

# Lalu in deep water, Cong fishing for more seats

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SHAHID PERVEZ

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STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

NEW DELHI, Dec. 25. — The Congress is amused by the RJD supremo Mr Lalu Prasad Yadav's growing discomfiture in various recent controversies, hoping to cash in on his agony during the party's bargaining for seats in the coming Bihar Assembly election. As pressurised mount on Mr Lalu Prasad from various quarters, especially the Election Commission front, the Congress wants to exploit the situation for its advantage. A besieged Mr Prasad means

for the Congress a "better leverage" for driving a hard bargain with him in negotiations for seat-sharing. "We hope to extract a decent number of seats for our nominees in the February Bihar poll," said a senior AICC leader.

Left to himself, the railway minister would not like to offer the Congress more than a couple of dozen seats of the total 243 Assembly seats in the state. The Congress wants a drastically bigger share in the seat pie than this meagre tally.

Signalling its intentions to do hard business with Mr Lalu Prasad in coming days, the



Congress high command has already set up a panel of three leaders — Mr Arjun Singh, Mr ML Fotedar, and Mr Harikesh Bahadur — to hold negotia-

tions for seat-sharing in Bihar. The panel's current mandate is restricted to talk to Mr Lalu Prasad over division of seats in the alliance.

The Congress has not forgotten the "acute humiliation" meted out to it by Mr Prasad in the last parliamentary elections, when the latter gave it only four of the total 40 seats. But, then the party was in bad shape and in Opposition.

Today, the Congress is leading the ruling UPA alliance at the Centre. The Congress would like the same Lok Sabha alliance — RJD, Ram Vilas Paswan's

LJP, and the Congress — to continue in the Assembly poll, with its representation being much better, but the formulation is not likely to materialise, given the continuing fierce stand-off between Mr Lalu and Mr Paswan.

Although both Mr Lalu Prasad and Mr Paswan are its partners at the Centre, the Congress is giving priority to having an alliance with Mr Lalu Prasad because his party is a major partner accounting for the maximum number of seats after the Congress withdrawal in the UPA. Also, the Congress shares power with the RJD in

the Bihar government, even as Mr Lalu Prasad has an excellent equation with Mrs Sonia Gandhi. For the record though, the Congress has still not closed its option to choose between Mr Lalu and Mr Paswan.

A section of the AICC central leadership, feels that aligning with Mr Paswan would be more beneficial since the Congress-LJP tie-up might succeed in formulating a support base comprising Dalits, minorities and upper castes, the social combination, which has been responsible for the Congress' triumphs.

# NDA stalls House on Laloo-Paswan spat

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE  
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 9

THE "Laloo versus Paswan" spat rocked Parliament for the second day today, but following a compromise formula, the Opposition stalled proceedings without entering the well of the House.

At a meeting presided over by senior BJP leader A.B. Vajpayee earlier in the day, NDA decided to continue with their demand that the Prime Minister make a statement on the Laloo-Paswan imbroglio. Despite pressure from a section of the JD(U), it was also decided that neither Question Hour nor post-lunch business would be disrupted and the protest would be confined to slogan shouting during Zero Hour.

NDA MPs — led by Prabhunath Singh (JD-U) and Sushil Modi (BJP) — proceeded to do just that as soon as Question Hour ended. Union Steel Minister Ram Vilas Paswan's statement that he had not said anything against any Cabinet minister and only criticised the Bihar government had no impact on the shouting NDA contingent. They insisted that PM Man-



Egged on by Yadav, RJD made it clear that they would rake up the wild allegations levelled by Advani's former daughter-in-law to counter the NDA onslaught.

mohan Singh clarify the situation as neither Union minister was telling the truth.

BJP leader V.K. Malhotra said Railway Minister Laloo Prasad Yadav's claim in Parlia-

ment yesterday that he had never said anything against Paswan was "ridiculous" as the whole nation had heard him on TV. Later, IFDP MP P.C. Thomas — a member of the NDA — moved a notice of breach of privilege against Yadav for misleading the House.

While Congress and Left MPs remained silent, a vociferous slanging match took place between NDA and RJD MPs lasting some 15 minutes. NDA's slogan "Pradhan Mantri jawab do" was met with RJD's cry — "Gauri Advani ko bulao."

Egged on by Yadav, RJD made it clear that they would rake up the wild allegations levelled by Advani's former daughter-in-law to counter the NDA onslaught.

The NDA-RJD slanging match turned ugly when the Railway minister reacted angrily to some remark by Prabhunath Singh, leading to an angry exchange of abuses. At this point, the Speaker adjourned the House for 30 minutes.

When the House reassembled after lunch, P.C. Thomas gave notice of his privilege motion and then members on both sides participated in the discussion on price rise.

# Laloo refuses to answer any non-railway questions

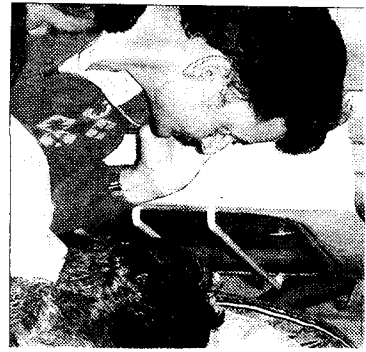
EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE  
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 9

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EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE  
CHENNAI, DECEMBER 9



# Vajpayee, Advani court arrest in rally against price rise issue

By Our Staff Reporter

NEW DELHI, DEC. 1. Top leaders of the Bharatiya Janata Party, including the former Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and the party president, L.K. Advani, along with hundreds of party workers staged a protest rally at the Ramlila Grounds here today and courted arrest near the Delhi Gate in Central Delhi. They were later released.

Warning that they would intensify their agitation against the "anti-people" policies of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Government if it failed to amend its "inflationary economic policies," the BJP leaders accused the Left parties of adopting "double standards" on the issue of price hike and "keeping silent" on the plight of the common man.

Addressing a rally, Mr. Vajpayee said that despite facing serious economic sanctions in the wake of the nuclear tests, the NDA Government headed by him never passed on the financial burden to the common man. The Kargil war and two big natural disasters during its rule did not deter it from safeguarding the interests of the poor and the middleclass. All this was possible because his Ministers met daily to take stock of the economic situation, a trend which was not visible now.

## 'Congress confused'

Recalling the Congress president, Sonia Gandhi's speech in Parliament, Mr. Vajpayee said she had accused him of being a day-dreamer. "My Government not only dared to dream, but

also realised its dreams. But now when the Congress has got a chance to rule, it looks confused and does not know how to shape the nation's future. Everyday, the UPA Government is changing its decisions, sending conflicting signals to the markets and global investors were losing confidence in India."

Mr. Vajpayee said that keeping inflation under check, increasing the per capita income, achieving a robust growth rate and launching major infrastructure projects were his Gov-

ernment's major achievements. But the policies of the Congress-led UPA Government had led not only to a steep increase in the prices of all essential commodities, but also brought national growth and development to a standstill. He warned the UPA to mend its ways before people threw it out.

## 'Super Prime Minister'

Mr. Advani said the Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, a renowned economist, had "failed miserably" to deliver

and his Government had no control over the rising prices. The Congress during the election promised to protect the interests of the common man. But after it came to power, the poor people were facing the brunt of its wrong policies.

The root cause behind the "mis-governance" was that the Prime Minister's was not the "last word" in decision-making as the country had a "super prime minister," Mr. Advani said. Unfortunately, never in the history of Indian democracy one faced a situation where the Prime Minister was not the final authority. "This is a dangerous trend," he said adding the Congress was not only facing a leadership crisis, but the so-called UPA unity had also been exposed with its two warring Ministers levelling corruption charges against each other.

## 'Soft approach to terrorists'

Mr. Advani also objected to the Centre's "soft approach" to terrorist and insurgent groups in Jammu and Kashmir and the North-East. Accusing the Government of "surrendering" to the perpetrators of violence, he said it had offered to talk to naxalites in Andhra Pradesh and to United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) just to win elections. "The nation would have to pay a heavy price of this serious lapse in internal security," he said.

Senior party leaders, including Murli Manohar Joshi, Jaswant Singh, Yashwant Sinha, Venkaiah Naidu, Arun Jaitley and Pramod Mahajan were also present.

## Global factors to blame: Congress

By Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, DEC. 1. The Congress today accused the Bharatiya Janata Party of "finding fault" with everything and refuted the charge that the policies of the United Progressive Alliance Government were responsible for the rise in prices and inflation.

The party said that the BJP should understand that global factors were behind the price rise including the hike in petroleum products.

The Congress spokesperson, Anand Sharma, said the BJP should remember the record of the last six years of National Democratic Alliance Government.

Stating that the Business Advisory Committee of the Lok Sabha had listed the price rise as an issue to be discussed in the coming week, he said the Opposition would get an opportunity to discuss the matter. When re-

mindful that the BJP had expressed its willingness to cooperate with the Government in Parliament but wanted the Congress to check its allies such as the Rashtriya Janata Dal from disrupting the House, Mr. Sharma sought to remind the BJP that during the tenure of the NDA, it failed to control the Shiv Sena.

He sought to distinguish the manner in which the BJP treated its allies as compared to the Congress. The UPA allies were separate entities unlike the NDA partners whom the BJP treated as "subordinates."

On the Left parties demand for rollback of petroleum prices, he said they were welcome to provide inputs on such matters.

Besides, the UPA and Left parties could sort out matters in the Coordination Committee and address matters concerning people and the alliance.

# First Gandhi to admit excesses

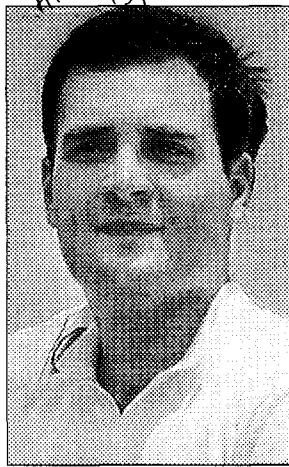
Agencies  
Amethi, October 14

IN WHAT could be music to the Opposition ears, Congress MP Rahul Gandhi has admitted that excesses were committed on the countrymen during the Emergency in 1975 that lasted about two years. "There were excesses during the Emergency, which were wrong," he said.

It is perhaps the first time that a member of Nehru-Gandhi family made no bones of the fact that excesses were committed during Emergency. Both the Congress and Nehru-Gandhi family faced strong criticism all these years over the issue.

Rahul, on a three-day visit to Amethi, said it was a "very complicated situation then and there were excesses". Incidentally, Rahul's comments came amid the controversy raging over the screening of a documentary on Jayaprakash Narayan, who spearheaded the movement against Indira Gandhi's Emergency.

To another question, Rahul took a dim view of the performance of the Mulayam Singh Yadav administration, saying that the SP-led state government has failed to



Rahul Gandhi

bring about any development in UP. Asked why Congress leadership was still extending support to the Mulayam government, he said, "It is a question of what the Congress perceives." Rahul's visit here coincided with voting in 12 Assembly by-elections.

**Cong downplays remark:** The Congress has downplayed Rahul's admission that there were excesses during the Emergency, saying it was a thing of the past and the people had punished the Congress party in the 1977 polls.

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# সভারকর-কাঁটার জবাবে কংগ্রেসের ঢাল উমা

স্টাফ রিপোর্টার, নয়াদিল্লি, ২০ আগস্ট: কংগ্রেসের 'দাগি' মন্ত্রীদের নিয়ে হইচইয়ের পর এ বার উমা ভারতীকে নিয়ে নিজেসরূপে বিপদে পড়ল বিজেপি। কারণ, কনটিকের একটি আদালত মধ্যপ্রদেশের মুখ্যমন্ত্রীর বিরুদ্ধে জামিন-অযোগ্য মুখ্যমন্ত্রী থাকবেন কি না, ঠিক করতে সোমবার বিজেপি-র সংসদীয় বোর্ডের বৈঠক ডাকা হয়েছে। উমা ইতিমধ্যেই দলের শীর্ষ নেতৃত্বের কাছে ইস্তফাপত্র পাঠিয়ে দিয়েছেন। কিন্তু উমার ইস্তফা নিয়ে দলেই দ্বিমত রয়েছে।

উমার ইস্তফার দাবি তুলে আজ ক্ষমতাসীন জোট, বিশেষ করে লালুপ্রসাদের দল সংসদে সরব হয়। বিজেপি-ও সেই সময় সভারকর প্রসঙ্গ নিয়ে সরব ছিল। প্রবল হইহুয়ায় লোকসভা ও রাজসভা আজ অচল হয়ে যায়। বিজেপি জানিয়ে দিয়েছে, সরকার আদমামানে স্বতন্ত্র জ্যোতিতে সভারকরের বাণী রাখার দাবি মেনে না-নিলে তারাও সংসদ চালাতে দেবে না। সভারকর নিয়ে গত দু'দিনের পর আজও যে বিজেপি হইচই বাধাবে, তা সরকার পক্ষের জানাই ছিল। তাঁরাও তাই পাল্টা উমার প্রসঙ্গ নিয়ে আসেন।

শ্রেফতারি পরোয়ানা জারির পর সংসদ অচল রেখে শিবু সোরেনকে মন্ত্রী পদ থেকে ইস্তফা দিতে বাধ্য করেছিল বিজেপি। এ বার শ্রেফতারি পরোয়ানা জারি হয়েছে উমার বিরুদ্ধে। এই অবস্থায় উমারও ইস্তফা স্বাভাবিক ছিল। কিন্তু বিজেপি এই ঘটনাকে একটা জাতীয়তাবাদী মোড়ক দিতে চাইছে। কনটিকের হুবলিতে সাম্প্রদায়িক উত্তেজনার পর বিতর্কিত ইদগাহ ময়দানে বিজেপি ও সঙ্ঘ পরিবারের জাতীয় পতাকা তোলার কর্মসূচিকে কেন্দ্র করে বছর দশেক আগের একটি মামলায় এই শ্রেফতারি পরোয়ানা জারি হয়েছে। বিজেপি তাই এটাকে একটা আবেগের প্রসঙ্গ নিয়ে যেতে চাইছে। পরোয়ানার পর উমা বলেছেন, "জাতীয় পতাকার জন্য মুখ্যমন্ত্রীর পদ ছেড়ে দেওয়া তো ছোট ব্যাপার, আমি ফাঁসি যেতেও রাজি।" আর বিজেপি মুখপাত্র সুখমা স্বরাজের বক্তব্য, "দুঃখের বিষয় হল, জাতীয় পতাকা তোলাকে অপরাধ বলে মনে করে কংগ্রেস। সোরেনের মামলার সঙ্গে তাই উমার শ্রেফতারি পরোয়ানার তুলনা চলে না।" আর প্রাক্তন আইনমন্ত্রী অরুণ জেটলির মত হল, "উমার মামলার সঙ্গে নৈতিকতাব সম্পর্ক নেই।"

এ দিকে, উমাকে নিয়ে হইচইয়ের পাশাপাশি সভারকর-বিতর্ক এখনও চলছে। মুম্বই থেকে নিজস্ব সংবাদদাতা জানিয়েছেন, সভারকরকে নিয়ে কেন্দ্রীয় পেট্রোলিয়াম মন্ত্রী মণিশঙ্কর আইয়ারের মন্তব্য পাশে বর হয়েছে শিবসেনার কেন্দ্রীয় মন্ত্রীর বিবৃতিতে কেন্দ্র করে মহারাষ্ট্রে বিধানসভা ভোটের ঠিক দেড় মাস আগে থেকে ভোটারদের উদ্বেগ দিতে মাঠে নেমে পড়েছে শিবসেনা। আজ সভারকরের জন্মস্থান ভাণ্ডারে বন্ধ ডেকেছিল তারা। আদমামানের সেলুলার জেলে সভারকরের একটি উদ্ধৃতি মুছে দিয়ে এবং তাঁকে ঘিরে বিরূপ মন্তব্য করে আইয়ার পরোকে অভিযোগ করেন বাল ঠাকরের ছেলে ও শিবসেনার কার্জনবাহী সভাপতি উদ্ধব ঠাকরে। কংগ্রেস এর আগেও বীর সভারকর, বাবাসাহেব অম্বেডকরের মতো মহারাষ্ট্রের মনীষীদের সম্পর্কে বিরূপ মন্তব্য করে তাঁদের হেয় করার চেষ্টা করেছে বলেও শিবসেনার অভিযোগ।

উমা আজ বিরোধী নেতা লালকৃষ্ণ আডবানী সহ বিজেপি শীর্ষ নেতাদের সঙ্গে দেখা করে ইস্তফাপত্র দিয়েছেন। তিনি তাঁদের জানিয়েছেন,

এই শ্রেফতারি পরোয়ানা নিয়ে তিনি রাজনৈতিক লড়াই শুরু করতে চান। জাতীয় পতাকার জন্য তাঁকে মুখ্যমন্ত্রীর ছাড়তে হয়েছে— এই প্রচার চালানো দলের রাজনৈতিক লাভ হবে এবং কংগ্রেস বিপাকে পড়বে বলে তিনি মনে করেন। মধ্যপ্রদেশের প্রায় সব বিজেপি নেতাই অবশ্য অবিলম্বে উমার পদত্যাগ চাইছেন অন্য কারণে। প্রথম থেকেই তাঁরা মুখ্যমন্ত্রীর থেকে উমাকে সরাতে চেয়েছিলেন। কিন্তু বেক্কাইয়া নায়াডু, অরুণ জেটলিরা ইস্তফা চান না। তাঁদের মত, এই 'প্রতিহিংসামূলক' মামলায় ইস্তফার কোনও দরকার নেই। বরং কংগ্রেস এতে বিপাকে পড়বে আর এস এস-ও চায় না, উমা পদত্যাগ করুক।

উমার বিরুদ্ধে এই পরোয়ানা হল শিবু সোরেন ও তসলিমউদ্দিন নিয়ে বিজেপি-র হইচইয়ের পাল্টা কংগ্রেসি চাল। উমার বিরুদ্ধে মামলাটি কংগ্রেসশাসিত রাজ্য সরকারই প্রত্যাহার করে নেওয়ার জন্য আদালতে আবেদন জানিয়েছিল। কিন্তু বিজেপি 'দাগি' মন্ত্রীদের বিষয়টি তোলার পর তাঁরা সেই প্রত্যাহারের আবেদন তুলে নেয়। তার পরেই উমার বিরুদ্ধে জামিন-অযোগ্য শ্রেফতারি পরোয়ানা জারি হয়েছে।

## UGLY FARCE

Indian politics is never quite starved of the farcical. But the case of Mr Shibu Soren is hardly a laughing matter. Little wonder that the absconding minister hugely embarrassed the United Progressive Alliance government. Although he has finally put in his resignation, it is unlikely to bring the curtain down on the ugly episode. Once the prime minister, Mr Manmohan Singh, asked him to resign, his exit from the cabinet was only a matter of time. And Mr Singh himself had little option but to show him the door once Mr Soren went underground to evade possible arrest in a criminal case against him. In a different situation, the prime minister would have probably sacked him straightaway. That would have been much more palatable for the government than facing the opposition's fire and its own embarrassment in and outside parliament. But the compulsions of coalition politics force governments to try and defend the indefensible. By hiding from the law, Mr Soren himself forced the prime minister's hands. His conduct once again raises serious questions about the politicians' contempt for the law. The people no longer expect politicians to be the epitome of public morality. Mr Soren's bizarre case must have come as a new low in politicians' popular profile.

However, there may be some truth in the complaint that the case against Mr Soren is born of political vendetta. The government of Jharkhand, run by the Bharatiya Janata Party and its allies, may well have a political motive in digging out a 29-year-old case and implicating Mr Soren in it. The suspicion is strengthened by the fact that over 400 cases, relating to incidents during the agitation for a separate Jharkhand state, have been withdrawn by the same state government. Even the BJP's decision to stall proceedings of both houses of parliament on Mr Soren's case has more politics than morality in it. After all, the previous National Democratic Alliance government tried everything to protect ministers like Mr George Fernandes and Mr Dilip Singh Judeo from corruption charges. Mr Fernandes, then defence minister, who had been forced to resign, was reinducted into the cabinet even before the inquiry against him was completed. But all this cannot justify Mr Soren's act of hiding from the law. It also makes little political sense for a man who aims to lead his party, the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, to power in Ranchi after the coming assembly elections. If he is eventually arrested, his supporters will understandably try to project him as a martyr. That is in the future, though. For now, his case is the first major loss of face for the UPA government.

# Hanging question

g. 10 min  
9. 10 min  
Invite single largest formation first 5. 6

Having once impolitely called Sonia Gandhi a "housewife", Jyoti Basu now inexplicably wants her to become Prime Minister. Perhaps, this metamorphosis is what prevents the likes of Amar Singh from taking Basu too seriously as attempts continue to get Opposition parties together. Singh, an energetic backroom operator, seems determined to "correct" the impression that Samajwadi Party is "close" to the BJP. Trying to get various Opposition worthies to keep their ambitions in their pockets is a good way to demonstrate distance from the BJP. Whether it is enough to keep the Opposition together is a different matter. Can Mulayam and Laloo sit down together and make mutual sacrifices for larger political goals? They are old-style politicians with similar caste bases and are itching to come to the national stage. Similar zero-sum games apply between other Opposition parties. Then, there's the Congress. For now, it is not projecting Sonia Gandhi. But Congress will be the largest party within the coalition and it has been effectively out of power since 1996. A non-Congress PM will mean the party may have to settle for the loaves but give up the fishes. A non-Sonia Congress PM will require a revolution in the party. These are all very, very difficult issues and some of them are arguably unmanageable.

That's the reason the President, APJ Abdul Kalam, may have a big role to play post-elections. It has been the convention for some time now that if any party or pre-poll alliance does not get a simple majority, the single largest party, or pre-poll alliance should be invited first. That gives everyone time and takes away a considerable amount of immediate instability. Since the changed anti-defection law makes horse trading impossible, leaders will be able to negotiate without having to lock up their MPs. These positive aspects will be forgotten, in the event NDA falls short of a majority. There will be a clamour for putting government formation on hold till the Opposition comes up with a working coalition. President Kalam, whose ex-officio authority is burnished by personal integrity, must opt for the simple, correct and the usual approach - call the single largest formation, give it some time and, if it fails, call the other fellows. In any case, as Amar Singh would testify, time flies when you have to get Laloo and Mulayam to see eye to eye.

THE STATESMAN

5 MAY 2001

Political  
to political  
By Our Special  
Correspondent

# 'Sari distribution a violation of code'

NEW DELHI, APRIL 13. The Opposition today kept up the heat on the Bharatiya Janata Party over the distribution of saris in Lucknow and urged the Election Commission to take appropriate action against persons who had violated the model code of conduct.

The Congress also demanded the prosecution of the BJP leader, Lalji Tandon, on whose birthday saris were distributed on Monday, leading to the death of 22 persons, mostly women, in a stampede.

In a joint memorandum to the Commission, the Congress, the Communist Party of India, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the Rashtriya Janata Dal and the Janata Dal (Secular) said that the free distribution of saris to "induce the voters, making use of the occasion" of the birthday of Mr. Tandon was a "blatant violation" of the code.

The parties said that as per the code, "all parties and candidates shall avoid scrupulously all activities which are corrupt practices and offences under the election law, such as bribing of voters, intimidation of voters..." The memorandum was signed by Kapil Sibal (Congress), Nilotpal Basu (CPI-M), D. Raja (CPI), Prem Chand Gupta (RJD) and Danish Ali (JD-S).

Later at a news conference, the Congress spokesperson, Kapil Sibal, said the Election Commissioner, N. Gopalaswamy, had informed the delegation of Opposition leaders that the EC had sought a report from the Uttar Pradesh Chief Secretary.

Mr. Sibal said the function in Lucknow was not just "a corrupt practice but a criminal offence" since the organisers did not take any permission in the area where prohibitory orders were in force.

The incident occurred due to a "gross negligent act," which was prosecutable under the Indian Penal Code. It was not enough to just transfer a sub-inspector and suggested that Mr. Tandon be prosecuted.

The Congress also clarified that it was guiding the Samajwadi Party Government in Uttar Pradesh to take necessary steps in this direction. Mr. Sibal said there were doubts over the direction in which the SP leadership was moving since the Chief Minister, Mulayam Singh Yadav, had tried to play down the tragedy.

The Lok Janshakti Party too submitted a memorandum to the EC urging it to take immediate and appropriate steps to stop "wanton misuse" of the State machinery by the BJP and its leadership.



Grief-stricken children and other relatives of a victim of Monday's stampede in Lucknow at the funeral. — Reuters

mediate and appropriate steps to stop "wanton misuse" of the State machinery by the BJP and its leadership.

The party suggested that the EC depute one of its official to Lucknow and conduct a "prima facie" inquiry and recommend

a judicial probe into the tragedy. The party national general secretary, R.G. James, suggested that the EC direct the State ad-

ministration to register criminal cases against the organisers, senior leaders and officials who were present on the occasion.



# Glitter in politics <sup>VV</sup>

51-6 p. 10/11/08  
Bollywood joins the tamasha 11/2

A link between film stars and politicians is not new, nor is it restricted to just Ronald Reagan, a matinee idol of Hollywood who went on to become president. The current governor of California Arnold Schwarzenegger also qualifies. Not to speak of our own Indira Gandhi. Jayalitha, was a leading heroine before she followed her mentor MG Ramachandran into politics. Film stars have a persona which is larger than life and the make-believe look real. These are exactly qualities that politicians of today need, hence the symbiotic relationship.

Veteran superstars have in their twilight years seen politics as an alternative profession, as well as an opportunity to give something back to society in the form of social work — Nargis, Sunil Dutt, Shabana Azmi. The new trend in the 2004 elections, however is not this. The floodgates are being opened to Bollywood stars both young and old, big and small screen, superstars and flop stars alike. Both Congress and BJP seem to be trying to get as many of the celluloid firmament into their camps as possible. A ravishing Raveena Tandon or Pooja Batra is considered a bigger attraction to lure crowds than boring old politicians in khadi who have nothing new to say. Like the traditional goongi gudias they were expected to look pretty, deliver a few filmi dialogues, wave and round off by telling everyone who to vote for. They did exactly that, and often made very little impact on actual voting patterns. The BJP is hoping to change this by providing dialogues for film stars — a training camp has been set up to teach them what to say and how to say it. We can expect good delivery from actors. But will they be able to deliver votes — hope springs eternal!

# Families hedge their bets, divide to rule

## Even Arjun Singh's son plays footsie with BJP

By Smita Gupta/TNN

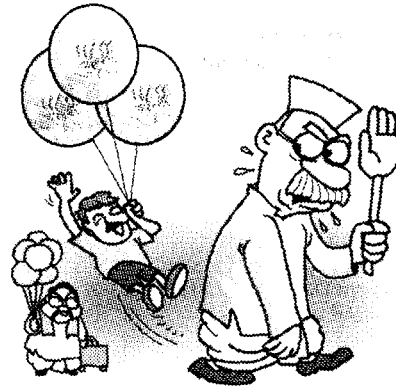
**New Delhi:** There are two ways of looking at it. One, that the BJP is becoming a master at the game of divide and rule. Or, if you are a cynic, that astute political families are hedging their bets in these uncertain times.

The talk of families betting on both sides—BJP and Congress—was furious on

fact, Madhya Pradesh pioneered the trend of playing both sides when Madhavrao Scindia switched over to the Congress after mother and saffron stalwart Vijayaraje Scindia was put behind bars during the Emergency.

Is it now happening the other way round? For, Ajeya and Laxman apart, senior Congress leader in Karnataka S. Bangrappa now has a foot in the BJP door, even as his son Kumar is a minister in the Congress state government. The ex-CM has already announced his desire to turn saffron and is expected to get into a public clinch after Holi.

On Monday Karnataka saw the BJP appear to be getting new recruits also from non-Congress rivals. R.K. Hegde's kin, Gopal Hegde, met BJP leaders



Monday when diehard Gandhi family loyalist Arjun Singh's son Ajeya met with the BJP brass, including L.K. Advani and M. Venkaiah Naidu. In no time, the political grapevine was buzzing about Ajeya switching loyalty—the speculation itself would be enough to demoralise an already depressed Congress in Madhya Pradesh.

The speculation is possibly off the mark as Ajeya stoutly denied possible infidelity to the Congress, but his meeting with BJP leaders still remains unexplained.

Only last week, the MP Congress lost Digvijay Singh's younger brother Laxman Singh to the BJP. In

here and the news is that he's on his way to join the party formally.

Closer to Delhi, Haryana CM Om Prakash Chautala's younger brother Ranjit Singh marched into the BJP amidst much fanfare. This doesn't seem to be a case of the family hedging its bets because sibling rivalry here is really strong and Ranjit had to find another home. For the BJP, however, he has provided a long-awaited Jat face in Haryana.

The split of all family splits of course has been the BJP's coup de grace in poaching two members of the Dynasty—Sonia Gandhi's sister-in-law Maneka Gandhi, and nephew Feroze Varun.

3 MAR 2004

# Court whip on defaulter MPs

**HT Correspondent**  
New Delhi, March 1

A.B.A GHANI Khan Chowdhury owes the nation more than Rs 71 lakh in unpaid phone and electricity bills. Former Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar and ex-Union minister Ram Vilas Paswan owe Rs 7 lakh and Rs 1.54 lakh. Another former Prime Minister, H.D. Deve Gowda, is just a shade behind with dues of Rs 76,772.

The arrears of these three and other such defaulter MPs will now be splashed across newspaper pages. The Delhi High Court on Monday directed the Election Commission to take affidavits from the politicians and publicise their dues, saying voters have

a right to know about candidates' "antecedents".

The facts are staggering. While 656 MPs (Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha — both sitting and former members) together owe MTNL Rs 11 crore in unpaid phone bills, 669 owe NDMC Rs 6.32 crore in water and electricity bills. The dues to ITDC are Rs 13-14 lakh.

Ghani Khan has emerged the highest defaulter, owing over Rs 41.31 lakh in telephone bills and over Rs 30 lakh in power bills. Ghani has challenged the bills in court and raised a counter claim, saying he had overpaid his dues.

The court has asked MTNL and NDMC to take all possible measures, includ-

ing disconnection of phones and electricity, to recover their dues.

A Division Bench of Justices B.C. Patel and B.D. Ahmed passed the order following a petition by Krishak Bharat in 1998. A notice has been issued to the secretaries-general of the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha, asking them why the MPs' arrears were not deducted from their salary, allowances and pension — as the rules say they should be.

The Bench observed, "The dues must be made public for the voter. For a healthy democracy, a voter must be well informed and must know the antecedents of the candidates. The EC shall take effective steps to

publicise the information furnished by candidates on the government dues in at least two local dailies."

The commission's counsel argued that advertising the dues would cost a lot. The court replied, "When so much can be spent, on feeling good, why can't it be spent on informing the voters?"

"The EC cannot be absolved of its responsibilities by only passing on the information to the media. When voters are required to be informed, it is necessary that the EC itself takes the task of informing the public."

The court, however, said the candidates would not be required to obtain 'no-dues certificates' from these departments.

## Hall of shame

- 656 MPs owe MTNL Rs 11cr in unpaid phone bills
- 669 MPs owe NDMC Rs 6.32 cr in water & electricity bills
- Dues to ITDC Rs 13-14 lakh
- Biggest defaulter Ghani Khan Chowdhury (Rs 41.31 lakh in phone bills and Rs 30 lakh in power bills)



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HT 2/3

# EC sets India's dates with polls

## Round 1 Begins On April 20; Counting Will Be Held On May 13

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

**New Delhi:** The elections to constitute the 14th Lok Sabha and assemblies in four states will be held in four phases—on April 20, April 26, May 5 and May 10. The counting of votes will be held on May 13. Announcing the schedule at a press conference on Sunday, Chief Election Commissioner T S Krishnamurthy said the model code of conduct comes into immediate effect. Calling upon all parties to play by the book, he said that the EC would not be a "mere spectator" to infringements. "Let India shine in the conduct of elections," he said.

The announcement of the poll dates not only brought the media blitzkrieg of the multi-crore "India Shining" campaign to an end, but also put Deputy Prime Minister L K Advani into an awkward position. On Sunday morning, he had left for Bangalore in an IAF aircraft, took an IAF chopper to reach Tumkur, but had to shift to a private aircraft after the code came into force. The four phases will involve a total of 67.5 crore voters and 10.75 lakh electronic voting machines. In the first phase on April 20, 141 constituencies in 16 states involving 141 parliamentary constituencies would go to the polls.

This will be followed by 137 constituencies in 11 states in the second phase on April 26, 83 constituencies in seven states in the third phase (May 5) and 182 constituencies in 16 states and Union territories in the fourth and the final phase on May 10.

While Jammu and Kashmir will have a four-phase election, Bihar and UP would have it in three phases. In J&K, two constituencies would go to the polls on April 20, one each on April 26 and May 5 and two on May 10.

States like Assam, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Manipur and Orissa will see two-phase elections. Except MP, states slated to have two-phase elections will have voting on April 20 and 26. MP, which will be hosting the month-long Ujjain Kumbh mela from April 5, will have polls on May 5 and 10. There will be a single-phase election

in Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Arunachal Pradesh, Chandigarh, Chhattisgarh, Dadra and Nagar Haveli, Daman and Diu, Goa, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Lakshadweep, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Delhi, Pondicherry, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Tripura, Uttaranchal and West Bengal.

The notification for the four phases will be issued on March 24 and 31 and April 8 and 16.

### States, Dates & Fates

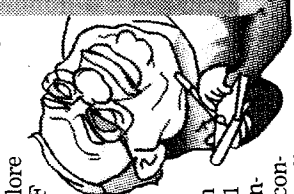
20 April	26 April	5 May	10 May
AP (21), Assam (6), Bihar (11), Gujarat (26), J&K (2), Karnataka (15), Maharashtra (24), Manipur (1), Mizo (1), Meghalaya (2), Orissa (11), Tripura (2), Chhattis (11), Jharkhand (6), Dadra & Nagar Haveli (1), Daman and Diu (1)	AP (21), Assam (6), Bihar (17), Goa (2), J&K (1), Karnataka (13), Maharashtra (24), Manipur (1), Orissa (10), UP (32), Jharkhand (8)	Andhra (2), Bihar (12), J&K (1), MP (12), Nagaland (1), Rajasthan (25), UP (30)	Haryana (10), HP (4), J&K (2), Kerala (20), MP (17), Punjab (13), Sikkim (1), TN (30), UP (18), WB (42), Uttaranchal (5), Andaman & Nicobar (1), Chandigarh (1), Delhi (7), Lakshadweep (1), Pondicherry (1)

Figures in brackets indicate no. of LS constituencies in which elections will be held on the particular date.

#### Assembly elections in AP

Karnataka and Orissa will be held in two phases on April 20 and 26. In Sikkim, it will be held on May 10

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# D.P. Yadav out of BJP

## Arif Mohammed Khan, Laxman Singh in

By Neena Vyas

**NEW DELHI, FEB. 24.** The Bharatiya Janata Party today withdrew membership for D.P. Yadav, member of the 11th Lok Sabha, although he was inducted into the party only four days ago amid much fanfare.

Simultaneously, the party took into its fold Arif Mohammed Khan, who had built a reputation when he resigned as Minister from the Rajiv Gandhi Government to protest against the reversal by legislation of the Supreme Court judgment in the Shah Bano case.

Laxman Singh, MP in the dissolved Lok Sabha and brother of the former Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister, Digvijay Singh, was also given the BJP membership by the party general secretary, Pramod Mahajan. Both said they would stand by the ideology of their newly-adopted party and that they expected nothing but to be allowed to work as "ordinary party workers."

Announcing the withdrawal of membership from Mr. Yadav, the BJP president, Venkaiah Naidu, said the decision was taken after consultations with the Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and the Deputy Prime Minister, L.K. Advani. While taking him into the party on February 20, Mr. Naidu had said



**The Union Minister for Law and Justice and Company Affairs, Arun Jaitley, greeting the former Union Minister, Arif Mohammad Khan (left), who joined the BJP in New Delhi on Tuesday. — Photo: Rajeev Bhatt**

the party would be strengthened in western Uttar Pradesh as a result. But, apparently, after days of criticism in the media, revolving round a number of charges that Mr. Yadav had faced in different places (although he had not been convicted), the party came to the conclusion that it was better to de-induct him.

"The membership of the party has been withdrawn from

D.P. Yadav. Last night, I met the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister and consulted them. Mr. Yadav also called me and said that if because of him the party was suffering that should not happen," Mr. Naidu said. Some party leaders had openly expressed the fear that Mr. Yadav's induction would lead to a backlash from middle-class voters, especially in Delhi, Ghaziabad and Noida.

Mr. Khan told the press that he had always fought communal politics. "Now I want to earn the goodwill of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh," he said.

To questions, he denied that he had been indulging in party hopping even as he admitted that he had been a member of the Congress, the Jan Morcha, the Janata Dal of V.P. Singh, the Bahujan Samaj Party and now the BJP. His association with the Lok Janshakti of Ram Vilas Paswan was explained away as "personal friendship." Admitting that the riots in Gujarat had ripped apart the Hindu and Muslim communities, he said that from "inside" the BJP and with the "help of the RSS" he could re-build the bridges of trust.

He charged the Congress with "flying the secular flag" while "playing the communal card" repeatedly.

Mr. Laxman Singh's explanation for deserting the Congress to join the BJP was short and simple. He was astonished when the Congress forged an alliance with the DMK, the MDMK and the PMK, after having charged them in 1998 with a role in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination.

Even when he was in the Congress he had "more respect for BJP leaders than the Congress leadership," he added.

# It's Gandhi vs Gandhi

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: Twenty-three-year-old Feroze Varun, the other Gandhi, who joined the BJP on Monday, said he did not intend to attack his cousins, Rahul and Priyanka, or his aunt, Sonia Gandhi, publicly as he did not wish to mix family relationships and politics. "I don't believe in attacking anyone, and I would rather be part of a positive rather than a negative campaign, based on a progressive agenda."

He, however, added that he would do whatever the party asked him to do. But he did not think that the BJP would ask him to attack his cousins or aunt. Asked whether the "foreign origin" of his aunt was an issue, he said it was a subsidiary issue as the main issues were development and the competence of the PM.

Former Union minister Maneka Gandhi, who too joined the BJP along with her son, found herself taking

the backseat at the party briefing with most questions being addressed to Varun. Fittingly so, as BJP sources pointed out, it was Varun who persuaded his mother to join the BJP. She had been apparently concerned

that joining the BJP might adversely affect her Muslim vote in Pilibhit, her constituency in UP. The BJP, on its part, wishes to use Varun, who will soon be inducted into the youth wing, in a limited way in the next polls.

## Polls Apart? Dynasty Parties With Parivar

### The Players

**Maneka Gandhi:** India's best known animal rights activist and Sanjay Gandhi's widow had a bitter falling-out with mother-in-law, Indira. Unsuccessfully contested against Rajiv Gandhi in 1984 and has said Sonia is unfit to be PM.

**Varun Feroze Gandhi:** At 23, the newest Gandhi on the block. Born March 13, 1980. Schooling: Rishi Valley and British School, Delhi. Graduated in Economics and Public Policy from the London School of Economics, pursuing an MSc there. Has written a book of poems, *The Otherness of Self* (which should go down well with our poet PM). Campaigns for his mother and intent on a political future. Got into a controversy on Oct 31, 2003, when he claimed he was barred from Shakti Sthal on his grandmother's 19th death anniversary.



Varun with Indira

**The Plot:** BJP's keen on co-opting members of the 'Gandhi' family in its fold. Varun's entry aimed at counter-



Varun Gandhi presents PM Vajpayee a bouquet after joining the BJP on Monday.

ing the charisma of first cousins, Priyanka and Rahul and confusing voters on the 'real Gandhi'.

**The Payoff:** Varun is too young to contest the LS polls (minimum age 25), but is being inducted into the BJP Youth Wing. Will play back-up to Vajpayee and other BJP heavyweights in election meetings. If NDA wins, mummy Maneka will be a strong contender for a ministry.

Sonia lashes out at NDA's *mayajal*

# Seat power keeps Pawar away

*9 Pawar's seat* *55-1* *12*

SNS & PTI

MUMBAI/NEW DELHI, Jan. 31 — Virtually sounding the Congress' poll bugle in Maharashtra today, the Congress president lashed out at the BJP-led NDA government for "failure on all fronts" and accused the government of spreading a "mayajal" to woo voters by offering poll-eve sops. But Mr Sharad Pawar's decision to stay away from the rally addressed by Mrs Sonia Gandhi at Digras in Maharashtra today completely dismayed the Congress and can probably be attributed to a tussle over seat-sharing for the next elections.

Mr Pawar, who was in Pune, did not travel to the Digras rally organised by the Banjara Mahasangh, as NCP sources said he was not "formally invited" at the golden jubilee of the Banjaras, a traditional vote bank of the Congress. Sources said Mr Pawar would address joint rallies with Congress only after a final deal on seat-sharing in and outside Maharashtra. The NCP chief had no reservation in sharing platform with Mrs Gandhi, they said.

The NCP has demanded 50 per cent of the seats in Maharashtra — both for Lok Sabha and the Assembly, sources said. At a meeting held at Mr Pawar's residence on Wednesday, Mr Pawar told senior Congress leaders that there should be fair distribution of seats between the two parties in accordance with the share of votes polled by NCP and Congress in the 1999 polls in the state. "It should be fifty-fifty," Mr Pawar reportedly told Mr Pranab Mukherjee, Mr Vayalar Ravi and Mr Ahmed Patel. The Congress leaders didn't reject the proposal.

## DMK parts with 10 for Congress

CHENNAI, Jan. 31. — The DMK tonight declared it would leave 16 seats to its allies — including 10 for the Congress, 4 for MDMK and 2 for CPI-M in Tamil Nadu. The seat-deal with CPI will be finalised later, DMK chief Mr M Karunanidhi said. However, the meeting between Mr Kamal Nath and Mr Karunanidhi, as promised by the former, didn't take place this evening as the Congress leader left for Delhi. Asked about it, Mr Karunanidhi said: "Better put the question to that party." The two held a two-hour meeting earlier today. — PTI

Sources said, they asked him to "wait". Outside Maharashtra, NCP demanded 25 Lok Sabha seats from Congress. In the 1999 Lok Sabha polls, Congress polled 29.71 per cent of popular votes and won 10 of the 42 seats it contested in Maharashtra which has 48 Lok Sabha seats.

## CPM to back Cong-led front

The CPI-M declared at Hyderabad today that they would support a Congress-led coalition after the elections, but the "CPI-M would have no alliance or front with the Congress" and the Congress-CPI-M combine's candidate for Prime Minister would be decided after the polls.

**Congress, Mayawati open dialogue, page 10**

# দক্ষিণে মিত্র পেল বিজেপি, কংগ্রেসে ফাটল

## এনডিএ'তে নয়, জয়া রাজি আসন রফায়

## করণাকরন সরলেন, ঘর গোছানোয় ধাক্কা

স্টাফ রিপোর্টার, নয়াদিল্লি ও চেম্বাই, ২৮ জানুয়ারি— তামিলনাড়ুতে জয়ললিতাকে সঙ্গী পেল বিজেপি। পাঁচ বছর পরে পন্ন ও দু'টি পাতা একসঙ্গে গাঁথা হচ্ছে তামিলনাড়ুতে। তবে এ আই এ ডি এম কে'র সঙ্গে বিজেপি'র আসন সমঝোতাই হচ্ছে, জয়ললিতা এখনই এন ডি এ-তে যোগ দিচ্ছেন না। আজ বিজেপি সভাপতি বেক্কাইয়া নাইডুর সঙ্গে জয়ললিতার পোয়েস গার্ডেনের বাড়িতে মিনিট পর্যতাল্লিশের বৈঠকে এই সিদ্ধান্ত হয়েছে। তিন শরিক ডি এম কে, পি এম কে এবং এম ডি এম কে এন ডি এ ছেড়ে চলে যাওয়ার পর জয়ললিতাকে পেল বিজেপি।

এ ডি এম কে আদৌ এন ডি এ-তে যোগ দেবে কি না সেই বিষয়ে জয়ললিতা বা বেক্কাইয়া পরিষ্কার কিছু জানাতে চাননি। বেক্কাইয়া বলেছেন, “আমরা একসঙ্গে কাজ করার সিদ্ধান্ত নিয়েছি। যে সব বিষয়ে আরও স্বচ্ছতা দরকার তা নিয়ে পরে আলোচনা করা যাবে।” জয়ললিতার সংক্ষিপ্ত মন্তব্য, “যা বলার বলে দিয়েছি। আর কিছু বলব না।” তবে তিনি এটা বলেছেন, বাজপেয়ীকে ভারী প্রধানমন্ত্রী হিসাবে মানুষের সামনে তুলে ধরবেন।

বিজেপি নেতৃত্ব অবশ্য জয়ললিতাকে জোটে আনার চেষ্টা চালিয়ে যাবেন। তাঁর সঙ্গে এ নিয়ে পরে আবার শীর্ষ নেতাদের আলোচনা হতে পারে বলে বিজেপি নেতারা দাবি করেছেন। এর আগে লালকৃষ্ণ আডবাণী এ আই এ ডি এম কে জোটে সামিল হওয়ার অনুরোধ জানিয়েছিলেন। কিন্তু চন্দ্রবাবু নাইডুর মতো জয়ললিতাও বাইরে থেকেই এন ডি এ-কে সমর্থনের পক্ষপাতী। স্থায়িত্বের স্বার্থে বাজপেয়ী-আডবাণীরা চাইছেন জয়ললিতাকে জোটে নিয়ে আসতে। এর আগে ১৯৯৮ সালে জয়ললিতা জোটে এবং সরকারে সামিল হয়েছিলেন। সে সময় জয়ললিতাকে সামলাতে যথেষ্ট বেগ পেতে হয়েছিল বিজেপি'কে। জোটে বাইরে থাকলে তাঁকে সামলানো আরও মুসকিল হবে বলে বিজেপি নেতারা মনে করছেন। চন্দ্রবাবুকেও বারবার জোটে ও সরকারে সামিল হওয়ার অনুরোধ করেছেন প্রধানমন্ত্রী। চন্দ্রবাবু রাজি হননি। জয়ললিতাও সেই পথেই হাটতে চান। তবে জয়ললিতার সঙ্গে সখ্য গড়ে ওঠায় বিজেপি যে খুব খুশি তা বোঝা গিয়েছে দলের সদর দফতরে বাজি পোড়ানো ও মিষ্টি বিতরণে। তুলনায় এ ডি এম কে দফতর ছিল উৎসবহীন।

জয়ললিতা কটা আসন বিজেপি'কে ছাড়বেন তা নিয়ে আজ কোনও সিদ্ধান্ত হয়নি বলে বেক্কাইয়া জানান। এই বিষয়ে আলোচনা করতে তিনি তিন সদস্যের কমিটি করে দিয়েছেন। কমিটিতে আছেন এল গণেশন, রাধাকৃষ্ণন ও সুকুমার নায়ায়ার। এর আগে জয়ললিতা বিজেপি'কে তিনটি আসন দিতে চেয়েছিলেন। তবে বিজেপি নেতারা জানিয়েছেন, জয়ললিতার সঙ্গে তাঁদের সম্পর্কের ক্ষেত্রে আসন সংখ্যা কোনও বাধা হবে না।

জয়ললিতার সঙ্গে আসন নিয়ে বেশি দরাদরি করতে পারছে না বিজেপি। কারণ, ডি এম কে এবং তাঁর সঙ্গীরা এন ডি এ ছেড়ে চলে যাওয়ার পর জয়ললিতাকে এখন তাদের অত্যন্ত দরকার। অন্য জায়গায় কিন্তু তারা আসন বাড়াতে চায়। যেমন অন্ধ্রপ্রদেশে তারা গতবারের থেকে বেশি আসন দাবি করেছে। পঞ্জাবেও তারা বেশি আসন চায়। কনটিকেও তারা গতবারের থেকে বেশি আসনে লড়তে চায়। গতবার বিজেপি লড়েছিল ৩৩০টির মতো আসনে। এই বার সংখ্যাটা সাড়ে তিনশোয় নিয়ে যেতে চায় বিজেপি। সংযুক্ত জনতা দল এ বার বিজেপি'র কাছে বেশি আসন দাবি করছে। জনতা দলের সঙ্গে সমতা পার্টি মিশে গিয়েছে। তাদের শক্তিও বেড়েছে। তাঁরা ঝাড়খণ্ডে বাড়তি আসন চায়। ওড়িশাতেও তারা আসন চেয়েছিল। বিজেপি-বিজেডি রাজি ছয়নি। ওড়িশাতে সংযুক্ত জনতা দলের দাবি খরিজ করে দেওয়া গেলেও ঝাড়খণ্ডে তা সম্ভব নয়। বিজেপি নেতারা জানিয়েছেন, যেহেতু ঝাড়খণ্ডে সমতা সরকারে আছে তাই তাঁদের দাবি উড়িয়ে দেওয়া সম্ভব নয়।

স্টাফ রিপোর্টার, নয়াদিল্লি ও চেম্বাই, ২৮ জানুয়ারি— ভোটের আগে ঘর গোছানোর পথে আবার সমস্যা পড়েছে কংগ্রেস।

কেরলের বিক্ষুব্ধ প্রবীণ নেতা কে করুণাকরন আজ দল ভেঙে বেরিয়ে যাওয়ার সিদ্ধান্ত ঘোষণা করেছেন। তিরুঅন্তপুরমের টেঙ্গোর থিয়েটারে এক নতুন দল গঠনের কথা জানিয়ে করুণাকরন বলেন, ‘কেরলের মানুষ ও প্রকৃত কংগ্রেসিদের’ এ কে অ্যান্টনির হাত থেকে রক্ষা করতে আগামী মাসে তিনি ‘ইন্দিরা জাতীয় কংগ্রেস’ গঠন করছেন। তবে কংগ্রেসের পক্ষে আশার কথা, করুণাকরনের পুত্র ও প্রদেশ কংগ্রেস সভাপতি কে মুরলীধরন জানিয়ে দিয়েছেন, তিনি কংগ্রেসেই থাকবেন। রাজ্যের দায়িত্বপ্রাপ্ত নেতা প্রণব মুখোপাধ্যায় অবশ্য বুঝিয়ে দিয়েছেন, করুণাকরন যদি দল ছেড়ে যেতে চান, যেতেই পারেন। সে ক্ষেত্রে কেন্দ্রীয় নেতৃত্ব তাঁর সঙ্গে কোনও রকম আলোচনায় বসবে না।

তিরুঅন্তপুরমের তাঁর নেতৃত্বাধীন ‘আই’ গোষ্ঠীর সম্মেলনে করুণাকরন আজ যখন নতুন দল গঠনের কথা ঘোষণা করেন, তখন সেখানে উপস্থিত ছিলেন রাজ্যের অ্যান্টনি সরকারের দুই মন্ত্রী কে শিবদাসন এবং পি শঙ্করন। ভায়লার রবি সহ কংগ্রেসের শীর্ষ নেতৃত্ব অবশ্য এখন ভরসা রাখছেন মুন্সীধরনের উপরই। কংগ্রেসের নেতারা আজ বিকেল থেকে নিজেদের মধ্যে কেরলের পরিস্থিতি নিয়ে আলোচনা করেছেন। তবে মুরলীধরন দলে থেকে গেলে করুণাকরন গোষ্ঠী বিভক্ত হয়ে পড়বে এবং ভোটে তেমন কোনও সুবিধা করতে পারবে না বলেই নেতৃত্বের ধারণা।

করণাকরনের ১৯ বিধায়কের গোষ্ঠীটি কংগ্রেস আই থেকে বেরিয়ে যাওয়ায় অ্যান্টনি কংগ্রেসের বিধানসভায় সংখ্যাগুরু নষ্ট হবে না। এখন যাতে রাজ্যে সরকার ভাঙার জন্য সি পি এম চেষ্টা না-করে তার জন্য সি পি এম নেতৃত্বকে আগেই অনুরোধ জানিয়ে রেখেছেন কংগ্রেস হাইকমান্ড। আজ বক্তৃতা দিতে গিয়ে ৮৭ বছরের করুণাকরন কিন্তু জানিয়েছেন, নির্বাচনে বামফ্রন্টের সঙ্গে সমঝোতার সম্ভাবনাও উড়িয়ে দেওয়া হচ্ছে না। তাঁর মন্তব্য, “কেউই তো অস্পৃশ্য নয়।” করুণাকরনের এই বিবৃতি থেকে স্পষ্ট, অ্যান্টনি কংগ্রেসকে হারানোর জন্য প্রয়োজনীয় নির্বাচনী জোট গড়ে তুলতে সচেষ্ট হবে কেরল কংগ্রেসের এই নতুন গোষ্ঠী।

এ দিকে, পণ্ডিচেরি কংগ্রেসের প্রবীণ নেতা পি কানন দলত্যাগ করার পরেই দুই মন্ত্রী, কে লক্ষ্মীনারায়ণ ও ই এলুমালাই, আজ রঙ্গস্বামী মন্দিরসভা থেকে পদত্যাগ করেছেন। পণ্ডিচেরি বিধানসভায় লক্ষ্মীনারায়ণ ছিলেন শিক্ষামন্ত্রী ও এলুমালাই আঞ্চলিক প্রশাসনমন্ত্রী। তবে তাঁদের পদত্যাগের কোনও কারণ এখনও পর্যন্ত জানানো হয়নি।

কংগ্রেসের অভ্যন্তরীণ এই সমস্যার পাশাপাশি যোগ হয়েছে অন্যদের নিয়ে মাথাব্যথা। অন্ধ্রপ্রদেশে তেলঙ্গানা রাষ্ট্রীয় সমিতি দাবি করছে, তাদের সঙ্গে জোট বা সমঝোতা করতে হলে কংগ্রেসকে পৃথক তেলঙ্গানার দাবিকে সমর্থন করতে হবে। শরদ পওয়ারের দল বলছে, কংগ্রেসের সঙ্গে সমঝোতা হলেও ‘বিদেশিনী প্রব্র’ থেকে তাঁরা সরে আসেননি। আর সমাজবাদী পার্টি সূত্রের খবর, উত্তরপ্রদেশের মুখ্যমন্ত্রী মুলায়ম সিংহ যাদব খুব সম্ভবত লোকসভার ভোটেও প্রার্থী হচ্ছেন। যার অর্থ, ভোটের পর নিজের জন্য ভিন্নতর ভূমিকার কথাও মাথায় রাখছেন মুলায়ম সিংহ যাদব। ভোটের পর পরিস্থিতি তেমন হলে কংগ্রেসকে সমর্থন করবেন, এমন নিশ্চয়তা মুলায়ম আজও দেননি।

ভোটের আগে কেরলের ভাজ্জ বা তেলঙ্গানা রাষ্ট্রীয় সমিতির জেদাজেদি কংগ্রেসের পক্ষে অবশ্যই একটা সমস্যা। এর পাশাপাশি তামিলনাড়ুতে ডি এম কে নেতা এম করুণানিধির সঙ্গে আসন-সমঝোতা সংক্রান্ত আলোচনায় এখনও তেমন অগ্রগতি হয়নি।



# Farmers, street vendors plied with poll sops

# Govt hawks some more concessions

OUR SPECIAL  
CORRESPONDENT

**New Delhi, Jan. 20: Pressing forward with the poll-sop policy of something for every interest group, the government today turned its attention to the rural economy and the street economy.**

The cabinet cleared a proposal to establish a national commission for farmers that will suggest ways to improve their incomes, slashed the interest rate on loans for irrigation projects from 10.5 to 6.5 per cent and approved a centrally-sponsored scheme to provide urban services in rural areas.

## CLIP'S COLLECTION

- National commission for farmers to suggest ways to improve income
- Interest rate on loans for irrigation projects cut from 10.5% to 6.5%
- National policy for street hawkers, giving them legal status
- Rs 12,390-crore scheme for providing urban services in rural areas
- Private companies allowed to buy foodgrain directly from farmers for export
- Approval for private participation in building international airport at Bangalore
- Nearly Rs 500 crore cleared for agriculture training centres
- Diesel at a rebate of Rs 1.50 a litre for fishermen

It felt a national policy for street vendors was also necessary to give them legal status.

This is the fourth instalment in the series of blandishments the government has announced over the past two weeks after deciding to go in for early elections.

In an attempt to blunt criticism, parliamentary affairs minister Sushma Swaraj said: "All these measures were announced by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee in his Independence Day speech last year. The framework for this package was ready

by September when the elections were nowhere in sight."

The commission for farmers will have a chairman of cabinet rank and two full-time and three part-time members.

Its brief will be to review the status of agriculture, recommend policies and programmes to enhance productivity, evaluate generation and dissemination of technology, and analyse the effectiveness of price and marketing policies and legal regimes.

The objective will be to increase farm income and take note of the changes taking place in the economic and trade environment. It will also discuss any other issue that is incidental or is referred to the panel by the government. The commission will prepare a roadmap for sustainable development of agriculture and optimise its contribution to the growth of the economy.

The cabinet also approved a change in the accelerated irrigation benefit programme under which the loan and the grant components will be clubbed. Two categories of beneficiary states have been created: the first — called the general category — will get a grant component of up to 30 per cent, and the second — a special category of states — will get grants up to 90 per cent.

Hawkers have been brought under a national policy. The move is an attempt to provide hawkers licences, create hawking zones in urban areas, ensure the empowerment of hawkers' organisations, rehabilitate child vendors and offer social security and access to credit through cooperatives and micro-finance institutions.

Street vendors will also be provided power and water. Measures will be taken to protect them against exploitation and extortion. The policy will be implemented by states.

Under a Rs 12,390 crore centrally-sponsored scheme, urban services will be provided in rural areas. It will focus on four areas — road and power, telecom and infotech services, educational and training institutions, and marketing hubs to ensure rural people get the best prices for the goods they produce. (See P 6)

# Sonia, Pawar talk sweet after tea

*Political Scene* Fri 16/1

KAY BENEDICT

New Delhi, Jan. 15: Sonia Gandhi and Sharad Pawar this evening stirred the brew for an alliance and sunk a five-year acrimony over tea, appearing before the media later wearing a smile and promising an alternative to the ruling combine.

Asked if it was a successful meeting, the Congress president said: "Yes. I think it was successful."

Pawar said the meeting was "good and I am happy".

The Maharashtra leader had left the Congress, along with P.A. Sangma, in 1999 over Sonia's "foreign origin", which he said today was not relevant at this point of time.

"That issue is not there. We are discussing an alternative to the NDA government," Pawar said. "One month ago I had said that this particular subject we are not going to raise at this juncture."

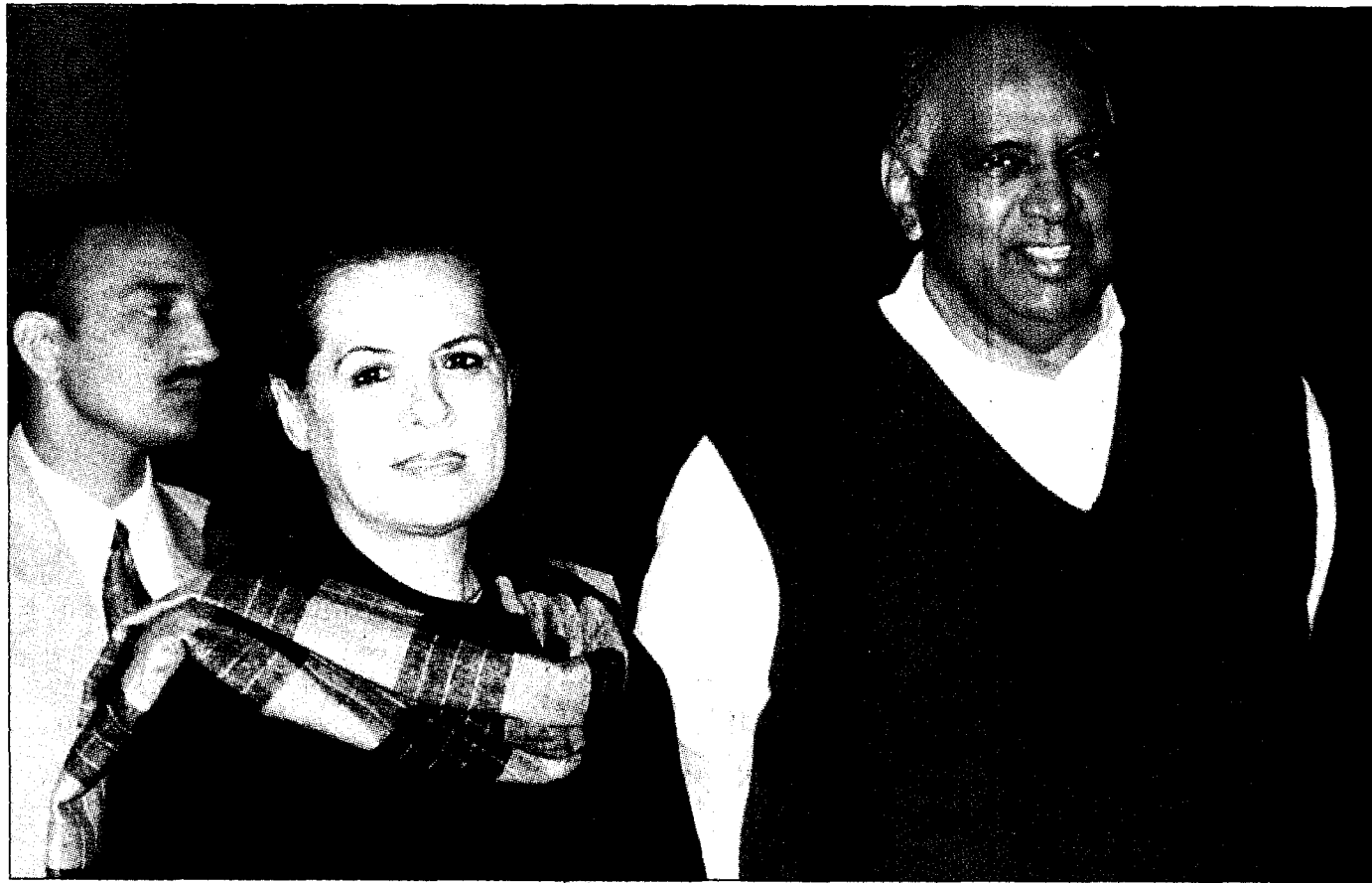
"There are certain issues for any political party. But when it decides to sit together (with other parties), certain things have to be kept out."

The meeting with Sonia came off after Pawar briefly resumed his on-and-off flirting with the BJP that now appears to have been a fruitless exercise.

BJP strategists, as high up as L.K. Advani, had tried to prevent a Sonia-Pawar alliance.

It appears that the pressure on Pawar from the rank and file of his Nationalist Congress Party in Maharashtra for an alliance with the Congress was too strong. A meeting of the party's national executive yesterday authorised Pawar to start talks with like-minded forces.

Sangma and Chhattisgarh leader V.C. Shukla, who left the



**FRIENDS AGAIN?** Sonia Gandhi with Sharad Pawar at New Delhi on Thursday. Picture by Rajesh Kumar ■ See Page 6

Congress later to join Pawar, opposed the Congress alliance but their voices were drowned in the overwhelming view in favour of one.

It is possible that Sangma and Shukla may leave the party. Sangma told PTI in Guwahati: "Sonia Gandhi started her political career with a cup of tea (hosted by Subramanian Swamy and attended by Jayalalithaa in March 1999 to topple the Vajpayee government, which happened, but the Congress could not pro-

vide an alternative) and has chosen to end her political career with another cup of tea (today)."

Sonia and Pawar seemed to have hit it off well at their first one-to-one that lasted nearly an hour, starting at 7.15 pm instead of the original 5 pm as the Congress president returned to Delhi late after addressing a rally at Bhatinda in Punjab.

"The process has begun," Pawar, flanked by Sonia, said.

"The process has started to fight the elections together. That

can be a possibility."

"We had a long discussion on the prospects of the two parties working together in the elections so that all like-minded parties defeat the BJP-led government," Sonia added.

She parried a question on whether Pawar's return to the Congress figured in the talks. "You leave that (for) now."

Asked if seat-sharing had been on the agenda, Pawar said: "It was a pre-poll meeting to discuss the possibility of providing

a viable alternative to the NDA government."

The ice between the two that even the local-level alliance in Maharashtra, where the two parties rule in a coalition, could not break melted after Sonia said a fortnight ago that she would talk to Pawar as part of her exercise to form a front to defeat the BJP. She followed it up by phoning Pawar on Tuesday night and he promptly invited her to tea.

After the debacle in the last Assembly polls, for the first time

## WOMAN OF THE DAY

MAYAVATI

- On her birthday, Sonia arrives first with flowers to keep alliance talks going
- CPM's H.S. Surjeet surprise visitor: has he given up on old friend Mulayam?
- M.A. Naqvi of the BJP was surprise No. 2: his intention is to create confusion

## MAN OF THE DAY

RAM VILAS PASWAN

- Two BJP ministers, Rajiv Pratap Rudy and Shahnawaz Hussain, at risk of losing their seats court Dalit leader
- BJP ally Telugu Desam comes calling for a different reason: to keep doors open for a post-poll realignment

## PARTY OF THE DAY

TEA AT PAWAR'S

- Sonia meets the Maharashtra leader at his residence: the 'process' of forging a partnership begins

## CALL OF THE DAY

HELLO DMK

- Sonia burns the phone line to Chennai, checking on new friend Karunanidhi

Sonia has embraced the task of forming a coalition seriously. In the morning, she visited BSP leader Mayavati to greet her on her birthday and called DMK leader M. Karunanidhi to reinforce the freshly-forged alliance.

The Sonia-Pawar bonhomie may provoke Sangma to strengthen his recently-floated North-eastern People's Forum and support the NDA. As for Shukla, who is being wooed by the BJP, the Congress has kept a line of communication open.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 10, 2004

## CHASING ALLIES

THE RECENT CONGRESS Working Committee meeting ended with an unambiguous message: the party will pull out all the stops to forge a broad alliance, either by building formal partnerships or by striking limited seat adjustment deals with other parties. Such an approach is in keeping with the political strategy articulated at the Srinagar and Shimla conclaves of the party. But the decision to cast the net as wide as possible in the search for political partners marks the formal recognition of a truth that the party has found difficult to accept: the Congress does not have the strength to come to power on its own. Wide as it may cast its net, it finds the opportunities limited by the current state of political play. In Bihar, the Rashtriya Janata Dal remains a loyal partner and in Tamil Nadu, the Congress seems to have all but tied up the loose ends in forging a powerful alliance with the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, which has pulled out of the National Democratic Alliance with a smaller offshoot in tow. But with the other major constituents of the ruling coalition showing no desire to leave the NDA, the Congress' room for building a large and broad-based anti-BJP front is somewhat restricted.

A major potential ally, the Nationalist Congress Party, was a cause for anxiety following its president, Sharad Pawar's statement that his party was keeping all its options open, including a possible tie-up with the NDA. However, talks between the BJP's poll managers and the NCP seem to have run aground, mainly due to differences over seat-sharing and difficulties with Bal Thackeray's "demand" that Chhagan Bhujbal, the former Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister who was once a senior Shiv Sena leader, be dropped from the NCP before it is accommodated in the NDA. The importance that Congress president Sonia Gandhi attaches to weaning the NCP away from the BJP's overtures was evident in her remark that she would talk to Mr. Pawar about an electoral tie-up. A Congress-NCP agreement on seat-sharing in

Maharashtra should make a substantial difference to electoral equations. In Uttar Pradesh, where the Congress is a junior partner, the party's chances of reaching an understanding with the Bahujan Samaj Party are good. Such an arrangement would benefit the Congress in Madhya Pradesh and to a smaller extent in Chhattisgarh and Haryana. In Uttar Pradesh, the Congress is clearly exploring the possibility of a larger front that includes players such as Mulayam Singh's Samajwadi Party and Kalyan Singh's Rashtriya Kranti Party. However, given the mutual animosity between the SP and the BSP, it is unlikely that these two formations will be a part of a common front.

The fact that the Congress is directly pitted against the Left parties in States where they are strong such as West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura, leaves scope for only minor adjustments between the two groupings elsewhere. In Andhra Pradesh and Orissa, the Congress is the main challenger to the Telugu Desam and the Biju Janata Dal; this automatically makes the BJP the *de facto* choice as junior partner for these strong regional parties. Among the smaller players that the Congress hopes to get on its bandwagon are the People's Democratic Party in Jammu and Kashmir, the Telingana Rashtra Samithi in Andhra Pradesh, and the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha in Jharkhand. Ram Vilas Paswan's Lok Janshakti is a potential ally but the problem here is the possible impact such a tie-up will have on the Bihar alliance with Laloo Prasad Yadav's Rashtriya Janata Dal. Having disbanded its isolationist no-coalition policy adopted at Pachmarhi in 1998, the Congress is in a situation in 2004 of chasing allies without adequate preparation and without clarity on the terms, starting with the identity of the Prime Minister on offer. The alliance factor will no doubt help its prospects but it needs a hefty swing in the popular vote if the grouping it heads is to have any real chance of forming the next Government in New Delhi.

# Third degree

The government we really don't deserve

Unlike their US or British counterparts, Indian newspapers do not endorse political parties during election time. This newspaper in particular always judges parties on merits and has a well-deserved notoriety among politicians of having severely criticised everyone at some time or the other. However, deep, a priori concern must be expressed over one possible outcome of Elections 2004 — the coming to power of the so-called Third Front. We have reservations whether the BJP, if it is returned to power, as seems odds on at the moment, will, as it should, put aggressive Parivar cousins in place once and for all.

We have serious doubts whether Ms Sonia Gandhi will make a good or even an average Prime Minister, not because she was born in Milan but because she seems to lack substance and her style is too reminiscent of byzantine Italian politics. But what causes the most serious apprehension is a verdict so fractured that the BJP or the Congress, to keep each other out, supports a motley collection of has-beens to form the government. Such a government is likely to include a combination of the following: Mulayam Singh Yadav (who can get either BJP or Congress support), the Left (no BJP support), George Fernandes, Nitish Kumar et al (no Congress support), one but not both of the Munnetra Kazaghams, the Telugu Desam Party, the Rashtriya Janata Dal, the Nationalist Congress Party and other regional players. It would be an error to assume that such a government would be as chaotic and farcical as those of the two United Front experiments between 1996 and 1999. The farce will be funnier but humour will be a luxury because India will suffer terribly under such a dispensation.

To begin with there will be a ridiculous internecine battle within the front over who should be Prime Minister. Chandrababu Naidu is the only candidate who does not curdle your blood. Jayalalithaa's undoubted administrative abilities and articulateness have to be set off against her strong propensity to confuse between public and private property. Similar concerns exist about Sharad Pawar, but he himself perhaps fancies his chances. The two Yadavs, however, won't serve under either Naidu or Jayalalithaa, neither probably will Fernandes or the Left leaders. That means what? Laloo Yadav as Prime Minister? Or Jyoti Basu? Or Mulayam Singh Yadav, who is only a shade better than these two in terms of his abilities for the top job? May be there will be a PM even more unlikely than HD Deve Gowda or IK Gujral. And that PM's cabinet, though constantly at war because every minister will have different regional fishes to fry, will have one unifying feature — it will have little or no understanding of economic imperatives, because crony socialism will be the dominant ideology. If India gets a new government mid-2004, it can end the year even better than 2003 — assuming an okay monsoon — if the Centre carries on reforming and building infrastructure, the latter with active private sector cooperation. But, again with the exception of Naidu and Jayalalithaa, a non-BJP, non-Congress government will have people with dreadful economic policy records and even poorer economic policy understanding. The Left in West Bengal, Laloo in Bihar, Mulayam in UP — their states speak for themselves. On current evidence, these are the last kind of politicians the economy needs. More so because international investor confidence in India will nosedive in the event of such a government. Of course, that's no reason to argue in principle against a democratic verdict. But it is a good reason to be extremely apprehensive in practice.

9-8-04  
11-04

# Congress rules out Sonia warms up to Paswan

K. SUBRAHMANYA

**New Delhi, Dec. 31:** Even as Sonia Gandhi approached fence-sitter Ram Vilas Paswan in an attempt to build a coalition that can take on the National Democratic Alliance, the Congress today said it would not deal with parties favouring a third front.

The assertion by party chief spokesperson S. Jaipal Reddy came soon after Mulayam Singh Yadav said his Samajwadi Party would have nothing to do with the anti-BJP alliance that Sonia is trying to build. The Uttar Pradesh chief minister made it clear his party would not join an alliance of which the Bahujan Samaj Party may be a part.

Reddy did not directly respond when asked about Mulayam's remark that he would not join a front that included the BJP or BSP. But the Congress would prefer the BSP as an alliance partner for it feels the Dalit party would be a more useful ally in the heartland, even though the Samajwadi may be a better bet in Uttar Pradesh.

Senior party leaders say aligning with the BSP could help the Congress win some favour among the Scheduled Castes.

Reddy responded to Mulayam's statement by saying the overriding objective of all anti-BJP parties must be to protect the country's secular character. Refuting the chief minister's BSP-centric argument for keeping away from the Congress, the spokesperson said: "The protection of secularism is so paramount that past contradictions need to be buried (in order to forge an alliance)."

The Congress may not have succeeded in roping in the chief minister of the electorally most crucial state as an ally, but its chief followed up yesterday's DMK success by opening a channel of communication with Lok Janshakti Party chief Paswan.

Sonia walked across to Paswan's residence that neigh-

bours her 10 Janpath residence and spoke for more than half an hour. "I came here to wish a very happy new year to Paswan and his family. We also discussed a little politics," she told media-persons as she emerged from his residence.

The Congress chief is obviously hoping to induct Paswan into her proposed anti-BJP alliance. The leader, who is also being urged by the NDA to return to its fold, was a bit hesitant about Sonia's overtures, even though he welcomed the move to forge an anti-BJP grouping.

Paswan said such an initiative should have been taken two years ago when he mooted such an alliance after quitting the NDA. The leader, who is a significant player in Bihar politics, said he and Sonia spoke about the contradictions among some parties which could pose problems in their coming together under a common grouping.

The leaders obviously discussed Paswan's continuing differences with Laloo Prasad Yadav's Rashtriya Janata Dal which make it difficult for the three parties to ally. But the Bihar leader said if the BJP could manage contradictions in the NDA, differences among allies in the proposed coalition could also be papered over.

Sonia spoke to DMK chief M. Karunanidhi over telephone yesterday and met CPM general secretary Harkishen Singh Surjeet as well. A few days ago, she had also spoken with CPI general secretary A.B. Bardhan. There are indications that the Congress chief might convene a party working committee meeting next week to discuss what progress has been made in netting allies in every state.

Elsewhere, Reddy discounted reports that the BJP-Shiv Sena combine in Maharashtra was trying to woo the Nationalist Congress Party into forming a three-way alliance ahead of Assembly elections in that state.

THE TELEGRAPH

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