

5 DECISION 2019



Milind Deora

MAHARASHTRA: 17 of 48 LS seats (2014: BJP 8, Shiv Sena 9)
 ■ Big faces in the fray include MoS, Defence, Subhash Bhamre from the BJP, and Milind Deora, Priya Dutt and Urmila Matondkar from the Congress. The impact of MNS chief Raj Thackeray's campaign is likely to be felt in this phase.



Dimple Yadav

UTTAR PRADESH: 13 of 80 LS seats (2014: BJP 12, SP 1)
 Out of the 13 seats going to polls, five are reserved seats. High-profile seats include Kannauj, where SP chief Akhilesh Yadav's wife and two-time MP Dimple Yadav will be up against BJP's Subrat Pathak, who lost to her in 2014. In Unnao, BJP MP Sakshi Maharaj is up against SP's gangster-turned-politician Arun Shanker Shukla 'Anna'.

RAJASTHAN: 13 of 25 LS seats (2014: BJP 13)
 Scions of two political families in the state, led by Vasundhara Raje and Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot, are in the fray. Raje's son Dushyant Singh is expected to sail through in Jhalawar-Baran, which he currently holds. The Chief Minister's son Vaibhav Gehlot faces a tough fight

against Union Minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat in Jodhpur.



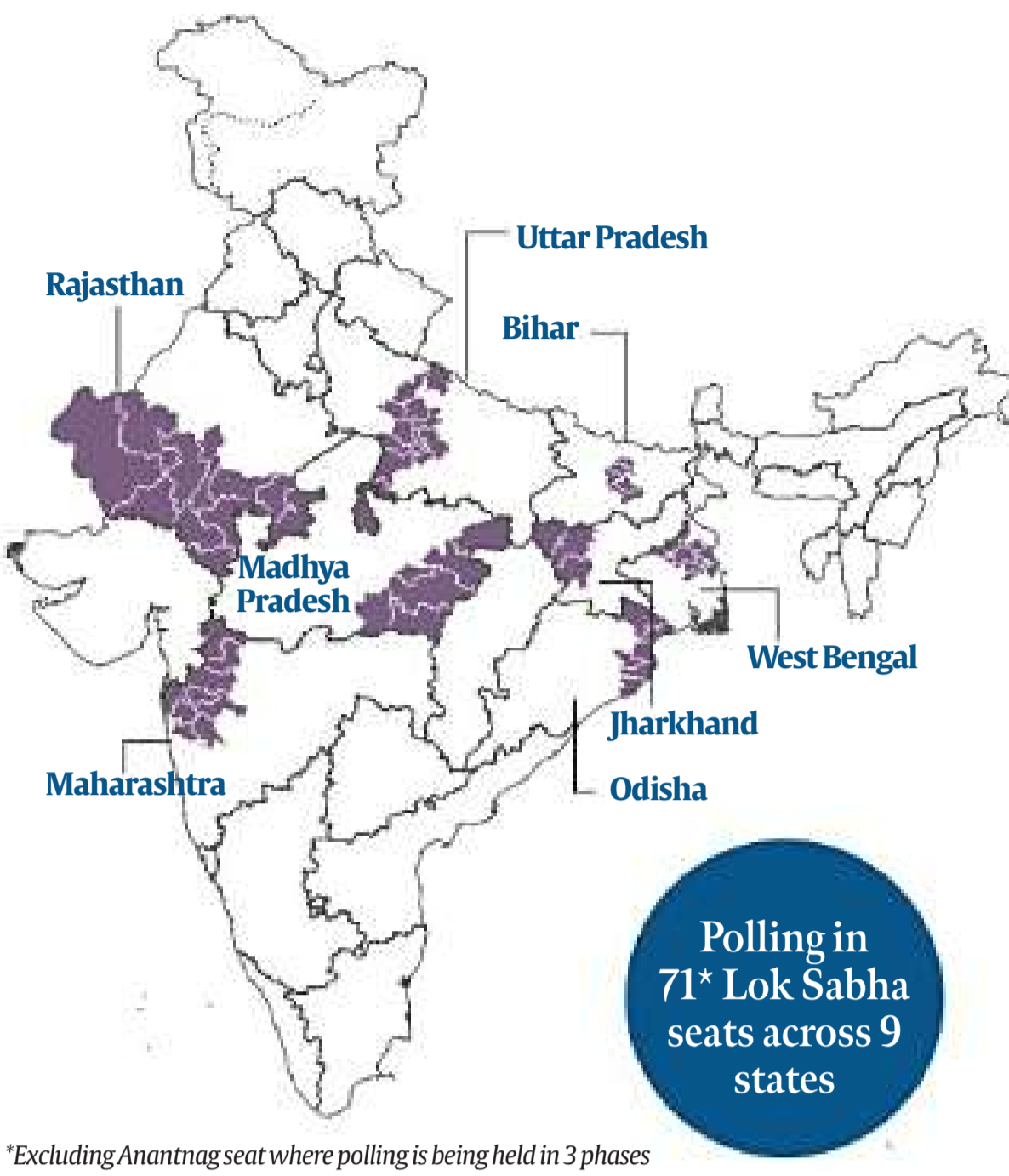
Babul Supriyo

WEST BENGAL: 8 of 42 LS seats (2014: TMC 6, BJP 1, Cong 1)
 The Lok Sabha election will enter south Bengal in this phase. While the TMC is strong in several south Bengal districts, the BJP is expected to give a tough fight in Asansol, Krishnanagar, Ranaghat and Birbhum. Union Minister Babul Supriyo will be up against TMC's Moonmoon Sen in Asansol. The Congress will try to retain its stronghold Baharampur.

MADHYA PRADESH: 6 of 29 LS seats (2014: BJP 5, Cong 1)
 Chief Minister Kamal Nath's son Nakul Nath is contesting from Chhindwara, which his father has represented for nearly four decades. BJP state president Rakesh Singh faces Vivek Tankha of the Congress in Jabalpur. The BJP is facing rebellion in Balaghat and Sidhi.

JAMMU & KASHMIR: 1 of 6 LS seats (2014: PDP 1)
 Kulgam district, a part of Anantnag constituency, is going to polls in the fourth phase. Known to see high turnouts, Kulgam is likely to witness a poll boycott this time as the district is a militant stronghold.

PHASE IV VOTING TODAY



Bajiyant Panda

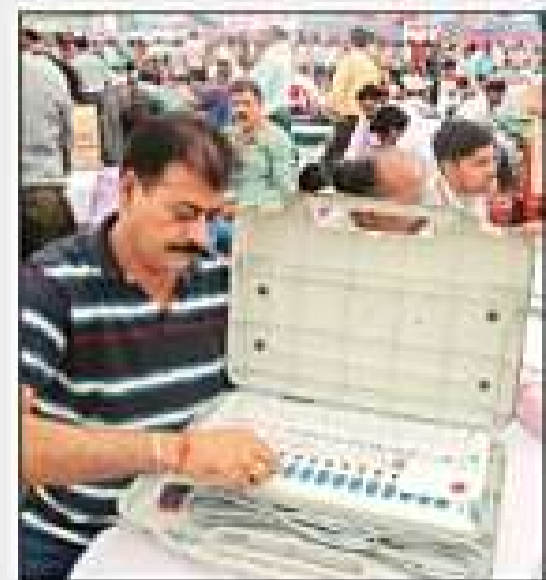
ODISHA: 6 of 21 LS seats (2014: BJD 6); 41 Assembly seats (2014: BJD 36, BJP 1, Cong 4)
 The BJD will face its toughest contest in Kendrapara, with its MP Bajiyant Panda joining the BJP. In these six seats, the Congress is expected to put up a strong fight too. Chit fund scam and MSP for paddy are key issues in these seats.



Kanhaiya Kumar

BIHAR: 5 of 40 LS seats (2014: BJP+5)
 NDA looks ahead in Munger where JD(U) candidate Rajiv Ranjan Singh is contesting against Congress's Neelam Devi, wife of Independent Mokama MLA Anant Singh. Begusarai is set for a triangular fight between BJP's Giriraj Singh, CPI's Kanhaiya Kumar and RJD's Tanvir Hassan.

JHARKHAND: 3 of 14 LS seats (2014: BJP 3)
 The BJP hopes to gain from PM Narendra Modi's charisma in Lohardaga, Palamu and Chatra, currently held by the party. Mahagathbandhan hopes to gain in Palamu and Lohardaga. In Chatra, the BJP has an advantage because the Congress and RJD are fielding separate candidates.



Poll officials collect EVMs and other material from an EVM distribution centre in Jabalpur on Sunday. PTI

TURNOUT SO FAR

Phase I	Phase II	Phase III
69.50%	69.44%	67.99%

PHASES LEFT

Phase V	May 6
Phase VI	May 12
Phase VII	May 19

Polling over for 302 seats in first three phases
 Polling left for 169 seats**

**Excluding Phase IV seats

SEAT WATCH CHHINDWARA, MP

Kamal Nath son set for maiden poll on father's turf

MILIND GHATAI
 BHOPAL, APRIL 28

IT IS not for nothing that even the politically uninitiated outside Madhya Pradesh associate Chhindwara with Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Kamal Nath. The large constituency has been a family pocket borough for nearly four decades.

Kamal Nath, who won the seat for the first time in 1980, has made way for his son Nakul Nath, 44, who is contesting his maiden election this time. The senior Nath is also contesting a by-election from the assembly segment of the same name to validate his stay in office.

Kamal Nath's wife Alka won the seat in 1996 because her husband did not contest in the wake of the hawala scam. She resigned in 1997 and in the by-election held that year, former BJP chief minister Sunderlal Patwa defeated Kamal Nath — his only electoral defeat.

When the Congress formed the government in Madhya Pradesh in December 2018, Kamal Nath was not an MLA. The Congress won all seven assembly seats, including the four reserved constituencies, in the district.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a rally in Chhindwara ahead of the Assembly election in 2018 and devoted a major portion of his speech to try and demolish what is known as Chhindwara model of development. Modi claimed that the model was a myth and that factories and other establishments that could have provided jobs are non-functional. Modi also addressed rallies in Sidhi and Jabalpur on Friday during which he referred to the recent income tax raids on the premises owned by people close to Kamal Nath and alleged that the money recovered was earned from the "transfer industry".

While Kamal Nath had to choose where he will contest from between Saunsar and Chhindwara assembly segments, his son's candidature was not a matter of conjecture. As chief minister, Kamal Nath had announced his son's candidature even before the party declared it officially. Nakul's answer to constant queries from reporters about when the official announcement would be made was simple — "the day you see me in a kurta-pyjama".

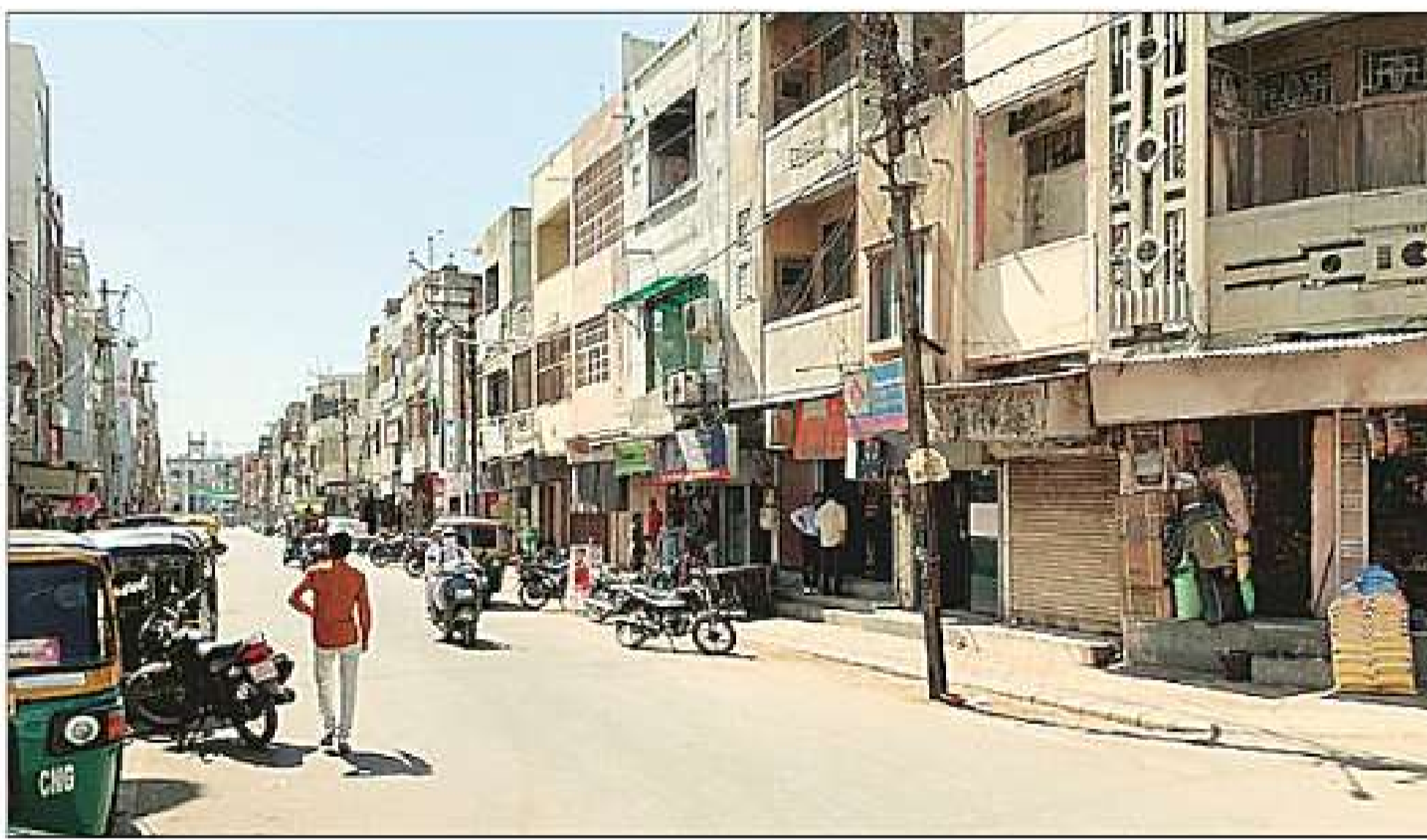
Chhindwara and Guna (represented by Congress leader Jyotiraditya Scindia) were the only two seats the Congress won despite the wave in favour of Narendra Modi in 2014. The BJP won 27 out of 29 parliamentary seats in the state, improving its previous best of 25 clocked in the 2004 elections.

The BJP has fielded former MLA Nathan Shah Kavreti against Nakul Nath. A tribal, Kavreti is a former RSS functionary. Three of the seven assembly segments that constitute Chhindwara parliamentary seat are reserved for tribals.

No senior Congress leader from outside the state campaigned in Chhindwara. The party, however, got new entrant Shatrughan Sinha to campaign for Nakul Nath.



Kamal Nath's son Nakul Nath. Twitter



One of the streets that marks the divide in Godhra. Seema Chishty

Old wounds 'drying slowly' amid faultlines in Godhra

In territory separated by railway tracks: Lack of development, jobs

SEEMA CHISHTI
 GODHRA (PANCHMAHAL), APRIL 28

AT THE Methodist Church in the Godhra bazar, Reverend Suresh Christie caters to a "very small number of families". He came here in 2007, five years after the burning of the train in Godhra and the riots, so "cannot comment" on the change. "But we are at the tri-junction with the Hindu side and the Muslim side... on the third side, we have the road that goes to the District Collector's office," he says.

The anti-conversion act is in place, but Christie says he has never initiated the process to contact the District Collector — a mandatory step for those who wish to change their faith — despite several pleas from families. There are "three levels" of internal checks for any such request within the Church. After that, it is up to the district officials. "We have never got to that stage," says Christie.

"The wounds of 2002 are drying slowly. After the Pulwama attacks, we took out a procession" to protest the killings. Other than that, Christie says, he is a man of faith and will not discuss politics.

Godhra is Ground Zero in more ways than one. Here, the divisions fostered by politics, riots, and "uneven development", are frozen in the town's geography.

It's been 11 years since the Parliamentary constituency was renamed Panchmahal, which includes the district. It falls under Gujarat's backward districts and receives funds from the Centre under the Backward Regions Grant Fund Programme (BRGF).

In 2014, of the 9,35,016 votes, BJP won by 1,70,596. But 2017 saw its seven assembly seats witness as much turbulence as the rest of the state. Three seats went to the BJP, two to the Congress, and two independent MLAs — one Independent MLA later joined the BJP, and the other, the Congress. The Independent who joined the BJP, Ratan Singh Rathore, is the

party's candidate here this time — Godhra voted on April 23 — and May 23 will decide his tussle with Congress's V Khandt.

Line of disconnect

It would seem that 17 years is a long time to get over the tragedy that befell the Sabarmati Express in 2002 at Signal Falia here, in which 57 kar sevaks returning from Ayodhya were burnt to death. It became the epicentre of the riots that enveloped the state.

But today, autorickshaw drivers near Signal Falia point to the road under the railway line that, according to them, is the symbol of the disconnect. The metaphors are "developmental", but it is clear they reflect deeper wounds. "This road connects to the highway, but after just one spell of rains, we cannot use it," says one of them.

"We have no jobs, many of the houses are still abandoned... five people from my family are in prison, held under the train-burning charge," says another auto driver.

The area used to be a hub for car repairs and second-hand vehicles. "But after this *toofan* (of 2002), the market was removed and we are in Simla now, a locality that is further away. Life goes on, with no help from the government,

that is what it is," says Haroon, a driver.

At the BJP candidate's office, large cut-outs of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and party chief Amit Shah greet all those who come in. Says Dignesh Parikh, media convenor: "This has been a BJP seat for the past four terms. There are no issues here." On being pressed, he says, the issues are "development" and "nationalism", which will ensure victory again. "Rs 400 crore has been announced in this year's budget for the area, the public and farmers are happy," says Parikh.

Says his colleague Anand Ghadiyali: "Last time, there was a Modi tsunami, this time

there is an undercurrent." He says 2017 has had "zero effect" although the BJP slid by 16 seats while retaining power. They admit that a communal divide "exists". "They stay there and do their work, we live separately," says Ghadiyali.

RSS pracharaks, lawyers and educationists across town say 2002 haunts Godhra. "No industry or branded goods showroom wants to come here," says Pintobhai Jani, who runs Aman Day School and supports the RSS-BJP. His colleague Nikunjhai Jani describes the divide as "60% Hindu and 40% Muslim". "After 2002, there has been no real riot although small tensions occur." An RSS pracharak says: "We interact with Muslims, there are journeys across the border several times during a day."

'Only way border will melt'

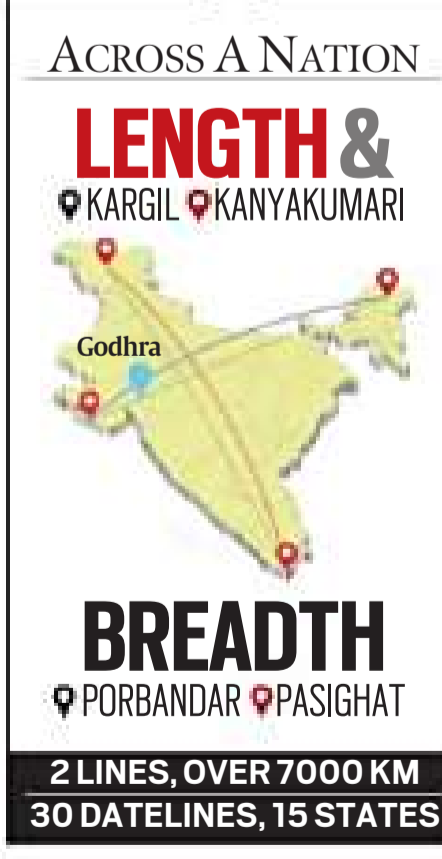
In the Muslim areas of the "border", the question is whether the youth who have not known 2002 can make a fresh start. Sajidaben, an educationist, asks: "How? So many children born after that have never seen their parents together, as they are in jail and parole is infrequent. No one has tried to bridge the divide."

Pointing to the wall between the track and the car-repair area, Sajidaben's younger colleague Latifaben says: "It was built to keep us away from the track in 2002. Recently, it was fortified. See the boys standing there and repairing cars? Their shops were taken away and they do their work standing."

Within the division and the "border", there is talk of lack of jobs and industry. "There are private banks, and three hotels, but people from outside are worried things may get ugly in an instant," says Sajidaben.

Residents say what has sparked tension often, is the occasional love affair that transcends the distance and alienation. And caught in the middle of it all, is Dr Sujaat Vali, an atheist who runs rationalist campaigns. "Hardliners on both sides attack me," he says.

In 2016, Vali organised Junoon, a musical concert that also gave space to four inter-religious couples to speak out. "No one charged for the performance that night. I got attacked a lot on Facebook when I promoted a poster saying 'Let them Love'. But this is the only way the border will melt."



SEAT WATCH KANNAUJ, UTTAR PRADESH

Dimple counts on Akhilesh work in SP fortress but anger over Yadav 'bias'

MAULSHREE SETH
 KANNAUJ, APRIL 28

REPRESENTED BY socialist leader Ram Manohar Lohia in the late 1960s and retained by the Samajwadi Party since 1998, the Kannauj Lok Sabha seat was once considered a safe bastion for Mulayam Singh Yadav's family. But this time, Mulayam's daughter-in-law and sitting MP Dimple Yadav appears to have a tough fight in hand.

Local residents talk of the development brought by "Bhaiya" — SP chief Akhilesh Yadav who has represented Kannauj thrice — and regular visits by "Bhabhi". But at the same time, there is talk about "special privileges" to the Yadav community in the constituency.

Unlike in the past, Akhilesh has been camping in the constituency, which goes to polls on April 29, for the past few days.

"It is not as easy as it was in the past. It is a fight between equals. They (SP) have brought development, travel time to Lucknow and Delhi was reduced due to the expressway, we got degree college, medical college. But not everyone is happy. Otherwise, Bhaiya would not have to camp here," says Rinku Kushwaha, a tea stall owner in Tirwa Market of Kannauj.

Kushwaha adds that some OBC groups feel neglected. Among them are the Lodhs, who have a considerable population in the constituency after Yadavs and Muslims, he says. Then he adds, "Jitengi to Bhabhi hi. Behenji (BSP chief Mayawati) bhi to saath hain (But Bhabhi would win, Behenji is also with them)."

The BSP chief and Akhilesh held a joint rally in Kannauj last week to boost Dimple's prospects. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has also addressed a rally in Kannauj in support of BJP candidate Subrat Pathak.

Dheeraj Singh, who runs an electric equipment shop at Tirwa market, says the SP "got work done" in the area, but there was a "lot of hoodlumism". "Most benefits were given to the Yadavs, machines to spray pesticides in fields came and were given to Yadavs, so were hand-pumps and other benefits," he says.

Manoj Singh from Partapur village is sitting outside his shop. "Akhilesh is a good man. He did a lot of work, but his party workers are not disciplined. This is the land of Lohia and you (Akhilesh) should have had faith in yourself. Tell us, if someone is wrongly booked un-

der Sect Act [SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act] and approaches you (Akhilesh), what would you do... Bhabhi has touched the feet," he says.

At the joint rally in Kannauj, Dimple touched Mayawati's feet on the dais.

He also says that after Dimple touched the BSP supremo's feet, people from other castes have started "teasing the Yadavs and asking them to touch Dalits' feet".

Mohd Murtaza, who works in an Attar factory as a labourer, is sitting at a tailor's shop in the heart of Kannauj town, which has a dominant Muslim population. Afraid to say "Yadavs" or "Muslims", he agrees to speak using "Y" and "M".

"Earlier, we used to get electricity round-the-clock. Today, electricity supply for even 12-13 hours a day is a dream. Kannauj enjoyed special status during the SP regime. Both Akhilesh and Dimple have regularly visited the constituency. Kannauj went 10 years ahead during their regime," he says.

He then adds, "But a recent incident in Bilochipura changed things. There a 'Y' was named accused in the rape of a 'M' girl last month. Everyone knew he was guilty and is now in jail. But they did not stand with us. They chose to stand with Y and not M."

Kannauj was represented by Ram Manohar Lohia as a Samyukta Socialist Party candidate in 1967. In 1984, Congress leader Sheila Dikshit won from the constituency. She later shifted to Delhi. In 1999, SP founder Mulayam Singh Yadav won the seat, but vacated it to retain another seat, Mainpuri. In the subsequent by-election, Akhilesh won the seat and retained it in the 2004 and 2009 Lok Sabha polls. In 2012, when the SP came to power in the state, he vacated the seat to become a member of the state legislature. In 2012, Dimple won from the seat unopposed as no other party fielded any candidate.

In the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, Dimple secured 4.89 lakh votes and won from the constituency. BJP candidate Subrat Pathak, who has been fielded again, got 4.69 lakh votes in 2014. BSP candidate Nirmal Tiwari had then got 1.27 lakh votes, which SP hopes to get this time owing to the alliance. The Congress has not fielded any candidate in Kannauj this time.

Kannauj parliamentary seat comprises five assembly segments — Chibbramau, Kannauj, Tirwa, Bidhuna and Rasulabad. Out of these, Kannauj and Bidhuna are reserved segments.



SP chief Akhilesh Yadav with Dimple Yadav in Kannauj on Saturday. PTI



THE QUESTIONS THAT MATTER JHARKHAND

Oppn alliance banks on tight margins of 2014, BJP on Modi name bridging gaps

ABHISHEK ANGAD
RANCHI, APRIL 28

WHEN PRIME Minister Narendra Modi was scheduled to hold a road show in Ranchi recently, the Jharkhand Congress held a press conference comparing him and BJP president Amit Shah to horror film producers Ramsay brothers, stating that the two leaders "scared people", just like the brothers' movies did. The Jharkhand Congress also expressed confidence that Modi's visit would eventually benefit the party as he talked about "futile issues".

However, far from this, on the ground, voters are ready to vote for Modi despite anti-incumbency against local MPs.

Jharkhand has been the BJP's stronghold since the time the state was carved out in 2000. The last two parliamentary elections, the party won most of the seats in the state, which is under its rule — eight of 14 in 2009; and 12 in 2014, riding on the Modi wave. Three of the 14 seats go to polls on April 29.

On April 24, during his visit to Lohardaga constituency, Modi called the Mahagathbandhan, which has ranged an impressive front in Jharkhand, "mahamilawatis (grand adulterators)". He then went on to focus on the national security issue, including invoking Vijay Soreng from Jharkhand, who had died in the attack on a CRPF convoy in Pulwama, J&K.

A large part of his speech was devoted to tribals, who constitute 26% of the Jharkhand population. Accusing the Congress of manipulating them, Modi said that as long as he, the "chowkidar", was there, "aapke jal, jameen aur jungle ko koi bhi panja haath nahin laga payega (no 'hand' will be able to touch your water, land or forest)".

The Mahagathbandhan has accused Chief Minister Raghubar Das of tweaking the Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act and Santhal



JMM's Shibui and Hemant Soren releasing the party manifesto on Saturday. PTI

Pargana Tenancy Act — enabling agricultural land use for non-agricultural purposes — as well as ignoring the tribal demand for a Sama code, formalising their acceptance as distinct from Hindu religion.

The Mahagathbandhan includes regional parties Jharkhand Vikas Morcha (Prajatantrik) (JVM-P), headed by former CM and BJP rebel Babul Marandi, and Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) (that won two seats in 2014), as well as the RJD and Congress. While the Congress will contest from seven seats, the JMM from four, the JVM(P) from two and the RJD from one.

The BJP has one ally, the All Jharkhand Students Union Party. Having refused tickets to four sitting MPs — Ravindra Ray (Koderma), Ravindra Pandey (Giridih), Karia Munda (Khunti) and Ram Tahal Choudhary (Ranchi) — the party is battling rebellion. Pandey made a public appeal to the BJP to reconsider its de-

cision, while Choudhary has filed nomination as an Independent from Ranchi.

However, the BJP is confident not just due to Modi's appeal but also the fact that in 2014, its vote share of 40.1% was more than the votes together polled by the above four parties (36.4%).

Plus, the Mahagathbandhan itself hasn't ironed out seat-sharing creases. The RJD had threatened to go it alone for not getting Palamu and Chatra seats, and while on the face of it there is peace now, an RJD leader is contesting from Chatra, a seat that has gone to the Congress in the Mahagathbandhan arrangement.

In Godda, after the ticket went to the JVM(P), sitting Congress MP Furkan Ansari accused Jharkhand Congress chief Ajoy Kumar of being biased towards the JVM(P), his former party.

With the Mahagathbandhan failing to in-

EXPLAINED E. Amid land rows, Oppn's hopes up

HAVING FORGED a successful alliance in Jharkhand, the Opposition's hopes are up. Plus, the BJP government is fighting discontent over tweaking of Acts regarding land use. The effect could tell on the five tribal-dominated constituencies in the state.



An RJD theatre troupe is holding shows daily on note ban, inflation. Santosh Singh

SEAT WATCH UJIARPUR

NDA 'vikas' resonates in Kushwaha's seat, especially with women

SANTOSH SINGH
UJIARPUR, APRIL 28

AT BALIGAON Mushahari Chowk in Patepur, Ujiarpur, it is only politics that is discussed in the road-side stalls. Sitting at a tea shop, Ranjeet Rai, a farmer, is busy attacking PM Narendra Modi, cracking jokes about the "Rs 15 lakh in everyone's bank account". He says he visited the bank after opening an account under the Pradhan Mantri Jan-Dhan Yojana to enquire if Rs 15 lakh had been credited. The account, Rai informs, still has zero balance.

The Ujiarpur Lok Sabha seat is witnessing a tough fight between Nityanand Rai, a prominent Yadav face of the BJP, and Rashtriya Lok Samta Party chief Upendra Kushwaha, the sitting MP of Karakat, who has chosen it as his second seat because of the nearly three lakh OBC Kushwaha population.

Of the constituency's six Assembly segments, the RJD and JD(U) had won three seats each in the 2015 Assembly polls. "Hindus were never threatened under Mughal or British rule," Rai says, wondering why the BJP believes Hindus should stand united. He also asks why former Bihar chief minister Jagannath Mishra got bail in the fodder scam case while RJD chief Lalu Prasad did not. "Bihar ke sher (Lalu) ko jail mein daal diya (the lion of Bihar has been put behind bars)," Rai says, as shopkeeper Ajay Kumar prods him to tell more. Rai has many such punchlines to share. He offers one: "All ponds have dried up. How will the lotus bloom?"

Just as another round of tea is ordered, an RLSV vehicle carrying a group of *nukkad-natak* (street theatre) artistes stops by. Led by Rukshana Parbeen from Buxar, the team has been campaigning for the RJD and its allies since the first phase of the polls. Fellow artists Ramashanker, Navin, Rustam, Arvind and Upendra stand in a circle to perform their first act — a song criticising demonisation and inflation. "Gangaji ke ghat par mila ek kisan, maine puchha uska naam to bola main hoon Hindustan, katora liye khada tha (I met a farmer on the banks of Ganga. When I asked his name, he said he was Hindustan, he was standing with a bowl in his hand)... As the crowd applauds the performance, Parbeen says the list of places where shows have to be staged and the content were provided by political parties. The group is holding 10-12 shows daily.

2014 LS POLLS VOTE SHARE	
BJP's Nityanand Rai	22.25%
RJD	18.01%
2009 LS POLLS VOTE SHARE	
JD(U)'s Ashamegh Devu	14.65%
RJD	12.59%

A few metres away, a group of women, however, hold a different opinion. "Now we have electricity, our children can study, we already have roads. The NDA government has done a lot of work," says Baligaon resident Kiran Devi, adding several women disagree with their husbands on the choice of candidates.

Fifteen kilometres away from Baligaon, at a small village market in the Sarairanjan Assembly segment of Ujiarpur, people are waiting for BJP national president Amit Shah to arrive. Tents have been put up at the high school to provide shade to the crowd. As the chopper approaches the school, young boys and girls rush to the helipad to catch a glimpse of Shah, who has arrived along with Bihar Deputy CM Sushil Kumar Modi.

The two leaders address the crowd along with the BJP's Ujiarpur candidate, Nityanand Rai.

While Sushil Modi says he is witnessing a "bigger (Narendra Modi) wave in 2019 than (he saw in) 2014", Rai believes "this election belongs to *deshpremi* and *vikaspremi* (country lovers and development lovers)". Shah, on the other hand, dwells at length on the BJP's strong policies on national security post the terrorist attack in Pulwama.

But it is the social math of the constituency that makes the battle in Ujiarpur so intense. While in 2014, Rai had won the seat beating the RJD's Alok Mehta, Kushwaha hopes the dominance of MYK (1 lakh-odd Muslims, around 1.5 lakh Yadavs and about 3 lakh Kushwaha voters) will turn the tide in his favour: The BJP is looking to split the Yadav and Kushwaha votes and add it to the NDA's base comprising upper castes Bhumihars, Brahmins and Baniyas.

SEAT WATCH NASHIK

In bastion, the loneliness of Chhagan Bhujbal

ZEESHAN SHAIKH
NASHIK, APRIL 28

THE SPRAWLING 30,000 sq ft mansion situated in the heart of the five-acre Bhujbal Farms was once said to be the epicentre of Nashik's politics. Hangers-on would linger in its sprawling lawns. Today the place bears a deserted look and stands testimony to former Maharashtra deputy chief minister Chhagan Bhujbal's declining political fortunes.

Bhujbal once sold vegetables for a living. But jumping parties and loyalties with ease, he had gone on to lord over prime real-estate and business interests worth crores.

In 2016, Bhujbal, who was with the NCP, was arrested on charges of money-laundering, pressed by the Enforcement Directorate (ED). The ED alleged that Bhujbal had received kickbacks in the proposed construction of a state library in Kalina and the Maharashtra Sadan in New Delhi, when he was the Public Works Department minister in the Congress-NCP government.

After spending over 26 months in jail, Bhujbal was released on bail in 2018. With a bulk of his supporters having deserted him, he is trying to reassert his claim on Nashik.



Nephew Sameer Bhujbal, who too spent time in jail, in race from seat. Yatish Bharu

rested in the same case, is the NCP's candidate from Nashik and will be squaring off against sitting Shiv Sena MP Hemant Godse. The constituency votes on April 29.

The initial situation seems to have been inimical to the Bhujbal clan. All the six Assembly segments in Nashik Lok Sabha constituency have a BJP or Shiv Sena MLA. Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi candidate Pawan Pawar was also seen as likely to make a dent in Bhujbal's OBC support base.

However, the entry of BJP rebel and sitting MLA Manikrao Kokate has allowed the

2014 LS POLLS VOTE SHARE	
Shiv Sena's Hemant Godse	52.77%
NCP	32.79%
2009 LS POLLS VOTE SHARE	
NCP's Sameer Bhujbal	36.34%
MNS	32.98%

Bhujbals a level playing field. The Bhujbals are hoping that Kokate, a Maratha, would eat into the votes of Godse, his clansman.

They are also counting on the supporters of Raj Thackeray, the supremo of the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS), which is not in the race but is believed to be working for the Congress-NCP. The MNS has a strong presence in Nashik and at one time, three of its MLAs had been elected from the city.

However, others believe Bhujbal's past may trip him this time. Apart from the corruption charges, the Bhujbal family is accused of fraying the social fabric of the city and paving the way for criminals to enter politics. In Nashik, there are several stories of his alleged high-handedness. In 2009, after then Nashik police commissioner V D Mishra had tried to extort four politicians with known criminal records, including Bhujbal aide

Kailas Mudaliar, he had been transferred. It was only after Nashik residents took out protest marches that the transfer order was revoked.

"They may claim to have worked for the development of the city but the Bhujbals have caused substantial damage to the political climate of this city. Electing them back to power would be an irreparable loss," Godse said. Bhujbal, however, denied playing any role in the criminalisation of the city's politics.

He said, "If Bhujbal is responsible, what has the present government been doing? I have done so much for this city. They don't have anything else to attack me on and this issue is raked up."

Bhujbal, who was also a member of the Shiv Sena and one of the first MLAs to be elected from the party in 1985, attributes his fighting spirit to late Sena supremo Bal Thackeray. "I have spent my formative years in the Sena with Balasaheb Thackeray. I guess this fighting spirit comes from there," he said.

Sitting in his sprawling office dotted with Victorian paintings, Bhujbal is these days busy working the phones to strengthen alliances in the constituency with 18 lakh voters.

Pointing to a painting depicting Napoleon Crossing the Alps mounted behind his chair, he said, "Napoleon overcame odds to succeed. I am sure I will too."

No work, but Rajasthan labour chowkis say: Modi better for nation

SHALINI NAIR
UDAIPUR, RAJESAMAND, AJMER, JAIPUR, APRIL 28

FOR ABOUT half an hour, starting 8 am, buses halt at Udaipur's Syphon labour chowki to offload passengers huddled on their roofs. Hundreds of daily wage workers commute to the 10-odd labour chowkis in Udaipur city, from villages as far as 60 km away. Rooftop travel cuts the Rs 25 one-way fare to Rs 15. Until a couple of years ago, this commute was sure to get them a daily wage of Rs 300 for unskilled work and Rs 500 for skilled ones; Rs 50 lesser in case of women. Now, more than half a month goes in day-long waits, only to return empty-handed.

"It's been like this for two years. First *note-bandi* and then GST, the market has slowed down," says Bansilal Salvi (40), who makes a living doing civil works such as laying bricks, cement, tiles, and plaster. His work is down to 10-15 days in a month.

Salvi, a migrant to Udaipur from nearby Rajesamand district, wants the Centre to legislate a job guarantee scheme in towns and cities like MNREGA in villages. Asked if that would decide his vote, he has a different answer though: "Woh hamare liye raat din border par tainaat hain. Pulwama ke baad pehli baar humne dent ka jawaab pathar se diya hai... Modi damdaar hai (They are stationed day and night at the border for our sake. After Pulwama, for the first time we have given an apt response. Modi is strong)."



(Left) Daily wage workers at a labour chowki in Udaipur; women at work at a mineral crushing factory at Beawar, Ajmer. Shalini Nair



two-cornered contest in Rajasthan, voters, irrespective of whether their allegiance rests with the BJP or Congress, are critical of the decline in jobs. But the BJP's nationalist pitch finds resonance across its stronghold of Mewar in south-central Rajasthan as also adjoining constituencies, which vote on April 29.

Rajasthan Labour Department officials confirmed that the post-demonetisation slump has hit the informal labour markets in cities the hardest. The MNREGA work reducing to a trickle under the Vasundhara Raje government made this worse, they say, by sending more labourers to the cities.

In a state where the BJP holds all the 25 Lok Sabha seats currently, the Congress

barely managed to come to power in December 2018. Even then, the rallying cry on the streets was, "Modi tujhse bair nahin, Vasundhara teri khair nahin (No anger against you Modi, but no sparing you Vasundhara)". Post-Pulwama, the scales seem further tilted in favour of the BJP.

Some 300 km away from Udaipur city, in Rani Sagar industrial area of Ajmer constituency, about 40 *hamaali* labourers (heavers) are gathered for tea at a roadside stall, waiting for the next goods-laden truck. Their leader Balvir Kathat (45), belonging to a community of Muslims that is known to follow Hindu rituals as well, says while his vote would be against the dwindling rate of employment, and for the Congress,

many in his clan and team would vote for the BJP. Except for a couple of Gujar and Dalit labourers with him, almost all the men nod in agreement.

Adds Devraj Rao, 25, "They got back Captain Abhinandan safely. In Congress time, soldiers would be beheaded." Rao says he gets all his information from WhatsApp, Facebook, apart from TV.

Asked about demonetisation, Hemsing Rawat, who is in his 40s, says they were hit for months. "But those who had hidden much more money were affected more."

In the adjoining Rajesamand constituency's Assembly seat of Beawar, one in every few households employed with a mineral grinding plant has a member in the

Army. Sunita Shankar (35), who hails from the marginalised Meghwal community, says her family has traditionally voted for the Congress, but that in 2014, she chose the lotus for promising development. In the 2018 Assembly polls, she went back to the Congress, but now, her vote would be "for the soldiers on the border".

That is not altered by the fact that, by the mother-of-five's own admission, her work has slowed down for the first time in 16 years. "Par Modiji desh ke liye sahi hain, aatankwad khatam kiya. Sabke liye sochna padta hai. Desh ka vikas hoga toh apna vikas hoga (But Modi is right for the country, put an end to terrorism. One has to consider everything. Only if the country prospers will

we prosper)," Shankar adds.

Her colleague Sabah Devi adds that she would much rather do MNREGA work in her village than lift feldspar rocks for 10-hour-long daily shifts. "But the last few years MNREGA work has been hard to come by, and anyway, pays less than half of the Rs 250 a day we make here."

In Udaipur, in addition to the slump in informal labour chowkis, marble manufacturing has been hit. At Arihant Marbles, among the largest marble production factories in the state, nine of 10 marble cutting plants have shut. Kushwendra Kumawat says the situation is the same at hundreds of marble units along the city's outskirts since GST.

Similarly, private car services report a dip in revenues due to declining tourism, and a funding cut to NGOs that previously frequented the state. Still, Ratan Patel, a driver, says he wants to give the BJP another chance. "Rioting has reduced. *Umme dar-sa baith gaya hai* (The minorities are scared now)."

Not very long ago, in December 2017, Udaipur had seen widespread rioting after Hindu groups had come out on the streets in solidarity with Shambhulal Regar, who had put up a video allegedly setting ablaze a migrant labourer, Mohammad Afrazul. Back at the Udaipur labour chowki, Mohammad Shah (45), a marble contractor, says more than the fall in his daily earnings from Rs 3,000-4,000 to less than Rs 500, he worries about this eroding social fabric. "Now they incite and polarise us and ask us to go to Pakistan. *Har aadmi toot chuka hai* (Every person is broken)."