

6 DECISION 2019



SEAT WATCH FAIZABAD, VOTING ON MAY 6

‘Hum to pakode hi talte reh gaye’: Not Mandir, in Ayodhya, a wish for ‘vikas’

MAULSHREE SETH
AYODHYA, MAY 5

IN THE Ayodhya market near the disputed Ramjanmabhoomi-Babri Masjid site, Kailash Singh Das, sporting saffron clothes and a *tika* on his forehead, is busy dusting religious books, like the Bhagwad Gita, on display in his store. Across the road, Atiq Ahmed is also waiting for customers at his shop of *itr* and perfumes, hoping they might start arriving as the sun goes down and the heat reduces.

Das is in his early 70s, Ahmed younger by nearly 20 years. When it comes to the dispute that remains a tinderbox 27 years later, they are on different sides. However, both are agreed that Ram temple is not the focus when it comes to this election.

Requesting that the temple remain an issue of just faith, voters here say they want development, jobs, and better education and health facilities. Some note that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's only rally in the area was held 25 km away from the makeshift temple area, and that he didn't pay a visit to the site.

As Faizabad, under which Ayodhya falls, votes on May 6, the fight here seems to be largely between Modi's name and the gathbandhan of the Samajwadi Party and BSP. While the BJP has re-fielded Lallu Singh, from the alliance side the ticket has gone to former MLA Anand Sen Yadav, who is counting on the image of his father and three-time MP from the seat Mitrasen Yadav.

However, Anand Sen's criminal background is causing some voters from the minority community to consider the Congress's Nirmal Khatri, who has a clean image. Like Anand Sen, the other two are known names. While Khatri is a former Faizabad MP (he won in 2009), as well as an ex-Congress state president, Lallu Singh is the sitting MP and has been an MLA from Ayodhya several times.

Most agree that under the BJP government, ghats have been developed, underground electricity cables laid, and sewage



The evening *aarti* at the Ayodhya ghat (top); Ram Das Yadav, who sells tea and snacks in Ayodhya town, says, 'Who will vote in the name of temple?' Vishal Srivastava

2014 LS POLLS VOTE SHARE	
BJP's Lallu Singh	48% votes
SP	20% votes
2009 LS POLLS VOTE SHARE	
Cong's Nirmal Khatri	28% votes
SP	21% votes

works undertaken. But others, like Ahmed, say development has been limited to Ayodhya town, with the rest of the Faizabad constituency in a bad state. However, he is hesitant when expressing his choice, only saying Khatri is a "good man", "who listens to everyone".

Das too acknowledges the small steps taken, but points out that "better education and jobs" are still to come. "*Mandir kaun nahin chahta? Ram ki nagari mein kaun nahi chahta ki Ram mil jayen? Par vote vikas ka hai, siksha ka hai, vote uska hai jo humara kaam kara sake* (Who doesn't want a temple? Who doesn't want that in Ram's birthplace, one finds Ram?

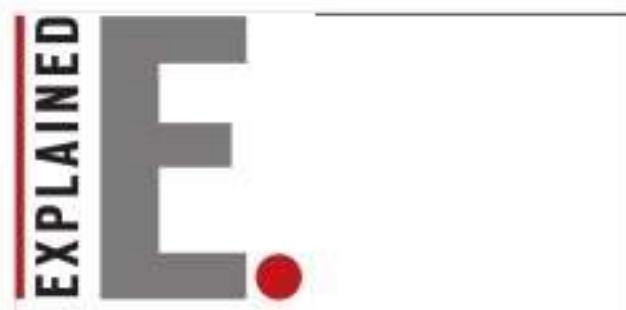
But vote is for development, education, someone who can get our work done)," he says.

About 20 km away, in the city that was earlier called Faizabad and has been renamed Ayodhya by the state BJP government, Ram Das Yadav, who sells *chai* and *pakodas*, almost echoes him. "Who will vote in the name of temple? What did they do for five years?" he says, adding, "We are among the faithful too, but tell me, why didn't Modi visit Ram Lulla?"

Regretting that "development" remains restricted to the disputed area, Ram Das says, "*Hum to pakode hi talte reh gaye* (We are still frying *pakodas*)."

The discussion at his tea stall, where around five people are gathered, soon veers around to the surgical strikes, Jameel Kureshi, a labourer, points out that the Indian side lost jawns too, and adds, "There was an attack from the other side, the government responded. Others would have done the same." According to Kureshi, the fight is between the BJP and gathbandhan.

Faizabad has been represented by several parties over the years. Mitrasen won from here



Change of course

AS THE BJP faces the challenge of repeating its 2014 performance in UP, it seems to be changing its strategy based on local sentiments. It may be for this reason that party president Amit Shah, who had earlier been talking about the construction of Ram temple, has put the topic on the back seat.

in 1989, 1998 and 2004 as CPI, SP and BSP candidate, respectively, while VHP leader Vinay Katiyar represented the seat thrice in the 1990s.

In 2014, Lallu Singh got 4.91 lakh votes, more than double of then-SP candidate Mitrasen's tally. The third placed was the BSP's Jitendra Kumar Singh (1.41 lakh votes) while Khatri finished fourth with about 1.29 lakh votes. With the Modi wave absent, the gathbandhan is hoping that the SP-BSP's combined votes would overtake Lallu Singh.

Meanwhile, at Saryu Ghat in Ayodhya, election dominates discussions amid preparations for the evening *aarti*. Like other BJP supporters, Raghunath Prasad Pandey, a retired Sanskrit School teacher, underlines that this is an election for the country's PM. "The Army's morale has got a boost (under the BJP)," he says. "The surgical strikes have left Ram Mandir behind."

But looking on at a newly constructed ghat, an under-construction sewage pump, and the silt accumulated on the water, shopkeeper R P Pathak, voices the undercurrent in Ayodhya: "Work should continue. That is what matters."

‘Priyankaji would have given a strong fight... (But) we have been here 5 yrs, it'll be good’

LALMANI VERMA

ENDING SPECULATION that general secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra would not be fielded against Prime Minister Narendra Modi from Varanasi, the Congress decided to go with Ajay Rai again. Contesting in 2014 too against Modi from the seat, Rai had finished third, behind Modi and Arvind Kejriwal, getting 75,614 votes.

Do you see any difference in Varanasi in the past five years?

The Gujarat development model highlighted by the BJP in 2014 has failed to deliver here. Whenever the PM came here, he laid foundation stones, but the projects are either incomplete or are not being used for the purpose they were built. The Trade Facilitation Centre is being used for RSS and BJP events, and no programme has been organised for weavers there... When the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas was organised this year, all the event-related works were assigned to people from Gujarat... The BJP and PM have used religious city Varanasi as an event venue for political gains.



What do you think of the massive support Modi got at his roadshow then?

The crowd was brought from Gujarat. Event managers distributed flowers to shower on the PM. In 2014, people had bought the flowers themselves... This time, there is an undercurrent in the Congress's favour.

Did you request the party for a ticket or did they choose you themselves?

I submitted a request as we have been working here for long.

Earlier it was rumoured that Priyanka Gandhi Vadra may contest from Varanasi. Why is she not contesting?

It is up to the party and Priyankaji herself to contest or not. The local party units of Varanasi and Allahabad had passed resolutions that she should contest on either of these seats. The media hyped Varanasi because it is the PM's constituency... The Gandhi family holds workers in high regard and hence they chose a worker as candidate.

Would Priyanka's candidature have made a difference?

Some mediapersons said Priyankaji did not contest against Modi probably because she was afraid that her start in politics would be ruined. I say, Priyankaji certainly would

have been a strong contender here... (But) we have been present with the public for 5 years, it will be good. We have Priyankaji's support.

Your name was announced two hours before Modi's roadshow, whereas the BJP decided a month ago. Was the Congress trying to sense the mood to find the best possible candidate?

Only the party leadership can speak on strategy and planning. The party has taken the right decision, at appropriate time.

The SP-BSP alliance is also contesting here. Do you think that it would have been better if they had supported you?

I do not know what the leadership of all these parties discussed and how they decided. Those who say they want to defeat Modi, should realise the Congress is the strongest fighter (against the BJP). They (the SP-BSP) should also have realised this.

Do you think if Priyanka had contested from Varanasi, it would have had a positive effect for the Congress in eastern UP?

Priyankaji ke ladne se unka ghoomna, movement karna zyada upyogi hai (Priyankaji travelling and canvassing is more useful than fighting an election.) The more she travels and connects with people, the more it will benefit the Congress.

Who has the minority vote, you think?

The Congress, across the country.

And the SP-BSP alliance?

They ignored dedicated workers and preferred those who joined recently. Obviously, there is disappointment among workers of the parties... You can see in Chandauli, the SP could not find a candidate in Varanasi, they changed candidates in Mirzapur twice... they are fielding weak candidates.

On which issues are you campaigning in Varanasi?

The biggest issue is unemployment. Second, in the name of developing the Baba Vishwanath Corridor (the Kashi Vishwanath project), Modiji attacked the religious sentiments of people.

Is nationalism an issue in this election?

Three *jawns* of Varanasi were martyred recently, two of them in the Pulwama attack. Modi did not even meet their families. Is this *rashtrawad*? But Priyankaji visited their homes. I am contesting on development and other local issues.

Punjab parties woo migrant voters with sops, star campaigners

RAAKHI JAGGA
LUDHIANA, MAY 5

WITH MIGRANTS emerging as a key vote bank in Punjab, political parties are going out of their way to woo them — from offering them gas connections and organising voter awareness programmes, to candidates such as the Congress's Raja Warring staying in migrant colonies in Bhatinda.

With an estimated 19 lakh migrant voters in Ludhiana alone, this section has emerged as a key focus area for the Congress and the Akali Dal in the region.

Maresh Inder Grewal, the Shiromani Akali Dal (Badal) candidate in Ludhiana, says, "The migrant voters are already so charged up. They tell us that they will vote for Modi and we only tell them that in that case, they have to press the button near the scales (symbol of SAD) since we are fighting this election in alliance with the BJP. Except for telling them that, we really don't need to make much of an effort."

Ram Chander Yadav, chairman of the SAD's Pravasi Board cell, says that of the 43 lakh migrant population in Punjab, nearly 60 per cent are registered as voters in the state. Nearly 19 lakh migrant voters live in Ludhiana alone, making this section a key focus area for political parties in the region.

"The migrants are mostly from UP, Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Odisha etc. We tell them that if the voters of UP and Bihar make up our mind and vote, they can be the king makers. We can make or break a government easily," says Yadav, who is originally from UP and came to Punjab decades ago.

Both the Congress and SAD-BJP alliance has sought star campaigners to visit the migrant colonies.



SAD's nominee Mahesh Grewal at a migrant colony in Ludhiana. Gurmeet Singh

Ludhiana's sitting MP and Congress candidate Ravneet Singh Bittu said, "I have asked the party to send Shatrughan Sinha and a few other leaders from Bihar and UP."

The SAD-BJP alliance has asked for Manoj Tiwari, the Bhojpuri star who is now the president of the BJP's Delhi unit, and singer Dinesh Lal Yadav, popularly known as 'Nirahua', to visit Ludhiana

and a few other town with migrant colonies. Representatives of migrant voters, however, said they are yet to decide whom to vote for. Ram Swarth, leader of the Poorvanchal Samaj who lives in Ludhiana, said that while migrant voters are sought after during elections, they rarely ever get political representation.

"In the last local body election, the Congress gave a ticket to one migrant candidate and he lost. But the BJP and SAD did not give us even one ticket. When it comes to giving us representation, they run away. So this time we will see whom to vote for. We can't let them treat us as a vote bank always," he said.

Unimpressed by ‘nationalism’, in seat he won four times, election about Lalu being put in jail

SANTOSH SINGH
BAJAHIA (SARAN), MAY 5

FROM THE Rail Wheel Plant in Bela, a small road takes one to Bajahiya, 5 km away. In this village, represented by a succession of prominent Bihar leaders, most walls are plastered with dung cakes, interspersed with a few *pucca* houses.

It was to Bajahiya that Daroga Prasad Rai, who became the second Yadav CM of Bihar after B P Mandal, holding the post from February to December 1970, belonged. RJD supremo Lalu Prasad held the Saran Lok Sabha seat, under which Bajahiya falls, four times.

The RJD has fielded Daroga Rai's son and former Bihar minister Chandrika Rai, against BJP candidate and former Union minister Rajiv Pratap Rudy. While Lalu's elder son Tej Pratap Yadav is married to Chandrika's daughter, Tej had openly disagreed with the party choice.

Lalu won the seat for the first time in 1977 and last in 2009. In 2013, he lost his Lok Sabha membership following his conviction in a fodder scam case. His wife and former CM Rabri Devi had contested in 2014 against Rudy and lost in the Modi wave.

While Chandrika is managing his campaign from a relative's house near the Bela rail factory, wife Poornima Rai has camped herself in the family's single-storey *pucca* house in Bajahiya village and is holding small meet-

ings. A weathered portrait of Daroga Rai, who died in 1981, adorns the entrance to the house, while inside, where he would meet people, a low-height single bedstead used by the former CM is kept for memory.

Police Rai (70), who used to be one of Daroga Rai's close associates — sharing with him more than their names, meant to make them sound "powerful" — says the latter had been happy with a teacher's job, and politics came suddenly. "At a school function, senior Congress leader Jagjivan Ram asked Rai to speak and was so impressed, he took him into politics," says Police.

Recalling his connect with the people, Police says Daroga Rai would walk 7-8 km every morning to meet people. Of his five sons and two daughters, only Chandrika, the second, took to politics.

The village remembers how as CM, Daroga Rai raised an embankment to prevent recurrent flooding of the village from the Gandak waters. The village's two schools, primary and secondary, both opened in the 1960s.

However, the village had to wait until 2016, for the Mahagathbandhan government of the JD(U)-RJD-Congress, in which Chandrika became a minister, to get a metalled road.

At some distance from Daroga Rai's house, Dharmnath Rai, who participated in the 1971 Indo-Pak war and retired as subedar major in 1991, says, "I am amused at all this talk about nationalism. I remember returning to my vil-



A brass bust of former CM Daroga Prasad Rai at Parsa Bazar. Santosh Singh

2014 LS POLLS VOTE SHARE	
BJP's R P Rudy	23.08% votes
RJD	20.42% votes
2009 LS POLLS VOTE SHARE	
RJD's Lalu Prasad	21.62% votes
BJP	17.53% votes

7 DECISION 2019



RAHUL GANDHI

UTTAR PRADESH: 14 of 80 LS seats (2014: BJP 12 Cong 2) Among the key contests in this phase are Rae Bareilly, where UPA chairperson Sonia Gandhi will be looking to retain the seat. She is up against former Congress leader and BJP candidate Dinesh Pratap Singh. Amethi is set for a contest between Congress president Rahul Gandhi and Union Minister Smriti Irani. In BJP bastion Lucknow, sitting MP and Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh is up against SP-BSP-RLD alliance candidate Poonam Sinha.



RAJYAVARDHAN RATHORE

RAJASTHAN: 12 of 25 (2014: BJP 12) Congress faces an uphill battle in Jaipur, where former Mayor Jyoti Khandelwal is up against BJP's incumbent MP Ramcharan Bohra. This phase will also decide the fate of Union ministers Arjun Ram Meghwal, contesting from Bikaner, and Rajyavardhan Rathore, contesting from Jaipur Rural.

WEST BENGAL: 7 of 42 LS seats (2014: TMC 7) Bongaon, Barrackpore, Howrah,



DINESH TRIVEDI

Bongaon, the family feud in Thakurbari, which wields influence in Matua community, will play out in the contest between TMC MP Mamata Bala Thakur and her nephew and BJP nominee Shantanu Thakur.

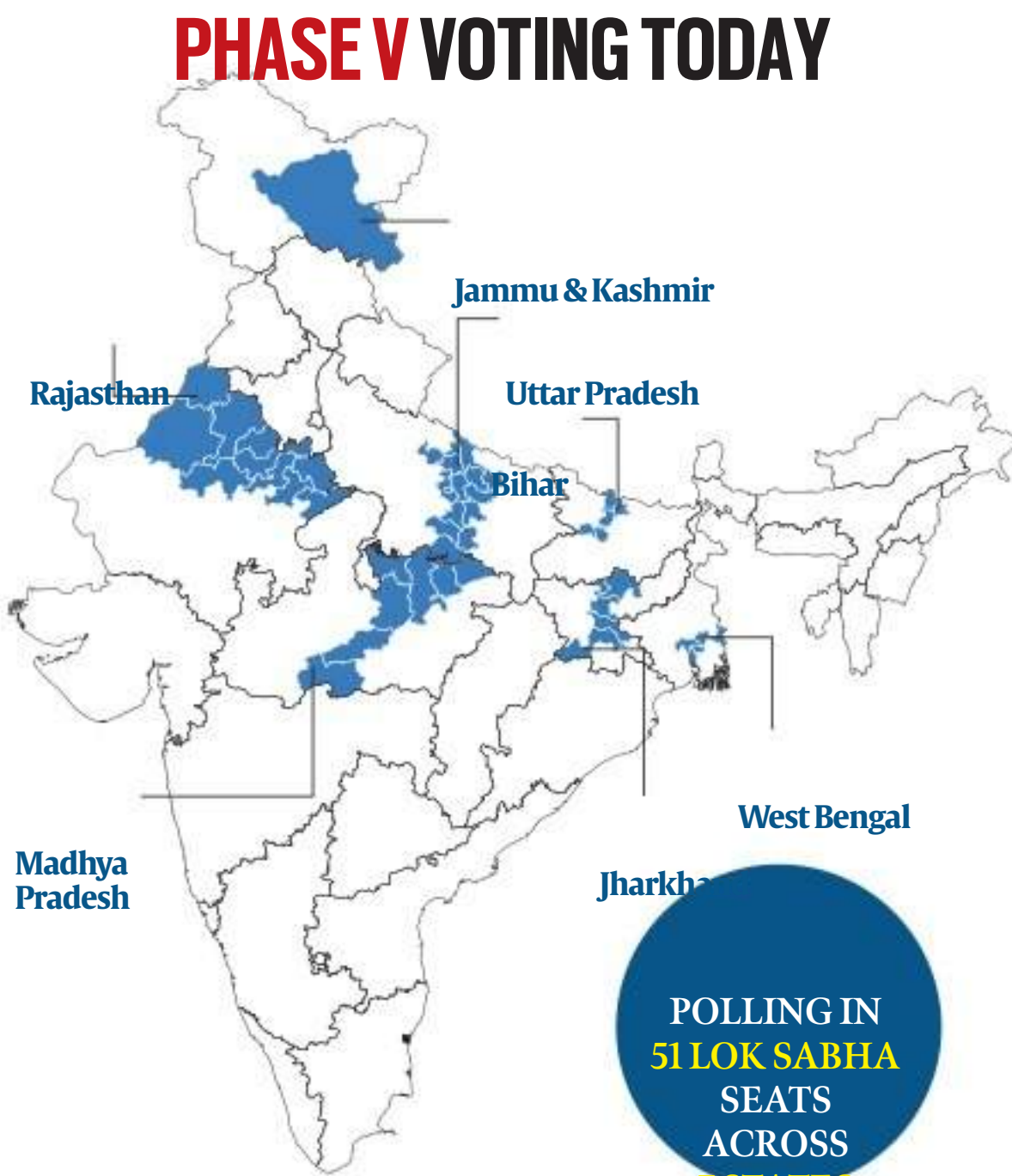
MADHYA PRADESH: 7 of 29 LS seats (2014: BJP 7) Three of these seats are in the Bundelkhand region and the Congress did well there in the recent state polls. BJP candidates from Khajuraho and Tikamgarh, Vishnu Dutt Sharma and Virendra Kumar are facing opposition from within the party.



RAJIV PRATAP RUDY

BIHAR: 5 out of 40 (2014: BJP+4, RLSP 1) Close contests are expected between RJD's Arjun Rai and JD (U)'s Sunil Kumar Pintu in Sitamarhi and between RJD's Chandrika Rai and BJP's Rajiv Pratap Rudy in Saran. In Madhubani, sitting MP

Uluberia, Sreerampur, Hooghly and Arambagh go to polls in fifth phase. Former TMC MLA Arjun Singh is BJP candidate from Barrackpore and is up against sitting TMC MP Dinesh Trivedi. In



Hukumdev Narayan Yadav's son and BJP candidate appears to have an edge over Vikassheel Insaan Party's Badrinath Purve.



BABUL MARANDI

JHARKHAND: 4 of 14 LS seats (2014: BJP 4) Koderma, Khunti, Ranchi and Hazaribagh go to polls in fifth phase. In Koderma, BJP has fielded former state RJD chief Annappurna Devi against JVM (P) chief Babul Marandi. CPI-ML's Raj Kumar Yadav, who is not part of Mahagathbandhan, may split votes. In Ranchi, sitting BJP MP Ram Tahal Choudhary, who was denied a ticket, is contesting as an Independent.

JAMMU AND KASHMIR: 2 of 6 LS seats (2014: PDP 1, BJP 1) The districts of Pulwama and Shopian in the Anantnag constituency go to polls in the fifth phase. Owing to militancy, the government's focus is on peaceful polling than on ensuring a high turnout. In Ladakh, it is not only a contest between four candidates but also between two districts — the Buddhist-dominated Leh and the Muslim-dominated Kargil. Apart from candidates of BJP and Congress, two Independents are in fray.



EVM distribution ahead of polling for the fifth phase, in Lucknow on Sunday. Vishal Srivastav

TURNOUT SO FAR

Phase I	Phase II
69.50%	69.40%
Phase III	Phase IV
69.44%	65.51%
PHASES LEFT	
Phase VI	May 12
Phase VII	May 19

Polling over for **373** seats
Polling left for **118** seats*

*Excluding Phase V seats

Despite Singur farm issues, TMC confident in Hooghly

RAVIK BHATTACHARYA
SINGUR, MAY 5



Concrete pipes at what was earlier the Tata factory site in Singur. Ravik Bhattacharya

EXPLAINED

Singur got development, waits for farming

THE SINGUR land agitation led by Trinamool Congress supremo Mamata Banerjee was a major factor behind the party coming to power in West Bengal in 2011. After coming to power, the Trinamool Congress government initiated development projects in and around Singur and handed over land deeds back to the farmers. But despite its efforts, the state government has failed to make the land suitable for tilling. So the farmers received their land back only on paper. With demarcations not done and the soil in an improper condition, the farmers who were part of the agitation are in a soup as they can neither sell nor cultivate their land.

A major portion of the land has mounds of soil, water accumulated in some parts and bushes. Women take cattle there to graze. There are also some tubewells, no longer in use.

A DAY before polling, Bharat Chandra Das, 73, loitered around what was once Tata's Nano plant site in Singur in West Bengal's Hooghly district. Despite the much-hyped land return by the state government, identification and demarcation of seven of his eight bighas of agricultural plot is yet to be done. The one bigha which has been demarcated yields nothing as there are sand and concrete chunks in the soil. Das, a resident of Khaserbheri in Singur, participated in the agitation against the Nano plant.

Das is not the only one. Three years after the return of land, woes of Singur farmers continue with most of them yet to start farming. Singur is part of Hooghly Lok Sabha constituency, where Trinamool Congress is looking for a third term and the BJP has emerged as its prime challenger.

In 2006, TMC supremo Mamata Banerjee started an agitation in Singur against the acquisition of farm land by the then Left Front government for Tata's small car factory. On August 31, 2016, the Supreme Court ordered that 997.11 acres acquired for the plant be returned to farmers. The verdict was considered a vindication of Banerjee's stand.

The state government removed concrete structures and initiated the process of returning the land in cultivable form. Land documents were returned to over 1800 farmers and seeds distributed. The state government has also been giving a monthly dole of Rs 2000 and 16 kg of rice to 3,200 farmer families in Singur.

Government officials stated that demarcation pillars were put up, but they were dislocated during the laying of fresh soil.

Initially, a small number of farmers started cultivating in small patches, but many of them discontinued after they failed to get produce.

Almost all farmers in villages like Khaserbheri, Joymollah and Beraberai alleged that the land is not ready for farming. "We used to get three crops a year in the eight bighas my family owns. I could only get one bigha demarcated. But that too is useless due to sand and concrete chunks. I have a small patch of land outside (the factory area), about 4 cottahs. That is all I have now. Who will identify my land and make it ready for agriculture?" asked Das, a resident of Khaserbheri.

"We do not want the Rs 2000 a month and rice from the government. We want to till our land. I still have cases against me in court because I participated in the agitation," said Sudip Ghosh (48) from Beraberai. Ghosh has received papers for his two bighas, but they are yet to be demarcated.

Cong suspends Shakeel Ahmed for contesting as Independent

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, MAY 5

ON THE eve of polling in the Madhubani Lok Sabha constituency in Bihar, the Congress on Sunday suspended former AICC general secretary and Union minister Shakeel Ahmed from the party.

Ahmed is contesting as an Independent candidate from the seat which was allotted to the Vikassheel Insaan Party as part of the seat-sharing arrangement in the Mahagathbandhan in Bihar.

"Ahmed, ex-MP, has been suspended, with immediate effect from the Congress party for contesting as an Independent candidate from the Madhubani Lok Sabha constituency in Bihar against the party's decision," a statement issued by AICC general secretary in charge of administration Motilal Vora said.

The party also suspended Bhavana Jha, an MLA from Bihar's Benipatti and a supporter of Ahmed, from the party for anti-party activities.

Ahmed had resigned as a spokesperson for the Congress before filing his nomination papers as Independent candidate.

Ahmed, who had represented the Madhubani seat twice in the Lok Sabha, had earlier urged Congress president Rahul Gandhi to either allot the party symbol to him or support him as an Independent candidate.

He had said that the Vikassheel Insaan Party candidate is so weak that it is more like giving the NDA a walk over.

Justifying his decision to contest as an Independent, he had argued that the RJD has fielded an Independent against the Congress candidate in Supaul seat in Bihar and fielded its candidate in Chatra seat in Jharkhand which is allotted to the Congress.

SEAT WATCH HAZARIBAGH

Hospital hope, AJSU tie-up may boost BJP show

ABHISHEK ANGAD
RANCHI, MAY 5



Union Minister Jayant Sinha

A FEW days ago, Union Minister and BJP MP from Hazaribagh, Jayant Sinha, triggered a controversy when he told a news channel that he and his party members provided financial assistance to convicts in the 2017 Ramgarh lynching case. Last year, Sinha had drawn flak for garlanding six men convicted for lynching cattle trader Alimuddin Ansari in Jharkhand's Ramgarh.

But on the ground in the constituency, this does not appear to be a major issue. People are talking about Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Balakot airstrikes and the medical college and 500-bed hospital — Modi inaugurated the college and laid a foundation stone for the hospital early this year.

JPGupta, who works in the administrative division of a college, told *The Indian Express* over phone, "We have to go to Ranchi in case of any medical emergency. The hospital would help us." While there is anger in a few pockets against Sinha, people largely support Modi. Dr Vinod Michael, who practises homeopathy, said, "Jobs are a major issue. However, votes will be cast on Modi's name."

At Chirudih, where four villagers were killed in 2016 during a protest against land acquisition by the NTPC, local residents said that

while there is anger against the BJP, a significant vote-swing is unlikely.

Asked about prospects of the Mahagathbandhan candidate, Congress's Gopal Sahu, local residents said not many know him by face and he is an "outsider". "Sahu needed to do a lot of ground work. Also, the fact that Sinha garlanded lynching convicts could not be exploited by the opposition. Public memory is short and barring a few intellectuals, this is not an issue

here," said a forest department employee.

Sahu, too, landed in controversy recently after Rs 22 lakh was seized from hotel rooms booked in his name. Subsequently, an FIR was registered. Sahu later clarified that the he had declared his cash with the EC.

Sinha is also expected to gain from the alliance of the BJP and All Jharkhand Student's Union (AJSU), whose candidate retained 1.56 lakh votes in the last election. "Due to the alliance, votes won't be split. This is a safe seat for the BJP," said a BJP leader. Former CPM MP Bhuvneshwar Prasad is also in the fray.

Hazaribagh Lok Sabha seat has five assembly segments — Barhi, Barkagaon, Hazaribagh, Mandu and Ramgarh. Hazaribagh and Ramgarh are held by BJP and AJSU, respectively, and Barhi and Barkagaon by the Congress. Mandu is held by JMM's Jai Prakash Bhai Patel. Last month Patel rebelled against JMM and is now supporting NDA.

At Gurdaspur, Shah talks Balakot: Modi made country safe

KAMALDEEP SINGH BRAR
PATHANKOT, MAY 5

IN PATHANKOT to canvass for the BJP's Gurdaspur candidate Sunny Deol, party president Amit Shah on Sunday said Prime Minister Narendra Modi had "made the country safe". Shah addressed the rally not far from the Pathankot airbase, which was attacked by terrorists in 2016.

Pointing out that the BJP-led government had increased MSP for crops, approved AI-IMS in Bathinda, and founded three mega food parks, he said: "You please don't vote for Sunny Deol for all these development works. You all must vote for Sunny Deol because Modi has made the country safe."

Invoking the air strikes in Balakot, he said: "The whole country was celebrating the strike. There was grief at only two places — one in Pakistan and second at the office of (Congress chief) Rahul Gandhi. Vote bank politics is above national security for Rahul Gandhi."

After the rally, Congress state president and the party's Gurdaspur candidate Sunil Jakhar asked Amit Shah in a tweet, "Dear Mr @AmitShah ji on your visit to Pathankot. Can you please explain why ISI was invited to the Pathankot airbase after the terrorist attack. What did India achieve by exposing our front line airbase to our enemy?"

Shah also attacked Punjab Cabinet minister Navjot Sidhu during the rally. He said that while "the whole word was saying that Pakistani terrorists were behind the Pulwama attack, Navjot Singh Sidhu was saying that a terrorist has no country".

"Dear brother Sidhu, if you like Pakistan so much, why are you living in this Punjab...go to that Punjab," he said. "Captain Amarinder Singh should clarify if he stands with what Sidhu said about Pakistan. We want to know this. He made Navjot Singh Sidhu minister and he (Sidhu) went to Pakistan to hug their Army chief."

Interestingly, Shah didn't claim credit for the Modi government's decision to open Kartarpur Corridor.

The BJP chief credited the Narendra Modi government for "ensuring justice" to the families of the 1984 anti-Sikh riot victims. He vowed that those behind the killings will not be spared at any cost. "The BJP government formed an SIT and gave justice to Sikhs all over the world. All those involved in 1984 Sikh riots will be sent behind bars," he said.

He also referred to Congress leader Sajjan Kumar, who was imprisoned in 2018 in connection with the case. "I want to ask Captain sahib...your party leader was made MP thrice. Where were you at that time? Just tell the people of Punjab," Shah said.

The BJP chief also remembered former BJP MP from Gurdaspur and veteran actor Vinod Khanna. He told the gathering that Deol will realise the dream of Khanna.

Addressing the gathering, Deol promised local residents to address the long-pending demand of removal of a railway barrier. "I will give 100 per cent to complete this project, which was started by former MP late Vinod Khanna. I will be also focus on improving day-to-day problems faced by the people of Gurdaspur from the day I get elected."



BJP president Amit Shah, SAD chief Sukhbir Singh Badal, BJP's candidate from Gurdaspur Sunny Deol and other party leaders in Pathankot Sunday. Rana Simranjit Singh

EC rejects demand for early polling for remaining phases

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, MAY 5

THE ELECTION Commission (EC) on Sunday rejected the demand for early commencement of voting — at 5 am instead of 7 am — for the remaining poll phases considering the heat wave and the onset of Ramzan month.

The poll panel, in its detailed six-page order, stated that voting hours and dates, at the time of election planning, are fixed only after taking several factors into consideration, including weather conditions. In fact, the Commission, the order states, decided to start polling at 7 am so that voters can start polling before it gets too hot.

Commencement of polling at 5 am, the Commission said, is not feasible for several reasons. For starters, it would affect pre-poll activities such as the mock poll. Currently,

the EC has set aside one hour of mock polling before the actual voting begins. If voting were to begin at 5 am, then the mock poll would have to start at 4 am. This would, in turn, mean other pre-poll preparations would have to start at 3 am and wind up at 4 am.

"In several places polling goes on late into the night for those who have reached the polling station at the hour fixed for close of poll. Therefore, starting the poll at 5 am, as proposed by you, would mean that the polling parties would be required to work in polling stations for not less than 18-20 hours, which will not only affect the quality of work but also will not be humanely possible for the officials," reads EC's order on the plea filed by Mohammed Nizamuddin Pasha, an advocate.

The Commission's order came after the Supreme Court last week asked it to pass appropriate orders on Pasha's plea.