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THE TRIBAL BALLOT WHY IT IS CRUCIAL

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JUNE 3, 2024 ₹100

INDIA TODAY

“RESERVATION SHOULD BE BASED ON CASTE, NOT POVERTY”
AKHILESH YADAV, SP

“I DO NOT ACCEPT THAT MUSLIMS SHOULD BE KEPT OUT OF OBC RESERVATION”
MAMATA BANERJEE, TMC

“THERE WILL BE NO RESERVATION ON THE BASIS OF RELIGION. I WILL SACRIFICE MY LIFE FOR IT”
NARENDRA MODI, BJP



THE POLITICS OF RESERVATION

HOW AND WHY CASTE QUOTAS HAVE BECOME THE MOST FRACTIOUS AND POLARISING ISSUE IN ELECTION 2024, IMPACTING THE FINAL OUTCOME

“BJP WILL CHANGE THE CONSTITUTION AND END RESERVATION IF IT COMES TO POWER”
ARVIND KEJRIWAL, AAP



“WE ARE SUPPORTING A FOUR PER CENT RESERVATION FOR MUSLIMS AND THAT WILL CONTINUE”
CHANDRABABU NAIDU, TDP

“WE WILL AMEND THE CONSTITUTION TO REMOVE THE 50 PER CENT CAP ON RESERVATION”
RAHUL GANDHI, CONGRESS



Unlike the previous two general elections, the seven-phase, 44-day-long 2024 general election has not had one overarching narrative. There have been a smattering of themes, but none that gained dominating traction. The one that finally did, somewhat inadvertently, is the matter of reservations. It all started with Prime Minister Narendra Modi announcing that the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) would go “*char sau paar*” this time. After all, he was riding on a grand narrative. His party also neutralised the caste reservation threat by co-opting the JD(U) patriarch and Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar, who was the architect of the caste reservation issue. There was also the recent inauguration of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, signalling a renewed consecration of Hindutva. Mixed with that was the ambitious and attractive idea of Viksit Bharat. There was little to dampen the ruling party’s optimism. But it didn’t quite pan out that way.

What brought reservation back centre stage was a minor event in Karnataka: just before poll dates were announced, BJP MP Anantkumar Hegde, on the campaign trail, said getting 400-plus seats was a necessity for the NDA because “the Constitution has to be amended...it cannot be done without a two-thirds majority. Our Constitution was amended earlier to oppress the Hindu religion”. The Opposition picked up his remark and amplified it, saying it exposed the real intent of the BJP, which was to amend the Constitution and usher in a Hindutva nation in which all caste-based reservations would be abolished. This included the 50 per cent reservation permitted for government jobs and educational institutions for the Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs).

Reservation, for these caste groups, is as precious as land is for farmers, and the Opposition narrative gained traction, especially among the Dalits who have an emotional connection with the author of the Constitution, Babasaheb Ambedkar. It also brought to the fore the long-felt demand by the OBCs for a reservation policy that would do justice to the size of their population. Under the Constitution, the SC/ST segments have been awarded 15 per cent and 7.5 per cent reservation, respectively, more or less equivalent to their population ratio. The OBCs, despite their population being estimated at over 51 per cent when the last national caste census was done in 1931, were given 27 per cent to keep the overall quota within a 50 per cent limit. The OBC demand for quota justice grew urgent after Nitish’s administration released the findings of a state-level caste survey in October 2023 that confirmed a widely held surmise: the OBCs constituted 63.14 per cent of the state’s population. Subsequently, the Nitish government passed two amendments raising the state’s caste-based quotas from 50 per cent to 65 per cent. This aligned Bihar with states like Tamil Nadu, where reservations exceed the 50 per cent ceiling reinforced by the Supreme Court in 1992. Because it was in breach of that ceiling, on November 22, 2023, Bihar requested the Centre to include the two amended laws in the Ninth Schedule of the Constitution to shield them from judicial review—the same protection that Tamil Nadu’s 69 per cent quota has enjoyed since 1994. So far, the Centre has yet to respond.

Meanwhile, other states had picked up the baton from Nitish by either conducting, promising or contemplating a similar survey—Odisha, Karnataka, Telangana and Maharashtra. There

is also a snowballing effect when it comes to reservations. For instance, Maharashtra, already roiled by the split in two of its big regional parties, saw the gathering storm clouds create a new point of aggravation over reservation—a demand from the Marathas to be included in the OBC list, and a counter-mobilisation of OBCs. As the voices everywhere grew louder and coalesced into a chorus, the demand for a national caste census began to become a sharply identifiable line. The Congress, which had been moving towards a ‘Mandal Plus’ line of late, adopted the caste census as its main campaign plank. It said that once India’s OBC numbers were known, along with socio-economic data on which section had how much wealth, it would help initiate a more well-targeted endeavour at social justice and affirmative action. Standing in the company of two Mandal legatee parties in the INDIA bloc, the Rashtriya Janata Dal and the Samajwadi Party, the Congress also promised to abolish the 50 per cent judicial ceiling on reservations.

It was at this point that the BJP went into urgent damage control mode. With PM Modi leading a supercharged counterattack, it sought to rebrew the rhetoric with religion, confounding the narrative by invoking the Muslim spectre and reviving the old charge of appeasement politics against the Congress. The BJP worked on a twin strategy. First, it linked the Congress manifesto and Rahul

Gandhi’s theme of wealth redistribution to a Muslim-first policy. The prime minister decried Rahul’s promised “X-ray of India” as a step towards grabbing all assets and rights—from the “*mangalsutra*” of Hindu women to existing caste quotas—and parcel it out to Muslims. Second, the past actions of a few Congress-led state governments, which had pushed for Muslim reservations, helped establish a pattern of conduct. As Exhibit A, they pulled out a 2006 statement by the then prime minister Dr Manmohan Singh, claiming he had said, “Muslims had the first claim on the country’s resources”.

On its part, the Congress charged the BJP with “distorting” Manmohan’s statement and trying to polarise the electorate along communal lines. But reservations for Muslim backwards, an old but often contested part of the quota landscape, became an intrinsic part of the superheated debate. While the Constitution does not permit reservations based on religion, it does not debar quota inclusion on a socio-economic basis for caste groups, including among Muslims, if they are deemed to be backward. Many states, including BJP-ruled ones, have recognised certain backward Muslim communities and awarded them OBC quotas. Some states like Telangana, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh have advocated that Muslims be given a separate quota, but the Supreme Court has often struck down their efforts for violating the 50 per cent limit. For our cover story this week, Managing Editor Sunil Menon takes you through this complex and acrimonious political battle over reservations and its impact on the outcome of the general election. In this sea of narratives and counter-narratives, which one makes the difference in the end will be known only on June 4.



May 15, 2006

(Aroon Purie)

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Volume 49-Number 23; For the week
May 28-June 3, 2024, published on every Friday

- Editorial/Corporate Office Living Media India Ltd., India Today Group Mediaplex, FC-8, Sector-16A, Film City, Noida - 201301; Phone: 0120-4807100
- Subscriptions: For assistance contact, Customer Care, India Today Group, C-9, Sector-10, Noida (UP) - 201301. email: wecare@intoday.com; Phone / Whatsapp: +91 8597 778 778 (Monday to Friday, 10 am - 6pm).
- Sales: Direct all trade enquiries to General Manager (Sales), Living Media India Limited, C-9, Sector-10, Noida-201301 (UP).
- Regd. Office: F-26, First Floor, Connaught Place, New Delhi-110001.
- Impact Offices: 1201, 12th Floor, Tower 2A, One Indiabulls Centre, (Jupiter Mills), S.B. Marg, Lower Parel (West), Mumbai-400013; Phone: 022 69193355; Fax: 66063226
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Printed and published by Manoj Sharma on behalf of Living Media India Limited. Printed at Thomson Press India Limited, 18-35 Milestone, Delhi Mathura Road, Faridabad-121007, (Haryana) and at Rajhans Enterprises, 134, Industrial Town, 4th Main Road, Rajajinagar, Bengaluru-560044, (Karnataka).
 Published at F-26, First Floor, Connaught Place, New Delhi-110001.
 Editor: Raj Chengappa.

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MANDATE 2024 | MAHARASHTRA |

“RESPONSE FOR THE MAHAYUTI IS PALPABLE”



With the five-phase election for the 48 LS seats in his state now over, Chief Minister **Eknath Shinde** is confident that his and the Modi government's performance will give the ruling Mahayuti an edge. Edited excerpts from an interview with Sr Associate Editor **Dhaval S. Kulkarni**

Q. Which way is the wind blowing in Maharashtra?

A. The response for the Mahayuti is palpable. Our government has made pro-people decisions over the past two years. We have restarted projects that the MVA had shut down. We have launched schemes like Shasan Aplya Dari, and skill development programmes, loans, the CM self-employment scheme for women, youth, farmers and start-ups. Regardless of what the Opposition might say, these decisions have led to a sense of positivity among the people. The work done by Modiji, our government and the direct benefit transfer schemes have led to people realising that this government works for them. The impact will be seen in the polls.

HINDUSTAN TIMES

Q. There seems to be a perception that the NDA may face some losses in Maharashtra.

A. Uddhav Thackeray broke the alliance *dharma*. He stabbed the BJP in the back and became the CM. The people have not liked this. They may not say this openly, but will make their choice evident in the election. Later, we brought about a regime change in what was a practical move. Uddhavji used to sit at home and do his Facebook Live. He did not come to Mantralaya. We work 24X7. So, will people vote for those who work or those who sit at home?

Q. The linguistic divide in Mumbai seems to be getting stronger with a regional narrative.

A. The Opposition is trying to set a narrative and create a perception. The ground reality is different. They want to get Muslim support for the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA). Their propaganda will have an impact on the minority and the majority.

“UDDHAV THACKERAY BROKE THE ALLIANCE DHARMA. HE STABBED THE BJP IN THE BACK AND BECAME THE CM. THE PEOPLE HAVE NOT LIKED THIS. THEY WILL MAKE THEIR CHOICE EVIDENT IN THE ELECTION”

Q. You mean there will be a counter-mobilisation from the majority?

A. Hundred per cent. Pakistani flags are being shown in their rallies. [1993 bomb blast convicts] Iqbal Moosa, Yaqub Memon's people and bomb blast accused can be seen there. The bomb blasts in Mumbai have killed innocents. They are taking along those who are accused of killing people. Questions are being raised over whether [then SIT chief Hemant] Karkare was killed by [Pakistani terrorist Ajmal] Kasab's bullets [in the 26/11 terror attacks]. This is an insult to our martyrs.

Q. Would you say the quality of our political discourse is falling in general?

A. I agree, in toto. They are unable to digest that their government has been toppled and Eknath Shinde is the CM. They must accept the reality. Why are people leaving them? Why have around 50 corporators from Mumbai joined us? We are being abused and pejoratives are being hurled at us. We have taken several decisions for Mumbai, to reduce pollution; we started dispensaries, cash-less facilities in hospitals, and are providing quality healthcare.

Q. Major industrial projects like Vedanta-Foxconn left Maharashtra for Gujarat.

A. When did Vedanta go to Gujarat? When our government was just two months old. I had called Modi Saheb. He said such decisions are not taken in two months. These preparations take time and they had realised that the [MVA] government was not

cooperating and supporting them. The decision was taken during the MVA's time. In the two years that it was in power, the state lagged in attracting FDI (foreign direct investment). Our government ensured that Maharashtra led in attracting FDI. We signed MoUs worth Rs 5 lakh crore at Davos in two years and 70 per cent of them are being executed.

Q. The Maratha quota protests led to social unrest.

A. Pawar Saheb did not provide quotas to Marathas when he could. Many people benefitted from the support of the Maratha community

“THEY ARE UNABLE TO DIGEST THAT THEIR GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN TOPPLED AND EKNATH SHINDE IS THE CM. THEY MUST ACCEPT THE REALITY. WHY ARE PEOPLE LEAVING THEM?”

and gained power, but kept the Marathas deprived. When I became the CM, I took this up on priority and said that Marathas would be given reservations without affecting the quota for OBCs (other backward classes). We convened a special session of the legislature and provided 10 per cent quotas to the Marathas. [Maratha activist Manoj] Jarange-Patil sought Kunbi certificates for Marathas that they were not getting in Marathwada. We started giving out these certificates and lakhs have received them so far.

Q. There are fears among weaker sections like the Dalits and tribals that the Constitution could be changed, that reservation will be done away with.

A. This narrative is being pushed by the Opposition. The Constitution framed by Babasaheb [Ambedkar] is the best in the world. The Congress amended the Constitution 83 times. They harassed Babasaheb, and defeated him twice. Modiji started marking 'Samvidhan Diwas'. He converted Babasaheb's dwelling in London into a memorial. We are developing his memorial in Mumbai. No one can change Babasaheb's Constitution even if they have 400 or 450 seats. It will remain till the sun and moon are there.

Q. It is said that you were in the reckoning for the CM's chair

before Uddhav Thackeray took over in 2019.

A. He [Thackeray] said he did not want to become the CM and wanted a Shiv Sainik to head the state. Who was that Shiv Sainik? It was me. If not me, another Shiv Sainik could have been chosen to fulfill Balasaheb's [late Shiv Sena supremo Bal Thackeray] dream of a Shiv Sainik becoming the CM. But he [Uddhav Thackeray] chose to sit in the chair himself. He acted in a manner that was selfish and self-seeking. He asked Pawar Saheb to suggest his name for the post. After becoming the CM, he neglected the party and Shiv Sainiks. The Shiv Sainiks were being demoralised, and MLAs were very upset as they were not being given any developmental funds for their constituencies.

Q. Has the entry of deputy CM Ajit Pawar and his NCP in the government reduced the BJP's dependence on you? The cabinet expansion is also pending.

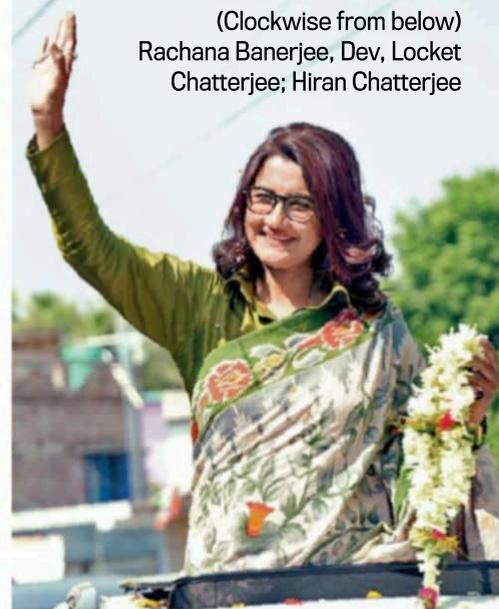
A. Who is saying this? Uddhav Thackeray? The people are not saying this. Our importance has not declined. We have secured 15 Lok Sabha seats. The cabinet expansion will take place.

Q. As the CM, what is your dream project?

A. Basic infrastructure and connectivity are important for Maharashtra. This includes roads, connectivity for its 720 km coastline, as well as air and rail connectivity. If any state is to progress, it must have good infrastructure and connectivity... When work on the 337 km metro routes in Mumbai will be completed, this will take private vehicles off the roads. Traffic congestion will also decline due to flyovers and bypasses. The state will progress due to all-round development. As John F. Kennedy said, "American roads are good not because America is rich, but America is rich because American roads are good." ■



Photographs by ANI



MANDATE 2024 | WEST BENGAL |

Star Wars in the Poll Firmament

Locket and Rachana in Hooghly, Hiran and Dev in Ghatal—two pairs of actor-turned-politicians slug it out in the polls

By Arkamoy Datta Majumdar

On March 3, West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee appeared on the immensely popular television game show for women, *Didi No. 1*. As millions watched, the Trinamool Congress chief read out her poems, painted, danced with tribal women and participated in games. Why this surprise appearance, many wondered. They got the answer a week later, when *Didi No. 1* host Rachana Banerjee—a former icon of Odia cinema who has also acted in Bengali, Hindi and South Indian films—was named the TMC candidate from the Hooghly constituency, which went to vote on May 20. Rachana took on incumbent BJP MP Locket Chatterjee, herself an actor-turned-politician. A popular entertainer, Mamata must have reasoned, has a better chance to take down a former TV star.

If the TMC hit upon this tactic to win back Hooghly, the BJP had exactly the same plan in mind. It nominated Hiranmoy (or Hiran)

Chatterjee—an actor-turned-BJP MLA—for the Ghatal seat, currently held by one of Bengali cinema's stars, Deepak Adhikari. Deepak, known by his screen name Dev, has been winning the seat since 2014 for the TMC. Though Dev had decided to quit after his second term, he changed his mind after Mamata and TMC national general secretary Abhishek Banerjee convinced him to contest again. Ghatal goes to the polls on May 25.

Both pairs of celebrities have shared screen space in the past. Locket and Hiran started their political careers with the TMC before switching to the BJP in 2015 and 2021 respectively.

In 2019, Locket snatched the Hooghly seat from the TMC's Ratna De Nag, chief of the women's wing of the BJP's state unit between 2017 and 2020, and later one of its five general secretaries. However, she soon fell out with party workers. In 2021, the TMC won all seven assembly segments in Hooghly; Locket herself was defeated

in Chunchura by the TMC's Asit Mazumdar. In fact, her growing unpopularity in Hooghly had left the BJP leadership wondering if she should be replaced by a new candidate. Even the TMC's surveys showed Locket's approval rating among her electorate to be one of the lowest among all the 42 MPs. "Rachana's show has made her a household name. Women connect with her promptly. Since Locket is already on the back foot, we believe we can woo voters through Rachana," a TMC source says.

Rachana herself has faced a few embarrassments, though. During campaigning, when asked about the alleged lack of industrialisation in Bengal, Rachana, referring to the smoke from factory chimneys she had seen on the way—and trying to make the point that Bengal has enough industry—enunciated thus with a wave of her hands: "Dhoan... dhoan" (smoke...smoke). It instantly provoked memes poking fun at her. Significantly, Singur, the seat of Mamata's anti-Tata movement that handed her Bengal's reins, falls under Hooghly.

In Ghatal, Hiran is linking every allegation of corruption and administrative mishandling directly to Dev, who has made the materialisation of the Ghatal Master Plan—a mega flood management programme—his poll plank. In the recent past, one of Dev's confidants was accused of taking a bribe against the promise of a government job. The fact that Dev was grilled by the Enforcement Directorate twice in connection with the cattle smuggling case has helped the BJP target him effectively. Abhishek has claimed that Hiran—who won on a BJP ticket from the Kharagpur Sadar assembly in 2021—had met him, hoping to rejoin the party. Hiran has rubbished the allegation.

The run up to the polls in Hooghly and Ghatal has grabbed eyeballs for its spectacle of stars crossing swords. That interest should extend up to June 4, when they will get to know which actor becomes Politician No. 1 in their seat. ■



ANI



MANDATE 2024 | AAP |

AAP'S SORDID S

By Avishek G. Dastidar

A week is a long time in politics, especially in election season. On May 10, the BJP was in shock after the Supreme Court granted interim bail to Aam Aadmi Party national convenor and Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal in the excise policy case (the BJP top leadership even called the SC order "extraordinary"). Kejriwal re-entered the poll campaign with a bang, making explosive allegations about the shifting power structure in the BJP top leadership.

A week later, though, the tables had been turned. At the centre of it was the party's Rajya Sabha MP Swati Maliwal, 39, who alleged that she was beaten up at Kejriwal's official residence by his long-time private assistant Bibhav Kumar on May 13. Soon, AAP was forced into fire-fighting mode, and the BJP was back in the game, launching back-to-back rallies by Prime Minister

Narendra Modi, party chief J.P. Nadda and Amit Shah.

With many of its 20 LS candidates (in Delhi, Punjab and Haryana) up in the last two legs of the polls, the controversy has disrupted their campaign momentum. Unwilling to cede an inch, AAP alleged a political conspiracy, even as Kejriwal dared the BJP to arrest all his leaders in one go after Bibhav was taken into police custody on May 18. "They arrested my PA... I say, why arrest our leaders one by one? Take all of us in one go," he said.

The Congress, AAP's ally in Delhi, has taken a cautious stand on the whole sordid saga. When questioned, party general secretary Priyanka Gandhi said she would stand by any woman who was a victim of an atrocity. In the INDIA bloc, the Congress is the only party with a direct seat-sharing agreement with AAP. Yet, so far it has maintained a careful distance from Kejriwal, not even addressing a joint press conference with him. Party sources say they will maintain silence till May 25 when Delhi and Haryana—



UNPLEASANT AFFAIR
Maliwal leaves the CM's residence after the recreation of the incident, May 17; (inset) Bibhav Kumar after his arrest, May 20



PTI

AGA

where the two have an alliance—go to the polls. All bets will be off in the last phase of the Punjab polls, where they are pitted against each other.

All this a far cry from the events of May 10, when Maliwal was one of the AAP members waiting outside Tihar jail and celebrating Kejriwal's temporary release, even declaring to TV cameras, "We will win, and we will win with a huge margin." Now she has even removed his photo from her social media profile on X, and is accusing the party she helped found of tarnishing her character and shielding a man who allegedly assaulted her. AAP, in turn, says Maliwal has become a "BJP pawn" to prevent Kejriwal from campaigning. They claim that the BJP is leveraging an ongoing corruption case against her. "Maliwal is facing an alleged recruitment scam case from the Anti-Corruption Bureau involving contractual staff for the DCW," senior AAP leader Atishi said. "The BJP seems to be applying its formula of filing cases against leaders on her. She has been in touch with them for months. Check her call records."

But what exactly happened on May 13. What is undisputed is that Maliwal arrived that morning at the CM's residence (apparently without an appointment) at around 8.40 am. Initially stopped by security, she persisted and gained entry into the drawing room. What happened between 9.10 am and 9.33 am is unclear. At 9.34 am, Maliwal called the police control room and went to the Civil Lines police station but left without filing a complaint, citing extreme trauma and unwillingness to politicise the incident. It later came to light that Maliwal, a former chief of the Delhi Commission of Women (DCW), had said in her statement to the police that Bibhav "slapped me 7-8 times while I screamed...." AAP condemned Bibhav's actions the next day, with fellow Rajya Sabha MP Sanjay Singh saying Kejriwal had ordered strict action against him. Singh also visited Maliwal, though details remain undisclosed.

On May 16, Maliwal filed an FIR, and broke her silence on X: "What happened to me was very bad. I have given my statement to the police. I hope appropriate action will be taken. There is a special request to BJP people to not do politics on this incident." But the next day, a video clip surfaced, purportedly showing an agitated Maliwal in the CM's house, demanding to speak to senior police officers. AAP's stand had shifted dramatically by then, with Atishi claiming, "Swati Maliwal's intention was to accuse the CM, but he was not available, so he was saved... that video has exposed her lies."

On May 17, Bibhav himself filed a counter-complaint, alleging that Maliwal became angry when he told her Kejriwal was unavailable and threatened to ruin his life. After the video, Maliwal accused "political hitman" Bibhav of orchestrating the leak and insisted the CCTV footage would disclose the truth. The police told the court that the CCTV footage of the CM's house has been wiped clean as is Bibhav's phone. On May 18, AAP released a video clip, claiming it was CCTV footage of the day. It shows security personnel escorting Maliwal out. "She is walking steadily, without a hint of any assault or pain," Atishi said at the presser. "She even misbehaves with a female police

personnel on her way out."

Texts and calls to Maliwal and Bibhav went unanswered. Both have had a long association with Kejriwal—Bibhav is his closest aide and wields significant power in the party; Maliwal has known him since his days in the NGO Parivartan and the India Against Corruption movement. But despite her achievements, newer leaders have overshadowed Maliwal within AAP. Political watchers say her Rajya Sabha ticket seemed insufficient compensation.

Her absence during most of Kejriwal's stay in prison also did not escape the party's notice. She was in the US for her sister's treatment, a fact that led BJP's Amit Malviya to say that AAP was a "sinking ship". Indeed, none of

THE SAGA HAS GIVEN THE BJP A STICK TO BEAT AAP WITH AND COUNTER THE NARRATIVE THAT THE PARTY HAS BUILT AROUND KEJRIWAL'S ARREST

AAP's Rajya Sabha MPs, except Sanjay Singh—himself out on bail in the excise policy case—and AAP general secretary Sandeep Pathak, was found protesting Kejriwal's arrest. Raghav Chadha, in London for an eye treatment, met Kejriwal after his return on May 18.

Meanwhile, stung by the accusation of being a "BJP pawn", Maliwal posted on X: "Leaders who joined the party yesterday declared a 20-year-old worker as a BJP agent." On May 21, Delhi Lieutenant Governor V.K. Saxena, who is forever at odds with the AAP regime, also put out a statement: "It is most disturbing to note that the alleged scene of crime was the drawing room of the CM, even while he was present in the house.... I would have expected that at least for the sake of propriety, my CM would have come clean, rather than being evasive and dodgy." The whole shabby incident serves the BJP well for the moment; whether anyone will be interested in resolving it after the election is another matter. ■

*with Kaushik Deka and
Anilsh S. Mahajan*



▶ WEST BENGAL

What's Cooking?



When is too *maachh* (fish) too much? Never enough in poll season, one can safely presume. So, after taking on Prime Minister Narendra Modi for his remarks on the fish- and mutton-eating habits of Opposition leaders, West Bengal chief minister and Trinamool Congress supremo **Mamata Banerjee** proposed to cook for him. Speaking at a poll rally in Barrackpore on May 13, she wondered if the prime minister would trust her cooking, since she has been doing so since childhood and invited many a compliment for it. If you're a Bengali, you could not possibly have missed the occasional sighting of Mamata wielding the ladle in her kitchen during Kali Puja or frying an *alur chop* or two or stopping to make a cuppa at a roadside stall while on an election or administrative tour. Didi also professed her love for both the Gujarati savoury *dhokla* as well as the Bengali staple *maachher jhol*. Before you wondered where all this inviting talk was leading up to, Mamata delivered a sour punch, saying Modi's comments on the dietary habits of others "shows that the BJP leadership has little idea of and concern for the diversity and inclusivity of India and its people". Enough to choke you on all that goodness, one supposes. ■



FOLK LURE

Katni singers in Bihar, Aalha-Udal folk songs in Bundelkhand, Mandyali-Chambyali ones in Himachal... political parties are relying on some local spice to add *tadka* to their political campaign. The harvest season for Rabi is on, enough cause already for revelry and folk singing; election season has thrown up more reason for celebration. And who better than

folk singers with their strong social media following to add a touch of virality and outreach? So, from providing background scores for a *neti's* digital campaign to the plain old need to set the mood, '*sama baandhana*' as it's called, folk singers suddenly are a much sought-after segment. And not for their vote but for what they can do to get others, especially the grassroots electorate, to vote. So whether

Illustrations by **SIDDHANT JUMDE**

▶ JHARKHAND

SITA AUR GEETA (2024)

With former chief minister Hemant Soren denied bail, it has fallen upon Kalpana Soren to fight her husband's battles. Part of that includes challenging Sita *aur* Geeta, one her sister-in-law, the other the wife of convicted politician Madhu Koda, both recent acquisitions of the BJP. **Sita Soren**, previously a Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) legislator, quit the family and JMM

in March, saying she was being neglected and is now contesting on a BJP ticket from Dumka, which goes to the polls on June 1. The constituency is of symbolic value for the family, being a traditional party stronghold and represented by its patriarch, Shibu Soren. **Geeta Koda**, meanwhile, will continue to represent family bastion Singhbhum, though as a BJP candidate this time instead of the Congress.



it's 'Badiya ronka layian Modi di scheme ne' in Hamirpuri dialect, or the Bhojpuri hit 'Chal ri Kataniya', there's a song to suit every political mood. Some are carefully-crafted ditties in praise of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's social sector schemes, the changes his government is bringing in people's lives, the glory he is bringing to the nation; others are a lyrical litany from the Opposition side, of how the country is getting centralised, how the poor still have no facilities while the rich are getting more. Whatever the tune, its end remains the same: get into people's heads so that the message—about the candidate, his party, its work—plays on an endless loop. ■

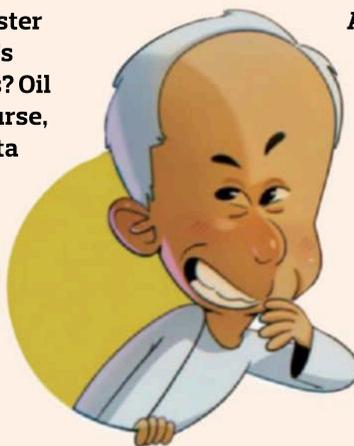


Meanwhile, what of the actress who played Seeta and Geeta in the 1972 film of the same name? Hema Malini will keep the BJP flag flying in Krishnabhoomi Mathura, from where she is contesting for a third time, oblivious to Sita aur Geeta's struggles in Jharkhand. ■

► ODISHA

THE LAST LAUGH

Odisha chief minister Naveen Patnaik's advice to BJP leaders? Oil your machine. Of course, the erudite Biju Janata Dal (BJD) veteran did not say so in so many words. But in a video circulated on his social media accounts on May 18, he hit out at his BJP counterparts who during their campaign promised to make Odisha the best state in India. Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma came in for a special mention, even as Naveen babu claimed that



Assam's per capita deficit is double Odisha's and that BJP CMs have become a laughing stock among his people. A day earlier, he had dubbed BJPwallahs 'political tourists', sighted in Odisha only during elections. Well, at a time Odia asmita is a key plank and he the state chief minister for nearly a quarter of a century, the BJD supremo has the natural prerogative to stake a claim to be the leading champion of the Odia cause! ■

► UTTAR PRADESH

A NEUTRAL TURN

He was supposed to be a source of the BJP's strength in Uttar Pradesh. Instead, *bahubali* Raja Bhaiya's change of heart is giving the saffron side some last-minute palpitations. Seven-time Kunda MLA Raghuraj Pratap Singh alias Raja Bhaiya has suddenly decided to go neutral, announcing that he will not support any political party or candidate this Lok Sabha election. Raja, a Thakur leader who had helped the BJP in the Rajya Sabha polls, wields influence in three Lok Sabha seats: Kaushambi, Pratapgarh and Prayagraj. Which is why his urging supporters to vote independently after meeting party leaders and workers at his residence



in Pratapgarh has caught the BJP unawares even as the Samajwadi Party leaders interpret this as Raja Bhaiya giving them backdoor support. Raja Bhaiya also mentioned Rajput anger in UP in an interview, adding to the BJP unease in eastern UP. Kaushambi candidates of both parties approached the strongman seeking his support, but they do not seem to have moved him. Neutrality certainly means no support for the BJP, even if it is keeping SP hopes alive. ■

Anilesh S. Mahajan, Amitabh Srivastava, Prashant Srivastava, Arkamoy Datta Majumdar



COVER STORY | RESERVATION

THE POLITICAL RESERVATION



WOONG AMBEDKAR
Both PM Modi and Rahul Gandhi
pay a visit to Chaitya Bhumi in
Mumbai on separate occasions

Photographs by ANI

CS OF ON

**CASTE QUOTAS HAVE BECOME
THE MOST FRACTIOUS
AND POLARISING ISSUE IN
ELECTION 2024, WITH THE
POTENTIAL TO INFLUENCE
THE FINAL OUTCOME**

By SUNIL MENON



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RAHUL GANDHI TOTES A SLIM LITTLE RED BOOK ON STAGE THESE DAYS.

It's the Constitution of India—the coat pocket edition of Eastern Book Company familiar to young lawyers. Holding it up, the Congress leader, who turns 54 exactly 15 days after the Lok Sabha results come out on June 4, vows to protect it. His language is an ingenious mix of the late Kanshi Ram and the Occupy movement—two sources that seem unlikely only at first glance. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, blending gravity of tone with animated emphasis like only he can, mouths his own refrain these days. “I’ll protect the Constitution with my life,” as he said in his INDIA TODAY interview on May 17. Why are the two opposite sides, locked in mortal combat in a hotly contested election, promising the same thing? It’s to do with something contained in that book, and what its author, B.R. Ambedkar, did through his life of ideas: a new politicisation of caste through affirmative action, or reservations.

The word ‘caste’—and its long shadow, reservations—often appear on the public stage with visible discomfiture. General Election 2024 is turning out to be the third great exception to that, after the Mandal era disrupted that old order a second time after Ambedkar. Perhaps it marks a tectonic shift of equal magnitude. India’s oldest party, the Congress, is going into the election with the promise of a national caste census as its primary campaign plank—to ensure reservations based on the population of the needy. It has for company two Mandal legatee parties—the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD)—promising to abolish the 50 per cent judicial ceiling on reservations in jobs and education. For the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Modi, seeking a third consecutive majority, the current Lok Sabha polls were to be the ‘Ram’ election, with the temple at Ayodhya as the stage prop for a renewed—and unproblematic—consecration of Hindutva. Instead, it was handed a forced detour into unpleasant territory by the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA), verging on topics like jobs and economic distress. Religion, intersecting with everything in India, offered a refuge—and it must have seemed almost like divine intervention when the Calcutta High Court, on May 22, annulled



WHERE THEY ST

NDA



BJP: Party manifesto claims 60 per cent of current ministers are from OBC, SC/ST communities

➤ Instituted 10 per cent reservation for EWS (economically weaker sections)

➤ Home minister Amit Shah says the BJP will not remove reservations for SCs, STs and OBCs, calling it a “Modi guarantee”

➤ On April 28, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat, who has in the past reflected the parent organisation’s old stand on reservation, clarified that it now favours reservation for SCs, STs and OBCs as long as there is discrimination



JD(U): Bihar CM and JD(U) boss Nitish Kumar clinched a major win in November last year when the state assembly unanimously passed a Bill raising the quantum of reservation for SCs, EBCs, BCs and STs, based on the findings of the caste census conducted by the then Mahagathbandhan regime

➤ With this, the overall reservation in government jobs and state-run educational institutions went up to 75 per cent. This includes the 10 per cent for the EWS in the general category



WAVE OF PROTEST
Manoj Jarange-Patil leads a demonstration for Maratha quotas in Mumbai, Jan. 27

HINDUSTAN TIMES

AND ON CASTE QUOTAS



TDP: TDP chief N. Chandrababu Naidu has

stressed that the party has actively fought for Muslim reservations in Andhra Pradesh, asserting that it is the party's obligation to fulfil its promises. "We will preserve the 4 per cent reservation for Muslims and provide Rs 5,000 a month in financial aid for mosque maintenance," he said



NCP (AP): In their party manifesto, the Ajit Pawar-led NCP

lent its full support to the demand for a caste-based census



CONGRESS: The party has in its manifesto, announced it will conduct a nationwide socio-economic and caste census to enumerate the castes and sub-castes and assess their present condition. Based on the data, they will strengthen the agenda for affirmative action

➤ The Congress guarantees that it will pass a constitutional amendment to raise the 50 per cent cap on reservations for SCs, STs and OBCs

➤ The party promises to implement 10 per cent quota in jobs and educational institutions for the EWS communities without discrimination



NCP (SP): In its party manifesto, the Sharad Pawar faction says it favours a caste census.

"We will push for a constitutional amendment to increase the reservation cap beyond 50 per cent," said Maharashtra unit chief Jayant Patil



RJD: Party supremo Lalu Prasad has advocated reservation not based on religion but on

INDIA

social backwardness. "In the Mandal Commission report, more than 3,500 BCs are listed who are entitled to reservations, including hundreds of castes of other religions," he says



SP: It has all along maintained that the share of a caste group in reservation and government schemes should be proportionate to its share in the population

➤ It favours increasing the 27 per cent reservation cap for the OBCs, stating they are over 60 per cent in Uttar Pradesh



TMC: West Bengal CM and Trinamool Congress chief Mamata Banerjee has maintained silence about the caste census and reservation; the party manifesto does not comment on reservation either

➤ On May 22, Mamata reacted sharply to the Calcutta High Court's annulment of old executive orders and a law that had included 106 Muslim groups among OBCs, saying, "I do not accept a judgment that says Muslims should be kept out of OBC reservation.... This is a tainted chapter in the country."



eight old executive orders and a legislation that had included 114 groups—106 of them Muslim—among the Other Backward Classes (OBCs). The wholesale manner of their inclusion, in 2010 and 2012, suggested “the said community has been treated as a commodity for political ends”, the court said, acidly. Modi lost no time to cite it and say “vote bank politics...is crossing every limit”. Whether infused with religion or not, caste reservation has become the directive principle of this election so emphatically that it looks destined to endure beyond June 4. The ghost at India’s electoral banquet that refuses to leave.

THE OPPOSITION STRIKES FIRST

Paradoxically, the axis tilted just when Modi was soaring into orbit, flowing from his assertion that the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) would cross 400 seats in the Lok Sabha. Such a majority would constitute near-sovereign levels of functional power. Repeated in incantatory tones, it also took on a certain symbolic potency. This flight of aspiration was borne aloft by a series of events: three Hindi heartland assembly election wins, the ceremony at Ayodhya that consummated a key Hindutva dream, and a run of dazzling tactical play that lassoed in key Opposition figures. One of them was Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar, the original engineering draughtsman for a second-generation model of Mandal. In 2022, all eyes had been on the live demo he put up of his consummate skills at political gymnastics while he executed another one of his pirouettes—this time, away from the BJP and towards his old frenemy, the RJD. Slowly, he also began giving himself a leading role in his own political script and production, the INDIA bloc. Fewer people took note of the vastly more seminal idea he was seeding: increasing reservations, particularly for the OBCs. On October 2, 2023, a date chosen with finesse, Nitish released the findings of the Bihar caste

survey—the first time an official caste count was being made public anywhere in India since 1931. It confirmed a widely held surmise: the OBCs constituted 63.14 per cent of Bihar’s population. The statistical injustice of the existing reservation space hemming them into a 27 per cent quota—because of the judicial ceiling of 50 per cent on overall quotas—lay there in plain sight, arguing its own case. Soon, the INDIA bloc, too, adopted the idea of expanded reservations as its raison d’etre, and it loomed menacingly before the BJP as a rival narrative. But with Nitish seduced to rejoin the BJP, the threat appeared conclusively neutralised. Or so it seemed.

The storm began again somewhat innocuously. A week before the dates for General Election 2024 were announced, Anantkumar Hegde, a BJP MP and regular stormtrooper from Karnataka, said getting 400-plus seats



GOVERNMENTS DID NOT ASK A QUESTION ON CASTE IN THE CENSUS FROM 1951 TO 2011. THEN THE DEMAND AROSE. HAD WE BEEN IN POWER, WE’D HAVE INCLUDED IT IN THE 2021 CENSUS”

P. CHIDAMBARAM
Senior Congress Leader

OBC RIDDLE

There has been no caste census since 1931, which estimated OBCs to be 52% of population. This is what the Mandal Commission also used. Sociologists say the numbers could be much higher—the Bihar survey found OBCs to be 63% in the state

MANDAL COMMISSION 1980

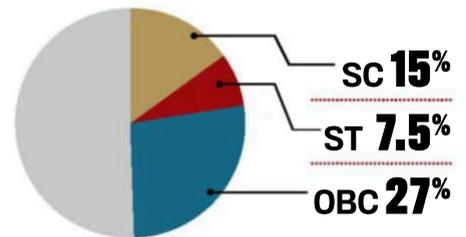
52%

BIHAR CASTE SURVEY 2023

63%

Only for Bihar

CASTE QUOTA PIE

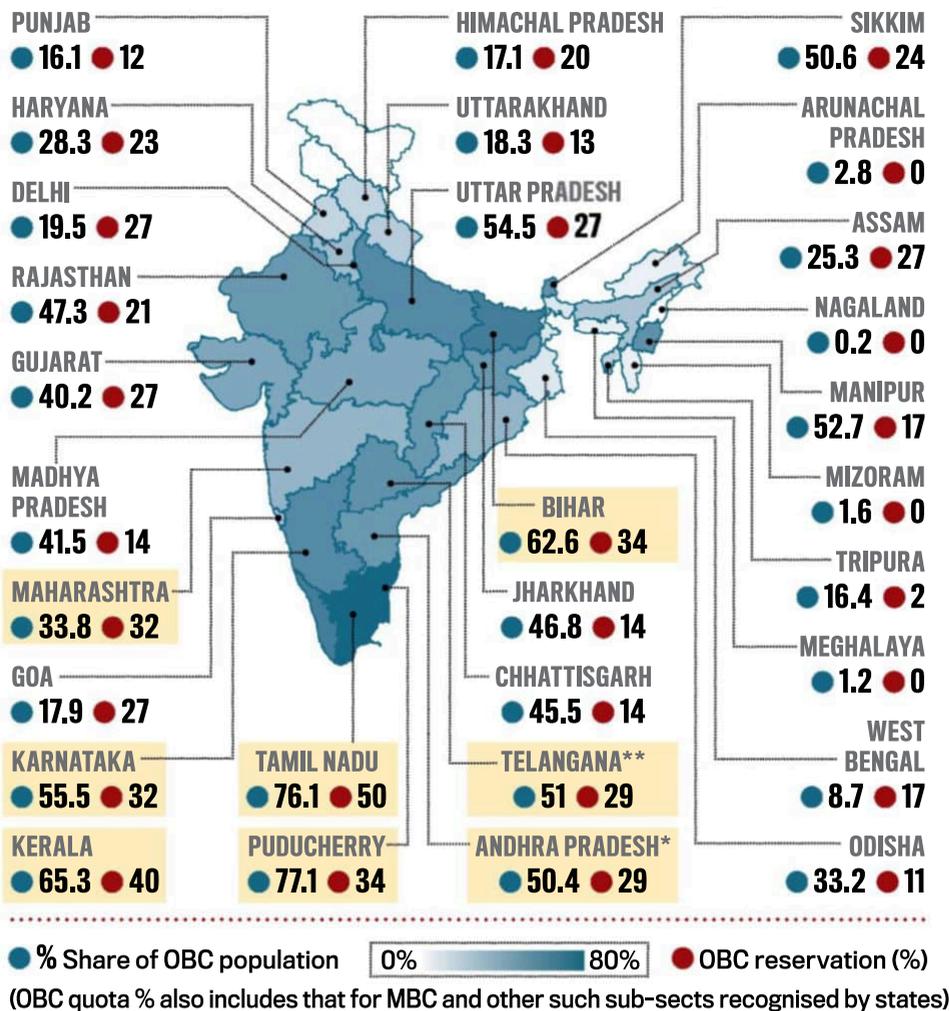


In case of direct recruitment on all India basis by open competition. The SC presently caps total SC-ST-OBC reservation at 50%

was a necessity for the BJP-led NDA because “the Constitution has to be amended...it cannot be done without a two-thirds majority”. Enough for the Opposition to pounce on the remark and amplify it multifold. The campaign, just picking up then, changed colour and tenor. A remark by Modi in February—giving notice to “even bigger decisions” in his third term—was now reinterpreted by the Opposition as bristling with intent. The INDIA bloc, led by the Congress, spread the word that the Modi government was out to abolish reservations based on caste as it never sat well ideologically with the old saffron notion of monolithic Hindu-

THE RESERVATION ROSTER

THE QUANTUM OF RESERVATIONS STATES AND SOME UTs KEEP ASIDE FOR THEIR ESTIMATED OBC POPULATIONS



Population sources: National Sample Survey 2011-12, *of undivided Andhra Pradesh, **from Telangana government website; Quota source: state government data

The highlighted states have more than the mandated 27% OBC quota. Some states which have a less-than-the-national-average population of SC/STs have adjusted that quota with an increased OBC reservation. While Tamil Nadu has received 9th Schedule inclusion to also exceed the SC's 50% reservation cap, Bihar has sought similar relief

ism—and its electoral correlate of a solid Hindu vote bank. As corroborative proof, there also existed earlier speeches by the prime minister where he had said that, for him, there were only four castes: the youth, women, the poor and farmers.

Opposition megaphones piled on the dire messaging, not without a touch of hyperbole of their own. Ambedkar's Constitution was under threat, they said, along with the array of rights and protections it offered. This could be the "last election", warned Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge, among others, and it was a battle to "save democracy" itself. Even

stripped of its extreme coating, the seed idea spread in the wind: that the BJP intended to end reservations. The Opposition's campaign began gaining traction among the target cohorts: the Scheduled Castes, who constitute 16.6 per cent of India's population according to the 2011 census; the Scheduled Tribes, who make up 8.6 per cent; and the mass of OBCs, who make up an unknown but significant majority.

DALIT DISQUIET

The subject opened up historical wounds and began to create vote-bloc dissonance on all sides. The ones really stung to the quick were the Dalits, very

many of whom had over the decades liberated themselves from degrading social apartheid and economic privations only because reservations had handed them the keys to the prison lock. "For Dalits, reservation is what land is for the farmer," says political scientist-activist Yogendra Yadav. "They will not permit or tolerate even the slightest possibility of that being touched." Also, as an electoral factor, that perceived threat too is nearly exclusive to Dalits, says Suhas Palshikar, co-director, Lokniti-CSDS, because of the "emotional connect with Babasaheb and the Constitution".

In practical terms, Dalit reservations are virtually a closed, inviolate circle—and the 'threat' to it more a spectral one. No party may hazard to venture anywhere close to it, but that the thought could even arise was enough of a spur. The grittier battle—more open-ended—is about the cluster of hues at the end of the rainbow occupied by the OBCs. Unlike the Dalits, whose population is known from the census, the OBCs have not been enumerated since 1931, except now in Bihar: so the caste census pertains properly to them. The very real possibility of a formal headcount far exceeding the 1931 figure of 52 per cent accepted by Mandal, and that catalysing a demand for OBC quotas to not be confined within the existing 27 per cent, could both spook elite-caste voters all over again, like it did in the 1990s, as also disrupt the BJP's quest for a unified Hindu vote.

For, this was like a subterranean polarisation flowing under Hindutva. Caste with a capital 'C'—a meta factor. It had a visibly catalytic effect on the mint-fresh INDIA bloc—by some reckonings, with key battleground states in heated contest, there was even talk of their gaining critical mass. The lukewarm voting in the first two phases that saw an average four percentage point drop in turnout came as another warning sign for the ruling party. The BJP sensed



the caste census plank could be rich fertiliser for the field the Congress was ploughing, becoming a live factor in a novel way it had not anticipated. A vague or tangible dread of losing reservations could actually be getting large parts of the voting public to circle their wagons against that threat.

BJP'S DAMAGE CONTROL

Suddenly, the BJP star team went into urgent reparation mode. Everyone from Modi to Union home minister Amit Shah hotly denied that there was ever any question of amending the Constitution or ending reservations. In 2015, a call for a "social review" of reservations by RSS sarsanghchalak Mohan Bhagwat, which he has often tried to walk back on since, had famously turned that year's Bihar assembly election. On April 28, Bhagwat, too, spoke out: "Reservation should remain in place as long as discriminations are not eliminated." The BJP also realised that all this went beyond the playfield of 'social engineering' where it had by now built specialised skills. There, pure tactical play could offer access to chunks from the caste landscape—say, a couple of Bharat Ratnas handed out as blandishment, or the diligent wooing of a spectrum of poor backward castes through alliances and segmented quotas. Unfolding here was a chapter of a greater epic.

If the BJP faces an introspective moment presently, it's because it is truly in a dilemma over the caste census and reservations. One immediate symptom of that inner conflict is the disquiet owing to reports of anger among Rajputs in Gujarat, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh—part of its oldest vote layers. The BJP's evolution since the 1990s had entailed expanding that base by stacking great numbers of OBCs atop that. The process acquired unprecedented momentum in the Modi years. Analyses by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) saw the BJP's vote share among OBCs double from 22 per cent in 2009—via 34 per cent in 2014—to 44 per cent in 2019. Prof. K. Ravikant of Lucknow University says the BJP accomplished this "not through Hindutva but representation", assiduously winning over hitherto ignored Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs) by offering them space, from the local level to the Union cabinet. Those who see 'Mandal' and 'Mandir' as polar opposites miss how transformative and creative Mandal has been for saffron: it's precisely the addition of caste to its diet that allowed the BJP to escape its old forward caste-dominated trap of a 25-27 per cent vote share. That core vote, it reck-



CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

THE MUSLIM QUOTA

➤ There is no constitutional provision for reservations on the basis of religion, and equality laws debar it by implication. But Article 16(4) allows quotas in jobs "in favour of any backward class of citizens...not adequately represented"

➤ About a dozen states have either specific sub-quotas for Muslim groups on a backwardness basis or progressively include groups in the OBC list without any fixed share for them

➤ Specific sub-quotas often face legal challenge for being on a "religious basis". The May 22 Calcutta HC verdict struck down inclusion in OBC lists for being done without proper survey

➤ Muslim quotas began in princely Mysore in 1874, but in free India, Kerala was first off the blocks, formalising a colonial-era quota for Muslims during state formation in 1956: now 12% in government jobs and 8% in education. All Muslims were classified as OBCs in 1958

➤ In Karnataka, despite the previous BJP regime's attempt to scrap it, the Muslim quota stands at 4% since the 1990s. In Tamil Nadu, it's 3.5%, introduced in 2007. Elite caste Muslims not covered

➤ In Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, similar sub-quotas are stuck in legal tangles for years. In Haryana, too, Muslim Jats were among the six groups allocated a 10% quota under



QUESTION

a special category after the Jat agitation in 2016, but the move was struck down by court

➤ Muslim groups are periodically added to central or state OBC lists without assigning any fixed quota. In Bihar, for instance, there are about 25 such caste groups in the central OBC list. Madhya Pradesh lists 20-odd caste groups, including Hajjam, Mochi, Luhar and Banjara. Among the states that follow this model is Gujarat, which has several Muslim OBC groups

➤ But, in West Bengal, the Left and TMC governments tried to push the envelope and included 106 Muslim groups among OBCs through executive orders and a legislation in 2010 and 2012. The Calcutta HC has now annulled these, stating that “the said community has been treated as a commodity for political ends”

oned, would bear some pain and still be loyal. But this vital buffer had to be protected at all cost. Perhaps dangling another threat to their reservation space would work.

This is where the BJP leaders, with PM Modi leading a supercharged counter-attack, sought immunity by adding religion to the mix, confounding the narrative by invoking the Muslim spectre. The Congress’s promised “X-ray of India” was meant to purloin all assets and rights—from the “*mangalsutra*” of Hindu women to existing caste quotas—and parcel it out to Muslims, Modi said. Muslim reservations were one of the oldest riddles within the OBC

THE COMMUNAL SHIFT

The BJP’s strategy of shifting the reservation debate to one on Muslim appeasement had the Congress on the back foot. The party clarified that Manmohan’s remarks were part of a ‘collective expression’ that included the OBCs, Dalits and Adivasis besides the minorities and said isolated focus on the latter, shorn of context, was a wilful distortion. It also doubled down on the national caste census: its manifesto had promised to embed it within a wider socio-economic survey—“based on the data, we would strengthen the agenda for affirmative action.” Paired with that was the pledge to pass a constitutional amendment to



YOGENDRA YADAV
Political Scientist,
Activist

“RESERVATION IS FOR DALITS WHAT LAND IS FOR THE FARMER. THEY WILL NOT PERMIT OR TOLERATE EVEN THE SLIGHTEST POSSIBILITY OF THAT BEING TOUCHED”

black box. Modi and the BJP pushed it centre stage and revived the old charge of appeasement against the Congress. They worked on a twin strategy. The Congress manifesto and Rahul Gandhi’s theme of wealth redistribution were linked to a Muslim-first policy. Then the past actions of a few Congress-led state governments, which had pushed for Muslim reservations, helped establish a pattern of conduct. As Exhibit A, they pulled out a 2006 statement by then PM Dr Manmohan Singh, ascribing to it an intent to give Muslims the “first claim” on India’s resources. There was also the Congress’s old ambivalence. Dr K. Laxman, president, BJP OBC Morcha, recalled Nehru’s 1961 letter to chief ministers where he expressed discomfort with caste-based reservations, saying he was opposed to anything that could lead to “inefficiency and second-grade standards”.

lift the 50 per cent ceiling on reservations, held sacrosanct since the Supreme Court’s post-Mandal Indra Sawhney judgment of 1992. Former Union home minister P. Chidambaram, who co-authored the party manifesto, denies any internal disagreement over these promises. “Nobody is ambivalent within the Congress,” he tells INDIA TODAY. “For various reasons, governments of the day did not consider asking a question on caste in the census from 1951 to 2011. Then the demand arose. If we had been in power, we would have included that question in the 2021 census.”

There is nothing in the Congress manifesto to suggest affirmative action, including taking *mangalsutras* and handing it to Muslims, as the PM had claimed. In fact, the document carefully skirts around the word ‘Muslim’ altogether. One implicit allusion to them comes where the manifesto promises to

implement the 10 per cent EWS quota the BJP had brought in 2019—i.e. reservation in jobs and educational institutions for economically weaker sections—“for all castes and communities without discrimination.” It goes unstated, but ‘communities’ will be commonly understood as clear verbal signalling at a spectrum that includes Muslims. The other red flag the PM raised, and a BJP chorus echoed, was on a purported Muslim-specific clause in the award of government contracts. The Congress counters that all it promises is a safeguard against anyone being unfairly denied such contracts, something it accused the BJP government of doing. The Congress manifesto reads, “We will ensure that the minorities receive their fair share of opportunities in education, healthcare, public employment, public works contracts, skill development, sports and cultural activities without discrimination.”

THE MUSLIM QUOTA

Historically, Muslim quotas are as old as quotas in India—beginning from the very first formal reservation, in 1874 Mysore. Thereafter, acknowledging Muslim backwards as part of the backwards spectrum has been the logic followed by several established layers of Indian law. It is mandated by Article 16(4) of the Constitution, was endorsed by the Indra Sawhney judgment and is reflected in the central list of scores of Muslim OBC communities for various states. This is followed in at least a dozen states and Union territories—states have their own lists with more communities. The constitutional logic is clear: every OBC quota inclusion is on a socio-economic basis, groups/castes qualify on account of their backwardness. This applies equally to Muslims, and hence it pertains to the Ajlaf (backward) segment of the Pasmandas. Equality laws, by implication, forbid religion-based quotas.

Curiously, this proscription has come to block the entry of the Arzal (Dalit) segment of Pasmanda Muslims—along with Christian Dalits—into Scheduled

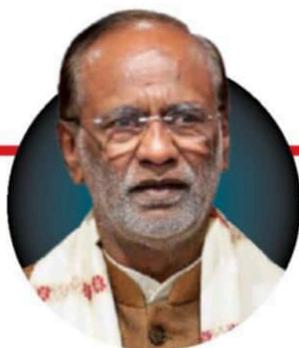
Caste quotas, although the socio-economic argument for their inclusion is identical, often more forceful. Dalits of non-Hindu faiths seen as ‘Indic’ are conferred with these benefits. Unlike with Muslim OBCs, the conceptual terrain enclosed by the Hindu *jaati* system is allowed play here and the question posed is whether a Dalit escapes Dalithood after conversion—but posed only in the case of Islam and Christianity. But with OBCs, religion does not enter the definitional field. Says Congress leader Veerappa Moily, who evolved the Muslim quota in Karnataka while he was CM circa 1992 (though it was the subsequent Deve Gowda regime that notified it): “The BJP calls it ‘religious’ reservation...we never meant it as that. On the Chinnappa Reddy commission report, I said mixing up the quotas for Muslim and Hindu backwards would do justice to neither. Acknowledging Muslim backwards is nothing new. Even under the Mysore maharaja in 1918, the Miller

CHANDRADEEP KUMAR



Committee categorised them as such.”

A legal tangle blocks Muslim quotas in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. In the first case, the dispute first arose because the entire Muslim community was classified as ‘backward’—including elite castes like Syeds, Pathans etc.—for the purpose of a 5 per cent quota. The latter one relates to a separate 12 per cent quota that would have necessitated breaching the 50 per cent overall ceiling. Another thorny issue the BJP is banking on is whether quotas for Muslim OBCs eat into the reservation pie. Nothing in OBC reservation law stipulates that ‘backwardness’ is to be mapped solely among Hindus. At the same time, politically, this can be a polarising issue if bias is perceived: the hot potato detonated in Mamata’s Bengal precisely because, of the 180 castes included in its OBC list so far, 118 were Muslim. Kerala pegged it at 10 per cent during state formation in 1956. After a tangled legal journey since the 1970s, Karnataka allotted 4 per cent in 1994. Tamil Nadu has had 3.5 per cent since 2007. The ‘Mulla Jats’ of Haryana were among the six groups allocated a 10 per cent quota in 2016, along with Hindu and Sikh Jats, but that ran headlong into legal coma, as collateral damage. Muslims have been included under OBCs/ EBCs in Bihar since the Karpoori Thakur regime of the



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**IN HIS 1961
 LETTER TO CHIEF
 MINISTERS, NEHRU
 ARGUED AGAINST
 CASTE-BASED
 RESERVATIONS,
 SAYING THEY LEAD
 TO INEFFICIENCY
 AND SECOND-
 RATE STANDARDS”**

DR K. LAXMAN
 President, BJP OBC Morcha



AN ANGRY PEOPLE
A Jat protest for reservations at Jantar Mantar in Delhi, Mar. 2, 2017

1970s—Nitish’s new proposal for raising overall quotas to 75 per cent will proportionately benefit them. Even Gujarat has 32 rows for Muslim OBCs who, as Modi acknowledged in a 2022 interview, “used to get benefits” when he was CM.

THE CASTE CATALYST

It was a series of contingent events that brought the Congress to the helm of a caste-based campaign. Once Nitish’s caste survey confirmed that non-elite castes constituted an overwhelming 84.5 per cent of Bihar’s teeming demography, other states picked up the baton by either conducting, promising or contemplating a similar survey—Odisha, Karnataka, Telangana, Maharashtra. A chorus started building up on the need for a nationwide caste census, and once Nitish plotted his own exit from centre stage, the Congress stepped into the vacuum. Moily, though, says: “The language Rahul is using is a mistake. Mixing it with ideas like wealth redistribution is not correct, it’s not the Congress way.” He advocates a more evolutionist approach.

Unlike issues where it was free to be both blunt and sharp, this was slippery turf for the BJP—saying yes would subvert the RSS idea of a ‘united Hinduism’, abjuring it could be injurious to electoral health. In the event, it chose feint over thrust: after a 2018 statement

by defence minister Rajnath Singh that caste would be part of the 2021 census, the party retracted; then Covid interrupted, and the main decennial census itself was missed. All this had a backing track: in 2017, the Centre had set up the Rohini Commission to study the uneven concentration of benefits within OBC castes and to suggest segmented quotas. After 13 extensions, it submitted a report in July 2023—but went straight into the chiller compartment as the atmosphere outside heated up on the issue.

Not everyone in the Opposition is conclusively on board. Mamata’s early silence on the issue, for one, was deafening—though she later took to invoking the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) as a “threat to quotas”. Though Trinamool Congress leaders deny it, she’s reported to have walked out of an INDIA meeting in September because the caste census was being brought up—apparently causing it to be dropped from the subsequent political resolution. A focus on caste is an unwanted complication for Mamata’s nativist, pro-minority politics. But Bengal is changing. The state’s OBC ratio is now estimated at 60 per cent—Mandal had said 40 per cent—and SC/STs account for another 29 per cent. So, that “90 per cent” is no metaphor. And Mamata is adjusting,

setting up community-specific development boards, and is often heard using the Santhal greeting ‘Jai Johar’.

Maharashtra, meanwhile, saw the gathering storm clouds create a point of aggravation: a sub-plot around a demand for Maratha reservations, and a counter-mobilisation of OBCs. Though its protagonists receded as mysteriously as they arrived, the issue is alive to some degree. “In reality,” says Palshikar, “caste blocs had generally fragmented in Maharashtra over the past decade owing to competitive politics; this applies across Dalits, Marathas and OBCs. There is no one-to-one correspondence between Caste X and Party X. Among Marathas, that fragmentation is more acute because of the two party splits. So, it has come down to the constituency level, where the caste/reservations vs Hindutva dilemma is often settled by who the candidate is.”

The older Mandal parties up north are, paradoxically, trying to shed that one-to-one correspondence. Akhilesh Yadav now cultivates a ‘PDA’ social alliance: the ‘D’ (for Dalit) occupies the centre among Pichhdas and Adivasis. Tejashwi Yadav tells his rally crowds to “be nice to others”; his RJD spouts an assimilative “A to Z” language. Both seek to grow out of the old “Yadav party” tag. Winning over the EBCs, with their past baggage, is the core of their present electoral struggle. Besides those of his family, Akhilesh has largely kept Yadavs out of his candidate list, preferring EBCs and Dalits. His partnership with the Congress, newly attractive with its Mandal Plus vocabulary, may also help.

For the ‘national’ parties, caste can no longer be taken as an interruption on the normal order of things. No longer is it the fine print of politics. To be dealt with in the dark, or on the margins of its main text. The reservation question yanks it to centre stage. Will it work electorally? Regardless of which side wins on June 4, it seems near-certain that the theme will leave a mark on policy—and the polity. ■

**with inputs from Arkamoy Datta
Majumdar and Vipul Grover**



“Congress is pushing Muslim League agenda and Left propaganda”

BJP national president **JAGAT PRAKASH NADDA** is confident his party and its allies are on track to breach the 400-mark. In an exclusive interview with Group Editorial Director **RAJ CHENGAPPA** and Deputy Editor **ANILESH S. MAHAJAN**, he says the BJP had been preparing for the polls two years in advance, while the opponents have come underprepared and are not even showing the resolve to fight. Edited excerpts

Q.

Compared to 2014 and 2019, what is different this election?

Every election changes with time, and from state to state. In 2014, the vote was for change. Voters were disgusted, disgruntled and there was a lot of negativity. The alternative was Prime Minister [Narendra] Modi. The voters supported us with a huge margin. In 2019, they saw that PM Modi had performed better than their expectations and hence voted him to power again. In 2024, it has become a belief that the country is secure under the leadership of the prime minister, it is developing and there is a vision of a developed India under him. The difference I find is that last time, the Opposition was talking about issues, they still had something, some substance. They were fighting a *ladai*. But this time, they are just shattered and scattered. They are pretending to fight, but, inside, they have all accepted defeat. For example, last time, they gave us a fight in UP. The Opposition had a formidable composition and they fought tooth and nail. This time, they just gave up. They are losing even (their pocket boroughs) Rae Bareilly, Kannauj and Mainpuri. And the issues they were picking up, the public has already rejected them. I have been saying for more than two years that if you have to do the politics of opposition, then you have to think out of the box and work hard. If you don't, that's not our fault.

Q. What are the key issues this election?

First of all, the voters have already made up their minds. The Opposition is mistaken if they think campaigning will change anything. The key issues for us are: development, providing momentum to that development; add speed, scale and skill. Above all, mainstreaming and empowerment are our top priorities—empowerment of women, empowerment of youth, empowerment of marginal sections of the society, empowerment of farmers, empowerment of Dalits, empowerment of tribals. With this, Bharat will grow.

Q. Your rivals are raking up the issue of inequality in society. Rahul Gandhi is talking of redistribution of wealth, and of caste census. They are also targeting the *labharthi varg* (beneficiary class) that PM Modi has created by offering freebies of their own.

Kuchh nahin hai. The Congress and Rahul Gandhi are trying to make superficial interventions. They cannot even understand the problem. PM Modi's schemes, on the other hand, have left a deep impression on the common man. They know that these schemes are really helping them to come into the mainstream and elevate the quality of their life. People are not even interested in the alternatives to these programmes. Sam Pitroda's explanations exposed them (the Congress); the rest, we

“OPPOSITION IS SHATTERED AND SCATTERED. THEY ARE PRETENDING TO FIGHT, BUT, INSIDE, THEY HAVE ALL ACCEPTED DEFEAT”



“THE MODI GOVERNMENT IS MAINSTREAMING AND EMPOWERING ALL THOSE SEGMENTS THAT HAVE BEEN MARGINALISED FOR ANY REASON—IRRESPECTIVE OF CASTE, COLOUR, RACE OR CREED”

did. They are doing two things—taking up the Muslim League’s agenda and mainstreaming Left propaganda. *To Left to pit gaya hai, aur Muslim League bhi* (The Left is beaten, so is Muslim League).

Q. This time, the BJP has set a target of *char sau paar* for NDA and 370 for itself. Your opponents allege it is a move to change the Constitution.

Not at all. We always fight elections with a target in mind. We are the saviours of the Constitution. The governments of Rahul Gandhi’s great-grandfather, grandmother and father sacked several state governments. PM Modi has never imposed President’s rule, except in J&K, where there was a national need, that too temporarily and with Parliament consent.

Q. Another issue that has surfaced is religion-based reservations. The BJP has made an issue of the Karnataka and Andhra governments giving Muslims quotas. The Khattar-led BJP regime in Haryana gave Muslim Jats quotas in 2016, which the SC later struck down.

The Constitution clearly mentions that reservations shouldn’t

be religion-based. Secondly, if there are some backward communities and they are part of the BC (backward classes) commission’s notification, they get reservations as a community, not as Muslims. The reservations provided by the Khattar government were on those lines.

Q. Why has the prime minister said the Congress will take away the *mangalsutras* of Hindu women?

First of all, we have to understand that, for the Congress, minority means Muslims. Prime Minister Modi has in the past 10 years given Muslims all due benefits. What was the need to bring minorities in paras one, five and six of the manifesto, saying there will be special reservation and special treatment? Now, when you talk of minorities, Manmohan Singh has explicitly said that minority means...first fruit from the resources is for the Muslims, he said it in the National Development Council. Now, when we talk of CAA, it is Hindus, it is Parsis, it is Christians, it is Jains. We don’t talk of Muslims, because they have Islamic states. They have Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan. But Congress opposes CAA, which means, for them, minority means only Muslims. So, it was our responsibility to



expose the Congress, why in the 21st century, when everyone is being given their due, should you talk only of one minority. This is again hitting the fabric of the country, number one, to bring division in the polity. This is the beginning of the setting up of the Muslim League's agenda. When you say minorities, *kabhi na kabhi munh se Muslim bhi niklega na...* (you will also say Muslim sometime).

Q. Is that the reason why you are being accused of creating polarisation now, also because the turnout in the first two phases was not that good, trying to energise your cadre...

No, not at all. The challenge that was there in the first two phases was that there was no one in the fight.

Q. There is a feeling that two of your allies—Nitish Kumar in Bihar and Eknath Shinde in Maharashtra—are proving to be weak links. Do you also think they have been given more seats to fight?

No. That is because the alliance (dharma) has to be adhered to as well. Even during the assembly polls (in Bihar), we had supported their candidates. Ours is a cadre-based organisation and we take charge of it. There are several things you have to extend to your partners in alliance. We are on the job, we will manage to win with allies.

Q. The other question is of turncoats fighting on BJP tickets—130-odd out of 445. Doesn't it dilute Brand BJP and exacerbate cultural differences?

You have to understand a few things. Firstly, whenever we induct someone, we analyse in detail what they can bring to the party. Secondly, we are a cadre-based party, yet we do take care of their (turncoat) assimilation so that they integrate well into the system. And our party's system is such that either a person gets settled or goes back. If you speak to the 130-odd who have joined the party, they will tell you that they had never expected that they would get such treatment from the party leadership.

As for our cadre, we explain things to them logically. We select candidates judiciously. The process started in November and we started announcing the names in February.

Q. The BJP has always claimed to be a party with a difference. Why then induct people earlier charged with corruption by the Enforcement Directorate or other agencies and then, once they enter the party, put them through the party washing machine, as the Opposition alleges. Doesn't this dilute Brand BJP too, and make it look like the old Congress...

No, it is not like this. You tell us if we have stopped investigation in a single case. There is no fiddling with the ED, no taming of

ED. They have come to our party. Welcome. But the law will take its own course, we respect the law. As for our brand, everyone knows that brand is PM Modi. And they also know Modi's integrity, his zero tolerance to corruption.

Q. What do you make of the Supreme Court giving interim bail to Arvind Kejriwal but denying the same to Hemant Soren? Do you think Kejriwal's release will impact the polls in Delhi and Punjab?

I don't want to comment on the Supreme Court. But many people are asking these questions. Much has happened since he got bail (the Swati Maliwal controversy). We are increasing our vote share and footprint in Punjab manifold.

Q. Your biggest battle is in Maharashtra where the BJP is accused of engineering splits in the Shiv Sena and NCP and allying with the breakaway factions. Everyone is saying this may cost the party dear, and that the allies may let it down.

Not breakaway, they are the main parties. Their style of functioning may differ, but they are leaders in their own right, so they will get seats in their own way and our cadre will provide them full support.

Q. How confident is the BJP of doing well in the remaining states going to the polls, namely, West Bengal, Bihar, UP and Odisha?

In West Bengal, we will improve our tally. Mamata is exposed. People are frustrated. Even the *bhadralok* have understood that Bengal has no future. In Bihar, under the leadership of Nitish Kumar... he has credibility, the rest we are confident our cadre will pull through. In UP, we are doing really

well. Last time, we (NDA) had 64 (seats); this time, we will do much better. In Odisha, we are confident of forming the government. The BJD may win a seat here or there, but the BJP will sweep the state. There is an anti-Pandian and anti-BJD wave in the state. People in the BJD itself are frustrated.

Q. The BJP, especially PM Modi, has put in a lot of effort in the southern states. Now that voting is over in these states, what is your feedback?

In the South, we are opening our account with more than one seat in Tamil Nadu. In Andhra, we are winning four, and may get the fifth one as well. Since the TDP has returned to the NDA, we will sweep the polls there. In Telangana, our strength has already doubled. We are maintaining our numbers in Karnataka and, in Kerala, we are winning more than one seat.

Q. So, what is the figure you are finally going with?
Four hundred plus. ■

“THERE IS NO FIDDLING WITH OR TAMING THE ED. ALL THOSE WHO JOINED OUR PARTY ARE WELCOME. BUT THE LAW WILL TAKE ITS OWN COURSE”



RACE TO HARVEST THE FARM VOTE

AMID AGRARIAN ANGST IN THE NORTHERN STATES, THE BJP HAS DEPLOYED A PRAGMATIC APPROACH IN ITS OUTREACH TO FARMERS EVEN AS THE OPPOSITION TRIES TO WOO THIS LARGEST VOTING BLOC OF INDIA

BY ANILESH S. MAHAJAN

ON

MAY 10, UNION MINISTER OF JALSHAKTI Gajendra Singh Shekhawat, who was in Punjab overseeing the Lok Sabha poll campaign of the Bharatiya Janata Party's Anandpur Sahib candidate Subhash Sharma, found himself at the receiving end of the wrath of the state's protesting farm unions. The local police had to intervene to bring the situation under control. This is no isolated incident. All 13 BJP candidates in the state are facing the ire of the farm unions that are seeking revenge for the confrontation at Punjab's Khanauri and Shambhu barriers in February this year.

This was when the Haryana Police used force to halt the aggressive unions from marching towards Delhi—on their tractors,

earthmovers and sundry vehicles. Among their many demands were a legal framework for minimum support price (MSP) for all crops and a complete waiver of farmers' debt. (In Punjab alone, farmers owe Rs 75,000 crore to institutional lenders.) As subsequent parleys with Union ministers failed to reach a resolution, the discontent has been on the boil.

Anger among farm unions is visible in neighbouring Haryana too, although the impact is limited to certain Jat-dominated pocket boroughs in four seats: Sirsa, Hisar, Rohtak, and Sonapat. Here, the demands extend beyond farm-related issues and include a share in governance. Since Haryana's formation in 1966, the state's politics has been dominated by the farming Jat community. But their





HARMEET SODHI

45

PER CENT
Share of labour
force engaged in
farming/ allied
activities

16

PER CENT
Agriculture
sector's
contribution
to GDP

4

PER CENT
The sector's
annual growth
rate in the
past 20 years

alienation and corresponding anger against the BJP began after Manohar Lal Khattar, a Punjabi Khatri, was chosen as chief minister in 2014. The past decade also witnessed aggravating events other than the protests against the now-repealed agricultural laws, like the violent 2016 Jat quota agitation and the wrestlers' stir in Delhi, which had Haryana's khap panchayats rallying behind female Jat grapplers. Mobilising around former Congress chief minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda, community leaders are now backing the farm unions blocking the entry of his rivals in Jat-dominated villages. Similar scenes are playing out in Punjab as well, where farmers plan to stage protests wherever Prime Minister Narendra Modi is scheduled to campaign.

Why the Farmers Matter

As the general election enters its last leg—Haryana votes on May 25 and Punjab on June 1—both the BJP and the Opposition have realised the alienation that pervades the farming community across the country, even though it may be manifesting more aggressively in the northern states. A fact that often tends to get overlooked is that farmers comprise the biggest voting bloc in India, often trumping caste, another important determining factor in Indian politics. And why is it so? For one, defining voters in terms of this economic category has a cohesive effect, rather than a fragmenting one. The social blocs that make up the other backward class (OBC) are often in competition with each other on the ground; so stoking ambitions



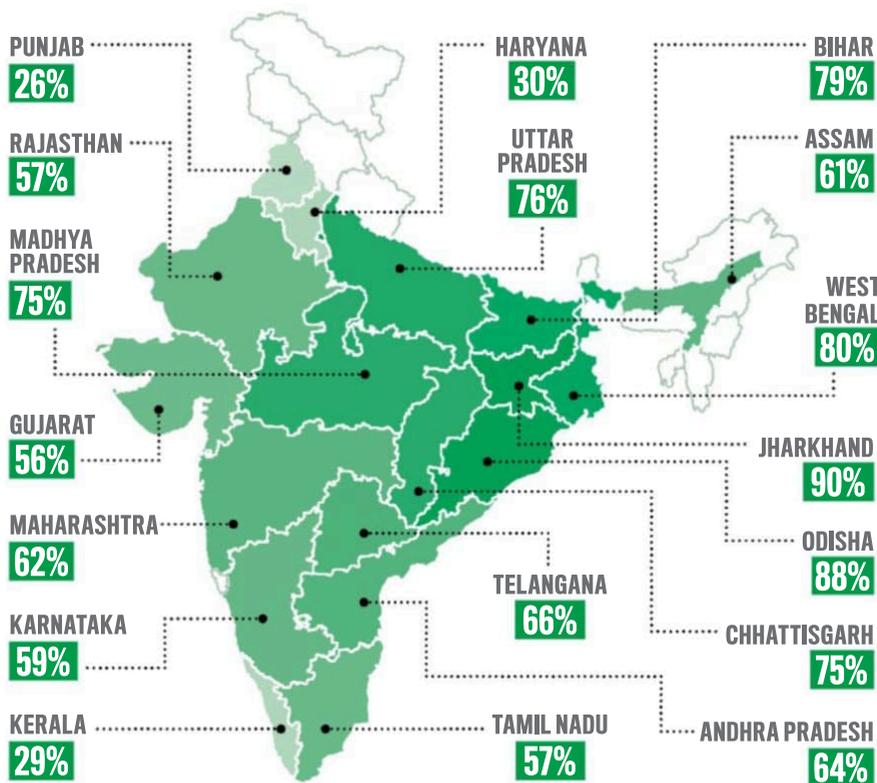
gets a bit complicated. If the idea is to win everyone's affection, parties must speak to universal needs. Nothing puts all the tiles of the mosaic together like agriculture. Almost every caste is connected to the land and tilling. And in a segment that lives on risk and financial insecurity, the promise of state support is relevant to all. No wonder, then, that all manifestos spell out a plethora of guarantees for the *annadata* (see *What's Promised to Them*).

The last available government data on agricultural households—collected during the 77th round of the National Sample Survey (NSS) in 2019, for the July 2018–June 2019 period—suggests that they account for 54 per cent of rural households in the country. In fact, 21 per cent of rural households are entirely dependent upon farming. But in the past two decades, even as the country's gross domestic product (GDP) has expanded at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 6-7 per cent, the agriculture sector has grown at just about 4 per cent annually.

In February 2016, addressing a rally in the run up to the Uttar Pradesh assembly election, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had committed to doubling farm incomes. According to the NSS data, the average monthly income for agriculture households had reached Rs 10,218 in 2018-19, from about Rs 6,426 in 2012-13. This data is not inflation-linked and doesn't reflect the doubling of the real income for farmers, even as the Modi regime has tailor-made social sector schemes to add to rural incomes. The PM Kisan Samman Nidhi, for instance, under which farmers are getting an annual financial assistance of Rs 6,000 as a direct benefit transfer. But data shows that nearly 70 per cent of agricultural households are still earning less than Rs 10,000 monthly (see *The State of Farmers*). Yet, at political rallies or in the BJP's *sankalp patra* (manifesto), the commitment to double the farm

THE STATE OF FARMERS

EVEN AS THE AVERAGE MONTHLY INCOME OF AGRICULTURAL HOUSEHOLDS TOUCHED RS 10,218 IN 2018-19, A LARGE PROPORTION CONTINUES TO SUSTAIN ON MEAGRE MEANS—AS MANY AS 68% HAD **TOTAL MONTHLY INCOME LESS THAN RS 10,000**. FOLLOWING IS A STATEWISE BREAKUP



Source: NSS 77th round (for the July 2018–June 2019 period)

IN THE PAST 10 YEARS, THE MODI REGIME HAS MADE EFFORTS TO REDUCE INPUT COSTS FOR FARMERS. BUT CHALLENGES PERSIST IN ENSURING REMUNERATIVE OUTPUT PRICES

income is now missing and the party leaders instead talk about boosting infrastructure at the farm gates and improving market access. This does work for the farmers elsewhere, but not in Punjab and Haryana, where government agencies are already carrying out assured procurements of the farm produce at a pre-decided MSP.

In the past 10 years, the BJP government may have made reasonable efforts to reduce input costs for farmers, but challenges persist in ensuring remunerative output prices.

Battling poor yields—both in terms of quality and quantity—and fluctuating prices, farmers in Punjab and Haryana heavily rely on government agencies to buy their produce at MSP, which is officially announced for 23 crops and acts as a safety net if market prices drop below the declared rate. In Punjab, for instance, nearly 85 per cent of the farm produce reaching *mandis* is procured by government agencies at MSP.

In 2020, the Modi regime tried to introduce structural reforms in the sector by pushing through three farm laws.

WHAT'S PROMISED TO THEM



BHARATIYA JANATA PARTY

- Increase in the minimum support price (MSP) of major crops from time to time
- Strengthen PM Kisan, under which farmers are getting annual financial assistance of ₹6,000
- Self-sufficiency in producing key pulses and oilseeds; greater focus on natural farming and crop diversification
- Clusters for production of tomatoes, onions and potatoes with storage and logistics facilities
- Access to robust agri-infrastructure, including commitment to launch a dedicated indigenous Bharat Krishi Satellite



CONGRESS

- A legal guarantee to the MSP in line with the Swaminathan report
- Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices, which recommends the MSP, will be made a statutory body
- A permanent commission on agricultural finance to monitor farm credit and address loan-related issues
- Regulated markets under the APMC Act; e-markets to operate under autonomous body
- Revive Agricultural Extension Services and open more Krishi Vigyan Kendras for technical aid

Aimed to deregulate the sector, the laws sought to give farmers more freedom to set prices directly with private businesses and enter into contract farming arrangements, intended to boost competition and investment in the agriculture sector. But in the absence of legally assured prices, farmers didn't have the confidence to enter into such arrangements with big corporate entities. As protests broke out in Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh and farmers laid siege to the national capital for over a year, the government was forced to repeal the laws.

Having faced a setback on this front, the government moved towards strengthening cooperatives and setting up logistics and storage facilities. The continuity is reflected in the promises the BJP is making. Now, there is no space for flashy big ideas like the '5F' formula—Farm to Fibre to Fabric to

Fashion to Foreign—for cotton growers that Modi had expounded in the run up to the 2014 general election in order to create a complete textile ecosystem in the country. The PM now talks about setting up new clusters for the production of staples instead—essentially an extension of the TOP (tomato, onion

ALTHOUGH THE CONGRESS HAD OPPOSED THE FARM LAWS, IT IS PROMISING A MECHANISM FOR FARMERS TO SELL THEIR PRODUCE AT THE FARM GATE OR PLACE OF THEIR CHOICE

and potato) scheme run by the ministry of food processing industries. BJP leaders, at their rallies in Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Uttarakhand, have also committed to pushing millet production and natural farming. The agriculture ministry is already planning ways to build the required market infrastructure and incentivise digital trading of commodities. There is also a commitment to crop diversification with an "appropriate" price support strategy. However, unlike the Congress, which has promised a legal guarantee to MSP, the BJP seems to be convinced that assured procurement and fixed prices are not good enough to build a robust marketplace for farm produce.

Who's their Custodian?

In poll season, it is no surprise that politics is being played over farmers' issues. In Himachal Pradesh, which goes to the polls on June 1, Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu of the Congress has squarely blamed the prime minister for allowing imports of apples from the US and denting the domestic prices. With the accusation severely hitting the prospects of BJP candidates in the apple belt, covering three of the hill state's four seats—Shimla, Mandi and Kangra—the saffron party turned the tables after the Congress announced former commerce minister Anand Sharma as its candidate from Kangra. The BJP leaders claim that Sharma was the one who signed the World Trade Organization's bound rates agreement, which caps the anti-dumping duty at 50 per cent.

Although the Congress had opposed the three farm laws, it is now making commitments to set up a mechanism for farmers to sell their produce at the farm gate or any other place of their choice with an option to upload the sale-and-purchase agreement on a digital ledger. In Maharashtra, along with the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) faction led by Sharad Pawar, it has proposed an



e-market operated by an autonomous body with representation of progressive farmers and farmers' organisations. At present, private or government-owned commodity markets perform this function.

Down south, former Karnataka chief minister H.D. Kumaraswamy often cites his concern for the farmers' welfare as the reason behind his Janata Dal (Secular) joining hands with the BJP and has made no secret of his desire to become the Union agriculture minister. Inking of this alliance did come in handy for coconut growers in the JD(S)'s pocket boroughs of Mandya and Hassan when, in mid-February, the Union government allowed the procurement of 7,000 tonnes of ball copra. The

as a guardian angel of farmers with his showpiece Rythu Bandhu Scheme. Around election time, however, each party keeps pushing the envelope.

BJP's Change of Tack

The Opposition may take potshots at the BJP regime for not fulfilling some of its commitments to farmers, but the latter has opted for a pragmatic approach that focuses on "doables" instead. Giving a silent burial to the much-touted '5F' formula, for instance, after it realised that the country's free trade agreements (FTAs) with ASEAN countries, which allow cheaper imports of raw material, leave no incentive for manufacturers to set up their units here. The finance and commerce

expanded from Rs 7.3 lakh crore in 2013-14 to Rs 21.5 lakh crore in 2022-23. Many of the BJP-ruled states have given incentives over and above those provided under PM Kisan, the latest being Rajasthan, where the newly formed Bhajan Lal Sharma government has added Rs 2,000 to the Rs 6,000 transferred by the Centre into the farmers' accounts annually.

But even as finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman talked of *aatmanirbharta* in oilseed production in her interim budget speech this year—which was also the BJP's promise in its 2019 manifesto—self-sufficiency remains elusive. There may have been progress in terms of the area under cultivation and yield of oilseeds and pulses since 2019, but the imports show no sign of tapering. In the 2022-23 marketing year (November-October), the country imported a record 16.44 million tonnes of edible oil, valued at Rs 1.38 lakh crore. In the case of pulses, almost 3 million tonnes were imported in 2023-24—the highest in six years. Pulses and oilseed growers are mainly concentrated in the Hindi belt of the country, and double up as the agrarian OBC voters. So, keeping them happy becomes all the more important for the BJP.

Conventionally, the farming community has not been a BJP supporter. That's the reason the party is struggling to co-opt the Jats in the North and mobilise support in agrarian belts of Maharashtra, Karnataka, Telangana and other states south of the Vindhyas. But in the past decade, PM Modi has overseen an effective outreach to the hitherto alienated communities via, what BJP leaders call, the *samagra samajik nyay*—or inclusive social justice. It is not only acting as a shield against the Congress's political agenda of committing to a caste census but is also helping the BJP break new ground. Come June 4, it will be hoping to reap a healthy harvest, overcoming the apparent discomfiture in the country's rural heartland. ■

CONVENTIONALLY, THE FARMING COMMUNITY HAS NOT BEEN A BJP SUPPORTER. THAT'S WHY THE SAFFRON PARTY IS STRUGGLING TO CO-OPT THE JATS IN THE NORTH AND MOBILISE SUPPORT IN THE AGRARIAN BELTS OF PENINSULAR INDIA

JD(S) had apparently pushed the issue keeping the election in mind.

In Odisha, which is going through simultaneous four-phase general and assembly elections, the Naveen Patnaik-led Biju Janata Dal (BJD) government has decided to extend its Krushak Assistance for Livelihood and Income Augmentation (KALIA) scheme for another three years. Running parallel to the PM Kisan scheme, it provides an additional Rs 4,000 annual assistance to farmers in two instalments for undertaking cultivation. In addition, eligible landless agricultural households get an annual support of Rs 12,500. Such schemes or promises may not always reap the desired dividends—the Bharat Rashtra Samithi's loss in last year's Telangana assembly election, for instance, even as its chief K. Chandrasekhar Rao had positioned himself

ministries are already looking for duty restructuring to boost domestic production. In his May 11 rally at Odisha's Bargarh, Modi said that he was working tirelessly to facilitate the empowerment of farmers. The PM cited how the poor and costly supply of urea had remained a bane for the farmers under previous governments and how his regime was making it available for under Rs 300 per bag (50 kg).

All in all, the Centre in the past decade has put an emphasis on easing the input cost pressure on farmers, by streamlining access to seeds, good quality manure, urea and other chemicals, providing income support through PM Kisan, and improving access to irrigation and electricity to farms, along with deepening the penetration of banking and insurance in this vital sector. Agricultural credit



NITISH PLAYS THE END GAME

AMID FREQUENT ALLIANCE SHIFTS, AN UNDERCURRENT OF ANTI-INCUMBENCY AND RISING OPPOSITION, CHIEF MINISTER NITISH KUMAR FIGHTS TO PROTECT HIS LEGACY OF GOVERNANCE AS WELL AS HIS OWN FUTURE

BY AMITABH SRIVASTAVA

On

MAY 19, AS THEIR HELICOPTER whirred to life after a public meeting in Gopalganj, Bihar, its chief occupant, Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, began flipping through a set of papers. The other two passengers—state water resources minister Vijay Choudhary and Rajya Sabha MP Sanjay Jha—mostly kept quiet, responding only if asked something work-related.

The documents that the Janata Dal (United) supremo was rifling through contained data on the various welfare schemes of his government, such as the number of rural roads built and the number of students benefitting from the state-run polytechnic in Siwan—his next stop for another rally. Once he finished speed-reading a page, Nitish stacked it meticulously so that all the pages were aligned. It is with the same precision that Nitish is approaching the Lok Sabha election in his state, which his party, the Janata Dal (United) is fighting as part of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA).

Pulling Out All the Stops

The current term of Bihar's legislative assembly comes to an end in November 2025. Until then, the state's longest-

serving chief minister is fairly secure, after having walked over to the BJP side in January. But things may not be as hunky-dory 18 months down the line. Especially amid suggestions that people may be growing weary of Nitish helming the state. His frequent switcheroos, from the NDA to the *mahagathbandhan* with the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and the Congress, and back again, haven't gone down well with the electorate. Not to mention the several conspiracy theories doing the rounds that the BJP may attempt to eat into Nitish's vote bank and diminish his influence post-election.

These are reasons enough for Nitish to stake his all this election. A strong performance will galvanise his party cadre and supporters for yet another shot in the assembly polls next year, but





THE JUNIOR PARTNER

As part of the NDA, the JD(U) is contesting one seat less than the BJP this Lok Sabha election

17



BJP

16



JD(U)

5



LJP
(Ram Vilas)

1



HAM
(Secular)

1



RLM

Figures denote number of NDA candidates in the fray

16%



2014



JD(U)

22%



2019

● SEATS CONTESTED
● SEATS WON ● VOTES

a poor show can hasten the endgame.

Needless to say, the spotlight has unwaveringly stayed on Nitish, especially after his return to the BJP fold. It was in saffron company that the JD(U) had secured a simple majority in the 2020 assembly polls, only to abandon it in August 2022 and forge a 17-month-long government with Tejashwi Yadav, now his principal opponent. “By making these frequent flip-flops, Nitish Kumar the politician has completely destroyed the credibility and image of Nitish Kumar the governance man,” says Prem Chandra Mishra, former Congress MLC and All India Congress Committee media panelist.

His partymen immediately spring to his defence. Says Rajib Ranjan, a former MLA and JD(U) spokesman: “Nitish Kumar scripted Bihar’s turn-

around, ensuring our state achieved one of the fastest growth rates in India. He also empowered the most marginalised sections, including women, extremely backward classes (EBCs) and Scheduled Castes (SCs). This makes him relevant not only today but for years to come.”

The greater challenge for Nitish is having to play the junior partner in the alliance with the BJP. At 16 seats, the JD(U) is contesting one seat less than in 2019 and also a seat less than the BJP, which is contesting 17, the same as last time. Bihar still has two phases and 16 seats left to go for the polls. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has taken the lead in campaigning, embarking on eight tours in the state to address a dozen public meetings. His aggressive campaigning aims to solidify support for the NDA. Tejashwi, meanwhile,

ANI



has mounted a spirited fightback, taking on the NDA juggernaut with determination, addressing more than a hundred public meetings.

Amid these two formidable protagonists, Nitish is quietly going the extra mile to ensure he doesn't end up in the 'also-ran' category. As of May 20, he had addressed 54 public meetings and conducted six roadshows, in a relentless if not desperate drive to remain a key player in Bihar's political theatre.

'Diminishing' Brand

The speculation about his diminishing brand value only got a fillip with the surfacing of images of him dwarfed in the company of Modi during his May 12 roadshow in Patna. Notably, the Bihar CM was seen holding a cutout of the BJP poll symbol—the *kamal* (lotus). Observers point to the CM's

from across the board—sections of his alliance partners and opponents alike—are also joining the chorus, freely speculating about his political longevity. Stories of his forgetfulness—such as saying *char hazaar* (4,000) instead of *char sau* (400) regarding the NDA's target—and the erosion of his political capital due to frequent U-turns have circulated widely.

However, those close to Nitish claim to have received very positive feedback from the first five phases, asserting that his vote bank remains intact. "He is someone who never had a simple majority of his own and yet remained central to every government formation in Bihar for almost two decades, which is an indication of not just the politician's adaptability but also his across-the-board acceptance," explains Choudhary.

AMID THE TALKS ABOUT NITISH'S DIMINISHING BRAND VALUE, IMAGES SURFACED OF HIM APPEARING DWARFED NEAR PM MODI. IT ONLY AIDED THE OPPOSITION'S ATTACKS

apparent discomfort and compulsion in this scenario. The day after, owing to an officially stated illness, Nitish had to cancel all his programmes. One of these was on May 14, the day Modi filed his nomination in Varanasi. But it added to the intrigue. Tejashwi described the absence as an indication that the CM's blessings were with him, subtly underscoring the perceived distance between Nitish and the ruling BJP.

There is also no dearth of writers eager to pen a swansong for Nitish after the Lok Sabha polls. "Nitish Kumar is a unique case, a survivor par excellence, but someone with increasingly declining relevance now," says N.K. Choudhary, a retired professor and political commentator. Politicians

Targeting the Core

At Siwan's Pachrukhi, Nitish took the mic for his 15-minute speech. He touched upon his initiatives that provided 50 per cent reservation for women in panchayats and urban local bodies, raised their quota in government jobs to 35 per cent, and gave cycles to school-going girls to increase education levels, which in turn led to a sharp decline in fertility rates.

To outsiders, a large part of Nitish's speech—focusing on education, fertility rate, reservation and empowerment—may have sounded like something of a NITI Aayog project. However, those familiar with him reveal a clever strategy underneath. Like in previous elections, women are once again voting in large numbers in

STRENGTHS

➤ **Known as the architect of Bihar's turnaround story, the 'Sushasan Babu' who built roads, delivered electricity, and established the rule of law**

➤ **Has a strong following among women, who credit him for their empowerment with 35% quota in jobs and 50% in panchayat and local bodies**

➤ **Nitish's committed constituency of a large section of EBCs, Kurmis and Mahadalits has never deserted him**

➤ **A section of voters who shy away from the RJD invariably votes for Nitish and the BJP**

Bihar. In the first four phases, they outnumbered their male counterparts by almost seven percentage points. Nitish has his hopes pinned on them. "His core support base, including women, is still largely intact," says Choudhary, warning that "they may start looking for options the moment it becomes clear that neither the BJP nor the RJD will accept his leadership in 2025. This is natural; every evolution is followed by decline."

However, it's not just cold statistics and empowerment that Nitish is talking of in his speeches. At Pachrukhi, the CM also switched gears and directly addressed a younger group among the crowd, who were demanding a high school. "*Arre bachcha sab, dhyan se suno na. High school vagairah e sab hoga. Chinta mat karo* (Children, listen carefully. High school etc. will be built. Don't worry)," he said, smilingly unleashing an elderly rap on the knuckles of a noisy section of the crowd, eliciting an even more rapturous response from them.

Also, unlike the somewhat over-the-top belligerence seen in his April

WEAKNESSES

➤ **Frequent switchovers have eroded Nitish's political capital**

➤ **For the first time in the BJP's company, Nitish is contesting fewer seats than the saffron party in this Lok Sabha election**

➤ **Nitish's image—of someone who relinquished power after his party's poor performance in the 2014 LS poll to the one who has switched sides to continue as the CM—has taken a beating**

➤ **The prohibition policy, once lauded by women, may prove**



ANI

electorally counterproductive, as the implementation gaps have spawned a big bootlegging business

➤ **Constant attacks on the RJD's 1990-2005 rule may now see diminishing returns, especially among young voters who have no memory of those times**

meetings, wherein he questioned political opponents (read Lalu Prasad) for “producing too many children”, his aggression is now more subdued. Though he still questions the family politics of the RJD, which has fielded two daughters of Lalu, he desists from personal attacks. His close aides describe this shift as a mark of his regained confidence.

But Bihar's “dark ages” remains a favourite stick for Nitish to beat the RJD with. At his rallies, the CM never fails to remind everyone, especially the youth, about the 15-year reign of the RJD from 1990 to 2005. This is not without reason. Among Bihar's 76.4 million voters, a staggering 9.2 million, or roughly 1.2 per cent, fall in the 18-19 age bracket—a cohort that didn't even exist when Nitish commenced his inaugural full term in November 2005. Moreover, there are an additional 16 million voters, constituting over 21 per cent of Bihar's electorate, aged between 20 and 29 years. The eldest in this demographic would have been merely five years old when Nitish took charge at Bihar's

A STRIKING IRONY IN NITISH'S SPEECHES IS THAT HE, CREDITED WITH BIHAR'S TRANSFORMATION, RELIES ON LALU-RABRI'S “MISRULE” TO WIN VOTES

helm, making any recollection of the Lalu-Rabri Devi administration quite unlikely for them.

This explains why Nitish emphasises the importance of “educating” young voters about the lawlessness that prevailed in the state before his tenure. Historically, both Nitish and the BJP have thrived by presenting themselves as a reliable alternative to Lalu's “jungle raj”. Nonetheless, there is a mounting apprehension that constant reminders of this threat is

yielding diminishing returns. In his public addresses, Nitish speaks about how he has created 800,000 jobs in his entire tenure, including 400,000 since 2020—a milestone for which he faces formidable competition from his former deputy Tejashwi, who also lays claim to these achievements. A striking irony in Nitish's speeches is that he, credited with Bihar's transformation, relies on his predecessor's “misrule” to win votes. Such is the reality of the state's caste-ridden politics that the CM is seen reminding more about the bad old days than making promises of ‘*achhe din*’ in the future.

The Strong Points

A close Nitish associate points out that even in 2014, when he finished with just two Lok Sabha seats, Nitish had still secured 16 per cent of the votes. “Similarly, in the 2020 assembly polls, when Nitish's tally slipped to just 43 seats, he still garnered 15.4 per cent of the votes. This indicates that his committed voters never desert him even in the worst of times. This is his biggest strength. This is why the BJP central leadership aligned with him. The results will once again prove his relevance,” he claims.

Apart from the EBCs, Nitish also commands a following among the SCs. According to last year's caste survey, SCs constitute 19.6 per cent of Bihar's population, up from 16 per cent in Census 2011. With both Chirag Paswan and Jitan Ram Manjhi as alliance partners, Nitish is expected to garner SC support as well, bolstered by his dozen or so pro-SC welfare schemes. But there are also challenges galore. The RJD-led INDIA bloc has fielded seven Kushwaha candidates, raising the possibility of the numerically significant Yadavs and Kushwahas coming together in many seats.

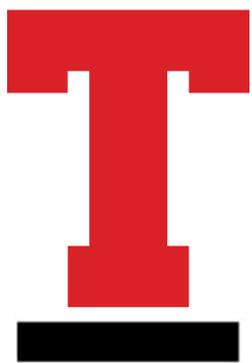
As the seven-seater Augusta 109 ascends, carrying Nitish for his third meeting of the day in Vaishali, the question lingers: will his fortunes rise with it? ■



WHY THE TRIBAL VOTE IS CRUCIAL

THE 47 MPs FROM THE TRIBAL RESERVED SEATS ACROSS INDIA FORM A CRUCIAL CHUNK OF PM MODI'S '400 PAAR' CAMPAIGN. WINNING THEIR VOTE MAY NOT BE AS EASY AS IT WAS IN 2019

BY JUMANA SHAH



THE MERCURY WAS UPWARDS OF 40 DEGREES CELSIUS AT THE ELECTION RALLY IN BANSWARA IN SOUTHERN RAJASTHAN in late April and the congregation of tribals was intently observing Prime Minister Narendra Modi. “The Congress could not find one tribal leader for the president’s post in 60 years...,” the PM asserted, as he launched into what all his BJP-led government had done for the community, including installing Droupadi Murmu in the Rashtrapati Bhavan. The audience, though, didn’t look too convinced.

Scores of forest-dwelling and nomadic communities are now bunched under the umbrella of ‘tribals’ (Adivasis) in the country. They make up 8.6 per cent of India’s population, and are custodians of much of the country’s natural resources. Traditionally Congress voters, the BJP has been actively wooing these largely backward communities, and with some success, especially in the western and central states. The tribal heartland, though, considers itself distinct in identity and way of life, and continues to defy attempts to merge them into a nebulous mainstream.

Currently, 47 of the 543 Lok Sabha seats are reserved for the STs (scheduled tribes), of which the BJP won an impressive 31 in 2019. To keep things in context, the main opposition Congress party won just four of these seats. In 2024, the saffron party remains the one to beat, even as it grapples with whispers among the tribals about the Constitution being amended to do away with reservations for STs, and

implementation of the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) that could erase their distinct identity. The BJP’s counterpush has been a rash of welfare schemes, urban development projects in the deep hinterland and, finally, appropriation and highlighting of tribal heroes.

Though tribal communities and settlements can be found in almost every state, the central Indian tribal belt covering a contiguous swathe of south-

ern Rajasthan, the eastern belt of Gujarat running north to south, and adjoining Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra to the south have a strong BJP presence and similar issues on the ground. To the east, Jharkhand and Odisha with five Lok Sabha seats each reserved for tribals, and Chhattisgarh with four, are also crucial in the saffron scheme of things. The other tribal strongholds are the Northeast and pockets in the southern



TAKING THE LEAD
PM Modi with tribal elders at an election rally in Mahasamand, Chhattisgarh, in late April

CHRISTIAN TRIBALS WHO ARE PART OF THE BJP IN MAHARASHTRA ARE UPSET AT THE SANGH DEMAND TO EXCLUDE 'CONVERTED' MEMBERS FROM THE ST CATEGORY

states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Telangana, where regional forces also hold sway.

Unease on the ground

In Maharashtra, the BJP holds all the four constituencies reserved for STs—Palghar, Dindori, Nandurbar and

Gadchiroli—and the Sangh Parivar's Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA) has a strong presence in the state. But despite the access to education, job opportunities are few. "Scholarships have dried up while recruitment for government and public sector jobs has also shrunk. Landlessness among

the tribals is rising as they make way for development projects and dams," says Suhas Naik, Congress leader and vice-president of the Nandurbar zilla parishad, voicing sentiments that echo across the tribal lands in the country.

The community's fears on reservations and the UCC are also real. For instance, Christian tribals in north Maharashtra's Navapur taluka of Nandurbar district who have joined the BJP are upset at the Sangh demand to exclude 'converted tribals' from the ST category. At the same time, the demand for the inclusion of the OBC Dhangar shepherd community—a cohort that the BJP has been assiduously



PICKING BUDS Congress's Rahul Gandhi meets tribal women gathering mahua in the forests of Umaria, MP

wooing—under the ST umbrella, has also ruffled feathers in the state. Similarly, in Gujarat, the ST status granted to the pastoral Maldhari community of the Gir forests (in 2021) has activated a fault line.

Implementation of the Forests Rights Act is an issue in western and eastern Madhya Pradesh as well as in many other tribal areas in the country. “Successive governments have denied claims, hence the migration in search of jobs,” says Venkat Ramanujam Ramani, postdoctoral research associate at the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE). “Fragmentation of land and lack of availability for water for irrigation are also issues affecting tribals.” The notification of the PESA (Panchayats Extension to Scheduled Areas) Rules, which protect tribal gram sabhas in MP and Chhattisgarh, in 2021 is seen as too little too late.

EDUCATION LEVELS AMONG TRIBAL COMMUNITIES MAY BE UP, BUT FINDING WHITE-COLLAR JOBS IS DIFFICULT. MANY HAVE RETURNED TO FARMING

Chhotu Vasava, a tribal strongman in Bharuch, Gujarat, says tribals have always been dealt a raw deal under all governments. “The gram panchayats have the primacy of power in deciding on village land usage, but they are constantly undermined. What is the point of a Sardar Patel statue (the 182-metre Statue of Unity) when what we

really needed was an Adivasi *sarovar* that would have been a source of irrigation for us?” asks the Bharat Tribal Party (BTP) founder.

The Saffron Counter

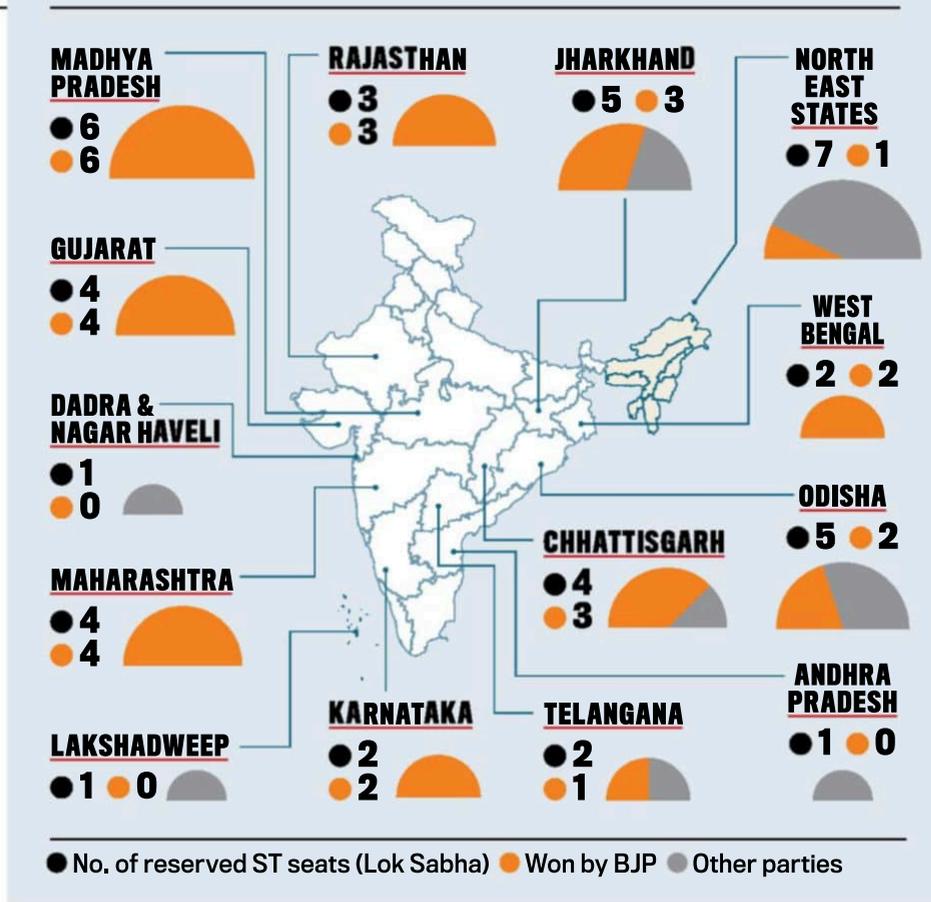
On November 15, 2023, Bhagchand Adivasi, a Sahariya tribal from MP's Shivpuri village, became the lucky owner of a ‘pucca house’, handed over to him remotely by the prime minister himself. Built under the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG) mission, it's part of the flagship Rs 24,000 crore PM Janjati Adivasi Nyaya Maha Abhiyan (PM-Janman), the big showpiece in the Modi government's plan to woo the tribal voter.

Launched on the same day—the newly created ‘Janjatiya Gaurav Divas’ commemorating tribal hero Birsa Munda's birth anniversary—PM-Janman has identified 75 tribal communities in some 22,000 villages across the country who will be the focus of the PVTG mission. According to a PMO note, this will consist of “11 critical interventions spread through nine line ministries and covering 18 states and a UT”. One of these key ‘interventions’ will be the construction of 490,000 houses for tribals, at a cost of Rs 2.39 lakh each.

Another key area of central government focus is improving education levels in the tribal areas, both through the state's Eklavya schools and the VKA-run institutions. The number of Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) has gone up to some 700 now, from 119 in 2013-14, and has become a key poll plank for the party. A tribal affairs ministry reply in the Rajya Sabha in 2023 said that literacy rates in the backward communities is 72 per cent. As much as there is to cheer here, there is a downside too—white-collar jobs are harder to come by. Vijay Singh Chopda of the Jai Adivasi Yuva Shakti, an organisation based in Dhar, MP, says, “Rising awareness and education levels have led to aspirations for

THE SAFFRON HEFT

The BJP won 31 of the 47 reserved tribal LS seats in 2019



Graphic by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

the blow in states where it rules, like Chhattisgarh for instance, by hiking the wages and bonus for tendu leaf pluckers (most of whom are tribals) and other means such as backing out of the controversial amendments to the COTPA (Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products Act).

Of course, the Modi government also has a trump card in President Murmu, the first tribal president of the country. The party is hoping it will swing votes in home state Odisha (the First Citizen is from Rairangpur in Mayurbhanj district).

Sound the Poll Bugle

Poll trends seem to suggest that the BJP is on a good wicket in the tribal seats, especially with the recent assembly election victories in the tribal heartland states of Chhattisgarh, MP, Rajasthan and Gujarat. The Congress is the main opposition in all four states, but all indications suggest they may be a bit stretched. In fact, in almost all the seats in these states, the BJP's main challenge comes from the young firebrands, relegating Congress veterans to the backburner.

Take Gujarat, for instance, where the BJP has swept all four tribal seats since 2014 and appears set for a repeat. Two young tribal MLAs—AAP's Chaitar Vasava, the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) candidate in Bharuch, and the Congress's Valsad candidate Anant Patel—are hoping to spoil the BJP's party. Chaitar is pitched against six-term MP Mansukh Vasava, while Anant is up against Dhaval Patel, the national social media in-charge of the BJP's Tribal Morcha.

The other formation creating quite a stir is the Bharat Adivasi Party (BAP), which won seats in both MP (1) and Rajasthan (3) in the recent state elections. BAP's rise—and its popularity among young tribal voters—has coincided with a general feeling that mainstream political

WHAT THE TRIBALS FEAR

- That the Constitution will be modified to remove reservations for STs
- Uniform Civil Code (UCC) will take away their privileges
- Displacement and forced migration due to loss of land to infrastructure/ industrial projects, resultant loss of identity and way of life, culture

- Access to affordable education in their habitats
- 'Converted' Christian tribals being excluded from the government quota
- Pastoral nomadic tribes in Maharashtra, Gujarat getting ST status
- Slow implementation of Forest Rights Act

a better life. Many try the competitive exams route, but only a handful succeed. They return to their village seeking white-collar jobs, but finally end up taking to farming or starting small village shops."

A big perception battle the BJP is fighting is over the controversial Forest (Conservation) Amendment

Act, 2023, which came into force in December last. The changes, which allegedly makes it easier for authorities to divert forest areas for commercial and public infrastructure purposes, could be a deal-breaker with sections of the tribal community who still live on the fringes of jungles. The party has tried to soften



parties have let them down. It has fielded two candidates in MP, in the reserved seats of Ratlam and Dhar, but is making its sharpest inroads in Rajasthan. Here, BAP candidate and Chorasi MLA Rajkumar Roat is in a tight battle against Congress turncoat and BJP candidate Mahendrajeet Malviya in the Dungarpur-Banswara seat in southern Rajasthan. In fact, the current is so strong in some areas, former 'sabhapati' of Dungarpur municipal council and BJP leader K.K. Gupta says, the non-tribal communities feel sidelined here. "We live under constant fear and have almost no representation in any elected body. We either suffer or migrate," he alleges, saying the Sangh's Rajasthan Vanvasi Parishad is not doing enough to counter the BAP here.

What also makes tribal votes crucial in Rajasthan is the 'spillover effect' it has on general seats. For example, Sawaimadhopur Tonk is a general category LS seat but has had a number of MPs from the Meena ST community. In southern Rajasthan too, the tribal influence extends to three more seats other than the reserved ones.

Regional Trails

In other states with sizeable tribal populations, regional forces seem to hold equal sway. In Odisha, the ruling Biju Janata Dal (BJD) has a firm hold over the tribal segments while in West Bengal, it's neck-and-neck between the BJP and the Trinamool Congress (TMC). The BJP won the two reserved LS seats, Alipurduars and Jhargram, in 2019, but the Trinamool Congress (TMC) came back strong in the 2021 assembly polls, winning nine seats in the region. In Jharkhand, the arrest of Chief Minister Hemant Soren could have a bearing in the five ST reserved seats, with a sympathy wave in favour of his wife, Kalpana, and the ruling Jharkhand

BJP'S VANVASI PITCH

↘ ST component in budget hiked from Rs 21,525 crore in 2013-14 to Rs 78,256 crore in 2021-22

↘ No. of minor forest produce items covered under MSP up from 12 in 2014 to 87 in 2021

↘ Scholarship budgets up from Rs 978 crore to Rs 2,546 crore (2021-22)

↘ 500-odd Eklavya schools sanctioned in past 10 years

↘ Ten tribal museums set up across the country; tribal freedom fighter Birsa Munda birth anniversary, Nov. 15, celebrated as Janjatiya Gaurav Divas

CONGRESS'S ADIVASI SANKALP

↘ 'Adivasi Nyay' guarantees the protection of water, forests, land rights of tribals

↘ All amendments made to the Forest Conservation Act and Land Acquisition Act by the BJP government to be rescinded

↘ Dedicated forest rights division, separate budget to implement Forest Rights Act. All FRA claims to be settled

↘ Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act or PESA will have state laws to protect gram sabhas

↘ MSP for minor forest produce to get legal status

Mukti Morcha (JMM).

Meanwhile, in the Northeast, the BJP's relationship with the tribals remains complicated. Barring Assam, Manipur and Tripura, tribal populations are a majority in the other five NE states. The current conflict between the Kukis and Meiteis has damaged the party's credibility in the region, but voting patterns among the NE tribals are unlikely to change. Assam and Arunachal, happy with the Modi government's focus on development, are unlikely to shift loyalties. In Manipur, the party is not even contesting the Outer Manipur seat, dominated by the Nagas. Other states will witness contests between the NDA allies and the Congress/regional parties. In Tripura, the BJP has formed a coalition with the Tipra Motha headed by royal scion Pradyot Debarma who is popular among the tribals.

Interestingly, reactions on the ground, without exception, suggest that issues like the construction of the Ram temple and the abrogation of Article 370 have little resonance among the tribal electorate. Even PM Modi's popularity doesn't seem to be the primary selling point. It's more the TINA factor that will be working for the BJP. The opposition Congress has been trying hard to reclaim its tribal strongholds, with Rahul Gandhi often raising the Adivasi (original settlers) versus the BJP's Vanvasi (forest-dwellers) debate, holding it up as an example of the ruling party's "perverted logic in denigrating the community". It remains to be seen whether such rhetoric will get traction on the ground, considering the ruling party's entrenched organisation network. ■

**with Rahul Noronha,
Arkamoy Datta Majumdar,
Kaushik Deka, Amarnath K.
Menon, Dhaval S. Kulkarni, Rohit
Parihar and Amitabh Srivastava**

PUTTING ON A UNITED SHOW
Himachal Pradesh CM Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu (right) campaigning with Congress Mandi candidate Vikramaditya Singh (middle) in Shamshi, May 7



MANDATE 2024 | HIMACHAL PRADESH

SUKHU LEADS A DESPERATE FIGHTBACK

RIDING ON TWO CONSECUTIVE CLEAN SWEEPS, THE BJP RELIES ON MODI MAGIC IN HIMACHAL. A FRACTIOUS CONGRESS, LED BY ITS BELEAGUED CM, TAKES HEART FROM ITS 2022 ASSEMBLY POLLS WIN

BY ANILESH S. MAHAJAN

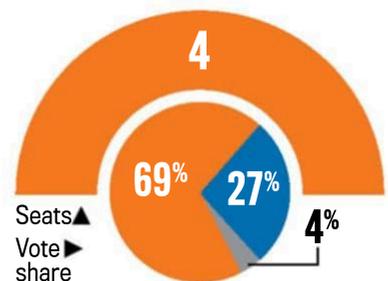
TURF BATTLE

Like in 2014, BJP got a clean sweep in 2019 LS polls, but the Congress clawed back to power in the state in 2022

ANI

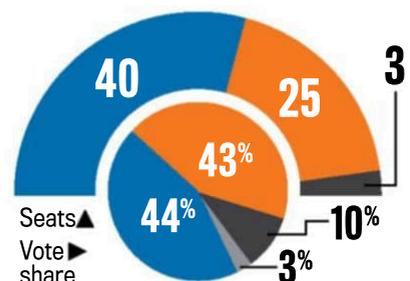
LOK SABHA 2019

(Total seats: 4)



ASSEMBLY 2022

(Total seats: 68)



Legend: BJP (orange), Congress (blue), Independents (grey), Others (black)

Vote share figures have been rounded off



T

THIS SPRING, AS THE SNOW STARTED MELTING in the middle Himalayas, the political temperature in Himachal Pradesh, as if on cue, kept rising. It started with the Bharatiya Janata Party's stunning capture of a Rajya Sabha seat for Harsh Mahajan—a former close aide of former Congress CM Virbhadra Singh—with the help of disgruntled Congress MLAs on February 27. It set the stage for a charged campaign for the Lok Sabha polls in the only northern state ruled by the Congress.

Though the incipient rebellion against Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu was patched up through troubleshooting by veteran Congress leaders, enabling the CM to cling on, the embarrassing episode has shaken party morale. Himachal Pradesh sends four MPs to the Lok Sabha. The Congress is defending the Mandi seat, which state unit chief Pratibha Singh, widow of Virbhadra, won in the bypolls in November 2021. Otherwise, the BJP has dominated Lok Sabha polls in the state, scoring 4-0 clean sweeps in 2014 and 2019. Riding on a high-pitched Hindutva narrative, it increased its vote share by 16 percentage points in 2019, scoring a stunning 70 per cent.

However, in the assembly polls of December 2022, the Congress managed to get the better of the BJP challenge led by then incumbent CM Jai Ram Thakur, capturing 40 seats in the 68-member legislative assembly. The

Congress fought as a cohesive unit and circumvented the Hindu nationalism agenda of the BJP by highlighting governance issues.

On June 1, along with the four LS seats (Shimla, Hamirpur, Kangra and Mandi), bypolls will also take place for six assembly seats in Himachal. All six seats were held by Congress candidates who cross-voted for Mahajan and against their own candidate Abhishek Manu Singhvi in the Rajya Sabha polls, put the Sukhu government in danger and were suspended. They later joined the BJP. In the 68-member assembly, the BJP has 25 MLAs and three independents. It's believed that Sukhu needs to win at least three assembly seats out of the six, along with all LS seats, to save his job. The former will maintain his majority in the assembly; parliamentary victories will ensure he remains in the high-command's good books. At present, a jittery Sukhu is trying his best to repeat the 2022 game plan, trying to stick to local issues to curtail the impact of such "achievements" touted by its rival as construction of the Ram temple.

The BJP is not taking things lightly either—it announced its candidates on March 24, giving them enough time to campaign. As former CM Thakur made it clear, all four BJP candidates will bank on PM Modi's popularity and charisma. "PM Modi is a big factor... he will form the next government. The BJP's target is to win 400 seats; four of them will come from Himachal," claims Thakur. Saying that PM Modi's image as a global leader "will have a major impact on the electorate", he lists the BJP's 'achievements'—abrogation of Article 370, construction of Ram temple, women's reservation in Parliament and the Indian economy becoming the fifth largest in the world. Can the faction-ridden Himachal Congress rise up to the challenge?

CM Sukhu is confident it can. "We delivered the old pension scheme, raised revenues by plugging leakages,



THE BIG ISSUES



BJP

- Making PM Modi the face of the campaign
- Playing up abrogation of Article 370, Ram mandir, social sector schemes
- Painting the Sukhu government as 'ineffective'; showing the Congress as a 'broken house'



CONGRESS

- Localising polls by raising constituency-related issues
- Not taking on PM Modi's popularity by not attacking him directly
- Making party heavyweights contest the Lok Sabha polls



HOME-GROWN STAR

BJP's Kangana Ranaut campaigning in Mandi with former CM Jai Ram Thakur (left), May 14

retain the seat. With the assembly constituency of CM Sukhu (Nadaun) also part of Hamirpur, the Congress is telling voters about the BJP plot to dislodge the local boy from the CM's post. In Shimla, Congress candidate Sultanpuri is trying hard to make it a Congress bastion, like it was during his father's prime. In 2022, out of 17 assembly segments here, Congress won 13.

'Queen' vs 'King'

Fielding actor Kangana Ranaut in Mandi is working out well for the BJP. With her aggression and star power, she has made an instant connect with the electorate, also helped by her being fluent in the Mandiyali accent. Indeed, in Mandi and Kullu districts, she has the persona of a local girl who made it big in Bollywood. The BJP has asked Jai Ram Thakur to anchor her campaign. "We had lost the bypoll (in 2021) narrowly. Now...there is no sympathy wave (after Congress CM Virbhadr Singh's death)," the former CM claims. Thakur is influential in Mandi, and in 2022, half of the BJP's legislative strength came from here. The stakes are high for him—he knows that his chances of being CM again depend on a favourable outcome.

Kangana is taking on Vikramaditya Singh, son of Pratibha Singh and former CM Virbhadr Singh, in his family bastion. Vikramaditya, the titular 'king' of Rampur Bushahr, is conducting a low-profile campaign. In February, he, too, had joined the rebellion and quit the Sukhu cabinet, claiming the government did nothing to preserve his father's legacy, before being persuaded to continue. Ironically, as Sukhu tries to seek votes for Congress candidates by pointing at the BJP's efforts to destabilise his government, Vikramaditya is trying to convince voters to safeguard his family legacy.

Amid these smaller battles, the bigger war for the Congress is to ensure their government lasts the whole term. A few Lok Sabha seats would be more than welcome too. ■

reduced red tapism, the government is committed to work for the people," he says. He accuses the BJP-led Centre of giving him insufficient funds for rehabilitation efforts after last year's floods. The other grouse against the BJP is, of course, the RS loss in February. "They have stolen a Rajya Sabha seat from me, I am seeking votes to take all four Lok Sabha seats," Sukhu tells INDIA TODAY.

Agnipath and Apples

The Congress is taking the fight to the BJP by targeting the Agnipath scheme in Kangra and Hamirpur—the belt known for high recruitment of youths in the military. With Himachal having 125,000 ex-servicemen and 115,000 men serving in the military, the practice of only 25 per cent Agniveers being absorbed is deeply unpopular. In the apple belt of Shimla, Mandi and Kangra, fruit growers are angry about cheaper imports from the US driving down prices and the inability of the Union government to levy higher anti-dumping duties. "I stand with apple growers...during the floods I ensured that road links were restored so they could send produce to markets," Sukhu says. However, with the Congress fielding former commerce minister Anand Sharma from Kangra, the BJP made the point that Sharma as Union minister had made a commitment to

the WTO (World Trade Organization) to keep rates of this tariff at 50 per cent.

The BJP has fielded Rajiv Bhardwaj against Sharma. He replaces incumbent MP Krishan Kapoor—who excused himself after being diagnosed with cancer—thus marking the end of his mentor and former CM Shanta Kumar's influence in Himachal. Union minister Anurag Thakur will again fight from Hamirpur, while former state BJP chief Suresh Kashyap got the ticket in Shimla. The Congress has fielded its MLA from Kasauli, Vinod Sultanpuri, to take on Kashyap. Former MLA Satpal Raizada is its Hamirpur candidate.

Anurag Thakur, the four-time MP from Hamirpur, also has to ensure victories for Congress turncoats Inder Dutt Lakhanpal (Barsar), Devender Bhutto (Kutlehar), Rajendra Rana (Sujanpur) and Chaitanya Sharma (Gagret) in the bypolls—all in his constituency—on BJP tickets. The other two Congress turncoats from the February episode, Ravi Thakur and Sudhir Sharma, are contesting from Lahaul Spiti (in Mandi LS seat) and Dharamshala (Kangra).

Though Hamirpur is a saffron bastion, the BJP lost 12 out of 17 assembly seats here in 2022 due to factionalism. This time, it hopes a nationalist agenda and an active Anurag would help it

INDIAN ARMY FACES THE GORKHA QUESTION

THE PANDEMIC AND NEPAL'S OPPOSITION TO THE AGNIPATH SCHEME HAVE STALLED GORKHA RECRUITMENT IN THE INDIAN ARMY. THEIR FALLING NUMBERS ARE A STRATEGIC CONCERN FOR INDIA, PARTICULARLY AMIDST RISING SPECULATION ABOUT CHINESE PLANS TO INDUCT THE LEGENDARY SOLDIERS

BY PRADIP R. SAGAR



A

AMONG ETHNIC COMMUNITIES WITH A GLOBAL REPUTATION FOR THEIR QUALITIES as soldiers, the Gorkhas of Nepal occupy the highest rank. Like the Highlanders of Scotland, Gorkha soldiers are celebrated for their exemplary courage under fire, devotion to duty and fierce loyalty. Ever since the Gorkhas started being recruited over 200 years ago into the East India Company's army, the British Indian Army, and then, after 1947, into the Indian and British armies, they have won battle honours and gallantry awards practically everywhere they were deployed, including in the two world

wars and in each war independent India has fought. A pillar of the Indian army, around 32,000 Gorkhas (39 battalions) are currently part of the seven Gorkha regiments of the Indian army. They include both Nepal-domiciled Gorkhas as well as India-domiciled Gorkha soldiers. Nepali Gorkhas constitute about 60 per cent of each battalion. However, their numbers in the Indian army have been steadily depleting, and no Gorkhas from Nepal—the only foreign nation whose men are part of the Indian army—have been recruited in the past four years.

Though the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020



AFP

first put a halt to recruitment, it was the announcement of the new Agnipath scheme of recruitment into the Indian armed forces of personnel below the rank of officers in June 2022 that struck the real blow. Under the scheme, youths between the ages of 17.5 and 21 years would be inducted for a four-year tenure, at the end of which only 25 per cent would be inducted into regular service. Soon after, in August 2022, the Nepal government blocked the recruitment of their nationals when it was clear that the Agnipath scheme would equally

apply to them. The ostensible reason is that it violates the tripartite agreement between India, Nepal and the United Kingdom signed in December 1947 that provided for the induction of Gorkhas in the Indian and British armies. The terms ensure equal pay, pension and other facilities on par with Indians. Though New Delhi has stated that none of that has changed, the Agnipath scheme has imposed a cold impasse on Nepali Gorkha recruitment that has yet to be resolved. It is understood that the expected socio-economic cost resulting

from 75 per cent of Nepali Agniveers returning to their land has forced Nepal's hand.

Two years later, things have come to a head on two dimensions. Firstly, the retirement of around 14,000 Nepali Gorkha soldiers since 2021 has left a vacuum in the Indian army's ranks. Secondly, the whole issue has cast a pall over India-Nepal ties and can undermine India's strategic, soft-power reach—manifest in the retired and serving Gorkha soldiers in the Himalayan nation. Bilateral ties, too, have had

their share of downturns since 2015, when both India and Nepal laid claim to the disputed land area of Kalapani, Lipulekh and Limpiyadhura in western Nepal. In 2020, Nepal updated its map by incorporating the strategically important areas, causing New Delhi to term it as a “unilateral act” and an “artificial enlargement”. The controversy flared up again in early May, when Kathmandu announced the printing of a new Rs 100 currency note with a map that showed the three areas.

Over this uncomfortable situation hovers India’s most implacable foe, China, which has been steadily expanding its strategic and economic footprint in Nepal. The fallout from the recruitment freeze of Nepali Gorkhas raises another dangerous possibility—their recruitment into the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) of China. The revelation that around 15,000 Nepali youths are fighting in the Russian army on the battlefields



CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

A SYMBIOTIC RELATIONSHIP

Ever since British commander Sir David Ochterlony recognised the superior fighting qualities of Gorkha soldiers during the Anglo-Nepal war (1814-1816) and raised the first Gorkha regiment in 1815, they have been part of the Indian army. Post-independence, the Gorkha regiments have given the army several chiefs, including the leg-

extremely limited. Service in the Indian army has been lucrative, as the pay is 2.5x of what the Nepalese army pays, while the pension provides economic security. Retired Nepali Gorkhas also have the option to settle down in India. As of April 2024, Nepal has around 122,000 pensioners who served in India. The Indian government, through various branches of the Defence Wing, provides social and medical benefits for them and their dependants on par with their Indian counterparts. The remittances that serving Gorkhas send home have given Nepal an economic cushion during difficult times. Their contribution to Nepal’s GDP is crucial too, as the salaries and pensions from India are greater than Nepal’s defence budget.

Nepal’s objections to the Agnipath scheme, therefore, are based on hard economic facts. The 75 per cent of recruits who return would have no pension rights and have to seek employment elsewhere. Also, a large number of youths with military training but without jobs can pose a security threat.

Brig. Gen. Prem Basnyat (retd), a former high-ranking officer from the Nepali army, feels the Agnipath recruitment scheme is against the basic norms of soldiering. “It is high time to amend or reframe the Tripartite Agreement so that Nepalese youths can join the Indian army under Agnipath with terms and conditions,” he tells INDIA

OTHER THAN 32,000 SERVING SOLDIERS, NEPAL HAS AROUND 122,000 GORKHA PENSIONERS WHO SERVED IN INDIA. AS THEY ARE OUR EYES AND EARS THERE, A DROP IN NUMBERS MEANS A DROP IN INDIA’S SOFT-POWER REACH

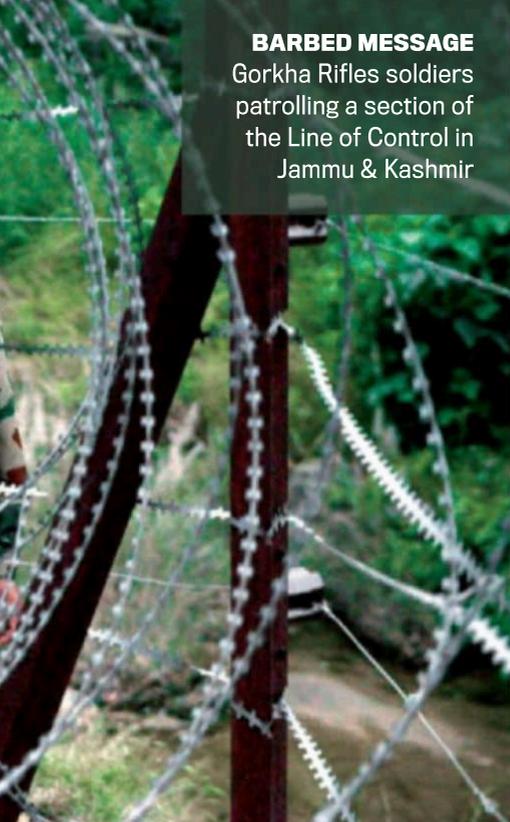
of Ukraine has rung alarm bells in the Indian security establishment. Though there is no immediate concern, the prospect of Gorkhas fighting for the Chinese against India on the Himalayan frontiers is not a pretty one. “It has been close to five years since we have recruited a Nepali Gurkha,” says an officer of the Indian army. “It seems that the future of the Gorkha Brigade and its 38 battalions is bleak, considering the adamant position of both nations.”

endary Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw and, more recently, Gen. Dalbir Singh Suhag, Gen. Bipin Rawat and the present Chief of Defence Staff, Gen. Anil Chauhan. Also the most decorated Indian General, the late Lt Gen. Zorawar Chand (Zoru) Bakshi.

The decades-long arrangement of Gorkhas serving in the Indian army has been beneficial to both sides. Nepal’s weak economy means that career opportunities for its youth have been

BARBED MESSAGE

Gorkha Rifles soldiers patrolling a section of the Line of Control in Jammu & Kashmir



TODAY from Kathmandu.

With no Nepali Gorkhas joining the Indian army in four years, the number of soldiers in the Gorkha Regiments is steadily falling and could impact their operational effectiveness. If the status quo continues, in the next 10 years, there will be no Nepali in the army, robbing it of high-quality soldiers. To address the problem, army chief Gen. Manoj Pande had in 2022 stated that the vacancies allotted to Nepali Gorkhas would be redistributed to others “for the time being”. Likewise, it is known that some Indian Kumaoni and Garhwali youths were recruited into Gorkha regiments and there is a lookout for youths from the hills ‘with similar traits’ to the Gorkhas.

Not just the loss of exceptional fighting men, experts believe that the Nepalis not joining the Indian army is a massive loss to India’s strategic reach in the Himalayan nation, as they are our “eyes and ears” there. The idea that Nepali youth might be drawn into China’s ambit is the main concern.

THE CHINA FACTOR

Nepal is strategically located as a buffer state between India and China, and Beijing has in the past decade been increasing its footprint there. China has invested over \$188 million in Nepal, mostly in energy and infrastructure

projects, making it the largest source of foreign direct investment. In 2016, Nepali leaders declared China an “all-weather friend” and signed on to its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) the following year, when the Nepali army also held a joint military exercise with the PLA. In 2018, Beijing pledged Nepalese Rs 250 crore (RMB 150 million; Rs 157 crore) for the Nepalese army. Though in recent months, Nepal authorities have vowed to stop youths fighting in the Russian army in Ukraine, some believe it’s a precursor to their being recruited by the Chinese.

“By not getting Nepalis, a vacuum is being created that any nation like China would like to occupy. China

has been eyeing such an opportunity,” says Lt Gen. Shokin Chauhan (retd), a former officer in a Gorkha regiment. He adds that though the PLA does not currently have the mechanism to recruit foreign soldiers, it is possible that China might create a border security guards unit with Gorkha soldiers.

However, experts believe that Gorkhas will never want to join the PLA and that, due to tradition and religious reasons, the Indian army would always be their first preference. But with little opportunity for employment, they might be pushed into that direction. Indeed, there are indications that Beijing is trying to encourage that subtly.

In the summer of 2020, when the Indian military and the PLA started their face-off in eastern Ladakh, Beijing funded a Nepali think-tank—China Study Centre—to conduct a detailed study on Nepalis being recruited in the Gorkha regiments of the Indian army. It not only aimed to find out the reasons behind Gorkhas joining the Indian army, but also the socioeconomic impact on the areas from where such recruitment is made and their interest in joining armed forces of foreign countries. Indian intelligence agencies are also aware of the increased activities of Chinese-funded thinktanks along the India-Nepal border. The continued presence of Nepali Gorkhas in the Indian Army is thus vital to counter the growing Chinese presence in Nepal.

Maj. Gen. Binoj Basnyat (retd), a former officer with the Nepali army and a strategist, believes that till both Nepal and India resolve the differences over Agnipath, Nepali youth should still be allowed to join the Indian army under some mechanism. “If they can join the Russian army for a few bucks, then why can’t they join the Indian army? Otherwise, other nations will lure unemployed youth,” he argues.

A resumption of Nepali Gorkhas joining the Indian army is in the security, strategic and economic interests of India and Nepal. It’s up to the two governments to repair this damaging rupture and break the deadlock. ■

TALE OF AN IMPASSE

➤ **Integral to the Indian army, around 32,000 Gorkhas (39 battalions) are currently part of seven Gorkha regiments, and 60 per cent are from Nepal**

➤ **The pay/ pension they receive from India is crucial for Nepal’s economy**

➤ **But the pandemic and Nepal’s objection to the Agnipath scheme for enlisting soldiers have stalled recruitment for four years**

➤ **Nepal says the scheme violates the 1947 agreement that provides for Nepali citizens to serve in the Indian army**

➤ **The depleting ranks of Nepali Gorkhas is a blow to the army and to India’s strategic reach in Nepal**

➤ **With Nepali youths fighting for Russia in Ukraine, some fear they are ripe for recruitment by China**

PANCHAYAT: THE GREAT
INDIAN VILLAGE
PG 56

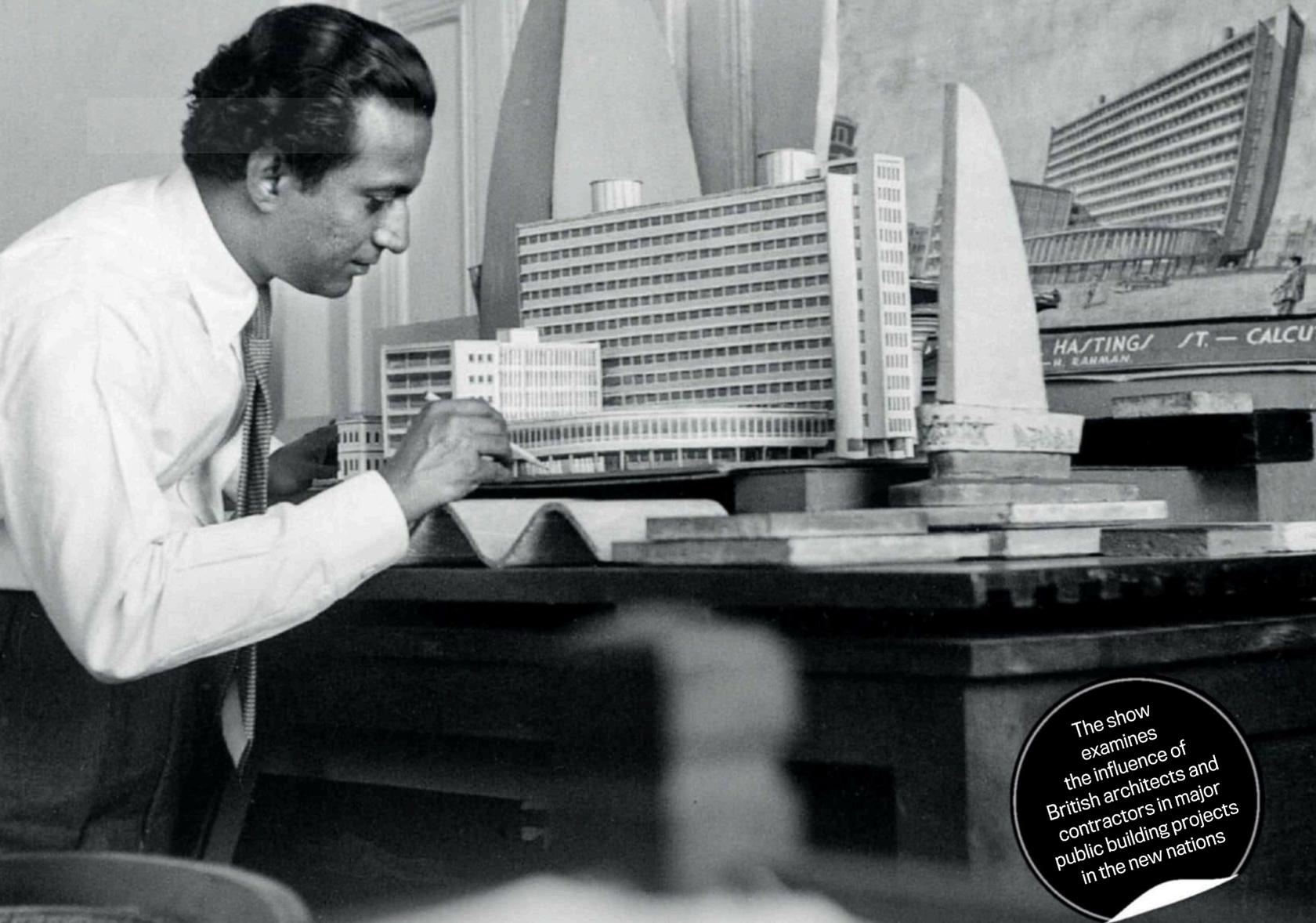
SPORTS: PICKING UP
PICKLEBALL
PG 60

EARLY PIONEER
Architect Habib
Rahman in the early
1950s in his studio in
Calcutta, a self-portrait
on display at the V&A

LEISURE

BOOKS: MAN OF
MANY IDEAS
PG 59

Q&A WITH
DEEPAK TIJORI
PG 62

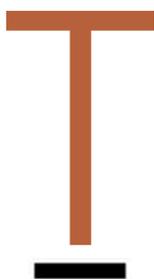


The show
examines
the influence of
British architects and
contractors in major
public building projects
in the new nations

EXHIBITION

TROPICAL TROPES

Tropical Modernism, an exhibition at the V&A, London, looks at the adoption of this architectural style in post-independence India and Ghana



This exhibition at the V&A, one of the few dealing with architecture held there in recent years, looks at Britain's unique contribution to international modernism in the mid-20th century, not at home, but in Ghana and India, where projects were selected, as the exhibition's principal curator Christopher Turner has written in the *V&A Magazine*, "that came to symbolise the utopian possibility of the transitional moment, a break with the colonial past articulated through art and architecture." This should be part of a wider examination of how European modernism responded to tropical climates, as there is no mention of countries such as Mexico, Brazil and Ethiopia, which did not have a mid-20th century disengagement from colonialism, nor of countries that did, such as Malaysia and, most significantly, Sri Lanka. But that would have required a far larger exhibition.

The thread that runs through the two case studies selected for this exhibition is the husband-and-wife team of Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew, who built up a profitable post-war practice

in British West Africa (now divided between Ghana, Gambia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone) and worked from 1951 with Le Corbusier in Chandigarh. In Africa, they tended to specialise in large-scale public buildings, many of which were funded by the British government as part of the retreat from empire. This was a less generous action than might at first appear, as initially it was intended to stave off growing calls for independence, whilst post-independence, it ensured that British architects and contractors remained key to the development of the new nations. The tropical zone was treated as a homogeneous entity and did not address regional cultures and conditions, a common critique now levelled at European modernists of this period.

In Chandigarh, where Fry and Drew were responsible for new housing, there was some social engineering. 'Custom' was something to be eradicated from the designs. Climate



RIBA

THE TRIUMPHANT SUCCESS LAY IN THE TRAINING OF INDIAN ARCHITECTS, REALISING NEHRU'S HOPE THAT CHANDIGARH WOULD BE A LIVING ARCHITECTURE SCHOOL



was the design driver and despite the building of prototypes of the new housing that were lived in, criticised and improved, only two options would be presented. Ever-present was the conviction that if the inhabitants were shown the right models (i.e., modernist ones) they would prefer them. By and large, this worked and their housing remains popular today.

In India, this style was, of course, a total contrast to the final great construction project of the British Raj, New Delhi. In the exteriors and gardens of the Viceroy's House, now Rashtrapati Bhavan, one can argue a greater awareness of the complexities and history of Indian buildings than is present in Chandigarh, but then Jawaharlal Nehru wanted a symbol of his country's progress. Like Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, he wanted to nurture a new generation of local architects to contract the architecture of a post-colonial nation. Chandigarh, as the new capital of the divided Punjab, was the showpiece. After something of a false



VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM, LONDON

MODERN TIMES Top, Jane Drew and Maxwell Fry; left, an installation at the Tropical Modernism exhibition; bottom, a scale model of Tower of Shadows, Chandigarh



THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK, SCALA, FLORENCE

VISUAL CONSTRUCTS

CLASSICS OF MODERN SOUTH ASIAN ARCHITECTURE ARE PORTRAYED IN THESE VOLUMES PHOTOGRAPHED BY **RANDHIR SINGH**

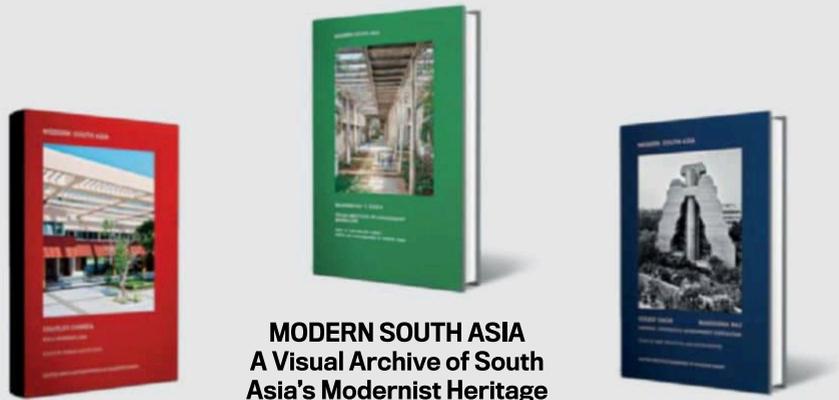
start, the commission went to the Franco-British team of Le Corbusier, his cousin Pierre Jeanneret, Fry and Drew.

There were failures, of course. Even Le Corbusier's ardent fan Charles Correa had to admit that "the Assembly chamber is an unhappy place to step into, and it is a near impossible Parliament to deliberate in", but added: "So Corb has his failures; yet somehow, in so glorious an architecture, they do not seem to matter."

The triumphant success lay in the training of Indian architects, realising Nehru's hope that Chandigarh would be a living architecture school. These torchbearers of Modernism included Eulie Chowdhury, Balkrishna Doshi, Jeet Malhotra, Aditya Prakash and Shivdatt Sharma. The last part of the Indian section of this exhibition focuses on the work of some of them and includes Raj Rewal's Hall of Nations (1972) in New Delhi's Pragati Maidan. This complex of exhibition halls commemorated the 25th anniversary of Independence and included a memorial pavilion to Nehru as a symbol of his vision of a secular and progressive India. Rewal himself describes his practice as "modern architecture with Indian roots, with an Indian ethos" and the fact that, despite a campaign to save his Hall of Nations, its demolition in 2017 made headline news in India and internationally says much for the success of Nehru's ambition. ■

—Charles Hind

Tropical Modernism: Architecture and Independence is on at the Porter Gallery, Victoria & Albert Museum, South Kensington, London, until September 22, 2024



MODERN SOUTH ASIA
A Visual Archive of South Asia's Modernist Heritage
Edited & photographed by *Randhir Singh*
ARTSHILA TRUST; ₹2,000 each

Architectural photographer Randhir Singh's three books—part of a nine-volume series—celebrating modern architecture in South Asia are odes to three landmark architectural projects (and their celebrated architects) that are exemplary specimens of modernist expression in India and assertions of the country's robust nation-building process.

The first book is a visual exploration of the iconic Indian Institute of Management Bangalore, a masterpiece designed by a visionary of modern Indian architecture, Balkrishna Vithaldas Doshi. Through the lens of the photographer, we get to experience the architect's interpretation of the spatial language of traditional Indian courtyard houses and temples into an inspired contemporary structural vocabulary. Our gaze walks into climatically responsive passageways, rhythmic paths and stairways that have been deliberately 'taken over' by nature and light. The photographer's eyes eschew all hierarchy of built geometry, to show the trees and foliage

sinuously usurping and coiling over it to create a remarkable organic building—part forest, part institution.

The second book of the series reveals to our habit-blurred eyes the architectural marvel of the National Cooperative Development Corporation headquarters building in New Delhi. A collaborative effort between architect Kuldip Singh and engineer Mahendra Raj, the arresting

Our gaze walks into climatically responsive passageways, rhythmic paths and stairways that are 'taken over' by nature and light

zig-zag, gateway-like building is "an exemplary structure of late-modern architecture in South Asia and beyond". The photographs create a strong representation of the building's 'brutalist' character, its powerful concrete materiality. The photographer then also attempts to 'humanise' the structure by locating it in its street geography and peopling

its severe majesty with street vistas, foliage and the occasional human presence.

The third book is a monograph on the Kala Academy, Goa, a hub of cross-cultural exchange envisioned by Charles Correa. Much like the architecture itself, the seemingly functional images stay clear of compositional ornamentation to show the building's open-to-sky spaces and intersecting semi-public zones that are set in an ingenious tropical modernism. Most striking are the images of the painted foyer where the space seamlessly extends into the perspectives of the street vistas and quadrangles painted on the walls, creating a theatrical illusion the visitor becomes a part of.

Magnificently produced and printed along with insightful essays, these books evoke the marvel of these modern buildings. The photographer, with a 'trained' restraint keeps the creative flourish a notch lower than the expression of the built spaces, allowing them to transcend their utilitarian ends and acquire auras of design and art. ■

—Bandeep Singh



The Great Indian Village

Everyone's favourite OTT show, **Panchayat**, is back for a third season on Amazon Prime Video. Expect a lot of laughs



PANCHAYAT has acquired a devoted fandom, with its characters becoming household names

Call it a funny coincidence. The makers of *Panchayat* didn't purposefully intend to have their third season, one revolving around panchayat polls, release in the midst of a general election. The new season drops on Amazon Prime Video on May 28, and since there's plenty of politicking, it isn't always a pretty picture. "It is out-and-out about political rivalry," says series director Deepak Kumar Mishra. "You've seen a sweet Pradhaan, but election *hota hai*, to leaders *ka face bilkul badal jaata hai* [come election time, people change]." And, unlike last season, which

ended on a surprisingly gut-punching note, this time around, there'll be no need for tissues, assures Mishra. "*Khoob hasaaoonga* (I'll make you laugh). Expect fun, political drama and emotions."

Four years since the first season dropped, *Panchayat* has acquired a devoted fandom, with its endearing central characters—Pradhaan, Vikas, Prahlad, Manju Devi, Rinki and Sachivji—becoming household names. For writer Chandan Kumar, their appeal lies in that "they are nice, but flawed people. They do err but still are loveable". The show's popularity is further evident in how it has inspired a series of memes,

including "*Dekh raha hai, Binodh*". "It is unexpected for us what the audience picks up," says Mishra. "We don't let what's happening outside affect us; we try to be honest to the story. Fanboy *wali cheez nahin karni hai* [We don't let the fans sway us]." Although Mishra admits that Chandan and he keep track of the audience chatter online.

What *Panchayat* has also done is fill a void by showing village life on OTT. In doing so, it has

put Mahodiya, a village in Madhya Pradesh, which goes by the name of Phulera in the show, on the nation's map. The past few years have seen the development of a *pucca* road (also a plot point in season one), a school, a temple and a revamped panchayat office. The residents are by now familiar with the cast and crew, welcoming them for two months and occasionally asking why they didn't stick to the village's original name. "These places are alive where people are quiet and lovely and the relationships matter to them," says Faisal Malik, who plays Prahlad. "[For me] coming back to shooting with the same people for two months doesn't feel an outdoor shoot but a retreat. *Mazaa hota hai, kaam nahin lagta* [It feels like fun, not work]."

The audience has noticed the bonhomie and responded to the show with warmth. The challenge for Mishra and writer Chandan Kumar has been to keep their interest going by delivering an equally good new season within two years and come up with more relatable situations to put the characters through. For Kumar, the quest is to "not repeat ourselves and go deeper into the story and get into the characters' minds" season by season. That they both enjoy doing so is the icing on the cake. "I know what I am going to put them through in seasons four and five," says Mishra. Faisal Khan, who is seated next to him, smiles. Bring on the adventure. ■

—Suhani Singh



DAVIDMAGINARY

MUSIC

LOVE CONQUERS

IKKA's third album *Only Love Gets Reply* brings together bigwigs like Diljit Dosanjh, Badshah and Karan Aujla, among others

R

apper Ankit Singh Patyal, better known as IKKA, can easily be called the 'poster boy' of Indian hip-hop. Whether it was his last two albums *Nishu* or *I*, or popular chartbusters in Bollywood films like *Badrinath ki Dulhania*, the

artiste has cracked the code to success.

While hip-hop remains his forte, he has attempted to offer his audiences a new flavour with his third album *Only Love Gets Reply* with T-Series. "This time around, I have tried to maintain a balance between commercial and hip-hop through my art. There is something for everyone," he shares.

What's more, IKKA has collaborated with big names like Diljit Dosanjh, Guru Randhawa, Badshah, Sunidhi Chauhan and Karan Aujla, among others, on this album. "I am so thankful that all the artistes who have contributed to *Only Love Gets Reply* have blessed my tracks with their art. Each of these artistes are pioneers in the industry and their presence is enough to create a huge impact on the album," he says.

But why did he decide on this particular name for the album? "The thought behind the album struck me because of the hatred I've witnessed on social media. I believe hate never takes one far and should be ignored. When you communicate with love, you only get love," adds IKKA.

Only Love Gets Reply has 10 tracks, out of which 'Laadla' and 'Urvashi' featuring MC Stan were released in November 2023.

IKKA's next 'House of Lies' featuring Aujla released on May 24 while the other songs will take a few months.

As someone who began his hip-hop journey many years ago, IKKA believes the industry has witnessed a transformation, with more creative tracks being released today. "From young guns to the pioneers of the industry, everyone is looking to do something fresh. Look at Badshah

Whether it was his last two albums or popular chartbusters in Bollywood films, IKKA has cracked the code to success



bhai collaborating with J Balvin or King with Jason Derulo. I am sure we will see many more such collaborations in the coming years."

Is that something that's also on his mind? "Certainly. I also believe collaborating with international artistes is a good idea to spread our music across borders. I collaborated with Dope D.O.D. on my previous album. I am open to joining hands with more such forces in music if a suitable collaboration comes my way," he concludes. ■

—Geetika Sachdev

THE HINDU NATIONALIST

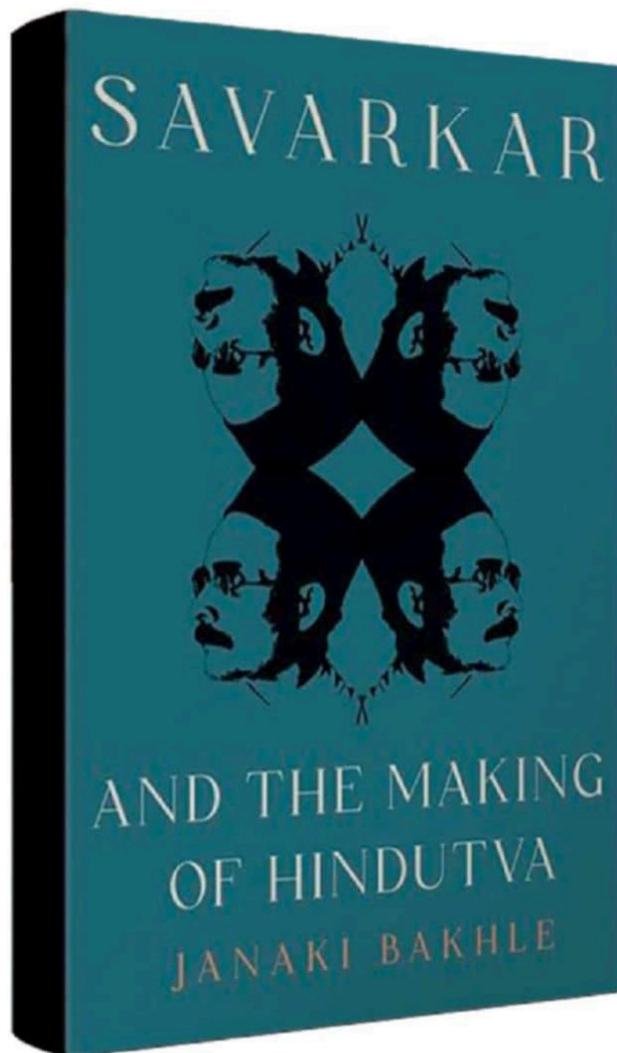
Janaki Bakhle's *Savarkar and the Making of Hindutva* is a deep dive into the creation of the ideologue

T

This is the latest addition to the considerable body of work—some objective, the bulk adulatory and hagiographic—on the Hindu nationalist icon V.D. Savarkar. Janaki Bakhle's endeavour is scholarly and source-based and underwritten by her fundamental disagreement with the basic thrust of Savarkar's thought. The book seeks a comprehensive picture of his political and social philosophy, looking at the entire corpus of his writings in Marathi—including a great deal of poetry—and English, which encompasses literature, history, social

commentary and, of course, politics and polemics. The book, therefore, seeks to bring “the Marathi and the English sources in conversation with each other”. This examination reveals a poet, a historian, a social reformer and anti-Muslim ideologue and polemicist—and how “each of these Savarkars was connected to the other”.

The milestones of Savarkar's life are well known. The events from his fiery first work in English on the revolt of 1857 to his arrest in England and conviction for sedition and transportation to the Andamans comprise one segment of his life till the early 1920s. Thereafter, his conditional release following repeated petitions for clemency amidst the waning Khilafat movement; a growing intensity to his anti-Muslim and anti-Gandhi discourse; leadership of the Hindu Mahasabha; and



↑
SAVARKAR AND THE MAKING OF HINDUTVA
 by Janaki Bakhle
 PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS
 ₹999; 432 pages



Bakhle aims to paint a comprehensive picture of Savarkar's socio-political philosophy through his writings in Marathi and English



the trial and acquittal in the Gandhi assassination conspiracy in 1948, form another. Through both stages, Savarkar had a considerable presence in the Maharashtrian mind and gradually also cemented an all-India reputation.

Bakhle notes that in the post-release phase of his life, Savarkar was not an episodic or occasional anti-Muslim, but a systemic one. To Savarkar, Gandhi's support for the Khilafat movement and the emphasis he placed on Hindu-Muslim unity proved his unsuitability to lead the national movement. Savarkar was also a prominent anti-caste protagonist. In Bakhle's analysis, Savarkar “inserted himself between Gandhi's and Ambedkar's position” while moving in a different direction to “either Gandhi's spiritual self-

Man of Many Ideas

Vanya Vaidehi Bhargav questions simplistic notions of Lala Lajpat Rai's politics in this well-researched book

searching or Ambedkar's revolutionary denunciation". Savarkar's critique of caste—and it was a severe and trenchant critique—is underwritten by the premise of the need for Hindus to unite against Muslims. For him, therefore, Hindus had to become a single 'meta category' for which caste would necessarily have to be jettisoned. Much the same logic applied to Savarkar's denunciation of Hindu veneration of the cow, of ritual and Vedic chants and prayers. What mattered to him was the nation and since caste or religious dogma and prejudice excluded some Hindus from its fold, they were attacked and rejected.

The great merit of Bakhle's work is its very detailed immersion in Savarkar's poetry in Marathi and his historical works. Immediately after Partition and Independence, suspicion of involvement in Gandhi's assassination "brought complete ostracisation and drove Savarkar into virtual isolation for the rest of his life" till his death in 1966. Yet he retained a core constituency of admirers and, from the 1990s onwards, his ideological position acquired a new traction and strength. Those wanting to know how this happened, his long afterlife and what gave Savarkar's writings their appeal, will find much meat in this book. ■

—T.C.A. Raghavan



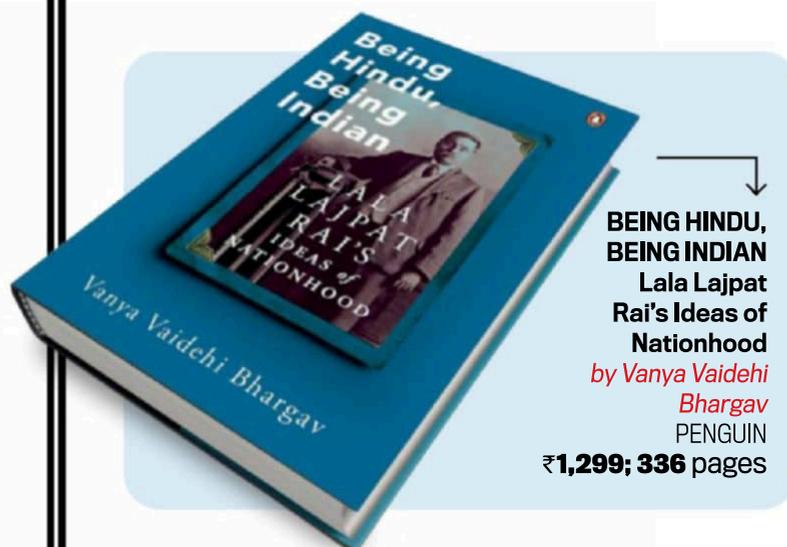
This is a spirited book, using prodigious amounts of research and an accessible writing style to argue a case for Lala Lajpat Rai. The resurrection of Rai follows a trend where critical research on the nationalist right wing is breaking new ground. Historians have usually associated Rai's politics with a unitary nationalism that was exclusivist. The author questions this simplistic interpretation. When Rai succumbed to a lathi charge by the colonial police in 1928, questions about subjecthood and citizenship had not been resolved. Staunch nationalists like him were still working on the range of choices between democratic principles based on individual rights and collective community sentiments, testing and strategising the possibilities of moving from one to the other or combining both.

As the title of the book provocatively makes clear, Rai's career challenges established conventions of understanding nationhood. It was not just religious minorities but also the majority Hindus who had to work out the question of belonging and nationality. Despite Rai's commitment to Hindu political organisations like the Arya Samaj and Hindu Mahasabha, no consistent connection with Hindutva ideologue Vinayak Savarkar can be established, argues the author, nor a lineage with the present-day right-wing politics that has noisily claimed him as a forebear. Rai's model of the Indian nation grappled with agnostic forms of nationhood and his rejection of a nation based on communities of faith cut both ways. It dismissed the two-nation theory but envisaged reservation for Indian Muslims. He also abandoned the reformist and theological version of modern Hinduism espoused by the Arya Samaj as it had no place for the

catholicity of Hindu sects.

Although this book primarily addresses the history of ideas and political thought in modern India, the biographical details are fascinating and show the many paradoxes in Lajpat Rai's career. Rai was a product of Islamicate North India yet, on the language question, he passed over Urdu for Hindi. The influence of his early upbringing persisted, however, and showed in his political choices. As a young activist, Rai was devastated when Dayanand Saraswati passed away in 1883. Despite the emphasis on religion in Saraswati's thought, Rai chose to work with desecralised categories of 'history' and 'culture'. Although a vegetarian, he refused to support dietary restrictions within the Samaj. He wrote a passionate critique of Syed Ahmed Khan's rejection of the elective principle espoused by the Congress. In 1909, when Madan Mohan Malviya was Congress president in Lahore, he stayed away differing on the acceptance of separate electorates, but later toyed with the idea of federated 'nations'. He supported the Khilafat Movement, but after the Kohat riots in 1924, worked to strengthen the Mahasabha. The author argues that Rai's public life offered the possibility of a secularised right wing in Indian politics, a nuanced overview of which is long overdue. ■

—Partho Datta



BEING HINDU, BEING INDIAN
Lala Lajpat Rai's Ideas of Nationhood
by Vanya Vaidehi Bhargav
PENGUIN
₹1,299; 336 pages

SPORTS

Great Balls of Fire

The sport of **PICKLEBALL** is set to get a boost in India with the launch of the World Pickleball League here



Six years ago, Tejas Mahajan made the switch from badminton to pickleball. He made rapid progress and went on to win multiple medals at the national and international level. The 26-year-old's latest triumph came at the Asia Pickleball Open in Thailand in February, where he picked up two golds and a bronze. More importantly, pickleball gave him an identity and means to earn a livelihood through which he has been able to pay off his home loan in Jalgaon and buy a shiny new motorcycle.

For the likes of Mahajan, there's more in store now with the announcement of the World Pickleball League that will start in a few months. Former Davis Cupper Gaurav Natekar's firm, Natekar Sports and Gaming, will be launching the enterprise in the country backed by Sony Entertainment Talent Ventures India. The six-team league will feature a mix of international and Indian players and see an investment of \$10 million over the next 3-5 years.

"About a year ago, I realised the potential of pickleball during a tourna-



"We'll have talent searches, grassroots programmes. The idea is to build our own heroes through this league"

GAURAV NATEKAR
Natekar Sports and Gaming



ment in Goa. The participation was good, building the court didn't cost much and it required little space. Besides, it included people of all ages with almost 35-40 per cent women. That said, it's an easy game to learn, but a tough one to master," says Natekar.

Pickleball's origins

After the China Masters in November last year, Lakshya Sen felt the need to hit pause. Since August, he had won just two matches in eight tournaments on the BWF World Tour, making it past the opening round only once. His qualification hopes for the Paris Olympics were hanging by a thread.

That's when he had a detailed discussion with coach Prakash Padukone to understand his shortcomings. That conversation seems to have done wonders for Sen, who made the cut for the Olympics in April. "He asked me to change my mindset, to look at winning a few matches every week rather than qualification on the whole," says the 22-year-old Sen.

The relentless tournament schedule until then had given Sen little time to focus on training; his

THE POWER OF PATIENCE

A steady approach has helped badminton player **Lakshya Sen** secure a spot in the upcoming Paris Olympics

recovery wasn't complete either. "The aim was to make the World Tour Finals in December, but when that didn't happen, it gave us a lot of breathing space to train well," he says.

■ For the next six weeks, Sen

got back to the grind to raise his fitness levels. Sports psychologist Gayatri Vartak Madkekar (a constant since his under-14 days) and South African performance coach Paddy Upton worked with him on the mental





lie in the United States of the 1960s. While the All India Pickleball Association (AIPA) was launched in 2008, it wasn't until a few years ago that it picked up in India. Although national-level ranking tournaments have been a regular feature, the highlight was hosting the Bainbridge Cup, con-

sidered the Pickleball World Cup, in Mumbai in 2022.

"We had 435 players from 11 countries and the \$50,000 prize money really had people sit up and take notice. And it has only grown since then. Today, we have over 10,000 registered players and about 25,000-30,000 in

all playing the sport in India," says Nikhil Mathure, treasurer of AIPA.

In a short span, India has done well on the international front too. Earlier this year, the teams picked up 10 medals at the US Open Pickleball Championship and five at the Asian Open Pickleball Championship. AIPA has been doing their bit to increase pickleball's popularity. After finding local manufacturers for equipment, they have been conducting demonstrations at schools and universities, besides going out to smaller towns (19 state associations have been set up so far). "Reducing the financial entry barrier was important to give everyone access. We have a lot of youngsters playing today," says Mathure.

Natekar wants to bring down some top international players to ensure that the league is a spectacle. "We are also making a few other commitments to the franchisees in terms of developing pickleball through talent searches and grassroots programmes. The idea is to build our own heroes through this league," he says. ■

-Shail Desai



With two semi-final runs at the French Open and All England Open, Sen did enough to qualify for his **OLYMPIC DEBUT**

aspect of his game.

On court, he maintained a high intensity under the watchful eyes of Padukone, coach Vimal Kumar and his father, Dharendra. To make up for the lack of match practice, training sessions included practice games. "It's rare to get this kind of time in-season, so I knew it was important to put in the work," he recalls.

However, the year started no different. In three tournaments in January, Sen picked up just one win. But he was sensing the improvements with every match and was patient. "The Indonesia Masters was a

great boost for my confidence. I was in a better space on the whole, much sharper with good fitness levels," says Sen. The pressure was immense as the competition moved to Europe in March. But with two deep semi-final runs at the French Open and the All England Open, Sen did enough to qualify for his Olympic debut.

"It's been a tough few months, but now it's done. The next few weeks will be about training to keep up fitness levels and playing tournaments to be match-ready," Sen says. And, as he's learnt, being patient. ■

-Shail Desai

BACK IN ACTION

Besides making a thrilling comeback with *Tipppsy*, **Deepak Tijori** is working on pushing the boundaries with new projects

Q. How does it feel to be back after a long hiatus, both as an actor and a director? What took you so long?

Premiering a movie like *Tipppsy* after a long hiatus can be a mix of excitement and anticipation. It's a chance to showcase new work and reconnect with audiences in a different capacity. Sometimes life takes unexpected turns, and filmmakers may need time to explore new ideas, recharge, or focus on personal priorities.

Q. What was the biggest challenge in making *Tipppsy*?

Tipppsy is a thriller that unfolds during a bachelorette party. The story revolves around Tanya, Iris, Pony, Selene and Yami (abbreviated as 'Tipppsy'), who find themselves entangled in a dangerous situation after a drug is slipped into their drinks. The most challenging part was bringing together a fresh cast and crew to create an engaging thriller that resonates with audiences. Additionally, crafting a gripping narrative while delivering a meaningful message about partying responsibly was a creative challenge.

Q. Do you identify more as an actor or a director?

As an actor, I experienced the magic of bringing characters to life, but I wanted to expand my creative horizons and tell stories from a broader perspective. Directing allows me to orchestrate every aspect of a film, from shaping the narrative and working with actors to making visual and stylistic choices that enhance the storytelling.

Q. What are you working on next?

I'm currently working on a new project, exploring different genres and storytelling techniques. As a filmmaker, I'm always excited about new ideas and narratives that challenge me creatively. Whether it's another thriller, a drama, or even a comedy, I'm eager to continue pushing boundaries and exploring diverse themes in my upcoming work. Stay tuned for more updates!

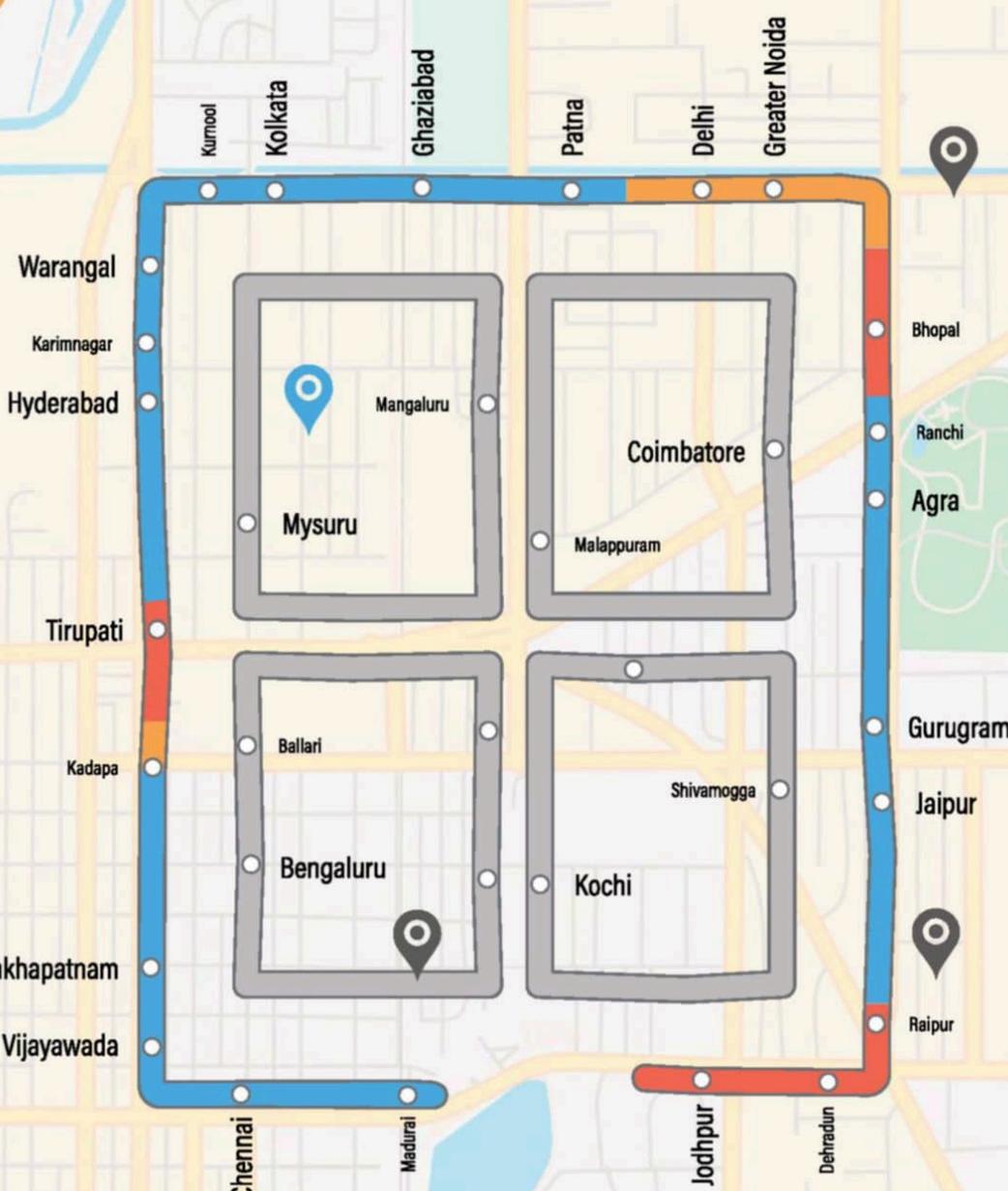
—with Rupali Dean



AFP

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