**[Change his name if BJP wins](https://www.dawn.com/news/1827758/change-his-name-if-bjp-wins)**

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THERE is a perceptible voter fatigue against divisive planks. That’s encouraging news coming in for Indian democracy, which braces for a seven-stage [general election](https://www.dawn.com/news/1821900) starting Friday. The last round of voting is set for June 1 and votes are to be counted on June 4.

The happy tidings for India’s troubled social fabric aren’t the version of reality you would get from monotonic hate-spewing TV channels awarded by their corporate owners to the Modi campaign. But the new findings, together with other crucial pointers, seem credible coming as they are from a respected [survey](https://www.thehindu.com/elections/lok-sabha/csds-lokniti-2024-pre-poll-survey-there-is-no-clear-and-close-challenger-to-the-bjp-this-time-ifs-and-buts-apply/article68058827.ece) published in *The Hindu* last week.

A bevy of independent accounts and spot reports circulating on the alternative media support this part of the pre-poll survey by the Lokniti-Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS). The finding makes it difficult not to see the Modi campaign wading into major headwinds.

On the other hand, the survey finds Mr Modi ahead of the main opposition Congress and its INDIA alliance partners. It offers no assurance that the adverse equation for the opposition may change during the long hard trudge ahead. Also, there’s no discernible hint about a likely voter response to the possibility of a last-minute divisive strike that the Modi campaign is well known for. Mr Modi won the 2014 elections riding communal polarisation triggered by his party’s anti-Muslim campaign in Muzaffarnagar in vote-rich Uttar Pradesh. He won in 2019 by staging a military stand-off with Pakistan.

Unemployment and price rise are the key concerns of nearly half the electorate, the survey shows.

The grand Ram temple in Ayodhya, as one has said earlier, had failed to become a national issue, be it for the Hindu electorate or any other. In a way, this represents a damning miscalculation for the Modi campaign given that the prime minister invested his prestige in the saturated TV coverage of the event beamed to cities and villages. Images of the prime minister in the role of a Hindu high priest failing to strike a chord in these elections is just one more worry for the ruling party.

The pre-poll study shows little to nothing that favours the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) even as it still sees that he remains ahead of rivals albeit subject to ‘ifs’ and ‘buts’.

Unemployment and price rise are the key concerns of nearly half the electorate, the Lokniti-CSDS survey shows. Nearly two-thirds of those surveyed (62 per cent), with the highest among cities (65pc), said getting jobs had become more difficult. A significant section, 55pc — way higher than the 40pc of those surveyed in 2019 — said corruption had increased, with only 19pc saying that it had decreased (a fall from 37pc who felt so in 2019).

Ram temple and religious issues figure way down in single digits in the order of importance to the voters. Two responses are evident to the state of play, one coming from Mr Modi, the other captured by the opposition’s Kanhaiya Kumar, a Congress candidate in Delhi supported by the capital’s ruling Aam Aadmi Party. Mr Modi has kept the divisive option warm. Not ready to respond to the questions on jobs and corruption, he has found references with communal slant more appealing.

It seems that Congress leader Rahul Gandhi rustled up a mutton meal with Bihar’s opposition legend Lalu Yadav a few weeks ago. More recently, Lalu’s son and former Bihar deputy chief minister Tejashwi Yadav posted a video of himself eating fish in a helicopter. Mr Modi has signalled these events as taunting his Hindutva supporters and as appeasement of Muslims. However, the claim seems to have drawn a yawn, even outright scorn as seen from a section of train commuters interviewed by NewsLaundry portal.

That the relatively tepid communal comment may be testing the waters for a more vitriolic polarisation is not lost on Mamata Banerjee. The combative woman chief minister of West Bengal has cautioned her cadre to not fall into the BJP’s trap by responding to communal needling with violence. West Bengal sends 42 MPs of whom the BJP took 18 last time, four less than 22 won by Ms Banerjee. She says she expects to win “twice the number of seats of the BJP” this time, which means a substantially reduced number for her main rival in West Bengal. If a communal assault does come its likely target would be West Bengal or Assam.

While Mr Modi has preferred to skirt the issues of [unemployment](https://www.dawn.com/news/1827383) and corruption, Kanhaiya Kumar, the former communist student leader from JNU, has kept his focus on jobs and electoral bonds, and on India’s troubled secular spine. In a way, it’s a summation of the opposition’s stance. Kumar is one of three candidates the Congress is fielding in Delhi, the other four going to the Aam Aadmi Party in a robust alliance that has worried the BJP. It’s partly to breach this Congress-AAP alliance that the Modi government is accused of using its agencies to jail Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal and his senior colleagues. But that may have boosted the alliance, which will find an even greater echo in Punjab, Goa and, importantly, also in the prime minister’s home state of Gujarat.

Kanhaiya is a candidate from north Delhi, which witnessed large-scale anti-Muslim violence in 2020 evidently orchestrated to disrupt a nationwide campaign against controversial citizenship laws. Abutting Uttar Pradesh, Kanhaiya hopes to heal the constituency’s experience that saw support against Muslims from various caste groups in the neighbouring state. Nine seats going to polls in the first phase come from western Uttar Pradesh, a heartland of Jat farmers, Rajput powerbrokers and a clutch of other influential castes that are said to have replaced their blanket support to Modi with a grudging one. This is tonic to the communal health of Kanhaiya Kumar’s Delhi constituency and has emboldened him to say: “Change my name if the BJP comes back again to rule the country.”

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