

OUR CORRESPONDENT OF THE HINDUSTAN POLITICAL BUREAU

Tainted Minister To Campaign In Polls, Will Harp On Conspiracy To Malign Him

Judeo quits, Atal orders CBI inquiry

Our Political Bureau
NEW DELHI 17 NOVEMBER

PRIME Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee on Monday ordered a CBI inquiry into the allegations that Union minister of state for environment and forests Dilip Singh Judeo had taken bribe for an Australian mining company even as the besieged Chhattisgarh BJP leader tendered his resignation from the council of ministers "upholding the dignity of the office".

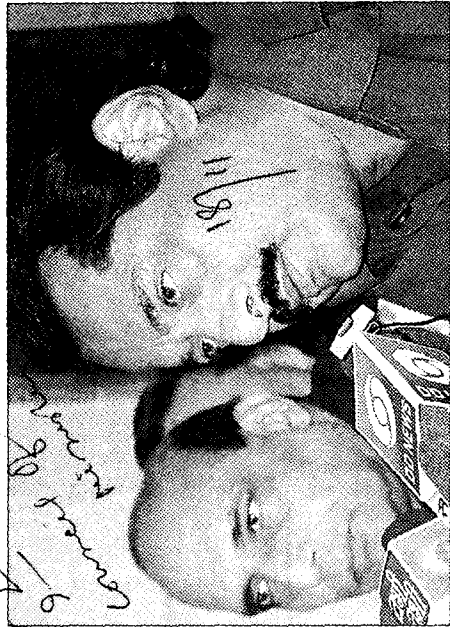
On a day of fast-paced developments which saw the Congress-led Opposition raising its ante on the entire episode in an attempt to corner the BJP a fortnight ahead of the Assembly polls in four states, including Chhattisgarh, the BJP tried to stage a fightback in an attempt to minimise the damage from the embarrassing revelations contained in the VCD, the contents of which were pub-

lished by a national daily on Sunday. With Chhattisgarh chief minister Ajit Jogi doing his own bit to queer the pitch for the BJP Sunday night by contrasting the latter's refusal to seek Mr Judeo's resignation

with the alacrity with which it had asked Mr Bangaru Laxman's to step down from the party president's post when confronted with a similar situation some two-and-a-half years ago, there was little that the party could do except to concentrate on the campaign.

seek Mr Judeo's resignation. Mr Jogi, while speaking to reporters in Raipur, had lashed out at the BJP for its double standards on the issue of corruption, while trying to give a tribal-versus-upper caste colour to its reluctance to seek BJP leader's resignation.

The best recourse, which met at Mr Vajpayee's residence here on Monday morning, was to ask Mr Judeo to put in his papers, while launching an aggressive campaign in Chhattisgarh to link Mr Jogi and his "dirty-tricks department" with the sting operation. The view formed by the party in the meeting was that Mr Judeo should not hold office till he was cleared of the charges. He should rather concentrate on the campaign.



ON A STICKY WICKET: Dilip Singh Judeo (right) and senior BJP leader Rajnath Singh (left) speak to the press in Raipur on Monday. — AFP

criss-crossing the state while telling the people about "the conspiracy" launched by the chief minister to have him fixed politically in view of his popularity, especially among the tribals.

Mr Judeo, known for his military green outfits and his ghar-wapsi campaign to convert tribals into Hinduism, was widely seen as the front-runner for the chief minister's post from the BJP stable.

Deputy prime minister L.K. Advani, along with his party colleagues Pramod Mahajan and Rajnath Singh are scheduled to launch the party's campaign in the state on Tuesday. They are likely to address 16 public meetings across Chhattisgarh. "They'll put a strong defence of Mr Judeo, vouching for his innocence and clean image," a senior BJP leader said. Mr Judeo was likely to organise a padayatra through the streets of Raipur on Monday night.

BJP SEES AJIT JOGI'S 'HIDDEN HAND'

Judev quits, PM orders CBI probe into VCD 'authenticity'

By Harish Khare

NEW DELHI, NOV. 17. The Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, today accepted the resignation of the Union Minister of State for Environment and Forests, Dilip Singh Judev, who finds himself embroiled in an alleged bribery affair. The Prime Minister also ordered a probe by the Central Bureau of Investigation into the whole gamut of issues concerning the "authenticity" of the video compact disc (VCD), purportedly showing Mr. Judev accepting wads of currency from a mining "agent."

Later in the night the President, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, accepted Mr. Judev's resignation with immediate effect.

The VCD has generated a runaway controversy, throwing out of gear the BJP's election campaign in the four northern States going to the polls later this month.

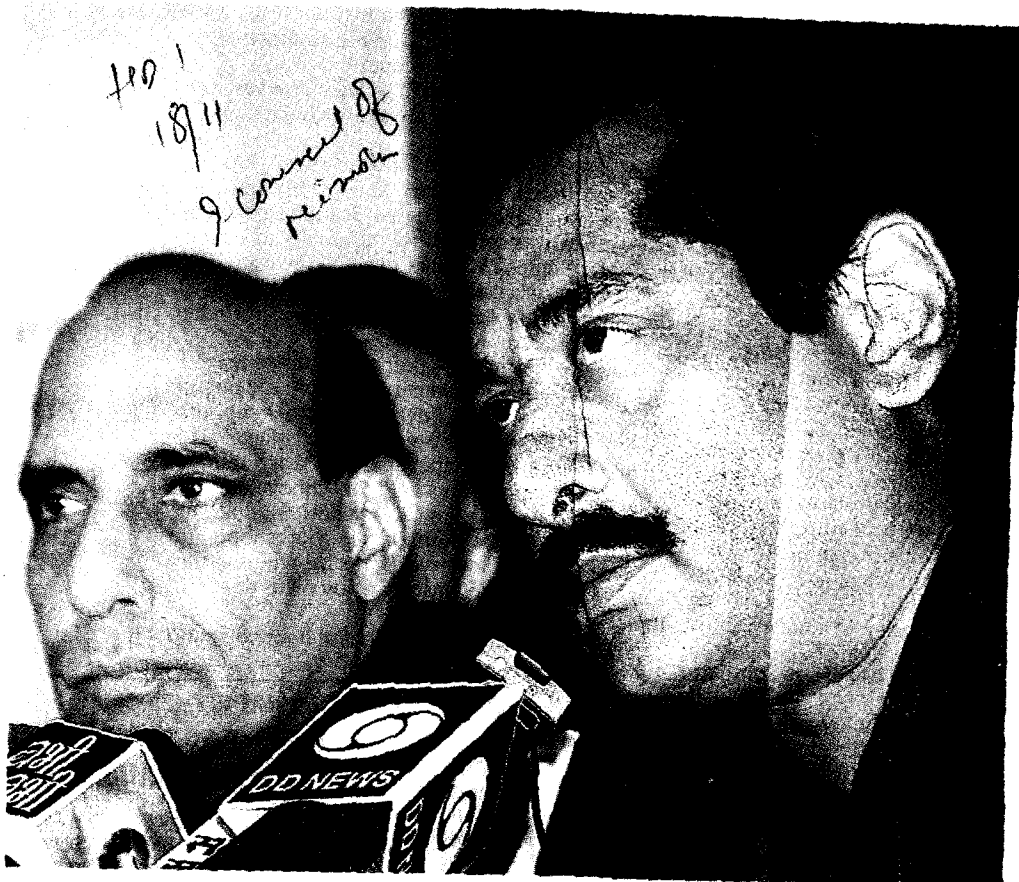
The decision to cut the ruling party's political losses was taken at a high-level meeting at the Prime Minister's residence this morning.

It was agreed that after the VCD had been released and aired by almost all television channel in the country, the BJP could no longer be seen as finding excuses for not seeking Mr. Judev's resignation.

It was also decided that the CBI should be asked to go into, what one participant called, "a whole range of suspicious circumstances" surrounding the damning VCD.

However, it is understood that even before the senior leaders confabulated this morning, Mr. Judev had been asked to send in his letter of resignation. Though Mr. Vajpayee had cautioned last night that Mr. Judev should not be pre-judged till a probe was carried out, the enormity of the Minister's culpability was obvious by this morning. The avalanche of negative images and sound-bytes from the Judev VCD provided another reason to show him the door.

After the meeting, the party president, M. Venkaiah Naidu, announced Mr. Judev's resignation. The CBI probe was announced by the Prime Minister himself at an "Iftar" party hosted by the Union Textiles Minister, Syed Shah Nawaz Hussain. Mr. Vajpayee, however, avoided saying anything on the matter; he merely observed that the



The Union Minister of State for Environment and Forests, Dilip Singh Judev, addresses a press conference in Raipur on Monday. To his right is the Union Agriculture Minister, Rajnath Singh, in-charge of the Bharatiya Janata Party affairs in Chhattisgarh. — AFP

"images were not very clear." Asked if the controversy would have any impact on the poll outcome, he said that "it will be known only after the votes have been counted."

Till the Prime Minister returned home late on Sunday night from his overseas trip and gave sufficient indication that Mr. Judev would have to go if found guilty, the BJP leadership found itself confused on the ethical issues arising out of the episode.

Till Mr. Vajpayee spoke, the party was stoutly defending the Minister. The delay in the resignation has denied it an oppor-

tunity to occupy the high moral ground. Curiously enough, the party continues to insist that Mr. Judev has done nothing wrong and that he has been "framed" in a "conspiracy", hatched allegedly by the Chhattisgarh Chief Minister, Ajit Jogi. Mr. Judev is one of the chief ministerial hopefuls if he BJP wins the Assembly polls in Chhattisgarh.

The Government and the ruling party are united in detecting the "hidden hand" of Mr. Jogi. The decision to have a CBI probe has been taken in the hope that it would enable the BJP to keep alive the "conspir-

acy" theory as well as to ask the Congress leadership to make Mr. Jogi also resign as Chief Minister since he is also an "FIRed" person. The Congress has already aggressively sought Mr. Judev's prosecution under the Prevention of Corruption Act.

By getting Mr. Judev to resign and by having a CBI probe instituted, the BJP establishment has acknowledged that the VCD has indeed queered the pitch in not just Chhattisgarh but also Madhya Pradesh.

More reports on
Pages 11, 12
Editorial on Page 10

Minister steps down, CBI steps in

Atal jumps to Judeo probe

RADHIKA RAMASESHAN

New Delhi, Nov. 17: Forced to hit the ground running from Damascus close to midnight, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee displayed this evening a "voluntary resignation" by Dilip Singh Judeo and delivered a lightning announcement of a CBI probe into the cash-on-disc scandal.

Asked about the likely impact of the storm on the round-the-corner Assembly polls, Vajpayee said: "That will be known after the counting of votes."

But the BJP was already squirming under a feeling made all too familiar by the Tehelka scandal. In a throwback to the defence scam days, television channels today kept strafing drawing rooms with ghostly images from the compact disc.

The VCD purportedly shows the just-resigned Union minister of state for environment and forests — and the BJP's favourite for Chhattisgarh chief minister-ship — accepting cash from a man who appears to be acting on behalf of a foreign mining company.

Asked whether he had seen the footage, the Prime Minister said: "Saaf nahi hai (It is not clear)."

But it was crystal clear that his government wanted to take few chances. The Prime Minister, who returned from a week-long foreign tour only last night,

FAST FORWARD

- **Sunday, 11 pm:** A.B. Vajpayee returns from Syria. Says if found guilty, Judeo has to go
- **Monday, 12 noon:** The PM convenes meeting attended by Advani, Jaswant, Venkalah and Mahajan
- **12.30 pm:** Judeo sends resignation to the PM
- **3.00 pm:** Congress hits the streets demanding Judeo's arrest
- **4.00 pm:** Vajpayee accepts Judeo's resignation
- **6.00 pm:** Case handed over to the CBI, says the PM

set a frenetic pace. (See chart)

At the airport itself, Vajpayee said Judeo will have to go, "if found guilty" — in sharp contrast to a BJP bid to brazen out the storm that broke on Sunday morning when a Delhi daily splashed the news.

Less than 24 hours after he landed, Vajpayee told reporters on the sidelines of an *iftar* hosted by minister Shahnawaz Hussain: "There will be a probe and the CBI has been entrusted with it."

Officialdom matched the alacrity of the political establishment — the inquiry notice from the cabinet secretariat reached the CBI within a few hours and the agency started collecting material soon after. Judeo said in Raipur he had resigned on "moral grounds".

BJP sources, too, stressed that Judeo had not quit "under pressure". "He informed the Prime Minister that until he was absolved of the charge, he would leave the ministry. He requested for a probe," a source said.

Sources claimed that the CBI investigation would "expose" the "machinations" of an Opposition chief minister who, they said, had "laid the trap" for Judeo.

"There is circumstantial evidence suggesting that certain persons were put on the job by the chief minister to ensnare Judeo. The CBI will nail the plot and the chief minister will have to answer a lot of questions," a cabinet minister said.

The BJP has decided that if Judeo is cleared of the charges, he would be reinstated in the cabinet.

In the interlude, he will campaign. "He will be the campaign in-charge," the source said. The party will underscore a line that Judeo resigned "even though no FIR or complaint was lodged against him".

However, the source admitted that Judeo would not share a platform with "star" campaigners from the Centre but "go about it on his own". He will not be present at the kickoff meetings which will be addressed tomorrow in Chhattisgarh by deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani and BJP general secretary Pramod Mahajan.

■ See Page 6

Judeo quits, PM orders CBI probe

By Smita Gupta
TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: Confronted with a second case of a party leader caught taking bribe on camera, and that too on the eve of key assembly elections, the BJP moved into damage control mode on Monday. Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee ordered a CBI probe to establish the veracity or otherwise of the VCD showing Union minister of state for environment and forests Dilip Singh Judeo taking a bribe, even as he forwarded the latter's resignation to the President for acceptance.

Mr Vajpayee, who returned from a foreign tour on Sunday night to the BJP's latest crisis, took these decisions after a meeting on Monday morning with senior colleagues. Those who met at the PM's residence included deputy PM L.K. Advani, finance minister Jaswant Singh, BJP president M. Venkaiah Naidu, general secretary Pramod Mahajan, party chief whip in Lok Sabha V.K. Malhotra and I&B minister Ravi Shankar Prasad.

Later, at an Iftar hosted by Union textiles minister Shahnawaz Hussain, the PM confirmed in reply to a question, "The CBI will inquire into it." On whether he had seen the Judeo CD, Mr Vajpayee said: "Saaf nahin hai (It is not clear)." Asked if the Judeo episode would damage the BJP's prospects in the assembly elections, Mr Vajpayee said cryptically, "Ginti ke baad hi pata chalega (That will be known only after the votes are counted)."

Still reeling from the shock and only too aware of how the Bangaru Laxman tape (showing him accepting a wad of notes) had damaged the party after TV channels



HEY JUDEO, DON'T LET ME DOWN: Dilip Singh Judeo talks to the press in Raipur on Sunday.

played it day after day, party leaders said they were yet to gauge the political fallout of this latest bribery-on-tape episode.

Till then, the party has decided to adopt a two-pronged approach—take the sting out of the Congress campaign by ordering a CBI inquiry and accepting Mr Judeo's resignation and then go on the offensive in all the states going to polls. "Compare Mr Judeo, who has resigned, with Chhattisgarh CM Ajit Jogi, who has not resigned even after a CBI indictment for reportedly forging documents," a minister said.

The attempt will be to deflect attention from Mr Judeo by targeting Mr Jogi, rather than permit Mr Judeo to be a stand-alone case of corruption. Simultaneously, the BJP plans to brazen it out, by permitting Mr Judeo—considered a possible BJP chief ministerial candidate in Chhattisgarh—to continue campaigning in the state.

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Complete Coverage
visit

No portfolio, no salary, no perks for Didi

Arindam Sarkar
Kolkata, November 8

EXACTLY TWO months ago, she rejoined the Vajpayee Cabinet as a minister without portfolio. Not much has changed for Mamata Banerjee. Only her refusal to avail of the ministerial entitlements has forced her to tighten her purse strings. For, as a minister, she is not entitled to an MP's salary or perks either.

According to Mamata, the Cabinet secretary sent her a car and the ministerial staff the day after she was sworn in. Again, at the end of September, she was sent a salary cheque of Rs 21,000 for the 22 days of the month that she was a minister. But she sent back the cheque and everything else.

Mamata laments that her current status has affected her travelling plans. As an MP, she was entitled to a travelling allow-

ance. But now that she is a minister but does not draw the salary or avail of the perks, she has to pay from her pocket for the trips or somebody else in the party has to foot the bill.

"The expenses for my air tickets to Delhi and other places are borne by my party leaders," Mamata told *Hindustan Times*. "But this can't go on. So I have been forced to reduce my trips to Delhi. The last time I went there,

it was to attend a Cabinet meeting. I have stopped going to Delhi since."

Though Mamata tries not to make too much fuss about her indeterminate status in the Cabinet, she is evidently quite miffed about the fact that the Prime Minister has failed to come up with a portfolio for her even after two months. She maintains that she will continue to give the ministerial entitlements a miss till

she is allotted a ministry.

"I have been into politics for ages now. This is not the first time that I have been inducted into the Cabinet. I won't be unhappy if the Prime Minister does not give me any office. But let me tell you that I agreed to join the Cabinet on the Prime Minister's request. I have no demands, but I want to be respected and given due recognition," Mamata said.

Only court can now solve Ayodhya tangle: Mulayam

Press Trust of India
Lucknow, October 26

UTTAR PRADESH Chief Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav said on Sunday that the only way to resolve the Ayodhya issue is to wait for court's verdict as the time for negotiations is over.

"All efforts for a negotiated settlement have failed. Therefore, I am of the firm view that concerned parties should wait for court's verdict for resolution of the issue," Yadav said in interview to Malayalam daily *Mathrubhumi* here.

He said communal parties were raising the issue time and again to gain political mileage.

Meanwhile in Srinagar, the All-India Muslim Personal Law Board said any legislation to facilitate construction of Ram temple at Ayodhya would be unconstitutional.

"A legislation on Ram temple would be unconstitutional as it would amount to depriving a particular community of their religious rights," AIMPLB spokesman



Mulayam Singh Yadav
Judicious view

S.Q.R. Ilyas, who was here as part of the National Commission for Minorities Committee for Rehabilitation of Kashmiri migrants, said.

He said by raising such a demand, the Sangh parivar and its allies virtually accepted defeat even before the high court had delivered a verdict on the issue.

"They know that their case is weak and would be defeated in the court, leading them to call for legislation. If they claim that Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) findings support their

claim, they should wait for the verdict," he said.

Ilyas claimed that prominent historians of the country have raised objections to the ASI findings during the excavations at Ayodhya and "we have filed the same before the court".

He said all political parties of the country including the Bharatiya Janata Party have opposed the demand for legislation on the Ram temple. Ilyas claimed that majority of Hindus were not in favour of the temple at the Babri mosque site.

Asked if a Bill for legislation was brought in Parliament, the AIMPLB leader expressed confidence that it would be defeated on the floor of the House.

"We will persuade all the secular parties including those who are part of the NDA government at the Centre to oppose such a Bill," he said.

In the hypothetical situation of the Bill being passed by parliament, Ilyas said: "We will then challenge the legislation in the supreme court."

Centre revives temple 'formula'

By Smita Gupta
TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Chinmaya

New Delhi: A fresh, if low key, attempt to resolve the Ayodhya issue is being made with Mahant Nritya Gopal Das and Mahant Awaidhnath, both religious leaders from Uttar Pradesh, being assigned to speak to representatives of the VHP and the Muslim community. However, the formula is the old one—to get the Sunni Waqf Board to withdraw its claim to the disputed land and pave the way for the construction of a Ram temple. In “exchange”, the VHP will give up its “claim” to two historic mosques in Kashi and Mathura, shrines whose status cannot be changed according to a 1993 act of Parliament.

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At this stage, the man in charge is minister of state for home Swami Chinmaynanda—a former member of the VHP marg darshak mandal—who had been asked by the Centre to deal with the VHP in the run up to the organisation's October 17 rally.

Sources close to him said the government would step in only when a concrete proposal mutually acceptable to both sides emerged. His job is to take the issue forward from where it was left off by Swami Jayendra Saraswati, the Shankaracharya of Kanchipuram, in July. But this time round, it is unlikely that the Kanchi Shankaracharya's services will be used, sources said.

Sources said the two UP religious leaders had already spoken to repre-

sentatives of the Muslims. However, it is not clear who they spoke to—whether they are members of the All India Muslim Personal Law Board and the All India Babri Masjid Action Committee, both of which had earlier negotiated for the community with the VHP and the Centre's interlocutors. The next round of talks will begin after Diwali.

BJP sources said the process should be resumed now as the Muslims did not protest when the VHP held its sankalp sabha in Ayodhya. “The Muslims are now prepared to give up their claim in Ayodhya provided the VHP gives up on Kashi and Mathura. They don't want any more confrontation. So this is a good time to strike,” a senior BJP functionary said.

THE TIMES OF INDIA

21 OCT 2003

HIGH COURT STAYS PROCEEDINGS

PM returns Joshi resignation

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Council
of Ministers

Statesman News Service

NEW DELHI, Sept. 30. — Within minutes of Allahabad High Court granting stay on proceedings against Mr MM Joshi until disposal of the revision petition, the Prime Minister "returned" the HRD minister's resignation letter to him. The latter withdrew it with "humility" and announced that he would resume office tomorrow.

Mr Joshi had yesterday filed a review petition in the Lucknow Bench of the High Court against the Rae Bareilly special court's order allowing framing of charges against him in the Babari Masjid case. The petition argued that Mr Joshi's case stood at par with that of Mr LK Advani, who was discharged.

The High Court's order saved the day for both Mr Joshi and the Prime Minister. Mr Vajpayee had reportedly taken the stand that the resignation was not needed. The face-saver of stay would not allow the Opposition to raise the



Mr MM Joshi at Tuesday's press conference. — AFP

issue which a blanket rejection would have permitted, BJP sources said.

The Prime Minister did not consult BJP leaders formally, sources said. The reason being that he did not want to send an impression that he was acting at the behest of party leaders.

Other accused such as Miss Uma Bharati and Mr Vinay Katiyar have been advised to approach the court in the same way.

Soon after Mr Vajpayee returned Mr Joshi's resignation, Congress spokesman Mr Jaipal Reddy asked the Prime Minister

"to explain whether Joshi would be asked to quit again if the stay is vacated on 4 November. And whether the Deputy Prime Minister would be asked to resign if the Rae Bareilly special court order discharging him in the case is stayed by a higher court". But the BJP asserted there would be no change in the party's stand even if the court vacated the stay later.

Mr Joshi said he had resigned on moral grounds. "If there is a charge against a minister, he should resign but the charge must be proved in court. There has to be a balance between governance and morality." He denied there were any differences within the party on the resignation issue. "It was a media creation."

Mr Reddy alleged that the CBI's "deliberate failure" to file a caveat in the High Court had led to the grant of stay on proceedings against Mr Joshi.

Muted celebrations,
page 4

2
conspiracy
9. re-mention
Babri Masjid
SATURDAY, AUGUST 2, 2003

CBI AND DEJA VU

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WITH THE HEARINGS on in the Rae Bareilly court on the Ayodhya case, a controversy has broken out over the Central Bureau of Investigation's admission that it has no taped evidence of the allegedly inflammatory speeches made by high-ranking Bharatiya Janata Party leaders such as L.K. Advani, Murli Manohar Joshi and Uma Bharti. But what really deserves attention is an antecedent and much more serious issue. This is the manner in which conspiracy charges were dropped against these and five other Sangh Parivar leaders, who were accused by the CBI of plotting the events that eventually led to the demolition of the Babri Masjid. The Centre's defence, most vociferously articulated by the Union Law Minister, Arun Jaitley, is that nothing of the kind happened. The conspiracy charge, he asserted, was "never there in Rae Bareilly." The charges and counter-charges have caused considerable confusion among the public, in the media, and in political circles. This is not surprising considering that they relate to a long, complex and tortuous process of bringing those guilty for demolishing the Babri Masjid to book. However, a close look at the salient facts in what is a protracted legal story reveals that the Centre's protestations of innocence are anything but convincing; actually, Mr. Jaitley's spin on the legal narrative conceals more than it reveals.

At the heart of the issue are a few crucial questions. Were the charges against Mr. Advani and others diluted? If so, what are the circumstances in which they were watered down? Does the Government's claim that no charges were dropped against the eight Sangh Parivar leaders have any factual basis? To answer these questions, it is important to begin at the very beginning. On December 6, 1992, the day the Babri Masjid was demolished, two First Information Reports were filed in the Ram Janmabhoomi police station. One (FIR No. 197) accused lakhs of unknown kar sevaks under a slew of Indian Penal Code sections that related to the demolition of the Masjid. The other (FIR No. 198) accused the eight Sangh Parivar leaders, including Mr. Advani, only under those sections usually used against people who make provocative speeches. These offensive speeches were made from a makeshift dais at Ram Katha Kunj, not far from the Masjid, on the morning of December 6, 1992. The origin of the present confusion lies in the manner in which these two cases were assigned. A week after the demolition, the first case was transferred to the CBI. The second case against Mr. Advani and others remained with the Uttar Pradesh police.

The U.P. CB-CID filed a charge-sheet in this case at Rae Bareilly in February 1993. However, the legal course of the case was altered after the State, then under President's Rule, requested the Centre to have all Ayodhya-related cases transferred to the CBI. As a result, a special court was set up in Lucknow and a formal notification to this effect was issued after consulting the Allahabad High Court. Among the cases transferred to the Lucknow court was the conspiracy case (relating to FIR No. 197) and some 47 relatively less significant cases relating to the assault of media personnel. Case No. 198 was omitted even though it had already been handed over to the CBI. It was included by an amending notification later but the process of consulting the High Court was overlooked, an oversight that would prove costly for the prosecution and the cause of justice. Meanwhile, the CBI had filed a consolidated charge-sheet that covered the eight Sangh Parivar leaders and 32 others. This charge-sheet clearly accused the eight leaders of being a part of the criminal conspiracy to demolish the Mosque. Specifically, it charged that Mr. Advani's involvement with the conspiracy went back to the 1990 Rath Yatra and traced a pattern of events that ended with his speech on December 6, 1992, and the Mosque's demolition soon afterwards.

Charges were framed in 1997 against the ac-

cused, but revision petitions in the Allahabad High Court led to another legal twist. In 2001 the Court held, quite properly, that the amending notification, which sought the inclusion of the case against Mr. Advani and others, was "bad in law" as the prior sanction of the High Court had not been obtained. At the same time, the High Court made it clear that the "defect was curable." Perhaps even more significantly, it upheld the validity of the CBI's consolidated charge-sheet and the Lucknow special court's order framing charges against the accused. From here on, matters assumed a blatantly partisan dimension with two Chief Ministers, the BJP's Rajnath Singh and later the BJP's ally Ms. Mayawati, turning a deaf ear to demands that the technical "defect be cured." This could easily have been done by issuing a fresh notification with the consent of the High Court and would have resulted in Mr. Advani and the other Sangh Parivar leaders being tried for conspiracy in the Lucknow court. Rather than do this, the U.P. Government transferred the case against the eight leaders to a special court in Rae Bareilly, where the CBI recently filed a charge-sheet. Significantly, this charge-sheet limits itself to accusing the eight leaders of making provocative speeches. It makes no mention of their alleged role in the conspiracy to demolish the Masjid.

What does this narrative establish? First, that the Centre is pulling the wool over the nation's eyes by claiming there was no dilution of charges. "Section 120 B [conspiracy] was never a charge in the Rae Bareilly case and so there is no question of dropping it," declares Mr. Jaitley. Factually, this is correct as far as it goes but the Law Minister is being too clever by half. It turns out that his reference points are both misleading and meaningless. What is the purpose of comparing the CBI's recent charge-sheet with the one originally lodged in the Rae Bareilly court by the U.P. police? Surely, it is the two CBI charge-sheets — the consolidated one filed in Lucknow and the recent one in Rae Bareilly — that should be compared in order to determine whether the charges have been diluted or not. The answer is: with the conspiracy angle abandoned, the charges have clearly been watered down.

Mr. Jaitley has suggested that the expansion of the charges to include conspiracy against Mr. Advani and others was a result of the Narasimha Rao Government's desire to foist the demolition charge on the BJP leadership. The merits of this allegation are irrelevant at this juncture. What is material is that the Lucknow special court framed charges on the basis of the CBI's composite charge-sheet and the Allahabad High Court upheld these charges and the validity of the charge-sheet. As for the CBI, it has maintained a deafening silence during this controversy. Its attitude to the case — evidently shaped under the shadow of the government of the day — is riddled with contradictions. It was only recently that the CBI pleaded unsuccessfully with the Lucknow court for the inclusion of the eight Sangh Parivar leaders in the case flowing from FIR No. 197. Significantly, a review petition filed by the CBI in the High Court is still pending. Having struggled until recently to make the conspiracy charge stick, it is deplorable that the same investigating agency should now file a charge-sheet that makes no mention of it. During the Rajiv Gandhi administration in the 1980s, the CBI was complicit in the cover-up of the Bofors corruption scandal; the political pressures continued in a different way during the Chandra Shekhar interlude and the Narasimha Rao administration in the 1990s. During much of the last decade, the CBI has done a valiant job of saving and taking forward the Bofors criminal case against heavy odds. The gain in credibility and reputation for independent, fearless investigation and prosecution is being undone by the way in which grave charges against the Deputy Prime Minister and other powerful persons have been compromised in the most recent period.

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THE POLITICS OF AYODHYA

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ON THE FACE of it, the Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee's formulation that a solution to the vexed Ayodhya dispute lies in depoliticising it and letting the contentious issues be settled amicably by the religious leaders of the Hindu and Muslim communities does make eminent sense. But then, the irony is that the one who is rooting for "freeing" Ayodhya from politics is none other than the patriarch and officially acknowledged No. 1 leader of the very party that is primarily responsible for pushing it into the quagmire of partisan politics. It was the BJP that used the Ram temple issue as a vehicle for political mobilisation and capturing power. For all the image of a 'moderate' (in relation to the Sangh Parivar's ideology) that attaches to him, Mr. Vajpayee has never been found wanting, when it came to the crunch, in playing the partisan political game, although he did make it a point to come out, off and on, with statesman-like observations. So frequent has been the switch between contradictory approaches on Ayodhya (and this goes also for several other issues that have a bearing on the BJP's core ideology) by the Prime Minister and other leading lights of the party that one is left with the inescapable impression that they are but a part of a grand strategy to concretise the majoritarian communal agenda. If Mr. Vajpayee is really serious about his 'depoliticisation' proposition, he could, for a start, get his own party to remove 'construction of Ram temple at Ayodhya' from its agenda, an objective which it has only kept in abeyance to sustain itself in power.

As a general rule, negotiation is undoubtedly the best method of resolving conflicts. But, given the context of the twists and turns the decades-long Ayodhya dispute has taken, not to speak of the national outrage perpetrated by the frenzied mob on December 6, 1992,

when it pulled down the Babri Masjid, the very suggestion of it by the protagonists of Hindutva becomes suspect. First of all, in a milieu where the VHP and other forces are relentlessly running their campaign for the building of the temple in open defiance of authority, there can be absolutely no scope for any fair negotiation or display of true give-and-take and the representatives of the Muslim community cannot be expected to be able to negotiate on a level field. Secondly, for the BJP or any of its ideological affiliates, there is invariably a non-negotiable factor, even if not spelt out, whenever they talk of negotiation, and that is: the Ram temple must be built on the site where the mosque had stood, since it is a matter of 'faith'. What according to them is open to negotiation are issues that are in the nature of the 'price' the Muslim community is willing to settle for. And this clearly is a position that seeks to add insult to the injury caused to the minority community and legitimise the brazen misdeed of revanchist forces.

More fundamentally, there are some disturbing questions about the religious leaders who are supposed to be negotiating on behalf of the two communities. Given the fact that there are any number of spiritual leaders, quite a few of them self-styled, on either side and that the writ of no single religious leader runs through the entire community, be it Hindu or Muslim, the question arises: what sanctity will attach to whatever settlement is reached — if at all — by those who have assumed the role of interlocutors? In the circumstances, the 'negotiations' route, despite its undoubted theoretical merits, stands little chance of producing a durable solution and the judicial route being pursued by way of title suits appears to be the best bet, something that has found favour with major political parties.

RAJNATH GETS AGRICULTURE; CIVIL AVIATION FOR RUDY

New faces in Vajpayee Ministry, Mamata Banerjee stays out

By Harish Khare

NEW DELHI, MAY 24. Rajnath Singh, B.C. Khanduri and Subodh Mohite are the new Cabinet rank Ministers in the Atal Behari Vajpayee Government. The Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, also inducted five new Ministers of State, besides making changes in the portfolios of a number of his Ministers.

The Minister of State-level entrants are: Chinmayanand Swami (BJP), Kailash Meghwal (BJP), Nagmani (Rashtriya Janata Dal-Democratic), Prahlad Singh Patel (BJP) and P.C. Thomas (Indian Federal Democratic Party). Mr. Khanduri gets promoted to Cabinet rank, while Mr. Mohite comes in place of his Shiv Sena colleague, Balasaheb Vikhe-Patil. The new Ministers were administered oath of office and secrecy by the President, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, at the Rashtrapati Bhavan this evening.

The most exciting element in the reshuffle of portfolios is the independent charge of the Ministry of Civil Aviation for Rajiv Pratap Rudy (who was Minister of State in the Ministry of Industry and Commerce). The elevation of Maj. Gen. (retd.) Khanduri to Cabinet rank (in the same Ministry of Road Transport and Highways) is conceded as recognition of a high level of integrity.

However, the much awaited Cabinet expansion lost its sheen when Mamata Banerjee of the Trinamool Congress refused to join the Union Cabinet. Ms. Banerjee's proposed induction was being cited as the original provocation for this expansion. However, Ms. Banerjee balked at taking oath because the BJP bosses appeared determined to jettison the existing NDA convention that permits the leader of an alliance partner the final say on who shall represent the party in the Union Government. The BJP leaders were insistent on including Sudip Bandyopadhyay, a "dissident" who had developed a warm working relationship with the ruling party when Ms. Banerjee herself was playing distant and cold.

There was little joy for the NDA managers when they dis-



The President, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, the Vice-President, Bhalron Singh Shekhawat, the Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, and the Deputy Prime Minister, L.K. Advani, with the new Ministers after the swearing-in-ceremony at the Rashtrapati Bhavan in New Delhi on Saturday. From left are Subodh Mohite, P.C. Thomas, Rajnath Singh, B.C. Khunduri, Nag Mani, Chinmaya Anand Swami (Prahalad Singh Patel and Kailash Meghwal are behind Mr. Vajpayee.) — Photo: Shanker Chakravarty

covered that a sulking Ms. Banerjee had not landed in the capital. Instead, the Trinamool leader faxed a letter to the Prime Minister, seeking "clarification" on whether he was thinking of inducting a nominee of the Trinamool Congress without her consent. The BJP bosses were

confidently asserting in private that Mr. Bandyopadhyay deserved to be rewarded for giving aid and comfort to the ruling party against Ms. Banerjee's preferences and that she could not be given any choice or say in the matter.

In her letter, Ms. Banerjee in-

voked Mr. Vajpayee's own mantra of coalition "dharma", and said: "The proposed inclusion of Shri Bandyopadhyay will go against this basic 'dharma' of coalition politics. You would, I am sure, agree with me that each of the political parties in a coalition must have total freedom and autonomy in its decision-making process, including the selection of any member of the party for inclusion in the Ministry."

Ms. Banerjee's fax prompted yet another round of consultation by the Prime Minister with his senior colleagues. Meanwhile, the NDA convener and Ms. Banerjee's most vocal advocate, George Fernandes, as well as the BJP president, M. Venkiah Naidu, also spoke to Ms. Banerjee.

However, as it became evident that Ms. Banerjee would not relent, the Prime Minister decided to "defer" — for now — the Trinamool Congress induction into his Cabinet. Curiously enough, while the BJP bosses were determined to have their way with Ms. Banerjee, they

quietly gave in to the Shiv Sena supremo, Bal Thackeray.

Mr. Thackeray suddenly decided to ask Mr. Vikhe-Patil, Minister of Heavy Industries and Public Enterprises, to resign; in his place, he nominated Mr. Mohite. The Sena leader had invoked the NDA principle once before when he secured the resignation of Suresh Prabhu, who at that time was widely considered to be the most efficient member of the Vajpayee Government.

Earlier in the day, a Rashtrapati Bhavan press communique noted that the President had accepted the resignations of Ajit Singh and Ginge Ramachandran, who had resigned from the Vajpayee Government yesterday.

Among the Cabinet-level Ministers, Mr. Rajnath Singh gets the agriculture portfolio, while Shahnawaz Hussain goes to the Ministry of Textiles and Kashiram Rana takes over as Minister for Rural Development. Portfolios of 11 Ministers of State have also been (re)-allocated.

'Talks on with Mamata'

By Our New Delhi Bureau

NEW DELHI, MAY 24. The Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, tonight said he would soon carry out a 'minor' reshuffle in the Union Cabinet and hinted at the possible re-induction of the Trinamool Congress leader, Mamata Banerjee.

Interacting with presspersons soon after the swearing-in ceremony at the Rashtrapati Bhavan, he said the MDMK would also get representation in the Ministry.

Responding to questions on Ms. Banerjee, the Prime Minister said, "talks are under way with Ms. Banerjee". He also said he was informed that she had been told of the move to induct Sudip Bandyopadhyay. He said the BJP president, M. Venkiah Naidu, had held talks with her.

The charge about attempts to split the Trinamool Congress was not correct, Mr. Vajpayee said adding that "there is no intention of breaking the party. On the contrary, we want to give more representation to it".

PM hints at Mamata, new faces in govt

■ RESHUFFLE | No date set, says Trinamool chief a possibility

ENS & AGENCIES
MANALI, KOLKATA, MAY 18

PRIME Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee today hinted that Trinamool Congress chief Mamata Bannerjee might join his cabinet which would soon be expanded. When pressed to disclose the date for expansion, Vajpayee said in a lighter vein, "*Koi achha sa muhurat dekh kar kareinge. Main saare rahasye kaise khol saktā hoon*" (Shall do so after choosing an auspicious time. How can I disclose all the secrets).

Vajpayee was talking to mediapersons minutes before he flew back to Delhi after a six-day sojourn here. Members of his family and the National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra accompanied him to Delhi.

The PM said that the country had not initiated the peace process with Pakistan under any compulsion and efforts were on to end cross-border terrorism. "We are firm on our stand that terrorism should end," he said.

Apropos the planned cabinet expansion, Vajpayee said that some of his ministers were overloaded and needed to be relieved



of the extra load and some new faces would also be added. Asked whether Mamata Bannerjee would be joining the cabinet, he said smilingly, "*Sambhavna to hai*" (the possibility is there).

In Kolkata, Trinambol Congress circles expressed happiness at the PM's hint that Mamata may return to the Union cabinet. "We are happy at the prospect that Mamata rejoins the cabinet", senior TC leader and party legislator Saugata Roy said. "There has been talks of cabinet reshuffle for some time and it was generally known that she might be re-inducted. Now that PM himself had said it, it only reconfirmed what we have been hearing," he said. The West Bengal unit of the BJP also welcomed the PM's move.

19 MAY 2004

INDIAN EXPRESS

MAMATA MAY GET AGRICULTURE

Ramachandran and Ajit resign

J. Council of Ministers

21/5 SR 1

Mohan Sahay in New Delhi

May 23. — Mr Ajit Singh, agriculture minister, and Mr Gingee Ramachandran, MoS for finance, resigned today, setting the tone for tomorrow's Cabinet reshuffle. Mr Ramachandran's personal assistant, Mr R Perumal Swamy, was caught yesterday taking bribes from an IRS official.

Mr Singh resigned to pre-empt his being dropped from the cabinet, his party leaders said. The agriculture minister has had major differences with the finance minister, Mr Jaswant Singh, over farm hand-outs and this is apparently one reason the Prime Minister was willing to drop the Jat leader. BJP leaders say the departure of Mr Ajit Singh is not likely to affect the party's fortunes in western UP "too much".

(PTI adds: Mr Singh has called a meeting of his party MLAs from UP tomorrow to consider withdrawal of support to the Mayawati government. He held late night parleys with RLD leaders to discuss the party's strategy following his resignation).

Political calculations and corruption allegations will also play major roles in other changes tomorrow.

Two BJP Cabinet ministers and two BJP ministers of state are reportedly under scrutiny. Officials said that whether or not they get the axe will depend partly on political factors — heavy-weight ministers may be spared this time.

Trinamul Congress chief Miss Mamata Banerjee may get agriculture, while Mr Shahnawaz Hussain's may be removed from civil aviation. Mr Mukhtar Abas Naqvi may replace Mr Hussain as the "Muslim face" if the former dropped.

Major-General BC Khanduri, MoS in charge of surface transport, is likely to be elevated to cabinet rank. BJP sources said that he may retain

surface transport, where he has been shepherding the golden quadrilateral project or be given another "important" ministry. Miss Banerjee's party MP, Sudip Bandopadhyay, may be inducted as MoS, railways. This, BJP leaders feel, may "upset" Miss Banerjee but senior ministers from the party are reportedly keen on Mr Bandopadhyay. The current MoS, railways, Mr Bandaru Dattaraya, may be dropped and asked to concentrate on BJP affairs in his state, Andhra Pradesh.

Some senior ministers are reportedly keen to have portfolio changes and some others are keen to have a general election. BJP sources said this list includes Mr Anant Kumar (urban development), Mr Ram Naik (petroleum), Mr Arun Jaitely (law), Mr Shatrughan Sinha (shipping), Mr Karia Munda (coal) and Mr Digvijay Singh (MoS, external affairs).

When contacted, Mr Omar Abdullah, National Conference leader, said that his father, Dr Farooq Abdullah, had not received any intimation from Delhi about a ministerial post as yet. Some BJP leaders are keen to have Dr Abdullah in the cabinet to "present India's Kashmir policy".

Mamata to fly to Delhi

Miss Mamata Banerjee is scheduled to leave for Delhi tomorrow, according to a PTI report from Kolkata. "She will fly to Delhi tomorrow morning," said senior Trinamul leader Mr Pankaj Banerjee, who was present during discussions during the day between Miss Banerjee and Mr Subrata Mukherjee on her re-induction into the Union Cabinet.

"If Mamata is in the Union Cabinet, she can serve Bengal's interests with greater responsibilities," Mr Banerjee said.

Earlier, the Trinamul chief said: "We thanked the Prime Minister when he gave an indication about my re-induction at Manali."

Swamy remand

NEW DELHI, May 23. — The personal assistant of MoS for finance Mr GR Ramachandran, Mr Perumal Swamy alias Babu, who was arrested on Thursday on the charge of taking bribe from a senior income-tax official seeking transfer, was today remanded by a special court in 10-day CBI custody. — SNS

Details on page 4

Cash-for-transfer: Minister quits



Gingee Ramachandran coming to the North Block on Friday. Raaj Dayal

■ **SCAM** | Ramachandran owns 'moral' responsibility; PA tells CBI about 'his role'

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, MAY 23

THE day after his personal assistant was caught taking bribe for fixing a posting, Union Minister of State for Finance Gingee N Ramachandran resigned from the Cabinet.

"Since a situation has arisen whereby I have to accept moral responsibility to save the government from unnecessary embarrassment, I have tendered my resignation. But my conscience is very, very clear that I have not done anything wrong," the minister said.

CBI sources said that R. Perumal Swamy, the private assistant, confessed to the CBI that he was taking the money for the minister. Swamy told the CBI that the Rs 4 lakh he was taking from IRS officer Anurag Vardhan for the transfer was actually meant for the minister.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani were today briefed separately by CBI director P.C. Sharma on the developments leading to the arrest of the minister's PA.

Meanwhile, the CBI hopes to get more information from Chennai-based chartered accountant A. Krishnamurthy, who is being brought to Delhi tonight. Krishnamurthy acted as the conduit in the case.

The CBI arrested a third person, Padmanabhan, a project associate at the centre for Atmospheric Science, IIT, Delhi late last night. He had apparently driven Swamy to the residence of IRS official Anurag Vardhan and was allegedly present when money changed hands yesterday.

Though the minister put up a brave face initially, it became obvious that the axe would fall on him on the eve of the scheduled cabinet

Ajit Singh quits, reshuffle today

■ **NEW DELHI:** Agriculture Minister Ajit Singh resigned on Friday setting the stage for Saturday's cabinet expansion and reshuffle that will bring back Trinamool Congress's Mamata Banerjee. Sources said transport minister B C Khanduri will be elevated to cabinet rank and MoS for Commerce and Industry Rajiv Pratap Rudy will get independent charge of some other ministry. — PTI

reshuffle.

He sent his resignation to Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee after he had discussed matters with Deputy Prime Minister L K Advani, NDA convenor George Fernandes and BJP President M Venkaiah Naidu following his return from Chennai. Contacts were also established with MDMK Chief Vaiko, who is at present lodged in Vellore Central Jail on POTA charges.

A Delhi court today remanded Perumal Samy, main accused, to 10 days in police custody, while the IRS officer Anurag Vardhan was remanded to four days custody taking into consideration that his two children were autistic.

The cash-for-transfer scandal has already shaken the corridors of the Finance Ministry. Officials are nervous amidst reports that more heads are expected to roll since the CBI has a long list of names.

Internal security in the ministry has been tightened and security officials have been told to keep a tight vigil on the visitors. The office of the other Minister of State for Finance (Insurance, Banking and Expenditure) A R V Adsul on Thursday issued circulars stating that with immediate effect the staff should keep a strict vigil on the visitors.

24 MAY 2003

INDIAN EXPRESS

Union Minister Shanta Kumar quits

By Vinay Kumar

g. Kumar
NEW DELHI, APRIL 6. The Rural Development Minister, Shanta Kumar, has resigned from the Union Cabinet. He met the Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, this evening and submitted his resignation, official sources said.

The Prime Minister has accepted his resignation and forwarded it to the President, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, for acceptance, sources said. On the advice of the Prime Minister, the President later accepted Mr. Kumar's resignation.

The Urban Development Minister, Ananth Kumar, has been asked to handle the additional charge of the Rural Development Ministry.

The resignation of Mr. Kumar, who hails from Himachal Pradesh, had been doing the rounds in party circles ever since the ruling BJP suffered a humiliating defeat in the recent Assembly elections there.

Mr. Kumar invoked the wrath of the party bigwigs after his outspoken criticism of the BJP-led Prem Kumar Dhumal Government which, he said, had failed to perform to the satisfaction of the people in the hilly State. It was felt that the public display of resentment against his own party's Government at the time of elections in the State had cost the BJP dearly at the hustings

and only helped bring to the fore the internal squabbling and instances of gross indiscipline.

Even at the just-concluded Indore national executive of the BJP, indications were available that Mr. Kumar could be shown the door. It was felt that a tough action needed to be taken against him to send a stern message to the party leaders and cadre that indiscipline would not be tolerated, particularly in a year which would witness the BJP facing the challenge of elections to the four State Assemblies of Delhi, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh.

PTI adds:

Taking note of Mr. Kumar's resignation earlier in the day, the BJP tonight declined to comment on the issue but said it would take a strong view of acts of indiscipline. The resignation comes in the wake of the party president, M. Venkaiah Naidu's speech at the recent national executive committee meeting in Indore taking strong exception to acts of indiscipline in the party.

Refusing to specifically comment on the resignation, the party spokesman, Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi, said "on issues of discipline the party would take a strong stand and those not adhering to the party discipline would be dealt with in a strong manner".

Jumbo ministries

planned *per cent* *circle* *up*
Cabinet sets 10 per cent limit, but not quite

Jumbo ministries are out, or so the Union government likes to believe after deciding to implement a recommendation of the National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution to limit the size of the council of ministers. But they have done violence to the recommendation to suit politicians. The NCRWC had recommended that jumbo ministries were prohibited by law and so the number of ministers should not exceed 10 per cent of the total strength of the elected House — which means 10 per cent of the strength of the legislative Assembly in the states and 10 per cent of the Lok Sabha at the Centre. This would have meant that in the era of coalition politics every small party or independent MLA or MP who supports the ruling government would not be able to extract its pound of flesh. Accepting the recommendation in its original form would have created problems in the first instance with the Vajpayee government which instead of inducting a couple more disgruntled elements of the NDA in the next Cabinet reshuffle, the Prime Minister would have had to drop about 22-23 existing ministers.

So a subterfuge was invented; to include the upper house in the calculations. In the case of the Centre where there is a well-filled Rajya Sabha, the council of ministers is safe in the numbers game. It also means that in states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar which too have an upper house there is more room for manoeuvre, but not enough. For example the strength of the Bihar legislative Assembly is 244 and the legislative Council is 67, a total of 311. Ten per cent of this is only 31, but Rabri Devi currently has 70 ministers. Her husband Laloo Prasad Yadav had headed a council of 80 in 1995, the largest Bihar has seen. Uttar Pradesh is not much better. From the BJP to Samajwadi Party to BSP, they have all headed huge ministries. In fact Mayawati recently set a record by making all dissident MLAs, ministers to prevent them from trying to defect. The original recommendation of the NCRWC should have been implemented.

Are government working on a scheme to bail out states without an upper House? They could add the staff employed by the legislature! If the intention is to subvert the recommendation, considerations of propriety alone need not stand in the way!

26 APR 2003

THE STATESMAN

Jaitley gets justice, Swaraj to take care of health

Mahajan puts on brave face



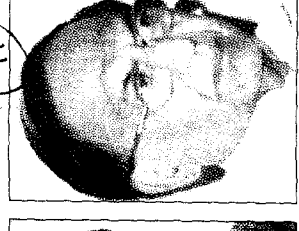
Pramod Mahajan
Out: Will be party general secretary



Sushma Swaraj
Stronger: Health and parliamentary affairs



Shatrughan Sinha
Out & In: Loses health, gets shipping



C.P. Thakur
Back: Small scale industries



Vasundhara Raje
Out: Will help build up party in Rajasthan



Uma Bharati
Out: Will lead BJP in Madhya Pradesh

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: Arun Jaitley and C.P. Thakur were reintroduced into the Union cabinet on Wednesday in a ministerial revamp which saw several spectacular exits, six new faces and a considerable amount of lateral movement among ministries.

Mr Jaitley has got back his old portfolio of law and justice but has also been assigned the portfolio of commerce and industry—a ministry headed until now by ailing DMK stalwart Murasoli Maran.

Mr Thakur, who was sacked as health minister in July last year, has now been given charge of small-scale industries and north-east affairs, two minor portfolios

held earlier by Vasundhara Raje and Arun Shourie respectively.

Also inducted as minister of state with independent charge is BJP veteran from Uttaranchal, Sanghpritya Gautam. The five new ministers of state are Dilip Singh Judeo, the firebrand Hindutva leader from Chattisgarh actively involved in Hindu conversion activities, Dilip Gandhi, a protégé of Union oil minister Ram Naik from Maharashtra, Bhavna Chikhalia, a DMK stalwart BJP stalwart Keshubhai Patel, Jaskaur Meena from Rajasthan and Chatrapal Singh, a Lodhi leader from UP.

Earlier in the day, IT, communications and parliamentary affairs minister Pramod Mahajan re-

signed from the cabinet pending his appointment as general secretary of the BJP. Uma Bharati and Vasundhara Raje had resigned on Tuesday itself, pending their shift to party activities in MP and Rajasthan respectively.

Although hectic lobbying for the allocation of portfolios continued until Wednesday evening, the main gainer from the reshuffle was undoubtedly disinvestment minister Arun Shourie. Not only did he retain his portfolio—confounding those in the BJP and government who wanted him divested of it—but was given another important economic ministry, communications and information technology.

The key information and broad-

casting ministry saw a change with Ravi Shankar Prasad from Bihar wresting the portfolio from Sushma Swaraj. On her part, Ms Swaraj has been moved to health, Parliamentary affairs, a part of Mr Mahajan's erstwhile ministerial empire, has also been given to her.

Shatrughan Sinha, whose underperformance in the health ministry came in for considerable criticism, has been shifted to shipping.

After the swearing-in, the PM said that Jana Krishnamurthy had chosen to resign from the cabinet as he did not want any portfolio other than law. Mr Vajpayee said that he had tried personally to persuade Mr Krishnamurthy to take some other portfolio but to no avail.

By Smita Gupta
TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: The official word on Wednesday's changes in the Union ministry is that this is the PM's "election cabinet" and the resultant re-organisation of the BJP will remain happy the party has given an important responsibility in the run-up to the 2004 general elections.

Mr Naidu, who had opposed Mr Jaitley's departure, is, sources say, wary of Mr Mahajan, a PM man. The reason is that the latter's entry could upset the triumvirate of Mr Naidu, Mr Jaitley and Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi at 11, Ashoka Road, which was essentially an Advani team.

Also, Mr Mahajan might end up overshadowing Mr Naidu, a senior leader said.

Anticipating this, the BJP chief has asked Mr Jaitley to come to the party headquarters for an hour every day until all the elections slated for this year have taken place.

But within the junior ranks of the BJP, Mr Mahajan's return has been received with enthusiasm as he is perceived to be not just media-savvy and dynamic but an organisation person and a skilful fund-raiser. Indeed, he is to be put in charge of elections slated for the year.

His efforts, therefore, to build a personal base in the party could serve him well now. In his home state, Maharashtra, brother-in-law Gopinath Munde is a key figure, he enjoys an excellent equation with Rajasthan chief Vasundhara Raje, and MP chief-to-be Uma Bharati is a good friend, too.

Additionally, shipping minister Ved Prakash Goyal, who has been dropped, may return to the BJP as treasurer, and the slots vacated by party vice president Sanghpritya Gautam, and party secretary Jaskaur Meena, who have joined the government, will have to be filled.

But party sources say Mr Jaitley's return to the cabinet has as much to do with his new-found rapport with the PM's powerful son-in-law, Ranjan Bhattacharya, as his legal skills, and that Mr Mahajan eventually became the fall guy because of his open support of Reliance's WLL telecom project as well as the fact that the Shivani Bhatnagar murder trial is to begin soon.

The first signs that Mr Mahajan's stock had fallen came when he was not included in the consultations on the cabinet changes as he had been PM, the DPM, BJP president M. Venkaiah Naidu and finance minister Jaswant Singh who formed the inner circle.

But Mr Mahajan, denying the reasons being attributed to his downfall, said his move to the party was not a "demo-

tion" and that neither the telecom wars nor the Shivani murder case had anything to do with it. Putting a brave face on the episode, he said, "The next year is important for the BJP, with elections due in half a dozen states. I am happy the party has given me an important responsibility in the run-up to the 2004 general elections."

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