

MANIPUR RETURN TO ANARCHY

BIHAR PRASHANT KISHOR WALKS THE POLL TALK

MADHABI BUCH HER TOUGHEST TEST

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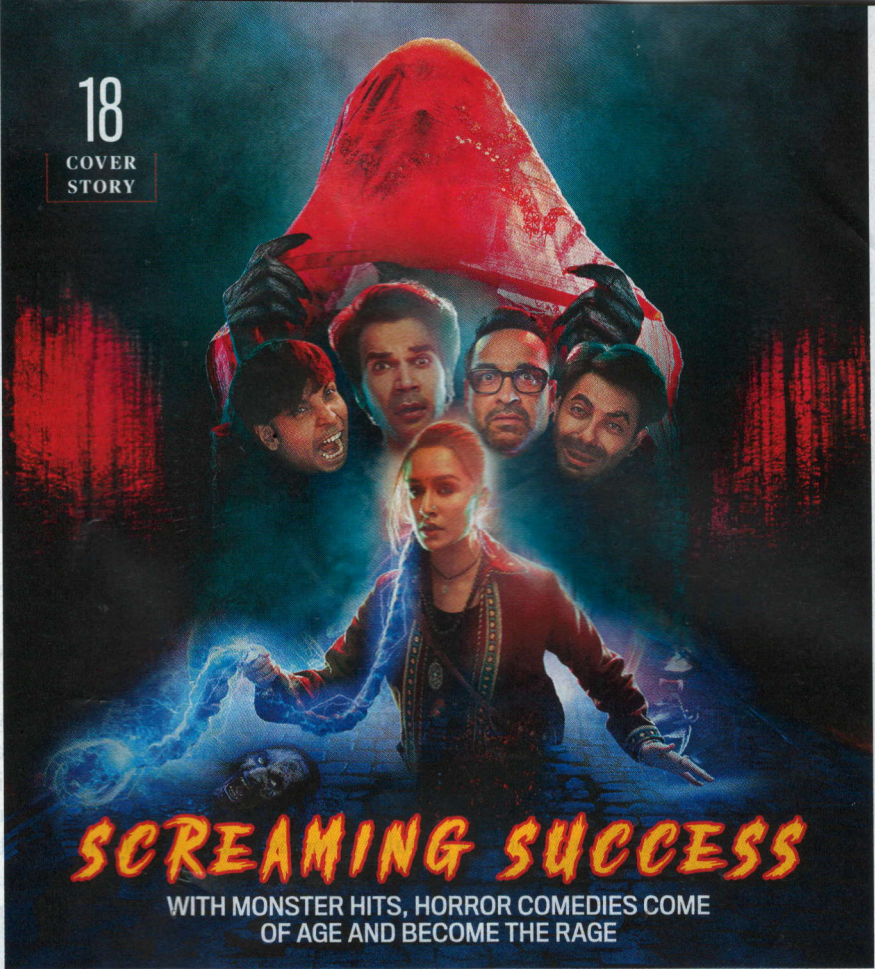
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X/@BHUPINDERSHOODA

THE JAT FULCRUM Leaders from various parties join the Haryana Congress in presence of Bhupinder Singh Hooda in Delhi, Aug. 25

HARYANA / CONGRESS

THE BATTLE WITHIN

By Anilesh S. Mahajan

In March 2005, after almost week-long tense parleys, the victorious Congress crowned a 57-year-old Bhupinder Singh Hooda as Haryana chief minister, overlooking the claim of three-time former CM Bhajan Lal, who was by then 74 years old. By far the party's tallest leader, Bhajan Lal had the loyalty of most of the 67 Congress legislators who were elected to the 90-member assembly. Hooda on the other hand had won his spurs in the

1990s, defeating the Chautala patriarch Devi Lal in three back-to-back parliamentary polls in the Jat heartland of Rohtak; above all, he had whole-heartedly backed the then Congress chief Sonia Gandhi in the party's internal tussle. With the Gandhis putting their weight behind the 'young' Jat leader, the newly elected MLAs, too, decided to ditch the old veteran Bhajan Lal.

Two decades later, as Haryana readies for yet another state election

on October 5, Hooda finds himself at a similar—if not the same—crossroads. At 76, he is ageing, and his younger bête noire Kumari Selja, the 61-year-old Sirsa MP, has better access to the Gandhis. Just a few years ago, Hooda was part of the 'G-23', a group of Congress MPs who had demanded large-scale reforms in the party—perceived to be a rebellion against the Gandhi family's dominance. Though he was given a free hand since 2022 to run the party's Haryana unit,