

The largest democracy goes to polls

A state-wise overview

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA writes from New Delhi

INDIA goes to fresh parliamentary 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-administered 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.

Uttar Pradesh (Total number of seats: 80): The state ruled by Mulayam 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.

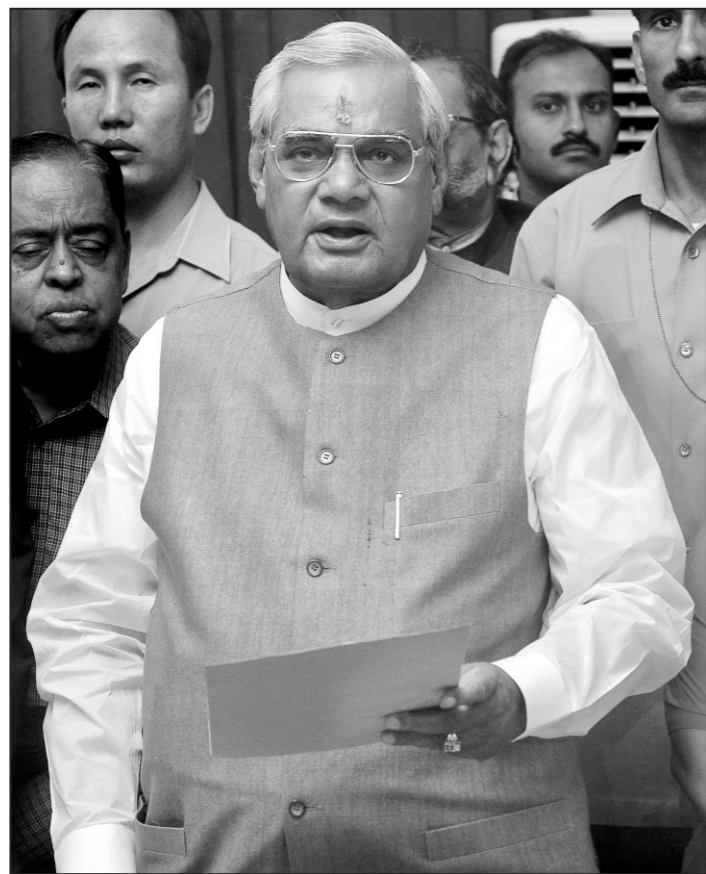
The state will witness four-cornered contest involving BJP, Samajwadi Party, Bahujan Samaj Party led by Mayawati and Congress after Congress' attempts to firm up alliance were rebuffed by both SP and BSP.

The state, where caste equations play an important role in deciding voting, has the biggest star candidates in fray in Vajpayee from Lucknow constituency, Sonia Gandhi from Rae Bareilly and her son from adjacent in Amethi. Rae Bareilly and Amethi are pocketboroughs of the Nehru-Gandhi family.

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 prominent backward caste leader. He had quit the party on the eve of 1999 parliamentary 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 verdict in the event of a fractured scenario at the national level. For



Atal Bihari Vajpayee

Mayawati too, the result in the state is crucial to her political survival.

Maharashtra (Total no of seats 48): It has the second largest number of seats and the fight is between two political formations represented by ruling Congress-Nationalist Congress Party of Sharad Pawar on one hand and BJP-Shiv Sena on the other.

In the 1999 elections, BJP and its ally Shiv Sena had bagged 28 seats taking advantage of a split between Congress and NCP. But this time, Congress and NCP are allies and stand 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.

Andhra Pradesh (Total no of seats 42): The ruling Telugu Desam Party headed by N Chandrababu Naidu, who has an image of the most

techno-savvy 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 newly-formed 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 helping the ruling Front.

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

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 parliamentary 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 problems.

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

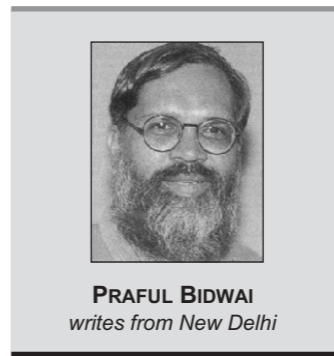
Besides the above-mentioned states, a key area for both BJP and Congress is northeastern India where small states together account for 25 parliamentary seats.

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 its hold on Tripura.

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

Bofors backfires, yatra fizzles

NDA in BJP's iron-grip



PRAFUL BIDWAI writes from New Delhi

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.

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" function was to reaffirm the RSS's core-agendas, embrace corporate globalisation, and begin a viciously personal anti-Sonia campaign.

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

Mr Lindstrom himself admits: "we were unable to establish the truth..." He has wantonly dragged in Ms Gandhi's name although it doesn't figure in any Bofors-related documents. The "new" revelation was carried six years ago in *The Indian Express* and comes 13 years after the Swedish investigation was terminated.

It's ludicrous to level charges against Ms Gandhi without a remotely plausible rationale. The "exposé's" timing speaks for itself.

And yet, Mr Vajpayee has applied indirect coercion on the CBI by saying it will look into the "new" disclosures. This is unbecoming of the Prime Minister. BJP leaders have shed all pretence of being broad-minded.

Mr Vajpayee has rubbed shoulders with Ms Gandhi any number of times in Parliament and in official functions. He treated her as a "normal", legitimate, leader. But he has turned — for opportunistic reasons.

Mr Advani also suffers from squint-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 happened..." He also said that, absent the demolition, the BJP would have secured a majority in 1999.

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 temple".

It's impossible not to condemn contempt for truth. The NDAs willing to subvert the Constitutional guarantee of universal citizenship — irrespective of ethnicity, caste, creed. This fundamental right to non-discrimination would become meaningless if citizens were to be divided according to place of birth.

Yet, the BJP celebrates each time a US, Canadian or British citizen of Indian origin is appointed to a public office.

The BJP's growing political anxieties are reproduced in the NDA. The Alliance is a shrunken image of what it



Sonia Gandhi

stagnating after a good start in the 1990s.

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

Gujarat (Total no of seats 26): Ruling BJP is once again set to reassert its supremacy with main opposition Congress still to get its acts together organisationally. The BJP got 20 seats in the 1999 parliamentary polls while Congress just six.

Rajasthan (Total no of seats 25): Another state where the main contenders are ruling BJP and opposition Congress. The saffron party hopes to cash in in parliamentary polls on the unexpected landslide victory in the state assembly elections in December last year.

Rajasthan is one of the three states — the other two being Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh — where BJP is widely 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 parliamentary 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 anti-incumbency 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 anti-incumbency 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 extent it is able to recover its support base among the tribals.

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

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