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Narendra Modi and Amit Shah will realise their mistake and their mistaken perception of Bengal. They don't understand Bengal. Their senior leaders don't know whether Rabindranath Tagore was born in Jorasanko or Birbhum but they want to get seats in Bengal

# ‘Hinduism is very liberal... They made Jai Shri Ram a political slogan, but Ram does not just belong to BJP’

Fighting one of the most decisive elections of her career, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee admits that the failure of the Left and Congress are behind the ascendance of the BJP. But that does not mean that the BJP can replicate its Tripura win in Bengal, she says in an interview to JAYANTA GHOSAL who followed her on the campaign trail

**In the past eight years, the Opposition's main allegation has been that your government has adopted a policy of Muslim appeasement, and that is why the lotus is blooming in West Bengal.**

I don't think so. In Bengal, the lotus (the BJP's party symbol) can't bloom. The Congress and CPI(M) are in a bad shape. Breakaway groups from the Congress and CPI(M) have joined the BJP. They are working together against the Trinamool Congress. The BJP has a good equation with the state Congress and the Left as well. It is a state-level understanding. I don't mind that. It is their political strategy. It is not based on any ideology.

The BJP always mentions Tripura (Assembly poll victory last year), but it is a small state, a municipality compared to Bengal. In Bengal, the BJP doesn't have any roots. In Tripura, there was a strong anti-CPM, anti-incumbency mood. The BJP spent huge amounts of money to win the Tripura election. The Congress also broke down in the state and a lot of Congress leaders and workers joined the BJP. If you have won Tripura that doesn't mean you can win Bengal too.

**The BJP has been accusing your government of minority appeasement. Has that pushed the Hindu voter away from your party?**

That's a myth that the BJP believes in. After May 23, when the results are out, the BJP will realise... In Bengal, we have unity among all communities. It is true that Bengal has 30 per cent Muslim population, but we also have Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists and many others. There is no hatred. The BJP is trying to break the unity among communities.

**It was a similar situation in Assam, where the BJP came to power in 2016.**

All states are unique and you can't have the same method for victory everywhere. What succeeded in Assam, that is not possible in West Bengal. In Bengal, we have a mini-world. We have 23.3 per cent SC voters, 5.9 per cent Adivasi voters, 17 per cent OBC voters, and there are the general category voters as well. We all work together. The BJP's campaign will be counter-productive.

**In your rallies you have spoken about going to the Ramakrishna Mission, worshipping Ma Durga and Ma Kali...**

We are secular. Here Muslims and all communities live together. I go to Ganga Sagar, that is called the 'Gateway to Kumbh'... Ganapati Bappa Morya, Chatth Puja, Kali and Durga Puja... Even when Sikh women organise festivals at gurdwaras, I go there and have meals with them. They (BJP) are spending a lot of money to spread hate. What is the BJP's strategy? In Gujarat they are saying 'Bihari Hatao', in Assam they are saying 'Bengali Hatao', in Maharashtra they are saying 'UP hatao'. In which direction is the BJP moving? Is this the philosophy of 'Akhand Bharat'?

Also, Hindutva is not the same as Hinduism. I want to explain this very clearly. Hindutva is a political ideology but Hinduism is a way of life. I am also a Hindu by birth. I worship God. Hinduism is inherently a very liberal religion. If you don't pray every day even then you are a Hindu. They have made 'Jai Shri



(From top) West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee at a rally in Purulia district; women and children at Banerjee's Bankura rally blow conches and do the 'ulu dhwani'. Banerjee has also been reciting the Chandi Paath at such events. ANI/Partha Paul

Ram' a political slogan, but Ram does not just belong to the BJP. Thakur Shri Ramakrishna was not just a strong devotee of Kali, but also Ram. Just by displaying the *gada* (mace), Hanuman's weapon, on the road, you are a Hindu? This is an insult to Bengal. Bengali Hindus are good Hindus with a good soul. It doesn't depend on how many rituals you follow.

**Would you agree that the BJP has now emerged as the main Opposition party in Bengal?**

It is true. Nature abhors vacuum. There is nothing wrong in that. I was once in the Opposition as well. In Bengal, it shows the failure of the Left and the Congress. But does that mean the people of Bengal have accepted the BJP? Ideologically, Bengal still doesn't like the communal approach of the BJP. Had the CPM and the Congress followed their ideological principles, then, perhaps, this situation could have been avoided. But in the past 34 years of the CPM, there existed a '*harmad bahini*', a gang of goons. These lumpen elements of the Left have now taken shelter in the BJP for the party's money. The BJP has brought in a bad *paisa* culture.

**You have not said it yourself, but many Trinamool workers have been pitching your name for prime minister.**

No, no. The issue of who becomes prime minister is not a priority right now. The main issue is to oust Modi. I wanted Opposition unity. Someone needs to bell the cat. So I tried to organise an Opposition rally in Kolkata. All Opposition leaders joined the conclave... We have several senior leaders, Sharad Pawar,

Sharad Yadav, Deve Gowda... We have 10 prime ministerial candidates. After elections we all can sit together and finalise a name.

**But, only one person can be the prime minister...**

Yes. But that will not be a problem, there will be no instability, like what the BJP is claiming in its campaign. The fact is that the people are frustrated and if Modi continues, the country will be destroyed. He is destroying all institutions. Demonetisation has created problems. There are no jobs. A day after demonetisation, there was an advertisement for PayTM... the very next morning. How did PayTM know that this would happen? Narendra Modi believes he will come back to power again. But actually he can't. The next government must probe these allegations.

**Why does Bengal see so many incidents of political violence? It happened under the Left regime, but it's the same under your government as well.**

There are a few small incidents. It happens everywhere during elections. A section of national media that is controlled by the BJP highlights it. They want to show Bengal in a bad light. Also, there are a lot of fake pictures do-

ing the rounds on social media. They are old photos, some are even photos from other countries. Once they put up a picture from Bangladesh. It's very sad.

**But television channels reported violence on polling days...**

Some small, scattered incidents are being blown up by a section of the national media that is controlled by the BJP.

**You have had a long political career, and in 2019, you have emerged as a strong Opposition force. Are you getting ready to play an important role in Delhi? Can you be the game changer in these elections?**

It is true that after May 23 the Trinamool Congress will come out with flying colours in Bengal. Narendra Modi and Amit Shah will realise their mistake and their mistaken perception of Bengal. They don't understand Bengal. Their senior leaders don't know whether Rabindranath Tagore was born in Jorasanko or Birbhum but they want to get seats in Bengal. It is very strange indeed. Many people think that Modi will come back, Modi thinks the same too. But I know that this time Modi will be overthrown and a new government will be formed.

**But who will be the PM?**

**“The issue of who becomes prime minister is not a priority right now. The main issue is to oust Modi. I want Opposition unity. Someone needs to bell the cat. So I organised an Opposition rally... We have several senior leaders, Sharad Pawar, Sharad Yadav, Deve Gowda... After elections, we can all sit together and finalise a name”**

I told you we have a lot of PM candidates and somebody will be the PM. We will take the decision after sitting together. It will not take much time to select a candidate.

**PM Modi has called the Opposition mahamilawat, with no unity or consensus on ideology among parties.**

This is an incorrect assessment. Modi's policy isn't pro-poor. There are no jobs. There has been no economic growth. Several economists, including Amartya Sen, have criticised Modi's economic model. Gujarat is a small state and the credit for what he has done in Gujarat goes to the people. They are inclined towards business. The state isn't as complicated as Bengal. Bengal has suffered for decades because of the Centre's atrocities.

**Modi always refers to you as Didi. In these elections, the entire political narrative has become 'Modi versus Didi'.**

No, no. It is not like that. Firstly, I have also tried to develop good Centre-State relations. He talks about federalism, but actually he doesn't care about the state's autonomy. The progress of the state isn't at all his priority. Delhi is taking the revenue from states but not helping the states back.

**There is a counter-allegation that you are not cooperating with the Centre. You stopped the Prime Minister's video conference with state officials, you don't send your officials to Delhi, you don't participate in CMs' conference etc.**

It's a big lie. I was called for the Inter-State Council meeting twice and I went both times. But nothing happens in those meetings. Only the Prime Minister talks and we listen. As for the NDC (National Development Council), I am not happy that they have destroyed the old Nehruvian concept of the Planning Commission. Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis, played a very significant role in creating the Planning Commission. It is still relevant. There is no *niti* in NITI Aayog.

Regarding the video conference with the chief secretary, I think that when there is an elected Chief Minister in a state, then avoiding the CM and talking to the chief secretary directly is not right. It is disrespectful to constitutional federalism. Once Rajiv Gandhi started a conference, PM to DM. He wanted to talk to all district magistrates directly and there was severe criticism. He had to stop it.

**Politics aside, you are known to walk everyday for good health.**

Yes, I walk 20 kilometers every day. When I am home, I use the treadmill. When I am out of Kolkata, I walk whenever I get the opportunity. Twenty kilometers is a minimum.

**And you eat very little too. You only had cucumber while flying.**

(Laughs) Actually, in this heat, cucumber is good to combat dehydration. Otherwise, I drink tea several times a day.

Ghosal, a senior journalist, is a columnist with ieBangla.com

## At Didi rallies, Sanskrit chants, Ma Durga and 'ulu dhwani'

JAYANTA GHOSAL

IT IS a hot afternoon. At Barrackpore's Amdanga Math, a teeming crowd waits for West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee to arrive. As she gets off her chopper, she says, referring to the Barrackpore Lok Sabha constituency (that voted on May 6), "There are all kinds of people in this area — Hindu-Muslim, Bihari-Bengali... It's very cosmopolitan."

Among the people gathered to hear the Chief Minister are several Muslims, but in her speech today, delivered passionately and without a pause, Banerjee doesn't mention them. The BJP has been accusing the TMC government in the state of appeasing the community.

"Do you know that (BJP president Amit) Shah came here and worshiped Ma Kali thinking she was Ma Durga? If he does not know the difference between Ma Durga and Ma Kali, how much will such a person know about the Hindu religion?" she says, going on to urge the women in the crowd to make the auspicious '*ulu dhwani*' for TMC's Barrackpore MP and candidate in these elections Dinesh Trivedi.

Such rituals have become common at Banerjee's rallies in these elections, where she has also been seen reciting the 'Chandi Paath', a Sanskrit prayer for goddess Chandi.

The next day, the TMC had planned a long *padyatra* in Howrah. Apart from Bengalis, Howrah, Kolkata's twin city, also has a large Hindi-speaking population and Banerjee has planned her rallies carefully here. In her speeches she has been pointing out how the BJP has been trying to create a divide between Hindi and Bengali speaking people. "We will not tolerate such politics," she says.

Later, the CM's chopper heads to Kharagpur in Medinipur district (voted on May 12), once a Communist stronghold. This time sitting Rajya Sabha TMC MP Manas Bhunia is contesting against BJP state party president Dilip Ghosh, the CPI(M)'s Biplab Bhatt and the Congress's Sambunath Chatterjee. Here too, perhaps to counter the BJP's allegation of the TMC going soft on illegal immigrants and Rohingyas from Myanmar, Banerjee goes to great lengths to explain the difference between Hinduism and Hindutva.

Back at the Barrackpore rally, Banerjee turns her attention to the men. "Listen boys, you are Dinesh's brothers. Why don't you clap?"

Soon, the high-pitched sound of *ulu dhwani*, conches and applause reverberates across the Barrackpore venue. Mamata Banerjee begins to recite the Chandi Paath.



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## BALLOTIN



EC move comes after Deora's reported remarks exhorting Jain community to vote against a party.

## Milind Deora censured by EC

**New Delhi:** The Election Commission on Monday censured Congress leader Milind Deora for his reported remarks exhorting the Jain community to vote against a party. The EC said that Deora, Congress candidate from South Mumbai, violated the provisions of the model code in his Zaveri Bazaar speech on April 2. "The Commission, after considering his reply found it violative of para 1 and para 3 of MCC and therefore censured him and warned him to be more careful in future," the EC said. Earlier, he was served a show cause notice for his reported remarks that Jains should teach that particular party a lesson for allegedly cooking meat near a temple.

PTI

## EC nod to Andhra Cabinet meet

**Hyderabad:** The EC has permitted the Andhra Pradesh government to hold a Cabinet meeting on May 14 with certain conditions. The state government had wanted to hold the meeting on May 10, but it was advised to seek permission from the EC as the Model Code of Conduct is in force. The EC on Monday stated that it has "no objection over the meeting, 'subject to conditions that any new decisions or revision of rates or any outstanding payment will require permission of the commission before implementation'". Andhra Pradesh CM N Chandrababu Naidu and Chief Secretary L V Subramanyam earlier appeared to be headed for a showdown as the Chief Secretary had asked officials not to attend the meeting.

ENS

## Modi has right to defend but can't denigrate the dead, says Ashwani Kumar

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE  
NEW DELHI, MAY 13

SENIOR CONGRESS leader and former Law Minister Ashwani Kumar has said that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has a "right to defend himself" but he cannot "denigrate the dead".

He was referring to Modi's remarks on Rajiv Gandhi in his campaign speeches in order to target Rahul Gandhi, who has routinely used the phrase 'chowkidar chor hai' to allege irregularities in the Rafale deal.

Kumar said Modi's "vicious campaign of calumny" against the late Rajiv Gandhi "must shame the high office he holds". "The anger, arrogance and triumphalism manifest in the PM's utterances at the cost of truth are a gross negation of civility, decency and humility expected of the holder of the highest executive office in the country. The Prime Minister's right to defend himself does not extend to denigrating the dead. Attacking the nation's beloved leader known for his decency and civility who is not in our midst and therefore unable to defend himself is not the act of a brave heart," he said.

On the Prime Minister's attack on the Congress in the context of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, he said it was clearly an attempt to polarise the votes.

"Every election we see very unfortunate events and the memories of those events being raked which does not serve to heal the wounds of the nation. 1984 was a colossal tragedy and can never be condoned," he said.

## Cong slams Modi over Ratlam candidate's Jinnah remark

The Congress on Monday criticised Modi after he addressed a rally in Madhya Pradesh's Ratlam for BJP candidate Guman Singh Damor, who last week claimed that the Partition would not have happened if Mohammad Ali Jinnah was made Prime Minister after Independence.

Addressing a press conference, Congress spokesperson Pawan Khara slammed Modi for campaigning for Damor and demanded an apology from the Prime Minister over the Ratlam candidate's statement.

"Now Modi ji is campaigning for his Jinnah-supporting candidate. Now it is becoming clear why Modi-ji invited (former Pakistan prime minister) Nawaz Sharif for his swearing-in, why he went to Pakistan uninvited and why (current Pakistan PM) Imran Khan wants them (BJP) to come to power. This is the 'Bharatiya Jinnah Party'," he said.

## Why is naamdaar pretending to reprimand mentor: PM in Punjab

'Hua to hua' mentality weakened India's security policy, says Modi

NAVJEEVANGOPAL, MILIND GHATWAI & KAVITA UPADHYAY  
BATHINDA, BHOPAL, SHIMLA, MAY 13

TERMING THE Congress as a party with a "confused leader and diffused thinking" that is struggling to get 50 Lok Sabha seats in the ongoing elections, Prime Minister Narendra Modi renewed his attack over Sam Pitroda's "hua to hua" remark on the 1984 anti-Sikh riots and said that Congress president Rahul Gandhi should feel ashamed of it.

At a rally in Bathinda in favour of Akali nominee and Union minister Harsimrat Kaur Badal, Modi said he wanted to know if Rahul reprimanded Pitroda for "letting out" what Rahul's family thought of the riots.

On May 9, Pitroda had said "hua to hua (it happened, so what?)" when asked about the 1984 anti-Sikh riots.

Jagdish Kaur, the main complainant in the riots case against Congress leader Sajjan Kumar, who was sentenced to life imprisonment for his role in the violence, also shared the dais at the Bathinda rally.

Without naming Pitroda, Modi said the "hua to hua" remark by Rahul Gandhi's mentor, who had "specially come from America" reflects the Congress's thinking and arrogance. "From Bathinda, I want to ask Congress on behalf of entire Punjab that for how long would it continue to rub salt on our wounds," Modi said.

"The 'naamdaar' (dynast) told his mentor that he should feel ashamed of what he said. I want to ask why the 'naamdaar' (dynast) was pretending to reprimand his mentor. Was it because the mentor made public what was in the heart and discussions within the Congress? Was the mentor being reprimanded for letting the family talk?" Modi asked in his 20-minute speech.

Kaur asked the gathering not to vote for Congress as it would be an insult to martyrs. She said she would soon get a case filed against slain Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi since he was the "biggest murderer who protected the perpetrators" of the riots. Referring to Pitroda's statement, Kaur said it showed that the Congress had no remorse.

At another rally in Solan in Himachal Pradesh, Modi alleged that the Congress's "hua to hua" mentality has weakened the country's security policy.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi at a rally in Solan on Monday. Pradeep Kumar

The Prime Minister alleged that the Congress treated defence deals as "ATMs" to make money. Modi said that when he assumed charge as the Prime Minister in 2014, he found that more than 70 per cent of the defence equipment were imported. "The high import was because defence deals were like ATMs for them (the Congress) to extract money, so they didn't let the country become self-dependent (in terms of production of defence equipment). There is no defence deal in which serious allegations of corruption have not been levelled against them," he said.

Stating that the country had up to "150 years of expertise and experience in manufacturing defence equipment" at the time of Independence, while China had no defence manufacturing units at the time, he said that the situation is the opposite now.

He said that while China has premier defence exports, India is now a big importer of defence equipment. He said the BJP had tried to change the situation. "The BJP government has tried to change this in the past five years. There has been an increase of 80 per cent in manufacturing of defence equipment," he said.

At another rally in Madhya Pradesh, Modi targeted Rajiv Gandhi again for the alleged misuse of *INS Virat*, comparing the supreme sacrifice of a lieutenant commander who died fighting fire on *INS Vikramaditya* with "picnicking on a war vessel".

His remarks came at a rally in Ratlam, where Lt Commander Dharmendra Singh Chouhan was cremated on April 29. Chouhan had sustained severe burns while dousing a fire on board *INS Vikramaditya* and had died during treatment at a Navy hospital.

"I pay my tributes to Lt Commander Dharmendra Singh who made the supreme sacrifice while saving a war vessel. On the other hand what does the Congress's 'naamdaar' family do? They use the war vessel for picnic. When questioned, they defend it shamelessly, carelessly and without fear, saying 'hua to hua'," Modi said, adding that the last three words are a reflection of the Congress's ideology, attitude and arrogance.

"Whether it's the Bofors scam, submarine scam, helicopter scam or death of security personnel due to lack of bulletproof jackets... they have the same response," he said.

Modi insisted there is a wave in his favour and criticised "pundits in Delhi" for not acknowledging it. "Youngsters are voting because they want to secure the 21st century and women because of the law providing death penalty for rape. There is a wave in every home."

Beginning his speech with 'Bharat Mata ki jai' which he called "our culture", Modi claimed the Congress has a problem with the slogan. "They like to hurl abuses but can't say Bharat Mata ki jai. Does the country need *rashtrabhakti* or *gaali bhakti*," he said.

## Sam Pitroda should be ashamed, told him to apologise: Rahul

KANCHAN VASDEV  
GAGGAR MAJRA (KHANNA), MAY 13

AICC PRESIDENT Rahul Gandhi on Monday attempted to strike a chord with Punjab's electorate by broaching the issue of the 1984 riots and bashing Congress leader Sam Pitroda for his "hua to hua" remarks, besides launching a scathing attack on Prime Minister Narendra Modi amid slogans of "chowkidar chor hai" by Congress workers.

In his 27-minute address at a rally in Gaggar Majra village in Khanna district in favour of party candidate Dr Amar Singh, Rahul said, "Maine Sam Pitroda ji ko bola Sam Pitroda ji ne 1984 ke baare mein bola wo bilkul galat bola hai, aur inko desh se iske liye maafi maangni chahiye. Main publicly bol raha hu yehi maine unko phone karke kaha ke Sam Pitroda ji aapne bilkul galat bola hai, sharam aani chahiye aapko aur public apology maango (I told Sam Pitroda-ji that whatever he said about the 1984 riots is wrong and he should apologise to the nation for his remarks. I am saying this publicly and I told him the same on a telephone call that whatever you said was absolutely wrong, you should be ashamed and must apologise to the people)."

Asking people to vote for Dr Amar Singh, who he said was involved in preparing the MGNREGA scheme and Food Security Act during UPA rule, Rahul lashed out at Modi for his unfulfilled promises like 2 crore jobs every year, and crediting of Rs 15 lakh in bank accounts. "Nahi" (no), shouted the crowd as Rahul asked if anyone got the jobs promised by Modi.

Hitting out at the Prime Minister for demonetisation and "Gabbar Tax" (GST), Rahul attempted to woo farmers, women, youth, BPL families and labourers alike by reiterating the



Rahul Gandhi at a rally in Punjab's Khanna district. Harmeet Sodhi

promises made in the Congress manifesto.

Hardselling the proposed NYAY scheme, Rahul said that 5 crore women would get Rs 6,000 every month under the scheme if Congress was voted to power. Referring to farmers, he said they helped the country usher in the era of green revolution. He said that under the Congress rule no farmer would go to jail for not repaying their loans and, 150 days of assured employment would be provided under MGNREGA instead of 100 days.

To attract youth, he said there were 22 lakh government vacancies in the country. "Within one year of our rule, all these jobs would be given to you. As many as 10 lakh youths can get employment in panchayats," he said.

Dubbing the 2019 Lok Sabha election as an "ideological fight between false promises and realistic commitments", Rahul asked the gathering for a show of hands on how many of them had to stand in queues to withdraw money from banks. "This chowkidar has been exposed, the people know the truth about him... Now he is even scared of debating with me on the issues as he has no answers," he said.



Priyanka Gandhi Vadra with Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Kamal Nath at the Mahakaleswar temple in Ujjain, on Monday. PTI

## Tapasya rids one of arrogance, didn't work for Modi: Priyanka

MILIND GHATWAI  
BHOPAL, MAY 13

CONGRESS GENERAL secretary in-charge of eastern UP Priyanka Gandhi Vadra on Monday took potshots at Prime Minister Narendra Modi on her first political visit to Madhya Pradesh, calling him a *tapasvi* (ascetic) whose arrogance is intact despite performing *tapasya* for decades.

"*Tapasya* rids one of arrogance, anger and hatred but it has not happened (in his case)," she told an election rally in Ratlam, hours after Modi addressed a rally in the town. The Congress leader said the BJP government at the Centre was so arrogant that it chooses only public meetings and speeches to communicate with people.

In an interview to *The Indian Express*, Modi had said that his image had been created by 45 years of his *tapasya*.

She alleged that the PM has not found the time to meet the poor or farmers in his constituency Varanasi to ask them what "*tapasya*"

he can do to alleviate their problems. Priyanka accused Modi of exploiting people's sufferings to build "towers of power" and of making fun of tribals. "Those who claim to be saviours are the ones who have harmed you," she said in the tribal-dominated constituency.

The Congress leader alleged that the Modi government was driven only by propaganda and tries to give the impression that there was no development before 2014. "You talk of providing security, claim to be such a big patriot and ascetic. Why can't you protect farmers, youths and women," she said, accusing Modi of raising trivial issues and making new promises without giving answers on why he did not keep his old promises.

She also visited the Mahakaleswar temple at Ujjain — the sacred paste was still smeared on her forehead when she addressed the rally at Ratlam.

On a visit to Indore, a group of people shouted pro-Modi slogans as her cavalcade passed them. Priyanka stopped her car and shook hands with some of them, wishing them good luck.

## Modi should remember one is abused only for acts that merit 'gaalis': Maya

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE  
LUCKNOW, MAY 13

DAYS AFTER Prime Minister Narendra Modi gave a list of abuses he has received from different Congress leaders, BSP chief Mayawati on Monday said at a rally in Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh, that a person is abused only when he does things that merit "*gaalis* (abuses)".

Claiming that Modi and BJP president Amit Shah's "*burey din* (bad days)" will start from May 23, when the Lok Sabha election results are announced, the BSP chief said that UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath will also start preparations to return to his matth (temple).

Adityanath was the chief priest of Gorakhnath matth in Gorakhpur.

Addressing the joint rally along with Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav and RLD chief Ajit Singh, Mayawati said, "Yeh (Modi) *apni chunavi jansabhaon mein yeh bhi bata rahay hain ki mujhe vipakshi dal nayi-nayi gaali de rahe hain. Kisi bhi vyakti ko gaali tabhi di jaati hai, jab woh gaali khane ka kaam karta hai. Yeh baat bhi shri Modi ko zaroor dhyan mein rakh kar chalna chahiye* (In his election rallies, Modi is telling people that the Opposition is hurling new abuses at him every day. A person is abused only when he does something that merits abuses — he

## PUNJAB

## Drug menace haunts families, scarcely mentioned in poll talk

NAVJEEVANGOPAL  
BATHINDA, SANGRUR, MAY 13

"*DO MUNDE si ikreh gaya* (I had two sons. Now I have just one)," says Shamsher Singh, fighting back tears as he recalls the pain and anger he felt on the day his son Gurddeep succumbed to drug overdose in February.

"Akalis had planted the tree of drugs, but it has spread more during the present government's rule," he says, seated on a cot in his house in Jhaneri village of Sangrur district.

With 114 last year and 13 in the first quarter of this year — drug overdose deaths continue to rattle Punjab at a worrying rate. From the brother of a councillor, son of a daily wageer, kabaddi players — many have fallen prey to the scourge in Punjab.

In the 2017 Vidhan Sabha elections, drug menace was one of the major issues. The Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) went to polls amid sharp criticism from opposition parties over the matter. SAD stood third, winning only 15 seats in the 117-member Vidhan Sabha.

This election, however, seems different. Except for a passing reference by SAD and its



At Avtar Singh's home in Rupa Heri, trophies surround the photo of his son Balkar, a kabaddi player who died of suspected drug overdose last December. Jaipal Singh

president Sukhbir Singh Badal attacking Chief Minister Amarinder Singh over unkept promises despite taking oath on the Gutka Sahib, the issue of drugs has not been a major talking point during campaigning.

But among families who have lost their loved ones to this menace, the issue can't be forgotten.

In the centre of Talwandi Sabo, which houses one of the five temporal seats of Sikhs — the Takht Damdama Sahib — Jeevan Khan, a daily wageer, talks about the loss of his 23-year-old son Lovepreet Babu in July last year.

"He managed to get votes due to this, but nothing happened," says Khan, referring to Amarinder's pre-poll promise of "breaking the

backbone" of the drug racket in four weeks.

"Policemen are hooked to drugs, how will they stop this? Drugs are sold more now as compared to Akali regime. And if someone indulging in drugs is caught, 10 people come to get that person off the hook," says Khan.

A photo of Congress candidate Amarinder Singh Raja Warring is pasted on Khan's door. "Persons hired to put up such posters may have pasted one here too. Otherwise, no politicians have come to us so far. They probably fear the questions we will ask," he says, his other son Yousaf, a Class XII student, by his side. Yousaf refers to the promise to end drugs as a "flop wali gal" (one that flopped).

In Raman Mandi, Puneet Maheshwari, a Congress councillor, is sitting in his shop. On a wall, he is seen in photographs with Warring and Congress president Rahul Gandhi.

Puneet's brother Kamal Kant Maheshwari died of drug overdose in June last year. Puneet says that Kamal, who died at the age of 24, got hooked to chitta and to wean him off it, his family stopped him from pursuing his undergraduate studies in commerce. Puneet says Kamal had given up drugs after treatment at a de-addiction centre in Malerkotla, but claims

he was "forcibly injected" with chitta in Talwandi Sabo by an addict who had met him at the de-addiction centre.

"The government cannot do anything. Drugs are coming from Khara. The border is just 7 km from this place," says Puneet.

"After my brother's death, we formed a committee and with the help of local police, launched a crackdown on people involved in drug trade. But now it's back to the usual. Police cannot do much. The drug peddlers bring in chitta in small quantities like 1 gram. What will you do if someone is caught with 1 gram? The accused gets bail as it is a very small quantity and starts peddling again," he says.

In Rupa Heri village in Sangrur, Avtar Singh points to the photo of his son, who died of suspected drug overdose in December last year. The photo is surrounded by trophies and awards he won as a kabaddi player. "Balkar was 15 when he started participating in open kabaddi tournaments," says Avtar, a small farmer in Rupa Heri. "He had a disturbed marriage... I don't know whether he was hooked to drugs... I spent a lot to make him a good kabaddi player. Those who own more land could never spend this much on their children."