



POWER & POLITICS

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ONE IS the ruling party at the Centre and the other the main Opposition but the dividing line between the Congress and the BJP on economic matters has got blurred in recent years. Even on some political issues, the twain have met. But that's where similarities end. The 125 year old Congress has a spring in its step, a stomach for a fight and has a clear roadmap for the future; the 30 year old BJP is content playing second fiddle to regional partners. The Congress is led by a feisty leader at the Centre whose handpicked nominees rule in the states.

The BJP on the other hand has a spineless central leadership, yet has star chief ministers in the states. Narendra Modi, Shivraj Singh Chauhan, Raman Singh, Prem Kumar Dhumal and B.S. Yeddyurappa are in office on their own right and they have gone about their job in a way to have won grudging admiration from even some of the UPA ministers at the Centre.

I would have thought that with a high stakes election going on in Bihar, the BJP's High Command would let loose these party mascots across the state to win votes for the JD(U)-BJP alliance government in Patna. But no. The presiding deities at 11 Ashoka Road have decided that there is no need.

The BJP has been in the grip of the warped ideology of political correctness for quite some time now. This was highlighted once again last week when the leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha said in Patna that "Modi's charisma and magic have worked in Gujarat, but it is not necessary that everybody's magic works in every place". More than anything else, Sushma Swaraj's statement is a pointer to the deep centre-state crisis that has engulfed the BJP. The powerful cabal at Ashoka Road thinks it knows what's best for the party, and runs it accordingly, often with disastrous consequences. Ranged against them are popular chief ministers who have fought all odds, both from within and outside the party, to keep the BJP flag flying in several major states. Sushma's graceless remarks about Modi show not just the depth of the divide but the lengths to which some of the party's leaders will go to belittle one another.

It's tragic but true that the party's chief ministers are not involved in any of the important political decision making process. Barring Lal Krishna Advani and BJP chief Nitin Gadkari, none of the other leaders even talk about the performance of governments in BJP ruled states in their speeches. Even in Bihar, BJP leaders remain content prais-



Narendra Modi

ing Nitish and playing second fiddle to him and dare not utter the 'M' factor in his presence. "In Bihar, the magic of Nitish Kumar is at work and we are confident of our victory," Sushma said last week. Nitish's aversion to Modi campaigning is well known, but Gadkari had told me on my TV chat show *Seedhi Baat*, as well as made several public statements, that the decision to nominate the party's campaigners remained the sole prerogative of the BJP. Then why are its star campaigners being kept out? My instincts tell me that the chief ministers have been kept away

from the campaign by the central leaders who fear being dwarfed by them.

Now look across to the other side at the Congress whose best hopes are centered on coming in a respectable fourth or fifth position in the polls. Yet it has drafted almost all its chief ministers for the campaign.

In the elections in which Nitish has made development his biggest plank, the BJP has asked Modi, Raman Singh and Chauhan, the party's development mascots to stay at home. Almost all the Congress chief ministers have visited the state at least once and in the last

fortnight, the Congress sent its own development mascot, Delhi's three term chief minister Sheila Dikshit on two whirlwind tours of Bihar (October 19-20, 26-27) during which she addressed more than 15 campaign meetings.

When things go wrong in politics, they never go half wrong. The defeat in the 2004 Lok Sabha elections shattered the morale of the BJP; the elections last year broke its back and there is a very good chance that even without any damage being inflicted from outside, the men and women at Ashoka Road will finish the job.

Centre-state crisis in BJP

Babus must look before they fly now

THE travel bug seems to have afflicted many of the top babus and the PMO is not amused. It has taken serious offence to the increasing incidence of bureaucrats of the secretary rank going on official foreign jaunts that can as well be undertaken by junior level officers. During his tenure the Cabinet Secretary K.M. Chandrasekhar is known to have sent out strictures at the rate of one every week and recently in a confidential note to all Union ministers at the instance of the Prime Minister, the Cab-Sec has stressed that the foreign trips of secretaries may be recommended "only in such circumstances, in which representation at a lower level is not advisable or where no one else can substitute them for enunciating policies or the stand point of government of India."

The Cabsec has also stressed that the participation of secretary level officers in international conferences and meetings should commensurate with the level of participation of other countries.

The note says that the absence of secretaries from Delhi should be restricted to the minimum and that they should under no circumstances be away for more than a week at a time. The letters also say that both ministers and secretaries of the same departments/ministry should not be away from Delhi at the same time on foreign tour, unless specially cleared by the Prime Minister.

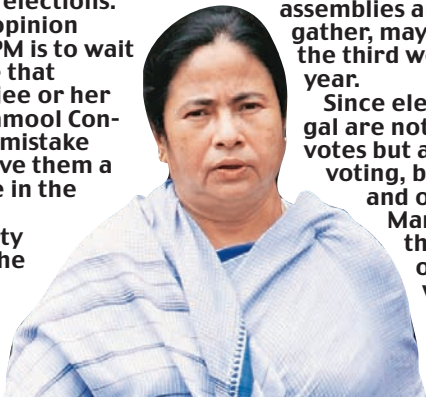
Secretaries have also been told that they are prohibited from going abroad when Parliament is in session. The CabSec has also stressed that political clearance of the External Affairs Ministry is mandatory before allowing any secretary to go for any international event. The secretary-level visits on invitations from non-governmental bodies require specific recommendation of the ministry and the Indian embassy or high commission concerned. It's a long list of do's and don'ts and what remains to be seen how much of it will be absorbed by the babus.

WITH the Communist Party of India (Marxist) getting trounced in the elections to the local bodies in Kerala, a section of party leaders are in favour of holding early polls. A similar view was expressed in the West Bengal unit of the party when, following the party's rout in recent by-elections, a senior minister of the Left Front government openly favoured early elections.

The counter-opinion within in the CPM is to wait it out and hope that Mamata Banerjee or her party, the Trinamool Congress, makes a mistake which would give them a fighting chance in the election.

While the party ponders over the pros and cons of the issue,

Mamata Banerjee



All parties and EC roll up their sleeves for 2011 polls

the Election Commission seems to have informally decided to club the electoral process in Tamil Nadu, Kerala and West Bengal assemblies and the polls, I gather, may be held in the in the third week of April next year.

Since elections in West Bengal are not just about casting votes but also involve bogus voting, booth capturing and other forms of Marxist art, the polls there are to be held over four phases while Tamil Nadu and Kerala are likely to be done with voting in a

day. The EC may borrow a few leaves from its Bihar strategy for the elections in Tamil Nadu where as in the past, big money is expected to play a big role.

For the first time, officers from the Indian Revenue Service will act as expenditure observers in addition to the regular as observers. All managers of the nationalised and private banks will be directed by the Chief Election Officer of Tamil Nadu that transactions above five lakhs should be reported to the EC, starting with the model code of conduct coming into effect. The EC strategy worked well in Bihar and it is to be hoped that it will be replicated in Tamil Nadu also.

IN A state where moviedom has a stranglehold over politics, the Congress has been a loser ever since the death of thespian Shivaji Ganesan who once represented the party in the Rajya Sabha. So the party is eager to rope in as many heroes and heroines for the campaign for the assembly elections due next year. But it has not been able to make much headway and even second rung heroes seem to be in no mood to embrace the party. Radha Ravi is the son of M.R. Radha, the actor who is more remembered for pumping a few bullets into M.G. Ramachandran than for the roles he did on screen. Recently, a senior Tamil Nadu Congress leader brought Radha Ravi to New Delhi to meet Rahul Gandhi.

Rahul was apparently told that Ravi was a top draw in film and the young man, being no Tamil buff probably swallowed it. In turn, it was assumed that Radha Ravi would be sufficiently charmed by Rahul into joining the Congress. There was a buzz in Chennai party circles about the meeting and the Congress leaders were patting themselves on the back for the "coup". But two days after he returned to Chennai, Ravi met Jayalalitha and joined the AIADMK of which he was an MLA once. When he was not renominated in 2006, he switched to the DMK. The Congress should now seek him out again in 2016.