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BATTLE FOR JAGAN**

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FACTOR IN ELECTION 2024

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**O**ur society often puts a bar on open and equal gender participation in the processes of democracy, even though the Constitution of India had granted women equal franchise rights at the dawn of the Republic. But this has been changing radically, in part due to the rising rate of female literacy, the greater space accorded to gender equality at the Panchayati Raj level, the self-help group movement and, in recent years, the growing availability of information due to the mobile revolution. Women's participation in the electoral process over the past decade has, therefore, been throwing up data that's truly historic. In 2019, for the first time ever in national elections, a higher percentage of the female electorate exercised their franchise than the male side—67.18 per cent out of the pool of 438.5 million registered women voters, against only 67.02 per cent of the men. It was a tiny gap of 0.16 percentage points, but a giant leap for womankind.

Statistics do reveal the revolutionary change that is unfolding on the ground. Take the lens away from national to state elections, and you see that the greater desire to participate is not an aberration but a consistent trend. Of the 23 major states that held elections in the five years till 2023, the female turnout was higher in as many as 18. The gender ratio of our electorate, or the number of females per 1,000 males among registered voters, too is moving fast towards a level playing field: there has been a 7.5 per cent rise among women electors this election, taking their total number up to 471.5 million now. Registered male voters have risen only by five per cent to 497.2 million. With that, the overall elector gender ratio has improved from 926:1,000 in 2019 to 948:1,000 this election. That includes 8.5 million first-time women voters (those who have reached voting age). Indian women are clearly becoming equal arbiters of the nation's political destiny. Sukanya Ganguly, 31, an IT consultant in Kolkata, could well be speaking for the entire sorority when she says, "I must vote if I want the country to be a better, more equal and just place for women to live in."

This greater share in the franchise has had a perceptible impact on electoral outcomes. In fact, the decade-long dominance of the Narendra Modi dispensation over Indian politics is partly attributable to female voting preferences. From the time Modi strode on to centre stage in 2014, it was a tangible trend. In the 2019 general election, as many as 46 per cent of women voters chose the BJP compared to only 44 per cent of the men, according to an analysis of voting patterns by polling agency Axis-My India. This was not a one-way traffic of adulation. Data from SBI Research shows that women have a significant share in the Modi government's central schemes. They account for as much as 68 per cent of all MUDRA loans. Expand the acronym MUDRA to its full form—Micro Units Development & Refinance Agency—and you know which sector of the economy is being benefited. It also tells you the kind of creative role that women are playing in the non-corporate, non-farm micro-enterprise universe, and how politics is entwined with economics. Similarly, more than 81 per cent of Stand-up India's footprint is female.

Policies attuned to women from across the political spectrum offer concrete proof that this is a much sought-after segment of the electorate. The Congress, on its part, is waging its own battle of guarantees to woo the women's vote. 'Nari Nyay' or 'Justice

for Women' forms one of the five components of its 2024 election manifesto. Under it, two big promises stand out. First, an annual Rs 1 lakh cash transfer, paid in monthly instalments, to the bank account of the eldest woman in every poor family under the Mahalakshmi scheme. Second, 50 per cent reservation for women in all central government jobs. Clearly, the Grand Old Party is keenly aware that its entitlement-led campaign is what helped it win Karnataka and Telangana last year. That had included simple expedients like free bus tickets to women.

**T**his is quite reminiscent of the welfare line of Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar, who had inaugurated this kind of outreach in the mid-2000s by offering money to buy bicycles to female students who had passed Class 8. That was a scheme that came to be emulated by many other states. From that primary mobility, India is fast reaching the next stage of economic mobility. State governments have often taken the lead in this aspect of gender outreach too. Former Madhya Pradesh CM Shivraj Singh Chouhan's hugely popular Ladli Behna scheme played a critical role in deciding last year's assembly election outcome in his state. The 'Modi Ki Guarantees' in the BJP manifesto this time include a massive scheme to empower 30 million rural women to become Lakhpati Didis.

Executive Editor Manisha Saroop and Senior Associate Editor Jumana Shah perform a gender audit of the ongoing election for our cover story this week. INDIA TODAY correspondents spoke with women across the country—young and old, rural and urban, working women and housewives—to find out what they want. And they discovered that women want more than just scheme after scheme. Bread-and-butter issues matter to them as much as they affect the men. The lack of access to education and employment is a recurrent theme in their conversations, and the pinch of high prices matters too. While the closing of the

gender gap in voter turnouts is a welcome sign, the gender gap in everything else remains a stark reality. Women's representation remains dismal. They constituted only 15 per cent of the 17th Lok Sabha. And even in this election, at the end of three phases, only 358 women had stepped into the electoral fray out of a total of 4,175 candidates, a deplorable 8.6 per cent. Women's empowerment needs more than just stated intent to become a reality.

The Modi government's landmark Constitution (106th Amendment) Act 2023, which reserves one-third of all seats for women in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies, is quite the transformative legislation here. Fulfilling a decades-long demand from women politicians and activists, it promises to reset the very grammar and vocabulary of Indian politics upon implementation. The Congress, in fact, promises only to expedite it. Clearly, amid all the mutual rancour and competition, there is a silent political consensus. One that recognises the centrality of women's political participation and why it is essential for India to be regarded as a great democracy.



February 25, 2019

(Aroon Purie)

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By Ajay Sukumaran

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MANDATE 2024 | UTTAR PRADESH |

## RAHUL'S NEW GAMBIT

The Congress leader decides to renew his fight in UP, but this time from another Gandhi pocket borough, Rae Bareli. Can he overturn the 2019 disappointment?

*By Prashant Srivastava in Rae Bareli and Amethi*

In a Congress social media post on May 1, Rahul Gandhi was seen playing chess where he draws an analogy between the game and politics. He says that in chess, as one improves in tactics, the opponent's pieces begin to function almost like one's own. The video may have acquired a risibly prophetic tone when, a week later, Prime Minister Narendra Modi raked up "Adani-Ambani" in accusatory tones against the Congress. But in the interim, it had everyone a bit foxed in Uttar Pradesh. Would Rahul agree to contest from Amethi? He had appeared to keep a moody aloofness from his old constituency, which he lost to the BJP's Smriti Irani in 2019. Would that end? Would the Gandhi siblings hunt in pairs, with sister Priyanka taking up Rae Bareli, the other pocket borough that mother Sonia Gandhi had vacated as she moved to the Rajya Sabha? Would the Family come to reclaim its northern legacy?

The wait for Rahul to make his move proved to be an agonising one. Even the BJP was getting a touch antsy. Having the principal Opposition face in the fray directly in UP could, after all, set off a little ripple effect—and strategies would have to be revised accordingly. In the event, the air of expectancy among the party worker base



Photographs by ANI

and pro-Congress media corps—which had been taking the anticipatory drum beats to a crescendo—found only partial fulfilment. On May 3, the last day for nominations, Rahul filed his papers from Rae Bareilly. Priyanka would not be in the field—except as a star campaigner.

The news met with mixed reactions. The BJP mocked Rahul, saying he was wary of facing Smriti again, in line with the taunt Modi had lobbed: “*Bhaago mat...lado* (don’t run, fight)”. Congress insiders, though, call it a well-thought-out strategy. Rae Bareilly has been a Family bastion since Feroze Gandhi won it for the first Lok Sabha in 1952, with the status of a prime ministerial constituency during Indira Gandhi’s 1967-77 term in office. And Sonia has held it for 20 years now—unaffected even by the Modi wave in 2014 and 2019. It, therefore, carries a certain cachet. A few months ago, Sonia had written a thank-you letter to her constituents saying the Gandhis would continue to serve them even though she was moving to the Upper House.

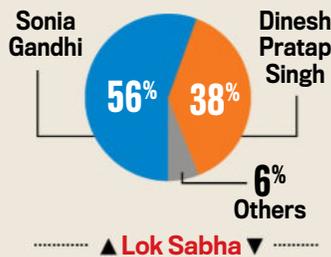


# THE FAMILY LAND BANK

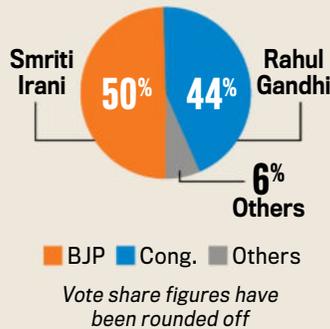
**Rahul decides to skip Amethi. Will the other Gandhi fiefdom hold?**



## RAE BAREILLY 2019



## AMETHI 2019



### THE WAR ZONE

(Left) Priyanka, Rahul and Sonia Gandhi en route to Rae Bareilly, May 3; (above) Amethi Congress candidate K.L. Sharma

Rahul was apparently reluctant to step in, saying he could not leave his adopted seat—Wayanad in Kerala—if he won both. It was Sonia, sources say, who impressed upon him that he had to bow to the cadre’s wishes. The party did not want to send the message that “the North didn’t matter” to Rahul as he had a safe seat in the South. Amethi got the thumbs down as it would have descended into a “prestige battle”, tying down the party’s main campaigner and its own scarce resources. Smriti, denied the benefit of a high-profile contest, now has unassuming Family loyalist Kishori Lal Sharma as her rival. Says a senior leader, “We did

**AMETHI APPARENTLY GOT THE THUMBS DOWN AS IT WOULD HAVE TURNED INTO A “PRESTIGE BATTLE”, TYING DOWN RAHUL, THE PARTY’S MAIN CAMPAIGNER**

not want another Rahul vs Smriti narrative in the media. Rahul is a national leader, there’s no need for him to go down to their level. What we are saying is, ‘Our Kishori is enough to take on Irani.’” Priyanka, her own candidacy deferred to a putative bypoll in the future, will do the heavy lifting on the campaign trail in both seats.

The BJP has fielded local Dinesh Pratap Singh again from Rae Bareilly. A party-hopper and ex-Sonia campaign manager, he’s no pushover, having halved her winning margin to 167,000-odd votes in 2019. What won’t harm the Congress is the tie-up with the Samajwadi Party, which holds four of the five assembly seats under Rae Bareilly. Kishori Lal is no stranger to Amethi either, having worked for the party here for over 40 years and been close to the Family since the days of Rajiv Gandhi. “I first came to Amethi in 1983. I know people in each and every block here,” he tells INDIA TODAY. “The people will vote for me and the Gandhis. They are annoyed with Smriti here.” The anti-incumbency dart may hit, but Sharma has barely three weeks to soothe the locals for being abandoned by Rahul. ■

**WAITING FOR CITIZENSHIP** Matuas hold their community ID cards aloft at the Hari Chand temple, Barasat, West Bengal



DEBAJYOTI CHAKRABORTY



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# DELAYING THE CAA EMBRACE

**Mindful of the TMC's unrelenting attacks on the CAA and the inflexible, must-have domicile proof requires by its rules, the Matua leadership decide on a watchful wait**

**By Arkamoy Datta Majumdar**

**T**he Matua community of West Bengal—who have long demanded formal Indian citizenship—has been the object of some assiduous courtship from the BJP in recent years. The legislative writ it enjoys at the Centre had allowed it to offer the Matuas a unique engagement ring: the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). But amidst the ruction of a protracted poll season, the ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC) here has managed to put a spoke—rather, a spook—in the wheel by drawing attention to the law's fine print. Now the All India Matua Mahasangha,

the community's umbrella outfit, led by Union minister and the BJP's Bongaon MP Shantanu Thakur, has informally asked its members to not apply for citizenship under the law until the Lok Sabha election is over.

The CAA seeks to fast-track citizenship for Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians—controversially excluding Muslims—who entered India from Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Pakistan before December 31, 2014. As a community that fled persecution in East Pakistan/ Bangladesh, with the wounds of history still raw, the Matuas are drawn to the CAA's

special value, material and symbolic. Mining that is a political priority for the BJP—beyond the Matua-dominated constituencies, it was a perfect recipe for overall Hindu consolidation. For the TMC, thwarting this project has its own charms, the 27 per cent Muslim electorate among them. If the TMC appears to control the ball currently, it has to do with the mechanics of the CAA—foggy as it is on a variety of points, including the delicate one of whether an applicant gets stripped back to an ab initio “foreigner” status by the very act of applying.

According to the government portal created for the purpose, an applicant must furnish a copy of one document establishing he or she was a resident of Afghanistan, Pakistan or Bangladesh. It is this condition—laid down under Schedule 1A of the rules notified in March—that can upset the community, Matua leaders say. Many of them do not have any document from their previous domicile in Bangladesh/ East Pakistan, from where they migrated to West Bengal during and after Partition and the 1971 India-Pakistan conflict. With the TMC confounding the air with the scare-mongering line that those who register under the CAA would be singled out and targeted through the National Register of Citizens (NRC), the Mahasangha feels

people might be further confused and aggravated. The grey areas are real. “A lot of things are unclear,” says Satya Ranjan Sarkar, a Matua rights activist with the Hari Guruchand Matua Mission. “Many Matuas are downtrodden people who have either lost or left everything in Bangladesh. They don’t have documents to prove they lived there. Citizenship to Matuas should have been unconditional,” he adds.

To allay fears, Thakur has decided to apply for citizenship himself and says Bangladeshi (or Pakistani, for pre-1971 migrations) documents have been sought for all applicants to ensure their genuineness. In its absence, he claims, “a written undertaking from a registered body” will work. The portal mentions no such alternative. Besides an eligibility certificate from “a locally reputed community institution”, the rules also call for a self-declaration attested by a judicial magistrate, an executive magistrate, an oath commissioner or a notary public. This last requirement is considered vague by stakeholders and experts, “tantamount to a confession of being a foreigner”. That’s what allows TMC chief Mamata Banerjee to create some resonance with

## AN IMPLACABLE CRITIC OF CAA, MAMATA’S RALLIES ARE NOW ATTRACTING LARGE MATUA CROWDS. CHANCES OF A DEPLETING VOTE SHARE IS A WORRYING CONCERN FOR THE BJP

her colourful allegation that the CAA is a trap to identify people as “foreigners”—she repeated the charge at a rally in Tehatta on May 2. Worryingly for the BJP, Mamata’s rallies are attracting large Matua crowds. Anirban Halder, a Matua BJP leader in Barasat, admits the requirements of Section 1A—which can end up frustrating the hopes of many—can deplete BJP vote share and help the TMC. Mamata also

claims applicants would be immediately deprived of all government benefits. While insisting the law doesn’t entail that, experts admit to a lack of clarity—including on “what happens after the hearings for applicants”, as hinted at by former Supreme Court judge Ashok Kumar Ganguly. Mahasangha general secretary Mohitosh Baidya says applications from interested Matuas are being collected and will be uploaded to the portal after the polls. “We have convinced people about the delay. I have collected some 50 names from Barasat. There is no confusion,” he says.

Over three million strong, Matuas dominate the Lok Sabha constituencies of Bongaon, Ranaghat, Barasat and parts of Krishnanagar—the BJP won the first two in 2019 primarily on its promise of enacting the CAA. The law came in December 2019, but its rules were not framed until March 2024. The TMC tried to play up the delay during the 2021 polls, but the BJP still won nine of the 10 Matua-dominated assembly seats. It’s the first four that are stake now. ■



## Clarification: Use Of Antibiotic In Venky’s Chicken

It is observed that few media companies have published a story alleging that Venky’s chicken has a heavy dosing of antibiotics in it. The said story was aired on Live TV and also circulated through social media platforms. At the outset we wish to clarify that such statement made by the media houses are unfounded, inaccurate and in contrast with the facts.

Venky’s is a pioneer in the Indian Poultry Industry and has been providing high quality chicken to its consumers for more than 4 decades. One of the products sold by Venky’s is processed and ready to eat chicken (Venky’s Chicken Products) which is made in state-of-the-art processing units having highest standard of production practices which are in strict compliance with the FSSAI norms. Our chicken processing units are having internationally recognized certifications such as HACCP and FSSC 22000.

Venky’s Chicken products are made from internally sourced chicken meat coming from birds raised in house or grown through contract farming supervised by Venky’s.

We can proudly state that the birds used for making Venky’s Chicken products are not fed with antibiotics on preventive basis or as growth promoter.

The meat used for making Venky’s Chicken Products is periodically tested from FSSAI approved NABL accredited laboratories for antibiotics residue as per FSSAI norms. We state that Venky’s Chicken Products are in compliance with FSSAI antibiotics residue norms.

We appeal to all our consumers not to believe such misleading media reports which are published without due research and verification. Issued in the interest of all customers of Venky’s and the public in general.

**FAST TRACK** Sonam Wangchuk with members of Leh Apex Body and Kargil Democratic Alliance



**MANDATE 2024 | LADAKH**

ANI

## UPFRONT

opment councils operating in Leh (since 1995) and Kargil (since 2003) districts, they were set up under a 1995 Act, and not under the Sixth Schedule. The demand for Ladakh's inclusion in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution has gathered a special intensity owing to an urgent need to protect its fragile ecosystem. Earlier this year, educationist and climate activist Sonam Wangchuk sat on a 21-day fast to highlight the problems facing Ladakh, among them the alarmingly "rapid pace of development projects" being announced in the area since Ladakh was made a Union Territory in 2019. Excessive industrialisation poses a clear and present danger to Ladakh's glaciers, says Wangchuk. His fast was supported by the socio-political organisations Apex Body, Leh, and the Kargil Democratic Association (KDA). According to Padma Stanzin, president of the Ladakh Student Educational & Environmental Action Forum, the youth in Ladakh are also unhappy with the BJP because recruitments for government jobs have allegedly stopped since 2019.

Historically, the two districts of Ladakh, Buddhist-dominated Leh and Muslim-majority Kargil have held ideologically and politically divergent stands on most issues. "The two have never formed an electoral alliance in the past nor will it happen now," says Jan, NC district president for Kargil. As part of the division of seats among INDIA partners, the NC received all three Lok Sabha seats in Kashmir, while the Congress got two seats in Jammu and one in Ladakh. The Congress has since fielded Tshering from Ladakh, but the decision has upset the NC's Kargil unit, whose entire top leadership resigned on May 6, alleging they were being pressurised to support Tshering. In

a letter to NC chief Farooq Abdullah, party official Qamar Ali Akhoun wrote that Jan will contest the seat as an Independent. "This is why we are demanding separate parliamentary seats for Leh and Kargil. It will end the deep division," says Jan. Now, there may be consensus on that one. ■

# A FRACTURED CONSTITUENCY

Statehood, and coverage under Sixth Schedule: two clear demands fog up the BJP's windscreen on its Ladakh drive

By **Moazum Mohammad**

**R**esistance against the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) for "non-fulfillment of poll promises". Infighting within that party. And cracks within the Opposition INDIA bloc, mirroring the fractured politics of the region. Ladakh may be all of one Lok Sabha constituency, even if India's biggest one, but it bristles with multiple personalities—enough to make 2024 a particularly thorny election season. In the fray are the BJP's Tashi Gyalson, the Congress's Tshering Namgyal and the National Conference's (NC) Haji Hanifa Jan, fighting as an Independent. With an electorate numbering 182,571, Ladakh votes on May 20, against the backdrop of a popular agitation joined by all sides.

The BJP, which had won the seat in the two previous general elections, has fielded Gyalson—a 57-year-old advocate. Challenges for the party include both infighting and anti-incumbency. Soon after Gyalson's candidature was announced, Ladakh's sitting BJP MP, the 1985-born Jamyang Tsering

Namgyal, made his displeasure at being overlooked public. While he had hinted at the possibility of contesting as an Independent, he later buried the hatchet and was seen campaigning for Gyalson.

Namgyal's apparent climbdown on the party decision, however, is not enough to comfort the BJP candidate. The party is facing resistance for non-fulfilment of rather core demands: like statehood for Ladakh and its inclusion under Schedule VI of the Indian Constitution (an issue mentioned in the BJP's 2019 manifesto), besides the setting up of a separate public service commission for Ladakh and being allotted two parliamentary seats. The Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, under Article 244, includes provisions for setting up autonomous councils to safeguard cultural and indigenous identities, manage land use and resources etc. But while Ladakh does have two autonomous hill devel-

**LEH AND KARGIL, BUDDHIST AND MUSLIM, HOLD DIVERGENT POLITICAL STANDS ON MOST ISSUES**

# THE FEMININE PULSE: HOW WOMEN'S VOICES WILL RESHAPE THE FUTURE OF INDIAN DEMOCRACY IN ELECTIONS

In the vibrant and diverse landscape of Indian democracy, the significance of the women's vote in the present Lok Sabha elections cannot be overstated. As a nation, Bharat stands at the precipice of transformative change, and it is in this context that the voices of women, resonant and powerful, are poised to shape the trajectory of our democracy, economy, and society.

At the core of any thriving democracy lies the principle of representation, a notion that every citizen's voice should echo within the halls of governance. The inclusion of women in this electoral process ensures that policies and legislation crafted in the Lok Sabha embody the aspirations and dreams of the entire populace. With a higher percentage of candidatures allocated to women by Prime Minister Modi Ji, the government has signaled a recognition of the transformative power of women's perspectives. Their enfranchisement transcends mere tokenism, ensuring a more inclusive and authentic democracy, where the legislative agenda reflects the needs of every Indian citizen.

The economic empowerment of women is a critical pillar of national growth. With women representing nearly half of the population, their active participation in the workforce and entrepreneurial endeavours is indispensable for unlocking India's full economic potential. A vote for women is a vote for policies that promote gender parity in wages, facilitate women's entry into traditionally male-dominated professions, and create a nurturing environment for female entrepreneurship. In this way, women's participation in the electoral process can drive equitable and sustainable prosperity, lifting entire communities and catalysing unprecedented national progress.

Infrastructure development, particularly in rural areas, is another domain where women's votes hold transformative potential. Rural women, who often bear the brunt of inadequate amenities, understand acutely the importance of access to clean water, reliable electricity, secure transportation, and efficient healthcare facilities. Their electoral voice can powerfully advocate for infrastructure projects that uplift rural communities, ensuring holistic development that reaches even the most marginalized segments of society.

Education, the cornerstone of societal progress, is a cause close to the hearts of women. An educated woman is a beacon of change, and women voters inherently grasp the transformative power of education. By supporting



**Dr. Monica B. Sood**

candidates and policies that champion educational reforms, they can help build an education system that fosters holistic growth and empowers the next generation of enlightened citizens. From promoting female literacy to ensuring equal opportunities in higher education and vocational training, women are poised to shape the educational landscape of India.

The realm of healthcare, particularly women's health, demands urgent attention. Historically relegated to the periphery of policy discourse, women's health encompasses a wide spectrum of issues, from reproductive health to child mortality, nutrition to geriatric care. Women voters, particularly as mothers and caregivers, are intimately aware of the gaps in healthcare and thus uniquely positioned to support initiatives that overhaul the medical infrastructure. Their votes can drive forward comprehensive policy changes that prioritize both preventive and curative healthcare, ensuring healthier generations for years to come.

Mental health, an often overlooked but critical aspect of societal well-being, has finally gained recognition as a national priority. Women, frequently on the frontlines as caregivers, understand the nuances of mental health challenges. Their electoral participation can advocate for greater mental health awareness, de-stigmatization, and the establishment of accessible mental health services across the nation. By shaping policies that prioritize mental wellness, women can ensure that this becomes an integral pillar of public health.

Ultimately, women possess a remarkable ability to think and nurture beyond horizons and barriers. Their votes represent a unique perspective for an India that is inclusive, empathetic, and progressive. By exercising their democratic rights, women shape national discourse, challenge entrenched patriarchal norms, and secure a future where every citizen can thrive, irrespective of gender.

In conclusion, the importance of the women's vote in the present Lok Sabha elections is paramount. Their enfranchisement is not merely a democratic imperative but a cornerstone of India's holistic development. By empowering women candidates and encouraging robust female participation in the electoral process, Prime Minister Modi has rightly acknowledged the transformative potential of women's perspectives. Their collective vision will fortify Bharat's democracy, ensuring that the Lok Sabha remains a true embodiment of the people's aspirations and the nation's bright future.





# PADMAJA REDDY CONQUERING RURAL HEARTS WITH MICRO FINANCE

Padmaja Reddy knows the magic that timely finance can do. A domain expert, she has seen how rural and small entrepreneurs miss out opportunities because they are up against the challenge of liquidity. She took over as the Promoter and Managing Director of Keertana Finserv in April 2022. Prior to that, she served as the Managing Director of Spandana Sphoorty Financial Limited, the second largest MFI in India. She shared her thoughts answering questions that were posed to her.



**PADMAJA REDDY**  
Promoter and Managing Director  
of Keertana Finserv

## WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO START KEERTANA FINSERV?

I established a Micro Finance Institution, Spandana in 1998. It became the second-largest Micro Finance Institution by 2009. We were to go public when the Andhra Pradesh (AP) Government implemented an ordinance, bringing microfinance activities in the state to a standstill. The company's net worth plummeted to a negative 1,400Cr and we went into Corporate Debt Restructuring (CDR). With unwavering determination, perseverance, and passion, we successfully emerged from the CDR process, increasing our Assets under Management eightfold and eventually listing it in 2019.

The Business faced another setback due to the impact of COVID-19. Micro Finance, as a monoline product, proved highly susceptible, experiencing crises every three to four years.

While proud to be one of the pioneers in this emerging industry, there remained a sense of dissatisfaction due to the inability to build a more sustainable and stable business. This fuelled the birth of Keertana Finserv. Here, there is a continuous focus on scaling the business, institutionalizing systems and policies, establishing layers of leadership, and optimizing technology adoption.

## TELL US ABOUT THE COMPANY AND ITS PRODUCTS AND SERVICES.

Keertana Finserv Private Limited is now a prominent Non-Banking Financial Institution (NBFI) in South India with an AUM of Rs. 1,200 Cr. It provides a diverse array of financial products such as Micro Enterprise Loans, Business Loans, Gold Loans, Loan Against Property and Housing Loans. Our distinctiveness lies in our dedicated focus on rural areas, particularly in interior and remote regions where financial services are sparse. Operating with a commitment to fairness and ethical conduct, Keertana ensures that its employees are not only skilled professionals but also trained to remain grounded, treating customers with utmost respect and dignity. This approach is pivotal in establishing strong and trustworthy relationships with our clientele.

## WHAT WERE THE INITIAL CHALLENGES YOU FACED?

The initial challenges faced by Keertana revolved around the constant need for capital. Since we had just commenced operations in 2022, lacking a substantial vintage posed a unique challenge in gaining the attention of lenders. We navigated through this situation by positioning ourselves as an exceptional case. It is a testament to our commitment and excellent financial performance, Keertana has successfully attracted numerous lenders and funding is no longer a hindrance.

Attracting and on boarding the right talent for employment, remains an ongoing challenge. We are proactively addressing this challenge by providing ample growth opportunities and fostering an employee-friendly environment, ensuring a holistic approach to talent acquisition and retention.

## WHAT ARE YOUR FUTURE PLANS FOR KEERTANA FINSERV?

With a diverse product range offering loans ranging from INR 20,000 to INR 20,00,000, Keertana strategically manages the advantages and limitations of each product in its portfolio. Our ambitious plan is to double the branches within the next two years and grow the Assets by five times. This is Keertana's commitment to expanding its market reach and making its services more accessible to a wider audience.

## WHAT IS YOUR LEADERSHIP PHILOSOPHY, AND HOW DO YOU ENSURE THAT IT IS REFLECTED THROUGHOUT YOUR ORGANIZATION?

I am a firm believer in excellence, emphasizing that everything we undertake should be executed with exceptional quality. Ethics and high integrity are paramount values in my leadership approach. By embodying these principles and fostering a culture of excellence, I aim to create a work environment where leadership is synonymous with integrity and the relentless pursuit of excellence.

Spoken like a true leader, we say!



# INDEPENDENT ATTACK

The new Nayab Saini regime is in crisis, but the BJP's immediate concern is the LS vote

By Anilesh S. Mahajan

**O**n the morning of May 7, political circles in Haryana were abuzz with the news that four independent MLAs had quit the BJP-led alliance, putting the Nayab Singh Saini government in crisis. By evening, three of them—Sombir Sangwan (Dadri), Randhir Gollen (Pundri) and Dharampal Gonder (Nilokheri)—appeared with ex-Congress chief minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda to announce that they had withdrawn support to the Saini government.

Saini, who took over the reins only in mid-March from Manohar Lal Khattar, is in fire-fighting mode. Before the crisis, the BJP had 41 MLAs and the support of five independents and two members of smaller parties (it had dumped ally Jannayak Janta Party, which had 10 MLAs) in the 90-member house. Now, with the exits and the earlier resignations of Khattar and another independent, Ranjit Chautala—both are fighting the LS election—the government is in a minority. The treasury benches now have 43 members, the Opposition

45. However, in private, BJP leaders say five JJP legislators are with them—even if its party chief Dushyant Chautala announced support to the Congress.

Haryana is in campaign mode and is set to vote for its 10 Lok Sabha seats on May 25. Both the BJP and the Congress are treating the election as a semi-finals before the battle for the state later this year. Though under pressure to prove its majority on the floor of the house, it's unlikely the BJP will take this path. Party spokesperson Jawahar Ya-

## THERE IS PRESSURE TO PROVE ITS MAJORITY ON THE FLOOR OF THE HOUSE, BUT THE BJP IN HARYANA IS UNLIKELY TO TAKE THAT PATH

dav says, "In mid-March, the CM had won the trust vote... another vote is difficult now. If there is a crisis, we'll prove our majority." Meanwhile, Saini is contesting the assembly bypoll from Karnal, the seat Khattar vacated.

In the opposite corner, ex-CM Hooda and son Deepender form an axis that has been growing in



**THE SWITCH** Ex-Congress CM Bhupinder Singh Hooda (second from right) with independent MLAs Dharampal Gonder, Randhir Gollen and Sombir Sangwan

strength. The Congress declared their 10 candidates last week; eight are from Hooda's camp. Saini, on the other hand, had inherited the baggage of a decade of anti-incumbency and Jat alienation (all three MLAs who withdrew support are Jats). Haryana's dominant agrarian community, Jats make up 27 per cent of the population and are a key element in a whole swathe of seats.

They have for years inhabited a zone of sullen alienation vis-a-vis the BJP. The sense of distance from power began when Khattar, a Khatri, was chosen CM in 2014 despite the overwhelming Jat support for Narendra Modi in the general election. Things never reached an even keel after that. The past decade saw a

series of aggravating events: the violent 2016 Jat quota agitation, the farmers' agitation, the wrestlers' protests in Delhi that got support from the khaps. The recent tinderbox situation with Punjab's farm unions has only exacerbated this. Like in Punjab, Jat-led farm unions have banned the entry of BJP leaders in villages dominated by the community. Ground reports suggest the Congress is strong in Sirsa, Hisar, Sonapat and Rohtak, all Jat-dominated seats.

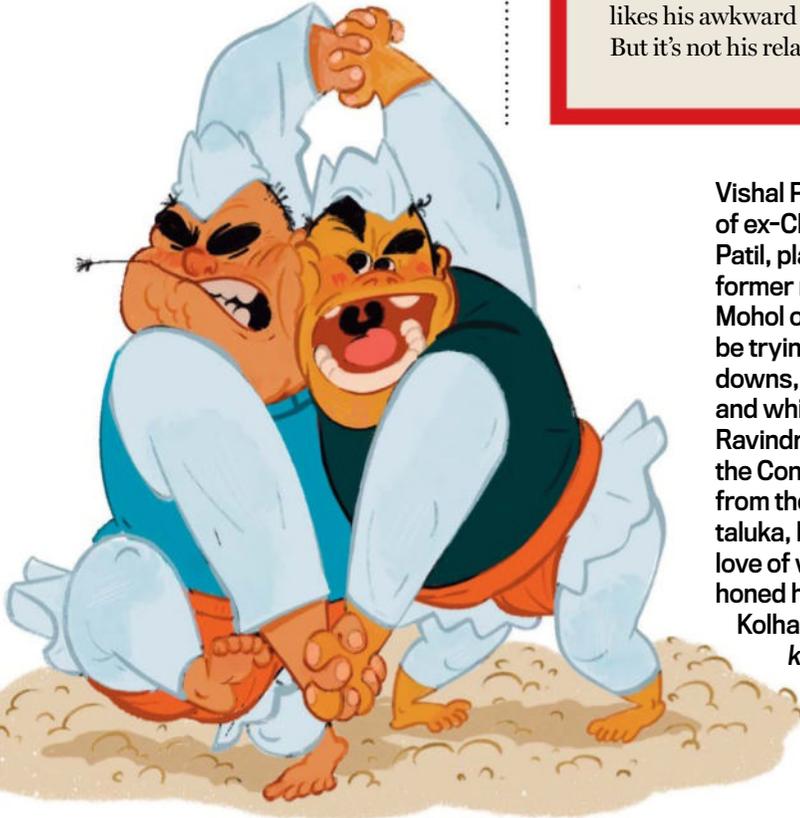
But there is a counter to this too. Saini belongs to a native, agrarian, non-Jat OBC community, the Sainis. There's a strong strategic continuity here: Saini is backing the caste coalition of non-Jats created by Khattar as a pushback against them. That said, in the 2019 Lok Sabha and assembly polls, 70 per cent of the non-Jats and 50 per cent of the Jats had voted for the BJP. They won all 10 LS seats then and the party will be hoping that on May 25, the Jats will back them once again. ■



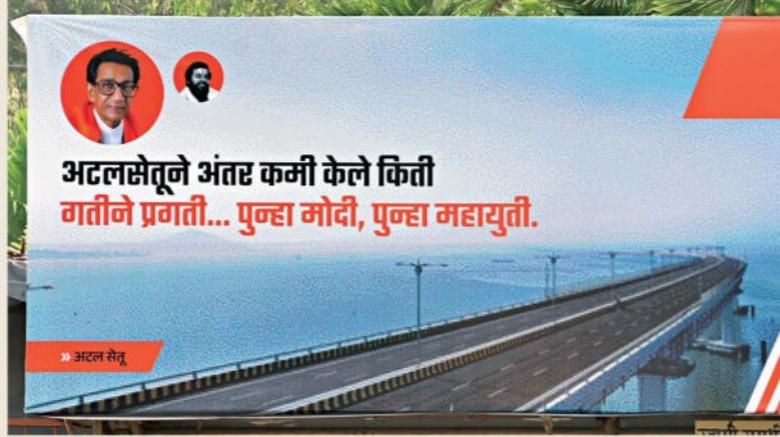
► MAHARASHTRA

## POLI PAHILWANS

**M**aharashtra loves its wrestlers. And why not? Many villages in western Maharashtra have an *akhada* and a fair share of grapplers, and cities like Kolhapur, Pune and Sangli are known for their *talims* (wrestling schools). How could the heaving mud pit of politics be immune to this? Four grapplers are testing their hold on the popular psyche in the hurly-burly of elections. Two are in Sangli. Chandrahar Patil, a two-time 'Maharashtra Kesari' who learnt from legends like Olympian Ganpatrao Anghalkar, is challenging two-term BJP MP Sanjaykaka Patil on behalf of the Uddhav Sena. His opponent is no pushover, and not just in politics: Sanjaykaka is also a trained wrestler! But the result may hinge on how Congress rebel



Illustrations by SIDDHANT JUMDE



► MUMBAI

## A Li'l Shin

**H**e's incised right between a giant Modi and a smaller **Devendra Fadnavis**, with a diminutive **Ajit Pawar** on the far left, quite the smallest matryoshka doll. So you can't be too sure that **Ekhnath Shinde** likes his awkward placement. But it's not his relative size

in that quartet that matters. The Maharashtra CM probably never imagined he'd live to see a day where his image has more prominence than the two Shiv Sena giants he reveres as his ideological preceptors: **Bal Thackeray** and Shinde's own political mentor and Thane strongman 'Dharmaveer'

Vishal Patil, grandson of ex-CM Vasantdada Patil, plays. In Pune, former mayor Murlidhar Mohol of the BJP will be trying all his take-downs, snap-downs and whizzers against Ravindra Dhangekar of the Congress. Originally from the local Mulshi taluka, known for its love of wrestling, Mohol honed his technique in Kolhapur, the state's *kushti pandhari* or 'mecca of wrestling'. Another strongman

waiting for the scores with bated breath is ex-Vidarbha Kesari, state wrestling association boss and BJP Wardha MP Ramdas Tadas, running for his political title a third time. They say he may be a bit out of breath against Amar Kale, a soft-spoken ex-Congress MLA chosen this time by Sharad Pawar, a veteran wrestling administrator who headed the state association for four decades till 2022. Now, that's a man who knows a trick or two on the mat.



MANDAR DEODHAR

# dig

**Anand Dighe.** And these hoardings adorn bus stops on arterial roads all across Mumbai, the city that Thackeray Sr could play like a Paganini played his violin: at will. For decades since 1989, when their Hindutva partnership began, the Sena had been the undisputed Big Brother to the BJP in these parts. Thackeray passed on in 2012, and **Narendra Modi** arrived in 2014—

the centre of gravity was bound to shift. The 2022 split in the Sena only put the seal on that. Shinde has all along justified his turn to a satellite existence by claiming to be the rightful inheritor of the Sena legacy. The BJP is equally intent on demolishing **Uddhav Thackeray's** proprietary claim over the Sena. But this piece of visual allegory, confirming who's the boss in the Mahayuti alliance, squeezes Thackeray Sr into an inconspicuous ring in the upper left hand corner. A picture is often worth a thousand silences.

## ► HIMACHAL PRADESH

# The Forbidding Fruit

**T**he disturbed snow cycle, the price of imported urea, cheaper imports from the South Asian neighbourhood—the whole world, it would appear, has

been conspiring against the apple farmers of Himachal Pradesh. And contestants across party lines are feeling the heat. If Bollywood queen Kangana Ranaut is copping it in Mandi, former Union minister Anand



Sharma—who first entered the Rajya Sabha all of four decades ago but is facing his first Lok Sabha election—is going a bit red in the face in Kangra. The social media was flooded with a communique he sent to the state government as India's commerce minister back in 2011, citing the WTO agreement to say hiking import duty beyond 50 per cent wasn't going to happen. Apple had bitten the BJP pretty bad during the assembly polls, and the Congress was gleefully pointing fingers at New Delhi even now. Till things turned vinegary with Sharma and his tariff recipes.

## ► UTTAR PRADESH

# NO RETURN GIFTS

**F**rom amanuensis to would-be nemesis: **Dinesh Pratap Singh** managed that role reversal against **Sonia Gandhi**, wangling 38 per cent votes against her from Rae Bareilly in 2019. The BJP has lobbed him one more moment in reflected spotlight, against RaGa this time. But that also turned the knob off on a parallel subplot cooking since the Rajya Sabha election in February. Manoj Pandey, one among



the eight Samajwadi Party MLAs who cross-voted in favour of the BJP, had fancied his chances from Rae Bareilly and even met BJP big daddies in Delhi. Three more—Rakesh Pratap Singh, Vinod Chaturvedi and Puja Pal—were hopeful of a return gift, in the shape of a ticket. Alas, that wasn't to be. The four quislings had made their Faustian deals on the cheap. All their blandishments were to no avail. Pandey & Co have to chew their paan stoically till 2027 now.



► HARYANA

# Boss In Da 'Hood

**C**rop rotation may be good for the farm, but not necessarily for politics. At least that's what the Congress has decided in Haryana, whose soil will host only one standing crop. A robust breed called Bhupinder Singh Hooda. Right from picking candidates, realigning caste equations and giving shape to the campaign, the former CM has elbowed out all his rivals. His eyes are clearly set on the assembly polls later this year—in an ironic twist, he's actually using the general election as a semi-final to

test his armoury. Eight out of 10 candidates in the state—including the one contesting on AAP's ticket—swear by the burly Jat leader from Rohtak. Even Gandhi family loyalist Kumari Shelja, a habitual Hooda-baiter under normal circumstances, appears to have compromised to his might and agreed to shift from bustling Ambala to the western outback of Sirsa. There she will take on another Hooda foe, Ashok Tanwar, who has switched to the BJP. In fact, it's as if a whole 'hood of Hooda haters who once made



inner party democracy a riveting affair within the Congress—Kuldeep Bishnoi, Vinod Sharma, Naveen Jindal—are now on the other side. The reverse traffic is a bit messed up too. Hooda's cousin and Hisar MP Brijendra Singh had returned to the Congress in March—followed in April by his father, Chaudhary Birender Singh, who had rebelled against Hooda's dominance in 2014 and

joined the BJP, going on to become Union minister. But the father-son duo are cut up again because Brijendra didn't get the ticket for Hisar. Kiran Chaudhary and Randeep Surjewala—the other two Hooda-baiters (everyone who's not a Hooda seems to be a baiter)—are in a sour mood too. But then, this is Haryana, with just 10 seats—too small a league to have space for Second Division players.

**I**n Punjab, where it's usually panthic politics that takes centre-stage, a strange inversion can be seen this time. Not just the BJP, even its rivals—the Congress, AAP and the Akali Dal—are being extra mindful of the way urban Hindus will vote. The BJP's Ludhiana candidate Ravneet Bittu and his Congress opponent, state party chief Amrinder Singh Raja Warring, are sworn political enemies by daytime: conferring colourful epithets on each other. But on May 4, as Bittu decided to play the devout by dancing at a jagaran in the city, he was joined by Warring! Most BJP candidates in

► PUNJAB



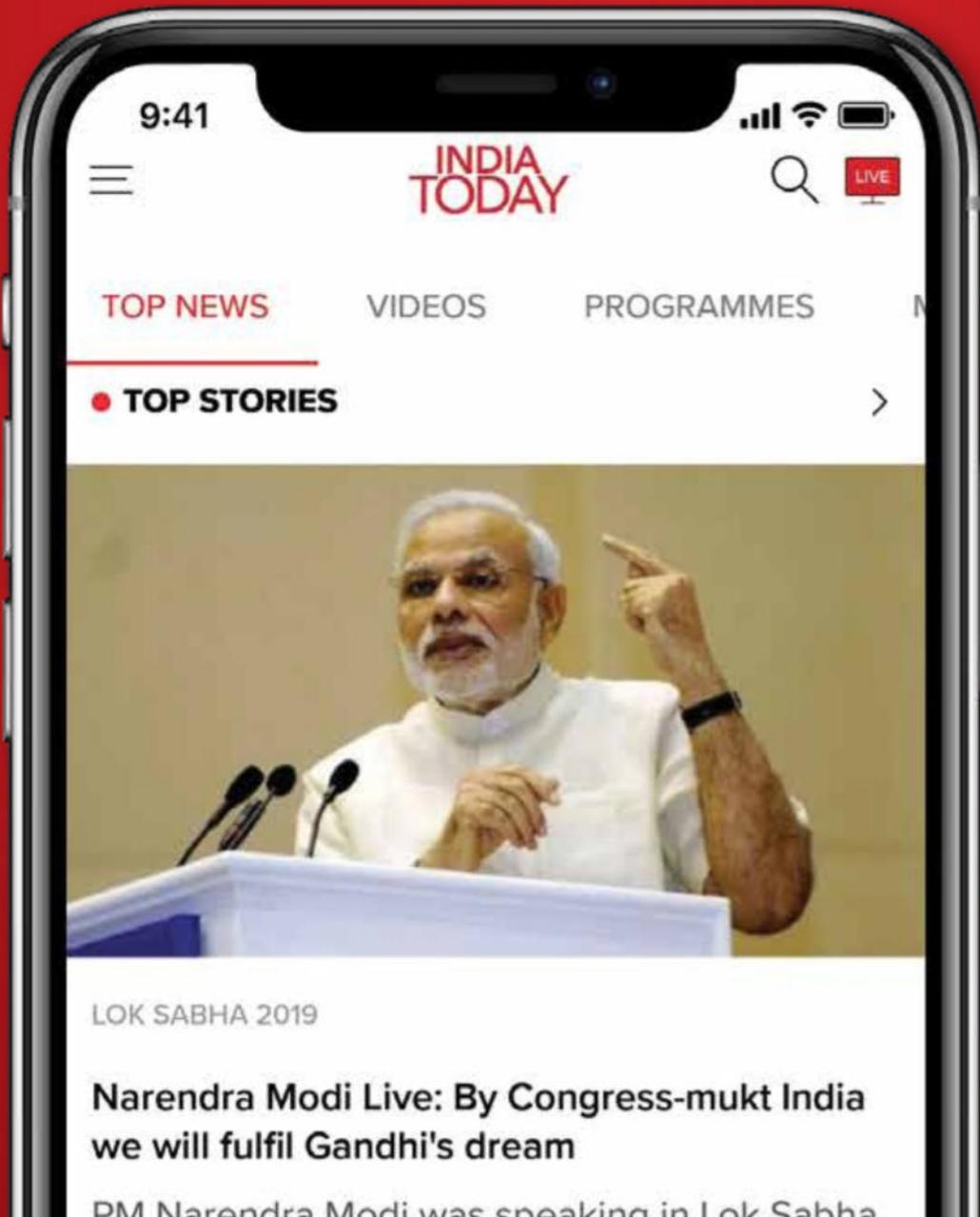
## AYODHYA, VIA LUDHIANA

Punjab, including Bittu, are turncoats with a deep Congress history, so the word 'traitor' flies around everywhere these days. Unlike some of his fellow refugees, though, Bittu gels well with the saffron cadre and openly embraces their pet religious symbols and slogans. But more surprising is how the Akali candidate from Amritsar, Anil Joshi, is taking credit for sending men and resources for the Ram temple construction at Ayodhya. Even his party chief Sukhbir Badal can be spotted making temple visits. AAP leaders, of course, have long made a habit of promising free Ayodhya pilgrimages.

INDIA  
TODAY

# BREAKING NEWS

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**HER VOICE, HER VOTE**  
Women queue up to  
vote at Dadal village  
in Jalore district,  
Rajasthan, Apr. 26



# THE *SILENT* REVOLUTION

**A GROWING FORCE, THE WOMAN ELECTOR IN INDIA IS REALISING THE POWER OF HER VOTE AND USING IT TO DIRECT HER OWN AND THE NATION'S DESTINY**

**BY MANISHA SAROOP  
and JUMANA SHAH**





# A RISING TIDE

MORE WOMEN ARE REGISTERING FOR THEIR VOTE AND TURNING

# IT

**IT WAS A TINY SLIVER—A MERE 0.16 PERCENTAGE POINTS—BUT IT BECAME THE BIGGEST STORY OF THE 2019** general election. That year, for the first time in India's parliamentary history, the turnout of women voters (67.18 per cent) exceeded that for men (67.02), reversing the gender gap. It was a small step, but it made Indian women equal arbiters of the nation's political destiny. And the tide is only rising. This election, there has been a 7.5 per cent increase in the number of registered women voters, to 471 million from 438 million in 2019, higher than the five per cent for men. It will include 8.5 million first-time women voters, or those who have attained voting age. The gender elector ratio, or the number of women per 1,000 men, too, has gone up, to 948 from 926 in the previous election. There are 12 states, in fact, where this ratio is in favour of women this year compared to eight in 2019.

Across the length and breadth of the country, this silent revolution has already begun to have a significant impact. The power of the woman vote was one of the major factors that propelled Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to total dominance in both the 2014 and 2019 general elections. According to an analysis by Axis My India, a reputed polling agency, as many as 46

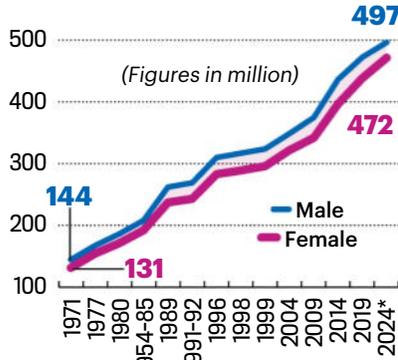
per cent of the women voted for the BJP in 2019 compared to 44 per cent of the men. Women voters, in fact, have become the backbone of the ruling party.

The fact that both national and regional parties have focused on schemes to improve their lot indicates that the woman vote is much sought-after. In a landmark legislation in September 2023, the Modi government passed the Constitution (106th Amendment) Act, reserving one-third of all seats for women

in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies, including those reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Women already have a significant share in the Union government's central schemes—27 per cent in PMJJBY (Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana), 37 per cent in PMSBY (Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana), 44 per cent in APY (Atal Pension Yojana), 68 per cent in MUDRA loans and 81 per cent in Stand-up India, according to SBI Research.

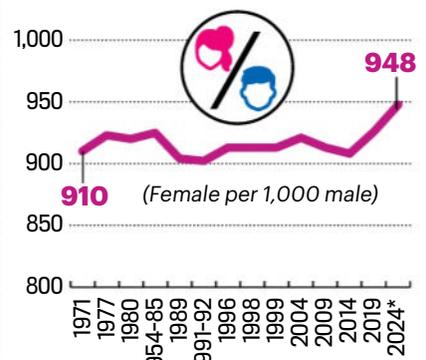
## REGISTERED VOTERS

There's been a 260% rise in the female electorate since 1971 compared to 245% in case of men



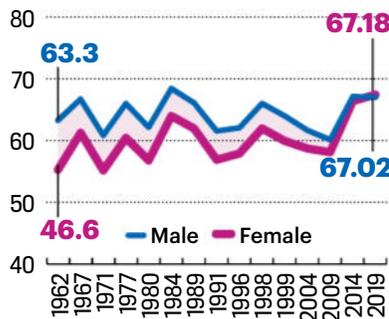
## GENDER RATIO

The ratio of women electors has taken a turn for the better since 2019



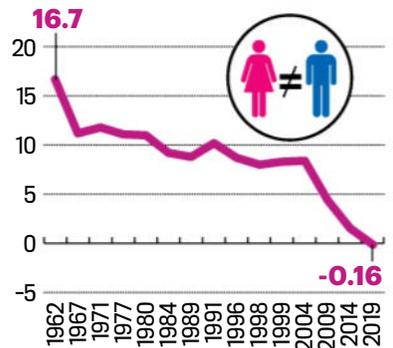
## VOTER TURNOUT (%)

Women voter turnout has shown a higher rise over men since 1962 when gender data was first published



## GENDER GAP (%)

The gap between male and female voter turnouts narrowed in 2014 and turned negative in 2019



Source: Election Commission of India

\*As on Feb. 8, 2024

# Mixed Blessings

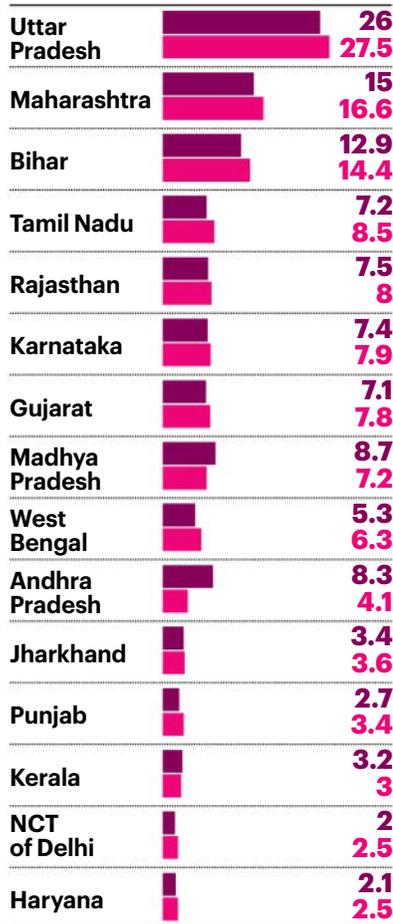
The gender gap remains huge in employment, literacy and internet access despite government efforts

## UP IN HIGHER NUMBERS TO CAST IT

### UNTAPPED WOMEN VOTERS

130 million female electors in India still don't reach the booth to vote

■ 2014 ■ 2019 (In million)

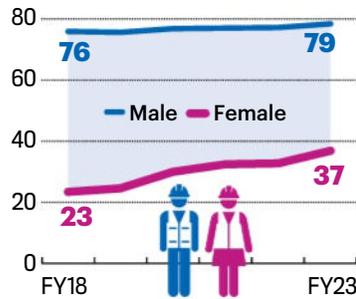


Source: SBI Research

### FEMALE WORKFORCE

Women are still lagging behind men significantly in the country's workforce

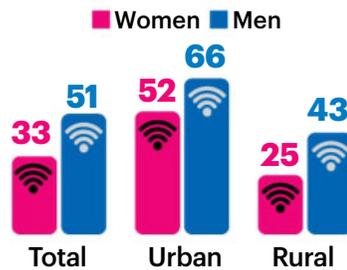
(Labour Force Participation Rate %, 15 years and above)



### INTERNET USAGE

Given its limited usage among rural women, internet is yet to become their primary source of information

(% of women and men aged 15-49)

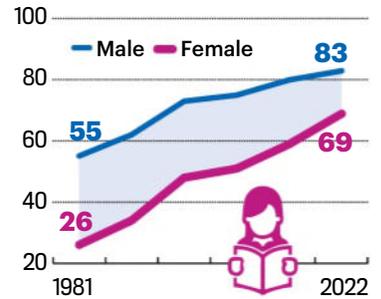


Source: PLFS 2022-23, World Bank, SBI Research, NFHS-V

### FEMALE LITERACY

Despite vast improvement in the past four decades, 3 in 10 women are still non-literate

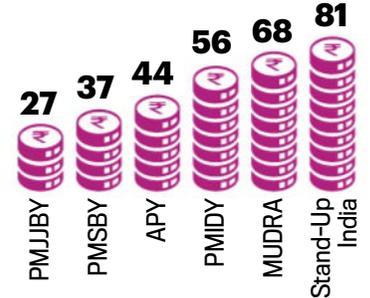
Literacy rate, adult (% of women and men aged 15 and above)



### FINANCIAL EMPOWERMENT

Women have been substantial beneficiaries in these government welfare schemes

(% Share of women in government schemes)



**THAT PARTIES HAVE FOCUSED ON SCHEMES TO IMPROVE THE LOT OF WOMEN IS PROOF THAT THEIR VOTE IS MUCH SOUGHT-AFTER**

In the ongoing general election, both the national parties—the BJP and the Congress—are waging a battle of guarantees to woo the woman vote. The Grand Old Party is conscious of the critical role its entitlement-led campaign played in helping it win Karnataka and Telangana last year. In its 2024 election manifesto, it has promised 'Nari Nyay', including a Rs 1 lakh annual cash transfer to the bank account of the eldest woman in every poor family and 50 per cent reserva-

tion in central government jobs. Not to be outdone, the BJP's 'Modi ki Guarantee' manifesto has a massive scheme to empower 30 million rural women by helping them become Lakhpati Didis.

Safety for women is another arena where political parties are wrestling to prove who protects women's interests better. So, if the BJP has latched on to Sandeshkhali to target Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee in West Bengal where it sees great scope for growth, the Con-



gress is taking the BJP to task over the rape allegations against Hassan MP Pranjwal Revanna.

## The She Revolution

What explains the new gender awakening that is influencing Indian election results and making political parties pursue the female constituency? Women in India have held the franchise since Independence, when the country opted for universal suffrage (the first general election was held in 1951-52). But it is arguably only in the past decade or so that they have really grasped the efficacy of their vote. Sukanya Ganguly, 31, an IT consultant in Kolkata, could well be speaking for the entire sorority when she remarks, “I must vote if I want the country to be a better, more equal and just place for women to live in.” Vibha Attri, researcher at the Lokniti-Centre for the Studies of Developing Societies (CSDS), in her study of the women vote in India found that they have begun expressing deep faith in the strength of their vote, with 69 per cent believing it makes a difference in how things are run in the country. For women in rural India, says Ireland-based political scientist Vasundhara Sirnate, “the election ID, like the Aadhaar card, has become one more means to access the State.” Hence the rush to register as voters. “It has a purpose too—to go and vote.”

**T**heir political awareness has come on the back of a whole line-up of factors. Women’s participation in local self-government institutions from the 1990s onwards opened an early window for the female cohort on the possibilities contained in the idea of their electoral participation. There is also the self-empowerment thesis, according to which growing literacy, financial empowerment and the rising availability of information raise women’s awareness and therefore their participation. Female literacy levels in India have gone up from 26 per cent in 1981 to 69 per cent in 2022, according to World Bank data, even if the distribution is grossly uneven across states and the gender gap remains vast (see *Mixed Blessings*). And while the fe-

male labour participation rate (the number of women between 15 and 66 years of age working or seeking work) remains low—37 per cent currently, according to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) annual report 2022-23—the self-help group revolution has some degree of financial empowerment in pockets across the country. Growing mobile and internet penetration has reached women too, even if in small numbers. According to National Family Health Survey or NFHS-V data, 54 per cent of India’s women now have access to a mobile phone, and 33 per cent use the internet.

But literacy alone is insufficient to explain the unleashing of the female political spirit in India, according to Rithika

favour but the gender elector ratio too improved to 926, the best it had been since 940 in 1989.

And yet, women continue to be underrepresented in electoral rolls, according to Kumar. Even among the registered voters, according to SBI Research estimates, 130 million women voters (147 million if you go by the ECI numbers for 2019) are still untapped. If persuaded to come out and vote, they could significantly alter electoral outcome. Especially since the untapped woman voter base is the highest in Uttar Pradesh (27.5 million), Maharashtra (16.6 million) and Bihar (14.4 million), three states that are crucial to the BJP’s tally this election. If more women turn up at the hustings, the

## WOMEN IN INDIA HAVE LONG HELD THE FRANCHISE. BUT IT IS ONLY IN THE PAST DECADE THAT THEY HAVE STARTED REALISING THE POWER OF THEIR VOTE

Kumar, a post-doctoral fellow at the University of Notre Dame, US. The lack of literacy, after all, does not affect women’s awareness of socio-economic or political issues in India or prevent them from voting, she argues. Instead, she lays greater store by the Election Commission of India’s (ECI) efforts to boost the electoral participation of women, particularly its SVEEP or Systematic Voters’ Education and Electoral Participation programme since 2009 to increase female turnout and close the gender gap. Women were also provided with a safe environment—including pink booths where election officials as well as security personnel were women—to vote without fear. The results were evident in the 2014 general election, when the number of registered women voters increased by 16 per cent and the gender gap in male and female turnouts narrowed to just 1.5 percentage points. The trend continued in 2019 when the gender gap not only turned in women’s

saffron party may be able to maintain or better its 2019 tally of 62 seats in UP, even if female loyalties in Bihar and Maharashtra end up divided.

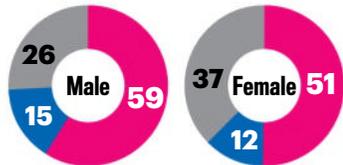
## The Voting Emancipation

Women are not just voting but also making up their own mind on who they want to vote for. According to a 2019 women’s study by Lokniti-CSDS, though the male influence remained predominant for 33 per cent of the women, 59 per cent were making their own voting decisions. Franziska Roscher, a fellow at New York University, attributes this to the sense of ownership among women in India, with ration cards and houses in their names. And as Sanjay Kumar, professor, CSDS, points out, “Voting on their own, not influenced by the male electorate, gives women a different kind of pleasure, makes them feel better, not a burden on the family.” The secret bal-

# MOOD OF THE WOMEN

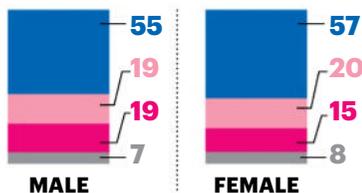
Female opinion on relevant issues in the INDIA TODAY MOTN poll in February

**Q. Who do you think is the most suitable candidate for the post of Prime Minister of India?**



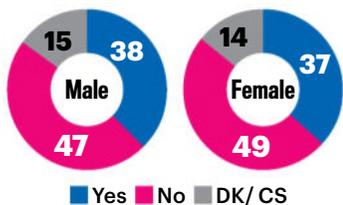
■ Narendra Modi  
■ Rahul Gandhi ■ Others/DK/CS  
*Narendra Modi retains his lead in women's affections over Rahul Gandhi*

**Q How satisfied are you with the overall performance of the NDA government?**



■ Totally satisfied ■ Neutral  
■ Totally dissatisfied ■ DK/CS  
*More women are content with the government's performance than their male counterparts*

**Q Will you weigh in Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra while casting your vote in the 2024 Lok Sabha election?**



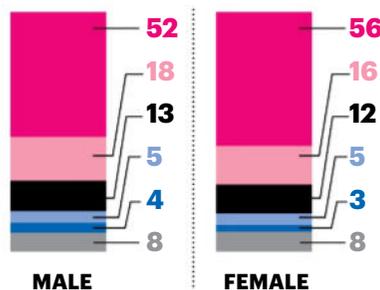
■ Yes ■ No ■ DK/CS  
*The BJNY will not translate into a positive vote for the Congress for at least half the women*

**Q. What will be Prime Minister Modi most remembered for?**

	MALE	FEMALE
Construction of Ram temple	42	42
Raising India's global stature	19	19
Revocation of Article 370	12	12
Surgical strike on Pakistan	9	9
Demonetisation	6	6
Covid-19 management	6	6
Fight against corruption	5	6

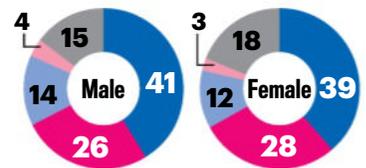
*The Ram temple construction in Ayodhya stands as PM Modi's most notable feat, far exceeding the fight against corruption*

**Q How do you view the unemployment situation in the country?**



■ Very serious ■ Serious  
■ Neutral ■ Not very serious  
■ Not at all serious ■ Others/DK/CS  
*The lack of employment, especially for the men in the household, remains a huge concern for women*

**Q. What's your view on the passage of the Women's Reservation Bill in Parliament?**

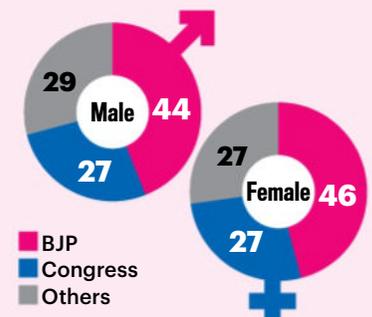


■ It reflects PM Modi's commitment to women's empowerment  
■ It has been timed to gain electoral advantage in 2024 Lok Sabha polls  
■ It's a much-needed reform and timing doesn't matter  
■ By linking it with Census, it has been made ineffective  
■ Don't know/ Can't say

*The highest number of respondents opine that the passage of the women's reservation bill underscores PM Modi's dedication to women's empowerment*

## Who Did You Vote for in 2019?

The Axis My India post-poll analysis showed that the BJP got more female votes last time than male ones while the Congress got equal support



All figures in percentage  
DK/CS: Don't know, can't say



lot aids this sense of independence and rational choice-making. And if they do vote as a family, Roscher points out, it is because it “makes them a force to reckon with, and serves as a bargaining tool with political parties”. Women, particularly the younger cohort, are also becoming more engaged, she adds. They are now voting in their 20s when their mothers would have first voted in their 40s.

Aware of their growing heft, political parties across the spectrum have pivoted their welfare narratives in the service of the country’s women. Some state governments led the way. It was Nitish Kumar in Bihar and Shivraj Singh Chouhan in Madhya Pradesh who perhaps first demonstrated the political capital to be made by cultivating women as a vote bank. If Nitish gave female students who finished Class VIII money to buy cycles and also introduced prohibition to win over the woman voter, Chouhan made Ladli Behna the centrepiece of his campaign, successfully delivering his state to the BJP in the assembly polls last year.

In the East, Mamata Banerjee in West Bengal and Naveen Patnaik in Odisha have made a success of their respective flagship schemes—Kanyashree and Mission Shakti. The Trinamool Congress (TMC) and the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) also field a significant number of female candidates out of their total nominees—the TMC has 12 women of 42 and the BJD seven of 21 in this Lok Sabha election. The Congress, too, is beginning to reap the dividends of women-centric poll promises—its Gruha Lakshmi and Mahalaxmi schemes guarantee cash incentives and free travel, which helped the party win Karnataka first and then Telangana last year.

## The Modi Effect

But no one has crafted welfare around women better than Narendra Modi and the BJP. Realising early his appeal among the women voters, Modi began wooing the constituency systematically the moment he came to power at the Centre in 2014. Every scheme he launched, he put dedicated it to the cause of women. Thus, Jan Dhan accounts (in which women are

said to have a 55.9 per cent share) would help them get direct benefit transfers, MUDRA loans aid their economic empowerment, PM Awas Yojana give them houses in their names. Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao was an exhortation to educate the girl child. *Nari sashaktikaran* (women’s empowerment) became a rallying cry, it is how the reservation bill too was named—Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam.

Name any indicator on the multidimensional poverty index (MPI), and Modi devised a scheme for it with an inbuilt focus on women—the JAM (Jan Dhan, Aadhaar, Mobile) trinity for their financial inclusion, Ujjwala for cooking fuel, Swachh Bharat for sanitation, Jal Jeevan Mission for drinking water, Poshan Abhiyan for nutrition, Matru Vandana for maternal health. That showed up in a declining MPI, from 29.17 per cent in 2013-14 to 11.28 per cent in 2022-23, according to a research paper by NITI Aayog. With 300 million-plus women expected to vote this election, Modi is hoping that the *mahila labharthi* will overlook caste and identity considerations and hand him and his party a third consecutive term.

**A** lot of women,” says Sirnate, “voted for Modi in 2014 and 2019, because he came across as a strong, appealing alpha male.” Hence the prime minister’s enduring brand recall, as research studies bear out Modi’s impact on the women voter. During her fieldwork in rural Bihar, for instance, Rithika Kumar found that women who did not know the name of their *mukhiyas* or chief minister (Nitish Kumar!) were readily able to

**WITH 300 MN-PLUS  
WOMEN EXPECTED  
TO VOTE THIS TIME,  
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LABHARTHI WILL  
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CONSECUTIVE TERM**

Photograph by BANDEEP SINGH



identify Modi. She quotes female respondents as saying “Modi *sarkar hai* (he is the government)” or Modi Bharat *ke malik hain* (he is the leader of the country). Modi remains popular in the female perception, as evident in the February 2024 INDIA TODAY MOTN survey, where he had a 39 percentage point lead over his nearest rival Rahul Gandhi on who should be the next PM (see *Mood of the Nation’s Women*). The NDA government’s performance received a thumbs up too, with its handling of the pandemic regarded as its single-biggest achievement among the female respondents, with 21.3 per cent of them selecting this option rather than the government’s welfare schemes or the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya.

What may also work in the BJP’s favour is the effective communication of its strategy. While Modi provides the lead and the narrative, the BJP cadre does the rest, bringing its booth management skills to bear on the female constituency. Giving a glimpse of that strategy, Vanathi Srinivasan, national president of the BJP Mahila Morcha, says at the booth level, ASHA and anganwadi workers are identified and targeted. At the district level, influential women involved in NGOs



## BREAD AND BUTTER ISSUES ARE BEGINNING TO BITE AS WOMEN—RURAL OR URBAN, EDUCATED OR NON-LITERATE, YOUNG OR OLD—COMPLAINED OF UNEMPLOYMENT AND INFLATION

or *bhajan mandlis*, doctors managing hospitals or women travellers organising spiritual tours are identified and asked to invite friends home. The Mahila Morcha workers then visit these households to engage with the gathered women and tell them about the various welfare schemes.

Opposition parties may not be able to match the BJP's phenomenal outreach, but are using their own means to connect with women voters. TMC volunteers, for instance, have been going door to door distributing an envelope/ clutch in non-woven fabric carrying the message of an increase in the flagship Lakshmir Bhandar scheme, calling it *Didir Upohar* (Mama's gift). The Congress, too, is trying to convert the goodwill Rahul earned during his Bharat Jodo Yatra into a positive vote for the party.

### Who Will Women Vote For?

With political parties engaged in competitive populism, the *ladli behnas* and the *gruha laxmis* are certainly not complaining. But will the expectation of still more handouts dictate who they vote for? "*Jiska namak khaya hai usi ko vote denge* (We will be loyal to whoever feeds us)," a group of housewives in a housing society in Agra does concede, endorsing the prime minister's women-centric schemes. Another raises the TINA factor: "*Aur hai hi kaun* (who else is there)?"

But scratch the surface and you sense disquiet, as INDIA TODAY correspondents found in their conversations with women across the country—rural or urban, educated or non-literate, young or old, Hindu or Muslim. Bread

and butter issues are beginning to bite, and the lack of education and employment, as well as inflation is a recurrent theme. Ritu Dewan, former president of the Indian Association of Women's Studies, reached the same conclusion in her research among rural women. "Two prevalent themes emerged," she says. "One concerned employment opportunities for their sons, the perceived lack of growth prospects for their husbands and fear that their sons may encounter similar challenges in securing employment as they mature. Additionally, numerous primary schools are shutting down in remote regions of the country, raising concerns about the accessibility of education and its impact on future job prospects for their sons."

Will economic issues, then, be uppermost in Indian women's minds as they vote this election? Election strategist Amitabh Tiwari is not so sure. "Economic issues are perennial," he says. "They do not become a factor unless women see a credible alternative narrative." And the Opposition has yet to provide one, he feels, forcing women to invest their faith in Modi and the BJP a third time.

What will the verdict of 2024 mean for the Indian women themselves? Will it mean more handouts, ones that reinforce their gendered roles, or will they be given education and employment, and hence real empowerment? Women's representation was a dismal 15 per cent in the 17th Lok Sabha. Even in the current election, there were 358 women contestants in the first three phases, 8.6 per cent of the 4,175 candidates in the fray. There are no interest groups of women to articulate what they want as a constituency. "Why do we not have an all-woman party," asks Sirnate. "Why has that experiment never been undertaken in India despite such a huge constituency?" The male-dominated political structure needs to address these questions if women in India are to get real empowerment. ■

with Sonal Khetarpal,  
Arkamoy Datta Majumdar and  
Siraj Qureshi in Agra



# WHAT WOMEN WANT

**While political parties give them schemes and promises based on their gendered roles, women across the country tell INDIA TODAY what they really expect—jobs, education, development—the same things that men desire**

*Photograph by BANDEEP SINGH*





**Mansi Choudhary, 18**

Jaipur, Student

**Aaditi Choudhary, 39**

Jaipur, Mansi's mum, helps run family business

**Mohini Devi, 58**

Sikar, Rajasthan

Mansi's grandmother, homemaker

**Constituencies:** Jaipur and Sikar

**Issues that will decide their votes:**

All-round better environment—  
at schools, for businesses or in villages

**Demands from the govt:**

Ensure harmony among people

## A 3-Generation View

**A**pril 19 was the first time 18-year-old Mansi voted in an election. Coming from a family divided in its loyalties between the BJP and the Congress, the first-year student opted to exercise her own choice, but since the candidate of the party she wanted to vote for was not good in her estimation, for a moment she contemplated pressing NOTA on the electronic voting machine. What she did eventually, she did not disclose.

Her mum Aaditi was just 15 years old and in Class 10 when she got married in Trilokpura village in Sikar. She joined her husband in Jaipur after completing Class 12, and went on to complete her graduation, post-graduation in political science, degree in journalism and a PG diploma in finance and banking. Aaditi now runs a firm offering consultancy and services for trademarks and registration of societies. She is staunchly against communal divide, and says no party has done anything effective for women. Her vote, she says, will go to a party that offers a conducive environment for everyone to grow and live in harmony.

Grandmother Mohini still lives in Trilokpura in a *dhani*, a cluster of houses of eight families. Her vote goes to whoever the larger family votes for, but she does want a few things: a fixing of the road that leads to their house and the scarcity of water. "When we vote for them, they must provide these basic facilities. Ultimately, though, it boils down to what the sarpanch wants," she says. ■

—Rohit Parihar



**Anusree Vishnu, 30**

**Thiruvananthapuram**

*CA student, part-time accountant*

**Constituency:**  
Thiruvananthapuram

**Issues that will decide her vote:**  
How parties treat women, candidate's track record

**Demands from the govt:** More jobs for women, ensure women's safety, reduce gender gap

## Teach Your Girl Children Well

Coming from a state that has the highest female literacy rate in the country, it's natural for Anusree to push for girl's education at the pan-India level. "All governments," she says, "must give priority to educate girls up to at least Class 12, and offer special scholarships for higher education to those belonging to poor families." For this, she suggests, the government should adopt gender budgeting—a strategy to achieve equality between women and men by focusing on how public resources are collected and spent—and double the allocation for women.

"It's only through education that women's empowerment can become a reality," adds Anusree. "We need more freedom at home, at the workplace and in public spaces." Women's safety remains a key concern for her; she feels it's becoming increasingly difficult for women to commute alone, especially at late hours. ■

—Jeemon Jacob



## Feeling the Pinch

A 'Class-8 pass' who has also been her village *mukhiya* for 10 years (2006-16), Reena Kumari comes from a financially stable family—her husband, Umesh Rai, is a farmer who also runs a successful dairy business. Yet, she is convinced that rising inflation has posed new challenges for every household, including hers. Managing expenses within a limited budget and also save money for exigencies has become particularly arduous. A mother of three, the eldest of whom—a daughter—is married, Reena is worried about the future of her two sons. The elder, 23, is assist-

VIVEK R NAIR



**She Voters**  
**MANDATE 2024**

## A Widow's Lament

**Lata Ganesh Suryavanshi, 58**

*Pune, Does stitching from home*

**Constituency:** Pune

**Issues that will decide her vote:** Inflation

**Demands from the government:** Reduction in inflation, LPG prices and power tariffs, support for weaker sections of society, such as widows

**I**t has been 18 years since Suryavanshi's husband passed away, and the childless widow who has studied till class X, takes on stitching jobs at home to make a living. "The prices of LPG cylinders have soared; I have no option but to use them, though I can ill afford it. The cost of essentials is also rising and electricity tariffs and GST are pinching the common man. Unfortunately, I have no aid from anyone to fall back on," she says.

Suryavanshi says her vote will go to the Congress, as she feels they can rectify these issues. "I want to go to the Ram Mandir at Ayodhya and also to Kashi. But issues like the Ram temple and the abrogation of Article 370 [which gave special status to Jammu and Kashmir] will not serve as a reason for me to vote for the BJP. I had voted for Narendra Modi in 2014 and 2019, but I will not do so this time because of the growing inflation," she adds. ■

**-Dhaval S. Kulkarni**



RANJAN RAHI



**Reena Kumari, 45**  
*Lohagir, Bihar*

*Former village mukhiya*

**Constituency:** Ujiarpur

**Issues that will decide her vote:**

Inflation, unemployment, poor returns in farming

**Demands from the govt:** Create jobs, curb inflation, ensure religious harmony

**"If there are sufficient jobs, educated youth will be able to contribute positively to our society and the country"**

ing his father in the dairy business, while the younger, 19, is studying. She wants both of them to find government jobs. "You can see educated youth," says Reena, "becoming disillusioned because they lack employment opportunities."

When it comes to her voting decision, Reena emphasises that her entire family sits together to discuss the available choices and collectively decide on a candidate. In a state where caste plays a key role in deciding the vote, she, a Yadav, asserts, "caste is not the determining factor" in the case of their family. ■

**-Amitabh Srivastava**





**She Voters**  
**MANDATE 2024**

# Inflation Pain

**Ulka Kharat, 58** ↓

**Lasurne, Maharashtra**  
*Anganwadi worker*

**Constituency:** Baramati

**Issues that will decide her vote:** Inflation, high LPG prices

**Demands from the govt:** Reducing inflation, ensuring employment for youth



MANDAR DEODHAR

**F**or Ulka Kharat, a widow living with her brother in Lasurne in Pune's Indapur taluka, inflation matters more than anything else. "LPG cylinders have become exorbitant," she says. "What will the poor do when they cannot make ends meet? The situation of the working class and daily wagers is miserable."

Kharat studied only up to standard VIII, but completed her education and acquired a BA degree at age 50. The one thing she is most concerned about is the job scene for the youth. It looks bleak and they seem to have no future. As for herself, the anganwadi worker says that employees of the childcare scheme must get better remuneration. ■

**-Dhaval S. Kulkarni**



MADHUSUDHAN SR



**S. Chandrakala, 47**  
**Mysuru, Shop owner**

**Constituency:** Mysuru-Kodagu

**Issues that will decide her vote:** Policies for women like easy access to loans, a performing candidate

**Demands from the govt:** Schemes for healthcare and education



SANDEEP SHAHDEV



# For Stability's Sake

**Manju Goyal, 38**

**Hyderabad**

*Technology head at a consultancy firm*

**Constituency:** North West Delhi

**Issues that will decide her vote:** Growth, prosperity and stability of the country, planning for India's future

**Demands from the govt:** Women's empowerment, population control, mitigating climate change

**A** graduate from IIT Roorkee, Goyal has a postgraduate degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the US. The 38-year-old says she will vote "because I care for a stable government".

**"I strongly believe that reservation is detrimental to India's progress and should be eliminated at all levels"**

Goyal adds that there is no better candidate than Prime Minister Narendra Modi currently, especially in the absence of a strong opposition. "Therefore, I will vote for him, as he has elevated India's position on the global stage, taken a firm stand against terrorism," she says. "Things are not as bad as they used to be," she adds.

She also praises the PM for the abolition of Triple Talaq in 2019 and helping improve the position of Muslim women. ■

**-Sonal Khetarpal**

# A Mantra Called Self-reliance

For 25 years, S. Chandrakala worked at a bag manufacturer before she decided to set up a small shop of her own six years ago. With her provident fund money and savings, Chandrakala bought two sewing machines. She

**“Before casting our vote, we need to think about and evaluate the candidates who have done good work”**

now makes and sells school bags, raincoats, vehicle covers and mends all these. Self-reliance is a watchword with her.

“For our livelihood, we should not be dependent on anyone,” she says. She casts her vote with the same independent spirit. Chandrakala lost her husband early and stays with her mother. The latter is a beneficiary of the state Congress government’s welfare schemes, such as

the Rs 2,000 monthly allowance for women heads of families and the free foodgrain scheme. With the Siddaramaiah-led government making bus travel free for women, Chandrakala saves about Rs 600 a month on her commute. She feels, however, that schemes focused on essentials like healthcare and education could come in more useful. ■

**-Ajay Sukumaran**

## WHERE ARE THE JOBS?



ARUN KUMAR

Sunita lives in a large joint family in the city’s Mantola neighbourhood, home to several shoe-making units. She had applied for the UP Police SI (sub-inspector) entrance test in 2017, but the exam got cancelled after a paper leak episode. She still hasn’t found a job, and she wants the government to do something so that Dalits can stand on their own two feet.

**“The cost of education is too high for most families and, in Uttar Pradesh, it’s of sub-standard quality too”**

The cost of education is too high and it’s of sub-standard quality, she says. Her family sitting around her nods in agreement when she says the price rise in essential commodities has become unbearable. Free ration is fine, but you can’t survive on that alone when you don’t have an income, she says. Over the years, her Jatav family has switched their political loyalties. This time too, she followed her family’s lead in who she voted for. ■

**-Manisha Saroop**



**Sunita Kumari, 27**  
Agra, MA Hindi

**Constituency:** Agra

**Issues that will decide**

**her vote:** Safety, development

**Demands from the govt:** Jobs, economic stability for Dalits



**She Voters**  
**MANDATE 2024**

## Ease Our Living

**T**his young professional's outlook for the present election hinges upon the work done by the government to promote education and build medical infrastructure at the national level. She also values what the political parties bring to the table for the local community, especially vulnerable sections. "I also evaluate the candidates," says Soumili, "based on their commitment to environmental sustainability, their policies on economic growth, and how they plan to improve public safety."

When it comes to reforms undertaken, she's not impressed with the new tax regime. "While the intent behind it was to streamline the process and enhance taxpayer autonomy," she says, "the transition has been fraught with challenges and uncertainties." Like many others, she is also dismayed by the high unemployment rate. Over the next five years, she feels, addressing this challenge will be critical for India's economic development. ■

—Sonal Acharjee



**Soumili Sen, 30**  
New Delhi, Brand marketing

**Constituency:**  
South Delhi

**Issues that will decide her vote:**  
Education and health infrastructure; what's promised for the local community, especially the vulnerable sections

**Demands from the govt:** Incentivise job creation, invest in emerging sectors, enhance vocational training to align with market demands



## DOUBLE MINDED



**Vilasben Vaghela, 50**  
Randesan, Gujarat, Homemaker

**Constituency:** Ahmedabad East

**Issues that will decide her vote:**  
Women's safety, development, ongoing Kshatriya stir in Gujarat

# ONE WINDOW, TWO VIEWS

## Mehrunnisa

**Khatun, 32**

South 24 Parganas, West Bengal  
Supervisor, Self Help Groups

**Constituency:** Jadavpur

**Issues that will decide her vote:** Employment opportunities, a general consensus within her family

**Demands from the govt:** A safer environment to vote, curb inflation



DEBAJYOTI CHAKRABORTY

Mehrunnisa works as a supervisor of 250-odd self-help groups (SHGs) that operate in Polerhat-I gram panchayat under Bhangar-II block. Mafuza is a member of one such SHG. In spite of their common endeavour to gain financial independence, their voting choices reflect a complete contrast, dictated as they are, among other factors, by their husbands.

Mehrunnisa believes that there is little independence for the people of Bhangar to exercise their franchise, pointing to incidents of political violence. She accuses the incumbent Trinamool Congress (TMC) government of misgovernance and says



DEBAJYOTI CHAKRABORTY

## Mafuza Bibi, 26

Member, Self Help Group

**Issues that will decide her vote:** Welfare schemes for women, Muslim women's safety, but ultimately her husband's consent

**Demands from the govt:** Curb price rise, provide better job opportunities

that there is a growing acceptance of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. But according to Mafuza, the women-centric schemes of the Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee-led TMC regime, like the direct benefit transfer of honorarium under Lakshmir Bhandar, have improved their lives. What both do agree on is for any incoming government to curb inflation, which is making it difficult for households to manage budgets all around. ■

—Arkamoy Datta Majumdar

Part of an agricultural household, Vilasben is the wife of a former sarpanch, who is also an office-bearer of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) at the taluka level. Though her loyalty clearly lies with the saffron party, she is in two minds this time about voting for it. The reason being the ongoing Kshatriya stir in Gujarat after Union minister Parshottam Rupala's controversial remarks against the erstwhile princely states.

Even as a saffron flag bearing Lord Ram's image flutters outside her house, Vilasben insists core Hindutva issues, like the Ram temple construction and the abrogation of Article 370, never influenced her vote. "Women are safe in Gujarat. We can work, go

**"Women are safe in Gujarat. We can work, go out alone. That is important to me"**

out alone. That is important to me," she says, adding that her village has seen unprecedented development in recent years.

A mother of two sons, Vilasben says that the construction of concrete roads and connectivity to urban centres has helped her children get good education and work opportunities. It's because of such factors, she says, that her family has been supporting the BJP all these years. ■

—Jumana Shah



**She Voters**  
**MANDATE 2024**

## For 'Greater Good'

**L**akshmi's family has been selling the fragrant *sampige* (champak) flowers near the entrance of Mysuru's famous Devaraja Market for three generations. "My grandmother sold flowers at this same spot and so did my parents," she says. The 48-year-old flower-seller reveres the erstwhile royal family of Mysuru, who constructed the market in the 1880s. Hence, she was thrilled to see the titular head of the family, Yaduveer Krishnadatta Chamaraja Wadiyar, whom the Bharatiya Janata Party has fielded from Karnataka's Mysuru-Kodagu seat this election, as he stepped out to campaign in the constituency ahead of the April 26 election.

When she votes, Lakshmi says, she is only thinking about the "greater good" of the people. In the May 2023 Karnataka assembly election, she had voted for the Congress with that thought



**Lakshmi Chandra  
Kumar, 48**

**Mysuru, Flower seller**

**Constituency:**  
Mysuru-Kodagu

**Issues that will decide her vote:** Work done by party/ candidate

**Demands from the govt:** Benefits for the poor

in mind. She is now a beneficiary of the Siddaramaiah government's Rs 2,000 monthly allowance scheme for eligible women.

For the Lok Sabha election, she was inclined towards the BJP which she says she has heard has done good for people, like building houses. Her final decision, she adds, is made on poll day, though. ■

**-Ajay Sukumaran**



PURUSHOTTAM DIWAKAR

## AN EQUAL WORLD

**Sukanya Ganguly, 31** ➔

**Kolkata, IT consultant**

**Constituency:**  
Kolkata Dakshin

**Issues that will decide her vote:** On-ground development, a democratic environment

**Demands from the govt:** Spend taxpayers' money wisely, capital investment should uplift life of people

MADHUSUDHAN SR





## A QUOTA FOR HER KINSMEN

**M**ember of a family of BJP supporters, Roopa says the ruling party at the Centre has introduced many schemes that have helped those living in the villages. "Nobody thought about providing drinking water connections and toilets in village homes, rural electrification and direct transfer of subsidies to our accounts," she says, explaining why she supports the BJP. She is also happy that the Modi government has built the new Ram temple at Ayodhya. But she wishes that the PM in a third tenure at the Centre would help provide more jobs for rural youth and ST status for the Gurjars, ensuring more quota in jobs and education.



**Roopa Gurjar, 58**  
Deoli Banas,  
Rajasthan, Farmer

**Constituency:** Tonk-Sawai Madhopur

**Issues that will decide her vote:** Welfare of women and her community

**Demands from the govt:** Gurjar quota like for tribal Meenas

"So many members of our community have lost their lives in the agitation demanding more reservation for Gurjars, still we have yet to get the reservation that our next-door Meena neighbours enjoy [designated ST in Rajasthan]," she says. ■

**-Rohit Parihar**



DEBAYOTI CHAKRABORTY

**S**ukanya has never missed casting her vote because she believes that it is her democratic duty to ensure a more "women-friendly world" for the future. While she is appreciative of the Women's Reservation Act, passed last year to ensure reservation of one-third seats in Lok Sabha and state assemblies for women, she believes that issues such as the Ram temple and the 2019 abrogation of Article 370 (which granted special

status to Jammu and Kashmir) must never be used as poll planks.

"There is an attempt to dictate our culture, food habits, what the women should wear. I think the BJP is behind this and that should be prevented," alleged Sukanya. She is also aware of the allegations of corruption against the ruling Trinamool Congress in West Bengal, but believes that CM Mamata Banerjee's government has done enough good work. Unsure if anyone she votes for can fulfil her demands for women and democracy, she says she will vote for the best among the candidates, basing her choice on the rule of elimination—striking off those she doesn't approve of. ■

**-Arkamoy Datta Majumdar**

**"The country must be a better, more equal and just place for women. I must vote if I want to get this demand fulfilled"**



**She Voters**  
**MANDATE 2024**



## Upma Chaturvedi, 55

Lucknow, Professor, Geography, Avadh Girls' Degree College, Lucknow

**Constituency:**  
Lucknow

**Issues that will decide her vote:** Infrastructure development, women empowerment and anti-corruption initiatives

# Full Marks for Performance

**G**eography teacher Prof. Upma Chaturvedi keeps a keen eye on the electoral landscape of the country. She is pleased that the ruling BJP government has placed a strong emphasis on infrastructure development and women's empowerment in recent years. According to her, the building of a network of highways and new roads has significantly eased travel across the state. Women's safety too has

improved. "The government has taken decisive actions to address the issue. This has instilled a sense of security among my students, which is significant from an educator's perspective."

Chaturvedi also appreciates the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, confident that developments like these are likely to influence the voting decisions of the women in her state. ■

-Prashant Srivastava



# A WOMEN-

**M**alla Devi Visalakshi takes a special interest in politics as "it is the best mode to serve the people on a mass scale". The interior designer is not aware of how Viksit Bharat, Ujjwala, Har Ghar Jal, Lakhpati Didi and other Union government schemes are changing women's lives but hopes the government devises programmes that can help make women independent.

"Women's decisions can steer more people towards



SUMIT KUMAR

## Good Intent Is Not Enough

**I**n July 2021, Reyman Jangde was elected sarpanch of her village in a keenly contested poll. However, this wasn't her maiden foray into village-level politics. She and her husband Yashwant, a farmer, had been panch between 2010 and 2015, and hence well aware of grassroots issues.

"I will vote for the BJP because of the numerous works done in the last two terms," says Reyman, listing the Jan Dhan and Ujjwala schemes and the Women's Reservation Act as



## Reyman Jangde, 40

Sankara, Chhattisgarh  
Sarpanch, works for an SHG

**Constituency:** Durg

**Issues that will decide her vote:** Jan Dhan and Ujjwala schemes; women's quota

**Demands from the govt:** Better execution of Ayushman Bharat and job quotas for locals



BHUPESH KESHARWANI



MK PATNAIK

# FIRST OUTLOOK

**Malla Devi Visalakshi, 47** 

**Visakhapatnam Interior Designer**

**Constituency:** Visakhapatnam

**Issues that will decide her vote:** Development of the people and state. Poverty eradication

**Demands from the govt:** Stop privatisation of Vizag Steel Plant; accord Special Category Status to Andhra; make Vizag a special railway zone

development, considering they are the beneficiaries of state-operated schemes," she says. In her own state, Visalakshi's vote will go to the YSR Congress Party because "Jagan garu [CM Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy] has strived towards eradicating poverty and reduced the percentage of people below the poverty line while taking care of the state's development." ■

**-Amarnath K. Menon**

achievements. Issues like the Ram temple in Ayodhya may be adding to the BJP's popularity but the abrogation of Article 370 has had little resonance in rural Chhattisgarh.

For the next government, which

she hopes the saffron party will form, she does have a wishlist: "While the Ayushman Bharat scheme is good," she says, "implementation on the ground needs to be better." Reymann spent almost Rs 90,000 when she

had her baby despite having an Ayushman card. Jobs is her other demand. "We need reservation not just for SC/ STs but also for local people in government as well as private jobs," says the sarpanch, who has studied till Class V and belongs to the Satnami community, listed as Scheduled Caste. ■

**-Rahul Noronha**

**"While the Ayushman Bharat Yojana is good, delivery on the ground has to improve"**

# Don't Blame God or Modiji

**Reshma Devi, 42**   
**Danapur, Bihar, Fish monger**

**Constituency:** Patliputra

**Issues that will decide her vote:** Women's security, free foodgrains, Ram temple construction

**Demands from the govt:** Secure business or earning opportunities for the poor

**E**very day at 6 am, Reshma Devi sets out on an autorickshaw from her Patna suburb home, carrying two large loads of fish to the city. She spends the entire day on the footpath under a canopy umbrella, which partially shields her from the scorching sun, as she sells her catch. That gets her about Rs 400 a day.

Reshma's casual labourer husband struggles to secure steady work. She does not complain though. "It's good to work hard and earn honestly. You cannot expect God or Modiji to solve all our problems," says Reshma, who has studied till Class V and belongs to the backward Mallah caste.

Reshma lauds the Ram temple construction and the provision of 5 kg free foodgrain by the Modi government. She also acknowledges the improvement in law and order in Bihar. However, she is unaware of Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's promise to provide Rs 1 lakh annually to poor women. But she disapproves of RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav for not visiting the Ram temple. ■

**-Amitabh Srivastava**

RANJAN RAHI





**She Voters**  
**MANDATE 2024**



**Mamta Meena, 25**

**Chalkchandpur,  
Rajasthan, Farmer**

**Constituency:** Dausa

**Issues that will decide her vote:** More jobs for her Meena (ST) community

**Demands from the govt:** Our income should double as PM Modi has promised



PURUSHOTTAM DIWAKAR

## The Local Roadblock

**M**amta comes from a BPL family but Chalkchandpur is a prosperous village of 2,000 families. Her son is in Class 3 and her daughter in Class 1 in a government school. She's happy that there are teachers at the school and doctors at the dispensaries and the fact that she gets free

medicines. Mamta studied till Class 12 while her husband, Jaldari Meena,

**“Modi is good as PM, but what can he do in a village? In the village, it is the sarpanch who matters”**

is an ITI graduate and has done a course in computer programming.

However, despite their Scheduled Tribe (ST) reserved status, he has found it hard to land a job. The couple make a living by farming on their small holding. “There are too many job applicants, too few vacancies,” she says.

She gets free rations, subsidy for an LPG cylinder and assistance to build a toilet but not for a house. “It all depends on the sarpanch,” she says. At the Centre, she likes Modi as PM but in the state feels that the former Congress government led by Ashok Gehlot was more welfare-oriented. ■

**-Rohit Parihar**

SUMIT KUMAR



**Suman Devi, 32**

**Hariharpur, UP  
Homemaker**

**Constituency:** Kheri

**Issues that will decide her vote:** Inflation, lack of government facilities  
**Demands from the govt:** A ration card that can help her avail of welfare schemes

## Give Us Just the Bare Minimum

**S**uman Devi is not against any political party. But she is angry with the local officials. Reason: A ration card, which could have helped her avail of the government

# Spare Our Religion

Development challenges are huge in a country like ours but if political parties are committed, sustained growth is possible," says Zeenathar Azmi Syed, a sociologist passionate about development studies. The youngest of three siblings of a physician and a former member of the Telangana State Legal Services Authority, she feels that schemes

like Viksit Bharat, Ujjwala and Lakhpati Didi are well intentioned. "As a woman, I find these initiatives important for our welfare, but the challenge lies in the execution," she says.

Azmi says a key issue will determine her vote. "If a candidate explicitly or implicitly expresses that religious convictions will control how he or she governs, then that person is not get-

ting my vote. Note that I refer to control rather than practice." On how life has changed in the past decade, Azmi explains how she cracked the UGC-NET exam, got into the PhD programme and was in the merit list of the UGC's Maulana Azad National Fellowship, a scheme beneficial for her research. The scheme was revoked in 2022. ■

-Amarnath K. Menon



## Zeenathfar Azmi Syed, 29 Hyderabad

Research scholar at Osmania University, social activist

**Constituency:** Secunderabad

**Issues that will decide her vote:** Family, community opinion will matter

**Demands from the govt:** Accessible quality education, a public funded healthcare system for all; and an annual job calendar

welfare schemes, has eluded her despite several appeals to the village head. "Many people in my village get free ration and have benefitted from the PM Awas Yojana whereas we have been unlucky. Why would we praise the government?" asks Suman, the wife of a farm labourer.

She believes Prime Minister Narendra Modi has done a lot of good work but it hasn't reached everyone. "There are

**"More than the Ram temple, we need basic infrastructure for the poor"**

several loopholes at the implementation stages," says Suman, who has studied till Class V. "More than the Ram temple, we need basic infrastructure for the poor. We do not have money and power, so no one comes to help us," says the Dalit woman. ■

-Prashant Srivastava



MANDAR DEODHAR

# Back to Firewood

## Tai Balu Kasbe, 42

Pune, Domestic help

**Constituency:** Pune

**Issues that will decide her vote:** Soaring prices of essential commodities

**Demands from the govt:** Reduce inflation, LPG prices

The resident of Sahakar Nagar in Pune city works as a housemaid in the local highrises, while her husband Balu Jangli Kasbe is a rickshaw driver. Kasbe, a Dalit from the Matang community, complains that the couple (they have no children) can barely make ends meet with their monthly income of around Rs 25,000.

"Everything is so costly, prices are soaring and all my women friends are very upset. I have been forced to put our gas cylinder away and cook using firewood and cowdung cakes," she rues. "Even when we buy things like clothes, we have to pay extra for GST. What can the poor do, we are badly affected by inflation. This is not a good government for us," says Kasbe. She feels that issues like the Ram temple in Ayodhya, and even the Centre's welfare schemes, are of no consequence because of this. "What is the use of the Ujjwala scheme if you can no longer afford an LPG cylinder?" she asks. ■

-Dhaval S. Kulkarni



# THE CHARM OFFENSIVE

**THE UNION COMMERCE MINISTER STEPS INTO THE HURLY BURLY OF ELECTORAL POLITICS IN HIS MAIDEN ATTEMPT TO WIN A LOK SABHA SEAT**

**BY RAJ CHENGAPPA & DHAVAL S. KULKARNI IN MUMBAI**

# A

**AS THE UNION MINISTER OF COMMERCE, HE IS USED TO WALKING THE RED CARPET.**

But as Candidate Piyush Goyal, says a partyman with a smile, he is forced to tread a carpet of brown dust and brave Mumbai's sultry heat that leaves his grey Modi jacket drenched in sweat. Goyal himself seems game for the rough and tumble of electoral politics as he greets supporters in a Kandivali bylane in what is his maiden attempt to win a Lok Sabha seat. Though nominated to the Rajya Sabha thrice, he does have some experience at the hustings. When he was a toddler, he points out, his mother, a three-time MLA from Maharashtra, would take him along while campaigning. His first brush with electioneering came when the veteran Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader L.K. Advani asked him to manage his campaign in his first Lok Sabha election in 1989 from New Delhi.

As Goyal sets out, sitting in his

rath, an open-roofed saffron-coloured SUV with large cut-outs of Modi emblazoned on its sides, he confesses that he finds the entire experience of campaigning both "exhilarating and elevating" and also unique because of the "feet on the ground" feeling (*see accompanying interview*). He had grown up in the much more storied Sion, an hour's drive away from Kandivali. He recalls that when he was young, Kandivali and much of Mumbai North, the constituency he is contesting from, was full of the stone quarries that supported the maximum city's construction boom. Now in Kandivali, as in neighbouring Borivali, slums have come up higgledy-piggledy, rubbing shoulders with the highrises for the middle and upper middle class, typical of the exponential growth of

**THOUGH A THREE-TERM RAJYA SABHA MP, GOYAL IS READY FOR THE CHALLENGES OF ELECTORAL POLITICS AND CRITICISES THE MVA FOR ITS 'DYNASTIC' MINDSET**

the Mumbai Metropolitan Region.

These are far removed from the sanitised environs of the Don Bosco school in Matunga where Goyal studied, following which he earned a degree in law and studied chartered accountancy at Mumbai University, eventually becoming a successful investment banker. After joining politics in 1989, Goyal gained plenty of party experience helping others campaign and also as the BJP's national treasurer. In 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi appointed him a Union minister of state and then elevated him to cabinet rank, where he handled several portfolios including railways, coal, finance and now commerce, textiles and consumers affairs.

As his rath yatra wends its way slowly through the streets of Kandivali, overshadowed by highrises all round, Goyal is all charm, waving cheerily at housewives who peer curiously out of their grilled windows, accepting flowers from an elderly couple that has come out to greet him. He then pauses to talk about the support he is getting from BJP allies, pointing to those carrying Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) flags that have their clock symbol on them and others with the rail engine that represents Raj Thackeray's Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS). Goyal then elaborates



**CONNECTING WITH THE  
MASSES** Piyush Goyal  
on the campaign trail in  
Mumbai North, May 4

# “MODI IS THE ONLY ISSUE IN THIS ELECTION”

On the campaign trail in the Mumbai North constituency from where he is fighting the Lok Sabha election, Union Minister **Piyush Goyal** spoke to Group Editorial Director **Raj Chengappa** and Senior Associate Editor **Dhaval S. Kulkarni** on a range of issues. Edited excerpts from the interview



RAJ CHENGAPPA

## On contesting

It's an exhilarating experience. It gives tremendous opportunity to connect with the local people, a sense of belonging and a feet-on-the-ground feeling. I will ever be grateful to PM Narendra Modi for the opportunity.

## On slum development in his constituency

In 'Modi ki Guarantee', the first chapter is 'Garib Parivar Jan' where we have talked of redevelopment of slums. We will give them a house in the same place, in Uttar Mumbai. With the PM's blessings, I will make sure this is the first area in which everybody gets a home and has a good quality of life.

## On the possible outcome of the Mahayuddh in Maharashtra

Both Uddhav Thackeray and Sharad Pawar are trying to create a story of sympathy for themselves, but people have recognised that both only want their children to come to power. Both have failed to do work for the state. That is why you see that all their MLAs and their parties have gone with either Eknath Shinde if they are with the Shiv Sena or with Ajit Pawar if they belong to the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP).

## On the BJP engineering splits

We have not engineered any splits. All the Sena MLAs know that they won the assembly election because of Mr Modi's leadership and [Devendra]

Fadnavis as CM. It is Uddhav who treacherously backstabbed Fadnavis and Mr Modi. We had announced Fadnavis as the next CM with Uddhav sitting on the stage. It is a figment of his imagination and greed for power to think otherwise. He stands totally exposed and people have lost all faith in Uddhav Thackeray and Sharad Pawar. That's why the whole of Shiv Sena came and joined hands with us as did the NCP, apart from Raj Thackeray. They all recognise that Modi is good for the country.

## On the main issue this election

It is Modi all the way—there is no other issue. The biggest issue is trust and when we say 'Modi hai to mumkin hai', it comes out of the fact that whatever he says, he delivers. I never thought in my lifetime—I have been in politics for 40 years—that Article 370 would go out from the Constitution. On the Ram Mandir, senior VHP leaders used to say 'prabhu ki ichha hai, banega', but Modi made it happen. I have gone through the 2014 and 2019 manifestos...there is action on every single point. He is a man of conviction, not false promises, that's what the people like. The women and young are completely behind Modi. That is going to be the swing factor which will take us past 400 seats.

## On the Congress comment on redistribution of wealth

This is a dangerous trend. It is going

back to the fossil age. We all remember how the estate tax was 85 per cent. The Congress is talking of redistribution of wealth by taking it from the people, we are talking of raising the incomes of the whole country and taking everybody along the way.

## On the Opposition's demand for caste reservation

The Opposition seems very keen on Muslim reservations. The Constitution just doesn't allow that. They want to foist this unconstitutional act as a part of their appeasement policy. And they want to take away the reservation from the SC, ST and OBC which the BJP and NDA will never allow.

## On calling Muslims 'infiltrators'

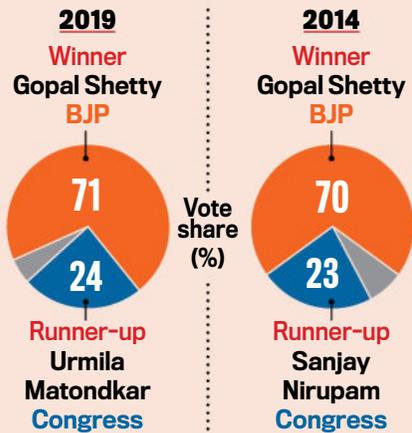
The CAA doesn't take away the citizenship from any Indian. Those communities who are in a minority in our neighbouring countries, like Jains, Buddhists, Hindus, are those that we are giving citizenship to, and not those who belong to the majority communities in Islamist countries. Indian Muslims are a part of us and will remain so.

## On the Muslim vote

Never before have they come out in such numbers for our rallies. I am amazed at the response. They know that Modi is doing things for all of them and not asking what their language, caste or religion is. ■

# CONSTITUENCY WATCH

## MUMBAI NORTH



Rest: others; figures have been rounded off

### PIYUSH GOYAL'S CHALLENGER

#### Bhushan Patil Congress

Rising through the party ranks, starting with the National Students Union of India, Patil is currently the vice president of the Mumbai Congress unit. Although he lost the state assembly election in the Borivali constituency in 2009, Patil is banking on his status as a son of the soil, fighting against an "outsider"



minister to the Lok Sabha. "He will use his influence as a senior leader to solve several issues and get new projects into the constituency," he points out.

However, BJP leaders concede that the opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) is likely to give the battle a Marathi vs non-Marathi colour as the Congress nominee Patil is a Maharashtrian and belongs to the Aagri community, regarded as among Mumbai's original settlers, along with groups like Kolis and Bhandaris. "The only saving grace for us is that the Congress does not have an image as a pro-Marathi party," says a BJP functionary. However, Aslam Shaikh, a former minister and the Congress MLA from Malad West, claims their chances are bright and points to how his party won the seat in 2004 and 2009. Now, with the Shiv Sena (Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray) led by former chief minister Uddhav Thackeray in alliance with the Congress as part of the larger MVA, Patil is expected to get a chunk of the Marathi vote.

Goyal has also found himself in the thick of several controversies, especially the one after students at the Thakur College of Science and Commerce in Kandivali, which is part of his Lok Sabha constituency, were allegedly forced to attend the speech of his son Dhruv Goyal in March. The IDs of the students were reportedly confiscated to ensure they were present when he spoke. In April, Neha Purav, a journalist with a vernacular daily, who had reported on Goyal's apparent discomfort with the smell of fish (he is said to have covered his nose with a handkerchief while campaigning in the *gothans* or village settlements in his constituency), filed a complaint with the police after unknown individuals allegedly threatened her. None of these controversies has dented Goyal's confidence of not only winning North Mumbai handsomely but also the BJP and its allies getting more than the 41 seats the NDA won in 2019. His reason? "It is Modi all the way—there is no other issue. The biggest issue is trust and when we say '*Modi hai to mumkin hai*', it comes out of the fact that whatever he says, he delivers." Goyal may have grown up in South Mumbai but he is certainly going north in the city in 2024. ■

on how connectivity to his constituency would vastly improve once the Rs 6,500 crore tunnel linking Mumbai with Thane comes up, passing under the Sanjay Gandhi National Park and cutting the commute time to Marine Drive by more than an hour. He also briefs residents about the medical facilities he would bring, with the construction of a 1,000-bed hospital by a charitable trust so that they don't have to travel to Central Mumbai for emergencies. Later, addressing slum dwellers, Goyal told them he will ensure that each of them gets pucca houses in the same area as part of the redevelopment plan under the Modi Ki Guarantee schemes. He also promised that drainage works would be complete.

Though Mumbai North has been the BJP's citadel for over three decades, Goyal will have to battle the tag of being an "outsider candidate" and the linguistic divide between Marathi speakers and non-Maharashtrians as he takes on his challenger—Bhushan Patil of the Congress. Unlike the incumbent two-term MP Gopal Shetty who has been dropped, Goyal lacks the local connect with workers and voters. A former corporator and Mumbai deputy mayor before he was elected the MLA from Borivali, Shetty is known among his supporters as a "garden samrat" for developing around 10 gardens across the constituency. He is also known for his brand of "instant justice" and has a pan-community and pan-linguistic appeal given his fluency in Marathi, Hindi, Gujarati and Kannada.

The BJP has dropped Shetty to nominate Goyal in what is seen as one of the safest seats for the party across India.

**B**JP insiders say Shetty was upset at being ousted from the constituency he had nurtured, but that hasn't stopped him from extending Goyal unconditional support; he is a constant companion on his election rath. Goyal's constituency also has a diverse social spread—from the tribal *padas* or hamlets in the Sanjay Gandhi National Park, Mumbai's largest green lung, to the *koliwad*s or fishing villages at Gorai and Bhati, gleaming glass-chrome IT hubs in Malad, and slums in Kurar. "Our victory is certain," Atul Bhatkhalkar, the BJP MLA from Kandivali East, says. "The only issue is people want Modi as the prime minister." BJP leader Kishor Joshi says Mumbai North stood to benefit if it elected a Union

**UNLIKE SITTING MP GOPAL SHETTY WHO HAS BEEN DROPPED, GOYAL HAS TO BATTLE THE TAG OF BEING AN 'OUTSIDER' WHILE WOOING THE VOTERS**



# GUARDING ITS BASTION

**AFTER AN EMPHATIC WIN IN THE STATE ELECTION, THE BJP LOOKS SECURE IN ITS CENTRAL INDIA FORTRESS. FOR A BATTERED CONGRESS, THE ONLY HOPE LIES IN EXPLOITING ANY CHINK IN THE SAFFRON ARMOUR**

BY RAHUL NORONHA

## On

**APRIL 21, KAMAL NAIK, A 50-YEAR-OLD FARMER AND BHARATIYA JANATA PARTY (BJP) WORKER FROM BHOPAL'S HUZUR ASSEMBLY SEGMENT,**

received a call informing him about Prime Minister Narendra Modi's road show in the state capital three days later. Naik, who had been camping at a wheat procurement centre awaiting his turn to sell his produce, at first couldn't understand the need for such an event in Bhopal—a BJP stronghold that the party has been winning handsomely since 1989. Nonetheless, he gathered a group of people and reached the venue at the designated time. "Victory in Bhopal is a foregone conclusion, but this is how we contest elections. Nothing is left to chance," Naik remarked, finally comprehending the rationale behind the PM's rally, as he waited for his arrival under the scorching sun.

Months after its comprehensive victory in the 2023 assembly election, the BJP indeed left nothing to chance as it went back to seek a stronger mandate in the ongoing Lok Sabha election. The party's main poll plank, as in other states, hinges on its manifesto, titled 'Modi ki Guarantee', highlighting the work done by the Modi regime over the past decade and the commitment to continue with the 'transformative growth' of four core groups—*Gareeb* (poor), *Yuva* (youth), *Annadata* (farmers), and *Nari* (women). In a way, the



contest in each seat is being turned into a battle between Modi and the Congress candidate, as the party's biggest trump card—the PM—is expected to lead it to another emphatic victory.

But besides these 'guarantees', the BJP election machinery has unleashed a kind of psychological warfare against the Congress, triggering mass defections in its ranks—especially at the booth level—and pushing the main opposition party's morale to rock bottom. It is with this overarching sense of domination on the battlefield that the BJP has approached this four-phase election in Madhya Pradesh—the last eight of the state's 29 constituencies vote on May 13—having reduced the Congress to a situation where it is in the contest, realistically, in just three to four seats.

In fact, a BJP 'joining cell', created under the stewardship of former state home minister Narottam Mishra for organising programmes to welcome leaders from rival parties to the saffron fold, went into overdrive from February onwards. "In the last few months," says BJP state spokesperson Ashish Agarwal, "over 700,000 Congressmen inspired by the leadership of PM Nar-



ANI

**STANDING TALL**  
Union home minister Amit Shah (centre) at a rally with Madhya Pradesh chief minister Mohan Yadav (left) and Union minister and BJP candidate Jyotiraditya Scindia in Guna, Apr. 26

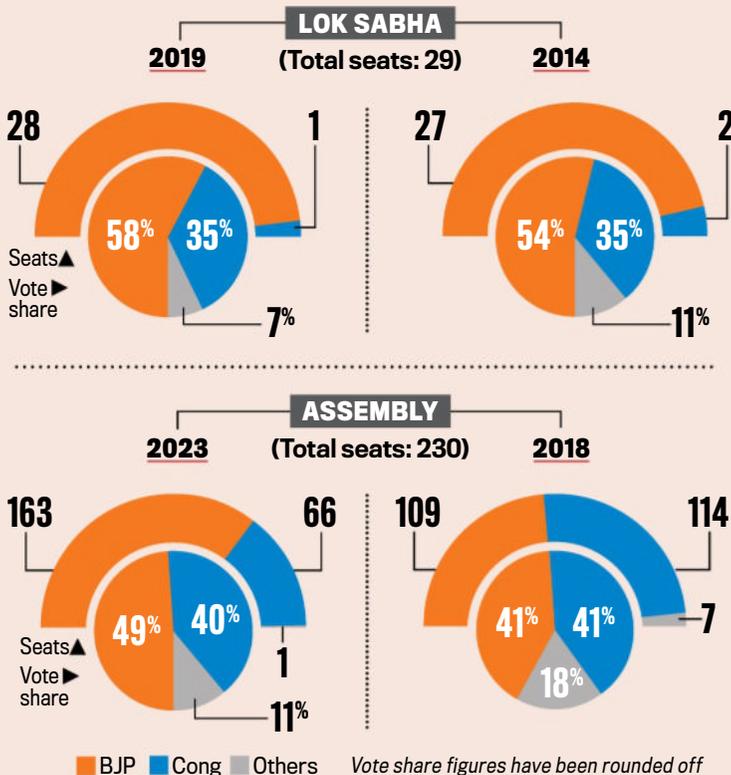
endra Modi have joined our party in Madhya Pradesh. Earlier, we had just former parliamentarians and state legislators joining us, but of late, even sitting MLAs have quit the Congress.”

For instance, just two days before the third phase of polling on May 7, Congress MLA Nirmala Sapre from the Bina assembly segment in Sagar constituency joined the BJP at a rally led by Chief Minister Mohan Yadav, thus becoming the third Congress legislator to make the switch since late March. Earlier, on April 30, veteran Congress leader Ramniwas Rawat, who is the incumbent MLA from Sheopur district’s Vijaypur seat, had also entered the saffron fold. A month before that, the BJP had managed to rope in three-time Congress MLA Kamlesh Shah, who represents the Amarwara assembly seat in the Chhindwara parliamentary constituency.

The defections are not just for the sake of political one-upmanship; there is a carefully thought-out strategy behind them. In 2019, the BJP had won all but one seat—Chhindwara, the bastion of former chief minister Kamal Nath that is currently being represented by his son Nakul. This makes this parliamentary seat, which went to the polls in the first phase on April 19, a prestige battle for both the BJP and the Congress. So it came as no surprise when, besides Kamlesh Shah, a large number of Congress corporators and block-level leaders from rural areas quit the party to join the BJP in the run up to the election. Even Chhindwara mayor Vikram Ahake had made a switch to the BJP before taking a U-turn and return-

## THE LION'S SHARE

After an upset in the 2018 assembly polls, the BJP has reclaimed its turf in Madhya Pradesh





ing to the Congress. By setting off such mass attrition, the saffron party tried to weaken Kamal Nath's support base at the grassroots level, which was seen as the main factor for his son's win in 2019.

**B**ut the biggest embarrassment awaited the party in Indore, as on April 29, its candidate Akshay Kanti Bam withdrew his nomination at the eleventh hour, pushing the Congress out of the running—a first in this key constituency's electoral history. As Bam later joined the BJP, he attributed his decision to the Congress organisation's "non-cooperation" for his campaign. "The Congress has fielded some good candidates, but they are unable to gain traction among the electorate," says Bhopal-based veteran journalist N.K. Singh. "The BJP had peaked in Madhya Pradesh in the last general election. But the Congress is severely disorganised and has failed to project itself as an alternative."

In fact, the BJP's domination over the voters' minds is nearly complete in most areas. Its core Hindutva plank, bolstered by the Ram temple in Ayodhya, may not find resonance with the electorate in tribal areas, but there are several pockets where such issues have delivered for it perennially—even when not pushed aggressively. This is true especially in the case of constituencies in the Malwa and Nimar regions, such as Indore, Ujjain, Dewas, Khandwa, Kharagone and Mandsaur. Needless to say, the BJP has a clear upper hand in such seats.

But despite this total domination in the battleground, some chinks in the armour are glaringly apparent. The BJP's candidate selection process for several seats seems to have disregarded track records and popularity. In Rajgarh, for instance, two-term MP Rodmal Nagar, who is pitted against former Congress chief minister Digvijaya Singh, has been facing opposition from within the ranks and is heavily banking on the



## CAMPAIGN STRATEGY



### BHARATIYA JANATA PARTY

- Turn the contest in every seat into a battle between Prime Minister Narendra Modi (and his 'guarantees') and the Congress candidate
- Trigger attrition in the Congress ranks—not just at the top but, especially, at the booth level
- Deploy the core Hindutva issues selectively in regions where they find resonance with the voters, like in Malwa



### CONGRESS

- Keep the campaign candidate-specific in each seat instead of trying to take on Narendra Modi directly
- Not stretch itself too thin and focus on the 15-odd seats where the party has done well in the recent past and put up a token fight on others
- Concentrate on the tribal-dominated seats, as STs were the only group that didn't abandon the Congress in the assembly polls



**A TALL ORDER**  
Congress candidate Digvijaya Singh (centre) campaigning along with the party's state unit chief, Jitendra Patwari, and other leaders at Khilchipur in Rajgarh constituency, which went to the polls on May 7

Modi factor and Hindutva rhetoric to help him sail through. Ironically, several candidates, like Union minister Faggan Singh Kulaste, Ganesh Singh, Alok Sharma and Bharat Singh Kushwah, who tasted defeat in the state election, have been awarded Lok Sabha tickets—a perplexing decision, to say the least.

**W**hat's more perplexing is the fact that the BJP's much-vaunted organisational prowess, often touted as its greatest asset, has somehow faltered in delivering during the initial two polling rounds. Its 'Mission 370' project—aimed at securing 370 seats in the Lok Sabha by capitalising on the abrogation of Article 370—had tasked the cadre with increasing the party's tally by 370 votes across Madhya Pradesh's 65,000-odd booths. However, this target has been rendered ambitious, with voter turnout dipping by 7-8 percentage points in the first two phases. "Clearly, the organisation's claims of increasing votes remain on paper," says political analyst Girija Shankar. "This is because while the high command has issued

directives, workers are sitting at home." There is a perceptible drop in enthusiasm, especially among women voters, and some insiders link this to the "marginalisation" of former chief minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan, the architect of women-centric schemes like Ladli Behna.

The only hope for the Congress lies in capitalising on such 'missteps' of the ruling party to corner some seats. Jitendra 'Jitu' Patwari, who took the reins of the state Congress

## **THE CONGRESS APPEARS TO BE ORGANISATIONALLY FEEBLE, HARDLY EXTENDING ANY TANGIBLE SUPPORT TO ITS CANDIDATES**

after the party's rout in the assembly polls last December, has put a basic strategy in place. Deciding not to spread the party machinery too thin, he has decided to mainly focus on the 15-odd Lok Sabha seats where the Congress has a "realistic" chance of winning and putting up just a token fight on the remaining seats that it has not won for the past five elections.

The party per se is concentrating on two types of seats—high-profile

ones, such as Chhindwara and Rajgarh, and those lying in the state's tribal belt, where it performed well in the assembly polls. Though the Congress's tally in the 47 seats reserved for the scheduled tribes (STs) dipped from 31 to 22, members of the tribal communities account for a third of the party's 66 candidates who entered the state legislature.

Tribals constitute 21 per cent of the state's population and there are six Lok Sabha seats reserved for them—Dhar, Betul, Shahdol, Ratlam, Mandla and Khargone. Besides, Chhindwara, Balaghat, Sidhi and Morena have a substantial tribal vote that can swing the outcome in anyone's favour. In Mandla, the Congress fielded Omkar Markam, a tribal strongman, against Union minister Kulaste, while in Ratlam, it bet on the old warhorse Kantilal Bhuria against Anita Chauhan, wife of the state forest minister Nagar Singh Chauhan.

All in all, though, the Congress appears organisationally feeble, hardly extending any tangible support to its candidates. Left to fend for themselves, only those with formidable political clout stand a chance of putting up a fight. Tragically, the party has failed to create a buzz around its manifesto promises, such as the Rs 1 lakh unconditional cash transfer annually to the poorest of the poor families, legal guarantee for minimum support prices, paid apprenticeships for graduates and educational loan waivers—pledges that could have galvanised the electorate. As the Mohan Yadav regime reneged on the BJP's pre-assembly poll guarantee of procuring wheat at Rs 2,700 per quintal and paddy at Rs 3,100, Patwari endeavoured to raise this critical issue, pivotal for the state's predominantly agrarian population. However, his efforts have found little resonance on the ground—a lost opportunity that could prove costly for the party. ■



# IN A STATE OF FLUX

**DEFLECTIONS AND INTERNAL SQUABBLES BECOME A NORM AS PUNJAB GEARS UP FOR A QUADRANGULAR CONTEST UNDER THE SHADOW OF UNRESOLVED LEGACY ISSUES**

BY ANILESH S. MAHAJAN

# A

**ACCUSTOMED TO QUIET LAIDBACK SUNDAY AFTERNOONS**, the residents of Thammanwal village, in the Nakodar assembly segment, were taken aback at the unusual burst of activity in late April. It was former Punjab chief minister Charanjit Singh Channi grappling with the fallout of Karamjit Kaur Chaudhary—wife of former Jalandhar MP, the late Santokh Singh Chaudhary—defecting to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Addressing a hurriedly convened meeting, Channi, who is the Congress's Lok Sabha candidate from Jalandhar, sought to pacify disgruntled delegates, mostly

from the Phillaur segment, represented by Karamjit's son Vikramjit. (The latter has since been suspended from all party posts.) Miles away, in Patiala, Punjab Congress chief Amarinder Singh Raja Warring was also engaged in damage control, persuading local leaders to accept the high command's decision to field former Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) MP Dharamvir Gandhi, whose radical Leftist ideas have left many in the party uncomfortable.

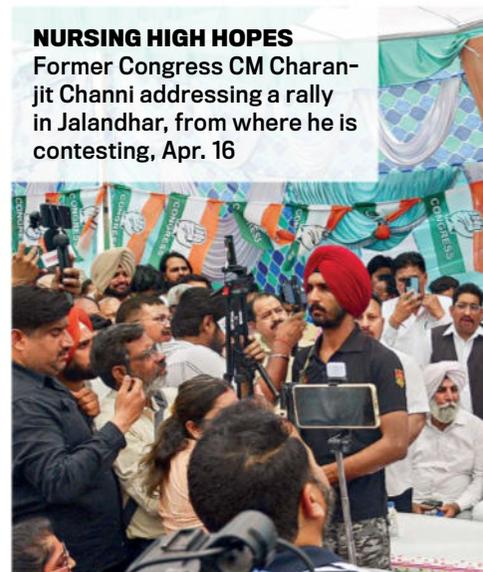
The political landscape of Punjab finds itself in a perpetual state of flux, exacerbated by the once-bipolar rivalry between the traditional heavyweights—the Congress and the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD)—evolving into a four-cornered contest with the emergence of the AAP and the fracturing of the SAD-BJP alliance. Amidst all this, splinter Akali groups, like the Sangrur MP Simranjit Singh Mann-led SAD (Amritsar), and Dalit-dominated Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which fought the 2022 assembly election in alliance with the SAD, are



PRABHJOT GILL

## NURSING HIGH HOPES

Former Congress CM Charanjit Channi addressing a rally in Jalandhar, from where he is contesting, Apr. 16

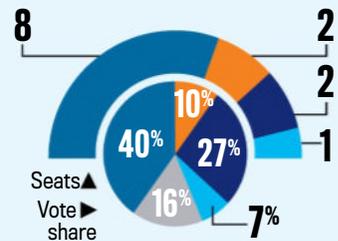


## SHIFTING FORTUNES

Within three years, the AAP's vote share spiralled from 7% in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls to 42% in the 2022 assembly election

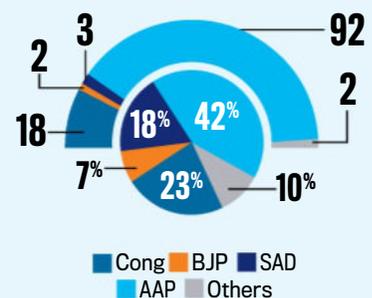
### LOK SABHA 2019

(Total seats: 13)



### ASSEMBLY 2022

(Total seats: 117)



Note: SAD & BJP were allies in LS 2019  
Vote share figures have been rounded off



**HELPING HAND** Punjab CM Bhagwant Mann on a road show in support of AAP's Amritsar candidate Kuldeep Singh Dhaliwal, Apr. 25



ANI

also vying for political space in select seats. Stirring this cauldron further, the 31-year-old radical Sikh preacher Amritpal Singh, lodged in an Assam jail after his arrest under the National Security Act charges last April, has announced his plans to enter the fray as an Independent from Khadoor Sahib. So, who has the upper hand?

### Congress: A Tall Order

The Grand Old Party nurses hope to win the maximum of the state's 13 seats, capitalising on anti-incumbency sentiments against the Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann-led AAP government. In 2019, then chief minister Capt. Amarinder Singh had stitched together a formidable caste coalition, attracting

even the traditionally Congress-averse Panthic (related to Sikh faith) voters and enabling the party to win eight seats—a remarkable feat amidst the Modi wave. However, his ouster and switch to the BJP, the Congress's dismal performance in the 2022 assembly polls (reduced to just 18 MLAs from 77 in the 117-member assembly), and the ascendancy of the AAP (it cornered 92 seats with a vote share of 42 per cent) have reshaped the dynamics. Not only does the Congress have to demonstrate that its new leadership wields a firm grasp over the cadre and projects a commanding presence to take on the AAP, but can also contain the BJP's rise and prevent the revival of the SAD's Panthic politics. However, even before establish-



ing its credibility with the electorate, the Congress is struggling to maintain unity within its ranks. The AAP has already poached a sitting MLA and a former one—Raj Kumar Chabbewal and Gurpreet Singh G.P.—fielding them from Hoshiarpur and Fatehgarh Sahib, respectively. Internal bickering persists over the party's decision to field turncoat Jeet Mohinder Singh Sidhu in Bathinda and shift another party-hopper, Bholath MLA Sukhpal Singh Khaira, to Sangrur. Meanwhile, the BJP, eyeing an expansion in the state, has lured two sitting Congress

### AAP: Issues Galore

But when it comes to the failure to put its own house in order, the biggest embarrassment was reserved for the AAP. In mid-April, a video surfaced of AAP legislator Kunwar Vijay Pratap Singh alleging that two police officers involved in the drug trade in Amritsar are close to a Rajya Sabha MP of the party, igniting a major controversy and touching upon the raw nerve of the electorate's frustration with the unresolved drug menace.

The 2022 verdict, which saw the AAP storming to power, was driven

The AAP, which has declared its candidates for all 13 seats, has fielded five state cabinet ministers, three sitting legislators and three turncoats besides singer-comedian Karamjit Anmol (Faridkot). Malvinder Singh Kang, the party spokesperson and candidate from Anandpur Sahib, calls it a "tactical move", as the party is new and doesn't have a pool of recognisable faces.

Notably, the Punjab AAP is attempting to project itself as a sub-regional front, carrying on its campaign in the name of Bhagwant Mann rather than the national party supremo Arvind Kejriwal. The slogan it has chosen says it all: '*Sansad vich vi Bhagwant Mann, khushhal Punjab te vadegi shaan*' (With Bhagwant Mann even in Parliament, Punjab will prosper with grandeur). In fact, after Kejriwal's arrest in the Delhi excise policy case, the response from the party's Punjab unit has been quite muted, as though distancing itself from the entire controversy. But the AAP's woes have been compounded after its sole sitting Lok Sabha MP Sushil Kumar Rinku, who won the Jalandhar bypoll in 2023, defected to the BJP in late March.



### AS A LAST-DITCH EFFORT, AKALI DAL CHIEF SUKHBIR BADAL TRIED TO RETURN TO THE NDA FOLD. BUT THE BJP SHUT THAT DOOR, CITING HIS ADAMANT STANCE ON PUSHING FOR THE RELEASE OF CONVICTED KHALISTANI MILITANTS

MPs—Ravneet Singh Bittu (Ludhiana) and Preneet Kaur (Patiala)—to contest from their respective constituencies. The latter's crossover was a mere formality, of course, she being the wife of Capt. Amarinder and under suspension due to "anti-party activities" since last February. Not to be outdone, the Akali Dal has roped in former Punjab Congress chief Mohinder Singh Kaypee as its candidate from Jalandhar. Partap Singh Bajwa, the Leader of Opposition in the Punjab assembly, terms it "good riddance", claiming that the departure of these leaders has given the party a chance to field fresh faces. Among the eight Congress winners in 2019, only two—Gurjeet Singh Aujla (Amritsar) and Amar Singh (Fatehgarh Sahib)—have been retained, while Manish Tewari (Anandpur Sahib) has been shifted to Chandigarh, and Jasbir Singh Gill (Khadoor Sahib) has opted out.

by voter fatigue with the conventional leadership's failure to address legacy issues like drugs, law and order, dwindling economy, Panthic matters and farmers' protests. Two years later, the Mann regime finds itself grappling with these unresolved issues: drugs are still a potent concern, farm unions continue to be up in arms, the state is caught in a debt trap, and Panthic demands—including justice for the 2015 sacrilege incidents and the release of Khalistani militants convicted for their involvement in violence during the insurgency in Punjab—remain unfulfilled. Agitated farm unions, dissatisfied with both the BJP-led Union government, for its failure to commit to a legal framework for the minimum support price (MSP), and the Mann regime, for not taking up their cause effectively, have been regularly disrupting campaigns of both the parties.

### BJP: Calculated Moves

Lacking a robust grassroots machinery, the BJP, besides defections, is banking heavily on the urban voters' perceived attraction to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the emotive undercurrent surrounding the construction of the Ram temple. This urban-centric strategy gained urgency after the BJP's efforts to make inroads into the rural Jat Sikh vote bank floundered, despite roping in former Punjab Congress president Sunil Jakhar as its state unit chief.

In Amritsar, the party has fielded Taranjit Sandhu, a Jat Sikh and the previous ambassador to the US, in a calculated move to appeal to both the rural and urban youth elector. While trying to break new ground, it is also consolidating its existing support base by fielding old-timers, like two-time legislator Dinesh Singh Babu from Gurdaspur. In Hoshiarpur, while dropping Union

# THE TURNCOAT BRIGADE

In this 'poaching season', several Punjab leaders have entered the fray after crossing over to rival parties. Here are a few sitting/ former MPs and MLAs from this league



**RAVNEET SINGH BITTU**  
**BJP, Ludhiana**  
 A three-time Congress MP from Anandpur Sahib (2009-14) and Ludhiana (2014-24)



**PRENEET KAUR** **BJP, Patiala**  
 Patiala MP, suspended from the Congress for 'anti-party activities' last year. Was elected in 1999, 2004 and 2009 as well

**SUSHIL KUMAR RINKU** **BJP, Jalandhar**

Won Jalandhar Lok Sabha bypoll as AAP candidate in 2023. Was earlier Congress MLA from Jalandhar West (2017-22)



**RAJ KUMAR CHABBEWAL** **AAP, Hoshiarpur**  
 Incumbent two-time MLA from Chabbewal in Hoshiarpur district, elected both times (2017 and 2022) on a Congress ticket

**GURPREET SINGH G.P.**  
**AAP, Fatehgarh Sahib**  
 Was a Congress legislator from Bassi Pathana (2017-22)

**PAWAN KUMAR TINU**  
**AAP, Jalandhar**  
 Former two-time SAD legislator from Adampur (2012-2022)

**MOHINDER SINGH KAYPEE**  
**SAD, Jalandhar**  
 Former Congress MP from Jalandhar (2009-14)/ three-time MLA/ PPCC president

**DHARAMVIR GANDHI**  
**Congress, Patiala**  
 Former AAP MP from Patiala (2014-19), floated his own party in 2019

**JEET MOHINDER SINGH SIDHU** **Congress, Bathinda**  
 Elected MLA four times as Independent/ Cong./ SAD nominee (2002-17)

minister Som Parkash, the ticket has been given to his wife, Anita, to keep the support intact.

When it comes to 'poaching', the strategy is to welcome Sikh leaders with a history of moderate stances and deep Dalit antecedents. Manjit Singh Mianwind, a Mazhabi Sikh Dalit, for instance, who crossed over from the Akali Dal ahead of the 2022 assembly election, and is fighting from Khadoor Sahib, a general seat. "The BJP," says Ashutosh Kumar, a political science professor at Panjab University, Chandigarh, "is expected to do much better in urban centres by peeling away potential voters from the AAP and the Congress."

## SAD: Battle for Survival

The saffron party's old ally, the Akali Dal, too, has fielded Brahmin candidates like N.K. Sharma in Patiala and BJP turncoat Anil Joshi in Amritsar, hoping to gain traction in urban centres. For SAD chief Sukhbir Singh Badal, the Lok Sabha election presents perhaps the last chance to restore his party's relevance. In 2019, they managed to win only two seats—Sukhbir himself in Ferozepur and his wife Harsimrat in Bathinda—and hit rock bottom with just three seats in the assembly polls. This time, while Sukhbir has withdrawn from contesting, Harsimrat will try and retain her seat. However, her chances

in Bathinda have been dented by the BJP fielding Parampal Kaur Sidhu, daughter-in-law of Akali veteran Sikander Singh Maluka, who until this announcement was in charge of Harsimrat's campaign.

**B**oth the BJP and the AAP have been regularly poaching Akali Dal leaders to stymie Sukhbir's revival efforts. Sukhbir was the first to kick off the campaign with his statewide 'Punjab Bachao Yatra' (Save Punjab Tour) in February, hoping to capitalise on the AAP's waning influence over rural Panthic voters. Regaining the trust of this core group is the biggest challenge for the Akali Dal after the 2015 sacrilege and police firing incidents that took place during its reign. Despite his repeated apologies for those incidents and their aftermath, Sukhbir found his party had lost the plot entirely in the elections held thereafter.

There have also been allegations of the Badals and their coterie concentrating power in their own hands while ignoring the Panthic leadership. To make amends, of the 14 candidates (including in Chandigarh) that the SAD has fielded this time, 11 have Panthic credentials. While staying away from the election himself, Sukhbir has also resisted the pressure to field other party elites, like his brothers-in-law Adesh Partap Singh Kairon and Bikram Singh Majithia, and former five-time state legislator and minister Parminder Singh Dhindsa, who has just returned to the party.

In a last-ditch attempt, the SAD chief even tried to return to the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), but the BJP shut that door, citing his adamant stance on pushing for the release of convicted Khalistani militants, including the killers of former chief minister Beant Singh. On March 26, Jakhar announced the breakdown of the alliance talks, and the same afternoon, the BJP inducted Beant Singh's grandson and Congress MP Ravneet Singh Bittu into the party. With Punjab going to the polls only in the final phase, on June 1, the churn is expected to continue for some time. ■



MANDATE 2024 | ANDHRA PRADESH

# A TOUGH FIGHT ON JAGAN'S HANDS

**N. CHANDRABABU NAIDU'S TDP MATCHES Y.S. JAGAN MOHAN REDDY'S YSRCP IN VOTER OUTREACH FOR LOK SABHA AND ASSEMBLY POLLS. BUT HIS WELFARE SCHEMES MAY GIVE JAGAN AN EDGE**

BY AMARNATH K. MENON

**T**

THE STAGE WAS SET ON A HOT summer's day in Hindupur, in the arid Anantapur region of Andhra Pradesh, where Yuvajana Sramika Rythu Congress Party (YSRCP) president Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy made passionate appeal on May 4 to voters about the state's controversial Land Titling Act of 2023. "Your child is a land giver, not a land grabber," he said, referring to himself and what his rival Chandrababu Naidu of the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) has called the legislation that has sparked some concerns vis-à-vis

transparency. "Beware of all the lies spread by Chandrababu Naidu out of desperation to come to power.... The Land Titling Act is a law made by the Union government by which farmers will have full rights over their lands.... Your child will make sure that farmers continue to own their lands and are not troubled in any way."

With polling for 25 Lok Sabha



Photographs by ANI

**OPPOSING NARRATIVES**

Far Left, Andhra Pradesh CM Y.S. Jaganmohan Reddy campaigning in Palamaneru, Chittoor, May 5; TDP chief N. Chandrababu Naidu with PM Narendra Modi at a rally in Anakapalle, May 6

seats and 175 legislative assembly seats slated for May 13, the battle lines are drawn between YSRCP and the opposition National Democratic Alliance (NDA), comprising arch-rival TDP led by N. Chandrababu Naidu as well as the BJP and actor Pawan Kalyan's Jana Sena Party (JSP). No-holds-barred attacks are the norm in this double-barreled contest for political control of the state.

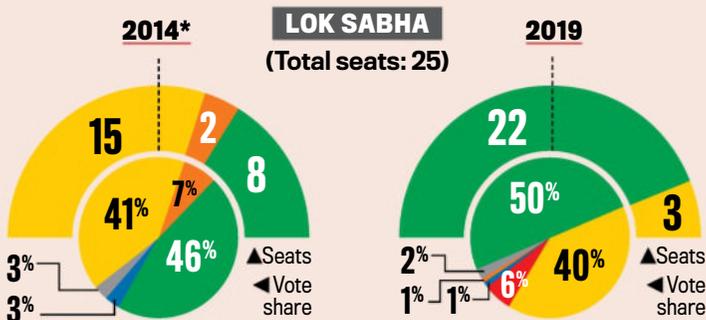
The previous evening, at a rally in Nellore, the TDP supremo had raised the pitch of the attack, terming Jagan Reddy a "destructor and dacoit", and confidently predicting a rout for the YSRCP in the elections and a sweep for the NDA troika. "These elections are a fight between *dharma* and *adhama*, between destruction and development, a battle between the dacoit that Jagan is and five crore people of the state," Naidu thundered.

The CM is looking for a second successive term, hoping that—with 38 state welfare schemes costing Rs 4.2 lakh crore reaching 125 million beneficiaries—around half the electorate will renew its support for him. Naidu has declared that at 74, this will be his last election and has made the emotional plea that he wants one last chance to set right the state that has been, he alleges, driven away from the path of development.

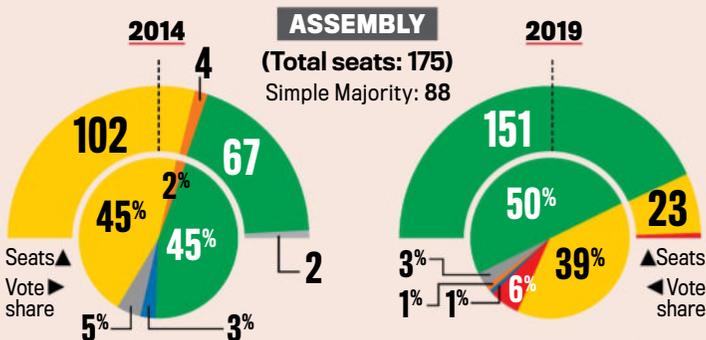
In addition to the bitter struggle between the YSRCP and the TDP, there is the combine of the Congress—led by Jagan's sister Y.S. Sharmila—and the Communist Party of India (Marxist), CPI, and a faction of the CPI (Marxist Leninist) in the mix. They, too, have been taking potshots at Jagan, recently accusing him of frittering away state resources, and leading a corrupt and chaotic administration. By contesting from the family pocket borough of Kadapa

## TURNING TABLES

Between 2014 and 2019, roles were reversed between the TDP and the YSRCP



\*Pawan Kalyan supported the NDA and TDP but did not field candidates



■ TDP 
 ■ YSRCP 
 ■ BJP 
 ■ Jana Sena Party 
 ■ Cong. 
 ■ Independents, others, NOTA

Vote share figures have been rounded off



LS constituency, a determined Sharmila has thrown down the gauntlet to Jagan. Her main grouse is Jagan fielding their cousin, Y.S. Avinash Reddy, the sitting Kadapa MP, who was allegedly connected with the murder of their uncle and former Kadapa MP Y.S. Vivekananda Reddy (a brother of late former CM and Jagan-Sharmila's father Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy) in the run up to the 2019 election. While the case remains unsolved, Jagan has given a clean chit to Avinash and got a boost when the Kadapa district court ordered on April 16 that Sharmila and TDP leaders could not make defamatory comments related to the murder. Jagan, thus, faces two formidable adversarial blocs.

## **UNDER THE JAGAN KOSAM SIDDHAM OUTREACH, 250,000 PARTY CADRES VISITED 16.7 MILLION HOMES, SINGING JAGAN'S PRAISES. THE YSRCP BELIEVES IT HAS TOUCHED MOST NEEDY PEOPLE**

For the two main belligerents, aggressive campaigning, with a focus on reaching out to a maximum number of voters, has been the norm. While Jagan is concerned about some pockets of anti-incumbency, Naidu is worried by how a perceived want of opposition unity—some sections of the BJP oppose the tie-up with the TDP—will hurt his prospects.

Some of the NDA's worries would have been allayed by visits of high-profile BJP leaders, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself. "The YSRCP government has crippled Andhra Pradesh with rampant corruption and it requires double engine growth (an NDA government in both Delhi

and the state) for revival," Modi said at a May 6 rally at Vemagiri in Rajamahendravaram constituency from where BJP state chief D. Purandeswari (Naidu's sister-in-law) is contesting. Modi accused the YSRCP of pushing the state into a debt trap and termed the state's irrigation and housing schemes abject failures. The PM's three visits to the state were focused largely on drawing support for the six BJP contestants to the Lok Sabha.

### **The Jagan Outreach**

Jagan's campaign strategy for the LS and assembly polls was rolled out over four months. He hit the road in earnest only after announcing the names of all the contestants on March 16, though he did at-

tempt to garner some early momentum with four massive regional Siddham (Ready) rallies, starting from January 27 in Visakhapatnam. The next phase, Memantha Siddham (We are ready), involved a 21-day bus tour of all 26 districts from late March with multiple meetings, whistle-stops and a rally at the end of each day. This was followed by Siddham Sabhas (readiness rallies) at select places to firm up support for the YSRCP and counter rival narratives. As a novel sideshow, the YSRCP deployed 12 common citizens as star campaigners to underscore its people-centric, welfare-oriented governance. The chosen persons spoke of how their families have gained from the

**By Amarnath K. Menon**

**F**or a decade now, actor-politician Pawan Kalyan has been trying to emerge as an influential force in the electoral politics of Andhra Pradesh, banking on his Kapu caste cohort. Despite a series of defeats and setbacks, the 'Power Star' is optimistic that his star will shine by playing second fiddle to Telugu Desam Party (TDP) supremo N. Chandrababu Naidu. Pawan's Jana Sena Party (JSP) is contesting 20 of the 175 assembly seats and two of the 25 Lok Sabha constituencies that will go to the polls on May 13. Both Lok Sabha candidates and 10 of the assembly contestants are from his community.

Pawan launched his party in March 2014, but did not contest the elections that year. He rather joined hands with the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), speaking alongside Narendra Modi and Naidu in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Karnataka, helping Naidu come to power in the first election of the bifurcated state. In 2019, the JSP contested in all 175 assembly constituencies, forming a bloc with both communist parties and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), and was routed. Pawan lost in both seats he contested from, Gajuwaka and Bhimavaram, and his party's lone winner from Razole later switched to the ruling Yuvajana Sramika Rythu Congress Party (YSRCP), which scored a landslide win.

Sensing united they could stand, Pawan, at first, struck an alliance with the TDP while the BJP held out. He worked overtime in aligning and addressing joint meetings with Naidu for about a year in preparing for the polls. Then, in recent months, in rallying to fight under the banner of the NDA, he conceded an additional Lok Sabha constituency to the BJP. His efforts have helped consolidate the alliance and the BJP is contesting in six Lok Sabha and 10 assembly seats.

Pawan believes the NDA can edge out the YSRCP given that both the JSP and TDP enjoy a 45 per cent vote share and need to add from the remaining 10 per cent to emerge the

# AN ACTOR PREPARES

Despite facing several political setbacks in the past, an assertive Pawan Kalyan, aligned with the NDA, seeks the backing of his Kapu community for a strategic position in the coastal state



**STAR POWER** JSP chief ▲ Pawan Kalyan at a roadshow in Rajampeta constituency, Andhra Pradesh, Apr. 25

winner. As part of this pragmatism, Pawan is contesting in one assembly seat—Pithapuram—abandoning the ones where he lost in 2019. In the long term, he hopes to use this election as a springboard for an enlarged post-poll political presence, considering Naidu, 74, has declared that this will be his

last election whether he wins or loses.

Winning the Kapu heartland of Pithapuram in the Godavari delta may be a daunting task. The YSRCP has fielded Vanga Geetha, the incumbent MP from Kakinada, of which Pithapuram is an assembly segment. In 2029, Pithapuram was won by the YSRCP's P. Dorababu with a 44.7 per cent vote share. Pawan's advantage is that S.V.S.N. Varma, who finished second with 36.7 per cent, is now working for his win though Geetha, also a Kapu, is a tough opponent. To counter his political rivals, who brand him an outsider,

## PAWAN BELIEVES THE NDA, BACKED BY THE JSP AND TDP'S 45% VOTE SHARE, NEEDS TO ADD FROM THE REMAINING 10% FOR VICTORY

he has bought a home in the town and announced that he would live there and work for the local people.

By tying the scarves of the TDP and BJP around his neck to symbolise the three-party alliance, Pawan led a two-wheeler rally in the constituency on April 23, coinciding with Hanuman Jayanti, when he went to file his nomination papers. "Jagan, an accused in more than 30 cases, is out on bail. However, after the elections, he will be in jail and this is Modi's guarantee," is his assertion in speeches holding up a placard with the image of a glass tumbler—the JSP poll symbol. "The JSP, TDP and the BJP have allied to assure people that law and order issues, corruption and anarchy prevailing in the state will stop."

Beyond his tell-tale aggression and optimism, and the ongoing construction of the JSP headquarters at Mangalagiri in Vijayawada (until now

in sheds), analysts are sceptical about his role except in bringing the TDP and BJP together. The JSP is largely a family enterprise. Elder brother K. Nagababu is the party's general secretary. The eldest, Chiranjeevi, who donated Rs 5 crore to the party, sent a recorded video message to campaign for Pawan in Pithapuram after raising expectations earlier about touring the constituency.

"The JSP has conducted Jana Vani to receive representations from people in all districts. This, coupled with the 3,920 meetings and gatherings of Pawan Kalyan, has helped the party as an influential force," says his political secretary P. Hariprasada. But, in last November's Telangana assembly election, where the JSP fielded candidates in constituencies populated with Andhraites, it came a cropper, with seven of the eight contestants losing deposits.

"Though Pawan enjoys considerable clout in the Union government and goodwill of his Kapu community, the influence has dwindled after he joined the NDA and the YSRCP fielded candidates from his community," says B.V. Muralidhar of the Department of Political Science, Sri Venkateswara University, Tirupati. There are other challenges too. "The JSP has not struck grassroots. Pawan does not have the clout to sway voters in favour of the NDA. Winning Pithapuram itself is a challenge," says social commentator A.M. Khan Yazdani.

Having polled 5.5 per cent in 2019 and travelled extensively since then, Pawan has the potential to draw substantial support from his community, which forms about 16 per cent of the population. "The JSP in a circumstantial political reality has been catapulted into significance and not because of its political depth or leadership prowess," says Harathi Vageeshan, who teaches political science at the NALSAR University, Hyderabad. "In a way, the party is clearing some road for the BJP for the future." Only the poll outcome with a vote share of 5 per cent or more will reveal whether the real Pawan Kalyan will stand up. ■



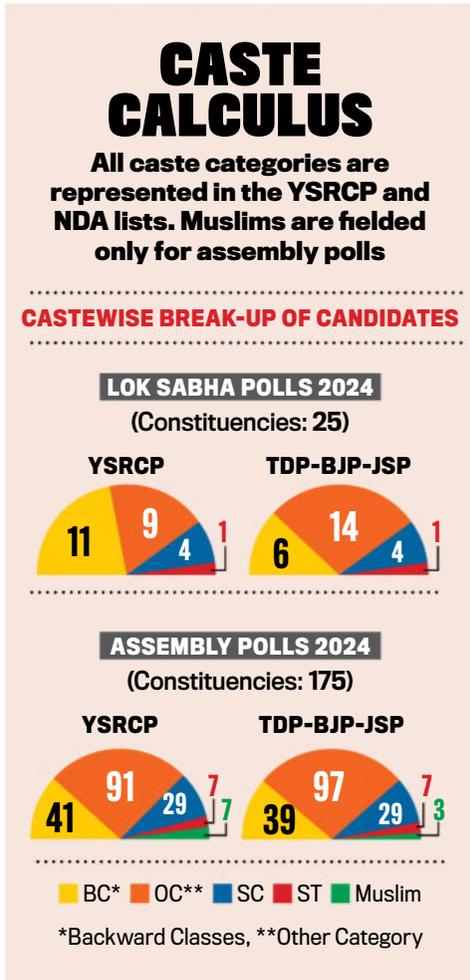
schemes, termed Navaratnalu (Nine Gems) by Jagan.

On May 2, the CM unleashed the 'Jagan Kosam Siddham' (We are ready for Jagan) campaign in which over 250,000 party cadres spread out across 47,000 polling booths and visited most of the 16.7 million households to brief everyone about Jagan's promises under the 2024 poll manifesto—Navaratnalu Plus. The manifesto, unveiled on April 27, eschewed grand new schemes and promised to implement continuing ones with increased allocation for some and a raise in welfare pension. YSRCP workers also reminded people that Jagan was the only chief minister who fulfilled all his 2019 manifesto promises and transformed the lives of beneficiaries. This saturation bombing, as it were, of the grassroots sprang from the confidence that welfare measures had touched almost all families at the bottom half of the pyramid.

The YSRCP has also taken care to carry all caste groups along in its welfare drive. "Through deft social engineering since 2019, the reworked social base for the YSRCP, beginning with a Jagan cabinet having ministers from key castes and cohorts, has meant that the clout of many individual strongmen of various castes is diminished," says Harathi Vageeshan, who teaches political science at the NALSAR University, Hyderabad.

### Caste Matters

Political parties can ill afford to ignore the caste balance. Indeed, under Jagan, Andhra was the second state in the country to carry out a caste census early this year. When accused of doing it to extract electoral advantage, Jagan countered that it would promote data-driven governance. The findings have not been put in the public domain. According to previously available



information, the Backward Classes (BC), which include 143 different caste groups, comprise about 37 per cent of the state's population of 49.8 million. The forward Kapu castes and various related groups are numerically significant too, constituting about 16 per cent. The influential Reddys (Jagan's caste) account for about eight per cent, and the mercantile Kammas, from which Naidu hails, comprise six per cent of the population respectively.

Just as Jagan is balancing Reddys with other castes, Naidu and the NDA are relying on Kammas domination. Predictably, for the 175 assembly seats, the YSRCP is fielding as many as 49 Reddys, while 29 find their way in the three-party alliance. Again, the NDA

has 35 Kammas in the race, as opposed to nine in the YSRCP list. There are 22 Kapus, too, on that list, more than the 18 in the NDA. In fact, the YSRCP has fielded more candidates from among the BCs and Muslims too—41 and 7—compared to the 39 and 3 in the NDA roster.

For the Lok Sabha polls, the YSRCP has fielded 11 BC contestants, and the NDA six. Among Other Castes (OCs) or general category, both have fielded five each from the forward Reddy community. The YSRCP has one Kammas and three Kapu candidates, while the alliance has fielded five Kammas and two Kapus.

### Naidu's 'Assurances'

Chandrababu Naidu's campaign also includes a barrage of yatras and programmes. It began last year, with the TDP first family covering constituencies according to a plan. First, Naidu dispatched son Nara Lokesh, a Stanford graduate and the TDP national general secretary, on the 'Yuva Galam Padayatra' (Voice of Youth March) from January 27, 2023, starting from his own Kuppam assembly constituency. The intent, as Lokesh

put it, was to reassure the 50 million people of Andhra "who have become victims of Jagan Mohan Reddy's corruption and anarchy". The padayatra was immensely popular, despite challenges forcing Lokesh to pause, such as after Naidu's arrest in September 2023 in the alleged AP State Skill Development Corporation scandal. In all, Lokesh trekked 3,132 km across 97 assembly segments to make the most of any anti-incumbency sentiment, before concluding the padayatra on December 20. Though he had narrowly lost the 2019 assembly polls from Mangalagiri (by 5,337 votes), Lokesh is confident of avenging that loss in 2024.

Even before Lokesh's padayatra had ended, Naidu's wife Nara Bhu-



# देश का नं. 1 हिंदी न्यूज़ ऐप

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**OPEN CHALLENGE** Andhra Pradesh Congress president Y.S. Sharmila campaigning in Visakhapatnam, April 28

vaneswari, the third daughter of TDP founder N.T. Rama Rao (NTR), launched the 'Nijam Gelavali' (Truth Should Triumph) tour on October 25, 2023 from Chandragiri in Tirupati district. The purpose was to console the families of TDP sympathisers who had reportedly died, "unable to bear the illegal arrest" of Naidu. Bhuvanewari met 203 bereaved families and offered financial help. That Bhuvanewari—who has so far kept a low profile, managing the Naidu family's Heritage Foods Ltd business—decided to step out is being seen as a last-ditch attempt by her husband to wrest power. The Nijam Gelavali tour took Bhuvanewari through 95 assembly constituencies across all 25 Lok Sabha constituencies before her tour concluded on April 13. To consolidate the gains from the tours by Bhuvanewari and Lokesh, Naidu began the 'Praja Galam' (Voice of the People) campaign on March 6. By all accounts, he has made the most of it, conducting roadshows and addressing rallies till late in the evening.

Realising early that the TDP may not be able to defeat YSRCP on its own, Naidu has since last summer cultivated an alliance with the BJP and

## THE ABSENCE OF COORDINATION BETWEEN THE TDP, BJP AND JSP HAS MADE TRANSFER OF VOTES AMONG THE ALLIES SEEM LIKE A MIRAGE

the JSP, though it was announced this March. For 2024, the TDP has kept a major share of the seats—144 assembly seats and 17 LS constituencies—for itself, handing out only 31 assembly and eight LS seats to its allies.

### NDA Blues

But not all is going well for the alliance. Analysts say that it suffers from an absence of a concerted effort by the three, which could undo NDA plans at the constituency level and in booth management. Inter-party differences rose to the surface too, with the BJP demonstrating publicly on April 30 against the alliance's common manifesto. The saffron party is also angry with Naidu and Pawan Kalyan for not featuring PM Modi's image and cutouts prominently during their campaigns.

Add to this the absence of coordination among the three parties, which has made transfer of votes seem like a mirage. There were other discordant notes too. While Naidu assured four per cent reservation for Muslims, Union home minister Amit Shah has stated that the BJP was against the very idea—reason enough for Muslim voters to shift towards the YSRCP.

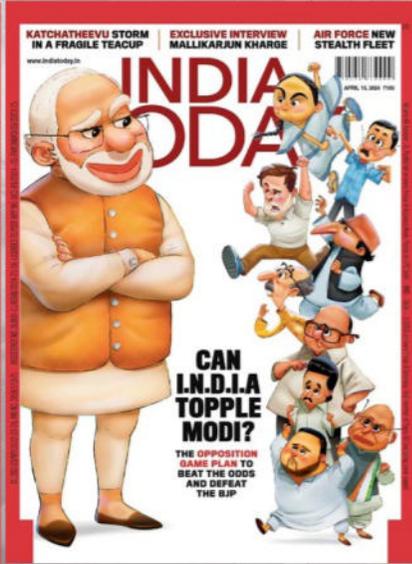
**P**rotesting the disbursal of social security pensions—around 6.5 million people get welfare pensions amounting to Rs 2,000 crore a month—saying it can affect voter behaviour has also boomeranged on the TDP. The Election Commission of India has now stepped in, clearing the state's payments due in May to beneficiary bank accounts. A staggering 96.7 per cent of Rs 1,945 crore to 6.54 million pensioners was disbursed to beneficiaries in the first two days of May itself. Those who did not get pensions through direct bank transfers were paid through the village and ward secretariat system. To be sure, it is advantage YSRCP here.

Political analysts believe that in a head-to-head contest between the YSRCP and the TDP, Jagan retains the edge. "The YSRCP social base was broadened through mass contact and welfare programmes, which would have cut into the TDP voter base among the poor," says Vageeshan. However, an undercurrent of anti-incumbency, along with the perception of corruption in governance, may whittle down the YSRCP's prospects. The CM, though, has played his hand intelligently. As social commentator A.M. Khan Yazdani puts it: "Despite signs of anti-incumbency, Jagan has won the trust of his Reddy community even as he implemented schemes for the needy." On May 13, Andhra's voters will choose between Jagan's slew of efficiently delivered welfare measures and Naidu's charges of corruption and appeals for a last chance. Expect a fight to the finish. ■

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THEATRE

## Back to Roots

Known for his lavish musicals, theatre director **Feroz Abbas Khan** returns to classic theatre with his latest, *Letters of Suresh*



**Letters of Suresh,**  
an adaptation of playwright  
Rajiv Joseph's work, is being  
staged from May 9-12 at  
the Nita Mukesh Ambani  
Cultural Centre



**ROLE PLAY** A scene from *Letters of Suresh*

In the last decade, Feroz Abbas Khan has become the S.S. Rajamouli or Sanjay Leela Bhansali of the stage. With musicals like *Mughal-e-Azam*, *Raunaq & Jassi* and *Civilization to Nation*—the pro-

duction which marked the launch of the Nita Mukesh Ambani Cultural Centre (NMACC) in Mumbai—which are big on scale and spectacle and incorporate varied performing arts, Khan has made theatre more accessible. It wasn't

a “conscious decision”, says Khan, to anchor a ship of 100-plus cast and crew day in and day out, but doing so did necessitate a “yearning”. “When it comes to pure theatre, my *parvarish* [foundation], where I feel most comfortable is the

minimum,” he says. “Going to the purest form of language and performance...that’s the power of theatre.”

From May 9-12 at the NMACC, Khan practices what he preaches as he adapts Indian-American playwright and Pulitzer Prize finalist Rajiv Joseph’s drama, *Letters of Suresh*. A play composed entirely of letters which features four actors performing a series of monologues, it sees Khan hark back to his roots which resulted in plays like *Tumhari Amrita*, *Salesman Ram Lal*, *Gandhi vs Gandhi* and *Saalgirah*. Marking the stage debut of Vir Hirani, son of filmmaker Rajkumar Hirani, the play will enjoy a run at Prithvi Theatre after a few months.

It was while *Mughal-e-Azam* was running at the prestigious Lincoln Theatre in New York last year that Khan got an opportunity to meet Joseph. Not to be un-

MUSIC

## THE GREAT DISRUPTOR

Rapper SlowCheeta is trying to shake things up with his EP, *Scene Mein Bawaal*

**A**pril was a busy time for rapper and actor SlowCheeta aka Chaitnya Sharma. Last month saw the release of the sports drama *Maidaan*, in which he played legendary Indian footballer P.K. Banerjee, as well as his sophomore EP, *Scene Mein Bawaal*. Both projects had been in the making for three years, but SlowCheeta didn't work on them simultaneously because he consciously keeps his two careers separate. “I would not like to be writing an EP while doing a film and vice versa,” says the 33-year-old MC

signed to INCINK Records, the music label co-founded by actor Ranveer Singh. “It seems a bit disloyal to one if I do something else at the same time”.

SlowCheeta candidly admits that he waited to put out *Scene Mein Bawaal*, and the Singh-featuring video for focus track ‘*Kar De Kaa?*’, after *Maidaan* opened at the box office in order to capitalise on the attention he would get from the big-budget Bollywood production.

Now that the film is out, he's shifted his focus to promoting the EP, which is based around the idea of taking listeners through

“every emotion” you experience when taking a particular step. “It could be something as silly as starting a workout or something as deep as hugging your father after 20 years,” he says.

On the dance-friendly ‘*Kar De Kaa?*’, SlowCheeta playfully asks his audience whether he should go ahead with a plan. Next we hear him chopping—a form of super-fast rapping—on ‘*Maniac*’, which represents the phase when you overthink the decision. It's followed by the galloping ‘*Chaaku Bhonk*’, which aims to capture the confidence you eventually gain to finally execute it, and party

derprepared, he headed to The Drama Book Shop to acquaint himself with his works. *Letters of Suresh* was one of the buys. “One of the indicators [of whether I should do a play] is how long it stays with me. If it keeps coming back and you feel like re-reading it, I must adapt it,” says Khan.

layered, complex, dense yet so accessible and compelling because it explores so many themes at the same time,” he adds.

Like Khan’s other works, *Letters of Suresh* also relies on audience participation albeit of a different kind compared to his musicals—“they need to

to paper, the little pause allows reflection,” he says, adding how instant communication has made us lose that ability. “With letters you are able to express yourself much better.”

The stage is how Khan has been expressing himself for four decades now, first as an actor and then as director. He credits the late Jennifer Kendal, founder of Prithvi Theatre and wife of late actor Shashi Kapoor, as an instrumental figure in his life. “I would have been a CA or a manager if not for Jennifer and Prithvi,” he says. Khan was part of the founding team of the Prithvi Theatre Festival and later served as its artistic director after Kendal’s demise. These days though Khan is better known for being a mentor and adviser to NMACC.

What’s impressive is that at an age when most

are preparing to hang up their boots, Khan, 65, is going through one of his most productive phases. In addition to *Letters of Suresh*, he has two more scripts waiting, with at least one looking to premiere this year. And no it’s not a great Indian musical but like *Letters of Suresh* one where the text takes precedence. “[The] journey has to be about going into uncharted territories...it’s the only way you grow,” he says. Success, for Khan, cannot come at the cost of stagnation. Musicals for now take a backseat, but the creator in him is still raring to go. Says Khan, “I haven’t felt so passionate, so able to do the work that I want to. I’d like to die with my boots on, in a rehearsal room or on the stage.” Trust Khan to be dramatic even in imagining the unimaginable. ■

—Suhani Singh

## WITH *LETTERS OF SURESH*, FEROZ ABBAS KHAN, BEST KNOWN FOR HIS BIG MUSICALS, TAKES THE MINIMALIST ROUTE, EMPHASISING ON THE ART OF LISTENING

The work sees Suresh, an origami wunderkind based in the US, read out letters he’s written to Father Hashimoto, a priest based in Nagasaki. “It’s so

link a lot of things”, says Khan. The adaptation wasn’t entirely easy for Khan either. “Only when I know it will be difficult to do, will I do it,” he says. With this play, Khan is also evoking the lost art of letter writing. “When you put pen



anthem ‘90’s ke Ladke’, which celebrates achieving what you set out to do. On outro ‘Chai Biskoot’, he reflects on “what just happened”.

As with most rappers, identity is a recurring theme in SlowCheeta’s work. In his case, it’s something he’s been grappling with since he was a child, he says. His first name Chaitnya is spelt without the

second ‘a’ because an uncle suggested his parents remove it for numerological reasons. Similarly, his performance name is written without the ‘h’ that ends “cheetah”. “I’ve spent my life correcting people [about my name],” he says. “So when I started writing as ‘Cheeta’, I would leave out the ‘h’ [perhaps] as a subconscious way [to say], this is my unique identity.”

His upper-middle class background also makes him stand out among his peers. The rapper says he named his EP *Scene Mein Bawaal* (Commotion in the Scene) to let people know that “I’ve come here to disrupt everything”. And that despite his occasional hiatuses, he’s “not going anywhere”. ■

—Amit Gurbaxani

Rapper and actor **SlowCheeta, aka Chaitnya Sharma**, consciously keeps his two careers separate

O

On a humid afternoon in May, seated against the backdrop of a poster of *Amélie*, Shriya Pilgaonkar is savouring a small pizza on what she says is her “last cheat day”. She has just finished a round of promotions for the second season of the Zee5 show, *The Broken News* (released on May 3). Unlike her peers, she loves the publicity tour. “I get to dress up,” she says. “A lot of characters I play don’t end up dressing so much.”

Pilgaonkar is talking about her parts in *The Broken News* (Radha, an intrepid reporter) and *Guilty Minds* (Advocate Kashaf, a righteous lawyer) which have made her the woke girl of streaming, who fights the good fight. They showcase an actor adept at heavy dramas, and also earned her the

tag of “serious actor”. In Bhuvan Bam-created comedy thriller, *Taaza Khabar*, she got to hop off the moral high ground. That show too returns for another season later this year on Disney+ Hotstar. Pilgaonkar doesn’t want to be stereotyped. “I want to dance on screen, do a fantastic love story. I know I am capable [of it], it’s just someone taking the leap of faith to present me in that way,” she says.

On the surface, Pilgaonkar is part of the ‘nepo baby’ brigade but she’s cut from another stone. The only child of actors Sachin and Shriya Pilgaonkar, who have thrived in both Hindi and Marathi cinema, she didn’t want to be an actor for the longest time. Instead, her interest lay in swimming, academics and extra-curricular activities. Learning kathak, including *abhinaya*, helped her connect with the actor within her. Add to it that she always believed “in the power and wonder of story”. “My



**Shriya Pilgaonkar** shuns labels, be it that of an OTT actor or a serious actor



father told me a new story every night before going to bed. I know what it can do to your imagination and creativity,” she adds.

In many ways Pilgaonkar’s cinematic journey commenced perfectly, being cast alongside Shah Rukh Khan in *Fan* (2016). “I was proud that I started off with a film that was taking risks,” she says. The action thriller with its meta-

commentary on stardom and hard look at fandom, however, failed to win over the masses. “I know better than to assume things will go as per plan,” she says. “You have to improvise in life as you do on camera.” She landed two films but they failed to take off. She acted in plays, did a small part in a French film and auditioned. Two years later, she found herself in the “blockbuster” she wanted, Amazon Prime’s *Mirzapur*. Soon Pilgaonkar was being called on the streets by her character’s name, Sweetie. “It gave me the momentum, push and fame but

OTT

## Cusp of Greatness

**Shriya Pilgaonkar** comes into her own as an intrepid reporter in Zee5’s *The Broken News*



# INDIA AT CANNES 2024

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## « **Sister Midnight**

**K**aran Kandhari's **British** production will be premiered in the **Directors' Fortnight** section. **Radhika Apte** stars as a newly married woman in a Mumbai slum. **Circumstances** make her set out for revenge in what the makers promise is "a fantastical punk comedy, a feminist revenge film, and a revamped vampire movie rolled into one".



I still wanted to take time to lock something that would truly give me scope to perform," she notes. That opportunity came her way in 2022 with two strong-headed, driven protagonists—Kashaf and Radha. Much like them, she has learned to stand up for herself.

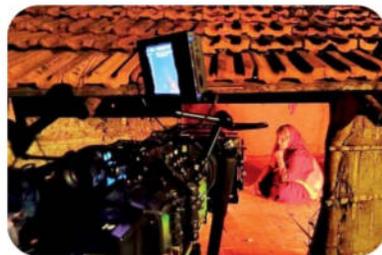
What Pilgaonkar needs is a big screen break, like her *Mirzapur* co-star Vikrant Massey recently experienced with *12th Fail*. "More than restart, for me it is shifting gears," she says. "I want to get parts which surprise people. I feel I am on the cusp of something exciting. What that is, I don't know yet." It's in the not knowing that Pilgaonkar finds endless possibilities. ■

—Suhani Singh



## **Santosh** ▲

**S**andhya Suri's feature film, premiering in the **Un Certain Regard** section, follows a widowed woman (Shahana Goswami) who gets her husband's job of being a police constable in rural north India. She gets drawn into the investigation of a rape and murder of a low-caste girl by a charismatic, feminist inspector.



## **Sunflowers Were the First Ones to Know** ▲

**F**ilm and Television Institute of India student Chidanand Naik's short film about an elderly woman stealing a village rooster and her family being exiled in return as per prophecy competes in the **La Cinef** section, which highlights entries from film schools.

## **In Retreat** ▼

**T**his 74-minute film, set in Ladakh, from director Maisam Ali, filmmaker Payal Kapadia's FTII (Film and Television Institute of India) batchmate, will premiere in the Cannes sidebar programme **ACID** (Association for the Diffusion of Independent Cinema). Harish Khanna stars as an urban nomad who returns to his hometown in the



mountains. His reconciliation with his past is underscored by acclaimed Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish's works.

## ▼ **All We Imagine as Light**

**S**et in Mumbai, this drama by Kapadia, stars Kani Kusruti and Divya Prabha. It follows her film *A Night of Knowing Nothing*, which won the Best Documentary award at the 2021 Cannes Film Festival. It will be competing for the coveted **Palme D'Or** against entries by world cinema heavyweights such as Francis Ford Coppola, Jia Zhangke, David Cronenberg and Yorgos Lanthimos.

—Devarsi Ghosh



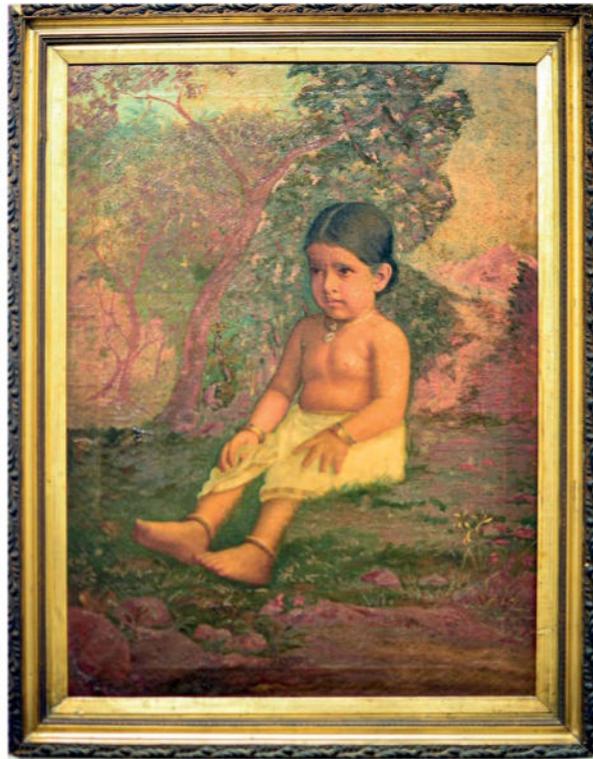
## EXHIBITION

# Time Travel

An exhibition in Bengaluru is showcasing an unseen artwork by legendary artist **Raja Ravi Varma**

**T**here's no better way to celebrate the 'Father of Modern Indian Art', Raja Ravi Varma, than through a showcase that delves deep into the many layers of his life. On the occasion of Varma's 176th birth anniversary (which fell on April 29), the Raja Ravi Varma Heritage Foundation opened the exhibition *Daughter of Providence* within its premises on Bengaluru's Lavelle Road that will go on till May 30.

"The idea behind the showcase was to highlight various elements of Ravi



RAJA RAVI VARMA HERITAGE FOUNDATION

## REGAL LEGACY

Painting of a young Maharani Sethu Lakshmi Bayi (1898) by her grandfather Raja Ravi Varma; (below) her portrait by granddaughter Bharani Thirunal Rukmini Bayi Thampuran



## BOOKS

# A BREATH OF FRESH PERSPECTIVE

**Ganesh V. Shivaswamy** brings a sharp and balanced approach to his three volumes on Raja Ravi Varma

**H**insight is a great teacher. Even though there have been many volumes on the noble painter Raja Ravi Varma, the three under review show, with the present's technological telescopes zoomed on the past, that there is much room left for fresh interpretations. In 1894, an anonymous Malayalam book appeared on Ravi Varma which stopped at the opening of his Press in Bombay. Then came Ramananda Chatterjee in 1904,

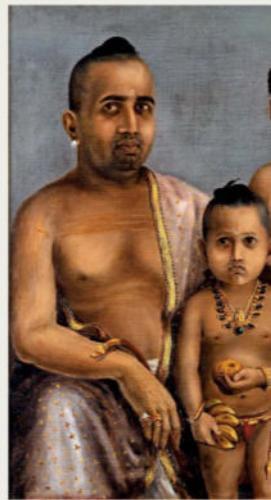
followed by Balakrishnan Nair in the 1950s, E.M.J. Venniyoor in 1980, and Rupika Chawla in 2010. What differentiates the tomes under review is not just the weight of the author's scholarship, but a very sharp eye which zooms into the many layers beyond the obvious.

The principal difference, which Shivaswamy brings with his work, is the awakening of the artist's context. He looks piercingly at the mindset of the period and the original, avant-garde vision of the protagonist.

In a fascinating lecture the author delivered at DAG, New Delhi, he pointed out that the first paid commission of Raja Ravi Varma was a 'legal', not 'regal', commission. It was Kizhakkepat Krishna Menon, Justice P. Muthuswamy Aiyar and G.P. Pillai who paid him to do portraits.

Looking at the precedents—the influences of murals, court paintings, photography—the eminent viewpoint of the author studies the whole process of image building. He also takes

COLLECTION DAG



**A 'LEGAL' COMMISSION**  
The Kizhakkepat Krishna Menon & Family' (1870) by Raja Ravi Varma

Varma's illustrious legacy, particularly his granddaughter—Maharani Sethu Lakshmi Bayi—the last ruling queen of the erstwhile Travancore kingdom,” says Gitanjali Maini, the foundation's CEO.

This art show has on display five oil-on-canvas artworks and photographs that cover the Maharani's life from her infancy to her reign, and then finally a quiet life in Bengaluru.

Conceptualised by the foundation with research and documentation by historian Manu S. Pillai, author of the award-winning *The Ivory Throne: Chronicles of the House of Travancore*, the centrepiece of the exhibition is a hitherto unseen original painting of the Maharani from the Travancore royal collection that depicts her as a three-year-old child painted by her grandfather Ravi Varma. “Legend has it that it was presented to her by Ravi Varma on the occasion of Onam after her coronation as the Maharani. The eyes and expression in this painting are unmistakably Ravi Varma's style, capturing a moment of amusement yet stoicism, embodying the qualities of a future Maharani,” says Bharani Thirunal Rukmini Bayi Thampuran, chairperson of the foundation.

Other paintings include one done in oil by Rukmini Bayi that depicts her grandmother—the Maharani—during her time as Regent. “Having known and cherished my grandmother deeply, I feel like I've infused her life essence into this piece and I'm delighted that it is now with Gitanjali,” she adds.

While the focus of the foundation is on the documentation and preservation of Ravi Varma's work, Maini says they often come across paintings done by the artist that have never been seen, researched, documented or published before. They continually work with collectors or public and private museums that house or own works by this incredible artist. “Therefore, it becomes the responsibility of the foundation that such paintings are talked about and displayed for the world to see,” reiterates Maini.

Are there plans to take this one-of-a-kind exhibition to other cities?

“We are definitely considering showcasing the event in other cities like Mumbai and Delhi,” says Mani. Exhibitions further afield, in Singapore and elsewhere are also being considered.” ■

—Geetika Sachdev

THE ART SHOW HAS ON DISPLAY FIVE OIL-ON-CANVAS ARTWORKS AND PHOTOS THAT COVER THE MAHARANI'S LIFE



**RAJA RAVI VARMA**  
An Everlasting Imprint  
by Ganesh V. Shivaswamy  
WHITE FALCON PUBLISHING

**Vol. 1: The Shaping of an Artist;** ₹4,750;  
352 pages

**Vol. 2: A Resonant Impression;** ₹4,550;  
320 pages

**Vol. 3: A Divine Omnipresence;** ₹4,750;  
348 pages



a look at the act of painting itself, with the fashionable and progressive European consciousness of perspective, shadow, posture and landscape creating a new genre. Perhaps the most important aspect of Raja Ravi Varma was how Dadabhai Naoroji convinced him to open a press in his own name, discontinuing the Chitrashala Press in Pune. With this, his paintings reached the public with a snowballing geometric progression of praise and purchase, a visual virus of the early 20th century, so to say, which consumed all elements of society by the sheer magic of lustrous prints married to the raging industrial revolution. This was the chromolithographic Ravi Varma Press which influenced the essence of Indian attire in theatre, cinema and even the high society of the times, to define the everlasting pan-Indian image of us, the Indians. While the royal patrons commissioned oil paintings, the

glistening chromolithographs rolled off the printing press to reach every domestic shrine within reach. This whole process was possible, as the author explains, because the picture was the protagonist, not the artist. The pictures of Raja Ravi Varma, which hold the popular imagination while the artist waltzes in and out of this art scenario for critics, were nothing short of a visual revolution.

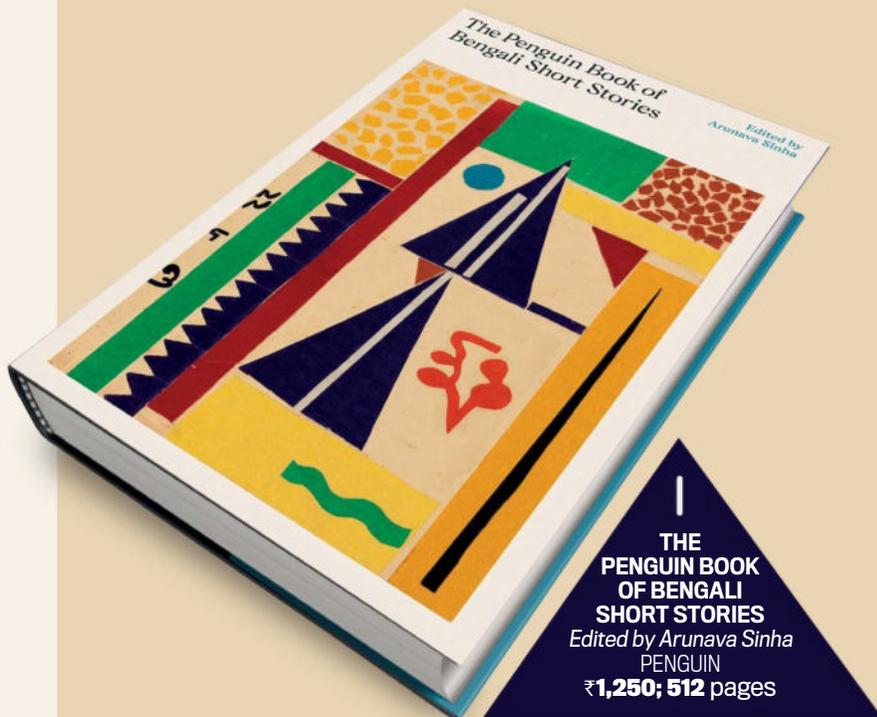
Shivaswamy does not approach the artist in any hagiographic or deferential manner. He tries to be as analytical and objective as possible, and his mind understands where to engage with the artist with respect and where to criticise him, and to join those who may have written of him only in praise, such as Coomaraswamy and Chawla. But he also agrees with the critics like Smith and Pearson, where they are reasonable, because Ravi Varma was a painter, not a God. ■

—Aman Nath



# Diverse Vignettes

*Edited by Arunava Sinha, The Penguin Book of Bengali Short Stories is a landmark new anthology which includes several previously untranslated works*



In 2021, Delhi University quietly dropped Mahasweta Devi's classic short story 'Draupadi' from its undergraduate English curriculum, prompting over a dozen members of the Academic Council to issue a note of dissent. First published in 1978, 'Draupadi' is about an adivasi woman from Jharkhand suffering sexual torture in the custody of the Indian armed forces. The story is a part of *The Penguin Book of Bengali Short Stories*, edited by Arunava Sinha. The project brings together 37 stories across nearly 500 pages, including works by titans like Rabindranath Tagore, Ashapurna Devi, Sankar and Sunil Gangopadhyay, as well as contemporary

writers like Manoranjan Byapari, Anita Agnihotri, Shahidul Zahir and Selina Hossain. This book has something in it for readers of every persuasion. As the last two names indicate, it includes Bangladeshi writers working in Bangla as well.

'Draupadi' is actually one of the few 'automatic' or 'canonical' selections in this remarkable volume. Rabindranath Tagore's 'Dead or Alive' (the opening story) and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's 'Paradise of the Wretched' are two others. As Sinha explains during a telephonic interview, this was part of the process. "I don't think there are too many 'shoo-in' selections in this book," he says. "I knew that this book

will reach audiences in the UK and US so for me it was more about picking the right writers and then running with that selection. I knew that Mahasweta Devi had to be there and I picked 'Draupadi', which is one of her best-known stories. At the same time, I didn't want this to be a representative collection or something that's covering the region geographically."

Delightful surprises abound in this collection. Moti Nandy's 'The Pearl' is a beautifully-crafted tragicomedy about a chance encounter between football stars past and present. Purnendu Pattrea's 30-page 'Conversations' treads the line between poetry and prose. Samaresh Basu's 'Aadaab' is a cautionary tale about the madness of communal violence. But my personal favourite is Manik Bandopadhyay's 'Prehistoric', a highly subtle and symbolism-laden story about a heavily wounded thief who's all but abandoned in the forest by a man he considered a friend.

"Manik Bandopadhyay is considered one of Bengal's finest writers," says Sinha. "He was a Marxist and you can see those concerns in 'Prehistoric' without the story ever becoming pamphleteering. You can see how he shows the process of an oppressed man losing his humanity out of neglect."

Sinha points out that stories published in the last decade or so are in the minority here. "Stories need at least a decade or 15 years to prove that they've stood the test of time," he says. He hopes to assemble another volume of Bengali stories soon, this time focusing on stories written after 2010 or so. On the evidence of *The Penguin Book of Bengali Short Stories*, that book will be unputdownable as well. ■

—Aditya Mani Jha



# R

Reading *Maya Nagari* is a little like crisscrossing the city in a BEST bus. Not one of those brisk routes that takes us along broad highways in a businesslike manner, but a ride that loops around neighbourhoods and meanders through narrow bylanes, offering glimpses into mithai

bhandars, marriage mandaps, first-floor windows, the lives of others.

Edited by Shanta Gokhale and Jerry Pinto, *Maya Nagari* possesses the haphazard, mosaic-like quality of the city that holds this anthology together. The 21 short stories traverse neighbourhoods, economic classes, communities and seven decades. Befitting the multilingual nature of Bombay-Mumbai, they represent works from

**IN THESE STORIES WE MEET MEMORABLE BOMBAYITES AND TRAVEL THROUGH A MULTITUDE OF MUMBAIS, FROM CHAWLS TO THE TAJ HOTEL**



the lovers who spend stolen afternoons under the unforgiving sun on the rocks of Bandra Bandstand; the Danger-log who burn each other's shops, attack each other's children, and live to cause trouble.

On these pages we meet an array of memorable Bombayites/Mumbaikars. The one-eyed Englishman who refuses to leave newly Independent India in Ismat Chughtai's plangent story 'Quit India'. The all-too-familiar residents of Batatyachi Chaal, whose attempts at coming together end with a petty squabble in Pu La Deshpande's darkly amusing 'A Cultural Movement is Born'. And the stubborn but powerful mother whose complaints against a blaring loudspeaker have unfortunate consequences in Manasi's gut-wrenching 'Civic Duty and Physics Practicals'.

Alongside these motley guides, we travel through a multitude of Mumbais. The chawls of the mill workers during the collapse of the textile industry. The cushioned cane armchairs scattered amidst the tall potted plants and salty air of the Taj Mahal Hotel. The Parsi colony on Sleater Road with its nosy neighbours and neat compound. And with each of these excursions into the familiar and the unfamiliar, into brothels and bustling offices, the attentive reader comes closer to comprehending the soul of the city. ■

—Shabnam Minwalla

BOOKS

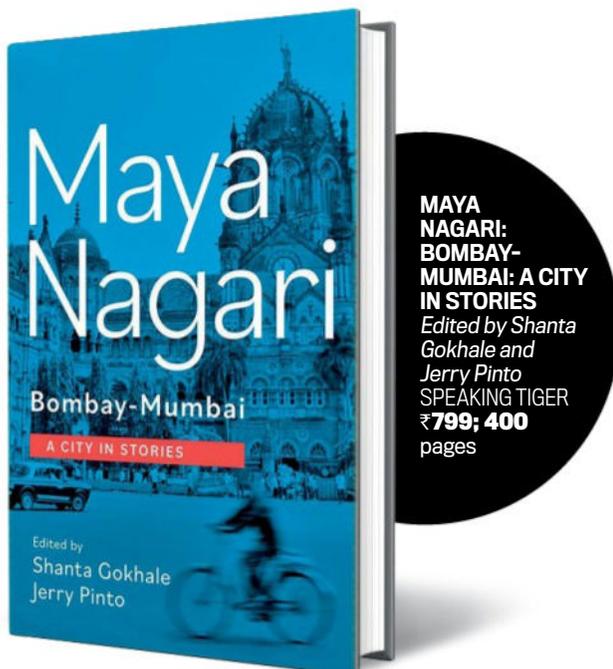
# CITY OF DREAMS

*This anthology of stories about Mumbai is like the city itself—crowded and chaotic, but ultimately illuminating*

eight languages. And in a nod to the higgledy-piggledy nature of the city, the stories have been arranged without organisation, structure, chronology. The outcome is a book that is crowded, chaotic, confusing, overwhelming—but ultimately illuminating and true.

"You cannot catch a city in words. You cannot catch a city at all," Pinto writes in the 'Introduction', making it clear that these stories do not claim to encapsulate the city. What they hope, however, is to spark reflection and understanding. For, as Gokhale writes, "I see this collection as an invitation: read it to know something of Mumbai, but also to know something of your own city, your own self."

The collection is also an invitation to know something of the people at the periphery of our vision—the children who inhabit the dark regions beneath railway bridges;



# Chicken Soup for the Heart

Former veejay, actor and now travel influencer, **Shenaz Treasury** is out with a book based on past romances—*All He Left Me Was a Recipe*

**Q. When did you discover the writer within?**

I've been writing since I was a kid. When I had this idea, I actually wanted to make it into a show. But since that's such a process, I reached out to Penguin Random House India for a book, and they loved the idea. I started writing it five years ago but around the same time my travel vlogging really picked up and this got a little sidelined. Then last year, I decided to travel less, write more and complete it, and the book is here!

**Q. How much of the story is fact, how much fiction?**

I'd love for people to guess... that keeps it spicy! But let's say, there's more fact than fiction. It's about a girl's life from when she's four to 40 and every chapter she's in a different stage of life, with a different guy. So, you see her life journey through the guys she dates.

**Q. Who was your favourite character?**

I'm dying to make this a show. Every episode will have a different hot guy and, sometimes, one will come back as well! But if I had to pick a favourite, it would be Roller Boy, whom she first meets and dates in 2001 and then he comes back in 2011. He's the 'baddest' boy in the book, the wildest, most loving, passionate and sexy. I like bad boys a lot. Everyone sees me as a good girl...I think good girls like bad boys because they free us from the pressure of being good girls.

**Q. Be it relationships or social media, you always put yourself out there. Have present-day trolls ever made you rethink your approach?**

I'm just me. At 16, I was doing TV commercials...then I did MTV, then movies in India, then MTV in Asia, then I moved to New York, and I did movies and shows there. You can't be an actor or a TV personality or a social media influencer if you care about what other people think. So, now on social media, I'm just authentically me. And that's not exhausting, it's exhilarating.

—with Priya Pathiyan



Photograph by HARNESH; Styling by NIKITA HATEY

# HELICOPTER YATRA MAKES HISTORIC DEBUT FOR ADI KAILASH AND OM PARVAT IN UTTARAKHAND



“In April this year, Delhi-based advocate Roachak Saxsena found himself at the heart of a historic moment. He was part of the very first batch of pilgrims to embark on a helicopter yatra to the sacred Adi Kailash, organized by the Uttarakhand Tourism Development Board (UTDB). Saxsena, overwhelmed by the experience, described it as “mesmerizing.” Witnessing Lord Shiva’s abode without the usual arduous trek left him speechless. He credits Uttarakhand Tourism and Trip to Temples for making this dream a reality and enthusiastically recommends it to his loved ones.”

Nestled in the Vyas valley of Pithoragarh district, Adi Kailash holds immense religious significance. It’s one of the five revered Panch Kailash yatras, believed to be the second abode of Lord Shiva and Parvati. Adding to the mystical aura of the region is Om Parvat, a natural wonder located on the India-Nepal-Tibet border. This mountain boasts a perfect “Om” shape, visible only from the Indian side. The ideal vantage point for this breathtaking sight is Nabhidang, a mere 11 kilometers from the Old Lipu Lekh pass.

Determined to make Adi Kailash and Om Parvat more accessible to devotees and tourists, the Uttarakhand Tourism Development Board launched a groundbreaking initiative this year: the aerial yatra. The inaugural batch of this unique pilgrimage took off on April 15th, with flights continuing until May 9th. Following this initial run, the yatra will reopen its doors to the public during the winter months (November to March) to accommodate the seasonal snow cover.

This innovative project is the product of a successful partnership between UTDB and Noida-based travel agency Trip to Temples. UTDB played a crucial role in securing the necessary approvals and laying the groundwork for the yatra. Trip to Temples, on the other hand, brings its expertise in marketing and operations to the table, ensuring a smooth and enriching experience for pilgrims.

The winter yatra, designed for the months of November to March, will be a four-night, five-day package starting and ending in Pithoragarh. Pilgrims will be transported by

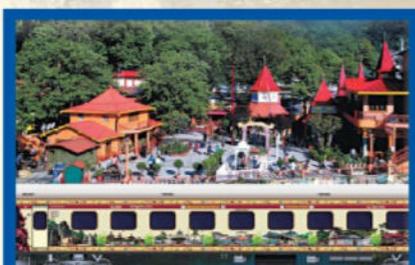
modern H-125 helicopters, with ATVs providing additional support for navigating the terrain. The itinerary promises six exhilarating helicopter rides, offering breathtaking aerial views of the majestic Himalayas.

“The aerial yatra to Adi Kailash and Om Parvat has been initiated by Uttarakhand Tourism,” Uttarakhand Tourism Secretary and UTDB CEO Sachin Kurve told India Today. “The first public yatra commenced on April 15th and will continue until May 9. We’ll then resume operations in the winter months, from November to March.”

The yatra goes beyond simply providing access to sacred sites. It also aims to empower local communities. Pilgrims will be accommodated in cozy homestays located in the charming villages of Gunji, Nabhi, and Napalchu. This approach not only provides a unique cultural experience but also generates much-needed winter employment opportunities for local residents.

“This helicopter yatra marks a significant step forward in making the wonders of Uttarakhand more accessible to a wider range of pilgrims and tourists. It not only offers a breathtaking journey but also fosters responsible tourism practices that benefit local communities.”

Vikas Mishra, the Founder and CEO of Trip to Temples, expressed his company’s immense pride in being part of this historic project. He looks forward to future collaborations and contributing to the development of sustainable and accessible pilgrimage experiences in Uttarakhand.



## Manaskhand Express Special Tourist Train

Uttarakhand Tourism has entered into an Agreement with IRCTC to provide Tours to hidden destinations of Uttarakhand through a Special Tourist Train, the first trip of which started from Pune on 22.04.2024 on 10 Nights/11 Days journey.

While the itineraries have been curated to include places in the Udhm Singh Nagar, Champawat, Pithoragarh, Almora and Nainital districts, the end to end services are being provided by IRCTC and the bookings are also available on the [irctctourism.com](http://irctctourism.com) website.

This unique initiative aims to expose some of the best kept secrets of Uttarakhand to citizens from different parts of the country.



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and we are here to keep building India.

