

[IN FOCUS: BAREILLY]

# A marquee fight between BJP and SP-BSP

The combine is trying to breach the ruling party's bastion using the Kurmi card, as Santosh Gangwar looks for eighth win

OMAR RASHID  
BAREILLY

From 1989 to 2009, Santosh Gangwar of the BJP reigned in Bareilly, a bustling city known for its *zari*, *manjha* (kite strings), furniture and *kohl* industries.

The winning streak was broken in 2009 when the Congress's Praveen Aron defeated him by just 9,338 votes. Bhagwat Saran Gangwar, the Samajwadi Party candidate, a fellow Kurmi (OBC), who despite finishing fourth, ate into the community's votes with 73,549 votes. Another reason was the departure of Lohd stalwart Kalyan Singh from the BJP.

Mr. Santosh reclaimed his seat in 2014, but the story of the 2009 defeat still looms in the current narrative. The three candidates are back in the fray again: the two Gangwars and Aron.

"It did [damage me] then. But the community [Kurmi] worker understands now [that Bhagwat Saran is not going to win but will only split votes]," Mr. Santosh says.

With that message, the Union Minister is looking for his eighth term as MP. But this



Back to the wall: The scene at the election campaign office of veteran BJP leader Santosh Kumar Gangwar in Bareilly. ■ RAJEEV BHATT

time, Bhagwat Saran, himself a five-time MLA and former State Minister, has the support of the BSP, bringing in crucial Jatav votes and the potential to consolidate the 4.5 lakh Muslim voters.

"My access is plenty. Bareilly has 30% Muslim voters. But for me, it's no problem. [Whether] they vote or not, they are positive towards me," Mr. Gangwar says, dismissing the threat of the new equation.

Just back after campaign-

ing, he is seated in his Bharat Seva Trust office in Premnagar, dispensing last-minute instructions to supporters and party workers.

"Bareilly voters love me. It doesn't depend on what work I am doing or not. I stay in personal touch and people trust me," he replies when asked to list his achievements.

Bareilly has an estimated 3-3.5 lakh Kurmi voters and is a business hub. The Muslim voters are usually divided and the city is prone to communal

tension, leading to polarisation. However, Mr. Santosh also scores through his accessibility and simple outlook. A rickshaw puller and BWM driver can both have access to him, says one supporter, while another claims that the MP responds to phone calls even in the middle of the night and often prepares tea himself for workers visiting him in the morning.

Mr. Saran, who won three Assembly elections with the BJP before joining the SP, was

once an aide to Mr. Santosh. In fact, local Kurmis say they favoured electing both as lawmakers but in different spheres, Mr. Saran to the Assembly and Mr. Santosh to the Lok Sabha. In 2017, however, Mr. Saran lost his seat to the BJP by 39,000 votes.

## Vote math

But that doesn't stop him from believing that his senior's fort is finally going to be breached. The Modi wave is over, the 10-12% floating voters the BJP got in 2014 are now with the alliance, whose combined vote across Uttar Pradesh is comparable to that of the BJP's, Mr. Saran says.

But what about the Kurmi voters in Bareilly?

"We both will get Kurmi votes ... but I will get 2-4% more," says Mr. Saran as he campaigns door-to-door in the Muslim neighbourhood of Sailani. He says that despite his rapport in his community and development work done by him in Nawabganj, one of the five Assembly constituencies, where he has been MLA five times, internal opposition and desertion of Muslim voters

ruined his chances in 2009. "The votes I got (73,549) were of those who personally loved me," he says.

The Muslim vote is once again under focus as both the Congress and the SP are claimants. However, it appears tilted toward the alliance and even influential Bareilly cleric Tauqeer Raza Khan has put his weight behind the SP candidate.

The tactical voting seems clear in Rabri tola and Sailani localities. Nasir Raza Khan, who runs a *zari* store and a tandoori tea stall, says the Muslims initially considered supporting Mr. Aron but after the SP declared Mr. Saran they changed their mind. "Only he can give a fight to the BJP," says Raza Khan, on the premise that the Kurmi vote will get split, a united Muslim vote along with Jatavs and Yadavs could defeat the BJP.

The Muslims here do not have much good to say about Mr. Santosh. They say several rubber, sugar cane and matchbox manufacturing factories were shut down during his tenure but he did nothing to revive them.

# Disenchantment writ large in Fatehpur

Protest against land grab bid for mine

SIDHARTH YADAV  
SURGUJA

As the situation came to a head for villagers of Fatehpur on March 29, Muneshwar Singh Porte resolved not to vote in the Lok Sabha election.

As in any other morning, women were away in the forests to collect *mahua* fruit and the men engaged elsewhere under the MGNREGA. Several officials accompanied by more than 100 policemen descended on the village in the Surguja constituency of Chhattisgarh that day, to survey land to be acquired for the Parsa opencast coal mine. The constituency goes to the polls on Tuesday.

"One of the children saw them measure our land and houses with tapes, and came running to us with the news. He told us that some of them had guns too," Mr. Porte, 22, says.

What difference will it make even if we vote someone to power?

Hariharpur resident

Sensing another attempt by officials to take over land for the 841.5-ha mine, villagers made a dash back home in a clearing of Hasdeo Arand, one of the largest contiguous forest stretches in the country. "We drove them away with lathis," he says. Since 2018, residents of six villages, already reeling under the operational Parsa East and Kente Basan mines nearby, have been resisting inducements to give up their land.

**'Falsified consent'** During gram sabhas in 2018, they say, officials falsified their consent for takeover, though it was not on the agenda during any of the meetings. And now there is no one to heed their complaints.

Disgruntled at the political indifference to their woes, villagers of Fatehpur and Hariharpur, facing dis-

placement, have decided to boycott the election.

Their resolve became stronger especially after the attempted survey and in-principle environment clearance to the mine in January. On April 9, they wrote to the Collector announcing the decision.

"All the political parties are corporate-friendly. We voted against the Bharatiya Janata Party government in the State in 2018 as it didn't stand by us. Now, the Congress has been giving us assurances but to no avail. We have lost faith in our leaders and democracy. What difference will it make even if we vote someone to power? Aren't they all the same?" asks Sukhmaniya of Hariharpur.

"We've lost faith in the system. There is point of even pressing NOTA," she says.

Her husband, a cleaner at the PEKB mines, says he will not vote until his two sons get the jobs promised by Adani Enterprises, which operates the mines.

The Parsa mine is controlled by Rajasthan Rajya Vidyut Utpadan Nigam Ltd. and will be operated by Rajasthan Collieries Ltd., a subsidiary of Adani Enterprises.

## Water diverted

"We don't want another mine here. We've seen how the previous one has uprooted our lives. Water from the only source around has been diverted. Despite having irrigated fields, we have to rely on rain. Earlier, we used to sow fields in both the seasons, but now it's only kharif," says Sukhmaniya.

Villagers, however, say they will take part in the panchayat election in the State later this year. "The *sarpanch* listens to us. He took our cause forward and has been fighting for us, whereas those in Parliament mean nothing to us now," says Balsai Korram, Fatehpur janpad member.



Boycott call: People of Fatehpur staging a protest. ■ SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

# Mask magic



On a high: BJP supporters flash Modi masks during the Prime Minister's campaign at Nandurbar in Maharashtra on Monday. Heena Gavitt is the BJP candidate in the constituency, which has a 65% tribal population comprising Pawars, Bhils and Gonds. ■ PRASHANT NAKWE

[BATTLEGROUND: BARAMATI]

# Pawars being tested in their stronghold

Sitting MP Supriya Sule is seeking the mandate from the constituency for the third time

SHOUMAJIT BANERJEE  
BARAMATI

The bastion of Nationalist Congress Party chief Sharad Pawar is under siege. The BJP top brass has pulled out all the stops to wrest the Baramati Lok Sabha seat, the stronghold of the Pawars since the NCP's formation in 1999. The constituency is going to the polls on Tuesday.

The BJP has launched a major blitz to topple Supriya Sule, Mr. Pawar's daughter who is seeking the mandate from Baramati for the third time. The constituency is at the centre of Mr. Pawar's stronghold stretching across Maharashtra's "sugar belt".

In the struggle for supremacy in western Maharashtra, the fall of Baramati to the BJP could signal the political twilight of the Pawars, besides dealing a massive blow to the NCP in the State.

The BJP-Sena *Mahayuti* has fielded Kanchan Kul, wife of Rahul Kul, Daund MLA and member of the Rashtriya Samaj Paksha. Dhangar leader Mahadev Jankar, who heads the Paksha, lost to Ms. Sule by fewer than 70,000 votes in the 2014 Lok Sabha election.

## Evenly matched

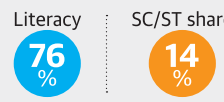
On paper, the BJP-Shiv Sena coalition and the NCP-Congress alliance appear evenly matched. Of the six Assembly segments, the rival camps hold three each. The BJP holds the crucial Khadakwasla Assembly seat, which has the highest

## Constituency profile: Baramati



Supriya Sule, the NCP candidate from Baramati seat, interacts with her supporters. ■ MANDAR TANNU

Assembly segments under Baramati: Daund, Indapur, Baramati, Purandar, Bhor, Khadakwasla



number of voters at 4.7 lakh. The Shiv Sena holds Purandar and Mr. Jankar's party has Daund.

Vijay Shitware, MLA for Purandar and member of the Devendra Fadnavis Cabinet, has vowed to defeat the Pawars. The NCP holds the Indapur and Baramati segments (Ms. Sule's cousin Ajit Pawar is the MLA for Baramati). The Congress hold the Bhor segment.

It took the BJP a long time to name Ms. Kul, who has a strong base in Daund and some rural pockets around Baramati but is a political novice. She belongs to a politically connected family, with her in-laws having been legislators in the past. She and her Sena allies have been frenetically campaigning to expose the allegedly "false" claims of the Pawars by highlighting the lack of develop-

ment outside Baramati city.

But Ms. Sule has kept her calm throughout her campaign. "Ms. Sule has begun her campaign well in advance this time. Her gruelling, though low-key campaigning, has focussed on a door-to-door connect with her constituents," a local analyst says.

## Extensive campaign

She has held extensive meetings not only in the rural parts of her constituency but has also targeted housing societies in the rapidly growing suburbs of Pune such as Khadakwasla and Dhayari. She has stayed away from personal attacks. Her promises include making Baramati "tanker-free" by addressing the acute water shortage through rejuvenating groundwater and focussing on child education. "It is unfortunate that lead-

ers aren't addressing issues this election. My aim has been to address serious issues such as unemployment. Whatever our detractors say, people here are aware of our work," she says.

BJP Minister Chandrakant Patil, in charge of Baramati, has an elaborate plan to storm the Pawar citadel. "We have aimed to increase our vote share in the Khadakwasla segment from 65,000 to 1.15 lakh by ensuring that the youthful IT crowd steps out to vote. Since we already hold Daund, we expect a major boost there as Ms. Kul hails from that part," he says.

The BJP has also been active in attempting to cash in on the resentment harboured by senior Congress leader Harshvardhan Patil towards Mr. Ajit Pawar.

In a humiliating defeat in the 2014 Assembly election, Mr. Patil lost his stronghold Indapur to the NCP's Dattareya Bharne, a protégé of Mr. Ajit Pawar. At the time, the Congress and the NCP fought the polls separately.

It was after the 2014 Assembly election that Mr. Kul caught Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis's attention after he won the Daund segment. It was Mr. Fadnavis who was instrumental in restarting Mr. Kul's dysfunctional sugar factory in Daund's Bhima-Patas area with an eye on expanding the NDA's presence in Baramati and thus threatening Mr. Pawar's backyard.

POLL POURRI

# Jaya Prada gets EC notice



NEW DELHI

The Rampur District Election Officer in Uttar Pradesh has served notice on BJP candidate Jaya Prada for allegedly giving inflammatory speech on Sunday. A non-cognisable report has been registered on the issue. It is alleged that Ms. Jaya Prada made personal comments against her rival and Samajwadi Party candidate, Azam Khan, and Bahujan Samaj Party supremo Mayawati. The war of words between both camps continues unabated with Mr. Khan's son on Sunday indulging in a veiled attack on Ms. Jaya Prada.

# Act against PM: Yechury

NEW DELHI



CPI(M) general secretary Sitaram Yechury, in a letter to the Election Commission, has sought immediate action against Prime Minister Narendra Modi for repeatedly flouting the poll panel's

guidelines of not using the armed forces for canvassing for votes if the Commission wants to uphold the its own sanctity. He has flagged Mr. Modi's speeches in Gujarat and Barmer where he spoke on Wing Commander Abhinandan and India's nuclear capability.

# Special observer for Tripura

NEW DELHI

The Election Commission has appointed former Deputy Election Commissioner Vinod Zutshi, a retired IAS officer, as a special observer for East Tripura polls. The Commission had earlier made Mr. Zutshi a special observer, along with retired IAS officer Noor Mohammad and retired IPS officer A.S. Gill, for assessing the ground situation in Jammu and Kashmir and determine the feasibility for holding State Assembly elections there. The team has submitted its report to the EC.



# Manipur repolling tomorrow

IMPHAL



Manipur Chief Electoral Officer Prasant Kumar Singh on Monday said repolling in 12 polling stations of the Inner Manipur Lok Sabha constituency would be held on Wednesday. Polling in

the constituency was held on April 18. Some candidates had demanded repolling in 28 polling stations alleging that the elections there were not free and fair. Out of the 12 polling stations, five are in the Assembly constituency of Chief Minister N. Biren Singh and three others in the constituencies of two Cabinet Ministers. The remaining four are in the constituency of a ruling BJP MLA.

# MLA held for attacking EC team

BHUBANESWAR

Pradeep Maharathy, six-time Odisha MLA and a Biju Janata Dal (BJD) nominee, was on Monday arrested on charges of leading an attack on an Election Commission team, during a search at his farmhouse. On being informed of the distribution of cash and liquor to influence voters, flying squad members comprising of a magistrate, a police official and others had gone to his farmhouse at Hunkeipur village near Pipili in Puri district to ascertain facts late on Sunday evening.



# 72-hour ban on Sidhu

NEW DELHI



The Election Commission on Monday ordered a 72-hour ban on Congress leader Navjot Singh Sidhu from campaigning for violating the model code of conduct by appealing for vote on religious lines. Reprimanding Mr. Sidhu for his "objectionable" comments in Bihar's Katihar on April 15, the Commission also restrained him from giving any statement in the media from 10 a.m. on Tuesday.

# POCKET | VASINI VARADAN

