

Daughter's Brutal End Puts a Mother in India On the Campaign Trail

By ANUPREETA DAS and HARI KUMAR

KOLKATA, India — The heinous rape and murder, in August 2024, of a young doctor who was resting in a hospital seminar room between shifts unleashed a storm of rage, leading to a criminal inquiry that expanded into potential systemic corruption.

More than a year and a half later, the doctor's mother, Ratna Debnath, has stepped into the political realm as a candidate for West Bengal's state legislature, seeking justice for her daughter and greater safety for women.

"I've lost my daughter, and my house has become empty, but I want to ensure the safety of thousands of women," said Ms. Debnath, 54. "That's why I've joined politics."

Ms. Debnath's personal story became a central element in the campaign of the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Hindu nationalist political party of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, to unseat the current government of West Bengal, which is led by Mamata Banerjee of the Trinamool Congress party.

By choosing to join the B.J.P., which sought her candidacy for months, Ms. Debnath has not just thrust herself into the heat of the state's election. She has also become a figure in Mr. Modi's wider campaign to position his party nationwide as a champion of women.

While women have made significant strides in India, with greater numbers entering the formal work force, many still fight the undertow of patriarchal norms that continue to dominate society and, in many contexts, normalize violence against them. In recent years, overall crime against women has risen, although there has been a decline in the number of dowry deaths, the leading cause of violence against women. Many crimes also go unreported.

The B.J.P. has introduced multiple welfare programs and campaigns to support women, but it has also been criticized in the wake of major episodes of sexual violence. The police in New Delhi

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cracked down on a protest against sexual harassment in the sport of wrestling in 2023 and, a year earlier, 11 men convicted of rape and murder in a state once governed by Mr. Modi had their prison sentences cut short.

In West Bengal, the B.J.P. has been seeking the votes of women by making their safety and welfare a pillar of its campaign. Women participated in the 2021 state election here in greater numbers than male voters.

At a rally with Ms. Debnath in West Bengal on Friday afternoon, Mr. Modi painted the Trinamool as a corrupt, lawless, "anti-women" government that had failed to bring to account all those involved in her daughter's case. Hundreds of women who attended wore turbans or scarves of saffron, the B.J.P.'s signature color.

He announced programs that would provide more cash benefits to pregnant women; loans of up to 2 million rupees, or about \$21,000, for self-employed women; and free cervical cancer vaccines.

The B.J.P.'s focus on women resonated with some. Neha Routh, 26, a teacher in Panighatta, a village, cheered Mr. Modi for his "feminism" because of his support for women's education and empowerment. She hoped the party could also provide jobs rather than simply doling out cash.

Ms. Banerjee, seeking a fourth term, highlighted popular welfare programs she started for women since she took office in 2011. She also focused on portraying the Trinamool as an inclusive party and a custodian of the Bengali identity.

At the national level, the B.J.P.-led government recently sought to push through a bill to expand the Parliament to 850 seats from 543, and reserve 33 percent of the seats in Parliament and state governments for women. (Women make up around 14 percent of India's current Parliament.)

But opposition parties accused the government of using the issue as a backdoor to potentially tilt the balance of power in Parliament to give more seats to states that are B.J.P. strongholds.

After the government's proposal was defeated, Mr. Modi delivered a televised official address blaming the opposition for hinder-



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ing a move to empower women. His speech was criticized by civil society groups as a violation of the country's code of conduct governing elections, which prohibits officials from using their official position to campaign. Voters headed to the polls in April in four Indian states and one territory.

On Friday afternoon, the prime minister took his message to Panighatta — the constituency in Kolkata where Ms. Debnath is running. Her daughter, a 31-year-old trainee doctor, was found dead at a top hospital there on Aug. 9, 2024. The crime set off nationwide

protests by doctors demanding safer working conditions and justice for the victim. Indian law does not allow rape victims to be publicly named.

As Mr. Modi walked toward Ms. Debnath onstage, he bowed to touch her feet as a mark of respect. Later, they folded their hands in prayer, and he touched her head with his palm as she sought his blessing — snippets that went viral on social media. He warmed up the vast crowd, giving shout-outs to women and young girls in the audience, before delivering his political broadside

Ratna Debnath, above center, campaigning last month for a seat in West Bengal's state legislature. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, left, with Ms. Debnath at a rally in West Bengal last week.

against the Trinamool.

The B.J.P. reached out to Ms. Debnath about six months ago to persuade her to join politics, said Joy Saha, a party member and her election adviser. But Ms. Debnath made the decision only recently, he added. Party officials said they expected her story to resonate with people and motivate them to vote. Voting ended Wednesday, with results expected on May 4.

Ms. Debnath's campaign was largely door to door. She usually dressed in plain white saris and slippers, a pair of rectangular glasses and the smear of vermilion in her parted hair that many married Hindu women wear. Most mornings and evenings, she shook hands and waved to potential voters. Sometimes, people touched her feet.

On a recent Saturday evening, she seemed overwhelmed at times by the endless sloganeering around her. While she lacked the performative flourishes of seasoned candidates, she spoke calmly about her plans if elected.

"I have joined the B.J.P. because they are a central party through whom we can approach higher

echelons of power for justice," Ms. Debnath said. "What happened with my daughter, why it happened and who did it — those are the three questions" she said she was seeking answers to.

A man was convicted of the rape and murder of Ms. Debnath's daughter and is serving a life sentence. But the case also led to broader investigations by two central government agencies into whether evidence from the crime scene had been tampered with and into allegations about financial misconduct at the hospital.

Since 2024, the Trinamool party has repeatedly said that it had no involvement in criminal behavior or financial misconduct and that any irregularities in the public hospital were tied to individuals.

If elected, Ms. Debnath said, she would seek to change the law to make it possible for rape victims to be named. She said her daughter was a hard-working doctor who had wanted to add more degrees to the end of her name. But as soon as she became a victim, her daughter's name was erased from public life. "As a mother, I can't bear this."