The constituency was essentially designed to divide Kashmiris and Muslims, but it is now backfiring and leading to Muslim unity and consolidation," says a local regional leader.

Meanwhile, the Election Commission of India (ECI) has rescheduled the Lok Sabha polls in this south Kashmir seat from May 7 to May 25. The ECI intervened after many political parties and three candidates shared concerns about the election schedule. They pointed out the tough weather conditions like snowfall on the 84-km-long Mughal Road that links Kashmir Valley with the Poonch district of Jammu.

"We've been hearing rumours that the BJP and their allies are plotting such a move, citing the condition of the Mughal Road," Abdullah had said. Mufti too had questioned the rescheduling saying that it would be akin to rigging the polls as it was done in 1987, which could have dangerous consequences. She has attacked the NC, widely alleged to have rigged the 1987 elections in J&K, which is seen as the trigger for the three-decade-long insurgency. Ⓞ

Facebook

Twitter

Left Side Story

Personal attacks, lower voter turnout and the BJP's determined campaigning: how has Kerala voted this time?

Shahina K K in Vadakara, Kerala

I T is 2 pm on April 4 in Kakkuni, Vadakara constituency. A large number of people have gathered under the blazing sun for a public meeting of the Left Democratic Front (LDF) candidate K K Shailaja. The crowd, particularly women, surround the former health minister expressing their love and affection, chanting slogans and listening attentively to her brief speech.

On the other side, the United Democratic Front (UDF) candidate and sitting MLA, Shafi Parambil, the youthful face of the Congress, receives an equally enthusiastic response during his roadshow. Around 5,000 women—Shailaja's mass base—are on the streets to display their support to Parambil. A member of the legislative assembly representing Palakkad, Parambil was a surprise addition to the UDF's line-up. In 2021, he won against the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) candidate, 'Metro man' E Sreedharan, and emerged as one of the most promising young leaders in the Congress.

During the final stretch of the election, as we journeyed through approximately seven constituencies in northern Kerala, we noticed a surprising emptiness on the streets, with the exception of Vadakara. The bustling energy depicted on social media did not align with the subdued atmosphere outdoors. One prominent reason for this is the intense summer heat, reportedly the worst in 50 years, which has deterred people from venturing out during daytime. Instead, social media platforms were flooded with videos and images of vibrant night marches, indicating that the true election fervour seemed to thrive only in the evening and night.

Vadakara stands out from the rest of the seats going to the polls. The constituency—once a stronghold of the Left—has witnessed a significant shift since 2009. The murder of T P Chandrasekharan, the CPI(M) rebel, who formed the Revolutionary Marxist Party (RMP) in 2012, dealt a severe blow to the LDF in this constituency, leading to an apparent shift in favour of the UDF ever since. That is precisely why Shailaja's candidacy reflects the CPI(M)'s determined effort to reclaim this seat. In response, the Congress has fielded Parambil, who the party feels can challenge Shailaja's stature.

Personal Attacks Take Centre Stage

However, the intense political contest took a disturbing turn with cyber attacks against Shailaja, alleging corruption in the purchase of COVID-19 kits. Though these accusations have been surfacing since 2021, no substantial evidence has been presented. The attacks on Shailaja escalated to an appalling extent, with her photos being manipulated alongside pornographic imagery. The veteran politician was visibly shaken, breaking down in tears during a press conference. She said that she had never experienced such personal and vicious attacks before in her life.

In the final stretch, the campaign took on a communal undertone. Parambil, although a Congress representative, is seen as the blue-eyed boy of the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML), which has embraced his candidacy as its own. Vadakara, which has a substantial Muslim population, is known for its secular ethos and has historically demonstrated that the candidates' religious affiliations do not significantly impact their electability. This trend is evident in the assembly segments within Vadakara as well. For instance, in the Nadapuram assembly constituency, where approximately 40 per cent of the population is Muslim, the electorate elected E K Vijayan of the CPI in the 2021 state elections.

It has been alleged that the UDF is trying to create a polarisation of the Muslim vote in favour of Parambil. Screenshots of messages asking for 'casting the core for a Muslim' circulated on WhatsApp groups that were exposed by

f Facebook

𝕏 Twitter

The Wait to Vote
People queue up to cast their vote in Palakkad, Kerala, on April 26, 2024

A P

IT IS INTERESTING THAT KERALA HAS DIFFERENT VOTING PARAMETERS FOR ASSEMBLY AND PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS.

the Left camp. The social media handles of the Left retaliated by calling Parambil a 'communal fanatic'. The furious and ugly fight has become the only point of discussion in Kerala.

Lower Voter Turnout

While the Wayanad constituency garnered significant attention, given the obvious reasons, the on-ground contest didn't appear to be tight. Annie Raja's candidacy against Rahul Gandhi has somewhat shifted the political dynamics, as compared to the previous election, when the LDF—caught off guard by Gandhi's entry—fielded P P Suneer, a local party leader, without a clear strategy. This time, they are determined to put up a strong fight against Gandhi, and the late entry of the BJP's state president K Surendran has tightened the electoral race.

The decision to refrain from displaying the IUML's party flags at Gandhi's rallies—out of concern that the BJP might exploit them nationally for a misinformation campaign by associating the IUML's green flags with Pakistani flags—has stirred dissatisfaction among the rank and file of the IUML. Despite attempts by the UDF leadership to downplay the issue, this move has led to widespread disappointment among young IUML workers, with the UDF fearing that this might have some impact on their prospects in north Kerala.

The lack of enthusiasm in the IUML camp seems to have been reflected in the polling. All constituencies in north Kerala, where the IUML is strong, witnessed a considerably lower voter turnout compared to 2019. The total polling in the state stood at 71.27 per cent, which is 6.57 per cent lower as compared to 2019. Historically, a low voter turnout has been advantageous to the LDF. Apparently, the LDF camp is hoping to win not less than 10 seats.

Significantly, it must be also kept in mind that Kerala has different voting parameters for assembly and Parliamentary elections. Though Kerala has alternatively voted for the LDF and the UDF in state elections, it has consistently supported the Congress and its allies in the Lok Sabha elections.

The BJP's Increasing Presence

In the electoral battleground of Thrissur, where a three-pronged clash unfolded, all eyes were fixed on Suresh Gopi, the BJP's star-turned-politician. The constituency gained instant attention when the Congress replaced its sitting MP, T N Prathapan, with K Muraleedharan, following the defection of Muraleedharan's sister, Padmaja Venugopal, to the BJP camp. Meanwhile, the CPI strategically fielded V S Sunil Kumar, a former minister, as its contestant. The fall in voter turnout, however, casts a shadow over the expectations of the BJP. Thrissur recorded 72.9 per cent polling, which marks a five per cent drop as compared to 2019. Though all parties claim victory, the assembly segment-wise voter turnout gives an edge to the Left.

In the capital constituency of Thiruvananthapuram, where incumbent MP Shashi Tharoor of the Congress is fighting Union Minister Rajeev Chandrasekhar and CPI veteran Pannyan Raveendran, the voter turnout holds significant weight. With a turnout of 66.46 per cent, well below the constituency's average and even lower than the higher turnout seen in 2019, the dynamics are notable. The Congress camp finds solace in the urban assembly segments, where the BJP typically garners support, showing a more significant decrease in voting. Moreover, the coastal belt, which tends to favour Tharoor, has displayed a better turnout. However, a silent but crucial factor lies in the potential consolidation of minority votes in favour of the LDF. This is influenced by Tharoor's perceived wobbly stance on issues such as the war on Gaza and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, which hasn't resonated well with the Muslim community.

Irrespective of the fierce fight between the UDF and the LDF, Kerala is anxiously waiting to know one thing: will the BJP open its account in the state this time? 🄾

Facebook

Twitter

Tier 2 & 3 cities: creating a new paradigm

These smaller corridors have huge potential and are continuing to contribute significantly to India's economy and real estate growth trajectory.

TOP STOREY
Kausar Firdausi

Creating a broad infrastructure network enables seamless last mile connectivity and opens new real estate development pockets throughout India especially in tier 2 and 3 cities. Thanks to enhanced accessibility, these cities are attracting a surge of businesses, industries, and investors, thereby driving up the demand for both commercial and residential properties in those areas.

Industry experts are of the view that these smaller cities have huge potential and are continuing to contribute significantly to India's economy and real estate growth trajectory. Anshul Jain, chief executive - India, South-East Asia & Asia Pacific tenant representation, Cushman & Wakefield, says, "Besides strengthening inter-city connectivity, the critical intra-city connectivity through modern transit systems is also receiving a big boost, thereby

generating huge opportunities for growth of real estate along these emerging corridors."

New expressways and airports are fuelling economic activity across tier 2 and 3 cities, opening-up business opportunities across a range of asset classes for developers and investors. "Infusing connectivity, infrastructure, technology, and investment into these cities has transformed them into vibrant centres of economic activity," affirms Dr Niranjan Hiranandani, chairman, NAREDCO National.

Diyesh Doshi, director, Kinjal informs

> "Besides strengthening inter-city connectivity, the critical intra-city connectivity through modern transit systems is also receiving a big boost along these emerging corridors."
>
> **ANSHUL JAIN**
> Chief Executive - India, South-East Asia & Asia Pacific Tenant Representation, Cushman & Wakefield

that research from a prominent institute in India in 2023 found that 86% of respondents consider improved connectivity as the primary catalyst for real estate expansion in tier 2 and 3 cities.

According to Anshuman Magazine, chairman & CEO, India, Southeast Asia, Middle East & Africa, CBRE, tier 2 cities are particularly not just experiencing a surge in corporate interest, but are becoming the hotspots for business expansion and diversification enabled by enhanced infrastructure initiatives. "Cities like Chandigarh, Lucknow, Indore, Jaipur, Ahmedabad, Coimbatore, Kochi, Thiruvananthapuram, Visakhapatnam, and Bhubaneshwar are not just witnessing transformative growth, but are poised to attract a wave of new enterprises, promising a future full of potential and opportunities," updates Magazine.

Elaborating on the ripple effect of these infrastructure developments extending beyond the core NCR cities, Manish Aggarwal, senior MD – North and East India, JLL says that it seems to catalyse the

ON THE SPOT

"Our model enables us to efficiently manage and complete real estate projects"
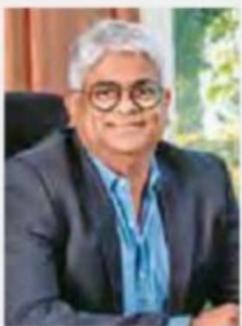
SRINIVASAN GOPALAN, Chairman, ArisUnitern RE Solutions Pvt. Ltd., in a conversation with **Kausar Firdausi,** elaborates on development management's benefits and challenges, how HNIs can invest in realty funds, what's the Indian residential market's outlook in 2024 and explains about Unitern's development management model. Edited Excerpts…

Q Please elaborate on the benefits and challenges that development management is currently facing in the real estate sector.

The development management model (DMM) is a collaborative approach where major developers join forces with smaller or regional players to mitigate financial risks, efficiently manage the development cycle, and exchange expertise to maximise project potential. This model is becoming highly relevant due to the sector's impressive growth trajectory, and the benefits are evident in the quality of development across a wider market, transcending the top-tier markets. Some of the key advantages that this model offers include creating opportunities for larger, branded companies and smaller and medium-sized developers to enter emerging real estate hotspots and enabling regional players by providing expertise, marketing supp... investment avenues.

Q What steps should the industry take to attract investments in the realty sector? How can HNIs use this opportunity to diversify their investments in the sector?

With innovative funds continually being launched, the investment ecosystem is poised to become more robust in the coming years. However, it's crucial to ensure that the quality of assets is not compromised and that projects adhere to all compliance and sustainable practices. This serves as the primary driver to attract investments. Moreover, alternative investment funds (AIFs) are democratising the entire ecosystem by creating opportunities for retail investors to leverage bullish sentiment. HNIs can invest in real estate funds, including private equity real estate funds, real estate investment trusts (REITs), and real estate crowdfunding platforms.

Q What's the outlook for the Indian residential market in 2024, considering

Facebook

Twitter

economic growth of neighbouring cities such as Agra, Mathura, Dadri, and Meerut in UP, and Jaipur, Alwar, Bhiwadi, Ajmer, and Jodhpur in Rajasthan, just to name a few.

Aggarwal further explains that the favourable conditions in these cities, such as moderate land prices and easy availability, present a golden opportunity for real estate developers to capitalise on.

Abhishek Raj, founder & CEO, Jenika Ventures, informs that the construction of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya has skyrocketed the prices of land by 5 to 10 times the prices that were prevalent four to five years ago. Similarly, the construction of the Dwarka Expressway showed a significant upswing in property prices. In Q4 of 2023 property prices on the Dwarka Expressway ranged between ₹11,300 and ₹11,700 per sq.ft., showing a substantial increase from Q3 of 2022.

The recently inaugurated Mumbai Trans Harbour Link (MTHL) is a monumental project that connects the island city of Mumbai with the mainland. "It promises to revolutionise travel by reducing the commute time to Panvel from the earlier two hours to a mere 20 minutes now," enlightens Sandeep Sonthalia, CEO,

> "The favourable conditions in tier 2 & 3 cities, such as moderate land prices and easy availability, present a golden opportunity for realty developers to capitalise on."
>
> **MANISH AGGARWAL**
> Senior MD – North and East India, JLL

Wadhwa Wise City.

As remote work gains popularity, Jayesh Rathod, director, The Guardians Real Estate Advisory, notes that professionals are moving to more affordable and serene locations like Chandigarh, Zirakpur and Mohali, sparking developer's interest. Simultaneously, multinational companies and a strong labour market are driving demand for both residential and commercial properties in these locations.

Manju Yagnik, vice chairperson, Nahar Group and senior vice president, NAREDCO-Maharashtra, highlights that the digitisation factor also assures that these cities are catching up with urban areas and jumping ahead into the future. Ultimately, this trend signifies a positive move towards balanced regional development and underscores India's potential for sustainable urbanisation.

One of the key factors which drives the expansion of coworking spaces in smaller cities is the remarkable development of infrastructure and connectivity. "The demand for flexible spaces is also gaining momentum in tier 2 cities as organisations look to optimise costs, be closer to employees, and retain talent with flexible work options," asserts Manas Mehrotra, founder, 315Work Avenue.

Developers are leading the way by creating modern malls which offer not just shopping but also entertainment, aligning with the evolving aspirations of these cities. "Homebuyers and developers prefer spaces where commercial, entertainment, business, healthcare facilities, banking, educational and living spaces are within reach and they also balance community living with green patches," avers C J Singh, COO, Wave City.

the ongoing trends and market dynamics?
The outlook for the Indian residential market in 2024 appears optimistic, considering ongoing trends and market dynamics. Despite challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, the residential segment has exceeded expectations and experienced a sharp rebound. Over the past two years, the segment has witnessed significant recovery, marked by record sales and launches.

🔲 **How do government policies shape the residential market in India, and what recent policy changes have influenced the industry's trajectory?**
Government policies indeed play a pivotal role in shaping the residential market in India, impacting demand, supply, pricing, and investor sentiment within the sector. Recent policy changes, notably the introduction of RERA, have significantly influenced the industry's trajectory.

Additionally, consecutive decisions by the RBI to keep the repo rate unchanged have not only provided relief to homebuyers but also empowered developers to explore funding opportunities.

🔲 **Can you provide an overview of Unitern's development management model and how it differentiates from traditional approaches in the realty sector?**
As the first-of-its-kind professionally-run development management company in South India, we offer comprehensive solutions in the realty sector, providing access to capital, materials, and a talented pool of professionals across all areas. Our model enables us to efficiently manage and complete realty projects ahead of schedule, with meticulous cash flow management. We believe that in today's dynamic landscape, developers can benefit from outsourcing s departments to seasoned expe

AP

The Unrest Is Spreading Across USA's Campuses A pro-Palestinian protest at the University of Texas in Austin on April 24, 2024

Occupy Ivy League

Students protesting in American universities are asking the US government to rethink its policy towards Israel

Seema Guha

"Never think that war, no matter how necessary, nor how justified, is not a crime."

—Ernest Hemingway

A wave of pro-Palestine demonstrations is sweeping across American campuses, with protests spreading to European colleges in Paris, Geneva, Berlin and London. Not since the Vietnam War, and the student movements of 1968 and the early 1970s, has a war in a foreign land whipped up so much anger in the US. Will the student unrest, which is now morphing into a similar larger movement, force the US administration to change track? It is too early to say if the anti-war movement can garner widespread public support. In Vietnam, the US was directly involved and body bags were coming in every day on military flights from Saigon. A majority of Americans wanted the troops back home. The students and the general public were on the same page on Vietnam. It is not the same now as a majority of Americans support Israel.

The US is not fighting the Gaza war with boots on the ground. Yet, as Israel's main backer and an iron-clad supporter of Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu, students believe the US is as responsible for the "genocide" in Gaza. President Joe Biden is arming, funding and providing political and diplomatic support to Israel in its almost genocidal attack on the people of Gaza as

collective punishment for the Hamas strike inside Israel on October 7 that shocked the world.

The epicentre of the current student unrest is New York's prestigious Columbia University, where students have set up a pro-Palestinian protest encampment and are clashing with university authorities, which called in the New York Police Department (NYPD) to clear the ground. But they came back the next day in larger numbers to continue the protests. At the moment, talks are on between university authorities and Columbia's protesters. University President Minouche Shafik is under fire from students for calling in the police and also for being too soft. Republican House Speaker Mike Johnson wants her sacked. He visited the campus to express solidarity with the Jewish students. He was booed when he denounced the protests as "mob rule" and said that the "virus of anti-Semitism" was spreading in the campus.

Following the unrest, Columbia authorities have announced online classes to ensure that teaching is not affected. However, there has been a backlash with some parents demanding that the hefty tuition fees paid by students for in-person classes are given back. Luckily, the academic session ends on April 29.

Since last week's protests in Columbia, campuses from coast to coast are taking the cue. At Atlanta's Emory University, protestors and law enforcers clashed with each other, resulting in the arrest of a clutch of students and two professors. Student protests have also been reported in Brown University, Yale University, University of California, Berkeley, Emerson College, Indiana University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, George Washington University, University of Texas at Austin, University of Minnesota as well as in the City University of New York and many others. Harvard students are putting up tents on the college grounds. Around 100 protesters from the University of Southern California were detained by the police. The university had earlier cancelled student Asna Tabassum's graduation speech for her pro-Palestine social media posts. The university said there is "no free-speech entitlement" to speak at the commencement. So far, over 500 anti-war protesters, both students and teachers, are being held by the police across the US. Will the protests gather steam or fizzle?

Jewish Intervention

The campus protests have angered several powerful Jewish billionaires who want to stop funding some of the Ivy League universities where protests are taking place. Billionaire Robert Kraft, a former student of Columbia University, has hinted that he would stop funding his university. "I am deeply saddened at the virulent hate that continues to grow on campuses throughout our country," Kraft said. "I am no longer confident that Columbia University can protect its students and staff, and I am not comfortable supporting the University until corrective action is taken." Others like Jon Huntsman and Leon Cooperman have stopped funding campuses where protests are on. Bill Ackman, another Harvard funder, went a step further and wanted the names of student protestors so that none of them got hired by him and other CEOs of top companies.

University authorities across the US are grappling with the complexities of trying to balance students' right to freely express themselves as well as protest, as guaranteed by the First Amendment of the US Constitution, with the need to maintain peace and security for all students on the campus. Some Jewish students are uncomfortable and feel unsafe on campuses where protests are on. But there are many Jewish students who have joined the anti-Israel demonstrations.

In the US, the Israel-Palestine narrative is often couched in the language of anti-Semitism. American Jews have strong connections to Israel. The pro-Jewish lobby in the US is extremely powerful and can influence politics, business and the media. Support for Palestine is often linked to anti-Semitism by large sections in the country. But in public discourse, the lines are often blurred, with many confusing criticism of the hard right-wing coalition led by Netanyahu as anti-Jewish. But the fact that in Israel too there is criticism of Netanyahu's policies is somehow forgotten. Republican politicians are critical of the campus protests and dub the protesters as anti-Semitic.

Netanyahu has condemned the campus protests and said in a video message: "Anti-Semitism on campuses in the US is reminiscent of what happened in German universities in the 1930s. It's unconscionable." Greg Abbot, Texas' Republican Governor, echoed Netanyahu when he said: "These protesters belong in jail… students joining in hate-filled, anti-Semitic protests at any public college or university in Texas should be expelled." To which Ben Jamal, the UK-based director of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, said: "This tactic of conflating anti-Semitism with legitimate criticism of the State of Israel is a very familiar one, and is used globally by Israel to silence those who are advocating for Palestinian rights."

Not that some students have not used hate speech. Khymani James, a protest leader from Columbia University, has been banned for saying in a social media post, which was widely circulated, that "Zionists don't deserve to live". He continued: "The same way we're very comfortable accepting that Nazis don't deserve to live, fascists don't deserve to live, racists don't deserve to live, Zionists, they shouldn't live in this world." He later apologised and said: "I misspoke at the heat of the moment." But for the majority of students, it is not so much hatred for Israel as compassion for the suffering civilians of Gaza.

The demand of the students is for the Biden Administration to stop providing lethal arms to Israel that has helped the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) to kill over 34,000 civilians, one-fourth of them being women and children. They want an immediate ceasefire to end the bloodletting and allow the much-needed food and medical aid to get through to Gaza. Students are urging their universities to break links with academic institutions of Israel, and companies with close connections with Tel Aviv. This move is inspired by Palestine supporters in the Middle East and other Muslim countries who have called for the boycott of American companies such as McDonalds, Starbucks, Burger King, Coca-Cola, KFC and Pizza Hut for their pro-Israeli views.

For the major powers, the figures of the dead and wounded remain just numbers, as they look to their own strategic interests. But students and young people across the world feel the pain of war and are horrified by the images of death and destruction in Gaza. Student bodies have galvanised into action to raise their voices against injustice. By doing so, young people have become the conscience keepers of the world, asking their governments to rethink. 🅾

Facebook

Twitter
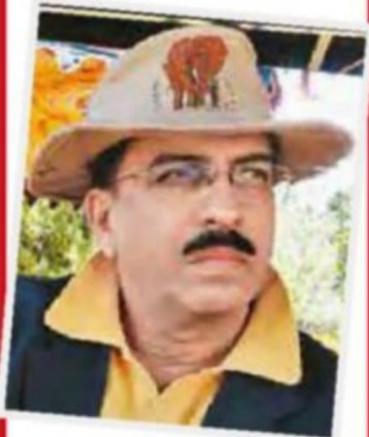
Sudhirendar Sharma
is a writer and book
reviewer

The Washing Machine

I still recall how excited my mother was when she loaded a washing machine for the very first time in her life. Unlike the unavoidable contraption it is now, back then, it was considered a luxury item. At a mini celebration with a handful of neighbours in attendance and lots of washable clothes scattered around, the machine was switched on, accompanied by its gurgling sound. Her life was transformed thereafter; she did not have to hand-wash laundry anymore for the five of us. She could hardly believe it!

Loading the machine and watching it swirl dirty clothes around remained a spectacle for quite a while before it became a familiar domestic ritual. Although the electric washing machine came into existence in the early 1900s, my mother got to use it almost a century later. There are billions still standing in queue to get hold of a washing machine. For those who survive on less than two dollars a day, hand-washing the laundry continues to be a drudgery.

An Interesting Evolution

Laundry technology has continued to evolve with new machines and many products offering improved efficiency, convenience, and sustainability are available. High-efficiency washing machines claim to use less water and energy, reducing the environmental impact of washing clothes while lowering utility costs. Yet, not more than three billion people can afford to wash their clothes in electric washing machines. A washing machine is every woman's demand, but gendered inequity still persists in our time.

Not sure why laundry as a task was assigned to women, many of whom used to wash clothes by pounding them on rocks after rubbing some cleansing stuff on them and drain the dirt away in streams or rivers. In colonial times, the most common way of washing clothes was to boil them in a large pot, then lay them on a flat board, and beat them with a paddle. Laundry was often a communal ritual along the banks of rivers and ponds where women did the washing.

Ever since the first patent was awarded for a washing invention in 1797, the history of laundry has gone through a fascinating transformation. From the ancient practises of washing with one's hands to the present-day use of innovative technologies, the focus has remained on methods for keeping clothes clean and fresh. New technologies promise to keep laundry a more efficient, convenient, and environmentally friendly process.

The Political Dimension

If the virtues of a washing machine are too many to list, why has it yet to become an electoral issue? Every woman may vote for a washing machine, but none would dare to "wash dirty linen in public". Keeping one's dirty linen away from prying eyes has been the preserve of the more affluent and genteel sections of society. It's a reminder to maintain discretion. Best to handle issues privately rather than airing them publicly.

Of late, washing machines have acquired a political dimension though. As the act of washing dirty linen in public gets negated, the washing machine has instead been put to use to wash the person clean (of his/her dirty attire) for the ballot box. The electoral value of a laundered candidate is worth an important place in legislative governance. One just has to pass through the right washing machine to be seen as neat and clean in the eyes of the public. ⊙

Facebook

Twitter