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‘We miss Lalu Prasad. We now have to remind voters about his misrule’

SANTOSH SINGH

With the seven-phase election in Bihar drawing to a close, how is the NDA placed?

We are supremely confident about returning to power with the BJP getting a majority of its own (at the Centre). Talking about Bihar, the last two Lok Sabha elections show that our alliance is about 10 per cent ahead of the Opposition. In 2014, NDA got about 38 per cent votes and RJD-Congress had about 28 per cent. Now that the JD(U) is with us, we will be well placed despite the Grand Alliance’s claims of having done well.

But doesn’t the social combination of the Grand Alliance worry you, especially since the RJD and Congress have got the RLSP, HAM(S) and VIP to their side?

All these three parties were part of the NDA. We had given 20 plus seats each to Jitan Ram Manjhi’s HAM(S) and Upendra Kushwaha’s RLSP in the 2015 Assembly elections but they were not able to transfer votes to us and could only win one and two seats respectively. We had also tested Mukesh Sahni (of VIP) in the 2014 elections. Only a few parties can transfer votes — parties like RJD and JD(U) can. We agree that there could be some split votes here and there but it may not translate into results (in favour of the Grand Alliance). We have a much better and proven social combination with allies JD(U) and LJP.

In 2004, the BJP’s India Shining campaign had backfired. Are there moments when you fear a repeat of that?

There is a difference between 2004 and 2019. Then PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee had not been keeping well and could not do aggressive campaigning because of his knee surgeries. There had been issues with the RSS as well. But current PM Narendra Modi had done some very



aggressive campaigning and we have perfect synergy with the RSS. We are fully confident about ourselves. Anyway, it’s just a matter of a few days now (for the results).

The BJD recently praised the Centre. Is the BJP still looking for potential allies?

I am focussed on Bihar and I am not the right person to answer this. But in politics, one never knows who will go with whom. We have already worked with the BJD and also the Trinamool Congress.

Your alliance partner JD(U) has started talking about special category status for the state all over again. Is this pressure tactics?

The 14th Finance Commission report had ruled out Bihar’s case. JD(U) leader KC Tyagi has said they would wait for the 15th Finance Commission report. Bihar has got adequate funds from the Centre. Special category status has been an old demand of the JD(U) and it is well within its rights to talk about it and pursue it.



Nitish Kumar seems to be uncomfortable with the BJP playing up nationalism.

Too much is being read into a video clip from the PM’s Darbhanga function in which he chants *Vande Mataram*. What do you have to say about the Parliament session beginning with *Vande Mataram* and concluding with *Vande Mataram*? I do not see any discomfort in the JD(U). Rather, JD(U) workers have been chanting *Vande Mataram* with more vigour.

National security is another of the BJP’s platforms this election.

We are talking about development in great detail. If you listen to the PM’s 34-minute speech in Buxar on Tuesday, he talked about national security for only four minutes. Anyway, it is a Lok Sabha election and national security is in the Centre’s domain. This is not a panchayat election after all.

You often say Narendra Modi is contesting from every seat. Are you not confident about your candidates?

Even though we do not have a presidential system, some leaders like Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Indira Gandhi and Narendra Modi

make it seem like one. The NDA has definitely been fighting this election in Narendra Modi’s name. We had played up the leadership of Vajpayee. But Congress could not do so with Manmohan Singh. Nor it can do so with Rahul Gandhi.

Rahul Gandhi recently said in an interview that the one thing he learnt from PM Modi was how not to run the country. Your comments.

Rahul Gandhi should have, in fact, tried to learn from PM Narendra Modi, who has set an example of hardwork. He has been one of the best performing PMs of our country. Rahul Gandhi has been trying unsuccessfully to tarnish the PM’s image. He tried to do so with the ‘chowkidar chor hai’ jibe but had to later apologise in court.

In retrospect, do you think GST and demonetisation were ill-conceived moves?

Some of our political opponents may well be talking about it but it is not an issue. We successfully contested the Gujarat polls after GST was passed. Not a single decision in the GST Council needed voting; all decisions were taken unanimously. No political party opposed. Also, what’s not often discussed is that price rise is not an issue this general election because we managed to keep prices under control. We should be given due credit for that.

Do you miss Lalu Prasad in this campaign season?

We do miss him. We now have to remind voters about his misrule. His presence could have helped us consolidate anti-RJD votes. He did campaign in the 2009 and 2014 polls but ended up getting only four seats on both occasions.

How do you rate Tejashwi Yadav?

It is up to the people of Bihar to rate him. I am not giving him any rating. But I would like to point out that his elder brother Tej Pratap Yadav will prove to be an RJD leader in the Lalu Prasad mould. He has the flourish and traits of his father. People may dismiss his statements but he shows maturity. The battle of succession in the Lalu family has not ended yet.

accusation by producing a list with names of beneficiaries, which include relatives of former chief minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan.

The BJP has fielded Shankar Lalwani in Indore, the seat synonymous with BJP veteran Sumitra Mahajan, who first won it in 1989. Mahajan, who turned 76 this year, was willing to contest but opted out after the party took time to announce her candidature.

In a rally in Indore on May 12, Modi took Mahajan’s name several times in a bid to placate her, saying she was the only person who could scold him.

Till recently, Indore was considered a safe seats for the BJP. However, in the Assembly elections, both the Congress and BJP won four seats each. Both the national parties have been campaigning extensively in the city. While the BJP has been holding rallies, Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra held a road show and also addressed a gathering in support of candidate Pankaj Sanghvi.

In Khandwa, former Union minister and PCC chief Arun Yadav is taking on Nandkumar Singh Chouhan, the former state BJP chief. In 2014, Chouhan had defeated Yadav, who had also contested against former chief minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan in the 2018 Assembly elections from Budhni and lost.

EXPLAINED

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Farmers to hold key

THE LAST stretch in Madhya Pradesh includes Mandsaur, where five farmers died in police firing in 2017. While in the 2018 state election, the BJP won seven of the eight segments that make up the Lok Sabha seat, the Congress, which came to power riding on its farm loan waiver scheme, hopes to reverse its fortunes.



Congress’s Priyanka Gandhi Vadra campaigning in Indore. PTI

Gandhi had announced, on the first anniversary of the firing incident, the farm loan waiver scheme, which, analysts believe, helped the Congress wrest power from the BJP after 15 years.

While the BJP did well in Mandsaur in the recent Assembly election, the Congress put up an impressive performance in Dhar, Jhabua, Alirajpur and Khargone districts that constitute the Dhar, Khargone and Ratlam

Lok Sabha seats, all of which are reserved for the Scheduled Tribes. The BJP has fielded Jhabua MLA Gumansingh Damor, the only sitting legislator in the fray, to take on Bhuria in Ratlam.

In its election campaign, the BJP has been targeting the state Congress government over the farm loan waiver scheme, arguing that the party had failed to keep its promise. The Congress, on its part, has countered the



Bhagwan More at his pakoda stall at Shirur Tajband, Latur. Zeeshan Shaikh

In region without jobs, industries, flyovers, Modi, BJP trump all

ZEESHAN SHAIKH
LATUR, MAY 15

AT 11 am, Shaikh Firoz and over a hundred other men and women who have gathered at Ganj Golai in Latur are becoming increasingly restless. Ganj Golai, named after the huge oval-shaped market, has served as a pick-up point where Latur’s daily wage labourers assemble for being hired for work.

“At 11 am, my heart sinks because contractors have already picked up their workers for the day. Earlier we used to get work at least four times a week. Now, I feel lucky if I get hired twice or thrice a week,” says 28-year-old Firoz, who works as a mason.

Firoz, who is planning to head home and try his luck the next day, blames his predicament on two factors — nature and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Latur, which falls in Maharashtra’s Marathwada region, has witnessed consistent rain deficit over the last five years. As of May this year, over 45 lakh residents, who constitute 24 per cent of the region’s population, are dependent on water tankers for their daily needs.

The region voted on April 18 and is now awaiting the results on May 23. “Due to water shortage, there is hardly any construction happening. That means there are no jobs for people like us. Also since Modi came to power, I believe my life has gone from bad to worse,” Firoz says.

The 28-year-old’s reference to Modi, however, brings a howl of protest from people standing nearby. Shaikh Gulrez, a rickshaw driver who does not remember the name of the BJP candidate whom he voted for, castigates Firoz for blaming Modi.

“Certain people in Latur have so much money that they can pave the streets of this city with marble and still have enough to lead a luxurious life. These people have made their fortunes by looting public money and Modi is now tightening the screws around him. I voted for him this time and I am sure we will see the results of his work in the next five years,” Gulrez says.

Latur is considered the bastion of the late Vilasrao Deshmukh, who served as the chief minister of Maharashtra for two terms, a tenure spanning over seven years.

The adjoining district of Nanded is seen as the bastion of Maharashtra state Congress president Ashok Chavan, who, along with his father Shankarrao Chavan, presided over as CM for three terms, stretching over seven years.

“For a region that has given the state three CMs, the area should have been prosperous. Apart from a few flyovers and underpasses, it has nothing. There are no industries where people like me can find work. I have faith that Modi will change all this,” says Rahul Yash-

wante, a 19-year-old first-time voter from Latur. Yashwante, a student of commerce, sells newspapers and works as a compounder for an Ayurvedic doctor to help his family.

This underlining angst against established politicians runs across the region with many like Yashwante believing that Modi can and will transform the way things are done.

“So many schemes have been launched by him. Earlier, I used to see my father stand for hours in a line to get an LPG cylinder. Now, we can do this online and the gas is delivered to our home in two days,” Yashwante says.

In Shirur Tajband, a village in Latur’s Ahmadpur taluka, Bhagwan More has recently opened a *pakoda* stall. A former tractor driver earning about Rs 8,000 a month, More opened the stall to supplement his family’s meagre income. He acknowledges that business is not as good as it should be but is betting on Modi to improve his plight.

“I have voted for Modi. I don’t care who the local candidate is. The business may not be great but I sense this government is working for the upliftment of people,” he says.

While many say that the region has not seen any job creation since Modi came to power, the heightened nationalistic fervour and surgical strikes have ensured that a large number of youngsters are now speaking of joining the army.

In the Latur-Nanded stretch, several coaching institutes have opened up which are training prospective candidates wanting to join the army.

“Students come asking how they can join the Army. Most of them belong to poor agricultural families. With jobs missing, they feel that joining the army can give them a better life. Moreover, under Modi’s leadership, our Army and armymen have got so much respect,” says Yashwant Pikle, an operator of a training centre in Ahmadpur.

The BJP’s nationalism narrative has many takers. “In spite of my disliking for our sitting Shiv Sena MP Bhavana Gawali, I voted for her as I want Modi back in power,” says Ganesh Gheware, a Shiv Sena worker who works as a newspaper vendor at the Washim Bus Stand.

Gheware laments about the abject state of infrastructure in Washim and the lack of development in the region. Pointing to a rickshaw driver, he says, “He has not had a passenger in the last two hours. Does this place look like a district headquarter? No work has happened here in the last five years.”

In spite of this, Gheware says his vote was for Modi because of the honour that the Prime Minister has brought to the nation.

“Earlier when Manmohan Singh used to visit foreign countries they used to make him sit on the last seat. Today, when Modi goes, he is asked to sit on the first seat. Foreign leaders like (US President Donald) Trump want to hug him and be friends with him,” Gheware says.

ACROSS A NATION

LENGTH & BREADTH

2 LINES, OVER 7000 KM 30 DATALINES, 15 STATES

ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL HARDEEP SINGH PURI

With late-night meetings, handshakes, minister makes up for lost time

MANRAJ GREWAL SHARMA
AMRITSAR, MAY 15

IT IS 11 at night, the shutters are down in Tej Nagar but there is a party underway at the end of a narrow alley. Standing on a stage in what has now become his signature blue waistcoat and turban, diplomat-turned-politician and now Union minister Hardeep Singh Puri is giving a call to action to the crowd that has a few youngsters. PM Narendra Modi is “definitely” returning to power, he says. “So be wise, vote for a candidate who will get a ministerial berth in his Cabinet, and see the fortunes of the city change,” he says.

Speech done, he leaves for a tea break at the house of a BJP supporter. The few local leaders break into a run as they try to catch up with Puri’s brisk strides. It’s a modest house already packed with people, ready with their cellphones, but Puri makes himself comfortable, shaking hands, making eye contact with everyone introduced to him, and happily posing for selfies.

It’s almost midnight and the city appears

fast asleep by the time he steps out, but the minister has yet another meeting at a hotel with a group of professionals. “It’s just another 5am-to-1am poll day,” he shrugs. No, he doesn’t mind the heat and dust of canvassing, he says. “The people here are unbelievably warm,” says the former diplomat, who often finds himself mentally correcting his Punjabi. “Japanese was my first language,” he laughs.

Pitchforked into the Amritsar poll fray rather late in the day, the BJP candidate is trying hard to make up for the lost time. In 2014, this seat, known to be unkind to ‘outsiders’, had defeated BJP stalwart Arun Jaitley, who had even bought a house here in a bid to burnish his Ambarsari credentials, preferring to elect homegrown Capt Amarinder Singh instead. Earlier, the city had forced cricketer-turned politician Navjot Sidhu to move base from Patiala to Amritsar — Sidhu bought a house here — and ensured three LS wins for him.

In the 2017 bypolls, necessitated by Amarinder’s elevation to chief ministership, the city defeated BJP candidate R M S



Campaigning in Amritsar, Puri dismisses the outsider tag, calls it “baloney”

Chhina by over 2 lakh votes and elected Congress councillor G S Aujla, 46, who is pitted against Puri now. In fact, Amritsar has

elected a BJP candidate only four times in the past 19 LS elections.

Calling the outsider tag “baloney”, Puri

says, “I am not an outsider, my grandparents came and settled here after Partition. I was four when I first visited the city.” The minister has even printed a brief ‘*jeevani*’, detailing his family’s ties with the holy city. He also underlines his panthicties. “As a long-haired child in Germany, I faced a lot of jibes from my classmates but I stood firm.” He reminds people how, as a special representative to the United Nations, he fought for the turban and even refused to remove it for a security check at Houston airport.

Early morning, Puri is at Company Bagh, the favourite morning hangout of Amritsaris, wooing voters with a smile. The locals acknowledge the effort he is making. “He is trying hard, he shakes hands with everyone but there were several local BJP leaders who could have made the cut,” says Vikas Chhabra, a trader.

Puri admits his nomination did cause heartburn among local hopefuls. “That is part of democracy, every leader should get a chance.” But he is quick to add he is no newcomer to the party. “I was an ABVP member in college. When I officially joined the party in

2014, the PM told me the BJP is already in you.” Navdeep Plato, a lawyer, says infighting in the BJP, coupled with Congress candidate Aujla’s local connect could foil his chances. Puri claims he is over this hump: “The party leaders are rallying behind me.” Waving his blue and red vision paper, detailing his ambitious plans for the city, he says, “I’ve done more for the city during my tenure as a minister than the last five MPs.” He takes credit for the Rs 1,200-crore grant under the Smart City project and Rs 70 crore under the Hriday scheme. “The city will see a dramatic change if I am elected.”

The BJP has pinned its mathematics on Puri, an urban Sikh, getting the 80,000-odd urban Sikh votes in the city with ally and Akali leader Birkram Majithia swinging the rural votes in his favour.

Puri is dividing his time between the urban and rural electorate, as wife Lakshmi Puri, executive director of UN Women, meets women in small groups.

The locals, meanwhile, are enjoying being wooed. As the lawyer Plato says, “He is putting up a good fight. Let’s see who wins.”

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128 years after death, Vidyasagar becomes election issue in West Bengal

RAVIK BHATTACHARYA & SANTANU CHOWDHURY
KOLKATA, MAY 15

NEARLY 128 years after his death, Bengali cultural icon Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar has become the focal point of Lok Sabha elections in West Bengal after his bust was targeted during clashes between TMC and BJP workers during a roadshow by BJP president Amit Shah in Kolkata on Tuesday.

On Wednesday, a day after the bust inside Vidyasagar College was vandalised, the TMC held more than 10 rallies in the state with pictures and T-shirts bearing images of Vidyasagar, the Left Front staged a rally in Kolkata, and BJP leaders sat on a dharna and accused the Trinamool of “orchestrating the attack” on Shah’s roadshow to malign their party’s image.

With the last phase of voting scheduled on Sunday, the political firestorm over Vidyasagar also shifted the election discourse from the narrative of BJP’s Hindutva versus TMC’s secularism. On Wednesday, TMC chief and West Bengal Chief Minister publicly paid tributes to Vidyasagar during a public meeting at Agarpara and claimed that “Bengal is under attack” from outsiders brought in by the BJP.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who addressed two public meetings in Bashirhat and Diamond Harbour, did not refer to Vidyasagar in his speeches but alleged that the TMC had attacked Shah’s rally.

Banerjee led a protest rally in North Kolkata to condemn the violence. “It was a planned criminal and communal conspiracy, and Bengal is under attack. They were outsiders. Had they been anyone from Bengal, wouldn’t they have identified the bust of Vidyasagar? They were hired goons of the BJP who carried out the attack and beat up college students. They should be ashamed,” she said.

Banerjee also led a *padayatra* (march),



West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee inspects the vandalised statue of Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar in Kolkata on Tuesday night. *PTI*

which included members of the civil society, from Gandhi Bhawan to Shyambazar, with hundreds of TMC workers holding images of Vidyasagar and banners that read “Shame BJP”. The *padayatra* began with Banerjee paying tribute to Mahatma Gandhi’s statue and ended with her placing flowers before the statue of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. Midway, she stopped at Swami Vivekananda’s ancestral house to pay tribute.

Taking the fight to social media, Banerjee changed her profile picture to an image of Vidyasagar, which was followed by many Trinamool leaders on WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook. The TMC also staged rallies in Hooghly, Howrah, Bankura and West Burdwan districts.

The party’s secretary general Partha Chatterjee accused Amit Shah of trying to “save his face” by putting the blame on the TMC for Tuesday’s incident. “But the people

of the entire country saw who broke the bust of Vidyasagar. The video footage is enough to unmask them. The state education department will restore the bust,” Chatterjee said.

The Left Front, too, took out a rally from Vidyasagar Udyan at College Square to Hedua Park in North Kolkata and held both the TMC and the BJP responsible for the incident, which CPI(M) general secretary Sitaram Yechury described as a “scar in the history of Bengal”.

Yechury said: “Vidyasagar was an important part of Bengal’s renaissance. His social contributions changed the course of national movement and ensured that India became free. It is a very dismal show by both political parties...both of them are acting completely against that.”

State BJP leaders sat on a dharna in front of Gandhi Statue on Mayo Road in Kolkata to protest “TMC attack” on Shah’s roadshow.

At the state BJP headquarters, UP Chief

Delhi BJP leader held after Shah roadshow

New Delhi: Delhi BJP leader Tajinder Bagga on Wednesday said that he was arrested at 2 am in Kolkata following the violence during Amit Shah’s roadshow in the city. He said he was released on Thursday morning. “The police reached my hotel room at 1 am and asked me to come down. After several phone calls, when I refused, 15-20 police personnel came and broke down my door. I was arrested. The police were cordial but said they had orders from top to arrest me,” he said. “They went through footage from the spot but realised I wasn’t there.... I was some 4 km from that place. When my lawyer came they let me go.” **ENS**

Minister Yogi Adityanath hit out at Banerjee for claiming that the BJP brought outsiders into West Bengal to create trouble. “The Bengal BJP has enough workers. We don’t need outsiders to come here and take part in roadshows. The TMC is nervous and puzzled by the BJP’s imminent victory, which is why its leaders are making such irresponsible comments,” he said.

One of Bengal’s towering cultural icons, and among the greatest personalities of the Bengal Renaissance, Vidyasagar was a polymath who reconstructed the modern Bengali alphabet and initiated pathbreaking reform in traditional upper caste Hindu society.

The focus of his social reform was to ensure an end to the practice of child marriage and initiate widow remarriage. Vidyasagar’s Bengali primer, *Borno Porichoy*, remains the introduction to the alphabet for nearly all Bengali children.

Didi behind attack on Shah roadshow, spreading terror: PM

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
KOLKATA, MAY 15

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi on Wednesday launched a blistering attack on West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and said that she “orchestrated an attack on Amit Shah’s roadshow on Tuesday”, and claimed that BJP will get more than 300 seats in the Lok Sabha elections.

Narendra Modi spoke at two public meetings in Taki, under Bashirhat Lok Sabha seat, and in Diamond Harbour.

At Basirhat, he said, “The country has seen pictures of Kolkata yesterday (Tuesday). Today the matter is on the lips of everyone. The BJP’s rise in Bengal has made Didi so frustrated that she is stooping to such a level.... Two days ago, Mamata Banerjee announced that she will take revenge. An attack was orchestrated on Amit Shah’s roadshow in Kolkata. The attack was meant to spread terror.”

He said, “This democracy gave you respect and made you the Chief Minister, but your hunger for staying in power is making you strangle democracy in Bengal. You are making a mistake by thinking that the people are your servants. When people want answers, you start abusing them and resort to violence. Modi is not scared of your threats and abuses because 130 crore people are with me. You have destroyed the tradition of Bengali *bhadralok* (gentleman).”

Modi also took a dig at Banerjee over the arrest of BJP youth wing leader from Howrah, Priyanka Sharma, for posting a meme on the Chief Minister on social media. “Four-five years ago, a Bengal’s daughter asked questions to Didi on a television show, over which



PM Narendra Modi at a rally in Diamond Harbour constituency. *PTI*

she got so angry and left the show after saying wrong things to the girl. She did the same to another daughter of Bengal. Her anger was so much that she put the girl in jail. Just for a picture, Didi has brought Bengal to Emergency days. Even Netaji’s grandson (Chandra Bose, Netaji’s grandnephew and BJP candidate from South Kolkata) was not spared by TMC goons,” Modi said.

“This is Bengal, Didi. If people can put you in the sky, they can also bring you down to the ground. Those daughters of Bengal whom you put to jail will teach you a lesson,” he said.

“Didi, you are an artist and a painter. Your paintings sell for crores. I appeal to you to make a painting of me, the dirtiest and a bad painting. After May 23, when I become the Prime minister again, come to my home and gift that to me. I will accept it smilingly and keep it with me for lifetime. I will not lodge an FIR against you,” Modi said.

“With the blessings of the people of Bengal, BJP will form the government with numbers on its own. BJP singlehandedly will cross the majority mark and get over 300 seats. If BJP alone gets 300, NDA will get more,” he said.

TMC shows videos as proof: ‘Shah’s goons’ broke Vidyasagar bust

ABANTIKA GHOSH
NEW DELHI, MAY 15

ARMED WITH videos which the party claimed conclusively proves that BJP workers had vandalised the statue of Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar in the eponymous college in Kolkata, the Trinamool Congress (TMC) on Wednesday handed a memorandum to the Election Commission, alleging that “hooligans” had attacked a “peaceful assembly” of Vidyasagar College students.

Accusing BJP president Amit Shah of lying and bringing outsiders into the state, senior TMC leader and Rajya Sabha MP Derek O’Brien said Vidyasagar is integral to the identity of Bengal and Bengalis.

“Their planned armed attack, organised to let loose a reign of terror on the eve of the final phase of Lok Sabha elections in and around Kolkata, knew no bounds. The armed goons even vandalised the bust of Pandit Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, a father figure of Indian renaissance,” O’Brien maintained.

Calling it his “saddest press conference”, O’Brien said: “Vidyasagar is part of Bengali ethos. The BJP president cannot understand that.... What he did with his hired goons.... Wikipedia will not give a feel of the man — writer, philosopher, social reformer, champion of women’s education...every boy and girl who has grown up in West Bengal has read his books, learnt their alphabet from them.”

O’Brien also said the party is still trying to confirm, but it has been “widely reported in Bengali media that while the desecration of the statue was being done, the slogans were ‘Vidyasagar finish, where is the josh?’”

Besides O’Brien, his Rajya Sabha colleagues Manish Gupta, Sukhendushekhhar Roy and Nadimul Haq were also present.

The TMC leaders played videos, one showing people who were purportedly part of Amit



Trinamool Congress MP Derek O’Brien with party leaders after the meeting at EC office on Wednesday. *Renuka Puri*

Shah’s roadshow scaling the walls and gates of Vidyasagar College, another showing men, including some in saffron T-shirts, smashing the Vidyasagar statue viciously.

The videos, O’Brien claimed, disprove Amit Shah’s contention earlier in the day that it was impossible for BJP workers to have broken the statue since the college gates were locked and they did not have the keys. “He’s a liar. This is how they responded to a democratic protest of college students with black flags and flex banners... he is lying.”

The Trinamool MPs slammed the EC and repeated the party’s charge that central forces are in cahoots with the BJP. In what they called “proof”, the TMC leaders showed photos of a man in combat gear first with some saffron-clad people and then with BJP state chief Dilip Ghosh. Asked for proof of their allegation that outsiders had been roped in to create trouble, Gupta said, “Throughout the elections, goons from Jharkhand and Bihar are staying in hotels...in private houses.”

On Delhi BJP leader Tajinder Bagga’s detention, O’Brien said, “Tajinder Bagga? Who is this guy? Didn’t he slap somebody in Delhi?” The reference was to an incident some time back involving Bagga and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal.

PROTESTS IN DELHI, KOLKATA



Prem Nath Pandey

(Left) BJP leaders Nirmala Sitharaman, Vijay Goyal and Harsh Vardhan protest at Jantar Mantar against the alleged attack by TMC workers on BJP president Amit Shah’s roadshow in Kolkata. Sitararam Yechury, Prakash Karat and other CPI(M) leaders at a rally on Wednesday to protest alleged vandalism by BJP at Kolkata’s Vidyasagar College.



Shashi Ghosh

Cong slams BJP; CPM blames both saffron party, TMC

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, MAY 15

THE CONGRESS and the CPI(M) on Wednesday condemned the violence during BJP president Amit Shah’s roadshow in Kolkata on Tuesday and slammed the saffron party for desecration of the statue of social reformer Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar.

The Congress accused the BJP of actively encouraging and abetting the politics of “mobocracy” across the country.

The Left, feeling squeezed out in West Bengal with the election turning out to be a battle and a war of words between Trinamool Congress (TMC) and the BJP, accused both parties of creating the chaos.

Addressing the media in the national capital, Congress spokesperson Abhishek Singhvi said, “A new politics, where moboc-

Why EC invokes its special power

ARTICLE 324 of the Constitution deals with superintendence, direction and control of elections to be vested with the Election Commission of India (EC). The unprecedented order of EC to restrict the campaign in West Bengal by 19 hours is on the premise that Article 324 empowers it to take all necessary steps to ensure free and fair

EXPLAINED

elections. Parliament has enacted specific laws — the Representation of the People Act, 1951, and several other regulations — that also empower the poll panel to conduct free and fair elections.

On any other area dealing with the issue of free and fair election, which is not covered by RP Act or other regulations, the EC invokes Article 324.

racy is being actively encouraged and abetted by the BJP in the country, has gained ground in the past five years. Prime Minister

Narendra Modi and Amit Shah-led BJP is squarely responsible for systematically damaging the cultural identity of each state.”

Mamata morphed photo: SC questions Bengal over delay in freeing BJP member

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, KOLKATA, MAY 15

THE SUPREME Court on Wednesday questioned the West Bengal government for the delay in freeing BJP member Priyanka Sharma — arrested for sharing a morphed picture of Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee — from jail, despite its direction on Tuesday that she be “immediately released”.

Making their displeasure evident, a vacation bench of Justices Indira Banerjee and Sanjiv Khanna observed that the arrest was “prima facie arbitrary”, when it was informed that Priyanka had not been released on Tuesday itself.

Senior advocate Neeraj Kishan Kaul, representing Priyanka’s brother Rajib Sharma, said that although the bench had granted her bail on Tuesday and directed her immediate



Priyanka Sharma on Wednesday refused to apologise. *PTI*

release, she was not freed.

The jail authorities, he added, had demanded that they bring certified copies of the court’s order or approach the Chief Judicial Magistrate Court concerned.

The counsel for West Bengal government responded that Priyanka was released at 9.40 am on Wednesday. The bench asked the counsel, “Why 9.40 am today? The order was passed in your presence (yesterday).”

When the state’s counsel referred to the jail manual, the bench retaliated, “Jail man-

ual can’t have precedence over an order of the Supreme Court.” “No. This is not done. First of all, the arrest was prima facie arbitrary,” the bench said and warned of contempt proceedings if she was not released forthwith.

Kaul asked what right did the state and the police have to detain her even for a minute after the apex court’s order.

In Kolkata, Priyanka refused to apologise after being released from Alipore Correctional Home. In its order on Tuesday, the SC had said, “The detainee shall, at the time of release, tender an apology in writing for putting up/sharing the pictures complained of...”

Priyanka also said, “I will fight this case. I will not apologise for a meme... I was detained for 18 hours even after my bail was granted... They did not allow me to meet my advocate and family. They made me sign an apology forcefully. I was tortured in jail. The jail staff pushed me as if I was a criminal.”

BJP’s Bengal focus: nearly double PM rallies for 6 fewer seats than Maharashtra

LALMANI VERMA
NEW DELHI, MAY 15

WEST BENGAL remained the second most focused area of canvassing for the BJP this Lok Sabha election after Uttar Pradesh, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the party’s top campaigner, addressing as many as 15 rallies until Wednesday.

Modi is scheduled to address rallies at Mathurapur and Dum Dum on Thursday, when campaigning ends in Bengal, as per the Election Commission’s order. This will take the total to 17, a number eclipsed only by his rallies in the politically crucial UP, which sends 80 members to the Lok Sabha.

Modi is scheduled to hold rallies at Mau, Chandauli and Mirzapur in UP on Thursday, which will take his UP rally tally to 31.

In NDA-governed Maharashtra, which



BJP supporters at PM Narendra Modi’s rally in South 24 Parganas district. *PTI*

sends 48 members to the Lok Sabha — the second highest after UP — Modi addressed only nine rallies.

In comparison to 17 rallies in West Bengal, which sends 42 MPs to Lok Sabha, Modi has addressed only nine rallies in Tamil Nadu,

Telangana, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh. These states together have 101 Lok Sabha seats.

In contrast, Modi addressed eight meetings in Odisha, which has 21 Lok Sabha seats.

On Friday, the last day of campaigning in the other states barring Bengal that go to the polls in the last phase on May 19, Modi is scheduled to address a public meeting in Madhya Pradesh. If these six rallies over the next two days are included, Modi will address 144 poll meetings in 27 states since the election dates were announced in March.

For the 65 seats from Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh, states where the BJP lost power in recent Assembly elections, Modi addressed a total of 20 rallies. In Bihar, which elects 40 MPs, he addressed 10 rallies.

Modi addressed only eight rallies in the whole of the Northeast, including the maximum four in Assam. The north-eastern states elect 24 Lok Sabha MPs.