

Mandi the hot seat in HP elections

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MANDI (HIMACHAL PRADESH), 1 NOV: Every time the state goes to the polls, this central district with 10 seats ~ the second largest in the state ~ has a candidate tipped to become the Chief Minister, but the hope is subsequently snuffed out.

And the question has once again popped up whether history will be repeated or whether the jinx will be broken this time.

As the chief minister's home district often gets preferential treatment in the hill state, the discussions here are often held around what could have been achieved if the CM's post had not eluded Mandi.

In the past, two Congress leaders from the district, the late Karam Singh Thakur and former Union telecom minister Sukh Ram had come close to becoming the state CM. The former was in the race to become the first CM but Mr Sukh Ram played spoilsport by siding with Mr YS Parmar (from Sirmaur district) who went on to become the state's first chief minister.

Later, in 1993, Mr Sukh Ram came close to becoming the CM due to his closeness to the then Prime Minister, the late PV Narasimha Rao. But another Congress leader from Mandi and currently a party candidate from the Darang constituency, Mr Kaul Singh, played spoilsport by siding with present Congress chief Virbhadr Singh to spoil Mr Sukh Ram's dream to become the CM.

Incidentally, Mr Kaul Singh ~ who was the state Congress chief till Virbhadr forced the Congress to give him the command in August to ensure the party's victory ~ is himself an aspirant for the CM's post and

many in the district wonder if the 66-year-old Kaul will end up like his Congress predecessors.

Mr Sukh Ram, campaigning for his son Anil Sharma from Mandi (town) constituency, has already expressed frustration over the lost opportunity to become the CM.

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Another former MLA Natha Singh ~ who was with the Virbhadr camp earlier ~ has expressed his regret publicly over having worked against Sukh Ram to deny him the CM's post. He has expressed hope that Kaul Singh will fulfil Mandi's wish for the CM's post even as the latter didn't seem to, have much support from party MLAs in the tussle for the state's leadership with Virbhadr.

As Shimla (with eight Assembly seats) and Kangra (15) have been traditional strongholds of the Congress and the BJP respectively, Mandi has been playing a key role in the formation of any government in the state and both parties require a good performance in the district to form the next government.

The four Assembly seats won in Mandi by the now defunct Himachal Vikas Congress,

formed by Sukh Ram after splitting from the Congress in 1998 (he is back in the Congress now), were instrumental in denying Virbhadr a consecutive term as CM and cleared the deck for Prem Kumar Dhumal's first term as chief minister. The HVC and the BJP formed the coalition government then.

In the 2007 elections, the BJP won six out of 10 seats and was supported by another independent MLA from the district who has been given a party ticket from Karsog constituency.

Apart from Daran where Kaul Singh faces a tough fight from BJP's Jawahar Thakur, there are several keenly watched contests in the district.

From Mandi (town), two-time MLA (Congress) Anil Sharma is fighting hard against BJP's Durga Dutt to retain the constituency nursed by his father Sukh Ram. In Joginder Nagar constituency, the public works department minister and six time MLA Gulab Singh (BJP) is fighting against his nephew Surinderpal Thakur (Congress).

In Dharampur, the transport and urban development minister Mahender Singh, who has won the last five elections from the constituency, is up against a young Congress candidate Chander Shekhar. Former Congress minister and six time former MLA Rangila Ram Rao is fighting to wrest the Sarkaghat seat from the BJP.

Former BJP minister and six time former MLA from Sundernagar constituency is fighting as an independent against the official candidate Rakesh Jamwal. Barring a couple of seats with strong rebel candidates, the Congress and the BJP are fighting directly in most of the constituencies.