

Third front: a non-starter

By Harish Khare

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The third front idea promotes a certain kind of unappetising political leaders and seeks to reward their equally unhealthy impulses and interests.

THE IDEA of a "third front" in Indian politics keeps getting resurrected periodically. It is going to get kicked around over the next few months as various segments of the Left are scheduled to debate their "lines," including the desirability of reviving the third front, at their respective party congresses. Whether the Left parties intend it or not, the enemies of the United Progressive Alliance Government are already permitting themselves a gleeful smile. As it happens, most of the non-Left political formations are variously ignorant of the culture of internal debate in the Left and are invariably prone to misunderstand the Communist parties' doctrine-centric formulations.

The third front idea can be traced to Ram Manohar Lohia's omnibus anti-Congressism, dating back to the mid-1960s, when the Congress loomed very large on the Indian political scene and the non-Congress parties were hopelessly divided and too weak to mount any kind of challenge. Except the Communist party and its various offshoots, almost all other non-Congress groups and their leaders also happened to have personal animosities and disagreements with the Congress leaders, especially the Nehru-Gandhi family. Whatever the reason, the Lohiaite anti-Congressism made electoral tactical sense, because beginning with the 1952 elections, the Congress could never win a majority of popular vote and it was common sense that the Congress could be booted out only if all its rivals were able to pool their votes behind one candidate. But this sensible proposition was rarely put into practice, primarily because of highly antagonistic contradictions among the non-Congress parties; these contradictions were rooted in the social realities of rural India.

The Lohiaite anti-Congressism, nonetheless, made certain kind of political permissiveness fashionable. Any group, any party, and any leader who declared itself/himself in opposition to the Congress were deemed to be politically correct and worthy of admiration. The post-Emergency Janata Party was the finest culmination of this omnibus anti-Congressism. The collapse of the Janata Party because of the internal contradictions is a well-known phase of our recent history; but it needs to be remembered that the experiment had only one lasting consequence. It provided

respectability to the Jana Sangh/Bharatiya Janata Party and its patron, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. Nonetheless, anti-Congressism reasserted itself in 1989 when the Left and the BJP propped up a National Front, which collapsed within 18 months, giving another boost not only to communal forces but also to the right-wing ideas and ideologues. The National Front regime paved the way for the 1991 decisive right turn in our polity.

The National Front experiment also gave a fillip to the politics of caste leader at the expense of every canon of wholesome politics or ideology-based articulation. Caste-based politics was, willy-nilly, accepted as a necessary antidote to the communal forces. The post-Mandal success of caste politics set the stage for an irreversibly fractured polity.

By the time the 1996 Lok Sabha elections came, the national parties were either stagnant or in decline to become the fulcrum of stability at the national level. And the United Front was formed. Driven by a desire to keep both the Congress and the BJP out of power, assorted parties and leaders joined hands to provide a "third front" alternative. The experiment failed in its two stated objectives. First, it did not slow down the growth and spread of the "communal" forces; and secondly, it did not reverse the process of liberalisation/globalisation of the economy that had begun in 1991.

This was not at all surprising because the United Front was a tactical device to enable all kinds of leaders to play out their regional or personal political aspirations. The first United Front Steering Committee, for instance, consisted of leaders such as Arjun Singh, Madhavrao Scindia, G.K. Moopanar and P. Chidambaram, all of whom were key players in the 1991-1996 swing towards liberalisation; they found themselves in the United Front company only because of their personal differences with P.V. Narasimha Rao, the then Congress president. This collection of highly personalised leaders only meant constant instability at the Centre. It also made the BJP an attractive proposition to the newly em-

powered and influential middle classes. The BJP became the preferred party of the corporate forces as also of the middle classes, which hankered for "stability." The polity is now afflicted with a Kafkaesque absurdity: first anti-Congressism strengthened the BJP, and then anti-BJPism brought an upswing in the Congress fortunes, enabling Manmohan Singh to cobble together a far from satisfactory coalition.

In itself, a third front is not such an outlandish idea; after all, the two "national parties" — the Congress and the BJP — barely command between them a majority of the Lok Sabha seats. And it can be argued that the non-Congress, non-BJP voices are entitled to want to provide a viable alternative at the national level. Unfortunately the polity, as it is

STATECRAFT

constituted today, cannot afford a third front luxury. A third front has to necessarily consist of regional parties. There is nothing intrinsically unhealthy about a regional party; by definition, a regional party is born when the national parties fail to appreciate and accommodate local sentiments and local leaders. It can be further argued that as part of natural progression, these regional leaders learn to shoulder national-level responsibility once they become part of a coalition at the Centre.

The third front idea thus becomes an invitation to the regional or State-based leaders to nurture national ambitions. Nothing intrinsically wrong with the flowering of such aspirations. However, in this age of coalition, regional leaders do acquire a national veto and often become an anti-thesis to collective national good.

With the possible exception of the Nationalist Congress Party, almost every other regional party can be essentially pared down as a caste party, centred around a leader. Given the deepening electoral competitiveness, the smaller the party the minimum are its institutional concerns. And to the extent the third front idea deepens these leaders' appeal, the polity is prevented in its healthy discovery of ideology and ideas. The worst sufferer is the Left movement.

The central committee of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), in its review of the 2004 Lok Sabha elections, noted the deleterious effect: "One of the problems facing the Party and the democratic movement in this connection has been sharply focussed once again in these elections. That is the continuing, and in some places, the intensification of the caste appeal and fragmentation of the political forces on caste lines. Caste based parties or the appeal of caste leaders in parties have succeeded in wooing away sections of people who should have been mobilised by us."

The third front idea puts a premium on not only a leader's caste-centric appeal, but it also provides a licence for leader-centric politics of negotiation, bargaining and intrigue. It is unfortunately true that almost all political parties — national or regional or sub-regional — suffer from a lack of internal democratic culture; but this undemocratic impulse gets institutionalised in these smaller parties.

The accent is on the leader, not on the party or its presumed constituency. The leader's doings — and undoings — have to be overlooked, all in the name of fighting the bigger political "enemy", the BJP or the Congress. In the process, the public opinion gets completely tired of the third front leaders' antics and eventually settles down for this or that "national" party.

Because the third front idea promotes a certain kind of unappetising political leaders and seeks to reward their equally unhealthy impulses and interests, it is basically at odds with the requirement of coherence and efficacy at the Centre. The institutional authority of the Prime Minister suffers substantial erosion. Even at the best of times, the Indian polity witnesses a daily tug of war between centripetal and centrifugal forces. In the near conceivable future, who-soever presides over New Delhi would need to have the requisite political elbowroom to deal effectively with a host of global forces and voices, all out to make unhappy, even rapacious, demands on us. Collective wisdom would need to be summoned to present a united front against these external players and their internal collaborators. Given this challenging context, the third front idea is decidedly a bad thought and an unhelpful tactical ploy.

23 DEC 2004

THE HINDU

REGIONALISATION AND THE VOTE

THE REJECTION OF the National Democratic Alliance was the most obvious feature of Verdict 2004. But an examination of the vote share and seats won by various parties points strongly to an underlying phenomenon — the growth of regional parties at the expense of the country's two political heavyweights, the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Congress. The BJP, which won 23.75 per cent of the total vote in the 1999 Lok Sabha, garnered only 22.16 per cent in 2004; the Congress' vote share dropped from 28.30 per cent in 1999 to 26.69 per cent this time round. Coincidentally, both parties registered a decline of 1.6 percentage points. However, the decline in the BJP's case is far more serious: unlike the Congress, it contested more seats than it did in 1999. Collectively, the vote share of the BJP and the Congress has slipped to less than 49 per cent (down from 52.05 per cent and 51.41 per cent in the 1999 and 1998 general elections respectively). The aggregate Lok Sabha seats they won stands at 283 compared with 296 in 1999 and 323 in 1998.

Against this story of decline, the performance of other parties, regional and national, stands out. This is led by the impressive performance of the Left parties, which won a record 61 seats on the basis of an 8.34 per cent vote share. An analysis by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies reveals that in this general election, as much as 37 per cent of the total vote was won by 'regional parties', a category that excludes the Left parties but includes national parties with region-specific bases, such as the Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party. This is a small but not insignificant increase over 1998 and 1999 when these regional parties won 36.0 per cent and 35.2 per cent of the total vote re-

spectively. In striking contrast, these parties managed only 19 per cent of the vote in the 1996 Lok Sabha election.

What does this electoral pattern signify? First it reveals that parties with region-specific bases have continued to grow since 1998, a watershed election for them. Secondly, it suggests that, in the absence of a reversal of this trend, the politics of coalition is here to stay. The Congress and the BJP might have other ideas but they will have no option but to forge as many pre-election alliances as possible in order to stay in the election race. Finally, the pattern of voting reveals that the BJP's attempt to convert the 14th general election into a presidential style contest — one between Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Sonia Gandhi hiding behind a question mark — was a total failure. The results suggest that local issues shaped the overall outcome much more than the BJP had anticipated. The factors that influenced Verdict 2004 ranged from the incumbency disadvantage at the State level (particularly in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh) to alliance arithmetic (in States such as Orissa and Bihar) and caste and community loyalties (most noticeably in Uttar Pradesh). Mr. Vajpayee's personal popularity was never in doubt and the BJP seems to have estimated correctly that it would be better placed if it made him the centrepiece of its campaign. The CSDS post-poll survey published in *The Hindu* (May 20) suggests that the net BJP vote share would have fallen by a whopping 5.7 percentage points had he not been projected as Prime Ministerial candidate. However, what Verdict 2004 highlights is that something as complex and multi-faceted as an Indian general election cannot, through hype and propaganda, be turned into a gladiatorial contest between two leaders.

Home fires, already

5/8
2/21 > Welcome to coalition politics

If Laloo Yadav is not to do to Manmohan Singh/Sonia Gandhi what Jayalalitha did to Vajpayee in 1998-99, the present Prime Minister and Super Prime Minister will have to do what the then Prime Minister didn't — tell a troublesome ally with troublesome curriculum vitae that some demands are non-negotiable. If mollified, politicians like Jaya and Laloo tend to multiply their truculence. And while Sonia may have happy memories of the Jaya tea party that brought the Vajpayee government down and brought her close to the prime ministership she says she never wanted, she should remember the storm is brewing in her own tea cup now. There are, however, some advantages for the Congress coalition. Jaya could switch sides. Laloo can't, since he and BJP are mutually unacceptable. Laloo can threaten to go alone but the departure of his 23 MPs will not affect the government's arithmetical stability. Plus, Laloo takes a lot of political advice from the Left, which seems keen to maintain a stable ship. His involvement in the fodder scam — that CBI conducted the investigation and courts are hearing the case — makes the RJD chief unacceptable for the home ministry and for any cabinet post for that matter. It also precludes a Laloo man getting the junior minister's post in home; this dodge the Congress must avoid.

Jaya had her man in the law ministry whose sole brief was to try and ensure the law takes allegedly anything but its own course where the AIADMK chief was involved. Laloo's main brief is likely to be the same and when he follows his master's instructions, the Congress will catch nothing but grief. Plus, once one ally has been seen to be acting up and getting away, others get encouraged. On the other hand, too strong an assertion of brotherliness can do damage. Massaging egos while moderating ambitions is a fine art that the Congress will have to learn on the job. They have a model: the 1999-2004 Vajpayee government that lasted its course.

THE STATESMAN

22 MAY 2004

Berth pangs in doc's chamber

HT Correspondent
New Delhi, May 20

THE PROCESS of government formation ran into early roadblocks today with some of the pre-poll allies, notably the RJD's Laloo Yadav first presenting an unrealistic wish list and thereafter resorting to brinkmanship.

Among the allies approached with invitations on behalf of CPP chairperson Sonia Gandhi to join the government included NCP chief Sharad Pawar and DMK's M. Karunanidhi. Three different two-member teams of Congress leaders contacted these leaders.

Throughout the day, these Congress leaders and Ghulam Nabi Azad, who received word from Andhra ally TRS that it wanted the Rural Development ministry, drove in and out of 10 Janpath. In the middle of hard bargaining by some of the al-

POUND OF FLESH



Laloo asked for Home plus Dy PM. Cong said no way. Angry, Laloo dashed to Patna, saying he is more interested in a package for Bihar



Though Lok Janshakti Party (LJP) leader Ram Vilas Paswan denies it, the buzz is he is angling for the Railways portfolio



The DMK will bargain for two Cabinet berths and two MoS positions, with the promise of giving Dayanidhi Maran a Cabinet post

lies, Manmohan Singh had four meetings with Sonia.

Laloo is believed to have sought the Home portfolio with the rank of Deputy Prime Minister. His reasoning: the RJD is the second largest alliance partner with 21 MPs.

But the Congress is reluctant to cede the Home,

Finance, Defence and External Affairs portfolios to any of its allies. In a pressure tactic, the RJD leader left for Patna after stating that he is more interested in an economic package for Bihar. "I'm not running after any portfolio. I'm the one who makes Prime Ministers."

Laloo, unlike the NCP and the DMK, is also understood to have sought ministerial berths for some of his party MPs, including Raghuvansh Prasad Singh, Taslimuddin and Kanti Singh. Whether or not the RJD will get the share it has demanded will depend on the criterion evolved by consensus on the basis of the legislative strength of various allied parties. Manmohan could also have reservations about inducting MPs facing criminal probes as ministers.

Pawar is understood to have taken a very reasonable position in his talks with Sonia's emissaries. Another pre-poll ally, the JMM's Shibu Soren, has already made public his preference for the portfolios of Coal, Steel or Power. The LJP's Ram Vilas Paswan is keen on the Railway ministry. But he may also settle for the Communications portfolio.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

21 MAY 2004

Government formation and after

By K.K. Kalyal

The new rulers will need to muster all the tact and ingenuity at their command to ensure the smooth functioning of the government they are going to put together.

THE PRESIDENT, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, has been spared the agony of choosing from among various options on how to go about the formation of a new government — a thankless job in the present surcharged political atmosphere. The decisive nature of the poll verdict, what with the Congress-led allies and its supporters crossing the halfway mark made his job easy. Not so easy is the task of the new rulers who will need to muster all the tact and ingenuity at their command to ensure the smooth functioning of the government they are going to put together. It is challenging but achievable.

The Congress, its allies and supporters would do well to learn from the debacle of the National Democratic Alliance. Among the several factors responsible for its downfall was the arrogance of its leaders, manifesting in diverse ways. Take the case of coalitional politics, of which Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the outgoing Prime Minister, was the architect. His party, the BJP, assumed office in early 1998 with the support of some 20 groups, big and small. It did experience hiccups but remained in power for over a year. The combine collapsed because of the exit of a major partner, AIADMK, but after being voted back to power in a fresh election, it nearly completed its tenure.

The very "success" of this coalition was its undoing. The BJP took its continuance for granted, and ignored the task of nurturing and strengthening the coalition. Its high and mighty ways alienated some of its important partners — notably the DMK and other Dravidian parties, the Indian National Lok Dal of Om Prakash Chautala in Haryana, Ram Vilas Paswan's Lok Janshakti Party, and the National Conference in Jammu and Kashmir. As shown by a quick analysis of the election results, the damage to the NDA would have been considerably contained had these groups stayed in the alliance. There would not have been any erosion in its strength nor would the alliance have suffered from the negative momentum generated by the well-publicised departures. Mr. Vajpayee did nothing to prevent it.

There are several theories about the alienation of the DMK from the BJP. One, strains in the ties between it and the Tamil Nadu BJP cadres for reasons not easy to identify. Two, the political consequences of the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, Jayalalithaa's

stand against religious conversions and Sonia Gandhi's foreign origin. This endeared her to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, leading to gradual proximity between the BJP and the AIADMK — and the inevitable distancing of the DMK from the NDA. The drift in the relations between Mr. Chautala, Haryana Chief Minister, and the NDA was also ascribed to the collapsed equation between the local BJP leaders and his party.

Another manifestation of the NDA's arrogance. The Vajpayee Government's action in pushing through the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act contributed — remotely and indirectly — to the bitterness between the Dravidian groups and the NDA. The arrest of Vaiko, respected leader of the MDMK, one of the Dravidian parties, by the Tamil Nadu Government under POTA, the widespread perception that the anti-terrorism law was used for extraneous — political — reasons, and the inability of the Centre to intervene in the matter (through a mechanism such as a Central Review Committee which was belatedly set up) naturally helped create — and gradually increase — the distance between them and the BJP.

Around the same time, the Congress witnessed a phenomenon in the reverse direction. Until recently its leaders, living in the past glory, contemptuously spurned the idea of power sharing. They continued to work for an unrealistic goal — of forming a "Congress only" government. Despite the qualitative change in the political landscape, they refused to see the relevance of the coalitional logic. Had that not been the case, a non-NDA coalition would have assumed office in 1999.

Some time ago, however, the Congress decided on a major strategic shift. Coalition was no longer a dirty word for Ms. Gandhi — and hence for other Congress leaders. Remarkable, indeed, was the way she went about in search of allies — walking to the house of next-door neighbour Mr. Paswan, visiting the Bahujan Samaj Party leader, Mayawati, at her residence, despatch of a high-profile

special envoy to establish contacts with the DMK leader, M. Karunanidhi, and his colleagues, making special efforts for talks with the Telangana Rashtra Samithi leaders in Andhra Pradesh, on the one hand, and the tribal representatives in Jharkhand, on the other. There was another masterstroke — alliance in Maharashtra with the Nationalist Congress Party leader, Sharad Pawar, who had parted company with her, not very long ago, on the issue of a person of foreign origin occupying a top position in the government.

If the BJP general secretary, Pramod Mahajan, is to be believed, Mr. Pawar had, in the first instance, sought a deal with the BJP and the Shiv Sena. The talks broke down because of the disagreement on the number of seats for his party. Mr. Pawar denied it, saying this was a mischievous disinformation of the type the BJP had used against the Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister, Mulayam Singh Yadav. Correct or otherwise, the "deal" had been a major talking point in political circles. Ms. Gandhi could not have been unaware of it and that, perhaps, accounted for the seriousness with which she sought to woo the NCP. This was an ironic turn of the political wheel — a bitter opponent of power-sharing turning into an architect of alliances, and the pioneer in the building of the NDA coalition damaging it, even though unwittingly.

The purpose in detailing the sequence of recent events in the two camps is to draw attention to the need for the Congress-led alliance to avoid the mistakes made by the NDA. There are at least three lessons that could be grasped by the new rulers. One, continuous attention will have to be paid to the task of nurturing the coalition and the political alliances behind it. Two, special care to be taken to ensure that contradictions among the alliance partners in the States do not cast their shadow on the functioning of the coalition at the Centre. Three, serious consideration should be given to the consequences of the legislative agenda, especially to the items with a divisive potential.

The Congress and the new Prime

Minister may have to deal with a lesser number of allies and supporters than the unwieldy 24-strong conglomeration that Mr. Vajpayee had to manage but its task would not be any less difficult. In the new dispensation, the asymmetry between the bigger constituent, the Congress, and the others is not as vast as was the case with the outgoing coalition.

As against 145 members of the Congress in the Lok Sabha, the Left will have 61 plus and Mulyam Singh Yadav's Samajwadi Party 36 (whatever be the nature of association with the new set-up). But the non-Congress parties in the new ruling combine have a mind of their own, with a pronounced ideological underpinning. The task of evolving a consensus on major policy issues, both at the decision-taking stages and at the level of implementation, will require a spirit of mutual accommodation and flexibility (of course, without sacrificing core ideological concerns).

There will be the risk of the country being treated to the unseemly spectacle of wrangling in public, which will need to be avoided in the interest of the credibility and cohesion of the new government. Nothing will be more damaging than a paralysis in decision-taking. The new rulers are not that unrealistic as to underestimate the divide, to cite one instance, between the thinking of the Congress and the Left parties on economic policies (as is evident from their manifestoes). They will need to rise to the occasion rather than slump in the face of the challenge.

State-level contradictions among some of the constituents of the new combine are sharper and the consequent problems tougher than before. Think of the clash in the political interests of the Congress and the Left Front in West Bengal and Kerala, and between the Congress and the Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh and you will have an idea of the enormous effort required to protect the Centre against the fallout of the wrangles in the States. The hostility in the relationship between the NDA constituents in Tamil Nadu was far less acute and yet the Vajpayee-led coalition collapsed under its weight. The task of de-linking the State-level wrangles from cooperative functioning at the Centre will be far from easy now.

And, finally, the new rulers will have to ensure that the POTA-like measures — and the attitude behind it — have no place on their agenda.

আঞ্চলিক দলের দ্বিধা

শেষ পর্যন্ত বামপন্থীরা কংগ্রেস নেতৃত্বাধীন সরকারে যোগ না দেওয়াই মনস্থ করিলেন। এ ব্যাপারে সকলেই বড়দা সি পি আই এমের দিকে চাহিয়াছিল। বড়দা সিদ্ধান্ত লইতে কিছু বেশি সময়ই লইলেন। এক বার বড়দার সিদ্ধান্ত জানা হইয়া গেলে একাধিক বার বাম পরিবারের মেজো, সেজো ও ছোট তরফও তাঁহার অনুগমন করিলেন। সরকারে তাঁহার যোগ না দিলেও বাহির হইতে কংগ্রেস জোটকে সমর্থনের নিশ্চয়তা বামেরা দিয়াছেন। যোগ না দেওয়ার ব্যাখ্যা তাঁহার দেন নাই বটে, তবে এই সিদ্ধান্তের পিছনে তাঁহাদের রাজনৈতিক বাধ্যবাধকতা বুঝিতে অসুবিধা হওয়ার কথা নয়। বাধ্যতাটি একটি আঞ্চলিক শাসক দলের কেন্দ্রীয় শাসক গোষ্ঠীতে শরিক হওয়ার সমস্যা প্রসূত। এবং এই সমস্যা একা বামেরদের নয়, আঞ্চলিক রাজনীতিতে হাত-পাকানো অন্যান্য দলেরও। এমনকী তথাকথিত কেন্দ্রীয় বা জাতীয় দলগুলিও এ সমস্যা হইতে মুক্ত নয়।

পশ্চিমবঙ্গ, কেরল ও ত্রিপুরায় কংগ্রেসের বিরুদ্ধে লড়াই করিয়াই বামেরদের ক্ষমতায় আরোহণ করিতে হয়। সেই কংগ্রেসের গড়া কেন্দ্রীয় সরকারে বামেরা যোগদান করিলে রাজ্যগুলিতে তাঁহার কংগ্রেসের বিরুদ্ধে প্রার্থী দিবেন কোন যুক্তিতে, ভোটারদের রায়ই বা চাহিবেন কেমন করিয়া? জ্যোতি বসুর মতো বাম নেতারা বিগত বেশ কিছু কাল যাবৎই বলিয়া আসিতেছেন, যে-সব রাজ্যে বামেরা প্রার্থী দিতে পারে না, সেই সব রাজ্যে বা আসনে কংগ্রেসের প্রার্থীকে বামেরা সমর্থন করিবে। কিন্তু বাম-শাসিত তিন রাজ্যে কংগ্রেসই প্রধান প্রতিপক্ষ, অতএব এই সব আসনে হাড্ডাহাড্ডি লড়াই। এই লড়াই বা প্রতিদ্বন্দ্বিতাকে সর্বভারতীয় স্তরে এতটা অদৃশ্য করিয়া দেওয়া সম্ভব নয় যাহাতে কংগ্রেসের সরকারে शामिल হওয়া যাইবে। দলীয় সদস্য, কর্মী বা সমর্থকদের কাছেই বা এই যোগদানের কী কৈফিয়ত দেওয়া হইবে? দল টিকাইয়া রাখার প্রস্তুতিও তো জরুরি। সমস্যাটি মুলায়ম সিংহ যাদব কিংবা লালুপ্রসাদ যাদবের মতো আঞ্চলিক মনসবদারদেরও। তাঁহার যা কেন্দ্রের

কংগ্রেস সরকারে যোগ দিতে কিছুটা দ্বিধাগ্রস্ত, তাহার কারণ ইহাই। হয়তো অ-বিজেপি, ধর্মনিরপেক্ষ সরকারে শরিক না হইলে লোকে পাঁচ কথা বলিবে এই শঙ্কা এবং মস্তিষ্ক হাসিল করিয়া নিজেদের নিয়ন্ত্রিত রাজ্যগুলির জন্য বাড়তি অনুদান বা সাহায্য আদায় করিয়া লওয়ার প্রত্যাশা তাঁহাদের দ্বিধা উত্তীর্ণ হইতে সাহায্য করিয়াছে দৃঢ়ভাবে নিজেদের রাজ্যে বন্ধন বামেরদের সে সমস্যা তত নাই। ও তাঁহার কেন্দ্রীয় শাসক জোটের বাহি- থাকার বিলাসিতা দেখাইতে পারেন- তেলুগু দেশম বিজেপির কেন্দ্রীয় জোটে শরিক না হইয়াও বাহির হইতে সমর্থনের বিনিময়ে জোটের সরকারের নিকট হইতে অঙ্গপ্রদেশের জন্য প্রভুত সম্পদ আহরণ করিয়া আনিয়াছিল। ফলে রাজ্যেও বিজেপির সহিত জোট গড়িয়াই তাহাকে ভোটে লড়িতে হয়। বিজেপির জনপ্রিয়তা হ্রাস চন্দ্রবাবু নায়ডুকেও ধরাশায়ী করে। তিনি যদি স্বাধীনভাবে ভোটে লড়িতেন, বিজেপি জোটের দায় স্বীকৃত বহন করিতে না হইত, তবে কী হইত কে জানে?

ভারতের গণতান্ত্রিক ব্যবস্থায় কোয়ালিশন রাজনীতির প্রচলন এই অভিনব সমস্যাটি সৃষ্টি করিয়াছে। ইহার মীমাংসা হইতে পারে রাজনৈতিক দলগুলির প্রতিদ্বন্দ্বিতার ক্ষেত্র যে কোনও একটি স্তরে সীমাবদ্ধ করিয়া। যেমন কেন্দ্রীয় আইনসভায় যে দল প্রতিনিধি প্রেরণের জন্য প্রার্থী মনোনীত করিবে, প্রাদেশিক আইনসভায় সে দল যোগ দিবে না। এমনকী পুরসভা, ত্রিস্তর পঞ্চায়েতের মতো স্থানীয় স্বশাসিত সংস্থার নির্বাচনেও তাহারা অনুপস্থিত থাকিবে। কিংবা কলেজ-বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়ের নিয়ামক সংস্থার নির্বাচনে, ছাত্র ইউনিয়ন, ট্রেড ইউনিয়নের নির্বাচনেও। এই বিভাজন নিশ্চিত করিতে পারিলে সর্বত্র সংকীর্ণ দলীয় রাজনীতির অগ্রাধিকার প্রতিষ্ঠা করার দায় হইতেও রাজনীতিকরা মুক্ত থাকিবেন। গণতন্ত্র যথার্থ অর্থেই বহুত্ববাদী, বহুমুখী, বহুস্তরিক, বহুমাত্রিক হইয়া উঠিতে পারিবে। এমন একটি বন্দোবস্তের দিকে কোনও দল স্বেচ্ছায় অগ্রসর হইবে, এমন সম্ভাবনা কম। তাই এ জন্য বিশদ আলোচনা এবং আইন প্রণয়ন আবশ্যিক।

বিদেশিনী বি জে পি-র প্রতিবাদ, বয়কটের খবরে তিনি আহত। বললেন, তৎ
 থাক। সাংসদরা বাইরে বসে অপেক্ষায়। প্রমাদ গুনলেন দলের নেতারা। ডাকলেন
 বাম ও শরিক নেতাদের। সবাই মিলে বোঝালেন, জানালেন আস্থা **জনপথে নাটক**

বেঁকে বসেছিলেন সোনিয়া!

দিল্লি, ১৭ মে— সংখ্যাগরিষ্ঠ দলের নেত্রী হিসেবে সরকার গড়া নিয়ে আলোচনা করতে সোনিয়া গান্ধীকে আমন্ত্রণ জানালেন রাষ্ট্রপতি এ পি জে আবদুল কালাম। আগামী কাল সকালে সোনিয়া রাষ্ট্রপতির সঙ্গে দেখা করবেন। সোনিয়ার সঙ্গী হবেন রাজ্যসভায় কংগ্রেস নেতা ডঃ মনমোহন সিং। সোনিয়াকে এভাবে আলোচনায় ডাকার অর্থই হল রাষ্ট্রপতি সোনিয়াকে সরকার গড়ার আমন্ত্রণ জানালেন। সংযুক্ত প্রগতিশীল মোর্চার (ইউনাইটেড প্রোগ্রেসিভ অ্যালায়েন্স) নেত্রী হিসেবে সোনিয়া শরিকদের সমর্থনের চিঠিগুলি রাষ্ট্রপতির হাতে তুলে দেবেন। রাষ্ট্রপতি ভবন তৈরি। বুধবার ভারতের প্রধানমন্ত্রী হিসেবে শপথ নেবেন সোনিয়া। কিন্তু আজ সন্ধ্যায় আচমকাই সোনিয়াকে নিয়ে নানা গুঞ্জন ছড়িয়ে পড়ে। কোনও কোনও শরিক সরকারে যোগ দিচ্ছে না। এতে সরকার দুর্বল হবে। তার চেয়েও বড় কথা, বি জে পি তথা সম্বন্ধ পরিবার বিদেশিনী ইস্যুতে যেভাবে দেশ জুড়ে উদ্‌যাদনা তৈরি করতে

অসীম নাথ, অনুমিতা সেনগুপ্ত

উদ্যোগী হয়েছে, তাতে সোনিয়া উদ্ভিন্ন। তাঁর কথায়, আমি প্রধানমন্ত্রী পদে বসলে শরিকদের হেনস্থা হতে হবে। তাই সোনিয়া নিজে নিজেই সিদ্ধান্ত নিয়ে ফেলেন, তিনি প্রধানমন্ত্রী পদে বসবেন না। অন্য কোনও কংগ্রেস নেতা ওই পদে বসুন, চেয়ার ছেড়ে দিতে তৈরি তিনি, জানিয়ে

সুঘমার পণ

আজকালের প্রতিবেদন: দিল্লি, ১৭ মে— সোনিয়া গান্ধী যেদিন দেশের প্রধানমন্ত্রী পদে শপথ নেবেন, সেদিন থেকেই আমি সাদা কাপড় পরা শুরু করব। ঘোষণা করলেন বি জে পি নেত্রী সুঘমা স্বরাজ। জানালেন, সোনিয়ার শপথের পরই মাথাও ন্যাড়া করে ফেলব। ওই দিন থেকেই মেঝেতে শোব। চাল-ডাল, রুটির মতো সাধারণ খাবার খাব। সম্মানসিঁদুর মতো জীবনযাপন করব।

দেন সোনিয়া। টানা আড়াই ঘণ্টা ধরে টানটান উত্তেজনা ছড়িয়ে থাকে ১০ জনপথে। সোনিয়ার বাসভবনে তখন সদ্যজয়ী লোকসভা সদস্যরা পৌঁছে গেছেন। রাজ্যসভার সদস্যরাও। এমনকি লোকসভা ভোটে হেরে গেছেন যারা, তাঁরাও হাজির হয়ে গেছেন। সন্ধ্যে সাড়ে ছটায় সবাইকে চা-চক্রে ডেকেছিলেন সোনিয়া। ছিলেন একশোর ওপর সাংবাদিক। সোনিয়া চা-চক্রে আসছেন না, সময় গড়িয়ে যাচ্ছে... অপেক্ষা আর অপেক্ষা। বাইরে রটনা হতে থাকে, সোনিয়া, প্রধানমন্ত্রী পদে যেতে রাজি হচ্ছেন না। তাঁর প্রস্তাব, 'প্রধানমন্ত্রী অন্য কেউ হোন। কেননা, প্রধানমন্ত্রী হওয়ার জন্য রাজনীতিতে আসিনি। প্রধানমন্ত্রী হওয়ার হলে ১৩ বছর আগেই হতে পারতাম। রাজীব গান্ধীর মৃত্যুর পরই সে সুযোগ এসেছিল। আমি সেদিন রাজি হইনি। আজও বলছি, প্রধানমন্ত্রী পদ নয় আমার স্বামীর স্বপ্ন বৃকে পুষে কংগ্রেসকে চাঙ্গা করতেই দলের রাশ হাতে নিয়েছি।' ততক্ষণে **এরপর ৫ পাতায়**

AAJKAL

18 MAY 2014

P. T. O.

সোনিয়া বেকে বসেছিলেন

১ পাতার পর

প্রণব, মনমোহনরা সোনিয়াকে বোঝাতে শুরু করেছেন, আপনি ছাড়া এই মুহূর্তে দেশের নেতৃত্বে অন্য কারও হাতে তুলে দেওয়া সম্ভব নয়। সোনিয়া রাজি হন না উল্লেখ্য। তিনি শরিক দলের নেতাদের সঙ্গে যুদ্ধের এক প্রহু কথা বলতে চান। শরিক দলের নেতাদের কাছে জরুরি বার্তা যায়, তাঁরা চলে আসেন ১০ জনপথে। সোনিয়াকে তাঁরা বোঝান, সম্মত পরিবারের আদর্শহীন খেলার কাছে মাথা নিচু করলে সাম্প্রদায়িক শক্তিগুলি ফের মাথাচাড়া দেবে। এটা কিছুতেই হতে দেওয়া যায় না। না, শরিক দলের নেতাদের আশ্বাস সত্ত্বেও প্রথম পর্বেই সোনিয়া 'প্রধানমন্ত্রী পদে যাচ্ছি না' সিদ্ধান্ত থেকে সরে আসেননি। কারণ চা-চক্রে সোনিয়ার জন্য অপেক্ষমাণ সাংসদ ও সাংবাদিকদের মাঝে গিয়ে অস্বস্তিকর মুহূর্তকে ঘোষণা করতে হয়, শরিক দলের নেতাদের সঙ্গে দ্বিতীয় পর্বের বৈঠক শুরু হয়েছে। আপনারা একটু ধৈর্য ধরুন। সোনিয়া গান্ধীর হয়ে তাঁর এখানে আসায় বিলম্বের জন্য ক্ষমা চেয়ে নিচ্ছি।

কংগ্রেস সাংসদরা ঠায় বসে থাকেন নেত্রীর ঘোষণা শোনার জন্য। বিভিন্ন টিভি চ্যানেলের দৌলতে গুজব দেশ জুড়ে ছড়িয়ে পড়ে। দীর্ঘ প্রতীক্ষার পর প্রণব মুখার্জি ও মনমোহন সিং এসে ঘোষণা করেন, সোনিয়া গান্ধী মঙ্গলবার রাষ্ট্রপতির কাছে যাবেন। যাবতীয় জল্পনা-কল্পনার অবসান ঘটতেই মুগ্ধ মুখার্জি এরপর বলেন, গুজবের আর কোনও অবকাশ রইল না। কংগ্রেস সাংসদরা উল্লাসে ফেটে পড়েন। অন্য দিকে শরিক নেতারা এই গুজব ছড়ানোর অত্যন্ত ক্রুদ্ধ হয়ে ওঠেন। ১০ জনপথে দাঁড়িয়ে তাঁরা সম্মত বলে, এই সরকার দুর্বল হবে না। ঠিকঠাকই চলবে। যদিও এটা ঠিক, এক দিকে 'বিদেশী' ইস্যুকে খুঁচিয়ে তুলতে বিজেপি-র শপথ বয়কটের ঘোষণা, অন্য দিকে শরিকদের কারও কারও সরকারের ভেতরে এসে দায়িত্ব নেওয়ার ব্যাপারে অনীহা— এ সব দেখে এক সময় সরে দাঁড়ানোরই কথা ভেবে ফেলেছিলেন সোনিয়া। গুজব ছড়িয়ে পড়ার ফলে কিন্তু সোনিয়ার প্রতি দল ও জোটের ভেতরে সমর্থনের ভিত আরও দৃঢ় হয়ে উঠল।

এদিন রাষ্ট্রপতি কালাম তাঁর চিঠিতে সোনিয়াকে লিখেছেন, আমি জানতে পেরেছি আপনিই কংগ্রেস সংসদীয় দলের নেত্রী নির্বাচিত হয়েছেন। একই সঙ্গে একক সংখ্যাগরিষ্ঠ দল এবং প্রাক-নির্বাচনী জোটের নেত্রীও নির্বাচিত হয়েছেন। সরকার গড়ার আলোচনা করতে আজ সন্ধ্যায় অথবা আগামী কাল আপনার সুবিধামত সময়ে আমার সঙ্গে দেখা করুন। এই চিঠি পাওয়ার পর বামপন্থীরা এবং ডিএম কে-সহ বেশ কিছু শরিক দল বাইরে থেকে সমর্থনের কথা বলায় সোনিয়া চিন্তিত হয়ে পড়েন তাঁর সরকারের ভবিষ্যৎ নিয়ে। এর সঙ্গে শেয়ার বাজারের ধস সোনিয়াকে চিন্তায় ফেলে দেয়। গুলাম নবি আজাদকে সোনিয়া পাঠান করুণানিধির কাছে। জরুরি ডাক পেয়ে প্রণববাবুকে দৌড়তে হয় ১০ জনপথে। সোনিয়া তাঁর আশঙ্কার কথা দলের শীর্ষনেতাদের জানান। প্রণব, মনমোহন ছাড়াও গুলাম নবি, অর্জুন সিং, আহমেদ প্যাটেল, অম্বিকা সোনি হাজির ছিলেন এই আলোচনায়। সরকারের ভবিষ্যৎ নিয়ে চিন্তা ব্যাড়াতে থাকায় সব ওলট-পালট হয়ে যায়। শরিক নেতারা সোনিয়ার সঙ্গে দেখা করেন। রাষ্ট্রপতির চিঠি দেখিয়ে শরিক সোনিয়া নেতাদের জিজ্ঞেস করেন তাঁরা সঙ্গে যাবেন কি না। শরিক নেতারা বলেন, রাষ্ট্রপতি তাঁকেই আমন্ত্রণ জানিয়েছেন। সুতরাং তাঁরই একা যাওয়া উচিত। প্রয়োজন হলে তাঁরা না হয় পরে যাবেন। রামবিলাস পাসোয়ান পরে এই আলোচনার কথা জানিয়ে বলেন, আমরা ন্যূনতম কর্মসূচি সম্পর্কে আমাদের মতামত সোনিয়া গান্ধীর হাতে তুলে দিয়েছি। জানিয়ে দিই আমাদের এখনই কোনও আলাদা দাবি নেই। নীতিগত বিষয়গুলি জানানো হয়েছে। করুণানিধির পক্ষ থেকে তাঁর দফা শর্ত জানানো হয় সোনিয়াকে।



মনমোহন ও প্রণব। ১০ জনপথে সোনিয়ার সব থেকে নির্ভরযোগ্য সহযোগী। দলের সাংসদদের জানালেন বুধবার সোনিয়া শপথ নেবেন। সোমবার রাতে। ছবি: এ এফ পি

অবিলম্বে তামিলনাড়ুর রাজাপাল রামমোহন রাও ও হাইকোর্টের প্রধান বিচারপতিকে সরাতে হবে, জয়ললিতার বিরুদ্ধে চালু যাবতীয় মামলার দ্রুত নিষ্পত্তি করতে হবে, আর পোটা তুলতে হবে। তবে করুণানিধি জানিয়ে দেন, এ সব দাবি থাকলেও তাঁরা এ নিয়ে চাপাচাপি করছেন না। কিন্তু অতীতে দেখা গেছে কেন্দ্রে মন্ত্রী হওয়ার পর তাঁর দলের সাংসদরা একটু বিগড়ে যান। তাই এখনই কাউকে মন্ত্রিসভায় পাঠানো হবে না। পরে যোগ দেবে ডি এম কে। এ সব আলোচনার পর কংগ্রেস সংসদীয় দলের একটি অঘোষিত বৈঠকে সোনিয়ার বক্তব্য পেশের কথা ছিল। সোনিয়া না আসায় ফিসফাস শুরু হয়ে যায়। অন্য কারও নাম সোনিয়া প্রধানমন্ত্রীর জন্য প্রস্তাব করতে যাচ্ছেন এমন গুজব দ্রুত ছড়াতে থাকে। কংগ্রেস সাংসদরা কেমন একটা বিষয় মুখ নিয়ে বসে থাকেন ঘটনার পর ঘণ্টা। শীর্ষনেতাদের দেখা নেই বলে তাঁরা ভেতরের খবরও পাচ্ছিলেন না। প্রিয়রঞ্জন দাসমুঙ্গি, সন্তোষমোহন দেবের মতো পুরনো সাংসদ, এমনকি মান্নান হোসেনের মতো নবীন সাংসদরাও বসে থাকেন এই সব গুজবের মধ্যে। রাত আটটা নাগাদ ভেতর থেকে একসঙ্গে বেরিয়ে আসেন প্রণব-মনমোহন। সাংসদ এবং গোটা দেশের সংবাদমাধ্যমের হৃদস্পন্দনও যেন শোনা যাচ্ছে— এমন নীরবতা। মনমোহন পড়েন রাষ্ট্রপতির চিঠিটি। ইইইই করে ওঠেন সাংসদরাও। দাঁড়িয়ে উঠে নিজেদের উল্লাস জানাতে শুরু করেন। আর প্রণববাবু গুজবের কফিনে শেষ পেরেকটি পুঁতে দেন। এই গুজব ছড়িয়ে পড়ায় ১০ জনপথের বাইরে ততক্ষণে জমে গেছেন হাজার হাজার কংগ্রেসি। পুলিশ ভিড় সামলাতে হিমশিম খাচ্ছে। সোনিয়া গান্ধীর সমর্থনে স্লোগান উঠছে। এই গুজব ছড়িয়ে পড়ায় শরিক দলের নেতারাও অবাক হয়ে যান। সোনিয়া বেকে বসেছেন, এ কথা কানে যেতেই ১০ জনপথে ছুটে এসেছিলেন সি পি আইয়ের এ বি বর্ধন, লালুপ্রসাদ যাদব, রামবিলাস পাসোয়ান এবং শিবু সোরেনরা দল বেঁধে। সরাসরি সোনিয়ার সঙ্গে দেখা করেন তাঁরা। এ বি বর্ধন বলেন, দু-একটি টিভি চ্যানেল এই গুজব ছড়িয়ে দেওয়ায় আমরা ছুটে এসেছি। কিন্তু সোনিয়াজি তেমন কোনও আশঙ্কার কথা বললেন না। এ সবই ভাবী সরকারকে দুর্বল করার খেলা। আমরা পরিষ্কার বলে দিচ্ছি, আমরা যোগ না দিলেও সরকার দুর্বল হবে না। লালুপ্রসাদ যাদব তাঁর স্বভাবসিদ্ধ ভঙ্গিমায়ে তেড়েফুঁড়ে বলে ওঠেন, সোনিয়া গান্ধী প্রতিটি পদক্ষেপ মেপে মেপে ফেলছেন। যারা গণেশজিকে দুধ খাইয়েছিল তাই এ-সব ছড়াচ্ছে। কিন্তু এতে লাভ হবে না। এ সরকার পাঁচ বছরই চলবে। শরিকদের নিয়ে সোনিয়া চলছেন। আমরা এর সমর্থন করছি। এক সাংবাদিক প্রশ্ন করেন, আপনাদের সঙ্গে অমর সিং নেই কেন? লালুজির বন্ধুগণিত: উনি অন্য কাজে ব্যস্ত আছেন তো! সব জল্পনা-গুজব কেটে ওঠার পর সোনিয়া শীর্ষ নেতাদের নিয়ে ফের

আলোচনায় বসেন। রাষ্ট্রপতির কাছে সোনিয়া সংযুক্ত প্রগতিশীল মোর্চার সাংসদদের তালিকা পেশ করবেন। সেই তালিকা তৈরি হয় অনেক রাত পর্যন্ত। সোনিয়ার সরকারের নাম হবে এই মোর্চার নামে। শরিকদের অনেকেই ধর্মনিরপেক্ষ শব্দটি রাখতে চেয়েছিলেন। কিন্তু করুণানিধি তামিলভাষায় এই শব্দটির অনুবাদ নিয়ে কিছু আপত্তি করেন। শেয়ার বাজারে ধস নিয়ে মনমোহন সিং তাঁর বিবৃতি দেওয়ার সময় মোর্চার নামটি ব্যবহার করেন। মনে করা হচ্ছে সোনিয়ার সরকারের এই নামই হবে। এরই মধ্যে সোনিয়া গান্ধীর হাতে নয়, সরাসরি রাষ্ট্রপতি কালামের কাছে গিয়ে সমর্থনের চিঠি তুলে দেয় আজ মুলায়মের সম্পর্কবানী পাটি। শরিক দল রাষ্ট্রীয় লোকদলের নেতা অজিত সিংকে সঙ্গে নিয়ে রাষ্ট্রপতি ভবনে যান অমর সিং। সি পি এম-সহ বাম দলগুলি জানিয়ে দিয়েছে সরকারে যাবে না। সমাজবাদী পার্টিরও সরকারে ঢোকার পথ প্রায় বন্ধ। কারণ, কংগ্রেস মোটেই সাধাসাধি করছে না। অগত্যা অমর সিং আজ বলেন, ব্যক্তিগতভাবে আমার মনে হয় সরকারে না যাওয়াই ভাল। এর সঙ্গে সঙ্গেই স পি এনে সতর্ক করেছেন, শ'খানেক সদস্য নিয়ে কিছু সমর্থক দল সরকারের বাইরে থেকে যাচ্ছে, এটা স্থিতিশীলতার পক্ষে ভাল নয়। অমর সিং বলেন, মন্ত্রিসভার লোভ আমাদের নেই। কেন্দ্রে একটি ধর্মনিরপেক্ষ সরকার হতে চলেছে। সরকার তৈরির প্রক্রিয়ায় যাতে কোনও জটিলতা না দেখা দেয়, সে জন্যই আমরা গতকাল ১০ জনপথের ভোজসভায় গিয়েছিলাম। খাওয়ার লোভে নয়। খাবারের অভাব নেই আমাদের। উল্লেখ্য, কংগ্রেসের দিক থেকে প্রথমে আমন্ত্রণ না এলেও হরকিষণ সিং সুরজিৎই অমর সিং, অজিত সিংকে নিয়ে যান। অমর সিং আজ আবারও বলেন, আমরা বামপন্থীদের সঙ্গেই আছি। সোনিয়া গান্ধীর হাতে সমর্থনের চিঠি তুলে দিলেন না কেন? অমর সিংয়ের উত্তর, 'ওটাকে বড় করে দেখার কিছু নেই। ডালে ঘি দেওয়া, আর ঘিয়ে ডাল দেওয়া একই ব্যাপার। আমরা তো ওদের কাজ সহজ করে দিলাম।' বোঝাই যাচ্ছে, উত্তরপ্রদেশে সরকার বাঁচানোর দায়ে, 'ধর্মনিরপেক্ষ' পরিচয়ের দায়ে আপাতত কংগ্রেসের জোট সরকারকে সমর্থন দিয়ে যাওয়া ছাড়া মুলায়মের সামনে অন্য রাস্তা খোলা নেই। বামপন্থীদের সঙ্গে কংগ্রেসের সম্পর্ক কোন দিকে গড়ায়, সেদিকেই নজর রাখবেন তিনি। রামবিলাস পাসোয়ান বলেছেন, আমি নিশ্চিত, বামপন্থীরা সরকারে না গেলেও সমর্থনে অটুট থাকবেন। স্থিতিশীলতা নষ্ট হবে না। বি জে পি-র 'বিদেশী' ইস্যু এককথায় খারিজ করে দেন রামবিলাস, লালুপ্রসাদ। এমনকি শারদ পাওয়ারও জানান, জনাদেশ এই বিষয়টিকে অপ্রাসঙ্গিক করে দিয়েছে। শপথ বয়কট নিয়ে বি জে পি-কে তুলোথোনা করে-গালি, পাসোয়ান, সি পি আই নেতা এ বি বর্ধন।

AJKA

8 MAY 2004

তৃতীয় জোটের আশায় বুদ্ধ

১-৫-৫৩

নিয়ন্ত্রণ-ভার

৮৫৭-৫০

৫/৫/৫৩

পেলে কেদ্রে

যাবে সিপিএম

স্টাফ রিপোর্টার: নিয়ন্ত্রকের ভূমিকায় থাকলে সি পি এম কেদ্রে সরকারে যোগ দিতে পারে বলে জানিয়েছেন মুখ্যমন্ত্রী তথা সি পি এমের পলিটব্যুরোর সদস্য বুদ্ধদেব ভট্টাচার্য। এন ডি এ নয়, কংগ্রেসও নয়। বাম ধর্মনিরপেক্ষ তৃতীয় বিকল্প জোটই সরকার গঠন করবে বলে তাঁর ধারণা। পাশাপাশি পশ্চিমবঙ্গে বামদেবের আসন তো বাড়ছেই, এমনকী কলকাতায় অন্তত একটি আসন তাঁরা পাচ্ছেন বলে মনে করেন মুখ্যমন্ত্রী। তিনি বলেন, “কৃষি, শিল্প ও রাজ্যের উন্নয়নে বামফ্রন্ট সরকার ইতিবাচক সাড়া ফেলেছে। নির্বাচনে তার ফল মিলবেই।”

শুক্রবার কলকাতা প্রেস ক্লাবে তৃতীয় বিকল্প গঠন প্রসঙ্গে মুখ্যমন্ত্রী বলেন, “বিহারের লালুপ্রসাদের আর জে ডি, উত্তরপ্রদেশের মুলায়ম সিংহ যাদবের সমাজবাদী পার্টি, আসমের অ গ প, কর্নাটকের দেবগৌড়ার দল, ডি এম কে প্রভৃতিকে নিয়ে জোট হতেই পারে। ইতিমধ্যেই এই বিষয়ে লালুপ্রসাদ ও মুলায়মের সঙ্গে আমাদের হরকিষেন সিংহ সুরজিতের এক দফা আলোচনা হয়েছে।” লালুর দলের পাল্লু যাদব, শাহবুদ্দিনের মতো অভিজুদের সঙ্গে তাঁর দল এক হয়ে কাজ করতে পারবে কি? মুখ্যমন্ত্রীর জবাব, “ওই ব্যক্তিদের পরিচয় আমি ভাল করেই জানি। ওদের আমিও পছন্দ করি না। কিন্তু তোগাড়িয়া, সুদর্শনদের ঠেকাতে জোট বাঁধতেই হবে। কারণ, আর এস এস দেশের পক্ষে বিপজ্জনক।”

তবে তৃতীয় বিকল্প জোট গঠনের সম্ভাবনা উড়িয়ে দিয়েছেন বি জে পি-র সর্বভারতীয় সভাপতি এম বেক্কাইয়া নাইডু। বেক্কাইয়া বলেন, “আগে বুদ্ধবাবুরা পলিটব্যুরোর বৈঠক ডেকে টিক করুন, তাঁরা কী চান। কেননা, জ্যোতি বসু তো খোলাখুলি বলছেন, সনিয়া গান্ধী প্রধানমন্ত্রী হবেন। আবার সোমনাথ চট্টোপাধ্যায় বলছেন, কংগ্রেস মন্ত্রিসভা গড়লে সি পি এম বাইরে থেকে তাদের সমর্থন জানাবে। সি পি এমের তিন নেতা তিন রকম কথা বলছেন। মানুষ ওঁদের বিশ্বাস করছেন না।” বেক্কাইয়ার দাবি, এ বার পশ্চিমবঙ্গে তৃণমূল-বি জে পি জোট দ্বিগুণ আসন পাবে।

তৃতীয় বিকল্প জোটের প্রধানমন্ত্রী কে হবেন, সেই বিষয়ে সরাসরি কোনও মন্তব্য করতে না-চাইলেও মুখ্যমন্ত্রী বলেন, “বাম ও ধর্মনিরপেক্ষ দলগুলিতে অনেকেই আছেন, যারা প্রধানমন্ত্রী হওয়ার যোগ্য।” প্রধানমন্ত্রী হওয়ার ব্যাপারে জ্যোতি বসু বা তাঁর নামও আছে কি? এই প্রশ্নের জবাবে বুদ্ধবাবু বলেন, “জ্যোতিবাবু তো বলেই দিয়েছেন, বয়সের কারণে তিনি প্রধানমন্ত্রিত্বের মধ্যে নেই। আর আমি পশ্চিমবঙ্গ-কেন্দ্রিক রাজনীতি করি। জাতীয় রাজনীতিতে জ্যোতিবাবুদের মতো অভিজ্ঞতাই নেই আমার।”

তবে তৃতীয় বিকল্প যদি শেষ পর্যন্ত ক্ষমতায় আসতে না-পারে, তা হলে কংগ্রেস জোট কেদ্রে সরকার গড়লে সি পি এম যে বাইরে থেকে তাদের সমর্থন করবে, তা স্পষ্ট ভাবেই জানিয়েছেন বুদ্ধবাবু। তাঁর বক্তব্য, “আমরা তো বারবার বলছি, বি জে পি-র মতোই কংগ্রেসকে সমর্থন করি না। কিন্তু সারা দেশ যাতে গুজরাত না-হয়, সে-জন্য বি জে পি-কে ঠেকাতেই হবে আমাদের। সে-ক্ষেত্রে আমরা, বামপন্থীরা যেখানে দুর্বল, সেখানে যেমন ধর্মনিরপেক্ষ গণতান্ত্রিক দলের প্রার্থীদের ভোট দিতে বলছি, তেমনই প্রয়োজনে কেদ্রে কংগ্রেসের সরকার গঠনের পরিস্থিতি এলে আমরা বাইরে থেকে সমর্থন জানাব।”

খড়াপুর ও দুর্গাপুর থেকে স্টাফ রিপোর্টার জানাচ্ছেন— বামফ্রন্টকে ভোট দেওয়া মানে দিল্লিতে সনিয়া গান্ধীকে প্রধানমন্ত্রী করার পথ প্রশস্ত করা। শুক্রবার সকালে খড়াপুরের রাণপোড়া ময়দানের জনসভায় বেক্কাইয়া নাইডু এ ভাবেই আক্রমণ করেন কংগ্রেস এবং সি পি এম-কে। তিনি বলেন, “পশ্চিমবঙ্গে যারা নিজেদের মধ্যে লাড়াই করছে, দিল্লির গদি দখলের জন্য নিজেদের মধ্যে সমঝোতা করছে তারা।” বেক্কাইয়া ঘোষণা

এর পর ছয়ের পাতায়

ANADABAZAR PATRIKA

8 MAY 1953

Congress confident of leading non-NDA camp

Our Political Bureau
NEW DELHI 3 MAY

EVEN as Congress, on Monday, sought to give an extra shine to its secular credentials by declaring that it would not do business with the pre-election partners of BJP, it moved further up the pivotal space in the non-NDA spectrum by asserting that it would lead the initiative in the post-poll stage. "Congress is leading the alliance. Therefore it will take the initiative in the post-poll stage as well," party spokesperson Jaipal Reddy said. The assertion, though based on and bolstered by exit poll reports of a hung Parliament, indicates the party's anxiety to beat others in the exercise of laying down coordinates for a post-poll arrangement.

Clearly, party managers are now trying to set the stage for a Sonia-led coalition if there is a hung House, although Mr Reddy's remarks were disguised enough not to throw up just a single interpretation. "Ideologically, our priority is to unseat NDA. But the political and historical necessity is that it can be done only through the instrumentality of the Congress party," Mr Reddy said. The comments, of course, also came with the explanation that the party had not shifted its stand on the issue of formation of a government at the Centre.

But it was evident that the objective was to keep the pot boiling, with party circles contending that "taking the initiative" could include a variety of options — including a measure to evolve a consensus on the leadership issue. "Hypothetically, it means that there can be a non-NDA government not led by Congress, a Congress-led government or a Sonia-led government," quipped a senior leader.

Meanwhile, the public embargo on the pre-poll partners of BJP seemed to have been designed as a



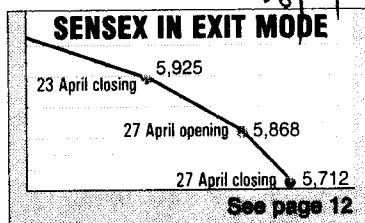
short term tactic rather than a policy decision. Encouraged by reports of a shift in the Muslim vote, the move was aimed at weaning away minorities from BSP in the third and fourth phases of the polls, although its calculations were actually based on the premise that none of the NDA allies could be dubbed prospective post-poll partners. "Tell me who within NDA can cross over to the Congress camp," a senior leader said. The last time, the party had resisted from taking such a position because of the presence of potential partners like Trinamool Congress, it said.

Third force thinks, third time lucky too

Mohan Sahay in New Delhi

April 27. — Formal consultations have begun among the "Third Force" leaders to work towards installing a secular government at the Centre and prevent the NDA from returning to power. The CPI-M has taken the lead in opening a dialogue with leaders like Mr Sharad Pawar and Mr Mulayam Singh Yadav anticipating a fractured verdict. Their optimism is based on the exit poll projections. This is the third time, after the Janata experiment of 1977 and the United Front of 1996, that the Third Force thinks that it will be lucky.

Mr Harkishen Singh Surjeet, the CPI-M general secretary, spoke to Mr Yadav before leaving



for Jaipur today, sources said. The Samajwadi Party leader has assured the Marxist that "it (SP) will not come to the rescue of the BJP in the event of the NDA falling short of a majority in forming the government, nor would it join the NDA," sources added.

And to add fuel to the Third Front fire, the notoriously unpredictable BSP leader, Ms Mayawati, addressing a rally in Lucknow today, ruled out any future alli-

ance with the BJP. While the BJP has been trying to "falsely implicate" her in the Taj Corridor case, the Congress, she said, had not been considering an alliance with the BSP as it was propping up the Mulayam government in UP.

CPI-M leader Mr Sitaram Yechury claimed the SP was a part of the secular front. It's learnt that some leaders such as Mr Pawar, who are now free of electioneering, have been asked to take the lead in holding consultations for the installation of a "secular" government. On 1 May, Mr Surjeet is to meet the southern allies in Chennai, including Mr M Karunanidhi, to ensure that the DMK doesn't again back the NDA.

Upbeat Cong braces for final assault, page 5

THE STATESMAN

28 APR 2004

Laloo, Paswan share buddy-ing relation

Ashok Mishra
PATNA 23 APRIL

NOT long ago they spitted fire. But the political contours changed and the twosome are now the best political chums. One began his political career from Chhapra in circa 1977, while the other went on to set a record in the Guinness Book from the adjoining Hajipur seat the very same year.

Images of the past will come alive when Laloo in Chhapra and Ram Vilas Paswan in Hajipur will flex their political muscles in Bihar on April 26. But this time, it is not going to be a win-win situation for them. For, both have a battle on their hands.

While Laloo is pitted against Union civil aviation minister Rajiv Pratap Rudy of the BJP, Ram Vilas Paswan has to take on

JD(U)'s Chhedi Paswan in Hajipur. Their friendship has borne the fruit in the sense that they have not felt shy of campaigning for each other in Chhapra and Hajipur. On the face of it, Ram Vilas Paswan may currently hold the advantage but to say that he was

sitting pretty would be an exaggeration. He has been indefatigably at work, launching high profile campaigns in Hajipur.

In the initial run-up to the elections, the gaining impression was that Ram Vilas Paswan would just steamroll the JD(U) nominee, considered to be a lightweight. That Chhedi Paswan is also being looked upon as an outsider upset his electoral

FRIENDS FOR NOW



who voted for Ram Vilas in 1999 feel cheated now because he has sided with Laloo, the man who till recently was unsparingly criticised by Ram Vilas Paswan. The people here are all supporting me and they will give a drubbing to Ram Vilas," he added. The majority of those who voted for Ram Vilas in 1999 — because the LJP leader had then opposed Laloo — will opt for Chhedi it seems. On the other hand, Ram Vilas Paswan will gain substantial support from the Yadavs and the Muslims this time around.

The JD(U) nominee is banking heavily on the support of railway minister Nitish Kumar, who has been spending time in

Hajipur for the last few days, soliciting support of the Kurmis and the Koeris for Chhedi Paswan. In Chhapra, Rudy was initially facing an uphill task. But enter Laloo and things swiftly began changing much in favour of him. The Rajputs who were virtually up in arms against Rudy are now a transformed lot.

"The Rajputs are out to defeat to Laloo. In the process, Rudy may win," said Dinesh Singh, a practicing lawyer and a resident of the Chhapra. Meanwhile, Laloo is pulling out all stops for his victory, with Rabri Devi undertaking a rath yatra in Chhapra to take up the campaigning job on behalf of Laloo. Even Laloo's trusted poll managers, Subhas Yadav and Sunil Kumar Singh, are working on strategies to make a dent into the Rajput vote bank.

Weakened partners follow the leader meekly

Alliance to reliance

KAY BENEDICT

New Delhi, April 9: Six years of marriage with the BJP has shown its allies who wears the trousers in the National Democratic Alliance.

The allies have now become the big brother's "B-team", as evident from the NDA manifesto released yesterday.

Their ideological opposition to the Sangh parivar appears to have crumbled in the face of a shrinking base in the states.

As recent as last year, Sangh parivar issues such as Ayodhya and cow protection were anathema to almost all the allies, except the Shiv Sena.

They had even opposed the "hardline" agenda umpteen times on the floor of Parliament.

With top NDA leaders such as George Fernandes, N. Chandrababu Naidu and Mamata Banerjee apparently becoming dependent on the BJP, the allies have now also shed their opposition to L.K. Advani's brand of "Hindutva".

For instance, chief ministers Naidu and Naveen Patnaik, of the Biju Janata Dal, showed up for the deputy Prime Minister's Bharat Uday yatra when it passed through their states.

Fernandes pulled out all stops by rushing all the way to Nagpur to join Advani.

Faced with "an Atal wave", the partners, who had the BJP pandering to them five years ago, have grown weak.

AT BJP MERCY



George Fernandes

Leader of a dwindling party



Chandrababu Naidu

Can he win minus BJP?



Naveen Patnaik

Needs BJP to stay in power



Jayalalitha

Skeletons in cupboard



Mamata

Shaky ground beneath her feet

A recent survey by STAR News has given the allies 66 seats compared to the 118 they won in 1999.

The allies would thus be losing 52 seats while the BJP is projected to gain 29.

The tally should, however, be seen in the context of a dwindling NDA, with as many as seven members having left.

The allies' situation is amply illustrated by the instances of Naidu and Fernandes. "The BJP secured 12 per cent votes for consecutive elections in Andhra Pradesh.

"Chandrababu Naidu is critically dependent on those votes. Even a 4-5 per cent swing could create havoc for the Telugu Desam," an NDA source said.

Naidu is not only facing anti-incumbency and a united Opposition, he is also losing the minority community that is perceived to have moved away

from the Desam as it has grown closer to the parivar ideology, the source added.

In Bihar, Fernandes requires BJP votes to win from his new seat of Muzaffarpur as the stock of the Janata Dal (United) has dwindled.

"There was a time when Fernandes could win from any constituency in Bihar, but today he desperately needs the BJP support to transfer upper-caste votes," a Dal (U) leader said.

"In Nalanda, he did not require the BJP so much but in Muzaffarpur he is critically dependent."

CONTINUED ON PAGE 9

Front meets today to discuss poll panel's transfer order

CPM sour, not brazen

OUR BUREAU

Calcutta, March 19: The CPM hurriedly convened a meeting of its secretariat today in the wake of the Election Commission's order to the government to transfer three top police officers accused of bias in election duty.

After the meeting, Jyoti Basu said the order was an "injustice". "Our politburo will take up the issue with the Election Commission." The party will send the poll panel a copy of its resolution pointing out that the transfers were ordered without any reason being cited.

The Opposition parties, however, had made specific complaints against deputy inspector-general, Malda range, Gaurav Dutta, North 24-Parganas superintendent of police Basudeb Bag and Nadia superintendent

Benoy Chakraborty before the chief election commissioner on Wednesday.

The Left Front will discuss the issue tomorrow.

"The government, the people of Bengal and the police officers concerned should know why they are being transferred. These officers don't know what crime they have committed," Basu said at the CPM headquarters this evening. "Such an action is unexpected."

The front partners echoed him. "The commission's order to transfer the IPS officers is a surprise to us. We will discuss it at our meeting tomorrow," said state Forward Bloc secretary Ashoke Ghosh.



Basu: Justice denied?

However, Basu made it apparent that the CPM did not want a confrontation with the poll panel. Asked if the government was contemplating legal action against the commission's decision, he said: "We repose our faith in the neutrality of the Election Commission and expect it not to allow any quarter to influence its decision."

He was silent when asked whether the transfer order was prompted by the allegations of the Opposition parties.

Asked whether the officers will move court, Basu said: "For that, they require permission from the government and I don't know what they will do."

The order will not mar the CPM's poll prospects, Basu said. "It is on record that the Election Commission thanked the state government several times for holding free, fair and peaceful polls," he said.

In a press note, the CPM said Bengal "has earned the distinction of having held free, fair and peaceful elections during the last 27 years".

Chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee refused comment on the shift order. Asked if polls in the state were "free and fair", Bhattacharjee said: "Definitely." He also said that government officials were "unbiased" when it came to election work.

Chief electoral officer Basudeb Banerjee said the commission wants the government to replace the three officers after consultations with him.

Mulayam Reluctant To Sign Pact, Laloo Seeks 5 Seats For Bihar

Yadav duo won't toe Cong line

Our Political Bureau
NEW DELHI 19 MARCH

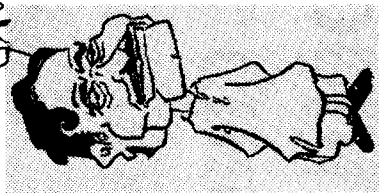
CONGRESS' efforts to emerge as the central focus of the anti-NDA spectrum have suffered a setback with Mulayam Singh Yadav reluctant to sign an "honourable" political contract with it in Uttar Pradesh and Laloo Yadav proposing a humiliating seat allocation deal — 5 out of 40 — for Bihar. The development is sure to put the Congress in an image deficit as it will be seen as a confirmation of the party's marginalisation in the Hindi heartland. It was the anxiety to dispel this impression that has been prompting the Congress president to devote more time for these states and carry out gruelling road-shows in various regions of Uttar Pradesh.

The decision of the two Yadavs will also impact adversely on the Congress' efforts to regain slices of its once powerful social coalition. While the scheduled castes firmly with the BSP and intermediate castes arrayed behind powerful regional formations, the Congress has limited social space. Besides, Muslims may also spurn their overtures as its ally-less status cannot be encouraging for any prospective stakeholder.

There is already acknowledgement in the party that a three-cornered contest in

Jharkhand will benefit the BJP. In Jharkhand, the Congress was banking on an alliance with the JMM. Although the JMM leaders stayed engaged for sometime, the BJP has managed to convince them against joining hands with the Congress.

All three states together count for 134 seats and the Congress' failure to forge alliances could mean a major setback for the party. In fact, this isolation of the Congress has been emboldening Laloo Yadav to propose a seat-sharing arrangement loaded heavily against the Congress. Ac-



hand, has demanded seats outside of Uttar Pradesh in return of the 15 seats of his choice for the Congress. While he is certain to pack the not-so-sure seats in the Congress kitty, the demand for seats outside may not be acceptable to the Congress.

The Congress president has summoned state unit

according to the proposal, he is willing to allot only those seats it won in the last election — two constituencies — and three segments where the party came second.

Mulayam Singh Yadav, on the other hand, has demanded seats outside of Uttar Pradesh in return of the 15 seats of his choice for the Congress. While he is certain to pack the not-so-sure seats in the Congress kitty, the demand for seats outside may not be acceptable to the Congress.

The Congress president has summoned state unit

field 12 candidates.

leaders to Delhi to take stock of the developments. While a section of the DP unit is keen on a tie-up with the SP, the terms of agreement is unlikely to pass muster.

There is also resentment in Bihar over Mr Laloo Yadav's proposal. But there is fear that the Congress will be squeezed out in the contest between two powerful sides — Laloo's RJD and the NDA.

The news of trouble in the RJD-led alliance must be soothing for the NDA as Mr Ram Vilas Paswan's refusal to get back into the saffron tent was a cause of concern.

Mr Yadav has made it clear to Mr Paswan that he will not be in a position to award more than four seats to his party. This could lead to unravelling of the alliance as Mr Paswan has threatened to

Regional parties struggle to survive

J.P. Pantia
59-5 10/3

Bijay Sankar Bora in Guwahati

March 9. — The Lok Sabha elections have thrown up a challenge before the regional political parties in the northeastern states to prove that they are still a force to reckon with.

This is particularly applicable to the Asom Gana Parishad. The party, despite being the most prominent regional political group in the region, is suffering from a crisis of identity of late. Having drawn blanks in the last two rounds of the Lok Sabha elections held in 1998 and 1999 and biting the dust in the last Assembly polls, the morale of the AGP has hit the nadir.

The new president of the party, Mr Brindabon Goswami, who took over the mantle of the beleaguered Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, former Assam chief minister, is subject to an acid test in these polls. Mr Goswami, who has a clean image compared to his predecessor, desperately needs to

score in a few constituencies to lift the morale of party workers as well as inject life back into regional politics as preached by the party. The party, which was formed in 1985 with leaders of the anti-foreigners agitation in the state, is now struggling to regain its grip among the masses.

The people of Assam have been disillusioned by the failure of the two AGP governments, both headed by Mr Prafulla Kumar Mahanta as the chief minister. The problem of illegal migrants, which forms the very foundation of the AGP, has remained a burning problem in the state as the two AGP regimes failed to pursue its agenda for detection and deportation of illegal migrants with the promised zeal.

In case of regional political groups in Meghalaya, they have been virtually eclipsed by Indian National Congress as on date. The parties which came into being opposing the Congress in the hill state, are now content

with playing second fiddle to it in running the government in the state. The regional parties are now trying to find a consensus candidate to be fielded from Shillong Lok Sabha constituency in Meghalaya against Congress although they are partners in ruling Congress-led collation government in the state. It speaks volumes of the identity crisis that has hit the regional parties in Meghalaya.

In Manipur, the arena of regional politics is too complex and crowded and Bharatiya Janata Party is busy fishing in the troubled waters to put up a challenge before Congress.

The silver lining is the Mizo National Front led by Mr Zoramthanga. The party is calling shots in the hill state where peace have come back to stay after decades of bloodshed. There too, the BJP is trying to ride on the MNF's shoulders to centrestage in the tribal-Christian dominated state like it has done in Nagaland with the help of Nagaland People's Front.

One after other, BJP splits Cong families

OUR BUREAU

March 1: Veteran Congress leader Arjun Singh's son Ajay today called on L.K. Advani and BJP chief M. Venkaiah Naidu separately, fuelling speculation on what could be the biggest blow yet to Sonia Gandhi's party.

That is not all. The Congress "parivar", the BJP's prime target in the run-up to the elections, might lose four veterans soon. They are Nawal Kishore Sharma, Balram Jakhar and Girija Vyas from Rajasthan and C.K. Jaffer Sharief, once P.V. Narasimha Rao's aide and one of the party's best known Muslim faces. For the record, Sharief maintained he would "rather die" than go to the BJP.

Ajay, one of the few in the Congress to have scraped through in the last Assembly polls in Madhya Pradesh, denied he was planning to join the BJP. But party sources claimed the "deal" will be sealed once an appropriate Lok Sabha seat is found for him.

The news that Ajay — also known as Rahul — met the BJP leaders upset Arjun Singh. "The very question is an insult to me," the Congress' most vocal secular voice rasped when reporters sought his comment.

"He is not a slave of anybody, least of all mine," Arjun told PTI, asked if Ajay might join the BJP. "I just cannot believe it."

In Madhya Pradesh Congress circles, Ajay has an image of an "obedient son" who seldom acts on his own. Both he and his fa-



Graphic: RAJ

ther are said to be influenced by Arjun's wife Saroj, popularly called Rani Sahiba. Although she has no direct role in politics, Congress workers are unanimous that she influences the decisions of both father and son.

If Ajay does join the BJP, it would be the second political family in Madhya Pradesh to be split by the party. The first was when Digvijay Singh's younger brother Laxman was inducted last week. Even if the uproar in the Congress eventually deters Ajay, the meeting in Delhi has compounded the confusion in

the party ranks, leaving many to wonder who will be the next to switch sides.

Politics continued to mirror the never-ending saga of splits in television soaps as another family witnessed a dramatic twist. Ranjit Singh, the son of Devi Lal and younger brother of Haryana chief minister and Indian National Lok Dal leader Om Prakash Chautala, switched to the BJP from the Congress.

Ranjit and Chautala have had a long-standing feud but NDA sources expressed dismay at the BJP's "shoddy" attitude towards

its allies. For the record, the INLD is still a constituent of the NDA although its alliance with the BJP will not hold for the Lok Sabha polls.

The BJP snapped ties with the INLD after the state leaders impressed on the Delhi bosses that there was a "huge" anti-incumbency wave against the Chautala government which could hit the BJP as hard, if not more than its ally.

Ranjit came with his Jat supporters and addressed them in the presence of Naidu and cabinet minister Arun Jaitley. It is not clear if and where Ranjit will be put up because of the Haryana unit's "opposition" to rewarding new entrants promptly with tickets.

In Karnataka, another family is on the verge of a split. Former chief minister S. Bangarappa seems set to join the BJP, though his son Kumar is a minister in the outgoing S.M. Krishna government. Kumar, a film star, has so far opted to continue in the Congress.

BJP sources claimed that the Congress would be wiped out in Karnataka if Bangarappa left. "There is no information, no confirmation. Why should I rule it out? Why should I welcome it?" Naidu said, asked if Bangarappa would join the BJP.

The two sons-in-law of the late Ramakrishna Hegde also met Advani. But BJP general secretary Pramod Majahan said Advani's meeting with Gopal and Manu Nichani, who came with Ajay, was not connected with politics. (See Page 8)

Cong demolishes NDA claims

HT Correspondent
New Delhi, February 19

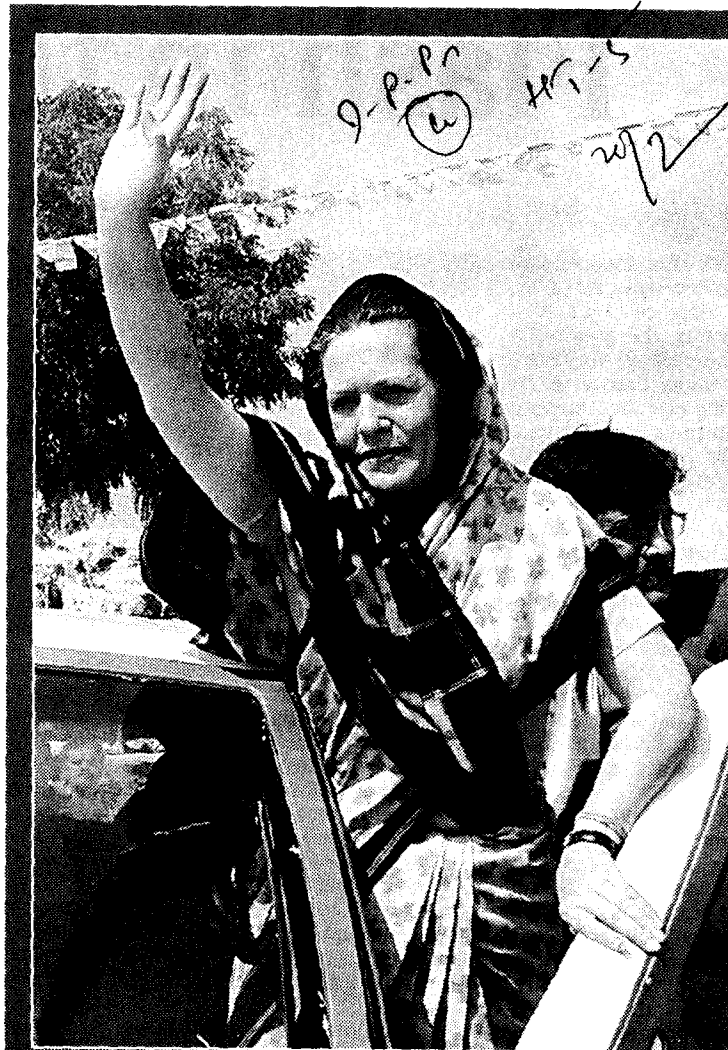
THE CONGRESS dared the BJP to name one Bokaro, Bhilai or Trombay it may have set up as it attacked the ruling party for its "Goebbalian" claims of having done more for the country in the past five years than the Congress did in 50 years.

"The BJP is insulting all those who have helped India progress so far with its "five vs 50" campaign. Has the BJP added an IIT, a Bokaro or a Trombay in continuation of the great saga of India's rise since Independence?" asked spokesperson Anand Sharma.

Taking forward his colleague, Kapil Sibal's charge that the BJP's "India Shining" campaign spelt "India (being) Cheated", Sharma accused the ruling party of "mis-using" the state's exchequer to fuel a "misleading" propaganda that "distorts facts, negates past achievements and questions both the memory and wisdom of the people".

After his Press briefing, Sharma also picked on Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani's comments that the farming community hasn't yet joined in cheering the "feel-good" factor. "Our stand is being vindicated", Sharma said, stressing that the BJP had been "denying reality, ridiculing the poor and insulting all those who have contributed in India's achievements in agriculture, industry or space".

To substantiate his charge, Sharma listed the achievements under successive Congress regimes, including those of Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi or Rajiv Gandhi. The country saw the establishment of premier institutes, like the IITs and IIMs, hydel and irrigation projects at Bhakra, Hirakud and Nagarajunasagar, steel plants at Bokaro, Bhilai and Rourkela and nuclear plants at Trombay, Narora, Rawabhatta and Kala-



SONIA GANDHI: In the heat of electioneering

pakkam — all symbols of India's pride, encapsulated in the industrial, green and white revolutions. The initiatives in the IT and telecom sectors prepared the country to become one of the acknowledged IT leaders in the world today.

Sharma said that, instead of "betraying" the people by wasting Rs 750 crores of public money to serve "partisan political ends", the government could have used it to redress the people's problems.

According to the Planning Com-

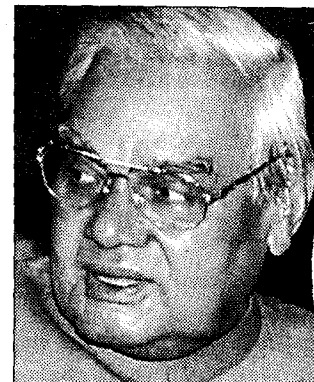
What Cong has done

- Under successive Cong regimes, the country has seen the establishment of premier institutes, like IITs and IIMs, irrigation projects at Bhakra, Hirakud and Nagarajunasagar, steel plants at Bokaro, Bhilai and Rourkela and nuclear plants at Trombay, Narora, and Kalapakkam — all symbols of India's pride
- The initiatives in the IT and telecom sectors prepared the country to become one of the acknowledged IT leaders in the world today

What BJP has done

- 'India Shining' campaign read 'India (being) Cheated', and the country's exchequer is being misused to fuel a 'misleading' propaganda that 'distorts facts, negates past achievements and questions both the memory and wisdom of the people'
- Planning Commission says: 260 crore are below the poverty line; 6 crore kids starving; 25 million without shelter; 170 million with no drinking water; 290 million adult illiterates; and a burgeoning population of unemployed youths

mission's statistics, there are 260 crore below the poverty line, six crore starving children, 25 million without shelter, 170 million with no drinking water, 290 million adult illiterates and a burgeoning population of unemployed youths.



Atal Bihari Vajpayee
Playing politics?

BJP blowing PM's 'trumpet of lies'

HT Correspondent
New Delhi, February 19

THE CONGRESS has stepped up its intensity and frequency of attack on the NDA and sought to expose the BJP's efforts to "blow the Prime Minister's trumpet" as "lies".

It dubbed Defence Minister George Fernandes as "King George of Kargil" for the coffin-body bag scandal. It also tried to "expose" the NDA's India Shining advertisements as a case of "India cheated". It quoted write-ups from *Time* and *India Today* on the PM to take away the shine from the Vajpayee's persona and put his regime on the mat for "playing politics" with the SC-ST commission by packing it with "yes-men".

Party spokesperson Kapil Sibal punctuated with "India cheated" each time he exposed the "lies" the government was propagating with "the taxpayers' money" on the ads on population control, *khadi* and village industries and the textile and telecom sectors. He cited figures to highlight the problems in these sectors.

Sonia lunch to cook up unity

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'Feel-good factor' seeps into Opposition camp

HT Correspondent
New Delhi, February 5

WITH THE NDA government holding all the aces before the Lok Sabha polls, a bit of the feel-good factor seems to have seeped into the Opposition camp. As the present Lok Sabha was being dissolved, they apparently buried their differences to present a show of unity in their resolve to defeat the BJP in the elections.

Congress chief Sonia Gandhi may not have got all the secular forces on a common platform, but she got them to share a table to provide a glimpse of a possible post-poll alternative to the BJP.

Twenty-eight representatives from 13 parties responded to her luncheon invitation on the last day of the 13th Lok Sabha to show the unity of the anti-BJP forces. Significantly, the rivals like SP's Amar Singh and the BSP's Rashid Alvi attended the lunch.

"My invitation was to thank them because we have been working together for five years. This is something which we will continue dur-



Pranab Mukherjee, Sonia Gandhi, Laloo Prasad Yadav and Deve Gowda at a luncheon meeting in New Delhi on Thursday. AP

ing the conduct of the next elections," Sonia said after the lunch where leaders lambasted the Vajpayee government's "sops" and the BJP's "fake" claims of a "feel-good factor" and the money spent on advertising it.

The "atmospherics and

bonhomie" lent force to the photo session which included political adversaries like Amar Singh and Alvi, foes-turned-allies Laloo Yadav and Ram Vilas Paswan and the Congress' pre-poll rivals but possible post-poll allies like H.D. Deve Gowda or

Somnath Chatterjee.

The invitees included Chandrashekhar, Sharad Pawar, T.R. Baalu and A.R. Pradhan. But the Congress failed to call RLD's Ajit Singh and JMM's Shibu Soren because of a "communication gap".

BJP attacks Cong over 'petro-bribe'

HT Correspondent
New Delhi, February 1

OPENING A new front against the Congress in the run-up to the Lok Sabha polls, the BJP on Sunday asked the Centre to go for a high-level probe into the "exposure" by the Iraqi government about the Congress receiving a huge "petro-bribe" from the Saddam Hussein regime. It said it was a serious matter and affected India's image.

Quoting media and official reports from Iraq, BJP spokesman Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi said Sonia Gandhi-led Congress and a senior Congress leader were among the 46 individuals, companies and organisations who got millions of barrels of oil as bribes in return for their support to the crumbling Saddam government.

"Iraqi oil ministry's official documents say there were two beneficiaries. One was the Congress and another a senior leader of the party. Both got one million barrels of oil worth Rs 150 crore each as a bribe for extending support to Saddam," he said, adding that the list of alleged bribe recipients had been published by a Baghdad newspaper, *Al-Meda*.

Naqvi released a list of 10 questions concerning the scam, seeking answers from the AICC.

● "Why did Saddam have to bribe the Congress?"

- What was the deal?
- What did the Congress do in return for Saddam?
- Where did the one million barrels of oil worth Rs 150 crore go?
- Obviously, the Congress did not hide the oil in the AICC headquarters, so where was it sold?
- "Did the Congress enter the sale proceeds of the oil in its official account?"
- Or was it kept in a mysterious account?
- How was the money used?
- Was any tax paid on the money from the sale of the oil?
- When is the Congress come out with the true account of this scam?" he asked.

Naqvi said Iraqi's ruling governing council member Naseer Chaderji had already stated that the published list of recipients of the bribe was true and they should be prosecuted.

Similarly, Iraqi Oil Ministry spokesman Assem Jihad had warned that "anyone involved in stealing Iraqi wealth will be prosecuted."

The BJP spokesperson said it was an embarrassment for India since the new Iraqi regime granted an order of go-ahead for probe into the "petro-bribery" against the Congress and other recipients who included organisations from Russia, China, Austria and a host of Gulf countries.

Sonia, Karunanidhi to launch alliance

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

NEW DELHI, Jan. 17. — The Congress and the DMK today came closer to finalising the details, including the seat-sharing formula, for their Tamil Nadu alliance for the next Lok Sabha polls. At the end of an hour-long meeting at 10 Janpath with Mrs Sonia Gandhi and Dr Manmohan Singh, DMK representatives Mr MK Stalin, Mr Dayanidhi Maran and Mr TR Baalu, there were indications that a formal announcement of the new alignment may be made in Chennai jointly by Mrs Gandhi and Mr Karunanidhi.

Though both Mrs Gandhi and Mr Stalin, talking to reporters after their meeting, said they had held "preliminary talks", the pace of the alliance was evident when Mrs Gandhi said: "We shall move ahead and we will only move ahead". Mr Stalin chipped in: "We came to Delhi to discuss with the Congress president the issues regarding the coming elections, developments in state politics and the steps to be taken to face the poll. We discussed constructive steps". Indications are that out of the 39 Tamil Nadu seats, Congress may bag eight to 10, DMK 15 to 17, and DMK allies PMK 6, MDMK, 4, and Left 4.

While Congress will contest the sole seat from Pondicherry, former finance minister, Mr P Chidambaram may be accommodated from Tamil Nadu. Mrs Gandhi said "Dr Karunanidhi was kind enough to send his representatives to hold further talks with us. Now I am looking forward to meeting Dr Karunanidhi soon in Chennai." The date for Mrs Gandhi's Chennai trip will be confirmed soon, said Mr Stalin.



Mrs Sonia Gandhi at the wedding reception of Sachin Pilot, son of the late Rajesh Pilot. — PTI

Dynasties meet

NEW DELHI, Jan. 17. — The Congress-DMK talks today also marked the coming together of two political dynasties: Mrs Sonia Gandhi of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty and Mr MK Stalin and Mr Dayanidhi Maran, son and grand nephew of the DMK supremo respectively, representing the foremost Dravidian dynasty. And while Mr Stalin is already being projected as Mr Karunanidhi's heir, Mr Maran, son of late Murasoli Maran, was sent along to signal his debut in politics. — SINS

Left wants post-poll CMP

The CPI-M leader, Mr HS Surjeet, said today that "it's better to think of the common minimum programme after the elections." He also said that as for collective leadership of the secular front, there could be some sort of a mechanism after the polls.

Editorial: Pawar Piay, page 8

It's time Cong woke up to BJP's clarion call

The Congress may have also begun its exercise for the big fight but its efforts need to pick up momentum

GEARING UP FOR POLLS

Pankaj Vohra

AS WAS expected, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) has left the decision to hold early Lok Sabha polls to the Prime Minister. Although Atal Bihari Vajpayee has not expressed his views on the subject, it is abundantly clear that the dissolution of Lok Sabha is imminent to pave the way for early elections.

In fact, the sops offered by Finance Minister Jaswant Singh on Thursday have left no room for speculation regarding the intention of the Vajpayee government. The announcements have been made clearly to create a feel-good factor in favour of the ruling alliance as also to sound the opposition parties that there would be no full-fledged budget session. Instead the possibility of a vote on account looks exceedingly strong before the Lower House gets dissolved.

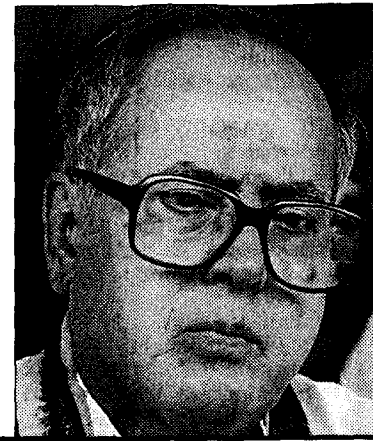
The meeting of the BJP national executive which begins on Sunday in Hyderabad assumes significance since the formal recommendation for an early election may be made to the Prime Minister in the political resolution. Therefore, the Prime Minister may either announce early polls or make a statement hinting at the dissolution of Parliament after a vote on account.

Vajpayee appears to be very optimistic about the NDA's chances in elections and according to informed sources within the BJP, has agreed to renew the mandate for his government even though there would be six to seven months left for him to complete his full tenure. He too



BJP's Hyderabad meet

- Formal recommendation for an early election may be made by the Prime Minister in the formal resolution
- PM may either announce early polls or hint at the resolution of Parliament after a vote on account
- For the first time, the BJP is likely to discuss and decide on organisational structures up to the block level
- The question of funding for various seats may also be discussed



The Congress formula

- While alliances with some partners are being worked out, the party seems also to be busy putting its own house in order
- After successfully defusing the Punjab crisis, a similar formula seems under consideration in Kerala to broker peace
- Not only orchestrated, top-to-bottom responses but also distribution of work to ensure candidates' success
- Reinventing secularist slogans and drawing up a plan for winnability

believes that the opposition parties have been caught on the wrong foot and may not be able to forge a formidable alliance to meet the challenge posed by the NDA.

The importance of the BJP's national executive in Hyderabad also lies in the fact that for the first time, the party is likely to discuss and decide about organisational structure upto the block level in order to prepare the party for the poll exercise. Even the question of funding for various seats may also be discussed and the blueprint for the party's electoral strategy will get the formal nod.

The blueprint is perhaps a document which is unprecedented and has been carefully prepared as a part of mission 2004 with major inputs from Venkiah Naidu, Pramod Mahajan, Arun Jaitley and last but not the least L. K. Advani. It is also a demonstration of the party's preparedness to take on any kind of opposition in the parliamentary polls.

In addition, an economic resolution stipulating the road map to remove poverty in the next five years is also likely to be

placed and passed at the crucial meeting.

The BJP's lead in preparing itself for the big fight is also evident from the fact that the day after the two-day deliberations, Advani and Naidu even sit along with presidents of state units as well as parbharis to discuss the poll strategy.

In sharp contrast, the Congress may have also started its exercise of preparing for the big

succeeded in defusing the Punjab crisis for the time being by appointing Rajendra Kaur Bhatnagar as the deputy CM.

A similar type of formula seems to be under consideration in respect of Kerala where efforts are on to broker peace between two warring groups led by veteran leader Karunakaran and chief minister A K Antony. There have been reports about some Congressmen protesting

Vaghela's plight is similar to that of NCP leader Chagan Bhujbal who retains the Shiv Sena type image even though he ceased to be a member several years ago.

The problem with the Congress at present is that it is not seen to be doing what it should be doing. On the other hand, the BJP appears to be much more confident without doing what it should have done in the last five

The sops offered by Finance Minister Jaswant Singh have left no room for speculation regarding the intention of the Vajpayee government. The announcements have been made clearly to create a feel-good factor in favour of the ruling alliance, as also to sound the Opposition parties that there would be no full-fledged Budget session. Maybe only a vote on account

fight but its efforts need to pick momentum in order to give a befitting reply to the NDA. While alliances with some partners are being worked out, the party seems to be simultaneously busy in bringing its own house in order in some states. For instance, the Congress high command has

against the Sena created by state unit chief Shankar Singh Vaghela in Gujarat. But what these Congressmen forget is that Vaghela despite being in the Congress has the mindset of his earlier organisation, the RSS, and may be using his Sena to counter the Swayamsewaks.

years. The difference is very striking even in camera shots shown on the electronic media where a CWC meeting appears to be very grim with the body language of most members more negative than positive.

However, in case of BJP, the camera shots give an impression

that its leaders were more relaxed and positive than their opponents even if this may not actually be the case.

In terms of drawing out an action plan, the Congress needs to focus itself on not only orchestrated responses starting from top to the bottom but also on distribution of work to ensure the success of its candidates.

For instance, if Sonia Gandhi as the party chief hits out at the government or the party's opponents, every leader big or small wherever he or she is based in the country should take the cue and hit out publicly. It is not the task of the Congress president alone to face the opposition but every congress leader should contribute to this effort.

Secondly, the Congress has a certain advantage over every other political party in this country. It is truly national in its organisation which exists even if in small strength in every district of the country. If at the national level, a dharna or a call against its opponents is given from Delhi, the party has the network to execute it simultaneously in every district of India, which itself would be an event to

send fear in the hearts of its rivals. Such an exercise would energise the cadres and at the same time help in creating public opinion against the policies and programmes of its opponents.

From the Congress perspective, the elections to Lok Sabha will be extremely crucial since it would pave the way for future politics of India. The BJP and the NDA will want to make the polls into a Vajpayee versus Sonia contest while the Congress should aim at making it into a fight between ideologies as well as progressive and secular forces on one side and communal forces on the other.

The BJP has taken a head start in this big fight largely because they have their strategy properly worked out and know what their top priorities are. Its leaders have prepared a blueprint which they feel will be reflected in the poll results. It has changed its tactics and instead of targeting minorities directly, the BJP uses the slogan of fighting terrorism to reiterate its commitment to Hindutava.

The global war against terrorism which invariably shows fanatic Muslims as perpetrators of terrorism has also worked to its advantage.

The Congress on the other hand has to reinvent slogans in favour of secularism and needs to draw a plan which makes winnability as the core of any tactics to be used in the polls. Like the BJP did in 1989, the Congress should give tickets to any candidate who can win. It should also entrust responsibility to each of senior leaders who should be asked to prove their worth by helping party win. If this does not happen fast, the big fight will begin with advantage to BJP.

BJP, Sena no longer untouchable for NCP

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TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Pune: NCP chief Sharad Pawar confirmed on Friday that his party was exploring the option of joining the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance for the Lok Sabha elections. A decision on the issue would be taken during the NCP's national executive meeting in New Delhi on January 25, he announced at a press conference here.



Sharad Pawar

Since the NCP had representatives in Meghalaya, Manipur and Uttar Pradesh, leaders from Maharashtra alone could not decide on the issue, he said, adding that party leaders from the north-eastern states had written to him urging an alliance with the NDA.

He said that the alliance for the Lok Sabha polls would apply to all states where the NCP contested. However, he did not rule out an alliance with the Congress for the assembly elections in Maharashtra.

(Maharashtra chief minister Sushilkumar Shinde said in Mumbai that he was "hopeful" of the current talks between the Congress and the NCP reaching a pre-poll electoral pact, PTI reported. "I am holding talks with Mr Pawar and I am hopeful about the outcome," Mr Shinde told reporters when his attention was drawn to the NCP leader's statement in Pune.

Asked whether Mr Pawar's statement was an attempt to pressurise the Congress, Mr Shinde said: "I will not comment on it.")

Mr Pawar's statement came barely a day after senior NCP leader and Maharashtra home minister R.R. Patil stressed that the NCP would never join the NDA.

The NCP had always maintained that it would not consider an alliance with "fundamentalist forces" like the BJP and the Sena. But Mr Pawar said on Friday that the results of the recent assembly elections had compelled his party to explore all options—whether to align with the Congress, NDA or the Left Front.

When asked if the BJP was no longer an "untouchable" for the NCP, Mr Pawar said that in the current political scenario, "no political party is an untouchable". He said it was clear that no single political party was in a position to provide a stable political alternative and that coalition politics was the order of the day. There was nothing wrong in working with other political parties on the basis of a common minimum programme, he said.

Clarifying that the NCP had not discussed the matter with any constituent of the NDA, Mr Pawar said deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani's talks with Shiv Sena chief Bal Thackeray in this regard was purely an internal matter of the NDA. He refused to react to Mr Thackeray's statement that the NCP was welcome to the NDA provided it dropped ex-deputy chief minister Chhagan Bhujbal.

SP will not join anti-BJP front

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: Samajwadi Party chief Mulayam Singh Yadav on Friday ruled out joining any anti-BJP front, saying it would only help that party. Explaining his position, Mr Yadav



Mulayam Yadav

dwelt on past experience and said, "Differences on the issue of seat sharing among 'morcha' partners had helped the BJP." He said the SP would now contest elections on issues and give and take issue-based support.

However, he hoped that socialists of all hues would come together some day and said that George Fernandes would be welcomed if he left the NDA. "There will be nearly 100 MPs even now if the socialists come together. Then, no third front will be needed," he said.

But at the same time, he praised Congress president Sonia Gandhi and said he would meet her whenever she wanted and was necessary.