

## BIG WINS IN MAHARASHTRA

**M**aharashtra, 2024 In a stunning and decisive outcome, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), secured a commanding victory in the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly Elections 2024, reaffirming its dominance in the state's political landscape. The NDA's triumph marks a pivotal moment in Maharashtra's history, as the alliance outperformed its rivals, including the Shiv Sena (Uddhav), Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), and the Indian National Congress (INC), in what was widely seen as a referendum on the state's governance and national policies.

The NDA, which includes the BJP, Shiv Sena (Eknath Shinde) faction, and smaller regional allies, clinched an impressive 220 out of 288 seats in the Maharashtra Assembly, a significant increase from their previous tally in the 2019 elections. This victory is seen as a strong endorsement of the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the BJP's national agenda, and the Shiv Sena (Eknath Shinde) faction's role in leading the state government post-2022.

The election results were marked by the NDA's ability to consolidate both urban and rural votes, with major victories in key cities like Mumbai, Pune, Nagpur, and Thane, alongside strong showings in the hinterlands. The BJP's ability to forge alliances with smaller regional parties also played a key role in expanding their voter base, particularly in areas traditionally dominated by the opposition.

On the other hand, Chief Minister Eknath Shinde's popularity in his home constituency of Thane and his ability to form a stable government with the BJP, despite early challenges, became a key factor that led to the NDA's favor. Shinde's victory in the Thane Assembly seat and his strong leadership were instrumental in ensuring the NDA's dominance in the state.

For the BJP, this win under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi is a validation of its nationwide appeal and its commitment to development, security, and national integration. Modi's rallies in Maharashtra, focusing on issues like infrastructure development, job creation, and women empowerment, resonated with a wide section of the electorate, from urban professionals to rural farmers.

The opposition, led by the Shiv Sena (Uddhav), NCP, and INC, struggled to make significant inroads, despite their united front in the election. The Uddhav Thackeray-led Shiv Sena's attempt to position itself as the alternative to the NDA was marred by internal divisions and a lack of strong leadership following the Shiv Sena's split in 2022. The NCP, led by Sharad Pawar, and the Congress faced challenges in retaining their voter base, especially in the wake of corruption charges and infighting among party leadership.

In particular, the Shiv Sena (Uddhav) failed to rally its core supporters in Mumbai and other urban areas.

## Kashmir wetlands abuzz with arrival of migratory birds

■ MOHAMMAD HANIEF



**W**ith the onset of winter in the Kashmir Valley, migratory birds have started flocking to wetlands, seeking refuge from the harsher climates of Siberia, China and Eastern Europe while as hundreds of birds, including species like mallards and gadwalls, have already started arriving at Hokersar and other wetlands.

Migratory birds arrive every year to stay in lakes, marshes, and at least five wetland spots in Jammu and Kashmir, typically for about five months. The annual migration brings not only birds but also wildlife photographers, hobbyists, and bird watchers who flock to these wetlands for a glimpse of the rare visitors and this winter season a good number of migratory birds are expecting as the temperature dips in the coming months, the number of migratory birds will increase. Over one million migratory birds arrived in Kashmir during last winter season. This year, Kashmir experienced a prolonged dry spell, although recent snowfall in mountainous and hilly areas is signalling a return to colder conditions. With colder months ahead, the wetlands of Kashmir will continue to serve as a vital sanctuary for migratory birds, adding to the valley's natural beauty and ecological diversity.

An impressive number of migratory birds have flocked to the region, upholding the centuries-old tradition of wintering in the wetlands. Hundreds of migratory birds, including mallards, gadwalls and various other species, have arrived at Hokersar wetland. Notably, more than 90 species of birds trek to breed and feed in the valley's wetlands, travelling from Siberia, China, and Eastern Europe. These include mallards, common teals, bitterns, graylag geese, pintails, shovellers, tufted ducks, and cormorants.

For bird watchers, it's an exciting time, especially as sightings can vary each year; however, despite the beauty and biodiversity, poaching remains a challenge for the wildlife department. The Jammu and Kashmir Wildlife department have already identified areas vulnerable to poaching and plan to intensify monitoring to prevent illegal activities in and around the boundaries of the wetland areas as they are committed



to safeguarding these migratory species, and efforts to prevent poaching incidents are being prioritized with extra vigilance around the wetlands.

In a remarkable development for bird enthusiasts and conservationists alike, the elusive Great Bittern (*Botaurus stellaris*) has been sighted for the first time in the Kashmir Valley at the renowned Wular Lake. This significant event not only highlights the ecological importance of the region but also strengthens the ongoing efforts to preserve its rich biodiversity. As migratory birds return to their seasonal habitats, Wular Lake has once again proven to be a vital refuge for avian species.

The arrival of the Great Bittern, known for its distinctive booming call and cryptic plumage, marks an extraordinary occasion for ornithologists and nature lovers. Its presence in the valley underscores the significance of wetland conservation in sustaining diverse bird populations.

The Wular Lake, one of the largest freshwater lakes in Asia, serves as a crucial habitat for numerous migratory birds each year. The arrival of the Great Bittern adds to the lake's already impressive roster of avifauna, including various species of ducks, herons, and other migratory birds that grace the region during the winter months.

Bird watchers and researchers are encouraged to visit Wular Lake to witness this remarkable event and participate in ongoing

conservation initiatives. The sighting of the Great Bittern not only fosters excitement within the community but also serves as a reminder of the need for collective action to protect our natural heritage.

Wular lake is much cleaner and full of water. A dry spell has reduced the areas of the other water bodies across the Valley, especially in neighbouring areas like Hygam, Hokersar and Shalhbough. Poaching of migratory birds has also come down due to strong vigilance around the lake. Now birds find this big water body a safe haven.

In past 12 months, the clean waters of the lake has even attracted some rare species, such as Falcated Duck, Horned Grebe, Western Reef Heron, Snow Duck, Long-tailed Duck, Pacific Golden Plover and the Broad-billed Sandpiper.

Wular is a shallow lake with a maximum depth of 5.8 metres and covers 130 sq km, providing 60% of the Valley's fish produce. Known for water chestnuts and lotus stems, the lake is the lifeline of the 30 surrounding villages. For the past three years, more than ₹300 crore has been spent on the lake's conservation, and experts say results are reflecting on ground.

The last Annual Water Bird Census (AWC) in the Kashmir had revealed that the wetlands here provide a pleasant stay for the birds from across Europe, Japan, China and Central Asia. According to official Census figures the arrival of migratory

birds ranged between eight to 12 lakh in 2022-23 and 11 to 12 lakh in 2021-22.

The migratory birds visiting Kashmir travel from the colder areas of the world, flying over continents in flocks. The birds that arrive here every year are mallards, graylag geese, pochards, common tails, shovellers, pintails and gharwals, which visit the region between October and April. Twelve lakh migratory birds from Eastern Europe and Central Asia visited Kashmir's wetlands the previous year, as per the Wildlife Department Kashmir's annual census.

Every year, the Wildlife Department Kashmir, in collaboration with several other agencies and stakeholders, conduct a census to determine the number of migratory birds that visit Kashmir during the winter. The season also attracts hobbyists, wildlife photographers and bird watchers, many of whom frequent these spots to catch glimpses of special guests as many of them look forward to this season to see a lot of them gathering near Dal Lake.

As the birds arrive, however, there is also a lurking threat from the poachers and hunters. The wildlife department seized more than 30 guns, including a rifle worth more than Rs 5 lakh, in the past two years. Around the same time, the Forest Protection Force (FPF) in north Kashmir's Bandipora, where Wular Lake is one of the main sites for bird visits, claimed to have seized as many as 11 punt guns - about 9 feet long - from the poachers.

The wildlife department has implemented multiple measures to transform all wetlands into habitable spaces, resulting in a noticeable surge in bird activity. Last year, the Kashmir valley hosted more than 12 lakh migratory birds, some visiting for the first time. The department has taken several initiatives to maintain suitable habitats for these birds, ensuring an adequate water level in the wetlands. Apart from Hokersar, other locations such as Wular Lake, Haigam, Shalhbough, Dal Lake, and Mirgund also attract migratory birds during the winter months.

Migratory period extends until March, when the birds return to their distant homelands, completing a cycle that has played out for centuries as the recent influx of migratory birds, numbering in lakhs, has infused the wetland reserves of Kashmir with vibrant hues and melodious sounds.

## The traditional Kashmiri Pandit's Dejhoor

■ OMKAR DATTATRAY

**K**ashmiri Pandits have a distinct, unique and peculiar cultural identity and heritage in the broad spectrum of Sanatan Dharma. The KP's attire, dress and ornaments are very distinct and these are traditional and from these symbols their cultural identity finds expression. It is every body's knowledge that Kashmiri Pandits were forced to migrate in 1989-90 and thereafter because of militancy and they took refuge in Jammu and other states of India. But the minuscule Kashmiri Pandit community needs commendation that despite their exile they have somehow preserved their traditional culture and heritage albeit with some modification here and there.

Not only their attire and dress used to be different but their food habits and cuisines too are different and the KP community is identified by these distinct and unique things of cultural.

One such symbol of Kashmiri Pandit culture is Dejhoor which is the wedding ornament of married Kashmiri Pandit women which they wear after marriage and carry/wear it throughout their life and in fact up to their passing away from this mortal world.

Dejhoor is the symbol and sign of the

married life of Kashmiri Pandit women and is the symbol of Suhag that means it shows that a KP women continues to have a husband.

Dejhoor is a slender, intricate gold ornament and signifies a talisman of heritage that is sworn by the Kashmiri Pandit bride before the wedding procession to mark her transition into womanhood. It has three parts - a chain, the main hexagon shaped ornament and the charm that hangs at the end. Married KP women wear it in their ear and it keeps hanging.

Dejhoor is crafted in gold with a hexagonal shape and features a central dot representing Shiva and Shakti. The tradition of Dejhoor earrings dates back centuries in Kashmiri Pandit history, reflecting ancient beliefs and customs passed down through generations. In the modern time the KP's have preserved this identity of theirs and are passing it to future generations and the Kashmiri Pandit women take great pride in wearing Dejhoor earrings. Every Kashmiri Pandit parent gets a Dejhoor crafted and prepared irrespective of his economic standing and gifts it to her girl at the time of her binding into nuptial-knot and he well before Lagan -ceremony of burning sacred fire. Dejhoor also symbolizes

union between two Kashmiri Pandit families. The Dejhoor ornament is always hexagonal and as mentioned above it symbolizes a Yantra denoting Shiva and Shakti.

Non-Kashmiris are welcome to wear dejhoor as a form of cultural appreciation, as long as they do so respectfully and with an understanding of its significance.

Today many non-Kashmiri women wear Dejhoor and it is a welcome development. The Dejhoor Athoor is more than just a jewelry. It is a reflection of the rich heritage and deep-rooted traditions of Kashmir. A married Kashmiri Pandit woman is identified by the two long gold chains with pendants that hung from both her ears. Dejhoor is akin to a Mangalsutra worn by married Hindu in the length and breadth of India. As already mentioned at elsewhere Dejhoor is put into the pierced centre of the ears at the time of a ceremony called Devgoan. The ceremony of Devgoan is generally solemnized a day before the wedding day. It indicates the transition from Brahmacharya Ashram to Grahasthya Ashram of the bride and bridegroom. Before Devgoan, the bride & bridegroom in their respective homes are given a bath called Kany Shraan -a

pre-nuptial bathing ritual. A fire is lit and Guruji called Gor performs Devgoan ceremony in front of the holy fire.

Both bride and bridegroom offer prayers in accordance with Vedic rituals. They observe a fast till the Puja is completed. The Dejhoor has a deep spiritual meaning and significance. The hexagonal shape depicts the union of Shiva and Shakti. The Ath and Dejhoor is a permanent thing while Athoor is changed often. It is customary that a new Athoor is worn at every important occasion such as birthday of both the couples and a fresh Athoor is worn at marriage festivals and other important religious festivals. A piece of Kashmiri culture and heritage, this traditional and conventional gold ornament has undergone a transformation and modification in the hands of modern KP women. The chain of Dejhoor goes over the ear and hangs as low as the chest. The Dejhoor is put on in a religious ceremony on the red thread before wedding by the bride and mantras are chanted into it. In modern time with the evolving aesthetics modern brides hold their traditions and wear modern designs of Dejhoor while maintaining the cultural and traditional sanctity of this ornament. In modern times very small Dejhoor called Aathoor

& Ath are worn by the married Kashmiri Pandit ladies but maintaining the cultural heritage, tradition and ethos of Kashmiri Pandit community. Even today also the KP ladies feel pride and see it as their privilege to wear Ath & Athoor. It in fact is mini-Dejhoor and it is security proof as it also hung on the both ears, but it a very small chain with Athoor. It points to the fact that Kashmiri Pandits and its womenfolk has preserved its rich, beautiful and pristine culture they pass it on to the future generations. Dejhoor in fact is the symbol of married Kashmiri Pandit women and it clearly identifies the Kashmiri Pandit ladies from the rest. It is also the symbol of Kashmiri Pandit ladies married life and it shows that a KP lady is married and as already mentioned Dejhoor is akin to a Mangalsutra which Hindu married women wear across the country. In the same way the married Rajasthani women wear Decktick and it is the symbol of their married life and also a symbol of their being Suhag. At some places in India, married women get their nose pierced and wear a small ornament called in Hindu dialect Rung. It shows that there are cultural diversities among the Hindu's and in fact among the Indian

married women. The Dejhoor is placed in the inner-center cartilage of the ear with a read thread on the day before the wedding. After the wedding, the thread is with a golden chain called an ath, given by the bride's in laws. A small gold ornament called an athur, is attached to the dejhoor. Only married Kashmiri Pandit women wear the dejhoor. It is not worn by Muslim Kashmiris or other Hindu communities, though in modern days some married Hindu women also wear Dejhoor and take pleasure in wearing it. The dejhoor is worn even after the death of the husband. It in fact is a hexagonal, dangling ear ornament worn by Kashmiri Pandit women to symbolize the union of not only the bride and bridegroom but also the union of two families. An interpretation of the term Dij is that it represents "dvija" and is thus the female counterpart of a yajnopavita in the Brahmin community. Its function is similar to that of a mangalsutra or Sindoor in other regions of India. Let the Kashmiri Pandit women continue to wear Dejhoor and preserve and protect this beautiful and pristine as well as traditional item of cultural heritage and pass it on to the coming generations.

(The author is a columnist, social and KP activist).

## The Untold Cause of Road Rage

The congestion on roads hits travelers'/drivers health, especially their mental health and this triggers road rage

■ SAJJAD BAZAZ

**A** recent tragic road accident in the heart of Srinagar city that consumed a few lives of minor boys has ignited a debate around parenting responsibilities. At the same time, the traffic police department swung into action and intensified its drive against minors driving two-wheelers and four-wheelers. Amid this action-and - reaction scenario, common people took to their social media handles, criticizing the parents who allow their minor wards to drive vehicles and at the same time appreciating the traffic police for cracking-down on traffic rule violators, especially seizing the vehicles driven by minors on the roads. In the overall situation, the traffic police department capitalized on the dreadful accident and tried to paint a rosy picture of itself in terms of their performance on roads and conveniently took a dig at general commuters/drivers for lack of discipline on roads.

Road accidents involving minors can be dubbed stray incidents when compared with the overall rate of accidents happening on the Jammu & Kashmir roads. Such accidents have happened in the past and will happen in future also. At the moment, launching a crackdown on traffic rule

violators is by all means a reactionary act and is bound to lose steam after a couple of weeks or so. In fact such reactions are nothing but applying a Band-Aid to a deep wound which does not serve any purpose!

Actually, the problem of the growing rate of road accidents is not that under-age boys and girls are driving vehicles. The problem lies with the system - the traffic management system. The management of roads and road-intersections is a huge issue and lack of professional personnel trained in handling traffic has complicated the mess on roads. The massive traffic jams, precisely congestion, on main roads, feeder roads, even in lanes and by-lanes, have become a norm at our place. This heavy congestion on roads is the basic cause of road accidents as this triggers road rage. Let us understand that traffic jams have a huge ripple effect impacting our countless aspects of travel and life. In other words, this congestion bears consequences of economic losses and adversely hits travelers'/drivers health, especially their mental health.

Let me explain. Who would like to be stuck on a heavily congested road? Of course, no

one. It is always inconvenient and frustrating to get locked in a traffic jam, especially when you have an urgent need to reach your destination. In economic terms, it negates the proverb: Time is money. For instance, a distance which normally takes twenty minutes to travel is completed in one hour or more due to traffic jams, wasting precious time of the commuters/drivers. It lowers their working hours, scales down productivity and earnings at the end of the day. However, economic losses apart, the significant ripple effect of congestion on roads, as already stated above, negatively impacts countless aspects of our life.

The more congestion experienced by the drivers, the more frustrated they become, leading to road rage. When a driver is late for work or gets frustrated with traffic jams, he is bound to begin to exhibit dangerous driving behaviors. He may resort to speeding, cutting other drivers off, or tailgating and all of these actions lead to road rage and significantly endanger other commuters on the roads. This road rage carries highest safety risks for all and if the authorities give a proper thought to find out the major cause of accidents, they will find this congestion-induced road rage as the

main culprit.

The most important observation is that congestion-induced road rage immediately takes the attention of drivers from the road. In this situation, drivers maneuver their vehicles into small spaces and during the course, they lose sight of the road ahead. Consequently, they get more likely to rear-end or hit another vehicle. In other words, during aggressive driving patterns in post-congestion driving, the drivers become less focused on the dashboard area. The Thar accident in Tengpora area of Srinagar city, which claimed a few lives of school-going children in the vehicle, is a perfect example of road rage in which they lost sight of the road ahead and collided with a stranded vehicle.

A driving simulation study is worth quoting. The study has found that driver behavior in post-congestion situations became more aggressive, more focused in the forward area but less focused in the dashboard area, and was associated with lower power of the  $\beta$ -band in the temporal brain region. The clustering results, as per the study, showed more aggressive and lack-of-aware response patterns while driving in post-congestion situations.

So, the negative influence of traffic congestion on the mental health of drivers is a dangerous aspect and it is this factor which has been taking the toll of lives in road accidents.

Precisely, the ripple effect that congestion has on our place is immense and acutely distressing. The need of the hour is to integrate advanced technology in the traffic management system with real-time traffic monitoring and traffic control technology, at least in the twin cities of Jammu and Srinagar. This way, the traffic department can capture credible traffic data to be turned into traffic analytics. These analytics will help to capture real-time detection, classification, and traffic tracking and ultimately this will contribute to efficient traffic management to prevent congestion on roads efficiently. Consequently, it will make travel safer and more efficient for drivers and commuters. Ultimately, the rate of accidents will come down and a positive ripple effect of productivity, efficiency, and safety can also be cultivated.

To conclude, the general public cannot escape from their responsibility to help in removing the mess on our roads. Generally, it is a common sight to observe that people are glad to

resort to on-street parking contraventions even on busy roads and block smooth traffic movement. There is also no concept of bus stops, though many bus stops exist at various points. Passenger vehicles hardly use bus stops. It is not the driver alone to be blamed for this. But the fact is that people never wait for a passenger bus at a bus stop. The understanding between the driver and the passenger has gone trendy that they know the bus can stop anywhere anytime for him at the cost of smooth traffic movement.

Let the people understand that we cannot afford to lock our future to these gridlocks. We have to seriously pull ourselves out of this mess and we need to challenge conventional thinking around traffic congestion.

Meanwhile, let me reiterate that time demands to rope in traffic engineers who are technically trained to develop traffic engineering plans; ensure proper traffic specifications; estimate traffic levels, and traffic control; and create traffic signal reports. They are the professionals who use computer simulations to test various traffic scenarios before implementing changes on streets and highways.

(The author is veteran journalist/columnist).