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Maharashtra's business of politics

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Mumbai, Oct 15 : In Maharashtra the business-politics diad is legit: of the 2,000 plus nominees in this year's assembly elections, a large number did not hesitate to declare themselves as entrepreneurs or businessmen.

Maharashtra Congress' decision to field developer-turned-politician Vijay Sawant (assets of Rs 206 crore) against the powerful former Shiv Sena chief minister Narayan Rane from the coastal constituency of Sindhudurg in the just-concluded state assembly elections evoked mixed reactions. Mr Sawant eventually lost.

The state BJP's move to nominate Shaina NC, designer and daughter of former Mumbai sheriff and socialite Nana Chudasama, against Congress' Baba Siddiqui, from the Bandra constituency caught the political class unawares. Mr Siddiqui defeated Shaina, though. Adding a new twist was the surprise announcement by school education, sports and youth welfare minister Amrish Patel. The promoter of textile and cotton mills and India's first gold refinery declared he would retire from electoral politics, but still emerged a winner.

Says Mr Patel: "Shirpur, situated in the tribal Dhule district, has been transformed into an ultra modern town. During my stint as the education minister, I even introduced insurance schemes for students."

But there's a dark side too. The decision by Anil Gote, one of the key accused in the Rs 3,000 crore fake stamp scam, to contest the assembly polls from jail has made the intelligentsia and politicians sit up and debate whether Maharashtra was also going the Uttar Pradesh and Bihar way. Mr Gote, who lost in the elections, entered politics after a career in journalism and agri-business.

Though the business-politics nexus is generally considered harmful, the Maharashtra model of a politics-business tie-up is seen by some as a means of taking the development process forward. A section of political observers even see this as an encouraging trend which can be emulated in other states.

Says veteran NCP minister Suresh Jain, who has won yet again in 25 years of state politics (having been a minister for two terms) after withdrawing from businesses in textiles, seeds, cotton and oil seeds, politics is not a means to achieving things: "I withdrew myself from business and entered into active politics with an aim to do something for society. I could achieve some of that, but a lot is yet to be done. I strongly feel that administrative reforms are a must to take government initiatives to the common man. Merely putting the onus on politicians is not the answer."

For Balasaheb Dangat, who joined the electoral politics by accident after the Shiv Sena nominated him for the first time as the party candidate from Junnar in Pune district in the 1990 assembly elections, it's an opportunity to work for the people. Yet, the people have rejected him, though the Dangat family has been newspaper agents in Mumbai and is a well-known name in politics and society.

Experts say that though money power is gaining undue prominence in the political process, some prominent state politicians have indeed done some positive development work.

State BJP chief Gopinath Munde, who managed to win, for instance, is busy involving farmers in the setting up of at least 25 sugar mills in the private sector. State finance minister Jayant Patil, who has been instrumental in the establishment of private sugar mills and a state-of-the-art school in his constituency, has been engaged in encouraging youth to take up careers in IT and bio-technology. Former energy minister Dilip Valse-Patil has been involved in the promotion of IT, especially among rural youth. Not to be outdone, Shiv Sena's rising star Raj Thackeray is actively pursuing his mission of encouraging educated unemployed to take up self



Maharashtra chief minister Sushil Shinde with his grandson Veer at his residence on Saturday

employment.

Sums up BJP nominee Prakash Solanki, who won from Majalgaon constituency in Beed district:
“A politician with a business background can do a lot for expediting the development process with a focus on the common man”.