



Star Power as Strategy: BJP's Use of Celebrity Politics in Kangana Ranaut's 2024 Mandi Victory

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Introduction

“Today the idea of democracy is universally popular. Most regimes stake out some sort of claim to the title of democracy; and those do not often insist that their particular instance of non-democratic rule is necessary stage along the road to ultimate democracy” (**Dahl, 1991 p.2**). Celebrity politicians have become a new factor affecting voter behavior in India's dynamic democracy, especially in areas like Mandi, Himachal Pradesh, where Kangana Ranaut used her celebrity status to win. “It is possible to conceive of different types of democracy as forming a continuum from the local to the national, with the local marked by direct and participatory process while larger areas with significant population are progressively mediated by representative mechanisms” (**Held, 1996 p.327; Bentham, 1993; Phillips, 1993**).

“India, the largest democracy in the world, has witnessed a transition over the last two decades with rising participation of Celebritisation in politics (CPs) in the electoral battles” (**Saikat Banerjee and Ray chaudhury, 2025; Mukherjee, 2004**). ‘The entry of CPs in Indian politics is not a new phenomenon’ (**Prasad, 1999**). The profile of CPs changed over time, and a number of well-known figures from the professional world such as athletes and movie stars joined the league. ‘The results of the election to the 18th Lok Sabha were declared on 4th June, 2024. Results have been declared for all 543 constituencies. 3% of MPs elected to the 18th Lok Sabha are from Art & Entertainment’ (**PRS, 2024**).

Despite the modest proportion, there is a significant impact on the winning % of candidates. Celebrities who are professional actors or those who transitioned into politics leverage their personality or popularity to achieve success in the political arena, like Sunny Deol (Actor, joined BJP), Rajya Vardhan Singh Rathore (Shooting, BJP), Gautam Gambhir (Cricket, BJP), Navjot Singh Sidhu (Cricket, INC), Harbhajan Singh (Cricket, AAP), Yusuf Pathan (Cricket, TMC), Vinesh Phogat & Bajrang Poonia (wrestling, INC), Dilip

Tirkey (Hockey, Biju Janata Dal, BJD), Monoj Tiwari (Cricket, TMC), Celebrity actors in politics or contested election; Kangna Ranaut (Actress, BJP), Hema Malini (actress, BJP), Arun Govil (actor, BJP), M.G. Ramchandran (actor, founder of AIADMK) and JaiLalita (actors, AIADMK). “As a public figure, they have different characters and personal backgrounds and leadership styles, but share a similar political path, which is starting their carriers as a celebrity, but turning into a politician” **(Ahmad, 2020)**.

“It’s important to note that the politics in Himachal Pradesh has seen fluctuations and shifts over the years, with the Congress and BJP being the dominant parties. The regional and state parties have also been active, albeit with limited impact. The political dynamics of Himachal Pradesh, as in other states, fluctuate in each election cycle” **(Thakur and Negi, 2025, p.306)**. “The visible impact of 'vote for change' was also witnessed in favour of the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) in the small hilly state of Himachal Pradesh. For the first time, the BJP not only succeeded in winning all the four Lok Sabha seats, it also increased its vote-share in this election. The election results turned out as a nightmare to the ruling party in the state with the electoral humiliation, being a party in power in the state. The electoral politics in Himachal witnessed a reversal of the past trend and this indicates that there was a wave for change and alongside the national trend the people of Himachal Pradesh also casted there choice in favour of the BJP” **(Chauhan, 2014, p. 141)**. “One notable development has been the increased role of youth and the increasing base of BJP in the old Himachal, especially in the districts of Shimla, Kinnaur, and Sirmour. While the factors like anti-incumbency, caste, community, region, horticulture, employment, and corruption are chronic, the state elections have witnessed the rise of ‘freebies politics’ and the engineering of the instantaneous issues which effectively impact the results” **(Thakur & Negi, 2025, p. 306)**. The old and new Himachal binary also largely coincides with the “Upper-Lower Himachal” binary **(Thakur & Negi, 2025, pp. 311-312)**.

Celebritisation of Politics

“The term ‘celebritisation of politics’ first coined by Nyarvi Ahmad, 2020, in his research paper in the context of Indonesia. It assumes that celebritisation of politics takes shape once politics and political affairs are celebritised. It argues that in democratic countries, not merely individual celebrity turns into politician (celebrification of celebrity-politician), but also individual politician transmutes into celebrity (celebrification of celebrity-politician). The degree to which these celebrifications take place is likely determined by the country-, the media-, celebrity and audiences-related factors. The first includes political party, government, media and election systems. The second incorporates mediatisation, representation and commodification of celebrity politician by the media and political economic structures of the media and cultural industries. The third consist of diversification and migration of celebrity politician and his/her personal and professional backgrounds. The fourth is connected with characteristics of the audiences addressed by the media and cultural industries, celebrity politician and political actor and organization s/he associated with” **(Ahmad, 2020, para.1)**. Ranaut's celebrity status was boosted by social media and national coverage, mirroring Ahmad's framework of celebrity-politician mediatization. The value of brand building activities on future performance is not easy to demonstrate. The challenge is to understand better the links between brand asset and future performance, so that brand building activities can be justified **(Aaker, David A, 2009)**. In the Mandi Lok

Sabha election, Kangana Ranaut successfully employed her celebrity branding by using her established reputation and robust media presence into political capital. She became well-known, influenced voters' opinions, and developed an emotional bond with the electorate through widespread media attention and social media interaction. Her appeal was bolstered by her ideological affinity and personal image, demonstrating how celebrity branding may be used as an electoral advantage in modern democratic politics.

Role of Media in Political Campaign

“The social media-driven campaign idolised Modi which was complemented by the Modi oratory. Besides the ‘Modi effect’, the superior organisational strength, well-planned election campaign, and media management helped the BJP” (Shastri, S & et, al. 2022, pp. 09-16). “Social Media is nurturing this celebritisation of politics. Everywhere someone is posting anything his self/ private to the public it is his best thing ever to share online media. What is new in the current situation is the degree of which presentational media has been made a cultural regime thanks to the ubiquity with which we all produce personalized content and the means by which we share such personal content with others. Everyone everywhere is making versions of themselves, in public, in private, at play, at work, and at rest, through ubiquitously connected devices and the result is a persona which represents the strategic public identity, purposefully and directed” (Marshall, 2020 p.33). Social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, TV, and radio allow people to connect with each other. As of now, Kangana has 9.8 million followers on Instagram and 7.4 million on Facebook, which significantly enhances her reach both locally and nationwide, boosting her public acceptance.

BJP’s strategy: Celebritisation and Electoral Success

“In addition to an appraisal of brand strength, it is important to know the importance/ relevance of that strength in the market, the firm’s ability to exploit it, and the commitment to protecting it” (Aaker, David A, 2009). Today anyone who sees the party only as an upper caste party is living in the past. The BJP is becoming an inclusive Hindu party, winning the support of the various communities, including the subaltern, which inhabit the broad Hindu fold (Jha, 2017, p.08). “Then BJP rise through that quintessentially democratic practice of elections, is one of the most fascinating story of contemporary India. It has altered politics, created new social coalitions, dissolved older fault lines, generated new conflicts, empowered some, alienated others and is heaving a profound impact on state institutions” (Jha, 2017, p.16). “The declaration of the post-1989 phase as a post-Congress phase was too hasty and it sounded more relevant after the 2014 parliamentary elections when the Congress was reduced to a mere 44 seats. After a quarter century of coalition politics, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliances (NDA) victory in 2014 heralded a new era in Indian politics where the BJP assumed a central role that the Congress had once played” (Thakur, 2022). “The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which is seeking another term in the corridors of power at Centre, has announced several candidates for the Lok Sabha elections. The party has dropped several sitting MPs while also giving another run to many others. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who is confident of a third tenure at the office, has set the target of 370 seats for the BJP to win in the upcoming polls, as part of which the party has fielded candidates from numerous walks of life, including actors and sportspersons” (India TV, 2024). “Seven names of film artists were announced in the BJP's first list of candidates, out of which there were four

Bhojpuri actors. The four Bhojpuri film actors are Ravi Kishan, Manoj Tiwari, Dinesh Lal Yadav 'Nirhua', and Pawan Singh” (India News, 2024).

Mandi Loksabha Constituency: Political Overview

Mandi Parliamentary Constituency geographically located at the centre of Himachal Pradesh. It has 17 Vidhan Sabha Constituencies, Kinnaur, Bharmour, Lahaul & Spiti, Rampur, Manali, Kullu, Banjar, Anni, Nachan, Seraj, Darang, Jogindernagar, Mandi, Balh, Sarkaghat, Sundernagar, and Karsog. Mandi is an epidemiological center for the study of elections in the state. It has a long history of electing royal candidates, dating back to 1948 when the state of C was established. “The Congress has dominated the Mandi Lok Sabha seat and has won 13 times during the 19 General Elections and by elections since 1951. The BJP candidates have won five times and the Janata party candidate won in 1977 elections” (The Tribune, 2024).

Early representatives from the constituency included Rani Amrit Kaur (1952-57), Raja Joginder Sen(till 1962), Raja Lalit Sen (1967). “The politics here after 1971 has been propagating around the families of former Chief Minister Virbhadra Singh and former Union Minister Sukh Ram. Virbhadra Singh remained victorious for three times, Sukh Ram also won the seat thrice and Virbhadra’s wife and the state Congress president Pratibha Singh also secured the victory three times. However after 1989, the Congress candidates have won from the Mandi Lok Sabha seat six times, while the BJP had remained victorious for five times, with Maheshwar Singh being victorious three times and Ram Swaroop Sharma securing the victory two times” (The Tribune, 2024).

Year	Winning Candidates	Runner-up candidates	Electorate Registered	Total Votes polled	Voter Turnout (%)	Winners Vote share (%)	Runner-up vote share (%)	Nota Votes (%)	Nota share (%)
2024	Kangana Ranaut (BJP)	Vikramaditya Singh (INC)	13,77,173	10,18,685	73.97%	52.71%	45.51%	5,645	0.56%
2021	Pratibha Singh (INC)	Brig. Khushal Thakur (BJP)	12,96,934	7,52,071	57.98%	49.14%	48.14%	12,661	1.68%
2019	Ram Swaroop Sharma (BJP)	Aashray Sharma (INC)	12,82,351	9,43,148	73.60%	68.75%	25.68%	5,298	0.56%
2014	Ram Swaroop Sharma (BJP)	Pratibha Singh (INC)	11,50,408	7,26,094	63.12%	49.97%	44.48%	6,191	0.85%

Source: [IndiaVotes PC: Himachal Pradesh 2024](#)

Table 1: List of winner and Runner-up MPs of Himachal Pradesh (2014-2024)

Table1 contains Quantitative election data from 2014 to 2024 a rising politically contested constituency dominated by BJP-Congress battles, with BJP victories. This decade saw population growth and voter participation increase the registered electorate from 11.5 lakh in 2014 to 13.77 lakh in 2024 in Mandi Parliamentary Constituency. Votes polled rose from 7.26 lakh in 2014 to 10.18 lakh in 2024, with the only fall being during the 2021 by-election, which normally draws fewer voters. This difference between general elections and by-elections is shown by voter turnout trends. 2014 saw a reasonable turnout of 63.12%; 2019 saw a huge increase of 73.60%; 2021 saw a sharp decline of 57.98%; and 2024 saw another high of 73.97%. The rise in voter turnout from 57.98% in the 2021 by-election to 73.97% in 2024 indicates that Kangana's star profile sparked the public beyond party-affiliation. The constituency continues to exhibit bi-polarity in terms of vote sharing. With the Congress at 44.48% and the BJP at 49.97%, the 2014 election was fiercely contested. With a landslide victory for the BJP (68.75%) and a severe decrease for the Congress (25.68%), the 2019 election was an exception. The tendency was reversed in the 2021 by-election, where the Congress won by a thin margin of 49.14% against the BJP's 48.14%. With 52.71% in 2024 compared to the Congress's 45.51%, the BJP reclaimed the lead.

The NOTA vote remained marginal throughout, never exceeding 1.68%, and did not materially affect outcomes except 2021 by-election. “With the victory margin in the Mandi bypoll being slender, had the 12,626 NOTA votes been cast in favour of the BJP, the bypoll outcome could have been different” (**The Tribune, 2021**).

An Overview of 2024 Loksabha Election

The election took place in seven stages between April 19, 2024, and June 1, 2024. On June 4, 2024, all phases' votes were counted. A majority of 272 Lok Sabha seats was needed to constitute the government. With 293 seats, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), crossed the majority threshold and formed the government. Despite capturing 240 seats on its own, the BJP was unable to secure a single-party majority. Consequently, the widely expected phrase of "400 paar" failed to materialize, suggesting that the perceived "Modi wave" had a visible dent. The INDIA group as a whole won 234 seats on the opposition side. The Indian National Congress (INC) became the official opposition party in the Lok Sabha after winning 99 seats under this alliance.

Source: <https://www.indiavotes.com/lok-sabha/2024/himachal-pradesh/18/22>

Constituency	Winning Candidate (party)	Electorate	Total Votes Polled	Voter Turnout (%)	Winning Votes	Winning Margin	Winning Margin of total voted
Kangra	Dr Rajeev Bhardwaj (BJP)	15,02,514	10,36,868	69%	6,32,793	2,51,895	24.3%
Mandi	Kangana Ranaut (BJP)	13,64,060	10,15,810	74.5%	5,37,022	74,755	7.4%
Hamirpur	Anurag Singh Thakur (BJP)	14,32,636	10,47,263	73.1%	6,07,068	1,82,357	17.4%
Shimla	Suresh Kumar Kashyap	13,46,369	9,69,965	72.0%	5,19,748	91,451	9.4%
State Total	BJP 4/4 INC 0/4	56,45,579	40,69,906	72.1%	-	-	-

Table 2: List of winning candidates for the 4 Lok Sabha seats of Himachal Pradesh

Table 2 shows with a high overall turnout of 72.1%, the BJP won all four Lok Sabha seats, demonstrating great voter mobilization as opposed to voter indifference. The BJP's victories were attained through various margin structures despite differences between constituencies, indicating a tailored, constituency-specific strategy rather than a uniform sweep.

When Mandi is contrasted with the other three seats, a clear pattern emerges. Despite having the tightest winning margin (7.4% of total votes), Mandi had the highest voter turnout (74.5%) of all four constituencies. Celebrity politics gains electoral value in such a setting by energizing core followers, drawing in neutral voters, and controlling media discourse.

In contrast, Kangra and Hamirpur have far greater winning margins (24.3% and 17.4%, respectively) despite slightly lower turnout. These wins seem to be more influenced by party loyalty, incumbent advantage, and traditional organizational strength than by new candidates. Shimla lies in the middle, with a moderate margin and turnout, implying a balance of organizational and candidate-centric elements.

All things considered the pattern suggests that the BJP's triumph in Himachal Pradesh was not uniform. In marginal constituencies like Mandi, celebrity politics served as a tactical instrument that complemented organizational strength elsewhere and allowed the party to achieve a 4/4 sweep in spite of 'tight bipolar contest' (Chauhan, 2022).

Candidate Profile: Kangana Ranaut

"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" (Ranta, 2024, p. 07).

Kangana Ranaut, drawing on the affidavit-based data (ADR–MyNeta, Lok Sabha 2024), In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, Kangana Ranaut, a candidate for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), was elected as a member of parliament from the Mandi constituency in Himachal Pradesh. She entered electoral politics as a first-time member of parliament, having previously worked as an actor, producer, and director in the Indian film industry.

Her candidacy is a reflection of the growing significance of celebrities in Indian politics, where media attention and public visibility serve as important electoral tools. Ranaut was 37 years old and had finished senior secondary school from DAV Model School Sec-15A, Chandigarh in 2003. She listed total assets of roughly ₹91.66 crore and liabilities of about ₹17.38 crore in her self-declared affidavit, which the Association for Democratic Reforms has archived. This indicates significant personal wealth in comparison to the ordinary legislator. Her income comes from corporate, professional, rental, and interest sources, placing her in the political elite of India.

Ranaut has eight open criminal cases, but so far, no one has been found guilty. Rather than violent or financial crimes, the majority of these prosecutions involve speech-based charges, such as defamation, inciting animosity, and offending religious sensitivities. Her political profile provides an analytical example of how elite economic involvement, celebrity politics, and discursive criminalization come together, making it a valuable case study for analyzing shifting trends in political representation and recruitment in Indian politics today.

Vikramaditya Singh

Vikramaditya Singh, a close runner-up to Kangana Ranaut's Mandi Lok Sabha seat, is a royal heir from the erstwhile Bushahr princely state and the son of the late Virbhadr Singh, who served as Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh six times. A prominent youth leader, Vikramaditya, currently serves as the Public Works Minister (Public Works, Urban Development) in the government of Himachal Pradesh. Representing the youth face of the Congress, he won from Shimla (rural) state assembly constituency. The Congress chose him to contest the Mandi Lok Sabha seat, a constituency long held by his family, leveraging both his dynastic influence and emerging appeal among younger voters.

Campaigning strategy and Narratives

In a state where the party in power at the centre always has had an advantage, the BJP was able to spin a 'narrative of hope' and 'perception of victory' that helped it despite a large percentage of respondents considering the lack of development and joblessness as the major issues in elections (**Shastri, et al., 2022, p. 16**). It was not the Bhartiya Janta Party, it was not state leaders, it was not the candidates and it was not the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh. Only one man won the BJP the state of Uttar Pradesh- Prime Minister Narendra Modi (**Jha, 2017, p.17**).

Massive rallies were held by BJP approximately 200 nationwide. Kangana Ranaut was also active in the field and had connected through local people with their local dialect. **Sharma** stated in the **Outlook 2024**, “Kangana draws an appeal to the public in BJP’s parliamentary constituency meeting at Mandi, ‘Don’t let my nose get cut off’ she made an emotional appeal. ‘Kangana should get a record lead from home. We all have to prove it to our opponents she said at the meeting’. She spoke at full-throttle to announce a BJP hat-trick—winning all four seats in Himachal Pradesh as it did in 2014 and 2019 because Modi ji’s target is 400 plus. It’s my janmabhoomi –where everyone is my family or relative. PM Modi is the incarnation of Ram and I am like a squirrel building a bridge. Just as the squirrel had worked in building the bridge, she too is working in the same way”.

Kangana Ranaut serves as an example of how to strategically employ symbolic representation and grassroots involvement to strengthen voter support. She demonstrated cultural assimilation and established herself as relatable to local populations by wearing the ‘dhathu’, a traditional head covering, which helped to close the gap between celebrity and average voter. Her significant participation with ‘Mahila Mandals’ and women’s organizations suggest a focused strategy to organize important voter demographics, especially women, who frequently have an impact on household and local voting trends. As a result, women outpaced men in voter participation, accounting for 72.64% of votes, compared with 69.19% cast by men in these elections.

Kangana, in contrast to her opponent, Congress candidate Vikramaditya Singh, whom she called a ‘nepo kid or prince’ (Shahzada) from a political lineage, Kangana Ranaut presented herself as a self-made person and contender.

Conclusion

Kangana Ranaut’s victory in the Mandi constituency exemplifies how celebrity appeal can challenge traditional political dominance, including that of established families. Since 2014, the BJP’s consistent success in Lok Sabha elections reflects the influence of the “Modi wave,” which has also shaped voting behavior in Himachal. In addition, Himachal Pradesh maintains its unique electoral tradition, which is characterized by the Congress and BJP alternating power in Assembly elections while endorsing the leading national party in parliamentary elections. Smaller states may have structural limitations, as evidenced by the limited success of new or regional parties in the state. Celebrities may help mobilize voters, but their influence in politics is still quite small. Himachal Pradesh story shows how to strike a compromise between popularity-driven electoral reform and party-based political continuity.

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