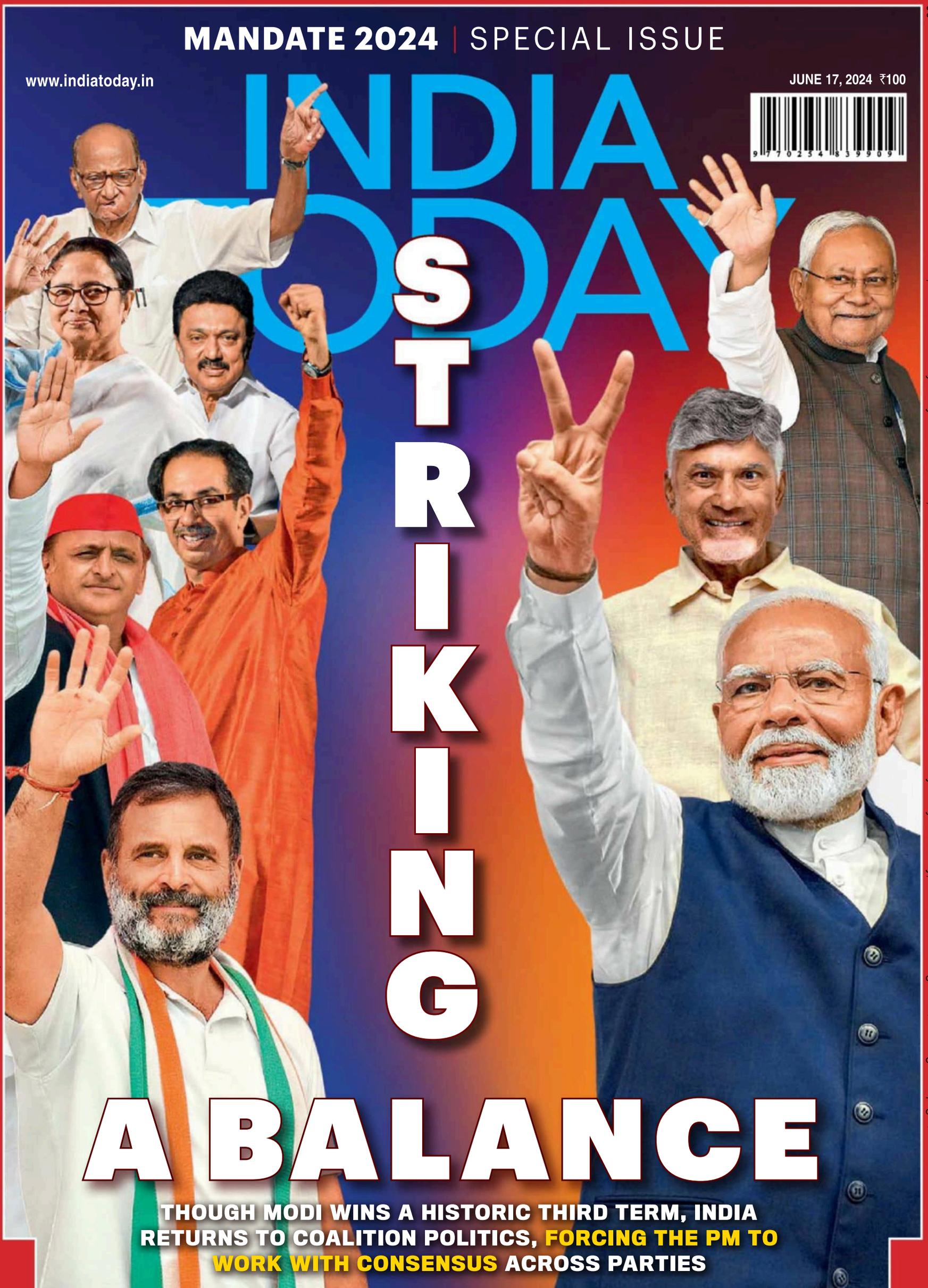


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STRIKING

A BALANCE

THOUGH MODI WINS A HISTORIC THIRD TERM, INDIA RETURNS TO COALITION POLITICS, FORCING THE PM TO WORK WITH CONSENSUS ACROSS PARTIES

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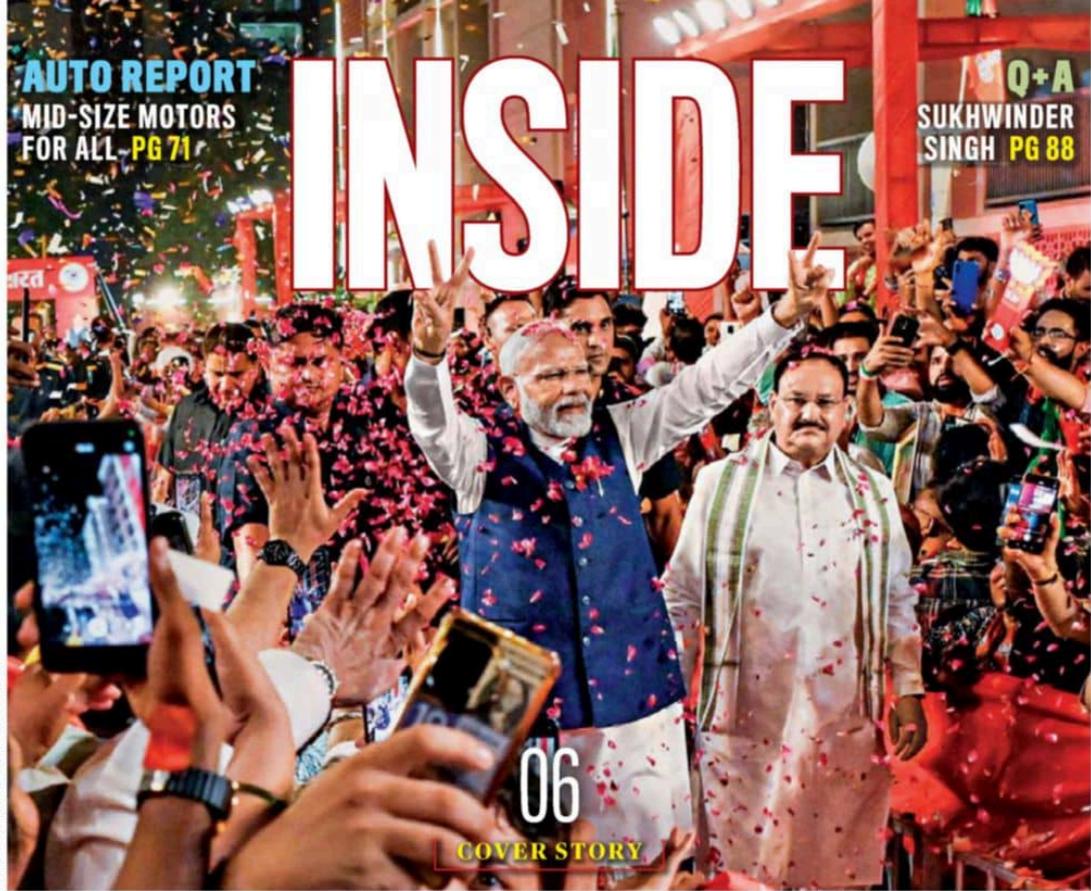
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History across the world has shown that the greatest of men who were treated like Gods by their citizens were eventually found to have feet of clay. That's the ultimate political paradox. This time in India, a powerful statement at the voting booths brought that diminution of stature. If it looks like a mixed mandate and not an emphatic one, that is precisely what it is meant to be. It is a correction of excess, a tempering, a recalibration. Instead of handing another blank cheque to the Narendra Modi dispensation, another gift of superabundance, the voters favoured moderation.

Democracy, by definition, is 'the rule of the people'. Governments must heed their collective will. Indeed, the Indian electorate is a great teacher. Here are some of the lessons of the 2024 election:

➤ Don't take the voter for granted. The BJP's "char sau paar" slogan may have been a war cry, but for many, it seemed like something preordained, which was unacceptable to them. For Indians, their vote is sacred and is their inalienable right.

➤ Modi is still an extremely popular leader, but the BJP can no longer rely exclusively on the Modi magic. It must nurture other regional leaders to increase its numbers.

➤ Vote banks are not monolithic. They can shift or combine to change the political landscape. In this election, new caste combinations emerged across the Hindi heartland. In Haryana, Dalits and Jats voted alongside each other for the first time in the post-Devi Lal era. East Rajasthan saw a rare convergence of Jat-Meena-Gujjar-Jatav voters. In Uttar Pradesh, Dalits voted alongside Yadavs for the first time in three decades. The BJP tally in SC reserved seats dropped from 46 in 2019 to 30 now. Maharashtra even coined the acronym 'Ma-Mu': Marathas and Muslims voting together! All this organic social engineering damaged the "char

sau paar" narrative.

➤ Even women cannot be treated as one neatly separable bloc, the assumption on which all parties have been assiduously courting them. They are hardly unconnected to the fate of men. Women can vote differently from men, but women can also vote differently from other women. It is wrong to assume direct transfers or other women-centric sops will attract them en masse. What worked for Mamata Banerjee didn't work for Arvind Kejriwal or Jagan Mohan Reddy.

➤ The politics of aggressive Hindutva nationalism has reached its limit. It probably has a negative effect on the moderate Hindu swing voter. The defeat of the BJP in Ayodhya, the new 'Vatican for Hindus', signals that unambiguously. Add to that the 68 per cent reduction in the prime minister's victory margin in the holy city of Varanasi. Hopefully, the sell-by date of divisive politics has expired.

➤ Fighting corruption is laudable, but not when it is selective. For example, welcoming defectors with serious corruption charges against them and not pursuing their cases. Out of the BJP's 43 defector candidates, only 14 won; and only five out of 28 won for the Congress.

➤ Breaking up political opponents' parties is frowned upon, as shown in the INDIA bloc tally of 30 out of 48 seats in Maharashtra, where the BJP splintered two regional parties.

➤ The issue of the much-reviled EVMs being rigged is buried. Elections in India are free and fair.

➤ The myth of the TINA or There Is No Alternative factor has been broken. There is now TIFA. There Is a Federal Alternative. Coinage courtesy Kapil Sibal.

➤ The main issue was unemployment and inflation. However, it has been there in every election in recent memory. The difference was that the BJP barely acknowledged it. The lack of jobs and the prices of everyday items affects everyone. Dole is like taking



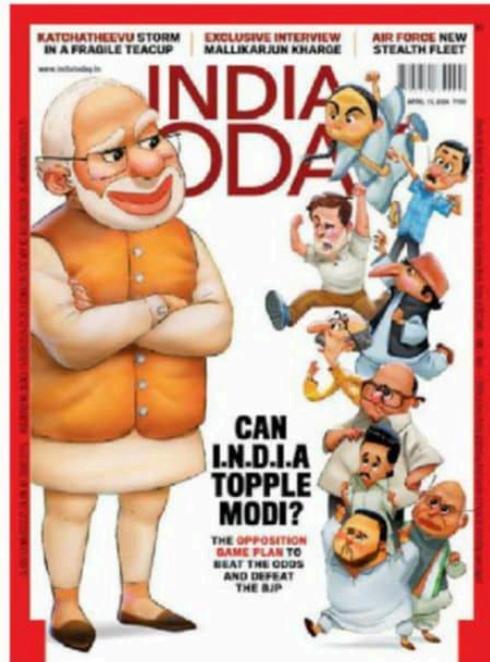
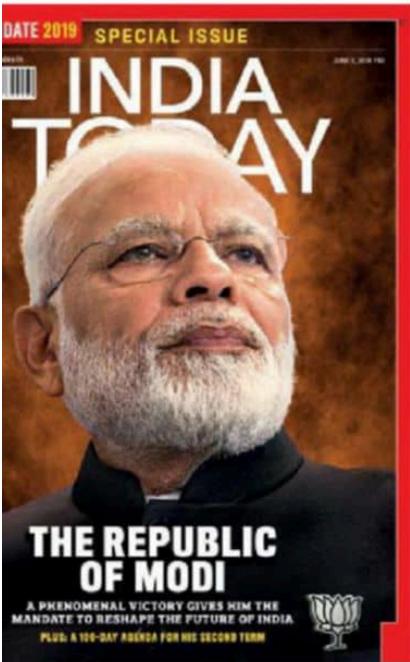
your citizens for granted and is not sufficient. The 'labharthis' are not going to be satisfied with 5 kg of free ration. They want jobs so that they can lead a life of dignity. The competitive welfareism being practised by all parties is a race to the bottom for the country.

➤ Related to jobs is the reservation issue, which is enshrined in the Constitution. The misleading narrative by the INDIA bloc that the BJP's 400-seat target was aimed at changing the Constitution to eliminate reservations gained considerable traction and affected Dalit and OBC votes. This issue is not going away, as the promoter of the caste census is part of the winning alliance.

➤ Rural distress clearly affected voting patterns. The BJP lost 49 of the 198 rural seats it held; the Congress added 26 to its previous tally of 29. The farmers obviously felt neglected by Modi 2.0.

➤ Finally, the voter has said that the sibling of being powerful must be humility, otherwise you fall on your own sword.

Besides all these factors, there is the intangible. The pervasive sense of fear in society. People talk in whispers in drawing rooms. When meeting government ministers, even in private conversations, they switch off their phones and ask you to do the same. Business people fear getting on the wrong side of the government. Academics are afraid of



◀ **OUR EARLIER COVERS ON MODI (L-R)**

- May 26, 2014
- June 3, 2019
- April 15, 2024

expressing their opinions freely. NGOs face a hostile environment. Since all the exit pollsters were wrong in one direction, I suspect they got their predictions messed up because people did not tell them the truth about who they were voting for out of fear and said 'yes' to the ruling dispensation. A free press is essential for a vibrant, functioning democracy. If the press is closely monitored and 'guided' to cover countless government events and criticism is muted in fear of retribution, then we all get far removed from ground reality. This is true of other ruling parties too. Perhaps the past regime would not have faced this electoral fate if it hadn't lived in its echo chambers. The autonomy of institutions has been undermined. Enforcement agencies are being used as instruments of terror. Loosely drafted, draconian laws like PMLA and sedition are being used casually. With countless rules and regulations, cases can be filed without much substance. It is well known that, in India, the process is the punishment, and very few cases are ever closed. This is not new, but has been accelerated and adopted as routine practice.

There is much drumbeating about becoming the third-largest economy in the world, little realising that it's primarily a factor of the size of our population. We still rank a lowly 125th

in the world in terms of per capita income (PPP). There is gross inequality. The top 1 per cent hold more national wealth now. The top 10 per cent hold nearly 80 per cent. All these are signs of not a very healthy society.

Notwithstanding all this, the BJP has been given another chance to govern India. It has to be congratulated for having fought 10 years of anti-incumbency. It is highly creditable that Modi has piloted the BJP to three consecutive terms, a feat last achieved by Jawaharlal Nehru six decades ago. But the message from the electorate to the party is admonitory, if still indulgent: cut down on the grandstanding, because symbolism does not equal substance, and focus instead on things that really matter to human lives and livelihoods.

The BJP has registered significant successes—most strikingly, a rise in new territories. But its long-term dream to supplant regional parties and turn India into a unitary, two-party system has come up against a sobering reality check. Ironically, what saved the day for the BJP was its phalanx of NDA partners, whom pollsters had predicted would be its weakest link. The message from the electorate applies equally to the Congress, which ran a spirited cam-

paign under Rahul Gandhi, who hit the country trails like a man possessed of revolutionary zeal despite the monetary constraints put his way. The result is the almost doubling of its seats that run pan-India, from Kerala to Punjab to the Northeast. But if it starts fantasising about a return to its glory days, that would be hubris. It has only become a handy instrument for the expression of mass disenchantment. If the party has to progress, it must develop a narrative beyond criticising Modi and the BJP. A vision which takes India forward, not backwards, as many of its hare-brained schemes would suggest.

We will now have an NDA government that is substantively different from the past decade. Modi 3.0 will be different, as he has to rely on two crutches—both known to be wobbly. By now, Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar's biggest calling card is that he can dump an alliance faster than you can pronounce its full form. We also have the surprise resurrection of Chandrababu Naidu, another hard bargainer who will now extract major concessions from his new partner. Both Nitish and Naidu are sure to take their Shylockian pound of flesh.

I believe India needs a person like Modi, who has a clear vision for a modern India, is hard-working, gets things done and is incorruptible. Still, with its immense diversity, he must realise that India itself is a coalition. And coalitions can only be ruled by discussion, debate and consensus. It may be slower and more arduous, but it will be more stable and lasting. India is a country with enormous potential. The previous Modi leadership made the world and India realise this, but a different path and style are needed to take us to the bright future that awaits us.

I salute the Indian voter for the 2024 mandate.

(Aroon Purie)

INDIA RISING

Narendra Modi greeted with flowers at BJP HQ, Jun. 4; 'UP ke ladke' Rahul and Akhilesh do the impossible



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STRIKING -

Indian voters grant Modi a historic third term, but without a majority and with the object lesson to rule by consensus

Photograph by **BANDEEP SINGH**

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A BALANCE

By **RAJ CHENGAPPA**

IT

is not quite the way Narendra Modi wanted to go down in India's electoral history. When he takes oath on June 9, Modi will be only the second prime minister in six decades to have served a third consecutive term. That's an outstanding achievement by itself. But for Modi, the outcome of Election 2024 is seen as a personal setback. Having led the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to back-to-back majorities in the 2014 and 2019 general elections, he would have liked to equal the record set by Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister. Nehru had a hat trick of Lok Sabha majorities for the Congress party in 1952, 1957 and 1962 elections. It was not to be for Modi, who was denied a majority in Election 2024.

When the results of the Lok Sabha election were declared on June 4, the BJP's tally had dropped 20 per cent, from 303 seats in 2019 to 240 this time. The party was 32 seats short of a simple majority of 272 seats on its own in the 543-strong Lok Sabha. It now has to rely on the 53 seats won by its National Democratic Alliance (NDA) partners, including the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) and the Janata Dal (United) or the JD(U), to lay claim to continue ruling the country. The Opposition's Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) led by the Congress acquitted itself surprisingly well with a tally of 234 seats. The Congress tally of 99 seats may appear modest compared to the 206 it won in 2009 when it headed the ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA). But then there was the absolute nadir the Grand Old Party plumbed thereafter when it won only 44 and 52 seats in 2014 and 2019 election, respectively. It has managed to find its way back up from that abyss, almost doubling its tally. More importantly for the INDIA bloc, Modi's third term heralds the return of coalition politics to the country after a hiatus of a decade.

In pronouncing this verdict, the Indian voter seems to have struck a balance between warring political forces and sent out an unambiguous message: that they want the continuity and stability that Modi and his team represent but are against absolute domination by a single party. Hence their vote for a strong Opposition that could hold the government



ANI

The message that the Indian voter has sent out is unambiguous. They want the continuity and stability of the Modi government but are against the domination of any one political party



to account and hammer out a consensus on how to rapidly address issues such as rising unemployment and inflation that continue to beset the country. If Modi was disappointed with the BJP not winning a majority on its own, it didn't show as he entered the BJP headquarters in Delhi soon after the results were announced and was greeted with a shower of rose petals by the party's supporters. His address was brief, but he made it clear that he would lead the nation again and work with NDA partners. "The NDA's third term will see a new golden chapter in India's development... this is Modi's guarantee," he said. "It also strengthens our resolve for a Viksit Bharat."

BRAND MODI ON THE WANE

While the BJP may not admit it, experts believe that the results do show that Modi's electoral invincibility has been seriously dented. Especially because he made Election 2024 a presidential-style campaign, holding over 180 rallies across the country, promising everyone "*Modi ki guarantee*". He also set an ambitious target of 370 seats for the BJP and pushed for a super-majority of 400-plus along with NDA partners. Many saw this stemming from his desire to equal Rajiv Gandhi's feat of winning 414 seats for the Congress in

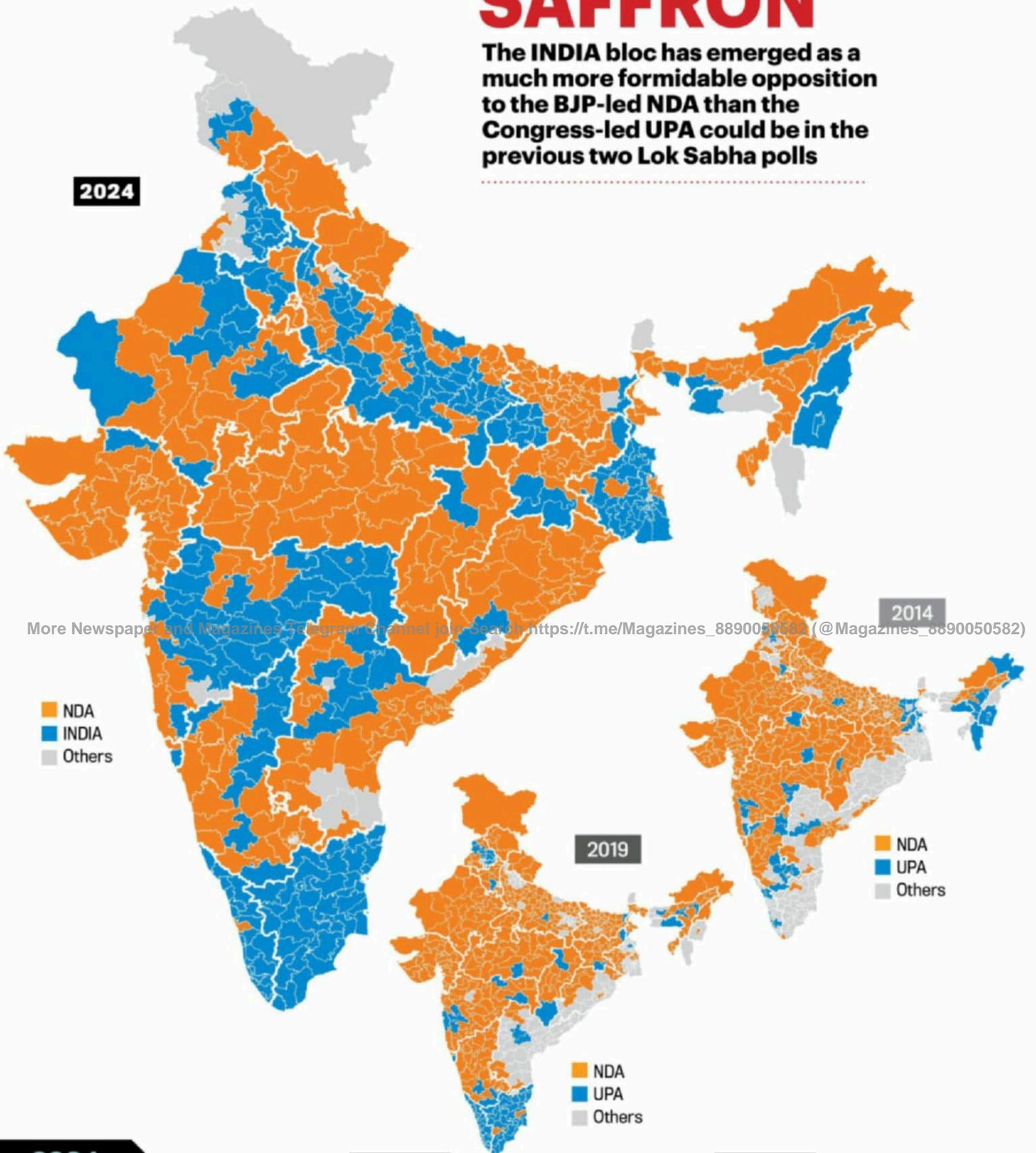
1984. In the event, the BJP's final tally of 240 seats, though creditable, seems like a huge comedown. Political analyst Amitabh Tiwari likens the progress of Brand Modi to what management experts consider the four stages of a product's life-cycle—introduction, growth, maturity and decline. The election results, he believes, demonstrate that Modi has crossed the maturity stage and is headed for decline.

Tiwari bolsters his argument with the post-poll analysis by the Lokniti programme of the Delhi-based Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), which shows that while Modi remained the leading choice of voters to become prime minister, his numbers had declined from 47 per cent in a similar poll in 2019 to 41 per cent now—a drop of six percentage points. "There is a clear plateauing of support for Brand Modi," says Sandeep Shastri, national coordinator of Lokniti-CSDS. For Tiwari, in that decline lies the possible reason for the current fall in BJP numbers since the party depended extensively on the 'Modi premium' to fetch votes for it. Interestingly, the same study showed the gap between Modi and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi narrowing from 24 percentage points in 2019 to 14 this time.

Other studies suggest that Modi's overzealous pitch for a

SHRINKING SAFFRON

The INDIA bloc has emerged as a much more formidable opposition to the BJP-led NDA than the Congress-led UPA could be in the previous two Lok Sabha polls

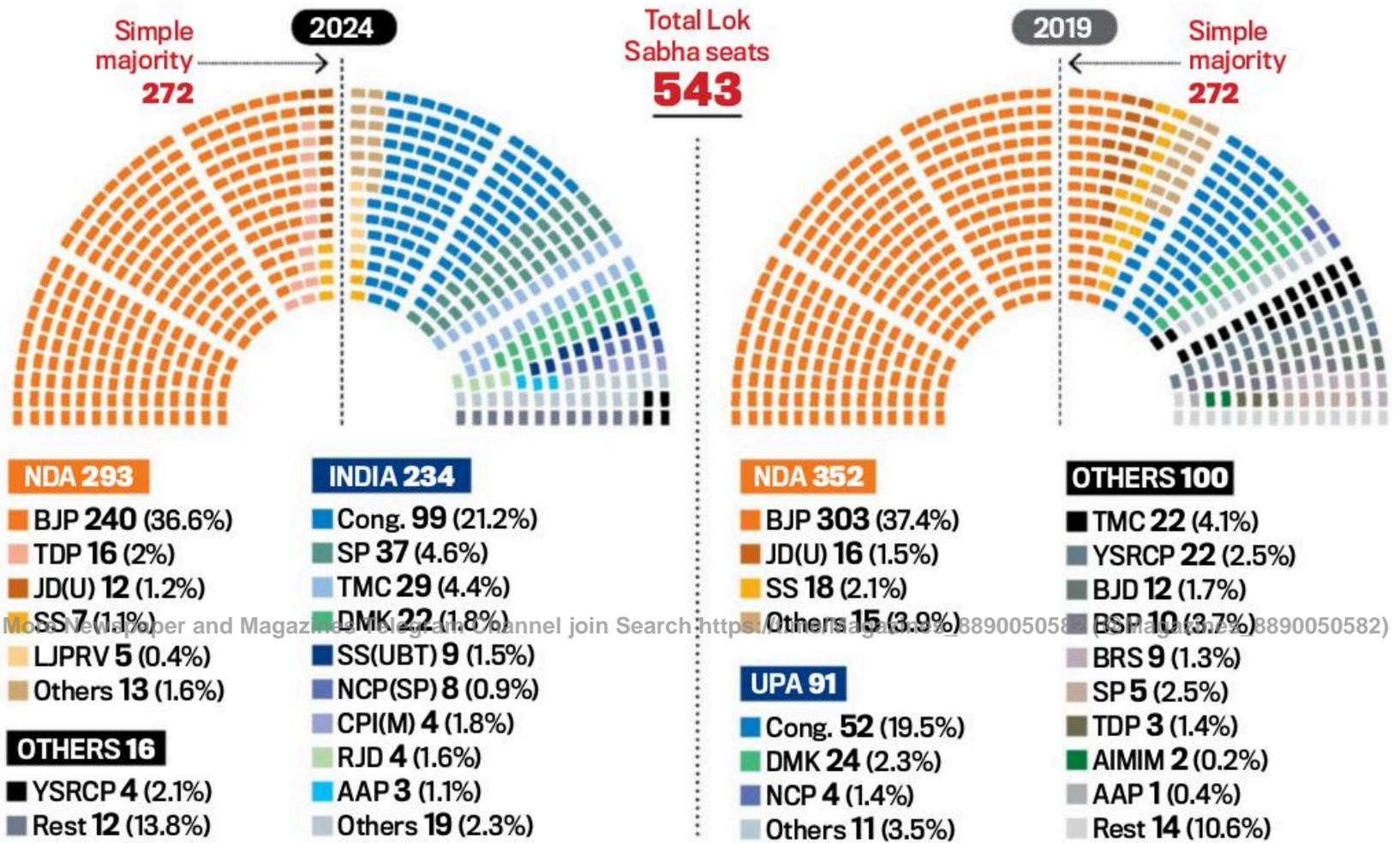


2024			2019			2014		
NDA	INDIA	OTHERS	NDA	UPA	OTHERS	NDA	UPA	OTHERS
293	234	16	352	91	100	336	59	148
VOTE SHARE			VOTE SHARE			VOTE SHARE		
43%	41%	16%	45%	27%	28%	39%	23%	38%

Vote share figures have been rounded off

WHO GOT WHAT

With the BJP's tally dropping 20 per cent, from 303 seats in 2019 to 240 this time, it was left 32 seats short of a simple majority on its own



Source: ECI

brute majority ended up having a negative impact on the BJP's campaign. Especially after Rahul Gandhi and other INDIA partners accused the party of wanting such a majority to effect major constitutional changes to scrap, among other things, reservations for the backward classes, Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). This clearly seemed to have spooked the voter, with the BJP tally in the 84 seats reserved for SCs dropping from 46 in 2019 to 30 this election. Their loss proved to be the Congress's gain, as the party, which won six SC seats in 2019, saw the number rise to 19 in 2024, and its alliance partner, the Samajwadi Party, gain another seven from the blank it drew in 2019. The INDIA TODAY-MyAxis exit poll results showed that there was an overall jump of 18 percentage points in Dalit votes for Congress and its allies across both general and SC reserved constituencies and a six percentage point drop for BJP & Co. The same held true for the ST voters, with the exit polls recording a 12 percentage point jump in vote share for INDIA and a two percentage point fall in the

What this verdict also makes clear is that Brand Modi is diminishing and heavy reliance on this factor can only be to the BJP's detriment

NDA's vote share. In terms of seats, out of the 47 reserved for STs, the BJP won 26, five less than in 2019, while the Congress cornered 12, eight more than its previous tally of four.

THE RURAL THUMBS-DOWN

Another big takeaway from this election is that the INDIA formation successfully capitalised on voter discontent on two major fronts: unemployment and inflation. The recent CSDS

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समय पत्रिका साधनापथग हलकषमी उदयइंडिया नरिंगधाम मॉडर्न खेतीइंडिया टुडेदेवपुत्र
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राजस्थान रोजगार संदेश राजस्थान सूजससखी जागरण अहा! जदिगी बाल भास्कर योजना कुरकषैन्
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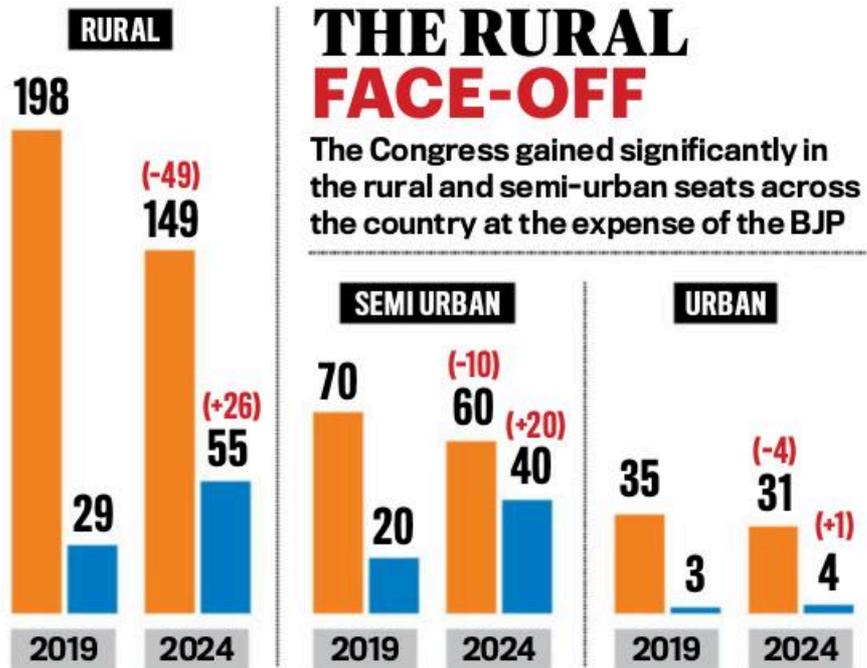
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study shows that not only were these two issues high on the list of voter concerns but more than 50 per cent of the respondents also said that their economic condition had either remained the same or worsened in the past year. The findings were akin to the conclusions in the INDIA TODAY Mood of the Nation survey in February 2024. Despite the BJP painting it as a ploy to rob Hindu women of their *mangalsutras* to give them to Muslims, Rahul's call for a redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor seemed to have had some resonance, as perhaps did

Modi's challenges may now come from within the party itself, which may call for an end to the overcentralised decision-making and the my-way-or-the-highway approach

the welfare guarantees listed in the Congress manifesto, including the Rs 1 lakh a year promised to every woman in a poor household as part of its commitment to Mahila Nyay. An internal study by India Today TV shows that the BJP lost as many as 49 of the 198 rural seats it won in 2019, while the Congress added 26 rural seats to its tally of 29 from the previous election. In semi-urban areas too, the BJP lost 10 of the 70 seats it won in 2019 while the Congress gained as many as 20 seats, taking its tally up to 40 this election.

What the BJP will take comfort in is their creditable win in Odisha, as it secured 20 out of the 21 seats in the Lok Sabha and a simple majority for the first time in the assembly election held simultaneously. Also its expansion of seats in Andhra Pradesh, where it tied up with the Telugu Desam Party as its junior partner and benefited from the landslide victory former chief minister Chandrababu Naidu pulled off in the assembly election that was also held at the same time. The BJP also retained its fortresses in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, while making modest gains in Telangana and scoring a major psychological victory with a seat in Kerala for the first time ever. But these gains proved scarce consolation for the blow it received in the swing states of Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, West Bengal and Bihar, which together account for 210 seats in the Lok Sabha. The BJP tally in these four states plum-

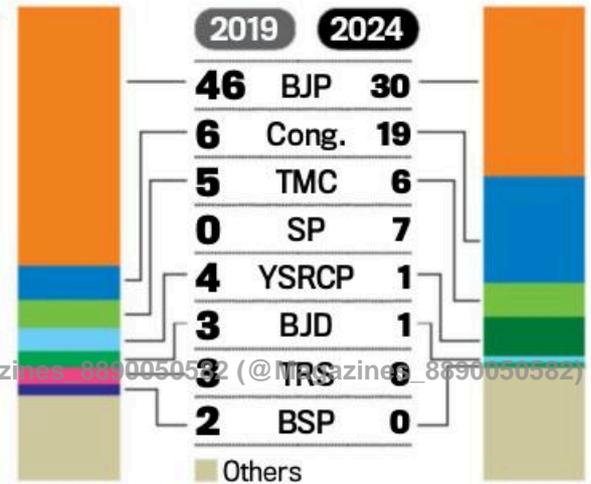


Source: Data Intelligence Unit, India Today

THE DALIT FACTOR

The Congress and its allies also made significant gains in the seats reserved for the Scheduled Castes

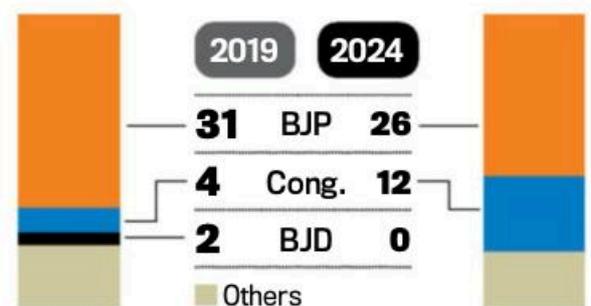
Total SC seats: 84



TRIBAL BALLOT

A similar story played out in the constituencies reserved for the Scheduled Tribes

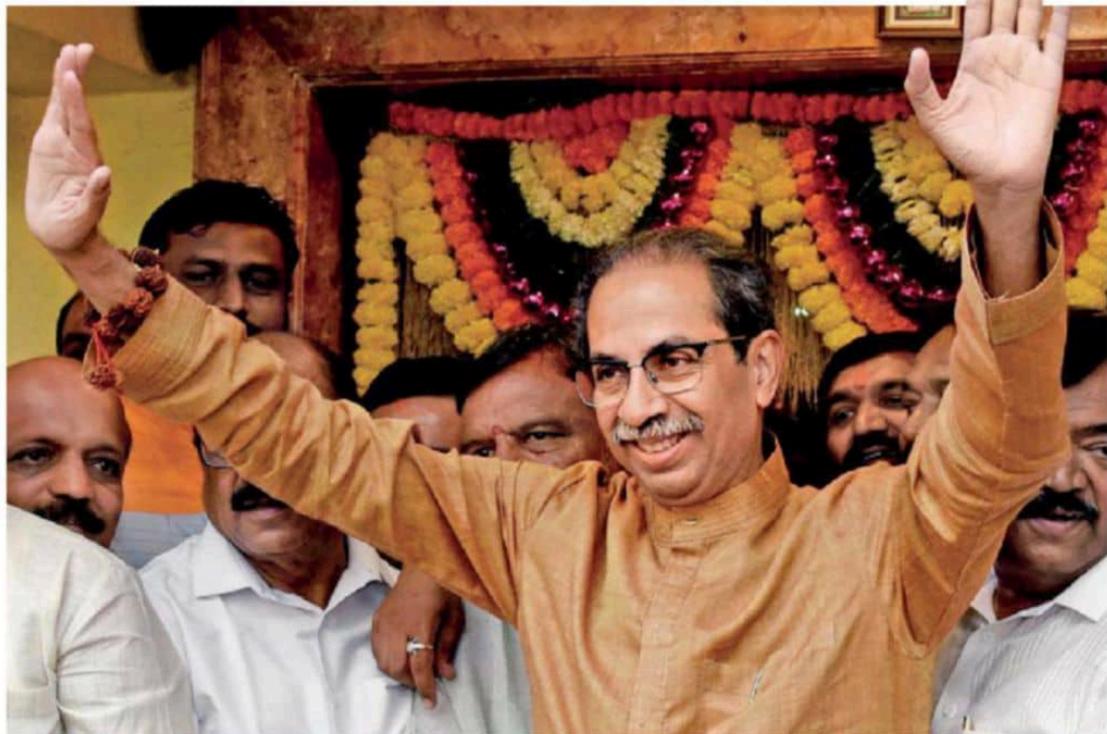
Total ST seats: 47



meted to 66 seats from the 120 it won on its own in the previous election, an attrition of 54 seats. The party posted losses in Rajasthan, Haryana, Karnataka and Jharkhand as well.

THE RAM PLATEAU

The cruellest cut came from UP, a BJP bastion that had given it 62 of its 80 seats in 2019, and another two to ally Apna Dal (S). That tally now stands reduced to a mere 33 for the BJP, 29 less than last time, and 36 for the NDA, less than half the total seats in the state. This despite UP being under the rule of another BJP strongman, chief minister Yogi Adityanath, re-elected by a handsome majority in the 2022 assembly polls. The BJP's hope of a wave around the



▲ THE REGIONAL RESURGENCE
 Clockwise from top left, Mamata, Uddhav, Tejaswi and Sharad Pawar with daughter Supriya Sule

ARUN KUMAR

construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya did not materialise. CSDS's Shastri, in fact, believes that the gains from Hindutva issues had begun "plateauing" in the state after 2019. And while Modi's polarising campaign speeches of "*mangalsutras, mujras* and Muslims" after the second phase may have shored up the party's core voter support, its appeal seems to have been limited since religion cannot feed empty stomachs and the young want jobs, not doles. Likewise, the BJP's poor showing in Maharashtra, where it had seized power by splitting the Shiv Sena and the Nationalist Congress Party, was evidence that not only did manufactured majorities not work, they also seriously damaged the BJP's image of being a party with a difference.

Modi's challenges may now come from within the party itself, with calls for an end to the overcentralised decision-making and what Tiwari calls the "my way or the highway" approach that has become a hallmark of the BJP under Modi. The BJP also has reason to worry as the Congress strike rate in direct contests with it has gone up from 8 per cent in 2019 to 30 per cent now. It is being seen as a major reason why the BJP lost its majority. Election 2024 also saw the resurgence of regional forces and leaders, including Akhilesh Yadav in Uttar Pradesh, Mamata Banerjee in West Bengal, M.K. Stalin in Tamil Nadu, Sharad Pawar and Uddhav Thackeray in Maharashtra and Tejaswi Yadav in Bihar, who have consistently



FORT NDA
 PM Modi with Nitish Kumar, Chandrababu Naidu, Rajnath Singh, J.P. Nadda, Pawan Kalyan, Chirag Paswan and other NDA leaders at his Delhi residence, Jun. 5

thwarted the BJP's bid to become a united, monolithic pan-national party with a brute majority built around Hindutva. Now, the electorate has strengthened their hand in rejecting the BJP's unitarian agenda and reinforced the belief in India's federal polity that best suits the multiple aspirations of the country's diverse communities, cultures and power structures. That Modi now has to depend on the support of regional leaders like Nitish and Naidu to survive is an indication of regionalism's return to the centre stage of the Indian polity.

COALITION CONTRADICTIONS

The outcome is that Modi, who had a splendid run sans any political constraints in his past two terms, now has to manage the contradictions and compulsions of a coalition government. He will now have to work towards building a consensus across parties if he is to push the needle forward on much-needed economic reforms. That may be a difficult ask of Modi who, as experts point out, has no experience of heading a coalition government, either as the chief minister of Gujarat or as prime minister, accustomed instead to being both a dominating and domineering leader. Though, as a former senior bureaucrat puts it, "Being a PM for so long creates a political osmosis that helps you develop tremendous man management skills. Modi will find it easier to shift gears and modulate his con-

duct according to the current-day requirements." Sudheendra Kulkarni, a key aide to Atal Bihari Vajpayee when he headed the coalition government between 1998 and 2004, is not so sure. He is sceptical about Modi completing his third term, given that Nitish and Naidu, his two main allies, are unreliable and have ditched him in the past. "After the election," says Kulkarni, "Modi's authority has been considerably reduced, and his legitimacy diminished. He will not be able to push through constitutional amendments of his choice like one nation, one poll. This is the beginning of the end of the Modi era."

There are several intractable issues Modi may find difficult to resolve while dealing with his coalition partners. Nitish, for one, wants the Agniveer scheme reviewed and a national caste census conducted—both moves the BJP is not keen on. Nitish also wants special category status for Bihar (see *Hard Bargain for Central Grants*) to attract more central funds, besides a couple of ministerial berths. Naidu wants the same for his state besides the easing of the many criminal cases against him. The TDP strongman is also likely to go ahead with his commitment to four per cent reservation for Muslims in government jobs in his state, in direct contravention to Modi's opposition to reservations on religious grounds.



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Modi can expect friction with his allies over special category status and the caste census. Naidu is also committed to 4% quota for Muslims in Andhra

The central government is also opposed to granting special category status, especially after the 14th Finance Commission advised against it. These and other issues have the potential to create an impasse and lead to a breakdown in ties.

MANUFACTURING A MAJORITY

Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh ideologue Seshadri Chari expresses complete faith in Modi being able to handle both allies and run-ins with other parties with skill. As he says, “He and the allies have complementary requirements that will help them stay together. There is a win-win situation in the relationship. Or put another way, it’s like two nuclear weapon powers who know there is a mutually assured destruction if either party falters.” Chari, who has also worked closely with

Vajpayee, believes that like the late prime minister, Modi too has always been first among equals, which bestows on him the authority to ward off any challenge he may encounter within the party and outside of it. Another political insider, who doesn’t wish to be named, says Modi will be even more determined to succeed. “Those who think Modi’s wings have been clipped are mistaken,” he says. “He will not only ensure that he flies far above others but will also go after his opponents mercilessly.” The prime minister made clear that intent emphatically in his victory address, saying that he would continue to come down heavily on corruption, sending a clear warning to his political opponents.

Among the things Modi and the BJP will do in the coming months is to try to shore up their majority to become less dependent on the current set of allies. This may mean getting MPs from other parties to resign and contest afresh. But Tiwari reckons that the BJP’s winnability index has diminished considerably after this election and many may be wary of going down the resignation route. The other option is to have other parties, especially the smaller ones, merge with the BJP, or engineer splits among them, like with the Shiv Sena and NCP, and onboard them as allies. The danger there is that it could deepen the negative perception about the BJP, the current results in Maharashtra being a case in point. Other contradictions abound. Modi has been a vociferous opponent of *parivarvaad* or dynastic politics, but Naidu epitomises it in Andhra, being the son-in-law of TDP founder, the late N.T. Ramarao, with a clutch of close relatives in the party. The BJP also needs to cleanse the accusation of being a “washing machine” for leaders in other parties who have cases against them that mysteriously disappear once they switch sides, as happened in Maharashtra. Corruption hardly figured in Modi’s campaign speeches in the state. The greater test will be the assembly election in the state later this year; if the BJP and its allies lose, experts believe it will spell the beginning of the end of the NDA coalition. Modi will have to work hard to ensure that 3.0 does not become Three Point Zero.

THE AGENDA FOR MODI 3.0

The real test for Modi now lies in handling the economy and addressing the key burning issues of unemployment and inequitable economic growth. The PM has several advantages that give him the confidence to achieve his goals. He had also, in the last months of his second term, got his ministries to work both on short- and long-term plans for transformation. B.V.R. Subrahmanyam, the CEO of government think-tank NITI Aayog, believes that India remains in a demographic sweet spot with its population at a median age of 29 years compared to 39 for countries like China and the US. That makes India and Africa the only regions to have youthful working populations. It is imperative for them, therefore, that their economies grow rapidly. As Subrahmanyam warns,

HARD BARGAIN FOR CENTRAL GRANTS

N. Chandrababu Naidu and Nitish Kumar leverage the BJP's dependence on them to seek Special Category Status for their respective states. This is what it will entail

By Amarnath K. Menon and Amitabh Srivastava



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Andhra Pradesh chief minister designate N. Chandrababu Naidu and Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar are adept at driving hard bargains. With their strong showing in the Lok Sabha polls, they are now indispensable to the BJP in forming a National Democratic Alliance government. Both are likely to reopen their old demand that Delhi accord their respective states Special Category Status (SCS)—whereby the Union government makes special financial grants for quicker development of an economically/geographically disadvantaged state—on priority. Naidu, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) supremo, has been demanding the SCS for long. Though it was promised by the United Progressive Alliance (UPA)-2 regime at the time of Parliament

adopting the Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act, 2014, Naidu's demand was finally turned down in 2018, leading him to quit the NDA. This was after he had got PM Narendra Modi to lay the foundation stone for a new capital at Amravati—a project close to Naidu's heart that he plans to finance with central funds and external borrowings. In Bihar's case, on November 22, 2023, while Nitish Kumar was still leading the Mahagathbandhan government, his cabinet passed a resolution seeking the grant of SCS to the state. New Delhi did not respond to the demand at the time. With Bihar going to the polls in 2025, all that is set to change.

With the 14th Finance Commission (2013-14) scrapping the practice of the SCS and the NITI Aayog—successor of the old Planning Commission—against the practice of making such extraordinary, and expensive, grants to select states, NDA 3.0 will be compelled to come up with alterna-

Nitish needs funds to finance grants for the disadvantaged and poor in Bihar. For Naidu, the money will help implement his pre-poll promises

tives. Finance experts reason that special assistance packages for both states are on the cards. Old practices like the Mukherjee-Gadgil formula—calculated to allocate planned funds among state governments after taking into account population, per capita income, fiscal performance and special problems—are being revisited too.

Nitish has been asking SCS for Bihar since 2010, and his current demand stems from the revelations of the 2023 Bihar Caste Survey, which found that 34.13 per cent of Bihar's population lives in poverty. They include 1.8 million people from unreserved categories, 2.4 million from

other backward classes (OBCs), 3.3 million from extremely backward classes (EBCs), 2.3 million from scheduled castes (SCs) and 201,000 from scheduled tribes (STs). With a per capita GDP of around Rs 54,000, Bihar is one of India's poorest states. Nitish wants to offer a one-time benefit of Rs 2 lakh to 9.4 million families who earn less than Rs 6,000 a month, as well as generous grants to homeless, landless and extremely poor families. Implementing all this will require about Rs 2.5 lakh crore.

Andhra Pradesh, too, is in dire need of funds. According to the Reserve Bank of India's December 2023 report on state finances, Andhra's



POSITION OF STRENGTH

Andhra Pradesh CM N. Chandrababu Naidu with Bihar CM Nitish Kumar

fiscal deficit (the excess of total expenditure over total receipts/income) was budgeted at 3.8 per cent (Rs 54,588 crore) of its Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) for 2023-24, and the state's revenue deficit was 1.5 per cent (Rs 22,317 crore) of its GSDP. This is above the prevailing average fiscal and revenue deficit for all states at 3.1 per cent and 0.1 per cent respectively. The outstanding liabilities of Andhra at 35.2 per cent of its GSDP are way above other states' average of 27.6 per cent. Against this dispiriting backdrop, Naidu has to mobilise funds to implement his pre-poll promise of 'six guarantees' as well as to continue older welfare schemes. Cash benefits under the Super Six schemes include an unemployment dole of Rs 3,000 to every jobless person, Rs 15,000 a year to every school-going child, Rs 20,000 a year to each farmer and a dole of Rs 1,500 a month to women aged 18 to 59.

Both Nitish and Naidu are desperate for the greater flow of funds from Delhi that a special category status would guarantee. It is a demand Modi and NDA cannot decline this time around. ■

"China is facing the challenge of becoming old and is not yet rich. If India doesn't achieve the kind of growth China did, we will become both an old and poor nation." Geopolitics, too, favours India as major powers court New Delhi. Rapid technological innovations, including AI, have levelled the playing field for aspiring nations like India. Climate change, meanwhile, is forcing countries to get out of the carbon economy, giving India a chance to emerge as a world leader in green technology instead of leading in coal consumption.

The past two terms have seen Modi deliver basic civic amenities such as water and sanitation and infrastructure like roads to near-saturation levels. He now has the leeway to hard-focus on areas that could spur rapid economic growth and generate vast amounts of quality employment.

After his meditation break at Kanyakumari just before the votes were counted, Modi wrote, "We must make excellence the fundamental principle to make our country Viksit Bharat. We need to work quickly in all four directions: Speed, Scale, Scope and Standards." And one area

Modi will have to hard-focus this term on areas that can spur rapid economic growth and generate vast amounts of quality employment

that Modi is likely to focus on is huge capacity-building in quality education and skill development. To create more jobs, he is also likely to give a major boost to labour-heavy sectors such as tourism and textiles besides continuing to spend big on infrastructure. Manufacturing, especially in the small-scale sector, is expected to receive renewed attention, as is agricultural reform. Subrahmanyam says, "Economic reforms are needed to make Indian firms global in size by improving competitiveness and that is likely to be the broad theme including a focus on revamping the financial sector." Modi is also likely to push schemes for urban renewal to ensure that the quality of life

in our cities is vastly improved. Boosting Indian R&D through generous funding for private ventures is also on the cards. On foreign policy, apart from working on India becoming a major international pole, signing on more trade pacts could be in the offing, for exports to grow.

Land and labour reforms as well as PSU disinvestment, along with delimitation of constituencies, which will increase the size of Lok Sabha seats in 2026, is where experts expect Modi to encounter resistance from his coalition partners. But the coalition governments of Narasimha Rao and Vajpayee have demonstrated that it is possible to push ahead with far-reaching and dramatic reforms. That it will be a tough haul for Modi is certain. But then he has also amply demonstrated in the past that he is capable of converting the worst adversity into the best opportunity. This is one such opportunity. The nation has given him and the BJP plus allies the mandate to rule for a third term while voting in a strong Opposition as a balance to protect the principles and institutions that make India a great democracy. That more than 640 million Indians exercised their franchise in the recently-concluded election proves that tradition is thriving. ■

A MUCH-NEEDED REALITY CHECK

Too much central control, voter and cadre apathy, arbitrary candidate selection, all conspired to give the party a humbling lesson at the hustings. The high command can ignore it at their own peril

By Anilesh S. Mahajan

ARUN KUMAR

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▲ CHEER LEADERS
(From left) Rajnath Singh, PM Modi, Amit Shah and J.P. Nadda at the BJP party HQ, Jun. 4

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ore embarrassment than riches. That's what the 2024 election results have brought for the top echelons of the Bharatiya Janata Party—a narrow face-saving win, a potentially worse fate averted, and plenty to introspect over. An unusual predicament for a party that had been lulled by a decade of unquestioned supremacy, but just about enough to put up a brave front. That allowed images coming out of

the prime minister's residence in New Delhi to exude an air of normalcy and cheer. It was a historic third straight term for Narendra Modi, after all. But among all the smiles, two faces bore visible signs of stress and exhaustion—that of Modi's 'Chanakya', Amit Shah, and party chief J.P. Nadda. They had a series of unending back channel negotiations. Partners, potential friends, anyone who could lend the required stability to Modi 3.0. It may be just the beginning of a long-drawn phase of labour: for the first time in a decade, the BJP doesn't have a full majority. It will

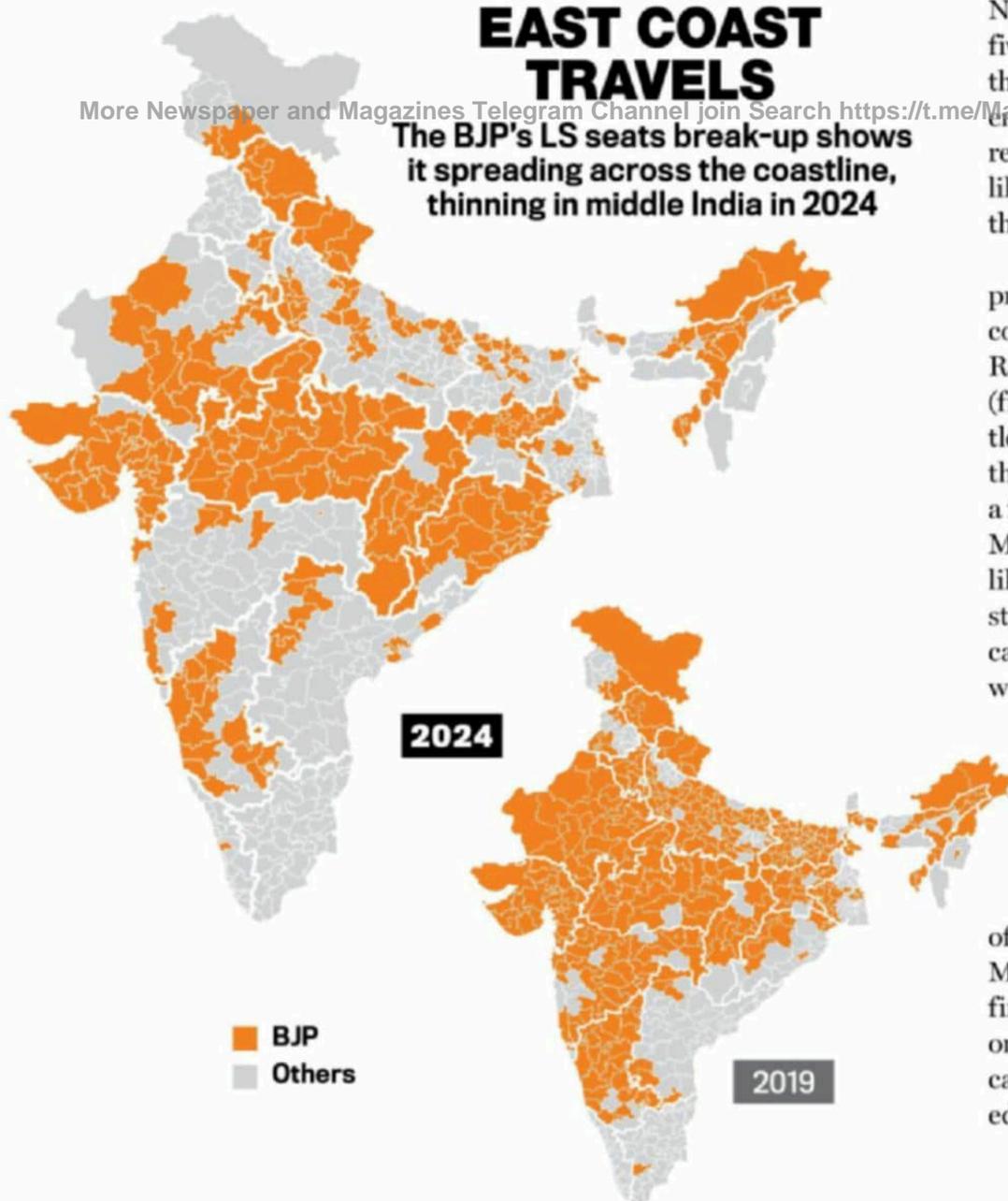
be dependent on external life support.

That calls for softer tones in bargaining, and a more supple language overall. PM Modi adjusted fast enough. The previous evening, at the party headquarters, he scrupulously avoided any mention of "Modi *sarkar*"—removing, with verbal symbolism, the near-synonymity that had come to develop between his office and his self. Instead, it was the "NDA *sarkar*", an entity that has coalition flexibilities inscribed into its very name. That's just as well. To survive and thrive, Modi 3.0 has to lean on a whole host of hard-playing partners. N. Chandrababu Naidu, the new Andhra Pradesh chief minister, brings 16 parliamentarians. Bihar CM Nitish Kumar brings 12. Even Eknath Shinde, a political creature whose rebirth as Maharashtra CM owes to saffron chess grandmasters, brings seven. Those 35 MPs, added to the BJP's 240, are what take Modi beyond the majority mark of 272. Making up the rest of the slender buffer of 20—the NDA's overall tally is 292—are Chirag Paswan's five MPs, and a string of even smaller parties. If the BJP's softer coalition-running skills have fallen into amnesia due to long disuse, it may have to relearn them from the playbook of older maestros like A.B. Vajpayee. It will have stern invigilators, at the Centre and in the states.

All this because, contrary even to internal projections, the BJP suffered body blows in its core areas—Uttar Pradesh (33 down from 62), Rajasthan (14 down from a perfect 25), Haryana (five, from a perfect 10). Toss in the complex battle arena of Maharashtra (9 down from 23) and the buffer zone of West Bengal (12 from 18), that's a future-bending loss of 63 seats right there. Maintenance of order in a string of old territories like Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Karnataka stanching the blood loss, but the morale-boosters came from new conquests: Odisha (20 out of 21, with a state assembly to boot), a historic debut in Kerala, eight seats in Telangana, and a massive upswing in vote shares in Tamil Nadu and Punjab that will bear fruit in the future. Hard-won gains—the result of painstaking industry of years—the party will hold on to what optimism it can eke out of those in this moment of shock for the cadre. Meanwhile, Modi inaugurates a new term—the first PM after Nehru to win a third consecutive one—that promises to entail a rather more delicate balancing act than he would have anticipated. With pushy allies already demanding a major

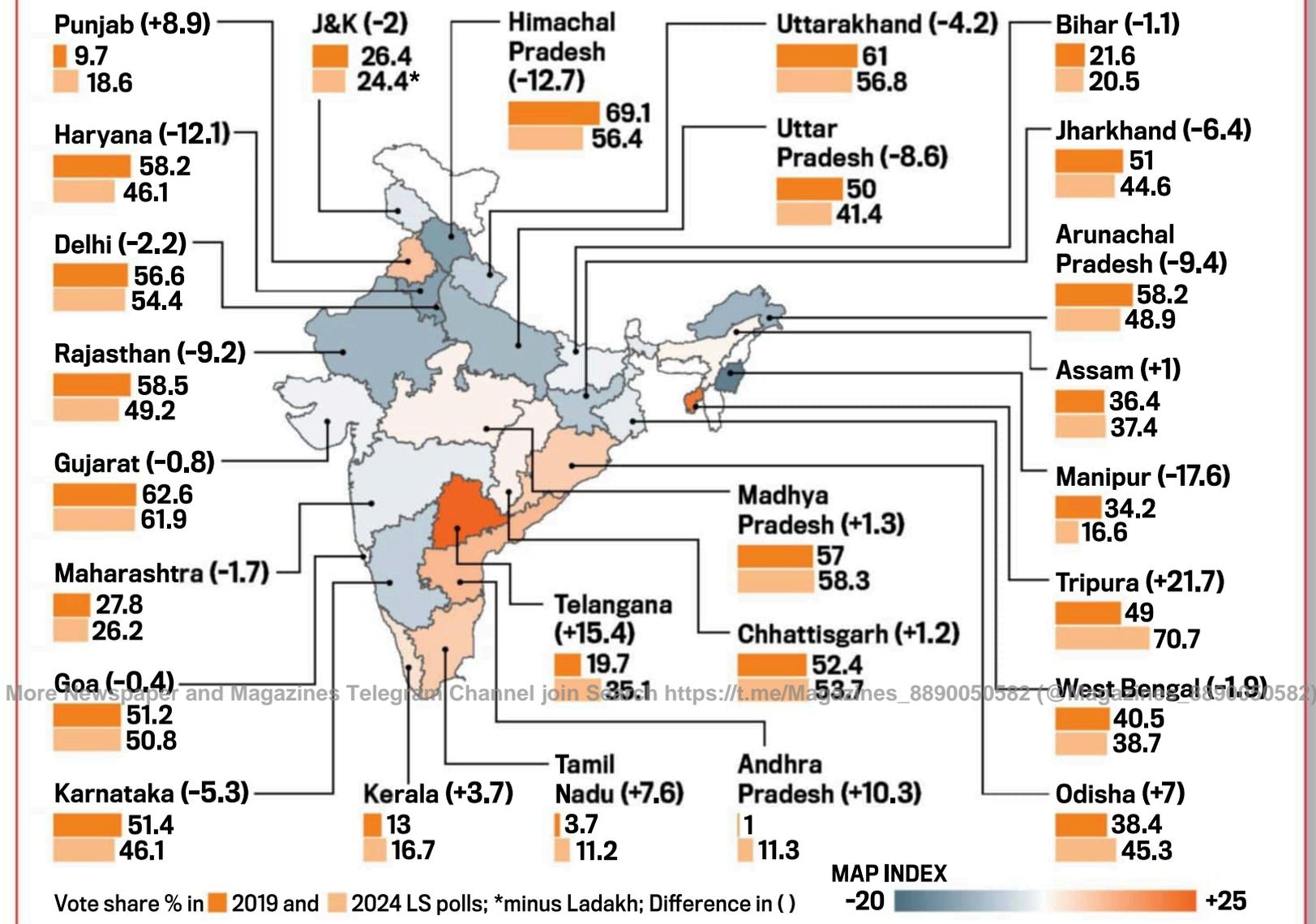
EAST COAST TRAVELS

The BJP's LS seats break-up shows it spreading across the coastline, thinning in middle India in 2024



SHIFTING WINDS

State-wise change in the BJP's vote-share percentage in 2024 over 2019



stake in the Union government as well as more central funds for their respective states, accommodative politics and governance will be the need of the hour.

INTERNAL POSTMORTEM

In the past decade, the BJP had developed a reputation as a relentless election machine—always whirring, never tiring, drawing and redrawing its templates like a giant self-learning algorithm as it chewed up the scenery. This time, the computer shows signs of needing a reboot. Among the error messages the cadre had tried to flash was the policy of wholesale duty-free ‘imports’ and then the investing of trust and position on them over old loyalists. This frequently

Pushy allies are already demanding a major stake in the Union government and more funds for their states...necessitating accommodative politics and governance

led to unfortunate candidate picks. In a private conversation, a top BJP leader cites Rahul Kaswan, two-term MP from Churu, Rajasthan—his long inter-generational family association with the BJP was overlooked as the leadership denied him a ticket. Kaswan switched over to the Congress and won Churu by 72,737 votes. State-wise lists were replete with such arbitrary selections

that left old-timers feeling disoriented and unwanted. The preference for turn-coats, even to form state governments, deepened the demotivation. In the past decade, the BJP has changed all its chief ministers, even replacing some with political lightweights. Rajasthan’s Bhajan Lal Sharma is a classic case in point—the BJP leadership sidelined several top leaders, including popular two-time CM



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SLIPPERY SLOPE (From top) UP's Yogi Adityanath with Smriti Irani in Amethi; Union home minister Amit Shah with Haryana CM Nayab Saini (right) and ex-CM M.L. Khattar; Maharashtra deputy CM Devendra Fadnavis offers to quit, Jun. 5



ANI

Vasundhara Raje, while picking his name in a draw of lots. Unable to control factional tiffs, Sharma has demonstrated not only his inefficiency but the very folly of his anointment.

When Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal claimed dramatically during the campaign that the BJP may replace UP's Yogi Adityanath after the Lok Sabha polls, it dug nails into already raw skin—seeking to create confusion among the cadre and Yogi's loyalists. A section of the party in UP grudges how Yogi was not used to full potential in the campaign, and that many of his recommendations were overruled.

These murmurs from its old base are becoming louder, with both cadre and veteran leaders calling it a symptom of too much concentration of power. As further proof, they point to lightweights who fill the ranks of crucial party bodies like the parliamentary board and election committee—people with no established electoral history or mass base, token figures with no bearing on decision-making. Even feedback did not elicit course correction: the BJP leadership didn't heed well-meaning suggestions from its own ground, preferring instead the laptop wisdom of hired professional agencies and their executives.

The centralisation of decision-making was such that even several CMs and state unit chiefs are cribbing that their feedback on local anti-incumbency against MPs was disregarded. Says a senior BJP leader, "An empowered and enthusiastic cadre is needed to counter narratives at the grassroots, and to bring both loyal and potential voters to polling booths." As it happened, Modi's war cry of "*char sau paar*" proved to be counterproductive and costly, with an already resentful cadre taking it too seriously and easing off during the campaign.

VOTER ALIENATION

To that process of internal enfeebling, add the estrangement of the BJP's natural voter: angry Jats all over the Green Revolution belt; irate Rajputs in UP, Rajasthan and Gujarat; restive Marathas; dejected youth all across low-growth states like UP and Bihar. They



MANDAR DEODHAR



LIGHTWEIGHTS
Figurehead CMs like Bhajan Lal Sharma have cost the BJP dear

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The BJP's impending headaches are the polls due in Maharashtra, Jharkhand and Haryana, where it dropped both seat and vote share

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had added millions of votes to the BJP's kitty in recent elections, rallying behind PM Modi over a decade, buying into his twin planks of nationalism and development. The disruption of the feedback loop played out here too. The common threads sewing up these latitudes of anger? An unrequited quest for government jobs, the related apprehensions over the reservation policy, the increasing immiseration of the farm economy.

In the last week of February, UP saw a cancellation of exams to recruit/promote constables after allegations of another paper leak: 4.82 million aspirants had appeared for 60,244 posts just the previous week. Youth anger blurred into caste anxieties: non-Jatav Dalits, a segment the BJP had assiduously wooed, sprang to the INDIA camp; even Jatavs shifted their loyalties from the BSP. Dalits, as a whole, reacted to the narrative about the threat to the Constitution, emanating originally from overconfident BJP candidates

and subsequently fanned by the Opposition. Non-Yadav OBCs, too, opted to vote on the basis of socioeconomic distress rather than caste affiliations. Alongside, with the Thakurs angry and Brahmins ambivalent in Yogi raj, a core vote subsidence saw the BJP's vote share drop 8.6 percentage points. Net loss: 29 seats. Even Ayodhya.

At the same time, Punjab's farm unions began another march on Delhi, demanding the fulfillment of promises made at the end of the 13-month siege the national capital had witnessed in 2020-21. Another theatre of dissent and repression was staged at the Shambhu and Khanauri borders between Punjab and Haryana—with teargas fogs and nailed highways creating their own visual narrative. Protesting unions continued to stalk BJP candidates in western UP, Haryana, Punjab and Rajasthan, turning Jats into an archipelago of anger. In Maharashtra, a new

reservation law passed in early March to placate agitating Marathas ended up angering other OBC groups, particularly the related Kunbi community who feared an ingress into their quotas. Result: NDA faced a rout in Vidarbha, the cotton belt it had dominated in 2014-2019, as angry Kunbis swelled the ranks of the rival Maha Vikas Aghadi, which was already bolstered by Dalit-Muslim refugees. Only Nitin Gadkari and two others escaped the wrath. Nor, in the event, did the quota lollipop soothe the Marathas, with their pride hurt by the two big regional party splits wrought by a 'Gujarati-dominated' BJP. A lone alliance win framed the washout in Marathwada, and Mumbai saw the unlikely 'Ma-Mu' phenomenon, as Marathas and Muslims converged against the BJP.

RAYS OF SUNSHINE

The biggest good news story came from Odisha, where decade-long efforts have borne fruit—in the shape of 78 assembly seats. For the first time, the party will have its own chief minister in an east coast state. With its allies, the TDP and Pawan Kalyan's Janasena Party, it will also enter the new Andhra Pradesh government. It also breached the Left-Congress fortress in Kerala for the first time, getting an MP there. In Telangana, its eight seats have come with a vote share boost of 15.4 per cent. In both Punjab and Tamil Nadu—traditionally non-receptive to Hindutva narratives—the BJP contested without its traditional allies and scored more votes than them. In Punjab, it got a lead in 24 assembly segments and netted 18.5 per cent votes; the vote share increased by 7.6 percentage points in Tamil Nadu. The immediate headaches are the impending assembly polls in Haryana, Jharkhand and Maharashtra later this year—all states where the BJP dropped seat and vote shares. There is plenty to think about, but little time left for urgent recuperative action. ■



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VIT FOUNDER & CHANCELLOR DR. G. VISWANATHAN RECEIVED THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK HONORARY DOCTORATE

Founder and Chancellor of Vellore Institute of Technology (VIT) Dr. G. Viswanathan received the State University of New York (SUNY) Honorary Doctor of Laws Degree during Binghamton University's convocation ceremony in the USA recently.

The honorary doctorate was conferred on Dr. G. Viswanathan by Binghamton University President Harvey Stenger.

Dr. G. Viswanathan has been conferred the honorary doctorate for his contributions to international higher education.

"Chancellor Viswanathan has been a pioneer for expanding access to higher education in India and partnering with institutions around the world," Binghamton University President Harvey Stenger said.

Binghamton University Provost Donald Hall,

Dean Prof. Srihari Krishnaswamy, the Member of Assembly Ms. Donna A. Luppardo, the Member of Senate Ms. Leaa Webb, VIT Vice Presidents Mr. Sankar Viswanathan, Dr. Sekar Viswanathan and Dr. G. V. Selvam, Assistant Vice President Ms. Kadhambari S. Viswanathan and Dr. R. Seenivasan, Director, International Relations, VIT were also present during the convocation ceremony.

Meanwhile, a felicitation function for Dr. G. Viswanathan was organised in Washington DC, USA, in which dignitaries including Mr. Kannan Srinivasan, Senator, Member, Virginia House of Delegates, Dr. P. Karunakaran, Head, Education Wing, Embassy of India, Washington DC, Mr. Bala Swaminathan, President, Federation of Tamil Sangams in North America (FETNA), Mr. Balagan Arumugasamy, Former President Federation

of Tamil Sangams in North America (FETNA), Dr. Veera Venugopal, President, Tamil Nadu Foundation, Dr. Prabu David, Provost, Rochester Institute of Technology, Dr. Jeyachandran, Former Senior Professor, Montclair State University, New Jersey, Dr. Sridevi Sarma, Vice Dean, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland, Dr. Paneer Selvam, Senior Professor, University of Arkansas, Dr. V. Raju, Provost, VIT Bangalore and Mrs. Indirani Radhakrishnan, Advisor, VIT Alumni Association, North America and office bearers of VIT Alumni Association North American chapters also took part in the function.

It may be pointed out that VIT Founder and Chancellor Dr. G. Viswanathan was conferred honorary doctorate by West Virginia University, USA in 2009.



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MANDATE 2024

| OPPOSITION |

NO FULL STOPS IN INDIA

Bit by bit, the Opposition alliance has managed to slow down the BJP juggernaut, if not bring it to a halt. Now it plans to capitalise on those gains to attain its aim of edging Modi out entirely

By KAUSHIK DEKA

a flagbearer of the new social coalition that the Opposition parties are gradually crafting to fight back the BJP's hegemony of the past decade. In the years to come, beyond Parliament and legislative assemblies, it is from this social coalition that incremental challenges to the BJP will come from.

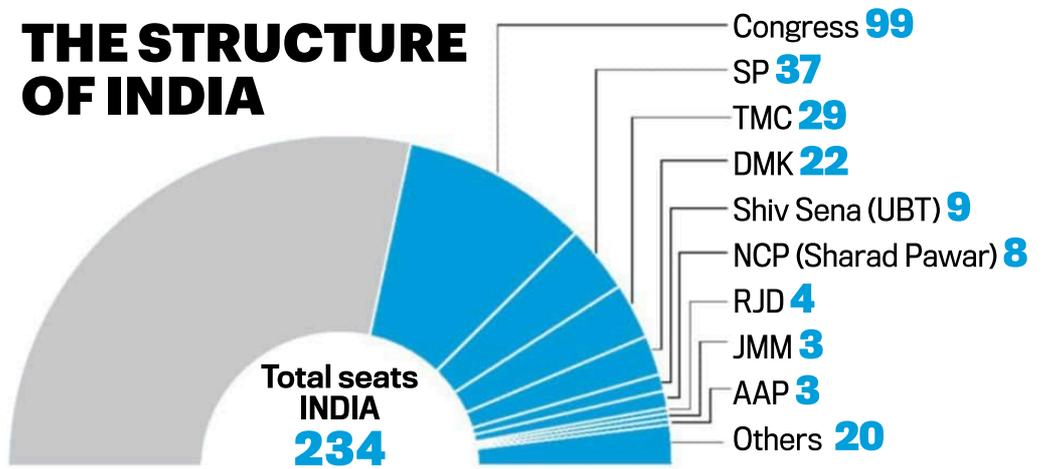
Ask the Congress, and insiders will tell you that Sanjana is a culmination of the core working philosophy Rahul has been formulating for some years and which has now begun gaining currency on the ground. Following consecutive and humiliating defeats in two general elections, the Congress was perceived to be a lost cause, helpless in the face of the BJP's Hindu nationalist agenda. Nobody knew what the Congress stood for any more. "The party needed to project an idea of itself beyond the one reflected through the prism of the BJP's IT cell and the pliable media," says a Congress leader who has just won a Lok Sabha seat.

A NARRATIVE CALLED NYAY

More importantly, the Congress needed to disrupt the unbeatable electoral arithmetic the BJP had devised through deft social engineering. The saffron formation, for example, had woven a vast and colourful tapestry of a singular Hindu identity, with its core elite caste vote bank providing the warp and disgruntled sections of the Other Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes and Tribes the weft. It worked wonders in large caste-driven electorates of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. But the uniform idea of Hindutva and the aggression associated with it, often resulting in minority-bashing, was also breeding resentment among large sections of the OBCs, Dalits, tribals—besides Muslims. Even liberal Hindus perceived India's secular values to be under threat.

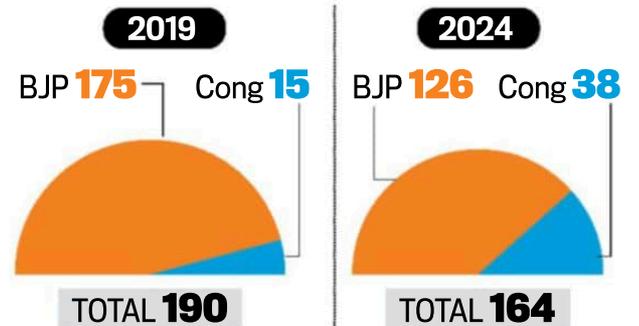
Post Covid, a large section of the population, particularly the low-income groups as well as rural folk, was getting restive because of the runaway

THE STRUCTURE OF INDIA



STRAIGHT FIGHTS

The Congress has improved its record in direct combat against the BJP, particularly because of its alliance in Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar



inflation and lack of jobs. Typical of the K-shaped growth phenomenon, the country's economy was growing, but that prosperity was not percolating down to the poor. It was these veins of anguish that Rahul tapped into while drafting a new narrative for the Congress. "We had to make the people understand that the Congress stands for three things—secularism, support for the marginalised, including OBCs, SCs, STs and minorities, and pro-poor politics," reveals a close Rahul aide. The strategy seems to have come good, as the Congress improved its tally in the 131 seats reserved for SCs and STs from 10 in 2019 to 31 this time.

If his Bharat Jodo Yatra (BJY) in 2022-23 was aimed at promoting love and brotherhood, rejecting the BJP's perceived politics of hatred, the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra earlier this year was about delivering socioeconomic justice to the poor and the marginalised. "Rahul is not in a hurry to grab power," says the aide. "He wants the people to first understand what the Congress

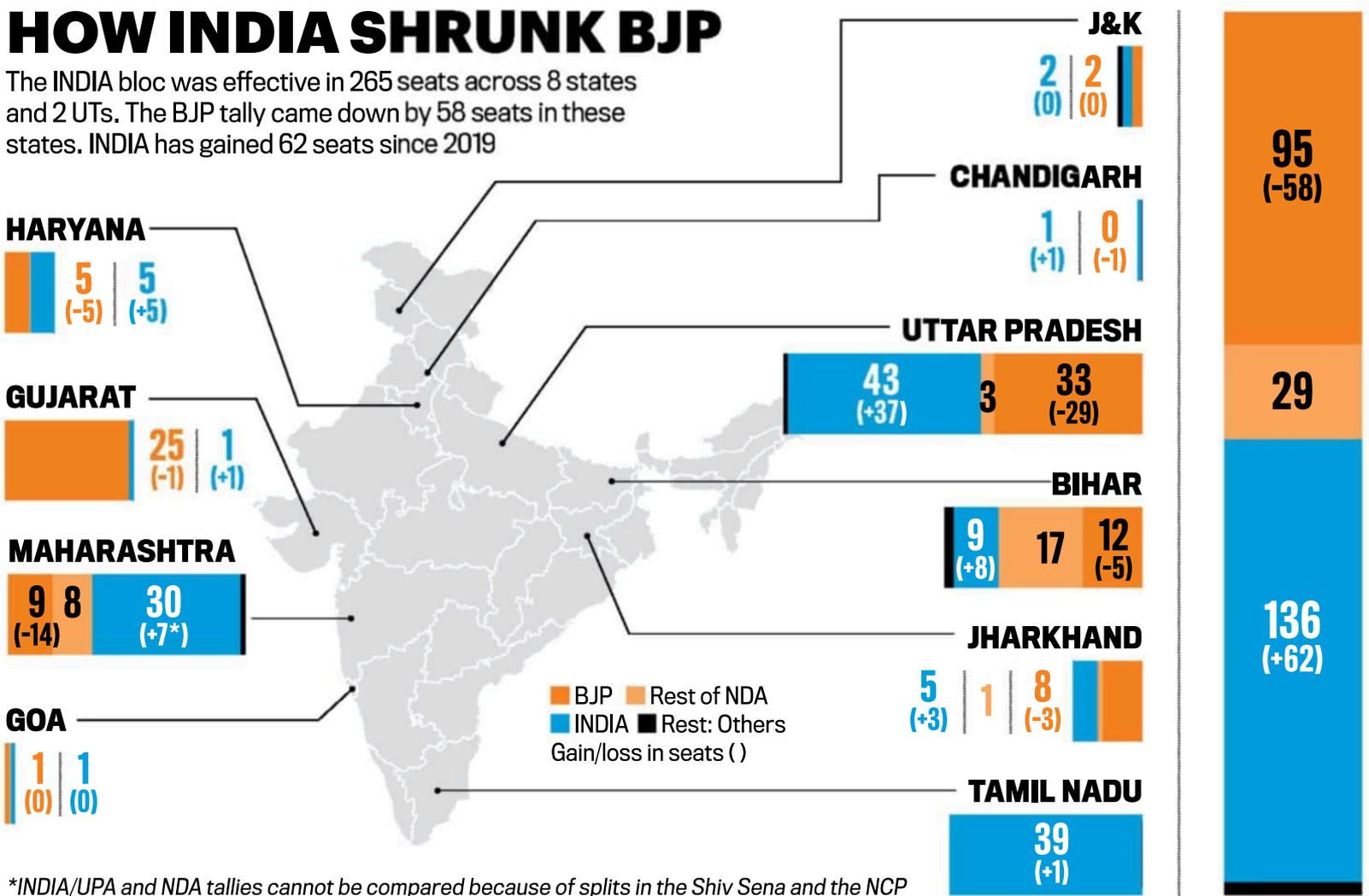
stands for." However, instead of making it a vague philosophical construct as in the past, Rahul enunciated it clearly this time, using all available tools to script his political narrative. In this script, Prime Minister Modi became the epitome of crony capitalism—with him as the benefactor and Adani as the beneficiary.

The Congress leader was also projected as a man of the people, someone who did not hesitate to join the farmers in a field, or spend time with coolies at a railway station, one who was at ease with every section of society—from IT professionals and academics to beedi workers and mechanics. He even gave glimpses into his hitherto guarded private life—be it making jam with mum Sonia or playing with his pet dog. If the BJP's IT cell cast him as a Pappu, Rahul used the same social media to present himself otherwise. "He is exactly like you see in the videos," says a close associate admiringly, "a regular guy who enjoys life beyond politics. We often find him cooking his own food."

The challenges of 2014 persist for Rahul in 2024—rebuilding the party organisation in some states, make it a winning unit in others

HOW INDIA SHRUNK BJP

The INDIA bloc was effective in 265 seats across 8 states and 2 UTs. The BJP tally came down by 58 seats in these states. INDIA has gained 62 seats since 2019



*INDIA/UPA and NDA tallies cannot be compared because of splits in the Shiv Sena and the NCP

THE MAHA SURPRISE

And the Congress believes this new image of Rahul has begun bearing fruit. As evidence, they point to all the states BJP covered. Barring Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, the Congress tally has either risen or sustained in all states. It has emerged as the leading player in Maharashtra, despite top leaders deserting it. The Congress won 13 of the 17 seats it contested here—15 of them against the BJP. A higher strike rate than that of ally Shiv Sena (Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray), which won nine out of 21. In fact, across India, of the 164 seats where the Congress faced off with the BJP, it won 38, a vast step up from the 15 it won out of the 190 such seats in 2019.

Maharashtra, where INDIA won a conclusive 30 of 48 seats, also offers testimony to how the Congress tapped into rural distress. The party won in all the rural constituencies the BJP passed through. The GOP has, in fact, improved its tally in the country's rural seats—from 29 in 2019 to 55 this time—even though it's no match to the BJP's tally of 149 seats.

Though the Opposition won the minority vote, over-reliance can leave them open to the accusation of appeasement

But all this joy could also be short-lived, particularly in the Maharashtra assembly polls later this year, if INDIA fails to put up a united fight against the NDA. There is still no clarity on which Sena has the bigger mandate. If SS(UBT) won nine seats, the Shinde faction won seven of the 15 seats it fought—including six in direct shoot-outs with SS(UBT), which won seven of those. Things are more definitive in the case of the two factions of the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP). Only one of the four candidates of the Ajit Pawar faction won while the NCP (Sharadchandra Pawar) won eight of the 10 seats it fought. But with the Con-

gress making the most gains, there are also murmurs in the Sena camp about the long-term utility of the partnership, particularly as it's no longer the biggest party in the Maha Vikas Aghadi. Meanwhile, Pawar Sr, who was contemplating merging his party with the Congress, may put his plans on hold following a superlative performance.

THE CASTE CHEMISTRY

A chief pillar of Rahul's social justice formula was the idea of a caste census, even if it originally came from Bihar chief minister and Janata Dal (United) patriarch Nitish Kumar, who subsequently switched sides. At the core of this assertion of *jitni aabadi utna haq* or proportional representation is the strategy to wean away the OBCs, Dalits and tribals from the BJP. UP and Bihar seem to have responded to this strategy, as the GOP teamed up with the leading regional parties in these states, the Rashtriya Janata Dal and the Samajwadi Party. Both parties have traditionally relied heavily on Yadavs and Muslims, alienating them from other caste groups. To amend



▼ **CRAFTING A WIN**
Rahul with sister Priyanka
and mum Sonia in Rae
Bareilly, May 18

ANI

The GOP must shoulder more responsibility to keep the alliance together to win elections and hold the government accountable

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that, both have recalibrated their caste calculus, incorporating inclusive elements in it. RJD leader Tejaswi Yadav carefully stuck to universalist themes like unemployment, and won Bihar's highest individual party vote share—even if for only four seats. The SP in UP reactivated its PDA—Pichhda (backward), Dalit and Alpasankhyak (minorities) plan. The alliance with Congress in both states ensured the least fragmentation of non-BJP votes (and also enabled the Dalit vote shift). Consequently, the NDA tally in Bihar was trimmed to 30 from 39 and in UP to a morale-crushing 36 from 64.

Then, there was the minority question. In the run up to the Lok Sabha polls, it became clear that the minorities, especially the Muslims, would for the first time vote with one goal—to defeat the BJP. Besides UP and Bihar, where the NDA suffered heavy losses, this consolidation helped Trinamool Congress chief and West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee increase

her tally from 22 to 29 in a state where the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, became a polarising issue. The Christians in the Northeast likewise consolidated around non-NDA parties following the ethnic violence in Manipur. The Congress ended up being the immediate beneficiary, winning both seats in Manipur, the one seat in neighbouring Nagaland (after two decades) and Tura in Meghalaya (since 1998). This still leaves it open to BJP invectives. Already, in Assam, CM Himanta Biswa Sarma has called the state results proof of Congress 'minoritarianism'—Muslims number over 60 per cent in two of the three seats the party won. But that it routed AIUDF chief Badruddin Ajmal in Dhubri also speaks of mainstreaming. And the marquee fight was won by Gaurav Gogoi in Jorhat, where Muslims are below seven per cent.

AN UNFINISHED YATRA

While INDIA's social engineering around economic distress and social inequity trimmed the BJP's tally, the

latter is still way ahead. INDIA's total MPs put together still number eight less than the BJP's individual tally. The future of some alliances, such as between the Aam Aadmi Party and the Congress in Delhi and elsewhere, is now shaky. The Congress was accused of playing big brother in INDIA even when it had just 52 MPs. Now, as the leading party in the alliance by a fair margin, the GOP must shoulder more responsibility to keep the alliance together not just to win future elections but also to hold the ruling party to account inside and outside of Parliament.

And while the Congress, now the second largest party in the country, may have improved its score in direct fights against the BJP in several states, including Maharashtra, Karnataka, Rajasthan and Haryana, it cannot ignore the ignominy of scoring a duck in three states that account for 38 seats—MP, Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh (where it won the assembly polls last year). In Gujarat and Chhattisgarh, it won just two of 35 seats. Indeed, in Karnataka and Telangana, both post-BJP conquests that were much ballyhooed, it won just only 17 of 45 seats. "The Congress has failed to develop a state as a model to market for electoral gains," says a party Rajya Sabha MP. "The Gujarat model has holes, but Modi successfully sold it to the masses. It gave people the confidence that his government will deliver."

The BJP remains strong against the Congress in a majority of its bastions and unless the GOP strengthens itself in these states, the allies may not allow it to benefit from their support in states where it is the junior partner. The challenge of 2014 persists for Rahul in 2024—to rebuild the Congress organisation in states such as UP, Bihar, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Tamil Nadu and make it a winning unit in states such as MP, Gujarat and Maharashtra. The party's future also depends on whether its inroads in Rajasthan, Haryana and Karnataka can be converted into bigger gateways. ■



SUMIT KUMAR

FIGHTBACK
Akhilesh Yadav at
a poll rally in
Kannauj, May 10

AKHILESH PUTS YOGI ON THE MAT

The Congress-SP alliance in Uttar Pradesh has done the unimaginable—turned the tide against the BJP by halving its Lok Sabha tally and endangering its prospects in the next state election

By Prashant Srivastava

“UP

ne kamaal kar diya (UP did an incredible thing)...” That was Congress leader Rahul Gandhi when asked about the Lok Sabha result in Uttar Pradesh. It is, in fact, the “*UP ke ladke*”, as Rahul and Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav are fondly called in UP, who have managed to do the ‘incredible’, stun the BJP despite the Ram temple and the Modi-Yogi double engine hype.

The Congress-SP alliance won 43 of UP’s 80 Lok Sabha seats (SP 37 and Congress six), restricting the BJP-led NDA to just 36 seats in the state, a feat that has huge ramifications. UP had propelled Narendra Modi’s rise to power in 2014, sending 71 BJP MPs to the Lok Sabha; in 2019, it helped

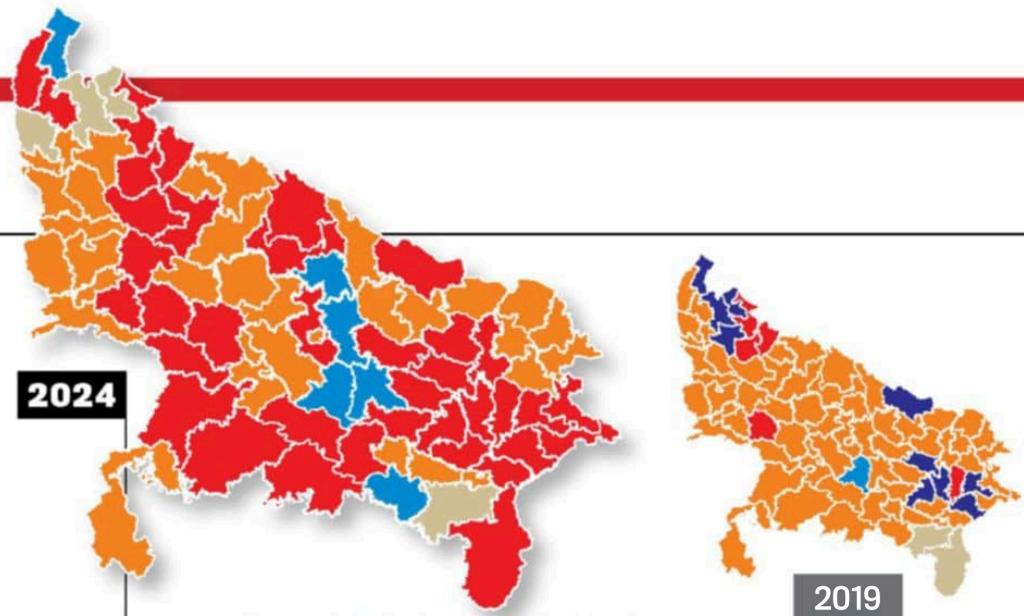
him consolidate his grip by electing 62 party candidates, along with two of ally Apna Dal (S). This time, UP was meant to set the ball rolling for an even larger mandate, but that was not to be. Prime Minister Modi's own victory margin of 152,513 votes in Varanasi—less than a third of the 479,000-odd he got in 2019—was prime evidence of how the BJP had lost the plot in UP.

SAFFRON GETS A SHOCK

Of the 12 members of the Union cabinet who contested again in UP, only five managed a return ticket to Parliament, among them PM Modi and defence minister Rajnath Singh. The list of those who fell by the wayside includes Smriti Irani in Amethi, Ajay Mishra Teni (whose son allegedly mowed down four people during the anti-farm laws protest) in Kheri and Sanjeev Balyan (an accused in the 2013 riots) in Muzaffarnagar. Irani's defeat summed up the anti-BJP sentiment in some seats. She lost to Gandhi family loyalist Kishori Lal Sharma—who had been informed he was contesting just a day before the nominations—by over 167,000 votes.

But nothing could beat the loss in the Faizabad Lok Sabha seat, where Lord Ram seems to have deserted the BJP, despite the spectacular opening of a grand temple in his name in Ayodha in January. Having come good on a promise that was part of the manifesto in the previous election, the BJP had hoped to bask in the glory of its inauguration, and use it to set the tone for the national poll campaign. But the sureshot win the party candidate in Faizabad, two-time MP Lallu Singh, had hoped for turned into a loss against the SP's Awadhesh Prasad, a nine-time MLA and one of the party's key Dalit faces, by over 54,500 votes. Incidentally, Lallu was one of the BJP leaders who had talked up the need for the party to go *char sau paar* so that it could "change the Constitution".

The saffron party also suffered heavy losses in western UP, despite its



TOTAL LOK SABHA SEATS 80

	BJP	SP	CONG	BSP	REST
2024	33 (41.5%)	37 (33.6%)	6 (9.5%)	0 (9.4%)	4 (-)
2019	62 (50%)	5 (18.1%)	1 (6.4%)	10 (19.4%)	2 (-)

In 2024, SP and Congress were in alliance and in 2019, SP and BSP fought together; vote share in ()

alliance with the regional Jat powerhouse, the Jayant Chaudhury-led Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD). Of the 26 seats in the region, the NDA managed to win just 13 (five less than in 2019). Though the RLD won its two seats—Bijnor and Baghpat—the party, it seems, failed to deliver for the BJP in the region, especially in Muzaffarnagar and Kairana. This could create friction in the alliance especially as Balyan, the losing candidate in Muzaffarnagar, is said to be fuming. Another big result from the sugar belt was the victory of Chandrashekhar Azad of the fledgling Azad Samaj Party (Kanshi Ram) in the Nagina seat reserved for the Scheduled Castes. Even INDIA had dumped Azad, yet he won against all odds, tak-

ing on and beating the biggies as well as Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP).

WHAT WORKED, WHAT DIDN'T

While the BJP registered its biggest loss since 2014, the SP ended up as the biggest gainer, both in seats (37) and vote share (33.6 per cent). The Congress also increased its tally from one to six seats this time. The game-changer has been Akhilesh's PDA (Pichhda, Dalit and Alpasankhyak) narrative and ticket distribution. The SP, which has always been known as the M-Y (Muslim-Yadav) party, borrowed the social engineering concept from the BJP and beat them at their own game. The party gave tickets to only five Yadavs (all Akhilesh family members) and four Muslims in a list of 62 candidates. Of the others, 10 were Kurmis and six from the Kushwaha-Maurya-Shakya-Saini castes (who had turned to the BJP as a refuge during the years of Yadav dominance). Its decision to field Dalit candidates in Meerut and Faizabad also paid off, while the alliance with the Congress was vital in enabling the Dalits to shift their votes to the SP, a party they had avoided since the '90s. Crucially, this even included Jatavs, hitherto solidly loyal to Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party

Losing in Faizabad, where it had inaugurated the Ram temple in Ayodhya, has demonstrated the limited appeal of the communal vote



LOSING SHINE
PM Modi and CM
Yogi Adityanath
at a roadshow in
Varanasi, May 13

unwilling one, fostered a new phenomenon: the Jatavs, who make up over 50 per cent of the Dalit population in UP and have long been faithful to the BSP, drifted towards whoever they felt was their best succour: the Congress, SP and, in Nagina, the Azad Bhim Party. Chandrashekhar's win in his debut election gives him a toehold in Dalit politics, as a long-term alternative to Mayawati.

Meanwhile, CM Yogi Adityanath will have to take part of the blame for the drastic reverses in his state. But since there is already some anger among the Rajputs at him being 'sidelined', the top leadership is unlikely to risk removing Yogi and stoking the flames further. A big challenge for the CM going forward will be how to play his cards in the state's caste politics as also in terms of the economy. Sources close to Yogi say the focus will now be on job generation and getting investments in UP. How that pans out will be crucial to the future of UP politics, for one factor that went unambiguously in the INDIA bloc's favour cuts across caste and community: the youth vote.

Question paper leaks and the uncertainty of the short-tenure Agnipath scheme contributed a lot to the disenchantment among this demographic. The two issues got a lot of traction during the campaigns of two young SP candidates—Pushpendra Saroj, 25, in Kaushambi and Priya Saroj, 25, in Machhlishihar. The two are now MPs and bear the responsibility of being part of a second-line leadership for the SP. The young leaders, though, credit party president Akhilesh for their victories. The 50-year old former chief minister of UP is now basking in the kudos from supporters and well-wishers. As one veteran put it, the SP chief has delivered a "*dhobi pachhad*" (a wrestling move where an unsuspecting rival is lifted off his feet and thrown on his back) on the BJP worthy of his late father, SP founder, former CM and *kushti* enthusiast Mulayam Singh Yadav. ■

The BJP think-tank will now have to ascertain how the state showed a very different voting pattern compared to the rest of the heartland

(BSP). The Dalit vote for the Yadav party became the story of 2024.

The BJP's ticket distribution, on the other hand, got flak even from the party's inner circle. The top leadership's decision to field 47 sitting MPs spiked the anti-incumbency vote. Also, unlike in 2019, it was the Congress-SP combine that succeeded in setting the narrative—that too around bruising issues like unemployment, feelings around it exacerbated by paper leaks, all-round inflation and the sense of the Constitution being in crisis. The BJP had no effective counter to these.

The party's strategic allies in eastern UP, caste-based outfits like the Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party (SBSP) and the Nishad Party, also failed to deliver. Voters in the region seemed to be fed up with the OBC and Dalit sub-segment loyalty narratives. The BJP think-tank has plenty to chew on over how UP led a heartland depar-

ture from its narratives, even if states like Madhya Pradesh held firm.

UP-based political analyst Dr Shilp Shikha Singh says, "Losing in Faizabad sent out a statement—that the communal appeal has limits. And anyway, it works best with a negative narrative. Building a temple is a positive development, it won't build communal momentum." She also cites the significance of the Dalit vote swing towards INDIA, fuelled by a threat perception around the constitutional architecture of reservations.

ANYONE SEEN MAYAWATI?

The decimation of the BSP is also a story of this election. The party of the Dalits failed to open its account, and its vote share fell to single digits—9.4 per cent, a drop of three percentage points even from the 2022 assembly election. The impression that the party was the BJP's B-team, even if an

MVA WINS THE SEMI-FINAL

With the Opposition MVA stealing a march on the ruling Mahayuti in the Lok Sabha stakes, Maharashtra is all set for a take-no-prisoners contest in the assembly election a few months from now

By Dhaval S. Kulkarni



▲ WINNING HANDS
MVA leaders Sharad Pawar, Uddhav Thackeray, Supriya Sule and Nana Patole at a poll rally in Pune, Apr. 30

ANI

M

ore than numbers and victory margins, the Lok Sabha results in Maharashtra were to be a referendum on the state’s political realignments since 2022. The first true test of the public opinion after the splits in the Shiv Sena and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) in 2022 and 2023 respectively, they were to determine which factions deserved to be called the ‘real’ Shiv Sena or NCP. It was also to be a verdict—a legitimacy test—on a government forged out of splits

and defections, toppling a democratically elected one.

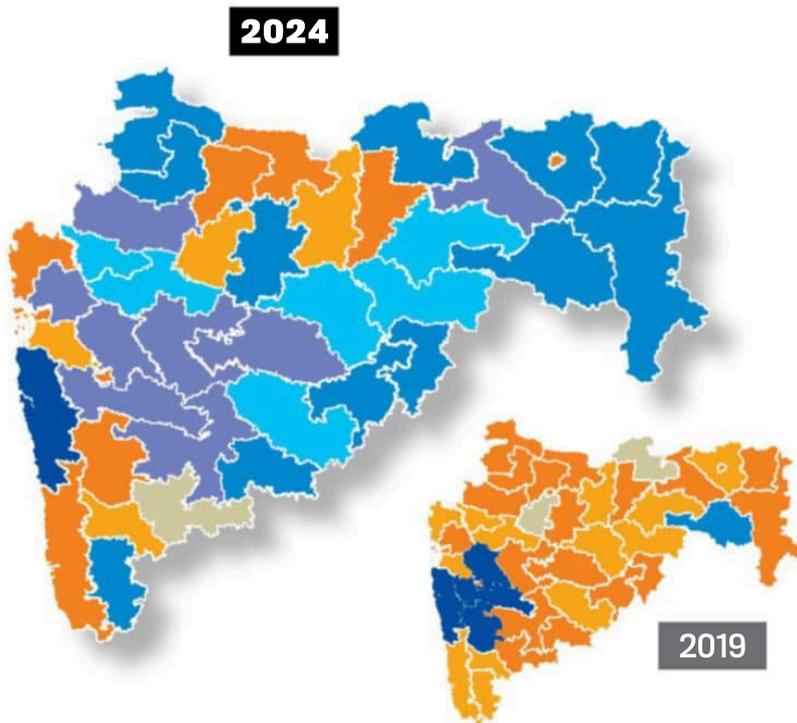
As it happened, it settled the second question—the more national one. It was the aggrieved Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA), the coalition of the Congress and the leftover Sena and NCP factions, that came up trumps at the end of the five-phase election in Maharashtra, winning 30 of the state’s 48 seats. That gave the larger Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) its second-highest tally after Uttar Pradesh. The ruling Mahayuti (grand alliance), a part of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), had to rest content with just 17; a rebel Congressman cornered one seat. The outcome will re-energise the MVA, placing it in a strong position for the assembly election later this year. As a senior leader of the Shiv Sena (Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray) puts it, “This is a win-win situation.... As a regional party, we have few stakes in the Lok Sabha polls. The real battle for us lies in the state assembly. Our numbers will serve as a morale-booster and stem further defections to Shinde.” But on this regional plane, the verdict also left that first question

partly unanswered. Neither Sena truly dominated, neither got decimated.

In the event, the Congress ended up being the real surprise of the election, winning 13 out of the 17 seats it contested, the highest tally by any party. It was a far cry from the one seat it won in 2019 and the two in 2014. “We lack pan-Maharashtra leaders, but the campaign picked up steam at the local level,” says a senior leader. The Congress even won Nanded, where its long-time patent-holder, former chief minister Ashok Chavan, had defected to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The GOP is now ruing having to relinquish its strongholds like Sangli, Mumbai North West, and Mumbai South Central to the Sena(UBT), something that had left the state unit profoundly unhappy. Its unforeseen bounty is now likely to alter the power dynamics within the MVA and give the Congress the upper hand in bargaining for seats in the assembly polls.

Nothing, though, can dampen the current elation in the Sena(UBT), not even the fact that its nine-seat win is only a shade better than the seven seats snaffled by the faction led by chief minister Eknath Shinde. In the endorsement it got for the MVA, which Uddhav Thackeray led from the front, the Sena(UBT) sees a moral victory over a faction that walked away with both the party symbol and the name. “For our party, the battle was not against the BJP, but the Shinde Sena,” says the Sena(UBT) leader. The Shinde Sena managed to win just seven seats.

The victory was even sweeter for the Sharad Pawar-led NCP, and not because it won eight out of the 10 seats it contested. It was because his nephew Ajit, who like Shinde, deprived him of the party symbol and name, won just one of the five seats he had been given to contest. “The popular sentiment seems to be against Ajit dada,” notes a source close to the Pawars. More significantly, Pawar’s daughter Supriya Sule defeated her sister-in-law, Ajit’s wife Sunetra, in the family pocket borough of Baramati in one of the most eagerly-watched contests in the country. Sunetra’s defeat, says a source, indicates that traditional BJP voters in assembly segments like Khadakwasla did not back the Ajit faction.



TOTAL LOK SABHA SEATS 48

	BJP	Shiv Sena*	NCP*	CONG	NCP-SP	SS-UBT	REST
2024	9 (26%)	7 (13%)	1 (4%)	13 (17%)	8 (10%)	9 (17%)	1 (13%)
2019	23 (28%)	18* (24%)	4* (16%)	1 (16%)	-	-	2 (16%)

Vote share in (); *2019 numbers are for united parties, 2024 for new splinters

As for the BJP, the loss of face was in sum greater than the quantifiable damages. Yes, its tally declined from 23 in 2019 to nine and three of its Union ministers—Raosaheb Patil Danve, Kapil Patil and Bharati Pawar—were trounced. But in the end, it was a defeat on the plane of strategy itself. On June 5, deputy CM Devendra Fadnavis, who led the Mahayuti's campaign in the state, offered to quit and focus on the organisation. The announcement, says a senior BJP leader, could have been aimed at persuading Shinde, Ajit and even leaders from his own party in other states who delivered a sub-par performance, to do likewise. BJP sources also argue that the political compulsion to set aside 15 seats for Shinde to prove his faction was the 'real' Shiv Sena cost the Mahayuti dear.

On his part, Shinde has blamed the Mahayuti's poor performance on the Opposition's "apaprachar" (fake propaganda) that the BJP would change the Constitution if elected to power, and the inability to counter this narrative. His partymen also allege that BJP leaders did not work for their candidates, affecting the transfer of their core votes.

Away from the official line, there is introspection within BJP circles too. "Many of our traditional voters have not liked the decision to take Ajit Pawar along; we have accused him of graft in the past," says a senior party leader. He points to the resentment among old-timers about the state unit turning into an unwieldy directory of defectors, with the rise of businessmen-politicians sans a mass base at the cost of loyalists. "Overall, the narrative had slipped out of our hands... They were using a sword while we were defending ourselves with a shield."

Another former minister close to the BJP adds more reasons—the top leadership's reluctance to drop some sitting MPs to mitigate local anti-incumbency and the strong narrative about agencies like the Enforcement Directorate being deployed against political rivals.

The echoes of such introspection can be heard within the Ajit faction of the NCP

AFTER THE BATTLE

WINNERS



Supriya Sule
NCP(SP)
Baramati



Shrikant Shinde
Shiv Sena
Kalyan



Piyush Goyal
BJP
Mumbai North



Anil Desai
SS(UBT)
Mumbai South Central

LOSERS



Sudhir Mungantiwar BJP
Chandrapur



Navneet Kaur Rana BJP
Amravati



Ujjwal Nikam BJP
Mumbai North Central



Dr Bharati Pawar
BJP
Dindori

too. "The politics of splitting parties, the sympathy for Thackeray and Pawar, the perceived arrogance of our leaders and agrarian distress have led to this debacle," confesses a senior Ajit faction minister. He even credits Shinde's performance as beyond expectations, given that it had a strike rate of 46 per cent compared to the BJP's 39 per cent. For this reason, he feels, the senior ally will not be able to do away with Shinde, as some had predicted..

There are niggles for Sena(UBT) too. It has faced shock losses in strongholds like Raigad and Ratnagiri-Sindhudurg. In Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar (Aurangabad), Sandipan Bhumre of the Shinde Sena, who is a Maratha, defeated old SS(UBT) war horse Chandrakant Khaire, a Dalit, due to a crystallisation of Maratha votes. It also lost the Mumbai North West seat to Shinde's Sena by just 48 votes. The Election Commission's grant of the Shiv Sena's bow and arrow symbol to the Shinde Sena may have confused some voters in urban pockets, claim SS(UBT) leaders.

What SS(UBT) has managed to do is expand its social base. In Mumbai, while its traditional Maratha voters may have backed Shinde or the BJP's nominees as well, the support of the Muslims in the Maratha-Muslim (MaMu) combination compensated for this attrition. In Marathwada, where the party had a bristling relationship with Muslims as evidenced by the slogan 'Khan hava ka baan hava?' (do you want the Khan or the bow and arrow symbol?), Muslim support for Thackeray saved the day, along with that of Marathas and Dalits. According to senior journalist Devendra Gawande, the DMK (Dalit, Muslim, Kunbi) combination had coalesced in the MVA's favour in Vidarbha.

As senior journalist Vijay Chormare says, it is the assembly polls that will determine the real Sena and NCP as the number of seats involved is significantly higher. Meanwhile, a few imponderables remain. Will the BJP ask Shinde to make way for a fresh face from his party, preferably from the dominant Maratha community? Will the BJP contest the assembly election on its own strength? Will the prodigal nephew return to the Pawar Sr camp? ■



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▲ **WINSOME DUO**
Mamata with
Abhishek Banerjee
in Kolkata, June 4

DIDI AND BHATIJA SHOW SANGH PARIVAR THEIR PLACE

Abhishek's astute strategy, Mamata's charisma and welfare schemes have cut short the BJP's ambitions for Bengal and put TMC in pole position for 2026

By Arkamoy Datta Majumdar

IN

the end, it was Didi who had the last laugh. On the evening of June 4, a little after the clock struck six, Mamata Banerjee climbed the stage erected on the backyard of her residence in Kalighat in Kolkata. Clad in a brown-bordered white saree, she looked sprightly even after attending 108 campaign events over 61 days. The joyous mood—with hundreds of slogan-raising Trinamool Congress (TMC) supporters caked in trademark green *gulal*—was well-deserved: under her, the TMC had emerged on top in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, wresting more than two-thirds of the 42 seats in Bengal. On the stage, she held the hand of her nephew and TMC national general secretary Abhishek Banerjee, and congratulated him for his record victory from Diamond Harbour. Before flashing cameras, the TMC chairperson subtly sent out the message that Abhishek is now indubitably the flagbearer of her legacy. In shaping the party's campaign strategy, organisation and choice of candidates, Abhishek, after fashioning the 2021 assembly election win, has shaped yet another stunning victory. The BJP's grand plan of breaching fortress Bengal lies in tatters once again. "He has won by over seven lakh votes. We should congratulate the people," Mamata said.

From the opening of the poll season to its closing stages, what stood out was Abhishek's calm confidence in a resounding TMC victory. On May 28, at a rally in Diamond Harbour, he had said that TMC had won 23 of the 33 seats that went to the polls in the first

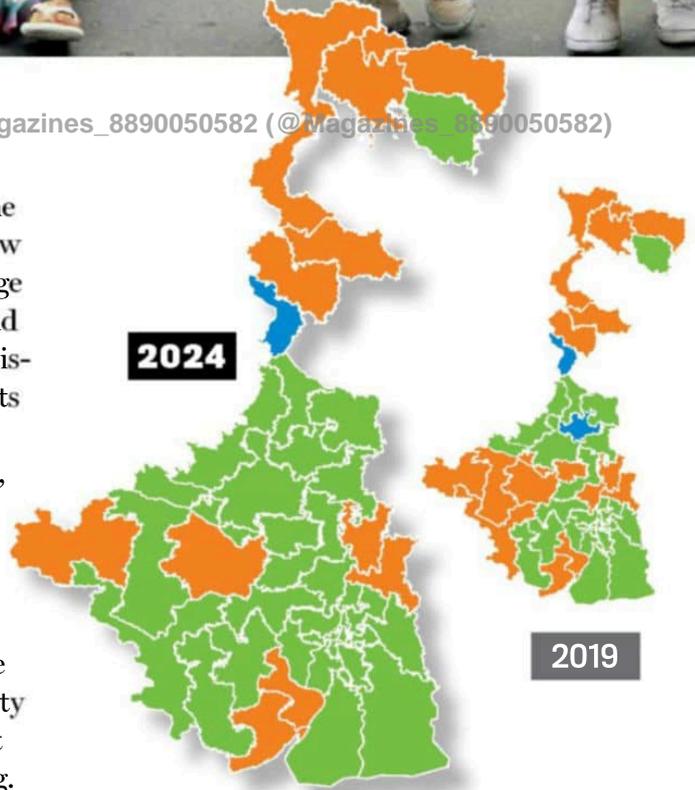
six phases. The Opposition leaders scoffed then, but were silenced as the ballots were counted. The joke is now on the exit polls that predicted a huge win for the BJP in Bengal. At the end of it all, the saffron camp looked a dismal sight—losing eight of the 18 seats it won in 2019 to the TMC, which finished with a morale-boosting 29, confirming its consummate hold over voters. The BJP was a distant second with 12 seats.

"The biggest credit goes to the people...that they have not given the importance of the single largest party to Narendra Modi," Mamata said at a press conference later that evening. The TMC secured a vote share of nearly 46 per cent, close to two percentage points less than in the 2021 polls, but higher than the 43.3 per cent in 2019. The seats TMC wrested from the BJP include Coochbehar, Barrackpore, Bardhaman-Durgapur, Jhargram, Hooghly, Medinipur and Bankura. The BJP won only two seats—Tamluk and Kanthi—that went to the TMC's books in 2019. Both are in East Me-



DANCING DIDI
Mamata at an election rally in Siliguri, north Bengal, April 16

ANI



TOTAL LOK SABHA SEATS 42

	TMC	BJP	CONG	CPI(M)
2024	29 (45.8%)	12 (38.7%)	1 (4.7%)	0 (5.9%)
2019	22 (43.7%)	18 (40.6%)	2 (5.7%)	0 (7.5%)

Vote share in ()

dinipur district, and are a face-saver in the backyard of BJP leader and the face of the party's 2024 campaign, Suwendu Adhikari. Key BJP candidates like Nisith Pramanik and Subhas Sarkar, the Union ministers of state for home and education respectively, and former BJP state president Dilip Ghosh were defeated. The BJP's vote share fell from 40.6 per cent in 2019 to 38.7 per cent this time. Though the Left-Congress combine did not do well—their only success was a win for Congress's Isha Khan Chowdhury from Malda Dakshin—their

recruitment scam—had battered the party, even as new charges like the ration scam embarrassed it even more. To reinstate people's faith, Abhishek undertook a 60-day statewide yatra in 2023, during which he realised that the non-payment of funds under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGN-REGS) and PM Awas Yojana-Grameen (PMAY-G) had angered people. He thus evolved a cunning strategy—in meeting after meeting, he played on that disgruntlement, juxtaposing the

state scheme and isn't related to who comes to power in Delhi," says political analyst Biswajit Bhattacharya.

Despite the BJP targeting the TMC over corruption, it is evident that people are willing to disregard it and still believe in Mamata. "Anti-incumbency against Modi triggered by unemployment, inflation and a fear that he might change the Constitution...also played on the voters' minds," adds Bhattacharya.

THE ROAD TO 2026

Meanwhile, the BJP appears to have been weighed down by drawbacks of poor organisation and candidate selection. Its biggest bet, the charge of atrocities against women by TMC men in Sandeshkhali, turned out to be a dud. In fact, the sting videos that the TMC released, accusing Adhikari and the BJP of engineering the protests, appears to have worked better. The TMC won the Basirhat seat, under which Sandeshkhali fails, by a margin of 333,547 votes. Adhikari, who got a free hand in selecting BJP candidates, blamed "electoral malpractices" and "violence by the TMC" to explain the defeat. "I accept the mandate of the people and thank them for polling one per cent more votes than 2021 in our favour and giving us a lead in close to 100 assembly seats," he said, trying to salvage something from the ruins. Much of the blame for the BJP's defeat shall have to be borne by Adhikari, who surely faces a question mark over his future.

On June 7, the state BJP leadership met the party high command to dissect the reasons behind this poor showing. The TMC, on the other hand, will now have an upper hand in the battle of perceptions before the crucial assembly election of 2026. This election has proven that voters would rally behind it even amidst towering allegations of corruption. Even so, the TMC leadership will need to regularly review the performances of their public representatives for the next two years to deny the Opposition a chance to build a damaging narrative. ■

The TMC's showing will give Mamata the upper hand in the battle of perception for the 2026 assembly polls. Sandeshkhali barely had an impact this election

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combined vote share of 10.6 per cent ate into the BJP share. However, framing of the Citizenship Amendment Act rules helped the BJP retain the Matua-dominated Bongaon and Ranaghat seat, but by diminished margins.

While she taunted Modi for "losing his magic and credibility" and called for his resignation along with that of Union home minister Amit Shah, Mamata made common cause with INDIA or the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance. However, she took a dig at the Congress and justified her decision to go it alone in the polls. "I have texted Rahul congratulating him. They haven't contacted us yet, but it doesn't matter if they do or don't. I had said that they will not win more than two (seats). What happened?" she asked, adding that she will continue to support the alliance.

TMC'S WINNING STRATEGY

While the TMC can gloat over their victory, it looked implausible a year back. A slew of alleged corruption cases—the coal scam, the cattle smuggling scam and the especially damaging teachers'

TMC's welfare schemes with how the BJP-led Centre—"anti-Bengal outsiders"—had deprived the state. At a huge rally in Kolkata on March 10, Abhishek encapsulated it all in a slogan: *Jonogoner Gorjon, Bangla Birodhider Bisorjon* (Roar of the people...will immerse anti-Bengal people).

However, what paid dividends many times over for the TMC is the direct benefit transfer scheme for women—Lakshmir Bhandar. The monthly honorarium paid to women was increased to Rs 1,000 (from Rs 500) for general categories and to Rs 1,200 (from Rs 1,000) for scheduled groups ahead of the polls. With over 20 million beneficiaries, its impact has been far-reaching. Bengal has over 37.3 million women voters (as compared to 38.3 million males) and till the sixth phase of polls, 81.22 per cent of them exercised their franchise. In every rally, Mamata and Abhishek said that the BJP, if voted to power, would stop the scheme. "It successfully instilled a sense of fear among women, even though Lakshmir Bhandar is a

NITISH THE KINGMAKER

Far from being written off, the canny JD(U) patriarch holds his ground in Bihar and wrests a key role for himself in determining the shape of national and state politics

By Amitabh Srivastava

ANI



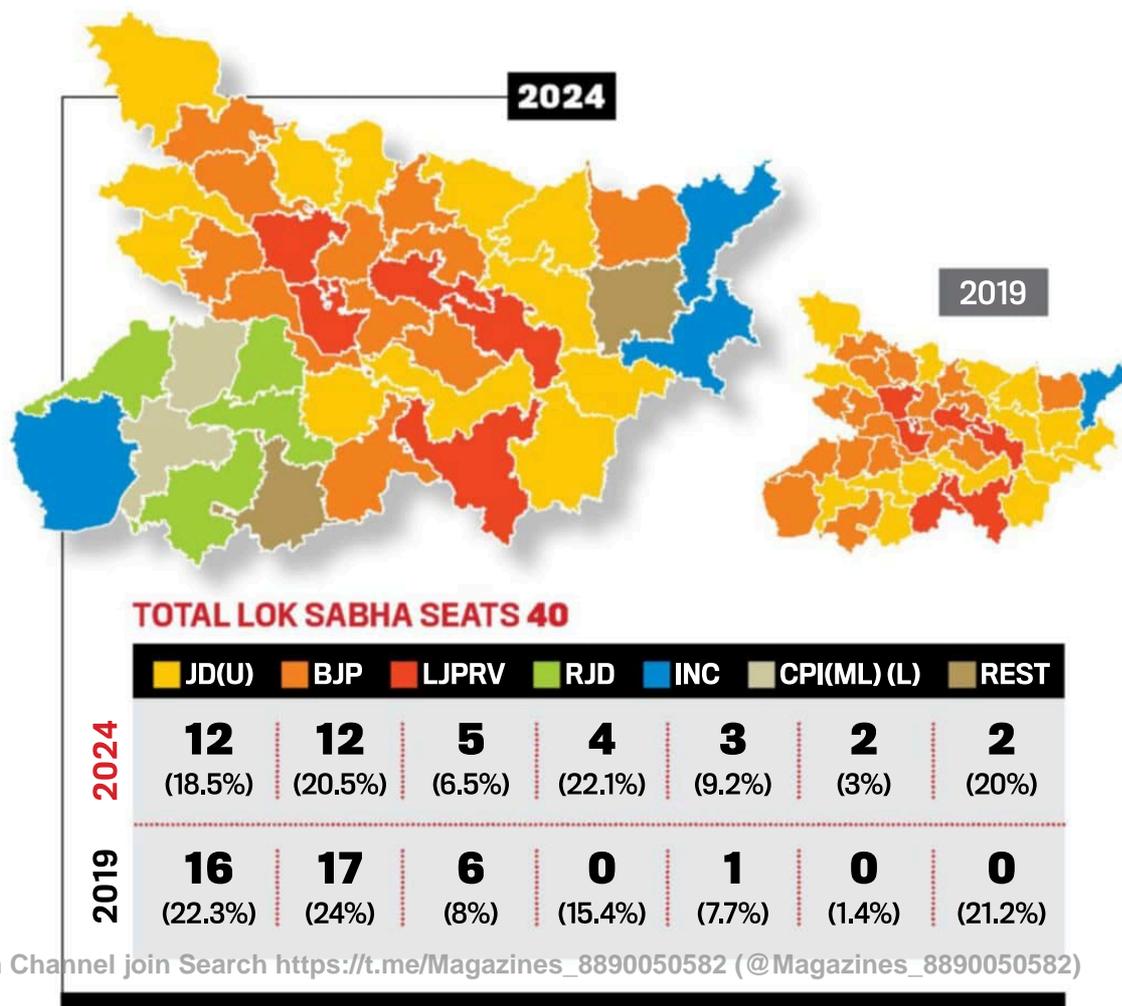
▶ LOUD & CLEAR
Bihar CM Nitish Kumar
campaigning for the
JD(U) candidate in
Sitamarhi, May 11

P

Politics may have put them on different planes but fate had Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar and his former deputy Tejaswi Yadav on the same plane on June 5. Or, more specifically the Tata Vistara flight from Patna to Delhi. The young Tejaswi, seated in Row 2, got up to greet the Janata Dal (United) patriarch, hands folded. Nitish enquired about his back, since the toll of holding 251 election rallies had evidently begun telling on the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) scion, seen as he was campaigning in a wheelchair or with a waist belt. Lalu's son assured Nitish that all was well.

The political scars, though, may take longer to heal. Despite a spirited campaign focused on employment and livelihood, Tejaswi proved no match for the combined might of Nitish and the BJP, though his party, along with other partners in the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA)—the Congress and Left parties—did trim the 2019 tally of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) by nine seats.

However, the biggest victory of the 2024 Lok Sabha election in Bihar belonged to Nitish, whose political obituary many a swan song writer had begun drafting. There were whispers about his health, his seeming bursts of temper, intemperate comments and the final straw—his return to the NDA fold this January. Surely, this was the beginning of the end for Nitish, whose status had already diminished considerably with the JD(U) winning just 43 seats in the 2020 assembly election. Rejoining the NDA would leave him on a weaker wicket, it was thought, with the BJP the big brother in the relationship and Nit-



Vote share in ()

ish forever condemned to the sidelines.

The Bihar chief minister has now broken his silence, not with words but with votes. Yes, his party won four seats less than in 2019—12 out of the 16 it contested, compared to the 16 out of 17 last time. But even the BJP has won the same number out of the 17 it fought. It conceded Buxar, Aurangabad and Patliputra (from where Lalu's daughter Misa Bharti was contesting) to the RJD, Ara and Sasaram to the

Nitish's 12 seats in the Lok Sabha will ensure that he plays a formidable role within the NDA, second only to Chandrababu Naidu's TDP

CPI (ML) (L). It was the Paswan scion Chirag who came good, winning five out of the five seats his party the Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas) fought, and securing a resounding victory for himself from Hajipur, a seat his late father, former Union minister Ram Vilas Paswan, previously held. Jitan Ram Manjhi kept the lone flag of his Hindustani Awam Morcha (Secular) flying from Gaya. Contesting independently Pappu Yadav won in Purnia.

As for INDIA, Tejaswi could take heart from the fact that the RJD improved its tally from nil to four and now has a presence in the Lok Sabha. The Congress, too, did two better than its 2019 tally of one seat. With CPI (ML) (L)'s two seats out of the total 40, Bihar was less of a sweep for the NDA.

However, his equal footing with the BJP in Bihar means Nitish is far from a spent political force. His 12 MPs in the Lok Sabha make Nitish a formidable player within the NDA, second only

to Chandrababu Naidu, whose Telugu Desam Party won 16 seats in Andhra Pradesh, in influence. Unlike in 2019, when the JD(U) won 16 seats but was offered only one ministerial berth—which he declined, Nitish can now leverage his position to drive a hard bargain and seek key portfolios, including the coveted railways ministry, alongside a special package for Bihar. Former JD(U) president Lalan Singh and Rajya Sabha MP Sanjay Kumar Jha are strong contenders for induction into the Union cabinet.

WHAT WORKED FOR NITISH

While many had dismissed Nitish's return to the BJP this January as madness, it now seems there was a method to it. Far from being another flip-flop, it was a calculated move. For one, the JD(U) has always done well

to accept Nitish again; state BJP president Samrat Choudhary had vowed he would keep his turban on until Nitish was ousted. Within the JD(U), there were murmurs that breaking off with Tejaswi would mean forfeiting the RJD's not inconsiderable 32 per cent Muslim-Yadav support base.

However, feedback from the ground convinced Nitish that any cohesion between his Extremely Backward Class (EBC) voters and the dominant Yadavs in the RJD would remain a pipe dream. The EBCs, a diverse tapestry of Bihar's smaller communities that constitute 36 per cent of Bihar's population, have been unwavering in their support for Nitish. Also the Mahadalits among Scheduled Castes and the caste-neutral constituency of women, whom Nitish has wooed assiduously over the years. The BJP, in turn, would bring its

Sushil Modi had also left a leadership void that deputy CMs Samrat Choudhary and Vijay Kumar Sinha had been unable to fill, particularly in inspiring their respective Kushwaha and Bhumi-har communities to vote for the NDA.

WHY TEJASWI DID NOT DELIVER

Be it narrative or attempts to broaden the RJD's vote bank beyond M-Y, effort was one thing Tejaswi did not skimp on. In the end, however, he could not convert smart strategy into votes or effect a shift in voter allegiance.

Instead, the ruling combine's narrative of a "return to jangal raj", alluding to the 15-year rule of the RJD from 1990 to 2005, worked against him. Especially as Nitish held up his own administration as a contrast to those "dark ages", constantly reminding the electorate, especially the youth who had no experience of it, of the regression in store for them if they voted the Opposition. In the end, the faithful went with Sushasan Babu, ensuring he remains a part of Bihar's constantly evolving political theatre.

Indeed, the altered Lok Sabha dynamics are likely to strengthen Nitish's hand in government back home too. The JD(U) may have only 44 MLAs compared to the BJP's 78, but Nitish is set to regain the control and authority he enjoyed prior to the 2020 assembly polls. Deputy CMs Choudhary and Sinha, as well as other BJP leaders, will now have to bow to his wishes, given his crucial role not only in state politics but also in the stability of the central government. The Lok Sabha results should also quell any speculation about change in leadership. His partymen are adamant that Nitish stays at the helm as the NDA prepares for the 2025 assembly polls. Especially as Lalu's son will be hot on their heels and people vote differently in a state election. Unless of course the election is advanced, and Nitish gains from the current momentum. ■

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Bihar BJP leaders will now have to bow to Nitish's wishes, and he is likely to remain at the helm as the NDA prepares for the assembly election in 2025

in the company of BJP, their combined vote share of 39 per cent, eight percentage points higher than the RJD-Congress this time. Then, there was the frustration building up with INDIA, whose differently moving parts were weighing down the whole. Nitish, the lead writer of that script, found himself being denied due recognition not just for this role but also for handing the Opposition a narrative of a national caste census with a survey in his own state.

With his options fast running out, Nitish chose pragmatism over ideological fidelity, even if many saw his return to the NDA as a leap into oblivion, convinced the BJP would wean away his voter base and hang him out to dry. The BJP's own state unit was reluctant

elite caste and Vaishya following to the table, while Paswan and Manjhi would assure the votes of their communities. Add BJP's formidable election machinery and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's widespread appeal, and the NDA seemed set to repeat its 39-seat tally of 2019.

WHY BJP FELL SHORT

It was not to be. The BJP's overdependence on Modi proved to be its undoing; as did its failure to address dissatisfaction among core voters. In Aurangabad, the decision to repeat Sushil Kumar Singh, despite local resentment, backfired. If the BJP did secure 12 seats, it was mainly because Nitish's voter base supported all NDA candidates. The untimely demise of

SHIFTING SANDS IN THE DESERT

Rajasthan serves the BJP a shock for ignoring issues that really matter to people and sidelining some of its tallest leaders. The party's state unit faces turmoil in the near future

By **Rohit Parihar**

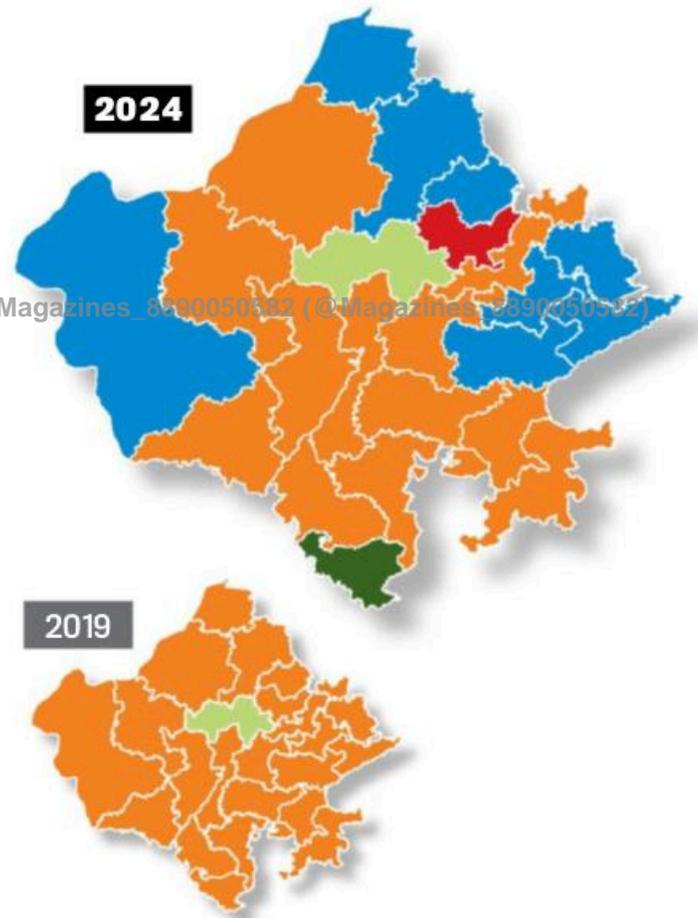
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ix months after handing the BJP a facile win in the assembly election, voters in Rajasthan sprang a big surprise in the Lok Sabha polls—handing the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) 11 seats and reducing the BJP, which had won all 25 Lok Sabha seats in the state in 2014 and 24 in 2019, to just 14 seats. Not just that, the BJP's victory margins have plummeted, with only six candidates winning by 300,000-plus votes, as against

16 in 2019. Its vote share, too, plunged to 49.2 per cent from 58.4 per cent. The INDIA bloc made a clean sweep in eastern Rajasthan and Shekhawati regions. The BJP lost 72 per cent of all seven reserved seats; among three seats reserved for Scheduled Tribes, the BJP won one and INDIA two; among four seats for Scheduled Castes, it won one against three by INDIA. Where the BJP fielded candidates from reserved categories, it appears many general caste voters forsook it, especially its traditional Rajput vote bank. BJP heavyweights Union minister Kailash Chaudhary came third in Barmer-Jaisalmer, while Gajendra Singh Shekhawat (Jodhpur), Arjun Meghwal (Bikaner), Bhupender Yadav (Alwar) and Lok Sabha speaker Om Birla (Kota) won by reduced margins. The BJP suffered heavily in the first phase, losing eight of 12 seats for which polling was held on April 19.

The first signs of the BJP's difficulties in Rajasthan could be read in the assembly results itself in December when, against an expected tally of 140, it managed just 115. Then, in January, it lost the Karanpur assembly bypoll. The common thread that runs through the BJP's underwhelming performances is its consistent sidelining of former chief minister Vasundhara Raje, as well as MLAs/ leaders deemed close to her. Though her belated assistance in ticket selection and campaigning helped the BJP tide through the assembly polls, keeping her out of the LS polls preparations and banking upon her rivals just did not produce results—many workers/ leaders did not vote, bringing down the margins of victory. At places, disgruntled BJP supporters even voted for rival INDIA bloc candidates.

Happily dipping into the BJP vote bank in areas of such surface tension



TOTAL LOK SABHA SEATS 25

	BJP	CONG	RLP	CPI(M)	BAP
2024	14 (49.2%)	8 (37.9%)	1 (1.8%)	1 (2.0%)	1 (3.3%)
2019	24 (59.1%)	0 (34.6%)	1 (2.1%)	0 (0.2%)	- (-)

Vote share in (%)



FIGHTING SPIRIT
 Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge (centre) with Sachin Pilot and Rajasthan Congress chief Govind Singh Dotasra (right) at a campaign rally in Chittorgarh

ANI

was the Congress and its three INDIA allies—the Bharat Adivasi Party (BAP), CPI(M) and Rashtriya Loktantrik Party (RLP)—who won a seat each in Banswara-Dungarpur, Sikar and Nagaur respectively. In seats where INDIA candidates won, votes were clinched by caste equations and issues like anti-incumbency against sitting MPs, safeguarding the Constitution and reservation for SCs/ STs and anger against the Centre’s Agnipath scheme. By contrast, a complacent BJP mostly depended on the appeal of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. As a result, the BJP’s 14 LS seats are now equivalent to 106 assembly seats; INDIA’s 11 signify wins in 89 assembly constituencies. “Congress’s net votes in each of the assembly constituencies in 10 of the 11 LS seats INDIA won were more than the BJP’s. Clearly, it cashed in whereas the BJP relying on Modi alone ignored it,” says Barmer-based political analyst Amit Rakesh Sharma.

Though he campaigned extensively, Chief Minister Bhajan Lal Sharma, a first-time MLA, cannot be blamed for the loss of 11 seats. That falls on the party high command and some state leaders. Yet, the BJP’s hope that Sharma, who is

The lukewarm LS results have strengthened the case of Vasundhara Raje, whose sidelining is considered to be a factor in BJP's decline

from Bharatpur in eastern Rajasthan, would boost the party’s chances in a region dominated by Gurjars and Meenas came to naught. The BJP lost Bharatpur to Sanjana Jatav of the Congress; adjoining Tonk-Sawai Madhopur, Dausa and Karauli-Dholpur too were lost.

RETURN OF RAJE?

So does all this signify a comeback for Raje? Indeed, the LS results and the growing dissent against the first-time CM have strengthened her position. Even veteran Kirodi Lal Meena, the agriculture minister, has indicated his intention to quit, owning responsibility for defeat in those very eastern constituencies that were entrusted to him.

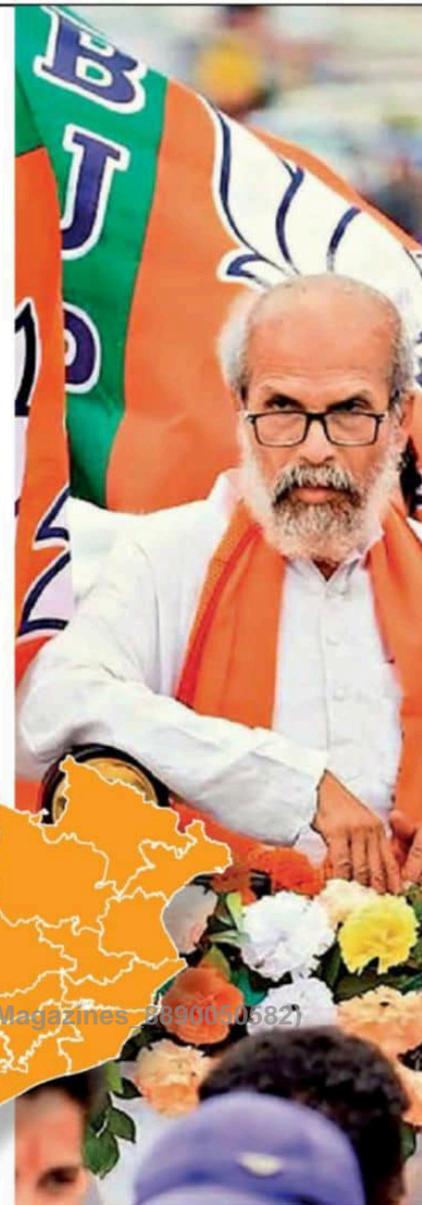
If this transpires, Meena, who is upset with his portfolio and little say in government, will encourage more dissent, which will force the high command to act. It remains to be seen if the top brass will hand more power to Raje or accommodate her son Dushyant, who has won for the fifth time from Jhalawar-Baran. With the Sharma government considered the weakest in years, there are calls to bring in Raje as CM for half its term.

With their house in better order than when it went to the assembly polls after five years of feuding between former CM Ashok Gehlot and his one-time deputy Sachin Pilot, the Congress is happy with a weakened BJP. Gehlot, however, has his son Vaibhav’s loss from Jalore to reckon with. Moreover, of the eight Congress candidates who have won, at least four are loyalists of his bête noir Pilot. Given that present Rajasthan Congress chief Govind Singh Dotasra has proven his worth, the high command is unlikely to replace him. Pilot now has time to build his credibility to present himself as the chief ministerial face for the 2029 assembly election. The LS polls have left both the BJP and Congress in Rajasthan with a lot to set right. ■

A NEW KING FOR KALINGA

As the BJP prepares to assume Odisha's reins, ending Naveen Patnaik's 24-year reign, it needs to demonstrate how it plans to improve governance and accelerate development

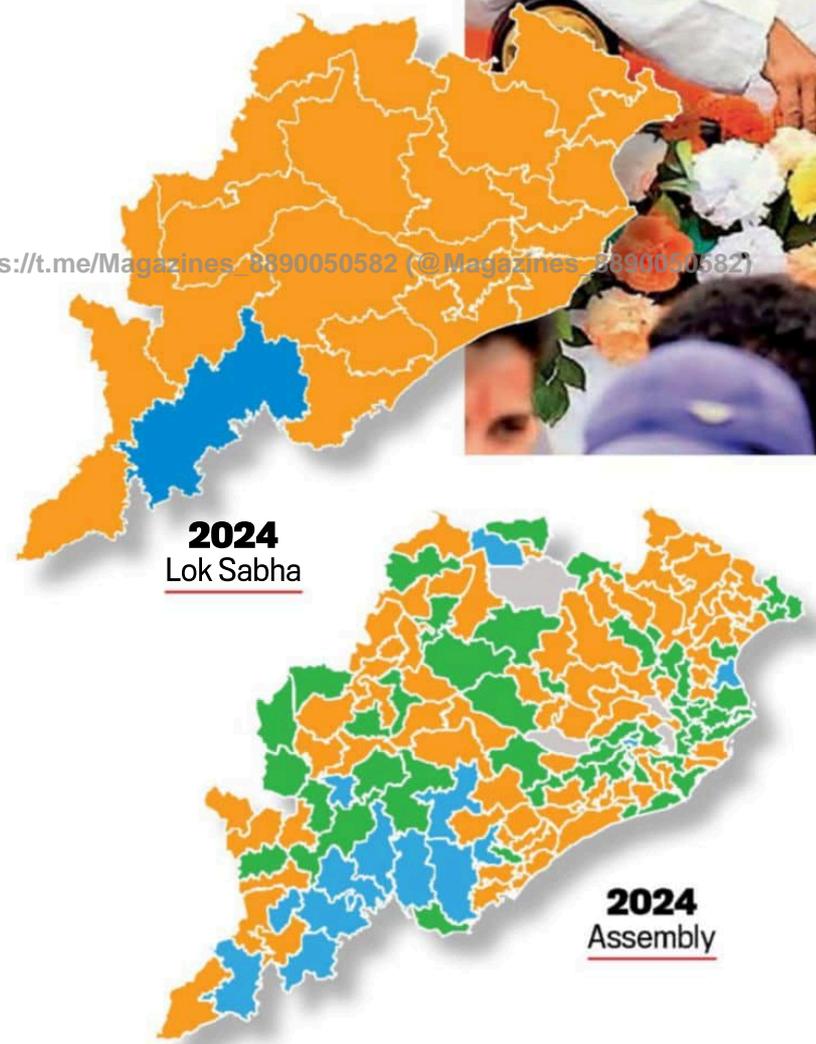
By **Arkamoy Datta Majumdar**



On June 6, two days after Odisha dealt a shocking defeat to the Biju Janata Dal (BJD), ending Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik's 24-year rule, chief secretary Pradeep Jena released a video message assuring the state's people about the continuance of the outgoing government's flagship health scheme, the Biju Swasthya Kalyan Yojana (BSKY). Jena was forced to come up with the clarification following media reports that several hospitals refused to honour the BSKY cards, turning away patients. This sense of uncertainty, believe experts, is likely to be the primary challenge that the incoming BJP government will have to tackle as it starts off. The burning question on everyone's lips is whether it will uphold the welfare initiatives pioneered by Naveen. This intrigue is fuelled by the hints dropped by various state BJP leaders, including their president Manmohan Samal, suggesting a potential adoption of the central Ayushman Bharat health scheme at the state level.

"BJP leaders have not categorically said that they will stop the BSKY. However, people are afraid that this may happen if Ayushman Bharat is implemented. Many hospitals have stopped accepting the card," says Sandeep Sahu, an independent political analyst. On June 5, Samal, who unsuccessfully contested the Chandabali assembly seat, told the media that Ayushman Bharat is a populist scheme and will be implemented so that the 15 million Odias staying outside the state can also avail of its benefits.

The BJP won 78 seats, only four more than the halfway mark, in the 147-member state legislative assembly, while the BJD was reduced to 51, in the hotly contested simultaneous four-phase polls that also decided the fate of the state's 21 Lok Sabha seats. In 2019, the BJD had won 112 assembly seats compared to the BJP's 23. While the BJP's vote share rose to 40 per cent from 32.5 per cent, that of the BJD went down to 40.2 per cent from 42.8 per cent. The Congress bagged 14 seats in the assembly, five



more than its 2019 tally. In the case of parliamentary polls, the saffron camp completely routed the BJD by cornering 20 seats with a vote share of 45.4 per cent. The remaining one went to the Congress, while the BJD drew a blank despite securing 37.5 per cent of the votes.

Samal says the BJP will deliver on all the promises it has made. "Be it the issue of opening of Ratna Bhandar



XI@DPRADHANBJP

JAI JAGANNATH
Union minister
Dharmendra Pradhan
(middle) at a roadshow
in Nilgiri, May 27

change. This may not be lost on the BJP top brass, say experts.

On the other hand, an existential crisis of sorts stares at the 27-year-old BJD. “The question is whether the party will survive after this defeat. Naveen Babu is too old and unwell to engineer a revival. The BJP will definitely try to break it,” says Sahu. Sources in Bhubaneswar’s power corridors are apprehensive about the new government’s potentially vindictive approach against the previous regime. The fact that several BJD leaders were allegedly mired in corruption, including in the Seashore chit fund and mining scams, may come in handy for the BJP government. Given the saffron party’s reported track record of using probe agencies to hound Opposition leaders until they are forced to bend their knee, there is speculation that the new government will use the

police to force the BJD and Congress MLAs to make the switch. Moreover, three top officials in the chief minister’s office, considered close to Tamil Nadu-born V.K. Pandian, Naveen’s closest aide and IAS officer-turned-BJD leader, have resigned signalling a significant reshuffle in the state bureaucracy. That Pandian was his party’s only visible face along with Naveen helped the BJP harp on the Odia *asmita* (pride) during the polls.

Moreover, one lingering question yet to be addressed is Naveen’s level of comfort on the Opposition bench. Having been thrust into politics at 51 after his father’s passing, the departing CM has remained in power consistently for 24 years. Initially a minister at the Centre, Naveen has governed Odisha since 2000. However, over the past five years, particularly since the onset of Covid-19, his presence in the legislative assembly and secretariat has been rare. He often opted for remote participation via live video links. This decision may well have cost Naveen in what many speculate may be his final election. ■

■ BJP	■ CONG	■ BJD	■ OTHERS
2024 Lok Sabha [Total seats 21]			
20 (45.4%)	1 (12.5%)	0 (37.5%)	-
2024 Assembly [Total seats 147]			
78 (40%)	14 (13.3%)	51 (40.2%)	4 (6.5%)

Vote share in (%)

or unlocking the gates of Srimandir [Jagannath Temple in Puri] or procuring paddy at Rs 3,100 per quintal, work on these will begin soon.” But before delivering on these fronts, picking the chief minister will be a crucial task at hand for the party. While multiple names are doing the rounds, former

Union minister and Sambalpur MP Dharmendra Pradhan is one of the likeliest choices. But at a time when the BJP is short of a clear majority at the Centre, Prime Minister Narendra Modi might not want to let go of a crucial parliamentary colleague. While comptroller and auditor general Girish Chandra Murmu’s name is adding grist to the rumour mill, primarily because of his proximity to Modi, many think it is unlikely that the party will put a former IAS officer at the helm of the state when it flayed the BJD for “turning Odisha into a bureaucrat-state”. There is also a chance that the party will settle for a lesser-known face. In that case, Suresh Pujari could be their bet. The former MP and state party chief has been elected to the assembly from Brajarajnagar in western Odisha, a region that voted decisively for a

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Voice & Data

हन्दी मैगजीन

समय पत्रिका साधनापथग हलकषमी उदयइंडिया नरिंगधाम मॉडर्न खेतीइंडिया टुडेदेवपुत्र
कुरकिट टुडेग हथोभा अर्नाखीहनिदुस्तानमुक्ता सरति चंपक परतयोगिता दरपण सक्सेस मरि
सामान्य ज्ञान दरपण फारम एवं फूड मनोहर कहानियां सत्यकथा सरस सललि स्वतंत्र वार्ता लाजवाब आउटलुकसचची शकिषावनति
मायापुरी रूपायन उजाळा ऋषि प्रसाद जोश रोजगार समाचार जोश करंट अफेयर्स जोश सामान्य ज्ञान जोश बैकगे और एएसएससी
इंडिया बुक ऑफरकिरइसपरक् तमिल
राजस्थान रोजगार संदेश राजस्थान सूजससखी जागरण अहा! जदिगी बाल भास्कर योजना कुरकषैन्
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NOW COMES THE HARD PART

Back in the NDA fold, TDP supremo N. Chandrababu Naidu sweeps both the parliamentary and assembly elections. But with the state treasury running on empty, he will need the Centre to bail him out

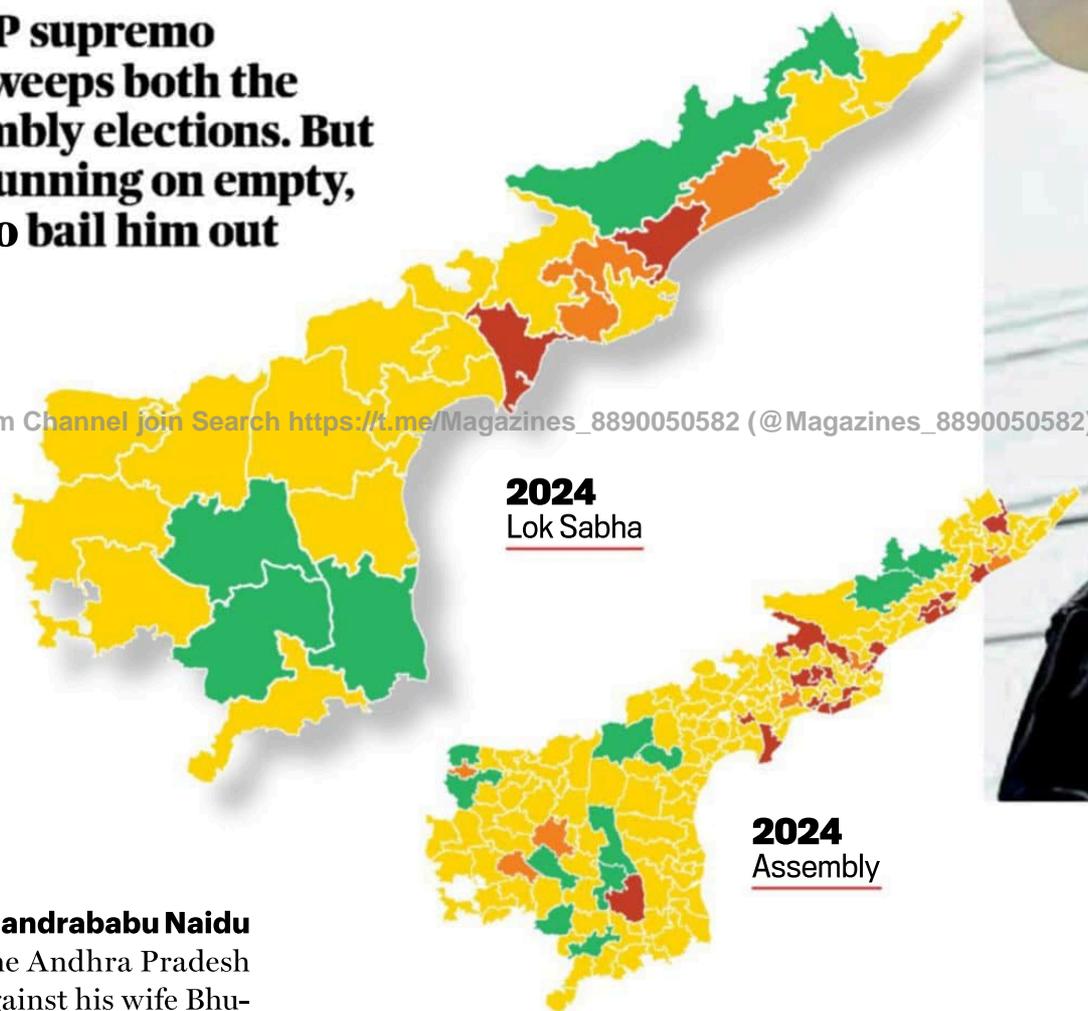
By Amarnath K. Menon

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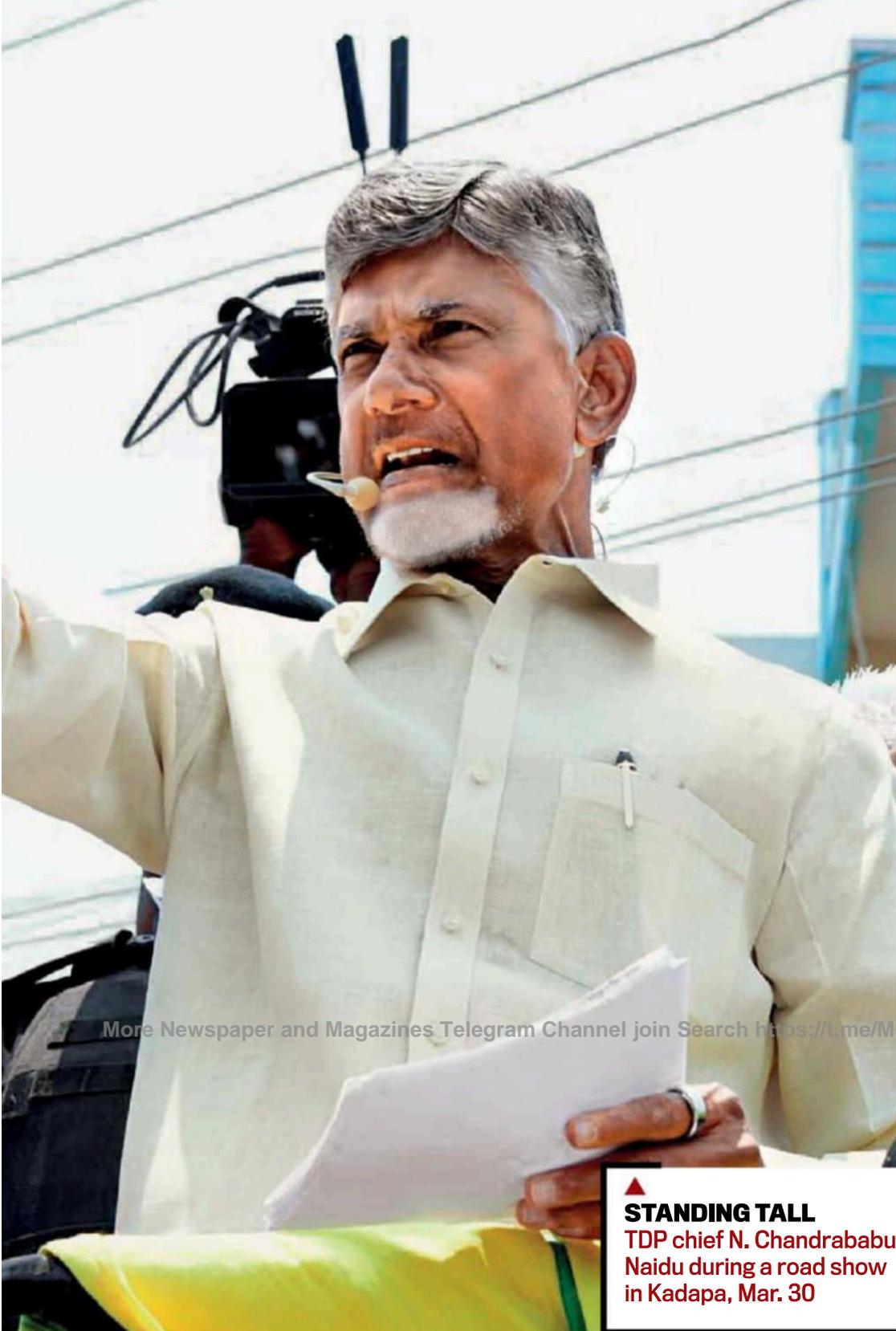
November 2021, an emotional N. Chandrababu Naidu had made a dramatic walkout from the Andhra Pradesh assembly. Stung by abusive remarks against his wife Bhuvaneshwari during a debate on women's empowerment, a tearful Naidu vowed with folded hands not to return to the Sasana Sabha "unless as chief minister". Nearly two and a half years later, the 74-year-old Telugu Desam Party (TDP) supremo has made good on that vow.

Riding a potent anti-incumbency wave against the outgoing chief minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy's Yuva-jana Sramika Rythu Congress Party (YSRCP), Naidu has led the TDP to a resounding victory and will now hold the state's reins for the fourth time. His party captured 135 assembly seats and swept all 16 Lok Sabha constituencies it contested, with its allies—actor Pawan Kalyan's Jana Sena Party and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—com-



TDP	BJP	JSP	YSRCP
2024 Lok Sabha [Total seats 25]			
16	3	2	4
(37.8%)	(11.3%)	(6.3%)	(39.6%)
2024 Assembly [Total seats 175]			
135	8	21	11
(45.6%)	(2.8%)	(8.5%)	(39.4%)

Vote share in (%)



ANI



for constitutional bodies,” notes political commentator A.M. Khan Yazdani, “proved to be his undoing.”

Banking on just DBT beneficiaries also backfired for Jagan. Resorting to token social inclusion—by assigning ministries to leaders from various groups without giving them any real authority—alienated nearly all sections. The disillusionment was so severe that in Visakhapatnam parliamentary constituency, the TDP’s Mathukumilli Sribharat won by a record 504,247 votes despite Jagan’s ambitious plan of turning the port city into the state’s administrative capital. For Jagan, despite cornering a nearly 40 per cent vote share, the prospects of keeping the YSRCP rank and file together will be a tall order.

Meanwhile, with a 16-seat tally, the TDP has emerged as the second largest constituent of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) at the Centre. This comes as a boon for Naidu, as he takes over the reins of a cash-strapped state. Andhra Pradesh faces a massive Rs 13.5 lakh crore debt burden. Revitalising the state’s finances is a priority if Naidu wants to revive his Amaravati megapolis project and deliver on the ‘Super Six’ guarantees, including two million new jobs and an array of populist freebies. Driving a hard bargain, he is demanding Special Category Status for the state to get central grants on priority. Promised during the state’s bifurcation in 2014, it was later denied by the Modi regime, forcing Naidu to quit the NDA in 2018.

Andhra’s longest-serving chief minister, Naidu is an old hand at political machinations that go on in New Delhi, having played a key role in cobbling together coalitions to form the two United Front governments (1996-98) and then serving as the NDA convenor under former PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee. The coming days will test his perseverance and acumen to the hilt. ■

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▲ STANDING TALL
TDP chief N. Chandrababu Naidu during a road show in Kadapa, Mar. 30

pounding the YSRCP’s humiliation. It has been restricted to just 11 of the 175 assembly seats and four of the 25 parliamentary seats.

The remarkable comeback after that emotional 2021 walkout and having hit a political nadir in September 2023—when he was arrested by the state police in a corruption case—underscores Naidu’s perseverance and political acumen. The YSRCP’s near 50 per cent vote share in 2019 and Jagan’s effective welfare delivery via direct benefit transfer (DBT) schemes loomed large, but proved no deterrent. Undaunted, Naidu marshalled his Kamma

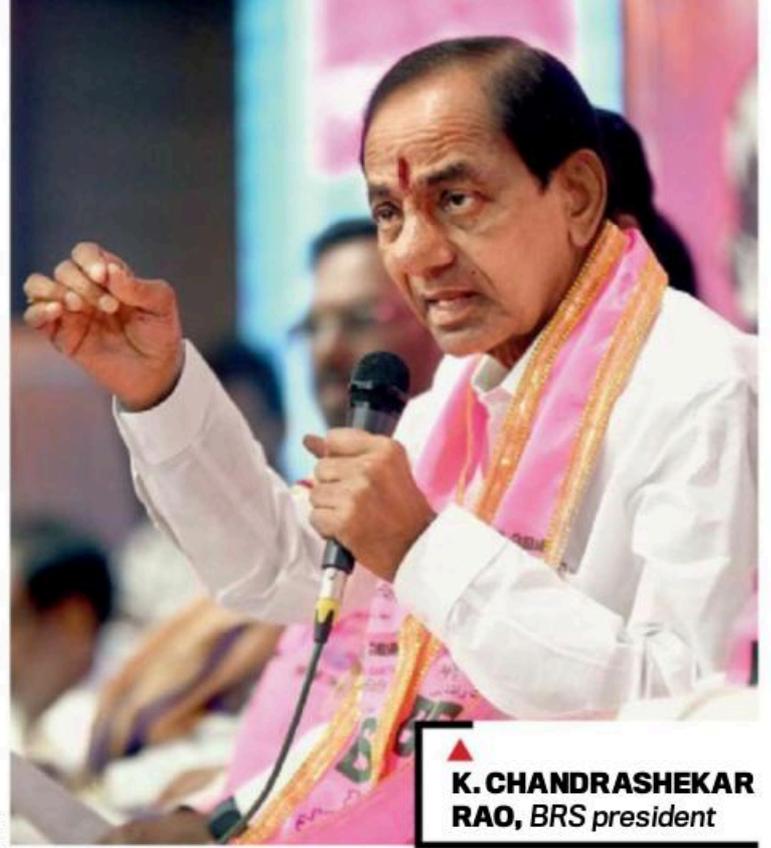
caste vote base and forged a surprising alliance with Kalyan, even as the latter’s Kapu cohort has a long history of rivalry with Kammas, and renewed ties with the BJP—forging a formidable flank to topple the YSRCP.

Naidu’s family—son Lokesh, and later wife Bhuvaneshwari, daughter of party founder N.T. Rama Rao—toured the state over the past two years, rallying support for the party. TDP loyalists from neighbouring states and abroad also descended to campaign and created a buzz against what the party termed an “authoritarian” regime. “Jagan’s authoritarianism and disregard

THE LAST OF KCR?

Months after losing power in the state, KCR's national ambitions also seem to have been thwarted. The BRS chief and his party now face an 'existential crisis'

By Amarnath K. Menon



K. CHANDRASHEKAR RAO, BRS president

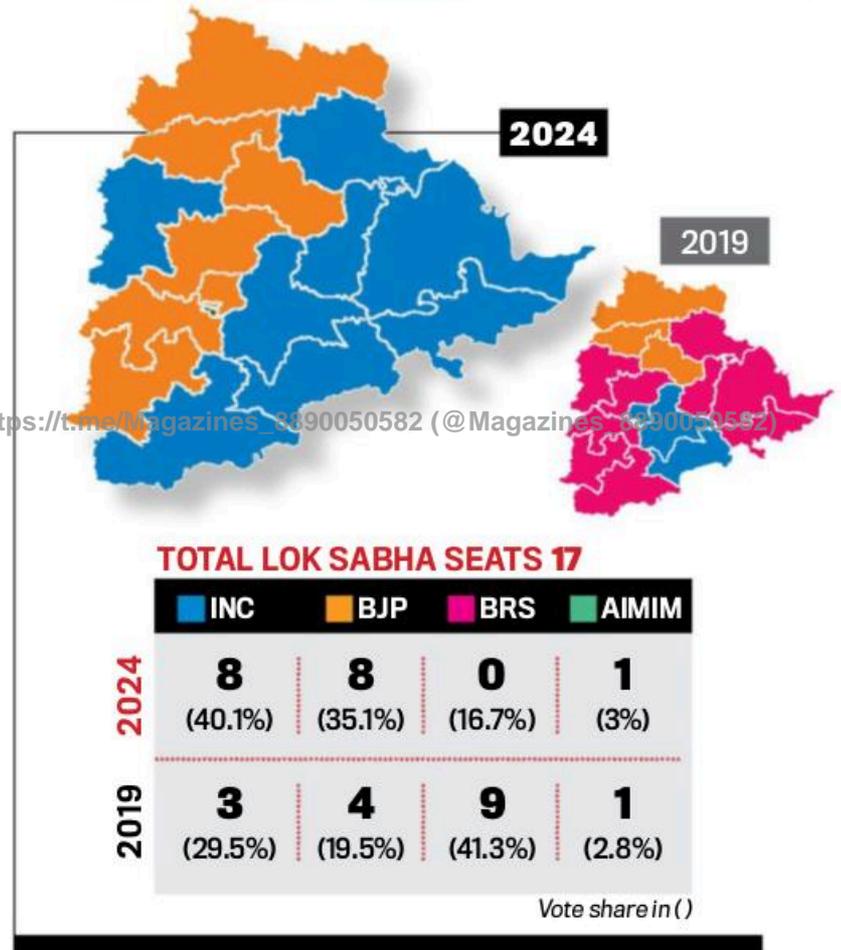
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hants of 'Desh ka neta KCR'—the national leader KCR—had echoed in the Telangana Bhavan as K. Chandrashekar Rao announced the rechristening of his Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) to Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS), and with it his intent to make a national foray. That was on October 5, 2022.

Now, barely six months after its drubbing in the assembly polls, yielding power to the A. Revanth Reddy-led Congress in the state, the once formidable BRS has suffered another humiliating rout in the Lok Sabha polls. The party that had won nine of the state's 17 parliamentary seats in 2019 failed to net even one seat, as its vote share plummeted to a dismal 16.7 per cent from 41.3 per cent in 2019. Conscious of the BRS's declining fortunes post the state election—a win on a third of the seats with a 37.4 per cent vote share—KCR had embarked on a frenetic bus tour, campaigning across all constituencies. But his sharp attacks on the ruling Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) proved futile, as both national parties equally split the state's seats, cornering eight each, and All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) chief Asaduddin Owaisi retained his Hyderabad bastion. The increase in the Congress's tally from three to eight saved the day for CM Reddy, who is also the party's state president. But it's the BJP that has served notice of its rise—its growth coming at the expense of the BRS and signalling the saffron party's emergence as the Congress's principal challenger.

The decline of the KCR-led BRS, which ruled Telangana for nearly a decade, is largely attributed to the former CM's own missteps. While the pioneering Rythu Bandhu scheme for farmers initially won it ardent supporters, the BRS soon became mired in a swirl of corruption allegations. KCR's attempts to stem the downward spiral bore little result, as several BRS leaders defected to the Congress and even the BJP. KCR may well struggle to retain his 39 MLAs, as the Con-



gress—with a slim majority of 64 in the 119-strong house—seeks to bolster its strength.

BRS working president and KCR's son K.T. Rama Rao, remains defiant, claiming the party will "continue to toil" and "rise from the ashes like a Phoenix". KCR's immediate challenge is to capture power in the impending local body elections. He also has to retain the support of Backward Classes (BCs), a crucial vote bank, as other disadvantaged sections look towards the Congress. But that's a tall order, says political scientist E. Venkatesu, given the farm loan waiver and caste census promises Reddy has made. Unless the BRS develops a coherent strategy to grapple with this crisis, its downward descent will continue to be relentless. ■

DR ANEEL KASHI MURARKA & **THE ART OF GIVING GENEROUSLY**

The Managing Director of Mirachem Industries and the Founder of the social enterprise Ample Mission, Dr Aneel Kashi Murarka defines himself as a common man and a dedicated social worker. He aims to create systems and structures that will make a meaningful impact on society.



Dr Aneel Kashi Murarka, Industrialist & Philanthropist

Dr. Murarka hails from a family of legends. His grandfather, Late Chiranjilal Murarka of Lachhmangarh of Sikar district, Rajasthan, was a Freedom Fighter and Philanthropist. His father Kashi Murarka made significant philanthropic contributions to society. Dr Murarka is upholding this legacy, focusing on achieving tangible outcomes, exploring and implementing innovative solutions to address the pressing issues facing our society and nation. His son Sidhaant is now actively engaged in social work and leads a dedicated team of young members at Ample Mission. Under his leadership, numerous innovative social campaigns have been successfully initiated across India, with a particular focus on reaching out to economically disadvantaged youth.

Ample Mission, founded by Dr Murarka, is dedicated to fostering societal progress for a better India through collaborative endeavors. He spearheads a diverse array of social programs, encompassing educational initiatives for underprivileged children in slums and rural areas, Adivasi empowerment activities including healthcare and employment opportunities through Warli Art, sports and talent camps for tribal youth.

Ample Mission conducts hunger alleviation programs for the urban poor by providing free meals to the homeless and creating livelihood opportunities for housewives involved in meal preparation. It showcases the talents of transgender individuals and facilitates livelihood options for acid attack survivors, disabled people and Dwarfs. Dr Murarka elaborates, "Our work at Ample Mission has always been guided by a steadfast commitment to prioritising vulnerable communities and creating opportunities for

them". Rural healthcare facilities for women and children, anti-plastic initiatives, large-scale tree plantation drives, pothole filling to prevent accidents, cleanliness and hygiene workshops for school children and women are all signature campaigns that define the trust.

In addition to his well-known social endeavors, Dr. Murarka has produced numerous short films addressing issues such as cleanliness, anti-tobacco campaigns, road safety and breast cancer awareness. His efforts were commended by Honorable Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Prime Minister's Office through a tweet. In recognition of his contributions, the Ministry of Urban Development, Government of India, appointed him as the Brand Ambassador for the Swachh Abhiyan Mission.



Ample Mission organizes inspirational award shows that celebrate remarkable individuals. The Shoorveer Awards recognize lion-hearted individuals who have displayed extraordinary acts of bravery. The Bharat Prerna Awards honors those who have overcome physical disabilities, mental illness, or sensory deprivation to achieve extraordinary feats of courage. Awards Zindagi Ke pays tribute to the exceptional valor, courage, and dedication of the unsung heroes - the men in uniform who have selflessly dedicated and sacrificed their lives for our nation.

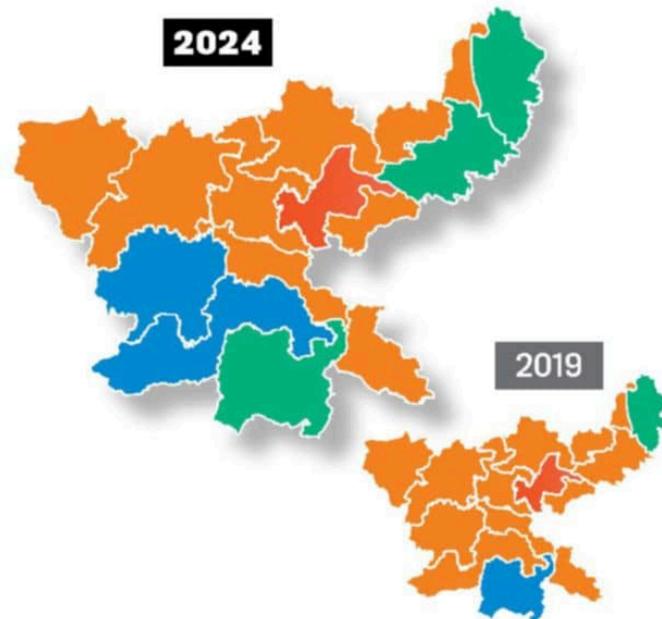
Aneel Murarka, in his role as a Trustee of the Samarpan, C.B. Murarka Charitable Trust, along with his family, has played a pivotal role in the establishment of several public utility projects that serve as pillars of support within their local communities.

Catalyzing a movement of "conscious giving" to drive inclusive growth and bridge societal divides requires more than just a prescribed set of practices. As Dr Murarka puts, "It entails listening with a humble heart to understand another's experience from their perspective, fostering a genuine connection that empathizes with the pain of others".



REVENGE OF THE TRIBALS

The NDA may have lost all goodwill among the state's 26 per cent tribals due to ED action against ex-CM Hemant Soren



TOTAL LOK SABHA SEATS 14

	BJP	AJSU	JMM	CONG
2024	8 (44.6%)	1 (2.6%)	3 (14.6%)	2 (19.2%)
2019	11 (51.61%)	1 (4.39%)	1 (11.66%)	1 (15.83%)

Vote share in (%)



THE RISE OF KALPANA SOREN
The JMM leader during election campaigning in Sahibganj in May

By Amitabh Srivastava

Did Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) leader and former Jharkhand chief minister Hemant Soren's

being in custody in an alleged land scam case result in sympathy voting for his party in the just-concluded Lok Sabha election? Yes and no. While the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) won nine out of Jharkhand's 14 Lok Sabha seats, it lost all five seats reserved for the Scheduled Tribes (STs) in the state, bringing its tally down by three from the 12 seats it had won in the previous election in 2019. The JMM and its allies have projected

Hemant's arrest by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) in January as an example of the anti-tribal stance of the ruling BJP at the Centre. On June 4, while the JMM picked three of the ST seats, two were won by ally Congress.

The BJP's reduced tally, and the outcome in the ST-reserved seats will be of some comfort to Kalpana Soren, Hemant's wife, who had emerged as the public face of the JMM since her husband's arrest. The June 4 results also something of a personal victory for her. Hemant's resignation from the post of CM ahead of his arrest on January 31 had left a vacuum in the state's JMM-Congress-Rashtriya Janata Dal government leadership, which Kalpana could

not fill owing to objections raised by her sister-in-law Sita Soren on her not being an MLA; Sita was then a JMM legislator. This resulted in 67-year-old Champai Soren being made CM. On June 4, Kalpana also won the Gandey bypoll, held on May 20, by a margin of 27,149 votes. What would likely add an extra edge of sweetness to her victory is Sita's loss from the family's Dumka stronghold—in March, Sita quit the JMM to join the BJP and was fielded as the NDA candidate from the constituency; the June 4 results showed she had lost the seat to JMM's Nalin Soren by a margin of 22,527 votes.

The Lok Sabha election outcomes serve as a critical wake-up call for the BJP in Jharkhand, especially with the state polls scheduled just months from now, says political observer Suman K. Shrivastava. Tribals comprise 26 per cent of Jharkhand's electorate, according to the 2011 Census. The BJP has experienced the influence wielded by the community in the past. In 2019, months after winning the Lok Sabha polls in the state, the party and its allies lost the assembly polls, arguably because of its poor show in ST reserved seats, of which the BJP won only two. It can upset the cohort at its own risk. ■

PTI



▲ FAILED OPTIMISM?

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge, Rahul Gandhi and CM Siddaramaiah in Shimoga, May 2

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WIN SOME, LOSE SOME

The Congress makes a dent in the BJP's tally, but its dwindling Vokkaliga support should be cause for alarm

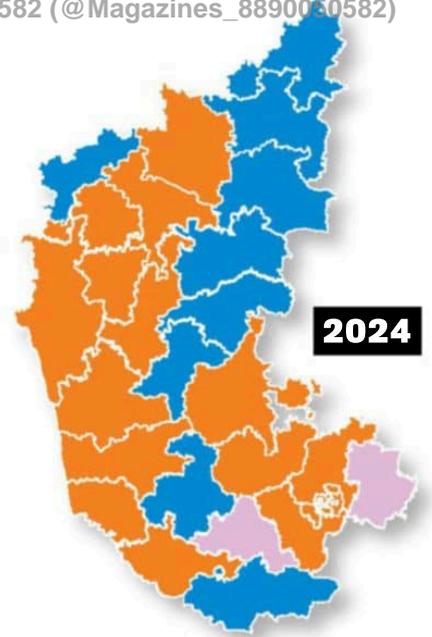
By **Ajay Sukumaran**

In

late April, amid the high-voltage campaigning leading up to the first phase of the Lok Sabha election in Karnataka on April 26, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah was thrilled to receive a unique souvenir from a law student in the state's Arsikere region. Strung together into a garland were the 'zero fare' bus tickets she had collected since bus travel was made free for women in Karnataka by the Sid-

daramaiah government after taking office last year. The Congress's welfare schemes have been a hit, especially among women, and it was this goodwill that the party was counting on for a double-digit haul in the Lok Sabha polls.

The jury is still out on whether these welfare schemes paid off. The Congress's vote share has risen significantly but the Karnataka result hasn't brought much



2024



2019

cheer to the ruling party. The Siddaramaiah-led government was expecting to win in more than 14 of Karnataka's 28 Lok Sabha constituencies, but it could manage to bag only nine. This, incidentally, was the exact number of seats the Congress had won in 2014 during Siddaramaiah's first term as CM. Which means the Congress, which stormed to power in Karnataka in May 2023, has been unable to reverse the paradoxical pattern that has held in the state for the past two decades—of Karnataka voters drawing a clear line between who they vote for in the assembly polls and in the general elections.

Since 2004, the Congress has come to power twice in Karnataka with a clear majority but has been unable to cross single digits in the Lok Sabha polls. In this period, the BJP has consistently won the lion's share of seats in every Lok Sabha election even though it has fallen shy of an outright majority in state polls. With 17 Lok Sabha seats, the BJP remains at the top of the pecking order in this general election as well, and NDA partner Janata Dal (Secular) stands third with two seats.

Addressing a press conference on June 5 after the results were announced, CM Siddaramaiah said, as though to console himself, "The vote share of both the BJP and JD(S) has decreased. Our share in polling has increased, but we could not win as many seats as we had calculated." Hitting back at the ruling party in the state, BJP state president B.Y. Vijayendra told the

media, "There's no reason for the chief minister to celebrate. The people of Karnataka have clearly shown their trust in Prime Minister Modi's performance over Congress promises." The BJP's tally, though is down eight seats from its 25-seat haul in 2019.

An appraisal of how senior leaders fared in their respective strongholds is now likely to determine Congress's future course of action

Meanwhile, the Congress's failure to reach its target tally has come as a blow to deputy CM D.K. Shivakumar, given the party's lacklustre performance in seats dominated by Vokkaliga voters. The community, designated other backward class (OBC) in Karnataka, is among the dominant ones in the state; Shivakumar, a Vokkaliga himself, has been vying with the family of JD(S) patriarch H.D. Deve Gowda for captaincy of the community.

SOUTHERN ROADBLOCK

A caste-based analysis of the results throws clearer light on the voting pattern in Karnataka. Half of the Congress's 14 seats came from northern Karnataka, where it swept all five seats in the backward northeastern region of Kalyana Karnataka, home to Congress chief Mallikarjun Kharge. The party picked up two more seats—in Chikkodi and Davanagere, both located in the Veerashaiva-Lingayat heartland. These victories are being attributed to the respective clout the families of state PWD minister Satish Jarkiholi and veteran Congress legislator Shamanur Shivashankarappa enjoy here. The BJP, which has been wooing the Veerashaiva-Lingayat community, took the remaining seven

seats in the north.

The Congress failed to register much of a presence when it came to southern Karnataka, dominated by Vokkaliga voters, where it won a dismal two of 14 seats. "The Vokkaligas have moved away from the Congress," says political commentator Narendar Pani. Of the six Vokkaliga candidates fielded by the Congress in the Old Mysuru region, only one, Shreyas Patel in Hassan, managed to win. "The performance of the Congress party in the Old Mysuru region has fallen compared to the assembly election, but that has been a trend for a long time," Shivakumar said at a press conference. The Vokkaliga community has traditionally rallied behind JD(S) chief Deve Gowda and his family. However, a year back, the Karnataka deputy CM had succeeded in pushing back the JD(S) to secure a handsome tally from the Old Mysuru region for the Congress. This feat, along with the party's impressive scorecard of 135 seats in the 224-member Karnataka assembly, had placed Shivakumar—also the Karnataka Pradesh Congress Committee chief—as a firm contender for the CM's post alongside Siddaramaiah. That may now be in jeopardy.

All through this past year, there has been an undertone of oneupmanship between the two top leaders, with Shivakumar making no attempts to disguise his chief ministerial aspirations in the current tenure. There have also been periodic nudges from other Congress seniors to be accommodated as deputy CMs alongside Shivakumar. That demand could possibly resurface following the party's dismal show in south Karnataka, says Pani.

Also likely is an appraisal of how other senior leaders, especially ministers, fared in their strongholds, as the Congress does a performance review. Its main worry will be how the BJP-JD(S) attempt to consolidate the Veerashaiva-Lingayats and Vokkaligas seems to be succeeding. The Congress must act before the trend takes root. ■

TOTAL LOK SABHA SEATS 28

	BJP	INC	JD(S)
2024	17 (46.1%)	9 (45.4%)	2 (5.6%)
2019	25 (51.4%)	1 (31.9%)	1 (9.7%)

■ An Independent candidate allied to NDA won one seat in 2019

Vote share in (%)

STALIN SECURES THE SOUTHERN CITADEL

The INDIA bloc led by the DMK in the state refuses to let the BJP in through the door, or cede even an inch to the AIADMK. With two years to go for the assembly election, more Centre-state friction looms on the horizon along with potential political realignments

By Amarnath K. Menon

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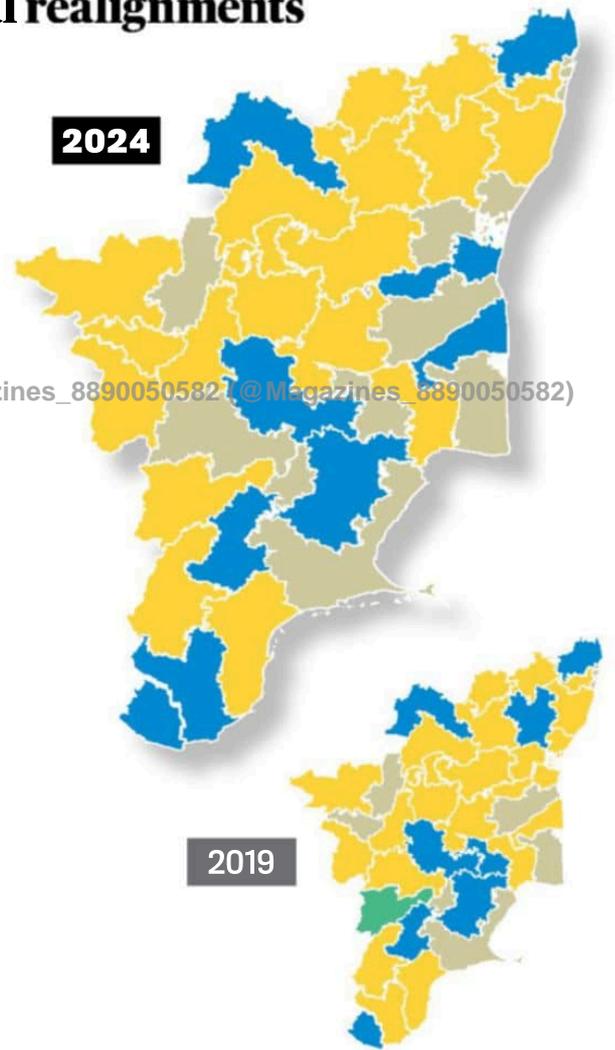
Chief Minister M.K. Stalin's rallying cry of 'Naarpathum Namathe' (All Forty are Ours) resounded loudly, enabling his Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam-led Secular Progressive Alliance (SPA) to sweep all 39 Lok Sabha constituencies in Tamil Nadu, along with the lone Puducherry seat. For the All India Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), hoping to reverse its fortunes after the 2019 setback—when it had won just one seat, down from 37 in 2014—this complete rout proved to be yet another disappointment.

In the wake of the Bharatiya Janata Party's push into the southern citadel, the contest was also seen as a clash between Hindutva and the Dravidian ideology. Denying the saffron party a toehold, the DMK chief came up trumps in that battle too. "It's a massive, historic victory for our DMK-led alliance," Stalin

declared after the win. "The BJP's plan to rewrite the Constitution and its hate campaign failed to cut ice with people."

Having stitched together a winning coalition with the Congress, the Left and other like-minded parties even while in the Opposition, the DMK persisted with it. Stalin's welfare initiatives, particularly those empowering women voters—otherwise a core AIADMK voter base since its founder M.G. Ramachandran's era—proved catalytic. Free bus travel for women, monthly Rs 1,000 allowance for women heads of households and free school meals resonated deeply with the working class. But some analysts do attribute the SPA's spectacular win to "Modi phobia" rather than any pro-incumbency for the DMK regime.

As the DMK surged ahead, the AIADMK- and BJP-led fronts vied for runner-up position. While the AIADMK emerged second in 24 seats, with allies coming second in three more, the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) finished second in just 12 constituencies. The BJP state chief K. Annamalai's high-decibel campaign



TOTAL LOK SABHA SEATS 39

	DMK	CONG.	AIADMK	BJP
2024	22 (26.9%)	9 (10.7%)	0 (20.4%)	0 (11.2%)
2019	24 (33.5%)	8 (12.6%)	1 (19.4%)	0 (3.7%)

■ DMK-Congress allies

Vote share in (%)

in Coimbatore fizzled out with his massive defeat to the DMK's Ganapathy P. Rajkumar by over 118,000 votes. Former AIADMK chief minister O. Panneerselvam's candidacy as an NDA-backed Independent in Ramanathapuram also came a cropper.

"A coherent Dravidian identity narrative, state autonomy plank and the grassroots organisational prowess helped the DMK secure its fortress," says political analyst Ramu Manivannan. Making the DMK's

triumph even more remarkable is the fact that for the first time since 1967 a ruling party-led alliance has achieved a clean sweep in the state, the previous such feats a preserve of the Opposition benches. DMK insiders attribute it to sustained alliance cohesion since 2019 and meticulous constituency-level efforts. Its ally Congress reaped rich dividends, with all nine candidates, including former bureaucrat Sasikanth Senthil (Thiruvallur), getting a ticket to the Lok Sabha.

THE AGENDA AHEAD

With the legislative assembly election just two years away, the BJP's hopes of forging its own alliance, without having to piggyback on Dravidian majors, have receded with this Lok Sabha election. One silver lining could be its vote share nearly tripling and reaching double digits from 2019's 3.7 per cent to 11.2 per cent. That, though, is more due to the BJP contesting 23 seats, up from five in the previous election. The AIADMK, too, seems ill-prepared for the 2026 assembly hustings. "The BJP's conscious strategy has enfeebled the AIADMK. Internal criticism is inevitable, but with the defeat of breakaway leaders T.T.V. Dhinakaran and O. Panneerselvam (OPS), Edappadi K. Palaniswami (EPS, the Opposition leader) remains a force to reckon with," Manivannan says.

The prospect of the BJP reworking its strategy and extending a hand to the AIADMK remains. "Teaming up didn't pay dividends in the past, but the temptation to jointly stir up any anti-incumbency sentiment against the DMK regime may persist," says Chennai-based political commentator N. Sathia Moorthy. To expand in Tamil Nadu, the BJP will have to considerably temper its Hindutva pitch, counter perceptions of being anti-South and, most importantly, says Moorthy, authenticate its embrace of Tamil culture beyond tokenisms like "brandishing the Sengol".

That said, the DMK too has to brace for more battles with the Centre as it will now have to deal with a more aggressive governor in R.N. Ravi, who has stalled legislations and stirred controversies over the customary addresses to the legislative assembly. This gubernatorial friction aside, financial devolution, delimitation and inter-state river disputes loom as other flashpoints. ■



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**THE DECISIVE
HAND** Tamil Nadu
chief minister M.K.
Stalin addressing
a gathering, Apr. 18

SAFFRON TSUNAMI



2019

The Congress has yet to crack the puzzle that is MP as defections in its ranks and the BJP's Modi narrative consistently deny the party space in the state

By **Rahul Noronha**

IN

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the Lok Sabha election held in 1984, shortly after the assassination of party leader and then prime minister Indira Gandhi in October, the Congress won all 40 seats in united Madhya Pradesh. Four decades on, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) seems to have returned the favour this summer, winning all of the state's 29 seats, the number it was left after Chhattisgarh was carved out of it in 2000. The Congress didn't manage to win any of the 27 seats it contested (Khajuraho was given to ally Samajwadi Party but the candidate's nomination was rejected, while the Congress's Indore candidate withdrew his nomination and defected to the BJP).

MP—often called the laboratory of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the “ideological fountainhead” of the BJP—has seen a gradual but consistent rise in the dominance of the saffron party, beginning from the 1989 Lok Sabha election. In 2014, when Narendra Modi first took oath as prime minister, the BJP had won



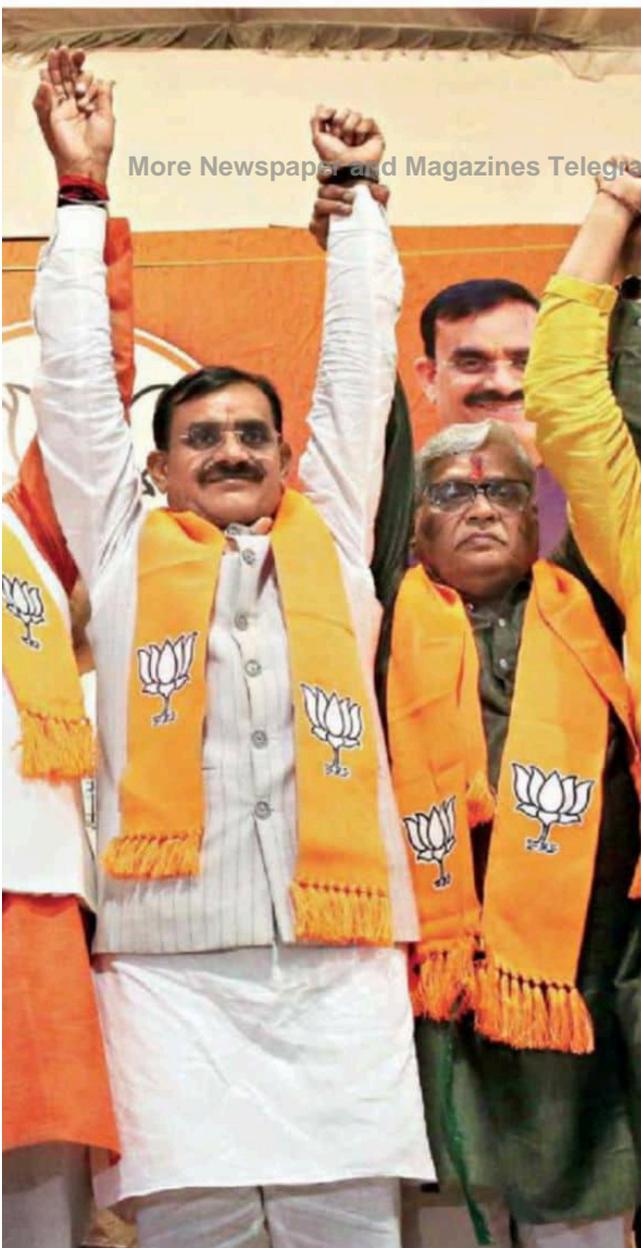
A REJOICING BJP

Former MP CM Shivraj Singh Chouhan, CM Mohan Yadav, BJP state president V.D. Sharma celebrate the party's victory in Bhopal

TOTAL LOK SABHA SEATS 29

	BJP	INC
2024	29 (59.3%)	0 (32.4%)
2019	28 (58%)	1 (34.5%)
2014	27 (54%)	2 (34.9%)

Vote share in (%)



ANI

27 seats—the two seats of Guna and Chhindwara, then represented by Jyotiraditya Scindia and Kamal Nath, respectively, the only ones to hold out against the BJP onslaught. By the next election, Guna too succumbed as Scindia, who contested from here as a Congress candidate, lost, and a year later, joined the BJP. Chhindwara remained the last Congress soldier on that battlefield, electing Congress candidate and Kamal Nath’s son, Nakul, to Parliament. This year, Scindia retained Guna, though as a BJP candidate, but Chhindwara stood felled, contributing to the perfect score of the BJP.

The BJP, which had won the state election only a few months earlier, went into the Lok Sabha election with the strategy to dominate its rival psychologically. Part of this strategy was to engineer mass defections in the Congress. The party also specifically targeted Chhindwara, according to party insiders, ensuring mass defections of corporator- and booth-level Congress leaders here, to alter voting patterns. “The victory in Chhindwara is an outcome of the booth-level strategy that was put in place before the assembly election. Also, the people in Chhindwara were yearning for a change,” says V.D. Sharma, state BJP president. The Congress, in comparison, “did not contest the election as a party”, observes political analyst Girija Shankar. “After polling in Chhind-

wara was over on April 19, Kamal Nath did not really pitch in for party candidates by campaigning for them. Some support by senior leaders and party could have helped in seats where the party was in the contest,” he adds.

THE CONGRESS DECLINE

No one would have predicted this rout in the lead up to the election, though. Political observers, in fact, believed the Congress to be a serious contender in more than half a dozen seats in the state—Bhind, Morena, Satna, Gwalior, Rajgarh, Chhindwara, Mandla and Ratlam. In these seats, the party was banking either on the draw of senior party leaders, local candidates or traditional vote banks like tribals, to pull through. However, while the Congress did manage to bring down the margin of votes by which it lost in Bhind, Morena, Gwalior, Rajgarh and Satna, it failed to win even a single seat in the state.

The Congress’s disappointing performance in MP may reflect poorly on state Pradesh Congress Committee (PCC) president Jitu Patwari, who was appointed to the post in December last year. What could act as a positive is that the poor results could relegate veteran leaders like Kamal Nath, Digvijaya Singh and Kantilal Bhuria to less demanding positions, leaving the field open to fresh faces and strategies and, hopefully, better results. Patwari, meanwhile, has his task cut out. He has four years to build the party’s base if the Congress hopes to challenge to the well-entrenched BJP in the 2028 assembly polls. Talking to INDIA TODAY, the PCC president said, “The results in Madhya Pradesh are naturally disappointing for the Congress and they call for a complete overhaul of the old working style. In the days to come, you will see a radical change in the way the Congress party functions in the state.” MP could well do with a wind of change to dispel any musty odour that may set in. ■

The Congress now has four years to build a base in MP if it hopes to challenge the well-entrenched BJP in the next assembly election



REPEAT SWEEP
Gujarat CM Bhupendra Patel (centre) with other BJP leaders in Gandhinagar, June 4

PTI

A BLIP CALLED BANASKANTHA

The north Gujarat constituency played spoiler in the BJP's hat-trick of a perfect score. The party must also guard against voter fatigue

By Jumana Shah

The BJP maintained its dominance in Gujarat on expected lines, albeit with a loss in one seat—Banaskantha—in north Gujarat. Not the ideal outcome for a party that strives for perfection in the prime minister and home minister's home state, a script that had been unwavering in the past two elections, when the BJP won all 26 seats. Assured of that unassailability, the ruling party had set an even more ambitious target—to win each seat by 500,000 votes. Three seats answered to that call—Amit Shah in Gandhinagar, C.R. Paatil in Navsari and Vadodara, where a new candidate, Hemang Joshi, was contesting. Notably, Rajkot candidate Parshottam Rupala won by a margin of 484,260 votes, despite his comment about



TOTAL LOKSABHA SEATS 26

	BJP	CONG	AAP
2024	25 (61.9%)	1 (31.2%)	0 (2.7%)
2019	26 (62.2%)	0 (32.1%)	- (-%)

Vote share in ()

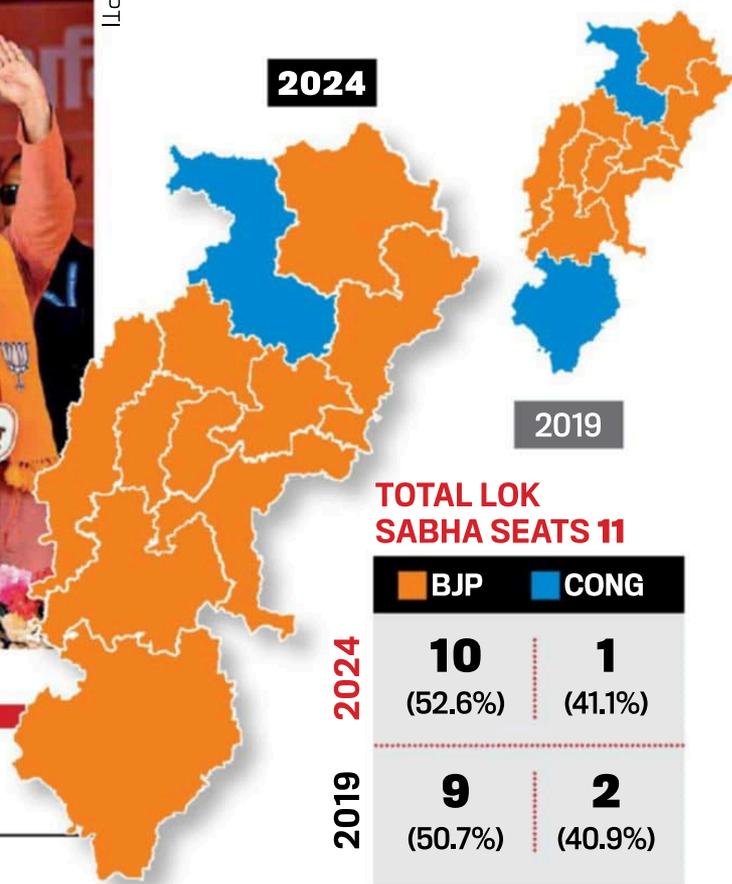
Rajput maharajas kicking off a right royal storm, with the Kshatriya community demanding his withdrawal and launching an anti-BJP campaign that reverberated beyond the state. Post the result, BJP spokesperson Yamal Vyas said Kshatriyas did not vote against the BJP. A native of Amreli, Rupala had been fielded from Rajkot. Similarly, Union minister Mansukh Mandaviya, from Bhavnagar, was asked to contest from Porbandar, a seat he won by 383,360 votes. While the BJP and the Congress saw minor reductions in their respective vote shares, new entrant Aam Aadmi Party (AAP)—which contested in two seats as part of the INDIA bloc—got a 2.7 per cent vote share.

The BJP's continued success owes to PM Narendra Modi's enduring popularity, as well as its dominance over all local governance bodies, which allows them access to households. However, Gujarat's voting pattern have begun to show some dissonance, indicating that shows that concerns like inflation, sidelining of senior BJP leaders and corruption need to be addressed. BJP sources confide that disgruntlement within the party, induction and rewarding of Congress turncoats at the cost of loyal cadres and voter fatigue have exposed some chinks in the BJP's Gujarat armour. It showed up this time in Banaskantha, where the Congress candidate, 48-year-old Geniben Thakor, a two-time MLA from Vav, won with a slim margin of 30,406 votes. Thakor's victory is credited to her reputation as a hard-working leader; she also crowdfunded her campaign. Congress spokesperson Manish Doshi said, "Banas ni ben' will be 'Gujarat ni ben' in Parliament...real issues of people will be raised in Delhi." The win in Banaskantha has infused new energy in a party that did not open its account at all in 2014 and 2019. The Congress was expected to win two more seats—Patan and Anand—while a tough fight was anticipated in Bharuch. The BJP won all three with slim margins. The AAP was routed by 85,696 votes despite its Bharuch candidate and MLA Chaitar Vasava's popularity among tribal youth. In the end, the BJP fell one short of a clean sweep, but not before the Gujarat voter gently reminded it that their loyalty cannot be taken for granted. ■



STEADY SHOW
Amit Shah with CM Vishnu Deo Sai in Khairagarh in April

PTI



TOTAL LOK SABHA SEATS 11

	BJP	CONG
2024	10 (52.6%)	1 (41.1%)
2019	9 (50.7%)	2 (40.9%)

Vote share in ()

| **CHHATTISGARH** |

BJP RULES THE ROOST

The saffron perch in the state seems secure for now, but not for ever should it drop its guard

By **Rahul Noronha**

To

someone not from the state, the results of the past three Lok Sabha elections in Chhattisgarh would suggest

a political placidity. The BJP won 10 of the 11 Lok Sabha seats in the state in 2014, lost one to the Congress in 2019 to reach a tally of nine (against the Congress's two), and reclaimed it again this year for a score of 10, to the Congress's one. The difference in vote share between the two principal challengers has also remained more or less the same in the past decade, around 10 per cent. For political observers on the ground though, the just-concluded election presents a nuanced design.

Chhattisgarh was one of the three states where the BJP won assembly elections held in November last year. Despite that, the Congress went to the Lok Sabha election on a positive note. The reason? The party had in the 2018

assembly polls won 68 of the state's 90 assembly seats, unseating the BJP in Chhattisgarh after one and a half decades. However, in the Lok Sabha polls that followed in 2019, the BJP won nine of the 11 LS seats. This year, too, the state seemed set for a close contest, and especially in seats like Bastar, Kanker, Rajnandgaon, Janjgir-Champa and Korba, political observers believed the Congress to be a strong contender. So what helped the BJP check the Congress's charge? "The BJP gained in tribal areas [like Bastar, Raigarh and Kanker] after it appointed Vishnu Deo Sai as the state's first tribal CM," says political analyst Sudeep Shrivastava.

While Prime Minister Narendra Modi's popularity continued to work in favour of the BJP, the Sai-led state government also delivered on promises made ahead of the assembly polls, such as financial assistance to eligible women under the Mahtari Vandan Yojana and procuring paddy at Rs 3,100 per quintal from farmers. A third factor

that boosted the BJP's chances was the 'outsider' tag that many of the Congress candidates were fighting. Former CM Bhupesh Baghel is not from Rajnandgaon, the seat from where he was fielded. Nor were former state home minister Tamradhwaj Sahu from the Mahasamund constituency, former minister Shiv Kumar Dahariya, a Janjgir-Champa local, or MLA Devendra Yadav a native of the Bilaspur seat from where he contested. All of them lost to local BJP candidates.

Interestingly, that very factor worked for the Congress in the lone seat that it won in the state, Korba. Despite perceived anti-incumbency against sitting Congress MP Jyotsna Mahant, she managed to retain the seat. "Charandas Mahant [leader of opposition in Chhattisgarh and Jyotsna's husband] turned the campaign into an insider vs outsider one [BJP candidate Saroj Pandey was not only not from Korba, but her family does not have roots in Chhattisgarh]," says a BJP leader.

The loss of a single seat to its rival may seem to be a matter of little concern to the BJP, but political analysts feel the party should guard against complacency in Chhattisgarh. The Congress does have 35 MLAs in the 90-member state assembly, and an upcoming byelection in Raipur South, to fill the seat vacated by Brijmohan Agarwal following his election as Raipur MP, would be a test of strength for the Sai government. ■

FORWARD MARCH

CM Himanta Biswa Sarma campaigning in Sivasagar, Apr. 17



ANI

MANDATE 2024

| NORTHEAST |

THE CONGRESS RISES, AGAIN

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The BJP's promises of development for the region notwithstanding, the Lok Sabha election results reveal the region's new-found favour for the Congress

By Kaushik Deka

In

the past 10 years, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has often talked about developing India's northeast—a marginalised region that has lagged in terms of infrastructure

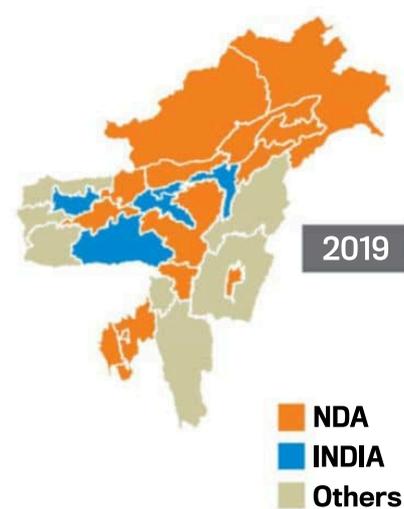
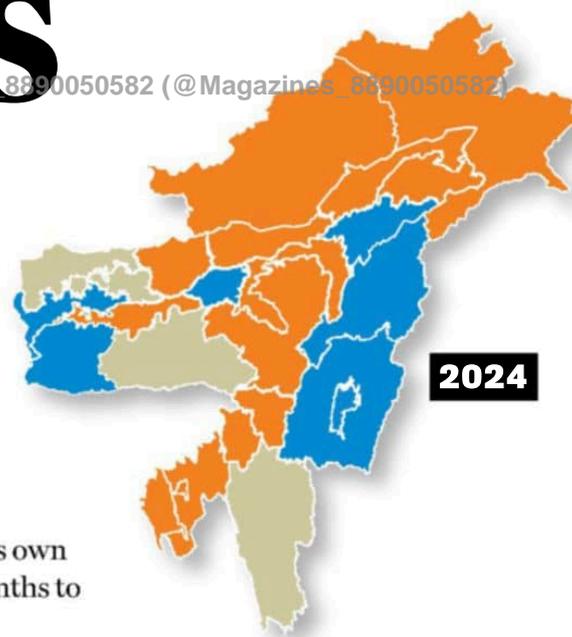
and socio-economic progress. Blaming it on the political apathy of the previous governments at the Centre, the BJP stalwart never misses an opportunity to point out that he, as PM, has paid more visits to the northeast than the combined trips of all his predecessors.

Yet, when Manipur remained engulfed in ethnic violence for more than a year, claiming the lives of more than 200 people and displacing 60,000, the PM did not pay a single

visit to the strife-torn state, ruled by his own party. He even took more than two months to break his silence on the sensitive issue.

In contrast, the Opposition Congress's top leader Rahul Gandhi visited the violence-hit regions and spent time with the victims. Srinivas B.V., chief of the party's youth wing, made regular trips to the state and distributed relief material. Earlier this year, the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra, led by Rahul, was kicked off from Manipur. That investment of time and effort now seems to have yielded dividend for the Congress this Lok Sabha election.

The Congress swept both seats—Inner Manipur, dominated by Meiteis, a majority of whom are Hindus, and Outer Manipur, inhabited by Nagas and Kukis who are mostly



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हन्दी मैगजीन

समय पत्रिका साधनापथग हलकषमी उदयइंडिया नरिंगधाम मॉडर्न खेतीइंडिया टुडेदेवपुत्र
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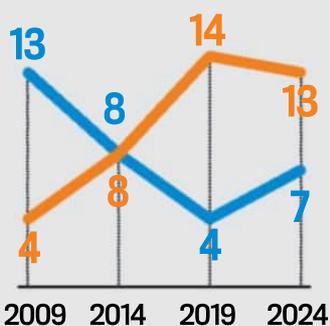
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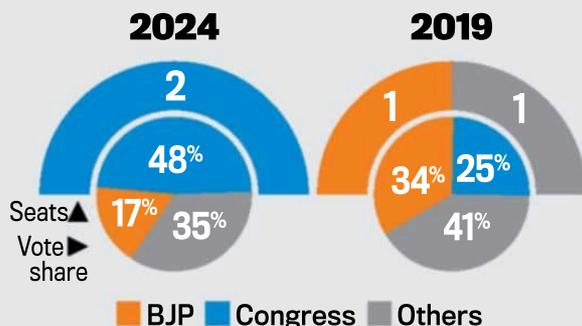
NETTING THE NORTHEAST

How the fortunes of the BJP and Congress have swung in the region's 25 LS seats



MANIPUR BITES BJP

The strife-torn state's three communities seem to have consolidated around the Congress, which has swept both Inner Manipur, dominated by Meiteis, and Outer Manipur, inhabited by Nagas and Kukis



Titabor, had gone to the BJP in the past two Lok Sabha polls.

Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma made it a prestige battle, unleashing almost all his cabinet colleagues and using the BJP's massive electoral resources in the campaign. Moreover, several close confidants of Gaurav in the constituency switched sides to the BJP just before the polls. Crippled by a financial crunch and a lack of manpower, he ran a lonely campaign, barring a solitary roadshow with Priyanka Gandhi. This victory—a third consecutive term—against all odds has positioned the 41-year-old as the prime challenger to CM Sarma. Thanks to his fiery speeches in Parliament, a rarity among parliamentarians from Assam, his popularity across demographics and geographies in the state has grown exponentially. The 54 per cent vote share and massive social media followings corroborate this trend.

The other giant-killer was Congress MLA Rakubul Hussain, who took on AIUDF (All India United Democratic Front) chief and three-time MP Badrudin Ajmal in Dhubri. With AIUDF cornering a substantial number of Muslim votes, the Congress had been eating humble pie the past few elections, at times forcing it to shake hands with Ajmal's party. However, with the rapid rise of the BJP and the AIUDF's failure to effectively counter CM Sarma's anti-Muslim narrative, a majority of the Muslim voters consolidated behind the Congress. Rakibul leveraged this sentiment and decimated Ajmal with a margin of more than 1 million votes, cornering 60 per cent of the vote share.

These two Congress victories have somewhat marred the NDA's superlative performance in Assam's 14 Lok Sabha seats—with the BJP winning nine and the allies two seats—adding two more to its 2019 tally. Besides Assam, the BJP has retained its Arunachal Pradesh and Tripura, winning all four seats, or two each, in the two states. That keeps its overall tally in the northeast almost unchanged. ■

Christians. What makes the win even more significant is the massive surge in the Congress's vote share—from 25 per cent in 2019 to 48 per cent now. The drop in the BJP's vote share—from 34 per cent in 2019 to 17 per cent—shows up in its humiliating defeat.

Manipur is not an outlier. The Congress has also earned a surprising victory in neighbouring Nagaland, the first time in two decades, defeating the ruling National Democratic Progressive Party (NDPP), a partner in the National Democratic Alliance. In Meghalaya too, the Grand Old Party won the Tura seat, the first time since 1998 when P.A. Sangma, father of Chief Minister Conrad Sangma, won as a Congress candidate. Its candidate Saleng Sangma defeated the National People's Party's (NPP) Agatha Sangma, Conrad's sister and head of the NPP. However, the Congress lost traditional bastion Shillong to the newly-formed Voice of the People Party. Barring this reversal, the GOP nearly doubled its tally in the northeast from four in 2019 to seven now.

In fact, the two most defining victories for the Congress came from Assam where it retained its 2019 tally of three. The delimitation exercise had changed the demographic configuration

Big Winners



Gaurav Gogoi
Congress
Jorhat, Assam

Won with a margin of more than 100,000 votes and 54 per cent vote share



Rakibul Hussain
Congress
Dhubri, Assam

Defeated 3-time MP Ajmal with a margin of 1 million votes, the highest in India

of Barpeta—a seat where Muslim votes offered an edge to either the Congress or the AIUDF—and eliminated the Kalia-lor Lok Sabha seat from where Gaurav Gogoi, two-time MP and son of the late CM Tarun Gogoi, used to contest. Gaurav initially wanted to contest from Nagaon, a safe seat for the Congress due to Muslim dominance. But just days before the polls, Sonia Gandhi asked him to fight from Jorhat. The seat, which includes the Gogoi family's hometown



CB PRADEEP KUMAR

TOTAL LOK SABHA SEATS 20

	UDF*	LDF	NDA
2024	18 (43.8%)	1 (33.4%)	1 (19.4%)
2019	19 (47.5%)	1 (36.3%)	0 (14.9%)

Vote share in (%)

Questions will be asked in the Congress on how they lost Thrissur in the midst of a wave in favour of the party-led United Democratic Front (the alliance won 18 out of the 20 Lok Sabha seats in the state). Gopi has been looking to “take Thrissur” since 2016, when he was first fielded in the assembly election here. He had tested his luck again in the 2019 Lok Sabha and the 2021 assembly polls, but with the same result. This time, too, he had the full backing of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his team (in fact, the PM visited the constituency thrice during the campaign; he even attended the wedding of Gopi’s daughter at the Guruvayoor temple in late January).

Gopi’s win is not the only happy news for the BJP. Industrialist and ex-Union minister Rajeev Chandrasekhar lost in a close race to three-time Thiruvananthapuram MP Shashi Tharoor in the capital, and it’s only the coastal belt votes that came into play at the fag end of counting that saved the latter. The party’s fast growing vote share (up to 16.7 per cent) and the spirited fight in at least two other LS seats should give heart to the cadre.

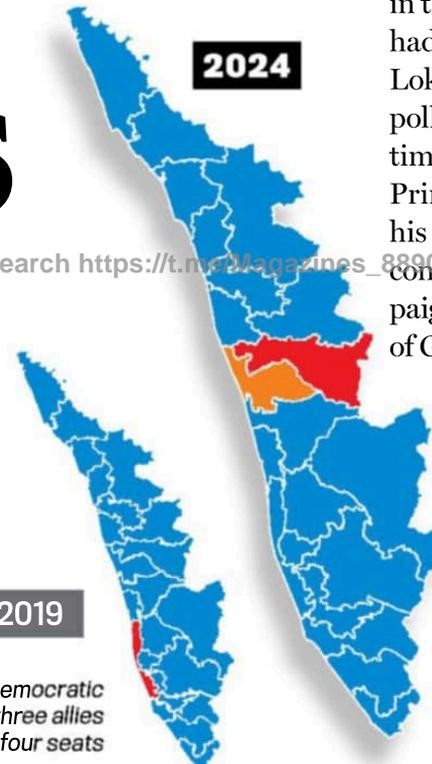
So even as the Congress celebrates another “RaGa wave” in Kerala (Rahul Gandhi won by a massive 364,422 votes in Wayanad), they and the Communists will be worried. The Left Front’s dismal outing again (just one seat: Alathur) will be cause for some heartburn for the Pinarayi Vijayan government in the state. ■

| KERALA |

THE LOTUS BLOOMS

Despite another RaGa wave, the Kerala story takes a new turn as the BJP finally plants its flag here

By Jeemon Jacob



*The United Democratic Front includes three allies who won in four seats

The last redoubt has fallen, the saffron charge has finally breached the Kerala fortress. The BJP has opened its Lok Sabha account in Thrissur, and it took an ageing Mollywood superstar to do it. Suresh Gopi, 65, the hero of umpteen action thrillers, hit the political box office jackpot in his fourth attempt here (assembly and Lok Sabha), winning by 74,686 votes against two formidable rivals, V.S. Sunilkumar of the Communist Party of India (CPI) and ex-Congress MP K. Muraleedharan, son of the late chief minister, K. Karunakaran.

It was the split in party votes that did in the Congress in their central Kerala bastion. Gopi, talking to INDIA TODAY, sounded overwhelmed, but not so much that he forgot to thank the twin poles that took him to victory. “I thank Lord Krishna...and the Mother of Lourdes for my victory. Nothing more to say,” he said. The consensus is that the upper caste Hindu vote and a section of the Christian community helped Gopi breast the tape (cathedral of Our Lady of Lourdes is the big Syro-Malabar church in Thrissur).

CAUGHT IN A QUAGMIRE

Faced by a resurgent Congress and radicals, the AAP finds itself in a precarious place

By Anilesh S. Mahajan

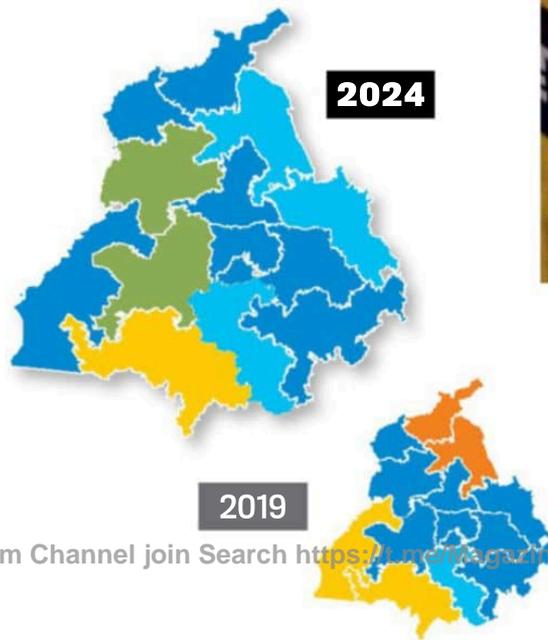
For the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), embattled as it is with its convenor Arvind Kejriwal back in jail, the news from Punjab would have been of little solace.

In a virtual mid-term referendum on the Bhagwant Mann regime's performance, the party managed to win just three of the 13 Lok Sabha seats in the border state, its vote share plummeting to 26.3 per cent from the 42 per cent it had cornered in the assembly election just over two years ago.

The AAP, in a seat-sharing agreement with the Congress elsewhere, decided to go solo in Punjab. And it was Mann who took it upon himself to lead the party's campaign, holding 122 public rallies and roadshows over 25 days besides travelling to Delhi and other states to canvass for the AAP candidates. Now, it seems, his campaign, built around the slogan 'Sansad vich vi Bhagwant Mann (Mann in Parliament too)', failed to stir the voters to the extent he had expected.

Mann had conquered the state with 92 seats in the 117-member assembly in 2022. It goes to his credit that the AAP was also able to increase its Lok Sabha tally to three from the one seat it secured in 2019. But his party candidates led in only 27 assembly segments. In comparison, the Congress dominated in 40 segments, translating into its win in seven Lok Sabha seats.

Meanwhile, the traditional custodians of Panthic voters, the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), slipped further down



TOTAL LOK SABHA SEATS 13

	CONG	AAP	SAD	BJP
2024	7 (26.3%)	3 (26%)	1 (13.4%)	0 (18.6%)
2019	8 (40.1%)	1 (7.4%)	2 (27.4%)	2 (9.6%)

■ Independents Vote share in (%)

to a lone seat—Harsimrat Badal from the family bastion Bathinda—and a meagre 13.4 per cent vote share, and the radicals garnered significant support. Fighting as Independents, jailed Khalistan propagandist Amritpal Singh (Khadoor Sahib) and Sarabjit Singh Khalsa (Faridkot), the son of former prime minister Indira Gandhi's assassin Beant Singh, won by massive margins, reigniting concerns over the resurgence of the separatist movement and the radicalisation of Sikh youth.



BHAGWANT MANN
Chief Minister, Punjab

PTI

So, it comes as no surprise that Punjabi Hindus seem to have gravitated towards the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in urban centres like Patiala, Ludhiana, Jalandhar and Amritsar. Despite drawing a blank, the saffron party led in 24 assembly segments and secured an impressive vote share of 18.6 per cent, up from 6.6 per cent in the 2022 assembly election. Back then, AAP had dominated all these segments.

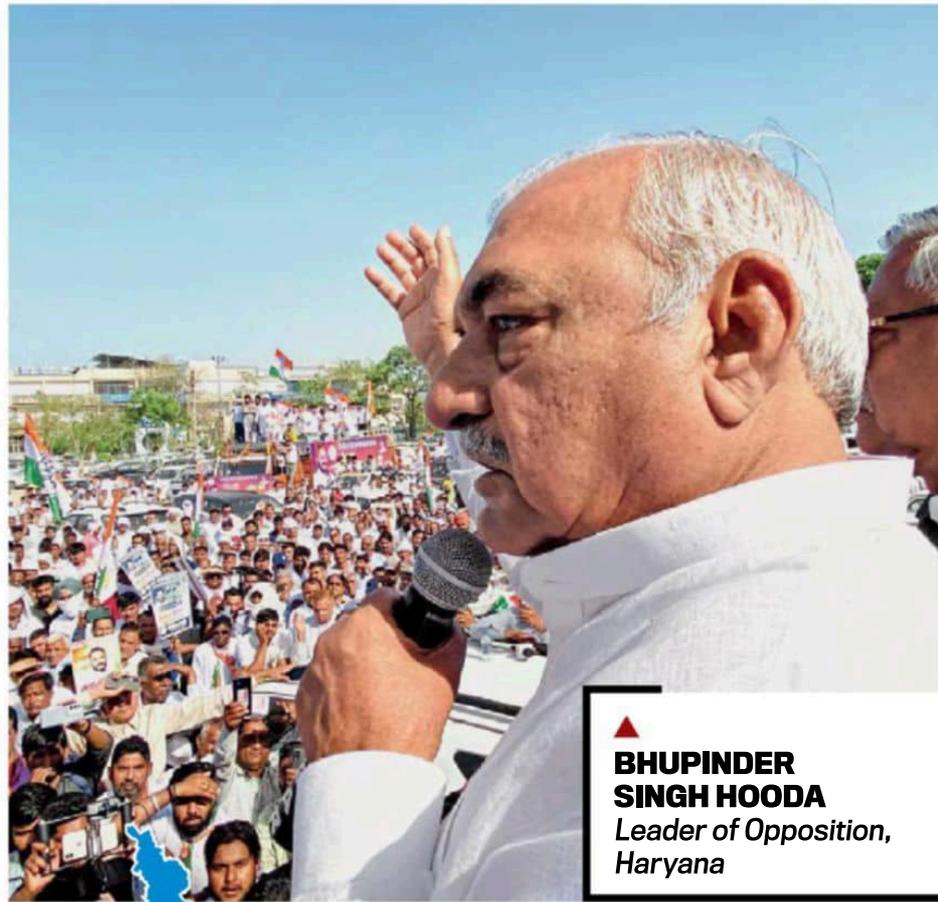
Mann's grand strategy of fielding five cabinet ministers failed to yield the desired results. Among them, only Gurmeet Singh Meet Hayer emerged victorious, regaining Mann's old parliamentary constituency Sangrur. Meanwhile, Opposition leader Partap Singh Bajwa, who was against an alliance with the AAP and spearheaded the Congress campaign, has effectively positioned himself as a formidable challenger to Mann.

With factionalism brewing within the party's state unit, Mann faces the daunting task of regaining control of the party and trust of the electorate, especially with its legislators being accused of high-handedness and the CM failing to revitalise the state's finances. The next electoral battle in Punjab will be the bypolls in five assembly seats—a litmus test for both Mann's and the AAP's resilience. ■

HOODA IS BACK IN THE GAME

Reducing the BJP's perfect 10 tally of 2019 to a 5-5 stalemate, the Congress sets the stage for an intense finale in the assembly polls later this year

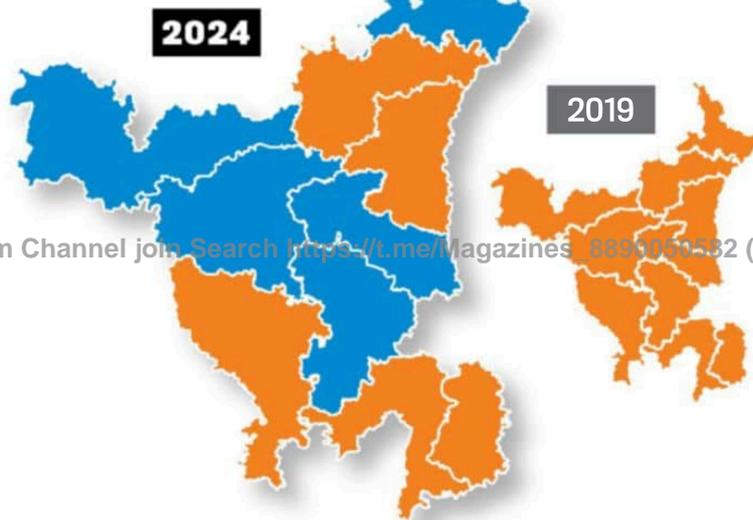
By Anilesh S. Mahajan



BHUPINDER SINGH HOODA
Leader of Opposition, Haryana

IN a wake-up call for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), coming just months ahead of the assembly election in Haryana, its Lok Sabha tally in the state has dropped from a perfect 10 to just five. And, what's more, the saffron party's vote share has plummeted to 46.1 per cent from the 58 per cent it cornered in 2019, also falling short of the combined numbers of the Congress and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP)—47.6 per cent—who took on the saffron juggernaut as part of the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA).

Much of the credit for the Congress's resurgence and the ruling BJP's plight goes to former chief minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda, who has also consolidated his position as a pre-eminent Jat leader in the state. Through deft political manoeuvring, Hooda not only discredited intra-community rivals like the Chautalas—all candidates fielded by the Abhay Chautala-led Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) and his nephew Dushyant-led Jannayak Janta Party (JJP) ended up losing their deposits—but also engineered the return of his cousin and former Union minister Birendra Singh from the BJP



TOTAL LOK SABHA SEATS 10

	BJP	CONG
2024	5 (46.1%)	5 (43.7%)
2019	10 (58%)	0 (28.4%)

Vote share in (%)

besides attracting Independent Jat legislators. Also, it was he who insisted on joining hands with the AAP to prevent any split in votes. As an icing on the cake, his son Deepender wrested the family bastion Rohtak from the BJP with a huge 345,000-plus margin.

Hooda's strategy revolved around exploiting Jat disillusionment with the BJP—stemming from the perceived sidelining of their interests, even as the community comprises 22 per cent of the state's electorate. It all started with the BJP's decision to appoint a non-Jat chief minister, Manohar Lal Khattar, in 2014, and was exacerbated by the 2016 quota agitation besides the farmers' and wrestlers' protests. The Congress's success in sweeping all four seats in Jat-dominated areas—Hisar,

Rohtak, Sirsa and Sonapat—underscores Hooda's firm grip on the community's vote. Bolstering this advantage was the party's ability to chip away at the BJP's support among the Dalits and Sikhs.

But the BJP is not a lost cause either. The party has cultivated a robust voter base among non-Jat Other Backward Classes (OBCs), comprising 21 per cent of the electorate, as well as Rajputs, Baniyas, Punjabis and other forward castes, which enabled it to retain five seats. As the state gears up for the assembly polls scheduled for October, the BJP will have to further strengthen its rainbow coalition of castes to counter Hooda's dominance. Meanwhile, the Congress is riding high on the momentum of its Lok Sabha performance and will be itching to dislodge the Nayab Singh Saini-led BJP regime when the time comes. ■



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THE LUXE FACTOR

IN THE LAST COUPLE OF YEARS, THE ULTRA-LUXURY CAR MARKET IN INDIA HAS SEEN RAPID GROWTH



YOGENDRA
PRATAP

The Indian passenger car market continues to show strong growth and, despite the blip caused by Covid-19, disruptions in the global supply chains and the semiconductor shortages, is back on a steady growth curve. The surge may not be as strong as the previous couple of years which saw the market scrambling to keep up with pent-up demand but it has been consistent. This is despite the added costs from emission norms and safety requirements. At over eight per cent growth in 2023, auto sector growth was among the highest in what is now the third biggest market in the world.

Perhaps this was only to be expected as car penetration in our country is amongst the lowest in the world (India is ranked closer to 200th than to 100th in the world on this metric). Which, in effect, means that in close to 200 countries, more people per thousand own cars. The low car penetration as well as fast growth in road development means the potential for rapid growth exists. What has been surprising is that over the last couple of years, the ultra-luxury car market has seen rapid growth. And here we are talking about vehicles with price tags of over Rs 2 crore and averaging out at about Rs 4 crore. This is also the segment where vehicle prices usually more than doubles between the time it leaves the factory and hits the road in India, primarily because of heavy taxation.

Mercedes-Benz keeps reiterating that its TEV (top-end) segment is driving growth. The numbers may not be very high but the revenues definitely are.



Bentley Mulliner Opulence Edition



Lamborghini Urus

Porsche, though not as big a player, sold close to 1,000 cars in India and Lamborghini, with an average sale price closer to Rs 5 crore, sold over a hundred cars.

This, of course means, renewed focus on the segment by the leading players. Lamborghini has been busy doing a series of events in the country, including off-road track experiences, anniversary celebrations and owner meets which have been setting records in terms of attendance. Bentley Motors launched an Opulence Limited Edition range specially crafted for India with colours taken from the Indian flag and mountain ranges as motifs in the interiors, paying homage to the Himalayas. In fact, when the last four cars with the W12 engine in the Bentley range (one each of the Fly-

ing Spur, Bentayga, Continental GT and GTC) went under the hammer, Indian bidders were front-runners for three of the four cars. Two of them finally found homes here.

These trends in the luxury car market echo those in other industries, and with loosened purse strings and an economy growing at a fast pace, it is only a matter of time before India realises its potential as one of the world's biggest markets for luxury cars—as it was back in the pre-Independence era.

In the coming days, we will see an increased focus on the Indian car market by the auto majors. We can also expect attention from a number of fresh players, especially the new-age companies that had not paid much heed to the India market so far. With the \$500 million scheme to attract the likes of Tesla now in play, we may even see a number of companies like Rivian, Lucid, Genesis, Fisker and Polestar make their way to Indian shores. Exciting times ahead for sure! ■

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A HERO'S JOURNEY

Hero MotoCorp's journey into the future has a mix of brand-new ICE offerings, electrification aspirations and a holistic customer-centric approach to new dealerships for its loyal customers



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The year 2024 holds a special place in Hero MotoCorp's illustrious journey. It marks the 40th anniversary of the indigenous two-wheeler brand as well as the centennial year of Hero MotoCorp's Founder & Chairman Emeritus, Dr. Brijmohan Lall Munjal. Furthermore,

the company held the second edition of the Hero World at the company's state-of-the-art research and development hub, the Centre for Innovation and Technology (CIT), located in the pink city of Jaipur, India. The one-of-a-kind event served as a platform to unveil the brand's promising future

roadmap. The latest production-ready vehicles in ICE segment, customer-centric solutions, technological innovations, electrification and sustainability took centre stage and opened the door for a number of exciting announcements.

The first step of this journey was the launch of



TO CATER TO THE DISCERNING HERO BUYER, THE INDIAN TWO-WHEELER MANUFACTURER ALSO DECIDED TO USHER IN A NEW ERA OF PREMIUM CUSTOMER-CENTRIC EXPERIENCE

the Hero Xtreme 125R. As the name suggests, it is meant to compete in the popular 125cc segment in India. Its powerful motor produces 11.4bhp and is capable of doing the 0-60kmph run in just 5.9 seconds. To ensure optimum refinement, Hero has also equipped the Xtreme 125R with Engine Balancer Technology (EBT). It's the first motorcycle in its segment to get single-channel ABS, which means it's not only fast, but safe, too. Efficiency has also been given special attention, as the Xtreme 125R is capable of returning a fuel economy figure of 66kmpl, which is aided by Hero's proprietary i3S idle stop-start system.

To cater to the discerning Hero buyer, the Indian multinational with a presence in nearly 50 countries, also decided to usher in a new era of premium customer-centric experience. In October 2023, Hero MotoCorp inaugurated its first premium dealership 'Hero Premio' in the vibrant city of Calicut, Kerala. The idea behind Hero's Premio dealerships is to provide a fresh automotive experience to all visitors with modern architecture, appealing design, and engaging new-age digital technologies. The Premio dealerships will showcase and sell Vida V1 electric scooters, Harley-Davidson X440 and other premium motorcycles like the Karizma XMR and Mavrick 440. That's not all, there are also over 300 Hero 2.0 showrooms in the country, which serve as upgraded stores to provide a more polished experience for the buyer.

At Hero World 2024, Hero MotoCorp exhibited production-ready vehicles and trailblazing concepts previously unveiled at EICMA 2023 in Milan, Italy. These are two new premium products Hero MotoCorp has planned for the Indian market. One is the Xoom 125R, which will serve as a more premium option in comparison to the standard Xoom scooter. Hero will further push the envelope with a larger capacity maxi-scooter in the form of the Xoom 160.





Engine
1.2-litre petrol
Power 82 bhp
Price ₹6.5-9.7 lakh
(ex-showroom)

MARUTI SUZUKI SWIFT

The fourth-gen version of one of India's most popular hatchbacks has gone on sale with prices starting from Rs 6.5 lakh (ex-showroom). Beneath the evolutionary design that makes it instantly recognisable as a Swift, the big change is the introduction of a new 1.2-litre 3-cylinder petrol engine offered with a 5-speed manual and a 5-speed AMT. Six airbags offered as standard ensure improved safety.

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HOT NEW RIDES

**THE NEW WHEELS THAT HAVE
JUST HIT THE ROADS IN INDIA**

MERCEDES-AMG S63

The Mercedes-AMG S63 E Performance is based on the S-Class platform. Playing a starring role is the 4.0-litre turbo-charged V8 petrol hybrid powertrain with a combined output of 802

bhp and 1,430 Nm! Mated to a 9-speed multi-clutch transmission and 4MATIC+ all-wheel drive, the AMG S63 goes from 0 to 100 kmph in just 3.3 seconds and will hit a limited top speed of

250 kmph. It's a plug-in hybrid with a 13.1 kWh battery pack and a claimed electric-only range of 33 km (WLTP). Adaptive damping and rear-axle steering are offered as standard.



MERCEDES-MAYBACH GLS 600

The Mercedes-Maybach GLS gets exterior updates similar to the face-lifted Mercedes-Benz GLS, the SUV on which it is based. There's an updated grille and a new bumper up front with the latter featuring Maybach-pattern inserts. The tail lamps have been updated to feature the three-pod LED light signature like the regular GLS. What's new inside is the steering wheel and revisions to the centre console. A rear bench with recline settings and extendable leg rests come as standard. Opting for the first-class rear compartment option replaces it with two

individual seats offering full electric adjustability, seat heating/cooling and massage functions, separated by a continuous centre console. Powering the GLS 600 is an updated 4.0-litre turbo-charged V8 petrol engine with a mild hybrid set-up. Mercedes-Benz claims a 0-100 kmph time of 4.2 seconds and a top speed of 250 kmph.

Engine
4.0-litre turbo petrol
Power 557 bhp
Price ₹3.35 crore (ex-showroom)



Engine
4.0-litre turbo petrol hybrid
Power 802 bhp
Price ₹3.3 crore (ex-showroom)



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BMW iX xDrive50

The iX xDrive50 electric SUV is priced at Rs 1.4 crore (ex-showroom). Compared to the iX xDrive40, the xDrive50 gets a larger 111.5 kWh battery pack which powers the dual e-motors, producing 523 bhp and 765 Nm of torque. This translates to a 0 to 100 kmph time of just 4.6 seconds and a WLTP range of 635 km on a single charge. The xDrive50 looks similar to the xDrive40, but gets specs updates like 22-inch alloy wheels and adaptive air suspension.

Engine
Dual electric motor
Power 523 bhp, 765
Nm torque
Price ₹1.4 crore
(ex-showroom)

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Engine
1.2 L petrol/1.5 L
turbo petrol
Power 90/100 bhp
Price ₹7.8-13.1 lakh
(ex-showroom)



TOYOTA TAISOR

Toyota has launched the Urban Cruiser Taisor which is essentially the Maruti Suzuki Fronx (like other cross-badged models of the Toyota/Maruti Suzuki partnership). Toyota has however made changes to the grille, and front bumper as well as the LED DRLs which do give the Taisor a differentiated look. The tail lamps have been tweaked as well, while it rides on new 16-inch alloy wheels.

Inside the cabin, the similarities to the Fronx are more apparent. Powertrain options include the 1.2-litre NA petrol and the 1.0-litre turbo-petrol, both available with manual and automatic transmission options.

Engine
249 cc
Power 24.5 bhp
Price ₹1.51 lakh
(ex-showroom)



PULSAR N250

The Bajaj Pulsar N250 comes with new 37mm upside-down fork finished in a golden colour, a traction control system along and three ABS modes—Road, Rain and Offroad. There's also a new fully-digital LCD screen which now supports Bluetooth connectivity and turn-by-turn navigation through the Bajaj Ride Connect app. The updated Pulsar N250 gets wider tyres and also comes in three new colours with updated graphics.

Engine
Electric motor
Power 5.8 bhp
Price ₹1.1 lakh
(ex-showroom)



ATHER RIZTA

Ather Energy's Rizta has a starting price of Rs 1.1 lakh (ex-showroom). The 'family scooter' comes in two models, Rizta S and Rizta Z. The former comes with a 2.9 kWh battery pack (range: 123 km), while the latter has a 3.7 kWh battery pack (range: 160 km) and a claimed top speed of 80 kmph. There is 56 litres of storage space. The Rizta also gets two riding modes—Zip and SmartEco.

THROTTLE BATTLES

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THE NEW SUMMER RIDES ARE HERE



SUZUKI V STROM 800DE

The Suzuki V Strom 800DE is finally in India, for an introductory price of Rs 10.3 lakh (ex-showroom). Powered by a 776 cc, liquid-cooled, parallel-twin motor, the engine is mated to a 6-speed gearbox with a slip-and-assist clutch and bi-directional quickshifter. It comes with a 20-litre fuel tank and has a seat height of 855 mm, while the weight stands at 232 kg. Comes in three colours—Champion Yellow No. 2, Glass Matte Gray and Glass Sparkle Black.

Engine
776 cc
Power 83 bhp
Price ₹10.3 lakh
(ex-showroom)



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LOCKED *BY RAHUL GHOSH* **AND LOADED**

MAHINDRA HAS GIVEN THE XUV300 COMPACT SUV A PROPER REVAMP AND INTRODUCED IT AS THE XUV 3XO

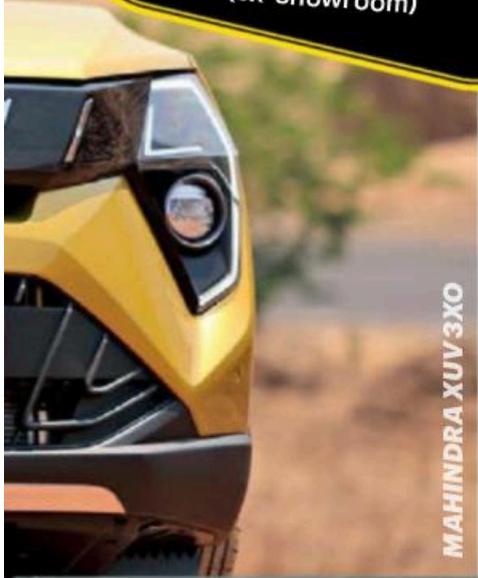
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he Mahindra XUV 3XO gets a properly modern design well suited to the needs of the day. The front end comes with big light panels which incorporate C-type LED DRLs that give it an aggressive look. The blacked-out grille section also looks cool and a closer view reveals small elements on it which add to the character of the SUV. The front end also comes with cameras and sensors all around as it now gets features like Level 2 ADAS and even blind spot cameras. In profile, the silhouette of the erstwhile 300 remains. However, there is a generous dollop of cladding added. Wheels now are 17-inch units on

the top AX7L variant and they sure look good. The rear end gets a connected tail light panel.

The new black and white treatment for the interior makes the large cabin feel even more spacious than before. The dash houses a new 10.2-inch infotainment setup which comes with a Harman Kardon-tuned audio system which sounds great. The doors and other panels of the XUV 3XO have been damped for better acoustics and NVH as well. The centre console though reminds us of the erstwhile XUV300 and it still retains small buttons which take time to get used to. The all-digital instrument panel

Mahindra XUV 3XO AX7 L
Engine: 1.2-litre turbo petrol
Power: 131bhp@5,000rpm
Torque: 230Nm@1,500rpm
Gearbox: 6-speed AT
Wheelbase (mm): 2,600
Price: ₹15.49 lakh
(ex-showroom)



MAHINDRA XUV 3XO



offers a plethora of information and also beams the feed from the blind spot cameras. There are plenty of stowage options as well. The front seats offer good support, making it comfortable around corners. As for the back, the XUV 3XO offers ample space for three. The window sill though sits a bit high up and that feels a little odd. On the upside, the rear armrest features soft touch points which make it comfortable for the passengers. There are AC vents at the back as well as charging

ports. The boot offers 364 litres of cargo space which is very respectable. The unit is deep and flat which is a plus. On the downside, the loading lip is a bit too high which makes loading of bigger luggage cumbersome.

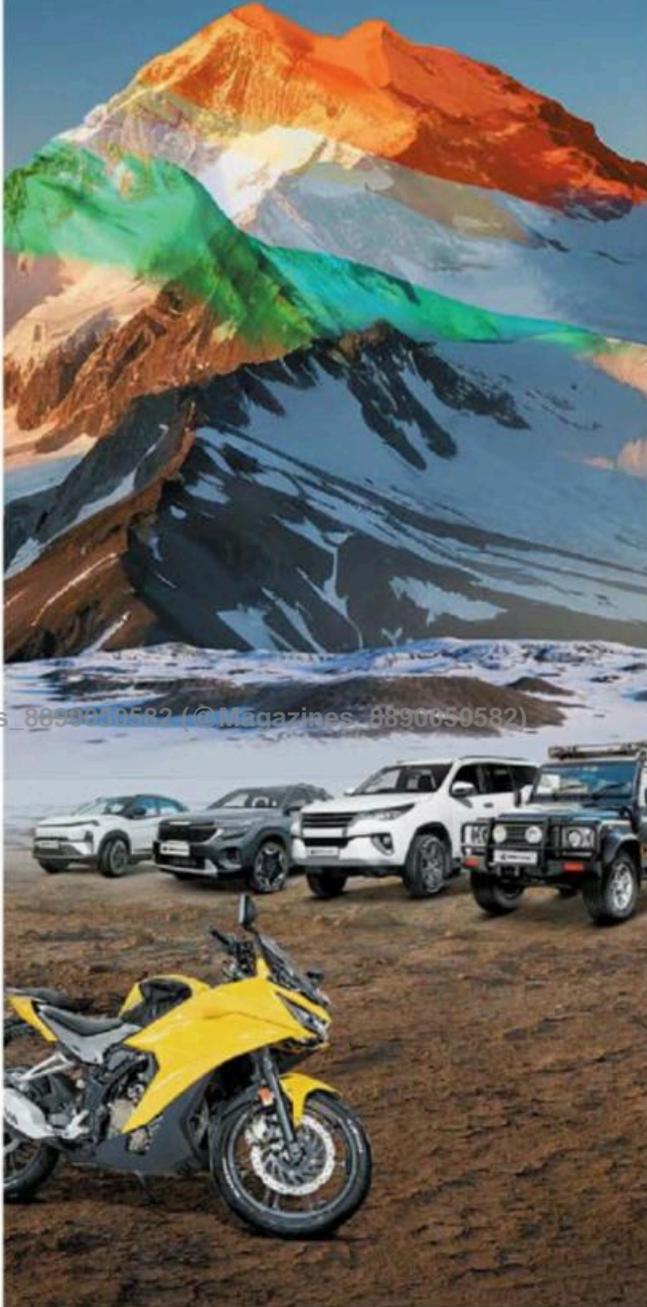
In terms of powertrain and gearbox options, the entry and mid-level variants come with a 1.2-litre, turbo-petrol motor that produces 110 bhp, can be had with either a 6-speed manual or 6-speed torque converter automatic. Then there's the 1.5-litre diesel option, which churns out 115 bhp, and can be configured with either a 6-speed manual or 6-speed AMT. The most powerful option on the 3XO is the 131 bhp, 1.2-litre turbo-petrol motor, which is available with a 6-speed manual and 6-speed torque converter automatic transmission. The 3XO we had for the drive was the range-topping 1.2-litre turbo petrol with an automatic transmission. The engine emits some vibes at start up but once in gear and on the move, these are well controlled. The engine also offers good cruising abilities and at 2,000 rpm or thereabouts, the SUV feels smooth and moves along effortlessly. If more performance is what you desire, shift to 'Zoom' mode and the 3XO transforms fast. The ride quality is on the stiffer side and this helps the big SUV negotiate corners with confidence. Body roll too is well controlled and adding to it is the responsive steering which plays ball.

With a starting price of Rs 7.49 lakh (ex-showroom), the XUV 3XO undercuts its rivals. The top-end trims do seem pricey; the range-topping AX7 L petrol auto that we drove costs Rs 15.49 lakh (ex-showroom) but that does bring with it a long list of features, some that are segment firsts. With the XUV 3XO, Mahindra has produced a solid competitor in the compact SUV segment, vastly better than the XUV300 it replaces. It offers good looks, ample space and a lot of features as well. Performance is quite strong too, especially in the case of the 131 bhp turbo petrol option. Two petrol and a diesel option, all available with both manual and automatic transmission choices, ensure there's something to suit the needs of a wide spectrum of buyers. ■



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GET SWIFTY

THE ALL-NEW MARUTI SUZUKI SWIFT HAS ARRIVED SPORTING A NEW LOOK, ADDED FEATURES AND A BRAND NEW PETROL ENGINE

BY DIPAYAN DUTTA

T

This new fourth generation model is still distinctly identifiable as a Swift. The front end is the most distinctive part with the sinewy flares of the fenders, a clamshell-like design for the bonnet and the headlamps that house LED projectors and boomerang DRLs. It gets 15-inch alloy wheels on the top-spec variant that look pretty cool, as do the smoked LED taillamps.

Inside, Maruti Suzuki has used contrasting textures like the silver inserts on the dashboard and the door panels that add to the premium perception. There's a 9-inch SmartPlay infotainment, the Arkamys audio system, and even wireless charging. The infotainment comes

with wireless Apple CarPlay and Android Auto connectivity. The steering wheel is a flat-bottom unit adding to the sporty appeal of the cabin. The pod concept for the instruments goes against the grain of modern all-digital units. It does get a digital display at the centre, which integrates well with the dials without taking away from the retro theme. The second row gets its own AC vents, but that said the space is a little cramped, especially for taller individuals. The front seats, though, might just be the best in the segment.

There's no rear-centre armrest although the back seat gets a 60:40 split option.

This Swift ditches the older K-series 4-cylinder for a 1.2-litre Z-series three-pot. It makes more torque in the lower reaches of the rev band, making it feel

a whole lot quicker where it matters. It's only while pushing triple-digits that you feel the power start to taper off. There is a 5-speed manual on offer alongside a 5-speed AMT. The AMT happens to be more efficient at a claimed 25.8 kmpl compared to 24.8 kmpl of the manual. It makes a strong case for itself if a large part of your driving is in the urban jungle, but if you want to explore the extent of the Swift's performance, manual is the way to go. The suspension seems set up on the firmer side, but there is an admirable amount of damping for bumps and ruts and it rarely bottoms out. The firm springs paired with the taut chassis make for really good handling around corners.

At Rs 9 lakh (ex-showroom) for the ZXI+ MT and another Rs 50,000 for the AMT, this new Swift isn't the most inexpensive hatch you can buy. But for the price, you get a car that pretty much does it all. It gets all the nice modern amenities and comfort you could want. It's a great handler and is pretty comfortable when the road surface isn't perfect. It looks striking and modern, and even though it is down on power, it is very engaging to drive. ■

Maruti Suzuki Swift
Engine: 1.2-litre petrol
Power: 82bhp@5,700rpm
Torque: 112Nm@4,300rpm
Gearbox: 5-speed MT/AMT
Price: ₹9.00/9.50 lakh
 (ex-showroom)

XTREME WAYS

DOES THE NEWEST MEMBER OF HERO'S XTREME FAMILY HAVE THE CREDENTIALS THE CLAN'S FOLLOWING DEMANDS?

BY ABHINAV JAKHAR



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HERO XTREME 125R

and 10.5 Nm of torque. Right from the get-go, this engine feels smooth, thanks to the silent cam chain and balancer shaft that Hero has added to make for a vibrate-free experience. Although there are some vibrations past the 7,000 rpm mark, the acceleration on the whole feels progressive and there isn't a lack of power. The mid-range is where the Xtreme 125R feels at its strongest. The five-speed gearbox operates without much hassle, although it has to be worked a lot if you want a quick overtake. The claimed fuel efficiency figure stands at 66 kmpl, which combined with the 10-litre fuel tank should give the Xtreme 125R a decent amount of range. Hero's commuter with a sporty twist can easily hold speeds of 80 to 90 kmph. The Xtreme 125R is one of those bikes that can be ridden right at the edge, in the sense that all the performance is being used, and it's a good feeling, to say the least. Overall, the engine and gearbox combination is a good one, and the output feels mature.

The Xtreme 125R is based on the same diamond-type frame as its elder sibling—160R. As a result, it is an able handler and feels rather fun around corners.

Hero MotoCorp recently added a new member to its family, and before you make any assumptions, no, we aren't talking about the Mavrick 440. It is the 'other' new motorcycle to come from the home-grown manufacturer's stable—the Xtreme 125R. It is now the smallest member of the Xtreme family. So, where does the 125R fit into the mix?

At first glance, the Xtreme 125R looks quite radical. Take for example the front projector LED headlamps, indicators and that funky headlamp cowl design. The tank extensions, alloy wheel design and extended rear section look rather sleek and sporty. Even subtle nuances like the reflector on the tyre hugger mudguard and well-integrated sari guard really blend in well together. There's a certain confidence in the Xtreme 125R's design language that is hard to miss,

and that is a crucial factor when it has to appeal to a buyer who is looking for an all-rounder of sorts.

In terms of features, the biggest talking point has to be the single-channel ABS, a segment-first. In fact, that's not the only segment-topping feature here. The Xtreme 125R also boasts the widest rear tyre in its segment, a 120-section unit. Other than that, the entire lighting setup, front and back, is LED, which is a nice touch. The negative LCD instrument cluster is neat and clean, and displays all sorts of useful information. Hero has equipped the 125R quite well, and this should go a long way in appealing to its target audience.

The Xtreme 125R comes with a 124.7 cc motor that churns out 11.4bhp

Engine: 124.7cc single cylinder
Power: 11.4bhp@8,250rpm
Torque: 10.5Nm@6,500rpm
Gearbox: 5-speed
Kerb weight: 136kg
Price: ₹95,000 (ex-showroom)

The 276 mm disc at the front and 130 mm drum brake at the rear do a commendable job. The chassis feels very well sorted and provides a lovely balance between agile handling and ride comfort. The Showa rear monoshock

must be praised for this, as well as the 37 mm telescopic front fork, which does a more than decent job at making the Xtreme 125R comfortable. All in all, the Xtreme 125R is a capable handler and comes with a respectable amount of ride comfort for daily use. To sum up, the 125R comes in two variants—IBS and ABS—which are priced at Rs 95,000 and 99,500, respectively (ex-showroom). It delivers on being a comfortable, fun-to-ride, stylish and fuel-efficient commuter. ■

GET SET, UPGRADE

A PICK OF THE BEST CARS AND NEW LAUNCHES AT THE **2024 NEW YORK INTERNATIONAL AUTO SHOW, HELD IN MARCH-APRIL**



HYUNDAI TUCSON

The Tucson is Hyundai's bestseller in North America and making its debut at the recent New York auto show was the car's new, updated model. There have been limited changes made to the car's exterior—a slightly revised front section sports rejigged LED DRLs, along with a redesigned grille and bumper. The dashboard has got a new dual-screen setup, housing the digital instrument cluster and infotainment screen, both measuring 12.3 inches. The steering wheel has been updated as well, ditching the old Hyundai logo for a strip with four dots that reads 'H' in Morse code. A column-mounted gear selector frees up space in the centre console. The Tucson is available in petrol, hybrid and plug-in hybrid powertrains.

Photographs by VARUN SAXENA & DHRUV SAXENA

KIA K4

Described as a fourth-generation compact sedan, the Kia K4 replaces the Forte in Kia's lineup. The car has a fastback silhouette giving it a very sporty look. The sedan has a sharp front end featuring the signature amber LED DRLs, sporty two-tone bumpers and inverted L-shaped taillamps that accentuate the width of the K4. Inside the cabin, there's a 30-inch digital setup housing the instrument cluster and infotainment screens. In its higher trims, the K4 comes equipped with a host of premium features, including heated and ventilated seats and Harman Kardon audio.



NISSAN KICKS

The entry-level, second-generation SUV gets a completely new design with a more upright nose dominated by LED DRLs that flow into the grille. The rear gets a more angular look defined by the tail lamps. Overall, the Kicks has grown in size. Enhanced dimensions translate to more room in the cabin. The dual-screen houses two 12.3-inch displays for the instrument cluster and infotainment functions. The range-topping trims get heated seats, a heated steering wheel and Bose audio. The new model will be offered in both front-wheel and rear-wheel drive configurations.



-Dhruv Saxena

'SAFE & SECURE'

**INDUSTRY LEADERS SHARE INSIGHTS ON
CONNECTED CAR TECHNOLOGY & THE
CONTRIBUTION OF ADVANCED DRIVER
ASSISTANCE SYSTEMS IN IMPROVING SAFETY**

SANTOSH IYER

MD & CEO, Mercedes-Benz India

The 'Mercedes me' application is the stepping stone to the connected world of Mercedes-Benz and is extremely popular amongst our customers, with more than 80,000 connected cars. Customers love connected features like geo-fencing, advanced navigation, vehicle stats-check, location, car to X communications and a host of other features like pre-climatised cabin, remote start-stop, remote lock-unlock and also setting up service appointments. Through regular over-the-air (OTA) updates, our vehicles easily cater to customers' ever-changing preferences and desires. Mercedes-Benz pioneered ADAS [advanced driver assistance systems] features in India and we are glad to see them widely adopted now, enhancing customer safety and convenience. In addition to ADAS features, for the first time in India, Mercedes-Benz offered Level 2 Autonomous Driving with 'evasive steering assist' and active brake assist with 'cross traffic function'.



TARUN GARG

COO, Hyundai Motor India

Hyundai has cemented its position as a pioneer in futuristic technology and smart mobility with our connected car platform, Bluelink. The share of connected cars in our total sales has significantly increased from 5 per cent in 2019 to 31 per cent in 2024 (as of April 2024). Some of the most frequently used features are navigation/map view, vehicle status—where a customer can check whether a door/window is locked or not, vehicle health, live car tracking, trip history, remote function to start the engine and turn on/off the AC. Hyundai has been the first mover of introducing advanced safety systems such as ADAS across mass market products. In September 2023, we took a pioneering step by introducing first-in-segment ADAS for the Venue and Venue N Line, making them India's most affordable SUVs to be equipped with the technology. Currently seven Hyundai models come with ADAS. These models contribute to over 16 per cent (as of April 2024) of our total sales and 30 per cent in models with ADAS.

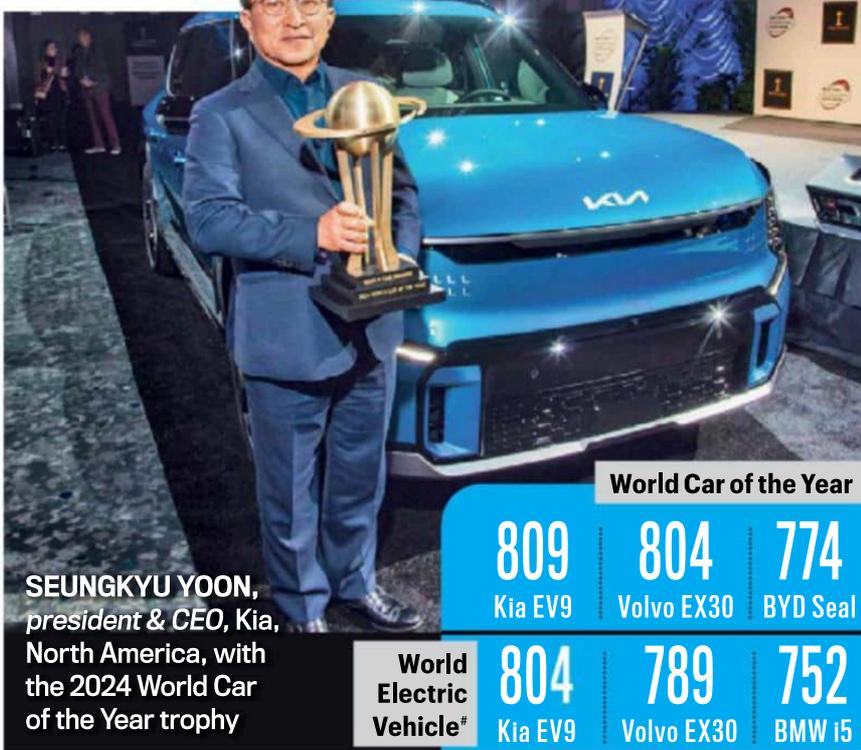
PARTHO BANERJEE

Senior Executive Officer, Marketing & Sales, Maruti Suzuki India

The Suzuki connect app has impressive activity metrics, with over 3,69,000 users, of which 94 per cent are 'monthly active users' while 20 per cent of the users engage with the app on a daily basis. A majority of the users have shown a preference for features such as live car parameters, including vehicle status on the app dashboard, location of the vehicle, and trip details. Notably, the remote AC

scheduling feature in our vehicles has also received appreciation. Over-the-air (OTA) updates have allowed us to reach customers more efficiently and quickly. Case in point: when Smartplay Pro/Pro+ was initially launched with the Baleno, it lacked wireless Apple CarPlay and Android Auto accessibility. However, these features were later made available to existing customers through an OTA update.





SEUNGKYU YOON, president & CEO, Kia, North America, with the 2024 World Car of the Year trophy

World Car of the Year

809	804	774
Kia EV9	Volvo EX30	BYD Seal
804	789	752
Kia EV9	Volvo EX30	BMW i5

World Electric Vehicle#

THE GLOBAL STANDARD

Kia EV9 won double titles at the 2024 World Car Awards, winning the World Car of the Year title and the World Electric Vehicle title. This takes Kia's award tally to five in the World Car Awards' 20-year-old history. Last year, the Kia EV6 GT won the World Performance Car title. In 2020, Kia won the World Car of the Year title for the Telluride and the World Urban Car title for the Soul EV. "This triumph is a testament to our unwavering commitment to pushing the boundaries of technology and design excellence. The Kia EV9's continued success will drive us to keep delivering exceptional vehicles that redefine the driving experience for customers around the world," said Ho Sung Song, president and CEO, Kia. The EV9 won the title ahead of the BYD Seal and the Volvo EX30 in the World Car of the Year category while it bested the BMW i5 and Volvo EX30 in the World Electric Vehicle category.

World Urban Car: Volvo EX30



World Urban Car#

797	735	734
Volvo EX30	BYD Dolphin	Lexus LBX

Volvo EX30 has been crowned the 2024 World Urban Car. The EV was selected for the title ahead of the Lexus LBX and BYD Dolphin, which were the top three in the category. Interestingly, the made-in-India Suzuki Fronx was one of the finalists in the category along with the Abarth 500e, but couldn't make the cut to reach the top three. "Customer response to the EX30 has exceeded our expectations, and it has proven to be a perfect car for today's marketplace as a growing number of car buyers switch to fully electric cars," said Jim Rowan, CEO, Volvo Cars.

Best Design for Toyota Prius

Toyota Prius has been awarded the 2024 World Car Design of the Year. The Prius outscored the Ferrari Purosangue and the Ford Bronco for the title. "It is an honour... the Prius not only looks great, but is fun to drive too," said Yasushi Ueda, its chief engineer. The design panel includes Gert Hildebrand, owner, Hildebrand Design; Patrick le Quément, designer; Tom Matano, former head of design, Mazda; Victor Nacif, chief creative officer, Brojure.com; Shiro Nakamura, CEO, Shiro Nakamura Design and Frank Stephenson, founder, Frank Stephenson Design.

World Car Design of the Year#	302	297	285
	Toyota Prius	Ford Bronco	Ferrari Purosangue



World Car Awards jurors with the Toyota Prius, winner of the World Car Design of the Year 2024

IONIQ 5 N SCOOPS AWARD

Hundai IONIQ 5 N marked the seventh win for the Hyundai Motor Company at the World Car Awards, with the 2024 World Performance Car title. The IONIQ series of cars from Hyundai have garnered applause at the World Car Awards, with the IONIQ 6 sweeping through with three awards last year. The IONIQ 5 N is the first electric vehicle to come out of Hyundai's N performance division and features comprehensive updates over the standard electric vehicle. Hyundai's first attempt at a performance electric car won the coveted award against two BMW cars—the new M2 and the XM.



World Performance Car#

823	764	743
Hyundai Ioniq 5 N	BMW M2	BMW XM

#Score obtained by each car

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Melodic Maestro

Singer **SUKHWINDER SINGH** is moving away from motivational pieces and making a return to romantic and club songs

Q. You sang 'Doubtwa' in Laapataa Ladies. Tell us about your experience of being a part of the song.

'Doubtwa' is my kind of song because it has a good melody with *chatpata* lyrics. I must thank composer Ram Sampath for giving me the opportunity to sing it. It's an important piece that takes the narrative forward.

Q. What was it like getting back to romantic tracks with Gabru Gang's 'Mujhe Ishq Hua'?

In the past few years, I have largely sung motivational title tracks in films like *Singham*, *Tiger Zinda Hai*, *Dabangg*, and *Dabangg 2*. I was aching to be a part of romantic and club songs with good lyrics; thus, I reached out to new-age music directors who are masters of their craft. That's how 'Mujhe Ishq Hua' worked out—it's a light-hearted song which I enjoyed working on.

Q. Let's talk about your song in the about-to-release Raayan. How does it feel to collaborate with A.R. Rahman again?

We met two days before the recording of 'Koi Tod Na Iska' to discuss the song. It is a typical A.R. Rahman composition with perfect orchestration. It has a dense quality that will stay with you long after you've played the tune. As always, it's been an enriching experience collaborating with him.

Q. You've been a part of several international collaborations in the past including the Oscar award-winning *Slumdog Millionaire*. Are you open to joining forces with global musicians in the future?

Several international artistes are keen to collaborate with me. If something interesting comes up, I am happy to go ahead with it. I am someone who enjoys music in every form; learning about its nuances continues to excite me. I do not believe in being in the rat race, so there's really no hurry for anything.

—Geetika Sachdev

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