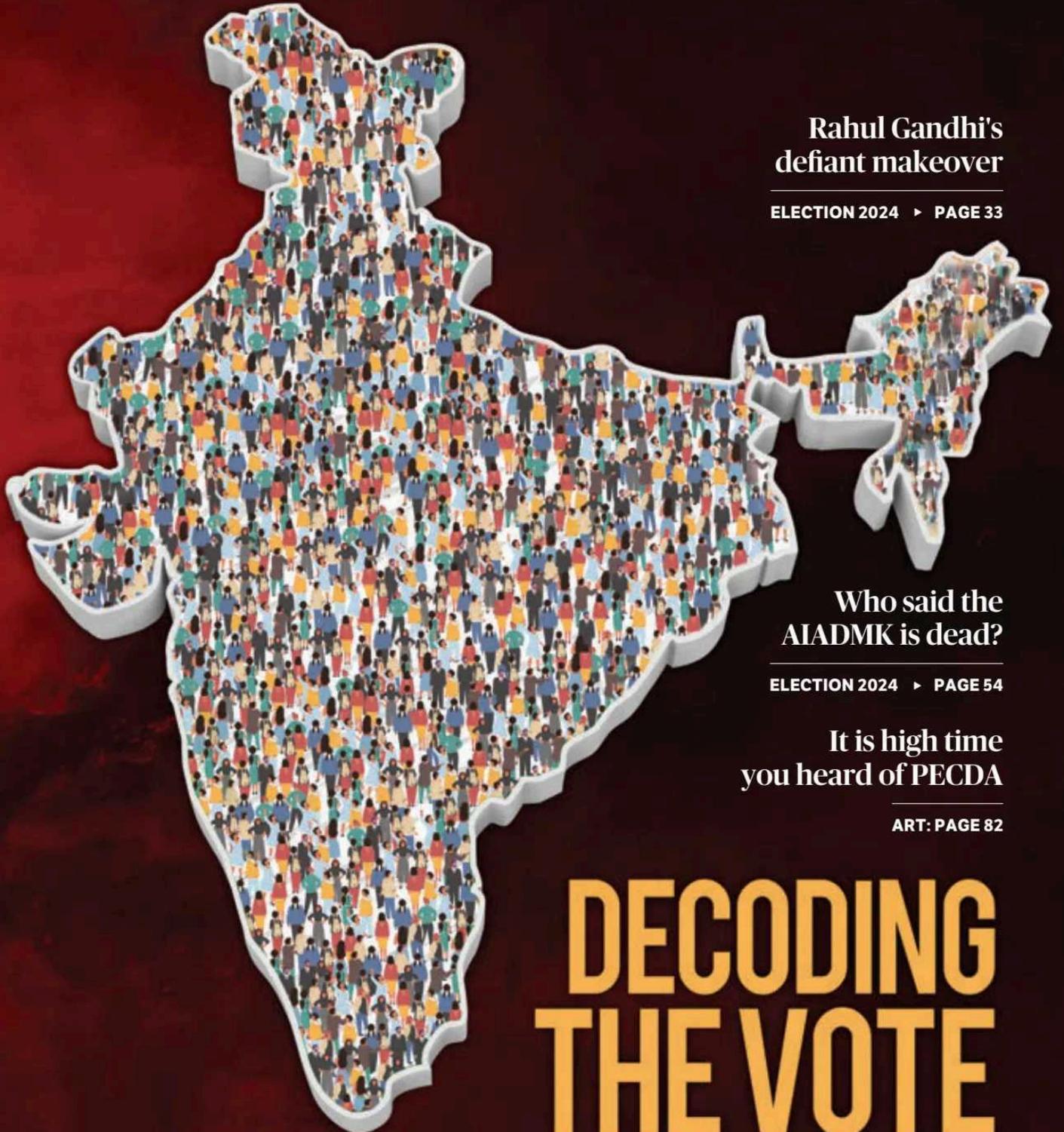


FRONTLINE

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**Rahul Gandhi's
defiant makeover**

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AIADMK is dead?**

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DECODING THE VOTE

A deeper mining of data from
Election 2024 yields some interesting findings

FRONTLINE

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COVER STORY

Rise of the regionals

10/ The biggest takeaway from the 2024 election is that the regional parties, whose future had been prematurely written off during a 10-year saffron wave, are back in the reckoning. However, their relevance appears contingent on joining one of the two alliances in a deeply bipolar polity.

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Cover design: R. Inbaraj
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Published by Nirmala Lakshman,
Kasturi Buildings, 859 & 860, Anna Salai,
Chennai 600-002 and Printed by SDT Rao at
Kala Jyothi Process Private Limited,
Plot No. CFC-1&2, Survey No. 18, E- City, SEZ
& General Industrial Park, Raviryal & Srinagar
(Village), Maheswaram(M), R.R.Dist,
Telangana - 501359 on behalf of THG
PUBLISHING PVT LTD., Chennai-600 002.

.....
Editor: Vaishna Roy (Responsible for
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Cynthia Stephen wears many hats. A journalist by training with a master's in women's studies and decades of work in the NGO sector, she now heads an NGO called Training, Education and Development Services (TEDS) Trust. She works with civil society groups to promote awareness on the Constitution and believes that a greater role for sensitised and empowered women in all places of decision-making is crucial for a safer, just, and vibrant society.

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Illustrations: P. Muthuraj

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Profiling Chandrababu Naidu in this issue, our writer Ayesha Minhaz speaks of how he was ousted after his second term largely because of the growing dissent among small and marginal farmers, whose unhappiness India's original technocrat politician did not understand and did not prioritise. Minhaz quotes a Telugu Desam Party insider saying, "During that period, Naidu truly thought he was invincible." Ironically, while this election saw Naidu claw his way back to a fourth term as Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, it is the leader of the party he allied with to craft his victory who must come to terms with the realisation that he is far from invincible.

Like Naidu and his party at one time, Narendra Modi and the BJP appeared infected with overconfidence in this election. They danced a premature victory lap with an arrogance that reeked of hubris, and it took the announcement of the actual numbers for the truth to sink in—both in the slavish TV studios and in the party offices. For a man and his cohorts to whom crushing dominance is the language of governance, the loss of 63 seats of their own and 60 seats of the NDA and being forced to rule at the head of a coalition is as good as defeat.

While the losses in places such as Ayodhya and its hinterland indicate an electorate tired of religious polarisation, this is unlikely to make the BJP or Modi or his successor, if any, alter the tangent of their ambition, which will always be to make India a Hindu Rashtra. Any post-mortem the party launches now will be about glib changes in vocabulary, and not anything substantive. Post-election analysts have written of the fear of the Constitution being altered that the opposition candidates invoked, but what they don't mention is that it was not invoked fear but a fact. The BJP is ideologically committed to certain ideas and those cannot be achieved unless it amends or jettisons the Constitution in

its present shape, for which it needs a two-thirds majority.

Saba Naqvi writes in her column this time that the BJP's ideological father, the RSS, is irked with Modi. The annoyance stems from Modi's losses, not from his actions. If the wild speeches spewing communal venom and the mandir campaigns in Mathura and Kashi had yielded a landslide, the RSS would have been embracing Modi without a mention of *ahankaar* or *maryada*. The RSS is critical of the "400 paar" slogan only because it would have preferred the party to cross the 400-seat mark quietly and then junk the Constitution, not announce it loudly (as some BJP leaders did) and scare away voters.

THE ELECTION RESULT of June 4 will yield no fundamental reset in the functioning of the BJP. On June 7, three Muslim men were assaulted in Chhattisgarh's Raipur while transporting cattle. All three are dead. There has been no statement from the Prime Minister condemning cow vigilantism. Instead, he celebrated Yoga Day in Kashmir and announced that practitioners can use any incantation "whether Allah, Ishwar, or Waheguru". The near future will only see more such hypocritical posturing by Modi while his stormtroopers do the opposite.

For now, we turn the spotlight back on further analysis of the election results. In this issue, Ashish Ranjan of Data Action Lab for Emerging Societies, Shamindra Nath Roy of Centre for Policy Research, and *Frontline* writers T.K. Rajalakshmi and Anand Mishra take up four angles: the performance of regional parties, the BJP's urban vote, the farmers' protests, and the rise of new Dalit leaders. Meanwhile, it is the upcoming Assembly elections that might more clearly confirm a rise or fall in the country's democracy barometer.

Vaishna



Election 2024

THE mandate for the 18th Lok Sabha has rightly curtailed single-party dominance and restored the voice of the opposition (Cover Story, June 28).

Over the past decade, the brute majority enjoyed by the ruling dispensation had resulted in the passage of Bills with little or no deliberation, mass suspensions and dismissal of opposition MPs, and the forcing through of contentious constitutional amendments. Today, India's democracy seems strengthened by a verdict that has ensured the continuance of a practically stable government while also checking its hitherto unbridled powers.

Bhargav M.B.
Bengaluru

THE most notable outcome of the 2024 general election is the revelation that democracy and secularism are deep-set in India's polity. The precarious "down-but-not-out" situation of the BJP will hopefully serve as a speed breaker to its wanton ways. Although the INDIA bloc was slow off the block, it was able to gain momentum in the later laps.

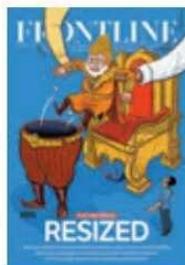
That the razzmatazz associated with the consecration of the Ram mandir in Ayodhya could earn only negative dividends for the BJP was clear from its humiliating defeat in Faizabad. The BJP's juggernaut has evidently lost its pace despite, or because of, the retrofittings provided by the NDA partners.

Ayyasseri Raveendranath
Aranmula, Kerala

ALTHOUGH BJP has captured power at the Centre and Narendra Modi has become Prime Minister for the third time, amidst the controversies about the manipulation of EVMs, it will not be a cakewalk for BJP this time round.

Cut down to size with only 240 seats, the BJP has to rely on its allies in the NDA, especially the Telugu Desam Party and the Janata Dal (United) which together account for 28 seats. TDP's Chandrababu Naidu and JD(U)'s Nitish Kumar are shrewd senior politicians who are bound to have their own distinct demands, and may both drive hard bargains. The BJP has to necessarily yield to these allies over the next five years in order to stay in power. The upcoming elections in Haryana, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan later this year will be another litmus test for the BJP.

M.Y. Shariff
Chennai



THERE are no clear winners in the 2024 general election. Contrary to post-poll predictions, the electorate delivered a split verdict with a thin majority to the ruling NDA over the INDIA bloc. It is heartening to note the new Lok Sabha will host a strong opposition which will hopefully function as a corrective force.

The results are a clear rejection of the authoritarian tendencies of the BJP regime which tried to implement many "Modi-fications" without taking their political, social, and economic fallout into account. The supremacy of citizens in a democracy who can tilt the political balance as they deem fit, has once again been proved.

T.N. Venugopalan
Kochi, Kerala

Manipur, one year later

WHILE the Central government has washed its hands of Manipur saying the violence is on



account of enmity between two communities and has nothing to do with State politics, the State government has been wilfully inactive through the many instances of ethnic violence and the abduction of a senior police official by

the Arambai Tenggol (Cover Story, June 14).

Manipur has become a militia state with the Arambai Tenggol at the centre of it all, enjoying political protection and firepower. It is distressing to see the people of Manipur reduced to refugees in their own land, living in makeshift tents and with their children deprived of education. The new government at the Centre must root out the groups that sowed enmity among the people and restore peace to this north-eastern State.

R.V. Baskaran
Chennai

Comic relief

APPUPEN'S series "The Dystopian Times" never fails to astound and delight. The edition with minions, which portrays how political leaders are making fools of us, made me laugh and ponder at the same time (Back Page, June 14). The best part was the minion behind the EVM. No words, haha. Kudos to Appupen and *Frontline*!

Elvaris Razi
Puthur, Kerala

NOTE

Letters, whether by surface mail or e-mail, must carry the full postal address and the full name, or the name with initials.



Recurring mishaps

On June 17, a goods train collided with the Sealdah-bound Kanchanjunga Express between Rangapani and Chatterhat stations in Darjeeling, killing 10 people and leaving over 40 injured. An inquiry by the Commissioner of Railway Safety revealed that a gateman had informed the Rangapani railway station about a goods train running on the same track as the Kanchanjunga Express. The Government Railway Police also started an independent investigation into the accident. Last year, also in June, a train accident in Balasore, Odisha, had killed 288 people. ANI

► Bridging the gap



Denmark's male footballers joining the national team have refused a salary hike unless their female counterparts get equal basic pay. The men's team and the player's union, Spillerforeningen, have made a new four-year deal with the Danish Football Association, which comes into effect after the ongoing European Championship in Germany until 2028. The players and the football association are also jointly creating a clubhouse that can be used by all national teams. ANGELOS TZORTZINIS/AFP

► 54

people died after consuming spurious liquor at Karunapuram in Kallakurichi, Tamil Nadu. Over 115 others are hospitalised in Salem, Viluppuram, and Puducherry. Residents of Karunapuram said most of the victims were labourers and loaders. The CB-CID has taken over the probe into the hooch tragedy. The Tamil Nadu government transferred the Kallakurichi District Collector and suspended the Superintendent of Police.

► 9,08,580

candidates appeared for the UGC-NET exam in June 2024, which was subsequently cancelled by the Union Education Ministry after the Union Ministry of Home Affairs indicated that the exam's integrity was compromised. The National Testing Agency (NTA), already embroiled in charges of paper leakages and cheating in NEET UG-2024, is also responsible for conducting UGC-NET. After the back-to-back debacles, the NTA postponed the joint CSIR-UGC-NET exam citing "unavoidable circumstances as well as logistic issues".

Cover Story

Rise of the Regionals

The biggest takeaway from the 2024 election is that the regional parties, whose future had been prematurely written off during a 10-year saffron wave, are back in the reckoning. However, their relevance appears contingent on joining one of the two alliances in a deeply bipolar polity.



Punjab

BHAGWANT SINGH MANN

Aam Aadmi Party

Ashish Ranjan

W

What does the Election 2024 verdict tell us? The overarching message is that the Narendra Modi-led BJP lost the majority for the 18th Lok Sabha and the Congress recovered to an extent from two crushing back-to-back defeats. But over and above these two major outcomes, it is the performance of the regional parties that dramatically impacted the electoral outcome of 2024.



Maharashtra

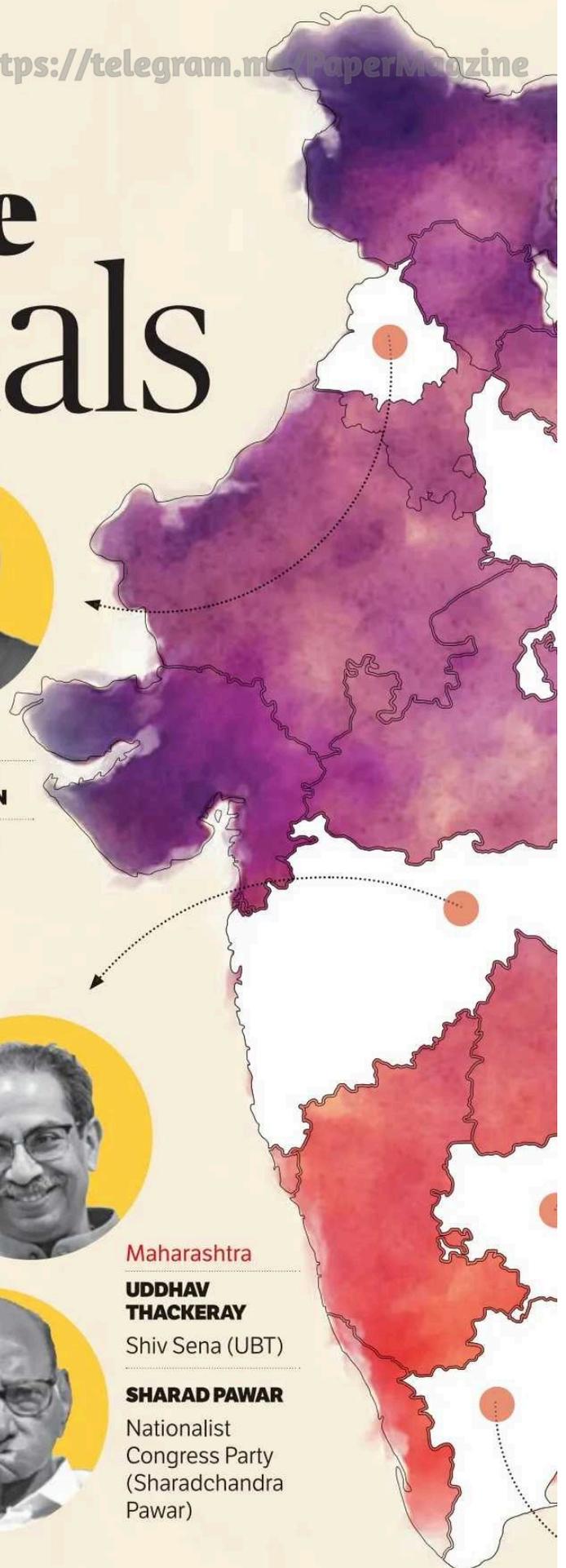
UDDHAV THACKERAY

Shiv Sena (UBT)



SHARAD PAWAR

Nationalist Congress Party (Sharadchandra Pawar)





Uttar Pradesh
AKHILESH YADAV
Samajwadi Party



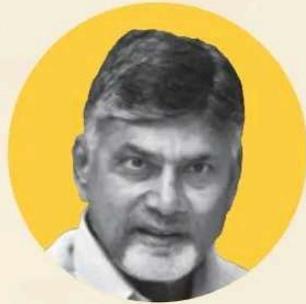
Bihar
TEJASHWI YADAV
Rashtriya
Janata Dal



West Bengal
MAMATA BANERJEE
Trinamool
Congress



Jharkhand
SHIBU SOREN
Jharkhand Mukti
Morcha



Andhra Pradesh
N. CHANDRABABU NAIDU
Telugu
Desam Party



Tamil Nadu
M.K. STALIN
Dravida Munnetra
Kazhagam

In West Bengal, the Trinamool was victorious in **29** seats, a gain of **7** seats from its 2019 tally

In Jharkhand, the ruling JMM was able to win **3** seats of **14**, up **2** seats, while the BJP's tally fell from **11** in 2019 to **8** seats

GRAPHIC: **INBARAJ R**

JULY 12, 2024

Table 1

VOTE SHARE (IN %)				
Parties	2009	2014	2019	2024
BJP	19	31	37	37
Congress	27	19	19	21
Non-BJP and non-Congress parties	54	50	44	42

Table 2

SEATS WON				
Parties	2009	2014	2019	2024
BJP	116	282	303	240
Congress	206	44	52	99
Non-BJP and non-Congress parties	221	217	188	204

Table 3

SEATS WON IN NON-HINDI SPEAKING STATES				
Parties	2009	2014	2019	2024
BJP	64	170	191	138
Congress	126	28	30	67
Non-BJP and non-Congress parties	207	199	176	192

Source: ECI

In this article, we analyse the performance of regional parties in the past and how they hurt the BJP in the 18th Lok Sabha election while helping the Congress regain some lost ground. At the same time, we will try to explain the variation in electoral performances of the regional parties.

This election presented two kinds of scenarios: some parties seemed effective against the BJP while others paid a heavy price and lost ground to it. We study why these two different outcomes coexisted despite a major blow to the BJP-dominant system. Also, the 2024 election was one of the closest bipolar elections in

the past four decades in which any party that was not part of the NDA or the INDIA bloc was severely damaged.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF REGIONAL parties in India can be traced back to 1967, when the Akali Dal in Punjab and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu (then Madras) won the Assembly elections in their respective States and formed the government. This was also the year when the Congress won the Lok Sabha election. However, the electoral hegemony of the Congress was questioned for the first time on a large scale with the grand old party losing the Assembly elections in eight States.

The late 1960s, therefore, can be termed as a watershed moment in the country's electoral history, which underlined two things: there was a multi-party democracy beyond the hegemony of the national parties, and cooperative but different party systems existed in the Centre and the States. State elections in the late 1980s and in the 1990s reinforced this aspect while gaining significant relevance and raising the stakes of States at the Centre, thus creating pathways of cooperative federalism. This was steered largely by regional parties, who functioned within their respective States but remained equally important in crucial decision-making at the Centre.

The ideological background of regional parties was, and is, rooted to certain identities such as caste, culture, language, or religion, but two specific incidents accelerated their growth. The first was the State reorganisation of the late 1960s and the 1970s, which boosted large-scale regional sentiment along linguistic and cultural lines. The second was the JP movement, steered by anti-corruption crusader Jayaprakash Narayan, popularly known as JP, against Congress misrule.

As a result of the imposition of Emergency by Indira Gandhi, an anti-Congress sentiment helped create a space for all the non-Congress parties to come together. The movement was successful, and Indira Gandhi was replaced by the Janata Party. However, this association of parties from across the ideological spectrum did not last long, paving the way for Round 2

Since 2009, the share of regional parties in 14 key States has been coming down, but in 2024, the regional players turned the tables significantly.



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▼
Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav in New Delhi on June 5. The SP, which won 37 seats in Uttar Pradesh, played a crucial role in halting the BJP juggernaut. ADNAN ABIDI /REUTERS

of the rise of the regionals.

The difference between the two rounds was that the first was more rooted in regional identities while the second was more sociopolitical in nature. As a result, there were significant differences among the regional parties that grew in the two different periods. Parties such as the DMK, the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), the Shiv Sena, and the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) are more focussed on their State-specific questions, while many regional parties who emerged in the 1980s and the 1990s as splinters of the Janata Dal, such as the Samajwadi Party (SP), the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), and the Janata Dal (United), were centred on identity-specific issues.

FROM THE MID-1990S to 2014 was the period that can be called the golden era of the regional parties, as they dictated the terms of electoral politics. While both the BJP and the Congress led the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) respectively, the regional parties held many key portfolios. Also, this was a the time when regional parties went beyond State-specific interests.

The 2014 Lok Sabha election saw a major change in the outcome. The Congress was weakened, the BJP dominated, and the regionals became less significant despite getting a significant chunk of the vote share.

The overall picture in Table 1 indicates a declining share of votes for parties other than the BJP and the Congress since 2009. It suggests that the non-BJP, non-Congress space has been consistently shrinking, and its vote share has reduced by up to 12 percentage points from 2009 to 2024. Despite this drop in vote share, these parties won 204 seats in 2024,

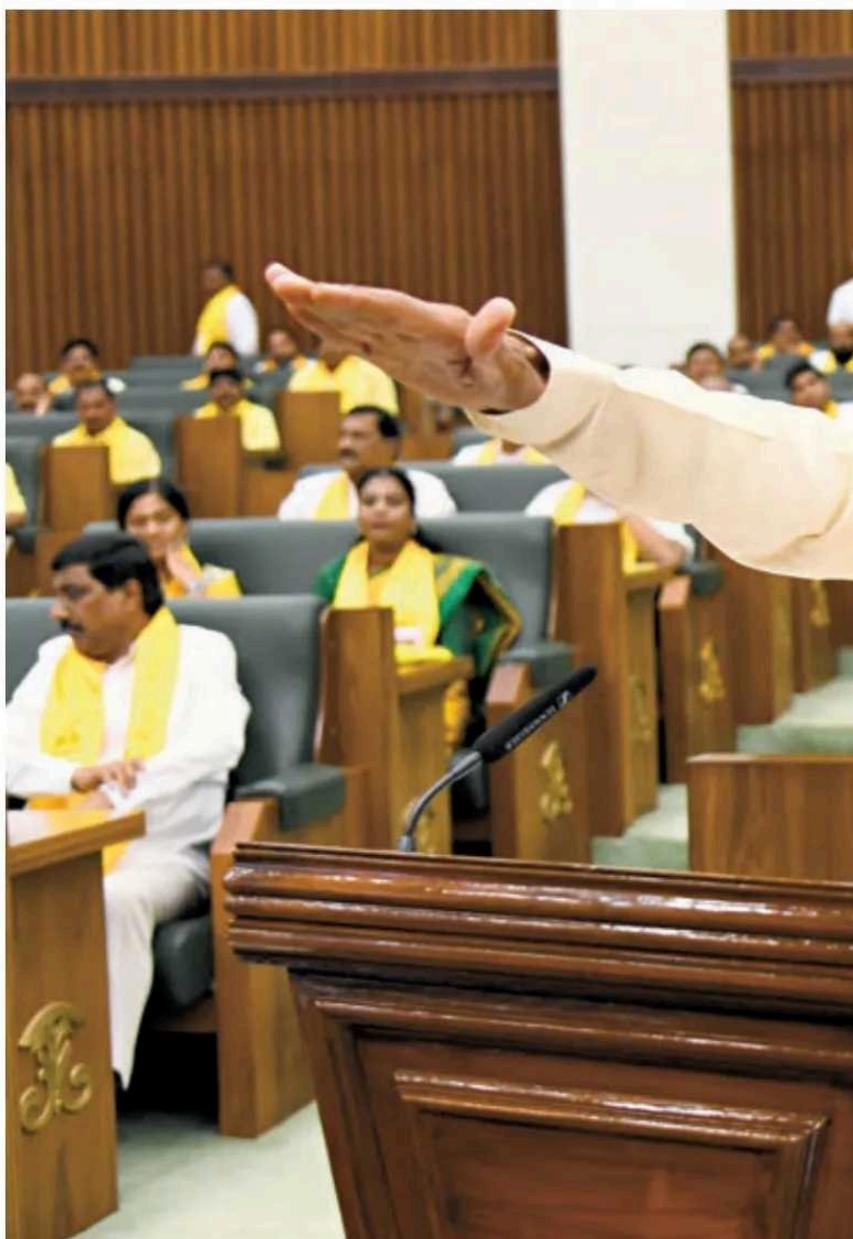
The 2024 election was one of the closest bipolar elections in the past four decades in which any party that was not part of the NDA or the INDIA bloc was severely damaged.

▼ **Andhra Pradesh**
Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu takes oath as a member of the Assembly on June 21. Naidu's TDP won 16 seats and is now a key pillar of the NDA government at the Centre. [PTI](#)

against 188 in 2019 (Table 2).

The 2014 and the 2019 general elections saw the total dominance of the BJP but its gains came from two different sources in each election. In 2014, it was predominantly due to the failure of the Congress; the seat share of the non-BJP, non-Congress parties did not see a drastic change from 2009.

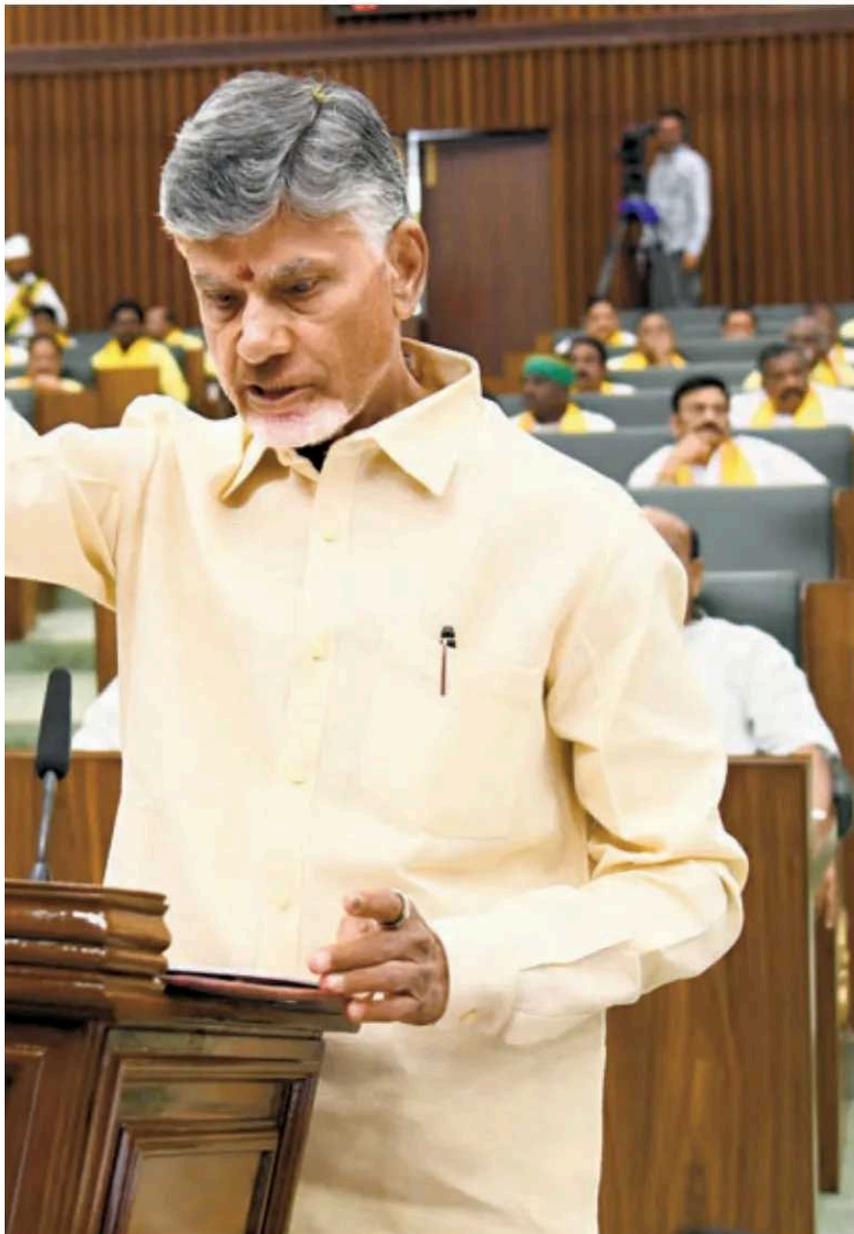
In 2019, in addition to the Congress' dismal performance, the BJP severely damaged the regional parties. The 2019 election was the



first since 1989 when the seat share of the non-BJP, non-Congress parties went below 200.

To look at the micro level performance of regional parties, this analysis focusses on 14 medium and big States where regional parties remain major players (Table 3).

These are: Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Assam, Bihar, Haryana, Jharkhand, Jammu and Kashmir (now a Union Territory), Karnataka, Maharashtra, Odisha, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal. Together, these



From the mid-1990s to 2014 was the period that can be called the golden era of the regional parties, as they dictated the terms of electoral politics.

States have 397 Lok Sabha seats. In 2014, the BJP won 170 of these seats and the Congress won just 28. In 2019, the Congress' performance did not improve; it barely managed to get 30 seats. But the BJP gained big, winning 191 seats, which helped it improve its national tally in comparison to 2014, and helped it cross 300 seats on its own for the first time.

SINCE 2009, THE SHARE of regional parties has been coming down but in 2024, the regional players turned the tables significantly in these 14 States. They not only gained themselves but also helped the Congress regain seats. The BJP lost 53 seats in these States.

The regionals gained 16 seats, but the Congress, benefiting from alliances, gained 37 more seats than its 30 in 2019. It is important to note that the Congress gained just 10 seats more than 2019 from States where it was in direct contest with the BJP.

For further analysis, we separate these States in two categories: Hindi-speaking and non-Hindi-speaking. Since Assam and Karnataka have become a largely BJP versus Congress contest, we excluded these two from further analysis and also dropped Jammu & Kashmir because of its Union Territory status. At the same time, we added Delhi, since the AAP is in power there.

In the Hindi-speaking States we grouped Bihar, Delhi, Haryana, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh, which together have 151 parliamentary seats. In the other section are Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, and West Bengal, the seven non-Hindi States, with 205 parliamentary seats.

At an aggregate level, we do not see much





change in terms of vote share, but the devil lies in the details. To look at the details, this analysis divides the parties into five categories: BJP, Congress, Left parties, Independents, and Others.

Four kinds of changes occurred in 2024 in the Hindi-speaking States where regional parties have major stakes (Chart 1).

First, the performance of the Left parties

▼
DMK leader M.K. Stalin with Congress leader Rahul Gandhi at an election meeting in Coimbatore on April 12. J. MANOHARAN

and Independents has not changed since 2014. Their vote share remains stagnant at around 5 per cent.

Second, the Congress has posted a gain in votes from 10 per cent in 2019 to 14 per cent in 2024.

Third, the BJP's performance seems to have peaked in the Hindi-speaking States in 2019. After consistently gaining vote share since

The electoral dynamics in the country have changed again, and State-based parties are not just regaining their place, they are expanding their support base.

2009, it lost a significant 7 per cent vote share in 2024. From 2009 to 2019, the BJP's vote share in these States more than doubled: from 18 per cent in 2009 it grew to 39 per cent in 2014, the major reason it swept the election that year.

Of the 151 seats in these States, the BJP won 119 in 2014, while in 2009 it had won just 30. In 2019, its vote share rose by five percentage points, going from 39 per cent in 2014 to 44 per cent, but its seats came down from 119 in 2014 to 107. The loss of seats despite gaining votes in 2019 was a result of the SP-BSP-RLD alliance in Uttar Pradesh. In Uttar Pradesh alone, the BJP posted a 9 per cent gain in votes, but lost 9 seats.

THE 2024 ELECTION brought a double jolt for the BJP in the Hindi-speaking States, where regional parties are key. The BJP lost a significant share of both votes and seats. Its vote share fell to 37 per cent from 44 per cent in the previous election. Also, it lost 42 seats, winning only 65 of the 151 from these States.

What were the changes in the performance of regional parties in this election? At the aggregate level, their vote share improved marginally, from 43 per cent in 2019 to 45 per cent in 2024. However, their seat share jumped from 41 to 70.

The regional parties in the Hindi belt, namely the SP in Uttar Pradesh and the RJD in Bihar, challenged the BJP more emphatically this time than in the past despite many observers indicating their decline owing to their focus on local and family-centric politics. For the first time, regional parties in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Delhi, and Jharkhand received more than 40 per cent of the vote in the seats contested in their respective States.

Uttar Pradesh surprised everyone, since it

Chart 1

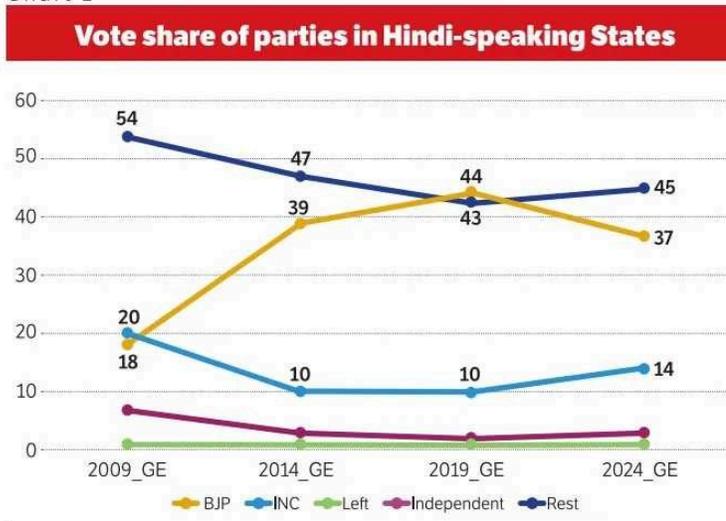
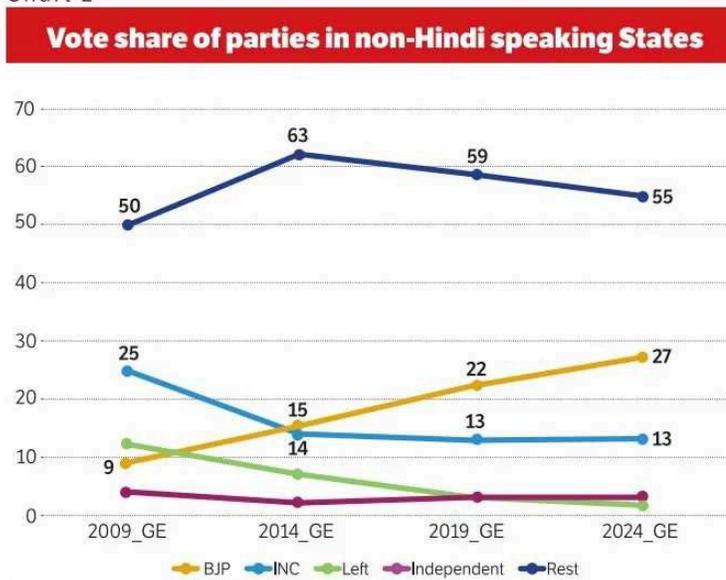
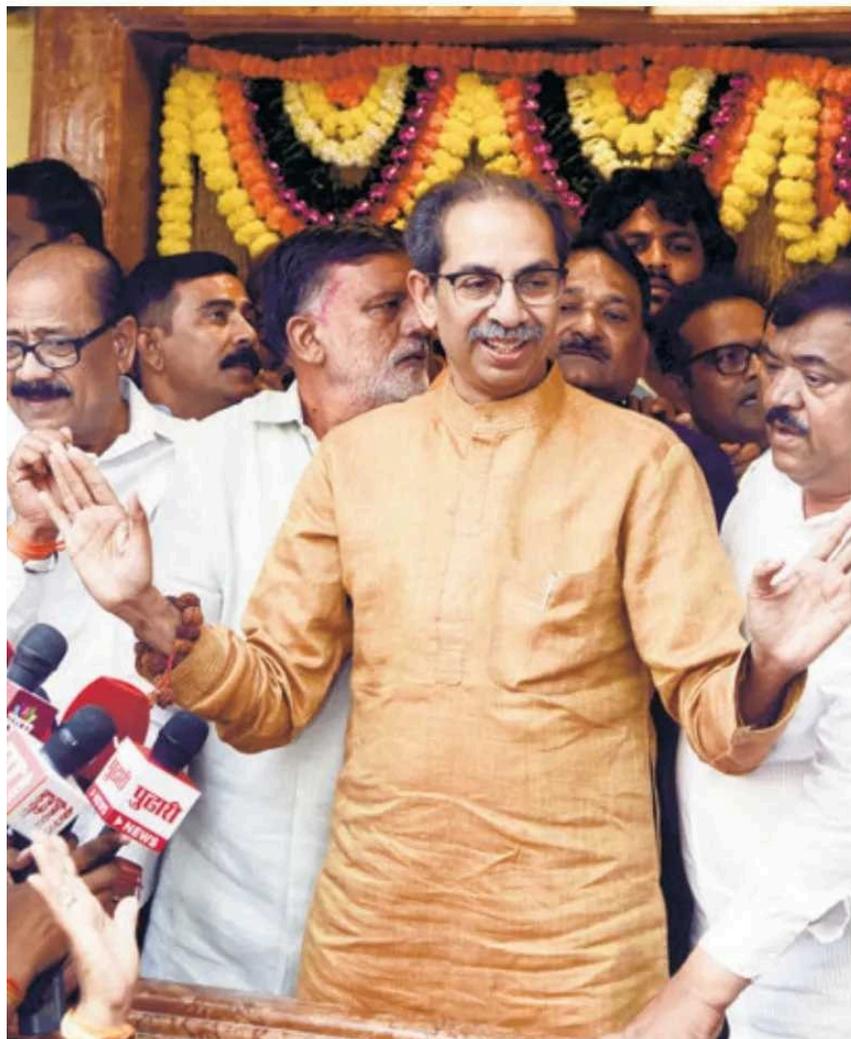


Chart 2



Note: All the figures are in per cent and rounded off. Data Source: ECI

is the State the BJP has been dominating in every State and national election since 2014. Akhilesh Yadav's SP dealt a shocking blow to the saffron party. The SP, which has always polled around 30 per cent of the vote, crossed the 40 per cent threshold this time, polling 43 per cent in the State. In the 2017 Assembly election and the 2019 Lok Sabha election, when it was in an alliance with the Congress and the Bahu-



jan Samaj Party (BSP) respectively, the party faced bitter losses. This time, it won more seats than the BJP.

What changed in Uttar Pradesh? The BJP had managed to consolidate the Hindu vote bank in a State like Uttar Pradesh whose political landscape was always fragmented along caste lines. As the numbers show, this social alliance helped the BJP gain significantly, with parties like the SP or the BSP, which are dependent on specific social coalitions, losing out. This changed in 2024.

The SP clinched an alliance with the Congress, not for the first time but with clever ticket distribution this time. The SP tried hard to move beyond its traditional social coalition,

▼ **Shiv Sena (UBT) chief** Uddhav

Thackeray after the party's victory in the election, in Mumbai on June 5.

DEEPAK SALVI

The 2024 election brought a double jolt for the BJP in the Hindi-speaking States, where regional parties are key. The BJP lost a significant share of both votes and seats.

the Muslim-Yadav (MY) equation, and explored new caste alignments by providing greater space for non-Yadav OBCs and non-Jatav Scheduled Castes (SCs).

For example, in a seat like Faizabad, which accommodates the Assembly constituency of Ayodhya, home of the Ram temple, the SP gave the ticket to Awadhesh Prasad, who belongs to the socially marginalised Pasi community (SC) and won the election. With the Congress in the alliance and a weak BSP going it alone, the Muslim and other anti-BJP votes shifted smoothly to the INDIA bloc. Ticket distribution was just one reason, the bigger issue was that the people started questioning the Modi government about its failure to curb inflation and its inability to generate jobs. Apart from this, the narrative that the BJP would “change the Constitution” impacted the BJP most in Uttar Pradesh.

During field work in early May in Uttar Pradesh, this writer met many people from the oppressed castes. Their fear of a change in the Constitution was clearly visible. They said the Constitution empowered them and affirmative actions such as reservation in jobs and education enabled them to move up in their social and economic hierarchy. The Pasis, who account for a significant share of the SC population after the Jatavs, voted en bloc for the SP after a long time. The SP’s alliance with the Congress also helped it win over the fence-sitters among the depressed castes.

The clear and well-communicated methodology of a regional party like the SP, which experimented beyond its traditional sociopolitical base to challenge the Hindutva-orchestrated social engineering of the BJP, proved successful in this election. This opens a space





for interesting debates on how regional parties can take a gamble and evolve their sociopolitical discourse over time.

South of the Vindhyas, in the non-Hindi regions, which has always been a tough turf for the BJP, the party's vote share increased but its

The SP gained through its new social engineering and the Shiv Sena (UBT) rode the sympathy of Marathi *asmita* (pride) as a result of the politics of factionalism encouraged by the BJP.

seat share did not improve. There are some States where the BJP gained significantly.

The non-Hindi speaking States account for 205 parliamentary seats, and this has been the weakest region for the BJP. However, the party's votes have been continuously rising since 2009, the share tripling from 9 per cent in 2009 to 27 per cent in 2024. Its seat share, however, has not improved. In fact, it dropped to 52 seats in 2024 from 55 in 2019.

IN TAMIL NADU AND TELANGANA, the party's performance in terms of votes was impressive. In Telangana it gained significantly in the number of seats as well. But where the BJP surprised everyone was in Od-



► **INDIA bloc leaders** after a meeting in New Delhi on June 5.
SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

isha, a State where the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) has been in power for over two decades.

While the curve suggests a continuous growth for the BJP, it is not spread evenly across the seven non-Hindi speaking States where regional parties are major contenders to power. In Punjab and West Bengal, the BJP lost seats.

While the Congress could not improve much in these States, being in an alliance in Tamil Nadu and in power in Telangana helped it gain some seats.

Chart 2 suggests a decline in vote share of regional parties in the non-Hindi speaking States, but there are some important observations to be made here. In many of these

States, there are two major regional players—for instance, the DMK and the AIADMK in Tamil Nadu, the AAP and the SAD in Punjab, and the two factions of the Shiv Sena and the Nationalist Congress Party in Maharashtra—and each of these parties has a strong vote base.

The BJP has been able to attract anti-incumbency votes in many of these States but the party's votes have not crossed the winning threshold and, therefore, its seat share has not improved much. In Telangana and Odisha, the BJP gained significantly but in Maharashtra and West Bengal, the party lost significantly.

IN CONCLUSION, THE BJP lost single-party majority in the lower House because of the strong performance of some regional parties, but it was able to form the government with the help of other regional parties. The electoral dynamics in the country have changed again, and State-based parties are not just regaining their place, they are expanding their support base. The nature of their reclamation is also different.

The SP gained through its new social engineering and the Shiv Sena (UBT) rode the sympathy of Marathi *asmita* (pride) as a result of the politics of factionalism encouraged by the BJP, but not all State-based parties were successful at the ballot box. Some parties, such as the BJD, the Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS), and the YSR Congress Party (YSRCP), sustained severe losses, losing their base to the BJP.

What is common to the BJD, the BRS, and the YSRCP is that all three were not in a formal alliance with either the NDA or the INDIA bloc, but their legislative practice shows that they have not been against the ruling BJP either. Unlike in the past, parties that chose to stay away from the two major poles were severely damaged.

This election has sent out a clear message: the regional parties have not lost their electoral base, but the country's polarisation is such that being indifferent is not an option any more. The electorate seems to be asking them to take a clear position in the bipolar polity of these times. ■

Ashish Ranjan is an election researcher and co-founder of Data Action Lab for Emerging Societies.

The non-BJP, non-Congress space has been consistently shrinking, and its vote share has reduced by up to 12 percentage points from 2009 to 2024.

Cover Story





Walking a tightrope

N. Chandrababu Naidu, stepping into his fourth term as Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, is known as a hard-working technocrat, but this time around he will have to balance welfare and development if he wants to take along his rural voters. **AYESHA MINHAZ**

The name Nara Chandrababu Naidu means many things to many people: the Chief Minister and exceptional technocrat who steered Hyderabad into an information technology hub, a Telugu leader who put Andhra Pradesh on the global map, an obsessively hard-working politician and reliable patron for members of his Kamma community, a skilful negotiator who brought World Bank funds to the State, an astute businessman, and, on the flip side, someone who favoured industry over agriculture and subjected it to significant setbacks. To his critics, he is a shrewd opportunist who stops at nothing to gain power. Naidu is all that and much more.

On June 4, stunning his opponents and political pundits alike, the alliance led by him and comprising the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), the JanaSena Party (JSP), and the Bharatiya Janata Party won 164 of the 175 Assembly constituencies in Andhra Pradesh; of this the TDP alone won 135 seats. The government is all set for a challenging ride, partly because of the state of affairs in Andhra Pradesh and partly because of the numerous promises the party rolled out in the run-up to the elections. The 74-year-old Naidu

► **Andhra Pradesh** Chief Minister Nara Chandrababu Naidu offers prayers at Praja Vedika, during his tour of Amaravati, in Undavalli of Guntur district, on June 20. **PTI**





du took oath on June 12 and became Andhra Pradesh's longest-serving Chief Minister (including undivided Andhra Pradesh).

“One thing about Naidu is that he is a hard-working Chief Minister. Secondly, if he wants to achieve some target, he puts a lot of pressure on the bureaucracy and the system and gets it done. That way, he is a taskmaster. At one point, he was even projected as a potential Prime Minister candidate,” said Professor G. Haragopal, an activist, social scientist, and former dean of the School of Social Sciences, University of Hyderabad. “But his model of governance is technology-centric and urban-centric.”

NAIDU'S FIRST TERM as Chief Minister began in 1995 after he launched a successful coup against his father-in-law Nandamuri Taraka Rama Rao (popularly NTR), the Tollywood superstar and founder of the TDP. Before joining the TDP, Naidu was a member of the Congress for over a decade, was elected as MLA in 1978, and served as a Minister for a couple of years. During this time, Naidu married NTR's daughter Bhuvaneshwari. He joined the TDP after the Congress' defeat in the 1983 Assembly election.

Naidu's tenure as Chief Minister coincided with the decade of change. Discerning the forthcoming software boom, he worked on turning a

▼ **Naidu's Amaravati capital project** had faced harsh criticism from not only a section of the populace and civil society but also policymakers and academics. Here, inspecting a replica of his dream project on June 20. G.N. RAO

part of Hyderabad into an IT hub. He also brought in several infrastructural projects, including an international airport, pharmaceutical industries, and colleges. Some sectors saw growth, while others declined. It was at this time that Naidu drifted towards a technocratic model of governance.

At the national level, Naidu first opted to side with the United Front (1996-98) before giving outside support to the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government in 1998. In 1999, Naidu got re-elected and became the Chief Minister for a second consecutive term (1999-2004).

Since his first term, Naidu has mastered perception management. It remains one of the domains where Naidu surpasses most of his contemporaries. “If one ignores political party press, Eenadu is probably one of the earliest privately owned media houses to discard all pretence of neutrality and throw its might behind a

Chandrababu Naidu's first tenure as Chief Minister coincided with the decade of change. Discerning the forthcoming software boom, he worked on turning a part of Hyderabad into an IT hub.

political party [TDP]. Naidu was a pioneer in capturing commercial media and cultivating it through various strategies of state patronage,” said Padmaja Shaw, a media critic and retired professor of journalism at Osmania University.

BY THE EARLY 2000S, Naidu was riding the wave of investment and the rise of the IT sector in Hyderabad. His high-tech governance and unwavering commitment to the neoliberal development model earned him laurels, often internationally. Where Naidu gained prominence was among urban people who were often unaware of the ground realities of rural Andhra Pradesh.

“He was the first Chief Minister to go global, working with the World Bank, [Microsoft co-founder] Bill Gates, and [former US President] Bill Clinton, which attracted national and international media attention to Naidu and Hyderabad city,” Shaw told *Frontline*.

As his second term progressed, the media hype about the “Naidu phenomenon” was perhaps misread as a widespread mandate for his policies. “During that period, Naidu truly thought he was invincible,” a TDP insider said.

Away from the corridors of power in Hyderabad, dissent against TDP rule was growing among small and marginal farmers. The State government’s retreat from the agricultural sector resulted in piling debts, farmer suicides, and a deepening state of crisis. Inadequate measures to deal with droughts worsened the situation in several areas.

That was when Congress leader Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy (popularly remembered as YSR) walked into the hearts of people: during his 1,500 km padayatra across the State, he vowed to serve farmers and other marginalised groups. Other factors too contributed to Naidu’s loss in the next election. YSR was a feudal leader who exuded benevolence and promised to usher in welfare, which sealed the fate of the 2004 election. YSR’s professional qualification as a doctor helped in building a connect with people.

Despite allegations of corruption, YSR won a second term in 2009 and was Chief Minister until his untimely death in a helicopter crash. Although the Congress faltered in maintaining control over the State in YSR’s absence, Naidu stayed out of power until 2014.

In 2014, Naidu became Chief Minister for a third time, but this time in the newly divided

Naidu’s high-tech governance and unwavering commitment to the neoliberal development model earned him laurels, often internationally.

State of Andhra Pradesh. Despite the provision in the Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act, 2014, which stated that Hyderabad would remain the joint capital for 10 years, Naidu was eager to replicate his Hyderabad model in the new State. Analysts say it was largely because of Telangana Rashtra Samithi supremo K. Chandrashekar Rao’s antagonistic approach towards the neighbouring State that began Naidu’s fixation with Amaravati, the new capital of Andhra Pradesh, for the rest of his term.

“Of course, Amaravati’s development remains important. But Hyderabad, unlike Amaravati, has had a long history of industrial development. Even during the Nizam era, there were a lot of industries. But Andhra Pradesh is primarily an agricultural economy,” Haragopal told *Frontline*. Several critics pointed that out early on, but Naidu took no heed and stopped paying the rest of the State the attention it needed.

Amaravati was to be built on 33,000 acres (13,355 hectares) of fertile farmland. Since the land acquisition phase (which bypassed the 2013 Land Rehabilitation Act), Naidu has faced harsh

▼ **With Microsoft co-founder**

Bill Gates at AP AgTech Summit 2017 in Visakhapatnam. C.V.SUBRAHMANYAM





criticism from not only a section of the populace and civil society but also policymakers and academics. The subsequent choices, including design, drew more criticism as Naidu's dream of a world-class capital looked increasingly unrealistic.

Naidu and his coterie rubbished the allegations that people from his Kamma community (a dominant caste group) benefited from the selection of the location for the capital city, the land deals, and the real estate opportunities. Naidu and several top TDP leaders have consistently maintained that the party works for everyone regardless of caste or religion. However, several scholars (such as Dalel Benbabaali, currently at the University of Oxford) have documented how political patronage has helped Kammas gain unparalleled socio-economic mobility in the State.

During this term (2014-19), Naidu also toyed with a real time governance system. Analysts would later speculate that fudged analytics (from bureaucrats) about efficient governance was one of the reasons that put him out of touch with the widespread anti-incumbency sentiment.

Initially in this term, Naidu had a decent run with the BJP. However, mounting pressure

▼ **With JanaSena Party chief**
Pawan Kalyan releasing the joint manifesto at Undavalli on April 30. G.N. RAO

Being a techno-managerial politician has inherent limitations, his critics believe, as that approach does not help the agrarian sector.

from the opposition parties (the Yuvajana Sramika Rythu Congress Party and others) about the Special Category Status to Andhra Pradesh and pending infrastructure projects made him quit the alliance. But it was too late, with a serious cash crunch having already hit the new State. Following a bitter fallout with the BJP, Naidu allied briefly with the Congress in 2019.

Now, it was Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy's turn to follow in the footsteps of his father YSR by embarking on a padayatra. He promised to cater to all neglected regions and people. Jagan swept the 2019 Assembly and Lok Sabha elections.

A defeated Naidu and TDP worked to revive themselves from the ground up. Describing this period (2019-24), Nara Lokesh, Naidu's son, told *Frontline* in an earlier interview that politics can be "unforgiving and gruelling", but it is a chal-



allenge he enjoyed working on. Most political analysts attribute one trait to the TDP's revival each time the party has faltered: Naidu's tact and hard work. Even many of his detractors, despite criticising his decisions, tend to agree that Naidu works hard, even when he is in the opposition. For instance, in 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic gripped the world, Naidu launched several initiatives such as video conference consultations with a US-based doctor and arrangements to bring back people of Andhra Pradesh stuck in other States.

During this period, for the first time, the TDP also hired a political consultancy group. According to Shanthanu Singh, the director of Show-Time Consulting, Naidu "gave us the space to try different things, freedom in terms of making decisions, and freedom to innovate and improve". Naidu's arrest in September 2023 on allegations of corruption could have slowed down the party's revival, but party leaders stepped up after the initial shock. Pawan Kalyan stepped in with unconditional support; the TDP-JSP alliance eventually propelled them towards victory.

Naidu's 45-year political career is dotted with several realpolitik decisions, which are at times termed as about turns. But he is unfazed by such

▼ **Interacting with cotton farmers**

at Chillakallu village in Krishna district in Vijayawada on January 22, 2013, as part of his Vastunna Meekosam Padayatra.

CH.VIJAYA BHASKAR

criticism. When the Gujarat riots shook the nation in 2002, Naidu demanded the resignation of Narendra Modi, the then Chief Minister of Gujarat. Naidu was then part of the Vajpayee-led National Democratic Alliance government and one of the first leaders to speak out. However, he swiftly abandoned the attempt to push the BJP to act stringently against Modi as he saw no hope of a favourable outcome.

His fallout with the BJP in 2018 was perhaps the most open and bitter one. Naidu challenged Modi's governance, his politics, and his anti-minority rhetoric. Both sides vowed to never come together again. Today, after returning to power, Naidu and other TDP leaders maintain that there were only a few differences with the BJP.

OVER THE YEARS, electoral compulsions have pushed Naidu to be more accepting of welfare. Moving away from his past mistakes, he has also vowed to distance himself from a bureaucratic governance model. Party members hope that the feedback mechanisms installed in the past five years will be retained, at least to some extent.

Led by Naidu, the alliance now faces an uphill task to deliver on the many election guarantees. The fiscal situation in Andhra Pradesh will test Naidu's enterprise in improving the State's revenues without levying additional taxes, and his competence in getting adequate funds from the Centre, which he failed to do in the previous term.

Being a techno-managerial politician has inherent limitations, Naidu's critics believe, as it does not help the agrarian sector. Thus, Naidu's fourth term will require more than striking a balance between welfare and development. He will have to learn the extent of the crisis and the aspirations of people in rural Andhra Pradesh.

Haragopal points out that when presented with an opportunity (after becoming a key player in the NDA), Nitish Kumar of the Janata Dal (United), one of the allies supporting the Modi government at the Centre along with the TDP, chose the rural development portfolio, whereas Naidu opted for civil aviation. And, as of now, Naidu's attention still appears to be on urban-centric development, as Haragopal told *Frontline*. Although too early to speculate, it does signify priorities. Party insiders, however, say Naidu is a changed man and will strike a balance this time around. ■

Busting the urban-rural myth

Grading urbanisation in constituencies using satellite imagery helps capture the dynamics of the transition, bringing out one interesting nugget: in the 2024 election the BJP has lost more ground in rapidly urbanising areas —places witnessing a lot of transition from rural to urban—than in areas that have urbanised more slowly. **SHAMINDRA NATH ROY AND ASHISH RANJAN**

In which areas exactly did the BJP lose the majority? In this article we analyse the outcome of Election 2024 in rural and urban areas across the country. Although India is primarily a rural country (the national urbanisation rate was 31.1 per cent in the 2011 Census) and the urban electorate makes up only 35 per cent of the total electorate, the pace of urban transformation is high.

According to the UN, about 675 million people will be living in cities by 2035. Cities and the villages differ in terms of economic profile and electoral issues, and there are big differences also in the turnouts of urban and rural voters. Political parties also have very different electoral bases across the rural-urban divide.

In a country at the cusp of large-scale urban transformation, it is pertinent to analyse the electoral outcomes from this angle and over a period of time. To look at these variations, we have used electoral data culled since 2009, and at European Space Agency data.

The identification of parliamentary constituencies (PCs) as rural or urban is not a straightforward issue. The PCs often

► **A large number** of job aspirants at a job fair in Moodbidri, a small town in Karnataka, on June 7. BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



While the rural electorate has far dominated the electoral rhetoric, it may be time to look beyond binaries and focus on the specificities of the areas in flux.

cut across administrative boundaries and across villages and cities. They could often be a mix of various kinds of localities, ranging from low-density rural areas to compact and dense urban settlements and cities.

Between the traditional binaries of rural and the urban lie suburban or peri-urban areas, which are socio-economically dynamic in nature. These are the places where the transition from agriculture to non-agricultural activities is high, and the forces of social and cultural changes are much stronger than in purely agrarian or purely urban societies.

The classification of the PCs in terms of airtight constituencies such as urban and rural, therefore, makes little sense and is not enough to capture the dynamics of transition. Understanding this distinction is important from the perspective of electoral behaviour as well: the differential nature of the electorate's demands, from basic income support to job guarantees and better education facilities to skill imparting schemes, are contingent on dynamics that occur across the rural-urban spectrum.

TO CAPTURE THIS VARIATION and its effect on the electoral dynamics over subsequent elections, we have used satellite data that provides a more continuous metric of place-natures within a constituency, rather than a discrete rural-urban measure. This data, which is provided by the European Space Agency, accounts for the built-up area and population densities, as captured by satellite imagery, and is subsequently modelled on the basis of several parameters.

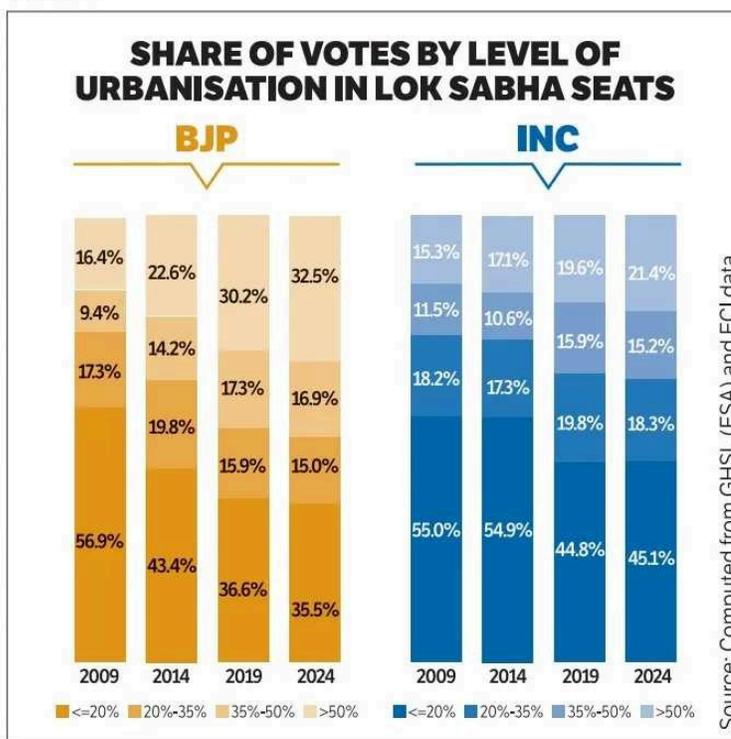
Instead of discrete categories of rural or urban, the use of this data facilitates a gradation of urbanisation within a constituency, as shown in Table 1. This data helps us understand—as the share of urban areas (densely populated and built-up areas) increases over time in a constituency—the change in electoral representation

Table 1

BJP'S VOTE SHARE (%)

Share of urban areas in constituencies	2009	2014	2019	2024
<=20%	23.7%	34.1%	40.6%	40.2%
20%-35%	15.6%	30.3%	32.7%	31.8%
35%-50%	15.0%	28.3%	35.7%	34.9%
>50%	13.8%	28.2%	37.3%	36.4%

Chart 1



of various parties with different electoral bases.

For example, we seek to ask: since the urban built-up area has changed in the last 15 years, what has happened to the BJP's electoral performance in these areas over the same period? We can also ask what kind of changes are to be seen in the electoral behaviour of places where the forces of rural-urban transition are higher than others.

Commentators usually say that the BJP is an urban party, but if we look at the share of votes polled in favour of the BJP in areas with different

Unemployment and job losses are a vital part of the demand of a specific voter bloc, specifically youths and young women.

categories of urbanisation as per our data, it shows that the party did well in places of least urbanisation as well.

Over the past decade, the party has gained significantly in every area, but the vote share gained by the BJP in urban areas has been much higher than in other locations. In 2009, the BJP's vote share in places that were more than 50 per cent urban was merely 14 per cent, but by 2019 its share had gone up threefold. In rural areas too, the BJP's vote share grew in double digits.

FROM 2009 TO 2019, the BJP's vote share has continuously grown, but in 2024, a reverse trend emerged. In this election, the BJP lost vote shares in every place, but the decline was higher in the peripheries and suburban areas.

Chart 1 suggests that the BJP's vote share is still higher in rural areas than in others. In 2009, of the total votes the BJP received, 57 per cent came from rural areas, while the share of urban votes was just 16 per cent. If we look at the votes of the Congress over the same period, a fascinating observation emerges. The total votes the Congress received in 2009 was 2 per cent fewer than the BJP's. That is, even in rural areas the Congress was behind the BJP. It was the periphery and suburban areas that provided the Congress a lead over the BJP in 2009. After that, the BJP began to lead everywhere. From 2009 to 2014, the BJP's vote share doubled in urban areas.



▼ **At a brick kiln** in Anandapuram, some 30 km from Visakhapatnam in Andhra Pradesh. Millions of people migrate from rural areas to cities and suburban areas every year in search of work.

K.R. DEEPAK

It must be noted that between 2009 and 2024, the rural space has been reducing and urban growth has been expanding. In 2009, there were 242 PCs with less than 20 per cent urban built-up area, but by 2024, this number had come down to 179.

Chart 1 shows that the contribution of PCs with a higher share of urban areas to the overall votes polled in favour of the BJP has increased over time. This is also true for the Congress, but at a lower level. Also, this is the only constituency where the BJP gained in the 2024 election despite its overall decline of around 1 percentage point.

But here is a caveat: Places are dynamic, and urbanisation is a continuous process. Constituencies keep getting more urbanised over time. For example, the share of constituencies that were primarily rural, where the proportion of urban areas was <=20 per cent showed a consis-

Table 2

HOW URBANISED ARE OUR CONSTITUENCIES?

Share of urban areas	Number of constituencies				Share of constituencies			
	2009	2014	2019	2024	2009	2014	2019	2024
<=20%	242	213	179	170	45.1%	39.7%	33.3%	31.7%
20%-35%	114	109	98	93	21.2%	20.3%	18.2%	17.3%
35%-50%	60	81	95	94	11.2%	15.1%	17.7%	17.5%
>50%	121	134	165	180	22.5%	25.0%	30.7%	33.5%
Total	537	537	537	537	100%	100%	100%	100%



tent decline over time (Table 2), with a corresponding rise in the share of highly urbanised constituencies (>50 per cent). Therefore, the apparent rise in the BJP's vote share in highly urbanised constituencies (as shown in Chart 1) is a result of the rising number of constituencies in that category—which also holds true for the Congress.

AT THIS JUNCTURE, the crucial question will be to see if any real growth in the urban population within a constituency leads to a simultaneous increase in the vote share of the BJP. We investigated this question by computing the growth rate of urban areas within a constituency from 2014 to 2019 and from 2019 to 2024—the periods that saw a dominance in the BJP's vote shares across the spectrum.

Table 3 shows the results: where the vote shares of the BJP over these three periods and

According to a report, in 2022 one-third of the population lived in cities. The percentage of people living in urban areas rose from 31.63 per cent in 2012 to 35.87 per cent in 2022.

From 2009 to 2019, the BJP's vote share grew, but in 2024, it lost vote shares everywhere, and the decline was higher in the peripheries and suburban areas.

the changes in vote shares are plotted against the different urban growth categories of the parliamentary constituencies, the BJP saw an increase in vote share across the spectrum from 2014 to 2019, but its growth was actually higher in constituencies that did not experience too great an expansion of urban areas.¹

In other words, these were places that are mainly the large cities where BJP already had an established vote bank and further growth prospects are limited for it.

However, areas with a high urban growth rate have actually seen a negative change in the BJP's vote share between 2019 and 2024. This, incidentally, is also the sharpest drop across all categories for the BJP. These areas are the erstwhile low-urbanised areas.

The BJP also saw a reduction in vote share from areas that have been slow on the urban growth chart, but the drop was on a lower scale than in the rapidly urbanising areas.

This tells us a different story than what is usually understood from a superficial examination of data. It tells us that the BJP has lost more ground in the rapidly urbanising areas in the 2024 election than in the slow urbanisation growth areas. These are areas where it had improved its footprint in 2019. In essence, this means that the BJP's appeal is facing a barrier in

Table 3

BJP'S VOTE SHARE IN URBAN / URBANISING AREAS (%)

Urbanised areas	2014	2019	2024	2014-19 change	2019-24 change
<=5%	28.81	36.63	34.96	7.82	-1.67
5%-10%	24.15	34.73	34.48	10.59	-0.25
10%-20%	26.13	31.85	31.69	5.73	-0.17
20%-40%	32.80	36.23	36.84	3.43	0.61
>40%	34.28	39.57	36.73	5.28	-2.84



places that are witnessing a lot of transition from rural to urban, and this is happening despite the party's gain in popularity in the village constituencies in 2019.

Findings like this are commensurate with the larger question of unemployment and job losses, which are a vital and integrated part of the demand of a specific voter bloc, specifically youths and young women, who are invariably the agents of change in these rapidly transforming spaces.

IT IS IMPORTANT, therefore, to understand that while the rural and urban areas vote differently, the electoral preferences of those in the middle also matter. While the rural electorate has thus far dominated the electoral rhetoric and the resultant policy-making in the country, it may be time to look beyond these bin-

▼ **Daily wage labourers** waiting for work, in Mumbai in June 2021. Unemployment and job losses were key issues in this general election.

RAFIQ MAQBOOL/AP

aries and focus on the specificities of the areas that are in flux. This is also a country with large-scale internal migration, and millions of people from villages move to cities for better prospects. All this contributes to the churning and complicates our understanding of the demands and aspirations of a typical rural or urban voter.

The State-specific differences across these parameters, such as what differences are emerging in less developed and more developed States, can be another point of inquiry. This piece hopes to open up some of these debates for electoral pundits to consider going ahead. ■

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Ashish Ranjan is an election researcher and co-founder of Data Action Lab for Emerging Societies.

FOOTNOTES

1. To counter for the base effect, that is, to eliminate the absolutely rural constituencies that may witness a higher urban growth rate, for this analysis we have only considered constituencies where at least 20 per cent of the population was already living in urban areas in 2014.

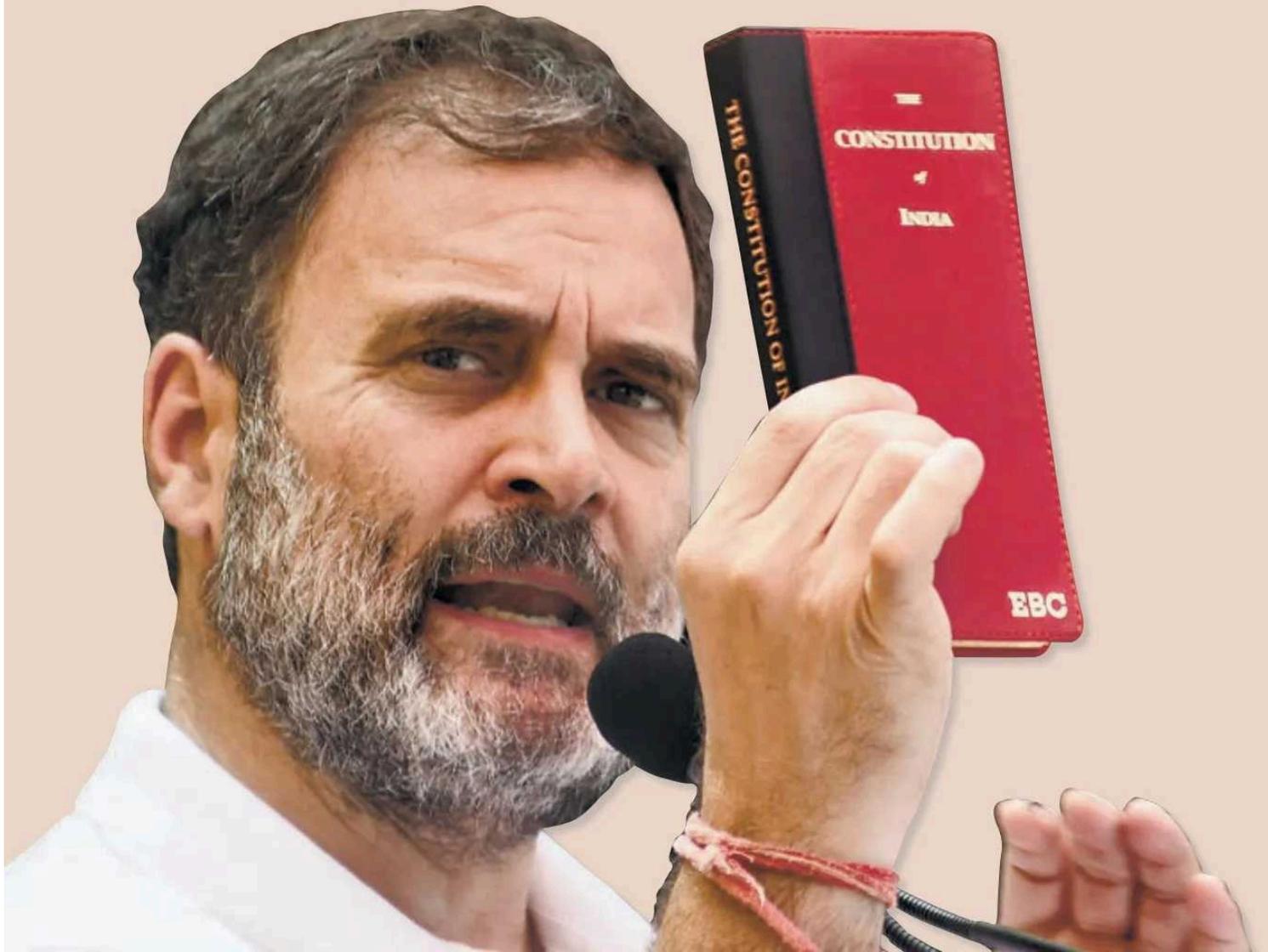
Reinventing Rahul

Through this election, a new Rahul emerged: confident, irreverent, assertive, yet accessible. With even Gen Z deigning to call him a “thirst trap”, it is quite the journey from Pappudom. **PAROMITA VOHRA**

► **Rahul Gandhi** campaigning in Patna on May 27. During the election, Rahul holding up a copy of the Constitution became a common sight. ११

On June 4, even as election results unfolded a changed political equation, Rahul Gandhi appeared in an intriguing place: the X account @archivedilfs. Expanding the acronym DILF may be more than this venerable journal can bring itself to do. For those who do not know, it stands for what some people might like to do to a Zaddy, or attractive older man, especially in the queer universe.

The tweet featured one of the videos from the Bharat Jodo Yatra where Rahul, backlit by a sunset, his wrinkles glowing in the golden hour, reaches out to



people and people reach out for him. The video was cut to the song, “Daddy’s Back”.

This may not seem like a significant political event, but I would like to argue that Rahul Gandhi’s journey from Pappu to DILF signals a turning point in not only his own evolution, but also in the evolving need for new political frames.

Although Rahul is blessed with movie star good looks, he never seemed to acquire a star’s stature, not even after perceptions of him altered with the Bharat Jodo Yatra. In December 2023, I wrote in this magazine about the very different masculinity Rahul embodies, one which provides an antidote to the more dominating and domineering version idealised over the last decade. This masculinity is softer, more embracing and caring. But I did end with the question of whether Rahul, for all his willingness to rise to the challenges of being on the losing side, could bring a more libidinal force to bear on his work and display a franker appetite for power.

THE LAST FEW WEEKS of the election campaign certainly showed us a Rahul possessed of an irreverent confidence which was mirrored in the energy and chutzpah of the Congress social media handles. What Rahul seemed to shed was a kind of self-consciousness that has shadowed him in the past. This was evident even in the interviews he did with YouTube channels such as Curly Tales and Unfiltered by Samdish during the Bharat Jodo Yatra, where he found it hard to respond fulsomely to everyday questions or humorous asides. He tended to fall back on logical-sounding, near-technical responses. He hesitated to expand on potent, culturally resonant ideas like *tapasya* even if he brought them up himself, as if that might sound overblown and dramatic. On questions from China to unemployment, he came across as a little

In other words, Rahul was trapped in a political aesthetic particular to liberal elites. Or, to put it more bluntly, an upper caste masculine aesthetic, where the idea of the “rational” dominates as the indicator of superior intellect.



▼ **Students wear** Rahul face masks at his 54th birthday celebrations at Gandhi Bhawan in Hyderabad on June 19.

THARUN VINNY/ANI

too bookish and nerdy. Knowledgeable yes, but not compelling.

In other words, he was trapped in a political aesthetic particular to liberal elites. Or, to put it more bluntly, an upper caste masculine aesthetic, where the idea of the “rational” dominates as the indicator of superior intellect, one that is cool and distant and rooted in realist, hence legalistic, forms of argument and denouncement. Here, culture must fit political theory rather than yielding new forms of theorising and paths of action. The emotional, the sensory, and the popular are viewed with mild distaste, seen as excessive hence uncontrolled, unreliable, inferior forms.

THROUGH THE ELECTIONS, Rahul seemed to slowly and steadily liberate himself from the last of this burden, which some might call the albatross of Lutyens’ Delhi. Over the course of his campaign, his images became gradually more cinematic, exceeding the boundaries of the social media frame. He was not merely transmitting decency and kindness, he was also willing to be a little rude about the other side, to make unambiguous promises, speak an emotive language, utilising every *rasa* available to a communicator: compassion, sarcasm, humour, assertion, and unabashed emotion.



Love ceased to be a politically pleasant concept and emboldened itself into an iconography of risk. Here was Rahul speaking in the rain. Here he was holding up the Constitution wherever he went. There he was with his family receiving women who brought gifts of ghee and asked his mother when she would arrange his marriage while children played with his dog. Here he was hugging his beloved sister and pulling her cheeks. There he was jumping a barrier to buy Mysore pak for “my brother Stalin”. He promised every woman below the poverty line Rs.1 lakh a year. He ceased to speak about caste and inequality via bureaucratic concepts and began to speak of these things experientially and from a place of faith. As he did so, he communicated more strongly and differently across masses of people than he had in the past.

As he evolved, jauntier and more suggestive memes appeared. The journalist Amrita Madhukalya tweeted: “GenZ twitter is so unserious, they have taken polls to a territory of innuendos and thirst traps”, while sharing a thread of said thirst traps. The emergence of Rahul as a “thirst trap”, a person whose photographs elicit and feed sexual thirst, indicates something libidinal that is unbound in the public when they connect one-to-one with a person and via that perso-

▼
A selfie session
during a ride in
the Delhi Metro
in May 2024. ANI

Also Read



Rahul Gandhi: A different kind of masculinity

na with an ideological universe. Rahul became, as stars and leaders do, the personification of an idea.

But the thirst that Rahul feeds is not merely a sexual one. We may more rightly describe it as eros. Plato defines eros as a “good composer” of every living thing, every work of art, every idea, “because you cannot give someone else what you don’t have or teach someone what you don’t know yourself”. This eros, of humour and sexual-ness, of connection and co-creation, brought to the surface what had been subterranean and scattered. It is an eros of diverse aspirations, a definition of Indianness which has been invalidated by Hindutva, a re-centring of the poor made vulnerable by the development so beloved of elites, and a new, non-technocratic imagination which must be co-created, not handed down; something porous and fluid, not intact and hermetic.

THROUGH THIS EMERGING PERSONA we see Rahul remix several ideas. For one, he reframes the idea of family, as not only the location of inherited privilege but also one of affection, loss, and supportive bonds. He also reframes the idea of a single man as the remote patriarch, the lofty ascetic, to one who exists in a vast network of relationships, of family and extended community. There are his sister and mother. There are *moonh-bole* (stated) brothers (aka my brother Stalin). There are comrades and partners, like Akhilesh Yadav (the UP *ke launde* or Uttar Pradesh’s lads). There is the respected older colleague, like Mallikarjun Kharge who holds Rahul’s hand to cut a birthday cake and feeds him a slice. He reframes the idea of touch as being not just sexual, but comradely, comforting, collegial, as he reaches out to people of all ages and genders in gestures of connection. These images of togetherness are potent for a reason.

The dread of unemployment, the obstacles to education, the crushing inflation—the sheer difficulty of life—have left people feeling undefended and alone. This comes on the heels of a long cultural period whose pervasive motto has been each man for himself. Moreover, it follows a time when tragic events around the





country have not been met with compassion by the ruling party. In fact, all events have been subsumed into the figure of Narendra Modi, and constantly used to bolster his image. We can think of Manipur, we can think of migrant workers on the long walk home in an abruptly announced lockdown, we can think of deaths due to COVID-19, and deaths due to communal hatred. Compassion, even acknowledgement, has been in short supply. Serving the people has become a long-forgotten formality. In a time of hypercapitalism, we inhabit a transactional culture, politically and personally, and it corrodes our lives, politically and personally.

In this world, which might be encapsulated in the Hindi phrase, “*Aisa koi saga nahin, jise humne thaga nahin*” (There’s not one relation I did not dupe), Rahul dares to personify the idea of “*Sab mere sage hain*” (The world is my family).

Equally, Rahul reframes the idea of the hero’s journey—a solitary sojourn to success. We do not see him emerge as a single or singular figure. His journey seems to exist amid other journeys, taken in tandem if not together. The images that emerge of the opposition victories in this election are heterogenous. We see Akhilesh Yadav and Uddhav Thackeray. We see the entry of Priyanka Gandhi, arguably the more

He reframes the idea of touch as being not just sexual, but comradely, comforting, collegial, as he reaches out to people of all ages and genders in gestures of connection.

► **Rahul comforts** a woman during the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra in January 2024. ANI

charismatic and statesperson-like of the two, competition and collaboration at once. We see Geniben Thakor defeating the BJP in Gujarat. We see Sanjana Jatav dancing when she wins, or, as the X handle of “The Dalit Voice” put it with pithy beauty, “One of the youngest Dalit women to become an MP is enjoying democracy.”

IF THE LAST DECADE SAW a paradigm shift in the discourse of politics, where engagement and debate became impossible in the face of totalitarian domination, perhaps this heterogeneity and its accompanying federalism signal a new paradigm shift. If the voter was often seen passively in terms of identity rather than actively as making strategic choices, then in this new paradigm the voter too demands to be looked at and seen. As Revati Laul wrote in a news website, “We are a country of subversives. Even when half of us conform and capitulate, we are in conversation with the half that does not. At various points in our lives as individuals and as a collective, each of us has conformed, capitulated, and then thrown it up in the air because that is who we innately are as a people. And it’s hard to measure, hard to quantify, because by definition it means that most of the time an Indian will not tell you what she really thinks. You have to be very good at reading the subtext and at eking it out of her.” In the mixed results of this election is a conversation that India is having with itself—perhaps an argument even. We cannot say Rahul has architected it, but for a number of reasons, he has come to symbolise it conceptually.

How, then, should Rahul enjoy democracy?

The answer seems self-evident—through trying to be Prime Minister. And yet, that answer is not so self-evident. Rahul’s own seeming ambivalence on this matter has marked him as a dubious political proposition across the ideological spectrum.

Hence, even when Rahul, and the Congress, seem to be having a moment, he cannot catch a break. The commentariat is always dis-

satisfied. Some suggest he should open a gym. Others complain that he brings up his personal losses and traumas too often. Another acknowledges that there have been some achievements but sets a report card for further progress to be made, or else.

But maybe these reactions say something about how our relationship with politics has become somewhat literal, where winning is the only thing that validates a political idea. There is that fear that Rahul Gandhi is more winsome than winning. And that by liking or supporting him, we show ourselves to be foolish believers. Not rational or critical enough, merely driven by sentiment. Should he be defeated, we too will be humiliated.

Hence, we wait, always, for him to culminate in conventional success before we are willing to grant full approval. But what if a climax is not the journey Rahul proposes for himself, at least not quite yet? Rahul has repeatedly said that he sees this as an ideological fight. It has its electoral dimensions, but his journey seems to be primarily a philosophical one.

Perhaps we might reframe how we see political success. What we see as Rahul's indeci-

Rahul's journey seems to exist amid other journeys. The images that emerge of the opposition victories in this election are heterogenous. We see Akhilesh Yadav and Uddhav Thackeray. We see the entry of Priyanka Gandhi. We see Geniben Thakor defeating the BJP in Gujarat. We see Sanjana Jatav, a young Dalit MP, dancing when she wins.

▼ **Rahul gives**
Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge a piece of birthday cake in New Delhi on June 19. ANI

siveness might also be seen as an open-endedness. Even while crafting a certain personal journey, he seems to generate the idea that multiple journeys might occur in cooperation, and iteratively.

ON JUNE 19, Rahul celebrated his 54th birthday. He ended the day with a reel where he initialled his signature white T-shirt, one that updates the politician's garb of kurta to an unpretentious, modern, youthful, class-agnostic, and gender-neutral garment, open wide to interpretations.

"This T-shirt for me symbolizes transparency, simplicity, and perseverance. I am sure you have used these values and fought for these values in your life. Tell me how you have used them, and I'll send you a white T-shirt in response. Love you all," he tweeted. It was an offer of co-creation and allyship through a common, inclusive frame, a validation of people's own political journeys, and at the same time an acceptance of the ideological responsibility he has laid claim to.

For Rahul's growing following, this transparency and sincerity are real, and they respond to it with growing love, as if he were a favourite cousin. They express a passionate wish that he should be Prime Minister, but even as they do so, they qualify it with the idea that he stands for values they believe in and that they want to see embodied in the system. It is entirely possible that whoever else becomes Prime Minister, in the comradeship of Rahul, they would still earn the public's love. ■

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THE CHANGING FACE OF DALIT POLITICS

This election saw New Age leaders take over to change the narrative of Dalit politics by focussing on pragmatic issues rather than on personality cults and identity politics. **ANAND MISHRA**

Dalit politics in north India seems to be in a state of flux, with fewer Dalit mascots holding sway over community votes. Given the upward social mobility among Dalits and their growing disenchantment with the status quo, they no longer want to be mere foot soldiers of a particular outfit or captive voters in furtherance of a personality cult. The beneficiaries of this shift have been a slew of opposition parties.

This represents a reversal of the politics that has played out since 2014, when the BJP benefited both from the marginalisation of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Uttar Pradesh and from its alliance with specific Dalit groups such as that of Ram Vilas Paswan in Bihar or Ramdas Athawale in Maharashtra.

Of the 84 Lok Sabha seats reserved for Scheduled Castes, the party won 46 in 2019 but only 30 this time. The Congress, meanwhile, has tripled its tally of reserved seats from 6 to 19.

Of the 80 Lok Sabha seats in Uttar Pradesh, 17 are reserved for SCs. Of these, this time the BJP won 8, the Samajwadi Party (SP) 7, the Congress 1, and Chandrashekhar Azad Ravan (Aazad Samaj Party-Kanshi Ram) 1. A CSDS-Lokniti Survey published in *The Hindu* says the SP-Congress alliance won 56 per cent of

► **Chandrashekhar Azad**, who won from Nagina, in a 2020 photograph. He won despite both the BSP and the SP fielding candidates against him. S. SUDARSHAN

the non-Jatav Dalit votes and 25 per cent of Jatav Dalit votes in Uttar Pradesh this time. The change could have a long-term impact for the State's politics.

Indeed, the victories of Awadhesh Prasad (SP) of the Dalit Pasi caste in Ayodhya, a non-reserved constituency and a crucible of Hindutva politics, against the BJP's two-term MP Lallu Singh, and of seven other Dalits in reserved (SC) constituencies signals a significant change in the frosty relationship of Dalits with the SP. The latter has hardly received Dalit votes since the infamous Lucknow Guest House incident of 1995, when its workers allegedly attacked BSP chief Mayawati after she withdrew support to the Mulayam Singh Yadav government in Uttar Pradesh.

Even in 2019, Dalit voters remained cold to the SP despite the party being in an alliance with the BSP and ensuring a transfer of its votes to the BSP. As a result, the BSP, which scored nothing in 2014, won 10 Lok Sabha seats, while the SP barely managed to retain 5 seats.

This year, without the alliance and contesting 48 seats, the BSP's vote share has come down to 9.39 per cent from the 19.43 per cent it had in 2019. The BSP failed to get substantial sections of both the Jatav votes and the non-Jatav Dalit votes. For a party that gave Uttar Pradesh its first Dalit Chief Minister who completed a full term (2007-12), this is by all accounts a huge setback.

The result also signals the return of the Dalit vote to the Congress, which has ruled the

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“Dalit aspirations and Dalit consciousness will take new forms and shapes even if the BSP does not revive itself.”

Prof. Anand Kumar

Retired professor, JNU.

Hindi heartland in the past with its Brahmin-Dalit-Muslim combination. While the Congress’ performance in direct fights against the BJP has generally been abysmal, in this election its SC candidates—Sanjana Jatav and Bhajan Lal Jatav from Bharatpur and Karauli Dholpur in Rajasthan, and Manoj Kumar from Sasaram in Bihar—emerged victorious against formidable BJP candidates.

“Dalit aspirations and Dalit consciousness will take new forms and shapes even if Mayawati’s BSP does not revive itself,” said Prof. Anand Kumar, a retired professor from the Centre for the Study of Social Systems, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi. “This time the SP showed some wisdom by breaking free from the Muslim-Yadav mould; the number of seats for other castes, such as Rajbhar and Nishad, in the OBC bloc has also increased.” A case in point is the victory of the SP’s Rambhual Nishad in Sultanpur against the former Union Minister Maneka Gandhi of the BJP.

According to Kumar, all sections seeking direct political representation is a new phenomenon. So is Chandrashekhar Azad’s victory in Uttar Pradesh’s Nagina. Kumar called it a warning signal for both the Congress and the BJP that Dalits will create their own leadership if they are not given space. The new consciousness, he added, was a sign of the decline of capitalist and dynastic politics, as evidenced by the emergence of new leaders with no political lineage.

The BSP’s vote share has been falling even in Assembly elections. In the 2007 Assembly election, the BSP had a vote share of 30.4 per cent and 206 of the 403 seats; in 2012 it fell to





25.91 per cent (80 seats), in 2017 to 22.23 per cent (19 seats), and in 2022 to 12.88 per cent (1 seat). That is, nearly half of the around 22 per cent Dalit vote in the State had shifted.

THE 2024 LOK SABHA election too signals a shift of the Dalit vote, this time to the SP-Congress. Evidently, Dalits are not returning to the BSP, especially the non-Jatavs. With Mayawati's marginalisation opening up space in Uttar Pradesh's polity, Dalits are set to become major beneficiaries of competitive Dalit politics.

In his book *Behenji: The Rise and Fall of Mayawati*, the political columnist Ajay Bose says: "Since her Dalit base is spread evenly across Uttar Pradesh and not concentrated in pockets, the BSP has always had a big problem with the first past the post system. It has invariably struggled to win [seats] with only the support of its core base."

Awadhesh Prasad's win in Ayodhya, despite a high-voltage Ram temple consecration cere-

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Charanjit Singh Channi of the Congress campaigning in Jalandhar on May 10. He won by 1.76 lakh votes, which is the highest in the constituency's history. ANI

mony in January, could well be the tipping point for secular politics in north India. And the OBC-Dalit-Muslim consolidation could well trip up Hindutva politics.

Azad's victory in Nagina too has to be seen against this backdrop. He won despite both the BSP and the SP fielding candidates against him. Azad, unlike Mayawati, has followed the path of aggressive Dalit politics since he set up the Bhim Army in 2015, and his rise in Uttar Pradesh has been gradual; in the 2022 Assembly election, he contested against Chief Minister Adityanath from the Gorakhpur urban seat and lost.

Harish S. Wankhede, Assistant Professor, Centre for Political Studies, School of Social Sciences, JNU, told *Frontline* that Azad's victory was unlike that of conventional Dalit politicians and suggests that there are significant recipients of radical Ambedkarite consciousness in the current era.

"Azad's machoistic image, militant language, and uncompromising attitude towards



Charanjit Singh Channi's victory from Jalandhar in Punjab indicates the potential for Congress' Dalit consolidation plans.

significant entry in UP's politics and building an organic organisation of committed young leaders, intellectuals, and social activists is required, which is not the case with the Aazad Samaj Party yet. Further, he has to offer a new social justice manifesto in response to the cultural and economic crises that the neoliberal market economy has perpetuated over the socially marginalised groups. While Azad is popular and promising, he lacks the additional appendages to mark his presence in national politics discourse as a visionary leader.”

LIKE AZAD, a few other Dalit leaders made their presence felt this time across north India. All of them are educated and committed to social justice. Sanjana Jatav's victory from Bharatpur is significant as it is the home district of Chief Minister Bhajan Lal Sharma. Sanjana talks of the backwardness of Bharatpur, which the BJP won in the previous two elections, ompared with other regions. She mentions her modest background and how her father used to drive a tractor. The focus of this 26-year-old law graduate is on creating jobs for women.



the Right forces has ignited a new energy among Dalit youths, making them his rapidly growing support base. The possibility for the revival of an independent Dalit movement depends on the capacity of such young leaders,” said Wankhede.

“Azad appears to be engaging with Dalit questions using innovative populist ideas and impressive political rhetoric. Although Azad has adopted the conventional tactics of the BSP to win elections, like his dependency on the Jatav-Muslim support base and the promotion of Bahujan ideology, he also stands distinct from his predecessors. His sudden arrival on the national scene as a key Dalit leader is astonishing, as many Dalit political leaders, while active and influential on the ground, have not received such extensive limelight and mass popularity.”

However, Azad's popularity, he said, appeared to have been crafted by social media and the BSP still held significant influence over marginalised groups. Said Wankhede: “For a



► **Shambhavi Choudhary** of the LJP (Ram Vilas), who won from Samastipur, talks about transforming regional connectivity and infrastructure. p11



Shambhavi Choudhary, who won from Samastipur in Bihar as a nominee of the Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas), or LJP (Ram Vilas), is another young Dalit who means serious business. Shambhavi is the daughter of Ashok Kumar Choudhary, a senior Minister in the Nitish Kumar government. Armed with a bachelor's degree in sociology from Lady Shri Ram College, Delhi, and a master's from the Delhi School of Economics, Shambhavi talks of transforming regional connectivity and infrastructure.

Tanuj Punia, who defeated the BJP in Barabanki is the son of Congress leader P.L. Punia, once a close aide of Mayawati, and a B'Tech

▼ **Awadhesh Prasad**, the SP leader who won from Faizabad, in Ayodhya on June 5. ANUSHREE FADNAVIS/REUTERS

Awadhesh Prasad's win in Ayodhya could well be the tipping point for secular politics in north India. The OBC-Dalit-Muslim consolidation could trip up Hindutva politics.

from IIT Roorkee. On his Instagram profile with 62,000 followers, he talks of how Mayawati has been sidelined in Dalit politics.

The Congress candidate Manoj Kumar, who defeated the BJP in Sasaram, has a degree in rural management. Arjun Ram Meghwal, a four-term Lok Sabha member of the BJP from Bikaner, is a law graduate with an MBA.

The buzz in the BSP is that Mayawati, who removed her nephew Akash Anand from the campaign midway, could make him the face of the party again to ward off the challenge from Azad and other emerging Dalit leaders. Akash Anand is an MBA from the University of Plymouth in the UK.

Charanjit Singh Channi's victory from Jalandhar in Punjab indicates the potential for the Congress' Dalit consolidation plans. Channi, who holds LLB and MBA degrees, is suave and shuns controversies. Before the 2022 Assembly election in Punjab, Rahul Gandhi replaced veteran leader Amarinder Singh with Channi as Chief Minister. This was a first for the community in Punjab, where Dalits constitute 32 per cent of the population. Channi, who was Chief Minister for 111 days, won from Jalandhar by 1.76 lakh votes, which is the highest in the constituency's electoral history.

The Congress' Bhajan Lal Jatav, who defeated the BJP in Karau Dholpur, hogged the headlines in 2021 for demanding an increase in the SC reservation quota from 16 to 18 per cent in accordance with the 2021 Census.

THE CLICHÉ OF identity politics is conspicuously absent in the conversation of these emerging Dalit leaders unlike under the three Rams—Kanshi Ram, Jagjivan Ram, and Ram Vilas Paswan. Under Mayawati, the trend shifted from “Bahujan” to “Sarvajan”, but the language of caste assertion remained the same.

The contrast in today's Dalit politics is also exemplified by the difference in the approach and style of the two Dalit Union Ministers from Bihar in the Modi government—Chirag Paswan of the LJP (Ram Vilas) and Jitan Ram Manjhi of the Hindustani Awam Morcha (Secular).

While Chirag seeks to cultivate a constituency beyond Dalit politics and enlarge on the development plank with the “Bihar first, Bihari first” pitch, Manjhi was caught in an older controversy for his remarks against Brahmins dur-

FACTS AT A GLANCE

1936: B.R. Ambedkar forms Independent Labour Party.

1972: Namdeo Dhasal establishes the Dalit Panthers in Mumbai, inspired by the African-American Black Panther movement.

1984: Kanshi Ram forms the BSP.

1960: D. Sanjivayya takes charge as the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, the first Dalit to hold the post in the country. He was in the post until 1962.

1995: Mayawati becomes UP Chief Minister. She is the only Dalit to become Chief Minister four times. She is also the only Dalit Chief Minister to have completed a full term (2007-12). Though Ram Vilas Paswan's dream to become Bihar Chief Minister did not materialise, the State had had two Chief Ministers from the Dalit community—Bhola Paswan Shastri (1968-71) and Ram Sundar Das (1979).

2021: Charanjit Singh Channi becomes the first Dalit Chief Minister of Punjab.

ing his campaign, for which he later apologised.

In Haryana, the re-election of former Union Minister Kumari Selja will give heft to the Congress in Dalit segments ahead of the Assembly election later this year. But this can happen only if the party works out the elusive Dalit-Jat unity, which has now become a possibility following a compromise between Selja and Bhupinder Singh Hooda.

Contrary to popular belief, Wankhede said, Dalit consciousness is robust, radical, and committed to social justice values, and the current political dynamics showcases the point that Dalit political parties can also be prudent and pragmatic. "Major Dalit parties (like the BSP and the Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi) chose not to join national political alliances while some others (mainly the LJP and the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi) shifted to different sides. The LJP joined the BJP-led NDA and showed that a Dalit political party can adopt an accessible, pragmatic route and divert the Dalit movement towards a new destination," Wankhede said. ■

Breaking barriers

Jitan Ram Manjhi, oldest Minister in the Modi Cabinet and a member of the Mahadalit Musahar community, is aware of the expectations from him. **ANAND MISHRA**

Indian politics is replete with stories of men and women who have surmounted their socio-economic challenges to occupy seats of power. The narrative of how a tea vendor's son rose to be Prime Minister or how a Dalit's daughter became Chief Minister of the most populous State of Uttar Pradesh needs no retelling.

Yet, one story that has escaped public attention is that of a Mahadalit from the Musahar community who is now the Minister for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises in the Narendra Modi Cabinet. His Hindustani Awam Morcha (Secular) is a constituent of the ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA). From his humble origins in a community that survived by eating rats to overcome food scarcity in the monsoon months, Jitan Ram Manjhi has come a long way.

At 79, Manjhi is the oldest Minister in the Modi Cabinet. A party hopper who has changed alliances at the drop of a hat, Manjhi, ironically, sought to assure Modi of his unflinching support this time, alluding to the mountain man Dashrath Manjhi, who cut through a mountain after chipping at it for 24 and a half years. Addressing the NDA Parliamentary Party meeting on June 7, Manjhi said he belonged to the same community as Dashrath and that, like him, he would shine the light of development on areas where it had not reached.

The Musahar community is part of the Mahadalits, who make up around 10 per cent of Bihar's population. They do not own land and work as sharecroppers. Manjhi has no qualms in admitting that he belongs to a community that has survived on eating rats. "Even I am a rat-eater," he once told *Frontline* in an interview. "The primary occupation of our Musahar caste is tilling land. The production of wheat and rice crops happen at different intervals. Rats take shelter in the paddy crop. When the crop is harvested, we catch them and eat them."

The early adversities in life strengthened Manjhi, whose political career began with the Congress in 1980. He changed parties several times, joining the Janata Dal (1990-96), the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) (1996-2005), and the Janata Dal (United), or JD(U), in 2005 before founding the HAM (Secular) in 2015.

Manjhi first became an MLA in 1980, from the Naxal-affected Fatehpur Assembly segment of Gaya. This is Manjhi's first Lok Sabha victory. He lost the Gaya Lok Sabha seat in 1991, 2014, and 2019.

Manjhi has served as a Minister under several Chief Ministers in Bihar since 1983, including Chandrashekhar Singh, Satyendra Narayan Sinha, Jagannath Mishra, Lalu Prasad, Rabri Devi, and Nitish Kumar. In Nitish Kumar's Cabinet, he was SC/ST Welfare Minister before Kumar named him Chief Minister.

He was the "accidental" Chief Minister after Nitish Kumar, hurt by the decimation of his party at the hands of the Narendra Modi-led BJP in the 2014 Lok Sabha election (when the JD(U) won just two seats), decided to hand over the mantle to Manjhi. He served as the 23rd Chief Minister for nine months from May 20, 2014, to February 20, 2015.

Later, he formed the HAM (Secular), but his party won just one seat in the 2015 Assembly election, which he fought in alliance with the BJP and Ram Vilas Paswan's Lok Janshakti Party. He then joined the RJD-led Mahagathbandhan but failed to make an impact in the 2019 Lok Sabha election. He returned to the NDA last year.

AS CENTRAL MINISTER, Manjhi is aware of the expectations people have of him. "They believe that since Manjhi did a lot of development work in the State and Magadh [region] as Chief Minister for nine months, he can develop the region in future as well. People believe that since Manjhi has a

good rapport with Narendra Modi, if he becomes MP, he can do great work for the region," he had told *Frontline* in an interview during the election campaign.

Soon after he was sworn in as Minister on June 10, the Aam Aadmi Party held a press conference in New Delhi, denouncing the appointment of one who had said "Ravan" is better than "Ram". They were alluding to Manjhi's statement in March last year when he reportedly said that Ram is not a "historical" figure and that Ravan was far more well-versed in *karma kanda* (rituals) than Ram. He had also said that he considers the Ramayana to be a work of fiction. Manjhi was then part of the RJD-led Mahagathbandhan in Bihar.

When the opposition used his remarks against him in the run-up to the Lok Sabha election, he apologised and hurriedly made a visit to Ayodhya.

Manjhi is no stranger to controversy. In 2021, he raised questions over the Hindu religion and the Satyanarayan Puja, a ritualistic worship popular in the Hindi belt. Addressing a meeting of the Musahar Sabha in Patna, Manjhi had said: "Satyanarayan Puja is held even in our *tolas* now. Brahmins perform the rituals but do not eat at our homes and demand cash in place of food."

Manjhi has never shied away from saying that he does not believe in *puja path* (rituals). He has said in

interviews that he was once forced out of a temple during a puja when he was in class VII and became convinced that the gods belonged only to the dominant castes.

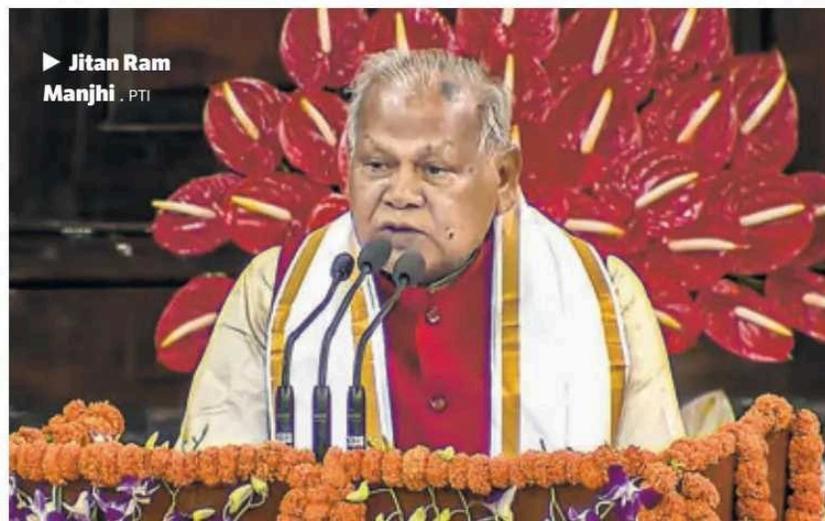
After the 2022 Assembly election, Manjhi had said: "I keep telling Dalits that you think yourselves as Hindus, but you have been treated as slaves for the past 75 years. Priests are reluctant to perform ceremonies at your place, and even when they do, they do not agree to accept food offered by you." He also called those who identified themselves as "upper caste" as outsiders and not natives.

The BJP had then hit back asking Manjhi to come clean about his religious identity if he did not consider himself a Hindu: "If sporting a tilak causes him discomfort, does he want to wear the skull-cap?"

In November 2023, when Manjhi questioned the veracity of the Bihar government's caste survey, Nitish Kumar said: "It was because of my stupidity that he became the Chief Minister. He doesn't have any sense."

In 2015, a controversy erupted when cops were deployed to guard the mango and litchi trees at the Chief Minister's residence in Patna when Manjhi was still occupying the bungalow after his resignation. Manjhi claimed it was proof of Nitish Kumar's "petty mindset". Kumar laughed it off by saying he was focussed on the development of Bihar, but if someone's entire focus was on eating mangoes and litchis, he would have the fruits picked and delivered to him.

While a section of the people considers Manjhi a motormouth, to many others he is an iconoclast who calls a spade a spade. Indeed, it has taken Manjhi more than 45 years to reach where he has now. Now is the time to make good every promise he has made all these years.





► **Farmer leaders** protest the three contentious farm laws at the Delhi-Haryana border on December 14, 2020. MANISH SWARUP/AP

REAPING AGRARIAN ANGER

In States that were the site of farmer protests in 2020-21, the BJP suffered a major setback despite its government at the Centre making many overtures to the peasant community. **T.K. RAJALAKSHMI**

In the first week of June, Kangana Ranaut, actor and MP-elect from Mandi constituency, Himachal Pradesh, made news for entirely non-film-related reasons. Ranaut was slapped by a female Central Industrial Security Force constable at the Chandigarh airport for “belittling” women peasants during the farmers’ protests against the three contentious farm laws in 2020-21. The constable’s mother, it transpired, had participated in the protests. The errant constable was suspended and an inquiry instituted against her. Although the incident was duly condemned, the constable’s expression of anger, related as it was to the “treatment of farmers” by the government and its apologists, became an interesting point of discussion.

The role of the recent farmer and peasant



In Maharashtra, the export ban on onions dominated the discourse in rural segments of constituencies like Nashik, Dindori, Pune, Ahmednagar, Dhule, Baramati, and Shirur.

struggles in shaping the outcome of the results in the 18th Lok Sabha election cannot be emphasised enough. The electoral setback to the BJP was particularly felt in States where agrarian movements and peasant struggles took place, be it Haryana, Punjab, parts of western Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Maharashtra.

The principal beneficiaries were the constituents of the INDIA bloc. In States where the Congress shared the opposition space with its allies, it made electoral gains. Since the Congress was seen as leading the INDIA bloc, it became the principal beneficiary in some States. This came about despite the Central government withdrawing the three farm laws in 2021 and making overtures to the peasant community through multifarious kisan schemes.

WHILE MSP LEGALISATION, the implementation of the M.S. Swaminathan Commission recommendations, and the shoddy treatment of the farmers' protest (including the most recent round in February 2024) were the larger issues, there were also region-specific issues such as the export ban on onions in Maharashtra that led to a fall in its wholesale price, and the pending dues of sugarcane farmers in western Uttar Pradesh.

Frontline spoke to a cross-section of farmer leaders and social scientists to understand the impact of the farmer protests on the electoral outcome, particularly in Punjab, Haryana, western Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Maharashtra.

In Maharashtra, onions dominated the discourse in rural segments of constituencies like Nashik, Dindori, Pune, Ahmednagar, Dhule, Baramati, and Shirur. INDIA bloc candidates won in Nashik, Dindori, and Dhule. Ashok Dhawale, president of the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS), said that onion farmers were "hop-

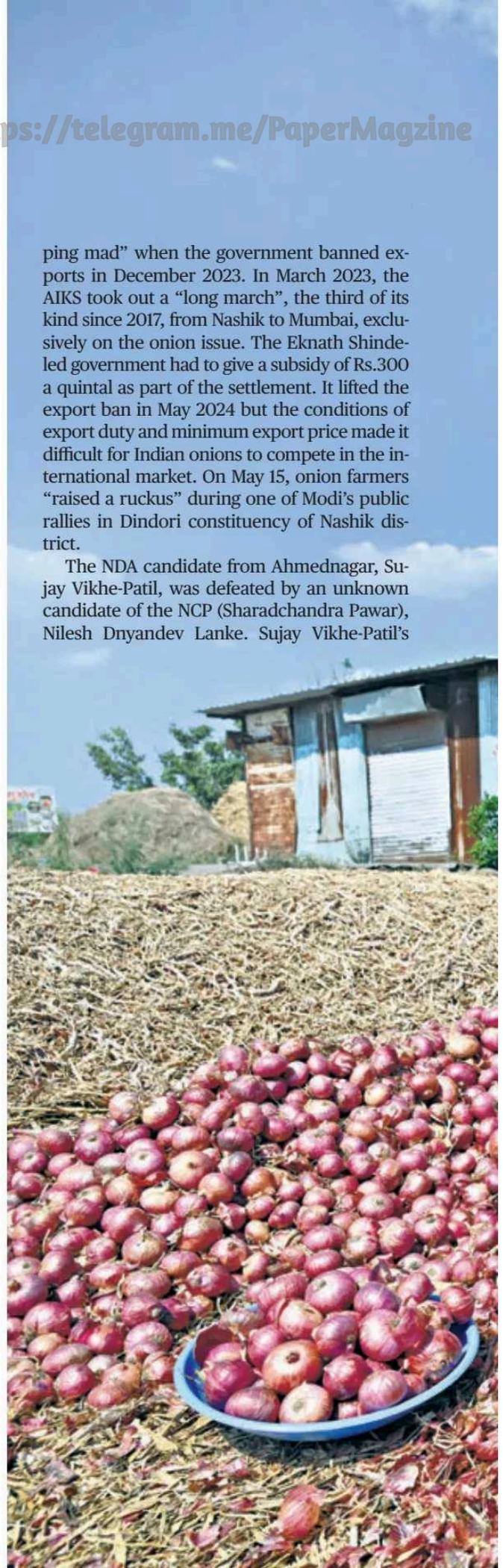
ping mad" when the government banned exports in December 2023. In March 2023, the AIKS took out a "long march", the third of its kind since 2017, from Nashik to Mumbai, exclusively on the onion issue. The Eknath Shinde-led government had to give a subsidy of Rs.300 a quintal as part of the settlement. It lifted the export ban in May 2024 but the conditions of export duty and minimum export price made it difficult for Indian onions to compete in the international market. On May 15, onion farmers "raised a ruckus" during one of Modi's public rallies in Dindori constituency of Nashik district.

The NDA candidate from Ahmednagar, Sujay Vikhe-Patil, was defeated by an unknown candidate of the NCP (Sharadchandra Pawar), Nilesh Dnyandev Lanke. Sujay Vikhe-Patil's

► An onion farmer in Nashik.

The ban on the export of onions, which led to a fall in its wholesale price, dominated the election discourse in Maharashtra.

B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM



father Radhakrishna Vikhe-Patil is a Minister in the State government and his grandfather Vitthal Rao Vikhe-Patil is credited with launching the cooperative movement. The Shirdi (reserved) seat, also in the onion belt, was won by the Shiv Sena (UBT).

Dhawale explained: "Even if there are burning issues, they only get expression in political-electoral terms if there is mobilisation and struggle around those issues." He added that even though the AIKS had initiated the protests for fair onion prices, there were other groups, too, that threw their weight behind the issue.

SOYA BEAN AND COTTON issues loomed large in the Marathwada and Vidarbha regions, known as the "graveyard of

farmers". Dhawale said that according to a petition taken up by the Aurangabad bench of the Bombay High Court, 1,439 farmers from Vidarbha and 1,088 farmers from Marathwada died by suicide in 2023. In the Marathwada belt, NDA candidates lost in all segments except Aurangabad. The reservation issue for Marathas was felt more keenly here even though its impact resonated across the State.

In the Vidarbha region, the NDA won only 3 of 10 seats. One of them was Nagpur, won by Nitin Gadkari. The BJP lost the adjoining Ramtek seat (rural Nagpur). Dhawale said the NDA won the Akola and Buldhana seats only because Prakash Ambedkar and his party, Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi, played spoiler. In Buldhana, Ravikant Tupkar, the candidate propped by Raju Shetti, prominent farmer leader and president of the Swabhimani Paksha, came third but secured a good number of votes. Dhawale said Tupkar had led militant struggles on soya bean



prices in the region. “That is why, electorally, he was able to get that many votes,” he explained. Raju Shetti was himself relegated to third place in the Hatkanangale seat in Kolhapur district.

IN WESTERN MAHARASHTRA (Kolhapur, Sangli, Satara, Pune), sugarcane and dairy farmers felt they had been shortchanged by the Centre, thanks to the ban on ethanol production and the ban on sugar exports. Milk rates have been dropping steadily and farmers in Maharashtra are being paid much less than their counterparts in Gujarat. Dhawale was of the opinion that the State government could well have intervened in favour of dairy farmers since milk was a local issue.

In Punjab, where the BJP was completely wiped out, the Congress reaped the benefits of the peasant protests. Farmer representatives told *Frontline* that the community was clear that they would vote for the Congress since it was leading the INDIA bloc from the front. Baljeet Grewal, general secretary of the Punjab Kisan Sabha, explained that the vote share of the BJP remained more or less the same as in the last election. While the party’s independent vote share was never apparent as it had always contested with the Shiromani Akali Dal, in Ludhiana it saw a bump in its vote share owing to the large migrant population from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Rural support for the BJP was almost nil, as the people saw it as a party hostile to farmers.

“The impact of the farmers’ agitation was felt all over the State. However, districts like Ludhiana have become highly commercialised with little dependence on agriculture. The support for the BJP comes from that segment,” said Grewal. “Around Ludhiana it is totally different. The same goes for Jalandhar district. A good majority of the landed people here live abroad. The land is tilled by tenant farmers. So the owners do not

really have a stake in the Centre’s farm policies. But the belt from Patiala onwards and moving towards Sangrur and Fazilka is entirely dependent on agriculture.”

Giving an example of the impact of the farmers’ struggle in this election, Grewal said that Amritpal Singh, who won the Khadoor Sahib seat as an Independent, had tried to “hijack” the farmers’ movement in 2020-21. Adding that it was the Congress that ultimately managed to reap the benefits of the farmers’ anger, Grewal stated that the decline of the fortunes of the Akali Dal was because of the party’s ambivalence towards the kisan *andolan*. Of the 13 seats in Punjab, the BJP ranked third in 6, came second in 3, fourth in 2, and a poor fifth in the 2 seats won by Independents.

In Haryana, the farmers’ movement and agrarian issues resonated across the State except southern Haryana where the BJP has pockets of influence among the Ahir community, the se-

▼ **Farmers raise slogans** against Prime Minister Narendra Modi at a protest to demand minimum crop prices at Gurdaspur, Punjab on May 24, 2024. NARINDER NANU/AFP

Farmer representatives in Punjab, where the BJP was completely wiped out, told *Frontline* that they were clear that they would vote for the Congress since it was leading the INDIA bloc from the front.



cond largest after the Jats. Mahabir Jaglan, former professor of geography from Kurukshetra University, said the catchment areas of the farmer protests were initially confined to the north-eastern parts of the State. The farmers here were concerned about the dismantling of the *mandis* and the system of procurement. When it intensified, the agitation spread to the northern, central, and western tracts of the State. In southern Haryana, barring the Palwal and Mewat regions, the movement did not have much impact.

In areas where farmers participated in large numbers in the protests, the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM) prevailed on the Congress to nominate candidates who had supported the movement. Jaglan told *Frontline*: “The Congress fielded only two members from the Jat community this time, from Rohtak and Hisar. More than caste identity, people were particular that candidates who supported the protests be fielded.”

The Bhiwani-Mahendargarh seat is a case in

Baljeet Grewal, general secretary of the Punjab Kisan Sabha, said that the decline of the fortunes of the Shiromani Akali Dal was because of the party’s ambivalence towards the kisan *andolan*.

point. The constituency has a mix of Jat, Ahir, and Yadav votes. The Congress candidate, Rao Dan Singh, who is the sitting MLA and belongs to the Ahir community, trailed in the Ahirwal dominated segments of the Lok Sabha constituency. Interestingly, the BJP candidate, who hails from the Jat community, trailed in the Jat-dominated segments but secured the votes of the Ahirs and the Yadavs, both OBCs who did not support the farmer protests. Both communities influenced the outcome in Gurugram and Bhiwani-Mahendargarh, both of which the BJP won.

Explaining why Jats rallied behind candidates who supported peasant issues, Jaglan said: “I visited my village in Bhiwani district and asked a section of Jats whom they would prefer as their candidate. They were emphatically against Shruti Choudhry, a Jat herself, as she had not supported the farmers during the agitation.” Choudhry is an ex-MP from Bhiwani-Mahendargarh to whom the Congress denied the ticket. On June 18, she, along with her mother Kiran Choudhry, a four-time Congress MLA, defected to the BJP.

There were instances of farmer leaders indirectly ensuring the victory of BJP candidates. In Kurukshetra, Gurnam Singh Charuni, a member of the SKM, nurtured ambitions of contesting himself and when that did not happen, he threw a spanner in the prospects of the AAP candidate by declaring the SKM’s support to Abhay Chautala of the Indian National Lok Dal. Though Chautala did not win the seat, the Jat votes were divided and the INDIA bloc candidate, a non-Jat, lost.

IN UTTAR PRADESH TOO, the peasant community participated in the 2020-21 farmer protests, although their concerns were dispersed and their participation not as intensive as that of farmers from Haryana and Punjab. Their concerns had more to do with sugarcane prices





than with a legal framework for MSP. Also, the participation of Jats in the 2020-21 protest was confined to a few districts in western Uttar Pradesh like Meerut, Baghpat, and Muzaffarnagar. The peasant communities from Aligarh, Mathura, and Agra did not participate actively in the agitation. Notably, these seats went to the BJP.

But the outcome was starkly different in Kairana, Muzaffarnagar, Baghpat, Bijnor, Saharanpur, and Nagina, where non-BJP candidates were elected. It was argued that even though the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD), an ally of the NDA, won two seats, the wins are for the RLD candidates themselves and cannot be interpreted as support for the Modi government.

Inderjit Singh, vice-president of the Haryana AIKS, said that the BJP heavyweight Sanjeev Balyan's defeat in Muzaffarnagar, Chandrashekhar Azad's victory in Nagina, and the complete rout of the BJP in eastern Rajasthan could be attributed largely to the peasants' anger against the BJP.

Even though the agitation was perceived to

▼ **Tear gas** fired at protesting farmers at the Delhi Chalo march near the Punjab- Haryana border at Shambhu on February 21, 2024. PTI

have been led by Jats, the unexpected support it got in eastern Rajasthan from OBC groups such as the Gujjar and from Scheduled Tribe communities such as the Meena, proved crucial to the INDIA bloc. In Haryana, too, the Gujjar community, although numerically small, backed the parties of the INDIA bloc.

Realising that farmers were still unhappy with his government, one of the first files that Narendra Modi signed as soon as he took charge in his third time as Prime Minister was to sanction the release of funds for the 17th instalment of the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi.

Farmer representatives said that the annual fund of Rs.6,000 a family from this income support scheme would amount to the income from the sale of two or three quintals of grain. It will be a big factor only where subsistence agriculture is practised. The farmers pointed out that this support was no substitute for their demand for a legal framework for MSP, fair prices for all crops, and assured procurement.

At the moment, it does not seem as if the Modi government is serious about addressing agrarian issues, considering that it did not invite the SKM for the June 21 pre-Budget discussion with farmer associations and agriculture economists. The issue could take a different shape altogether in the coming months if the government continues to ignore substantive issues raised by the agricultural communities. ■

One of the first files that Narendra Modi signed in his third term as Prime Minister was to sanction the release of funds for the 17th instalment of the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi.

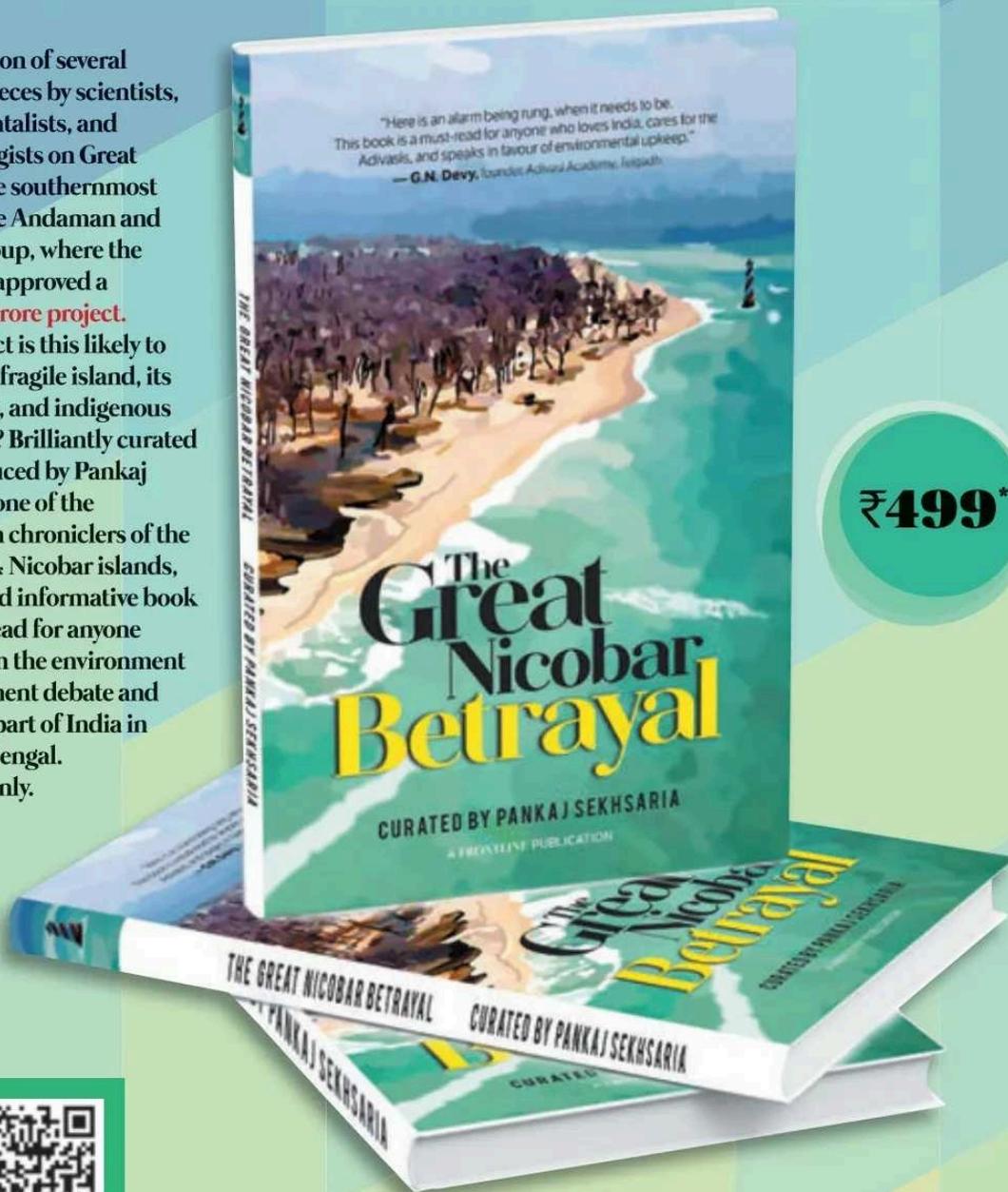
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[FROM THE SIDELINES]

SABA NAQVI is a Delhi-based journalist and author of four books, who writes on politics and identity issues.

The RSS sends a message

The RSS believes the confused signalling on the caste census and the misfiring of the “400 paar” narrative are among the reasons for the BJP losing seats in its stronghold of Uttar Pradesh. The Sangh, apparently, has put Narendra Modi on notice.

The RSS, which celebrates its centenary next year, is known to play the long game. Towards that end, Prime Minister Narendra Modi was a great enabler of its ideological agenda. With the BJP managing to retain power at the Centre, albeit at the head of a coalition, despite its Lok Sabha numbers crashing in Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra, among the largest States in the country, there is the realisation in the mothership that the party (which is the political wing of the RSS) could do so only because of a surprise haul of 20 seats from Odisha.

In such a scenario, the recent utterances of the RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat cannot be brushed aside as empty moral posturing or as an attempt to quickly occupy the opposition space. It must be read as a clear message to Modi, and it could be the beginning of a change in the power balance within the BJP and in its equation with the RSS. The RSS chief said, among other things, that a true *sevak* does not have arrogance. Given that the 2024 campaign was reduced to a message about “Modi ki guarantee” and that a once voluble party with multiple power centres is now a one-man cult, using the word “arrogance” was a clear signal from the head of the Sangh Parivar.

It was reinforced in a signed piece in the RSS magazine, *Organiser*, by Ratan Sharda,

author of several books on the Sangh. He critiqued fighting from all 543 seats on Modi’s name as “self-defeating”. There were other scathing lines in the article, such as: “Targets are achieved by hard work on the field, not sharing posters and selfies on social media. Since they [BJP leaders] were happy in their bubble, enjoying the glow reflected from Modiji’s aura, they were not listening to voices on the streets.”

A very significant challenge to Modi, therefore, comes from within the Sangh Parivar. First, it is no accident that the high command did not follow the protocol of calling a meeting of the BJP’s Parliamentary Party that consists of newly elected MPs to elect their leader in the House. There was a meeting of NDA MPs but significantly not a meeting of BJP MPs. The reason for this was that the RSS had positioned some MPs to not challenge Modi directly but to ask questions about the conduct of the election and the issue of fixing responsibility. This sort of conversation would have been par for the course in the era of the first BJP Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, but Modi was having none of that, so the meeting never took place.

Next, there are two leaders who have the absolute trust of the RSS: the MP from Nagpur, Nitin Gadkari (Union Transport Minister), and former Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan, who has now been given the Agriculture portfolio. Neither has been included in the Cabinet Committee on Security, which remains unchanged. Modi is signalling—both to allies and to his ideological family—that he will do it his way.

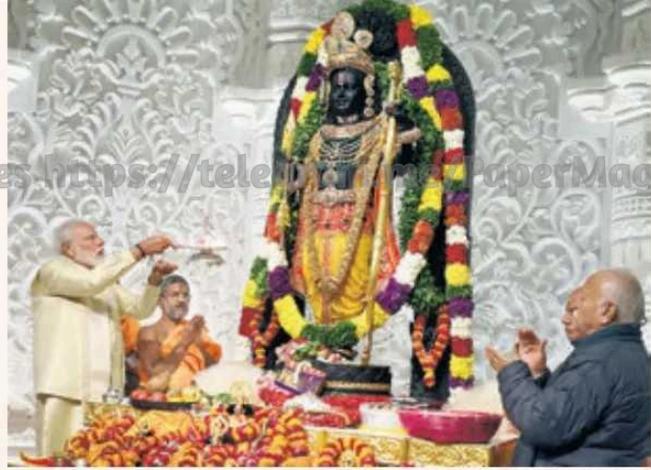
Still, it is useful to share an anecdote from the era when both Chouhan and Modi were seen as successful Chief Ministers. Both also happened to be OBCs, which was a deliberate RSS template in the post Mandal-Mandir era. At a meeting of the BJP held to assess State performances, the praise for Modi’s Gujarat model was countered by leaders who said that

Gujarat was always a rich State, but the Chouhan model was more remarkable since Madhya Pradesh was performing well even after its bifurcation and the loss of its resource-rich parts to Chhattisgarh. A veteran recounts that even then, “already a cult hero, Modi did not like it”. This anecdote is applicable to equations today, as Chouhan represents a counter to the Modi persona of narcissism/authoritarianism combined with proximity to big capital. The RSS has kept quiet since it has also been a beneficiary of the Modi phenomenon, but there is a genuine liking and admiration for Chouhan, who is modest (no arrogance, as the RSS chief would say) and is seen to have performed well in agriculture.

THE OTHER PERSONALITY about whom there is speculation is Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath. The RSS does not hold him responsible for ticket distribution in the State, especially because it has become clear that he had limited influence, with Modi and Amit Shah using their greater clout. The Delhi duo obviously lived in the bubble of belief that the “Modi magic”, as reiterated by their loyal media servants, would overcome organisational rumblings and public disconnect. The “deluded high command”, to use the language of a veteran, also pushed the “400 paar” narrative that was clearly damaging because it reinforced the idea of constitutional change, which hurt the party in Uttar Pradesh. There is also a strong critique within the party about the hand-picked social media team, which entirely missed this, obsessed as it is with petty and daily trolling.

A more serious view emerging from the

It is true that the RSS is BJP, and the BJP is frequently RSS. But what the RSS firmly believes is that Modi is not the BJP and that both party and parivar are bigger than the Prime Minister, who has turned out be entirely biological.



► **Prime Minister** Narendra Modi and RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat at the *pran pratishtha* ceremony in Ayodhya, on January 22. ANI

RSS is that the Modi regime created confusion on the issue of a caste census, something the Sangh opposes fiercely. In some places the Prime Minister made quota promises and in others he did not. Today, the RSS believes that the potential gains from a formidable social coalition in Uttar Pradesh were lost because of this mixed messaging. Once the caste genie is out of the bottle, it is not easy to expect Hindutva issues to bring it together in this State’s political and social terrain.

Also linked to this is the fact that the RSS did not create any mass movement on the mosque-temple demand in Mathura and Kashi. It is speculated that this was because the RSS chief signalled that more mandir issues would not work on the ground for the next few years. According to well-placed sources, the entire mobilisation on Kashi and Mathura was done by lawyers, some *sadhus* and *sants*, and local individuals with sporadic backing from the BJP. The RSS did not believe a mass movement on either issue would be “appropriate or successful”. As mandate 2024 showed, overplaying the Ram card also flopped.

While Adityanath is not being held directly responsible for the Uttar Pradesh debacle, should the RSS/BJP feel the need to project an OBC or Dalit face in the future then his Thakur caste would be a liability. Many veterans in the BJP insist that the perception of Adityanath as good in handling law and order would work in the Assembly election, but it is not clear which, individual or regime, will survive until then as the next election in the State is due only in 2027. The NDA alliance did well in Bihar, but Chief Minister Nitish Kumar is the first author of the caste census, which makes the Sangh very uneasy. It is fundamentally a Brahmanical outfit that works on social engineering to uphold traditional caste structures.

The RSS’ anger with Modi also extends to Maharashtra as the instruction to go for a smash-and-grab policy here by breaking other parties came from the Delhi high command. There is a clear view that the strategy damaged and lowered the morale of the BJP’s Maharashtra unit. With the State’s election due in a few months, it will be interesting to see how things pan out not just between the BJP and the opposition, but in the leadership and candidate choices the BJP makes from now on.

It is true that the RSS is BJP, and the BJP is frequently RSS. But what the RSS firmly believes is that Modi is not the BJP and that both party and parivar are bigger than the Prime Minister, who has turned out be entirely biological. ■

DRAVIDIAN POLITICS AT A CROSSROADS

Right-wing pundits are busy writing the AIADMK's obituary in Tamil Nadu even though the party's core base remains intact. With regional players like the NTK slowly rising, the BJP has a long way to go before it can emerge as a force in the State. **ILANGO VAN RAJASEKARAN**

When a few candidates of the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), one of the two main Dravidian parties in Tamil Nadu, forfeited their deposits in the Lok Sabha election and the party, which contested 34 seats, suffered a crushing defeat, political doomsayers were quick to herald the beginning of the end of more than 50 years of bipolar Dravidian politics in the State.

The prediction gained currency when the BJP registered a vote share of 11.24 per cent after contesting in 23 seats without being in an alliance with the Dravidian majors. Its vote share until then, in previous outings, was around 5.5 per cent.

The BJP's 2019 vote share of 3.62 per cent (five seats) was achieved in alliance with the AIADMK, while its previous best performance of 5.56 per cent was in 2014, when it was not in an alliance with the Dravidian parties.

Soon, the right-wing grapevine and some political circles got busy speculating whether the BJP could replace the AIADMK as the principal rival to the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)

The BJP's interference in the AIADMK's internal affairs after Jayalithaa's demise weakened the party. The former lured into its fold O. Panneerselvam and T.T.V. Dhinakaran, both of whom were engaged in a leadership tussle with Edappadi K. Palaniswami.

and eventually position itself as a threat to both Dravidian parties. State BJP president K. Annamalai even claimed that the AIADMK would "not be there" after this election.

What he perhaps did not foresee was the BJP's performance in the election: its candidates forfeited their deposits in 11 seats, while its ally, the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK), saw 6 of its 10 candidates lose their the deposits, followed by the Amma Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam (AMMK) in one of the two seats it contested.

Dismissing claims that the BJP might replace the AIADMK in future, the AIADMK's organising secretary, S. Semmalai, said this was the BJP's "manufactured perception". He told *Frontline* that his party had retained its core vote base with minimal erosion, which he said was "not unusual" for a party engaged in "five decades of active politics successfully". But the veteran leader conceded that the AIADMK did not get the "neutral" vote this time. "Also, the first-time voters were reluctant, and our anti-DMK votes were possibly frittered away," he added.

A CSDS-Lokniti post-election survey published in *The Hindu* said that the BJP "gained mainly through the slight erosion of the bipolarity of the State". However, in the 234 Assembly segments of the 39 Lok Sabha constituencies, the BJP did not lead even in one.

MEANWHILE, TALK OF THE BJP's rise arrived in the mainstream media as well, giving rise to the idea that the BJP, despite losing all 23 seats (19 direct and 4 allies on its symbol), had opened up a political space for itself in the State. With the AIADMK drawing a blank, such narratives gained traction.

Aiding this process was also a dip in the DMK's vote share despite the alliance mop-



ping up all 39 seats plus Puducherry. The party contested 22 seats directly and got 26.93 per cent of the vote as against 33.52 per cent in 2019 when it contested 24 seats. The DMK polled about 1.17 crore votes against the AIADMK's 89 lakh votes and the BJP's 49 lakh votes.

But what is most agonising for the AIADMK leadership is that in seven seats its candidates lost their deposits, an embarrassment the party has not faced since its maiden win in the byelection in Dindigul in 1973 (immediately after screen icon M.G. Ramachandran, or MGR, formed the party after breaking away from the DMK in 1972). However, it finished second in 24 seats and polled between 30 and 40 per cent of the vote in 8 other seats.

While there is no reason for the party to press the panic button yet, it cannot afford to remain complacent. Contrary to popular perception, the AIADMK has, in fact, registered a wafer-thin increase in vote share, up from 19.39 per cent in 2019 to 20.46 per cent.

However, in 2019 it was in alliance with the

▼ **The AIADMK headquarters** in Chennai. Marred by internal tussles and a lack of strong leaders, the party, which saw seven candidates lose their deposits, needs to urgently set its house in order. R. RAGU

The BJP, once confined to certain pockets in Tamil Nadu, has now gained a foothold across the State. For the two Dravidian majors, it is a wake-up call.

PMK and the BJP. In the 2021 Assembly election, with the same alliance, it got 33.29 per cent of the vote. (Party performance in the 2021 Assembly election is merely of academic interest here as the electoral and social dynamics differ in Assembly and Lok Sabha elections, and they are not generally comparable.)

The AIADMK is yet to initiate a critical evaluation of its insipid performance and has chosen to stay away from the Vikravandi Assembly byelection scheduled for July 10. The party polled



more than 84,000 votes there in 2021; where those AIADMK votes will go this time remains to be seen.

Analysts, however, said that the 2024 result reflects a 5-7 per cent chunk of “disenchanted voters” who do not want to vote for the Dravidian parties. Besides this, a significant number of Gen X and Z voters could have opted for alternatives. The BJP believes that it has gained part of the traditional anti-DMK vote that would have otherwise gone to the AIADMK, and that it was able to get the support of first-time voters too, mostly from the elite and upper-middle-class sections. The BJP’s strategy of roping in familiar faces and caste leaders as allies boosted its vote share.

THE BJP TODAY HAS a strong contender in S. Seeman’s Naam Tamilar Katchi (NTK) for voters looking for alternatives to the Dravidian majors. This party, founded on the principle of Tamil nationalism, has emerged as a strong competitor in the State’s politics with its steady performance.

And unlike the BJP, it has always fought alone. The NTK was a major gainer in the latest election, with its vote share increasing from 3.8 per cent in 2019 to 8.1 per cent. It is clearly preying mainly on the DMK vote base and looking to lure anti-Dravidian and anti-BJP voters, besides rural youths and gig workers across the spectrum. It is

The 1977 election, a four-cornered contest between the AIADMK, the DMK, the Congress, and the Janata Party, saw the AIADMK win 144 seats.

an enviable feat for a party that entered electoral politics only in 2016. The NTK’s adversaries claim that it is a “BJP proxy”, but Seeman has stoutly denied this.

The AIADMK, ever since MGR founded it in 1972, has seen both dismal lows and phoenix-like rises in its five-decade existence in the State’s politics. After winning the Dindigul bye-election, the party went on to win Puducherry, then Pondicherry, in 1974 to form its first government. It won Tamil Nadu from the DMK in 1977. The worst debacle it faced was in 1996, when the dream team of the DMK and G.K. Moopanar’s Tamil Maanila Congress devastated it.

Then too, political analysts had prophesied that the party would become history. The AIADMK rebounded to a fairy-tale revival in the next Assembly election in 2001. For the record, when the party was in alliance with the BJP in the 2004 general election, it lost all the 33 seats it contested but polled 29.77 per cent of the vote. In 2009, it won 9 of 23 seats for a share of 22.85 per cent. It has always risen from its defeats, rebuffing all predictions of its extinction.

Semmalai said that the AIADMK was insulated against any corrosion. “It is not an individual-based party. It has survived crises in the past and will do so in future. When MGR was there, a few deserted the party. When Jayalithaa was the leader, seniors R.M. Veerappan and S.D. Somasundaram raised the banner of revolt. The party suffered a vertical split after MGR’s demise. It has the resilience to overcome any debacle,” he said. But what Semmalai forgot to mention was that during all those comebacks, there were tall leaders at the party’s helm.

The DMK has also faced similar situations. It remained out of power until MGR’s demise in 1987. It won in 1989, but the government was dismissed two years later.

In the aftermath of Rajiv Gandhi’s assassination, the party suffered debilitating defeats in both the Assembly and parliamentary elections in 1991. It won just two seats in the Assembly, and its leader M. Karunanidhi, one of two elected, vacated the seat. But the party bounced back, thanks mainly to its robust structural stability.

► **BJP State president** K. Annamalai at a campaign rally in Coimbatore on April 17. The BJP lost all the seats it contested, and its candidates lost their deposits in 11 seats. M. PERIASAMY



On the flip side, the Congress has had a friendly understanding with both Dravidian majors, the DMK now and the AIADMK in the past. It has maintained a steady 10-12 per cent vote share in a few seats in every election since 1989. The Congress also tried to challenge the Dravidian monopoly when Moopanar chose to go it alone in the 1989 Assembly election. Rajiv Gandhi, like Prime Minister Narendra Modi, visited the State several times, but the Congress could win only 26 seats. It reworked its strategy and has since been an ally of one of the Dravidian parties.

IT MUST BE GALLING for a national party like the BJP to constantly be rejected by a State, but one must remember that the State's politics has been a two-sided battle for more than 50 years now. Despite the BJP's exhilaration, the fact remains that the space it is earnestly seeking remains elusive.

The allegations that political opportunism and mutual betrayals between the Dravidian majors enabled the BJP to gain a toehold in the State cannot be dismissed. Ironically, it was the AIADMK that first invited the BJP into its fold in the 1998 general election, a move Jayalalithaa later regretted. An outsider until then, the BJP found surprising sponsors in both parties. It was the DMK's turn in 1999 to embrace it. A political analyst said: "No other State has such a robust political system where the two main rival parties have the same ideology. If the BJP was able to find space, the blame should squarely be on these two."

The BJP's interference in the AIADMK's internal affairs after Jayalalithaa's demise has become folklore now. The saffron party further weakened the AIADMK by luring into its fold O. Panneerselvam and T.T.V. Dhinakaran, both of whom were engaged in a leadership tussle with Edappadi K. Palaniswami. Their defection hit

The NTK was a major gainer in the latest election, with its vote share increasing to 8.1 per cent. It is clearly preying mainly on the DMK vote base and looking to lure anti-Dravidian and anti-BJP voters.



▼ **AIADMK general secretary**

Edappadi K. Palaniswami with the party's Salem candidate P. Vignesh, at a roadshow on April 17. While it did not win a seat, the AIADMK registered a slight increase in vote share, up from 19.39 per cent in 2019 to 20.46 per cent.

E. LAKSHMI NARAYANAN

the party hard in the southern belt, where the caste groups of Kallars and Maravars, to which the two belong to, are dominant. Besides, the northern parts also went against it, as the PMK, which has a significant presence among the dominant Vanniyar caste, went with the BJP.

However, the AIADMK as a whole has not seen a worrying shift in its core vote bank, barring certain substantial constituency-specific erosions. But the party needs to seriously study its weak performance in the seven seats where its candidates lost their deposits. Despite severing ties with the BJP, the AIADMK's leaders have remained inexplicably tame in their campaign against the saffron party. This, according to political analysts, has been a blunder as the ambiguity kept all the minority communities away from the party.

As Palaniswami emphasised, the AIADMK polled one percentage point more votes than its 2019 tally. "We too have learnt certain lessons from this election," he said.

Within the BJP, voices of dissent can be heard. Former Telangana Governor and former State party president Tamilsai Soundararajan, who stood second in Chennai South, said that an alliance could have changed the scenario. "Forming an alliance is a strategy. But Annamalai showed no liking for it," she said. But Annamalai contended that the increase in vote percentage itself was a victory.

It cannot be denied that the saffron party, once confined to certain pockets in Tamil Nadu, has now gained a foothold across the State. For the Dravidian majors, it is a wake-up call that Tamil Nadu politics may not continue to remain bipolar; the field is getting crowded. ■



[POLITICAL THEATRE]

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A vote for constitutional values

The Modi government's actions that were seen to be privileging Hindutva over the Constitution opened up space in the Lok Sabha election for opposition parties to revive the struggle to protect democracy.

Narendra Modi's re-election as Prime Minister for a third consecutive time came with a caveat to realign the majoritarian politics of his government with constitutional values. The failure of the Hindutva polity to reach majority on its own is expected to stall the majoritarian agenda and give space for constitutional politics. While the BJP's rabble-rousing politics benefits a small section of the elite, in the long run it deprives the majority of the people of equality, employment, freedom of speech, and other significant rights, and large numbers of ordinary people are taken for granted because of the arrogance of majoritarian electoral success. Communal polarisation in the form of hate speech and violence against Muslims, Dalits, and other vulnerable sections has surged sharply over past 10 years. This is in conflict with the fundamental constitutional values envisaged by the founding fathers and mothers of the Constitution. The present result has put a strong restraint on the majoritarian agenda that tried to override the democratic aspects of parliamentary politics.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the Genevan philosopher, gave us the concept of "general will", which influenced the French Revolution and modern parliamentary politics. It acts as a check against majoritarian imposition by the democratic participation of all sections of so-

ciety in the decision-making process. The concept of general will is also the founding principle of Indian constitutional values. According to Rousseau, general will is not merely a collection of all individual wills but an underlying moral principle that emphasises social justice, egalitarianism, and liberty irrespective of an individual's social and political standing in society. Thus, decisions made in politics are not based merely on numbers but on how far the majority takes into consideration the concerns of the minorities while making the final decision. The final decision should reflect the general will principle and address the concerns of all sections of the population.

When majoritarian decisions are imposed over the minorities, it defies the concept of general will. The way in which the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, and the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act, 2019, were passed, the latter by disabling Article 370, shows that the consent of the people who were affected by the Acts did not matter to the government. Even the resistance shown to the farmers protesting the three farm laws stems from a majoritarian agenda.

The Constitution reflects the principle of general will through the word "fraternity", which underpins "general will". The word fraternity was not in the original objective resolution introduced by Jawaharlal Nehru in 1946. It was a unique contribution by B.R. Ambedkar and acts as the foundation for the other values of equality, justice, and liberty. Ambedkar derived it from the Buddhist concept of "Maitreyi", which widens the meaning of fraternity beyond more than just brotherhood/sisterhood and equates it with the concept of democracy. Without respecting and treating people equally, based on the concept of fraternity, no other constitutional values can be realised. Thus, Ambedkar locates the concept of fraternity as the moral foundation of the Indian Constitution.

Fraternal values accommodate the concerns of diverse sections of society in the decision-making process. This constitutional value is still very relevant and has emancipatory potential, giving hope to minorities, Dalits, women, and other vulnerable populations.

But in the last 10 years we have seen explicit hatred towards minorities, including towards those who are ideologically opposed, within institutional structures and in the public sphere. Violence, murder, hate speeches, and institutional targeting of opposition parties have defied constitutional values. In this election, we saw that wherever such constitutional deviations peaked, there was a resisting response from the electorate. Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra, the core forts of Hindutva politics, responded astutely and restrained the free march of the regime. Thus, it was not just economic and political reasons but the politics based on religious polarisation that made minorities and Dalits reassert their voting power and reclaim the constitutional values.

INDIA HATE LAB (IHL), a Washington, DC-based research group, has documented around 668 instances of hate speech in 2023 that targeted Muslims. Almost 75 per cent of these took place in BJP-ruled States, with Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh topping the list. Uttar Pradesh also has recorded the highest number of atrocities against Dalits, according to the National Crimes Record Bureau's report of 2022. According to Human Rights Watch's report of 2019, between 2015 and 2018 around 44 people were killed, including 36 Muslims, in the name of cow protection. The IHL report also highlighted that the Hamas attack on Israel was used as a pretext to fuel fear and animosity towards Indian

The Indian Constitution, which protects the political identity of citizenship inclusively, irrespective of cultural identity, has always been a problem for the exclusive cultural nationalist.

Muslims, where between October and December 2023, 41 hate speeches were delivered (32 in BJP-ruled States) to target and project Muslims as inherently violent.

The reservation policy based on the constitutional ideology of positive liberalism, meant to uplift the vulnerable and help them participate in the developmental path of the nation, has long been an eyesore for the BJP. In the Champakam Dorairajan case in 1951, when the court overturned the Communal Government Order issued by the Madras Presidency in 1927, the Union government came with the first amendment to the Constitution that, along with other issues, introduced a special provision for the advancement of backward classes under Article 15. The Akhil Bharat Hindu Mahasabha in its election manifesto in 1951 promised to overturn this amendment if it came to power. It was Syama Prasad Mookerjee, the leader of the Hindu Mahasabha, who started the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, the precursor to the BJP, which was launched in 1980.

The BJP withdrew its support to the V.P. Singh-led National Front coalition government when it implemented the Mandal Commission report giving 27 per cent reservation to OBCs. Even though the party does not explicitly state its opposition to reservation, a move that can impact its SC/ST and OBC voter base, the way it has implemented the Economically Weaker Sections reservation, which favours the privileged castes and dilutes the constitutional essence of reservation, shows its hidden animosity to reservation. Even the Women's Reservation Act was linked to delimitation to delay its implementation.

The Indian Constitution, which protects the political identity of citizenship inclusively, irrespective of cultural identity, has always been a problem for the exclusive cultural nationalist. Even though Indian secularism does not explicitly prohibit the government from participating in religious events, the constitutional value system prescribes equal treatment of all religions without discrimination. The participation of the Prime Minister in a particular religious event and the glorification of Hinduism, accompanied with the targeting of minorities during the election campaign, go against the secular ethos of the constitutional framework. This cultural nationalist politics has concealed the widening economic disparities, unemployment, poverty, and inflation.

The government's actions belittling constitutional values opened up space for opposition parties to revive the struggle to protect the Constitution. The Congress played a major role in bringing the discussion around the Constitution from the sphere of academics and elite conferences to roads and rallies. The minorities, Dalits, Adivasis, and other backward classes, who still depend on the Constitution for their livelihood, peace, security, and growth, have strengthened the struggle with their vote. The BJP's numbers are drastically reduced in SC/ST constituencies. Even though the election did not overturn the regime, it has conveyed a strong message to all political parties that constitutional values are still relevant in the lives of the majority of this country's citizens. ■



The southern outlier

Karnataka's unique politics, with no strong regional party, was born of numerous strands of people's movements that have contributed to its non-typical Dravidian culture in which minorities, backward classes, and Dalits are equally significant. **CYNTHIA STEPHEN**

Karnataka has always been an outlier in national politics. In south India, it is the only State that does not have a strong regional party. The national parties, the Congress and the BJP, have ruled Karnataka alternatively for several decades.

In the tumultuous post-Emergency election in 1977, Indira Gandhi was defeated in her traditional seat of Rae Bareilly by Raj Narain of the Janata Party. However, the southern States bucked the national anti-Indira trend, and the Congress won most of the Lok Sabha seats in south India. The then Congress Chief Minister of Karnataka, D. Devaraj Urs, invited Indira

Gandhi to contest from the safe seat of Chikmagalur: it had 50 per cent women voters, 45 per cent people belonging to the backward class, and nearly 50 per cent people below the poverty line. Unsurprisingly, Indira Gandhi won by over 77,000 votes against Veerendra Patil of the Janata Party.

Devaraj Urs is remembered as the architect of the coalition of *Alpasankhyataru* (minorities), *Hindulidavaru* (backward classes), *Dalitaru* (Scheduled Castes), better known by its Kannada acronym AHINDA, which continues to play an active part in the State's politics. The present Chief Minister, Siddaramaiah, is considered to have inherited the AHINDA mantle and leadership.

The only other major party in Karnataka is the Janata Dal (Secular), or JD(S). Originally a part of the Janata Party of the 1970s, it later fell into the hands of a feudal political family whose patriarch H.D. Deve Gowda served a short stint as Prime Minister in 1996, helming a coalition government. The JD(S) continues to have a presence in the State Assembly chiefly as a result of the Vokkaliga Gowda community,



▶ **The Karnataka tableau** at the full dress rehearsal of the Republic Day Parade in New Delhi on January 23, 2023. BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

the local equivalent of the Jats of Haryana or Punjab. Deve Gowda's son H.D. Kumaraswamy negotiated a deal with the BJP in 2006, bringing them into government for the first time. Now, the JD(S) is barely surviving, having lost support in most of its traditional strongholds in southern Karnataka and reduced to being a junior coalition partner of the BJP.

To understand the unique significance of Karnataka, we have to go back several decades to when it emerged as a separate State when linguistic States were being birthed in newly independent India. The kidney-shaped State has five distinct geopolitical regions, and if you were to divide it with an x- and y-axis, every quadrant has a different history.

THE NORTH-WESTERN REGION, formerly a part of the Bombay presidency, speaks a dialect—and has a culture—heavily influenced by Marathi. The north-eastern region joined India—and the State—much later, as it was a part of Hyderabad, the Nizam's dominion, and has a large number of speakers of Dakkani Urdu. A part of south-eastern Karnataka, including part of the State capital, Bengaluru, was under the

Karnataka is home to many social reformers, such as the 12th century poet Basavanna, whose vachanas (poems) are notable for their rejection of caste.

This is regarded as the first-ever effort in undivided India to provide reservation on the basis of caste in government at a time when Brahmins dominated the administration in the princely states.

Madras presidency and is now divided between Andhra Pradesh (hence the influence of Telugu) and Karnataka. A sizeable area was also under the princely state of Mysore, a city even now considered the cultural capital of Karnataka. Bengaluru is only 30 km from the Tamil Nadu border and has a large number of native Tamil speakers. A sizeable section of the population also speaks Thigala, a creole of sorts of Tamil and Kannada. These people are excellent horticulturists and were originally brought to Bangalore by Hyder Ali, the father of Tipu Sultan, when he decided to set up the iconic Lalbagh.

The south-western region is partly hilly, partly coastal, and culturally diverse. Languages such as Tulu, Konkani, and Beary are spoken on the coast, while Kodava and other indigenous languages are spoken in the hills, famous for their coffee plantations and forests. This area also has a large population of Christians and Muslims. The histories of the regions are diverse and it is wonderful that the State thrives as an administrative and cultural entity.

Karnataka was known as Mysore State until 1973. The region, however, had been historically known as Karnataka. Even the kingdom ruled by the Raya dynasty, of whom the most famous king is Krishnadevaraya, was known as Karnataka *desh* or *Karu nadu*. The name derives from the colour of the soil, which in large parts of the State is black, hence Kari+Nadu, but a more widely accepted theory is that it is *Karu* (elevated, big) + *nadu*, hence *karnata*. Three wars, later to be known as the Carnatic wars, were fought in this region in the 18th century between the British and the French.

In 1919, the then Maharajah of Mysore appointed the one-man **Miller Committee** to study the representation of communities in government and educational institutions. The report noted an over-representation of Brahmins and non-representation of other communities and recommended a proportional representation for all citizens in education and government jobs. Incidentally, while framing policies for proportionate representation at the national level, B.R. Ambedkar referenced the Miller report.

Karnataka is home to many social reformers, beginning with the 12th century poet Basavanna, whose *vachanas* (poems) are notable for their rejection of caste. Akka Mahadevi, the first and



most radical woman writer in Kannada, composed stunning *vachanas* to her *ishta devata* (favourite God) Chennamallikarjuna, or Siva. Basavanna's critique of social and religious conservatism faced severe repression, and his followers were persecuted by kings and priests. However, his work survives in the form of a Saivite religion whose practitioners are known as Lingayats. They are concentrated in parts of northern and western Karnataka, with some presence in the areas bordering Maharashtra. The Lingayats, drawn from all walks of life and castes, currently constitute a large and politically powerful section of society in Karnataka.

THIS TRADITION OF poet-philosophers influencing political structures continues in Karnataka. Reviewing *Another India: Events, Memories, People*, a collection of writings by Chandan Gowda, the scholar Prashant Keshavmurthy writes that the book documents a State that owes its "cultural pluralism" to its "regional traditions of non-atheist socialism". The opening essay in Gowda's book, titled "People without a Stereotype", reflects the absence of a single "cultural identity for Karnataka".

Karnataka's unique brand of socialism was forged in the 1950s by Shantaveri Gopala Gowda, an activist and politician who was deeply influenced by a sense of service to farmers and the poor. He mentored several socialists in Karnataka, including J.H. Patel, S. Bangarappa, S.M. Krishna, and Devaraj Urs, all of whom served as Chief Ministers of the State. Urs, in particular, was inspired by Gopala Gowda's concern for farmers and the downtrodden and brought in reservation for the backward classes for the first time in Karnataka in the 1980s.

Gopala Gowda was also closely associated with the poet Gopalakrishna Adiga, who pioneered the *Navya* (modern) trend in Kannada literature; the novelist U.R. Ananthamurthy; the writer and journalist P. Lankesh; and the farmer leader M.D. Nanjundaswamy, all of whom had a powerful impact on Karnataka politics.

Ananthamurthy, writer and winner of the Jnanpith award, was a strong critic of the BJP and even contested the Lok Sabha election in 2004 on an anti-BJP plank. He was severely critical of the JD(S) when it entered into a coalition with the BJP. He received death threats after the BJP won the election in 2014. It was Ananthamurthy's proposal to rename 10 cities with their

Karnataka's unique brand of socialism was forged in the 1950s by Shantaveri Gopala Gowda, an activist and politician who was deeply influenced by a sense of service to farmers and the poor.

original Kannada names that saw Bangalore changed to Bengaluru in 2005.

P. Lankesh, poet, writer, translator, journalist, and award-winning director, had an outsized secularising influence on Karnataka's political, social, and cultural life. A Lohiaite socialist, his tabloid weekly, *Lankesh Patrike*, was instrumental in raising an entire generation of Kannada writers, thinkers, journalists, and activists.

Similarly, Nanjundaswamy, law professor, socialist, and close associate of Gopala Gowda and Ram Manohar Lohia, was one of India's most influential anti-globalisation activists and the founder of the Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha, one of the largest and most active farmers' movements in the country.

K.V. Puttappa, popularly known as KuVemPu, was a writer, educationist, and poet who composed the State anthem. He is also the first Kannada writer to be conferred the Jnanpith award. He is famed for his tradition of scientific temper, rationality and critical thinking, and his criticism of Hindu ritualism and superstition.

But by far the most influential factor in Karnataka's politics today is the Dalit movement, even though it is not the powerful force it was some decades ago. In 1973, Basavalingappa, a Minister and a Dalit, while speaking at a function in Mysuru, said: "There is a great deal of *bhoosa* [chaff] in Kannada literature." He was referring to the absence of Dalit representation. The media reported this as an attack on "Kannada pride". The resultant furore forced him to resign as Minister and prompted a huge casteist backlash against Dalit sensibilities.

In response, the Dalit Sangharsha Samiti, formed in 1974, undertook a series of protests against caste discrimination and atrocities. Dalit writers came together in a combination of literature and struggle, with songs, plays, and stories depicting their world. There was a rebellion against the "correct" academic world, giving rise to a new genre called "Bandaya Sahitya" (rebel literature), which used colloquial language and moved away from the lyricism of the mainstream writers.

The poems of Siddalingaiah, then a young student, became the anthems of the movement. Karnataka saw protests, rebel literature, and the mass mobilisation of Dalits coming together in several cultural and awareness-raising rallies. This was also a time of political ferment across the country. The ruling Congress was consi-



dered to be incapable of helping Dalits, who went on to support the Janata Party, which was in power between 1983 and 1989. At this time, Ramakrishna Hegde, as Chief Minister, drew several Dalit leaders into mainstream party politics; Siddalingaiah, too, accepted a Rajya Sabha seat in 1988. There was also some resentment against politicians elected from reserved constituencies who had failed to work for Dalit welfare.

In 1991, along with the new liberalisation policy, came uncertainty and economic compulsions that gradually eroded the unity of the Dalit movement. Speaking of this in 2019, Siddalingaiah said: “There are too many factions... it is no longer a pressure group that can make the establishment take note of it. It lacks mature leadership. I wish they would all come together and fight for a common cause. There is low ideological awareness. But that is the state of all progressive movements, be it the farmers, the Left, the labourers... all of them.” Siddalingaiah died in June 2021 of COVID complications, aged 67.

THUS, KARNATAKA’S POLITICS is unique, born of numerous strands of people’s movements. Besides the State’s linguistic, cultural, and geological diversity, the metropolis of Bengaluru is a national and international melting pot. The city has newspapers in more languages—English, Kannada, Telugu, Tamil, Hindi, and Urdu—than any other comparable city in India. All this makes Karnataka a society and a polity that defies categorisation.

Dalits, at around 15 per cent, and Muslims, at around 14 per cent, are among the largest communities numerically, followed by the Vokkaligas (10 per cent) in the south and the Lingayats (10.9 per cent) in northern Karnataka. These figures come from a leaked caste census report,

▼ **Bhootaradhane**

or spirit worship is a practice native to Tulunadu in south-western coastal Karnataka.

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

The State is at a cross-roads with its uniqueness but also embracing diversity to a degree that detracts from a strong linguistic culture.

and have knocked the last two politically powerful groups off the first and second place in the population they were alleged to hold. The report is being hotly disputed by the Vokkaligas and Lingayats, who have supplied the most number of Chief Ministers in the State, with 8 Lingayat and 7 Vokkaliga among the 22 Chief Ministers so far, some more than once.

In 1990, Veerendra Patil, a Lingayat, was forced to resign by the Congress high command; subsequently, the community moved away from the Congress towards the BJP at a time when it was just expanding across the country. Thus the Lingayats were instrumental in the making of three BJP governments—one in coalition and two in majority—between 2008 and 2024. The JD(S) has been the party of the Vokkaligas. However, the Congress is known to have support among the AHINDA groups and also among some Lingayat and Vokkaliga groups. The third large group, the Kurubas (shepherds), are part of the AHINDA, and Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, now in his second term, belongs to this group. D.K. Shivakumar, the strongman of the Congress, is a Vokkaliga, and his rise corresponds to the erosion of support for the JD(S).

Karnataka thus exhibits a non-typical Dravidian culture, at a crossroads with its uniqueness but also embracing diversity to a degree that detracts from a strong linguistic culture, the pro-Kannada stance of activists and politicians notwithstanding. This explains why it is the only State in south India to be ruled by national parties and why no strong regional party has risen, unlike its other Deccan neighbours. ■

Cynthia Stephen is an independent journalist and social policy researcher who tracks developments related to marginalised sections and women.

Election 2024

Defiant Victory

Abdul Rashid Sheikh's electoral victory in Baramulla, while in prison, against the popular Omar Abdullah of the National Conference, did not come as a surprise to the people of Langate. This is where he began his political career as an MLA in 2008 and introduced the "Rashid model" of governance that involved protecting human rights and fighting corruption while promoting development. **IFTIKHAR GILANI**

From the humble origins of remote Langate, Handwara, Abdul Rashid Sheikh, also known as Engineer Rashid, would have seemed an unlikely candidate to emerge as a formidable political figure in north Kashmir. Yet, his journey from an engineering student to a notable political disruptor is nothing short of remarkable.

Despite being held in Delhi's Tihar jail, Rashid has achieved a surprising electoral victory in the Baramulla Lok Sabha seat, outmanoeuvring heavyweights such as former Chief Minister Omar Abdullah and Jammu and Kashmir People's Conference leader Sajad Gani Lone. This victory was not just a personal triumph but a significant political statement, given both his opponents' substantial political networks and backing.

His win has stirred considerable debate, with some analysts suggesting his success might signal a resurgence of separatist and Islamist sentiments. These fears echo Kashmir's unfortunate history, particularly the 1987 Assembly election, where similar narratives contributed to the election results being overturned, which led to a severe distrust in democracy,

► **Abdul Rashid Sheikh**, aka Engineer Rashid, at a protest against the attack on Kashmiris after the fidayeen attack on the CRPF in Srinagar, on February 16, 2019. **NISSAR AHMAD**

thus igniting prolonged conflict and bloodshed.

The 2024 election was the first significant electoral exercise in Kashmir since that controversial election. Therefore, the turnout was remarkably high, reflecting perhaps a renewed faith in democratic processes or a defiant hope for change.

For Rashid, a former college mate of mine at Government Degree College, Sopore, his ascent from an unassuming student to a political maverick encapsulates a tale of unwavering resilience and determination.

His political leanings were evident, especially his admiration for Abdul Ghani Lone and his left-leaning ideas, which often led to lively discussions with his peers. When I went to New Delhi to study journalism, which also coincided with the outbreak of militancy and anarchy in Kashmir, we lost touch. I had no idea that he had obtained an engineering diploma after graduation. I barely had a picture of him in my mind.

In the 1990s, the Urdu weekly *Chattan*, under its editor Tahir Mohiuddin, had become quite popular for its investigative and insightful reporting. The paper used to reserve space for a writer, Engineer Rashid, for an analytical column. A.G. Noorani, a well-known writer on Kashmir and India-Pakistan affairs, frequently relied on and quoted Engineer Rashid's analyses in his articles published in *Frontline*. But it was only after almost a decade that I learnt that Sheikh Rashid and Engineer Rashid were the same person. After completing his engineering degree, he had joined Jammu and Kashmir Projects Construction Corporation (JKPCC) as a civil engineer.

Rashid's transformation from an engineer to an accidental hero began with an act of integrity that nearly cost him his life. While temporarily supervising a bridge construction work for JKPCC, he was confronted by armed men demanding bags of cement. He told them to visit him on the last day of the month so that he could pay them from his salary in cash instead of bags of cement.

They kidnapped him, and after a few days he was found almost half-dead at the edge of a drain. The bones in his arms and legs were broken. In the meantime, work on the bridge had been stopped due to the absence of the site manager. The complaint reached the Managing Director of JKPCC in Srinagar, who then learnt that a temporary site supervisor had suffered broken

Rashid's emergence evokes a sense of cautious optimism. His task now is to promote a transparent administration and create a balanced political environment that bridges ideological divides.

When Engineer Rashid was an independent MLA, he was attacked by BJP MLAs in the Jammu and Kashmir Assembly for hosting a beef party in Srinagar in 2015.

bones to save cement bags for the government. His conscience immediately took him to the hospital where he met Rashid and offered him a permanent job at JKPCC.

The controversial land transfer of Amarnath in 2008 was a turning point for Rashid. He decided to run for office in Langate, which many of his friends opposed. Rashid justified it as a way of gaining protection and a platform for his causes. Despite a short campaign period, Rashid's persistence paid off when he won the election by 211 votes over Mohammad Sultan Panditpuri of the Peoples Democratic Party.

According to Rashid, his only concern until then was to protect himself from police raids and summons from army camps. In 2005, he was arrested by the Special Operations Group on charges of supporting militant groups and subsequently detained for three months.

He was subjected to extreme torture in the interrogation centres. The court dismissed all charges against him. He was later detained by gunmen said to be pro-government and released after five months on payment of a ransom. He said that his father had to sell cows, goats, and property to raise money for his life.

AS AN **MLA**, Rashid's involvement went beyond traditional politics. He vehemently opposed the forced labour known as "convoy duty", used by the army in remote areas at the time. Villagers were forced to guard and ensure the safe passage of military convoys. He explained how four to eight people from each village in Langate would assemble as early as 3 am with lanterns and sticks at a designated spot in their village. Villagers had to take turns being part of the group. About 200 people from different villages would line up and wait for the Army lorries. When the military convoy arrived, they had to move ahead of it, exposing themselves to explosive devices, if any, placed on the road or nearby. They then gathered at the camp around 9 am where work for the day was distributed among them.

After becoming an MLA, he organised peaceful sit-ins outside Army camps and the Secretariat in Srinagar. His campaign led to the end of this practice, which brought considerable relief to his constituents and strengthened his reputation as a champion of human rights.





Rashid's commitment to his constituents went beyond human rights. He vigorously fought corruption and urged people to report all demands for bribes directly to him. His unique approach to governance included regular visits to remote villages, leading protests, and ensuring the completion of development projects. His hands-on style earned him a second term in the Assembly in 2014.

It was due to his introduction of peaceful protests that Langate remained an island of peace in 2010 and 2016 when the whole of Kashmir was engulfed in violence. Both the security forces and the government credited peace in the region to Rashid's engagement with the public.

Few may know that when the Aam Aadmi Party was formed in New Delhi in 2012, many of its leaders drew lessons from Rashid. Many of the AAP's leaders visited the villages of Langate several times to study and understand Rashid's political model.

In the just-concluded election, Rashid's popularity skyrocketed when his son, Abrar Rashid, ran a short but effective campaign calling for his father's release, capitalising on Rashid's track record as a dedicated public servant.

Remarkably, the campaign's modest budget of just Rs.27,000 stood in stark contrast to the exorbitant spending of the other candidates, highlighting the grassroots support for Rashid. This is reminiscent of George Fernandes contesting the 1967 Lok Sabha election, when he defeated the Congress stalwart S.K. Patil with only Rs.10,000 in his pocket.

Engineer Rashid's arrest by the National Investigation Agency on money laundering charges has been a controversial issue since no trial

▼
Engineer Rashid's mother, Rahmi Begum, and son Abrar Rashid after his victory in the Lok Sabha election, on June 4. PTI

Rashid's victory signifies not just a personal triumph but a potential turning point in Kashmir's quest for true democracy.

has taken place in the last five years. His application for bail to take oath of office is pending in court. His victory has nevertheless revitalised his career and made him an important figure in Kashmir's political arena.

HIS SUCCESS IS reminiscent of the way the writer Shaikh Shamim Ahmed won the 1971 Lok Sabha election in Srinagar against Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad, a former Prime Minister of Jammu and Kashmir. However, while Shamim's performance in Parliament earned him much acclaim, he was never able to emerge as a leader in the public eye.

Historically, Kashmiris have long yearned for a leader capable of steering the region through its turbulent political landscape. Rashid's emergence evokes a sense of cautious optimism. His task now is to promote a transparent administration and create a balanced political environment that bridges ideological divides.

His victory signifies not just a personal triumph but a potential turning point in Kashmir's quest for true democracy. As the region looks forward to the upcoming Assembly election, it is important that democracy now goes beyond voting. For that, the state must ensure democratic rights and many degrees of freedom in the daily lives of the people.

The demand for the release of prisoners like Engineer Rashid is a crucial test of the authenticity of the democratic process and the state's commitment to it. Only time will tell if the region can achieve truly democratic governance that addresses its long-standing problems. ■

Iftikhar Gilani is an Indian journalist based in Ankara.

Election 2024



► **MVA leaders** Uddhav Thackeray and Sharad Pawar at a press conference in Mumbai on June 15. The excellent performance at the hustings has infused fresh energy into the alliance, which is now working on strategies for the Assembly election. EMMANUAL YOGINI

Getting ready for a bigger battle

Maharashtra's Lok Sabha election results have shaken the ruling NDA and given the opposition MVA a distinct advantage in the Assembly election scheduled for October. **AMEY TIRODKAR**

The Lok Sabha election results in Maharashtra came as a shock to many political pundits. The INDIA bloc, known as the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) in the State, bagged 30 of the 48 seats, while the National Democratic Alliance's (NDA) tally was just 17, compared with 41 in 2019 when the BJP was in alliance with an undivided Shiv Sena. An independent candidate who won the Sangli seat

later aligned himself with the MVA. When seen from an Assembly seat perspective, the MVA's decisive victory meant that it had the upper hand in 157 seats, while the NDA was ahead in just 128 seats.

However, the difference in vote share is very slim: the MVA garnered 44.92 per cent of the vote and the NDA 43.54 per cent, with the actual difference in the total number of votes just seven lakh. Prakash Ambedkar's Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (VBA) got 15.6 lakh votes, or 2.75 per cent vote share. It is clear that both alliances have a strong chance in the Assembly election.

In the 288-member Assembly, leading in 157 seats may seemingly put the MVA in a comfort



table position, but Assembly elections are a different ball game. Hence, all the key players are redrawing their strategies, making Maharashtra politics even more intriguing and now highly unpredictable.

Within a week of the results, the State BJP unit held a meeting of its core group. Devendra Fadnavis, Deputy Chief Minister and the party's top leader in the State, accepted responsibility for his party's debacle. (From winning 23 seats in 2019, the BJP is down to 9 seats. After 1998, the BJP has been reduced to single digits for the first time.) He offered to resign but the high command asked him to continue.

Although there is no change in the NDA government, the alliance is already seeing a change, with the exit of Raj Thackeray's Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS). Raj joined the NDA without demanding any Lok Sabha seat, but for the Assembly election, he has decided to contest on his own. In a meeting with party leaders, he reportedly said that the MNS would contest around 250 seats. This development could be the result of MNS workers deserting his party and returning to Uddhav Thackeray's Shiv Sena (UBT). The voting pattern in Mumbai and Thane district also showed that Raj's core voters did not shift to the NDA. Rather, in many seats, MNS voters threw in their lot with Uddhav Thackeray. So, to remain relevant in State politics, Raj has little choice but to go solo.

THE SECOND DIMENSION to this story is Eknath Shinde's Shiv Sena. After the split in the Shiv Sena, Shinde has emerged as the third force within the Shiv Sena umbrella. His faction won seven Lok Sabha seats. In the current situation, where the BJP is short of a majority, every partner is important. Given Shinde's growing stature, coupled with money and muscle, there is a possibility that he will attract MNS cadres. By quitting the NDA, Raj is now trying to limit Shinde's possible expan-

The undivided NCP won only four seats each in the previous two Lok Sabha elections, but after the split, the Sharad Pawar faction has actually managed to perform better.

sion. Raj could also cut into the Marathi vote in Mumbai. The consolidation of Marathi, Muslim, and Dalit votes helped the MVA win four of the six Lok Sabha seats in Mumbai. It lost the Mumbai North West seat by just 48 votes; Uddhav's Shiv Sena said it was planning to move the courts against the result.

In Mumbai, MVA gained in 23 Assembly segments, while the NDA was ahead in 13. The MNS can hope to do well in the 36 Assembly seats in Mumbai, 24 seats in Thane, and a total of 12 seats in Pune and Nashik. So, if Raj succeeds in cutting into the MVA's votes in these 72 constituencies, it will be a big boost for the NDA.

In the case of Ajit Pawar, it is uncertain if he will continue in the NDA. His party, the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), contested four seats but won only one. His wife, Sunetra Pawar, lost in Baramati in a battle of prestige against cousin Supriya Sule. In addition, an article published in the RSS mouthpiece, *Organiser*, blamed his induction into the NDA for the BJP's poor performance, saying it did not go down well with BJP workers in Maharashtra and they did not work for the party wholeheartedly.

The Lok Sabha results also showed that Ajit Pawar grossly failed to bring NCP voters to the NDA. The other NCP faction, led by Sharad Pawar, contested 10 seats and won 8. Thus, while the NCP's voters are still with Sharad Pawar, the BJP's core voters are disturbed by the alliance with Ajit Pawar.

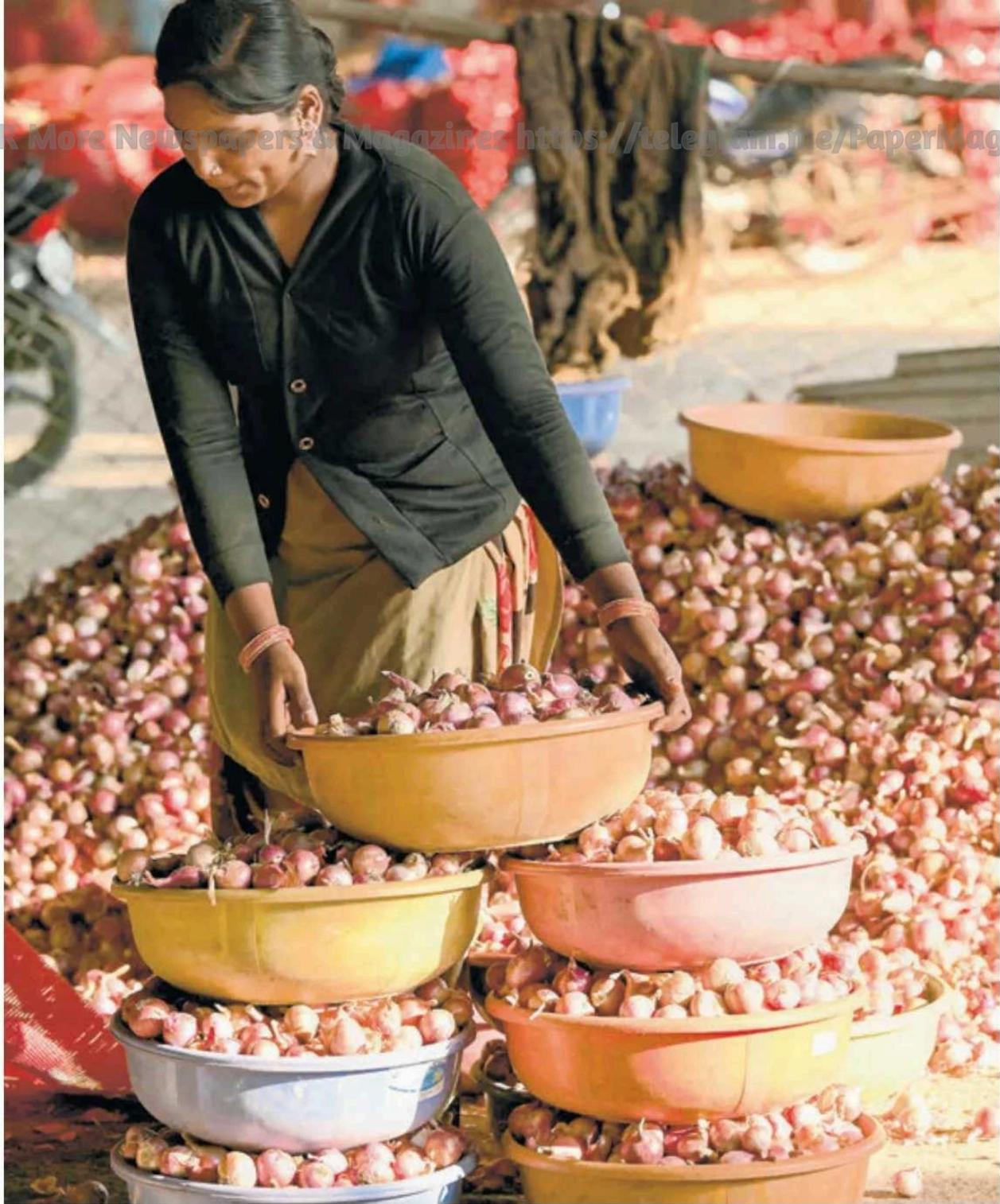
In such a situation, a serious question before the BJP is whether it should continue with Ajit as an alliance partner for the Assembly election. Ajit currently has the support of 42 MLAs, of whom 20 won against BJP candidates. If the alliance continues as it is, then the BJP will have to accommodate these MLAs too.

In contrast, Shinde's faction contested 15 seats and won 7 in the Lok Sabha polls, while the BJP fought 28 and won only 9. The Shinde faction's strike rate is better than the BJP's, strengthening Shinde's hand within the alliance.

On June 15 in Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar, Sanjay Shirsath, the faction's spokesperson, said: "Look at our strike rate. We have fought against tough challenges. We will be the elder brother in the NDA in Maharashtra."

This statement is an indication of the future for BJP workers. These workers had accepted Shinde only as a stopgap arrangement. But if the NDA comes back to power in the State, there is a

A big challenge for the MVA is winning back the Konkan region plus Thane and Palghar districts. Also, expanding the social base by bringing smaller parties on board would strengthen its prospects.



high probability of Shinde becoming Chief Minister again. This realisation could impact the morale of BJP workers ahead of the Assembly election. It remains to be seen how the BJP leadership will be able to convince them.

The BJP's State committee has launched a special mission to reach out to every home. Chandrashekhar Bawankule, the State party head, said: "We will go to the people again, with our 35 lakh party workers, and convince them to vote for the BJP."

▼ **Sorting onions**

for auction at a godown in Nashik on May 21. Farmer anger owing to low prices cost the NDA a few seats in the election. INDRANIL MUKHERJEE/ AFP

Apart from the political manoeuvres, the NDA government must urgently address the agrarian crisis, particularly among onion, cotton, and soya bean growers, for whom falling prices are the biggest concern. Both Fadnavis and Ajit Pawar admitted that the fall in wholesale prices of onion hurt the NDA in Dhule, Nashik, Ahmednagar, and Solapur districts. Similarly, cotton and soya bean also played a role in ensur-





ing the MVA's success in the Marathwada and Vidarbha regions. Since the Model Code of Conduct came into force, the State government was unable to deposit the price difference between this year and last year in farmers' accounts. The failure to do so angered farmers, and the NDA paid the price. Pacifying the farmers will be a major challenge for the NDA.

A bigger challenge before the NDA is the Maratha reservation demand. Manoj Jarange-Patil, a Maratha community leader, has sought reservation in education and jobs and Kunbi certification for his community. The government enacted a law giving 10 per cent reservation to Marathas, but the matter is pending in court. On Kunbi certification, the government accepted the demand in principle, but the Kunbi community is unhappy with the decision.

Another task before the NDA government is to battle the opposition's narrative that it is allowing industries to shift to Gujarat from Maharashtra. Although Fadnavis and State Industry Minister Uday Samant kept claiming that Maha-

▼ **The Maratha reservation activist** Manoj Jarange-Patil with Chief Minister Eknath Shinde after ending his protest on January 27. The issue is now before the courts and could play a key role in the Assembly election later this year. ANI

The NDA government must urgently address the agrarian crisis, particularly among onion, cotton, and soyabean growers, for whom falling prices are the biggest concern.

rashtra topped in foreign investment in 2023, they failed to convince the public at large.

The Lok Sabha debacle has also resulted in the BJP's attack on Uddhav Thackeray turning more communal. The entire BJP leadership has been trying to create a narrative that the MVA's victory, and particularly Uddhav Thackeray's success, was the result of Muslim consolidation.

On June 15, the top leaders of the MVA addressed a press conference in Mumbai. They thanked the people of Maharashtra and announced that they would fight the Assembly election as an alliance. This public posturing was an important step for the MVA to show unity when the road ahead is strewn with multiple hurdles.

A KEY CHALLENGE for the MVA would be to field strong candidates. Both Ajit Pawar and Eknath Shinde have plenty of influential MLAs, apart from financial resources and manpower at the booth level, and a dedicated voter base. It will take meticulous planning at all levels to pose a serious challenge to them.

Another challenge for the MVA is winning back the Konkan region plus Thane and Palghar districts. There are 39 Assembly seats in this area. Earlier it was a bastion of the Shiv Sena, but the Lok Sabha results clearly showed that Uddhav Thackeray has lost his grip on the region.

Expanding the social base by bringing smaller parties on board would strengthen the MVA's prospects. For instance, Raju Shetti, former MP and leader of the Swabhimani Shetkari Sanghata, contested independently and hurt the MVA in Buldhana and Hatkanangale seats. The division of votes helped Shinde's candidates win. The same is the case with Prakash Ambedkar's VBA. Talking about Ambedkar and other smaller parties, Uddhav Thackeray said on June 15: "If people are ready to join with sincere demands, we are here to welcome them."

In October, Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Haryana, and Jammu and Kashmir are scheduled to go to the polls. There is also a buzz about an advanced election in Bihar. Of these, the Maharashtra election will certainly be the most important and keenly watched one, as the results will have a significant national impact and a psychological one too. The NDA, particularly the BJP, will go all out to retain power in the State. The battle for Maharashtra promises to be a thrilling and memorable one. ■



► **SAD chief Sukhbir Singh Badal** leading a protest against the farm laws, in New Delhi on September 17, 2021. Despite such protests, the party has lost public support and ceded much of its space to other parties and radical elements. **SANDEEP SAXENA**

A SAD ending?

The Shiromani Akali Dal, the second oldest political party in the country, is yet to reinvent itself after the breakdown of its 23-year-old alliance with the BJP, even as Punjab itself is in a deep political churn. **ASHUTOSH SHARMA**

The Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), which came into existence in 1920, is at a cross-roads. The party, according to observers of Punjab's politics, is fast ceding political space to radical Sikhs (neo-Panths) and other parties, mainly on account of an "indecisive" leadership that departed from regional identity politics and

started a journey of self-destruction by siding with the Narendra Modi government.

After the Assembly election in 2022, the SAD suffered another body blow in the recent Lok Sabha election. Although it retained its bastion of Bathinda from where Harsimrat Kaur Badal, wife of party president Sukhbir Badal contested, its overall vote share nosedived to 13.42 per cent from 27.76 per cent in 2019.

Despite a three-month-long "Punjab Bachao Yatra" by the SAD leadership across the State, 10 of its candidates lost their deposit. The party could put up a fight only in Ferozpur and Amritsar. What is even more worrying for advocates of federal politics and SAD loyalists is the fact that the party has slid to fourth position in the State, falling far behind its former junior partner, the BJP.

The Congress is right now on top, having won seven seats and garnered 26.30 per cent of the vote share, followed by the AAP, which managed to win three seats and gain 26.02 per cent of the vote share.

Harjeshwar Singh, a political commentator



After the Assembly election in 2022, the SAD suffered another body blow in the Lok Sabha election. It could win only its bastion of Bathinda, and its overall vote share nosedived to 13.42 per cent from 27.76 per cent in 2019.

who teaches history at Sri Guru Gobind Singh College, Chandigarh, said: “The party that has historically stood for the rights of Punjab, Sikhs, and farmers is now irreversibly sliding towards irrelevance. Its leadership stands discredited and it has nothing new to offer.”

He added: “Despite giving some good candidates and making a decisive break from the BJP, past mistakes have continued to hang around its neck like a millstone. The party still has committed cadre but the people are avoiding it.”

According to him, a prominent feature of the election was the rise of radical Sikhs. “Not confined to a single political party, they are an assorted group comprising the old Khalistani war-horse Simranjit Singh Mann, whose party SAD (Amritsar) contested nearly all seats, and Independents like Amritpal Singh, the radical preacher currently lodged in Dibrugarh jail [in Assam], and Sarabjit Singh Khalsa, son of Beant Singh, the assassin of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.”

AMRITPAL SINGH WON by over 1.97 lakh votes in Khadoor Sahib, and Sarabjit Singh in Faridkot won by just over 70,000 votes. Amritpal’s was the highest victory margin in the State. “Simranjit Singh Mann managed to secure 1.87 lakh votes in Sangrur. Others, like Lakha Sidhana (Bathinda), Mohinder Pal (Patiala), Kamaljit Brar (Ludhiana), and Raj Jatinder Singh (Fatehgarh Sahib) also secured a significant number of votes,” Harjeshwar Singh stated, adding that collectively the radical Panthic factions secured about 10 per cent of the votes.

The SAD was formed as a political institutional wing of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), the highest Sikh religious body, to lead the gurdwara reform movement. Ashutosh Kumar, head of the political science department at Panjab University, said: “The party emanated from a homegrown movement, like

The sixth Sikh guru, Guru Hargobind, established the principle more than 400 years ago.

the National Conference in Kashmir and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam in Tamil Nadu. As regional entities, the three parties have pursued cultural and geographical region-specific autonomist politics vis-a-vis the Centre. The SAD’s stand has always been based on the adoration of the two political identities of Sikh nationalism and Indian nationalism.”

Kumar said that at the time of its inception, the SAD was conceived as a Panthic party formed to serve the religious and political cause of the Sikh community wherein religion and politics have historically been linked under the tenets of of “Miri Piri”, a Sikh principle highlighting the importance of worldly and spiritual power. It finds representation in the iconic emblem of Sikhism: a double-edged sword (*khanda*) at the centre, a *chakkar* (circular weapon), and two single-edged swords on either side of the *khanda* and the *chakkar*.

After Partition, the party waged a long political battle first to secure a Sikh-majority Punjabi Suba, or Punjabi-speaking State, to fulfil its long-cherished agenda of securing a “territorial homeland” for Sikhs. Later, it campaigned for the newly reorganised State’s autonomy vis-a-vis the Centre.

Before the BJP, it was allied with the Jana Sangh. While the party resisted the Emergency, it surrendered to radical elements during the pe-



riod of insurgency before making a comeback as a mainstream party of “Punjab, Punjabi, and Punjabyat”, with a discernible shift in its ideological focus and political practices. It forged an alliance with the BJP in 1996.

The SAD-BJP alliance government in Punjab from 2007 to 2017 saw rampant drug trafficking, illegal mining, an increase in gang wars, the high-handedness of Akali leaders, the Badal family tightening its grip over the transportation sector, and incidents of desecration of the Guru Granth Sahib. All this led to an erosion of public support for the party and its defeat in the 2017 Assembly election, in which it bagged just 15 of the total 117 seats.

THE BADAL FAMILY, which leads the SAD, has been accused of abandoning the party’s core ideology after joining the National Democratic Alliance. While in the NDA, the Akali Dal never raised its voice against atrocities on Muslims and Dalits. When the whole of Punjab was raising its voice against the abolition of Article 370, the SAD sided with the Modi government.

The SAD quit the NDA only after more than 700 farmers died during the year-long agitation against the three controversial farm laws brought in by the Central government. According to observers, electoral politics, and not the

“Ever since the SAD distanced itself from regional identity politics and stopped acting as an advocate of a strong federal structure, it has lost the faith of voters.”

Prof. Ronki Ram

Political commentator

► **Supporters of the Sikh**

separatist leader Amritpal Singh, an Independent candidate from Khadoor Sahib constituency, during an election campaign in Tarn Taran district on May 28. Amritpal won the seat with a huge margin, triggering worries about the rise of radicalism in the State.

MUNISH SHARMA/
REUTERS

BJP’s “insensitivity” in issues concerning Punjab or Sikhs, was central to the SAD’s decision to quit the NDA.

Before the Lok Sabha election, the SAD and the BJP attempted to form an alliance but failed to reach an agreement regarding seat-sharing. In the election, the BJP did not win any seat but its vote share was a significant 18.56 per cent. In 2019, when it was in alliance with the SAD, the party’s vote share was 9.63 per cent.

“At least 10 BJP candidates secured more votes than Akali candidates in this election. In case the BJP decides to throw a political lifeline to the Badal family in the future, the SAD will have to be a junior partner this time,” said Harjeshwar Singh. But time may be running out for Sukhbir Badal and the Akali Dal with the rise of the neo-Panths, and a resurgent BJP and the ruling AAP looking to poach its supporters, leaders, and cadre.

Indeed, party leaders like Prem Singh Chandumajra, SAD spokesperson and former MP from Anandpur Sahib, and Daljit Singh Cheema, former State Education Minister, are a worried lot. “At a time when regional parties are growing everywhere in the country, it’s a cause for concern that the party which has been at the forefront of advocating regionalism has got marginalised,” Chandumajra told *Frontline*.

He added: “We were not with the pro-Modi or the anti-Modi group. Then we saw a new wave of Panthic politics, but we couldn’t co-opt it. Similarly, we couldn’t formulate a third front after bringing together democratic-secular forces like the BSP [Bahujan Samaj Party] or the CPI(M).” This indecisiveness has been the SAD’s undoing.

THE POLARISATION FACTOR worked in this election, said Cheema. “For the first time in the past 23 years we have contested the Lok Sabha election separately from the BJP. The party was weak in the seats where the BJP used to contest as part of the seat-sharing arrangement.”

In the past years, senior party leader and former Union Minister Sukhdev Singh Dhindsa and former SGPC president Bibi Jagir Kaur were among those who questioned Sukhbir Badal’s decisions and demanded reforms within the party.

Following the rout in the 2022 Assembly elec-





tion, former MLA Iqbal Singh Jhundan led a 13-member committee that aimed to suggest course correction measures. The committee, in its report, recommended the introduction of “accepted faces” into the party leadership. While some of the recommendations have been implemented, the rest too will be implemented gradually, said Cheema. He maintained that the party was still introspecting to strengthen its organisational structure.

On the rise of radicals in this election, Cheema said that Operation Blue Star and the 1984 anti-Sikh massacres in Delhi are issues which the Sikh community has not forgotten. “In both cases, justice has not been done. This feeling of injustice keeps manifesting itself in one form or another from time to time. The long-standing issue of Bandi Sikhs [political Sikh prisoners] is also a part of it now.”

Harinder Singh Khalsa and Simranjit Singh Mann had contested and won Lok Sabha elections on similar sentiments. Sarabjeet Singh Khalsa rode a wave of sympathy in Faridkot for his father, Beant Singh.

The SAD’s Khadoor Sahib candidate, Virsa Singh Valtoha, was imprisoned under the National Security Act in the 1980s and was an associate of the separatist leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. “But it happened over 40 years ago. Today’s generation doesn’t know what happened to him. On the contrary, Amritpal Singh’s case is new. Naturally, people have sympathised with him,” said Cheema.

Speaking to *Frontline*, Prof. Ronki Ram, a political commentator who is the Shaheed Bhagat Singh Chair professor of political science at Pan-

▼ **Supporters** at a public meeting of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Hoshiarpur, on May 30. Although the BJP did not win a single seat, it succeeded in increasing its vote share significantly.

ANI

jab University, said: “Ever since the SAD distanced itself from regional identity politics and stopped acting as an advocate of a strong federal structure, besides on other basic issues confronting Punjab, it has lost the faith of voters. But it still has some hold in rural areas.”

THE LOK SABHA RESULTS also indicate growing disillusionment with the AAP, with votes drifting to the Congress. “There is every possibility that the SAD may reclaim lost ground in the near future. But it will have to act as the strongest voice of the region,” Prof. Ram said, adding that the space ceded by moderates was being appropriated by radicals.

Meanwhile, there are persistent doubts about the independence of the neo-Panthsics. Said Harjeshwar Singh: “Many believe they have been propped up by Central agencies. Their sudden rise serves many purposes for the BJP-led government: it increases Hindu anxieties, aids the rise of the BJP, restricts the scope of centrist parties like the Congress, AAP, and SAD, and helps diminish the surge of civil society in Punjab, as epitomised by the kisan unions.”

The biggest beneficiary of the rise of the Panthsics has been the BJP, which doubled its vote share. Citing the induction of Ravneet Bittu into Modi’s Cabinet despite his defeat in Ludhiana, Harjeshwar Singh said: “It signals that the BJP will continue using him to polarise the State’s politics and fan Panthic grievances.”

Bittu is the grandson of former Chief Minister Beant Singh, who was killed in a suicide bomb blast in Chandigarh in 1995, for which Babbar Khalsa International claimed responsibility. ■



Precarious state

The violence that broke out in Manipur’s Jiribam district in June has resulted in a hardening of positions of the Meitei and Kuki-Zo groups, and the fallout of this has been the spread of fear among all communities with no solution in sight.

SUSHANTA TALUKDAR in Guwahati

Manipur’s Jiribam district, a region with a mixed demography, had been relatively peaceful and largely unaffected by the violent clashes between Meitei and Kuki-Zo groups over the past year. That changed on June 6 when Soibam Saratkumar Singh, a 59-year-old Meitei farmer, went missing and his mutilated body was found later that day. Following the killing, several houses were set ablaze by armed miscreants, resulting in the forced displacement of about 2,000 people belonging to both communities. “Further, two police pickets and the Borobekra Forest Beat Office were also burnt down by sus-

▼ **A screenshot from a PTI video** of people displaced by the recent violence who took shelter at a relief camp in Jiribam district, on June 15. [PTI](#)

pected Kuki armed miscreants,” the Manipur Police said.

BJP legislator Rajkumar Imo Singh accused top police and security personnel of failing to prevent the outbreak of violence in Jiribam despite advance intelligence reports from the State government. Five days after the violence started in the district, Imo Singh wrote on his X handle:

“We have top police officials heading the Intelligence Wing in our State. State Government has to initiate an enquiry regarding the lackadaisical attitude of the officers who were given advance intelligence report by the State Government regarding the situation in Jiribam earlier this year. These officers should be held accountable for the loss of lives and property of all those affected and, pending such enquiry they should be suspended and strict action should be taken up against them as per procedures prescribed by law. Along with their associate officers, they should also be held accountable for the ambush on the State Police team heading as advance cavalcade for the Chief Minister, which is also related to the Jiribam incident.”

Singh demanded that the Manipur government immediately “fix responsibilities against



all the officers and people involved, and further ensure that the people of Jiribam be given adequate security and allowed to continue living at the original place of residence sooner than later”.

Altogether, 943 displaced individuals, including women and children, have taken shelter in seven relief camps across Jiribam district while over 600 people belonging to Meitei, Kuki-Zo, and other communities have fled to Assam’s Cachar district to take shelter in relief camps set up by the district administration. The Barak and Jiri rivers demarcate the boundary between Manipur and Assam. Jiribam is about 45 km from Silchar town in Cachar, and 222 km from Manipur’s capital city, Imphal. Jiribam district was carved out of Imphal East district in 2016. The Meitei are in a majority in the district and also in the headquarter town of Jiribam. Other communities in the district include Hmar, Rongmei Naga, Kuki, Paite Thadou, Meitei Pangal (Manipuri Muslim), Bengali Hindu, Bengali Muslim, Khasi, and Bishnupria.

Police officials from both States held a joint meeting in Jiribam town on June 15 to discuss the prevailing situation. They have intensified patrolling and area domination of the inter-State boundary along the riverine stretches.

Professor Angomcha Bimol Akoijam, who was elected to the 18th Lok Sabha from Inner Manipur constituency on the Congress ticket, told *Frontline*: “The Jiribam incident can’t be viewed in isolation. It’s a symptom of a larger crisis that has plagued Manipur for over a year, since May 2023. When communal conflicts fester for so long, they expose systemic failures. In essence, the system itself becomes complicit in the ongoing crisis. This continued violence is likely being exploited by those who seek to destabilise Manipur.”

Akoijam added that the State authority must be made accountable for the crisis. “Public awareness is crucial; a well-informed citizenry can demand decisive action from the government. This includes prioritising law enforcement to restore order. Once a sense of security is established, facilitated dialogue among citizens can pave the way towards peace.”

THE RONGMEI NAGA COUNCIL Manipur, Goinanglong (Oinamlong) Luangrian (segment), strongly condemned the brutal murder of the Meitei farmer and the ab-

Blockades and counter-blockades have choked supplies of essential commodities to both the hills and valley areas.

duction of a 40-year-old Kuki resident of Jiribam, L. Thianmuang, by unknown miscreants. Appealing for peace, it urged both the Meitei and Kuki communities to refrain from escalating the crisis and to work out a solution for the welfare of the residents of Jiribam.

Manipur Chief Minister N. Biren Singh dropped his scheduled visit to Jiribam to take stock of the situation after suspected militants ambushed his advanced security team at K. Sinam village near Kotlen in Kangpokpi district along National Highway (NH) 37 on June 10. The Manipur Police claimed that the attack was carried out by “suspected Kuki militants”.

A police official and a civilian driver of the advanced security team were injured in the ambush. Empty bullet cases were recovered, and some illegal temporary hideout/bunkers, suspected to have been used by the militants, were destroyed during search operations in and around K. Sinam village, the police said. The Chief Minister condemned the attack and ordered a high-level probe.

THE OPPOSITION led by the Congress urged the Central and State governments to control the situation and protect lives and property in Jiribam. The Congress victory in both the Lok Sabha seats from the State—Inner and Outer Manipur—has been seen as a protest vote against the silence of Prime Mi-

► A “village volunteer” stands guard at a bunker set up in conflict-hit Manipur, in May 2024.

GUNJAN SHARMA/PTI



nister Narendra Modi on the Manipur violence that has claimed 221 lives and displaced more than 60,000 people since May 3, 2023. Four days after the Jiribam incident, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat pointed out, while addressing an event in Nagpur, that Manipur had been waiting for peace for over a year and stressed the need to resolve the situation on a priority basis.

The Coordinating Committee on Manipur Integrity (COCOMI), a conglomerate of five major civil society organisations in the State, condemned the attack on the advanced security team of the Chief Minister. The organisation alleged that “the incident underscores the escalating conflict between the State government and Kuki terrorist organisations, exacerbated by the perceived complicity of Indian central security forces”. COCOMI further said that “the Central government’s neutral stance” amidst these attacks had not only compromised the safety of Manipuris but also undermined the authority of the State government. According to COCOMI, the refusal of Central forces to assist the State forces suggests an implicit support of the Kuki groups by the Indian state, going against the interests of the State government and fuelling further violence and instability.

It also dubbed the evacuation of Meitei villages, purportedly for safety reasons, as a “tactical manoeuvre” meant to facilitate the occupation of these areas by Kuki groups. The umbrella or-

The Coordinating Committee on Manipur Integrity alleged that under the current leadership of Prime Minister Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah, the hope for a peaceful and prosperous Manipur has dwindled.

The organisation said in a press note that “The Meitei community has been continuously causing problems for the Kuki-Zo tribals in Jiribam by burning abandoned Kuki-Zo houses and preventing Kuki-Zo people from traveling on NH-37.”

organisation alleged that under the current leadership of Prime Minister Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah, the hope for a peaceful and prosperous Manipur had dwindled. “COCOMI has lost faith in the Indian government’s commitment to protecting the indigenous people and safeguarding the State’s integrity,” it said while calling upon the people of Manipur to “take charge of their future”.

Tension continued to simmer in the district after the Kuki Women Union of Jiribam and Tamenglong (KWUJT) endorsed the blockade of NH 37 called for by Kuki-Zo Village Volunteers to “counter the blockade imposed by Arambai Tenggol and the Meira Paibis of Jiribam”. The women’s body alleged in a statement that Saratkumar Singh was killed by unknown miscreants, but Meitei organisations blamed Kuki-Zo groups “with the intention of escalating tension in Jiribam”. It accused the Meitei radical outfit Arambai Tenggol and Meitei militant groups of torching all Kuki-Zo houses in Jiribam and dragging L. Thianmuang out of his house. He has been missing since.

The stretch of NH 37 (old NH 53) connecting Jiribam to Imphal has been seen as the highway of hope in the past one year. When blockades and clashes have frequently crippled movement on the main lifeline of Manipur, NH 2 (old NH 39), NH 37 kept the supply line open.

But now it wears a deserted look, with torched houses along the way and the threat of gun violence hanging like a dark cloud over it. Blockades and counter-blockades have choked supplies of essential commodities to both the hill and valley areas. Hundreds of trucks from Jiribam carrying essential goods were stranded on the highway after volunteers of KWUJT prevented trucks from proceeding towards Imphal and beyond. A convoy of about 140 trucks escorted by personnel of the Central Reserve Police Force returned to Jiribam after CRPF and police officials failed to persuade the women to lift the blockade.

Earlier, on the night of June 15, miscreants torched two trucks carrying construction materials in Bishnupur district. The trucks were headed to Churachandpur district, where Kuki-Zo people are in a majority. This incident was believed to be another trigger for the blockade imposed by Kuki groups.

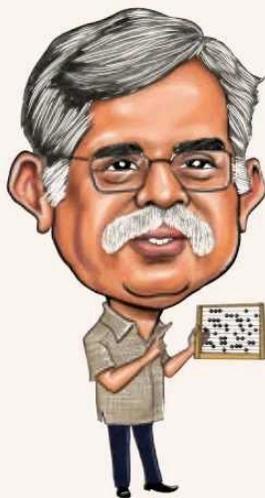
With the violence showing no sign of abating, the future of Manipur remains fraught. ■



Policy dilemma for Modi 3.0

The failure of the communal agenda to deliver adequately for the BJP in the Lok Sabha election, and the harm that economic outcomes seem to have inflicted in terms of prices, employment, and social protection, suggests that the economic policy objectives of the new Modi-led government could change.

C.P. Chandrasekhar



The election results, which gave both the BJP and the National Democratic Alliance a far fewer number of seats than they had in the previous Parliament, surprised many. But now, attention has shifted to assessing what that would do to this version of a Narendra Modi-led government in terms of its behaviour and policies in different spheres. One such sphere is economic policy, where the results suggest that the second Modi government's claimed sense of comfort with the nature and outcomes of its policies was misplaced. Speculation is rife about the compulsions of coalition politics and the possibility of it triggering change on the economic policy front. Some suspect that it will, while others believe that Modi is incapable of change, as the composition of the new Cabinet indicates.

However, assessments of the likelihood of such change are hampered by the difficulty in characterising the nature of economic policy under the two previous Modi governments. Reading the policy on the basis of statements from Modi and his spokespersons yields a framework that has an eclectic set of features: capital spending with a focus on infrastructure; efforts to build India's woefully inadequate manufacturing base, not least by offering subsidies under the production-linked incentive scheme; and special welfare schemes varying from transfers to farmers to provision of free foodgrains, to name a

few. Arriving at a holistic understanding of the government's policy stance from elements of that kind is difficult.

In fact, in each such policy area, the details suggest that decisions seem to have been driven by the demands of propaganda rather than a concern with substance and impact. For example, under infrastructure, much was made about transforming the railways by showcasing more than 50 new Vande Bharat trains, even while periodic accidents revealed the failure to renovate and modernise track and signalling infrastructure.

While the extension of the COVID-era food provision schemes and transfers to chosen sections were flagged as indicators of an enhanced emphasis and spending on welfare, budgetary allocations for a whole host of welfare schemes on the books, targeting areas ranging from employment generation to housing and nutrition, have been kept at woefully inadequate levels. The emphasis has been on branding and presenting many old and a few new schemes as measures and guarantees directly attributable to the Prime Minister. The presumption seems to have been that with an aggressively communal and divisive political agenda helping gather majority voter support, political legitimacy does not depend on the outcomes of economic policy.

Besides propaganda, there have been rather diverse drivers of whatever goes by the name of economic policy. To start with, the numbers make it clear that central to the BJP's strategy of winning political power was the monopolisation of the mobilisation and use of political funding. This required obtaining the maximum in the form of political donations, as well as finding ways, ranging from the use of state agencies to the alleged use of demonetisation, to freeze funds available to the opposition. Both carrots and sticks were deployed to mobilise funds, as the court-directed release of evidence on the operations of the now



► **Opposition leaders** protesting against the BJP government over distribution of funds to States, in New Delhi in February. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

defunct “electoral bonds” scheme revealed.

This funding strategy has implications for economic policy. If humongous sums have to be mobilised from the private sector, those private donors have to be rendered capable of making such large donations and be incentivised to do so. This has encouraged a policy environment in which the accumulation of assets and wealth of favoured wealth holders is facilitated and engineered. The net result has been an unusual increase of income and wealth concentration in the hands of a few business houses, which in turn are direct or indirect sources of political funding. It is to be expected that this mutually beneficial nexus between state actors and private capital will influence the character of “industrial policy”.

A second feature of policy during the Modi regime has been an effort to extract resources from the States, the RBI, and some public sector entities to ensure that its spending on select infrastructure projects and welfare schemes does not result in too much of a deviation from its fiscal consolidation targets and damage its claim to be fiscally prudent. A growing reliance on revenues from cesses and surcharges that are not shared with the States, refusal to continue compensating the States for shortfalls in revenues under the goods and services tax regime, record transfers of special dividends from the RBI, and enforced payments of large dividends to the government as owner by profitable public sector units have all been deployed to this end. This also allows for continuing with a light direct tax regime, required to keep both domestic and foreign capital happy, with virtually no taxes on wealth and inheritance.

Third, the squeeze on spending at the State level as a result of the concentration of tax revenues in the hands of the Centre has been consciously worsened by capping bor-

rowing by the States, including borrowing by off-budget public sector entities such as the Kerala Infrastructure Investment Fund Board. Most States have been forced to substantially prune their spending. With opposition parties still exercising power in many States, this has a political benefit. It prevents opposition parties at the State level from winning legitimacy and voter support through capital and welfare expenditures. Even when they manage to spend on such projects, to the extent that the cost is shared by the Centre through its centrally sponsored schemes, allocations are increasingly tied to attributing those projects to the Centre and Prime Minister Modi. Undermining the opposition at the State level has been an objective of economic policy.

WITH THESE ECONOMIC measures being driven by political objectives, actual economic policymaking becomes a residual and often distorted activity. Much is done to present the government as being business- and market-friendly, partly also to neutralise the resentment that special benefits for favoured corporates and business houses generate among the rest. This can take the form of widely distributed largesse. Thus, the production-

linked incentive scheme uses subsidies to pay off and persuade foreign and domestic investors to establish capacity or expand in chosen manufacturing sectors, with no indication as to whether and how this will build indigenous technological and production capability.

Given these drivers of economic policy under successive Modi regimes, it is unlikely that there will be much desire to change as long as the objectives remain the same. So, the question is whether the failure of the communal agenda to deliver adequately and the harm that economic outcomes with regard to prices, employment, and social protection seem to have inflicted will change the objectives of the BJP and its leadership. Moreover, with parties ruling the States now wielding power as coalition partners, there will be pressure to either unwind the centralisation of resources or pay off the partners. But these could imply small changes, leaving the framework of policy relatively untouched. ■

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THE FAR RIGHT ADVANCES

The results of the EU elections show that if the far right were to form a single group, it would constitute the second-largest bloc in the European Parliament. **SUSAN RAM**

The results of European Union-wide elections held over four days at the start of June have confirmed the pollsters' bleak prognosis: that of significant gains for the far right.

Despite claims by President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen that the centre has held, the new parliament that will convene in Strasbourg, France, in July will be one that tilts emphatically to the right. The "moderate" conservatives and Christian Democrats of the European People's Party group have reinforced their position as the largest bloc, with 190 seats (up by 14). But the real story of the elections relates to the gains made by formations on the radical and far right.

Between them, the ECR (European Conservatives and Reformists) and the neo-fascist alliance known as Identity and Democracy (ID) now control 134 seats in the 720-member European Parliament, a total just short of the 136 seats won by the Social Democrat bloc S&D (the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats). When one stirs in the 15 seats garnered by Germany's neo-fascist *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), summarily ejected from the ID bloc on the eve of the elections following pro-Nazi comments by its leader Maximilian Krah, the overall advance made by Europe's far right becomes clearer.

Across the continent, the variegated forces of the extreme right now seem intent on operating and communicating in ways that seem compatible with EU institutions.



And that is before the 11 seats won by the Fidesz party of Viktor Orbán in Hungary are factored into the equation.

To put it bluntly, if the far right were to form a single group, it would constitute the second largest bloc in the European Parliament.

The election's chief losers have been Renew Europe, the "liberal", free-enterprise-friendly group in which French President Emmanuel Macron's Renaissance party plays a prominent role, and the Greens/EFA coalition of green and regionalist parties. Renew Europe lost 22 seats, reducing its strength to 80; the Greens saw their tally fall by 19, to just 52 seats.

The Left in the European Parliament alliance of anti-capitalist forces has been able to slightly increase its strength, its tally of seats rising by 2 (for a total of 39).

THERE CAN BE little doubt about the headline story of these elections: the stomping advance made by France's neo-fascist far right. After decades of assiduous scheming and efforts to "detoxify" its public face, the Marine Le Pen-led formation now known as the Rassemblement National (RN: National Rally) has just plunged France into political turmoil by topping the elections, with 31.4 per cent of the vote. Piqued by the poor performance of his own list, Réveillon Europe, placed third with a dismal vote share of just 13.8 per cent, Macron has dissolved the French parliament and called snap elections at the end of June. This high-stakes gamble, redolent of the glory days of the Bourbon monarchy (think Louis XV and "après moi, le de-



► **“Europe stay colourful”** reads the banner at a demonstration against right-wing extremism, and for the protection of democracy ahead of the European Parliament elections, in Berlin on June 8. NNEGRET HILSE/REUTERS

luge”), has now unleashed a frenzy of turmoil, with farcical flourishes, within France’s political establishment.

Germany, too, has witnessed a powerful surge of its own far-right formation, the avowedly neo-Nazi AfD, which won close to 16 per cent of votes. Taken together with the collapse of the German Greens, a core constituent, along with the free-market Free Democratic Party, of Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s “traffic light” (red, yellow, green) coalition, this development will put further pressure on Germany’s dominant status within the EU while encouraging Scholz to concede further ground to racist, anti-immigrant, and ultra-nationalist forces.

AS TROUBLES ACCUMULATE within the Franco-German partnership, long extolled as the engine of European integration, the attention of EU movers and shakers seems to be shifting south to sun-drenched Italy, where Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and her neo-fascist Brothers of Italy party have emerged from the European elections with pennants soaring. Untroubled by any significant opposition from what would once have constituted Italy’s political mainstream, Meloni and the Brothers seized the elections as a chance to land blows on their coalition partner and principal far-right rival, the Lega (formerly the Northern League) led by Matteo Salvini. The gamble paid off, the Brothers taking 28.76 per cent of the national vote against the Lega’s 9 per cent.

Since coming to power in 2022, Meloni has artfully contrived to woo Europe’s political mainstream, conducting a charm offensive tar-

geting Brussels’ bureaucrats, party leaders, think tanks, and credulous journalists fixated on the need for stability at almost any cost. A key element in the resulting normalisation of a far-right politician who has made no secret of her extremist take on a range of issues, from abortion and homosexual rights to racism and immigration, has been Meloni’s readiness to retreat from what was once a *sine qua non* of Europe’s far right: hostility to the EU and rejection of the very notion of European integration. This putative break with the past has been enough to persuade key players, von der Leyen prominent among them, that the canny Italian leader is not only a regular politician with whom deals can be done but also a potential kingmaker.

THE READINESS OF the wider European far right to break with, or tone down, its traditional Euroscepticism is now emerging as a strategic shift. Asked in a French pre-election TV debate why the Rassemblement National had now ditched its long-standing demand for a referendum on leaving the EU, party president Jordan Bardella, who leads the party’s contingent at Strasbourg, replied: “You don’t quit the negotiating table when you are about to win.” Across the continent, the variegated forces of the extreme right now seem intent on operating and communicating in ways that seem compatible with EU institutions.

The willingness of key EU players to reciprocate these advances is already apparent. The drum-beating, immigration-averse Ursula von der Leyen, bent on retaining her job in the wake of the elections, seems particularly receptive to a stress-free accommodation of the far right. But the drive to normalise goes much deeper than the whims and ambitions of individuals. Notwithstanding mainstream media efforts to put a gloss on the situation, exemplified by *The Economist’s* gushing pre-election endorsement of Meloni, Le Pen, and von der Leyen as “the three women who will shape Europe”, there is much that is deeply troubling about the EU’s current direction of travel. ■

Susan Ram has spent much of her life viewing the world from different geographical locations. Born in London, she studied politics and international relations before setting off for South Asia: first to Nepal, and then to India, where fieldwork in Tamil Nadu developed into 20 years of residence.

Germany, too, has witnessed a powerful surge of its own far-right formation, the avowedly neo-Nazi AfD, which won close to 16 per cent of the votes.

A PLACE TO DANCE

In the 12 years of its existence, the biennial dance competition, Prakriti Excellence in Contemporary Dance Awards, has created a valuable ecology for dance practice in India, where resources and opportunities for dancers are still scarce. **RANJANA DAVE**

Dancers in India's contemporary dance landscape stretch the field's meagre resources to grand ends, working alone and together, juggling any available space, time, and funding to sustain their practice. Any emergency throws their carefully wrought budgets and lives into chaos. In 2017, the dancer and choreographer Diya Naidu found herself contemplating this chaos when she missed a flight from Mumbai to Hyderabad during a six-city tour for The Park's New Festival. She was one of five choreographers invited to tour a performance at the festival, following a stellar showing at the Prakriti Excellence in Contemporary Dance Awards (PECDA) in 2016—both events conceptualised by the Prakriti Foundation.

Delayed by a series of small mishaps, Naidu and 21 other artists had missed the flight's check-in window and were now stranded at Mumbai airport, worried about having to buy expensive last-minute tickets to make it to their next show in time. Used to expecting very little from funders and patrons, the artists reached out to the festival team with great trepida-

tion. They were quickly given replacement tickets, and the missed flight was never mentioned again. "In 2017, you were still very grateful to be platformed, invited, curated... for every free meal you might have been given," Naidu said.

In a landscape of few resources and opportunities, this was a significant gesture. It epitom-

Dancers converge from all corners of the country for PECDA, spending an extended weekend together watching performances, participating in discussions, and taking the pulse of the field.



mised the warmth and the camaraderie she had grown to treasure at PECDA.

A biennial event, PECDA offers financial support, mentorship, and performance and networking opportunities to choreographers who enter an open competition. Run by the Chennai-based Prakriti Foundation, the awards have had six editions since 2012, the latest being in March 2024. The winner receives funding to make a full-length work and spends time with a mentor during an international residency or workshop. Choreographers use their funding to hire dancers and artistic collaborators, defray production expenses, and pay for rehearsal space, besides the costs of their own time. The finished work is invited back to the next edition of the awards. Several other finalists receive profes-

sional development opportunities or, like Naidu, are invited to tour their works.

PECDA wears the air of a reunion; dancers converge on it from all corners of the country, spending an extended weekend together watching performances, participating in discussions, and taking the pulse of the field. Back in 2012, when it began, large contemporary dance gatherings were restricted to a few biennial events, the Attakkalari India Biennial in Bengaluru and the Ignite! Festival of Contemporary Dance in New Delhi, among them. State support for contemporary dance was sparse. The term “contemporary” was yet to enter the Sangeet Natak Akademi’s institutional vocabulary; until 2014, it gave awards and

▼
“Meepao”,
choreographed
by Surjit
Nongmeikapam,
from PECDA
Showcase 2022.
PRAKRITI FOUNDATION



grants for “Creative and Experimental Dance”, defining the category in terms of stylistic expression instead of temporal significance.

In the 2010s, artist-run community initiatives were setting up spaces and platforms to grow local dance scenes across major metros. They were supported by a mix of international cultural institutions, occasional state funding, and individual donors, who were often artists themselves. But while they could raise funds for specific projects, it was hard to find the crucial support needed to build infrastructure—establish spaces, acquire resources, guarantee a baseline level of functioning—that would make them into sustainable hubs for local dancers.

Ranvir Shah, founder-trustee, Prakriti Foundation, started considering the PECDA model in the late 2000s. The foundation had organised festivals and presented work, but it wanted to do more. The poet, producer, and curator Karthika Nair came on board to define a framework. “There were what I call the 3 Ms: the prize money, the mentoring, and the ‘market’ of [touring] five to six different cities. We wanted to let young choreographers find and create their own language [by being] catalysts who nurtured them and created a sense of community,” Shah said of PECDA’s origins.

THE COMPETITION QUICKLY became an important platform for young dancers, who filled out a simple application form to enter. Those who were selected were offered support to travel to the competition, where they had opportunities to meet one another, going beyond their usual networks of peers from the same school, training background, company, or city. PECDA does not discriminate between choreographers with years of experience and those who are just starting out.

Aseng Borang, winner of the 2018 edition, was a first-year student in a master’s programme when she won. The validation helped her feel more certain about a future in the arts. She said: “In 2018, I was competing with artists who... were already established. So there was a sense of achievement that somebody like me, who probably was never even considered a choreographer or an artist, was given this platform, or that the jury felt that I deserved it. I went to PECDA and I won, and then



▼ **Saïdo Lehlouh** (jury member and mentor at PECDA 2024) speaking at a session titled “Discussion: Expanding the Contemporary Dance Practice—Present and Future”, at PECDA 2024. PRAKRITI FOUNDATION

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I came back to Delhi, where I was still a student. There was an interesting [juxtaposition] of studying and being recognised as an established artist. I think it really pushed me to see a future, to see an ecology where I could position myself as an artist.”

Nair, who directed the first four editions of PECDA, explained that it was blueprinted on three international reference points: the Place Prize of the UK, which gave selected choreographers space and resources to develop a full-length work; Danse élargie of France, which demystified the application process by not demanding complex descriptions of works-in-progress from choreographers who were not usually trained to write them; and Premio Equilibrio of Italy, an annual national dance award that Nair co-curated with the choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui for six years.

“Blueprinting PECDA meant that the references needed to be adapted to the realities and financial, infrastructural possibilities in India,” Nair said. “PECDA, as Ranvir christened it almost immediately, was not a solution: it was meant to be a first step, a platform to showcase, and support, new work... also a meeting point where the same work could get seen by international programmers. Any award comes with its own set of problems, beginning with the idea of a superlative in something as subjective as an artistic work.”

The festival’s co-director in 2022 and 2024, Chandrika Grover Ralleigh, described PECDA as a “landing” for dance makers. While every edition still has a “winner”, the event has been reshaped to offer sustainable support. Eddie Nixon, artistic director of The Place and 2024

co-director of PECDA, was able to consider these changes over several editions, having been a jury member in 2016 and 2018. In this edition, each of the selected choreographers was matched with an established artist from the dance scene in India and supported through a process of mentoring and feedback in the months before the competition. “The focus was on trying to surround the choreographers with a bit more creative support along the way so that their creation would feel a little more like an artist development journey. The work developed, critical relationships were formed. We are really trying to develop PECDA into something that is a rich contribution to art-form development rather than just a biennial competition,” Nixon said.

A TYPICAL EDITION of PECDA occurs over three or four days. The last two editions were held in Bengaluru, which has long been a hub for dancers who move there to attend training programmes and workshops, and stay for the collaborative possibilities and teaching opportunities it offers. Over two days, the selected choreographers present short performances. Of these, five performances are chosen for the final. The period between the two rounds of performance is tense. Competing for PECDA, most choreographers have already spent weeks or months developing and rehearsing their short performances. The mood is jovial, but the stakes are high.

▼
“**Vaasipinnal 12**”,
choreographed by
Chandiran. R.
Shortlisted for
PECDA 2024.

PRAKRITI FOUNDATION

Being in the final increases choreographers’ chances of being able to develop their 10-minute iteration into a full-length performance. A longer work requires more rehearsal, greater time commitment from dancers, plans for music, set, and light design. It is also more likely to be positioned as a stand-alone performance, justifying the costs incurred to rent a venue, plan travel and accommodation, and market an event.

Increasingly, artists in the Indian ecosystem do not rely on being invited by venues to perform. Instead, they plan their own tours across major metros and a few smaller cities, sometimes travelling to multiple venues in each city, performing at proscenium venues of varying sizes and makeshift studios. Sometimes, they hold workshops as they go along, disseminating their knowledge and simultaneously cross-subsidising performance costs. The profits can be slim; dancers may recoup their costs and have a little left over but do not come even close to significantly earning a livelihood from performance and touring.

This is true of most independent dancers, barring those with regular corporate or entertainment industry gigs. Performing or making work independently does not cover rent, pay for health insurance, or cover the cost of time off due to injuries. Teaching is a steadier prospect and also a sustained way of developing one’s artistic practice, with many dancers carrying ideas from their works into the classroom, and vice versa.





► From “Discussion: Expanding the Contemporary Dance Practice—Present and Future” at PECDA 2024. PRAKRITI FOUNDATION

The period between the two rounds of performance is tense. The mood is jovial, but the stakes are high.

For Pradeep Gupta, winner of the 2022 edition, teaching is also a way of giving back, using the knowledge he has gained to bring new people into the field. Gupta started out as a self-taught artist, watching YouTube videos and parlaying dance reality show wins into a scholarship to a dance institute in Mumbai. He was then able to work with other dancers, even appearing in runner-up Purnendra Meshram’s work, “2 Men”, at PECDA 2018.

Gupta’s 2022 win opened up a wealth of possibilities; the money he was awarded allowed him to focus on making a work without financial pressures. He also learned a lot from being able to see works by other artists and having opportunities to travel. He said: “I didn’t want to waste that information just on myself. So, I thought, let’s share this with the



► **Winner Jasmine Yadav;** runner-up, Anjali A.R.; and winners of the Karthika Nair Best Dancer Award, Priyanka Chandrasekhar and Khulem Tennyson, at PECDA 2024. PRAKRITI FOUNDATION

dancers of Chhattisgarh, who mainly follow Bollywood or hip-hop. I thought it would be good for them to understand other body languages or different kinds of practice. I started my workshops, not just in my native place (Maroda, Bhillai) but also in different cities in Chhattisgarh. The idea of the workshops is to make a community here where I can survive, because in Chhattisgarh there is nobody I can

speak to about my art.” Teaching allows Gupta to pass on what he has learned and build a community of peers who hold space for his artistic preoccupations.

What does PECDA’s future look like? Each year, the competition gets more diverse, welcoming participants with no direct links to big-name institutions or metropolitan dance scenes. In a few editions, Shah hopes, the competition may evolve into other forms of support. “Maybe we can then move to fellowships and mentorships within the community, with senior choreographers, and also create more regular spaces for interaction and discourse,” he said.

THERE HAVE BEEN GAPS along this journey; PECDA skipped an edition in 2020 due to COVID-19. The pandemic posed a challenge for most dancers; while it opened up digital possibilities, it shut them out of the physical spaces where most of their work happened. Choreographers who employed full-time dancers were forced to disband their companies as work dried up. Everyone seemed to be teaching Zoom classes.

The master’s programme in Performance Practice (Dance) at Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University (where both Borang and the 2024 PECDA winner, Jasmine Yadav, were students), had to pivot from plans to facilitate field research and

full-length performance works to figuring out how dissertation projects could be executed on camera in students’ homes, negotiating shared domestic spaces or restrictive family environments. Dancers who had migrated to cities like Bengaluru sometimes had to move back home to cut costs.

In a landscape defined by precarity, institutional initiatives have been slow to return. To survive and run a national competition successfully is PECDA’s biggest win. For independent dancers, life has gradually bounced back, but survival remains an exercise in grit and ingenuity, and every initiative helps. ■

▼
“**Folktale**”,
choreographed
by Surjit
Nongmeikapam.
Winner, PECDA
2016.

PRAKRITI FOUNDATION

Ranjana Dave is an independent artist and writer. She explores how people build relationships with other people, ideas, objects, and ecologies—what makes us social beings. She is the editor of *Improvised Futures: Encountering the Body in Performance* (Tulika Books, 2021).



Art

Art and the political imagination

An ongoing exhibition in Paris upholds the Palestinian right to statehood through a display of works by artists from populations uprooted or exiled by violence. **RAHAAB ALLANA**

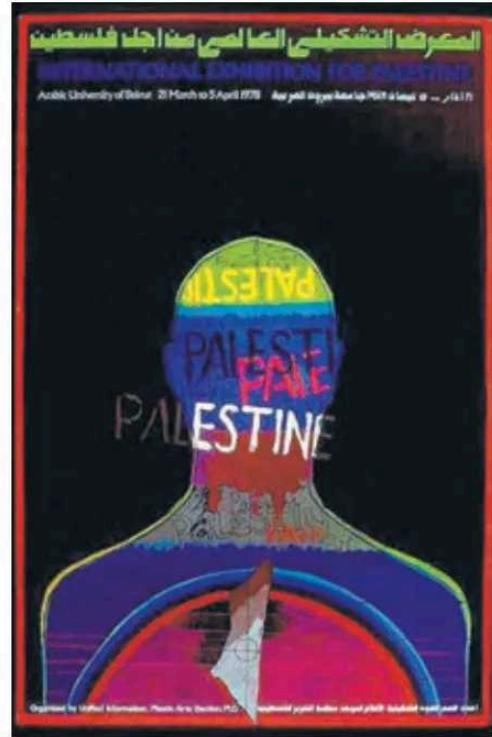
"The question is not whether a given being is living or not, nor whether the being in question has the status of a 'person'; it is, rather, whether the social conditions of persistence and flourishing are or are not possible.... Only under conditions in which the loss would matter does the value of the life appear."

—Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (2009)



In April 2024, partnering with Columbia University’s Department of Middle Eastern, South Asian and African Studies (MESAAS), the MurthyNAYAK Foundation, and the Al-kazi Foundation for the Arts co-organised a one-day symposium, “Camera South Asia II” (a successor to the well-received “Camera South Asia I” organised on campus in April 2023), co-chaired by the film/media studies scholar Professor Debashree Mukherjee of MESAAS. As stated on the poster, the symposium sought “to balance a focus on the contemporary with a long view of the past and to unsettle easy ascriptions of identity or authenticity, be it for individuals or for images”.

The date and venue had been scheduled months earlier, when no one could have foreseen the conflict that started raging on cam-



► The poster for the International Art Exhibition for Palestine, Beirut Arab University, 1978, designed by the Iraqi artist Dia al-Azzawi. DIA AL-AZZAWI

pus in April: the turbulent yet largely peaceful students’ protests against the genocide in Gaza, demanding that the state and businesses divest from Israel and stop supplying it with arms. Initiated at Columbia, the dissent spread to other US universities and then to campuses in Europe, and has been compared to the 1960s’ students’ protests against the Vietnam war.

The protest sites became nodes of solidarity and impassioned debates about political legitimacy, sovereignty, free speech, social justice, and human rights. Police intervention soon turned violent, and hundreds were arrested. Amidst the furor, through the efforts of Columbia faculty, our symposium was shifted to St Mary’s Episcopal Church in Harlem (considered a sanctuary space). While the students’ protests have now been significantly reduced by regular police action, the movement has left a deep imprint both on and off cam-



► “Past Disquiet” at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris. AURÉLIEN MOLE/PALAIS DE TOKYO

pus. As Osita Nwanevu remarked in *The Guardian* (May 13, 2024), an “extraordinary propaganda campaign” against the protesters is being “pushed by critics in the press and in office”, while, in fact, the media’s work should be “to change public opinion on the actual matter at hand—to make urgent arguments to the American public not about the plight of Palestine’s defenders on campus but the plight of the Palestinians. The students have done their part; they will be recognized in time. Now it’s up to the rest of us.”

The “rest of us”: this includes the spectrum of arts/media practitioners, archivists, curators, gallerists, scholars, critics, technologists, designers, art activists, specialists (in arts markets, arts management, arts policy, arts pedagogy). A different, yet vital genealogy of transcontinental political dissent underpins the compelling documentary and archival show, “Past Disquiet”, related to the International Art Exhibition of Palestine, 1978 (IAEP), that I recently viewed at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris.

ON VIEW until June 30, having travelled from several venues and different editions starting with the Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona in 2015, it aspires to create awareness about political sovereignty and Palestine’s right to statehood through themed displays of work by artists from populations uprooted and scattered via war or civil unrest, or in exile across refugee camps in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria.

A dedicated publication (Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw/University of Chicago Press, 2018) with essays, interviews, and archival content also narrates how the 1960s and the 1970s witnessed the emergence of artists’ unions and associations across the Arab world with the aim of fostering dialogue and cultural

Built on intensive, remarkable forensic research starting in the 1990s by the scholars Kristine Khouri and Rasha Salti, “Past Disquiet” explores how the IAEP ingeniously connected artists in solidarity with four major liberation and social justice struggles (Palestine, Nicaragua, Chile, South Africa).



intervention in the regional public sphere.

“Past Disquiet” begins by tracing how, soon after the Israeli attacks in southern Lebanon, the Plastic Arts Section of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), headed by the Jordanian artist Mona Saudi, organised the IAEP in March 1978 in the Beirut Arab University basement hall. Built on intensive, remarkable forensic research starting in the 1990s by the scholars Kristine Khouri and Rasha Salti, “Past Disquiet” explores how the IAEP (comprising work by 179 international artists and one collective from 30 countries, and able to tour via networks of politically engaged associations, collectives, and unions of artists) ingeniously connected artists in solidarity with four major liberation and social justice struggles (Palestine, Nicaragua, Chile, South Africa).

The PLO itself invited artists from many countries, and Saudi, the IAEP’s de facto custodian/curator, travelled widely to meet artists, requested artist participation through various embassies (Poland, Denmark, Romania, and the Soviet Union), and spread the word



through Arab friends and colleagues. Artists eventually contributed from France (through collectives like L'Association de la Jeune Peinture), Italy (L'Alzaia and L'Arcicoda) and Japan (through the Japan Afro-Asian Latin American Artist Association, or JAALA) as well as through artist unions in Baghdad, Berlin, Casablanca, Damascus, and Warsaw. International artists who travelled to Beirut to attend the opening included Claude Lazar (France), Gontran Guanaes Netto (Brazil), Bruno Caruso and Paolo Ganna (Italy), and Mohamed Melehi (Morocco), to name a few. The exhibitors noted that, surprisingly, no artists were represented from the erstwhile German Democratic Republic, Yugoslavia, or Sweden, countries that were sympathetic to the Palestinian people's struggle.

The IAEP was underpinned by the ideology of "Tricontinentalism", forged through the 1966 Tricontinental Conference in Cuba; it aimed to empower states in Asia, Africa, and Latin America to challenge Western imperialism through an array of alliances that would

▼
"Past Disquiet"

at the Palais de
 Tokyo in
 Paris. RAHAAB ALLANA

The IAEP was underpinned by the ideology of "Tricontinentalism", which aimed to empower states in Asia, Africa, and Latin America to challenge Western imperialism through an array of alliances that would benefit the Third World/Global South.

benefit the Third World/Global South. Regional cooperation was fostered by individuals and institutional and para-institutional groups.

For instance, the curators mention how at the First Arab Festival of National Plastic Arts (Damascus, 1972), the Palestinian artist Samir Salameh lobbied museums to dedicate a space for fellow Palestinian practitioners as an act of support for Palestine's claim to statehood; the General Union of Arab Artists, formed in 1972, organised a biennial of Arab art, with each edition to be held in a different city (Baghdad, 1974; Rabat, 1976, and so on); the Union of Palestinian Artists developed relations with JAAALA that presented the IAEP at the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum in 1978 as well as in the Palestinian Poster Exhibition in 1984.

However, in 1982, during the Israeli invasion and siege of Beirut, soldiers raided research centres and seized archival holdings after shelling the PLO offices, destroying many of the works.

In the *Past Disquiet* book, the Israeli scholar Rona Sela is cited for her belief that despite the 1993 Oslo agreements stipulating that looted materials be returned to the PLO, the Israeli army still holds crucial materials, including film reels and photographs. Kristine Khouri notes elsewhere that "the materials presented in *Past Disquiet* are mostly printed-out scans and digital photographs. These include pages from catalogues of exhibitions, posters, postcards, photographs, excerpts from newspaper and magazine clippings, books, pamphlets, art publications, and handwritten notes."

From curatorial, authorial, and viewer perspectives, the skilful design of "Past Disquiet"





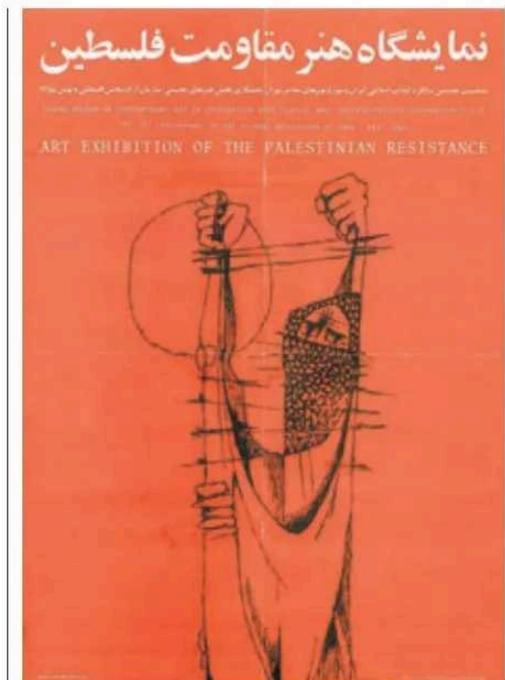
► **The artists Jamil Shammout and Michel Najjar painting the banner for the International Art Exhibition for Palestine, Beirut Arab University, 1978. CLAUDE LAZAR**

weaves a potent visual historiography that links to the fraught political moment in a deeply insightful manner.

It brings to light other ongoing exhibitions that have been forced to address questions of divestment like the Toronto Photo Festival sponsored by Scotiabank, or street exhibitions like “no-photo2024”, a sequence of large posters created by a group of anonymous artists and activists with the aim of highlighting the exclusion of Palestinian photographers (who captured the violence in Gaza) from the PHOTO 2024 international festival in Melbourne organised by Photo Australia.

THIS EXHIBITION also crucially reminds “the rest of us” that our responses to the ongoing atrocities in the region should at least have moved “past” mere “disquiet”. The juxtaposition of the redacted image and the textual description not only commemorates the efforts of Palestinian photographers but also prompts a broader reflec-

► **The poster for Art Exhibition of the Palestinian Resistance, Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, 1980, featuring works from the collection. ABDALLA FAMILY ARCHIVES**



tion on the societal and ethical implications of selectively withholding images of atrocity from the public eye.

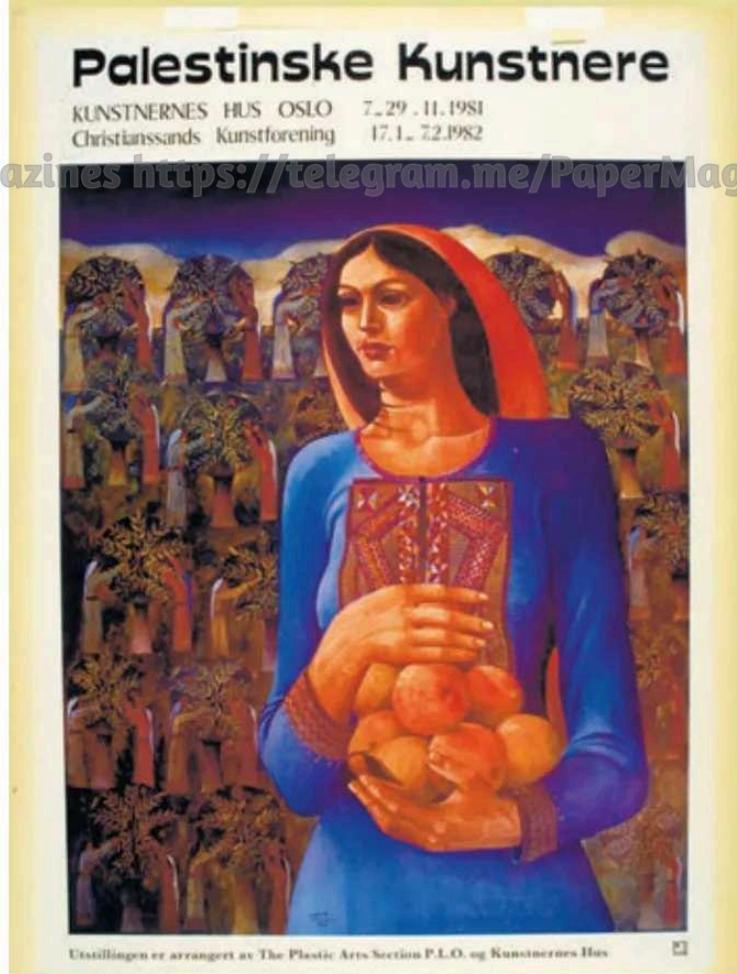
The accompanying collective statement of “no-photo2024” declares: “No photos of the war. No photos of its victims. No mention of the hundreds of photographers who have died taking them. We are a group of activists and artists who believe the future will be shaped by those who can see it. We stand together against the forces that refuse to let us. The future is being shaped by art festivals that choose what we see. Hiding behind the pretty face of diversity, while refusing to see the genocide.”

One of the points the exhibition of 1978 clearly reveals is that there are complications in institutional or state-sponsored forms of “protest making” that are relate-able to acts of diplomacy. As the 1978 exhibition was about creating a seed collection for a future museum in Palestine (a dream still unrealised), how would one, or can one, as the curators intimate, create an awareness and acknowledgement that also expresses radical grassroots politics, recentring motivations, and can the idea of the museum-in-exile—artworks donated in the name of people and movements, not institutions and power blocs—become a reality in order to safeguard autonomy, diversity?

PAST DISQUIET” also presents some incisive historical reference points for India. For instance, an exhibition text mentions how the artist Krishna Reddy participated in the IAEP as well as another exhibition in 1978 in Morocco, associated with the Asilah Cultural Moussem (or Harvest festival), which was a response to a call for artists to demystify art and retract from elitist circles.

It made me realise the importance of continually opening new spaces of collaboration and collective action, seeking new frontiers of multiple solidarity based on inclusion and freedom. Many events in the recent past, including peaceful demonstrations organised for Palestine in Delhi earlier in June, make us realise the need for continuing this dialogue—including the disbanding of the Documenta committee and the cancellation of exhibitions in Manheim, to name others.

Of late, even a member of the “Friends of Palais de Tokyo Patrons Group” resigned and



► The poster for Palestinian Art/Palestinske Kunstnere, Kuntsneres Hus Oslo, 1981, and Christianssands Kunstforening in 1982, featuring works by Palestinian artists from the collection. PALESTINE POSTER ARCHIVES

This exhibition crucially reminds “the rest of us” that our responses to the ongoing atrocities in the region should at least have moved “past” mere “disquiet”.

discontinued her support, claiming that an ongoing show on Palestine at the venue was “dictated by wokeism”, a claim refuted by the institution itself, and by this author.

As the art historian Toni Maraini asserts in her previously unpublished 1978 essay about the IAEP (now translated and published in a comprehensive book by the curators):

“To preserve their dignity, people will protect their arts and creativity at all costs... this creativity flows like an underground stream, and is an undeniable (even if hidden) source of psychological well-being, equilibrium, and prosperity.... The elimination of cultural identity is a less tangible form of genocide, in that it destroys individuals’ consciousness of themselves, their history, their aspirations, spiritual knowledge of the world, and poetic sense of life... individual and collective human culture must guide the road to action; we run the risk of transforming into relics of history if we ignore it.” ■

Rahaab Allana is Curator/Publisher, Alkazi Foundation for the Arts (New Delhi), and Founder, ASAP/art.

Ways of unseeing

There is a kind of art criticism that dwells in the distance it creates between art and meaning. Why is the obvious so suspect? Why is the surface not nourishing enough?

Prathyush Parasuraman



You are looking at a painting, say Gieve Patel's *Crows With A Debris* (1999)—two crows are pecking at the remains of an animal flattened and decapitated by the tyre of a car or bike; the tyre mark is embossed on the grey surface of the tarred road, the grooves of the tyre outlined in blood; there is a used condom in the foreground and a fence with broken barbed wire in the background.

An image of casual brutality and life being lived alongside it, feeding off it. Imagine, then, the gaze of a critic that looks at the used condom and theorises its presence on the canvas as one symbolising “the transience of pleasure”; looking at the fencing, the wiring, and gesticulating excitedly its meaning, “the abortion of quest”. The kind of cauterised gaze that takes a thick, slippery image and forcefully attaches it to meaning, to a stone-anchored symbol, pulling your gaze away from the image, towards that symbol. This gaze, unable, uninterested, or incapable of sinking you into the image, distracts your body away from it, creating, instead, an alternative, parallel, otherwise, otherplace site of fixation. In some sense it proliferates the image, but in a more palpable sense, it bankrupts it.

Ranjit Hoskote, the prolific poet, translator, art critic, curator, cultural theorist, and a general fixture in the Mumbai arts circuit, penned essays for exhibitions over the years on the late artist Gieve Patel; they are pooled and pulled together in *To Break And To Branch: Six Essays On Gieve Patel*. Hoskote's friendship with Patel gleams through the essays, in the intimate de-

tails that are strung in.

Otherwise, these essays offer a kind of criticism—if you want to call these that; they read as art catalogues generally do, uncritical, contextualised, and overwrought embraces of the artist—that insists that art needs to be *read* because it often imagines the surface as “annotated”. To be fair, many of these essays come from a previous decade, the earliest from 2000, and in Amit Varma's podcast *The Seen And The Unseen*, Hoskote did caution against his early criticism which “tended towards a certain kind of arcane expression”.

The title comes from one of Hoskote's essays where he sees breaking and branching as “crucial movements that captivate [Patel's] attention: nodes of pain, but also of growth”. This is also the crucial movement in Hoskote's criticism, holding the paintings in his hands, and theorising away from it. The interpretative movement of these essays is not dialogic but digressive. You can feel the vapour of thought rising away from the canvas; nothing settles. This might be the architecture of thought that comes most intuitively to Hoskote, for even on the podcast, when he was asked questions that required him to be concrete, substantial, and specific, he would ruminate instead in abstractions, metaphors, and “brutal” generalisations.

This posture is strange when deployed on an oeuvre like Patel's because of the thick, inviting materiality of his surfaces, not just his paintings but also his poetry; they ask you to be intensely present.

So thick that when both Hoskote and the poet Arundhati Subramaniam remark about Patel's poem “On Killing A Tree”, which was part of their school syllabus, they refuse to indulge the metaphors and prescriptive morals of the poem. Hoskote's fixation on the “sharp-edged tonality... survived [his] teacher's valiant efforts to domesticate it into a... cautionary tale”.

Subramaniam writes: “It was my first realisation that a gaze unclouded by sentiment could evoke something truer than sympathy... that poetry could lie in a simple unblinking intensity of attention.”

It is in pursuit of that intensity that we consume criticism—to transcribe that intensity, to contextualise it so as to make the intensity more clear, less clouded, to make the cloudedness more productively ambivalent, and to provoke further intensities, to be in a recursive dialogue *with* it. For the questions to never feel settled. I suppose I am asking for a criticism that brings you closer to the surface of the work of art.

To transcribe that intensity is to give shape to a feeling. When we see the paintings of Patel’s wells, an exploration of his childhood at Nargol, Hoskote writes movingly of the paradox of looking at these paintings: “to look down is to look up and indeed, to look into a depth is to risk falling or being disoriented, losing oneself.” This poignant observation, even if it overstates an “attack of vertigo”, is padded by a peacocking, undoing this moment of repose: “It is a moment fraught with the potentiality of self-dissolution.” How fragile is this self that is dissolved by dizziness? Why are words like self and dissolution and transcendence—in the spiritual sense—being deployed so carelessly, so as to render them toothless?

IN A SENSE, Patel’s art is what the art critic Sebastian Smee calls “baroque”—to “transcend... programmatic dictates” by refusing to keep the viewer at a “chaste distance”. To look at Patel’s *Crow With Egg-Shell* (1999), a crow precariously balancing an egg on its beak, and to see the egg as a “symbol of fertility” and the image as an “allegory of the imagination under threat from destructive forces”, is to see how art criticism can almost un-make the art itself. Remember how most



► **Embrace** by Gieve Patel (2016).

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

archaeologists of a certain vintage would look at ancient sculptures of women hewn from the debris of time and think: “fertility goddess”?

This is not to prescribe an allergy to allegory or a mockery of metaphor. There are ways that these fragments of speech can broker and broaden and branch our relationship to the world, and ways that they burden it; ways that they insist on burdening it.

When criticism dulls that intensity, giving into what John Berger in his seminal television programme *Ways Of Seeing* called “false mystification”, it is not just criticism but the work of art itself that is washed out.

Embrace (2016), one of Patel’s images, leaks in yearning. There are two men, seemingly vertical, spooning, the one behind holding on to the one in front in an expression of Josh O’Connor-desire, while the man being held, has his finger pointing upward—*tawhid*, perhaps?—eyes shut in rapture. Hoskote notes that the painting, based on an image Patel saw of football players, could be “read, perhaps

quite persuasively, as homoerotic kinship”, only to swerve immediately and fixate, instead, on a more spiritual reading that interests him: “of exaltation, of communion, of intimate exchange transmuted into a sacred moment... perhaps, a martyred saint and his apostle?”

To evade the most obvious, most potent affect of the image—desire—and to, instead, float possibilities of pithy spiritual insight is a tiresome tilt away from the image itself. A kind of criticism that dwells in the distance it creates between art and meaning. Why is the obvious so suspect? Why is the surface not nourishing enough?

I suppose the fundamental question this brings up is how to see art. To state this question itself hazards the realm of the prescriptive. It is not what is right and what is wrong but what *feels* right and *feels* wrong—the objective tainted by the subjective, a fact undone by feeling. To refuse to see Patel using the Telugu script in the letter a scribe is writing in *The Letter Home* (2002) as “bold”. To be unsettled by the phrasing of Patel’s exhibition *Wells Clouds Skulls* as a “transit among the three lokas, three domains of being”, seeing in it a cheapening of an oeuvre using flattened interpretations of “Indic philosophy”. To see that meaning can tarnish feeling, just as much as it can flood it. To, as a critic, dance that fragile dance. ■

Prathyush Parasuraman is a writer and critic who writes across publications, both print and online.

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► A graffiti of Gabriel García Márquez in the Ciudad Bolívar neighbourhood of Bogotá. April 2024. ALEJANDRO MARTINEZ / AFP

STORY OF RETURNS

The publication of Gabriel García Márquez’s “lost novel”, *Until August*, 10 years after his death should be an occasion not so much to confirm his greatness as to read the context out of which we reconstruct his significance to our lives. **DAKSHAYINI SURESH**

Gabriel García Márquez, Nobel laureate, enduring voice of Latin America, connoisseur of the strange, and astute observer of literary culture, has been brought back from the dead. Not since the legendary novelist’s passing in 2014 has there been such a flurry of conversation about him as there is now, in 2024, after the release of a “lost novel”, *Until August*, translated from the Spanish by Anne MacLean, and the announcement, close on the heels of this, of a Spanish-language Netflix series based on *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Ten years after his death, Már-

quez is suddenly the subject of widespread critical and public chatter—a figure revived, resuscitated, reconstructed.

If the Netflix trailer reinvents in Disney-for-grown-ups fashion his trademark magical style of storytelling, in *Until August* it is his persona that is charmed back to life in two accounts that bookend the text: one a preface authored by his sons, Gonzalo and Rodrigo, and the other a translated editor’s note by Cristóbal Pera, who handled Márquez’s work near the very end of his career. Both conjure up an ageing Márquez, who is earnest, waning, and losing his way in the labyrinths of dementia: he wishes to complete this story of a lone woman and her late life love affairs but runs out of time. Ultimately, he declares that it would be better if the work, still raw and unresolved, but meticulously typed out by a recently hired assistant, does not see the light of day.

As if to assure us of the authenticity of these narratives, plucked from personal memories, there are facsimiles of amendments and corrections to the original manuscript of *Until August* in Gabo’s own hand—signs of intention that have now been carried out by his sons and editor, we are given to understand. In order to believe in the experience of reading Márquez once again after his death, we must believe in these narratives. The meaning we assign to the story of Ana Magdalena Bach, the middle-aged woman at the centre of *Until August*, depends a lot on how it is framed within the larger narrative of Gabo’s life and work. An

ungenerous critic might even feel that Penguin Random House, the publisher, is at pains to convince you that the novella was not written by ChatGPT.

Reviewers have responded to *Until August* variously with disappointment at its ending, dissatisfaction at its looseness and incompleteness, and gratitude at having one more piece of Gabo to savour, all summed up best by Lucy Hughes-Hallett in *The Guardian*: “*Until August* is a sketch, as blurry and flawed as sketches generally are, but a sketch from a master is welcome.”

WHEN WE SEEK TO NARRATIVISE our encounter with Márquez in 2024, what we look for is something originary and definitive, which will not only confirm what we know already about him but also renew our relationship with him as readers in familiar, stable form.

But the process of interpreting Márquez has always problematised the location of the reader. In a 1993 essay titled “The Dangers of Gullible Reading: Narrative as Seduction in García Márquez’ *Love in the Time of Cholera*”, the literary critic M.K. Booker tells us that while the confirmation-of-bias approach to reading Márquez is not new, in applying it we are perhaps missing the point of his work. *Love in the Time of Cholera*, published in 1985, was received as an “affirmation of the human spirit, the auth-

An ungenerous critic might feel that Penguin Random House, the publisher, is at pains to convince you that *Until August* was not written by ChatGPT.

or’s kindest and gentlest work”, moving readers and critics alike with its patient treatment of a romance between older characters. Booker suggests that this is a “gullible reading” that fails to see the irony created by Márquez’s various “textual traps”. That the languid, distant narrative voice “duped” readers into interpreting years of suffocating oppression—the agency of the female protagonist, Fermina Daza, is brutally eroded over years of marriage with the clinical Dr Juvenal Urbino and persistent courtship by the foolish and sappy Florentino Ariza—as tenderness. We were too easily led, by narrative persuasion, into accepting a comfortable, self-affirming version of the truth.

Márquez’s use of magical realism too has frequently been misconstrued—as the cosmetic “adding in” of fantastical elements to the portrayal of an indisputable “real” life, rather than as an expression of the dramatic powers of the every day. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, describing the political and cultural “solitude” of Latin America, Márquez felt the need, not for the first time, to clear the air: “I’d like to think it is this outsized reality, and not just its literary expression, that has deserved the attention of the Swedish Academy of Letters.”

Think about it. Growing up within the unfurling narrative of postcolonial Latin America, young Gabo simultaneously, and harmoniously, imbibed his grandfather’s politically realist storytelling and his grandmother’s everyday sense of magic, miracles, portents, and mayhem. His rationalist grandfather was deeply dismissive of his wife’s world-view, no matter how rooted and real it was. The Banana Massacre, notable not only for the use of force against peacefully striking workers of the United Fruit Company but also for the way in which official records fudged the truth of American imperial complicity and the number of deaths, took place in the town of Ciénaga in Colombia in 1928, a year after Márquez’s birth.

In the colonial Latin American experience, objective reality was not an inflexible, trustworthy truth; it was a cultural standard, a version of a narrative that could be easily manufactured by those in power. It is doubtful whether his readers fully grasp this, even to-



► **Gabriel García Márquez** at the piazza Navona in downtown Rome with his wife, Mercedes, and sons, Gonzalo and Rodrigo, on September 6, 1969.

VITTORIANO RASTELLI/CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES



day, when they watch a Netflix teaser of *One Hundred Years* replete with sounds of jungle drums and visuals of sun-dappled leaves and words in out-of-place Devanagari script—all carrying traces of the colonial imagination.

The agenda of Márquez's less magical works is remarkably close to that of his more magical ones. After the rapturous success of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), he perhaps feared that magical realism had itself become the expectation of the cultural establishment, rather than the voice that troubled expectation. Labouring under this burden, he took four years to compose his next work—*Autumn of the Patriarch* (finished in 1971 but published in 1975)—a novel about a dictator, where “objective truth” is embodied in the undying, endlessly adaptable figure of the dictator.

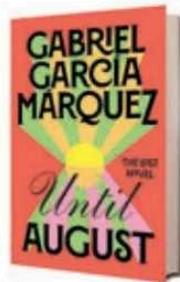
His next, a chilling novella entitled *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, delicately suspends the reader between the real and the strange as the same event is interpreted in different ways by unreliable narrators. Versions of reality get coloured not only in narration but also in the minds of listeners, who tend to believe what they want to believe. In this sense, it is not just storytelling but also *listening*, buying passively into an acceptable narrative of reality, that Márquez renders political.

Until August is, aptly, a story of returns: every year, the happily married Ana Magdalena Bach—teacher, reader, music enthusiast, mother of two—makes a trip to the island of her birth to leave a bouquet of gladioli at her mother's grave. She stays in the same hotel, buys flowers from the same woman, and takes the same taxi to the cemetery. It is a ritual, one she performs with love but also with a sense of routine—until one year, when she finds herself seducing a man at the hotel bar.

With this, she finds herself unmoored from the network of places and relations she had so far relied upon. Her returns to the island grow increasingly more desperate and lustful, even as the island, once a land of “virgin jungles”

▼
A still from the trailer of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, coming soon to Netflix.

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Is the novella an allegory for the breakdown of memory, a meditation on rituals and predictability and on the newness of everyday failures, once memory starts fraying?

decays into a faceless globalised hell, suddenly full of “poor neighbourhoods” and kitschy tourist experiences. Her marriage too begins to fray with each passing year and each passing affair.

In spite of its brevity, the novella is a slow, uncertain churn, shrouded in an atmosphere of dissolution. Is this the ageing Márquez mourning for the once-untouched Colombian town of Aracataca where he was born, the wellspring of his imagination? Is it an allegory for the breakdown of memory, a meditation on rituals and predictability and on the newness of everyday failures, once memory starts fraying? Through the text, Ana Magdalena never quite realises that the changes she struggles against are “not to the world but to herself”.

PERHAPS THE CHALLENGE for the reader in this year marking a decade of Márquez's death is to go beyond interpretations that simply reaffirm his greatness and examine the context out of which we reconstruct his significance to our lives. A “gullible” reading of his style and content is one in which we are unreflexive about how he is culturally revived and sustained. Are his critiques of imperialism, of power, of exoticised visions of reality still heard, or have they been absorbed into the discursive glut and indeterminate historicity of the contemporary cultural era?

After all, we read Márquez in a time in which facsimiles can be produced at the drop of a prompt, in which Spanish-language dramas on Netflix enjoy outsized viewing success among international audiences, in which genocides compete with fashion events for eyeballs, and the question of official memory in a postcolonial nation depends on which textbooks you are given to read in school and which political party you support.

There is a scene towards the end of *Until August* where Ana Magdalena exhumes the body of her mother with perhaps the aim to unbury her past, to demand of her forebears a logic, a kernel of ordinary truth that will explain her actions in the present. In return for her pains, she sees only her own face in the grave staring back at her. ■

Dakshayini Suresh is a feminist writer and educator based in Bengaluru.

Bihar: An uncertain abyss?

In the absence of either fieldwork involving interviews with politicians, journalists, academics, and local residents, or any substantial archival work, the book suffers a lack of rigour, which would have provided it with academic credence. **SUPRIY RANJAN**

Since the trail-blazing work of the journalist Arvind Narayan Das, scholastic works documenting the politics and society of Bihar have been steadily rising. A State mired in stark backwardness undergoing deep sociopolitical transformation has been of much interest to policymakers, journalists, academics, and activists alike. In recent years, a new trend of writing accessible non-fictional book-length tales documenting events and personalities of the State has kicked off. Well-known journalists like Sankarshan Thakur, Santosh Singh, Arun Sinha, Nalin Verma, Shrikant, and numerous others with their books on Bihar have been pioneers in the same.

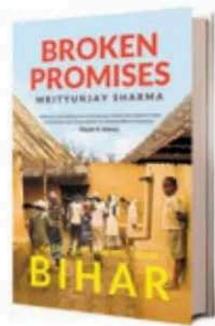
The latest entrant to this list, Mrityunjay Sharma's *Broken Promises: Caste, Crime and Politics in Bihar*, has a rather misleading title. Given what is inside the book the apt title would have been "Chronicles of the Jungle Raj: Bihar under Lalu Prasad Yadav". Divided into seven major parts, the book is a tale of the ills that befell the State with the rise of Lalu Prasad in Bihar's politics from scams, criminalisation, caste wars, misgovernance, to policy paralysis.

While the book cover sells it off as a riveting and meticulously researched account of the State, I found it short on both counts. However, we will come to that later. For now, let me recount the three important contributions of the book.

First, the book is written in a lucid narrative style that reminds one of Santosh Singh's numerous books on Bihar. Although spanning more than 300 pages, one can breeze through it in quick time. Widely circulated tales of Bihar's politics that generally form the bread and butter of political gossip in the power corri-

Broken Promises

Caste, Crime and Politics in Bihar



By Mrityunjay Sharma

Westland Books

Pages: 333+ xiii

Price: Rs.699

dors of Patna have been documented for the first time. The veracity of some of these tales, though, remain doubtful.

Second, the crime and caste wars that ravaged different parts of Bihar in the 1990s have been well documented. Apart from journalistic pieces, it is rather hard to find such a broad-stroked view of the State vis-a-vis the nexus between crime and politics. The book provides rich political documentation of how various ganglords literally provincialised the State, running their own parallel governments in their respective areas.

Third, examples of numerous incidents and events do well to substantiate the larger claim that Sharma seems to be making about the abyss of darkness that engulfed Bihar in the 1990s.

However, it is here that Sharma's work hits the ceiling and does not move beyond to give us answers to deeper scholastic questions that should have guided the framing of the book. The trope of *jungle raj* popularised by the media has come under increasing academic scrutiny since the publication of the anthropologist-professor Jeffrey Witsoe's (2013) well-researched book on Bihar titled *Democracy Against Development: Lower-Caste Politics and Political Modernity in Postcolonial India*. In that book, Witsoe systematically shows how historically empowering Lalu's regime was, not only for Yadavs, the primary beneficiaries of his rule according to Sharma, but also for the entire spectrum of historically marginalised Biharis. It is owing to this empowerment that subaltern groups cutting across castes voted for Lalu in two consecutive elections since his coming to power. The trope that somehow





these groups were misguided under false promises flies in the face of successive electoral results. Witsoe also shows how systematic weakening of the State by design was instrumental in breaking the long-entrenched caste hierarchy in Bihari society. Counter-intuitively enough, the social change at the local level was so cataclysmic, argues Witsoe, that poverty levels actually declined during Lalu's era despite recurrent charges of misgovernance and policy paralysis.

Two, the author while pointing to the unique nature of certain dominant caste groups (Bhumihars) that routinely indulged in violence against marginalised caste groups fails to question the connivance of middle-class Biharis (mostly from the dominant castes) in keeping their hegemony intact until the 1990s when they were suddenly forced to renounce their privileges. Marginalised caste groups who formed the overt majority in the State were systematically excluded from any power-sharing arrangements.

THREE, WHILE IT IS true that the law and order situation was abysmal during Lalu's regime, two things need to be outlined here. In his analysis of public administration in the first decade after Independence, Bihar was termed as the best-governed State of India by no less an authority than Paul Appleby. What Appleby forgets to underline is the complete hegemonic hold on the administration by the privileged castes of Bihar. This began to be challenged as democratic politics began to diminish the hold of older social order.

The resultant lawlessness was partly an outcome of the conflict between public and political institutions as well, wherein public institutions (say, the bureaucracy, the judiciary, and so on) were still controlled by privileged castes, while in politics marginalised castes had suc-

▼ **Rashtriya Janata Dal** president and former Bihar Chief Minister Lalu Prasad being welcomed by villagers with dhol during a byelection campaign at Bhagwanpur in 1994.

THE HINDU ARCHIVES

cessfully asserted themselves. Secondly, as scholars have pointed out, the rule of law historically had largely remained marginal in the functioning of Bihari society. The fact that the cult of the gun had become a legitimate modality in Bihar's politics has been well documented in the biweekly ground reports written by Arvind Narayan Das for *Economic & Political Weekly* in the early 1970s as well as the two newspapers, *The Indian Nation* and *The Searchlight*, that used to come out of Patna until the turn of the century. Thus, what happened in Bihar in the 1990s needs to be read in this broader context.

FOUR, THE BOOK fails to ask the question why it is that most politicians with criminal backgrounds in the State come from privileged castes or dominant castes like the Yadavs. Why is it that Dalits, Advaitis, and Extremely Backward Castes have hardly any *Bahubali* politician of clamour? What does violence and the skewed distribution of violence wielded by certain caste groups tell us about the organising structures of Bihari society?

Fifth, in the absence of either fieldwork involving interviews with politicians, journalists, academics, and local residents or any substantial archival work, the book suffers from a lack of rigour, which would have provided it with academic credence. As a result, at times it feels like one is plugging in to gossip that one hears at political offices and tea stalls in Patna. This feeling is aggravated by mistakes like referring to Ranchi as the once "designated winter capital of Bihar" (page 223) or calling the All Jharkhand Students Union the All Students Jharkhand Union (page 225). ■

Supriy Ranjan is a visiting faculty member at the National Law School of India University, Bengaluru, and a PhD candidate at the Centre for Political Studies, JNU.

What does violence and the skewed distribution of violence wielded by certain caste groups tell us about the organising structures of Bihari society?

The Modi model

As Narendra Modi clinches a record third term as Prime Minister of India, this book by Christophe Jaffrelot offers a fascinating context to the rise of Hindutva in Gujarat, and the authoritarian model of governance that Modi formulated as Chief Minister, which he then implemented across the country. **SHAKIR MIR**

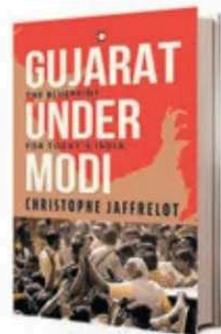
It is difficult to argue exactly at what point Hindu nationalism emerged as a potent force in India, especially in Gujarat, where Prime Minister Narendra Modi burnished his career as a populist leader with a particular finesse for the politics of polarisation.

In his most recent book, *Gujarat Under Modi: The Blueprint for Today's India*, Christophe Jaffrelot writes: "The year 1985 is an important turning point in the post-Independence political history of Gujarat." It was in this year that a popular agitation erupted against the decision of the ruling Congress party to hike reservation by 28 per cent for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in the State.

These protests drew upon the pre-existing social fault lines in Gujarat, where the politics of affirmative action had precipitated uneasy tensions between the Hindu "traditionalists" (epitomised by a caste alliance between Brahmins, Vanyas, and Patidars, the so-called dominant castes), and the historically marginalised segments including Kshatriyas, Dalits, and tribals.

As mounting civilian casualties from the violent protests brought pressure to bear on the Congress government, Madhavsinh Solanki resigned as Chief Minister. His successor tried to douse the fire by revoking the decision. But far from receding, the anger on the streets took a different form, with the charged mobs turning their ire on Gujarat's Muslim residents. As the Congress influence in the State started to plummet, the RSS saw its political reach widening like never before. The forces of Hindutva forces took control of the riots, envisioning violence as a tool to iron out the social fragmentation among Hindus along caste lines, while defining the community on the ad-

Gujarat Under Modi



The Blueprint for Today's India
By Christophe Jaffrelot
Context
Pages: 626
Price: Rs.899

versarial terms against the Muslim "other".

For all its talk of secularism, it is the Congress that was responsible for the ascendance of Hindutva in Gujarat. This is primarily because the leaders who embodied Gujarat's Hindu traditionalism—which Hindutva piggy-backed on to prominence—were all Congressmen.

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel has a history of courtship with Hindu far-right groups. K.M. Munshi penned several novels that drew on nostalgia for the Vedic period while portraying Muslims as invaders. Gulzari Lal Nanda consorted with Hindu reactionaries, for which the RSS, which he defended as "not a religious but a cultural organisation", publicly hailed him. Morarji Desai was one of the key architects of the Congress' split along ideological lines in 1969, with the faction that Desai joined representing the conservatives. This split liberated the Hindu traditionalists from the secular influence of the Nehru-Gandhi family.

This way, the social set-up in Gujarat was already replete with the sentiment of Hindu nationalism even when it was a Congress stronghold. The Jana Sangh, a forerunner to the BJP, was initially on a weak footing in Gujarat but received a fillip after former Congressmen with affective ties to Hindu traditionalism switched over to its side. This ragtag collection of like-minded political players railed against Indira Gandhi's espousal of social justice politics and later refashioned themselves into the BJP in response to her proclamation of the Emergency.

Jaffrelot's lucid narration of Gujarat's modern history is punctuated with powerful datasets that allow readers to glimpse how RSS





used communal violence as a tool to polarise society, making it possible for far-right Hindu organisations to spread their influence, which culminated in the victory of the BJP in Assembly elections in the 1990s. The party held on to the power firmly—save for a brief interlude on account of internecine rivalry between Shankarsinh Vaghela (an OBC leader whom the BJP had started courting to counter Congress' reservation rhetoric) and Chief Minister Keshubhai Patel—until the early 2000s when the BJP badly lost the municipal elections.

THE ANGER AGAINST Keshubhai Patel reached its crescendo in the aftermath of the earthquake in January 2001 amid allegations that the government had mismanaged the delivery of relief aid. Patel resigned and Modi took his place. The riots of 2002 are thus situated in the context in which Modi was saddled with the responsibility of stemming the rising tide of disaffection with the BJP. Once his stewardship of Gujarat was reconfirmed in the 2002 snap election, Modi moved to centralise his authority, bringing the vast State apparatus to heel. This involved the politicisation of law enforcement and the judiciary, which Modi achieved by rewarding officers such as Ahmedabad Police Commissioner P.C. Pandey, who was accused of failing to control the riots, with promotions.

The officers who sided with the victims—like Vivek Srivastava, Superintendent of Police in Kutch district, who arrested BJP leaders for attacking Muslim families—were transferred. As a result of this partisan control over the police, investigations in the riot cases remained

▼
Modi masks

on display at the Vibrant Gujarat summit in Gandhinagar in January 2019.

VIJAY SONEJI

shoddy. Of the 4,252 complaints lodged with police, 2,032 were dismissed for want of evidence. The subversion extended to the judiciary where the BJP appointed members of the RSS and the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) as public prosecutors. It became the reason why one probe panel after another issued a clean chit to Modi. Jaffrelot critically evaluates the rapid industrial boom that Gujarat witnessed after Modi's rise. This industrialisation catered more to the super-rich than the middle or lower classes, and the growth it engendered did not reflect in the percentage of jobs it created. The labour situation remained grim in Gujarat, and 31.8 per cent of Gujaratis continued to live below the poverty line.

Modi built a personality cult around him and suppressed rival power centres, a process that accelerated after his clash with former colleagues such as Keshubhai Patel for control of the party machinery. To undercut the influence of the VHP's Pravin Togadia, another polarising figure in Gujarat, Modi destroyed several Hindu temples. He was, counter-intuitively, labelled as the second Mahmud of Ghazni. Modi was even rebuked by the RSS for personalising power on this scale. He responded by freeing himself of RSS support and cultivated an alternative ecosystem of local leaders, political consultants, and communication experts committed to enshrining him as a cult figure in regional and national politics.

Eventually, the RSS succumbed to Modi's demands because they saw in him a staunch *Hindutvavadi*. Modi's unrepentant Hindu discourse was something right-wing organisation had been yearning to articulate. Above all, the RSS was desperate for the BJP to win the 2014 Lok Sabha election as the United Progressive Alliance government doubled down on investigations in terrorism cases involving Hindu fundamentalists. Jaffrelot has followed the developments in Gujarat for more than two decades. His book offers a fascinating context to how the forces of Hindutva were able to capture institutions in Gujarat and prolong their vice-like grip on power by devising a model of governance tailored to Modi's authoritarian needs, a model he has systematically implemented across the country since 2014. ■

Shakir Mir is a freelance journalist based in Srinagar. He was previously a correspondent with *The Times of India*.

They all fall down

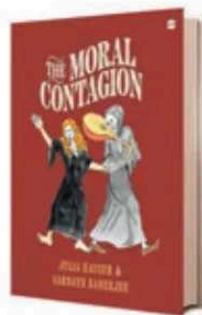
The book follows the strategy of complementing facts about the bubonic plague with fictionalised people, imagined dialogues, illustrations, and other creative gestures. And it works, mostly. **ANIL MENON**

Amazon.com lists well over 180 books solely on the bubonic plague. If one includes its guest appearances in epidemic-related books, then the list would number in the tens of thousands. What, then, would motivate a respected historian to write yet another book on the bubonic plague and its impact on the world through the ages? In her author's note, Julia Hauser provides a number of reasons: the shadow of COVID-19, questions about societal response, change in moral codes, have us engage "in critical reflection" about pandemics, etc.

Her reasons sound quite truthful, but they are not what the book is about. Almost none of the questions she raises in the introduction is really addressed, let alone answered. This is a book about the bubonic plague, not any moral contagion. Which is fine. Some topics are inexhaustible in their intrinsic fascination. The bubonic plague is varied in its causes (fleas and a wide variety of rodents), disgusting in its manifestations (pus-filled lymph nodes, gangrene), and fatal in its prognosis (it wiped out almost 50 million people in the 14th century alone). In short, few pestilences can match the grotesque charm that the bubonic plague possesses in such ample measure.

The Moral Contagion, copiously illustrated by Sarnath Banerjee, narrates the impact the bubonic plague had on different civilisations over the centuries. Ever since the advent of "new journalism" in the 1950s, fictional techniques have been used to enhance non-fictional narratives. Thus, each chapter deals with a specific place and time and introduces a set of fictionalised (but historical) characters directly impacted by the plague. Giovanni Boccaccio makes an appearance as does Emperor Justinian and his wife, Theodora; the ever-horny

The Moral Contagion



By Julia Hauser, illustrated by Sarnath Banerjee
HarperCollins
 Pages: 140
 Price: Rs.699

Samuel Pepys; the doctor Alexander Russell; and many other characters, famous and not-so-famous. The characters are mostly there to spice up the narrative, but in a few places (like the Arab thinkers or the doctors who identified the bacillus), they play a genuinely important role.

Similarly, the book's back cover says that Hauser's text is "enhanced by Sarnath Banerjee's wry illustrations". I found them droll, but perhaps the overall effect is akin to watching a serious movie accompanied by an oddly jaunty sound track. Banerjee's vast talent is a Kolkata Rabelais, an unfrocked Marxian; here it is on its best behaviour but still cannot resist an occasional secretive swig from the hip flask. For example, in the middle of a sombre discussion on the plague in Ethiopia, Banerjee inserts a panel depicting Lee Falk's Phantom—diagonally striped underwear, mask, leather boots, crossed arms—with his best friend Guran, grass skirt and spear, lurking in the background.

THE STRATEGY of complementing facts with people, imagined dialogues, illustrations, and other creative gestures mostly works. But Hauser has an intractable problem to deal with. Irrespective of the place or time, the story revolves around the same sequence of events: a few people get suddenly sick and die, then lots of people get suddenly sick and die, and then some more people die, and finally, people go back to dying in more predictable ways. How do humans respond? As expected. They quarantine, scapegoat, sniff this, eat that, dip in water, avoid water, listen to quacks, pray, but in the end, it is simply the end.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the psychologists





Hauser does not discuss learned helplessness, but given the scale of the plagues and the lack of effective medical knowledge, I wondered how our species managed not to succumb psychologically.

Martin Seligman, Steven Maier, and their colleagues showed that when conscious creatures are repeatedly placed in unchangeable circumstances that cause them great suffering, they develop what psychology now calls

▼ **A coloured wood engraving** showing a street during the Great Plague in London in 1665, with a death cart and mourners. It is captioned: “Bring Out Your Dead.” WELLCOME LIBRARY, LONDON/WIKI COMMONS

“learned helplessness”. They give up, turn passive, apathetic. In some extreme cases, they just lie down and die.

Hauser does not discuss learned helplessness, but given the scale of the plagues and the lack of effective medical knowledge, I wondered how our species managed not to succumb psychologically. Why did our species just not give up? Of course, some of us did. But why did most people keep having children? Keep working on love poems? Keep setting off on trade? Why on earth did Isaac Newton keep working on the theory of planetary orbits as 17th century London succumbed to plague?

I do not think *The Moral Contagion* offers any answers to the existential question of how we are able (enough of us anyway) to find reason enough in some Yeatsian “lonely impulse of delight” to keep going even in the most desperate of circumstances. The book did not set out to provide such answers, and I do not believe any single book can. Nevertheless, Hauser and Banerjee’s book does lead one to see just how astonishing it is that our species is still here. It is a worthy achievement. ■

—
Anil Menon is the author, most recently, of the short story collection *The Inconceivable Idea of the Sun*.

Gift of freedom

The Palestinian author’s second novel in translation evokes family bonding, tenderness, and women’s resilience with a joyful clamour. **LATHA ANANTHARAMAN**

In the unashamedly emotional opening of *Before the Queen Falls Asleep*, a mother sees off her daughter who is going abroad to study, clawing her back for one more tearful embrace. She desperately holds on to the glances and words of a girl who is herself desperate for liberty. The daughter, Maleka, is the queen of the title, and the mother who writes this story of her life, of their lives, addresses it directly to her.

There is a reason for the narrator’s appetite for tears. Her family’s homeland was Palestine, and in the first chapter, she describes the images she sees of the massacre of children in Gaza (not the first she has seen, and not the one we are living through now, but one of the numberless massacres in between). It is a recurring catastrophe that shows her that god is capable of not existing. Somewhere between the war crimes on television and the grilled cheese burning in the toaster, we see that Ma-

leka also has an appetite for tears and, while fighting her mother, can cling to her with equal ferocity, demanding to hear her stories.

Huzama Habayeb leavens the tragedies of a community with humour and hope. Kay Heikinen's translation is smooth and yet evokes a kind of joyful clamour. The narrator, Maleka's mother, is Jihad, so named because her parents were sure they would have a boy. She grows up to be her father's son and eventually the man of the family. The day her father chooses to lay on her young shoulders the burden he is incapable of bearing is the day she is leaving home to pursue her studies and dreams.

THE MODERN WORD "parentification", considered a form of abuse in some contexts, describes the inordinate burdens of adulthood placed on a child when the parents are unable or unwilling to carry out their duties. But this is a family that left Palestine in search of refuge and survives dislocation after wrenching dislocation. They are made of sterner stuff.

Jihad's mother and aunts and grandmothers have found ways of negotiating the uncertainties of their lives, and Jihad herself not only shoulders her burdens but soars with them. Through her writing and her teaching, she lifts her entire extended family out of poverty and proves to be a woman of substance.

There is a shared history, banter, flirting, and tenderness in the earning and hoarding of money. With a proper show of domestic humility, a householder often staves off public humiliation.

▼
Huzama Habayeb
leavens the tragedies of a community with humour and hope.
GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

The burden of womanhood, when Jihad finds out she is pregnant, is just as unwanted. But she protects and raises her daughter through poverty, uncertainty, and danger and ultimately gives her the gift of freedom. Theirs is a community in which parents are named after their children, Abu Jihad or Umm Jihad, as much as the other way around, and even the most unforeseen child defines her mother.

Within the framework of her negotiation with loads of expectations, Jihad tells her family's stories as well—they come together to form a kaleidoscope of narratives from which we must discern a continuity. She writes of her aunts who hide money in their provisions jars, in their bras, in the secret pockets stitched into their salwars, even their knickers. The treasures they gather grain by grain are often scattered or plundered wholesale, but it is not all disaster. There is a shared history, banter, flirting, and tenderness in the earning and hoarding of money. With a proper show of domestic humility, a householder often staves off public humiliation.

Jihad writes of the marriages that are arranged and paid for, which end in sorrow, violence or detente. Some women wait much of their lives, begging and borrowing from relatives, to wear gold bangles that might draw in a man. Others keep their hair dyed and

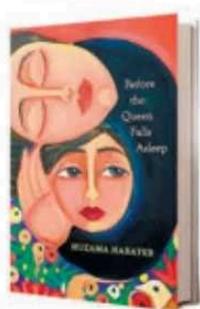


their eyes on the street. And then there are the women who are simply paid for one day and sent to another house.

The little neighbours who plunder their fruit trees have stories of their own, and they end up eating and sleeping with the rest of Jihad's numerous and still growing family. A great deal is written about nudity (or what Jihad considers so) and living in this teeming crowd.

IT IS NOT POSSIBLE, or necessary, to define where one story ends and another begins in Jihad's narration. She saves the chronicle of one part of her life for the end, though it is central to the path she chooses. In this last chapter, Jihad finds love, rejection, marriage, and marital rape, in that order. Here, the writing rambles into autobiographical territory and mops up the lives of other

Before the Queen Falls Asleep



By Huzama Habayeb, translated by Kay Heikkinen
Maclehose Press
 Pages: 288
 Price: Rs.699

family members, but that does not diminish the way Jihad writes about her feelings.

She falls in love with that most irresistible kind of man, one who has read her stories and recognises her name. Their passion seems to end in a predictable falling off, but although he walks away, he holds on to the short story that first drew his attention to her and writes it into a play. Years later, Jihad is left with a manuscript that he has written and left for her, its mysteries preserved for her eyes alone. As much an enigma as this ex-lover is the unloved, unloving ex-husband who walks out of her life and is never heard from again.

Jihad, meanwhile, has more to write, more to read, and much more to live. ■

Latha Anantharaman is a writer and editor based in Palakkad, Kerala.

Murder is announced

The latest in Krishnan Srinivasan's thriller series featuring the retired diplomat Michael Marco and the feisty private detective Koel Deb is as peppy and perceptive as it gets. **TALMIZ AHMAD**

Krishnan Srinivasan, a former Foreign Secretary, has, after retirement, diverted himself and thousands of delighted readers with stories of criminal investigations by a low-key and soft-spoken Somali diplomat based in Kolkata, Michael Marco. After a distinguished diplomatic career, Marco came to Kolkata to research African presence in India, took assignments from the Indian government (which conferred a Bharat Ratna on him), and periodically assisted the Kolkata Police.

After setting out Marco's activities in five earlier books, Ambassador Srinivasan has paired him with a young and ebullient former police officer and now private detective, Koel

Koel was hit by a bullet in her left arm in an earlier police encounter and acquired a prosthetic arm, a half-pension, a Glock-17, and a Harley-Davidson Elektra.

Deb ("Minnie" to close friends). *Right Angle to Life* is their second outing, though they investigate different cases that have hardly any links with each other. Koel was hit by a bullet in her left arm in an earlier police encounter with a known criminal and acquired a prosthetic arm, a half-pension, a Glock-17, and a Harley-Davidson Elektra. The motorcycle has been adapted to her injury and is now her principal mode of transport through Kolkata and neighbouring towns.

Right Angle to Life is straightforward. A prominent Mumbai-based film producer, Ranvir Sethi, has been murdered in his hotel room in Burdwan, two hours from Kolkata. He had gone there to locate a director, Vishnu Baras, who had made a students' film, *Daughter of the Clouds*, about two decades ago. Judged as

“softcore” by the moral norms of the times, both the film and its director had vanished from the public eye. But, on viewing the film much later, Sethi had detected a unique cinematic talent in the young filmmaker and wanted to sign him up for some of his own films.

Sethi is killed on his first night in Burdwan. Given the victim’s national importance, the State Home Minister enlists Koel’s services to investigate the murder. In Burdwan, Koel encounters diverse personalities: the local police superintendent, the town mayor, a business tycoon who owns the film studio, the tycoon’s wife, a local trade unionist, and a few ruffians. She also meets a rather attractive person from Mumbai, Elem Hussain, who is friendly but seems to be stalking her, intentions unknown.

With the murder obviously tied to the two-decade-old film and its missing director, the local people make every effort to obstruct Koel, misdirect her, and threaten her with violence. But the energetic and dogged Koel gets the better of them, her prosthetic arm proving to be a particularly useful weapon when needed. She describes a savage attack in which her attacker “struck my raised bionic arm with a metallic thud”. She responds with a poke with her steel fingers, which brings him down “like a punctured balloon”.

Koel intuitively asks the right questions and coaxes the truth out of the characters until a sad and sorry tale of unrequited love and misplaced possessiveness explains the murder and exposes the story behind the film and its director.

SRINIVASAN DESCRIBES people in a few deft words. A mayor has “the assured voice of a man of means approaching sixty”, and a policeman “walk[s] as if his feet hurt constantly”. The tycoon’s wife is a “self-conscious beauty and she knows how to impose it on an audience”. At the other end of the social scale, a taxi driver is “stick-thin with a supercilious expression and pretentious pony-tail”.

Srinivasan is also a shrewd observer of the social scene. At an upmarket reception in Kolkata, “the guests inched together, joined in forced heartiness, everyone milling about, passing and repassing like a pack of cards shuffled by a clumsy dealer”. The guests’ interactions consist of “mumbled introductions, mea-



▼ **It is an enjoyable romp**, embellished by the feisty heroine Koel’s joie de vivre.
GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

ningless cliches, unresponded enquiries, indifferent handshakes, enthusiastic references to the weather, sudden silences, and insincere enquiries about everyone’s state of health”.

Koel’s zest for life enlivens the book. She likes Elem Hussain’s looks (“a fashionable two-day-old unshaven face with sharp cheekbones, light-brown eyes, thick hair flopping over his forehead”). On the motorcycle, she enjoys having his “arms around my waist or his hands on my hip-bones”. It is an enjoyable romp, embellished by our feisty heroine’s joie de vivre.

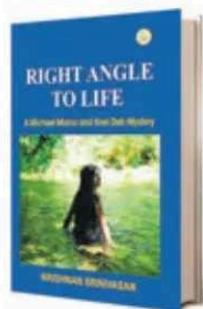
The deaths examined by Michael Marco run parallel to Koel’s investigations. These cases appear briefly early in the book and then take up almost all of its last bit. The story, of two cousin sisters, involves identity theft, complex financial transactions, and a gruesome murder—all this is unravelled by the unassuming Somali diplomat.

With the cheerful and buoyant Koel absent, these investigations are slow, efficient, and painstaking. Marco also provides the final links between the murder investigated by Koel and the one examined by him.

Right Angle to Life refers to alternative ways of looking at the various events that make up our life, seeing different meanings in human thought and action, and identifying patterns in disparate occurrences that would usually evade the casual observer. This is what makes Marco and Koel such good detectives and Srinivasan such a great writer. ■

Talmiz Ahmad is also a former diplomat who, however, lacks Srinivasan’s “right angle to life”.

Right Angle To Life



By Krishnan Srinivasan
Har-Anand Publications
Pages: 195
Price: Rs. 495

Fiction

The World and All That It Holds
Aleksandar Hemon
Picador

Blackouts
Justin Torres
Granta Books

New Life
Tom Crewe
Chatto & Windus

North Woods
Daniel Mason
Random House

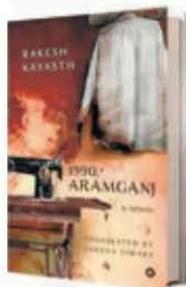
Non-fiction

Good for a Girl: A Woman Running in a Man's World
Lauren Fleshman
Penguin Press

Questioning Humanity: Being Human in a Posthuman Age
Thomas Osborne and Nikolas Rose
Edward Elgar Publishing

How The World Made The West: A 4,000 Year History
Josephine Quinn
Bloomsbury Publishing

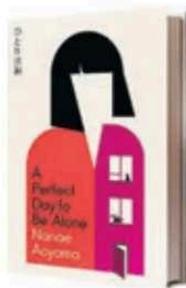
My Girls: The Power of Friendship in a Poor Neighborhood
Jasmin Sandelson
University of California Press



1990, Aramganj: A Novel
Rakesh Kayasth, translated by Varsha Tiwary
Eka Rs.499

Ashiq Miyan, a Muslim tailor and

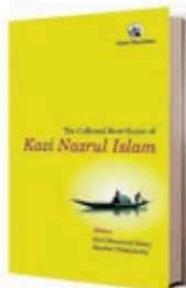
Ram devotee, performs incredible feats at the annual Dasara festival. As L.K. Advani's Rath Yatra is announced, Ashiq, who hails from the mohalla of Aramganj, finds himself caught in a deadly web of politics and communal tension.



A Perfect Day to Be Alone
Nanae Aoyama, translated by Jesse Kirkwood
MacLehose Press Rs.499

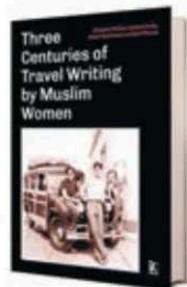
This astute analysis of loneliness won

the Akutagawa Prize, Japan's most prestigious literary award. It is about 21-year-old Chizu forging her identity through encounters with unsatisfactory relationships, part-time jobs, and solitude.



The Collected Short Stories of Kazi Nazrul Islam
Edited by Syed Manzoorul Islam and Kaustav Chakraborty
Orient BlackSwan Rs.805

Kazi Nazrul Islam, the Bengali rebel poet whose verses spell action, wrote short stories too. With 20 of Kazi Nazrul Islam's short stories translated into English for the first time, this collection evokes the poetry, folktales, music, and the lush landscape of Bengal.



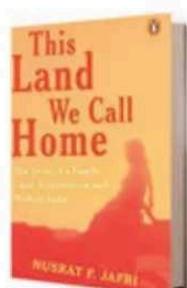
Three Centuries of Travel Writing by Muslim Women
Edited by Daniel Majchrowicz, Sunil Sharma, Siobhan Lambert-Hurley
Zubaan Rs.1,400

Translated from 10 different languages, the first-hand accounts in this collection upend preconceived notions of travel writing and tell us how a few intrepid Muslim women experienced the world—in their own voices.



The New Experts
Populist Elites and Technocratic Promises in Modi's India
Anuradha Sajjanhar
Cambridge University Press \$105

An in-depth analysis of how political leaders in India strategically use populist spectacle and technocratic institutions to craft the vision of a glorified hyper-nationalist future.



This Land We Call Home
The Story of a Family, Caste, Conversions and Modern India
Nusrat F. Jafri
Penguin eBury Press Rs.699

Tracing the roots of her nomadic forebears, the Bhandus of Rajasthan, the cinematographer Nusrat F. Jafri writes about a tribe that tried hard to fit into a caste society and eventually chose alternative faiths in pursuit of acceptance.



Gangster

By **BABURAO BAGUL**

Translated from Marathi by **JERRY PINTO**

He pounded the ribcage of the staircase, his footsteps thumping as he walked. He struck the door with a powerful fist. The door took the blow and opened. Peace evaporated from the room behind it; it began to darken with fear. Seeing the angry demon standing there, the Bohri treasurer sitting inside began to stammer and stutter. Terror filled his eyes.

"Give me some chips."

The Bohri man could not understand this urgency. He could not make himself get up—and this when the man outside was not willing to suffer a moment's delay.

"Quickly!" he roared.

His iron-coloured face swelled up with anger. His bone-white teeth flashed in a menacing grimace. His small red eyes gave him the look of a cruel bear from Africa.

Swallowing spitballs of fear, the old Bohri got up and began to fum-

ble in the cupboard. This delay further enraged the terrible man. He needed money quickly. He wanted to go and slam it down in front of Jayanti-ben so that he might soothe the storm in his heart.

He gave the old man a buffet and grabbed the money. He rushed out and ran down the steps, his feet keeping pace with his racing heart. The slap of his slippers ate up the distance as this magnificent, iron-chested man, black as night, his hair curly, his face thrust forward, stormed down the road, as if he were a wild animal about to pounce on its prey.

As the road turned, a small paan shop lodged in the angry man's eye and he turned abruptly towards it.

In the broad mirror of the paan shop, four wastrels were getting nothing done in a hurry. One was using the juice of the tambul to redden his lips. The second was cleaning his face with an air of deep appreciation for his own efforts. The third was pulling up the ears of his collar. The fourth was trying to fluff his hair out to make it look a little more luxuriant. Suddenly a dark cloud appeared and the four faces vanished with the speed of startled squirrels. Only two red slit eyes in a face the colour of iron were now reflected in the mirror. The entire shop went uncomfortably dark.

"Paan..." the echoes resounded among the glass bottles. The small shop trembled. The paanwala's hands, intent on preparing a betel-leaf, jerked to a stop. His fingers, which had a pinch of tobacco between them, would not let it go. The rhythm of his movements had been disrupted. Darkness clouded his vision. He felt as if he had been seized by a huge monster out of a whirlwind and began to tremble.

His hands began to flutter like a bird among the bottles and jars as he selected the condiments. They



reached the extreme limit of speed possible and then collapsed limply.

"Here you are," the paanwala said, without raising his head.

One hand, rich with the virility of Africa, plunged into a pocket and came out with an inflated wallet. Tossing a coin down, the man strode off and the oppressed paanwala was left staring—an insect regarding the powerful departing back.

This mysterious man's discomfiture shocked many people. In that crowded hour, passers-by jumped out of his way. Behind him, a crowd slowed its steps even as it followed him. They were all scared that he might suddenly turn around.

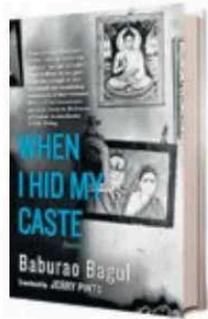
"Gone..." the people heaved a sigh of relief and things went back to normal.

"Does she love me?"

This terrible cry exploded from his burning heart like a bullet out of a gun. His feelings surged and stormed, a flock of startled bats in his head. His unease increased; it was as if electric jolts were shattering his peace of mind. He felt like a wounded wild animal frothing at the mouth.

When he saw the hutments, he stopped with the same haste with which he had been approaching it. From his uncontrollable, obsessive heart, the same cry arose: "Does she love me?"

He was not about to receive the answer he wanted, the relief he sought. Before he had joined a gang in Hong Kong, he remembered doing an immense amount of work. After that, he had performed several bloody deeds for a blood-soaked gang with a bravery that he could still remember. He had felled his first



man easily, with a single blow but what he had felt after this first murder still haunted him. During his life in Hong Kong, he had no memory of the company of even one woman. Nor did he remember his parents. He had no recollections of a mother's magical touch, of her stroking his head or back or face. He had no idea how he had ended up in Hong Kong either. He only remembered a street. And holding on to that memory, he had grown huge, as big as an elephant.

HONG KONG HAD BECOME too hot for him. Finally it had come to the point where he could no longer stay there. The law was hunting him, axe in hand. This meant he could not break out of the enfolding embrace of darkness. He could not come out during the day. The sun could not come near him. Some years passed like this. He had never found a woman. No woman had ever looked at him and smiled. Or wept. Or complained about him.

One day, the gang moved to Singapore. There, too, they carried on the same activities and there, too, he lived in the same dark loneliness.

There were two Chinese and two Europeans in the gang who were allowed to move around freely. They could come and go as they pleased, but he did not have permission to go out. One glimpse of him and he would be arrested and the entire gang would then be at risk.

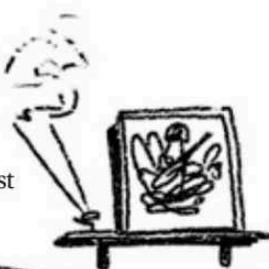
He knew this but still one day, he did go out and just as the mynah calls its alarm when it sees a snake, the sex workers of Singapore shouted up a storm at the sight of him.

He turned back. The gang began to howl about his going out and the supervisor issued a stern order.

Despite that, the next day, he sought out the prostitutes' lane again. A German prostitute savagely turned him down on the grounds of his appearance. He tried to bribe her with a lot of money but she refused, and in terrible words, she told him what had happened to another woman who had accepted a customer like him.

He turned back.

At the hideout, he and the supervisor had a fight. Both threatened to kill the other. A tem-



porary truce was patched up but the gang had begun to turn against him. They thought to kill him and leave Singapore. He got wind of this. Finally it was he who killed the boss and left. The gang broke up. Some went to Taiwan and some came to Mumbai via Karachi.

TEN YEARS PASSED. During that period no woman ever showed any sign of attraction for him. Nor did he ever visit the red-light areas. He had not forgotten the German prostitute's words. He did not want to become an animal, driven by lust. But in the night, of her own accord, Jayantiben had come to him, had sought him out. She was weeping, babbling, asking for something in Gujarati. The entire slum feared him as if he were a fiend. And yet, alone, in the night, this petite, fragile widow stood in the house of an ogre and had the gall to ask something of him.

No woman had ever stood so close to him. No woman had ever wept before him, and in truth, he had never seen a woman at such close range. He had never experienced the effects of a woman's tears.

And then, just as the crowbar of the first rays of the sun cracks the dark boulder of the night and allows the light to flood through, her weeping broke his shell open. He agreed to help and went out to get the money.

"He's coming!" the people standing in the chowk around the bhenda tree announced, their voices filled with trepidation. They had gathered there to accompany Jayantiben's mother on her last journey.

He came forward, each stride a pounce, as he headed towards Jayantiben's hut. His backwash dispersed much-smearing men and mosquitoes alike.

He put his hand on the poor lintel of the house and stuck his huge head in, scanning the room for Jayantiben. Seeing him, the hut lost its courage. The men looked down. The women pulled their pallus over their heads and folded their bodies into themselves. Jayantiben let loose an ululation.

Hearing this wail that Jayantiben let loose on seeing him, his heart rose on a tidal wave



No woman had ever stood so close to him. No woman had ever wept before him, and in truth, he had never seen a woman at such close range. He had never experienced the effects of a woman's tears.

of feeling. He felt as if all his questions had been answered.

And in that second, the storm in his heart stopped. He felt the joy of having escaped some huge calamity. He threw the swollen packet of money in front of Jayantiben.

Men of all castes, states, and religions were at work. They were getting the bier ready.

The preparations done, the corpse was raised. The "Ethiopian" offered his shoulder as one of the corpse bearers, and when the burden was settled on his shoulder, he began to walk at a brisk pace. The other three pall-bearers were not as tall as he. They had to hold the bamboo rods high up with their hands as they trotted after him. They were all concerned that the body might slip and slide off the bier.

They were almost running now. Carrying the burden of the corpse and chasing the Ethiopian was proving difficult. But, who could stop him? Who could tell him that the old woman's body was bouncing along in an indecorous fashion? Who was going to blame him if the corpse fell?

The three of them and the people behind were now running. Then suddenly he came to a halt, looking stunned and exhausted. The other three stopped to mop their brows.

In his heart, a pain began to grind, as if deep inside him something was being born. He might have discovered what this was if he had wept. But he had never wept in his life! ■

Selected by Mini Krishnan

Reproduced courtesy of Speaking Tiger

Illustrations by Siddharth Sengupta

Staying in



Wicked Little Letters

premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival on September 9, 2023.

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Films & Series

Wicked Little Letters

Comedy, mystery
1918-1920. A stuffy little English village, Littlehampton, where people's lives are hedged with prejudices. Here arrives a young, free-spirited Irish woman, Rose, who drinks with men, curses, and lives "in sin" with a Black boyfriend, scandalising everyone. Her neighbour, Edith, a middle-aged woman still camping with her god-fearing parents, suddenly accuses Rose of sending her letters full of profanities. The police are ready to believe Edith, (anti-Irish sentiments are running high), but a lone woman officer, Gladys, herself sidelined in a man's world, guesses that something is not right. Olivia Colman (as Edith) and Jessie Buckley (as Rose) make this comedy-mystery,

based on a real-life incident, sizzle with wit and verve. Available for rent on Amazon Prime Video. English, R, 1 h 40 m Amazon Prime Video

Bridgerton Season 3

Historical drama, romance
This gaudy series set in the Regency era has held viewers in thrall ever since Season 1. Season 3, now on Netflix, brings two side characters—Colin Bridgerton (Luke Newton) and Penelope Featherington (Nicola Coughlan)—to the foreground and explores their steamy romance. Despite inconsistencies and structural flaws, Season 3 is a romp, and fans are loving Coughlan as the erstwhile wallflower coming into her own as a writer and a wife. English, 8 episodes Netflix

Primitive technology



To watch this series is to be armed for doomsday. Each episode is a lesson on building things in the wild completely from scratch without the help of any modern tools or materials. The rules are strict: if you want a fire, use a fire stick; an axe, pick up a stone and sculpt it; a hut, build one from trees, mud, and rocks. The challenge is to see how far one can go without taking recourse to modern technology. Videos include

building a natural tiled roof hut, making a natural bow and arrow, a sling, and more. YouTube

Online archives

Archives of India

The Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad has created "Archives on India", a platform compiling and mapping 500+ physical and digital archives and repositories relevant to the history and cultural heritage of the Indian subcontinent. With web links to the archives, this tool is designed to assist historians and archivists in their work. https://archives.iima.ac.in/archives_on_india.html#example

Audiobook

The Verdict: Decoding India's Elections

With the elections still fresh in our mind, this is the perfect moment to listen to this audiobook written by Prannoy Roy and Dorab R. Sopariwala explaining the workings of the biggest festival of democracy. It uses psephology, original research, and as-yet-undisclosed facts to discuss the huge span of India's electoral history from the first election in 1952 to the general election in 2019. Narrated by Sumit Kaul, the audiobook runs for 8 hours and 49 minutes.

Audible



Stepping out



▼ **The actor Soori (centre)** gives an intense performance in *Garudan*.

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Films

Garudan

Action, thriller

With a 7.8 rating on IMDb, this rural drama is well on its way to becoming a big hit. It takes the trope of the rise of the underdog to a different level with action-packed storytelling and a commendable performance by the lead actor, Soori. Sokkan, an orphan boy, is devoted to his friends Karunakaran and Aadhithya, until his loyalty and self-respect are put to test. There are several characters in the cast, but the pace is taut and the action sequences are cleverly executed.

Tamil, 2h 13m

Munjya

Horror, comedy

This is the fourth in the series of horror comedy films

produced by Maddock Films after *Stree* (2018), *Roohi* (2021), and *Bhediya* (2022). Touted as India's first film with a CGI actor in the lead role (the titular ghost), *Munjya* also stars Abhay Verma, Sharvari Wagh, Mona Singh, Suhas Joshi, and S. Sathyaraj. It is based on the Konkani folklore that a Brahmin boy who dies after his sacred thread ceremony but before the *Sod Munjya* ritual, symbolising the transition to the family phase of his life, has been performed is destined to become a ghost haunting peepal trees. A good blend of horror and comedy is notoriously difficult to master but director Aditya Sarpotdar pulls off the feat with a tight narrative and exceptional artwork.

Hindi, 2h 20 m

Tara: The Lost Star

Family drama



The Sikkimese director Samten Bhutia's film, which debuted at the Cannes International Film Festival this year, has been released in theatres across India now. The Nepali-language film opens a window to the vibrant culture of Sikkim and the eastern Himalaya. Shot against the backdrop of Gnathang-Memenchu near the spectacular Changu Lake, the film wowed audiences

at Cannes with its breathtaking visuals.

Nepali, 1h 30m

Film festival

South Asian Short Film Festival

The 7th South Asian Short Film Festival will be held at Nandan, Kolkata, from July 7 to 13. Organised by the Federation of Film Societies of India Eastern Region, this is the biggest short fiction and documentary film festival in east India. There will be about 100 films from different States as well as from Cambodia, South Korea, Bulgaria, Iran, Canada, the UK, and the US.

Kolkata

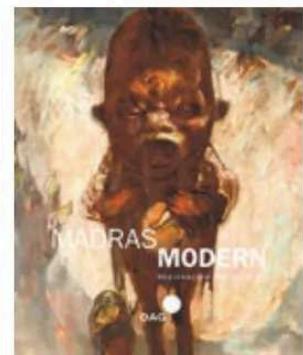
Art

Madras Modern: Regionalism and Identity

The Madras art movement of the 1960s, considered to be "the last platform for Indian modernism", took its inspiration from folklore, architecture, and history. This exhibition at Delhi Art Gallery features works by D.P. Roy Chowdhury, K.C.S. Panicker, J. Sultan Ali, L. Munuswamy, S. Dhanapal, R.B. Bhaskaran, P. Gopinath, P.V. Jankiram, and S. Nandagopal, examining the nuances of their art to underline their contributions.

On until July 6.

Delhi



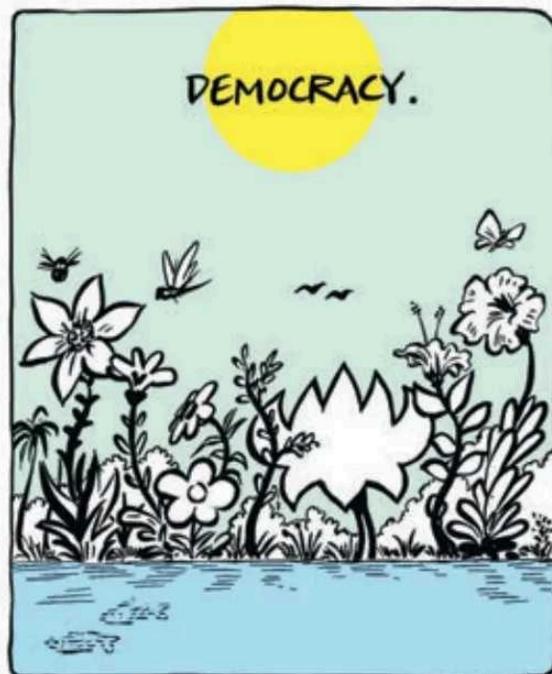
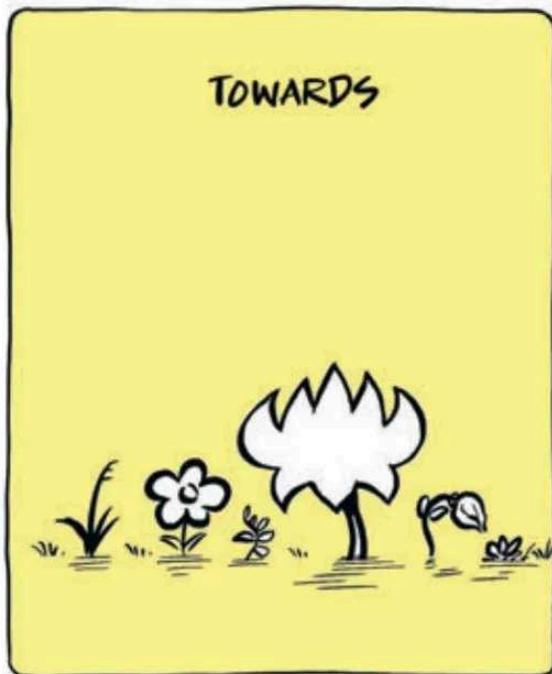
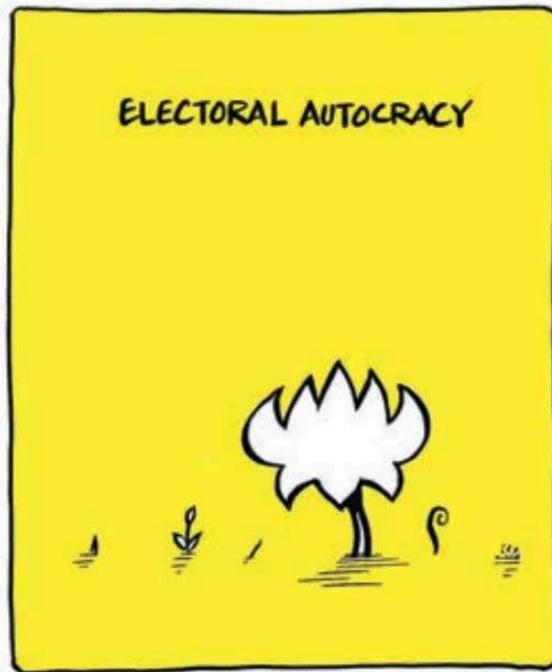
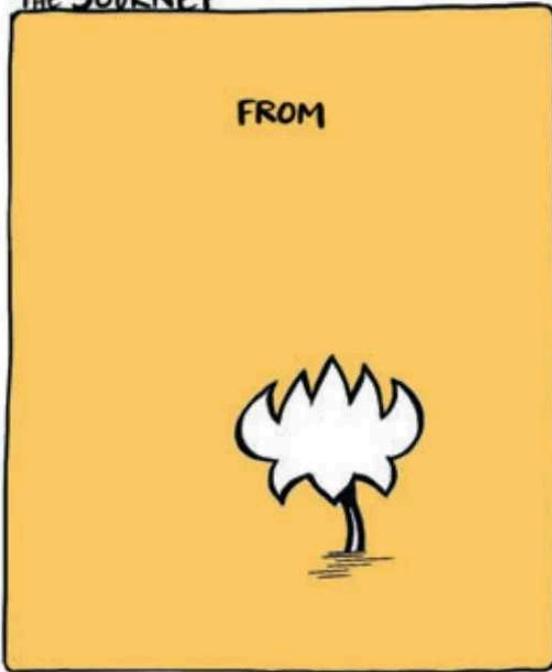
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