

Rao cremated with state honours

Sonia's absence riles Cong leaders

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

HYDERABAD, Dec. 25. — Mrs Sonia Gandhi's absence at PV Narasimha Rao's funeral today riled Andhra Pradesh's Congress leaders and bolstered their belief that leaders from the South do not get their due respect in Delhi.

Reactions of senior Congress leaders and ministers The Statesman spoke to about Mrs Gandhi's absence ranged from anger to disillusionment. One leader wondered why Mrs Gandhi could not make it herself instead of deputing Mr Motilal Vora, who is a senior and older than her.

"The Congress leadership ignored Rao's wish to be cremated in Delhi. And Mrs Gandhi decided not to come. Its obvious that people from Delhi do not care much for people from the South", one minister said.

"Had Mrs Gandhi come, it would have enhanced her prestige and stature in the state," another minister commented. Some even recalled that Mrs Gandhi had preferred to contest the 1999 general elections from Bellary in neighbouring Karnataka instead of Cuddapah in Andhra Pradesh.

Those sympathetic to Mrs Gandhi explained that she functioned within a coterie, who, they alleged, did not feel the need to advise her that her presence here would be appropriate.

Curiously, Rao's final destination was undecided for several hours after he passed away. His family members told Congress leaders in Delhi about Rao's wish to be cremated in Delhi. Around 4 p.m. on 23 December chief minister Dr YS Rajashekar Reddy was informed of Rao's death the moment he landed at Hindupur district.

He then called up Rao's sons and offered to make all arrangements for the funeral here. He cancelled his official programmes at Hindupur and flew to Bangalore and took the next flight to Delhi. Later, he met Union home minister Mr Shivraj Patil and it was decided that the funeral would be held here.



Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh showers rose petals on the funeral pyre of PV Narasimha Rao in Hyderabad on Saturday. — AFP

HYDERABAD, Dec. 25. — PV Narasimha Rao was cremated with full state honours today.

His eldest son Mr PV Ranga Rao lit the pyre at 1.51 p.m. Rao is the second former Prime Minister after Morarji Desai to be cremated outside Delhi.

The cortege arrived at 1 p.m. after which the chiefs of the Army, Navy and Air Force placed wreaths on the body. Rao's last rites were jointly performed by his three sons — Mr Ranga Rao, Mr PV Rajeshwara Rao and Mr PV Prabhakar Rao — in the Yejur Vedic tradition, under the direction of family priest Mr Y Seetharama Shastri.

Other than Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh, finance minister Mr P Chidambaram, defence minister Mr Pranab Mukerjee, former Prime Minister Mr HD Deve Gowda, BJP president Mr Lal Krishna Advani, AP Governor Mr Sushil Kumar Shinde, chief minister Dr YS Rajashekar Reddy were among the many dignitaries present.

'Unburnt after hours'

PV Narasimha Rao's mortal remains did not reduce to ashes twelve hours after his pyre was lit at 1.51 p.m. today, as telecast live by local TV channels. Skull apart, several other body parts, were visible unscathed past midnight. While no family member or Congress leaders were present at the site, half a dozen policemen are keeping vigil. — SNS

THE STATESMAN

'I'm absolutely optimistic... This country has to be philosophical, looking far into the future'

In an interview conducted before the general election in May 2004, former prime minister P V Narasimha Rao talked to SHEKHAR GUPTA, Editor-in-Chief of *The Indian Express*, about the crucial period in 1991 when he took over the reins of the country, how he steered through it and how it felt seeing an election where another party was taking the credit for India Shining. Silent on Babri, and his own party's indifference towards him, Rao nevertheless revealed more than he ever had in his first interview in eight years, which would also be his last before his death. Excerpts from the interview on NDTV 24X7's *Walk the Talk*.

■ It's a rare occasion for somebody in the media to be talking to you, particularly on camera. Equally rare to me...

■ You have acquired a reputation for being the quietest among our senior politicians. Is it cultivated? Is it something you were born with? Is it tactics or a strategy?

It's a part of all that you have catalogued. It cannot be just cultivated, it cannot be just inborn. You have to match your attitude with the situation, if you don't then you are a failure...It has to gel with the circumstances, it has to gel with the surroundings and also with the particular context you are talking about.

■ I think this is your first interview in almost eight years. It's like you are a master at keeping things to yourself.

No, it's not keeping things to myself. It's a question of vague interest in several things. Unlike you. When you come to me you are interested in only...politics.

■ As one of our most experienced politicians, do you find too much of our politics still comprises the past? There is not enough promise of the future. Either you vote against the injustice of the past, or vote for the glory of the past.

Well, do you find any area where you only talk of the future?

■ If you look at say an American campaign, people are talking about their children, grandchildren, healthcare, taxes, education. Here it is more about a mosque and a temple or about Gandhi and Nehru or about Lord Ram. Or Marx or Lenin.

You see, what you promise for the future is strengthened by what you have done in the past. If you have done nothing in the past and promise everything in the future your credibility suffers...He may not say it in so many words to your face, but he won't vote for you. So therefore it's a continuum—past, present and future. You just cannot mechanically separate them...There can be no future unless it is borne out of the present.

■ Or is it because too many of our politicians are too old?

No, it's not like that. You see it's part of the tradition. In some countries, the entire past consists of 200 years. If it is 5,000 years, that to extend the past has a dominant role to play.

■ But can a society that is moving forward remain mired in the past? The past also has many negatives...

No, we are not mired in the past...If you go into the details of 5,000 years, you will find that this nation has never been mired in any particular period of time. If that had been so, we would have perished long ago.

■ But today you are caught up in caste, you are caught up in religious issues, prejudices. In the last 10 years, politics has lost its way.

It has not lost its way. It has come up against certain hurdles. That's part of history and you have to train yourself to live with it and to find a way through all the hurdles. There's hardly any nation which has not faced these hurdles. We have seen how Italian immigrants fought with Irish immigrants, Irish immigrants with some other country's immigrants and so on. You see, there is a streak

in human nature which tries to distinguish itself. A person wants to distinguish himself from the next man. It's quite natural...And sometimes even on silly things, on very trivial things you want to show that you are different from your neighbour or the person you are talking about. So...if you are a strong man you would like to show off your strength to the extent you feel that you are talking to a physically weak person. You don't say so in so many words, it's psychological...

■ Are you referring to a strain in our politics? It may be too subtle for me and my viewers.

No, there is nothing subtle about it. This is very plain. A person who is aggressive by nature, he may be a coward inside. But he tries to hide his cowardice by being too abrasive...

■ Could you mean the BJP...?

No, no. That's where the long trap you laid comes in...Nothing to do with the party at all.

■ So all this talk about Shining India, "feel good", 8 per cent growth...from your vantage point, how do you look at it? Does it impress you, does it amuse you, does it irritate you?

No, why should it irritate me?

ON THE RECORD

P V NARASIMHA RAO
FORMER PRIME MINISTER

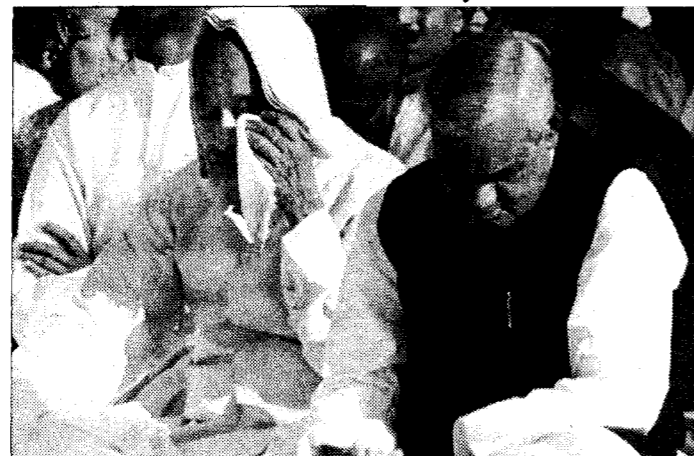
I know when I need to be irritated. When someone says India is shining, then he goes on to say that he is the cause for it...There, of course, one will differ...There is good rain, I'm a farmer, I have a good harvest. There is no need for me to feel sad, it's all shining to me. But if you say you have brought the rain, then I differ.

■ ...You suggested to me in the past that what we are seeing today is perhaps chapter three in our history of reforms.

Sure.

■ And chapter three would not have come if chapters one and two had not been written.

And there is also another thing...How did chapter one come? It came from 0. Maybe



"Vajpayee and I have remained lifelong friends...We will also remain lifelong adversaries...The greatest contribution India needed at that moment was to save the country from an election every year...To be able to unite those who could not be united otherwise...But all this has nothing to do with results. If you don't have a programme, an ideology, you will use hype before polls"

negative. So taking something from 50 to 100 is making it double. But if you take it from 0 to 1, how many times is it?

■ It's infinite.

Infinite, and what it really entails is a complete U-turn without seeming to be a U-turn...So the question for you to consider is: which is more difficult?

■ Certainly a change is more difficult than accelerating a continuum.

That's why it need not be laboured too much, because it's obvious.

■ So tell me a little more about how this 0 to 1 came about. Take us back to 1991, when you took over power and the challenge that faced you.

Logically we had come up against a blank wall; there was nothing more to do. You had no money, you were going to become a defaulter within two weeks and you can imagine what it means for India to be a defaulter. We have always been paying our instalments of debt in advance. That has been our record. Once you become a defaulter your entire economy, your honour, your place in the comity of nations, everything goes haywire.

■ You were a lifelong socialist or you were brought up in a Nehruvian sort of milieu. When did you conclude that: look this has to change, the world has changed? Was it in the first couple of weeks, was it in a chat with Dr Manmohan Singh?

You see Nehru was the person who said something about not being Nehruite. Gandhi was the person who said very strongly that 'I am not a Gandhite'. This becoming 'ite' (means) becomes something frozen. Gandhi was never static. Nor was Nehru. We did Nehru leave the whole of agriculture in the private sector? Not many people realise it.

■ And not go the way of either Lenin or Ben Gurion.

You are right. So he said it in so many words that if you are talking of socialism...it's not being imported, it's being evolved under our own conditions. So that should suffice as a permanent answer in favour of what Nehru really wanted to do. And what we were trying to do in that spirit.

■ So for you it was not such a

big instinctive shift. It was not like Deng Xiaoping changing the Chinese economy.

Not for me. You have to read my presidential speech at (the AICC in) Tirupati in 1992...I traced from Nehru to what I was doing and no one could say that it was a sudden shift. You cannot afford U-turns in this country.

■ So how does one make a U-turn without making a U-turn? That's a Narasimha Rao art.

It's not like that. If you understand that where you are standing is itself in motion...

■ A clever way of putting it...

The turning becomes easier. You are not static. That's what I just told you.

■ So you didn't feel you were leaving something behind?

Well, I did feel that. I thought we were growing up, you cannot possibly make do with the clothes that you wore 50 years back.

■ But did you have some self-doubts while doing this?

In a new field like this, you are never sure. Only a foolish man can be too sure of himself. So one has to be looking right, looking left, looking behind and looking before. And looking all the time for pitfalls. If you don't do that particularly in the beginning stages, then you will be in trouble.

■ So what were the pitfalls that you spotted and avoided?

I don't think this interview is enough to cover all this.

■ ...Maybe you worried about social security, unemployment?

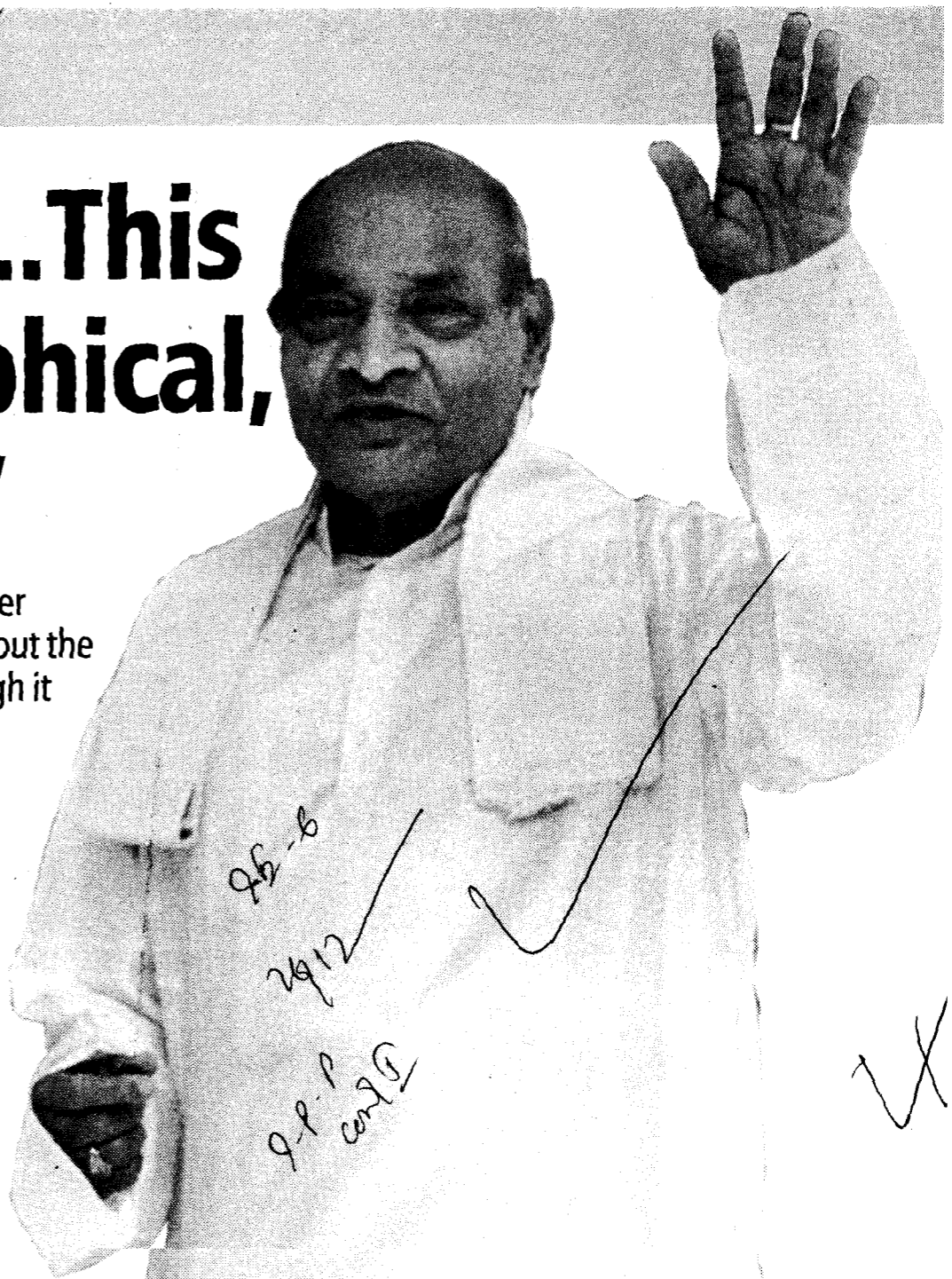
Yes, of course. We talked about the human face. You never asked me about the human face. People never ask me about the human face...The white-collar people never ask me about the human face. They say they are very happy because there is a change, there is an increase, their incomes are increasing. Good, it is good so far as it goes. What happens to the next man? That is my concern...There are people left behind. Maybe his own cousin, maybe his own nephews back in the village. So what does he think about them?...These are the things which need to be inculcated. Nation is not just one section, nation is a whole. Most of my past 30 years I have been in Delhi, but can I ever forget where I came from? Where I was born? Can I

■ When you managed this change, shift, U-turn without taking a U-turn...did you deal with many doubts?

No, I don't think I managed this. It was an objective situation which had its own impact and own momentum. Dr Manmohan Singh tried his very best to push it forward, behind him I stood like a rock. To give him political support through thick and thin. So this was kind of teamwork.

■ In fact, when Dr Manmohan Singh appeared on this show, he described how he quietly devalued the rupee, he went to the RBI Governor because you had not got the vote of confidence. And, in fact, you told him that if it goes alright it's fine, if it goes wrong, then you may pay for it with your job.

No, I didn't quite tell him that. We may all have had to pay for it. Because it is not just the finance minister, it's the duo. The prime minister giving him the political wherewithal, the armour which



"I know when I need to be irritated. When someone says India is shining, then says he is the cause for it...Then I differ...How did chapter one (of reforms) come? It came from 0. Maybe negative. Taking something from 50 to 100 is making it double. But if you take it from 0 to 1, how many times is it?...Infinite, and what it really entails is a U-turn without seeming to be a U-turn...So the question to consider is: which is more difficult?"

he needs. And the finance minister being an expert in the job in which I don't interfere. Unless I find there will be something like a backlash. Then, of course, I have to warn him and he takes...consideration of that warning.

■ When you pulled him back on the question of subsidies.

Quite right. I encouraged him when I found him diffident. Many people attacked him, I said Attack me, don't attack him. He's not a politician, let him do his job...

■ In fact, that's the interesting thing. Reform was done by two people. One of whom was a politician, not an economist, and the other was an economist and not a politician.

It's just like cricket, you know. One player keeps one side going, not scoring too much.

■ In this case, who was keeping the end and who was scoring?

I was keeping the end because it is the political end which has to be taken care of in order to enable the other man to do his best...And I think he (Dr Singh) has done his best.

■ Do you remember some moments that were particularly trying, when you thought—shall we do it, shall we not do it?

Well, if you really go into the nitty-gritty, every question has two sides. You have to balance them. This 'madhya marg' has come down to us from Buddha and was very well adopted by Panditji. That is something which has saved us from extremes, from crisis after crisis, from various matters not having gone wrong. When it doesn't go wrong, it doesn't make news. That's the whole story.

■ Did you ever think things would change so fast in India? In 1991, could you have imagined India in 2004?

I may have imagined 2010 but I was realistic enough to know that without passing through 2004, you can't reach 2010. And there were people who asked me at that time, particularly when I went for the Singapore lecture...There was a hue and cry. Some editorials and statements had come, to which I didn't answer, Mr Lee Kuan Yew answered.

■ What did he say?

He said something very interesting. 'Sitting in London, you are not running India. You are purveying your ideas. Don't be too critical because he (Rao) knows where the shoe is pinching'. I

couldn't have thought of sturdier help from a fellow politician much senior to me.

■ Has your party given you your due, for having made reforms possible? For having given it five years of power?

I didn't act like a wage-earner, you see, asking for more wages. But even that way, what is it that my party has not given me? What is it the country has not given me?

■ I am talking about the past five years. You were out of power.

It's not a question of five years or 25. I am one of the most content persons you can imagine. It's time for younger people to take over...I don't hold anything against my party.

■ It's only now they have put

"Nehru said something about not being Nehruite. Gandhi said he wasn't a Gandhite. Neither was static. Why did Nehru leave the whole of agriculture in private sector? Not many people realise it...He said if you talk of socialism...it is not being imported, it's being evolved under our own conditions"

your picture in the manifesto.

It doesn't matter. Do you know that in my five-year term, my photograph never appeared in any of the public places, like railway platforms, airports and VIP lounges?

■ I've heard people in your party say that's because they thought your name, your picture and your personality was a liability in the poll.

That doesn't matter. There was no election in 1992 and in 1993. If they had stopped putting it in 1995, I could understand. The point is some people look at these things very carefully, meticulously. I had no such interest.

■ Given your experience...and you are not too old for politics...

What is old for politics, if not 84?...The point is if Morarji Desai became prime minister after 80, I don't have to.

■ But you can be Bhisma Pitamah, you can be Kautliya. Your party should use your experience.

I am very happy that I have got lots of time to write, which will be destroyed...See certain aspects of personal experience are priceless. You just cannot think of how to evaluate them. And if you go by newspapers, the less said the better.

■ Why do you say that?

Because there's always the danger of distortion. Take the Emergency. Whatever was done was condemned wrongly. Do you think the Emergency was full of mistakes and nothing else? I have to correct that. Because I have lived through that.

■ Even Sonia Gandhi has called the Emergency a mistake.

That's okay, that's okay.

■ She said Mrs Gandhi realised it as well. That is straight from the dining table.

Well what I am going to tell you is straight from her...From Indira Gandhi.

■ Does the party's top leadership consult you now?

I have no reason to believe that I am not being consulted some way or the other. There may be other methodologies. Suppose I tell you something, then how do I know that you have not been sent by someone who wants to consult me?

■ You have spent now eight years out of power and a lot of it has been spent fighting corruption cases, some of which are quite silly. Do you handle this philosophically? Does this make you bitter?

What is the way of handling it? If you tell me something different from what I have done, which I ought to have done and have not done then I am prepared to listen.

■ Today you are 84, but when the cases started you were not 84. The cases have taken eight years of your political life.

That's okay, doesn't matter. In any case, what do you do? If there is a case, there is a case. There is no point in going into it and brooding.

■ But there are those who say that your party hung you out to

Leaders pay last respects to Rao

By Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, DEC. 24. Leaders of various political shades today paid their last respects to the former Prime Minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao, with the Congress president, Sonia Gandhi, placing the party flag and a wreath over the body when it reached 24, Akbar Road, party headquarters.

The body of Mr. Rao, who passed away here on Thursday, was shifted from his 9, Motilal Nehru Marg residence to the AICC headquarters for a brief time before being flown to Hyderabad.

The Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, members of his Cabinet and United Progressive Alliance constituent leaders, Ram Vilas Paswan, were among those who offered floral tributes.

The Chief Ministers of Delhi and Meghalaya, Sheila Dikshit and D.D. Lapang, also paid homage.

The Communist Party of India (Marxist) general secretary, Harkishan Singh Surjeet, accompanied by Polit Bureau member, Sitaram Yechury, placed a wreath.

Scores of senior Congress Working Committee members, and other leaders were among those who paid homage.

The body of Mr. Rao was

moved from Motilal Nehru Marg to the adjacent Akbar Road in a flower-bedecked carriage, tugged by a military vehicle and escorted by services personnel.

The family members of Mr. Rao, including his three sons, P.V. Ranga Rao, P.V. Rajeswara Rao and P.V. Prabhakar Rao, were among those who went with the body.

Earlier, several party leaders such as the Nationalist Congress Party leader, Sharad Pawar, the Rashtriya Janata Dal leader, Lalu Prasad, the former Prime Minister, V.P. Singh, the Bharatiya Janata Party leader, Jaswant Singh, and the former Samata Party president, Jaya Jaitly, were among those who paid respects at Mr. Rao's official residence.

Congress Seva Dal workers carrying the party flag filed in a row as the military vehicle pulled the cortege to the airport.

The party leaders, Motilal Vora and Ashok Gehlot, accompanied the body while the Union Ministers, S. Jaipal Reddy and Prithviraj Chavan, did so from the Government side.

The Union Ministers, Pranab Mukherjee and Shivraj Patil, the Lieutenant Governor of Delhi, B.L. Joshi, and Ms. Dikshit were present at the airport.



Defence personnel carry the body of the former Prime Minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao, to an aircraft to be flown to Hyderabad from New Delhi, on Friday. — AP

25 DEC 2004

THE HINDU

Narasimha Rao passes away

By Our New Delhi Bureau

NEW DELHI, DEC. 23. The former Prime Minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao, died today at the All-India Institute of Medical Sciences here. He was 83. He leaves three sons and five daughters.

Mr. Rao had been hospitalised since December 10 following cardiac and respiratory problems. His condition was stable this morning but later he suffered a cardiac arrest from which he did not recover.

The end came at 2.10 p.m. and his youngest son, P.V. Prabhakara Rao, and other family members were present at his bedside.

Seven-day mourning

The Central Government has announced a seven-day national mourning and the Union Cabinet, which met in the afternoon, recorded Mr. Rao's "dedicated services to the nation" and the "leadership he provided in carrying out the economic reforms." The condolence resolution passed by the Cabinet, presided over by the Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, said that Mr. Rao was a "statesman, scholar and linguist" who strove to improve the condition of the common man.

Hailing from Karimnagar district of Andhra Pradesh, Mr. Rao was the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh from 1971 to 1973. When he became the Prime Minister in 1991, he was affectionately called "Telugu bidda," the Telugu son who had done his State proud.

News of the death swept through Parliament, which was in session — it was the last day of the winter session. In the Lok Sabha, the Leader of the House, Pranab Mukherjee, announced it while in the Rajya Sabha the Minister of State for Parliamentary Affairs, Suresh Pachauri, made the announcement.

The Speaker, Somnath Chatterjee, said the House had lost a former member and former Prime Minister who was an elder statesman. In both Houses, members stood up to observe a two-minute silence before Parliament was adjourned sine die and the valedictory speeches were done away with.

The Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, and the Congress president, Sonia Gandhi, were among the first to pay their respects to the departed leader when the body was brought to Mr. Rao's residence at Motilal Marg at 5 p.m. Earlier Dr. Singh said that Mr. Rao was like "a father figure to me whom I could turn to when in doubt." Ms. Gandhi said: "His contribution



Narasimha Rao at a function in Hyderabad in October 2004. — Photo: P. V. Sivakumar

at the State and national levels will be remembered for generations to come. We shall miss his wise counsel. We have lost a valuable senior colleague."

End of an era

The former Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, said Mr. Rao's death had brought an era to an end. He said that many had called him a "Chanakya."

The Congress Working Committee met at the AICC headquarters late in the evening to join the nation in paying tributes to its former president. In a five-paragraph resolution, it said that Mr. Rao would be remembered for consolidating economic reforms.

Mr. Rao's residence received a steady stream of personal friends, VIPs, Members of Par-

liament and others who came to offer their respects.

Politicians from across the political spectrum paid glowing tributes to the scholar-statesman who steered the country at a difficult time. They said that he stabilised the country's economy and initiated the economic reforms; he ended the black days of terrorism in Punjab; in Kashmir, he revived the

stalled political process that led to the holding of Assembly elections soon after his five-year tenure as Prime Minister from 1991 to 1996 came to an end.

Many firsts

Mr. Rao, who led the first minority government at the Centre, was the first Prime Minister from the south. He emerged as a surprise choice of the Congress for Prime Minister after the 1991 elections during which Rajiv Gandhi, then Congress president, was assassinated.

Mr. Rao had, in fact, packed his bags and left New Delhi to retire, as he was not a candidate in the 1991 elections. But he came back to become the PM. In the early days after he assumed office even the main opposition party, the BJP, hailed

him as the "best Prime Minister" the country had had.

However, towards the end of his term he lost the goodwill — the Jain hawala case made him many enemies within the Congress and outside in other parties as many big political leaders were caught in that scandal. And, perhaps, as many saw it, his biggest political setback was that the Babri Masjid was demolished on December 6, 1992 when he was Prime Minister.

For this the Congress paid a heavy price and he could not win the electoral battle in 1996, leading to the formation of the United Front Government supported by the Congress from outside.

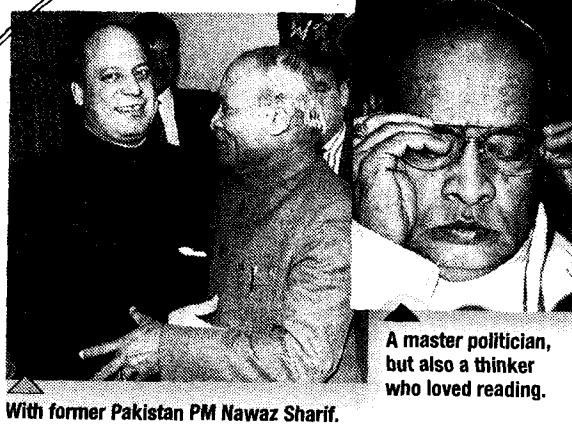
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Cremation tomorrow

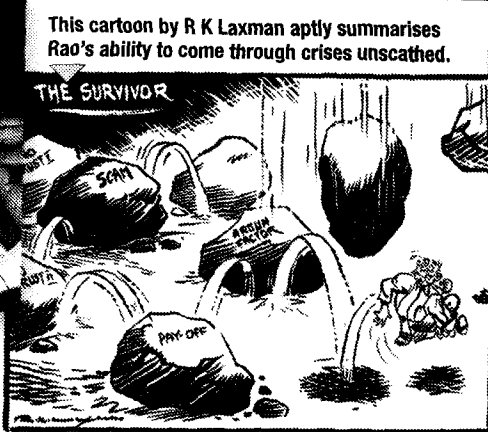
NEW DELHI, DEC. 23. The cremation of the former Prime Minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao, will take place in Hyderabad on Saturday, December 25.

24 DEC 2004

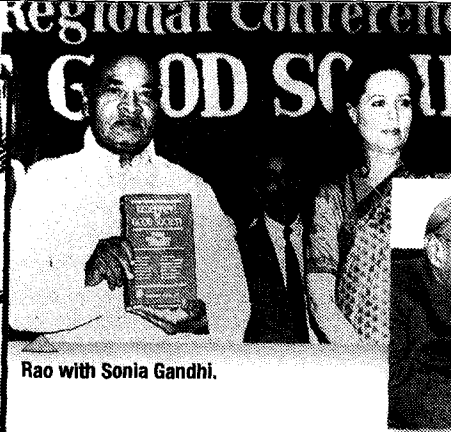
THE HINDU



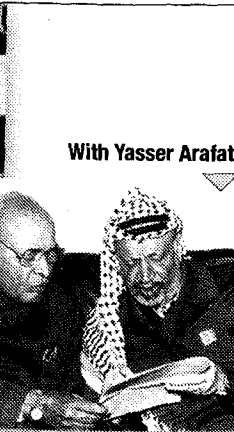
With former Pakistan PM Nawaz Sharif.



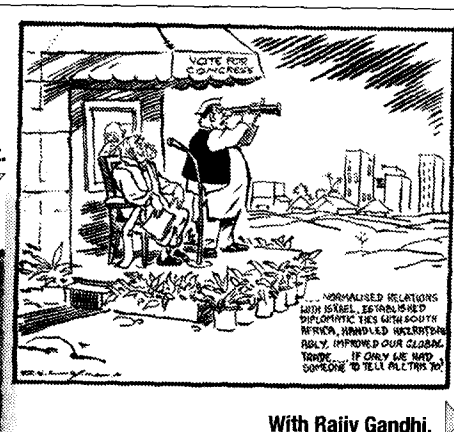
This cartoon by R K Lakshman aptly summarises Rao's ability to come through crises unscathed.



Rao with Sonia Gandhi.



With Yasser Arafat.



With Rajiv Gandhi.



1921 - 2004

NARASIMHA RAO

The legacy of 1991-96 still lives on

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: Narasimha Rao may have had a "troubled political legacy", but India will remember its ninth Prime Minister as the man who freed India's economic genius. The Indian economy rose like a phoenix from the ashes — from a grave crisis when Rao took over in 1991 to one of the fastest growing economies in the world in 1996. A few months before the Rao government was voted out, his finance minister Manmohan Singh asserted that "the idea of India has arrived" — and the world listened, with respect.

On Thursday, Singh, the incumbent Prime Minister, called Rao "the father of India's economic reforms", saying whatever he could achieve then as finance minister was because of Rao's support. Few among business leaders, economists and economic administrators would disagree.

Finance minister P Chidambaram, who was commerce minister in the Rao cabinet and steered trade policy changes, said: "When the story of India's economic reforms is written, his Rao cabinet and steered trade policy changes, said: "When the story of India's economic reforms is written, history would record that the invisible hand that guided the reform process was that of Narasimha Rao".

"No doubts, the reforms were under the compulsions of the crisis, but a paradigm shift took place in the Indian economy", said Jairam Ramesh, MP and secretary of the Congress economic cell, who worked in the PMO in early days of Rao tenure. "The transformation of the policies was bold. There were radical changes".

Some economic commentators have held it against Rao that he did not dig his heels deep in to support economic

reforms when confronted with political counter-pressure and in fact, slowed down the pace, after electoral reversals in state assemblies in 1993. "There were real reforms in the first 100 days and homeopathic reforms afterwards", Ramesh agrees, but emphasises that three non-Congress PMs after Rao followed the same direction of reforms which goes to show the resilience of what Rao started.

In the same vein, former Proctor & Gamble head Gurcharan Das regrets the loss of opportunity by Rao to go down as a Jawaharlal Nehru or a China's Deng Xiaoping for the sheer doggedness of Great Reformers. But he too agrees that Rao did change the course of Indian economy.

Corporate India sees Rao as a major driver for economic freedom for Indian entrepreneurs and its aspiring middle class. India Inc remembers him as the man who set in motion 6% economic growth leaving behind India's decadal "Hindu rate of growth". The economy of shortages started giving place to the economy of plenty — healthy forex reserves, foodgrain stocks, high exports and foreign investments.

The "licence, quota and inspector raj" was delivered a body blow and Indian business started to breathe freely: "We will never have to look back at those dark days of doing business in the country. Rao changed the economic face of the country", said N Srinivasan, CII director general.

"Rao addressed the economic crisis of India in 1991 with courage, determination and total dedication and launched the country's economic liberalisation", said CII president Sunil Kant Munjal.



PVN was no outsider to Marathi Manos

By S Balakrishnan/TNN

Mumbai: Even though he hailed from Andhra Pradesh, P V Narasimha Rao had a strong connection with Maharashtra for four reasons: he had studied in Mumbai and Nagpur universities, his immense love for Marathi language, he was elected to parliament from Ramtek in Vidarbha and he sought endorsement for his visionary economic policies from India Inc which was headquartered in Mumbai.

City Congress president Gurudas Kamat said Rao's love for Marathi, which he spoke fluently, was so immense that he insisted on speaking to MPs from Maharashtra in that language. He had a collection of the best in Marathi literature and would often quote from the classics to buttress a point. One of his biggest fans in Maharashtra was the late Shrikant Jichkar, Congress leader of Vidarbha, who was impressed by Rao's knowledge of Marathi and Maharashtra.

When Rao's candidature from Ramtek was announced by the Congress in 1984, there was no murmur of protest because nobody in the party perceived him to be an "outsider".

Rao evinced a keen interest in Maharashtra's politics, which came in handy when he had to outwit Sharad Pawar for the prime minister's gaddi in 1991. Rao realised that Pawar did not share a good equation with Sonia Gandhi. He exploited this shrewdly and pipped the ambitious Maratha at the winning post.

Even though he included Pawar in his cabinet as the defence minister, Rao always kept a close watch because he knew that Pawar was not reconciled to his defeat. Rao tried to weaken Pawar in his home turf by winning over the then chief minister and Pawar-loyalist Sudhakar Naik to his side. Pawar simply could not believe his eyes when Naik defected to the Rao camp. The second move which Rao made against Pawar was to summarily pluck him out of the Union cabinet and send him back to Maharashtra as chief minister in 1993. Rao used the post-Babri communal riots of 1992-93 in Mumbai as a pretext to send Pawar packing to Maharashtra and thus ensured that Pawar would not be able to build a rival power centre within the Union cabinet.

As far as his economic policies were concerned, Rao sought the nod from the business community of Mumbai. He hoped that the czars of the old economy would not misunderstand his policies which encouraged MNCs. The scions of some of the big business families were initially apprehensive of Rao's policies. But, ultimately, they veered around his viewpoint.

But, ultimately, they veered around his viewpoint.

Said Congress MP Murlidhar Deora, "Rao received full support for his economic policies from the corporate world of Mumbai. He understood the language of businessmen, who he looked upon as partners in progress. He earned the appreciation of Mumbai businessmen for pursuing his economic strategy with courage and conviction, despite lacking a comfortable majority in the Lok Sabha."

Down memory lane in Fergusson College

Pune: The demise of former prime minister P V Narasimha Rao has evoked poignant memories at Fergusson College, one of the oldest colleges in Pune, where Rao studied mathematics in the pre-Independence era.

"Rao was deeply attached to this college and had many fond memories of his stay in Pune in the 1940s", college principal Vasant Wagh told TOI on Thursday. Wagh recalled Rao's visits to Fergusson College in 1984 and 1985 to attend the centenary celebrations. His last visit to Pune was as recent as 2003 when he was on his way to Karad in Satara district to attend the Marathi literary congress, the Sahitya Sammelan.

Former college principal V M Bachal also recollected fond memories of Rao. TNN

BIG BANG

1991-92	1992-93	1993-94	1994-95	1995-96
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rupee devalued by 18% Import licensing scrapped for many things. Number of things to be imported through govt shrunk About 80% of industries delicensed, number of licensed sectors shrinks from about 100 to 18 Disinvestment begins. 51% FDI allowed in important sectors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Income tax rates and number of slabs reduced Wealth tax abolished on productive assets Many import curbs lifted New exchange rate mgmt system in place Customs duties cut FERA relaxed Private sector enters value-added telecom, allowed in roads, oil refining 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Excise slabs merged Dual exchange rates merged Cars and white goods delicensed Large-scale garment making opened to FDI Interest rate floors brought down Prudential banking norms written 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bulk drugs delicensed, 51% FDI allowed Private players in telecom: First cellular services in metros Private bids for roads, tolling allowed First private airlines: Jet, EastWest start Takeover code passed, UTI comes under Sebi jurisdiction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> First foreign car-maker, Daewoo, makes Cielo Telecom regulator Tri legislated Kelkar draws up 7-year oil deregulation plan SBI lists overseas

Dec 6, 1992: As news of the Babri demolition poured in, the 'teflon PM' looked as if he had been hit by a bus

The day that came to define a term

By Rajeev Deshpande/TNN

New Delhi: In the evening of December 6, 1992, P V Narasimha Rao sat motionless in his office as angry Congressmen walked in and out. Some thumped his desk, others shouted that all was lost. Still others talked of political challenges already looming on the horizon.

In Lucknow, there was an unnatural calm. The BJP government led by Kalyan Singh was packing up, anticipating dismissal; in fact, wondering why that had not happened as yet. Congress veteran N D Tiwari remained confined to his house, telling visitors that the "Cabinet is meeting in Delhi".

There are various accounts of how December 6 unfolded. Conspiracy theorists averred that Rao had winked at the demolition of Babri Masjid. But those who saw the former Prime Minister that evening say that he looked as if he had been hit by a bus.

It is a telling comment on Rao's personality matrix that even when the Babri Masjid was being brought down, it took him till evening to agree to the dismissal of the UP government. Even then his prime minister-ship looked extremely shaky, the crisis of confidence that loomed over his tenure seemed insurmountable.

Until then, Rao who scripted an unlikely survival story since June 1991,

had elevated "inaction as action" into kind of a sublime mantra. On becoming PM, he was confronted by the filibustering of Karnataka CM S Bangarappa. Rao's answer to his party was to suggest that he would strike at the right time.

And so it was with almost everything else. The AICC could wait, as

ing the Sangh Parivar and now he stood within grasp of the ultimate prize.

But as the night wore on, the thakur from Madhya Pradesh dithered. His supporters pleaded that he resign from the Cabinet and consign Rao to the chronicle of failed politicians. Why Arjun Singh did not heed the urgings is not clear. Perhaps he spent too much time working success ratios.

Rao survived. Miraculously No mean manipulator himself, he set about firming support in Parliament through a split in Janata Dal. His relations with Sonia Gandhi deteriorated, but such is the power of being PM and Congress president that he hung on. Arjun Singh fussed and fretted, but his resignation on the Christmas of 1993 was too little, too late.

Though he completed his term, Rao could never shake off Ayodhya. It blotted his report card as Congress lost state elections — the party was routed in his home state of Andhra Pradesh — Rao began to depend more and more on political fixers. There came a time when the decidedly unsavoury Matang Singh was trouble shooter-in-chief.

Rao would have done posterity a huge turn if he had left a chronicle of his momentous days in office.

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: The man who gave economic reforms in India a human face, P V Narasimha Rao, had a personality that traversed a wide spectrum: from an astute politician once termed "Chanakya" to a do-gooder who, to incumbent Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, was "generous to a fault".

He can't be said to be overstating facts. After all, one July morning 13 years ago, Singh got a call from Rao, who had just become PM, to take over the finance ministry.

At the time Singh, who'd held all sorts of economic portfolios, was UGC chairman. The same evening, Singh was sworn in, along with P Chidambaram, who became commerce minister to take over a battered economy.

There were many similarities between Rao and Singh: both were bookish and prone to lapse into pedantry. One flaunted his knowledge of 16 languages, the other had the quiet confidence of a man who had not just stopped with economic theory, but had nucked around with the messy business of policymaking. But there the similarities ended.

Singh was an open, transparent person, sometimes emotional. Rao was anything but open: face set in an inscrutable pout, he'd plot the downfall of many politicians through his long career.

Rao handpicked Manmohan as finance minister, but their relationship had its share of ups and downs

Now off, now on with the Man

While Singh's natural instincts were to go right to the heart of the problem, Rao famously chose to sit through many crises, believing — often correctly — that things would eventually resolve themselves. The theory failed disastrously on December 6, 1992, when Rao ignored threats that the 16th-century Babri Masjid would be demolished by Hindutva zealots. It was, and the event changed the course of modern politics.

The demolition and the violence that followed,

cism from farm lobbies, Rao announced a reversal of the policy. Singh was furious. Disaster was averted after Rao, not known to be a charmer, nevertheless convinced Singh to take back his resignation.

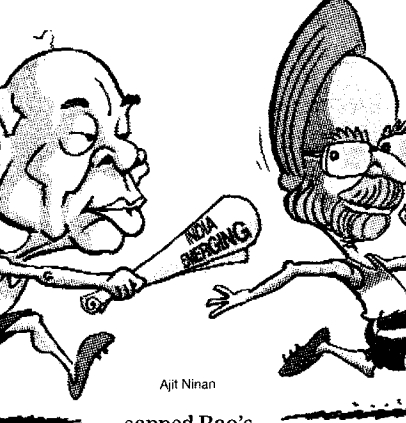
By early 1993, the economic crisis was over and Rao and Manmohan Singh settled down to a routine, in which incremental reforms would go through but major steps would be put on hold. Rao had started fretting about elections in 1996.

He got the Reserve Bank of India to tighten money supply drastically to squeeze inflation, which could hurt voters. The RBI obliged, inflation fell and people like Singh fretted that high interest rates mandated by RBI could choke off investments.

Yet, through all their ups and downs, the two continued together through Rao's regime. He did not consider Singh a political threat, liked the fact that Singh had high credibility among overseas investors and didn't try to marginalise him.

Singh became increasingly remote, but did his work professionally.

After 1996, when the Congress lost the elections, Singh kept a reasonable distance from Rao, whose government was accused of being part of many a scandal. In a gentle reproach to Rao, who was at the time the Congress president, he said at a CPP meeting that, like Caesar's wife, the party should not merely be free of taint, but be seen to be so.



sapped Rao's will. People in government saw that Rao's enthusiastic backing for his reformist finance minister fell off after 1992.

In fact, right after Singh's path-breaking budget of July 24, 1991, relations between Rao and him came close to breaking down completely. Singh had announced cuts in fertiliser sops. A few days later, in the face of criti-

কংগ্রেসে ফেরাতেই আগ্রহী সনিয়া

পুরভোটের আগে রফা

হোক, মমতাকে প্রণব

জয়ন্ত ঘোষাল • নয়াদিল্লি

১১ ডিসেম্বর: সনিয়া গান্ধীর আগ্রহে প্রণব মুখোপাধ্যায় এখন তৃণমূল কংগ্রেস নেত্রী মমতা বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়ের সঙ্গে আলোচনা শুরু করেছেন। মমতার সঙ্গে দিল্লিতে গত সোমবার প্রদেশ কংগ্রেস সভাপতি প্রণব মুখোপাধ্যায়ের বৈঠক হয়েছে। পাঁচ মাস পরে দিল্লি এসে তৃণমূলনেত্রী মমতা প্রণববাবুর বাসভবনে গিয়ে আলোচনায় বসেন। প্রণববাবুর প্রস্তাব, আসন্ন কলকাতা পুরসভা নির্বাচনের আগেই দু'দলের মধ্যে সমঝোতা হোক। তা হলে আসন্ন সমঝোতার ব্যবস্থা করাও সম্ভব হবে।

সনিয়া চাইছেন, মমতা কংগ্রেসে ফিরে আসুন। এখনই তৃণমূলের অস্তিত্ব মুছে ফেলে কংগ্রেসের সঙ্গে মিশে যাওয়া যদি কঠিন হয়, তা হলে আপাতত দু'দলের মধ্যে রাজাস্তরে নির্বাচনী সমঝোতা হতে পারে।

এমন নয়, দু'পক্ষই এই প্রস্তাবে রাজি হয়ে গিয়েছে। এমন নয়, এই জোট গঠনের আনুষ্ঠানিক সিদ্ধান্তটুকুই শুধু বাকি। কিন্তু দু'পক্ষ থেকেই বিষয়টি নিয়ে খোলামেলা আলোচনার প্রক্রিয়া শুরু হয়েছে। এর আগে, মনমোহন সিংহ প্রধানমন্ত্রী হওয়ার পরেই মমতা এক বার দিল্লির গ্রেটার কৈলাসে প্রণববাবুর বাসভবনে গিয়ে কথা বলেছিলেন। তার পরেও বরফ গেলেনি। কিন্তু বিজেপি নেতৃত্ব যে ভাবে আরও বেশি করে উগ্র হিন্দুত্বের লাইন নিচ্ছে এবং এ ব্যাপারে শরিকদের মতামতের তোয়াক্কা না-করেই এগোনোর



সিদ্ধান্ত নিয়েছে, তাতে মমতা অসন্তুষ্ট। মমতা বিজেপি নেতৃত্বকেও জানিয়ে দিয়েছেন, উগ্র হিন্দুয়ানার লাইন নিলে তৃণমূল বিরোধিতা করতে বাধ্য হবে। এর আগে পোটা আইন নিয়েও বাজপেয়ী সরকারের সঙ্গে তৃণমূল কংগ্রেসের বিরোধ হয়। পোটার অপব্যবহারের প্রতিবাদে মমতা লোকসভাতেও সরব হন। লোকসভায় ক'দিন আগে পোটা আইন তুলে নেওয়ার বিষয়টি পাশ করার দিন এনডিএ সিদ্ধান্ত নেয় যে, মনমোহন সরকারের সিদ্ধান্তের প্রতিবাদ জানানো হবে এবং পোটার পক্ষে সওয়াল করা হবে। এই ব্যাপারে ভিন্ন মত থাকায় মমতা দিল্লিতে থাকলেও সে দিন লোকসভায় যাননি।

সম্প্রতি সনিয়া কলকাতা গিয়েছিলেন। সে দিনও তিনি মমতা সম্পর্কে নীরব থেকেছেন। তিনি চান মমতা ঘরে ফিরে আসুন। কিন্তু পুরো বিষয়টি এখনও রাজনৈতিক পরিপক্বতা পায়নি বলে প্রকাশ্যে এ ব্যাপারে মন্তব্যই করছেন না মমতা। আপাতত সনিয়া তাই চাইছেন, তাঁর অনুগামী নেতারা আগে মমতার সঙ্গে কথা বলুন। তাঁকে বোঝান। মমতা রাজি হলে তখনই সনিয়া তৃণমূল নেত্রীর সঙ্গে কথা বলবেন।

এআইসিসি-র ভারপ্রাপ্ত সাধারণ সম্পাদক অম্বিকা সোনি

বলেন, “আমরা চাই, তৃণমূল কংগ্রেস কংগ্রেসেই মিশে যাক। তৃণমূল কংগ্রেসের কর্মীরা অনেকেই কংগ্রেসে আসতে শুরু করেছেন।” মমতার পাশাপাশি কলকাতা পুরসভার মেয়র সুরভ মুখোপাধ্যায়কেও দলে ফিরে পেতে উৎসাহী কংগ্রেস নেতৃত্ব। সুরভকে দলে নিয়ে আসতে তৎকালীন সাধারণ সম্পাদক সলমন খুরশিদও সক্রিয় হয়েছিলেন। তবে সুরভ একক ভাবে কংগ্রেসে এলে তাঁকে তৃণমূল সদস্যপদ খোঁয়াতে হবে। সে ক্ষেত্রে তাঁর পক্ষে মেয়র থাকা সম্ভব হবে কি না, তা নিয়েও প্রশ্ন আছে। কিন্তু মমতা যদি কংগ্রেসের সঙ্গে জোট বাঁধেন, তবে সুরভকে একক ভাবে কোনও সিদ্ধান্তই নিতে হবে না।

কিছু দিন আগে প্রতিরক্ষামন্ত্রী প্রণব মুখোপাধ্যায়ের ছেলের বিয়েতে সুরভ সস্ত্রীক দিল্লি আসেন। সে দিন কিন্তু তৃণমূলের অন্য কোনও সদস্য বিয়েতে ছিলেন না। তবে সুরভের কথায়, “সামাজিক অনুষ্ঠানে, বিশেষত প্রণবদার ছেলের বিয়েতে হাজির থাকার মানে কংগ্রেসে যোগ দেওয়া নয়।” মমতা যখন গত সোমবার প্রণববাবুর কাছে যান, সঙ্গে ছিলেন রাজ্যসভার তৃণমূল সদস্য দীনেশ দ্বিবেদী। তিনিও বলেন, “প্রণবদার ছেলের বিয়েতে মমতা থাকতে পারেননি বলেই সে দিন তিনি গিয়েছিলেন।”

তবে মমতার দিক থেকে কংগ্রেসের সঙ্গে জোট বাঁধার ক্ষেত্রে সমস্যা মূলত দু'টি। প্রথমত, জাতীয় স্তরে সিপিএমের সাহায্য নিয়েই সনিয়া সরকার চালাচ্ছেন। তা হলে রাজ্যস্তরে সিপিএম বিরোধিতা কী ভাবে হবে? প্রিয়রঞ্জন দাশমুন্সি ও প্রদেশ কংগ্রেস সভাপতি প্রণব বলেন, “জোটের বাধ্যবাধকতায় বিজেপি-কে রুখতে বামদের সঙ্গে বোঝাপড়া হলেও রাজ্যস্তরে সিপিএম বিরোধিতা লঘু করার প্রশ্ন ওঠে না।” প্রণববাবু বলেন, “রাজ্যে ভোটের সময় বিরোধী দল হিসাবে কংগ্রেসের লড়াই তো শাসক দলের সঙ্গে।”

সোমেনবাবুর প্রতিক্রিয়া কী হবে? পুরসভা বা বিধানসভা নির্বাচনে জোট হলে তৃণমূল কংগ্রেসকে ক'টি আসন কী ভাবে দেওয়া হবে? কংগ্রেস নেতাদের বক্তব্য: আলোচনা আসন্ন রফার স্তরে আসেনি। কংগ্রেস নেতৃত্ব মমতাকে ফেরাতে নীতিগত ভাবে সন্মত হয়েছে। সিপিএমের সঙ্গে বোঝাপড়া থাকলেও মমতা দলের সম্পদ হবেন বলে মনে করা হচ্ছে।

আসলে দেশ জুড়ে পুরনো কংগ্রেসিদের দলে ফেরানোর প্রক্রিয়া শুরু হয়েছে। কর্নাটকের বঙ্গারপ্পা বিজেপি ছেড়ে কংগ্রেসে ফিরতে পারেন। লালবাহাদুর শাস্ত্রীর ছেলে সুনীল শাস্ত্রীও বিজেপি ছেড়েছেন। পূর্ণ সাংমা সনিয়ার সমর্থনে বিবৃতি দিয়ে এনসিপিতে ফেরার কথা বলছেন। রাজ্যে রাজ্যে কংগ্রেসকে এ ভাবে শক্তিশালী করতে চাইছেন সনিয়া। মমতাকে ফিরিয়ে আনা এই কৌশলেরই অঙ্গ।

12 DEC 2006

ANADABAZAR PATRIKA

Heavy burden of birthday

OUR SPECIAL
CORRESPONDENT

9 P.P. conf

New Delhi, Dec. 9: Keep it "simple and low key", Sonia Gandhi is believed to have wished.

Her every wish may be a command for them, but not this one — not on her birthday.

Surging crowds laid siege to the area outside her residence at 10 Janpath and the party headquarters close by, singing and dancing, bhangra and kathakali, united in the diverse expression of what the Opposition called "sycophancy".

It could not object to the 26-foot-long cake weighing 100 kg that had been made for the Congress president's 58th birthday. Such examples were not quite scarce during Atal Bihari Vajpayee's reign — BJP and Congress supporters treat their leaders equally well.

The National Democratic Alliance smelt "gross political impropriety" in the series of advertisements put out in this morning's newspapers by Congress-led state governments.

Chief ministers followed the ads. Half-a-dozen of them trooped into 10 Janpath, including Punjab's Amarinder Singh and N.D. Tiwari of Uttaranchal who have been rather shaky in their chairs.

Faced with NDA criticism, a Congress spokesman said: "They (the Opposition) have no moral right (to criticise) ...The NDA ran the India Shining campaign on the directive of Atal Bihari Vajpayee."

The spokesman asserted that neither the Union government nor the party had issued any directive to Congress

states to take out the ads. "Sonia means good governance" — that was the theme in most ads, though she is not in government.

Today, much of the government shifted to her home for at least a part of the time.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited her. Allies and ministers Laloo Prasad Yadav, K. Chandrasekhar Rao,



Sonia on her birthday. (PTI)

Dayanidhi Maran, T.R. Baalu and Praful Patel came, too.

Communists don't celebrate birthdays, but Sitaram Yechury was there, maybe to discuss the oil price rise.

Only on two previous occasions have so many supporters collected outside Sonia's residence. The first was in May 1999 in a reaction against the Sharad Pawar-led revolt against her. Then it was in last May, initially to hail her for leading the party back to power and then to plead with her not to refuse the Prime Minister's post.

Now, the birthday bouquets carry the extra weight of that renunciation.

10 DEC 2004

THE TELEGRAPH

Chidambaram merges his group with Cong

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: Finance minister P Chidambaram, who himself had won the Lok Sabha election on a Congress ticket, merged his breakaway group with the parent party on Thursday.

Congress Jananayaga Peravai, a breakaway faction of the Tamil Maanila Congress founded by the late G K Mooppanar after parting company with the Congress, was formally welcomed back into the parent party by AICC general secretary Ambika Soni.

Chidambaram, who was present along with a large group of his party workers and office-bearers, explained that the formality of the merger had taken a few months as he had been preoccupied in the government since the elections.



Sonia Gandhi with P Chidambaram after the CJP's merger with Congress in New Delhi on Thursday

Kartik Chidambaram, his son, and M Kandaswami, another senior functionary of the group, were with him. Later, Chidambaram and his party colleagues met Congress president Sonia Gandhi.

Martial law after riot in Chinese province

JOSEPH KAHN

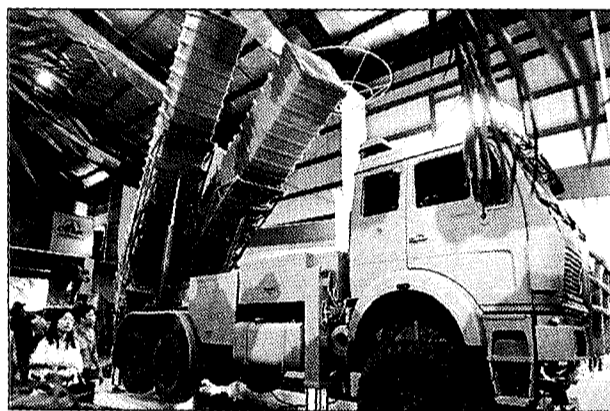
Beijing, Nov. 1: Ethnic clashes between majority Han Chinese and Muslim Hui left almost 150 people dead and prompted the authorities to declare martial law in a section of Henan Province in central China, journalists and witnesses in the region said yesterday.

The fighting flared last Friday and continued into the weekend after a Hui taxi driver's car hit and killed a six-year-old Han girl, prompting recriminations between different ethnic groups in neighbouring villages, these people said. One individual briefed on the incident by the police said that 148 people had been killed, including 18 police officers sent to quell the violence (However, Reuters reported that only seven people were killed).

Chinese media have reported nothing about the unrest in Henan.

But a news blackout would not be unusual, as propaganda authorities routinely suppress information about ethnic tensions.

Though most Chinese belong to the dominant Han eth-



A Chinese-made B611 surface-to-surface missile launcher at the International Aviation and Aerospace Exhibition in Zhuhai, Guangdong province. (Reuters)

nicity, the country has 55 other ethnic groups, including several Muslim minorities and others with ties to Tibet, Southeast Asia, Korea and Mongolia.

Hui Muslims, scattered in several provinces in the central and western parts of the country, are relatively well integrated into Chinese society and not generally considered a threat to stability.

The traffic accident last Friday set off large-scale fighting after relatives, friends and fellow villagers of the girl who

was killed, most of them Han, travelled to the mostly Hui village of the taxi driver to demand compensation.

The rival villagers failed to settle their dispute, which quickly grew to involve thousands of people in Zhongmou County between the cities of Zhengzhou and Kaifeng, according to two accounts of the incident. Local police failed to contain the unrest and authorities deployed the paramilitary People's Armed Police to restore order.

Martial law was declared

over the weekend, people in the area said, adding that the situation has since stabilised.

One person said the authorities may have been particularly alarmed after the police stopped a 17-truck convoy carrying Hui men to the area from other counties and provinces as it passed through Qi County, near Zhongmou. Blockades were set up on major roads in the area.

That suggests the word of the violence may have spread through a network of Hui and perhaps other Muslim groups, and that mutual support among them is relatively strong. But details were sketchy and difficult to confirm.

A police officer who answered the telephone in the Zhongmou county public security office last night declined to provide any information on the violence.

Last week, rioters set fire to police cars and looted government offices in Wanzhou, in Chongqing municipality in southwest China, after an argument between several people set off a riot involving as many as 10,000 people.

NEW YORK TIMES NEWS SERVICE

The wait ends, state gets a govt at last

Wanted Deshmukh, R R Patil Sworn in ■ But Ministry

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Mumbai: A fortnight after the assembly election results were announced on October 16, Maharashtra finally got a government on Monday with the swearing in of Congress leader Vilasrao Deshmukh (59) as the 23rd chief minister of the state at a simple ceremony at Raj Bhavan. State Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) president R R Patil was sworn-in by governor Mohammed Fazal as deputy CM.

Senior leaders from both the Congress and the NCP were present along with Shiv Sena and BJP leaders when Fazal administered the oath. Both Deshmukh and Patil took the oath in Marathi in the name of God amidst cheers from their supporters who had come from their home districts Latur and Sangli respectively.

Deshmukh claimed that the list of ministers was ready, but they will be administered the oath of office only on Wednesday. Obviously, he is still facing a problem in composing his 43-member team. The Congress high command had reportedly told him not to include first-time MLAs in the ministry. He has also been asked to



CM And His Deputy Reach Out To People

But he could not reach Raj Bhavan in time since his flight was delayed. But after he checked into the government guest house "Sahyadri" later, Deshmukh called on him and sought his blessings. Incidentally, both of them are ardent devotees of Sathya Saibaba of Puttaparthi in AP.

The outgoing chief minister and governor of Andhra Pradesh Sushilkumar Shinde, minister of state in PMO Prithviraj Chavan (Congress) and civil aviation minister Praful Patel (NCP) were present at the ceremony. Senior NCP leaders Vijaysinh Mohite-Patil, Chhagan Bhuwal, Dr Padamsinh Patil and Madhukar Pichad, who were miffed at being denied the deputy CM's post by Sharad Pawar, were also present much to the relief of R R Patil. From the opposition, state BJP president Gopinath Munde and leader of opposition in the state legislative council Nitin Gadkari attended the ceremony.

After calling on Shivraj Patil, the chief minister drove straight to Chaityabhoomi, memorial of Babasaheb Ambedkar, at Dadar beach. Later he visited Mani Bhavan at Gamdevi, which was home to Mahatma Gandhi whenever he visited Mumbai.

on the number of ministers but we will give an effective cabinet," he announced while speaking to mediapersons.

Union home minister Shivraj Patil, who is also from Latur and Deshmukh's political godfather, had flown in from New Delhi specially to attend the ceremony.

2 NOV 2004

THE TIMES OF INDIA

NCP reels under top post shock

'Concession' blame on Praful

OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

New Delhi, Oct. 30: Still reeling from the shock of being comprehensively "outmanoeuvred" by the Congress in Maharashtra, Nationalist Congress Party leaders today said chief negotiator Praful Patel could have bungled.

"In the delicate art of negotiation, if you make one major concession to your interlocutor, you end up making your negotiating position untenable by ending up making a series of concessions.

"That is what happened after we conceded the chief minister's job to the Congress last Sunday. We have pointed this out to Praful," a senior NCP leader said.

The NCP leadership was dumbstruck last night when the Congress dumped Sushil Kumar Shinde in favour of former chief minister Vilasrao Deshmukh, a prominent Maratha leader who fell out with Sharad Pawar a decade ago.

"Before and after we made the big concession of giving chief ministership to the Congress despite being the larger of the two parties, we were given to understand that Shinde would continue as chief minister.

"Which is why we elected R.R. Patil (a Maratha leader) for the deputy chief minister's post earlier yesterday. We did not at all expect Deshmukh's election," said another NCP leader.

The NCP leadership is convinced that the Congress brought back Deshmukh to counter the consolidation of the powerful Maratha lobby

behind it.

Nor are all sections in the NCP prepared to believe Shinde was the Congress frontrunner for the job till last evening.

The reason for the NCP's doubts is that the Congress chose to clam up on the leadership issue soon after the parties announced an understanding on government formation on Wednesday night.

NCP leader Pawar had then apparently prepared to make a statement that his party gave up chief ministership to allow a prominent Dalit leader (Shinde) to continue in office. But the statement was reportedly not made on a Congress suggestion that it would adversely affect the formal election of the legislature party leader.

NCP leaders do not appear to have imagined the Congress would replace a Dalit chief minister.

They also seem to have banked too much on assurances from Shinde that he was the high command's nominee regardless of what the MLAs said.

Indications are an atmosphere of gloom has settled in the NCP camp in Mumbai and leaders have yet to reconcile with yesterday's shock.

Praful, who a few days ago claimed the NCP state leadership would revolt if he conceded the chief ministership to the Congress, is said to be facing uncomfortable questions from the rank and file.

The 13-day drama that culminated in Deshmukh's election has also dented Pawar's image in the NCP state unit.



Vilasrao Deshmukh outside Sonia Gandhi's residence in New Delhi after meeting her on Saturday. (PTI)

10 Janpath to Raj Bhavan

OUR BUREAU

New Delhi/Mumbai, Oct. 30: Chief minister-designate Vilasrao Deshmukh has been invited by Maharashtra governor Mohammad Fazal to form a government. He is likely to be sworn in on Monday.

Deshmukh drove straight to the Raj Bhavan tonight on returning to Mumbai from Delhi. He had emerged triumphant from the front gate of Sonia Gandhi's 10 Janpath residence earlier this afternoon after getting her nod for heading the Congress-Nationalist Congress Party

coalition government.

Twenty-two months earlier the Maratha leader had slunk out of the Congress chief's house after being replaced by Sushil Kumar Shinde. But today, Deshmukh emerged from Sonia's residence with Shinde whom he has replaced this time around. He will no longer be haunted by the question that has dogged him since January 2003: "Why was I removed as chief minister?"

Deshmukh thanked Sonia for entrusting him the Maharashtra top job and reposing faith in his leadership last night. Even if he does not

know why he was removed last year, the leader must have figured out why he has been chosen to head this Democratic Front government.

Deshmukh was elevated to the top job in 1999 to counter NCP chief Sharad Pawar and this time too, the Congress expects he will ensure that Marathas do not rally behind the Union agriculture minister's party. The Congress yielded ground to its alliance partner in the Maratha strongholds of west Maharashtra and Marathwada during Assembly elections earlier this month.

But the chief minister-

elect chose to underplay the Maratha factor. "There has been a tradition in Maharashtra (that) the chief minister is never chosen on caste lines," he said.

With Shinde by his side, Deshmukh could scarcely have said anything else. It was not easy for the Congress to remove its first Dalit chief minister in Maharashtra, especially as it partly acted under pressure from the Deshmukh-led Maratha lobby. The circumstances of Shinde's ouster prompted the Congress to appoint him Andhra Pradesh governor immediately.

THE TELEGRAPH

31 OCT 2004

Double surprise in Maratha conquest

OUR BUREAU

Mumbai/New Delhi, Oct. 29: After three days of discussion, Marathas emerged on top of Maharashtra politics with the Congress springing a surprise by selecting Vilasrao Deshmukh to be the next chief minister.

Earlier, its partner, the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), produced the first stunner of the day, choosing R.R. Patil as its candidate for the post of deputy chief minister. Patil, like Deshmukh, was a come-from-behind winner since V.S. Mohite Patil was said to be the frontrunner, having held the seat in the previous coalition.

Deshmukh was very much the comeback kid as he upset the favourite and chief minister in the previous government, Sushil Kumar Shinde, who had replaced him in the first place.

Shinde, 62, was expected to get the top job — an impres-

sion the Congress had also created — because he was seen to have led the combine to victory in the election, an argument the party supposedly used during protracted negotiations with Sharad Pawar's NCP to claim the chief minister's post.

A Dalit, Shinde was the choice of the high command and was also said to have the confidence of Pawar. Deshmukh, 59, pulled through on the strength of the powerful Maratha lobby. It was claimed that he had the "overwhelming" backing of 40 out of the 69 party MLAs. Twenty-seven of the MLAs belong to the Maratha caste.

It will be a sweet second coming for Deshmukh. Shinde replaced him 22 months ago when there was intense fac-



Deshmukh

tionalism in the party. Some observers were interpreting today's outcome as a victory of local political forces over the high command.

"The MLAs selected his name and then we were in touch with Delhi. The high command approved the choice," a Congress spokesperson said. "We have proved democracy prevails in our party and the Congress legislature party elects its leader."

Aware of a growing anti-Shinde sentiment and fearing a revolt if MLAs' views were ignored, the high command swallowed its preference.

While making a virtue of its respect for majority opinion, the high command also made a strategic decision in going along with the choice of Deshmukh to counter Pawar.

The two are known rivals.

Similar popular support saw Patil emerge as leader of the NCP in the Assembly. After a "secret ballot", his name was proposed unanimously as the other contestants dropped out.

It is possible that the NCP picked Patil to forestall a Maratha leader's selection by the Congress in the belief that two Marathas cannot hold the positions of both chief minister and the deputy. The presumption proved to be wrong.

Deshmukh tonight said the alliance is likely to stake claim tomorrow, adds PTI.

Notwithstanding the show of democracy, the Congress legislature party, which met at Vidhan Bhavan at noon, took all day to choose the leader — the announcement being made late in the evening.

Until the central leaders, Ghulam Nabi Azad, Ashok Gehlot and Margaret Alva, came out of the meeting to say Deshmukh was the chosen one, Shinde supporters were claiming their leader had won.

THE TELEGRAPH

30 OCT 2004

Cong CM for Maharashtra

Shahid Pervez in New Delhi

28/10 5/1 7/10
Oct. 27. — The Congress and the NCP tonight clinched a power-sharing deal in Maharashtra, with the chief minister's post going to the Congress. The party is yet to name the new CM, though the incumbent, Mr Sushil Kumar Shinde, is a front-runner. The agreement appeared to be a climb-down by NCP supremo Mr Sharad Pawar.

The Congress seemed to have outmanoeuvred the NCP as despite pressing for chief ministership and subsequently two deputy CMs in lieu of conceding the CM's office to the Congress, Mr Pawar's party settled for just one deputy CM besides three additional ministers, including two Cabinet ministers, and two extra portfolios.

There is speculation about Mr Pawar's deal with the Congress over some other matters not relating to Maharashtra: a bid for an extra-ministerial berth in the Central government for an NCP candidate. Mr Pawar was closeted with the Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, and the defence minister, Mr Pranab Mukherjee. What further reinforced such speculation

was the presence of Mr Lalu Prasad at a meeting of the Congress brass at Mrs Sonia Gandhi's residence just before the agreement was finalised.

The Congress interlocutors, Mr Ahmed Patel and Mrs Margaret Alva, and Mr Pawar's pointman, Mr Praful Patel, announced the agreement which, they said, were to the "satisfaction of both the sides". The deal was struck after Mr Praful Patel met Mrs Gandhi and Mr Ahmed Patel and Mrs Margaret Alva met Mr Pawar. Mr Pawar spoke to Mrs Gandhi before the agreement was announced.

In the 43-member council of ministers, the Congress has been allotted 19 berths, including the CM's post, while the NCP remained content with 24 berths, including key portfolios like home, finance, PWD, power, and irrigation. The Speaker's post would go to the NCP. Mr Vijaysinh Mohite Patil (NCP), the incumbent deputy chief minister, might retain the post.

The swearing-in of the new chief minister would take place after a meeting of the two legislature parties, scheduled for 29 October.

THE STATESMAN

28 OCT 2004

Pawar blinks: Cong CM for Maharashtra

NCP wants 2 Dy CMs to seal deal

HT Correspondents
New Delhi/Mumbai, October 25

TOUGH BARGAINING continued on Monday to untie the Maharashtra knot. And though the NCP seemed ready to concede the chief minister's post to the Congress, it was not willing to cede ground without a fight.

It was making last-ditch efforts to extract as much as it could before sacrificing the top post to its ally. Though the final power-sharing formula may be hammered out during the meeting between Sharad Pawar and Sonia Gandhi, negotiations hit another hurdle late on Monday night over the NCP's insistence on a second deputy chief minister. This would be in addition to what the Congress has already given the NCP — two extra berths in the Cabinet and one minister of state.

The Congress is willing to give up Forests and Environment, but the NCP is said to be holding out for Cooperation and Housing — two most significant departments in Maharashtra and Mumbai. Rooting for Chhagan Bhujbal as the second deputy chief minister, the NCP also wants the revenue portfolio which the Congress has refused to concede.

NCP pointsman for talks, Praful Patel, said: "There is no final solution. They took eight days to come with a proposal. Give us a day or two at least to examine it."

Ironically, the NCP is keen that if the Congress retains the CM's post, Sushil Kumar Shinde should be kept in the saddle. "After all, he is close to our leader Sharad Pawar," said an NCP official.

The first signs of NCP muscle-flexing came when Patel said the legislature party, which met in Mumbai, "wasn't enthusiastic about the Congress proposal and

HT Correspondents
New Delhi/Mumbai, October 25



Sushil Kumar Shinde (CM) Vijaysinh Mohite Patil (Dy CM)

Berths of contention

2nd Dy CM: Chhagan Bhujbal

Revenue: Cong refuses to concede as it would lose grip over administration

Cooperation: Cong refuses against backdrop of PM's promise to turn Mumbai into Shanghai

Cooperation: NCP won't budge as majority MLAs come from co-op sector

Environment: NCP retains home, and gets three additional portfolios — labour, forests, environment

wanted the CM's post to come to the party. We have to take our state unit's view into account".

The fact of the talks being deadlocked came as a surprise as right through the day NCP sources maintained that a solution was imminent.

Since the legislature party has authorised Pawar to decide on the matter, the NCP office-bearers will meet on Tuesday to take stock of the situation. Meanwhile, Patel is said to have already conveyed the legislature party's sentiments to senior Congress leader Pranab Mukherjee.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

26 OCT 2004

Cong's final offer: 3 more ministries ^{25/10}

Saroj Nagi
New Delhi, October 24

AFTER EIGHT days and two rounds of meetings failed to break the deadlock, the Congress today gave the NCP a take-it-or-leave-it offer: three more ministerial berths (two Cabinet and one MoS) and two more portfolios in addition to the ones it had in the last government. In return, the NCP must give up its claim to the chief minister's post.

While the NCP didn't appear too keen, there are indications that it may accept this proposal. If that happens, Sushilkumar Shinde looks set to get another shot at the top job.

Right through the day, there was no communication between the two parties, each of which has staked its claim to the CM's post. But in the evening, defence minister Pranab Mukherjee called up Praful Patel, the NCP negotiator, with the proposal.

"This is all we can offer... It is now for them to respond," Mukherjee told newsmen, putting the ball in the NCP's court with a tone of finality that indicated that the Congress is now willing to form the government at any cost, even if the NCP decides to support it from outside.

Soon after he heard from Mukherjee, Patel told reporters that the preliminary reaction of some NCP leaders he had spoken to about it "wasn't very enthusiastic".

Patel has discussed the proposal with party chief Sharad Pawar; tomorrow, it will be put before the party legislators in Mumbai. The Congress proposal comes on the eve of the meeting of the Congress legislature party in Maharashtra for which Ghulam Nabi Azad, Margaret Alva and Digvijay Singh are going as observers. Mukherjee dismissed suggestions that CPI-M general secretary H.S. Surjeet might be roped in to help break the impasse.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

25 OCT 2004

Cong wary of NCP dominance

Girish Kuber

MUMBAI 20 OCTOBER

THE stakes for the Congress in Maharashtra are high, much higher than the chief ministership of the state, which currently looks like the main issue. If the NCP succeeds in forming the government, Maharashtra will join the league of states where the Congress has lost out to its younger allies.

The party now has only a minor presence in states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal. Giving up the chief minister's chair to the NCP in Maharashtra will deprive the Congress of its key position in the state. "Maharashtra was always a key to the Congress' fortune at the Centre. There's no other state we can look forward to," said a Delhi-based Congress leader, when asked to explain the stand off with the NCP.

All of this was a part of alliance politics, he added. "The

politics of alliance helps the bigger partner and Sharad Pawar knows this better than us," he said. In the 400-member UP Assembly, the Congress' strength is only 25, while its alliance partner, the Samajwadi Party (SP), has 150 seats. Though there is a cold war between the SP and the

Congress, neither party is in a position to dump the other.

The Congress decline in the Hindi belt began in early 1990s. The party strength virtually came down to zero by the mid-1990s. In the Lok Sabha, it has eight MPs from UP, the state that sends the biggest chunk

of 80 MPs to the House. The SP has 28 seats. The situation in Bihar is similar, where the state is ruled by another Congress ally, the RJD. In the 243-member Bihar Assembly, the RJD has 124 seats while the Congress has been restricted to 23. For the Lok Sabha, the Congress has just three MPs from Bihar, while the RJD has 22.



MUCH AT STAKE

The Economic Times

21 OCT 2004

Cong and NCP still differ

Vinod Sharma & Saroj Nagi
New Delhi, October 19

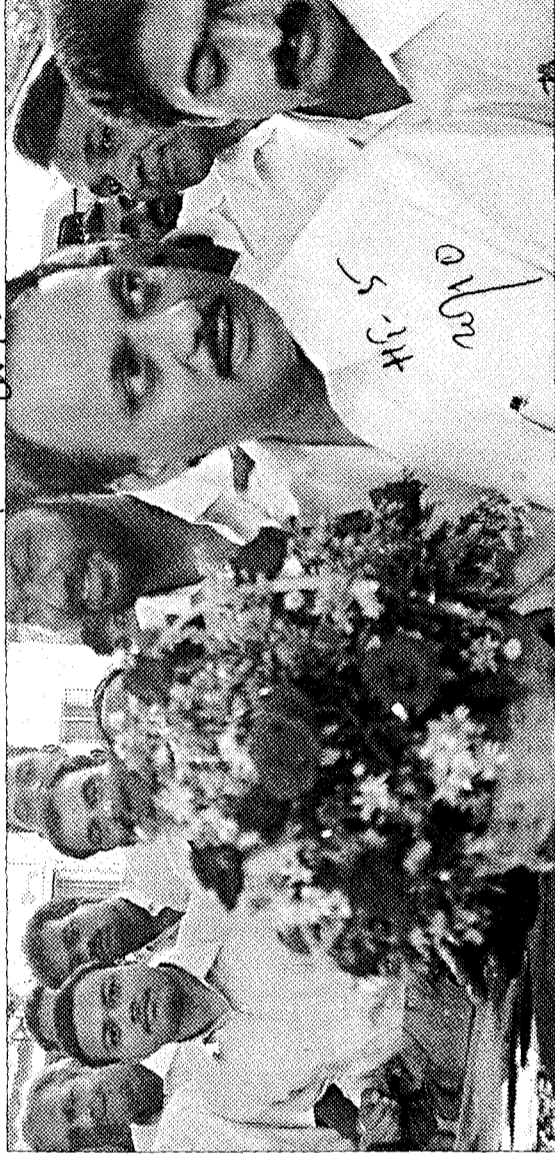
KEY INTERLOCUTORS on the Maharashtra leadership issue reported no progress in breaking the Congress-NCP talks deadlock for the third consecutive day on Tuesday.

"Political mates are still in a stalemate", remarked an NCP leader. He said no proposal has been formally broached by the Congress leadership to break the deadlock. "At their meeting with Sharad Pawar on Monday night, they said the status quo should continue and we said it shouldn't", he added.

Amid indications that the standoff would not cast any long-term shadow on the democratic alliance in the state, both sides waited for the other to blink first. Perhaps for this reason, a scheduled meeting between Congress leaders and Pawar did not materialise on Tuesday.

Meanwhile, the Congress came up with another argument supportive of its claim to the Chief Minister's office.

A senior party leader pointed out that the ticket distribution was on a Congress plus and NCP plus basis — meaning that the figures to be taken into account to ascertain the largest party should be the aggregate tally of the claimants and their



PTI

NCP president Sharad Pawar's nephew, Ajit Pawar, at the NCP office in Mumbai on Monday.

immediate allies. If this calculation were to be accepted, the Congress plus tally would be 74, as opposed to the NCP plus score of 72.

But the calculations that suit one do not suit the other. And therein lies the impasse.

From the off-the-cuff remarks of leaders of either side, it was apparent that even the proposal — made

verbally to Sharad Pawar by Parliamentary Affairs Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad — to rotate the Chief Ministership has not made any headway. NCP sources said, if the Congress was serious about it, it should place the idea in writing. In response to a question on the proposed rotational arrangement, a key AICC functionary remarked:

"Our talks with Pawar so far have been inconclusive. Even in J&K, we had no written agreement with the PDP on rotating the CM's office".

Meanwhile, CM Sushil Kumar Shinde today submitted his resignation to Maharashtra Governor Mohammad Fazal before leaving for New Delhi, where his party leaders were to meet Sharad Pawar.

Q.P.P. *Consi*

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MPO

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES
20 OCT 2004

Day 3: Congress holds out as NCP mounts pressure

19/10 HFI

J-P-P-Cong E

Vinod Sharma/Saroj Nagi
New Delhi, October 18

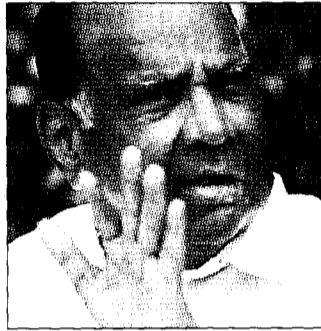
HAUNTED BY the experience in Bihar and Tamil Nadu, where it remains tied to the apron strings of regional forces, the Congress is shaken by the mere thought of giving up the CM's office in Maharashtra.

At the in-house meetings, the party's latent fears found full-throated expression after the NCP's D.P. Tripathi lobbed an obviously loaded suggestion: that the order of precedence be altered in the Maharashtra line-up to call it an "NCP-Congress" alliance.

The Congress knows it has been pushed on the back foot and is desperately seeking an argument that would convince Sharad Pawar to give up the chief minister's post to it. In their quest for one, Congress leaders from the state and the Centre went into a series of huddles today. They were all agreed that the party would lose its electoral base to the NCP by conceding the top job.

Even as the Congress worked on innovative formulations, Sharad Pawar went public with his threat: "There should be no going back on the 1999 principle. If the Congress still insists, we shall give them support from outside for five years."

The warning wasn't lost on the Congress. A government minus the largest single party would make no political sense to



Sharad Pawar
Stepping up the heat

even the most ardent Congress supporter in Maharashtra.

Some suggested a modified version of the Kashmir experiment, but so far there has been no consensus on this. The formula provides for a three-year chief ministerial term for the party, which agrees to assume office in the second half of the Assembly's tenure.

For further talks, the Congress has put together a team, which includes Pranab Mukherjee, Sushil Kumar Shinde, Ghulam Nabi Azad, Ahmed Patel and Margaret Alva. After a meeting at Mukherjee's residence, the leaders drove down to 10 Janpath to brief Sonia Gandhi. She advised them to discuss the matter with Pawar. But the dominant mood found reflection in Alva's remarks to newsmen that the mandate was for a Congress-led coalition.

■ See also Page 2

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

19 OCT 2004

Allies drive hard bargain for trophy

Pawar prods, Cong stalls

K. SUBRAHMANYA

New Delhi, Oct. 17: The bargaining table in Delhi remained crowded through the day but the throne in Mumbai was still awaiting its new occupant when night fell.

Fresh from the triumph in Maharashtra, the Congress and the NCP were locked today in tough bargaining for the chief minister's chair—a trophy that has become a bone of contention after Sharad Pawar's party emerged with the largest number of MLAs.

Senior leaders of the two partners—Congress chief Sonia Gandhi's political secretary Ahmed Patel and Pawar's lieutenant Praful Patel—have been assigned to hold consultations. The emissaries held a round of talks this evening and briefed their respective leaders.

The Congress started building its case for the Maharashtra chair after Pawar met Sonia at her home this morning. The two Patels, too, were present at the meeting.

Pawar is understood to have conveyed to Sonia his party's "rightful" claim as it has won 71 seats—two more than the Congress.

Sources in the NCP said Pawar also asked Sonia to follow the so-called Maharashtra model that evolved when the

THE CLAIMS

Pawar

NCP: 71

Cong: 69

Pawar says 9-10

Independents also back the NCP

Congress

Cong: 69

CPM: 3

Ind: 2

Cong total: 74

Congress and the NCP came together to form a coalition ministry in 1999.

The principle envisaged that the chief ministership would go to the largest party in the alliance, which the Congress was in 1999 as it had won 75 seats to the NCP's 58.

Sonia is understood to have not made any commitment on conceding the top post in Maharashtra.

Congress sources said Sonia's reservations stemmed from the party's conviction that the mandate in Maharashtra was for the coalition as a whole. It would be difficult for the party to ask Sushil Kumar Shinde to step down as he led the alliance to victory, the sources said. However, they added, Sonia has not yet made up her mind.

Soon after the Pawar-Sonia meeting, Margaret Alva, the Congress general secretary in charge of Maharashtra affairs, came up with a new argument in Mumbai. She said the Congress' tally of 69 should not be taken independently. The Congress had left seats from its quota for the CPM and, therefore, the Left party's three MLAs should be added to the 69, she said.

Citing the same logic vis-à-vis two Independents, the Congress claimed its effective tally is 74, higher than the NCP's even if an MLA from a small party—the RPI(A)—is counted among Pawar's supporters.

The CPM, which received emissaries from both camps today, took a neutral stand.

Alva's contention was contested by the NCP, which said if the number of supporters is the criterion, it can count on nine to 10 Independents. Some NCP leaders also mooted a proposal—seen as a pressure tactic—to offer only outside support to a Congress government if their party is not given the chief minister's post.

Emerging from his meeting with Sonia, Pawar appeared to be in no hurry to settle the leadership issue, saying government formation could take two to four days. However, there are expectations in both camps that it could be sorted out by tomorrow. (See Page 6)

THE TELEGRAPH

18 OCT 2004

Pawar dwarfs victor Cong

NCP eyes top post as ally celebrates

OUR BUREAU

New Delhi/Mumbai, Oct. 16: The Congress camp today won Maharashtra, but the bigger winner was lurking in its ranks.

Sharad Pawar's Nationalist Congress Party emerged the surprise single-largest party in the votecount, pocketing 71 of the 288 Assembly seats, two more than alliance partner Congress. The unexpected win upturned the bargaining stance of the NCP, which now looks set to take a shot at the chief minister's chair.

As late as this afternoon, Pawar had gone on television that his party was not in the race for the hot seat. But he switched tune in the evening, saying the leadership should go to the largest party though he avoided directly staking his party's claim to the post.

"Even if they (Congress) get one seat more than us, I will accept their chief minister," Pawar said in New Delhi, hinting at his party's intentions. He is expected to meet Congress chief Sonia Gandhi tomorrow for talks on government formation, NCP sources said.

NCP general secretary D.P. Tripathi was more forthcoming. After an informal huddle at Pawar's residence, he said:



Congress-NCP supporters in Mumbai. (PTI)

"The democratic principle is that the largest party in the alliance forms the government. In line with this principle, five years ago we agreed to leave the chief ministership to the Congress."

Pawar's victory comes only a fortnight after the cricket board elections in Calcutta in which he had ended up on the losing side. Asked which was the tougher election, he quipped: "Of course, the BCCI."

At last count, the Congress-NCP alliance, along with smaller partner Republican Party of India (Athawale), was just five short of the magic 145 figure. The CPM, which won

three seats, is expected to lend its support. (See chart)

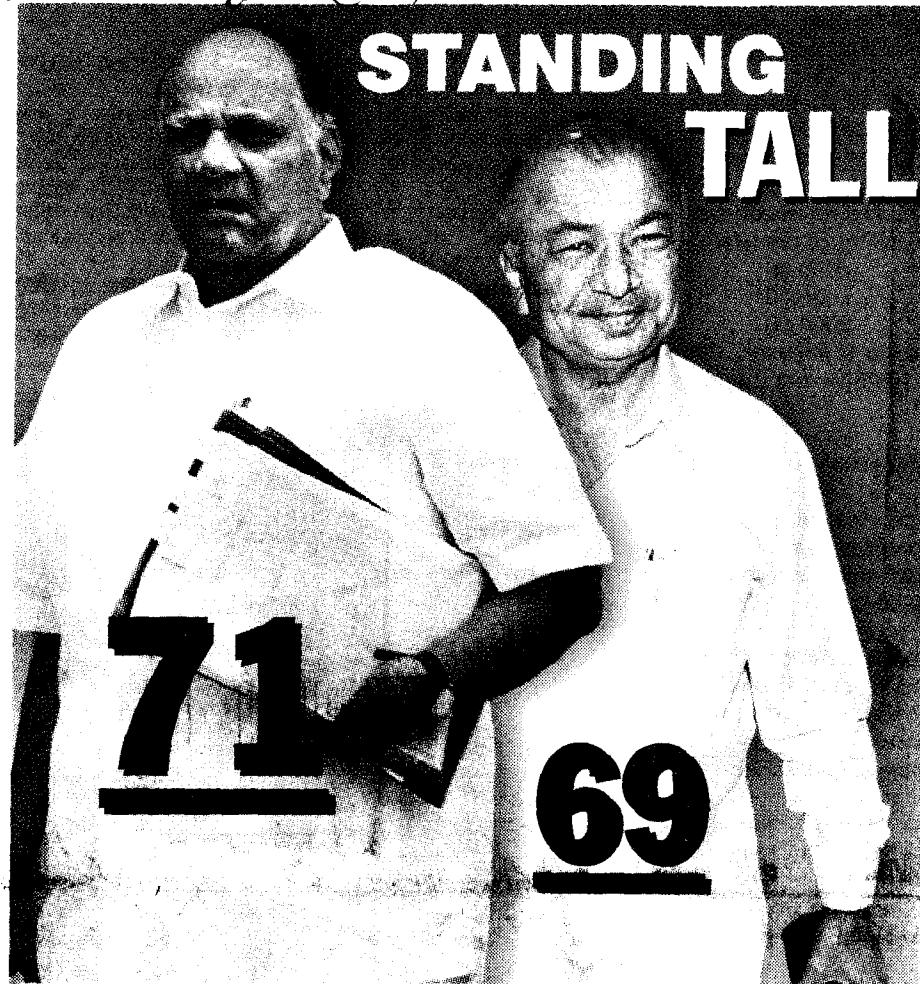
The BJP-Shiv Sena combine managed a tally of 117, winning 54 and 62 seats respectively.

This evening, Sonia preferred to celebrate the Maharashtra victory than go into the nitty-gritty of government formation. "Let the final results come. We will sit together and discuss the issue," she told reporters at 10 Janpath when sounded about who would be chief minister.

Pestered if the Congress would concede the hot seat to its partner as it had done in Jammu and Kashmir, she said that was a "special case".

It was not immediately clear how Sonia intended to grapple with the knotty issue but she put off a move to send senior colleagues Pranab Mukherjee and Ghulam Nabi Azad as central observers to Mumbai to oversee tomorrow's election of the Congress legislature party leader.

Among the NCP names doing the rounds for chief minister are those of Vijaysinh Mohite-Patil, deputy chief minister in Sushil Kumar Shinde's ministry, state NCP chief R.R. Patil and Pawar's son Ajit. Pawar is believed to be pushing for his son, but there could be resistance in the ranks.



FINAL TALLY

TOTAL SEATS: 288

MAJORITY MARK: 145

Congress alliance: 141

Congress	69
NCP	71
Others	1
CPM*	3

*Not part of alliance

BJP alliance: 117

BJP	54
Shiv Sena	62
Others	1

Independents & others: 27

Shield for Sonia, Singh

K. SUBRAHMANYA

New Delhi, Oct. 16: Last Sunday, while addressing his first rally for the Maharashtra elections at Akola in the Vidarbha region, Manmohan Singh had asked voters to strengthen the hands of Congress president Sonia Gandhi by teaching the Opposition BJP a lesson.

"The BJP-led Opposition has not accepted the fact that people rejected them four months ago. Defeat them again to make them realise that they have been rejected," the Prime Minister said.

Singh said at another rally that there were efforts to destabilise his United Progressive Alliance government.

The verdict from Maharashtra could become a pillar of stability for his government. Moreover, the defeat of the saffron combine has dashed the BJP leadership's hopes of bouncing back in the national polity.

The Maharashtra and by-election results have strengthened Sonia's position as the unquestioned leader of both the Congress and the UPA. It is a mandate endorsing the UPA arrangement she has helped set up with Singh as the Prime Minister as it had come under attack during campaigning in the state.

The Congress leadership can now expect to deal with a "less strident and more responsible" BJP in Parliament.

Though the Congress conceded its position as the single largest party in the Assembly to its ally — the Nationalist Congress Party which won two more seats — what mattered to Sonia today was victory and, more clearly, the decisive defeat of the BJP.

At a brief interaction with reporters at 10 Janpath this evening, she referred to the "different" pre-poll views about the Maharashtra verdict and expressed happiness with the outcome.

With the result expected to give confidence to both Sonia and Singh, the Congress is likely to enjoy greater flexibility to implement its policies and programmes. Singh can bank on Sonia's stature as the unquestioned leader to take the hard decisions his government wasn't taking in the last four months, partly because of the negative attitude of the BJP-led Opposition and partly due to a lack of clarity within the UPA.

Sonia can now steam ahead with preparations for the next round of Assembly polls in Bihar, ally Laloo Prasad Yadav's turf, Jharkhand and Haryana early next year.

HVP merges with Congress

5/2
13/10
Statesman News Service

NEW DELHI, Oct. 14. — Mr Bansi Lal's Haryana Vikas Party (HVP) today merged with Congress, with Mr Lal's son Mr Surendra Singh leading the merger exercise in the presence of senior Congress leaders at the AICC headquarters here.

The ailing Mr Lal (80) was not present at the function, but vesting Mr Surendra Singh with "full authority in writing" made it clear that he had set the

stage for his son to take the leadership mantle from him. Despite being relegated to the margins of Haryana politics, the HVP sought to present a show of its strength on the occasion. Hundreds of HVP members thronged the AICC headquarter complex and gathered outside making this stretch of Akbar Road out of bounds for traffic.

Decks were cleared for the merger after Mr Surendra Singh, armed with the authorisation letter from Mr Lal, met the

Congress president, Mrs Sonia Gandhi, who "gladly" accepted the proposal.

The "homecoming" of Mr Lal and his rank and file took place 13 years after the veteran Jat leader was expelled from Congress for "anti-party activities" in the wake of his differences with another state stalwart, Mr Bhajan Lal. Earlier today, the HVP executive committee passed a unanimous resolution proposing merger and expressing "full faith" in Mrs Gandhi's leadership.

THE STATESMAN 15 OCT 2004

Rahul admits to Emergency excesses

Amethi: In what could be music to the opposition ears, the Congress MP Rahul Gandhi said there were excesses during the Emergency, which were wrong.



Replying to questions from reporters, the young MP, currently on a four-day visit to his constituency, said that his opinion was that it was a "very complicated" situation during the Emergency and "there were excesses which were wrong".

In reply to another question, Rahul took a dim view of the performance of the Mulayam Singh Yadav government in the state saying that its rule was bereft of any development work.

Asked why the Congress leadership was still supporting the Mulayam government, he said, "it is a question of what the Congress leadership perceives. Congress leadership is not stupid. Congress leadership is acting the way it is acting for a particular reason". PTI

CONGRESS COMEBACK IN ARUNACHAL

A CONGRESS VICTORY in the Arunachal Pradesh Assembly election was a foregone conclusion after Gegong Apang, the former Chief Minister, rejoined the party last month. Arunachal Pradesh is a traditional Congress stronghold. The Bharatiya Janata Party-allied United Democratic Front (UDF) that ruled for a year until July 2004 owed its existence to Mr. Apang. His decision to make the UDF a part of the National Democratic Alliance reflected long-standing pique with the Congress leadership in Delhi and a desire to get even with his old rival, Mukut Mithi, rather than political oneness with the BJP. The Congress comeback was evident in the dramatic events that followed the trim Mr. Apang gave his Ministry in July this year, to bring it in line with the 97th Amendment of the Constitution. (This limits the size of a Ministry to 12 per cent of the total strength of a legislative Assembly in small States.) The rebellion this exercise set off saw all 29 loadshedded Ministers cross over to the Congress camp. The Governor dissolved the House and asked Mr. Apang to be the caretaker Chief Minister. With Mr. Mithi, a Congress loyalist, campaigning for President's Rule instead, it was only a matter of time before the Chief Minister decided it was in his best interest to return to the party of his political roots, and work for it in the Assembly elections.

Although the Congress has won a comfortable majority, securing 34 of the 60 seats in the Assembly, the outcome leaves unresolved the Apang-Mithi rivalry. Since 1999, when Mr. Mithi first led a revolt against Mr. Apang, forcing him to resign as Chief Minister, an office he

had held for a record 19 years, the two have been engaged in undoing each other. Their increasingly embittered personal tussle has dictated the political twists and turns in the State over the last few years. Although Mr. Mithi was none too happy to see his rival back in the party, the two had no choice but to shelve their differences during the election campaign. But who will be made Chief Minister? Both have strong suits. Mr. Apang commands substantial loyalty within the State-level organisation of the party; this is clear from the large numbers that have followed him in his political flip-flops. On the other hand, Mr. Mithi can press his claim on the strength of his continued loyalty to the Congress. Faced with the prospect of a fierce struggle for the top job in the State, the party leadership can at best hope for a truce, whichever way the choice goes. Without a patch-up between the two powerful rivals, there can be no stability for the State Government.

The BJP has made some inroads in a State where, in 1999, it won no seat at all. It has bagged nine of the 39 seats it contested this time, including the prestigious Itanagar constituency where its candidate managed to unseat a three-time winner. Considering that the party did not have enough candidates to contest all seats after Mr. Apang and his supporters left at the last minute to rejoin the Congress, it will be reasonably pleased with this performance. The new Chief Minister — whether it is Mr. Apang or Mr. Mithi — will have his hands full keeping his Government together and preventing the BJP from exploiting the factionalism within the State Congress, as it managed to do the last time.

THE HINDU

12 OCT 2004

CONG EYES INDEPENDENTS IN MAHARASHTRA...

Sonia fears split verdict

...Set to stage
a comeback
in Arunachal

Oct. 10. — Just a day before campaigning ends for polling in 288 Assembly constituencies in Maharashtra, senior Congress leaders, including Mrs Sonia Gandhi, apprehend falling short of a clear majority for the Congress-NCP combine should the voters deliver a fractured verdict on 13 October.

As part of the last-minute assessment undertaken in the midst of campaigning, the Congress is eyeing potential rebels and Independents who may win the election and hold the key to government formation. This, despite the ruling coalition being quite sure of a victory.

"We may fall short by 10-12 seats for an absolute majority. This could compel us to approach some Congress-NCP rebels and even Independents to extend support to help form the government and keep the BJP-Sena out of the race," said a former chief of the Maharashtra PCC currently campaigning in Vidarbha. Even former chief minister Mr Valsrao Deshmukh is open to the idea of roping in rebels and Independents to secure the majority mark should the verdict not come out clear, a source close to him said.

A hung verdict is also a cause for concern for the current incumbent. Insiders say Mr Sushil Kumar Shinde, who is leading the campaign and seeking a second term for his government, is a worried man. If the party does not get a clear majority, the strong Maratha lobby of the Congress, that includes Mr Vilasrao Deshmukh and Mr Ranjit Desh-

mukh besides others, would have a decisive role in the selection of the leader. This is where Mr Shinde is vulnerable. However, should the verdict come clearly in favour of the ruling coalition, Mr Shinde is likely to secure a second term in office.

In Nagpur today, some senior Congress leaders also discussed the post-poll situation that will egg on the BJP-Sena combine to do some wooing. In some 50 constituencies, the BJP-Sena is lending tacit support to the Congress-NCP rebels where the saffron combine's prospects of winning the seat appears bleak.

The Dalit votes are likely to slip away from the Congress-NCP in many constituencies where the candidates put up by the Bahujan Samaj Party, the Lok Jan Shakati Party of Mr Ram Vilas Paswan and the Republican Party of India (both factions) would eat into the Congress-NCP share. Vidarbha is also a difficult region for the ruling combine where Miss Mayawati's sway over Dalits is significant. The BSP had polled more than five per cent of the total votes in the Lok Sabha elections held six months ago.

The CPI-M, though not much of a force to reckon with, has not withdrawn its candidates from 16 constituencies despite being allotted four seats as part of the seat-sharing arrangement with the Congress and NCP. The CPI-M, along with the Samajwadi Party may not poll many votes but their presence in the fray would only damage the ruling coalition's prospects on 13 October.

ITANAGAR, Oct. 10. — The Congress is set to return to power in Arunachal Pradesh having won 25 seats, even as the BJP opened its account in the state by winning six seats.

The Congress, however, was six short of majority in the 60-member Assembly. But in a likely boost for the party, independents, many of whom are rebel Congressmen, emerged the second biggest group with 12 of them romping home and expected to play a crucial role in the ministry-making. The NCP won two seats and regional outfit Arunachal Congress bagged one.

Counting was taken up in 46 of the 57 seats today with three of the seats having already gone unopposed to the Congress.

Among the successful Congress candidates are APCC chief and chief ministerial hopeful Mr Mukut Mithi, who was re-elected from his old constituency Roing. However, the fate of Mr Mithi's rival for the top post and incumbent chief minister Mr Gegong Apang will be known tomorrow when counting of votes in Yingkoing, his constituency, is taken up along with 10 others.

Mr Mithi, meanwhile, said the Congress might take the help of Independents in forming the next government. "They are important people and should not be ignored."

On the question of his becoming the chief minister, Mr Mithi said "loyalty" to the party might not be the sole criterion for choosing the chief minister and the important thing was to provide a stable government. — PTI

More reports on page 5

Sonia opens Congress doors to Varun

Liz Mathew
New Delhi, October 6

VARUN GANDHI may be preparing to join the Congress after campaigning actively for the BJP in the April-May general elections.

Privileged sources close to 10 Janpath, the official residence of Congress president Sonia Gandhi, said the 24-year-old Gandhi scion who was too young to contest elections last time has had three meetings with his aunt (Sonia) to discuss his joining the party.

"Soniaji, who was always very fond of Varun, told

him categorically that she would love to have him in her party. But she will never welcome his mother Maneka Gandhi," a close aide of Gandhi family said.

Sources added that Sonia's son and first-time MP Rahul is also keen to have his cousin Varun in the Congress. "Both Priyanka and Rahul are very close to Varun. They have kept in touch even after he joined the BJP," a source said.

Varun, who along with his mother joined the BJP in February, has been campaigning for the BJP-Shiv Sena alliance in Maharashtra.

While addressing a series of public meetings in the state, he has not said a word against his aunt and the family. Instead, he lavishly praised his grandmother and former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, as well as father Sanjay Gandhi, who died in an air crash in 1980.

This has not gone down well with BJP leaders who have complained about him to the party top brass.

Sources said "after a lot of pressure", Varun on Tuesday attacked the Congress and its government at the Centre for its stand against Muslims.

Interestingly, Varun also refrained from mentioning the BJP-Shiv Sena alliance's pet issues, like the recent Veer Savarkar controversy.

In fact, he was quoted as saying: "Whether you wear the BJP cap or the Congress cap, nothing is done for you. I'm sure you are tired of the politics of hatred or divisiveness. We need to completely overhaul the system. My *daadi* (grandmother) changed things for the poor. We must look for those who'll do the same."

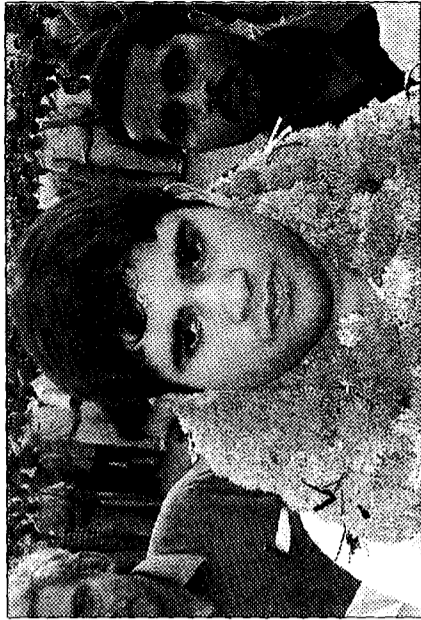
Maneka Gandhi, whose ties with the family have been strained since her hus-

band's death in 1980, has opposed the Congress for more than two decades.

"Sonia and her children always held Varun in high regard as they knew that he was a thorough family person and he respects his aunt a lot," the source added. He pointed out that Varun had expressed his displeasure publicly when Gujarat CM Narendra Modi used derogatory language against Sonia and Rahul during the Lok Sabha campaign.

How Maneka Gandhi will take her son's political move remains to be seen.

IANS



Varun Gandhi
Blood is thicker

TOP PRIORITY FOR MAHARASHTRA, SAYS PAWAR

We speak for all Indians: Sonia

By Javed M. Ansari

NASHIK, OCT. 5. The past was omnipresent this afternoon when the Congress president, Sonia Gandhi, met the Union Agriculture Minister, Sharad Pawar, but even if the audience scanned the stage for visible signs of discontent, there were not any. Both leaders seemed determined to put up a united front in Maharashtra. As the day drew on in Nashik, the term "Congress parivar" acquired a new meaning.

Ms. Gandhi flew in here from Vidarbha after a whirlwind tour of the region, while Mr. Pawar arrived from the hinterland. When he received her at the helipad, he was respectful and friendly. Minutes later, Ms. Gandhi returned the compliment when they addressed a public meeting at the Golf Club grounds.

Calling Mr. Pawar a valued colleague in the battle for India, indeed Maharashtra, she emphasised that the State could not be allowed to fall into the hands of "communal elements."

The change in the chemistry was there for all to see. The two leaders confabulated and exchanged notes on the stage. Gone was the awkwardness of their first joint meeting during the last Lok Sabha elections.

Soon the mood radiated to the crowd. The people cheered when the two leaders appeared on the stage together. And every time there was a reference to the "Congress parivar" there was a resounding applause. All around the place flags of the Congress, the NCP and the RPI fluttered side by side. Senior Congress leaders such as the Maharashtra Chief Minister, Sushilkumar Shinde, the MPCC chief, Prabha Rau, the AICC general secretary, Magararet Alva, and the RPI chief, Ramdas Athawale, were present.

Unity, cohesion

At a time when the Sena-BJP combine has been hit by the withdrawal of its star campaigners, the former Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and the Shiv Sena leader, Bal Thackeray, due to various ailments, the Congress-NCP combine has received the much-needed boost with the presence of both Ms. Gandhi and Mr. Pawar. Senior Congress leaders told *The Hindu* that plans were afoot to repeat the experiment in other parts of the State. Clearly, the effort is directed at sending out a message



The Congress president, Sonia Gandhi, with the Nationalist Congress Party chief and Union Agriculture Minister, Sharad Pawar, and the Maharashtra Chief Minister, Sushilkumar Shinde, at a joint election rally in Nashik on Tuesday. — PTI

of unity and cohesion — that a "secular alliance" is not only possible but also durable, despite differences among its major players. And that compromise is likely, given the larger interests at stake.

Today's rally was also significant for another reason. Fifteen km from here is Bhagur, the village where V. D. Savarkar, hero to many in Maharashtra and controversial freedom-fighter, was born. But the two leaders made no reference to the recent debate in their speeches.

Instead, other current issues demanded their attention. Ms. Gandhi reminded the gathering of the good work done by the Democratic Front Government and promised to ensure that whatever remained would be completed if the combine was returned to power.

She spoke of the unique ex-

periment that was the United Progressive Alliance and also of the benefits that would accrue to the State if it had a government that was in tune with the ideology of the dispensation at the Centre.

Inclusive ideology

Ms. Gandhi dwelt at length on the inclusive ideology of her party and her allies. "We speak for all Indians and do not differentiate between different sections. But we must also acknowledge that those who are weak and poor deserve special attention. We will continue to raise our voice for the poor, women, the deprived sections and the minorities," she said.

Ms. Gandhi appeared at ease with herself while delivering her short speech.

She also appeared eager to mingle with the crowd and im-

part a personal touch to the campaign.

After the meeting, she went around the enclosure shaking hands with the people and talking to them.

Mr. Pawar, in his speech, lambasted the Sena-BJP combine accusing it of having turned a "deaf ear" to the plight of farmers. "One of the first things that the new Government [at the Centre] did was to sanction Rs. 500 crores for relief to the State."

The UPA Government had accorded top priority to Maharashtra as was evident from the presence of a large number of Ministers from the State in the Central Government.

"The State will benefit immensely if we have a like-minded Government in Delhi and Mumbai," he said.

More reports on Page 11

THE HINDU

6 OCT 2004

P.P. - 6/10

Consultative groups of Plan panel dissolved

New Delhi: Bowing to pressure from the left parties, the Planning Commission on Thursday dissolved all the 19 consultative groups following the controversy over the presence of "foreign" experts in these groups.

The decision was taken within three days of return of Prime Minister Manmo-

han Singh from his foreign trip during which he had stated "we will look into all aspects of it (outside experts)."

"The Commission has reviewed the matter and has decided to dissolve the consultative groups. The commission will revert to the earlier practice of consulting individuals separately as part of the mid-term appraisal process," the Commission said in a statement.

The announcement follows two meetings that deputy chairman of the Planning Commission Montek Singh Ahluwalia had with the Prime Minister since Wednesday evening. "The decision to include in these groups, the individuals associated with international multilateral organisations and foreign firms operating in India has been subject to some discussion,"

the statement said referring to the controversy.

In the process, all the experts including some of the left economists who had threatened to quit in protest against Ahluwalia's justification from London about the presence of "outside" consultants, have been disassoci-

The Planning Commission will revert to the earlier practice of consulting individuals separately as part of the mid-term appraisal process



ated from the mid-term appraisal process.

The presence of nine experts from the World Bank, ADB, Mckinsey and First Boston had triggered the major political controversy around an apolitical economic think-tank of the government with the left parties demanding their ouster.

After arrival from abroad, Ahluwalia called an internal meeting of the commission on Tuesday where the proposal for dissolving the groups was understood to have been mooted. PTI

1 OCT 2004

Congress, NCP finalise seat-sharing pact

By Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, SEPT. 19. After days of negotiation, the Congress and its alliance partner in Maharashtra, the Nationalist Congress Party, have finalised their seat-sharing arrangement for the Assembly elections in the State. Of the 288 seats, the Congress has been allotted 161, while the NCP has been given 127.

The seat-sharing arrangement was finalised on Saturday evening after an hour-long meeting between the Congress president, Sonia Gandhi, and her NCP counterpart, Sharad Pawar. The final list of candidates will be released on Monday. Both the parties have agreed to broaden the alliance and involve like-minded parties such as the CPI(M), CPI, RJD, LJP and factions of the Republican Party of India.

The Congress will leave some seats from its share for the Left parties, and those led by Mr. Lalu Prasad and Mr. Ram Vilas Paswan, while the NCP will accommodate, the Ramdas Athawale faction of the Republican Party of India (RPI).

Senior Congress and NCP

leaders told *The Hindu* that it was necessary to share seats with like-minded parties in order to broaden the alliance and minimise the possibility of a division of the secular vote. The Congress-led Democratic Front Government in Maharashtra did not have a majority and was supported by the Left parties, the Janata Dal (S) and some smaller parties, besides independents.

The combine believes that there is a likelihood of a hung Assembly, in which case it might require the support of friendly parties to form the Government.

BSP factor

The Congress-NCP combine also has to contend with the threat posed by the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which cut into its vote during the Lok Sabha elections held earlier this year.

The combine is also wary of the Samajwadi Party's (SP) efforts to cut into its Muslim votes by deciding to contest a sizeable number of seats and field a number of Muslim candidates.

The Congress has also conceded the NCP's request to leave seats for it in Congress

strongholds such as Vidarbha and Mumbai. The Congress has decided to leave 15 seats for the NCP in the Vidarbha region and eight in Mumbai.

Similarly, the NCP is likely to concede some seats to the Congress in its strongholds of western Maharashtra, Pune and Satara districts.

Strategic move

The Congress decision to defer the announcement of its list of candidates by a day is said to be part of a strategy to minimise the chances of disgruntled ticket hopefuls from contesting as rebel candidates.

The last date for filing nominations is September 22, and by delaying the release of its list till the last moment, the party hopes there will be very little time for rebel candidates to come up.

Meanwhile, the poll managers of the Congress-NCP combine are giving the final touches to the campaign strategy.

Senior Congress and NCP leaders believe that they will be able to offset the disadvantages of the Savarkar controversy and the anti-incumbency factor by focussing on development.

THE HINDU

19 SEP 2004

Singh satisfies Basu

MONOBINA GUPTA

New Delhi, Sept. 18: The CPM's growing grumbles melted over a sumptuous lunch at the Prime Minister's home this afternoon, with Jyoti Basu emerging "satisfied" and Manmohan Singh unwrapping a package that brought the smiles back to its leaders' faces.

In keeping with his luncheon word that he would "fulfil their aspirations", Singh announced that the education cess levied in the budget would be used to finance a non-lapsable fund for elementary education — Prathamik Shiksha Kosh.

Hours before flying out to the UK and the US, Singh followed up yesterday's feel-good initiative with a string of policy measures while opening a website of the National Advisory Council, which has some Left sympathisers. (See chart)

"I am satisfied with the

PM PACKAGE

- Education cess to bankroll primary education fund
- Food-for-work programme from next month
- Rural employment bill in winter session
- Bill to amend right to information act in pipeline
- Arjun Sengupta appointed chairman of panel for promotion of enterprises in the unorganised sector
- V. Krishnamurthy made head of the National Manufacturing Competitiveness Council

meeting," Basu said before leaving for Calcutta with Bengal chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee. "We told the government it should consult us before taking important decisions, even if there are differences on these issues."

Over the last two months, the CPM has been criticising the Centre's policies on foreign direct investment, provident fund interest rate, foreign

trade and World Bank consultants.

But after the 90-minute lunch date, the CPM leaders — Basu, H.S. Surjeet and Sitaram Yechury — appeared pacified. "I told the Prime Minister we want his government to continue for five years," said Basu, who had recently declared that he was "dissatisfied" with the UPA.

Basu is also believed to have suggested that the UPA-Left coordination committee should meet more often to thrash out differences, which still exist but could wait to be sorted out after the Prime Minister returns.

Yechury said the Prime Minister "assured us" that all concerns of the Left on implementing the common minimum programme would be taken care of.

Singh did not forget his smaller allies either, bestowing MDMK chief Vaiko the honorific "Mahatma Gandhi of Tamil Nadu". (See Page 6)

Joint manifesto for Congress, NCP

Saroj Nagi
New Delhi, September 3

AFTER JOINING hands to keep the BJP-Shiv Sena out of power in 1999, the Congress and the NCP will now go into the 2004 Maharashtra Assembly polls with a joint manifesto to seek a fresh mandate from the people.

"We will have a joint manifesto and go in for joint campaigns," said NCP leader and Rajya Sabha member Tariq Anwar.

The two parties, which are already in the midst of seat-sharing talks, are also busy collecting inputs for the document, which — in keeping with the UPA's Common Minimum Programme — is expected to focus on the common man, especially the farming community, with its promise of free electricity.

There is no word yet on whether the demand for a



Sharad Pawar & Sonia Gandhi

separate Vidarbha will find a place in the manifesto. As both the Congress and the NCP believe that the demand is raised only "feebly and sporadically", it is unlikely to be highlighted — notwithstanding former MPCC chief Ranjit Deshmukh's bid to fan the issue

to assert his identity.

The Congress won only 27 out of the 74 Assembly seats in this region in 1999 and had fared poorly in the Lok Sabha polls.

The combine hopes to counter the anti-incumbency factor working against it by focusing on themes like So-

nia Gandhi's renunciation, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's clean image, Sharad Pawar's stature in the state and by projecting the Assembly polls as a clash between the secular ideology of the Congress-NCP-led alliance and the BJP-Shiv Sena's communal ideology.

But the Savarkar controversy has threatened to blur the line with the Congress' state leadership at odds with the AICC's assessment of the Maharashtra leader's role in the freedom struggle.

While most of them are hoping that the issue will blow over by the time the elections take place in October, the saffron combine intends to keep it alive by launching a 'Savarkar Gaurav Yatra'. Joint rallies by Sonia and Pawar are expected once the seat-sharing talks are over and the manifesto finalised.

ANOTHER MR CLEAN TAKES CHARGE

Chandy sworn in as Kerala CM

Our Thiruvananthapuram Bureau

31 AUGUST

KERALA got its 19th chief minister in popular leader Oommen Chandy who was sworn in on Tuesday along with one member each of from four coalition partners. With that, the Congress party that heads the United Democratic Front coalition showed rare courage in keeping out two of its coalition partners of the previous government led by A.K. Antony. The case of the two parties, who were kept out of the swearing-in on Tuesday, is to be finalised later.

"There are complaints about the two coalition partners with the Congress high command," Mr Chandy said hours after his swearing in, referring to the Kerala Congress (B) and Kerala Congress (Jacob). Both parties have been accused

of dissident activities in the recent past, particularly during the Lok Sabha elections in which all Congress candidates were defeated.

While one member each from the Indian Union Muslim League, the Kerala Congress (M), the Janadhipatya Samrakshana Samithy and the Communist Marxist Party (CMP) were sworn in on Tuesday, former ministers



CHANGE OF GUARD: Antony and Chandy in Thiruvananthapuram on Tuesday. — PTI

and leaders of the two "tainted" parties, R. Balakrishna Pillai of Kerala Congress (B) and T.M. Jacob of Kerala Congress (Jacob) were left to ponder their future.

Mr Chandy, only the third Congressman to be chief minister of Kerala in the past quarter of a century, is

widely considered to be an untarnished politician in the mould of A.K. Antony. But if Mr Chandy has masterminded the omission of Mr Pillai and Mr Jacob from the Cabinet, it is a move that indicates a strong resolve

Cong govt unfurls U-turn on Uma

B.R. SRIKANTH

Bangalore, Aug. 30: Jailed BJP leader Uma Bharti may walk free in a couple of days, but it is the Congress that is breathing a bigger sigh of relief.

In a surprise somersault aimed at denying the BJP a plank before the October elections in Maharashtra, the Congress-led Dharam Singh government told Karnataka High Court today that it stood by an earlier decision to drop riot charges against the former Madhya Pradesh chief minister.

Advocate-general B.T. Parthasarathy said there was no change in the previous Congress government's January 23, 2002, decision to drop charges against Uma, accused of inciting a flare-up after a 1994 flag-raising ceremony on the disputed Idgah Maidan left several persons dead.

Chief Justice N.K. Jain and Justice V.G. Sabhahit directed the Hubli court, before

THE SOMERSAULT

Jan. 23, 2002: The S.M. Krishna government decides to withdraw all 10 cases against Uma Bharti. Court permits withdrawal of eight cases but said two (attempt to murder and rioting) were outside its purview

The government moves sessions court to seek permission to drop the two cases

Aug. 22, 2004: The Dharam Singh government sends a police team to Bhopal to serve an arrest warrant on Uma

Aug. 23: The Karnataka government decides not to press the appeal seeking withdrawal of the two cases. Sessions court rejects original appeal. Uma resigns

Aug. 25: Uma sent to judicial custody in Karnataka

Aug. 28: Two central Congress leaders advise Dharam to find a way out as they feared a fallout on Maharashtra Assembly polls

Aug. 29: Dharam's coalition partner H.D. Deve Gowda asks why his party was not taken into confidence

Aug. 30: The Karnataka government says it stands by the 2002 plea to withdraw all the cases

which Uma had surrendered on August 25, to "consider the application" of the additional public prosecutor. The judges said Uma could approach the high court for bail and for quashing proceedings against her.

Sources said the government's U-turn came after Congress leaders had factored in the possible negative impact on the party in the run-up to the polls in neigh-

bouring Maharashtra.

On Saturday, two Congress central leaders told Dharam Singh that the BJP and the Shiv Sena could turn Uma's detention and the controversy over an alleged insult to Hindu Mahasabha leader Veer Savarkar into twin nationalism issues.

Yesterday, former Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda, whose Janata Dal (S) is part of the Dharam Singh-led coal-

tion, also advised the chief minister against giving the BJP an opportunity to generate sympathy.

The sources said the Congress also took into account the likely effect of the eight-day countrywide satyagraha top BJP leader L.K. Advani is scheduled to launch in Bangalore on September 1.

The BJP today said if the court sets Uma free before that date, its protest will be converted into a victory celebration.

The state government's move has also given the BJP a face-saver as the party was not sure of the response to its agitation in places where it does not enjoy support.

But it leaves the BJP with a headache as the party has to find a place to suitably accommodate Uma if and when she is released. Uma's rival Babulal Gaur, who succeeded her as chief minister of Madhya Pradesh, is unlikely to give up his throne in a hurry.

■ See Page 6

Embattled Antony quits as CM

Ramesh Babu

Thiruvananthapuram, Aug 29

A.K. ANTONY today resigned as Kerala chief minister after a one-on-one with Sonia Gandhi, taking his friends and opponents by surprise.

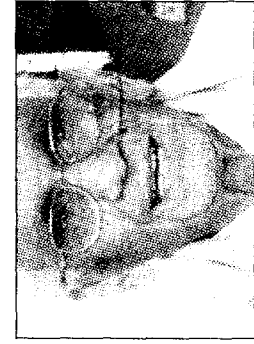
Antony announced the decision right at the Thiruvananthapuram airport after seeing off the Congress president, who was on a whistle-stop visit to the state to inaugurate social reformer Sree Narayana Guru's 150th birth centenary.

Antony then cited the reason for his move: "I take moral responsibility for the party's defeat in the Lok Sabha elections. I have got the party president's nod to resign."

Asked why he had waited for three months to take the deci-



A.K. Antony and K. Karunakaran: Arch-ribals



sion, Antony said he had been ready to quit immediately after the Lok Sabha poll debacle in May, when the Congress lost all the 17 seats it contested from the state. "But I got the party leadership's permission only now."

The 63-year-old "Mr Clean" of Kerala politics then drove straight away to Raj Bhavan to submit his resignation to Gover-

nor R.L. Bhatia.

The Congress legislature party will meet tomorrow to elect a new leader. The AICC general secretary in charge of Kerala, Ahmed Patel, and CWC member Anil Shastri — both Sonia aides

— are already in Thiruvananthapuram. Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee will arrive on Monday.

Power struggle

Antony's resignation has fanned the intense factionalism in Kerala. All the four camps (Antony, Karunakaran, Vyalar and Chennithala) are busy sharpening their claws to pocket the spoils.

The front-runners for the top job so far are Vakkam Purushottaman, K. Sankaranarayanan, Oommen Chandy and Vyalar Ravi. Purushottaman, Speaker of the Kerala Assembly, is from the backward Ezhava community and is viewed as being neutral against nor loyal to Antony's arch-rival, former chief minister K. Karunakaran.

Finance Minister Sankaranarayanan is not identified with any of the major factions while Oommen Chandy — UDF con-

leader and former finance and home minister — is believed to be close to A.K. Antony. Vyalar Ravi, former home minister and former AICC general secretary, is now a Rajya Sabha member.

The Congress's main challenge in Kerala is to end factionalism. Sonia recently took a step in this direction by appointing the non-controversial Rajya Sabha member, T. Balakrishna Pillai, as state Congress chief.

Karunakaran, recently ousted from the CWC, welcomed the development. "This will help strengthen the party in Kerala," he said. This is the second time that Antony has resigned the chief minister's post. In the late 1970s, he had quit as head of government because of differences with the central party leadership.

Apang returns to Congress

By Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, AUG. 28. With Arunachal Pradesh getting into election mode, the Congress today took a leap forward by readmitting the Chief Minister, Gegong Apang, and other members of the Bharatiya Janata Party into the party. Mr. Apang, who quit the Congress in 1996 along with his supporters to form the Arunachal Congress, joined the BJP last year after toppling the Congress Government of Mukut Mithi in July.

The Assembly election in the State is scheduled for October 7. The Congress Working Committee member, Ramesh Chennithala, who is in charge of the party affairs in the northeast, made the announcement on the readmission of Mr. Apang and others. Among those present on the occasion was Mr. Mithi, who heads the State Congress State unit, the newly-appointed working president, Nabam Tuki, the State leader and CWC member, Omen Deori, and the AICC secretaries, Imran Kidwai and Sudhakar Reddy.

Describing his return to the Congress as "homecoming," Mr.

410-1 29/8
Apang dismissed as "baseless and unfounded" the charges made earlier by the Congress about the role played by insurgents in toppling the Mithi Government.

With the Congress central leaders, including the chairperson of the Media Department, Girija Vyas, offering no comment, it was left to Mr. Mithi to save the situation by stating: "Let the past be buried and let



Gegong Apang addresses the media in New Delhi on Saturday. — PTI

us look forward for a brighter future."

Earlier, the AICC leaders asserted that Mr. Apang's return would strengthen the Congress in the border State and the hands of Sonia Gandhi.

Disenchantment

Expressing disenchantment with the BJP, Mr. Apang said: "Having grown on the secular philosophy of the Congress, we expressed our strong reservations about the ideology and policy of the BJP. But we were assured in clear terms that the BJP would be as secular as any mainstream party. But unfortunately the promises turned out to be hollow. The BJP did not give up its divisive policies and programmes."

He said that in sharp contrast to the broken promises of the BJP, the Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, had been taking interest in the problems of the State without any political considerations. "Both the Prime Minister and the Union Home Minister, Shivraj Patil, made anxious enquiries about the recent devastating floods in Arunachal Pradesh."

'Human rights cannot be lost sight of'

By Our Special Correspondent

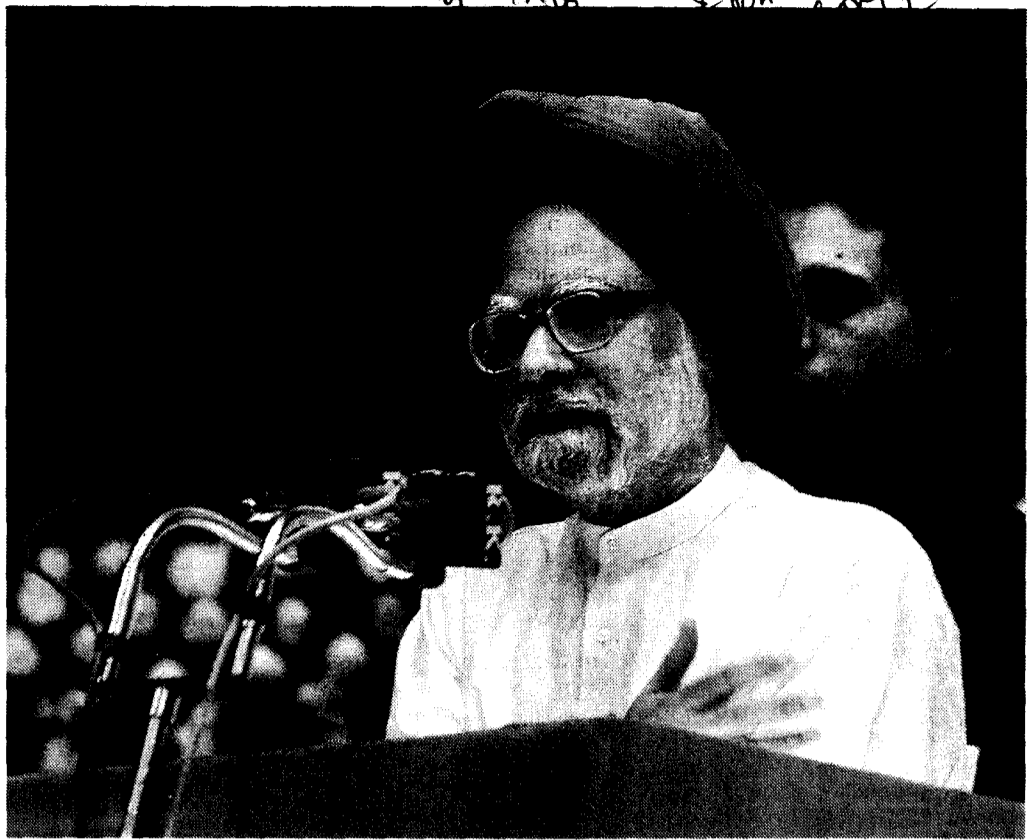
NEW DELHI, AUG. 21. The Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, has said that a multi-faceted approach is needed to tackle the cross-border terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir or the insurgency in parts of the North-East or the naxalite violence in some other parts of the country. While the law-enforcing machinery has to be made both effective and people-friendly, it should also address the feeling of alienation among a section of people.

"Human rights concerns cannot be lost sight of and genuine concerns and grievances should be redressed," he added.

Addressing the All-India Congress Committee, Dr. Singh reiterated his Government offer to hold talks with any group provided they gave up violence.

As regards the North-East, he said some underground elements were out to vitiate the atmosphere and the Government was committed to restoring normality so that people could lead a peaceful life and prosper both economically and socially. The Manipur situation was being monitored closely and the Government would take whatever steps were needed to ensure that people there live in peace and dignity.

"We need to have a new development paradigm here which revitalises the growth processes. I take development



Prime Minister Manmohan Singh addressing the AICC session in New Delhi on Saturday. — Photo: Shanker Chakravarty

aspirations of these regions seriously but one must remember that development can take place only in a secure, peaceful and harmonious environment... I appeal to the people of Jammu and Kashmir and North-East to help us in this gi-

gant national task of reconstruction."

Seven priorities

Dr. Singh highlighted seven priority areas, of agriculture, water, education, health care, employment, urban renewal

and infrastructure. He also touched upon the legislation the Government plans to bring, including one to repeal the Prevention of Terrorism Act. The need for better fiscal management both by the Centre and the States was also stressed.

'No let-up in fight against communalism'

By Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, AUG. 21. Coming together for the first time since the Manmohan Singh Government took office, the Congress leadership and delegates today signalled that the fight against the communal forces was on and that the party remained mindful of the interests and the welfare of "aam aadmi" (common man).

Both the Congress president, Sonia Gandhi and the Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh asserted that the divisive forces would not be allowed to get away with their agenda of mischief.

The one-day session of the All-India Congress Committee found the party in an upbeat mood. In her inaugural remarks, Ms. Gandhi reiterated her party's secular commitments, she also tried hard to send out a message that the entire party hierarchy was respectful towards the Prime Minister.

To enthusiastic applause, she declared "In Dr. Manmohan Singh, India has a Prime Minister of great learning, vast administrative experience and impeccable reputation. Let us

welcome him today and congratulate him once again."

On his part, the Prime Minister, Dr. Singh, mentioned that the people's mandate was in favour of Ms. Gandhi and all the allies of the United Progressive Alliance too were of the opinion that she be the Prime Minister. However, she made a supreme sacrifice by not accepting the post and the decision was unique in world history. He then went on to state how he felt honoured for the trust she reposed in him.

But the prime focus was on the fight against communal forces. It was reflected in Ms. Gandhi's speech and the political resolution adopted at the session with both the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the Bharatiya Janata Party coming in the line of fire.

Ideological battle

The fight with the BJP, she said, was not limited to an electoral tussle but was an ideological battle. Congress nationalism was based on the best Indian traditions and culture that was secular, liberal and inclusive whereas the BJP definition of nationalism was based on discrimination, hatred

and fundamentalism. The BJP rejects all these values and this was the message the party needs to carry to each and every home.

She said there could be no let-up in the Congress fight against the RSS and its outfits. The RSS, she charged was spreading the communal poison at a time when the country's founding fathers were engaged in freedom struggle and later tried to show the efforts of nation-building by party leaders in poor light.

Respect party workers

On the political front, Ms. Gandhi took on the BJP-led NDA, stating that "their arrogance, their lust for power and their pursuit of personal profit blinded them to reality. They believed they had attained political immortality... yet, the BJP is behaving in a manner that subverts this mandate. It has not accepted its rejection by the people, by the aam aadmi."

Ms. Gandhi emphasised the need to "respect" party workers and also to associate and promote common workers with the party programme.

Similarly, the observation that her suggestion to Chief

Ministers and State units to follow a code of conduct and adopt simple living appeared to have been ignored, rung loud and clear.

She said there should be no double standards inviting charges that even as the party talked of concern for the poor, its leaders lived in style and opulence.

The session being held to commemorate the 60th birth anniversary of the former Congress president, Rajiv Gandhi, paid tribute to the vision of the man who became the country's youngest Prime Minister. Besides the special resolution, the "presence" of the late leader was made to be felt what with Ms. Gandhi herself recalling his contribution both in her opening remarks and concluding observation. Dr. Singh too noted his achievements in a short span of time that left an imprint on the nation.

Overall, the meeting adopted four resolutions — a combined one explaining the political, economic and international stand of the party, one recalling Rajiv Gandhi's contribution, another thanking the people and Sonia Gandhi and the last on Panchayati Raj.

Coalitions inevitable, says Congress

By Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, AUG. 21. The Congress today accepted the "inevitability of coalitions for the foreseeable future" and the central leadership used the first All India Congress Committee (AICC) meeting after the 14th Lok Sabha elections to drive home this point to its rank and file. The political resolution noted that the "success" of the party's first experiment at coalition governance at the Centre was dependent equally on workers and leaders of the affiliates.

'National imperative'

Stating that the stability of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Government is a "national imperative," the AICC said: "Whilst we emphasise the crucial importance of the Congress president's contribution to the management of the UPA and maintenance of comfort level of the alliance partners, it cannot be gainsaid that the real success of the UPA depends as much on the cooperation and understanding between the rank and file of the respective partners as indeed between the leaders in

Parliament."

'Natural rallying point'

Also, the Congress sought to portray itself as a party at ease with coalition politics and a natural rallying point for various political forces in the country's fractured polity. "Historically, the Congress party has been seen as a broad coalition of social groups and interests... Many empowered sections of society which directly benefited from Congress policies consistently supported us whilst others even branched off to other political formations for a host of subjective and objective reasons. However, their separate successes were sporadic and varying. Prevailing ground realities have led to inevitable public aspiration for renewed collaboration and cooperation with the Congress."

While a separate resolution had been passed thanking the voters and the Congress president, Sonia Gandhi, for the 2004 mandate, the three-in-one (political, economic and diplomatic) resolution was also lavish in its praise for her. In a separate

resolution, the party re-dedicated itself to the "grand ideals" cherished by the former Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi. A fourth resolution was passed on Panchayati Raj in which the Congress called for "the closest possible institutional links between elected party representatives in the urban and rural local bodies and the party organisation in the States and Union Territories and at the level of the AICC."

Resolutions passed

These three resolutions were passed immediately and the omnibus resolution was open to debate but for the most part delegates preferred to shower praise on Ms. Gandhi. Besides reiterating the party's commitment to coalitions, the political resolution also attacked the National Democratic Alliance — particularly, the BJP — for its "misdirected and misconceived governance."

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) also came in for scathing criticism in the political resolution. "The ideology, programmes and principles of

the RSS are blatantly communal, divisive and contemptuous of the basic precepts that define the ideology of the Constitution of India. A country that cannot faithfully preserve the narrative of its history betrays its succeeding generations. The BJP's assault on the education system, particularly, in the distortion of history, has therefore to be corrected with single-minded devotion of all liberty-loving citizens of India." Stating that the battle for the minds and hearts of the people was far from over, the resolution asserted the need to clean up the "atmosphere polluted by the RSS."

Referring to the "saga of corruption and exploitation evidenced by scams" the resolution called for urgent, "appropriate corrective measures and accountability." Also, it presented the Congress governance model as one that "eliminates corruption, legislates good laws that can be reasonably obeyed, provides for accountability and transparency in administrative decisions, greater people's participation in policy-making, and ensures a pervasive sense of justice."

Party above govt: Sonia

SHAHID PERVEZ
STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

NEW DELHI, Aug. 21. — The AICC meeting here today clinched the question of supremacy relating to the government-organisation matrix, giving a clear verdict in favour of the Sonia Gandhi-led Congress party organisation.

The theme song of the conclave turned out to be the Congress' complete dependence on the Nehru-Gandhi family, with Mrs Sonia Gandhi being unanimously applauded and acknowledged as the party's "undisputed leader", by one and all, including Dr Manmohan Singh.

In her address, Mrs Gandhi touched upon the subject of government-organisation relations, giving the answer the party leaders and workers had been looking for. "It generally happens that in the wake of a party's victory in election and establishment of the government, the organisation takes a back seat. This should absolutely not happen," she said while going on to make the point that "this has also been a reason behind our electoral defeat in some states that the government had eclipsed the organisation there... this should not be repeated in the future."

She called for strong bonds and ceaseless interaction between the organisation and the government. "Our governments, both at Central and state levels, should be very sensitive to the concerns of the party workers; the workers also should understand the limitations and constraints of the government". But, then she put the onus of "more responsibility" on the shoulders of "those in government", who, she said, "must ensure that the party workers should not feel disillusioned and betrayed".

As party leaders, including senior ministers like Mr Pranab Mukherjee, Mr Arjun Singh, and Mr Natwar Singh, went about singing hosannas for Mrs Gandhi's "charismatic leadership" and her "historic abdication of the PM's post", besides paying their tributes to Rajiv Gandhi's

"visionary leadership", the question as to whose leadership reigns supreme was decisively answered. None of them addressed Dr Singh as their leader, describing him merely as the PM, even as Mrs Gandhi warmly welcomed him and praised him as "a PM of great learning, vast

administrative experience, impeccable reputation".

Dr Singh thanked Mrs Gandhi, saying: "I feel honoured by the trust you've reposed in me. I will do my best to retain this trust. Mrs Gandhi's decision to turn down the PM's post was historic with very few parallels in the world."

...And Cong places Rahul above PM



NITIN MAHAJAN & MOUSHUMI DAS GUPTA
STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

NEW DELHI, Aug. 21. — Mr Rahul Gandhi, MP, stole the show from Dr Manmohan Singh, PM. At the AICC session today, the Nehru-Gandhi scion completely overshadowed the Prime Minister. Congress delegates and leaders — cutting across hierarchy — went overboard in their attempt to please the 34-year-old Gandhi family scion. Attired in a spotless white *kurta-pyjama*, Rahul arrived at Rajiv Gandhi Nagar (the Talkatora stadium venue) at 9.30 a.m. amidst chants of Rahul Gandhi *zindabad*.

There were no cries of Manmohan Singh *zindabad*, and no adulatory mention of the Prime Minister. Neither were there cheers when Dr Singh arrived, or went to the podium. The sycophancy show was evident from the beginning. Seated in the front row earmarked for special invitees, Rahul vacated his seat at the arrival of the Union human resource development minister, Mr Arjun Singh. However, the senior Cabinet minister didn't take his seat until a suitable seat was arranged for the first-time member of Parliament.

In her inaugural address, the Delhi chief minister, Mrs Sheila Dikshit, welcomed Rahul amid loud cheers from supporters. The Congress workers demanded that Rahul should come on stage but he waved at the delegates amid loud cheers and slogan shouting like Rahul Gandhi *amar rahen*. The delegates repeated their demand during the lunch session. The senior Congress leadership obliged this time, inviting Rahul to the dais. However, he was not allowed to make a speech, as demanded by delegates, and just sat next to his mother and Congress chief Mrs Sonia Gandhi for a short while before returning to his seat.

Rahul was not alone in receiving the adoration. Senior Congress leaders went out of their way to please their boss. While Ms Ambika Soni was seen carrying the tea tray to the Congress chief, the Delhi chief minister stuck to her side the entire day. As the Congress chief addressed the meeting, there was pin-drop silence, with party workers glued to their seats. However, many empty seats were noticed when the Prime Minister spoke. Even the room of the Congress chief was decked up with her favourite flower, pink lily.

Coalitions are here to stay, says Cong : page 10

Sonia packs Rajiv's punch

Target: pelf and parivar

K. SUBRAHMANYA

New Delhi, Aug. 21: Sonia Gandhi has arrived, in Rajiv Gandhi style.

Nineteen years after her late husband stunned the top rung gathered for the special Congress centenary session in Mumbai with his attack on an entrenched "power-broker" culture in the party, Sonia today condemned blatant display of money power.

"We live amongst the poor who lead a difficult life. We talk about the problem of poverty. But we ourselves practise an ostentatious lifestyle and indulge in vulgar display of wealth. We, who take inspiration from Mahatma Gandhi, should not be adopting this kind of double standard. We must introspect and lead a



Sonia salutes the party flag at the AICC meeting. (PTI)

public life that is marked by simplicity and honesty," the Congress president said to prolonged applause.

Rajiv Gandhi had launched his attack at the April 1985 session after he was armed with a massive mandate — 400-plus seats in the Lok Sabha — in elections held the previous December.

Standing head and shoulders above the rest at a day-long special session of the All India Congress Committee in the capital, Sonia today wielded the moral authority she has acquired by renouncing prime ministership. In her opening address, the party chief censured the top brass for not taking her suggestion to follow a "code of ethics" seriously.

"Two years ago, I sent some suggestions regarding a

code of ethics to chief ministers and Pradesh Congress committees. But it appears that the suggestion has remained only on paper. This is disturbing," she said.

The Congress president stressed that people from ordinary homes should get a chance in the party, noting that prosperous and established families have an advantage while promoting their children. She also came down on men ruling as de facto sarpanchs in villages after their wives get elected in seats reserved for women.

Sonia, in her 45-minute speech, set the tone for her colleagues by launching an ideological and political offensive against the RSS and the BJP. She also outlined the priorities of the Congress-led government at the Centre.

Accusing the Sangh parivar of trying to wreck national unity by spreading communalism, the Congress president said its target has been to run down leaders of the Independence movement and weaken social harmony.

Sonia said there would be no let-up in the political and ideological battle against the forces of communalism. The fight between the Congress and the BJP was not just electoral. It was a confrontation between the Congress' inclusive, liberal, secular nationalism and the BJP's narrow nationalism based on fundamentalism and communal hatred, she said.

Expressing confidence that the Congress-led coalition government would succeed, Sonia pointed out that though the experiment was new to the party, "we have adjusted easily, proving our opponents and critics wrong".

On a personal note, she thanked partymen for accepting her decision to turn down prime ministership. In Manmohan Singh, the country has a Prime Minister of "great learning, vast administrative experience and impeccable reputation", she said.

To loud applause, Sonia emphasised the primacy of the party over government. "It is the party that works to win elections and form government," she said but added that both needed the other for their success and called for better interaction between the two.

■ See Page 6



Rahul Gandhi at the AICC session (PTI)

Dress rehearsal under duress

RADHIKARAMASESHAN AND KAY BENEDICT

New Delhi, Aug. 21: Rahul Gandhi is the future of the Congress: this is the message that went out of Talkatora Stadium.

Proposing a resolution in memory of Rajiv Gandhi a day after his 60th birth anniversary, party leader Priya Ranjan Das Munshi told the former Prime Minister's son: "My dear Rahul, the nation is looking at you."

The heir apparent was seated below the podium in a section reserved for ministers and senior functionaries attending the AICC session.

Master of ceremonies Janardhan Dwivedi said a "very important" message from Elections 2004 was Rahul's debut not just in politics but in Parliament. "That is a pointer to the future," he concluded.

A delegate from Uttaranchal wanted Rahul to be made

general secretary while a leader from Uttar Pradesh wanted him appointed Youth Congress chief. "Draft him into the Youth Congress. Not one Mulayam, but scores of them will be out," he declared.

Living up to the Congress tradition of dynasty worship, some leaders said the session had been rendered "historic" by his presence.

The statements were signal for the crowd to shout slogans in favour of the Nehru-Gandhi scion and demand that he take his place on the stage. An AICC member from Bihar, Ram Dhan, even took off his shirt to make a point while another unfurled a banner with pro-Rahul slogans. But Sonia Gandhi gestured to Rahul to stay put, so he obliged the crowd by standing up and waving.

Later, when he returned from the lunch break, the chorus started again. The demand was so vociferous that general secretary Ambika Soni inter-

rupted Anand Sharma, who was then speaking. "I appeal to Rahul to come and sit on the dais for some minutes," she said. He went up and sat beside his mother for 7-8 minutes before returning.

Sonia was deferential to protocol and went out of her way to reaffirm Manmohan Singh's authority as Prime Minister. When Sonia in her introductory remarks spoke of Singh's attributes, the Congress chief clapped and, as if on cue, the other delegates joined in. When sports minister Sunil Dutt presented her with a set of books and leaflets, she gestured to him to first hand them to the Prime Minister, seated next to her.

But the party was happy to hail the dynasty. "The Nehru family is not a family but a movement. Their sacrifices are supreme. Nehru was in Naini jail for a long time, Indira Gandhi was assassinated, so was Rajiv. Sonia sacrificed

the highest office in the country," Das Munshi said.

The resolutions reflected the sentiment. One on Rajiv Gandhi said: "In the wake of... the assassination of Indira Gandhi, her young 40-year-old son, Rajiv Gandhi, was sworn in as her successor Prime Minister — and within weeks rescued India from the depths of despair, despondency and distress. A grateful nation rendered him the largest mandate ever accorded in the elections to the Lok Sabha. His five years as Prime Minister stand out as among the most shining epochs in the evolution of Independent India."

On Sonia, the AICC resolution stressed her "spirit of sacrifice and service of the common people" and congratulated her for giving India a Prime Minister like Singh who, it said, represented her own priorities in politics — "competent, clear, clean and compassionate governance".

THE FUTURE & the present

What the AICC resolution said

- Coalition politics in the country is inevitable for the foreseeable future
- Stability of the UPA government is a national imperative
- UPA partners need to adopt a spirit of honest accommodation for the success of the coalition
- The RSS and its associates must be confronted head-on
- Problems in Jammu and Kashmir, the Northeast and Naxalite-affected states can be resolved only through negotiations
- The common minimum programme, which advocates reforms with a human face, is endorsed
- P. Chidambaram's first UPA budget makes a good beginning in pursuing the Congress model of growth with social equity
- A GDP growth rate of 7-8 per cent a must for job-based growth
- Inter-state water sharing problems should be resolved urgently
- Terrorism, abetted from across the border, continues to be a menace
- The convergence of principles and pragmatism in Indo-US ties is welcomed. The concept of a unipolar world is rejected
- Improving ties with Israel cannot be at the cost of traditional support for the Palestinian cause

CWC AND AICC REVAMPED

Sonia picks loyalists

571
1877

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com 95

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

NEW DELHI, July 17. — Mrs Sonia Gandhi today finally effected the long-pending revamp of the Congress Working Committee as well as that of the AICC. It quite expectedly did not turn out to be a radical exercise and there were few surprises.

Mrs Gandhi inducted Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh, and heavyweight Cabinet ministers — Mr Arjun Singh, Mr Pranab Mukherjee, Mr Shivraj Patil, Mr Natwar Singh and Mr Ghulam Nabi Azad — into the 22-member CWC — the party's highest policy-making body.

Finance minister Mr P Chidambaram was denied a CWC berth. The status quo was maintained in the redesigning exercise with regard to the existing power superstructure within the organisation. Mrs Ambika Soni will remain the de facto No. 2 in the party. A CWC member and AICC general secretary, she will continue to call the shots. She's been entrusted with the job of looking after the party president's office as well as meetings and sessions of the CWC, CEC and the AICC; this in addition to the charge of Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh. Her ally, Mr Ahmed Patel, will continue to be Mrs Gandhi's political secretary.

Several leaders with major portfolios are affiliated to the Ambika-

Ahmed team. Mr Digvijay Singh and Mr Ashok Gehlot have been brought into the CWC with another former chief minister, Mr Vilasrao Deshmukh, being also there. Mr Singh and Mr Gehlot have also been made AICC general secretaries with significant charges.

It was not entirely a case of "old wine in a new bottle" though. One huge surprise was the elevation of the Madhya Pradesh leader Mr Satyavrat Chaturvedi, who recently lost the last Lok Sabha poll. In addition to being inducted into the CWC, Mr Chaturvedi has been given the crucial charge of Uttar Pradesh as an AICC general secretary. Mr Salman Khurshid, known to belong to Mrs Soni's camp, was also suitably "rewarded" with CWC a berth and the post of general secretary.

Mrs Gandhi dropped Kerala stalwart Mr K Karunakaran and veteran leader Mr RK Dhawan from the CWC. Among the old guards retained are Mr ML Fotedar, Mr Motilal Vora and Mrs Mohsina Kidwai. Mr Vyalar Ravi has not been inducted as his name is tipped for the post of Rajya Sabha deputy chairman.

The balancing and adjustment act was also evidenced by today's revamp in the cases of those leaders who either lost the polls or were not accommodated in the government.

Another report on page 10

WHO'S IN



Digvijay Singh, Ashok Gehlot

WHO'S OUT



K Karunakaran, RK Dhawan

শরিকদের ঝামেলা কাঁধে নিলেন সনিয়া

উপদেষ্টা
পর্ষদের
নেত্রী, মর্যাদা
পূর্ণমন্ত্রী

স্টাফ রিপোর্টার, নয়াদিল্লি, ১৮ জুন: কেন্দ্রে সরকার পরিচালনার কাজে শরিক দলের সঙ্গে মনান্তর হলে প্রধানমন্ত্রী মনমোহন সিংহকে সেই সঙ্কট নিরসনের দায়িত্ব নিতে হবে না। সে দায়ভার গ্রহণ করেছেন সরকার নিযুক্ত জাতীয় উপদেষ্টা পর্ষদের চেয়ারপার্সন সনিয়া গান্ধী। যদিও অভিন্ন ন্যূনতম কর্মসূচি রূপায়ণের দায়িত্ব সরকারের প্রধান হিসেবে মনমোহনের উপরেই বর্তাবে। জাতীয় উপদেষ্টা পর্ষদ এই পদ্ধতি নিরস্তর পর্যালোচনা করবে। শরিকদের সঙ্গে আলোচনার মাধ্যমে বিরোধের অবসান ঘটানো এবং মন্ত্রীদের কাজকর্মের মূল্যায়নের দায়িত্বও পর্ষদের।

পর্ষদের চেয়ারপার্সন হিসেবে সনিয়াকে পূর্ণমন্ত্রীর মর্যাদা দেওয়া হচ্ছে। শুধু তাই নয়, বিজ্ঞানভবনে গড়ে তোলা হচ্ছে জাতীয় উপদেষ্টা পর্ষদের নতুন অফিস। সনিয়ার নেতৃত্বে গঠিত এই উপদেষ্টা পর্ষদের মোট সদস্য সংখ্যা হবে কুড়ি। বিজ্ঞানভবনে প্রত্যেক সদস্যের জন্য আলাদা ঘর তৈরি করা হচ্ছে।

উপদেষ্টা পর্ষদের সদস্যদের নাম এখনও বিবেচনার পর্যায়ে। মধ্যপ্রদেশের প্রাক্তন মুখ্যমন্ত্রী দিগ্বিজয় সিংহ এবং কনটিকের প্রাক্তন মুখ্যমন্ত্রী এস এম কৃষ্ণ প্রমুখের কথা ভাবা হচ্ছে। সনিয়া গান্ধী এই উপদেষ্টা পর্ষদে বাম নেতাদেরও शामिल করার চেষ্টা করছেন। সনিয়া মনে করেন বাম নেতারা এই পর্ষদে থাকলে সরকার পরিচালনার কাজ আরও সহজ হবে। বিশেষত সমন্বয় কমিটিতে বাম দলগুলি शामिल হতে রাজি না হওয়ায় এই পর্ষদে তাঁদের দায়িত্ব দেওয়ার চেষ্টা চলছে।

বসন্ত বিজ্ঞানভবন এবং ৭ নম্বর রেস কোর্স রোডের মধ্যে কী ভাবে সমন্বয় হবে সে বিষয়ে কর্মপন্থা স্থির করা হয়েছে। প্রধানমন্ত্রীর সচিবালয় কী কী কাজ করবে এবং উপদেষ্টা পর্ষদেরই বা কাজ কী হবে তা যথাসাম্য সুস্পষ্ট করে দেওয়া হয়েছে। পর্ষদে খুবই গুরুত্বপূর্ণ ভূমিকা পালন



করবেন রাজ্যসভার সদস্য জয়রাম রমেশ। তিনি এই উপদেষ্টা পর্ষদের সচিবও হতে পারেন। আবার প্রধানমন্ত্রীর সচিবালয়ের যুগ্মসচিব পুলক চট্টোপাধ্যায়ও সনিয়া এবং মনমোহনের কাজকর্মের মধ্যে সমন্বয় রক্ষা করছেন।

সনিয়া প্রত্যেক কেন্দ্রীয় মন্ত্রীর কার্যকলাপের দিকেও কড়া নজর রাখছেন বলে খবর মিলেছে। অভিন্ন কর্মসূচি

রূপায়ণের কাজ কোন মন্ত্রী কী ভাবে করছেন তার মূল্যায়ন হবে। বিদেশমন্ত্রী নটবর সিংহকে সনিয়া ইতিমধ্যেই সংযত হওয়ার নির্দেশ দিয়েছেন। আমেরিকা গিয়ে নটবর ইরাকে ভারতীয় সেনা পাঠানোর ইঙ্গিত দিয়েছিলেন। এ ঘটনায় নাকি সনিয়া আদৌ খুশি নন। তাই তাঁকে সতর্ক করা হয়। তারপর নটবর সিংহ বিবৃতি বদলে সেনা পাঠানোর কথা অস্বীকার করেছেন।

ইজরায়েল এবং মার্কিন যুক্তরাষ্ট্রের সঙ্গে দ্বিপাক্ষিক সম্পর্কের উন্নতিতে সচেষ্ট হলেও সনিয়া নাকি বিদেশনীতিতে আমেরিকা ও ইজরায়েল সম্পর্কে একটু ভিন্ন দৃষ্টিভঙ্গী নিতে চাইছেন। অর্জুন সিংহ যে ভাবে শিল্পক্ষেত্রে গৈরিকীকরণের বিরুদ্ধে সক্রিয় তাতে নাকি কংগ্রেস দল নেত্রী সন্তুষ্ট। সনিয়া ও বাম নেতৃত্ব যৌথ ভাবে মনে করেন, প্রত্যেক মন্ত্রীরই এমন

কিছু কাজে সক্রিয় হওয়া উচিত যাতে প্রমাণ হয় এ সরকার ভোটের সময় বাজপেয়ী সরকারের বিরুদ্ধে যে সব অভিযোগ তুলেছিল সেগুলিকে কংগ্রেস গুরুত্ব দিচ্ছে। ক্ষমতায় এসে মনমোহন সিংহের সরকার সে সব কাজ ভুলে যায়নি। যেমন প্রতিরক্ষামন্ত্রী প্রণব মুখোপাধ্যায় সংসদে জর্জ ফার্নান্ডেজের বক্তব্যের প্রতিধ্বনি করলেও ভিতরে ভিতরে

প্রণববাবু জর্জের বিরুদ্ধে তদন্ত চালাচ্ছেন। তথ্য ও সম্প্রচারমন্ত্রী জয়পাল রেড্ডিকে প্রসারভারতী বোর্ড ও দূরদর্শনে বিজেপি মনোনীত বেশ কয়েক জন ব্যক্তিকে সরাসরে বলা হয়েছে। বিশেষত ভূপেন হাজারিকার মতো ব্যক্তি, যিনি এখনও প্রসারভারতী বোর্ডের সদস্য এবং এ বারের ভোটে বিজেপি'র প্রার্থী হয়েছিলেন। এঁদের সরাসরে বলা হবে। তবে এঁদের অনেকেই

কার্যকালের মেয়াদ শেষ হতে চলেছে। তাই জয়পাল রেড্ডি সময় শেষ হওয়ার জন্য অপেক্ষা করছেন। কংগ্রেস সূত্রে বলা হয়েছে, প্রধানমন্ত্রী সচিবালয়ে প্রায় ১৫ জন কাজ করছেন, আবার সনিয়ার দফতরেও থাকছেন প্রায় ২০ জন। এই দুই দিকের সুষ্ঠু সমন্বয়ই হল এ বার পরিচালনার চাবিকাঠি। দলনেত্রী রাজনীতির দিকটি সামলাবেন আর প্রধানমন্ত্রী নজর দেবেন প্রশাসনে।

Sonia's attack on Mulayam worsens Cong-SP ties

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: The heartland has begun to hot up with Congress president Sonia Gandhi following son Rahul in attacking the Mulayam Singh Yadav government on the law and order situation in the state.

Her remarks during the tour of her Rae Bareilly constituency on Friday left no doubt that an inexorable con-

frontation was building up in UP over control of political territory between the ruling Samajwadi Party and a resurgent Congress.

The uneasy relations between the two parties took a sudden turn for the worse with Sonia ascribing the state's slump to the long spell of non-Congress rule and implicitly calling for her party's return to Lucknow. What began as an exchange of sulk statements has threatened to become a full-

blown conflict with the rapid-fire assault on the SP from the mother-and-son team.

Rattled by Congress MP from Amethi Rahul Gandhi's indictment of the Mulayam Singh government over the law and order issue in the state, the SP bosses

pretended to have heard only a "kid's prattle".

Adopting a condescending attitude, Mulayam questioned Rahul's political

stature. Amar said that if any reaction was called for it would be made by Akhilesh Yadav, Mulayam's son.

Congress was not amused. "To call Rahul Gandhi a kid and raise doubts about his stature is an insult to the country's youth because he represents them," fumed party spokesman Anand Sharma. He accused the SP of creating an air of confrontation in the state. "What Rahul Gandhi said was based on facts," he said.



Mulayam



Sonia

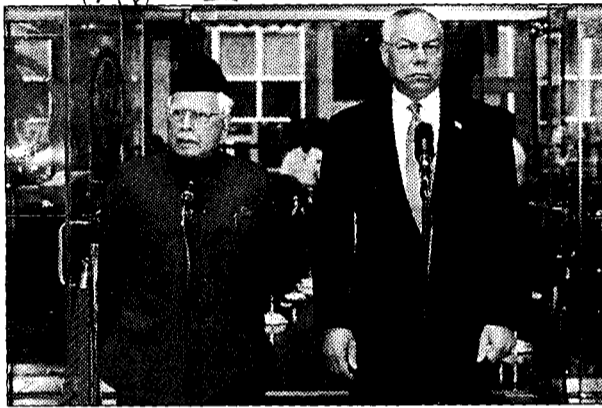
Natwar speak on troops to Iraq gives Cong the blushes

Our Political Bureau
NEW DELHI 11 JUNE

EXTERNAL affairs minister K. Natwar Singh on Friday came under sharp criticism, from the supporting allies, for his assertion on Friday that the changed situation, following adoption of the UN resolution last week, had reopened the issue of sending Indian troops to Iraq.

With the Left parties displaying their extra sensitivity to the issue of sending troops to the strife-torn country and launching a strong protest, the Congress too was forced to distance itself from the minister's remarks.

Joining the Left parties was the JD(S) leader and former Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda who said Mr Singh's comments were uncalled for. Clearly wanting to reassure its supporting allies, the



SEARCH FOR SYNERGY: Natwar Singh and Colin Powell in Washington on Thursday. — AFP

Congress was compelled to come out with clarifications.

Mr Singh's comments, that mark a turnaround from the stated position of the Congress party,

came at a joint media address, with the US secretary of state Colin Powell in Washington, where he is representing the country at former President

Ronald Reagan's funeral.

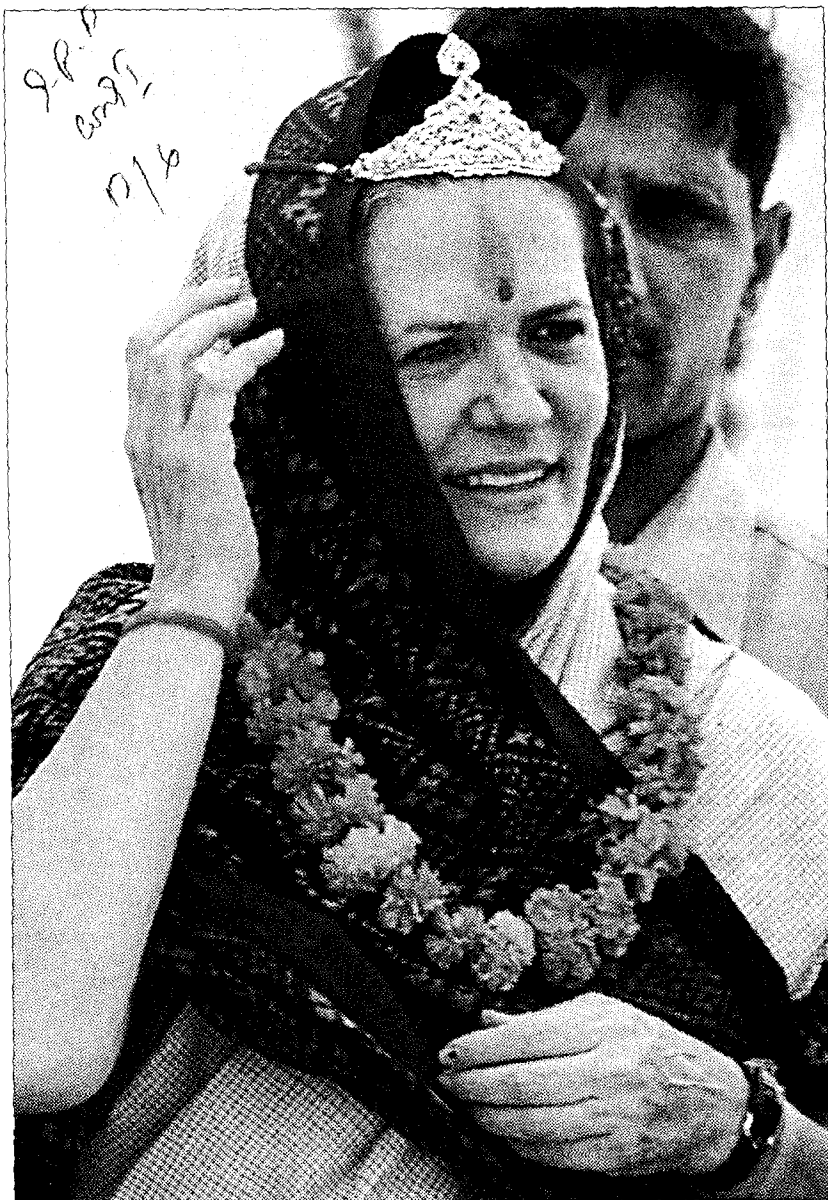
"There is a resolution of the last Parliament on this issue in which we had given our opinion that we were against sending troops to Iraq. Now the situation has changed. There is a resolution, unanimously passed in the United Nations, and there are Arab members in it. We will look at it very carefully. But I must emphasise that this matter will have to be placed before the government at the highest levels, so it would be premature for me to say aye or nay... We are a coalition government, so the matter will have to be discussed by the government and by the Cabinet Committee on Security," he said.

Incidentally, New Delhi had cautiously responded to the UN resolution two days ago, emphasising only on unanimous acceptance of the UN role in Iraq.

The Economic Times

12 JUN 2001

Sonia puts Mulayam on notice



CROWNING GLORY Sonia Gandhi has a moment of glory on Friday on her first visit to Rae Bareilly after the triumphant abdication.

REUTERS

CONG CHIEF BLASTS CM FOR FAILURE ON ALL FRONTS

Press Trust of India
Rae Bareilly, June 11

PICKING UP the threads from her son Rahul's attack on the Mulayam Singh Yadav government in Uttar Pradesh, Congress president Sonia Gandhi on Friday said the heartland state's development had suffered during 15 years of uninterrupted non-Congress rule.

As if on cue Union home minister Shivraj Patil displayed perfect timing with his comment to reporters that the Centre has received "lot of complaints on the deteriorating law and order situation" in Uttar Pradesh. Asked if he agreed with Mulayam's comment that law and order in Delhi or Mumbai was worse than his state, Patil declined to react saying "I know the intention behind asking such a question".

Arriving to a tumultuous welcome in Rae Bareilly on her first visit after her historic abdication of the post of Prime Minister, Sonia stuck to bemoaning the lack basic amenities and the poor state of law and order. Gandhi, who is on a thanksgiving tour, was accompanied by Rahul.

"In the last 15 years different non-Congress governments which came to power in the state acted as per their whims and fancies and ignored the interests of the people ... causing them hardship. Today too the condition is the same. The state of affairs on electricity, water, roads, law and order is bad."

This was followed by a state-

ment pregnant with latent meaning, with Sonia assuring that with a Congress-led government at the Centre there would now be no hurdles to the path of development here "from the Centre's side".

The Samajwadi Party took the war of words ahead with general secretary Amar Singh asserting in New Delhi that he would continue to ignore Rahul Gandhi since he was a "bachcha (kid)". "I will follow his (Rahul's) advice of not taking a *bachcha* seriously and will continue to ignore him," he told reporters after his meeting with Finance Minister P. Chidambaram to press for an economic package.

To a question on why Congress had turned against SP lately despite extending support to Congress-led coalition at the Centre, Singh quipped "Sonia Gandhi is a big leader ... I cannot offer suggestions to her".

Yesterday, the Chief Minister had insisted that UP is better off on the law and order front compared to Delhi and Mumbai and cited the incident of rape of a Swiss diplomat near Siri Fort Auditorium recently.

Asserting that his party was "committed to maintaining the secular fabric of the country by fighting communal forces", Singh said the LS poll verdict brought out the victory of the Samajwadi Party over "communal leaders" such as Vinay Katiyar, Murlidhar Joshi and Swami Chinmayanand. The three saffron heavyweights were trounced in their constituencies in the state.

12 JUN 2001

Congress backs up Rahul attack

K. SUBRAHMANYA

New Delhi, June 9: If Amar Singh thinks Rahul Gandhi is still a "kid" prone to making immature comments, he had better think again.

A day after the first-time MP from Amethi said law and order in Uttar Pradesh under the Mulayam Singh Yadav government was deteriorating, the Congress stepped in to rubbish the Samajwadi Party general secretary's "*bachcha hai*" remark.

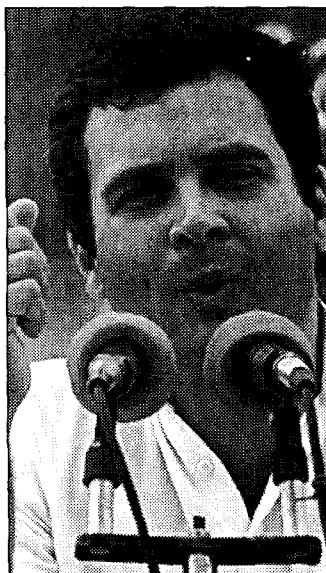
"Rahul Gandhi has made a factual and true comment on the state of affairs in certain parts of the state. He has expressed serious concern over the deteriorating law and order condition," Congress spokesman Anand Sharma said today.

On his first visit to Amethi after his victory in the elections, Rahul had condemned the recent attacks on party workers in Rae Bareilly, his mother Sonia Gandhi's constituency. "The law and order situation in Uttar Pradesh in general was not good and in Rae Bareilly it was worse," he said.

He also spoke in favour of a regime "change".

Reacting to the comments, Amar Singh had said: "I can understand Rahul Gandhi's problem. He is a kid. He has to learn the tricks of politics."

Sharma laughed off the Sam-



Rahul addresses supporters in Amethi on Wednesday. (Reuters)

ajwadi Party leader's reaction. Even during the campaigning for the parliamentary elections, the Congress, he said, raised serious concern over the law and order situation, particularly in Rae Bareilly and Amethi. The matter had also been brought to the notice of the Election Commission, he added.

Sharma steered clear of giving any indication about how the Congress proposed to deal with

the seeming contradiction between continuing outside support to the Mulayam Singh government and its criticism of the government. The working committee would address all such issues, including the much talked about possibility of reviewing support, the spokesman said.

However, well-placed sources in the party made no bones about the leadership's intention to confront the Samajwadi Party "head on in the context of the state". They said there might be scope for some give-and-take between the two parties outside Uttar Pradesh, based on the assumption that the Samajwadi Party, because of its concern for maintaining its secular credentials, cannot make common cause with the Opposition NDA at the national level.

Therefore, it may not be too risky a venture to take on the Samajwadis in Lucknow. And the only way the Congress could hope to revive the party would be to confront the Samajwadis, the sources added.

About the oft-raised question of withdrawing support to the Mulayam Singh government, the sources said the move would make sense only when "we are in a position to bring down the government".

"Today, we do not think such a situation exists," said a source.

Rahul puts Mulayam on notice

'If Things Don't Improve In UP, Cong Will Be Forced To Act'

By Manjari Mishra/TNN

Jagdishpur: Rahul Gandhi may be counted as the first among the babalogs in Congress, but on Tuesday he showed he wasn't kidding with politics. In his first foray into Uttar Pradesh as MP on Tuesday, he demanded that Mulayam Singh Yadav's government should be replaced as it had failed.

Gandhi said matters in UP would only improve if the Mulayam government was replaced by Congress. His harsh remarks came amidst a deepening rift between Congress and Mulayam's Samajwadi Party, and increased speculation about Congress pushing for an early election in the state by withdrawing its support to the government.

There hasn't been any official word about this, obviously because a number of things—



A MARKED MAN IN UP: Rahul Gandhi is greeted by Congress party supporters in Jagdishpur, Amethi, on Tuesday

including Congress' relationship with Mayawati—have to be sorted out before the party can take such an extreme step in conjunction with groups like Ajit Singh's RLD.

Rahul described his trip to Amethi as a thanksgiving visit, but it was a clear message to Mulayam that Lucknow had been put on watch by the new dispensation in Delhi.

He said if things didn't improve, his party would be forced to take "effective measures," but didn't elaborate on this. And even as he offered a dream package to Amethi—better power supply, more jobs and the revival of sick units which still hold some promise—he said he had serious doubts about the extent of co-operation from Mulayam's government. "Development is a state issue and we have our limitations," he said ruefully.

— The Sunday Times

Sonia's Status

Cabinet rank for Cong president will create confusion

After the sublime, the farcical. If reports are to be believed, then Sonia Gandhi, president of the Congress and chairperson of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), is soon to be granted the status of a cabinet minister, complete with all the trappings of state power, including a full-fledged secretariat in Vigyan Bhawan. Sonia, whose business it is to oversee the implementation of the UPA's common minimum programme or CMP, will be assigned a battery of babus for the purpose. Three weeks ago, when Sonia dramatically renounced her claim to the prime ministerial *gaddi*, she had made it known that she would rather devote herself to the *political* task of rejuvenating the party than play any *executive* role in the government. Her new assignment does not square with that division. But that, unfortunately, is not the only issue at stake. For starters, there is the little matter of constitutional propriety. Will Sonia's proposed secretariat work like any other ministry? Will it, in other words, be the functional equivalent, by another name, of the existing ministry for programme implementation? And if so, will it be answerable to the prime minister and the cabinet in the same way? Or will it work as an independent, larger-than-life entity — a sort of super PMO?

Let's be clear: These misgivings about Sonia are not the same as those raised by the BJP. As a citizen of this country and leader of the ruling coalition, the Congress president is eminently qualified to play whatever role she chooses. The question is whether this role is consistent with the smooth and orderly functioning of the Westminster model, where the prime minister, as the head of the government, occupies the highest political office. As it stands, Sonia's proposed role is a kind of half-way house. She is neither fully in government nor out of it, an unhappy ambiguity that is liable to create needless confusion and controversy. If Mrs Gandhi's earlier act of renunciation was motivated by a welcome concern for the future of the government and polity — given the risks of a divisive Opposition campaign on her foreign origins — the new arrangement is likely to undermine that cause. Since Manmohan Singh's elevation as prime minister, the Opposition has persistently raised the bogey of there being more than one centre of power in the new dispensation. The new proposal will lend credence to that charge. One can only hope that Sonia will recognise the absurdity of the situation and opt out of any overarching official position.

Chidambaram returns to Cong

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

59-10
b/b
CHENNAI, June 5. — Union finance minister Mr P Chidambaram today merged his Congress Jananayaka Peravai with the Congress. He had formed the CJP after breaking away from the Tamil Manila Congress in protest against its alliance with the AIADMK in the May 2001 Assembly elections.

The CJP's decision was taken at a meeting of its general council. Mr Chidambaram contested and won from Sivaganga on a Congress ticket in the Lok Sabha elections. The merger marks Mr Chidambaram's return to the Congress after a gap of eight years.

The minister had left the Congress along with GK Moopanar in 1996 when the party decided to align with the AIADMK. But when Moopanar himself took the same decision for the Tamil Manila Congress in 2001, Mr Chidambaram floated the CJP and fought the Assembly polls on the DMK symbol, winning two seats. After Moopanar's death in 2001, his son Mr GK Vasanth took over the leadership of the TMC and merged it with the Congress.



Red light for Pota, green for women's quota

New Delhi: After days of intense negotiations, the Congress-led UPA government on Thursday unveiled its political, economic and foreign policy agenda, pledging to scrap the controversial Pota legislation and disinvestiture of profit-making PSUs and promising 33 per cent reservation for women in legislatures.

The Left parties broadly endorsed the Common Minimum Programme (CMP) released by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in the presence of Congress President Sonia Gandhi and all allies, but said they had a "differing position" on a range of economic policies relating to privatisation, public distribution system and current fiscal policies.

The 24-page document said the government would introduce cess on central taxes, expand the base of tax payers, increase tax compliance and make the tax administration more efficient. Tax rates will be stable and conducive to growth, compliance and investment. Special schemes to unearth black money and assets will be launched. The CMP pegs the economic growth rate at 7-8 per cent and commits to

push reforms with a human face.

On Ayodhya, the document said it would await the court verdict but at the same time would encourage negotiations between parties to the dispute for an amicable settlement which "must, in turn, receive legal sanction".

It pledged to take immediate steps to reverse the trend of "communalisation of the education that had set in the past five years".

In the backdrop of the controversy over IIMs' fee cut effected by the ousted BJP-led government, the CMP said the government would ensure that all institutes of higher learning and professional education retain their autonomy and that nobody is denied professional education because he or she is poor.

The PM said the CMP sought to accelerate the tempo of social and economic change. "It is a starting point that highlights the main priorities, policies and programmes...it's by no means a comprehensive agenda."

In her opening remarks, Sonia Gandhi as UPA Chairperson, said the CMP reflected the mandate of the people for a strong, stable and secular government.



UPA chairperson Sonia Gandhi and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh displaying copies of the CMP to the media in New Delhi on Thursday

On defence and internal security, the CMP said the government was committed to retaining a credible nuclear programme but at the same time vowed to evolve demonstrable and verifiable confidence-building measures with its nuclear neighbours.

It said the government would pur-

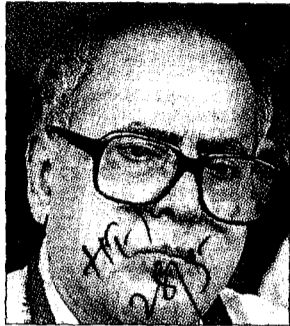
sue an independent foreign policy that would promote multipolarity in world relations and oppose all attempts at unilateralism while pursuing closer engagement and relations with the USA. It said the government was committed to deepening ties with Russia and Europe. With regard to Pakistan, it said dialogue on all issues would be pursued systematically and on a sustained basis. Referring to China, the document said India would seriously pursue talks on the border issue.

The CMP outlined the broad contours of the Union budget for 2004-05, promising stable tax rates, far-reaching tax reforms, including value added tax and wiping off of revenue deficit of the Centre by 2009 for releasing more funds for public investment in growth. The PM said the government would carry forward reforms and lay special emphasis on agriculture, infrastructure and SSI sectors with the objective of pushing employment-oriented growth. Assuring India Inc of measures to boost industrial growth, Singh said the new government would encourage FDI in infrastructure, hi-

tech sectors and exports. Agencies

► **CMP focus, Page 12**

>> INBOX



**Pranab made
leader of LS**

THE TUSSLE for the number two slot in the government appears to have been resolved with Pranab Mukherjee nominated Leader of the House in the Lok Sabha on Thursday. This effectively spells out the hierarchy in the government.

Manmohan Singh nominated Mukherjee's name and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad conveyed the decision to him through a letter. Azad also informed the Lok Sabha secretariat of the nomination. As Singh is a Rajya Sabha member, the decision to name Mukherjee as Leader of the party in the Lower House seems to have cleared the air on hierarchy.

HTC, New Delhi

NEW GOVERNMENT AGENDA PLEDGES TO REPEAL POTA, SCRAP DIVESTMENT MINISTRY

Dr Singh's heavy Left dose

Shahid Pervez in New Delhi

May 27. — The CMP of the United Progressive Alliance government, worked out by the "reforms-friendly" Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, among others, is clearly marked by a heavy dose of Left influence.

The document was today released by Dr Singh, Mrs Sonia Gandhi and other leaders of the allies.

The Congress seems to have conceded a wide swathe of the CMP ground to the Left on a range of issues, particularly economic policy, which include privatisation, disinvestment, power and labour reforms.

Downplaying the question about the Left's resounding stamp on the CMP, Dr Singh said: "The document reflects a national consensus which has been deservedly given due recognition; it has been framed in response to the felt needs of the time".

Dr Singh said his government will "normally" be against privatisation of profit-making PSUs. He also announced the scrapping of the disinvestment ministry, while declaring that a divestment department will be created under the aegis of the finance ministry.

"The UPA will retain existing navaratna companies in the public sector while (allowing) them to raise resources from



UPA leaders with the alliance's common minimum programme document at the Prime Minister's residence in New Delhi on Thursday. — AFP

the capital market", the CMP stated. Committing the government to a "strong and effective public sector", the CMP said, "all privatisation will be considered on a transparent and consultative case-by-case basis".

The CMP pledged not to curtail the workers' "right to strike". While rejecting the idea of "automatic hire and fire", it

assured at least "100 days' employment for labourers.

In yet another concession given to Left sentiments, the CMP vowed to undertake review of the power reforms legislation, Electricity Act, 2003, while making it clear that the deadline of 10 June 2004 for "unbundling and replacing" the SEBs will be extended. The Left

parties endorsed the document.

Dr Singh said farm subsidy will continue, but the government will review it to make it agriculture growth-oriented as well as fiscally responsible".

The CMP pledged one-third reservation for women in state and Central legislatures. On Ayodhya, Dr Singh echoed the CMP line that the dispute

should be resolved through a court verdict or through a "negotiated settlement bearing legal sanction". In view of Pota misuse, the government vowed to repeal it.

Overruling the Left stand, the government promised to consider the demand for a Telengana state.

More reports on page 4

Highlights

- Economic reforms with a human face, for growth, investment and employment
- Focus on the welfare of farmers, labourers, poor, minorities and marginalised people
- Selective privatisation geared to the needs of common people
- Commitment to pass the legislation to provide 33 % reservation for women in state and Central legislatures
- Pledge to repeal Pota
- Ayodhya resolution through court verdict, or through negotiated settlement with legal sanction
- Pledge to enact a law to guarantee at least 100 days of employment to casual labourers
- Pledge to raise public spending in education to 6% of GDP, 2-3% of GDP on health
- Will "de-saffronise" school syllabi and institutions, ensure autonomy for institutions of higher learning
- Pledge to take affirmative action, including reservation, in private sector for Dalits, tribals
- To enact model comprehensive law to deal with communal violence
- To consider the demand for a Telengana state
- Pledge to ensure robust public sector, strong private sector, FDI to be encouraged, economy growth target 7-8 % p.a.

Agenda agreed without antics

Sonia elected alliance chief

OUR BUREAU

New Delhi, May 26: The basic framework for the new administration to begin the job of governing was put in place tonight when the coalition and the Left that is providing support from outside agreed on a common minimum programme.

Expected to be released tomorrow, the programme was finalised at a four-hour meeting without an almighty public row erupting over contentious issues such as divestment of government shares from companies owned by it.

The Left and the Congress that leads the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) have differences over it, as they have on other issues as well, but these have not been allowed to come in the way of arriving at a broad consensus.

At the meeting, Sonia Gandhi was elected chairperson of the UPA and was authorised to appoint a convener and a spokesperson. She will also head the committee which will coordinate between the alliance and the Left.

Agreement on the agenda of governance at the very first meeting of the alliance after the swearing-in was possible because of the preparatory work done before. Today's was the sixth draft.

After the meeting at Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's house, CPM politburo member Sitaram Yechury said the partners had arrived at a "broad consensus".

"Though there may be some areas of difference, by and large we will endorse it tomorrow," Yechury said.

The Left will not sign the programme, which means it is not committing ownership, but will only "endorse" it.

One key area of contention was the public sector. The adopted programme says that generally, profit-making companies will not be privatised. All privatisation will be considered on a transparent, consultative and case-by-case basis.

So-called navratnas, that include companies like ONGC and Gail, will remain in the public sector. But these companies will be allowed to raise resources from the capital market, a euphemism for divestment.

The second draft of the programme, details of which had come out earlier, had 16 pages. Some changes could have been made to the 23-page sixth draft that was placed before the UPA meeting, but most leaders said there was a "broad consensus" on this version and the final document would more or less reflect that.

Three paragraphs have been added to the second draft on labour laws. Legislation — other than the Industrial Disputes Act — that creates an inspector raj will be re-examined and procedures harmonised and streamlined. It says rights and benefits earned by workers will not be taken away.

A major addition is a commit-

WHAT THE ALLIES WANT AND WHAT THE CONGRESS WANTS TO GIVE

LABOUR REFORMS

- **Left:** No flexibility for industry
- **Congress:** Will agree to tripartite talks involving government, management and workers

AIRPORTS & PORTS

- **Left:** Can't agree to privatisation
- **Congress:** Can't concede this in the common minimum programme

LPG & KEROSENE

- **Left:** Virtual freeze on LPG and kerosene prices
- **Congress:** Not possible beyond a point

PDS

- **Left:** Comprehensive coverage for the poor and the middle class in rural and urban areas
- **Congress:** PDS will be strengthened in relation to the poorest and backward areas in the country

WOMEN'S QUOTA

- **RJD:** Laloo Prasad parrots old line that sub-quotas for OBCs and minorities must find place
- **Congress:** Not keen. Bill should be tabled in the present form. Rest to be left to Parliament

TELENGANA

- **TRS:** The CMP must mention separate Telengana state
- **Congress:** Agreed but with riders such as "appropriate time" and "consensus"



Sonia Gandhi with Manmohan Singh during the alliance meeting. (PTI)

ment to pilot the oft-aborted bill reserving a third of the seats in the Lok Sabha and Assemblies for women.

Sonia Gandhi has always supported it — a women's delegation met her today to press for the legislation — as has the Left.

It appears alliance partner Laloo Prasad Yadav, who wanted a quota for backward classes within the women's quota, has had to fall in line.

Agreement was reached to move the bill in its present form — 33 per cent reservation.

A second addition, though not as contentious, is the nuclear issue. The agenda commits the government to a credible nuclear weapons programme. At the same time, it will evolve demonstrable and verifiable confidence-building measures with

nuclear neighbours.

Congress ally Telengana Rashtra Samiti's demand for a separate state was another fractious point where the Left, which generally opposes bifurcation, has had to compromise.

The second draft had made a

general mention of another states reorganisation committee. The final document is likely to say: "The UPA government will consider the demand for the formation of a Telengana state at an appropriate time after due consultations and consensus."

SINGH
AND
67PRIME MINISTER:
MANMOHAN SINGH

Cabinet ministers

- Finance: P. Chidambaram
- Home: Shivraj Patil
- External affairs:
K. Natwar Singh
- Defence: Pranab Mukherjee
- Railway: Laloo Prasad Yadav
- Agriculture, Food & civil
supplies, Consumer affairs &
public distribution:
Sharad Pawar
- Chemicals & fertilisers
and Steel: Ram Vilas Paswan
- Coal & mines and Minerals:
Sibu Soren
- Commerce & Industry:
Kamal Nath
- Environment & forests: A. Raja
- Health & family welfare:
Anbumani
- HRD: Arjun Singh
- Information & broadcasting
and Culture: Jaipal Reddy
- IT and Telecom:
Dayanidhi Maran
- Labour & employment:
Sis Ram Ota
- Law & justice: Hans Raj
Bhardwaj
- Parliamentary affairs and
Urban development:
Ghulam Nabi Azad
- Petroleum & natural gas and
Panchayati Raj:
Mani Shankar Aiyar
- Power: P.M. Sajeed
- Rural development:
Raghuvansh Prasad Singh
- Shipping: K. Chandrasekhar Rao
- Small-scale, Agro and Rural
Industries: Mahavir Prasad
- Social justice & empowerment:
Meira Kumar
- Sports and Youth affairs:
Sunil Dutt
- Surface transport & highways:
T.R. Baalu
- Textiles: Shankersinh Vaghela
- Tribal affairs and Development
of Northeast: P.R. Kyndiah
- Water resources: Priya Ranjan
Das Munshi

Ministers of state
(Independent charge)

- Civil aviation: Praful Patel
- Company affairs: Premchand
Gupta
- Food processing: Subodh Kant
Sahay
- Heavy Industries and Public
enterprises: Santosh
Mohan Dev
- Non-conventional energy
sources: Vilas Muttemwar
- Non-resident affairs:
Jagdish Tytler
- Science & technology and
Ocean development: Kapil Sibal
- Statistics & programme
Implementation: Oscar
Fernandes
- Tourism: Renuka Choudhury
- Urban employment and Poverty
alleviation: Kumari Selja

Ministers of state

- Home: Manik Rao Gavit
- Home: S. Regupathy
- Home: Sri Prakash Jaiswal
- External affairs: E. Ahmed
- External affairs: Rao
Indrajit Singh
- Defence and Parliamentary
affairs: B.K. Handique
- Railway: Naranbhai Rathwa

Left unions reject common
code as 'inadequate'Leaders and
labour pull
in two ways

MONOBINA GUPTA

New Delhi, May 24: Harkishen Singh Surjeet told Sonia Gandhi — at a dinner hosted by the Congress president last night — that the CPM does not have any basic objection to the draft common minimum programme, but not all sections within his party agree.

The CPM general secretary's comrades in the Centre of Indian Trade Unions do not have a single positive word to say about the draft. The labour leaders today rejected the common minimum programme as "inadequate and unacceptable" at a convention organised by the Left trade unions to celebrate the National Democratic Alliance's defeat and attended by the CITU, the CPI-backed All India Trade Union Congress and the Hind Mazdoor Sabha.

The central leadership of both the CPM and the CPI, however, believe the draft is in tune with the Left's economic and social-sector policies.

"We are suggesting changes. But there is nothing in the draft that we are fundamentally opposed to. The CMP's thrust is in line with our basic perspective," said CPI leader D. Raja — one of the four who had drawn up the common minimum programme during the 1996 United Front government.

The CPM and the CPI are sending their suggestions to the Congress before the common minimum programme is finalised.

However, Aituc general secretary Gurudas Dasgupta, who has been elected to the Lok Sabha this time, is against the draft. "The CMP is inadequate and not acceptable to us," he said.

The trade unions will work out their own charter of demands and place it before Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Some of the main demands of the unions include constituting the Sixth Pay Commission, increasing the interest rate of the Employees Provident Fund, abolishing contract labour for perennial jobs, removing the ceiling on bonus and scrapping the voluntary retirement scheme.

The trade unions also want the government to undo the Supreme Court ban on strikes by introducing a legislation in Parliament.

The pro-changers in the CPM have always found it difficult to convince the CITU to soften its position. In Bengal, the CITU opposed the new industrial policy announced by former chief minister Jyoti Basu, though its general secretary M.K. Pandhe, also a member of the party politburo, conceded that the compulsions of governance required a different strategy.

The functioning of the government will depend to a large extent on the Left accepting the common minimum programme. The CPM has said it will sign the draft only if the party agreed with it. The party has also made its joining a co-ordination committee conditional on the draft.

OLD ADDRESS, NEW OCCUPANT



Atal Bihari Vajpayee chats with Manmohan Singh who called at his 7 Race Course residence in New Delhi on Monday. The Prime Minister paid a customary visit for 20 minutes. Vajpayee will move to 8 Krishna Menon Marg soon. (AFP)

BBC-type
DD on
Jaipal
screenOUR SPECIAL
CORRESPONDENT

New Delhi, May 24: Jaipal Reddy, the new information and broadcasting minister, promised a large dose of autonomy to Prasar Bharati and hoped to bring in a full-time regulatory authority to put in place a broad framework for broadcasters.

Reddy, who took charge of the ministry today, said he wanted to implement the spirit behind the creation of the autonomous corporation. He promised to give "full functioning autonomy" to Doordarshan and All India Radio.

"It will be my sincere endeavour to augment the Prasar Bharati Act," he promised, seeking the cooperation of all political parties, including the Opposition, on sensitive issues that plague the ministry.

The articulate new minister, who will also be in charge of the ministry of culture, hoped to model the national network on the pattern of the BBC, which is known for its independent stand though funded by the British government.

The minister's admiration for BBC was apparent when he said he wanted the national media to show the same grit as the BBC did when it took on Tony Blair's government over Iraq. Reddy in his office on Monday. (PTI)



Reddy had, during his previous tenure as I&B minister, pushed for autonomy for the government media and the Prasar Bharati legislation was placed in Parliament during his earlier stint in the ministry.

The minister wondered about the autonomy promised to Prasar Bharati and the Broadcasting Authority Bill that he had introduced. "But this is not the right time to make critical or negative noises," he said.

The minister said he would want to put a regulatory authority in place as soon as possible but admitted there were a variety of opinions on the subject. "My endeavour will be to have a bipartisan consensus on all these issues," he said. He spoke of a public broadcasting authority on the lines of the Federal Communication Corporation of the US.

Reddy refused to comment on either the conditional access system or the direct-to-home system, or the problems plaguing FM radio. "We have to look at all these aspects, not with preconceived notions," he said.

Asked if the new government was thinking of sweeping out from DD News those close to the former regime, the minister said: "We are not interested in change of personnel but with change in content."



Defence minister Pranab Mukherjee in his office in Delhi. Picture by Rajesh Kumar

No night out in sub: image does not bother Pranab

SUJAN DUTTA

New Delhi, May 24: Pranab Mukherjee, 69, is seated in the room occupied by George Fernandes, 74, till last week but he has not yet occupied the chair vacated by his predecessor. To his right is the member of Parliament from Murshidabad, Adhir Choudhary, who helped in the campaign to elect him from Jangipur. His Man Friday is Bengal Congressman Pradyot Guha. The only thing remotely military in Mukherjee in his avatar as defence minister is his ability to rebuke.

"I am not concerned with image or self-projection," he cuts a questioner short.

It is difficult to visualise Mukherjee ridding himself of his crisp *kurta, dhoti and angavastram*, donning the fighter pilot's paraphernalia and flying in the MiG-21, dashing off to the wastes of the Siachen glacier in snowgear every month, flying in the Sukhoi 30 or spending a night in a submarine. All of which Fernandes was probably the only

minister and the oldest politician to do. "Image does not bother me. I am interested only in getting things done", Mukherjee adds.

Minutes ago, in his house on 13 Talkatora Road, he was accepting congratulatory messages and a small red *tilak* on his forehead is the giveaway that there was a thanksgiving to the Lord. It was past office time but he was timing his visit to his South Block office for 11.30 am. Mukherjee took the seat some time later in the excellently appointed office on the first floor that overlooks India Gate and Raisina Hill.

In the morning, Mukherjee was briefed by defence secretary Ajay Prasad and his colleagues. He is now due to meet the service chiefs. Across the street in North Block is the home ministry, which he was tipped to get and which has now gone to Shivraj Patil. But Mukherjee is all correctitude.

"There is no element of surprise (in my appointment as defence minister). It is the prerogative of the Prime Minister to constitute his/her ministry."

He is prepared for business straightaway and has marked out his priority areas. If Mukherjee is not going to fly in the MiG-21, he is not going into a Tehelka either. "Three areas I will look into are: institutional arrangements for procurement — both emergency and regular — that are transparent and clean; ensuring that the funds allocated are utilised in full because we cannot waste resources and integration of the three wings of the armed services." If there are specific corruption charges, "they will definitely have to be looked into".

It is difficult to say just yet if Mukherjee will open old cans of worms. The possibility is there, that he may want to re-examine purchases made in a hurry during and just after the 1999 Kargil war and also the issue of imported coffins.

In the short term, it is certain, however, that with the departure of the NDA government the security establishment is likely to lose its militarist edge, the tendency to think in military

terms of engagement whenever confronted with crises.

"In Jammu and Kashmir, we are aware of the issues. We will deal at different levels. Yesterday's killing shows that terrorists will not allow us to live in peace. We need to look at civilian security and also the political angle. Some of this work involves the home ministry as well," Mukherjee says.

Among the decisions pending with the ministry is the recommendation of a Group of Ministers to create the post of Chief of Defence Staff as a single point military adviser to the government and a necessary step to integrate the three armed services.

The defence minister will also study the recommendation of the recent commanders' conferences of the three services. Among the most important of these is the question of the size of India's one million-strong army. With confidence building measures with China having by now become almost institutionalised, some argue that India should trim its two-front army.

মনমোহনের মন্ত্রিসভা ১৪.৫.০০

● প্রধানমন্ত্রী : মনমোহন সিংহ
 ● পূর্ণমন্ত্রী—
 প্রতিরক্ষা: প্রণব মুখোপাধ্যায়
 বিদেশ: নটবর সিংহ
 অর্থ: পি চিদম্বরম
 স্বরাষ্ট্র: শিবরাজ পাটিল
 রেল: লালুপ্রসাদ যাদব
 মানবসম্পদ উন্নয়ন: অর্জুন সিংহ
 বাণিজ্য ও শিল্প: কমলনাথ
 সংসদীয় বিষয় ও নগরোন্নয়ন: গুলাম
 নবি আজাদ
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 তথ্যপ্রযুক্তি ও টেলিকম: দয়ানিধি মারান
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 কয়লা ও খনি: শিবু সোরেন
 ইস্পাত, রসায়ন ও সার: রামবিলাস
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 জলসম্পদ: প্রিয়রঞ্জন দাশমুঙ্গী
 পঞ্চায়তি রাজ, পেট্রোলিয়াম শিল্প:

পরিসংখ্যান ও কর্মসূচী রূপায়ণ: অঙ্কার
 ফার্নান্ডেজ
 পর্যটন: রেণুকা চৌধুরী
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 বিজ্ঞান, প্রযুক্তি ও সাংগঠনিক: কপিল
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 ● প্রতিমন্ত্রী—
 বিদেশ: ই আহমেদ
 সংসদীয় বিষয়ক ও পার্সোনেল: সুরেশ
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 স্বাস্থ্য ও পরিবার কল্যাণ: পদ্মা লক্ষ্মী
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মণিশঙ্কর আইয়ার
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 শক্তি: পি এম সঙ্গীদ
 পরিবেশ ও বন: এ রাজা
 ভূতল পরিবহন: টি আর বালু
 গ্রামোন্নয়ন: রঘুবংশ প্রসাদ সিংহ
 শ্রম ও কর্মনিযুক্তি: সিসরাম ওলা
 কৃষিশিল্প, কৃষিজ ও গ্রামীণ শিল্প: মহাবীর
 প্রসাদ
 আদিবাসী ও উত্তর-পূর্বাঞ্চলের বিকাশ:
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 বহুশিল্প: শঙ্করসিন বাঘেলা
 ক্রীড়া ও যুবকল্যাণ: সুনীল দত্ত
 সামাজিক ন্যায় ও ক্ষমতায়ন: মীরাকুমার
 জাহাজ: কে চন্দ্রশেখর রাও
 ● প্রতিমন্ত্রী (স্বাধীন দায়িত্ব)—
 বহু শিল্প ও রাষ্ট্রায়ত্ত্ব উদ্যোগ:
 সন্তোষমোহন দেব
 অনাবাসী বিষয়ক: জগদীশ টাইটলার

বিদেশ: রাও ইন্দ্রজিৎ সিংহ
 রেল: নারায়নভাই রাঠোয়া
 রসায়ন ও সার: রহমত খান
 সড়ক পরিবহন: কে এইচ মুনিয়াপ্পা
 যোজনা: এম ভি রাজশেখরন
 কৃষি, খাদ্য ও সরবরাহ: কাঙ্কিলাল ভূরিয়া
 স্বরাষ্ট্র: মানিকলাল গাভিট
 স্বরাষ্ট্র: শ্রীপ্রকাশ জয়সওয়াল
 প্রধানমন্ত্রীর দফতর: পৃথীরাজ চহান
 বহু শিল্প ও রাষ্ট্রায়ত্ত্ব উদ্যোগ:
 তসলিমুদ্দিন
 গ্রামোন্নয়ন ও সংসদীয় বিষয়ক: সূর্যকান্ত
 পাটিল
 মানবসম্পদ উন্নয়ন: মহম্মদ ফতমি
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 রেল: আর বেলু
 বাণিজ্য ও শিল্প: এস এস পালানিমিনিকম
 স্বরাষ্ট্র: এস রঘুপতি
 আইন ও বিচার: এ বেঙ্কটপতি



North India loses out to West and South ■ Significant minority representation in ministry

Congress ^{5.1} ^{29.5} grabs lion's share

SHAHID PERVEZ
STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

NEW DELHI, May 22. — Leading a coalition government for the first time ever, the Congress does not appear to have conceded much ground to its allies, as the party with 145 MPs managed to corner the lion's share of the Cabinet and ministers of state berths in the Manmohan Singh ministry.

Nearly 10 days after the poll verdict, a 68-member council of ministers headed by Dr Manmohan Singh was sworn in at Rashtrapati Bhavan's Ashoka hall this evening. There are 28 Cabinet ministers and 39 MoS, including 10 holding independent charge. The portfolios will be announced tomorrow, the Prime Minister said.

Getting down to business shortly after he was sworn in, Dr Singh tonight drove to South Block and met Cabinet secretary Mr Kamal Pande and other officials. He is scheduled to hold his first Cabinet meeting at 4 p.m. tomorrow.

In the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance ministry, southern and western India have clearly outstripped the north, particularly the Hindi heartland, on the front of regional representation

While highlighting its character of being a rainbow coalition, Dr Singh's ministry has given significant representation to minority MPs, especially Muslims.

The Congress' dismal standing in north India was reflected as only a

few party leaders were inducted from UP and Madhya Pradesh.

By securing 42 ministerial berths for its own nominees — including 18 Cabinet, eight MoS (Independent), and 16 MoS — the Congress showed that it handled the bargaining with its allies with deftness and a tough approach.

Apart from retaining the big four — home, finance, defence, and external affairs — the Congress is also set to dominate other key ministries. Except Mr Pranab Mukherjee, the other potential party nominees for key Cabinet portfolios — Mr Arjun Singh, Mr Natwar Singh, Mr Ghulam Nabi Azad and Mr Hansraj Bharadwaj — are all Rajya Sabha members. Even senior leaders Mr Shivraj Patil and Mr PM Sayeed, who lost the polls, were inducted.

These "old guards" are known for their unflinching loyalty to Mrs Sonia Gandhi, who has been instrumental in fashioning the ministry list in consultations with Dr Singh and alliance partners.

The allies, however, have not lagged behind. The DMK bagged seven portfolios, including three Cabinet berths, while the RJD got eight, including two Cabinet portfolios. The NCP got three (a Cabinet berth for Mr Pawar), the PMK and TRS two each; Mr Ram Vilas Paswan's LJP and Mr Shibu Soren's JMM got one Cabinet berth each.

Evidently, the ministry is heavily tilted in favour of four states — Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Bihar



Dr Manmohan Singh lends an ear to Mrs Sonia Gandhi after the swearing-in. — AFP

and Andhra Pradesh — which together accounts for more than half of the ministry's strength. These are the key states where the Congress had forged successful tie-ups with regional players.

Barely a few Congress leaders

from the heartland — UP, MP and Rajasthan — were inducted into the ministry. Out of its four MPs in Bihar, the Congress inducted two.

At least two Cabinet ministers, Mr Laloo Prasad Yadav (RJD) and Mr Shibu Soren (JMM), and MoS,

Mr Santosh Mohan Deb (Congress) and Mr Taslimudeen (RJD), have been under a cloud over various cases of moral turpitude.

■ More reports, photographs on pages 10 & 12

Singh's not what doctor ordered: senior Congmen

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

NEW DELHI, May 22. — Senior Congressmen, especially Mr Pranab Mukherjee and Mr Arjun Singh, are deeply unhappy with the choice of Dr Manmohan Singh as Prime Minister. Their view is that they are as qualified, if not more so, to assume the top job, even going to the extent of saying that Dr Singh is only good at "doing sums".

Mr Mukherjee is widely

tipped to assume the home portfolio. He was offered finance, but he has in the past served as the country's finance, commerce and foreign minister and was clear he would not take finance under an eminent economist.

Mr Arjun Singh is expected to get the HRD ministry, where he served under Rajiv Gandhi. Mr Mukherjee is the oldest member of the Rajya Sabha, but one of the newest members of the Lower House, having won a

BIHAR 'POWERLESS'

NEW DELHI, May 22. — As Mr Laloo Prasad Yadav, joined the Cabinet along with Mr Ram Vilas Paswan, and 10 others, darkness enveloped Bihar. A collapse of the super grid of the Power Grid Corporation at Biharsharif and technical snags at Tenughat thermal plant just about the same time Mr Yadav emerged triumphant from the swearing-in, vowing to address the problems of the common man. — SNS

(Details on page 7)

seat to the Lok Sabha for the first time, from Jangipur in West Bengal.

West Bengal Congress chief and one of Mrs Sonia Gandhi's most trusted lieu-

tenants, Mr Mukherjee decided after a fair degree of hesitancy to contest the polls. Jangipur allowed him his maiden entry to the Lok Sabha in his three-decade-long political career.

In 1977, Mr Mukherjee had first tried his luck in Lok Sabha elections, contesting from Malda, considered a safe seat for the Congress, but he lost to CPI-M's Dinesh Joardar. In 1980, he shifted to the Bolpur Lok Sabha con-

stituency, his hometown, but lost again to the CPI-M. Two successive defeats scared him away from fighting polls and earned him the epithet of being a rootless wonder in the Congress.

Mr Mukherjee, sworn in today as a Cabinet minister, has been a Rajya Sabha member ever since and is considered a major player in national politics. He is considered to be the brain behind the party's resurgence in several states.

Seeking Sonia, internationally...

21/5

Stanley Theodores in Hyderabad

May 20. — Mrs Sonia Gandhi today is being tracked by over 10,000 news sites and is among the most searched for word on the Internet. For a person who had just 30,000 websites featuring her name six months ago, which went up to 50,000 when searching *Google* increased its index recently, Mrs Gandhi's is found in 277,000 websites, and at *Yahoo!* it's 449,000 websites.

The *Washington Post* drew an interesting analogy in its lead paragraph for the story headlined — "India's Divisions Block Gandhi's Bid for Power". "Imagine a US presidential election in which the front-running incumbent was upset by the foreign-born widow of a Kennedy, and the next day Wall Street had its worst day ever. Welcome to India", it said.

Pakistani daily, *The News*, obviously influenced by the over-the-top coverage in a section of the Indian Congress-handmaiden press, commented in its editorial, "Sonia Gandhi's decision will remain unprecedented in political history for a long time. It demonstrated a high level of statesmanship and set impossible political traditions for South Asia."

The *New York Times* and the International Herald Tribune quoted veteran Marxist leader Mr Jyoti Basu about Mr Rahul Gandhi and Mrs Priyanka Vadra's concerns. "Now the children are opposing — they said we have lost our father, now we don't want to lose our mother", he was quoted in these papers. (The Gandhi children have since denied expressing any security concerns.)

Britain's, *The Guardian* wrote, "Sonia Gandhi's renunciation of the premiership when it was within her grasp

is the second shock of an Indian election which no one — herself included — had expected would put her in a position even to dream of doing so".

The *New York Times* headlined its op-ed story — "The Jewel Turns Down the Crown". It said, "The issue of foreign origin would have hobbled her in office — accusations of being 'un-Indian' and insufficiently protective of Indian interests would have haunted her and her government. There would have been no other issue. Perhaps too she wanted to clear the way for her children to succeed in politics — her son has been elected to Parliament, her daughter campaigned actively this election. Now both are as unencumbered as a Gandhi can possibly be".

London's *Independent* wrote that the real surprise is not in Mrs Gandhi declining the job, but it "must surely be that she came as

close as she did to the job". Switzerland's *Berner Zeitung* wrote that the renunciation has taken the winds of her opponents' sails and said "the Italian would go down in history as one of the few politicians who wasn't obsessed with power and who led according to their feelings".

China's *Xinhua* featured a story on why she declined the job. It said, "With this deed, Gandhi has showed to her critics that she has placed her party and the nation above any individual ambitions and positioned herself on a platform together with the country's idols. Sonia's decision is unusual in a nation that is famous for its power-ambitious politicians and has gained a lot of merits for her." It could not be ascertained whether the Chinese media were briefed by those political parties and pseudo-political organisations it claims "fraternal ties" with.

There was some regret from Italy. Rome's *Il Messaggero* said she was not enough for the nationalists. It regretted that the world's largest democracy would not be run by an Italian. It said, she was quite aware of her national sensitivities towards her origin, tried her best to be and appear as Indian as possible.

Mrs Gandhi's alleged "renunciation" was the focus of many. On this Columbia Institute's South Asian Studies associate director Mr Philip Oldenburg told *Newsweek*, "So there's an underlying reluctance (after Rajiv Gandhi's assassination). I also think she believes that her husband was not guilty of corruption, and she wanted to do everything to get his name cleared that she could. If that involved going into politics, then so be it. She was competent as leader of the Opposition, but I never got the impression that she enjoyed it".

Soniamania grips nation

TIMES NEWS NETWORK & AGENCIES

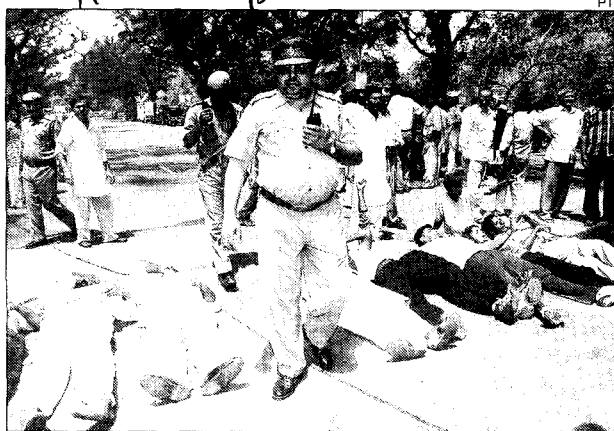
New Delhi: A day after Congress chief Sonia Gandhi announced that she would not take over as PM, the entire nation reeled under Soniamania on Wednesday. If some threatened self-immolation, others took to the streets, and still others burnt effigies of BJP leaders and brought rail and road traffic to a halt. The way of expression may have been different, but the cause was one—getting Sonia to change her mind.

Thousands of Congress workers converged outside Sonia's residence at 10, Janpath, and beseeched her to reconsider her decision. Slogans like 'east or west, Sonia is the best' and 'Sonia nahin to koi nahin' rent the air as Congressmen and women set ablaze effigies of BJP leaders Uma Bharati and Sushma Swaraj, who had threatened to launch a movement against her Sonia for her foreign origin.

Hundreds of agitated Congress workers also smashed the main gate of the media hall at the AICC headquarters where party general secretary Ambika Soni was briefing the press on the political developments. The party workers first tried to enter the media room, but on failing to do so they pelted stones and smashed window panes, disrupting the meeting and injuring a journalist. The journalist was seen bleeding profusely after being hit by broken window panes. Soni and Reddy stopped the briefing midway and left the hall through a side door.

Earlier, Congress workers attacked the crew of a private TV channel when a journalist reported that Manmohan Singh could be the next PM. "Either it's Sonia or nobody," the protesters shouted, before the police stepped in and brought the situation under control.

In Uttar Pradesh, senior party leader Siraj Mehndi resigned from the legislative council while protests were held in various parts of the state. Congress workers, who had been sitting on dharna ever since Sonia's announcement on Tuesday, broke the police barricade in the Vidhan Sabha Marg. Some of the protesters also attacked state unit president Vinay Katiyar's car, breaking its windows. The free for all between workers of the Congress and the BJP that ensued forced the police to resort to lathi charge, resulting in injuries to at least ten people, two of who are serious. While hundreds of activists were arrested in Varanasi as some tried to immolate themselves and the others disrupted train services by squatting on tracks, irate party workers stopped two trains and raised anti-BJP slogans in Amethi.



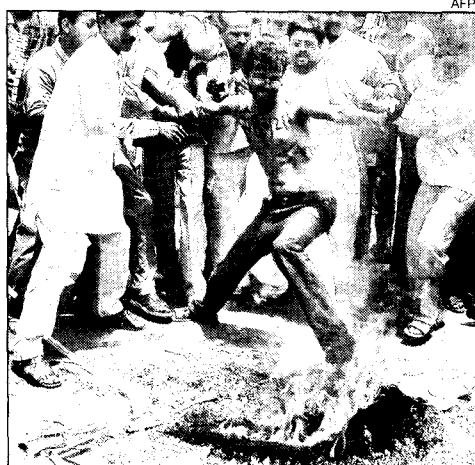
A Delhi police officer walks past Congress supporters lying on the ground near the residence of Sonia Gandhi in New Delhi



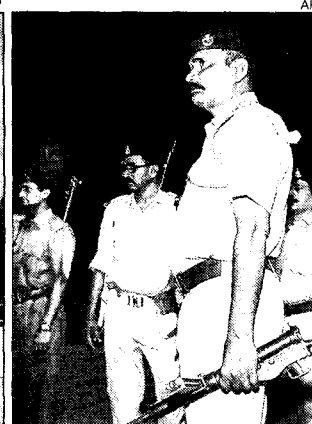
Congress members raise their hand in a show of support for the party chief in Bangalore



Kashmiri women stage a hunger strike in Srinagar



A Congress activist is restrained from setting himself on fire by fellow supporters in Patna



Policemen stand guard after clashes broke out between Congress and BJP supporters in Ahmedabad

In Jaipur, Congress workers staged a peaceful dharna at the party office demanding that Sonia change her decision and take oath as PM. They also passed a resolution saying she should respect the mandate given by the people and take up the responsibility. Former PCC chief Girija Vyas said everyone felt that by not becoming the PM Sonia had proved that she was another Gandhi who believed in serving the people without accepting any position. Fearing an attack, additional security was provided at the BJP headquarters in Jaipur.

Traffic was brought to a complete halt in parts of Pune by hundreds of Congress workers who staged a rasta roko at Balgandharva chowk. They later took out a mock funeral procession and burnt effigies of Swaraj and Bharati. Congress workers sat in the middle of the chowk for almost an hour-and-a-half, shouting slogans like 'Sonia ko PM banao, desh ko bachao,' 'Sonia Gandhi zindabad', 'No Soniaji, no central government' and 'Sonia Gandhi aage badho, hum tumhare saath hain', before they were herded into police vans.

Joining their counterparts nationwide, activists of the Goa Youth Congress held a dharna in Panaji demanding that Sonia revoke her decision. "We humbly request Sonia Gandhi to take her decision back. People have placed faith in her leadership and the Congress has emerged as the single largest party," youth Congress president Girish Chodankar said.

In Indore, a youth Congress leader made an unsuccessful bid to immolate himself to protest against Sonia's decision. Devendra Yadav was arrested before he could carry out his threat and taken into custody with his supporters. Meanwhile, in Bhopal five Congressmen were arrested for trying to hang an effigy of Madhya Pradesh chief minister Bharati near the zoo to protest her anti-Sonia stance.

In Patna too, Congressmen burnt effigies of Swaraj, Bharati and other BJP leaders and blocked the busy Ashok Raj Path to protest against their movement against Sonia. Vehicular traffic was disrupted in the area for hours as the party activists jammed the road and burnt tyres.

In Kolkata, demonstrations, rallies and meetings marked the day. A group of slogan-shouting Congress workers demonstrated in central Kolkata condemning the "heinous conspiracy of the sangh parivar" against Sonia. The protesters burnt effigies of Bharati, Swaraj and BJP leader Govindacharya. Mocking at Swaraj's threat to tansure her head if Sonia became PM, a 11-year old girl shaved off her hair.

White at Hisar in Haryana, Congress workers took out a protest march which culminated in the burning of Swaraj's effigy. 12 Congress workers were injured in Jammu following a clash with the police when they were on their way to the BJP office to protest its anti-Sonia campaign.

In Ahmedabad, mayor Aneesa Mirza announced that corporators would submit a letter to Sonia written in blood imploring her to reconsider her decision. At Hubli in Karnataka, three Congress activists doused themselves with kerosene and tried to set themselves ablaze, before the police intervened.

Security threat not a reason: Rahul

NEW DELHI, MAY 19. Security threat was not the reason for the Congress president, Sonia Gandhi, not taking up prime ministership, according to her son, Rahul. "If there was a security threat, we would have closed our mother inside a room and told her not to go out," Mr. Rahul Gandhi said adding that Ms. Gandhi moved freely during the election campaign despite security threats.

"It's (security threat) is like a cloth which we wear," the newly-elected MP from Amethi told presspersons after the Congress Parliamentary Party meeting. Asked whether he and his sister, Priyanka Vadra, had advised their mother against taking up prime ministership, he said: "I want to go into detail on this aspect." In 1998, when Ms.

Gandhi was elected the Congress president, he and his sister had told her "not to do it [join politics]. Our mother felt that the Congress was drowning and she has to pull it up. At that time there was no question of her be-

coming Prime Minister."

In the recent elections too, Mr. Rahul Gandhi said, people were speculating that the Congress would be wiped off. The results proved them wrong and threw up a chance for her to be-

Rahul rules out becoming Minister

NEW DELHI, MAY 19. Shortly after Manmohan Singh's election as the Congress Parliamentary Party leader, Rahul Gandhi, MP and son of the Congress president, Sonia Gandhi, said there would be no two power centres in the party and ruled out becoming a Minister in the new government.

"I don't think there is any question of power centres in the party. He [Singh] is my leader. There will be complete support from the party," Mr. Rahul told reporters who wanted to know whether there would be two power centres with Ms. Gandhi remaining outside. — PTI

come Prime Minister. "After the elections were over, I asked my mother whether she wants to become PM. She said no."

'Not decided about marriage' "I have not decided yet," said Mr. Rahul Gandhi said when asked about his marriage plans. "I have not decided whom to marry. I will tell you the moment I decide it," he told presspersons.

He urged a scribe not to address him 'sir'. "Another sir and you will find me in my car."

As he emerged from the CPP meeting, Mr. Rahul Gandhi was virtually mobbed by journalists. One of them asked him to throw a tea party for the scribes. "When do you want it? Tell me. These days you are also busy. OK, let it be 25th evening," he said. — PTI



‘তাঁরই পরামর্শে চলবে’

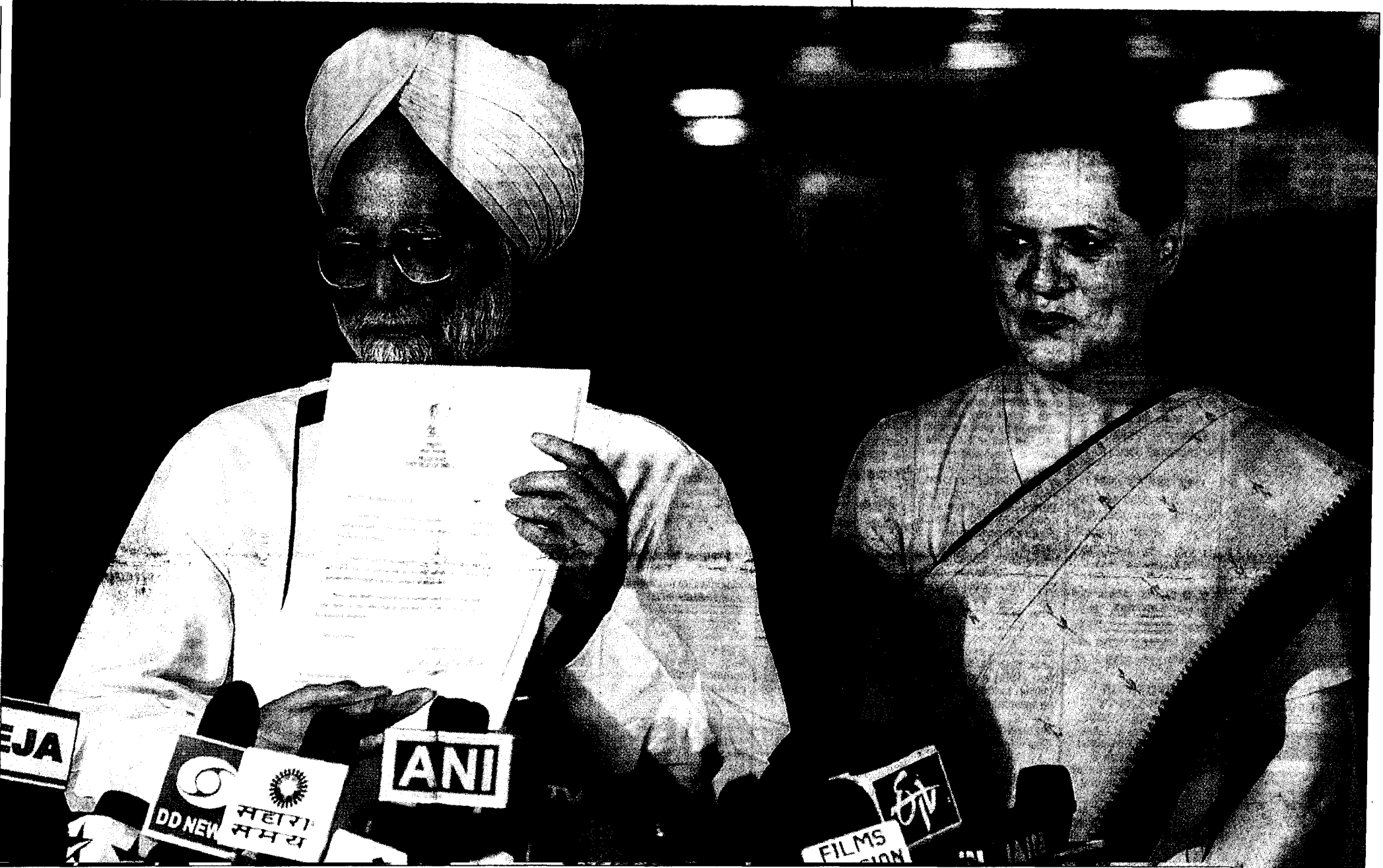
লালু-শিবুকে মন্ত্রী করতে চায় না কংগ্রেস

সুনন চট্টোপাধ্যায় • নয়াদিল্লি

ভোটের ফল জানার পরেও টানা ছদিন ধরে প্রধানমন্ত্রী কে করেন সেই টানাটানিতে মন্ত্রিসভা গঠন ও দফতর বন্টন নিয়ে কেন্দ্র আলোচনাই এতদিন শুরু হয়নি। আজ রাত থেকেই মন্ত্রিসভার দফতর বন্টন নিয়ে প্রাথমিক আলোচনা শুরু হতে চলেছে। সনিয়া গাধী নিজেও এত দিন দলের মধ্যে এ নিয়ে কথা বলেননি, শরিক দলের নেতাদের সঙ্গেও আলোচনার সূত্রপাত করেননি। এখন মনমোহন সিংহ প্রধানমন্ত্রী হবেন ঠিক হয়ে যাওয়ার পরেই রাত থেকে মন্ত্রিসভা গঠনের এই প্রক্রিয়া শুরু হচ্ছে।

কিন্তু কেন সূত্র মেনে কংগ্রেস ও তার শরিকদের মধ্যে এ বার দফতর বন্টন করা হবে? এ বার লোকসভায় কংগ্রেসের আসন ১৪৫টি, শরিক দলগুলির সম্মিলিত আসনসংখ্যা ৭২। কংগ্রেসের এক মহল থেকে সনিয়ার কাছে দফতর বন্টনের যে সূত্রটি দেওয়া হয়েছে, তাতে বলা হয়েছে লোকসভায় কংগ্রেস ও শরিকদের শক্তির আনুপাতিক হার অনুযায়ী মন্ত্রিসভার মোট দফতরের তিনভাগের দু'ভাগই কংগ্রেস নিক। বাকি এক ভাগ দফতর শরিকদলগুলির মধ্যে ভাগ করে দেওয়া হোক। অন্য ভাবে দেখলে, সরকারপক্ষের প্রতি সাড়ে তিনজন লোকসভা সদস্য পিছু একজন করে মন্ত্রী করা হোক। মন্ত্রিসভার অকার্যকর হতে পারে তার যে মাফকৃতি সূত্রটি নির্দিষ্ট করে দিয়েছে, সে অনুযায়ী মনমোহন মন্ত্রিসভায় সর্বোচ্চ ৮০ জন মন্ত্রী রাখা যেতে পারে। কিন্তু কংগ্রেস হাইকমান্ডের সামনে এখন যে প্রাথমিক প্রস্তাবটি রয়েছে, তাতে বলা হয়েছে আপাতত ৬০ জনের বেশি মন্ত্রী করার দরকার নেই। এই ৬০ জনের মধ্যে ৩০ জন করা হোক কংগ্রেস থেকে, বাকি ২৭ জন নেওয়া হোক বিভিন্ন শরিক দলের থেকে। ছোট ছোট শরিকদের, অর্থাৎ যাদের একটি বা দু'টি বেশি আসন নেই, তাদেরও খুশি করতে ৫টি প্রতিমন্ত্রীর দফতর রাখা হোক।

শরিকদের খুশি রাখার কথা মাথায় রাখলেও অন্তত ১৫টি গুরুত্বপূর্ণ মন্ত্রকের দায়িত্ব কংগ্রেস নিজের কাছেই রাখতে আগ্রহী। তার মধ্যে অর্থ, স্বরাষ্ট্র, বিদেশ, প্রতিরক্ষা, গ্রামোন্নয়ন, নগরোন্নয়ন, মানবসম্পদ উন্নয়ন, শক্তি প্রভৃতি রয়েছে। অন্য দিকে, রেল, কৃষি, বাণিজ্য, শিল্প, অসামরিক বিমানচালনা, সড়ক পরিবহন প্রভৃতি মন্ত্রক শরিকদের দিতে আগ্রহী কংগ্রেসে। কিন্তু এই সূত্র অনুযায়ীই সূত্র ভাবে শরিকদের মধ্যে দফতর বন্টন করা সম্ভব হবে কি না, তা নিয়ে এখনও রাজনৈতিক মহল নিশ্চিত নয়। তার কারণ, একজন শরিক নেতা শরণ পণ্ডার ইতিমধ্যেই প্রতিরক্ষা মন্ত্রক পেতে দাবি করে বসেছেন। আর এক প্রভাবশালী শরিক দলের নেতা লালুপ্রসাদ যাদবও রেল মন্ত্রকে আগ্রহী। করুণানিধিকে



রাষ্ট্রপতি এ পি জে আব্দুল কালামের সঙ্গে সাক্ষাতের পর রাষ্ট্রপতির পাঠানো আমন্ত্রণপত্রটি সাংবাদিকদের দেখাচ্ছেন ভারী প্রধানমন্ত্রী মনমোহন সিংহ। পাশে কংগ্রেস সভানেত্রী সনিয়া গাধী। বৃহবার সন্ধ্যায়। --- এ এক পি

মনমোহনের হাতে দেশ নিরাপদ, বললেন সনিয়া

জয়ন্ত ঘোষাল • নয়াদিল্লি

১৯ মে মনমোহন সিংহই শেষ পর্যন্ত দেশের নতুন প্রধানমন্ত্রী হতে চলেছেন। রাষ্ট্রপতির কাছ থেকে আমন্ত্রণ পাওয়ার পরেই ভারতের অর্থনৈতিক সংস্কারের জন্য মনমোহন জাতিয়ে দিয়েছেন, সামাজিক ও অর্থনৈতিক উন্নয়নকেই তিনি প্রধানমন্ত্রী হিসাবে অগ্রাধিকার দেন। তার শপথ নেওয়ার দিনক্ষণ অবশ্য এখনও চূড়ান্ত হয়নি। মনমোহন প্রধানমন্ত্রীর পদে আসতে পারেন, সেই সম্ভাবনার কথা চাউর হতেই চান। এ নিয়েও সনিয়ার বাজার শেয়ার সূচক ৫০০০ পেরিয়ে যায়।

ঘড়িতে তখন পৌনে নটা। পাশে দু'দু'ই নির্ভর দলনেত্রী সনিয়া গাধী। রাষ্ট্রপতির কাছ থেকে প্রধানমন্ত্রী হওয়ার আমন্ত্রণপত্র নিয়ে মনমোহন বললেন, “আই ফিল হাঙ্গলড।” কারণ? “দেশের মানুষ শ্রীমতী সনিয়া গাধীকেই প্রধানমন্ত্রী করার জন্য রায় দিয়েছেন...কিন্তু তিনি সেই দায়িত্ব তুলে দিলেন আমার উপরে।” সনিয়াও হাসিমুখে জাতিয়ে দিলেন, “আমি খুশি। মনমোহন সিংহের হাতে এই দেশ সম্পূর্ণ নিরাপদ থাকবে।” তার আগেই অবশ্য সন্ধ্যায় কংগ্রেস সংসদীয় দলের নেতা নির্বাচিত হয়েছেন মনমোহন, যিনি দেশের সংখ্যালঘু সম্প্রদায়ভুক্ত প্রথম প্রধানমন্ত্রী। এর আগে রাষ্ট্রপতিপদে বেশ কয়েকজন সংখ্যালঘু আসীন হয়েছেন। শিশুও ছিলেন— জ্ঞানী জৈন সিংহ। কিন্তু প্রধানমন্ত্রিপদে শিশু এই প্রথম।

কৃষিক্ষেত্রে, সামাজিক সুরক্ষায় এবং চাকরির সুযোগ সৃষ্টিতে। শিল্প মহলকেও আশ্বস্ত করতে আজ ফের মনমোহন বলেন যে, তাঁরা সুস্থ ও সবল শেয়ার বাজারের গুরুত্বও স্বীকার করেন। সনিয়ার পাশে দাঁড়িয়ে মনমোহন জানিয়েছেন, সব মিলিয়ে তাঁর সরকার রাজী গাধীর স্বপ্ন অনুসারে এমন ভারত তৈরি করবেন, যা একবিংশ শতাব্দীর উপভুক্ত।

নতুন মন্ত্রিসভার শপথ গ্রহণের দিনক্ষণ চূড়ান্ত করে সেই সিদ্ধান্ত জানাতে তিনি

আবার রাষ্ট্রপতি ভবনে যাবেন বলে জানিয়েছেন মনমোহন। শুক্রবার রাজী গাধীর মৃত্যুবর্ষিকীর দিনে সনিয়া-মনমোহন যৌথ ভাবে যাবেন শ্রীপেরমপুর।

সনিয়ার পাশে থেকে রাষ্ট্রপতি আব্দুল কালামের সঙ্গে তাঁর বৈঠক এবং রাষ্ট্রপতির কাছে থেকে ডাক পাওয়ার পরেই মনমোহন প্রথম যে কাজটি করেছেন, সেটি হল নতুন সরকারের আনুষ্ঠানিক দায়িত্ব সনিয়া গাধী না নিলেও তিনি যে তাঁর পরামর্শেই এগিয়ে, সেটা প্রকাশ্যেই

জানিয়ে দেওয়া। সংসদীয় দলের বৈঠকে তিনি বলেছিলেন, সনিয়া তাঁর ‘ফিলজফার’ ও ‘গাইড’। আর রাষ্ট্রপতি ভবনের বাইরে সাংবাদিকদের কাছে মনমোহন ঘোষণা করেন, সনিয়ার নেতৃত্বেই তিনি এগিয়ে চলবেন। কংগ্রেস সংসদীয় দলের নেতা হিসাবে মনমোহন নির্বাচিত হলেও সনিয়া হলেন সংসদীয় বোর্ডের নেত্রী। এই সিদ্ধান্তের মধ্যে দিয়ে কংগ্রেস কর্মীদের ক্ষোভ প্রশমিত করারও চেষ্টা হয়েছে। দেশের কাছে আর্থিক সংস্কারের একটি

নমুনা তিনি তুলে ধরবেন বলেও প্রথম আলাপচারিতায় আশ্বাস দিয়েছেন মনমোহন। তাঁকে প্রধানমন্ত্রী করার কাজে আজ সকাল থেকে সব চেয়ে বেশি সক্রিয় ছিলেন সনিয়া গাধী নিজে। ১০ নম্বর জনপথের সামনে উত্তাল জনতা গোট্টা দধির সনিয়াকেই চেয়েছেন নেত্রী হিসাবে। বিহারের নেতা লালুপ্রসাদ যাদব সন্ধ্যায় ঘোষণা করে দেন, সনিয়া নেত্রী না হলে তাঁর দল সরকারে যোগই দেবে না। এই ক্ষোভ-অসন্তোষ সাতা দিন ধরে সনিয়া

নিজে নিরসনের চেষ্টা করেছেন। এক দিকে, কংগ্রেস নেতাদের সঙ্গে বৈঠক করে কর্মীদের অসন্তোষ দূর করার জন্য সক্রিয় হতে বসেছেন। অন্য দিকে, একের পর এক শরিক নেতাদের সঙ্গে বৈঠক করে তিনি সরকার গড়ার পথ মসৃণ করেছেন।

কিন্তু লালুকে শান্ত করতে প্রথমে তিনি গাঠান আর কে ধনকে তার পর নিজেই যান। বহু গলে। আর তার পরেই লালু-সনিয়া সাংবাদিকদের সামনে আসেন। লালু জানান, তাঁর সারকারে সামিল হতে। ডি এম কে-কেও সরকারে সামিল করা আজ কংগ্রেস নেত্রীর বড় সাফল্য। এ ক্ষেত্রেও তিনি নিজে চলে যান করুণানিধির কাছে। সেটা আইই প্রত্যাশার ব্যাপারে আশ্বাস দেন করুণানিধিকে। এর পর করুণানিধি তাঁর জাট নিয়ে সরকারে সামিল হতে রাজি হতে বাধ্য। শরণ পণ্ডার এবং সি পি আই নেতা এ বি বর্ধনের সঙ্গে বৈঠক হয় সনিয়া। এই বৈঠকে এন সি পি-ও সরকারে যোগ দিতে রাজি হয়ে যায়। এই ভাবে একের পর এক সরকার গঠনের জটগুলি একের পর এক ছাড়ানোর কাজে সক্রিয় ছিলেন দলনেত্রী।

উত্তাল কর্মীদের অসন্তোষ সামলাতে কংগ্রেস নেতারা কাল রাতেই ইস্তফা দিয়েছিলেন দলবদ্ধ ভাবে। এই ইস্তফার ফলে গোট্টা দলকে এ বার ঢেলে সাজার সুযোগও পেলে নেত্রী। আবার আজ কংগ্রেস সংসদীয় দলের বৈঠক বসার আগেই মনমোহন সিংহকে নেতা করার বিষয়ে একটি খসড়া প্রস্তাব তৈরি করা হয়। প্রিয়রঞ্জন দাশমুন্সি এই খসড়া নিয়ে বিভিন্ন সাংসদের সঙ্গে দফায় দফায় বৈঠক করেন সাতা দিন ধরে। সন্ধ্যার আনুষ্ঠানিক বৈঠকেই আসেই সব দিক থেকে ক্ষেত্র স্তম্ভও করে ফেলা হয়। আর দু'দিন ধরে চলতে থাকা কংগ্রেস নাটকের অবসান হয় ওখন, মনমোহন সিংহকে পাশে দাঁড় করিয়ে সনিয়া যখন সাংবাদিকদের বললেন, “মনমোহন সিংহের হাতে দেশ নিরাপদ।”

‘ফ্রেড-ফিলজফার-গাইড’

তবে কংগ্রেস নেতাদের একটাই আশা, সনিয়া নিজে প্রধানমন্ত্রী না হলেও যে অন্যায়সমূহ দৃষ্টিতে আজ দলকে নিয়ন্ত্রণ করে তাঁর পছন্দের লোক মনমোহনকে রাষ্ট্রপতির কাছে হাজির করানেন, তাতে শরিকদলগুলির সঙ্গে এই সব ছোটমটি কামেলায় ক্ষেত্রেও তিনিই ত্রাণা হিসাবে অবতীর্ণ হবেন। এ ব্যাপারে মনমোহন নিজেও সনিয়ার উপরই নির্ভরশীল। আজ রাতে রাষ্ট্রপতির সঙ্গে দেখা করে বেরিয়ে এসে সনিয়ার সামনেই মনমোহন সাংবাদিকদের বলেছেন, সনিয়ার পরামর্শ ও উপদেশ নিয়েই তিনি চলবেন। কে কোন দফতর পাবেন, তার তালিকা করে ও শপথগ্রহণের দিনক্ষণ ঠিক করে তিনি আবারও রাষ্ট্রপতির কাছে যাবেন।

সনিয়া কেন নিজে না হয়ে মনমোহনকে প্রধানমন্ত্রী হতে এগিয়ে দিলেন, এই বিতর্কে পিছনে ফেলে দিয়ে এখন কংগ্রেস মহলে একটা প্রশ্নই বুরগাচ্ছে। এই মুহূর্তে সবচেয়ে বেশি গুরুত্বপূর্ণ প্রশ্ন, এ বার সনিয়ার ভূমিকা কী হবে? সনিয়া ও জোটের মধ্যে সংস্কার, সেটা এখন ইতিহাস। এখন আলোচনা একটাই, কংগ্রেস সনিয়ার ভূমিকা ঠিক কী হবে? অন্য ভাবে বললে, ‘চাঁচ ও স্টেট’-এর মধ্যে কে নিয়ন্ত্রক ভূমিকা নেবে? এক দিকে প্রধানমন্ত্রী, অন্য দিকে কংগ্রেস সভানেত্রী, কংগ্রেস রাজনীতিতে ক্ষমতার ভারকেন্দ্র কে হবেন? এমন কি হবে পারে যে, এখন থেকে কংগ্রেস ক্ষমতার দু'টি কেন্দ্র থাকবে? প্রকাশ্যে প্রধানমন্ত্রী মনমোহন, আড়ালে সনিয়া? দলে ও জোটের মধ্যে সনিয়াই কি হবেন শেষ কথা? এ সব প্রশ্নের সদৃশ্যের কারণও আছে। এ ব্যাপারে কংগ্রেস সাসন কপিলা সিংহের মন্তব্য প্রাসঙ্গিক, “নতুন সরকারের ফ্রেড, গাইড ও ফিলজফার থাকবেন সনিয়াই। কিন্তু দৈনন্দিন প্রশাসনিক কাজের ব্যাপারে অবশ্য মনমোহনই সিদ্ধান্ত নেবেন।” লক্ষণীয়, কংগ্রেসের মধ্যে ক্ষমতার দুই কেন্দ্র যাতে মাথা না তোলে, সে জন্য আজই কংগ্রেস সংসদীয় দলের সভানেত্রী হিসাবে সনিয়া গাধীকে নির্বাচিত করা হয়েছে। অর্থাৎ, সংসদেই বাইরে এ আই সি সি, এবং সংসদের ভিতরে সংসদীয় পাঠি—কংগ্রেসের এই দুই গুরুত্বপূর্ণ সংগঠনের নিয়ন্ত্রণ একজনের কাছেই রইল, নেত্রী হিসাবে একজনই রইলেন, সনিয়া গাধী।

এর আগেও বিভিন্ন সময়ে কংগ্রেস সভাপতি ও সংসদীয় দলের নেতা দু'জন আলাদা ব্যক্তি হয়েছেন। সীতারাম কেসরী কংগ্রেস সভাপতি হওয়ার পরেও সংসদীয় দলের নেতা ছিলেন শরণ পণ্ডার। তা ছাড়া সনিয়া ১৯৯৮ সালে সক্রিয় ভাবে দলের হাল ধরার আগের কয়েক বছর অনেক সময়ই দলীয় নেতারা নানা ক্ষোভের কথা জানাতে, বা দলের নেতাদের উপর চাপ তৈরি করতে তাঁর কাছে হাজির হতেন। নরসিংহ রাও প্রধানমন্ত্রী থাকাকালীন যেমন ১০ জনপথে থেকে অর্জুন সিংহ ও নারায়ণ দত্ত তিওয়ারিয়া। এখন নতুন সরকারের আমলে দলের মধ্যে বা শরিকদের সঙ্গে কামেলা বাহলে কে তার মীমাংসা করতে হস্তক্ষেপ করবেন? এ সব প্রশ্ন নিয়েই রাজধানীর রাজনৈতিক মহলে এখন জোর চর্চা চলছে।

আনুগত্য সন্দেহাতীত

আরও একটা প্রশ্ন এখন মাথা তুলতে শুরু করেছে। মনমোহন সিংহের যা মানসিকতা, তাতে তিনি প্রধানমন্ত্রী হলেও কখনও সনিয়ার ইচ্ছার গতির বাইরে কোনও ভাবেই পা ফেলাতে পারবেন না। কংগ্রেসের প্রবীণ নেতারা এই ব্যাপারে একমত যে এই ক্ষেত্রে মনমোহন একেবারে সনিয়ার ইচ্ছা ও অনুজ্ঞা মেনেই কাজ করে চলবেন। মনমোহনকে প্রধানমন্ত্রী করার কারণও এই মধ্যে নিহিত। সনিয়ার প্রতি তাঁর প্রস্তুতিও আনুগত্য নিয়েও কংগ্রেস মহলে কোনও খটকা নেই। এমনিতেও এই মুহূর্তেই নেতা কখনওই দলের মধ্যে কোনও বিতর্কে নিজেকে জড়িয়ে ফেলেননি। ১৯৯৮ থেকে ২০০৪, এই ছয় বছর কংগ্রেসের যাবতীয় গুরুত্বপূর্ণ বিষয়ে সিদ্ধান্ত নেওয়ার ক্ষেত্রে মনমোহন সবসময় সনিয়ার সবচেয়ে বিশ্বাস করেছেন। মনমোহন সিংহের দায়িত্ব পালন করছেন যে কোনও গুরুত্বপূর্ণ ক্ষেত্রে কংগ্রেসের প্রতিনিধির প্রশ্ন উঠেছে, সনিয়ার সঙ্গে সঙ্গে মনমোহনকে দেখা গিয়েছে। কংগ্রেসের সাম্প্রতিক অতীতে অবশ্য এরকমই একজন একান্ত আনুগত্য ও বিশ্বস্ত লোক খুঁজা পেয়ে পরে তাঁর নেতার বিরুদ্ধেই ঘুরে দাঁড়িয়েছিলেন। রাজী গাধী তাঁর ‘বিশ্বস্ত’ এর পর সাতের পাতায়

মনমোহন উবাচ

(রাষ্ট্রপতিভবন থেকে বেরিয়ে)

সনিয়াজি আমাকে গুরু দায়িত্ব দিয়েছেন। তাঁর পরামর্শ, তাঁর সাহায্য নিয়েই কাজ করব। জনা দেশ ছিল সনিয়া গাধীর প্রতি। দেশের মানুষ তাঁকেই প্রধানমন্ত্রীপদে চেয়েছিলেন। নয়া সরকারের নীতি, উন্নয়নে ভারসাম্য আনা, বিকাশ ঘটানো, কৃষিতে জোর, কর্মসংস্থান বৃদ্ধি। আর্থিক সংস্কার চলবে, কিন্তু তার মানবিক চেহারা থাকবে।

সনিয়া উবাচ

(সংসদীয় দলের নেতা হওয়ার পর)

আমি যদি বলি, আপনাকে ধন্যবাদ ম্যাডাম, এতে কিছুই বলা হয় না ... তাঁর মহত্ব তুলনায়... সনিয়ার বিকল্প হওয়ার কথা ভাবতেও পারি না। কেউই সনিয়ার বিকল্প হতে পারেন না।

মনমোহন সিংহের হাতে দেশ নিরাপদ থাকবে বলেই মনে করছি। এটা আনন্দের মুহূর্ত।

আমি কোথাও যাচ্ছি না। রাজনীতিতেই থাকছি। কংগ্রেসই আমার জীবন। আপনারা সবাই আমার পরিবারের অংশ। আপনাদের আশাহত হওয়ার কারণ আমি বুঝি। যখন বলছি যে, আমার সিদ্ধান্ত ফিরিয়ে নাতে পারি না, তখন আমার আবেগটাও আপনারা একটু বুঝুন।

সমস্বয়ের শ্রেষ্ঠ বাজি

তেরো বছর আগে নরসিংহ রাও তাঁহাকে যখন ভারতের অর্থমন্ত্রীর আসনে ডাকিয়া আনিয়াছিলেন, তখন মনমোহন সিংহ ছিলেন দেশের রাজনীতিতে সম্পূর্ণ নবাগত এবং বহিরাগত। তেরো বছর পরে আজ তাঁহাকে আর নবাগত বলিবার উপায় নাই। কিন্তু একটি গভীর অর্থে মনমোহন সিংহ আজও ভারতীয় রাজনীতিতে বহিরাগত। এই রাজনীতিতে ক্ষমতা দখল, ক্ষমতা সংরক্ষণ ও ক্ষমতা ব্যবহারের (প্রায়শ অপব্যবহার) যে রীতি বহুলপ্রচলিত, মনমোহন সিংহ গত তেরো বছরের 'রাজনৈতিক' জীবনে তাহা হইতে নিজেকে দূরে সরাইয়া রাখিয়াছেন। আজ, কংগ্রেসের অবিসংবাদিত নেত্রী সনিয়া গাঁধী প্রধানমন্ত্রিত্ব স্বীকার না করিবার পরে মনমোহন সিংহের অভিষেক যে কার্যত অবধারিত ছিল, তাহা যে মসৃণ ভাবেই সম্পন্ন হইয়াছে, তাহার পিছনে বড় ভূমিকা লইয়াছে তাঁহার এই 'অ-রাজনৈতিক' চরিত্র। এক দিকে সংযুক্ত প্রগতিশীল জোটের শরিক ও সমর্থক দলগুলির নিকট তাঁহার গ্রহণযোগ্যতা, অন্য দিকে বহুগোষ্ঠীর টানা পোড়েনে সমন্বিত কংগ্রেসের অন্দরে তাঁহার নির্বিবাদী ভাবমূর্তি— এই দুইটি সত্যই এ ক্ষেত্রে অত্যন্ত প্রাসঙ্গিক। তাঁহার উপর দলনেত্রীর আস্থার পিছনে যেমন এক দিকে তাঁহার দক্ষতা, তেমনই অন্য দিকে তাঁহার সর্বজনস্বীকৃত ভাবমূর্তি। মনমোহন সিংহের প্রধানমন্ত্রিত্ব এক অর্থে ক্ষুদ্র রাজনীতির পরিচিত পরিমণ্ডলে বৃহৎ রাজনীতির জয়।

সমস্বয়ের রাজনীতিরও জয়। কেবল জোট সরকারের অভ্যন্তরীণ বিভিন্ন মতের সমস্বয় নয়, কেবল বামপন্থীদের সঙ্গে কংগ্রেসের মতের সমস্বয় নয়, এই সমস্বয় আরও বড় অর্থে। এ বারের নির্বাচনে জনাদেশের প্রধান সংকেতটি সেই সমস্বয়ের দিকেই। বাজপেয়ী সরকারের আচরণ ও কর্মপদ্ধতিতে নানা ক্ষেত্রে বহু মত ও বহু পন্থের সমস্বয় সাধনের কর্তব্যটি যথাযথ অনুসৃত হয় নাই, তাহার বদলে এক ধরনের অনমনীয় ঔদ্ধত্য প্রকট হইয়াছিল। এন ডি এ-র পরাজয়ের পিছনে সেই অনমনীয়তা একটি বড় কারণ। কংগ্রেস এবং তাহার শরিক ও সমর্থক দলগুলি যে দেশ শাসনের অধিকার হাতে পাইয়াছে, তাহার সঙ্গে জড়িত রহিয়াছে এই অনমনীয়তার বৃত্ত হইতে শাসনধারাকে বাহির করিয়া আনা এবং একটি যথার্থ সমস্বয়ের পথে তাহাকে পুনঃপ্রতিষ্ঠিত করা। মনমোহন এই কাজটির পক্ষে অত্যন্ত উপযুক্ত। তাঁহার উদার ও গণতান্ত্রিক চিন্তাধারা, তাঁহার সংযত আচরণ, তাঁহার ব্যক্তিগত সততা ও শালীনতাবোধ— এই সকলই ভারতের মতো দেশের রাজনীতিতে

সমস্বয় সাধনের আবশ্যিক শর্ত। অনেক নেতাকে যে সকল সু-অভ্যাস চেষ্টা করিয়া আয়ত্ত করিতে হয় বা আয়ত্ত করিবার ভাণ করিতে হয়, সেগুলি মনমোহন সিংহের সহজাত। ইহা একবিংশ শতাব্দীর ভারতের সৌভাগ্য বইকী।

সমস্বয়ের একটি সমস্যার দিকও থাকি সম্ভব। অনমনীয়তা যেমন অনেক সময়েই দোষের, নমনীয়তাও আবার তেমনই দুর্বলতার নামান্তর হইয়া উঠিতে পারে। মনমোহন সিংহ সম্পর্কে তেমন একটি সংশয় নিতান্ত অহেতুক নহে। তিনি, এক কথায়, নরম ধাতের মানুষ। নরম ধাতের মানুষকে ভীক বলিবার কিছুমাত্র কারণ নাই, বরং অনেক সময়েই দেখা যায় যিনি আপাতদৃষ্টিতে কম হাঁকডাক করেন, কার্যক্ষেত্রে তিনিই সাহসী এবং বলিষ্ঠ সিদ্ধান্ত লইতে পারেন ও তাহাতে অটল থাকিতে পারেন। কিন্তু মনমোহন সিংহকে ইতিপূর্বে সেই সংযত সাহস ও মিতবাক বলিষ্ঠতার পরীক্ষা সে ভাবে দিতে হয় নাই, কারণ তিনি অর্থমন্ত্রী হিসাবে অত্যন্ত গুরুত্বপূর্ণ ভূমিকা পালন করিলেও তাহা করিয়াছেন প্রধানমন্ত্রী নরসিংহ রাওয়ের নেতৃত্বে, তাঁহার প্রতিনিধি হিসাবে। এ বার কিন্তু তিনিই সরকারের শীর্ষ নেতৃত্বে, এই সরকার হইবে তাঁহার সরকার, সুতরাং তাঁহার সিদ্ধান্তের দায়দায়িত্ব তাঁহাকেই বহন করিতে হইবে। তিনি আপন বাজেটে সারের উপর ভর্তুকি কমাইয়া সম্পন্ন কৃষক লবির চাপে আবার তাহা বাড়াইয়া দিতে 'বাধ্য' হইয়াছিলেন, সেই দুর্বলতার দায় সে দিন প্রধানমন্ত্রীর উপর পড়িয়াছিল। আজ কিন্তু তাঁহার উপর কোনও প্রধানমন্ত্রী থাকিবেন না, দায়ের পরম্পরা তাঁহার নিকট থামিয়া যাইবে। অবশ্যই তাঁহার পাশে বা অন্তরালে থাকিবেন দলনেত্রী সনিয়া গাঁধী, যিনি কংগ্রেস সভাপতি তো বটেই, কংগ্রেস সংসদীয় দলের নেতা হিসাবেও নির্বাচিত হইয়াছেন। কিন্তু সেই নেত্রীকে 'মাথার উপরে' রাখিয়া রাজ্যপাট চালাইতে গেলে প্রধানমন্ত্রীর সমস্যা বাড়িবে বই কমিবে না। বস্তুত, সনিয়া গাঁধীর আত্মসংযম দল ও সরকারের মধ্যে সমস্বয় সাধনের একটি উৎকৃষ্ট সুযোগ আনিয়া দিয়াছে বটে, কিন্তু তাহাই আবার শক্তির দুই 'কেস্তের' মধ্যে টানা পোড়েনের এবং তাহার ফলে দায়িত্ববিশ্রমের একটি আশঙ্কাও জারি রাখিবে। এই পরিপ্রেক্ষিতে মনমোহন সিংহ কী ভাবে জ্ঞানীয় অর্থনীতি ও রাজনীতিকে একটি যথার্থ উদার গণতন্ত্রের পথে পুনঃপ্রতিষ্ঠা করিতে পারেন, তাহাই দেখিবার। তেরো বছর আগে তিনি ছিলেন দেশবাসীর অপরিচিত। আজ অপরিচয়ের আড়াল আর নাই। নাই বলিয়াই, তাঁহার নিকট প্রত্যাশা বিপুল।

ABDICATION

EMPERORS AND KINGS HAVE DONE IT BEFORE, BUT NOT AN ELECTED LEADER

● Richard, son of Oliver Cromwell, abdicates on June 3, 1659, less than a year after his father names him his successor as Lord Protector. It paves the way for the resumption of monarchy in England.

● Napoleon Bonaparte is the only ruler to have abdicated twice. After a disastrous Russian campaign in 1812, his enemies turn on France and force him to abdicate in April 1814. He is exiled on the Mediterranean island of Elba.



PU YI

A year later, he begins an attempt to regain power, which ends in a final, crushing defeat at Waterloo and his second abdication a few days later, on June 22, 1815.

● Emperor Pu Yi of the Qing Dynasty

— portrayed in the Oscar-winner *The Last Emperor* — stepped down on February 24, 1912, as a revolution fanned by Sun Yat-Sen spread across China.

● Under tremendous pressure as revolution sweeps Russia and his wife and children are taken into custody, Czar Nicholas II abdicates in favour of his son on February 15, 1917. It is rejected and he is forced to hand over power to his brother, who renounces the duty a month later.

● After a ruinous World War I, Kaiser Wilhelm II steps down on November 28, 1918, as revolution

threatens Germany.

● In January 1929, King Amanullah of Afghanistan hands the reins of power to his brother in the face of a tribal revolt against his reforms. He flees to India and goes into exile in Italy.

● Edward VIII abdicates on December 10, 1936, in favour of his younger brother George VI, to marry the woman he loves, becoming the only British monarch to resign voluntarily. He spends the rest of his life in Paris with Wallis Simpson, an American who had married twice before.



CZAR NICHOLAS II



EDWARD VIII

MIXED BAG

Black flags for BJP duo

● COIMBATORE (PTI): Congress workers will stage black-flag demonstrations against the BJP, particularly against its chief M. Venkaiah Naidu and Sushma Swaraj if they ever visit the region, for their various remarks against party president Sonia Gandhi, a senior party leader said here on Tuesday.

Taking exception to the decision of the National Democratic Alliance to boycott Sonia's swearing-in as Prime Minister, state Congress general secretary K. Selvaraj told newsmen that Naidu should have resigned and taken "political sanyas", owning responsibility for the drubbing his party suffered in his own state of Andhra Pradesh.

Instead of indulging in unnecessary talk, BJP leaders like Naidu, Swaraj and Uma Bharti should think of working for the welfare of the people, Selvaraj said.

PUJA FOR PARTY



A girl with a portrait of Sonia Gandhi at a good-luck prayer in Mumbai. (AFP)

Immolation bid

● BHOPAL (PTI): Protesting against Sonia Gandhi becoming Prime Minister, the Shiv Sena's Madhya Pradesh general secretary, Pramod Chug, tried to immolate himself but was prevented by police on time.

Chug poured kerosene on his body near a statue of Jawaharlal Nehru, facing the state Congress headquarters, around noon and was about to set himself on fire when policemen present on the spot caught hold of him.

About a dozen of his associates were present when the Sena leader arrived at Roshanpura crossing in a jeep.

Chug, who was whisked away by the police, said he and his supporters would continue to oppose Sonia as Prime Minister as "it involves the national self-respect of every Indian".

He, however, replied in the negative when asked whether he would again attempt self-immolation.

Victory yagna

● Mumbai (PTI): Youth Congress workers in the city performed a *vijay yagna* to celebrate the success of the Congress in the Lok Sabha elections under the leadership of Sonia Gandhi.

The *yagna* by religious leaders of all faiths was performed also to seek the blessings of the almighty to "enable Sonia to perform her role as Prime Minister of the nation and make it the most developed nation in the world".

KAY BENEDICT

New Delhi, May 18: The BJP camp saw high drama today in the hours preceding Congress chief Sonia Gandhi's decision to relinquish her claim to the prime ministership.

Stepping up the foreign-origin offensive, Madhya Pradesh chief minister Uma Bharti tendered her "resignation" to BJP chief M. Venkaiah Naidu and senior leader Sushma Swaraj called on the President to urge him against inviting Sonia to form the new government.

Uma in her letter said "installing" a "foreign person" in the top post was an "insult" to

national insult," she said. Similar agitations by other BJP leaders such as Sushma Swaraj would finally converge into one, Bharti added.

Swaraj met A.P.J. Abdul Kalam for 30 minutes and said she expressed her "pain and anguish" but did not divulge details. She had yesterday threatened to shave her head, wear white clothes, sleep on the floor and eat only roasted gram like a mendicant if Sonia became Prime Minister.

A Rashtrapati Bhavan press release said Swaraj told the President she felt Sonia should not become Prime Minister because of her foreign origin.

The release added that a delegation of the "Rashtriya Swabhiman Andolan" led by former BJP ideologue K.N. Govindacharya also met Kalam and gave a representation pleading that Sonia not be sworn in to the top post. "The President simply heard them," the release said.

Swaraj dismissed the suggestion that the BJP was not with her in her move. "I cannot withstand crowning a foreigner as PM of my country," she said.

Several individuals and organisations opposed to Sonia's candidature would coordinate their efforts and, if need be, "we can start a countrywide protest", she added.

If the BJP drama was not enough, an enraged Congress camp tried to storm the BJP office at 11 Ashoka Road, minutes after Sonia announced her decision in a televised address.

Timely intervention by riot police prevented a clash as the Congress workers tried to gate-crash, shouting slogans against Swaraj, Bharti and Govindacharya. The BJP, after an emergency NDA meeting late this evening at Atal Bihari Vajpayee's house, charged the Congress with resorting to "cheap tactics".

"(The) Congress should find solutions to its internal problem on its own and not hold demonstrations outside offices of other political parties and trigger violence. This is an attempt to create tension and we condemn it," BJP spokesman Arun Jaitley said.

After the stock-taking meeting, NDA convener George Fernandes said the alliance could lift the swearing-in boycott if Sonia is not a claimant to the Prime Minister's post.

BJP's last foreign cry

WHAT A CLOSE SHAVE, SUSHMAJI!

I cannot withstand crowning a foreigner as the Prime Minister of my country. We cannot stand and address her as Madam Prime Minister

I will shave my head, wear white, sleep on the floor and make gram and water my staple diet. I will not let hair grow as long as she is Prime Minister



Sushma is only doing a political stunt to come one up against Pramod Mahajan and Arun Jaitley, who had sidelined her during the election

the country and would compromise national security.

"Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani, besides Naidu, are aware of my decision." She said she would fax her resignation to the governor after visiting Kedarnath.

Sources said Uma has written to the state chief secretary seeking a week's leave and handed charge to urban development minister Babu Lal Gaur.

Hours before Sonia went public with her decision, Uma had said she would launch a nationwide agitation against foreigners occupying high posts from Jalianwala Bagh and end it at August Kranti Maidan in Mumbai. "I appeal to the people of the country to stand up against the

Modi beams after refusal

BASANT RAWAT

Ahmedabad, May 18: As news of Congress president Sonia Gandhi opting not to take up the country's top job was being flashed on a TV channel, Narendra Modi heaved a sigh of relief and smiled.

This was probably the first time after the BJP's disastrous election performance in Gujarat was declared that the chief minister was smiling.

And there was good reason for it.

Nothing would have been more embarrassing for Modi than interacting with Sonia had she become the Prime Minister since it was he who had launched a sustained campaign against her foreign origin and ridiculed her aspirations to become the political head of the country.

His controversial Gaurav Yatra, which started from Phagvel in Kheda district of Gujarat in September 2002, was essentially directed against the Congress president who was slammed as "Italy ki beti". Congress supporters were described as people wearing "Italian glasses" who could not see reality.

The Sonia-bashing continued throughout the Assembly elections in December 2002, which the BJP won, and into the general elections where it performed miserably.

While the Congress doubled its tally, the BJP lost six seats from its 1999 tally, managing to retain only 14 of the 26 seats.

Modi's description of the Congress chief, in a rally that was part of the deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani's Bharat Uday Yatra in north Gujarat, as someone "who was not even competent to become a clerk" provoked objections even within the BJP.

With Sonia refusing to become the Prime Minister, a large section of BJP leaders felt Modi's power as a "star campaigner" had somewhat eroded.

But it has also removed the black clouds hovering over Modi's political future. Analysts feel there is no immediate threat to his career now that Sonia has ended her chances of becoming the Prime Minister.

State Congress vice-president Hansmukh Patel, however, maintained that irrespective of who became the Prime Minister, Modi's political career as Gujarat's chief minister was over.

"It is a matter of time. He will have to go. If the BJP's central leadership does not replace him, the central government will sack him," he said.

Analysts, however, disagree. According to them, the anti-Sonia campaign was launched by the second rung of the BJP leadership. With the campaign succeeding in stopping Sonia from becoming the Prime Minister, the second rung of the party is likely to assume a more assertive and powerful role from now on and also steer the course of the BJP.

The implication of this development for Gujarat is that Modi and his group becomes more powerful and those who are not happy with his functioning are likely to keep quiet.

'Sinister' ploy in BJP Big Two silence

OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT AND PTI

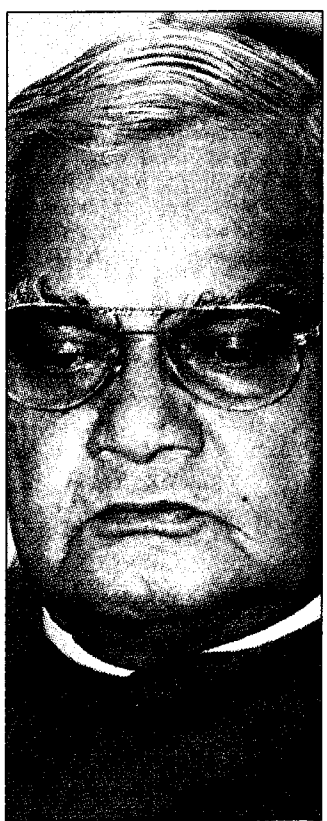
New Delhi, May 18: Senior CPM MP Somnath Chatterjee has attacked A.B. Vajpayee and L.K. Advani for their continued "silence" on their party colleagues' "sinister attempts" to stall Sonia Gandhi's appointment as Prime Minister.

Chatterjee, who is tipped to become Speaker in the new Lok Sabha, said at a news conference here today that the campaign launched by the Sangh Parivar against the Congress chief was aimed at invalidating Verdict 2004. The MP said "there is a campaign of vilification" afoot, adding that "despicable" attempts were being made to "overrule the verdict of the people".

He said voters had rejected the NDA and opted for a Congress-led coalition, but "there is a sinister attempt to stall the appointment of Prime Minister".

The CPM leader said an "attempt is being made to nullify the popular verdict" and questioned Vajpayee and Advani's "silence".

"Where are the norms and etiquette of parliamentary democracy Atal Bihari Vajpayee was so fond of recalling? His colleagues are launching an all-



Advani, Vajpayee: Keeping mum

out attack on parliamentary democracy - on the verdict of the people. And the Prime Minister is keeping silent," Chatter-

jee said. "He is in fact encouraging the campaign. This is cultural fanaticism," the veteran CPM

leader added. Chatterjee said the attempts to pressure Sonia into stepping aside was a "sinister attempt on part of (the) BJP and its leaders including (outgoing) Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and (outgoing) deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani and some market manipulators".

"I do not know what is happening. It is a war against the people's verdict," he added.

The CPM leader wondered where Vajpayee and Advani had "vanished". "They are in complete hibernation. Does it mean that they support the move of certain fundamental elements?" he said. Pressing further, he asked: "...Why are they maintaining silence as threats are being issued by so-called religious and cultural protectors of the country?"

Referring obliquely to Govindacharya and Sushma Swaraj's pledge to unleash a movement over Sonia's foreign origin, Chatterjee said: "Somebody (Govindacharya) has suddenly come out of hibernation. And let me tell you we do not mind anybody sacrificing her hair."

Sushma had said she would shave her head and wear white to "mourn" Sonia's becoming Prime Minister. The veteran rarely uses

such strong language either in or outside Parliament. But today he was on an all-out offensive against the entire BJP leadership. "We would like to know where do Vajpayee and Advani stand on the issue. Why are they silent? Do they support the campaign?" he demanded.

Chatterjee said he thought one of the reasons Sonia had declined the Prime Ministership was because her children Rahul and Priyanka fear for her safety. But other Left leaders say the only reason she has opted out is that she does not want to give the BJP a handle for launching a campaign over her foreign origin.

The MP maintains that it is for the Congress to decide who should be its Prime Ministerial candidate.

Referring to Sonia's reluctance to become Prime Minister, Samajwadi Party leader Shah Siddiqui said it was an internal Congress matter.

"But we were correct when we had extended support to Congress and not to Sonia Gandhi," he added. BJP leader Govindacharya said if Sonia had indeed stepped out of the race, the whole country would be relieved and it meant better wisdom had prevailed on her.



I do not know what is happening. It is a war against the people's verdict... Where are the norms of behaviour and etiquette portrayed by Vajpayee?... Where is Advani?... Have they gone into hibernation?

Somnath Chatterjee



With Rahul and Priyanka in Bhutan



Watching the 1962 Asian Games with Indra Gandhi



Paying tribute to Indira Gandhi in 1989

Authority above power

SUMIT MITRA

Abdication, Italian style. Thrice did the citizens of Rome invite Julius Caesar to wear the crown, and thrice he refused. Aeons later, in Delhi's sizzling summer, Sonia Maino Gandhi has turned down the request of the majority of members elected to the 14th Lok Sabha to accept the Prime Minister's mantle.

If Caesar declined kingship to become the republican leader, Sonia's refusal is perhaps the product of a lot more complex web of issues. At one level, it may be the realpolitik of an exceptionally high order. But it is also the imprimatur of a deep ethical conscience.

"I listened to my inner voice," she said at the Congress parliamentary party meeting on Tuesday, "and it was against accepting the post". The words had the

tion that sweeps through the capital is: how true is the reason that Sonia has given for her refusal?

The question haunts the political class like a searing gust of the summer wind. Could it be that she was conscious all along of the deeply embedded cultural incompatibility between India and an alien Prime Minister, even if she were democratically elected?

Is it possible that the two assassinations in her family had left her ravaged within, and politics to her had become more a call of duty to her family honour than the Holy Grail of power?

Was it in response to some stern security warning about her and her two children, their threat levels recently upgraded by the Sangh parivar's fierce campaign to stall her appointment?

It is an undeniable fact that outgoing Prime Minister A.B.



After Rajiv Gandhi's death

"I fought like a tigress — for him, for us and our children, for the life we had made together, his flying which he loved.... I was angry and resentful towards a system which, as I saw it, demanded him as a sacrificial lamb. It would crush and destroy him — of that I was absolutely certain"

resonance of revelation. They took wing and flew to the roof of the Central Hall of Parliament, adorned by the portraits of great leaders, and made many of them look small, even if it was for a moment.

Mahatma Gandhi, the ultimate icon of sacrifice, was of course the exception. If he did not accept even the ordinary membership of the Congress, it is because he never faced the temptation of power; his mission ending with Independence.

But Sonia pushed the bejewelled trophy of power away after winning what is arguably the hardest ever electoral battle. Against an enemy that overwhelmingly outnumbered her in men, power and resources.

In the span of a single day, from Monday when she told her aides that she'd not be the Prime Minister, and her formal announcement of the decision at the CPP meeting, she made over her image from a canny politician to a statesman with an unparalleled moral authority. "Sonia is now a real Gandhi," a television anchor screamed in a moment of excitement.

While a crestfallen Congress braces to accept Manmohan Singh as her choice, and the BJP keeps its fingers crossed for a possible tidal wave of public anger for spearheading a hate campaign against her, the ques-

Vajpayee's studied silence in the past few days on his party activists' virulent campaign had left her worried, puzzled and saddened. During the campaign, Vajpayee said that his party would reopen the debate over the propriety of constitutional posts being claimed by persons of foreign origin.

But starting a debate is one thing and unleashing an emotional campaign even before her being sworn in is another. By his silence, Vajpayee eloquently stated the agenda of the NDA in the next Parliament: to bring its roof down on Sonia's foreign origin. Her personal and political worries obviously grew by the hour, driving her even more closely into the close family huddle of children and son-in-law, and finally propelling her to give it up.

The inadequacy of this explanation is that it presents her as yet another calculating politician who'd duck under some high-sounding excuse if the road ahead seems too full of danger. It is out of her character. In 1999, when Sharad Pawar and Purno Sangma humiliated her for being a foreigner with prime ministerial ambition, after having drawn up an elaborate plan to split the Congress and lead the breakaway group to the BJP, she experienced her first dilemma of her political career.

She quit the party rightaway,



and wrote a letter of resignation that had a ring similar to her CPP speech of Tuesday. It read: "I came into the service of the party not for a position or power but because the party faced a challenge to its very existence and I could not stand idly by."

The party rallied behind her and sat in on Akbar Road her days until she withdrew her resignation. But the letter had already defined her space in the political life of the country of domicile by marriage. It is limit-

ed to reviving the party.

When power was offered to her on a platter in 1991, after Rajiv's assassination, with party workers shouting "Sonia lao, desh bachao" at her door, she bolted it firmly after issuing a terse statement which said: "The tragedy that has befallen me and my children does not make it possible for me to accept the presidency of the Congress."

It took her seven years to cross the first step and assume leadership of the party. But

shunning "position or power" was a solemn covenant. It came back to her like a warning sign, encoded as the "inner voice".

The strength of her consequent moral authority is certain to unravel in the future. It is true that India's evolving democracy ends the office of the Prime Minister with more power than what the framers of the Constitution could foresee. With party offices reduced to rubber stamp from as early as the days of Jawahar Lal Nehru, and the cabinet

system generally ineffective, the Prime Minister wields almost sovereign power.

In her long years as a member of the first family, in power or out of it, Sonia has seen how quickly can reputations crumble when power comes unfettered. Indira Gandhi's "massive mandate" took just a few years to become a dictator's ignoble crown. Rajiv, the new hope of the nation, lost power in five years amid howls of execration for corruption charges. P.V. Narasimha

Rao, the scholarly reformer of 1991, was a pathetic caricature of his former self when he was voted out in 1996.

By abdicating prime ministership yet holding on to her post as Congress president, Sonia can put South Block under a new set of checks and balances. Rather than being an alternative centre of power, 10 Janpath can emerge as a moral custodian looming over the maze of power corridors. It can avoid being if it wishes. It can rule from above instead

of ruling by remote control, like the RSS bosses of Nagpur or the power hungry Balasaheb Thackeray of Mumbai.

The capital's long evening of moral turbulence and public cynophancy ended when Priyanka, Sonia's daughter, declared that it was never her mother's desire to accept the prime minister's chair. Son Rahul said he'd asked mama on the phone during the campaigning if she really intended to be the Prime Minister, and she had said no. The question that remains to be answered is, could the BJP get the drubbing it got if Manmohan Singh had been projected as Vajpayee's rival, or Pranab Mukherjee, or Arjun Singh? Certainly not.

If the inner voice had been speaking to her in the past, too, she kept it close to herself and family members, resorting to the public ambivalence for which Renaissance Italy is famous. The vanquished, BJP, feels it has been cheated. The Congress, the victor, realises it has been led past the winning post by a person who'll rule from her seclusion. The nation feels it has to live with a concept of power sharing that is foreign, literally.



At the Great Wall of China with Rajiv Gandhi in 1988

"Wherever I go, wherever I have been... I have never ever been made to feel like I am not like everyone else, so it doesn't hurt at all"

Sonia Gandhi reacting to the BJP's foreign origin campaign



Voting in 1991 before Rajiv Gandhi left for Sriperumbudur

Secret that salvaged unity

Clock strikes nine and new script unfolds

RASHEED KIDWAI AND K. SUBRAHMANYA

New Delhi, May 18: Daughter Priyanka today said Sonia Gandhi never wanted to be the Prime Minister.

Son Rahul endorsed her saying during the campaign, he had called his mother from Amethi to ask if she would be the Prime Minister. "No," she had said, pointing out that her sole aim was to drive out "communal forces".

Rahul and Priyanka said they would be "surprised" if Sonia reconsiders her decision in view of the Congress parliamentary party's insistence.

Last night, when the parliamentary party was told that Sonia would stake claim on Tuesday, it learnt a half-truth.

But what could be the rationale of projecting Sonia as the Prime Minister for the past three

days and keeping her rejection a secret? Sources close to Sonia have an answer. The secrecy and her primacy were required to bring about unity in the Congress and its allies.

Having achieved the twin tasks, Sonia moved on to her original plan — to shun power and ensure smooth succession. Had she announced the decision on May 13, the fragile unity of what is now called the United Progressive Alliance, packed with ambitious leaders and whimsical allies, perhaps could not have been achieved.

Sonia remained reluctant throughout and announced her decision this morning after a round of consultations with her children and two apolitical friends.

Sources said the decision was not influenced by any of them. The children and family friends backed Sonia's stand respecting her strong sentiments.

Congress sources said Rahul and Priyanka did initially try to influence her pointing at work-

ers' sentiments but gave in. Yesterday, when the allies were sounded, there was a strong reaction. At the end of the day, Manmohan Singh and Pranab Mukherjee dubbed speculation over her reluctance "rumours" but they did not stress that Sonia would be the Prime Minister.

Today, both of them clarified that the media and Congress MPs had presumed that she would stake claim when told Sonia would meet President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam at 9 am.

The clock struck 9 and ticked past but there was no sign of Sonia at Rashtrapati Bhavan. She called senior party leaders to tell she would not be accepting the post and then took Manmohan Singh to Kalam.

Pleasantries were followed by some business. When a smiling Kalam asked her to produce the letters of support, she asked for a day.

A day to obtain a fresh set of letters from allies who had pledged support specifically to a new government "under Sonia Gandhi's leadership".

Back at 10 Janpath, she assigned senior leaders — Manmohan Singh, Pranab Mukherjee, Ahmed Patel and Ghulam Nabi Azad among them — to personally visit the alliance leaders and explain her point of view.

The leaders were told to convey her decision so that the allies could issue letters of support in favour of a "Congress-led alliance". Most of the allies were surprised and some dismayed but in keeping with Sonia's wishes, obliged.

Mukherjee went to Sharad Pawar's house and soon the news was out. AICC functionaries busy having their fill at various Delhi restaurants left in a hurry when their mobile phones began ringing. Many did not believe but Sonia had indeed declined.

The doors to 10 Janpath were firmly shut even for those who had a reasonably good access.

Ahmed Patel and Ambika Soni admitted in hushed voices that their "worst fears" were true.

Sonia summoned two of her trusted writers and began drafting a speech that was later delivered in the Central Hall of Parliament.

Overwhelmed and at times emotional, the seasoned word-smiths took short breaks when at work. Sonia provided inputs, articulating that she wanted to convey to party leaders that no matter how her critics had dubbed her power hungry and "foreigner," she was more Indian than many Indians. Her act had a message for cynics that politics was not about hankering for power and occupying office.

AFTER THE TEMPEST, TEARS



A misty-eyed Sonia Gandhi after her speech to Congress MPs in the Central Hall of Parliament on Tuesday. (Reuters)

Madam over Punjab da puttari

GAJINDER SINGH

Chandigarh, May 18: Shocked at Sonia Gandhi's decision not to be Prime Minister, Punjab today reacted cautiously to news of Manmohan Singh's likely elevation to the top post.

"There are lakhs in Punjab who want to see Sonia visit the Golden Temple as PM. Nothing will be more tragic if she does not become PM," said industrialist Baljit Singh of Mohali, a die-hard Akali supporter.

"As far as Manmohan Singh is concerned, can a non-Brahmin become PM of India? If he does, new history will be written," he said.

Punjab's acceptance of Sonia as Prime Minister was evident even in the run-up to the polls. At her rallies in Pathankot and Phagwara, long-time supporters, mostly Sikhs, had cried: "Desh ki agli pradhan mantri Sonia Gandhi zindabad."

The foreign-origin issue had no takers in the state, except among the BJP and some leaders of the Shiromani Akali Dal. Even Akali chief Parkash Singh Badal had said he had no objection to Sonia as Prime Minister though he later denied it under pressure from the BJP, party sources said.

The Congress's poor performance in the Lok Sabha polls clearly had nothing to do with the origin issue. "The Congress lost in Punjab because of the anti-people policies pursued by the Amarinder Singh government and not Sonia's origins," said an Akali leader who refused to be named.

Blaming the Congress for Operation Blue Star and the 1984 pogrom against Sikhs, the leader said still "she (Sonia) should have been given a chance".

"She apologised to the people for the past mistakes of the Congress. She touched the right chord even among Akali supporters... She could be a boon for the nation as PM."

While welcoming Manmohan's likely elevation, the Akali leader said: "We must remember that he gave nothing to Punjab when he was finance minister and a Congress government was in the state."

The Akali Dal, however, had no official reaction to offer on the news regarding Manmohan. "We will give a statement only after he is appointed. It could be somebody else also," party secretary Daljit Singh Cheema said.

Punjab University student Satbir Mann was, more or less, as cautious. "If Manmohan steps in, it will be only for some time. But I expect he, too, will do the country proud."

Mann was all for Sonia, whose decision he termed "catastrophic". "I have heard dozens of politicians say they are prepared to do anything for the country. But here is one whose only interest has been to put her party back on the rails and not seek power when it is hers for the asking.... Perhaps she will be PM next time."

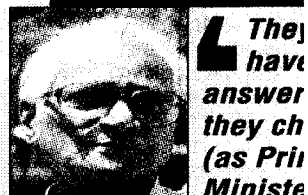
Farmers gathered outside the state secretariat for various official purposes also appeared to prefer Sonia over Manmohan.

"Jo hoye hai oh galt hai. Oh te Hindustan di maharani hai (What's happening is wrong. She is the queen of India). We can never side with the Congress. But we have always liked Sonia," one of the farmers said. "Manmohan di gal hor hai. Oh Congress nai. Apne kam naal matlab rakhdia hai (As for Manmohan, he is not a Congressman. He is only interested in his work)," he added.

The remark is a reflection of the general sentiment among Sikhs, many of whom believe a Sikh Prime Minister would deliberately ignore the genuine needs of the state's farmers for fear of inviting charges of favouritism.

Deputy chief minister Rajinder Kaur Bhattal, who was among the first state Congress leaders to reach Delhi after Sonia's decision, said: "It is an unfortunate development."

"She would have been an asset to the country as she would have gone around solving things from a different angle, quite alien to the ones we are used to in the country.... It will be a national tragedy if she continues to refuse to be PM," Bhattal said.



They have answer they ch (as Priyanka Ministe
fickle-minded person has changed her view four times. How will country be run if she becomes the Prime Minister?

George Fernandez

Mass hysteria, utter chaos and sneaking admiration

RASHEED KIDWAI

New Delhi, May 18: Some called her the "real Gandhi", others chose to play up her "Christian" faith.

Sonia Gandhi's decision to step out of the race for prime ministership may have disappointed most Congress MPs but privately they all confessed a sneaking admiration for her.

The news of her reluctance to head the new government spread fast, creating mass hysteria, chaos and confusion. For two hours, no one knew why the Congress chief had opted out.

Party workers who gathered in large numbers outside her 10 Janpath residence and the 24 Akbar Road Congress headquarters believed Sonia would be persuaded not to withdraw. But when they saw the dejected faces of Ahmed Patel, Kamal Nath, Mohsina Kidwai and Ambika Soni, they realised something was amiss.

The crowd spontaneously began to raise slogans, but the cheerleaders were missing.

Worse was to follow. A Delhi police truck came to pick the most vocal workers. They were virtually lifted onto the bus and off-loaded at Tilak Marg, 1.5 km away. Among the pale-faced party functionaries was a shocked Nadeem Ahmad, Uttar Pradesh Youth Congress chief and a close



A supporter on a tree in Delhi on Tuesday. (Reuters)

associate of Priyanka Gandhi. Nadeem could only manage a "yeh kya ho raha hai"? It was learnt that the instructions to clear the crowd came from 10 Janpath.

But more drama was to follow. Gangacharan Rajput, a prominent backward caste leader from Hamirpur, Uttar Pradesh, stood atop a vehicle pointing a pistol to his forehead and holding a sword in the other hand. He threatened to commit suicide, adding in a charged voice: "Soniaji must accept prime ministership, or else... I will commit suicide."

Tempers were clearly running high as one of the placards flashed for the benefit of television channels read: "Sonia ya atamdah (Sonia or suicide)". A group of 20 Mahila Congress workers pricked their index fingers to write letters with blood urging Sonia not to change her mind.

There were reports of similar scenes on the streets of Hyderabad, Bhopal, Mumbai and Rae Bareilly. In Mumbai, some overzealous party workers organised yagnas complete with chanting of Vedic mantras in front of a Sonia portrait kept alongside religious idols.

Congress functionaries in Bhopal shouted slogans against Madhya Pradesh chief minister Uma Bharti, her Gujarat counterpart Narendra Modi and BJP chief M. Venkaiah Naidu and burnt their effigies.

The more sober elements kept themselves busy discussing Sonia's decision. Somebody recalled that Bertrand Russell had reacted to news of Mahatma Gandhi's assassination by saying future generations would wonder if such a man was born in flesh and blood. Congress workers said the Mahatma's sacrifice was justified as Jawaharlal Nehru was waiting in the wings. "But Soniaji must realise that we do not have a Nehru in the party," a Bihar leader said.



Congress supporters try to break a police barrier in front of Sonia's residence in Delhi on Tuesday. (AFP)

Turncoats fail at the hustings

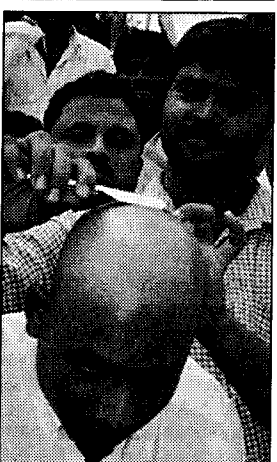
● **PATNA (PTI):** The Lok Sabha polls are a lesson to the "migratory birds" who failed to make their way to Parliament.

Barring BJP's Sukhdeo Paswan and Uday Singh and Devendra Prasad Yadav (RJD), prominent political turncoats had to bite the dust. Three-time chief minister of Bihar Jagannath Mishra, whose career seemed doomed following his implication in the fodder scam along with Laloo Prasad Yadav, had to eat humble pie. Mishra, who saw his time ticking away in the NCP, sent feelers to the BJP and the JDU with the latter lapping him up to contest from Jhunjharpur. Mishra lost to Devendra Yadav, a four-time MP who joined the RJD weeks before the election.

Women MPs

● **NEW DELHI (PTI):** Even as a consensus was being evolved on increasing women's participation in Parliament, only 44 women have been elected to the 14th Lok Sabha, four less than the 1999 elections. According to official statistics released on Tuesday, Uttar Pradesh led the states in the number of women contestants as well as winners. The state, with 80 Lok Sabha seats, had 61 women candidates, seven of whom won. Goa, with two Lok Sabha seats, had one woman among the 16 contestants.

TONSURE PROTEST



A man in Hubli shaves his head in protest against Sonia Gandhi becoming Prime Minister. (PTI)

Chhapra cops

● **PATNA (PTI):** The Election Commission on Tuesday ordered the transfer of the deputy inspector general and the superintendent of police of Chhapra, where Lok Sabha polls were countermanded following allegations of rigging by RJD president Laloo Prasad Yadav's supporters. DIG (Saran range) Ganesh Prasad Yadav and Saran SP Ganesh Kumar have been shifted, police said. Chhapra constituency is part of Saran district. The replacements have not been announced.

Review meet

● **GANDHINAGAR (PTI):** Senior Gujarat BJP leaders met at the official residence of chief minister Narendra Modi here on Tuesday to take stock of the party's poll performance in the state. BJP national treasurer Ramdas Agarwal, former chief minister Keshubhai Patel and state BJP chief Rajendrasinh Rana were among those present.

Postal votes

● **MUMBAI (PTI):** Satara constituency registered the highest number of postal votes — 1,919 — in Maharashtra, while the plush South Mumbai constituency recorded the lowest — 15 — in the polls. Kolhapur constituency registered the second largest number of postal votes — 1,810 — followed by Kopergaon, 1,804. Nearly 145 candidates out of the 412 in the fray registered zero postal votes.

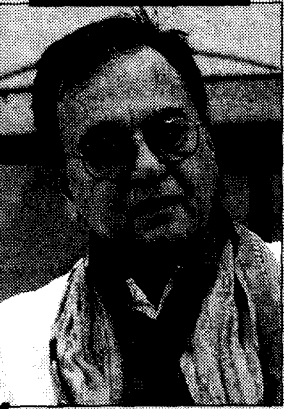
Rae Bareilly erupts in rage

TAPAS CHAKRABORTY

Rae Bareilly, May 18: A streak of gray lay across the skyline of Rae Bareilly town today as residents flooded the streets, angry over the BJP's campaign against Sonia Gandhi and dismayed at her decision not to be Prime Minister.

As thousands hit the streets, a few hundred sat on an indefinite fast in front of the Congress office here to persuade Sonia to change her mind and not to give in to the BJP's foreign-origin campaign.

"The foreigner issue was settled by voters in Amethi in 1999 and here on April 26 when we voted Sonia Gandhi. We voted her to become Prime Minister," said Umashankar Mishra, the Congress' Rae Bareilly district



Please surrender your inner voice to the voice of crores of people of the country

Sunil Dutt

chief.

Radharaman Tripathy, a retired teacher of Maharajganj, said as much. "Amethi had voted her to victory with a margin of 3 lakh in 1999. She became leader of the Opposition."

"At that time, the BJP kept quiet. And now they are back to her foreign origin because they lost the polls. This is too much of a rotten politics," he added.

Tripathy emphasised that the Congress chief won the polls this time with more than 200,000 votes over her nearest rival Samajwadi Party's Ashoke Singh.

"To the BJP, votes have no relevance. In a democracy, who settles these crucial issues except

the people, the voters?" he asked.

The youths of Maharajganj compared the BJP move to that of the Kauravas in Mahabharata to "humiliate Draupadi".

Rajat Bhar, a resident, drew a parallel between Sonia and Sita of Ramayana. "She is our present-day Sita who cannot even tolerate one single stain on her character."

Congress spokesman Jagdish Piyus, who is also the editor of local news magazine *Amethi Samachar*, said the mood of the people in both Amethi and Rae Bareilly swung between anger and grief since the news broke in the afternoon.

Fifty people on a fast at Harchandrapur held aloft handwritten posters that read: "Sonia nahi to koi nahi (No Sonia, no one for PM)."

As many as 200 Youth Congress workers squatted on the road in Maharajganj.

Residents of Salon and Harchandrapur put up a roadblock in protest against the foreign origin campaign and driven away by police, sat on a dharna by the roadside.

"There is no example in the country of the way Sonia has embraced the philosophy of the Indian way of life," district parishad member R.P. Singh said.

"After she became wife and then mother, she became a widow and she was one in the true tradition of a Hindu widow. What more evidence of Indianness do they ask for?" he demanded to know.

Rae Bareilly's frustration was compounded because it was preparing to celebrate the day of Sonia's swearing-in as Prime Minister. Farmers had had a good yield and residents had collected money for a weeklong event to mark the return to power of another Nehru-Gandhi.

Muslims in the constituency — dotted with the palaces and tomb of Nawab Jahan Khan from Emperor Shahjahan's era — had lined up a special prayer for Sonia the day she took oath. They were stunned today.

Business came to a standstill in the town, considered an important centre of trade in muslim and cotton cloth, as traders remained glued to TV for the better part of the afternoon.

Drawing another mythological parallel, trader Dhiraaj Kausal said: "Sonia is our Deokli (Krishna's mother). The hell with the Kansaraj of the BJP!"

SONIA OR SUICIDE: CONGRESSMAN LIVES TO TELL THE TALE



Chaos reigned outside 10 Janpath as hysterical Congress workers gathered to mount pressure on Sonia Gandhi not to decline prime ministership. Party workers said they would lay down their lives if she did not relent.

Gangacharan Rajput, a former MP who lost the Hamirpur seat, climbed on top of a vehicle pointing a pistol to his forehead and holding a sword (Reuters picture on left). "Sonia must accept prime ministership, or else...I suicide, I suicide," Gangacharan said. Mahila Congress workers wrote letters in blood, requesting their party chief to change her mind. A placard said: "Sonia ya amadah (either Sonia or suicide)."

Huge barricades and a posse of SPG personnel tried to bring the situation under control. Many people tried to break the outer security cordon and jump the barricades.

Hundreds of Congress workers also descended onto the BJP headquarters in Delhi in an attempt to storm it, creating a near clash situation.

Policemen, including personnel from the anti-riot Rapid Action Force, were rushed to the BJP office.

Raising slogans — particularly Sushma Swaraj, Uma Bharti and Govindacharya — the Congress workers tried to force their way into the premises to protest the BJP's opposition to Sonia becoming Prime Minister.

Dozens of BJP activists inside also came out to confront the Congress workers. But policemen intervened before the two groups could clash. Security at the BJP headquarters has been beefed up and RAF personnel stationed there.

Sena, BJP all smiles over 'success'

ANAND SOONDAS

Mumbai, May 18: The pav bhaji seller sitting opposite the Century Mills compound in Worli doesn't really care who will become Prime Minister.

"Sonia Gandhi chalega," he says. Then after a moment's thought, he adds: "Manmohan Singh bhi chalega." The only thing Mahadev is concerned about is mahengai (inflation). "Bhav nahi badalna chahiye, Prime Minister badle toh badle."

Inside the Nationalist Congress Party's Nariman Point office, the issue takes on a slightly nuanced tone. Prabhakar Kulkarni, an activist, says that the moment party chief Sharad Pawar gave his support to the Congress, he had accepted the candidacy of Sonia Gandhi for the country's top post.

"What is the BJP now crowing about? Their entire election strategy backfired and now they are desperately trying to garner political points by raising Sonia's foreign origins issue all over again. Sushma (Swaraj) wants to tansure her head and give up her comfortable life and Uma Bharti wants to quit as Madhya Pradesh CM (chief minister). What is this nautanki?" he thunders.

Chief minister Sushil Kumar Shinde, who is working away overtime after his wife lost the Lok Sabha election from his home seat of Solapur, hoped Sonia would take over as Prime Minister. "I, for one, am fervently hoping that she will be our PM. That is what has been mandated. What the other parties want is inconsequential. The elections have proved that the people have put

faith in her. That is the reality and everyone should respect that," he said.

The mood was very different at the Shiv Sena office. "Party supremo Balasaheb Thackeray will be making a formal statement on this very serious issue," Sena spokesman Prabhakar Desai said. On being prodded further, Desai laughed heartily and described the mood in his camp thus: "All along we had been insisting that she (Sonia) should not be the country's Prime Minister. This is a very serious issue and only Balasaheb will be able to give the official line on it."

But some of the Sena workers gathered outside looked as if they were ready to burst crackers. Prashant, a young party worker, was all fired up. "Sonia must have realised what a deadly mistake she was about to make. The people may

have given the Congress a few more seats than the BJP, but to see an Italy-born woman as the country's head...what dignity? What happens to our thousands of years of honour I mean, come to think of it? One billion people being unable to come up with an Indian to rule them," he says.

To the Sena and ally BJP, the success in getting Sonia to step out of the Prime Ministerial race is a huge consolation prize after their electoral disappointments. The BJP won 13 seats in Maharashtra and the Sena 12, down three from last time.

The allies are bent on making the most of this success. But amid the drum-beating and celebration of the victory-by-default, some BJP leaders privately admit that the focus

of their campaign during the elections could have been different. The parties stuck to their Sonia-bashing even when a large chunk of people were facing a drought in Maharashtra and the combine could have attacked the Shinde government over its monetary mismanagement.

A glance at the conditions of drought-affected districts of Satara, Solapur, Beeders, is anabad, among other thirsting to confirm that bothered aners were not origins. Sonia's

India had fau. them yet again. An shine for the hurrah of Sonia's down — which the BJP-ning combine will ascribe to its pressure tactics — the allies are set to change their strateg. for the coming Assembly elections in the state.

Manmohan balm for market

CHANDRIMA S. BHATTACHARYA

Mumbai, May 18: Manmohan Singh has made the stock exchange feel better. Even if some fear a relapse, the market has revived and put the smiles back on the faces of brokers wrung dry by yesterday's meltdown.

The mood within the small and usually dark rooms, crammed with PCs, at the Bombay Stock Exchange improved as the day closed with the sensx at 4877.02 points.

Yesterday, around the same time, Bhavesh Shah of the firm Ramanlal D. Shah was sitting almost alone in his office, writing out a solitary cheque. Today, he could finally tear himself away from the computer screen and his three mobiles about 10 minutes after trading hour ended at 3.30 pm.

Other brokers were squeezing past him to get into their chairs, arranged against the

walls on two sides of a long table covered with computers. The small chamber was buzzing with activity.

"We are relieved by the announcement that Sonia Gandhi may step down and Singh may be Prime Minister," Bhavesh said. "The market went up by 180 points after the announcement."

Vipul Shah of Vijay Bhawan Das echoed him. "The market is steady. Sonia stepping down made the difference."

Brooding after the crash yesterday, Vipul had refused to look up and speak a word. "If Singh is at the helm of affairs, we are more hopeful because we are aware of his policies," he said, his words reflecting the changed mood.

have got over yesterday."

Other brokers warned that though yesterday's was a panic-driven situation, it could recur on a lesser scale. They asked the Left to "behave".

Vinod Vasa of Marvel Equity Ltd said the crash may have been the biggest crisis in terms of statistics, but it was only an immediate reaction to the political uncertainty in Delhi and too much should not be read into it. But he warned that instability would remain a feature of the next government and the market would continue to suffer because of this.

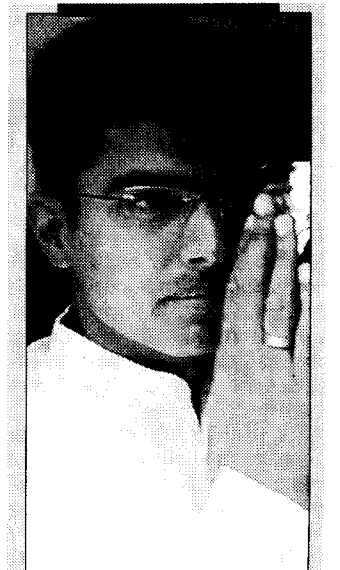
"Yesterday, I did not come to the exchange before 3.30 pm. I stayed at home and watched the drama on television, because I knew the collapse was only a knee-jerk reaction. But if there is one signal that has been given by the market, it is that political parties must think twice before making irresponsible statements," he said.

A broker at Nagarall Saraf Ltd said Sonia's decision to step down indicated that the new government would remain unstable with the Left parties as partners.

"Her stepping down shows her despair at the misbehaviour of the Left parties. It shows she is not sure and there is inherent instability in the government, which will be reflected in the market."

Another broker, who berated the Left yesterday saying their irresponsible remarks on investment on television had sent bad signals and led to the crash, said he felt better now, but was not free of fear.

"With so many disparate partners, the government will find it difficult to come up with a common minimum programme. The markets may collapse again. Bahut mushkil hai, mushkil hai (it is going to be difficult, very difficult)," he said, slowly shaking his head.



I, as the youngest member of the Congress and the Lok Sabha, expect you to lead the party

Sachin Pilot

Sonia's masterstroke

Congress MPs must now respect her decision to decline the primeministerial post

SONIA GANDHI spoke with clarity and conviction when she addressed the Congress parliamentary party late on Tuesday evening. There were two ways to respond to the campaign her political opponents had mounted against her becoming prime minister. The first would have been to up the ante and disdain to even acknowledge it. Given the political strength of her party, she could easily have chosen that option and steamrolled her way through with the support of her MPs and allies. Such a recourse may have brought her the top political post of the country but it would have also provided the BJP and its NDA allies a heavy duty handle to use against her as long as she was in power.

By choosing to "humbly decline" to take up the prime minister's post, she has played a masterstroke. For one, it allows her to assume the high moral ground and signal that she was by no means enamoured of power for its own sake, but power for the principles she believes in. She has thus neatly disarmed her political opponents of the one weapon they had hoped to use against her. The BJP and those of its allies who supported this petty-minded campaign — there are some honourable exceptions — have emerged from the affair much diminished. The BJP in particular has

shown itself as a party that could be swayed by the impetuous gestures and words of a few junior leaders and appear more than willing to trade its constitutional responsibility and democratic commitments for a sake of a few moments of xenophobic muscle-flexing. In the process, it has just provided Sonia Gandhi with an aura she may never have had as a prime minister in the difficult circumstances of running a messy coalition. Their move may, in fact, have made it that much easier for her to assume this very post the next time around.

While Sonia Gandhi's gesture was marked by grace and maturity, the same cannot be said for her fellow MPs, each of whom tried to outdo the other in an unredeeming display of servility. They begged, pleaded, cajoled and sobbed that she stay on and lead them, they breathed fire and brimstone against her political opponents — the scene was vintage Congress sycophancy, in the Indira-is-India-and-Indira-India manner. Sonia Gandhi let it be known in no uncertain terms that she will not review her decision. They should now respond positively to her request that they accept it and move on. Then, perhaps, the country can also move on and get back to normalcy. Something it badly needs to do.

WEDNESDAY, MAY 19, 2004

9-10-04
STUNNING POLITICAL SACRIFICE 10-20-04
9/15

THERE WILL BE enormous sympathy and respect for Sonia Gandhi's decision to turn down the Prime Ministership of a country of one billion people after leading her party to a position of advantage that was least expected during the run-up to the 14th general election. After a precipitous decline over the past decade, the Congress has experienced a revival of fortunes under Ms. Gandhi's leadership, reflecting the effectiveness of clever new alliances she made in key States on top of a modest upsurge in popular support that she led from the front. The Congress upset all electoral calculations and poll predictions by emerging as the single largest party and the spearhead of the single largest pre-election formation in the new Lok Sabha. It was a hard-worked victory earned through a decent, issue-based campaign that refused to respond in kind to highly personalised attacks targeting, among other things, Ms. Gandhi's foreign origin and 'antecedents'. As the world watched, she was first elected leader of the Congress parliamentary party, which in effect meant Prime Minister-designate; was endorsed by the party's pre-election allies, by the Left and by other secular parties, who gave letters of support signifying a comfortable majority in a House of 543; then came up with her extraordinary act of political renunciation — and stuck to her decision in volatile circumstances.

There will be speculation about the considerations behind this development, but the following explanation will go some way. First, the Congress president has seized the high ground to make it plain, in her renunciation speech, that "the post of Prime Minister [has not been] my aim," but that her belated, conspicuously reluctant entry into national politics was to further a cause — "to defend the secular foundations of our nation and the poor of our country." With such a vision, she worked to revive the fortunes of her party, as a way of checking the advance of highly divisive communal politics. "Our foremost responsibility at this critical time," she explained, "is to provide India with a secular government that is strong and stable." After all, as she has pointed out in informal conversations and more recently, in interviews, she could have been Prime Minister in 1991 had she wanted to, in the highly abnormal circumstances

that followed her husband's assassination. Secondly, Ms. Gandhi has signalled in a subtle manner that, since her aim is to defend India's secular foundations by providing a stable, people-oriented government, she does not wish to be the cause of, or pretext for, confrontation and ugly chauvinistic politics. Thirdly, she has made a moral point (whether others buy it or not): "power in itself," raw power, "has never attracted me, nor has position been my goal." Finally and importantly, there are the personal considerations. In addition to Ms. Gandhi's personal goals and "inner voice," it is clear that her son and daughter firmly support her personal decision not to be Prime Minister, not the least because they fear for her safety and happiness.

Ms. Gandhi's stunning act of self-denial and political renunciation cannot be allowed to be seen as an endorsement of the vicious campaign that the Sushma Swarajs, the Uma Bhartis, the Govindacharyas and the rest in the *sangh parivar* have launched to block and subvert the electoral verdict. The likes of Ms. Swaraj centred their political campaign on Ms. Gandhi, her 'foreignness' and her presumed unfitness to be Prime Minister (although they had made no fuss, it must be recalled, in dealing with her as Leader of the Opposition). People did not buy the argument. In no democracy are losers in an election entitled to overrule the umpire on who won and who lost. As for narrow-minded interpretations of 'Indianness' and 'foreignness', Mahatma Gandhi anticipated the real issues while visualising the Constitution of India as something based on universal values applied to the particular conditions of India. As early as 1931, he promised to strive for a Constitution that would "release India from all thralldom and patronage" but made it clear that "all interests not in conflict with the interests of the dumb millions will be scrupulously respected whether foreign or indigenous," and that personally speaking he hated "the distinction between foreign and indigenous." Having made her point, the Italian-born Congress president who could have been Prime Minister by Wednesday has grown enormously in political and moral stature. The new coalition government that will be led by Manmohan Singh has the opportunity to build on this advantage and get off to a fine start.

THE HINDU 19 MAY 2004

Sonia follows her SF-5 19/5 'inner voice' *g b cont.*

NEW DELHI, May 18. — The following is the text of Mrs Sonia Gandhi's address to the Congress Parliamentary Party meeting this evening where she announced her decision not to accept the Prime Minister's post.

"Friends, throughout these past six years that I have been in politics, one thing has been clear to me. And that is, as I have often stated, that the post of Prime Minister is not my aim.

"I was always certain that if ever I found myself in the position that I am in today, I would follow my own inner voice. Today, that voice tells me I must humbly decline this post.

"You have unanimously elected me your leader, in doing so, you

TEXT OF SPEECH

have reposed your faith in me. It is this faith that has placed me under tremendous pressure to reconsider my decision. Yet, I must abide by the principles which have guided me all along.

"Power in itself has never attracted me, nor has position been my goal.

"My aim has always been to defend the secular foundation of our nation and the poor of our country—the creed sacred to Indiraji and Rajivji.

"We have moved forward a significant step towards this goal. We have waged a successful battle. But we have not won the war. That is a long and arduous struggle, and I will con-

tinue it with full determination.

"But I appeal to you to understand the force of my conviction. I request you to accept my decision and to recognise that I will not reverse it.

"Our foremost responsibility at this critical time is to provide India with a secular government that is strong and stable.

"Friends, you have given me your generous support; you have struggled against all odds with me. As one of you and as president of the Congress party, I pledge myself to work with you and for the country. My resolve will in fact be all the more firm, to fight for our principles, for our vision, and for our ideals." — PTI

নাটকীয়, নিশ্চয়ই। তবে ঈষৎ ভিন্ন গোত্রের নাটক। ভারতীয় রাজবৃত্তে ক্ষমতা লইয়া কাড়াকাড়ি বিস্তর দেখা গিয়াছে। সিংহাসনে কে বসিবেন, সে জন্য প্রকাশ্য কলহ এবং গোপন তৎপরতা, দুইয়েরই সাক্ষী হইয়াছে ভারতীয় গণতন্ত্র, এক বার নয়, অনেক বার। সেই সকল কুনাট্যের ধারায় একটি গৌরবময় ছেদ ঘটিল এই ২০০৪ সালে। যিনি সেই ছেদ ঘটাইয়া দেশবাসীকে এক সুনামটা উপহার দিলেন, তাঁহার নাম সনিয়া গাঁধী। লোকসভা ভোটে অভাবিত জয়মাল্য অর্জন করিয়াছেন তিনি, কংগ্রেসের নির্বাচনী সাফল্যের অবিসংবাদিত রূপকার ও নায়িকা। আপন দলে তো বটেই, সহযোগী এবং বন্ধু দলগুলিও কার্যত সমন্বরে ঘোষণা করিয়াছেন, প্রধানমন্ত্রীর ভূমিকায় তিনি স্বাগত। অর্থাৎ প্রধানমন্ত্রীর আসনটি সর্ব অর্থেই তাঁহার জন্য প্রস্তুত ছিল। এই প্রক্ষে ভারতীয় জনতা পার্টির আপত্তি ও কুৎসা নিতান্তই পরাজিতের অ-সভ্য আর্চনাদের মতো শুনাইতেছিল, তাহাতে কান পাতিবার কিছুমাত্র প্রয়োজন ছিল না। কিন্তু তবু সনিয়া গাঁধী প্রধানমন্ত্রীর আসন প্রত্যাখ্যান করিয়াছেন। কেন এই প্রত্যাখ্যান, তাহার নানা ব্যাখ্যা ইতিমধ্যেই শোনা গিয়াছে, আরও অনেক হয়তো ক্রমশ প্রকাশ্য। এখানে সেই সকল ব্যাখ্যা লইয়া আলোচনা নিষ্পয়োজন। যে ভাবেই এই প্রত্যাখ্যানের কাহিনি রচিত হইয়া থাকুক, শেষ বিচারে ইহা এক নেত্রীর আপন অন্তরের, বা মস্তিষ্কের, সুচিন্তিত সিদ্ধান্ত। সংখ্যাগরিষ্ঠ সাংসদের সমর্থন লাভ করিয়া তিনি প্রধানমন্ত্রী হইলে তাহা হইত ইতিহাসের একটি অধ্যায় মাত্র। সনিয়া গাঁধী নূতন ইতিহাস রচনা করিলেন।

কেন সনিয়া গাঁধীর এই সিদ্ধান্তটি বিরল বিচক্ষণতার প্রমাণ, তাহা নূতন করিয়া বলিবার প্রয়োজন নাই, আমরা ইতিপূর্বেই এই স্তম্ভে সেই বিষয়ে বিশদ আলোচনা করিয়াছি। (সনিয়া গাঁধী: সাফল্য ও কর্তব্য, ১৫/৫) আমরা বলিয়াছিলাম, তিনি কঠিন নির্বাচনী পরীক্ষায় উত্তীর্ণ হইয়াছেন, এ বার তাঁহার কঠিনতর পরীক্ষা। ক্ষমতা হাতে পাওয়ার পরে কী ভাবে ব্যক্তিগত ভাবে সেই ক্ষমতা প্রত্যাখ্যান করিতে হয়, তাহার পরীক্ষা। তাহার কারণ, “আমরা মনে করি, গাঁধীজি বা জয়প্রকাশ নারায়ণের মতো তাঁহারও উচিত হইবে প্রশাসনের দৈনন্দিনতা হইতে নিজেকে দূরে সরাইয়া দলের সংগঠনের কাজে মনোনিবেশ করা, নিছক সরকারপ্রধানের ভূমিকায় নিজেকে সীমিত না রাখিয়া ভারতীয় রাজনীতির স্থায়ী ও গভীর সংস্কারে ব্রতী হওয়া।” সনিয়া গাঁধী সেই দ্বিতীয় পরীক্ষাতেও উত্তীর্ণ। এবং সেই উত্তরণের ভিত্তিতেই এ বার তিনি যুগপৎ দুইটি কাজে মনোনিবেশ করিতে পারেন। প্রথমত, তাঁহার দলটিকে নূতন যুগের উপযোগী

করিয়া গড়িয়া তুলিবার কাজ, যে কাজ তাঁহার প্রয়াত সহধর্মী রাজীব গাঁধী শুরু করিতে চাহিয়াছিলেন, পারেন নাই। সনিয়ার সামনে সুযোগ আসিয়াছে ব্রিটেনের প্রধানমন্ত্রী টনি ব্লেয়ার যে ভাবে ‘নিউ লেবার’ সৃষ্টি করিয়াছেন সেই ভাবে একটি নূতন কংগ্রেস সৃষ্টি করার। তাহা কেবল কংগ্রেসের পক্ষেই মঙ্গলজনক নয়, তাহা দেশের সামগ্রিক রাজনীতি তথা গণতন্ত্রের পক্ষেও মঙ্গলজনক, কারণ এই বারের নির্বাচন নূতন করিয়া প্রমাণ করিল যে ভারতীয় রাজবৃত্ত ভাঙিয়া চুরিয়া গেলেও, অথবা ভাঙিয়া চুরিয়া গিয়াছে বলিয়াই কংগ্রেসের মতো একটি মধ্যবর্তী জাতীয় দলের গুরুত্ব প্রবল।

কিন্তু সনিয়া গাঁধীর এই সিদ্ধান্ত কেবল দল পরিচালনার কাজে সুবিধা করিবে না, সংযুক্ত প্রগতিশীল মোর্চার নূতন সরকার পরিচালনার কাজেও তিনি একটি গুরুত্বপূর্ণ ও কার্যকর ভূমিকা লইতে পারিবেন। এই সরকারের গতিপথ মসৃণ ও নিরুদ্বেগ হইবে না, তাহা লইয়া কোনও সংশয় নাই। বাহিরের, বিশেষত বামপন্থীদের সঙ্গে নানা প্রক্ষে টানাপোড়েন হইবেই, যাহার প্রাথমিক লক্ষণ ইতিমধ্যেই প্রবল। কিন্তু শাসক দলের অন্দরমহলেও বিবিধ প্রক্ষে মতানৈক্য অস্বাভাবিক নয়। (ভারতীয় জনতা পার্টির অভ্যন্তরেও এমন অভ্যন্তরীণ মতানৈক্য দেখা গিয়াছিল।) একটা ‘সংখ্যালঘু’ জোট সরকারের ঘরে বাহিরে এই সকল টানাপোড়েনে মোকাবিলা করিতে হইলে সর্বাত্মক প্রয়োজন একটি সুগঠিত সমন্বয় কাঠামো। লক্ষণীয়, পশ্চিমবঙ্গে বামফ্রন্ট এই সমন্বয়ের কাজ সাফল্যের সঙ্গে করিয়া আসিতেছে এবং সেই কাজে বামফ্রন্ট কর্মী অত্যন্ত গুরুত্বপূর্ণ ভূমিকা লইয়াছে সনিয়া গাঁধী তাঁহার জোট এবং সমর্থকদের লইয়া একটি সমন্বয় কর্মী গঠন করিতে পারেন, যাহা পরিচালনার দায়িত্বে থাকিবেন তিনি দলে তো বটেই, বামপন্থী শিবিরেও তিনি যে স্বীকৃতি অর্জন করিয়াছেন তাহার ফলে সমন্বয় এবং দ্বন্দ্ব নিরসনের কাজে তিনিই যোগ্যতম ব্যক্তি। প্রধানমন্ত্রিত্বের দৈনন্দিন দায়িত্ব বহন করিতে হইলে এই সমন্বয় সাধন তাঁহার পক্ষে দুঃসাধ্য হইত। এখন তিনি সেই কাজে মন দিতে পারিবেন। তাহাতে কেবল একটি বিশেষ সরকার পরিচালনার সুবিধা হইবে না, সাধারণ ভাবে জোট সরকার পরিচালনার একটি সুষ্ঠু নীতি ও প্রকরণ উদ্ভাবনের সুযোগ আসিবে। রাজনীতিতে খুব কম সিদ্ধান্তই সকলের পক্ষে ভাল হয়। সনিয়া গাঁধীর সিদ্ধান্তটি তেমনই একটি বিরল সিদ্ধান্ত। অবশ্য বেকাইয়া নায়াডু ও তাঁহার সতীর্থরা নিশ্চয় মনে মনে বড় দুঃখ পাইয়াছেন— তাঁহাদের সুপরিচালিত কুৎসা অভিযানের বর্ষামুখটি সহসা ভেঁতা হইয়া গেল যে!

Family pressure tilted the scales

Sonia dreaded idea of a 'divided India'

Vinod Sharma and Saroj Nagi
New Delhi, May 18

AS WORD spread about Sonia Gandhi's decision to step aside, a section of her party-men hoped that she would allow herself to be persuaded to change her mind. But there were some who worried over the consequences of a Prime Minister other than her.

The only informed people in the prevailing confusion were Sonia's close aides and associates, some amongst whom had seen it coming on Monday itself. In fact, the Congress president's decision to summon the newly-elected MPs to a tea party just a day after her election as CPP leader was the real straw in the wind. Originally she had planned to withdraw her candidature before responding to President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam's invite for a meeting.

But Sonia was forced to put her plans on hold under pressure from the Congress's allies who had elected her leader of the UPA.

She didn't press the issue as allies like Laloo Yadav and Ram Vilas Paswan made out a strong case for not being brow-beaten by the Sangh Parivar. They argued that, as the leader of the new formation, Sonia couldn't be acting unilaterally.

In retrospect, it appears that the pressure on Sonia was much more from within her family than the secular parivar she had sewed up to forestall the BJP's return to power. Her children worried about the possible threat to her from the fanaticism sought to be unleashed by the saffron parivar's campaign. But Sonia dreaded the idea of the country being divided over the Gandhi-Nehru

BEHIND THE NEWS

name which bound India together against the British.

The scales tilted in favour of her giving up the PM's office. Letters of support from allies were ready when Sonia left 10 Janpath for Rashtrapati Bhawan. But she chose to leave them behind. This was the first indication of the path she had chosen.

That Dr Manmohan Singh was present when she met Kalam was another strong signal that she was backing down. "I'll meet the President again tomorrow with support letters," Sonia told reporters after the meeting. But that was just a ruse.

On returning home, she instructed her political secretary Ahmed Patel and other senior leaders to convey her stand to the allies: "Tell them I'm not going to reverse my decision." Simultaneously, another CPP meeting was convened.

To keep the alliance intact, even Priyanka made a couple of calls. One amongst those who had her on the line was Paswan who said she and Rahul should persuade her to revise her decision. "Aap dono bhai-bahen unko manate, desh ka sawaal hai," But that was not to be. She withstood pressure both from allies and partymen.

At the end of the day, the allies were willing to accept her nominee for the top slot, an idea which she failed to sell to her own partymen at the CPP meet. Her children watched as one speaker after another referred to her as "Madam Prime Minister." The standard exhortation: Don't give in to the BJP's blackmailing tactics.

TEXT OF ADDRESS TO CPP

THROUGHOUT THESE past six years that I have been in politics, one thing has been clear to me. And that is, as I have often stated, that the post of prime minister is not my aim.

I was always certain that if ever I found myself in the position that I am in today, I would follow my own inner voice. Today, the voice tells me I must decline this post. You have unanimously elected me your leader, in doing so, you have reposed your faith in me. It is this faith that has placed me under tremendous pressure to reconsider my decision. Yet, I must abide by the principles which have guided me all along.

Power for itself has never attracted me, nor has the position been my goal. My aim has always been to defend the secular foundation of our nation and the poor of our country — the creed sacred to Indiraji and Rajivji. We have moved forward a significant step towards this goal. We have waged a successful battle. But we have not won the war. That is a long and arduous struggle, and I will continue it with full determination.

But I appeal to you to understand the force of my conviction. I request you to accept my decision and to recognise that I will not reverse it. Our foremost responsibility at this critical time is to provide India with a secular government that is strong and stable.

Friends, you have given me your generous support; you have struggled against all odds with me. As one of you and as president of the Congress party, I pledge myself to work with you and for the country. My resolve will in fact be all the more firm, to fight for our principles, for our vision, and for our ideas.



LAST WORD Congress MPs plead with Sonia to relent. At the CPP meet on Tuesday.

WHO STANDS WHERE

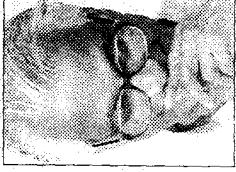
RJD president Laloo Prasad

Yadav urges Sonia to reconsider her decision. Tells her not to get carried away by what the 'communal forces' have to say



CPM's Jyoti Basu says Sonia has been dissuaded by Priyanka and Rahul, who fear she might be killed. 'It is a family affair now...'

CPI says the Congress could choose any leader... it's their internal matter



NDA convener George Fernandes says the alliance will not boycott the swearing-in of the Cong-led coalition front if Sonia does not become PM

Cong allies okay Sonia as PM

Mulayam's SP Is Surprise Packet At Meet

New Delhi: The Congress' pre-poll allies and the Left parties on Sunday night asked Congress leader Sonia Gandhi to form the new government at the Centre.

Earlier, continuing her efforts to provide a stable coalition, Sonia on Sunday met leaders of the allies to discuss government formation.

The meeting, which was held at Sonia's 10, Janpath residence in Delhi is expected to decide the shape of the new government and the issue of common minimum programme.

Those attending the meeting included K Karunanidhi (DMK), Laloo Prasad Yadav (RJD), Ramvilas Paswan (LJP), Sharad Pawar (NCP), Ramdas Athawale (RPI), Shibu Soren (JMM), Ginjee Ramachandran (PMK), Vaiko (MDMK), E Ahamed (Muslim League), Mehbooba Mufti (PDP) and Chandrashekhar Rao (TRS). Most of the allies of the Congress have given letters supporting Sonia for government formation. Besides Sonia, the Congress team at the meeting comprised Manmohan Singh, Arjun Singh, Pranab Mukherjee and Kamal Nath.

In a significant development, Samajwadi Party too joined the meeting convened by Sonia. SP general secretary Anwar Singh, whose party was not a pre-poll ally of the Congress,

drove to Sonia's residence along with CPI-M general secretary H S Surjeet, who has been advocating entry of the SP into the alliance.

Earlier, consensus on joining a Congress-led government eluded the central committee of the CPI(M) with sharp differences on the issue among senior leaders. Senior party leader Jyoti Basu said that only four members had spoken on the matter at the central committee meeting and 23 others were yet to express their views. "Discussions are still on," he said. The CPI(M) meeting discussed issues ranging from economic agenda, disinvestment and joining a Sonia-led government.

CPI(M) sources said a decision on whether to participate in the coalition government was expected to be taken on Monday by the central committee. While Basu said that he had no appointment with DMK president K Karunanidhi, Surjeet said he would be holding discussions with the DMK supremo. As many as 70 members were present at the central committee meeting. The issue of disinvestment appeared to be the major stumbling block in CPI(M)'s joining the government. Sources said the CPI(M) would become party to many decisions taken by the Congress-led coalition government. Agencies

On Saturday, she was poised to be Prime Minister. Just weeks ago, in a freewheeling interview with Shekhar Gupta, Editor-in-Chief of The Indian Express, Sonia Gandhi spoke on what a Congress-led government would look like, its economic policies, her identity as an Indian of Italian origin. And the relationship between the personal and political. Excerpts from the interview on NDTV 24x7's Walk The Talk.



Life changes a great deal. Let me go back to where it began, when did you first come to Anand Bhavan? I came to Anand Bhavan in 1970 and that was when Indiraji dedicated Anand Bhavan and Swaraj Bhavan to the nation, in terms that it became a museum, open to the public. That was 1970, I had been married for two years, I was mother of a young baby, Rahul. It left a great impression on me. My mother-in-law was winding up, deciding which things to leave here or take, there were still some personal items here. She was describing to me—and one of the friends who had accompanied us—what all happens in both these houses.

From whom did you first hear about the freedom movement and the politics of those years? Rajiv or your mother-in-law? Certainly from my mother-in-

law. In fact, whenever she was free or when you were—seldom though—holidaying with her, she would recount and tell us about her childhood, her youth, which, of course, was part and parcel of the freedom struggle. But you never imagined at that point that either your husband or you would ever get caught up in this? No, never. I never imagined that I had just come here for marrying Rajivji. And that never crossed my mind or my husband's mind for that matter.

But you never thought when you got married to Rajiv that you were marrying into a political family? When I came to this family, I was a complete stranger on what was going to come.

Like what? For instance, if we go to a wedding, you have to wear a sari. Or you have to eat Indian food... slowly I started eating Indian food, now I can't do without it.

Then in Delhi you didn't get much pasta, but now you do—half the Punjabi chefs in Delhi make pasta... Yes, I know, but I am very fond of Indian food. In our house, we eat mostly Indian food. Occasionally, some friends come and ask for pasta, then it is made.

Do you cook? No, I used to when my husband wasn't in politics. I used to look after my mother-in-law, and she did occasionally enjoy western meals... but when I got married I didn't know how to cook. I had to learn from books.

So what were your mother-in-law's favourites? Well, she did enjoy pasta, occasionally.

That's what you critics say sometimes: Congress party ka ek hi raasta, bolo Italian khao pasta. Have you ever heard it? (Laughs) Yes, I have heard it.

Tell me, what else did you learn from your mother-in-law? She was a tough woman. She was a very strong woman, but she had a very gentle side to her... a side that very few people know. She had an eye for detail. If someone was unhappy or unwell, she would immediately notice and she would immediately do something about it. Perhaps by jotting down two lines. I remember when I got married, my mother came to the wedding and she stayed for a month. And when she was going,

other child the next day, I made it a point to be there at the airport. There was such excitement.

What was the conversation on your dining table like during the days of the war? Well, mostly we were getting reports of the atrocities by the Pakistani army on the people of Bangladesh. Then the crisis of—I think we had 10 million refugees—from Bangladesh. Nowadays, when you read about 3 million refugees, a couple of hundred thousand refugees, the whole world...

But during those 13 days of the war, is there something that Mrs Gandhi said at the dining table that you remember? Obviously, she won't come out with the details, but she would certainly talk about today's happened, they have killed so many people, so many refugees have

ports post-Emergency that went into details of the family planning programme which turned out to say that the problems were magnified. Yes there were problems, but not in the scale that the Opposition had built up.

Emergency was a lesson that no government will repeat. It is not possible to bring in so much authoritarianism in India. I guess yes, but those were different times.

Do you remember this coming up between Mrs Gandhi and Rajiv or between Sanjay and Rajiv? I do remember, but I wouldn't like to disclose it.

25 years have gone past, maybe you should. Maybe another 25 years, maybe I'll write it some day.

What motivated you to come

'The policy of continuing with economic reform will carry on. Nobody should have any doubts on that'

amount of... party people saying that I ought to help out the party. But it was more than that. It was this feeling of responsibility towards the family. And the country, because their lives were in the country, service to the people.

What are the three things that your government will do that will be an improvement over the current government? Well, first of all, I know there are some reservations among people on our stand on reforms... economic reforms. There should be no worry whatsoever. The pol-

icy of continuing with economic reform will carry on. Nobody should have any doubts on that. But our economic reforms are slightly different from the BJP's. In ours, there is a very strong focus on social welfare programmes, rural development programmes, poverty alleviation programmes and administrative and financial strengthening of panchayats which has not taken place. In the case of this government what they have done, they have clipped and chopped so many of the poverty alleviation programmes that they have become practically ineffective. We greatly admire our entrepreneurs, administrators and business class because they have done a great deal. The business community going ahead, we are all for it. At the same time we have to focus on the poor.

Why does the BJP worry you? It is a political party... Because it is a party which believes in a divisive agenda. It has a particular agenda, which at the moment they have sort of softened or kept on the side.

But haven't they given it up pretty much in a coalition? No, I don't think so. Here their leaders are giving statements like as soon as we are in power by ourselves, our agenda will be fulfilled. And we all know what their agenda is. This is an agenda against which my family has fought, they lived and died for the country... they fought this agenda because this agenda, if carried out, will divide our country.

Yes, there were instances, through what she said, from which one could understand that I can't recall any particular instance but I can recall that at times she was uneasy about it.

After that, the Opposition, the

public opinion responded to Emergency. Remember that slogan, Indira, Sanjay, Bansi Lal, that public rejection... was that a low moment in the family as well? Well, there is no way we can say that the Emergency was right. But there was a great deal of propaganda against Mrs Gandhi, deliberately done. And I think there were even some re-

It was not just the pressure from the party people coming and getting the votes? Yes, there was a certain

hekte hain ki galti ho gayee. Nahin. Let me tell you, during Narasimha Rao's time, even during Rajivji's time when economic reforms were first introduced, these were the very people who attacked Congress bitterly on economic reforms.

Were you bitter or frustrated even after this, Nan Modi won such a big victory. Certainly it was disappointing for all of us that we were to win those elections. I was sad, naturally, of that ilk was that these kinds of are been endorsed by the voters.

Tab laga aapko ke secures ko saath hona chahiye coalition banana chahiye. Yes, I felt strongly and strongly that we have to get together if we want to see such acts are not repeated.

Your commitment to nation ideas is not just for elections? Do you see this as future politics? No, first of all, I am quite aware that this is continuously

difficultly but soon I got used to it.

So do you miss the personal space that you had earlier? I have got used to it now. And I think perhaps, if I take up a job or a duty I feel very strongly that you have to pursue that. Therefore, I don't really miss it.

When did the transition start? When was it completed? Well, the transition was completed long ago. It was a slow transition. After all, marrying into this sort of family, which was part of the freedom movement, which sacrificed, which lived in complete service, soul, of the people. They had no life outside this. So, you also imbibe and as-

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Electrolux Democratic ally voted as The World's No. 1 Choice.

Sonia vows to work closely with allies

CONG CHIEF RECALLS FAMILY ROLE IN HOUR OF TRIUMPH

Anil Anand & PTI
New Delhi, May 15

ON BEING unanimously elected Congress Parliamentary Party leader on Friday, bringing her a step closer to the Prime Minister's chair, Sonia Gandhi today vowed to work closely with "our allies and partners" to serve the people.

Sonia's election as CPP leader came an hour later than scheduled. Slated to take place at 11 am, its proceedings finally began around 12 noon. The whole exercise was over in less than 30 minutes.

In her thanksgiving address, which she delivered to thunderous applause, Sonia declared that though the Congress would act as a pivot for the coalition that would be in place shortly, it would be their "earnest endeavour" to respect and work closely with the allies and partners.

She said the Congress-led combine was committed to providing a "strong and stable" government dedicated to promote social harmony and peace, which was the binding factor for the allies.

"The commitment to the welfare of farmers, farm labourers, youth, women and the weaker sections of society unites us in the coalition," she said.

The CPP leader said the alliance was working on a joint action plan that would outline the government's priorities, policies and programmes, which would be focussed on employment generation, growth and investment.

Cautioning her partymen not to be complacent, Sonia warned them of the vast challenges and the bumpy road ahead. "Let us not revel in our victory. Let's welcome it as an opportunity to better the lives of our brothers and sisters... the people have

chosen us to represent their aspirations, not our own."

Gandhi said the electoral verdict was a "decisive" rejection of the RSS ideology and the "destructive and self-serving" policies of the BJP-led NDA. The voters have re-affirmed what "we all believed within our hearts," she said. The mandate was an assertion of the popular belief that "the soul of our nation is inclusive, secular and united".

Reminding the newly-elected MPs that they owed their positions to the people who elected them, Sonia exhorted them to act as their electorate's humble servants.

Sonia Gandhi paid tribute to Pandit Nehru, Indira and Rajiv Gandhi and said that their lives had been her guiding force. "Their courage and complete devotion to India has given me the strength to follow their path. I would like to remember them today ... I would like to honour them today."

A number of AICC office-bearers, PCC chiefs and defeated candidates, including Margaret Alva and Girija Vyas, were present on the occasion. Among the Chief Ministers spotted were Sheila Dixit, Sushil Kumar Shinde, Virbhadr Singh and Amarinder Singh. Karnataka's S.M. Krishna stayed away.

For a brief while that marked his entry, filmstar Govinda kept photographers busy once he walked into the Central Hall. Known for his colourful attire, Govinda today had chosen a spotless *khadi* in his first real-life role as a politician. After walking down the aisles exchanging greetings and pleasantries with MPs, Govinda sat on a back-bench with Kamal Nath.

The Congress's team for 2004



BUDDING LEADER Newly elected Congress MP Rahul Gandhi offers a flower to his mother after her election as Congress Parliamentary Party chief on Saturday.

has acquired a fresh look with the entry of several youngsters, most of them sons of politicians: Ajay Maken, Sachin Pilot, Milind Deora, Naveen Jindal, Jatin Prasada, Sandip Dixit and Tejaswini Ramesh, scribe-turned-politician who defeated H.D. Deve Gowda in Kanakpura LS. They joined the ranks of

other young leaders like Jyotiraditya Scindia. Among the first-time entrants to the Lok Sabha is also veteran Rajya Sabha MP Pranab Mukherjee. Proposing Sonia Gandhi's name for CLP leadership, Pranab called himself the "oldest Rajya Sabha and newest Lok Sabha member".

Rahul steals show

Rahul Gandhi was greeted with loud applause when he stood in a queue behind several MPs to congratulate his mother Sonia Gandhi, shortly after she was unanimously elected leader of the Congress Parliamentary Party.

Attired in a spotless white *kur-*

ta-pyjama, he presented a rose to Sonia much to the delight of photographers in Parliament's hallowed Central Hall. Rahul, who won from Amethi with an impressive margin, stole the limelight ahead of Sonia Gandhi's election as members made a beeline to greet him. Warm hugs, *angavastrams* and bouquets came his

way as he slowly moved towards the front benches where he sat next to former minister Jagdish Tytler. Rahul repeatedly stood up in respect as new and old members walked up to him to felicitate him. He was also seen chatting with peers of his age, Jyotiraditya Scindia, Sachin Pilot, Milind Deora and Ajay Maken.

16 MAY 2004

Sonia gets letters of support

● Elected CPP leader ● Meeting allies today

By Harish Khare

NEW DELHI, MAY 15. All the pieces of Sonia Gandhi's prime ministerial puzzle are falling into place. Today, Ms. Gandhi was unanimously elected the leader of the Congress Parliamentary Party (CPP) and she used the occasion to lay out the rationale for "a strong and stable government, dedicated to promoting social harmony and peace."

For most of the day Ms. Gandhi had a series of meetings with the leaders of allies and po-

tential allies. Indications are that she could stake her claim to lead the next government as early as tomorrow evening and a new government is expected to be sworn in on Tuesday, May 18.

The Congress has already received "letters of support" from many of its pre-poll allies, including Laloo Prasad Yadav's Rashtriya Janata Dal, Ram Vilas Paswan's Lok Janshakti Party, Mufti Mohammed Sayeed's People's Democratic Party, Shibu Soren's Jharkhand Mukti Morcha and the Telangana

Rashtra Samiti. Mr. Sharad Pawar's Nationalist Congress Party is expected to send in its letter of support tomorrow after a discussion with the Congress on the proposed common minimum programme (CMP).

All the letters received so far have pledged support to a secular coalition government, led by Ms. Gandhi. The Congress leaders are hoping to get letters from the DMK and other allies from Tamil Nadu tomorrow after the DMK leader, M. Karunanidhi, meets Ms. Gandhi.

Ms. Gandhi has called a meeting of the allies tomorrow evening, when some tentative agreement on the proposed CMP could be agreed upon. Modalities such as a "coordination" committee could also be discussed. A meeting with other like-minded parties is also scheduled and Ms. Gandhi is hosting a dinner for all the leaders of the allies.

While there is no doubt about a new Congress-led secular government having the support of over 300 Lok Sabha MPs — in-

cluding that of the pre-poll allies, the Left and the Samajwadi Party (SP) — considerable ambiguity prevails over who joins the government and who opts to stay out. The DMK, for now, has decided to stay out.

The Left parties too are yet to decide on the question of joining the government. On her part, Ms. Gandhi is said to have invited the CPI (M) to come in when she met the veteran Marxist leader, Jyoti Basu. Soon after her election as the CPP leader, she called on the former West Bengal Chief Minister at Banga Bhavan here.

The Congress' own understanding is that there are three distinct views within the Left. One opinion is that the Left parties should stay out, the second view favours joining the government in order to take maximum advantage of its leverage, and the third is that the Left should make it a condition that the SP be also accommodated.

The Congress' allies, however, are not all that keen on including the SP in the Cabinet. Mr. Paswan and Mr. Laloo Prasad Yadav are reported to be unexcited about Mr. Mulayam Singh Yadav's participation; even, Mr. Sharad Pawar is said to be lukewarm to the proposition, though he is keen that the DMK should be on board. The SP, on its part, has virtually given a blank cheque to the CPI(M) leader, Harkishan Singh Surjeet. Mr. Surjeet, as well as the former Prime Minister, V.P. Singh, are keen on the SP being part of the government, as a way of firming up the stability as also to act as a pressure bloc. However, the Congress strategists are keeping their fingers crossed whether the Left parties would get the necessary join-the-government mandate from their decision-making forums.

Soul of the nation is secular: Sonia: Page 8



AYE TO SONIA: Newly-elected Congress Members of Parliament, attending a session of the Congress Parliamentary Party at the Parliament House on Saturday, raise their hands in support as the name of the party president, Sonia Gandhi, is proposed as the CPP leader. — AP

Origin not relevant: Pawar

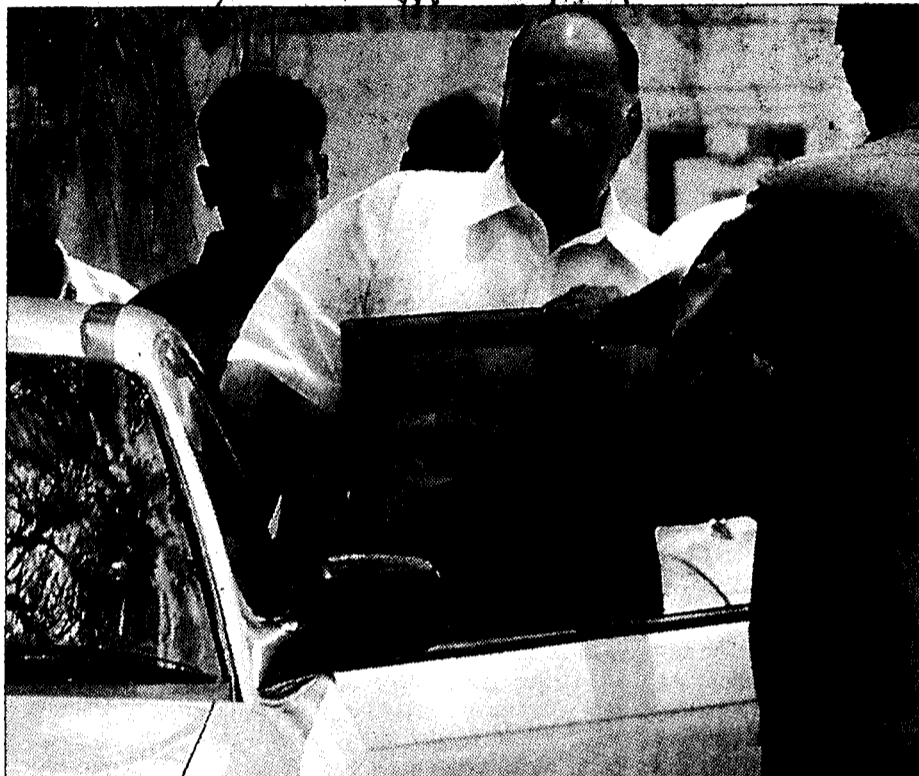
■ Congress, NCP set up panels to draft common programme

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, MAY 14

FURTHER softening its stand towards joining the Congress-led coalition government at the Centre, the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) today made it clear that Congress chief Sonia Gandhi's foreign origin was "no more relevant".

With the government-formation exercise gaining momentum, the Congress over the weekend will finalise the Cabinet seats it can give away to its allies. The NCP would be looking at a cabinet berth and minister of state portfolio, it is learnt.

Party chief Sharad Pawar, who met Sonia earlier in the day, said that the issue of her becoming the prime minister "did not come up at the meeting". "It will be decided by all coalition parties in a day or two," he said referring to the meeting of all the secular coalition allies in the coming days. It is expected that on May 16, Congress and its pre-poll allies will meet, followed by a meeting of the possible



NCP chief Sharad Pawar leaves CPI(M) leader H.S. Surjeet's residence after meeting him and UP Chief Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav on Friday. Anil Sharma

post-poll allies. Meanwhile, the Congress has set up a four-member committee comprising senior leaders Manmohan Singh, Pranab Mukherjee, Jairam Ramesh and Jaipal Reddy to draft its common minimum programme.

To coordinate with this Congress committee, the NCP has set up its own committee on the CMP comprising Tariq Anwar and Praful Patel. Pawar noted that draft-

ing of the CMP would be the "first step towards government formation."

He also stressed the stability of the coalition government, and said: "Without the association of the Left parties, it will be difficult to provide a stable government."

Addressing mediapersons after the NCP working committee meet, party spokesperson Praful Patel said, "The NCP has decided that it will

agree with whatever consensus emerges among the rest of the allies."

The Congress president today met CPI(M) leader Sitaram Yechury and D. Biswas of Forward Bloc.

Tomorrow, she is expected to meet former West Bengal chief minister Jyoti Basu, Rashtriya Janata Dal president Laloo Prasad Yadav and the newly elected MPs of her party.

INDUSTRY DOWNPLAYS LEFT'S STANCE

Congress bid to calm capital market

Press Trust of India

NEW DELHI, May 14. — Congress leader, Mr Manmohan Singh, along with chambers and industry bigwigs today sought to reassure bourses that the disinvestment path would not be abandoned altogether.

Seeking to assure investors and calm the volatile stock markets, the Congress today said that a healthy capital market was important for the country's development and it was not opposed to disinvestment *per se*.

Widely perceived as the finance minister in the next Congress-led coalition, Mr Manmohan Singh, credited for initiating reforms in 1991, told reporters here today "investors can rest assured that the new government will pursue policies to create favourable climate for growth." Simultaneously, apex chambers of industry today sought to downplay the anti-disinvestment stance taken by Left parties, which led to the crashing of stock markets, saying they would wait for the "official position" of the new government that will come at the Centre. "This is not the official view of the new government."

Many view points are expressed... they were expressed in NDA Government also... The Congress-led Government is yet to be in place. Let us first wait for the allies to work out a Common Minimum Programme," Mr N Srinivasan, CII director-general (designate) said.

Leaders of the CPI (M) and the CPI, emerging from an informal meeting to discuss the political situation, said the issue of disinvestment should be kept

out of any common minimum programme that could be the basis for forming a secular coalition government.

"Obviously it goes without saying that policy of disinvesting PSUs should go," the CPI general secretary, Mr A B Bardhan, said, a statement which led to stock market crash with



Manmohan Singh

BSE Sensex closing 329.60 points down at 5,069.87.

Ficci secretary general Mr Amit Mitra also expressed similar views and said Left had disinvested loss making public sector units in West Bengal.

While admitting that Mr Bardhan's statement has had some psychological impact, Mr Mitra said "markets were over-reacting".

Mr Srinivasan also expressed confidence that markets would bounce back next week once the new government is in place.

Mitra said markets were over-reading into the views expressed by leaders of Left parties, and stressed that one should wait for the Common Minimum Programme. Terming the statements made by leaders of the Left parties as "unfortunate", the Assocham president, Mr M K Sanghi said individual parties should

desist from making such statements as it sent wrong signals to investors both inside and outside the country.

He termed the stock market crash as a panic reaction and said the markets and businesses would stabilise once the new Government is in place and it spells out its policies.

Mr Sanghi said leaders like the former finance ministers, Mr Manmohan Singh, and Mr P Chidambaram who were the architects of the reform process in the country would not allow markets to go haywire.

He said the Left itself was now pushing for reforms in West Bengal and hoped that the reform process would not be halted.

Mr Mitra said lot was dependent on who would take over as the Prime Minister, if Left would be a part of the government and the Common Minimum Programme.

Earlier in the day, Mr Singh, entrusted with the responsibility of formulating a Common Minimum Programme in consultation with Congress allies and Left parties, had a telephonic talk with the CPI(M) general secretary, Mr H K S Surjeet.

Asked if Congress-led government would reverse the disinvestment policies under pressure from Left parties, Singh said "we are not pursuing privatisation as an ideology. We are not against disinvestment *per se*. We are open to all options." In the wake of the battering the oil PSUs shares received during the day, Mr Singh said "there should be no doubt that we will pursue reforms in oil sector that are in our national interest."

Cong to work out CMP with allies

Statesman News Service

NEW DELHI, May 14. — The exercise towards forming a Congress-led "secular coalition" government gathered momentum today as Mrs Sonia Gandhi entrusted Dr Manmohan Singh with the task of working out a draft common minimum programme in consultation with allies and Left parties.

Mrs Gandhi held a series of meetings with the leaders of her allies throughout the day at her residence. She will formally meet the President after her party's consultations with allies and Left parties are over.

The CPP is going to elect its leader tomorrow. It's clear that Mrs Gandhi will emerge as the "obvious, unanimous choice" for the post, which will enable her to be sworn in as the next Prime Minister.

Mrs Gandhi held meetings today with Mr Sharad Pawar, Mr D Biswas (Forward Bloc), and CPM leader Mr Sitaram Yechury. She also met Mr Laloo Prasad Yadav in the evening. She is slated to meet Mr M Karunanidhi on 16 May.

On 17 May the Congress might convene a joint meeting of all the partners, including the Left parties, to decide about their alliance leader and to give final touches to the CMP. Mrs Gandhi also convened a core strategy committee meeting of her party's senior leaders at her residence this afternoon.

The Congress is faced with a dilemma over including "non-NDA secular parties" such as the SP, BSP and JD-S. The party could strike a quid pro quo deal with JD-S leader Mr HD Deve Gowda since it needs his party's support in staking claim over the

Italy press salutes victory

ROME, May 14. —

The Italian press today saluted the victory of Italian-born Sonia Gandhi and her Congress party in the Indian elections. "Italian Sonia Gandhi triumphs," trumpeted Italy's leading daily *Corriere della Sera* in a front-page headline. "Sonia Gandhi: an Italian triumphs in India," echoed the headline in the leftist *La Repubblica*.

Against all expectations, there is now little doubt that the Italian from Orbassano will become India's next Prime Minister," said *La Repubblica*. The unexpected defeat of the BJP was seen by observers as an angry backlash by poor voters who felt ignored by a government whose focus was seen to be on the wealthier urban classes. *La Stampa* picked up on that theme, saying Sonia has "taken the place of Indira Gandhi in the hearts of the deprived masses." India's "economic miracle didn't save Vajpayee," noted the daily. — AFP

Karnataka government. The issue of SP-BSP is much more complicated as the Congress is split into two camps, with each of them backing either of the two UP satraps, Mr Mulayam Singh Yadav and Miss Mayawati.

The MDMK tonight said it will accept Mrs Gandhi as the next Prime Minister but ruled out joining the government. On the other hand, the JMM has expressed its desire to join the government, adds PTI.



THE STATESMAN

15 MAY 2004

AMAZING! POWER OF THE FINGER

Sonia draws out PM suspense

swept away tidal wave

OUR BUREAU

New Delhi, May 13: In the most dramatic election since Indira Gandhi was driven out of power in 1977, another Gandhi led the nation's oldest party back to the throne in Delhi after eight years in opposition.

After a day of stunning results with a confounding Congress resurgence in Gujarat setting the tone, Sonia Gandhi left the nation wondering who would be Prime Minister of the new government.

She simply said: "Normally this happens." It was a reply to a question if the Congress Parliamentary Party leader would become the Prime Minister.

The Congress emerged as the single largest party in Parliament, pushing the BJP to the second slot, and the alliance led by it ended some 30 seats ahead of the rival combine, a conclusion of the rival election that no exit or opinion poll had predicted.

"Victory and defeat are a part of life, which are to be viewed with equanimity," outgoing Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee said in an address to the nation, capping a day of searing shocks to his party and the National Democratic Alliance he led for six years.

The Indian voter left the NDA — possibly also the Congress alliance — blinking in amazement as the Choice of 2004 unfolded. It would never be known if the voters had surprised even themselves.

On Saturday, the CPP will meet to elect its leader who has traditionally taken the Prime Minister's chair. Sonia's choice of words — "normally this happens" — has left open interpretations. These are abnormal times, as this election has proven.

Senior AICC members Manmohan Singh, Arjun Singh, Pranab Mukherjee, Natwar Singh, Ambika Soni, Ghulam Nabi Azad, Ahmed Patel, Motilal Vora and Oscar Fernandes sprang into action to "build up pressure" on Sonia to lead the new government.

The two Singhs, Azad and Patel are establishing contact with the allies to obtain letters of support for a Congress-led government. "They have already begun talking to the allies," an AICC general secretary said.

Other than the question of when the Prime Minister's name would be announced, the hottest speculation centred on whether the Left, particularly the CPM, would join the government.

The CPM has emerged as the third largest party in Parliament



The Congress will ensure a stable and secular government

SONIA GANDHI

with a likely tally of over 50 and the Left as a group has more than 60 in a situation where its support is enough for the Congress alliance to form a government.

As in 1996, the CPM has been sucked into a debate over joining the government. It had then decided to stay out because of a conflict of interests between associating with the Congress in Delhi and fighting it in Bengal and Kerala.

Party general secretary Harkishen Singh Surjeet admitted that the conflict exists even today while at the same time hinting at a way out. "There are state-level contradictions. But there can be a different strategy at the national level," he said.

The CPM politburo and the central committee will meet between May 15 and 17, where, Surjeet said: "We will clinch the issue once and for all."

No dilemma assailed the other Congress allies whose leaders called up Sonia to congratulate her. Even Bahujan Samaj Party leader Mayavati, with whom efforts to form a pre-poll alliance had come a cropper, conveyed her party's support to Sonia's leadership.

If the Congress and its allies accept Mayavati into the combine, Mulayam Singh Yadav's

Samajwadi Party could find itself denied a share of power even after an impressive victory in Uttar Pradesh, where the BJP suffered deep humiliation.

Sonia has asked Pranab Mukherjee, who in the twilight of his career scored his first election win, to go into the manifestos of all allied parties to evolve a common minimum agenda for governance.

The CPM could insist on some compromises over economic policy, particularly in reference to divestment of public sector units.

Discussions on portfolios have already started among Congress leaders. If Sonia heads the government, the buzz is that Manmohan will be asked to head the foreign ministry because of the importance of "economic diplomacy", specifically in relations with the US. On the off-chance that Sonia declines the Prime Minister's post, there have been rumours that her first choice is Manmohan. P. Chidambaram would be a strong claimant to the finance ministry.



My party and alliance may have lost, but India has won

ATAL BIHARI VAJPAYEE

of the Shinde-led coalition.

'Hindutva' did not work its magic even in Gujarat as bread and butter issues moved to the fore, a rap on the knuckles for chief minister Narendra Modi. The BJP actually reported a score of 14 of 26, the worst since 1996. Even epicentres of the communal fratricide in 2002, like Vadodara and Anand voted Congress. Among the fallen fortresses was Mehsana, a seat won by the saffron party even in 1984 when it had only two Lok Sabha seats in the country.

Since 1991, the south has been the gateway to power in New Delhi. But the NDA's two southern allies were completely out of tune with the popular mood. Jayalithaa's strident anti-Sonia language was rejected in Tamil Nadu where the DMK-led alliance annexed every seat in sight. In Andhra Pradesh, the results of 1999 were neatly reversed, with the Congress and allies taking all but six of the 42 seats.

The north reported a similar picture. Saffron was washed off the map in Bihar where the BJP and its ally were sent reeling by the polarisation of the Mandal communities, Dalits and minorities not seen since 1991. Only this time, Laloo Prasad Yadav led the charge with the Congress as a

small, if respected, ally. Uttar Pradesh saw a surge in Congress votes though not in seats. Here, the BJP was reduced to a few oases like Bulandshahr where a chastened Kalyan Singh won. The Samajwadi Party-led alliance cornered the cultivator's vote and took nearly half the 80 seats. It seems the Centre's handling of relief in last year's drought, the worst in 35 years in north India, convinced the kisan that India was not shining.

Mayavati got her best-ever total of 20 seats. In fact, the "reverse social engineering" worked all the way. In a fascinating twist, Unnao has a Brahmin MP for the first time in nearly three decades, ironically under the banner of the Dalit-led BSP.

There is little doubt the verdict was stunning and momentous. Its scale left even seasoned observers stunned, while all pollsters ran for cover.

The facts are simple. The NDA was sadly out of touch with reality. It was lulled into complacency born of three state victories. It also misread the monsoon magic in north India. Despite a bumper crop in the valley of the Ganga, it was routed all the way. In the combined tally of UP, Bihar and Bengal, it was reduced to 24 out of 162 seats.

The flip side of the coin is worth a look. After a decline that goes back to 1989, the Congress has recovered significant ground among its traditional voters. All the states with large numbers of Muslims, like Andhra, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Bengal, have either rallied to the Congress or voted for the Left. The alienation of the Babri Masjid era is but a dim memory.

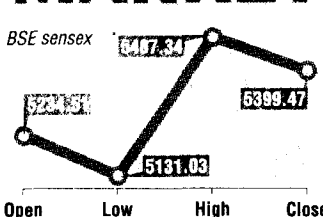
Sonia has not only recovered the ground that Rao lost. She has trodden on ground her late husband never covered. Building an alliance was the first step to power and she succeeded beyond anyone's expectations.

The NDA dismissed her as a paper tiger. Once it was too late, it tried damage control by wooing the most unlikely of potential allies. But the voters had other ideas.

They put an end to plans for a fresh *raj tilak* for Vajpayee. As with Rajiv Gandhi in 1989, early polls backfired as India's first BJP Prime Minister was left contemplating possible retirement.

For Sonia, winning might have been the easy part. Ruling a diverse coalition with competing demands is a new game for the Congress. But the voters rung in the new and rung out the old. And they did it as they often have in the world's largest democracy, decisively and clearly.

MARKET



Shock opening but steady close as hung House horror disappears

TALLY • Total seats 543 • Counting held 539 • Results 532

GROUPS	CONG+	BJP+	OTHERS
Cong and allies	215		
BJP and allies	182		
Others	135		
	Congress 144	BJP 137	CPM 43
	DMK 16	Sena 12	SP 36
	RJD 20	TDP 5	BSP 17
	NCP 9	Akali 8	CPI 10
	Rest 26	Rest 20	Rest 29



INSIDE

• Four-page election special
• Metro package on Calcutta coup
• Plus six other pages capture the political drama

অস্তিত্ব অটল, উদয়ে সনিয়া

বিরোধের
চোরা শ্রোত,
ডুবে গেল
বিজেপি

রজত রায়

সকলের সব হিসাব ভুল করে
দিল জনা দেশ। লোকসভা নির্বাচনের
ফলাফলে অটলবিহারী বাজপেয়ীর এন
ডি এ সরকারকে হারিয়ে দিল সনিয়া
গাধীর নেতৃত্বে কংগ্রেস ও তার
জেটসঙ্গীরা। দিল্লির মসনদে এ বার
আসীন হচ্ছে কংগ্রেস জেট। এই ভাবেই
১৯৯৬, '৯৮ ও '৯৯ পর পর তিনটি
লোকসভায় বিরোধী আসনে বসার পরে
আবার ক্ষমতায় ফিরছে কংগ্রেস।

জনগণেশের রায় মেনে নিয়ে
প্রধানমন্ত্রী বৃহস্পতিবার সন্ধ্যায় রঞ্জিত
কাছে গিয়ে ইন্তুফাপত্র দিয়েছেন। এ বার
তাকে দেখা যাবে লোকসভায় বিরোধী
দলনেতার আসনে। আজ ইন্তুফা দেওয়ার
আগে মন্ত্রিসভার আনুষ্ঠানিক শেষ বৈঠক
হয়। তার পরেই সুখমা স্বরাজ জানিয়ে
দেন, ঠিক হয়েছে বাজপেয়ী বিরোধী
নেতার দায়িত্ব নেবেন। পরে জাতির
উদ্দেশ্যে বিদায়ী ভাষণ দিতে গিয়ে
বাজপেয়ী কিছুটা দার্শনিকসুলভ সুরে
বলেন, হার-জিত জগতে থাকবেই। এখন
থেকে তাঁরা বিরোধী আসনে বসলেও
দেশের স্বার্থ সংরক্ষণ সব বিষয়েই
সরকারের পাশে থাকবেন।

এ দিন সকালে জেট গণনা শুরু
হতেই বোঝা যায়, যুগ ফেরত সমীক্ষা
থেকে বিশেষজ্ঞদের অনুমান কিছুই
মিলছে না। শুধু দক্ষিণ ভারতেই নয়,
দেশের বিভিন্ন প্রান্তেই এন ডি এ
সরকারের বিরুদ্ধে যে একটা চোরাশ্রোত
বইছিল, তার আঁচ বিশেষজ্ঞরা তো
বটেই, সবাব্যমথ্যমও দিতে পারেনি।
ফল বেরনোর পরে দেখা গেল, কেন্দ্রে বি
জে পি-নেতৃত্বাধীন এন ডি এ সরকারের
পাঁচ বছরের শাসনে দেশের কোনায়
কোনায় এতটাই বিভ্রাট জমেছিল যে
তার আগে পড়তে হয়েছে বি জে পি-র
সহযোগীদেরও। অঙ্কে তেলুগু দেশম,
পশ্চিমবঙ্গে তৃণমূল কংগ্রেস,
তামিলনাড়ুতে জয়ন্তালিতার এডিএমকে,
এমনকী মহারাষ্ট্রে শিবসেনাকেও
স্বতন্ত্র হতে হয়েছে সে জন্যই।

তার চাইতেও গুরুত্বপূর্ণ, বি জে পি
ও সঙ্ঘ পরিবারের যাবতীয় হিন্দু
রাজনীতির সূতিকাগার গুজরাতের বি
জে পি ভেটরিয়ে বড় মাপের ধস
নেচ্ছে। সেখানে ২৬টির মধ্যে গভ বার
কংগ্রেসের ছিল মাত্র ছয়টি আসন, বাকি
সবই বি জে পি। দাঙ্গার পরেও সেখানে
বিধানসভা নির্বাচনে বি জে পি বিপুল
ভাবে জিতেছিল। সঙ্ঘ পরিবারের
নয়নের মণি নরেন্দ্র মোদী এ বার বাকি
আসনগুলিও কংগ্রেসের হাত থেকে
কেড়ে নেওয়ার ব্যাপারে প্রচণ্ড
আত্মবিশ্বাসী ছিলেন। কিন্তু কংগ্রেস
সেখানে এ বার ১২টি আসন পেয়েছে।
গোটা দেশের ফলের মতোই গুজরাতের
ফলও এ বারের ভোটার বিরাট চমক।
সঙ্ঘ পরিবারের অন্যতম সদস্য হিন্দু
পরিষদের নেতা দিলীপ জিবেদী
পরাভয়ের জন্য আঙুল তুলেছেন
বাজপেয়ী ও তাঁর শরিক নেতাদের
দিকে। আমদাবাদে জিবেদী বলেছেন,
হিন্দু থেকে সরে এসে মুসলিম ভোষণই
কাল হয়েছে এন ডি এ-র। মুম্বইতে
শিবসেনার মুখপাত্র সুভাষ দেশাই ও
দিল্লিতে আর এস এস মুখপাত্র রাম
মাধবও একই সুরে বলেছেন। বি জে পি-র
স্বাস্থ্য, নরেন্দ্র মোদী না পারলেও
প্রতিবেশী মধ্যপ্রদেশে আর এক কট্টর
হিন্দুত্ববাদী সন্ন্যাসিনী উমা ভারতী
পেরেছেন। মধ্যপ্রদেশ ও রাজস্থানে বি
জে পি-র ছয় মাস আগের বিধানসভা
ফলেরই প্রতিফলন হয়েছে এ বার
লোকসভা ভোটেও।

বাজপেয়ীর বিদায়বার্তার ক্ষেত্র প্রস্তুত
হয়েছে দক্ষিণ ভারতের সঙ্ঘ



প্রধানমন্ত্রীও সনিয়া কি না, উত্তর মিলল না

জয়ন্ত ঘোষাল • নয়াদিল্লি

১৩ মে: প্রত্যাশিত ভাবেই কংগ্রেস
অনুরোধ করলেও তিনি প্রধানমন্ত্রীর পদ
গ্রহণ করেন কি না, সে ব্যাপারে সনিয়া
গাধী আজ রাত পর্যন্ত নিরুত্তরই রইলেন।
ফলে, প্রধানমন্ত্রী কে হবেন, সনিয়া নিজে,
নাকি মনমোহন সিংহের মতোই অন্য
কোনও নেতা, সে প্রশ্নের উত্তর এখনও
পাওয়া যায়নি। কংগ্রেস ওয়ার্কিং কমিটির
বৈঠকে দলের তরফে প্রধানমন্ত্রী হওয়ার
জন্য সনিয়াকে অনুরোধ করা হলেও তিনি
নিজে এ নিয়ে কোনও মন্তব্য করেননি।
বাইরে সাংবাদিকদের প্রশ্নের উত্তরে তিনি
শুধু জানিয়েছেন, দলের রীতি মেনেই
কংগ্রেস সংসদীয় পার্টির বৈঠকেই দলনেতা
বাঁচিৎ হবেন।

এর আগে ত্রিশত্বে লোকসভা হওয়ার
সম্ভাবনায় শরিক দল ও বাইরে সমর্থন

করতে প্রস্তুত অন্য দলগুলির কাছে
প্রধানমন্ত্রী হিসাবে মনমোহনের নাম
বাজিয়ে দেখেছিল কংগ্রেস হাইকমান্ড।
ভোটার ফলে পরিবর্তিত পরিস্থিতিতে
দলের মধ্য থেকে সনিয়াকে প্রধানমন্ত্রী
করার চাপ আসছে। শনিবার কংগ্রেস
সংসদীয় দলের নেতা নির্বাচনের বৈঠক।
প্রধানমন্ত্রী কে হবেন, সে প্রশ্নের
ফয়সালা অবশ্য কংগ্রেস সংসদীয় পার্টির
বৈঠকের আগেই ঠিক হয়ে যাবে। কংগ্রেস
সংসদীয় পার্টির বৈঠকে আনুষ্ঠানিক ভাবে
নেতা নির্বাচন হওয়ার পরেই কংগ্রেসের
নেতৃত্ব নতুন সরকারের শপথগ্রহণ। তার
আগের দিন, শুক্রবারই সনিয়া আলোচনায়
বসছেন শরিক দলগুলির সঙ্গে। উদ্দেশ্য
পরিষ্কার, প্রধানমন্ত্রী পদে তাঁর
গ্রহণযোগ্যতা নিয়ে শরিকদলগুলির
প্রতিক্রিয়াও বাজিয়ে দেখতে আগ্রহী
কংগ্রেস হাইকমান্ড।

তবে এই মুহূর্তে সনিয়া প্রধানমন্ত্রী
হবেন কিনা, তা নিয়েই জল্পনা তুলে। সনিয়া
নিজে কী ভাবছেন, তার কোনও ইঙ্গিত
দেননি। একটি মহলের মতে, কংগ্রেস

দলের নেত্রী হিসাবে তিনি অবশ্যই
প্রধানমন্ত্রী পদে বসতে পারেন। বিশেষ
করে, সনিয়ার বিদেশিনি প্রশ্রুতির মীমাংসা
যখন জেটের রায় ফয়সালা হয়েই

গিয়েছে, তখন এ নিয়ে কোনও বাধাই
থাকতে পারে না। আবার, শেষ পর্যন্ত যদি
সনিয়া নিজে না-হয়ে মনমোহনকেই দলের
সংসদীয় নেতা হিসাবে দাঁড় করিয়ে দেন,

তা হলে এক টিপে তিনি অনেকগুলি পাখি
বধ করে ফেলাবেন বলে আর একটি মহল
মনে করছে। প্রথমত, 'বিদেশিনি' গ্রামে বি
জে পি-র লাগাতার প্রচারকে দুই তেলে
ভোটে দেশবাসীর রায় পাওয়ার পরেও
তিনি নিজে প্রধানমন্ত্রী হওয়ার সুযোগ ছেড়ে
দিলে, তাঁর ভাবমূর্তি যে দেশবাসীর কাছে
আরও উজ্জল হবে, তাতে সন্দেহ নেই।
আবার নেহরু-গাধী পরিবারের পরবর্তী

সরকারের পরাজয়ের পরে কংগ্রেস
ক্ষমতায় এলে সংস্কারের উল্টো পথে
হটবে বলে চার দিকে যে রব উঠছে,
মনমোহনকে প্রধানমন্ত্রী করে দেশে-বিদেশে
সেই প্রশ্নেও সঠিক সংকেত পাঠানো
যাবে। কারণ, ১৯৯১ সালে এই মনমোহন
সিংহই অর্থমন্ত্রী হিসাবে এ দেশে সংস্কারের
দরজা খুলেছিলেন।

সনিয়ার নেতৃত্বাধীন সরকারে শেষ
পর্যন্ত বামদলগুলি যাতে যোগ দেয় তার
জন্য চেষ্টা করছেন কংগ্রেস নেতারা।
বামদলগুলিকে সরকারের ভিতরে আনতে
পারলে কেন্দ্রের স্থায়িত্ব অনেক বেশি হবে
বলে মনে করা হচ্ছে। এই ব্যাপারে সি পি
এম, সি পি আই এখনও প্রকাশ্যে মুখ না-
খুললেও কোনও ইতিবাচক ইঙ্গিতও
দেখনি। দলের পলিটব্যুরো এবং কেন্দ্রীয়
কমিটির বৈঠক হবে ১৫ থেকে ১৭ মে।
এর পর পার্টির পাতায়

বাইরে থেকেই সমর্থনের পথে বামপন্থীরা

প্রসূন আচার্য

দলের মধ্যে একাংশের চাপ থাকলেও সি পি এমের
নেতৃত্বাধীন বামেরা দিল্লিতে কংগ্রেসের নেতৃত্বাধীন কোনও জেট
সরকারে সম্ভবত অংশগ্রহণ করছেন না। বাইরে থেকেই তাঁরা
সরকারকে সমর্থন করবেন। সি পি এম এবং সি পি আই দু'দলই
সম্ভবত এই নীতি নিতে চলেছে।

দুই কমিউনিস্ট দলের সহযোগী আর এস পি এবং ফরওয়ার্ড
ব্লক সরকারে অংশগ্রহণ তো দু'রের কথা, সরাসরি কংগ্রেসের
নেতৃত্বাধীন কোনও সরকারকে সমর্থন করবে কি না, তা নিয়েও

ভাবনাচিন্তা শুরু করেছে। তবে সি পি এমের নেতারা নিশ্চিত,
ওই দু'দল এমন কোনও কাজ করবে না, যাতে কংগ্রেসের
নেতৃত্বাধীন ধর্মনিরপেক্ষ জেট সরকারের কোনও অসুবিধা হয়।
তারা কী করবে, কোন নীতির ভিত্তিতে কংগ্রেস সরকারকে
সমর্থন করা হবে, তা ঠিক করতে সি পি এমের কেন্দ্রীয় কমিটি ও
পলিটব্যুরোর বৈঠকে বসছে। সি পি আই-ও তাদের জাতীয়
কর্মসমিতির বৈঠক ডেকেছে। অন্য দিকে, ফরওয়ার্ড ব্লক এবং
আর এস পি-র সঙ্গে কথা বলতে আজ, শুক্রবার বৈঠক ডাকা
হয়েছে বামফ্রন্টের। সব বাম দল মিলে এ বার ৬২টি আসন
এর পর নয়ের পাতায়

Sonia's next test

518
9.8.14
14/15
BJP's next job

In complex, socially fractured, regionally stratified country, every national election tells many stories, from which it is the unenviable job of commentators to pick out a theme. The story of this election is Sonia Gandhi. Written off by even Congress sympathisers after the December assembly election defeats, thought to come across as small in stature compared to the now ex-Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, not particularly articulate, foreign-born and family-privileged — Sonia was the leader the Congress was said to have been handicapped by. With Congress increasing its tally beyond perhaps even its own expectations, with almost every alliance which Sonia arranged bringing in significant gains, and with the "Atal factor" not seriously helping BJP, the issue of whether the fourth Nehru-Gandhi can lead her party has been settled. For now. That caveat is important because Sonia, justifiably euphoric having proved so many people wrong, has another test — as Prime Minister. The electoral calculus that comes up makes an inarguable case for her being just that — she leads the largest party in the non-NDA political spectrum and therefore has to be leader of the new government.

If that doesn't happen, it would be wrong. But it would be equally wrong and very foolish to assume that the victory the elated Sonia has staged will ipso facto steady the appletart of governance. Sonia will have to come across as prime ministerial. Being prime ministerial may not help you win elections, as Vajpayee has accepted, but while on the job, there's no choice. And Sonia, like it or not, will be compared to Vajpayee, whose quick and graceful acceptance of a loss of mandate defines the man. Vajpayee will be wondering how cruel politics is. But Sonia must remember that, also. For she will be compared to Vajpayee, who, even in the aftermath of an upset defeat, cannot be described as anything less than one of the finest Prime Ministers India has ever had. In many ways therefore, another battle will begin for Sonia.

For Vajpayee, the battle, the war and most probably his public life is over. In his eighties but much more in control of himself than other former Prime Ministers, he is unlikely to carry on as a has-been, looking for spots under the limelight. Even his political opponents must concede that India's public life will be poorer without Atal Bihari. So, will the BJP, because with Vajpayee's innings over, with Advani in his late seventies and still not a mass leader and with every member of the younger generation ambitious for himself or herself, the party that had supposedly solved the leadership issue is suddenly looking at a vacuum. There will also be recriminations and bloodletting in the BJP about making Vajpayee the poster boy of this campaign, of agreeing to follow the Atal line on development-centric campaign, of trying to create a pan-Indian theme.

This election has shown that India is too fractured to be won by a pan-Indian theme. But that doesn't mean the BJP should give it up. In the Opposition now, the party must keep working on the theme. Even if India has decided for now it does not want Atal Bihari as Prime Minister, India needs his ideas. The BJP must have the guts, the intelligence and the responsibility to ensure that it doesn't waste the legacy of a leader it is unlikely to

No sacrifice big enough to form secular government: Congress

By Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, MAY 12. The Congress today indicated that "no sacrifice was big enough" to enable the formation of a government comprising parties that fought on the anti-National Democratic Alliance (NDA) platform, separately or in alliance. It was a clear hint that the "leadership issue" will not be allowed to thwart the formation of a secular government.

As the Communist Party of India (Marxist) general secretary, Harkishan Singh Surjeet, became the focal point of confabulations among the secular parties, two issues were clarified — there are no takers for the so-called 'third front' idea, and most party chiefs are willing to sit together to settle the leadership issue amicably.

Significantly, the Congress indicated that "its doors will be open" to those leaving the NDA, provided they agreed on a common minimum programme to be drafted by the secular alliance. Also, party sources said that the Congress-led alliance would be inclined to stake its claim to form a government immediately if its numbers, along with those of the Left, exceeded those of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led NDA. The issue of other parties joining the alliance could come later.

The reported statement of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam president, M. Karunanidhi, in Chennai that he personally preferred the DMK remaining outside the government was a dampener on the Congress. It was tight-lipped on the development. However, there was satisfaction that the Rashtriya Janata Dal chief, Laloo Prasad Yadav, had come out openly in support of not only the alliance, but also the candidature of Sonia Gandhi for prime ministership.

The Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister, Mu-

layam Singh Yadav's categorical statement that he would not support the NDA, describing suggestions to the contrary as a "personal insult," was seen as a positive development. While ruling himself out of the race for prime ministership, Mr. Yadav was ambivalent on support for Ms. Gandhi's candidature. "This is a question that will be decided once the results are declared. All the secular parties will sit together and decide on this," he said.

The Congress also noted that the Na-

tionalist Congress Party leader, Sharad Pawar, had made an unambiguous statement about remaining with the secular alliance.

Mr. Surjeet told presspersons that the priorities for the secular parties were to form a coalition government and decide on the modalities for running a strong and stable government in the event of their being able to muster the required numbers to stake a credible claim. No party had taken a tough line on the leadership issue.

There was hectic activity throughout the day with several leaders of the secular parties meeting one another. The former Prime Minister, Chandra Shekhar, met Ms. Gandhi after calling on another former Prime Minister, V.P. Singh. Emerging from the meeting with Ms. Gandhi, Mr. Chandra Shekhar said he had "no problem with Ms. Gandhi's leadership" and "by virtue of being the largest party, the Congress should lead the secular front."

Mr. Surjeet's residence was another important meeting point. The former Prime Minister, H.D. Deve Gowda, the Congress spokesperson, Jaipal Reddy, the Communist Party of India general secretary, A.B. Bardhan, and Mr. Mulyam Singh met the CPI(M) leader and exchanged views on the political situation.

Anil Ambani meets Sonia

By Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, MAY 12. Amid the hectic behind-the-scenes parleys on government formation, the vice-chairman and managing director of the Reliance group, Anil Ambani, met the Congress president, Sonia Gandhi, here this evening. He spent close to a quarter-of-an-hour with Ms. Gandhi but refused to divulge details about what transpired. Neither was the Congress forthcoming with details about the meeting. Mr. Ambani's meeting with Ms. Gandhi is significant given his proximity to the

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister, Mulyam Singh Yadav, whose Samajwadi Party the Congress is trying to woo in the eventuality of its secular alliance being in a position to form the next government at the Centre.

The Bharatiya Janata Party was quick to react to the development. It expressed surprise that such a meeting had taken place in full public gaze.

Though there were speculative reports that Mr. Ambani had held a similar meeting with the BJP leadership earlier in the day, there was no confirmation from either side.

SATURDAY, MAY 8, 2004

CONGRESS ON NEW GROUND

THE CONGRESS PARTY can be said to have snatched defeat from the jaws of victory in 1999 through the ham-handed moves it made following the fall of the Vajpayee Government. The big miscalculation at that juncture was taking for granted a wide range of national and regional parties and making a unilateral public announcement that an alternative Congress-led government would have the support of 272 Lok Sabha MPs. When nothing of the kind materialised, the whole project collapsed messily. This time the party has waited until the completion of two thirds of the general election to proclaim the inevitability of "a secular, non-National Democratic Alliance government led by the Congress." Whether this comes off or not, the party can hope to make gains from the current Lok Sabha election in terms of acceptance by most of the other secular parties as the principal opposition to the BJP at the national level. This marks a significant change from 1996 when the Congress was forced to lend outside support to a third front alternative to the BJP put together by the Janata Dal, the Left, the Samajwadi Party, the Telugu Desam Party, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and some others. Almost all the parties in the United Front were opposed to both the BJP and the Congress. Now the Left parties, the DMK and the Rashtriya Janata Dal have accepted the dominant role of the Congress at the Centre. In fact, none of the former constituents of the United Front, not even the Samajwadi Party, sees an anti-BJP front minus the Congress as a viable option today.

No doubt, the turnaround reflects profoundly changed circumstances. The 1996 election result was seen as an anti-Congress mandate as that party had been in power the previous five years. Now it is perceived as a bulwark against

the BJP. However, other factors have contributed to the increasing acceptability of the Congress as an active member and even leader of a non-BJP coalition. The first factor has been the willingness of the party to search for and find new allies in States where it was no longer a dominant force. It showed a readiness to strike electoral deals as a junior partner in Tamil Nadu and Bihar. In Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh, the party as a senior partner showed an accommodative attitude towards the Nationalist Congress Party and the Telangana Rashtra Samiti. The only setback in alliance formation was in Uttar Pradesh where the party first wooed the Bahujan Samaj Party and later the Samajwadi Party, but could not conclude seat-sharing agreements with either.

Although there is no agreement among the non-BJP parties on who should be the next Prime Minister in the event of the National Democratic Alliance being unable to form the government, the central role of the Congress in such a situation is not under dispute. The Congress and other secular parties have moved away from their 1999 positions. Making a virtue of necessity perhaps, the Congress has not only overcome its inhibitions about a coalition government but has also recognised as potential allies parties that have grown at its expense in the fairly recent period. The Left parties, on their part, have clear-sightedly demarcated the imperative of a national-level alternative to the BJP from their fight against the Congress in States such as West Bengal, Tripura and Kerala. The question is whether the Congress will take advantage of the new situation by persisting with an inclusive approach that gives enough space for the smaller parties in a broad coalition — or return to its old ways after this election is over.

Congress storms back to power in Andhra Pradesh

By S. Nagesh Kumar

HYDERABAD, MAY 11. An anti-incumbency groundswell dashed the Telugu Desam Party president, N. Chandrababu Naidu's hopes of retaining power for a third term in the Andhra Pradesh Assembly and swept the Congress led by Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy back to the centre stage.

Riding on the popular support in all three regions of the State, the Congress won 185 seats on its own and a three-fourths majority of 226 seats in the 294-member Assembly in alliance with the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (26), the CPI(M) (9) and the CPI (6).

The debacle for the TDP-BJP is a major setback to the NDA's hopes of returning to power because projections show they can win only three to five Lok Sabha seats against the 36 they held in the 13th Lok Sabha. The TDP could win only 47 Assembly seats against 180 in the last elections. Its ally, the BJP, bagged just two out of the 27 seats it contested.

The Congress alliance made roads into the Telugu Desam

bastion — the coastal Andhra region — where it won 102 out of 134 seats. In the Telangana region, the alliance bagged 84 of the 107 seats. So extensive was the sweep by the Congress-led alliance partners that the TDP slumped to its worst electoral performance since it was founded by N.T. Rama Rao. When it last yielded power to the Congress in 1989, the TDP had man-

Assembly tally		
Congress	185	226
TRS	26	
CPI (M)	9	
CPI	6	
TDP	47	49
BJP	2	
Independents	11	19
AIMIM	4	
JP	2	
SP	1	
BSP	1	

aged to win 74 seats. It fared poorly even in Hyderabad, which Mr. Naidu showcased to the rest of the world, by winning a mere two out of 13 seats.

An overwhelming majority of Mr. Naidu's 38 Ministerial colleagues and the Speaker, K. Pratibha Bharathi, fell by the wayside in the wake of the Congress' spectacular victory. Six time-winner P. Ashok Gajapathi Raju could not make it this time and was defeated by an independent in Vizianagaram.

Among the seven Ministers who made it this time were Y. Ramakrishnudu, T. Devender Goud, K. Subbarayudu, N. Janardhan Reddy, P. Narayanaswamy, Ch. Ayanna Patrudu and Uma Madhava Reddy. As a small consolation, Mr. Naidu himself romped home with a massive margin of 59,588 votes over his little-known Congress rival, Subramanyam Reddy, in Kuppam.

As soon as the counting trends showed that the Congress was heading for a landslide victory, Mr. Chandrababu Naidu drove to the Raj Bhavan and tendered his resignation to the

Governor, S. S. Barnala, ending his eight year and eight month-long stint as the longest-serving Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh. Declining to discuss the reasons for his party's poor showing, he said he "bowed with humility to the wisdom of the people."

Mr. Naidu's exit has paved the way for the installation of Y. S. Rajasekhara Reddy as the next Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh. Dr. Reddy is expected to be elected unanimously as the leader of the Congress Legislature Party (CLP) at its meeting here at 11 a.m. on Wednesday in the presence of AICC observers Shivraj Patil and Ghulam Nabi Azad. The AICC president, Sonia Gandhi, was among the first to congratulate Dr. Reddy for the party's excellent performance.

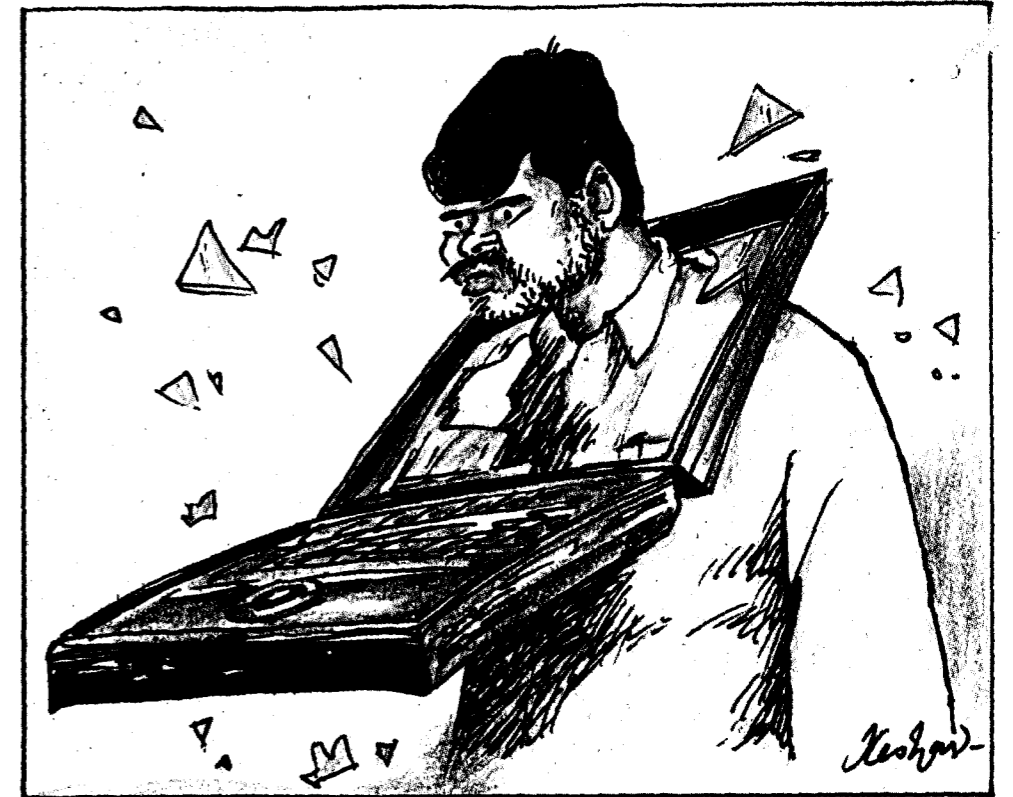
The Congress leader attributed his party's victory to the antagonism among farmers, agricultural labourers, women, youth and, above all, government employees who resented Mr. Naidu's policies. Dr. Reddy said the "hi-tech governance was full of hype and cosmetic development that did not bene-

fit anyone except the middlemen."

Confident till the last moment that his party would at least scrape through with a simple majority, the TDP supremo apparently did not realise the threat posed by the anti-incumbency factor, which ultimately turned into a wave. The Congress' promise of supplying free power, which contrasted sharply with the stiff power tariffs the TDP Government had imposed, the unrest among farmers over the lack of irrigation facilities coupled with drought and corruption were cited by leaders of the Congress alliance as the reasons for their victory.

These factors evidently contributed to a 7.8 per cent swing away from the TDP against the 1999 Assembly elections where as a two per cent swing was sufficient to unseat it from power. The TDP-BJP combination had surged to victory in the last elections by winning 47.54 per cent of the votes and 191 seats. This time, it could win only 49 seats and 39.69 per cent of the votes.

Editorial on Page 10
Sonia thanks AP voters: Page 11



'It's important that Congress comes to power'

At a time when some exit polls have breathed a modicum of optimism into the Congress campaign to cobble together a coalition to replace the NDA, Congress president Mrs Sonia Gandhi has once again become the focus of political attention. In a wide-ranging interview halfway through the elections to the 14th Lok Sabha, Mrs Gandhi speaks her mind to JONATHAN POWER on secularism, her Catholic values, the nuclear issue and what made her join active politics.

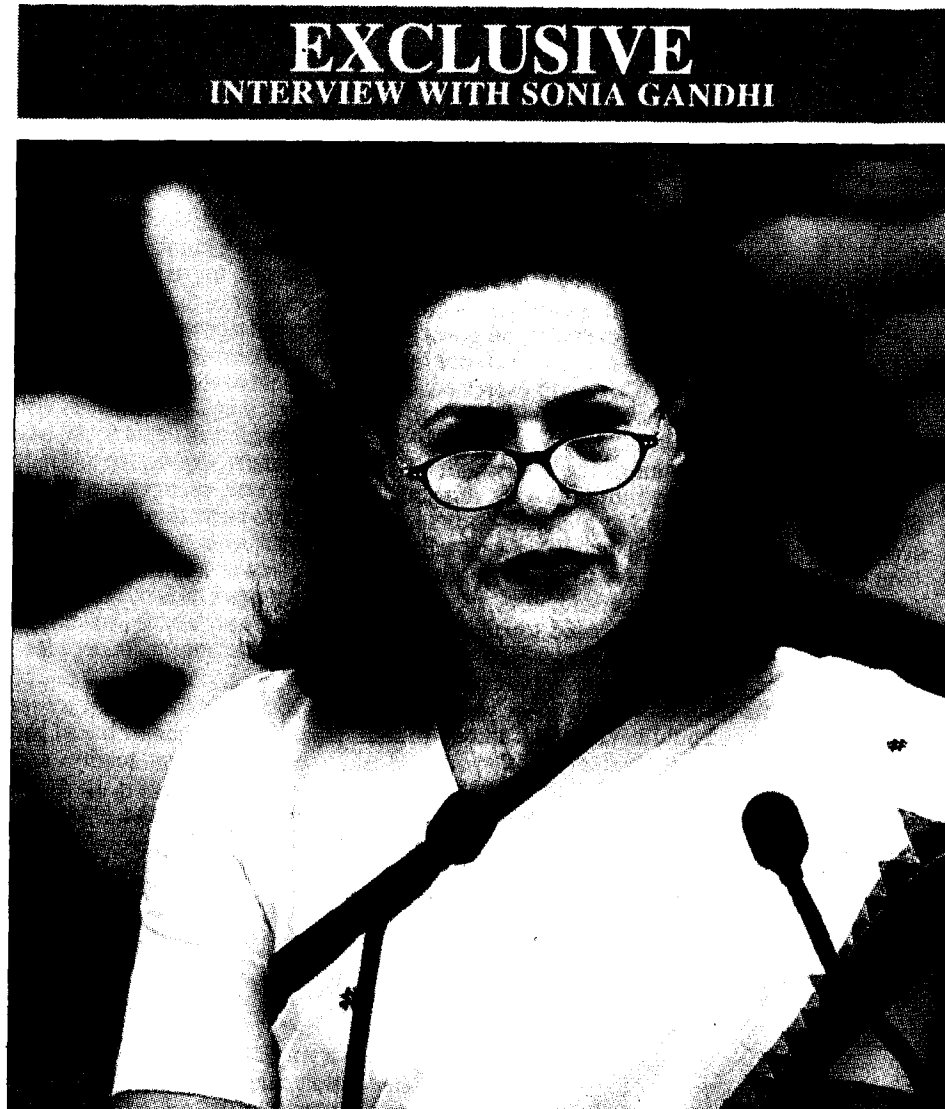
TWO weeks before the count we already can be pretty sure of the outcome of the Indian election. Mrs Sonia Gandhi, head of the Congress party, the fifty-seven-year-old widow of the slain Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, will not be the next leader of India. There is a very slight chance that this is wrong — opinion polling sometimes goes awry.

Mrs Gandhi is the underestimated candidate. She has everything against her — her origins (Italian), her religion (nominally Catholic), her education (modest) and, not least, that this excruciatingly shy woman pales into a shadow compared with her murdered mother-in-law, Indira Gandhi, the master politician. Even some of her staff are dismissive, calling her *goongi gudiya* (mute doll).

In fact, she comes across as a woman who is not at all fazed at the prospect of moving from housewife to be the ruler of 500 million males. Moreover, the Congress hopes, apolitical Indians uncomfortable with the religious fundamentalism associated with the incumbent government may yet decide at the last moment to vote for her.

It is rare a journalist arriving for an interview with a politician doesn't get a handshake, especially so when they are totally alone. But that is how it was with Sonia Gandhi. I felt left with no alternative but to ask my last question first. I would break the ice or be broken by it. "May I ask you a very personal question?" Quietly, but quickly, the answer came back: "Yes". "Isn't it difficult to go into the centre of the maelstrom of Indian politics knowing all you do of its dangers and the terrible toll it has taken with two assassinations in your family? Are you really at peace with that?" "I am at peace. I have thought it through."

"Why did the pull of politics overcome your inhibitions? You had long said you would never go into politics." "At the time of the 1998 election (the) Congress was in



serious difficulties. We were badly divided and factions were fighting each other. Senior members of the party who had tried to persuade me before came to me again.

My children were then grown up. I agreed. Moreover, I feel very strongly about India being a secular state. By secular state I mean one that will encompass all religions.

The present government doesn't stand for that. It is important that Congress is in power."

She looks surprised when I ask her about her own religious convictions. "I'm not religious. My family never was. My father never went to church; my mother did but not every week. I got sent away to boarding school so I suppose that had its effect too." "So on what principles do you draw on when you make moral decisions, in family life or in politics?" "I suppose these Catholic values are at the back of my mind," she replies without needing to pause to weigh what she is saying. "And how would that affect a decision whether or not in a crisis to use nuclear weapons? Could you press the button?" She grimaces but doesn't answer. The rolled eyes tell it all.

I break the silence recounting how when Zbigniew Brzezinski was President Jimmy Carter's National Security Advisor I asked him this question. She asked me what his answer was — brutal in a word — and then told me she had just been given his latest book. "But Robert McNamara (US Secretary of Defense, 1961-68) has a very different view on the value of nuclear weapons," I opine. "I like that man. He's been here a couple of times for seminars we've organised. I have learnt a lot from him," she says.

The mood has changed. Her lips are no longer pressed. The tension has dissipated. For the first time she is looking me in the eye. I can see she wants to talk about the dilemma of nuclear weapons. She asks me not to write in detail about this part of the conversation but I am left with the feeling of a moral soul who will not take a step towards war with the equanimity that characterised her mother-in-law.

We end up talking at length about Mrs. Gandhi senior and the amusing political stories she used to regale me with. She raises her hands ever so slightly. My time is up.

SONIASPEAK

"I feel very strongly about India being a secular state. The present government doesn't stand for that."



"I'm not religious. My family never was. My father never went to church; my mother did but not every week. I got sent away to boarding school so I suppose that had its effect too. I suppose these Catholic values are at the back of my mind," she replies without needing to pause to weigh what she is saying.

And how would that affect a decision whether or not in a crisis to use nuclear weapons? Could you press the button? She grimaces but doesn't answer. The rolled eyes tell it all.

Cong against SF 23/4 space to third force

Mohan Sahay in New Delhi

April 28. — The Congress is not prepared to concede the political space to the "third force" in the event of the NDA failing to get a majority in the new Lok Sabha.

This view was expressed during a strategy session of senior Congress leaders held immediately after polling on 26 April, sources said.

The dominant view of the party is to lead the government rather than repeat the 1996 United Front experiment by allowing someone from the third force to become the Prime Minister with Congress support, according to senior party leaders.

The move initiated by the CPI-M leader, Mr Harkishen Singh Surjeet, to forge a third force and then bargain with the Congress to support it may not find favour with the party leadership. Under the third force's scheme of things, the Congress would be a major partner in the government. "The Congress would be invited to share power," is what a senior CPI-M leader told *The Statesman*.

In Kolkata, Mr Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee today reiterated that there was a possibility of a third front assuming power at the Centre.

"Talks are being held by the CPI-M's central leadership. If the NDA returned to power, it would spell disaster for the country. We are trying to prevent it," the chief minister said.

However, even before these moves get under way, Mr Laloo Yadav has thrown a spoke into the wheel by abusing Mr Mulayam Singh Yadav publicly. In a television show, Mr Yadav questioned Mr Mulayam



Mrs Sonia Gandhi at a rally in Lucknow on Wednesday. — AFP

Singh's secular credentials and rejected outright the Samajwadi Party's role in any future government formation exercise.

"The next non-BJP, non-NDA government would be formed minus Mulayam Singh," the RJD leader told the interviewer.

A senior Congress leader said: "It is too early to commit on the government formation. It all depends on how many seats the Congress gets. Why should we concede ground to the third force if we have more than 150-160 seats?"

Whether the Congress would lead the government and if so would Mrs Sonia Gandhi be the prime ministerial candidate, or would it be someone else in the party — decisions such as these would be taken at the core level, Congress sources said.

BSP leader Ms Mayawati today ruled out aligning with either the BJP or the Congress after the Lok Sabha elections. She was addressing a rally at Phulpur, 40 km from Allahabad.

More poll reports on pages 3 & 4

Eager Cong starts playing with numbers already

C.L. Manoj
NEW DELHI 27 APRIL

BUOYED by the exit poll projections, the Congress on Tuesday tried to hard-sell the "anti-NDA alliance" to take a shot at power. However, many regional parties and even the Left, whose support is crucial in the post-poll numbers game are playing hard to get now.

The party spokesman, Jaipal Reddy on Tuesday struck a "confident posture," mainly a public posturing aimed to boost the morale of the party workers for the next two phases of polls. He said it was not expecting a hung Parliament and expressed confidence of forming the next government with the support of its "allies" and "the Left parties which have fought election in some states in alliance with the Congress."

Not only the party consciously promoted the Left to its alliance category, it also subtly hoped that the SP and the BSP, whose support the party earlier said was not needed for forming an alternative government, would also stand by the "secular camp."

Trying to please the Left further, Mr Reddy rejected the Nationalist Trinamool Congress statement (meant to humour the minorities of the poll-bound West

Bengal), that it would review its continuation in the NDA after the polls, by saying the Congress will not join hands "with parties that are now in the NDA."

The main worry of the Congress is the looming gulf between the "positive" projections of the exit polls and the magical 272 half-way mark. While the "best"



SONIA: GRIN CARD

projection of the NDTV puts the "Congress and the allies" at 200, still short of 72 to cross of the half-way mark, the more conservative Zee projections further widens the gap to 106 by giving the Congress front only 166 seats. Whereas even the worst projection of 245 for the NDA by NDTV means the ruling front still is only short of just 27 numbers to touch the half-way mark.

But the CPI-M which is gear-

ing up to fight the Congress in West Bengal and Kerala, virtually cold-shouldered the Congress advances.

Aware of its "compulsions in the Left states," the West Bengal chief minister, Mr Budhadeb Bhattacharjee, on Tuesday said the priority of the Left would be to try and install a "non-BJP and non-Congress government at the Centre." His colleague Sitaram Yechury said the exit poll projections showed that it was allies not the Congress that was making major gains.

While Mr Reddy, quick to read between the lines, quoted Jyoti Basu's past statement to nullify, the possibility of a third front, the Marxists have not talked of a "Congress-led government" thereby keeping "the other alternatives."

The CPI-M and the CPI also appear to be cautious of the anti-Congress stand of its two comrades, the RSP and the Forward Bloc.

Even if the Left's traditional 40-45 seats are added to the "Congress front," the Opposition party still needs to knock at the doors of the SP and the BSP, dreaded for their "political two-timing" streaks and the prime ministerial ambitions of Mulayam Singh Yadav and Ms Mayawati.

Ultras attack Srinagar Cong HQ

23 injured in several incidents of violence throughout the day

By M Saleem Pandit
TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Srinagar: An insurgent group made an unsuccessful attempt to storm the Congress headquarters in Srinagar on Friday, three days ahead of the Lok Sabha elections. Elsewhere in the city, insurgents threw grenades at three places to scare away Monday's voters. In all, 23 people, including three security personnel and two photojournalists were injured in the attacks.

The insurgents who attacked the Congress HQ with grenades managed to get away despite a cordon, after retreating to a side building when their attempt at entering the main building met with resistance.

The side building was cordoned off and office staff evacuated in preparation for flushing out the insurgents, numbering two to three, holed up in there. However, they managed to get away. Three troopers and two photojournalists were injured in the incident. Five others were also wounded. The insurgent group Al Mansooran, believed to be a front for the Lashkar-e-Toiba, issued a statement claiming respon-



A paramilitary officer being taken away by his colleagues after he was wounded in a grenade attack in Srinagar on Friday

sibility for the attack. Another statement came from Al Arifeen, making a similar claim.

In another incident earlier in the day, insurgents tried to storm a special police camp at Surankote in Poonch district, seriously wounding two policemen. The attackers got away here too.

On Thursday night, the BSF unearthed a big weapon store in Karan Nagar, in the heart of the city. The consignment—comprising grenades, a grenade launcher, two rockets, mortar bombs, detonators, 5,000 rounds of ammunition, a satellite phone and a wireless set—seemed meant for a major terrorist operation in the area. No arrests have been made so far, either in connection with the store or the attacks.

In other violent incidents during the day, insurgents threw a grenade at a bus hired for National Conference's poll campaign in Rambagh, injuring a police constable and 10 NC workers, two of them seriously. (Another NC campaign vehicle had been attacked on Thursday on the same road, leaving seven persons injured.) Later, a grenade was hurled at a CRPF picket in Amirakadal, 200 yards from the Congress HQ. There were no casualties.

THE TIMES OF INDIA

24 APR 2004

Congress Rising

11-16 23A
Campaigning Rahul, Priyanka
give GOP a boost

From being entirely written off to showing the first signs of resurgence, the Congress in Uttar Pradesh has come quite some way and very quickly too. Indeed, few would dispute that there is a buzz about the party that was least expected when elections were announced. Today, the Samajwadi Party may be the front runner followed closely by the BJP and the BSP, but, surprisingly, it is the Congress that is the topic of discussion everywhere in UP. This is extraordinary, considering barely a month ago Sonia Gandhi had gone from one party to another, begging bowl in hand. First, Mayawati led her up the garden path and then Mulayam Singh Yadav politely but firmly showed her the door. Clearly, the Congress in UP was bad news; it was perceived as a loser. So, what has happened overnight that has changed the unhappy atmospherics around the party? The grand entry made by the Gandhi children in the Amethi-Rae Bareli belt. In this once Nehru-Gandhi pocket borough, it was almost as if the siblings had waved a magic wand. Rahul Gandhi's political debut in particular must have caused dynasty-bashers to wonder at the irony of our democracy: India's oldest political party depending yet again on one family to resurrect its fortunes. But perhaps that is India; from cricket to the English language to McDonald's *aloo-tikki* burger to democracy, it is a mongrel version of the original that we always favour.

To return to the Congress, the question arises as to the significance of the new turn of events in the party. Reports in this very newspaper suggest that the Rahul-Priyanka factor has made an impact well beyond Amethi and Rae Bareli, indeed that the siblings have caused a revival of interest in the Congress in far off constituencies in eastern UP. However, no one is saying yet that the Congress is going to bag a fair share of votes or seats in UP. This is because over the years the Congress's fortunes have declined to an extent where it has no base vote left. Assuming a section of Muslims and Brahmins want to return to the Congress fold — which apparently is the case — they will do so only if the Congress candidate has a winning chance. Otherwise their votes go waste. On the other hand, the Congress must first get the support of at least one community in order further to build on it. To emerge from this catch-22 situation the party needs the support of an ally, which, as is obvious, is not quite happening. Will the Gandhi brother-sister duo achieve for the Congress what their mother couldn't?

NDA takes credit for Congress achievements: Sonia

9. P.P. 110-1 w.r.t. /

RAE BARELI, APRIL 22. Rejecting the National Democratic Alliance's claims of all-round development under its rule as "hollow," the Congress president, Sonia Gandhi, today accused the BJP-led Government of trying to take credit for projects and programmes initiated and implemented by successive Congress regimes.

From setting up of new industries, laying of roads and canals to white and green revolutions as well as nuclear programmes, all had been the achievements of successive Congress Governments for which the NDA was trying to take the credit, she said addressing an election rally in the Pure Pande area here.

"The reality is that the only development during the

tenure of the NDA Government was in the fields of corruption and scams," Ms. Gandhi said listing various scams that had surfaced during NDA rule.

Ridiculing the BJP's

Another report, photograph on Page 13

assertion that it was a party with a difference, Ms. Gandhi pointed to the cash-on-camera scam. The BJP made many promises before coming to power but forgot to fulfil them during its rule and "deceived and belied" the hopes and expectations of the people who voted it to power.

Ms. Gandhi described the BJP's claims of providing one crore jobs to the people as

28/4

"false propaganda" and said many industries which were set up during the Congress regime were closed adding to unemployment.

She blamed the NDA Government for the unprecedented price rise and inflation, which had badly hit the poor. Reminding the people of the close association of the Gandhi family with the area, the Congress president asked them to ensure her victory with a thumping majority.

Like her grandmother late Indira Gandhi, Priyanka urged the crowd to thrice say Jai Hind and later mingled with them. — PTI

UNI reports from New Delhi:

Ms. Gandhi will campaign in Andhra Pradesh tomorrow.

THE HINDU 23 APR 2004

Additional Special Observer for Rae Bareilly

Priyanka wants spl watch, EC nods

SANTWANA BHATTACHARYA
NEW DELHI, APRIL 19

HOURS after Priyanka Gandhi Vadhera complained to the Election Commission of criminal intimidation of Congress campaigners and voters in Rae Bareilly, the panel decided to depute an additional special observer for the constituency, going to polls on April 26. Among Sonia Gandhi's opponents in the constituency is the Samajwadi Party's Ashok Singh. It is against his brother and "chief election manager" Akhilesh Singh that the party made the complaint. Akhilesh is also the MLA from Rae Bareilly Sadar. The Congress described Akhilesh as a "history-sheeter" and a "habitual booth-capturer".

He is accused of criminally hindering the Congress campaign in Rae Bareilly, which Priyanka is overseeing. "I have given (the EC) a list of sensitive and hypersensitive booths in Rae Bareilly. There is some irregularity happening in my mother's constituency and criminal elements are moving in. We are apprehensive of (them indulging in) booth capturing," Priyanka said, after filing her complaint at Nirvachan Sadan.

Acting on the list of 60 "sensitive" polling stations given by Priyanka, the EC ordered videography in these to check booth-capturing and record the polling. The Congress memorandum submitted to CEC T.S. Krishnamurthy and EC N. Gopalaswami alleged that the publicity material of the Congress party was forcibly removed from certain areas. "He (Akhilesh) and his henchmen are threatening supporters of the Congress and the people in the constituency," Congress spokesman Anand Sharma said.



EC ordered videography in 60 'sensitive' polling stations listed by her

Priyanka knocks on EC door

OUR SPECIAL
CORRESPONDENT

New Delhi, April 19: The Election Commission today had an unexpected visitor from the Congress.

Priyanka Gandhi Vadra knocked on the doors of the Election Commission this afternoon, playing her mother's emissary. She sought the poll panel's intervention in ensuring free and fair elections in Rae Bareilly, Sonia Gandhi's constituency.

Rae Bareilly goes to polls in the second phase of the elections on April 26. Priyanka, Congress leaders said, has been spending a lot of time in Rae Bareilly, managing her mother's campaign.

Priyanka drove down to Nir-

vachan Sadan at 8.30 pm, attracting a large fleet of mediapersons who descended on the commission to catch a glimpse of her.

She met chief election commissioner T.S. Krishnamurthy and election commissioner N. Gopalaswami, drawing their attention to the criminal activities of Akhilesh Singh, an MLA from Rae Bareilly, whose brother is contesting against Sonia on a Samajwadi Party ticket.

Priyanka submitted a memorandum signed by Congress district president Uma Shankar Mishra, expressing apprehensions about the viability of free and fair polls when Akhilesh was being allowed to terrorise voters.

Akhilesh, a party hopper, has a string of criminal charges

ranging from murder to intimidation against him.

Emerging from the meeting, Priyanka appeared only too willing to speak to the waiting reporters. However, she only managed to get a few audible sentences in when hordes of camerapersons went into a tizzy, jostling with each other to get a better shot of the Congress charmer.

In the midst of the chaos Priyanka swiftly turned back and moved into the car, which zipped out of the commission headquarters.

The Congress memorandum demanded the deployment of revenue staff at polling booths in Rae Bareilly for correct identification of voters and that CRPF personnel be posted to ensure that

voters feel safe and come to vote. It also asked the commission to ensure that polling booth staff are employed from outside the constituency and that an ink mark is put on the fingers of the voters after they cast their votes.

The Congress has urged the district administration to install a video camera in hyper-sensitive booths — 60 have been listed — where special deputy magistrates should be present.

"We would like to bring to your notice that Akhilesh Singh is a known history sheeter — a booth capturer who has been involved in several criminal cases, including that of murder, criminal intimidation, attempt to murder and breach of peace," the memorandum said.

"To become Prime Minister... that's not why I joined (politics)"

Vir Sanghvi

How do you think the campaign has been going?
Extremely well. I had actually started travelling all over the country in January. That was part of a programme that had been planned out when we thought the election was in October or so. When elections were called early, I continued that programme which became part of the election campaign.

Right from January, wherever I went I was surprised by the affection I received. In such situations, political workers of course come out. But there were large numbers of ordinary people who were waving out, or stopping me. And the thing which struck me was how well women were responding to the campaign. Wherever I went, there would be women waiting on the roadside, wanting to say something.

So, I'm very happy with the response.

Were you dispirited by the assembly election defeats in Rajasthan, MP and Chhattisgarh?

Yes. Certainly. Perhaps not dispirited but definitely disappointed.

In Rajasthan, for instance, I thought we would scrape through so I was disappointed by the result. In Madhya Pradesh, even though there were problems and we faced anti-incumbency after two terms, I thought our Chief Minister had done a great deal of work in social infrastructure. But obviously that wasn't enough to meet the aspirations of the people.

Well, the BJP called the General Election early because morale in the Congress was at an all-time low.

I wasn't demoralised. But yes, I was disappointed. And in the states where we lost there was a certain amount of demoralisation. So that's probably why they chose that time.

Has morale improved as the campaign has gone on?

I have been pleasantly surprised by the response we are getting. If you look at our morale when the campaign began and morale now, you'll see how much it has improved.

But no matter how much morale improves, you are still stuck for numbers because of the situation in UP and Bihar. Is that a fair assessment?

It is a fair assessment to say that we are not at the top in those states. But in Uttar Pradesh, we are not as badly off as some people seem to think. I can base this on the welcome I have received when I travel through Uttar Pradesh.

But do crowds for Sonia Gandhi translate into seats for the Congress?

That's the big challenge for our party machinery and our workers. We have to translate that goodwill into votes.

Were you surprised when Laloo offered you only four seats?

Yes. We were surprised.

So why align with him? Why not fight on your own?

We are in an alliance with him. And sometimes, keeping in mind the larger picture, we have to make certain adjustments no matter how disappointed we may feel.

But if you were willing to take just four seats from Laloo in the interests of a secular alliance then why did you hold out for more with Mulayam? Amar Singh is on record as saying that they offered you anywhere from 18 to 20 seats and you turned them down.

First of all, if that had been the offer, I would never have turned them down as you say I did. There was never any such offer. In fact, there was never any sort of discussion on numbers with either Mulayam Singhji or Amar Singhji.

So what were your meetings with them about, then?

We had general discussions on the importance of working together, of secular parties coming together.

They say that you made it clear to them that your preference was for an alliance with the BSP.

No, I never said anything like this to them. Never.

Was it ever your preference to go with the BSP over the SP?

Well, when you look for an alliance, you talk to all possible allies. You don't exclude anyone. You can't shut your door to one party and talk only to the other if there are two possible allies in a state.

Yes, but was the BSP your own preference?

No. Not at all. In any such situation there will be members of the party who will prefer one alliance and others who will prefer another. But these are all just inputs which come in when you are in politics.

You tell me: would it make any sense for me to focus on any one potential ally and to exclude another?

No, the argument is that Mayawati would not have aligned with Mulayam and vice-versa so you had to choose one. And that you went with Mayawati.

No. That is not correct. Not at all.

What went wrong with Mayawati?

Well, they obviously thought it was a better option for them to fight the election on their own.

But you went and met Mayawati. Things seemed to be going well. And then the BSP ruled out an al-



'I don't own a house (in Italy). My father died without making a will. In Italian law, the bulk of a man's estate goes to his wife, the rest is shared among his children'

lance. I don't think there was a change as such. There are certain courtesies between political colleagues so I met her, I wished on her birthday. There was always a general conversation. And eventually I guess she decided it was more beneficial for her to fight on her own.

Of course, there are reports that certain parties worked very hard to ensure that our alliance didn't happen.

The BJP?
Obviously. (Laughs)

Do you think the SP and the BSP are keeping their options open for a post-poll adjustment with the BJP?

That is something that we shall only find out after the election.

That sounds like a 'yes' to me.

(Laughs) In politics it is always difficult to assess these things, in advance.

Even if the Congress does better than predicted, nobody seriously expects you to get an overall majority. Your best case scenario is to be the largest party in a ruling coalition.

But is that an attractive prospect for Congress voters? A coalition where, one day, Laloo threatens to walk out and the next day, Mulayam holds the government to ransom? Isn't that a valid scenario? And why should anybody vote for you then?

Well it is all valid of a Congress-led coalition as it is of a BJP-led coalition. The BJP is not going to get an overall majority on its own either. So these are the risks of coalition politics. I can't un-

derstand why this argument should be used only against the Congress.

After all, we've seen how they've been held to ransom in this coalition. Their government even fell because of coalition partners.

Since you've raised the subject yourself, do you think it was a mistake to have brought down the last Vajpayee government during the confidence motion.

Yes, I think it was. It was a miscalculation on our part. We were depending on assurances given by certain persons and those assurances were not fulfilled.

Still on the same subject, what were you thinking when you stood on the forecourt of Rashtrapati Bhawan and said: "we have 272....?" Did you really believe that?

I obviously didn't mean that I, Sonia Gandhi, had 272. For God's sake, grant me a little more sense than that! (Laughs)

What I meant was the opposition now constituted a majority of the House because the government had just been defeated in a confidence vote.

Since we are still on that subject, why does Jayalalitha now seem to have it in for you?

You'll have to ask her (smiles)

Well, during that Confidence Motion were the two of you friends?

Not only were we on very good terms but her party even wrote to the President saying that it supported the Congress led by Sonia Gandhi, if I remember correctly.

No problems with foreign birth, in those days, then? Yes, that would seem to be so. (Smiles)

Talking about foreign birth, are you surprised that the issue has resurfaced in this campaign?

No. They brought it up halfway through the campaign. First they talked about India Shining and feel-good and then, they began to get worried by the fact that our campaign was getting a tremendous response.

I don't like to boast but there was a tremendous response to our Jan Sampark abhiyan and that worried them. If you analyse that period you will see that soon after that, Advani decided to go on a yatra and this issue was dragged out again. They always drag it out when they think the Congress is getting stronger.

Do you think it is still a live issue. Or has it played itself out?

I have travelled throughout the country, to every possible place and I have never ever been made to feel that I do not belong. So I can't see that they are getting any response from this issue.

Well, let me turn it around. Supposing you hadn't met Rajiv Gandhi. Supposing you were still living in Italy. How would you have felt if an Indian was running for office in your country?

Let me tell you, in the small town in Italy where my mother lives, recently there was an election for mayor. And one of the candidates, the front-runner, was an Indian.

I am told by my mother that he was a much admired and loved person. Eventually he didn't win the election but his Indian origin was not an issue.

So, to answer your question, I don't think I

would have felt bad if one of the leaders in Italy was born outside the country, or born in India.

I noticed from your statement of assets that you still own a house in Italy. That's a bit odd, isn't it?

I don't own a house. My father died without making a will. According to Italian law, the bulk of a man's estate goes to his wife and the rest is shared among his children.

So, I am entitled to some share of the home he left behind. That's hardly the same thing as having a house of my own in Italy.

I am going to ask you this straight out: Do you really want to be Prime Minister?

I have answered this question. I've answered it with my actions. In 1991, when my husband was assassinated, the Congress party asked me to take his place. It would have been easy for me to become Congress President and as you know, the Congress then formed the government. But I refused all offers to join politics.

When I did join, I did it only because I felt that the party my husband, my mother-in-law and so many members of his family had given their lives to was becoming weak. And because of this, communal and divisive forces were on the ascendancy.

At that time, when there was no question of becoming Prime Minister, I decided that it was cowardice for me to sit back and stay at home. I owed it to the family that I married into to do whatever I could.

It is hard for some people to understand why anyone would join politics except to become Prime Minister. But that's not why I joined. I joined because I couldn't have faced my own conscience otherwise.

How did your children react when you decided to join?

I had opposed my husband's joining politics. And I had opposed it because I feared that I might lose him.

I was right. So when I took the decision, this was one of the main factors my children were concerned about. Both my son and daughter were very worried about this aspect but eventually they said they would go along with any decision I took.

Now that Rahul has actually taken the plunge, I can ask you this: when was that decision taken? Was it always on the cards?

Well, we all knew that at some stage we would have to decide one way or the other. That was a given.

We sat down and discussed it like all families do and then Rahul decided to file his nomination.

Yes, but when did you discuss this? Was this decision taken years ago? Or was it taken say, last month?

No, not years ago. It was as the campaign drew nearer that we finally sat down and discussed it.

What about Priyanka? Is it also just a matter of time now?

(Laughs). You'll have to ask her. She is a young mother with two small children and a husband to look after and naturally she feels that she has to look after her family. If she entered politics, she wouldn't be able to give them the attention they need.

So she'll wait till the kids are older.

(Laughs). You should ask Priyanka all this, not me. It sounds silly to keep repeating this like a stuck record but I have always said that it is my children's decision. We may have discussed Rahul's joining. But it was his decision. And it is up to Priyanka to decide also.

Are you upset or are you secretly pleased when people say that Rahul is the crown prince, that he'll be your successor?

This is quite absurd. How can anyone say something so absurd? He has just joined. Let him win an election. His focus is on Amethi.

Who am I, anyway, to decide who my successor will be? The Congress elects its President. And there is no shortage of young leaders in the Congress. It is absurd to talk about Rahul as though I can arrange his succession.

Well, that rather depends on how you see the Congress. The BJP regards itself as a party based on ideology but argues that you are simply a family business run on the basis of the cult of personality.

We are a party which elects its leader. We have organisational elections. I have been elected. We stand for certain values and we are fighting this election on the basis of ideology and a vision for India, not on any family name or any personality.

It is the BJP that wants to turn this election into a personality contest. They are the ones who believe in a cult of personality. We say: talk about the issues. They say: talk about Vajpayee.

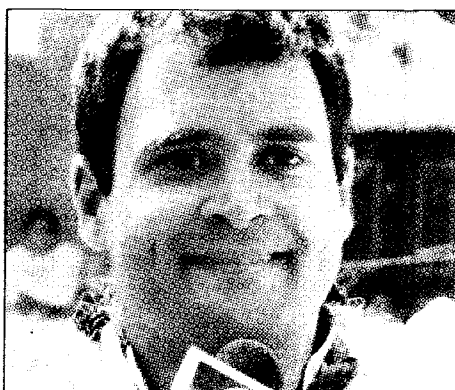
Have you seen their Vision Document? It is like a photo album with a few captions. There are, I think, 50 pictures of Vajpayee. So, who believes in the cult of personality? Us or them?

Have you seen that old picture of the young Vajpayee sitting down, where he's wearing an RSS cap? There is Advani standing behind him. Then there's a new picture, and again Vajpayee is sitting. And Advani is still standing.

When will Advani finally sit down? That's the only serious question posed by their Vision Document. Otherwise, it is all personality, personality, personality.

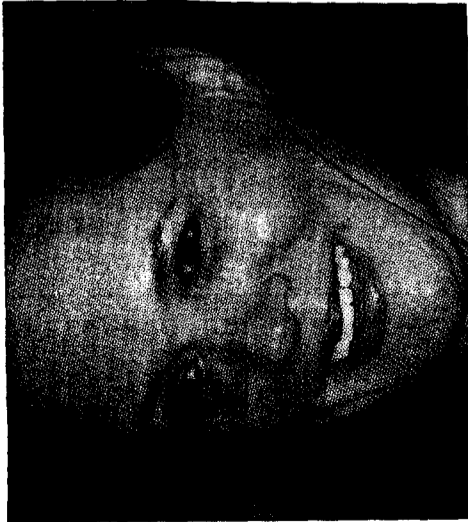
ON RAHUL IN POLITICS

'We sat down and discussed it like all families do and then Rahul decided to file his nomination. No, not years ago, but as the campaign drew nearer.'



ON PRIYANKA'S ENTRY

'It sounds silly to keep repeating this like a stuck record but I have always said that it is my children's decision... It is up to Priyanka to decide.'



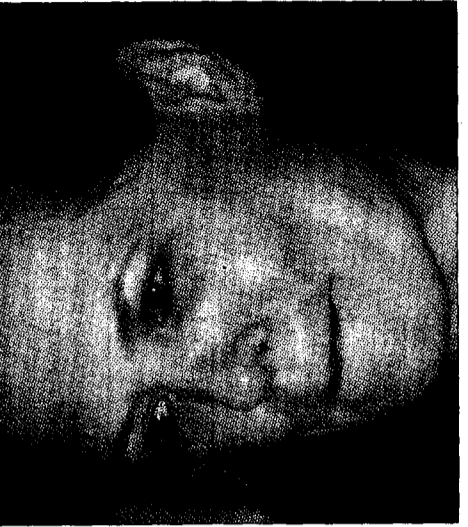
ON PARTY That's the big challenge for our party machinery and our workers. We have to translate the goodwill into votes



ON RAHUL Regarding his entry into politics, we all sat down and discussed it like all families do and then he decided to file his papers



ON PRIYANKA If she joined politics she wouldn't be able to give her two small children and husband the attention they need



ON DYNASTY RAJ Who am I to decide who my successor will be? The party elects its president. And there is no shortage of young leaders

'I'm not in politics to become PM'

SHE MAY not have got the alliances she wanted. And the polls may not be predicting an electoral victory for the Congress, but Sonia Gandhi is pleased with the way this election campaign is going. Despite fighting off the beginning of the same viral infection that forced her son Rahul to suspend campaigning for a few days, Sonia was cheerful and combative as she fielded questions on a wide range of issues in an interview with **Vir Sanghvi** in her study at 10 Janpath.

She began by conceding that while she had been disappointed by the Congress defeats in the Assembly elections — and in particular in Rajasthan where she expected the Congress to win — and while workers had also been dispirited, the party's morale had shot up during the campaign because of the

response it had received. She attributed the BJP's decision to hammer away at the foreign-origin issue to its fear that the Congress campaign was gaining momentum. "They brought it up halfway through the campaign. First they talked about India Shining and feel-good and then, they began to get worried," she said. "They always drag out this issue when the Congress is getting stronger."

She said that her son Rahul's decision to join politics was his own. "We sat down and discussed it as the campaign drew nearer but it was his decision."

About her daughter, Priyanka, she said: "She is a young mother with two small children and a husband to look after and if she joined politics she

Exclusive interview with Sonia Gandhi

wouldn't be able to give them the attention they need." However, she did not rule out the possibility of Priyanka's entering politics at a later stage. Mrs Gandhi refuted the Samajwadi Party's claim that the Congress had turned down its offer of 18-20 seats. "If that had been the offer, I would never have turned them down," she said. "There was never any sort of discussion on numbers with either Mulayam Singhji or Amar Singhji."

She denied also that the Congress

had preferred the BSP to the SP. But she suggested that the BJP "had worked very hard to ensure that our alliance did not happen."

Asked if the SP and the BSP were keeping their options open for a post-poll alliance with the BJP, she laughed: "In politics, it is always difficult to assess these things in advance."

She conceded that she was disappointed after Laloo Yadav offered the Congress only four seats, but argued, "Sometimes, keeping in mind the larger picture, we have to make certain adjustments no matter how disappointing we may feel."

Mrs Gandhi admitted that it had been a mistake to have brought down the last Vajpayee government during the Confidence Motion. But she said that she did

not know why Jayalalithaa had now turned against her and raised the foreign origin issue. During that period, she said, "Not only were we on very good terms but her party even wrote to the President saying that it supported the Congress led by Sonia Gandhi."

She hit an emotional note when asked whether she wanted to be Prime Minister. She said that had she joined politics only to get power, she would have accepted the Congress party's offer to replace her husband when he was assassinated in 1991. Instead, she joined when the Congress was weak because it would have been cowardly not to have helped the party "my husband, my mother-in-law and so many members of his family had given their lives to".

(Transcript of interview on P10)

NDA Government failed on foreign, defence fronts: Congress

By Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, APRIL 10. The Congress today criticised the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance Government for its 'record of grave failures' on the management of national security, foreign policy and defence and unveiled its agenda in each of these three vital areas of governance.

Recounting the lapses on the national security front ranging from the Kargil war, the under-utilisation of the defence budget, the handling of the Kandahar hijack episode, the deployment of the armed forces on the India-Pakistan border, and the 'abysmal' management of intelligence institutions, the Congress offered to formulate and implement a comprehensive multi-dimensional national security policy to cover all vital aspects of energy and food security and to counter centrifugal trends affecting the country.

Releasing a 12-page agenda on Security, Defence and Foreign Policy here today, senior party leaders K. Natwar Singh and J.N. Dixit made sharp remarks about the handling of India's foreign policy, especially with Pakistan and the United States. They accused the Government of eroding the national consensus while conducting the country's foreign policy.

Charging that the institutional arrangements such as the National Security Council and its wings — the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS), the Strategic Policy Group (SPG) and National Security Advisory Board (NSAB) — created by the Vajpayee Government have been cosmetic, the Congress promised to institutionalise regular meetings of the CCS and also have systematic and institutional interactions between the National Security Adviser, the SPG and the NSAB.

The party said it would ensure necessary connectivity between the intelligence agencies of the government and the NSAB as well as among the agencies of the Ministries of Defence and External Affairs. It also promised to restructure intelligence agencies and also modernise them and in particular implement the recommendations of the Expert Group after the Kargil war to reform the intelligence agencies. "The Congress will implement a comprehensive multi-faceted strategy to cope effectively with the twin challenges of terrorism and insurgency," the document said.

On the foreign policy of the Vajpayee Government, the Congress accused it of lacking "clarity, consistency and conviction" while dealing with Pakistan and "lack of transparency" of policies towards the United States.

"The BJP/NDA Government has failed to take the country into confidence about the national security implications of the new tie-up between Pakistan and the U.S. [according non-NATO ally status on Islamabad]. It has also failed to dispel the widely-held fears that India has accepted American mediation in Indo-Pakistan relations," the document said.

"We want close, cordial relations with the U.S. but it does not mean we do not have differences...this Government has repeatedly bent backwards and talked of a paradigm change," Mr. Dixit said.

Asked about its views on relations with Sri Lanka, he said the party always stood for a peaceful solution of the ethnic problem while maintaining the unity and territorial integrity of the country. "We are opposed to Eelam and insist on the extradition of LTTE chief V. Prabhakaran [accused in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case]," he added.

11 APR 2004

Sonia breathes Bofors fire

Rahul backs up offensive

RASHEED KIDWAI

Raipur, April 10: Returning fire for the first time since the Bofors guns boomed again, Sonia Gandhi today said the BJP was deliberately raising the "bogey" ahead of the elections to cover up its failure to tackle the country's problems.

"The timing of this being brought up again speaks for itself.... The bogey of Bofors has been raised for the last 18 years and it was thrust on my husband, now on me very conveniently and god knows one day on my great-grandchildren," she said in Raipur after a hectic day of campaigning.

Sonia had thought hard, amid advice by senior Congress leaders to remain quiet and let the party defend her, before deciding to rely on her instincts to hit back in a tone that exhibited agony as well as contempt. She broke her silence 36 hours after Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee said the "fresh revelations" were "worth CBI's investigation" and an eager BJP pounced upon it as an "election issue".

But true to her reticent nature, the Congress chief hit back at her political opponents not at the large public gatherings that greeted her in Bastar and Durg but at Raipur airport in the presence of a handful of journalists.

Sonia said the BJP had grabbed the issue as it was scared it had not been able to solve the unemployment problem or handle the farmers' issue. "So what else

to do? Attack the Nehru-Gandhi family and me in particular," she said. "Let them go ahead."

Many Congress leaders — Arjun Singh, Manmohan Singh, Natwar Singh and Kapil Sibal among them — had expressed divergent views. While some wanted Sonia to go public, others thought the charge was "unworthy" of a reaction from her.

Sources close to Sonia said that while she was once again touched by the sympathy from Congress workers, she was sceptical about the party's ability to defend her and her late husband. As a 10 Janpath insider said: "Bofors always makes Congressmen rush to extend support but somehow a potent strategy to counter it has been lacking."

But this time, Congress leaders said, there is a "qualitative difference" as Sonia, Priyanka and Rahul — all in the political arena — are itching to take the subject to the "people's court".

Rahul said in Amethi today the BJP was raking up Bofors as its "feel-good" show was not cutting much ice with the people. "The BJP is trying to grab power by diverting the attention of the people by raking up the Bofors and the foreign origin issue."

Rahul said the BJP would not succeed as it "stands exposed before the people". He said the BJP did not like the fact that his father Rajiv Gandhi had been cleared by court. "Sometimes my mother is called a foreigner and sometimes they call me a foreigner. Do I look like a foreigner?" he asked. "Let them say anything. We are not worried."

SPARRING MATCH



Atal Bihari Vajpayee at a rally in Orissa on Friday. (PTI)

This bogey of Bofors has been raised for the last 18 years and it was thrust on my husband, now on me very conveniently and god knows one day on my great-grandchildren — **Sonia Gandhi**

Atal team keeps up attack

OUR BUREAU

April 10: Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee led the charge and his lieutenants joined the chorus as the BJP stepped up its attack on the Congress and its chief, Sonia Gandhi.

In his first election campaign in Bihar, Vajpayee targeted the Congress for failing to accelerate the pace of development. "It is all too evident that what they (the Congress) could not achieve in 40 years, we did in six years," he said at a rally in Buxar.

"The Congress sees unemployment everywhere because they are themselves going to be jobless," he said, asking unemployed youths to be patient and not take up the gun.

His party colleagues kept up the attack on Bofors. Law minister Arun Jaitley and general secretary Pramod Mahajan demanded that Sonia "come clean".

In Chhattisgarh, deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani said the Congress should answer the questions his party has raised.

Mahajan also called for a debate on qualifications of people aspiring to be Prime Minister. "The person aspiring for such a post should at least be a graduate," he told a rally in Uttar Pradesh.

Mahajan said he was not referring to any particular person but added that to the best of his knowledge, after Jawaharlal Nehru no member of the Nehru-Gandhi family could get a graduate degree. "Even Sonia Gandhi and Rahul are not graduates."

Cong agenda finds fault with NDA policies

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

NEW DELHI, April 10. — Releasing the Congress agenda for security, defence, and foreign policy for the elections, senior party leader Mr K Natwar Singh today accused the Vajpayee government of "failing disastrously on these fronts".

Mr Singh alleged that the NDA government displayed a "flip-flop" approach towards Delhi's relations with Islamabad over the past five years while "cynically causing cracks in the 56-year-old traditional national consensus on foreign


State Gen. Colin Powell's recent action to confer the status of a "major non-Nato ally" on Pakistan without taking India into confidence. "And then, New Delhi did not have the courage to even condemn the move".

The government failed to utilise Rs 24,000 crore from the allocated defence budget for the modernisation of our armed forces, said Mr Singh highlighting its "futile deployment of our armed forces on Indo-Pak borders at staggering costs".

Former foreign secretary Mr JN Dixit who recently joined the Congress said: "The one-sided

love and illusion could not be the basis of foreign policy, defence, and security as betrayed by the Vajpayee government". He criticised the NDA's alleged bid to weaken the country's institutions for national security after their establishment. He called the ongoing Indo-Pak cricket matches as "Bharatanatyam and not sound foreign policy".

The "most important task of the Congress", the document says, "would be to retain for India freedom of options in conducting its foreign relations in the country's national interests in a changing world".



The NDA has failed disastrously on security, defence, and foreign policy fronts'

Mr Singh

policy matters".

He said the government's claims of effecting a "paradigm shift" in Indo-US relations was shattered by the US Secretary of

*"The Congress ushered in the computer revolution,
and will also make us a worldbeater in IT. Isliye
main Congress ke saath hoon."*



Issued by the All India Congress Committee (AICC), 24 Akbar Road, New Delhi-110 001.



The Congress Party's far-sighted policies brought computers to India, started the PCO revolution, and took TV to the masses. The Congress will take the country even further, on the path of progress, in the years to come.

Six Basics of Governance:

- Samajik Sadbhavna.
- Yuva Rozgar.
- Grameen Vikas.
- Arthik Navotthan.
- Mahila Sashaktikaran.
- Saman Avsar.



**Congress Ka Haath
Aam Aadmi Ke Saath**

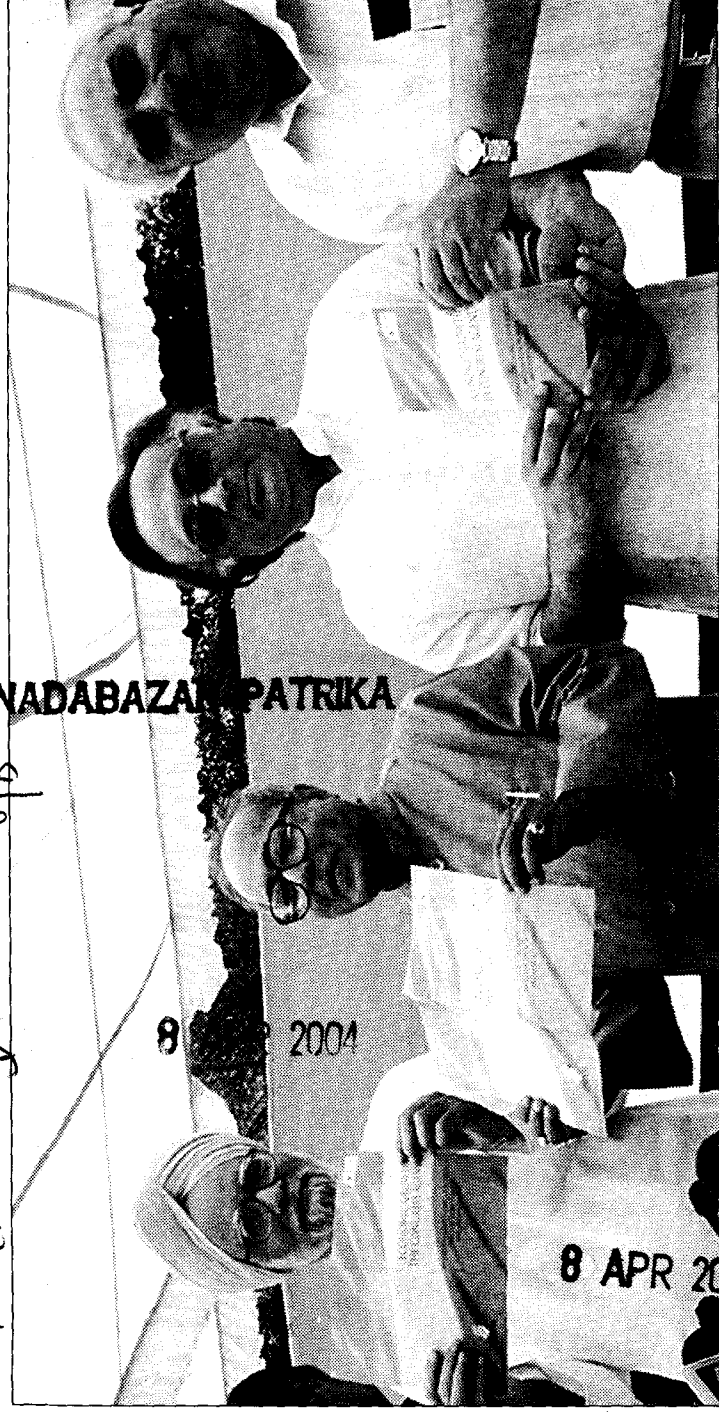
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8 APR 2004

জিতলে ছাঁটাই নীতি বাতিঘের আশ্বাস কংগ্রেসের

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ANADABAZAR PATRIKA



কংগ্রেসের অর্থনৈতিক দিশাপত্র প্রকাশ অনুষ্ঠানে মনমোহন সিংহ, প্রণব মুখোপাধ্যায়, জয়রাম রমেশ ও কপিল সিংহ। — পি.টি.আই

স্টাফ রিপোর্টার, নয়াদিল্লি, ৭ এপ্রিল— সনিয়া গাঁধীর কংগ্রেস স্লোগান তুলেছিল, ‘কংগ্রেসকা হাত গরীবোকে সাধ’। পরে গরিব শব্দটি বদলে দলের কর্তার করে দেন: ‘আম আদমী’। ন্যা-পাল্টালেও ক্ষতি ছিল না। কারণ, আজ প্রকাশিত দলের দলিলে নিজেদের কর্মসূচি কী হবে তা জানাতে গিয়ে গোড়াতেই সনিয়া গাঁধীর দল বলেছে, শুধু অর্থনৈতিক বৃদ্ধির চর্চা হারনেকই তাঁরা উন্নয়নের মাপকাঠি বলে মনে করেন না। এই অবস্থায় কংগ্রেস নেতারা জানিয়েছেন, ক্ষমতায় এলে তাঁরা ছাঁটাই নীতি তুলে দেবেন, সাধারণ মানুষের সুবিধার জন্য মুদ্রাস্ফীতি বাড়লে সুদের হার বাজারেন, অমনিবিড় শিল্প গণ্ডিতে বিশেষ ব্যবস্থা নেন এবং ‘ন্যায়া সমাজ’ তৈরির চেষ্টা করবেন।

ভোটার বাজারে যতই জনমোহিনী সাজায় ইচ্ছা থাকুক, তাঁরা সংস্কারের বিকল্প— এমন দাবি তো আর কংগ্রেসের পক্ষে করা সম্ভব নয়। তাই দল অবশ্যই দাবি করেছে সংস্কার কর্মসূচিকে বিজেপি বিপক্ষে নিয়ে গিয়েছে, আর তাকে ঠিক পথে এগিয়ে নিয়ে দেশকে সমৃদ্ধির পথ দেখাতে পারেন শুধু তাঁরাই।

কিন্তু তাঁরা কতখানি সংস্কারের পক্ষে আছেন, তা স্পষ্ট বিলম্বীকরণ এবং অসংস্কার নিয়ে দলের নেতাদের বক্তব্যে। ‘অর্থনৈতিক কর্মসূচি’ দলিলটিতে অবশ্য এই দুটি বিষয়ে কোনও কথা নেই। কিন্তু এই বিষয়গুলিতে তাঁদের মনোভাব কী জানতে চাইলে মনমোহন সিংহ ও প্রণব মুখোপাধ্যায় যা বলেন, তাতে কমিউনিষ্টদের যথেষ্ট খুশি হওয়ার কথা। মনমোহন বলেন, “(চাকরির) নিরাপত্তা ব্যবস্থা জোরদার করার প্রয়োজন

• বেকারত্বের অবসানের জন্য কাজের নিশ্চয়তা দেওয়ার বিশেষ ব্যবস্থা। (এর জন্য খরচ রাজ্যের মোট অভ্যন্তরীণ উৎপাদনের ১ শতাংশের বেশি করার প্রয়োজন হবে না)।

• দারিদ্র দূরীকরণের জন্য শিশুদের উপর এবং দেশের ৭৯টি সর্বাধিক অনগ্রসর জেলার দিকে বিশেষ নজর দেওয়া হবে।

অর্থনৈতিক কর্মসূচি সংক্রান্ত এই দলিল প্রকাশ করে আজ কংগ্রেস এন ডি এ-র পাঁচ বছরের শাসনকে বিচার জানিয়েছে। প্রণববু বলেছেন, “আর্থিক বৃদ্ধির ক্ষেত্রে ওরা যে দু’অঙ্কের সংখ্যা তুলে ধরছে তা পৃথিবীতে কেউই বিশ্বাস করবে না। অথচ এমন ভাবে বিজেপি প্রচার করছে যেন তা অষ্টম আশ্চর্য।” অর্জুন সেনগুপ্তের বক্তব্য, “বিজেপি-র আর্থিক নীতির ক্ষেত্রে ক্রমাগত সোদুল্যমানতা রয়ে গিয়েছে। সংস্কারের প্রশ্নে তাদের ভূমিকা খুবই শোচনীয়। দাঁড়ানোর জায়গা নেই।” মনমোহন সিংহ বলেছেন, ভারতের আর্থিক বৃদ্ধি গড়ে গত পাঁচ বছরে ৬ শতাংশের বেশি নয়। বিজেপি-র শাসনকাল সম্পর্কে মনমোহনের বক্তব্য, “সামাজিক বিষয়গুলির প্রতি পাহাড়প্রমাণ অবহেলা করা হয়েছে। শিক্ষা ও স্বাস্থ্যের মত বিষয়ের পাম্পাশি অবহেলা দেখানো হয়েছে কৃষিক্ষেত্রকেও।”

একচেটিয়া কারবার বন্ধ করা এবং পরিবেশের সুরক্ষার জন্য কিছু বিধিনিষেধেরও পক্ষপত্তি তাঁরা।

• ছোট ঋণসহায়ীদের, বিশেষ করে শিক্ষিত যুবসমাজের স্বনির্ভুক্তির ক্ষেত্রে, উৎসাহদান।

• সরকারি ও বেসরকারি ক্ষেত্রের জংশীদারি, যার মাধ্যমে উন্নয়নের কাজে অনুপাত ১:২ শতাংশে নিয়ে যাওয়া।

ও বণার নথিপত্র দ্রুত দেওয়ার ব্যবস্থা করার প্রতিশ্রুতি দিয়েছে দল।

• দেশি-বিদেশি বেসরকারি বিনিয়োগবিধির উপযুক্ত পরিবেশ তৈরি করা। এ জন্য তাঁরা সব আমলাতান্ত্রিক বাধা দূর করবেন। তবে এ ক্ষেত্রেও প্রতিরক্ষার মত কিছু স্পর্শকাতর ক্ষেত্রে তাঁরা বেসরকারি বিনিয়োগের পক্ষপাতী নন।

সহায়তা করছে এমন শিক্ষাসংস্থাকে বিশেষ ছাড় দেওয়া হবে।

• উৎপাদনশীলতা বাড়ানোর জন্য সহজ ঋণদানের ব্যবস্থা, প্রযুক্তি আমদানির পথ যতটা সম্ভব খুলে দেওয়া।

• আর্থিক শৃঙ্খলা জোরদার করা এবং কর আদায় ও মোট অভ্যন্তরীণ উৎপাদনের অনুপাত ১:২ শতাংশে নিয়ে যাওয়া।

Poll stars start week with bang, file papers

Our Political Bureau
NEW DELHI 5 APRIL

FROM veteran parliamentarian and Sonia-baiter George Fernandes to debutant Nehru-Gandhi heir Rahul Gandhi, several political heavyweights filed their nominations across the country on Monday for the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections.

Former Uttar Pradesh chief minister and BSP leader Mayawati, Bollywood star Govinda and controversial RJD leader Mohammad Shahabuddin also chose this day, which coincided with the beginning of the auspicious day of Simhastha, to file their nominations.

In Sultanpur (Uttar Pradesh), Rahul Gandhi, who is entering the electoral fray for the first time, was accompanied by mother Sonia Gandhi, sister Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, brother-in-law Robert and hundreds of slogan-shouting party workers as they filed the nomination papers from Amethi.

The VIP constituency is considered a family pocket-borough, having earlier elected Rahul's mother, late Sanjay Gandhi, and uncle, late Sanjay Gandhi.

Family-loyalist Satish Sharma too filed his nomination paper from Sultanpur, while Congress president Sonia Gandhi is slated to file her papers on Tuesday from Rae Bareilly, the

seat vacated by Captain Sharma. For Mr Fernandes, who filed his papers for Muzaffarpur in Bihar, it was a return to his old constituency from where he had won four elections in 1977, 1980, 1989 and 1991.

He will be pitted against the ruling RJD's Bhagwan Lal Sahni. After the break-up with Laloo Prasad Yadav in 1995, the NDA convenor had shifted to the Kurmi-dominated Nalanda, which he won three consecutive times from 1996. He was accompanied by his party colleagues — railways minister Nitish Kumar and Union minister of state for external affairs Digvijay Singh.

Another Congress first-timer, film-star Govinda filed his nomina-

tion papers from North Mumbai constituency, where he is pitted against the BJP veteran Ram Naik, who has romped home from the seat five times in a row. Govinda filed his papers at suburban Bandra.

The Bahujan Samaj Party president Mayawati will be seeking to stage a comeback in the House of the People as she filed her nomination from the Akbarpur (reserved) seat from Uttar Pradesh.

The constituency has remained loyal to her since 1996. Mohammad Shahabuddin, the controversial RJD leader now incarcerated in jail on several charges of murder, also completed the formalities from his stronghold of Siwan in Bihar.



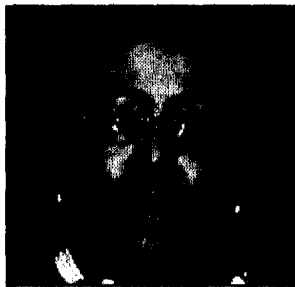
By Word: Rahul Gandhi takes oath after filing his nominations in Sultanpur on Monday as Sonia and Priyanka look on. — AFP

Row over Najma remarks at Powell dinner

Shahid Pervaz
In New Delhi

April 1. — The Rajya Sabha Chairperson, Mrs Najma Heptulla's alleged remarks against "dismal performance" of previous Congress governments in the presence of the United States Secretary of State, Mr Colin Powell, has triggered a controversy.

Mrs Heptulla is accused of this "diplomatic impropriety" at a dinner party hosted by the US Ambassador to India, Mr David Mulford, at his residence during Mr Powell's visit to the Capital about two weeks ago. The party was given in honour of Mr Powell and attended by a select group of distinguished people. Sources charged that in the presence of Mr Powell and Mr Mulford, Mrs Heptulla had said that "nothing has been done for the development of the country over the last fifty years, and it's only now,



Mrs Najma Heptulla

during the Atal Behari Vajpayee Government's regime, that real development is taking place resulting in a positive atmosphere". She had cited the instance of the Prime Minister's road projects to reinforce this point. Eyebrows have been raised over Mrs Heptulla's remarks made in the presence of foreign dignitaries. "It has been traditionally the practice of our leaders to rise above partisan politics and speak in one voice in front of foreign countries' representatives, our political differences are our internal matters, we don't criticise our

political opponents on such occasions," said a senior Congress leader. Mrs Heptulla, however, denied the charges, saying her remarks have been "distorted". She told The Statesman that she only praised the incumbent Government in response to a leader's bid to paint a bleak picture of the current situation in the country. "He was complaining about non-existence of employment opportunities and farmers' plight and suicides", she said. "I reacted by saying that the PM's road projects are positive initiatives which will result in development as well as job creation, I did nothing wrong".

Mrs Heptulla attacked "some vested interests" for "trying to create trouble for her and isolate her" by spreading such stories against her. The Congress, in turn, has attacked Mrs Heptulla for allegedly hobnobbing with the Sangh Parivar.

'She (Indira Gandhi) did think Emergency was a mistake. She was never quite at ease with it'

■ Since you know my guest today so well let me first tell you about this remarkable setting. This is Swaraj Bhavan, part of the larger Anand Bhavan complex in Allahabad, the home of the Nehru-Gandhi family, and my guest today, somebody who carries that formidable dynasty on her slender shoulders if I can put it like that

Welcome to Swaraj Bhavan

■ Thank you for finding the time in the very busy election season

Yes, very busy. In fact I have been touring Uttar Pradesh, Orissa and other states...only yesterday I was in Benares, Badhoi, Mirzapur. And it's going to carry on like this till the end.

■ Life changes a great deal. Let me go back to where it began, when did you first come to Anand Bhavan?

I came to Anand Bhavan in 1970 and that was when Indira dedicated Anand Bhavan and Swaraj Bhavan to the nation, in terms that it became a museum, open to the public. That was 1970, I had been married for two years, I was mother of a young baby, Rahul.

It left a great impression on me. My mother-in-law was winding up, deciding which things to leave here or take, there were still some personal items here. She was describing to me and one of the friends who had accompanied us what 'all happens in both these houses.

■ From whom did you first hear about the freedom movement and the politics of those years? From Rajiv or your mother-in-law?

Certainly from my mother-in-law. In fact, whenever she was free or when you were — seldom though — holidaying with her, she would always recount and tell us about her childhood, her youth, which of course was part and parcel of the freedom struggle.

■ But you never imagined at that point that either your husband or you would ever get caught up in this?

No, never. I never imagined that. I had just come here for marrying Rajivji. And that never crossed my mind or my husband's mind for that matter.

■ But you never thought when you got married to Rajiv that you were marrying into a political family?

When I came to this family, I was a complete *anaari* on what was going to come.

■ *Anaari* means novice, but it's not an apt translation...

But you know what it means. Here, this house, they moved in here precisely about 104 years ago, Motilal Nehru. And Mahatma Gandhi came here in 1919. And that was when Motilal Nehru was persuaded by Mahatma Gandhi and by his son to join the movement. And in 1919 when the non-cooperation movement was launched, it was in this courtyard that they made a huge mountain of all imported matters, mostly dress materials, and they made a bonfire as a symbol of rejecting foreign goods.

■ But when you came here in 1970s, you were much more an Italian than an Indian...you were here for a very short time.

Yes, at that time I was adjusting...adjusting to life here, to ways of thinking, but that is something that happens to every young bride when she gets married.

■ Because India at 1968, 1970 was very different from India 2004. And for somebody who came in from Europe it would have been serious adjustment issues.

Well, there were many similarities of mindset, cultural, at least of that period, of the country that I came from and India.

■ Give me some examples of similarities...

Congress president Sonia Gandhi spoke to Shekhar Gupta, Editor-in-Chief of *The Indian Express*, on how she came to the centrestage of Indian politics, her relationship with Indira Gandhi and Varun Gandhi joining the BJP. Excerpts from Part I of the interview telecast on NDTV 24x7's *Walk the Talk*:



SANJAY K SHARMA

ON THE RECORD SONIA GANDHI

Of family bonding, the way the family is together, respect for certain values. But of course I can say that there was certain amount of adjustment, which had to be made. But it wasn't as difficult as perhaps...

■ ...as you may have imagined before you came here?

Frankly, I came here because I was madly in love with my husband, and he was with me. So nothing else mattered. It didn't matter what I had to face...and that also helped.

■ But did you have any apprehensions, *kabhi ghabrahat hut aapko*?

No, *ghabrahat nahin*, at least I can't recollect any such *ghabrahat*. The fact that it does not remain in my mind means that there wasn't such a major — there was sort of adjustments perhaps of food or dress, little little things. My mother-in-law

was very understanding, and she tackled me very cleverly unlike perhaps some other mother-in-laws I know who force their daughter-in-laws to be, you

know, 'you have to do this...' She allowed me to be myself. She didn't force me to do things that she felt I could be uncomfortable with, and I think that was a very intelligent way of tackling me because on my own I slowly slowly adjusted, and did things that if perhaps, had she told me to do I wouldn't have done.

■ Like what?

For instance, if we go to a wedding, you have to wear a saree. Or you have to eat Indian food...slowly slowly I started eating Indian food and now I can't do without it.

■ Then in Delhi you didn't get much pasta, but now you do — half the Punjabi chefs in Delhi make pasta...

Yes, I know, but I am very fond of Indian food. In our house, we eat mostly Indian food. Occasionally some friends come and ask for pasta, then it is made.

■ Do you cook?

No. I used to when my husband wasn't in politics. I used to look after my family, I used

to look after my mother-in-law, and she did occasionally enjoy western meals, so I used to...but when I got married I didn't know how to cook. I had to learn from books and recipes.

■ So what were your mother-in-law's favourites?

Well, she did enjoy pasta, occasionally.

■ That's what your critics say sometimes: *Congress party ka ek hi raasta, bolo Italian khao pasta*. Have you ever heard it? (Laughs) Yes I have heard it.

■ Tell me, what else did you learn from your mother-in-law? She was a tough woman.

She was a very strong woman, but she had a very gentle side to her...a side that very few people know. She had an eye for detail. If someone was unhappy or unwell, she would immediately notice and she would immediately do something about it. Perhaps by jotting down two lines. For instance, I remember when I got married, my mother came to the wedding and she stayed for a month. And when she was going, obviously it was a sad moment for me. And my mother-in-law sent a little note to me: 'Hi Sonia, this is just to tell you that we all love you'. And that totally melted me. It gave me a lot of strength, that I am loved and cared for.

■ Do you have any recollections from that time of her responses to things that were happening in India which showed her character to you...something that made her angry, something that made her very determined?

She was at her best when faced with challenges. If she was pushed to the wall, there was pressure on her, she would come out and really fight back.

■ Give me some examples...

When there was a split in her party...

■ In 1969

Yes, she came out and fought. I remember the elections for the president at that time.

■ Sanjeeva Reddy and Nijalingappa...Reddy was the presidential candidate.

Yes, that was a time when she came out strongly and aggressively.

■ Was that the first time when you saw her as the iron woman as she came to be known as later?

Yes.

“ (Varun Gandhi) is a young man, he is embarking on a political career, I wish him well...In some ways, it is painful. But I would not like to comment further on this, I wish my nephew all the best ”

■ And the Bangladesh war, do you recollect any of that?

Yes, Bangladesh war was a very exciting moment for all of us, we lived every moment of that crisis in our family. And I remember when Mujibur Rahman came to Delhi from London, there was a big reception at the airport, even though I was about to deliver my other child the next day, I made it a point to be there at the airport. There was such excitement.

“ When I came to this family, I was a complete *anaari* on what was going to come ... My mother-in-law was very understanding... I remember, my mother came to our wedding and stayed on for a month. And when she was going, it was a sad moment for me. And my mother-in-law sent a little note to me: 'Hi Sonia, this is just to tell you that we all love you'. That totally melted me. It gave me a lot of strength, that I am loved and cared for ”

comments, from which one could understand that. I can't recall any particular instance but I can recall that at times she was uneasy about it.

■ After that, the Opposition, the public opinion responded to Emergency. Remember that slogan? *Emergency ke teen dalal, Indira, Sanjay, Bansi Lal*, that public rejection...was that a low moment in the family as well?

Well, there is no way we can say that the Emergency was right. She herself said it wasn't right. But there was a great deal of propaganda against Mrs Gandhi, deliberately done. And I think there were even some reports post-Emergency that went into details of the family planning programme which turned out to say that the problems were magnified. Yes there were problems, but not in the scale that the Opposition had built up.

■ But Emergency was a lesson that no government will repeat such a thing. It is not possible to bring in so much authoritarianism in India, the Indian system will not accept it.

I guess yes, but those were different times.

■ Do you remember this coming up between Mrs Gandhi and Rajiv or between Sanjay and Rajiv at that point?

I do remember, but I wouldn't like to disclose it.

■ 25 years have gone past, may be you should.

May be another 25 years, may be I'll write it some day

■ But can you say that this is something that one can make a reasonable guess as to what the conversation was?

Well, I said I wouldn't like to discuss it now, may be another time.

■ But there is a certain irony to the fact that one member of your family who was so involved in the Emergency, namely Sanjay, his family is now on the other side.

Well, I can only say what I said the other day, he (Varun Gandhi) is a young man, he is embarking on a political career, I wish him well.

■ Does it cause unhappiness — I want say bitterness — in your mind? These are visceral issues in our politics: to be with the BJP or not with the BJP. And if one section of the immediate Gandhi family goes that side, does it hurt you? Not politically, I mean personally or ideologically?

In some ways, it is painful. You are here in this house where the freedom movement took place, where strategies for the course of the movement were envisaged, this house symbolises the freedom movement...it symbolises not only the fight against the British, but also a fight against communal forces. My mother-in-law was born here and other members of the Nehru family, stalwarts of the freedom movement came here, they lived and died upholding certain principles...and secularism, this principle, the fight against communal forces of all kind, was very much core of...

■ And direct descendants of that family go and join the BJP now, does it amount to betraying that legacy?

I would not like to comment on this, I wish my nephew all the best.

■ That you should even if he were a political opponent. But I am just talking in philosophical terms? Would it hurt less if he were in another party than the BJP?

I would rather not go beyond this.

To be continued

Coomi Kapoor's Inside Track will appear in *The Indian Express*, March 1

Sonia shrugs off snub, toils for BSP

OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

New Delhi, Feb. 27: Displaying the tact honed by a series of roadshows into interior India, Sonia Gandhi today glossed over a snub from Mayavati and went public with a fresh appeal for an alliance.

A day after the BSP leader clubbed the Congress with the BJP and branded both *Manuvadis*, Sonia addressed a convention of Dalits — Mayavati's constituency — but refrained from striking back.

Sonia — who had launched her campaign caravan from Uttar Pradesh and is aware of the indispensability of an ally like the BSP in the heartland — used the opportunity to urge Dalit pressure groups to persuade leaders like Mayavati to close ranks with the Congress.

Without naming the BSP, Sonia said: "All those who are fighting against injustice and atrocities on poor in the country must come together to provide social justice and equality for all sections."

She urged the organisers of the convention, the All India SC/ST Railway Employees Association, to convince Dalit parties like the BSP to fight the coming elections along with the Congress. A joint fight would be the best way the Dalit agenda could be taken forward, she added.

The public appeal followed her two unsuccessful round of

dinner talks with Mayavati over the past few weeks. Mayavati has not categorically ruled out an alliance, but she has been taking swipes at the Congress from public platforms as she did yesterday in Patna.

Sonia did refer to the Patna potshot yesterday but confined herself to setting the record straight.

The Congress president disagreed with Mayavati's assertion that the Congress had "insulted" B.R. Ambedkar in the early fifties.

Atal admirer

The Congress today inducted an industrialist, Naveen Jindal, who confessed at his initiation ceremony that he was an "admirer of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee".

"I respect Vajpayee," said Naveen, who lead the crusade for ordinary citizens to hoist the national flag. Naveen added that he joined the Congress because it is secular. Asked why he respected Vajpayee, the 33-year-old said he could give two thousand reasons.

Reacting to Mayavati's comment that the party had not allowed the Father of the Constitution to enter the Lok Sabha in 1952, Sonia said that contrary to the BSP leader's assertion, Ambedkar himself had praised the party.

Najma opportunistic, says Congress

By Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, FEB. 24. The Congress today responded to the criticism of the Raja Sabha Deputy Chairperson, Najma Heptullah, against the Congress leadership stating that it reflected the "level and quality of opportunism."

The party said Ms. Heptullah's charge of having been humiliated was baseless as it was the Congress which had given her four terms in the Council of States and supported her to become the Deputy Chairperson of the House for over a decade.

"If giving four terms is a humiliation...it only means somebody is hungry for more," the party spokesperson, Kapil Sibal said, adding that in the hearts of Congress workers she did not belong to the party ever since she had received an award from the

RSS chief, K.S. Sudarshan.

Commenting on reports about her tilt towards the BJP, Mr. Sibal said the party knew it was coming and said the question of taking any action like expelling her from the Congress was "irrelevant".

Mr. Sibal likened her movement towards the BJP to the flight of Siberian crane during winter in search of food and greener pastures.

He asserted that her act would not cause any damage to the Congress and would in fact "expose her."

Ahmed Patel, political secretary to the Congress president, also joined issue with Ms. Heptullah and said it was not fair on her part to have dragged the issue of minorities.

Asked for his reaction on the development, Mr. Patel said that the high post

given to her by the Congress also helped her become the president of Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU).

Disputing her statement that the Congress President did not even congratulate her on becoming the IPU chief, Mr. Patel said that senior party leader, Pranab Mukherjee, had hosted a dinner in her honour, which was attended by Ms. Sonia Gandhi.

Reacting to it, the former Union Minister, Saifuddin Soz, said Ms. Heptullah's move had given a "rude shock to her admirers" by "unjustifiably seeking parallels to Gujarat massacres in the previous riots in India."

He said political observers felt Ms. Heptullah would soon learn to her horror that the community she professes to represent will be on the other side of the fence for substantially important political reasons.

Najma attacks Sonia's leadership

NEW DELHI, FEB. 23. In an indication that she was moving closer to the Bharatiya Janata Party, the senior Congress leader and Rajya Sabha Deputy Chairperson,



Najma Heptullah, today attacked the party president, Sonia Gandhi, alleging that she had been "humili-

ated" by her.

She also praised the Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, saying that "he is a good man, someone who only thinks about the nation." "He is a leader you can respect and trust. The Congress leadership has lost that respect."

"The problem is not with the party, but with the party leadership. The present Congress leadership has moved away from the ideology of Nehru, Azad, Patel and Gandhi. This is not a leadership I respect," Ms. Heptullah said in an interview to NDTV.

"When I was elected chairperson of the International Parliamentarians Union, Ms. Gandhi did not even bother to call me. I have been subject to all kinds of humiliation over these years," she said.

Asked whether she was preparing the ground for joining the BJP, Ms. Heptullah said that "she had not taken any such decision, nor had she been approached by the BJP. I am happy with what I have for now. I am not hankering after anything. This is not about any position or Rajya Sabha seat, but about my dignity and self-respect." Admitting that the violence in Gujarat had left her ashamed, Ms. Heptullah said that this, however, did not mean that the BJP was anti-minority. "I think Vajpayee is a leader that the minorities also have faith in..." she said. —

PTI

PM's post not a priority for me, says Sonia

HT Correspondent
New Delhi, February 22

CONGRESS PRESIDENT Sonia Gandhi said on Sunday that becoming Prime Minister was not a priority for her. The BJP, she alleged, was making her foreign origin a poll issue because the government had failed to deliver.

In response to a question about the Congress's reticence about choosing a leader for the anti-BJP alliance, she said: "For me, that is not a priority. Let us see when the time comes."

In an interview to NDTV, Sonia Gandhi also said she was completely Indian. "I have never felt that I am a foreigner. I am an Indian absolutely," she said. "Wherever I go, especially in rural areas, in the midst of women and less fortunate people, I never feel that I am a foreigner. They never look at me as a foreigner because I am an Indian. In fact, I feel like a foreigner when I go abroad."

"I don't resent it when they (BJP leaders) talk about my foreign origin. That should be a message to everyone that they have so totally failed that they have to pick up one issue. In fact, it makes me laugh."

Asked whether her transition from a foreigner to an Indian had been completed, she said, "The transition was completed long ago. I have assimilated and imbibed a certain amount of these feelings after being part of a family which took part in the freedom struggle and laid down lives in the service of the nation."

Sonia also defended Indira Gandhi against charges of totalitarianism, saying her mother-in-

Poll pot



SOCIAL SOPS

Vajpayee launches social security scheme in Lucknow. It offers health insurance and old-age pension to the unorganised sector



HEPTULLAH IN BJP?

Party president M. Venkaiah Naidu says there is no proposal to induct Najma Heptullah (Cong) into party

law considered the declaration of Emergency a "big mistake".

"My mother-in-law did consider the declaration of Emergency a big mistake. That she (later) declared elections meant that she had to rethink," Sonia said. "The Indira Gandhi I knew was a democrat at heart and I think it was circumstances that compelled her to take that action."

Maneka vs Sonia

Who's got the better daughter-in-law?

It can be said with some justice that had Maneka Gandhi, and not Sonia Gandhi, assumed the Congress mantle, as could have happened had the Family trajectory and tragedies taken a different turn, the BJP would have faced a more formidable Opposition. Maneka scores better than her sister-in-law on most of the necessary ingredients of political calibre and she is free of the "foreign origin" baggage. That Indira Gandhi's younger daughter-in-law has now joined the BJP is, therefore, not only a twist in the history of India's foremost political dynasty but also a reminder to Congressmen, however much they may dislike it, that they didn't get the best bargain out of the division of Family affairs. Proof, albeit indirect, of this comes from the fact that had Sonia been half as self-assuredly articulate as Maneka, Congress spin-doctors would not be jumping for joy every time their party president provided five minutes of unprompted soundbytes to the media.

That comparison is one of the reasons the BJP may contemplate using Maneka as the shadow Nehru-Gandhi, not quite the bahu-versus-bahu direct confrontation the media deliciously anticipates perhaps but as an attempt to blur the brand. Intra-Family name calling may not be likely, at least initially, because neither the Congress nor the BJP can be sure how voters will take to a soap opera. Varun Gandhi, who followed his mother to the BJP, declaring that he will not target cousins Priyanka and Rahul tends to reinforce this possibility.

Even without invectives and the washing of dirty but colourful Family linen in public, a Sonia-Maneka face off, however carefully indirect, cannot but be interesting. More so, if the BJP, as it is reportedly contemplating, sends Maneka immediately to areas toured by Sonia. Plus, the younger daughter-in-law may appear on-stage with Atal Behari Vajpayee, the BJP's biggest brand and the only other pan-Indian political marketing success after the Nehru-Gandhis. The Congress may respond by pushing the articulate Priyanka to the forefront, etc, etc. All good fun for voters, therefore, and even better if it's relatively clean fun as well. But should we be navel-gazing about the hold of dynasty politics in India? After all, the BJP has felt the need of absorbing one Nehru-Gandhi in part because the Congress cannot then claim a monopoly on Nehru-Gandhis. There's actually not much reason to be depressed. The crucial issue in dynasty politics is whether birth or relation by marriage guarantees elevation to the top, no matter other qualities, or rather the lack of them. In this case, Maneka will simply be one among several BJP leaders. And Sonia, about whom such questions have been raised, will either prove herself with the second chance she has got — she failed in 1999 — or most likely not get a third chance. Should she fail to deliver this time, there may in near-future be a Congress minus a Nehru-Gandhi at the helm — Priyanka is too young — but a BJP with a Nehru-Gandhi as a party leader. How much more strange can politics get.

রাজীব-হত্যার দায় থেকে ডিএমকে'কে মুক্তি দিচ্ছি: সনিয়া

১৩ ফেব্রুয়ারি ২০০৪

বিক্রম নায়ার • চেম্বাই

গান্ধী

১৩ ফেব্রুয়ারি: ডি এম কে-র সঙ্গে হাত মিলিয়ে লোকসভা নির্বাচনে কংগ্রেস এ ডি এম কে এবং বিজেপি-কে ধরাশায়ী করতে পারবে বলে আশাবাদী সনিয়া গান্ধী। ডি এম কে নেতা করুণানিধির সঙ্গে আজ এখানে তাঁর বৈঠকে আসন ভাগাভাগি নিয়ে কথা না-হলেও কংগ্রেস সভানেত্রী মন্তব্য করেছেন, ডি এম কে-র নেতৃত্বাধীন জোট ডেমোক্রেটিক প্রোগ্রেসিভ অ্যালায়েন্স (ডি পি এ) যথেষ্ট শক্তিশালী এবং এ ডি এম কে-বিজেপি-কে হারানোর ক্ষমতা রাখে। করুণানিধির দলের সঙ্গে তাঁদের বন্ধুত্ব কতকটা সিলমোহর লাগানোর চেষ্টাই সনিয়া বলে গিয়েছেন, রাজীব-হত্যার দায় থেকে তাঁরা এখন ডি এম কে-কে মুক্তি দিচ্ছেন। জৈন কমিশনের চূড়ান্ত রিপোর্টের কথা উল্লেখ করে তিনি বলেছেন, আগে ডি এম কে-কে ভুল বুঝেছিলেন। উল্টো দিকে করুণানিধি জানিয়ে দিয়েছেন, সনিয়াকেই প্রধানমন্ত্রী পদের দাবিদার হিসাবে মেনে নিতে তাঁদের আপত্তি নেই।

দলের সাধারণ সম্পাদক কমলনাথকে সঙ্গে নিয়ে আজ বিমানবন্দর থেকেই সোজা করুণানিধির বাড়িতে চলে যান সনিয়া। দু'জনের মধ্যে ঘণ্টাখানেক আলোচনার পরে করুণানিধি সাংবাদিকদের বলেন, “এ ডি এম কে-বিজেপি জোটকে হারানোই এখন প্রত্যেক কংগ্রেস এবং ডি এম কে কর্মীর উদ্দেশ্য। সেই উদ্দেশ্যপূরণে সফল হব বলেই আমাদের বিশ্বাস।” কংগ্রেস সভানেত্রীর সঙ্গে তাঁর আলোচনাকে ‘রাজনৈতিক দিক থেকে কার্যকর’ বলে মন্তব্য করেছেন তামিলনাড়ুর প্রাক্তন মুখ্যমন্ত্রী। আর সনিয়ার কথায়, দুই ডি এম কে নেতা স্টালিন এবং টি আর বালুকে তিনি যে-প্রতিশ্রুতি দিয়েছিলেন, আজ করুণানিধির সঙ্গে বৈঠকে তিনি সেই কথা রেখেছেন। এ ডি এম কে এবং বিজেপি-র ভোটব্যাঙ্ক ভাঙতে গ্রামাঞ্চলে উন্নয়ন না-হওয়ার বিষয়টিকে কংগ্রেস প্রচারে আনবে বলে সনিয়া জানিয়েছেন।

এল টি টি ই-র সঙ্গে সম্পর্ক এবং রাজীব-হত্যার দায় সংক্রান্ত পুরনো অস্বস্তিকর প্রসঙ্গ আজ নিজেই টেনে এনেছেন সনিয়া। কেন্দ্রীয় মন্ত্রিসভা থেকে ডি এম কে মন্ত্রীদের সরিয়ে দেওয়ার দাবি না-মানায় আই কে গুজরাল সরকারের উপর থেকে সমর্থন তুলে নেওয়ার সময়ে তিনি ডি এম কে ভুল বুঝেছিলেন বলে আজ জানিয়েছেন সনিয়া। তাঁর ব্যাখ্যা, “জৈন কমিশনের অন্তর্বর্তী রিপোর্টে কিছু ডি এম কে নেতা সম্পর্কে নেতিবাচক মন্তব্য ছিল। কিন্তু কমিশনের চূড়ান্ত রিপোর্টে সে সব কিছু ছিল না। অন্তর্বর্তী না চূড়ান্ত—কোনটা বেশি গুরুত্বপূর্ণ?” বিজেপি-এ ডি এম কে জোটকে হারানোর কথা বলার পাশাপাশি ‘বিদেশিনি’ প্রসঙ্গে সনিয়ার বক্তব্য, “আমি অন্তর থেকেই ভারতীয়। এ ডি এম কে সুপ্রিমো (জয়ললিতা) বা অন্যেরা যে যা-ই বলুন, আমার অন্তরের পরিচয় তো পাল্টাবে না।”

পশ্চিমেরি, শ্রীপেরুমপুদুর বা নাগেরকয়েলের মতো আসন নিয়ে বিতর্ক মেটানোর বিষয়টি দলের সাধারণ সম্পাদক দেখবেন বলে জানিয়ে পাশে দাঁড়ানো কমলনাথকে দেখিয়ে দেন সনিয়া। বস্তুত, আসন ভাগাভাগির বিষয়টি যে পরে আলোচনা হবে, দু’পক্ষই তেমন ইঙ্গিত দিয়েছে। সাধারণ ইস্তাহার নিয়ে ভোটে লড়ার প্রসঙ্গে করুণানিধি বলেছেন, ২১-২২ ফেব্রুয়ারি ডি এম কে-র ভিরুধুনগর সম্মেলনে এ ব্যাপারে আলোচনা হতে পারে।

করুণানিধির সঙ্গে বৈঠকের পরে কামরাজ ভবনে কামরাজের মূর্তি উদ্বোধন করতে গিয়ে সনিয়া বলেন, কৃষিক্ষেত্রে বাজপেয়ী সরকার কোনও উন্নয়ন আনতে পারেনি। তামিলনাড়ুর গ্রামাঞ্চলে মানুষের ক্রয়ক্ষমতা কমে গিয়েছে। কাবেরী বন্দীপে জল না-পেয়ে অজস্র মানুষের দুর্দশা এবং মৃত্যুর প্রসঙ্গ কংগ্রেস প্রচারে তুলে আনবে বলে জানিয়েছেন সনিয়া। রাজনৈতিক মহলের বিশ্লেষণ, শহরে ডি এম কে-র নিজস্ব ভোটব্যাঙ্ক এবং গ্রামে ও দলিতদের মধ্যে জয়ললিতার প্রভাবের কথা ভেবে সচেতন ভাবেই প্রচারের বিষয়টি বেছে নিয়েছেন কংগ্রেস সভানেত্রী।

Sonia at DMK 'tea party'

OUR SPECIAL
CORRESPONDENT

Chennai, Feb. 13: Kick-starting the Congress election campaign in Tamil Nadu today by reviving memories of the Kamaraj era, Sonia Gandhi brushed aside attacks on her foreign origin as something that did not bother her at all.

After a 45-minute meeting with DMK chief M. Karunanidhi, who has shaped the Democratic Progressive Alliance here, the Congress president declared that this is a "winning and formidable alliance".

Sonia said her promise, made when DMK leaders M.K. Stalin, T.R. Baalu and Dayanadhi Maran had called on her in New Delhi, to "meet Karunanidhi at the earliest opportunity" was fulfilled today. The Congress president was accompanied by party leaders Pranab Mukherjee, Kamal Nath and Mani Shankar Aiyar.

Interacting briefly with reporters after her first formal meeting with the DMK patriarch in the spacious hall spruced up for the occasion at the party



Karunanidhi greets Sonia at the DMK headquarters in Chennai on Friday. (AFP)

headquarters Anna Arivalayam, the Congress president described the talks as "good". They discussed "how to work together" to remove the B.J.P.-led NDA from power at the Centre, she said. The local Congress unit's anger over the denial of the lone Pondicherry seat was also taken up. "The Pondicherry issue will be resolved in a day or two," Sonia said.

Asked about Jayalithaa's

remarks that "a foreigner should not be allowed to become the Prime Minister of India and that only an Indian should come to that high office" a surprised Sonia shot back: "I am an Indian. Regardless of what some people or political leaders like the ADMK leader may say, nothing can take away from my heart that is Indian." "My heart is Indian," she repeated for emphasis.

Another reporter asked

whether with this 'tea party' with the DMK leader the "ghost" of the Jain commission report on Rajiv Gandhi's assassination had been buried once and for all. Turning towards Pranab, Sonia said: "There is some misunderstanding about the Jain commission report; the interim report made some comments, but the final report did have any negative comment on the people concerned."

But "will not the observations of the interim report stand"? the reporter persisted. "How can it stand after the final report?" she shot back.

When she walked into the DMK office complex for the first time, Sonia was first received by the Stalin, the party's youth wing leader and Karunanidhi's son, and then by the DMK chief.

Karunanidhi said the DMK and other alliance partners accepted Sonia for the Prime Minister's post, adding that his party had never got into this "uncivil debate" about her foreign origin. His first-ever political meeting with Sonia was "cordial, honest and one that the country needed at this juncture", the DMK chief said.

'War group' at 10 Janpath

CL Manoj in New Delhi

Feb. 12. — As the poll battle gains momentum, Mrs Sonia Gandhi has set up a "war group" to formulate and monitor the Congress' strategy against the Safron brigade. And true to army tactic of keeping the command structure camouflaged from the public and enemy ranks, the Congress president is unlikely to publicise the formation of this top strategy team, which has already started functioning from her heavily-guarded residence at 10 Janpath.

Mrs Gandhi's top command structure now comprises a 14-member "strategy committee", a six-member "election management and monitoring team", a seven-member "control room" for liaison with party coordinators and observers at the state level, a 14-member "manifesto committee", a seven-member team for "publicity, slogans and literature", and a six-member "constituency database research centre". The teams function under Mrs Gandhi's direct command.

Setting up of such micro-management teams was a key recommendation of the Pranab Mukherjee committee that had analysed the party's debacle in the recent Assembly polls.

The teams' composition signals

return of the "old guard" to the centre of the party's decision-making process, as well as the propping up of a new "Young Turks" group. It also signals the erosion of the AICC secretariat's control over strategy — the secretariat has virtually been reduced to a mere decision-implementation forum.

The "strategy committee" includes Mr Pranab Mukherjee, Mr Arjun Singh, Dr Manmohan Singh, Mr Ghulam Nabi Azad, Mr ML Fotedar and Dr Karan Singh; the new "Young Turks" include Mr Digvijay Singh, Mr Salman Khursheed, Mr Suresh Pachouri and Mrs Rita Joshi. The control room is being manned by Mr Ahmed Patel, Mr Oscar Fernandes, Ms Selja, Mrs Jayanti Natarajan and Mr Ranjit Thomas. The team in charge of monitoring the poll management, headed by Mr Mukherjee, comprises Mr Ahmed Patel, Mrs Ambika Soni, Mr Oscar Fernandes, Mr Khursheed and Mr Jairam Ramesh.

'Varun to join BJP'

Mr Varun Gandhi will join the BJP on Monday. "With Varun joining the BJP, half of the Congress will be with us and the other half with them (Congress)," BJP leader Mr Pramod Mahajan said in Jalgaon, Maharashtra. PTI adds.

92-5
62

Naidu alleges Cong-PWG nexus

Statesman News Service

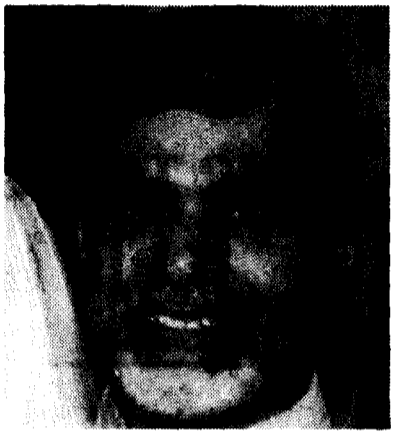
HYDERABAD, Feb. 5. — Mr N Chandrababu Naidu has alleged that the Congress is colluding with the PWG in Andhra Pradesh to kill Telegu Desam Party leaders, clearly indicating a nexus between the two.

Congress leaders were shocked by Mr Naidu's allegations. "This is not a small issue. What he has said is something dreadful. We are thoroughly going through what he has said. We will offer an appropriate and full-fledged reaction tomorrow," Congress chief spokesman Mr K Rosaiah told The Statesman.

"The Congress is colluding with the extremists for political greed and giving information about TDP leaders' whereabouts and having them killed," the Andhra Pradesh chief minister said at a press conference called to announce the TDP's election plans. When asked why he did not act on this information, he said: "They are desperate. If we have proof we will act. We have to establish facts and this is difficult when they (PWG) are an underground organisation."

He elaborated, "Our people (of the TDP) are saying that the Congress is colluding with them for greed." On whether he would probe the alleged nexus, he said: "We will take action if there is evidence." He also said the government would not use Pota against political activists and expressed confidence that TDP leaders would be able to campaign freely for the forthcoming Lok Sabha and Assembly polls.

When pointed out that there are sufficient laws other than Pota that



Mr N Chandrababu Naidu could be invoked to contain extremism, he said: "We cannot catch them immediately. As they are an underground organisation, it is difficult to track down where they (PWG and Congress) are meeting."

To substantiate his charges, he said "when we organised a public meeting, PWG called a bandh. Then they started calling and threatening TDP leaders that they would be killed if they participated in the meeting."

Making a specific allegation, Mr Naidu said that the PWG attempt on the life of TDP MLA Mr Jaypal Yadav in October 2003 could happen only because "the Congress had passed on information about his (Mr Yadav's) whereabouts to the PWG". Mr Yadav was severely injured in the PWG strike, but survived.

The Congress says it's not connected with such things, but indirectly the nexus is clear. "If you trust them (PWG), you will have a problem. Some are compromising for some temporary benefits," Mr Naidu said.

INDIAN EXPRESS 16 FEB 2004

সনিয়ার ভোজে সবাই খুশি, হাজির প্রায় সব নেতাই

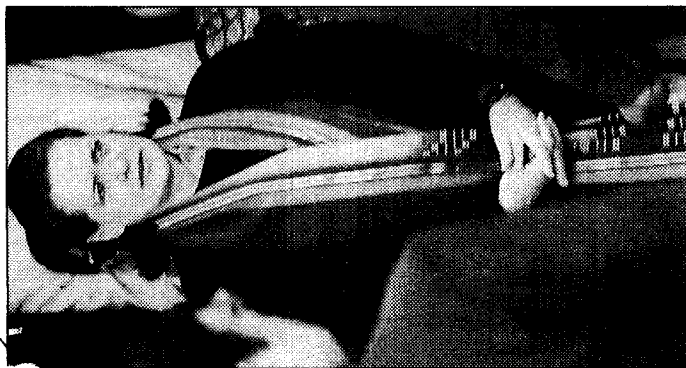
স্টাফ রিপোর্টার, নয়াদিল্লি, ৫
ফেব্রুয়ারি— যে মধ্যাহ্নভোজকে কংগ্রেস
নেতারা মোটে গুরুত্ব দিতে চাইছিলেন
না, শেষ পর্যন্ত সেখানেই সাফল্য এল।
সংসদের অ্যানেক্সিতে সনিয়ার
মধ্যাহ্নভোজে যোগ দিলেন প্রায় সমস্ত
বিরোধী দলের নেতা।

কংগ্রেস কিছুদিন ধরেই নাজেহাল
হচ্ছে উত্তরপ্রদেশ নিয়ে। সমাজবাদী
পার্টি ও কংগ্রেসের সম্পর্কে কোনও
উন্নতি ঘটেনি। এমনকী সমাজবাদীর
পরিবর্তে বি এস পি'কে সঙ্গে পেতে
গিয়েও হোট খাচ্ছে কংগ্রেস। এই
অবস্থায় দুই দলকেই আমন্ত্রণ জানানো
হবে কী না তা নিয়ে দ্বিধা ছিল নেতাদের।
পরে আমন্ত্রণ জানানো হলেও কেউই
আসবেন কী না তা নিয়ে সংশয় তৈরি
হয়। শেষ পর্যন্ত হাজির দু'তরফই,
সমাজবাদী পার্টির অমর সিংহ এবং
বহুজন সমাজবাদী পার্টির সাংসদ রশিদ
আলাউদ্দিন। কংগ্রেস সূত্রের খবর, কাল
রাতে সনিয়া স পা'র নেতা মুলায়ম সিংহ
যাদবকে টেলিফোনে এই 'বিরোধী-
ভোজের' কথা বলেন। মুলায়ম আসতে
না পারলেও পাঠান অমর সিংহকে।
ঝাড়খণ্ড মুক্তি মোর্চার শিবু সোরেনের
সঙ্গেও ফোনে কথা বলেন সনিয়া।

বাকিরা যে আসবেন তাতে সংশয়
ছিল না। কংগ্রেসের নতুন সঙ্গীদের মধ্যে
ছিলেন এন সি পি-র শরদ পওয়ার, প্রমুখ
পটেল, ডি এম কে-র টি আর বালু,
লোকজনশক্তির রামবিলাস পাসোয়ান।
এসেছিলেন সি পি এমের সোমনাথ
চট্টোপাধ্যায়, সি পি আইয়ের অজয়
চক্রবর্তী। ছিলেন প্রাক্তন প্রধানমন্ত্রী
দেবেগৌড়া, চন্দ্রশেখর। সনিয়ার
সেনাপতিদের মধ্যে ছিলেন প্রণব
মুখোপাধ্যায়, শিবরাজ পাটিল, অর্জুন
সিংহ, প্রিয়রঞ্জন দাশমুন্সি, জয়পাল
রেড্ডিরা। আসেনি ফরওয়ার্ড ব্লক এবং
আর এস পি। সব মিলিয়ে উপস্থিত
ছিলেন ১৩টি দলের ২৮ জন নেতা।

ভোজের সময় তেমন গুরুতর
রাজনৈতিক কথা হয়নি বলে নেতারা
জানিয়েছেন। ভোজ থেকে বেরিয়ে
সনিয়া বলেছেন, "আমরা পাঁচ বছর
একসঙ্গে কাজ করেছি। মধ্যাহ্নভোজে
সবাইকে ডেকেছিলাম ধন্যবাদ দেওয়ার
জন্য। ভোট আসছে। আবার আমরা
একসঙ্গে কাজ করব।" সোমনাথ সহাস্যে
বলেন, "আমাদের ভোজে খুব ঝাল-
মশলা ছিল। অন্যরা অবশ্যই তা টের
পাবেন।"

হাস্কা মেজাজে নেতারা আলোচনা
করেছেন সংসদে পি এ সি রিপোর্ট,
যশোবন্ত সিংহের 'নির্বাচনী উপহার' ফিল
গুড ফ্যাক্টর প্রচারের জন্য বি জে পি-র
কোটি কোটি টাকার বিজ্ঞাপন দেওয়ার
প্রসঙ্গ। ভোজ শেষে লালু স্বভাবসিদ্ধ
ভঙ্গিতে বলেন, "আমরা এক টেবিলে
খেয়েছি। জিতে এসে এক টেবিলে বসে
খাব।" অমর সিংহ বলেন, "আজকের
পরিবেশ খুবই ভাল ছিল।"



Sonia Gandhi
A very special moment

Truth, finally, after 17 years of abuse: Sonia

98 P. 201

Press Trust of India
New Delhi, February 4

"ONE DAY, my innocence will be proved", an emotional Congress president Sonia Gandhi recalled her husband as having said after Delhi High Court on Wednesday gave a clean chit to late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in the Bofors gun deal. Not generally inclined towards sweets, Gandhi partook of a *rasgulla* to join the mood of jubilation at the Congress Parliamentary Party executive meeting shortly after the Delhi High Court judgment.

Veteran Supreme Court lawyer, Kapil Sibal, who is also a Congress Rajya Sabha MP, narrated the details of the court judgment as several members, like P.R. Das Munshi, Shivraj Patil and Vilas Muttemwar, recalled how his political detractors had hounded the late leader on the issue.

The buoyant mood at the concluding

'Since the first accusation to the last indignation inflicted by the BJP-led NDA government by placing my husband's name on the chargesheet, I've never felt more proud to be the wife of such a man'

meeting of the executive saw Sonia exhorting her party men to be ready for the big fight ahead and come back to Parliament with bigger margins and bigger numbers.

In a brief statement to the media, Sonia said it was a very special moment for her, Rahul and Priyanka.

Asked by a TV channel whether power brokers close to Rajiv had misused their proximity, she said there were possibilities that some people might have taken advantage. Sonia recalled that Rajiv had said he and his family were not involved in the case.

"There were persons who were particularly responsible for this campaign and many of them are in government.

This very government is the government which dragged his name into the case where he was actually named in that infamous second column as an accused and a conspirator", she said.

"This was something, which not only V.P. Singh did, but all other leaders of all parties did the same. They went around campaigning against my husband naming a farzi (forged) secret account, which never existed, saying he was a thief and that he had taken money", she said,

but ultimately the truth has prevailed", Sonia said.

"(We have gone through) 17 years of abuse, 17 years of vilification and the worst character assassination throughout these 17 years," she said, adding that, since the first accusation to the last indignation inflicted by the BJP-led NDA government by placing "my husband's name on the chargesheet, I've never felt for a second more proud to be the wife of such a man". And truth had emerged victorious, she added.

Asked whether Italian businessman and one of the prime accused in the Bofors case, Ottavio Quattrocchi, should be brought to India for trial, Sonia said she had always maintained that whether it was Quattrocchi or anyone else, the law should follow its course.

To another question on corruption, she said that, in cases of certain leaders of the ruling NDA, "we saw in black and white on television their taking money".

adding that these politicians - "throughout the campaign in 1989, and even much earlier - were doing the same, and all of them spoke the same language.

"They continued in the 1991 elections, and these very people continued all along, and, as I mentioned, the case - as you all know - continued under this government.

"Even today, in Parliament, when the interim Budget was being discussed, a BJP member spoke of this case and my husband's involvement", she said.

"Seventeen years of vilification... All of us have tolerated this all these years,

Congress-BSP talks 'positive'

CL Manoj in New Delhi

Feb. 1. — The Sonia-Mayawati talks for a Congress-BSP alliance for the Lok Sabha polls was "positive", AICC sources said today.

The sources hinted that the Congress — facing the BSP leader's bargaining skills — is thinking of settling for about 30 to 35 of the 80 Lok Sabha seats in UP, leaving the majority to the BSP. But the Congress may also have to shell out

some seats for the BSP in MP, Punjab and Rajasthan. With the Congress leaders indicating progress in the talks, the party unit in UP seems gearing up to withdraw support to the Mulayam Singh government.

Mrs Gandhi and Miss Mayawati, "during their frank talks last night, agreed to have a give-and-take attitude" in order to achieve "the principle goal of defeating the BJP". If the alliance is formalised, Mrs

Gandhi may make a few changes in the UP Congress unit as it's perceived to be headed by some pro-Mulayam leaders.

With the Lok Sabha scheduled to be dissolved this week-end, sources said the next 15 days will be crucial for Mrs Gandhi to put in place her "alliance mission" through a professional give-and-take bargaining with potential allies.

Advani-Jaya dinner,
page 4

TOUCH AND GO

Age and seniority are no reasons not to want more. So Mr K. Karunakaran has not hesitated to throw down the gauntlet in Kerala, just when the major rivals are mustering troops to get ready for the Lok Sabha elections. According to Mr Karunakaran, either the Congress accepts all the demands he has made, or he quits to form a new party named after Indira Gandhi. According to the Congress, this is "unfortunate", since the high command has granted almost everything Mr Karunakaran has asked for. But of course, it has not granted him what he possibly wants most — it is not ready to wrest the chief minister's chair from Mr A.K. Antony and hand it to Mr Karunakaran instead. In spite of the appearances of a do-or-die battle, Mr Karunakaran seems to be doing a delicate balancing trick. His son, Mr K. Muraleedharan, the state Congress chief, is repeatedly assuring the high command of his unswerving loyalty. Interestingly, his father's threat of parting ways has led to him being inducted as the state's twenty-first minister.

Mr Karunakaran has enough on his side to be tempted to drive a hard bargain. He has been associated with the party throughout his life, is a member of the Lok Sabha and a permanent invitee to the Congress working committee, with an old and devoted following. The Congress would not like to have its votes divided, and like still less the ill-feeling the senior man's exit would generate. At the same time, the party is no longer willing to be conciliatory over Mr Karunakaran's open and continued criticism of both the state and central units. Both sides are waiting for the other to jump, because an understanding still seems possible. This is the reason the chief minister, Mr Antony, has cited for his own soft tone towards his rival: unity in the party is above all. It is also not absolutely certain how far Mr Karunakaran's threat is a realistic one. Times have changed, and not many would like to leave seats in the legislature for the sake of loyalty. Outside of the Congress in Kerala, Congressmen would find it tough to find solid ground without being important community leaders as well. Nor are all of his followers in the party equally supportive of Mr Karunakaran's move. Quite a few of them were disappointed at his announcement that he would be forming the new party within a week. Besides, the conditions of the new anti-defection law may cramp his style. There is quite a lot hanging in the balance. That Mr Karunakaran is still willing and able to play suggests that to be chief minister again, especially by depriving a rival, may be worth a hard bargain even in the waning years.

'Amethi is like my home'

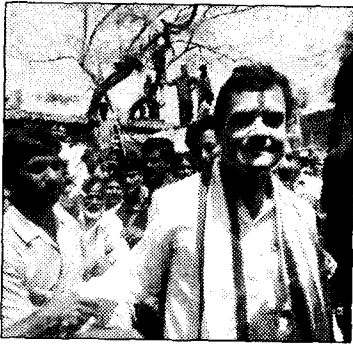
Devesh Kumar
AMETHI 30 MARCH

FOR the people of Amethi, it was time to affirm their old faith and loyalty to the Gandhi family. When the latest entrant from the dynasty to this dusty little town, he was showered with the devotion and affection reserved only for a raja. If Rahul bhaiya, as Mr Rahul Gandhi has come to be known in this part of the country, intended to make a power statement, he couldn't have chosen a better place and time.

Carrying on from where he had left on Monday, the first day of his two-day-long visit to the constituency — his first after the announcement of his candidature from the seat for the Lok Sabha polls, Mr Rahul Gandhi on Tuesday continued with his journey to renew his old bonds with a constituency which has made it a habit to send one of the members of the Gandhi family to Parliament. In his interaction with mediapersons early in the morning, Mr Rahul Gandhi pointed out that Amethi had come to be like his home. "I like visiting the place," he said, adding, "there is much work to be done." Speaking at an impromptu rally in front of the ITI factory's main gate at Rae Bareilly, which is gearing up to welcome his mother Sonia Gandhi on April 6, he told a cheering crowd: "Amethi and Rae Bareilly are like a family to me" adding, "I am aware of the problems faced by you here. You leave it to us for their solution."

He then said something which could only have been uttered by someone who's new to the game. "I've to board a plane for New Delhi. I must rush. But I promise I'll meet you again soon." The people who had gathered at the venue just lapped it up.

Call it a manifestation of the realization that he's yet to internalise the tricks of the trade or a deliberate at-



PATH BREAKING: Rahul Gandhi meets local people during his election campaign in Rae Bareilly on Tuesday. — AFP

tempt to tone the rhetoric that comes so easily and naturally to politicians, Mr Gandhi chose to stay quiet as he mingled with the local populace on his way back to Lucknow from Munshiganj, via Gauriganj and Rae Bareilly. At all the points in which he stopped, he went through a by-now familiar routine. He would step down the Toyota Qualis in which he was travelling along with the family-loyalist, Capt. Satish Sharma and Mr Kishori Lal Sharma, Ms Sonia Gandhi's point-man for the People of Amethi; venture into the arms of the waiting crowd; shaking hands with a few, giving anxious moments to the retinue of security-persons tasked to protect him; and wave at the people gathered around the venue from the roof-top of his vehicle.

At some places, he would put his arms around the shoulder of a youth, or embrace an elderly person after asking his name, or stoop down gently to hug a small child.

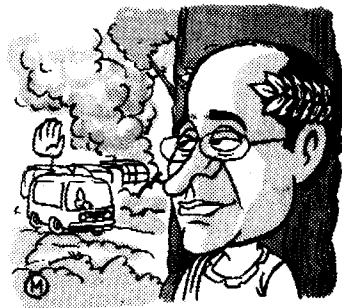
It was clear, nonetheless, that he had managed to strike a sympathetic chord with the locals. Many people, especially women, were overheard wondering about the striking resemblance between him and his father, late Rajiv Gandhi.

Raja, Rani missing

Devesh Kumar
AMETHI 30 MARCH

WHILE Mr Rahul Gandhi's first visit to this constituency after the announcement of his candidature for the forthcoming general election went off exactly as planned by the Congress strategists, there is one question that rankled most of the mediapersons gathered here to catch the event live — Where is Mr Sanjay Singh and his wife, Amita?

The Raja of Amethi, who represented



the constituency in the Lok Sabha between 1998-99 wearing the saffron attire, had re-joined the Congress late last year after a brief stint in the BJP. His wife, Amita, a minister in the Mayawati government, had followed suit subsequently. The Singhs were, however, nowhere to be seen during the entire jan-sampark abhiyan undertaken by Mr Rahul Gandhi. On persistent queries, local Congressmen said Mr Singh had visited the Sanjay Gandhi Hospital, which houses the local address of the Gandhis, on Monday night to offer his blessings. But there is obviously something amiss.

Rahul drives in with Rajiv dream

TAPAS CHAKRABORTY

Amethi, March 29: Rahul Gandhi arrived in Amethi on his first campaign trip today to declare he was his "father's son" and would complete "his unfinished task".

"I too am young and I have a dream — one of a highly developed Hindustan," Rahul — in white kurta pyjama and *angochha*, like his father — told villagers as he swept through the dusty hamlets, past mango trees and wheat fields.

If the words sounded like an echo of Rajiv Gandhi's *I am young and I too have a dream*, the son was not apologetic. "My father is my hero and I am here to complete his unfinished task."

Rahul arrived at 10.30 am on a two-day tour of the constituency and drove 120 km through Jagdishpur along Sultanpur Road, Jamo Road, Gauriganj and Munshiganj.

People lined up on the roads to greet the latest member of the family to contest from Amethi. Drums and bands played on, crackers were burst and supporters showered rose petals and marigold garlands on the heir-apparent of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty. From trees hung cloth banners that said "*Atut rahega yeh bandhan, Rahul Gandhi ka abhinandan*" and welcomed the "*Yuva Hriday Samrat*".

Seventy-six-year-old Shanta Prasad, head shaking and walking stick held firmly in frail hands, stood in front of a brick house at Jagdishpur market when Rahul's long convoy, escorted by 100-odd motorcycles, arrived in the semi-rural industrial suburb at 11.30 am.

Enthusiastic youngsters waved Congress flags and shouted slogans like "*Gaon Gaon mein aandhi hai, kewal Rahul Gandhi hai*." Rahul stepped out of his vehicle and walked briskly up



A woman hugs Rahul Gandhi as a boy holds his hand at a village near Amethi on Monday. (AFP)

the dusty path to Prasad.

Touching the hands holding the oiled stick, he asked: "*Aap mujhe pahchante hain?* (Do you know me?)" The man looked at him for a few quick seconds, searching perhaps for Rajiv

Gandhi's likeness in the smiling face before him. His eyes moistened and a sad look clouded them as he said: "Who doesn't know you, my son? You used to play here as a child when your father would tell us about politics."

Rahul's eyes glistened and he glanced away. He touched two children playing nearby, bid *namaste* to everyone and trudged back to his vehicle. "Please don't ask me anything now," he begged.

The 33-year-old, who has so

far been happy to let Priyanka engage the crowds and the media, initially appeared diffident although he would not admit it. "I am not nervous for politics comes naturally to me," he protested. But after the first

few hours, the latest Nehru-Gandhi in politics had taken to canvassing like a duck to water.

Encouraged perhaps by the huge turnout that included Hindus and Muslims, upper castes and backwards, Rahul stopped more often to chat with people and had tea sitting on the mud floor of ramshackle stalls. When he needed privacy — as when he was calling his mother in Jamo — he stepped into the fields.

At 2.30 pm, he had his meal under a tree near Gogmau village near Jamo.

Beginning at Chilauti Primary School, whose foundation stone had been laid by Rajiv Gandhi, Rahul's six-hour journey ended at Munshiganj, about 130 km from Lucknow. As voters blessed him, they went down memory lane. "I have seen three generations of leaders from his family. He has imbibed the true values of his family. He is firm, bold and stern when under fire yet vulnerable," gushed Kripa Shankar Dubey in Jamo.

Rahul said: "Like my father and my grandmother, I will perform my assigned job — which now is to contest polls from this constituency — even if I am attacked, criticised and vilified."

"My father was the target of a false campaign by the Opposition. I used to ask him why he did not retaliate. He told me we should be doing what we think is right and not bother about these things. Therefore, I will follow the same path. But I am not to be bullied by the Opposition."

Rahul said his first priority was to win from Amethi. "My family has associated with this place for 40 years and I hope we will be associated with it for the next 40 years."

But at least some voters have bigger plans for him. "If we could have our way," said farmer Anand Kishore Shukla, "Rahul would be Prime Minister."

CROWN PRINCE

The law of primogeniture is a relic of the feudal era. But intentionally or otherwise, Ms Sonia Gandhi and the Congress seem to be upholders of that rather quaint law in modern times. The decision to promote Mr Rahul Gandhi ahead of Ms Priyanka Gandhi in the election batting order cannot be explained in any other term save the preference for the male first-born. Mr Gandhi has not ever shown a pronounced public interest in politics. The same cannot be said of his sister, who has been visible and occasionally vocal as well. Mr Gandhi has been something of a recluse, staying away from the limelight. Also, he was abroad for a considerable period of time pursuing a career which was far removed from Indian politics. Yet he is the Congress candidate from Amethi. The choice of Amethi is also significant since it is a kind of a Gandhi family fiefdom: three Gandhis have previously fought elections from there, Rajiv, Sonia and Sanjay. The emphasis on dynasty, lineage and tradition is too strong to be ignored. Ms Sonia Gandhi seems to be telling her critics that although her provenance is Italian, she is culturally and socially imbued in traditional Indian values. These are values that privilege son over daughter, the first-born over other children, and family (read dynasty) over merit. Mr Gandhi goes to Amethi, according to this set of values, to claim his heritage as the eldest son of the Gandhi dynasty. All other considerations pale into insignificance.

It is very easy to scoff at these values from the ramports of a Westernized and urban modernity. But these are the values that are respected all over India, in the villages and even in some towns and cities. It can hardly be disputed that despite the considerable success of the modernization project, large parts of India remain outside its influence. The choice of Mr Gandhi for Amethi will not strike a discordant note in those parts that are relatively untouched by modernity and its attendant attitudes. In such areas, the choice will reinforce the Congress as the party that respects Indian tradition, and this in turn will serve to counteract the foreign-origin campaign directed at Ms Sonia Gandhi. Mr Gandhi's candidature from Amethi announces that the dynastic mantle has passed to the person who will easily be recognized by traditional India as the rightful claimant to represent the dynasty.

The obvious focus on the dynasty underlines a contradiction that stalks the Congress. In terms of policies, it has been the pioneer of modernity in India. Yet this has not stopped it from nurturing traditional values. It led the campaign to make India a republic. Yet this has not stopped it from becoming a party driven by a dynasty. Mr Gandhi has nothing to recommend himself save the names of his father, grandmother and great grandfather. This lineage, and this lineage alone, makes him different from any other loyal Congress worker of his age group. The Congress continues to sit on the fence that separates tradition from modernity, but its loyalty to a dynasty is proof that its legs are dangling on the tradition side of the great divide.

Action-oriented manifesto, says Sonia

By Our Special Correspondent
NEW DELHI, MARCH 22. The Congress today described the coming Lok Sabha elections as a "clash of sharply competing values, of diametrically opposite ideologies" and against the Bharatiya Janata Party, which was "systematically undermining the very essence of Indian civilisation".

"The Congress' goal is to defeat the forces of obscurantism and bigotry who contributed nothing to the Freedom movement or the making of our Constitution and whose sole objective is to subvert our millennial heritage and composite nationhood," the party said in its 32-page manifesto.

Releasing the document, the party president, Sonia Gandhi, said it was packaged differently, action-oriented and transparent unlike the BJP whose real agenda was hidden behind the veneer of the National Democratic Alliance. As a measure of the party's commitment to implementation of the manifesto and accountability, she said every year on October 2, birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, the Congress would bring out a progress report of its implementation.

Spread over five sections, the document provides an overview of 45 years of the party's achievements, the reasons for which the party should be voted back to power, the "failures" of the NDA/BJP, and the priorities, plans and programmes of the Congress. In addition, over the next few days the party would publish "vision documents" on economic and political affairs,



The Congress president, Sonia Gandhi, shows the party's manifesto at a press conference in New Delhi on Monday. — Photo: Shanker Chakravarty

minority educational institutions that will provide direct affiliation for minority professional institutions to central universities.

The Congress promised to spend budgeted funds "to the fullest" and ensure elimination of delay in modernisation of the armed forces. It also committed to maintaining a "credible nuclear weapons programme" while simultaneously evolving "demonstrable and verifiable confidence-building measures with its nuclear neighbours". Promising to make the National Security Council a professional and effective institution, the party said it would move resolutely to implement the recommendations of the Subrahmanyam Committee on Kargil to strengthen intelligence networks. On relations with Pakistan, the Congress said unlike the BJP it had been consistent on the issue of dialogue with Islamabad on all issues, including Jammu and Kashmir. The party said it had advocated formal and informal talks on the basis of the Shimla Agreement. It said that Pakistan's sponsorship of cross-border terrorism must end completely once and for all. "If it continues, then the Indian state has the responsibility to protect its citizens".

It promised to carry out administrative, police, judicial and electoral reforms and tackle the root causes of corruption and the generation of black money. Besides deregulation and removal of laws that have outlived its utility, the party felt that transparency in party financing and state funding of elections would help

ers, compromised national security and social disharmony. Also, it accused the Government of

subverting the school curricula, destroying probity, denigrating key institutions and undermining the independence of the foreign policy.

On the contentious Ayodhya issue, the manifesto said all par-

ties must wait for and abide by the verdict of the courts.

For minorities, the Congress pledged to extend reservation for the economically deprived persons belonging to communities that were at present not entitled to such reservation. It also promised to amend the Constitution to establish a commission for

social empowerment, and national security and foreign affairs separately.

Listing the "monumental failures" of the BJP-led NDA Government, the document said the last five years were marked by massive unemployment, falling growth rates, acute distress among farmers and farm labour-

Crass obsession with dynasty: BJP

Party plays cool to Rahul factor

OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

New Delhi, March 21: The BJP has tried to underplay the Congress decision to field Rahul Gandhi from Amethi, with party leaders saying they would treat it like a normal political battle.

A senior BJP leader said the party would not go overboard in countering Rahul's entry into electoral politics. "We are not going to bring extra glamour and glitz just because Rahul Gandhi is contesting," said the leader.

No top BJP leader was willing to go on record. However, party general secretary Vijay Kumar Malhotra termed the decision to field Rahul "crass *parivarvaad*".

Malhotra said the Congress decision showed that the 118-year-old party totally depended on children of the Gandhi family. Rahul, he said, has no experience or skill and his only qualification is that he is Congress president Sonia Gandhi's son. "That is why he is demanding the Prime Minister's post. This is an example of *rajtantra*."

Asked why he felt Rahul is a prime ministerial candidate, Malhotra explained that Sonia has already said she is not a candidate for the post. Thus, the only conclusion is that Rahul is the prime ministerial candidate, he said.

The BJP leader said Maneka Gandhi's son Feroze Varun (who

cannot contest the elections as he is only 24 and the eligibility age is 25) had already campaigned during the Uttar Pradesh Assembly polls and has been doing work in a few constituencies.

Malhotra claimed that the BJP is not practising dynastic rule, overlooking that Rajasthan chief minister Vasundhara Raje is the daughter of the late Vijayaraje Scindia and that Union finance minister Jaswant Singh's son Manvendra is also contesting the Lok Sabha polls.

National Democratic Alliance convener George Fernandes' party said the decision to field Rahul "exposed (the) Congress' weakness". Janata Dal (United) spokesperson Shiv Kumar said: "The Congress can bring anyone. We are not worried. We know the Congress has become weak. By bringing him (Rahul) the party is showing its weakness and the dynasty established in the Congress."

Fernandes said the Congress should be "ashamed" for not being able to name its prime ministerial candidate, despite having more than 120 years of experience, according to a PTI report from Salem in Tamil Nadu.

Fernandes expressed his surprise over the People's Alliance in Tamil Nadu proposing him as the candidate for the top post. The NDA convener said he had come to attend the conference of the third front in Tamil Nadu.

IN THE FAMILY'S FOOTSTEPS



NAME: RAHUL GANDHI

Age: 33

Education: MPhil in economics from Cambridge, according to Priyanka

Passions: Fast cars, dogs, pistol-shooting and now politics

First noticed: As a toddler playing with grandmother Indira

Last noticed: 10 hours a day in the company of a crack team of technocrats and politicians formulating the Congress' strategy for Election 2004

Temperament: Reticent with an eye for detail, patient listener and at home with technology

Can do what cousin can't: Contest elections. Cousin Varun is 24 — a year short of the eligible age

WHY AMETHI

Sanjay, Rajiv and Sonia chose Amethi for their gateway to power politics. The family's ties date back to 1900. Motilal Nehru is said to have bought Anand Bhawan at Allahabad from the Raja of Amethi.



Indira Gandhi contested her first Lok Sabha election in January 1967 when she was 49. Indira chose Rae Bareilly, which was represented by husband Feroze Gandhi in 1952.



Rajiv Gandhi debuted from Amethi in 1981. He won the by-election three days before his 37 birthday. The seat got vacated after the death of younger brother Sanjay.

Graphic: MANOJ

Naidu whets foreign origin knife

OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

New Delhi, March 21: The BJP kept up the heat on the Congress over Sonia Gandhi's origin a day before the main Opposition party releases its manifesto.

The Congress manifesto should state the party's policy on the foreign-origin issue, BJP chief M. Venkaiah Naidu said here today. "The Congress should spell out clearly its stand on people of foreign origin occupying posts like that of the Prime Minister.

"If they want to reserve top posts for people of non-Indian origin, they should say it clearly," he added.

Yesterday, Naidu had said the NDA, if it returned to power, could amend the Constitution to bar people of foreign origin from occupying high constitutional posts such as that of the President, the Prime Minister and the Chief Justice of India.

Naidu clarified that his party was raising the issue in the larger interests of the country and not because of any individual.

The BJP also asked the main Opposition party to name its leader in the event it is voted to power at the Centre.

"We want the Congress to clarify its stand on three vital issues. One, what alternative — one-party rule or coalition government — are they presenting before the nation. If it is a coalition, then their agenda should be laid out, and lastly, who is their leader," Naidu said.

The ruling party received a shot in the arm today when the heirs of the former princely state of Baroda entered its fold. Maharani Shubhangi Niraje Gaekwad, the wife of former maharaja Ranjitsingh Gaekwad, and their son Samarjitsingh joined the party at Naidu's home here.

"She expressed her desire to join the BJP and we are welcoming her in the party," Naidu said.

Mother and son will campaign for the elections, he added.

Shubhangi Niraje had unsuccessfully contested the 1996 general elections as an Independent from Vadodara. "The BJP has already declared its candidate from Vadodara seat, and we did not join the party on the condition that I should contest the polls. I am happy campaigning for the party," she said.

Amethi erupts, asks where's Priyanka

TAPAS CHAKRABORTY

Lucknow, March 21: Sripal Chamar could not wait to hit the road of Bahadurpur, Amethi, when he heard the news on radio this evening.

Sripal led 20 of his neighbours, armed with *mandara* (a village drum), down Amethi-Sultanpur Road in a spontaneous show of joy to celebrate Rahul Gandhi's debut in electoral politics.

The enthusiastic group even demanded Priyanka's entry from some other constituency in Uttar Pradesh.

Sripal, 45, had good reason

to celebrate. He had met Rahul and sister Priyanka when they secretly visited Amethi in January.

At the guesthouse in Bahadurpur village, he had told them how BJP supporters thrashed him for being an active worker of the local unit of the Rajiv Gandhi Charitable Trust.

Sripal's enthusiasm infected the Congress office in Lucknow when the story of his procession filtered down here. "There is a wave of excitement among the party workers," party spokesman Akhilesh Prasad Singh said.

The announcement in Delhi

that travelled to Amethi in just about an hour, however, had a different effect on the offices of the BJP, the Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party.

The local BJP, yet to announce its candidate for Amethi, was taken by surprise and sounded defensive. But Kalyan Singh was clear that dynastic rule would be its target now.

"Rahul's nomination from Amethi reflects the desperation of the Congress. The very fact that son and mother would be contesting from neighbouring Amethi and Rae Bareilly would help us shift the focus to dynastic rule," he said.

The BJP is without a nominee since Sanjay Singh of the local royal family recently returned to the Congress, followed by his wife Ameeta.

Sanjay had defeated the Congress' Satish Sharma from Amethi in 1998. But he was trounced by Sonia Gandhi in 1999 when she won with over 300,000 votes.

Amethi, 40 km southwest of Sultanpur, has belonged to the Nehru-Gandhi family since the late 1950s. The constituency is part of the former Sultanpur-Kanhapuria estate and comprises five Assembly segments of about 314 villages.

The Congress had led in all segments in 1999, except Tilohi where the BJP was ahead. The BJP won Tilohi in the 2002 Assembly polls and the BSP pocketed another segment called Gauriganj. The BSP MLA later joined the Samajwadi.

Rahul is not expected to have a tough battle from Amethi, which has an overwhelming number of upper-castes and Ahir farmers as also backwards from Ghusia, Jhusia, Jatav, Kori and Pasi.

The Samajwadi and the BSP, which has fielded Chandra Prakash Mishra Matihari, are yet to react officially.

Rahul to contest from Amethi, Sonia shifts to Rae Bareilly

● 'Priyanka's plans will be made known in due course'

By K.V. Prasad

NEW DELHI, MARCH 21. The Congress today announced the formal entry of Rahul Gandhi into electoral politics by declaring his candidature from Amethi, the constituency represented by his mother and Congress president, Sonia Gandhi, in the dissolved Lok Sabha. Ms. Gandhi now shifts to neighbouring Rae Bareilly once represented by Indira Gandhi.

The decision to field Rahul Gandhi ended speculation on the political role for the next generation of Nehru-Gandhis. Talk of his taking the electoral plunge began earlier this year after he toured Amethi along with his sister, Priyanka Vadra. While Priyanka Vadra, has been active, campaigning for her mother and assisting her with constituency-related work, Rahul Gandhi joined her recently.

Since 1980, Amethi has been represented by the Gandhi family except between 1991 and 1998 when family loyalist Satish Sharma held the seat and between 1998 and 1999 when it was lost by the Congress to Sanjay Singh, then contesting on a Bharatiya Janata Party ticket. Rajiv Gandhi won the seat on four

occasions, including in 1991. (He was assassinated before the results were out). In 1980, Sanjay Gandhi won the seat and later Rajiv Gandhi won the byelection after his death. Sonia Gandhi successfully contested the seat for the first time in 1999.

There has been a clamour in the party that both the Gandhi siblings be fielded in the coming general elections and the Uttar Pradesh Congress Committee had even passed a resolution to that effect. Today while announcing Rahul Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi's candidature with 29 other names, the AICC general secretary, Ambika Soni, said the "programme of Ms. Priyanka Vadra will be made known in due course."

The Congress decision to

field Rahul Gandhi was expected to galvanise the party in Uttar Pradesh, especially since it has been left without a major political partner in the State. The Congress hopes for an electoral tie-up with the Bahujan Samaj Party were dashed last week with the latter deciding to go it alone. The Samajwadi Party, whose Government was being supported by the Congress in Uttar Pradesh, had earlier decided to contest 70 of the 80 seats in the State, leaving the rest to its partner, Rashtriya Lok Dal.

Though it seems that the Congress may have no option but to go it alone in Uttar Pradesh, even at this late stage the party was trying to negotiate a deal with the

Samajwadi Party, which was confirmed by Ms. Soni today.

Among the other seats declared today include Maharashtra (10), Rajasthan (nine), Kerala (five), Jammu & Kashmir (three) and Chhattisgarh (two) taking the total number of candidates cleared to 180.

Prominent among those cleared include the former Union Minister Balram Jakhar from Churu in Rajasthan, the former Jammu and Kashmir State Congress chief, Ghulam Rasool Kar from Baramulla, and the former Maharashtra Chief Minister, A.R. Antulay from Kolaba. The list of candidates from Maharashtra includes Milind Deora, son of the former Mumbai Territorial Committee chief Murli Deora, from Mumbai South, the current chief, Gurudas Kamat, from Mumbai North-East, the Indian Olympic Association chief, Suresh Kalmadi from Pune, the former Union Minister Balasahib Vikhe-Patil, who left the Shiv Sena recently, from Kopergaon and the AICC general secretary, Mukul Wasnik from Buldhana. Two Ministers in the J&K Government, Lal Singh (Udhampur) and Madan Lal Sharma (Jammu) are also being fielded.

It was expected: Jaitley

NEW DELHI, MARCH 21. The BJP tonight said the nomination of Rahul Gandhi, son of the Congress president, Sonia Gandhi, for the Amethi Lok Sabha constituency was expected because the party decides its future leadership on the basis of an individual's relationship with a family.

"It has always been on expected lines that Congress determines its leadership on the basis of a relationship that an individual has to a family," the BJP general secretary, Arun Jaitley, said. — PTI

Another report on Page 11

নেহরু-গান্ধী পরিবারের নতুন প্রজন্মের যাত্রা শুরু, রাহুল প্রার্থী অমেঠিতে



মায়ের সঙ্গে শলায় ব্যস্ত পুত্র রাহুল। — এ এফ পি-র ফাইল চিত্র

স্টাফ রিপোর্টার, নয়াদিল্লি, ২১ মার্চ— ছেলে রাহুলকে অমেঠি ছেড়ে দিয়ে কংগ্রেস সভানেত্রী সনিয়া গান্ধী এ বার তাঁর শাশুড়ি ইন্দিরা গান্ধীর কেন্দ্র রায়বরেলি থেকে নির্বাচনে লড়বেন। আজ রাহুলের নাম ঘোষণা করা হলেও কন্যা প্রিয়ঙ্কা বচরার নাম প্রার্থী হিসাবে ঘোষণা করা হয়নি। কংগ্রেসের সাধারণ সম্পাদক অম্বিকা সোনির বক্তব্য, “আপনারা কিছু দিন অপেক্ষা করুন। প্রিয়ঙ্কা যে-রকম সিদ্ধান্ত নেবেন, সেই রকমই হবে।” তবে কংগ্রেস ওয়াকিং কমিটির সদস্য এবং প্রবীণ নেতা প্রণব মুখোপাধ্যায় স্পষ্ট বলে দিয়েছেন, “আমাদের পরিকল্পনা হল, রাহুল-প্রিয়ঙ্কার মধ্যে এক জন লড়বেন। অন্য জন প্রচার করবেন। রাহুল যে-হেতু প্রার্থী হয়েছেন, তাই প্রিয়ঙ্কা দেশে ব্যাপক প্রচার করবেন।”

প্রিয়ঙ্কার জায়গায় রাহুলকে প্রার্থী করার কারণ হিসাবে কংগ্রেস নেতাদের একটি গুরুত্বপূর্ণ অংশ জানাচ্ছে, ভারতীয় ঐতিহ্যের রীতি মেনে পুত্রসন্তানের অগ্রাধিকারের বিষয়টিকে প্রাধান্য দিয়েই এই সিদ্ধান্ত নিয়েছেন সনিয়া। প্রিয়ঙ্কা রবার্ট বচরাকে বিয়ে করার পরই সনিয়া এই

‘রাজনৈতিক উত্তরাধিকার’ রাহুলের উপরে সঁপার পরিকল্পনা নিয়েছিলেন। কংগ্রেসের অন্য একটি যুক্ত, সঞ্জয় গান্ধীর পুত্র বরুণ বিজেপি-তে যোগ দেওয়ার পরেই ১০ জনপথ সক্রিয় হয় রাহুলকে দাঁড় করাতে।

প্রিয়ঙ্কার জায়গায় রাহুলকে প্রার্থী করার অন্যতম কারণ এটাই। কংগ্রেস নেতাদের বক্তব্য হল, জনগণের কাছে রাহুলের থেকে প্রিয়ঙ্কার আবেদন অনেকটাই বেশি। তাই একটা কেন্দ্রে প্রার্থী করে তাঁকে বেঁধে রাখতে চায়নি কংগ্রেস। বরং প্রিয়ঙ্কার জন্য তৈরি করা হচ্ছে দেশব্যাপী প্রচার সূচি। সনিয়ার মতোই সারা দেশে প্রিয়ঙ্কা প্রচারে নামবেন। নেহরু-গান্ধী পরিবারের সঙ্গে জড়িত অমেঠি থেকে রাহুলকে জিততে খুব বেশি বেগ পেতে হবে না বলেই আশা করছে দলীয় নেতৃত্ব। প্রণববাবুর মতো কংগ্রেস নেতারা দ্বিতীয় যে-যুক্তিটি দিচ্ছেন, তা হল, “দেশের যুবা সম্প্রদায়ের কাছে কংগ্রেস একটি সদর্ধক বার্তা পাঠাতে চেয়েছিল। এটা দু’ভাবেই করা যেত। রাহুল অথবা প্রিয়ঙ্কাকে দাঁড় করিয়ে। এ ক্ষেত্রে রাহুলকে বেছে নেওয়া হয়েছে।”

বাবার স্মৃতিবিজড়িত কেন্দ্র অমেঠি

থেকে পুত্র রাহুলকে প্রার্থী করার পরই অম্বিকার কাছে ভেসে আসে এই প্রশ্ন — ক্ষমতায় এলে রাহুলই কি তবে প্রধানমন্ত্রী হবেন? এই সম্ভাবনা উড়িয়ে দিয়ে সোনি জোর গলায় জানিয়ে দিয়েছেন, সনিয়া গান্ধীই তাঁদের একমেবাদ্বিতীয়ম নেতা। সোনির জবাব, “অন্য কারও নেতৃত্বের প্রশ্ন উঠেছে না। সনিয়া গান্ধী আমাদের অধ্যক্ষ। তিনিই আমাদের নেতা।”

রাহুল গান্ধীকে লোকসভা ভোটের ময়দানে নামিয়ে কংগ্রেস নেত্রী বিজেপি-র বিরুদ্ধে তুরূপের তাসটি খেললেন বলে মনে করছে রাজনৈতিক শিবির। নির্বাচন এগিয়ে আসার সঙ্গে সঙ্গে দেশের সর্বত্র বিদেশিনি প্রসঙ্গ তুলে প্রচারের হাওয়া গরম করছিল বিজেপি। রাহুল প্রার্থী হওয়ার ফলে বিজেপি-র সেই প্রচারে অনেকটাই জল ঢেলে দেওয়া গেল বলে মনে করা হচ্ছে। রাহুলের বিরুদ্ধে ‘অনভিজ্ঞতা’, ‘বংশপরম্পরার রাজনীতি’ ইত্যাদি অভিযোগ ইতিমধ্যেই তুলতে শুরু করেছে বিজেপি। কিন্তু এর বাইরে গিয়ে বিদেশি জন্মসূত্র নিয়ে রাহুলের বিরুদ্ধে কোনও প্রচার তাদের পক্ষে করা সম্ভব হবে না।

আজ রাহুলের এই অভিযেকের

ঘোষণার পর রাজনৈতিক মহলে প্রশ্ন উঠছে, কেন অমেঠি ছাড়লেন সনিয়া? কংগ্রেস নেতারা ঘরোয়া ভাবে জানাচ্ছেন, ভারতীয় পরিবারের ঐতিহ্য মেনে চলতেই এই সিদ্ধান্ত নেওয়া হয়েছে। প্রকাশ্যে অম্বিকা সোনি অবশ্য যুক্তি দিচ্ছেন, “গোটা দেশই সনিয়াকে চাইছিল। দাঁড়ানোর জন্য তাঁর কাছে আমন্ত্রণ ছিল দেশের প্রায় সব রাজ্য থেকেই। কিন্তু রায়বরেলি ছিল প্রয়াত ইন্দিরা গান্ধীর কেন্দ্র। সেখানকার মানুষের অনুরোধ তাই অগ্রাধিকার পেয়েছে।” তবে, কংগ্রেস নেতারা ঘরোয়া আলাপচারিতায় জানাচ্ছেন, ভারতীয় পরিবারের মূল ধারাকেই এই মনোনয়নের ক্ষেত্রে অনুসরণ করা হয়েছে। অর্থাৎ, পিতার উত্তরাধিকার তাঁর ছেলের উপরে বর্তানো। বাবা রাজীব গান্ধীর কেন্দ্র তাই ছেলেকে ছেড়ে দিয়েছেন সনিয়া। তবে আবার রাজনৈতিক সূত্রের খবর, এই নির্বাচনে দু’টি কেন্দ্র থেকে দাঁড়াতে পারেন সনিয়া। রায়বরেলি ছাড়াও কর্ণাটকের বেলারি থেকে তাঁর দাঁড়ানোর সম্ভাবনা প্রবল বলে শোনা গিয়েছে। এই সম্ভাবনা পুরোপুরি খারিজ না-করে অম্বিকা সোনি বলেছেন, “যখন অন্য আসনগুলির ঘোষণা হবে, তখনই এ বিষয়ে জানিয়ে

দেওয়া হবে।” এ প্রসঙ্গে প্রণববাবুর বক্তব্য, “গোটা দেশ থেকেই সনিয়াকে দাঁড় করানোর আমন্ত্রণ আসছে। তবে শেষ মুহূর্তে কোনও পরিবর্তন না-হলে সনিয়া একটি কেন্দ্র থেকেই লড়বেন।”

আজ তৃতীয় প্রার্থী তালিকায় মোট ৩১ জন প্রার্থীর নাম ঘোষণা করেছে কংগ্রেস। তার মধ্যে রয়েছেন মহারাষ্ট্রের কংগ্রেস নেতা মুরলী দেওড়ার ছেলে মিলিন্দ দেওড়া, মুকুল ওয়াসনিক প্রমুখ নেতা। রাহুল অথবা প্রিয়ঙ্কাকে রাজনীতির মূলস্রোতে নিয়ে আসা নিয়ে রাজধানীতে দীর্ঘ জল্পনার অন্ত ছিল না। প্রত্যেক বারই সনিয়া বলে গিয়েছেন, “বিষয়টা একদমই ওদের উপরে নির্ভর করছে।” তবে রাহুলকে প্রার্থী করার বিষয়টি একেবারেই গোপন করে রেখেছিল ১০ জনপথ। বরুণ কংগ্রেস শীর্ষ নেতৃত্ব এই জল্পনাকে বরাবরই উস্কে দিতে চেয়েছে। আজ এই উৎকর্ষার অবসান হওয়ার পরে অম্বিকা সোনি জানিয়েছেন, “সনিয়া গান্ধী তো আপনাদের প্রথম থেকেই বলছিলেন, বিষয়টি ওদের সিদ্ধান্তনির্ভর। দেখলেন তো শেষ পর্যন্ত সিদ্ধান্ত নেওয়া হল।”

● রাহুলের বিরুদ্ধে বিজেপি-র অস্ত্র..পৃঃ৫

22 MAR 2004

Desperate Congress now looks towards Mulayam

Statesman News Service

NEW DELHI, March 19. — Left out by the BSP and facing the prospects of being left alone in the crucial state of UP, a desperate Congress has started subtly working on the option of a poll alliance with Mr Mulayam Singh Yadav. But the party, given its poor organisational strength and cornered political status in the state, faces the prospects of being without much bargain-power for seats with the SP chief even if he chooses to entertain the advances from the Congress camp.

Though the AICC offi-

Second list delayed again

NEW DELHI, March 19. — The AICC today again failed to release its second list of candidates amidst talk of hectic tug-of-war between various factions in the inner circle for share of candidates from their camp. The party's inconclusive talks with potential allies are being seen as a reason for delaying the list. There are some indications that Ms Priyanka Gandhi and her brother Rahul may step in for active campaign any time after the formal release of the party manifesto. — SNS

cially refused to comment on whether it was exploring the SP option, there are indications that some senior leaders, including Mrs Sonia Gandhi's political secretary Mr Ahmed Patel, have established contact with Mr Yadav. Also a significant section of the UP Congress is reportedly backing this gamble.

Punjab Cong rattled: The Congress high command is being rocked by the revolt within its ranks in Punjab against the nomination of former chief election commissioner Mr MS Gill as its candidate for the Rajya Sabha. The open opposition has caused immense embarrassment to the party.

THE STATESMAN 20 MAR 2004

9
(18/7)
Rebel skirts hand symbol to swing Trinamul votes

Cong support for Sudip

OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

Calcutta, March 17: The Congress will back Sudip Bandopadhyay in his attempt to seek reelection from his Calcutta Northwest seat as an Independent after being denied a ticket by the Trinamul Congress.

"We have already held a preliminary discussion with Sudip and a final decision on this score will be taken as soon as possible," said state Congress president Pranab Mukherjee. The Trinamul rebel is yet to write to the party formally seeking its support, he added.

Asked if he had set any condition for his support, Mukherjee replied in the negative. "The only thing is that an Independent candidate must not join any party after the elections if he or she is elected. I believe Sudip is

aware of this," he said.

Earlier, the Congress was insisting on a written statement from Bandopadhyay accepting Congress president Sonia Gandhi as his leader and criticising the BJP-led NDA. Some state leaders also wanted him to promise that he would not enter into any truck with Mamata Banerjee after the elections.

Bandopadhyay said this afternoon that he was happy with the Congress' gesture.

"I shall officially seek the Congress' support in a day or two by calling on Mukherjee and other PCC leaders. I think the Congress' support will help me retain the seat," he said.

Bandopadhyay is, however, unwilling to fight with the "hand" symbol and has approached state electoral officer Basudeb Banerjee for another. Congress leaders said the Trinamul rebel was hoping to mop up Trinamul votes by not taking the Congress symbol.

The Congress' support has not come to Bandopadhyay as an "unmixed blessing," because state leaders will target the Vajpayee government in rallies where he will share the platform with them. "We will highlight the NDA government's failure in Sudip's presence. Vajpayee is definitely our main target," said Somen Mitra, a former state unit chief.

Reacting to the Congress' decision, Trinamul spokesman Pankaj Banerjee said: "It will only split the anti-CPM votes and has vindicated our contention that the Congress has been serving as the 'B' team of the CPM." He said the party would initiate disciplinary action against Bandopadhyay once he files his nomination.

Trinamul has put up mayor Subrata Mukherjee from the seat and had offered Raigunj to Bandopadhyay.

Nayna, Bandopadhyay's actress-turned-legislator wife, welcomed the Congress' decision. "The Congress is an all-India party and its support will definitely help Sudip sail through in the polls," she said.

Replying to another question, the Trinamul MLA from Bowbazar said she has not yet decided whether to campaign for her husband.

"I shall shortly meet Didi (Mamata) to discuss what I should do at this juncture. I am hurt by some party leaders' attempt to corner me ever since Sudip decided to contest from his old seat as an Independent candidate. Is it my fault that I got married to Sudip?" she said.



FRIENDS: Bandopadhyay (top), Mukherjee

Two steps backwards for Cong

Sri
Mohan Sahay in New Delhi

March 17. — Failing to get Miss Mayawati's commitment for an alliance in Uttar Pradesh, the Congress may also be forced to go it alone in Bihar as Mr Laloo Prasad Yadav seems to be unwilling to concede to its demands.

With this in mind, the AICC today set up the election campaign committee for Bihar. It's headed by PCC chief Mr Ram Jatan Sinha. Ruling out any alliance between the BSP and Congress, Miss Mayawati today announced the candidates for 75 of the 80 LS seats in UP and said she herself would be in the fray.

gpp-
Mr Yadav today left Delhi with a message for Mrs Sonia Gandhi that there was no case for the Congress to ask for 22 seats in Bihar. Besides, he would not share a dais or even coordinate with the PCC president, who is an "epitome of Laloo *hatao* campaign".

The Congress may be forced to contest all the 40 seats in Bihar, which by default suits Mr Yadav in a polarised polity. According to RJD sources, the party would like the Congress to contest all seats, which would see a division of upper caste votes that are polarised against Mr Yadav.

The Congress had contested all seats in the 2000 Assembly

polls, helping the RJD return to power. Mr Yadav is keen to repeat the experiment while maintaining a facade of sorts that he is not to blame if the secular alliance fails to materialise.

Mr Yadav had a long meeting with Mr Ram Vilas Paswan last night and assured the latter of support.

In UP, a division of anti-BJP votes will be a clear "advantage BJP", which finds itself in a vulnerable position. But Miss Mayawati said: "A multi cornered contest is advantage BSP." Also, the politically tall Dalit leader has ensured that she would have a crucial role to play after the polls in case of a fractured verdict.

Sonia roadshow rolls after chopper crash

9 p.m. cont'd.
 A. V. BASANTRAWAI

Khanvel (Dadra & Nagar Haveli), March 16: Sonia Gandhi's western roadshow got off to an inauspicious start as minutes after she had touched down safely, a second helicopter carrying three Congress leaders crash-landed here, injuring general secretary in charge of Gujarat Prithviraj Chauhan and the pilot.

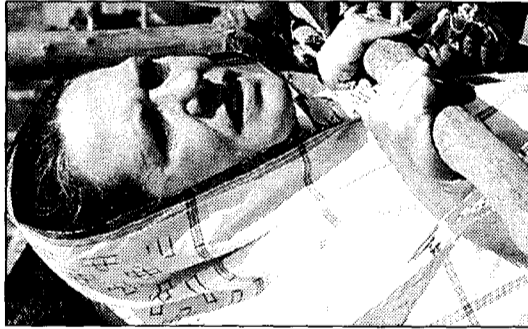
Ahmed Patel, Sonia's political secretary, and another leader Kiumari Selja escaped unhurt.

The chopper started rocking about 15 metres above the ground in its landing descent. Chauhan, who was sitting on the left, was thrown out as the door flew open and fell face down. He was admitted to the Silvassa civil hospital, where he received four stitches on his forehead. He is stated to be "stable and out of danger".

Patel and Selja jumped to safety as the chopper landed with a thud and ran away from the juddering craft. Police personnel rushed in and rescued the pilot and the co-pilot.

"Allah has saved me," said a shaken Patel, trying to remain composed. "Every thing was all right. The take-off was perfect. We don't know what went wrong."

Selja, who joined the roadshow with Patel, said the "chopper began to shake vigorously just 5-



Sonia at Khanvel. (Reuters)

7 feet before landing and the vibration shattered the glass".

The mishap occurred around 2.30 pm, minutes after Sonia landed for her Jansampark Abhiyan beginning from the tribal-dominated Union territory on the Maharashtra border. The helicopter, belonging to Delhi-based Ace Aviation, had taken off from Mumbai at 1.54 pm.

Sonia, wearing a grey sari, visited the injured in hospital before embarking on the public contact programme in the tiny

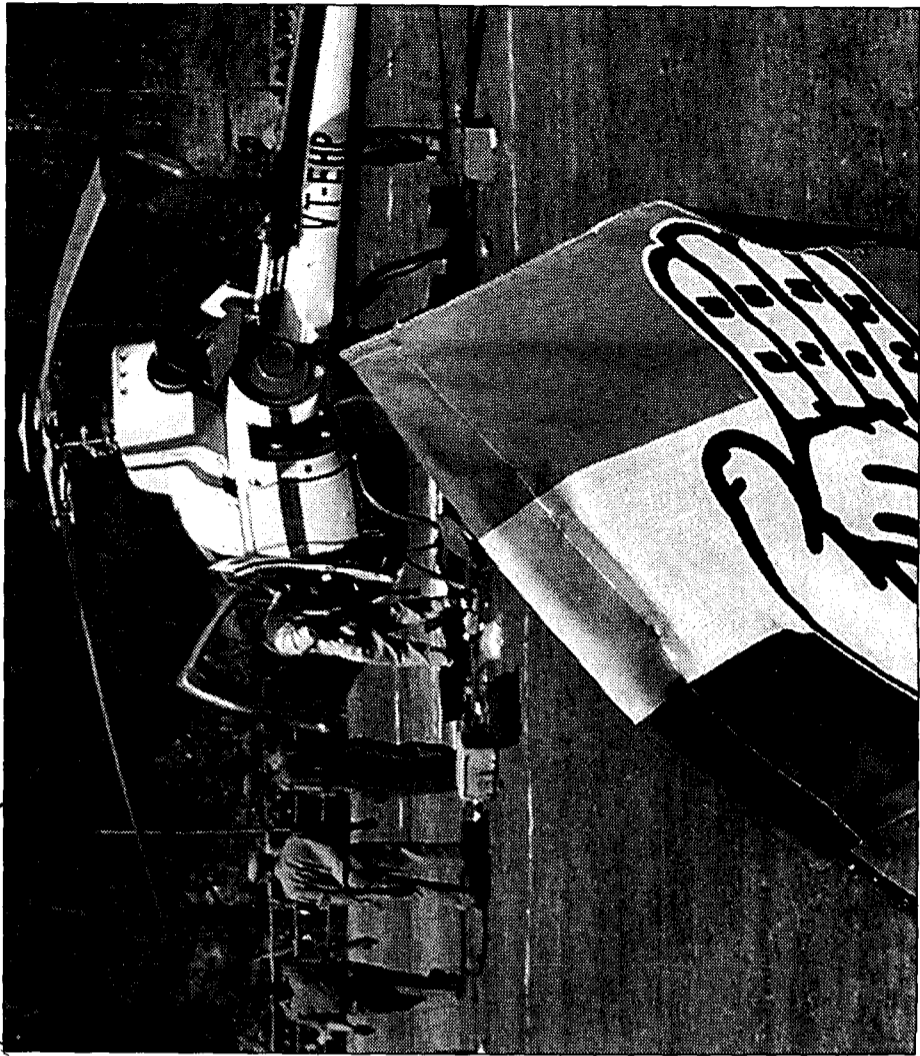
territory once considered a Congress bastion. The two-day roadshow will cover a major portion of the tribal belt in south Gujarat where the Congress hopes to recapture two seats from the BJP, besides Dadra and Nagar Haveli, Daman and Valsad that she toured today.

Sonia spoke little as she greeted the people who lined her route. Perhaps the mishap and a faux pas — she mistook a woman reporter at the helipad for a local tribal and asked what she did for a living — had unsettled her.

At Silvassa, Sonia received a lukewarm response from the people of the tribal constituency, where four-time MP Mohan Daler, who leads a party of his own, holds sway.

She entered Bhilad village to a better reception — hundreds stood waiting for her braving the scorching heat. From Vapi to Daman, at many places she stopped for five to 10 minutes, but only waved at the people or greeted them.

Still, the people seemed impressed, even with her "eloquent silence". But she would have won more hearts if she had lent an ear to the woes of many like Manjuben, who does not want to part with her land that the government has unilaterally decided to acquire for an airport.



Police men stand near the damaged helicopter in Khanvel. (Reuters)

"If I had wanted... I would have become PM in 1991"

TAKING TIME off her hectic election schedule, Congress President and Leader of the Opposition **Sonia Gandhi** gave her first full length interview to the print media to senior political analyst **Neeraja Chowdhury**. The interview was completed in two sittings at Ms. Gandhi's residence at 10 Janpath earlier this week, and lasted over two hours. A relaxed Ms. Gandhi answered questions on a wide range of issues, from the political to the personal. She talked about why she came into politics; whether she is a candidate for prime ministership; her party's prospects in the coming elections; her relationship with her husband Rajiv Gandhi and mother-in-law Indira Gandhi; and the controversy over her foreign origins. Excerpts:

Question: What is your response to the charge made by your detractors that a country of one billion people cannot have a foreign born person as Prime Minister?
Sonia Gandhi: That is really for the people to decide, for the country to decide. **Are you a candidate for prime ministership?** If I had wanted to be Prime Minister, I would have become PM in 1991. That is not the reason I came into politics. It was for the revival of the Congress Party. That is supremely important to me. I have said that my priority is to see to it, with other like-minded parties, that we defeat the present dispensation. **Would there be a possibility of someone else becoming the leader of the Congress Parliamentary Party, if that is demanded by the Congress allies, and the Congress is not in a position to form a government on its own?** The way I see it, a party normally chooses its leader. It is really for the party to decide. **But if the allies insist on someone else?** Again it is for the party to decide, not for me to decide. **The overwhelming mood in the country is of disenchantment with the political establishment, and everyone is looking for new themes, new faces and a new kind of politics. What are the changes you would like to bring about in the country's political culture?** It is a fact that there's a certain disenchantment with politics. Political financing has to become more transparent. We had a committee headed by Manmohan Singh to work on political financing. This is of major importance. **I also think we need many more professionals in politics, and a larger representation of youth, women and minorities. We have a large number of bright young men and women in the Congress today who have spread out to the country campaigning and this has been very successful. It is widely talked about in the regional press. Then we need adherence to certain values, which seem to be absent in today's politics. These days politics is seen as another business. I think we**

needing more people to come into politics who do not see it as a business but as an opportunity to serve people with sincerity. But political parties are not going for such people? There are such people in all parties and we have to have many more of them. I would certainly do my best to have more such people. This can't be done overnight and has to be a gradual process. **With money coming to dominate politics in a big way, it is more and more of the moneyed who are entering Parliament?** This is the sad part of politics. But now hopefully with the new legislation, less of this will be possible. **Earlier we used to hear that some Rajya Sabha candidates paid to a whole lot of MLAs to buy their votes. Now they may just deal with the party leaders.** I hope that doesn't happen. If it does, corrective measures will have to be taken. **At one stage, the Prime Minister praised you warmly and said, "Humare sar milte hain" (We sing in tune). Politically, of course, you differ. Is it true that at the personal level, apke sar milte hain?** Politically and ideologically, it is out of the question. It can't happen. At the personal level, whenever I have interacted with the PM, I have always felt very comfortable. We have supported the Government on many policy issues where we were in agreement, and no one can fault us on that. **Mystery still surrounds what went wrong in 1999, when you tried to form a government. Were you promised the support of certain parties and did they back out at the last moment? What really went wrong?**

We were dependent on assurances from certain political leaders, which did not materialise. **Who were they?** That is history now and I wish it hadn't happened. One always learns from one's mistakes. **There is an impression that you supported the formation of Congress (Tiwari), which led to the defeat of the Congress in 1996?** No, this is not true. **The Congress has hardly been in the picture in U.P., Bihar, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, and now Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh have been added to the list after the recent elections. This adds up to 280 Lok Sabha seats. Incumbency may also go against you in Maharashtra and Karnataka. What really is your plan to power?** I don't agree with this assessment. If you look at it, we have now tied up with the NCP and with the Telangana Rashtra Samithi in Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh. We started with the DMK and, by all accounts, that has received quite a positive response in Tamil Nadu. I am also happy about the response I received during my Jan Sampark Abhiyan in many places including U.P. The workers are upbeat and this is very visible and palpable. **But you will have to convert this enthusiasm into votes. While there seems to be a window of opportunity for the Congress in U.P. and you have appointed several people as UPCC chiefs in recent years, nothing seems to have worked. Do you see any going to align with in U.P.?** At the moment, we are looking at working with one or the other of the parties which have influence in U.P. I am positive that we will work out something. If we don't, we will fight elections on our own. We are not afraid to do so. **In Bihar you have an alliance in place but in Jharkhand it seems to have run into trouble with the JMM, and cases have been revived against Shibui Soren?** I am confident that the problem with the JMM will be resolved. This Government is misusing the institutions to put

pressure on certain political parties which could work with us. This is quite shocking. This never happened during the Congress' rule. There is misuse of the CBI to block our alliances. **The Congress does not seem to be exhibiting a will to win, even though there is no dearth of leaders in the party and you have managed to forge alliances. But only you seem to be campaigning, whereas there is a battery of leaders on the BJP side. Why is this so?** This is not true. We have a set of young people and a large number of women who have gone out to campaign. The trouble is that a designated person gets more attention. We keep hearing that the BJP has got a team. There is more focus on them because many of them are Ministers. It is neither correct to say that I am the only one who is working, nor that the Congress does not have the will to win. I would ask people to see the response we are getting. What you are saying is just a Delhi based reaction. **It is said that many of your senior leaders like P.V. Narasimha Rao, N.D. Tiwari and Pranab Mukherjee should contest to lend weight to the campaign?** I have no problem if they wish to contest. **One of the difficulties the Congress is likely to face this time is the erosion in the tribal vote which became evident in the elections in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan?** There has been a change amongst the tribals. I set up a committee soon after the recent Assembly results, consisting of senior people and some of them belong to the tribal community, to look into this issue. We have to give representation to a whole new generation of tribals

in the country and start in the States where we are in power. We shall also give more tickets to young tribals. **There is criticism that the Congress has ignored the Hindu psyche in recent years, and rightly or wrongly there is a perception that the party is inclined towards the minorities. On the other hand, your CMs, Digvijay Singh, A.K. Antony, and Ajit Jogi were accused of following a soft Hindutva line, making the minorities edgy. Do you think you run the risk of falling between two stools?** I really don't think we run that risk. There is no question of hard or soft Hindutva. We are a secular party to the core, and secularism means equal respect for all religions and it means combating communalism of all kinds. **Do you think a mix of religion is inevitable in a country like India?** India is a deeply religious country. But there is no room for politics based on religion. It has to have a moral and ethical basis. To arouse religious passions and mobilise people must not be part of our politics. Secularism is a battle to save all the great religions from forces of hate, bigotry and obscurantism. **Some people have made the charge that the Congress is soft on Muslim communalism?** I have always made it clear that the Congress Party is against communalism and fundamentalism, regardless of the religious group from which it emanates. **The Muslims have not forgotten the demolition of the Babri Masjid, and feel that more could have been done by the Government, and it was a Congress Government in 1992, to prevent it?** You are quite right. This is something which lingers in their hearts and minds. I strongly feel that the demolition should never have been allowed to happen. **Rajiv Gandhi had toyed with the idea of inviting back all those Congressmen who left the party or had been expelled. Would you welcome back such people?** I have already taken back people who left the party. If I am working with other parties, why shouldn't I work with Congresspersons who left the party at some point? **Do you feel that younger members of the Congress have accepted you while there is resistance from some of the old guard, rather like what Indira Gandhi encountered?** I do have some colleagues with whom I work closely. But we are mindful of our senior colleagues. I have to take along both, the younger colleagues who have more energy but the experience of my senior colleagues is certainly very helpful and is needed. **There is a feeling that the Congress has become defensive about talking of the gareeb (poor). Your slogan is no longer 'Congress ka haath gareebon ke saath' (Congress' hand is with the poor). Instead it is now 'Congress ka haath aam admi ke saath' (With the ordinary people). This is a subtle shift that has taken place.**



The TDP is our adversary in Andhra Pradesh and the BJD in Orissa. They have chosen to align with the BJP for purely opportunistic reasons. Presently we are bitter opponents. But as I said, the Congress is adjusting to new circumstances. So, one can't tell in the future. In politics anything is possible. **Do you really expect to win in the 2004 elections?** Yes, of course. **You have already said that economic reforms will continue if you come to power. How is it going to be different from the way the BJP has done it?** We will certainly continue with the reforms process but our focus will also be on the poor and on poverty alleviation. Can you have a country with a small island of prosperity and a huge mass down there? If we continue like this, it will pave the way for social discontent and conflict. And that would hamper economic reforms, they would come to a standstill. It is in everyone's interest, particularly those of us who have more, and I include myself in this, to see that the huge gap between the rich and the poor is reduced. Our energies will be guided in this direction. Of course the existing programmes will have to be tightened and the delivery systems made more efficient. **Will you carry on what Prime Minister Vajpayee has initiated for a rapprochement with Pakistan?** It was Rajiv Gandhi who made a move for a rapprochement with Pakistan when he became Prime Minister. I remember going to Pakistan. That was when Benazir Bhutto was in power, and the visit took place after many years [of an impasse]. Coming to the present, it has been the Congress which has all along said that we must not close our doors, that a

dialogue with Pakistan must continue. It was the NDA Government which was saying all along that it was an 'aar paar ki larhai' (fight to the finish), and this was followed by 'we shall never talk till cross border terrorism continues'. And this was followed yet again by the deployment of forces on the border, which lasted for nine months. While the Government has been inconsistent in its policy towards Pakistan, we have been consistent. We are very glad that the PM followed our counsel. There is no question of going back on it. We will take the policy of the present Government forward. **What about Indo-U.S. relations?** The Congress party is for closer economic and political ties with the USA. The Indira Gandhi-Reagan summit in 1982 and the Rajiv Gandhi-Reagan meeting in 1985 gave a new direction to the relationship between the two countries. At the same time there are some differences — for instance, the

manner in which the U.N. was marginalised during the Iraq crisis and the fact that the USA has not been mindful of our special concerns in Jammu and Kashmir. **How did the PDP-Congress Government pass the Permanent Resident (Disqualification) Bill in the Kashmir Assembly?** I was flabbergasted when I heard. The whole thing was pushed through in a hurry. They had to wind up the Assembly on the 5th of March. It was passed by a voice vote. I shot off a letter to Mufti [Mohammed Sayeed] expressing my anguish against something which is completely against the rights of women. I asked that it be referred to the Select Committee. At the same time I reiterated our support to his Government. **It is said that you tried very hard to dissuade your husband Rajiv Gandhi from coming into politics?** That is true. I was absolutely against my husband coming into politics. First my brother-in-law was killed in an accident and that is when Rajiv joined politics. I'd seen politics from very close quarters. I had seen my mother-in-law struggling, and very often deserted by her colleagues. Then a stage came when pressure grew on my husband to join politics. I couldn't see him torn between a strong feeling of duty to his mother and to the country and my not wanting him to join politics. In a way I had felt I would lose him. **Did you have a sense of foreboding even at that time?** I knew that being in politics and being the kind of person my husband was, would mean that people would come first and he would have to be available to them all the time. Till then Rajiv had spent a great deal of time with us, with the children and with me. Of course he was flying [he was a pilot at the time] but that was not everyday. He would go off for two days and have three days off. It was a more relaxed pace of life. **The real thing came when my mother-in-law was assassinated [in 1984]. Because that's when the party decided that he had to take the responsibility [of prime ministership]. I remember very vividly, we were in the hospital, at the Medical Institute. I had been there the whole morning. I had taken my mother-in-law to the hospital. Rajiv was away touring in West Bengal. He arrived later. I remember the scene when he was told that he must take up the responsibility. I literally begged him [not to].**

I didn't want him to do it. There was my mother-in-law's body lying by our side. Basically, I felt that most probably he would end up the same way. **Did you express it to him at the time?** Yes, I did say that to him — that he too would be killed. **What did he say?** Well, he said it was his duty to his country to take on this responsibility. **What made you change your mind and decide to enter politics? Earlier you had refused after Rajiv's assassination?** I changed my mind because at that particular time [in 1997], the Congress was going through a bad patch. There were problems in the party and senior leaders came and asked me to involve myself actively in the party. The pressure grew. You see those two photographs, of my husband and my mother-in-law [on the wall]. I couldn't walk past them without feeling a strong sense that I was being cowardly just to sit here leisurely and watch things slowly go from bad to worse. That was when I took the decision. **Did people try and dissuade you?** I am rather stubborn, maybe that is the wrong word. If I think it is my duty to take a certain

decision, then it doesn't matter who tells me what to do or not to do, which is what happened. **So ultimately it was the pressure of the party that brought you in?** Of course that was there, but then there were also problems in the party. I was terribly worried about the Congress. **In 1991 also, there was pressure on you to become Congress President. Why did you not come in at that time?** There were others at the time. And I felt completely broken. I could hardly think of anything. **Do you have any regrets coming into politics?** No, I don't have regrets. As I said, when I take a decision, that's it. In life there are always ups and downs. There are things that go well and things that don't go well. **You are not what is called a '24 hour politician' and politics does invade your private space?** It does but then you get used to it. **You were married into a politi-**

cal family, but you entered active politics only after your husband's death without his protection or of any other member of the family and at a time when the Congress was out of power. Indira Gandhi had been groomed by her father, and Rajiv took the leap when she was in power. Do you feel very lonely at the top heading a political party, especially as a woman?
My mother-in-law was not groomed by her father. She grew up during the freedom movement and in that atmosphere. I did take up the responsibility at a time when the Congress was not in power, which makes a big difference, and when my husband was not there. Of course, my son and daughter are very much with me. Is it very lonely at the top? I wouldn't say very lonely heading this party. My experience in talking to people who are in positions of power is that it is pretty much the same whether in business, politics or any other sphere. There is a certain amount of solitude and loneliness when you are at the top. It is part of life. **But, as you must have found, politics is a rough world... What has been of help is the**

fact of belonging to a political family. I saw so much happen. Of course I was never directly involved at the time but you observe, imbibe, absorb. So I had a pretty good idea of what life was going to be. **Has it been a drawback being a woman?** No, not at all. **You have seen death at close quarters, first of your mother-in-law and then of your husband. What sustained you during those times and kept you going?** What has sustained me is my love for my husband. **And after his going?** Still, I would say, my love for him and his love for me, and those wonderful memories, because we had a very happy life and so many wonderful times together. And the fact that he himself wanted to do so much. And that in a small way perhaps I am doing something. **You were born in a Catholic family and were married into a Hindu family, you have met the Shankaracharyas and frequented temples. Do you have a personal faith in God or whatever you may want to call it?** I can't say I really have a personal faith. Basically I believe in the intrinsic message that comes through all the religions — the message of love, understanding, service, of being true to yourself. **A faith in God?** I think to be true to yourself and your conscience — that is really what it's all about. And don't forget, I married into a Hindu family, but a secular Hindu family. **You mean there were not many rituals?** Not many of them. But we celebrated all the festivals like Holi, Diwali, the Parsi Navroz, Basant Panchami, when in the old days we would wear something yellow, if nothing else carry a yellow handkerchief. Christmas too was celebrated with a family lunch and an exchange of gifts. At id, friends would come over. My favourite festival of course is Diwali. We have a *mooarti* of Ganeshi and we used to light a *diya* before it before lighting up the *diyas* in the house. I remember the Diwali before my mother-in-law was killed, that was the only Diwali when Rajiv was not present. We always made it a point of being at home for the festivals. Of course sometimes my mother-in-law had to be away. **We also celebrate the Kashmiri Navroz, it is also called Navre. It is a festival celebrated by the Kashmiri Pandits. It has beautiful rituals. In the morning the lady of the house carries a thali (plate) carrying a mirror, misri (sweet) and things that indicate the profession of the family members. She goes around to every member — you have to look at every object and into the mirror — and touches their eyes with the bud of a rose. It's like a blessing. When my mother-in-law was alive she would do it, now I do it, and Priyanka does it in her home. You wear new clothes and eat sweet rice. What drew you first to Rajiv Gandhi? What is it about him that you really liked?** Anyone who met my husband — I don't know if you knew him — would immediately be drawn to him. Basically, I think his inner beauty and goodness were reflected in his eyes. His eyes were the most beautiful features of his physical presence. That is what struck me first. It was love at first sight.

What do you mean when you say that? It is a feeling inside that this is perhaps the person you have been looking for. It was mutual. This happened in Cambridge. **What do you feel is the difference between you and Rajiv as politicians?** My colleagues will be able to answer that better. Basically we believed in the same values but that is the similarity. Perhaps I am more cautious than he was. **Motilal Nehru encouraged Jawaharlal Nehru to come into politics, and Jawaharlal did likewise with Indira Gandhi, and Indira Gandhi with Sanjay and Rajiv. Every parent has dreams about what their children will do. I know you have repeatedly said that your children will decide whether they want to enter politics. But what is it that you would like for them?** What does every single parent want — that their children be happy in whatever they do. This is what I would like for them. **And yet there is the family legacy, and both you and Rajiv had to contend with pressure from the party, and your children too may not be left free to decide?** Yes, there is this cloud — I

“**We need many more professionals in politics, and a larger representation of youth, women and minorities.**”

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NC expels Dar for Bill passage delay

Arun Joshi
Jammu, March 12

NATIONAL CONFERENCE expelled chairman Legislative Council Abdul Rashid Dar from the party for his adjournment of the House on Thursday night hampering plans to pass the Jammu and Kashmir Permanent Residents (Disqualification) Bill 2004. The adjournment helped the ruling coalition to get a breather.

First, the NC moved a vote of no-confidence against the chairman and within seconds expelled him from the party. National Conference chief Omar Abdullah, in a letter addressed to Dar, said, "You are hereby expelled from the party for the behaviour of unbecoming of a National Conference member".

Though expulsion will not cause any problems for Dar as it requires a two-third majority in the House for his impeachment and the way his adjourning the House on the legal and constitutional points has helped Congress-PDP alliance in the state, he can sit back and relax.

The NC had come to suspect the motive of the chairman since Wednesday night when Dar told a news channel that the Bill was a special one and required a two-third



PTI
National Conference president Omar Abdullah with his father, Farooq, at a Press conference in Srinagar on Friday.

majority in the House for its passage. "We had given the no-confidence motion against the chairman," Abdul Qayoom, the NC and Opposition leader said.

The J& K Permanent Resident (Disqualification) Bill 2004 is indefinitely deferred despite claim to the contrary and the political hype on the issue, glimpses of which were visible in the Legislative Council on Thursday.

Legislative Council chairman Abdul Rashid Dar did not put the bill that snatches the rights of women marrying outside Jammu and Kashmir to vote. Moreover, he has made it impossible for

the passage of the Bill in the House with less than a two-third majority of the House as and when it meets.

Unless the chairman changes his mind, the Bill cannot be passed with a simple majority and in this situation because of the composition of the House, it is unlikely that the Bill would ever be passed the way National Conference wanted.

"Even if we go to fresh elections and come back with a two-third majority in the Legislative Assembly, we cannot change the composition of the Upper House and the Bill would stay where it is", said a senior minister.

Cong 'chargesheets' NDA govt...

Statesman News Service

NEW DELHI/KOLKATA, March 11. — The Congress today slapped the NDA government with a charge-sheet accusing the Vajpayee government of a Rs 49,057 crore corruption in as many as 11 major scams and asked the prime minister to explain the role of his foster son-in-law, Mr Ranjan Bhattacharya and his principle secretary, Mr Brajesh Mishra, in the defence scam.

Releasing the 55-page charge-sheet titled, "Vajpayee government: A saga of sins, scams and shame" at the Congress headquarters, senior party leader

Pranab Mukherjee has lashed out at Mr Vajpayee: "Prime minister Vajpayee is the man responsible for all these ills." Asked whether Mr Vajpayee or his family members were personally involved in these alleged scams, Mr Mukherjee responded by scoffing at the BJP's "Atal factor" plank, saying: "There is no Atal factor for us to cope with individually."

The 11 major scams listed include Tehelka tapes, coffin purchase, Kargil procurement, Kargil cess, MiG issue, UTI scam, petrol pump allotments, Hudco scam, Judeo episode and scandalous allotments of government plots and medical procure-

Sonia wrath

KARIMNAGAR, March 11. — Mrs Sonia Gandhi today charged the NDA and TDP governments with treachery and playing with the hopes of the people and made a sharp focussed, scathing attack on the Chandrababu Naidu government. "The number of women committing suicides is also on the rise in Andhra Pradesh. What kind of a government is this where people do not want to live?" she said. — SNS

ment scam. Mr Mukherjee and Mrs Dixit alleged that these scams involve a sum of Rs 49,057.

Identical chargesheets were simultaneously released by senior leaders Mr Arjun Singh in Kolkata, Dr Manmohan Singh in Mumbai and Mr Natwar Singh in Bangalore. Copies of the chargesheets are being distributed across the country to make it the party campaign theme. In the second chapter "Vajpayee's flip-flops", it lists the prime minister's 'contradictory' statements on various issues — Mr George Fernandes's re-induction into the cabinet, Ayodhya issue, Gujarat and Naresndra Modi, Muslims, and employment generation.

Another chapter deals with a series of administrative "omis-

sions and commissions" by listing "growing unemployment", "loot of PSUs", Balco and Centaur hotel sell-off, farmers' suicides, "failure on national security front", "worsening communal situation" and the "declining economic growth" as the true picture of the shining India in the Vajpayee regime.

In Kolkata, Mr Arjun Singh spoke of the "communal designs" of the RSS and its plans to ensure "300 seats" for the BJP in the coming elections. He explained how Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee and Mr LK Advani are continually pushing their own "two-nation theory on ethnic lines".

... stale & pale: Naidu

NEW DELHI, March 11. — The BJP president, Mr M Venkaiah Naidu, today described the Congress' charges as "stale and pale." These charges were often repeated by the Congress against the NDA government in and outside Parliament and were appropriately answered by the treasury benches, he said while asserting that the Congress raking them up again will not go well with the people. The Congress spin doctors were using "expired medicines" to revive the patient (Congress) from the ICU, he said. The Congress had failed to prove any of the charges, he said.

'BJP will cash in on anti-incumbency factor': Seeking to strike it big in Karnataka in the coming polls, the BJP today said it was determined to bring the party to power, cashing in on the "anti-incumbency" factor and "corrupt image" of the ruling Congress.

"We see a realistic possibility of the first ever BJP government in Karnataka. We are determined to seize this opportunity", party spokesman Mr Arun Jaitley, who has been put in charge of party affairs of Karnataka, told reporters after strategy sessions with party functionaries since last night. — SNS

Cong-RJD alliance on the rocks

Statesman News Service

NEW DELHI, March 11. — The alliance between the Congress and the RJD in Bihar is on the rocks following Mr Laloo Yadav's abstention from holding talks with the Congress leaders on seat sharing. Mr Arjun Singh and Mr RK Dhawan, the leaders entrusted with the task of bringing Mr Yadav to the negotiating table, have failed.

Mr Yadav is expecting a personal call from Mrs Sonia Gandhi and would discuss the seat sharing plan only with the Congress president, sources said. Even before the Congress could strike a deal with the JMM in

Jharkhand, Mr Yadav called Mr Shibu Soren to Patna and struck a deal with the tribal leader in Jharkhand. Mr Yadav has refused to recognise the Bihar Congress president Mr Ram Jatan Sinha who has asked for 22 Lok Sabha seats, including the prestigious seat of Patna which the RJD has been losing to the BJP in the past. Although Mr Sinha himself is a claimant to Patna seat, another contender for the constituency is Mr Shambhu Shrivastava who left Samata Party on the assurance of being given the Patna seat which has Kayastha voters. However, Mr Yadav said it would be contested again by relative Mr Ram Kripal Yadav.



Eve Ensler (extreme right) at the reading session of the play *Necessary Target* in Mumbai. Also seen (from left) are Nighat Rizvi, Ayeshah Alam from Pakistan and Jane Fonda. — PTI

Natwar accuses Advani of violating code

Statesman News Service

BANGALORE, March 11. — Congress leader Mr Natwar Singh, who released a list of charges against the NDA-led government here, today accused Deputy Prime Minister and Union home minister Mr LK Advani of making personal attacks on Mrs Sonia Gandhi during his Bharat Uday Yatra.

He told newsmen here that it was unbecoming of Mr Advani to have made such attacks. More important, it was in complete violation of the code of conduct for elections.

According to him, Mr Advani feels overshadowed by Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee which is why he was resorting to such gimmicks.

Mr Singh, who was here to release his party's charge sheet against the NDA government, said

Liberhan panel gets another extension

NEW DELHI, March 11. — The government today granted a further six-month's extension to the Liberhan Ayodhya panel of inquiry that was constituted in the wake of the demolition of the Babari Masjid on December 6, 1992 to probe into the sequence of events that led to it.

"The term of the Liberhan Ayodhya Commission of Inquiry has been further extended up to September 30, 2004," a PIB press release issued here said. — SNS

that under Mr Vajpayee's leadership, the last five years were one of sin, scams and shame. Highlighting the series of controversial issues that had surfaced during the NDA rule, he said that the Vajpayee government had let down the people on every front.

98-10

A GOOD DECISION

11/3

THE ELECTION COMMISSION deserves to be commended for arriving at a swift and definitive decision on the dispute between the two rival groups of the Nationalist Congress Party. At one level, the decision to recognise the group led by Sharad Pawar as the real NCP was an easy one. It was indisputable that the Maharashtra strongman had the following of the overwhelming majority of the organisational and legislature wings of the party. In dismal contrast, all that his rival P.A. Sangma could show by way of support was eight legislators of the Meghalaya State Assembly and an insignificant fraction of those who held organisational posts. Given the "far superior numerical support" enjoyed by Mr. Pawar's group — which included seven out of eight MPs, 57 MLAs from Maharashtra and 16 out of the 23 working committee members — it was inevitable that it would be eventually recognised as the NCP and allotted the reserved symbol (clock) for election purposes. By adjudicating the NCP dispute quickly — and well in time for the coming Lok Sabha and Assembly elections — the Election Commission has ensured it will not adversely and unfairly affect the political prospects of the group that has a legitimate claim to the party's name and symbol.

The Commission was wise in being unmoved by the plea that the dispute should be taken up for final resolution only after the general election. Mr. Sangma's strategy was directed at getting the NCP's name and symbol frozen and allowing the two groups to contest the coming elections as separate national parties. Such a decision would have affected the NCP's prospects in Maharashtra, something that its principal rival and Mr. Sangma's newfound political friend — the Bharatiya Janata Party — would have been pleased with. In pleading for an interim order, Mr. Sangma's counsel cited earlier dis-

putes where the Commission had frozen the name and symbol in contention, for example, after the Janata Party split in 1980 and the Janata Dal split in 1999. But as the Election Commission observed, an interim order would have been justified had Mr. Sangma been able to demonstrate support that matched Mr. Pawar's or had the Commission been unable to settle the issue.

Disputes in which two or more rival sections of a recognised political party lay claim to the party's name and symbol are decided by the Election Commission under paragraph 15 of The Election Symbols (Reservation and Allotment) Order 1968. The test lies in determining which group enjoys the greater support of the organisational and legislature wings of the party — a practice endorsed by the Supreme Court in *Sadiq Ali v/s Election Commission of India* (AIR 1972). Short of numbers, the Sangma group advanced the novel but flawed argument that Mr. Pawar's group could not represent the NCP as it had betrayed the basic ideology of the party — which is that persons of foreign origin (read: Sonia Gandhi) should not occupy high constitutional office. The argument goes that by allying with the Congress in the general election, Mr. Pawar's group had given up the basic principle on which the NCP was founded. This line of reasoning ignores the fact that the Congress and the NCP have been running a coalition Government in Maharashtra since 1999 and the detail that Ms. Sonia Gandhi is formally not the Prime Ministerial candidate of the Congress-led alliance. The Election Commission's reasons for rejecting the argument are of course largely technical. They are related to the fact that the constitution of the NCP submitted at the time of registration does not even mention the issue of barring people of foreign origin from certain constitutional posts.

THE HINDU

11 MAR 2004

Cong resigned to coalitions for power ride

Swaraj Thapa
NEW DELHI 9 MARCH

In its first formal acceptance that the era of coalitions has arrived, the Congress, in its draft party manifesto for the coming Lok Sabha elections has conceded that it will not be able to form a government on its own at the Centre.

Besides the sharp departure in its claim, which had been the bedrock of the party, the document also promises a 7 to 8% growth rate in its economic agenda as well as low interest rates in the agricultural sector.

The significant shift made in the manifesto admitting that no single-party government at the Centre was possible and approved by the CWC on Tuesday, only reaffirms what many in the party have



GO GETTER

been expressing publicly. It also dilutes the party's thesis that political stability was imparted only by single party governments

and that coalitions are inherently unstable. This line of the Congress in fact had become obvious when Ms Sonia Gandhi had given the first call for potential allies in Mumbai last year.

The realistic assessment made in the document, however, has steered clear of proclaiming itself as the leader of the anti-NDA coalition.

By doing so, it clearly wants to avoid stirring a hornet's nest, preferring rather to go by its articulation that the issue of leadership was something to be dealt with only in the post-election phase.

Significantly, the party has attempted to avoid making categorical pledges in the manifesto, with the view apparently prevailing that the electorate always saw through such promises that were difficult to implement. Therefore, unlike earlier

party manifestos which had also made the similar promise of one crore jobs like the NDA, the document this time has consciously avoided figures. On issues like reservation to economically backward upper castes too, which Ashok Gehlot had taken up strongly in the Rajasthan assembly polls, the party has made a vague statement to set up a commission to look into it.

From all indications, it appears that the 7 to 8% growth is the only major assurance made categorically by the party in its manifesto.

The promise though is not very different from the one made by the NDA. However, Congress leaders have rubbished them maintaining that the NDA figures pertained only to last year, whereas the overall indicators for the last five years of its governance stood at a dismal 5%.

Congress still open to alliances in U.P.: Sonia

By Kanwar Yogendra

MANDI (H.P.), MARCH 4. The Congress is still open to the idea of alliances in Uttar Pradesh where the Bahujan Samaj Party leader, Mayawati, has not agreed to its proposal for a tie-up, the Congress president, Sonia Gandhi, said here today.

"We would go it alone if it does not work," she added.

Ms. Gandhi told mediapersons that the Bharatiya Janata Party was "afraid" of her mass contact programme and that was why the Deputy Prime Minister, L.K. Advani, was again undertaking a yatra. "They are scared of a woman," she said.

Asked if the BJP would "rake up" communal feelings during the "Bharat Uday Yatra" and how the Congress would counter it, Ms. Gandhi said she was not aware of the BJP's agenda. However, the Congress would

surely make "corruption" an election issue, "since the past five years of NDA rule were full of it."

She said the response during her two-day tour of the State was "lovingly overwhelming." Asked why she was mingling freely with crowds despite repeated SPG (Special Protection Group) warnings, Ms. Gandhi said, "*Risk to jivan mein hota rehta hai* (life is full of risks)."

During her tour, the Congress president not only refused to talk to the media formally but also avoided the public address system at a number of places. She preferred brief interactions with the waiting crowds on the road. Earlier, after a breakfast meeting with PCC office bearers and State Ministers at the Circuit House in Mandi, Ms. Gandhi headed towards Sundernagar along National Highway 21.

The Congress president, who

stopped at three places along the stretch, appealed to the people to oust what she called the "corrupt" National Democratic Alliance Government. The people of Himachal had always voted for the Congress and she expected them to do the same this time too.

UNI reports:

The Congress president blamed the NDA Government for the rise in prices of essential commodities. The worst-affected were the women, she said. After crossing Bhareri, Bhoranj, Bhotia and Badsar, the Congress chief ended her programme at Lathyani in Una district.

During the tour, she was accompanied by the Congress observer for Himachal Pradesh, Ashok Gehlot, the former MP, Selja, the Himachal Chief Minister, Virbahdra Singh and the State Congress chief, Vidya Stokes.

THE HINDU

15 MAR 2004
15 MAR 2004

Cong-NCP deal stuck

Statesman News Service

NEW DELHI, March 2. — The Congress and the NCP tonight failed to reach an understanding on seat sharing in Maharashtra for the Lok Sabha polls. NCP's insistence on a fifty-fifty seat-sharing formula had reportedly caused the deadlock, though both sides agreed to put up a joint fight against the BJP-Shiv Sena combine in the state. The talks will be resumed after two days, NCP leaders said.

Congress representatives, led by Mr Pranab Mukherjee, and Mr Sharad Pawar today agreed to leave three seats to the RPI and the Malegaon seat to the JD-S which has a sitting MP from the constituency. However, Mr Pawar declined the Congress proposal to leave 26 of the 48 seats in the state to that party. The NCP has asked for 22 seats. Sources said, key constituencies of senior leaders of both parties would be retained as it is.



Meanwhile, in Chhattisgarh the BJP has put former NCP leader Mr VC Shukla on the "waiting list" as it continues to remain indifferent towards a tie-up with his new regional party, Rashtriya Jantantrik Dal. By adopting a non-committal stand, the party rather seems to be humiliating Mr Shukla. State BJP chief Mr Nandkumar Sai today said it was for the party's central leadership to decide on an electoral tie-up with the Dal.

Cong-NCP work out deal for 41 seats

KOTA NEELIMA
NEW DELHI, MARCH 2

THE Congress and the Nationalist Congress Party today finetuned the seat-sharing formula. Just seven of the 48 seats in Maharashtra are left to be decided.

According to sources these seats are Washim, Jalna, Parbani, Rajapur, Jalgaon, Mumbai (South Central) and Ichalkaranji.

Both parties are now working on the formula where 24 seats would go to Congress, 18 to NCP, three to the Republican Party of India, one each to Samajwadi Party and Janata Dal (Secular). Akola, where Prakash Ambedkar could be the candidate, is yet to be decided.

There are nine sitting Congress MPs from Maharashtra and six from NCP. It is learnt that one sitting MP from Satara could be replaced. Candidates for the prestigious seats of Mumbai have been almost finalised.

From Mumbai (North), the Congress is planning to field filmstar Govinda against Petroleum Minister Ram Naik. From Mumbai



(South) against Jayawanti Mehta, the Congress is hoping to field former naval chief Vishnu Bhagwat.

Gurudas Kamat, the Mumbai party chief, could be fielded against Kirit Somaiyya from Mumbai (North-East). Speaker Manohar Joshi could be challenged by former policeman Sanjay Pandey from Mumbai (North-Central).

If Mumbai (North) should go to the Samajwadi Party, then the Congress might ask the NCP to give up the claim for Satara. The NCP could contest Mumbai (South-Central) but the discussion over the candidature of Sachin Ahir are said to be on.

The NCP, which was looking to contest at least 21 seats, has managed to land Thane and Beed, the seats it has been asking. NCP leader Sharad Pawar would be con-

testing from Baramati and Praful Patel from Bhandara.

Talks are still on about the seats that the NCP is seeking from Congress outside Maharashtra — the figure is said to be 10 in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Gujarat and Goa.

From the Congress, Balasaheb Vikhe Patil, who recently joined the party, could be fielded from Kopergaon. The Congress is also considering fielding former CM Vilasrao Deshmukh from Aurangabad, though it is yet to be decided.

The tentative list of the breakup of the rest of the seats appears to be that Congress could contest Nagpur, Chandrapur, Wardha, Buldhana, Ramtek, Yavatmal, Colaba, Dhanu, Latur, Nanded, Aurangabad, Kopergaon, Solapur, Pune, Dhule, Nandurbar and Yerrandhol. The party could get some more of the seven disputed seats like Washim, Parbani and Jalgaon.

The tentative list for NCP would be Baramati, Bhandara, Thane, Hingli, Beed, Usmanabad, Nasik, Ahmednagar, Khed, Karad and Ishanganj.

INDIAN EXPRESS

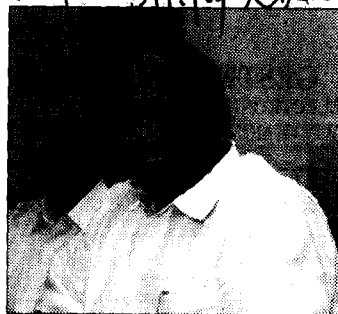
3 MAR 2001

EC notices to Pawar, Sangma

NEW DELHI, Jan. 30. — The Election Commission has issued notices to Mr Sharad Pawar and Mr Purno A. Sangma to substantiate their claims on the name, party symbol, and flag of the NCP.

The EC has asked the leaders of the two NCP factions to furnish the evidence backing their respective claims of majority support in the party by 9 February, to enable it to adjudicate in the matter, sources said.

In its notices issued last night, the EC has asked the two factions to provide, in their response, the information regarding the numbers of office-bearers, working committee members, MLAs and MPs supporting each of them. They were also asked whether the party constitution was followed when the split was effected and a new president of a breakaway group had emerged, sources said.



The full bench of the Commission will hold separate hearings with the representatives of the two factions on 13 February in the run-up to its verdict on the issue. The EC is likely to take a final decision before the announcement of the LS poll schedule.

Mr Sangma had broken away from the Pawar-led NCP on January 24 over the latter's decision to forge an alliance with the Congress for the coming Lok Sabha elections. On 27 January, he filed a petition be-

fore the Commission, staking his faction's claims over the party's name, symbol and flag.

Mr Sangma told the EC that his faction was "real and original NCP" with the party's original ideology, claiming that his group enjoys "overwhelming majority" of party functionaries and legislators. Before Mr Sangma's move, on 27 January, an NCP team from the Pawar faction filed a caveat before the panel, urging it to give them a hearing before taking any decision on the party. — SNS

Sangma plans tough times for Pawar

By Dilip Chaware
TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Mumbai: Close on the heels of the party split and the election symbol row, NCP leader Sharad Pawar faces yet another battle with his bete noir P.A. Sangma, who is working with top BJP leaders in a bid to neutralise the Maratha boss in his own backyard.

Sources said that Mr Sangma, in consultation with BJP strategists in Delhi and Mumbai, has prepared a plan to hound Mr Pawar in the state in the Lok Sabha elections. As part of this plan, Mr Sangma has offered to field candidates of his faction from western Maharashtra and Marathwada.

Said a senior BJP leader: "We welcome this move as the Sangma faction of the NCP has been receiving increasing support on the issue of the foreign origin of Sonia Gandhi. The NCP workers who fought tooth and nail against the Con-

"Although grass-roots workers of the Congress do not speak out openly, they are in an agitated mood because of the Congress high command's decision to team up with the NCP founder-president"

gress party since June 1999 by pledging to strengthen Mr Pawar are in no mood to follow him blindly now."

The leader was confident that the Pawar-led NCP would lose at least six and up to 10 Lok Sabha seats in Maharashtra because of the Sangma factor.

Maharashtra BJP president Gopinath Munde confirmed that Mr Sangma was in touch with him. "I shall discuss this development with the Shiv Sena. However, I am sure that the Sena will

raise no objections as defeating the Congress-NCP combine is our common goal."

The BJP strategist explained that the Congress was already nervous as there was no guarantee that Mr Pawar would support Ms Gandhi after the Lok Sabha polls. The Congress rank and file were not favourable to Mr Pawar's shaking hands with Ms Gandhi.

"Although grass-roots workers of the Congress do not speak out openly, they are in an agitated mood because of the Congress high command's decision to team up with the NCP founder-president," he said.

Sources in NCP said there were certain constituencies in Maharashtra which had been won with very slim margins either by the Congress or the NCP.

This time, their fate could be different even if there is a tilt of just a couple of per cent of votes. Such seats existed in south Maharashtra and Marathwada.

Post-split, NCP to resume talks with Congress

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: Boggled down by the split in the party caused by its senior leader P.A. Sangma, the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) will soon resume its dialogue with the Congress on a pre-poll alliance in Maharashtra.

As a follow-up to the recent meeting between Congress president Sonia Gandhi and NCP chief Sharad Pawar, NCP spokesman Praful Patel said on Tuesday that he expected to meet senior Con-

gress leader Manmohan Singh "in a day or two". Amidst the dust kicked up by the split, the Pawar-led party is walking the tight rope on the issue of Ms Gandhi's acceptability on account of her foreign origin.

Responding to Mr Sangma's criticism that Mr Pawar had dropped the opposition to Ms Gandhi, Mr Patel asserted at a news conference that the Congress was aware of the NCP "stand and ideology" and there was no change in it.

Mr Patel said the issue was not there now since Ms Gandhi had declared that she was not insisting on any leader who would head the secular coalition and that this would be decided by the constituents after they secured a majority.

Describing Mr Sangma, who split the party last week, as an "opportunist", Mr Patel said, "He changes his stand according to

his convenience. When Mr Sangma helped form a government in Meghalaya with the help of the Congress, he forgot all about the foreign origin issue."

Recalling the political resolution adopted by the national convention of the party in May last year, Mr Patel said, "We are working exactly as per the resolution."

Moved by Mr Sangma, the resolution had unanimously authorised Mr Pawar to start negotiations with like-minded parties to form a secular alliance to fight the Lok Sabha and assembly polls. Later, the working committee had also authorised Mr Pawar to hold talks with Ms Gandhi, he said.

"Joining the NDA-BJP alliance is by itself going openly against the reso-

lution and hence a blatant violation of the mandate and a serious anti-party activity. It is a pity that Mr Sangma himself is breaking the mandate of his own resolution adopted by the national convention," Mr Patel said.

Asked why no action has been taken against another senior party leader, V.C. Shukla, Mr Patel said that Mr Shukla had made it clear that he was not following Mr Sangma. Mr Shukla is floating a regional outfit in Chhattisgarh. "We have no objection if somebody wants to join the party or leave the party," Mr Patel said.



P.A. Sangma (left) and Sharad Pawar in New Delhi recently

Rival NCP factions head for EC now

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: Who will keep the clock? After the split, a fight has ensued between the rival factions of the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) over its election symbol (the clock), its flag and a somewhat more intangible asset—the party's ideology.

The Election Commission (EC) on Tuesday received a representation from P.A. Sangma seeking the symbol and the flag, but the Sharad Pawar group filed a caveat to pre-empt this move and Sangma's claim that his group was the real NCP.

In the morning, Mr Sangma met EC officials, claiming that the ideology of banning people of foreign origin from occupying high posts, which gave birth to the NCP, is "100 per cent" with his faction and so is the symbol and the flag. "My NCP is real and original," he claimed. He also asserted that a large number of office-bearers, MPs and MLAs were with him.

But a caveat came from the general

secretary of the Pawar camp, Pitambar Master, asking the EC not to take any decision on the matter without hearing that camp.

Outside the EC, Mr Sangma told reporters that he even has support from Pawar's bastion, Maharashtra, and would produce the evidence before the EC. "My faction has a national character, since it is represented in three states—Meghalaya, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh," he said. "The entire students' wing in Maharashtra has en bloc resigned from the Pawar group and resolved to join me. I am getting a lot of individual letters supporting me," he said.

But he added that he did not want the EC to take an ex-parte decision. Appropriate time and opportunity should be given to the rival camp.

According to Mr Sangma, although Chhattisgarh leader V.C. Shukla has floated a regional outfit and not joined him, there is an understanding between the two.

NCP takes battle to EC

HT Correspondent
New Delhi, January 27

AS EXPECTED, the dispute in the NCP reached the Election Commission on Tuesday with both factions claiming to be the "real NCP". So, while P.S. Sangma approached the commission, staking claim on the party's name, symbol and flag, the Sharad Pawar group filed a caveat with the commission requesting they should be given a hearing before a final decision was taken.

Commission sources said that, though it was too early to decide on the issue, it seemed the EC would not freeze the party's symbol — a table-clock — and would give its verdict in favour of either faction. Sources said initial information gathered by the EC indicated that a majority of the party MLAs, MPs and office-bear-



P.A. Sangma and Sharad Pawar
Fight over Clock

ers were still with the Pawar faction. "But all these things need to be thoroughly verified", a senior official remarked.

The NCP had split on Saturday and Sangma had announced he would approach the commission for the party symbol. Interestingly, senior NCP leader from Chhattisgarh, V.C. Shukla, decided to float a regional outfit instead of aligning with either Sangma or Pawar. However, both Shukla and Sangma claimed they would have an electoral under-

standing with the NDA during the coming Lok Sabha elections.

Meanwhile, the Sharad Pawar-led NCP on Tuesday filed a caveat with the EC following reports that Sangma would be approaching the commission to stake his claim to the NCP's name, symbol and flag. The caveat was filed by an NCP delegation led by party general secretary Pitamber Master. Master said the petition requested the commission to give them a hearing before deciding on any matter concerning the party.

NCP spokesman Praful Patel claimed that virtually the entire party was supporting Pawar. "Out of eight, seven MPs are with us. Similarly, 66 of 75 MLAs and 23 of 26 state unit chiefs are supporting our faction. Now, it's for the commission to decide which the real NCP is", said Patel.

Loyalty show in town, siblings offered seats

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Mumbai: Congressmen from all over the country are falling over each other for a piece of the Rahul & Priyanka Show. Mumbai's now jumped on to the bandwagon.

Party activists, never shy of wearing their loyalty to the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty on their sleeves, have invited siblings Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Vadra to contest the Lok Sabha elections from Mumbai. MP Congress Committee president Gurudas Kamat kickstarted the process on January 26 after hoisting the national flag at the party headquarters in south Mumbai, where he convened a meeting of his executive committee.

The committee first passed a resolution authorising party president Sonia Gandhi to select the Congress candidates for all six Lok Sabha seats from the city. By another resolution, it requested Rahul to contest from the silk stocking south Mumbai constituency, currently represented by the BJP's firebrand minister of state for energy Jaywantiben Mehta, popularly referred to as the Bha-

to the Mantle Born?



vani of Bhuleshwar.

Next came Priyanka's turn, with the MRCC generously offering her the slum-dominated Mumbai north-east constituency, which is now held by Kirit Somaiya of the BJP. Mr Kamat had earlier represented this sprawling constituency, but was defeated in the last polls by Mr Somaiya. In yet another show of largesse, the MRCC suggested that either Rahul or Priyanka could contest the Ramtek seat, once represented by former prime minister P.V. Narasimha Rao.

The Mumbai Youth Congress unit also pitchforked itself into the loyalty race by burning posters of BJP general secretary Pramod Mahajan at Dadar on Tuesday to protest his recent remark that voters would not accept either Rahul or Priyanka since their mother, Sonia Gandhi, was of foreign origin.

The MRCC is up against competition from Congress units in other states. Senior Congress leader Y.S. Rajshekhar Reddy of Andhra Pradesh, for instance, has stated that the Cuddapah seat is available either to Rahul or Priyanka.

Priyanka, Rahul to campaign

SNS & PTI

KOLKATA/NEW DELHI, Jan. 25. — Senior Congress leader Mr Pranab Mukherjee today said Mrs Priyanka Vadra and Mr Rahul Gandhi would campaign for the party before the Lok Sabha elections. He did not say whether the siblings would contest the polls.

Mr Mukherjee said: "They (Mrs Vadra and Mr Gandhi) would be beneficial for the party. They would draw crowds." Asked if the brother-sister duo would campaign for the party throughout the country, he said their programmes were being chalked out. Their mother and AICC president Mrs Sonia Gandhi would, however, campaign throughout the country, he said.

On poll alliances, Mr Mukherjee said talks are now on with BSP leader Miss Mayawati, while it has already been decided that the Congress

will contest the election in alliance with DMK and Sharad Pawar's party. The party has also tied up with Rashtriya Janata Dal of Mr Laloo Prasad Yadav and Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, led by Mr Shibu Soren, he said.

Mr Mukherjee, who is also the president of WBPCC, said Congress would have ties with the Party for Democratic Socialism, a breakaway group of the CPI-M, and Jharkhand Party in West Bengal, though it was not finalised how many seats would be left to them. He said he would meet the party's state election committee and hoped that candidates for the Lok Sabha polls in the state would be selected within another week.

The PCC chief said Congress' fight in the state would be tough as it would have to face two opponents. "We have to fight the CPI-M on the one hand, and BJP and its ally Trinamul Congress on the other." He alleged that to create an atmosphere of terror before the election, "police

was reviving some old cases and has arrested five Congress supporters in the name of re-investigation".

On being asked whether there was a possibility of any NDA partner joining hands with Congress, Mr Mukherjee avoided a straight reply saying: "Political realignment is taking place. DMK, MDMK and PMK have already left the NDA. During the election, the process of political realignment takes place speedily."

The Uttar Pradesh unit of the Youth Congress has passed a resolution asking the leadership to draft Priyanka and Rahul into the party so that they could play active roles during the polls. The NSUI and the Mahila Congress have echoed the UP party unit's demand.

When asked by reporters if Priyanka and Rahul would be contesting elections, Mrs Sonia Gandhi said: "I have been saying this again and again that you better put this question to Priyanka and Rahul."

Sangma swings it, NCP splits

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

NEW DELHI, Jan. 24. — Mr PA Sangma today staged a coup by electing himself president of the Nationalist Congress Party within minutes of meeting Mr Sharad Pawar, the party's de jure president. Before the "election" at a convention of rebel party leaders and workers from across the country, Mr Sangma and his supporters "expelled" Mr Pawar from the party. And in a prompt tit-for-tat, the Pawar-led faction threw out Mr Sangma and five others.

As the drama unfolded, the NCP split down the middle. Mr Sangma claimed he was elected president by his supporters present at his 24 Aurangzeb Road residence since morning. But Mr Prafull Patel, NCP treasurer, at whose residence the meeting between Mr Sangma and Mr Pawar took place, rejected the former LS Speaker's claim. "Which is the real NCP and who's the real president would be decided by the Election Commission," he said.

The party constitution says that an incumbent president can be dislodged only if 75 per cent of the party legislators express their lack of trust in him at a general body meeting.

Mr Sangma, however, claimed that most NCP leaders were with him and that he would lead the party in the Lok Sabha polls as an ally of the NDA. Mr VC Shukla, a veteran leader from Chhattisgarh, accompanied Mr Sangma at the press meet. He was, however, not present at the rebels' convention

and hence was spared the axe by the Pawar faction. Earlier in the day, Mr Shukla had met the Prime Minister and pledged his support to the NDA in Chhattisgarh. (Mr Shukla declared that he would float a regional outfit, PTI adds)

Mr Sangma, it seemed, had been preparing much in advance. He had his followers lined up at his residence, got a resolution ready that expressed faith in his leadership, and "elected" himself president.

At the closed-door meeting between Mr Pawar and Mr Sangma, the Maharashtra strongman reportedly said: "Let's part company but there shouldn't be any bitterness between us". He was not let down — Mr Sangma described him at the press conference as a "tall leader".

Mr Sangma's parting words: "The contentious issue over which the Congress split on the eve of the 1999 Lok Sabha polls was Mrs Sonia Gandhi's foreign origin. It was like the battery of the clock — the poll symbol of the NCP that was formed after the split. What's the clock without the battery?"

Mr Pawar, who has allied with the Congress, has six members in the Lok Sabha — all elected from Maharashtra, where the NCP has 55-odd MLAs. Mr Sangma, Lok Sabha member from Meghalaya, has more than half-a-dozen MLAs loyal to him.

NCP general secretary, Mr Jagannath Mishra, has thrown his weight behind Mr Pawar and described the split as "unfortunate", a report from Patna adds.

Rahul, Priyanka primary members: Congress

Statesman News Service

NEW DELHI, Jan. 22. — Congress spokesman Mr Anand Sharma today announced that Mrs Priyanka Vadra and Mr Rahul Gandhi had "already become primary members of the party" and described them as "integral part" of it. This is being seen in the Congress circles as a clear signal of the duo's formal debut in the Lok Sabha polls.

Reacting to the BJP charge of the Congress encouraging "gynastic culture", Mr Sharma said one could not expect a sound political comment from the BJP when it came to the Nehru-Gandhi family. "Thirteen years after the martyrdom of their father Rajiv



Gandhi and 20 years after their grandmother Indira Gandhi sacrificed her life for the country, a mere tour of the constituency of Mrs Sonia Gandhi by her two children has unnerved the party which is confident of winning 300 seats in the LS polls."

The spokesman said he would be "grateful" if the "collective" leadership of the BJP and Sangh Parivar could name a family or a leader who had contributed more to the country's freedom struggle than the Nehru-Gandhi family. He also said the Parivar did not

play a "supportive" role in the Independence movement.

Mr Sharma's remarks came at a time when Rahul and Priyanka are on a high-profile tour of Amethi and Rai Bareilly. Becoming a primary member usually marks the technical initiation of one's innings in Congress politics. The announcement has lent some credence to speculations that Priyanka and Rahul will actively join the Congress campaign and that she might contest from Rai Bareilly.

Mr Sharma's combative remarks marked a shift from his colleague Mr Abhishek Singhvi's wavering on the status of the Gandhi siblings yesterday. He had ended up describing them as "Congressmen by birth".

Back to North-east

2/1/04 NCP 9-P.P. 5-8
But fortune may favour brave Sangma

By opposing the Nationalist Congress Party's poll alliance with the Congress, PA Sangma has shown himself to be a man of some principle. Unlike the party chief, Sharad Pawar, he had been unwavering on his stand that no person of foreign origin should become India's prime minister. What is of interest now is who will carry the NCP forward if Pawar and Sangma stick to their respective grounds and decide to part company after their meeting this week.

Technically, Sangma rightly claims that the Nationalist Congress Party belongs to those who are steadfastly sticking to its ideal. Judging by what he has said he would leave the matter to be decided by the Election Commission. For the time being, Sangma appears to hold all the cards — of the four states that pulled six per cent of votes to be eligible for recognition as a national party, three — Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Meghalaya — are in the North-east and Sangma also claims the support of Chattisgarh.

While in the Congress, the former Lok Sabha Speaker was an undisputed national leader from the North-east; after the formation of the NCP he became a regional chief. Now he may go back to his state as a mere Garo politician. He will continue to win from his Tura constituency but his "splinter" group is unlikely to make much of an impact. Recently six of his 14 members in Meghalaya joined the Congress.

In Manipur and Assam also, all the members of the Nationalist Congress Party have sided with the Congress. In other states the party hardly has any influence. The apparent motive behind the formation last September of the North East People's Forum, comprising regional parties and BJP, was to refurbish his image as a national leader. Sangma has made no secret of his intention to give it a political shape depending on the situation in "current Indian politics".

The largest regional party — Asom Gana Parishad — is yet to make up its mind on the issue and will probably decide at its convention this month. The forum's Monday meeting in Delhi was a mere formality since the decision to support the NDA for the Lok Sabha elections was made much earlier. And it is only a matter of time before Sangma joins the NDA — his meeting with the Prime Minister on Sunday was not without significance — and earn himself a portfolio. After all, a resourceful person like Sangma cannot remain in the political wilderness for long.

AICC COTERIE SNUBBED 571

Sonia props up Digvijay, Gehlot

Statesman News Service

NEW DELHI, Jan. 19. — The Congress president today brought in a new generation of leadership by appointing Mr Digvijay Singh, Mr Priya Ranjan Das Munshi, Mr Ashok Gehlot, Mr Ramesh Chennithala and Mr Prithviraj Chavan as special invitees to the Congress Working Committee with charge of important states. AICC general secretary Ms Ambika Soni and the controversial coterie have been stripped of some of their influence. Ms Gandhi now heads a 56-member mega CWC, with 24 regular members, 14 permanent invitees and 18 special invitees.

Ms Gandhi named two Jat leaders from the North, Mr Balram Jakhar of Rajasthan and Chaudhary Birendra Singh of Haryana, as special invitees to the CWC. Mr Naval Kishore Sharma is no more a general secretary, but will continue as a CWC member.

The reshuffle, announced by general secretary Mr Oscar Fernandes "as part of toning up the organisation to face the Lok Sabha elections," will be followed by the appointment of a political management committee comprising the old guard and some seasoned lead-



Ms Ambika Soni



Mr Digvijay Singh



Mr Ashok Gehlot

ers who would take over poll strategy management.

Ms Gandhi has changed the tradition of only general secretaries being gi-

ven charge of states. Consequently, Ms Soni has been divested of her charge of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. She has got only Uttaranchal, apart from J&K and Congress president's office, which she will share with Mr Janardhan Dwivedi. But she remains chairperson of Congress' media cell.

Mr Digvijay Singh will be in charge of Orissa and Assam, Mr Das Munshi of Madhya Pradesh, Mr Gehlot of Himachal Pradesh and Chhattisgarh and Mr Chavan of Gujarat. Mr Arjun Singh's nominee, Mr Birendra Singh, a Jat OBC, has got the crucial charge of UP.

Apart from Ms Soni, all the other three coterie members failed to gain any new responsibility. Mr Ahmed Patel will continue as political secretary with no charge of states, Mr Kamal Nath has lost Orissa and Mr Mukul Wasnik has no additional charge. However, Mr RK Dhawan and Ms Mohsina Kidwai gained charge of Haryana and Rajasthan respectively. While Mr JB Patnaik will not figure in the CWC, the man whom he replaced as PCC chief, Mr Sarat Patnaik, and Rajya Sabha MP Mr KB Krishna Murthy have been appointed AICC secretaries.

Sangma hints at split in NCP

Press Trust of India
Guwahati, January 17

P.A. SANGMA said on Saturday that a split is imminent in the NCP because party chief Sharad Pawar is forging an alliance with Sonia Gandhi.

The former Lok Sabha Speaker said: "I can't be a party to the alignment with Congress as our Nationalist Congress Party was formed on the basis of not allowing a person of foreign origin to be the Prime Minister of our country. Besides, it goes against our ideology of nationalism and patriotism."

According to him, "There will be an immediate split in the party if a show-cause notice is issued to me or I am expelled from the party for speaking out against the alignment."

Sangma said he could not stomach the idea of aligning



P.A. Sangma

End of the party?

with the Congress, when the NCP was formed on the "basic principle of objections to foreign-born Sonia Gandhi's leadership".

"How can Pawar go against it

to join hands with Sonia when it is enshrined in the preamble and constitution of our party?" he said. "My request to Pawar is that he should leave the NCP and join the Congress straight away because he has set aside the issue of foreign origin."

He said: "If Pawar does not leave NCP, I will be compelled to go to the Election Commission and claim that the NCP remains with us as he cannot carry the party with him ... Anyway, the real NCP is with us and not with Pawar."

On Thursday, Pawar invited Sonia to tea, and declared his readiness to contest the polls along with the Congress to defeat the BJP-led coalition. The party had evidently not heeded Sangma's relentless protests and threats to quit.

More poll reports on Page 4

Sonia pushes ahead in tie-up race

HT-1 12/1 9 p.m. 6/9/04

HT Correspondent
New Delhi, January 16

WITH THE Congress pulling out all stops in its search for partners for the coming Lok Sabha polls, party chief Sonia Gandhi on Friday sealed an alliance with Sharad Pawar's NCP. Soon after, she even gave the Congress what could eventually turn out to be the party's key slogan for the elections: The feel-good factor that the Prime Minister is talking about is no good.

What gave a further boost to the morale of Congress workers on Friday was Mayawati's announcement at the BSP national executive meeting in New Delhi that her party would have nothing to do with the BJP in the polls. Of course, she also made it clear that the BSP was still not decided about an alliance with the Congress, but political observers say that such a stance is largely due to Sonia's support to the Mulayam Singh Yadav

cern, especially if a Dalit-backed party like the BSP should eventually support the Congress. The BJP is now trying to get the Janata Dal (United) to woo Ram Vilas Paswan back to the NDA fold, but as of now, the slighted Bihar leader is firmly with Sonia.

The BJP has now adopted a wait-and-watch policy and will only get back to wooing after "a concrete picture" emerges. "Right now, what we are seeing is that the Congress is trying to show it is in command," said a BJP leader, adding, "Let's see what happens in the days to come. We still do not think that the BJP is in trouble. We will act at the right time."

Meanwhile, the BJP has called a meeting of seven BJP Chief Ministers on January 21 to discuss the Congress offensive and work out a strategy to counter Sonia Gandhi's moves.

More reports on Page 4

SERIAL SETBACKS FOR SAFFRON BRIGADE



SHARAD PAWAR has formally tied up with the Congress; common agenda being drafted



MAYAWATI has kept the Congress guessing, but she has said a firm no to the BJP



JAYALALITHAA has indicated that she would rather go it alone in Tamil Nadu

regime in Uttar Pradesh.

But what must have come as a real shot in the arm for Sonia is a signal from Tamil Nadu that Jayalalithaa is keen that her party, the AIADMK, should go it

alone. With the Congress having already tied up with the DMK, the PMK and the MDMK in the state, the BJP's prospects in Tamil Nadu look indeed bleak.

Despite these fast-paced politi-

cal developments, BJP leaders put up a brave front, rubbishing the so-called secular front that the Congress is slowly building. But party insiders admitted in private there is cause for con-

SONIA, PAWAR DISCUSS POLITICS OVER TEA

Stage set for Cong-NCP pact

CL Manoj in New Delhi

Jan. 15. — Mrs Sonia Gandhi today reached out to three potential allies with whom she has not been on the best of terms. By the end of the day, she had virtually sealed a pre-poll alliance with Mr Sharad Pawar over tea, wooed Miss Mayawati with flowers on her birthday and rung up Mr M Karunanidhi in Chennai to deliver a "Pongal-day political message".

Mrs Gandhi tonight drove, without political aides, to the home of the former Congressman, who had revolted against her foreign origin and whom she had expelled from the party. After their first one-on-one meeting in five years, lasting 50 minutes, Mrs Gandhi and Mr Pawar came out to talk to the press. "I had talked to Pawarji and he invited me for tea. We had a good time, held detailed talks on the coming Lok Sabha polls and the need for like-minded parties to join hands against communal parties...", Mrs Gandhi said.

Mr Pawar said "the process" to jointly fight the Lok Sabha and Assembly polls "has begun". "It'll, though, take some time to work out the details."

Asked whether Mrs Gandhi's foreign origin was still an issue, Mr Pawar said: "That issue is not there. We're discussing an alternative to the NDA government. One month back, I had said this particular subject we aren't going to raise at this juncture. There are certain issues for any party. But when it decides to sit together with another party certain things have to be kept out." Mrs Gandhi brushed aside queries on the issue with a "leave it".

Congress-NCP leaders will now focus

BJP leaders meet Mayawati

NEW DELHI, Jan. 15. — Senior BJP leaders met Miss Mayawati today, the BSP leader's birthday, indicating the possibility of a new political equation in UP. The alliance in the state was broken in August last year. The BJP leaders called on Miss Mayawati shortly after Mrs Sonia Gandhi met her. — SNS

Details on page 4

on seat-sharing. To neutralise or isolate the anti-Congress Mr PA Sangma, they may offer seats to those close to Mr Pawar in the NCP, such as Mr Tariq Anwar, Mr Jagannath Mishra and Mr VC Shukla.

Mrs Gandhi started the day by visiting Miss Mayawati with flowers and sweets. While posing for photographers, they said it was an informal meeting. Politics will be discussed later. But at tomorrow's BSP national executive meeting, Miss Mayawati may make some anti-NDA noises and offer help to the Congress. However, to checkmate Mr Mulayam Singh Yadav, she could express reservations about the NCP being part of "any front that comprises SP". The Congress and BSP are likely to join hands in UP, MP and Rajasthan after a round of seat-bargaining. Mr Harkishen Singh Surjeet too dropped in to meet Ms Mayawati.

In the morning, Mrs Gandhi had called Mr Karunanidhi to offer Pongal greetings and further firm up the Congress-DMK pact. The NCP, SP and DMK are crucial for the Congress to reinforce itself in Maharashtra, UP and Tamil Nadu.

Photograph on page 4

State panel against Bharat II

KOLKATA, Jan. 15. — The technical committee set up by the state government to monitor the shift to Bharat stage II has concluded that conversion is "a theoretical impossibility." The observation, however, will be made "very mildly" by the 10-member panel.

With six weeks to go for the expiry of the High Court deadline, the panel has only decided "what all is convertible and the possible methods of doing it". The panel, supposed to submit its report to the government today, held another marathon meeting this afternoon to thrash out the finer points. The report was being "fine tuned" till late this evening and would be handed over to the transport secretary tomorrow, officials said. — SNS

PAWAR INVITES SONIA TO TEA

Cong races on alliance track

CL Manoj in New Delhi

Jan. 14. — The Congress today moved on the fast track to firm up pre-poll alliances with Mrs Sonia Gandhi telephoning Mr Sharad Pawar hours before the crucial NCP working committee meeting and proposing a Congress-NCP tie-up. Mr Pawar, in turn, invited her to tea at his residence tomorrow or the day after.

Mrs Gandhi also decided to attend Ms Mayawati's birthday celebrations tomorrow demonstrating the Congress keenness to strike suitable alliances in its big fight against the NDA. The party wants partners in Maharashtra, UP, Bihar, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu which together account for 249 Lok Sabha constituencies and where the Congress won only 26 seats last time.

Mrs Gandhi also began revamping her party set-up by appointing new PCC heads. She assigned Mr Motilal Vora as Chhattisgarh Congress chief, re-appointed Mr JB Patnaik as Orissa Congress chief and propped up a Brahmin-Jat combination in Rajasthan by naming Mr BD Kalla as CLP leader and Mr Narayan Singh as PCC chief. She is expected to name Mr Digvijay Singh as Congress in-charge of UP, and bring Mr Ashok Gehlot as a member of the central election committee.

Both the Congress and NCP camps earlier in the day said the Pawar-Sonia meeting will be held tomorrow, but by evening both sides said it could take place "tomorrow or day after". Mrs Gandhi's scheduled trip to Punjab tomorrow and the need for Mr Pawar to sort out the anti-Congress 'Sangma issue with NCP' are being cited as reasons for the timing not being definite. Though the Congress is exuding confidence about striking a pact due to the "Maharashtra compulsions", it does expect the NCP chief to drive a hard bargain on seat-sharing. The

Lok Sabha dissolution

HYDERABAD/NEW DELHI, Jan. 14. — While the Cabinet is likely to take up the Lok Sabha dissolution issue tomorrow, a top BJP source told The Statesman tonight that the House might be dissolved on 8 February after passing the vote-on-account on the 5th. The Prime Minister might not be attending the three-day BIMSTEC Summit in Thailand starting on 8 February. Mr Vajpayee had wanted dissolution after the summit as he did not want to be there in a caretaker capacity. As the BJP conceded Mr Vajpayee's request that he address the nation on Republic Day as a full-fledged PM, he may return the favour by allowing dissolution ahead of the Summit. The Cabinet may also discuss possible dates for the next Lok Sabha elections during the meeting tomorrow. — SNS

Congress and NCP, which fought the last Lok Sabha polls separately due to the Sonia-Pawar rift over "foreign origin", hope to join hands to fight the anti-incumbency factor against the Congress-NCP state government.

Mrs Gandhi and BSP chief Ms Mayawati are expected to come closer to an alliance in UP and elsewhere. At tomorrow's birthday celebrations of Ms Mayawati, they are expected to demonstrate some "anti-NDA political gestures". The Congress is expected to overlook Mr Mulayam Singh Yadav who may now align with the Left.

The Congress strategy to take on the BJP-led NDA largely depends on its success to reinforce itself in Maharashtra (Congress won only nine out of 46 seats last time), UP (won 10 out of 80 seats), Bihar (won 2 out of 20 seats), Tamil Nadu (2 out of 39 seats) and West Bengal (3 out of 42 seats).

NCP leaves it to Pawar but Sangma, Shukla adamant, page 6

Cong-DMK pact after 24 years

CHENNAI, Jan. 8. — After a gap of 24 years, the Congress and the DMK today clinched an alliance deal for contesting the Lok Sabha polls and agreed to work together to defeat the “communal forces” and form a “secular” government at the Centre.

The alliance was firmed up when Dr Manmohan Singh, Mrs Sonia Gandhi’s emissary, called on the DMK president, Mr M Karunanidhi, at his residence here. The last time the two parties had contested an election together was in 1980, but the relationship between the two had soured since then.

Dr Singh said today’s talks were preliminary; the two parties have agreed in principle to form an electoral alliance in Tamil Nadu and that it would be led by Mr Karunanidhi.

Asked if the Congress would feel comfortable in an alliance that would include the MDMK led by Mr Vaiko, a staunch supporter of the LTTE, Dr Singh said it was for the DMK to decide which parties would be included in the alliance.

“Mr Karunanidhi is a big leader. We’ve opened a new chapter. We’ll work together to defeat the communal forces,” Dr Singh said. Seat-sharing and other nitty-gritty would be discussed later. Dr Singh was accompanied by Mr GK Vasan, TNCC president, in the talks.

Although it was all smiles today as the two leaders renewed their friendship, DMK cadres have not forgotten how the Congress, extending support from the outside to Mr IK Gujral’s UF government, insisted on dropping the party’s nominee in the Union Council of Ministers because of some critical reference in the interim report of the Jain Commission on the Rajiv Gandhi assassination. The final report, however, cleared the DMK of any involvement. The AIADMK, which is in power in Tamil Nadu, is bound to exploit the critical reference during the campaign. — Sam Rajappa

THE STATESMAN 9 JAN 2004

9 JAN 2004

Recast Sonia tells unreconstructed Left she's ready to repent

CL MANOJ
STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

NEW DELHI, Jan. 3. — Mrs Sonia Gandhi seems to have read the writing on the wall thanks to the Congress rout in the North and realised that her party cannot fight the NDA alone in the forthcoming do-or-die Lok Sabha elections.

The result: She has finally come out of her "political shell" and started acting independently, without the guidance of the AICC coterie which was largely responsible for the recent poll disaster. More importantly, she has acknowledged to potential allies the need to consciously work to change the psyche of her party and is working hard to acquire a suitable image for herself.

The re-cast Mrs Gandhi is trying to be a "functioning leader", one who reaches out to potential allies to discuss real politik. She is no longer comfortable waiting for others to knock at her door only to give them a silent hearing.

She has also promised her Leftist "friends" that she will try to make her party and her political managers shed their lingering "ruling party hangover". These New Year political resolutions notwithstanding, Mrs Gandhi will find that the path towards "secular unity" is not strewn with roses.

Accepting these "occupational hazards", Mrs Gandhi has literally hit the road in search of allies and started continuously "working the phones", as Tony Blair's aides described the beleaguered UK Prime Minister's desperate calls to mobilise allies for the war against Saddam.

Mrs Gandhi is also having more frequent "carefully arranged accidental interactions" with the Press and paying more visits to the Congress headquar-



Makeover moments

ters.

Last Saturday she offered to 'drop in' at Ajoy Bhavan to meet Mr AB Bardhan; both of them then held a 45-minute discussion at 10 Janpath. On Sunday she called on Mr Harkishen Singh Surjeet's residence, shared her plans for secular unity and sought his well-know expertise in political deal-making. The next day she walked down, with the SPG personnel in tow, to meet her neighbour, Mr Ram Vilas Paswan. Conspicuously none of her general secretaries and political managers escorted her for these three confabulations. This was perhaps a message meant to project her 'capacity' to lead without crutches and her distancing herself from "the coterie under attack".

She also rang up DMK leader Mr M Karunanidhi to deliver a 'forget Jain Commission report, let us do business' message. Telephone calls were also made to Ms Mayawati and Mr Mulayam Singh Yadav and Mr Sharad Pawar was offered talks. More meetings and calls are to follow.

Her talks with Mr Surjeet and Mr Bardhan provided Mrs Gandhi an opportunity to "listen to some plain truths" even while getting the "assurance of cooperation". One Left leader re-

mind^{ed} her how none of her political managers, due to misplaced over-confidence, had not bothered to contact any of the "like-minded" parties for "alliance talks" during the Assembly elections, despite her Shimla resolve.

An optimistic Communist leader told her that it is now the Congress, not the "others" who needed help desperately. Therefore, the talks for seat-sharing and cooperation have to be on "realistic terms". In response, Mrs Gandhi told him that she agreed that her party and some of her colleagues should "now get rid of their ruling party hangover". To avoid more trouble, they also agreed to "underplay" the issue of her leading the secular brigade.

The Left leaders told her that it would be impractical, due to the regional compulsions of some parties including the Left, to "form one secular front". Post-poll alliance and informal seat adjustments by "two secular formations" could be more viable.

They conveyed their opposition to the Congress aping the NDA's economic policies and the "anti-Communist attitude of some Congress leaders". An alert Mrs Gandhi tried to soothe her "friends" by referring to the Left "sympathies" of some members of her family in Turin near Milan.

"Well, I find her quite sincere in her efforts, and am also pleasantly surprised by her ability to discuss politics quite intelligently and frankly. She has certainly improved. It's a good beginning, but she should not have any illusions of a smooth time in bringing together all secular parties," a Left leader said.

And, Mr Sharad Pawar and Mr Mulayam Singh Yadav appear determined to prove that her mission remains far from being smooth.

...But Congress allies play hard to get

MOHAN SAHAY
STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

NEW DELHI, Jan. 3. — Apart from some reservations on accepting the leadership of Mrs Sonia Gandhi, the prospect of sharing votes is also keeping potential allies of the Congress from entering into a pre-poll pact to fight the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance in the next general elections.

Mr Mulayam Singh Yadav, for instance, is not comfortable about a pact with the Congress as he considers himself a 'big player' in national politics. Also, the weak electoral base of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh is making him wary. According to sources close to Mr Yadav, the Samajwadi Party is not prepared to spare the desired number of seats to the Congress in UP.

The Congress' share of votes in the previous Lok Sabha elections was less than 15 per cent of the popular votes compared to nearly 30 per cent votes polled by the SP. Mr Yadav considers it a politically negative move to share his party's votes with the Congress in view of the series of defeats the latter has suffered in by-elections in the state. The Congress lost a couple assembly seats in the Parliamentary segment of Amethi represented by the party president. However, in 1999, the Congress showing in UP was better as the party won 10 seats against six in 1998 and five in 1996. From available accounts, the SP has decided to contest some 75 odd seats keeping six seats for potential allies like the CPI-M, CPI and Mr Ajit Singh's Lok Dal.

More than UP, it is Bihar



Friends in need...

where the Congress will have serious trouble in getting a respectable number of seats from its ally, the RJD. After the division of the state in 2000, Bihar is left with 40 Lok Sabha seats. The Congress has two MPs — Mrs Shyama Sinha from Aurangabad and Mr Rajo Singh from Begusarai.

Congress leaders from Bihar have tentatively decided to demand at least 15 seats from the RJD which too had fared badly in 1999 by bagging only seven out of 54 seats in undivided Bihar. But Mr Laloo Yadav has told his partymen that at best the RJD would be willing to spare five seats to the Congress.

In Jharkhand, the Congress would have to sacrifice its interests to accommodate the RJD, which has negligible support base in 14 Parliamentary constituencies of the new state. After the BJP, the Congress enjoys considerable following in Jharkhand. In Parliamentary elections, the JMM is a third force.

"The Congress would be willing to strike a deal with Mr Shibu Soren of the JMM for sharing of seats in the Lok Sabha elections, provided Mr Soren agrees to spare at 10-12 seats for the Congress," Mr Satyendra Jaiswal, vice-president of the Jharkhand Pradesh Congress Committee said.

Congress hunts for friends

By Mahendra Ved
TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: Open to alliances and electoral adjustments with "anyone opposing the BJP/ NDA", the Congress is all set to court the DMK in Tamil Nadu and the NCP in Maharashtra and elsewhere in the country, it was decided at the Congress working committee meeting (CWC) meeting here.

The party is also ready to do business with the PMK, the Tamil party that it once accused of being involved in the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi.

Also likely is adjustment with former UP chief minister Kalyan Singh, leaving behind his role in the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992. But the Congress is yet to work out its equations with other prospective allies—UP CM Mulayam Singh Yadav and Mayawati.

Emerging from the meet, party chief Sonia Gandhi said she was "talking" to the NCP. Doubts have been raised about the NCP's role following Sharad Pawar's "nobody is untouchable" remark.

However, NCP leader Praful Patel clarified: "There has been no discussion with the BJP at all." He ruled out the

NCP going with the NDA and indicated that a pre-poll alliance with the Congress was very much on the cards. A final decision would be taken on January 14 at the NCP's working committee meeting here.

Sections of Maharashtra Congress, apparently unaware of Ms Gandhi's statement, were still lobbying against an alliance with the NCP.

Fresh from the electoral drubbing, the Congress is engaging prospective allies through an informal but high-powered group headed by Ms Gandhi. It is also attempting to set its house in order. An election management committee will oversee the party's poll strategy, it was announced.

In what might mean diluting the role of AICC general secretaries, "experienced people" are being drafted for poll management. Each leader will be assigned one big or two or three smaller states.

Senior party leader Pranab Mukherjee was at pains to explain that the general secretaries would continue with their tasks, while the new team would tour their assigned states and be accountable for them.



Congress president Sonia Gandhi arrives for the Congress Working Committee meeting at the Congress office in New Delhi on Wednesday.

THE TIMES OF INDIA

3 JAN 2001
2 JAN 2001

Sonia knocks on BSP door to capture cow belt

Our Political Bureau
NEW DELHI 1 JANUARY

SONIA Gandhi, shedding her party's notions of vanity of being a major player, has approached the BSP for a political deal that can bolster the Congress' electoral prospects in the crucial "cow belt" battleground.

The Congress' desperate attempts to work out an alliance with the BSP comes in the wake of a fresh no from parties of consequence in northern India like the Samajwadi Party (SP) to be part of a Sonia Gandhi-led alliance and the possibility of some non-NDA parties pledging support for the Vajpayee leadership.

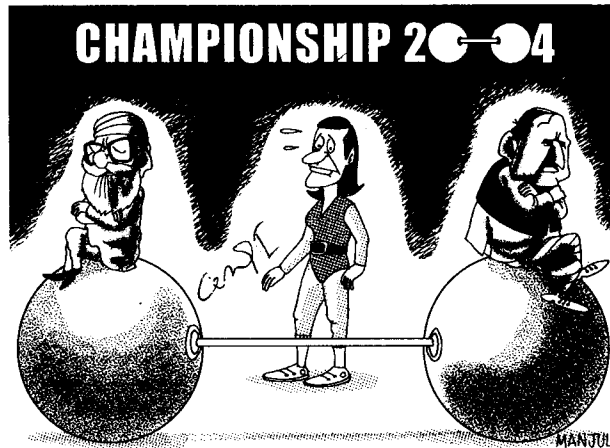
While this has already prompted Sonia enthusiasts in the Left to revive talks about a Third Front, a BSP-Congress alliance will end the Congress' cohabitation with the SP in Uttar Pradesh, besides making the BJP the chief claimant of the upper caste votes once again.

Although the alliance with the BSP is sound on paper, not many are willing to bet on its efficacy in countering the NDA. Just like the recent Assembly elections, it could reactivate parties SP and others to make forays into states like Madhya Pradesh for spoiling the Congress' chances.

But with the elections round the corner, the Sonia establish-

POLITICKLE

MANJUL



ment is under pressure to demonstrate that its coalition claims have some takers. In fact, this was evident when Ms Gandhi's suddenly discovered that Ram Vilas Paswan was her next door neighbour and drove down to H.K. Surjeet's residence for "political discussions."

Signals are quite clear that political reflexes of these "friends" of Ms Gandhi would ultimately depend on their assessment of the utility in helping the Congress.

On her part, Ms Mayawati, reacted favourably to Ms Gandhi's proposal and said she would convene a meeting on January 16 to discuss the issue. In New Delhi,

Ms Gandhi also chose to advertise her conversation with the BSP leader. "I rang up to meet her last night. Mayawati said she is going to Mumbai and promised to meet after the return," Ms Gandhi said after taking part in a manifesto committee meeting.

Referring to the Shimla Sankalp, Ms Gandhi said the Congress was working on firming up coalition of like minded parties. "In fact, I have been talking to others for some time," she said. That the current setback will not deter her was also not evident when she said that her party would continue its efforts to unite parties against the NDA.

The Economic Times

? JAN 2004

? JAN 2004

NCP denies alliance talks with Sena

31/1/04

HT Correspondent
Pune, January 2

REACTING TO Bal Thackeray's overtures, Sharad Pawar on Friday denied he had ever held talks with the Shiv Sena or the BJP on the issue of joining the NDA.

Pawar said the decision on an alliance was the internal matter of the Nationalist Congress Party and he had no intention of dropping any of his colleagues to forge such an alliance.

Speaking to reporters on Thursday, Thackeray said he was willing for an alliance with the NCP provided the party dropped former Deputy CM Chhagan Bhujbal. "We do not accept the *diktats* of other political parties and whatever Tha-

ckeray has said is entirely his own opinion," Pawar said. However, after issuing an ultimatum to the Congress to decide on an alliance with his party by December 31, Pawar on Friday backed out of his earlier stand, saying the party's position would be clear only by January 25 when the party executive met in New Delhi to discuss the issue.

He said that after the last round of elections in the state, his party had received three proposals from various groups: that of a tie-up with the Congress, a tie up with the NDA and of joining the secular front now being forged by the CPI(M)'s Harkishen Singh Surjeet.

"So, the issue is still open and I can't take a decision

POLL VAULT

Pawar politics

- The decision about an alliance was NCP's internal matter, said Pawar
- The party had no intention of dropping any of its leaders, the Maratha strongman said
- Thackeray said on Thursday that he was willing for an alliance with the NCP provided the party dropped former Deputy Chief Minister Chhagan Bhujbal



Sharad Pawar

on my own. It's the party executive that will have to decide which way we will have to go," Pawar added.

the NCP becomes part of the NDA. "Their views will have to be heard first," he said.

However, his compulsions in Maharashtra might force him ultimately to go with the Congress, since a tie-up with the saffron forces will only help the BJP eventually to wrest the Maratha vote bank from Pawar and edge out the Sena, which holds the residual Maratha vote and is a strong adversary to the NCP and Congress in areas like Marathwada.

Thackeray's Thursday statement is being seen as a calculated move by the Sena Tiger to sully the electoral atmosphere ahead of the polls. Asking Pawar to drop Bhujbal puts the Maratha strongman in an awkward position vis-à-vis a possible

alliance with the NDA that may, hence, never happen.

But it could also take away the Dalit and Muslim vote from Pawar — the Sena is trying hard to gain the confidence of the Dalits and is in direct competition with both the Congress and the NCP for this vote bank.

Pawar's dilemma also is that the Congress is cool to his demand for an alliance although it has indicated this will happen, but in its own time and not according to the NCP's convenience. The January 25 deadline is now being seen as Pawar's face-saver, as well as an attempt to turn the tables on the Congress that has now demanded the NCP clear its position before seeking an alliance with it in Maharashtra.

3 JAN 2004

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

3 JAN 2004

So far, Sonia

Rest will be decided by elections

Assuming April-May elections, as the Congress is certainly assuming, it is rather extraordinary that the party is having to issue clarifications on its prime ministerial candidate. Mrs Sonia Gandhi's semantics are partly to blame for this. What she meant at the Mumbai press conference was clear as mud. To say people will decide the Prime Minister is to mean anything between a cliché and a revolution (voters directly nominate the head of government). To say that the Congress won't impose leadership on other parties is, similarly, stating the obvious, if she meant leaders of other parties, or changing tack, if she meant herself. This possibly involuntary malleability of her statements allowed the media to talk of a change in Congress strategy on Sunday and the Congress to claim status quo on Monday. Not much should be made of the supposed Congress subtext that Mrs Gandhi's leadership is no longer a coalition pre-condition. Since the party has ruled out a Geriatrics United (aka Third Front) government, since the Congress is almost certainly going to be the largest party in any anti-NDA coalition and since Mrs Gandhi will be the Congress parliamentary leader, there's not the slightest doubt about the outcome of a process choosing a non-BJP prime ministerial candidate. Therefore, pre-conditions are irrelevant. Given that, the Congress must admit that second and more important reason the party had to restate its position is Mrs Gandhi herself.

Questions about her leadership simply won't go away and there need be only one random query at a press conference, as happened in Mumbai, for everyone to get excited. The arguments why Mrs Gandhi is not the Congress's best bet do not need repetition. What is becoming clear is that the party may have no confidence that it can get anyone better. That is, dynasty and sycophancy may not explain the whole story. Congress strategists may be apprehensive that only Mrs Gandhi can, at present, keep the party together. Any other leader will represent some faction or the other and provoke powerful centrifugal disturbances.

As long as Mrs Gandhi is leader, party culture won't allow nurturing of an obvious deputy or a group of potential successors. So, the only way the party can replace her credibly is by risking a period of internecine power struggle from which a new leader will emerge. Certainly, four months before elections is the time the BJP would have chosen for the Congress to risk such a change.

The party, therefore, is right, because it has little choice, in keeping Mrs Gandhi as its leader. One way or the other, elections may solve the problem. If Mrs Gandhi can form the government, the issue becomes irrelevant. If she loses her second general elections, and the Congress faces another five years in the Opposition, the party will have the luxury of being able to afford a post-coup instability.