

# Mandi Lok Sabha Showdown: Royal King Vs Bollywood Queen

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## **Abstract:**

The southern states of Kerala and Karnataka will be the centre of attention as India's massive parliamentary elections enter their second of seven phases on April 26. On April 19, India's general election for the 543 seats in the Lok Sabha, began. On June 4, the outcomes of the biggest democratic election in history will be made public. The two main alliances, aside from a number of regional and national contenders, are the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA), led by the main opposition Indian National Congress, and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), which is led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP). India's political scene frequently features captivating contests characterised by the coming together of disparate identities and backgrounds. This phenomenon is best exemplified by the upcoming election between two strong candidates, Bollywood star Kangana Ranaut and Royal scion Vikramaditya Singh, for the Mandi Lok Sabha seat in Himachal Pradesh. Through shedding light on the complex issues involved in the conflict between the conventional aristocracy, represented by Vikramaditya Singh, and the magnetism of Bollywood fame, personified by Kangana Ranaut, this research adds to a deeper understanding of the changing landscape of Indian politics, where identity politics and personality cults collide with the established power system.

**Keywords:** Mandi Lok Sabha election 1, Himachal Pradesh 2, Electoral Politics 3, Vikramaditya Singh 4, Kangana Ranaut 5, celebrity politics 6, identity politics 7.

## **Introduction**

The national general elections of 2014 dealt Congress a political blow that completely deflated its hopes. This led to a seismic shift in Delhi's political equilibrium from the Congress's centrist ideology to the right-wing politics of the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), which unveiled a new platform promising to usher in a new India free from the Congress (Praveen Rai & Sanjay Kumar, 2017). According to Neera Chandhoke (2014), there were three noteworthy aspects of this election. Firstly, it was the first time in India's electoral history that a non-Congress party had gained power independently. Two, for the first time in thirty years, that is, since 1984, a political party has taken the majority. Three, a charismatic leader's image is more prominent than their party for the first time in thirty years, or since Indira Gandhi passed away (Chandhoke, 2014, p. 3). In addition, Chhibber and Verma (2014) pointed out that the UPA government led by the Congress had administrative shortcomings, which provided the BJP with a major opportunity to establish its reputation among the general public. Secondly, it can be argued that the Modi factor or wave was a significant factor in this election and ideological foundation of Hindutva was another reason for the victory of the BJP. This sparked a BJP wave among the Hindi-speaking states and resulted

in the BJP's lopsided dominance in these states' elections (pp. 50-56). E. Sridharan (2014) stated in the *Journal of Democracy* that "the results were dramatic, possibly even epochal." The world's largest democracy currently appears to have a new party system led by a newly dominant party, a stark departure from the electoral patterns of the previous 25 years (pp. 20-33). Thus, with its historic win, "the BJP has clearly replaced the congress as the system-defining party and would likely become the focal point of electoral alignment and realignment in India," according to Chhibber & Verma (2018). The 2019 elections yielded similar outcomes as well. The entire shift in India's electoral politics has been referred to as the "Second Dominant Party System" by Palshikar (2017). India's political development has entered a new phase. The Congress party was once the dominant political force in India, but it is now evident that the BJP is a new, influential force in politics. Based on a wide range of factors, it is evident that India is experiencing a transition to a new, dominant party system with the 2019 general election (Vaishnav & Hinton, 2019).

The Indian state of Himachal Pradesh is set to hold its General Elections on June 1, which is the final phase of the election period. What makes the parliamentary elections of particular interest in the state is that, the state is impacted by the nearly two-year anti-incumbency factor against the faction-ridden Sukhu Government in the state, which makes this election cycle seem intriguing again. The Congress party's huge victory in the assembly election of 2022 also makes this election cycle noteworthy. 6 legislators voted against the party in the Rajya Sabha elections severely damaging the hopes of the state government in the upcoming parliamentary elections. Another important thing that makes these elections interesting is the personal battle for the four parliamentary seats from the state. The most interesting Face-off out of these four seats seems to be building on the Mandi Parliamentary seat of Himachal Pradesh.

Mandi Parliamentary constituency, which spans an expensive and diverse geographic area from Bharmour to Kinnaur, consists of 17 seats in the Vidhan Sabha (legislative assembly). A report from the Indian Election Commission in 2019 states that 12.81 lakh voters, nearly equally divided between the sexes, reside in the constituency. With 6,47,189 votes, BJP candidate Ram Swaroop Sharma won the seat in the 2019 election, surpassing the total votes cast by Congressman Ashray Sharma and CPI(M) candidate Dilip Singh Kayath, who received 241, 730 and 14,838 votes, respectively. In the 2014 elections, BJP candidate Ramswaroop Sharma defeated Congresswoman Pratibha Singh, a former two-time MP, by a margin of 39000 votes. Sharma received 3.62 lakh votes to Singh's 3.22 lakh, with Kushal Bhardwaj of the CPI(M) coming in third.

### 1. A Brief Overview of Hill States Politics

The small state of Himachal Pradesh has a high rate of literacy (82.80%). 50.72% of its population, according to the 2011 census, are members of higher castes (32.72% Rajput and 18% Brahmin), 25.22% are Scheduled Castes (SCs), 5.71% are STs, 13.52% are OBCs, and 4.83% are members of other communities (Census of India, 2011). The scheduled tribes are concentrated in the districts of Kinnaur, Lahul-Spiti, Chamba, and Kangra, whereas the higher castes and scheduled castes are dispersed throughout the state. The Kangra district is home to about 70% of OBCs, who participate heavily in elections. At the local level, voting patterns are influenced by the caste or community equations of Brahmin, Rajput, Girath, Chaudhary, Gaddi, Muslim, and Sikh. Nonetheless, the state's election results this time around strongly suggest that these factors have been subdued, as the BJP candidates' unprecedented wins in all four constituencies in the previous election represent the complete eradication of caste and community politics from the state's political landscape (Thakur, 2019, p. 4).

As it sends seven members to parliament and sixty-eight members to the legislative assembly, HP is the key state where the bi-party system has shaped democratic politics in the Hindi Heartland and the nation since the mid-1980s. Today, the state is renowned for its unique party politics, which include features like anti-incumbency every five years, the dominance of two national parties (Bipolar Contest) With rare exceptions, when certain smaller parties managed to secure some incisions and upset the political balance, Himachal Pradesh’s politics is characterised by bipolarity, and voters who are highly educated and prioritise development over all other issues when it comes to voting. The state is renowned for lacking communal politics and for having upper-caste dominance in party politics (Thakur, 2014). The polls are also influenced by the regional divide between the districts of “*Old Himachal*” (Shimla, Kinnaur, Kullu, Mandi, Solan, Sirmaur, and Bilaspur) and “*New Himachal*” (Kangra, Hamirpur, and Una) (Verma, 1994). Even though it may not seem like much, caste has occasionally had a major influence on state politics. Since the state has the largest population of upper caste members, Rajputs and Brahmins have dominated Himachal Pradesh politics. As per the 2011 census, the upper castes make up approximately 51% of the state’s population, with Rajputs making up 33% and Brahmins making up 18% (Census of India, 2011). In the politics of the hill state, the upper caste has prevailed. Conflicts over leadership and intra-party pulls have a lengthy history in state politics (Sharma, 1976). In the state’s politics, political opportunism is nothing new, as party dissidents and rebels have frequently switched sides over the years (Thakur, 2017, p. 12).

## 2. BJP’s Back-to-Back Wins: A Closer Look

As indicated in Table 1, the BJP won all four of the state’s seats in the 2019 general elections and saw a significant increase in votes (15.02%) in its favour over the 2014 elections. Congress experienced the most significant loss in the history of the Himachal Pradesh Lok Sabha elections, with its vote share declining by -13.55%. Kishan Kapoor, Ram Swaroop Sharma, Anurag Thakur, and Suresh Kashyap defeated Pawan Kajal, Ashray Sharma, Ram Lal Thakur, and Dhani Ram Shandil by enormous margins of 4,66,659, 3,87,812, 3,97,776, and 3,23,659, respectively (See Table 1). “Others,” who garnered 16.42% of the vote in the 2014 elections, have lost 13.67% of their vote share and are all but gone from the state with a miserable 2.75% of the vote. whereas 27321, or 0.86% of the votes, were NOTA. The only candidate from the Mandi constituency to receive a respectable number of votes (14742) was Daleep Singh Kaith of the CPI (M). The other candidates from the BSP, All India Forward Block, Swabhiman Party, Himachal Jan Kranti Party, Nav Bharat Ekta Dal, and other parties, as well as independents from every constituency, were far behind (Thakur, 2019).

**Table 1: Summary Results: Party Standings in Lok Sabha Elections 2019 Gain-Loss Compared with Lok Sabha Elections 2014**

Political Parties	2014 Seats won	2014 Votes secured	2019 Seats Won Gain/Loss	2019 Votes secured	Vote Swing since 2014
Congress	0	1447319 (41.07%)	-	1,044,305 (27.52%)	-13.55%
BJP	4	1300756 (53,85%)	4	2620692 (68.87%)	+15.02%

Others	-	(16.42%)	-	84826 (2.75%) +	-13.67%
Nota	-	-	-	27321, (0.86%)	-
Total	4	100%	4	100%	-

Source: Election Commission of India; and A Statistical Report on General Election to Lok Sabha, 2014 and 2019, in Himachal Pradesh.

On May 19, 2019, Himachal Pradesh held its final round of voting, achieving its highest-ever polling percentage of more than 72%. This is approximately 8 percentage points more than the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, and it is 5 percentage points more than the 2019 national average. The Indian National Congress (INC), the other major player in the state’s divisive political contest, saw a vote share decline of about 13 percentage points, while the BJP saw a sharp 16 percentage point increase in its share of the vote over the 2014 Lok Sabha polls (Chauhan et al., 2019, p. 18).

### 3. Mandi’s Historic Parliamentary Battle

On April 15, 1948, when the state of Himachal Pradesh was established, the two princely states of Mandi and Suket merged to form the current district of Mandi. There have been no changes to the district’s jurisdiction since its creation (District Human Development Report Mandi district 2003, p. 14). Mandi has witnessed the battle of the royals ever since Amrit Kaur, daughter of King Harnam Singh, emerged victorious in the first election held in independent India in 1952. The Mandi-Mahasu constituency was then represented by Shri Gopi Ram (Mandi) from 1952 to 1957 and Rani Amrit Kaur from the (former Patiala State). In 1957, a high-stakes royal battle took place when Joginder Sen Bahadur, a Congress candidate, defeated Anand Chand, the scion of the former state of Bilaspur, who was the eighth ruler of Mandi. In 1962 and 1967, Mandi supported Lalit Sen, a congress candidate and Ruler of the former princely state of Suket, for two terms in a row.

The scion of the former Bushahr Princely state, Virbhadra Singh, first entered the electoral fray in 1971. He was affectionately referred to as “Raja Ji” by the state’s populace and went on to hold the position of chief minister for six terms (Kumari, 2022). The constituency was represented by Janata Party candidate Ganga Singh from 1977 to 1979; however, after the Janata Party government fell in 1980, Virbhadra Singh reclaimed the seat. Ganga Singh, who had no royal ancestry, had become a giant slayer after defeating Virbhadra Singh in 1977.

The first election without a royal participating was held in 1984. Shortly after, a man identified as Sukh Ram, the “son of the soil”, entered the race. In 1984, he made the transition from state to parliament politics and won handily. But in the subsequent 1989 election, the son of the Soil was defeated at the polls by Maheshwar Singh, a blue-blooded royal who was the Scion of the former Kullu State. Later on, in 1991, Maheshwar was defeated by Sukh Ram, who later became the Chief Minister.

However, Sukh Ram reappeared and triumphed once more in 1994. However, a few years later, he was banished from Congress due to the alleged discovery of significant amounts of cash in his home (Sharma, 2022). In 1996, it was yet another deviation, this time without any royals involved. In an attempt to regain political control, Sukh Ram founded the Himachal Vikas Congress (HVK) and made a spectacular return to politics, taking back five assembly seats in 1998 and the Congress party’s Shimla (reserved) parliamentary seat in 1999.

The royal family made a comeback in 1998 when Pratibha Singh, Virbhadra Singh’s wife, won the seat. In 1999, Maheshwar Singh defeated Congressman Kaul Singh to resume his winning ways. The tables

were turned once more in 2004 when Pratibha Singh defeated Maheshwar Singh (Chauhan & Ghosh, 2004, p. 5505), and Virbhadrha in 2009 back at the helm. Pratibha was elected from the constituency in 2013 following her husband’s resignation to take on the role of chief minister. In the 2014 elections, Ram Swaroop Sharma of the BJP defeated Pratibha Singh, riding high on Narendra Modi’s wave. In 2019, he kept his seat, defeating Ashray Sharma, the grandson of Sukh Ram. Following Ram Swaroop Sharma’s untimely death, bye-elections were held in 2021, and Pratibha Singh won once more (Hindustan Times, 2024). Table 2 indicates the all-previous winners from the Mandi Parliamentary seat.

**Table 2: Winners From Mandi seat over the years (1952-2021)**

Year	Winners	Party	Year	Winners	Party
1952	Gopi Ram	INC	1989	Maheshwar Singh	BJP
1952	Rajkumari Amrit Kaur	INC	1991 and 1996	Sukh Ram	INC
1957	Raja Joginder Sen	INC	1998 and 1999	Maheshwar Singh	BJP
1962	Lalit Sen	INC	2004	Pratibha Singh	INC
1967	Lalit Sen	INC	2009	Virbhadrha Singh	INC
1971	Virbhadrha Singh	INC	2013 Byelection	Pratibha Singh	INC
1977	Ganga Singh	Janata Party	2014 and 2019	Ramswaroop Sharma	BJP
1980	Virbhadrha Singh	INC	2021 Byelection	Pratibha Singh	INC
1984	Sukh Ram	INC			

Source: Chief Electoral Officer, Election Commission of India, New Delhi.

#### 4. Current Trends in Mandi Parliamentary Seat: Insights and Analysis

According to the Election Commission of India, there are currently 17 assembly segments that make up the Mandi seat. These include Bharmour, Lahaul & Spiti, Manali, Kullu, Banjar, Anni, Karsog, Sunder Nagar, Nachan, Seraj, Darang, Joginder Nagar, Mandi, Balh, Sarkaghat, Rampur, and Kinnaur. Looking at the results of the last five general elections (The 2013 and 2021 byelections), it appears that the Congress and BJP are the only rivals on the Mandi Seat. Since the Bushahr royal family has been running for the seat, Congress has maintained its hold on it (Virbhadrha Singh, Pratibha Singh). They are still discernible through people’s emotions. With the ascent to national prominence of Modi and the prominence of Jai Ram Thakur- a significant regional figure from the Mandi Seraj Constituency, the BJP has also gained popularity in recent times.



**Table 3: Previous Five Election Results on Mandi Seat (Congress & BJP: 2009-2021)**

Years	Total Votes	Voters Turnout	BJP Votes (%)	Congress Votes (%)	Margin
2009	7,13,026	64.09%	Maheshwar Singh - 326976 (45.85%)	Virbhadra Singh - 340973 (47.82%)	13997 (2.0%)
2013	582249	51.80%	Jai Ram Thakur -216765 (37.23%)	Pratibha Singh -353492 (60.71%)	136727 (23.48%)
2014	7,26,094	63.1 %	Ram Swaroop Sharma -362824 (49.94%)	Pratibha Singh -322968 (44.46%)	39,856 (5.5%)
2019	9,43,148	73.60 %	Ram Swaroop Sharma -647189 (68.7%)	Ashray Sharma -241730 (25.68%)	4,05,459 (43.1%)
2021	753566	57.98%	Brigadier Khushal Thakur- -- 3,56,884 (48.05%)	Pratibha Singh- 365,650 (49.23%)	8766 (1.18%)

Source: Election Commission of India; A Statistical Report on General Election to Lok Sabha, 2009, 2013,2014,2019, in Himachal Pradesh.

The Congress Party managed to win the Mandi parliamentary seat in 2009, despite losing three of the state’s four parliamentary seats. The ruling Bhartiya Janata party in Himachal Pradesh managed to secure three of the four Lok Sabha seats in the state thanks to factionalism within the state congress and favourable opinions of the government led by Prem Kumar Dhumal, which has been in office for just two years (Chauhan & Ghosh, 2009, p. 180). Even in Mandi, where the Congress candidate prevailed, the BJP held the advantage in nine out of seventeen assembly segments. Virbhadra Singh’s victory margin was likewise extremely narrow, at just 13, 997 (2.0%) votes (See; Table 3). According to polls, Pratibha Singh won in 2013 and 2021. Due to the passing of Raja Virbhadra Singh, she received sympathy votes in 2021; however, the margin of victory was still extremely narrow, coming in at 8766 (1.18%). With a massive margin of 1,36,727 (23.48%) votes, Pratibha Singh defeated Jai Ram Thakur of the BJP in the 2013 election (See Table 3). It demonstrated the public’s faith in both Virbhadra Singh’s leadership and the state’s ruling congress party.

Speaking of the BJP’s dominance in the general elections of 2014 and 2019, Ramswaroop Sharma was elected on the strength of the Modi wave and issues of national importance. With a margin of 39,856 votes, or 5.5%, Ramswaroop Sharma of the BJP defeated Congresswoman Pratibha Singh, a former two-time MP, in the 2014 election. Singh received 3.22 lakh votes compared to Sharma’s 3.62 lakh, with

Kushal Bhardwaj of the CPI(M) coming in third (See Table 3). The BJP's ability to employ a novel electoral strategy of social engineering at the national level is what allowed it to secure substantial support from other backward castes. In addition, the lower and middle class were drawn to the party's promises of development and the image of Modi as a strong and decisive leader (Palshikar & Suri, 2014). At the state level, the 2014 elections saw Virbhadra Singh and Dhumal turn their supposed charges of scams and scandals into a family feud fuelled by politics of vendetta (Chauhan, 2014, p. 147).

With 6,47,189 votes, BJP candidate Ram Swaroop Sharma won the seat in the 2019 election, surpassing the votes of Congressman Ashray Sharma and CPI(M) candidate Dilip Singh Kayath, who received 241,730 and 14,838 votes, respectively. There were 4,05,459 (43.1%) votes separating the winners (See Table 3). Among the other reasons that contributed to the BJP's overwhelming victory in the centre of the 2019 election were the opposition parties' inability to come together and defeat them, as well as the BJP's superior party organisation and ability to turn obstacles like the Pulwama tragedy into opportunities. Narendra Modi's leadership, also known as the "Modi Wave," was another important factor (Chhibber & Shah, 2019). Micro-level elements like employment, development, health, social security, law and order, etc. also contributed significantly to the party's victory in the state elections. The combination of macro and micro factors gave the BJP an unprecedented lead across the state's four constituencies (Thakur, 2019).

## 5. 2024: Political Showdown Ahead

The four Lok Sabha seats in Himachal Pradesh are up for election, and there is a sense of mystery and unpredictability about it. After a recent rebellion within its ranks, the Congress—which had a comfortable majority when it came to power in 2022—seems to have lost some of its credibility. The party has been enduring a series of crises since late February 2024. Due to cross-party voting by six of its party's MLAs, the BJP pulled off an upset a few months ago when it defeated Abhishek Manu Singhvi of the Congress in the race for the state's sole Rajya Sabha seat. Even though the BJP had 25 MLAs and the Congress had 40 MLAs in the 68-member house, Singhvi was not elected.

The BJP currently holds three Lok Sabha seats: Hamirpur, Kangra, and Shimla; the Congress currently holds the seat of Mandi. Riding high on the Modi Wave, the BJP replicated its 2014 performance in the 2019 parliamentary election, winning all four seats with sizable margins. The party received 69.7 per cent of the vote, a significant increase over its 2014 total. However, Mandi MP Ram Swaroop Sharma committed suicide in 2021. Following that, the BJP lost Mandi to Pratibha Singh, the late Vir Bhadra Singh's wife and former Chief Minister.

## 6. Candidate, Campaign & Issues

### • Meet the Contenders

The hill state's Lok Sabha elections took on a Bollywood flair when the BJP declared Kangana Ranaut's candidature for the Mandi parliamentary seat. The actor, a self-described admirer of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has been making overt allusions to a political career for more than two years. She was there when the Ram temple became a reality as well. Given that Kangan was raised in a small town in the Mandi district, it was an obvious choice. Her father, Amardeep, is a businessman, and her great-grandfather, Sarju Singh Ranaut, was a retired Mandi school teacher.

Kangana, a resident of Bhambala Village in the Sarkaghat assembly segment of Mandi, has been actively campaigning for the seat in the delightful state for several days. On the other hand, Kangana has become

involved in several disputes and has solidified her position as a “Hindutva Advocate” in more recent times (Hindustan Times, 2024). Kangana, 37, is a native of a small town in the Mandi district of Himachal Pradesh. She signed her first movie contract at the age of 18, “Gangster,” and she hasn’t stopped since. She continued to produce numerous hits, including “Tanu Weds Manu” and “Manikarnika.”

She is renowned for taking on Bollywood heavyweights and got into a protracted argument with multiple prominent male stars. Her remarks on political matters have frequently courted controversy. She has made several indications in recent years that she intends to enter politics. From the Mandi Lok-Sabha constituency, her nomination as the BJP’s Lok Sabha candidate is not shocking. Ranaut, who is well-known for her strong political beliefs and rebellious behaviour in Bollywood, has shown her political inclinations by playing the leading roles of Indira Gandhi and J. Jayalalitha in biopics, who are arguably the two most influential women politicians in India.

Kangana Ranaut’s road show and rally in Mandi launched the campaign in the state on a high note. With her traditional clothing, her campaigning style is becoming more and more popular among the natives. She also uses the Mandyali language, or “Pahari,” at her rallies, which makes the voters appear more endearing. Additionally, she is remaining true to her one-liner and concentrating her campaign on topics like women’s empowerment and the work of the Modi government.

Kangana is also using social media and election rallies to her full advantage to attack her rival, the scion king Vikramaditya Singh. She has been making provocative statements on social media and other media platforms, as well as at rallies while narrating Vikramaditya Singh as (*Chota Papu*) she said;

“It saddens me that the prince (Vikramaditya Singh) didn’t treat his wife well. Maybe they do not know how to respect women. His wife says that she was harassed in many ways”- Kangana Ranaut (Hindustan Times, 2024).

“Yeh Tumhare Baap Dada ki Riyasat Nahin Hai, Ke Tum Mujhe Dara Dhamka ke Vapis Bhej doge” (this is not the estate of your father or grandfather that you will threaten me and send me back)- Kangana Ranaut (Deccan Herald, 2024).

Ranaut is the ideal choice when it comes to winning over the state’s female populace. The number of women participating in elections has increased. In a few constituencies, women now make up a greater percentage of voters than men. There are more women than men among the newly added voters. The Lok Sabha 2019 saw a higher percentage of female voters than male voters in the state while analysing the Mandi Parliamentary seat female voters were 4,69,659 (49.80%) compared to male voters 4,73,487 (50.20%) which is a marginal difference on the gender line. Kangana can have a big impact on the female voters through her campaign. The number of women voting in the state has increased by 5.5% since the last Lok Sabha elections, from 26 lakh in 2019 to 27.5 lakh in 2024. However, since 1951, only three women from Himachal Pradesh have been elected to the Lok Sabha; Amrit Kaur, Chandresh Kumari, and Pratibha Singh are the descendants of former royal families, and two of them were elected from the Mandi Parliamentary seat. In the previous few assembly elections in Himachal Pradesh, the number of female voters exceeded that of male voters. There’s no doubt it will have a significant impact on the Mandi seat as well. In the campaign, Jai Ram Thakur, a senior BJP leader and former chief minister of Himachal Pradesh, is another factor supporting Kangana Ranaut. The party has won nine assembly segments under the parliamentary constituency in the 2022 assembly elections, even though it lost the state elections.

Vikramaditya Singh is the son of Virbhadra Singh, the six-time chief minister, and Pratibha Singh, the current member of Parliament from the Mandi seat, also serving as the president of the Congress state unit. Vikramaditya Singh, currently serving as the PWD Minister for the Himachal Pradesh government,



was twice elected as a Shimla (Rural) MLA. As his mother and father both won the seat three times, Vikramaditya Singh is not a newcomer to the Mandi Parliamentary constituency.

Vikramaditya Singh attended Bishop Cotton School in Shimla and St. Stephen’s College in Delhi. In addition, Singh presided over the Himachal Pradesh Youth Congress from 2013 to 2018 (The Himachali Podcast, 2024). Before the announcement of his candidature, Vikramaditya Singh got into a heated argument with the politician and actor from the Bollywood movie “Queen,” in which neither party held back. Even though Singh referred to Ranaut as the “*Queen of Controversies*,” Vikramaditya Singh observed that;

“It’s the BJP’s decision to decide upon whom they want as a candidate. But I would say the candidate should be committed leader than those who are like tourists, their campaign seems like a tourist visit. The tourists wear the regional attire get their pictures clicked and leave”. - Vikramaditya Singh

“It is people’s decision whether they want an entertainer or a serious leader. The people of Mandi are well read and intellectual, they understand that contesting election isn’t fun, it requires dedication, commitment, understanding and Knowledge of the region”. - Vikramaditya Singh (Bisht, 2024).

What makes Vikramaditya Singh more likely to win this seat is Since 1952, the Mandi constituency has favoured the scions of former princely states, electing royals in 13 of the 19 elections that have taken place, including two that were decided by polls. Singh has heavily pushed for his mother in the 2021 bye-elections for the seat. Therefore, his candidature for this seat may be aided by the legacy of his parents as well as the fact that he is a member of a royal family. Also being a young leader, he can make his presence felt among the youths of the Mandi Parliamentary seat. His social Media presence also makes him not less than celebrity in the state.

• **Issues and campaigns**

Assembly elections are unique in that they prioritise state-specific development, local governance, and regional issues. These issues might include regional autonomy in states like Assam or Jammu and Kashmir, industrial development in Gujarat, or agricultural policies in agrarian states like Punjab. The general elections in India, in contrast, are a huge event that involves the entire country. India’s general elections are centred on national issues, broad policies, and the leadership that will determine the direction of the nation. While talking in terms of issues differentiation, people’s consideration during the previous two assembly elections in the state is given below in the (Table, 4).

Issues	2022	2017
Development	45	19
Inflation/Rising Prices of essential commodities	12	4
Unemployment	9	6
Functioning of government	5	Less Than 1%
Change/ removal of government	5	Less Than 1%
Bringing back the government	3	Less Than 1%
Vote for a particular leader/ Party Candidate	2	Less Than 1%

**Table 4: consideration while voting during the assembly election 2022 and 2017 Himachal Pradesh or determinants of Vote Choices in the Previous two Assembly Elections (2022-2017)**

Source: CSDS Post-Poll Survey Data.

Note: also cited by The Hindu in their article named “Economic Issues in Himachal Pradesh Assembly Election” December 11, 2022.

*Question Asked: what was the most important issue for you while voting in this assembly election?*

According to the Lok-Niti CSDS Post-Poll data and Table 4 given above, voters ranked price increases and unemployment as the second and third most important voting considerations, respectively, during the state’s assembly elections, despite believing that the state’s overall development was the most important voting consideration (See; Table, 4). Even though the Congress Party’s pledge to reinstate the OPS also played a significant role in the 2022 elections and affected the state’s government employees’ voting patterns.

In 2022 Assembly elections, the state’s citizens were forced to choose between two narratives: one that promotes nationalism, strong leadership, development, security, health, and welfare policies, and the other that highlights state problems like unemployment, inflation, and the OPS. As a result, the state’s local concerns overshadowed the BJP’s election agenda and the Hindutva slogan, which began to lose steam during Narendra Modi’s rallies. In the meantime, the BJP had finished its core development projects and pan-Indian welfare schemes, promising to introduce the Uniform Civil Code, create 8 lakh jobs, build pucca roads to every village, establish five medical colleges, provide mobile clinic vans, startup schemes, provide bicycles and scooty’s to female students, and grant 33% reservation to women in the workforce, among other things (Thakur et al., 2022, p. 57). In an attempt to play the card of regional discrimination, the congress offered ten guarantees and begged for aid to the upper HP apple belt. It produced Rs. 1500 for each woman, rations for families above the poverty line, 300 units of free electricity per month, subsidies for apple growers, the land acquisition act, and compensation for the owners in addition to OPS and one lakh jobs in the first year (Thakur et al., 2022, p. 57).

However, on the other side, the state’s parliamentary election results are influenced primarily by matters of national significance and the candidate’s image for prime ministership. The state’s congress party’s primary advantage is its sporadic victory in the assembly elections. and continuing to receive public support. The state government’s reasonably good handling of the monsoon disaster, which included the announcement of a special package worth Rs. 4,500 crores funded by its resources, gives the Sukhu government additional leverage. Additionally, the Congress party will attempt to market the state’s success in reversing the Old Pension Scheme.

The only thing that could lower the expectations of the Congress party in the state is that it is a divided house right now. The recent rebellion by six MLAs caused a serious crisis in the state congress, and party workers’ morale suffered before the elections due to infighting. Additionally, the state’s two-year anti-incumbency movement and the party’s failure to deliver on assembly poll promises could affect the party’s performance in the Lok Sabha, similar to the unrest among youths over the delay in announcing exam results for government jobs.

The Congress party is accused of discriminating against the Kangra and Mandi regions, and the concentration of power in the Shimla and Hamirpur seats alone could further undermine the party’s hopes in these elections. This may put an end to the aspirations of Mandi-based Vikramaditya Singh, who had been actively engaged in his two-term assembly seat in Shimla (Rural) and had not been active in the region for some time (The Economic Times, 2024).

Speaking of the BJP, the election battle for the Mandi seat will revolve around the leadership of Modi and Jairam as well as Kangana Ranaut, a celebrity. Additionally, since this area is more strongly associated

with religious beliefs (*Known as Little Kashi*), the inauguration of the Ram Temple by the BJP government in recent times will undoubtedly have an impact on the outcome of the elections. The BJP stands to gain from the inauguration of Ayodhya's Ram Temple, but other national issues should also be taken into consideration. These include the ideological battle between the Congress and the BJP, the legal guarantees provided to farmers by the MSP (farmers protest), the disclosure of electoral bond data, Ram Mandir, the Abrogation of Article 370, CAA, and Uniform Civil Code, unemployment, and price increases.

Both parties' Manifesto includes, The Modi ki Guarantee (youth development, women's empowerment, farmers' welfare, and the upliftment of marginalised communities) and Congress's Nyay Guarantees (emphasising justice for various segments of society, from youth and farmers to women and labourers) (The Economic Times, 16 March 2024) will also have an impact on the election results.

However, the BJP will also have to deal with accusations of discrimination against the state from the BJP-led federal government, given that no special package was announced in response to the monsoon disaster and that the previous BJP government in the state left behind a sizable debt load. Regarding the Mandi Lok Sabha seat, the BJP's hopes of winning this seat may be dashed by the dissatisfaction of senior leaders such as Maheshwar Singh (the seat's twice-elected MP), Kushal Thakur (the party's candidate in the 2021 byelection), and also parties' worker.

- **The Leadership Effect**

The Congress party will place greater emphasis on its state-level leadership, such as recently elected State Chief Minister Sukhwinder Singh Sukhu, State Congress Party President and Mandi parliamentary seat member Pratibha Singh, and youthful candidate for the MP election from Mandi Seat, Vikramaditya Singh, when analysing the influence of leadership on voter behaviour.

The BJP will rely more on its national leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who oversaw the party's two previous victories in the state. Jagat Prakash Nada, the national president of the party and a native of Himachal Pradesh, will also be a prominent figure in the campaign. Anurag Thakur, the current minister of sports, youth affairs and minister of information and broadcasting in the second Modi Ministry, will also be contesting from his Parliamentary seat in Hamirpur, Himachal Pradesh, and will face challenges in proving himself following the party's poor performance in his district in the 2022 assembly election (Una, Hamirpur).

Speaking specifically about the Mandi Lok Sabha Seat, former chief minister Jai Ram Thakur will have a significant influence. Thakur is a resident of the Seraj Assembly Segment. In the 2022 assembly election, Thakur won nine out of ten assembly segments from the district, despite the party ended up on the losing side. The BJP party's candidature (Kangana Ranaut) for the seat is bolstered by the fact that the candidate is a well-known celebrity who has garnered positive public opinion will also be a factor that will mobilise the voters.

- **Strategy: Mapping the Path to Victory**

In Rampur, where Vikramaditya Singh was born, as well as in the three tribal assembly segments of Kinnaur, Lahaul-Spiti, and Bharmour in Chamba, the strategy of the congress will be to gain as much ground as necessary. In the Rampur Lok Sabha bye-election of 2021, Pratibha Singh won by 20,000 votes, but in the Lok Sabha elections of 2019, the BJP surprised everyone by taking the lead in the constituency. With Kullu District having four Assembly Segments (Kullu, Manali, Banjar, and Anni), the Congress is hoping to gain traction there as well.

But what will ultimately decide Vikramaditya Singh and Kangana Ranaut's fate in the Mandi district is the level of support the Congress can muster there. The BJP is expected to gain a significant lead in Seraj,

the home constituency of opposition leader Jai Ram Thakur, which could upset the Congress’s calculations. When it comes to the BJP, the nine assembly constituencies in Sunder Nagar, Balh, Mandi, Darang, Joginder Nagar, Nachan, Seraj, Karsog, and Sarkaghat can give them a significant advantage because Jai Ram Thakur, the former chief minister of HP, is from this area and won nine of the ten assembly seats there in the 2022 assembly elections. The BJP intends to use these nine assembly segments as a major source to gain the lead.

It was an interesting contest in the 2014 elections between the Congress party’s royal family led by Pratibha Singh and the BJP’s (Ramswaroop Sharma) for these assembly segments. (Table, 5), below unequivocally shows that the BJP was able to secure a healthy lead in the majority of these assembly segments. In Joginder Nagar BJP recorded the highest vote margin in favour of the BJP candidate Ram Swaroop Sharma, with a lead of 19911 (36.45%) votes. From other assembly segments with the leads from Sarkaghat 8434 (18.32%) votes, Sunder Nagar 4682 votes (10.49%), Nachan 4077 votes (8.06%), Daran, 1648 votes (3.63%), Mandi, 6394 (14.82%) votes, Balh, 5252 (10.86%) votes, Karsog, 2676 (7.97%) votes (See Table 5) BJP dominated the Mandi district completely.

With a lead of 1491 votes (3.26%), the Congress party was only able to win one of the nine segments, the Seraj assembly constituency. Despite this narrow victory, the Seraj constituency can now unquestionably support the BJP candidate as it did in the 2021 Bye-election on this seat, due to the presence of former chief minister Jai Ram Thakur. To reap the benefits of these nine seats, the Congress party will need to work harder and longer on them.

**Table 5: Result of the 2014 General Election Between Congress and BJP (Mandi Assembly Segment Margin of Votes)**

Assembly Segment	Congress Votes/%	BJP Votes/%	Margin
Karsog	14610 (43.51%)	17286 (51.48%)	2676 (7.97%)
Sarkaghat	17896 (38.88%)	26330 (57.20%)	8434 (18.32%)
Balh	20621 (42.63%)	25873 (53.49%)	5252 (10.86%)
Mandi	17180 (39.81%)	23574 (54.63%)	6394 (14.82%)
Joginder Nagar	15589 (28.55%)	35500 (65.0%)	19911 (36.45%)
Darang	21020 (46.36%)	22668 (49.99%)	1648 (3.63%)
Seraj	22673 (49.60%)	21182 (46.34%)	1491 (3.26%)
Nachan	22377 (44.27%)	26454 (52.33%)	4077 (8.06%)
Sunder Nagar	18860 (42.23%)	23542 (52.72%)	4682 (10.49%)

Source: Election Commission of India (Note: These results exclude the service voters) Also the data of the 2021 byelection is not taken because there was a huge sympathy wave towards Congress candidate.

## 7. Conclusion

To sum up, the historic Mandi Seat serves as a captivating stage for an electorate fascinated by the divergent personalities of Vikramaditya Singh and Kangan Ranaut. As the campaign progresses, it becomes clear that this is more than just a political contest—rather, it represents a quest for both candidates’ redemption and validation. Kangana sees her political career as a chance to change her public persona and establish herself as a capable leader. On the other hand, motivated by the desire to build a

border support base within his own constituency, Vikramaditya Singh, a young MLA from Shimla (Rural), stakes his established reputation in the state and also the name of Royal family with the historic legacy on Mandi Parliamentary seat. In addition, it will serve as a test of electoral judgement for the residents of Mandi, reflecting their voting patterns. The result will ultimately determine not only the fate of the Mandi seat but also the paths taken by these two formidable competitors.

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