

**PAKISTAN: IMRAN
LOSING PACE**

**ASSAM: HIMANTA
STRAINING AT THE LEASH**

**BENGAL: THE
HINDU VOTE TRICK**

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NOVEMBER 23, 2020 ₹75



INDIA TODAY



NITISH KUMAR

A SAFFRON CROWN

**THE NDA COALITION WINS THE BIHAR POLL BUT THE BJP,
WHICH WON FAR MORE SEATS THAN THE CM'S PARTY, IS
LIKELY TO BE THE REAL POWER BEHIND THE THRONE**

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NYAY Schemes of Chhattisgarh

Determined to Deliver



Shri Bhupesh Baghel
Hon'ble Chief Minister, Chhattisgarh

- Disbursement of Rs. 5770 crore under Rajiv Gandhi Kisan NYAY Yojana near completion
- Average Payment of Rs. 15 crore per month under Godhan NYAY Yojana



Farmers

- ❖ 9,000 cr short term farmers' loan waived off
- ❖ 4,200 acres of farming land, acquired for establishing a steel plant in Lohandiguda, Bastar returned to the tribals

Leading State in Recognizing Forest Rights

- ❖ Individual and Community Forest Rights on 51 lakh acres of forest land
- ❖ Highest procurement of Minor Forest Produce, Highest remuneration for tendupatta collection, procurement of 31 Minor Forest Produce under MSP

Education

- ❖ 54 schools established under 'Swami Atmanand English Medium School Scheme'
- ❖ Dry ration under the 'Mid-day Meal Scheme' to 29 lakh school going children during the lockdown
- ❖ Schools in naxal affected regions reopen after remaining shut down for more than a decade
- ❖ Innovative educational web portal based scheme, 'Padhai Tunhar Dwar' launched amid the lockdown, 39.57 lakh online classes conducted on www.cgschool.in web portal

Employment

- ❖ New avenues of employment generation during the lockdown
- ❖ Highest number of jobs under MGNREGA, daily employment provided to 25 lakh people
- ❖ Unemployment rate in October reaches 2%, one of the lowest in the country

Health and Sanitation

- ❖ 65% decline in Malaria cases in one year under 'Malaria Mukta Bastar Abhiyan'
- ❖ Cleanliness Survey 2020 - Chhattisgarh declared the 'Cleanest State of India', honoured with 14 more awards in various categories related to cleanliness, hygiene and sanitation
- ❖ Under the 'Mukhyamantri Suposhan Abhiyan' 13.79% decline in the rate of malnutrition among children; 67,000 children become malnutrition free
- ❖ Weekly Haat Bazaar Clinics : Mobile clinics organised for providing health facilities to people in remote areas

Industrial Growth

- ❖ Chhattisgarh leads in industrial development, 848 new industries and investment worth 15,000 cr
- ❖ New Industrial Policy for setting up new industries
- ❖ Developing industries based on Minor Forest Produce for employment generation



Service-Care-Empathy : Govt. of Chhattisgarh

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FROM THE

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

When we put Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chief Minister Nitish Kumar on the cover of the magazine three weeks ago, with the headline ‘A Winning Combination’, it seemed like the Bihar elections would be a cakewalk for the NDA. A Lokniti-CSDS poll predicted a comfortable majority and given this formidable alliance of leaders—one with national charisma and the other with powerful local salience—facing a relative newcomer, the 31-year-old dynast Tejashwi Yadav and his hastily assembled allies, the result seemed a foregone conclusion. But as former British prime minister Harold Wilson famously said, “One week is a long time in politics”. Three weeks, of course, would then be an age.

So it was in the recent Bihar elections. After a shaky start, Tejashwi emerged as a serious contender. He ditched the dubious legacy of this father, Lalu Yadav, and took up the issue of unemployment, which hit a nerve with the young. In the end, he brought the Bihar elections to a nail-biting finish, closer than any seen in recent years. Yet, ultimately, political math prevailed. The formations that made the right set of pre-poll alliances coasted past the finish line with a simple majority.

There are several takeaways from this election. It has established that Prime Minister Modi’s charisma remains undiminished by the Covid pandemic and economic downturn. It is also a verdict on the success of central schemes, such as Jan Dhan, PM Ujjwala Yojana, PM Kisan Samman Nidhi Yojana and the distribution of five kilos of foodgrains and a kilo of pulses every month to poor families through the pandemic. The increase in the turnout of women apparently worked to the BJP’s advantage as they credited Modi for all these schemes.

The BJP has emerged as a major force in Bihar—with many more seats than its ally—although the chief minister will be from the Janata Dal (United) for now. The BJP cannot form a government without Nitish Kumar’s party, and to his credit, he has pulled off a record seventh stint as the state chief minister. But his party lost seats and vote share to anti-incumbency and the challenge from a former ally, Chirag Paswan’s Lok Janshakti Party (LJP). Also, the JD(U) vote got transferred to BJP candidates but the favour was not returned.

These were the first Bihar elections in recent years in which issues like development and employment proved as significant as the state’s powerful caste equations. Bihar’s young voters, who have never known a non-Nitish Kumar government, voted in large numbers for the opposition. It is imperative for Nitish Kumar to expand his party beyond his traditional support base, the women and extremely backward classes. He also has to build the missing second rung of leadership in his party which, like many other regional parties, has become a one-person show; otherwise, it will disintegrate on his departure.

The challenger, Mahagathbandhan (MGB) alliance head Tejashwi, came within a whisker of becoming India’s youngest ever state chief minister. Tejashwi was four months

old when father Lalu first became chief minister in 1990. In the final weeks before the polls, Tejashwi commandeered his father’s party, the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), waged a tenacious political campaign that sidestepped his family’s troubled history and focused instead on the aspirations of the state’s youth bulge. His efforts have not gone unrewarded—the RJD remains the state’s single largest party and Tejashwi has emerged as a leader of the present and future.

The directionless Congress, meanwhile, continues its drift into the widening gap between its promise and performance. It dealt the MGB a fatal blow by winning just 19 of the 70 seats it contested. Keeping Hyderabad MP Asaduddin Owaisi’s All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) out of the MGB was another costly mistake, splitting the Muslim vote. The AIMIM grabbed five valuable seats. All sides will closely study these changed ground realities and new actors for the assembly elections in West Bengal, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Assam next year.

Our cover story, ‘Saffron Crown’, written by Senior Associate Editor Amitabh Srivastava, analyses the results of these elections and looks at the road ahead for the government in Patna. Nitish Kumar has to walk the talk on issues of unemployment and development raised by Tejashwi in one of India’s poorest, least industrialised states. He has to meet the aspirations of the 16.7 million young people in his state who are between 18 and 29 years old. He has to deliver on his pre-poll promises of skill development, healthcare, promoting entrepreneurship among women, providing irrigation facilities to farms and waiving student loans. The state’s per capita income had gone up from Rs 30,617 in 2018-19 to Rs 43,000 in 2019-20. But it is still less than half the national average. Nitish Kumar will have to focus on the services and manufacturing sectors to provide jobs and boost incomes.

The November 10 verdict has also sown the seeds of potential conflict. Nitish Kumar faces significant challenges in the next five years as chief minister. With a three-seat majority, the NDA will need to depend for its survival on fickle allies like the Vikassheel Insaan Party and the Hindustani Awam Morcha (Secular), which have four seats each. Nitish Kumar will have to deal with the looming shadow of a Big Brother-like BJP, now the state’s second largest party. While the BJP will support Nitish Kumar’s candidature for chief minister, there is likely to be a significant reset in the equation. The BJP is unlikely to be content with just 10 cabinet berths out of 33 as it was in the last government. A larger number of berths could increase their say in the government. Nitish Kumar, ever conscious of his secular image, had always reined in the forces of Hindutva in Bihar. How this will play out against the ambitions of a resurgent BJP, looking to become the state’s predominant party, remains to be seen.



November 2, 2020

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Cover by NILANJAN DAS; Original photograph by Ranjan Rahi



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UPFRONT



REUTERS

MIRACLE DRUG?

The Pfizer and BioNTech's mRNA vaccine could usher in an exciting era in vaccine technology

COVID VACCINE

NOT A SILVER BULLET

By Sonali Acharjee

On November 10, even as the world enthused over the possible introduction of a Covid vaccine courtesy US drug major Pfizer and BioNTech, whose mRNA-based vaccine had logged 90 per cent efficacy in Phase 3 trials, many smaller players in India's challenged health ecosystem wondered if they could ever be a part of the rollout of this vaccine in India. Why? Because most small hospitals—and some larger public hospitals too—usually have cold chain facilities for vaccine storage capable of maintaining temperatures of

2-8 degrees Celsius. The Pfizer vaccine BNT162, however, needs to be stored at minus 70 degrees Celsius or below to last up to six months. In standard fridges, it has a lifespan of five days.

For developing nations, setting up infrastructure for extreme cold chain storage will be a major challenge. Facilities without appropriate freezers will have two options: i) store them in regular fridges and use all 975 doses in each container in less than five days; ii) restock them with ice and open them less frequently to increase the effective lifespan of the vaccines. The vaccine

being developed by Moderna, which is based on similar technology, does not need to be stored at such low temperatures. Interestingly, the government's current blueprint for vaccine distribution involves schools and anganwadi centres as vaccination points, neither of which will have anything beyond everyday refrigerators.

There are also fears of a shortfall of syringes to administer the vaccine. Unicef, the world's largest buyer of vaccines, has already announced that it will stockpile 520 million syringes in its warehouses, as part of its larger plan

UPFRONT

of 1 billion syringes by 2021, to guarantee initial supply. “Ensuring equitable distribution of any vaccine in India will require investment and fair pricing. Everybody is going to want it, but in the rush people shouldn’t get left out,” says Malini Aisola, co-convenor of the All India Drug Action Network. Earlier this year, unregulated prices for Covid tests meant that many ended up paying 3x the current standard Rs 2,400 charged for the RT-PCR test in various parts of the country. Health activists fear a repetition of this very scenario, where only those who can afford the vaccine will have easy access to it. But quite apart from the challenges involved in an equitable distribution of BNT162 in developing countries such as India, there is the larger problem of securing enough supplies of the vaccine.

In July, the UK had signed an agreement with Pfizer for 90 million doses of its vaccine. Of these, following results of the vaccine, the UK has ordered 40 million doses—enough to vaccinate a third of its population—as soon as the vaccine receives final approvals. The US and Canada too had signed deals with Pfizer in July—for 600 million and 20 million doses, respectively. While Indian companies have an agreement for the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, whose results are still awaited, there is no clarity on how many doses of the BNT162 India can hope to receive this year. Activists for equitable distribution of vaccines have been concerned over the huge orders placed for the vaccine by the developed world and how it could potentially leave the developing world with a limited stock. According to a Pfizer spokesperson, “Based on current projections, Pfizer expects to produce up to 50 million vaccine doses in 2020 and up to 1.3 billion doses in 2021. If our vaccine candidate is successful, Pfizer will allocate the available doses across the countries where we have fully executed supply agreements.”

For now, however, the vaccine still has a few more steps to clear before it can be ready for production. “The current results are based on the first and only interim efficacy analysis conducted by an external, independent Data Monitoring

While many developed countries have firm bookings for their share of the Pfizer vaccine, India does not yet have a production and/ or marketing deal in place. Some of the biggest orders have been placed by:



UNITED STATES

600mn doses

(agreed in July)



EUROPEAN UNION

300mn doses

(agreed November)



JAPAN

120mn doses

(agreed July)



UNITED KINGDOM

90mn doses

(agreed July)



AUSTRALIA

50mn doses

(agreed November)



CANADA

20mn doses

(agreed August)

It is not clear how many doses, if any at all, of the Pfizer BNT162 vaccine India can hope to get this year

Committee (DMC) from the Phase 3 clinical study. This first interim analysis evaluated 94 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in participants without prior SARS-CoV-2 infection between 16 to 85 years of age. As established in the protocol, we will continue the study until we accrue at least 164 cases and conduct the final analysis. Submission for Emergency Use Authorization (EUA) to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is planned for soon after the required safety milestone is achieved, which is currently expected to occur in the third week of November,” adds the spokesperson.

If all goes well, the BNT162 could usher in a new and exciting era of vaccine technology. The mRNA vaccine is novel because it does not contain the actual virus in a weakened or altered form like other vaccines. Instead, it consists of an mRNA strand that codes for a disease-specific antigen. Once the strand is inside the body’s cells, the cells use the genetic information in the strand to produce the antigen themselves. This antigen is then recognised by the immune system, which produces antibodies in response, and is thereby primed to respond when it encounters the real virus.

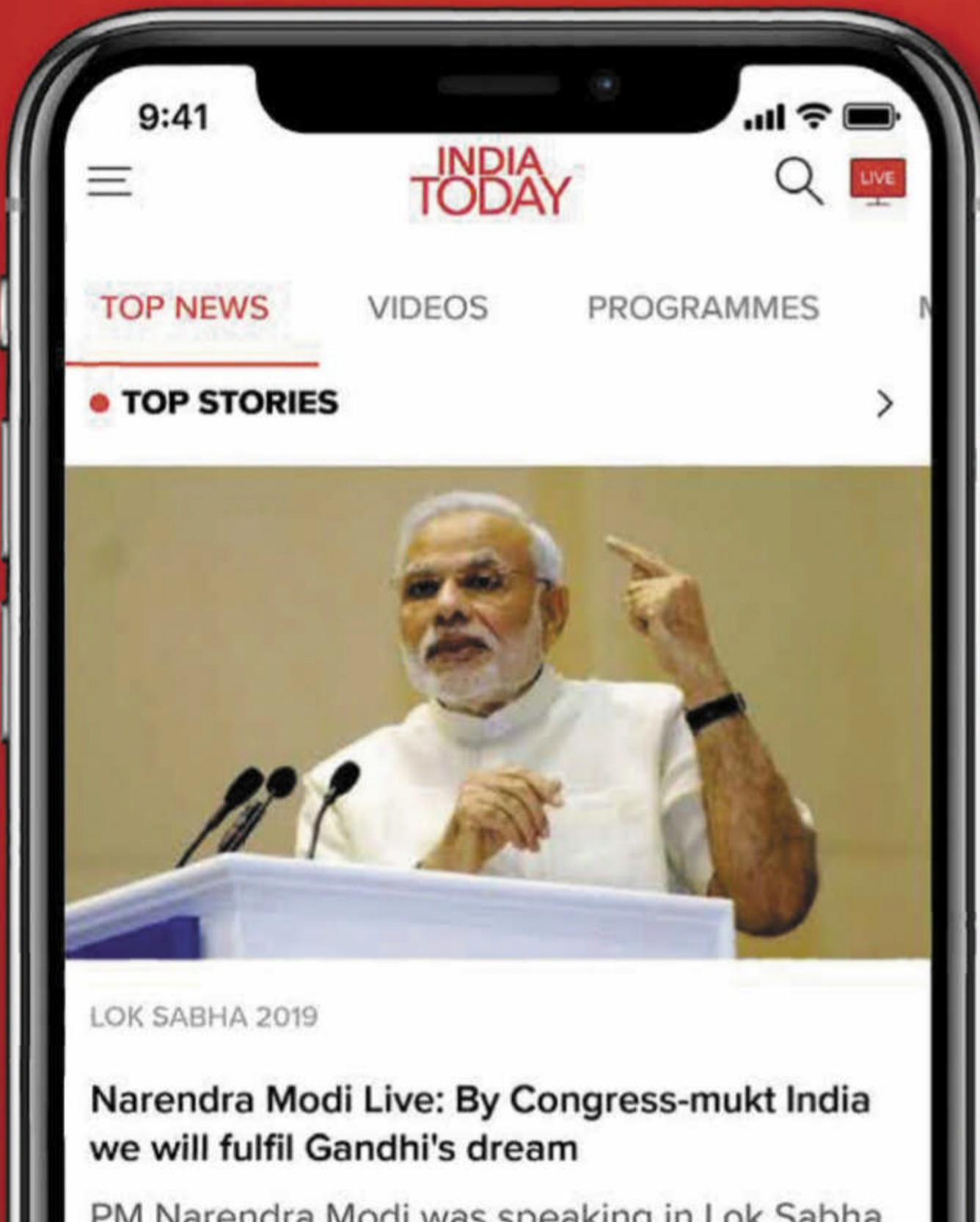
The Pfizer vaccine would need two doses in order to be effective. According to the spokesperson, “Since no viral vector is used, mRNA vaccines pose no risk of an anti-vector neutralising antibody response, thereby permitting repeated boosting, which may be important if additional vaccinations are recommended in the future.” The mRNA technology enables rapid development if the vaccine needs to quickly adapt to potential mutations. It also has an efficient and rapid production process, without the need for complex mammalian cell systems like other RNA or DNA vaccines. “It is a new technology but it will make production of vaccines much more streamlined, and fast,” says Dr Shahid Jameel of the DBT/Wellcome Trust India Alliance. As of now, no major side effects of the technology have been observed during the trials.

So, while there is cause for cheer, the rollout challenges for BNT162, both in terms of global supply and national distribution, are a certain damper on enthusiasm in India. ■

INDIA
TODAY

BREAKING NEWS

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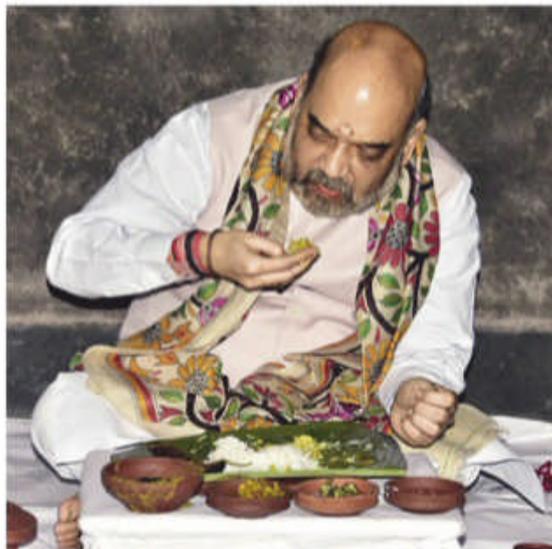
GLASSHOUSE

MAKE PEACE, NOT WAR FILM

It was a worthy enough cause. To make a film on the India-China skirmish in Galwan Valley on June 15. Twenty Indian soldiers, including commanding officer Colonel Santosh Babu, and an undetermined number of People's Liberation Army soldiers were killed in the clash. Except that the Indian Army denied permission to the project announced by actor-producer Ajay Devgn. Government officials say it had to do with the sketchy proposal they received from Devgn's office. But the real reasons lie elsewhere. With the government keen to dial down tensions with Beijing—a ninth round of military talks with the PLA are set to begin soon in Ladakh—a Bollywood war film is the last thing you need.

Fare Play

Both the BJP and the Trinamool Congress are lavishing attention on a tribal family in Bankura in West Bengal at whose house **Amit Shah** stopped for some traditional fare on November 5. The BJP has promised to fly an ailing diabetic child in the family to AIIMS in Delhi for treatment. The TMC has promised to get another boy enrolled in a nursing course. A member of a tribal household in Naxalbari, where Shah dined in 2017, was given a government job this year. It pays to have the home minister dine in your home.



ANI

UPFRONT



NEW SHERIFF IN TOWN

When Bollywood stars have nightmares these days, they are about the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB), or more specifically, its zonal director, **Sameer Wankhede**. Under Wankhede, the NCB seems to have become hyper-active in Mumbai in recent months, raiding the film fraternity to ferret out a possible Bollywood drug nexus. Never mind that his own wife, Kranti Redekar, is a leading actor in the Marathi film industry. An IRS officer of the 2008 batch, Wankhede shot into the limelight a few years ago for nabbing top movie stars tip-toeing through Mumbai's green channel with goods they should have paid duty for. Earlier, as an Intelligence Bureau officer, he had made a name for himself for undercover operations.



THE GOOD DOC

Maharashtra opposition leader **Devendra Fadnavis** discovered a Nagpur connection during his 10-day stay at Mumbai's state-run St George Hospital for Covid treatment. It turns out the hospital dean, Dr Akash Khobragade, is from Fadnavis's assembly constituency, Nagpur Southwest. Fadnavis made it a point to get photographed with Dr Khobragade and his team before being discharged on November 7. Never too early to secure a vote.



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FARM LAWS

PUNJAB UPS THE ANTE

By Anilesh S. Mahajan

CHANDRADEEP KUMAR



CAPITAL PROTEST Amarinder Singh at the November 4 dharna in New Delhi

On October 20, the Punjab assembly passed four bills, moved by the Amarinder Singh-led Congress government to counter the provisions—and their supposed adverse impact on farmers—of the three new farm laws passed in Parliament a month earlier. The fourth bill, to amend the Code of Civil Procedure (CPC), seeks to grant farmers the right to take their grievances to civil courts.

The legislative activism—later mimicked by the Congress-ruled government in Rajasthan too—has set the Amarinder Singh government on a collision course with the BJP-ruled Union government, and is now really getting in the way of life and business in the state. To become laws, however, the new state bills need Punjab governor V.P. Badnore's assent, and chances are that he will refer them upward to President Ram Nath Kovind, given that the bills fall foul of the recently promulgated central laws.

The legislative battle aside, the unrelenting farmer protests in the state have consequences the Punjab chief minister must worry about. Since late September, protesters have been

blocking highways and railway tracks and laid siege to power plants, petrol bunks, malls and much else. Punjab is in a gridlock.

With railway tracks and stations taken over by protesters, the movement of goods has been crippled. According to Railway Board CEO V.K. Yadav, protesters have taken control of, or are camping close to, two stretches of track and 22 railway stations. The Railways are firm that freight and passenger trains cannot resume operations until the protesters are evicted from these sites—and with the Punjab and Haryana High Court pulling up the state government for its inability to restore law and order, pressure is now building on the government.

The railways estimate revenue losses of about Rs 500 crore whereas industry lobby groups in the state claim daily business losses to the tune of Rs 1,500 crore. With trains not running, Punjab is not getting supplies of coal or fertiliser. Goods manufactured in the state—woollens, auto parts, hand tools etc.—meant for supply to other parts of the country and for international exports are stuck.

Punjab is also staring at a power

crisis. Its five thermal power plants—two owned by the state and three by private players—have a combined capacity of about 5,680 MW per day. While two private plants ran out of coal supplies and shut down on October 1, the other plants exhausted their critical stockpiles in the first week of November. Punjab has a daily power demand of about 7,500 MW in the current season, of which only 1,200 MW can be met through renewable sources.

While the BJP accuses Amarinder of covertly backing the farmer protests, the Centre, in an apparent retaliatory move, has refused to disburse Rs 1,100 crore owed to Punjab as rural development fund (RDF) on the procurement of paddy during the kharif season. (Punjab receives RDF at the rate of 3 per cent of MSP (Minimum Support Price) on procurement of wheat and paddy by the Food Corporation of India.) The Piyush Goyal-led Union ministry of consumer affairs, food and public distribution has held back these payments, demanding that Punjab first produce the 'utilisation certificate' for RDF funds released last season.

His fiscal challenges aside, farmer organisations seem unconvinced that

A LEGAL QUAGMIRE

★ CENTRE'S POSITION:

Procurement on MSP basis from APMC markets to continue. The new laws offer farmers an alternative to sell produce outside APMCs at higher rates.

PUNJAB'S AMENDMENTS:

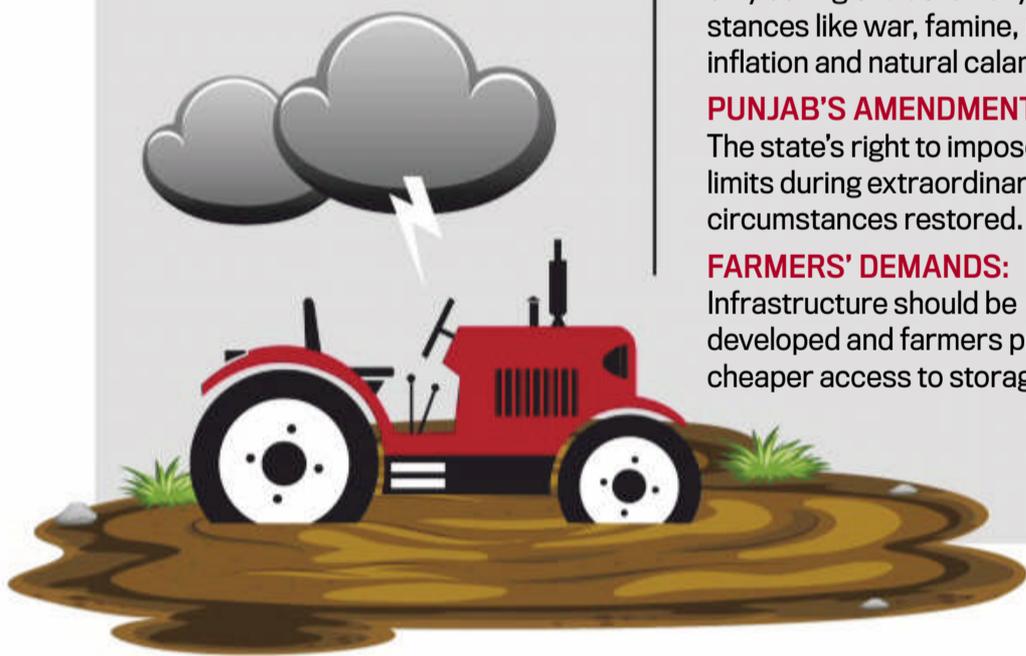
Paddy and wheat purchases from farmers below the MSP made a criminal offence.

FARMERS' DEMANDS: The bar on purchases below MSP should extend to other crops as well.

★ **CENTRE'S POSITION:** States cannot levy tax on transactions outside APMC markets.

PUNJAB'S AMENDMENTS: The state retains the power to levy a fee on trade in agricultural produce outside APMCs.

FARMERS' DEMANDS: While fee/tax is a Centre-state issue, the entire state should be declared a single APMC market. Markets should be located closer to farms.



the state's recent legal interventions will work to their advantage. For instance, the government has made sale/purchase of wheat and paddy below the MSP a criminal offence, inviting a minimum sentence of three years in jail besides fines. But farmer groups say the two crops are already being procured by the FCI at MSP and what will really help is to extend the punitive sanctions to all crops grown in the state.

Initially, 31 farmer outfits in Punjab

★ **CENTRE'S POSITION:** For disputes, farmers and corporates can approach the 'consolation board', headed by the sub-divisional magistrate, with the collector as the appellate authority.

PUNJAB'S AMENDMENTS:

Farmers can move civil courts to seek redress of grievances.

FARMERS' DEMANDS: Special tribunals or courts should be set up for farmers, on the lines of consumer protection forums.

★ **CENTRE'S POSITION:** Farmers can choose where to sell their produce—the local APMC market or anywhere in the country.

PUNJAB'S AMENDMENTS: Entry of produce from other states restricted.

FARMERS' DEMANDS: MSP procurement preference should be given to local farmers. Farmers do not mind opening up of the APMC market for surplus produce.

★ **CENTRE'S POSITION:** The Centre can regulate supply of items such as cereals, pulses, potato, onion and edible oilseeds only during extraordinary circumstances like war, famine, unbridled inflation and natural calamities.

PUNJAB'S AMENDMENTS: The state's right to impose stock limits during extraordinary circumstances restored.

FARMERS' DEMANDS: Infrastructure should be developed and farmers provided cheaper access to storage.

had come under the umbrella of the All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee to spearhead protests against the central farm laws. The committee included eight factions of the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) and even the RSS-affiliated Bharatiya Kisan Sangh. Gradually, the agitation was taken over by other farmer groups, BKU factions backed by Left organisations and groups supported by the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) and Aam

Aadmi Party (AAP). These groups have argued that similar laws introduced by Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh are more effective since they have turned the entire state into a unified APMC market. "Rather than enter into a confrontation over the central farm laws, Punjab should have effected changes on the lines of the Chhattisgarh Krishi Upaj Mandi (Amendment) Bill, which declared the entire state a single market for agriculture produce," says SAD chief Sukhbir Badal. The farmer groups are scheduled to meet Union agriculture minister Narendra Singh Tomar and Goyal on November 13 to try and break the stalemate.

The Punjab BJP, which has drawn the farmers' ire, has been trying to cash in on the protests by mobilising the support of business houses and factories that have suffered losses due to the agitation. That is another constituency Amarinder needs to reach out to for damage control. While looking to win farmers' hearts with his counter-bills, he must also contain the economic fallout of their agitation.

Adding to Amarinder's worries, in end-October, the Enforcement Directorate (ED) summoned his son Raninder Singh under FEMA (Foreign Exchange Management Act) in a 2016 case of alleged transfer of funds to Switzerland and the creation of Jacaranda Trust and a few subsidiaries in the British Virgin Islands. Amarinder has questioned the timing of the summons.

He has exchanged letters with BJP president J.P. Nadda and Goyal on the situation in Punjab due to the suspension of trains. On November 4, he took part in a protest in Delhi. The next day, eight Congress Lok Sabha MPs from Punjab, led by his wife Preneet Kaur, met railways minister Goyal, who told them that trains could move only after the Punjab government vouched for the safety of railway assets, staff and passengers. The coming weeks are crucial for Amarinder Singh and Punjab. ■

MADHYA PRADESH

THREE MORE YEARS

By **Rahul Noronha**



ANI

The BJP's emphatic win in the byelections to 28 seats in Madhya Pradesh has smoothed the way for the safe party's rule in the state for the next three years. The party won 19 of the 28 seats that went to the polls, more than every survey, official or unofficial, had predicted, and more than what the BJP itself had projected. On the other hand, the Congress fared worse than surveys predicted, falling far short of its far-fetched hope of returning to power, winning just nine seats. Between these over- and under-achievements lies the story of MP's biggest byelections in recent times, necessitated by the defection of 25 Congress MLAs to the BJP since March this year.

Regionwise, the byelections could broadly be seen as taking place in two areas—MP's Gwalior-Chambal (GC) region, where 16 of the 28 seats are located, and the rest of the state. The BJP did moderately well in the GC region, taking nine of the 16 seats there, and spectacularly outside it,

taking 10 of the 12 seats. The Congress did well in a handful of areas—winning four of the seven seats in Morena and Bhind districts, two of three seats in Gwalior and one of two in Shivpuri. The party's poll plank—campaigning against the *gaddari* (disloyalty) of the defecting MLAs—did not find much resonance in other areas. Just three of the 14 ex-Congress MLAs who had been given ministerial berths in the Shivraj Singh Chouhan government after defecting to the BJP—Adal Singh Kansana, Imarti Devi and Girraj Dandotiya—lost their elections. The BJP's strength was visible even in the GC region: it won the Ashok Nagar, Bamori and Mungaoli seats, which are

geographically close to Bhopal. The *gaddari* leitmotif found no takers outside Gwalior-Chambal—the two seats that the Congress won in this area were those that had fallen vacant after the deaths of the incumbent MLAs.

Many ask if the Congress' poor performance came from a poor poll plank. Hindsight suggests this may be so, but the results also reflect the stiff opposition it faced—both the psychological advantage a ruling party has in a byelection as well as the organisational might of the BJP. While the Congress, for a change, ran a slick campaign, there is no replacement for a strong on-ground presence, which it lacked. Secondly, the *gaddari* pitch was compromised by the fact that the Congress itself gave tickets to nearly half a dozen BJP defectors (one of whom, Satish Sikarwar, won). Another area in which the BJP outperformed the Congress was in ensuring that the party remained more important than the leaders—many expected that entrenched BJP leaders would damage

THE BJP WON 19 OF THE 28 SEATS THAT WENT TO THE POLLS; THE CONGRESS WON JUST NINE



< BETTER THAN EXPECTED
MP chief minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan (centre) and BJP state president V.D. Sharma (right) celebrate the win in the byelection

the prospects of Congress defectors who had joined the saffron party. However, as the results in Sanchi, Haatpipalya, Badnawar and Gwalior show, this was not the case.

The results have major consequences for the principal players involved. In the BJP, it is chief minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan and new leader Jyotiraditya Scindia who will benefit the most. Chouhan's political career was given a second lease of life in March, when the BJP appointed him as chief minister of the state, despite there being other strong personalities in the reckoning, like Narottam Mishra, Narendra Singh Tomar and Kailash Vijayvargiya. Some argue that the main reason for this choice was that the BJP, looking ahead to the byelections, realised that it would need a tried-and-tested name with a pan-MP appeal. In this, Chouhan has proved himself, consolidating his position in the state and with the party's central leadership. However, he shares credit for the victory with Union minister Narendra Singh Tomar, who is said to have been central to winning the Ambah and Joura seats, both of which are in Morena district, his Lok Sabha constituency. The byelections were also the first test for newly appointed BJP state president V.D. Sharma, who is from that district.

Chouhan now has to deliver on the promises made in the run-up to the elections. To counter the Congress' 'disloyalty' charge, the saffron party in turn alleged that it was the Congress that had played *gaddari* with the state's voters by letting them down on the development front. To hammer this home, the BJP announced new projects worth lakhs of crores, including the Chambal expressway. However, actually breaking ground on these projects will be an uphill task, to say the least—Madhya Pradesh, like most

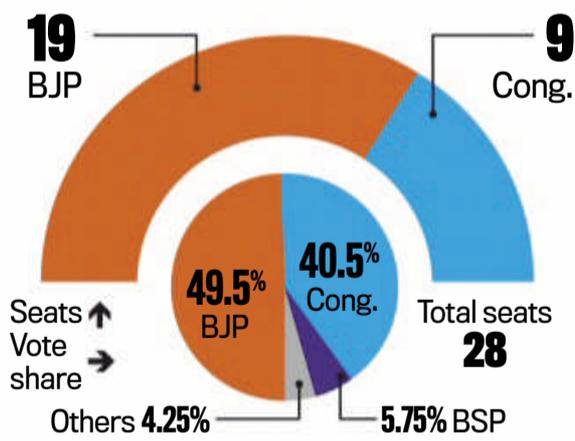
other states, faces a budget crunch as a result of the economic downturn resulting from the pandemic and the resulting lower revenue collections.

When it comes to Jyotiraditya Scindia, election watchers say the results will see him past the initial coordination issues he faced with his new party. Though the BJP did lose seats in the Gwalior-Chambal region, four Scindia loyalists from elsewhere in the state—Tulsi Silawat, Prabhuram Choudhary, Govind Singh Rajput and Rajvardhan Singh Dattigaon—won their elections by massive margins. Accepted wisdom is that Scindia was en route to an appointment as a Union minister, and the results of these bypolls should expedite that matter. What will be a point of interest going forward is how his politics evolves, now that he is firmly ensconced in his new party—the BJP has a reputation for privileging party over personality (with honourable exceptions, of course), and how Scindia and his loyalists adapt to this will be carefully watched.

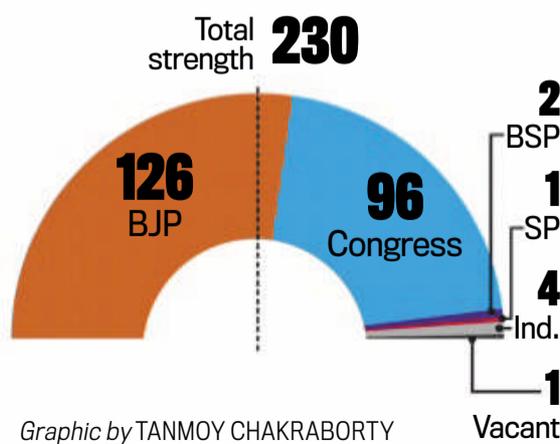
Congress leaders will have to reckon with the results too. Kamal Nath, who is both PCC (Pradesh Congress Committee) president and the leader of the opposition, will have to make some hard choices. However, the party still has substantial numbers in the assembly, more than enough for it to play the role of a viable opposition. More importantly, there will likely be a demand for a generational shift within the party's state unit; whether Nath gives in to this or finds a way for the old guard to retain its authority remains to be seen.

The party would also do well to focus on rebuilding its presence at the grassroots, in the villages where it once thrived. Congress leaders had recently made much of the fact that the elections were announced on a Tuesday (September 29), as were voting and counting slated for Tuesdays (November 3 and 10), which would work in favour of Hanuman *bhakt* Kamal Nath (Tuesdays are an auspicious day for devotees of Hanuman). That fond hope was belied, but will the Congress see the light? ■

BYPOLL 2020 RESULTS



ASSEMBLY BREAKDOWN AFTER BYPOLL



Graphic by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

JAMMU & KASHMIR

The New Lay of the Land in Kashmir

By Moazum Mohammad in Srinagar

On November 7, the People's Alliance for Gupkar, a coming together of seven mainstream political parties in Jammu and Kashmir, announced that they would jointly contest the District Development Council (DDC) elections, scheduled from November 28. It's an unprecedented decision by political parties often bitterly opposed to each other, now making common cause in an attempt to resist the Centre's plan to script a political future for J&K that will further undermine their role in it.

The DDC elections come 15 months after the abrogation of Article 370 and the bifurcation of the state of J&K into two Union territories on August 5, 2019. The last elections held were the panchayat and urban body polls in 2018 which the National Conference (NC) and Peoples Democratic Party (PDP)—the main political players in the erstwhile state—boycotted, effectively handing the BJP a walkover. This helped the BJP wrest control of the local governance system in the Valley, where it had never won any poll of significance. The Gupkar Alliance leaders want to make sure they don't make the same mistake again. The 20 DDCs, each led by a chairperson (who may be vested with junior minister status), will have a five-year term and appear designed to curtail the powers of elected representatives of any future legislative assembly in J&K.

"The sudden announcement of the polls revealed their plans. They want to cut us off from the people but we won't allow it," says Gupkar alliance signatory and senior CPI(M) leader Mohammad Yousuf Tarigami. "Our agenda is the restoration of the constitutional position as



UNITED WE STAND NC chief Farooq Abdullah, PDP's Mehbooba Mufti and other leaders at a Gupkar meeting in Srinagar, Oct. 24

existed on August 4, 2019, but that does not bar us from participating in an exercise in public interest."

The decision was not easy. Multiple factors, especially how the move would go across in Kashmir, was a concern. But almost everyone they consulted was of the opinion that they should not cede unopposed space to the BJP. There were other issues too. NC president and Gupkar Alliance chief Farooq Abdullah says they could not get a common election symbol as elections had been announced all on a sudden. "We will field joint candidates and they will

use their respective party symbols," says the 84-year-old former J&K chief minister and MP.

The BJP has announced candidates for the polls, but many in the party are sceptical about their prospects now. A state unit leader says even without the NC-PDP and others jumping into the fray, the people would have balked at voting given the public antipathy over recent policies like the new land laws. "Even my children will be affected by this," says a BJP office-bearer pleading anonymity. "I can't understand what they (the leadership) are up to."

One of the major poll issues is likely to be the order issued by the Union home ministry on October 26—the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Fifth Order, 2020—repealing 11 land laws and opening up land and property ownership in the UT to all Indian citizens. Earlier, only Permanent Resident Certificate holders or state subjects defined by a law introduced by Dogra king Maharaja Hari Singh in 1927 were entitled to buy and own movable and immovable property. The same state subject law was replicated in the Constitution (Article 35A) through a presidential order in 1954, which allowed the J&K legislature to define ‘permanent residents’.

The new land laws have created disquiet in not just the Valley but in Jammu too. This is quite evident on the streets as well as on social media. Soon after they were introduced, protests broke out in Jammu while a call of the Hurriyat Conference shut down the Valley on October 31. Hurriyat leader Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, who is still under house arrest, broke his silence for the first time since August 5, 2019 and called for the strike against the “anti-people orders”.

Initially, when Parliament ‘fully integrated’ J&K last year, Jammu played a big role in the bid to legitimise the decision. There were celebrations in many parts, denoting an end to what they felt was the Valley’s ‘dominance’ in the administration and politics. But gradually realisation dawned that the new state of affairs was diluting their Dogra identity, leaving them more vulnerable to outside influx. “*Hamara itihaas khatam kar diya* (Our history has been destroyed),” says Sunil Dimple, a Jammu resident and president of ‘Mission Statehood’. He is garnering support for restoration of statehood and special status. Dimple now regrets that Jammu stood with the BJP and brought them to power in the 2014 assembly election (25 seats) and 2019 Lok Sabha election. “The new law is like an advertisement to bring people from outside. Like the East India Company looted India, they (the BJP) have opened the doors of J&K to big business houses,” he says. “They don’t want the people, they want the land.”

The J&K government, however, disagrees. Government spokesperson Rohit

WHAT IS THE ROSHNI ACT?

↘ J&K State Land Act (vesting of ownership of land to occupants) was promulgated by the Farooq Abdullah government in 2001. It was to **generate a Rs 25,000 crore corpus to fund power generation, hence the ‘Roshni Act’**

↘ Initially, the act set 1990 as the cut-off year for **regularising private ownership of state land occupied through encroachment, on payment of prevailing market rates**. The cut-off date was later relaxed to 2004, and then 2007

↘ In 2014, the CAG found **gross irregularities in the sale of land including reduction in prices to benefit politicians** and other bigwigs. Report indicted officials but no further action was taken

↘ In 2014, Ankur Sharma, who heads Hindu right-wing group **Ikjutt Jammu, challenged the Roshni scheme in court**, blaming it for a “demographic invasion of Jammu”

↘ In October 2020, the J&K high court declared the act unconstitutional and ordered a CBI probe into wrongdoing. **All land allotments/ ownerships vested under the act were declared void**

↘ The government said it would evict the “encroachers” in six months, triggering **speculation that the huge land bank—348,160 kanals were transferred over the years—created through this attachment of property would be sold to outsiders**

Kansal insists the “new land laws will not only afford protection to over 90 per cent of the land in J&K but will also revamp the agriculture sector, foster rapid industrialisation and create jobs in J&K”. Kansal says the old laws had scope for discretionary interpretation and rent seeking. J&K lieutenant governor Manoj Sinha also clarified that agricultural land has been reserved for farmers. “No outsider will come on those lands,” he says. “But we have also defined industrial areas...we want industries to come to J&K so that it develops and jobs are generated.”

The Gupkar alliance, though, rejects these assurances. The real objective, they say, is to effect a “demographic change that will only disempower the local population”. Tarigami points out that the BJP is only targeting J&K while there are exclusive land rights laws in Himachal Pradesh and the Northeast too. “We will approach the courts and every other forum to repulse these pressures from the Government of India,” he says.

Before the new land laws came into being, the J&K High Court, on October 9, struck down the J&K State Land Act (vesting of ownership to occupants) 2001, commonly known as the Roshni Act. It declared the act “unconstitutional” and ordered a CBI probe into the wrongdoings in implementation. All land allotments under the act were declared “void ab initio from its very inception” (see *What is the Roshni Act?*).

The BJP has also introduced a communal angle to it, saying the “land jihad” was aimed at changing the demography of Jammu. Senior BJP leader and former deputy CM Kavinder Gupta even saw a Pakistan hand in it. But Jammu-based lawyer Sheikh Shakeel Ahmad, who filed the original petition in the high court challenging the encroachment on state land, calls it a false narrative. To cite an example, he says 44,915 kanals (1 kanal=550 sq. ft approx.) of land were regularised in Jammu district under the Roshni scheme; only 1,180 kanals were distributed among non-Hindus. “They are running a narrative that is factually incorrect,” says Sheikh. “This is just meant for the elections.” ■

COVER STORY

ASSEMBLY POLL

BIHAR

UNEASY TRIUMPH

It's not the jubilant return six-time CM Nitish Kumar might have hoped for. Big brother BJP is likely to be the real power behind the throne

BY AMITABH SRIVASTAVA

Nitish Kumar should be a happy man. He proved wrong scores of opinion polls which had predicted that he would be swept away by the perceptible undercurrent of anti-incumbency. The results of the hard fought Bihar assembly election showed that the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) headed by Nitish secured a slender majority, thwarting a determined challenge by the *mahagathbandhan* (MGB) led by young Tejashwi Yadav, the son of his old political rival Lalu Prasad Yadav. It ensured that Nitish would be sworn in for a fourth consecutive term as chief minister of Bihar (all in all, the seventh time).

Yet, hours after the victory, barring a thank you tweet to voters from the official handle of his party, the Janata Dal (United) or JD(U), there was silence from Nitish about the outcome of the elections. This was strange, given that his alliance partners, particularly the BJP, were making a big show of celebrating the victory. Indications were that Nitish was unhappy with his own party's performance, apart from his grouse



BIG BROTHER
CM Nitish Kumar
speaks at a rally
in Sasaram with
PM Modi's picture
looming behind



COVER STORY

ASSEMBLY POLL
BIHAR

at the way the BJP had handled some key issues during the campaign. It seems Nitish wanted to lay down the ground rules for his seventh stint before agreeing to be sworn in as chief minister of a new NDA government.

BJP, THE BADA BHAI

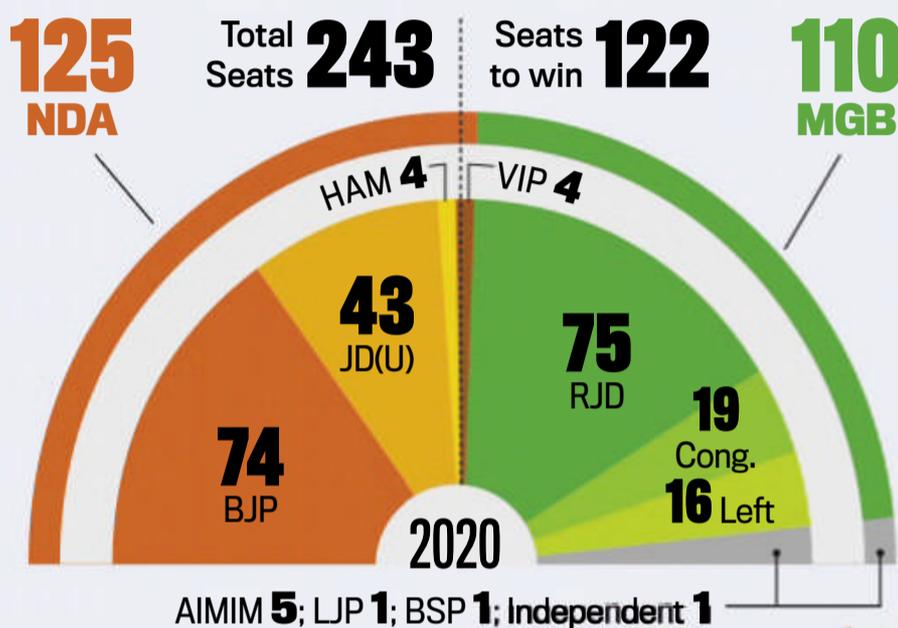
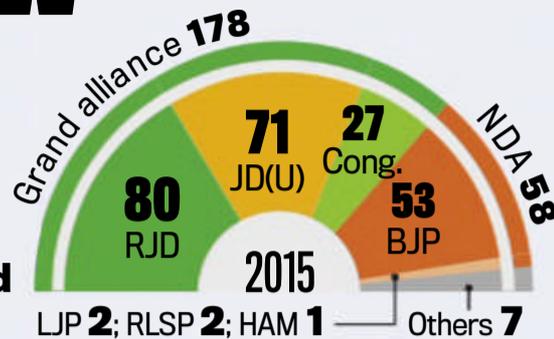
There are plenty of reasons for Nitish to be troubled about the outcome. For one, his party's tally has dropped from the 71 seats it won in 2015 to 43 (a loss of 28 seats) while ally BJP is up from 53 to 74 (a 21-seat gain), which makes the national party the senior partner in the new government. Election 2020 has seen the emergence of the BJP as a dominant force in the assembly polls, garnering 19.5 per cent of the total vote, much higher than the JD(U) with 15.4 per cent. Tejashwi's Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), with 23.1 per cent, was the only party to garner more votes. So, in effect, Nitish will be wearing a saffron crown that would sit uneasily on his head. The JD(U) chief has been part of coalition governments in the past, but he's always run it on his own terms. He will be wary of the BJP taking a 'Bada Bhai' (big brother) approach in the governance stakes.

The second major concern is that the new government is dependent on two unreliable partners—the Hindustani Awam Morcha (Secular) or HAM(S) headed by former chief minister Jitan Ram Manjhi and the Vikasheel Insaan Party (VIP) led by the mercurial Mukesh Sahani. Both parties secured four seats each which helped push the NDA past the halfway mark of 122 in the 243-seat assembly. Both have switched sides at will in the past and will most likely seek more than their pound of flesh to continue the support.

Apart from these troublesome allies, Nitish is also upset at the way the BJP has retained the Lok Janshakti Party (LJP) as its alliance partner at the Centre despite its president, Chirag Paswan, playing spoilsport in the assembly election and continuing his diatribes against him. While the LJP won only one seat of the 135 it contested, it is said to have damaged

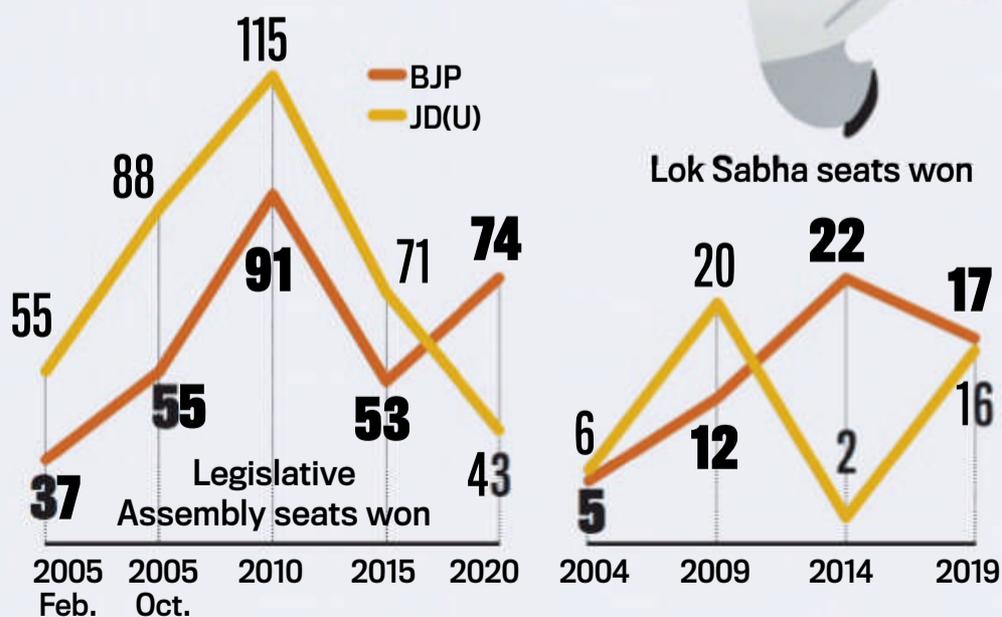
THEN AND NOW

The 2020 results almost upended the three-side contest theory, that an alliance of any two will sweep past the third



POLITICAL OVERTAKE

Seat tallies of the JD(U) and BJP have changed in the past 15 years or so, but clearly the saffron party is the big brother now in the NDA



Source: Election Commission of India

SO CLOSE, YET...RJD leader Tejashwi
at an election rally in
Digha, Nov. 1

SANTOSH KUMAR/HINDUSTAN TIMES VIA GETTY IMAGES

TEJASHWI, WHO WAS ONCE NITISH'S DEPUTY CM, HAS COME INTO HIS OWN THIS ELECTION, PROVING TO BE A CHARISMATIC LEADER WITH WIDE SUPPORT AMONG THE YOUTH

the prospects of the JD(U) in as many as 36 seats. Even after the results, Chirag made it clear that he would never support Nitish in the state. The latter is said to have sent word to BJP leaders to end the duality over the LJP if they wanted the NDA to run smoothly in the state.

Nitish will also have to contend with a resurgent Tejashwi as the Opposition leader. With the RJD emerging as the single largest party in the state with 75 seats (the MGB bagged 110 in all), Nitish will have to deal with a united, strong and vocal opposition both in the assembly and outside it as he goes

about his business as chief minister. Tejashwi, who was once Nitish's deputy CM before the latter dumped the RJD to ally with the BJP in 2017, has come into his own this election, proving to be a charismatic leader with widespread support among the youth in the state.

But the real worry for Nitish will be to keep his flock of 43 legislators intact. For he made a political faux pas by announcing on the last day of campaigning that this would be his last election. It took his supporters by surprise when, at a rally in Dhamdaha

in Purnia district on November 5, Nitish, with folded hands, addressed the women in the crowd: *"Ab dekhiye, bahno ko ham kahenge, aap hi ke liye to sabse jyada kaam kiya hai, toh aapse agrah hai, parso subah pahle vote de dijiyega* (Sisters, I have worked for you the most, so please do go and vote)". And then he declared that this was also his last election, ending with *"Ant bhala to sab bhala* (All's well that ends well)".

WHY THE NDA WON

The appeal to women was well-timed for, as the results showed, it looks like it was their support that propelled the Nitish-led NDA to power. Election figures reveal that 65.5 per cent voters in the final phase were women, massively outnumbering the 54.9 per cent male voters. Overall, 59.7 per cent women voted in Bihar against 54.7 per cent men. Nitish has always had the female voter in his focus, and hence the various schemes for them, including distribution of bicycles to girls and 50 per cent reservation of panchayat posts.

COVER STORY

ASSEMBLY POLL

BIHAR

WHY THE BIT PLAYERS MATTER

The NDA government depends on eight MLAs from the VIP and HAM(S) parties. How the small parties have come good this election

1. JITAN RAM MANJHI

Former Bihar chief minister and Dalit leader Jitan Ram Manjhi rebelled against Nitish Kumar after being removed from the post. Sacked by the JD(U), he formed the Hindustani Awam Morcha (Secular) or HAM(S) in 2015, contested the assembly polls as a BJP ally before shifting to the RJD camp for an unsuccessful Lok Sabha run in

2019. Returned to the Nitish camp in August

2. CHIRAG PASWAN

Though the LJP won just one seat, it still bagged close to 2.4 million votes. Also cut the JD(U)'s chances in close to 36 seats

3. CONGRESS AND LEFT PARTIES

Once part of the big boys, the Congress has been reduced to 19 MLAs now. The Left has seen a resurgence

with the CPI(ML) winning 12 seats and the CPI and CPI(M) two seats each

4. ASADUDDIN OWAISI

His party, the AIMIM, bagged five assembly seats in Bihar's Seemanchal area. In addition to this, the AIMIM also got 523,000-plus votes and is said to have hurt the RJD-led grand alliance in what was considered a stronghold. His five

MLAs could prove crucial role in the future

5. MUKESH SAHANI

The self-described 'Son of Mallah' started his political journey by backing the BJP in the 2015 assembly poll. The Vikassheel Insaan Party (VIP) made its electoral debut in the 2019 Lok Sabha poll, but returned a blank. Joined the NDA in October. The VIP won 4 seats but Sahani lost



SANTOSH KUMAR/HINDUSTAN TIMES VIA GETTY IMAGES)

Even the imposition of prohibition was for their benefit. Opinion polls also showed that the prime minister's schemes like Ujjwala (free gas connections), Swachh Bharat (free toilets) and the Pradhan Mantri Gareeb Kalyan Anna Yojana (free grain scheme) which is being extended till the Chhath Puja, Bihar's big festival, have had a big impact.

Along with women voters, what seems to have worked for Nitish is the goodwill earned on his past governance record and the continuing alliance with the BJP. In fact, it was Prime

Minister Narendra Modi's blitzkrieg campaign in the second and third phase of the campaign that pulled the alliance back from the brink. The PM's popularity remains extremely high and his strong backing of Nitish at all his public meetings created a narrative of the "double engine"—NDA governments in Bihar and at the Centre—which ultimately helped Nitish retain power. A senior JD(U) leader, however, admitted that too much reliance on the TINA factor, complacency, overdependence on the goodwill for Nitish and dismissal of Tejashwi as a non-entity

contributed to the party's reduced tally. "In a state with 39.3 million internet users and 62.1 million mobile phones, the JD(U) had a lacklustre social media presence, whereas the opposition RJD used it aggressively to bolster its reach. Besides, those tasked to boost the JD(U)'s campaign and strengthen Brand Nitish were ineffective," says a senior BJP leader.

THE FUTURE THREATS

By making the announcement that this was his last election, Nitish has created uncertainty among partymen about

SONU KISHAN



ANI



ANI

NITISH WILL HAVE TO BE ON THE LOOKOUT CONSTANTLY, FOR THE THREAT TO HIS FLOCK IS AS MUCH FROM ALLY BJP AS THE RJD

the JD(U)'s future. The party, like the RJD, is a breakaway faction of the original Janata Dal; the former taking shape in 1999 and the latter in 1997. Both are wedded to socialist ideals but the differences between Lalu Prasad and Nitish ensured that they have only once joined hands—in the 2015 assembly election to ensure the BJP did not come to power. Nitish has not named a successor but he is assisted by senior JD(U) leaders like Ashok Choudhary, Sanjay Jha, Bijendra Prasad Yadav and Shrawan Kumar. The fear in the JD(U) is that after his

departure the party would become a non-entity. It would be in Tejashwi's interest to woo disgruntled JD(U) MLAs and engineer a split in the party, enabling him to come to power in the state. Nitish will have to be on the lookout constantly, for the threat is as much from ally BJP as the RJD.

Yet, it is not as if Nitish isn't holding a few cards of his own. Despite having the upper hand, the BJP is aware that it cannot push Nitish beyond a point. Sources close to the chief minister told INDIA TODAY that Nitish has always been a politician in firm control of his image and the curtailed tally of seats is unlikely to change his approach. "You need to see a person's track record and behavior patterns to gauge how he is going to do the job at hand. Nitish left the RJD alliance instead of defending the sullied image of Lalu's family. He did not allow the BJP to flex its Hindutva muscle on the question of NRC. Now that the man himself has admitted that this will be his last tenure, it will be foolish to expect that he will take pressure beyond a point. And the BJP knows it well," says the source.

JD(U) spokesperson Rajiv Ranjan, meanwhile, says that the "vote tallies should not be viewed separately, as the 125 seats won were to ensure the continuation of Nitish Kumar as CM". Nitish had also created a rainbow coalition of castes including the EBC and caste neutral constituencies like women which enabled the NDA to retain power. Though the results have left him with a diminished strength in the assembly, the JD(U) can take solace in the fact that its vote tally is intact (and has even marginally increased, up to 6.48 million votes in comparison to 6.41 million in 2015). The BJP's share is down to 8.2 million from 9.3 million votes whereas the RJD registered a phenomenal rise, up from 7 million to 9.7 million.

THE TEJASHWI CHARGE

The BJP's performance may have been impressive this election, but it's Tejashwi who has stunned both supporters and opponents winning 75 assembly seats for his party. The young leader led

COVER STORY

ASSEMBLY POLL
BIHAR

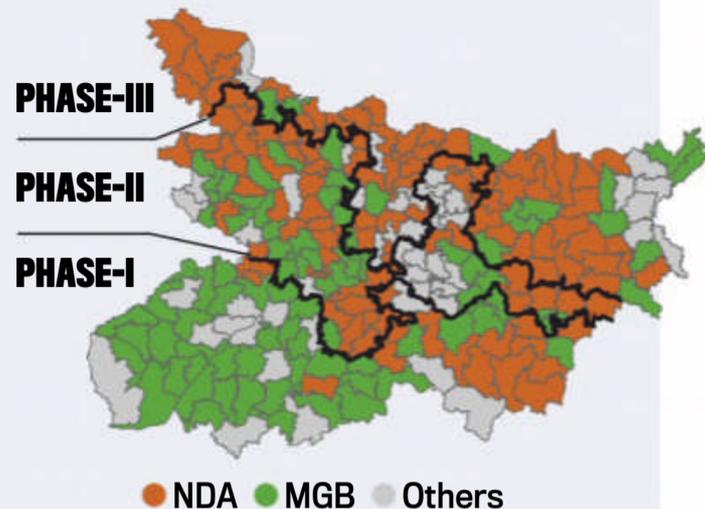
a spirited election campaign in the absence of Lalu Prasad, who is serving time following his conviction in the fodder scam cases. The RJD and Tejashwi did everything to distance themselves from the old 'jungle raj' tag. His promise of delivering one million government jobs ("*dus lakh sarkari naukri*") also caught the imagination of Bihar's youth—16.7 million voters in the 18-29 age group, accounting for 23.6 per cent or close to one-fourth of the total voters this election. He seems to have struck a chord with them, and more so because Covid-19 had caused widespread unemployment in the state.

Tejashwi also came out with a development programme with the catchy slogan, '*Kamayee, Padhayee, Sinchayee, Dawayee, Sunwayee and Karwayee*', which roughly translates into a government that will deliver employment, education, irrigation, medicine and legal recourse. Tejashwi carried a mixed bag with his father's legacy—if Lalu was once credited for backward caste empowerment in Bihar, his reign was also a marker for lawlessness and misgovernance. Indeed, PM Modi's description of Tejashwi as the "*yuvaraj* of jungle raj" was meant to highlight this very fact. The RJD also lost out with its alliance partners. A section of RJD leaders concede that the party lost its initiative the moment Tejashwi offered 70 seats to the Congress. As it turned out, the party won only 19, eight less than what it won in 2015. While Nitish gained in the company of the BJP, the RJD lost the momentum because of the lacklustre performance of the grand old party.

A central idea of Tejashwi's campaign was to broadbase the party's support network and move beyond the limiting M-Y (Muslim-Yadav) factor which, though formidable at

PHASING OUT RJD

While the RJD opened strongly in the first phase of the polls, the BJP and JD(U) caught up quickly, making significant gains in the second and third phases



PHASE I: 71 seats went to polls on October 28. The RJD-led Grand Alliance made an impressive start, winning 46 seats (RJD, 31; Congress, 8; and Left parties, 7), whereas the NDA won just 22 seats (BJP, 11; JD(U), 7; and HAM-S, 4). Others won three seats

PHASE II: 94 seats went to polls on November 3. The NDA bounced back, winning 54 seats (BJP, 34; JD-U, 17; and VIP, 3), whereas the RJD-led grand alliance stopped at 39 (RJD, 28; Congress, 4; and left, 7). Others won 1 seat

PHASE III: 78 seats went to polls on November 7, two days after Nitish declared it to be his last election. The NDA bagged 52 seats, with a strike rate of 67%. The RJD-led grand alliance got just 21 seats (RJD, 13; Congress, 6; and Left, 2), while the AIMIM bagged the remaining 5 seats



almost 30 per cent of the vote, was not good enough to win seats in straight contests. He tried his best to reach out to everyone, describing the RJD as the party for A to Z, and even fielded 24 candidates from the Extremely Backward Castes (EBCs), a segment identified with Nitish. But at the end of it, the RJD's 23.1 per cent vote still suggests that Tejashwi's appeal may have been noticed but it failed to convert to votes.

The RJD-led Grand Alliance also suffered in the Muslim dominated Seemanchal region where Asaduddin Owaisi's party, the AIMIM (All India Majlis-e-Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen) bagged five seats. Though the minority community has traditionally gone with the Congress and RJD, they seem to have preferred the AIMIM in these seats. In the five seats that it won, the AIMIM defeated the JD(U) in two and the RJD, Congress and BJP in one

each. The AIMIM bagged 523,000-plus votes and this is said to have hurt the grand alliance's chances.

THE MODI-NITISH COMBO

In the days ahead, Modi and Nitish will be watched closely to see how they iron out any differences that may arise. The two became a team only after July 2017 when Nitish left the RJD to join the NDA. Before this, they had an on-off relationship. While Nitish had initially defended Modi's development record in Gujarat when he was minister in the Vajpayee-led NDA government, he quit the NDA in 2013 when Modi was declared chairperson of the BJP's campaign committee.

But since 2017, Modi and Nitish have buried their animosity and displayed an excellent working relationship. Nitish not only attended every rally that the PM addressed in Bihar for the 2019 Lok Sabha election, but also travelled to Varanasi for the PM's nomination. This year, just before the Bihar election dates were declared, Modi made a ringing endorsement of Nitish on September 18 saying, "*Nitishji jaisa sahyogi ho to kya kuchh sambhav nahin* (Anything is possible with an ally like Nitish)," a line that has subsequently made its way to JD(U) posters.

Nitish also attended Modi's rallies on October 23, 28 and November 3, where the CM mostly kept his speeches short and let the prime minister take centre stage. The PM was a huge hit with the crowds wherever he spoke. After the NDA's win, the prime minister's victory rally speech on November 11 dispelled all doubts about whether Nitish would be the chief minister. "Under the leadership of *Nitishji*, we will leave no stone unturned in fulfilling the promises made to the people of Bihar," he said.

NITISH'S LAST HURRAH

Nitish, now 69, is a leader whose survival skills have often prevailed over his political challenges. In the 33-member Bihar cabinet of the outgoing government, Nitish's JD(U)

manned 23 berths and the BJP 10. Now, when the new government takes over, the numbers, if not the power equation, will shift; the BJP may have more members in the cabinet.

Though there are concerns about an increased saffron presence in the cabinet, a reassuring presence for Nitish could be Sushil Modi again as his deputy CM. Having spent 11 years together in two NDA state governments, Nitish and Sushil have developed a deep understanding of each other's deadline driven work ethic. "The people of Bihar denied the corrupt an

AS THE CM,
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OUT OF THESE
DIFFICULT TIMES

opportunity to loot the state again. We feel grateful that they trust the NDA," says Sushil.

A major concern for Nitish and also the BJP will be their response to the unemployment issue. "The government can no longer ignore the issues raised by Tejashwi. Our assessment is that he may not have succeeded in adding new numbers to the RJD's M-Y support base, but it will be tantamount to handing him a new vote bank if we don't address the issues that helped him create a new poll narrative in Bihar," says a senior minister from the outgoing government.

Nitish has already promised a '*Saat*

Nischay (Seven resolves) Part 2', the sequel to the winning mantra of 'good governance' that helped him retain power in 2015. Saath Nischay Part 1 had clear goals of delivering electricity, toilets and piped drinking water to every home and pucca roads in the villages. Almost all the programmes have met their targets. Nitish's new seven resolves include programmes to enhance the skill of youths, promote entrepreneurship among women and provide irrigation facilities to farms and additional health facilities for people. He is also promising a separate skill and entrepreneurship department, Rs 10 lakh assistance to women starting a business venture, besides setting up a mechanism to monitor the progress of work. "The government may expand the skill enhancement goal in keeping with the aspirations of the youth. A waiver of student loans may also happen," says a senior officer.

The new government will have to look beyond just skill development. The need of the hour is to create conditions for employment generation in Bihar. With not much happening by way of manufacturing or industrialisation, Bihar remains a major centre of outward migration. The government needs to step in and try to arrest the trend. The 2019-20 Bihar Economic Survey says the worker population ratio (WPR) for male workers in rural Bihar was 64 per cent, about 8 per cent lower than the all-India average. The state's per capita income has gone up from Rs 30,617 in 2018-19 to 43,000 in 2019-20. But, it is still less than half the national average. Nitish must focus on the services and manufacturing sector to provide jobs, boost incomes.

As the CM, Nitish is in the driver's seat. It doesn't matter who is helping navigate or who is sitting in the back, he has control over the wheel to steer the state out of these difficult times. He has one more shot at going down in history as Bihar's best known chief minister, the man who delivered. ■



COVER STORY

BJP

BIHAR

ON A HIGH
BJP leaders, led by PM Modi, greet party workers in New Delhi after the Bihar election and bypoll wins

CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

THE MODI SHOW

The BJP's victories will boost its bargaining power with allies and energise the cadre for crucial assembly polls in 2021

BY ANILESH S. MAHAJAN

A

powerful performance in Bihar and sweeping bypoll victories across 11 states—the BJP has good reason to celebrate the results of the recently-concluded elections. For the first time in the NDA's reign in Bihar, the BJP has emerged as the predominant party in the alliance. Its 74-seat haul in the 243-member assembly leaves Nitish Kumar's Janata Dal (United) a distant second, at 43 seats. While the chief minister's post may still go to Nitish, a reset of the equation within the NDA looks imminent—and it's certain to be advantage BJP. With the

JD(U) down 28 seats from the last assembly election, it is the BJP that ensured incumbent Chief Minister Nitish Kumar retains power—albeit with a razor-thin majority. The JD(U) won less than 40 per cent of the 115 seats it contested.

As far as the bypolls go, the BJP secured its government in Madhya Pradesh, strengthened its position in Manipur, Gujarat, Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh, and managed to get a toehold in the Telangana assembly. The party won 40 of the 59 assembly bye-elections. For the BJP, this is not only a vindication of

PM Narendra Modi's enduring popularity but also proof that Covid and the economic hardships it brought have not dented the party's core base. The electoral successes will help reinvigorate the BJP cadre and give the party a psychological boost ahead of two crucial assembly poll campaigns next year—in West Bengal, where the party is the principal challenger to the ruling Trinamool Congress, and Assam, where it's the incumbent.

The BJP, which has been on an expansionist drive, has in the past few years often relied on engineering defections to breach opposition bastions. Many of its breakthroughs have come at the cost of the Congress. The bypolls in Madhya Pradesh were primarily necessitated by the flight of 25 Congress MLAs to the BJP, most of them being Jyotiraditya Scindia loyalists. Though the Congress accused the BJP of rewarding turncoats with election tickets, the electorate remained unconvinced. Of the 28 bypoll seats, the BJP won 19, securing a clear majority for the Shivraj Singh Chouhan government.

In the bypolls to six seats in Manipur, five BJP candidates—all defectors from the Congress in end-August—emerged victorious. Earlier, Ginsuanhau Zou was declared elected uncontested from Singhat on a BJP ticket. In the sixth seat, however, an independent candidate backed by the BJP lost. All eight Congress turncoats contesting the bypolls in Gujarat on BJP tickets won. The BJP now has 111 members in the 182-member Gujarat assembly. Six of the seven bypoll seats in Uttar Pradesh went to the BJP. In Telangana, the BJP wrested the Dubbak assembly seat from the ruling Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) while in Karnataka, the BJP's B.M. Rajesh Gowda breached the Vokkaliga bastion in Sira. Gowda had joined the BJP from the Congress. The victory has surprised many as traditionally, the Congress and the Janata Dal (Secular) compete for Vokkaliga support. Former Congress leader N. Munirathna won the R.R. Nagar seat, this time on a BJP ticket.

Amid the rejoicing, two defeats should worry the BJP—of Olympic

medallist Yogeshwar Dutt from the Jat-dominated Baroda seat in Haryana and Gambheer Singh from Marwahi in Chhattisgarh. The BJP's defeat in Haryana perhaps points to the continuing Jat polarisation against the Manohar Lal Khattar government.

The BJP had its own set of challenges during the Bihar campaign—fighting an election amid Covid, selling its development plank amid the pandemic-induced economic distress, and growing differences between allies JD(U) and

PM MODI THANKED THE WOMEN VOTERS OF BIHAR FOR THE NDA'S VICTORY, HAILING THEM AS THE BJP'S "SILENT SUPPORTERS"

the LJP (Lok Janshakti Party). While seat distribution negotiations with its allies were far from smooth, several star BJP campaigners, such as Bihar election in-charge Devendra Fadnavis, Bihar deputy chief minister Sushil Modi and Saran MP Rajiv Pratap Rudy, tested positive for Covid and could not campaign for brief periods. The vacuum left by the absence of Amit Shah, recuperating from Covid, was apparent. It was left to PM Modi to do the heavy-lifting. The NDA campaign picked up momentum after Modi's rallies in Sasaram, Gaya and Bhagalpur on October 23. His nine other rallies in Bihar—held in Darbhanga, Muzaffarpur, Patna, Chapra, West Champaran, East Champaran, Samastipur, Saharsa and Forbesganj—were screened at over 100 places—an effort to reach out to voters

in 99 assembly seats. The NDA won 70 per cent of these seats.

Modi not only lauded Nitish's role in Bihar's development but also spoke at length about the Centre's welfare schemes. The Rs 1.7 lakh crore relief package under the PM Garib Kalyan Yojana to help the poor during the Covid crisis was trumpeted, as were other schemes such as Jan Dhan bank accounts, cooking gas under the Ujjwala scheme, affordable housing and electricity in villages. Modi sought to connect with the poor and with women, who have been among the biggest beneficiaries of central welfare schemes. A day after the NDA's victory in Bihar, at party HQ in New Delhi, he thanked the women of Bihar for stepping out to vote in overwhelming numbers, hailing them as the BJP's "silent supporters".

The BJP's emphatic wins in the elections will strengthen its position in the NDA, which has seen a string of desertions by major allies, such as the Telugu Desam Party in 2018, the Shiv Sena last year and, most recently, the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD). It will also give the BJP greater negotiating power with its allies. Going forward, the BJP's first test will be the Rajya Sabha bypoll necessitated by the death of LJP patriarch Ram Vilas Paswan. The party is also in a dilemma over rehabilitating LJP chief Chirag Paswan in the Union cabinet. Chirag had walked out of the NDA in the Bihar election due to differences with the JD(U), particularly over seat distribution.

The BJP would also want the JD(U), nationally the second largest NDA constituent with 16 Lok Sabha and five Rajya Sabha MPs—to join the Union cabinet. After the general election last year, the BJP had offered Nitish's party two berths—one cabinet minister and one minister of state (MoS). But Nitish demanded two cabinet minister slots and decided to stay out of the government. With his bargaining power significantly reduced, will he now reconsider? More importantly, how will 'Big Brother' BJP deal with its old ally now? ■

COVER STORY

CONGRESS

BIHAR

ABSENTEE LEADER

The leadership crisis in the Congress has manifested as election losses across the country. To survive, it must solve this problem

BY KAUSHIK DEKA

In the run-up to the Bihar assembly elections, Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed a dozen rallies in the state. Rahul Gandhi spoke at eight. Both campaigned for chief ministerial candidates from other parties. That's where the similarities end. Modi's rallies helped the BJP increase its seat count to 74 from 51 in 2015, and ensured a fifth chief ministerial term for JD(U) (Janata Dal United) chief Nitish Kumar. Rahul could not deliver similarly for the RJD (Rashtriya Janata Dal). Rather, the Congress' abysmal poll performance—it contested 70 seats, but won only 19—brought down

the RJD-led alliance's final tally.

The Congress' slide is visible across the board. In Madhya Pradesh, where bypolls were held for 28 seats, it won just nine. Its numbers in that state assembly fell to 96 from the 114 it had won in the 2018 elections. A cursory glance at the results of bypolls held for 59 assembly seats across 11 states in the recent past highlights this trend—of the 59, the Congress won just three. At the moment, it is in power on its own in four states—Punjab, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Puducherry and is a junior partner in the coalition governments ruling Maharashtra and Jharkhand. Its position as kingmaker in the latter two states is essentially the party's sole success story following the massive debacle in last year's Lok Sabha election—since December 2018, it has not been able to win a single state on its own. "It is clear from the Bihar elections that in terms of ideology, organisation and leadership, the Congress is not seen as a viable alternative to the BJP because of the continuing resonance of the BJP's Hindutva

SHOW OF FORCE

The Congress' Rahul Gandhi addresses a rally in Hisua, in Bihar's Nawada district



ANI

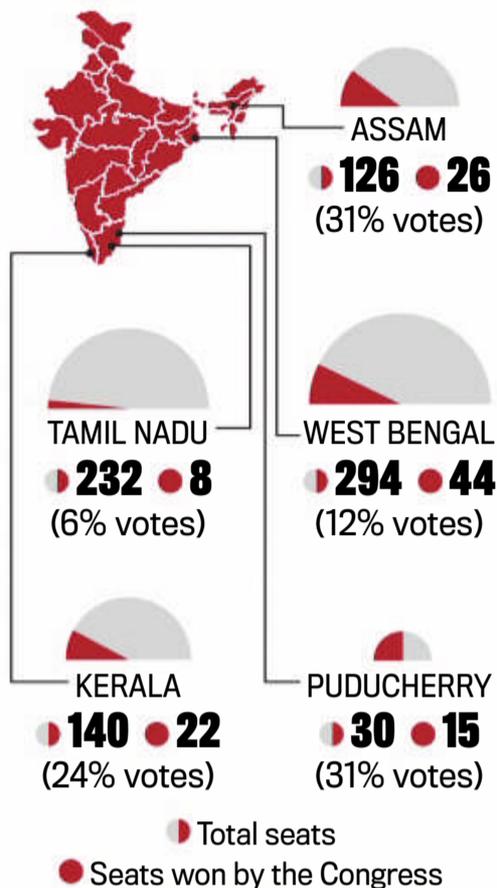
agenda in the Hindi heartland," says Zoya Hasan, professor emerita, JNU, and author of *Congress After Indira: Policy, Power, Political Change*. "The Congress needs to reinvent itself to do well in future elections. It can begin by nurturing state leaders and sorting out the leadership tangle at the top, which has besieged it for much too long."

As most political analysts have observed, the party's defeat in Bihar highlights the leadership crisis the Congress faces. For instance, in 2018, in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, where it could visibly showcase individual or collective leadership, it won the state elections. The same was evident in the 2017 Punjab polls where Captain Amarinder Singh headlined the campaign. Then, in 2019, the Congress narrowly lost Haryana, primarily because of a late call on the leadership in the state. The indecisiveness—mostly on the part of Congress high command and particularly the Gandhi family—has often resulted in electoral debacles and defections. Infighting and a

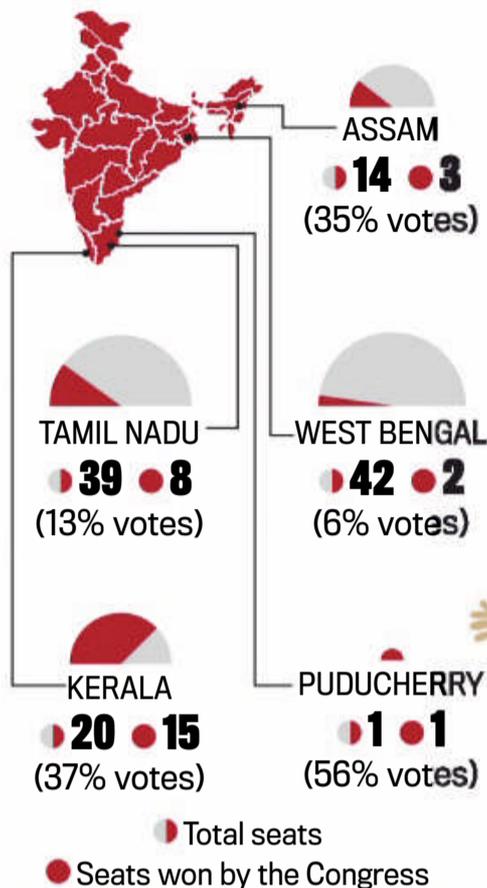
FIVE FUTURE BATTLES

The results of assembly elections in these five states will have a major impact on the Congress' revival plan. Past outings have been a mixed bag, with Kerala and Puducherry showing promise

ASSEMBLY POLLS 2016

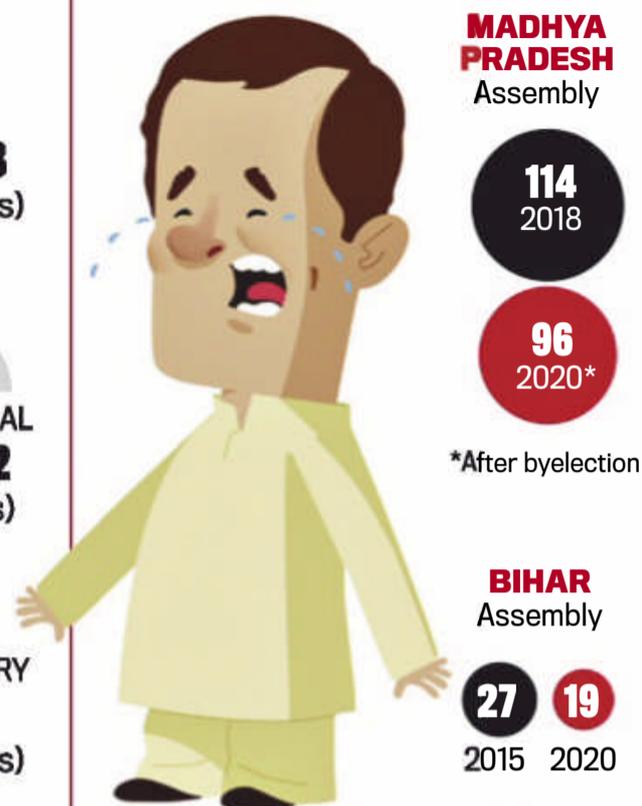


LOK SABHA POLLS 2019



THE TWIN BLOW

In both Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, the Congress' seat share has shrunk



subsequent defection by former party stalwart Jyotiraditya Scindia also cost the Congress an elected government in Madhya Pradesh. In neighbouring Rajasthan, where the Congress is in power, an uneasy calm prevails after a similar rebellion by Sachin Pilot was narrowly halted by the party high command.

The Gandhis recently faced some uncomfortable questions, in the form of a letter written by a group of 23 Congress leaders and handed to current president Sonia Gandhi. This group, led by veterans like Ghulam Nabi Azad, Anand Sharma, Mukul Wasnik, Bhupinder Singh Hooda, Shashi Tharoor and Manish Tewari, demanded an overhaul of the party and the election of a new president. Following the 2019 Lok Sabha debacle, Rahul Gandhi had resigned as party president, with Sonia Gandhi taking interim charge. With Sonia unwilling to continue in the post beyond a year and Rahul showing no interest in taking back the chair (though for all practical purposes he remains de-

facto party chief), the 23 leaders sought clarity on leadership via organisational elections at every level. Though Sonia clipped the wings of most of the 23 leaders, the Congress has begun the process of elections for party president.

Nonetheless, the party faces a major dilemma. Rahul's supporters say his return to the top post is just a formality—nobody is likely to contest against him, and even if someone does, there is little chance of victory. However, Rahul himself has given no indication of becoming a candidate. Besides, the losses in Bihar and Madhya Pradesh may have added a complication. If the Congress had done well and become a partner in the new government in Bihar, it would have given Rahul the perfect moment to stage a return. The failure of two of his most trusted aides—Randeep Singh Surjewala, who led the Bihar campaign, and Shaktisinh Gohil, AICC (All India Congress Committee) in-charge of Bihar—will embolden the 23 leaders looking for change. Under these circumstances, Rahul's return, or even a presidential poll within the party, may

have to wait. And there is already a perfect excuse—the Covid-19 pandemic.

However, while the party can delay an internal election, there is no escaping the polls being conducted in five states—Assam, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Puducherry and Kerala—by April next year. To perform well, the party will have to dramatically improve its organisational structure. Barring Kerala, its district- and block-level organisation in all these states are in shambles. And while chief minister V. Narayanasamy is the party's face in Puducherry, there is no clear leader in the rest. Talking about the debacle in Bihar, one of the 23 letter writers says, "We are reaching a new low with every election, because we haven't had a strong state leader for decades and we have no organisation. You can't win an election on media bites"—an indirect dig at both the high command and Surjewala, the party's communication in-charge.

However, to create the necessary infrastructure and leadership in the poll-bound states, the Congress must first end the ambiguity at the top. ■



SPECIAL
REPORT

— PAKISTAN —

RUNNING OUT OF PACE



EPA

PEOPLE POWER
Crowds at the first PDM anti-government rally in Gujranwala, Oct. 16; (inset) Nawaz Sharif addresses the rally via videolink

A DEFIANT OPPOSITION ALLIANCE HAS TAKEN ON THE IMRAN KHAN GOVERNMENT AND, FOR THE FIRST TIME EVER, EVEN THE PAKISTAN ARMY. WHERE WILL IT ALL END?

By **HASAN ZAIDI** IN KARACHI

P

Politics is a far more difficult game than cricket as Pakistan prime minister Imran Khan has learnt the hard way. The World Cup-winning cricket captain never tires of talking about his achievements on the pitch or drawing parallels between his sporting exploits and his political struggles. But the one thing that helped him achieve success on the pitch as a skipper—his self-belief and the arrogance that came with it—is possibly not the best match for the rough and tumble of politics or for governing a complex country.

Since he became prime minister in 2018 in a controversial election, Imran has found out that running a country of 220 million is a tough proposition—even if you have the umpires on your side. Of late, an increasingly vocal opposition (which disparages him as a “puppet prime minister” at every chance) and mounting public disaffection with his government’s economic policies have forced Imran

to fall back on his cricketing instincts and dig in his heels. He has rubbished all well-meaning suggestions to reduce the polarisation within the country and has declared that he will “never be blackmailed”. In a recent speech, he claimed the opposition had only seen his softer side so far and vowed to show them “a different Imran Khan”.

The opposition, meanwhile, is batting on the front foot with entrenched rivals of the past joining hands to form an 11-party alliance, the Progressive Democratic Movement (PDM). Its members include the main opposition parties such as the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) led by former prime minister Nawaz Sharif (currently based in London), the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) headed by Bilawal Bhutto, son of the late Benazir Bhutto (a former prime minister) and Asif Ali Zardari (a former president), and the right-wing Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) led by Fazlur Rehman, who also heads the PDM alliance.

The PDM has held three rallies so far in major Pakistan cities—Karachi, Gujranwala and Quetta—that drew substantial crowds. In a major development, Nawaz Sharif crossed Pakistan’s Rubicon when he openly criticised the Pakistan army chief Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa and the Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) head Gen. Faiz Hameed for interfering in politics. At the Gujranwala rally, Nawaz thundered against the two key army generals saying, “You will have to answer for it.” He also added that the PDM’s struggle was not against the “irrelevant” Imran but against “the subversion of popular will”. His statement raised the stakes in the political battle as the military establishment is generally regarded as a holy cow and political parties are careful not to criticise it.

On his part, Imran has accused the opposition en masse of being corrupt “criminals” who have banded together to escape the accountability he is putting in place. Numerous cases have been filed against opposition leaders alleging graft during their time in power. Increasingly, he and the ministers from his party, the PTI (Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf), also claim that their opponents are in cahoots with “the enemies of Pakistan” (read India). And threats are frequently made to charge them with treason.

With Imran looking the other way, the screws have also been turned on the media, and anyone voicing dissent has been trolled by his PTI support-



THE OTHER SIDE ↑
Pakistan’s prime minister Imran Khan addresses a ‘freedom day’ celebration in Gilgit-Baltistan on November 1



ers or, in extreme cases, been ‘picked up’ by the security agencies. The owner of Pakistan’s largest media house, Mir Shakilur-Rehman, chief editor of the Urdu daily *Jang* and the Geo News TV channel, was finally released on bail this past week after being incarcerated without trial for the past eight months in a property case dredged up from 1986.

When he first took over, Imran offered his supporters the catchphrase “*Ghabrana nahin hai* (Don’t get worried)”, to reassure them that he was there to put everything right. Almost 27 months and many policy reversals later, most observers feel the government is rudderless and is itself showing signs of anxiety.

IT’S THE ECONOMY, STUPID

So, what went wrong? Imran Khan’s election to the position of prime minister in August 2018 had been made possible by his party, the PTI, emerging marginally as the largest in the National Assembly. Following some last-minute wheeling and

IMRAN HAS ACCUSED THE OPPOSITION EN MASSE OF BEING CORRUPT “CRIMINALS” AND FILED NUMEROUS CASES AGAINST OPPOSITION LEADERS

dealing, this allowed the patching together of a coalition government. The PTI had won 149 seats in the 342-strong assembly, 23 short of a simple majority. Khan cobbled together a coalition of seven parties and independents to form the government.

Although the parties that lost out claimed right from the outset that the PTI had been the beneficiary of some creative electoral engineering by the military establishment, the problem for them was two-fold. For one, taking on the all-powerful military is no easy task. Second, many within Pakistan were willing to give Imran a chance, after consecutive terms by the two mainstream parties, the PPP and PML-N, and a narrative propagated in the media that depicted them as having “looted the country”.

But things started going south for the PTI government right from the get-go. Having come in on the largely fanciful promise of fixing everything within the first 90 days, the clock was ticking for Imran the moment he assumed office. As the self-imposed 90-day deadline was extended first to six months, then 18 months and then to

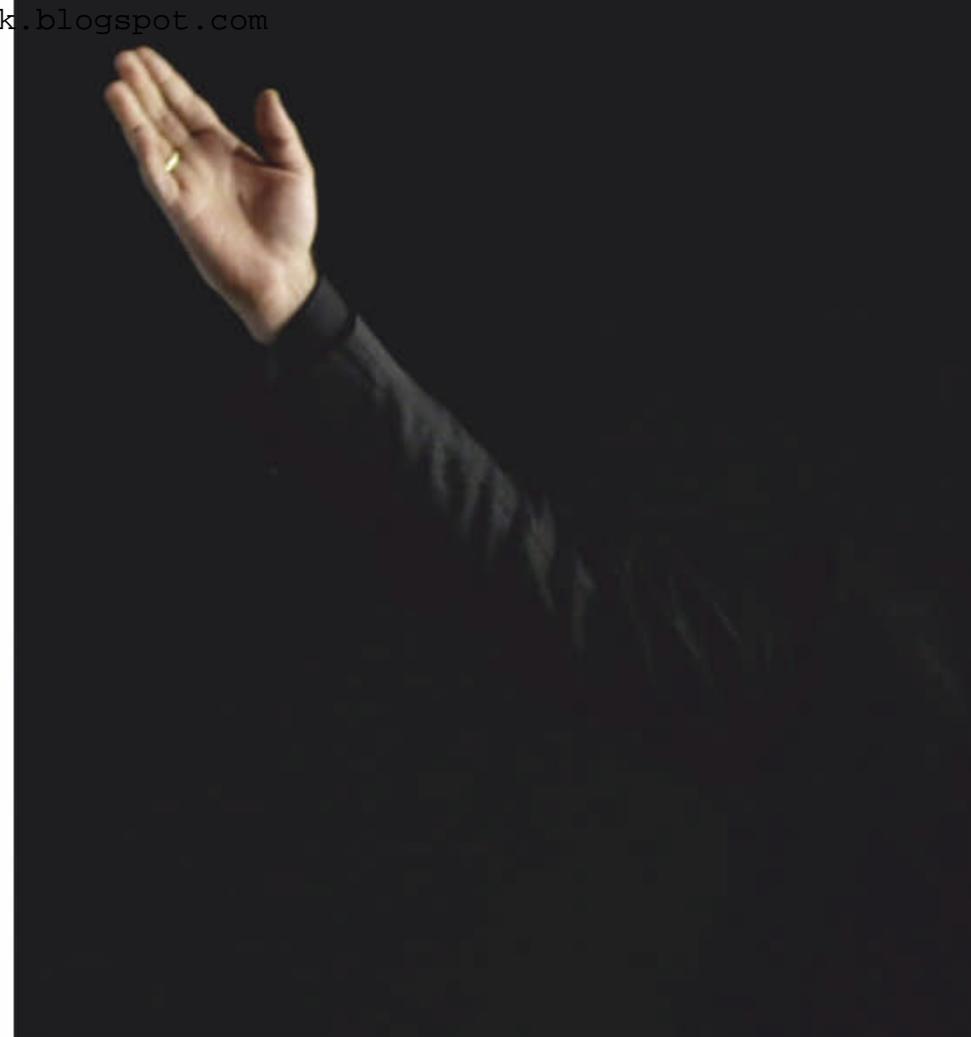
three years, the public disaffection with PTI's narrative of 'change' began to grow.

It didn't help that Imran and many in his inner circle in the PTI had no experience of government or of how to handle the bureaucracy, leading to a number of blunders and reversals of decisions. The first big test for the government was bringing reforms to salvage "the devastated economy", as Imran repeatedly called it. But his government dithered on whether to accept a \$6 billion IMF programme to save Pakistan from a possible financial meltdown. While the government initially pinned its hopes on a bailout from friendly Arab countries and China to avoid the IMF, the industry and markets showed their lack of confidence in the government's economic managers by spiralling into a slowdown, increasing unemployment and depleting revenues further.

Eventually, six months later, Pakistan did join the IMF programme but on much harsher conditions than it faced earlier and with an even weaker economy. The reforms mandated by the IMF came as more pain for the average Pakistani. With the overvalued Pakistan rupee falling by almost 60 per cent against the US dollar and inflation hitting record highs—food inflation was at a whopping 25 per cent year-on-year at one point (and is still pegged at over 16 per cent)—Pakistanis were already crying blue murder long before things hit a nadir with the Covid-19 pandemic.

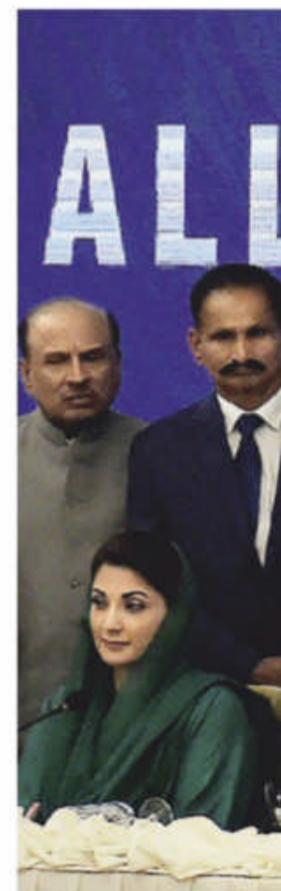
The country's GDP growth had slowed from 5.5 per cent in the last year of the PML-N government to about 2 per cent in PTI's first year. By the second year, despite the government taking credit for a surprisingly low-impact Covid-19 first season (till November 4, Pakistan had reported 337,573 cases of infections with only 6,867 deaths), economic growth was estimated in the negative. Pakistan's economy was not just in recession, but in depression.

Meanwhile, a number of scandals began to rear their heads, related mainly to the skyrocketing prices of staples such as wheat and sugar—prices have more than doubled in the past few months—and which can charitably be laid at the feet of government incompetence. Similar disasters in the field of aviation and fuel imports and missed targets for revenue collection (set by the IMF) have only added to the general perception that the government is completely at sea, at least as far as the economy is concerned. The only saving grace has been turning a massive current account deficit into a surplus (based mainly on production imports drying up) and remittances from Pakistani expats abroad which have risen in the past few months (up 30 per cent y-on-y in the first three months of FY21) but which many analysts are cautioning may be because of worldwide restrictions on travel because of the pandemic.



RAHAT DAR

**WITH THE OVERVALUED
PAKISTANI RUPEE
FALLING BY ALMOST 60
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US DOLLAR, PAKISTANIS
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BLUE MURDER BEFORE
THINGS HIT A NADIR
WITH COVID-19**



OUTSIDER AS INSIDER

Imran Khan's politics has always been to position himself as the outsider who would take to task the "corrupt" leaderships of PPP and PML-N. One of the PTI promises was to bring the "looted wealth" back to the country. Before the elections, PTI stalwarts often tossed around the figure of \$200 billion stashed abroad that they would somehow bring back to Pakistan. That figure never stood up to scrutiny, but it's one of the reasons why Imran would never deign to ally himself with the PPP or PML-N, even if some of his advisors may have wished it.

Over time, the single-minded focus on past corruption,



AP



FAROOQ NAEEM/GETTY IMAGES



GROWING OPPOSITION

(Clockwise from top left) Bilawal Bhutto Zardari speaking at the anti-government rally in Gujranwala, Oct. 16; Maryam Nawaz, daughter of PML(N) chief Nawaz Sharif, addresses supporters while leaving her home to attend a rally in Lahore, Oct. 16; Opposition leaders in Islamabad at a meeting of the All Parties Conference demanding the resignation of PM Imran Khan, Sep. 20

real or imagined—at the expense of all other aspects of governance—and the vicious witch-hunts against opposition politicians left the latter with little breathing room. Things came to a head first with the conviction and jailing in December 2018 of Nawaz Sharif and his daughter and political heir Maryam Nawaz.

While the Sharifs believe the conspiracy against them was hatched by the military establishment way back in 2014—when Imran had launched a 126-day *dharna* against the PML-N government in Islamabad—they continued to be somewhat circumspect in public, only using euphemisms to refer to the “conspiracies against elected governments” while raising the slogan “Vote *ko*

izzat do (Give respect to the vote)”.

While Maryam was subsequently allowed out on bail, Sharif continued to be incarcerated for most of 2019. The next turning point came when he was allowed to go to London in November 2019 for treatment for what was presented as “life-threatening illnesses”. PM Imran, who was persuaded that it was not in his interest to have Sharif die on his watch, would later come to believe he was deceived through an elaborate conspiracy (though he demurs in explaining how this could happen without the connivance of at least some of his military advisors).

Insiders say it was Imran Khan’s growing anger at Sharif’s flight that created hurdles in Maryam joining her

father in London. Imran has vowed to do everything in his power to bring Sharif back to serve the remainder of his seven-year jail term.

Meanwhile, it is widely believed that Sharif's brother, the former Punjab chief minister and current leader of the opposition, Shehbaz Sharif, was trying his best to mediate with the establishment through secret contacts. Certainly his tone was much less hostile than his brother's and he apparently had Nawaz's go-ahead to see if the tactics would work. Observers point to how, for many months after Nawaz's departure, there were no public pronouncements from either him or Maryam. But when Shehbaz was arrested in a money-laundering case in September, the elder Sharif's patience ran out.

It's possible that if Imran and the military establishment (he often says they are "on the same page") had managed to stabilise the economy, nothing much might have happened no matter what Sharif felt. But with people suffering the effects of a badly-managed economy made worse by a pandemic-induced global recession, the situation contained the seeds of the perfect storm.

The PPP, which still governs the province of Sindh and has a contentious relationship with the federal government, was also facing serious cases against its leader, former president Asif Zardari. These too suddenly began to intensify, purportedly under Imran's direction, though he claims the Gen. Musharraf-created National Accountability Bureau (NAB) operates independently. Not many buy this line, especially since a number of potential cases against those in government—the latest scandal involves Gen. (ret'd) Asim Saleem Bajwa who heads the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project in Pakistan and was an advisor to Imran—never see any progress. Even the Pakistan supreme court has criticised the NAB for creating a perception that it is being used for political victimisation.

Meanwhile, there was the JUI's Maulana Fazlur Rehman, who had long harboured resentment against the "electoral manipulation" that had shut him and most of his party out in the 2018 election. He had advised the opposition to resign en masse from the assemblies even in 2018 and had attempted a march on Islamabad last December, but both tactics had failed to garner support from the other opposition parties. The maulana's party may not be big in electoral terms but has 'street power', with thousands of dedicated workers drawn from the religious seminaries. Suddenly, he found that the frustrations of the 'mainstream' parties mirrored his own. The conditions were ripe for a rebellion of sorts.

A DIPLOMATIC NADIR

Indo-Pak relations under the Modi government, which began on a promising note, have nosedived since then following a series of terrorist attacks out of Pakistan and are now at their lowest point in nearly two decades

- **May 27, 2014**
PM Narendra Modi and then-Pakistan PM Nawaz Sharif hold talks in New Delhi after the new NDA government is sworn in



- **December 25, 2015**
PM Modi makes a surprise stopover in Lahore en route to India from Afghanistan. The increasing diplomatic contact rekindles hopes of improved relations

- **January 2, 2016**
Pakistan-based militants launch a suicide attack on an Indian airbase in Pathankot, killing several soldiers. On Sept. 18, a similar attack targets an army base in Uri, Kashmir



- **September 29, 2016**
Following the Uri attack, Indian forces conduct a retaliatory cross-border raid on militant camps in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. Notably, the raid is publicly acknowledged by the Modi government

- **February 26, 2019**
After a suicide attack on an army convoy in Pulwama on Feb. 14 by JeM cadre leaves over 40 soldiers dead, IAF jets bomb a terrorist training camp in Balakot, Pakistan. Matters escalate the next day—a brief dogfight between IAF and PAF warplanes leads to an IAF plane being shot down and the pilot captured; he is returned within hours



- **August 5, 2019**
India revokes Article 370, which granted J&K special status. Pakistan expels the Indian high commissioner in Islamabad and recalls its envoy from New Delhi



FROSTY PARTNERS

Prime Minister Modi at a meeting of SAARC leaders discussing ways to combat Covid-19

AT A RALLY HE ADDRESSED IN GUJRANWALA VIA VIDEO LINK, SHARIF NAMED THE ARMY CHIEF AND ISI HEAD, DIRECTLY ATTACKING THE MILITARY'S POLITICAL ROLE

THE PDM ALLIANCE

Nevertheless, when the 11-party PDM was formed in September, not much was expected from it. There have been multi-party alliances against governments in the past as well, but nothing much came of them. The PDM, too, had chalked out a series of rallies throughout Pakistan “to build momentum”, which would ostensibly culminate in a march on Islamabad in January. But at the first PDM rally in the Punjabi city of Gujranwala, Sharif—addressing the rally via videolink from London—set the tone and electrified all those watching by directly naming the army chief and the ISI head. Videos of the rally show that his words were widely applauded by the audience. For many, Sharif was finally putting into plain words what everyone had long been speaking about privately—the military establishment's unconstitutional interference in Pakistani politics.

This is completely uncharted territory for most of Pakistan. Outside of military dictatorships, there have never been such direct attacks on the political role of the military. Certainly never with names being taken. But perhaps even

more unnerving for the establishment is that this reaction was coming from the Punjab heartland, from which the military draws the majority of its ranks, and which forms 60 per cent of Pakistan's population. Sharif's direct attacks—and the indirect ones by Maryam Nawaz, Fazlur Rehman and others—on the establishment have continued through subsequent rallies. It is all rather new for everyone.

MILITARY 'SIGNALS'

Some analysts speculate that Nawaz Sharif would never have indulged in a head-on confrontation unless he had received a ‘signal’ from elements within the military itself. They point to the disaffection within the military leadership over the extension granted to Gen. Bajwa by PM Imran. Due to retire in November 2019, Gen. Bajwa got a second three-year term as army chief, and that obviously created resentment among those aspiring to higher posts in the normal course of army promotions. Even at the time, many retired military personnel refused to endorse the extension.

The military establishment was stunned by the turn of events at the PDM *jalsa*. It has always relied on a tacit understanding with politicians that, despite its overt interference in policy, its role is never spoken about publicly. Behind the scenes, however, a narrative was being built—through the spokespersons of Imran's government—that the opposition was playing into the hands of Pakistan's enemies, such as India, which wanted to undermine the military. But each action of political rhetoric often begets a reaction.

This is where Indian Air Force (IAF) wing commander Abhinandan Varthaman, retired Indian Navy commander Kulbhushan Jadhav and India's scrapping of Article 370 in Kashmir come in. With Imran's government attacking the opposition as puppets of Narendra Modi and India's intelligence agencies, the opposition, too, decided to respond in


**ALL-WEATHER
ALLIES**

Chinese president Xi Jinping (R) with Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff, Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa

kind. Their spin was that Imran's government was overly hasty in returning the captured Indian pilot (Abhinandan), that it was trying to let the alleged Indian spy in Pakistan custody (Jadhav) get away by bringing in special laws, and that it had done nothing when Kashmir was in effect "annexed" by India in 2019—in effect, it is the "traitorous" PTI government that is actually soft on India.

But even leaving inflammable political rhetoric aside, it is difficult at the moment to see how things will play out in the coming months. It is an open secret in Islamabad that the military leadership has not been particularly enamoured by Imran's style of governance. Time and again, Gen. Bajwa has had to directly step in to smooth things over after government blunders with allies like China and Saudi Arabia (minister for industries Abdur Razzak Dawood once gave a statement against CPEC's feasibility and foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi criticised Saudi Arabia for dragging its feet on the Kashmir issue). Decisions have often been delayed and reversed. Indeed, Gen. Bajwa has even gone to the extent of directly meeting businessmen to assuage their fears and to encourage them to invest and kickstart the economy.

When Maryam's husband Safdar Awan was arrested in a morning raid on his hotel in Karachi (the Sindh police chief was allegedly forced to assent to the arrest), causing the usually moderate PPP chairperson Bilawal Bhutto to openly decry the rising "fascism" of the state, it was Gen. Bajwa again who called Bilawal to placate him.

But the military is also in a bind. It realises—as does Imran—that the PTI is nothing without him, such is the cult

he enjoys. The establishment has also invested too much in the PTI. Abandoning it would be like starting all over again. And with Nawaz Sharif on the warpath and Punjab likely to go to the PML-N in a fair election (it already has the highest number of seats in the Punjab assembly though it was denied the chance to form a government), the establishment's only sliver of hope is in the PML-N or the PDM fracturing. That does not look like happening anytime soon.

In an interview to BBC Urdu, Bilawal admitted he was stunned by Nawaz Sharif's naming of the military leadership at the Gujranwala *jalsa*, which was soon hyped by pro-government forces as evidence of disagreements within the PDM. But the statement was taken out of context (Bilawal had said that Sharif had every right to take names though he himself avoids it), and both the PPP and PDM moved swiftly to quash such speculation.

The military establishment also has to deal with another problem—neither Imran nor the opposition will budge from their position of absolute hostility towards each other. There are reports that Imran has commented that Gen. Bajwa's meetings with the opposition were a mistake. It's a dangerous game of high stakes and egos that nobody has a roadmap for.

Most people in Pakistan already assume that the real power lies with the army. But with power comes responsibility. And, increasingly, people are holding the military rather than the civilian government responsible for all their ills. The military establishment may still think of Imran Khan as the equivalent of its cricketing night-watchman. But in dwindling light, it's not clear how many balls he will survive. ■

INSIGHTS
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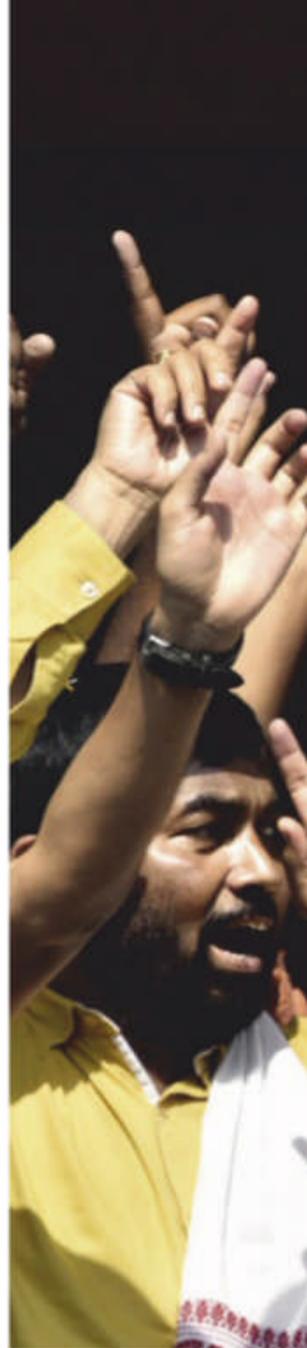
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MAN IN POLL POSITION

THE BJP HAS THE UNENVIABLE TASK OF MANAGING HIMANTA BISWA SARMA'S AMBITION AND KEEPING HIM ON ITS SIDE TO RETAIN A PRESENCE IN THE NORTHEAST

BY KAUSHIK DEKA



O

n November 6, Assam's finance minister Himanta Biswa Sarma posted a video on his Twitter handle claiming that supporters of the AIUDF (All India United Democratic Front) chief Badruddin Ajmal shouted 'Pakistan Zindabad' slogans to welcome the Dhubri Lok Sabha MP at Silchar airport a day earlier. There is no official verification of whether the supporters did indeed shout the slogan, they claim they were hailing local MLA Aziz Khan, but Sarma's tweet is just another example of the rising communal decibel in Assam, heading for an assembly election in less than six months. By consistently targeting the AIUDF, a party representing the interests of Muslims of immigrant origin, the Assam minister is aiming to consolidate the Hindu vote in a state where Muslims form 35 per cent of the population, the highest in the country.

Indeed, the ruling BJP in the state has been brazenly trying to ignite religious polarisation to replace the Assamese-speaking people's linguistic fears in the electoral narrative. If the state government shut down government-run madrassas—along with Sanskrit tols—it also rejected

a Congress MLA's request to expedite the process of setting up a museum reflecting the culture and heritage of the inhabitants of Assam's 'Char Chaporis', or the riverine sand belts of the Brahmaputra that are home to a vast majority of Bangla-speaking Muslims who originally migrated from Bangladesh. Interestingly, a 16-member panel, which included six BJP MLAs, had already approved the proposal.

Driving this renewed religious polarisation in Assam is Sarma, the grandmaster of all electoral moves in Assam as well as the entire Northeast. He was the architect of the saffron party's victories in Assam and Tripura, and used back-door management to help the BJP form a government in Manipur in 2017 and in Meghalaya in 2018 in partnership with the National People's Party (NPP), despite the Congress emerging as the single-largest party in both the states. And it is again he, not chief minister Sarbananda Sonowal, who is generating all the electoral noise for the BJP's 2021 Assam campaign, leading Congress general secretary in-charge of Assam Jitendra Singh to derisively ask

THE CHARMER
Sarma campaigning
for the Lok Sabha
election last year



DAVID TALUKDAR/GETTY IMAGES

who the real chief minister of Assam is.

Sarma, who handles the finance, education, health and PWD ministries, among others, is also the one who represents the BJP's viewpoint to the Assamese people on various issues, whether it is the contentious Citizenship (Amendment) Act or CAA, 2019, or Covid-19. It was Sarma who took all Covid-19-related decisions, including lockdown measures and norms, at times even overruling the decisions of the state chief secretary.

He also took direct briefings from top police officers and district superintendents of police on implementing the lockdown, even though the CM handles the home department. Yet, there seems no public conflict between the two leaders, their styles of functioning complementing each other. While this coordinated performance has surprised both their supporters and critics, a conflict of interest may indeed build up in the run-up to 2021 state election. How it plays out will depend on how the central BJP fields Sarma in the election.

Not just during elections, Sarma also represents the government's stance, be it on CAA or on Covid

Sarma has been a minister in Assam for the past 18 years—14 years under the Tarun Gogoi-led Congress government and four years under the Sonowal-led BJP government. His departure from the Congress came in 2015 when he wanted to replace Gogoi as chief minister. Impressed with his electoral efficiency, the then BJP president and now Union home minister Amit Shah took him under his wings and made him the last word on party affairs not just in Assam but in the entire Northeast. Sarma is also the convenor of NEDA (North-Eastern Democratic Alliance),

a BJP-led umbrella organisation of all non-Congress parties in the region.

Shah has often utilised Sarma's services beyond his remit as a minister in the Assam cabinet—from providing the last-minute thrust to the BJP's Lok Sabha campaign in West Bengal in 2019 and defusing the recent crisis in the Manipur government to persuading NSCN (IM) chief TH Muivah to dilute his hard stance on the peace agreement with the Union government. However, while the BJP brass has showed wide appreciation for his efforts, the long-standing ambition of becoming the state's chief minister still eludes the 51-year-old Sarma.

Tired of playing second fiddle in the Assam cabinet for more than 15 years, Sarma sought a national assignment when in the run-up to Lok Sabha election in 2019, he announced that he would contest from Tezpur. However, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in a one-to-one meeting with him in Delhi, asked him to stay put in Assam, saying his services were needed more in that

A NEW BINARY

The BJP-led Assam government's recent decisions—perceived to be anti-Muslim—are aimed at giving a religious twist to Assam's fight against illegal infiltration

➤ The Assamese-speaking people have been demanding for nearly five decades that illegal immigrants from Bangladesh be detected and deported. The National Register of Citizens was updated last year, showing 1.9 million people ineligible for citizenship

➤ The Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, is expected to legitimise the non-Muslims among these 1.9 million people as citizens. This has caused huge resentment among Assamese-speaking people who fear being outnumbered by Bangla-speaking Hindu immigrants from Bangladesh. Two political parties have been set up to represent this public sentiment

➤ To counter this outrage, the BJP has sought to convert the narrative from Assamese vs illegal Bangla-speaking Bangladeshi immigrants to Hindu vs Muslim. Sarma's recent actions against madrassas and rejection of a Miya museum are aimed at projecting to Assamese people that Muslims are a bigger threat than Bangla-speaking Hindus. In the past, he has openly said that Assamese people need the support of 500,000 Bangladeshi Hindus to prevent the AIUDF, a party representing mostly Muslims of immigrant origin, from winning in 17 assembly constituencies

➤ With talk of Congress and AIUDF joining hands for the assembly poll, religious polarisation in Assam, which has a 35 per cent Muslim population, can swing the votes in favour of BJP, which is facing public protest over CAA

ELECTION ENGINEER

Why Himanta Biswa Sarma's role may decide the outcome of 2021 Assam assembly election

➤ The BJP has relied heavily on Sarma's mass appeal and managerial skills to establish itself in the Northeast. He was the chief architect of its electoral wins in Assam and Tripura and his backdoor management helped it form governments in Manipur, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh, despite Congress being single-largest party

➤ Before the 2021 assembly poll, he wants either a senior Union cabinet portfolio or made CM candidate of Assam. By saying he won't contest assembly poll next year, he has already sent the high command a signal

➤ For BJP, it will be extremely difficult to ignore current Assam CM Sar-

bananda Sonowal, who is a popular leader across the state and who has always had RSS backing

➤ However, the BJP will need Sarma's poll management skills and resources to counter anti-BJP sentiment among Assamese-speaking people for passing the Citizenship Amendment Act,

region. With that ambition thwarted, Sarma now wants an elevated role in Assam, which can happen only if he is given the top job.

In an indirect message to the BJP brass, Sarma had in a tweet on August 25, the day BJP national general secretary B.L. Santhosh arrived in Guwahati, said he would not contest the assembly election in 2021. Though he has made the same statement on multiple occasions in the past four years, this tweet created a flutter in the state as Sarma's organisational network, electoral manoeuvring and personal equation with alliance partners remain extremely crucial for winning the 2021 polls. "It's natural for a leader of his calibre to have such ambition," says Professor Akhil Ranjan Dutta, head of the political science department at Gauhati University. "He plans and executes the BJP's poll strategy in Assam. So his commitment or lack of it will certainly be a matter of concern for the party."

The BJP also needs Sarma to counter the anger among Assamese-

speaking people, particularly in the upper Assam region, against the BJP for passing the CAA. Assamese-speaking people fear that the legislation will in effect provide citizenship to Bangladeshi Hindu immigrants who will outnumber them in their own state. The saffron party's nervousness is evident as both Sarma and Sonowal have been spending unusually long time in the upper Assam areas in the past six months. In fact, Sarma's recent utterances against Muslims of immigrant origin is an attempt to replace fears of linguistic loss with the threat of religious invasion. "The BJP wants to convert the linguistic chauvinism to religious polarisation and Sarma is showcasing his skills in this exercise," says Dutta.

The party is also relying heavily on the goodwill Sarma has earned with his effective management of Covid-19 to neutralise the damage caused by the CAA. Political observers even consider the pandemic to be a blessing in disguise for the Assam BJP, as it cut short public mobilisa-



DAVID TALUKDAR/GETTY IMAGES

◀ HIGH COMMAND'S CHOICE

Chief minister Sarbananda Sonowal enjoys the confidence of the people and the RSS

➤ A tacit Congress-AIUDF seat-sharing understanding will render BJP vulnerable in 45 of the 126 assembly seats. In a hung assembly, the BJP will need Sarma's backdoor management to bring around other allies, particularly in the 12 Bodoland Territorial Area Districts, to its side

➤ In fact, if Sarma doesn't apply himself fully this poll, the anti-CAA sentiment against the BJP in Brahmaputra Valley and the emergence of

new regional parties may severely dent its vote bank, especially in upper Assam

➤ Sarma's non-cooperation in the event of BJP brass not accepting his demands may yield a fractured mandate, which will go in his favour. He has the manpower and the money power to cobble up a non-BJP government, if required. Even the Congress has sent him feelers about backing him in such an eventuality

2019, which in effect will provide citizenship to illegal Hindu immigrants from Bangladesh. Sarma has earned considerable public goodwill for his effective management of Covid-19, which could neutralise anti-CAA resentment

that the high command was ready to support Sarma if their former colleague contemplated forming a non-BJP government in the state.

Sarma, however, rubbishes the speculation about his chief ministerial ambition or his possible rebellion in the BJP. "I have been a minister in Assam for the past 18 years and have been part of electoral campaigns at every level, from the panchayat to the Lok Sabha. I'm physically and mentally exhausted and, therefore, need some rest. But before that, I will ensure that the BJP returns to power in the state with an enhanced mandate," he says. However, despite this public posturing, sources close to him claim that Sarma will not be keen to deliver on BJP's expected lines if the central leadership doesn't either offer him a prestigious portfolio in the Modi government or make him the chief ministerial candidate before the assembly poll.

The BJP high command has till now not given any indication of fulfilling Sarma's ambition. For the BJP, it will be extremely difficult to ignore current Assam CM Sarbananda Sonowal, who is a popular leader across Assam, particularly in upper Assam. Though he has allowed Sarma to hog the limelight in the past four years, Sonowal has anchored certain big-ticket decisions, which have earned him public goodwill. For instance, his cleaning up of the selection process in the Assam Public Service Commission has been widely appreciated for ending institutionalised corruption in government recruitment. Though his silence over CAA made Assamese-speaking people brand him as a traitor, he has sought to neutralise the damage by consistently patronising Assamese civil servants—the state has after a long time seen Assamese officers as chief secretary and the state's DGP. More importantly, he has always been backed by the RSS leadership in the state.

It will, therefore, be interesting to see how the BJP brass in Delhi sets the house in order in Assam. Four other states go to polls around the same time next year and it is in this northeastern state that the saffron party has the highest chance of capturing power. ■

Despite his public posturing, it is to be seen whether Sarma will do the BJP's bidding if denied his expectations

tion against the CAA and the BJP.

"It's a fact that Covid killed the CAA impact in Assam. But the agitation gave birth to some new young leaders who will, at least, cause some damage to the BJP's vote bank," says Professor Satyakam Borthakur, chairperson of the Centre for Studies in Journalism and Mass Communication at Dibrugarh University.

Emerging electoral equations among opposition parties are another challenge for the BJP. A tacit understanding on seats between the Congress and the AIUDF could leave the BJP vulnerable in at least 45 of the total 126 seats. A consolidation

of the Muslim vote for a Congress-AIUDF alliance can seriously impact the electoral outcome.

In a hung assembly scenario, the BJP will need all of Sarma's backdoor management as he has friends in every party. For instance, the support of the dominating party in the Bodoland Territorial Area Districts, which account for 12 seats, will play a key role in the formation of the next government. Sarma has a strong personal equation among all sections of Bodo leadership.

Within the state BJP too, Sarma has a set of loyal supporters who flock around him—like they did when he left the Congress for the BJP—in the event of his rebellion. In fact, several political analysts believe that a fractured mandate in the next election may actually work to his advantage as he has the manpower and the money power to cobble together a non-BJP government, if required. Even some top Congress leaders in Delhi told india today, on the condition of anonymity,



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সফলকৈ দুৰ্গাপূজাৰ শুভাৰ্ছা

মাদীজিৰ সঞ্চে পৰিষ্কাৰ কৰাৰ বাবে বিনামূলীয়া



THE BENGALI WAY

BJP leaders at the inauguration of their party's first Durga Puja in West Bengal, in Kolkata

ANI

WEST BENGAL | **ELECTIONS 2021**

THE GREAT HINDU VOTE TRICK

THEY COMPRISE 70 PER CENT OF THE POPULATION OF THE STATE, AND ARE BEING PROPITIATED BY BOTH THE BJP AND MAMATA BANERJEE'S TMC. BUT WILL THE BENGALI HINDUS VOTE EN BLOC?

By Romita Datta

The strains of a shehnai in the background, the aroma of *dhuno* incense filling the air, the chants of *Chandi Paath* (shlokas dedicated to goddess Durga) and the beats of the *dhaak*. Durga Puja at the Eastern Zonal Cultural Centre in Kolkata's Salt Lake—the West Bengal BJP's first ever—was a quintessential Bengali affair, marked by the presence of party leaders keen to look at home. If the male ushers—among them national leaders like Kailash Vijayvargiya and RSS pracharaks like Arvind Menon and Shiv Prakash loaned to the BJP—wore *dhuti-panjabi*, the women leaders, such as Lockett Chatterjee and Agnimitra Paul, wore the traditional *laal paar* (red-bordered) saris.

The festivities were opened by Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself, albeit virtually. Wearing tussar silk, sourced from Bengal, he peppered his address with references to Bengal's history, traditions, icons and proverbs. He had done his home work and paid tribute to the intellectual and cultural prowess of Bengalis, to the leading lights of the Bengal Renaissance and their contribution to nation-building. Modi sought to be excused for his Bengali pronunciation, but added that he found the “sweetness of the language” irresistible.

The political underpinning of this Bengal(i) lovefest is not lost on anyone with even a nodding acquaintance with the BJP's gameplan for Bengal. The party wants to consolidate the 55 million Bengali Hindu vote in the state, and is trying its damndest to ingratiate itself with the section of the electorate that sees the BJP as a ‘Hindi heartland party’ with no real feeling for, or appreciation of, the state's culture and ethos. This mistrust suits the embattled incumbent Mamata Banerjee, and her party's poll campaign for 2021 makes much of Bengali regionalist pride, the openly parochial appeal reflecting in slogans like ‘Bengal for Bengalis’.

The ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC) has been trying to stir up regional sentiment by telling the people of Bengal that the BJP-led Modi government is discriminatory, has not cleared Rs 50,000 crore worth of central dues to the state, and has been unfairly upbraiding the Mamata government over the handling of Covid, Amphan relief and law and order. The BJP counter-claims that Mamata is depriving her people the benefits of central schemes, such as the PM Kisan Samman Nidhi dole and insurance under Ayushman Bharat.

In the culture wars, the BJP also has the services of its ideological parent, the RSS, which is hosting seminars and events celebrating Bengal's icons and its glorious past, while also simultaneously engaging people on Hindu nationalism and *sanatan* Hindu dharma. “The messaging is that

Bengalis need not feel threatened by the BJP's promotion of ‘Bharatiya’ culture. Rather, they should feel proud that *Vande Mataram*, composed by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, and ‘Bharat Mata’, as depicted by artist Abanindranath Tagore in one of his works, are at the core of the BJP's ideology,” said a senior RSS leader, requesting anonymity.

Political scientist and former Presidency University principal Amal K. Mukhopadhyay was scathing of both campaigns. “Both the TMC and BJP are indulging in a politics that reinforces narrow identities. Anyone living in Bengal is a Bengali, irrespective of mother tongue,” he says.

Politics of polarisation and provincialism

The BJP's meteoric rise in Bengal has coincided with intense communal polarisation in the state. In 2017, surveys commissioned by the party—then led by Amit Shah—sensed discontent brewing among Bengali Hindus over the Mamata government's alleged appeasement of Muslims. If the BJP was looking for an opportunity to milk it, Mamata offered it on a platter when, the same year, her government postponed the immersion of idols after Durga Puja by a day to prevent it from coinciding with Muharram.

The directive invited flak from the Calcutta High Court and had Shah declaring: “Now, the people of Bengal have to move court [to get permission] for immersion of idols after Durga Puja.”

For some, the BJP is only making political capital of a deep-running communal fault line in Bengal. As Sumit Chakrabarti, professor of English at Kolkata's Presidency University, says: “An undercurrent of communal sentiment has run in middle-class Hindu

households for decades. It is evident in, say, how people feel uncomfortable about letting out homes to Muslims or having them as neighbours.” On the TMC government's alleged appeasement policy, he says: “Why only Hindus, even educated upper class Muslims feel embarrassed about the preferential treatment given to their community, such as the blocking of roads for namaz.”

Some observers link the rise of communal politics in Bengal to the end of over three decades of communist rule in 2011. That the BJP's vote share in the Lok Sabha election jumped from 17 per cent in 2014 to 40 per cent in 2019—just 3 percentage points less than the TMC's—indicates a Hindu consolidation in favour of the party, they say. A post-Lok Sabha election survey by Lokniti and CSDS (Centre for the Study of Developing Societies) last year shows that 57 per cent of the BJP's votes came from Hindus and only 4 per cent from Muslims. For the TMC, Muslims accounted for 70 per cent of the votes and Hindus 32 per cent.

Union home minister Amit Shah targeted the Mamata government during his November 6 visit to Dakshineswar temple in North 24 Parganas district, saying that “politics

THE COMMUNAL POLARISATION IN WEST BENGAL IS DUE BOTH TO THE METEORIC RISE OF THE BJP AND THE DOWNFALL OF THE LEFT

of appeasement” had hurt West Bengal’s image as a centre of spiritual awakening in the country. Bengal officials already see tell-tale signs of the BJP sharpening its polarisation campaign for the assembly poll. “What, after all, made the Union home ministry send the Bengal government an advisory singling out Muslim-dominated areas of Kolkata for so-called violation of lockdown norms and saying that the administration was being lax about it?” asks a senior state bureaucrat.

Mamata’s decision to permit community Durga Pujas despite the risk of a surge in Covid infections is considered a calculated move to prevent any Bengali Hindu backlash. When rumours surfaced on social media about proposed restrictions during the puja, she promptly announced that puja pandals would open to public three days in advance. Her other moves to gain traction among Hindus include the doubling of annual doles for community Durga Pujas to Rs 50,000, a monthly honorarium of Rs 1,000 for 8,000 Hindu priests, renovation of pilgrimage spots and refurbishing of temples.

The Bengali regionalist stance has been Mamata’s other strategy against the BJP’s polarisation. On her way to North 24 Parganas in May 2019, it saw her confront the men who were raising ‘Jai Shri Ram’ slogans en route just to needle her. She even had them booked. This July, Derek O’Brien, the TMC’s leader in the Rajya Sabha, launched *Shoja Banglaye Bolchi* (Plain-speak in Bengali), a video series to highlight the state government’s achievements and to counter BJP propaganda. TMC strategists later warned Mamata about the risk of alienating Bengal’s 15 million non-Bengali Hindu population. And so, her announcement on Hindi Diwas (September 14) that the TMC’s Hindi cell would be restructured and Bengal would get a revamped Hindi academy.

Which way will the Hindu vote swing?

Hindus add up to about 70 million in Bengal’s 100 million population, of which around 55 million are Bengalis. Bengali Hindus cannot be treated as a monolithic entity in elections as class, caste and geographical differences determine political affiliations. “Bengali Hindus have never been a homogeneous group. But the past decade has seen politics and religion cross paths, transcending caste and class barriers. Worse still, identity politics is on the rise among caste groups, their ambitions stoked by political outfits,” says Chakrabarti.

In the last Lok Sabha poll, the Other Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes of Purulia, West Midnapore, Jhargram, Bankura and Birbhum backed the BJP, which won five of the eight seats in these districts.

In their heyday, the Left parties attracted a heterogeneous group of supporters. The late Jyoti Basu, who led the Left government in Bengal for 23 years, was popular among upper-caste, conservative Bengalis, while leftist farmer lead-

ers, such as Hare Krishna Konar and Benoy Chowdhury, had influence in rural Bengal. The working class, consisting of SC/ STs, adivasis and minorities, supported the Left because of its strong social foundations and grassroots presence among these groups. Bengal’s electorate, cutting across class and caste, kept the Left in power for 34 years.

That social fabric in Bengal is certainly frayed, but even so, and despite the political machinations of the BJP, Bengali Hindus are not likely to vote on communal lines. Educationist Sugata Hazra says, “Unlike a political construct like Hindutva, Hinduism in Bengal has been inclusive, enriched by spiritual leaders like Sri Chaitanya, Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Swami Vivekananda. Bengalis are largely expected to base their voting on political and economic concerns.”

Maidul Islam, assistant professor of political science at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, says Mamata may counter the BJP’s polarisation with narratives woven around class, caste and language. “The more the BJP attempts religion-based mobilisation, the more Mamata will play up-

per castes against lower castes. The Hathras (gang-rape) case may play out big in the Dalit pockets of West Midnapore, Purulia and Bankura,” says Islam. “Mamata’s spectacular rise from a lower middle class family was always sniggered at by the elite, upper-caste Bengali Hindus, who were traditionally Congress or Left supporters.”

Islam feels it is too early to predict which way Bengali Hindus will swing in this election. “The Congress-Left, a secular alternative, could be a key player. They have stepped up attacks on the TMC to prevent the BJP from cornering the anti-incumbency vote.”

Mohit Ray, head of the BJP’s refugee cell in Bengal, accuses the Left of propagating a distorted version of history to dissuade people from talking about religion. “Bengali icons like Syama Prasad Mookerjee, Jadunath Sarkar and Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay favoured a separate state of West Bengal because they wanted a homeland for Hindus,” he claims. Ray is confident of a Hindu consolidation in the election. “Bengal’s Hindu population has slumped from 80 per cent in 1951 to about 69 per cent in 2020, whereas the Muslim population has shot up from 19 per cent to almost 30 per cent. While 20 million Hindu refugees migrated to Bengal to escape religious persecution [in their native countries], the state has witnessed the influx of 15 million [illegal] Muslims. Aren’t these enough reasons for Hindus to unite and vote?”

It would certainly help the BJP’s cause if they did, but even after their best efforts to polarise the state electorate, the Bengali Hindu is unlikely to vote en bloc. Not only is the intellectual, cultural and class history of the state a counterpoising weight to that possibility, Mamata Banerjee will know that such a consolidation will work against her interests, and she’ll do everything at her command to head it off. ■

MAMATA’S NOD FOR DURGA PUJA, DESPITE THE COVID PANDEMIC, IS BEING SEEN AS A MOVE TO AVOID A BENGALI HINDU BACKLASH

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A NEW ERA IN EDUCATION

Experts and entrepreneurs came together for the India Today Education Summit to discuss NEP 2020 and the role of technology in institutional learning

The new National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 promises to be a game changer. The policy, approved by the Union cabinet in July, replaces the National Policy on Education 1986. The sector has been waiting for some big reforms for the past three decades and will now undertake sweeping changes as laid down by the new policy—access, equality, affordability, quality and accountability will be the core focus areas. From a multidisciplinary approach to doing away with rote learning, from experiential learning to foundational literacy, and from vocational education, along with technical know-how, to learning in one's mother tongue, NEP 2020 aims to transform the education space from pre-school to secondary levels and higher. On November 8, during the first-ever virtually held edition of the India Today Education Summit, educationists and academicians came together to take a closer look at NEP 2020 and debate on its impact on the Indian education system. The keynote address at the summit was delivered by Union cabinet minister for education Dr Ramesh Pokhriyal Nishank.

Also discussed at the summit was the introduction and role of technology in the education sector and its impact on the student-teacher relationship. Most speakers spoke in favour of the NEP's focus on foundational learning.

—Shelly Anand

To watch the full programme, visit
[Bit.ly/32CEnNg](https://bit.ly/32CEnNg)



HOW NEP 2020 WILL CHANGE THE INDIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

DR RAMESH POKHRIYAL NISHANK

Union Minister for Education



“**School kids will be evaluated with a 360-degree approach. It will include self, teacher and peer evaluations. They won't be given report cards, but progress cards to check their real development**”

“**At the higher education level, students will be able to combine subjects of choice across streams—such as science with literature. They will have flexibility in entry and exit from programmes**”

THE MAKING OF NEP 2020

DR K. KASTURIRANGAN

Eminent scientist and Chairman of the Committee for Draft National Education Policy



“There will be no distinction between curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular subjects, arts and science, and academic and vocational. All children will take vocational studies”

“How to bring face-to-face learning into online education needs to be looked into. Distance learning needs to be elevated to the same stature as that of education in a regular class”

THE ROADMAP FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF NEP 2020

AMIT KHARE

Secretary, Department of Higher Education and Department of School Education and Literacy



“In school education, we will have a focused intervention in early childhood education. The silos we have built—arts, commerce and science—will slowly wither away”

“Lot of things require reforms and not just funding, such as reforms in the regulatory structures which do not cost the state anything, but make things easier for institutions”

NEW SLATE FOR SCHOOL: THE NECESSITY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF THE NEW 5+3+3+4 MODEL OF EDUCATION



DR RUKMINI BANERJI

CEO, Pratham Education Foundation

“If we don't build the foundation—the first five years of a child's education in the age group of 3 to 8 well, then the rest of the policy is almost irrelevant”



REKHA KRISHNAN

Principal, Vasant Valley School

“To implement the policy, we need champions and we will find them in pre-school teachers and anganwadi workers”



ATUL KOTHARI

Secretary, Shiksha Sanskriti Utthan Nyas

“Parents and children must be made aware of the policy and its changes. They have to be involved, or implementation of the policy won't be possible”



DIGITAL DRILL: TECHNOLOGY VS TEACHERS, WILL LEARNING MOVE TO THE VIRTUAL WORLD?



MANIT JAIN

Chairman, FICCI ARISE,
Co-founder and Director,
Heritage Group of Schools

“Every teacher who can be replaced by technology will be replaced by technology. If you are a teacher who walks into a class, starts lecturing and doesn't stop to take questions or encourage discussion, then you'll perhaps be replaced”



PAVAN ALLENA

Founder
and CEO,
Metamorphosis Edu

“Technology can't be a mentor or replace our teachers. It acts more as a catalyst to develop certain tools and methodologies which help teachers engage students. A teacher is not just a content delivery person”



SAIJU ARAVIND

Founder and CEO,
EduBrisk Knowledge
Solutions

“Technology vs teachers is a crazy idea. Technology is a tool in the hands of a teacher or a parent or a student. It's like using a scalpel to do a surgery. It's like how doctors or engineers use finer and finer tools to perform their tasks”



PULKIT JAIN

Co-founder and Product
Head, Vedantu

“Technology can play a role in creating the right environment for the best to become teachers. There is a need to help them fine-tune their teaching and content. Technology is evolving the entire process of teaching”

COLLEGE CALLING: CAN INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION BE WORLD-CLASS?



PROF. DINESH SINGH

Former Vice-
chancellor,
University of Delhi

“One of the best features of the policy is the focus on undergraduate level of education. All international institutes emphasise on this level as most learning happens at this time”



PROF. M. JAGADESH KUMAR

Vice-chancellor,
Jawaharlal Nehru
University

“We need to expand the exposure we provide to our students so that they can connect their work and research to the needs of society. The NEP aims to do that”



PROF. V. RAMGOPAL RAO

Director, Indian
Institute of
Technology, Delhi

“I am a strong advocate of bringing unlike minds together. Our institutions have become very homogenous and we need to bring different institutes and disciplines together”

NORA FATEHI HAS
THE MOVES
PG 55

LEISURE

BOLD AND
BRASSY
PG 56

MEMOIRS OF AN
EARLY FEMINIST
PG 57

Q&A WITH
MANOJ BAJPAYEE
PG 58

Through her films,
DEEPA MEHTA
has repeatedly
touched upon
issues faced by
minority
communities

FILM

SUCH A LONG JOURNEY

Not afraid of being political, **Deepa Mehta** in her latest film,
Funny Boy, explores a Tamil-Sinhalese gay love story



VIDUR BHARATRAM

HEARTS IN CONFLICT
 Brandon Ingram (left) with
 Rehan Mudannayake in a still
 from *Funny Boy*

Deepa Mehta's latest film *Funny Boy* is a coming-of-age story of a minority Tamil Christian boy growing up in a Buddhist, Sinhalese-majority Sri Lanka. Set in the 1970s-80s, it explores a Tamil-Sinhalese gay love story at the onset of the 26-year civil war that left about one million Tamils as refugees. A sumptuous period film that is deeply felt, moving and funny, it is Mehta's finest film yet. The book is an adaptation of Shyam Selvadurai's 1994 best-selling book, *Funny Boy*.

Even before its release, *Funny Boy* has been garnering laurels: it has been selected as Canada's entry for the Academy Awards for Best International Feature Film (Amritsar-born Mehta is based in Toronto). Additionally, it is being released by the high profile Ava DuVernay's Array, a distribution collective for films by people of colour and women. Following *Funny Boy's* theatrical release in Canada on November 20, Netflix will release the film in the UK and US on December 3 and 10. The film's Indian premiere will be in New Delhi on December 10 at the Engendered I-View-World 2020 Human Rights Film Festival (its India distribution dates were yet to be finalised at the time of writing).

"All my films are quite political," Mehta told *Variety*. "This was a good fit for me, because it's not just a coming-of-age film. It also deals with an oppression of minorities. Who is the victim? Who is the perpetrator? Where is humanity?... It's too easy to make somebody bad, or somebody good. Life is far more complicated than that." In the pristine-beach poster-like Sri Lanka of 1974, we are introduced to the upper crust Tamil family of Chelva (Chelvaratnam), who runs a resort. He is embarrassed by his 'funny boy' son Arjie (Arjun, played by Sri Lankan actor Brandon Ingram), who prefers playing 'bride-bride' with the girls, than cricket with the boys. Arjie's mother Nalini defends him, but his biggest ally is his America-returned Radha Aunty, who encourages him to be himself. As a teenager, Arjie falls in love with a Sinhalese boy, Shehan Soyza (Rehan Mudannayake). But as the

LEISURE

Sinhalese-Tamil conflict explodes into a civil war, Arjie's family is devastated by it.

The direction is absolutely assured, with magnificent craftsmanship. Even as Mehta spins a love story, the film addresses ethnic, religious and class issues. There are masterly scenes in which she plays with time, including a scene in which Radha is forcibly married to a Canadian-Sri Lankan: the kid Arjie weeps in the church pews, but in the next scene, an older, guilty Arjie is unable to meet the bride's eyes.

Ingram plays Arjie with an easy confidence in his debut feature. Accomplished British-Sri Lankan actress Nimmi Harasgama (also seen in *August Sun* and the short *I Too Have a Name*) stands out as the bold, married Nalini, who falls for Jegan, a Tamil Tiger activist. Seema Biswas, as the grandmother, is a delight. The rest of the cast, including Ali Kazmi, Agam Darshi, Rehan Mudannayake and Shivantha Wijesinha, are good too. The screenplay, by Selvadurai and Mehta, is intimate, yet universal, and peppered with humour. Cinematographer Douglas Koch imbues the gorgeously-lit frames with nostalgia and empathy. The film is well edited by Teresa Font. Oscar-winning Howard Shore (*Lord of the Rings*) composes beautiful music. The film is produced by David Hamilton and Hussain Amarshi.

Mehta has directed about 24 films and series. It remains to be seen how Indian audiences receive the film: while empathetic to the plight of the minority Tamils in Sri Lanka, it is also empathetic to a gay teenager, so hopefully as audiences, we have grown up a bit since her 'elements trilogy,' *Fire*, *Earth* and *Water*. *Fire* (1996) was among the earliest Indian features to openly address a lesbian relationship; *Earth* (1998) was a love story set during the Partition; and *Water* (2005) was on the plight of a Hindu child widow in Varanasi. Her *Midnight's Children* (2012), adapted from Salman Rushdie's novel, was on the destiny of two children born at midnight, when India was born. Her *Anatomy of Violence* (2016) was based on the infamous Delhi gang-rape of 2012. She also directed two episodes of *Leila*, a Netflix Original series, on a mother's search for her daughter, set in a dystopian future.

Mehta is no stranger to Sri Lanka. Hindu fundamentalists had burnt some of the theatres screening *Fire* in India; and after they also vandalised the sets of *Water* in Varanasi, she secretly shot the film in Sri Lanka instead.

Water won an Oscar nomination. Later, she secretly shot *Midnight's Children* in Sri Lanka, fearing trouble from Islamic fundamentalists. Life seems to have come full circle, after she returned to shoot in Sri Lanka again for *Funny Boy*. Such a long journey for Deepa Mehta, whose father was a film distributor and theatre owner in Amritsar. And such a fulfilling one. ■

—Meenakshi Shedde

Mehta had secretly shot her *Water* in Sri Lanka, a place she returned to for *Funny Boy*



She's Got the Moves

VIRAL VIDEOS

Norah Fatehi aims to be more than a dancer in Bollywood

Over 400 million and counting—that is the cumulative view count for 'Garmi' (*Street Dancer 3D*) and the recently released single 'Naach Meri Rani', two 2020 tracks featuring the Canada-born Moroccan dancer-actress Nora Fatehi. It's not quite her personal best—'Dilbar' (2018) at 907 million views—but is double that of 'O Saki Saki' (2019) with 294 million views. A significant reason for their popularity lies in Fatehi's indisputable terpsichorean talent. A self-taught dancer, Fatehi, as an adolescent, relied on YouTube videos to hone her skills. The same platform has now made her a sensation. "It's a divine force that pushes me to learn and prove myself," says Fatehi of her ability to pick up dance styles—Afro, dance-hall, street, hip-hop, belly dancing and Bollywood.

It's why Fatehi now also has a say in the selection of choreographers. Her brief to them is simple: "make it hard". "I want to push the boundaries in terms of moves," she says. "I know if I do difficult things I will make an impact." Fatehi prefers to collaborate with choreographers rather than be a passive participant. "I don't want to be a temporary [in Bollywood]," she says. Dance, she adds, is not the be-all and end-all of her artistic journey, it is a tool "to open doors". After her initial struggle, it is finally working.

Fatehi's love for Hindi films began in Morocco where she would visit her

grandmother and watch Hindi films with Arabic subtitles. Her parents, though, didn't support her affinity for the performing arts. However, it didn't deter Fatehi who came to Mumbai in the early 2010s with no knowledge of the workings of the Hindi film industry or even the language. After a forgettable debut in *Roar: Tigers of the Sundarbans* (2014), she turned to TV shows—*Bigg Boss* and *Jhalak Dikhla Jaa*—to make an impression. "I couldn't sit at home and be picky or wait for that big launch by a big production house as a main lead. I knew it wasn't going to happen," she

says. The *Jhalak* stint got her two music videos, one of them directed by choreographer-filmmaker Remo D'Souza. The game changer though was *Dilbar*, which she would also sing and produce as a single in Arabic. More songs have followed, along with small parts in *Bharat*, *Batla House* and *Street Dancer 3D* and, recently, a month-long stint as judge on *India's Best Dancer*.

On top of Fatehi's 2021 to-do list is to not let herself be pigeonholed as a dance specialist in a film industry prone to assigning labels. Yesteryear actress Helen's journey is an inspiration but Fatehi wants to carve her own space. "I am already a hustler who has fought and worked towards getting the things I wanted," she says. "I believe I am the one. That kind of energy can take you really far." ■

—Suhani Singh

NORAH FATEHI prefers to collaborate with choreographers, rather than be a passive participant

TEJAS NERURKAR



FANCY FOOTWORK

1. DILBAR

(*Satyameva Jayate*, 2018)

Five years after she came to Mumbai, Fatehi got her breakthrough with this Adil Shaikh-choreographed belly dancing number

2. O SAKI SAKI

(*Batla House*, 2019)

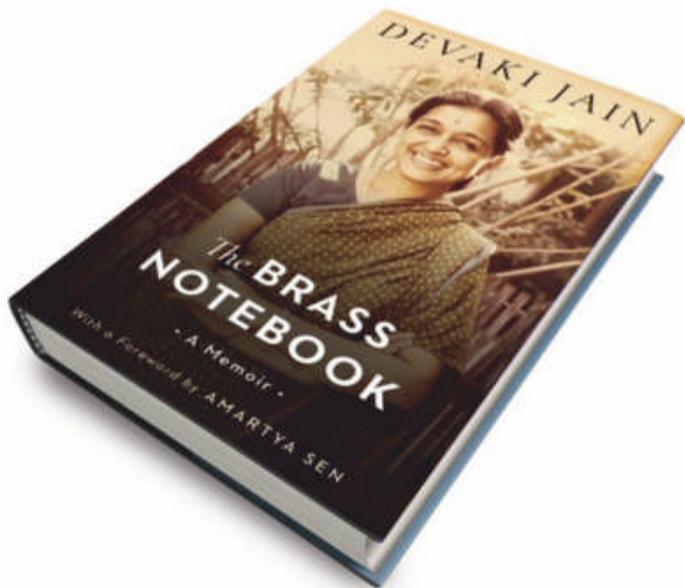
Fatehi's flexibility is on full display in this track, a portion of which required her to dance with a fire fan. She learnt it in two days

3. GARMİ

(*Street Dancer 3D*, 2020)

Fatehi was a standout in the film with this frenetic dance number which capitalised on the sexiness and swagger of twerking





THE BRASS NOTEBOOK
A Memoir
by Devaki Jain
SPEAKING TIGER
₹599; 220 pages

BOOKS

BOLD AND BRASSY

DEVAKI JAIN IS VIGILANT ABOUT SHOWING HOW FREEDOM IS FOUGHT FOR CONSTANTLY BUT IS ALSO CONTINGENT ON PRIVILEGE

In her landmark 1962 novel, *The Golden Notebook*, Doris Lessing explored what it meant to be a ‘free woman’, while acknowledging the irony built in to the phrase. ‘Free women’, says the protagonist ‘wryly’ and with anger—‘They still define us in terms of relationships with men, even the best of them.’

Economist and activist Devaki Jain acknowledges both the inspiration and the irony in her recent memoir, *The Brass Notebook*. In a meeting with Lessing in 1958, the writer instructed her to ‘write your story now’. Decades later, Jain, now 87, chose brass as “the receptacle for my story”, “a hardier, homelier metal than gold. It represents not perfection or unity, but an honourable imperfection consistent with my own limits”.

As Jain describes her childhood in a well-off but sheltered Tamil-Brahmin household, her leap into the world of Oxford and eventually into newly independent India’s emerging intellectual class, she is vigilant about showing how freedom is fought for constantly, as a way of being despite the constraints of society, and also contingent on luck, opportunity and the social structures of privilege. Jain’s father’s connections, letters of introduction sent round the world, opportunities seized by being at the right place and time—these all point to a world with roomier prospects for advancement while taking nothing away from the exhilaration of reading about Jain’s year at Ruskin College, a working women and men’s institution at Oxford, or demeaning her pluck and hunger for adventure.

That Jain fought for every inch of her circumscribed independence is made clearer in the second half of the book, which fleshes out her sexual and intellectual history, only alluded to in the less analytical biography that comprises the book’s first half. These latter chapters show—through Jain’s experiences with sexual assault, or her work with poor women—how much work remains to be done to reveal the unwritten codes of oppression.

The division of the book isn’t formal, and the two strands could just as well have been integrated. The second portion, with Jain’s reflections on ‘touch’, ‘the academy’ and social hierarchies, provides ballast and context for the breezier first half. Of particular interest is Jain’s work in the international development sphere and with feminist economists—as a woman from the global south, her critical perspectives on institutions and methodologies inherited from former colonisers are invaluable.

The protagonist of *The Golden Notebook* wonders ‘if we lead what is known as free lives, that is, lives like men, why shouldn’t we use the same language?’ Jain subtly seems to argue that it is imperative to forge new ways of speaking and acting. She writes, ‘I am almost convinced that freedom, or emancipation from bonds, comes from fighting for freedom, which in itself is the affirmation of freedom.’ Jain’s title harkens back to the large utensils ubiquitous in the middle-class, south Indian homes of her childhood, but her memoirs also imbue the typically negative connotation of a woman’s brassiness with new brilliance. ■

Jain’s book shows how much work remains to be done to reveal the unwritten codes of oppression



—Sonal Shah

Memoirs of an Early Feminist

BOOKS

Translated into English by her granddaughter, **Saeeda Bano's** memoir retains the flavour of its Urdu original



A *b aap Saeeda Bano se khabrein suniye...* (And now listen to the news read by Saeeda Bano).’ And a nation waited in breathless anticipation for the bulletin that followed. The first woman to read the news on All India Radio (AIR), Saeeda Bano was to an earlier generation of radio listeners what Pratima Puri and Salma Sultan would be for decades of television viewers.

Her Urdu memoir, *Dagar se Hatt Ke*, published in its English translation as *Off the Beaten Track: The Story of My Unconventional Life*, is important not merely because it records a life less ordinary lived during the nation’s most turbulent years when the narrator had the occasion to meet several very interesting people from diverse fields of life, but also as a documentation of a woman’s life and struggles to break free from the conventions of birth, class and privilege to chart her own destiny exactly how she pleased. An early feminist, possibly an instinctive one, Saeeda Bano understood the importance of freedom of choice and exercised it knowing full well the cost she would pay. And all along there is an immense self-awareness about her strengths and weaknesses: ‘There is no arrogance in what I am writing. I have carried the heavy burden of my life on the strength of my voice. I have a fiery temper but I know when to control it. I’m a bit too

frank, but I am not in the habit of saying bitter things, criticising or even hurting anyone deliberately.’

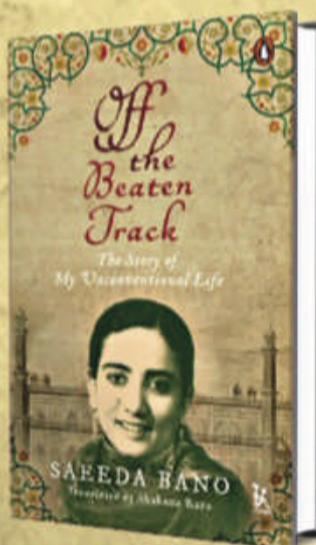
In walking out of an unhappy marriage (interestingly, unhappy on grounds of plain and simple incompatibility uncompounded by the usual reasons of abuse or infidelity), she chose to leave behind the trappings of luxury in her marital home in Lucknow. Landing in Delhi in August 1947, when the country and its capital were in the midst of a blood-thirsty partition, she began life anew on her own terms, earning her living, raising her two sons, meeting the man with whom she embarked on a romantic relationship that lasted till his death 25 years later. Her account of telling her grown son of the man in her life is inspirational: “*Bete*, I do

not want you to hear rumours about me from here and there. Nuruddin is a very special part of my life. If you accept this, please stay with me, otherwise you can stay in the boarding at St Stephen’s College.”

And remarkably enough, the son chose to stay with his mother in her house.

Generously studded with jewel-bright Urdu and Farsi verses, ably translated by the author’s granddaughter Shahana Raza, the narrative retains the flavour of its Urdu original. It reminds us of a time when even those with little formal education had a wide frame of literary references and a world view that was eclectic and liberal. ■

—Rakhshanda Jalil



OFF THE BEATEN TRACK
The Story of My
Unconventional Life
By Saeeda Bano;
translated by Shahana Raza
ZUBAAN & PENGUIN
₹499; 268 pages

SAEEDA BANO
understood the
importance of
freedom of choice and
exercised it knowing
full well the cost
she would pay

Q. You enjoy a reputation as an intense actor. *Suraj Pe Mangal Bhari* is a comedy, a genre you are not associated with much.

I enjoy watching slapstick films but doing silly things to make people laugh doesn't come naturally to me. This film is different from others in that we are not playing to the gallery. The director just wanted me to be in character, which is what I do with my other roles.

Q. They say the toughest job for an actor is to make the audience laugh. Do you concur?

From Charlie Chaplin to Jim Carrey and Adam Sandler, I have complete admiration and respect for them. You need a genius mind, skill and hard work to perform the way they do. The film has given me the chance to be part of a comedy where my preparation is as intense as any other drama I do.

Q+A

A MAN AND HIS ART

Manoj Bajpayee on his approach to acting in a comedy film and on giving his voice to the tragedy of labourers during the nationwide lockdown

Q. You hope that with *Suraj Pe Mangal Bhari*, which is getting a theatrical release, audiences have some fun after an extended grim period. What kept you going in the past six months?

When you have a family, you are distracted from the outside world. If you have a little one, you're all the more busy. My daughter is quite a handful. This period has given our family a chance to spend time to understand each other more deeply.

Q. You recently tried your hand at Bhojpuri rap.

Anubhav Sinha sent me a song seeking my opinion on it. Suddenly he wanted me to be a part of it. I am not a singer at all but I wanted to give voice to the tragedy of labourers during the nationwide lockdown. It was my way of being part of a worthwhile cause.

—with Suhani Singh

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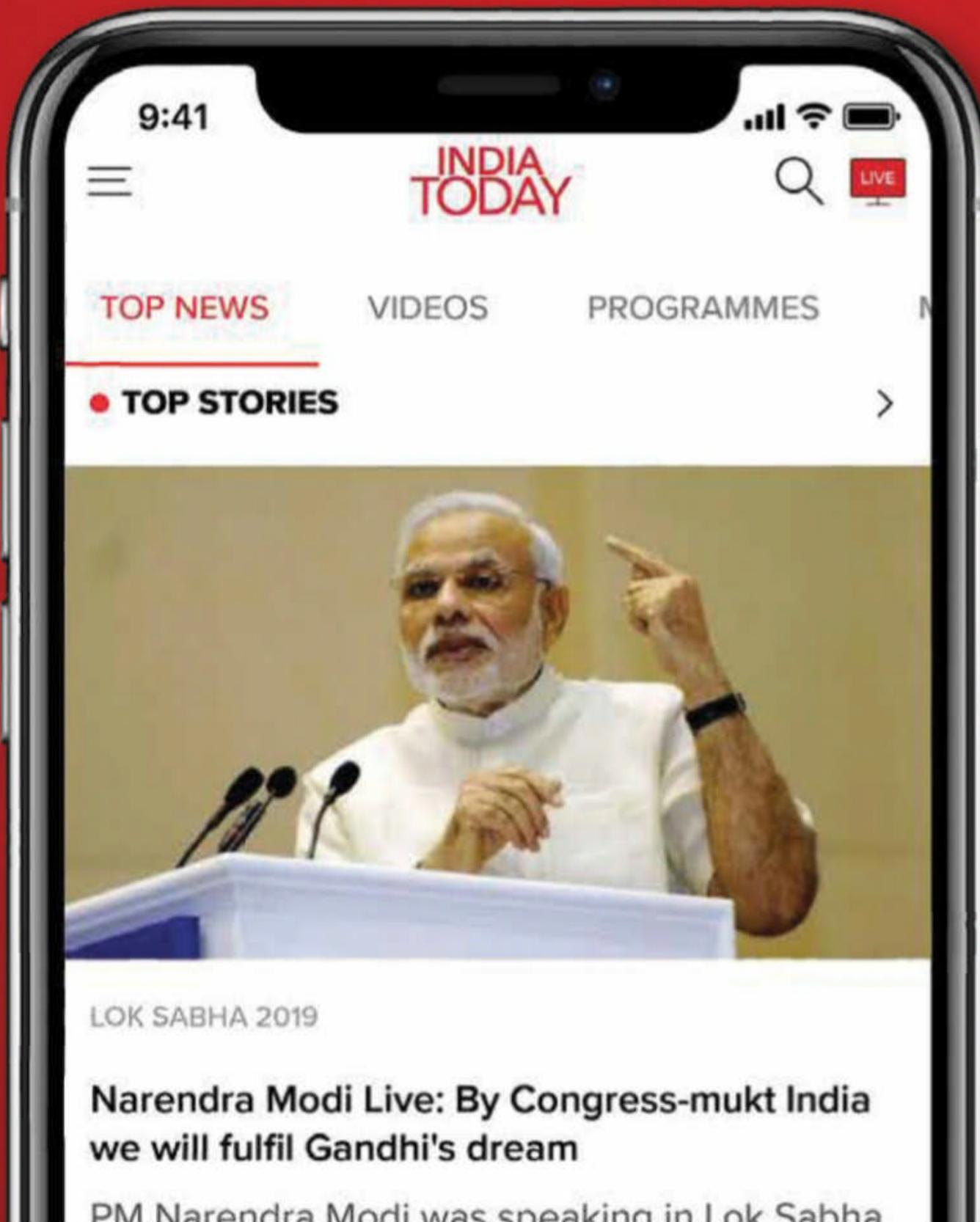
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<https://xlridelhi.ac.in/>

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NOVEMBER 2020

HOME

CELEBRATIONS COME HOME

From gifting to table decor, your guide to good design this festive season

IN CONVERSATION

WITH INTERIOR
DESIGNER VINITA
CHAITANYA

PLAN AHEAD

KALYANI SAHA
CHAWLA SHARES
DIWALI PARTY
ESSENTIALS

Studio Beyond
Designs styles
a lavish feast





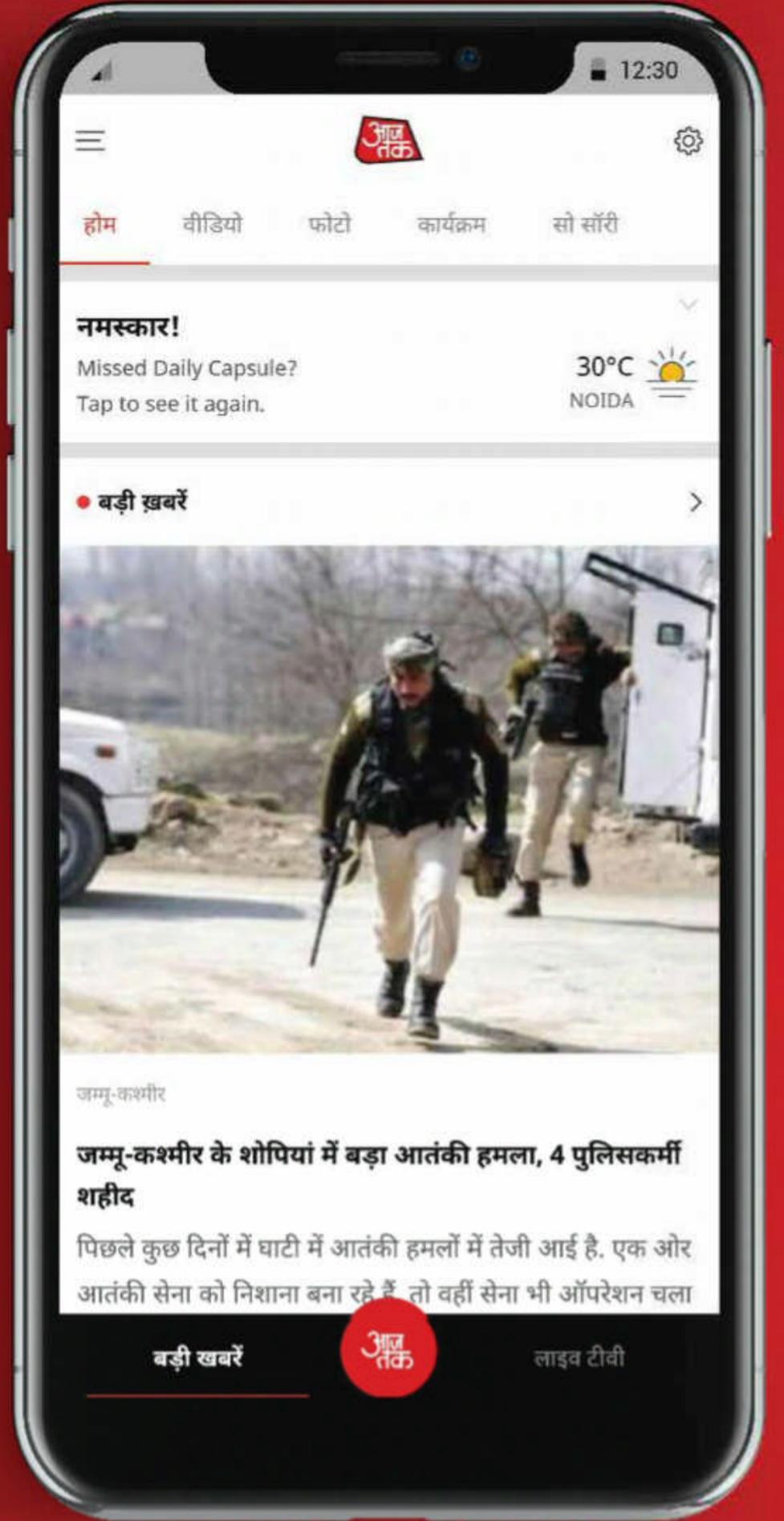
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कहीं भी, कभी भी

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ajtak.in/app

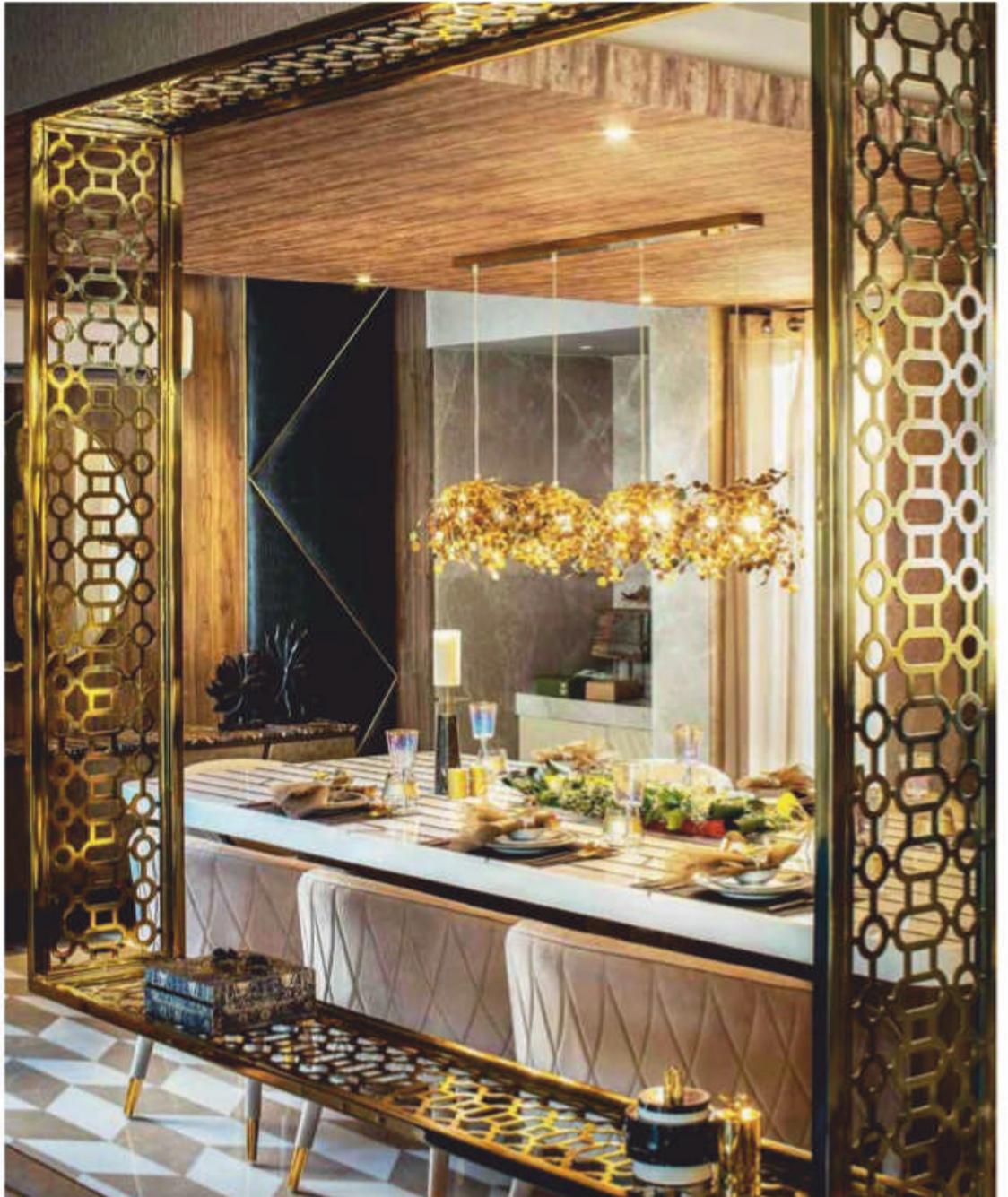
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Inside fashion designer Abhinav Mishra's home ready for the festivities

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iSpy

Your guide to the
hottest new stores
and products

By **RIDHI KALE**



LIGHT UP

Add a bit of shine to your interiors with the Shimmer Tea Light Holder. The piece is part of Swarovski's capsule collection for home, for the festive season.

PRICE ₹3,190
AT www.swarovski.com



LEVEL UP

Titled Tai Chi, this asymmetrical vertical display table inspired by Yin and Yang is by Ahmedabad-based multi-disciplinary studio, KEPH. Standing tall at 5 feet, it is made of solidified resin with teak wood pillars.

PRICE ₹35,000
AT www.kephdesign.com



IN YOUR PRAYERS

Take your celebrations up a notch with this pooja thali from Arttd'inox. Called Padma Shvet, it comes as a full set.

PRICE ₹3,564
AT www.arttdinox.com

news Launches



GLEAM OF GOLD

Home4U is a new e-commerce website that is all about affordable luxury. It is founded by Ritika and Nitin Jain, who are passionate about decor, design and textiles. Featured here is the brass Ganga Martaban.

PRICE ₹2,100 (large)
AT www.home4u.in

NEW STORE

Furniture and interior designer, Neeta Kumar has launched Inhabit in Delhi's MG Road. Spread over 7,000 sq ft the furniture pieces are made of reclaimed teak wood and are a blend of classic silhouettes with modern sensibilities across styles and moods.

PRICE on request
AT www.neetakumar.com

BLOOM ROOM

Luxury furniture brand STROT has launched a vibrant furniture line for the festive season. Shown here is the Blossom Chair with stool inspired by floral beauties.

PRICE ₹67,500 (festive rates)
AT www.strot.in



news Launches



CHILD'S PLAY

Scandinavia inspired luxury wallpaper company, Dolce Bambino has introduced wallpapers for children's rooms. The wallpapers are fire-retardant, odourless, eco-friendly and PVC free.

PRICE ₹275 per sq ft
AT @dolcebambinoco (Instagram)

HAUTE SEAT

These upholstered poufs from LABxNeon Attic called Murano and Flying Parasols have bass legs. The brand works with local artisans to create the pieces.

PRICE on request
AT @studioneonattic (Instagram)



SMELLS GOOD

This launch is just in time for the festivities. Timeless, the new series of candles and diffusers in Lladro's Light & Scent collection are hand crafted with fine detailing. The porcelain candles have natural wax in them and the diffusers come in a glass bottle.

PRICE on request
AT www.lladro.com

TRENDY TEXTILES

Sarita Handa's Festive Collection 2020 comprises geometric shapes, floral prints and suzani. What stands out is the sustainable line of upcycled organisers, pouches and tissue box covers.

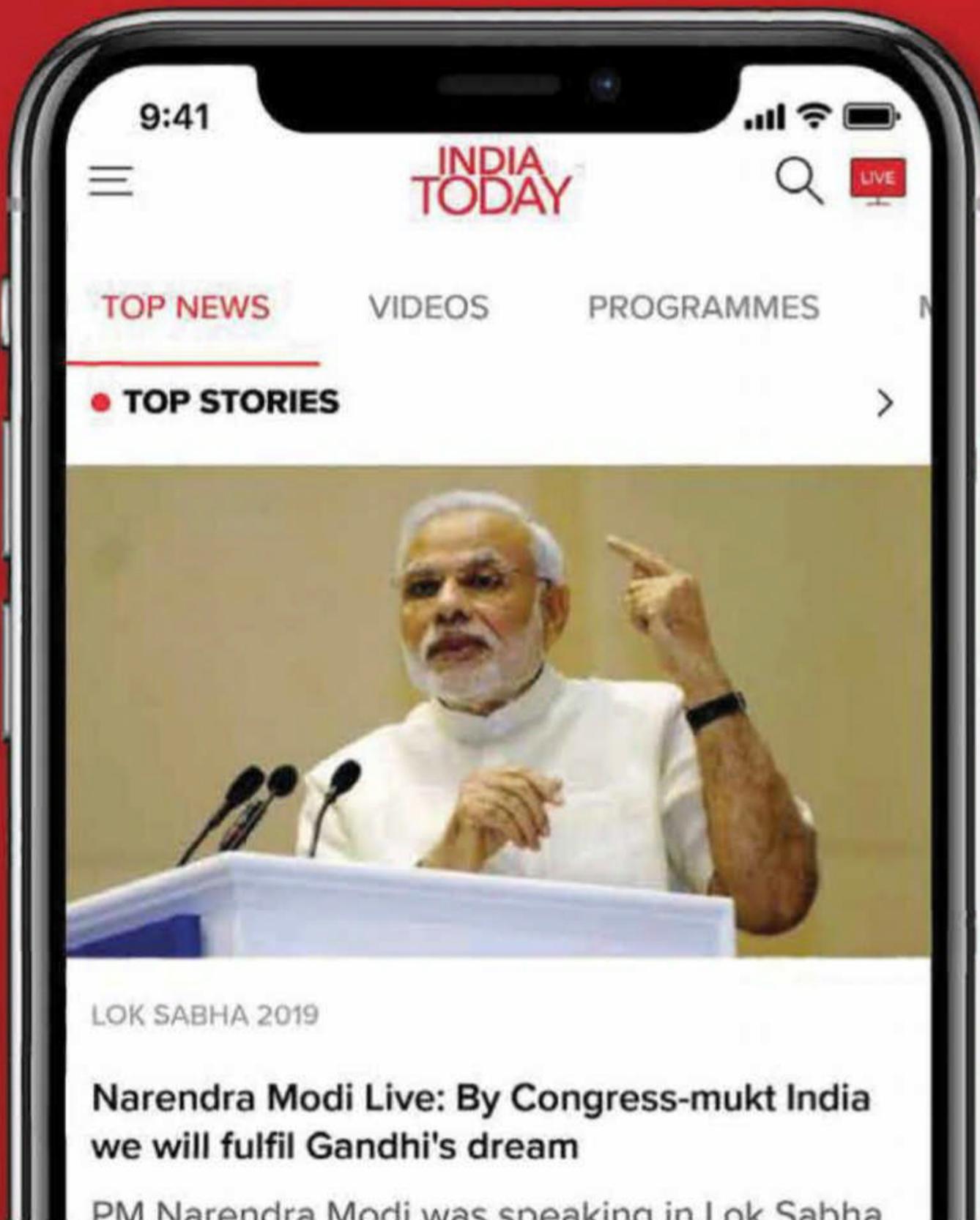
PRICE ₹2,100 onwards
AT www.saritahanda.com



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A FEAST FOR ALL YOUR SENSES

Flowers, glittering candles and rich textiles, fashion designer Abhinav Mishra's new home in Delhi is all set for the festivities

By **RIDHI KALE**

Photographs by **BANDEEP SINGH**

Smell. The first thing you notice even before you enter the front door, wafts of mogra mixed with tuberose, jasmine and rose. Sight. Gorgeous whites in varying tones, with hints of champagne gold and subtle yellows, spread across the festive landscape. Touch. Mirror work cushions, cool marble dining table, tufted sofas or the rough stone coffee table, textures fill up the space. Sound. The joyful whisper of leaves when a cool breeze brushes past the many potted beauties, the soft music playing in the background and the clamour of shoes that are doing last minute festal touches, echo the celebratory mood. Taste. Bright orange *motichur ladoos* placed delicately on tables, shiny *kaju katli* lined in neat rows, make mouths water as if on cue. We don't know if it was intentional but fashion designer Abhinav Mishra's festive-ready home in Chattarpur, Delhi is a delight for all the senses.

BIGGER IS BETTER

Mishra moved into this space, six months ago, as the lockdown left him craving for a bigger, more-open home. He has given the interiors his patent subtle yet sophisticated touch. Spread over two floors the ground floor is divided into several rooms that are all

SIT PRETTY

Abhinav Mishra in his informal living room on a custom made sofa with ikat upholstery



BRIGHT IDEAS

Mishra's living room is dressed with flowers and candles that go well with the horses with mirror work (below); a glimpse of Mishra's seating area in his bedroom (right)



cover story

Home

used for entertaining. While on the first floor are the bedrooms including his master suite, as well as his reading bay and the TV room. Connecting the spaces is an almost spiralling staircase dotted with plants. Interestingly, before Mishra plans the decor and design, he first places plants, big and small. The interiors are then designed around it. “My house is airy and infused with nature. You will spot little nooks and corners dotted with leafy plants and vases filled with delicate flowers. For me, the plants complete my home and add a sense of serenity and calm, a much needed element for me,” says Mishra. After the greens, the designer populated the space with vibrant art works, which are prints he bought online and then printed, as well as framed them.

THE LAYOUT

The main door opens into a foyer-like space that acts as a transitional area between the two living rooms and the dining. Comfortable custom made seaters in wood and cane are dressed with cushions, again custom made. “Whenever I travel I collect elements that catch my eye, these then come together piece by piece, to make up the space. You will find my walls adorned with artworks from parts of Rajasthan and intricately embroidered cushion covers and *dhurries* that complement my neutral-monochromatic furniture,” he says. But then nothing less is expected from Mishra who is the co-owner of Rani Pink, a wedding decor company. The consoles here are dressed in flowers and shimmering candles, which can also be seen in the dining room. The floral and festive story continues into the two living areas. But what distinguishes the spaces is that one is more formal, paying homage to mirror work (also seen in his clothing line) and the other has a casual-chic vibe. The formal space is a story of white-on-white being always right. From eggshell and ivory to cream and off-white, all shades of this hue can be found here. “This room is a safe space and a happy haven for me to host get-togethers with friends and family. Tone on tone cushions with mirrorwork aptly reflect my signature design aesthetic, while the horses are a childhood affiliation,” says the designer, adding, “I grew up with admiration for horses and their unbridled spirit, I always identified with horses and knew eventually they would come to be my brand mascot.”

SOFA, SO GOOD

An ikat, hue-heavy sofa forms the focal of the informal living room. This sofa was specially designed by Mishra to ensure everyone could enjoy the view of the courtyard in the front. The very long couch can easily accommodate eight people. A low coffee table, a few knick-knacks he collected from his travels dot this space. However, the view of the gleaming diyas placed on the earthen pots and the stone centre table outside steals the show.

PRIVATE PARADISE

As for Mishra’s bedroom, it accommodates everything he needs. A comfortable bed to sleep on, a separate nook for his desk while working and relaxed seating when he wants to unwind. He has purposely left a lot of open space and kept it clutter free. Bold furnishings create quite a visual treat.

Clearly, every element in Mishra’s home is an extension of his personality and aesthetics.





DECODING DIWALI DECOR



The fashionable Kalyani Saha Chawla walks us through her home in Delhi and shares her best kept festive secrets

By RIDHI KALE

cover story

Style

If there ever was a hostess with the mostest, Kalyani Saha Chawla's name would be on top of the list. For those not in the know, if there are any, Chawla is a serial entrepreneur with her fingers dipped in everything from luxury lifestyle and fashion to leather and now silverware. She is also a luxury consultant (formerly the vice president, marketing and communications, at Christian Dior, India) and an art aficionado. "My home turns into an open house for all my friends, who pour in after *pujas* at their homes," says Chawla. Twinkling lights, floral beauties, an impeccably set table, art and Bengali delicacies makes it a celebration to remember.

THE ESSENTIALS

Candle and flowers, two things that are always a part of Chawla's Diwali decor. She lines the staircase with sweet smelling candles, they are placed on tables, in corners—in short, just about everywhere. From the floral *rangolis* to pretty flower arrangements, like the candles, blooming beauties are spread across the home. "I make these moss balls and pack them away after the celebrations. In fact, I have three

GLITZ MEETS GLAM

(clockwise from below) Intricately detailed silverware from Rezon on the table; a Viya Home brass centre piece next to the staircase steals the show; the buffet-style table; Kalyani Saha Chawla getting her home ready for the festivities



Photographs by MANOJ KESHERWANI

different sizes on which I delicately place marigold flowers," says Chawla. Interestingly, she sticks to one shade, either orange or yellow and places them in every corner of the house. "Besides being auspicious, it gives a bright, happy and festive feeling," she says.

TABLE OF PLENTY

"Typically in Delhi people at Diwali parties tend to only drink, but at my house, everyone eats, it's all because of the homemade Bengali food I serve," says Chawla, who makes it a point to not have catering. The tables are laid buffet style, dressed by Chawla herself, using silverware from her brand Rezon. Intricately detailed serving dishes, cutlery and candle stands dot the table. "One of the most interesting pieces on my table happens to be the runner, it's actually a Kimono Obi that I bought in Tokyo," says Chawla, as she regrets not having bought more.

SPARKLING SOIREE

"I have a varied group of friends from different backgrounds and friendships evolve from my dinners," says Chawla. So, for Diwali she likes to call a lot of people, who come at different times and this creates an interesting mix.

Good conversations and equally delicious food, over a stunning decor, ensures festivities at the Chawla household are forever memorable.



TRENDING TABLESCAPES

Planning a festive feast, what about the decor? To complete and enhance the gastronomic experience your table needs to look as delicious as the food tastes. Don't worry, these four settings will provide you with all the inspiration you need.

By RIDHI KALE



A Tropical Retreat

Flowers big and small, lush scenes from the forest, delicate patterns, bring the jungle alive on your table with Passifolia tableware collection by Hermès. Place the flatware at different levels to recreate the forest indoors. The range has 30 pieces including presentation platters, coffee cups and dinner plates, giving you a lot of options to choose from.

PRICE on request;

AT Hermès store in Delhi and Mumbai (The brand also has a home delivery service, through which products can be sent across the country)



Natural Beauty

Nature continues to be the central trend in décor across the globe. This tablescape by Goodearth takes its cues from there with elements foraged from the garden sitting pretty next to traditional Kansa dinnerware (made using the age-old technique of hand-beating).

Complemented with contemporary bone china crockery designs from Rosabagh and Oceana collections, they have 24 karat gold detailing and fine craftsmanship.

PRICE ₹850 onwards (kansa range), ₹1,200 onwards (oceana range), ₹4,200 (rosabagh range)
AT www.goodearth.in

cover story

Tableware

Art of Plating

In this table setting, tableware brand Kaunteya has brought traditional art of Pichwai life, with a collection by the same name. Inspired by timeless paintings of Nathdwara, enhanced with 24 karat gold, this is alfresco dining at its best.

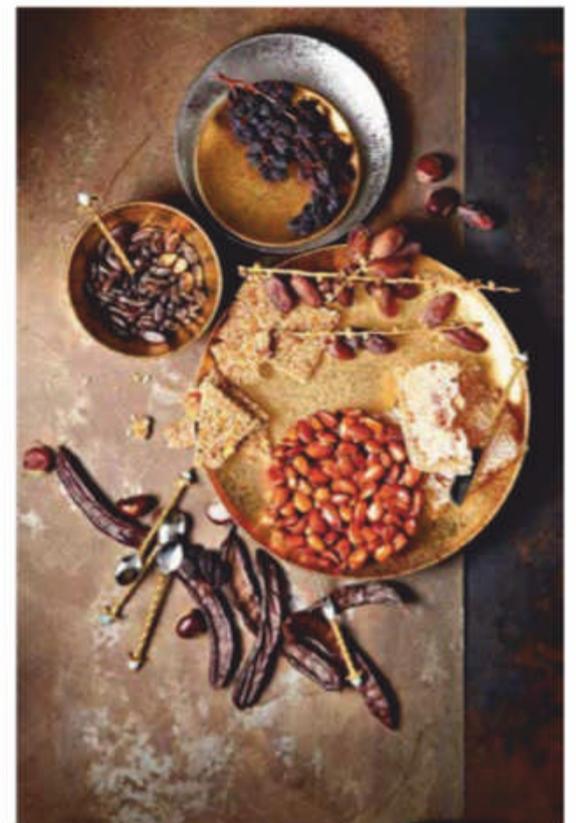
PRICE ₹3,980 set of two (dinner plate), ₹3,580 set of two (side plate), ₹2,890 (serving bowl)

AT www.kaunteya.in



cover story

Tableware



Contrast is Key

Go off the beaten track for your festive table this year, gold on one side, platinum on the other. Confused? Take a tip or two from this set-up by L'Objet. The tablescape is dressed with the Alchimie collection, where each piece is crafted from fine earthenware and enhanced by a white, 24 karat gold or platinum finish. The two contrast and complement one another creating quite a dramatic effect.

PRICE on request
AT Emery Studio, Delhi

THE ACCOMPANIMENTS

Bought pretty crockery, but what about the cutlery? This oft ignored element is key in elevating the look of your table.

By RIDHI KALE



CURVES ARE IN

Ergonomically designed and evenly weighted for ease of use, Aura and Enigma are part of Ellementry's festive cutlery collection of dining spoons, forks, knives, teaspoons and ladle sets.

PRICE ₹1,350 onwards

AT www.ellementry.com

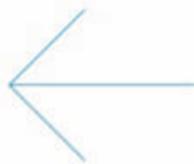


SAY CHEESE

From cutting, slicing and spreading these three knives from The Décor Circle are what you need before serving cheese.

PRICE ₹1600 (set of three)

AT www.thedecorcircle.com



ANIMAL INSTINCT
Called Monkey Around, this mini cutlery set of 12 pieces, from Topp Brass, is made of brass and perfect for special soirees.

PRICE ₹2,800

AT www.toppbrass.com



UP THE STYLE QUOTIENT

The Atako set in gold from XAKA Cutlery will uplift your dinner table in no time.

PRICE ₹9,240 (set of 24)

AT www.xakacutlery.com



FRENCH CONNECTION

For a stand out light go for the Noblesse Oblige chandelier from Windfall's Frenchy Balance collection that has mouth blown gold plated glass candles.

PRICE on request

AT [@emerystudio.in](https://www.instagram.com/emerystudio.in) (Instagram)



GO FOR GLOW

Lighting can make or mar your decor. So, this festival of lights, we help you pick the perfect illumination with the latest in the market and expert tips.

By RIDHI KALE



CHANDELIERS

Rohit Suraj, founding principal and design director, Urban Zen

“The difference between darkness and light is typically what makes or breaks a space. Spending on expensive fit outs with improper lighting never brings out the best in the textural and tonal qualities of the room. Chandeliers are a perfect center point to lighting design as they illuminate the room while adding to the drama of a design.”



HANG IN THERE

Crafted in metal, wood and glass, this chandelier from It's All About Home, has eight bulbs.

PRICE ₹34,995

AT www.iaah.com

cover story

Lighting

CENTRE OF ATTENTION

This sculptural copper chandelier mimics the delicate silhouette of dandelion flowers. Aptly titled Flaming Copper Dandelion, it is hand-crafted by Studio Avni.

PRICE on request

AT www.studioavni.com





GROUND REPORT

(clockwise from above left) Add drama with the Flora Floor lamp from Visionnaire, PRICE on request, AT www.visionnaire-home.com; Regent Floor Lamp from Beyond Designs Home is perfect for modern homes, PRICE on request, AT www.beyonddesigns.in; This iron lamp by Ador from Asian Paints is stunning, PRICE ₹7,786, AT www.asianpaints.com; The Nusa Floor Lamp from Artisan Lab is a showstopper, PRICE ₹55,990, AT www.artisanlab.in



FLOOR LAMPS

Meena Murthy Kakkar, design head and partner, Envisage

“Floor lamps are an excellent addition to transforming any space immediately. Generally, when we put lights on the ceiling, it creates a flat look, but when you add a floor lamp, its muted light creates a lot of drama in terms of shadow it casts. Since they do not light everything with equal intensity, floor lamps help create a warm and inviting space, perfect for conversations. As opposed to other lights, they also occupy less space and do not need any additional electrical work.”



cover story

Lighting



WONDER WALL

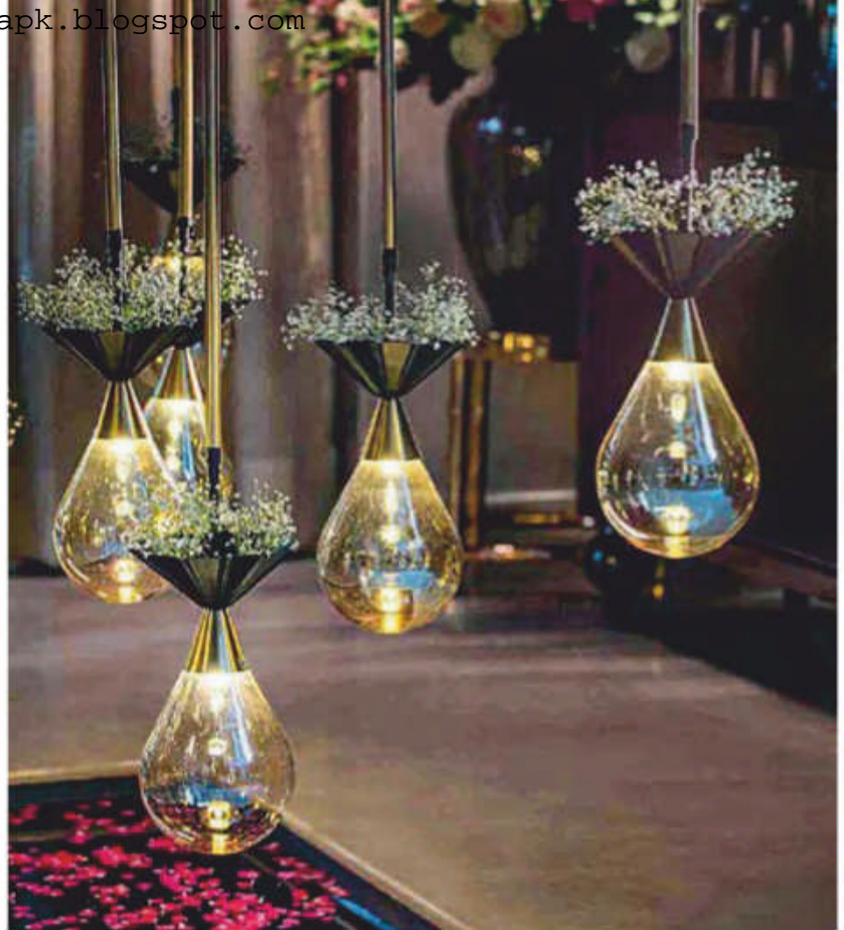
(clockwise from above left) Part art, part magic, the Diamond Wall light is from Sans Souci; **PRICE** on request, AT www.ss-gd.com; Add shimmer with the Lumas wall light from Tisva's festive collection 2020, **PRICE** ₹4,590, AT www.lightsbytisva.com; The Whim by Rhea Mehta is made from hand carved wood and inspired by the waves of Arizona, **PRICE** ₹66,000 (for a pair), AT [@rheamehtadesign](https://www.instagram.com/rheamehtadesign) (Instagram)

WALL BRACKETS

Abhigyan Neogi, principal architect and founder, Chromed Design Studio

"The lighting preferences should be sorted during the initial design phase of a new build or renovation project. There is more to lighting than just deciding how many downlights to put in each room. Depending on the location, wall sconces or uplighting can be put to use to create a softer ambiance and avoid potentially harsh downlighting that can cast ominous shadows."





DROP DEAD GORGEOUS

(clockwise from above left) Contardi available at Sources Unlimited has a satin brass finish with a clear glass diffuser; PRICE on request, AT www.sourcesunlimited.co.in; Glass and metal light available at MADS Creations, PRICE on request, AT www.madsc creations.in; Pendant light from Signify Innovations India, PRICE on request; AT www.signify.com; Ettore pendant lamps from Anantaya Decor; PRICE ₹10,545 to ₹17,800; AT www.anantayadecor.in

PENDANT LIGHTS

Sumit Dhawan, founder and principal architect, Cityspace'82 Architects

“A pendant or suspension light is a fixture suspended from the ceiling by a cord, chain or metal rod. Pendant lights are usually harnessed in clusters or arrays, dangling in a decorative series, or as a stand-alone fixture serving as a focal facet. It can be used as a functional lighting source as well. Automated dimming can aid pendant lights to bestow multiple scenes. Ideally, in a house, one or two pendants are usually enough for specific areas.”



cover story

Lighting



LIGHT IT RIGHT
Kabuki lamp in crystal from Kartell, designed by Ferruccio Laviani, PRICE on request; AT www.iotafurniture.com (above)



THE LUMINARIES

Metal structure with fabric lampshade from Cipriani Homood available at Ottimo; PRICE on request; AT www.ottimo.in; Xi Lamp, by Poltrona Frau available at EtreLuxe; PRICE on request; AT www.etreluxeluxindia.com



TABLE LAMPS

Anurag Pashine and Pallavi Pashine, principal architects, Salankar Pashine & Associates

“Table lamps can be used in an engaging way of using light in a diffused manner. The lamp can be used as a design element in terms of form or shape and the way it distributes light in terms of up lighter or down lighter and the way it creates different patterns. They are a perfect example of creating ambient lighting in a residence.”



ART OF GIVING



*Sanjyt Singh is an interior designer and stylist. He studied Design and textiles at Fashion Institute of Technology, New York and Spatial Design at Chelsea College of Art and Design, University of Arts London.
www.sanjytsynggh.com*

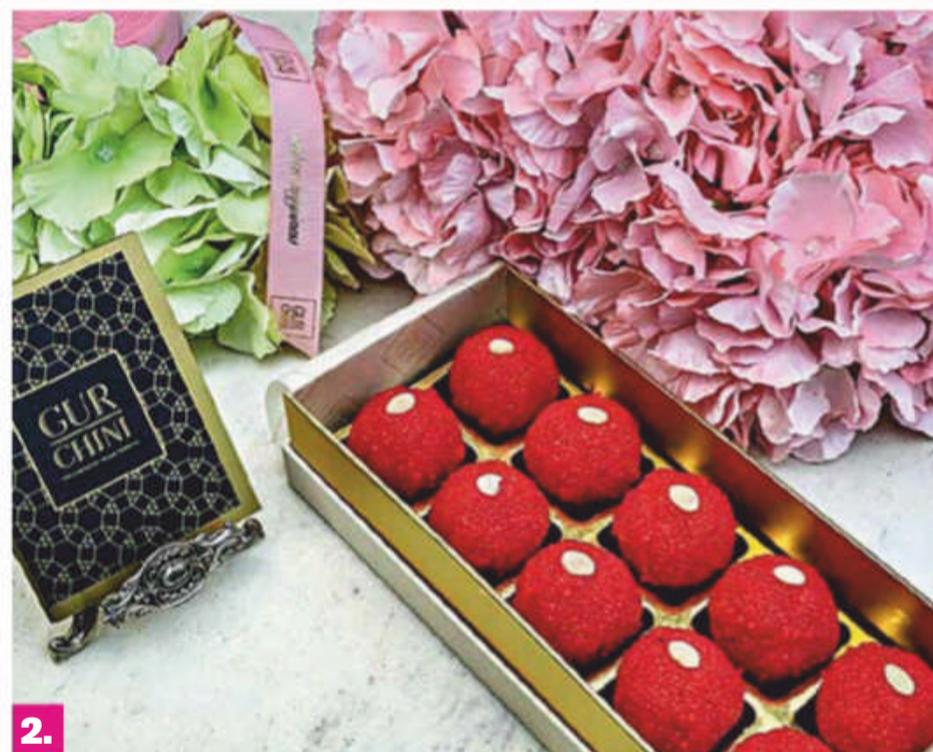
This is how you can curate an innovative and unforgettable gift hamper

By **SANJYT SYNGH**

The festive season is synonymous with gifting.. When it comes to the most memorable gifts, the devil is in details. Curated hampers keeping personal and unique tastes in mind is the key. Readymade hampers are usually passed from one home to the other. Curating hampers by handpicking objects from a variety of brands adds a fresh take and a sense of excitement and distinction. Use complementary colours and layer the hamper with objects of different size, scale and texture to make the gift you give create a high impact.

STEP 1 The starting point is a tray. Selecting a good tray is the key to a stand out hamper. It also shows the extent of detail. I am totally in love with thali trays from No Mad India. Available in plenty of colours, you can choose depending on the mood of your hamper. I suggest rustic earthy tones. The palette stays true to our culture and aesthetics.

STEP 2 Adding sweets is an unsaid rule. I say take risks and break the rules. So many young brands are making contemporary Indian sweets. Gurchini being one. Their Pink Motichoor laddoos add the perfect pop of colour.



2.



3.



1.



4.



5.

SHINE ON
5. Candle holder from Good Earth; 6. Candles from Beyond Deigns Home; 7. Table linen from No Mad India



6.



7.

STEP 3 Adding gourmet Chocolates are another way to elevate any hamper. Chocolate atelier, Ether is one of my favourites. Their colourful chocolates cultivate a vibe that is special.

STEP 4 How can a Diwali hamper be complete without candles and candle holders? Beyond Design Home and Good Earth are my go to for candles and candle holders. Candles tie the hamper together hence choosing the right scent is important. Adding a personalised gift is a way of expressing your fond-

ness. Recipients will remember the little things that make your hamper so special.

STEP 5 Something for the home is always welcome. No Mad India has a beautiful range of table mats and cushion covers. These pieces will add sophistication and drama.

Curating the perfect hamper is a labour of love. Don't be afraid of taking risks. Most importantly, have a safe and happy Diwali.

TAKE YOUR PICK

1. Thali tray from No Mad India; 2. Pink Motichoor lados from Gurchini; 3. and 4. Chocolates from Esther



DRESSED, DRAPED AND DRAMATIC



Silk runners, fuchsia cushions, intricate motifs, bold patterns, from the fanciest fabrics to luxurious linen, there's no better way to transform your space than with textiles. Four experts share the latest trends.

By **RIDHI KALE**



UNLIKE FASHIONWEAR, most don't think of furnishings as seasonal. They think of their dream home as a fixed entity. Unfortunately, that dream is a lie. Home textiles are subject to trends as much as the clothing industry. This does not mean you need to buy a new set of curtains or change your upholstery every three months, but it does mean that as the season changes—elevate, renovate and innovate. Diwali is the perfect time to buy, DIY or take out of your closet bright cushions, rich materials, stylish curtains and gorgeous table linen. However, before you start here's what the experts have to say.

Go for a rich material palette

“This festive season, we see the inclusion of hand printed silk cushions and runners, contemporary lighting, rugs and hand crafted festive decor. Create a luxurious tablescape with brocade or silk embroidered table runners and layer in decorative dinnerware, intricately adorned with gold and platinum accents. Complete the scene with tealights, diyas and fresh flowers. Treat yourself to a seasonal refresh by investing in new curtains and bed-

ding, opting for vibrant, jewel tones to bring an instant uplift and a touch of glamour. Alternatively, if you are seeking a calmer and natural look, choose natural hues with hints of metallics, layering in texture and mixing materials for a warm and comforting feel. Don't forget the fairy lights and you can never have too many plants or fresh flowers.”

– Catherine Trotman, creative head,
Fabindia Home and Lifestyle

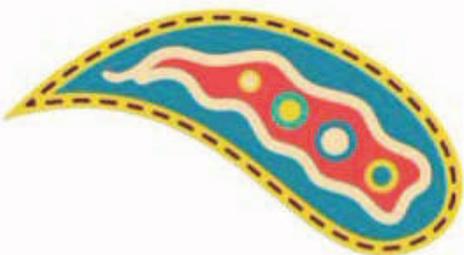
Photograph by RJWANT RAWAT



Enjoy the Outdoors

“The weather is perfect, it’s not too hot or too cold, making it the ideal time to take the festivities outside. Take colour cues from yellow marigold and contrast it with a lovely blue for an offbeat Diwali décor. Place comfortable cushions around the table and you have a recipe for a wonderful celebration. To truly make your space stand out let the furnishings be inspired by the architecture of the city.”

– Anica Kochhar, architect and founder BoderlinePLAY



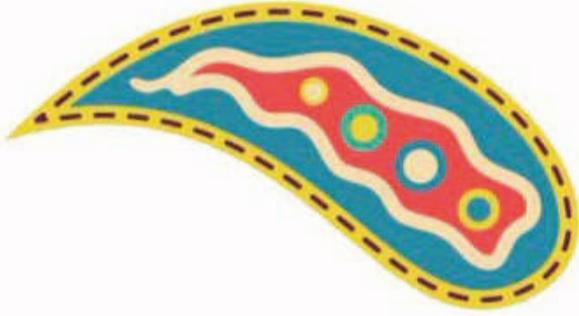


It's closer home

“The trends we’re looking at this year are buying organic festive things from the country. There was a time when we had things like candles decorated with crystals coming from all over the world. This year, people want to invest in textiles, Kansa thalis that are indigenous to India. Additionally, with the vision of making the country self-sufficient as well as due to the pandemic, changes in buying patterns have been observed. Homeowners are looking at things that they can buy now and save for many seasons like it used to be in older times.”

– Ritu Kumar, Head of Design, Ritu Kumar Home





Don't forget the floors

“Jacquards are perfect for the casual-chic festive season. Take for instance the Monar rug. It is jacquard woven in cotton chenille and backed with a canvas for stability and durability. It echoes a coastal or bohemian vibe. Further, blue pairs well with almost any kind of decor and brightens up the room.”

-Raghav Gupta, director of e-commerce, The Rug Republic



this & that

Designer of the month

Photograph by GOKULL RAO KADAM

“WORK HAS NEVER BEEN MY BREAD AND BUTTER, IT’S MY PASSION, THAT PERFECT STRAWBERRY ON TOP OF THE JAM”

Known as the queen of maximalism, interior designer Vinita Chaitanya shares her design journey, current projects and the slow life

By RIDHI KALE



PICTURE PERFECT

Vinita Chaitanya at her Bangalore Home

It was 1988. Vijay Mallya had asked her to pitch a design for one of his offices. Everything had to be ready in a week’s time. During this period, she had friends over and happened to tell them she needed to print her letterheads the next day. They together came up with the name Prismic; and her interior design firm was born. Prior to this she was working with the Oberoi Group in the design department. The designer in question is Bangalore and Coorg-based Vinita Chaitanya, who is synonymous with creating dramatic interiors for top corporates, athletes, Bollywood

this & that

Designer of the month

stars and a wide range of high-end clients. Over the years her repertoire has grown to include some of the most beautiful homes in the country. Even today she continues to break the glass ceiling by conquering social media with her advice, tips and signature style.

What are you working on?

I have a lot of work right now. Many of my earlier clients have come back to us, to create and add new spaces to their homes. There are homes we are designing in the city (Bangalore) as well as holiday homes, a drive away from the city. I am also working on a large residential project in Hyderabad.

How did you end up focussing on designing homes?

I started 32 years ago, when large MNCs were entering the market. With spaces of 50,000 sq ft to be designed. I did this for a long time. Then slowly started designing homes for the managing directors and guest houses. I found these to be more enjoyable, as commercial spaces had started becoming boxy and lack lustre for me. Then 20 years ago my focus changed. So I made my team leaner. I wanted to focus on a limited number of projects. I prefer doing homes, its my forte.

How many projects do you work on at a time?

We work on five to six projects at a time. This allows me to manipulate my five-day week. However, sometimes projects stretch and so last year we were doing 12 projects one a time.



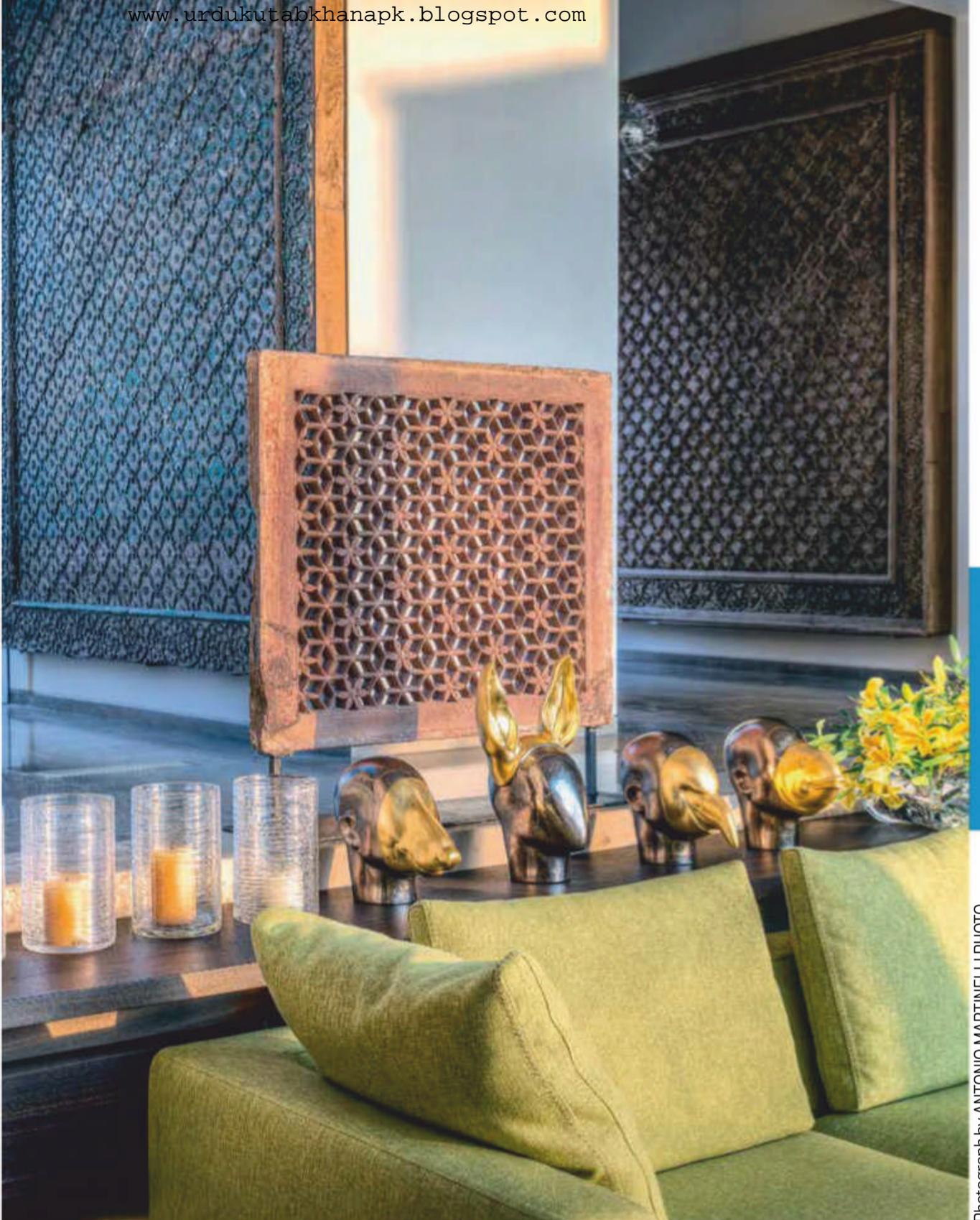
Photograph by SHAMANTH PATIL PHOTOGRAPHY



What made you start the hugely popular VQ series on Instagram?

Over the last five to six years I have been toying with the idea of a TV series that I could host in my own style. A couple of channels did approach me, but I could not take the time out for six months to prepare for the show. And when the lockdown happened, I was in Coorg, at my home, Slow Life along with my daughter, Diya. I was posting a lot about nature, but I was getting a lot of questions about my designs, my style, my home... So I thought I could do a fun video. I spoke with Greg (editor of *Architectural Digest*, India) about what to call it and we zeroed in on VQ. Q for the questions people were sending me and V is the first letter of my name.

The first VQ was very impromptu with no makeup, I used baby oil and Vaseline and I had wet hair from swimming. My daughter shot the video in one take and we put it up for fun. And the response it



Photograph by ANTONIO MARTINELLI PHOTO

ACE OF SPACE

A still from Vinita Chaitanya's VQ video shot at Slow Life, Coorg (above); homes (left and next page) in Chaitanya's signature style

got was astounding.

What inspires you?

A lot actually. Nature, fashion, travel and people. Pre-pandemic it was also design fairs and the magazines—from politics to fashion—I would read 20 of them. Now, it's all digital.

Brands or people doing great work?

I have always promoted made in India, it's a big part of my interiors as well. Even when I did my own home, I customised everything and sourced from the sub-continent. In India Viya Home, Jaipur Trunks Company and architects like Rooshad Shroff and Ashiesh Shah are doing amazing things with our arts and crafts.

A project that is close to your heart

In 2013-2014 I designed a home for a client that was super exciting. The space was enormous, located just outside the city. It was not meant to be my project—the architecture was done by Singapore-based architect Andy Fisher—I was roped in for the interiors over a conversation one evening. My client allowed me to explore my aesthetic—using antiques and artefacts from India. I remember spending time at Harrods (they have a special home section) in the penthouse suite that is opened only for big buyers and we had access to pieces from across the world. I spent four days picking up limited edition finds for the contemporary home. This was then juxtaposed with pieces from India. The sense of scale and space, even today it looks amazing. The project is very close to my heart.

AT @vinitachaitanya (Instagram)

Last look Gardening

Photographs by HEMANT MISHRA/LC

GREEN THE GAP

Driftwood gardens are not only trending right now, they also make for great gifts

By **RIDHI KALE**



Radeesh Shetty, 39
Founder Beruru
www.beruru.com

What is a driftwood garden?

Driftwood is an amazing material to use as garden décor as it can add a sense of charm to these spaces. Upcycled and made from hollowed roots and stems of trees, the plants are chosen according to the size and shape of driftwood available and designed accordingly.

What type of plants are used?

Driftwood serves as an excellent container for succulent plantings. Specifically, the shape and drainage ability of driftwood pieces make them ideal for creating centrepieces with succulents in the garden landscape. Other than that green leafy indoor plants that have smaller roots and can grow in smaller containers can be used. In addition to

the succulents, you can also opt for air plants that fit well with larger pieces of the driftwood.

How to care for them?

Each plant maintenance and watering will be different according to the plant. It can be kept in balconies and needs partial sunlight for six to eight hours a day but should not be exposed to rain.

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