

MDMK Ministers put in papers

By Our Special Correspondent
NEW DELHI, DEC. 30. M. Kannappan and Ginge N. Ramachandran, both belonging to the Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK), today resigned from the Union Council of Ministers. The Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, forwarded their resignations to the President for acceptance.

According to a Rashtrapati Bhavan release, the President has accepted the resignations. Mr. Kannappan was Minister of State for Non-Conventional Energy Sources and Mr. Ramachandran was Minister of State for Textiles.

The two Ministers met the Prime Minister this morning at his residence and handed over their letters of resignation, as per the decision of the MDMK to part company with the National Democratic Alliance. No attempt was made to make the

Ministers rethink their resignations, as the MDMK was deemed to be only following in the footsteps of its senior partner in Tamil Nadu, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), whose Ministers had earlier put in their papers.

The MDMK became the fifth partner to go out of the Vajpayee Government; besides the DMK, those who have left the ruling coalition include the National Conference, Ajit Singh's Lok Dal and Ram Vilas Paswan's Lok Shakti. Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress has been periodically in and out of the Government.

Today's resignations have added to the pressure on the Prime Minister to undertake one more reshuffle of the Union Cabinet. Mr. Vajpayee is expected to attend to this demand after his return from the SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) meeting in the first week of January 2004.



The MDMK leaders, Ginge N. Ramachandran (left), and M. Kannappan, talking to mediapersons after tendering their resignations from the Union Council of Ministers to the Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, in New Delhi on Tuesday. — PTI

578 EARLY BIRDS 28/12

But many turns in electoral worms

WITH BJP hints about early general elections dropping thicker and faster than Delhi's winter morning dew, there's reason to suspect the party may have made up its mind. Of the factors that could change the plan between now and the BJP's Hyderabad national executive on 11-12 January is an inspirational regrouping in the Congress organisation. That would, to say the least, take some doing, since the main Opposition party hasn't even finished, far less discussed, the report on the assembly poll defeats and the CWC-AICC resignation farce hasn't been played out fully yet. Congress disarray may, in fact, have prompted a change in BJP strategy. Immediately after the assembly elections, the ruling party had more or less decided to let this Lok Sabha run its course. The Prime Minister had done the elections-on-time spin. It is the Prime Minister again who changed the spin. Atal Behari Vajpayee may have therefore taken a look at his challenger and decided that her travails represent his best opportunity. The Atal versus Sonia contest is likely to even more unequal than it normally is if general elections are held around April-May. But that is merely one of the factors that will determine the outcome. And one of the risks an upbeat BJP runs, especially since it is gleefully looking at a downcast Congress, is to forget the complexity of the job. For example, it is perfectly likely that there will be a gap between public approval for Vajpayee and actual votes for the BJP. How big that gap is may have a critical impact on the BJP's seats.

The BJP says that economic good news and good monsoon will help it as a party of the government. There's enough in economic data to put together a positive message but this message plus Vajpayee's image are not enough for India's villages, where general elections are decided. State and local level election management, the term the BJP spin doctors made popular after the assembly poll wins, will be required. Most politically major states do not lend themselves to easy management solutions. Kalyan Singh's possible return and Mulayam Singh Yadav's possible soft enmity have made UP look less bleak for the BJP. But neither advantage has been actualised and dissatisfaction over Vinay Katiyar as state president has not yet resulted in a suitable replacement. In chaotic Bihar, the BJP is hoping but still not certain that the various lapsed Socialists — George Fernandes, Nitish Kumar, Sharad Yadav — will stand together and stand with it to give Laloo Prasad Yadav a fight. Maharashtra presents a better picture, with anti-incumbency and the Congress-NCP problems giving the BJP-Shiv Sena the starting odds. Narendra Modi will hope to swing Gujarat the BJP's way, in part because the state Congress seems to have not recovered from its assembly election defeat. In MP, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh, the three states the BJP won, the party will be desperately hoping the new chief ministers do not mess it up. In the event of April-May elections, there may not be enough time for the CMs to betray voter expectation. On the other hand, the hope and hype the victories generated may mean voter dissatisfaction takes less time to find some expression. The South? If Andhra Pradesh and the country go to polls together, the BJP's performance in that state will rise and fall with Chandrababu Naidu's. Naidu is a "performing", "governing" chief minister. But remember so were Ashok Gehlot and Ajit Jogi. Tamil Nadu poses the toughest question: to love her again or leave her alone. Jayalalitha is thought to have the political upper hand in the state now and she has sometimes outdone the BJP in Hindutva-speak. But what about the frequent storms in her tea cup and the tea parties that follow? That one question should make every BJP optimist wary.

BJP puts 'communal' tag on Sonia

HT Correspondent
New Delhi, December 15

TWO DAYS after Congress president Sonia Gandhi fired a broadside over the NDA government at the Aligarh Muslim University, BJP spokesman V.K. Malhotra charged the Congress chief with attempting to provoke communalism at a place which is the nerve-centre of country's largest minority.

Malhotra said a member of the Nehru-Gandhi family had visited AMU after 40 years. "Her speech was to encourage the communal forces and create fear psychosis among Muslims for the sake of votes."

Sonia on Saturday said past few years had seen a severe assault on secularism. Sonia said: "The assault still continues unabated. Text-books are being rewritten. Institutions of excellence are being subverted. Scholars are being hounded. Minorities are being targeted."

One could understand if somebody was talking about

Uma takes oath in Sanskrit

UMA BHARTI, her five ministerial colleagues and some ruling party and Opposition members took the oath in Sanskrit. The legislators had started taking their seats much before the House assembled at 10.30 am. Assembly officials assisted the newly elected MLAs to identify their seats. The seat of the leader of the Opposition remained vacant because Jamuna Devi, who was elected CLP leader on Satur-



Uma offers pooja at her office.

day, was in the Speaker's chair. Bharti, who became MLA for the first time, and Digvijay Singh entered about five minutes before the House began the day's business. **HTC, Bhopal**

the welfare of Muslims, or taking a pro-Muslim stand "but to promote fear among the community is bad", Malhotra said. He said Sonia's call for Opposition parties to unite on the plank of secularism showed the Congress'

desperation to cobble up some alliance in the wake of humiliating defeat in the recent Assembly polls.

Objecting to Gandhi's charge that the minorities had been targeted under the BJP rule, the BJP spokesman

said: "There is now communal harmony in the country. Sonia would like to disturb it. She must first define secularism. Is it being anti-Hindu, or Hindu-baiting?"

He reminded Sonia that the minorities in India were not only equal citizens but enjoyed privileges that were not available to the minorities in any country. "In no country, you will find the minorities enjoy a separate civil code, get subsidy to undertake religious travels like the Haj, have a separate commission to look after their interests or a financial body to cater to their needs."

He said Sonia, instead of appealing to the Muslims to join the national mainstream, was trying to create fear in their minds. On her charge that the BJP had deleted portions of text-books, Malhotra asked: "Is she unhappy with the deletion sought by the Congress government in Delhi relating to the denigration of the Sikh gurus and the Jain community?"

Cong should treat defeat as

of 80%
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7/12

Pankaj Vohra

THE CONGRESS debacle in three states in the just-ended Assembly polls has demoralised the party's rank and file because of two factors — the defeat comes after a string of successes in earlier polls and, second, no one expected the outcome would be so disastrous in view of the opinion polls predicting a Congress edge in at least two of the three states.

When I sent some dispatches from Jodhpur in the last week of November raising doubts on the supposedly good position of the party in Rajasthan and underlining how the BJP had gained under Vasundhara Raje, not many people in Delhi were willing to concede the change at the ground level. They told me I was wrong and the Congress could nev-

In other words, the three new CMs are able to provide model governance so that the chances of their party brighten during the Lok Sabha polls next year.

The Congress has tried to console itself with a comfortable victory in Delhi made possible by a strong anti-incumbency wave against the Centre, as also Sheila Dikshit's ability to win over a large chunk of middle-class vote, which, traditionally, went to the BJP in the past.

Had it not been for the formidable M.L. Khurana, whose "never say die" spirit kept his party's hopes alive, the BJP would virtually have been wiped out in Delhi. The majority of the 20 seats the party has won were largely on account of "street-fighter" Khurana, who is apparently being made a scapegoat for a defeat

BEHIND THE NEWS



Sheila Dikshit



Sonia Gandhi



Madhava Prasad

One wonders why the BJP is overplaying it

Ladies first, Congress comes in second

Sheila Dikshit retains Delhi, but Vasundhara Raje, Uma Bharati wrest Rajasthan, MP

By Manoj Joshi
TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: Defying pundits and pre-poll forecasts the BJP recorded a spectacular victory in the assembly elections in Chattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. In politics as in war, it has always been 'Jo jeeta wohi Sikandar', but the election results made it clear that good governance and development had at last gained salience at the hustings. A win-win aside for the region, known for its poor treatment of women, is that three of the four incoming chief ministers are likely to be women.

With the Congress having been in power in all four states, the stakes in the assembly elections were weighed in the BJP's favour. But what made the victory sweeter for the latter was the scale of the Congress defeat. In Madhya Pradesh, the BJP swept all the regions, capturing 179 seats, and the Congress lost a staggering 86 seats to end up with just 33. In Rajasthan, where reports had spoken of a neck-and-neck race, there was, in the end, no contest—the BJP captured 121 seats, the Congress 56. In smaller Chattisgarh, despite the Judeo tapes episode, the BJP pulled off 51 to the Congress' 35. The consolation, if any, was Delhi where the Congress' 47 seats to the BJP's 20 was definitive and decisive.

The most striking feature of the campaign was that it was not about the BJP's core issues—Ayodhya, Hindutva and so on. It was about development, or the lack of it. In Delhi, the one state where the BJP projected an antediluvian campaign, it lost. Law minister Arun Jaitley, who led the BJP's assault team in MP, correctly identified the causes of the victory on Thursday. "There was anti-incumbency on account of lack of electricity, roads, water, industrial development and rising unemployment."

Just how the debate on development played out was seen in Delhi. Victorious chief minister Sheila Dikshit declared that development had been and would remain her motto. "You have seen the development work that has been done here, my priority will be to take this ahead," she told jubilant party workers at her residence. On the other hand, her rival, Madanlal Khurana, lamented that the Congress government was taking undue credit for the development work already done in the capital.

If there was a communal element in the campaign, it was introduced, ironically, by Digvijay Singh when he spoke of banning cow slaughter and also tried to convert the Bhojshala-Kamal Moula mosque controversy into a statewide issue.

Delhi: Comfortable win for Cong

Party	Seats
Congress	47
BJP	20
Others	3

M.L. Khurana: True, we've lost, but Congress is taking undue credit for development

Sheila Dikshit: It's been the ugliest campaign I have seen. I hope my rivals are satisfied



M L Khurana

Madhya Pradesh: Cong is wiped out



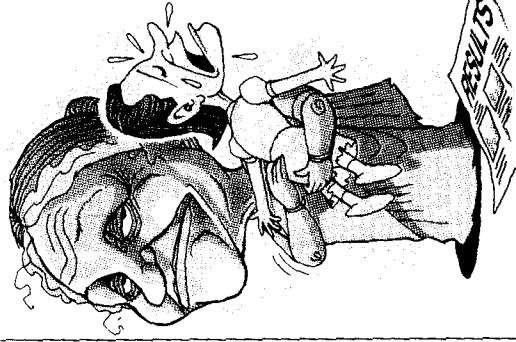
Digvijay Singh: We failed to feel the pulse of the people

Party	Seats
BJP	179
Congress	33
Others	18

Chhattisgarh: No effect of 'bribe-on-camera'



Ajit Jogi: I accept the people's verdict with humility. We'll play the role of a constructive opposition



Ajit Niran

Rajasthan: Record win for BJP

Party	Seats
BJP	121
Congress	56
Others	23

Pramod Mahajan: For the first time BJP has crossed the 100 mark in Rajasthan



Vasundhara Raje Scindia

Party	Seats
BJP	51
Congress	35
Others	2

Cong ready for early LS elections

New Delhi: The Congress is banking on the working of a "cyclical pattern" in elections whereby if it has lost this round, it could win the next. So, no heads may roll for the assembly poll debacle as the party gets ready for the Lok Sabha elections which it expects to be advanced.

"If these elections were the semi-finals as PM A.B. Vajpayee said, we are ready for the finals. Let LS elections be held in March," party spokesman Jaipal Reddy told reporters on Thursday.

While his reaction was analytical, that of party chief Sonia Gandhi was direct. Expressing "deep disappointment" over her party's reverses in the assembly elections, she said the party would have "to pull up its socks" for the big electoral battle ahead. **TNN**

By Smita Gupta
TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: The BJP's spectacular performance in the just-concluded assembly elections, particularly in Rajasthan and Chattisgarh, have once again put the spotlight on party general secretary Pramod Mahajan. As the party functionary in charge of the four states, with special responsibility for Rajasthan, he is widely being seen as the architect of the victories in these two states. On Thursday, he received personal congratulatory phone calls from Andhra Pradesh CM N Chandrababu Naidu, NDA convenor George Fernandez and Shiv Sena chief Uddhav Thackeray.

For, of the four Congress-ruled states of MP, Delhi, Rajasthan and Chattisgarh that went to the polls on December 1, the results of the first two were a foregone conclusion: If all surveys indicated that the Congress would be routed in MP, in Delhi, the Congress's Sheila Dikshit was consistently seen as far ahead of the BJP.

Indeed, if the BJP had only won MP, then the focus would have been on law minister Arun Jaitley, who was in -charge of the state, as he had been for Gujarat where, too, the BJP won an impressive victory not so long back. But with wins in Rajasthan and Chattisgarh as well, Jaitley's thunder has

been stolen and party sources say, it could change inner party dynamics as well. On Thursday, a beaming Mahajan, for whom the party general secretaryship had initially been seen as a punishment, said, "I'm beginning to enjoy this job."

For in Rajasthan and Chattisgarh, the Congress appeared to have an edge, even if narrow. But in the end, in Rajasthan, the BJP's meticulous poll management, supervised and planned by Mahajan, based on this election's most expensive and extensive pre-poll surveys conducted by a leading pollster which identified 37 marginal constituencies and suggested remedial measures, turned the tide in favour of the BJP.

Three out of four, and all eyes on Mahajan

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3/12

Opposition plans offensive on Judev, PSUs issues

9 Political

By Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, DEC. 2. The Opposition today decided to go on the offensive and press for an immediate discussion in the Lok Sabha tomorrow on the corruption issue and the Dilip Singh Judev tapes episode through an adjournment motion.

The decision was arrived at a meeting of the Opposition leaders on the opening day of the winter session of Parliament, which was adjourned today without transacting any official business as a mark of respect to the death of some of its sitting members. The Opposition will also raise the issue of the report of the Chief Vigilance Commissioner on "interference" in the working of the Public Sector Undertakings and demand a statement from the Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

The CPI(M) Parliamentary party leader, Somnath Chatterjee, at whose initiative the floor coordination meeting was organised, said the Opposition would demand that the Prime Minister take Parliament into confidence on the CVC report, instead of denying that the name of any Minister was mentioned in the meeting between the Prime Minister and the CVC. "No one de-

nies that there is a report and the CVC felt necessary to give a report about malfunctioning/misuse of PSUs," he said.

The Congress has requested the Lok Sabha Speaker, Manohar Joshi, to advise the Government to table all documents relating to the PSUs issue and the November 14 meeting of the Committee of Secretaries. The party said that Mr. Vajpayee should tell the nation what happened between him and the CVC regarding the "lack of autonomy for the PSUs."

The other issues include the recent violence over the Railways recruitment policy, the multi-crore fake stamps scam and "misuse" of the Central Bureau of Investigation.

The party leader, Priya Ranjan Dasmunshi, said that in reply to a letter from the Leader of the Opposition, Sonia Gandhi, on the issue the Prime Minister said that he had directed the Cabinet Secretary to hold such a meeting to consider, among other things, how to make the PSUs perform with due autonomy. On the stamp paper scam, the Congress chief spokesperson, Jaipal Reddy, said the party was prepared for any kind of inquiry and it was for the Centre to decide since the security press at Nashik functions directly under the Centre.

Asked whether the party would agree to a parliamentary probe, he said it stood for a "transparent and open-ended inquiry."

The Congress also said that it would support the passage of the Lok Pal Bill provided it brought the office of Prime Minister under its ambit.

The party was eager that the Anti-Defection Law be amended in such a manner as to eliminate provision for splits/mergers, which it said had been used during the last 15 years to frustrate the basic objective of the law.

The meeting was attended by the former Prime Minister, Chandra Shekhar, the NCP chief, Sharad Pawar, Pawan Bansal (Congress), Ram Vilas Paswan (Lok Janshakti), Ajit Singh (Rashtriya Lok Dal), Ramjilal Suman (Samajwadi Party), Raashid Alvi (Bahujan Samaj Party), Ali Mohammed Naik (National Conference), Raghuvansh Prasad Singh (Rashtriya Janata Dal), Ajay Chakraborty (CPI), Bir Singh Mahato (Forward Bloc), Sanat Mandal (Revolutionary Socialist Party), Haribhau Mahale (Janata Dal-Secular), G.M. Banatwala and E. Ahamed (IUML), Francis George (Kerala Congress) and Simranjit Singh Mann (SAD-Amritsar).

THE HINDU

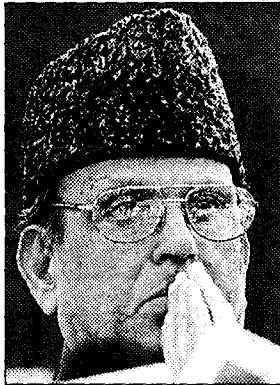
DEC 2003

VP blasts BJP, stands up for 'foreigner' Sonia

New Delhi 9 November
6 NOVEMBER

CASTIGATING the BJP for raking up the "bogey" of Congress president Sonia Gandhi's foreign origin, former Prime Minister V.P. Singh on Thursday said only the Congress could give a befitting reply to the BJP in the states going to polls.

Repeatedly clarifying that this did not mean he was joining the Congress, Mr Singh told reporters here that the "objective reality" was that Congress was the main force which could fight and defeat the BJP in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Delhi. "Though the JD(S) or Left parties would be putting up candidates in these states



SINGH: THEORY OF ORIGIN

and we will support them, the main force that could defeat BJP is the Congress," Mr Singh said, adding: "I will be with (former premier) H.D. Deve Gowda and the Left parties. If it

was Karnataka or West Bengal, then they would have been the main force to defeat the BJP."

Stating that the "real face of BJP has been exposed after Gujarat riots," he said it was imperative not to split the secular votes as the BJP wanted that to happen. On BJP's campaign on Sonia Gandhi's "foreign origin," the former premier said: "She is not a foreigner. She has become a naturalised Indian. There is this phenomenon of naturalisation the world over, but BJP raises this issue to side-track real issues afflicting the people. They don't criticise her children because they are Indians." Mr Singh said: "Being Indians themselves, they (BJP) are inviting foreigners to rule the roost in this country." —PTI

Shifting political sands: Foe is friend today, foe tomorrow

The dice is loaded; the winner waiting in the wings. But who'll it be? The outcome of next month's assembly elections in four Congress-ruled states are crucial. With general elections in 2004, these polls could see a major reurning of political forces. Sunday Times examines the winning combinations



George Fernandes: This defence minister knows how to defend the BJP. He's a 'loyalist', keeps NDA flock in order, brings in new friends. He's ambitious; may throw his hat into arena at the right time



Mulayam Singh: Could be a kingmaker when the next government is formed. After all his SP boasts of 27 MPs. He hopes his current stint as CM will see that figure rise. Aspires to be PM.



Mayawati: Notwithstanding all her problems, she has many suitors. As BSP president, she appears determined not to just to retain her base in UP, but also in neighbouring states.



J Jayalithaa: Another prime ministerial aspirant. She's all set to launch herself in national politics on Makar Sankranti when she inaugurates the spanking new TN Bhavan in Delhi



Sharad Pawar: Though Maharashtra politics dictates he cannot tie-up with the BJP there, he is not averse to playing footsie with the BJP at the Centre. His strength lies in his many friends

New Delhi: It's that time of the year when political fluidity assumes a new meaning. Naturally. With less than a year for the general elections, and with neither the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) nor the Congress likely to secure a majority, the race for political partners has hotted up.

The BJP, of course, has a headstart with its National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in place. But the Congress is not exactly lagging behind. Its president, Sonia Gandhi's call at her party conclave in July, for a secular alliance has added an edge to the battle for South Block. This was the first official sign that the Congress too was prepared to head a coalition.

If Ms Gandhi's statement was the first shock for the BJP, the next was in August when the Mayawati government collapsed in Uttar Pradesh. The BJP lost a key partner, the Bahujan Samaj Party. But wait, all was not lost. Last week, the Samata Party and the Janata Dal-U reunited under George Fernandes, to stem the possibility of defections to the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and the Congress, simultaneously strengthening the NDA and the anti-Laloo Prasad Yadav front in Bihar. But while this may be Mr Fernandes' objective, a senior JD-U leader said the reunion would lead the new party to becoming the "focus of Third Front politics."

Evidently, nothing is as simple as it

looks. Acknowledging this ambivalence, BJP president M. Venkaiah Naidu said recently that next month's assembly elections in the Congress-ruled states of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan and Delhi would trigger political re-alignments. What are the possibilities?

If the BJP wins three or even two of the major states, disgruntled NDA partners, such as the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), may halt in their tracks. A senior BJP functionary said, "If the Congress governments in Punjab and Uttaranchal will be in danger we will step up our campaigns there."

Another factor that will affect the BJP-led NDA will be the Telugu Desam Party's (TDP) performance in the Andhra Pradesh elections, in case N. Chandrababu Naidu decides to dissolve the assembly next week.

But if the Congress retains all or at least three states, there will be a churning in the NDA. This will have an impact on:

- ◆ The re-united JD-U in Bihar
- ◆ The Bijoya Mahapatra-led BJD splinter in Orissa
- ◆ The DMK
- ◆ Mulayam Singh Yadav's Samajwadi Party (may consider an electoral arrangement with the Congress)
- ◆ Jayalalithaa's AIADMK (it too could consider a partnership with the

Congress)

◆ The NCP will have to accept the Congress' terms in Maharashtra if Sharad Pawar wants a political future.

◆ The BSP, currently considering an electoral tie-up with the Congress in MP, may be tempted to strengthen the relationship.

However, should either the BJP or the Congress not touch the 180 to 200 mark, there will a possibility of a Third Front (TF) government. And given the political uncertainties, smaller political players have not given up their Third Front ambitions. Some re-united JD-U members are hoping to bring back other Samajwadi parivar members into its fold and become the focus of TF politics.

The leader of the TF? That's easier said than done. There are almost as many aspirants as there are parties—from Fernandes, to Mulayam Singh to former prime minister Chandrashekhar to "outsiders" such as Chandrababu Naidu, Jayalalithaa and Pawar.

If, however, the BJP makes the mark, the NDA will stay intact, and the SP, the AIADMK and the NCP would support it if necessary, as Atal Bihari Vajpayee remains their first choice. But, if the Congress nears 200, the Left, Laloo Prasad Yadav's RJD in Bihar and H.D. Deve Gowda's newly-resurgent JD (Secular) in Karnataka will help it secure a majority. If a few more MPs are required, the SP and the NCP will pitch in.

—Smita Gupta

DEEP FOCUS

2 NOV 2003

FOR CONTINUING OF THE

Divisions Come To The Fore As Politicians Across The Great Divide Stick To Their Stands

No-confidence vote highlights gap between hype and reality

Our Political Bureau
NEW DELHI 20 AUGUST

THE two-day polemical duel in the Lok Sabha over the Congress no-trust vote has turned the spotlight again on the nearly-forgotten Doordarshan comedy serial of the late 80s, *Mungeri Lal Ke Haseen Sapne*.

The show was a major draw on prime time with Raghubeer Yadav playing the principal protagonist, Mungeri Lal, a Bihari rustic with day dreaming as his chief addiction. Raghubeer Yadav got raves for his performance in the Prakash Jha-directed serial where Pyare Mohan Sahay, a versatile stage actor from Patna, gave the country its maiden exposure to Laloo-type delivery.

Its title came handy for Ms Gandhi on Monday when she set out to rubbish the assertion of the government that the economy was doing fine as a mere reverie. The BJP reciprocated the next day with the parliamentary affairs minister Sushma Swaraj



SONIA & VAIPAYEE: CLOSE ENCOUNTER

defly employing the same as a peg for her argument that dreaming big was no crime.

"Only those who dream big can make it big. Mulayam Singh Yadav would not have made it big in politics if he had not set his sights high. Ramvilas Paswan, born in a Dalit family, would not have reached where he has if he had not thought beyond the

mundane. And Rabri Devi would not have been the chief minister," said Ms Swaraj, trying to embarrass Sonia Gandhi and flatter her potential allies at the same time.

Today it was the turn of BJP spokesman Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi to use the same *Sapne* theme to hit out at Congress chief for having moved the no-confidence motion. Latching on to the

punchline used by Ms Gandhi, ruling party spokesman said that the Leader of the Opposition inflicted embarrassment upon herself by allowing her prime ministerial aspiration to get the better of common sense.

"The no-confidence motion of Congress was nothing a *Mungeri Lal ka sunhara sapna* of the Congress president Sonia Gandhi," said Mr Naqvi.

"Congress should know that Parliament is an august house where oratorical skill and a leader with a vision is required and it is not a declamation contest where on the basis of a written text you can impress members," he said.

This is not the first instance where a Congress leader has seen her hyre being grabbed and hurled back by her opponents. In 1977, Indira Gandhi dismissed the infant Janata Party as a kitchen-deli. Late Jagjivan Ram swiftly swung back her description to argue that it only pointed to the disconnect between the Congress and the underprivileged masses.



Fernandes

IN what appears to be a move aimed at getting the Congress stick to his earlier stand on George Fernandes, the CPI(M) said it would continue to boycott the defence minister in the Parliament.

The move is expected to put pressure on the Congress, which had used the no-confidence motion to wriggle out of a position that has become untenable in the face of the Prime Minister and the ruling regime's stout defence of the minister. The Congress is dependent on the Left parties and Laloo Yadav for sustaining its claim of being the leader of the alternative to the NDA government. The Samajwadi Party has been toting an independent line on this issue with its leader Mulayam Singh Yadav disapproving the continued boycott of his old

Our Political Bureau
NEW DELHI 20 AUGUST

socialist associate, Mr Fernandes. The increased cooperation between the Congress and the CPI(M), meanwhile, came under in-house attack with two components of the Left Front — Forward Bloc and the RSP — asserting that it will not support the big brother's line in Sonia Gandhi.

The loud "no" to the leadership of Ms Gandhi also coincided with cacophony within the CPI(M) over the matter. While the secretary of the Bengal unit of the CPI(M) said the Sonia leadership was not discussed by his party's politburo, Jyoti Basu insisted that the party has already given its consent.

The Left Front components not only opposed Mr Basu's stand but are also angry that the issue wasn't discussed in the Left Front committee. "We consider both the BJP and the Congress as enemies of the working class. We have resolved to maintain equidistance from both parties, an agency reporting from Kolkata quoting Forward Block general secretary Debabrata Biswas said.

Fernandes fielded for trust vote debate as govt goes on offensive

Atal blows battle bugle

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OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

New Delhi, Aug. 16: The government today donned its battle gear ahead of the no-trust motion on Monday with the Prime Minister declaring that his regime would defend itself and attack the Opposition at the same time and boldly picking George Fernandes as one of his main speakers.

After the initial surprise at the Opposition-sponsored move, the government — secure that the motion will be defeated in Parliament given the NDA's numerical majority — has decided to go on the offensive. This is evident by its decision to field defence minister Fernandes at the centre of Parliament's storm — as one of its principal speakers.

"We will defend the government and attack the Opposition at the same time," Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee told

NDA leaders at a meeting this morning.

Speaking to reporters later, the BJP's chief whip in the Lok Sabha V.K. Malhotra said: "It is a vote of no-confidence against the council of ministers. The Prime Minister said we will attack and defend at the same time. George is not the only minister against whom this no-confidence vote has been moved."

The decision to field Fernandes is meant to expose the chinks in the Opposition, which has not taken a coordinated stand on his boycott. The Samajwadi Party and the Nationalist Congress Party — which said they would vote for the motion — have, however, registered their opposition to the boycott on record.

From the NDA's viewpoint, if the Opposition stays put during Fernandes' speech, it effectively means the nearly two-year boycott will end in a whimper.

Malhotra took a cue from Vajpayee and deputy L.K. Advani,

both of whom reportedly stressed the trust vote should be converted into a "major opportunity". "This will be the opportunity to list the government's achievements in the economic sphere, education, health and security before the nation and also to prove how baseless the Opposition's allegations are," he said.

The two-day debate — scheduled to start at noon on August 18 and end by August 19 evening with Vajpayee's reply — will be telecast live on Doordarshan.

Vajpayee has convened a meeting of NDA legislators in the Central Hall on Monday morning before Parliament assembles. This will be the NDA's first parliamentary meeting since it came to power in 1999.

The government is not taking any chances with its numbers. The parties supporting it from outside — the Telugu Desam Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party — have been asked to attend the meet-

ing. Allies have been told to issue a three-line whip asking MPs to be present and vote against the motion.

Efforts are on to coax MDMK chief Vaiko — in Vellore jail since his arrest under the anti-terrorism act over a year ago — to appeal to the Supreme Court for parole so that he can be present during voting.

But a jarring note was struck in the NDA's efforts to show solidarity after Sushma Swaraj said yesterday that the BJP may approach the ADMK for support. Sources said this spurred DMK central minister T.R. Baalu into declaring at the NDA meeting that there was "no need" to seek help from outside parties like the ADMK since the coalition had a comfortable majority.

Although Fernandes claimed there was no "contradiction" in having the Tamil Nadu adversaries on the NDA's side, DMK chief M. Karunanidhi hinted in Thanjavur his support could not be taken for granted.

CBI 'doctored' tapes: Opp rocks Parliament

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, JULY 31

PARLIAMENT saw uproar in both Houses today over CBI's admission in Rae Bareilly court that video and audio tapes submitted by it in Ayodhya case do not contain speeches of Dy PM L.K. Advani, HRD Minister Murlidhar Manohar Joshi and a few other ministers on the day of the Babri Masjid demolition.

While Lok Sabha was adjourned over the issue, Rajya Sabha decided to discuss it on Monday. This is unprecedented as Parliament does not discuss an issue twice in the same session. The Rajya Sabha decision was taken at a meeting between Congress-led Opposition and Government at the instance of Chairman Bhairon Singh Shekhawat. This followed a stormy start to the day's proceedings as a determined Opposition demanded Advani's resignation over the CBI failing to present evidence against him.

The debate in the House will be

BJP vs Cong on Advani

BJP: Let the Congress produce a tape to prove that Advani was involved in the Babri demolition... The CBI tapes, which it says are doctored, were prepared during the tenure of Narasimha Rao.

CONG: The BJP is sabotaging the case to get Sangh Parivar leaders off the hook. Advani is too thick-skinned to resign, but it is the Government's responsibility to agree to a discussion.

on a short duration discussion notice under Rule 176. It was decided to "discuss the role of the Government with respect to the investigative agencies in Ayodhya". Shekhawat initially did not entertain a notice by Congress member Suresh Pachguri for suspension of question hour to debate the Ayodhya issue but was forced to adjourn the House later.

A visibly disturbed Shekhawat reminded the members that they had taken a "pledge" never to demand adjournment of the question hour in

deference to common masses. However, Congress argued it was an extraordinary situation, "where the PM should speak to clarify and to give reassurance to the country that CBI was not being misused".

In the Lok Sabha, the ruckus began after the House met for the day, when the Opposition protested against the "misuse" of CBI to get senior leaders of the Sangh Parivar "off the hook", and demanded Advani's arrest.

The Congress submitted a notice for an adjournment motion on the CBI's evidence not mentioning Advani. Giving the notice, Priya Ranjan Dasmunsi charged that CBI's tapes were "doctored and tampered with". He also demanded that all the evidence in the matter be tabled in the House. This plunged Lok Sabha into turmoil before it was adjourned for lunch. When it reconvened, the pandemonium continued, forcing the House to again adjourn a few minutes later.

Meanwhile, the Rae Bareilly special court has fixed August 8 for further hearing in the case.

Double blow to George boycott rollback

9-6-2677

OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

New Delhi, July 25: Efforts to end the boycott of George Fernandes ran into fresh hurdles today with the Opposition remaining divided on a truce and the government refusing to accept the Congress' proposal for a discussion on Tehelka in the Lok Sabha as well.

The government had yesterday agreed to allow a short-duration debate in the Rajya Sabha on Monday on a notice given by Congress MP Suresh Pachauri, after which the party indicated it "could consider" lifting the boy-

cott, at least in the Upper House. But parliamentary affairs minister Sushma Swaraj told reporters today: "If the Congress' official position is to have a discussion in both Houses, we will not have it in either House."

The minister also distanced herself from the efforts made to end Fernandes' "non-recognition", saying that the idea to have a debate in the Upper House was not the government's "brave" but was mutually worked out after discussions with party leaders from both Houses.

Asked why the government was against allowing a discus-

sion in the Lower House, Swaraj said: "The basic principle is of a boycott. It was a decision taken by parties, by the Congress and the Party as the Samajwadi Party and the Rashtriya Janata Dal as well as the Rashtriya Janata Dal. If it ends in one House, it is automatically taken to mean that it has ended in the other House."

She claimed that senior Congress leaders had conveyed to her their willingness to settle for a debate in just the Upper House. "Ask them who backed out for an explanation. Why tie up Rajya Sabha business with that of Lok Sabha?" she asked and stressed

that there was no question of the government reneging on any assurance made to the Congress.

Non-Congress sources also pinned the blame for the twists and turns in the Fernandes boycott issue on the Congress. At an informal and unscheduled meeting of the Opposition this morning, leaders of the Left parties and the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) made two issues clear to the Congress.

One, they would lift the boycott only if Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee explained to the House why Fernandes had resigned after the Tehelka tapes were made public and why he

was reinstated. Two, as the boycott decision was taken collectively, they would not support any unilateral attempt by the Congress at ending it.

Left sources insisted that they had no idea that a truce had been worked out. They said the meeting was held after they learnt of the "development" from newspapers.

The non-Congress Opposition also refused to buy the Congress' argument that continuing the boycott was counter-productive because the defence minister could not be quizzed on the several controversies his ministry was mired in.

"If we have done it for a year and-a-half, what is the tearing hurry to end it now? All these controversies are anyway being raked up outside Parliament," said a Bihar leader.

Faced with the prospect of the fragile Opposition unity coming apart after the Left and the RJD stuck to their guns, the Congress quickly upped its ante and demanded a discussion in the Lok Sabha.

The Opposition is likely to meet again on Monday and, this time, the non-Congress parties have requested Sonia Gandhi to be present while they discuss the boycott.

PM's Age vs Sonia's Origin

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI | JULY 19

political scene

THE Congress today countered the BJP's attack on Sonia Gandhi's foreign origin by questioning the competence of "ageing" Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee.

"We don't want to make a personal attack against anyone. But we are aware of Vajpayee's competence...If Vajpayee was so competent then why has the BJP not got two-third majority in the 2002 Uttar Pradesh elections from where he is a Lok Sabha member," party spokesman Jaipal Reddy said.

"Does the BJP have nobody other than an octogenarian?" he asked, adding, "There must be an objective criterion for a leader."

Yesterday, BJP spokesperson Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi in response to a question had said, "We have no problem with the Congress making Sonia Gandhi or even Pervez Musharraf its president but projecting her as Prime Minister could raise questions among the people about national interest and security."

In Sonia's defence, Reddy said: "What administrative experience did Vajpayee have before he became the Prime Minister? Perhaps, Vajpayee with his advancing age and sinking health needs more time to rest."

On the other hand, he said: "Sonia Gandhi has exhibited exceptional political competence and Congress has marched from being in power in five states when she took over to 15 states."

On Vajpayee's 50 years of experience, Reddy said: "It is up to the BJP if it wants to project Vajpayee as the mascot. The BJP is a party with two mascots and three musketeers."

Reddy said Vajpayee-Sonia face-



Anil Sharma

Jogi wins over Opp leader's daughter

ASHWANI SHARMA
RAIPUR | JULY 19

CHIEF Minister Ajit Jogi pulled the carpet from under the BJP's feet today by announcing that the Opposition leader's daughter, who was missing since yesterday, has joined the Congress.

Just when the BJP's national executive was deliberating on the strategy for five states going to polls, the CM appeared before television cameras, confirming the induction of Priyam Paikra, daughter of BJP Legislature Party chief Nand Kumar Sai.

Paikra, the Janpad chief in Jaspur district, had gone missing from her house along with her husband. The Congress leaders deputed a senior government official to bring her to Raipur today and then presented her before the national media.

Even as BJP general secretary Pramod Mahajan dismissed the episode as a "local matter", Sai complained before reporters that Jogi and his son Amit were behind the "defection drama".

Yesterday, Sai had alleged that his daughter and son-in-law have been kidnapped at the behest of the Chief Minister and his son. The BJP leader sat on a dharna in front of the police station after the police refused to lodge his complaint.

This morning, PCC president Ramanuj Lal Yadav presented Sai's daughter before the media and issued a signed statement on her behalf.

"This again is an immoral act by Jogi. He has not even spared me — the leader of the opposition," Sai said.

■ Stung by BJP linking Sonia with danger to national security, Cong asks: "Does the BJP have nobody other than an octogenarian?"

off for the next general elections will be based on "age, results shown by the party, issues and politics".

Condemning Naqvi's statement today, Reddy said: "It is totally objectionable, it is an outrageous utterance. This statement was later amended or withdrawn by some other leaders of the party. But that the official spokesperson should have made this statement indicates moral and cultural bankruptcy of the BJP as a political party."

On the BJP's resolution on Ayo-

dhya legislation today, Reddy said: "BJP must first get its NDA partners' support. There is no point in putting before us what NDA has rejected."

Meanwhile, in Bhopal, NCP leader Sharad Pawar reiterated that his party has not changed its views on a person of foreign origin as Prime Minister. Initially reluctant to air his views, "it is up to the Congress to choose its leader", he went on to hint that a coalition with the Congress was still possible if it was led by someone from outside that party.

BJP seeks Cong. apology for Emergency

By Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, JUNE 26. It was a day when the Bharatiya Janata Party remembered the Emergency declared by the Indira Gandhi Government in 1975, and while the Deputy Prime Minister, L.K. Advani, praised the "vibrant democracy" here which helped the country come out of the dark days, the party general secretary, Pramod Mahajan, demanded that the Congress apologise to the people for what it had done.

Talking about democracy at a party function here today, Mr. Advani said the United States must differentiate between the Government and the people in a "vibrant democracy" like India. "Even if the (Indian) Government were to understand (the American position) in relation to cross-border terrorism in India, the people do not. How can those who fight global terrorism be on the side of those (Pakistan) who sponsor terrorism?"

The BJP president, Venkaiah

Naidu, said it was important to remember the time when an attempt was made to derail democracy and more important to strengthen it.

Mr. Mahajan said the BJP was right to remember the imposition of Emergency on this country 28 years ago. "Till the Congress apologises for the Emergency we cannot trust them not to do it again."

While Mr. Mahajan criticised the Congress, he admitted that in the RSS a prayer was said for "Hindu Rashtra", but the Congress perhaps believed in "Indu Rashtra", a reminder of the time when Congressmen equated India with Indira and Indira with India.

Mr. Advani recalled the days when the press was censored, when it was impossible to get information on who had been arrested and in which jail they had been lodged. It was important for every Indian to be aware of what happened during those days, important for their political education. But, he said, many young boys and girls know very little about what happened between June 1975 and the Lok Sabha elections in 1977.

Aid to Pak. baffling: Advani

NEW DELHI, JUNE 26. In a virtual disapproval of the \$ 3-billion U.S. economic aid to Pakistan, half of which is for defence, the Deputy Prime Minister, L.K. Advani, today said that it baffled the people and the Government why such assistance was extended to "sponsors and abettors" of terrorism.

In an apparent reference to the U.S., Mr. Advani said "you have declared yourself the leader of the global coalition against terrorism. Then, why do you give economic aid and arms to those who sponsor and abet terrorism? This they (people of India) do not understand."

Speaking at a function to mark the 28th anniversary of the imposition of Emergency in 1975, he asked the U.S. to be sensitive to the people and the Government of India, while taking a decision concerning economic aid and arms to Pakistan.

Later in an interview to 'Aaj Tak' he dismissed suggestions of differences with Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee. He declared there were no power centres and no rivalry between the two.

Saying he was amused over frequent reports of Mr. Vajpayee and he quibbling, he said "there is no truth whatsoever in this. People who know us closely understand it very well". — PTI

THURSDAY, JUNE 26, 2003

THE POLITICS OF TRAVEL

THE CONTROVERSY OVER the Rajasthan Chief Minister, Ashok Gehlot's three-day visit to New York may have blown over with the Centre finally giving him permission to make it an official tour. But it remains a mystery why the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), which had earlier refused permission for an official trip, allowed the matter to attain the dimension of a political controversy before tamely giving in at the end. Earlier, Mr. Gehlot — who has been invited to attend the International Rajasthan Sammelan on July 4 — had declared he would not travel to the United States in his personal capacity, something that the MEA had recommended he do. A petty squabble seems to have broken out about the nature of the trip with the MEA maintaining it was a response to an invitation from a private organisation and the Rajasthan Government stressing its public purpose — namely, that of conveying first-hand information about the investment climate in the State and of receiving a tidy sum of money collected by the Sammelan for drought relief. One result of the controversy was the Rajasthan High Court's decision to treat newspaper reports about it as public interest litigation and seek explanations from the Centre and the State Government about whether spending public money on Mr. Gehlot's trip was justified in these financially difficult times.

The general principle that official trips must be underpinned by official purposes is unexceptionable, but it is odd that overseas visits of some Chief Ministers have suddenly come under such rigorous Central scrutiny. Clearances of such visits of high-ranking politicians in power, whether in the States or at the Centre, have been pretty much a matter of routine. Approvals of such visits have hardly been preceded by subtle or painstaking calculations about whether the public money incurred on them is commensurate with the public benefit that will accrue from undertaking them. Given the generally lax or lenient attitude in granting permission for overseas official visits, it is hardly surprising that the Congress feels that the Centre is trying to play

petty games and interfere with the proposed foreign trips of Chief Ministers belonging to the main Opposition party. Apart from that of Mr. Gehlot, the proposed visits of the Maharashtra Chief Minister, Sushil Kumar Shinde, and the Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister, Digvijay Singh, had come under a cloud. The basis for objecting to these trips was of course different. Mr. Shinde's visit met with opposition from the Union Finance Ministry, which felt the meetings he had scheduled to conduct direct negotiations with World Bank officials were out of place. Mr. Shinde has since proceeded abroad after suitably modifying his programme.

The fact that approval has come smoothly for many others is partly responsible for the Congress spokesman's charge that a blatantly discriminatory attitude is being adopted by the Centre in granting permission for official visits by party Chief Ministers. For instance, the BJP-propped Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister, Mayawati, returned only recently from a three-week tour of the United States and Europe. And several NDA politicians and parliamentarians, if not already abroad, are either packing their bags to leave or unpacking them having just returned from one foreign destination or another. While public money should not be squandered on profitless foreign trips, it is also important to avoid evaluating each proposed visit through the framework of a harsh and miserly cost-benefit analysis. Whether it is really in the public interest for Mr. Gehlot to officially travel to New York (and that too with a 12-member delegation) is a question that can and perhaps will be asked. But the point is that the Rajasthan Chief Minister can hardly be portrayed as a parasitic freeloading junketeer — this being his first official overseas trip since he assumed power in 1998. There was no official communication from the MEA about why it refused permission for the visit just as there was no explanation about why it finally decided to approve it. The result of this has been a political controversy over something there should have been none about.

16/4/03

Cases kursi ke

169

Not one, but 137 cases against Mulayam: ruthless excess now marks Mayawati's political style

A LEGAL bonanza for Samajwadi Party leader Mulayam Singh as Mayawati smashes not one, not two, but a 137 legal cases against him on charges of doctoring BSP tapes. The legal tu tu main main between the Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party mirrors the battle of political rallies. If Maya musters a massive 400,000 for her recent pardafash rally, then the Samajwadi didn't do too badly with its 'thu thu' rally earlier this year. If Mayawati launches the 'dhikkar' rally, then the Samajwadi Party says it plans to launch its own 'cycle rally' later this month. The vast crowds that regularly turn up for the rallies, whether in bitter cold wave conditions or in searing heat, seem to indicate that in India's largest state where human development indicators are dismal, politics has come to completely dominate civil society. There have been arguments that the reasons for the dominance of politics lies in UP's mass unemployment or in the fact that the state was the cradle of the freedom movement. But, whatever the reasons, as far as UP is concerned, it's a case of satte pe satta.

In this surcharged atmosphere of personality-dominated politics, third-time chief minister Mayawati

has shown that she is today totally confident about deploying the instruments of state power. This is a power that has been used against the bureaucracy, against political rivals like Raja Bhaiyya and Mulayam Singh and it is a power that is demonstrably intended to impress her constituents. Mayawati may be opposed to the laws of Manu but makes easy use of the laws of the Indian Constitution to pummel her opponents — 137 legal cases is power as divine dharma-as-tra, power as folk theatre designed to cow down rivals and stun followers by its epic scope and glittering rhetoric. While in her previous tenures as chief minister, she may have been hampered by her dependence on her allies today, the sheer size and receptivity of her vote bank, gives her a ruthlessness that she earlier did not possess.

The fact that the BJP at the Centre is simply standing by and watching, shows how wary it is of antagonising her. And the Congress, hopeful perhaps of gaining from the weakening of Mulayam Singh, is also conspicuously silent. Yet Mayawati's ruthless politics may turn out to be short-lived. Not only will it drag the state to news depths of political competitiveness, but also reduce politics itself to being a stand-up nautanki.

16 APR 2003

INDIAN EXPRESS

Oppn tries to nail govt on Ayodhya

Our Political Bureau
NEW DELHI, 27 FEBRUARY

WITH their engagement with cricket over, the Opposition parties on Thursday plunged into the task of debating Ayodhya in the Lok Sabha. The MPs, who, on Wednesday, sought a deferment of the debate because of their keenness to see the Tendulkars and Nehras in action and feared losing out on column space on the day of Railway budget, tried to make up, but the debate went only along predictable lines.

The main thrust of arguments put forth by the Opposition parties, as they sought to put the ruling coalition in the dock, centred around two main issues — the need for the Centre to approach the Supreme Court to secure a vacation of the stay on any religious activity in the undisputed land in Ayodhya, and the "worrisome" spectre of the allies being reduced to "mere appendages" of the BJP. Speaker after speaker from the Opposition camp tried to bait the NDA partners into speaking out against the BJP's "relapse" into its original ideolog-

ical moorings, but to no avail.

The BJP, assisted by its old ally, the Shiv Sena, tried to defeat the government's decision to move the apex court for a resolution of the decades-long dispute, and accused the Opposition parties, particularly the Congress and the Samajwadi Party for trying to put roadblocks in the process. Initiating the debate, which was moved under Rule 193, Samajwadi Party supremo Mulayam Singh Yadav took Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to task for his election rally speech in Himachal Pradesh, in

which he declared he was confident that all evidences would establish beyond doubt a temple once existed in Ayodhya. "It's a very serious issue. How could he make such a statement even before the apex court gave its verdict?" he asked. The provocation for the present discussion, observed senior Congress leader S. Jaipal Reddy, has been caused by a deliberate mischief on the part of the BJP-led government. He said the Centre's decision to go to the Supreme Court was "brazenly partisan and blatantly anti-Constitutional." "It has tried to

stage a coup against the Constitution." Claiming that BJP was back to its "pre-1996 agenda" the Congress spokesman said the NDA partners had become completely marginalised.

Mr Reddy's charge drew vehement protests from Mr K. Verran Naidu (TDP) as well as Mr Prabhunath Singh and Mr Raghunath Jha (both from Samata) who referred to the statements made by the Prime Minister and his deputy, Mr L.K. Advani that the NDA remained committed to the national agenda for governance.

Politicians, pota and the poor

Invocation of Pota against Raja Bhaiya and his father has exposed the double standards of leaders, says HEMENDRA NARAYAN

WHEN the Sonbhadra district administration in eastern UP invoked Pota against the poor tribals for rebelling against their feudal masters, hardly did anyone batter an eyelid. Worse still, the tribals were labelled supporters of Maoist Communist Centre, a Naxalite group active in Bihar and Jharkhand. But when the Pratapgarh district police found an AK-56 assault rifle, other firearms, explosives and wireless sets from the possession of the Raja of Bhadri, Udai Pratap Singh, and booked him under Pota all hell broke loose. UP Singh, a feudal lord, had been absconding for almost two months.

The police slapped Pota on his son Raghuraj Pratap Singh, alias Raja Bhaiya, and a relative, MLC Akhshay Pratap Singh, alias Gopal, too. Both were already in jail for criminal cases, including those under the National Security Act and Gangster Act, pending against them. Raja Bhaiya was arrested on 3 November on charges of threatening BJP legislator Mr Ravindra Singh Pudir with dire consequences for not supporting him in the revolt against the Mayawati government. Rajas senior and junior and AP Singh have been charged with hatching a plot to eliminate chief minister Mayawati.

Right from the coalition partner BJP to the opposition Samajwadi Party, all have criticised Mayawati for victimising her political opponents. The father and son duo were a law unto themselves in the Kunda-Bhadri area. Some of the more than 40 cases pending against UP Singh are five-decade old. One of the most celebrated cases against him could be the forcible take-over of the 110-hectare Benti Multipurpose Horticulture Farm when VP Singh was the UP chief minister. The government has remained helpless ever since he rode into the farm on horseback with a cutlass on a July morning in 1980. Horticulture department officials said the state and the district administrations never tried to help them recover the prized property.

Later, the Benti Farm was turned into Raja Bhaiya's operation base. He became the country's youngest MLA in the early Nineties and was a Cabinet minister in Rajnath Singh's government.

Late last year, Raja Bhaiya led a group of seven Independent legislators to Raj Bhavan to withdraw support to the government after Mayawati didn't accommodate him in her ministry in late last year's expansion. The chief minister said she hadn't done so because his name was not recommended by the BJP.

In the Assembly polls, the BJP had supported Raja Bhaiya in Kunda and one of his aides in a reserved constituency of Bihar. Both won handsomely, though the Election Commission ordered a total re-poll in Raja Bhaiya's constituency.

To many, the government action against his father is seen as a direct fall-out of the changing political scenario. For, earlier none dared question them. It is likely that father and son would still have enjoyed the government's favours but for the Kunda MLAs revolt against Mayawati.

Mayawati has denied all allegations of political vindictiveness, saying just action "should be taken without discrimination against anyone who violates the law." In fact, before he went to Raj Bhavan with his supporters, at least eight registered cases were pending against him. His supporters say most of them are "politically motivated", though. After Raja Bhaiya's arrest, the district administration cracked down in Kunda. Several of his cronies and relatives were taken into custody. Officials dismantled the three gates to a water tank spread over 1,370 bigha. The tank was used to collect water from the Ganga for pisciculture and the returns were in lakhs of rupees. But officially, the pond was not personal property; it was shown as *gram sabha* land.

The Benti farm, "illegally occupied and cultivated" too has been freed and the duo's bank accounts in Kunda frozen. Some cooperative bank officials too have been arrested for colluding with the Rajas.

What's surprising is the support Raja Bhaiya enjoys among opposition leaders such as Samajwadi Party general secretary Amar Singh and former Prime Minister Chandrashekhar. Amar Singh feels "Rajput pride has been hurt". He has visited Raja Bhaiya in jail, as has Chandrashekhar. The latter even described Mayawati's move as "fascist".

But why were these leaders silent when poor tribals in Sonbhadra were being branded extremists? The Rajas have the means to fight long court battles and even win. But for the tribals, for whom even a hand-to-mouth existence would be a boon, Pota could be the long rope around their neck with which they can only hang themselves.

(The author is Lucknow-based special representative of The Statesman.)

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