

## India witnessing second wave of Covid-19 in multiple states

By Shreya Gautam, Oshi Saxena

**Delhi** - March 24, 2021, marks a year of the nationwide lockdown that was imposed to restrict the transmission of Coronavirus. Several states in the country are now witnessing the second wave of Covid-19 cases. With a total of 11.2 million cases till now, India is slowly reaching a worrying number of new cases every day since February 2021. As a result, governments of the affected states are considering imposing lockdown whereas many have already announced Covid-related restrictions and night curfews in several regions.

According to the Union Health Ministry, Maharashtra, Punjab, Karnataka, Gujarat, Chhattisgarh, and Tamil Nadu have accounted for 80.90 percent of the new cases as of 23rd March. On Tuesday, the nationwide tally rose to 1,16,86,796, while the active caseload stood at 3,45,377, showing an upwards trend for the 13th day in a row. The recovery rate has also dropped to 95.67 percent. A new double mutant strain has also been found by the Indian SARS-CoV-2 Consortium of Genetics (INSACOG) which has been carrying out genome sequencing of domestic samples and samples of international travelers.

“Given the nature of the virus, a sec-

ond wave was bound to happen and could also turn out to be more dangerous,” stated Dr. Ajay Saxena, Senior Doctor at Government Hospital in the Hoshangabad division of Bhopal. Two prominent strains have been found after research. The British strain has been seen in a larger number of Covid cases in Delhi whereas, in Maharashtra, the Brazilian and African strain are more prominent. Both strains tend to mutation in a very short period of time and spread four times faster than the previous strains, being a significant factor in the sudden rise in cases. The fatality rate of these strains is quite low hence the cases are not severe and most of them are asymptomatic. The casualties are low. Problems of inadequate resources, lengthy approval procedure at government institutions, and sudden rise of cases clashing with the vaccination process, is causing pressure on the government hospitals. They have to rely on the contractual recruitment of nurses and compounders.

Delhi’s earlier average of 150 cases per day has been rising, with an average of 1100 cases as of March 23. Chhaya Singh, Assistant Nursing Superintendent (ANS), Safdarjung Hospital, Delhi, stated, “the healthcare workers are better equipped to deal with the rising cases now as compared to the situation

last year when very little was known about the disease.” With the rising number of cases, vaccination guidelines are revised. The previous gap of four weeks between the two doses has now been increased to six-eight weeks because it was found that after the first dose, it takes 14 days for the antibodies to develop and one was prone to the virus during this period.



Image source: Times of India

Maharashtra, on March 24, reported 31,855 new Covid-19 cases, in the highest ever single day spike in the state since the beginning of the pandemic last year. Vineet Joshi, a resident of Bavdhan, Pune said, “The authorities sealed the society to cope with the rising number of cases in our area two weeks ago. The sudden rise in cases has put the government in a tight spot as the city cannot afford another lockdown.”

Suhani Dhumne, a B.Tech student at Manipal Institute of Technology, Karnataka, informed how all students decided to go back home after the college began to register an average of 70-80 new cases everyday post reopening. According to her, the college’s safety protocols were insufficient as the students rarely followed social distancing and no proper updates were given regarding the students testing positive on campus which resulted in a sudden rise in cases. On March 18, the college was declared a containment zone.

“Using a mask has now become a choice more than a need.” said Satish Gulati, owner of Gulati General Store in Paharganj, Delhi, expressing his displeasure over the callous nature of customers and vendors in following the safety guidelines issued by the government.

The initial fight for survival against the pandemic is now a fight to rise above its aftermath. Economic stability has taken precedence over health. More than the government, it’s fallen upon the citizens to adhere to the safety protocols to ensure that they do not contribute in further transmission of the virus.

## Gujarat government to introduce body-worn cameras for police personnel

By Disha Palkhiwala, Rhea Varghese, Surabhi Srivastava

**Ahmedabad** - Gujarat government has introduced 9000 body-worn cameras to strengthen the law enforcement system in Gujarat, as an initiative under the Video Integration and State Wide Advanced Security (VISWAS) Project.

As part of VISWAS, 7,000 CCTV cameras have been set up at strategic locations in 34 districts controlled by one centralised command centre. The locations include prominent spots like Somnath Temple, Palitana, Dwarka, and Statue of Unity.

Their recent initiative is the ‘Body Worn Cameras’ which is aimed to improve law and order, detect crimes, traffic management, and combat cybercrime in the state. These will be worn by Police officials on their uniform to monitor activities on ground. Gujarat is the first state to introduce 9000 such cameras in India. Narsimha Komar, ADGP

Law and Order and ADGP Planning and Modernization says, “The state government, with the advent of body-worn cameras, aims at reducing theft of vehicles, cases of hit and run, identification of number plates and tracing signs on vehicles. Furthermore, it will account for peaceful police-public communication and increased awareness regarding traffic laws.”



Image source: Gujarat Police

Komar, while briefing about the initiative said that these cameras are of two types - 8000 stand-alone and 1000 live broadcasting cameras. Stand-alone cameras are equipped with rechargeable batteries and memory cards to store data, the audio-visual output of which can be downloaded later.

Live Broadcasting cameras can monitor riots, protests, and rallies in real-time. This will help solve cases involving allegations regarding bribery, misconduct, and violence on the road. They are connected to the base stations and controlled by the Command & Control Center.

Every police station will serve as the base station so that the Station House Officer (SHO) can directly keep an eye on the functioning of these tools. An end-to-end IP-based network called Gujarat State Wide Area Network

(GSWAN), designed for service convergence will connect the base stations to Gandhinagar.

“The implementation of the program will be first started in metropolitan cities like Ahmedabad, Vadodara, Surat, and Rajkot followed by tier 2 cities.” said Komar. He mentions, “Road safety is one of the key agendas. It will increase the police presence in remote areas of the state.”

Delhi, Rajasthan, Maharashtra and Kerala had begun experimenting with body-worn cameras for some years to manage traffic effectively. Gujarat is taking a step ahead by incorporating docking stations, servers, analytical tools and integration with the command & control center, making use of available resources in an enterprising manner.

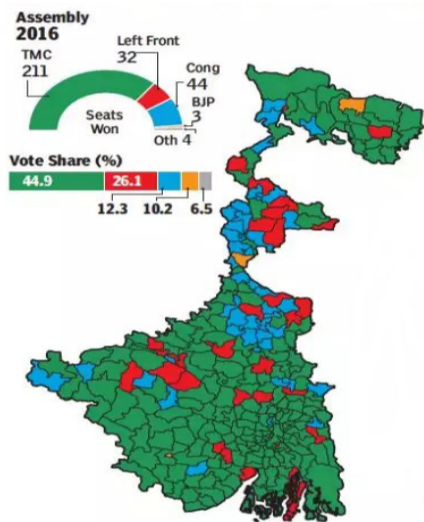
# 4 States, 1 UT - 2021 Assembly Elections



Image source: Indian Express

## West Bengal - Nishit Navin, Shriya Handoo

The Bengal 2021 Assembly election for the 294 Assembly seats will be held in 8 phases spanning 34 days from March 27 to April 29. It will be a three-way contest between the ruling party Trinamool Congress (TMC), Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP), and the recently formed alliance of Congress and Left-wing parties.



In 2016, Mamata Banerjee led Trinamool Congress, was re-elected to power with an enhanced majority win-

ning 211 seats and getting 44% vote share. BJP, on the other hand, could only secure three seats with 10% of total votes. Congress and Communist Party of India Marxist (CPIM) won 44 and 26 seats, respectively.

Although the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Front ruled Bengal for 34 years till 2011, it has lost its footing in the state, making BJP the main rival of TMC. The Saffron party won 19 out of the 42 Lok Sabha seats in 2019 with 40.64% of vote share, which has become a source of optimism for the party which has never ruled the state.

Both BJP and TMC have focused on welfare issues in pre-election claims. BJP has promised to provide free education for girls, and 33% reservation for women in jobs. Mamata Banerjee in TMC's manifesto has assured 1.6 crore families Rs. 500 per month for the general category and Rs. 1000 for SCs/STs category.

"This is one of the most crucial elections in this state's history because never before an election in Bengal has been fought along the lines of religious polarisation," said Arfa Khanum Sherwani, a senior journalist for The Wire. "BJP has managed to create a Hindu vote bank following their ideology in various pockets across the state," Arfa added. Another major issue BJP is focusing on is the infiltration from Bangladesh. "BJP has promised to implement CAA in Bengal if it comes to power to polarise Hindu voters," said Umesh Kumar Ray, a journalist at Caravan and The Wire.

TMC has been campaigning on the back of its flagship welfare programs. To counter BJP's appeal, they have crafted their narrative of Insider v/s Outsider, projecting BJP as a non-Bangla party. "For the first time, a non-Bengali has released a manifesto meant for Bengal because @BJP-4Bengal did not give a single 'son of the soil' to do the same. #BengalRe-

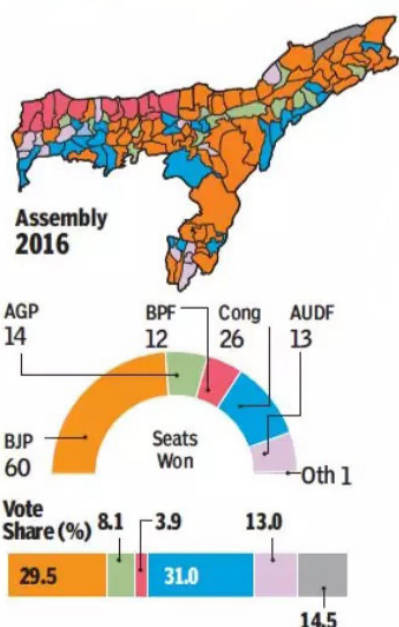
jectsGujratiManifesto," read a TMC tweet.

The Left and Congress alliance claim that the people of Bengal will reject the communal politics of both these parties. "Both BJP and TMC are trying to divide the people of Bengal along communal lines, but our goal is to bring development to the state," said Arghya Banerjee, a senior member of the Students' Federation of India (SFI).

The results of this election will have far-reaching implications that will affect both regional and national politics. Mamata Banerjee is desperate for a third term to ensure that BJP does not gain ground in a state where political success has eluded them. A victory for BJP, on the other hand, would take them a step further in their pursuit of being a pan-India party rather than a party of just the Hindi belt.

## Assam - Ashish Chandra, Anand Singha, Yagosheni Das

The Assam Assembly elections for the 126 Assembly seats will be held in 3 phases. The first phase will be held on March 27 across Upper Assam, covering 47 Assembly seats across 12 districts. The second phase will be held on April 1, covering 39 Assembly seats in 13 districts. The final phase will be held on April 6 covering 40 Assembly seats in 12 lower Assam districts.



This election will see a three cornered

fight between Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led alliance, Congress led alliance, and United Regional Front. BJP has gone into alliance with United People's Party Liberal (UPPL) and Asom Gana Parishad (AGP). On the other hand Congress has formed a grand-alliance with All Indian Union Democratic Front (AIUDF), three Left parties and Bodoland People's Front (BPF) calling it 'Mahajot'. Assam Jatiya Parishad (AJP) and Rajior Dal (RD), who were formed out of 2019 anti-CAA protest, have formed an alliance for this election.

In 2016 Assembly elections, out of 126 seats, BJP won 60 seats getting 29.5 percent of the vote share and formed the government for the first time in Assam in coalition with AGP (14) and BPF (12). On the other hand, Congress which had been in power for three consecutive terms won only 26 seats, even though its vote share of 31 percent was higher than BJP's.

This will be the state's first major election post National Registration of Citizenship (NRC) conducted in the

state which led to disenfranchisement of 19 lakh people. The state also witnessed massive protests throughout 2019 on the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Bill, 2019. "The politics of Assam over the last few decades have been shaped by 'identity', 'belonging', who is an 'insider' and who is an 'outsider'," said Tora Agarwala, assistant editor of The Indian Express, covering the Assam election 2021.

With Assam having more than 18 major ethnic groups, it boasts of vast regional and ideological diversity varying across the state. According to Tora, in Upper Assam people identify themselves as "indigenous Assamese". During the anti-CAA movement, this region saw the most "violent and vociferous protest" compared to the rest of Assam, she added.

Zubair Rehman, All Assam Students' Union member said, "They are trying to strip us away from our identity, destroy our culture. Our state is already overburdened with illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, be it Muslims or Hindus.... the state is facing an iden-

tity crisis."

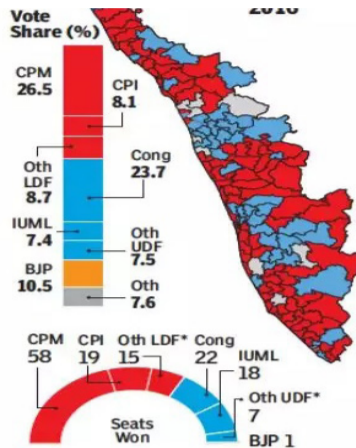
Barak Valley, which consists of three districts, has a predominantly Bengali speaking population with a roughly equal population ratio between Hindus and Muslims. However, the two valleys of the state, Brahmaputra and Barak have a contrasting response to the CAA. According to Tora, "it is the area which supports the CAA unlike the rest of Assam" because of "the persecution faced by the Bengali Hindus".

The people of Kamrup metro, consisting of 4 districts, were at the forefront of anti-CAA protest and have been demanding the implementation of the recommendations made by the committee to 'safeguard, preserve and promote the culture, social, linguistic identity and heritage' of the Assamese people.

With this election being a three front fight, it will be known only on May 2 whether any party or alliance has a majority or the election throws up a hung assembly.

## Kerala - Meenakshi Maidas, Suramya Sunilraj, Riya Ashok

The 15th Legislative Assembly election of Kerala is to be conducted in a single phase on April 6, followed by the counting of the votes on May 2. A majority of 71 assembly seats, out of 140, are required to win the election. The current government's tenure comes to an end on May 31.



From the formation of the first Niyamasabha (Legislative Assembly) in 1957, several parties and coalitions have governed the state. However, only two parties - The Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI (M)) led Left Democratic Front (LDF) and Indian National Congress (INC) led United Democratic Front (UDF) have been in power alternatively since 1980.

Former Excise Minister and current UDF candidate, K. Babu when asked about the growth of NDA in Kerala said, "They got a basic vote of 10,000-20,000 during the 2016 elections solely because of excessive campaigning." The key constituencies to observe in this election are Nemom, Dharmadom, and Konni. During the 2016 polls, Nemom was BJP's first electoral win in

Kerala, and as a result, it is the most talked-about constituency in the state. Dharmadom is a significant constituency as CM Pinarayi Vijayan is seeking to retain his seat. On the other hand, winning a seat in Konni, the epicentre of the Sabarimala protests, would be a matter of pride for the saffron party.

The 2021 election holds a stark difference from the election patterns observed in the past. The contributions of the LDF stands out in sectors of health and welfare. Claims of corruption have also been raised against the ruling party, however, no concrete evidence has been found to prove the aforementioned allegations. The gold smuggling case put the ruling party through a series of charges which could not be proved due to lack of evidence. The

names of leading members of the ruling party were associated in this case, resulting in a gradual shift of public support from the LDF to the opposition, over time. The UDF on the other hand has been known for its strong identity politics since the 1980s. "Today, there are multiple caste and social organisations like those of Orthodox and Jacobite, which have joined hands with UDF. Whilst LDF has executed commendable service in their ruling tenure, there are these facts that stand in favour of UDF," said N Sreenath, Special Correspondent, News 18.

Keralites will have to wait till May 2 to find out if the ruling LDF will manage to break the chain of rotation by holding on to power or will the UDF maintain the existing pattern.

## Tamil Nadu - Navamya G. Acharya, Damini Solanki

The Tamil Nadu Assembly election is to be conducted in a single phase on April 6, and votes will be counted on May 2. A majority of 118 assembly seats, out of 234, are required to win the election. The current government's tenure comes to an end on May 24.

Tamil Nadu has witnessed the domination of the Dravidian parties since 1967. Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and All India Anna Dravida

Munnetra Kazhagam (AIDMK) stand as robust political parties and they are chosen alternatively by the people. Although, this time the election will be fought without the faces of the two parties, namely J. Jayalalithaa who led AIADMK and M. Karunanidhi of DMK.

After the death of Jayalalithaa, AIDMK went through a prolonged crisis of leadership. Edapaddi K Palaniswami from AIDMK is the current chief minister of Tamil Nadu. AIADMK is contesting the elections with an alliance with the BJP, who have been offered 20 seats, this year along with Tamil Maanila Congress, Pattali Makkal Katchi, and others.

DMK, at present, is headed by Karunanidhi's son, MK Stalin. The DMK led alliance includes the Congress, Communist Party of India, the

Communist Party of India (Marxist), Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi, and a few others. Congress demanded at least 30 seats, but DMK offered only 18 in the Assembly election 2021.

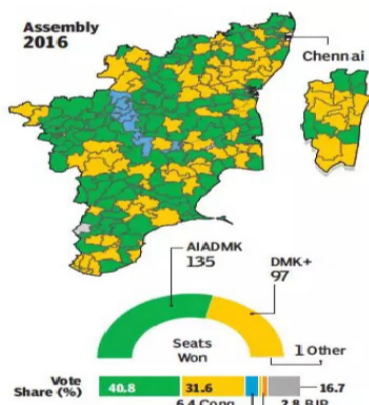
Priyanka Mohanavel, a resident, said, "People in Tamil Nadu have always been aware of their rights and what's happening in their surroundings. During Amma's (J Jayalalitha) reign, there were a lot of benefits provided and her sudden death was a shock to everyone in the state."

Another party that emerged in 2019, debuting in the Lok Sabha election and Assembly by-polls is Makkal Needhi Maiam (MNM), led by Kamal Haasan. MNM has promised to challenge the status quo in Dravidian politics.

AIADMK has promised to give one

government job per family and has intended to provide washing machines and cable TV to all the families below the poverty line. It has also offered 2 GB free data for college students and a mid-day meal scheme for students from class 9 to 11. DMK, on the other hand, promised to reduce the price of LPG cylinders by 100 each and has offered a tablet to every college and government school student. The parties also promised to waive education loans and give maternity leave of one year to women along with other benefits.

Although no single party has a clear edge, DMK's landslide victory in 2019 Lok Sabha election has forced AIADMK to fight hard to not lose any more ground in the coming election.



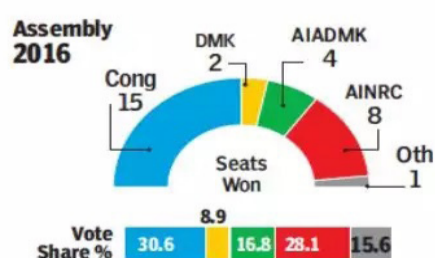
## Puducherry - Divya Shree, Mansi Verma

The 15th Legislative Assembly election of Puducherry will be held on April 6, 2021 in a single phase in its four districts - Puducherry, Karaikal, Mahe and Yanam. Puducherry district includes 23 constituencies, five constituencies belong to Karaikal while Mahe and Yanam both have one constituency each, adding up to 30 in total.

cured 12 seats, as opposition. In 2018, the central government nominated three MLAs to the Legislative Assembly under The Union Territories Act and Article 239A of the Constitution.

In total six MLAs, including five from the Congress have quit, while the legislator from the national party was disqualified, last year, under the anti-defection law. As of February 24, the government had 12 MLAs, one short of the halfway mark. The opposition has 14 MLAs, seven from AINRC, four from AIADMK, and three nominated MLAs from BJP.

Chief Minister V Narayanaswamy faced a no-confidence vote in the house on February 24. The votes of the three nominated MLAs, controlled by the Centre, contributed to his defeat. "BJP used the same tactic before in Manipur, Uttarakhand, Karnataka,



In the 2016 Assembly election, Congress secured 15 seats and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) secured two. All India NR Congress (AINRC) and All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) together se-

Madhya Pradesh and repeats it now in Puducherry," said Anusuya, political analyst and professor at National School of Journalism, Bengaluru. President's rule was then imposed in Puducherry on February 25.

The Congress and DMK alliance accused Kiran Bedi, the Lieutenant Governor who, according to Narayanaswamy, ran a parallel administration by giving direct orders to officials which punctuated the functioning of the state government. But before the imposition of the President's rule, on February 16, Kiran Bedi was sacked from her post. "This is seen as a smart tactic by the BJP government as Kiran Bedi's removal as Puducherry Lieutenant Governor has denied Narayanaswamy a key issue to counter anti-incumbency," said Nadarajan, journalist at Press Trust of India.

While the Congress is fighting the polls in an alliance with DMK, the opposition tie-up consists of All India NR Congress, BJP and AIADMK. Perier pointed out that AIADMK is losing Muslim voters due to the alliance with BJP. Adding to this Anusuya said, "NDA is likely to target the voters based on caste because of the presence of a large number of minorities in the territory". She also said, "The vote bank cannot be formed based on language and religion disparity as the territory is divided into 4 districts and they are composed of four different linguistic and cultural groups".

With Congress and DMK facing a tough task of holding onto their allies, the opposition is banking on the local credentials of former CM N Rangaswamy to win.

## A star-studded Bengal election

By *Debomita De, Anuran Sadhu*

**Kolkata** - Bengal politics is at a crossroads, with two ideologically opposite parties, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Trinamool Congress (TMC) at loggerheads, setting the stage for the 2021 West Bengal Legislative Assembly election. Interestingly, celebrities are playing an important role on this 'stage'. Till now, 23 popular faces from Bengal have been nominated by either party, and the number keeps going up as we come closer to polling dates. But why this sudden surge?

In India, actors and sports stars are treated like idols by the masses. Naturally, political parties seek their association to cash into celebrities' popularity and increase their voter base. In West Bengal, this trend got started with Mamata Banerjee led TMC coming to power in 2011 where she managed to beat the Communist Party of India (Marxist) who had ruled Bengal politics for 34 years straight.

"Celebrity influx in politics during difficult times is very common, this trend was popularized by Rajiv Gandhi and has since then evolved," said Sayani Chaudhuri Patra, a Political Science professor at Loreto College, Kolkata mentioning Utpal Dutta and Satyajit Ray, who were strongly affiliated to the Left but "did not contest elections out and out. Contesting on a party

ticket is the new trend in Bengal," she added.

A host of celebrities joined TMC at a Hooghly rally on February 24. TMC's star list has increased manifold in the upcoming election with most of them replacing old party leaders. Political experts see this as a strategy by political parties to tackle disaffection and anger towards the existing local leadership. Ambar Ghosh, a researcher studying 'populist politics' at Jadavpur University said, "Whatever disaffection is there towards the local leadership, has been nullified by bringing in outsiders and their untainted popular image." BJP on the other hand, according to Ghosh, does not have many local leaders in Bengal and is therefore banking on popular personalities.

The success of celebrity candidates in previous elections has encouraged the political parties to induct them in more numbers. "A popular actor like Dev (Deepak Adhikari) has delivered in poll results and also developed his area - Ghatal," said Rajat Roy, Assistant professor in Political Science at Presidency University. Introducing Tollywood stars Mimi Chakraborty and Nusrat Jahan in the 2019 Lok Sabha Election was a strategic move. According to Patra, Mimi took over

the masses of Canning in Jadavpur, while the Bengali 'bhadrolok' (Bengali intellectual class) preferred CPI-M. Nusrat won because of the Muslim majority in Bashirhat.

The success of the strategy in the past has led to a surge in fielding more faces in important constituencies like Sayoni Ghosh (TMC) and Agnimitra Paul (BJP) from Asansol-south, Raj Chakraborty (TMC) from Barrackpore, Payal Sarkar (BJP) from Behala-east.

So, how much popularity is considered popular? The veteran CPI-M leader who carried mud over his head during the cyclone Aila reconstruction was defeated by veteran actress Debashree Roy of TMC in the 2016 assembly election. However, today she is trying for a BJP seat after being denied a TMC nomination because of her involvement with BJP in 2019.

For celebrities, joining politics is described as an opportunistic move by Patra and Ghosh. Having no ideology, SPatra says, "they are looking at politics as a regular source of income" given the financial crunch in their industry following the Pandemic and their celebrity life span being short. They would join whichever party approaches them. However, Ghosh argues, "ideological flexibility is rampant, everyone is shifting from here to there. So singling out the celebrities is not fair."

How long can parties sustain this strategy? Star-power cannot be exploited for long. A hint of their unacceptability is felt when a voter from Behala-east says, "Ekta goli o chenena (doesn't know a single street)" As Patra metaphorised, this election is an acid test of the entire trend to check how corrosive it is.



Image source: The Quint

## Jharkhand students suffer as government and para teachers continue to tussle

By *Rupesh Kumar, Sangam*

**Ranchi** - Ekakrit Parasikshak Sangarsh Morcha (EPSSM), an umbrella outfit of 66,379 para teachers (ad hoc teachers) staged a five-day-long protest from March 15-19 outside Jharkhand Legislative Assembly. Demanding job regularisation, pay raise, implementation of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) akin to that of the permanent teachers among others, they encircled the assembly.

In response to the protest, Sailesh Chaurasia, Director, Jharkhand Education Project Council (JEPC) told us, "Disciplinary action will be initiated against anyone who remains absent, we are strictly going to follow the 'no work no pay' rule."

After the formation of Jharkhand in the year 2000, the state faced an acute shortage of 40,000 teachers. To overcome this, a policy was formulated to recruit para teachers contractual basis) aiming to provide universal access to elementary education and improve the

pupil-teacher ratio. A relaxed qualification criterion was adopted initially for the para teachers, even making their pre-service teacher training conditional. However, compared to the permanent teachers, their salary was far less.

The demands of the para teachers in the state have garnered support across the political spectrum. However, the demands of the para teachers have still not been fulfilled due to many factors. Prominent being, lack of capital with the state to finance the salary and pension of all the 66,379 para teachers as Jharkhand stands 18th in the country in terms of Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP). GSDP is the sum of all values added by industries. Also, the new National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 states that "The practice of 'Para-teachers' (unqualified, contract teachers) will be stopped across the country by 2022."

With the continuing logjam, Gopal

Ray, para teacher of UPG Government MS Nekkura, Giridih warned of 'mass resignation' by the para teachers if demands are not met soon. He added, "government will be responsible for student's future." The protest has impacted education in 40,000 government schools out of which 9000 are solely run by para teachers. Students coming from poor financial backgrounds are completely dependent on the para teachers as they can't afford private tuitions.

Alwin Hansda, a class X student of Lakshmi Narayan Vidyamandir School, Dhanbad, run entirely by Para teachers told us, "Our education had come to an absolute standstill due to the lack of resources to conduct classes in the virtual mode and now that our board exams are around the corner, I hope these protests aren't a rift in the lute and jeopardize our preparations."



Image source: Rajneeti Guru

Protests by para teachers are not a recent phenomenon with the first such protest taking place in 2004. During the July-October 2012 protest, para teachers across the 24 districts used 'Jharkhand Mobile Vaani' (JMV), a voice-based social media platform to organize themselves and mobilise their strikes. 2018-19 saw the longest strike ever, which lasted for 93 days. The strike came to an end only after the then Education and Literacy department minister Neera Yadav, promised a raise in their pay by Rs 4,800 in addition to regularising their jobs.

## The precious one: Life as a Rinpoche

By Asmita Pant, Samrah Attar, Sneha Mothey

Rinpoche, an honorific Buddhist title bestowed upon spiritual leaders for ages, continues to be a lesser-known tradition among the Indians. While Guru Tulku Rinpoche is acknowledged as the 12th reincarnation of Tulku Rinpoche, Khen Rinpoche Jangchup Sangye studied for 20 years to acquire the title of Khen Rinpoche. Kilometres and stories apart, the two live a kindred life.

To understand the life of the Rinpoche, we interviewed both, Guru Tulku Rinpoche from Arunachal Pradesh and Khen Rinpoche Jangchup Sangye from Karnataka.

Guru Tulku Rinpoche was five years old when he was acknowledged as the 12th incarnation of Rinpoche. Narrating the incidents which led to his recognition, Rinpoche says, "After my predecessor, the 11th reincarnation died, his disciples and devotees started to search for their Gururji's reincarnation.

After a persistent but futile search, the abbot of Tawang Monastery in Arunachal Pradesh wrote a letter to His Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama, to inquire about the same. Devotees pointed out a child who could be 'the one'. His Holiness then sealed the document and in 1972, I was officially recognised as the 12th reincarnation."

53-year-old, Khen Rinpoche Jangchup Sangye is the abbot of the Gaden Shartse Monastery in Mundgod, Karnataka. An erudite in Buddhist philosophy, Khen Rinpoche started his education in 1980 which continued till 2000. He then trained in the tantric practices of Buddhism till 2009. It was only in 2017 that he was



Image: Guru Tulku Rinpoche

granted the title by His Holiness, the Dalai Lama.

The origin of the Tibetan word 'Rinpoche' can be traced back to the 8th century. Rinpoche means the 'precious one'. It was first used to address Padma-sambhāva, believed to be the second Buddha, who was commonly known as Guru Padma Rinpoche or simply Guru Rinpoche.

A Rinpoche has to tend to both, social and cultural responsibilities. Mornings are devoted to meditation and afternoons are spent teaching junior monks. They also have to attend to the visitors who seek guidance. The additional responsibilities of a Rinpoche include performing 'havans' and 'blessing' any newly built stupas or prayer halls.

Restrictions observed by a Rinpoche, are similar to a monk. One is forbidden to consume alcoholic drinks, non-vegetarian food and takes a vow of celibacy. There are certain books and small idols that they have to carry with them at all times, even while travelling.

When COVID-19 struck the country, the monasteries were hit too. All the suggested and imposed precautions, from wearing masks to using sanitizers, were followed at all times. Moreover, visitors weren't allowed in the monastery, and classes for the junior monks weren't conducted. Though there were

a few death cases, Khen Rinpoche positively said that it was not as bad as it could have been.

On being asked how different his life would have been had he not been a Rinpoche, Guru Tulku Rinpoche says, "I think as my parents were firm Buddhist followers, even if I wasn't recognised as a Rinpoche, they would have definitely sent me to become a monk. When I was a child, the conditions of the schools weren't great and even though my elder brother and sisters went to a government school, they acquired very poor education. I am blessed that I got a chance to acquire a good education under the wings of His Holiness, the Dalai Lama."



Image: Khen Rinpoche Jangchup Sangye

"If not Khen Rinpoche, I would have continued to stay in the monastery and coach students," says Khen Rinpoche. "Otherwise also, I'd have gone back to my hometown and trained people living there or to a quiet place to do meditation and personal retreat. The possibilities are endless. I would have chosen to be busy with some or the other intellectual contribution connected to Buddhist traditions, nonetheless."

## Guwahati's midday meal workers protest against new centralised mega kitchen

By Anand Singha

**Guwahati** - On January 20, Akshaya Patra Foundation, an NGO based in Bangalore inaugurated a new 'centralized mega kitchen' in Guwahati, near GNRC hospital. The inauguration however has renewed the fear of job loss among the Mid-day meal cooks leading to protest in the city on March 20.

The mid-day meal workers see the new kitchens as a threat to their livelihood as most of them are lacking the skill to find an alternative job. Dulahi Devi, a mid-day meal cook for the last 10 years says, "I have dedicated half of my life doing this job and I have nowhere else to go. I am deaf in one ear and do not have a family. I have gotten used to this, the kids are my life and I'm too old for a

In an interview with Siddhartha Bhattacharya, Administrative Manager of Akshaya Patra, Guwahati, he said, "People are content and happy that their kids will be fed hygienic food every day. Our foundation is trying to counter malnutrition and is only seeking to provide for society." The new kitchens with a capacity to feed 50,000 students daily will help provide meals to underprivileged children and support the right to education of children hailing from socio-economically challenging backgrounds, he added.

On being asked about the protest by the mid-day meal workers, Siddhartha stated, "I understand that there's a strong mood of anxiety brewing amongst the midday meal



Image source: Akshayapatra.org

change." Poonam Nath, a young 20-year-old girl who used to work in a tea garden before shifting to the city with her 3 brothers said, "I do multiple jobs but being a cook in the school is my primary source of income. If that is taken away from me, I don't know how I will look after my family, as I have three brothers who're younger than me. And the youngest one goes to the same school I cook for."

Amal das, a 24-year-old midday meal cook from Guwahati Adarsha High School said, "I come from a very small village in Nagaland and have an ailing mother back home. Every month I send her money so she can survive, but it's hard sometimes as Rs 1500 is just not enough. I don't know where I will go if this job is taken away from me."

The new kitchens will help provide meals to underprivileged children, counter malnutrition and support the right to education of children hailing from socio-economically challenging backgrounds.

cooks, and rightly so, they're concerned for their employment. But what we are trying to do will benefit everyone. And the cooks can apply for jobs in our kitchens as well."

The Mid-day meal scheme was launched in 1995 to improve the nutrition of school-going children. The mid-day meal cooks staged a similar protest in 2019 when the govt gave the contract of serving meals to 15 NGOs.



Dulahi Devi with Poonam Nath, both midday meal cooks

## Labour demands not a ‘cup of tea’ for any political party

By Suramya Kaushik from Sundarnagar,  
Ashish Chandra from Tezpur

The Assam government on February 20, 2021, announced a hike in the state’s tea garden workers’ daily wages by Rs. 50. The Assam cabinet chaired by Assam Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal approved a proposal to increase the daily wage of tea garden workers from Rs 167 to Rs 217.

Mohan Tanti, Central Executive member of All Assam Tea Tribes Student Association (AATSA) believes the wage increase has come in the backdrop of upcoming State Assembly elections beginning from March 27. He said, “We have been demanding an increase in wage to Rs 351.33 since 2017, but it was only when we decided to boycott Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s election rally at Dhekiajuli on February 7, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government finally decided to increase the wages”. However, the increase in wage has been stayed by the Guwahati High Court on a petition filed by the tea plantation owners.

Tea garden workers constitute 17 percent of Assam’s total population and are the deciding factor in 40 assembly seats out of total of 126 Assembly seats in the state assembly elections. The community is spread over 850 large tea gardens plus several unorganised small gardens in the state. Therefore, the community is politically significant for any party in the state. However, the conditions of almost 20 lakh tea plantation workers are marked by exploitation, economic backwardness, poor health conditions, and low literacy rates.

Tora Agarwala, Assistant Editor, The Indian Express who covers the North-Eastern region, said that tea plantation workers are some of the “oppressed people” in the state. Most of them are tribal (Adivasis) and were brought to Assam by the British in the 1860s from the central Indian states like Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha.

Another long-standing demand of the workers has been gaining the Scheduled Tribe (ST) status. Mohan Tanti said, “India is ruled by one Constitution, however, while the Constitution provided ST status to our communities in Central India when it comes to Assam, we become ‘refined’ and are treated as Minorities and Other Backward Classes (MOBC) or Other Backward Classes (OBC).” He believes this denial of ST status to their community is to ensure that “we are kept as workers and voters only, and not become politically empowered.”



Image source: Countercurrents Assam

In BJP-led Himachal Pradesh, the tea garden workers received a hike in daily wages in 2020. The Himachal Pradesh Labour Department revised minimum rates of wages to Rs 275 in the Scheduled employment of tea plantations on July 21, 2020.

Therefore, currently, Himachal Pradesh is giving the highest wages to tea garden workers in the country. However, according to the graph, there is no mark of Himachal on the world map of tea gardens whereas there is a huge significance of Assam and Darjeeling tea gardens on the map.

Nitin Sharma, a tea garden worker in Kangra, Hi-

machal Pradesh, said, “We are just political targets to be aimed by politicians for the sake of wages but no government addresses our real issues. Our tea is no less than Assam or Darjeeling in quality. Despite that, why are we not marked in the list of tea gardens in the world? Why is there no separate policy to promote Kangra tea?”

He further stated that tea garden workers in all the states are seen as vote banks and a hike in wages is just a way to ensure votes. He added, “The truth behind Kangra Tea not being on the world map is because it is not a priority for any government or any election manifesto. Government should think beyond wages to bring us on a world map like Assam and Darjeeling as our tea has the finest qualities.”

Mohan Tanti also talks about the false promises and politicization of tea workers in Assam. He said, “While the BJP has been promising growth in the name of ‘Double Engine Sarkar’ (same party ruling centre and state) in Assam, on the other side in West Bengal, which has a different party in the state, their tea labourers get wages of Rs 202 a day. While in Assam, we are getting only Rs 167. BJP had promised in their 2016 Assam election manifesto to increase the tea garden wages to Rs 351 but that never happened.” In West Bengal in 2021, Union Home Minister Amit Shah while presenting Sankalpa Patra (election manifesto) of BJP in Calcutta said that if voted to power, they would hike the wage of tea workers to Rs 350. In all the states, political parties believe that they have prioritized tea garden workers by aiming at wage hikes, but workers disagree.

Several tea garden workers from Assam, West Bengal, and Himachal Pradesh said that only one government (BJP) promised us hikes but neglected our demands and dignity, others didn’t even prioritize us. They question, “In such a case, whom to trust and vote?”

## Visual effects industry’s inhuman race to meet deadlines in Hyderabad

By Vishal U.

**Hyderabad** - With the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, all film shooting and production work across the country were brought to a halt. According to the studio heads, now that shooting and production work has been allowed to resume, the lives of Visual Effects (VFX) artists based in Hyderabad have taken a turn for the worse.

To make up for the lost shooting and production time from last year, many movie projects have accelerated their schedules. This has caused many production studios to be overburdened with work. “With many movies piled up, I haven’t been able to go home in over two months and this workload has started taking its toll on me. I sometimes question whether this money is even worth all this.” said Vikram Khatare who is a roto artist (a type of VFX specialisation) at Circus studio.

With uncertainty still looming, many directors and producers want to wrap up their movies quickly to prevent any further delay. “The producers are con-

stantly on call with us. They will lose a lot of money if everything is brought to a halt again so we don’t have any choice but to speed things up on our end as well.” said Ramakrishna Polina who is the director of IACG studios.

The COVID-19 cases in Hyderabad are not well tracked and this has added to the uncertainty, causing the production houses to take drastic steps to prevent a virus outbreak in the studio. According to Sanath P.C., the head of Firefly Creative Studios, they can’t afford to lose any workforce and need maximum hands and hours to keep up with the deadlines. To ensure maximum safety, the artists have been asked to shift temporarily to nearby areas. “Some of my colleagues even spend the nights there (in the studio)” said Mounica Devireddy who is a roto artist at Firefly. “We often find ourselves working 17-18 a day but we have no choice as even they (Department heads) have pressure from the producers and the work just keeps coming” she added.

Having to shift temporarily and with the stark increase in working hours, many VFX artists are finding it extremely difficult to keep up. While some fear retrenchment on raising the issue with the production coordinators or department heads, others chose to understand the situation and provide support to the studios during these tough times. However, they all agree that their normalcy is still quite far away and hope to get there one mouse click at a time.

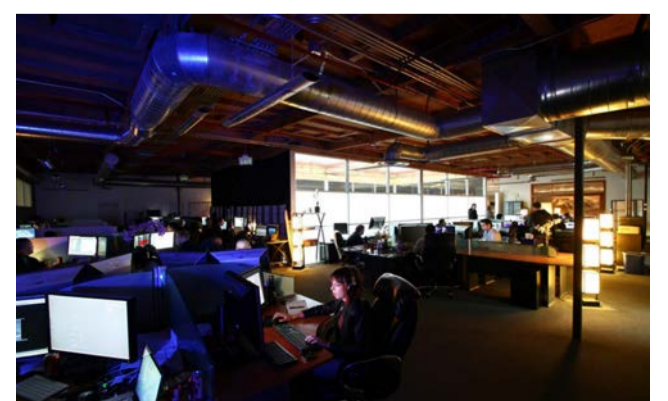


Image source: Studio Daily

# Are coaching classes the only path to success?

By Atreya Raghavan, Saloni Dhumne, Pradyumna Kalagi

**Pune** - "Self-discipline and a supportive environment eliminate the need for private coaching," says Mayank Raj, an alumnus of the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad (IIM-A), who achieved a 100 percentile in the Common Admission Test (CAT) without any extra coaching. "Coaching classes were a difficult fit into my schedule. I could manage my studies much better with friends around me who would clear my queries," he says. He also believes that with a set timetable, it is possible to oneself for such an exam by themselves. "Coaching classes are really not for everyone. For some they work, for others, they don't. The choice is up to the individual," he adds.

joining the coaching classes. I could study as well as play sports."

According to Rahul Shukla, a National Defence Academy (NDA) alumnus, coaching centres can be considered as an additional source to help with one's preparation for competitive exams, but one must not be entirely dependent on them. He feels that coaching classes adopt a crash course pattern that doesn't hold ground in a student's mind for long, and eventually dies down. "Joining renowned coaching centres instills a sense of belief in one that it will give them an edge over other students without much effort from their end," he adds. His parents weren't supportive of his idea to

lege. But I found that it was not helping with my studies and also dragged my academic performance in school down." She adds that coaching classes started taking a toll on her mental health, so much so that she considered taking a drop year and preparing for her entrances on her own. "Coaching classes are very hectic and stress on rote learning to prepare for competitive exams. They advocate quantity over quality."

Rashika Shrivastava, a graduate from the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT), Bangalore, cleared the NIFT entrance exam on her first attempt without availing any coaching classes and shares a similar perspective. A late deci-

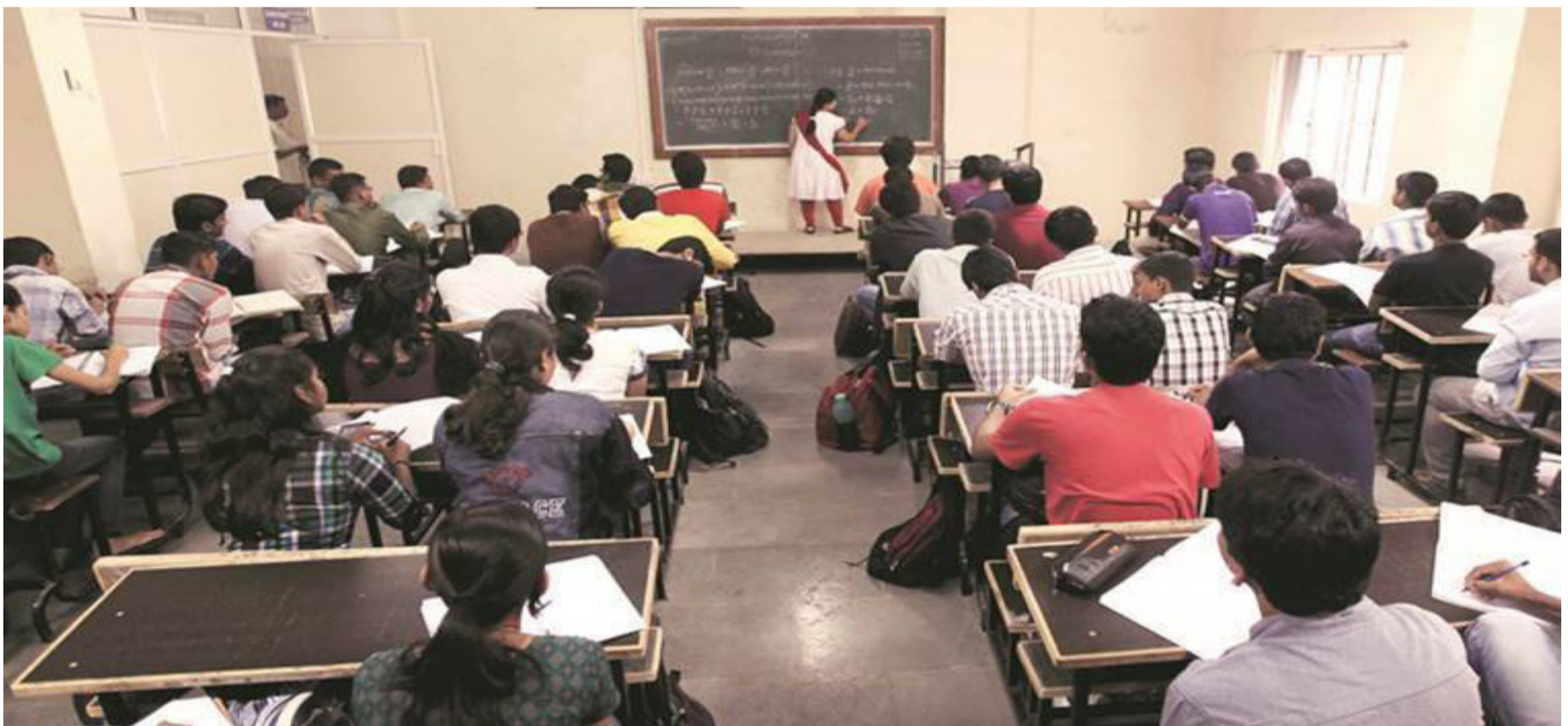


Image Source: The Indian Express

As per a report by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) under the Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation on 'Key Indicators of Social Consumption in India' (Education), as many as 72.5% of students at the secondary and higher secondary level and 25.9% at the graduate level and above enrolled for private coaching classes in India. It is a general assumption that joining a coaching centre guarantees a seat at one of the most premier institutions in the country? But, are they one's only option? Some say otherwise.

"I come from a small town and people here aren't really aware of coaching classes. That was one reason why I did not join the same," says Nishant Aggarwal, a student of Birla Institute of Technology and Science (BITS) Pilani, Hyderabad who got 332 rank in BITSAT, 2017. "But now that I look back, I realise it was a very good decision". He suggests for students to not join coaching classes as he believes one should enjoy their college years. "I found a balance in my life by not

not join coaching classes but they eventually realised the drawbacks of a high stressed environment. Studying from home was tough but he found the right atmosphere in the public library.

Merwyn Abraham, a design aspirant who cleared the Undergraduate Common Entrance Examination for Design (UCEED) 2021, conducted by the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Bombay, says, "People in my field suggested against joining coaching classes. Because I did not restrict myself to them, I could utilise the time thus saved in experimenting with design software. This enhanced my creativity further." He believes that coaching classes hamper one's creativity and prevent one from exploring new avenues. Moreover, he is also a recommended cadet for the National Defence Academy, which he also managed without any external classes.

Akshiti Kaushik, a final year MBBS student of Manipal University who cleared NEET says, "I joined the coaching classes during my junior col-

sion to pursue her education in fashion meant that she couldn't join coaching classes as the entrance exam was just a few months away.

However, since the syllabus was fairly similar to management courses, material specific to it was fairly easy to come by. "Conversations with those who had cleared the exam already online as well as articles on the same helped me develop a preparation strategy for the same, after which, it was just a question of practice," she tells us.

The experiences of these students amongst many others, reveal that coaching classes do not necessarily guarantee success. There exists a divide in the student community between those who believe it is imperative to join coaching classes to clear competitive exams and those who believe otherwise. It finally comes down to one's preferences and what works best for oneself.