

## International

# The Indian 'Miss Marple' snooping on poll candidates

## Pandit's team busy 'integrating' into political parties

**MUMBAI:** As India's best-known female private eye, Rajani Pandit has posed as crazy, blind and deaf to solve murders and unmask unsuitable fiances. But election time is boom time for the woman dubbed "Miss Marple". In the world's biggest election ending on Sunday, Pandit and others like her are in high demand from political parties to dig up dirt on the opposition and make sure their own candidates are squeaky clean.

"It's confidential but whenever a party finds one of its own candidates or an opposition candidate suspicious they ask us to investigate them," Mumbai-based Pandit told AFP. "Often we are asked to look into their finances and how they have procured money to fund their campaigns. We try to maintain a low profile," the 57-year-old added.

### Inundated

Hindu nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi is up against Congress leader Rahul Gandhi in the world's largest democratic exercise, which is awash with cash. Some experts say the polls could cost \$10 billion. Pandit says her team has been busy "integrating" themselves into political parties since January, inspecting finances and attending rallies before submitting reports to their clients. "There's usually a surge of cases ahead of the

elections. We've been inundated with requests and were only able to take on a few," she said. Kunwar Vikram Singh, chairman of India's Association of Private Detectives and Investigators, said "there's a lot of due diligence". "(A candidate's) local reputation, influence, his stance in his own caste... all these things are looked into," Singh told AFP.

### Magnifying glass

Private detective agencies are popular in India, with sleuths tasked with solving everything from petty household thefts to business deals gone wrong. Pandit has been conducting covert operations across India for over 30 years out of her small office in the Asian giant's financial capital. The investigator - who does own a magnifying glass - was dubbed India's first female private detective by media outlets when she began cracking cases in the early 1980s.

She has been featured in countless newspaper articles, often referred to as India's "Miss Marple" or "Nancy Drew". Agatha Christie's fictional spinster sleuth and the ever-evolving US amateur detective. This has encouraged scores of women in male-dominated India to follow in her footsteps. Several women-dominated investigative firms now operate in the country, such as Lady Detectives India and Venus Detective which

are both headquartered in the capital New Delhi. "Clients are open a lot more to having a female investigator. They feel we are more empathetic and that they can talk to us," Lady Detectives CEO Tanya Puri told AFP.

### A suitable boy

Pandit first started snooping as a 22-year-old at college, informing the parents of a fellow student that their daughter was drinking, smoking and hanging out with boys. Her most difficult case was when she worked undercover for six months as a maid for a woman who was suspected of poisoning her husband to death and then killing her son through a hitman. She gathered evidence and handed it over to police who arrested the hitman and the woman.

Pandit has won numerous awards, written two books, and says she has completed more than 80,000 cases - most of them pre-matrimonial investigations. Parents in the ultra-conservative country seeking a suitable husband or wife for their offspring will ask her to investigate the potential spouse and their family. She looks into whether they have the job they say they have and tries to find out if there is anything in their past that might be deemed to bring shame to the family they are marrying into.

Pandit has had to be the master of subterfuge to gather evidence, including donning



**MUMBAI:** In this photograph taken on Jan 29, 2019, Indian detective Rajani Pandit speaks with a client at her office. — AFP

"various disguises". But she says she received no formal training. "Detectives are born, not made. I will keep doing this job until I am no longer alive," she said. — AFP

## 'Dead livestock, water running out' in Myanmar village

**YANGON:** Rakhine villagers trapped by a Myanmar army lockdown said yesterday they are fast running out of water as the operation against suspected ethnic rebels - which killed six and saw mass detentions - entered a third week. Thousands of troops have been deployed across northern Rakhine to root out Arakan Army (AA) insurgents in violence which has displaced more than 30,000 people since December. Myanmar's armed forces are using heavy artillery against the AA, who are fighting for more autonomy for the state's ethnic Rakhine Buddhists, but civilians say they have been caught up in the operations.

Complex ethnic and religious divisions cut across Rakhine state. It was also the scene of the military's brutal crackdown against Rohingya Muslims in 2017, which forced some 740,000 over the border into Bangladesh in violence branded as "genocide" by UN investigators. On April 30, security forces raided the ethnic Rakhine village of Kyauk Tan in Rathedaung township, taking 275 men for interrogation at a school. They admitted shooting dead six detainees and wounding eight more two days later, claiming the men tried to attack them.

Eight men have been arrested and taken to state capital Sittwe, military spokesperson Brigadier General Zaw Min Tun said, adding that six of them had confessed to being AA members. He said all the remaining detainees were released Monday. But residents told AFP by phone yesterday the village remained sealed off - and food and water supplies were running dangerously low. "Both humans and animals are thirsty as we still cannot go outside the village," said village elder Tun Thein, 56. "Some animals have died from starvation and thirst," he said, adding soldiers were still preventing residents from moving freely.

Another woman, asking not to be named, said the villagers were forced to boil "muddy water" to drink. Zaw Min Tun said as far as he knew the only people still facing constraints were the released detainees in case they were needed for "further investigation". Access to the north of Rakhine state is heavily restricted, making independent verification difficult. In the absence of oversight, fears are mounting of military impunity. Zaw Naing was one of the final detainees released from the school Monday. — AFP

## 'Rise up': PNG female police chief's battle cry to women

**KOKOPO, Papua New Guinea:** In a nation where sexual violence is endemic, women are still targeted and attacked for witchcraft, and female representation in parliament is non-existent, police chief Julie Palakai is blazing a trail for change. The 43-year-old inspector, a domestic abuse survivor and 18-year veteran of the force, is one of the most senior female police officers in Papua New Guinea - and is calling on the nation's women to take a stand against sexism with her. "Women must strive and rise up against any discrimination, abuse and sexual harassment in the workplace," she tells AFP. "For young girls who are still struggling: Do not give up but strive for the best to achieve your goals and to find a better and happy life. Nothing is impossible," she insists.

Human Rights Watch named Papua New Guinea "one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a woman" in a report which estimated 70 percent of women would be raped or assaulted in their lifetime. The NGO added that sorcery-related violence remains an issue, adding that women and girls are the "primary targets", though men too have been attacked in witch-hunts. None of the country's 111 par-

liamentarians are women and there are few women in the police force.

Palakai is the only female commissioned officer - an umbrella term for senior management from inspector grade upwards - in all of Papua New Guinea's northeastern Islands Region. She has worked hard to get to her position battling institutional discrimination, abuse, and rigid cultural expectations. Palakai now heads the Public Safety Unit at Kokopo Police Station: It's a role that's highly visible - she leads the prestigious Guard of Honour parade.

Dressed in crisp police blues and wielding a large silver sword, she proudly marches judges, superior officers and other dignitaries - almost always male - up and down Guard of Honour lines. It's a rare sight in the male-dominated nation, and a role that requires total respect from subordinates. "When inviting and escorting an important officer or VIP on parade, we are actually inspecting each individual on parade," she says.

Palakai came from a broken family and while she finished secondary school, any plans for further education were disrupted when her home town of Rabaul, was devastated by twin volcanic eruptions in 1994. Instead, she took a job as a sales rep for a stationary firm in the area but soon became restless. By chance, she saw an advert from the police in the local paper and decided to respond to their search for new recruits. She was shocked to be selected, Palakai conceded, but happily took the six-month training course near capital Port Moresby before being posted to Lihir, an island best known for gold-mining.

## More protests in Kashmir over child's rape

**SRINAGAR:** Police in Indian-administered Kashmir fired tear gas yesterday as thousands of students protested for a second day over the alleged rape of a three-year-old child. On Monday more than 70 people were injured, at least 50 of them from the security forces, as demonstrations raged across the restive northern territory. Yesterday, students mostly protested at a university campus in the main city of Srinagar, but hundreds of female students assembled near the city center demanding quick justice.

Police fired tear smoke shells to confine the students to a college, an officer said. No one was injured. School students also protested across many other towns in the region. Authorities imposed restrictions on the assembly of

## Duterte loyalists dominate midterm Philippines vote

**MANILA,** Allies of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte have dominated a mid-term Senate election according to unofficial results yesterday, indicating growing support for the maverick leader and broad public endorsement of his controversial rule. Nine of 12 Senate seats available look set to go to pro-Duterte candidates and the rest to independents, unofficial results showed, with the opposition that campaigned strongly against his presidency failing to make the cut.

Monday's ballot for more than 18,000 posts, among them hundreds of mayors, governors, and Congressmen, was billed as a referendum on the firebrand president, with special focus on his bid to consolidate power in the all-important upper house. A Senate majority would be a boon for Duterte, lessening the chance of censures and house probes against his government and making it easier to co-opt independents and sideline opponents to push through bills vital to his ambitious reform agenda.

"This president's popularity and transferability of his popularity is unprecedented to say the least, despite all the controversies," said political analyst Edmund Tayao. "You expect normally two or three candidates from the opposition to win but this is a wipe-out." Candidates lead-

people to prevent protests from spreading by deploying thousands of police and paramilitary troops across the territory. The demonstrators have been calling for the accused to be given a harsh sentence.

Police have set up a special investigation team to fast-track a probe into the alleged rape of the child last week by a 20-year-old neighbor in the northern area of Sumbal. But that has not calmed the anger across the Kashmir Valley where protests over even civic issues often morph into anti-government and anti-India demonstrations. On Monday, police also arrested a school principal who allegedly issued a fake age certificate declaring the accused to be a minor in order to help him evade being punished as an adult. Another case of alleged rape of a teenager came to light yesterday in the northern Ganderbal area. Police have arrested the accused man and also promised a fast-track investigation. In Jan 2018, an eight-year-old girl was abducted, starved for a week and murdered after she was raped by several people in the southern Kathua area of Jammu & Kashmir. That incident caused widespread outrage and protests in Kashmir and many Indian cities and towns that lasted weeks. — AFP

ing the Senate race include the president's closest aide, the daughter of late dictator Ferdinand Marcos, the wife of the country's richest man, a jailed politician recently cleared of plunder, and a police general who led a war on drugs that killed thousands in its first few months.

### Opposition decimated

They would join 12 Senate incumbents of which only four are from the opposition, including the biggest critic of Duterte's war on drugs, Leila de Lima, who has been in detention since 2017 on narcotics charges. The mid-term results leave the political opposition in tatters and changes the dynamic of a Senate that has traditionally been a vital check on state power and a bulwark against the kind of political dominance that Duterte is demonstrating. Duterte is expected to retain control in the lower house also.

The opposition vowed not to give in. "We acted not for the certainty of victory but the certainty of our beliefs and conviction," said incumbent Senator Francis Pangilinan. "Our fight for justice, for sovereignty and a more progressive future for our people continues." The mid-terms came at a time when Duterte, 74, is seemingly untouchable, with last year's spiralling inflation now under control and a recent poll showing his public approval rating at a staggering 81 percent.

Duterte's down-to-earth appeal and his diehard social media support base has so far insulated him from domestic repercussions for his misogynistic remarks, jokes about rape, tirades against the Catholic church, an embrace of rival China, and a crackdown on drugs that killed thousands of users and small-time peddlers in slum communities, many execution-style. — Reuters



**KOKOPO, Papua New Guinea:** This picture taken on March 4, 2019 shows parade commander Julie Palakai (left) escorting East New Britain's new residential Judge Justice Stephen Kassarman during a guard of honor parade outside Kokopo police station. — AFP

"I was just a young policewoman officer posted out there to lead, manage and command officers older than me, very experienced and long-serving policemen and women," she said of the role as station commander. "You have to learn to think fast during states of emergency or in everyday situations whilst on normal police duties, and make prompt and wise decisions," she added.

Palakai was ambitious, but like many women in Papua New Guinea, she found her partner was not receptive to her career aspirations. "I had to leave him as I could not see any better future with him given...the disrespectful behavior that I could not stand any longer," she told AFP.

"He often argued telling me that I was just a woman and policemen and women will not listen to my instructions and orders and that women had no power to lead," she recalled.

In May 2013 she became a commissioned officer, graduating along with four other female officers placed around the country, and 20 male colleagues at a ceremony overseen by Prime Minister Peter O'Neill. Since then she has championed the push to encourage women to actively invest in their future. She explains: "Education does not stop when you are young or old. Where there is opportunity, go for it, as education is your future." — AFP

### News in brief

#### N Korea demands return of ship

**SEOUL:** North Korea yesterday demanded the return of a cargo ship seized by Washington last week for violating international sanctions, calling it an "unlawful and outrageous act". On Friday, the US Justice Department said it had taken possession of the North Korea-registered bulk carrier M/V Wise Honest, one year after it was detained in Indonesia, citing illicit sanctions-busting activities. A spokesman for the North's foreign ministry slammed the move yesterday, saying it was an "outright denial" of the spirit of a statement signed by leader Kim Jong Un and US President Donald Trump at their landmark summit in Singapore last June. The move was an "extension of the American method" of seeking to bring Pyongyang "to its knees" through maximum pressure, he said. "The US should ponder over the consequences its heinous act might have on the future developments and immediately return our ship," the statement added. — AFP

#### BJP activist gets bail for meme

**NEW DELHI:** India's top court yesterday granted bail to a ruling party activist who was arrested last week for sharing a meme of opposition leader Mamata Banerjee, one of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's challengers in the general election. Priyanka Sharma's arrest for sharing a meme on Facebook that superimposed Banerjee's head on a picture of actress Priyanka Chopra sporting frizzy hair at the Met Gala in New York was criticized as a curb on free speech. Sharma, who had been remanded in custody, is a member of the youth wing of Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). "Sharma is directed to be released immediately, without any condition," Supreme Court judge Indira Banerjee said in a ruling after withdrawing an initial order that Sharma apologize to the Bengal leader. — Reuters

#### Nigerians charged over love scam

**SINGAPORE:** Two Nigerian men believed to be members of an Internet love scam syndicate were charged in Singapore yesterday with recruiting local women to collect money for them, police said. Such scams, where victims part with cash after a fraudster feigns romantic interest in them, are a growing concern in the city-state, with police reporting 660 cases last year. The Nigerians - identified in local news reports as Oladayo Opeyemi Awolola, 34, and Gbolahan Ayobami Awolola, 37 - were arrested by Malaysian authorities in Kuala Lumpur last month and sent to Singapore on Monday. The men allegedly recruited two Singaporean women "as money mules to receive criminal proceeds linked to Internet love scams in Singapore" between 2017 and 2018. The women received Sg\$85,700 (\$63,000) during that period and turned the money over to syndicate members in Malaysia, police said. — AFP

#### New Bangladesh court to try Zia

**DHAKA:** Bangladeshi authorities have set up a new makeshift court adjacent to a jail outside the capital Dhaka to try imprisoned opposition leader Khaleda Zia, a prosecutor said yesterday. Zia, a two-time former prime minister, is already serving 10 years in two cases of graft that her supporters say were politically motivated. She has faced a trial on new charges in a courtroom inside the abandoned prison in old Mughal-era Dhaka where she is the only prisoner. Her supporters say this has affected her health and the 73-year-old has been in hospital since April. But with a move under way to shift Zia to a new prison at Keraniganj, just outside the capital, the government has set up a new court adjacent to the jail, prosecutor Mosharraf Hossain told AFP. Zia's lawyers condemned the decision to set up the makeshift court, saying it reflects a "cruel attitude" on the part of the government. — AFP