

WHO

## Kamala Harris, Democratic hopeful

Kamala Devi Harris is a 54-year-old American senator from California, of Indian and African descent, and candidate for President of the United States in 2020. Ms. Harris announced her candidacy on Martin Luther King Jr. Day (January 21) and launched her campaign in Oakland, California, a week ago. She is the second African-American woman (and the first Indian-American) in the Senate and first Indian and African (Jamaican) woman to have been California's Attorney-General. Ms. Harris, when asked about her firsts, often quotes her mother as saying, "You may be the first to do many things, but make sure you're not the last."

### Where did she grow up?

Ms. Harris was born in Oakland, California, to two Ph.D students at the University of California, Berkeley – Shyamala Gopalan from Chennai, who was studying nutrition and endocrinology and eventually became a breast cancer researcher, and Donald Harris from Jamai-

ca, who was studying economics and went on to become a professor at Stanford. The two met during the civil rights movement and would take Kamala and her sister Maya on marches. They divorced when Harris was seven. Harris's Indian grandfather, P.V. Gopalan, was a diplomat with the Government of India and a former freedom fighter and her grandmother was an activist for birth control in India. "She was the purest form of the Harris women...we're all diluted versions of my grandmother," Ms. Harris told *Vogue* last year. "My mother, grandparents, aunts and uncle instilled in us the pride in our South Asian roots," Ms. Harris



### Where does she stand?

In 2004, Ms. Harris became San Francisco's District Attorney, and in 2011, California's Attorney-General. Ms. Harris's contradictory stances as a public prosecutor have drawn criticism from many on the left. She has been praised for her efforts to reduce re-

cidivism through education and training, introducing racial bias training for police officers and for not backing California's Proposition 8 (a ban on same sex marriage). She has been criticised for her hardline positions on crime. Most notably, while Ms. Harris is personally against the death penalty – in 2004 she did not seek the death penalty for a man who had killed a police officer – she defended the death penalty's presence on the statute book in California in 2014, when she was Attorney-General.

### What is her platform?

Ms. Harris's campaign slogan is 'Kamala Harris, for the people,' the words she first said as a public prosecutor, introducing herself in court. Ms. Harris said she is an advocate of Medicaid for All (her proposal to get rid of private health insurance was controversial and her campaign staff later presented a softer position on this) and will provide the largest middle-class tax cut in history.

She also spoke out against big banks and corporations, alluded to the unfairness of tax giveaways for the rich, spoke of uniting Americans and making education a fundamental right at her campaign launch.

### What is in store?

It is hard to tell at the moment how Kamala Ms. Harris will fare in the 2020 race. Harris has to first win the Democratic nomination – no mean feat as the field is diverse and crowded and new candidates continue to declare their interest (Cory Booker, an African-American Senator from New Jersey, declared on Friday that he would run). A Politico/Morning Consult poll conducted on January 25-27, before Mr. Booker announced his candidacy, ranked Ms. Harris as the third favourite candidate of Democratic voters, below former Vice-President Joe Biden and Independent Senator from Vermont Bernie Sanders.

SRIRAM LAKSHMAN

WHAT

## The lowdown on MGNREGA funding



### WHAT IS IT?

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) scheme has been allocated ₹60,000 crore in the Budget for 2019-20. It is less than what was spent on the scheme in the current year, that is, the revised estimate for 2018-19, which stands at ₹61,084 crore. In his Budget speech, Finance Minister Piyush Goyal noted: "Additional amount would be provided, if needed." The original 2018-19 Budget allocation for the scheme, a lifeline for landless la-

bourers and rural workers, was ₹55,000 crore. However, by the end of 2018, 99% of the funds had been exhausted. A number of States already had a negative net balance. The activists protested that people were being denied work in several States. The Rural Development Ministry, which administers the scheme, asked for a supplementary allocation and was granted ₹6,084 crore in early January, taking the revised estimate for the year to ₹61,084 crore.

### HOW DID THIS COME ABOUT?

A look at the funding patterns over the last decade shows this is not the first time allocations for the scheme are lower than what was spent in the previous year. In most years, supplementary allocations later in the year have ensured that the final amount spent has risen at least incrementally each year. However, the revised estimates for 2012-13 were actually lower than the previous year, while the

amount spent in 2014-15 was exactly the same as in the previous year. When MGNREGA funding is adjusted for inflation, a bleaker picture appears, making it clear that both the UPA and NDA governments have short-changed the scheme for several years now. In 2011-12, the revised estimate was ₹31,000 crore. For the next four years, the inflation-adjusted amount spent on the scheme was lower than ₹30,000 crore in 2011 terms. The current allocation of ₹61,084 crore drops to just ₹41,013 crore in 2011 terms, when adjusted for inflation using the Consumer Price Index for rural labourers.

### WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Rural workers are being discouraged from registering with the scheme, being denied work even when they do register, and are facing long delays in payment of wages even when they do get work. Researchers, activists and elected representatives blame this

on the lack of sufficient funding. The promise of the MGNREGA is to enhance livelihood security by providing at least 100 days of wage employment a year to households that want it. If work is not provided within 15 days, applicants are entitled to an employment allowance. Thus, work is a legal entitlement under the scheme and funding should be demand-driven.

However, researchers have found a widening gap between demand and supply of work. A study of 3,500 panchayats in 2017-18 found that the employment provided was 32% lower than the work demand generated. Researchers calculated that in order to meet the registered work demand last year, the scheme should have had an allocation of ₹76,131 crore. Workers are also facing weeks- and months-long delays in payment of wages, often without compensation. Finance Ministry documents admit that one of the causes is the non-availability of funds.

### WHAT LIES AHEAD?

The future funding situation is bleak, given that the government's "highest ever allocation" tag disguises the pending liabilities. If the total allocation of ₹61,084 crore had come through on the budget day, the scheme would still have a negative net balance of ₹3,270 crore, according to its financial statement on February 1. The next two months are the peak season, and workers have been promised an additional 50 days of work in drought-hit areas. Researchers predict that the deficit could grow as high as ₹12,000 crore by the end of this financial year. With Central money running out, States have also been asked to use their own funds to pay workers over the next two months, with the promise of an April refund. These deficits and liabilities will eat into the allocation for next year, slashing the amount available for new works in 2019-20.

PRISCILLA JEBARAJ

WHY

## parties in Tamil Nadu are against 10% quota



### What is their stand?

The 103rd Constitution Amendment, through which the Centre has introduced a 10% quota for the economically

weaker sections among communities that do not enjoy any other form of reservation, has drawn near universal opposition from almost all major parties in Tamil Nadu. When it was introduced as the 124th Constitution (Amendment) Bill in Parliament, the AIADMK, the ruling party in the State, and considered to be friendly towards the BJP, spoke out against it in both Houses of Parliament. Its MPs walked out during the vote. Kanimozhi, DMK MP, moved a motion to refer the Bill to a select committee, but it was defeated. R.S. Bharathi, organising secretary of the DMK, has challenged the amendment in the Madras High Court. The Viduthala Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK), an ally of the DMK, has moved the Supreme Court against it. D. Veerasekaran, an advocate who belongs to the Dravidar Kazhagam, has also approached the High Court.

### Why is there such opposition?

Tamil Nadu is a pioneer in providing reservation in employment and education

as a social justice measure. Its backward classes reservation history goes back to 1921. For historical and ideological reasons, therefore, the concept of social justice in the State is anchored firmly in the belief that reservation is a tool to ameliorate the conditions of sections of society that had been discriminated against in the past and that had suffered deprivation of employment and educational opportunities on account of their social backwardness. Here, reservation is seen not merely as an exception to the equality clause in the Constitution, but is considered an important and essential component of equality. In other words, equality acquires deeper meaning only if social injustices of the past are undone through preferential treatment for backward classes and other affirmative action programmes.

### What are their principal objections?

The first and foremost objection to the 10% reservation for the economically poor in other classes is that it cannot be

used as a poverty alleviation measure. The amendment to the Constitution to add an enabling provision for extending quotas on economic grounds is seen as a perversion of the idea of social justice. So far, only social and backwardness and educational backwardness were valid grounds for reservation. Many in Tamil Nadu believe economic disadvantage among sections of the advanced castes can be addressed through other measures such as job creation, provision of scholarships and financial concessions. However, carving out a quota among government jobs and educational opportunities cannot be a just solution. One principal reason is that a family's economic condition is variable, whereas social status based on caste or community cannot change. Someone getting a new job, a promotion or an additional breadwinner in the family may result in a change in a person's economic status. On the other hand, the social disability caused by being born in a particular caste cannot be easily undone.

### Are there any other apprehensions?

Yes, there are fears that this will lead to shrinking of opportunities for those already enjoying reservation. A significant section of the population is already covered by the State's total reservation of 69% for the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes, the backward classes, the most backward classes and notified communities. The backward class quota has a sub-quota for backward class Muslims and the Scheduled Caste reservation has a sub-quota for Arundhatiayars, considered the worst-off among the Scheduled Caste. All of them are eligible to contest on merit under open competition too. The open quota may now come down by 10%. Further, there are fears the courts may insist on the 50% judicial cap on total reservation, and may order a cut in the caste-based quotas to accommodate the economic quota.

K. VENKATARAMANAN

WHEN

## 31 January 2019

**Deep freeze:** Tens of millions of Americans braved Arctic-like temperatures on Thursday as low as minus 49 degrees Celsius that paralysed the U.S. Midwest and were blamed for 21 deaths. News agencies said warmer-than-normal weather was on the way, but that offered little comfort to the homeless enduring a chill that caused frostbite in minutes. The cold has been blamed on a phenomenon called the 'polar vortex'. Meteorologist Mark Chenard said a polar vortex refers to the upper level jet stream that circulates around both the North and South Poles, keeping the coldest air there. When that jet stream occasionally weakens and buckles, he told Reuters, it disrupts weather patterns – bumping warmer air into Alaska and pushing cold winds down into the U.S. Midwest and East Coast. Pictures show ice flowing in the Merrimack River as it heads to the Atlantic Ocean in Newburyport, Massachusetts, and the impact of freezing temperatures on the Horseshoe Falls in Niagara in Canada. •AFP, AP



WHERE

## Maharashtra struggles to amend APMC Act



The Maharashtra government's attempt to amend the Maharashtra Agriculture Produce Marketing (Development and Regulation) Act, 1963, has hit a roadblock again. It had to withdraw the Bill from the Legislative Council even after it was passed by the Assembly. The amendment Bill has been in the works for over 14 years and owing to its political and economically important stake-

holders, who are farmers, traders and 'mathadi' workers (head loaders), the government has struggled to push through the changes.

### What is the problem?

After it was passed in the Assembly last November, the Mumbai and Pune APMCs called a strike, alleging that the proposed amendment severely limited their powers. One of the important amendments the Bill seeks to bring about is to free essential items from the purview of APMCs and allow them to be sold outside.

Farmer organisations such as the Shetkari Sanghatana, formerly led by Sharad Joshi, support this amendment. "Sharad Joshi always said that the APMC Act is one of the main reasons why farmers are prey to the monopoly of traders," said Anil Ghanvat, president of Shetkari Sanghatana.

### What are the changes?

The Bill also has a provision that the

APMCs can continue to levy cess/market fee on the produce brought and traded in their mandis, but cannot charge anything on goods traded outside. The traders' lobby had said no levy should be charged if the produce was sold outside. Following the meeting between the stakeholders and the government, sources said a compromise was reached to abolish this levy altogether. One of the amendments that was opposed by traders and farmer organisations was the direct payment to farmers from traders for purchase of more than ₹2 lakh, bypassing the *Adta* (the middleman). According to both, the *Adta* plays an important part as an assessor to both parties, and eliminating his role would be harmful to traders as well as to farmers.

Maharashtra is the second State after Bihar to attempt such amendments. While Bihar scrapped it altogether, Maharashtra is trying to do the same, by first allowing traders or processors to deal directly with farmers. Neither they

nor the farmers will have to go to the APMC yards to buy and sell their produce. The buyers can directly buy from farmers based on the price quoted by them. Unable to get the Bill cleared in both Houses of the Legislature, the government in August 2016 de-listed fruits and vegetables from the purview of the APMC through a resolution. Further, it was expanded to all farm products. Apart from the government claim that farmers will get a better price after the amendment, it believes that the competitive environment will help the APMCs improve their infrastructure as well as their quality of service to attract farmers. According to Mr. Ghanvat, farmers will go to the market which gives them a better price, be it private buyers or the APMCs.

### How many APMCs are there?

Maharashtra has 306 APMCs. The APMC Act had made it mandatory for farmers to sell all their crops in the mandi within a geographically delineated

market area under a particular committee's jurisdiction. A few lakh traders and head loaders survive on these committees. It is alleged that local political interests drive all the decisions taken by the APMCs. The supporters of the Bill claim that political compulsions have forced successive governments not to push for the amendments.

Shashikant Shinde, leader of the head loaders and one of the MLAs opposing the Bill, said it is being introduced to serve the interests of multinational companies. According to him, the APMCs provide a mechanism which ensures at least a minimum support price for the farmers' produce, and outside the APMCs, farmers will be forced to sell at a price quoted by companies.

The State government will continue to hold meetings with the stakeholders, and is likely to present the Bill, approved by all, in the budget session from February 24.

ALOK DESHPANDE

