

3 THE CITY

Andheri East bypoll: No surprise in victory of Latke, but runner-up NOTA the scene-stealer

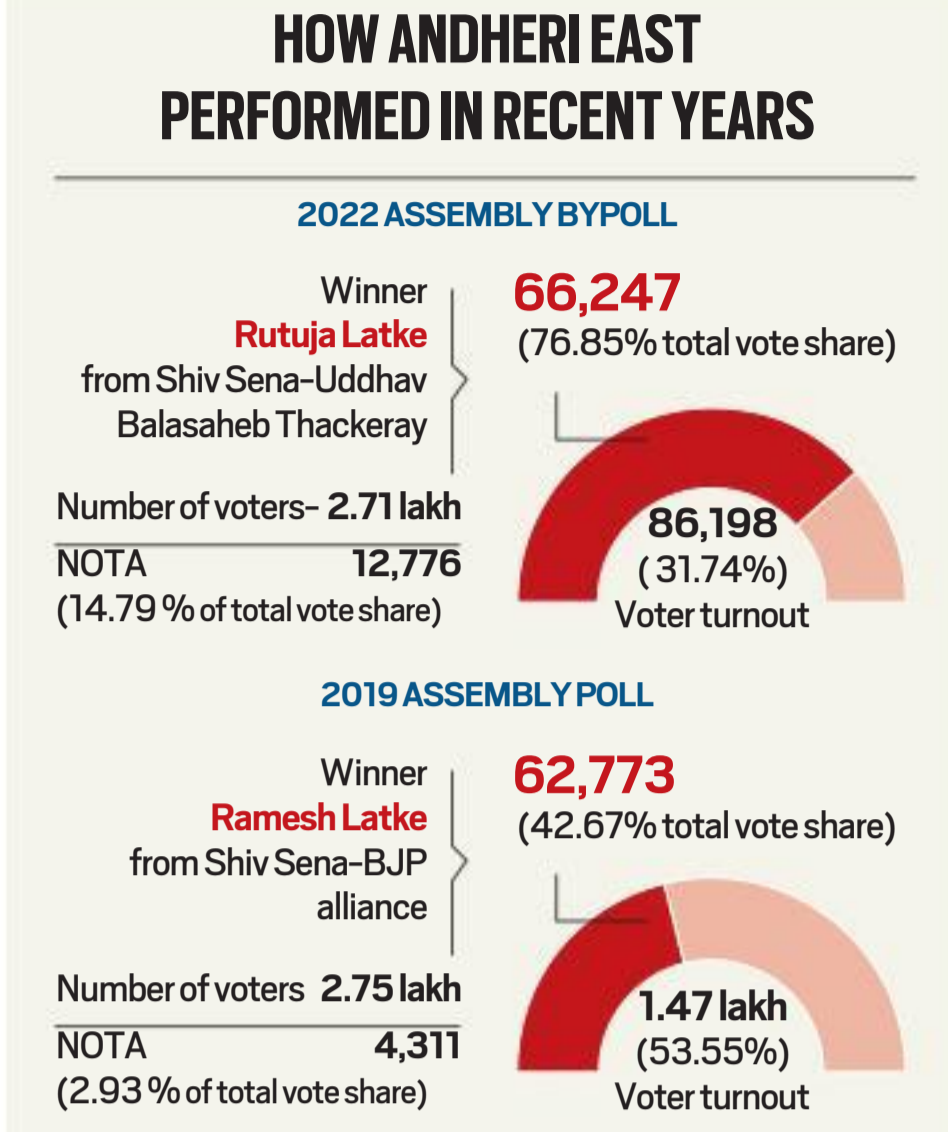
VALLABH OZARKAR
MUMBAI, NOVEMBER 6

THE UDDHAV Thackeray-led Shiv Sena won the Andheri (East) Assembly bypoll on Sunday as many observers expected but an eye-catching takeaway from the election was the high share of None of the Above (NOTA) votes at nearly 15 per cent of the votes polled.

The high percentage of NOTA votes — up from 2.93 per cent of the total vote share in the 2019 Assembly elections — raised the eyebrows of many, with the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) alliance, of which the Uddhav faction of the Sena is a part, and political observers suspecting the use of money power.

Some political analysts claimed that of the total NOTA votes, over 70 per cent was the result of a sustained behind-the-scenes campaign carried out of vendetta for not getting BJP candidate Murji Patel to bow out of the contest. Following appeals from outfits such as the Raj Thackeray-led Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), the BJP withdrew Patel and provided the Thackeray-led Sena's candidate Rutuja Latke an almost clear path to victory. The bypoll was necessitated by the death of Latke's husband Ramesh Latke in May.

"The NOTA voters in 2019 seem to be traditional voters who choose NOTA as a means of protest. But it seems that the remaining (NOTA) voters (this time) chose NOTA for political vendetta to mobilise voters against Latke. Three kinds of voters might have opted for NOTA. First, those who did not see any viable alternative from the contesting candidates voted NOTA as a protest. Second, the hardcore BJP and RSS sup-



porters may have chosen NOTA since there was no BJP candidate. And third may have been the supporters and sympathisers of Murji Patel who were upset with the BJP as the party asked him to withdraw his nomination and they campaigned for NOTA," said Sanjay Patil, a political analyst.

After the results were declared, Shiv Sena alleged that voters were paid to choose NOTA and alluded to the role of "some parties" in attempting to ensure that Latke's victory was "disgraced and dishonourable". Hitting out at the BJP, Uddhav Thackeray said, "It is clear that there was a use of notes in the elections... there was campaigning for NOTA. Had the BJP contested the election, the party would have got the same number of votes as NOTA."

Latke also claimed that the BJP withdrew their candidate after realising that he would lose and hence the NOTA campaign was launched.

"The BJP knew that they would get the same number of votes as NOTA, so they withdrew from the polls stating tradition but later campaigned for NOTA," Latke said.

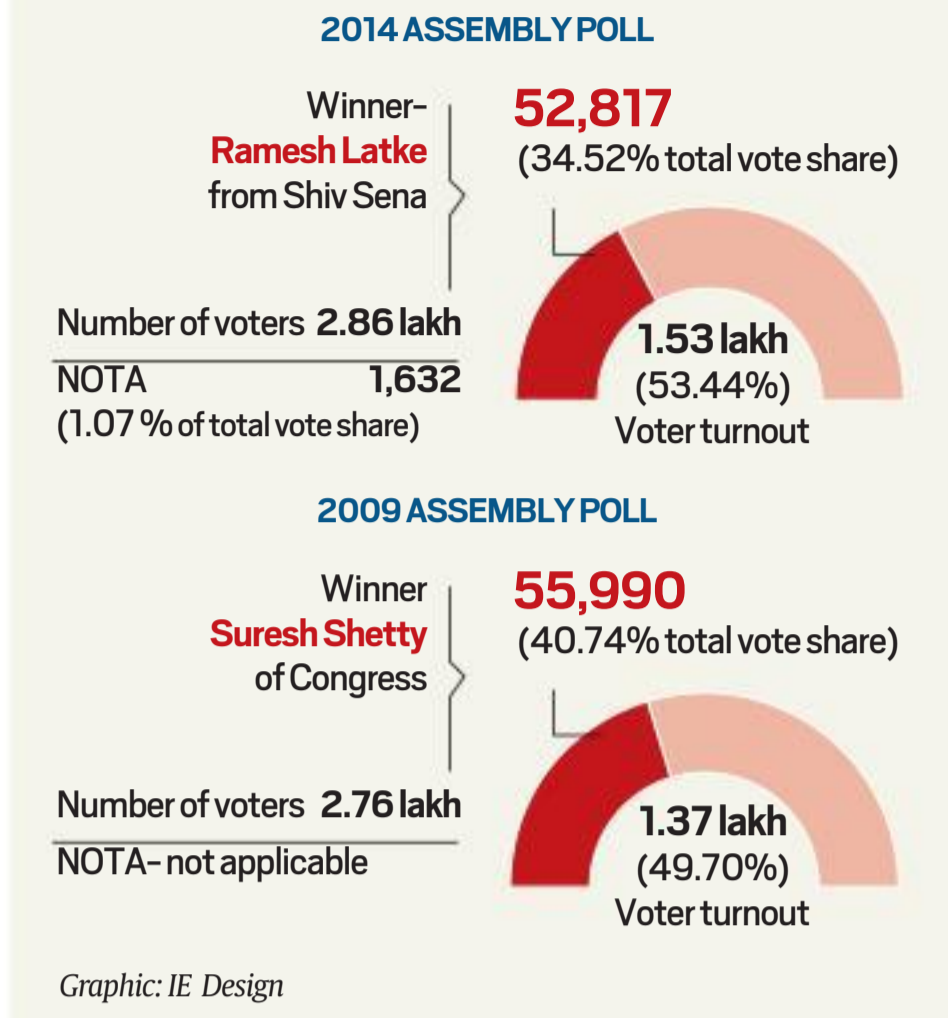
The BJP denied the allegations and claimed it had nothing to do with the high number of NOTA votes polled. Congratulating Latke, Mumbai BJP president Ashish Shelar claimed the Uddhav Sena candidate won only because of his party's help and had the BJP contested she would have lost. "The Shiv Sena (Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray) did not mobilise more votes. Had BJP contested the bypoll, the Shiv

Sena candidate would have lost. So, Shiv Sena (UBT) should realise that Latke's win is with the help of BJP," Shelar said.

Murji Patel said the low turnout on polling day (November 3) — almost 1.9 lakh voters did not vote — indicated public anger with Uddhav and his party. "There is dissatisfaction and unrest among the public against Thackeray and the Sena led by him. So, almost 70 per cent of voters did not turn up for voting and almost 15 per cent chose NOTA. There is no point in blaming us if people are choosing to vote NOTA," Patel said.

Along with Latke, six other independents and candidates from small parties were in the fray but their total vote share was far less than the NOTA vote share. While these candidates

An eye-catching takeaway from 2022 bypoll was the high share of NOTA votes at nearly 15% of the votes polled



Gokhale Bridge closed to traffic from today

Additional traffic police personnel deployed to guide commuters

EESHANPRIYAMS
MUMBAI, NOVEMBER 6

THE MUMBAI traffic police have planned extra arrangements in Andheri at the two ends of the Gokhale bridge, which will shut from Monday.

The bridge, which is an important link between Andheri East and West, will be closed for traffic from Monday morning for at least two years while the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) begins demolition and reconstruction of the bridge.

Mumbai police have issued instructions on alternate routes to be taken by the public but suspect that it will take a few days for everyone to get to know them.

"Generally, the bridge saw a lot of traffic as it is one of the main routes connecting two sides of Andheri. Now, with the bridge being shut we suspect chaos for the first few days for which we have deployed extra traffic policemen," an officer said.

The bridge goes over the Western suburban railway tracks just south of Andheri railway station. It is also an important link in this area of the western suburbs, connecting the Western Express Highway that falls on its east side, with the SV Road that falls on its West. It is among the busiest routes in the Western suburbs, especially during peak hours.

The BMC decided to shut the bridge as it found the structure to be unsafe during a structural audit in September. The audit found



The bridge, an important link between Andheri East and West, will be closed for at least two years. Amit Chakravarty

ALTERNATE ROUTES TO TAKE

The traffic police have suggested other east-west connectors in the vicinity for commuters such as the Balasaheb Thackeray flyover, the Andheri subway, the Milan subway and the Mrinal Tai Gore flyover

These alternate routes are likely to add 2-5 km of distance for commuters travelling between east and west in the western suburbs and will add to traffic snarls on the Western Express Highway and SV Road, especially during peak hours

routes for commuters, who use the bridge.

The closure of the bridge is expected to prompt more commuters to use the Andheri metro. In a statement last week, a Mumbai Metro One Private Limited (MMOPL) spokesperson said, "Mumbai Metro One is prepared to accommodate additional commuters due to the closure of the Gokhale Bridge. We anticipate the ridership to increase by around 20,000 per day. We have also kept a train on standby and will introduce services if we come across any increase in footfalls at the stations. We had successfully accommodated additional commuters when the bridge was closed in July 2018."

In 2018, a portion of the bridge collapsed killing two people. Following the incident, it was found that the portion which collapsed was under the jurisdiction of the Railways.

P Velrasu, Additional Municipal Commissioner of BMC and in-charge of the project said that tenders for the new Gokhale Bridge will be floated within the next month for the final design and approval of the bridge will be completed soon.

In a low turnout election, Latke polls highest votes ever from constituency

Experts cite lack of opposition and smooth transfer of Cong and NCP votes as possible factors

VALLABH OZARKAR
MUMBAI, NOVEMBER 6

DESPITE THE low turnout of 31.7 per cent for the Andheri bypoll elections, Latke not only won the assembly election by securing 77 per cent votes but in the process also became the candidate to secure the highest number of votes from this constituency till date. This, many believe reflects a clear and smooth transfer of votes by Congress and NCP.

Winning the assembly election on Sunday, Latke, secured a total of 66,530 votes, out of the 86,570 voted polled during the election. This is the highest vote that any candidate from this constituency has secured in the four assembly elections, since its formation in 2008. In the previous three elections, the highest vote was secured by Latke's husband Ramesh Latke in 2019 when he polled 62,773 votes even as Sena and BJP contested the elections together.

But this was at a time when the total votes polled for in the constituency were 1.47 lakh.

As against a voter turnout of 31.74 per cent this time, the polling percentage was much higher in the past. In 2009 assembly polls, 49.70 per cent voters cast their votes and then the turnout in 2014 and 2019 rose further to 53.44 per cent and 53.55 per cent respectively. The electoral statistics shows that the Andheri east constituency has over 2.7 lakh voters of which in all the past three elections the voters turn out was between 49% to 53 per cent. While in 2009, 1.37 lakh voters voted, in 2014 and 2019, 1.53 lakh and 1.47 lakh voters casted their votes.

In this by-poll however even after being lowest voters turn out with 31.74%, wherein only

86,198 voters casted their votes out of the total 2.74 lakh voters, Latke managed a clean sweep by consolidating a total of 66,530 (76.85% total vote share).

According to the political observers, the reason behind the surge in votes to Latke, despite low voters turn out could be linked to no candidature by BJP and Congress and the possibility of smooth transfer of votes from Congress, as MVA partners contested this election as allies. Analysts also claimed that the sympathy for the Sena as well as the Latke in the constituency may have also played a major role apart from the transfer of votes.

A Sena functionary confessed that the voting to Sena-MVA candidate Latke showed that those against BJP also cast their votes for Sena, which the party would not get earlier owing to its alliance with BJP. "Since, we are not with BJP, the anti-BJP and secular votes seems to have been transferred to us, which would not happen earlier," the functionary said.

Anil Parab, who was in charge of the Andheri(E) by poll campaign said the results show that the MVA has a long way to go and the expressed confidence that if the polls are fought in alliance as MVA then it can get victory in the upcoming BMC elections as well.

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