

Single Mauled Government Bends Backwards to Survive



Singles are the flavour of the season. All of them also hold double barrel guns and are firing at will.

Early this month, the people of Tamil Nadu and West Bengal voted two single women to power. All the singles represent an ideology, a mission and have a message to deliver to their own constituencies. If one represents the elite, the others enjoys huge mass support. If some of them have both degree and pedigree, the others have their ears to the ground and the pulse of the people on their fingers.

Last week, a bearded san-yasi in a five-metre saffron sarong became the most sought after single in India. He had, a day earlier, turned down the prime minister's appeal to desist from his satyagraha. Breaking all protocol and ignoring political humiliation, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh directed four of his senior ministers and the cabinet secretary to drive down to Indira Gandhi airport and persuade Baba Ramdev to abandon his indefinite fast against black money—a delegation worthy of greeting a visiting head of state. It was an unprecedented 18 km journey for Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee, Human Resource Development Minister Kapil Sibal, Tourism Minister Subodh Kant Sahai and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Pawan Bansal accompanied by a retinue of senior officials, including Cabinet Secretary

K M Chandrasekar—even German Chancellor Angela Merkel was not given such a welcome. Even Jai Prakash Narayan whose movement led to the ouster of the Congress government in 1977 wasn't accorded such an honour. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister, just ignored him at her own peril. But Manmohan Singh is not willing to walk that perilous path. The two-and-a-half-hour meeting in the airport lounge between the yoga guru and the Group of Ministers revealed the contours of the power shift in the nation's ruling echelons. While the Baba dictated and directed the agenda for the discussion, it was clear that those who claim the mandate of the people were utterly helpless in front of a person who had just threatened to start an agitation. The Awesome Foursome of the Congress were forced to establish their credibility and credentials to a Single who had never fought an election. It was a decisive victory of a Single over the Gang of Four.

It wasn't for the first time that

UPA II had lost to a Single. Last month too, the Government panicked and surrendered to Anna Hazare, yet another white dhoti-and-Gandhi cap-wearing Single. As he sat on a choreographed hunger strike at New Delhi's Jantar Mantar, the Government sent ministerial emissaries and finally conceded to Anna's demand for the appointment of a joint panel to suggest a new draft for a Lokpal Bill. Even at that point of time, the Government created yet another precedent: for the first time since Independence, it involved

in trouble. But none of the above command the widespread social acceptability the Hazare and Ramdev duo does. Though both are fighting for the same cause, they represent an entirely different class and community spectrum. Hazare was catapulted to public prominence by the left-of-centre upper middle class. When he began his fast, Hazare was visited by Bollywood glitteratti, members of the exclusive chatteratti club from Lutyen's Delhi as well as a few corporate leaders. Hazare's team mesmerised the

classes and monopolised prime time news. While he nourished his middle class constituency, Hazare ignored people like Ramdev. Since the timing of Hazare's fast coincided—knowingly or unknowingly—with the Assembly polls, UPA leaders hurriedly caajoled the Gandhian into accepting a 10-member panel to solve the impasse. Hazare didn't compromise on his basic demands but he did yield to his secular promoters, sparing the political leadership and choosing to attack Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi on corruption—a charge that carries no credibility. But the Government's reprieve was short-lived.

As the Manmohan administration began its confabulations with Team Hazare, Baba Ramdev took the establishment by surprise by

taking on the Government in a manner more organised than his colleague-in-fasting. Not only did he expand the scope of his movement by making black money the central issue, but he also exhorted his followers in 600-odd districts to join. Unlike Hazare, who used social media, the Baba activated his massive following. For the Congress, it was like eating crow. In spite of its contrarian motormouth general secretary Digvijaya Singh constantly attacking Ramdev, the Baba is unperturbed. Obviously neither Singh nor his party are aware of the massive following Ramdev—hailing from a remote Haryana village—has acquired. The Congress made the crippling mistake of considering him just another baba teaching followers how to breathe. But last week, Pranab and his colleagues realised to their regret that Baba Ramdev could breathe fire as well—one that could easily become a conflagration that may consume this Government.

prabhuchawla@newindianexpress.com



RAVI CHAUDHARY

The two-and-a-half-hour meeting in the airport lounge between the yoga guru and the Group of Ministers revealed the contours of the power shift in the nation's ruling echelons.

civil society leaders in drafting a legislation. Former Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru had in the 1950s sought the opinion of other parties and civil society on the Hindu Code Bill, but only after it had been adopted by the Cabinet. From the day the UPA Government constituted the panel, it is Single Hazare and not the ministers who have been setting the pace and nature of the discussion on the proposed Bill.

The rise of both Hazare and Ramdev symbolise the emergence of civil society leaders without clannish or political baggage. Both come from ordinary families and have not studied in elite educational institutions. Still they have acquired national acceptability and credibility by virtue of their work, not just words. The victory of political leaders like J Jayalalithaa, Naveen Patnaik, Mayawati and Mamata Banerjee is also significant as all of them could cut the political Gordian knot because they were not crippled by family considerations or fear of putting their successors