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The largest democracy goes to polls

A state-wise overview

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA writes from New Delhi

NDIA goes to fresh parlia-mentary polls staggered over five phases from April 20 in the largest democratic exercise in the world in which 675 million people are expected to cast votes

Every election to choose representatives in Lok Sabha, the lower house of bicameral Parliament, is different with fresh political alignments, new equations among social groups and a set of new issues on which the battle is fought. The 2004 elections are no different

The stage is set with candidates of all parties finalised, alliances struck, manifestos released and filing of nominations for all but the final phase of polling to be held on May 10 completed. While the first phase is scheduled

for April 20, the second on April 22, the third on April 26, the fourth on May 4 and fifth and final on May 10. The counting of votes is slated for May 13 For the first time, electronic voting

machines will be used in all the 543 parliamentary constituencies, putting behind the days of paper ballots.

In all, 28 states and seven federally administrated territories will go to poll in five phases The battle is mainly between Prime

Minister septuagenarian Atal Bihari Vajpayee's party and main opposition Congress led by Sonia Gandhi, in her late fifties, in several states.

In a number of other states, it's between BJP-led National Democratic Alliance and Congress-led combine. Both BJP and Congress have firmed up alliances with regional parties, which are key players in a number of states, in order to checkmate each other.

In fact coalition of alliances is the order of the day in Indian politics. The BJP and Congress are locked in straight fights only in 108 seats while in 293, the two parties are fighting in the company of regional outfits.

The Congress has shed its reservations about alliance politics after being voted out of power in three states last December and sewed tie-ups in 210 constituencies in states like Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, Bihar, Jammu and Kashmir, Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

The BJP is an experienced hand in coalition game. BJP's previous incarnation Jan Sangh had tied up with anti-Congress parties in 1967 before it merged with the then Janata Party in 1977. After the demise of Janata Party and birth of BJP in 1980, the saffron party was in the company of Left and regional parties to prop up V P Singh government for 11 months from 1989.

In most states where BJP has alliance, it is playing a second fiddle to regional parties. Among these states are Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and all northeastern

states Following is an overview of the 14 states which have double-digit Lok Sabha seats where the outcome is crucial to determine which party or group of parties will rule India for the next five years

taking advantage of a split between Uttar Pradesh (Total number of Congress and NCP. But this time, seats: 80): The state ruled by Mulayam

The state, where caste equations play an important role in deciding voting, has the biggest star candidates fray in Vajpayee from Lucknow constituency, Sonia Gandhi from Rae Bareli and her son from adjacent in

Amethi. Rae Bareli and Amethi are pocketboroughs of the Nehru-Gandhi mily The Congress, which has been in doldrums in the state since long, is hoping that the presence of Sonia and

Rahul as candidates and their campaigning as also that by Priyanka GandhiVadra and the magic of Nehru-Gandhi dynasty will resurrect the party in the poll.

A quadrangular fight is seen by political observers as benefiting BJP which was boosted by the recent return to its fold by former Chief Minister Kalyan Singh who is the party's most minent backward caste leader. He had quit the party on the eve of 1999 rliamentary elections.

The stakes are high for Mulayam Singh Yadav's party as a good show in the state will allow the party to be in the position of a king-maker in the post-poll scenario in the event of a fractured verdict at the national level. For

techno-savvv chief minister of India. and its junior ally in the state BJP had taken 36 of the seats in 1999. But this time, the scene appears to be much more difficult for TDP-BJP combine

On the other hand, Congress, which had ruled the state for long in the past. has struck up an alliance with a newlyformed party whose influence is confined to a particular portion of the state, in a desperate bid to regain lost ground.

The electorate of the state also chooses a new legislature in tandem with choosing representatives for Lok Sabha. The electoral battle seems headed for a close finish

West Bengal (Total no of seats 42): Ruling Left Front is once again expected to retain hold on most of the parliamentary seats. In 1999. Mamata Banerjee-led Trinamool Congress, the main challenger of the Left parties, had thrown up a strong fight but stands weakened this time. Trinamool has a seat-sharing pact with BJP in the state.

Congress is hoping to improve on its tally of just five last time but it may end up splitting anti-Left votes thereby nelping the ruling Front.

Bihar (Total no of seats 40): A new political equation has taken place in the

state with strongman and ruling

Rashtriya Janata Dal chief Laloo

Prasad Yadav roping in prominent

backward caste leader Ram Vilas

Paswan who parted ways with BJP and

formed Lok Janashakati Party two

years ago. This may also give rise to a

change of caste polarisation. Yadav

has realised that his charisma alone is

no more enough and has therefore

with Paswan lies in the fact that in the

The significance of Laloo's alliance

the RID had

struck the alliance with Paswan.

and AIADMK supremo Jayalalitha to sail through. AIADMK and DMK are the two dominant players in the state where others play second fiddle to them.

Madhya Pradesh (Total no of seats 29): Ruling BJP has an edge with all opinion polls predicting it to benefit from the momentum generated by its unprecedented landslide win in state assembly polls just five months ago.

Congress seems to be in disarray after its best-known face and former chief minister Digvijay Singh concentrating more on national than state politics

Karnataka (Total no of seats 28): This is another state where parliamen tary polls are being held along with polls for a new state legislature. A close finish is expected between ruling Congress and BJP hoping to gain power in the state for the first time

Various factions of Janata Dal. once a potent force in the state politics, have fallen apart benefiting both Congress and BJP.

Congress which had won 18 parliamentary seats last time is facing a powerful challenge this time from BJP which seems to have regrouped since

Haryana (10 seats): The state is likely to witness a close contest with main players ruling Indian National Lok Dal headed by Chief Minister Om Prakash Chautala and main opposition Congress have their own set of prob-

INLD's alliance with BJP has collapsed because the latter withdrew following the perception of a heavy antiincumbency factor. Congress's efforts to benefit may be hampered by intense groupism in the party.

states, a key area for both BJP and Congress is northeastern India where small states together account for 25 parliamentary seats.

A region which has for long been Congress stronghold, there are already signs of change. Leading regional parties of the states like Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Sikkim have backed the BJP and CPI(M) retaining ts hold on Tripura.

region rests on Assam where the party is in power. In 1999 parliamentary polls, the party got ten out of the 14 seats and

The Congress' only hope in the

globalisation.

EH.

the BJP's obsession with GDPwithout-equity and termed its 8 percent growth promise as "a mere dream" But now, it's itself promising 10 percent growth!

To be fair, the Congress focuses on the agrarian crisis unemployment and job reservations even in the private sector. But that's not enough to project an alternative vision.

The Congress has scored many pluses. Rahul Gandhi's entry into election has drawn a near-rapturous public response. The Congress has also shown nimbleness in forging alliances, although that effort has suffered setbacks in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar

It's attempting to project vigour and vivacity through young leaders. Rahul and Priyanka Gandhi, Jyodiraditya Scindia, Sachin Pilot and Selja provide a fresh, youthful and earnest contrast to one-liner-savvy but cynical secondgeneration BJP leaders like Venkaiah Naidu, Narendra Modi, Pramod Mahajan, Arun Jaitley, and Uma Bharati

The Congress's upturn and the hearty response to Ms Sonia Gandhi has unnerved the BJP. In UP, Messrs become meaningless if citizens were Vajpayee and Advani have failed to draw crowds. Even devotedly pro-BJP papers like The Pioneer admits this. Their meetings have been small in important towns, and downright embarrassing in Lucknow.

office. The NDA started with highpowered, slick campaigns like "India Shining". But these peaked early. In fact, the phrase "Shining" provokes

Many NDA parties face a dire prospect in the coming elections. Barring regional-ethnic parties like the Akali Dal, TDP, AIADMK, most are likely to suffer an erosion of their vote and base.

was. Over 15 months, 10 parties have

quit it. Month by month, it is looking

witness to this. Thirteen chairs were

placed on the dais. One, marked for

the Shiv Sena, remained empty. Of the

remaining, the BJP occupied six and

the JD(U) two, while one each was

graced by the Nationalist Trinamool,

Akali Dal, Biju Janata Dal and Indian

This corresponds to the NDA

That very day, some NDA members

Federal Democratic Party.

The release of its manifesto bore

more moth-eaten

anger in many parts of the country. Devoid of issues, the NDA is clutching at "negative" planks -- "foreign origins", cow protection and Ayodhya. The "Vision 2004"'s function was to reaffirm the RSS's core-agendas, embrace corporate globalisation, and begin a viciously personal anti-Sonia

Bofors backfires, yatra fizzles

campaign. The latest plank is the Bofors "expose", based on the surmises of the Swedish policeman (Sten Lindstrom) who ran the Bofors investigation but

distribution of political power. The failed to establish corruption charges. Mr Lindstrom himself admits: "we manifesto itself reflects the BJP's total heaemony. It was drafted entirely by were unable to establish the truth... the BJP and shown only to NDA He has wantonly dragged in Ms Gandhi's name although it doesn't. convenor George Fernandes. Mr figure in any Bofors-related docu-Fernandes claims he read out the relevant text to the other members ments. The "new" revelation was carried six years ago in The Indian distanced themselves from controver-Express and comes 13 years after the wedish investigation was terminated. sial formulations, including Trinamool, It's ludicrous to level charges Biju Janata Dal and Telugu Desam. against Ms Gandhi without a remotely

pretence of being broad-minded.

tunistic reasons.

temple".

birth

leader. But he has turned -- for oppor-

eyed vision. On April 5, the BBC

quoted him as saying that the anti-

Babri Ayodhya campaign had "hurt"

the BJP. It "should never have hap-

pened..." He also said that, absent the

demolition, the BJP would have

But the very next day, Mr Advani

said the temple issue boosted the

BJP's fortunes: "where we have

reached today is only due to the Ram

contempt for truth. The NDA is willing to

subvert the Constitutional guarantee of

universal citizenship -- irrespective of

ethnicity, caste, creed. This fundamen-

tal right to non-discrimination would

to be divided according to place of

US, Canadian or British citizen of

Indian origin is appointed to a public

Yet, the BJP celebrates each time a

It's impossible not to condemn

ecured a majority in 1999.

Mr Advani also suffers from squint-

The BJP has imposed its Avodhva line on its allies -- for the first time. This line is far plausible rationale. The "exposé's timing speaks for itself. from benign. It makes no reference to the Babri demolition, and relates the temple And yet, Mr Vajpayee has applied indirect coercion on the CBI by saying it to "national integration". will look into the "new" disclosures.

But why should the temple have This is unbecoming of the Prime anything to do with "national integra-Minister. BJP leaders have shed all tion" unless integration was menaced in the first place by the demolition? The Mr Vajpayee has rubbed shoulders manifesto says the issue should be with Ms Gandhi any number of times in Parliament and in official functions. He resolved through a judicial verdict or "dialogue". Now, this amounts to subtle coercion of Muslims into agreeing to a reated her as a "normal", legitimate,

temple -- without the mosque being mentioned. An early court verdict is unlikely. And going by recent formulas (e.g. the Kanchi Shankaracharya's), a negotiated deal will be one-sided: a temple at the site of the razed mosque, in return for an assurance that Kashi and Mathura won't be targeted.

The BJP now treats its allies with disdain. It bullied them into accepting other policies too without discussion for instance, allowing foreign investment in retail trade.

Many NDA parties face a dire prospect in the coming elections. Barring regional-ethnic parties like the Akali Dal, TDP, AIADMK, most are likely to suffer an erosion of their vote and base

Their ability to bargain with the BJP has drastically shrunk. The turning point was Guiarat, when they miserably failed to demand that Modi & Co. be brought to book. Today, they are paying capitulation's price.

The BJP's growing political anxi-Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist. eties are reproduced in the NDA. The Alliance is a shrunken image of what it

Interestingly, opinion polls predict while BJP is likely to win more parliamentary seats in the state, the Congress would return to power in state

Ruling BJP is once again set to reasser its supremacy with main opposition Congress still to get its acts together organisationally. The BJP got 20 seats in the 1999 parliamentary polls while

it remains to be seen if the performance will be repeated this time.

Pallab Bhattacharya is The Daily Star's

Sonia Gandhi

stagnating after a good start in the 1990s.

assembly polls.

Gujarat (Total no of seats 26):

Besides the above-mentioned PRAFUL BIDWAI writes from New Delhi

> S India gets ready for the hustings, the Congress, with its allies, is edging up against the National Democratic Alliance. The gap between the two has been steadily narrowing, according to successive opinion polls over three months.

NDA in BJP's iron-grip

The latest poll, by The Week estimates the NDA's score at 235-260 seats, clearly below the 273 "magicmark". It gives the Congress and allies 170-200 seats.

The Congress's fortunes are looking up despite its policy confusions. Particularly disappointing is its economic "vision". This, sadly, claims that the Congress "pioneered" what the BJP is taking credit for --7liberalisation, privatisation and

The Congress once rightly decried

Singh Yadav-led Samajwadi Party will once again be crucial to BJP's bid to retain power at the Centre and Congress' efforts for revival

The state will witness four-cornered contest involving BJP, Samajwadi Party, Bahujan Samaj Party led by Mayawati and Congress after Congress' attempts to firm up alliance were rebuffed by both SP and BSP.

favourite banking on dominant Maratha community votes. The BJP-Sena is relying on support

among Dalits and a section of Marathas and possible anti-incumbency factor against Congress-NCP.

Atal Bihari Vajpayee

crucial to her political survival.

Mayawati too, the result in the state is

48): It has the second largest number of

seats and the fight is between two

political formations represented by

Party of Sharad Pawar on one hand

ally Shiv Sena had bagged 28 seats

and B.IP-Shiv Sena on the other

ling Congress-Nationalist Congress

In the 1999 elections. BJP and its

Maharashtra (Total no of seats

Andhra Pradesh (Total no of seats 42): The ruling Telugu Desam Party headed by N Chandrababu also be oversimplifying to assume that all Dalits are committed voters of Naidu, who has an image of the most Paswan's party.

lost at least ten seats by a margin of Rajasthan (Total no of seats 25) 30,000 votes and it is here Paswan's Another state where the main contendparty can bail him out by transferring ers are ruling BJP and opposition their committed caste vote bank. Congress. The saffron party hopes to Paswan is estimated to have swung a cash in in parliamentary polls on the substantial Dalit vote bank in favour of unexpected landslide victory in the BJP and allies in 1999. It may, however, state assembly elections in December last vear.

Raiasthan is one of the three states - the other two being Madhya Pradesh It remains to be seen if BJP and its and Chhattisgarh -- where BJP is widely allies are able to repeat its 1999 show of tipped to win majority Lok Sabha seats Orissa (Total no of parliamentary seats 21): Will ruling Biju Janata Dal and its junior partner BJP be able to

storm back to power in the state where parliamentary and state assembly polls are being held simultaneously?

Will Congress be able to benefit from desertions in the ranks of BJD and improve on its tally of just two parliamentary seats in 1999?

Kerala (Total no of seats 20) Ruling Congress and its smaller allies are locked in straight fight with main opposition Left Front in all seats. Congress has a tough task in the backdrop of sharp factional feud in its rank and file and the beneficiary might be the Left parties.

Jharkhand (Total no of seats 14): The ruling BJP had grabbed 11 parlia mentary seats in the previous polls but it faces strong challenge from a new alliance between Congress and regional outfit Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM), led by prominent tribal leader Shibu Soren, which had teamed up with the saffron party in 1999.

The BJP government is not only facing anti-incumbency and factionalism in the party and given the Congress-JMM tie-up, it may be an uphill task for BJP to retain the 11 seats it had won last time

Punjab (Total no of seats 13): Ruling Congress may find it difficult to repeat its 1999 performance of securing eight seats in the light of antiincumbency factor and desertion from the party. The main opposition Shiromani Akali Dal and its junior partner BJP, which had suffered a virtual rout in parliamentary polls five years ago mainly because of antiincumbency and split in Akali Dal, also hopes to benefit from a reunification with a dominant breakaway group.

Congress has struggled to put a lid on sharp factional squabble between Chief Minister Amarinder Singh and his deputy Rajinder Kaur Bhattal but it may tell on the party's prospects in the state

Chhattisgarh (Total no of seats 11): As in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, ruling BJP in Chhattisgarh hope to win most of the parliamentary seats building on its spectacular victory in the state assembly polls last December.

The Congress? prospects depends on to what it extent it is able to recover its support base among the tribals.

ahead of RJD-Congress alliance. The saffron party and its partners hope to capitalise on anti-incumbency factor which they hope will cut across caste barriers. Tamil Nadu (Total no of seats 39): The state too has witnessed new alignment of political forces. The DMK, main opposition in the state, has guit BJP's company and struck alliance with Congress and they are considered the favourite to win majority of the seats. In

> NDA secure 22 parliamentary seats apart from BJP's own four. BJP has firmed up alliance with ruling AIADMK, which had got ten seats in 1999 and the two parties are banking on the personal appeals of Vajpayee

