

D I V I D E D

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INDIA IN A TIME OF COALITIONS

Paranjoy Guha Thakurta  
Shankar Raghuraman



**DIVIDED WE STAND**



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# Praise for the Book

## ***A Time of Coalitions: Divided We Stand***

‘... a book that will be indispensable for specialist and lay persons alike. Where the book really succeeds is in evolving a framework that organizes complex events in a simple pattern.... The reader is left wanting more, especially about the interest groups and lobbies that are so crucial to the making of economic policy.’

—Mahesh Rangarajan, *Seminar*

‘... a well-written and well-researched book on contemporary Indian politics.... Specially useful is the graphic mapping of the last three general elections.’

—Jawed Naqvi, *Business World*

‘This is a book written by political scientists working with theory, gut feeling and journalistic experience applied to empirical data.

Timely, informative, well argued in easy-flow journalese.’

—Monojit Majumdar, *The Hindustan Times*

‘... it is one of the most intellectually stimulating books of our times, will rarely be challenged by anybody ... informative, factually accurate, politically sophisticated, intellectually challenging and richly stimulating in its wisdom, its logic, its structure and even in its tentative conclusions, which are arrived at with due humility and not a little self-examination. It spares none as none should be spared, which is what gives to it credibility even if it invites anger and derision from those criticized. What it does is to tell the truth—and isn’t that what history is all about?’

—M.V. Kamath, *Free Press Journal*

‘The 400 page book is packed with information and analysis about the current political scenario.

Serious work, yet not stodgy or pompous.’

—Ravi Shanker Kapoor, *The Financial Express*

‘While the book’s preoccupation is with the workability of coalitions as a governing arrangement, the authors have given a rather comprehensive account of the political developments in the last five years, as seen through the performance of various political parties’.

—Harish Khare, *The Hindu*

‘Published at the completion of the first non-Congress coalition government that has lasted its full term, and at the beginning of yet another experiment, this book is a pioneering project in the analysis of coalition politics in India’.

—Ajit Kumar Jha, *India Today*

‘The strength of the book lies in its enormous empirical data, which are very useful to understand the rise and consolidation of the coalition experiment in India. It is a readily available reference book for those seeking to lay hands on the nature and dynamics of coalition in a society torn by divides of religion, region and caste. The authors therefore deserve to be complimented for having set the ball rolling in a field that is empirically rich but theoretically developing.’

—Bidyut Chakraborty, *The Book Review*

‘... this book arrived at certain inferences about the future course of Indian politics, that stand up rather well to subsequent events’.

—Sukumar Muralidharan, *Biblio*

‘The book scores brownie points with its in-depth analyses of coalition politics and brings to readers information and analyses in a lucid manner’.

—Santanu Nandan Sharma, *The Economic Times*

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# List of Abbreviations

AASU	All Assam Students' Union
ABCD	Akhil Bharatiya Congress Dal
ADB	Asian Development Bank
AGP	Asom Gana Parishad
AIADMK	All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam
AITUC	All India Trade Union Congress
AJGAR	Ahirs (Yadavs), Jats, Gujjars and Rajputs
APM	Administered Pricing Mechanism
AUDF	Assam United Democratic Front
BALCO	Bharat Aluminium Company
BAMCEF	All India Backward and Minority Communities Employees' Federation
BCCI	Board of Control for Cricket in India
BHEL	Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited
BJD	Biju Janata Dal
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BJS	Bharatiya Jana Sangh
BKU	Bharatiya Kisan Union
BLD	Bharatiya Lok Dal
BMS	Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh
BNP	Bangladesh National Party
BPPCC	Bombay Pradesh Congress Committee
BPCL	Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd
BPPF(H)	Bodoland People's Progressive Front (Hargrama faction)
BSP	Bahujan Samaj Party
CFAR	Centre for Advocacy and Research

CFD	Congress for Democracy
CPI (M)	Communist Party of India (Marxist)
CPI	Communist Party of India
DMDK	Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam
DMK	Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam
DS-4	Dalit Soshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti
EPF	Employees' Provident Fund
EPFO	Employees' Provident Fund Organisation
EVR	E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FICCI	Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry
FIIIs	Foreign Institutional Investors
FIR	First Information Report
HPCL	Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd
HVC	Himachal Vikas Congress
HVP	Haryana Vikas Party
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
ICHR	Indian Council of Historical Research
ICSSR	Indian Council for Social Sciences Research
IMDTA	Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunal) Act
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INC	Indian National Congress
INLD	Indian National Lok Dal
INTACH	Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage
IOC	Indian Oil Corporation
IOU	Index of Opposition Unity
IPCL	Indian Petrochemicals Corporation Limited
IRDA	Insurance Regulatory & Development Authority
ISI	Inter-Services Intelligence
IUML	Indian Union Muslim League
JD (U)	Janata Dal (United)
JD	Janata Dal
JKD	Jan Kranti Dal

JMM	Jharkhand Mukti Morcha
JVM	Jharkhand Vikas Morcha
KMPP	Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party
LDF	Left Democratic Front
LJP	Lok Janshakti Party
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
MBCs	Most Backward Castes
MCC	Maoist Communist Centre
MCOCA	Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act
MDMK	Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam
MISA	Maintenance of Internal Security Act
MNS	Maharashtra Navnirman Sena
MPCC	Maharashtra Pradesh Congress Committee
NAC	National Advisory Council
NALCO	National Aluminium Company .
NC	National Conference
NCERT	National Council for Educational Research & Training
NCMP	National Common Minimum Programme
NCP	Nationalist Congress Party
NDA	National Democratic Alliance
NREGA	National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
NTPC	National Thermal Power Corporation
OBCs	Other Backward Classes
OGL	Open General Licence
OSD	Officer on Special Duty
PDP	People's Democratic Party
PDS	Public Distribution System
PEPSU	Patiala and East Punjab States Union
PIL	Public Interest Litigation
PMK	Pattali Makkal Katchi
PMO	Prime Minister's Office
POCA	Prevention of Crime Act
POTA	Prevention of Terrorism Act
POTO	Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance

PSP	Praja Socialist Party
PSU	Public Sector Undertaking
PT	Puthizha Tamizhagam
PWG	People's War Group
PWP	Peasants and Workers' Party
RBI	Reserve Bank of India
RJD	Rashtriya Janata Dal
RJP	Rashtriya Janata Party
RKP	Rashtriya Kranti Party
RLD	Rashtriya Lok Dal
RPI	Republican Party of India
RSP	Revolutionary Socialist Party
RSS	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh
RTI	Right to Information
SAD	Shiromani Akali Dal
SEBI	Securities and Exchange Board of India
SEZ	Special Economic Zone
SGPC	Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee
SIL	Special Import Licence
SIMI	Students' Islamic Movement of India
SJM	Swadeshi Jagaran Manch
SOG	Special Operations Group
SP	Samajwadi Party
TADA	Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Act
TANSI	Tamil Nadu Small Industries Corporation
TDP	Telugu Desam Party
TINA	There Is No Alternative
TMC	Tamil Maanila Congress
TRC	Tamizhaga Rajiv Congress
TRIPS	Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights
TRS	Telengana Rashtra Samithi
TUJS	Tripura Upajati Juba Samiti
UF	United Front
UGC	University Grants Commission
ULFA	United Liberation Front of Asom

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UPA	United Progressive Alliance
VAT	Value Added Tax
VHP	Vishwa Hindu Parishad
VKA	Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram
VSNL	Videsh Sanchar Nigam Limited

## Preface

In March 2004, when SAGE published our first book *A Time of Coalitions: Divided We Stand*, the political atmosphere in India was charged. The 14th general elections were scheduled for April-May that year and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) appeared to be riding the crest of a wave of national euphoria; at least, that is what was being said by most of the media, opinion pollsters and political analysts. The outcome of the elections was being treated almost as a foregone conclusion. The debate was centred more around how comfortable the majority of the NDA would be rather than whether or not it would obtain a majority of seats in the 543-member Lok Sabha or lower house of the Indian Parliament. Those who disagreed with such a prognosis, including the authors of this publication, were treated with a fair amount of disdain by the political pundits of the day.

When the outcome of the elections became known on May 13, 2004, quite a few were taken aback at the sharp fall in the number of seats won by the BJP—from 182 to 138. The supporters of the Indian National Congress were also (pleasantly) surprised that the number of members of Parliament (MPs) owing allegiance to the party had risen from 114 to 145. Many Congress sympathisers were not expecting that the party would become the single largest party in the Lok Sabha for the first time since 1991—the BJP commanded the support of the largest number of MPs after the general elections held in 1996, 1998 and 1999.

The formation of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition government in New Delhi led by the Congress marked a continuation of the phase of coalition governments. If anything, it was an accentuation of the splintering of votes that has characterised India's polity after 1984. For the first time in 2004, a general election was

contested by two major coalitions—one led by the BJP and the other by the Congress—but neither was able to come even close to obtaining a majority in the Lok Sabha. The Congress-led UPA ultimately had to seek the support of the 61 MPs belonging to the left parties, the largest of which was the Communist Party of India (Marxist), to form the government.

Another statistic from the 2004 Lok Sabha elections shows just how misplaced was the theory about India moving towards a bipolar polity. The two largest political parties between themselves managed to win only 283 seats, just 11 more than the half-way mark in the Lok Sabha. The combined tally of the two largest parties has never been lower. For us, this was particularly gratifying. Towards the end of the final chapter of our book that was published in March 2004, we had stated:

As for the much talked about bipolarity of the Indian polity...it is more wishful thinking than actual fact. Here's a thought that might have seemed shocking till not very long ago, but can by no means be ruled out any longer. We could in the near future, perhaps as early as the 14th general elections in 2004, have a Lok Sabha in which the BJP and the Congress put together cannot muster a majority. This may or may not happen, but it does not seem impossible as it once would have.

In the concluding paragraph of the chapter on the Congress party, we had written:

Given the absence of a coherent ideology, either political or economic, can the Congress regain its past glory and form a government on its own? That is a rather remote possibility. Can the party then head a coalition that would replace the NDA after the 14th general elections? That is a possibility that cannot entirely be ruled out.

We wrote these lines with a certain degree of circumspection, given the fact that this reading of the situation was almost completely at variance with the conventional political wisdom prevailing in the first four months of 2004. In fact, our publisher, Tejeshwar Singh, suggested that since we had spent nearly six years writing the book, we might wait for a few more months for the outcome of the 2004

Lok Sabha elections before we finalised the book. Many friends and well-wishers also pointed out that it was rather foolhardy of us to be attempting to anticipate the outcome of the elections so close to the event itself. If we were proved wrong, they argued, our book would languish in the godowns of the publisher.

We were well aware of the risk, but decided to take it, largely because we felt that if our assessment turned out to be more or less correct—as it should if our hypothesis was right—it would support our argument more forcefully than any post-facto analysis. Our publisher, despite not sharing our conviction about the likelihood of the NDA being voted out of power, backed us to the hilt, for which we remain extremely grateful to him.

In the three and a half years since the book was published, there have been several important political developments that have strengthened the hypothesis that the process of fragmentation of the Indian polity is far from over. This period has also seen a growing acceptance of coalitions—even by the Congress—as the ‘natural’ form of governments in India, at least in the foreseeable future. When we wrote our first book, the main debate was whether or not coalitions are here to stay. Today, this debate has been settled to a great extent. But other questions have emerged—whether coalitions are a necessary ‘evil’ or they are better than single party governments. If coalitions are inevitable, is there a way to ensure better governance?

## **Diversity in Unity**

Till the turn of the 21st century, conventional wisdom in India had it that coalition governments were an aberration, a brief and temporary phase that would soon give way to single-party governments led either by the BJP or the Congress. Over the term of the third Union government headed by Atal Behari Vajpayee, which came to power in October 1999, most political participants grudgingly came to accept that this phase of coalition governments might be less shortlived than they had initially anticipated. Yet, they often sought to underplay the significance of this development by arguing that the polity remains essentially bipolar.



To claim that the BJP and the Congress represent two poles of the Indian polity would be too simplistic a view of the complex reality. Indeed, it can even be forcefully argued that Indian politics is becoming less, and not more, bipolar. There are strong indications that the process of fragmentation of the polity is far from over.

While at the all-India level there may appear to be only two fronts or political formations of any significance, this picture of a uniformly bipolar polity disappears the moment we examine what's happening in the states. There are states in which the BJP and the Congress are the only major political players, but these states—Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand (carved out of Uttar Pradesh in 2000), Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh (earlier a part of Madhya Pradesh) and the National Capital Territory of Delhi—between them account for less than one-fifth of the total number of seats in the Lok Sabha. Looked at differently, in only six out of 28 states and in the country's national capital is the electoral battle between the two largest political parties in India. Then there are states where either the Congress or the BJP is one of the major political players, but the other is minor or insignificant. Such states include Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, where the Congress is at best a marginal player, and Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and the north-east excluding Assam, where the BJP is no more than a fringe participant. Finally, there are states like Tamil Nadu and West Bengal where neither the BJP nor the Congress can claim to be one of the poles of the polity.

The elections to the state assemblies of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan and Delhi in December 2003 provided evidence that the so-called bipolarity of Indian politics is being threatened even in states that have traditionally witnessed straight electoral battles between the BJP and the Congress.

Even at the national level, the hypothesis of an increasingly bipolar polity is scarcely borne out by facts. The Congress and the BJP put together did increase their combined tally in the 543-member Lok Sabha by barely 22 seats between the May 1996 and February 1998 general elections. However, in the 1999 elections, the combined tally of the BJP and the Congress came down to below the level in 1996. In fact, the combined strength of 296 Lok Sabha MPs for the BJP and the Congress was the lowest since the BJP came into existence

in 1980. The trend continued after the 2004 general elections and as mentioned, the Congress and the BJP together obtained 283 seats in the Lok Sabha, just 11 above the half-way mark.

If at all one can talk in terms of two poles in Indian politics, it would have to be in terms of the pole of sectarian politics on the one hand, and inclusive politics on the other. The BJP, the caste-based parties and the regional parties, all base themselves on a sectarian appeal, though this would certainly not be acknowledged officially. The Congress and the left, on the other hand, seek to make a genuinely pan-Indian appeal. In the contest between these two types of political mobilisation, the initial years of the coalition era conveyed the impression that sectarian forces would have the upper hand over political forces that tried to appeal across the social spectrum. The defeat of the NDA government in the April–May 2004 elections and the improved performance of the Congress and the left, however, suggests that this contest is not yet over.

Those who believe that the Indian polity is becoming bipolar overlook the fact that coalition politics can create compulsions for the larger party to woo the smaller ones and not the other way round. To cite an extreme example, in a Parliament with, say, 100 seats, assume there are three political parties. Party A has 49 seats; Party B has a similar number while Party C has only two seats. In such a situation, Party C could be the most powerful party because its decision to align itself with either Party A or Party B would determine who comes to power.

The very description of two large parties as poles suggests that they are the ones that call the shots, which is not necessarily the case in India. This hypothetical example may seem absurd, but something quite close to it actually took place in Indian politics more than once. In Uttar Pradesh, for instance, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) has on three different occasions formed the government in the state with the support of the BJP after having opposed the party during the election campaign. On the first two occasions, the BSP held the upper hand despite the fact that the BJP was by far the larger of the two parties in the Uttar Pradesh assembly. This was possible because the BJP's stake in keeping the rival Samajwadi Party (SP) out of power was greater than that of the BSP.

In Himachal Pradesh, events came as close to our hypothetical example as possible. In the state assembly elections in February 1998, the BJP won 31 of the 68 seats in the assembly, the Congress 31 seats, while the Himachal Vikas Congress (HVC headed by former Union Communications Minister Sukh Ram who was expelled from the Congress after corruption charges were filed against him following the recovery of large sums of unaccounted money from his residences) won five seats. There was one independent candidate who won while elections were not held in one constituency. After the elections, the BJP had to align with Sukh Ram's HVC though the two parties had opposed each other. In the state government, the BJP had to make Sukh Ram the second most important minister and provide a Rajya Sabha seat to his son. The point is simple—BJP needed the HVC more than the latter needed it in order to form the government in Himachal Pradesh. (And it is indeed a quirk of Indian politics that the same Sukh Ram who had made it to the Guinness Book of World Records for the wrong reasons was accepted back into the folds of the Congress. This was nearly eight years after he had been expelled after the Central Bureau of Investigation found a sum of more than Rs 3.6 crore—or Rs 36 million—from his residences).

Another instance of the 'tail wagging the dog' syndrome in Indian politics was highlighted in Jharkhand, a state in eastern India that used to be part of Bihar before 2000. After the NDA government in the state headed by Arjun Munda of the BJP fell without seeking to test its majority on the floor of the 82-member state assembly on September 15, 2006, an independent legislator Madhu Koda became Chief Minister by cobbling together a tenuous majority with the support of UPA constituents like the Congress, the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM), the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and the All India Forward Bloc. Koda also received the support of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), the newly formed Jharkhand Vikas Morcha (JVM) led by former BJP Chief Minister Babulal Marandi and former Deputy Chief Minister Stephen Marandi, though CPI(ML) later parted ways with the coalition. Like Sukh Ram in Himachal Pradesh, Koda was able to arm-twist larger political parties because the number of legislators owing allegiance to the UPA and the NDA

were so evenly balanced. All governments in Jharkhand since the state was formed have barely survived with razor-thin majorities in the assembly, including the first two that were headed by BJP chief ministers Babulal Marandi and Arjun Munda.

A common fallacy that is related to the conviction that India's polity is essentially bipolar and contributes to it is the notion that the decline of the Congress and the rise of the BJP bear almost a one-to-one correspondence. Put differently, the rise of the BJP is seen as a process of the party occupying the space vacated by the Congress. Though this view is very widely held, the reality is far more complicated.

It is true that the period that witnessed the fastest growth of the BJP as an electoral force—from two seats in the 8th Lok Sabha elected in 1984 to 182 seats by the 12th Lok Sabha elected in 1998—coincided with the most rapidly declining phase of the Congress, from 404 seats in 1984 to 112 seats in the 13th Lok Sabha elected in 1999. That is perhaps why the two phenomena are seen as completely correlated with each other. However, what such a view misses is the fact that in areas where the Congress has been almost completely marginalised, it has been displaced not so much by the BJP as by smaller regional parties.

To take the most obvious case first, the marginalisation of the Congress in India's largest state, Uttar Pradesh (accounting for 80 out of the 543 seats in the Lok Sabha) has not led to the BJP becoming a party with unquestioned dominance in the state. On the contrary, the party is today reduced to third position in Uttar Pradesh, way behind the BSP and the Samajwadi Party. Even at its peak in the mid-1990s, the BJP in UP never managed to get close to 40 per cent of the popular vote, though it was at that stage the single biggest party in the state assembly.

The story in neighbouring Bihar has not been very different. Here again, the Congress has been reduced to a marginal presence over the last decade-and-a-half, but its decline has not led to the BJP becoming the dominant party. Lalu Prasad Yadav's Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) or its forerunner the Janata Dal (JD) were the main agents of the erosion of the Congress party's vote banks. The Janata Dal (United)—formed by breakaway groups of the erstwhile JD coming

together—has a strength in Bihar that is equal to if not more than the BJP in terms of its political influence.

Could Uttar Pradesh and Bihar represent an exception to the rule that the BJP grows to fill the vacuum created by a shrinking Congress? Not quite. In states like Orissa, Assam and Karnataka, for instance, the BJP has grown rapidly, more often than not by consolidating the anti-Congress political forces. It is another matter that other anti-Congress groups—like the JD(U) in Karnataka, the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) in Orissa and the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) in Assam have at some stage decided that rather than compete with the BJP for the opposition space, they could gain by aligning with the party.

Also, if we look back to the period before the decline of the Congress accelerated, namely, between the late 1960s and the mid-1980s, there were already signs of the party losing ground gradually but quite consistently to regional parties. The most obvious example would be Tamil Nadu, where the Congress today has little choice but to align with one or the other of the two main Dravidian parties in the state—the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK). But Tamil Nadu is not the only example. Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra, traditional strongholds of the Congress, witnessed similar trends even if the process did not lead to the complete marginalisation of the Congress. In Andhra Pradesh, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) rose from almost nowhere to become a powerful challenge to the Congress in the mid-1980s and has remained the main contender for power with the Congress. Similarly, in Maharashtra it was the rise of the Shiv Sena rather than the BJP, which first raised questions about just how firm the Congress' grip on power in the state was.

Therefore, our main assertions so far are:

- The process of fragmentation of the Indian polity is not over but continuing.
- The polity is not becoming bipolar with smaller parties, including regional parties and caste-based parties, having no choice but to become appendages of either the BJP or the Congress either before or after elections.
- The decline of the Congress has not automatically resulted in the rise of the BJP—in other words, the political tussle between

the two largest political parties in India has not been a 'zero sum game' in which the losses of one inevitably result in the other gaining by filling a so-called political vacuum.

- Coalition politics is maturing. Political parties are becoming increasingly adept at managing contradictions and are now even able to co-exist at the Union level with their major rivals in the states. The electorate too seems to better understand the compulsions of coalition politics that lead to alliances appearing contradictory or even illogical.

The new era of coalition politics does not necessarily signify a nightmarish scenario for India. As the polity of the world's largest democracy evolves and as institutions of governance mature, political instability would reflect the internal dynamics of a highly heterogeneous and deeply divided nation-state. Coalitions, in spite of their ideological contradictions, are perhaps better equipped to deal with the tensions of such a divided society than single party governments that have a tendency to centralise and homogenise.

It might help here to examine the factors that have led to the fragmentation of India's polity and why these same factors work towards further fragmentation. Several political scientists have analysed the phenomenon of 'identity politics'. Sudipto Kaviraj has some interesting insights to offer on this question (*Contemporary Crisis of the Nation-State?* edited by John Dunn, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995). His contention is that the benefits of the Nehruvian model of economic development remained confined to a section consisting of the 'bourgeoisie, high managerial elites, state bureaucracy and agrarian magnates' and this fostered resentment in the vast majority of the population. It is this resentment, he suggests, that has been tapped by various political groups leading to the fragmentation of the polity. Kaviraj also argues that the resentment against the elite extends to a rejection of all that the elite stood for, including the notion of the Indian identity over-riding sub-national identities.

He writes:

Since this elite speaks the language of national integration and unity, the latter [movements of the non-elite] speak the negative language of localism, regional autonomy, small-scale nationalism, in

dystopias of ethnicity—small xenophobic, homogeneous, political communities. This does violence to the political imagination of the Indian nation-state, which emphasised diversity as a great asset and enjoined principles of tolerance as the special gift of Indian civilisation.... The world of political possibilities in India seems to be simplifying into the frightening choice before most of the modern world's political communities: to try to craft imperfect democratic rules by which increasingly mixed groups of people can carry on together an unheroic everyday existence, or the illusion of a permanent and homogeneous, unmixed single nation, a single collective self without any trace of a defiling otherness.

Kaviraj's point is well taken. The fragmentation of India's polity is undoubtedly an outcome of the feeling among very large sections of the population that they had been left out of the development process. What is interesting, however, is that this resentment hasn't always manifested itself through parties and groups that claim to be speaking for the excluded sections of society. The TDP, for instance, appeals to the Telugu identity across Andhra Pradesh. Clearly, it is not the case that all Telugus have been left out of the development process. Similarly, nobody can seriously argue that the Shiv Sena's appeal to a Maharashtrian identity arises from the feeling that all of Maharashtra has been denied the benefits of economic growth. Obviously, it has been possible for parties like the TDP and the Shiv Sena to use the resentment of specific sections of the Telugu and Marathi speaking population and channelise it along lines of their choosing.

Yet, there is something that the TDP and the Shiv Sena have in common with caste-based parties like the SP in Uttar Pradesh or the RJD in Bihar. In each of these cases, the revolt of the underprivileged has been led by the most dominant of the intermediate castes—the Khammas in Andhra Pradesh, the Marathas in Maharashtra and the Yadavs in UP and Bihar. This is actually not very surprising. After all, even the ability to lead a revolt against the prevailing elite must presume some minimal access to the institutions of power and to resources of a sufficient magnitude. Such access and resources would be available only to the upper most layers of the relatively underprivileged. These were indeed among the few sections outside the

traditional elite that had not entirely been left out of the development process. As Kaviraj points out, ‘the only rural group which secured benefits out of the development process were the large farmers whose compliance was bought by heavy subsidies, absence of income tax and slow cooptation into governmental power.’

The Dalit Movement might at first seem an exception to the rule, since dalits (or those at the very bottom of the caste hierarchy) have little or no control over land anywhere in the country. However, what is noteworthy is that even in this instance, the leadership has come from among the well-off sections of the dalits.

In this context, the fragmentation of India’s polity can be seen as the result of various sections deciding that an informal coalition like the Congress had failed to serve their interests. But what explains the tendency for coalitions to persist? It could well be the case that these sections perceive themselves as having gained from a process of explicit coalitions in which groups ostensibly speak for them. It is pointless, in this context, to debate whether Yadavs as a whole have actually gained because of the SP or the RJD, whether dalits are better off since the BSP was formed or whether Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra have performed better after the formation of the TDP and the Shiv Sena. What matters is the popular perception among the relevant sections that their interests are being taken care of better than in the past.

The BSP’s success in UP, India’s most populous state, is perhaps the best illustration of the point. The party’s success in consolidating the dalit vote was such that by the time the assembly elections took place in April–May 2007, it was able to use that ‘core’ to build a coalition of social forces that included substantial sections of the brahmins, banias, muslims and even some ‘other backward classes’ (OBCs). This combination was not new. Its composition was a throwback to the early years of Congress rule in northern India. What was different, however, was that it was now the dalits who were at the helm of the coalition rather than the brahmins.

Political scientist Arend Lijphart in his article, ‘The Puzzle of Indian Democracy: A Consociational Interpretation’ (*American Political Science Review*, June 1996), had contended that India largely conforms to what he described as ‘consociationalism’ in a deeply divided society.



He set out four parameters denoting consociationalism. These were: (a) a grand coalition government that includes representatives of all major linguistic and religious groups; (b) cultural autonomy for these groups; (c) proportionality in political representation and civil service appointments; and (d) a minority veto with regard to vital minority rights and autonomy. When Lijphart wrote this, it was true that the four characteristics were by and large present in the government of the day and had been present in all past Union governments in India as well.

However, after 1998, when the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government came to power, the government in New Delhi no longer met some of the parameters of consociationalism. Notably, the almost total exclusion of the Muslim community from the government was rather evident, despite the presence of a single Muslim Union Minister in the two NDA governments that came to power in 1998 and 1999. It is noteworthy that the 24 political parties comprising the NDA, the largest being the BJP, were unable to find more than one Muslim to hold a ministerial position in a country where roughly one out of seven individuals is a Muslim.

India is by no means unique among democratic nations in having coalition governments. In France, which has a system of proportional representation, and in Germany, which has a combination of proportional representation and constituency or seat-based direct elections, coalition governments have been more of a rule than an exception after the conclusion of the Second World War in 1945. In both these countries, coalition governments have not usually brought about political instability.

For instance, there is in Germany a legal provision that an incumbent government cannot be voted out of power in between general elections without simultaneously voting in an alternative government. In recent years, for obvious reasons, many have suggested that India could adopt a similar system to avoid frequent elections that are expensive to conduct. Those opposed to this suggestion have argued that even if political instability results in frequent elections having to be conducted, this is a 'small price' to pay to ensure the existence of a vibrant and dynamic democratic polity. These arguments and counter-arguments came to the fore in discussions on Indian politics for the

simple reason that from May 1996 to October 1999, the country for the first time witnessed three general elections in quick succession.

If the experience of countries like Germany and France shows that coalitions and instability do not necessarily go together, Japan and Italy are proof of the fact that even unstable coalition governments do not automatically result in declining economic progress. Japan has had a series of coalition governments since 1976, when the Liberal Democratic Party lost its monopoly on power for the first time after the Second World War. That certainly did not prevent Japan from marching swiftly ahead of most of the world to become arguably the strongest economy in the world after the US, till the slowdown of the 1990s robbed it of some of the sheen. The Italian experience is even more remarkable. In the 50 years after the World War ended, Italy had an equal number of governments. Thus, governments in Italy lasted a year on an average. Yet, Italy today is among the five most industrialised countries in the world. This, if nothing else, should make us wary about drawing any facile conclusions about the effects of political instability on the economy.

The last three years have thrown up enough experience to help us search for answers to the questions: whether coalitions in India fare better than single party governments, and if so, will they lead to better governance. The relationship between the UPA and the left has been particularly instructive, especially for the manner in which it has impacted economic policies. Few would have predicted that a thoroughly demoralised BJP would virtually abdicate its role as the main opposition party to the left. This was most dramatically illustrated in the showdown between the Congress and the left on the nuclear agreement between India and the United States. While the BJP, like the left, was opposing the deal, there was no doubt that in popular perception it was essentially a stand-off between the UPA and its allies in the left on whom the survival of the government depended.

Till the middle of August 2007 when Prime Minister Manmohan Singh gave his speech on the 60th anniversary of India's Independence, there was hardly any indication of an impending political crisis. A week later, the speculation was entirely on when the next general elections would be held—that the government would not complete its five-year term was taken as a foregone conclusion.

These developments, as well as the power struggle within the BJP, the contradictions within the Congress and the left on a host of other issues, the bizarre manner in which Pratibha Patil emerged out of near oblivion to become India's first woman President, the unexpected victory of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Uttar Pradesh, all provide enough material for us to revisit the central thesis of our earlier book.

## **Introduction: India in a Time of Coalitions**

Chapter 1 briefly outlines why the Indian polity fragmented. It seeks to examine the political and social processes that led to the decline of the Congress and the rise of the BJP and regional parties, including caste-based parties. The new phase of coalition politics in the country is contextualised in this chapter and arguments are presented to support the contention that coalitions have had a positive influence on the working of the country's democratic polity. This introductory chapter explains why coalitions are not an aberration or a temporary phenomenon.

## **UPA Government: Peaceless Coexistence**

Chapter 2 looks at how the Manmohan Singh government has sought to manage contradictions within the centre-left UPA coalition and coexisted with the left on whose 'outside' support the government is dependent for its very survival in power. An interesting aspect of the working of the UPA coalition is that for the first time in India, parties which perceive each other as principal political adversaries in provinces or states (like Kerala, Tripura and West Bengal) came together at the Union or federal level. This coexistence—to keep out their common enemy, the BJP—has hardly been a smooth affair. Ideological contradictions between the Congress and the Communists, for instance, led to major tensions in the formulation and implementation of economic and foreign policies. These tensions are likely to exacerbate as the 15th general elections approach (scheduled for April 2009 but expected much earlier).

## **Indian National Congress: Alive but Not Quite Kicking**

Chapter 3 examines how the Congress has managed to lead a government in New Delhi without any major improvement in its electoral performance because it appears to be coming to terms with the reality of coalition politics. The party seems to have slowly accepted that no single party can dominate India's polity in the immediate future. The chapter documents the dramatic decline of the Congress and its marginalisation in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. It looks at how the large-scale desertion of the minorities (Muslims and Sikhs) and other sections like the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in many parts of the country robbed the party of the 'umbrella' character it once had on account of its leadership of the independence movement. This chapter goes on to examine the Congress party's attempts to woo back these sections under the leadership of Sonia Gandhi and whether such attempts are succeeding or are likely to do so.

How far can the Congress revive its political fortunes? Can a party that has just a little more than one-fourth of the seats in the Lok Sabha continue to boast that it remains the only truly national party? Can the Congress afford to ignore the fact that it has over the years lost important regional leaders? Will the dearth of leaders with a mass base within the Congress further centralise power in the hands of the 'high command', which has become a euphemism for one person—Party President Sonia Gandhi? What could this mean for the prospects of a revival of the Congress?

## **Bharatiya Janata Party: Coping with a Power Cut**

Chapter 4 looks at the rise of the BJP from the time when it was virtually wiped out of Parliament in 1984 and its precipitous decline since the 2004 Lok Sabha elections. The party not only provided India its first truly non-Congress Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, but also the first non-Congress Prime Minister to have remained in

office for more than five years. The chapter documents the manner in which the BJP periodically toned up or subdued its Hindutva rhetoric to come to power and retain it. It also looks at how the BJP found it difficult to reconcile itself to the fact that it had lost power. The party found itself in the throes of internal power struggles and in the process abdicated its role as the main opposition party.

The chapter attempts to answer the question: Which of the two faces of the BJP that have been seen in recent years—the hardline Hindutva face or the moderate, accommodative face—is likely to emerge as the party’s real face over time?

The chapter also looks at the ‘Congressisation’ of the BJP, at how a party that once prided itself on its discipline is today as faction-ridden and corrupt as any other and has lost whatever claims it had to being ‘a party with a difference’. Also examined is the rise and fall of the BJP in Uttar Pradesh, a state that is of crucial significance for the party in its search for power on its own at the centre. Of particular interest is the social combination that the BJP had seemingly forged successfully in the state and the reasons for this combination now apparently coming apart.

## **Hindi Heartland: Asserting Caste Identities**

Chapter 5 deals with the fragmentation of the polity along caste lines in the states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The social churning that most of southern India witnessed over a long period starting about half a century ago is now in evidence in the north in a more violent form. The backward sections of the population, which have for some time now exercised economic clout in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, are clear that this influence has to be translated into political power as well. This attempt has succeeded to a great extent in the two states. However, with the dalits also starting to assert themselves more vigorously and with fissures developing within the ranks of the other backward sections, the caste arithmetic in the country is not easy to decipher or interpret—even if class and caste tend to overlap in many parts of the country.

## **Regional Parties: Increasingly Influential**

Chapter 6 examines the rise of regional parties and looks into the question of how well established these parties are and how long their alliances are likely to last. Such political parties would include the Telugu Desam Party in Andhra Pradesh, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam in Tamil Nadu, the Shiromani Akali Dal in Punjab, the National Conference in Jammu & Kashmir, the Shiv Sena and the Nationalist Congress Party in Maharashtra, the Biju Janata Dal in Orissa and the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal. Regional parties have often been portrayed—particularly by supporters of the Congress and the BJP—as parties with narrow, partisan interests that are incapable of transcending the confines of their state or region. The interests of the country as a whole, it has been argued, cannot be safe in their hands. This chapter shows why this is a coloured view of regional parties. It illustrates situations in which the regional parties have shown that they are capable of looking at issues from a wider perspective.

## **Left Parties: Barking and Biting**

Chapter 7 describes the changing tactics of the left in parliamentary politics and the differences that have cropped up between them. While the Communist Party of India (CPI) became a part of the Union government for the first time in May 1996, the largest among the left parties, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) remained wary of becoming part of an ideologically disparate United Front coalition. It had shunned the opportunity of even leading the Union government when the party's central committee voted against the party joining the United Front government thereby depriving the then West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu of a chance of becoming the Prime Minister. After the 2004 elections, for the first time the CPI(M) supported a Congress-led government in New Delhi. The chapter looks at how the left has been a key factor in shaping anti-BJP political formations and changing its once-adversarial relationship with the Congress. The culmination of this process led to 61 MPs belonging to four

left parties and their supporters extending crucial ‘outside’ support to the Congress-led UPA coalition. Since the UPA is in a minority in the Lok Sabha, the Manmohan Singh government has no choice but to solicit the support of the left to remain in power. For the left, this unusual situation has meant that it has had to, on the one hand, influence government policies and, on the other, compete with the BJP and the NDA for the opposition political space. The chapter also examines the feasibility of a non-Congress, non-BJP ‘third front’ which the left believes can be built one day.

### **Friends in Need: Pages from the Past**

Chapter 8 deals with the question of whether coalitions can provide stable Union governments. It analyses coalitions in the past, in New Delhi and in various states, to see whether there are any credible guarantees for the longevity of coalitions. In New Delhi, the first non-Congress coalition government came to power in March 1977. Since then, there have been 10 coalition governments at the centre. Why did the first eight of these not survive a full term? Why was it relatively easier to forge stable coalitions in states than at the level of the Union government until recently?

In explaining the instability of coalitions in New Delhi, various reasons have been cited. It has been argued that coalitions have been unstable because they were forged after elections rather than before them. Another popular argument is that coalitions can last only if there is one dominant party leading a pack of relatively insignificant partners. Do these theories stand the test of facts? Not quite, as this chapter reveals.

### **Friends in Deed: Governance and Stability**

To what extent have political coalitions in India led to better governance? This is not an easy question to answer. Good governance has to be first defined and would include various considerations such as a lower incidence of corruption, greater transparency and accountability of bureaucrats and politicians, greater federalism, better

distribution of the benefits of economic growth among the weaker sections and empowerment of those social sections which are less privileged in the country's caste-based society.

Chapter 9 focuses on some of these issues. Have coalition governments reduced the incidence of corruption in India? Some would argue that the fragmentation of the polity and the existence of coalition governments have brought about a slow and gradual process of cleansing in the economy and society. Others would contend that the incidence of scams and scandals would continue to rise as politicians, bureaucrats and those in business scramble to make a fast buck in a system in which the honest are penalised, and a few have vast discretionary powers. The other issue is whether coalition governments have brought about a greater degree of federalism (or decentralisation) in India's polity. The answer to this question, we show, is an unequivocal 'yes'.

## **Economic Policies: Pulls and Pressures**

Chapter 10 is on the economy. Is it true that coalition governments have slowed down or changed the course of economic policy making? We argue that it is not. At the same time economic decisions have certainly reflected the pulls and pressures of coalition politics. This chapter also shows how the notion that there is a consensus on the economic reforms programme within and across political parties is quite misleading. Very often the dissensions within parties—whether it be the BJP or the Congress—are as sharp as those between them. The chapter deals with whether the shifts in the polity and those in the economy are working in tandem or pulling in different directions. It examines how the left has helped shape the economic policies of the UPA government and indirectly bolstered the influence of the left-leaning faction within the Congress.

## **Looking Ahead**

The concluding chapter, Chapter 11, attempts to look ahead. The future of Indian politics has never been easy to predict at the best of times, more so now than ever before. The behaviour of more than



700 million voters—over half of whom actually cast their votes—has become increasingly difficult to anticipate. If the view that ideologies are getting more and more blurred is accepted, the political matrix would get exceedingly complex and unpredictable. How well can a country with 23 officially-recognised languages, whose people practice over half-a-dozen major religions (though over 80 per cent of the Indian population is Hindu) and divide themselves along every conceivable line—be it language, religion, class, caste, region or race—not merely survive but also prosper as a nation-state? Read on.

# Acknowledgements

Anybody who has followed Indian politics over these last few years even cursorily would be aware of how rapidly the polity has been changing—and continues to change—and would, therefore, we hope be able to understand the need to debate about this ever changing polity.

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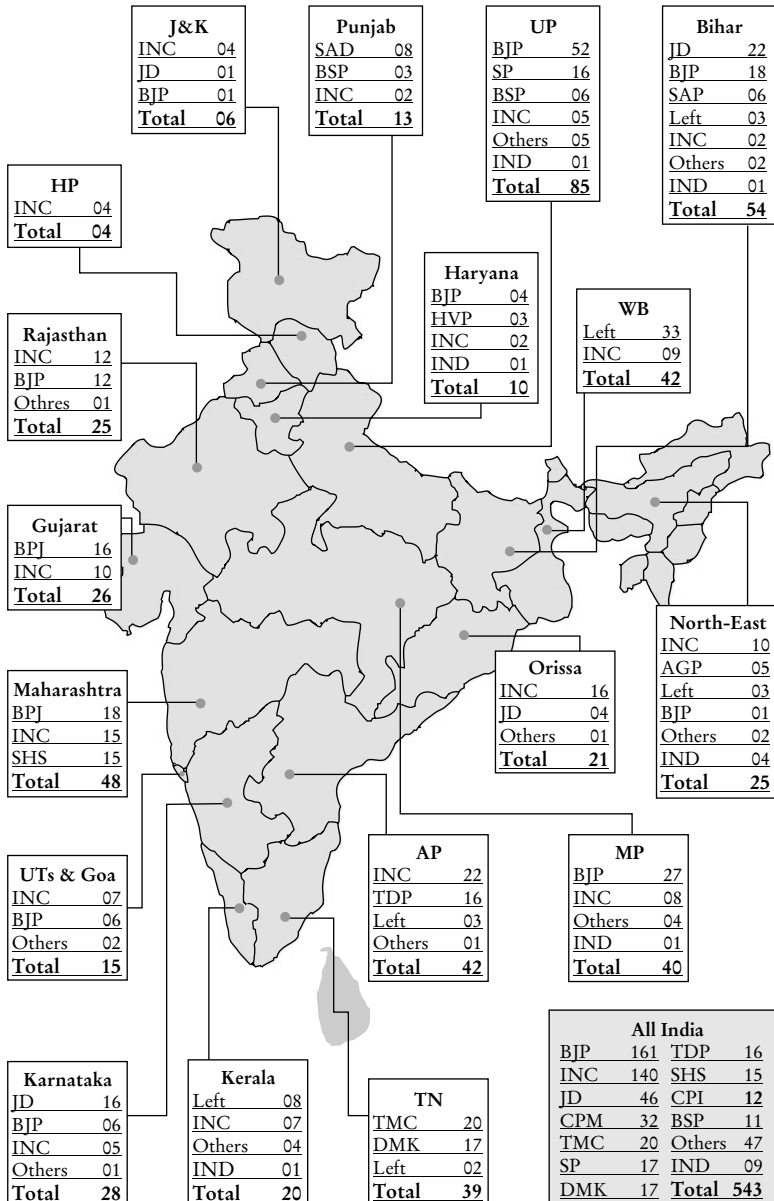
The late Pranab Guha Thakurta, who unfortunately did not live to read his son's book, encouraged us to persevere, as did Krishna Guha Thakurta, K. Raghuraman and T.S. Kamalam. As parents, their anxiety to see the task completed and their constant queries on when the book would be published helped us to keep going. Thanks are

due to Santwana Nigam and Rajendra Nath, who often had to adjust their schedules to take care of their grandchildren to enable us to work on the book.

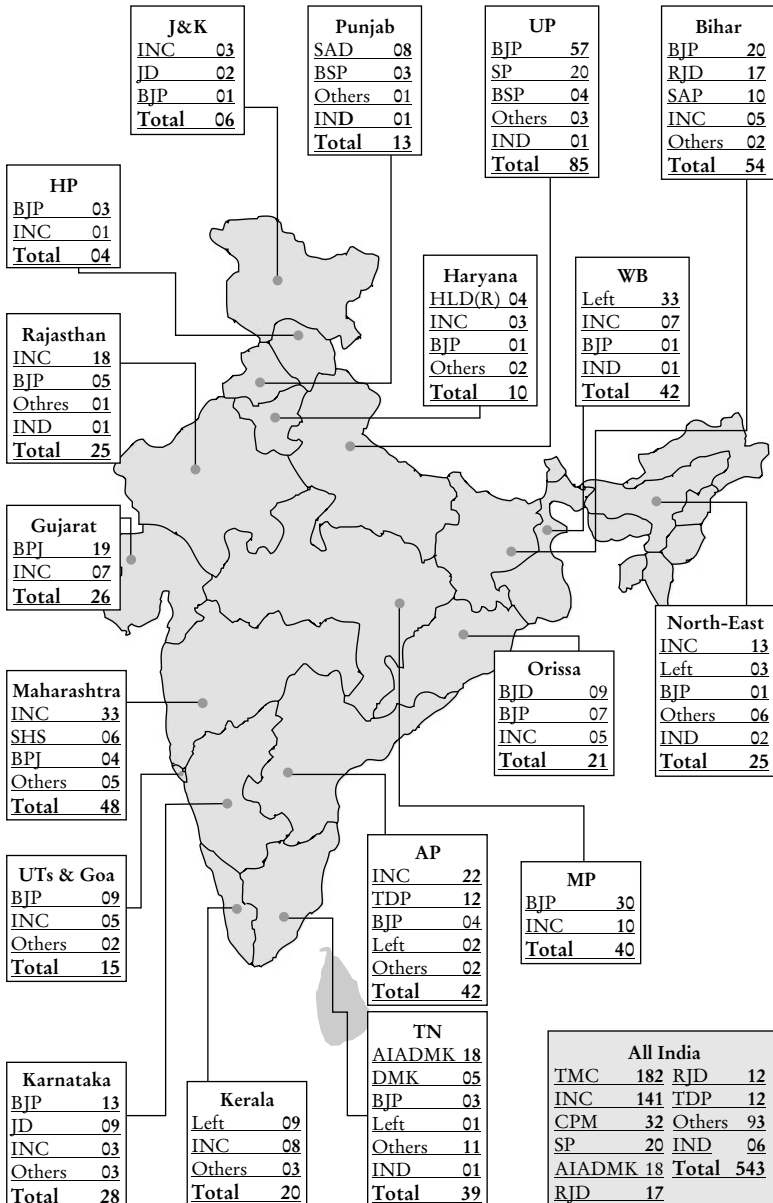
Our thanks are also due to many friends, colleagues and well-wishers but for whose encouragement we might have despaired of ever finishing the book.

**Paranjoy Guha Thakurta  
Shankar Raghuraman**

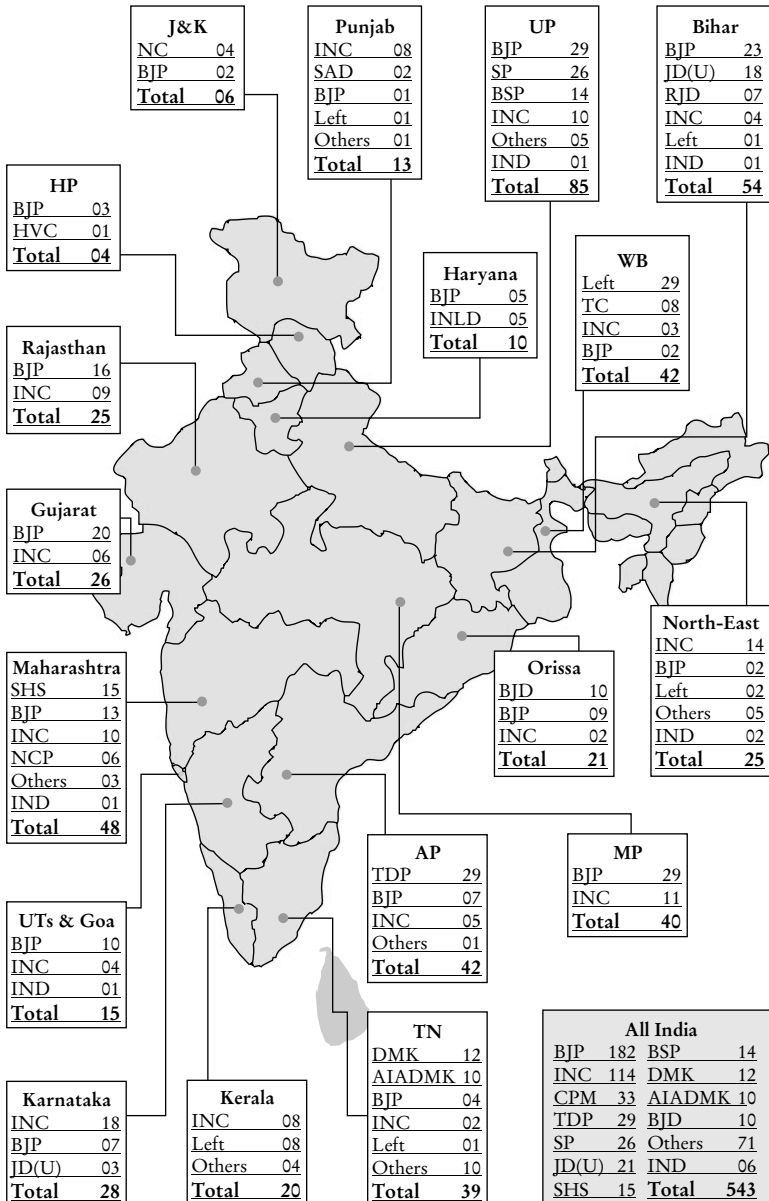
# 1996 LOK SABHA ELECTIONS



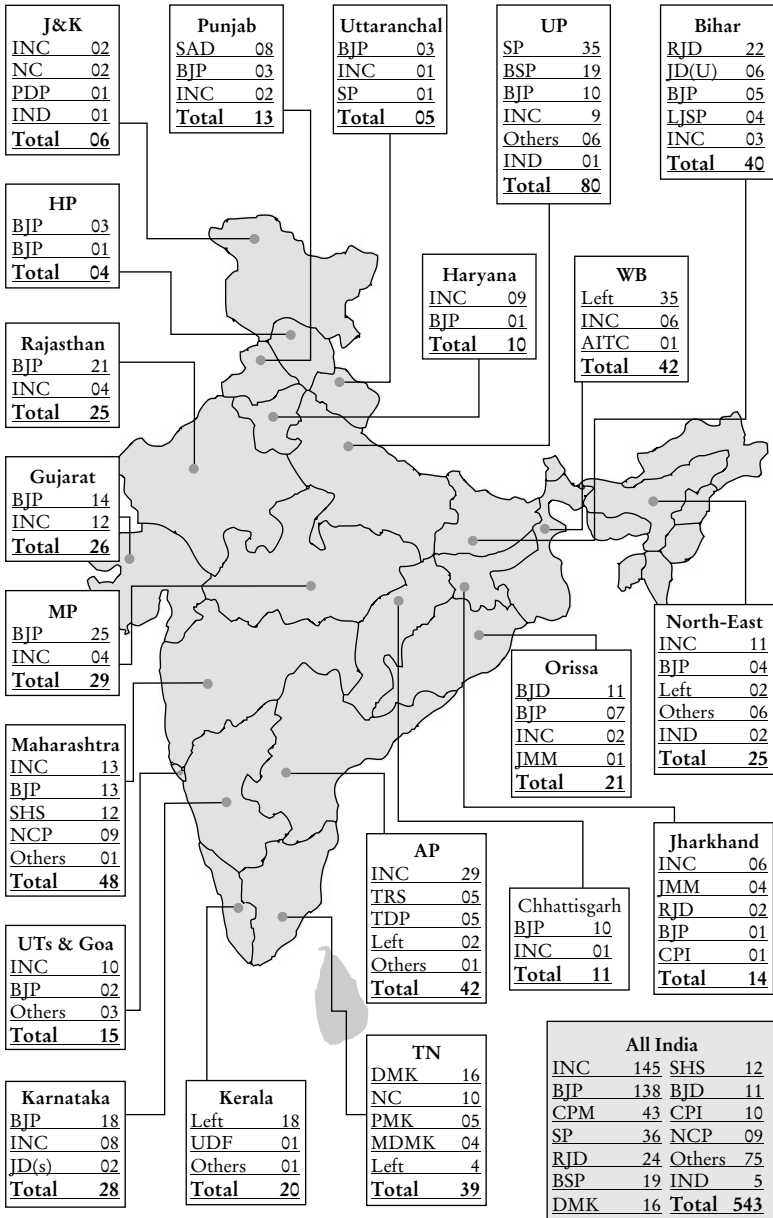
# 1998 LOK SABHA ELECTIONS



# 1999 LOK SABHA ELECTIONS



## 2004 LOK SABHA ELECTIONS



# Chapter 1

## Introduction: India in a Time of Coalitions

In March 2003, Atal Behari Vajpayee became the first person who had never belonged to the Congress party to remain Prime Minister of India for five successive years. In fact, the Vajpayee government that came to power in October 1999 would almost certainly have lasted its full five-year term till October 2004, except for the fact that it voluntarily sought early elections, not because it could not continue in power. As we complete writing this book, the first Congress-led coalition at the level of the Union government had completed three and a half years in office but looked unlikely to complete its full term. The differences between the UPA and the left were evident from the very inception of the government and at times threatened to reach breaking point. But few could have imagined that the standoff between the Congress and left would be over a foreign policy issue, specifically, the nuclear agreement between the governments of India and the United States of America. In the middle of August 2007, when Manmohan Singh addressed the country on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of Independence outlining a slew of initiatives on education, health-care and agriculture, the differences between the left and the Congress had not reached a flashpoint. An interview by the Prime Minister virtually daring the left to withdraw support to his government precipitated a political crisis that took everyone unawares. The crisis seemed certain to result in the fall of the UPA government before it completed its full five-year term.

Does this mean that India has returned to an era of unstable coalition governments in New Delhi and that Vajpayee's government between October 1999 and May 2004 was an aberration of sorts? At one stage it had appeared that the citizens of India would have to exercise their franchise every few years, that P.V. Narasimha Rao was destined to be the last Prime Minister to have completed his



full term in office. The reasons for such a prognosis were obvious. Five successive general elections, starting with the one held in 1989, had failed to yield a single party majority in the Lok Sabha. The last three of these elections were held within a span of less than three-and-a-half years, unprecedented in Indian history. The Narasimha Rao government was the only one among the seven governments in New Delhi that preceded Vajpayee's government of 1999 to have lasted the course. Even Rao's government was in a minority when it came to power in June 1991 and ultimately secured a majority only through defections.

The initial years of the Vajpayee government strengthened the apprehension that it too would prove to be an unstable coalition although the BJP-led NDA had the support of over 300 of the 543 members in the 13th Lok Sabha. Halfway through the government's five-year term, the ruling NDA was looking extremely shaky and threatening to collapse under the weight of its internal contradictions. It seemed that the BJP would find it difficult to manage the conflict between what its own core support base—including the Sangh Parivar—wanted and what was acceptable to its nearly two dozen allies. A string of electoral defeats in various states, the massacre of thousands of Muslims in the Gujarat riots that started in March 2002 and the heightening of tensions over the Ayodhya dispute (see chapter on BJP for details), all appeared to put enormous strain on the stability of the NDA and its government.

However, when push came to shove, it became apparent that remaining in power was more important to the BJP's allies than maintaining ideological purity on the issue of secularism or politically correct postures. Whatever little doubts may have remained about the longevity of the NDA government were set at rest when two former foes—the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)—became friends. Interestingly, it was in April 1999 that the AIADMK headed by Jayalalitha withdrew support to the NDA government, which lost a vote of confidence in Parliament by a single vote in the 543-member Lok Sabha (more on that later). The government would have survived had the two BSP MPs voted in its favour and not abstained.

Irony of ironies. By May 2002, the BJP had decided to support BSP's Mayawati to run a coalition government in Uttar Pradesh, India's largest state (though the arrangement broke up after 15 months). The victory of the BJP in the December 2003 elections to the assemblies of three states in northern and central India—Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh—further strengthened the party and the NDA while weakening the Congress. The voters' verdict in the three states was evidently beyond the best expectations of the BJP and its partners in the NDA. Although the Congress was able to return to power in the national capital territory of Delhi, the party was terribly demoralised by its electoral losses.

The results of the December 2003 assembly elections clearly had an impact on the attitude of Congress leaders towards coalitions. Many sections in the party started questioning the strategy of the Congress fighting elections on its own. While the Congress seemed more willing than before to strike alliances with other 'secular' parties, the big question of whether Sonia Gandhi would remain a contender for the post of Prime Minister remained unresolved. Significantly, on December 26, 2003, she said the Congress would not 'impose' its leadership on the secular alliance that would fight the NDA in the next Lok Sabha elections. She added that the Prime Minister would be 'chosen by the people' implying that the choice of who would be the candidate for the post would be decided only after the outcome of the elections was known. Sonia Gandhi's supporters claimed she was the glue that was keeping the Congress together. Her opponents, on the other hand, argued that it was not merely her foreign origin but her political inexperience as well that was checking a revival of the Congress party under her leadership. The outcome of the 14th general elections helped clinch the argument.

The 2004 Lok Sabha elections did not result in a dramatic increase in the number of seats won by the Congress. With 145 MPs, it still had just a little over one-fourth the strength of the House. These elections were nevertheless an important milestone in the evolution of the Congress party and of coalition politics in India. For the first time, the Congress had embraced the mantra of pre-election alliances across the length and breadth of the country. The BJP, which had

won the 1999 Lok Sabha elections with a similar strategy, had been beaten at its own game.

The Congress had tied up with regional parties in three of the four southern states as well as in Bihar, Maharashtra and Jammu & Kashmir. Interestingly, the left parties were also components of most of these alliances. This was despite the fact that in Kerala, West Bengal and Tripura, the Congress and the left were contesting the same elections as principal adversaries. The alliances in Tamil Nadu and Bihar were particularly significant. In Tamil Nadu, the Congress and left were part of an alliance in which every other constituent had been a part of the NDA government till just a little before the polls. Similarly, in Bihar, Ram Vilas Paswan, who had been a minister in the Vajpayee cabinet, was now part of the alliance led by Lalu Prasad's Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) along with the Congress. These two alliances were to prove crucial in the outcome of the Lok Sabha elections, with the UPA making a clean sweep of Tamil Nadu and trouncing the NDA in Bihar.

In short, the 2004 elections proved that winning elections in India hinged more on which side had sewn up the better coalition rather than on the popularity of the leaders of the national political parties. Even after the outcome of the elections was known, opinion polls indicated that Vajpayee in his individual capacity remained more popular than Sonia Gandhi. The Congress had finished on the winning side not because it had more charismatic leaders or a better organisation, but because it had stitched up a stronger alliance than the BJP.

The elections also made it obvious that the hype generated by the NDA's 'India Shining' campaign had not had the desired impact on large sections of the electorate. On the contrary, the campaign may have actually been counter-productive for the incumbents.

A series of state assembly elections after the UPA came to power have demonstrated that the Congress would be wrong to assume that 2004 was a turning point in its electoral fortunes and that it was only a matter of time before the party regained its pre-eminent position in the Indian polity. Between February 2005 and May 2007, the Congress and its allies in the UPA lost one election after the other in states like Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Kerala, Punjab, Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh. Tamil Nadu, in which the coalition led by the DMK won, and Assam were two notable exceptions.

The Uttar Pradesh (UP) elections, the last in this series, also disproved the notion that the pendulum was swinging back in favour of the BJP and the NDA. Despite a strong anti-incumbency wave against the Samajwadi Party-led government in the state, the BJP suffered a massive setback, winning just 50 seats in the 403-member assembly, against the 88 it had won in 2002.

The BSP's victory—the first time since 1991 that a single party had obtained a majority in the UP assembly—showed once again how India's two largest parties, the Congress and the BJP, were getting reduced to the margin in the country's most populous state. Ironically, the results of the UP elections on May 11 came just the day after the then President of India A.P.J. Abdul Kalam had said, 'Many challenges need to be responded to: the emergence of multi-party coalitions as a regular form of government, that needs to rapidly evolve as a stable two-party system'. Kalam was addressing Parliament on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of India's First War of Independence.

Also ironically, the clearest indication that India's polity is far from moving towards a bipolar situation came in the elections to decide who would be India's President when Kalam's term ended in July. Given the numbers in the electoral college that elects the President—members of both houses of Parliament and the state assemblies—it was clear that if the UPA and the left could reach a consensus on a candidate, the elections would be little more than a formality. What followed, however, was more than a little farcical.

The left laid down certain ground rules by declaring that while it was up to the Congress to select a candidate, it should put up a political person with secular credentials and the ability to comprehend the nuances of constitutional provisions. The names of several prominent Congressmen—Home Minister Shivraj Patil, External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee, former Union Minister Karan Singh, Power Minister Sushil Kumar Shinde and Human Resources Development Minister Arjun Singh—started doing the rounds. If media reports are to be believed, the left vetoed Patil and Karan Singh's candidatures, because it was not entirely convinced about their commitment to secular values. Shinde and Arjun Singh apparently were ultimately not put up by the Congress for the left's consideration. Mukherjee was ruled out because he was considered indispensable to the government—he headed dozens of 'groups of ministers' responsible for key policy decisions.

The candidate eventually chosen by the Congress and endorsed by the left was, to put it mildly, a dark horse—Pratibha Patil, politician from Maharashtra who was then Governor of Rajasthan. While it was evident that Patil was selected because India had never had a woman as President, she was largely an unknown entity, despite having served as a minister in various governments in Maharashtra.

The BJP-led NDA felt its candidate, Vice-President Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, might just be able to scrape through if all non-UPA, non-left parties voted in his favour and some UPA legislators cross-voted. To enable this to happen, Shekhawat was projected as an ‘independent’ candidate supported by the NDA. Given the fact that Shekhawat has been a BJP leader for over five decades and the announcement about him contesting was made by the BJP, this was in keeping with the farcical nature of the entire exercise.

The BJP’s gameplan came unstuck when a new coalition was formed weeks before the Presidential election by several regional parties. Dubbed the United National Progressive Alliance (UNPA), the coalition included the Samajwadi Party (SP) led by Mulayam Singh Yadav, the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) led by J Jayalalithaa, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) led by N Chandrababu Naidu, the Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) led by Om Prakash Chautala, the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) led by Brindaban Goswami, the Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK) led by Vaiko, the Vikas Manch of Babulal Marandi and the Kerala Congress (Mani) led by P C Thomas. The UNPA suggested that Kalam be given a second term.

The UNPA’s stand was a little embarrassing for the BJP, which found itself having to reject the candidature of a person it had supported five years earlier. The NDA, however, decided to use it to its advantage by announcing that Shekhawat would withdraw his candidature provided there was an all-party consensus on re-electing Kalam. The party obviously knew this was unlikely to happen, but it saw two advantages in taking such a stance. First, Kalam was clearly a popular and non-controversial President among much of the population. Second, they hoped that if Kalam’s candidature fell through, the UNPA could be persuaded to go along with the NDA in supporting Shekhawat.

As part of its gameplan, the BJP launched an aggressive campaign about Patil being ill-suited to hold the country's highest constitutional post. Patil herself did not help matters by making indiscreet and controversial statements. One statement related to women having to wearing a veil to guard themselves against Mughal invaders, a fact historians disputed. Patil was also reported as saying that she had talked with 'spirits' of those no longer alive. With the help of information that had been disseminated by local journalists from Jalgaon in Maharashtra, Patil's home town, the BJP mounted a well-orchestrated campaign against her. Her husband was allegedly involved in a conspiracy to murder a political opponent and this opponent's widow was produced before the media. It was further alleged that Patil had helped set up a cooperative bank that had run up large losses because her family members, among others, had defaulted on repaying loans that had been disbursed to them. (Many such cooperative banks in the state had run up similar losses.) It was also claimed that Patil had abused her position as a minister in the state government and as an influential politician to help her relatives and cronies set up factories and educational institutions. The campaign against Patil strained the BJP's relations with its oldest and staunchest ally, the Shiv Sena—the Sena supported Patil because she is from Maharashtra. The BJP campaign against Patil—articulated largely by former Union Minister Arun Shourie, former adviser to Prime Minister Vajpayee, Sudheendra Kulkarni, and the party's sympathizers in the media (such as Chandan Mitra, MP and editor of *The Pioneer* newspaper)—was helped by the fact that Patil steadfastly refused to respond to the allegations that were leveled against her. The Congress in turn, as well as publications such as *Outlook* magazine, turned the spotlight on Shekhawat and highlighted old allegations against him to the effect that his actions were not above board when he was a policeman in Rajasthan.

Eventually, Patil was elected with a substantial majority indicating that whatever cross-voting that took place had actually been in her favour. Soon after the Presidential elections got over, it became time for elections to the post of Vice President who also serves as the Chairperson of the Rajya Sabha or the upper house of Parliament. This time round, the candidate of the Congress and the left was agreed upon expeditiously without any bargaining. It appeared that the left wanted

Abdul Hamid Ansari, a career diplomat who had served as India's ambassador to various West Asian countries such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, besides Afghanistan. He is reportedly not exactly pro-American in his political inclinations and is close to left leaders like Prakash Karat, general secretary of the CPI(M). That the candidates for Vice President put up by the NDA, Najma Heptullah, former Deputy Chairperson of the Rajya Sabha, and by the UNPA, Rasheed Masood, a former Union minister, never really stood much of a chance against Ansari became evident when the results of the election were announced. As with the Presidential elections, during the Vice Presidential elections as well, the UNPA refused to go along with either the NDA or the UPA.

In August 2007, differences over the India-US nuclear agreement between the Congress-led UPA and the left precipitated a political crisis. Manmohan Singh, supported by Sonia Gandhi, had made the successful conclusion of the agreement an important prestige issue for the government—they argued that the agreement would end the 'nuclear apartheid' imposed on India by the US after the Indira Gandhi government conducted nuclear tests in 1974, leading to an easy flow of fuel (uranium) and dual-use technologies (or technologies that had both civilian and military applications) from all 45 member countries of the Nuclear Suppliers' Group (NSG). The Prime Minister also argued that the agreement would help India attain 'energy security' although this line of argument appeared disingenuous to many since nuclear power comprised 2–3 per cent of the total energy consumed in the country and the most optimistic projections suggest that this share could go up to about seven per cent by 2020. Whereas the deal was criticized by many scientists who were part of India's nuclear establishment in the past on the ground that it could compromise the country's sovereignty, what proved to be a major point of contention—especially for the left—was the enactment of the Henry Hyde Act in the US in December 2006. One of the 'enabling' or 'recommendatory' provisions of the American law stated that India would have to follow US foreign policy—including that country's opposition to Iran's nuclear programme. For the left, the nuclear agreement was part of a larger strategic engagement with the 'imperialist' US administration led by President George W Bush.

While the left had been opposing the deal and demanding that it should not be 'operationalised', what apparently triggered off the

crisis was an interview given by the Prime Minister to Manini Chatterjee of the Kolkata-based newspaper, *The Telegraph* (August 11, 2007). In that interview, Manmohan said that he had told the left the deal could not be renegotiated and went on to add, ‘I told them to do whatever they want to do, if they want to withdraw support, so be it....’. It was widely seen as a case of the Prime Minister cocking a snook at the left and ‘calling its bluff’.

Exactly a week later, on August 18, the Polit Bureau of the CPI(M) passed a resolution asking the government to halt the deal, failing which there would be ‘serious consequences for the government and the country’. In a press conference later that day CPI(M) General Secretary Prakash Karat made matters even more clear—no further steps should be taken on the deal till the issue had been ‘fully debated’ and all the implications of the deal and the Hyde Act examined. He stopped short of actually announcing that his party would withdraw support to the UPA government, but the message was unambiguous—the government would have to choose between the deal and its own survival. On August 20, the left parties had a joint meeting to reiterate the same position.

They also made it clear that though the BJP had also opposed the deal, they would have no association with a party they saw as communal as well as one that was not committed to an anti-imperialist foreign policy. Several components of the UNPA, particularly the SP, were also strongly critical of the nuclear deal.

The Congress could draw some consolation from the fact that all its allies in the UPA stood by the government. The UPA government set up an informal committee with leaders of the left to examine the implications of the Hyde Act, a move that was perceived as an attempt to ‘buy time’. The UPA government set upon ‘informal’ Committee with leaders of the left to examine the implications of the Hyde Act, a move that was perceived as an attempt to ‘buy time’. Despite this, at the time of writing, in mid-September 2007, it seemed almost certain that the Manmohan Singh government would not complete its full term of five years, scheduled to end in May 2009.

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In 1999, after the second Vajpayee-led government, which came to power in March 1998 and fell on April 17, 1999, the NDA (by then



a pre-election alliance, unlike in 1998) secured a majority (299 seats) on its own. After the election results were announced, other MPs extended support to the government, taking the NDA's strength in the 543-member Lok Sabha to over 305. This meant that no single ally or constituent of the NDA had the numbers to reduce the government to a minority. Even withdrawal of support by the largest supporter or partner of the BJP-led alliance, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), with 29 MPs, would have left the government with the support of around 275 members, a little more than the majority mark of 272.

Over the next two years, the NDA acquired new partners while some of its constituents—like the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal and the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK) in Tamil Nadu—deserted the alliance for a while, only to return to its fold after faring poorly in state elections. Despite the pulls and pressures of coalition politics, the constituents of the NDA by and large remained faithful to Vajpayee's government. If anything, the government faced stronger opposition to its policies from within the BJP and its ideological parent, the avowedly pro-Hindu RSS and its Parivar, than from the other partners in the alliance.

The NDA government's stability may have seemed inexplicable given the sheer number of coalition partners that had to be kept together, the number varying between 18 and 24 parties, and the fact that there was little ideological affinity among its constituents. The history of Indian politics also suggested that the longevity of alliances was uncertain, even when these were formed before elections. Most of the existing allies of the BJP were its political opponents almost till the day before they joined the NDA and had labelled the party Hindu chauvinist, if not downright 'communal' or 'fascist'. One of the former Ministers in Vajpayee's government formed in October 1999, Ram Vilas Paswan, had voted against the motion of confidence in April 1999 before he joined the government (though he left the NDA three years later). Despite ideological contradictions, however, the lust for power and opposition to the Congress—born of political compulsions in different states—proved strong cementing forces binding the NDA.

The performance of constituents of the NDA in elections to state assemblies in May 2001 was uniformly poor, while the Congress, the leading Opposition party, put up a reasonably good show. As a result, the NDA and the Congress were ruling more or less the same number

of states after these elections. One of the reasons cited for this poor performance of the BJP and its allies was a certain disillusionment among the electorate. It appeared that there was little to differentiate between the BJP and the Congress. The BJP had, at one stage, claimed that it was a ‘party with a difference’, that its supporters were less corrupt than politicians belonging to the Congress, that its cadres were more disciplined and less prone to factionalism, and that it believed in inner-party democracy unlike its political opponents. Within barely three years of being in power, many of these myths about the BJP had been shattered.

There were no discernible signs of a let-up in the incidence of corruption, internal bickering among contending groups within the party was rife and above all, the BJP’s ‘high command’—a revealing term once used only by the Congress to refer to the party president—was prone to replacing chief ministers in Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat and Uttaranchal (now Uttarakhand) at the proverbial drop of a hat without even going through the pretence of consultations among members of legislative assemblies. There was one important difference, however, between the two largest political parties in the country. Whereas the Congress took many decades in power to acquire its image of being a slothful, corrupt and decadent party, the BJP had achieved this dubious distinction in the span of just a few years.

The BJP’s allies could read the writing on the wall even before elections to Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Uttaranchal and Manipur took place in February 2002. While their unease grew, however, there was little they could immediately do about it, with the Congress preferring to bide its time rather than precipitate a political crisis. The BJP’s allies were not the only ones to sense a decline in the NDA’s popular support. Sections within the Sangh Parivar responded to the threat by seeking to appropriate some of the ‘Opposition space’ by criticising the government for its economic policies as well as its foreign policy.

If the BJP’s allies were worried about the NDA’s popular support prior to the state assembly elections of February 2002, the results of these elections confirmed their worst suspicions. The BJP and its allies lost in all four states that went to the polls and the Congress ended up forming a government in three of them. Prior to the polls, the BJP and its partners had held power in three of these states, while the fourth—Manipur—was under President’s rule.

In Uttar Pradesh, politically India's most significant state, the BJP put up its worst showing in over a decade, finishing third behind the SP and the BSP. The BJP-led alliance as a whole was only a handful of seats ahead of the BSP and well behind the SP. Considering that this was the state from which one out of every three BJP MPs in the Lok Sabha originated in the 1998 elections and that the party had cornered the single largest chunk of Parliamentary seats from Uttar Pradesh even in the 1999 elections (29 out of 85 seats in the undivided state), the outcome of the February 2002 assembly elections was a really serious setback to the BJP and, by extension, to the NDA. (Five years later, in 2007, the situation was to get even worse for the BJP in UP, but more on that in a later chapter.)

In Uttaranchal, the BJP was sitting pretty before the elections, with three-fourths of the legislators belonging to the party. But the 2002 assembly elections, the first in the state's history, saw the Congress gaining a majority and forming the government. In Punjab too, the Congress was a comfortable winner with the ruling Akali Dal-BJP alliance getting just over one-third of the seats in the 117-member assembly. What was significant was that the BJP fared much worse than the Akali Dal, winning just three of the 23 seats it contested.

Manipur, with a history of political instability, was arguably the state where the NDA's stakes were the lowest. None of the alliance partners had any history of electoral support in the state and it was only through a series of defections that first the Samata Party and then the BJP had managed to form governments in the state which lasted for very brief periods before continuing instability led to central rule being imposed on the state. If the elections to the Manipur assembly were significant in any sense in the national political scene, the significance lay in how the Congress would perform. The Congress finished as the single largest party and though it won only 20 of the 60 seats in the assembly, it managed to cobble together a coalition that formed the government in Manipur.

What the two rounds of state assembly elections in May 2001 and February 2002 had done to the electoral map of India was quite dramatic. Prior to May 2001, the NDA was in power in as many as 16 out of the 30 assemblies in the country (including the ones at Delhi and Pondicherry which are not full-fledged states) while the Congress

ruled in only nine assemblies. After February 2002, the situation had altered radically: the Congress was in power (or was sharing power) in 16 states while the NDA's tally had shrunk to only seven. Of these seven assemblies, the largest—and the only state assembly in which the BJP commanded a majority on its own—was Gujarat, which sends 26 MPs to the Lok Sabha. In four out of these seven state assemblies, the party was not a part of the government. (The December 2003 assembly elections saw the political map of India changing again, this time to the advantage of the BJP, with the party wresting from the Congress the three states of, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh).

Soon after the results of the February 2002 assembly elections became known, Hindu-Muslim riots rocked Gujarat. Despite L.K. Advani's claim that Narendra Modi had acted with alacrity and contained the violence 'within 72 hours', the NDA government's opponents argued that the Modi administration had been deliberately negligent in containing the violence, if not actively colluding with those who sought 'revenge' against Muslims. Media reports of the riots indicated clearly that the state government had chosen to turn a blind eye to the 'retaliatory' acts of violence. It was not just the BJP's political opponents who attacked the Modi administration's role in the riots, some of the party's allies in the NDA were sharply critical of the Gujarat government in general and, more specifically, Modi's reported claim that the communal riots in different parts of the state were a 'reaction' to the 'action' against the *kar sevaks* at Godhra. (Modi was to subsequently deny that he had implicitly justified the violence by suggesting that Hindus had 'reacted' to the Godhra incident.)

The rift between the BJP and some of its alliance partners in the NDA—often described by the media as 'secular'—as well as the fissures between the so-called hawks and doves within the Sangh Parivar were further widened in early March over the Ayodhya issue.

Over and above the fact that the political temperature had risen on account of the Gujarat violence and the Ayodhya episode, two other incidents precipitated heated exchanges in Parliament. The first was a resolution by the RSS to the effect that the safety of the minorities in India depended on the goodwill of the majority. This statement was flayed by some of the NDA constituents on the ground that it was not just patronising towards the Muslims but also displayed the

majoritarian or ‘fascist’ mindset of the Sangh Parivar. The second incident took place in Bhubaneswar. A group owing allegiance to the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and RSS ransacked a number of rooms in the Orissa assembly apparently on the ground that particular legislators had made statements that were termed ‘offensive’ by the VHP. This incident caused a fair amount of embarrassment to the Union government not merely because the state government in Orissa was controlled by the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) in alliance with the BJP, but also on account of the fact that the mob had raised slogans in favour of Vajpayee. While the VHP later apologised for the incident, Orissa Chief Minister and BJD leader Naveen Patnaik claimed his political opponents had engineered the incident to discredit him and his government.

The series of apparently unconnected but dramatic developments in February–March 2002 made the NDA government appear more fragile and prone to internal strife than it had been at any stage since it came to power in October 1999. But, as already mentioned, this appearance was deceptive. In fact, the period February–March 2002 was, in retrospect, a kind of watershed in the NDA’s evolution. It was from this period onwards that it became amply clear that the BJP’s allies in the coalition had lost much of their ability to influence the agenda of the government, or at least of the BJP.

The declining clout of the BJP’s allies and the increasing confidence of the BJP were starkly evident a year later. The Ayodhya issue came to the fore again in February 2003, with the government adopting a stance that was more favourable to the VHP’s position than it had ever done in the past. Yet, there was no protest from the allies, unlike a year earlier.

The results of the December 2003 assembly elections further strengthened the position of the BJP within the NDA. The BJP’s victory in three out of four states that went to the polls was a significant departure from the trend since 1998. In the five years between November 1998 and December 2003, the BJP had won assembly elections only in the small state of Goa (that too, with a razor-thin majority) besides, of course, Gujarat. That the party was able to defeat the Congress in three states in the Hindi heartland (Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh) was a major morale booster in the run-up

to the 14th general elections. However, the BJP's resounding victory over the Congress was not the only significant aspect of the December 2003 assembly elections in these three states. While these states are characterised by polities that are essentially bipolar, the combined vote share of the BJP and the Congress was a little over 74 per cent in Madhya Pradesh, a significant drop of 3.2 per cent from the combined vote share in the 1998 assembly elections. Thus, one in every four voters in Madhya Pradesh did not vote for either the BJP or the Congress and this share is increasing, not decreasing. The picture in Rajasthan was even clearer. The BJP and Congress between them mopped up a little over 74 per cent of the votes cast in 2003, a 5.3 per cent decline from their combined tally in 1998. Similarly, in Chhattisgarh, the BJP and Congress put together lost 5.4 per cent of their combined share of votes between the 1998 and 2003 assembly elections.

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The 13th general elections, held in September–October 1999, marked a watershed in the contemporary political history of India. For the first time since 1984, a pre-electoral alliance was able to win a majority of seats in the Lok Sabha. Further, two clear trends that had persisted for a decade and a half were either arrested or reversed. For the first time since 1984, the BJP was unable to add to its tally of seats. In fact, it lost around two percentage points of its share of the popular vote—roughly equal to 8 per cent of the total votes cast in favour of the party in the February 1998 elections. Though this decline in the vote share of the BJP was popularly attributed to the party having contested nearly 50 seats less in 1999 (339 against 388 in the 1998 elections), this was only partly true. Even a comparison of the vote share of the BJP in the 331 seats that it contested in both the 1998 and 1999 elections indicated a slight fall (of the order of 0.8–0.9 percentage points) in its support base.

The second trend that was arrested was the fall in the share of votes obtained by the Congress. The party's vote share had gone up by nearly 3 per cent between 1998 and 1999 though it lost nearly 30 seats in the Lok Sabha thanks to the 'first-past-the-post' principle. The support of the Congress was evidently spread relatively thinly

across the country whereas the BJP's support base was concentrated in particular geographical regions, enabling the party to win more seats in the Lok Sabha even with a lower share of the popular vote. The net result of these two trends was that the expected polarisation between the BJP and the Congress did not take place (more on this later).

The 1999 general elections had also seen the most concerted attempt ever in Indian politics to project the electoral battle as some sort of a presidential referendum, with the BJP harping on a comparison between Atal Behari Vajpayee and Sonia Gandhi. Another issue raised at this juncture was Sonia Gandhi's foreign origin. Some argue that this fact became a 'campaign issue' only after three senior Congress leaders broke away from the parent party after demanding that Sonia Gandhi make it clear that she would not be a Prime Ministerial aspirant. The leaders, who went on to form the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), were Sharad Pawar, former Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Union Defence Minister in the Narasimha Rao Cabinet, and leader of the Opposition in the 12th Lok Sabha; P.A. Sangma, former Speaker of the Lok Sabha; and Tariq Anwar, a long-standing Lok Sabha MP from Katihar in Bihar. Their contention, in a letter circulated among members of the Congress Working Committee, was that no person of non-Indian origin should be entitled to hold the posts of President, Vice President or Prime Minister of the country. This dovetailed very well with the BJP's strategy for the impending 13th general elections, in which the party made it clear it would raise Sonia's Italian origin as a major issue. Ironically, by 2004, Sangma had parted ways with Pawar whose party had by then formed an alliance with the Congress in Maharashtra.

As it turned out, the NCP did not make much of an electoral impact, except in Pawar's home state of Maharashtra, though Sangma too won from his constituency in the north-eastern state of Meghalaya. In Maharashtra, the NCP managed to win six of the state's 48 Lok Sabha seats, but severely damaged the Congress by splitting its traditional support base across the state. The NCP then went on to form an uneasy alliance with the Congress to form the state government in India's most industrialised province in western India.

Another significant event that took place when Vajpayee's government was reduced to a 'caretaker' one in April 1999 was the

infiltration of hundreds of people who crossed the Line of Control (LoC) between India and Pakistan in the Kargil area. The Indian defence forces responded by launching air and ground strikes. The success in driving back infiltrators from Indian territory in the Kargil area in Jammu & Kashmir along the LoC in the middle of 1999 was also sought to be projected as a 'victory' of the Vajpayee government and was exploited for electoral mileage. The results and analyses based on post-poll surveys by the New Delhi-based research institution, the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), among others, suggested that Kargil did not have such a major impact on the electorate. The CSDS survey indicated that almost two-thirds (65 per cent) of the respondents questioned were aware of the skirmishes along the LoC but a mere 15 per cent acknowledged that the Kargil episode had influenced their voting. The same survey incidentally indicated that less than half (46 per cent) of the respondents were aware of the nuclear tests conducted by the Vajpayee government in May 1998.

The 13th general elections were the first after the 3rd general elections in 1962 in which polling was spread in five phases over a period of one month. A number of political analysts and psephologists claimed that the impact of Kargil had waned over this period, and that the throwing out of infiltrators to the Pakistan side of the LoC had a greater impact on the electorate in the first three phases of polling in September 1999. Much of this analysis was based on studying the gains and losses in terms of Lok Sabha seats over the five phases of polling. If, however, one studies the data on vote shares, the hypothesis that there was a 'Kargil effect' in the early phase of polling, which waned as the elections progressed, cannot be sustained.

The data revealed that the vote share of the BJP and its allies did not show an improvement over the 1998 figures (if one takes into account the new alliances) even in the early phases of polling. This means that the Vajpayee government's claims of having won a 'victory' at Kargil did not add votes to the kitty of the NDA. The 'Kargil effect' must, therefore, be seen as a myth. After all, if there was a Kargil effect in favour of the BJP and its allies in the early stages of the elections, it should have resulted in more voters voting for them than the number which did in the 1998 elections. This simply did not



happen. A more plausible hypothesis is that the incidents in Kargil did help the BJP and its allies to stem, and reverse, what till early 1999 seemed like an upsurge in the fortunes of the Congress. Even so, the impact of Kargil seems at best to have prevented loss of seats for the NDA relative to the 1998 position, not added seats. The BJP certainly did not lose support on account of Kargil—but the extent to which the party gained remains debatable.

That the NDA won more seats in 1999 than in the 1998 elections was thanks entirely to the electoral arithmetic in different states. In particular, the split in the traditional Congress base in Maharashtra and the addition of the votes of new allies of the BJP like the TDP in Andhra Pradesh and the Janata Dal (United) (JD[U]) in Bihar drastically changed electoral equations in these states. These three states between them accounted for 144 seats in the Lok Sabha and the NDA gained almost 50 seats in these states compared to the 1998 elections. Of these, 37 seats were gained in Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh alone. The fact that both these states had completed polling by the third phase explains the huge gains made by the NDA in the initial phases of polling, rather than any so-called Kargil effect. It must be emphasised that the BJP–Shiv Sena (the BJP's oldest ally in the NDA) alliance lost a substantial chunk of its vote share in Maharashtra, but gained seats thanks to the split in the Congress on the eve of elections. Similarly, in Andhra Pradesh, the BJP and the TDP put together could not improve on their vote share between 1998 and 1999, while the Congress did—but not enough to counteract the consolidation of votes on the other side.

There is another, more obvious, explanation to counter the hypothesis of the Kargil effect. Evidence of this came in the form of the divergent results in different states that went to the polls in the initial part of the elections, in the first three weeks of September 1999. If Kargil did indeed boost the prospects of the NDA, why did the alliance sweep Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Delhi (winning all 21 seats in these states) while, at the same time, being very nearly wiped out in neighbouring Punjab (winning just 3 of the 13 seats in the state) which borders Pakistan? Why did the BJP and its allies win 36 of the 42 Lok Sabha seats in Andhra Pradesh, but only 10 of the 28 seats in Karnataka, where they had won 16 seats in the previous

elections in 1998? The explanation is rather mundane and, as stated earlier, has more to do with electoral arithmetic—the division of opposition votes or an addition of a new ally to the BJP’s camp. In addition, there were strong anti-incumbency sentiments in states like Punjab and Karnataka, where the local governments were perceived to be less than responsive to popular aspirations.

The 1999 elections also disproved the hypothesis of ‘voter apathy’ due to frequent elections. The 60 per cent voter turnout in 1999 was a little lower than the 62 per cent recorded in the 1998 elections, but higher than the 58 per cent recorded in 1996. Even if many of the 700 million plus voters in India are poor and illiterate and should have good reason for being disillusioned with democratic institutions of governance, the fact is that they exercise their franchise in much higher proportion than do the educated and economically better-off urban middle-class. The South Delhi constituency (regarded as having one of the most educated and prosperous electorates), for instance, recorded only a 42 per cent voter turnout. (This was the constituency from which former Finance Minister Manmohan Singh, considered the architect of economic reforms in the Narasimha Rao government, lost by roughly 30,000 votes to the BJP’s Vijay Kumar Malhotra.)

A related phenomenon, which might explain the continuing enthusiasm for voting, is the strong anti-incumbency trend witnessed in the last four general elections. On each occasion, between 40 per cent and 50 per cent of incumbent MPs were rejected, either by their own parties or by the voters. Thus, each of the last four Lok Sabhas has seen around 250 new faces in a House comprising 543 members. Considering that the first three of these elections were held within a span of just three-and-a-half years from 1996 to 1999, this is a telling indicator of the way the electorate punishes politicians perceived to be ‘non-performing’. Anti-incumbency sentiments operate at both the central and state levels. As a result, it is not uncommon for a party’s MPs to pay the price for the failure of their state government to deliver on its promises. The number of constituencies retained by political parties in the three elections held between 1996 and 1999 barely exceeded half the 543 seats in the Lok Sabha: the exact figures were 264 in 1996, 263 in 1998, and 283 in 1999. Though it may seem unfair that an individual MP should be punished by the electorate for no

fault of his, the flip side is that good work by the party's government too pays off for the incumbent MP. This underlines the fact that while individuals do matter, the policies and performance of parties are more important in a Parliamentary democracy.

In the 1999 elections, there were strong anti-incumbency sentiments among voters in a number of states. These sentiments worked against the BJP-led NDA in Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Maharashtra and Karnataka. The same sentiments worked against the Congress in Orissa and Rajasthan and the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) in Assam. However, many state governments defied this trend. Among such states were the left-ruled states of West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura, the Congress-ruled Madhya Pradesh, the TDP-ruled Andhra Pradesh and the DMK-ruled Tamil Nadu. However, in the May 2001 assembly elections, anti-incumbency sentiments were strong in Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Assam, while West Bengal's voters continued to swim against the tide—helped by the CPI(M) led Left Front replacing the octogenarian Jyoti Basu with Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee (who is 25 years younger) as Chief Minister, despite the fact that Basu holds the distinction of having been India's longest-serving Chief Minister in a state (between 1977 and 2001).

The importance of anti-incumbency sentiments is best illustrated by the BJP's performance in undivided Uttar Pradesh which then had almost one-sixth of the total seats in the Lok Sabha (85 out of 543). In the 1998 elections, the BJP on its own had won 57 of the state's 85 seats and with its allies had won 60 seats. In 1999, however, the party could barely win 29 seats on its own and a total of 32 seats with its allies. While most political pundits and opinion polls or exit polls had predicted some reverses for the BJP in UP, the magnitude and scale of the party's losses, in a four-cornered contest in most parts of the state, came as a surprise even to them.

The surprising nature of the UP results in the 1999 Lok Sabha elections was attributed by many, including psephologists, to 'tactical voting' by those opposed to the BJP (a thinly-veiled reference to the Muslims in particular). However, the data does not bear out such a hypothesis. If indeed tactical voting was resorted to in larger measure, the voting patterns should have shown less of a division in the non-BJP votes in constituencies than it did in the past. On the contrary, what

the data revealed was a significant increase in the division of votes in most constituencies. To be precise, the index of opposition unity (IOU), a statistical tool used by psephologists to measure the division of opposition votes, had increased vis-à-vis 1998 in 57 of the state's 85 Lok Sabha constituencies. The increased division of votes was thanks largely to the fact that the Congress, which had been reduced to no seats and just 6 per cent of the vote in 1998, increased its vote share by 8 percentage points to 14 per cent and won 10 seats while two more seats were won by its ally, the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) led by Ajit Singh. (The RLD subsequently ditched the Congress for the BJP in 2001 and Ajit Singh, son of former Prime Minister Charan Singh, became Union Agriculture Minister in the Vajpayee government. Ajit Singh again parted ways with the BJP in 2002.)

The real reason for the BJP's debacle in Uttar Pradesh was an extremely strong anti-incumbency wave against the party. The BJP, which had won 36.5 per cent of the votes in the state in the 1998 elections, got only 27.6 per cent in 1999, a drop of about 9 per cent. This was by far the largest swing of votes away from an incumbent state government anywhere in the country in the 1999 elections. However, as we shall elaborate later, this swing away from the BJP was not uniform across all sections of UP society. There were clear indications of a marked disenchantment among the upper castes, who had in the 1990s been ardent supporters of the BJP. The result of this disenchantment was that Kalyan Singh, the man the BJP had projected through the 1990s as its most popular mass leader in the state and the automatic choice for Chief Minister, had to step down a month after the results of the October–November 1999 Lok Sabha elections were known and yield place to Ram Prakash Gupta, a man who was Deputy Chief Minister two decades earlier in 1977, but had since then been consigned to political oblivion. Despite the so-called dynamism displayed by Gupta's successor Rajnath Singh and his concerted efforts to woo the 'most backward classes', the BJP was unable to recover lost ground in the May 2002 assembly elections—as already mentioned, the party ended up third in the elections, after the Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party. Out of the 403 seats in the UP assembly, in the February 2002 elections the BJP obtained 88 seats, the BSP 98 and the SP 143.

While on the subject of anti-incumbency, it is worth pointing out that the viewpoint widely spread by the media and political analysts about the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) in Bihar doing very poorly in the Lok Sabha elections in 1999 because of resentment against its state government's non-performance was simply not true. Election data reveals that the RJD and its major ally in the state, the Congress, both increased their share of the popular vote. Yet, the alliance (which also included the CPI[M]) could win just 12 (RJD: 7, Congress: 4 and CPI[M]: 1) out of the state's 54 Lok Sabha seats. This was, as in Andhra Pradesh, electoral arithmetic at work rather than anti-incumbency sentiments. While the Janata Dal had contested against the BJP–Samata Party alliance and the Congress–RJD alliance in 1998, it had joined the NDA in the 1999 elections. Since the Janata Dal had secured 9 per cent of the popular vote in the 1998 elections, this addition was always likely to be electorally significant, if the party's supporters were willing to accept such an alliance. As it turned out, the majority was comfortable with this arrangement. Thus, the addition of 6 per cent to the NDA's kitty of votes was enough to add 10 seats to its tally in Bihar.

Yet, it was true that by any yardstick of performance, the RJD government in Bihar could not be said to have 'performed' if one looks at the economic indicators of one of India's poorest states. All of this suggests that the anti-incumbency factor too cannot be seen merely as a consequence of 'lack of performance' by state governments, as perceived by middle-class analysts or sections of the media. It is a rather more complex mix of developmental issues and of community identity and *izzat* (honour or pride).

The RJD was ultimately defeated in Bihar in the assembly elections of October 2005, but it took a reworking of the electoral arithmetic for that to happen. The end game began with the assembly elections held in February 2005. The coalition of the RJD, Congress, Ram Vilas Paswan's Lok Janshakti Party (LJP), the left and NCP, which had proved a formidable alliance in the Lok Sabha polls, fell apart when it came to the state assembly elections. The LJP declared that defeating Lalu Prasad was the most important goal for Bihar. It was joined by the CPI, which is the most important constituent of the left in Bihar.

The CPI(M) stayed with RJD, but the Congress adopted a peculiar position. It tied up with the LJP for about one-third of the seats in the assembly while maintaining its ties with the RJD for the rest. This peculiar strategy didn't help the Congress, but it certainly worked to the advantage of the NDA in the state, led by Nitish Kumar of the Janata Dal (United).

The election results threw up an assembly in which nobody had the numbers to form the next government. The RJD remained the single largest party, but with 75 seats in the 243-member assembly it was nowhere near a majority. Even with the 14 seats won by its allies—the Congress, NCP and CPI(M)—it was left 33 seats short of a majority. The NDA had only just a few more seats, with the JD(U)'s 55 seats and the BJP's 37 adding up to just 92 seats. The key to government formation clearly lay with the LJP, which had won 29 seats, and with the 17 independents. The LJP insisted that it could neither support Lalu's wife Rabri Devi as Chief Minister, nor align with the 'communal' NDA. Paswan was faced with a real dilemma. His job as a Union Minister in New Delhi obviously made it difficult for him to align with the NDA. On the other hand, the bulk of his MLAs belonged to the Bhumihaar caste which was extremely hostile to Lalu and any attempt on his part to mend fences with the RJD would have resulted in a rebellion among his legislators. He, therefore, continued to sit on the fence.

The stalemate continued for weeks before Governor Buta Singh (a former Congress Union minister) recommended President's rule in the state on the grounds that he was convinced no government could be formed without 'horse-trading'. Coming close on the heels of media reports that Nitish Kumar had finally mustered the numbers required and was about to approach the Governor to stake a claim to form the government, Buta's move was seen as a blatantly partisan attempt at preventing the NDA from forming the government. The assembly was dissolved. Even as the Supreme Court was hearing a petition challenging the dissolution, the Election Commission announced that assembly elections would be held in October. On the eve of the elections, the court issued an interim order that said Buta Singh's decision was wrong, but refrained from doing anything to stop the elections.

The UPA once again failed to stay together and this time the NDA was able to make the most of it. Analysts also believed that the alliance had successfully managed to woo the most backward castes (MBCs) away from the RJD's fold. The NDA gained a comfortable majority on its own, with the JD(U) winning 88 seats and the BJP 55 for a combined tally of 143 seats. It was not just the RJD that suffered, its seats being cut to 54, but also the LJP, whose sitting on the fence after the earlier elections seemed to have gone down badly with the electorate. Paswan's party could win just 10 seats in October. The man who had set out to be king-maker in Bihar had been reduced to a marginal player by the voters.

Nitish Kumar was sworn in as Chief Minister of Bihar for the second time on November 24, 2005. (In 2000, Nitish had been sworn in as Chief Minister but had to resign in a week after he realised the NDA did not have a majority in the state assembly—see his profile later in the book.) The Supreme Court subsequently minced no words in criticising former Governor Buta Singh's recommendation to dissolve the state assembly in March 2005. Buta Singh resigned his post in January 2006. West Bengal Governor Gopal Krishna Gandhi took over temporarily before Republican Party of India leader R. S. Gavai was sworn in as the Governor of Bihar on June 22, 2006.

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After the 11th general elections in May 1996, Atal Behari Vajpayee's government had lasted barely 13 days. This was followed by the formation of a United Front comprising over a dozen political parties that ran the government with tenuous support from the Congress for a year-and-a-half under two Prime Ministers, H.D. Deve Gowda and I.K. Gujral. The slender majority of the next Vajpayee government that came to power after the February–March 1998 elections was despite the truly spectacular rise of the BJP's strength in Parliament over the previous decade and a half. In the last decisive general elections held in India, in 1984, the BJP had won only two of the 543 seats in the Lok Sabha. The Congress, which had at that time run the Union government for all but six years since 1947, when India became politically independent, held as many as 404 seats in the Lok Sabha

after the 1984 elections. The party, for the first and only time, had a two-thirds majority in Parliament following the elections that were conducted after the assassination of former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in October that year. The elections saw her son Rajiv Gandhi succeeding her with a thumping majority in Parliament, the likes of which was never enjoyed by Indira Gandhi herself or her father Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India.

Since 1984, the BJP has gained the most from the decline of the Congress. But that is only the beginning of the story. The rest of it is about the mushrooming of myriad political formations, which, in turn, has resulted in six coalition governments since May 1996. For the first time, the chair of the Prime Minister of India was occupied by no less than four individuals in the span of less than a year, between May 1996 and April 1997.

Has India entered a new phase of coalition politics? Yes, it has. Is the country ultimately moving towards a two-party system or is it moving towards a multi-party system in which two dominant parties provide poles for the rest to cluster around? As already stated, we do not think so. In our view, the process of fragmentation of the polity is not yet over. This, in turn, could throw up unexpected possibilities and political realignments, including the formation of new political parties.

To what extent has the BJP succeeded in shedding its image of being a right-wing Hindu nationalist party dominated by the upper-caste sections of north India? To some extent, it undoubtedly has, and in fact went out of its way to shed it. Will the Congress, set up in 1885, be able to revive and re-occupy the centrist political space as an umbrella organisation representing the interests of all sections of the world's most heterogeneous society, under the leadership of Sonia Gandhi? We are not so sure. Has the so-called 'third force', an amorphous combination of the left and largely regional parties, become irrelevant after just 18 months in power or will this section continue to play a pivotal role in shaping the country's politics? The answer is that smaller parties would be playing an even more important role in shaping the country's polity, whether or not they come together as a united front.



Virtually everybody has now come to accept the new reality of Indian politics, namely that the era of single party rule is over, at least in the foreseeable future. In fact, it can convincingly be argued that it was the Congress' failure to recognise this reality that led to the party steadily losing seats in Parliament. After the 13th general elections, the Congress found itself with just 112 seats in the Lok Sabha, by far the lowest ever, despite increasing its vote share significantly. The results of the 1999 elections and the 2004 elections clearly suggest that the polity is far from becoming bipolar. The two largest parties—the BJP and the Congress—between themselves accounted for just over half the seats and less than half the votes polled. In other words, close to half the votes and seats went to roughly three dozen other political parties of varying sizes. Clearly, despite assertions to the contrary by both the BJP and the Congress, the political space for a 'third front' does continue to exist, however amorphous such a grouping might be.

Any government in a polity as badly fractured as India's has been after the last four general elections—held in May 1996, February 1998, September–October 1999 and April–May 2004—would almost inevitably not be very stable. On its own, the Congress, the single largest party in the 14th Lok Sabha, had barely one-fourth of the total number of seats. In the 13th Lok Sabha, the then single largest party, the BJP, had on its own barely a third of the total number of seats. In 1998, 1999 and 2004, the party leading the ruling coalition has been forced to depend on those willing to categorise it merely as a 'lesser enemy' in order to ensure the survival of its government.

After May 2004, the UPA had no option but to form a government supported from outside by the left. For the Communists, the Congress may be an adversary—especially in West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura—but in the context of national politics, it is a 'lesser evil' than the 'communal' BJP.

One of the biggest surprises of the post-election scenario in March 1998 was the support given to the Vajpayee government by the TDP headed by Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu who, till that stage, was the convenor of the United Front. Naidu played a tantalising game of hide and seek with his erstwhile allies, insisting that the TDP would remain 'equidistant' from the Congress and the

BJP. The first indication of what equidistance meant to the TDP was the surprise election of its nominee, G.M.C. Balayogi, as the Speaker of the Lok Sabha with the support of the BJP and its allies. The drama reached its culmination with Naidu announcing just hours before the actual vote of confidence in the House that his party would be voting in favour of the Vajpayee government.

Also surprising was the decision of the National Conference (NC), a party that was then ruling the northern-most state of Jammu & Kashmir—India's only Muslim-majority state—to abstain in the vote of confidence sought by Vajpayee in March 1998. The decision of the NC, led by Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah, surprised many since the BJP has long been perceived as inimical to Muslim interests and also because the party in its election manifesto had argued in favour of abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution (which confers special status on the state of Jammu & Kashmir in terms of autonomy from the central government). Abdullah justified his decision on the ground that the state could ill afford to have an antagonistic relationship with whoever was in power in New Delhi. While the TDP subsequently had to part ways with the United Front (UF), the NC curiously never formally withdrew from the Front. It is another matter that the Front itself later ceased to exist without any formal process of dissolution ever taking place. After being a part of the NDA for more than four years, the NC left the alliance in 2003 after it failed to form the government in Jammu & Kashmir.

What were the consequences of the fractured mandate and the unexpected shifts in allegiances after the 12th general elections held in February–March 1998? One was that the Vajpayee government had 18 parties supporting it at that time, including half a dozen parties with just one MP each. Yet, the government's survival of its first vote of confidence was thanks almost entirely to the TDP's last-minute decision to support the BJP-led government. The fact that the TDP insisted its support to the Vajpayee government was issue-based and not unconditional underlined the fragility of the government.

Vajpayee himself had felt that the mushrooming of regional parties—the 13th Lok Sabha had 38 political parties recognised by the Election Commission of India, the 12th Lok Sabha had representatives

of 42 political parties while there were 26 parties in the 11th Lok Sabha—together with the arguably disproportionate clout these parties enjoy in a situation in which Parliament is ‘hung’, represents a phase that Indian politics could not have avoided but is also one which could not last for long. This was what the then Prime Minister had asserted in his reply to the discussion on the motion of confidence moved by him in the Lok Sabha in March 1998. Vajpayee saw the fragmentation as an aberration in a polity that is gradually moving towards a more stable polarisation (a formulation that the BJP has since been careful not to emphasise).

This analysis was to a large extent a reflection of the outcome of the February 1998 polls in which the 13-party United Front, which ran the two previous governments for 18 months with grudging and uneasy support from the Congress, suffered a debacle. The UF’s strength in the Lok Sabha had been reduced from close to 180 seats to less than 100 after the elections. Subsequent desertion from its ranks left it with less than 85 Lok Sabha MPs in March 1998. This convinced the votaries of the two-party theory that they were correct in writing off the ‘third force’ as a spent force in national politics. As they saw it, the smaller parties would either fade away or be forced to align themselves with one or the other of the two strong poles of Indian politics, the BJP and the Congress. Many shared this view. They suggested that there were distinct signs of the polity becoming bipolar, the BJP providing one pole and the Congress the other.

However, the outcome of the 13th general elections held in September–October 1999 indicated that this trend towards bipolarity was still not taking place and the ‘third force’ was far from becoming irrelevant. Significantly, the BJP too had subtly changed its assertions on the issue. Unlike the Congress, it had come to terms with the fact that prospects of it growing further on its own steam were dim in the immediate future. Hence, even leaders like L.K. Advani (who went on to become Deputy Prime Minister), perceived as ideological hardliners, conceded that the BJP’s continuation in power would depend on its ability to tie up alliances with several regional partners. (The 14th Lok Sabha constituted in May 2004 had 38 political parties recognised by the Election Commission.)

Though the United Front itself became defunct, regional parties as a category have not lost out. On the contrary, these formations have come to hold the levers of power in the Union government. In terms of numbers, the Congress and the BJP put together increased their tally in the 543-member Lok Sabha by less than 30 seats between the May 1996 and February 1998 general elections. Following the 1999 elections, the combined tally of the BJP and the Congress in fact came down to roughly the same level as it was after the 1996 elections. There are, therefore, many who argue that a third space will continue to exist in Indian politics, even if the parties that occupy this space keep changing.

The phenomenon of political parties extending 'outside' support to coalition governments is considered to be a reason why such governments have been unstable—in fact, four out of the last seven governments in New Delhi since 1989 were brought down on account of withdrawal of support by various parties (especially the Congress and the BJP) that supported governments without participating in them. The exceptions were the Narasimha Rao government, which completed its full term of five years (June 1991 to May 1996) despite starting out as a minority government, and the Vajpayee governments of 1996 and 1998–99. Narasimha Rao had to face charges in court for having allegedly bribed MPs to win a vote of confidence in July 1993. India's premier investigating agency, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), framed the charges. A lower court convicted Rao and one of his Ministers, Buta Singh, but the Delhi High Court acquitted them on appeal.

The other factor that arguably influences the stability of a coalition government is whether the alliance came into being before or after the elections. On the face of it, pre-poll alliances are likely to be more stable than post-poll ones. Yet, the BJP-led coalition found itself unable to muster a majority in the 12th Lok Sabha without the assistance of post-poll allies. As the BJP-led government realised within days of securing power, even pre-poll allies could prove to be troublesome partners—a case in point being AIADMK—and J. Jayalalithaa brazenly arm-twisted the Vajpayee government to accept her demands on more than one occasion. Eventually, she and

her party went on to successfully destabilise the government, thus triggering off the process leading to the 13th general elections. The experience of the recent past lends weight to the contention that the only reasonable guarantee of the stability and longevity of a coalition government is ideological compatibility among partners. The Left Front government in West Bengal and the BJP–Shiv Sena alliance in Maharashtra are two such examples.

The United Front government under Deve Gowda was the first Union government in India that was formed following a post-poll alliance cobbled together in May 1996 and after a Common Minimum Programme (CMP) had been thrashed out. The earlier coalitions at the centre—the Janata Party government in 1977–78 headed by Morarji Desai and the Janata Dal government in 1989–90 headed by V.P. Singh—were formed on the basis of pre-poll alliances.

After the May 1996 elections, for the first time the Congress was not the single largest party in the Lok Sabha. Of course, the Janata Party in 1977 had more seats in the House than the Congress, but the party came into being after various constituents of a pre-poll alliance merged after the elections. In the results of the 1977 elections, therefore, the Congress did emerge as the single largest party. In 1996, in fact, the Congress became weaker than it ever was in Parliament, with barely 140 MPs in the Lok Sabha against nearly 200 MPs owing allegiance to the BJP and its allies. The BJP emerged as the single largest party in the lower House despite getting just over one-fifth of the popular vote, while the Congress got just under 30 per cent of the votes. But Vajpayee's first government lasted only between the 16th and the 28th of May 1996.

This was followed by the formation of the 13-party United Front coalition which was supported from 'outside' by both the Congress and the CPI(M), the second and third largest parties in the Lok Sabha. Unlike the Congress, the CPI(M) joined the Front (but not the government). While erstwhile political opponents came together to keep the BJP out of power, also for the first time, representatives of regional parties as well as nearly a dozen chief ministers of various Indian states started playing a more active role in the functioning of the central government.

The change from a situation in which a single party (the Congress) dominated the government to one of multi-party configurations has been accompanied by other significant changes in the working of India's polity. One such change has been the growing role of Constitutional institutions from the President to state Governors and the Election Commission. Yet, the instability of central governments has periodically resulted in an active debate on the need for fundamental alterations to the Westminster Parliamentary form of government itself. Arguments have been made in favour of and against different forms of government—an American-style presidential system or a French type of combination of the presidential and parliamentary systems.

The 1999 Lok Sabha elections and to a lesser extent the 2004 elections were sought to be projected as a 'presidential' election, one that pitted Vajpayee against Sonia Gandhi. But, it would be simplistic to perceive the elections in this manner. Personalities, separated from the political parties they represent or the issues and ideologies they stand for, have always influenced the Indian electorate to a lesser or greater degree. However, it can be contended that given India's tremendous diversities, the socially and regionally heterogeneous peoples of the country have to evolve their own system that could perhaps uniquely combine the systems existing in other countries.

The questions remain:

- Is India moving towards a two-party system or into an extended phase of coalition politics?
- If indeed coalition governments are here to stay, just how relevant are the experiences of coalitions in various states since 1957?
- Are there lessons to be drawn from these state-level experiences over four decades that are relevant at the all-India level?
- Is there reason to believe that coalitions at the centre are intrinsically more unstable than similar formations in states?
- Will the endeavour to ensure stability of governments lead to a further blurring of ideological distinctions within and among political parties?

The answer to these questions will have an important bearing not only on the future of individual parties or the composition of future governments, but also on the very nature of Indian politics.

As far as the economy is concerned, there has been a subtle, but distinct, change in the debate on the merits of liberalisation, which was significantly accelerated by the minority government of P.V. Narasimha Rao, which came to power in May 1991 after Rajiv Gandhi's assassination. At present, sections of the Congress and the BJP want the Indian economy to integrate with the rest of the world at a faster pace. There is undoubtedly a consensus on the need for and virtues of de-bureaucratisation cutting across all political formations. However, the left and sections of the BJP, the Congress and other political parties have their own different notions about the nature of economic reforms required.

While it has been argued that its tenure in office compelled the BJP to move away from its image of being a right-wing party and to adopt a less sectarian form of politics, there is the counter argument that the Vajpayee government conferred a certain legitimacy to communal (anti-Muslim) politics that was not so far available to it. Either way, Indian politics changed fundamentally.

It is also worth examining how realignments of social forces are likely to influence the course of the country's politics. The growing confidence of the dalits, together with the consolidation of their influence in some of the country's largest states behind parties representing their interests, is one such phenomenon. The emergence of 'other backward classes' as a political force to reckon with is another.

- Does bickering among coalition partners lead to greater transparency and more accountability, which, in turn, reduces the incidence of corruption in public life?
- Or, does it result in greater cynicism among politicians, since today's accusers could become tomorrow's allies?
- Will the participants in governments with short tenures tend to adopt an approach of 'making hay while the sun shines'?
- Or will the fear of their actions being scrutinised by successor regimes act as a check on the propensity of politicians in power to earn a fast buck?

Even though a number of politicians facing charges of corruption have been re-elected (for, among other things, being seen to be fulfilling the aspirations of the electorate), corruption remains an important political and economic issue in India. Sections of the media and the judiciary have become more active in highlighting as well as following up instances of corruption involving persons holding positions of power. The manner in which Narasimha Rao's minority government won a vote of confidence in Parliament in July 1993 and became a majority government by 'allegedly' bribing MPs to defect was itself the subject of a protracted legal battle, as mentioned earlier.

The recent history of India has thrown up a number of crucial questions, the answers to which are not very clear.

- What impact would the process of economic liberalisation have on the functioning of the polity and on the development of a country which entered the 21st century with the world's largest population of the poor and the illiterate?
- Will the political changes that have taken place lead to a greater integration of minorities and tribals within the national mainstream?
- Will future governments be better able to reflect the aspirations of different regional and ethnic groups?
- Will the redrawing of the internal political map of India be more than a cartographic exercise and heighten fissiparous tendencies?
- And, will the aggravation of contradictions in the world's second-most populated country and arguably the most heterogeneous nation-state bring about its disintegration, as some have claimed from time to time?

These questions are obviously too complex to be answered by specialists in any one discipline. In fact, it would be futile to pretend that any definitive answers can be provided at all. All that can be attempted is to present as many aspects of the totality as possible and provide pointers to some of the linkages. In this respect, the generalist approach of the journalist may perhaps make up in width and reach for what it might lose in terms of theoretical academic rigour.



## Chapter 2

# UPA Government: Peaceless Coexistence

The Election Commission of India announced the schedule for the 14th Lok Sabha elections on February 29, 2004, elections that would become a watershed in Indian politics. Though the five-year term of the 13th Lok Sabha was to expire in October 2004, the NDA government decided to bring forward the elections by roughly five months. The decision was, at that time, considered by some as a political ‘master-stroke’ that would enable the NDA to return to power by catching the Congress off guard. Fresh from electoral victories in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh that were ruled by the Congress, the NDA leadership believed the electorate would be willing to give the incumbent government led by Vajpayee another term in office.

As already stated, the December 2003 assembly elections proved to be a disaster for the Congress—it lost power in three states, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, while retaining Delhi. Out of power in New Delhi since 1996, the Congress seemed to be facing an uphill task in getting back on to the road to power.

Opinion polls seemed to suggest that the BJP’s decision to hold early elections was a smart move. In its ‘mood of the nation’ opinion poll held in January 2004, *India Today* magazine estimated that the NDA was likely to sweep the 2004 elections with 330–340 seats against the 304 seats won in 1999. The poll projected a washout for the Congress and its allies, estimating that the alliance would win 105–115 seats, down at least 30 seats from its previous tally. While a few political analysts were sceptical about the accuracy of these polls, in the NDA and the BJP camps the mood was upbeat—or even euphoric.

It was at this juncture—around the time our first book was published in March 2004—that the Vajpayee government started

what would become perhaps the largest and most controversial public relations exercise in the history of independent India conducted by a Union government: the 'India Shining'/'Bharat Uday' campaign. Deputy Prime Minister L.K.Advani, on February 8, 2004, gave an insight into how the oft-used phrase 'feel-good factor' was coined by the NDA: I had seen an advertisement of Raymond Suitings where people who touch the suit fabric ask the person wearing it, 'How do you feel?' To which he replies, 'I feel good'. The advertisement further says, 'If it feels like heaven, it must be Raymonds' (Press Trust of India report from Ahmedabad, as quoted in rediff.com).

'We cannot compare the situation with heaven, but we can certainly use 'feel good' as a catch phrase to show the work done by the NDA under the leadership of Vajpayee in the past five years,' Advani told a gathering in Ahmedabad while inaugurating a health camp. On the same day, T.S. Krishnamurthy took over as Chief Election Commissioner and in his first press conference said that advertisements lauding the government's achievements were not in keeping with the spirit of the model code of conduct for elections. 'Since we have not announced the poll schedule, we have no powers to intervene but taxpayers' money should not be wasted in publicising the achievements of governments,' he said in a thinly-veiled reference to the 'India Shining' campaign.

The Comptroller and Auditor General of India was to later (May 2005) criticise the government for spending Rs 63.23 crore on this campaign without parliamentary approval. The CAG pointed out that the Ministry of Finance had 'diverted' this money from funds that had been sanctioned for 'cooperation with other countries'. The Finance Ministry curiously justified the expenditure claiming the 'India Shining' campaign was meant to support an 'overall, general and imaginative promotion of India, its trade and foster technical and economic cooperation and intellectual progress with other countries' and hence did not require separate parliamentary approval. Jaswant Singh, who was Finance Minister at the time of the campaign, went a step further saying that the CAG had got its facts wrong and the NDA government had in fact made a Rs 100 crore 'grant' for this publicity campaign. The central point is that the 'India Shining' campaign, far from helping the BJP and the NDA, may have indirectly contributed

to the electoral defeat of the coalition. It can be argued that those sections of the population which did not believe that their economic condition had improved, were actually angered by the government spending public funds to tell them they should be ‘feeling good’—this was reluctantly conceded by supporters of the BJP and the NDA after the outcome of the elections was known in May 2004.

Returning to the run-up to the 14th general elections, perhaps for the first time in the history of independent India, the Congress faced a resource crunch. Unlike in countries like the US where campaign contributions are reasonably transparent, the manner in which election campaigns are funded in India is secretive despite the regulations that have been laid down by the Election Commission. The amounts that candidates and parties spend on elections are more often than not several times higher than the legal limits specified by the EC thanks to generous contributions from ‘friends’ and ‘well-wishers’ of those standing for elections, many of who are wealthy businesspersons. The Congress is said to have approached some two-dozen leading industrialists for financial support but reportedly met with lukewarm responses from them. The Congress having been out of power for nearly eight years, most businesspersons, like many within the Congress itself, were not expecting the party to be in a position to form the next government in the country. Hence, the coffers of the Congress were depleted. ‘All I can say is (that) we are not flush with funds—a political party of the size of the Congress needs lots of money to fight elections,’ Congress treasurer Moti Lal Vora pointed out in an interview to [rediff.com](http://rediff.com) on March 24, 2004.

Ironically, a shortage of resources did not turn out to be such a liability for the Congress. The party’s leaders were compelled to adopt campaign strategies that entailed direct contact with the electorate that, on hindsight, turned out to be more effective. The BJP, on the other hand, was flush with funds. It launched what was easily the most technology-savvy election campaign in India’s history. A recorded appeal from Vajpayee went out automatically to people directly on their mobile phones; BJP leaders were touring the country in helicopters and fancy vehicles, boasting that they had achieved more in the last five years than the Congress had in 45 years of ruling India.

On March 2, 2004 the BJP announced that Advani would undertake what was called the *Bharat Uday Yatra*. The *yatra* was to start the

BJP's election campaign for the Lok Sabha elections from Kanyakumari, the southern tip of India's mainland, and its first phase was to end in Amritsar, in the north. The second phase of the *yatra* was to start from Porbandar in Gujarat and culminate in Puri in Orissa. In all, Advani would travel nearly 8,000 km by the time the *yatra* ended in April.

In 1999, it (an earlier *yatra*) was for continuity. Now it is for political stability, for continuity and over and above all for performance. Incumbency, generally speaking, is always regarded (as) a liability. In our case incumbency is not a liability. Incumbency is, in fact, the Vajpayee-led NDA government's biggest asset, Advani bragged at a press conference.

Even in the early days of the *yatra*, media reports indicated that the 'India Shining' campaign was not generating the kind of enthusiasm that the BJP had hoped for. With temperatures touching 40 degrees celsius and drought affecting many parts of the country, it seemed that Advani had chosen the wrong time to tell the electorate that India was doing very well under the NDA.

The fact that he was travelling in an air-conditioned, souped-up Toyota complete with portable toilet and a mini-crane that would lift him above the vehicle to address people, did not help. If anything, it seemed to underline the gulf between ordinary voters and political leaders. Travelling at speeds close to 60–80 kmph, Advani may have failed to notice the disenchantment.

The Congress campaign presented an effective contrast. When the NDA was tom-tomming the 'feel good factor', the Congress riposte was: '*Hum ko kya mila?*' (What have we got?), indicating that while the NDA had brought prosperity to a small section of society, the common man had gained very little from the so-called economic boom. The party's slogan, '*Congress ka haath garib ke saath*' (The hand of the Congress is with the poor), in which *garib* (poor) was later replaced with *aam aadmi* (common man) was a return to tried and tested rhetoric.

Despite the lukewarm response to Advani's *yatra*, in the initial days of the campaign, the momentum seemed to be with the NDA. The BJP would frequently announce the names of celebrities—from film stars to political bigwigs—who were joining the party and campaigning for it. Such individuals included Maneka Gandhi's

son Varun Gandhi, former Union Minister from the Congress and political bigwig from Madhya Pradesh Vidya Charan Shukla, Rajya Sabha Deputy Chairperson Najma Heptullah, senior Congress leader Digvijay Singh's brother Lakshman Singh, former Union Minister Arif Mohammed Khan, besides film personalities like Hema Malini, Manoj Kumar, Yukta Mookhey, Sudha Chandran, Suresh Oberoi, Jeetendra, Poonam Dhillion, singers like Bhupen Hazarika and Kumar Sanu, among others. The Congress too had its share of film personalities such as Govinda, Zeenat Aman, Celina Jaitley, Om Puri, Asrani, Namrata Shirodkar and Sharad Kapoor, beside former cricketer Bishen Singh Bedi.

While the BJP was evidently happy with prominent personalities choosing to campaign for the party, the Congress was tying up electoral alliances—a lesson it had learnt from the BJP that won more seats in 1999 with a relatively lower vote share because it had tied up with different coalition partners at local levels before elections. The BJP had perhaps forgotten this important lesson that shaped the arithmetic of the Lok Sabha or, more plausibly, become complacent by under-estimating the strengths of its political opponents. Thus, while the Congress was gaining new allies, the BJP was losing partners (or even getting rid of them).

The first bit of bad news for the NDA came from Haryana where the BJP had an uncomfortable relationship with the ruling Indian National Lok Dal, headed by Chief Minister Om Prakash Chautala. Whereas Chautala himself had a rapport with the BJP leadership, many supporters of his party were far from comfortable with the alliance. The BJP's local functionaries rightly felt there were strong anti-incumbency sentiments against the Chautala government and, hence, welcomed a parting of ways with the INLD that formally took place in February 2004. What this meant was that the NDA would now not be sure of retaining the ten Lok Sabha seats from Haryana.

In Tamil Nadu, all the constituents of the NDA barring the BJP, left the alliance. Led by the DMK, they tied up with the Congress. In Bihar and in Jharkhand, after a long period, all the major political parties who were not a part of the NDA came together—such parties included the Congress, the Rashtriya Janata Dal (led by Lalu Prasad Yadav), the Lok Janshakti Party (led by Ram Vilas Paswan), the

Nationalist Congress Party, the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) and the two Communist parties. In Andhra Pradesh, the Congress had not only forged an alliance with the left, it had tied up with the Telengana Rashtra Samithi (although the left and the TRS were competing against each other).

These developments were to become not just crucial but decisive in the subsequent formation of the Union government by the UPA in May 2004, for the UPA made a clean sweep of Haryana and Tamil Nadu and won handsomely in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and Jharkhand. All these states (accounting for 145 Lok Sabha seats) had been politically dominated by the NDA after the 1999 elections. Even at the time when these alliances were being forged, a few political observers pointed to their significance. However, the mainstream media—in particular, the influential English media—were gung-ho about the prospects of the NDA returning to power.

According to an opinion poll conducted for New Delhi Television (NDTV) and *Indian Express* newspaper by A.C. Nielsen, the NDA was poised to bag 287–307 seats against the Congress-led alliance's 143–163 seats. The survey, claimed to be the largest-ever opinion poll, covered a sample of 45,000 people in 207 constituencies, 80 per cent of them in rural areas. While the poll rightly predicted that the BJP-AIADMK alliance was in trouble in Tamil Nadu, it was unable to record the strong anti-incumbency sentiments prevailing in Andhra Pradesh and the reduction in the levels of communal polarisation in Gujarat. All the opinion polls indicated that the NDA was heading for a majority and failed to anticipate the gains that would be made by the Congress as well as other constituents of the UPA.

A study by a non-government organisation in late 2004 highlighted and quantified the extent of the bias that some of India's leading television news channels had betrayed in the run-up to the elections, confirming what many had perceived. The study conducted by the New Delhi-based Centre for Advocacy and Research (CFAR) showed that in terms of TV coverage of high-profile campaigners, the clear leader was Advani (19 per cent) who beat even Vajpayee (17 per cent), with Congress President Sonia Gandhi lagging far behind (5 per cent) followed by Mulayam Singh Yadav, Lalu Prasad and Mayawati (each with 3 per cent). These six individuals accounted

for half the time given to campaign stories. Advani's *Uday Yatra* from Kanyakumari to Kashmir hogged a phenomenal 478 minutes of television coverage, according to the study. The study pointed out how while both Advani and Sonia had campaigned in Gujarat, issues relating to the 2002 communal riots in the state were 'ignored as an election issue by them—and the media'.

The two largest parties, the BJP and the Congress, accounted for 76 per cent of the total coverage, though they together polled less than half the total votes in the elections. In contrast, the left parties together got only one per cent of the total coverage though they emerged stronger than ever before with 61 MPs in the 14th Lok Sabha. As for the parties based in south India, the study said they were literally 'out of the picture' as far as the so-called national television channels were concerned.

Despite a sympathetic media, one particular episode tarnished the image of the incumbent regime. On April 12, at a BJP rally in Lucknow, where Vajpayee was contesting, a stampede broke out killing at least 21 women, while party leader Lalji Tandon was distributing sarees to poor women as part of his birthday celebration. The shocking incident compelled Vajpayee to admit in an interview to NDTV on April 15 that the entire country was not shining. 'There are several aspects of India. While some aspects are shining, there are also some dark aspects. We got a shock. So just seeing the shining part will not work. We have to see the other aspects too', he conceded.

This realisation had dawned a little too late as the results of the election were to prove. The media, however, continued to see the NDA as a comfortable frontrunner. At the end of the last of the four phases of polling, on May 10, exit polls were still projecting the NDA as the largest pre-poll alliance, the number of seats ranging between 248 (NDTV) and 270 (Sahara Samay). Unlike in the run-up to the elections, the NDA was not being seen as likely to win a majority of the seats, but it still was tipped to be far ahead of the Congress-led alliance. According to the exit polls, the UPA would get close to 180 seats while others, including the left, SP and BSP, were expected to get close to 102 seats.

The results of the Andhra Pradesh assembly elections, announced on May 11—two days before the counting for the Lok Sabha polls were to be held—proved to be a curtain-raiser. The ruling TDP-BJP alliance was able to win only 49 of the 294 seats in the state while the Congress and its allies managed 226 seats, a little more than three-fourths of the strength of the House. The verdict could not have been more decisive. The NDA could do little more than hope that Andhra Pradesh's voters would have voted differently in the Lok Sabha polls. Despite the hope, NDA leaders started looking for potential new allies in case the alliance fell short of the half-way mark. According to media reports, the NDA had started sending out feelers to the SP and BSP in UP, some of the smaller parties in Tamil Nadu and the NCP in Maharashtra. Clearly, the BJP and the NDA still believed that they would finish ahead of the UPA and be invited by the President to form the next government.

Counting started at 8:00 am on May 13, 2004. Television cameras showed the late BJP general secretary Pramod Mahajan on a treadmill in his home, exuding confidence. The question, the pictures seemed to suggest, was not who would form the government, but how many seats short of the magical 272 the NDA would get. It was a different Mahajan who appeared in TV studios that afternoon. As the results poured in, it was clear that Andhra Pradesh was not an aberration. The NDA's worst nightmare had come true. The Congress led alliance won 217 seats (37 more than what the exit polls had suggested on an average) while the BJP-led NDA won 185 seats, 73 less than the average number of seats projected by the polls. The 'others' got a total of 137 seats, which included 61 seats to the Left Front and 39 seats to the Samajwadi Party and its ally RLD, besides four independent members.

The results of the Lok Sabha elections came as a shock to everyone in the BJP and the NDA. The results indicated that while the BJP had suffered a net loss of 42 seats, in terms of vote share there had been a negative swing of 1.6 per cent against the party, despite it contesting 25 seats more than what it had in 1999. The performance of the BJP's allies in the NDA was way below what they had achieved in the previous elections. A telling response came from party general secretary Pramod Mahajan who acknowledged that the Congress had beaten them at their own game. He admitted that the Congress



managed its coalition better than the BJP and that this was one of the most important factors that influenced the electoral outcome. 'I think they (the Congress) exactly followed the same strategy (as that) of the BJP to consolidate the (UPA) coalition and give scope to the regional parties,' Mahajan said.

There was much more to the defeat of the NDA than the Congress' strategy of forging alliances. Large sections of the electorate were clearly unhappy with the quality of governance provided by the incumbent MPs. Less than half or only 261 of the 543 MPs in the Lok Sabha were able to retain their seats. While the Congress managed to increase its tally from 114 to 145 seats in the Lok Sabha, it was able to retain only 49 (or just over 40 per cent) of the seats it had won in the September–October 1999 elections. The party increased its tally because it won 96 additional seats. The BJP, on the other hand, was able to retain 90 of the 182 seats it had won in the 1999 Lok Sabha elections—a slightly higher retention rate in comparison to the Congress.

While the Congress and its allies did form the Union government with the help of the four left parties, the verdict of the 2004 Lok Sabha elections was not as clear as it may appear to some. The Congress suffered a negative swing of about 1.77 per cent in the vote share—this was mainly on account of the fact that the party contested 36 seats less than what it had done in 1999 in order to accommodate its coalition partners. The combined vote share of the two alliances (the one led by the BJP and the other by the Congress) remained virtually unchanged, but the realignment of the affiliation of parties meant that while the NDA's vote share dropped by over 4 per cent from 40.74 per cent in 1999 to 36.41 per cent in 2004, the Congress-led alliance gained an almost equal proportion, its vote share rising from 31.89 per cent to 35.86 per cent.

Large sections within the Congress were slowly but surely learning the rules of the coalition game. If the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance had, at one stage, as many as 24 constituents not to mention the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) supporting the coalition from outside, the UPA comprised no less than 14 relatively large and small political parties excluding the Congress. These were the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), the

Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), the Pattali Makal Katchi (PMK), the Telengana Rashtra Samithi (TRS), the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM), the Lok Janshakti Party (LJP), the Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK), the All India Majlis-E-Ittehadul Muslimeen, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), the Indian Union Muslim League, the Republican Party of India (Athawale), the Republican Party of India (Gavai) and the Kerala Congress (Joseph). (The alliance remained intact till August 2006 when the TRS left the UPA because it felt the government had failed to honour its promise that it would examine the possibility of forming a separate state of Telengana. Thereafter, in March 2007, the MDMK also quit the UPA, ostensibly because it was unhappy with the government's inability to enforce implementation of an order by the Cauvery River Waters Tribunal on sharing of waters between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.)

For almost a week after the results of the 14th general elections became known on May 13, 2004, it seemed inevitable that Sonia Gandhi would succeed Vajpayee as Prime Minister of India. Though the BJP was obviously not happy with such a denouement, most party supporters realised they had no choice but to accept a person of 'foreign origin' as the next head of the Indian government. Senior BJP leader Sushma Swaraj, threatened that she would shave her head if Sonia were to be sworn in as Prime Minister. But that was not to be. Swaraj's locks remained on her head. On May 19, Sonia announced that she would 'sacrifice' the most important political position in India. She said she would remain as head of the Congress party while 'nominating' the soft-spoken, economist-technocrat, former Finance Minister Manmohan Singh as the Prime Minister of India. (See profiles of Sonia Gandhi and Manmohan Singh towards the end of the following chapter on the Congress party.)

In hindsight, Sonia's decision not to become Prime Minister was a politically astute move. On the one hand, she took the wind out of the sails of a major plank of the opposition campaign against her, namely, that a person of foreign origin should not hold the topmost political position in the country. On the other, observers reckoned that given Manmohan Singh's relative naivety in the world of Indian politics—he became the first Indian Prime Minister to have never won a Lok Sabha election—she would be the 'real power behind the throne' while not

formally holding the position of Prime Minister. What was decided was that Sonia would not only head the Congress party and the UPA but would also act as the chairperson of a newly-created body called the National Advisory Council (NAC) that would monitor the implementation of a National Common Minimum Programme to be worked out among the constituents of the UPA and the left parties which were providing crucial 'outside' support to the government. The NAC, it was decided, would consist of 'eminent' representatives of civil society (and not include politicians or bureaucrats, apart from Sonia). The BJP described the move as an attempt to confer 'extra-constitutional authority' on Sonia Gandhi.

If the looming shadow of Sonia put a question mark on the extent to which Manmohan Singh would be able to wield authority in an independent manner, the composition of his government when it was formed in late May 2004 only underscored the point that his room for manoeuvre would be limited. The Council of Ministers included several from smaller parties with barely a handful of MPs in the Lok Sabha. More importantly, some of them had serious criminal charges pending against them, notable among these being Mohammad Taslimuddin, M.A. Fatmi, Jai Prakash Yadav and Lalu Prasad of the RJD as well as Shibu Soren of the JMM. The NDA promptly accused Manmohan Singh and the UPA of plunging new depths in Indian politics by making 'tainted' people ministers in the Union government. The UPA retorted that the NDA too had ministers like Advani and M.M. Joshi who had been chargesheeted in criminal cases.

The issue gradually died down, but it remained alive in the courts because of a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) filed in the Supreme Court seeking the removal of 'tainted ministers'. In November 2006, Shibu Soren ultimately had to step down after he was convicted for the murder of his former secretary and sentenced to a life term in jail, the first time any politician in India had received such a sentence. Soren was said to have murdered his secretary, Shashi Nath Jha, because the latter was demanding a share in the money allegedly paid to Soren and other JMM MPs for voting in favour of the P.V. Narasimha Rao government in July 1993. He was released from jail after being acquitted by a higher court in August 2007.

By the time Manmohan Singh was sworn in as Prime Minister on May 22, 2004, negotiations had begun in earnest among the constituents of the UPA as well as the left parties supporting it on putting together a 'National Common Minimum Programme' (NCMP). The document, released on May 29, was by and large a statement of intent containing sentences that were unexceptionable to everybody in the country. There were, however, a number of significant inclusions on economic policy issues and other issues to set apart the left-of-centre policies of the Congress-led UPA from those that had been followed by the NDA.

Even before the NCMP was finalised, four days after the election results became known and five days before Manmohan Singh was sworn in as the new Prime Minister, Indian stock market indices collapsed by 6 per cent on May 17, one of the sharpest falls ever in a single day. The crash occurred after spokespersons of the communist parties—A.B. Bardhan of the CPI and Sitaram Yechuri of the CPI(M)—sharply criticised the NDA government's policies of privatisation and disinvestment and stated that the Ministry of Disinvestment should be wound up. In an unusual move, former Finance Minister Jaswant Singh and Manmohan Singh came together to assure investors in stock exchanges that their money was safe. Both warned speculators against seeking to gain from a situation where one government was on its way out but the new government was not in place. The markets rebounded the following day, recovering much of the losses they had incurred on 'Black Monday'. As it subsequently transpired, after the new government was formed, the Ministry of Disinvestment was indeed wound up and made a department under the Ministry of Finance.

To return to the National Common Minimum Programme, the document included a statement to the effect that the government would not be 'generally' privatising profit-making Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs). It was stated that privatisations would take place on a consultative and case-by-case basis that should increase competitiveness and not decrease it. The NCMP said there would be no support for privatisation that led to emergence of any monopoly—an apparent reference to the takeover of the erstwhile public sector Indian Petrochemicals Corporation Limited (IPCL) by the Reliance group during the NDA government.

Talking of the need for economic reforms with a human face, the NCMP added that no decisions would be taken on the Employees' Provident Fund (EPF) without consultations with and the approval of the EPF Organisations' board of trustees. This was a demand of the left trade unions that were peeved that the Union government would reduce the interest rate on EPF deposits against the wishes of labour union representatives on the EPFO board. The NCMP talked of the need to strengthen PSUs, especially those manufacturing pharmaceuticals, and the public distribution system for foodgrain. The NCMP also laid considerable emphasis on improving the conditions of farmers and rural development. Significantly, it talked of the 'immediate' enactment of a National Employment Guarantee Programme and called for the imposition of an 'education cess' on all central taxes—both of which became reality (unlike some of the general statements of intent in the NCMP document). The NCMP also mentioned the need for an affirmative action plan to induct those belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in private enterprises.

In a reference to the manner in which the BJP had packed centrally-funded research institutions with nominees who were politically sympathetic to the party, the NCMP stated that 'academic excellence and professional competence' would be the only criteria governing appointments to institutions like the Indian Council of Historical Research ( ICHR ) , the Indian Council for Social Sciences Research (ICSSR) , the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the National Council for Educational Research & Training (NCERT) . There was also a statement in the NCMP on formulating a 'model law' to check communal violence.

The NCMP further stated that the Right to Information (RTI) Act would be made more progressive, participatory and meaningful. The National Development Council—a body that brings together chief ministers of all states in the country and important functionaries in the Union government—would be made a 'more meaningful instrument of cooperative federalism'. The document added that the Inter-State Council would be activated.

Besides the left, the NCMP also sought to keep in mind the sectional interests of the smaller constituents of the UPA. Thus, to

keep the TRS happy, the NCMP stated that the government would 'consider the demand for the formation of' a separate state of Telengana out of Andhra Pradesh 'at an appropriate time after due consultations and consensus'. For the RJD and the LJP, the NCMP stated that the economic package announced for Bihar after its division in 2000 would be implemented expeditiously. Among other things, the NCMP talked about the need to repeal POTA or the Prevention of Terrorism Act. Whereas the BJP had called for doing away with Article 370 of the Constitution of India (that provides a great deal of autonomy and a special status to the state of Jammu & Kashmir) and its allies in the NDA kept silent on the issue, the UPA's NCMP categorically stated that the Constitutional provision would be respected in 'letter and spirit'.

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There was considerable confusion and chaos in the BJP-led NDA government on the thrust and tenor of particular economic policy issues, including the efficacy of privatisation, the role of foreign capital and the need to amend labour laws (to name only three). Part of the chaos was a result of deep-rooted ideological differences among the disparate constituents of the NDA while some of it was a direct consequence of the compulsions of coalition politics.

This story was repeated in the UPA government. Consider, for instance, the tussle between the communists and the Congress on the desirability of increasing the sectoral caps on Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in insurance, civil aviation and telecommunications that was mooted by Finance Minister Palaniappan Chidambaram in his proposals for the Union budget for 2004–05, the first budget of the UPA government presented on July 8, 2004. The left remained unconvinced by the logic put forward by Chidambaram for raising the sectoral FDI caps. The Finance Minister said that if 51 per cent foreign investment was allowed in airports it should also be allowed in civil aviation—the left argued that majority foreign holdings should not be allowed in either case. Chidambaram said foreign investors already held 74 per cent in certain private telecom companies—that is, through foreign institutional investors and complex

cross-holdings—and that his proposal would merely impart transparency to the situation prevailing.

The most contentious issue in this context was the proposal to hike the FDI cap in the insurance sector. The Finance Minister argued that there was little to differentiate between a cap of 26 per cent and one of 49 per cent for insurance companies, except that a higher cap would attract more foreign investment. The left said it would not support any legislative amendment to this effect. Curiously, so did the BJP and its opposition to the move was articulated by none other than Vajpayee himself. This was a clear instance of opposition for the sake of opposition, for such a step may have been proposed by a BJP-led NDA government had it remained in power. As for the left, it has never been convinced of the need to have private investment—leave alone foreign investment—in insurance companies in the first place. Ultimately, Chidambaram had his way on the proposal to hike the FDI ceiling in telecom, but had to yield to the left in the area of insurance and airports.

The pulls and pressures of coalition politics on economic decision-making were also evident on the issue of increasing the prices of petroleum products. Whereas the United Front government had dilly-dallied and agonised for months on end over such a decision in 1997, the Vajpayee government too had succumbed to pressure from NDA constituents not to hike the prices of petroleum products between March 1998 and April 1999. Eventually, just before the BJP-led NDA coalition came to power for the second time in October 1999—exactly a day after the last round of polling—the then caretaker government of Vajpayee hiked the politically-sensitive price of diesel by a whopping 40 per cent.

The story was repeated all over again in 2004. During the first six months of the year, oil refining and marketing companies had not increased domestic prices of petrol and diesel although world crude oil prices had shot through the roof—by over 30 per cent in this period. The NDA government evidently did not want oil companies to increase the prices of petroleum products in view of the impending general elections. It was left to the UPA government to perform this politically unpopular chore and the prices of transportation fuels—petrol and diesel—went up on two occasions in July and August. Not surprisingly, the left expressed its unhappiness. Since

then, there have been a number of other occasions on which prices of petroleum products have become a bone of contention between the UPA government and its left allies. Typically, the left has succeeded in postponing impending hikes or moderating the extent of the rise in prices, though it has not succeeded in preventing them altogether. It has also had limited success in convincing the government that it should reduce the taxes imposed on petroleum products rather than allow oil companies to increase retail prices.

Those who perceive Manmohan Singh and Chidambaram as gung-ho liberalisers, individuals who are overly enamoured of not just the virtues of free enterprise capitalism but also its relevance for the Indian economy, may be exaggerating. Yet, both are not exactly flaming-red communists. Compulsions of coalition politics, however, have transformed them into left-of-centre social democrats in practice. Both have not only had to coexist with Marxists; they have had to necessarily attack the economic policies pursued by the NDA government, even if some of these policies were ideologically compatible with their way of thinking. Manmohan, the person who had initiated the process of disinvestment of shares of PSUs in the early 1990s, has had to justify the UPA government's decision not to privatise profit-making PSUs. He has talked about the need to create job opportunities for those belonging to the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes with captains of private corporate bodies. He has repeatedly asserted that the communists are 'patriots'. Chidambaram too, like his Prime Minister, has had to change. He described the left as his 'conscience keepers'.

This does not in any way mean that the left has always had its way with the UPA government. In fact, one of the key economic functionaries of the government, Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission, Montek Singh Ahluwalia who is a close confidante of the Prime Minister, is among those perceived as the most ardent proponents of liberalisation in India. Ahluwalia antagonised the left when he decided to include representatives of multilateral financing agencies like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) as well as multinational firms such as McKinsey and the Boston Consulting Group in various consultative groups constituted for the mid-term appraisal of the Tenth Five Year Plan (April 2002–March 2007).



Ahluwalia was working with the IMF before he moved into Yojana Bhavan at Manmohan Singh's request. He has been closely associated with the World Bank from the late 1960s. He should have been aware that mere mention of consultations with the Bank or the Fund, particularly coming from him, would be akin to waving a proverbial red rag before a raging bull as far as the left was concerned. What he may not have expected was that his actions would unite the left with its arch political opponents in the BJP, the RSS and NDA convenor George Fernandes.

All the left economists in the consultative groups put in their papers protesting against the decision to include representatives of international bodies in these groups. Ahluwalia tried to justify his action. In a letter written to the left (*The Hindu*, September 11, 2004), he claimed that the consultative groups would not be 'committees of outsiders', that there was 'enormous expertise' outside the Indian government and that it was necessary for the Planning Commission to make itself aware of the views of these experts instead of relying on one set of bureaucrats commenting on the views of another group of civil servants. He added that the members of the consultative groups would include experts from different walks of life, including representatives of the trade unions supported by the communist parties.

Ahluwalia stated:

Representatives of the World Bank and the ADB have been included in four of these groups that deal with areas in which these agencies are actively involved in supporting the Central government or state government projects ... By including individuals from outside the government in the consultative groups, we are not in any way handing over to them critical decision making involved in the mid-term appraisal on policies and policy corrections that need to be introduced to achieve the objectives laid out in the National Common Minimum Programme.

He added, '... we recognise fully that the individuals whom we hear have their own agendas, but I would like to assure you that we will subject the views expressed in our consultative process to careful professional scrutiny'. Moreover, he stated that the multilateral institutions 'in any case interact regularly with Central and state government agencies and this has in the past also included the Planning Commission'.

The left was far from convinced by these arguments. They pointed out that borrowing money from a multilateral funding agency is one thing; seeking its advice on policy matters is a different kettle of fish altogether. As A.B. Bardhan, general secretary of the CPI, asked, ‘... one can certainly informally consult and interact with as many experts as one wishes ... (but) why institutionalise the process by including representatives of such foreign institutions in regularly constituted panels?’

Eventually Ahluwalia had to retreat and the consultative groups were simply wound up. This meant there were no representatives of international bodies, but it also meant that the left lost its representatives on the consultative groups of the Planning Commission. Despite the controversy, Ahluwalia remained one of the most influential people in terms of formulating the economic policies of the UPA government.

Another issue on which the left locked horns with the UPA government related to disinvestment of shares in Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited (BHEL), an efficient government-owned company manufacturing power equipment. The government proposed that a mere 10 per cent of the company’s shares be divested, which would still leave the government in control of over 51 per cent of the company’s shares because it held 67.72 per cent of BHEL shares. The proposed 10 per cent divestment would be different from BHEL issuing new shares to the public. What was done in the case of the National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC) in October 2004 was a combination of divestment of government equity together with issuance of new shares. While this move was also not approved by the left, its opposition was muted.

North Block argued that small investors would gain by investing in BHEL shares as they did when they invested in shares of NTPC, Maruti Udyog and the Oil & Natural Gas Corporation. But the left did not buy this argument. The communists claimed that divestment would be the ‘first step’ towards privatising BHEL. Critics of the left argued that if the Left Front government in West Bengal had no problems privatising PSUs in the state, including Kolkata’s Great Eastern Hotel, the Marxists should not be speaking with a forked tongue in Delhi.

Quite unlike many Indian PSUs characterised by sloth, inefficiency and corruption, BHEL is not just highly profitable; it is able to compete

effectively with global giants like ABB and Siemens in manufacturing power equipment. The NCMP stated that the government would retain managerial control over the *navaratna* ('nine jewels') PSUs while allowing them to raise funds from the capital market. The Congress party's election manifesto had stated that privatisation would be done in a selective manner and divestment would not be resorted to merely to raise revenue but to increase competition and consumer welfare. The position of the left was supported by a section within the Congress, which included individuals such as the then Petroleum & Natural Gas Minister Mani Shankar Aiyar who describes himself as a Nehruvian socialist. This section pointed out that BHEL's equity is being sought to be divested merely to raise revenue, not to enhance competition or for the welfare of consumers.

One section in the UPA wanted to call 'the bluff of the left'. This group argued that the Communists had no choice but to support the UPA government and that the rhetoric of the left was prompted by the impending assembly elections in West Bengal and Kerala that were scheduled for April–May 2006. The communists, however, argued there was nothing to distinguish between the economic policies of the BJP and those of the Congress. Eventually, the government decided not to divest BHEL's shares.

The dispute between the left and the Congress did not have any impact on the smooth functioning of the government. Both the communists and the members of the Congress hated the BJP more than they hated one another while the BJP was in a state of disarray. The Congress, especially Sonia Gandhi, realised that it could not push the Marxists beyond a point simply because the UPA government would lose its majority in the Lok Sabha without the support of the 61 left MPs. While the shadow boxing between the Congress and the left continued, the issue of divestment kept coming up again and again. What finally stopped the disinvestment programme was not just the opposition of the left but when a constituent of the UPA, the DMK, joined the left in vehemently opposing the disinvestment of shares in Neyveli Lignite Corporation, a Tamil Nadu-based PSU.

Disinvestment was not the only contentious issue between the UPA and the left. There were a whole host of economic issues on which there were serious differences—whether FDI should be

allowed in retail trade or not; the policy on special economic zones; pension reforms; the interest rate on EPF deposits; patent laws; the list went on (see chapter on economic policy). Recognising that many of these disputes could not be settled once and for all, the UPA and the left agreed to form a co-ordination committee that could act as a mechanism for evolving at least a temporary consensus whenever one such issue came to the fore. The mechanism seemed to be working reasonably well, till the friction over the proposed disinvestment in BHEL saw the left leaders announcing that they would boycott all further meetings of the co-ordination committee, since their opinion was in any case not being respected.

It took four months before the co-ordination committee was revived in late-October 2005, despite the fact that the proposal to divest BHEL shares was dropped by the Ministry of Finance. In one area, the left, the Congress—at least, a large section of the party—and the rest of the UPA came together, which was on the expeditious enactment of the National Rural Employment Guarantee (NREG) Act to implement what is described as the world's biggest and most ambitious social security scheme to provide work to millions of unemployed individuals living in rural areas. There was considerable resistance from within the UPA government to implement the NREG programme that aims at providing guaranteed employment for 100 days a year to one able-bodied member of each and every rural household who volunteers to do unskilled manual labour. There was a view in the government, including in the Ministry of Finance, that the programme would be too expensive, ineffective in alleviating poverty in rural areas and would lead to large-scale corruption and wastage of public funds. It was, therefore, suggested that the programme be confined to only 150 (out of the 600-odd) districts in the country and that too only for those belonging to families living below the poverty line.

This view was vehemently opposed not just by the left but also by key members of the National Advisory Council (NAC) headed by Sonia Gandhi—including social activist Aruna Roy and economist Jean Dreze. The left and these NAC members saw this as a dilution of the promises contained in the NCMP. The government had to eventually concede to the views of the NAC members—the NREG

programme was not confined to those living below the poverty line and was initially implemented in 200 districts and would be extended to the entire country over time. Dreze resigned from the NAC on this issue and so did Roy later because she was unhappy with the way the government was ‘diluting’ the Right to Information Act, among other issues. The coverage of the NREG was increased to 330 districts (or more than half the country’s geographical area) in the Union budget presented by Chidambaram in February 2007.

Sonia Gandhi was perceived to have played a critical role in persuading those in the government who were sceptical about the efficacy of the NREG programme. Sonia has had to play this role—namely, that of an arbitrator between the left and a government led by the party she headed—on a number of occasions. For instance, she wrote a letter (quoted in *The Times of India*, February 6, 2007) to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (her nominee) urging the government to inquire into the possible impact of allowing 100 per cent foreign investment in retail trade—a proposal that was being mooted by Industry & Commerce Minister Kamal Nath, reportedly with the support of Manmohan Singh and Chidambaram (Sonia’s letter was leaked to the media). Her comments on the need to ensure that prime farmland was not acquired for setting up industrial concerns, at a conclave of Congress chief ministers in Nainital, also contributed to the government in general (and Nath in particular) shifting its policies on the establishment of special economic zones (SEZs).

In all these instances, Sonia—and not Manmohan—was seen to be the more left-of-centre, politically mature and accommodative leader of the two. This image has arguably served the Congress well. While the presence of Manmohan and Chidambaram in the government assures the proponents of neo-liberal economic reforms that the UPA is not hostile to their concerns, Sonia ensures that the Congress also has a socialist image for some people. At a plenary session in Hyderabad in January 2006, Parliamentary Affairs Minister Priya Ranjan Das Munshi described the Congress as ‘India’s greatest left party’. He was followed by a junior party functionary M.I. Shahnawaz, who described Sonia Gandhi as an ‘extreme left leader.’

The NAC helped Sonia project this image, but in March 2006 she quit the council and resigned as MP in the wake of the ‘office of profit’ controversy. The controversy broke out after a junior

Congress functionary from Uttar Pradesh moved the Election Commission seeking to disqualify Jaya Bachchan, a Rajya Sabha MP from the Samajwadi Party, for holding an ‘office of profit’, namely as chairperson of the UP Film Development Corporation. The law in India prevents legislators from holding any other government or quasi-government position for which a remuneration is payable. The EC recommended her disqualification to the President of India, who acted upon it on March 16, 2006. This snowballed into a major controversy. Each party came out with its own list of MPs belonging to rival parties who they claimed were holding offices of profit. Among the many dozens of MPs cutting across political lines who faced the sudden threat of disqualification were Sonia (as chairperson of NAC) and Lok Sabha Speaker Somnath Chatterjee.

Sonia’s resignation from the Lok Sabha—like her earlier ‘sacrifice’ of the Prime Minister’s post—saw the Congress seeking to turn the tables on the opposition and occupying the high moral ground. She was eventually re-elected from Rae Bareilly with an impressive margin of victory. Her exit from the office-of-profit controversy also made it easier for the political class to close ranks and enact suitable legislation to ensure that dozens of positions held by MPs of all hues in central and state government bodies were excluded from being treated as offices of profit.

Some other MPs were not so lucky. They were caught on hidden cameras accepting bribes for raising questions in Parliament and were expelled by committees of the two Houses of Parliament. Their appeal against the expulsion briefly threatened to become a point of friction between the judiciary and the legislature, but such an eventuality was avoided after the Supreme Court upheld Parliament’s decision.

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The phrase ‘compulsions of coalition politics’ usually signifies the pressures that are exerted on the largest party in the coalition by its smaller allies or supporting parties. However, this is only one aspect of the compulsions that characterise politics in an era of coalitions. Another, perhaps equally important, aspect of the compulsions of coalition politics is the manner in which the leading party in the

coalition has to accommodate sectional interests (from within the party and outside it) in an attempt to widen its support base. An example of this aspect may be found in the way in which the Congress aggressively sought to project itself as a champion of the interests of OBCs (other backward classes) by reserving seats for them in higher educational institutions that receive financial support from the government. In fact, there was a move to reserve seats for OBC candidates even in higher educational institutions that were not aided by the government that did not materialise.

Though there were enough supporters of the Congress (as well as the BJP) that were ideologically opposed to this move, they were clearly in a minority. For the record, the entire political class supported the UPA government's position on reservation of seats for candidates belonging to OBCs in government-aided higher educational institutions. The contrast from the situation in 1990 when the V.P. Singh government implemented the Mandal Commission's recommendations by reserving 27 per cent of government jobs for OBCs was stark—at that time, the Congress and the BJP had opposed the decision, ostensibly not because the parties were per se opposed to job reservation for OBCs, but, they said, because they were unhappy about the 'manner' in which the decision had been implemented 'in haste'.

The UPA took much of the wind out of the sails of those agitating against the OBC quota in higher educational institutions by assuring them that the quota would not eat into the number of seats available for 'general' candidates—those who do not qualify for reservation of any sort. The government promised that the number of seats in higher educational institutions would be increased so that the OBC quota could be accommodated without affecting the others. In effect, this meant that the number of seats would have to go up by as much as 54 per cent in one jump—a fact that prompted many critics to ask why the seats had not been increased for so many years if it was possible to make such a sizeable addition at one go. The February 2007 Union budget imposed a one per cent cess on all central taxes to fund the proposed increase in seats in colleges and technical institutes. This was in addition to the two per cent education cess that had been imposed in 2004 to fund investment in primary and secondary education.

On the issue of reserving jobs for those belonging to the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes in private enterprises, the political class was deeply divided. Even within the Congress, there were differences of opinion. Whereas Meira Kumar, Minister for Social Justice & Empowerment—daughter of the late Jagjivan Ram, India's first dalit Union minister—favoured an element of compulsion to ensure that entrepreneurs employed individuals belonging to the SCs and the STs, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (among others in the Congress) was more inclined to 'persuade' industrialists to employ people from disadvantaged sections of Indian society. (The 2001 census indicated that the number of those belonging to the SCs and STs would be in the region of 250 million, or roughly one-fourth of India's population that year.)

Speaking to corporate captains at the annual conference of the Confederation of Indian Industry in New Delhi on April 18, 2006, Prime Minister Singh said, 'I urge you to give more attention to questions of social and economic discrimination and deprivation, to the educational and health status of our people, to employment generation, to social security and to the employment of women and the minorities.' He did not mention mandatory reservation of jobs for those belonging to the SCs and the STs in companies that are privately owned and controlled.

The fact that the private sector has been providing more employment opportunities than government corporations in recent years is an important reason why there has been demand for job reservation in private corporate entities. A group of ministers headed by Union Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar stated that job reservation in the private sector would be possible only by introducing new legislation after amending the country's Constitution. But the government demurred on introducing a bill in Parliament mandating job reservation in private corporate bodies.

The UPA government also set up a panel headed by Justice Rajinder Sachar, a former Chief Justice of the Delhi High Court, to study the social, educational and economic status of Muslims in India. The report submitted by the panel in November 2006 revealed that the Muslims were among the most economically, socially and educationally deprived communities in the country.



In fact, in some aspects and some states—including left-ruled West Bengal—they were worse off than even the SCs and STs. Soon after the report was submitted, the Prime Minister told a meeting of the NDC that Muslims should have ‘first charge’ on the resources of the government. This statement predictably aroused the ire of the BJP, which accused Manmohan Singh and his party of ‘minority appeasing’, a charge that has been levelled by the Sangh parivar against the Congress and the left for as long as the ideological fraternity has existed. Even before Manmohan Singh’s statement before the NDC meeting of chief ministers, the BJP had been extremely critical of the Sachar Committee’s attempts at ascertaining the number and the proportion of Muslims in the Indian defence services.

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One of the first tasks that evidently preoccupied the newly-installed UPA government was to replace governors and lieutenant governors nominated by the NDA, most of whom were elderly leaders of the BJP, with individuals who were aligned to the Congress. This ‘unpleasant’ task was one of the first responsibilities of Union Minister for Home Affairs Shivraj Patil. Between June and December 2004, as many as 19 states or Union territories (UTs) saw their governors or lieutenant governors (LGs) being replaced one after the other. The UPA government—and the Congress leadership—were in such a hurry to replace these constitutional functionaries that in eight states/UTs, the incumbent governor/LG was replaced by a person who held charge for a few days or a few weeks while the name of the replacement was finalised.

In June 2004, in Delhi, LG Vijai Kapoor was replaced by B.L. Joshi. In the same month, in Kerala, Governor T.N. Chaturvedi (a former BJP MP and Governor of Karnataka who was holding additional charge after the death of Sikander Bakht) was replaced by R.L. Bhatia (a former Congress Minister of State for External Affairs). In Madhya Pradesh, K.L. Seth was replaced by Balram Jakhar (a former Congress Union Minister and Speaker of the Lok Sabha).

The following month, in July, five Governors/LGs were changed. In Goa, Kidar Nath Sahni (a senior BJP leader) was asked to leave and,

curiously, another NDA nominee Mohammed Fazal (former Member, Planning Commission who was then Governor of Maharashtra) was asked to hold additional charge for 15 days before he was replaced by S.C. Jamir (former Congress Chief Minister of Nagaland). In Gujarat, Kailashpati Mishra (a senior BJP leader) was replaced by Jakkhar for 22 days before another former Congress Union Minister Nawal Kishore Sharma took over charge. In Haryana, the incumbent governor Babu Parmanand was first replaced by a NDA nominated governor from neighbouring Punjab, O.P. Verma for only five days before A.R. Kidwai replaced him. In the UT of Pondicherry, N.N. Jha (a former diplomat nominated by the BJP) was replaced by M.M. Lakhera for 12 days before Mukut Mithi (former Congress Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh) took over charge. Perhaps the most significant replacement of a governor took place in Uttar Pradesh where Vishnu Kant Shastri (an old BJP hand) was replaced by Sudarshan Agarwal (Governor of neighbouring Uttaranchal) for six days before he, in turn, was replaced by T. Rajeshwar (a former senior police officer who used to head the Intelligence Bureau).

In August, only one governor was replaced; in Manipur, Arvind Dave was replaced by S.S. Sidhu (both former bureaucrats). For inexplicable reasons, nothing happened on this front over the next couple of months. In November, the UPA government seemed to be making up for lost time by replacing governors in six states.

What happened in Tamil Nadu was rather interesting. The then Chief Minister J. Jayalalithaa was keen that the incumbent governor of the state, P.S. Ramamohan Rao, not be replaced by the Union government. So when Shivraj Patil called her up to tell her that the governor would be changed, she promptly gave the media a verbatim account of her conversation with the Union Home Minister. Her political opponents claimed that she had secretly recorded her phone conversation with Patil, which would have been both 'illegal' and 'improper'. Jayalalithaa, on the other hand, claimed that she had a remarkable memory and hence was able to recall virtually each and every word of her conversation with Patil. The issue at stake was that Patil was merely 'informing' her of the impending change in governors rather than 'consulting' her—or even seeking her prior approval—as convention demanded. On October 28, Patil informed

her that Ramamohan Rao would be replaced by then Andhra Pradesh Governor Surjit Singh Barnala who was, ironically, a former Chief Minister of Punjab belonging to the Shiromani Akali Dal, one of the BJP's most faithful allies in the NDA.

The DMK, Jayalalithaa's principal political opponent in Tamil Nadu, was clearly comfortable with Barnala with whom the party had a long and cordial relationship. In early-1991, when Chandra Shekhar was Prime Minister of India, the Union government dismissed the DMK government in Tamil Nadu headed by M. Karunanidhi using Article 356 of the Constitution—action under this provision is normally taken after a state governor submits a report recommending imposition of President's rule on the ground that there has been a breakdown in the constitutional order. Jayalalithaa and her AIADMK had been actively pressing for dismissal of the Karunanidhi government and imposition of President's rule. Barnala, who was then the governor of Tamil Nadu, refused to submit the kind of report that New Delhi wanted and instead chose to resign on 'moral grounds'. It is not surprising then that the DMK had a soft corner for Barnala. This relationship was further cemented when DMK and the SAD were both part of the United Front governments headed by H.D. Deve Gowda and I.K. Gujral and thereafter, in the NDA government under Vajpayee in 1999. In fact, it is believed that Barnala played a key role in persuading DMK to join NDA after AIADMK parted ways with the BJP-led alliance.

Returning to the dismissal of governors by the UPA government in November 2004, governors were placed in five other states namely, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa, Punjab and Rajasthan. In Andhra Pradesh, Barnala was replaced by former Congress Chief Minister of Maharashtra Sushil Kumar Shinde. In Bihar, Rama Jois was replaced for four days by Ved Marwah (a former senior police officer who was then governor of neighbouring Jharkhand) before Buta Singh (a former Congress Union Minister) took over. In Orissa, M.M. Rajendran was replaced by another former Congress Union Minister Rameshwar Thakur. In Punjab, O.P. Verma was replaced by A.R. Kidwai for 13 days before General S.F. Rodrigues took charge. In Rajasthan, Madan Lal Khurana (former BJP Chief Minister of Delhi) was replaced by T. Rajeshwar (then Governor of UP) for a week before Pratibha Patil took over.

Four more governors were to be replaced in December 2004. In Arunachal Pradesh, former bureaucrat V.C. Pande was replaced by a former diplomat S.K. Singh. In Jharkhand, Ved Marwah was replaced by Congress loyalist Syed Sibtey Razi and in Maharashtra, Mohammad Fazal was replaced by former Congress Chief Minister of Karnataka S.M. Krishna. In West Bengal, former BJP MP and industrialist Viren J. Shan was replaced by Gopalkrishna Gandhi, a former diplomat and the youngest grandson of the Mahatma.

The BJP was predictably upset with the ‘undignified’ manner in which the UPA government removed these constitutional functionaries. Advani claimed that the NDA had waited for the terms of governors or LGs to be over before nominating their replacements. As subsequent events proved, the decision to replace NDA/BJP-nominated governors with individuals who were obviously ‘sympathetic’ to the Congress and the UPA, turned out to be significant. The governors of Goa, Jharkhand, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh were to be embroiled in controversies over the next few years and were accused of acting in a blatantly partisan manner.

In late-January 2005, the 32-month-old BJP led government in Goa headed by Manohar Parrikar faced a crisis. The government had a wafer-thin majority in the state assembly: 21 out of the 40 seats. Three BJP MLAs switched allegiances to become ‘independent’ legislators and withdrew support to the government. Governor Jamir instructed Parrikar to prove his majority on the floor of the assembly immediately and asked the Speaker to convene a special session for this purpose. The incumbent government could obtain the support of only 18 MLAs whereas 6 MLAs voted against the confidence motion. Even as the assembly session was in progress discussing the confidence vote, a group of Congress legislators and former BJP MLAs were at Raj Bhavan meeting Governor Jamir. The Speaker had disqualified the former BJP MLAs under the Anti-Defection Act and the Congress had walked out of the assembly in protest. These Congress MLAs were now trying to persuade Jamir that the manner in which the BJP was trying to ‘engineer’ a majority in the assembly amounted to a breakdown of the constitutional order and he should hence dismiss the Parrikar government.

Even as the BJP MLAs came out of the assembly session claiming they had won the vote of confidence, a messenger from Raj Bhawan handed over a message to Parrikar telling him his government had been dismissed. Pratapsingh Rane of the Congress was sworn in as Chief Minister at midnight on the same day and given 32 days to prove his majority. Fillipe Rodrigues, one of the dissident BJP MLAs who became 'independent' was made Deputy Chief Minister. The BJP, not surprisingly, cried foul and accused Jamir of having turned the Raj Bhawan into the local Congress headquarters. Neutral observers also conceded that the governor's role in the entire episode had been far from neutral.

A couple of months later, in March 2005, gubernatorial incumbents were to come under a cloud again, this time in Jharkhand and neighbouring Bihar. In both states, assembly elections had been held simultaneously and had thrown up hung assemblies with no pre-election alliance having a clear majority. In Jharkhand, the BJP-led NDA was just short of a majority and it seemed obvious that the governor would invite the leader of the BJP to form the next state government. In a controversial move, Governor Syed Sibtey Razi decided that the UPA led by the JMM's Shibu Soren was better placed to obtain a majority in the house and invited him to form the government. Soren remained Chief Minister for just 10 days from March 2 to March 12, before he lost a vote of confidence in the assembly. Faced with no choice, Razi was forced to invite former BJP chief minister Arjun Munda to once again head the Jharkhand government.

The BJP's tenure at the helm in Jharkhand ultimately proved to be shortlived too. In September 2006, about 18 months after Munda was sworn in as Chief Minister, his government fell as a group of independents and MLAs belonging to smaller parties withdrew support. The hectic negotiations that followed ended up in a rather unusual compromise. Madhu Koda, an independent MLA, became Chief Minister with the support of the entire UPA.

The controversies surrounding the actions of former Governor of Bihar, Buta Singh and UP Governor T. Rajeshwar have been detailed in Chapter 5 of the book. The key point to note is that despite the presence of a number of regional parties in the UPA coalition,

the Congress did not shy away from first appointing sympathetic governors in states and then, using their discretionary power to install 'friendly' state governments or destabilise 'unfriendly' ones.

Cynics might point out that the one state in which the Congress lost power through a change in political alliances after the UPA came to the power in New Delhi was Karnataka—one of the few in which the NDA appointed governor had not been replaced by a UPA nominee. On February 3, 2006, H.D. Kumaraswamy, younger son of former Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda, was sworn in as the 18th Chief Minister of Karnataka and B.S. Yediyurappa of the BJP was sworn in as Deputy Chief Minister. Weeks before he was sworn in, Karnataka politics had been in a state of turmoil after Kumaraswamy led almost all the MLAs of the Janata Dal (Secular) out of the ruling coalition with the Congress headed by Dharam Singh (who had become Chief Minister of the state in May 2004).

Deve Gowda publicly 'disowned' his son and claimed that he was not supporting his son's decision to tie up with the BJP to destabilise the Dharam Singh led coalition government of the Congress and the JD(S). He even claimed that it was saddest day of his life and the darkest moment of his political career to see his son allying with a non-secular party like the BJP. At the same time, he blamed the Congress for compelling Kumaraswamy to leave the Congress-led coalition by not treating the JD(S) with the respect it deserved. The former Prime Minister's protestations were regarded by most as insincere and hypocritical. Months later, the cynics were to be proved right when Deve Gowda made peace with his son. Whether this was because blood is thicker than water or because power is more seductive than ideology is a matter of conjecture.

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Apart from a wide range of economic policies, another major bone of contention between the UPA government and its left allies was Indo-US relations. While the UPA government saw the new-found bonhomie between India and the US as one of its major foreign policy successes, the left viewed the same development as a violation of the NCMP and a deviation from the country's traditionally non-aligned

foreign policy. Two issues, in particular, became sticking points. The first was a civilian nuclear agreement signed between American President George Bush and Manmohan Singh in July 2005, under which the US would lift long-standing sanctions against India's nuclear establishment and facilitate transfer of technology and fuel for nuclear power plants. The sanctions had been imposed in 1974 after India conducted nuclear tests for the first time.

The UPA and Manmohan insisted that the deal would not compromise India's national sovereignty and would help the country meet its growing power needs. The left maintained that the agreement did compromise India's sovereignty and strategic interests. It was supported in this view not only by many eminent scientists and administrators who had earlier held top positions in the country's nuclear establishment, but also by the BJP. All of them pointed out that the UPA was being less than honest in claiming that the deal would be some kind of panacea for ensuring India's energy security. Nuclear power, they pointed out, constituted less than three per cent of the total electricity generated in India in 2006 and even the most optimistic projections did not envisage this proportion exceeding 10 per cent over the next couple of decades.

The other issue that rankled with the left in particular was India's decision to vote against Iran in the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) at a time when the Bush administration was exerting considerable pressure on Iran to stop developing its nuclear facilities. The left saw this as further evidence of the Manmohan Singh government's willingness to be co-opted into playing a supportive role to US global interests. On both issues, despite the vehement protests of the left and even veiled threats that the support of the left to the UPA should not be taken for granted, the government ultimately had its way.

The left was not the only political force uncomfortable with what it saw as an overly cosy relationship between New Delhi and Washington DC. Even within the Congress, there were sections that favoured a more arm's length relationship with the US. Though these leaders never publicly expressed their reservations on the direction foreign policy was taking, they were widely perceived to be out of tune

with the prevailing official mood. Among them was the then Minister for Petroleum & Natural Gas, Mani Shankar Aiyar, a former diplomat and self-confessed Nehruvian socialist. His ardent advocacy of the expeditious completion of a gas pipeline from Iran to India through Pakistan did not exactly endear him to the Bush administration, which was at the time very hostile to Iran. When Aiyar was replaced by Murli Deora—who had once been invited for dinner in the White House—some saw the ‘hidden hand’ of the US at work.

Whereas Aiyar continued holding the ministerial portfolios of Panchayati Raj, Youth & Sports Affairs and was also asked to take over charge of the Ministry for Development of North Eastern Region, former External Affairs Minister Kunwar Natwar Singh was not so fortunate. In August 2006, he and his son along with their associates were named in the report of the Paul Volcker Committee set up by the United Nations Secretary General to inquire into the food-for-oil scandal involving the Saddam Hussein government in Iraq. The report alleged that Natwar Singh, his family members and their associates had cornered lucrative contracts from the Iraq government. The UPA government set up two inquiry committees that quickly upheld the findings of the Volcker panel. Natwar Singh and his son Jagat Singh, a member of the legislative assembly of Rajasthan, were both expelled from the Congress in September. After his expulsion, Natwar Singh became a bitter critic of the Manmohan Singh government’s pro-US foreign policy. He went on to join the Samajwadi Party in the run-up to the elections in UP.

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For the better part of the first three years of the UPA government, the going appeared rather smooth. It seemed that while there were predictable tensions on economic and foreign policy issues, in particular between the Congress and the left, these had not been allowed to get out of hand. More importantly, the main opposition party, the BJP, seemed to have completely abdicated the opposition political space to the left, ‘too busy fighting a war against itself’ as one senior BJP leader privately acknowledged to the authors.



The electoral setbacks in Bihar and Jharkhand may have subdued the euphoria within the UPA, but the Congress remained confident that its fortunes were looking up and those of the BJP were on the decline. Elections to the state assemblies of Punjab and Uttarakhand in February 2007 dramatically changed the mood. Both had been Congress-ruled states and the party lost in both. In Punjab, the number of seats held by the Congress came down from 62 in 2002 to 44 in the 117-member assembly and in Uttarakhand from 36 to 21 in a 70-member assembly. In both states, the major gainer was the BJP, which increased its tally of seats from 3 to 19 in Punjab and from 19 to 34 in Uttarakhand.

While anti-incumbency feelings in both states may have been fuelled by several factors, one major reason common to them was clearly the sharp rise in prices of essential commodities, in particular food items. Whereas till August 2006, inflation in India had largely been driven by high prices of petroleum products, in the following months the rise in prices was mainly a consequence of a spurt in the prices of pulses, wheat, onions, edible oils, milk, fruits and vegetables. Politicians in India are well aware that when inflation is driven by surging prices of food items, it quickly translates into popular resentment against the government.

Analysing the results of the assembly elections, Sonia conceded that the failure of the government to control prices had cost the party dear in Punjab and Uttarakhand. It was not just the Left and the BJP that were attacking the so-called neo-liberal policies favoured by Manmohan and Chidambaram. Sections of Congressmen were unhappy that despite claims of working for the *aam aadmi* and reviving the *garibi hatao* slogan used by Indira Gandhi in the early 1970s, the government was increasingly being perceived as not sufficiently sensitive to the concerns of the poor and the underprivileged. It was also becoming clear to Congressmen that complacency regarding the apparently sorry state of the BJP could prove costly. Mere talk of how the Indian economy was growing at nine per cent plus each year—one of the fastest in the world—would not be enough to retain power either.

The impact of this apprehension was evident in the Union budget for 2007–08 presented by Chidambaram on February 28, 2007. The

Harvard-educated lawyer with a reputation for being market-friendly was no longer waxing eloquent about economic reforms. Rather, the thrust of his budget speech was on what needed to be done to make growth more 'inclusive'. The Budget surprised most people by being more left-of-centre than expected, with the Finance Minister's speech repeatedly emphasising rural development, health care, education, agriculture and irrigation.

At the time of writing in September 2007, one section of the Congress seemed to be wary of repeating the mistake the NDA had made with its 'India Shining' campaign. There was also a view within the party that the UPA government should 'publicise' its pro-poor programmes and policies more effectively. Whether that will lead to sufficient action on the ground or will merely lead to a leftward tilt in rhetoric could well determine how well the Congress fares when the 15th general elections take place.

## Chapter 3

# Indian National Congress: Alive, but Not Quite Kicking

India's oldest and largest political party, the Indian National Congress (INC), is far from being the dominant party that it was for the better part of the first half of a century of independent India's existence. True, the Congress is not merely the single largest party in Parliament with 145 (out of 543) members when the 14th Lok Sabha was constituted in May 2004. At the end of 2006, the party was in power—alone or in coalition with others—in 15 of the country's 30 assemblies. In two other assemblies (Tamil Nadu and Jharkhand), the Congress is supporting the ruling coalition but not participating in the state governments. By way of contrast, the BJP was ruling in only four states on its own (Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh), and was part of the ruling coalition in two others (Bihar and Karnataka) and its ally, the Biju Janata Dal, was ruling in Orissa.

These statistics might seem to suggest that the Congress is not doing all that badly. What they do not reveal is the fact that the party is extremely weak in at least four states and that between them account for over 200 of the 543 seats in the Lok Sabha. These states include the largest state in the country, Uttar Pradesh (80 Lok Sabha seats), besides West Bengal (42 seats), Bihar (40 seats) and Tamil Nadu (39 seats).

Die-hard supporters of the Congress insist that it is the 'natural party of governance' in India. This phrase was used by Sonia Gandhi at the Guwahati conclave of Congress chief ministers in April 2002. Yet, even in a best-case scenario for the party, it is difficult to see the Congress winning more than 35 seats in general elections from the four states mentioned. What that means is that the Congress would have to win at least 240 seats from the remaining 341 in 24 states and seven Union Territories to win a majority in the Lok Sabha, certainly

a tall order if not impossible. It would seem, therefore, that the best the Congress can hope for is to lead a coalition government in New Delhi.

Yet, until as late as December 2003 the party appeared strangely reluctant to concede that the country had entered an era of coalition politics in which single party governments were ruled out in the foreseeable future. This presented an interesting contrast with the BJP. Like the Congress, the BJP till 1998 saw coalitions as an aberration of sorts and insisted that they were a temporary phenomenon. The polity, the BJP then maintained, was inevitably becoming bipolar, with the Congress and the BJP representing two poles. Subsequently, following the 1998 and 1999 general elections, which threw up hung Parliaments, the BJP modified its earlier position and accepted that coalitions were here to stay at least for some time. The Congress, on the other hand, continued to staunchly assert that it was capable of governing India on its own. However, in the run-up to the 14th general elections, the Congress changed its position and acknowledged that it would have to forge alliances in several states if it was to make a serious bid for power in New Delhi. In other words, many within the Congress tacitly accepted that the new era of coalition politics may not be short-lived.

Ironically, the Congress was less rigid about governing India on its own at a point when its dominance in the country's polity was unchallenged. The very first elected Union government formed in independent India included not only people from outside the Congress or any other political party—like the eminent scientist C.H. Bhabha, Dr. John Mathai and C.D. Deshmukh—but even members of Opposition parties like B.R. Ambedkar of the Republican Party of India and Shyama Prasad Mookerjee of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh. Of course, it was the fact that the Congress had an overwhelming majority in the Lok Sabha and was under no threat from any other party that allowed Jawaharlal Nehru to show such magnanimity towards his political opponents. Conversely, it is the fact that the Congress is today fighting for its political survival that makes it very difficult for the party to cede any ground to other parties, except when it is compelled to do so.

In June 2003, the Congress party convened a conclave (*vichar manthan shivir* or, literally, a meeting to churn ideas) at Shimla, the capital of Himachal Pradesh where the party had just been returned to power. During the conclave, the party diluted its position somewhat on forming coalitions to oppose the BJP-led NDA. Unlike the similar session held five years earlier in September 1998 at Pachmarhi, Madhya Pradesh, this time round the Congress did not expressly state that coalition governments were an aberration in Indian politics, and that the party should fight on its own under most circumstances and seek allies only when absolutely necessary and in states where the party was especially weak. At Shimla, however, the Congress seemed to be coming to terms with the fact that its weakness in states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu would not be a passing phase and that given the reality on the ground, the party would have to be more open to the idea of a broad anti-BJP coalition.

The Congress President—like all Congress presidents in the past—has been surrounded by sycophants and they ensured that the message coming through from Shimla was that the Congress would not be averse to tying up with ‘secular’ parties provided the partners accepted Sonia Gandhi’s candidature as Prime Minister. This predictably aroused the ire of parties like the Samajwadi Party and, of course, the Nationalist Congress Party whose very existence had been founded on the premise that a person of foreign origin should not aspire to hold the highest political position in the country. (Ironically, the NCP subsequently split on the issue of extending support to the Congress headed by Sonia Gandhi with former Lok Sabha Speaker Purno A Sangma, parting ways with Sharad Pawar who went on to become Agriculture Minister in the UPA government.) These parties pointed out that it was premature on the part of the Congress to decide who would lead a coalition even before such a coalition came into existence. While Mulayam Singh Yadav had been ‘soft’ on the issue of Sonia’s foreign origin and so also was a section within the NCP, Sharad Pawar and others were of the view that the Congress should not adopt a ‘big brotherly’ attitude even before an anti-NDA front was formed. The left had, in any case, contended that Sonia’s foreign origin was a non-issue, particularly after the Supreme Court had categorically rejected a petition challenging her Indian citizenship.

After the shock of the results of the December 2003 state assembly elections, the Congress party seemed to have realised that it would need allies if it were to put up a serious challenge to the NDA in the 14th Lok Sabha elections, which seemed likely to be held ahead of schedule. In late December 2003, after Sonia Gandhi addressed a public rally at Mumbai's Shivaji Park, she told journalists that the Congress would not impose its leadership on the secular alliance that it was trying to forge. This was interpreted as a signal from the Congress to parties like the NCP and the SP to join a broad anti-NDA alliance without the apprehension that they would necessarily have to accept Sonia as the leader of the alliance and hence a prime ministerial candidate. The decision on who should become Prime Minister, Sonia said, would be left to the people. The day after her statement to the media, however, Congress spokesperson S. Jaipal Reddy and other party leaders bent over backwards to clarify Sonia's remarks, insisting that she remained the leader of the Congress and, therefore, the party's candidate for the post of Prime Minister. Not surprisingly, neither the NCP nor the SP were particularly enthused by the 'clarification'. The Congress' position on coalitions remained as nebulous as ever.

Whatever may have been the formal position of the Congress party on coalitions or on the issue of building a 'secular' alliance of parties opposed to the BJP and the NDA in the run-up to the 14th general elections, the reality on the ground was far more complex. Barely a week after the confabulation of top leaders of the Congress party at Shimla in July 2003, the party's MP from Malda, West Bengal, the late A. B. A. Ghani Khan Chowdhury decided to tie up with the BJP to control the board of the Malda zila parishad (or district council). The parishad had been controlled by the ruling Left Front in the state for 15 years. In 2003, out of the 33 members in the council, the Congress had wrested 15, the Left Front had 16 while the BJP and the Trinamool had one member each. Ghani Khan Chowdhury successfully wooed the BJP councillor to support the Congress-led alliance, at a time when the two largest political parties in the country were bitterly opposed to one another in every other part of the country.

Incidentally, Ghani Khan Chowdhury had been elected on the Congress ticket no less than seven times in a row since 1980, that

too, from a constituency in a state that has been a bastion of the communist parties and where the Left Front has been in power continuously since 1977. When he was asked why he had allied with the BJP to control the Malda zila parishad, he stated categorically, '[To] hell with party policies. To me people come first. By capturing the board, the Congress will bring relief to the people oppressed under the CPI(M). That's my first priority,' he told the *Indian Express* on July 14, 2003.

## Performing on the Periphery

In recent years, the electoral performance of the Congress has hardly been consistent. The outcome of the 1998 and 1999 general elections were the worst in the history of the party before a moderate revival in the 2004 elections. Yet, the party had put up a creditable show in the assembly elections, not just those held after 1999, but even in those held between the two general elections when the NDA was in power in New Delhi. This is because the electoral performance of the Congress has in most cases merely mirrored the rise and fall of the NDA's popularity. In other words, the Congress has done little on its own to win over new sections of the electorate, but has been content to cash in on anti-incumbency sentiments.

When the Vajpayee government fell in April 1999 and mid-term elections to the Lok Sabha became inevitable, the Congress saw itself as a serious contender for power. Six months later, when the election results were in, it had to face the bitter reality. The party had the lowest number of seats ever in the Lok Sabha. The anticipated 'magic' of the Nehru–Gandhi family name clearly had not done the trick despite the leadership of Sonia Gandhi. Yet, the results of the 13th general elections were far from an unmitigated disaster for the Congress. For the first time since the 1984 elections, the party had increased its share of the popular vote by nearly 3 per cent between the 1998 and the 1999 general elections. Interestingly, comparing the performance of the party in the 1999 and the 2004 elections, the vote share of the Congress actually came down marginally from 28.3 per cent to 26.5 per cent—largely because the party contested fewer seats—although the

number of seats it won went up from 114 to 145, thanks to the first-past-the-post system.

What explains the dramatic decline of the Congress in the span of a decade-and-a-half since 1984 and its sluggishness in adapting to the changing political scenario? One important factor was its unwillingness to recognise that India has entered an era of coalition politics, in which no single party can expect to govern the country on its own. Related to this is the failure to accept that the Congress can no longer claim to be 'a coalition within a party'. While the party acknowledges that some sections of the population have deserted its ranks in recent years, it does not seem to realise that this is part of a pattern and not just stray unrelated phenomena.

Congress supporters argue that it lost the support of these sections due to specific circumstances: for instance, the Muslims deserted the party because they held it responsible for the demolition of the Babri Masjid in December 1992 and the Sikhs because of the anti-Sikh riots of November 1984, following the assassination of Indira Gandhi. These are at best elements of a larger trend; the Congress has been losing its coalition character because it has failed to live up to the aspirations of those very sections of the country that constituted its 'traditional' support base. Instead of crumbs, these sections have tasted power and become empowered through their association with regional as well as caste-based political parties. For the Congress, what is worse is that the party seems to be unsure about the strategies it should pursue to win back its traditional supporters among the religious minorities as well as intermediate and backward castes. Within the party, there are many who still believe that coalition governments have been and remain aberrations; that single-party rule is superior. This view, the Congress' opponents believe, is born out of arrogance and is also responsible for the decline of the party.

Why did the Congress find it so difficult to read the writing on the wall? Why do influential sections in the party still believe it has an almost divine right to rule and that any other political formation is doomed to be shortlived and ineffective? A crucial reason is the 'ivory tower' nature of the Congress leadership. Many of the party's leaders have led and continue to lead cloistered lives in the capital's spacious bungalows, their political survival dependent on loyalty to



the party president instead of their popularity among the electorate. It is hardly a secret that many of those who are at the helm of the party's affairs are individuals who would find it tough to win an election from any part of the country. During the post-independence period, especially the period when Jawaharlal Nehru served as Prime Minister, the Congress truly represented a federation of state units and its state leaders commanded considerable clout in influencing the central leadership.

Many analysts see the roots of the decline of the Congress in the party's highly centralised structure that was imposed by Indira Gandhi and was continued by all subsequent party presidents, particularly Rajiv Gandhi and now Sonia Gandhi. Under what circumstances can the Congress hope to regain its lost glory? Anti-incumbency sentiments against the Vajpayee government worked in its favour. But this alone was insufficient. One view within the Congress is that the party should no longer hesitate to strike alliances with regional political parties even if it means the Congress accepts that it is a junior partner in these states. But there are many within the party opposed to this line of thinking; this section clearly believes it is worth waiting for the time when voters would return to the Congress because of the non-performance of incumbent governments. If the latter view prevails, the lost glory of the Congress may never be regained, that paradise would be lost forever. Marking time does not always work. In the fluid world of Indian politics, stagnation almost inevitably leads to decline. The results of the 14th Lok Sabha elections may convey an impression that the fortunes of the Congress have substantially revived. However, it seems unlikely that the Congress would be able to form the Union government on its own in the foreseeable future.

## **A Single Party Coalition**

The Congress is India's grand old political party, it was set up in December 1885 and was at the forefront of the struggle against the British. It represented a coalition of various sections of the country that had fought for independence from colonial rule. The Congress has ruled India by forming the Union government for all but roughly 12 years between August 1947 and May 2004. During this

period of four and a half decades of Congress rule, a member of the Nehru–Gandhi family has headed the government for all but six years (when Lal Bahadur Shastri and P.V. Narasimha Rao served as Prime Ministers).

Till 1984, when the influence of the Congress reached a peak in terms of seats in the Lok Sabha, the party had its share of ups and downs, particularly when it suffered major setbacks in the fourth general elections in 1967 and the sixth general elections 10 years later. During this period, however, the Congress managed to, by and large, maintain its ‘umbrella’ character and no major social groups could be said to have become hostile or completely alienated from the party. In fact, the Congress could rightfully claim that it was the only political party that not only represented all sections of the population but also had a base in virtually every single village across the length and breadth of the country. The Congress could also rightly contend that it was unique among political parties in India, in that it afforded an opportunity for all sections to put forward their claims and points of view even if these conflicted often with one another. The party believed in a consensus-building approach and, in that sense, acted like a coalition. Academics like Rajni Kothari have analysed this phenomenon at great length and pointed out that this was in fact the strength of the party and a legacy of its leading role in the anti-colonial struggle.

The fact is that the Congress is the only major Indian political party that still believes it can single-handedly rule a diverse country. The party believes it has been able to internalise this diversity and thus, at best, needs a few minor ‘regional’ partners to come along with it. It is worth noting that even when Congress governments in the past have required the support of other parties (the ones led by Indira Gandhi in the late 1960s and by Narasimha Rao in the early 1990s), the party had preferred not to form coalition governments, that is, until the UPA was formed in 2004.

Congress spokespersons have forwarded another reason for the party not forging too many alliances with regional partners. The logic is disarmingly simple, in many states, the Congress is either ruling or is the principal opposition party where a regional party is in power. The argument is that if one looks at the list of allies of the

BJP, almost all of these alliance partners are from states where the BJP itself is relatively weak and has never been in power. For example, Andhra Pradesh where the TDP rules, Punjab where the Akalis were in power, Tamil Nadu where the DMK or AIADMK is the ruling party, Orissa where the Biju Janata Dal is the main opponent of the Congress, Karnataka, West Bengal, Bihar and so on. In other words, it is the relative weakness of the BJP in these states that does not threaten the regional parties and hence, makes the formation of alliances easier. The argument of the Congress thus runs something like this, if the Congress is perceived as a threat to its regional ally, where is the question of forming a coalition? While there is considerable weight in this argument, it still begs a critical question. Why has the Congress not been successful in forging an alliance in one state where it is weak (specifically, Uttar Pradesh) and been a reluctant ally in another (Bihar)?

In Uttar Pradesh, the Congress is vying with the Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party for specific political constituencies: with the SP for the support of the Muslims and with the BSP for the votes of lower castes (dalits). Clearly, the Congress is left without any option in Uttar Pradesh, because neither the SP nor the BSP wants to help revive the Congress because it would almost inevitably imply erosion in their respective areas of support.

Unlike in Uttar Pradesh, in Bihar it was the Congress that was reluctant to tie-up with the RJD and not the other way round. This would seem inexplicable given the fact that the Congress and the RJD in Bihar—before Jharkhand was carved out of the state on November 15, 2000—had fairly distinct areas of influence, geographically as well as among social sections (castes). In the southern, mineral-rich part of the undivided state, which has a significant population of tribals, the Congress was the dominant partner in the Congress–RJD alliance, while the reverse was true for the central and northern regions of Bihar. As far as caste equations were concerned, the RJD had the support of an overwhelming majority of Muslims and Yadavs, but had very little support from the upper castes while the Congress did. This was remarkably similar to the pattern of the rival BJP–Janata Dal (United) alliance’s support base. The BJP commanded the support of the upper castes in Bihar while the JD(U), which at that time included the Samata Party, appealed to sections of the intermediate and the

lower castes. Again, the JD(U) was the stronger of the two allies in northern and central Bihar, while the BJP was by far the bigger political force in southern Bihar, now Jharkhand.

If the BJP and the JD(U) could effectively forge an alliance in Bihar, what prevented the Congress from doing the same with the RJD till 2004? The situation in Bihar was a clear illustration of the refusal of the Congress to accept the reality on the ground: that coalition politics had become the order of the day and in coalitions, the smaller partner often has to accept its position as a junior ally and be more accommodating (or less cussed).

## **A Democratic Party?**

The Congress boasts that it is the 'largest democratic party in the world'. The epithet 'democratic' may once have described the grand old party of the Indian freedom movement quite accurately, but many would now question the validity of such an adjective to describe the Congress. The reality is that, barring a period of a little less than six years between May 1991 and January 1998 and Lal Bahadur Shastri's short-lived term as Prime Minister between 1964 and 1966. The Congress has been seen more as a party that has willingly submitted itself to dynastic rule by the Nehru–Gandhi clan ever since Indira Gandhi acquired unquestioned control over the party by splitting it in 1969. The assumption of the reins of the party by Sonia Gandhi from 1998 and the events that have followed have only further buttressed this view of the Congress.

If the party has surrendered its moral right to be called democratic, it still retains the status of being the largest party in the world, with the exception of the Chinese Communist Party. The Congress also, till the last Lok Sabha elections held in 2004, had obtained a larger share of the popular vote in India than any other party. However, the vote share of the party has more or less steadily declined since its peak performance in the 1984 general elections when it won just over 48 per cent of the popular vote, the highest it had ever achieved. Never before, not even in the first general elections held in 1952, had the party managed such a high share of the votes polled. From that peak, the decline has been steady, indeed even precipitous at times. In each of the four general elections that followed, in 1989, 1991, 1996 and

1998, there was erosion to the point where the Congress could win only 25.8 per cent (just over one in four) of the valid votes polled in the February 1998 Lok Sabha elections.

In the 1989 elections, which Rajiv Gandhi faced after a roller-coaster ride on the popularity charts during his tenure as Prime Minister, the Congress' share of the popular vote had already been drastically reduced to 39.5 per cent, a decline of almost 9 per cent from the 1984 peak. Only once before, in 1977, had the party got less than 40 per cent of the popular vote. The loss in the number of Lok Sabha seats was even more damaging. The party won just 197 seats, less than half the number it had won in 1984 (404 on its own and 415 with its allies). In the 1991 elections, the situation should have been ideal for the Congress to make a comeback. As in 1980, the elections were being fought at a time when a puppet government supported by the Congress had been brought down after it had replaced another non-Congress government. The non-Congress government, like the previous one in 1977–79, had collapsed because of internal squabbles. This should have given the Congress the ideal platform to recapture power.

As it happened, the Congress did come back to power after the 1991 elections, but not with a majority of its own. The party won just 232 seats and had to depend on allies (and later defections) to form the government and then survive for five years. Even this figure of 232, most analysts agree, was thanks largely to the sympathy wave generated by the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi halfway through the elections. Most pollsters who have analysed the results of the two phases of polling, one held before the assassination and the other after it, believe that the Congress tally would not have been significantly higher than the 197 seats it got in 1989, but for this tragic event. In any case, there were alarm bells ringing for the Congress, which had seen its share of the vote dip even further, despite increasing its tally of seats. The 39.5 per cent of votes that it secured in 1989 had slipped further to 36.5 per cent in 1991. This trend continued in 1996, with the vote share coming down further to 28.8 per cent, and the number of seats coming down to 140. As we have noted earlier, there was to be a further decline in 1998 (to 25.8 per cent of the vote), before the trend got reversed in 1999. The reversal in the trend proved to be

temporary with Congress obtaining 26.5 per cent of the vote in 2004 against 28.3 per cent in 1999.

What should be worrying for the Congress is that at the current level of its vote share, the BJP is close on its heels. The Congress had already, in the 1996 elections, ceded its position as the single largest party in terms of the number of Lok Sabha constituencies won, to the BJP. However, it was still comfortably ahead in terms of the share of the popular vote, with almost 29 per cent to the BJP's 20 per cent. The results of the 1998 elections suggested that the Congress was, for the first time, in serious danger of losing its pride of place even in terms of the share of the popular vote, the gap being narrowed down to just 0.2 per cent. Though the gap had widened to just over 4 per cent in 2004, it is still too close for comfort for the Congress.

The slump from a position of seeming invincibility in 1984 to a party in danger of being relegated to second place in the Indian polity in 1998 took less than a decade and a half. In retrospect, it must be said that much of the blame for this state of affairs rested squarely on the shoulders of the Congress leadership. At a time when major changes were taking place in Indian society and politics, particularly in the northern Indian states, or the Hindi heartland as it is often referred to (see chapter 5), the Congress was unable either to intervene actively to influence the course of these changes or even to react adequately to them to ensure its survival. The result was that in India's two most populous states, undivided Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, which at that time between them accounted for 139 of the 543 Lok Sabha MPs, that is more than one in every four, the Congress was reduced to a virtual non-entity by 1998.

In the 1998 elections, the Congress drew a blank in Uttar Pradesh and its share of the vote in that state was down to single digit figures. In the 1999 elections, the Congress staged a recovery in the state, increasing its share of the votes from 6 per cent to 14 per cent and winning 11 Lok Sabha seats where it had none in 1998. In 2004, the Congress won 9 Lok Sabha seats in Uttar Pradesh with a vote share of 12 per cent. It seems ironical to recall that during the first three decades after independence (1947–77), all the Indian Prime Ministers (barring Gulzari Lal Nanda), who were from the Congress, were elected from Uttar Pradesh. Of the Prime Ministers who followed

Morarji Desai, Charan Singh was elected from Baghpat in the state. Whereas Indira Gandhi was re-elected from Medak (Andhra Pradesh) in 1980, Rajiv Gandhi, V.P. Singh and Chandra Shekhar were all elected from constituencies in Uttar Pradesh.

The importance of Uttar Pradesh in Indian politics is not merely on account of the fact that nearly one out of every five Indians live in the state and account for 80 out of the 543 seats in the Lok Sabha. Only thrice in independent India has a party formed or led a government in New Delhi without having won the single largest chunk of the Lok Sabha seats in the state. (Uttar Pradesh had 85 Lok Sabha seats till October 2000 when Uttaranchal/Uttarakhand was carved out of it.) These were during the Congress regime of Narasimha Rao (1991–96), the following United Front government under two Prime Ministers (Deve Gowda and Gujral) that lasted 18 months and the UPA government headed by Manmohan Singh formed in May 2004. On all these occasions the ruling party or front did not have a majority in the Lok Sabha.

In Bihar, arguably one of the most economically backward states in the country, the Congress has been reduced to a marginal political force. The figures of the number of Lok Sabha seats won by the Congress in the state (which sent 54 MPs to the Lok Sabha before its division in 2000) tell their own story: 48 in 1984, four in 1989, one in 1991, two in 1996, four in 1998, five in 1999 and three in 2004. The failure of the Congress to revive in Bihar in the 12th, 13th and 14th general elections was despite the party striking an alliance with the then ruling party in the state, the RJD headed by Lalu Prasad Yadav. The Congress continues an uneasy love-hate relationship with the RJD and the party's leaders in Bihar have often protested against the foisting of an alliance by the high command.

The decline of the Congress party since 1984, particularly in the Hindi-speaking heartland of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, cannot be understood merely in terms of numbers. The fall of the party has been precipitated by specific communities and social groups deserting its fold almost en masse. Indira Gandhi's assassination led to the biggest-ever electoral victory of the party under Rajiv Gandhi. Ironically, however, this was also the first election that witnessed almost the entire Sikh community turning hostile to the Congress after the November 1984 anti-Sikh riots that were concentrated largely around

the national capital. By the time the 1991 elections were completed, after Rajiv Gandhi's assassination in May the same year, large sections of the backward castes of northern India (especially Uttar Pradesh and Bihar) had also become alienated from the Congress. In any case, this section that is loosely referred to as the OBCs had never been particularly loyal to the Congress. After the December 6, 1992 demolition of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya when P.V. Narasimha Rao was Prime Minister, the Muslims—large sections of that community had by then already started doubting the ability and willingness of the Congress to protect and promote their interests—started withdrawing their support to the Congress. In states like UP, the Muslims switched their allegiance to parties like the Samajwadi Party led by Mulayam Singh Yadav.

There are other groups, like the scheduled castes and tribes in many parts of the country, which have moved away from the Congress not because of any strong dislike for the party, but because of two broad factors. On the one hand, there is a growing disillusionment with the Congress and a belief that the party has 'used' them as vote banks without sincerely addressing their concerns and aspirations. This feeling is perhaps best epitomised in the slogan that the Bahujan Samaj Party used to telling effect in wooing the scheduled castes in Uttar Pradesh—'*vote hamara, raj tumhara, nahin chalega*' ('our vote and your rule, this cannot go on'). On the other hand, alternate platforms have emerged which arguably provide the dalits superior options. This is a sort of vicious circle. For instance, the very fact that Muslims and Yadavs in Bihar had left the Congress and got together under the Janata Dal in 1989 meant that the Congress was no longer seen as a viable political force by the dalits, who saw the Janata Dal as a better prospect. This, in turn, meant that the upper castes in Bihar—as in Uttar Pradesh—who had by and large stayed with the Congress till that stage, had to look for a more viable alternative to counter the consolidation of the lower castes. They turned to the BJP in these states. Thus, the Congress became the victim of a chain reaction of group desertions in these two most populous states of India.

After the May 1996 elections, the fact that the Congress had perceptibly lost support in the north also meant that social groups in other parts of the country had to re-examine their options. This was an important reason for the party ceding ground to the BJP in various



parts of the country. For example, it was arguably the feeble state of the Congress at the national level that emboldened the maverick Mamata Banerjee to break away from the parent Congress in West Bengal, float the Trinamool Congress and fight the 1998 elections in alliance with the BJP. Similarly, in Tamil Nadu and Orissa, where the BJP had never had a significant political base, there were regional parties willing to ally with it, because of the perception that it was the BJP and not the Congress that was more likely to form the government in New Delhi. The BJP also found allies in the north-east, another area which had been outside its sphere of influence. The decision of the National Conference of Jammu & Kashmir not to oppose the formation of a BJP government was also dictated by similar pragmatism (some would call it opportunism) rather than any fondness for the BJP's policies.

Yet, it is precisely this feature of its decline—the chain reaction—that makes the Congress believe it can engineer a dramatic revival. The party believes that the process can be reversed just as easily. The argument is that since many of those groups which deserted the party over the last 15 years have done so not out of animosity, but due to pragmatic considerations, they would not hesitate to return to the Congress fold if the party shows signs of recovering lost ground. For example, the Congress believes that if it can win back the Muslims in Uttar Pradesh, it would be better placed to woo the upper castes and the dalits too. However, the results of the February 2002 assembly elections, the April–May 2004 Lok Sabha elections in the state and the April–May 2007 assembly elections indicate that most Muslims are either with the SP or the BSP and have not returned to the fold of the Congress, except in specific constituencies where individual Congress leaders are better placed to defeat the BJP than either the SP or the BSP.

The fact that the Congress believes the SP and the BSP in UP have vote bases that could easily be brought back to the party's fold has often dictated its tactics. For instance, in early 2003, when the Mayawati government was threatened by dissidence from among the BJP and some independent MLAs, the SP was keen to hasten the government's demise by staking a credible claim to forming the government. For this, the SP, which had 143 MLAs in the 403-member assembly, clearly needed the support of the 25 MLAs belonging to the Congress and others belonging to smaller political parties, besides any

dissidents who could be persuaded to switch sides. The SP tried to convince the Congress that if the party were to publicly announce its support to an SP-led government, other groups and dissident MLAs would be quick to jump on to what would appear to be the winning bandwagon. The Congress, however, kept saying that it would extend support to the SP only if the latter could convince the party that it would be able to garner a majority. With the standoff remaining unresolved, the ruling coalition had been given enough breathing space not only to keep its flock together, but ultimately, to even break the Congress party in the UP assembly. Of the 25 MLAs belonging to the Congress, eight left the party's fold to form a separate group, which joined the ruling coalition.

The official explanation given by the Congress for dithering on that occasion was that the party did not wish to destabilise elected governments and would rather wait for such governments to collapse under the weight of their internal contradictions. Many political observers saw this as camouflage. The real reason, they insisted, was that the Congress wanted to get back at the SP for not having supported Sonia Gandhi's candidature for Prime Ministership in April 1999, when the second Vajpayee government lost a vote of confidence. There could well be some merit to this argument. However, hard-nosed political calculations also seemed to have been a factor in the Congress' reluctance to back the SP in its bid for power in UP. As already mentioned, there is a considerable overlap in the potential support bases of the two parties. Hence, it is not particularly surprising that the Congress has no desire to strengthen the SP's position in the state any further. The state government in UP formed by the SP in May 2002 was supported by the Congress from the 'outside' while the SP supported the UPA government in New Delhi also from the 'outside' till the run-up to the 2007 assembly elections in UP. Despite this apparently mutually beneficial association, leaders of the two hardly spared an opportunity to criticize each other simply because the two remain bitter rivals in UP's political battlefield.

## **After the Glorious Days**

The decline of the Congress as the 'natural party of governance' in India took place over a long period of time, as already seen—from

the heady days of '*garibi hatao*' ('remove poverty') and the formation of Bangladesh, to the Emergency which brought an end to the glorious days.

The assassination of Indira Gandhi was followed first by the Congress' most spectacular electoral victory ever in the December 1984 general elections and then a period of steady decline right till the 1996 elections. After these elections, what was particularly worrying for the Congress was its dismal performance in three of the country's most populous states from the crucial Hindi heartland—Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh—and in two other states which had long been regarded as secure bastions of the party in parliamentary polls—Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. Between them, these five states account for 266—or almost half—of the 543 Lok Sabha seats. The combined score of the Congress in these five states in the 1996 elections was only 30 seats. But if the decline in the party's Hindi heartland had been apparent for some time, what came as a rude shock was its performance in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. These two states had always elected an overwhelming majority of MPs from the Congress and its allies, not breaking that pattern even in the most disastrous elections for the Congress till that stage, the 1977 elections. In 1996, the Congress drew a complete blank in Tamil Nadu and won just 15 of the 48 seats in Maharashtra.

Predictably, the man seen as responsible for this debacle was the one who was then party President and Prime Minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao. Party supporters who had till that stage eulogised Rao as the man who, by ushering in a bold package of economic reforms, had placed the Indian economy on a new high growth path, suddenly started finding inadequacies in their leader that they had carefully overlooked till that time. After being unexpectedly catapulted to the Prime Minister's post as a 'compromise' choice between powerful rivals in the aftermath of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination in May 1991, Rao had kept the party in power for five years despite starting out with a minority government, which remained in a minority for a considerable part of the tenure of the government. This had earned him the loyalty of his colleagues in the Congress and grudging admiration for his policy of 'masterly inactivity' in times of crisis.

With his hold over power gone, Rao was now put under the microscope for all his faults. What was thus far seen as masterly inactivity was now held up as the inability to respond to situations. Party activists argued that the Rao government's failure to prevent the demolition of the Babri masjid in December 1992 and the apparently callous attitude of Rao himself during the event had finally driven the Muslims away from the party's fold and contributed in no small measure to its debacle. It was also pointed out that Rao's insistence on forging an electoral alliance with the AIADMK in Tamil Nadu had proved disastrous on two counts. For one, it had forced most party supporters in Tamil Nadu, who had vehemently opposed the tie-up, to quit the party and form the Tamil Maanila Congress (TMC).

To add insult to injury, while the Congress–AIADMK alliance failed to win a single seat from Tamil Nadu, the polls had vindicated the TMC's decision to align with the DMK and the CPI instead. This three-party alliance won all of the 39 Lok Sabha seats in the state. It was also pointed out that the Rao government's image of being one of the most corrupt in India's history badly dented the party's electoral prospects. A final addition to this litany of complaints against Rao was that he lacked the charisma that had been the hallmark of Congress leaders of the past, notably of those from the Nehru–Gandhi family. Rao, the party seemed to be suggesting now, was not a vote winner and while he may have proved adept at retaining power, he could not be expected to win an election for the Congress. Those familiar with the internal politics of the Congress would suggest that despite the poor showing at the hustings, Rao might have been spared these barbs if he had somehow been able to get the party a share in power. As it turned out, that was not to be.

On December 23, 2004, Rao passed away at the age of 83. In the last years of his life, he had written a long book called *The Insider*—a publication that can be described as a 'fictionalised autobiography'. In an interview with one of the authors of this book, the erudite Rao himself was hard pressed to name another book that could be described in such a manner, implying that what he wrote was indeed unique. He also wrote another book justifying his role as Prime Minister during the demolition of the Babri mosque on December 6, 1992. In the last months of his life, he appeared rather lonely. He

had been marginalised and isolated by the Congress leadership. In a phone conversation, he explained his dilemma; he could not speak out against the Congress as he was always a Congressman and would remain one till his death.

Rao will be remembered not only for the policies of economic liberalisation that were ushered in from the middle of 1991 onwards during the period he was Prime Minister under the then Finance Minister Manmohan Singh, policies that were to remove the shackles of the infamous licence-control raj on Indian industry. The first Prime Minister from the south of India will unfortunately also be remembered for the wrong reasons—as a person who tried to make a virtue out of inaction, and who was utterly cynical when it came to using money to bribe MPs so that his government could shed its ‘minority’ tag and become a ‘majority’ government before a no-confidence motion in the Lok Sabha in July 1993. While he was Prime Minister of India, Rao was also accused of receiving a bribe from a disgraced stock-broker Harshad Mehta, a charge that was never established.

## Out of Power

The 1996 elections had delivered a hung verdict in which the BJP and its allies had by far the largest block of seats, but were still more than 70 seats shy of the halfway mark of 272. The Congress and its allies had just about 150 seats, while the National Front and other regional parties shared close to 190 seats. Since well over 100 of these 190 seats were shared between the Janata Dal, the left, the TDP of Andhra Pradesh and the AGP of Assam, and none of these parties was prepared to support the Congress, this led to a peculiar situation for Rao. As leader of the second-biggest party in the Lok Sabha, he had to agree to extend support to the United Front (formed after the elections and consisting of 13 parties including those in the erstwhile National Front, the left and most of the regional parties).

The alternative would have been either to let the BJP form the government or to precipitate another round of elections immediately, both of which were considered worse options for the Congress. For the Congress, the BJP represented the long-term threat, the party that was growing at an alarming pace and seemed on the verge of replacing

it as the premier party in India. The United Front, on the other hand, was seen as a motley group, which would most probably collapse under the weight of its own internal contradictions and was, therefore, unlikely to pose a challenge to Congress supremacy in the foreseeable future, a perception that subsequent events partially bore out.

Despite the fact that supporting the UF seemed to be the only course open to the Congress under the circumstances, Rao took enough time to decide upon it for the BJP to be invited to form the government by President Shankar Dayal Sharma before he had written to Sharma informing him of the Congress' decision to support the UF's claim to form the government. However, the BJP's stint in power proved really shortlived, with the party and its allies holding office for less than a fortnight before being forced to resign as it became clear that they would lose the mandatory vote of confidence. Thus, the Congress ultimately ended up supporting the UF government headed by H.D. Deve Gowda, former Chief Minister of Karnataka, who emerged as the unlikely consensus choice for the post of Prime Minister from among the 13 parties in the UF, that is, after former Prime Minister V.P. Singh and Jyoti Basu, Chief Minister of West Bengal and leader of the CPI(M), both turned down offers to head the government. Basu's party decided he should not become Prime Minister.

The Congress extended support to the Deve Gowda government without participating in it. Within the party there were two points of view. One school of thought held that it would be best for the party not to be directly associated with a government that was likely to be seen as a squabbling ineffective bunch, while another felt that the Congress must extract the price for its support in the form of a share in power. As it turned out, the decision was in a sense taken out of the party's hands, since most constituents of the UF had made it amply clear that not only were they unwilling to support a Congress government, they were equally against sharing power with the Congress, even if it were a minor partner. Congress support was thus strictly from 'outside', no different from the kind of support it had extended in the past to the Charan Singh government in 1979 or the Chandra Shekhar government in 1990-91.

The UF was expected to have its share of internal wrangles and it did. However, the differences within the Front never quite reached flashpoint. For the Congress, therefore, which had banked on the

coalition collapsing on its own to get a second chance at grabbing power, the wait was proving to be a test of its patience. It was a matter of time before the party would have to take the initiative to change the power equations in New Delhi. Developments within the Congress helped precipitate such an initiative. This came after the chargesheeting of Rao in the JMM bribery case (detailed later in the book) and of his son in the infamous 'urea scam'. The two chargesheets provided just the ideal excuse that dissidents within the party had been waiting for. Sitaram Kesri, who had for long been treasurer of the Congress, deposed Rao as the President of the party and immediately started issuing statements that revealed that the Congress was not prepared to play second fiddle to the UF any longer.

Among the many statements that Kesri issued over a few months in late 1997 and early 1998 was one in which he 'warned' the government that his party's support could not be taken for granted. Kesri's new aggressive posture was widely interpreted in political circles and among analysts as an attempt to get the Congress a share in power. The UF, however, was unwilling to respond to these threats in the manner in which the Congress President expected it to. Finally, after it became clear that the Congress would once again have to take the next step, Kesri sent a formal letter to the President announcing that his party had withdrawn its support to the government. Since that effectively meant that the Deve Gowda government was reduced to a minority in the Lok Sabha, the President directed it to seek a vote of confidence.

Even at this stage, it seemed that Kesri thought the UF would be willing to share power with the Congress rather than face a complete loss of power and the prospect of fresh elections. The second best scenario being viewed by the Congress was one in which the UF would break apart and large sections of it would then be either willing to join a Congress-led government or support one from the outside. So transparent were Kesri's motives that even the *Times* of London editorially dubbed him an 'old man in a hurry', a sobriquet that Deve Gowda repeatedly referred to in his last speech in Parliament as Prime Minister. As events unfolded, neither of these wishes of Kesri was fulfilled. Despite severe pressure from first-time MPs, who were horrified at the prospect of their tenure in the Lok Sabha proving

even more shortlived than they had anticipated, the UF refused to succumb to the Congress' tactics. Deve Gowda retained the support of the entire UF in the vote of confidence.

But, the situation changed after he was voted out, as was inevitable. Though the UF still refused to consider sharing power with the Congress, the choice was now between forming a government under a new leader acceptable to the Congress, or facing elections. The UF settled for a change at the top and thus gave Kesri a face-saver. Kesri immediately declared that the Congress would have no problems in supporting a UF government led by anybody other than Deve Gowda. In fact Kesri insisted rather unconvincingly that he had at no stage objected to the UF per se. His objection, he maintained, was restricted to Deve Gowda himself, ostensibly because the former Prime Minister had not given the Congress the respect it deserved as the single largest party supporting the government and had also failed to provide adequate leadership to the fight against communalism.

Kesri's explanation may have fooled nobody, but what mattered was that another Congress-supported UF government was in office. Inder Kumar Gujral thus became Prime Minister, but Kesri's toying with the UF was not done yet. Within a year of Gujral becoming Prime Minister, the interim report of a commission of inquiry into the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi provided the Congress President another opportunity to turn the screws on the UF. The Congress by this time was clearly restless, out of power and willing to try any trick in the book to get it. The commission, headed by a retired judge, Milap Chand Jain, indicted the DMK government that was in office in Tamil Nadu in 1991, for having failed to protect Rajiv Gandhi despite intelligence reports indicating a threat to his life. The interim report was characterised by sweeping indictments that earned the wrath of not just the DMK and the UF but also of the media. Yet, the Congress found it extremely useful, because it provided the fig leaf that the party was searching for to camouflage its blackmail of the UF. Kesri jumped at the opportunity and demanded that the UF should dissociate itself from the DMK, failing which the Congress would withdraw support to the government. The ostensible argument was that the Congress could not possibly support a government in which one of the partners was being held responsible for contributing,



even if only through negligence, to the assassination of a former Congress president.

Once again, the Congress' calculations seemed to be that whatever position the UF took it would work to the benefit of the Congress. If it refused to expel the DMK from the Front, the Congress could pull down the government and then hope to be given a chance to form the next one. If such a chance were given, the Congress was sure that it would be able to muster up enough support from within the UF itself to form the government and win the vote of confidence in the Lok Sabha. If, on the other hand, the UF succumbed to Congress blackmail, the party would gain further ascendancy in the coalitional arrangement.

As it turned out, the Congress had once again miscalculated and underestimated the cohesion within the Front. While there were a few murmurs to the effect that the DMK should withdraw from the government of its own accord and thereby make things easier for the other UF partners, these were quickly squashed. The TDP and the left were prominent among those that insisted that the Front should not succumb to pressure tactics. The government rejected the Jain Commission's interim report and the UF declared that the DMK would stay, as part of the Front and of the government. As soon as the Congress withdrew support, as it was forced to, on November 28, 1997, the Union Cabinet met and decided to resign without seeking a fresh vote of confidence. More importantly, the Cabinet also decided to recommend fresh elections, a recommendation K.R. Narayanan, who was now President, immediately accepted. The Congress move had misfired once again and the party was to face an election for which it was clearly less well prepared than its main rival, the BJP.

Most Congressmen were aware that Sitaram Kesri would, if anything, be even less effective than Narasimha Rao at attracting voters. While Rao had a long experience of electoral politics, having been Chief Minister of his home state of Andhra Pradesh, Minister in several Union governments and finally Prime Minister, Kesri had for most of his career remained an organisational man. His rare forays into electoral politics had been embarrassing. Clearly, he could not be the face the party presented to the electorate, particularly when the BJP and its allies were basing much of their electoral strategy on

the undoubted popularity of their Prime Ministerial candidate, Atal Behari Vajpayee. Yet, Kesri himself could not afford to let any of the other leaders within the Congress emerge as the man to lead the party's election campaign. Given the history of the Congress since Indira Gandhi, it was clear that the individual who would electorally lead the party would ultimately also call the shots organisationally, especially if the party performed well.

## Back to the Family

Given Kesri's dilemma and the unwillingness of rival leaders to let each other gain an edge in the organisational stakes, it was hardly surprising that the Congress turned once again to a member of the Nehru–Gandhi family to bail it out of a crisis of its own making. The fact that Sonia Gandhi was born an Italian may have seemed to rule her out of contention for party leadership to many outside the party. Yet, within the Congress, it appeared the most obvious course. Why was this so? New York-based Shashi Tharoor, who used to work with the United Nations, asks this question and then goes on to offer an interesting explanation in his book (*India: From Midnight to the Millennium*, Penguin Books India 1997), 'What, then is this mystique made of, that it can make an Indian ruler out of an Italian whose only patrimony is matrimony', is the question Tharoor asks. He says the real strength of the Nehru–Gandhi dynasty lies in its members being perceived as truly national figures.

Displaced Kashmiris to begin with, the Nehrus' family tree sports Parsi, Sikh and now Italian branches, and its roots are universally seen as uncontaminated by the communal and sectarian prejudices of the Hindi-speaking 'cow belt'. Nehru himself was an avowed agnostic, as was his daughter until she discovered the electoral advantages of public piety. All four generations of Nehrus in public life remained secular in outlook and conduct. Their appeal transcended caste, region and religion, something impossible to say of any other leading Indian politician.

Sonia Gandhi, who had first been offered the leadership of the party immediately after the assassination of her husband, Rajiv Gandhi, in 1991, had steadfastly stuck to her stance that while she remained a well-wisher of the Congress and was willing to intervene to settle internal

disputes, she had no desire to participate in active politics. For reasons best known to her, she shifted her position and in early 1998, with just over a month to go for the general elections, she agreed to take over as President of the Congress, ostensibly because the party was facing an electoral and organisational crisis from which she could help it emerge. Sonia Gandhi still insisted that she would not contest the elections, but became the main campaigner for the party.

Her entry into the thick of the election campaign undoubtedly galvanised the party organisation that till that stage had seemed distinctly uninspired. It also meant that the focus of the campaign became increasingly personality-oriented, with both the major parties—the Congress and the BJP—projecting individuals rather than issues. The BJP, which conveyed the impression of being rattled by Sonia Gandhi's entry into the fray, chose to pick on her Italian origins and portray it as the bankruptcy of the Congress that it could not throw up an 'Indian' leader and had to depend on someone of foreign origin to rescue it. The Congress countered by pointing out that Sonia Gandhi had married into a family that had not only provided India three Prime Ministers, but had sacrificed two of them—Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi—to 'protect national integrity'.

The results of the 1998 general elections, when they became known, became the subject of much debate on exactly how much of an impact Sonia Gandhi had on the Congress performance. Her detractors pointed out that the party had won just as many seats in the 1998 elections as it had in the 1996 elections (140) and, therefore, the claimed impact was more hype than reality. Her supporters, on the other hand, argued that but for her intervention the Congress would definitely have lost further ground in the 1998 elections since it was seen as the party which had forced a mid-term election on the people, and it was only because of Sonia Gandhi that the Congress had managed to hang on to its tally in the Lok Sabha.

Sonia Gandhi herself had some interesting things to say on the issue. In her first speech as Congress President to the session of the All India Congress Committee (AICC) on April 6, 1998, she said:

I have come to this office at a critical point in the history of [the] party. Our numbers in Parliament have dwindled. Our support base among the electorate has been seriously eroded. Some segments of the voters—including our tribals, dalits and minorities—have

drifted from us. We are in danger of losing our central place in the polity of our country as the natural party of governance.

In the same speech, she also quoted extensively from the hard-hitting introspective speech made at the centenary session of the Congress in 1985 by Rajiv Gandhi. In that speech, she reminded the AICC, Rajiv Gandhi had said: ‘What has become of our great organisation? Instead of a party that fired the imagination of the masses throughout the length and breadth of India, we have shrunk, losing touch with the masses.’ Sonia Gandhi reiterated her husband’s assertion that the only way in which the Congress could once again fire the imagination of the people was by ‘a politics of service to the poor’.

She also reminded the AICC that Rajiv Gandhi had, in the same speech, made some incisive remarks on the de-ideologisation of the party:

The ideology of the Congress has acquired the status of an heirloom, to be polished and brought out on special occasions. It must be a living force to animate the Congress workers in their day-to-day activity. Our ideology of nationalism, secularism, democracy and socialism is the only relevant ideology for our great country.

And, said Sonia Gandhi:

the instrument for carrying the Congress policies to the people had, of course, to be the humble Congress worker. But the genuine Congress worker remains unheeded and unrecognised. He is not only the last to be heard but also the least heard. I see it as my primary task as Congress President to restore to the Congress the vision of the Congress centenary—power to the people through the panchayats; and power to the Congress worker through democracy within the party.

This last remark of Sonia Gandhi seems particularly ironic in the context of all that followed, as we shall elaborate later.

In the same speech, Sonia Gandhi also cautioned her party against seeing her entry as some kind of a magic wand that would overnight revive the Congress. She said:

I am no saviour, as some of you might want to believe. We must be realistic in our expectations. The revival of our party is going to

be a long drawn process, involving sincere hard work, from each and every one of us.... It was our party which lowered the voting age to 18 from 21; yet, as the average Indian voter gets younger and more educated, it is our party which has suffered reverses. To this large and influential segment of the electorate, some of their disenchantment with us arises from our party being seen as soft on corruption and criminalisation. The impression has gained ground among them that we want to cling to power or achieve it at any cost.

This was a surprisingly candid observation at that time, but Sonia Gandhi's practice as Congress President and as the Chairperson of the Congress Parliamentary Party (to which post she was elected soon after the elections despite not being a member of either house of Parliament) has hardly shown any departure from the party's desire to 'cling to power or achieve it at any cost'.

Immediately after the 1998 election results were announced, the Congress believed it had an outside chance of forming the government, since the leading left party, the CPI(M), had declared that it would be prepared to support a Congress government to keep the BJP out of power. However, such hopes were soon dashed as it became clear that most other constituents of the UF would not be prepared to support the Congress. In fact, the Front ultimately disintegrated rather rapidly on the question of support to the Congress. The TDP's Chandrababu Naidu, Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, objected to the CPI(M)'s position saying that it was the Front as a whole (of which he was the convenor) to take a decision. The CPI(M), by taking such a unilateral stand, he felt, had forced other Front constituents to also chalk out their individual strategies. While Naidu at this stage was still talking in terms of maintaining 'equidistance' from the BJP and the Congress, it soon became apparent that he considered the Congress the bigger enemy. As the CPI(M) and others called him a traitor and worse, Naidu switched his allegiance to the BJP. He argued that there was no way he could support the Congress that, among other things, had pulled down two successive UF governments.

Vajpayee agreed to G.M.C. Balayogi (MP, TDP), becoming the Speaker of the Lok Sabha after days of high drama, as a quid pro quo for the TDP's support. It was not just the TDP, but by that

time a number of smaller parties including the INLD and the Sikkim Democratic Front had announced that they would support a government headed by Vajpayee while the National Conference decided to abstain from the voting. What was amply clear by then was that the Congress could under no circumstances form the government. Sonia Gandhi went to President K.R. Narayanan and said the Congress would henceforth play a constructive role as an Opposition party.

For much of the first year of the Vajpayee government, the Congress repeatedly emphasised that it would do nothing to destabilise or pull down the Vajpayee government, but would fulfil its 'constitutional responsibility' as the single largest Opposition party if and when the government fell. Throughout this period, other parties opposed to the BJP, like the CPI(M) and the Samajwadi Party, kept urging the Congress to take the initiative to 'rescue the country from the misrule of the BJP', but Sonia Gandhi remained adamant. The Congress, she said, would not make the first move. This seeming reluctance to pull down the government was seen as the right strategy for the party till the November 1998 assembly elections in Delhi, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Mizoram.

## **The Pachmarhi Session**

At the Congress' 'brainstorming session' in September 1998 in Pachmarhi, Sonia's comments were revealing of the Congress strategy at the time. In her opening remarks, she said:

In less than two hundred days, the BJP led coalition has proved its inability to govern India. There is no evidence of firm and decisive direction in any branch of its activities. The economy is stagnant, inflation is on the rise. Investor and business confidence is at an all time low. Foreign policy is in a shambles. The coalition in Delhi is at war with itself. Internal contradictions are being exposed day by day. The BJP and its allies are speaking with different voices on vital national and international issues.... Our stand of not rushing into bringing this government down has been appreciated all round. I once again wish to make it clear that as and when the need arises our party will fulfil its constitutional obligations without hesitation

and provide stability and purpose. We have never opposed for the sake of opposition. We have highlighted the failures and follies of the government. We will continue to do so.

In her speech at the conclusion of the Pachmarhi session, Sonia Gandhi reflected the mood of the Congress, which seemed to believe it was on a major upswing. She said:

Friends, there has been much talk about the Congress's attitude towards a coalition government. The fact that we are going through a coalitional phase at national level politics reflects in many ways the decline of the Congress. This is a passing phase and we will come back again with full force and on our own steam. But in the interim, coalitions may well be needed.... In the last few months, I get the feeling that the country, fed up with over two years of non-governance, is waiting to give us another chance. I get the feeling that more and more people who moved away from us are once again coming around to the point of view that only the Congress has the experience, the expertise, the energy and the enthusiasm to provide an effective government that will revive the stagnant economy, arrest the price rise, get new investments flowing once again and improve our standing in the world. We should, however, not be complacent. But we must recognise that the tide seems to be turning.

At the same time, the Pachmarhi session also recognised that there were several major weaknesses in the Congress organisation that needed urgent attention. Sonia Gandhi had pointed to these as well in her opening remarks:

The question we must ask ourselves is whether we have, in any way, diluted our commitment to the fight against communal forces. It would perhaps be tempting to say we have not. However, there is a general perception that we have at times compromised with our basic commitment to the secular ideal that forms the bedrock of our society. During our deliberations we must all apply our minds to this vitally important question. Second, we must acknowledge that we have not successfully accommodated the aspirations of a whole new generation of dalits, adivasis and backward people particularly in the northern parts of the country. Could this be one of the reasons for our decline in states like Uttar Pradesh

and Bihar? Regrettably, we have not paid enough attention to the growth of such sentiments and feelings and consequently have had to pay a heavy price. It is not enough to make promises. The Congress Party must ensure to this section of our people full and equal representation. Great damage has been done to national-level politics itself on account of our decline in north India particularly. Electoral reverses are inevitable and are, in themselves, not cause for worry. What is disturbing is the loss of our social base, of the social coalition that supports us and looks up to us.

An interesting feature of the discussions at Pachmarhi was that the Congress chose to identify organisations like the Samajwadi Party, the Rashtriya Janata Dal, and the Bahujan Samaj Party as ‘casteist’ and as parties that would have to be fought if the Congress’ fortunes were to revive in northern India. This was to have a major impact later when the Congress unsuccessfully tried to form a government after the collapse of the Vajpayee government in April 1999.

## **So Near, Yet So Far**

Events proved that the Congress gameplan for the November 1998 elections to four state assemblies was well conceived. In fact, the party’s showing in these elections exceeded even its own expectations. The Congress won three-fourths of the seats in Rajasthan, two-thirds in Delhi and got a comfortable majority in Madhya Pradesh, where most pollsters had predicted a BJP victory. The result was seen largely as a reflection of popular disenchantment with the Vajpayee government’s abysmal mismanagement of onion supplies. A 15 per cent drop in the output of this essential vegetable had sent its prices soaring in September–October to as much as 10 times the normal price. This was, in a sense, a repetition of history. Earlier, in 1980, Indira Gandhi had also used the rise in onion prices during the Janata Party’s tenure to devastating effect in the election campaign to return to power.

The Congress itself saw the November assembly election results as a sign that the time was ripe for it to start sending out signals that it might not be averse to forming an alternate government in New Delhi. The signals were quite enthusiastically picked up by the



AIADMK, which had been an uncomfortable ally of the BJP throughout the tenure of the Vajpayee government. J. Jayalalithaa, through her emissary Subramaniam Swamy, arranged a meeting with Sonia Gandhi at a 'tea party' given by Dr. Swamy in March 1999. The maverick Dr. Swamy himself referred to it as the most talked-about tea party after the Boston Tea Party. The reasons were obvious. Nobody was fooled by the apparent casualness of the meeting and it was clear that a serious challenge was being mounted against the Vajpayee government. Jayalalithaa meanwhile kept up the pressure on Vajpayee through a series of demands that she knew would not be conceded. Among them was the demand for the reinstatement of sacked naval chief Admiral Vishnu Bhagwat and the 'transfer' of Defence Minister George Fernandes to some other position. The Congress too was pressing for a parliamentary discussion on the Bhagwat episode, as was most of the Opposition.

The chain of events that began with the 'tea party' culminated in Jayalalithaa withdrawing the support of her 18 MPs to the Vajpayee government on April 14, 1999. The President, K.R. Narayanan, on the same day asked Vajpayee to seek a vote of confidence on the floor of the Lok Sabha. While Narayanan himself did not indicate the time within which this would have to be done, the BJP decided that the vote of confidence would be moved the very next day in Parliament. Party insiders say this was done because the BJP felt it would give the Opposition no time to arrive at a consensus on the contours of the alternate government. Confusion on this score, the BJP felt, would force many of the smaller parties to play safe by voting for a government that already existed rather than risk dissolution of the Lok Sabha if the Vajpayee government fell and no alternate government could be formed.

The BJP's calculations proved incorrect, but only just. After a two-day discussion on the vote of confidence, in which one session lasted through the night, it was still not clear which way the numbers would stack up. In fact, even after the votes had been cast, at noon on April 17, the MPs themselves were still not sure whether the government had survived or lost. It was only after the results of the electronic count were modified through physical checks that it became clear that the Vajpayee government had lost the vote of confidence by a single vote.

With the Vajpayee government reduced to a 'caretaker' status, attempts began to form an alternative government. The CPI(M) and the CPI had already made it clear that in their opinion the only party that could form such a government was the Congress and that all other secular parties should lend the Congress support in doing so. Two other left parties, the All India Forward Bloc and the Revolutionary Socialist Party, maintained that their MPs would not support a government led by the Congress or one of which the Congress was a part. Mulayam Singh Yadav of the Samajwadi Party made similar statements. He also made an attempt to drum up support for a government led by Jyoti Basu, but these were nipped in the bud by the CPI(M) itself refusing to consider such a proposal. Despite these hurdles, Congress and left leaders felt the differences would ultimately be ironed out.

This misplaced confidence provoked Sonia Gandhi to meet the President and claim that she had the support of 272 MPs. The Congress had also made it clear that it would not be part of a coalition government. Soon, Sonia Gandhi realised that instead of the claimed 272 MPs, just about 233 MPs would go along with a Congress government. There was once again an attempt to bring about a consensus on a government led by Basu. The CPI(M), seeing that the choice was between accepting this and facing an election or perhaps even giving the BJP a second chance to form a government, indicated that it might be willing to accept such an arrangement if the Congress were prepared to do so. However, the Congress made it clear that it was in no mood to succumb to Mulayam Singh Yadav's 'blackmail'. That brought to an end the Opposition's attempts to cobble together a government. Though sections of the BJP did tentatively suggest that it should once again be called upon to form a government, the Cabinet ultimately decided to go along with the President's view that the only solution to the impasse was to dissolve the Lok Sabha and call for fresh elections.

Sonia Gandhi later justified the Congress' position in the following words at a meeting with chiefs of the party's state units on May 6:

As we had promised all along, as soon as the government fell, we prepared to take upon ourselves our Constitutional responsibilities. The parties of the secular Opposition wanted us to take up the

leadership of an alternative government. Differences among different parties of the Opposition quickly made it clear that a stable, viable coalition government could not be put together. Only a minority Congress government, supported from the outside by the other secular parties, could give the country the assurance of a stable government. This was well understood by almost all members of the secular Opposition.

If such an alternative minority Congress government did not come about, much to the disappointment of the left and the Third Front, as also the country at large, the blame lies squarely at the door of a small, regional party, which placed its narrow interests above the larger interest of the secular future of the country. We were not prepared to succumb to political blackmail. Bending at the knee is a BJP habit. It is entirely appropriate that the Samajwadi Party has found its destiny in the arms of the communal forces of this country. The clandestine contacts between leaders of the SP and the BJP have ruthlessly revealed the nexus between them, a nexus which has led us to the present situation. These nefarious links, now exposed, must be rejected through the ballot box by defeating both the BJP and its secret partner.

## **The Foreign Hand?**

Within a fortnight of the fall of the Vajpayee government, several dramatic developments occurred within the Congress. As already mentioned, Sharad Pawar, P.A. Sangma, and Tariq Anwar, broke away after demanding that Sonia Gandhi make it clear she would not be a Prime Ministerial aspirant. Their contention, in a letter circulated among members of the Congress Working Committee (CWC), was that no person of non-Indian origin should be entitled to hold the posts of President, Vice President or Prime Minister of the country. It became clear that the BJP would raise Sonia Gandhi's Italian origin as a major issue.

Sonia Gandhi took the issue as a personal affront to her and dramatically submitted her resignation from the post of party President after walking out of the meeting of the Congress Working Committee where it was being discussed. In her letter of resignation, she said:

Though born in a foreign land, I chose India as my country. I am Indian, and I will remain so till my last breath. India is my

motherland, dearer to me than my own life.... I came into the service of the party not for a position of power but because the Party faced a challenge to its very existence, and I could not stand idly by. I do not intend to do so now.... I will continue to serve the Party as a loyal and active member to the best of my ability.

What followed was high drama. It began with all the Congress Chief Ministers submitting their resignations to Sonia Gandhi saying they had no desire to continue in her absence. Leaders of various state units also sent in their resignations. Even the CWC, barring the three 'offending' members, submitted letters of resignation en masse to Sonia Gandhi. Congress workers in various parts of the country threatened to immolate themselves unless Sonia Gandhi withdrew her resignation. The three leaders who had raised the issue were dubbed traitors and their effigies burnt.

After this farcical show of loyalty had lasted for over a week, the CWC met once again and expelled Pawar, Sangma and Anwar from the party. Sonia Gandhi still maintained that she would not withdraw her resignation. However, that this was merely a posture became clear when a special session of the AICC was organised a few days later at the Talkatora Stadium. Sonia Gandhi returned triumphantly to preside over this session. In her emotional speech on the occasion, she said:

The very people who had come to me with folded hands to plead that I emerge from my seclusion to save the Congress began questioning my patriotism. They sought to sow seeds of suspicion about me in the minds of my fellow countrymen and women. And they did this in concert with those very forces whom I had entered the political arena to combat.

Apart from the issue of her foreign origin, the stick that has been repeatedly used by her opponents to beat her is the Bofors scandal. The scandal erupted during Rajiv Gandhi's tenure as Prime Minister. The Swedish armaments manufacturer Bofors was allegedly awarded a major contract to supply howitzers (field guns) to the Indian army after it paid bribes to various influential individuals who were reportedly close to Rajiv Gandhi. Thirteen years after the contract was awarded and a decade after the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), filed a first information report (FIR), charges were framed

against a number of accused persons, including former bureaucrats and businessmen, among whom was the Italian Ottavio Quattrocchi, reportedly a close friend of the Gandhi family, in particular Sonia Gandhi. The CBI chargesheet also named Rajiv Gandhi as an accused, though he obviously could not be legally proceeded against, simply because he was no longer alive.

The manner in which the Congress headed by Sonia Gandhi reacted to the development is significant. The party not only blocked Parliamentary proceedings demanding the removal of Rajiv Gandhi's name from the chargesheet, but it mobilised a large rally of its supporters in the Capital in late November 1999 to back up its demand. The fact that the Congress chose to focus on this issue to attack the Vajpayee government spoke volumes for the absence of issues with a wider political appeal in the Congress gameplan.

The 'Q' issue cropped up again in January 2006 when the CBI told a London court that it had no objections to removing a 'freeze' on Quattrocchi's assets in two British banks. There was a hue and cry in Parliament with Opposition leader L.K. Advani alleging that the UPA government and Union Law Minister H.R. Bharadwaj had put pressure on the CBI to change its position since it had been arguing for a long time that the money in Quattrocchi's accounts should remain frozen till criminal charges are established against the Italian. By the time, the Supreme Court ordered the CBI to ensure that no money was withdrawn till it clarified why it had changed its position, Quattrocchi had already cleared the sum of around US\$ 4 million from his bank accounts. Sonia Gandhi kept mum right through this episode while Prime Minister Manmohan Singh claimed that the CBI had acted in an independent manner while denying government pressure on the country's premier police investigating agency. On February 6, 2007, Quattrocchi was detained in Argentina on the basis of an Interpol 'red corner' notice. The CBI was again criticised for making a lacklustre attempt to get him extradited and a judge asked it to pay for the Italian's legal expenses after throwing out its case. The Indian government chose not to appeal against this judgement and 'Q' returned to Milan six months later.

Another source of embarrassment for Sonia Gandhi was the charge made by Subramaniam Swamy that precious Indian antiques had been smuggled out of the country and were being sold at a shop in Italy owned by Sonia's sister. Swamy also referred to allegations in a book

by a Russian author that Sonia Gandhi and her son Rahul Gandhi had received payments from the KGB before the Soviet Union broke up. The Vajpayee government referred these allegations to the CBI, which instituted cases which are pending in court. While these allegations have not become a major political issue, they are raised from time to time by the political opponents of the Congress, especially the BJP.

## **Congress in No Hurry**

During the tenure of the third Vajpayee government, the Congress at no stage made an attempt to destabilise it, nor did it appear restless out of power. This was a marked change from previous occasions when the Congress was not in power in New Delhi. What explained this willingness on the part of the Congress to rest content as an Opposition party? The BJP and its allies had lost almost every state assembly election held after the general elections of September–October 1999 and before the Gujarat assembly elections held in December 2002, while the Congress had won many of these elections. The NDA's only successes came in the assembly elections in Haryana and Orissa, which were held in February 2000, within four months of the general elections. Since then, the NDA had no success in any state election. In the May 2001 elections to the state assemblies of Kerala, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Assam and Pondicherry, the Congress won on its own in Assam and was part of the winning alliance in Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry. The NDA fared miserably in each of these states. In February 2002, it was no different. The NDA lost in each of the four states that went to the polls—Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Uttaranchal and Manipur—despite having been in power in three of these states prior to the elections. The Congress won a majority of the seats in Punjab and Uttaranchal and managed to form a coalition government in Manipur.

It was this sequence of assembly elections that seemed to have convinced the Congress leadership that the longer the NDA remained in power, the more of an 'anti-incumbency' burden it would accumulate. It was also the party's belief that if the NDA government was given enough time to thoroughly discredit itself, the electorate would have no option but to turn to the 'natural party of governance' in the next general elections. That, the Congress believed, represented

the party's best chance of coming back to power on its own, or at least forming a coalition government in which it would not merely be the largest constituent, but also be able to call the shots.

Anti-incumbency votes against the NDA were not all what the Congress was banking on. The party was also anticipating a realignment of political alliances by the time of the next general elections. For starters, it was expecting the Nationalist Congress Party to be part of a Congress-led alliance for the next elections. The Congress had also anticipated that some of the BJP's partners in the NDA, like the DMK in Tamil Nadu, could dissociate themselves from the BJP by the time the 14th general elections took place and join hands with the Congress. With the Tamil Maanila Congress (TMC)—which had broken away from the Congress in 1996—also merging with the parent party in May 2002, this could significantly improve the electoral prospects of the Congress in Tamil Nadu, a state whose polity is dominated by the two Dravidian parties, the DMK and the AIADMK, and where the Congress had become an almost non-existent political force.

The Congress' expectations about political realignments before the 14th Lok Sabha elections were not entirely unrealistic. In 1999, the Congress and the NCP had contested against each other, thereby benefiting the BJP-Shiv Sena alliance in Maharashtra. Subsequently, the Congress and the NCP came together to form a coalition government in the state. However, this alliance has never looked secure. The Vajpayee government, in 2001, tried to woo Sharad Pawar by giving him a Cabinet-ranking position as head of an official all-party disaster management committee. In December 2003, Advani met Shiv Sena chief Bal Thackeray apparently to ascertain his reaction to a situation in which the NCP became a part of the NDA. Thackeray said he was not averse to the idea provided the NCP dissociated itself from former Deputy Chief Minister of Maharashtra Chhagan Bhujbal (who was earlier in the Sena). Despite repeated attempts by the BJP to woo the NCP, the Congress-NCP coalition in Maharashtra had not broken down at the time of writing. Meanwhile, the DMK and the MDMK, both of which had seemed quite uncomfortable within the NDA, finally broke away from the ruling coalition in December 2003 and tied up with the Congress in the run-up to the 14th general elections.

Apart from the electoral arithmetic, the Congress also devised a new strategy to refurbish the party's image among the electorate. For long, the Congress leadership was perceived as the party President assisted by a group of geriatrics, most of whom would find it difficult to win even a local election. These individuals have been perceived as being more cut out for palace intrigues than for mass politics, though some of them may have had genuine popular support in their heydays. There is no dearth of examples of this breed of Congress 'leaders'—Ambika Soni, Arjun Singh, Ghulam Nabi Azad, R.K. Dhawan and M.L. Fotedar, to name just a few. Sonia Gandhi consciously went about projecting a different image of the Congress. Chief Ministers like Digvijay Singh of Madhya Pradesh, Ajit Jogi of Chhattisgarh, S.M. Krishna of Karnataka, Ashok Gehlot of Rajasthan, A.K. Antony of Kerala, Tarun Gogoi of Assam and Sheila Dixit of Delhi were projected as efficient and dynamic administrators capable of galvanising development in their respective states.

The projection of Congress chief ministers had acquired a new fillip after the untimely deaths of two prominent young party leaders, Rajesh Pilot and Madhavrao Scindia. This was a dramatic shift from the culture inculcated in the Congress by Indira Gandhi and continued by her son Rajiv as well as his successors, P.V. Narasimha Rao and Sitaram Kesri. Since the late 1960s, when Indira Gandhi assumed leadership of the Congress, Chief Ministers from the party were treated with complete disdain by the party high command. Not only were they expected to be at the beck and call of the party President, they would be routinely removed from their positions depending on the whims of the high command.

Sonia Gandhi's change of tack may have been prompted by the recognition that it was easier to use the chief ministers as pin-up boys and girls than to rejuvenate the entire party apparatus. On the other hand, it may have been prompted by a genuine desire to decentralise the party. Either way, the effects were the same—the geriatrics were effectively marginalised and a new lot of leaders was projected as the party's future. However, the outcome of the December 2003 assembly polls came as a setback to this strategy—the party performed terribly in Madhya Pradesh under the leadership of Digvijay Singh who was the state's Chief Minister for 10 years and had also lost



out in Rajasthan where Gehlot was Chief Minister for five years. In Chhattisgarh, a state that had been in existence for barely three years, Ajit Jogi too had to eat humble pie as the BJP romped home to victory. Subsequently, S.M. Krishna ceased to remain Chief Minister of Karnataka after the Congress lost the state assembly elections in 2004 and A.K. Antony was displaced as Chief Minister of Kerala by Oomen Chandy in August that year. Both were later ‘rehabilitated’ by the Congress high command, Krishna as Maharashtra Governor and Antony as Union Defence Minister.

## Groping for a Strategy

Events in late 2002 and early 2003 revealed very starkly how devoid of a coherent strategy the Congress had been in its attempts to counter the aggressive Hindutva campaign of the Sangh Parivar. The best illustration of this was in Gujarat, during the campaign for the state assembly elections of December 2002. Shortly before the elections were formally notified, the Congress replaced the President of the state unit, Amarsinh Chaudhary, with Shankersinh Vaghela, a former BJP Chief Minister of the state and someone who had been an RSS activist for most of his political career. Vaghela had quit the BJP after factional fights in the party (see the chapter on the BJP) and formed his own party, the Rashtriya Janata Party (RJP) in 1995, that was later merged with the Congress.

The appointment of Vaghela as the Gujarat Congress Chief disappointed all those who had seen the Gujarat elections as a crucial battle between the aggressive Hindutva of Chief Minister Narendra Modi and the VHP, and secularism. It appeared likely that the Congress would not be confronting the BJP’s aggressive Hindutva head-on. This suspicion was further strengthened when another former RSS activist and former BJP MLA Narendrakumar Yatinbahi Oza was nominated to contest against Modi for the assembly elections. Any doubts that remained were settled by the tone and tenor of the Congress campaign. Individuals and organisations close to Vaghela—including a group of sadhus (ascetics)—attacked the Modi government for not having done enough to completely eliminate cow slaughter in the state. The fact that an issue that had traditionally been

raked up by the Sangh Parivar was now being used by people working for Vaghela, if not at his behest, spoke volumes about the so-called 'soft' Hindutva strategy adopted by the Congress.

The Congress predictably denied the charge made by secularists that it was following a soft Hindutva policy, but Modi remarked at more than one election meeting that the people of Gujarat were known for their willingness to pay a couple of rupees more to buy 'the real thing' rather than settle for an imitation product. 'Don't buy copycat products', he exhorted the crowds, drawing appreciative chuckles and applause.

The election results showed just how miserably the Congress strategy had fared. The BJP romped home with a two-thirds majority. In the introspection meetings that followed within the Congress, there were some leaders who blamed the soft Hindutva strategy for the debacle. Officially, however, the party concluded that the Gujarat election results were a consequence of a severely communally polarised society that had been brought about on account of the post-Godhra violence and not because the Congress had adopted a faulty campaign strategy to woo the electorate of Gujarat.

The diffidence about taking on the Hindutva campaign was also evident in the Congress' response to the assembly elections in Jammu & Kashmir, which had taken place in October 2002, just two months before the Gujarat elections. The National Conference, which had been in power till the elections, finished as the single largest party in the newly elected assembly with 28 seats, but was well short of 41, the number needed for a majority. The Congress with 21 MLAs finished second. The next biggest party in the assembly was the People's Democratic Party (PDP) led by Mufti Mohammad Sayeed, a former Congressman who had also served as Union Home Minister in V.P. Singh's government in 1989–90. The PDP won in 15 constituencies, while the BJP, which had eight MLAs in the outgoing assembly, managed to retain just one seat.

The indecisive nature of the mandate in the elections meant that no single party could form a government. It was also clear that the electorate of the state had voted against the National Conference. The obvious combination to form a government in the state, therefore, was an alliance between the PDP and the Congress supported by independent

MLAs and MLAs belonging to smaller political parties (including the Panther's Party and the CPI[M]). There was, however, a more ticklish issue that had to be resolved. Which of the two parties would be the senior partner in the alliance and whose representative would become the Chief Minister? It might appear obvious that the Congress as the larger party should have had the privilege of leading the government. But, the regional composition of the seats won by the Congress and the PDP posed a problem. While the Congress had won a majority of its seats in the Hindu-dominated Jammu region, almost all of the PDP's MLAs had been elected from the Muslim-dominated Kashmir Valley.

Why should this have posed a problem? The answer lies in the turbulent history of insurgency in the Valley. Secessionists have had some influence in Kashmir ever since its accession to the Indian Union in 1948. But from 1989 the secessionist demand gathered momentum and turned violent, especially in the Kashmir Valley. Most analysts agree that the perception that elections in the state have repeatedly been rigged by the ruling party contributed to fuelling the insurgency and the violence. This is why Prime Minister Vajpayee and Chief Election Commissioner J.M. Lyngdoh repeatedly assured the people of the Valley that the 2002 elections would be 'free and fair', a promise that was by and large fulfilled when the elections did take place. As a matter of fact, Lyngdoh alleged after the elections that the NC had tried to manipulate the government machinery to influence voter behaviour, but its attempts had been foiled by the EC, a charge that Farooq Abdullah predictably vehemently denied.

The October 2002 elections were, therefore, seen as the first genuine chance the people of the Valley have had in a long time to exercise their franchise. The positive impact of a credible election, it was feared, would be offset if the people of the Valley did not have their representative as chief minister, Mufti and his daughter argued. To be fair to them, this was a view that most neutral observers also shared. The Congress, however, was reluctant to concede the post of Chief Minister to a smaller party.

The Congress' reluctance to concede the Chief Minister's post to the PDP was not merely a reaction of a 'big brother' to his younger sibling.

In the Jammu region, campaigners of the Congress party (including Ghulam Nabi Azad) had categorically stated that if the Congress performed well in Jammu, there was every reason to break with tradition and have a person from this region as Chief Minister. (The state of Jammu & Kashmir comprises three distinct ethno-religious regions, Jammu, the Kashmir Valley and Ladakh–Leh—the state’s Chief Minister had always been an individual from the Valley.) The Congress also appeared to be concerned about the BJP accusing it of ‘appeasing’ the minority community (in Gujarat) if it conceded the Chief Minister’s post to a person from the Valley instead of an individual from the Jammu region, even if both contenders were in this case Muslim. The Congress leadership dilly-dallied for over a fortnight before it eventually agreed to Mufti becoming the next Chief Minister of Jammu & Kashmir for half the term of the assembly, that is, two and a half years.

The ambivalence of the Congress’ approach towards Hindutva was evident once again in early 2003, when Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Digvijay Singh suddenly raised the issue of cow slaughter. Singh was at pains to portray himself as a devotee and protector of the cow and the BJP as negligent on this issue. The MP Chief Minister went to the extent of publicly drinking cow’s urine and vouching for its therapeutic qualities. He then accused the BJP of being insincere in its campaign against cow slaughter. If, he argued, the BJP was really keen about banning cow slaughter, what prevented it from enacting an all-India law on the issue.

The BJP was quick to pounce on this ‘challenge’. In April 2003, during a discussion on a non-official-private member’s-Bill in Parliament calling for a national ban on cow slaughter, Minister for Parliamentary Affairs Sushma Swaraj embarrassed the Congress, which opposed the Bill. The Minister recalled what had been stated in the Lok Sabha by Shivraj Patil, a senior Congress MP and former Speaker in support of a national ban on cow slaughter. Patil was left sheepishly admitting that he could not recall what he had earlier said on the subject.

Hindutva is not the only issue on which the Congress has of late been somewhat ambivalent. Economic policy is another area in which the

party's rhetoric has been perceived to be inconsistent. There have been deep divisions within the party on the ideological thrust of the economic reforms programme, including the issue of privatising public sector undertakings. While there is more detailed discussion of this topic in the chapter on the economy, it is worth pointing out here that there has been a marked leftward shift in the party's rhetoric since 2003. Indira Gandhi's *garibi hatao* was resurrected as: *Congress ka haath, garib ke saath* ('the Congress' hand is with the poor', a reference to the election symbol of the party which is an open palm) which was thereafter changed to *Congress ka haath, aam aadmi ke saath* ('the Congress' hand is with the common man'). Sonia Gandhi and spokespersons of the UPA government have repeatedly claimed that the party and the government are working for the '*aam aadmi*' (common man). In October 2006, the '*garibi hatao*' slogan raised by the Congress under Indira Gandhi in 1971 was revived by the UPA government. In September 2007, Rahul Gandhi, then 37, was formally inducted into the party as general secretary. One of his reported wishes was to extend the National Rural Employment Guarantee programme all over the country—a wish that was promptly acceded to by the UPA government. It became evident that he would become a key campaigner for the Congress in the run-up to the 15th general elections.

Given the absence of a coherent ideology, either political or economic, can the Congress regain its past glory and form a government on its own? That is a rather remote possibility.

### **Sonia Gandhi**

Sonia Gandhi, President of the Indian National Congress, was born Edvige Antonia Albina Maino (better known as Sonia Maino) on December 9, 1946, in Lusiano, a small village in Italy to Roman Catholic parents. Her father was a building contractor and a former supporter of Mussolini. Widow of former Prime Minister of India Rajiv Gandhi, her rise in the country's political firmament has been truly exceptional. Sonia met Rajiv Gandhi in England in 1964 where she was studying English at the Bell Educational Trust, Cambridge. Rajiv was at that time enrolled at Trinity College, University of Cambridge. They married four years later, she moved to India and

the couple started living with Rajiv's mother who was then Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi.

Despite being married into a highly political family, she and her husband Rajiv (then a pilot with the public sector Indian Airlines) preferred to remain aloof from politics. Even after Indira Gandhi was voted out of power in March 1977 and after Rajiv Gandhi became general secretary of the Congress after the death of his younger brother Sanjay in a plane crash in 1980, Sonia stayed far away from Indian politics preferring to take care of her two children Priyanka and Rahul. It was not until 1983 that Sonia Gandhi acquired Indian citizenship, a fact that was repeatedly cited by her political opponents as evidence of her 'foreign' loyalties and political ambitions.

Yet, Sonia's aversion to politics was well known. One writer (Nicholas Nugent, *Rajiv Gandhi—Son of a Dynasty*, BBC Books, 1991) claimed that Sonia had even threatened to divorce Rajiv if he ever entered politics. Rajiv commented on this later saying Sonia felt she would be losing him. Another writer (Tariq Ali, *An Indian Dynasty—The Story of the Nehru-Gandhi Family*, Penguin, 1985) wrote that Sonia had at one point told a friend that she would rather have her children beg in the streets than have Rajiv join politics. Circumstances chose otherwise.

In 1986, two years into Rajiv Gandhi's tenure as Prime Minister, the Bofors scandal broke. Ottavio Quattrocchi, an Italian businessman representing Snamprogetti (an Italian government company that had bagged a series of contracts in India) is believed to have been involved in the scandal that involved alleged payment of bribes by the Swedish armaments manufacturer for supply of howitzers to the Indian Army. He, his wife and their children were close to the 'first family' of India thanks to the Sonia connection and would reportedly frequent the Indian Prime Minister's official residence.

After Rajiv Gandhi's death in May 1991, Sonia remained out of the limelight for nearly six years appearing only infrequently at public functions. Though Congress loyalists wanted her to lead the Congress party, she refused. During P. V. Narasimha Rao's term as Prime Minister, she remained in the background though there were occasional reports in the media claiming that she was unhappy with slow progress in the investigations into Rajiv's assassination. It was after the Congress lost power in the 1996 general elections, that there

was a clamour for her to lead the party. The former President of the Congress, the late Sitaram Kesri said he was willing to do anything—including falling at her feet—to persuade her to join active politics.

Sonia Gandhi became a primary member of the Congress less than a year before the plenary session of the Congress in Kolkata in August 1997. She, however, continued to maintain that she was not willing to be anything more than an ordinary party worker. It was only on the eve of the 1998 Lok Sabha elections that she finally took the plunge and became the leading campaigner for the party and was credited by most observers with preventing an electoral disaster for the party. She officially took charge of the Congress party as its president in 1998 after much drama. Sonia was elected to the Lok Sabha from Rae Bareilly (from which constituency in Uttar Pradesh her mother-in-law had been elected) in 1999 and became Leader of the Opposition in the 13th Lok Sabha.

The third woman (and eighth person) of foreign origin to hold the post of President of the Congress party after Annie Besant and Nellie Sengupta, Sonia Gandhi became the fifth member of the Gandhi-Nehru family to head the party after Motilal Nehru, Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi.

In the run-up to the 2004 general elections, Sonia undertook an extensive and strenuous campaign for her party propagating the slogan '*Congress Ka Haath Aam Aadmi Ke Saath*' pitching it against the 'India Shining' slogan of the BJP-led NDA. Her campaign style, which involved wading into crowds despite the high level of security given to her, was reminiscent of the manner in which Indira Gandhi would draw people to herself in her heydays. While her speeches in Hindi were obviously written out for her by speechwriters, she managed to give them an emotional tenor that seemed to match Indira's. BJP activists routinely ridiculed Sonia, saying she was 'a reader, not a leader' and dubbing her a '*goongi gudiya*' (dumb doll), the epithet that socialist leader Ram Manohar Lohia had once used to describe Indira Gandhi in her early years in politics. They pointed out that Sonia rarely spoke impromptu to even the media, hinting that this was not just because she was unfamiliar with Hindi, but also because she wouldn't know what to say.

Despite all the ridicule and criticism, the Congress, which many NDA supporters had forecast would not get even 100 seats, won a tally of 145 and even her critics had to grudgingly acknowledge that this was largely due to Sonia's campaigning skills. Pramod Mahajan, who was a key campaign strategist for the BJP, candidly admitted that the Congress leader's campaign style of connecting with the masses had worked better than the more distant attitude adopted by his own party's leaders.

During the election campaign, Sonia's political adversaries (most of them in the BJP) kept emphasising her 'foreign origin', the fact that she became an Indian citizen 15 years after she married Rajiv Gandhi and started living in New Delhi and her lack of fluency in Hindi or any other Indian language. Sonia, on the other hand, said she was the country's *babu* (wife) and she had effectively become an Indian in her heart the day she became Indira Gandhi's daughter-in-law. She added that even after she became a widow she had chosen to remain in India. (Earlier, in May 1999, Sonia offered to resign as President of the Congress after three senior leaders Pawar, Sangma and Anwar challenged her right to become India's Prime Minister.)

After the election results were announced on May 13, 2004 and it became clear that the Congress would lead the coalition that would form the government, it was widely believed that Sonia would become the next Prime Minister of India. Three days later, on May 16, she was unanimously chosen to lead a 15-party coalition government with the support of the left. BJP leader Sushma Swaraj threatened to shave her hair in protest if Sonia became Prime Minister. But she confounded all her critics and surprised her supporters by declining the position. Instead, on May 18, she nominated Manmohan Singh to lead the Union government. Her refusal to hold the highest post in the country was predictably hailed by her supporters as the 'ultimate' sacrifice or act of renunciation. Sonia, however, retained the post of Chairperson of the Congress Parliamentary Party.

She also became the Chairperson of the National Advisory Council (NAC), a body comprising eminent persons with expertise in different areas that was set up to advise the government and interface with civil society on the implementation of the National Common Minimum Programme. As CPP chairperson, Sonia was not just the *de facto*



leader of the UPA but also its de jure leader. This status also allowed her to play the role of the ‘elder statesperson’ or the ‘final arbiter’ in disputes and disagreements, be these between the left and the Congress or UPA, or within the Congress itself. Her critics described her as the ‘power behind the throne’ and as an extra-constitutional authority. Though Congress supporters rejected such criticism of her role, few had any doubts that her wish would be command, as far as the Prime Minister or the Congress party were concerned. She was often perceived as more ‘left of centre’ than Manmohan Singh and Finance Minister Chidambaram on economic policy issues and she did play a crucial role in ensuring the enactment of the National Rural Employment Guarantee (NREG) Act—described as the world’s largest social security scheme—despite the reservations of quite a few important functionaries in the government. She ‘intervened’ by writing a letter to the Prime Minister when there was criticism of the UPA government’s policy on setting up Special Economic Zones (SEZs). In March 2006, she resigned from the Lok Sabha as well as the post of NAC head after the ‘office of profit’ controversy broke out—on whether an MP could hold a post that entailed pecuniary gain—and was re-elected from Rae-Bareilly by a margin of over 400,000 votes.

She was named the third most powerful woman in the world by *Forbes* magazine in 2004 and her rank in 2006 was 13th. Whenever she was asked if her children would be entering politics, Sonia would reply that it was up to them. Rahul was almost 34 years old when he became MP in May 2004, but daughter Priyanka (who many believed would join politics before her younger sibling) has restricted her political role to merely campaigning for the party .

### **Manmohan Singh**

Dr. Manmohan Singh is India’s 17th Prime Minister and the first one never to have won a Lok Sabha election. The only occasion he contested for the Lok Sabha elections was in 1999 from the South Delhi constituency—he lost to the BJP’s Vijay Kumar Malhotra by roughly 30,000 votes. Manmohan is the only Sikh to have held the highest post in the country. Despite having been a Congress MP in the Rajya Sabha since 1991, he is considered more of a technocrat

and academic than a politician. Manmohan is perhaps best known as the person who liberalised the Indian economy during his tenure as Finance Minister in the Narasimha Rao government. It is this aspect of Manmohan, together with his reputation of being scrupulously honest, that endears him to many in the country's upper and middle classes.

If one goes by academic qualifications, Manmohan is undoubtedly the most educated Prime Minister India has had. Starting off from humble beginnings in Gah village in what is now Pakistani Punjab, Manmohan was able to study in universities like Cambridge and Oxford thanks to scholarships that were awarded to him for his academic excellence. Manmohan is on record saying that his eyesight may not have been as poor as it has turned out to be if he did not have to spend long hours in his childhood studying by the dim light of a lantern. The long hours paid off, with Manmohan standing first in Punjab University in his MA in Economics, before going on to an Economic Tripos with first class honours from Cambridge and then a D.Phil from Oxford.

The early part of his public life was spent as a teacher of economics at various educational institutions, but his first brush with officialdom came in 1971 when he became economic adviser to the Union Ministry of Foreign Trade. That was to be the start of a long stint in government bodies and international organisations, lasting 20 years. During this period, he was Chief Economic Adviser to the Finance Ministry, Finance Secretary, Governor, Reserve Bank of India, Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission, Economic Adviser to the Prime Minister and Secretary General of the Geneva-based South Commission. As observers have pointed out, Manmohan is the only man to have held all top government jobs relating to the management of the Indian economy.

Till the point he became Finance Minister in the Rao government, Manmohan was seen as an economist who had endorsed the 'socialist' policy framework of the Indian government. Even as South Commission Secretary General he articulated the economic aspirations of the developing countries and delivered a stinging critique of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. It came as quite a surprise, therefore, when he espoused a

rightward shift in India's economic policy regime as Finance Minister. The shift was welcomed not just by the Indian upper and middle classes, but also by publications like *Euromoney* and *Asiamoney*, which gave him awards for Finance Minister of the Year in 1993 and 1994 respectively. As Prime Minister, Manmohan has had to tone down his image as a gung-ho economic liberaliser, though he is still seen as among the more right-wing leaders of the Congress as far as economic policies are concerned. Former Finance Minister of West Bengal Ashok Mitra has claimed in a book (*A Prattler's Tale: Bengal, Marxism and Governance*, Samya, 2007) that Manmohan's appointment as Finance Minister in the Rao government was on account of American pressure.

Mild-mannered and soft-spoken, he has rarely courted controversy. Only on a few occasions has he been in the limelight for the wrong reasons. In 1992, when he was Finance Minister, Opposition leaders had attacked him for remarking that he would not lose his sleep because stock-markets were going down—this comment came at a time when India's capital markets were racked by a securities scandal involving, among others, stockbroker Harshad Mehta. Manmohan attracted attention when he was elected to the Rajya Sabha from the north-eastern state of Assam—he stated that he was a tenant of the wife of the then Chief Minister of Assam Hiteshwar Saikia. His official bio-data lists his 'permanent address' as: House No. 3989, Nandan Nagar, Ward No. 51, Sarumataria, Dispur, Guwahati (Assam) 781006.

Former Rajya Sabha member and journalist Kulip Nayyar petitioned the Supreme Court challenging an amendment to the Representation of the People Act, 1951, which allows anyone who is a citizen of India to be elected to the Rajya Sabha from any state even if he is not a resident of that state. On August 22, 2006, a five-judge Constitution bench of the Supreme Court of India unanimously upheld the constitutional validity of the amendments that had been made to the country's electoral law dispensing with the 'domicile' requirement for getting elected to the upper house of Parliament. This judgement not only provided great relief to Manmohan but to a host of other Rajya Sabha MPs cutting across political lines.

Perhaps the most controversial decision he took as Prime Minister was the signing of an agreement with the US government headed by George W Bush called the 'Indo-US civilian nuclear cooperation agreement' in July 2005. Manmohan and the government justified the agreement arguing that it would help end India's nuclear isolation—which began after the tests conducted at Pokhran in 1974 and then 1998. The agreement, they said, would give India access to nuclear technology and fuel that was essential for developing nuclear power, which in turn was crucial to the country's energy requirements for the future. Critics of the deal, who included important nuclear scientists, the left and the BJP, argued that it would compromise the country's sovereignty and its ability to develop its nuclear weapons programme. The controversy was worrisome for the Congress also because of the apprehension that the perceived proximity to a Bush-led US administration might not go down too well with many sections of the electorate, including the Muslims.

Another aspect of Manmohan's Prime Ministership that has had a mixed response is his peace overtures to Pakistan. While his predecessors had also made gestures of conciliation towards India's western neighbour, Manmohan has been seen as more of a peacenik than most. The BJP has predictably panned him for being too 'soft' on Pakistan, particularly after he made a statement in Havana to the effect that, like India, Pakistan too was a victim of terrorism.

Three years after he became Prime Minister, Manmohan's political instincts appear to have matured, but he is still seen by many as a person who is more comfortable in the world of academia than in the portals of power. Despite the relatively high ratings he has got in several opinion polls, he continues to be perceived as an efficient and honest administrator and not quite a political leader of significant stature. The perception remains that it is Sonia Gandhi who calls the shots on every important issue within the coalition and the government. Manmohan's own repeated assertions that Sonia is his leader have not helped dispel this notion.

## Chapter 4

# Bharatiya Janata Party: Coping with a Power Cut

The Bharatiya Janata Party has for long rightly been perceived as the political wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Recent electoral history, however, suggests that the party is ambivalent about the extent to which it should assert its Hindu nationalist identity. One section in the BJP is of the view that a militantly pro-Hindu image cuts both ways and may, therefore, have to be used selectively. The pro-Hindu stance certainly served its purpose in the early 1990s and catapulted the BJP within a stone's throw of power in New Delhi. Yet, this same image limited its further growth in the second half of the 1990s and on occasions was a distinct liability. It was a liability primarily in terms of alienating almost all the minority communities and also large sections of the majority Hindu community. It was also an image that made other parties wary of joining hands with the BJP. This latter fact was brought home to the BJP the hard way, when it failed to win over any new allies to its side in May 1996, despite having formed the Union government. Thereafter, the party's leadership took pains to project a more moderate and secular face while the BJP-led NDA was in power in New Delhi even though the veneer kept slipping from time to time.

After the NDA was voted out of power in 2004, the BJP was in a state of shock. The party had anticipated a clear victory for the NDA and some even believed that BJP could obtain a majority—or close to a majority—of seats in the Lok Sabha on its own. The outcome of the 14th general elections, the results of which were declared on May 13, 2004, made the party realise that its 'India Shining' campaign had badly backfired—far from enthusing voters to re-elect the NDA, the mandate indicated that large sections of the electorate of the country were not just unimpressed by the high-profile publicity campaign but in fact had rebuffed the BJP's claims that close to six years of NDA

rule had benefitted the country's ordinary people. What is noteworthy is that it took a long time for many party sympathisers to come to terms with the factors that had contributed to the NDA losing power. What was worse for the BJP was that the party appeared to be in the throes of an internal power struggle with the 'old guard' represented by Vajpayee and Advani getting marginalised by a younger group. However, the divisions within the party were not as stark or as simple as that.

The unexpected defeat in the elections gave the younger leaders an opportunity to press their claims to lead the party. At the same time, sections within the party which had been uncomfortable with the party's 'dilution' of its core ideology during the NDA government also sensed a chance to push for a return to the 'hard Hindutva' strategy. The leadership struggle that followed reflected both these currents.

A development that precipitated the internal crisis in the BJP was a series of remarks made by Advani during a visit to Pakistan in June 2005. Advani was at the time the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha and had been invited by the Government of Pakistan. Advani created quite a stir by describing Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the Father of the Nation of Pakistan and the most important leader of the Muslim League in Independent India, as a great man and a secular person. He quoted from Jinnah's speech to the Constituent Assembly in August 1947 to substantiate his point. Advani's unexpected endorsement of a man whom the BJP had traditionally demonised as the architect of India's Partition created a storm within the party and outside. Barring Jaswant Singh who publicly came out in support of Advani and Vajpayee who made some cryptic remarks that were open to interpretation, most other BJP leaders were clearly unhappy with Advani's apparent attempt to present a moderate face before the Muslim community. Some like Yashwant Sinha even openly criticised Advani, saying that his remarks on Jinnah were 'unnecessary and avoidable'. Another BJP leader and former Chief Minister of Delhi, Madan Lal Khurana, also expressed his displeasure with Advani's comments on Jinnah. The RSS leaders who were also extremely unhappy with Advani's comments decided it was time to flex their muscles and ensure that the BJP was led by a person they had confidence in.

On June 7, 2005 Advani offered to resign from the post of party president, but took back his resignation three days later. Sinha meanwhile suggested that Advani should step down from the post of the Leader of the Opposition as well. He said, 'Advani has resigned as BJP president, he should also consider whether he can be an effective leader of the opposition'. By taking back his resignation, Advani had temporarily averted a leadership crisis within the party, but it soon became evident that he would have to quit. There were reports of the RSS insisting on his exit, though these were predictably denied. The denials seemed hollow when barely three months later, on September 18, Advani himself announced that he would soon resign from the post of party president, though his term was till the end of 2006.

Advani's impending exit from the post of BJP president precipitated a deepening of the fissures within the party. Various individuals from the 'young' section of the BJP were perceived as serious contenders for the party president's post. These included Pramod Mahajan, Sushma Swaraj, Arun Jaitley and Rajnath Singh. Eventually Rajnath Singh became the new party president, though only for the remaining part of the term that originally Venkaiah Naidu and then Advani were supposed to have completed. The scheduled three-year term starting January 2004 had thus seen three individuals occupy the post. Rajnath Singh was later re-elected for a full term as party president in November 2006. Soon thereafter, he 'reorganised' the party hierarchy in the process 'sidelining' Narendra Modi and Arun Jaitley, two relatively young party stalwarts.

While the game of musical chairs was going on as far as the party president's post was concerned, a number of leaders of the BJP who had held prominent positions had openly started rebelling against the party leadership as a prelude to their eventual exit from the BJP. Such leaders included not just Khurana, but also Uma Bharti, former Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh and Union Minister. K N Govindacharya, who had once been a prominent party ideologue and general secretary, joined Uma Bharti in criticising the BJP leadership for having lost its ideological moorings. That Bharti was uncomfortable with the state of affairs in the party had become evident much earlier when she stormed out of a BJP executive meeting in front of television cameras in November 2004 daring Advani, who was then party president, to

take disciplinary action against her. Her anger, she said, was prompted by leaders without any mass base who spent their time planting stories in the media against more popular leaders like her. While she did not name any such leader, most observers saw this as an oblique reference to people like Jaitley. Given the fact that Bharti's challenge had been broadcast live on television, Advani had no option but to suspend her from the party, but she was predictably reinstated a few weeks later. Bharti's love-hate relationship with the BJP leadership continued till she was expelled from the party in December 2005 and went on to form her own political outfit.

Two apparently unconnected incidents that further dented the image of the BJP were the sudden death of Pramod Mahajan and Jaswant Singh's sensational 'disclosure' in his biography that there had been an American intelligence mole in the office of the Prime Minister of India for several years. On April 22, 2006, Mahajan was shot at point blank range by his younger brother, who reportedly felt humiliated by the manner in which the elder Mahajan had treated him. Mahajan had held a number of important positions in the governments headed by Vajpayee as well as the party—in fact he was a prominent election strategist and spokesperson of the BJP. Not only was he an important party functionary, he was perhaps the only major BJP leader from Maharashtra, a state that has provided most of the top leaders of the RSS. Soon after Mahajan's death, his aide was found dead in his official residence under suspicious circumstances and his son was hospitalised; both were accused of consuming illegal substances. As for former Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh's claim about an American mole in the highest echelons of the Indian government, he released a document whose authenticity was questioned and Singh was even accused of seeking 'cheap' publicity to boost the sales of his book.

With one embarrassing incident after another denting the party's image, there were clear signs by the end of 2006 that the BJP would turn to its time-tested strategy in an attempt to regain lost ground. When the party's national executive met in Lucknow in December soon after Rajnath Singh was re-elected as the president, he challenged the Congress and the SP to honour their past commitment to rebuild the Babri mosque. 'The BJP is clear that only a grand temple for *Maryada Purushottam* (The Most Honourable Man) Lord Shri Ram should



be built at that place,' he said in his speech. With the elections to the Uttar Pradesh state assembly barely a few months away, it was clear that the BJP was raising the pitch on the Ayodhya issue (see Annexure at the end of the chapter). In September 2007, after the UPA government modified a court petition relating to the Sethusamudram project, in which Lord Rama had been described as a 'mythical' character, the BJP led by Advani sought to politicise the issue and play on Hindu sentiments.

Even during the period when the NDA was in power, it is not as if the entire rank and file of the BJP, or even all of the party's national leadership, was comfortable with the idea of 'diluting' the party's core Hindutva agenda. There were sections within the BJP that still believed that the party would be best served by a single-minded focus on garnering votes from the majority community. This section became more assertive after the BJP won a two-thirds majority in the December 2002 assembly elections in Gujarat after the communal riots, which severely polarised the state's electorate. Nevertheless, the party's practice even after the Gujarat elections showed that the dominant opinion within the leadership was in favour of a more flexible strategy.

As mentioned already, the BJP had also realised it could not hope to form the Union government without the support of regional parties. Hence, from a party that insisted, till as late as 1998, that coalitions were temporary, the BJP did an about-turn and declared that coalitions are here to stay in India.

Yet, the BJP's opponents always maintained that the party had only acquired a façade of moderation and its core agenda of Hindutva remained undiluted. This has often been referred to as the BJP's and the Sangh Parivar's 'hidden agenda'. The notion that the 'hidden agenda' is merely a convenient stick for envious opponents to beat the BJP with is quite a common perception. However, it is not quite as much of a hoary old cliché as BJP spokespersons would have us believe. The most overt and blatant manifestation of the real agenda of the BJP was the manner in which the party's functionaries tried to impart a majoritarian bias—often described by the media as saffronisation, since the colour saffron is considered devout by Hindus—to the education system and syllabi and content of history textbooks in particular and also by making key changes in the academic establishment (more on this later in the chapter).

The party's reluctance to discard the Hindutva plank was also made evident in a series of incidents in February–March 2002. The clearest evidence of this was of course the Gujarat riots. Never after 1947 had communal riots in a state been so widespread and so sustained. Further, with the exception of the anti-Sikh riots that followed Indira Gandhi's assassination by a Sikh member of her personal security team on October 31, 1984, there have perhaps been no other communal riots in which virtually all the victims belonged to one community—in this case the Muslims. It is this that led many observers to characterise the communal disturbances in Gujarat as a 'pogrom'. There was another unique feature about the Gujarat riots. These were the first major riots in India in the era of private television channels and hence the first riots to be telecast live, as it were. The Gujarat riots were unique in yet another respect. For perhaps the first time in India, large numbers of relatively well-to-do people actively participated in the looting of property owned by Muslims that accompanied the riots.

While the media and almost all political parties including most constituents of the NDA were unanimous in criticising the Modi administration for acting too late—whether it be in calling in the army to control the rioters or in arranging relief for those affected—spokespersons of the BJP (including the Prime Minister) blamed the media for allegedly inflaming communal passions and for playing a partisan role while reporting the incidents that had taken place.

When the then Prime Minister Vajpayee visited Gujarat for the first time after the communal violence, he expressed regret for what had happened and advised Modi to follow *raj-dharma* (or the duty of the ruler) and not discriminate among his 'subjects'. On the same occasion, on the eve of a visit outside the country, Vajpayee lamented that the Gujarat violence had made India lose face before the rest of the world. Within weeks, however, Vajpayee had not-so-subtly changed his position. At a party conclave in Goa, he claimed that while the riots should not have taken place, the reasons why they occurred should not be ignored. He claimed that if Muslims and opposition leaders had condemned the Godhra incident—in which compartments of a train carrying Hindu *kar sevaks* were set on fire in February 2002—strongly enough, the violence that followed might have been contained. He blamed the BJP's political opponents and the media for demonising the entire population of Gujarat—and this became an election slogan for Narendra Modi.

That the BJP was keen on garnering advantage from the communally charged atmosphere in the state became obvious when the party sought to hold elections in the state ahead of schedule. The Chief Election Commissioner J.M. Lyngdoh refused to oblige the party and, despite the fact that he was a Constitutional authority, was publicly and privately attacked by those in government. Lyngdoh had been scathing in his criticism of the state administration for not having created an atmosphere in which large sections of the minority community living in rehabilitation camps would have been able to exercise their franchise without fear of intimidation. The elections were eventually conducted in December 2002. Modi led a vicious campaign not only against his main political opponent from the Congress—Shankersinh Vaghela who used to be a member of the BJP and the RSS—but kept referring to the Chief Election Commissioner by his full name, James Michael Lyngdoh, to establish Lyngdoh's Christian identity and impute a motive that he was somehow favouring Sonia Gandhi because of her Christian background. On more than one public occasion, Modi rhetorically speculated if the two met in church. It was, of course, a separate matter that Lyngdoh openly proclaimed that he is an atheist.

The clout of the hardliners within the BJP received a major boost when Modi's strategy worked—the BJP swept to power in Gujarat with a two-thirds majority in the 182-member state assembly. Modi's supporters within the party, including Arun Jaitley who was general secretary of the party at that time, were predictably exultant. The hardliners kept talking about how the 'Gujarat experiment' should be replicated in other parts of the country. If one excluded the outcome of the Goa assembly polls that the BJP won with a slim majority, Gujarat was the first state assembly election won by the BJP since the third Vajpayee government came to power in New Delhi in October 1999. But the so-called 'Modi magic' had worn off by the time the next round of assembly elections took place a few months later, in February 2003. In the small mountainous state of Himachal Pradesh, the BJP failed to return to power. In December 2003, the BJP did win assembly elections in three crucial states—Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh—but the Hindutva agenda was conspicuous by its absence, at least from the official campaign.

The BJP's claims that it had set aside the controversial Ayodhya issue and adopted the NDA's agenda as the only one to be followed by the party while it shared power with its coalition partners also came under a cloud in February–March 2002. The party's opponents saw a 'conspiracy' when the VHP stepped up the tempo in its campaign to build the temple at the disputed site in Ayodhya in the run-up to the assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh. The allies, however, were not yet concerned, since the BJP publicly maintained that it had nothing to do with the VHP's campaign and that the Ayodhya dispute could ideally be settled through a negotiated settlement between Hindus and Muslims or by a court order. But, the then Attorney General Soli Sorabjee ended up upsetting many of the BJP's allies in the NDA with his suggestion that a token foundation stone laying ceremony be allowed on land acquired by the government near the disputed site on March 15. Despite subsequent attempts at damage control, the BJP's 'secular' allies remained upset at the turn of events. The BJP, they felt, was not honouring its promise that it would abide by the Common Minimum Agenda of the NDA and set aside all contentious issues. The unease of the BJP's allies grew as the VHP and the RSS grew increasingly belligerent while the government sought to walk a tightrope, simultaneously attempting to placate the Sangh Parivar and the constituents of the NDA.

A year later, the Ayodhya issue was back in focus. In February 2003, the government moved a petition in the Supreme Court urging it to vacate its March 2002 order banning religious activity on the acquired land. There was, however, an interesting contrast from the situation just a year before. Gone was the pretence that Sorabjee's was a 'personal opinion' or his reading of the legal situation; the government was making no bones about the fact that it wanted to give part of the acquired land to the Ram Janmabhoomi Nyas, a VHP-supported trust to build a Ram temple.

The outcome of the February 2002 assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh had dealt a body blow to the BJP's ambitions to consolidate its position as the only alternative to the Congress in national politics. The party's attempts to project itself as a centrist party believing in the future of coalitions also took a beating as the outcome of the UP polls turned out to be much worse than what the BJP had been expecting. Out of the 400 assembly constituencies that went to the

polls, the BJP ended up a poor third with 88 seats after the SP with 143 seats and the BSP with 98 seats.

During the election campaign, the BJP was quite hopeful that it would be able to impress the electorate of India's most populous state and that the party's Chief Minister Rajnath Singh (who had replaced the octogenarian Ram Prakash Gupta more than a year earlier) would be the most effective and efficient person to lead the economically backward state in which caste sentiments run deep. Rajnath Singh tried hard to rid his party of the image of being controlled by upper-caste individuals (mainly Thakur and Brahmin) by offering reservation of government jobs to the 'most backward classes' (MBCs). Though the Supreme Court shot down his plans, Rajnath Singh had clearly sought to divide the intermediate and lower castes and appeal to sections that were seen as staunch supporters of the SP and the BSP. By playing the 'MBC card', he had also attempted to win back to the BJP's fold certain lower-caste groups (like the Lodhs) owing allegiance to former BJP Chief Minister Kalyan Singh who had been expelled from the party in 1999. (While this strategy failed in UP, it helped the party in neighbouring Bihar during the assembly elections held in 2005.)

The results of the UP elections left no room for doubt that the strategy had failed to deliver the goods. Once again the BJP's focus in UP shifted to damage control. More specifically, an attempt was made to ensure, by whatever means possible, that Mulayam Singh Yadav's SP would not be able to form the next government in the state, despite being by far the single-largest party in the assembly. In the days immediately following the election results, BJP leaders kept insisting that the party was quite prepared to sit in the Opposition benches according to the 'mandate of the people'. However, at the same time, party leaders were conducting hectic negotiations with Mayawati, the BSP leader. Soon enough, the two parties had reached an understanding on power sharing in the state. Mayawati would head a coalition government with the BJP and sundry, smaller groups and individuals as junior partners.

The BJP central leadership did not have an easy time trying to persuade its UP unit to accept such an arrangement. Several important leaders of the BJP in UP, including Rajnath Singh, were hostile to a tie-up with the BSP, with which the BJP had in the past had an extremely acrimonious parting of ways. These leaders did not bother to make a

secret of their opposition to any alliance with the BSP. They argued that playing second fiddle to the BSP, a party whose support base was predominantly among the dalits, would further alienate many of the BJP's supporters belonging to the upper castes. These leaders of the BJP in UP—who were themselves from the upper castes—had to ultimately relent, when the central leadership reportedly bluntly told them that they had no choice but to support the coalition led by the BSP. Rajnath Singh, in what was seen as a face-saving move, was inducted into the Vajpayee cabinet.

The BJP–BSP tie-up nevertheless remained shaky till Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani in a public appearance on April 14, 2002 made it amply clear that the alliance was there to stay. April 14 is an important day in the BSP's calendar, since it marks the birth anniversary of Bhimrao Ambedkar, the only dalit leader with an iconic status cutting across rival dalit groups and parties in different parts of the country, who is also considered to be the architect of the Indian Constitution. At the annual rally to mark the occasion, Advani not only made it a point to be present, but also extolled Mayawati's virtues in no uncertain terms, making it clear that opposition to the BJP–BSP coalition would not be tolerated.

This remained the position of key central leaders like Vajpayee and Advani even a year later, when a large delegation of BJP MLAs from Uttar Pradesh came to meet the Prime Minister in New Delhi to complain about the 'step-motherly' treatment being accorded to them and their party by the Mayawati government. The two leaders are said to have ticked them off, pointing out that having failed to win the elections, they were in no position to be finicky. Without an alliance with the BSP, they were reportedly told, the BJP would be in dire straits in UP in the Lok Sabha elections due in 2004.

The central leadership's anxiety to keep the coalition together was understandable. Not only was UP itself an electorally crucial state for the BJP, the possible support of the BSP in the neighbouring state of Madhya Pradesh could even mean the difference between winning or losing in that state. With the Madhya Pradesh assembly elections scheduled for October–November 2003, the party did not want to rock the boat in UP. Unfortunately for the BJP, while the UP state unit could understand the compulsions of the central leadership, this did not prevent many of the MLAs from making their displeasure

evident. They continued to maintain that the alliance would only work to the BSP's advantage, while the BJP's support base in the state would continue to shrink. Ultimately, as detailed in another chapter, the contradictions between the BJP and the BSP led to the alliance falling apart in August 2003 leading to Mulayam Singh Yadav becoming Chief Minister of UP.

Unlike the BJP's central leadership, Mayawati never bent over backwards to keep the coalition going. She was not averse to taking steps she knew would antagonise at least some sections within the BJP. A prime example of this was her decision to arrest independent MLA Raghuraj Pratap Singh—alias Raja Bhaiyya—and his father. Raja Bhaiyya is an archetypal feudal lord and is notorious for 'ruling' his fiefdom with brute violence. Dozens of criminal cases had been pending against him for decades, but no progress had been made as the administration had never before received the political support necessary to proceed against him and his family. Raja Bhaiyya was among the independent MLAs who supported Mayawati's government when it was formed in February 2002. Towards the end of that year, however, he was part of a group of independent MLAs and BJP dissidents who unsuccessfully sought to bring down the Mayawati government. Suddenly, the Mayawati government swung into action against Raja Bhaiyya. Cases that had been gathering dust for years were resuscitated and his estates in Kunda were raided. The police allegedly found caches of arms, buried treasures, a skeleton of a man in a pond and so on. The once untouchable feudal lord was put behind bars and charged under POTA for, among other things, conspiring to kill Mayawati.

The crackdown on Raja Bhaiyya was an astute political move that achieved several objectives. First, it sent out a clear message to all existing and potential dissidents that they should be prepared to face the wrath of the state if they did not fall in line. At the same time, it helped Mayawati establish her credentials as a dalit leader who was not scared of taking on even the most powerful among the upper castes. Finally, it left the BJP's leaders with the unenviable choice of either alienating their upper-caste supporters by backing her move or being seen as aligning themselves with a person with an unsavoury reputation.

After the BJP parted ways with the BSP in August 2003 and Mayawati resigned from the post of UP Chief Minister, speculation was rife that the party had tacitly supported Mulayam Singh Yadav in his bid to become Chief Minister. Mulayam's detractors alleged that the quid pro quo for the BJP's tacit support was that the state government would soft pedal the criminal cases pertaining to the demolition of the Babri masjid against BJP leaders like Advani, Joshi and Uma Bharti. What explained the BJP's changed attitude towards Mulayam, traditionally the party's prime rival in UP? The main factor seemed to be that the BJP wanted to buy time. When the alliance with the BSP broke up in August 2003, the BJP was clearly in disarray in UP and could ill afford an election at that stage. Also, it needed to get its act together before the 14th general elections.

This episode encapsulated the various contradictions that the BJP tried to resolve in its new avatar as a party in government rather than as one in opposition. Electorally, it was engaged in an attempt to reconfigure the caste coalitions it had traditionally banked on. Politically, it was struggling to find a way by which it could reconcile the conflicting interests of the Hindutva hardliners and the 'secular' allies of the BJP in the NDA. While Vajpayee, Advani, and the then Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh projected the 'moderate' or 'liberal' mask of the party in power, others like Human Resources Development Minister Murli Manohar Joshi were left free to vigorously pursue the party's Hindu nationalist agenda.

## **Saffronising Education**

The very fact that Joshi and another hardliner, Uma Bharti, were chosen to head the Human Resources Development (HRD) Ministry when Vajpayee became Prime Minister in 1998 was seen by observers as evidence of the party's hidden agenda. This was only one of two ministries in which both the senior as well as junior ministers were from the BJP, the other being the Ministry for Information and Broadcasting (which too could greatly help the party's propaganda efforts). Joshi's first stint in the job was surrounded by controversy, but he retained the portfolio in the third Vajpayee government as well. This only added to the misgivings of the BJP's political opponents about the party's hidden agenda.



In his first tenure as HRD Minister, Joshi had already made sweeping changes in key positions in the academic establishment, pertaining to both school and higher education. The Indian Council for Historical Research (ICHR) witnessed a complete revamp, at the end of which historians known to be inclined towards the BJP were at the helm. That this was not merely a ‘jobs for the boys’ move is evident from the pronouncements of historians close to the BJP, like K.S. Lal, who had earlier headed the Archaeological Survey of India. The right-wing historian was quoted by Akshaya Mukul who then worked for *The Hindustan Times* as arguing that there was nothing wrong with Joshi attempting to rewrite history, since the Congress and left intellectuals had (according to him) done the same thing. Lal told Mukul:

Historians like Nurul Hasan saw to it that books written during his stint as education minister hid the true face of Islam, which is essentially a barbaric religion. Instead, emphasis was laid on the study of economic history. Institutions like NCERT [National Council for Educational Research and Training] and ICHR were used to propagate this ideology.

Lal went on to assert that the ‘corrections’ would now be thorough.

Textbooks should highlight the achievements of Hindus during the Vedic period; the role of religion during the medieval period; how Muslim rulers from [Allauddin] Khilji onwards deliberately kept Hindu farmers at subsistence level, forcing them to migrate as indentured labour to Mauritius and the West Indies.

It was the communal bias that is evident in these statements, which have little basis in fact, that was the real cutting edge of the attempt to saffronise education. It was not as if Lal’s positions were an aberration from the norm among those appointed or elevated to high positions in academia under Joshi’s tutelage. Krishna Gopal Rastogi, Joshi’s appointee to the NCERT, had in 1998 privately circulated a copy of his autobiography titled *Aap Beeti* (literally, ‘My Experiences’). Rastogi has in his book graphically narrated how he shot dead a Muslim woman in Uttar Pradesh during Partition. Rastogi has justified his actions by writing that the woman’s beauty had distracted his friends in the RSS from rioting and turned them into ‘lusting human beings who were on the verge of raping her’.

The author stated, 'I have always felt sorry for the action' (which stunned his friends into returning to their 'task'). The RSS head K.S. Sudarshan had, in his foreword to Rastogi's book, lauded the author's wife for allowing his 'physical needs' to be fulfilled during his trips abroad. On his foreign travels, Rastogi writes that the three things most easily available in the West were food, liquor and women. He has, at the same time, claimed that he was reminded of divine fairies when he saw scantily clad women on a beach in Yugoslavia. Rastogi has also revealed his unhappiness about not having been earlier appointed as an adviser to the education minister because he 'did not like a more intelligent person to work under him'. After the contents of Rastogi's controversial autobiography became public, he claimed that sections of his account were 'fictionalised'.

Rastogi was not the only Joshi protege at the NCERT. A few months after he assumed office, in July 1998, Joshi appointed J.S. Rajput as Director. Rajput's mandate was clear, to 'indigenise' education. Guidelines issued by him made it clear that 'the remnants of the alien legacy of the pre-independence period have to be shed completely'. Nor were the ICHR and the NCERT the only institutions that faced the sweep of Joshi's broom. The physics professor also radically revamped the Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR) and the governing body of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, packing both these institutions with votaries of Hindutva.

The extent of Joshi's zeal for ensuring that the academic establishment was packed with those with the right worldview is best illustrated by what happened at the ICSSR in 2001. The late Manohar Lal Sondhi, a former MP belonging to the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (the BJP's earlier avatar), who had been appointed Head of ICSSR by Joshi, was sacked soon after he organised a seminar of 'intellectuals' from India and Pakistan. The seminar was organised days before the Agra summit meeting in July 2001 between Vajpayee and Musharraf. While Sondhi was allegedly removed for financial irregularities and replaced by a bureaucrat, it was no secret that the seminar was the real reason for his dismissal. The episode revealed how intolerant the ruling establishment was towards even a 'liberal' member of the Sangh Parivar. Another Joshi nominee who had to face the HRD

Minister's wrath for being too independent was ICHR head M.G.S. Narayanan who, like Sondhi, was ostensibly removed for financial irregularities.

The BJP's determined efforts to 'saffronise' the education system became more evident when the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) issued a circular deleting certain references made in NCERT textbooks on history meant for school students. These references were, among other things, to Hindus eating beef during the Vedic ages and also on the question of whether there existed a Hindu civilisation at Ayodhya—the so-called birthplace of the mythical Lord Rama—around 2000 B.C., the period to which Rama is sought to be dated according to Puranic tradition. These efforts saw the political opposition coming together against the BJP and the NDA; Congress leader Arjun Singh even accused the government of 'Talibanising' education which led to members of the ruling coalition walking out of the Rajya Sabha.

BJP-ruled states too contributed to the effort at saffronising education. The Kalyan Singh government in UP, for instance, had rewritten history textbooks (as reported by *Frontline* in November 1998) to portray the RSS founder, Dr. K.B. Hedgewar, as one of the leading lights of the freedom movement. Also, the entire period of rule by Muslims was presented as a 'period of resistance' by Hindus. The Sultanate period was characterised as one in which society was divided into two main classes—'ruling or Muslim class and ruled or non-Muslims of whom Hindus were the majority'.

Even in Rajasthan, a state that was ruled between 1993 and 1998 by the BJP's Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, a Chief Minister seen as very much in the same moderate liberal mould as Vajpayee and who went on to become India's Vice President, the party attempted to use textbooks for its propaganda. *Frontline* detailed how school textbooks in the state not only justified the Pokhran nuclear blasts, but also played up writings of RSS ideologues like Professor Rajendra Singh, the then RSS chief, Tarun Vijay, the editor of the RSS mouthpiece *Panchajanya*, and K.S. Sudarshan. These attempts were apart from the RSS-run Vidya Bharati institutions. These include 14,000 schools at the nursery, primary and secondary levels with 18 lakh students, 60 colleges and 25 other institutions of higher education. An NCERT

report in 1996 had warned that many of the Vidya Bharati textbooks were 'designed to promote bigotry and religious fanaticism'.

Thus, there can be little doubt that the BJP and the RSS did have an agenda distinct from that of the NDA's, even if the agenda was not exactly hidden. At the same time though, the party succeeded in ensuring that this agenda did not acquire too high a profile, except on rare occasions like the states' education ministers' conference in 1998, where Joshi's eagerness to thrust a report drawn up by a known RSS votary and to use the controversial *Vande Mataram* song as a substitute for the national anthem in opening the conference, drew flak from allies and foes alike.

Historians like Bipan Chandra and Romila Thapar, two so-called left-wing historians, passages from whose textbooks were deleted by the NCERT/CBSE dictat, have argued that changing the manner in which history is taught to young people is crucial for the RSS and the BJP. For them, it is crucial that India's ancient past be glorified so that the country's subsequent decline can be largely attributed to the onset of Mughal rule. For the propagandists of the Sangh Parivar, the achievements of Muslim rulers like Akbar need to be underplayed just as they seek to lay less emphasis on the degeneration of Hindu society because of the ills of the caste (varna) system which were responsible for the rapid spread of Jainism, Buddhism and later, Islam in the subcontinent. If this slant is not imparted to the interpretation of ancient and medieval Indian history, Chandra contends that the entire edifice of the communal ideology of the RSS and the BJP would collapse.

## **Controlling the Organs of the State**

The BJP's attempts to propagate its Hindutva agenda were not confined to the educational establishment. The party's supporters and sympathisers over the years came to occupy key positions in various organs of the state, while those seen as inimical to its ideology and interests were marginalised in the bureaucracy, the defence services, the judiciary and in non-government organisations. A large number of retired judges, bureaucrats and senior officers of the armed forces joined the BJP in the second half of the 1990s.

As a part of this process, some individuals also acquired power and influence disproportionate to their official position. The most obvious example was the former Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister who doubled up as National Security Advisor, Brajesh Mishra, a former career diplomat. Mishra was catapulted to the pinnacle of administrative power during the second and third Vajpayee governments. So powerful did he become that at one point in 2000, the media, the Opposition and even sections within the Sangh Parivar were of the view that he was the power behind the throne. While some went as far as to suggest that he was the ‘real prime minister’, most analysts agreed that Mishra’s ability to influence government policy and decisions was considerably greater than most members of the Vajpayee cabinet. At one stage, the RSS as well as the Shiv Sena gunned for Mishra and another bureaucrat, Nand Kishore (N.K.) Singh. Vajpayee however, stood behind Mishra like a rock. He made it clear in no uncertain terms that any attack on his Principal Secretary amounted to a personal attack on him. Though an official panel suggested that Mishra be divested of one of his two responsibilities, nothing of the sort took place. Mishra, whose father was former Congress Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh in 1963, continued to wield considerable clout—he merely adopted a lower public profile.

The importance of Mishra in the Vajpayee regime was indicative of a bigger strategy followed by the BJP in the ruling coalition—allies and partners were given considerable ‘autonomy’ to pursue their political interests provided they did not object to the BJP using the levers of power to try and fulfil its long-term goals. It was, therefore, no coincidence that barring the Ministry of Defence, all crucial ministerial portfolios (including Home, External Affairs, Finance, and Human Resources Development) were ‘reserved’ for the BJP. The party had no problems in handing over the stewardships of many of the economic ministries perceived as lucrative to its partners, ministries such as Telecommunications, Civil Aviation, Industry and Commerce, Railways, and Power.

A rather controversial decision of the NDA government was the appointment of Bhishma Kumar Agnihotri as advisor in the Indian embassy in the US in August 2001. In an unprecedented move, he was given a ‘personal’ rank of Ambassador and Ambassador-at-large for

non-resident Indians and persons of Indian origin. His appointment raised the hackles of the political opposition not only because of Agnihotri's close links with the RSS but also because the American government embarrassed New Delhi by categorically refusing to grant him the diplomatic status that was asked for. The Vajpayee government sought to ignore the controversy that had been generated. Nearly four years later, in May 2005, the Comptroller & Auditor General of India sharply criticised the Ministry of External Affairs for incurring 'avoidable expenditure' of Rs 16 crore of public funds on the extraordinary facilities that had been provided to Agnihotri. The Ambassador-at-large resigned in 2004 after his political mentors were voted out of power.

In early January 2000, the Gujarat government ruled by the BJP, which had a majority in the assembly on its own, announced a controversial decision to lift the ban on government employees joining the RSS. The conduct rules for government employees not only barred them from joining or aiding any political party or movement, but also specifically listed 14 organisations including the RSS as those which they could not join. The Gujarat government's order, by lifting the ban on the RSS alone, certainly created the impression that the state government was bent on appeasing Hindu organisations. This impression was strengthened by the track record of the BJP government in Gujarat and the timing of the order on the eve of a major RSS gathering. Gujarat, through 1998 and 1999, had witnessed a spate of violent incidents against the Christian community, particularly in the tribal-dominated Dangs district. Towards the end of 1998, Vajpayee himself came under considerable criticism for suggesting that a national debate on religious conversions take place after a visit to some of the communally disturbed areas of Gujarat. Since the VHP, which was seen as instrumental in the attacks, had also taken the position that conversions of tribals by Christian missionaries had led to communal tension, Vajpayee's call for a national debate on conversions was seen as dovetailing into a communal Hindu agenda.

While the BJP in Gujarat had to climb down from its position following instructions from the party 'high command' and after its allies kicked up a fuss, the BJP, prior to the Gujarat riots of 2002,

had always claimed that it was the best guarantor of protection of the rights of minorities and that communal disturbances had not taken place in states ruled by the party. More than one judicial commission of inquiry has indicted supporters of the Sangh Parivar for instigating communal riots, but often such riots have occurred in states in which the BJP has not been in power. Significantly, the brutal murder of Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two sons in January 1999 took place in a remote forest area in Orissa, a Congress-ruled state. This impression that minorities are most safe under BJP rule has, however, taken a beating after the series of recent incidents involving attacks on Christians in Gujarat followed by the 2002 communal violence against Muslims.

Earlier, the BJP–Shiv Sena government in Maharashtra had tried its very best to delay the publication of the report of the Justice Sri Krishna Commission, which inquired into the December 1992 communal riots in Mumbai and the bomb blasts in March 1993. The waves of riots which rocked India’s commercial capital in the wake of the demolition of the Babri masjid left some 3,000 dead and many more injured, most of them belonging to the Muslim minority. The Manohar Joshi government in Maharashtra refused to initiate any action against those who had been indicted in the Sri Krishna Commission report for inciting the riots, including some of his own ministers as well as the Shiv Sena supremo Bal Thackeray.

## **Reworking Caste Equations**

At the same time, the so-called moderate sections of the BJP continue their efforts to rid the party of its exclusivist image by actively wooing tribals and lower-caste Hindus, with varying degrees of success. In December 1999, Vajpayee announced that the government was committed to amending the laws relating to job reservations for those from the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Under the existing provisions, while 22 per cent of all government jobs at the entry level are reserved for these categories, promotions are ‘merit-based’. Various SC/ST organisations have for long been demanding that the 22 per cent reservation be extended to promotions as well.

Merit as a criterion, they argued, was used by upper-caste superiors to deny the SC/ST employees promotion. The courts, however, have ruled in the past that promotions without merit as a criterion were violative of the law. Vajpayee's assurance in December 1999 was that the laws would be suitably amended to ensure that merit would no longer be a necessary criterion for promotion.

This move was out of character with the BJP's traditionally implicit apathy towards low caste Hindus. In fact, it was the perception that the BJP was essentially a party anaemic to the lower rungs of Hindu caste society that helped the party make the most of the upper-caste backlash against the implementation of the Mandal Commission's report in the Hindi belt. Though not in tune with the BJP's track record, Vajpayee's attempt to woo the SC/ST sections was a response to the imperatives of the times. In Uttar Pradesh, in particular, the expulsion of former Chief Minister Kalyan Singh from the BJP led to an erosion in the party's support base among the intermediate castes. This was sought to be countered by Rajnath Singh as Chief Minister of UP, by a concerted pre-election effort to woo the so-called 'most backward castes' by reserving government jobs for them within the quota reserved for the 'other backward classes' (OBCs). The BJP justified its strategy by arguing that the relatively advanced sections of the OBCs had cornered most of the jobs that had been reserved for this section. While there is certainly considerable merit in this argument, the party's detractors are also not wrong in claiming that this marks the BJP's attempts to create a rift within the ranks of the OBCs, a substantial proportion of whom are aligned to the SP in the state.

What is interesting here is that the BJP in UP had attempted to cobble together a caste alliance very similar to what the Congress had done in the 1970s and 1980s. The Congress after 1967 had lost the support of substantial sections of the intermediate castes, who saw in Charan Singh a leader of their own ilk, but retained its hold over power thanks to the support of the upper-most and lower-most castes of the Hindu hierarchy. Yet, the BJP was a long way from replicating the situation. For one, the party, unlike the Congress of yore, had virtually no support among the sizeable Muslim population (in both the 12th and the 13th



Lok Sabhas, the BJP had just one Muslim MP). Moreover, given the consolidation of the BSP, it seems unlikely that the BJP will be able to win over large sections of the dalits to its fold.

Among the tribals of northern India, on the other hand, the BJP has made impressive inroads. Seats reserved for candidates from the scheduled tribes—whether in Parliament or in the state legislatures—have traditionally been the bastion of the Congress since independence. This was true more or less across the length and breadth of India, except in some pockets where local groups specifically espousing the cause of tribals challenged the dominance of the Congress. Thus, groups like the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) in Jharkhand (earlier the southern districts of Bihar) or the Mizo National Front in Mizoram were the only serious challenge the Congress faced in tribal-dominated areas.

Today, that situation has undergone a drastic change in wide areas of northern India stretching from Gujarat to Orissa and Jharkhand. In this band cutting across the heart of India, it is the BJP that now dominates tribal seats, with the Congress struggling to catch up. Here are some telling statistics: In the elections to the state assembly in Bihar (which then included Jharkhand) held in 2000, the BJP won 14 of the 28 seats reserved for STs, the Congress and the JMM could do no better than six each. In neighbouring Orissa, where elections were held at the same time, the BJP contested 23 of the 34 ST seats, leaving its partner the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) to contest the remaining 11. The BJP won 13 seats and the BJD won eight, the same number as the Congress.

Two-and-a-half years later, the same trend was visible in the December 2002 Gujarat assembly elections. The BJP won 13 of the state's 26 ST seats, the Congress, 11. Fast forward another year to December 2003 and move to Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh—the trend was if anything, even clearer. In Madhya Pradesh, the BJP won 37 of the 41 ST seats, the Congress just two. In Chhattisgarh, the 34 ST seats were split 25–9 in favour of the BJP and in Rajasthan the Congress won five of the state's 24 ST seats against the BJP's 15. In these six states put together, therefore, the BJP held at the end of 2003, 117 of the 187 assembly seats reserved for tribal candidates. The second biggest party, the Congress, held a mere 41 by comparison.

What explains this dramatic turnaround among tribals? Much of the credit for this impressive performance by the BJP must go to the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA), an RSS front working among tribals. For the record, the VKA does various things for the benefit of the tribals, including setting up schools and health centres. The cutting edge of its activities, however, remains its campaign to prevent tribals from being converted to Christianity. The VKA has been quite successful in polarising tribals along communal lines, pitting the 'Hindu' tribals (many of whom are actually followers of animist religions) against the Christians. Partly, it has been helped by the fact that successive Congress governments were quite content to pay lip service to developing tribal areas, while doing precious little. The fact that tribals who have converted to Christianity also typically have better access to education and hence to jobs has also helped the VKA in its attempts to drive a wedge between tribals belonging to different religions.

There are many who believe, somewhat simplistically, that the BJP succeeded in government by becoming increasingly like the Congress, a centrist political party that had attempted to reconcile the interests of different sections of society. In the early 1990s, BJP insiders who were sympathetic to the more rabid sections within the Sangh Parivar would jocularly remark that Vajpayee was the best known Congressman in the BJP. One BJP leader, K.N. Govindacharya, was even quoted as claiming before a foreign diplomat that Vajpayee was the mukhota (mask) of the party—although this statement was denied, the message stuck. Little could these BJP 'hardliners' have realised—as they did in June 1996 after the first 13-day Vajpayee government fell—that they would have to eat their words, that the BJP would have to shed its exclusivist stance and compromise with its erstwhile political opponents to remain in power. The BJP subsequently had to justify these political compromises as a choice between 'lesser evils'.

To understand the manner in which the BJP has evolved from a mere adjunct of its ideological parent, the RSS, to a political party that has sought to occupy the centrist space in the country's polity vacated by the Congress, it is necessary to go back in time. In the course of this chapter, we juxtapose the current face of the BJP with references to the past to examine how the party has become what it is today.

## Living Down the Past

The Bharatiya Janata Party is the successor to what was the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) between 1951 and 1977, but most of the political party's supporters and cadre owe allegiance to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, ostensibly a social association of Hindu nationalists, the largest organisation of its kind in India and the world. Whereas the Indian National Congress was formally established in 1885, the growth of the RSS and some other nationalist organisations like the Hindu Mahasabha can be traced to the second decade of the 20th century.

The RSS was founded by Keshavrao Baliram Hedgewar in 1925 and consolidated by M.S. Golwalkar (better known as *Guruji*, meaning teacher or guide) from 1940 onwards. But it was only in the wake of the January 30, 1948 assassination of Mahatma Gandhi and the widespread condemnation of the assassin, Nathuram Godse and his links with the RSS that the Sangh felt the need for a political front. The circumstances which led to the founding of the BJS in 1951 were explained by the former BJP Vice President, the late K.R. Malkani, in an article on the party's history posted on the BJP's official website:

The RSS, along with millions of people, did not approve of Gandhiji's Muslim appeasement policy...but it had the greatest respect for the Mahatma. Indeed, Gandhiji had visited the RSS winter camp in Wardha in December 1934 and addressed the Delhi RSS workers in a bhangi [low caste] colony in September 1947. He had deeply appreciated the 'noble sentiments' and 'astonishing discipline' of the RSS.... But after his killing, 17,000 RSS workers—including Shri Guruji—were accused of conspiracy of the murder of Mahatma Gandhi.... But during all this time, not one MLA or MP raised the issue in any legislature. For the RSS, it was the moment of truth...unless the RSS grew political teeth and wings, it would always be at the mercy of unscrupulous politicians. This was the context in which Shri Guruji blessed the birth of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh under the leadership of Dr. Shyama Prasad Mookerjee.

This account of the origins of the BJP clearly establishes that the party is the political 'teeth and wings' of the RSS and is contrary to the position adopted by certain BJP spokespersons in recent years that while many party leaders are members of the RSS, the BJP as a

party only has fraternal links with the Sangh and is independent of, and autonomous from, the RSS.

For the better part of the first half-century of independent India, the Congress ruled India while the BJP remained a party in opposition. The BJP and its predecessor participated in a number of coalition governments both at the Union as well as in a number of states in northern India from the 4th general elections in 1967. However, it was not until as late as May 1996, nearly three decades later, that a representative of this political stream for the first time came to occupy the highest post in the country when Atal Behari Vajpayee headed the Union government for a period of barely two weeks. While this was the shortest tenure of any Indian Prime Minister, Vajpayee—the first Prime Minister who did not have his origins in the Congress—returned to the seat of power in New Delhi for a second time after the February 1998 elections by forming a shaky and fragile coalition of over a dozen political parties. This government lasted 13 months (for the superstitious, Vajpayee's first term as Prime Minister had lasted 13 days!) before it lost a dramatic vote of confidence in the Lok Sabha by a single vote. Vajpayee returned as Prime Minister for the third time in October 1999 after the 13th general elections—the third in barely three-and-a-half years—this time heading a larger and more stable coalition of some two dozen partners.

The BJP's political opponents have always dubbed the party's followers as communal, exclusivist, majoritarian, fanatical and fundamentalist. The more militant supporters of the BJP and its fraternal organisations believe that Hindus in India are in danger of losing their identity in the land of their birth because successive Congress governments have pandered excessively to the interests of minorities (read Muslims). An extreme viewpoint—articulated by persons like Acharya Giriraj Kishore of the VHP—is that India, which is home to the world's second-largest population of Muslims (after Indonesia), is unique in the sense that the minority community has been able to control if not dominate the Hindus who comprise a majority (around 80 per cent of the Indian population). This could happen, it is claimed, because past Congress governments were willing to excessively placate Muslims and condone extremist and fundamentalist elements among them.

Some of those from the BJP's ideological fraternity also contend that because Hindus are divided into hundreds of castes, while the Muslims are less divided, the Muslims effectively become the single biggest group in India rather than a minority community. The more moderate sections of the BJP, on the other hand, acknowledge that Indian society is diverse, plural and multi-cultural and Hindus as the dominant community should accommodate the interests of the minorities. Nevertheless, those belonging to even this liberal section within the BJP are not always comfortable condemning majority communalism in terms as strong as they use for the communalism that is displayed by fringe sections of the Muslims in India.

Many BJP supporters frequently invoke the violent memories of Partition and the formation of Pakistan. The Congress has always attacked the BJP (and earlier the BJS) because Nathuram Godse was said to be a supporter of the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha. Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh spokespersons have, on the other hand, claimed that Godse had publicly rejected the views of the RSS and joined the Hindu Mahasabha before he started planning his assassination of Gandhi. The Congress has always claimed a right to rule the country on the ground that its organisation was at the forefront of the struggle for independence that culminated in 1947. At the same time, the Congress has criticised the BJP because its supporters did not play an active enough role in throwing British colonial rulers out of the country. Congress leader Arjun Singh once challenged the BJP and the RSS to place before the nation the names of those among its supporters who had opposed British rule. Atal Behari Vajpayee's official curriculum vitae (in the Lok Sabha *Who's Who*) does, of course, state that he was jailed in 1942 during the time of the Quit India movement against colonial rule, but more on that later (see profile of Vajpayee at the end of the chapter). The BJP's sympathisers, on the other hand, don the mantle of being the 'true' nationalists, the 'genuine' patriots who did not collaborate with the British.

In a critique of the RSS, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags* (Delhi: Orient Longman, 1993), Tapan Basu, Pradip Dutta, Sumit Sarkar, Tanika Sarkar and Sambuddha Sen, all of whom are left academics based in Delhi, argued that the events of December 6, 1992 reaffirm the conviction that the RSS and the VHP dictate the politics of the Hindu

right and define the limits within which the BJP can manoeuvre. The editor's preface to the book states:

The Hindu right has for long operated with two faces.... On the one hand, it has sought to present a gentle face symbolised in L.K. Advani's beatific smile; on the other it has widely projected an angry, aggressive and savagely sectarian face expressed in the speeches of Sadhvi Rithambara and Uma Bharti. These two faces are iconically represented...in the twin images of Ram...the image of Ram lalla, the child god and the image of Ram as the masculine warrior god. The Hindu right also talks in two languages: the language of democracy and that of authoritarianism, the language of law and that of force. The BJP claims to function within a constitutional, democratic, legal framework; but the activities of the RSS, the VHP and the Bajrang Dal mock this framework.

Over the years, the RSS has sought to gain greater acceptability by appropriating icons of Indian history. The list includes spiritual leaders like Swami Vivekananda, Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Sister Nivedita, and leaders of the freedom movement like Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, Bhagat Singh, Annie Besant, Vallabhbhai Patel and even Gandhi. In fact, most members of the Sangh Parivar have more than a hint of admiration for independent India's first Union Home Minister Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel in Jawaharlal Nehru's government who presided over the construction of a temple at Somnath that had been destroyed by Muslim conquerors. It is no coincidence that former Home Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, L.K. Advani, had often been affectionately compared to Sardar Patel. So has Narendra Modi, who was dubbed the 'Chhota (small) Sardar'. The supporters of the Sangh Parivar predictably ignore the fact that Patel was, on many occasions, a trenchant critic of the RSS. In projecting Patel as a great hero of the national movement, it also likes to drive home the point that the Congress has not adequately appreciated the contribution of leaders like him in the national movement while lauding the role of the Nehru-Gandhi family.

The need to associate itself with leaders identified with the freedom movement stems from the fact that the RSS has for long, and rightly, been perceived as an organisation that stayed aloof from the mainstream of the anti-colonial struggle. The fact that

Gandhi's assassin had for long been a member and activist of the RSS (though at the time of the assassination he was a member of the Hindu Mahasabha) only added to this need. RSS publications (and its website) prominently display statements by many of these leaders allegedly praising the activities of the RSS. They, of course, do not bother to point out that these same leaders had on several occasions scathingly criticised the RSS as a communal organisation or that Bhagat Singh was a communist.

The RSS' selective quoting of Gandhi perhaps best illustrates the point. Their propaganda material keeps emphasising the fact that Gandhi had been impressed by the discipline of the RSS cadre when he visited an organisational camp at Wardha in Maharashtra (not far from Gandhi's own Sevagram) at the invitation of the RSS founder, Dr. Hedgewar, in 1934. Dr. Hedgewar himself had been a former member of the Congress party and had been jailed briefly during the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930–31. What the RSS and the BJP conveniently overlook is what Gandhi said about the RSS 12 years after his visit to the RSS camp at Wardha in the wake of the communal riots of 1946. When one of Gandhi's supporters praised the RSS cadre for the work done by them in helping Punjabi refugees at the transit camp in Wagah (now a border post between India and Pakistan), Gandhi had answered, 'But don't forget even so had Hitler's Nazis and the fascists under Mussolini.' He went on to describe the RSS as a communal body with a totalitarian outlook and asserted, 'the way [to independence] does not lie through *akhdas* (wrestling groups)...if they are meant as a preparation for self-defence in Hindu-Muslim conflicts, they are foredoomed to failure. Muslims can play the same game, and such preparations, covert or overt, do cause suspicion and irritation. They can provide no remedy.'

That Gandhi should have drawn an analogy between the RSS and the Nazis was hardly surprising. M. S. Golwalkar was an unabashed admirer of Hitler's methods as this excerpt from his *We or Our Nationhood Defined* (1938) reveals:

German national pride has now become the topic of the day. To keep the purity of the nation and its culture, Germany shocked the world by her purging the country of the semitic races—the Jews. National pride at its highest has been manifested here.

Germany has also shown how well-nigh impossible it is for races and cultures, having differences going to the root, to be assimilated into one united whole, a good lesson for us in Hindustan to learn and profit by.

Golwalkar was not reticent when it came to elaborating on exactly what the lessons for India were:

The non-Hindu people in Hindustan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and revere Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but the glorification of the Hindu nation, i.e. they must not only give up their attitude of intolerance and ingratitude towards this land and its age-old traditions, but must also cultivate the positive attitude of love and devotion instead; in one word, they must cease to be foreigners or may stay in the country wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment, not even citizen's rights.

Khaki Shorts points out that Golwalkar developed his exclusivist logic to target one more enemy: the communists who were branded as being of foreign origin. Even after Nehru's government banned the RSS in February 1948 following Gandhi's assassination, in his letters to Nehru and Patel, Golwalkar argued for lifting the ban on the RSS as it could help the government of independent India fight against the 'menace' of communism. There were many within the Congress at that time, not excluding Acharya Kripalani and Patel himself, who were sympathetic to his pleas and the RSS won back its legality in July 1949.

## **Legitimising the Hindutva Agenda**

The BJP and the BJS, even when they were part of coalition governments in New Delhi or in various states, had sought to retain their distinctive identity despite being part of bigger coalitions. The Janata Party government, which came to power in March 1977 after 19 months of Emergency rule by defeating the Congress headed by Indira Gandhi, broke apart in 1979 on the issue of 'dual membership'



of its constituents, namely, the BJS group led by External Affairs Minister Vajpayee and Information & Broadcasting Minister L.K. Advani, who both refused to disown their association with the RSS. It is ironic to recall how 'socialist' George Fernandes—who later became Vajpayee's ardent supporter, close confidante and Defence Minister—was at the forefront of the campaign to remove the BJS section from within the Janata Party government on this issue. More than a decade later, in September–October 1990, the V.P. Singh government collapsed soon after the BJP withdrew its support in the wake of Advani's arrest in Bihar during his *rath yatra* to build the Ram temple at Ayodhya.

It was the BJP and its allied organisations like the RSS, the VHP and the Bajrang Dal which took the initiative to mobilise the group which demolished the Babri masjid. The destruction of what the BJP's supporters euphemistically called a 'disputed structure' was sought to be projected as a dramatic assertion of the victory of the Hindus over the Muslims who had conquered and ruled India for centuries and as a righting of a historical wrong. Many of those who participated in the demolition were young lumpens who wanted to return to their nondescript villages with a handful of rubble (symbolically referred to as Babar's bones). The demolition of the mosque, preceded by Advani's *rath yatra*, resulted in a violent fallout more than a thousand kilometres away in places like Mumbai and Surat in Gujarat where waves of anti-Muslim riots occurred leaving hundreds dead and thousands more traumatised. In March 1993, a series of bomb blasts in public places occurred which were apparently in retaliation for the demolition of the mosque.

In 1997, Ainslee T. Embree, professor and India-watcher at Brown University in the US, argued that describing the groups responsible for the demolition of the mosque as fundamentalist or fanatic can be misleading as these terms suggest a primarily religious motivation.

Hindu nationalists is a more accurate description, for, their leaders insisted, they were inspired not by religious fervour but by a desire to assert the pre-eminence of Hindu culture in the life of the Nation. The unifying ideology of Hindu culture, to which they gave the name 'Hindutva', was an explicit rejection of secular nationalism, which, they argued, was a deceptive mask for enemies of the Hindu

nation, including the westernised, denationalised intellectuals that had made common cause with Muslims, communists, and other alien ideologies, to seize control of the state.

The rise in the BJP's political support base was closely linked to the Ram temple/Ayodhya controversy although the party had consciously sought to play down the issue in the years when it was in power. The BJP's supporters argued that the party had not given up its intention of building a temple at the site where the mosque stood but was not pressing the issue since the party on its own did not command a majority in Parliament.

The BJP's allies contended that secularism had been made into a 'bogey' to disguise opportunistic opposition to the BJP. Despite the presence of many persons in the Vajpayee government whose secular credentials had never been in doubt, it is also a fact that very few Muslims have come forward to join the BJP in recent years. In the second Vajpayee government, for instance, there were only two Muslim ministers, one of them being Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi who also happened to be the only Muslim MP belonging to the BJP in the 12th Lok Sabha. Naqvi lost his seat in the 13th Lok Sabha elections and was made party general secretary and spokesperson. In that Lok Sabha, the only Muslim MP belonging to the BJP was Shah Nawaz Hussain who also happened to be the youngest minister in Vajpayee's council of ministers. Also significant is the fact that Hussain represented Kishanganj in Bihar, the only Lok Sabha constituency with a Muslim majority outside Kerala and Jammu & Kashmir. Despite the efforts made by sections of the BJP to project the party as secular, Muslims in India have remained by and large wary of aligning themselves with the BJP. This is hardly surprising given the fact that virtually every single judicial commission of inquiry into incidents of communal violence in independent India had indicted either members of the BJP or persons and parties that have been allied to the party.

At the time of the demolition of the Babri masjid, most senior leaders of the BJP, especially Vajpayee and Advani, publicly expressed their sorrow and unhappiness at what happened at Ayodhya. The Party, however, stopped short of condemning those responsible for the demolition. In fact, it virtually provided a justification for the

act by its stance that the incident was unfortunate but a result of the Narasimha Rao government not heeding the people's religious sentiments. The BJP also harps on the fact that it was during the tenure of the Congress government headed by Rajiv Gandhi that the locks on the gates to the Babri complex were opened following a court order.

The Sangh Parivar has long practiced the art of speaking with a forked tongue. As early as 1956 when the States Reorganisation Act was enforced, Guru Golwalkar favoured a more unitary India whereas Deen Dayal Upadhyay, the then head of the BJS, favoured the formation of as many as 40 states (against 28 at present). In a more contemporary context, the VHP and the Bajrang Dal have typically taken harder and more strident positions, while the BJP seeks to project itself as a liberal, cosmopolitan organisation.

Despite an antipathy towards minorities in most cases, the BJP has been able to strike a close rapport with sections of the Sikh community, especially the supporters of the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), because the Sangh Parivar views Sikhs as 'essentially' Hindu. The alliance between the BJP and the Akalis, which had its origins in the late 1960s, was cemented after the anti-Sikh riots that took place in and around New Delhi after the assassination of Indira Gandhi by a Sikh member of her bodyguard on October 31, 1984.

In order to win new allies and influence political leaders, the BJP had, particularly since the February 1998 general elections, sought to play down three controversial aspects of its election manifesto, as already mentioned, namely, the building of a Ram temple at Ayodhya, the formulation of a uniform civil code for citizens of all religious denominations, and the abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution of India. Each of these issues was central to the BJP's manifesto for the 1998 Lok Sabha elections.

Though the BJP played down these issues after coming to power, other organisations of the Sangh Parivar had no qualms about continuing to emphasise these and other sensitive issues. As a matter of fact, the VHP and the Bajrang Dal kept talking about the need to demolish structures at Kashi and Mathura (two other cities in Uttar Pradesh) that had been built centuries ago, allegedly over Hindu religious sites. The RSS too periodically supported this move.

Their repeated assertions caused quite a bit of embarrassment to the Vajpayee government. Advani met representatives of the hardliners in the Sangh Parivar, like Ashok Singhal of the VHP, to try and convince them to moderate their statements.

There are many in the RSS and allied organisations who desperately feel the need to correct the wrongs of history and who passionately argue that the main reason why Hindus have been oppressed over the centuries is on account of the community being too passive and too accommodating. At the same time, the moderate voices within the Sangh Parivar acknowledge the plurality of Hinduism and its non-partisan character. The one time militant proponents of Hindutva (or Hindu-ness) currently spare no effort in highlighting the accommodative and ‘melting pot’ nature of Hinduism; they agree that Hinduism is perhaps less an organised religion and more a philosophy of life.

Swaminthan Gurumurthy, a leading ideologue of the Swadeshi Jagaran Manch (SJM), a front organisation of the RSS which concerns itself with economic issues, stated in 1993:

We must realise that we have a problem on hand in India, the problem of a stagnant and conservative Islamic society. The secular leaders and parties tell us that the problem on our hands is not Islamic fundamentalism, but the Hindutva ideology. This view is good only for gathering votes. The fact is that we have a fundamentalist Muslim problem, and our problem cannot be divorced from the international Islamic politics and the world’s reaction to it...the apparently unorganised and diverse Hindu society is perhaps the only society in the world that faced, and then survived, the Islamic theocratic invasion.

He goes on to add:

The assimilative Hindu cultural and civilisational ethos is the only basis for any durable personal and social interaction between the Muslims and the rest of our countrymen.... A national effort is called for to break Islamic exclusivism and enshrine the assimilative Hindutva. This alone constitutes true nationalism and true national integration.

The BJP's 1998 election manifesto also sought to project Hindutva as a civilisational concept and not a narrow religious one. It also said:

Every effort to characterise Hindutva as a sectarian or exclusive idea has failed as the people of India have repeatedly rejected such a view and the Supreme Court, too, finally endorsed the true meaning and content of Hindutva as being consistent with the true meaning and definition of secularism. In fact, Hindutva accepts as sacred all forms of belief and worship. The evolution of Hindutva in politics is the antidote to the creation of vote banks and appeasement of sectional interests. Hindutva means justice for all.

The reference to the Supreme Court is to the December 1995 judgement of a Constitutional bench of the apex court headed by the then Chief Justice of India, J.S. Verma (who went on to become Chairman of the National Human Rights Commission). The judgement came in response to a petition filed in the court challenging the validity of the election of Maharashtra Chief Minister Manohar Joshi of the Shiv Sena on the grounds that he had appealed to religious sentiments by stating that industrially prosperous Maharashtra would become India's first Hindu state. This, the petition argued, was a corrupt electoral practice. The judgement stated:

...no precise meaning can be ascribed to the terms 'Hindu', 'Hindutva' and 'Hinduism'; and no meaning in the abstract can confine it to the narrow limits of religion alone, excluding the content of Indian culture and heritage. It is difficult to appreciate how... the term 'Hindutva' or 'Hinduism' per se, in the abstract, can be assumed to mean and be equated with narrow fundamentalist Hindu religious bigotry....

Not surprisingly, the BJP's ideologues were jubilant about this judgement, while its opponents felt it had given the party an opportunity to claim that its secular credentials had been upheld by the apex court of the land.

## **Speaking with a Forked Tongue**

Within the BJP, and especially within the larger Sangh Parivar, members have held various shades of political opinion from the extreme right to

the relatively moderate. While speaking in many voices can confuse political opponents when a party is out of power, the same trait can prove to be a liability when the party is governing. This was what the BJP realised within months of the Vajpayee government coming to the helm of power in New Delhi. The BJP's critics in the Congress and the left had always claimed that the party and its allies spoke in a forked tongue and that its public pronouncements concealed a hidden agenda.

To put Advani's call for moderation in the public statements made by VHP leaders in perspective, here's one example of the kind of vitriol that was spewed by VHP functionaries. At a public rally in New Delhi's Ramlila Maidan in late January 2002, Acharya Dharmendra attacked Vajpayee in downright abusive terms. He suggested that the Prime Minister, who had had his knees operated, should get his eyes operated as well if he was unable to see the mass upsurge in favour of building the Ram temple at Ayodhya. He also pointed out that the money spent on the knee operation had come from the exchequer and asked whether the people had paid so that Vajpayee could kneel before George Bush and Tony Blair.

Dharmendra then went on to accuse Vajpayee of being a betrayer to the Ram temple movement and said the Prime Minister ought to remember the fate of villains like Hiranyakashyap, Ravana, Taimur, Aurangzeb and even Tony Blair's 'aunt', Queen Victoria, who could not retain power forever. The VHP leader, somewhat unusually, used an Urdu couplet to hint that Vajpayee should quit if he couldn't ensure the construction of the Ram temple. The couplet went, '*Had-e-gham-e-hasti se guzar kyon nahin jaate, Jeena nahin aata hai to mar kyon nahin jaate, Manzil ko paana hai to toofan bhi milenge, dar agar hai to kashti se utar kyon nahin jaate.*' (Why don't you reach beyond the limits of the perils of being? Why don't you die if you don't know how to live? If the goal is to be reached, storms will have to be braved. If you are afraid, why don't you get off the boat?) Advani too was not spared, with Dharmendra pointing out that those who described the demolition as a shameful incident would not have reached where they had but for that incident.

The then BJP president M. Venkaiah Naidu created a stir in June 2003 when he described Vajpayee as a *vikaspurush* (development man) and Advani as a *lohpurush* (iron man) and said that his party

would contest the 2004 general elections under the leadership of both these stalwarts. The media interpreted the statement to mean that Vajpayee could hand over the mantle of leadership of the BJP as well as the NDA (and future governments as well) to his deputy Advani. Advani promptly said Vajpayee was his leader but Vajpayee's own statement at a party gathering soon after returning from a visit abroad made it apparent to all concerned that he was the real boss. He said that he was neither 'tired' nor 'retired' and added, 'Let the party fight the elections under Advani's leadership'. Naidu went into a tizzy clarifying that he had not questioned Vajpayee's position nor was he in any way trying to drive a wedge between the two tallest leaders of the BJP. While the dust raised by his remarks took some time to settle, this episode revealed once again that much of the so-called differences between Vajpayee (the 'liberal') and Advani (the 'hardliner') lay in the minds of mediapersons and that if it came to the crunch, Advani too was clear that Vajpayee was the most suitable person to lead the coalition and the government even if Advani controlled some of the key portfolios and was responsible for taking many crucial decisions.

To some extent, Advani's position was a bit vulnerable at that time because his name figured in the court cases relating to the demolition of the Babri masjid. Though the cases had remained largely forgotten for over a decade, the issue came to the fore in July 2003, when the CBI filed fresh chargesheets against some of the key accused including Advani and one other Minister in the Vajpayee cabinet, Murli Manohar Joshi. (The fresh filing of chargesheets had become necessary after the Allahabad High Court had rejected the earlier chargesheets on technical grounds.) It was revealed that the CBI had dropped the charge of conspiring to demolish the masjid that was part of the earlier chargesheet. The Opposition accused the government of having unduly influenced the CBI, while the government predictably denied the charge. The Opposition also pointed out that it was untenable for those who were the prime accused in a case to also be the political masters of the prosecuting agency in the case. As on previous occasions, the issue ultimately died down, but it did, even if only briefly, put the spotlight back on an aspect of Advani's past that the BJP's allies and many of its new-found supporters have not been very comfortable about.

On the economic front, the BJP had often been derogatorily dismissed as a party of upper-caste traders who had little or no influence in large parts of the country in the south, east and north-east. The economic policies articulated by the party have been in favour of free enterprise capitalism. When the Finance Minister in the P.V. Narasimha Rao government, Manmohan Singh, unveiled his policies of economic liberalisation in July 1991, the BJP accused the Congress of hijacking its economic agenda. This was the same political party that, despite its avowed pro-business stance, had earlier agreed to follow the tenets of 'Gandhian socialism' in its economic policies. Active advocacy of the virtues of capitalism was not considered desirable in the Indian context, not even for the BJP, which (together with the Swatantra Party in the 1960s) had vociferously espoused the cause of free enterprise. While there is a lot that is common among the economic policies of the Congress and the BJP, within the Sangh Parivar itself there are deep divisions on a number of issues. Thus, while one section of the BJP is in favour of the government rolling out the red carpet for foreign investors, another section argues for a cautious and selective approach towards multinational corporations. 'Computer chips not potato chips' was a slogan that became popular in the run-up to the May 1996 general elections.

One section of the Sangh Parivar, the Swadeshi Jagaran Manch, had time and again opposed decisions of the Vajpayee government that were perceived to be against the interests of local entrepreneurs. In fact, the extreme right and the left have often made common cause in articulating the need to protect domestic industries from international competition (by increasing tariff barriers in the form of higher customs duties as well as other restrictions on inflows of foreign capital). The SJM as well as the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), the trade union wing of the RSS and the BJP, opposed some of the economic policies of the Vajpayee government, which caused considerable embarrassment to the ruling party.

RSS leaders like Dattopant Thengadi had openly criticised the government at public meetings where the then Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha's competence was questioned. Later, this section of the Sangh Parivar was persuaded to tone down its criticism. The then BJP President, late Kushabhau Thakre, had to personally intervene



with RSS leaders to ensure that the government's sympathisers spoke in one voice. As stated earlier, what was a diversionary tactic for the Sangh Parivar when in Opposition became a distinct liability for the Vajpayee government.

## Party with a Difference?

The BJP and the RSS have always emphasised the importance of 'discipline'—the *shakhas* or gatherings of RSS volunteers clad in khaki shorts and holding sticks usually begin by a chanting of prayers and physical exercises. For many years, the leaders of the BJP claimed that theirs was the most disciplined, cadre-based party in the country (ironically, as disciplined as members of the communist parties which have always been their biggest political rivals). But this perception was more media hype than reality.

The BJP's claims of being a disciplined party, a party different from others especially the Congress, were shattered by a series of incidents which took place in Gujarat in 1995 and 1996. Infighting and factional conflicts between rival groups culminated in unprecedented physical violence inside the assembly at Gandhinagar on September 19, 1996. In the state assembly elections in February 1995, the BJP had secured 121 seats or two-thirds of the total and Keshubhai Patel was sworn in as Chief Minister in March. Dissensions were evident from day one and within six months, the fight was out in the open. On September 27, a group of 46 MLAs headed by Shankarsingh Vaghela signed a memorandum to the state's Governor, Naresh Chandra, staking claim to form a new government after contending that Keshubhai Patel had lost his majority in the assembly. In a dramatic gesture, Vaghela took his group of legislators to Khajuraho, apparently to protect them from the ruling faction of the BJP in Gujarat. In November, the Party's national leaders led by Advani intervened to defuse the crisis. Keshubhai Patel resigned and was replaced by Suresh Mehta as Chief Minister.

The truce between the warring factions lasted barely six months. On May 20, 1996, factional infighting within the BJP resulted in supporters of the official group assaulting the octogenarian Cabinet Minister Atma Ram Patel, seen as sympathetic to the Vaghela group, and stripping him naked in the presence of thousands of people at a

public meeting addressed by Vajpayee. Three months later, in August, Vaghela led a group of 46 MLAs in submitting a memorandum to the Governor that the BJP had been reduced to a minority in the assembly. Legislators complained that they were being kept under 'house arrest' by members of the ruling faction. Soon, Vaghela split the party to form the Rashtriya Janata Party (RJP).

With both factions prepared to do anything to ensure they formed the government in Gujarat, matters reached a point where the Governor had no option but to submit a report to the Union government in September stating that he had come to the 'painful conclusion' that there had been a Constitutional breakdown in the state and he was left with no alternative but to suggest invocation of Article 356 to impose President's rule in the state. He recommended that the assembly be kept in suspended animation. The Union government headed by H.D. Deve Gowda did not act on this report, but after Chandra sent in a similar report again within days, the Union Cabinet decided to impose President's rule in Gujarat.

Vaghela went on to become Chief Minister of Gujarat, but not for long. By March 1998, Keshubhai Patel was again Chief Minister of Gujarat after fresh assembly polls were held in the state with Vaghela's RJP suffering a major electoral reverse. Nevertheless, the infighting within the BJP in Gujarat and its eagerness to form coalitions and find new allies, highlighted how the party had become prone to all the ills plaguing the Congress.

Factional fighting was to erupt again in the Gujarat BJP on the eve of the December 2002 state assembly elections. Narendra Modi, who was seeking re-election after the communal violence in different parts of India, decided to make it clear who was the boss in the state. As part of his attitude of brooking no opposition, he refused to let Haren Pandya, another prominent BJP leader in Gujarat, be nominated as the party's candidate for the Ellis Bridge constituency in Ahmedabad, the state's largest city. Pandya, who had served as Home Minister in the Keshubhai Patel government, had represented this constituency for several terms and won each time with impressive margins. Yet, Modi put his foot down and made it clear that Pandya would not be nominated again. Even attempts by senior central leaders of the BJP, like Advani, to persuade Modi to relent proved futile. Modi had made it a 'prestige issue' and his views prevailed.

Three months after the 2002 assembly election, in March 2003, Pandya was shot dead by ‘unidentified gunmen’ outside a public park in Ahmedabad where he went for his morning walk. He lay bleeding to death in his car for two hours before he was discovered. It is a measure of the hostility between Modi and Pandya and the public perception of this hostility that the opposition Congress was not alone in insinuating that Pandya’s killing was a ‘political murder’. As a matter of fact, the same phrase was used during a memorial meeting by Keshubhai Patel and by Pandya’s father, in the presence of Advani and Modi. Interestingly, on the same occasion Advani acknowledged that ‘injustice’ had been done to Pandya by not allowing him to contest the election.

The virus of indiscipline that the BJP first contracted in Gujarat later spread to the state that was of paramount importance in its bid to win and retain power at the centre—Uttar Pradesh. Despite serious efforts by the BJP’s central leadership to contain the damage of an ugly factional fracas, it ultimately led to the party’s most high-profile mass leader in the state at the time, Kalyan Singh, being expelled. While Kalyan Singh’s threats of causing a vertical split in the UP unit of the BJP ultimately proved exaggerated, his expulsion did alienate sections of the OBCs from the party.

Soon after the 1998 Lok Sabha elections, it became clear that the BJP in Uttar Pradesh was a badly divided house with a section of the party’s MLAs publicly demanding the ouster of Chief Minister Kalyan Singh, the man who was seen as the architect of the party’s dramatic rise in electoral fortunes in the 1990s. There was little doubt that Kalyan Singh was by far the most popular leader of the party in Uttar Pradesh. Yet, within his own party he faced a growing challenge to his leadership from a group predominantly of MLAs and organisational leaders from the upper castes. It was also widely believed that while Kalyan Singh enjoyed the confidence of the former BJP President L.K. Advani, Vajpayee’s own sympathies lay more with the dissident group.

The dissidents, who included prominent party leaders like Lalji Tandon, Kailashpati Mishra and Rajnath Singh, were ostensibly opposed to Kalyan Singh’s leadership because of his autocratic style and the favours he was alleged to have done for some of his close

associates like the corporator Kusum Rai. They argued that the Chief Minister's undemocratic ways were fast eroding public support for the party and could deliver a body blow to its electoral prospects if he was not ousted. The media, political analysts and the lay public, however, remained convinced that their real grouse against the Chief Minister was the fact that he was from one of the intermediate castes—a Lodh—and his tenure had loosened the upper castes' grip on institutions of power in the state.

Ironically, when Kalyan Singh was first chosen by the BJP in June 1991 to head the state government, it was this same caste background that played a major role in his selection. The entire northern region of the country was at the time severely divided along caste lines in the aftermath of the decision by the Janata Dal (JD) government at the centre to implement the report of the Mandal Commission. The report had essentially recommended reservations in government jobs for the intermediate castes and though most major political parties had consistently promised in their election manifestoes to implement the report, there was an unstated understanding that the promises would remain unhonoured—till V.P. Singh's own political compulsions provoked him to announce as Prime Minister that the government would in fact implement the report. The violent agitations against this decision, led largely by upper-caste students, laid the foundation for a caste-based division that was more overt than ever before. It was with a view towards exploiting these caste divisions that the BJP groomed Kalyan Singh as its foremost leader in UP through the 1990s.

By the time of the 1999 general elections, it was quite evident that there was considerable resentment against Kalyan Singh within the BJP's state unit. However, the BJP leadership was unable either to discipline the dissidents or replace Kalyan Singh on the eve of the crucial Parliamentary elections of 1999, though virtually everybody in the state, from the political pundits to the layman, was clear that the Chief Minister would almost inevitably be removed from his post, whatever be the results of the elections. During the elections, Kalyan Singh refused to condemn the activities of his former associate Sakshi Maharaj (who, like him, had been named as an accused in the Babri masjid demolition case) who openly campaigned against the BJP and for the Samajwadi Party, a party Sakshi Maharaj later joined. Soon

after the Lok Sabha elections, this reckoning was proved right. The fact that the BJP fared rather poorly in UP only helped the dissidents to raise their campaign for the removal of Kalyan Singh as Chief Minister. It was the severe anti-incumbency factor against the Chief Minister, they said, which had led to the BJP winning just 29 Lok Sabha seats in the state, almost half the number it won in 1998.

The party's central leadership too was now willing to play along with the dissidents and, in November 1999, it decided to ask Kalyan Singh to step down. The man named to replace him, however, came as a surprise. Ram Prakash Gupta, it is true, had once been Deputy Chief Minister of the state, but that was more than two decades earlier, in 1977. Since then, he had maintained a relatively low profile in politics. What might have swung the decision in his favour were two facts: first, he was neither from the upper castes, nor quite from the backward castes. As a bania (member of a trading community), he could possibly manage to strike a balance in the fight for power between the two contending caste factions in the BJP's UP unit. Equally, Gupta was seen neither as a prominent dissident, nor as a Kalyan Singh loyalist. Clearly, the BJP's central leadership was still hoping that a truce could be negotiated in a factional fight that was threatening to do severe damage to the party in the state. As part of this attempt at a truce, Kalyan Singh was offered a berth in the Union Cabinet, as was a prominent dissident leader, Rajnath Singh. While Rajnath Singh accepted the offer, Kalyan Singh refused it, giving the first indications of what was to come.

Immediately after he stepped down as Chief Minister, Kalyan Singh launched a frontal attack on Vajpayee, blaming him for orchestrating the revolt against him. He also chose to single out Vajpayee for 'betraying' the party's ideology and its commitment to its voters to build a Ram temple in Ayodhya. It was this jettisoning of the BJP's core agenda, he insisted, that had led to its electoral defeat in the state. Kalyan Singh also attempted to drive a wedge between Vajpayee and Home Minister L.K. Advani, by maintaining that Vajpayee had 'hijacked' the party, while Advani was feeling suffocated in a party which had parted from its ideological moorings. All he succeeded in doing in the process was to force Advani, and other leaders who had earlier been seen as sympathetic to his travails, to condemn him and deny any rift within the central leadership. Kalyan Singh's deliberately provocative

statements against Vajpayee had the predictable result of forcing the party's central leadership to expel him from the BJP.

Speculation that Kalyan Singh's expulsion would lead to a significant split in the party's leadership and ranks in UP was belied. While a few individual leaders spoke in defence of him, there was no significant desertion from the BJP's ranks. However, the departure of Kalyan Singh did cost the BJP dear in the February 2002 assembly elections. Kalyan Singh's Rashtriya Kranti Party (RKP) managed to win in only four constituencies (Kalyan Singh himself winning from two of them), but damaged the BJP's prospects in dozens of seats. The result was that the BJP finished third behind the SP and the BSP.

It is not as if the BJP was unaware of the implications of expelling Kalyan Singh. Yet, faced with the choice of alienating Kalyan Singh's support base or much of its leadership in the state, the party chose what it felt was the lesser evil. In a significant development in December 2003, four years after he was forced to resign as Chief Minister of UP, Kalyan Singh met Vajpayee at the residence of Lalji Tandon, signaling a thaw in their strained relationship. He went on to rejoin the BJP before the Lok Sabha elections in April–May, 2004. Yet again, what became apparent was that there are no permanent friends or enemies in politics.

The Himachal Pradesh assembly elections of February 2003 saw factional feuds within the BJP coming out in the open. The party's campaign was led by Prem Kumar Dhumal, the incumbent Chief Minister, who was seeking re-election. The BJP was convincingly beaten by the Congress, which managed to win a majority in the assembly despite also being faction-ridden. Shanta Kumar, former Union Minister for Civil Supplies and Consumer Affairs in the Vajpayee Cabinet, and the senior-most BJP leader in Himachal Pradesh, who had been elected Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh on two previous occasions in 1977 and 1990, was quick to blame Dhumal's 'non-performance' for the debacle. Dhumal, in turn, accused Shanta Kumar of sabotaging the BJP's prospects by propping up 'rebel' candidates in several constituencies. The party officially blamed 'infighting and factionalism' for the electoral defeat and Shanta Kumar was dropped from the Union Cabinet.

Another episode which badly battered the image of the BJP as the 'party with a difference' and the attempts of the NDA to present itself

as a 'clean' coalition was the Tehelka episode of March 2001. Two journalists belonging to the website Tehelka masqueraded as arms dealers and secretly videotaped a number of defence officials and politicians. The most sensational of these recordings was a sequence showing the then BJP President Bangaru Laxman accepting a wad of currency notes from the two journalists. Laxman, who belongs to the scheduled castes and was Vajpayee's nominee as party president presumably to rid the BJP of its image of being a party dominated by Hindu upper-caste members, had to resign in ignominy. There was an attempt to rehabilitate Laxman more than six months later when he was made the head of a Parliamentary committee on housing. Though he bitterly complained that he had merely done what all Indian politicians do, namely, accept funds on behalf of his party and that he was made a scapegoat because of his caste background, the damage to the BJP had already been done.

The bigger fallout of the Tehelka episode was the resignation of Defence Minister George Fernandes, a socialist, a non-practising Christian, and an individual who had revealed his amazingly dexterous skills in acting as Vajpayee's handy-man and trouble-shooter when it came to placating troublesome allies like Jayalalithaa and Mamata Banerjee. Fernandes put in his papers since the secretly-filmed Tehelka tapes indicated that the journalists had entered the Defence Minister's official residence and had spoken to his party president and companion Jaya Jaitly about donating funds to their party (the Samata Party). Even as the one-judge commission of inquiry was questioning witnesses to determine the correctness or otherwise of the charges thrown up by the Tehelka tapes, Fernandes was re-instated as Defence Minister in October 2001, seven months after he resigned. The Opposition attacked the government and took the novel step of refusing to ask Fernandes questions as Defence Minister in Parliament, arguing that he could not legitimately hold the post till he was cleared of wrongdoing by the commission.

## **Going Beyond the Cow Belt**

Unlike the Congress till recently, the BJP, ever since it was formed in 1980, and the BJS before it, has not hesitated in becoming part of

a coalition. After the 4th general elections in 1967, many states in northern India including Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar saw the formation of non-Congress state governments which were cobbled together by opportunistic alliances among those opposed to India's grand old party. The BJS even agreed to sink its differences with the communist parties to keep the Congress out of power in these states, even if the coalition governments that were formed were shortlived and prone to implosion, since there were no ideological bonds to bring together the politically diverse groups. Despite such alliances, the BJS was not a serious force to reckon with in Indian politics till 1977.

In the 1st general elections held in independent India between October 1951 and February 1952, the BJS won three out of the 94 Parliamentary seats it had contested (two from West Bengal and one from Madhya Pradesh) out of 489 seats in the first Lok Sabha. In the 2nd general elections held in 1957, the BJS contested more seats (130) but was able to gain only one extra seat in the aggregate while losing all four seats it had won earlier. Of the BJS's four seats in the second Lok Sabha, two came from Uttar Pradesh and two from Bombay. It was after the 3rd general elections in 1962 that the presence of the BJS on the national political scene became more evident, the party won 14 out of the 196 seats it contested, increasing its tally in Madhya Pradesh (to three) and Uttar Pradesh (to seven) while opening its account in Punjab (with three seats) and Rajasthan (one seat). The party's share in total votes polled went up steadily in the first three general elections from just over 3 per cent in 1952 to just under 6 per cent in 1957 and 6.4 per cent in 1962.

The 4th general election in 1967 was the first that saw the Congress' hold on Indian politics diminishing. The BJS won 35 seats in a Lok Sabha with 520 seats. The party obtained 9.4 per cent of the votes polled. It expanded its position in Uttar Pradesh with 12 seats, six in Delhi, 10 in Madhya Pradesh and three in Rajasthan. The three seats held earlier in Punjab were subdivided into Haryana and Chandigarh. The BJS opened its account not only in Bihar by winning a seat but also in south India, by returning an MP from Andhra Pradesh for the first time. The period that followed saw the beginning of coalition politics in the states of north India with BJS members participating in various non-Congress governments in states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh,



Punjab, Haryana, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh. For the first time, the BJS gained experience of working with diverse political groupings including ideological opponents like the communists.

The rise of Indira Gandhi eclipsed the growth of the BJS for a while thereafter. Indira Gandhi headed the Union government for the first time on January 24, 1966. She split the party three years later in 1969 to establish the Congress(I), as also her supremacy. She successfully projected herself as an upholder of socialistic values while painting her opponents within the Congress as those in favour of a conservative status quo. Her '*garibi hatao*' (banish poverty) slogan caught the imagination of the people as did her stance on issues like bank nationalisation, abolition of privy purses to feudal lords, and land reforms.

The 1971–72 war with Pakistan and the formation of Bangladesh saw Indira Gandhi riding the crest of a popularity wave. The first nuclear test was conducted in Pokhran, Rajasthan, in 1974—this event was welcomed by the BJS in Opposition, a fact that the party sought to repeatedly emphasise to garner domestic support after the second set of nuclear tests were conducted in the second week of May 1998. In the 1971 elections, the Congress strode ahead with as many as 342 MPs in a Lok Sabha of 518 members. The BJS got 22 seats while its share of the votes polled came down to 7.4 per cent.

By the mid-1970s, Indira Gandhi's authoritarian tendencies and imperious attitude had become apparent. She was accused of promoting her younger son Sanjay Gandhi as an 'extra-constitutional' authority. This phase culminated in the imposition of an internal Emergency that lasted 19 months—this was the only time in independent India's history when citizens' fundamental rights were brutally curbed, and censorship enforced on the press. The result? Indira and Sanjay Gandhi and her party suffered a humiliating defeat, and India saw the re-emergence of the Sangh Parivar from the shadows. While many within the BJS actively opposed Indira Gandhi's authoritarian actions and supported the 'total revolution' movement led by Jayaprakash Narayan popularly known as 'JP', there were others in the Parivar who 'tactically' accepted her 20-point programme to escape the rigours of jail. There was limited opposition within the Parivar

to merging with the Janata Party. Indira Gandhi was routed by Raj Narain at Rae Bareilly and her younger son, Sanjay Gandhi, lost the elections at Amethi, both in Uttar Pradesh. The Congress had been routed in the elections, surviving mainly in the south, with 154 MPs elected to the 542-member 6th Lok Sabha. The Janata Party government, which came to power on March 24, 1977 with Morarji Desai as Prime Minister, had Vajpayee as External Affairs Minister and Advani as Minister for Information & Broadcasting. This was the first time that representatives of the Sangh Parivar participated in a coalition government in New Delhi.

What followed is well known. Morarji Desai started faltering in late July 1979, ostensibly on the issue of the 'dual membership' of Vajpayee, Advani and others who refused to disown their allegiance to the RSS, thus culminating in the fall of the Janata Party government. The Congress went on to support a minority government led by Charan Singh which lasted barely six months. There were many internal contradictions that had dogged the short-lived Janata Party government. But to some, like socialist firebrand George Fernandes, who almost overnight switched loyalties from Morarji Desai to Charan Singh, the issue of dual membership was most significant. Fernandes had, by then, been accused in the Baroda Dynamite Case. (There is an interesting sidelight here: among the lawyers who supported him then was a young man, Swaraj Kaushal, and his wife Sushma Swaraj, who was, five years later, to move from the Janata Party—as the youngest MLA and minister in two governments in Haryana headed by Devi Lal—to become an important figure in the BJP.) Chaudhury Charan Singh's government lasted from July 28, 1979 to January 14, 1980. He was the only Indian Prime Minister who never faced Parliament during his entire tenure.

Having been unceremoniously rejected by the electorate three years earlier, Indira Gandhi strode back to power in the 7th general elections helped by the mileage the Congress extracted from the rising prices of onions, the Congress(I) won 353 out of 529 seats in the Lok Sabha with nearly 43 per cent of the votes polled. After Indira Gandhi's assassination on October 31, 1984 which led to the most brutal attacks on the Sikh community by goons—some of

them associated with Congress politicians—the Congress, headed by Rajiv Gandhi and riding a ‘sympathy wave’, won a massive mandate—415 out of 517 seats in the Lok Sabha with its allies—unprecedented in the annals of Indian history. This was also the period which saw the BJP going through its politically weakest phase: the party had won two out of the 229 seats it had contested in the 1984 elections and its share of the popular vote stood at 7.4 per cent—the BJS had obtained an identical proportion of votes polled in the 1971 elections. The 1980s were truly a lost decade for the BJP. It was only towards the end of Rajiv Gandhi’s term as Prime Minister, between 1987 and 1989, that the BJP’s political support base started picking up and since then, the rise has been truly spectacular.

In the 1989 elections, racked by charges of corruption and inefficiency, the Congress headed by Rajiv Gandhi collapsed. The BJP bounced back with 11.5 per cent of the votes polled which translated into a big jump in the number of seats in the Lok Sabha. The party had 86 members in a house of 543 seats making it the third largest after the Congress with 197 seats and the Janata Dal with 142 seats. The BJP chose to support V.P. Singh’s minority coalition government without participating in it. More than the internal contradictions within the JD that led to Chandra Shekhar being sworn in as Prime Minister on November 10, 1990 with ‘outside’ support from the Congress headed by Rajiv Gandhi, there was another more important reason for the collapse of the V.P. Singh government. This was the clash between his Mandal Commission agenda—aimed at reserving government jobs for backward castes—and the agenda of the BJP to build a Ram temple at Ayodhya after demolishing the Babri masjid, symbolised by Advani’s *rath yatra* across the length of north India, whipping up support to build the temple, before his arrest at Samastipur, Bihar, by the police in the state whose government was headed by Lalu Prasad Yadav.

The first round of voting in the 10th general elections took place on May 20, 1991. The next evening, Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated by a ‘human bomb’ at Sriperumbudur, Tamil Nadu. The elections were completed on June 15 and a minority government of the Congress party headed by former Minister for Human Resources Development in Rajiv Gandhi’s government, P.V. Narasimha Rao, assumed power

in New Delhi on June 21, 1991. The BJP's tally of 120 seats in a Lok Sabha with 543 seats made it the biggest Opposition party. The rush to build the Ram temple picked up in 1992. In late November, Narasimha Rao cut short his trip to Dakar in Senegal, where heads of state of the Group of 15 (G-15) developing countries were gathered, to attend a meeting of religious leaders to sort out the Ayodhya issue which was threatening to get out of hand. Among the so-called religious leaders was one of Narasimha Rao's cronies, controversial 'godman' Chandra Swami, also known as Nemi Chand Gandhi, aka Nemi Chand Jain.

## Ayodhya and After

On December 6, 1992, the Babri masjid's structure was demolished by gangs of hooligans. As described earlier, it was one of the worst moments in independent India's history. India's image as a tolerant, secular nation took a battering in the eyes of the world. Vajpayee and Advani, both in Parliament and outside, expressed regret for what happened. But the BJP was a divided house. The official bio-data of Uma Bharti, who took an active role in urging the mob to demolish the structure, describes her as a 'religious missionary'. Clad in saffron and sometimes derogatorily referred to as the sexy *sanyasin* by her political opponents, Bharti and Vajpayee openly clashed in public years later in 1998 when the BJP government was seeking to change its position on privatising the insurance industry.

Right through the better part of 1994 and 1995, the BJP tried assiduously to convey the impression that it was indeed the party of the future, that Vajpayee was the Prime Minister-in-waiting. The fractured mandate thrown up by the May 1996 general elections disappointed the BJP, which was hoping it would be able to comfortably form the Union government, led for the first time by a truly non-Congress Prime Minister. Even when it was apparent that a majority would elude the BJP-led alliance, party ideologues convinced Vajpayee and Advani that they stood a faint chance of convincing others to support the alliance. As temperatures rose in the capital city of New Delhi in more than just the metaphorical sense, Vajpayee remained Prime Minister for just two weeks starting May 16, 1996. During this fleeting period in Indian history, a significant event took

place—Union Finance Minister Jaswant Singh formally approved the counter-guarantee to the loans taken to set up the country's first power project fully financed by a foreign corporate group, Enron of the US.

The first Vajpayee government may have lasted barely 13 days, but even that short period was enough for dissidence to raise its ugly head. The BJP's only Muslim MP at that time (from the Rajya Sabha) Sikandar Bakht had been given the Ministerial portfolio of Urban Development. But he was most unhappy, refused to attend office or stop sulking till he was made External Affairs Minister. By then, the BJP's power brokers, armed with cellular phones, had come back with the news that no new MPs, individually or in groups, would be willing to switch their allegiance. The Telugu Desam Party led by the Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu was firmly with the 'third force' as convenor of the United Front and busy confabulating on the formation of the next government. It was apparent that Vajpayee was bound to lose a vote of confidence in the Lok Sabha.

In the meantime, the United Front, comprising 13 political parties, had been formed and had chosen an unlikely 'dark horse' candidate, former Chief Minister of Karnataka H.D. Deve Gowda, as the man to head its government. After the BJP government fell, Deve Gowda was invited to form the government and did so with the support of the Congress. The BJP thus became the main opposition party in the Lok Sabha for the 18-month period in which the UF remained in office.

During this period in Opposition, the BJP often appeared divided about its future strategy. Should it stress the accommodative 'Vajpayee line' on welcoming new alliance partners to form coalitions or should it continue with contentious issues like the building of the Ram temple, the uniform civil code, and so on, which could alienate existing and potential allies? The hardline view prevailed and these issues (together with the old BJS issue of a ban on cow slaughter) were mentioned in the BJP manifesto issued before the February 1998 elections.

The elections saw India's voters giving an even more fractured verdict. While in most states the battle-lines were clear and the polity

was bipolar, by the time the numbers were totted up and aggregated, it was apparent to all that the 12th Lok Sabha, like the earlier house, would not be able to provide a government with some degree of stability for any length of time. Based on the results of 534 seats (in a lower house of Parliament with 543 seats), the BJP and 12 of its alliance partners was able to muster the support of just under 250 MPs. The Congress and its allies won just over 170 seats, the United Front was considerably weakened with less than 100 seats (93 to be precise), while independents and 'others' took up the remaining seats.

The BJP's pre-election alliance partners were the Samata Party in Bihar led by Nitish Kumar and George Fernandes; the Biju Janata Dal headed by Naveen Patnaik, the son of the late Chief Minister and 'strongman' of Orissa, Biju Patnaik, and a relative greenhorn in politics; the Shiromani Akali Dal of Punjab; the Trinamool Congress of West Bengal led by Mamata Banerjee; the Shiv Sena; five parties in Tamil Nadu: the AIADMK led by Jayalalithaa, the PMK (Pattali Makkal Katchi) led by Dalit Ezhilmalai, the MDMK (Marumalarchi DMK or the DMK for resurgence) led by Vaiko, the Tamizhaga Rajiv Congress led by K. Ramamurthi, the Janata Party of Dr. Subramaniam Swamy; and the Lok Shakti led by the late Rama Krishna Hegde, former Chief Minister of Karnataka.

In addition, the BJP alliance included one MP from the Haryana Vikas Party led by the then Haryana Chief Minister Bansi Lal. His arch opponent in the state, Om Prakash Chautala of the Haryana Lok Dal with four MPs, while opposing Bansi Lal in Haryana, chose to support the Vajpayee government with the HVP. Such indeed are the curious twists and turns in Indian politics. Also interesting is the fact that one member of Parliament belonging to the Janata Party, the colourful Dr. Subramaniam Swamy, was at this juncture an ardent supporter of Vajpayee and the coalition government he would head.

While Vajpayee formed his council of ministers that was sworn in on March 19, 1998, even with the 12 alliance partners, the BJP was still falling short of the magic majority mark in the Lok Sabha. The National Conference, as already mentioned, had abstained in the vote of confidence sought by the Vajpayee government. The final act in the drama was played out a week later, on the fateful morning of March 28, 1998.

Till that morning, on the issue of who would hold the post of Speaker of the lower house of Parliament, the BJP and its partners had conveyed the impression that they would settle for the candidature of P.A. Sangma, Congress leader, former Speaker who had received quite a few compliments for his stewardship of the 11th Lok Sabha, and was the first and only tribal to hold the post. In fact, even that morning, the then Parliamentary Affairs Minister Madan Lal Khurana had spoken to him about the BJP's support for his candidature while, at around the same time, the Telugu Desam Party had decided to jump the UF ship and go along with the BJP-led alliance. Chandrababu Naidu, who was no less than the Convenor of the United Front, justified his position on the plea that there was no way the TDP could support a government led by the Congress. The 'reward' received by the TDP for the support of its 12 MPs to the Vajpayee government was that one of them, G.M.C. Balayogi, became the new Speaker of the 12th Lok Sabha. While the other constituents of the UF predictably screamed blue murder and accused Naidu of being a betrayer, the deed had been done.

## **Defeated by a Single Vote**

The second Vajpayee government, which lasted 13 months between March 28, 1998 and April 17, 1999, was a fragile coalition from the start. The AIADMK-led group (including the PMK, the MDMK, the Tamizhaga Rajiv Congress and the Janata Party) that commanded the support of 27 MPs at that time, kept the BJP on tenterhooks because Jayalalithaa delayed her letter to the President of India committing the group's support to a government led by Vajpayee. From the word go, when the ruling alliance confabulated on its National Agenda for Governance, the AIADMK and Jayalalithaa proved to be rather troublesome and unreliable partners. The portly former film actress from Poes Garden, Chennai, put her foot down (and got her way) when it came to ministerial appointments. Her loyalists occupied crucial positions which, it was believed, was aimed at ensuring that the 42 corruption cases instituted against her and her associates by the DMK regime would proceed as slowly as possible.

Among the AIADMK MPs who occupied key posts were M. Thambi Durai, who became Union Minister for Law, Justice and Company Affairs, R. Muttiah, who became Minister of State for Revenue in the Ministry of Finance (but had to quit after his name appeared as an accused in one of the court cases against Jayalalithaa and her associates and was replaced by R.K. Kumar). K. Ramamurthy of the TRC became Minister for Petroleum and Natural Gas. Predictably, Thambi Durai was later accused of trying to influence the transfer of prosecutors in Tamil Nadu who were handling cases against Jayalalithaa and her associates. Similar accusations were levelled when there were large-scale transfers of officers belonging to the Income Tax Department. The government—and even the BJP’s spokespersons—claimed that these transfers and new appointments were ‘routine’ and the prerogative of the government, but very few were fooled. The Vajpayee government also took the initiative to sort out the apparently irreconcilable differences primarily between two states in southern India, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, over sharing the waters of the river Cauvery.

The first major decision of the Vajpayee government that stunned the world was his decision to conduct a series of nuclear tests at Pokhran in the second week of May 1998. These explosions were conducted almost exactly 24 years after the first tests were conducted at the same arid desert zone in Rajasthan’s Jaisalmer district. Even as international attention was focused on the subcontinent, Pakistan conducted its ‘tit-for-tat’ tests.

Just over a fortnight after the nuclear tests, on June 1, 1998, Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha presented the first Union budget of the Vajpayee government, which turned out to be quite a disaster. What was unprecedented was the fact that within days of the announcement of the budget proposals, the government backtracked on a number of key proposals (detailed in the chapter on the economy). The entire sequence of events following the presentation of the budget conveyed a distinct impression (even to the BJP’s sympathisers) that the government was being pulled apart on account of internal dissensions.

As the fragility of the coalition government became more apparent, the AIADMK continued to put pressure on Vajpayee and his colleagues to dismiss the DMK government in Tamil Nadu headed by



Karunanidhi on the ground that the state government was not being able to check the activities of anti-national terrorists and Tamil rebels in Sri Lanka. Other partners in the BJP-led alliance like the Trinamool Congress obtained a 'Bengal package' of concessions from the Union government, which included an extension to the underground railway in Kolkata.

At around this juncture, the Vajpayee government came under a lot of criticism for failing to prevent attacks on the Christian community in the tribal-dominated district of Dangs in Gujarat on Christmas Day (which coincidentally also happened to be Vajpayee's birthday). The Prime Minister returned from a visit to the state and was quoted by the media as saying that a national debate on religious conversions was needed. A group of nuns had earlier been gang-raped in Madhya Pradesh while an Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two young sons were brutally burnt to death in their vehicle in a village in northern Orissa. Both Orissa and Madhya Pradesh were ruled by Congress governments and the BJP sought to dismiss as 'politically motivated' the criticism that attacks on Christians had mounted after the party came to power in New Delhi.

By the end of December, another major controversy engulfed the Vajpayee government even as the Prime Minister made his much-publicised plans to undertake a bus ride across the border to Lahore to meet his Pakistani counterpart Mian Nawaz Sharif. This was the sacking of the former Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral Vishnu Bhagwat on December 30, 1998. The same day, the Cabinet Committee on Appointments also transferred the former Defence Secretary Ajit Kumar and made him Industry Secretary. Defence Minister George Fernandes came into the eye of an unprecedented storm after it was disclosed that he had been approached by all three Chiefs of Staff of the Army, Navy and Air Force to persuade him to stop the government (the Defence Ministry) from intervening in what are considered to be 'mandated' and 'routine' operations to check the inflow of illegal arms through sea routes in the Bay of Bengal. The entire operation was code-named 'Operation Leech' and the insinuation that was later made was that Fernandes for some reason did not want to prevent the inflow of arms to those opposed to the military regime in Myanmar. It was pointed out that refugee students of Myanmar had been guests in the official residence of Fernandes.

The Defence Minister, who had earlier sought to convey an impression that he was in favour of upholding the interests of ordinary service personnel by making frequent trips to visit troops in the Siachen glacier, eating with them and hauling up bureaucrats who were slow in sanctioning expenses of army jawans in inhospitable terrain, painted the entire Vishnu Bhagwat episode quite differently. Fernandes accused Bhagwat of insubordination, of trying to undermine civilian authority over the defence forces, and for refusing to make Vice Admiral Harinder Singh the Deputy Chief of Naval Staff. Singh had accused Bhagwat of discriminating against him in a public complaint and also described Bhagwat's wife, Niloufer Bhagwat, as a communist sympathiser and pointed out that she was half-Muslim. A distinct impression was created that the government was trying to kill two birds with one stone, the Shiromani Akali Dal was keen on Harinder Singh's appointment because he was a Sikh, while the BJP's ally in Maharashtra, the Shiv Sena, was already quite upset with Admiral Bhagwat's lawyer-wife who had vociferously protested against functionaries of the Shiv Sena who had been accused of abetting the anti-Muslim riots in Mumbai before the Justice Srikrishna commission of inquiry.

As allegations and counter-allegations flew thick and fast, selected media persons sympathetic to the Vajpayee government were fed selective bits of information purporting to indicate how Bhagwat was a troublesome and treacherous character. Bhagwat, in turn, accused the Defence Minister of having become a victim of the lies spread by corrupt officials and former senior defence personnel turned arms agents. Fernandes and Defence Ministry officials, on the other hand, claimed that Bhagwat was a 'habitual' litigant on the ground that he had gone to court earlier against the decision of the then Chief of Naval Staff who had not promoted him to the rank of Vice Chief. What did not help Bhagwat's cause was that he had eventually been promoted under former Admiral L. Ramdas who had, by then, become an important pillar of the anti-nuclear movement in the country and a bitter critic of the government. Around this time, former Prime Minister Deve Gowda levelled another accusation at the Defence Ministry headed by Fernandes. On the basis of leaked confidential correspondence, he claimed that new Russian tanks were

being sought to be hastily inducted into the Indian Army without proper evaluation and trials. Vajpayee stood by Fernandes in his fight against the sacked Admiral and his wife. He even spent New Year's Eve at the residence of Harinder Singh who was then the Fortress Commandant of the Navy stationed at Port Blair in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal.

The Bhagwat episode did not die down as quickly as Vajpayee and Fernandes may have hoped even after Vajpayee made his 'historic' trip by road to Lahore in February 1999 to meet his counterpart in Pakistan, Mian Nawaz Sharif. It was not just the Congress that attacked the government in general and Fernandes in particular for having sacked Admiral Bhagwat. The BJP's largest ally, the AIADMK, too later demanded that Fernandes be removed from the post of Defence Minister. There was more than a touch of irony in this demand because Fernandes had, on more than one occasion, been despatched by Vajpayee to Chennai to meet and placate Jayalalithaa.

In April 1999, Jayalalithaa's confidante Subramaniam Swamy (who had, incidentally, many years earlier been instrumental in instituting a number of corruption cases against her) organised a tea party at a Delhi hotel which was attended by, among many others, the Congress President Sonia Gandhi. The BJP was hoping against hope that the AIADMK would not pull out from the alliance. The party had weaned away the AIADMK's former supporters to its side. But the writing on the wall was clear, there was no way that Jayalalithaa could be persuaded not to withdraw the support of 18 AIADMK MPs from the Vajpayee government. The inevitable took place on April 14, 1999 after the AIADMK withdrew its support to the government and the President of India asked Vajpayee to seek a fresh vote of confidence in the Lok Sabha.

The following day, Vajpayee moved the vote of confidence in his 13-month government and stated that while all his political opponents had ganged up opportunistically to defeat his government, they would not be able to form an alternative government. He was proved correct. The Lok Sabha debated the motion that evening and the whole of the following day with the Lok Sabha session stretching till past 6.00 am. On April 16, the Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) led by Om Prakash Chautala with four MPs in the Lok Sabha decided to abstain

from voting after earlier claiming that the party would vote against the Vajpayee government and in favour of a pro-farmer leader like Deve Gowda. Also unexpected was the position adopted by the five MPs of the Bahujan Samaj Party led by former Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Mayawati. On the floor of the house, Mayawati claimed that the BSP would abstain from voting but when the votes were cast the next morning, it became evident that the BSP had voted against the Vajpayee government.

In the cliff-hanging vote of confidence, the government obtained 269 votes while one extra vote (or a total of 270 votes) was cast against the motion of confidence. Just before the voting took place, objections were raised against Giridhar Gamang casting his vote since he had by then become Chief Minister of Orissa although, technically, he remained a member of the lower house of Parliament since he had not been elected to the state legislative assembly. The Speaker, Balayogi, asked Gamang to use his 'good sense' to decide whether or not he should vote. Gamang did. Another MP who said his conscience dictated that he flout his party's directive to vote in favour of the Vajpayee government was Saifuddin Soz of the National Conference. Soz had never been comfortable with his former leader, Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah's decision to ditch the UF and support the Vajpayee government.

After the Vajpayee government was reduced to a 'caretaker' status on April 17 and he had put in his papers, unsuccessful attempts were made to form an alternative government. Congress President Sonia Gandhi first claimed before the President of India that 272 MPs would support an alternative government led by the Congress (and presumably under her leadership). Thereafter, the Samajwadi Party led by Mulayam Singh Yadav stated that it could not under any circumstances support a minority government comprising the Congress. The Congress, in turn, claimed that it would not be part of a coalition government. The CPI(M), which had been actively trying to woo its partners among the left parties, found that there was dissension in the ranks of the left as well. Two small left parties, the All India Forward Bloc and the Revolutionary Socialist Party, stated that their MPs would not support a government of which the Congress was a part. Even after the four MPs of the Janata Party (including two

former Prime Ministers, Deve Gowda and Gujral) agreed to support a Congress government, Sonia Gandhi realised much to her chagrin that instead of 272 MPs, just about 233 MPs would go along with a Congress government.

At this time, BJP supporters carried out a systematic ‘whisper campaign’ against President K.R. Narayanan, hinting that he was biased in favour of the Congress because he had served as a bureaucrat in successive Congress governments and had been a Congress MP too. It was claimed that the President should not have asked Vajpayee to prove his majority but instead let the government be defeated on the floor of the house in the normal course. It was also argued that Narayanan gave Sonia Gandhi ‘too much time’ to try and cobble together an alternative government. Eventually, the 12th Lok Sabha was dissolved. The President asked all parties to come together to pass the Union budget (which had been presented as usual in end February) without any amendment and without any discussion to avert a possible financial crisis.

- Within a fortnight of the fall of the Vajpayee government, as already mentioned, dramatic developments occurred. In early May, hundreds of armed infiltrators crossed the Line of Control (LOC) in the Kargil area of Jammu & Kashmir.
- Three senior Congress leaders broke away from the parent party and formed the NCP, after demanding that Sonia Gandhi make it clear that she would not be a Prime Ministerial aspirant.

Kargil and Sonia’s foreign origins thus became the two key issues in the BJP’s election campaign. As Kargil gripped the country and became India’s first televised war, the Vajpayee government and its supporters sought to play up jingoistic sentiments. Many believe the Kargil war was a key factor that ensured that the BJP and its allies returned to power after the 13th general elections in October 1999. Yet, as already observed, the impact of Kargil was not uniform, there was no apparent impact in states like Punjab, Karnataka or Uttar Pradesh. The ‘mandate’ of the 13th general elections may have been widely welcomed by the BJP but clearly there was no euphoria. For the first time since 1984, the BJP had not been able to increase

the number of Lok Sabha seats it held nor its share of the popular vote. In fact, the BJP's share of the total vote came down by roughly 2 per cent between the 12th and the 13th general elections.

The results of the 13th general elections meant two things for the party. On the one hand, they gave Vajpayee's third government a firmer hold on power than his previous attempts. On the other, they greatly increased, at least initially, the dependence of the BJP on its allies for remaining in power. This latter fact was crucial in ensuring that the so-called Vajpayee line of moderation prevailed. Not only were functionaries of the BJP in the Union government at pains to deny they had any agenda other than the National Agenda for Governance adopted by the National Democratic Alliance, even state-level BJP leaders making contrary noises were quickly chastised. The former Chief Minister of UP, Ram Prakash Gupta, for instance, sought to clarify that the BJP had not forgotten its promise to its supporters on building a Ram temple at Ayodhya. Following predictable protests from the allies, Vajpayee declared in the Lok Sabha that Gupta had assured him that he never said the temple was part of the UP government's agenda.

More significant was a BJP national council meeting held in Chennai in December 1999. The meeting adopted a resolution putting all contentious issues on hold. The initial draft of the resolution had, in fact, contained a paragraph suggesting that the party had no agenda apart from the NDA agenda. This was clearly too much for the hardliners in the 1,400-member national council to stomach and had to be dropped. Thus, the struggle between the hardliners and the moderates within the BJP continued and if the moderate position prevailed more often than not, it was largely because of political compulsions.

These compulsions have tested Vajpayee's ability to walk the tightrope, a skill he has mastered over the years. For example, soon after a trip to the United States where, while addressing a group of non-resident Indians, Vajpayee described himself as a true *swayamsevak* (a member of the RSS, literally, one who volunteers to serve society before self). Then, he put out a long, written treatise entitled *Musings from Kumarakom*—a holiday resort in Kerala. In that treatise, Vajpayee described the Ram Mandir issue as one involving 'national prestige' even as he asserted that no person was above the

law, in an apparent attempt to counter the assertion of the VHP, the Bajrang Dal and others that a temple would be constructed at the disputed site at Ayodhya irrespective of the outcome of lawsuits which were pending in various courts.

Vajpayee and the BJP thus continued to equivocate on the Hindutva issue. The question about whether Hindutva would remain the main vote-catching plank for the party or whether it would evolve into a more moderate, secular organisation remained alive. If Gujarat convinced most observers that the BJP would continue to rely on its communal card to deliver votes, the victories in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh in December 2003 led political analysts to suggest that the party had discovered the virtues of making governance a primary election issue. The BJP, it was suggested, had realised that the communal card was yielding diminishing returns and hence was unlikely to use it aggressively in future.

Such a prognosis was more than a little premature. True, the assembly elections of December 2003 showed that the BJP could win elections even without using the communal card. However, the manner in which the party responded to the defeat in the 2004 Lok Sabha elections shows quite clearly that the tendency to keep returning to the Hindutva plank whenever the BJP sees itself as facing a crisis is far from being a thing of the past. The manner in which the party attempted to use the Sethusamudram controversy in September 2007 only underlines this point. What has also not been demonstrated yet is whether the BJP can retain power without resorting to an election campaign that polarises the electorate along communal lines. The only state in which the BJP has won two successive terms in the recent past has been Gujarat, where its return to power seemed threatened till the post Godhra riots took place in the first half of 2002.

## **Monopoly 'Nationalists'**

The Sangh Parivar has always projected itself as the only truly nationalist force. It has traditionally portrayed the left as a political force whose patriotism is questionable, as one that has owed greater allegiance to 'masters' in Moscow (when the Soviet Union was still a communist regime) and Beijing than to India. The minorities have

been painted as people whose patriotism cannot be taken for granted since they too owe allegiance to authorities or holy places outside Indian soil, whether it be the Vatican or Mecca and Medina. Guru Golwalkar did not mince words in saying as much. In one of his books, *Bunch of Thoughts*, he described the Muslims, the Christians and the communists as post-independent India's three 'internal enemies'. In more recent times, the Sangh Parivar, and in particular the BJP, have not been quite as candid about this formulation, but the mindset has not changed very much, nor has any leader of the RSS or the BJP ever disowned these views. Nor has the BJP ever taken exception to one of its staunchest allies, the Shiv Sena, periodically voicing such sentiments about the minorities.

The questioning of the Congress' nationalist credentials has been somewhat more subtle. In the immediate post-independence phase, it was obviously not easy to sell the line that the Congress was not a nationalist party. Hence, the Sangh Parivar concentrated its criticism of the Congress on pointing out that it had acquiesced in partitioning the country, that its leaders were 'appeasing' Muslims and in general were too corrupt and self-serving to bother about the interests of the country at large. With Sonia Gandhi becoming President of the Congress, the BJP stepped up its propaganda against her origins, a position that went down well with sections of the middle class.

After it came to power in 1998, the BJP assiduously sought to propagate its more patriotic-than-thou image. The first attempt to 'monopolise' the nationalist agenda was seen when the government decided to conduct nuclear tests in Pokhran in May 1998 and announced to the world that India was now capable of weaponising its nuclear programme. The tests were justified by citing 'threat perceptions' not just from Pakistan, but also from China in the east. Those who spoke against the nuclear weapons programme were dubbed anti-national, if not agents of Pakistan's infamous spy agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).

Nine months later, in February 1999, Vajpayee took his famous bus ride to Lahore for a summit with his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif. The trip was hyped up as one that could provide a new direction to India-Pakistan relations and reduce tensions between the two neighbours. Those who had said the Pokhran blasts would vitiate the atmosphere between the two countries were being proved



wrong, the government claimed. On the contrary, India's nuclear blasts had forced Pakistan to take a more conciliatory position, the BJP argued. Within a month of the fall of the Vajpayee government in April that year, the Kargil war took place. As the facts revealed themselves, it became clear that Pakistan's intrusion in Kargil was on even as Vajpayee and Sharif were discussing plans to meet each other.

No longer could the BJP and the government claim that Pakistan had been brought to heel by the Pokhran blasts. The tack, therefore, changed. Kargil became a rallying point for jingoistic posturing. Once again, those who questioned the wisdom of the Pokhran blasts or suggested that the government had been too complacent about the Lahore trip or claimed that Kargil took place on account of intelligence failure were sought to be clubbed into the 'anti-national' category by the BJP and its supporters. The BJP claimed its critics had 'politicised' what was a matter of national concern and that these misguided sections should be training their guns on Pakistan instead of attacking the government.

When the Taliban regime in Afghanistan destroyed the world's largest statues of Buddha carved out of mountainsides at Bamiyan, leaders of the BJP spared no efforts in condemning the move. These leaders were extremely uncomfortable when media commentators sought to compare the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas with the destruction of the Babri mosque at Ayodhya.

In May 2001, Vajpayee and General Pervez Musharraf (who replaced Nawaz Sharif as Pakistan's head of state in October 2000) met at Agra. The summit meeting, which had been preceded by considerable media hype, turned out to have raised more expectations than it fulfilled. Vajpayee sought to unsuccessfully change Pakistan's position that Kashmir was at the 'core' of the dispute between India and Pakistan—his close friend and then External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh had said Kashmir was at the core of Indian nationhood. At Agra, Musharraf did not bend one bit and managed to hog much of the media limelight after his meeting with senior Indian journalists (which was supposed to be off-the-record) was broadcast over television channels.

The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon on the outskirts of Washington on September 11, 2001, provided yet another occasion for the Vajpayee government to

propagate its view that some Muslims were not to be trusted. Even before September 11, the Vajpayee government had displayed its affinity towards American interests when it enthusiastically welcomed the new George W. Bush administration's announcement of a missile development programme to militarise space. Weeks before the American air attacks on Afghanistan started, Foreign Minister Singh had told a journalist that the Indian government would be happy to provide military support to the US by offering its airports as bases.

Despite obvious pointers that the US was not interested in extending its 'war on terror' to Kashmir, at least in the immediate context, the government kept trying to portray American intervention in Afghanistan as a golden opportunity. The suggestion was that the US would become more appreciative of India's concerns about terrorism in Kashmir and exert pressure on Pakistan to stop its 'proxy war'. In reality, of course, the US restricted itself to paying lip service to the Indian government's concerns and refused to pressurise Pakistan to stop its support for 'freedom fighters' in Kashmir. In fact, the attacks on Afghanistan gave the Pakistani President an opportunity to demand, and get, various financial sops in the form of write-off of loans from multilateral aid agencies.

A month after the September 11 attacks, the government banned the Students' Islamic Movement of India (SIMI), charging the organisation with having links with Osama bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda network and with having participated in acts of terrorism in India. Riots broke out in Lucknow, a city with a sizeable Muslim population, when the authorities followed up the ban by arresting several SIMI leaders. Fortunately, however, the riots neither spread to other parts of the country nor lasted very long. The timing of the ban on SIMI, just four months before the elections to the Uttar Pradesh assembly were to be held, was seen not just by Muslims but also by most political analysts as motivated.

Most commentators not identified with the BJP or the Sangh Parivar also pointed out that the ban betrayed a communal bias. While not defending SIMI, they asked why organisations like the Bajrang Dal, which made no secret of their aggressive intent against Muslims, had not been included in the ban. Advani disingenuously sought to explain this by saying that while there was specific evidence

of SIMI's connections with terrorist acts and organisations, nobody had presented any evidence of the Bajrang Dal being involved in such 'anti-national' activities. The Opposition pointed out that there had been any number of reports in the media on the Bajrang Dal distributing arms and organising camps to train its cadres in the use of these weapons.

In the last quarter of 2001, the ruling party mounted a concerted campaign to push through a law ostensibly aimed at curbing terrorism. In October, the Union Cabinet suddenly got the President to promulgate an ordinance called the Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance (POTO). This was done without consulting even the BJP's allies in the NDA, leave alone the Opposition. The ordinance raised a big hue and cry. The political Opposition, civil rights groups, several jurists and most journalists protested against the promulgation of the ordinance. Even some allies of the BJP, like the DMK, publicly announced their opposition to POTO.

The opposition to POTO was on several counts. The most common cause for resistance was the experience with the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Act (TADA) that had been in force between 1987 and 1995. Critics pointed out that POTO was simply TADA reincarnated. In fact, they said, the new law included some provisions that were even more draconian than those in TADA. For instance, under POTO, the accused need not be given the identities of 'witnesses' deposing against him. TADA had been allowed to lapse in 1995 since Parliament agreed that it had not served the intended purpose. Worse, it had been severely misused by the police against the minorities, particularly the Muslims, or to settle personal scores. The fact that at a time when terrorism was rampant in Punjab, Kashmir and much of the north-east, the largest number of those detained under TADA came from Gujarat, a state with no history of terrorism, was seen as clinching evidence of its misuse. That barely one per cent of the 76,000-odd people charged under TADA had been convicted was also cited as evidence of its ineffectiveness and of the fact that its preventive detention provisions had been misused on a large scale.

Apart from these general reservations on TADA and hence POTO, the media had a specific cause for worry. A provision in POTO made it mandatory for journalists with any information about terrorists

to pass it on to the authorities. Failure to do so would make the journalist liable to prosecution under POTO. Thus, for instance, if a journalist were to secure an interview with, say, the commander of the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen, it would be mandatory for him or her to tell the authorities where, when and through whom the interview was arranged. This provision, journalists pointed out, would severely curtail their ability to gather information without fear of being labelled as abettors of terrorism.

The government initially took the attack to the critics, accusing them of effectively helping the terrorists by trying to block the passage of the Act to replace POTO. Like President George Bush, Advani presented everybody with a choice of being 'with-us-or-with-them'. Those who did not support POTO were playing into the hands of terrorists, he argued. His Cabinet colleagues like Arun Jaitley, Union Law Minister, argued that POTO had in-built safeguards that did not exist in TADA. Jurists like Fali Nariman, former Attorney General and now a member of the Rajya Sabha, were not impressed by these 'safeguards'. The law, he maintained, was too draconian and in any case not needed since existing laws were adequate to deal with most of what POTO was trying to tackle.

The government also attacked the Opposition, accusing it of being hypocritical. States like Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, both ruled by the Congress either by itself or in an alliance, and West Bengal, which was ruled by the CPI(M), it pointed out, had enacted similar laws to deal with organised crime. While the CPI(M) responded by announcing that it would withdraw the Prevention of Crime Act (POCA) that it was proposing to pass, the Congress governments argued that the Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act (MCOCA) and the corresponding Act in Madhya Pradesh were not similar to POTO and that the BJP was being disingenuous in making the comparison.

After a standoff in Parliament lasting weeks and after growing protests against POTO, the government changed its tack somewhat. While still insisting that POTO was essential to combat terrorism and that there could be no compromise on it, the Prime Minister admitted that the government should have consulted all political parties before promulgating the ordinance. He also said that the government was

willing to consider suggestions on how the law could be fine-tuned, but would not relent in its resolve to get the legislation through Parliament. An all-party meeting was convened in early December 2001, but failed to make any difference to the entrenched positions. Shortly thereafter, the government made more conciliatory gestures, saying that the law would not be misused against journalists.

POTO eventually became POTA, after the government convened a joint session of the two houses of Parliament. This became necessary since the government was not sure that it would be able to muster a majority in support of the Bill in the Rajya Sabha. Under the Indian Constitution, legislation must be adopted by both houses before it becomes law. In the event of the Rajya Sabha rejecting a Bill that has been adopted by the Lok Sabha, it can still become law provided a joint sitting of both houses votes in favour of the Bill. This provision in the Constitution had been used only on two previous occasions in the history of independent India. The fact that the government chose to use it to pass POTA was clearly intended to prove that it was committed to fighting terrorism.

Ironically, one of the first occasions the law was used was to jail Vaiko (formerly known as V. Gopalaswamy) who was arrested by the Tamil Nadu government headed by Jayalalithaa for allegedly supporting the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) of Sri Lanka—the organisation had been banned in India after its leader Velupillai Pirabhakaran was accused of conspiring to assassinate Rajiv Gandhi. Vaiko's arrest was ironical for more than one reason. First, his party, the Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK) was a partner in the NDA government headed by Vajpayee. Second, he was arrested at a time when the AIADMK under Jayalalithaa was making a concerted effort to come close to the Vajpayee government. Finally, Vaiko himself had vociferously argued in Parliament in favour of enacting POTA and, in fact, had rubbished suggestions from the opposition that the enactment was 'draconian' and that its provisions were liable to be misused against political opponents.

Also significant was the fact that whereas POTA was used against all the persons accused in the Godhra incident of February 27, 2002, the law was not used even once against any person involved in the subsequent violence that took place in Gujarat that was specifically

targeted at Muslims. POTA, as already mentioned, was also used by the Mayawati government in Uttar Pradesh against MLA Raja Bhaiyya (Raghuraj Pratap Singh) and his father for allegedly conspiring to kill the Chief Minister.

POTA once again figured prominently in the BJP's attempts to portray itself as the only 'nationalist' party and the Opposition—the Congress in particular—as suspect on this count, in the context of Jammu & Kashmir. This state as we know has been gripped by terrorist violence since 1989 that has claimed over 60,000 lives. The terrorists—who have received moral and material support from Pakistan, not to mention training in the use of arms—have undoubtedly been helped by a sense of alienation from the Indian mainstream within large sections of the population in the Kashmir Valley, which is predominantly Muslim. Elections over the years have been perceived as rigged, with the government in New Delhi conniving with the one in Srinagar to keep out genuine representatives of the people who might have demanded greater autonomy or perhaps even secession. As is typical in such situations, the Indian security forces' attempts to counter the militants involved some excesses, which added further fuel to the fire and accusations of large-scale violation of human rights by groups like Amnesty International.

It was in this context that the state assembly elections of October 2002 were held. Unlike in the past, these elections were perceived as being relatively free of official coercion or manipulation. The fact that the BJP and the National Conference, the parties in power in New Delhi and Srinagar respectively, were trounced, helped buttress this feeling. No single party managed to get a majority, but the Congress in the Hindu-majority Jammu region of the state and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in the Muslim majority Kashmir Valley emerged as the winners. Though the Congress overall had more MLAs than the PDP, it was ultimately the PDP that headed the coalition government formed by the two parties along with some smaller parties and independents. One of the key campaign promises of the PDP had been that it would disband the Special Operations Group (SOG) of the J&K police. This group, formed specifically for counter-insurgency operations, was seen as particularly ruthless and unconcerned about human rights.

Not surprisingly, among the first announcements made by PDP leader Mufti Mohammed Sayeed when he became Chief Minister of the state was a declaration that the SOG personnel would be absorbed into the main police force and that POTA would not be used by his government. This policy, which he described as a ‘healing touch’, was immediately attacked by the BJP as ‘going soft on terrorists’. These developments took place barely two months before the Gujarat elections. As a result, the BJP made the ‘fight against terrorism’ one of the major issues of the Gujarat election campaign and Modi constantly accused the Congress of playing into the hands of terrorists. In fact, he even kept referring to the Congress as sympathisers of ‘Mian Musharraf’ (the Pakistani President) in his election speeches.

Out of power after the 2004 general elections, the BJP once again sought to portray itself as more patriotic than the Congress. One issue that gave it an opportunity to do so was the death sentence handed out to Afsal Guru, one of the accused in the December 13, 2001 attack on Parliament. While Guru’s clemency petition was pending before the President, most leaders in Kashmir, including Congress Chief Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad appealed for his life to be spared. The BJP immediately latched on to Azad’s statement, saying that it showed how ‘soft’ the Congress was on terrorists and was part of the Congress’ policy of appeasing Muslims.

A nuclear deal reached between Manmohan Singh and US President George Bush was also attacked by the BJP as having compromised national sovereignty. A party that had boasted of how it brought India closer to the US while in power was suddenly singing a different tune altogether. The language it used to attack the deal was virtually indistinguishable from that used by other critics of the nuclear agreement, including those belonging to the left and scientists and retired officials who were part of the nuclear establishment.

## **Pragmatism, BJP Style**

An interesting feature of the alliances that the BJP has forged since 1998 has been what the party likes to describe as ‘pragmatism’, but others might see as opportunism or ruthlessness. As already mentioned, the BJP forged a coalition with the BSP in Uttar Pradesh for a third time,

despite having gone through two previous acrimonious alliances with the same party. This is not because the BJP leadership was under any illusion that the latest tie-up with the BSP would be long-lived or less problematic. It was simply because the BJP believed it needed the BSP to survive the short term in Uttar Pradesh and to pose a serious threat to the Congress in Madhya Pradesh.

Uttar Pradesh is not the only state where the BJP has shown such clinical 'pragmatism' in deciding its alliances. Andhra Pradesh, Haryana and Tamil Nadu are three states where the party has jettisoned pre-election allies without even a pretence of any differences merely because other parties in these states had become more 'useful'. The first of these instances was in Andhra Pradesh in 1998. In the Lok Sabha elections that year, the BJP had partnered the Lakshmi Parvathi faction of the Telugu Desam Party, contesting against the faction headed by Lakshmi Parvathi's step-son, Chandrababu Naidu. Unfortunately for the BJP, Naidu's faction got 19 out of the 42 Lok Sabha seats in the state, while Lakshmi Parvathi's faction could not win a single seat. Without even a formal announcement of the alliance with the Lakshmi Parvathi faction being broken, immediately after the election results were known, the BJP started negotiations with Naidu to form the government in New Delhi.

In 1999, the BJP acted equally ruthlessly in Haryana. The previous year, the BJP had fought the assembly elections in the state in alliance with Bansi Lal's Haryana Vikas Party (HVP) and come to power. When the second Vajpayee government fell in April 1999 and it became clear that another general election was round the corner, the BJP decided that Om Prakash Chautala's INLD was the horse to back in Haryana. It withdrew support to the Bansi Lal government, resulting in its fall, and helped Chautala form a government in July 1999. Its assessment about the INLD being a more useful ally proved right, with the BJP-INLD alliance winning all 10 Lok Sabha seats in the state in the September–October general elections.

What happened in Tamil Nadu was perhaps the most bizarre example of the BJP's 'pragmatism'. On the one hand, the DMK was a constituent of the NDA and its leaders were members in the Vajpayee governments' council of ministers till December 2003. Yet, it was evident that the AIADMK, which was formally an Opposition party, was closer



to the BJP than the DMK. Similarly, Vaiko had been in jail for over a year, charged under POTA, but there was hardly any protest from the BJP or any acknowledgement that the case against the MDMK leader was politically motivated. The reason was simple enough, in the last assembly elections held in Tamil Nadu in May 2001 the AIADMK won close to three-fourths of the seats, the DMK and the MDMK had to eat humble pie. In December 2003, the DMK and the MDMK both finally left the NDA.

In the mountainous state of Himachal Pradesh, an interesting development occurred after the assembly elections in the state coinciding with the May 1996 general elections. Out of 68 seats, the BJP won 31 seats, the Congress 31 seats, the HVC (headed by former Union Communications Minister Sukh Ram who was expelled from the Congress after corruption charges were filed against him following the recovery of large sums of unaccounted money from his residences) won five seats, there was one independent candidate who won, while elections were not held in one constituency.

The BJP—which had attacked Sukh Ram in 1995 and, together with other Opposition parties, paralysed the Lok Sabha which was debating the Narasimha Rao government’s telecommunications policies for two weeks—realised the only way it could form a government in Himachal Pradesh was by aligning with Sukh Ram. By aligning with the HVC to come to power in the state, the BJP proved that it could act as opportunistically as any of its political opponents.

There is an interesting aside to this episode. Fortuitously for the BJP, the HVC split down the middle with two of its MLAs joining the BJP. Interestingly, Sukh Ram later described this split as his ‘master stroke’. It might seem strange that a party leader should welcome a split in his own party and treat it as a master stroke. But Sukh Ram was not being facetious. Given the provisions of the anti-defection laws as they were at the time, the five-member HVC would have been open to the threat of defections from its ranks to the Congress, which would then have been in a position to form the government. Under the prevailing law, if one-third or more of a legislature party’s members left the parent party it would qualify as a ‘split’ rather than a defection and the members would not be disqualified from the legislature. By ‘making’ two of his MLAs join the BJP, Sukh Ram had

effectively ensured that they could not defect, since they were now part of a much bigger group in the legislature.

There is little doubt, therefore, that the BJP's much-touted 'coalition dharma' is not far from being a euphemism for crass opportunism, principles and loyalty be damned.

### **Atal Behari Vajpayee**

Atal Behari Vajpayee, the first person to become Prime Minister of India without ever having been a member of the Congress party, has been in the political limelight for most of the past four decades. Though he was a founder member of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh when it was formed in 1951, and a protégé of the first President of the BJS, Dr. Shyama Prasad Mookerjee, he was first noticed on the national stage when he got elected to the Lok Sabha in 1957 from Balrampur, having failed in his earlier attempt to enter Parliament from Lucknow in a by-election in the mid-1950s. In 1957, he was just one of four successful BJS candidates all over the country, though Vajpayee too lost from two other constituencies, forfeiting his security deposit in one of them. In all, Vajpayee has been elected to the Lok Sabha on nine occasions and lost elections twice. His losses came in 1962 from Balrampur in Uttar Pradesh and from Gwalior in Madhya Pradesh in 1984, when he was defeated by Madhavrao Scindia, in an election that saw just two BJP members being elected MPs. Vajpayee is the only person to have been elected to the Lok Sabha from four different states—Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Delhi.

India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, impressed with Vajpayee's Parliamentary interventions had, as early as the 1960s, picked him out as one with a bright future in Indian politics and a man who could even one day become Prime Minister—an insight that has proved truly prophetic. Along the way to becoming India's 10th Prime Minister (and later the 13th and 14th as well), Vajpayee has had an impressive political career in his party, in public office, and above all in being able to steer (but not entirely, as we shall see) clear of controversy.

He has been awarded the country's second highest civilian award, the Padma Vibhushan, and was the first recipient of the Best

Parliamentarian Award in 1994. In the citation for the latter award, he was described as a ‘multifaceted personality’ and as ‘an eminent national leader, an erudite politician, selfless social worker, forceful orator, poet, litterateur and journalist’. The extent to which this opinion is shared by people cutting across the political spectrum is best illustrated by two facts. For one, it was noticeable that when the Lok Sabha was debating the motion of confidence in his government in May 1999, speaker after speaker from the Opposition ranks castigated the government for its failures on all fronts, but made it a point to shower praise on Vajpayee the individual. For another, many of the partners in the coalition led by Vajpayee, like Mamata Banerjee of the Trinamool Congress, pointedly observed that their support is to the leadership of Vajpayee, not to the BJP.

This non-partisan appreciation of his qualities, which few Indian political leaders have been able to command, has also been the reason for Vajpayee’s participation in, and on one occasion leadership of, Indian delegations to international fora. He was part of the Indian delegations to the United Nations General Assembly in 1988, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994 and 1996. He also led the Indian delegation to the UN Human Rights Commission meeting in Geneva in 1993 (when he was in the Opposition) and was widely acknowledged as having done a commendable job of forcefully presenting the Indian position on human rights.

As the External Affairs Minister in the Janata Party government of 1977, Vajpayee was credited with having taken a significant step towards normalisation of Sino–Indian relations by initiating a visit to the Chinese capital. During this period, he also created a minor flutter by insisting on addressing the UN General Assembly in Hindi, the first time anybody had done so.

Vajpayee has long been perceived as having views that are not always fully in tune with his party’s, even if he has been content with merely expressing a divergent view rather than aggressively countering the party’s stance. Invariably, such differences have seen Vajpayee espousing a moderate line against the more hardline Hindu nationalist positions of his party colleagues. The most striking example of this divergence between Vajpayee’s position and his party’s came immediately after the Babri masjid demolition. Vajpayee described

the incident as India's 'darkest hour', while the rest of the party was busy celebrating privately and publicly refusing to condemn the incident. It is another matter that with the passage of time the two positions have converged into what is now the official party position—the demolition was 'unfortunate' but the inevitable outcome of playing with the people's religious sentiments.

The differences Vajpayee has often expressed from the party's official position has contributed in great measure to large sections of people who do not agree with the BJP's ideology, and the media, describing him as 'the right man in the wrong party', an image that has helped immensely in winning him support from outside the BJP's spheres of influence. The same image, however, has also periodically resulted in those within his party and the larger Sangh Parivar viewing him with suspicion, or at least seeming to do so publicly. The BJP's general secretary, K.N. Govindacharya, for instance, started quite a controversy when he allegedly contemptuously dismissed Vajpayee as little more than the party's public 'mask' and as a leader of no consequence in the party organisation. There are many who argue that such apparent distinctions between Vajpayee's positions and those of other BJP leaders are no more than an elaborately played out charade scripted by the Sangh Parivar to appeal both to militant Hindus and more moderate elements. A conspiracy theory of this sort would normally have found no takers, but for the Sangh Parivar's well-established penchant for speaking in different voices.

However, despite all his perceived or real differences with the BJP's official stance, Vajpayee has been its most acceptable public face and no non-entity in the party organisation either. He led the BJS from 1968 to 1973 and into its merger with the Janata Party in 1977 and subsequently became the BJP's first president when the party was formed in 1980 with the BJS sections of the Janata Party breaking away. He has also been the undisputed choice of the party and its electoral partners for the post of Prime Minister since the 1996 elections.

Vajpayee himself has not only denied that he has any differences with the ideology and the philosophy of the RSS, he has categorically stated in an article published in *Panchajanya*, 'The single reason for

my long association with the RSS is that I like the sangh, I like its ideology and above all, I like that RSS attitude towards people, towards one another which is found only in the RSS.' Having elaborated on his first links with the RSS, which was then dominated in Gwalior by Maharashtrians, Vajpayee described how his own brother was changed after he joined the RSS and persuaded to give up his 'elitist' habit of cooking his own food and not eating the same fare offered to others in a camp.

Vajpayee's attitude towards Muslims as revealed in this article does not seem very different from the dominant view in the RSS.

[The] Congress has not correctly understood the Muslim problem. They continue to carry on their policy of appeasement. But to what effect? The Muslims of this country can be treated in three ways. One is *tiraskar* which means if they will not themselves change, leave them alone, reject them as out-compatriots. [The] second is *puraskar* which is appeasement, that is, bribe them to behave, which is being done by the Congress and others of their ilk. The third way is *parishkar*, meaning to change them, that is, restore them to the mainstream by providing them *samskaras* [a Sanskrit word whose meaning is a complex amalgam of culture, tradition and etiquette]. We want to change them by offering them the right *samskaras*....

While Vajpayee is clearly not implying that violence or force be used against Muslims, it is revealing that he too sees the Muslim 'problem' as one of a community that has to be provided the 'right *samskaras*'. On the Ayodhya issue, Vajpayee has in the same article stated:

We [meaning, the Hindus] did pull down the structure in Ayodhya. In fact, it was a reaction to the Muslim vote bank. We wanted to solve this problem through negotiation and legislation. But there was no *puraskar* for *burai* [no reward for an evil act]. We change *burai* also with *parishkar*. Now I think the Hindu society has been regenerated which was the prime task of the RSS. Earlier, Hindus used to bend before an invasion but not now. This change in Hindu society is worthy of welcome. So much change must have come with the new-found self-assertion. This is a question of self-preservation. If the Hindu society does not expand itself, it will face the crisis of survival....

Vajpayee is obviously a highly complex personality—one who can write poetry expressing empathy with the victims of the nuclear holocaust at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and yet spearhead the government's decision to go ahead with the nuclear tests in May 1998. It is said that as early as the 1950s, Vajpayee publicly said that one could live with half a piece of bread (*adha-roti*) but India must have its own atomic bomb to earn the respect the country deserves in the comity of nations.

It would, however, be incorrect to state that Vajpayee has never had a taste of controversy since he was initiated into public life while still a student by the senior RSS leader Balasaheb Deoras in the late 1930s. In fact, the controversy that has dogged him most over the last two decades pertains to his role in the Quit India Movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi against the British rulers in 1942. Life sketches sponsored by the Sangh Parivar and the BJP have invariably included a reference to Vajpayee being jailed during the Movement, without providing any further details. Vajpayee himself describes the incident rather blandly in his own article 'The Sangh is my Soul'. The third paragraph of the article ends, 'I also participated in the Quit India movement in 1942 and was jailed. I was then studying for my Intermediate examination. I was arrested from my native village Bateshwar in Agra district. I was then 16.' (This would imply that Vajpayee was born in 1926, but more of that later.) The unstated, but clearly intended, implication of all the references to Vajpayee's term in jail is that he indeed played a heroic role during the Quit India Movement, a major milestone in the history of India's freedom movement. Interestingly, a hagiography of Vajpayee written by two of his long-standing associates (including one who became a Union minister) makes no mention whatsoever of the Bateshwar episode or the Prime Minister's role in the Movement.

In *India under Atal Behari Vajpayee: The BJP Era*, C.P. Thakur and Devendra P. Sharma (UBS Publishers, 1999) have devoted a full chapter to detailing Vajpayee's career in politics. The chapter entitled 'Gwalior to New Delhi: A Short Distance But a Long Journey' goes into considerable detail about Vajpayee's childhood, his family background, his early education and his rise in the Sangh Parivar and the BJP. The authors are notably silent on Vajpayee's involvement,

if any, in the freedom movement. Since 1974, charges have been levelled from time to time by his political opponents that Vajpayee's testimony before a magistrate in his native village of Bateshwar, near Agra in Uttar Pradesh, on September 1, 1942 was, in fact, responsible for at least one 'freedom fighter', Liladhar Bajpai, being sentenced to five years' rigorous imprisonment. It is ironical to recall today that one of those who made this charge against him in 1989, the late P. Rangarajan Kumaramangalam, was later a prominent member of the BJP and Cabinet Minister in the second and third Vajpayee governments. Earlier, Kumaramangalam, as a Congress MP at the time, was a signatory to a letter by 52 MPs accusing Vajpayee of playing a 'nefarious role' in the Quit India Movement and suggesting that 'he implicated a number of freedom fighters to save his own skin'. In fact, the letter even insisted that Vajpayee has signed a confessional statement that was 'the only basis for sentencing a whole group of freedom fighters for long terms of imprisonment'.

On every occasion on which this charge has been raised since 1974 (when *Blitz* published an article on the topic), Vajpayee, his party, and the Sangh Parivar have responded by dismissing the allegations as totally baseless and even threatening to sue those who made the accusations. The controversy, however, refused to die down. Ultimately, in early 1988, the facts of the case were brought to light by a detailed investigation by a team of journalists for *Frontline* magazine and were confirmed by Vajpayee himself.

As is often the case, the truth lies somewhere in-between the two extreme positions taken by the supporters of the accused and the accusers. While it is true that Vajpayee's testimony was not used as evidence in court, it is also equally true that Vajpayee did sign a confessional statement absolving himself of any role in an incident that had taken place in September 1942 in which a government building at Bateshwar village had been damaged by a group opposed to British rule in India. In that statement, Vajpayee also named Liladhar Bajpai alias Kakua as one of those who led the mob that had damaged the building.

Clearly, therefore, while Vajpayee was not directly responsible for Liladhar Bajpai being sentenced to five years' rigorous imprisonment, he was also by his own admission not an active participant in the

Quit India Movement. That Vajpayee was arrested on the occasion was merely due to the fact that he, with his brother, was present in a crowd. In defence of his having named Liladhar Bajpai, Vajpayee has clarified that his confessional statement was recorded in Urdu, a language he cannot read, and it was not read out to him later. However, Vajpayee did confirm (in an interview with *Frontline* editor N. Ram) that he had indeed signed the statement. Liladhar Bajpai himself contended that though the confessional statement signed by Vajpayee was not used as evidence in court, it was a major factor in his being sentenced since the Vajpayee brothers were, unlike the rest of the village, educated and hence considered more dependable in their testimony by the police and the court. He also suggests that the case of the prosecution very closely mirrored the testimony of the Vajpayee brothers.

Another occasion on which Vajpayee created a bit of a flutter in political circles was when he described Indira Gandhi soon after the 1971 war with Pakistan as Durga, a reference to one of the most popular mother goddesses in the Hindu pantheon. Just a few years later, during the Emergency declared by Indira Gandhi in 1975, he was jailed as were most prominent Opposition leaders.

There is also a relatively trivial controversy surrounding Vajpayee's age. Official records say he was born on December 25, 1926. Vajpayee's own article, quoted earlier, bears this out. So too does the hagiography of Vajpayee written by Thakur and Sharma. However, his confessional statement of September 1, 1942 records his age as 20, by which logic he should have been born in 1922. In recent years, his supporters have taken to celebrating his birthday, Christmas Day, with great fanfare. Special supplements were brought out in leading national dailies on his '75th birthday' both in 1997 and in 1998. Interestingly, there were posters on Delhi's walls again in December 1999 announcing celebrations of the Prime Minister's 75th birthday, till newspapers reported that Vajpayee had decided not to celebrate his birthday as a gesture of solidarity with those being held hostage in a hijacked Indian Airlines aircraft at that time.

In the middle of 2000, Vajpayee's knees were operated on. Many felt that by then he had lost the metaphorical spring in his step. He seemed to be smiling less and his famous wit and oratory skills were



less in evidence. His critics claimed he had started resembling former Prime Minister Narasimha Rao who would often make a virtue out of inaction. To many, Vajpayee remained more than a bit of an enigma. The same man who described himself as a *swayamsevak* to a gathering of non-resident Indians at Staten Island, New York, would in his *Musings from Kumarakom* talk of the Ram Mandir problem as an issue of 'cultural nationalism' even as he asserted that the verdict of the courts would be respected in the case of the Ayodhya temple.

Vajpayee revelled in trying to be everything to everybody. He would seek to placate the hawks in the RSS by stating that the writing of history should not be one-sided. At the same time, he would project a moderate 'Nehruvian' image of himself as the archetypal liberal politician who would strive to attain a balance between conflicting viewpoints. While the media would often highlight the differences between the two 'camps' in the BJP, one led by Vajpayee and the other by Advani, Vajpayee himself would periodically attempt to paper over such alleged differences by suddenly dropping in, unannounced, to Advani's home for lunch. Advani too would from time to time assert that Vajpayee was his senior and leader and that there was no man he admired more. Nevertheless, the differences in their styles were apparent to all observers of the Indian political scene, Vajpayee's approach was indeed laid-back and conciliatory. He loved his good food and his jokes. Advani, on the other hand, was the man who was in charge of things, a 'modern-day Sardar Patel' who would not fight shy of controversy in stating his positions. His lifestyle, unlike that of Vajpayee, was spartan, almost puritanical. The two were a study in contrasts.

It is clear that Vajpayee has never quite adhered to the ascetic and austere image that many other leaders from the Sangh Parivar have sought to project. For instance, he makes no bones about the fact that he is a bachelor and not a *brahmachari* (celibate). He told a group of children in a jocular vein that he hadn't married because no woman was willing to marry him. His love for poetry, music and cinema has only added to his image as a charming and multi-dimensional personality.

It was reported that Vajpayee was not in favour of the 14th general elections being held roughly four months ahead of schedule in April-May 2004. He, however, had to go along with the rest of the BJP and

the NDA. It will perhaps never be known whether his reluctance to bring forward the election schedule was on account of him anticipating an electoral setback for the coalition or whether he was of the view that his government's 'India Shining' campaign had not really worked. He was graceful in accepting the defeat of the NDA and slipped quietly into the shoes of the 'elder statesman'.

### Lal Krishna Advani

Lal Krishna Advani also known as Lal Kishenchand Advani (born November 8, 1927, in Karachi, now in Pakistan) was president of the BJP for three separate terms, the last ending in December 2005. He is Leader of the Opposition in the 14th Lok Sabha. He was the second in command in the Vajpayee government, the rank of Deputy Prime Minister being added to his designation of Union Minister for Home Affairs. His political career began in the RSS in 1942. He was the Sangh's Karachi branch secretary. He is accused as an absconder in the Mohammed Ali Jinnah murder conspiracy case still registered in a Pakistani police file in Karachi, though the government in Islamabad has stated that no charges would be pressed. The case was lodged at Karachi's Jamshed Quarters police station, on September 10, 1947.

Till 1977, Advani maintained a somewhat a low public profile and was considered to be a largely 'organisational' leader. He often likes to refer to himself as a journalist. Advani came into the limelight when, like a number of other opposition political activists, he was detained under the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA) during the Emergency (June 1975–March 1977). He became a Union Minister for the first time in 1977 in the Morarji Desai government when he held the portfolio of Information & Broadcasting.

After 1984, when the BJP won only two seats in the Lok Sabha, Advani was credited with building the party in different parts of the country virtually from scratch. From 1970 till 1989, he was a member of the Rajya Sabha. In 1989 and again in 1991, he was elected to the Lok Sabha. In 1989–90, Advani turned the BJP into a significant force in Indian politics by undertaking a *rath yatra* (chariot tour) to mobilise public support for the building of a temple dedicated to Lord Rama at Ayodhya at the site where the Barbi mosque stood. After the

demolition of the mosque on December 6, 1992, a police FIR (first information report) was filed in which Advani was named amongst other leaders of the BJP and the RSS. They were accused of delivering 'inflammatory speeches to spread communal hatred'.

In his appearances before the Justice M S Liberhan Commission, a judicial body set up to investigate the events leading up to the demolition of the Babri mosque on December 6, 1992, Advani claimed that the demolition was the most agonising moment of his life. Advani who was present in Ayodhya on the day the Babri mosque was demolished, had left the site on that very day.

Advani has traditionally been known for his hardline views on the issues of terrorism and Pakistan. This image made it particularly surprising that while touring Pakistan in June 2005, he made apparently laudatory remarks about Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan that created a huge controversy in his own party. He became the first major Indian political leader to visit Jinnah's mausoleum and he wrote in the visitors' book:

There are many people who leave an irreversible stamp on history. But there are few who actually create history. *Qaed-e-Azam* Mohammed Ali Jinnah was one such rare individual. In his early years, leading luminary of freedom struggle Sarojini Naidu described Jinnah as an ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity. His address to the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan on August 11, 1947 is really a classic and a forceful espousal of a secular state in which every citizen would be free to follow his own religion. The State shall make no distinction between the citizens on the grounds of faith. My respectful homage to this great man.

Despite the controversy it created within the BJP and the larger Sangh Parivar, Advani refused to retract his comments on Jinnah. In fact, till as late as the end of 2006, he was still justifying his remarks. He told a television interviewer in December 2006 that his remarks on Jinnah were meant to assure Muslims in general and Pakistanis in particular that contrary to what the BJP's political opponents claim, his party was not against Muslims.

If that was indeed the purpose behind his remarks, Advani would seem to have at least partly succeeded. While the Pakistan government was cautious in its official response, *The News* of Pakistan in an editorial

said, 'His remarks have certainly given him a new look among the Pakistani people, who otherwise would reject him as a hardcore radical with nothing good to contribute to peace'. Others in Pakistan saw this as posturing on Advani's part to widen his appeal to the Indian masses to appear as a prime minister in waiting.

In the December 2006 interview, Advani was asked whether he had ambitions of becoming the Prime Minister of India. His reply was that he was the leader of the Opposition and the convention in Britain—from which India has borrowed much of its political structure—was that the person who led the Opposition was treated as a shadow Prime Minister. This observation by itself was unlikely to have created a storm, though it would have seemed to be a pointer towards Advani's ambitions. What created a controversy was media reports that Advani had said that while he had proposed Vajpayee's name as Prime Minister a decade earlier, he did not expect Vajpayee to return the favour to him. This was perceived as an expression of Advani's bitterness.

To be fair, this is questionable interpretation of what Advani actually said. The interviewer Bhupendra Chaubey of CNN-IBN had asked him, 'Many years back, you proposed the name of Atal Behari Vajpayee to be the Prime Minister. Are you expecting Mr Vajpayee to return the favour?' Advani replied, 'There is no question of anyone returning any favour of this kind. It is a question of assessment and I still think that it will depend a lot upon not only Atal Behari Vajpayee, but the whole party to decide who will be the Prime Minister.'

In March, 2006, following a bomb blast at a Hindu shrine at Varanasi, Advani decided to undertake another *yatra* which he called *Bharat Suraksha Yatra* or a journey to raise awareness about India's security. This campaign, in stark contrast to his earlier *rath yatra* 1989–90 to campaign for the building of a Ram temple at Ayodhya, turned out to be a damp squib. Over a period of more than a decade and a half, Advani had moved from being a leader who was virtually setting the country's political agenda to one who was struggling to retain his status even within his own party.

Within the BJP, Advani has always had a reputation of being widely-read and contrary to his public image as a Hindutva hawk, he is believed to be an agnostic of sorts in his personal life.

## Annexure

### Ayodhya Dispute

Ayodhya, a small town in eastern Uttar Pradesh, has been at the centre of a major controversy since the mid-1980s. A section of Hindus claims that a mosque (the Babri masjid) built in this town by a general of Babar, the first Mughal emperor, in the 16th century had been constructed by demolishing a temple to mark the birthplace of the mythical Lord Rama. For over half a century, ownership of the land on which the mosque existed has been disputed. Before the mid-1980s, few outside Ayodhya were aware of (or even bothered about) this dispute. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) or World Hindu Organisation started a campaign to build a temple where the disputed structure stood at Ayodhya in 1986. This campaign received a major fillip in 1989 when the BJP threw its weight behind the VHP's campaign and Advani undertook a *rath yatra* (a procession led by a 'chariot') across the country to popularise the demand for building a Ram temple to replace the Babri masjid. The dispute erupted on December 6, 1992, when a mob of Hindus chanting slogans, demolished the structure. Prime Minister Rao was the perfect picture of a helpless spectator as the official media provided a running commentary that afternoon of how the domes of the mosque were being reduced to rubble one by one. (Months later, Home Minister in Rao's government S.B. Chavan was to remark that all that the Prime Minister did that afternoon was watch television, a remark he later withdrew.) Vajpayee was not present at the site, but other BJP leaders Advani, Uma Bharti, and Sadhvi Rithambara among others, were. Communal riots ensued in different parts of India, particularly Mumbai and parts of Gujarat.

After December 1992, the Union government acquired the land around the site where the disputed structure had stood. The Supreme Court of India ordered the government to ensure that the status quo was maintained in the area and no fresh construction was allowed. Even as leaders of the VHP periodically hyped up a demand to construct a temple at the site where the demolished mosque had stood, it backed off from precipitating a direct confrontation with the authorities.

Towards the end of 2001, Vajpayee declared that he was confident the dispute could be resolved through negotiations between Hindu and Muslim organisations and that he was hopeful the settlement would be reached by March 2002. In January 2002, the VHP issued an 'ultimatum' that it would start constructing the temple on March 15 irrespective of whether the various disputes had been resolved by the government or the courts of law. Shortly thereafter, the Prime Minister announced that his attempts to resolve the issue through negotiations had failed and that it was now up to the courts to give their verdict.

The VHP steadily stepped up its aggressive posture as the campaign for the Uttar Pradesh elections drew to a close, leading most observers to conclude that the timing was more than a coincidence. After the UP election results and the communal violence in Gujarat, the VHP's posture became even more strident and it started asserting that it would install the foundation stone (*shila*) for the Ram temple in Ayodhya on March 15, come what may. Many of the BJP's allies within the NDA, including the numerically most significant TDP, expressed their strong disapproval of the VHP's stance and publicly called upon the government to ensure that law and order was maintained in Ayodhya.

Meanwhile, a Muslim petitioner from Delhi pleaded with the Supreme Court to prevent the *shila puja* (ceremony to consecrate the stone) at Ayodhya on March 15. With March 13 being set as the date for the court to deliver its verdict on this petition, the BJP's allies stepped up pressure on the government to ensure that the court's verdict was strictly implemented. At an all-party meeting Vajpayee assured those present that the government was committed to upholding the law and that it would strictly follow the directions of the apex court.

On March 13, the Supreme Court ordered that no religious activity of any sort should be allowed on the land acquired by the government in Ayodhya till further orders. While the order was widely welcomed by the Opposition in Parliament and by almost all the BJP's allies in the NDA, the Attorney General's (Soli Sorabjee's) pleadings while appearing in court on behalf of the Union government led to fresh controversy within the NDA and outside it. When asked for the

government's response to the petition, Sorabjee told the court that the Union government was of the view that a symbolic ceremony could be allowed under strict conditions to ensure that no untoward incidents took place. Several of the BJP's allies took exception to this position taken by Sorabjee and protested that they had not been consulted before formulating the government's position. These allies further argued that this position smacked of a 'soft' or 'conciliatory' attitude towards the VHP. The opposition too attacked the government, charging it with actively colluding with the VHP.

The government immediately started a damage limitation exercise. Several of its ministers appeared on television channels to 'clarify' that the stand taken by Sorabjee in court was not the government's, but his own. The following day, Vajpayee reiterated this point of view in Parliament and Sorabjee too was at pains to suggest that he had merely offered a legal opinion and not put forward the government's views on what ought to be done or not done on March 15. The Opposition dismissed the entire exercise as an absurd claim. The Trinamool Congress and the TDP publicly appeared to accept the explanation, although many of them said they still disapproved of Sorabjee's intervention in court.

Meanwhile, security in Ayodhya had been stepped up to unprecedented levels. Trains and bus services to the town had been suspended after the Gujarat riots and outsiders seeking to enter Ayodhya had to obtain special passes. Sensing that it would not be able to mobilise enough people in Ayodhya on March 15 to precipitate a confrontation with the administration, the VHP toned down its rhetoric and said it was prepared to settle for a symbolic *puja* outside the acquired land. On March 15, the government finally acceded to the VHP's demand that a symbolic *puja* be allowed in Ayodhya outside the land acquired by the government and that an official from the Prime Minister's office be present to accept the symbolic *shila* after the *puja* from Ramchandra Das Paramhansa, president of the Ramjanmabhoomi Nyas, a VHP front organisation set up for the specific purpose of constructing the Ram temple in Ayodhya.

While this strategy ensured that March 15 passed off peacefully, barring stray incidents of communal violence in Gujarat and some other parts of northern India, it led to fresh accusations from the

Opposition of the government having become party to the VHP's programme. Though the BJP's allies did not publicly support this position, there was definite unease among many of them at the manner in which the VHP seemed to be setting the agenda. The unease grew as the VHP announced that it would be initiating a campaign (*asthi yatra*) in which urns carrying the ashes of the victims of the Godhra carnage would be carried to various parts of the country to be immersed in different rivers. Once again, the BJP's allies joined the Opposition in protesting that this was calculated to whip up communal passions and should not be allowed. Soon thereafter, the VHP claimed that it had no intentions of organising any such procession.

The Ayodhya issue came to the fore again in February 2003, when the government moved a petition in the Supreme Court urging it to vacate its March 2002 order banning religious activity on the acquired land. Interestingly, this time round there was no pretence that this was not the official position of the government or that it was the Attorney General's 'personal opinion'. Nor was there any protest from the allies, unlike a year earlier. It is another matter that the Supreme Court dismissed the government's petition on March 31, 2003.

The BJP keeps raising the Ayodhya issue from time to time. As recently as December 2006, BJP president Rajnath Singh had stated that the law of the land would be changed to enable the construction of a Ram temple at the site where the Babri mosque had stood if the party wins a majority of seats in the Lok Sabha. Reports indicate that the so-called liberal faction within the BJP is of the view that the party should not rake up the Ayodhya issue, a view that is contrary to the position held by the RSS and the 'hardliners' in the party. Till September 2007, the M.S. Liberhan Commission had not submitted its report on the Babri Masjid demolition despite having been given 41 extensions of its term since it was appointed 10 days after the December 6, 1992 demolition. Anupam Gupta, who served as the commission's lawyer since 1999, spoke out against Justice Liberhan for not consulting him while writing the section on Advani's role in the demolition.



## Chapter 5

# Hindi Heartland: Asserting Caste Identities

Political parties with a base only in specific regions or states have been around for as long as India has been independent. Such parties would typically appeal to the narrow, parochial sentiments of the people of a particular region of the country or even of a specific section of people within that geographical area—emphasising regional over national loyalties and stressing affiliation to caste, religion and language. The omnibus label of ‘regional party’, however, could be misleading in many cases. It would be worthwhile to make a distinction between parties that consciously appeal to a regional identity and those that seek to appeal to people over a wider geographical area, but have in practice been unable to exert their influence beyond one or two states.

For instance, the DMK and the AIADMK are by definition not even seeking to appeal to voters in the north, east or west of the country, since these populaces would not qualify as ‘Dravidian’. In fact, these parties are apparently not even interested in extending their support base very much beyond the Tamil-speaking areas, which include Tamil Nadu, Pondicherry and a few pockets in neighbouring Karnataka and Kerala. The Samajwadi Party, on the other hand, appeals to a constituency that is largely caste-based (though, of late, it is trying to reach out beyond this constituency). The fact that support for the SP has remained, by and large, confined to Uttar Pradesh is not on account of the party’s unwillingness to spread its wings to other parts of the country, to states like Maharashtra for example. The same considerations hold good for the Rashtriya Janata Dal, which has been unable to find too many supporters outside Bihar, not for want of trying.

There are a number of examples of political parties that have defined themselves in terms of a particular region or ethnic group. In that sense, the term ‘regional’ is appropriate to describe a wide and diverse

range of political parties which would include the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh, the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) in Punjab, what was once the Tamil Maanila Congress (TMC) in Tamil Nadu, the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) in Assam and the Haryana Vikas Party (HVP) in Haryana. In another category would come parties like the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) in Orissa, the National Conference (NC) in Jammu & Kashmir, and the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal—all these parties apparently do not appeal to people belonging to a certain region but have, in fact, not even attempted to go beyond the particular state in which they originated. Then there are parties like the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) that—like the SP and the RJD—are often considered ‘regional’ but in fact would like to spread their support base across a number of states. Into this group would also fall the Shiv Sena (which is based mainly in Maharashtra) and the Nationalist Congress Party that broke away from the Indian National Congress in 1999 but had a presence mainly in Maharashtra and Meghalaya (thanks to the influence of two of its stalwarts, Sharad Pawar and P.A. Sangma) before it split in 2004.

The fact that some of these parties are by definition regional while others do not quite fit the tag is no coincidence. This distinction stems from the factors that have contributed to the emergence and growth of each of them. The Hindi heartland—in particular the states of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar—has witnessed the phenomenon of ‘Mandalisation’ since August 1990. The Mandal Commission had advocated reservation of 27 per cent of all government jobs for the OBCs. The decision to implement this recommendation sparked off a sharp polarisation along caste lines in many states in north India. Parties like the SP and the RJD (both of which did not exist at that time and were part of the undivided Janata Dal) have been the main beneficiaries of this polarisation, emerging as champions of the OBCs.

This was possible because while the two biggest national parties—the Congress and the BJP—did not overtly oppose the implementation of the Mandal Commission’s recommendations, restricting their official criticism to the manner in which V.P. Singh had attempted to implement the commission’s suggestions, it was hardly a secret that the bulk of the leadership of both the Congress and the BJP was unhappy with the decision. The violent protests by upper-caste students all over north India that followed the decision were widely

believed to have had the tacit support of both the Congress and the BJP. In this highly charged atmosphere, only parties that were willing to aggressively play the caste card could hope to win the loyalty of the OBCs. V. P. Singh's Janata Dal—of which the SP and the RJD are offshoots—was the only major political force that adopted such an aggressive posture.

The BSP too has, from its very inception, defined itself as a party of the dalits and other oppressed castes. Its origins lie in the All India Backward (SC, ST, OBC) and Minority Communities Employees' Federation (BAMCEF), an organisation of government employees led by the late Kanshi Ram when he was himself a government employee. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the BSP's vision is not confined to any specific state or region.

Many supporters of the BJP and the Congress often disparagingly dismiss the communist parties too as regional parties, pointing out that their influence is largely restricted to the states of West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura, though they may have enclaves of influence in various other states. This is not factually inaccurate, though the two communist parties have had their representatives elected to the legislatures of most states in India barring Gujarat and a few of the smaller states. Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to club the left even with parties like the SP or the RJD, which claim a national vision but are restricted to a couple of states. This is because, unlike the SP or the RJD, which are targeting specific caste or community groups, the left's appeal is not sectarian in nature.

Parties like the TDP and the AGP, in contrast to the caste-based formations of northern India, have emerged by exploiting the apprehensions of domination by Delhi. They are manifestations of what academics would refer to as sub-national aspirations. By the very nature of their sub-national character, they cannot afford to broaden their support base for fear of losing their core section of followers. The Dravidian parties may seem to fit into the category of caste-based formations. After all, their origins lie in the anti-Brahmin movements led by the Justice Party in British-ruled India. Yet, the fact is that the process of social churning that has been witnessed in north India since the 1990s had taken place in south India more than half a century earlier. From the 1960s, therefore, the Dravidian movement

has acquired an increasingly regional flavour rather than a caste identity. So much so that the unchallenged leader of the AIADMK J. Jayalithaa is herself a Brahmin. To that extent, the DMK and the AIADMK are more akin to the TDP or the AGP today than to the SP, the BSP or the RJD.

Like the regional parties, the left too has made an issue of the centralised and unitary nature of the Indian state and of the 'discrimination' faced by states ruled by it. The communist parties have repeatedly alleged that successive Union governments have starved states like West Bengal, Tripura and Kerala of funds for development for partisan political reasons. The left had till the 1980s also often taken a lead in organising conclaves of state governments to demand a more federal fiscal structure and a more de-centralised polity. (More on this in the chapter on the left.)

The supporters of the BJP and the Congress have often sought to portray the so-called regional parties as having narrow, partisan interests. The leaders of these parties have been described as 'myopic' individuals who have not been able to transcend the confines of their state. Thus, sections of the BJP and the Congress have argued that the interests of the country as a whole cannot be safe in the hands of leaders of these regional political formations. However, such a coloured view cannot be substantiated, as such leaders have time and again displayed a capacity to look at issues from a wide perspective. On the contrary, it is the failure of the 'national' political parties to address the aspirations of large sections of the population that has contributed in no small measure to the emergence and growth of regional parties. The fact that Indira Gandhi, sitting in New Delhi, whimsically and contemptuously changed successive Chief Ministers in Andhra Pradesh was taken advantage of by N.T. Rama Rao, founder of the TDP. He was able to successfully use injured 'Telugu pride' to such effect that the TDP swept the first state assembly election it ever contested.

More importantly, the decline in the fortunes of the Congress and the inability of the BJP or the communist parties to fill the vacuum created by this decline resulted in the growing influence of smaller parties. It also meant that no single party was any longer able to win a majority in the Lok Sabha. As a result, the smaller parties have often

been able to exert an influence on the government disproportionate to their numerical strength. The clout that the AIADMK led by Jayalalithaa wielded in the second Vajpayee government and the manner in which the TDP led by Chandrababu Naidu was often able to have its way with—some would say arm-twist—the third Vajpayee government are clinching evidence of the growing importance of smaller parties in national politics.

### **The Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party: Changing Caste Arithmetic in Uttar Pradesh**

The course of politics in Uttar Pradesh (UP) in the last decade to an extent represents a microcosm of what is happening in Indian politics as a whole. Arguably, no other state has seen as rapid a fragmentation of the society and the polity as UP has since the beginning of the 1990s. Understandably, the fragmentation in India's largest state, accounting for almost a sixth of the country's population, has not been on linguistic or ethnic lines, but along the lines of caste and community. This polarisation of UP society along caste lines has resulted in the rise of two strong regional parties, the BSP and the SP, both of which have enjoyed power in the state, in alliance with each other and separately with the support of other parties. At the same time, the polarisation has led to the marginalisation in UP of the once-powerful Congress, which, despite a modest resurgence in the 1999 Parliamentary elections, has been relegated to an also-ran in the politics of the state. The BJP, on the other hand, through astute management of caste equations, had become the strongest of all the parties in the state, that is, till the results of the assembly elections of February 2002, the Lok Sabha polls of 2004 and finally the assembly elections of April–May 2007 gave it a series of severe jolts. In each of these elections, the BJP finished third, behind the SP and the BSP and with each passing election, it slipped further.

The process of social churning in UP is far from over. Caste equations and correlations are fast changing and how they move will remain the key determinant of the course of politics in the state in the foreseeable future. It is not surprising therefore, that the 1990s in UP saw political alliances that proved extremely shortlived and fragile.

A single-party majority was not thrown up in the state since 1991, that is, until the stunning victory of the BSP in 2007, when the party won 206 of the 402 seats that polled (voting in one constituency was countermanded due to the death of a candidate).

The BSP's win has the potential to completely change the course of politics in UP. Some commentators are even suggesting that it could usher in a bipolar polity in the state, but the two poles would be the BSP and the SP, with the Congress and BJP getting progressively weaker despite the fact that prominent leaders of both parties (including Rahul Gandhi, Sonia's son in his late-30s) had conducted extensive campaigns to canvass support for party candidates. The prognosis that the two parties that would continue to matter in UP politics are the BSP and the SP seems quite plausible, especially since the SP increased its vote share in the 2007 assembly elections marginally (by less than one percentage point) though the number of seats won by the party declined dramatically from 143 to 97. The BSP, on the other hand, increased its tally in the assembly from 98 to 206 with its vote share going up by 7.4 per cent.

The rapid rise of overtly caste-based parties in UP was clearly precipitated by the decision of V.P. Singh's government to implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission in 1990. While this led to an immediate and violent backlash among the upper castes in the state, as in some others, it also helped to a large extent in consolidating the OBCs, who are estimated to account for over a third of the state's population. Simultaneously, the process of dalit consolidation behind the BSP also gathered steam. Though neither the OBCs nor the dalits completely switched allegiances to any one party, the magnitude of the consolidation of these two vote banks was sufficient to create new viable political forces that were able to play a major role in the politics of UP.

At the time of the state assembly elections in 1993 though, a series of political developments including some emanating from the national capital had repercussions in UP. They had left the Janata Dal in no position to capitalise on this consolidation. On the contrary, it was the Samajwadi Party, a breakaway group of the Janata Dal, which cashed in on the benefits of the Mandal programme. The events that led to this denouement began with the BJP's *rath yatra* to Ayodhya in 1990, as part of an agitation to 'grab' the Babri masjid from the

Muslims and build a temple dedicated to Lord Rama. This was really part of a calculated strategy to create a communal polarisation across the country and in UP in particular. The BJP believed, rightly as subsequent events proved, that such a polarisation would work to its advantage in electoral politics.

Mulayam Singh Yadav, a prominent leader, who was then the Janata Dal Chief Minister of UP, cracked down on the agitators ruthlessly. While this led to his being accused of running a police state and being derogatorily dubbed 'mullah Mulayam' by the BJP, it also ensured that he won the loyalty of the Muslims who, till that stage, had by and large been voting for the Congress. This switch on the part of the Muslim community was to prove crucial in determining the new equations in UP. Yadav also had the support of the bulk of his community, the Yadavs, who account for about 10 per cent of the state's population. The Mandal programme also meant that the Janata Dal had the support of substantial sections of other OBC castes. However, some of the most backward castes among the OBCs were not too enamoured of the Mandal plank, convinced as they were that it would yield benefits only to the relatively advantaged sections among the OBCs. This conviction and the successful mobilisation of these sections by the BJP through the emotive Ram temple issue also won the BJP the support of a major chunk of the OBCs.

Despite this, however, the Janata Dal at this stage could reasonably hope to command over a third of the popular vote in the state, with almost the entire Muslim community and the bulk of the OBCs as also a section of the dalits backing it. In a four-cornered fight with the BJP, the Congress and the BSP, it should have been sufficient to bring it back to power. This was, however, not to happen. When V.P. Singh's government fell in November 1990 within a year of coming to power, the Janata Dal itself split. While in most other parts of the country the bulk of the Janata Dal remained in the parent party, in UP a substantial chunk, led by Yadav, joined the breakaway Samajwadi Janata Party headed by Chandra Shekhar, who replaced V.P. Singh as Prime Minister with the support of the Congress. The only major leader of the Janata Dal in UP who remained with the parent party was Ajit Singh, the son of former Prime Minister Charan Singh, who was the unquestioned leader of the Jats of western UP and Haryana in his time. While the US-educated Ajit Singh, who had

worked in an American computer firm before taking to politics, was not a patch on his father as a political leader, old loyalties meant that the Jats, a powerful peasant community in the grain bowl of western UP, continued to support the Janata Dal.

The split in the Janata Dal meant that Yadav's government, which was always in a minority, now became even more precariously perched, entirely dependent on Congress support for its survival. Since the Congress was supporting the SJP government in New Delhi, it also extended its support to the government in UP. Soon after the Congress withdrew support to the Chandra Shekhar government in March 1991, however, the clamour to pull down Yadav's government grew within the upper caste dominated Congress in UP. This was partly triggered by the feeling that Yadav's aggressive championing of the OBC cause could alienate upper caste supporters of the Congress, who could consider the BJP a better option, and partly by the fear that Yadav's continuing in power could further cement his already strong roots among the Muslim community. The Congress' central leadership, with Prime Minister Narasimha Rao at the helm, resisted such pressures for some time, but ultimately succumbed, precipitating mid-term elections to the assembly in 1991.

As was to be expected, the vertical split in the Janata Dal's support base ensured an easy victory for the BJP, which won 221 seats in the 425-member assembly. Apart from the emotive appeal of the Ram temple issue and the split in the Janata Dal vote, another key factor in the BJP's win was its projection of Kalyan Singh, a leader who belonged to the Lodh community (part of the OBCs), as the party's Chief Ministerial candidate. For the first time, the BJP, a party that had traditionally been dominated by the upper castes, was projecting someone from an intermediate caste as its main leader. This helped the BJP win over a sizeable section of non-Yadav OBC votes, in particular those of the Lodhs and Kurmis, who, like the Yadavs, are among the relatively better-off sections of the OBCs with many among them being middle peasants. As was to happen later in neighbouring Bihar, the attempt by Yadav leaders to monopolise the benefits of the Mandal platform alienated other sections of the relatively powerful among the OBCs. As later in Bihar, so also in UP in 1991, this rift within the ranks of the OBCs worked to the advantage of the BJP.



The BJP government in UP, however, lasted just over a year, before being dismissed (along with three other BJP-led state governments) by the Union government in December 1992 for having aided and abetted the demolition of the Babri masjid. There followed a nearly year-long spell of President's rule before fresh elections to the UP state assembly were held in November 1993.

By this time, Mulayam Singh Yadav had floated his own party, the Samajwadi Party, though he continued to have an alliance with Chandra Shekhar's BJP. Political commentators writing before the elections foresaw an easy victory for the BJP despite the tie-up between the SP and the BSP. This was largely based on the assumption that the old Janata Dal base would still be vertically split between the parent party and the SP. As it turned out, this did not happen. Yadav's credentials among the Muslims and in his own community stood him in good stead. The SP-BSP alliance and the BJP emerged as the largest groups with 176 members each in the 425-member state assembly, though short of a majority by about 37 seats. The Janata Dal managed to win just 27 seats and the Congress a mere 29 seats, by far the lowest number of MLAs it had ever had in the UP assembly. Given the composition of the assembly, both the Janata Dal and the Congress, as also the four MLAs from the left parties, had little choice but to support a Yadav-led SP-BSP government to keep the BJP out of power. The change in the vote shares of the various parties and groups in these elections was a clear indicator of the changing patterns in UP politics. While the Congress lost about 2.4 per cent of the vote from the 1991 elections, the BJP and the BSP gained about 2 per cent each. The major loser was the Janata Dal, whose share of the vote dropped from 18.8 per cent in 1991 to 12.2 per cent in 1993, most of this loss being picked up by the SP, which, in its earlier incarnation, had won 12.5 per cent of the votes in 1991, but now managed 18 per cent.

The violent incidents inside the state assembly on the first day that it met were later seen as symbolic of the new-found confidence among sections that had traditionally been at the lower rungs of the social hierarchy. The predictable jibes between the BJP MLAs on the one hand, and the SP-BSP MLAs on the other, soon degenerated into ugly brawls in which microphone stands were uprooted from their tables

and used as weapons, while paperweights were used as missiles. Several MLAs, most of them from the BJP, were injured in the fracas and were taken to hospitals for first aid. Scenes of BJP MLAs crouching behind the assembly benches while their SP–BSP counterparts attacked were seen on national television that night and have remained imprinted in the memories of those who saw the episode as a powerful symbol of changing caste equations in the state. Even those who interpreted the unruly scenes in the UP assembly as the beginning of the state descending into a phase of anarchy, chaos and criminalisation of politics, reluctantly agreed that the days of upper-caste domination of the state's politics were on the way out, if not over.

The SP-BSP alliance, though heralded as the first real consolidation of the oppressed sections of UP society, was beset with internal contradictions from its very inception. With the benefit of hindsight, it can be argued that the alliance never had the potential for longevity given the ground realities of caste equations in UP. While the BSP's support base was almost entirely confined to the dalits (and in particular to the Jatavs or Chamars, who were traditionally in occupations connected with leather and hides), the SP's stronghold was among the relatively affluent sections of the OBCs, particularly the Yadavs. The Yadavs, thanks to tenancy reforms ushered in by Congress governments since independence, had become a prominent land-owning community, like many of the other relatively prosperous OBC communities—the Kurmis, the Lodhs and the Koeris, to name a few. The bulk of the dalits in the rural areas, on the other hand, were agricultural labourers with little or, more often, no land. It was hardly surprising, therefore, that there should be a fierce hostility between these two communities, which were constantly pitted against each other in real life. The alliance between the SP and the BSP was, to that extent, an attempt to impose from above a coalescing of forces that were inherently opposed to each other and had conflicting interests.

The bickering between these two alliance partners continued, but remained within manageable proportions for the best part of the next year-and-a-half. The BSP's two most prominent leaders, Kanshi Ram and Mayawati, throughout this period used public platforms to drive home the point that while Yadav was the Chief Minister

and commanded the support of a larger number of MLAs than their party, he would ignore the BSP's strength at his own peril. Despite these tensions, however, Yadav used his tenure as CM to further buttress his claims of being the champion of the OBCs in the state. One of the key instruments used was his decision in 2000 to extend the reservation for OBCs in government jobs to the hill districts of the state, now Uttarakhand.

These districts of western UP had for long witnessed a movement for a separate state—proposed to be called Uttarakhand—and the attempt to foist OBC reservations in an area which had virtually no OBC population added fuel to the fire. Of all the districts of what was then UP, the territory of the proposed Uttarakhand was the most upper-caste dominated, with Brahmins and Rajputs constituting the majority of the population. While the dalits too had a significant presence, though less than in the plains, the OBCs were conspicuous by their absence. The attempt to introduce reservations in these areas was, therefore, viewed as just another instance of people from the plains trying to exploit the hill folk. The Uttarakhand agitation visibly gained impetus and a call was made for a mass rally in Delhi to press for the demand for a separate state and to protest against the reservation policy.

The state administration decided to do its best to prevent the agitators from reaching Delhi, and on October 2, 1994, the anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi's birth, busloads of Uttarakhand supporters were stopped on their way to Delhi and brutally beaten by the police near Muzzafarnagar in the plains. Some of the women in the group were allegedly raped by the policemen. While this incident shocked the country and gave the Uttarakhand movement a profile that it did not have nationally till that stage, political observers also saw it as a cynical ploy by Yadav to gain support among the OBCs in the plains at the expense of unpopularity in an area of the state in which he had no political stake.

The period of Yadav's government was also characterised by deep rooted suspicion within the BSP that he was trying to engineer a split in the BSP's ranks, particularly among the Muslim and non-dalit MLAs of the party, to further consolidate his position. The apprehension, as later events proved, was not entirely misplaced.

Matters came to a head in the elections to the panchayats and zila parishads held in May 1995.

In these elections, the SP was seen as having used muscle power not just to defeat the BJP and Congress candidates, but also BSP candidates in several areas. Many instances of SP workers voting for Janata Dal candidates to defeat BSP aspirants were witnessed in the state. This proved the proverbial last straw for the BSP, which was already finding it difficult to justify the alliance among its cadre and support base, which felt that Yadav's tenure as Chief Minister had only further emboldened their Yadav oppressors in the rural areas. The BSP withdrew its ministers and its support from the Mulayam Singh Yadav government in June 1995, with the BJP's Murli Manohar Joshi, who later became the party's President and a Union Cabinet Minister, actively egging the BSP on to part ways with Yadav.

On June 2, 1995, the day after the BSP withdrew support to Yadav's government, the state guest-house in Lucknow was witness to scenes that were testimony to all the acrimony between the erstwhile partners, the SP and the BSP. Thousands of SP activists patrolled the streets outside the guest house where Mayawati was staying at the time, and virtually kept her under house arrest while Yadav and his lieutenants worked on weaning away some of the BSP's legislators to ensure that his government would survive. Sensing an opportunity to build ties with the BSP, the BJP 'rescued' Mayawati from the guest house. Once out, Mayawati insisted that the SP activists had been sent specifically to physically eliminate her, while Mulayam protested that they had merely been 'protecting' her from those who might be incensed at the BSP's 'betrayal'. Even ignoring these exaggerated claims, there is no denying the fact that the fateful day has left as indelible a mark on UP politics as the violence in the UP assembly the first time it met during the SP-BSP government's tenure. Ever since that day, the SP and the BSP have been sworn enemies. The BSP has since then fought an election in alliance with the Congress, it has formed governments with the help of the BJP, but it has refused to have anything to do with the SP.

Despite the rift between the SP and the BSP, over the second half of the 1990s and the first couple of years of the new millennium, both parties have managed to consolidate their electoral base in UP,

relegating the BJP and the Congress to third and fourth positions respectively. Interestingly, while the BSP used its brief stints in power to great effect in its strategy to woo new sections to its fold, the SP thrived despite having been out of power in the state throughout this period.

The BSP has made no bones about the fact that it has no compunctions about aligning with anybody in its attempts to come to power. It has, in the last decade, allied with the SP, the Congress and the BJP at different points of time in Uttar Pradesh. On none of these occasions has there been any attempt to justify the alliance on ideological grounds. As far as the BSP is concerned, all of these parties are *manuvadi* (which can be loosely translated as serving the upper castes) and there is fundamentally no difference between them. The BSP states quite clearly that it merely uses these *manuvadi* parties to further the interests of the dalits. In this sense, the BSP is quite unique in Indian politics. No other party is as brazenly contemptuous of the need to cover up opportunism with an ideological fig leaf.

The BSP is also unique in that Mayawati has never denied the fact that she asks those who wish to become party candidates (or ticket-seekers) to pay large sums of money before their cases are even considered. This has been highlighted quite a bit in recent years in the mainstream media. Video recordings of meetings of BSP leaders where Mayawati is shown asking prospective candidates to contribute to party coffers were widely circulated among journalists by SP representatives. When confronted with such evidence, Mayawati said she found nothing unusual about the fact that as the leader of a political party, she was raising funds for the BSP. All parties raise funds in a similar manner, she argued. A criminal case against her for allegedly acquiring assets disproportionate to known sources of income is pending. But these allegations do not appear to have made any dent whatsoever on the popularity of the BSP or its leader. On the contrary, she appears to have become even more popular and not only among the dalits who comprise roughly a fifth of the population of UP. The BSP is perhaps also the only party to publicly favour unstable governments. Mayawati and Kanshi Ram said several times that they preferred a *majboor sarkar* (a dependent government) to a *mazboot sarkar* (a strong and stable government) in New Delhi. Their

rationale was fairly simple, only a government dependent on them for survival would be forced to listen to the voice of the dalits; one that was stable would ignore them as most governments have done. Stable governments, the argument went, were in the interests of the elite and those in favour of the status quo, not those who wished to change society for the better.

While Mayawati's first three stints in power in Uttar Pradesh were characterised by an imperious style that antagonised her coalition partners and large sections of the state's bureaucracy, apart from her political opponents, she does seem to have been successful in using power to consolidate the BSP's vote bank among the dalits and thereafter expanded it to include substantial sections of the upper castes (in particular the Brahmins and Banias) and the Muslims and a relatively smaller section of the OBCs. The mainstream English—and vernacular—media have built a stereotype of Mayawati as a whimsical, crude, crass, domineering Chief Minister who throws her weight around and terrorises anybody who dares to oppose her. Interestingly, these same attributes are seen to be her strengths by her supporters (see profile of Mayawati later in the chapter). But for the terror she evokes in the state administration, her supporters argue, the upper-caste dominated bureaucracy would have remained unsympathetic and callous towards the dalits. These supporters are quick to cite instances of the difference her presence has made to their lives.

Said one dalit at a village near Hapur in western UP to one of the authors in 1999:

In the old days, if we went to the police station to complain about our women being molested by some upper-caste males, not only would no case be registered, the officer-in-charge would probably abuse us and perhaps even beat us up, accusing us of bringing false charges against respectable citizens. We would not even be allowed to sit on the bench in the police station, we would have to squat on the floor. After *behen* [sister] Mayawati came to power, that has changed. The police will now register a case, even if nothing much happens thereafter. We are at least treated with respect. The policeman knows that if word reaches Mayawati that he has ill-treated dalits or refused to register their complaints, there'll be hell to pay.

Unlike most other parties in coalition situations, the BSP has also shown that it is quite willing to antagonise even sections that support its partners in the alliance. The rationale seems to be that the BSP's need is less than the partner's need to keep the coalition going. This was true of the BSP's alliance with the SP, in which Kanshi Ram and Mayawati were not afraid of publicly and repeatedly proclaiming the SP's dependence on them and threatening to pull down Mulayam Singh Yadav's government if he did not heed their word. It was also true of the BSP's alliances with the BJP on more than one occasion. The BSP seemed to take the attitude that it would pursue its agenda and if the partner did not like some elements of the agenda, so be it.

An episode that most clearly illustrated this attitude was the way in which Mayawati confronted Raja Bhaiyya in 2003. She was well aware that large sections of the BJP, which was supporting her government, were against his arrest and his being charged under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA). However, she was also aware that the BJP central leadership would do its best to prevent the disgruntled BJP MLAs from destabilising her government. Many others in her position might not have thought the gamble worthwhile, but she did. The arrest of Raja Bhaiyya triggered off a reaction that did, for some time, threaten the survival of Mayawati's government, but she had gambled right. The BJP's top leadership, including Vajpayee and Advani intervened to ensure that the dissident MLAs fell in line.

Unlike the BSP, the SP made a virtue of the necessity of remaining in Opposition for almost seven years from 1995. While the BJP was in power in the state, it positioned itself as the only party that had the intent and the strength to present a credible opposition. The Congress was evidently too weak to play this role and the SP was keen to drive home the point, particularly among Muslims, that the BSP could not be depended upon to oppose the BJP since it had in the past had an alliance with that party. This campaign does seem to have ensured that the bulk of the Muslims of UP have remained loyal to the SP, though Muslims in specific constituencies have voted for the Congress or the BSP, where these parties have been perceived as best placed to defeat the BJP.

When Kalyan Singh was expelled from the BJP, the SP promptly took up cudgels on his behalf and even had a tacit understanding with

him during the February 2002 assembly elections. This was despite the fact that Kalyan Singh was one of those accused of conspiring to demolish the Babri masjid at a time when he was the Chief Minister. One of the factors that ultimately led to Kalyan Singh's expulsion from the BJP was the fact that he had publicly accused Vajpayee of having 'cheated' his supporters by promising to build a Ram temple if the BJP came to power and then having forgotten about the promise. Logically, one would expect that Kalyan's projecting himself as the real Ram *bhakt* (devotee) while Yadav was seen as the strongest opponent of the Ram temple agitation led by the Sangh Parivar should have made it impossible for them to make common cause. Yet, it was widely acknowledged that Kalyan Singh's Rashtriya Kranti Party and the SP had an implicit electoral understanding. Both sides, understandably, preferred to play up their OBC identity rather than focus on their respective positions on the Ayodhya mandir-masjid (temple versus mosque) controversy. (As already mentioned, Kalyan Singh later returned to the BJP's fold.)

After the 2002 assembly elections, with the BJP in decline in UP, the SP switched tack to portray itself as the only credible opposition to the BSP and Mayawati. In the Raja Bhaiyya incident, for instance, the SP was quick to cash in on the disillusionment with the BJP among the Thakurs. Amar Singh, the SP's general secretary, who is himself a Thakur, was projected as a Thakur *kulbhushan* (an ornament of the Thakur or Rajput clan) at a public rally organised the members of his caste. The message was loud and clear, Rajputs had been loyal to the BJP for close to a decade, but had been badly let down by the party. It was time they switched allegiance to the SP.

Dramatic events in August 2003 led to the ouster of Mayawati and to Mulayam Singh Yadav being sworn in as Chief Minister for the third time in his political career. There was hardly any indication of the impending changes when Mayawati hinted to the media on August 24 that she would give them 'spicy news' the next day, when the BSP was scheduled to hold a public rally in Lucknow. The papers the next morning were rife with speculation that the BSP leader might be preparing for a break with the BJP and for a snap poll in the state. The speculation was not misplaced. On August 25, Mayawati held a cabinet meeting barely an hour before the rally in which—she



later claimed—it was decided that the government would recommend dissolution of the assembly and the holding of fresh elections. The BJP disputed her claim.

The provocation for this decision came from a standoff between Mayawati and the BJP on the Taj corridor issue that had been brewing for a couple of months. What had transpired was that work on a project to develop a commercial corridor near the Taj Mahal had begun without obtaining the necessary approval of particular departments of the Union government—these included the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Environment and Forests. The matter came to light after media reports highlighted how the area around the Taj—declared as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO—was going to be disfigured. A public interest petition was also lodged. Subsequently, the Union government clarified that it had not sanctioned the project and sought the state government’s explanation on who was responsible for approving the commencement of work on such a project. Mayawati flatly denied that she had approved the project and, in fact, called for the resignation of Jagmohan, Union Minister for Culture and Tourism.

What was till that stage a minor fracas between coalition partners, spun out of control after the Supreme Court ordered the CBI to inquire into who was responsible for sanctioning the project. Mayawati was humiliated when forced by the BJP to withdraw her demand for Jagmohan’s resignation. The CBI then started interrogating various officials in the UP government to find out the truth. What is significant is that Mayawati decided to part ways with the BJP a day after the CBI interrogated her confidante, the state’s Environment Minister Nazimuddin Siddiqui.

After the BJP-BSP alliance broke, both sides freely traded charges against each other. Mayawati accused the BJP of putting pressure on her to tinker with the legal cases on the Babri masjid demolition in which Advani, Joshi and Uma Bharti, among others, had been named as accused. BJP loyalists on the other hand claimed that Mayawati was on the defensive because the CBI investigation would ultimately rest at her doorstep.

While there was a dispute between the BJP and the BSP about whether Mayawati had first recommended dissolution of the assembly or whether the BJP had withdrawn its support to the BSP, the fact is

that the BJP Parliamentary Board met in New Delhi on August 27 and decided that the party would play the role of opposition in the state. On August 28, UP Governor Vishnu Kant Shastri formally asked Mulayam Singh Yadav to present him with a list of MLAs who would support his claim for becoming the Chief Minister. The SP provided the governor with a list of 205 out of 405 MLAs, including MLAs belonging to the Congress, the RLD, Kalyan Singh's RKP and sundry small parties (including the ABCD, or the Akhil Bharatiya Congress Dal). Interestingly, the list also included 14 MLAs from the BSP. The list was enough to convince Shastri that Yadav should be invited to form a government, though the actual trial of strength would take place on the floor of the assembly two weeks later.

What went on behind the scenes after Mayawati's dramatic announcement that she had sought the dissolution of the assembly highlighted quite clearly how desperate the BJP's position in UP had become. It was quite apparent that the BJP did not under any circumstances want an immediate election in UP. The only way of avoiding an election was to allow the SP to form a government. The BJP, therefore, let it be known that it would not try and prevent Yadav from forming the government in Lucknow. This was quite a remarkable turnaround for a party that had repeatedly aligned itself with the BSP in the past for the sole reason of ensuring that the SP could not form a government in the state.

What had changed in 2003? For starters, the BJP's rank and file—and a substantial section of its upper-caste leadership—had realised that the alliance with the BSP was steadily eroding the party's support base. At the same time, it needed time for the 'taint' of its association with the BSP to be washed away from public memory before any elections. An SP government in Lucknow, therefore, suited the party admirably. It would, the BJP hoped, give the party some breathing space and hopefully ensure that any anti-incumbency sentiment would work against the SP rather than the BJP because of its association with the BSP. Finally, with an SP government, the BJP could hope to turn the political battle in the state into one between itself and the SP, pushing the BSP off centrestage.

This was important for the BJP because, over the last decade, the BSP and the SP had, willy-nilly—or perhaps deliberately—emerged

as the two parties with the sharpest contradictions in UP politics. In the process of fighting their battles, neither set too much store by ideological niceties. But the fact that they managed to dictate the terms of political confrontations in the state meant that first the Congress and then increasingly the BJP were getting marginalised in India's most populous state.

Interestingly, the growing marginalisation of the two 'national' parties has meant that both the SP and the BSP are now attempting to expand beyond their sectarian vote banks and reach out to new sections. Perhaps this is because of the realisation that if the BJP and the Congress do get marginalised, it will no longer be possible for them to win elections with just the 25–30 per cent vote shares they have historically had, which was enough in a three or four-cornered contest. The manner in which the two parties have sought to expand their base has, however, been different. The BSP has, in a turnaround that would have seemed almost unthinkable just a few years ago, actively wooed sections of the upper castes like the Brahmins, assuring them that her party was not hostile to them or their interests. A party that had once raised slogans like '*tilak, tarazu aur talwar, inko maaro joote chaar*' (loosely translated as give the boot to the mark on the forehead—symbolising Brahmins—the weighing scales—symbolising the Baniyas or traders—and the sword—symbolising the Rajputs, the so-called warrior caste) now started talking of having nothing against any community or caste. Mayawati specifically organised meetings of Brahmins and Baniyas in various parts of the state to drive home the point that she had nothing against these communities.

Mulayam's attempts at expanding his support base were less blatantly caste-based. Having the advantage of being in power in the state, he tried to reposition the SP, as the party that had a new vision for UP, one that would transform the state beyond recognition. Mulayam's right-hand man in the SP, Amar Singh (who comes from a business family in Kolkata) spearheaded the effort to woo industrialists from different parts of the country, including the head of the Mumbai-based Anil Ambani group. Amar Singh's proximity to the younger Ambani sibling as well as to a UP-based businessman Subroto Roy, who heads the Sahara group that has interests in para-banking, real estate, media and aviation, was used to good effect. Both

groups announced a series of mega projects in the state, including what is claimed to be Asia's largest gas-based power plant and a massive township. Ironically, these projects also became the source of controversy, with allegations that the state government was giving away land to industrialists close to the Chief Minister and Amar Singh at throwaway prices. Embarrassingly for Mulayam, the protests were led not by the BJP or the BSP, but by his former leader, V.P. Singh, and a rebel MP from his own party, film star Raj Babbar. The CPI too was part of the protests.

An attempt by Mulayam to widen the SP's support base was the state government's '*kanya vidya dhan yojana*' or a scheme to provide a grant of Rs 20,000 to girl students from 'poor' families who had completed their high school (or cleared the intermediate examination) to enable them to study further. Not only did this programme become popular, it enabled the SP to woo women voters in the state. As Chief Minister, Mulayam personally supervised the handing over of cheques to the beneficiaries of the programme. Amar Singh and Mulayam are also particularly close to Amitabh Bachchan (arguably India's most popular film actor and a stalwart of the Mumbai cinema industry) and his equally well-known wife Jaya and their son Abhishek. Not only has this led to Jaya becoming an SP member of the Rajya Sabha, Amitabh also starred in a series of advertisements for the party, designed to project the state government's programmes of industrialising and modernising Uttar Pradesh.

Even as the SP attempted to widen its appeal, its critics pointed out that it had become increasingly desperate about retaining the support of the Muslims and in the process encouraged fundamentalist elements from within the community. One party bigwig based in Maharashtra (Rajya Sabha member Abu Asim Azmi) was accused of having close connections with Islamic fundamentalists and was arrested for allegedly making 'anti-national' remarks. A minister in Mulayam's government in UP, Haji Mohammad Yaqoob, created quite a stir by making a public announcement that he would pay Rs 51 crore to anybody who would behead the Danish cartoonist who drew offensive cartoons of Prophet Mohammad. Another incident that contributed to the perception that the SP was pandering to communal sentiments was a riot that broke out in Mau in eastern UP in October 2005. While accounts of what caused the riots and who was

responsible for the mayhem continuing for days vary, independent MLA Mukhtar Ansari—seen as a strongman of the region and a leader close to the SP—was portrayed by much of the media as one of the key instigators.

In the run-up to the April–May 2007 assembly elections, Mulayam’s coalition partners started deserting him. The first was the Ajit Singh-led RLD followed by the Congress. In February 2007, the Supreme Court ruled that 13 out of the 37 MLAs who had been elected as BSP candidates and who had ‘defected’ from the party in four batches to lend their support to the Mulayam Singh government in the third quarter of 2003 were indeed defectors and disqualified them. (The 37 MLAs comprised more than one-third of the 98 MLAs who had been elected as BSP candidates.) The court directed the assembly speaker to decide the fate of the remaining 24 MLAs. At the time Mulayam Singh became UP Chief Minister in August 2003, it had been suggested that there was a tacit understanding between him and the BJP not to rock each other’s boats in the interest of some political stability since neither the SP nor the BJP was keen on another round of elections. As part of this so-called ‘understanding’, Mulayam Singh agreed to let Kesri Nath Tripathi continue as speaker of the assembly—soon thereafter, Tripathi ruled that the MLAs deserting the BSP to support the SP government were not defectors but had ‘split’ the party under the provisions of the Anti Defection Act. This decision was challenged by the BSP, eventually leading to the Supreme Court judgement.

After the judgement, the SP’s political opponents called for Mulayam Singh’s resignation on ‘moral’ grounds but he stood his ground and said he still commanded a majority in the assembly. The Supreme Court judgement did not threaten the survival of the SP government which remained in charge of the state administration in the run-up to the assembly elections, even if it was perceived as embarrassing for Mulayam Singh. At one point it appeared likely that the Congress would persuade the UPA government to dismiss Mulayam Singh’s government in UP on the grounds that it was ‘unconstitutional from day one’ since it was based on the support of the 13 BSP MLAs who should have been immediately disqualified. Despite the vehement opposition of the CPI(M) to any such move, the Congress seemed to have made up its mind to dismiss the government.

Mulayam Singh alleged that a conspiracy to dismiss his government had been hatched by a leading industrialist (who he did not name) and had the support of the Congress and the BJP. Earlier, Mulayam had alleged that UP Governor T. Rajeshwar had sent a report to New Delhi recommending that his government be dismissed. Even as Congress spokespersons interpreted the law to support their claim that the UP government should go, SP leaders wondered why the Congress had supported the government in Lucknow for more than three years if it was indeed 'unconstitutional from day one' as it was now claiming.

As speculation mounted about Rajeshwar having recommended dismissal of the Mulayam government under Article 356 of the Constitution, the Election Commission announced the dates for an unprecedented seven-phase election in April–May 2007 and the threat of dismissal of the state government receded. On the day the EC announced the poll schedule, February 21, the SP announced that it was withdrawing its support to the UPA, though this made little difference to the stability of the government. On May 21, after Mayawati had been sworn in as UP Chief Minister, in his opening address to the newly constituted assembly, Governor Rajeshwar referred to the previous state government led by Mulayam Singh Yadav as 'unconstitutional', 'the people's verdict was ridiculed by forming an unconstitutional government after splitting political parties,' he stated under the new political dispensation. Meanwhile, a court in Lucknow asked the CBI to seek the permission of UP Governor Rajeshwar (former head of the Intelligence Bureau in the Union government) to start prosecution proceedings against BSP chief and UP Chief Minister Mayawati in the Taj corridor case. The Governor denied his permission. The Supreme Court also asked the CBI to inquire into the veracity of allegations contained in a public interest litigation to the effect that Mulayam and his family members had acquired assets disproportionate to their known sources of income. Both Mulayam and Mayawati said the cases against them were politically motivated.

The UP assembly election of April–May 2007 were unprecedented in the sense that the voting was to take place in seven phases spread over more than a month from April 7 to May 8. The Election Commission, obviously enthused by its performance in earlier elections in Bihar and

West Bengal, had decided that an election broken up into a large number of phases was conducive to ensuring that it was 'free and fair'.

On the eve of the elections, most opinion polls in the media predicted a very even battle between the SP and the BSP with the BJP not too far behind in the third position. The polls differed on whether the SP or the BSP would finish ahead of the other, but they seemed to agree that there would be very little difference between the number of seats they would win. As the elections got under way, this picture changed only slightly. Most exit polls now showed the BSP as the front-runner but none of them suggested that the party would get anything more than 140 seats. At the end of the last phase of polling on May 8, most polls still held on to this projection, some even giving the BSP as little as 120 seats. The maximum that any exit poll was willing to give the BSP was 168 seats. Another point on which almost all the polls agreed was that the SP would lose both votes and seats, while the BJP and Congress would gain on both counts. Only one poll predicted a decline in the BJP's vote share and seats, but even that showed only a minor decline.

When the results were finally declared in May 11, therefore, they came as a complete surprise not only to pollsters, but also to most political analysts. For the first time since 1991, UP had given a single party a majority on its own. The BSP won 206 seats, the SP 97, the BJP 50 and the Congress 22. The BSP's vote share had gone up dramatically since 2002, the SP had marginally increased its vote share, the Congress vote share had dropped marginally (by less than one percentage point), while the BJP lost over 3 per cent from its vote share. In fact, if we take into account the fact that Kalyan Singh's Rashtriya Kranti Party had won about 3.5 per cent of the votes in 2002 and had since merged back into the BJP, the effective decline in the BJP vote share was closer to 6.6 per cent.

The outcome forced political commentators to come up with new explanations for the exit polls going wrong and what explained the decisive mandate obtained by the BSP. What the data suggests is that it was the result of a combination of successful wooing of some upper-caste voters by the BSP as well as a consolidation of the anti-incumbency votes behind the party seen as most likely to be able to defeat the SP.

## Mayawati

The rise of Mayawati (normally used as a single name, prefixed by *Behen* meaning sister) in Indian politics has been truly phenomenal. An icon for millions of dalits—once described as ‘untouchables’ or ‘harijans’, both terms no longer considered politically acceptable to those belonging to the lower castes—Mayawati was born on January 15, 1956, into a relatively poor family of Jatavs or Chamars, a community whose traditional occupation was skinning animals and working with leather. She was born in Delhi where her father Prabhu Dayal was employed as a supervisor with the Department of Posts & Telegraphs; his family traces its roots to Badalpur village in what was then the district of Bulandshahr (now Ghaziabad) in Uttar Pradesh. The national capital was also where Mayawati received much of her education—she completed her bachelor’s degree as well as a degree in law from Kalindi College, University of Delhi; later she earned a degree in education from the same university. As a student, she was active as a public speaker who would often participate in debating contests. She taught in various schools run by the Delhi administration between 1977 and 1984 before associating herself with Kanshi Ram who had by then floated the non-political organisation, BAMCEF.

When she met Kanshi Ram for the first time, before he became her political mentor, Mayawati was studying to appear for the examinations held to select civil servants. She was hoping to join the Indian Administrative Service when Kanshi Ram reportedly told her that she should instead join him because he would make her a ‘queen’ who could control and decide the fates of IAS officers. Her political career formally began with the establishment of the Bahujan Samaj Party in April 1984. Kanshi Ram’s ‘partiality’ towards her was apparent even earlier and led to some of his supporters leaving the company of first, BAMCEF and then, DS-4 or the Dalit Soshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti.

Interestingly, Mayawati lost the first three elections she contested as a BSP candidate—for the Lok Sabha constituency of Kairana (a part of Muzaffarnagar district in western UP) in December 1984 and then, two Lok Sabha bye-elections from Bijnor and Hardwar. She was elected to the Lok Sabha for the first time in 1989 from Bijnor. Thereafter, in 1994, she was elected to the Rajya Sabha. As already



stated, the BSP supported the SP in UP in 1993 and on June 3, 1995, in the wake of the incidents leading up to the 'guest house incident', she and her party parted ways with Mulayam Singh Yadav and joined hands with the BJP for the first time. When she became Chief Minister of UP the following day, she was only 39 years old, the youngest ever head of India's most populous state and the first dalit to hold the post. This was perhaps the first indication that she had acquired a political stature independent of her mentor. While Kanshi Ram remained the party supremo, it had become evident that she had all but taken complete charge of the party in UP. Her first stint as UP Chief Minister lasted a few months and ended in October that year with the BJP-BSP alliance abruptly coming unstuck.

In the 1996 elections to the UP assembly, she contested and won from two seats, Bilsa in Badaun district and Haraura in Saharanpur district; she retained her latter constituency. A new alliance between the BSP and BJP was struck under which it was decided that each party would have its own Chief Minister for six months at a stretch. Mayawati was sworn in as UP Chief Minister for the second time in March 1997, becoming the first woman to have a second term as the head of UP's government. After six months, she withdrew from the coalition government on the ground that her partners in the BJP were not cooperating with her party's attempts to rigorously implement a law (the Dalit Act) aimed at prevention of atrocities against those belonging to the lower castes. The widely held perception at that time was that she feared that the BJP could engineer a split in the BSP to form a government on its own in UP and chose to pre-empt such a possible move.

Mayawati won both the 1998 and 1999 Lok Sabha elections from Akbarpur constituency that was reserved for Scheduled Caste candidates. Her choice of this constituency was significant in that Akbarpur is in eastern UP whereas all the constituencies she had contested from earlier (during assembly and Lok Sabha elections) happened to be in the western part of the state. This indicated her confidence in the BSP's ability to garner votes all across a state that was then geographically larger than the whole of Western Europe. (In terms of population, UP would be the sixth most populous 'country' in the world had it been an independent nation-state.)

Her third stint as Chief Minister of UP lasted just over a year, from May 3, 2002 to July 25, 2003. The BJP withdrew support to her

government soon after her decision to build a commercial corridor near the Taj Mahal generated a major controversy and allegations of corruption were levelled against her, ministers in her government and bureaucrats who were supposed to be close to her. She was accused of approving a project in violation of laws that protect the famous monument. The Supreme Court ordered an investigation by the CBI into the case and also ordered a probe into allegations that she and her family members had acquired assets disproportionate to known sources of income.

Mayawati won the Ambedkarnagar Lok Sabha seat in 2004 but resigned the following year to become a member of the upper house of Parliament. Soon after her third stint as UP Chief Minister, a new controversy surrounding her broke out when members of Kanshi Ram's family instituted legal cases against her for, among other things, allegedly making him her 'prisoner' and denying family members access to him. Kanshi Ram was by then very ill and in hospital most of the time. Even after his death in October 2006, his family members claimed she did not allow them to take his body before cremation.

Mayawati has often been criticised for her imperious style of functioning. Her birthdays have been celebrated lavishly; these became public occasions attended by thousands of supporters. Sections of the media have often highlighted the size of the cakes she has cut, described the glittering sets of diamond jewellery she wore and the change in the way she styles her hair (from a ponytail to a bobbed cut) and mentioned her penchant for pink *salwar-kameez* dresses. If by emphasising such information, attempts were made to paint an unflattering picture of the BSP leader, the impact on her supporters was just the reverse. For many dalits, the fact that one of their representatives can currently boast a lifestyle that was earlier considered a prerogative of the rich, upper castes is a matter of considerable satisfaction and pride. Political observers draw an analogy between Mayawati's public demeanour and the sartorial habits of the best known dalit leader in pre-independence India, B. R. Ambedkar, who used to invariably wear a suit and tie, the dress of the country's British colonial masters.

Following the victory of the BSP in the 2007 assembly elections in UP, in her fourth stint as Chief Minister of India's most populous state, Mayawati appears to have become politically mature. She has chosen to fill up key administrative positions with bureaucrats who

have a reputation for efficiency and probity. Instead of breathing fire at her political opponents in spontaneous speeches, she has chosen to read out of prepared texts during her interactions with the media. If she remains Chief Minister of UP till 2012 (and there is a strong possibility that she would), she would become the first Chief Minister of the state to have completed a full term of five years after Sucheta Kripalani completed her tenure as UP Chief Minister in May 1967—incidentally, Kripalani was the first ever woman Chief Minister in the country.

Mayawati has set her sights higher than the position she occupies in Lucknow. She has made no secret of her ambition to one day become the Prime Minister of India. Whether or not she is able to hold the most powerful post in the land is a matter of conjecture. But what cannot be disputed is that for an unmarried woman who grew up outside Uttar Pradesh and who entered active politics when she was just 28, Mayawati's political career has indeed been quite remarkable.

## **Bihar: Can the 'Worst' State Show the Way?**

During the 1950s and even during much of the 1960s, Bihar was considered to be one of the best-administered states in the country. However, through the 1970s, 1980s and the 1990s, this image plummeted precipitously. The state acquired the reputation of being one of the most backward in India, backward in just about every respect—certainly in terms of social and economic indicators. It is said that Bihar symbolises the existence of a 'Fourth World' in a Third World country.

Bihar is one state where feudal feelings are perhaps most evident, where caste sentiments determine the course of politics, and where the economic divide has resulted in active Naxalite groups espousing the cause of poor and landless labourers fighting periodic pitched battles against 'armies' comprising members of upper castes and representatives of landlords. Bihar is also a state where corruption has become more than a fact of everyday life; it is a state where corruption is so endemic that myths and legends have been woven around the phenomenon.

In the middle of the 1970s, Bihar became the focal point of a political and social movement aimed at *sampoorna kranti* or 'total revolution', spearheaded by Jayaprakash Narayan (JP). The movement that had begun in Gujarat and had spread rapidly across the country acquired such momentum in Bihar that Indira Gandhi placed many leaders of the movement behind bars before declaring Emergency in June 1975. The fact that Bihar remains the only state in India in which individuals who had cut their teeth in the Janata Party and later the Janata Dal continue to dominate the course of politics, is undoubtedly an important legacy of the JP movement.

But the existence of a strong anti-Congress political formation dates back to 1967. That was the year in which the Congress for the first time saw its hold on power slipping in many states in India, particularly those in the north. The Samyukta Vidhayak Dal government that came to power in Bihar in 1967 saw the left and the right coming together for the first time to prevent the formation of a Congress government in the state. The socialists, the communists and the BJS made common cause. Given the obvious political differences between these groups, it is hardly surprising that there followed a period of considerable instability, with chief ministers enjoying brief stints punctuated by the frequent imposition of President's rule. Between 1968 and 1980, President's rule was imposed in Bihar on as many as five occasions. Between March 1967 and June 1980, chief ministers were sworn in on no less than 15 occasions in Patna. No chief minister lasted even two years in this phase, Karpoori Thakur's 22-month-long tenure from June 1977 to April 1979 being the longest.

Karpoori Thakur's espousal of the interests of the intermediate castes was to leave a lasting legacy, though the Congress remained in power through almost all of the 1980s. Thakur had forged a coalition of backward and intermediate castes including the numerically significant Yadav community and made this social coalition the pivot of his anti-Congress political platform. This was quite akin to what happened in neighbouring Uttar Pradesh, where leaders like the socialist Ram Manohar Lohia and Charan Singh had built a similar caste-based coalition.

After the V.P. Singh government implemented the recommendations of the Mandal Commission, the Janata Dal was able to tap into this

hitherto dormant political base both in UP and in Bihar. In both states, the Congress—which lost power in 1989—has since been relegated to an also-ran in the electoral race. In Bihar, as in UP, the Congress has seen its erstwhile supporters from the upper castes shifting allegiance to the BJP, which these sections feel is better placed to confront the growing political clout of the intermediate castes and protect their interests. Again, as in UP, in Bihar too a single party has been unable to garner the support of all of the intermediate and lower castes. Just as in UP, with the SP and the BSP competing to occupy this political space, in Bihar also the RJD and the JD(U) both claim to be the true representatives of the ‘downtrodden’. Interestingly, in both states, this fragmentation in the ranks of the middle and lower castes has not worked to the advantage of either the Congress or the BJP. Politics in Bihar (after Jharkhand was carved out) is dominated by the confrontation between the RJD and the JD(U)—or earlier the Samata Party—with the Congress and BJP being reduced to lesser partners of these two antagonists.

While Bihar was still undivided, it was not quite as obvious that the BJP and the Congress were not powerful forces in the state’s electoral battleground. In the 1999 Lok Sabha elections, for instance, the BJP won 23 of the 54 seats in the state, more than any other party. However, 11 of these 23 seats came from the 14 that were subsequently carved out to form Jharkhand. Further, many of the remaining 12 seats that the party won in central and northern Bihar (which constitute the truncated Bihar) could not have been won without the support of the Janata Dal (United), the BJP’s ally. Similarly, the Congress won three of the 54 seats in undivided Bihar in the 1999 elections, but two of these were in what became Jharkhand. The bulk of the 40 seats that now remain in Bihar, therefore, were won by the RJD and the Samata Party, neither of which won any seats in Jharkhand. The division of Bihar has, therefore, made a dramatic difference to electoral politics in the state. The RJD, which had never managed to win a majority on its own in the state after the 1989 assembly elections, hoped to make a credible bid for power on its own. But that was not to be. As mentioned, the non-NDA political players were so deeply divided that the RJD’s ambitions were not fulfilled. The Samata Party, on the other hand, that had, since its inception, almost been compelled to play second fiddle to the BJP, could assert its dominance in the NDA as its strongest constituent in the state.

Again, there is a parallel with the situation in Uttar Pradesh. In UP too, the newly carved out state of Uttaranchal was an area in which neither the SP nor the BSP had a meaningful presence, while the BJP and the Congress were the two dominant parties. Thus, the separation of Uttaranchal undoubtedly helped the SP and the BSP in Uttar Pradesh, while hurting the BJP and the Congress. The difference, however, is that while Uttaranchal (now Uttarakhand) accounted for just five of the 85 seats in undivided UP, Jharkhand had a considerably bigger share of the Lok Sabha constituencies (14 out of 54) that formed undivided Bihar. Clearly, therefore, the impact of the division of the state is greater in Bihar than in UP.

The division of Bihar changed caste-based political affiliations in the state. In undivided Bihar, the upper castes had the choice of supporting either the BJP or the Congress. Now that the Congress has been marginalised in the state, upper-caste voters are more or less committed to going along with the BJP as long as it remains an ally of the JD(U). If ever the JD(U)-BJP alliance were to break up, upper caste sections could be confronted with having to choose between two parties, the RJD or the JD(U), both of which espouse the cause of the intermediate and lower castes. In Tamil Nadu, those belonging to the upper castes found that their votes would be 'wasted' if they did not support either of the two Dravidian parties. In UP as well, upper-caste voters increasingly have to choose between the SP and BSP since both the BJP and the Congress have become weak in the state. Will a similar voting pattern be replicated in Bihar? The possibility certainly exists. If such a situation indeed takes place, as the Tamil Nadu experience has indicated, the sectarian, caste-based character of the RJD and the JD(U) could undergo a gradual change. These regional parties would necessarily have to broaden their appeal if they are to attract voters from different social strata—as the BSP and the SP have already begun to do in UP.

Lalu Prasad Yadav, who was a student leader during the JP movement in the mid-1970s, became Chief Minister of Bihar in February 1990, less than three months after V.P. Singh became Prime Minister in December 1989. Despite the nationwide anti-Congress wave in the 1989 Lok Sabha elections, which was still in evidence during the February 1990 assembly elections in Bihar, the Janata Dal did not actually obtain a majority on its own or even come close to

doing so. In the 324-member assembly, the JD's tally was only 123. It was with the support of the BJP (39 seats), the CPI (23 seats), the JMM (19 seats) and the CPI(M) (six seats) that Lalu was able to form the government in Patna. Having formed the government, he lost little time in trying to reduce his dependence on these allies. He engineered defections from the BJP, the JMM and the Indian People's Front (IPF), one of the few Naxalite groups that participated in electoral politics, to increase his strength in the assembly. It was this strategy that enabled Lalu to survive in office even after the BJP withdrew its support to his government following the arrest of L.K. Advani in Bihar in October that year.

This episode helped Lalu acquire a national profile. Advani's nation wide *rath yatra* was halted at Samastipur in Bihar and he was 'jailed' in a government bungalow at Masanjore near the Maithon dam. The incident sparked off riots in neighbouring UP with protesting BJP supporters going on the rampage and targeting the Muslim community, but Bihar remained peaceful. This did not go unnoticed. The same Bihar had in October 1989 witnessed one of the worst riots in its history, when over a thousand people were killed in Hindu-Muslim clashes in Bhagalpur. The arrest of Advani and the state administration's determination to prevent any communal backlash helped Lalu consolidate the support of the Muslims. Along with his own Yadav community, this gave him a formidable electoral base to build on. At this early stage in his political career, Lalu also had with him prominent leaders of the Kurmi and dalit communities in Nitish Kumar and Ram Vilas Paswan, who were to later break away from him.

By the time the Bihar assembly elections of 1995 were held, the JD under Lalu had strengthened its position considerably. The party secured a slim majority on its own, winning 167 of the 324 assembly seats. With its allies from the left, the CPI (26) and CPM (six), the JD had control of 199 seats. The BJP, which was the next biggest party in the state assembly, won just 41 seats, while the fledgling Samata Party had a mere seven seats in the new assembly. The Congress too had been reduced to 29 seats.

Ironically, having survived a full term as Chief Minister without having a majority in the state assembly, Lalu could not complete

his second term when he did have a majority. Barely a year after his second stint as Chief Minister, the 'fodder scam' hit the headlines. The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) had found that hundreds of crores of rupees from the state's coffers had been siphoned off under the pretext of being used to provide fodder for cattle. The period to which the audit pertained included Lalu's first term as Chief Minister as well as that of his predecessor Dr. Jagannath Mishra. The BJP demanded Lalu's resignation, alleging that he was not just morally responsible for the scam, but one of those directly involved and among the biggest beneficiaries of the funds siphoned off government coffers. The party demanded an inquiry into the scandal by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) and urged the Union government, then headed by Narasimha Rao, to grant permission for such an inquiry, which was acceded. The investigations were spearheaded by U.N. Biswas, who was the CBI's Joint Director (East) based in Kolkata. Whereas one section perceived Biswas as a maverick police officer who was incorruptible, dogged and unafraid of politicians in power, others saw him as a publicity seeker and even as a closet sympathiser of the Hindutva ideology to explain his zealotry in pursuing the cases against Lalu.

At the end of July 1997, after the CBI had decided to prosecute both Chief Minister Lalu and former Chief Minister Mishra, Lalu was arrested for the first time. He remained in jail for more than 100 days before he was released in December that year. Over the next four years, Lalu was to be jailed on four more occasions. However, well before he was actually arrested and imprisoned, Lalu had been forced to resign as Chief Minister after the CBI filed a chargesheet against him. By this time, there was a United Front government in power in New Delhi with H.D. Deve Gowda as Prime Minister. The sequence of events can be summarised thus: the BJP and its allies had been demanding Lalu's resignation on the ground that he was a Chief Minister against whom corruption charges had been levelled that were being probed by the CBI. If he remained in office, he could influence the course of the investigations and misuse his position to tamper with evidence, it was argued. On the other hand, the UF government—of which the Janata Dal was the biggest constituent—contended that an elected chief minister



should not be forced to resign merely because certain unsubstantiated allegations had been made against him. Not even a formal chargesheet had been issued against him, it was pointed out. When the CBI actually chargesheeted Lalu, the Janata Dal as well as the rest of the UF was in a quandary. They clearly found that it was becoming increasingly difficult to continue defending Lalu. They advised him to put in his papers, which he was unwilling to consider.

It was at this juncture that the Janata Dal split. The party was to elect a new president on July 6, 1997. Lalu and his supporters announced that they would be boycotting the elections and instead organised a parallel meeting on July 5 at which the Rashtriya Janata Dal was formed and Lalu was voted as its first President. Sharad Yadav was elected President of the Janata Dal. Given the split in the JD, the Bihar Governor A. R. Kidwai asked Lalu to seek a fresh vote of confidence in the state assembly. On July 15, Chief Minister Lalu won the vote of confidence with the support of two factions of the JMM (including one led by Shibu Soren) and 14 independent MLAs. The Congress was in an uncomfortable situation. It did not wish to be seen as supporting a 'corrupt' chief minister and at the same time did not want to go along with the BJP. It therefore abstained from voting during the confidence motion in the assembly. On July 17, the United Front in New Delhi realised that the RJD could no longer be a part of the UF so long as Lalu was the head of the RJD. Eight days later, on July 25, Lalu finally resigned as Chief Minister after the designated CBI court issued an arrest warrant against him. The same day, Lalu got the RJD MLAs to ratify his decision to nominate his wife, Rabri Devi as his successor. She thus became the first woman Chief Minister of Bihar.

Why did Lalu decide to resign only after he realised that the CBI had issued a warrant of arrest against him and not earlier? It seemed that Lalu wished to ensure that his nominee—in this case, his wife—would succeed him as Chief Minister rather than wait for a situation where he would be behind bars and a party colleague who could later become his rival would be elected by the MLAs of the RJD. The sheer cynicism of the move shocked quite a few people, including many who were not hostile to him. After all, till she became Chief Minister, Rabri Devi had been a home-maker looking after their nine children.

She had never contested an election in her life or even participated in any political activity worth mentioning. Neither Rabri Devi nor Lalu made any bones about the fact that he would continue as the de-facto Chief Minister of the state. Even those sympathetic to Lalu felt that he had gone too far in taking the support of his party's MLAs for granted and that Rabri Devi would not be able to survive the mandatory vote of confidence that any new chief minister would necessarily have to seek. Three days later, on July 28, the Rabri Devi government won a vote of confidence in the Bihar assembly.

The very next day, the CBI ordered Lalu's arrest. Lalu surrendered before the CBI court in Patna and he was remanded to judicial custody. Before his arrest, the CBI's Biswas reportedly asked the court to seek the intervention of the Army, fearing a violent backlash from Lalu's supporters. This was a completely unprecedented situation. Law and order is meant to be a state subject and the state government has to decide how this is to be maintained. Lalu was to later argue that this was yet another clear instance of Biswas over-stepping his authority and attempting to paint him black. He claimed that the fact that nothing much happened when he was arrested went to show how Biswas had sought to malign him by raising the bogey of RJD hoodlums wreaking violence on the streets of Patna.

In 1999, Rabri Devi survived an attempt made by the NDA government in New Delhi to dismiss her government by invoking Article 356. By this time, Kidwai had been replaced as Bihar's Governor by Sunder Singh Bhandari, a member of the RSS and a former Vice President of the BJP. The incident that prompted the NDA government to invoke the controversial provisions of Article 356 was the massacre of 12 dalits by members of an upper-caste 'army' at Narayanpur village in Jehanabad district. Governor Bhandari, in his report to New Delhi, had suggested that there had been a complete breakdown of the working of the constitutional machinery in the state. On February 12, two days after the Jehanabad massacre, the Union government dismissed the Rabri Devi government. It had two months' time to have this decision ratified by both houses of Parliament. After dithering for some time on what position it should take, the Congress decided to oppose the government's resolution authorising President's rule in Bihar. Some of the BJP's allies in the NDA, like the TDP and

the Shiromani Akali Dal, were uncomfortable about supporting the use of Article 356 to dismiss an elected state government, but they eventually fell in line.

In the Lok Sabha, where the NDA had a clear majority, the government was able to get the resolution imposing President's rule in Bihar passed quite easily on February 26. The problem arose in getting the resolution adopted by the Rajya Sabha, in which the NDA was in a minority. The BJP believed the Congress could be persuaded to change its stance since the party's state unit was clearly opposed to the idea of bailing out the Rabri Devi government, so much so that as many as 40 members of the party's local executive had put in their papers in protest against the decision of the Congress central leadership to oppose President's rule. Sonia Gandhi too had earlier been rather critical of the RJD government in the state. On March 7, Prime Minister Vajpayee spent 45 minutes with Sonia Gandhi trying to persuade her to make her party change its position on opposing the imposition of President's rule in Bihar, ostensibly on the ground that it would be in the 'national interest' to do so. It was reported at that time that Vajpayee had even offered to replace Governor Bhandari with a person 'more acceptable' to the Congress as part of a quid pro quo if the Congress was willing to vote in favour of the government's resolution in the Rajya Sabha. Sonia Gandhi refused to oblige Vajpayee.

On March 8, Home Minister L.K. Advani announced in the Lok Sabha that the Cabinet had decided to revoke the imposition of President's rule in Bihar.

Soon after Rabri Devi resumed office as Chief Minister, Governor Bhandari decided to quit. Since he had evidently been a prime mover in the attempt to unseat Rabri Devi, her return to power was clearly a loss of face for Bhandari. However, the BJP did not want to convey the impression that he had been sacked. He was, therefore, promptly appointed Governor of Gujarat. The man who replaced him at the Raj Bhavan in Patna was Vinod Chandra Pande, a former bureaucrat, who had risen to prominence as Revenue Secretary in the Rajiv Gandhi government and later as Cabinet Secretary in the V.P. Singh government.

Many political analysts saw the Congress' decision to oppose the dismissal of the Rabri Devi government as a 'blunder' on par with

Sonia's ill-considered boast just a month later—in April 1999—that she had the support of 272 Lok Sabha MPs for her bid to become Prime Minister after the Vajpayee government lost a vote of confidence. The results in Bihar of the September–October 1999 general elections seemed to bear out this analysis. The NDA won 40 of the 54 Lok Sabha seats in Bihar, the BJP winning 23, the JD(U)—which included the Samata Party—getting 17, and the Shiv Sena winning one seat. In contrast, the RJD won just seven seats and the Congress four. The BJP and the JD(U) were ecstatic. Their decision to dismiss the Rabri Devi government had been ratified by the people of Bihar, they claimed, and the Congress' decision to stick by the RJD had been rejected.

The euphoria was not to last very long. In the state assembly elections of February 2000—barely four months after the Lok Sabha elections—the RJD once again emerged as the single largest party. The party won 124 seats in the 324-member assembly on its own. Along with the Congress and the CPI(M), which had fought the elections as its allies, it could count on the support of 149 MLAs in the new house. The NDA, on the other hand, could muster only 122 MLAs from within its own ranks, the BJP having won 67 seats, while the Samata Party and the JD (U)—which were by this time once again two separate parties—won 34 seats and 21 seats respectively. Yet, what was clear was that neither of the two pre-election alliances had a majority in the newly elected assembly.

Both sides started frantically hunting for possible supporters among the 53 MLAs who were part of neither front. Here again, the RJD had an advantage over the NDA. Various left parties—like the CPI, the CPI (ML)-Liberation and the Marxist Coordination Committee—accounted for 12 of the 53 seats. While they had their reservations about the RJD and Lalu, there was little doubt that the NDA was for them the bigger enemy and when it came to the crunch, they would not allow an NDA government to be formed in Patna. The only other big blocks that could be wooed by either side were the JMM (12 MLAs) and the independents (20 MLAs, many of them with criminal backgrounds who had in fact contested and won the elections while in jail). The RJD soon announced that it had secured the support of the JMM and that it was, therefore, just two short of the 163 required to muster a majority. The NDA, which had nominated Nitish Kumar as its Chief Ministerial aspirant—despite the Samata

Party being a junior partner in the alliance—predictably rubbished the claim and presented its own counter-claim. Nitish’s bid for Chief Minister, they asserted, had the support of 146 MLAs. Further, they maintained that this was more than the RJD could muster, since not all the Congress MLAs would actually support Rabri Devi’s bid to become Chief Minister for a second term. As had become the norm in such situations, both sides presented lists of ‘supporters’ to the Governor.

For reasons best known to him (and reasons which the world will never know because of his demise), Governor Pande decided to swear in Nitish Kumar as the next Chief Minister of Bihar on March 4, 2000. The RJD protested, arguing that the Governor was only encouraging ‘horse-trading’ since parties and individuals who accounted for at least 173 seats in the 324-member assembly had gone on record to say that they would not support an NDA government in Bihar. Neutral observers could not help but agree with this contention. Pande asserted that his intentions were above board and in an attempt to prove that his motives were honourable, he gave Nitish Kumar only 10 days to seek and win a vote of confidence in the assembly. The NDA’s power brokers got into the act. The 20 independent MLAs were aggressively wooed. Those of them who were in jail informally elected Suraj Bhan their leader. Suraj Bhan, who was an accused in as many as 26 cases, told reporters that his group had decided to support the NDA ‘to give a new direction to development in the state’.

Despite such brazen attempts at garnering support, it was becoming clearer each day that Nitish Kumar would find it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to win the vote of confidence. The first effective trial of strength was to take place even before the formal vote of confidence. The Speaker of the new assembly was to be elected on March 9. The RJD-led alliance proposed the name of Sadanand Singh, a Congress leader, for the post. The voting to elect the Speaker, the alliance asserted, would nail Nitish’s claims to having the support of a majority of MLAs in the assembly. That the NDA was also aware of this became clear when it announced that it would not put up its own candidate—ostensibly because it wanted a consensus—for the post of Speaker. The game was almost over by then. The next day, on March 10, Nitish resigned after two-and-a-half hours of debate on

his motion of confidence, without waiting for the debate to conclude and the assembly to vote. The second brief interlude in the 11-year old Lalu–Rabri reign had lasted less than a week.

What happened thereafter has already been recollected in the Introduction to the book. In the 2004 Lok Sabha elections, the state’s voters expressed their mandate overwhelmingly in favour of the UPA. The alliance won 29 of the 40 seats in Bihar, the NDA having to settle for just 11 seats. The RJD was the biggest gainer, winning 22 seats. Within months, however, political equations in Bihar were to change dramatically against the RJD and for the NDA.

In the first of two assembly elections held in 2005 in the state, the UPA had fallen apart with Ram Vilas Paswan’s LJP striking out on its own with the CPI for company. The Congress was ambivalent about which of the two main UPA constituents in the state—the RJD or LJP—it should go with. The February election results threw up a hung assembly. The RJD remained the single largest party, but the NDA had more seats than the party and its allies (even if one included the Congress in that category) had. If the LJP had also thrown its weight behind the RJD, it would have been just a little short of a majority in the assembly, but that was not to be. The LJP insisted that it was committed to defeating Lalu’s wife Rabri Devi as Chief Minister and not aligning with the ‘communal’ NDA. Paswan was faced with a real dilemma. His job as a Union Minister in New Delhi obviously made it difficult for him to align with the NDA. On the other hand, the bulk of his MLAs belonged to the Bhumihar caste which was extremely hostile to Lalu and any attempt on his part to mend fences with the RJD would have resulted in a rebellion among his legislators. He, therefore, continued to sit on the fence.

The stalemate continued for weeks before Governor Buta Singh (a former Congress Union minister) recommended President’s rule in the state on the grounds that he was convinced no government could be formed without ‘horse-trading’. Coming close on the heels of media reports that Nitish Kumar had finally mustered the numbers required and was about to approach the Governor to stake a claim to form the government, Buta’s move was seen as a blatantly partisan attempt at preventing the NDA from forming the government. The assembly was dissolved. Even as the Supreme Court was a hearing a

petition challenging the dissolution, the Election Commission announced that assembly elections would be held in October for the second time that year. On the eve of the elections, the court issued an interim order that said Buta Singh's decision was wrong, but refrained from doing anything to stop the elections.

The UPA once again failed to stay together and this time the NDA was able to make the most of it. Analysts also believed that the alliance had successfully managed to woo the most backward castes (MBCs) away from the RJD's fold. The NDA gained a comfortable majority on its own, with the JD(U) winning 88 seats and the BJP 55 for a combined tally of 143 seats. It was not just the RJD that suffered, its seats being cut to 54, but also the LJP, whose sitting on the fence after the earlier elections seemed to have gone down badly with the electorate. Paswan's party could win just 10 seats in October. The man who had set out to be king-maker in Bihar had been reduced to a marginal player by the voters.

Nitish Kumar was sworn in as Chief Minister of Bihar for the second time on November 24, 2005. The Supreme Court subsequently minced no words in criticising former Governor Buta Singh's recommendation to dissolve the state assembly in March 2005. Buta Singh resigned his post in January 2006. West Bengal Governor Gopal Krishna Gandhi took over temporarily before Republican Party of India leader R.S. Gavai was sworn in as the Governor of Bihar on June 22, 2006.

## **Janata Dal (United): Tripping on Egos**

The rise of the Samata Party—which later became the Janata Dal (United)—perhaps best illustrates how Lalu's near-instant success in dominating Bihar's politics also became his biggest weakness. The Janata Dal in Bihar at the end of the 1980s and in the early 1990s was certainly a party with no dearth of leaders. Apart from Lalu himself, there were George Fernandes, Nitish Kumar, Ram Vilas Paswan and Sharad Yadav, each of whom could in varying degrees lay claim to having acquired a national profile. Of these, George Fernandes and Sharad Yadav were not strictly speaking Biharis—the former being

a Mangalorean and the latter a native of Madhya Pradesh—but both had made Bihar their political home.

When Lalu became Chief Minister of Bihar in 1990, he was definitely a relative newcomer to the big stage of politics compared to some of these stalwarts. Yet, within a couple of years it was clear to everybody that the undisputed leader of the Janata Dal in Bihar was Lalu. It also became increasingly clear that despite the presence of Nitish Kumar and Paswan in the party's leadership, neither the Kurmis nor the dalits could hope to break the stranglehold of the Yadavs on the levers of power in Patna under Lalu's regime. Lalu was also not averse to periodically 'reminding' George Fernandes that he remained a leader in Bihar only at Lalu's mercy. He also made it clear to Nitish and Paswan that while he did not grudge them their share of the limelight in New Delhi, they would be well advised to play second fiddle to him in Bihar. The repeated rebuffs eventually proved too much for Fernandes and Nitish to stomach. In 1994, the two left the Janata Dal to float the Samata Party and immediately launched a virulent campaign against the 'misrule' of Lalu's government.

As yet, however, the two Samata Party leaders were not willing to consider an alliance either with the Congress—against which party Fernandes had fought throughout his political career—or with the BJP, which they continued to see as a communal outfit. In the 1995 state assembly elections, therefore, the Samata Party was on its own, and—as we have seen—made a rather pathetic debut in electoral politics. This soon convinced the party that the BJP's communalism was a 'lesser evil' in Bihar than Lalu's so-called 'jungle raj' and caste based politics. Thus, by the time the 1996 Lok Sabha elections took place, the Samata Party had struck an alliance with the BJP in Bihar. The alliance was not spectacularly successful, but it did help the Samata Party win its first Lok Sabha seats—six from Bihar and one each from Uttar Pradesh and Orissa.

Since then, the Samata Party/JD(U) has grown considerably, from first becoming the main rival to the RJD in the state after it was divided to ultimately leading the ruling coalition in Bihar in October 2005. It has become the nucleus around which political and social forces hostile to Lalu's Yadav-Muslim combine have gathered. There is a parallel



in this with what had happened in Uttar Pradesh, though there are important differences as well. The social support base of the RJD in Bihar, like that of the SP in UP, is largely among the Yadavs and the Muslims. Like in UP, in Bihar too, the BJP succeeded in preventing this base from expanding further to include all the non-Yadav OBCs. The difference, however, is that while in UP the BJP was able to achieve this by projecting a non-Yadav OBC leader—Kalyan Singh, who belongs to the Lodh community—from within its own ranks, in Bihar it had to depend on the Samata Party/JD(U) to split the pan-OBC coalition that Lalu was attempting to build. Another similarity between the political situation prevailing in UP and Bihar in terms of caste equations is the manner in which dalit leaders like Mayawati and Paswan have managed to deny the SP and the RJD—as well as the BJP and the Congress—substantial sections of the votes of their community.

Unlike the SP in Uttar Pradesh, however, Lalu started off with the support of powerful non-Yadav OBC castes like the Kurmis—he was, of course, a part of the Janata Dal at the time. He also had the support of the dalits, which again was something that the SP did not have to a significant extent at any stage. In that sense, it would perhaps be fair to say that Lalu has contributed in substantial measure to the alienation of these castes from his party and has squandered more opportunities than Mulayam ever had to widen and expand his support base across different caste groups.

Politics in Bihar, of course, is substantially different from that in UP in at least one major aspect: The presence of ‘armies’ and Naxalites who are outside the electoral process, but who are nevertheless an important and integral part of politics in the state. While the Naxalites, as Marxists, are ideologically not motivated by caste factors, there is little doubt that the bulk of their sympathisers come from those at the lower end of the caste hierarchy. This is not surprising given the fact that their focus on agrarian issues has pit the Naxalites constantly against big landowners of Bihar and in favour of agricultural labourers. Since the upper castes and Yadavs dominate big land-holdings in Bihar and agricultural labourers in the state are predominantly dalits and other lower castes, there is a considerable intermeshing of caste and class in the battles between

the Ranvir Sena—the private army of upper-caste landlords—and Naxalite groups like the People's War Group (PWG) and the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC).

To return to the Samata Party/JD(U) in Bihar, ego clashes among its leaders have from time to time conveyed the impression that the party could break up. Besides the existence of two factions allegedly owing allegiance to George Fernandes and Nitish Kumar, the party's MPs and MLAs have often issued statements in their 'personal' capacity, which have run contrary to the official party position. For instance, the former spokesperson of the party Shambhu Srivastwa was extremely critical of the failure of the Gujarat government to control the communal riots in the state. He stopped short of asking for what the Opposition to the NDA had been demanding—the resignation of Modi. Srivastwa's statements were brushed aside as his 'personal' views and not those of the Samata Party. Subsequently, in May 2003, Srivastwa—a medical doctor by profession—quit his post and joined the Congress. He later re-joined the Samata Party/JD(U). Certain Samata Party/JD(U) representatives have also openly expressed their unhappiness with their party's leadership on account of the presence of former party general secretary Jaya Jaitly who is close to George Fernandes.

Matters came to a head in June 2003 when Nitish Kumar submitted his resignation from the post of Railway Minister to Vajpayee on the grounds that it would be morally untenable for him to continue since his own party colleagues were accusing him of corruption in purchase contracts. The reference was to charges made against him by Samata Party MP Prabhunath Singh. While Singh has always had the reputation of being a maverick and a 'loose canon', Nitish clearly believed that he had Fernandes' backing. Nitish specifically asked why no disciplinary action had been taken against Prabhunath Singh by the party president George Fernandes. The resignation drama lasted for three days, during which time speculation was rife about a possible split in the Samata Party with Fernandes and Nitish leading rival factions. As in the past, however, the storm soon blew over after Nitish was 'persuaded' to withdraw his resignation.

The Samata Party/JD(U) has by and large been confined to Bihar, despite the fact that it had MPs like Kalpnath Rai (who had been asked to quit his post as Food Minister in the Narasimha Rao government

for alleged acts of corruption) from neighbouring Uttar Pradesh and Bhakta Charan Das (formerly of the Janata Dal) from Orissa. The party, however, surprised many by obtaining the allegiance of a number of MLAs from Manipur in north-east India in 2002. This state has witnessed rapid changes in government and its MLAs have acquired notoriety for the frequency with which they have switched political parties. In the run-up to assembly elections to the state in February 2002, a group of MLAs from Manipur decided to support the Samata Party and even took on the BJP (with which it was in alliance in New Delhi) to destabilise the state government in Imphal. It was not as if the Samata Party had had a support base in Manipur for a long time; it was merely that a group of MLAs from the state found the Samata Party a convenient platform on which they could come together.

The personality clashes within the JD(U) again came to a head in 2006, when George Fernandes was 'ousted' by Sharad Yadav as president of the party. While Yadav won the party elections by a massive margin, Fernandes' supporters alleged that the process had been irregular. His defeat seemed to signal the beginning of the process of another split in the party. In early 2007, Fernandes loyalists held a convention in New Delhi seeking to revive the Samata Party. Interestingly, while Fernandes 'blessed' these efforts, he made it clear that he would continue as a JD(U) MP as well as the Convenor of the NDA.

What follows are thumbnail sketches of some of these important politicians from Bihar.

### **Lalu Prasad Yadav**

In less than a decade and a half, Lalu Prasad Yadav has risen from being a virtual nonentity, even in his native Bihar, to arguably one of the best known political leaders in India. True, Lalu had been a member of the Lok Sabha as early as 1977, when the Janata Party made a clean sweep of all 54 seats in Bihar riding a wave of popular anger against the Emergency which had ended barely three months before the elections were held. Yet, hardly anybody outside his constituency had heard of Lalu in this period. In fact, he had not even been a member of the Bihar assembly prior to contesting the Lok Sabha elections. Today, he symbolises the very essence of Bihar for most Indians like nobody else ever has.

Lalu's beginning in politics was in the JP movement in the mid-1970s. He was at that time—in 1973–74—the President of the Patna University Students' Union. There's a story about a specific incident during those days that could well be apocryphal. The story goes that on the day of a much-publicised rally to be addressed by JP in Patna, the police cracked down with teargas and lathi charges to ensure that many of those who wanted to participate in the rally would not be able to do so. That evening, Lalu himself called up newspaper offices to announce grandly that 'Lalu Yadav has been arrested'. Many of the journalists contacted were puzzled by this piece of information and wanted to know who Lalu Yadav was. At this point Lalu is said to have expressed shock at their ignorance of such an important student leader. The story may well be untrue, but if it sounds plausible it is because Lalu remains to this day a man who knows how to stay in the news and hog the headlines, whether for the right reasons or for the wrong ones.

Despite his carefully cultivated image of being a rustic buffoon, Lalu has certainly been one of the most media-savvy politicians in India. He has never ducked questions or refused a request from a journalist for an interview, no matter how big or small the publication or organisation the journalist represents. His clever one-liners have not merely spawned a series of jokes but have also been the delight of television journalists looking for a sound byte and a godsend for headline writers. For example, on the day the RJD was formed in July 1997, Lalu had appeared on a TV news programme where the anchor patronisingly remarked that his party could at best hope to be described as a regional party. Pat came the reply without batting an eyelid, 'Regional party? RJD is the original party'. Of course, this was not a just a play on words. In his characteristic style, Lalu had used humour to drive home the message that his party would be the one to matter in Bihar, not the parent Janata Dal.

Humour has been an important weapon in Lalu's armoury. He has used it to disarm aggressive critics—whether inside a TV studio or on the floor of the Bihar assembly or in Parliament. He has also used it to great effect in attacking his opponents. While most other 'secular' leaders prefer to angrily rave and rant at the Sangh Parivar's activities, Lalu more often than not resorts to ridiculing them. For instance, at a public rally he made fun of Murli Manohar Joshi—who was then

the BJP President—for getting knocked down by police personnel using water cannons during a demonstration near Parliament during the tenure of the Narasimha Rao government. He referred to Joshi ‘keeling over like a sick pup’ under the impact of a ‘shower’ and wondered aloud how such a leadership could claim to provide an alternative to the Congress. Most other politicians would have considered his choice of words ‘unparliamentary’ if not downright vulgar, but the guffaws that followed from the thousands assembled near the Red Fort left little room for doubt that his gag had gone down well with the crowd. His penchant for referring to the Chief Secretary of Bihar as *bade babu*—a term more commonly used to describe a head clerk—was another instance of his deliberate use of ridicule. It certainly wasn’t considered offensive or rude behaviour by millions of people who did not think too highly of a bureaucracy that they perceived as an institution that only harassed them. At the same time, it also served to tell the Chief Secretary—and hence the rest of the bureaucracy—who the real boss was.

The choice of language and idiom is decidedly rustic, but undoubtedly deliberately so. Lalu realises only too well that the more he is berated by the English media for being a boor, the easier it is for him to project himself as a man of the people, one who doesn’t mind talking bluntly. Unlike many others, who might prefer to play down their humble beginnings, Lalu goes out of his way to keep reinforcing the fact that he is from a family of cowherds and had lived for many years in the quarters given to his brother as a government peon. While other politicians from northern India will spend Holi paying visits to other bigwigs or receiving guests at home and exchanging sweets, Lalu can be seen on the evening news drenched in coloured water and playing the dholak with gay abandon. It is not uncommon to find TV footage of Lalu talking to journalists wearing a sleeveless *ganji* (vest) and *dhoti*. Most other politicians would dread the thought of appearing in public dressed so informally, but for Lalu it is just one more opportunity to tell his supporters that he remains one of them, not a leader who has become so big as to live like the elite.

Lalu also knows, perhaps better than any other Indian politician, the public relations value of being able to laugh at oneself. Thus, when asked about the incongruity of his government preaching the virtues

of small families when he himself is a father of nine children—two sons and seven daughters—Lalu just chuckles. Similarly, when asked whether Rabri Devi is merely a de-jure Chief Minister and he is the man who really calls the shots, Lalu grins and says that Rabri is a good Indian wife and like all good Indian wives takes her husband's word as her command. The candour is disarming, as Lalu knows only too well. His whacky sense of humour is also evident from the fact that he named one of his daughters Misa—the acronym for Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA) that was misused by Indira Gandhi during the Emergency—because she was born while he was imprisoned under that Act. Another of Lalu's daughters is named Jalebi, a popular sweet.

It would be foolish, however, to view Lalu as merely a person with a sense of humour and as a good communicator. As he has revealed on more occasions than one, he is no simpleton when it comes to high-stake political battles. The ease with which he has managed to engineer defections from other parties—those friendly to him as well as those hostile to him—and keep his governments and Rabri Devi's governments afloat even when they were in a minority in the assembly is testimony to his consummate skills in the murky numbers game that has come to dominate many of India's legislatures. An equally telling indicator of his political acumen was the manner in which he transformed Jagannath Mishra, a former Congress Chief Minister of Bihar, from one of the biggest leaders in the state to someone who was seen as Lalu's lackey even by his own party colleagues.

He has also shown a better appreciation of the compulsions of coalition politics than many other Indian politicians, especially the dictum that there are no permanent friends or enemies in politics. When the RJD was formed in 1997, he was ostracised by many of his own former colleagues in the JD, as well as erstwhile allies in the United Front. In such a situation, many politicians would have become bitter and borne a grudge, but not Lalu, who has displayed a spirit of magnanimity. In this respect, he presents a sharp contrast to another Yadav leader, Mulayam Singh Yadav, who has never forgotten his brushes with his political rivals or opponents, be these in the Congress party (Sonia Gandhi's alleged disrespect towards Amar Singh before she staked her claim to form the Union government in

April 1999), or the Bahujan Samaj Party (the Lucknow guest house incident involving the attack on Mayawati by goons allegedly owing allegiance to the Samajwadi Party).

At the same time, Lalu also suffers from a weakness common to many Indian politicians. He has been unable to resist the temptation of flaunting his riches and his power. Thus, his daughter Misa's wedding was celebrated with much pomp and splendour that stood out starkly in an economically backward state. It was reported that his cohorts coerced car dealers to part with their brand new vehicles for a short period to ensure that the wedding guests could travel in style. He has also been quite brazen about the manner in which he has patronised criminals and goons. Mohammed Shahabuddin, the RJD MP from Siwan in northern Bihar is notorious in the area as a 'don' who has been accused of engineering the murder of several people including Chandrashekhar, a former president of the students' union at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, for daring to organise political opposition to him as part of a Naxalite group. Lalu's own brothers-in-law, Sadhu Yadav and Subhash Yadav, have been a law unto themselves in the state and, as in the case of Shahabuddin, the local administration and the police have never taken any action against their strong-arm tactics. To be fair to Lalu, however, it is not as if he is the only politician in Bihar—or indeed in India—to patronise criminals and musclemen. Yet, he and subsequently Rabri Devi have been unable to prevent Bihar from being seen as the most lawless of India's states.

The Samata Party first referred to the RJD's reign as 'jungle raj', an accusation that has subsequently been echoed by many others, including the BJP, the Congress and the CPI, not to mention the media. Lalu once attempted to laugh this away by quoting from a hit Hindi film song of the 1970s—*chabe koi mujhe junglee kahe, kabne do ji kabta rabe, hum pyaar ke toofanon mein ghire hain, hum pyaar karen* (loosely translated, 'I don't care if anybody calls me a savage, I'm caught up in a whirlwind of love, I just continue to love'). However, when *India Today* magazine organised a conclave in New Delhi and disclosed the results of a survey that ranked Bihar at the bottom of the list of all Indian states in terms of various socio-economic criteria, Lalu got Rabri Devi to walk out of the conclave in protest. He himself stayed on, since he was one of the speakers. In his speech, he argued

that Bihar's economic backwardness was due to the discriminatory attitude that New Delhi had adopted towards Bihar since it was ruled by a party hostile to the BJP. Lalu hasn't always bothered to seriously respond to the charge that economic development was a casualty under the RJD. For instance, there is this story—once again perhaps apocryphal—about a villager complaining to him that the road passing through the village had been potholed for years without anybody bothering to repair it. Lalu is said to have replied that smooth roads would only help those with fancy cars and would actually be a threat to the children and cattle in the village, who might be run over by speeding vehicles.

In a largely successful political career, Lalu had to face an embarrassing defeat in the 1999 Lok Sabha elections. In these elections, Lalu contested from Madhepura, considered a stronghold of the Yadavs and hence of the RJD supremo. The contest was particularly important for Lalu because the man opposing him as the NDA's candidate was his erstwhile colleague in the Janata Dal, Sharad Yadav. Lalu boasted that he would prove Sharad Yadav a mere paper tiger and a person without a mass base. Sharad Yadav, on the other hand, asserted that he would prove he was a taller leader of the Yadavs in Bihar than Lalu. As the campaign progressed, it was evident that the contest would be closer than initially expected. Nevertheless, few people expected Lalu to lose. So much so, that immediately after the polling was over, Sharad Yadav demanded a re-poll alleging massive rigging by RJD supporters. When the Election Commission refused to yield to the demand, Sharad Yadav alleged bias and announced that he would fast unto death unless a re-poll was ordered. The EC went ahead with the counting and Sharad Yadav was ultimately left facing the comic situation of wildly cheering supporters informing him that he could break his fast, since he had won in an election that he had earlier insisted had been rigged!

The second time Lalu Prasad had to eat humble pie was when his party lost the assembly elections in October 2005 after the UPA fell apart, as already mentioned. Exhibiting the resilience and political acumen for which he has always been known, Lalu quickly reinvented himself on the national scene. A man who had thus far been seen more as a populist and a bit of a buffoon by the urban middle classes was



being feted by the media as a minister who had turned around the Indian Railways. The Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, one of India's leading business schools, invited him to lecture its students on how the turnaround had happened and several media opinion polls indicated that he had higher approval ratings than even Finance Minister P. Chidambaram, who has for long been a darling of the middle and upper classes. Experts may question the extent to which Lalu contributed to the turnaround of the Railways, arguing that all he did was to allow his professional managers to have their way. To be fair to him, however, it is not very often that a politician as big as Lalu will let bureaucrats run the show without interfering too much.

### **Nitish Kumar**

The two tallest leaders of the Samata Party/JD(U), Nitish Kumar and George Fernandes, come from different backgrounds, the only common thread being their espousal of the socialist cause. Born in 1951, Nitish cut his political teeth in the JP movement—he was held under the notorious MISA in 1974 and was also jailed during the Emergency. Despite his claims to the contrary, his support base was confined largely to the Kurmis, an intermediate caste that is powerful in his Lok Sabha constituency, Barh. He became an MLA for the first time in 1985, and in 1987 became the president of the Yuva Lok Dal in Bihar. In 1989, when the Janata Dal was formed, he became the secretary general of the party's Bihar unit. The same year, he was elected to the Lok Sabha for the first time. He has been re-elected on four subsequent occasions from the same Parliamentary constituency and also from Nalanda.

Nitish Kumar's first stint as Union minister in the V. P. Singh government was a short one—from April to October 1990—when he served as Minister of State for Agriculture. He became all-India general secretary of the Janata Dal in 1991. He was appointed to the important post of Railway Minister in the second Vajpayee government in 1998. He moved to the Ministry of Surface Transport, then to the Agriculture Ministry. He moved back to the Rail Bhavan in March 2001 after Mamata Banerjee resigned as Railway Minister, holding additional charge of the Railway Ministry while continuing as Agriculture Minister. In July that year, he was relieved of the

Agriculture portfolio when Ajit Singh took over as Agriculture Minister. From March 1998 onwards, he continuously served in the Union Cabinet holding some portfolio or the other, barring the brief period between March 3, 2001—when he had to resign as Union minister to be sworn in as Chief Minister of Bihar—and March 20 when he rejoined the Union government.

One of the most controversial decisions taken by Nitish Kumar as Railway Minister was to reorganise the different railway ‘zones’ in the country. He decided to break the erstwhile Eastern Railways into three parts, including a large chunk that went into a newly created zone called the East Central Railways headquartered at Hajipur in Bihar. This move, although accompanied by less controversial decisions to create six more railway zones, was opposed by each and every political party in neighbouring West Bengal while being supported by every party in Bihar. Thus, while the CPI(M) and the RJD would act together on many national issues, the two parties found each other on opposite sides of the debate to create the new railway zone. Similarly, the Trinamool Congress headed by Nitish Kumar’s predecessor in Rail Bhavan, Mamata Banerjee, staunchly opposed the move to trifurcate the Eastern Railways although both the Trinamool Congress and the Samata Party were constituents of the NDA. Such indeed were the curious compulsions of coalition politics. At one stage, Mamata had issued veiled threats to quit the NDA unless Vajpayee reversed Nitish’s decision but that did not happen. Nitish, on his part, pointed out that the decision to create new railway zones had been taken when Ram Vilas Paswan was Railway Minister and that this decision had not been reversed during Mamata’s tenure as head of the Railway Ministry.

The other controversial decision taken by Nitish Kumar was his move to build an ‘extension’ of an existing railway line to make it run through three Parliamentary constituencies: his own (Barh), that of his party colleague and Union Defence Minister George Fernandes (Nalanda), and that of former Union Minister Dr. C.P. Thakur (Patna). The existing railway line, approved by the Planning Commission, ran between Fatuah and Islampur. Without obtaining fresh approval from the Planning Commission, Nitish Kumar carried out what was euphemistically described as a ‘material modification’

to the railway line to ensure that it would now run 123 kilometres from Neora to Daniama, Biharsharif, Barbigha and on to Sheikhpura. Since Neora and Sheikhpura were already connected, the 'modified' railway line was slated to run more or less parallel to an existing railway line. Nitish claimed that he was within his rights as Union Railway Minister to 'modify' the railway line by incurring an additional expenditure of Rs 255 crore not included in the annual Railway Budget, but his political opponents (as well as estranged MPs belonging to the Samata Party) argued that the Railway Minister had 'abused' his authority to benefit his constituents and those of his colleagues and allies.

Nitish Kumar had earned compliments in February 2002 when his Railway Budget had taken the politically difficult decision to increase passenger fares. His predecessor Mamata Banerjee had not increased passenger fares for two years in succession—a move that was described as 'populist'. In February 2003, however, faced with a 4 per cent drop in passenger earnings, Nitish Kumar took a leaf out of Mamata's book and chose not to touch passenger fares.

As already mentioned, Nitish was sworn in for the second time as Chief Minister of Bihar in November 2005. This time round there was no doubt about the stability of his government. During his first year in office, he maintained a rather low profile and enhanced his reputation of being a hard-working administrator. A major move that could have a long term impact on the politics of Bihar was his government's decision to reserve half the seats in all local bodies (panchayati raj institutions) for women.

### **George Fernandes**

If Nitish Kumar's term as Railway Minister was reasonably controversial, the political career of George Fernandes is replete with so many twists and turns that it is a difficult task to unravel the ideological contradictions that are apparent in his complex personality. Born in 1930 to a poor Christian couple from South Kanara district of the Mangalore region of Karnataka, in his youth Fernandes was sent to a seminary by his father to become a Catholic priest. Not only did he choose not to pursue his theological studies, he became

a confirmed socialist after a meeting with Ram Manohar Lohia. The man who would have been a priest became instead a firebrand labour leader and a 'younger brother' of socialist ideologue Madhu Limaye. In 1967, he captured national attention when he beat S.K. Patil—a senior Congress leader—to enter the Lok Sabha for the first time from a Mumbai constituency. Four years later, however, he had to eat humble pie when he not only lost in the 1971 general elections, but forfeited his deposit as the Congress rode the electoral wave generated by the euphoria of the war that year and the creation of Bangladesh. An angry Fernandes swore he would never again contest from Mumbai. He has stuck to that pledge.

He gained national prominence once again in 1974 when, as president of the All India Railwaymen's Federation, he spearheaded the longest ever strike by workers in the Indian Railways. In fact, the strike was one of the important factors that prompted the Emergency. During the strike, he was charged with sedition and attempt to destabilise the Indian state by, among other things, planting dynamite allegedly to blow up railway tracks in what came to be known as the Baroda Dynamite Case. He was jailed towards the fag end of the Emergency and was still in prison when the general elections were conducted in March 1977. He won from Muzaffarpur in Bihar by about 3.5 lakh votes, one of the largest margins of victory at that juncture. Since then, Bihar has served as Fernandes' political home although he has also contested from Bangalore.

As Industry Minister in Morarji Desai's government, George acquired international fame when he decided to throw out two giant multinational corporations from India, Coca-Cola and IBM (formerly International Business Machines), for not adhering to the provisions of the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act (FERA). Yet, during the same period, Fernandes was also accused of unduly favouring the German multinational Siemens by 'forcing' the Indian public sector engineering company, BHEL, to enter into a technical collaboration agreement with the German firm. Even though Fernandes insists till today that he remains a socialist at heart, he became the blue-eyed boy not only of Vajpayee and Advani but also the RSS and organisations affiliated to it. In fact, Fernandes is the only non-RSS, non-Hindu political leader to have featured on the cover of *Panchajanya* the

mouthpiece of the RSS. Asked to explain the contradiction between his personal economic ideology and the policies followed by the Vajpayee government, he argues that Narasimha Rao had surrendered India's economic sovereignty to the World Trade Organisation and that successor governments have no choice but to continue along the same path.

Many years earlier, in July 1979, when the Morarji Desai government was teetering on the brink of collapse, Fernandes had made an impassioned speech in the Lok Sabha defending the government during a vote of confidence. Within days, however, he had switched sides and became an equally vociferous supporter of Charan Singh, Desai's rival who deposed him as Prime Minister with the support of the Congress. When asked to explain his sudden turnaround, Fernandes claimed that he was not aware at the time that he was making the speech in Parliament, that many of his close political associates like Madhu Limaye and Biju Patnaik had already decided to ditch Morarji Desai and instead support Charan Singh. When he subsequently learnt about this, he says he was left with the choice of either falling out with his associates or eating his own words. He says he chose the latter, knowing that it was bound to adversely affect his personal credibility.

His ideological somersaults have not been confined to the economic and political spheres. While he was in jail in 1974, he had stayed up all night to write a long diatribe against Indira Gandhi's decision to conduct nuclear tests at Pokhran. 'Should any government discuss such a proposition [meaning, building nuclear weapons] seriously without first taking steps to provide all citizens of the country with food, clothes, shelter, pure drinking water, education and a chance to live a life befitting human beings, such a government can be called nothing but criminal,' Fernandes wrote (in what was later published as a booklet) while describing talk of building a nuclear bomb as so much 'bombast'. Twenty-four years later, after the Vajpayee government had conducted nuclear tests in May 1998, as Union Defence Minister George Fernandes was to remark that he was proud of the achievements of Indian scientists in making India a nuclear weapons state. His explanation for his about-turn was that there is one aspect of national life that comes above everything else—and that is national security.

One consistent aspect of Fernandes' worldview through the many metamorphoses he has undergone is his dislike for China. At the time of the Pokharan II blasts, he had reportedly stated that India's nuclear programme should not be seen as being aimed primarily against Pakistan and that China was a larger and perhaps more dangerous 'enemy' in India's neighbourhood. After his remarks raised a hue and cry in diplomatic circles, Fernandes clarified that this view had been stated in successive annual reports brought out by India's Ministry of Defence. But Fernandes' views on China may have changed after his visit to Beijing as Union Defence Minister in May 2003.

The change in Fernandes' position on civil liberties has not been any less dramatic than the volte face in his views on nuclear disarmament. As a man who has been associated with Amnesty International and the People's Union of Civil Liberties (PUCL), Fernandes had a history of opposing all 'draconian' laws. In fact, he had once stated in Parliament that the only purpose served by laws like TADA was to suppress legitimate trade union activity at the behest of influential business groups. Yet, Fernandes had no compunctions supporting the enactment of POTA. Still, these apparent ideological contradictions pale into insignificance when one considers how Fernandes' views on the communal character of the BJP and the RSS have changed over the years.

Till 1996, Fernandes had consistently opposed the Sangh Parivar. As a matter of fact, an important reason why the Janata Party split in 1979 was his insistence that the two ministers in the Morarji Desai government belonging to the erstwhile Bharatiya Jana Sangh—that is, Foreign Minister Vajpayee and Information & Broadcasting Minister Advani—should give up their 'dual' allegiances since they continued to be members of the RSS although their party (the BJS) had formally merged with the Janata Party.

After his decision to ally the Samata Party with the BJP in 1996, George Fernandes was attacked time and again and reminded of his speeches and statements against the BJP and the RSS following the demolition of the Babri masjid in December 1992. Interestingly, even at this stage, Fernandes and his party did not question the characterisation of the RSS and the BJP as communal organisations. They merely argued that in the specific context of Bihar, casteism

and corruption were bigger and more immediate dangers than communalism. They had, the argument went, joined hands with the lesser evil to defeat the bigger one.

In the years since then, Fernandes has changed his position even further. Today, he insists that the RSS and the BJP are transformed from what they once were and are no longer communal. The very fact that he—a Christian—had been given such a high position in the BJP-led government and treated with great respect by the RSS and its front organisations is illustrative of how they have changed, he asserts. Perhaps the most telling indicator of how much Fernandes' view of the RSS and BJP has changed over the years is the fact that the Samata Party remained silent even when other allies of the BJP in the NDA kicked up a fuss about the big brother trying to 'impose' its agenda on the NDA. Whether it was the Gujarat riots of 2002, the murder of Australian missionary Graham Staines in 2000, or the controversy over the VHP's Ayodhya agitation, the one 'secular' ally of the BJP that steadfastly refused to criticise the BJP or even the VHP was Fernandes' Samata Party. As a matter of fact, even when individual leaders of the Samata Party like spokesperson Shambhu Srivastwa expressed their dissatisfaction with the communal agenda of the Sangh Parivar, the party was quick to dissociate itself from such views.

As Defence Minister, Fernandes took great pains to project an image of being the soldier's man. More than any other minister, he repeatedly visited jawans at the military base located on top of the Siachen glacier—the world's highest battleground and one of the coldest. The same individual who had participated in innumerable anti-war demonstrations all over the world did not find it incongruous to transform himself into an ardent advocate of India's military might. One of his most controversial decisions as Defence Minister was his removal of Chief of Naval Staff Admiral Vishnu Bhagwat. The decision strained relations between the bureaucracy and the military establishment as never before. But Vajpayee and Advani stood steadfastly behind Fernandes on this occasion, as they did on most other occasions. As a matter of fact, as convener of the NDA, he revelled in his role as the Prime Minister's trouble-shooter—from rushing to Chennai to placate a recalcitrant Jayalalithaa during the second Vajpayee government, to keeping in regular touch with a sulking Mamata Banerjee.

Usually clad in a cotton kurta and pyjama, 'socialist' George Fernandes' 'clean' image took a beating like never before when *tehelka.com*, a news and current affairs website, produced secretly-recorded videotapes in which Fernandes' companion and Samata Party general secretary Jaya Jaitly was heard discussing defence deals with two journalists posing as arms dealers. What made matters worse was that the videotape had been recorded in Fernandes' official residence. The *tehelka* tapes also contained recordings of conversations with the then treasurer of the Samata Party R.K. Jain (who was promptly sacked), bragging about how he could swing defence contracts because of his proximity to Fernandes. The Defence Minister's explanation of how a man like Jain could become party treasurer was not particularly convincing. Soon after the *tehelka* tapes (that also depicted the then BJP president Bangaru Laxman receiving wads of currency notes) were made public in March 2001, Fernandes put in his papers. He had insisted that he wanted to resign before he actually did but that Vajpayee did not wish to accept his resignation letter.

The government appointed a one-man inquiry commission headed by a retired judge of the Supreme Court to inquire into the revelations made in the *tehelka* tapes, but well before the commission could arrive at a conclusion Fernandes was reinducted into the Union Cabinet later that year. Soon thereafter, in December, the Comptroller and Auditor General of India published a report alleging that the Indian Army had purchased coffins from the US for those killed during the Kargil war at highly inflated prices. The coffins had arrived well after the conflagration was over. The scandal, dubbed 'Coffingate', also dented Fernandes' image as a 'clean' minister who took care to uphold the interests of ordinary soldiers. After he returned to the Cabinet, the entire Opposition took a decision not to recognise Fernandes as Defence Minister and boycotted proceedings of Parliament that involved interacting with him. This decision was broken as late as May 2003 by a few Congress MPs including Jagmeet Singh Brar—who went on to apologise for his actions but was nevertheless reprimanded and removed from his position as party whip. Other Congress MPs who had violated the party's directive to boycott Fernandes in Parliament included Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Digvijay Singh's brother Laxman Singh and former Union minister K.P. Singhdeo.



Not surprisingly, after the UPA came to power, it directed the CBI to inquire into the allegations against Fernandes and his associates, decisions that were equally predictably described as politically motivated by him. Out of power and out of the limelight, George Fernandes seemed to have lost a bit of his ‘firebrand’ reputation. What made things worse for him was the fact that even his own party compatriots in the JD(U) did not seem particularly enamoured of his legendary leadership qualities and had marginalised him to the extent that he and Jaya Jaitly have sought to revive the Samata Party.

### **Ram Vilas Paswan**

When Ram Vilas Paswan first entered parliamentary politics in 1977, he seemed to be a politician with a bright future. He made his presence felt in the first Lok Sabha elections he contested from Hajipur, setting a new record for the highest margin of victory in any Lok Sabha constituency up to that point—4.24 lakh votes. He was to subsequently break his own record by winning from the same constituency in 1989 by 5.05 lakh votes, a record later broken by Narasimha Rao when he won from Nandyal in Andhra Pradesh by over 6 lakh votes in a by-election.

By the late 1980s, Paswan had not only made a habit of winning Lok Sabha elections by huge margins, he had also acquired a profile well beyond his constituency or even his state. He had started being recognised as an important leader of the dalits even in areas like western Uttar Pradesh and the outskirts of Delhi. So much so that the Dalit Panthers—an organisation floated by some of Paswan’s supporters—were able to organise fairly impressive rallies in western UP. The extent of Paswan’s fan following can be gauged from one of the slogans often raised at these rallies, ‘*Upar aasmaan, neeche Paswan*’ (there’s the sky above and on the earth there’s Paswan). Analysts saw in him the first dalit leader after Jagjivan Ram (who was also from Bihar) to have a support base extending across a wide swathe of the Hindi heartland.

Right up to the mid-1990s, Paswan remained on a steadily climbing political career graph. In 1988, he became the general secretary of the

newly-formed Janata Dal and a secretary of the National Front that the JD had forged with the left parties and some regional parties. When the National Front led by V.P. Singh came to power in 1989, Paswan—who was barely 43 at the time—became a Cabinet Minister, handling the Labour and Welfare portfolios. When the United Front came to power in 1996, Paswan not only got the prestigious Railways portfolio, he was also designated the leader of the Lok Sabha. This unusual situation of the Prime Minister not being the leader of the lower house came about because both H.D. Deve Gowda and I.K. Gujral his successor as Prime Minister, were members of the Rajya Sabha and not the Lok Sabha. Even if the position came to Paswan partly by default, it was an indication of his political stature.

Since then, Paswan's career seems to have stagnated, while his politics have been perceived as crassly opportunist. By the time of the 1998 elections, the Janata Dal in Bihar had badly disintegrated. Having survived the exit of people like George Fernandes and Nitish Kumar to form the Samata Party in 1994, the Janata Dal in 1998 was struggling to cope with the serious damage done by Lalu Yadav's decision to split the party and form the RJD in 1997. In 1998, therefore, Paswan and Sharad Yadav were the only leaders of any consequence in the JD in Bihar and of these Sharad Yadav was hardly a person with a huge mass base in the state. Not surprisingly, the JD fared very poorly in the 1998 Lok Sabha elections in Bihar. Though Paswan comfortably retained his own seat, no other candidate of the JD won from Bihar. Paswan could, however, draw some consolation from the fact that his party had polled close to 9 per cent of the total votes despite having fought on its own.

When the second Vajpayee government faced its crucial vote of confidence in April 1999, after the AIADMK had withdrawn support, Paswan was among those who spoke strongly against the 'communal' BJP and voted against the government. Yet, when the 1999 Lok Sabha elections were held barely six months later, the JD led by Paswan and Sharad Yadav had made common cause with the NDA and formally joined the Front. Like the Samata Party, Paswan was now rather unconvincingly trying to argue that his alliance with the BJP was not opportunistic but based on the principle of fighting corruption and jungle raj in Bihar.

Paswan's ability to attract as much as 9 per cent of votes in Bihar may have amounted to little in the 1998 elections, but in 1999, this proved a decisive advantage for the NDA against the RJD–Congress–left alliance. The NDA won as many as 40 of the 54 seats in Bihar. The Samata Party and the Janata Dal, which had fought under the common symbol of the Janata Dal (United), won 16 seats. The RJD was reduced to just seven seats. Paswan's reward for his role in bringing about this scenario came in the form of the coveted Telecommunications portfolio in the Union Cabinet.

As Telecommunications Minister, Paswan lost much of his earlier image as a dynamic leader. Instead, he came to be seen as a man more interested in doling out favours to cronies by setting up various official bodies to accommodate them. Speculation also started mounting about whether it was just a coincidence that some of his policy decisions as Minister suited the business interests of powerful industrial houses.

In September 2001, Paswan was ultimately relieved of the telecom portfolio in the face of mounting criticism by the media and others. He was assigned the Coal and Mines portfolio, which was seen as a distinct demotion from his earlier job. Already smarting under this 'insult', Paswan realised that his future within the NDA was dim when the BJP formed a coalition government with the BSP in Uttar Pradesh in March 2002. It was clear to most observers that BSP leader Mayawati would use her new-found clout with the BJP to try and cut Paswan to size. Given the fact that Paswan, like Mayawati, is a dalit leader, the latter was keen to ensure that Paswan's political stature did not reach a point where he could become a threat to her mass base in UP or become a rival dalit leader at the national level.

However, Paswan could not be seen to be exiting the NDA because of a political or ego clash with another dalit leader. He, therefore, needed a credible reason for his exit. The communal riots in Gujarat provided him with just the excuse he was looking for. He joined various other allies of the BJP in asking for the resignation of Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi for his dubious role in the manner in which the state government dealt with the riots, but unlike the others quit the NDA in April 2003 when the BJP refused to sack Modi.

Paswan then formed his own party, the Lok Jan Shakti Party. As the 1998, 1999 and 2004 Lok Sabha elections and the October 2005 assembly elections have taught him, he can be a formidable force in Bihar as part of an alliance, but can hope to win very little contesting without any allies. Interestingly, however, Paswan seems to believe that while forging alliances with either the NDA or the RJD is the right strategy for Lok Sabha elections, his interests are better served by staying away from both as far as assembly polls are concerned. Perhaps this stems from the calculation that a lone MP can hardly be a kingmaker in New Delhi, but a party that gets a dozen or more seats in the assembly could hold the key to government formation. Unfortunately for Paswan, as already mentioned, his calculations backfired in the two rounds of assembly polls in Bihar in 2005. Even his transparent attempt at gaining brownie points among the Muslims by insisting after the February 2005 elections that he would be willing to support an RJD government provided it was led by a Muslim, seems to have fallen flat.

As a Union Minister in the NDA government, Paswan chose populism as his USP (Unique Selling Proposition). As Communications Minister, he announced that all calls on the network of the state-owned Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) network over a distance of upto 250 km would be treated as local calls. He also gave all employees of the Department of Telecommunications (DoT) free telephones at home, a move that was castigated by the media as a case of the minister buying himself some cheap popularity with public money, but which Paswan defended on the grounds that it was nothing unusual for even a private sector firm to give its workers its own product or service either free or at a huge discount. So what was wrong if BSNL did the same? As Minister for Chemicals and Fertilisers in the UPA government, he made a number of publicised efforts to control prices of medicines with limited success.

## **Chapter 6**

# **Regional Parties: Increasingly Influential**

### **The Telugu Desam Party: NTR, the Populist; Chandrababu Naidu, the Opportunist**

Andhra Pradesh, formed in 1953 out of the Telugu speaking areas of the erstwhile Madras province, is geographically the largest and most populous of the four states of south India. For nearly three decades after the state came into existence, it was ruled by the Congress party. Between November 1956 and January 1983, the month Nandamuri Taraka Rama Rao (better known as NTR) was first sworn in as Chief Minister, the state had seen eight Congress chief ministers. One Chief Minister, Bhavanam Venkatram remained in his position for only seven months.

Venting his anger against the Congress headed by Indira Gandhi, NTR, who founded the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) after having acted in some 300 films, wrote the following in the first manifesto of the party that he founded:

The 35 years of Congress misrule has created such a mess that the Telugus have to hang their heads in shame. Despite the overwhelming majority of the ruling party in the state assembly, political instability has become the order of the day. The enthronement of four and the dethronement of three chief ministers within the span of five years is an indication of the sorry state of affairs. The elected representatives of the people have become mere pawns....

The way the Congress functioned under both Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi was to a great extent responsible for NTR's meteoric

rise to power and his successful projection of himself and his party as upholders of the 'self-respect' of the Telugu speaking people. Former President Neelam Sanjiva Reddy ruled Andhra Pradesh as Chief Minister from November 1956 till June 1964, after whom K. Brahmananda Reddy ascended the seat of power in Hyderabad. He was rudely removed by the Congress high command in September 1971 to make way for P.V. Narasimha Rao, who eventually went on to become India's first Prime Minister from the south in June 1991. During successive Congress governments, all important decisions in the state—including the transfer of middle-level officials—were referred to New Delhi. In fact, the Congress in Andhra Pradesh was deeply divided into at least three major factions led by Narasimha Rao, M. Chenna Reddy and T. Anjaiah (all of whom served as CMs at different points of time).

Another factor that surely must have contributed to the Andhra Pradesh electorate's disenchantment with New Delhi was the fact that under Congress rule and even thereafter, Andhra Pradesh remained the least developed of the four southern states. A study conducted by the Planning Commission had estimated that the state had slipped from 8th position in the country in 1961 to 14th position in 1978. Though the literacy rate in the state went up from under 30 per cent in 1981 to just over 45 per cent 10 years later, Andhra Pradesh still lagged behind in almost all other respects.

Besides exploiting the resentment born out of these factors, NTR was also able to channelise the attempt by the Kammas (whose standing in Andhra Pradesh is not dissimilar to that of the Yadavs in UP or Bihar) to grab the reins of power from the Brahmins and the Reddys who had traditionally dominated Andhra Pradesh politics. The dominance of the Reddy community can be gauged from the fact that approximately one out of four members of the legislative assembly belonged to this caste.

In the 1983 assembly elections, the newly-formed TDP swept to power winning 203 seats out of the 294 seats in the assembly with over 46 per cent of the popular vote. The Congress won only 60 seats despite retaining more than one-third of the share of the total votes cast. NTR stormed to power as Chief Minister within barely nine months of having formed his own political party. The TDP

was the main Opposition party in the Eighth Lok Sabha (1984–89) during Rajiv Gandhi's tenure as Prime Minister and the party joined the National Front led by V.P. Singh after he became Prime Minister in December 1989.

There are a number of similarities between the TDP and parties like the DMK and AIADMK in Tamil Nadu. One was the whipping up of sub-national sentiments. The second related to the fact that like NTR, almost all the important leaders of the DMK and the AIADMK have been associated with films. NTR's was a household name in Andhra and having spent all his life in show-business, he excelled in using all forms of media to project himself as the saviour of Telugu pride, a just ruler who was a *sanyasi* (saint) as well. He portrayed himself as someone who desired nothing but the welfare of the poor, having accumulated enough riches of his own thanks to his flourishing career in cinema. He played out on celluloid the characters of *Krishna*, *Karna*, *Bhishma*, *Rama*—just about everybody's favourite Hindu mythological figures.

As a political leader, NTR traversed the length and breadth of his state in an adorned vehicle he called the *Chaitanya ratham* (Chaitanya's chariot) long before L.K. Advani's *rath yatra* aboard a similar vehicle. Above all, NTR assured voters that they would get rice for Rs 2 per kg through the ration shops and children in schools would be provided free mid-day meals. Like Tamil Nadu's Dravidian parties, NTR asserted time and again that the Union of India had discriminated against states like Andhra Pradesh. Right through the early 1980s, NTR aligned himself and his party with all those who supported his theme of the economic neglect of the state by the central government in New Delhi. Yet, the public rhetoric of NTR was different in one important respect from that of the Dravidian parties. He never brought up the issue of secession from the Union. On the contrary, NTR said he wanted to integrate Andhra Pradesh with the Indian nation. At the same time, he also stood for local autonomy.

The Congress used every trick at its command to oust NTR's party from power in Andhra Pradesh. In fact, NTR was elected to his post no less than four times in 11 years, first in January 1983, then in September 1984, again in March 1985 and for the fourth and last time, in December 1994. On each occasion the Congress tried to

remove him, he emerged stronger. But there was one problem with the charismatic NTR: his populism was not entirely sustainable in economic terms. The Rs 2-a-kilo rice scheme as well as the mid-day meal scheme drained the state's exchequer. The TDP lost the assembly elections in March 1989 and the party's vote share came down by almost 10 per cent to under 37 per cent—the TDP had 74 MLAs against 181 owing allegiance to the Congress in the legislative assembly.

The TDP under NTR was, however, able to bounce back five years later in the November 1994 elections winning a record 213 seats in the 292-member assembly. NTR's charisma faded somewhat towards the end of his life and his fourth and last term as Chief Minister. A widower, his decision to marry his official biographer Lakshmi Parvathi was disapproved of by many, notably his son-in-law N. Chandrababu Naidu with whom his relationship was often strained. Naidu made no secret about the fact that he was most unhappy that NTR, by then over the age of 70, had chosen to marry a once-married woman who was then half his age. And, he was upset by NTR's opposition to his marriage to his eldest daughter. Even if NTR's mass appeal was on the wane at that time, his death on account of a heart attack on January 18, 1996, ensured that he would remain a martyr in the minds of many in Andhra Pradesh. Shortly before NTR died, his astute 45-year-old son-in-law Chandrababu Naidu (or Babu as he is often called) had split the party he had founded. NTR witnessed to his mortification an overwhelming majority of MLAs belonging to the TDP switching sides to join Naidu.

Naidu apparently lacked his father-in-law's appeal but he turned out to be a durable politician. By the turn of the century, in a period of less than five years, he had acquired a high profile in India and abroad. He became one of the country's best-known Chief Ministers the world over thanks to his propagation of the virtues of information technology and his self-projected image as the Chief Executive Officer of Andhra Pradesh. Naidu had evidently come a long way from the days when he was known as an activist of the Youth Congress. Public memory is short and few remember Naidu as the person who had stood staunchly behind Sanjay Gandhi well after the infamous 19-month Emergency.



Born on April 20, 1950 in Naravaripally in Chittoor district, Chandrababu Naidu became an MLA for the first time in 1978 from the Chandragiri constituency from the same district on a Congress ticket. He served for a while as director of the state's Small Industries Development Corporation. He even served as a minister in the state government headed by K. Vijayabhaskar Reddy. Between 1980 and 1983, he held various ministerial portfolios in the state government including those of Archives, Cinematography, Technical Education, Animal Husbandry, Dairy Development, Public Libraries and Minor Irrigation. He also served as head of a state government body (*Karshak Parishad*) looking after farmers' interests, before he quit the Congress and joined the recently founded TDP. He initially served as general secretary of the party. In 1989, Naidu was elected from Kuppam and was re-elected in 1994 from the same constituency by a handsome margin of around 57,000 votes. Thereafter, he was entrusted with the crucial portfolio of Finance and Revenue by NTR.

Naidu and Lakshmi Parvathi perceived each other as competitors for NTR's attention and Naidu was not averse to hijacking the party and splitting it to quash Lakshmi Parvathi's political ambitions. A month after NTR's death, in February 1996, Lakshmi Parvathi bitterly complained in an interview to a journalist: 'I will not sleep till I teach Naidu a lesson' (*Outlook*, March 13, 1996). She—like NTR's son Haribabu, who later parted ways with Naidu in 1998—proved no match at all for Naidu's masterly political skills. Both were eventually consigned to oblivion and remained outside the public eye.

Chandrababu Naidu's political stature rose really rapidly after he became convenor of the centre-left United Front, the 13-party coalition that came to power in New Delhi in the wake of the May 1996 general elections. After the fall of the UF government headed by I.K. Gujral and after the outcome of the February 1998 elections that saw the second Vajpayee government comprising the NDA coming to power became known, the computer-savvy politician from Andhra Pradesh demonstrated his astute abilities yet again. He dropped the United Front like a proverbial hot potato and instructed the 12 MPs belonging to the TDP in the 12th Lok Sabha to abstain from voting against the second Vajpayee government in the motion of confidence adopted by the Lok Sabha. For his support, which

was critical for the new government to survive, Vajpayee appointed Naidu's nominee, G.M.C. Balayogi as the Speaker of the Lok Sabha—in fact, Balayogi became the first (and thus far, the only) dalit to hold this important post. (Balayogi died on March 3, 2002 in a helicopter crash.)

A former Congressman himself, Naidu persuasively argued that the very existence of the TDP depended on it continuing to oppose the Congress. Naidu's opportunism paid him rich political dividends. Although he realised that he risked alienating nearly 20 per cent of the voters of his state—mainly Muslims and Christians—he took a calculated risk and aligned the TDP with the BJP after ditching the communists. In the September–October 1999 Lok Sabha elections that were conducted simultaneously with the assembly elections in Andhra Pradesh, the TDP was able to return to power albeit with a reduced majority. The Congress improved its performance but not enough to threaten Naidu's government.

The media often painted Chandrababu Naidu as the most 'forward looking' among India's Chief Ministers. He too was adept at managing the media and his visit to the US to meet, among others, Bill Gates, was widely publicised. He successfully sought to place Hyderabad on the 'netlas' of the world and set up a high profile educational institution, the Indian School of Business. He also headed the first state government in India that successfully obtained a huge Rs 2,200 crore loan from the World Bank despite the economic sanctions imposed against India in the immediate aftermath of the nuclear tests conducted by the Vajpayee government in May 1998.

Unlike his one-time mentor and father-in-law, Naidu apparently shunned the economic populism that was associated with NTR. He cut subsidies by increasing power tariffs, water rates and bus fares. The state government he headed reduced subsidies on distribution of rice and increased taxes on professionals and traders. While Naidu said he wanted to make Andhra Pradesh the fastest growing and economically most advanced state in India, he, more than anyone else, surely knew he had a long way to go. Like many other states, the Andhra Pradesh government remained—and still remains—steeped in debt and teetered periodically on the brink of bankruptcy. Even as Hyderabad glittered and glowed and promised to match

Bangalore as the infotech capital of the country, if not the world, the rural population in the state remained vulnerable to epidemics and penurious farmers committed suicide when they were unable to repay loans. Extremist groups, including the People's War (earlier the People's War Group), a Naxalite outfit, continued to indulge in acts of violence with impunity. Naxalite groups remain active in many parts of the state, including Telengana, which has a long history of violent insurgency from the pre-independence period when peasants rose in arms against the Nizam of Hyderabad's mercenaries as well as the British.

Naidu, like other Chief Ministers of Andhra Pradesh, equivocated on the issue of dealing with the Naxalites. Attempts at initiating a dialogue with the People's War were interspersed with periods during which the state government cracked down hard on the Naxalites and the latter responded in a similar manner. During one such phase, in October 2003, Naidu came perilously close to being assassinated by a landmine planted along a route he was travelling. The mine exploded as his car passed over it, killing his driver and seriously injuring one of his ministers who was travelling with him. Naidu himself suffered relatively minor injuries. His subsequent decision to call for early elections to the state assembly was perceived as an attempt to cash in on the 'sympathy' factor. If so, the attempt was a disastrous failure, as we shall see.

While asking for enhanced central financial assistance to tackle the activities of Naxalite groups in Andhra Pradesh, Naidu strongly opposed the Vajpayee government's position on carving out smaller states from big ones. He certainly did not want Telengana to become a separate state. Naidu and the TDP also opposed the position of the BJP hardliners on the Ayodhya issue. On August 3, 2003, Naidu reiterated his party's position that it was in favour of the Supreme Court resolving the dispute over the construction of the Ram temple. Earlier, in February 2003, he had reportedly said exactly the same thing during his meetings in New Delhi with BJP leaders, including Vajpayee and Advani.

Naidu time and again affirmed the TDP's support for the BJP-led NDA government, but emphasised that its support was contingent on the government sticking to the Common Minimum Programme of

the NDA. For instance, a resolution passed by the party's *mahanadu* (or convention) held at Tirupati in May 2002 stated that the TDP would 'not continue its support blindly' if the BJP introduced its own agenda which was different from the agenda of the NDA.

While occasionally asserting its 'independence' from the BJP on issues like Ayodhya and while underlining the fact that the TDP was not a part of the government or the NDA, Naidu was not averse to arm-twisting the Union government to ensure that more funds flowed from New Delhi to Hyderabad. He successfully lobbied with the Vajpayee government to ensure that more money was given to the state for various natural calamities and to ensure that the public sector Food Corporation of India procured large quantities of rice from farmers in the state. The state government was at the forefront while representing before the 11th Finance Commission that it should not be 'discriminated' against for having 'performed' well— that is, by bringing down the rate of growth of population and by improving education and health care facilities in the state. The TDP was also among the political parties that had vehemently opposed the decision of the then Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha to increase the officially administered prices of fertilisers in his budget speech delivered in February 2002.

On one occasion it appeared as if the ideological rift between the TDP and the NDA government would widen. This was during the communal riots in Gujarat between March and May 2002. Less than six weeks after the communal riots began in Gujarat, on April 11, 2002, the TDP formally called for the ouster of Narendra Modi. At a meeting of the politbureau of the TDP—the only common aspect of the communist parties and the TDP is the name of their highest decision-making bodies—the party adopted a resolution asking the BJP for an immediate change in leadership in Gujarat. The TDP was severely critical of Modi's administration and leadership and said the Gujarat government had 'failed miserably' in discharging its responsibilities in an impartial and effective manner. The party was also critical of the state government not providing adequate relief to the victims of the communal riots. It said that there had been 'erosion of public confidence' because of the Gujarat government's failure to provide 'just governance' and that it was important at that juncture

for the state to provide a 'healing touch'. Asserting that secularism is one of the 'fundamental tenets' of the TDP, the party resolution did not stop at criticising the Modi government but added that the communal riots in Gujarat had 'tarnished India's image' as a liberal, modern and secular society.

It was reported in newspapers that Naidu had been told in confidence by Vajpayee that Modi would be replaced in Gujarat and it was this 'assurance' that emboldened the TDP to attack the BJP, using the kind of strong language that it did, language that would normally have been associated with a party of the Opposition and not an ally of the ruling coalition. It was further claimed that Vajpayee's statement at the Goa conclave of the BJP in support of Narendra Modi came as a surprise to Naidu. Whereas it is difficult to verify if there was any grain of truth in these speculative reports in the media, what is a fact is that the 28 MPs of the TDP abstained from voting in the Lok Sabha on May 1, 2002 after a 16-hour debate during which the Opposition unsuccessfully sought to pass a motion castigating the government for the communal riots in Gujarat.

Even on the eve of the Gujarat assembly elections that took place in December 2002 in a communally charged atmosphere, on November 17 the TDP publicly backed the order of the Election Commission banning religious rallies from being held in Gujarat. The party categorically stated: 'religion and politics should not be mixed'. Naidu, presumably with an eye towards the Muslim voter, would periodically seek to underline his party's secular character and would emphasise the fact that the TDP was only supporting the BJP-led NDA government 'from outside', that the party was not a part of the coalition government and that it was not interested in the perquisites of power. The TDP was also at the forefront of the protests in Parliament over the issue of imposing a ban on cow slaughter. Naidu reportedly told Vajpayee that not only was the issue not part of the NDA's agenda, it certainly could not be considered a priority for the country.

What Naidu's supporters claimed was his 'independent' position was predictably perceived by his political opponents as a 'hypocritical' stand. Like NTR, Naidu had travelled extensively across Andhra Pradesh and sought to temper his pro-rich image (played up by his

political opponents) by initiating schemes like the Janmabhoomi scheme: a programme of community participation to build projects in rural areas. His critics complained that Naidu's policies widened the gap between the rich and the poor, that he was too opportunistic to be a reliable ally, and that he believed in no ideology other than the ideology of power. His supporters, on the other hand, contended that more than most other Indian politicians, Naidu understood the importance of modern technology and its potential to radically change the lives of the majority of Indians, especially those living in rural areas. He was perceived as a zealous economic liberaliser pleading for higher inflows of foreign investment in the poorest state in south India.

The image did not help him in the state assembly elections held together with the countrywide 14th general elections in April–May 2004. The electorate of Andhra Pradesh summarily rejected the TDP. Naidu was clearly perceived as a political leader whose programmes had benefitted only the affluent. In his zeal to spread the message about how important information technology was to the ordinary person in the state, he had forgotten to commiserate with the families of farmers who had committed suicide because of their inability to repay usurious loans obtained from local moneylenders. His political opponents said he had time only for the big 'Bills' (Clinton and Gates), not for poor villagers.

The mainstream media had played up Naidu's so-called achievements to such an extent that after he lost the elections, the former Union Information & Broadcasting Minister S. Jaipal Reddy sarcastically remarked that if one went only by what a large section of the media (especially the English media) claimed, the people of Andhra Pradesh sprung a huge surprise on the people of India by voting the TDP out of power. This section of the mainstream media had not merely lapped up everything Naidu claimed (he was rather savvy in dealing with journalists), it had completely ignored the intensive campaign launched by his principal political opponent, Congress leader Y.S. Rajashekhara Reddy, who had walked over 1,000 km from village to village in the peak of summer, traversing virtually the length and breadth of the state. Out of power, Naidu was contrite and apparently apologetic for having ignored the poor. He later tried

briefly to revive a Third Front by aligning with the Samajwadi Party and making overtures to the left by distancing the TDP from the BJP. In the second half of 2007, as anti-incumbency sentiments started apparently mounting against the Congress government, Naidu and the TDP got closer to the CPI(M) as the left party attacked the state government for the police firing on farmers on land-related disputes.

## **Friend or Foe?—Changing Equations in Tamil Nadu**

Tamil Nadu can lay claim to at least one unique feature in Indian politics—it is the only state in which no national party has ever been in power in the last four decades, to be precise, since 1967. Nothing can illustrate the lasting impact of the ‘Dravidian’ movement in the state better than this simple fact. Yet, ironically, each of the several pillars on which that movement was built has been dismantled by parties that are offshoots of the movement. The pillars of the movement were anti-Brahminism, an antipathy to the north of India and its predominant language, Hindi, atheism, rationalism—none of these is in great evidence today in the inheritors of the Dravidian movement, so much so that Jayalalithaa of the AIADMK is herself a Brahmin. Also, her government was one jump ahead of even the BJP in pushing through a law ostensibly aimed at checking forcible religious conversions. As for the hostility to the north, both the DMK and the AIADMK have, since 1998, had alliances with the BJP, a party that was till a few years back almost entirely confined to north India and was seen as the most ardent champion of a unitary nation in which the hegemony of Hindus and Hindi was emphasised.

Tamil Nadu till recently had more political parties represented in the Lok Sabha than almost any other Indian state. The 39 MPs that the state sent to the Lok Sabha in the 2004 general elections belonged to six political parties. (Uttar Pradesh has representatives of eight parties in the 14th Lok Sabha.) In the 1999 elections, however, there were eight parties representing these 39 Lok Sabha constituencies in Tamil Nadu and in the 1998 elections there were nine. Despite this proliferation of parties, the state had not had a coalition government since its inception. Even when alliances have won assembly elections, it had invariably been the case that the leading party in the winning

alliance secured a majority of the assembly seats on its own, enabling it to form a government without having to accommodate the junior partners. This pattern changed after the May 2006 elections, in which the DMK—which led the UPA to power in the state—did not have a majority of seats in the assembly. In fact, with 96 seats in the 234-member assembly, the DMK was well short of a majority. Yet, none of the other coalition partners joined the government which was formed by the DMK.

Till as late as 1998, the only national parties with any presence in Tamil Nadu were the Congress, the CPI and the CPI(M). The BJP had not won even a state assembly seat, leave alone a Lok Sabha constituency in the state. Even the three national parties that did have a presence in the state were in no position to contest on their own and had to align themselves to one of the two main Dravidian parties—the DMK or the AIADMK—to be able to make any significant headway in terms of winning seats in either the assembly or the Lok Sabha. In 1998, Jayalalithaa surprised everybody by tying up with the BJP for the Lok Sabha elections. Political pundits, opinion polls and exit polls all suggested that the experiment would be a failure. The results proved all of them completely wrong, with the AIADMK-led alliance winning 36 of the 39 seats in the state. Besides the AIADMK and the BJP, the coalition included a clutch of smaller parties—many of which had come into being only in the 1990s—like the Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK), the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK), the Tamizhaga Rajiv Congress (TRC) and the Janata Party. The BJP had finally managed to register its presence in Tamil Nadu and as subsequent events indicated, it was there to stay. Even today, the BJP would be hard put to win a single seat on its own strength, but since the 1998 general elections the party has made a significant breakthrough—it is no longer considered an ‘untouchable’ in Tamil Nadu politics.

The reasons for the dominance of the AIADMK and the DMK in Tamil Nadu politics since 1967 lie in a socio-political movement whose origins can be traced back to the Justice Party formed in 1916 in what was then the Madras Presidency of the British Raj. The Justice Party was formed by P. Thyagarayar as a platform for the area’s non-Brahmin social elite. In the first general elections in British India held in 1920, the Justice Party won a landslide victory in the Madras Presidency, bagging 63 of the 98 seats. It remained in power in the provincial government for the next 17 years, advocating ‘social justice



and equality' for all segments of society. E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker (EVR), who was a member of the Indian National Congress, found himself agreeing with the ideology of the Justice Party. He joined the party and started the Non-Brahmin Self-Respect Movement in 1925. In 1944, by which time Naicker was the leader of the party, he renamed the party the Dravida Kazhagam (the Dravidian Federation) and demanded the establishment of an independent state called Dravidasthan. The Dravidian movement had begun.

To the anti-Brahmin thrust of the Justice Party was now added an ideology that defined itself in racial terms. The Brahmins—and the people of north India—were identified with the Aryans, who were invaders, while the non-Brahmins were portrayed as Dravidians and the true descendents of those who had built the Indus Valley civilisation. So virulent was the Justice Party's opposition to 'the north' and its leaders, that the party saw August 15, 1947 as a 'black day', a day on which the British rulers while leaving the country had left them at the mercy of the north. The Justice Party had demanded that if India were to be granted independence, the south should be carved out as a separate Dravidasthan.

The antipathy to 'Aryans' also extended to hostility to their religion—Hinduism—which was seen as a religion that had sanctified caste oppression, by the Brahmins in particular. Thus, the Dravida Kazhagam campaigned actively against religion, indeed even against the concept of God. The most prominent religious texts of the Hindus—the Ramayana and the Gita—were denounced as part of an Aryan conspiracy to enslave the Dravidians. The DK also launched a campaign for *sua-maryadai kalyanam* (self-respect marriages), which were weddings bereft of any of the Sanskritised rituals and hence, of Hindu priests. This again was an attempt to deny the Brahmin any pride of place in the everyday lives of people.

The next plank of the Dravidian movement was a logical corollary of these moves. Language became the central focus of the movement. Tamil was eulogised as the oldest 'living' language in the world and the most 'evolved' of all languages, while Sanskrit and Hindi were presented as impositions by the aggressors from the north. It was this, in fact, that provided the real cutting edge for the Dravidian movement in electoral politics. The Congress, being an all-India party,

could hardly have accepted such a hardline linguistic stance. As the party governing India, it was also committed to the attempt to make Hindi a link language nationally. It could, perhaps, have shown greater sensitivity towards the suspicions of the Tamils about the attempts to 'impose' Hindi, but it seems to have failed to understand the depth of feelings on this issue.

The language issue was to become the catalyst that precipitated the decline of the Congress in Tamil Nadu and the ascendance of the Dravidian parties. But before that could happen, EVR himself had lost the leadership of the movement. A group of young DK leaders, led by C.N. Annadurai and including Muthuvel Karunanidhi (both were to later become Chief Ministers of the state) left the party over personal differences with EVR. They formed the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in 1949 which remains to this day one of the two main Dravidian parties in Tamil Nadu.

The first anti-Hindi agitation was launched by EVR in 1952, but it was the agitations of 1965 and 1968 that really assumed a mass character. Both were spearheaded by the DMK. In 1965, the Congress was still in power at the centre and in what was then the state of Madras. Its government in Madras cracked down on the agitation, arresting thousands of agitators. This played no small part in the DMK's victory in the 1967 assembly elections—one in which Congress leader K. Kamaraj had boasted that he would win without having to get up from bed. As soon as it came to power, with 'Anna' as the Chief Minister, the DMK government released all those jailed for the anti-Hindi agitation. The very next year, in 1968, another massive agitation against the centre's attempts to impose Hindi was launched, this time with a sympathetic government running the state. The DMK warned the Congress government in New Delhi that any attempt to impose Hindi would only strengthen the demand for a separate *Dravida Nadu* (the land of the Dravidians). A group of students leading the anti-Hindi agitation told Prime Minister Indira Gandhi when she met them that she should choose between Hindi and the unity of the nation.

An interesting paradox of Tamil Nadu politics is the fact that in a state in which language has been the major political issue, at least three important political personalities trace their origins from

outside the state. M.G. Ramachandran, or MGR as he was popularly called, whose iconic status remains unchallenged, was a Malayalee of Sri Lankan origin. Jayalalithaa, though a Tamil, comes from a family of Brahmins from Mysore. Finally, Rajnikanth is a Marathi who spent the early part of his adult life as a bus conductor in Bangalore before moving to Madras and Tamil films. Throughout MGR's tenure as Chief Minister, the DMK cadre would try to make an issue of the fact that he was not a Tamil, though the leadership would never publicly raise the issue. Yet, the campaign cut no ice with the electorate. Equally, the AIADMK cadre's attempts to counter this by insinuating that Karunanidhi himself was actually a Telugu and not a Tamil left the voters cold.

Having ridden to power on the strength of a movement that was explicitly anti-Brahmin, anti-religion and anti-north, the DMK gradually diluted each of these agendas. This process picked up pace after the formation of the AIADMK in 1972, when MGR broke away from the DMK. He preferred to focus on projecting the image of the AIADMK as a party of the downtrodden. The groundwork for this had, ironically, already been done by his erstwhile mentor M. Karunanidhi, who had written the scripts for most of the films that MGR had starred in. As a conscious political strategy that has perhaps no parallel anywhere in the world, the DMK had systematically used the medium of cinema to project its leaders and its message. MGR had been the prime vehicle for this strategy. In film after film, he appeared either as someone from the working classes or as a benefactor of the working classes—fishermen, rickshaw pullers, landless labourers and so on. Karunanidhi's acknowledged prowess in writing powerful scripts had ensured that MGR was seen as a 'messiah of the people' even before he floated his own political party.

MGR made the most of this image both as the leader of a political party and as Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu after 1977. He also made a conscious effort to specifically target women as a vote bank, coining the term *tai kulam* (literally, the family of mothers) while referring to them. Arguably the single-most important measure he undertook as Chief Minister was to introduce the mid-day meal scheme in the state. Under the scheme, every child who attended primary school was entitled to a meal in school at the expense of the state. There

were additional incentives for girl children in particular. The idea was to provide an economic incentive for poor families to send their children to school rather than to work for a living. To begin with, most economic commentators were aghast at the scheme, derogatorily describing it as 'populist' and arguing that it would place an unsustainable burden on the state's coffers. More than a decade later, even the World Bank, one of the most virulent critics of the mid-day meal scheme when it was introduced, was forced to admit that it had indeed been a major success and more and more states sought to emulate the scheme.

There were other schemes as well that buttressed MGR's image as a messiah of the masses. One scheme was to motorise rickshaws in Chennai which did away with almost all the physical labour involved in plying such vehicles. The other scheme was to construct *pucca* houses for fisherfolk. These schemes became so popular that MGR came to be known as *puratchi thalaivar* (revolutionary leader) and the AIADMK was to stay in power from 1977 to 1989. Many outside Tamil Nadu have simplistically perceived MGR's popularity to be primarily a consequence of his popularity as a film personality. The reality was clearly more complex.

MGR's tenure also saw an interesting innovation being brought into the manner in which electoral alliances were struck. After the creation of the AIADMK, the politics of Tamil Nadu had followed a pattern—the Congress, which by this time had acknowledged that it could not come to power on its own in Tamil Nadu, realised that it could play a decisive role by aligning with either the DMK or the AIADMK. The two Dravidian parties also recognised that the Congress could tilt the electoral balance even if it couldn't do very much on its own. MGR, however, carried this logic a step further. In 1984, when general elections and state assembly elections were held simultaneously, the AIADMK agreed to let the Congress contest as many as 26 of the 39 Lok Sabha constituencies in Tamil Nadu. In the assembly elections, however, the Congress contested only 72 of the 234 seats, while AIADMK candidates contested from as many as 155 constituencies.

This was a radically different approach from what had been practiced all over India till then. Traditionally, the share of seats contested

by alliance partners remained more or less the same irrespective of which level of government the elections were for, and would depend on the relative strength of the partners. What MGR's 'two-third, one-third' formula sought to formalise was the understanding that while the Congress was undoubtedly the only partner in the alliance making a bid for power in New Delhi, in the state the AIADMK would be the one that would form the government if the alliance was voted to power. In effect, MGR was telling Rajiv Gandhi, the then Prime Minister and leader of the Congress, 'you keep New Delhi, but leave Madras to me'.

The formula may not have become a precursor for coalition arrangements in other parts of the country, but it was a significant acknowledgement by both the Congress and the AIADMK of their relative strengths and weaknesses. The Tamil Nadu electorate had in 1980 played its part in bringing about this recognition. That year, roughly four months had separated the Lok Sabha elections that saw Indira Gandhi returning to power and the state assembly elections. In both the elections, the Congress was in alliance with the DMK, while the AIADMK contested with the left parties as partners. The Congress–DMK alliance swept the Lok Sabha seats, winning in 37 of the state's 39 constituencies. Just three months later, the same alliance fared miserably in the assembly elections, winning just 68 of the 234 seats, while the AIADMK-led alliance won in 156, or two thirds of the assembly constituencies.

By the time of the 1984 elections, Jayalalithaa was already one of the most important leaders of the AIADMK. Her rise in the party structure had been meteoric thanks to the patronage of MGR. Jayalalithaa formally joined the AIADMK only in June 1982, but the following year MGR made her the party's propaganda secretary. The move was stiffly resisted by senior AIADMK leaders, but MGR refused to budge. As propaganda secretary, Jayalalithaa was increasingly calling the shots in the absence of MGR, who was often bed-ridden or hospitalised. The victory in the 1984 assembly elections, in which Jayalalithaa was the main campaigner, further strengthened her position in the party.

When MGR ultimately died of a prolonged illness in 1987, the battle for succession in the AIADMK had boiled down to MGR's

widow Janaki Ramachandran and Jayalalithaa. Senior AIADMK leaders recognised that they could not take on Jayalalithaa on their own, since MGR in his lifetime had made it amply clear that he saw her as his second in command. In Janaki, however, they thought they had found a person who could make the most of the ‘sympathy wave’ that was bound to follow MGR’s death. Jayalalithaa was not willing to give up her claims to the MGR legacy without a fight. She tried to portray herself as the chief mourner at MGR’s funeral, fighting to clamber on to the vehicle carrying his body, only to be rudely pushed away by party leaders who felt they no longer had to play second fiddle to her. Janaki became Chief Minister and leader of the AIADMK legislature party, while Jayalalithaa was left out in the cold.

The unsavoury infighting that followed saw the Election Commission ‘freezing’ the AIADMK’s election symbol of ‘two leaves’. The resultant confusion helped the DMK come to power in the 1989 elections, winning 155 of the 234 assembly seats. Both factions of the AIADMK—the AIADMK (JR) and the AIADMK (JL)—were humiliated. Despite the humiliation, however, Jayalalithaa had scored an important political point. While the Janaki faction managed to win just one assembly seat, the Jayalalithaa faction won 27. The debate over which of the two women in MGR’s life was his political heir had been settled.

Jayalalithaa emerged as the undisputed leader of the AIADMK, with her supporters anointing her *puratchi thalaivi* (revolutionary leader) in an obvious allusion to the sobriquet conferred on MGR. Janaki faded into oblivion and most other AIADMK leaders who had supported her swallowed their pride and pleaded with Jayalalithaa to let them back into the party. Most importantly, the party had got back its election symbol, ‘two leaves’ by which voters all over the state recognised the AIADMK candidate on ballot papers. The impact was immediate. In the Lok Sabha elections of December 1989, the AIADMK–Congress alliance made an almost clean sweep, winning all but one of the 39 seats in the state. The AIADMK itself won all the 11 seats it contested.

In the 1991 assembly elections, the party’s performance was even more impressive. This time, the AIADMK–Congress alliance won in 224 of the state’s 234 assembly constituencies, a performance that

has not been bettered before or since by any alliance in Tamil Nadu. The DMK was left with just two MLAs in the new assembly, one of them the deposed Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi.

The period since then has seen fairly dramatic developments in Tamil Nadu politics. Jayalalithaa's first term as Chief Minister saw her adopt an imperious style of functioning that has now become her trademark. Stories abound of how even senior ministers and party leaders would not be allowed to sit at the same level as 'amma' on a dais during public meetings. They would also publicly touch her feet and make it a point to sing praises of the *puratchi thalaivi* at every opportunity. The state's bureaucracy too learned how not to offend the Chief Minister in any way, since she could be extremely humiliating. Jayalalithaa was also perceived as a corrupt leader, one who used power to confer undue favours on those close to her, including, above all, Sasikala Natarajan, a woman who had almost overnight become her close confidante and was seen as an extra-constitutional authority in the state. A southern industrialist, Rajarathinam, who emerged as a take-over tycoon out of the blue, was also seen as a frontman for Jayalalithaa.

The incident that did most damage to Jayalalithaa's reputation, however, was the marriage of Sasikala's son in 1995. The streets of Chennai through which the wedding procession was to pass were decorated in a manner reminiscent of royal weddings of yore. Plantain trees in hundreds were cut down in various parts of the state and planted along the route of the procession and the state machinery was blatantly used for the organisation of the lavish ceremony. Many residents of Chennai who witnessed the extravaganza first-hand were shocked at the pomp and show, but the DMK made sure this sense of shock was not confined to Chennai alone. Sun TV, the most popular private television channel in the state and one that is owned by former DMK leader Murasoli Maran's family, spared no effort in ensuring that the pictures of this outrageous splurge reached every corner of the state. (If films were the medium for the political message in Tamil Nadu till the 1980s, TV subsequently emerged to grab that role. If the DMK could depend on Sun for propaganda, Jaya TV made sure Jayalalithaa's views reach the masses.)

As the 1996 Lok Sabha and state assembly elections drew near, it had become increasingly clear that Jayalalithaa's charisma had begun to fade and that voters were disillusioned with her government and fed up with her autocratic and corrupt ways. The Congress leadership in the state, having seen the writing on the wall, tried to persuade the central leadership of the party that striking an alliance with the AIADMK for the elections would prove suicidal. P.V. Narasimha Rao, who was then Prime Minister and Congress president, however, insisted on an electoral pact with Jayalalithaa. This led to a revolt in the state unit, with almost the entire local leadership quitting the Congress to form the Tamil Maanila Congress (TMC). The TMC then struck an alliance with the DMK. In the assembly elections that followed, the DMK-TMC alliance romped to victory, winning 212 of the 234 seats. Tamil Nadu had rejected Jayalalithaa almost as decisively as it had voted her to power just five years earlier.

Among the first things the DMK government (the TMC did not join the government, but supported it from outside) did after assuming power was to get the state administration to institute a slew of corruption cases against Jayalalithaa, charging her with impropriety in land allotments, import of coal, foreign exchange transactions and so on. Special courts were set up to deal with these cases on the grounds that they involved the larger public interest and could not be allowed to proceed at the languid pace at which cases normally proceed in India's logjammed judicial system. At the behest of the DMK government, police officials raided her residence at Poes Garden. The media was treated to detailed accounts of the number of sarees she possessed, not to mention pairs of shoes and jewellery. These were also shown on the Sun channel and she was sought to be derogatorily portrayed as an Indian version of Imelda Marcos, the late Filipino dictator's wife with a reputation for a fondness for the good things in life.

Jayalalithaa was arrested and put in jail. This, as later events proved, was an error of judgement on the part of the DMK government. As with Indira Gandhi in the immediate aftermath of the Emergency, public anger against Jayalalithaa soon turned to sympathy for a woman who was seen as being hounded by her political opponents. Jayalalithaa contributed to this by portraying herself as a defenceless woman who



was being made to suffer in jail like an ordinary criminal as part of a politically motivated witch-hunt. However, she also realised that mere public sympathy would not be enough to undo the damage that the cases against her could do. For that, she would need access to the levers of power.

In 1998, she took the plunge by striking an alliance with the BJP and a host of smaller parties that had sprung up in the state during the mid-1990s. Most analysts and political pundits were dismissive of this alliance. The BJP, it was pointed out, was rather weak in the state, having won an assembly seat in Tamil Nadu for the first time in 1996. The other partners in the AIADMK-led alliance included fledgling regional parties like the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK), the Marumalarchi DMK and the Tamizhaga Rajiv Congress, none of which were expected to make a major contribution to the cause of the alliance. Opinion polls and exit polls conducted before and during the 1998 Lok Sabha elections seemed to bear out the prognostication of political analysts that the AIADMK-led alliance would not perform well. The results, however, proved the pollsters and the pundits completely wrong—Jayalalithaa's electoral strategy proved to be a winner with the AIADMK-led alliance winning 30 of the 39 Lok Sabha seats in the state.

In retrospect, a series of bomb blasts in Coimbatore on February 14, 1998, the day L.K. Advani was to address an election meeting in that city, appear to have played a significant role in catalysing the switch in voter preference towards the AIADMK and the BJP. The blasts, which were the handiwork of an organisation of Muslim fundamentalists, served the AIADMK-BJP alliance at two different levels. At one level, they helped the BJP polarise voters along communal lines not only in Coimbatore, but also in other parts of the state where it had till that stage a marginal presence. At another level, it helped the alliance portray the DMK government as being inept and reluctant to deal with the menace of terrorism.

The AIADMK with 18 MPs turned out to be the single largest ally of the BJP in the second Vajpayee government that came to power in New Delhi in March 1998. Jayalalithaa used her clout from the word go—she delayed providing a formal letter of support to the Vajpayee government till almost the final hour. Then, she demanded that her nominees (including Dr. Subramaniam Swamy of the Janata

Party who had, ironically, earlier been responsible for instituting a number of criminal cases against her) be allocated key portfolios in the Union government. As a matter of fact, she even demanded that Dr. Swamy be made Finance Minister, a demand that was rejected by Vajpayee and his supporters (including Jaswant Singh who had gone to Chennai to negotiate with Jayalalithaa). The AIADMK general secretary did, however, succeed in having her party's MPs as Union Law Minister and Minister of State for Finance.

What became evident in no time at all was that these Ministers had a single-point agenda: to ensure that the criminal cases against their leader were either dropped or placed in cold storage. Minister of State for Finance, R.K. Kumar, who was in charge of Revenue, Banking and Insurance, did his bit for his leader by transferring a number of income tax officers. However, Jayalalithaa asked him to resign in May 1998. The ostensible reason was that his health was rather poor. It was another matter that speculation was rife that the real reason for his removal was that Jayalalithaa felt he hadn't done what she had expected of him. Another AIADMK leader, K.M.R. Janarthanan, who was earlier Minister of State for Personnel and Grievances in the Vajpayee government, later got Kumar's job in the Finance Ministry. Another AIADMK Minister, Sedapatti Muttiah, who held the Surface Transport portfolio, had to quit within weeks of his becoming Minister for different reasons—a court hearing the corruption cases against AIADMK leaders passed strictures against Muttiah for allegedly acquiring assets disproportionate to his known sources of income.

Law Minister M. Thambidurai transferred large numbers of legal officers in Tamil Nadu. Jayalalithaa's supporters wanted to transfer some of the criminal cases pending against her from the special courts in Chennai to the Supreme Court in New Delhi. The gameplan was to try and ensure that the state government would not remain the prosecuting authority. Jayalalithaa's lawyers also sought to convince the apex court of the country that the criminal cases against her had been politically motivated and should, therefore, be dropped and the special courts be disbanded.

The Supreme Court did not accept the AIADMK's plea that the cases against Jayalalithaa should be moved from Chennai to New Delhi. She and her supporters then stepped up their demands for a dismissal

of the Karunanidhi-led DMK government in Tamil Nadu under Article 356 of the Constitution of India. The Coimbatore blasts and the DMK's alleged softness towards the perpetrators of that crime were presented as the reason for invoking Article 356. Vajpayee and other senior leaders of the Union government refused to play ball. Having always protested against the misuse of Article 356 by Union governments led by the Congress, they argued, they could not now turn around and apply the same constitutional provision on the flimsiest of excuses to dismiss a democratically elected state government. The friction between the BJP and the AIADMK that was to ultimately result in the fall of Vajpayee's government in April 1999 had reached a critical point.

The dispute between Tamil Nadu and Karnataka over the sharing of the waters of the River Cauvery (also spelt Kaveri) became another issue on which the Vajpayee government found itself facing pressure from Jayalalithaa. For the BJP, the issue was decidedly ticklish. On the one hand, Karnataka was a state in which the BJP had made significant inroads in recent years. The party also believed at that time that it could split the ruling Janata Dal in Karnataka and further enhance its presence in the state. The Vajpayee government could not, therefore, adopt a stand on the sensitive issue of apportioning the waters of the Cauvery (especially during the summer months) that would be seen to be against Karnataka's interests. On the other hand, taking a position that was entirely supportive of Karnataka would nip in the bud any prospects the BJP had of making headway in Tamil Nadu, a state in which the party had only just managed to register its presence. Jayalalithaa also spotted in the controversy an opportunity to embarrass an ally who had refused to give in to all her demands, while simultaneously scoring political points against her main political opponent in the state, the DMK and its Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi. She, therefore, adopted a hardline stance, accusing the centre of being deliberately partisan towards Karnataka and the DMK state government of not doing enough to protect the interests of the farmers of Tamil Nadu's Cauvery delta.

Jayalalithaa also took exception to the dismissal of Chief of the Navy, Admiral Vishnu Bhagwat. This was a clear sign that the AIADMK leader was increasingly distancing herself from the

Vajpayee government, since the then Defence Minister Fernandes had often acted as an emissary between the Prime Minister and her, and was seen as having a better rapport with her than many others in the Vajpayee government.

It was a matter of time before the rapidly deteriorating relationship between the AIADMK and the BJP finally fell apart. Matters came to a head in April 1999, ultimately leading to the fall of the government. However, Jayalalithaa's gameplan did not succeed fully. The Congress' attempt to form an alternative government failed. The AIADMK supremo did not have the friendly government in New Delhi that she had so desperately tried to bring about. The criminal cases instituted against her continued to do the rounds of courtrooms.

In the September–October 1999 Lok Sabha elections, political alliances in Tamil Nadu had changed drastically from what they were a year earlier. The BJP was now in an alliance with the DMK, as were smaller parties like the PMK, the MDMK and the TRC. The TMC, earlier the DMK's partner, refused to have anything to do with an alliance that included the BJP. On the other hand, the Congress and the left parties being in alliance with the AIADMK meant that the TMC could not be part of that front either. After all, the very existence of the TMC was due to the fact that its leaders had left the Congress because of its tie-up with the AIADMK. Thus, the TMC was left out in the cold, having to contest more or less on its own, though it had an alliance with the Puthizha Tamizhagam (PT), a party that was trying to build itself as a representative of the dalits, much like the BSP in Uttar Pradesh.

The results of the 1999 elections in Tamil Nadu were not quite as decisive as had been the trend in the state. The DMK-led NDA won 26 of the 39 seats, but the AIADMK-led alliance also managed to win 13 seats. The TMC, not surprisingly, drew a blank. In 2000, Jayalalithaa became the first Chief Minister to be convicted and sentenced in a criminal case of corruption. The case involved allotment of land by a state government undertaking, the Tamil Nadu Small Industries Corporation (TANSI), allegedly at throwaway prices, to a company associated with the Chief Minister. Jayalalithaa's lawyers appealed against the special court's decision in the High Court but before the court decided on the appeal, assembly elections were notified to take place in May 2001. It was generally believed that the AIADMK would

be able to defeat the DMK in the elections. Jayalalithaa becoming the next Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu seemed an almost foregone conclusion. She filed her nomination as a contestant from four separate constituencies—Krishnagiri, Pudukottai, Andipatti and Bhuvanagiri—but her nomination papers were rejected in all four constituencies.

In Krishnagiri and Andipatti, her nomination papers were rejected on the ground that she had been convicted in a criminal case and hence could not contest elections under Section 8 (3) of the Representation of People Act, 1951. Jayalalithaa's lawyers argued that since she had filed an appeal against her conviction in a higher court, she should be allowed to contest the elections. The returning officer of the constituency from where she had filed her nomination, on the other hand, ruled that as a convicted individual she was not eligible to contest the elections under the provisions of the Act. The fact that she had filed an appeal against her conviction, the returning officers pointed out, did not imply that the conviction was no longer valid. In Bhuvanagiri and Pudukottai, the returning officers rejected her nomination on the ground that Section 37 (7) (b) of the Act prohibited a person from contesting elections from more than two constituencies simultaneously.

The dispute on Section 8 (3) went to the Supreme Court, which stated that during an election, the ruling of the returning officer was final. Any appeal against the officer's order could be made only after the elections had been concluded. Jayalalithaa was thus unable to contest the assembly elections that saw the AIADMK emerging as the ruling party—the party on its own won 132 seats and with its allies (the Congress, the left parties and the PMK) won 173 seats in the 234-member assembly. Jayalalithaa was sworn in as Chief Minister because the law provided for a person who was not an elected member of the assembly to become a Chief Minister provided such a person was elected to the assembly within a period of six months. The decision of Tamil Nadu Governor Fatima Beevi to swear Jayalalithaa in as Chief Minister despite her conviction drew a lot of flak not just from the DMK and the BJP, but also from several legal luminaries and political leaders. The critics pointed out that as the first woman to become a judge of the Supreme Court, Beevi should have known better than to interpret the law in the manner in which she did. So much so, that the

Governor was eventually asked by the Union government to put in her papers. However, Jayalalithaa continued as Chief Minister even after Beevi was replaced.

Jayalalithaa nevertheless needed to get elected to the state assembly by November 2001, when the six-month deadline would run out. Unfortunately for her, the High Court did not decide on her appeal against her conviction in the TANSI land case by that time. Jayalalithaa appealed to the Supreme Court to ask the High Court to expedite its decision, but the highest court of the land refused to intervene. Hence, she had no choice but to step down as Chief Minister. The question upper-most in the minds of most political analysts was whom would she nominate to act as stand-in Chief Minister. In her characteristically imperious style, Jayalalithaa deliberately chose O. Panneerselvam, a first-time MLA to succeed her. Not only was Panneerselvam too junior to harbour any ambitions of his own, he was also a 'dependable' stand-in because he was a protégé of T.T.V. Dinakaran, the nephew of Jayalalithaa's confidante Sasikala and a member of the Lok Sabha.

Soon thereafter, the Chennai High Court upheld Jayalalithaa's appeal against her conviction in the TANSI land case, thereby clearing the way for her to become Chief Minister once again. She was subsequently elected to the assembly from Andipatti. Soon after she returned as Chief Minister in March 2002, Jayalalithaa left nobody in doubt that the DMK and others in the Opposition would have to pay for the 'wrongs' done to her during the DMK's stint in power. A slew of corruption cases were filed against Karunanidhi and some of those who had been ministers in his government. Officials who were seen as close to the DMK were transferred en masse. The extent to which Jayalalithaa's quest for 'revenge' would go became clear when policemen arrested Karunanidhi from his home in the middle of the night. The DMK alleged that the septuagenarian leader had been manhandled by policemen and Sun TV repeatedly broadcast shots of Karunanidhi being bodily lifted to the waiting police vehicle while crying out for help. Karunanidhi would not spend too much time in jail, but the drama had made its point—Jayalalithaa would not pull punches in her battle against the DMK and its top leadership.

Any doubts on this score were settled when the AIADMK used its majority in the assembly to push through legislation which prohibited

the same person from being a member of the legislative assembly and holding the post of mayor at the same time. It was no secret that the law was aimed specifically at M.K. Stalin, Karunanidhi's son and heir apparent. Stalin was at that time Mayor of Chennai as well as an MLA. Despite the passage of the law, Stalin refused to resign from either post. He was then disqualified from holding the post of Mayor.

Subsequently, in July 2002, the Tamil Nadu government threw another bombshell when it had V. Gopalaswamy (who prefers to be known as Vaiko) arrested under POTA on the ground that he had made speeches supportive of the banned LTTE. The MDMK leader had been among the most vociferous in supporting the enactment of POTA, in particular arguing strongly in Parliament that it had enough safeguards to prevent its misuse for partisan political purposes. (Ironically, having spent 19 months in jail and having been part of the UPA's clean sweep of the seats in Tamil Nadu in the 2004 Lok Sabha elections, Vaiko had no compunctions in joining the AIADMK in an alliance for the assembly elections of May 2006. He and his party, however, continued to remain part of the UPA in New Delhi.)

At the time of Karunanidhi's arrest, together with two of his party colleagues who were central ministers, the Union Law Minister Arun Jaitley had argued that a grave constitutional impropriety had been committed. A state government, he insisted, could not arrest central ministers without the permission of the Union government. The governor of Tamil Nadu was asked for a report on the law and order situation in the state, the underlying threat being that the central government could invoke the provisions of Article 356 to dismiss the state government. When Vaiko was arrested, on the other hand, the BJP restricted itself to making statements to the effect that the use of POTA may have been inappropriate in this case. The reason for the strangely subdued tone of the protest was not very hard to find. Jayalalithaa had by the time of Vaiko's arrest started making overtures to the BJP, clearly indicating that she was willing to forget the acrimony of the past and build new bridges with the Vajpayee government.

The message became increasingly louder thereafter. One of the clearest signals was when Jayalalithaa, during a press conference in Delhi, 'volunteered' the information that she was against Sonia Gandhi

becoming Prime Minister because she was born an Italian. Considering that the press conference was taking place after a meeting convened by the Prime Minister to discuss the Cauvery waters dispute between Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, Jayalalithaa's unsolicited comment on the Congress president's Italian origins acquired considerable political significance. In December 2002, Jayalalithaa was the only Chief Minister whose party was not a member of the NDA to be invited to the swearing in ceremony of Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi and the only one to attend it. The AIADMK supremo also gladdened the BJP by enacting a law in Tamil Nadu ostensibly aimed at preventing 'forcible' religious conversions. Modi approvingly cited Tamil Nadu's example and promised to follow suit by enacting a similar law in Gujarat.

While these moves by Jayalalithaa were signs of a growing closeness between the AIADMK and the Vajpayee government, they were also a telling indicator of how drastically 'Dravidian' politics has changed over time. The AIADMK today is indistinguishable in its ideology (and to a large extent so is the DMK) from any of the other mainstream parties in India. The anti-Brahminical thrust, the shunning of ritual and religion, the demonisation of the north of India, are all at best fast fading memories.

This perhaps also explains the fragmentation of Tamil Nadu's polity in recent years. The reasons for the formation of each of the many new parties in the state may vary, but ideology certainly doesn't appear to be the motive force. The MDMK, for instance, was formed because Vaiko, who was one of the most prominent young leaders in the DMK, could see that the rise of Stalin under Karunanidhi's patronage made his progress within the party hierarchy extremely unlikely. The PMK arose as a party restricted to espousing the cause of the Vanniyars, an intermediate caste group accounting for a significant part of the population in some of the northern districts of Tamil Nadu. The Puthiya Tamizhagam (PT) has emerged as a party specifically focusing on dalits, though it is yet to make much headway. In the heyday of the Dravidian movement, these were all groups who saw their aspirations find expression within the Dravidian fold.

At the same time as these small groups have been breaking away, the DMK and the AIADMK have been trying to extend their influence



beyond their traditional vote banks to groups like the Brahmins. Interestingly, the beginning of a similar phenomenon is discernible in the caste-polarised polity of states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, where the SP, BSP and RJD are all attempting to woo voters from the upper castes as well.

In the May 2004 Lok Sabha elections, the DMK-led alliance had thrashed the AIADMK coalition by winning all the 40 Lok Sabha seats in the state as well as in Pondicherry. Unlike the left, which chose to support the UPA government in New Delhi from outside, the DMK became a significant partner of the Congress in the UPA. This shock woke Jayalalithaa up. In the months that followed, the former Tamil Nadu Chief Minister unleashed a series of programmes aimed at wooing the poor and very poor. She offered free books to any student, girl or boy, up to Class XII. She also offered Rs 500 to every woman who reported pregnant at the local government hospital. If the woman delivered a child, she got an additional Rs 5,000. This was aimed at trying to end the practice of female foeticide in Tamil Nadu. With a slew of other schemes, Jayalalithaa ensured that every poor family got at least one monetary offering a month.

And in the first week of March, she managed to break the DMK-led alliance when she got Vaiko to her side. This was the same Vaiko whom Jayalalithaa had kept in prison under the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Act (TADA) for 19 months because Vaiko was said to have spoken to Tamil activists from Sri Lanka who belong to the LTTE. The state government had also been complimented for its efforts during the relief and rehabilitation of the victims of the tsunami of December 2005.

Despite the AIADMK's attempts to match the DMK in announcing populist schemes, such as providing rice at Rs 2 per kg and free television sets, Jayalalithaa and her party lost the assembly polls in May 2006. She had tried very hard to change her image of being a haughty and arrogant leader. After dismissing many striking state government employees, she agreed to reinstate them. None of these moves eventually helped her in the assembly elections. The DMK emerged as the single largest party in Tamil Nadu after polling 26.45 per cent of the votes and winning 96 seats. Its biggest ally, the Congress, won 34 seats, a huge improvement from 2001 when the party

won only 7 seats. The alliance obtained 44.73 per cent of the votes, around 4.7 per cent more than its opposing coalition.

Tamil Nadu politics has been influenced greatly by its film personalities, as already mentioned. In 2006, a new political outfit headed by a film personality, Vijayakant, the Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam (DMDK), played the role of spoiler by fielding candidates in as many as 206 out of the 234 seats in the assembly; the party's candidates were placed third in many constituencies and indirectly worked towards the defeat of AIADMK candidates. In fact, the DMDK polled 8.38 per cent of the total votes polled in the state, which was almost equal to the vote share of the Congress and four times more than the vote share of the BJP (2.02 per cent).

Another newly floated party that entered the electoral fray for the first time was the Lok Paritrana party that was led by former and current students of the Indian Institute of Technology at Chennai. This party sought to make a point that educated individuals should enter politics. However, the best a candidate of the party could do was to be placed in the third position in the posh Anna Nagar constituency in Chennai.

An interesting fallout of the 2006 assembly elections in Tamil Nadu has been that the Congress and the DMK have become more dependent on each other. The DMK is for the first time heading a minority government in the state with the Congress as one of its partners, while the DMK is an important constituent of the UPA government in New Delhi.

Dramatic events in May 2007 illustrated both the problems that are likely to confront the DMK after Karunanidhi is no longer around as well as the manner in which coalition partners 'nominate' their members to hold ministerial positions in New Delhi, irrespective of what the Prime Minister might want. In early May, Dayanidhi Maran, who was then Union Minister for Communications & Information Technology, had to resign following a factional fight within his own party, the DMK, that claimed three lives.

The problem started with the Tamil daily, *Dinakaran*, publishing an opinion poll on who should succeed Karunanidhi when he hands over the reins of the party. According to the poll, the younger of the DMK chief's two sons from his second wife, M.K. Stalin, was

chosen by 70 per cent of the respondents, while Stalin's elder brother M.K. Azhagiri and Karunanidhi's youngest daughter, Kanimozhi (from his third wife) got barely 2 per cent support each from those polled. An undefined group of 'others' was supported by 20 per cent. Azhagiri's supporters saw this as an attempt by the Marans, who own the *Dinakaran* and the *Sun* media group (the largest conglomerate of its kind in southern India, headed by Dayanidhi's elder brother Kalanidhi), to marginalise him and to indirect promote Dayanidhi's own claims to succeeding Karunanidhi. They went on a rampage attacking the *Dinakaran* office on the outskirts of Madurai with petrol bombs. Two systems engineers and a security guard died in the resulting fire.

The fracas detracted from what was supposed to have been a period of grand celebration for Karunanidhi—he had just completed 50 years in the state assembly and his 84th birthday was to follow soon on June 3.

Far from condemning the Azhagiri faction's strong-arm tactics, the DMK leadership threw its weight behind the Chief Minister's family and demanded that action be taken against Dayanidhi—himself a grandnephew of Karunanidhi. Dayanidhi had no option but to resign as Union minister even as he kept insisting that he would remain a supporter of the DMK till the day he died. He told journalists how he as a Union Minister had been responsible for bringing to Tamil Nadu major investments made by multinational telecommunications firms. While Dayanidhi denied that he had promoted his brother's business interests, it is also correct that the *Sun* group had drawn up ambitious expansion plans not only in the media (including a tie-up with a Rupert Murdoch-controlled organisation) but also in aviation. Dayanidhi hinted that his hope of making a major announcement—abolishing of 'roaming' charges within India for users of mobile telephones—on Karunanidhi's birthday had been dashed. The Chief Minister's loyalists in the DMK accused Dayanidhi of over-stepping his limits by calling up the Home Secretary in the state government 'threatening' him with stern action if he did not apprehend the 'real' culprits behind the arson and violence in the Madurai office of *Dinakaran*.

The Prime Minister had no option but to acquiesce in the exit of Dayanidhi from the Union Cabinet and wait for the DMK to

nominate someone to replace him. Interestingly, the DMK actually settled for one Cabinet post less than it earlier had. While A. Raja, who was Union Minister for Forests and Environment was given Dayanidhi's portfolio, the new DMK person inducted, M.K. Selvi, was given only a Minister of State rank. Both ranks and portfolios were decided by the DMK, not Manmohan Singh.

What this episode made evident was that in coalition governments, there is an unwritten rule that partners have specific quotas 'reserved' for them in the Union Cabinet and Council of Ministers and it is up to them and not the prerogative of the Prime Minister to decide who should hold which of these posts.

## **Biju Janata Dal: Father to Son**

Any account of the Biju Janata Dal (BJD)—named after the late Biju Patnaik, political stalwart of Orissa, freedom fighter, Chief Minister, daredevil pilot and Union Steel Minister, among other things—has to begin with his second son Naveen Patnaik. Naveen Patnaik was by any reckoning the most unlikely successor to Biju Patnaik. It seems the first person who was chosen to succeed Biju-babu was his eldest son, Prem, a businessman with interests in the paper industry. He refused. Gita Mehta, Biju Patnaik's only daughter, is married to publisher Sonny Mehta and divides her time between New York, London and Delhi. She was also said to be not particularly keen on becoming a politician and, almost by default, the mantle of Biju-babu's political legacy fell on his younger, unmarried son, Naveen.

To many who had known Naveen, his decision to leave the rarefied comfort of his Aurangzeb Road house in New Delhi for Aska, a dusty township north-west of Behrampore (the closest airport, Bhubaneswar, is a three-hour drive away) to contest the Lok Sabha elections came as a bit of a surprise. Till 1997, Naveen Patnaik was better known for his parties than his party work, for his connections with socialites than his socialist ideology. Naveen's friends were among the rich and the famous, his social and intellectual pursuits more jet-set cosmopolitan than grassroots provincial. His friends and acquaintances include Rolling Stone Mick Jagger whom he met in 1970, Martand Singh of INTACH (Indian National Trust for Art

and Cultural Heritage) and the Rajmata of Jaipur, to name just a few. Jagger and Jerry Hall had invited him to stay at their chateau in France. Yet, Naveen Patnaik invariably claims he is appalled by the appellation of ‘socialite’ tagged on to him.

Admittedly, Naveen Patnaik had no experience of either politics or social work. Until his election in 1997, he had never visited Aska, although he does remember going once in the 1960s to a neighbouring town, Chhattarpur, for a Congress party session that his father was attending. When he contested the by-election for the Aska Parliamentary seat in June 1997, he could barely speak his mother tongue and his campaign speech comprised a single sentence—‘Mothers, sisters and brothers please vote for me’—delivered in hastily-learned Oriya. This limitation hardly affected the electoral verdict. He won by a huge margin of some 76,000 votes and became an MP in the 11th Lok Sabha. His political rivals attributed his victory to feudal instincts running deep among the electorate and the so-called ‘sympathy factor’. Naveen Patnaik himself cited the love of the people of his constituency for his father as a major factor in his electoral success.

Within six months of Naveen Patnaik’s election as MP from Aska, on December 15, 1997, the Janata Dal in Orissa split: 29 out of 43 legislators left the party to form a new political entity under the stewardship of Naveen Patnaik. The chief architect of the rebellion was Dilip Ray, who had served as Union Minister of State for Food Processing in the United Front government. The split was justified on the ground that it had become ‘impossible’ for the new group to cohabit with the United Front in Delhi, which was then being supported by the Congress, whereas the group was staunchly opposed to the Congress in the state. Soon thereafter, the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) came into being as an independent electoral entity. Two of the four MPs of the JD in Orissa joined the new party and the BJD went on to form an alliance in the state with the BJP that had, incidentally, not won a single seat in the state in the 1996 Lok Sabha elections.

As for his party’s alliance with the BJP, Naveen Patnaik said his principal aim was to fortify anti-Congress forces in Orissa. He told *Frontline* magazine that the voters of Orissa had ‘rejected the corrupt Congress government’. He added, ‘Ours is a secular party.

We have built up an alliance with the BJP with the primary objective of removing the corrupt Congress from power in the state.' The victory of BJD candidates, he said, had 'vindicated our contention that our party is the real inheritor' of Biju Patnaik's legacy. He said the Biju Janata Dal had entered into a seat sharing adjustment with the BJP but did not necessarily agree with every aspect of the BJP's agenda: An objective reading of the politics of Orissa would suggest that the BJD had read the writing on the wall and was acting before it was too late.

The BJP had been a growing political force in the state, though it had not yet reached a stage where its presence could be electorally felt. There was a growing feeling within the erstwhile Janata Dal in Orissa that the BJP's growing influence was eroding its vote base to a level where the Congress might become invincible. The tie-up with the BJP was thus an attempt to consolidate the anti-Congress vote. For the BJP too the alliance made sense. While it might over time have dislodged the Janata Dal or its successor as the main challenger to the Congress in Orissa, here was an opportunity to fast forward the process.

In the 1998 elections, Naveen Patnaik was re-elected to the Lok Sabha from Aska. Out of the 21 seats from Orissa, the BJD obtained nine, the BJP seven while the Congress was left with the remaining five seats. The rise of the BJD-BJP combine in Orissa saw the simultaneous decimation of the Janata Dal and its left allies together with the decline of the Congress. Enfeebled by the December 1997 split, the JD saw large-scale desertion of party workers and suffered a funds crunch. The party's sole star candidate, former Union Minister for Tourism and Parliamentary Affairs Srikant Jena, finished third in Kendrapara, a key coastal constituency that was hitherto considered a 'safe' seat for the JD. Jena secured only 91,565 votes against the BJD candidate's 2.82 lakh votes, while the Congress came a close second with 2.74 lakh votes.

If the JD was wiped out, the Congress was severely battered. Having won 17 of the 21 Parliamentary seats in the state in 1996, the Congress was swept aside by an anti-incumbency wave. Only twice in the past had the Congress fared worse—in 1977, when it won four seats, and in 1989, when it won three. Three campaign tours by Sonia

Gandhi did not have much of an impact in electoral terms. The BJP won its first Parliamentary seat from Orissa in 1998. It won seven of the nine seats it contested, mainly from western and northern Orissa. The BJD won nine of the 12 seats it contested and most of these were in coastal Orissa. Significantly, the BJD-BJP combine made inroads into Congress strongholds in constituencies with a high proportion of tribals and dalits.

Congress leaders in Orissa claimed that the outcome of the 1998 Lok Sabha elections was not a referendum on the performance of the state government and J.B. Patnaik dismissed calls for his resignation. Some Congress leaders, however, admitted in private that a strong anti-establishment mood combined with the Janata Dal's obliteration led to a consolidation of BJD-BJP votes. Others blamed the infighting in the Congress. Dissident leaders claimed that the party fared badly because voters were disenchanted with J.B. Patnaik's alleged misrule and nepotism: they pointed to the fact that his wife, son-in-law and relatives all held positions of power.

After the poor performance of the Congress in the Lok Sabha elections, in February 1999, the party's leadership decided to replace J.B. Patnaik as Chief Minister with a tribal, Giridhar Gamang, who had earlier served as Union minister. (Patnaik, incidentally, was one of the longest serving Chief Ministers in the country, having headed the state government for 13 years over three terms.) The position of the Congress in Orissa continued to deteriorate rapidly. In the September–October 1999 Lok Sabha elections, the BJD-BJP combine won 19 out of the 21 Parliamentary seats in the state—the Congress was left with only two MPs from Orissa.

In the assembly elections of February 2000, the BJD-BJP combine wrested power from the Congress in Orissa by forming the government in Bhubaneswar. On March 5, 2000, Naveen Patnaik was sworn in as the new Chief Minister of the state—the date of the swearing-in is significant as it is the birth anniversary of the late Biju Patnaik. Capitalising on the strong anti-incumbency sentiments prevailing in the state, the BJD-BJP combine secured a two-thirds majority in the 147-member assembly, virtually repeating its performance in the 1999 Lok Sabha elections. The BJD contested 84 assembly seats and won 68; the BJP won 38 of the 63 seats it contested. The Congress, which

had 81 members in the earlier assembly, suffered a serious setback winning only 26 seats. The BJD–BJP coalition won most of the seats in western and southern Orissa.

Within the BJD, however, Naveen Patnaik was perpetually kept on his toes by internal rivalry and squabbles in the initial years of his political career. In most cases, the challenge to his leadership or his decisions came from a group of leaders who were perceived as being very close to Biju Patnaik while he was alive and who clearly resented Naveen Patnaik's attempts to sideline them and gain unquestioned command over the BJD. These individuals included Bijoy Mohapatra, Nalini Mohanty and Dilip Ray. Naveen Patnaik was successful in warding off challenges to him from within the BJD. He was even able to expel these three leaders without the party splitting down the middle, as seemed possible at one stage. One reason for his success, it appears, was the fact that he took on his detractors within the party sequentially rather than at one go. Another could be the fact that most BJD politicians faced a TINA (There Is No Alternative) factor. If they had left the BJD, their only option would have been to either join hands with the Congress, a party they have opposed throughout their political careers, or risk facing marginalisation in the state's politics. Whatever the reason, the BJD has survived more or less intact under Patnaik. What's more, the marginalisation or expulsion of senior leaders did not prevent the BJD from coming back to power, with the BJD-BJP alliance winning 93 of the 147 seats in the assembly elections that coincided with the 2004 Lok Sabha elections.

Patnaik has periodically had to deal with friction between his party and its ally, the BJP. For instance, in October 2001, a problem arose for his government following a sudden spurt in the influx of refugees from Bangladesh following the assumption of power by the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) government in Dhaka in October. There were tensions between Bangladeshi refugees and local tribals in the Raigada district. The tribals claimed the state government was not evicting illegal migrants from their lands. In November, there were clashes between tribals and Bengali settlers and three tribals died in police firing. There were also instances of deportation of alleged infiltrators from Bangladesh who were accused of spying and gathering sensitive information on defence installations like



the missile testing range at Chandipur in Balasore district. The state government's Welfare Minister Mangala Kisan said that after thorough investigations, a number of Bangladeshi citizens had been booked under the Foreigners Act. He told the state assembly that a total number of 2,854 infiltrators had been identified in the districts of Sambalpur, Bhadrak, Jagatsinghpur, Malkangiri, Kendrapara and Nabarangpur, and that 392 of them had been deported to Bangladesh with the help of the Union government.

These developments caused a strain in relations between the BJD and the BJP. Spokespersons of both parties attacked each other at public press conferences. While a section of the state's BJP leaders took up cudgels on behalf of the Bengali-speaking settlers in Raigada, the BJD in turn accused its coalition partner of double standards. BJD secretary general Dr. Damodar Rout pointed out that while the BJP had been agitating for deportation of infiltrators from Assam and West Bengal, it was opposing their deportation from Orissa. BJP spokesperson Raj Kishore Das and party MP Anadi Sahu, however, claimed after the party's two-day state executive committee meeting that the Bengali-speaking individuals being deported were refugees who had come to the state in the 1960s and were not infiltrators. Political analysts saw the tensions between the two coalition partners as a consequence of the fact that while the BJP had a support base among the Bangladeshi refugees and settlers, the BJD had the support of tribals who lived in the same areas in Orissa's Nabarangpur and Malkangiri districts.

On March 16, 2002, activists of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal stormed the Orissa assembly building, smashing the window panes of the Chief Minister's office. The VHP and Bajrang Dal goons ransacked the assembly complex, protesting against remarks allegedly made against the two organisations by certain MLAs. The protesters, including a number of women, had been agitating outside the main gate of the assembly. Subsequently, some of them managed to get past two police cordons, entered the assembly building complex and went on a spree of destruction shouting 'Jai Shri Ram' and 'Naveen Patnaik murdabad' ('Down with Naveen Patnaik'). Sporting head-bands bearing the names of the VHP and the Bajrang Dal, the protesters hurled stones, broke flower pots, tore out name plates of ministers in the assembly library complex, and pulled out fire extinguishers from the walls and hurled them into the garden. The

mayhem continued for roughly 20 minutes. The protesters could have wreaked more havoc but were prevented from entering the lobby of the assembly by security personnel who had by then bolted the doors.

Even if Naveen Patnaik has been able to defuse internal dissensions in the BJD, he has a long way to go before he is able to improve the economic condition of the majority of the people living in Orissa. The state has been and remains one of the most backward in the country, as the starvation deaths in the state in 2001 so starkly highlighted. What does not help is that, perhaps on account of his upbringing and his association with the well-off, Naveen Patnaik continues to be perceived as a member of the elite and an individual who has remained aloof from the people of his pathetically poor state.

Patnaik's approach has been to try and attract mega projects in Orissa. International steel giants like Posco of South Korea, Mittal Steel and Tata Steel have all been wooed by the state government and the companies have found the offers lucrative given the large deposits of high grade iron ore in the state. Orissa also has the best chromite deposits in the world. These projects have created quite a controversy for two major reasons. The first of these relates to the rehabilitation of—and compensation for—people who would be displaced, a significant proportion of them being tribals. The other is the issue of whether Orissa is gifting away precious natural resources—such as iron ore—to multinational firms rather than using them to add value locally.

Patnaik's ability to manage such political and economic contradictions will definitely be put to the test by such issues. What is clear, however, is that he has matured as a politician and is no longer a person dependent entirely on his father's legacy.

## **Trinamool Congress: Mamata the Maverick**

To talk about the Trinamool Congress party in West Bengal without talking about its colourful leader Mamata Banerjee is almost impossible. Born on January 5, 1955, to lower-middle class parents, the late Promileswar Banerjee and Gayatri Banerjee, Mamata was the second of eight children, six sons and two daughters. While she has preferred to remain single, her brothers are all married and

run small businesses of their own. Her father had opposed British rule as a supporter of the Congress party. He died soon after Mamata completed her school-leaving examinations.

After joining Jogamaya Devi College in Kolkata, she started a unit of the Chhatra Parishad (the students' wing of the Congress party) to confront the existing leftist students' union. Mamata became an active supporter of the Congress when the violent Naxalite movement (of left extremists) was at its height during the late-1960s and early 1970s.

Right through her childhood and youth, Mamata had to struggle hard to overcome economic hardship—she presumably got used to a spartan lifestyle at that stage of her life, a lifestyle that she would flaunt many years later as a Union Minister in New Delhi. During her years in college, she earned around Rs 150 a month giving tuition to four or five school-going children. Besides, she did all kinds of odd jobs so that she could complete her studies without imposing any additional financial burden on her family. She worked as a part-time assistant in a state government milk depot earning Rs 60 a month. She also worked as a part-time teacher in several local schools and was reportedly even instrumental in founding a school.

It was in the mid-1970s that Mamata found a supporter and mentor in Subrata Mukherjee, who was a Minister in the then West Bengal Chief Minister Siddharta Shankar Ray's cabinet and also a leader of the Chhatra Parishad. As president of the South Calcutta (Kolkata) District Congress Committee, Subrata Mukherjee displayed faith in Mamata's political skills and made her secretary of the committee, a position she held from 1978 to 1981. Through the 1970s, she also held the posts of general secretary, Mahila Congress (I), West Bengal. Subrata Mukherjee then entrusted her with overseeing accommodation arrangements for Rajiv Gandhi at the plenary session of the All India Congress Committee (AICC) held in Calcutta in 1983. This, incidentally, was the last AICC session presided over by Indira Gandhi who was then Prime Minister and Congress President while Rajiv Gandhi was one of the general secretaries of the party. Mamata's work evidently did not escape the attention of Rajiv Gandhi for when her name was proposed as the Congress candidate for the Lok Sabha seat at Jadavpur (in south Kolkata) in 1984, he was quick to recollect her name and promptly gave the green signal.

That year, two Congress stalwarts from West Bengal, Professor Debi Prasad Chattopadhyay (who had served as a Union Minister in Indira Gandhi's government) and Saugata Roy, had both refused to contest from Jadavpur, which was considered to be a stronghold of the Marxists. Subrata Mukherjee proposed Mamata Banerjee's name and she ended up creating history in the first election she contested. Mamata was elected to the 8th Lok Sabha by defeating CPI(M) stalwart, Somnath Chatterjee (now Speaker of the Lok Sabha), by a margin of nearly 20,000 votes.

From the mid-1980s onwards, Mamata held a number of positions in New Delhi while continuing to maintain close contact with her supporters in Kolkata. By 1990, she had become president of the Youth Congress in West Bengal. On August 16 that year, she survived what she claimed was a near-fatal attack on her by goons supporting the CPI(M). The following year, in May 1991, she was re-elected to the 10th Lok Sabha for a second term. Between 1991 and 1993, for the first time, she served as a Union Minister in New Delhi in the P.V. Narasimha Rao government.

In the April–May 1996 elections, she was elected yet again to the Lok Sabha. The ensuing months saw her party, the Congress, supporting the centre-left coalition government of the United Front. The fact that the UF government was supported by the CPI(M) made Mamata most uncomfortable. After all, her fight in West Bengal was first and foremost against the ruling Left Front in the state. By this time, she had begun openly rebelling against the official leadership of the Congress in West Bengal—the party in the state was at that time being headed by Somen Mitra. Mamata was also very unhappy with the central leadership of the party for ignoring her claim to become the head of the party in West Bengal.

In September 1997, after a four-month-long agitation, she floated a formation called the Trinamool Congress (or the Grassroots Congress) after accusing the official leadership of the Congress in the state of being ineffective and acting as if it was the 'B Team' of the CPI(M)-led ruling Left Front. The then President of the Congress, Sitaram Kesri, finally expelled Mamata Banerjee from the Congress in December 1997 for allegedly splitting the party's West Bengal unit. The Trinamool Congress then became a separate political entity.

By the time the March–April 1998 general elections took place, it was clear to most that Mamata was ready to jump ship and would be throwing her weight behind the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) formation. Sure enough, after she was elected to the Lok Sabha for the fourth time and after Atal Behari Vajpayee was sworn in as Prime Minister for the second time, Mamata Banerjee was elevated to the highest official post she had ever held, that of Union Minister for Railways, heading the second largest railway system in the world.

The first Railway Budget presented by Mamata Banerjee in late February 2000 was described by all as ‘populist’: she took the decision to not increase passenger fares and increased freight rates only moderately. She was especially generous towards her own state. Eleven railway projects in West Bengal that had been in limbo for a decade and a half were all revived and money sanctioned for land acquisition.

Mamata’s second Railway Budget for 2001–2002 presented in February 2001 turned out to be an even more blatantly populist exercise than her first budget. This time, she clearly had an eye on the elections to the West Bengal assembly scheduled for May that year. She chose to ignore all advice given to her about the need to take hard decisions to improve the financial health of the Indian Railways. In an unabashed bid to woo her constituents, she announced a slew of new projects for West Bengal, including seven of the 24 new trains that she proposed to start. She left her political opponents in the Left Front government in West Bengal completely dumbfounded—they could not criticise her budget for the new trains would clearly benefit the state. (The left had been arguing for years that the Union government in New Delhi had neglected West Bengal by denying it new projects, including new railway lines.)

If people in West Bengal cutting across political lines were happy with Mamata Banerjee’s Railway Budget for 2001–2002, those in other states were rather vocal in expressing their dissatisfaction. No railway minister is able to satisfy the demands of all states, but this time round there were unusually loud protests from MPs belonging to Bihar, Andhra, Karnataka, and particularly, Orissa. The protests from Orissa MPs were rather embarrassing for the Vajpayee government. The Biju Janata Dal, together with the BJP, was not only ruling

Orissa but the party was a part of the NDA coalition in New Delhi. BJD MPs registered their protest against Mamata's Railway Budget by walking out of the Lok Sabha after claiming that they were being given 'step-motherly' treatment.

Mamata Banerjee was roundly criticised by the media for her populism. But she remained unfazed. After all, she was convinced her actions would be supported by the people of the country—not excluding, of course, the voters from her own state. But weeks before the assembly elections took place in West Bengal, two extremely significant developments took place. The first and most important development was Mamata's decision to switch sides—she chose to ditch the BJP-led NDA in March 2001 and go along with the Congress—a party she had earlier derogatorily referred to as the 'B team' of the CPI(M) in West Bengal. She quit her post as Union Minister for Railways and her party, the Trinamool Congress, left the NDA coalition.

The stated reason for her decision to resign from the Union government was Prime Minister Vajpayee's apparent reluctance to accept the resignation of Defence Minister George Fernandes who was then in the dock following the *tehelka.com* episode. The real reason for Mamata quitting the NDA government was, of course, quite different. She wanted to improve her party's electoral prospects by aligning the Trinamool Congress with its parent party, the Congress, by forming a *mahajot* or grand alliance against the CPI(M)-led Left Front. And this was simply because she felt (perhaps rightly so) that West Bengal's Muslim voters would stay away from the Trinamool Congress as long as it was closely associated with the BJP.

The second important development that considerably weakened Mamata Banerjee and the Trinamool Congress days before the elections was the revolt that took place within the ranks of her own party. This revolt was led by Ajit Panja. He was the only politician other than Mamata in the Trinamool Congress who had had a long career in politics. As a matter of fact, Panja had held positions in the Union government and been around in Congress politics much longer than Mamata. On April 17, 2001, Panja publicly aired his differences with Mamata Banerjee at the Kolkata Press Club. Panja, a co-founder of the Trinamool Congress, said he could not go along

with Mamata's decision to align with the Congress and ditch the BJP-led NDA alliance before the West Bengal assembly elections. Though a tearful Panja said he had taken a principled position, cynics claimed he was most reluctant to give up his post as Minister of State, External Affairs, in the Vajpayee government—a post with considerable perks and opportunities to travel all over the world.

The Congress–Trinamool Congress combine, which had been cobbled together barely a month before the last date of filing nominations, failed to defeat the CPI(M)-led Left Front in the assembly elections held on May 10, 2001. On the contrary, the ruling Left Front improved its position by bucking anti-incumbency sentiments and successively romped home. This electoral victory of the left in West Bengal was the sixth consecutive one since 1977—a record not only in India but anywhere in the world. Many voters in the state clearly perceived Mamata as a maverick, an impulsive and unreliable individual heading a team that would not have been able to offer better governance in the state. She had been going hammer and tongs at the Left Front government for its alleged failure to maintain law and order—especially after a series of violent incidents in Midnapur district where Trinamool Congress sympathisers were reportedly killed by left supporters.

Despite Mamata Banerjee's shrill criticism of the Left Front, her charges clearly failed to influence the pattern of voting in the state. It was not merely the infighting within the ranks of her party that adversely affected her credibility as a political leader, but the local units of the BJP seized the opportunity to play spoiler. The other factor that worked in favour of the Left Front was the image of Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, who is a good 30 years younger than his predecessor Jyoti Basu. During the election campaign, Bhattacharjee had cleverly refrained from personal attacks on Mamata and he was successful to an extent in winning back the support of the middle-classes in urban and semi-urban areas in the state—sections of the electorate that had become staunchly anti-left. The Chief Minister's 'new left' image evidently went down well with the voters. He was seen as a communist who was not only willing to acknowledge the mistakes made by the CPI(M) in the past, but was also willing to mend the ways of his party's cadres to make them more responsive to the aspirations of the people of the state.

The Left Front improved its position in the 294-member West Bengal assembly from 189 seats to 200 seats. Even the most ardent supporters of the left were unwilling to predict such a convincing victory. In the earlier assembly elections held in 1996, the undivided Congress had obtained 85 seats. On this occasion, the Trinamool Congress–Congress alliance could win only one extra seat. The poor performance of the Trinamool Congress–Congress combination shocked Mamata. She had, after all, confidently predicted an electoral defeat for the Left Front and at least on this occasion, she knew that her standard complaint that the Left Front’s victory was on account of ‘scientific rigging’ of elections would sound like a lame excuse.

After the assembly elections were declared, Mamata Banerjee went into a deep sulk. She held the Election Commission of India, the central government as well as the ‘machinations and manipulations’ of the Left Front responsible for her party’s performance. Her criticism of the Election Commission appeared to be an instance of the referee being blamed for the defeat of one’s team. Asked why she had chosen to align her party with the Congress during the assembly polls, she claimed, ‘We had waited for the BJP for a seat adjustment, but they rejected it. Since the Left Front had so many parties in its fold, we too wanted to have a front. So, we had to go along with other parties to fight the left.’

Her explanations did not sound convincing. Mamata then decided to act against Ajit Panja by stripping him of all official positions in the party. On May 21, Panja was reduced to becoming an ordinary primary member of the party. Panja had earlier held the positions of chairman of the party’s West Bengal unit and a member of the All India Trinamool Congress Working Committee. Panja remained unrepentant and continued to criticise Mamata’s decision to quit the NDA and go along with the Congress. (During the election campaign, Panja had shared a platform with Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee at a rally near Kolkata.) Panja told all who were willing to listen that he was the only ‘real’ leader in the party and that Mamata Banerjee’s style of functioning was ‘undemocratic’.

While the assembly elections debacle did not lead to any real questioning of Mamata Banerjee’s authority in the party, there was growing criticism of what was seen as a tendency on her part to take



hasty and impulsive decisions. Though all talk of a split in the party was quelled, there were reports that Panja might attempt to woo two of the party's nine MPs away from Mamata. On August 28, 2000, former Union minister and founder-member of the Trinamool Congress was formally suspended from the party.

A day before she removed Ajit Panja from the Trinamool Congress, on August 27, 2001, Mamata indicated that her party's alliance with the Congress was over. She said the Congress had been more of a burden than an asset for the Trinamool Congress during the West Bengal elections. Mamata and her Trinamool Congress were back with the NDA. She sought to emphasise that her party's support was being extended to Prime Minister Vajpayee and his government but that this did not imply that the Trinamool Congress would automatically have an understanding with the state unit of the BJP. There was a touch of irony that it was none other than Prime Minister Vajpayee's trouble-shooter, Defence Minister and NDA convenor, George Fernandes, who persuaded the alliance to readmit Mamata Banerjee.

She justified her re-entry by saying her party had left the NDA on the tehelka issue and that the Prime Minister had subsequently accepted all the demands she had made on the issue. She also claimed that the Trinamool Congress would give 'issue based' support to the Vajpayee government, a fact that she pointed out had been clearly mentioned in the party's election manifesto. Despite disagreements with the BJP-led alliance, Banerjee maintained that the NDA was a 'natural ally' of her party.

Mamata Banerjee's morale touched a new low after four of her party legislators voted in favour of a rival candidate in the Rajya Sabha elections. Then, in March 2002, an important party leader Debi Prasad Pal quit the Trinamool Congress and returned to the Congress. These two incidents exposed the fragility of the party leadership. While the Congress candidate for the Rajya Sabha, Arjun Sengupta, failed to get elected and the Trinamool Congress candidate, Dinesh Trivedi, did, the cross-voting exposed the dissensions that continued within Mamata's party.

Her relations with the BJP as well as the NDA had been turbulent and continued to be so. As early as October 1998, during the second Vajpayee government, Mamata went on record stating that she and

her party were unhappy with the agenda to 'saffronise' education as devised by Human Resources Development Minister Murli Manohar Joshi. Then, in October 2000, Mamata Banerjee and Ajit Panja put in their papers protesting against the government's decision to hike the prices of petroleum products. Mamata claimed she had not been consulted on the decision. She withdrew her resignation only after Prime Minister Vajpayee sent her a fax saying he would personally look into the issue after he returned to Delhi following surgery of his knees. The prices of petroleum products were not rolled back and Mamata and Panja continued in their positions.

Much later, during the communal carnage that took place in Gujarat in April and May 2002, she repeatedly sided with the government's opponents by calling for the removal of Narendra Modi. She also demanded a 'comprehensive relief package' for the victims of the carnage and urged that an all-party peace march take place to restore the confidence of minorities in the state. At the same time, she could not resist taking pot-shots at the West Bengal government. In the Lok Sabha, she claimed that the violence that had occurred in both Gujarat and West Bengal was tantamount to state sponsored terrorism while urging the Union government to intervene and put a stop to this kind of 'barbarism'. Yet, curiously, despite demanding the removal of Narendra Modi, when it came to voting in the Lok Sabha, she and MPs from her party voted in favour of the Vajpayee government.

Earlier, MPs belonging to the Trinamool Congress deliberately absented themselves during the discussion in Parliament on POTO and also abstained from voting in favour of the Ordinance. Mamata Banerjee said she and her party could not support POTO since the Trinamool Congress had opposed a similar act, POCA, or Prevention of Crime Act, that had been enacted by the West Bengal government. She claimed that both POTO (that later became POTA) and POCA would be misused by the authorities to harass the political opponents of those in power, both in New Delhi and in Kolkata.

Besides POTO, the Trinamool Congress also expressed serious reservations about the Union government's proposal to amend the Industrial Disputes Act by permitting employers to lay-off or retrench workers in industrial units employing up to 1,000 employees without obtaining the prior approval of the concerned government

authorities. Describing the decision to amend the Act as ‘dangerous’ for employees, Mamata Banerjee said such decisions should be arrived at only after wide-ranging consultations had taken place among all political parties in the NDA.

In late May 2003, Vajpayee decided to reshuffle his Council of Ministers and it was widely believed that the Trinamool Congress would once again find representation in the Union government. There was speculation about the portfolio that would be allotted to Mamata since Nitish Kumar was well ensconced in the post of Railway Minister and it seemed unlikely that he would be removed. Media reports suggested that Mamata might be made Agriculture Minister. What transpired thereafter turned out to be a bit of an anti-climax. On the evening of May 24, 2003, the day before the reshuffle, Mamata reportedly spoke to Vajpayee and BJP president Venkaiah Naidu and told them not to induct any representative of her party in the government. She told her party colleagues in Kolkata that the Trinamool leader in the Lok Sabha, her one-time confidante Sudip Bandopadhyaya, had been lobbying hard with Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani and was expecting to be made minister. She told members of her party’s working committee that Sudip was proving to be a ‘risk to the unity’ of the Trinamool Congress.

Just as the manner in which Mamata fell out with Sudip seemed inexplicable to many, the way in which she buried the hatchet with Ajit Panja was equally unexpected. Nearly two years after he had been suspended from the Trinamool Congress, Panja’s suspension was formally revoked in July 2003. There was no explanation as to how the person who had publicly trashed his party leader had again endeared himself to her.

Mamata’s long wait to become a minister in the Cabinet finally ended in September 2003, but in the most bizarre fashion. While she was made a Cabinet Minister, Vajpayee refused to succumb to her demand that she be given the Railways portfolio. With Mamata also refusing to settle for any other portfolio, the standoff meant that she remained a Minister without portfolio till January 2004, when she finally accepted the portfolio of Coal and Mines.

Mamata Banerjee’s unpredictable behaviour has not exactly endeared her to her current political allies and has made potential

partners circumspect about aligning with her. Her party failed to make any headway—in fact, it lost considerable support—during the next assembly elections that took place in West Bengal in April–May 2006. For the first time, elections in the state were conducted over five phases and under the strict supervision of the Election Commission of India. On this occasion as well, defying anti-incumbency sentiments prevailing in the rest of the country, in West Bengal, the Left Front returned to power for the seventh time increasing the number of seats held by it by 39 from 199 to 235 in the 294-member state assembly.

Significantly, the anti-left vote was splintered. Five years earlier, in 2001, when the Trinamool Congress had cobbled up an alliance with its parent, the Congress, the combine obtained 39.3 per cent of the total votes cast in West Bengal. The Trinamool Congress ended up with 60 seats in the assembly and the Congress with 26 (plus three independent candidates supported by it). In 2006, the Trinamool Congress stuck with the BJP—which does not have much of a support base in the state—and ended up with 28.9 per cent of the vote and 29 assembly seats; the Congress won 21 seats with two independent legislators supporting it.

Interestingly, the Trinamool managed to retain much of its support base in Kolkata—the Left hardly increased its vote share in the city (from 42.3 per cent to 42.5 per cent) but won nine instead of eight seats. It, therefore, became clear that although sections of the urban upper and middle classes have apparently moved towards the CPI(M)—during the 2004 Lok Sabha elections, for the first time, only one anti-Left candidate won and she was Mamata herself from south Kolkata—residents of urban areas in the state, especially Kolkata, by and large, remain opposed to the Communists and support either the Trinamool Congress or the Congress. In the state as a whole, the weakness of the opposition made life that much simpler for the left. Far from matching its organisational strength, both the Trinamool Congress and the Congress could not even find enough supporters to act as election agents in all the polling booths in the state.

Mamata Banerjee's political career seemed to be reaching a dead end. However, in late 2006 and early 2007, a controversy over acquisition of nearly 1,000 acres of land at Singur, in Hooghly district, 40 km from Kolkata, by the state government to facilitate the establishment of a

car manufacturing factory by Tata Motors, brought her dramatically back into the political limelight. She went on a hunger strike in the centre of Kolkata protesting against the manner in which the state government had sought to ‘forcibly’ acquire fertile land from farmers. From the Governor of West Bengal Gopal Krishna Gandhi to former Prime Minister V.P. Singh, the President and the Prime Minister of India, a large number of prominent personalities urged her to break her fast and come to the negotiating table. She did eventually break her fast, which lasted 25 days, at a time when it appeared that she would have to be hospitalised.

She was joined in her protest against the Left Front’s policies of acquiring agricultural land to set up industrial ventures by a combination of parties and individuals cutting across ideological lines—on the one hand, there was BJP President Rajnath Singh and on the other, there were extreme-left Naxalite groups and social activists like Medha Patkar and Arundhati Roy. Though many of those who opposed the Tata Motors project at Singur were ideologically poles apart from the Trinamool Congress, Mamata Banerjee undoubtedly did benefit from the perception that she had become a rallying figure of sorts. What helped her was that after Singur, another conflagration over acquisition of land broke out at Nandigram in Midnapur district where the state government had made a tentative attempt to acquire land for a special economic zone to be set up by the Indonesia-based Salim group. Following protests by local villagers and skirmishes with the police which resulted in the deaths of several local people, Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee himself and his government backtracked. With even the CPI(M)’s partners in the Left Front opposed to the manner in which land was sought to be acquired, the state government had to take a conciliatory position and said that land would not be acquired until a proper policy of compensation, rehabilitation and resettlement was in place.

To what extent all this would help revive the fortunes of the Trinamool Congress remains to be seen. Meanwhile, Congress leaders in New Delhi continue to urge her to return to the folds of the parent party but she has demurred—her hesitation may have a lot to do with local compulsions and the fact that a large section of the Congress leadership in West Bengal would stand to get marginalised should the Trinamool Congress and the Congress become a single political outfit.

## Asom Gana Parishad: Co-opted Rebels

Assam is by far the most populous of the seven states, or 'seven sisters', of the north-eastern part of India (excluding Sikkim). The north-east is separated from the rest of the country by a narrow 'chicken's neck' in West Bengal, but more than the geographical separation, the people of north-east India have for long felt alienated from the country's mainstream. Questions relating to sub-nationalism and regional identity, illegal immigration and violent separatist movements have dominated the political discourse surrounding Assam and the north-east for more than half a century.

Till December 1985, nine out of the 10 individuals who served as Chief Ministers of Assam belonged to the Congress party; the exception was Golap Chandra Borbora of the Janata Party who was Chief Minister between March 1978 and September 1979. From the late-1970s, a series of agitations against the state government as well as the Union government spearheaded by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) paralysed the working of Assam for long periods. President's rule was imposed in the state on no less than three occasions in December 1979, June 1981 and March 1982. In the 1980 general elections, polls were not conducted in 12 out of the 14 Lok Sabha constituencies in the state. In December 1985, nearly one year after the 1984 general elections had taken place, the voters of Assam exercised their franchise. Again in 1989, the Lok Sabha elections did not take place in Assam.

Until recently, many political observers believed that national parties like the Congress and BJP had lost most of their influence in Assam. The 13th general elections in 1999, however, proved such a perception wrong. Not only did the electoral fortunes of the Congress revive, the BJP too performed better than it ever had in the state. The outcome of the 12th and the 13th general elections delivered rude shocks to the former student leaders of AASU who had gone on to form the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) after the 1985 accord with the Rajiv Gandhi government in New Delhi and had come to power in the state. During both the 1998 and 1999 elections, the AGP could not win a single Lok Sabha seat in Assam. The Congress, as already mentioned, had played a dominant role in the state. It was only in the 1985 Lok Sabha

elections in Assam that the vote share of the Congress dipped below the 45 per cent mark. Between 1985 and 1991, the share of the Congress in the total votes polled in the state went up from below 24 per cent to over 28 per cent in both the Lok Sabha and assembly elections. Thus, the improved performance of the Congress in the subsequent general elections was not entirely surprising.

What was unexpected was the emergence of the BJP as a major opposition party to the Congress. Since the 1980s, the BJP started recording its presence in Assam. Within the party, individuals like L.K. Advani and former general secretary K.N. Govindacharya could sense that the state would one day become a fertile ground for the BJP's brand of Hindutva politics. Assam has a long international border with Bangladesh which has been traditionally difficult to police. Even if the BJP was branded a communal party by its political opponents, a substantial section of the upper-caste Hindus in Assam had been wary of the BJP. This section saw the party as one that was supported by Marwari traders: the alien 'exploiters' of the people of Assam.

Initially, the BJP was perceived to be soft on Hindu immigrants and hard on Muslim immigrants. This policy did not, however, elicit the sympathies of those sections of the ruling elite in the state who were more fearful of the alleged domination of Bengalis (both Hindus and Muslims) in Assam. The apprehension that the original inhabitants of Assam could become a 'minority' in their own state and that their own culture and tradition would be submerged by waves of immigration fashioned the reactions of many sections of Assamese society (from the peasantry to the middle and upper classes) which supported the AASU-led agitation against 'foreigners' in the state in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

By the time the Assam accord was thrashed out in 1985, large sections had become completely disillusioned with the Congress. Following an all-party meeting convened when Rajiv Gandhi was Prime Minister, Parliament passed the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunal) Act or the IMDT Act. The accord was aimed at disenfranchising illegal immigrants who had settled in Assam in the period between 1965 and 1971, the year in which Bangladesh became an independent nation-state. After the erstwhile AASU leaders formed the AGP, which came to power in 1985, many in Assam

believed the accord would be fully implemented. The AGP was also expected to try and resolve the problems of unemployment and lack of industrial development in the state, issues which the party's leaders had themselves raised as student leaders.

It did not take very long for the realisation to sink in that the process of detecting and deporting illegal immigrants was easier said than done. The biggest 'constraint' of the Act was that the onus of proving that a person was a foreigner rested with those who made the complaint (a provision that was later struck down by the Supreme Court). Much to the dissatisfaction of the AGP, the party's leaders realised that the state government as well as its supporters would at best be able to identify a few hundred thousand 'illegal immigrants' and that it would be next to impossible to deport even these individuals to Bangladesh. Not only was the AGP government unable to tackle the issue of 'foreigners' effectively, the party's leaders proved to be as inefficient, corrupt and fractious as those belonging to the Congress. Far from setting up employment generation schemes, the erstwhile students' leaders fell out with one another, the first and perhaps most significant being the parting of ways between Chief Minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta and his one-time associate-turned-bitter-rival, the late Bhrigu Kumar Phukan.

As the AGP weakened, the Congress was able to return to power in the May–June 1991 elections winning 66 out of the 126 seats in the state assembly. In the same election, the AGP's vote share nearly halved from 35 per cent in 1985 to under 18 per cent in 1991; the number of the party's MLAs shrank from 65 to 19. Unhappy with the AGP's poor track record in power, sections within the party started breaking off and one radical group formed the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), which proclaimed the need for a violent secessionist movement. The ULFA claimed that the only way the problems of Assam could be resolved was if the state ceded from the Indian Union.

Taking a cue from the first AASU-led agitation and the rise of the ULFA, militant groups were formed by sections of other important tribal groups in Assam, the Bodos and the Karbis. The ULFA attracted, and continues to attract, considerable notoriety because it is running a 'parallel' administration in large parts of Assam by levying 'taxes'



and eliminating ‘collaborators’. The ULFA and its sympathisers have been responsible for innumerable hit-and-run killings in remote areas of Assam and many government officials and owners of tea gardens had no alternative but to pay the ‘dues’ demanded by the militants to ‘protect’ themselves and their family members. The problem reached such a stage that the Mahanta government in 1997 even accused officials employed by Tata Tea, which is part of one of the biggest corporate groups in the country, of collaborating with militants by arranging for the medical expenses incurred by their supporters in Mumbai hospitals.

The electoral debacle of 1991 seemed to convince the AGP that it would be unwise to confront the Congress entirely on its own. Thus, by the time the 1996 assembly elections took place, the AGP had cobbled together an alliance that included the left, in particular the CPI. The strategy worked with the AGP-led alliance returning to power. The AGP itself won 59 seats, a little short of a majority, against 19 seats in 1991 and 65 in 1985. The Congress was reduced to 34 seats against 66 in 1991 and 25 in 1985, while the BJP, which had 10 seats in the outgoing assembly, managed to win only four seats this time round. The 1996 assembly elections saw a sizeable section of the minority Muslim community voting for the first time for AGP candidates—as many as 10 Muslim MLAs were elected to the assembly on AGP tickets against 12 Muslim MLAs belonging to the Congress.

The alliance between the AGP and the left meant that when the United Front was being formed in New Delhi in May 1996, it was a foregone conclusion that it would be a part of the UF. The AGP formally remained with the UF right up to the 1999 Lok Sabha elections. However, there was evident strain within the Front, with the left parties in Assam refusing to back the AGP in the 1999 elections, accusing the party of having a tacit understanding with the BJP against the Congress. The AGP repeatedly denied the existence of any such unwritten pact, but it was a widely held perception that it fielded weak candidates in some Lok Sabha constituencies to let the BJP emerge as the main challenger to the Congress in these constituencies.

In 1999, the BJP managed to win two of the state’s 14 Lok Sabha seats—the prestigious Guwahati seat and Nowgong. Bijoya Chakraborty, who won from Guwahati, went on to become a Minister

in the Vajpayee government. AGP chief Mahanta's remark that 'one of our own' had become a minister confirmed the perception that the AGP and the BJP had come closer together. (Chakraborty was AGP MP in the Rajya Sabha between 1986 and 1992.) Whereas the BJP's vote share had jumped from less than 0.4 per cent in the 1985 Lok Sabha elections to 33 per cent in the 1999 elections, the AGP's share of the total votes cast had crashed from 27.2 per cent in 1996 to 12.7 per cent in 1998 and less than 12 per cent by 1999.

In 2000, Advani complimented Mahanta for his handling of the situation after ULFA militants attacked Hindi-speaking settlers in Assam. And while there were murmurs of dissent within the AGP about the party's growing proximity to the BJP, it was not until as late as April 2001 that the AGP formally became a part of the NDA on the eve of the assembly elections in the state. By then, the Muslim minority in Assam had become alienated from the AGP because (among other things) of the party's demand to scrap the IMDT Act and because it had come close to the BJP. The AGP-BJP electoral alliance, however, proved to be a political disaster for the erstwhile student leaders of AASU who had been easily co-opted by the establishment thanks to their evident love for all the pomp and pelf that came with being in power.

Prime Minister Vajpayee and Advani campaigned for the AGP in Assam. In the run-up to the elections, Vajpayee made a controversial statement that the Union government would consider providing work permits to illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. But this statement evidently did not have much of an impact on the electorate of Assam, nor did the accusation by the BJP that the Congress was hand-in-glove with ULFA militants. While both the BJP and the AGP harped on the issue of illegal immigration from Bangladesh, the statistics issued by the Census Commission of India indicated that for the first time in a century, the rate of growth of population in Assam (at around 1.6 per cent per year between 1991 and 2001) was lower than the average rate of growth of the population in the country as a whole (roughly 1.8 per cent per annum). The demand for the repeal of the IMDT Act turned out to be a less emotive issue than had been presumed by the AGP and the BJP.

The 2001 assembly elections saw the AGP obtaining only 20 seats in the 126-member assembly against the 59 seats it had held in the

outgoing assembly. The Congress obtained a majority on its own with 71 seats, more than double the 34 seats it had won in the 1996 assembly elections. On May 18 that year, Tarun Gogoi became the new Chief Minister of Assam.

Dramatic developments in December 2003 were expected to have a bearing on the fortunes of not just the AGP, but also the BJP and the Congress in Assam. In that month, the Royal Army of Bhutan, which shares a border with Assam, launched a massive offensive against ULFA camps located in Bhutan. The operation was quite successful in closing down the camps and in flushing out some important ULFA leaders. New Delhi was quite obviously pleased at this development and repeatedly tried to drive home the point that other neighbours like Bangladesh and Pakistan should follow the example set by Bhutan.

The significance of this development was that the BJP would obviously try to take credit for New Delhi's success in persuading Bhutan to cooperate. If the ULFA's ability to operate in Assam was seriously affected, the BJP would try to derive political mileage from the fact that its government was instrumental in solving a problem that successive Congress and AGP governments had been unable to tackle. However, that was not to be. The Indian government claimed that the ULFA had regrouped and strengthened its bases in Bangladesh from where it continued to strike in Assam, most often targeting non-Assamese migrant workers from places like Bihar and Jharkhand rather than Bangladeshi or Bengali migrants.

By the time of the 2006 assembly elections, the situation seemed ripe for the opposition to cash in on anti-incumbency sentiments against the Gogoi government. A split in the AGP, however, helped the Congress. The number of seats held by the Congress in the assembly came down from 71 to 53 and its vote share shrunk by nearly 8.5 per cent. Yet, the party was able to form the government by cobbling up a majority with the support of 12 members belonging to the Bodoland People's Progressive Front (Hargrama faction) or the BPPF(H) and independent MLAs, including Congress rebels.

The official AGP, now led by Brindaban Goswami went along with the left, and won 24 seats, while the AGP (Progressive) headed by former Chief Minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta was all but wiped out with Mahanta only managing to win one out of the two seats he contested.

With the Supreme Court of India repealing the controversial IMDT Act in September 2005, the Manmohan Singh government moved quickly before the 2006 elections to amend the Foreigners Act to ensure that the Muslim community in Assam would not be completely alienated. The move evidently worked, although the Muslims in the state did vote tactically in certain areas. A new political outfit called the Assam United Democratic Front (AUDF), comprising Muslim organisations and led by the wealthy businessman Badruddin Ajmal, made its presence felt for the first time by winning 10 seats in the assembly.

At one stage it had appeared as if Ajmal and the AUDF would play king-maker in Assam, but incumbent Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi did not need their support and instead went along with the BPPF(H). Nevertheless, the significance of the AUDF making its presence felt in Assam's political scenario may be gauged from the fact that it won 10 seats out of the 69 it had contested whereas the BJP won the same number of seats in the state assembly after contesting no less than 125 seats, or all but one.

Over the course of its brief history, the AGP has tried to stick it out on its own in Assam politics, has flirted with the left—which was totally opposed to the AASU movement—and then with the BJP. A priori, an alliance with the BJP seemed the most viable, since the two parties share a common base—both deriving their support essentially from within the Asom community. Ironically, this is the strategy that proved the least fruitful. Where the AGP goes from here remains to be seen. What is certain though is that a party that arose out of a movement projecting itself as a challenge to mainstream politics has today become completely co-opted in that same mainstream. There is little to distinguish the AGP factions of today from any other party in the state, though stands on individual issues may differ from party to party.

## **National Conference: Keeping New Delhi Happy**

The history of the Jammu & Kashmir National Conference, more commonly known as the National Conference, is quite intimately and inextricably linked with the history of the state itself and it is not surprising that the NC today is quite radically different in character

from the one that was founded by Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah in 1939. Jammu & Kashmir is at the core of India's tensions with Pakistan and hence has attracted considerable international attention. Moreover, the politics of Jammu & Kashmir is intimately linked to the question of how the state's relationship with the rest of India is to be defined.

When India gained independence from British rule in August 1947, Jammu & Kashmir was not a part of the territory agreed upon as part of the new Indian Union. Like other princely states, Jammu & Kashmir too subsequently joined the Union. The process of its integration into India, however, was quite different from other princely states. To begin with, J&K was unique among the princely states in the fact that a Hindu king ruled it though the vast majority of his subjects were Muslims. Also, unlike in most other princely states, the king, Maharaja Hari Singh, had not decided to join either India or Pakistan.

Things changed dramatically in October that year, when Pakistan first prevented the movement of essential supplies to J&K and then actively encouraged armed tribesmen to enter Kashmir. Hari Singh, apprehensive of Pakistan's intentions, sought India's help in countering the offensive. The Indian government made it clear that it would come to Hari Singh's defence only if he were willing to join the Indian Union. On October 26, 1947, Hari Singh, with little choice in the matter, signed the instrument of accession, which was no different from those signed by almost 500 other erstwhile rulers of princely states. The very next day, Indian troops arrived in Kashmir to combat the Pakistani troops that had come in on the heels of the tribesmen.

On January 1, 1948, Prime Minister Nehru declared a unilateral ceasefire and India filed a complaint with the United Nations against Pakistan for invading Kashmir. At this point, Pakistan occupied about two-fifths of the original area of J&K while India was in control of the remaining three-fifths. Over the next 55 years, that has not substantially changed, though the Line of Control has been marginally altered in the course of the two wars—1965 and 1971—India and Pakistan have fought since then. United Nations resolutions pending since 1948 have made no difference to the situation on the ground or been able to make India and Pakistan reach a final settlement on the Kashmir issue.

The partitioning of Kashmir may not have been accompanied by the kind of violence and bloodshed that was witnessed in Punjab, or, to a lesser extent, Bengal, but it continues to rankle much more than the splitting up of these two states. This is not surprising. Both in Punjab and in Bengal, the partition was along communal lines. Thus, the phenomenon of families being separated by international borders is not quite as widespread in Kashmir, where Kashmiri Muslims inhabit both sides of the border. Also, of course, from the Pakistani point of view, J&K remains the most obvious challenge to the 'two nation theory' (the theory which held that Muslims and Hindus in India were two separate nations, on the basis of which the Muslim League demanded partition and got it).

This perhaps explains more than anything else why Kashmir's relationship with India—or with Pakistan—remains a live political issue. This is the context that has defined the politics of the NC and indeed of other parties in the Kashmir region of J&K. The NC from the very beginning, therefore, has sought to strike an aggressively pro-autonomy posture while also distancing itself from those demanding secession of J&K from India. In fact, till 1969, Sheikh Abdullah had led a formation called the Plebiscite Front which continued to demand a plebiscite to determine the will of the people of the state—whether they wanted to stay with India or not—that Nehru had offered at the UN. India continued to argue that a plebiscite could not be held as long as Pakistan occupied part of the territory.

It was only after the 'Kashmir Accord' was reached between Sheikh Abdullah and Indira Gandhi in 1975 that the former gave up the demand for a plebiscite, disbanded the Plebiscite Front and rejoined the NC. This was to be the beginning of an era of cosy relationships between the NC and whichever party happened to be in power in New Delhi. The NC continued to pay lip service to the state's autonomy, but did not really put up any resistance to J&K being treated like any other state in India.

Periodically, under pressure from competing groups in Kashmir, the NC has gone through the motions of demanding that the relationship between the state and New Delhi should go back to the pre-1953 arrangement, when J&K had its own prime minister, constitution and flag and New Delhi's writ ran in the state only in

matters of finance, defence and communications. In fact, right up till 1965, J&K continued to have a prime minister and a president instead of a chief minister and a governor. However, this has been perceived as mere posturing not just in New Delhi, but also in Kashmir itself.

To return to the NC's penchant for staying on the right side of the government of India, what had only been a matter of practice from 1975 to 1998 was elevated to the status of principle when Dr. Farooq Abdullah, who was then Chief Minister of J&K and the president of the NC, declared that the NC would always support the government in New Delhi. He sought to justify this 'principle' on two grounds, one applicable not just to J&K and the other specific to his state. He argued that those who ran governments in India's smaller states had no option but to build bridges with the party in power at the centre, since they were heavily dependent on the Union government for financial assistance. Further, he added, in the specific case of J&K, the menace of terrorism made it imperative that Srinagar and New Delhi pull along well.

Critics of the NC view the process of its 'co-option' rather differently. They point out that J&K is the recipient of generous transfers of funds. In per capita terms, the residents of J&K have received more money from New Delhi than people living in any other state in India barring one, that is Arunachal Pradesh. Yet, ironically, the people of J&K as well as its politicians complain—and rightly so—that the state remains economically underdeveloped and dependent on a few industries such as tourism, handicrafts and horticulture. The NC's critics, therefore, claim that the bulk of the money that comes to the state gets siphoned off by the ruling elite—including politicians and bureaucrats. Thus, local politicians have a vested interest in maintaining cordial relations with whoever is in power in New Delhi to ensure that the flow of funds does not abate.

But, if the NC ran such a thoroughly corrupt administration, what explains the fact that it managed to remain the dominant political party in J&K and repeatedly came back to power, till it was deposed by an alliance of Mufti Mohammed Sayeed's People's Democratic Party and the Congress in the October 2002 elections? Part of the explanation lies in the early history of NC rule in J&K. Arguably

the most crucial step taken by the NC in these early years was the implementation in 1950 of some of the most radical land reforms ever seen in India. This step meant that lakhs of ordinary peasants, who had till that stage been working on people's lands, became the owners of the land they tilled. This certainly contributed to the NC acquiring a sizeable popular base.

The NC's hold on power, however, hasn't always remained secure for such laudable reasons. Few today dispute the fact that the NC had—particularly in the 1980s—been a major beneficiary of systematically rigged elections in the states. In fact, most commentators on Kashmir acknowledge that rigged elections have been a major—perhaps even the single-most important—factor in alienating large sections of the people of Kashmir and making them disillusioned with Indian democracy. Governments in New Delhi and pliant Election Commissions either connived in this subversion of the electoral process or at least looked the other way. The reason seems to have been the belief that the NC was the only political party that could keep J&K with India and that allowing its rivals in Kashmir to come to power would have strengthened the secessionists.

Even the 1996 elections, which were held after a prolonged spell of President's rule in J&K, were widely perceived as rigged with widespread allegations of Indian security forces coercing voters to vote and in some cases to vote for the NC. The official figures suggest that almost 54 per cent of eligible voters voted in these elections. But groups like the All Party Hurriyat Conference—a united front of motley groups including some demanding *azadi* (freedom) and others in favour of joining Pakistan—insist that these are highly exaggerated figures and that barely 10 per cent of the electorate actually voted.

Many would also argue that it was precisely because the 2002 elections were widely recognised as being by and large free and fair that the NC finally lost power. Whether or not that is entirely true, it threw up a new coalition in Srinagar—the PDP-Congress coalition. Whether the PDP is able to redefine the politics of Kashmir or—like the NC—discredits itself as another pet of New Delhi remains to be seen.

What changed was the NC's relationship with New Delhi. In July 2003, NC President Omar Abdullah announced that his party was pulling out of the NDA and its government. Omar admitted that the



decision was long overdue and that the NC should have exited from the NDA when the communal carnage in Gujarat was on. He publicly apologised for the NC's silence during that period and was also candid enough to admit that instead of being seen as a party representing Kashmir in New Delhi, the NC had over time come to be perceived in the Valley as New Delhi's representative in the state.

What explained the dramatic shift in the NC's attitude towards those in power in the national capital? Omar Abdullah and his party would have liked people to believe that it was a genuine case of introspection leading to correction. What many believed, however, was that there was a rather more mundane explanation for the parting of ways between the NC and the Vajpayee government. According to those who held this view, the NC had been trying to persuade the BJP to accept Dr. Farooq Abdullah as the NDA's candidate for Vice President of India or—failing that—to make him a minister in the Vajpayee cabinet. It is when these attempts came a cropper that the NC suddenly discovered the evils of the BJP, argue the cynics.

Whatever the real reasons for the NC's leaving the NDA, there is little doubt that the decision was welcomed both by people in the Kashmir Valley and by Opposition parties. Rallies addressed by Omar Abdullah in the days immediately following his announcement reportedly drew huge crowds and he was also soon attending Opposition conclaves.

Being in opposition has apparently helped the NC. In fact, it can be argued that while incumbency carries a load in any state in India, the burden is particularly heavy in J&K. All parties in the Kashmir Valley have to pronounce themselves in favour of the state's autonomy from the Centre, against human rights violations by security forces and for a 'healing touch' towards militants. The disadvantage the party governing the state has is that it must at the same time not go overboard on these issues and annoy New Delhi. Those in Opposition, on the other hand, have no such compulsions. This was a major factor working in favour of the PDP when it was out of power and seems to have benefited the NC after it lost power in the 2002 assembly elections.

The PDP was clearly very aware of the fact that the NC was sounding more radical and pro-Kashmiri than itself. Even while in power in the state, therefore, it tried to maintain a somewhat radical

stance. A good illustration of this point was provided in early 2007. The PDP, which was the junior partner in the coalition government headed by Ghulam Nabi Azad of the Congress, insisted that the Union government should ‘demilitarise’ the Kashmir Valley, that is, it should pull out troops stationed in the Valley to combat militants. New Delhi insisted that demilitarisation would not be possible till such time as infiltration of militants from Pakistan-occupied Kashmir came to a complete halt. At the time of writing, in September 2007, speculation continued on whether the controversy would ultimately take its toll on the Congress-PDP alliance or the latter would be content with having portrayed itself as more sensitive to Kashmiri concerns.

### **Shiromani Akali Dal: Comfortable in Coalitions**

The Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD)—or rather one of its predecessors, the Akali Party—has the distinction of having led the first non-Congress government ever to be formed in independent India. That was the government headed by Gian Singh Rarewala formed in April 1952 in the erstwhile PEPSU (Patiala and East Punjab States Union). Rarewala was himself not a member of the Akali Party at the time, but an independent MLA. The Akalis, however, were the single-largest group in the United Front headed by Rarewala. The Congress had emerged as the largest party in the 60-member PEPSU assembly after the 1951 elections, but with 26 MLAs was just short of the halfway mark. The Akalis, who had won 19 seats, cobbled together the United Front with the help of independent MLAs and the CPI. Ironically, Rarewala was to later join the Congress in 1956 and become a minister in Pratap Singh Kairon’s cabinet in 1957, before again joining the Akalis in 1969, who had by now renamed themselves the Shiromani Akali Dal.

From that historic beginning in 1951 to date, the Akalis have periodically participated in coalitions, both in Punjab and in New Delhi, and have maintained a consistently anti-Congress stance.

The Akalis did not start as a political party or even a political movement. On the contrary, the SAD traces its origins to an organisation set up primarily for religious reform within the Sikh community. This forerunner of today’s SAD was the Gurudwara Sewak Dal, formed in December 1920 to raise and train volunteers

for what came to be known as the Gurudwara Reform Movement. The primary objective of the movement was to break the stranglehold of the *mahants* (priests) on gurudwaras since they had acquired a reputation for corruption and misuse of their position for personal gratification. The Gurudwara Sewak Dal was renamed the Akali Dal in 1921 and SAD the following year.

Though it started primarily as a religious reform organisation, SAD even in its early days had sections that felt it needed to play a larger role—whether in India’s struggle for independence or in the revolts of the peasantry. The embryo of a political party thus existed even in those early days. As it has evolved, the SAD has remained not only a party almost solely of Sikhs, but one that provides expression to Sikh consciousness in all aspects of society, not just religion. It is important to recognise also that despite being a party with an explicitly Sikh character, the SAD has never been perceived as a communal organisation or one that discriminates against non-Sikhs in matters of state. Its secular credentials have never seriously been in doubt, though it was not till as late as 1995 that the party permitted non-Sikhs to become members.

Because of the part-religious, part-political character of the SAD, Akali politics has traditionally revolved round more than one power centre, unlike with most other Indian parties. The party president, the leader of the legislative wing and the head of the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC)—a body that is ostensibly purely religious and responsible for the management of *gurudwaras*—have all been part of the same loose organisation, but on occasions at loggerheads with one another. It has been said of the Akalis that they tend to unite when out of power, but resort to factional feuds when in power.

There is merit in this apparently sweeping statement given the number of occasions on which governments in Punjab led by the Akali Dal have fallen because of internal strife. For instance, between March 1967 and March 1970, the state had three different chief ministers—all from the Akali Dal—and a brief spell of President’s Rule in between. Again, when Surjit Singh Barnala became Chief Minister in September 1985, he lasted less than two years before he was pulled down by intra-party fights leading to the imposition of President’s rule in May 1987, which continued for nearly five years till February 1992.

This was to become the longest spell of President's Rule in the state, since it also coincided with the period when Sikh militancy was at its peak.

Interestingly, one man has been involved in each of these episodes of factional fighting, either as the incumbent chief minister facing dissidence or as the man leading the revolt against the chief minister. He is Prakash Singh Badal, who has proved to be the greatest survivor in Punjab politics, having served as Chief Minister of the state on four occasions. The fact that these occasions have been as far apart as 1970, 1977, 1997 and 2007 is a testimony to Badal's tenacity through the ups and downs of electoral politics.

Badal is arguably also the man primarily responsible for the Akali Dal being perceived as the natural party of the Jat Sikh peasantry in Punjab. This is no small achievement considering that till the 1960s, the SAD was a party largely under the leadership of urban Sikhs and the Sikh farmers by and large voted for the Congress in elections to the state assembly and Parliament. Of course, the process of the farmers moving out of the Congress fold has been a general phenomenon in north India and not just in Punjab, but Badal's aggressive championing of issues that appealed to the farmers—like free power, higher support prices and subsidised fertilisers—certainly helped hasten the process and ensured that farmers disillusioned with the Congress gravitated towards the SAD.

The events of the late 1970s and the first half of the 1980s further alienated large sections of Sikhs—and not just those in rural areas—from the Congress. In retrospect it can be said that the Congress paid the price for trying to be too clever by half. The rise of militancy in Punjab might have happened even without the Congress covertly playing along, but there is little doubt that Giani Zail Singh, who was Chief Minister from March 1972 to June 1977 and later became President of India, tacitly encouraged the growth of leaders like Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. The idea apparently was that Bhindranwale, with his militant espousal of the Sikh cause, would provide an alternative centre of power in Sikh politics and hence reduce the Akali Dal's support base. The growing clout of Bhindranwale could also be expected to heighten tensions within the Akali Dal, between the faction led by Badal and the one led by Gurcharan Singh Tohra and Jagdev Singh Talwandi.

The plan worked up to a point. Bhindranwale did rapidly become a cult figure in Sikh politics. Akali leaders were clearly apprehensive of losing many of their supporters to him, but finding it hard to match his militant rhetoric, which was increasingly acquiring secessionist tones. The more moderate Akali stance—which was to demand greater autonomy for Punjab and indeed all states—did not quite have the same appeal. The problem, however, was that having tacitly supported Bhindranwale while he took on the Akalis, Zail Singh and his mentor Indira Gandhi found that they could not put the genie back into the bottle once he had served his purpose.

By the beginning of the 1980s, Bhindranwale was no longer just a leader of a relatively insignificant group called the Damdami Taksal. He had acquired the halo of a saint and was called Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. He not only called upon Sikhs to take up arms against the Indian state, he also preached the virtues of abstinence. His puritanical and spartan lifestyle combined with his militant rhetoric proved the perfect magnet for thousands of unemployed youth. Bhindranwale's group started gaining control over many important gurudwaras in Punjab and the Akal Takht located in the Golden Temple complex at Amritsar—said to be the holiest shrine of the Sikhs—became the de-facto headquarters of Bhindranwale and his supporters.

By 1984, the Akal Takht was a hotbed of militant activity and a place where huge quantities of arms were stocked. In June that year, Indira Gandhi took a step that few—including Bhindranwale—believed she would dare take. On June 6, 1984, the Indian army stormed the Akal Takht using tanks and infantry to flush out Bhindranwale and his men. Bhindranwale died in the fighting, as did many of his men, but the army could not achieve its objective without inflicting considerable damage on the Akal Takht. The incident shocked even those Sikhs who had no love lost for Bhindranwale. Their holiest shrine, they felt, had been desecrated by Indira. The government tried in vain to argue that it was really Bhindranwale who had desecrated the Akal Takht by using a place of worship as a base for subversive activities.

What followed was Indira Gandhi's assassination which in turn sparked off one of the worst communal genocides India has ever witnessed. The repercussions for the Congress were severe, both in Punjab and in Delhi. In Delhi, large sections of the Sikhs had

traditionally been Congress voters and in fact the only Sikh political leaders in Delhi were in the Congress. Following the storming of the Akal Takht, however, the community switched en masse to the BJP, a fact that decisively changed the electoral arithmetic in the national capital. The Congress had to wait till 1999 before it could outdo the BJP in elections in Delhi, whether for the Lok Sabha, the assembly or the local bodies.

Similarly, in the 1985 elections in Punjab after 1984, the Akali Dal romped home to victory. Again, as with the BJP in Delhi, this was not so much because of its popularity as on account of the Akalis becoming the only credible alternative to the Congress. The Akalis, despite the victory, were in disarray in the state. Throughout the period of militancy, the Akalis had been marginalised in Punjab, unable to decide whether they should adopt a stance sympathetic to the militants or take a firm position against them. Whatever little political resistance was being offered to the militants came from smaller parties like the CPI, whose leader Satpal Dang was nationally recognised as one who was bravely opposing militancy on the ground.

Just before the 1985 elections, however, the Akalis had made a serious bid to get back into the thick of Punjab politics. The Congress, now led by Rajiv Gandhi in New Delhi, was desperately seeking ways of dealing with the problem of militancy in Punjab. The Akalis were equally looking for ways to remain relevant in the politics of the state. The accord signed between Rajiv Gandhi and Sant Harcharan Singh Longowal, the Akali Dal president, was a result of this convergence of necessities between the two traditional rivals in Punjab politics. The accord sought to convey the impression that it was addressing most of the genuine concerns of Punjab and the Sikhs. Thus, it provided for Chandigarh—which was a Union Territory that served as the capital for both Punjab and neighbouring Haryana—to be transferred to Punjab. It also stipulated that any river-water sharing arrangement involving Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan would ensure that Punjab's farmers did not get less water than they were already getting.

The accord was denounced as a 'surrender' of Punjab's interests by the militants. The crucial question of autonomy of the state, they pointed out, had not been adequately addressed. The Anandpur Sahib Resolution—a document asking for greater autonomy, and which got

its name from the place at which the meeting in which it was adopted was held—had, the hardliners argued, been effectively consigned to the dust heap since the accord merely said that it would be ‘referred to the Sarkaria Commission’ which was dealing with centre–state relations.

Longowal was assassinated in August 1985, even as the campaign for the September 1985 assembly elections were on. The transfer of Chandigarh to Punjab, which should have taken place on January 26, 1986 according to the Rajiv–Longowal accord never did take place. The much-touted accord had effectively been buried within months of it being signed. The militants could adopt a ‘we told you so’ attitude, while the Akali Dal was left desperately trying to defend its ‘surrender’. With the imposition of President’s rule in 1987, politics in Punjab took a back seat and so did the Akali Dal. The confrontation between the administration—in particular the police—and the militants took centrestage. As so often happens in such situations, innocents were often caught in the crossfire, literally and metaphorically. While the police was cracking down on those suspected of being sympathetic to the militants, the militants too were terrorising innocent people into providing them shelter and money.

Ultimately, the militants gradually lost their ideological edge and became increasingly seen as extortionists. As incidents of women being molested and even raped by them grew, Sikh militancy in Punjab lost its support base. Combined with strong arm tactics by the police, led by K.P.S. Gill, this helped bring militancy under control by the beginning of the 1990s.

When the P.V. Narasimha Rao government announced its decision to hold elections to the state assembly in 1992, almost every party except the Congress protested saying the situation on the ground was hardly conducive to the conduct of a free and fair poll. True, militancy had been considerably reduced from its peak, but it remained a serious problem. Rao, however, got a pliant Election Commission to hold the elections despite the protests. The Akali Dal boycotted the elections and appealed to people not to participate in them. Whether because of this appeal or because of fear, the turnout in the 1992 elections was 20 per cent, the lowest Punjab has ever witnessed. Despite this, the political process in Punjab had unmistakably resumed.

The Akalis, who had been drifting aimlessly till this stage found once again that they had been given an emotive issue by default. Since the Congress was identified with the excesses of the police during the militancy years, the Akalis were the obvious rallying point for those demanding action against police officers who had exceeded their brief and made innocents suffer. In the next elections in 1997, therefore, it came as no surprise that the Akali Dal emerged as a comfortable winner.

At this stage, the Akali Dal was still a constituent of the United Front government in New Delhi. However, with the collapse of the UF in 1998, the Akalis had to look for other options in Punjab. In the 1998 Lok Sabha elections, therefore, the Akali Dal became the first of the UF constituents to join the BJP-led alliance. The two partners complemented each other remarkably well. While the Akali Dal had a strong base in rural Punjab and among the Sikhs, the BJP was almost entirely a party of the Hindus in Punjab's urban centres. Predictably, the alliance won the overwhelming majority of Punjab's 13 Lok Sabha seats in 1998.

Since then, the Akali Dal has stuck to the NDA despite occasional friction with the BJP. It has not managed to replicate the success of 1998, with the Congress winning nine of the 13 Lok Sabha seats in 1999 and then going on to win the state assembly elections in 2001. This is not to suggest that the relationship between the two parties has always been smooth. In fact, on one occasion in 2000, the Akali Dal came close to snapping its ties with the NDA over the creation of Uttaranchal (now Uttarakhand). The bone of contention was the district of Udham Singh Nagar, in the '*terai*' (foothills) region of Uttar Pradesh, which was dominated by rich Sikh farmers who had settled in what was once marshland but has now been transformed into a fertile grain and sugarcane cultivating area. The Sikh farmers of Udham Singh Nagar were averse to the idea of their district being made part of Uttaranchal. The Akali Dal championed their cause, threatening to withdraw support to the Vajpayee government unless the map of Uttaranchal was redrawn to exclude Udham Singh Nagar. Eventually, the matter was sorted out, but for a while the threat seemed serious.

Similarly, the Akali Dal was at the forefront in opposing moves by New Delhi to hike fertiliser prices or keep the minimum support



prices for procurement of grain by official agencies in check. With support from other ‘pro-farmer’ parties like Ajit Singh’s RLD and Om Prakash Chautala’s INLD—it successively resisted such moves. The most obvious instances were in 1998, when the then Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha announced in his budget that urea prices would be hiked, but had to beat a hasty retreat within days. Similarly, Jaswant Singh tried in his budget of 2003–2004 to raise fertiliser prices by barely 2–3 per cent. Once again, the Akali Dal together with other parties was able to force a rollback.

Despite such periodic tensions, there was little reason to believe that the BJP-Akali Dal tie-up would disintegrate. The Akali Dal had a long history of coalition politics and was unlikely to overlook the fact that the BJP remained a useful ally in taking on the Congress in Punjab. More importantly, there was hardly any other party in Punjab that could prove even a partial substitute for losing the BJP’s support base. The CPI, which once had a reasonably strong base in the state, is too emaciated a force to be a major ally and the BSP could not ally with the Akalis since their support bases—the lower-caste Sikhs and the Jat Sikhs, respectively—were at loggerheads with each other.

The outcome of the February 2007 assembly elections in Punjab is only likely to cement the ties between the Akali Dal and the BJP. The alliance of the two parties got a comfortable majority, winning 67 seats in the 117-member assembly, but unlike in the past the Akalis did not have a majority on their own. While they had won 48 seats, just seven more than in the 2002 elections, the BJP had increased its tally from a mere three to 19. For the first time, therefore, the Akalis were forming a government that would be dependent on the BJP for its survival. The election results also made it obvious that the slew of corruption cases initiated against Parkash Singh Badal and his son Sukhbir by the Congress government headed by Amarinder Singh had not impressed the electorate. Amarinder’s style of functioning, perceived by some as ‘imperious’ and smacking of his royal lineage, may also have added to the anti-incumbency sentiments and prevented the Congress from fighting the elections as a cohesive force. (After the elections, Amarinder’s arch rival in the party, former Chief Minister Rajinder Kaur Bhattal, became leader of the opposition in the state assembly.)

## INLD and RLD: Fathers and Sons

The names of both the Indian National Lok Dal led by Om Prakash Chautala and the Rashtriya (or National) Lok Dal headed by Ajit Singh would literally imply that the two political parties have a 'national' character. But the fact is that the INLD and the RLD, both offshoots of the Bharatiya Lok Dal (BLD), are confined to specific geographical areas—the INLD to Haryana and the RLD to western Uttar Pradesh. Unlike the BLD that in its heyday in the 1970s had a base almost through all of the Hindi heartland—from Haryana to Bihar—the INLD and the RLD have not been able to expand their political influence beyond areas where Jat farmers comprise a substantial portion of the population. In fact, curiously, these two political parties have relatively little influence over the Jat community based in Rajasthan, which borders Haryana.

Another common factor binding these two parties is the fact that their leaders are both sons of prominent political personalities—Ajit Singh is the son of former Prime Minister Chaudhary Charan Singh while Chautala's father was Chaudhary Devi Lal, who served as Deputy Prime Minister in V.P. Singh's government in 1989–1990. Yet another common aspect of the working of the INLD and the RLD has been the utterly opportunistic manner in which they have formed and broken alliances with other political parties.

Like their fathers, Ajit Singh and Chautala have relied primarily on projecting themselves as champions of the interests of farmers to garner votes, though Chautala also sought to project himself as a Chief Minister who was rapidly modernising and industrialising Haryana. Of the two, Chautala has been the more successful in taking over the mantle from his father, while Ajit Singh's stature as a leader has never come close to matching his father's. At the height of his popularity, Charan Singh was not only the undisputed leader of the Jats of both western UP and Haryana, but had also successfully cobbled together a caste-based social coalition popularly referred to in Uttar Pradesh by the acronym AJGAR, standing for Ahirs (Yadavs), Jats, Gujjars and Rajputs. He had also emerged as a leader of the intermediate castes in other parts of the Hindi heartland. In contrast, Ajit Singh has struggled to even keep his hold over the Jats of western UP secure. So much

so that in the 1998 Lok Sabha elections, he was himself defeated by Som Pal from Baghpat, the constituency that had been his father's pocket borough and had elected Ajit Singh himself on four occasions prior to 1989.

To be fair to Ajit Singh, the comparison with Chautala is perhaps unduly harsh on him. Singh could legitimately argue that the number of Lok Sabha constituencies in which the RLD has influence and a real chance of winning is significantly larger than those in which the INLD is a serious contender. The RLD can claim considerable influence in at least 14 seats in UP, whereas the INLD cannot realistically lay claim to any influence outside the 10 Lok Sabha seats in Haryana. While this is true to a great extent, unfortunately for Ajit Singh, the 14 constituencies in which his party wields influence are part of a state that had 85 Lok Sabha seats before it was bifurcated and even today has 80 seats. Thus, while the INLD has the ability to come to power in Haryana, the RLD can at best hope to be a minor partner in any alliance that rules Uttar Pradesh.

This could well explain the RLD's periodic attempts to raise the demand for a separate 'Harit Pradesh' (green state) to be carved out of Uttar Pradesh, comprising 22 of the state's western districts. This demand was also raised by the INLD in the 2002 state assembly elections, when it was trying to establish an independent presence in UP, without much success. Though neither Chautala nor Singh can seriously believe that they will make a serious impact in each other's territories, both sides keep up the apparent battle to inherit the legacy of Charan Singh. This has given rise to animosity between the two, which they have made no secret of.

Thus, for instance, when Ajit Singh—in one of his many flip-flops—decided to join the NDA in 2001 after having contested the 1999 Lok Sabha elections in alliance with the Congress, Chautala publicly threatened that he would quit the NDA if Ajit Singh were made a member of Vajpayee's cabinet. Eventually, when in July 2001 Ajit Singh became Union Agriculture Minister, Chautala was left sulking. There was precious little he could do, apart from 'clarifying' that he had never questioned the Prime Minister's prerogative to appoint anyone he liked as a member of his cabinet.

However, in the February 2002 assembly elections in UP, Chautala saw an opportunity to do some damage to the RLD's prospects. He put up candidates in more than 100 constituencies in western UP, knowing full well that none of them had even a reasonable chance of getting elected. The idea was to split the Jat vote in these constituencies, thereby sabotaging the prospects of victory for some of the RLD's candidates. Throughout the campaign, Chautala also concentrated his attack on Ajit Singh, accusing him of having betrayed the cause of Harit Pradesh once he had secured a ministerial berth. The beneficiaries of the rivalry between the INLD and the RLD—which were both members of the NDA—turned out to be the SP and the BSP.

Chautala's apparent indignation at Ajit Singh's opportunism was hypocritical to say the least. The Haryana leader has himself shifted political allegiances with alacrity in an expedient manner. For instance, the INLD had been a part of the United Front government that was in power from June 1996 to February 1998. In the Lok Sabha elections that followed, the party contested the polls as part of the UF with its main rivals in Haryana being the Congress led by Bhajan Lal and the Haryana Vikas Party (HVP) led by former Congress Chief Minister, Bansilal, in alliance with the BJP. When the results were announced, the INLD had won four out of the state's 10 seats and its ally the BSP (which was not part of the UF but had tied up with the INLD in Haryana) had secured one seat. The BJP won two of the remaining five seats, the Congress winning three. The HVP could not win a single seat.

What followed was opportunism at its worst. Since the BJP-led alliance had not secured a majority in the 543-member Lok Sabha, it was left hunting for potential new allies. The constituents of the UF, which had performed quite poorly in the 1998 elections, became obvious targets. The INLD was just one of the many parties in the UF which was wooed by the BJP to support its government in New Delhi. Like the DMK, the TDP and the NC, the INLD too decided it wanted a piece of the national cake. But that was not all. Having joined the BJP at the national level, the INLD set about ensuring that the quid pro quo was complete. In 1999, the BJP—which had partnered the HVP in the 1996 assembly elections and joined the coalition government in the state—withdrawed its support to Chief Minister Bansilal,

precipitating the fall of his government. It then extended support to Chautala to form the next government. The flimsy pretext of the BJP being dissatisfied with the Bansi Lal government's performance fooled nobody.

Described in his official curriculum vitae as a 'computer expert' educated at the Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur and the Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago, Ajit Singh had worked in the American computer industry for 15 years before entering the hurly-burly of politics in India's Hindi heartland. Like Chautala, Ajit Singh too has excelled at switching allegiances to be on the right side of whoever happens to be in power in New Delhi. When the Janata Dal was in power between 1989 and 1991, Singh was in the JD. When the Narasimha Rao government was struggling to win a vote of confidence in the Lok Sabha in 1994, Rao found Ajit Singh willing to bail him out. The price the Jat leader extracted for his support in a time of need was a berth in the Union Cabinet. In February 1995, Ajit Singh became Cabinet Minister for Food in the Rao government. When the UF came to power in 1996, Ajit Singh was again on the winning side and was made a Cabinet Minister yet again. In 2001, he joined the Vajpayee government, despite the fact that he had contested the 1999 Lok Sabha elections in alliance with the Congress. Again in 2003, he extended support to Mulayam Singh's government in UP in return for some of his MLAs being made ministers.

Despite all these flip-flops—or perhaps because of them—Ajit Singh has failed to outflank his *bete noire* in Uttar Pradesh politics, Mulayam Singh Yadav. Until the fall of the V.P. Singh government in November 1990, Ajit Singh had tried to better Mulayam Singh Yadav while remaining in the same party, the Janata Dal. Since then, he has been part of virtually every possible political formation or combination. However, while he has remained a leader in only one region of UP, Mulayam has grown in stature to become one of the state's most important leaders and even a national leader of sorts.

Chautala, who has been sworn in as Chief Minister of Haryana no less than five times (in December 1989, July 1990, March 1991, July 1999 and March 2000), had a rather controversial first term as Chief Minister that began on December 2, 1989, after his father Devi Lal was designated Deputy Prime Minister in the V.P. Singh government.

At the time he was sworn in as Chief Minister, Chautala was a member of the Rajya Sabha and he was required to win an assembly election. He chose to contest a by-election in February 1990 from the Meham constituency against a popular Congress candidate Anand Singh Dangi (who was once Chautala's colleague in the Congress but had later become a bitter rival).

During the election, senior policemen who were stationed at Mokhra Madina village claimed they were attacked by a mob that included Dangi's supporters. Subsequently, three persons died in police firing and another was killed in a separate incident. The Meham by-election was countermanded in the wake of allegations by Dangi and others to the effect that state government officers and policemen had rigged the polls to ensure Chautala's victory. After elections were conducted again, Chautala was declared the winner. A commission of inquiry was later instituted by the Punjab and Haryana High Court and criminal cases were registered against police officers present during the Meham incident after Bhajan Lal of the Congress party became Haryana's Chief Minister in 1991. While neither Chautala nor any Haryana police officer was formally indicted for what had taken place, the stigma of the 'mayhem in Meham' remained with him for many years.

Chautala's attempts at portraying himself as a farmer leader too have not always been successful. His most significant setback in this regard came in 2002, when his erstwhile ally, Mahendar Singh Tikait, the leader of the pro-farmer Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU), led an agitation against Chautala's government in Haryana on the issue of electricity dues. Tikait charged Chautala with going back on his election promise of waiving all past arrears. With the state government taking a tough stand, the agitation took a violent turn resulting in policemen being taken hostage by farmers. Thereafter, the police fired on protesting farmers. While the issue died down, it dented Chautala's pro-farmer image to some extent. To his credit, however, unlike Ajit Singh, Chautala did not remain content merely projecting a uni-dimensional image of himself as a farmer leader. He assiduously tried to project himself as a dynamic chief minister who was keen on implementing economic reforms; one who was determined to make Haryana one of the country's most industrialised and technologically advanced states.

Despite these attempts, Chautala's government was perceived to be extremely corrupt. Individuals close to the Chief Minister, including his relatives, reportedly amassed fortunes through land deals, while officials seen as honest and willing to tackle corruption were harassed. Such a perception, along with the dent in his pro-farmer image contributed to the INLD's defeat in the assembly elections of 2005. While the party's vote share declined only marginally from 29.6 per cent to 27 per cent, its tally of seats plummeted from 47 to 9 in a 90-member assembly.

As for Ajit Singh, he quit the Vajpayee government in a huff in May 2003 when he heard that he would be removed from his position as Union Agriculture Minister and replaced by Rajnath Singh, former BJP Chief Minister of UP. Soon thereafter, he met Congress President Sonia Gandhi and Samajwadi Party Chief Mulayam Singh and said he was willing to support them to topple the Mayawati government regime in UP.

Ajit Singh asked his party's 14 MLAs, including five ministers, to resign from the state government and herded them away from the heat of Lucknow to more pleasant climes, first to Pachmarhi and then to Srinagar, so that they would not be 'tempted' to defect. As already mentioned, the RLD did ultimately join a coalition led by Mulayam to form the government in Lucknow. As the government neared the end of its term in early 2007, Ajit Singh withdrew support to the SP-led government. While the RLD claimed that it was doing so because the government had been unfair to sugarcane farmers in fixing the prices at which sugar mills buy cane and also because the law and order situation in UP had deteriorated, few were convinced by such claims. It was widely perceived as yet another instance of the RLD superno keeping all options open on the eve of an election so that he could end up backing the winning horse. Ajit Singh continues to remain a politician who has had at best modest electoral success, but more than proportionate success in sharing power, whether in Lucknow or in New Delhi.

## **Shiv Sena: Riding the Hindutva Tiger**

It would be difficult to find any political leader of significance anywhere in the world who openly praises Adolf Hitler for his

‘nationalism’. The founder leader of the Shiv Sena, a right-wing political party with a base in Maharashtra, specifically Mumbai, Balasaheb Thackeray (pronounced *Thaak-re*), former cartoonist, is one person who remains unabashed and uninhibited in his adulation for the German dictator.

The Shiv Sena, it is believed, was used by textile mill owners of Mumbai to counter the left trade unions in the commercial capital through the 1960s and 1970s. The Sena’s strident rhetoric against ‘outsiders’—people who were not natives of Maharashtra—and in favour of ‘sons of the soil’ was a very useful tool in dividing the workers, large sections of whom were migrants from states like Tamil Nadu, Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh. The Sena in its early years was also not averse to using brute force to break up strikes.

While the Sena cut its political teeth in the movement for including the Dharwar and Belgaum districts of adjoining Karnataka in Maharashtra, it is not surprising, therefore, that it first consolidated its strength in the city of Mumbai and surrounding industrial areas like Thane. Having tasted considerable success in breaking the back of the left trade unions, it then went on to capture many of the unions and hence establish a base for electoral conquests in the future.

The first major electoral success for the Shiv Sena—which uses a snarling tiger as its party symbol—came when it won the Bombay Municipal Corporation elections in 1968, barely two years after the party formally came into existence on June 19, 1966. The Sena owed its victory in part to dissension within the Congress, in particular to the confrontation between the Bombay Pradesh Congress Committee (BPCC) and the Maharashtra Pradesh Congress Committee (MPCC). The two Congress committees were bitterly opposed to each other because of the contradictory stands they had taken on an extremely emotive issue: the creation of the state of Maharashtra from the erstwhile Bombay Presidency. While the BPCC, dominated by the city’s industrial and trading elite, was against the idea of Bombay being part of Maharashtra, the MPCC, which was dominated by the rural elite of what is today western Maharashtra, had argued for Bombay being part of the new state.

This conflict within the ranks of the Congress certainly helped the Shiv Sena in the elections for the Bombay Municipal Corporation. But, it wasn’t just a victory by default. The Sena’s virulent campaign



against the *lungi walas*—a disparaging sartorial term used to describe those from the southern states of India—also played a significant part. Migrants from the south, particularly from Tamil Nadu, had a considerable share in white-collar jobs in Bombay and the Sena's demand that these jobs should go to native Maharashtrians found an echo among the Maharashtrian middle class, given the context of rising unemployment. The Sena chose to attack restaurants run by south Indians to highlight its opposition to 'outsiders'.

Despite this early success, the Sena remained essentially a party confined to Mumbai and some neighbouring smaller industrial towns till the mid-1980s. Through the late 1960s, the 1970s and the early-1980s, the Sena experimented with various alliances, without succeeding in making a major impact on the politics of Maharashtra. According to Praveen Swamy (*Frontline*, May 26, 2001):

It is also instructive to note that opportunistic alliances have been a second key element of Sena strategy. Many of its collaborators have been improbable allies. It fought the 1973 Mumbai municipal elections, for example, in alliance with the pro-Dalit Republican Party of India, and then had its candidate elected as Mayor in a deal with the Muslim League, the socialists, the Congress (O), and both the BPC and the MPCC; all these were wooed and in turn courted the Sena. The only consistent element in Sena politics was its hostile anti-communism, a project that had the gleeful support of both factions of the Congress. Through the 1970s, Sena gangs repeatedly attacked leading communist trade union leaders, and in 1973 were responsible for the murder of popular Parel MLA Krishna Desai. It was only in 1984, with the Sena discredited as a criminal mafia and in electoral decline, that Thackeray sought alliances with the Hindu Right, first forming the Hindu Mahasangh, and then allying with the BJP.

The period since 1984 has seen the Sena acquiring the image that has now come to stay—as a rabidly anti-Muslim organisation and one that believes in violence as a means of getting its point of view accepted. Thus, the Shiv Sena proudly took credit for the fact that its supporters actively participated in the demolition of the Babri mosque. It has also been at the forefront of the campaign to oust 'illegal' Bangladeshi migrants from Mumbai and other parts of the country. While the issue is ostensibly one of national sovereignty and

preserving the sanctity of international borders, the Sena's interest in it clearly stems from the fact that the Bangladeshi migrants also happen to be Muslims.

For six years, between December 1995 and December 2001, Thackeray had in fact been disenfranchised because he had been held guilty of delivering speeches and writing articles that were considered communally inflammatory. During the hearing of this criminal case (which was upheld by the Supreme Court), there was a marked contrast between Thackeray's conciliatory attitude in court and his public belligerence.

While the BJP-Shiv Sena government was in power in Maharashtra, it spared no effort to prevent the smooth functioning of the Justice B.N. Srikrishna commission of inquiry. The commission's report had categorically blamed the Sena for fomenting the violence that had been largely targeted against Muslims, though it was also critical of the failure of the state government to quickly contain the violence that left over 1,000 killed and many more injured and rendered homeless. At the time of the riots, the Maharashtra government was headed by Congress Chief Minister Sudhakar Rao Naik, who was not exactly on the best of terms with fellow Congress leader from Maharashtra, Sharad Pawar (who was then Union Defence Minister in the Narasimha Rao government).

The BJP-Sena government stalled the presentation of the Srikrishna commission report in the state assembly for as long as it possibly could. And not surprisingly, the state government headed by Manohar Joshi (who went on to become Union Minister for Heavy Industry and Public Enterprises and subsequently, Speaker of the Lok Sabha) chose to reject the report's findings and not accept most of its recommendations that called for punitive legal action against Sena supporters allegedly responsible for the communal carnage—the likes of which had never been witnessed in Mumbai and did much to tarnish the cosmopolitan image of a city that is considered by many to be the bastion of capitalism in India.

In September–October 1999, during the state assembly elections—which were held simultaneously with the Lok Sabha elections—the Congress claimed during its campaign that it would properly implement the recommendations of the Srikrishna commission if it were voted to power. Eventually, the Congress came to power in the

state by forming a coalition government with the Nationalist Congress Party. But this government, headed by Vilasrao Deshmukh, did not do much to follow up its election campaign promises. At one stage in July 2000 it appeared as if the Congress-NCP government would initiate stern action against Thackeray when state Home Minister Chhagan Bhujbal (a former Shiv Sainik himself who had broken away from Thackeray) indicated that the police might arrest his former mentor. (The non-implementation of the recommendations of the Srikrishna Commission report remained a live political issue till the time of writing in September 2007 with sections of the Congress criticising the Vilasrao Deshmukh government in the state for dragging its feet in redressing the grievances of those who had suffered almost 15 years earlier).

As soon as Thackeray's arrest seemed possible, the Shiv Sena threatened that violence would rock Mumbai if he were arrested. In New Delhi, the Shiv Sena ministers in the Union government—besides Joshi, such ministers included Minister for Chemicals and Fertilizers Suresh Prabhu and Minister of State for Finance Balasaheb Vikhe Patil—decided to resign from the government in protest and stayed away from work for nearly a week demanding that Prime Minister Vajpayee intervene to prevent Thackeray's arrest in Mumbai.

What was eventually enacted was a damp squib, with Thackeray being released within minutes of being 'arrested'. Several observers felt that the Congress-NCP government had simply lost its nerve and sought a face-saving way out of the mess. Whether that is true or not, this was not the first time that Thackeray had successfully dared his opponents to arrest him. At the height of the communal riots in December 1992–January 1993, when calls for Thackeray's arrest were mounting and the Naik government seemed to be toying with the idea, the Sena had threatened that blood would flow on the streets of Mumbai if Balasaheb were placed behind bars. Not only was Thackeray not arrested, the Mumbai police actually went round town announcing from loudspeakers mounted on police jeeps that 'rumours' about the impending arrest of the Shiv Sena chief were false. The police later justified this action on the ground that it was necessary to diffuse tension in the city to prevent the law and order situation from getting completely out of hand.

There is a section of opinion that argues that Thackeray is just an overgrown bully and that like all bullies he is essentially a coward.

Those who subscribe to this view point out that after the bomb blasts of March 1993, including one very close to Thackeray's residence and another near the Sena headquarters, there was no further communal violence in Mumbai. Hence, they argue, the state government should have called Thackeray's bluff and arrest him without fear of the consequences. Whatever the merits of this hypothesis, it was not put to the test.

Since 1984, the Sena and the BJP have remained affiliated to each other and Sena supremo Thackeray has not found it necessary to go along with any other political party, in contrast to the Sena's fast changing alliances in the past. The Sena, despite its ideological affinity with the BJP, however, has not always supported the larger party. It has periodically sought to distinguish itself as the more 'radical' of the Hindutva parties. Just as the BJP has time and again accused the Congress of 'appeasing minorities', the Sena has been critical of the BJP for its alleged appeasement of 'secularists'. One of the more obvious attempts by the Sena to portray itself as the more radical Hindutva party was in 2002, when Thackeray grandly announced that his party would form 'suicide squads' of Hindus to counter the suicide squads of the Kashmiri militants. Not surprisingly, nothing has since been heard of such Hindu suicide squads, but Thackeray had derived the limited mileage that he sought.

The tensions within the Sena-BJP alliance in Maharashtra were most evident after they lost power in 1999. In mid-2000, at a time when Thackeray was besieged by criminal cases filed against him, BJP leader Gopinath Munde (who was earlier Deputy Chief Minister in the Manohar Joshi government and was the brother-in-law of the late Pramod Mahajan) converted a public rally by the BJP into a Sena-bashing session. He accused the Sena of being selective in its use of Hindutva and claimed that the BJP was more faithful to the ideology, sticking with it even through difficult times. Relations between the two allies deteriorated quite sharply after this incident and the BJP even suggested that it would contest elections for local bodies in Maharashtra—held in September that year—without the Sena as a partner. Bickering within the Sena-BJP alliance became so endemic that there was even speculation on whether the BJP was attempting to topple the Vilasrao Deshmukh government by forging an alliance with the NCP rather than the Sena.

This, of course, did not happen, and the Sena and BJP soon mended fences, but the alliance has never been free of tension and jockeying for positions in the state. Not surprisingly, this had its impact on the coalition in New Delhi as well, with the Sena often going public with its criticism of the Vajpayee government on different issues. On several occasions, for instance, Thackeray sought to rubbish the government's peace talks with Pakistan, arguing that the only way to settle the India-Pakistan dispute was to teach Pakistan a military lesson by forcibly occupying Pakistan Occupied Kashmir. The Shiv Sena chief even went to the extent of opposing cricket matches between the two neighbouring countries. In January 1999, a relatively unknown Sena supporter in the capital went as far as digging up the cricket pitch and filling up the holes with oil in New Delhi's Feroz Shah Kotla stadium in the middle of the night to prevent the test match that was scheduled to start the following day. The Sena has also opposed performances by Pakistani artistes like the popular ghazal singer Mehdi Hasan and was also allegedly responsible for an attack on film star Dilip Kumar's residence after he was awarded the Nishan-e-Pakistan—the highest civilian award of the Government of Pakistan.

Another occasion on which the Sena openly attacked the Vajpayee government was in early 2001, when editorials written by Thackeray in the *Saamna* were scathing in their reference to Brajesh Mishra, Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister and the government's National Security Advisor. The editorials suggested what many believed: that Mishra had acquired power way beyond what was desirable and that his competence also left much to be desired. The editorials came at a time when several in the media were already questioning the 'extra-constitutional' nature of the clout wielded by a coterie in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) led by Mishra and including Nand Kishore Singh, a career bureaucrat who had retired but was an Officer on Special Duty (OSD) in the PMO. Thackeray also questioned the clout of Prime Minister Vajpayee's foster son-in-law Ranjan Bhattacharya. The attack on the PMO from one of the BJP's closest and biggest allies was particularly embarrassing because of its timing.

Sanjay Nirupam, then a Sena MP perceived as being a young firebrand who enjoyed the confidence of Thackeray, initiated another of the periodic spats between the BJP and the Sena in 2002, when he attacked Disinvestment Minister Arun Shourie in Parliament for the

manner in which a public sector hotel, the Centaur Hotel at Juhu near Mumbai's international airport, had been privatised. Nirupam joined the Opposition in attacking the government for irregularities in the deal and even hinted that Shourie was personally involved in the alleged irregularities and that the Minister had swung the deal to favour an old friend, charges that Shourie denied. Ultimately, the controversy died down, but it did underline once again that the BJP could not take the Sena for granted.

Nirupam had on at least one other occasion in the past embarrassed the Vajpayee government after the former Chairman of the Unit Trust of India, P.S. Subramanyam, had been arrested by the CBI for alleged financial misdemeanours. Nirupam created a furore when he released documents that indicated that Ranjan Bhattacharya and N.K. Singh had been calling Subramanyam frequently on his mobile telephone. Singh later sought to justify the calls he had made to the disgraced UTI Chairman by describing them as 'routine'.

Nirupam ultimately left the Shiv Sena—Sainiks say he was expelled, Nirupam himself claimed he resigned. The ostensible issue was Nirupam's discomfort with the strident stance adopted by the Sena against people from Bihar and eastern UP in Mumbai. Nirupam himself is from Bihar, perhaps the only Bihari leader the Sena has ever had in Maharashtra. The immediate provocation for Nirupam and the Sena parting ways was the former's decision to raise in Parliament the controversial allotment of equity shares in Reliance Infocomm—a telecommunications service provider—to individuals close to former Communications Minister Pramod Mahajan at extremely low prices.

Thackeray has not been averse to occasionally establishing that 'he is the boss' in the relationship between the two pro-Hindutva parties. For example, Suresh Prabhu, who had managed to earn a reputation for himself as a dynamic Union Power Minister in a fairly short period of time, was suddenly asked to put in his papers by the Sena chief. Thackeray had ostensibly decided that Prabhu was needed for party work in Maharashtra, though the political grapevine suggested that the move was prompted by Thackeray's feeling that Prabhu was not doing enough for the Sena in the Union government. Vajpayee and other senior BJP leaders were quite evidently upset at Prabhu being pulled out of the government, but Thackeray not only stuck to his decision, but also ensured that the man replacing Prabhu in the power ministry would be another Sainik, Ananth Geethe.

The Sena's 'cultural policing' has also proved an embarrassment for the BJP on several occasions. For instance, the Sena decided to 'enforce' a self-proclaimed ban on the film *Fire* directed by Mira Nair on the grounds that it depicted Indian women indulging in lesbianism, which was apparently against Indian culture. Earlier, during the tenure of the Sena-BJP government in Maharashtra, its Culture Minister, Pramod Navalkar, a Sainik, had earned a dubious reputation for moral policing, raving and ranting against young couples dating and pubs.

Despite all the embarrassment and the periodic friction, what has kept the BJP firmly wedded to the Sena in Maharashtra for close to two decades? Part of the reason of course lies in the fact that the ideological affinity between the two parties is strong enough to offset minor—or at times even major—irritants. But the bonding is not all ideological. The BJP is also acutely aware of the fact that the Sena has over the years acquired a strong base in a section of Maharashtrian society that is electorally crucial—the upper-caste Marathas. The Maratha community had traditionally been loyal to the Congress, and the BJP—or its forerunner the BJS—had never succeeded in making a dent in this section. The Sena, on the other hand, has managed to woo large sections of the Marathas. In fact, studies have shown that in Maharashtra today, the NCP and the Sena are the two parties that contend for the bulk of the Maratha vote, with the Congress left to mop up the crumbs. The OBCs constitute another section into which the Sena has made significant inroads and the BJP has not. For the BJP, therefore, the Sena serves as the ideal complement to its own electoral base in the state.

In December 2003, however, there were signs that the BJP was making a serious attempt to widen its options in Maharashtra by roping in the NCP. Had the attempt succeeded, the BJP's bargaining position vis-à-vis the Shiv Sena would have dramatically improved. Not only would the NCP have brought into the NDA's kitty additional Maratha votes, it would also have left the Congress on its own. But this did not happen, with Pawar preferring to remain part of the alliance with the Congress.

In the 2004 assembly elections in Maharashtra, the Sena lost more support than its partner, the BJP. In the 288-member assembly, the number of seats held by the Sena came down to 62 from 69 in 1999

whereas the number of seats held by the BJP decreased from 56 to 54. It seemed as if some of the Thackeray charm was wearing a bit thin.

With Thackeray growing older, the issue of who would succeed him as the leader of the Sena cropped up. For many years, it was assumed that his nephew Raj, who some saw as a replica of Thackeray in his younger days, would succeed him. Interestingly, the debate on who would lead the Sena always remained centred around Thackeray's own family. The question was whether Raj should be preferred over Thackeray's own son Uddhav. Senior party leaders like Manohar Joshi or Narayan Rane simply did not figure in this debate. For a party that had raved and ranted about the 'dynastic rule' of the Nehru-Gandhi family in the Congress, this was hypocritical to say the least.

Rane left the party in 2005—evidently convinced that he had no future in the Sena—to join the Congress. His exit was a severe blow to the Sena in Konkan, a part of the coastal region of the state where it had traditionally been dominant. Not only did Rane himself leave the Sena, he took along with him a group of MLAs. Most of them subsequently successfully fought bye-elections on the Congress ticket.

The ego clashes within the Sena's second generation leadership led to another major setback after Thackeray announced that Uddhav would succeed him as the Sena president. Raj quit the party in January 2006 saying the Sena was being run by 'petty clerks' and hence had fallen from its former glory, while asserting that his respect for Thackeray senior had in no way diminished. What was evident was that he could not accept Uddhav as his leader. Raj set up his own political outfit, the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS). Some analysts predicted that Raj, who was undoubtedly more charismatic than Uddhav, would be able to wean away a large section of Sena supporters to his party.

The hypothesis was put to the test during the elections to municipal bodies in Maharashtra in February 2007. The MNS did make an impact and would perhaps have been a significant spoiler for the Sena. Thankfully for Uddhav, however, the Congress and the NCP did not contest the elections as an alliance. The resultant division in the 'secular' vote meant that the Sena-BJP alliance did quite well, retaining the prestigious Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation—the richest municipal body in the country—though with fewer seats than



in the last elections. The alliance also performed well in Ulhasnagar and Thane—both adjoining Mumbai—and in Nagpur and Nashik. The election results may have postponed soul-searching in the Sena on the viability of its future political strategy, but it would be premature to see this as signalling a revival of the right-wing alliance in Maharashtra. In the second quarter of 2007, relations between the BJP and the Sena soured because the latter refused to oppose Pratibha Patil's candidature for the post of President of India on the ground that she was from Maharashtra. The Sena refused to go along with the BJP and the NDA in supporting Vice President Bhairon Singh Shekhawat. A few months later, BJP-Sena relations were back on an even keel following a meeting between Uddhav and Advani.

### **Nationalist Congress Party: Pawar Politics**

Certain regional political parties were formed on the basis of specific agendas—for instance, anti-Brahminism in the case of the DMK and Assamese sub-nationalism in the case of the AGP—that lost their relevance with the passage of time. The parties, however, continued to exist if not thrive. The Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) is perhaps the most apt example of a political formation that was formed on account of a specific issue, namely, the foreign origin of Congress President Sonia Gandhi, that lost its relevance within a few years of the party being born.

That the BJP-led NDA would make Sonia Gandhi's Italian origin a major issue was hardly surprising. What did surprise quite a few was when, on the eve of the 1999 Lok Sabha elections, three Congress leaders decided to part ways with the parent party on the issue of whether it would be appropriate for a person of foreign origin to hold the highest position in the country's government. What these leaders insisted on was that the Congress should make it clear that Sonia Gandhi would not become Prime Minister of India should the party be in a position to form the government or head a coalition that would form the government in New Delhi.

These three leaders, who went on to form the NCP, were Sharad Pawar, former Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Union Defence Minister in the Narasimha Rao Cabinet, and leader of the Opposition

in the 12th Lok Sabha; P.A. Sangma, former Speaker of the Lok Sabha (the first tribal to hold the post); and Tariq Anwar, a long-standing Lok Sabha MP from Katihar in Bihar. Their contention, in a letter circulated among members of the Congress Working Committee, was that no person of non-Indian origin should be entitled to hold the posts of President, Vice President or Prime Minister of the country. This dovetailed very well with the BJP's strategy for the impending 13th general elections, in which the party made it clear it would raise Sonia's Italian origin as a major issue.

When Pawar, Sangma and Anwar made their position clear in an internal party meeting, Sonia walked out in a huff saying she was resigning from the post of Congress president. Then followed a public spectacle when large numbers of Congress workers made clear who their leader was—some even threatened to commit suicide if Sonia did not withdraw her resignation. She eventually did. But the actions of the threesome led by Pawar took many political observers by surprise simply because Pawar had not merely been singing paens of praise for Sonia just a short while earlier, he had even been personally urging leaders of political parties to support Sonia's candidature as Prime Minister after the NDA government lost a vote of confidence on the floor of the Lok Sabha by a single vote in April 1999.

Whereas the presence of three prominent political personalities from different parts of the country apparently gave the NCP a 'national' character, what was evident was that the party really had a significant presence in one state where Pawar came from, namely, Maharashtra in western India, one of the country's most industrialised states. Like Pawar in Maharashtra, Sangma was the Congress' most important leader in the north-eastern state of Meghalaya, but the state was too small to make much of a difference to the party at a national level. Tariq Anwar was not quite as big a leader as either Pawar or Sangma and the Congress had by then already been marginalised in his state, Bihar. His exit, therefore, was unlikely to be very damaging for the party.

The only issue of interest was just how much Pawar's exit would damage the Congress' electoral fortunes in Maharashtra. In the 1999 elections, the NCP did make an electoral impact in Maharashtra. (Sangma too won from his constituency in Meghalaya.)

In Maharashtra, the NCP managed to win six of the state's 48 Lok Sabha seats, but severely damaged the Congress by splitting its traditional support base across the state. Ironically, the NCP then went on to form an uneasy alliance with the Congress to form the state government after the assembly elections that were held at the same time as the Lok Sabha polls.

The NCP's alliance with the Congress in Maharashtra continued even after the assembly's term ended in 2004. In fact, this time round, the two parties fought the assembly elections—as well as the Lok Sabha polls—as allies. Following the defeat of the NDA in the Lok Sabha elections, Pawar decided to extend support to the Congress to form a government in New Delhi. What was significant was that this happened at a time when Sonia was still perceived to be the person most likely to head a Congress-led coalition government. Pawar's decision led to a split in the NCP with Sangma parting ways, saying he could not be party to the NCP's *raison d'être* being violated in such a brazen manner. Sharad Pawar went on to become Agriculture Minister in the UPA government.

The NCP has had a love-hate relationship with the Congress ever since its inception. One reason could be that Pawar has perhaps felt that the Congress did not give him his due while he was in the party. After Rajiv Gandhi's death, there was widespread speculation that the responsibility of heading the party—and the government if the Congress won in the 1991 elections—would devolve upon either Pawar or Arjun Singh. Eventually, Narasimha Rao was brought out of political hibernation to head the party and the government, perhaps as a compromise between the supporters of Pawar and Arjun Singh.

Pawar's ambitions continued to be thwarted even after the exit of Rao, with first Sitaram Kesri and then Sonia Gandhi becoming party president. Pawar's contribution to the Congress' electoral fortunes was considerable. Not only was he clearly the most important leader in one of the country's biggest states, he was also seen as one of the premier fund raisers for the Congress. After the formation of the NCP, given the issue on which it was created, it was also obviously never going to be easy for Pawar and Sonia Gandhi to be really comfortable with each other.

Whatever be the real reasons for the uneasiness in the initial stages of the Sonia-Pawar relationship, two developments in 2004 seemed to add to the friction. The first of these was at the time of the elections for the president of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI). The two contenders were the incumbent Jagmohan Dalmiya—a Kolkata-based businessman—and Pawar. To those not familiar with the world of Indian cricket, it may sound strange that a political heavyweight like Pawar should have been contesting elections to a sports body, even if it was the richest in the country. However, cricket in India, as indeed other sports, is run by politicians and politically-connected bureaucrats and businessmen. If reports of the time are to be believed Pawar expected Sonia to ask state governments run by the Congress to urge their respective cricket associations to support Pawar's candidature. He also assumed that associations under the control of the Union government—like the Railways, Services and Combined Universities—would be given a similar hint, if not an informal instruction. His hopes proved futile. Dalmiya scraped through, only to lose the election to Pawar the following year. It appeared that this time round, Sonia did not ignore Pawar's request for support.

The Maharashtra assembly elections that year witnessed a strain in the relations between the Congress and the NCP, this time on account of Pawar's own miscalculations. In the run-up to the elections, presumably expecting that the NCP would obtain fewer seats in the assembly than the Congress, Pawar 'magnanimously' offered the post of Chief Minister to the Congress. The outcome of the elections took Pawar by surprise—he had clearly underestimated his own party's potential. The NCP won 71 seats in the assembly against 69 by the Congress. (In the 1999 elections, the Congress had held 75 seats against 58 held by the NCP.) Pawar then suggested that the state's Chief Minister should belong to the larger partner in the alliance, but that was clearly an afterthought. The Congress reminded him of his pre-election assurance and Vilasrao Deshmukh of the Congress became the head of the Maharashtra government.

The tussle between the NCP and the Congress for occupying a larger political space in Maharashtra resulted in the opposition Shiv Sena-BJP combine performing well in elections to municipal bodies in the state in February 2007. It became clear that the so-called

'secular' alliance would have performed substantially better than it did had there been understanding between the NCP and the Congress on seat-sharing. This explains why Congressmen have sometimes suggested that it would be best if Pawar returned to his parent party, but the NCP chief himself has made it quite clear that he has no such intentions.

There are also indications that, like many others in Indian politics, Pawar is not averse to the idea of his offspring inheriting his political legacy at an appropriate time. Pawar's 37 year old daughter Supriya Sule was made a Rajya Sabha MP from Maharashtra in 2006 in what was seen by many as the first step in her gradual ascent up the organisational ladder of the NCP.

## Chapter 7

# Left Parties: Barking and Biting

The four major left parties in Indian politics—the two communist parties, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Communist Party of India, together with the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) and the All India Forward Bloc—have arguably had more experience with coalitions than any other political group in India. Not only have these parties been running the state government in West Bengal since 1977—a record by itself—they also have a similar formation in Tripura and (with the exception of the Forward Bloc) in Kerala. It is another matter that the left has not had quite the same degree of success in either of these two states in comparison to West Bengal, though the Left Front in Tripura has lost a state assembly election only once since 1977.

The 2004 general elections saw the left becoming more powerful than ever before in national politics with the four parties obtaining 61 seats in the Lok Sabha. Importantly, the Manmohan Singh government formed by the Congress-led UPA coalition was completely dependent on the ‘outside’ support extended by the four left parties for its very survival in power. Not surprisingly, the influence of the left on decision-making by the Union government—especially on economic policy issues—became more pronounced than ever before. While the critics of the communists claimed the left was exercising power without responsibility since it was not part of the government, leaders of the left argued that it was their influence that ensured that the UPA government’s policies did not veer excessively to the right. At the same time, the left constantly stated that in its opinion there was little to differentiate between the economic policies of the Congress and the BJP even if the former was not a ‘communal force’.

On occasions, the communists found that a ‘left’ section within the Congress would be making common cause with them. Simultaneously,

there was a 'role reversal' of sorts with the Left Front government in West Bengal being accused of following economic policies and advocating 'reforms' of the kind that were no different from those espoused by both the Congress and the BJP. The political opponents of the communists accused them of hypocrisy and of following double standards, 'They speak one language in New Delhi and a different one in Kolkata,' was a familiar complaint against the left. 'They wish to exercise power without responsibility,' was another.

What became increasingly apparent during the UPA government's tenure since May 2004 was that the left in general—and the CPI(M) in particular—was not exactly the kind of ideologically monolithic, disciplined and cadre-based political force that it was made out to be by some. Divisions within the CPI(M), the largest left party in the country, deepened on issues relating to privatisation of public sector undertakings and acquisition of farm land for setting up industrial ventures. Unlike in the past, political observers discerned distinct factions within the CPI(M)—one so-called 'liberal' or 'new left' group included the Chief Minister of West Bengal Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee while the other group of 'traditional hard-liners' included individuals like the Kerala Chief Minister S. Achuthanandan. Whether or not the identification of specific leaders in the CPI(M) as belonging to one or the other faction was correct, it would be futile to suggest that there was no sharp cleavage within the party on economic policy issues. While the CPI(M) officially denied the existence of divisions within the party, one interpretation of why the CPI(M) started resembling typical faction-ridden large political parties in India was that proximity to power had made the party more 'pragmatic' and 'ideologically less dogmatic'. In this sense, the CPI(M) had perceptibly become part of the political 'mainstream' in the country.

The divisions within the left widened considerably after a series of violent incidents at Singur and Nandigram relating to acquisition of farm land for establishing industrial ventures that have been detailed later in this chapter.

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A key difference between Kerala and the other two states in which the left is a major political force is the fact that the left-led front in Kerala

includes parties that do not subscribe to a leftist ideology, which is why it is called the Left Democratic Front (LDF), rather than merely the Left Front. It is also a fact worth noting that neither West Bengal nor Kerala or Tripura has ever had a single party government since the left first came to power in each. In Kerala, this has meant that the state has not had a single-party government since 1957, when the E.M.S. Namboodiripad government became the first elected communist government in the world. In Tripura, on the one occasion that the left lost power, in 1988, it was a coalition of the Congress and the Tripura Upajati Juba Samiti (TUJS)—a party with a base confined largely to the tribals in the state—that formed the government under Sudhir Ranjan Majumdar.

What is interesting is that this absence of single-party rule has not been because no party has been able to win a majority of the seats in the assembly. On the contrary, the CPI(M) has in every state assembly election in West Bengal since 1977 won a comfortable majority on its own. This holds true in Tripura too (barring 1988). Since the Left Fronts in West Bengal and Tripura as also the LDF in Kerala have been pre-poll alliances, it might seem only natural that the governments formed after elections should be coalition governments, even if one of the partners is able to muster a majority on its own. However, it is not uncommon in Indian politics to find the dominant partner in a pre-election alliance ultimately forming a single-party government if it has a majority on its own in the state assembly. For instance, while the TDP and the BJP fought the 1999 Andhra Pradesh assembly elections as an alliance, the BJP was not invited to join the TDP government headed by Chandrababu Naidu after the elections. The same was true in Haryana, where the INLD-BJP pre-poll alliance won comfortably, but the INLD formed the government on its own since it had a majority. More recently, in 2001, the AIADMK in Tamil Nadu had a pre-poll alliance with the Congress and the left parties for the assembly election, but after the elections, formed the government entirely on its own. The fact that the CPI(M) has not adopted this attitude towards its junior partners in the Fronts in West Bengal and Tripura suggests that its attitude towards coalitions is somewhat different from most other parties in India.

This is also borne out by the fact that the Left Front in West Bengal has lasted without a break ever since it was formed in 1977 and—more



importantly—that it is not merely an electoral alliance. The Front also functions jointly as an opposition group within Parliament and in various agitational activities throughout India. In particular, the Left Front has coordinated protests against the economic reforms programme launched in 1991 and sustained by successive governments in New Delhi ever since. The coordination between the left parties extends also to their mass organisations—thus the student organisations affiliated to the various left parties periodically organise joint rallies in New Delhi and in state capitals in support of their demands. Similarly, rallies and demonstrations by the left trade unions too have more often than not been a joint effort. Thus, unlike almost all other coalitions in the Indian context, the Left Front has functioned as a broad ideological coalition that is not limited to electoral politics. The only other alliance that comes close to achieving such unified functioning is the one between the Shiv Sena and the BJP in Maharashtra. However, while the two partners do share a close ideological affinity, their joint activities are kept to a minimum and generally restricted to the electoral arena.

The different approach that the left parties have towards coalitions and coalition politics is not really surprising, given the ideologies of these parties, in particular the two communist parties. The CPI(M) for instance, believes that its immediate task is the building of a ‘people’s democratic front’ to usher in people’s democracy—an intermediate stage in the ultimate goal of building a socialist society. This is something that is written into the party’s programme—a document that lays down the long term vision of the CPI(M) as distinct from election manifestoes, which espouse limited tactical objectives applicable in a given situation. The party believes that for people’s democracy to be built, a broad coalition of various classes will have to be built against landlords and representatives of monopoly capital—which are the classes the party characterises as the ruling classes. Thus, the programme of the CPI(M) itself envisions the party playing only a leading—or vanguard, to use Marxist jargon—role in a broader coalition. With some differences on exactly which classes constitute the ruling classes and hence what kind of coalition needs to be built, the CPI too shares this understanding that it can only lead a social coalition to bring about a revolution in India. Since both parties

see themselves as representing the working classes, it follows from their strategic vision that the coalition to be built with other classes will involve parties that represent the interests of these classes.

Most of the writing on the left parties, in the mainstream media and elsewhere, has tended to overlook this fact. As a result, it has not been sufficiently highlighted that unlike the other parties in Indian politics, the left has pursued coalitions as an objective rather than merely accepting them as a necessary evil thrown up by a polity that is increasingly getting fragmented. Thus, the political resolution discussed and adopted at every congress (held roughly once in three years) of the two communist parties invariably has a section on left unity and on how much progress has been made towards cementing this unity and towards broadening it to include forces outside the left fold. In fact, the focus on building a 'left and democratic' coalition has been such that recent party congresses of the CPI(M) have had to take note of the fact that the party's independent activities have tended to be overshadowed by its joint efforts with other parties.

None of this is to suggest that the relationship between the various partners in the Left Fronts in West Bengal and Tripura and the LDF in Kerala has been free of acrimony. As with any other alliance, there has been a fair amount of bickering, particularly by the junior partners in the Fronts, who perceive the CPI(M) as acting like a 'big brother' and being insensitive to their concerns and interests. In West Bengal, for instance, there have been occasions when the RSP and the Forward Bloc have held out veiled and not-so-veiled threats of leaving the Left Front if the CPI(M) did not desist from its 'authoritarian' ways. The Forward Bloc, in fact, underwent a split in the early 1990s when one section walked out of the party, accusing the other of subjugating the party's interests to those of the CPI(M). Typically, the bickering between the partners has tended to peak around election time, when the issue of which partner would contest from which constituency heightens differences and raises tempers. Nevertheless, the friction between the constituents of the Left Front has never seriously threatened its survival.

At a national level, the fissures within the Left Front came to the forefront like never before in April 1999 just after the second Vajpayee

government lost a vote of confidence and Congress President Sonia Gandhi decided to stake a claim to form an alternative government. Her efforts were scuttled largely because the Samajwadi Party chose not to support her as a likely Prime Minister heading an anti-NDA coalition. Together with the SP, two of the largest constituents of the Left Front after the CPI(M) and the CPI decided to make common cause with the SP—these were the Forward Bloc and the RSP. The leaders of these two parties were evidently uncomfortable supporting a government headed by Sonia Gandhi. Despite attempts by individuals like Harkishen Singh Surjeet, general secretary of the CPI(M), to persuade MPs and leaders of the Forward Bloc and the RSP to support a Congress-led coalition headed by Sonia Gandhi, the two smaller left parties stood their ground.

More than seven years later, the CPI(M) remained close to the SP and the Rashtriya Janata Dal headed by Lalu Prasad Yadav unlike the CPI. Whereas this had much to do with the CPI perceiving itself to be stronger than the CPI(M) in the two northern Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, in the run-up to the 2006 elections to the UP assembly the SP maintained that it was only the CPI(M) that could be counted on as its ally and that every other party was opposed to it. Earlier, in May 2004, Surjeet had unsuccessfully tried to convince the Congress that it should mend its fences with the SP by bringing SP general secretary Amar Singh along with him as a ‘gate crasher’ to a party that had been organised by Sonia Gandhi.

The Congress never forgot the fact that the SP had not supported Sonia Gandhi’s attempts to form a government in New Delhi in April 1999. And what was perhaps the biggest surprise of the 14th general elections was that despite winning 39 out of the 80 Lok Sabha seats from UP, instead of being a ‘king maker’ the SP found that it was nowhere on the national political map because the Congress-led UPA preferred the ‘outside’ support of the 61 MPs belonging to the four left parties instead of playing ball with the SP. (Ultimately, the SP ended up extending support to the UPA without the latter asking for it and withdrew support just before the 2007 UP assembly elections.)

Some would argue that the survival of the Left Fronts in West Bengal and Tripura and the LDF in Kerala is entirely because of the overwhelming dominance of the CPI(M) in all of them. The others in the Fronts, they would argue, know that their political survival depends on their remaining part of the Fronts and that they would be committing political hara kiri by trying to contest on their own. There is certainly an element of truth in this analysis. However, it would be facile to explain the continued cohesion of the left purely in terms of political pragmatism. To understand why, a look at the electoral arithmetic of West Bengal or Kerala would suffice. While the Left Front has had an uninterrupted period of 30 years in power in West Bengal till 2007, the dominance of the Left Front in the state's politics is overstated by the number of seats that the Front has won in every election after 1977.

If one were to look at just the number of seats won, the Left Front has consistently won a two-thirds majority in the 294-member assembly. However, if we take a look at the vote shares the picture appears quite different. The most dramatic illustration is provided by the 1987 assembly elections. The Left Front won in 242 of the 294 constituencies, with the CPI(M) alone winning 187 seats, while the Congress won only 40 seats. In terms of vote share, however, the Congress won 41.8 per cent of the votes against the CPI(M)'s 39.3 per cent, while the CPI, Forward Bloc and RSP put together won 11.6 per cent of the votes. Had the CPI(M)'s partners in the Front deserted it and joined the Congress instead, the result would probably have been a sweep for the Congress-led alliance. This is even more evident in the context of Kerala, where many state assembly constituencies are often won or lost by a few hundred votes. The shift of a single party, however minor, from one alliance to the other could therefore decisively alter the verdict of the electorate. That the Left Fronts and the LDF have more or less held firm despite this suggests that ideological affinity between the partners has played at least as important a role as political pragmatism.

Ideological affinity apart, the Left Fronts in West Bengal and Tripura have consciously built an institutional mechanism to ensure that the Front stays together and that there is a platform apart from the state government in which the various constituents of the Front

have the opportunity to discuss issues and sort out differences between themselves. This institutional mechanism is in the form of regular meetings of representatives of the parties constituting the Front. It is not a coincidence that the convenors of the Left Front have always been individuals who are not part of the state government. As a matter of deliberate policy, the distinction has always been maintained between the Front *per se* and the government run by it. Typically, in West Bengal, the secretary of the state unit of the CPI(M) has been the convenor of the Front. At its inception, the convenor of the Front, Promode Dasgupta—or PDG as he was popularly known—was perceived as being as powerful as Chief Minister Jyoti Basu. Also as a matter of conscious policy, PDG was projected as the first among equals in party and Front matters, while Jyoti Basu was seen as the undisputed leader of the government.

In more recent years, however, this separation between the Front and the government in West Bengal has become somewhat blurred. Whether this is because CPI(M) state secretaries after PDG did not have quite the same stature as Jyoti Basu or because the state government increasingly became the focus of the CPI(M)'s activities in the state is a moot question. The answer, as often, probably lies somewhere in between. What is more relevant to the larger national context, however, is that this mechanism of a formal coordinating body of a coalition was subsequently picked up by the United Front when it came to power in New Delhi, then by the NDA and thereafter by the UPA.

Prior to the UF, there had been five non-Congress coalition governments formed in New Delhi. None of them had any formal mechanism for discussion and policy formulation among the partners of the coalition. The UF became the first union government in which a party from the left—the CPI—joined the government. That may well explain the fact that it was the first time a coordination committee of the Front was formed. It was also the first time that a coalition forming a Union government formally adopted a Common Minimum Programme acceptable to its constituents. The model was later replicated by the NDA, which adopted a 'national agenda for governance' and then the UPA, which thrashed out a National Common Minimum Programme (NCMP) with the left. To the extent

that formal mechanisms for consultations among partners and clearly spelt out programmes for the government indicate a maturing of coalition politics, the left can justifiably lay claim to having made a significant contribution to the evolution of coalitions in India, particularly at the national level.

Despite its success in setting a model for others to follow in terms of what the BJP today calls 'coalition dharma', the left remained a fringe player in national politics, unable to make its impact felt in terms of influencing policy, till 2004. Since 1977, the left had supported five governments in New Delhi before the UPA government—the ones led by Morarji Desai (1977), Charan Singh (1979), V.P. Singh (1989), H.D. Deve Gowda (1996) and I.K. Gujral (1997). One section of the left—the CPI—was part of the last two of these governments. Yet, on none of these occasions did the policy of the government make any major concessions to the left. The impotence of the left in this respect was most obvious during the tenure of the two UF governments in the late 1990s. The left was avowedly against the processes of economic liberalisation and globalisation launched by the previous Narasimha Rao government. Yet, neither the Common Minimum Programme of the UF nor the actions of its governments showed the slightest concession to this position. On the contrary, P. Chidambaram, who was Finance Minister in both the UF governments, was hailed as one of the most enthusiastic liberalisers India has seen.

Ironically, on the one occasion on which the left was able to stall a reform measure during the UF's tenure, it was not because Chidambaram or others in the government yielded to its persuasion; it was the result of unexpected support from the main opposition party, the BJP. This was when the Finance Minister was trying to push a bill through Parliament to open up the insurance sector to private firms, both Indian and foreign. Despite vehement opposition from the left, including the CPI, which was part of the government, Chidambaram decided to go ahead because he had obtained informal assurances from both the BJP and the Congress that they would support the bill. Ultimately the BJP reneged on its informal commitment to Chidambaram, on the plea that the insurance sector should be opened up in stages—allowing only the Indian private sector in during the first stage.

The inability to influence policy—particularly economic policy—was not inexplicable. It was a consequence of the fact that the left's support to governments in New Delhi, unlike its formation of coalitions in the states, had been driven by political compulsion rather than choice. Thus, the support extended by the CPI(M) to the Janata Party governments of the late 1970s was a result of the desire to prevent the 'authoritarian' Indira Gandhi and the Congress from returning to power. Having identified the Congress as the biggest enemy and recognising that the CPI(M) on its own was in no position to counter the Congress, except in the three states of West Bengal, Tripura and Kerala, the party had no choice but to support the Janata Party governments. (The CPI at this stage was still of the opinion that the Congress under Indira Gandhi should be supported since it was fighting the right wing RSS.) Similarly, in 1989, it was the same desire to keep the Congress—still seen as the main enemy—out of power that forced the left to align itself with the V.P. Singh-led Janata Dal.

While the formation of the V.P. Singh government has often been portrayed as an occasion on which the left and the right in Indian politics came together to keep out the Congress, the reality is more complex. The fact is that the left throughout the 1989 Lok Sabha election campaign attacked both the Congress and the BJP, refused to share a platform with the BJP, and repeatedly exhorted V.P. Singh not to have any arrangement with the right-wing party. In states like Bihar, where both the left and the BJP had some electoral presence, they fought elections against each other. While both were aligned to the Janata Dal, they were openly hostile to each other.

By the time of the 1996 Lok Sabha elections, the growing influence of the BJP had convinced the left that it was at least as big an enemy as the Congress. Hence, when the UF and its government were formed, the left's stated objective was to keep both the Congress and the BJP out of power. On each of these occasions, the immediate political objective was perceived as being of such overriding importance that the left was prepared to sacrifice its economic agenda to achieve the more urgent political goal. Since those running the government were also aware of the overarching importance of the political objective for the left, they knew only too well that the left's ability to bargain in terms of policy measures was limited if not totally absent.

It was the same awareness of a lack of bargaining power in terms of policy that ultimately led to the CPI(M)'s decision not to join the UF government in 1989—a decision that was later famously described as a 'historic blunder' by Jyoti Basu, the man who was the UF's first choice to become Prime Minister. It remains the only occasion on which the representative of a party has been offered the post but had to refuse because his own party voted against accepting the offer. The decision was by no means easy. It was also not the unanimous view of the party leadership. When the UF constituents suggested that Jyoti Basu be made Prime Minister, the CPI(M)'s politbureau decided by a thin majority not to accept the offer. The party's central committee—which under the party's constitution is the highest decision-making body between two party congresses—endorsed the politbureau's decision, again by a narrow margin, leaving the door open for H.D. Deve Gowda to become the Prime Minister.

The decision continues to remain controversial with the CPI(M)'s leadership and cadre divided on whether it was right or wrong. Those in favour of the decision argue that the manner in which the UF government functioned and the fact that it collapsed after barely two years bears out the proposition that being party to it would have done the CPI(M) no good. Those against the decision argue that Jyoti Basu as Prime Minister could have run a much more successful government than either Deve Gowda or Gujral and that the CPI(M) would have been able to significantly influence policy. Even in a worst-case scenario, they add, the party would at least have acquired a national profile and could have broken out of its image of being confined largely to three states. While the debate has not been clinched, it increasingly looks likely that the CPI(M) will not repeat its 'historic blunder', given another chance. Whether such a chance will be available in the foreseeable future is, of course, another matter.

Since the formation of the UPA government in May 2004, the left has been able to exert more influence on economic policy in New Delhi than ever before. One obvious reason for this is the fact that without the 61 MPs of the left the UPA would not be able to command a majority in the Lok Sabha. But that's not all. There have been occasions in the past—during the governments headed by V.P. Singh, Deve Gowda and Gujral—when the left's support was crucial. What



seems to have changed is that the left for the first time is explicitly stating that it will not underwrite the stability of the government.

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If there is one issue that has troubled the left parties—in particular the two communist parties—more than any other throughout their history, it has been their inability to make their presence felt in the Hindi heartland: the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. Not only are these states electorally crucial (between them, before each was bifurcated in 2000, they accounted for 179 of the Lok Sabha's 543 seats), any political movement would have to recognise that it cannot acquire a truly all-India character without having a foothold in the Indo-Gangetic plains, which have dominated the politics of the country.

Between the two communist parties, the CPI has over the years had a stronger base in the Hindi heartland than the CPI(M), which is by far the more dominant of the two communist parties in most other parts of the country. Yet, even at its best, the CPI has had only a modest influence in Bihar, present-day Jharkhand and Uttarakhand, a marginal presence in Uttar Pradesh and not even a token presence in Madhya Pradesh or present-day Chhattisgarh. For the CPI(M) too, Bihar has presented more reason for hope than any of the other parts of this region, though its strength in each of the states has consistently been much less than the CPI's.

Interestingly, the weakness of the left parties in the electoral arena in the Hindi belt does not necessarily extend to their mass organisations. The CPI-affiliated All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) and the CPI(M)-affiliated Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), for instance, are among the strongest unions in this region, as indeed in the rest of the country. Yet, the same workers who opt for these unions are quite reluctant to extend their support to the electoral battle when it comes to bargaining for their economic rights.

One of the reasons most commonly cited for the failure of the CPI and the CPI(M) to make a breakthrough in the Hindi belt has been the inability of the communists to fully comprehend and come to terms with the caste phenomenon. With their emphasis on class, this

view would suggest that the communists have simply not recognised that caste is a much stronger motivating force in the Hindi belt and a decidedly better platform for political mobilisation. This is a view that is not merely confined to outsiders analysing the communist movement. The late Indrajit Gupta, one of the foremost leaders of the CPI for over four decades, shared this view. In a personal interview a few months before he died, Gupta 'admitted' that the left had seriously underestimated the influence of the caste system in Indian politics in general and in the Hindi belt in particular. This, he felt, was one of the key reasons for the left's failure to grow beyond the narrow confines of West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura.

Gupta said:

Exploitation of one caste by another was never a big factor in our minds. But in a Hindu society, I find this is the dominant thing... much more than class. We have a working class in the big industrial centres where we were the dominant force among the workers, particularly at the trade union level. Big strikes were taking place. We were leading those strikes. But when it came to elections, the same worker who was carrying a red flag on his shoulders in order to get a higher salary or a bonus... would look towards his own caste.... This disrupted the unity of the class completely. But I don't think the communists, the Marxists in this country paid sufficient attention or made a proper study of this phenomenon.... This thing [caste] is so deeply rooted in our psyche, this Manusmriti, this Chaturvarna, to get out of it will take a thousand years.

There is indeed some merit in the argument that the communist parties have failed to understand the importance of caste in the Hindi heartland or have at least underestimated its hold on the people. However, to see this as the sole or even the main reason for the failure of the left to make inroads in this region might be to oversimplify a complex reality. There could be other historical reasons for the weakness of the left in this region. For instance, it is the Hindi belt in which the 'socialist' parties have traditionally had a significant presence. Thus, if one considers the left of centre space in Indian politics, it might with some justification be argued that while the communist parties faced little or no challenge for this space in the southern states and in West Bengal and Tripura, they had to face

the challenge of the Samajwadis in the Hindi heartland. Leaders like Ram Manohar Lohia and Acharya Narendra Dev were definitely a formidable challenge. Of course, it is also true that Samajwadi politics right from its inception has had caste overtones and this could be a factor in its gaining greater success than the politics of the communist parties.

Another factor in the weakness of the left could be the manner in which the two major splits in the communist movement took place in 1964 and 1967. When a section of the CPI broke away in 1964 to form the CPI(M), in most other parts of the country the bulk of the undivided party's support base and some of the key figures in its middle-level leadership were part of the breakaway faction. As history subsequently proved, it was the breakaway CPI(M) which was to become the more dynamic of the two communist parties and the one that would grow faster, while the parent CPI was clearly on a downhill slope. The fact that most of the communist leadership in states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh remained with the CPI may also, therefore, have contributed to the gradual demise of the mainstream left parties in this region.

Once again, when the CPI(M) in turn split in 1967, with the breakaway group forming the CPI(ML), which was to lead what came to be known as the Naxalite movement, the Hindi heartland again saw a larger proportion of the cadre and leadership joining the CPI(ML) than in many other parts of the country. Thus, both in 1964 and in 1967, the CPI(M) was at the losing end of the split in the Hindi heartland. To what extent this has had an effect on the growth of the communist parties as a whole in the Hindi region is a moot question.

As later events have shown, the CPI in Bihar—and to a lesser extent in UP—was soon beset with caste-based factionalism (ironical considering that the party has been accused of not understanding caste as a phenomenon) and hence became easy prey for the likes of Lalu Prasad and Mulayam Singh Yadav when they emerged as caste-based leaders in their own right. Both in Bihar and in UP, the CPI was split by the two Yadav chieftains, with a section joining the SP in Uttar Pradesh and the then Janata Dal in Bihar. The desertion of Mitrasen Yadav in UP was particularly embarrassing for the party since it had always been proud of the fact that he (as a CPI leader) had managed

to win the Faizabad Lok Sabha seat, which included Ayodhya, at the peak of the BJP–VHP movement for the construction of the Ram temple. The CPI(M) too has not been entirely free of caste-based factionalism in Bihar, though the virus may be less virulent than in the CPI.

In the context of the weakness of the left in the Hindi heartland, it must also be recognised that while the mainstream left parties may have failed to make much headway, the extreme left has had a consistent—and growing—strength in rural Bihar and Jharkhand, not to mention Chhattisgarh. This has happened despite repeated splits and mergers in the CPI(ML) since it was formed in 1967. Briefly, in the late 1980s and early-1990s, it appeared that the ultra-left in Bihar could even emerge as a credible electoral force, when the Indian People's Front (IPF) made significant inroads in some districts of central Bihar. However, it turned out to be a false promise and the IPF, which metamorphosed into the CPI(ML)–Liberation, subsequently lost steam. As with the CPI, it also had to face the embarrassment of some of its elected representatives switching to Lalu's RJD.

Outside the electoral arena, however, the extreme left has significantly expanded its influence in central Bihar and in Jharkhand, through groups like the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC) and the People's War Group (PWG). These groups now merged to join the CPI(Maoist) are able to strike at police stations and other symbols of state authority with impressive regularity, and in parts of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh in particular their writ seems to run at least as much as the elected government's. The extent of their influence is such that political commentators and intelligence sources have on more than one occasion pointed out that all the way from Nepal in the north through Bihar, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, to Telengana in northern Andhra Pradesh and even the eastern extremities of Maharashtra, there is a huge swathe of land—often described as the 'red corridor'—that faces a 'Maoist menace'.

The growth of the extreme left could also provide some pointers to why the more moderate sections of the left have been unable to make serious headway beyond the states of West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura. Arguably one major factor has been the tendency of the left to 'tail' one of the established parties in each state in order to defeat whichever party it views as the biggest enemy in a given context. Thus,

the left has tailed one or the other of the Dravidian parties in Tamil Nadu for most of the period since 1967, initially on the grounds that defeating the Congress was the priority and in more recent years with the objective of keeping the NDA at bay. Similar considerations have meant that the left has latched on to the RJD in Bihar and the SP in Uttar Pradesh, the Akali Dal in Punjab (before the Akalis joined the NDA), and so on. As a result, any chance that the left might have had of establishing its distinct identity, it can be convincingly argued, has been lost. In fact, even where the left historically had a presence, it lost out to regional parties. The most telling example of this is in Andhra Pradesh. In the elections held in 1952, when the state was part of the Madras Presidency, the undivided CPI had emerged as the single largest party ahead of the Congress. Today, the two communist parties put together would be hard-pressed to win more than a couple of Lok Sabha seats in Andhra Pradesh on their own.

## **In Power in the States**

The Left Front may have failed to make an impact on policy, particularly economic policy, at the national level, even when it has supported governments in New Delhi, but in the states where it has been in power, it is a somewhat different story. While Tripura being a small state, has escaped national attention more often than not, the left's successes in implementing at least parts of its agenda in West Bengal and Kerala have often been commented upon. What is particularly significant is that the 'Kerala model' of development, initiated by the E.M.S. Namboodiripad government of 1957, has not only been widely commented upon, it has by and large been adopted by most governments that have followed in the state. Thus, the left has influenced policy in Kerala not only when in power, but also when it has been out of power. In West Bengal, of course, there is no way of knowing whether this pattern would be repeated, since the left hasn't lost power since it first assumed office in 1977.

What is evident, however, is the fact that the left-led governments in West Bengal and Kerala have been unable to clearly distinguish themselves from 'pro-reform' state governments since the process of

pro market economic reforms was initiated in India in 1991. While the left has been a virulent critic of the liberalisation and globalisation programme, its practice has not been markedly different from the Congress government of S.M. Krishna in Karnataka or the TDP government of Chandrababu Naidu in Andhra Pradesh.

Like other state governments, those led by the left have also sought to attract foreign investment and even privatised ailing state-owned enterprises (though they have tried to couch privatisation as 'partnership' with the private sector). It is not surprising, therefore, that most commentators see the left's attack on economic reforms either as part of a more general trend of parties being anti-reform when they are in opposition and pro-reform when in office, or as a case of serving vested interests like those of the trade unions. The left's response to such criticism has been to argue that state governments are constrained in terms of economic policy by what New Delhi decides and can only tinker at the margins. While this may be true to some extent, it is not a position that the left has been able to successfully present to commentators or to the public at large.

Prior to the reforms, on the other hand, the left was successful in demarcating its economic agenda from those of others. This was particularly true of the early years of left-led governments in Kerala and West Bengal. The Namboodiripad governments of 1957 and 1967, for instance, initiated radical land reforms of the sort never seen anywhere in India before, except in Jammu & Kashmir under the National Conference. These governments were also responsible for setting up what remains, to date, the only universal Public Distribution System (PDS) in the country.

A slight digression is necessary at this point to explain the significance of this move. The responsibility for running the PDS in India is shared jointly by the Union and State Governments. While New Delhi is responsible for centralised procurement for the PDS and for passing on the grain, sugar, etc. procured or obtained through levies to the states, the states bear the responsibility of actually distributing material under the PDS to the populace. As a result, the actual coverage of the PDS varies widely across states. Kerala has the distinction of being the only state with a PDS that reaches every resident of the state. Also, Kerala's PDS distributes through its chain

of fair price shops several items—like soap, detergent, etc.—that are not part of the centrally determined list of items to be made available under the PDS.

Kerala's record in health care too is remarkable in comparison to other states in India. The Human Development Report 2003 of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) states: 'The state of Kerala, India, has health indicators similar to those of the United States—despite a per capita income 99% lower and annual spending on health of just \$28 a person.' By any yardstick, this is a considerable achievement, particularly considering that Kerala is not even among the most prosperous Indian states.

As already mentioned, the fact that the left has repeatedly lost and regained power in Kerala has not undone the radical measures it has taken while in office. The land reforms, which ensured the abolishing of landlordism and the distribution of small land holdings to millions of agricultural labourers who were till that stage landless are arguably major factors in Kerala having significantly better social indicators than any other Indian state. The land reforms and the universal nature of the PDS also go some distance towards explaining the fact that Kerala has significantly lower poverty ratios than many other states with much higher per capita incomes.

In more recent years, the left in Kerala has also been at the forefront of initiating genuine decentralisation of the planning process down to the level of the village panchayat. Again, as with earlier radical measures taken by the left in the state, decentralisation proved irreversible even after the left lost power in the state assembly elections in 2001.

In West Bengal too, the Left Front to begin with followed an economic policy that had elements quite distinct from the policies that had been followed by earlier governments. In particular, the very first Left Front government that came to power after the 1977 assembly elections initiated a radical programme called Operation Barga that dramatically altered agrarian relations in rural West Bengal. In essence, the scheme institutionalised the rights of sharecroppers tilling land formally owned by others, often absentee landlords. Such was the effect of this move in terms of empowering millions of relatively poor farmers that the CPI(M)'s hold on the Bengal countryside has remained unshakeable to this day, over a quarter of a

century after Operation Barga was launched. The same Left Front government also initiated land reforms on a scale never before seen in the eastern state.

The Left Front in West Bengal can also legitimately claim credit for making panchayati raj a reality, more than in most other states in India, though the extent of decentralisation may not quite match up to what has been achieved in Kerala. Some of the left's other pet initiatives have been less successful. In particular, the attempt to make Bangla the mandatory medium of instruction in primary education proved a failure and public pressure from parents who felt that their children were losing out to those educated in English-medium schools in other states ultimately forced the government to abandon this plan after having experimented with it for more than two decades.

Other key problem areas for the Left Front government in West Bengal have been its perceived neglect of Kolkata and other major urban centres as well as their inability to overcome the state's image of being prone to labour unrest. The net result is that the left, despite ruling West Bengal for 30 years, remains much weaker in the towns and cities than in the rural areas. The Left Front has consistently argued that the 'de-industrialisation' of Bengal—the most industrialised of India's provinces when the country became independent—is a consequence of the step-motherly treatment meted out to the state by hostile governments in New Delhi, whether these governments have been run by the Congress or by the BJP. For instance, they point out, central public sector undertakings have stopped investing in the state. Also, New Delhi has always fixed royalties on minerals at inordinately low levels, thereby effectively subsidising the rest of the country at the expense of mineral-rich states like West Bengal.

This is a complaint that other mineral-rich states like Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Assam and Orissa have also echoed on several occasions. Similarly, they argue that a now-defunct 'freight equalisation' scheme—under which coal and steel were made available throughout the country at the same price from the 1960s and 1970s to the 1990s—undermined the locational advantages that states with abundant coal, iron ore and limestone reserves would otherwise have enjoyed.



There is certainly more than a grain of truth in these complaints. However, it cannot seriously be denied that the major reason why industries fled West Bengal through the 1970s and 1980s was political. In the first half of the 1970s, the violent nature of politics in the state—with the Congress, the CPI(M) and the Naxalites fighting each other on the streets and in the villages—was enough to scare business away. After the Left Front came to power in 1977, the violence gradually abated, but replacing the old scare was a new one: the fear of labour militancy backed by a state government favourably inclined towards the unions. The phase of militant trade unionism in West Bengal dated back to the 1960s and peaked between 1967 and 1969, the two years which saw the formation of two United Front governments in the state, both dominated by the CPI(M).

Since the beginning of the 1990s, the CPI(M) has consciously tried to get out of this 'image trap'. Leaders like Somnath Chatterjee have periodically travelled abroad to try and woo investors, attempting to convince them with facts and figures that labour unrest in West Bengal is no worse than anywhere else in India. These attempts have had, at best, limited success. However, after Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee replaced the octogenarian Jyoti Basu as Chief Minister in 2001, there has been a perceptible improvement in the manner in which Indian industry looks at West Bengal. The fact that the power situation in the state is significantly better than it was in the 1970s has also helped. Ironically, one of the key reasons why the power situation seems less acute from the mid-1990s onwards is because de-industrialisation meant that demand for power did not grow at the pace at which it would otherwise have done.

A moot question is what effect the incidents at Singur and Nandigram (detailed later in this chapter) will have on the manner in which industrialists perceive the investment climate in the state. Will they be impressed by the government's zeal to attract private investments and its commitment to doing whatever it takes to create a conducive environment for business? Or, will they be apprehensive about the potential for violent clashes that these incidents have revealed and fear a return to the street-fighting days of the 1960s and 1970s? Nobody can honestly claim to have an answer to these questions today.

## The Left and the Congress: A Love-Hate Relationship

Virtually right through the first five decades since the country became independent, the left participated in coalition politics with the specific purpose of keeping the Congress out of power, whether at the level of the states or at the Union. What was described as ‘pathological’ anti-Congressism dominated the psyche of communist leaders simply because these individuals looked at the Congress as representing the interests of the big bourgeoisie and the capitalist class. The notable exception was in the early 1970s, when the CPI had supported Indira Gandhi’s government. The party was clearly impressed by her ‘socialist’ image, and even during the initial phase of the Emergency period in 1975–1977, the CPI supported her regime although the bigger CPI(M) remained steadfastly opposed to the Congress. Eventually, the CPI agreed that its support to the Emergency had been a mistake.

Anti-Congress sentiments in the left remained strong even when the CPI decided to participate in a Union government for the first and (so far) only time, namely the United Front government headed first by Deve Gowda and then Gujral. The CPI’s representative in the government was one of its senior most and tallest leaders, Indrajit Gupta, a veteran of Parliamentary debates. As a matter of fact, before he became Union Minister for Home Affairs in the Deve Gowda government, he was the senior most member of the Lok Sabha as a result of which he served as pro-tem Speaker when the lower house of Parliament assembled in May 1996 to elect P.A. Sangma (then of the Congress) as Speaker. Despite Gupta’s long innings as a politician and despite the fact that the UF government was dependent on support from the Congress to remain in power, Gupta could not resist making jibes against the Congress while he was Home Minister.

Gupta had stated that if the Congress decided to withdraw support to the UF, they would offend the public at large and might provoke people to throw *chappals* (slippers) at them (Congress leaders). Leaders of the Congress, including its then president Sitaram Kesri, made no secret of their deep displeasure at Gupta’s remarks. In one of his last interviews to the present authors, Gupta confessed that his comments were ‘indiscreet’. The Congress, it may be recalled, changed the first

Prime Minister in the UF government, Deve Gowda, within eight months and replaced him with Gujral. The Congress then went on to withdraw its support to his government roughly a year later.

After the BJP-led NDA government came to power in 1998, the two communist parties and the left as a whole started coming closer to the Congress. Although the two relatively small left parties, the All India Forward Bloc and the Revolutionary Socialist Party, went along with the Samajwadi Party in not supporting Sonia Gandhi's candidature as Prime Minister after the second Vajpayee government lost a vote of confidence in April 1999, the left as an ideological grouping was clear that the Congress was the 'lesser evil' when compared to the BJP. Whereas the left agreed that there was little to distinguish between the economic policies followed by the two largest political parties in the country, unlike the BJP the Congress was not 'communal'.

In the run-up to the 14th general elections, the left found itself in a dilemma. While it would have liked to ensure that the anti-NDA vote did not get divided, it did not want to push possible allies like the SP and the NCP into the NDA camp by forcing them to choose between the Congress and the NDA. As a result, it found itself becoming the fulcrum of a non-Congress 'secular' platform. Even after the election results were known and it became clear that the left had no option but to support a Congress-led government, the left did not give up its hopes of forming a 'third front' at some unspecified point of time in the future. CPI(M) general secretary Prakash Karat periodically kept reiterating his party's desire that such a front should emerge, while insisting that it would have to be more than just an electoral alliance. The SP, the AGP and the TDP were among the parties that at various points responded to such overtures, but at the time of writing there were no signs of any concrete movement in this direction.

In fact, developments in early 2007 could have dealt a major blow to the left's plans of building a third front. When, in February that year the Congress was toying with the idea of dismissing the Mulayam Singh government in UP under Article 356, the DMK initially demurred, but then supported the Congress, though the party has traditionally opposed the use of this provision in the Constitution to dismiss state governments, having itself been a victim on more

than one occasion. Since the DMK and the SP would both normally have been potential allies in a third front, this development could be a serious setback. Of course, cynics might argue that memories are a luxury in politics and the SP and DMK will be quite willing to forget such issues and come together if power seems to be within grasp.

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The Political-Organisational Report of the 18th Congress of the CPI(M) held in April 2005 represents perhaps the clearest manifestation of the mainstreaming of the party, at least as far as economic issues are concerned. The report contained a section entitled: 'On Certain Policy Matters', which spelt out in clear terms the stand that the CPI(M) would take on issues like foreign direct investment, privatisation and loans from multilateral lending institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The positions taken on FDI and privatisation were a significant departure from the earlier stance of the party.

On FDI, for instance, the report 'recognised' that the forces of globalisation would make FDI inflows inevitable and that, therefore, the best the CPI(M) could do was to strive for these inflows to be 'regulated' and directed towards serving the national interest. From a party that had traditionally viewed all FDI as unwelcome, this was quite a change. The party laid down three conditions that FDI must fulfil for it to be welcome. It must, the report said, augment productive capacities in the Indian economy; upgrade technology in the economy; and generate employment.

On the issue of the public sector and privatisation too, the shift from the earlier stance of no disinvestment under any circumstances was marked. The report said public sector undertakings (PSUs) could be broken up into four distinct categories: '(a) giant profit-making units in the core and strategic sectors usually referred to as *navaratnas* (or nine jewels); (b) medium size profit making public sector units; (c) loss making but potentially viable units; and (d) unviable and/or chronically loss making units.' The first two categories, it insisted, must remain in the public sector and 'any erosion in their equity must be resisted'. Interestingly, however, for the third and fourth categories

while ‘all efforts must be made for the revival of such units’, it conceded that ‘if such efforts do not succeed, then other options may be considered, including joint sector, or, in the final eventuality the disposal of these units.’ The report added that, ‘under all circumstances, the interests of the workers must be protected.’

As far as obtaining loans from multilateral financial institutions like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the Asian Development Bank, the party stated that such loans may be taken provided no conditions are imposed that go against the social and economic policies of the government, in particular, no ‘structural adjustment’ programmes of the kind advocated by the IMF and the Bank would be acceptable.

These positions taken by the CPI(M) congress, the party’s highest decision making authority, show quite clearly that contrary to the perception of ‘pragmatism’ being driven by West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, the party as a whole has subtly shifted its stance in recent years. This does not mean, of course, that there is total unanimity on these questions, but it does indicate the direction in which the CPI(M) has been moving and given its dominance in the left front, the direction that left politics as a whole can be seen as taking.

The CPI(M) congress was also notable for the candid admission by the party of rampant factionalism within the party’s Kerala unit. The Politburo elected at the end of the Congress had a vacancy, which party general secretary Prakash Karat announced would be filled by a person from Kerala later, since factionalism had made it impossible to reach a consensus on a name at the party Congress itself. Leaks in the media of the ostensibly confidential discussion among delegates at the Congress revealed how leaders from Kerala had openly attacked each other during the deliberations.

The factionalism was to be reflected in the build-up to the state assembly elections in Kerala in May 2006. The popular mood in the state seemed to be quite hostile to the incumbent (United Democratic Front) government led by Oommen Chandy of the Congress. In the Lok Sabha elections held two years earlier, the UDF had for the first time failed to win even one of the 20 seats in the state. The Congress had split down the middle with former Chief Minister K. Karunakaran,

arguably the party's most seasoned politician, having formed his own outfit the Democratic Indira Congress (Karunakaran). The Left Democratic Front (LDF) could not have asked for a more ideal situation. Media reports also suggested that the left leader who was best positioned to capture the popular mood was V.S. Achuthanandan, an octogenarian CPI(M) leader who had a reputation for honesty and for being a 'hardliner' on policy issues.

The problem for the CPI(M) was that Achuthanandan was the leader of a faction that had been marginalised within the party's state unit, by state CPI(M) general secretary Pinarayi Vijayan. Unlike Achuthanandan, Vijayan had faced allegations of corruption. On the flip side, Achuthanandan was perceived as a loner within the party organisation, unlike Vijayan who was seen as an adept organiser. With weeks to go for the assembly elections, the CPI(M) state unit was unwilling to project Achuthanandan as the chief ministerial candidate. Speculation was rife that the Vijayan faction would instead nominate Palloli Mohammad Kutty, the convenor of the LDF to head the government if it won the elections. This led to unusual scenes of public mobilisation demanding that Achuthanandan be nominated for the top job, which ultimately prompted the party's Politbureau to intervene in favour of the octogenarian.

The outcome of the elections vindicated the decision. The LDF won comfortably, bagging 98 seats in the 140-member assembly, the scale of the victory being unprecedented. The LDF increased its vote share by 5.65 per cent and its tally of seats by 59 from the 39 seats it won in 2001. On the other hand, the UDF suffered major setbacks with seven of the cabinet ministers in the Oommen Chandy government losing. A key ally of the Congress in the UDF, the Indian Muslim League, too suffered major political losses with two-thirds of its candidates losing the elections, including candidates who stood from constituencies in the Malabar area that was considered the party's stronghold. The strength of the Indian Muslim League in the assembly came down from 16 to seven. As for the Congress, the main constituent of the UDF, it contested 77 seats but won only 24 against 62 in 2001.

The victory of the Achuthanandan-led LDF in Kerala meant that the two major state governments led by the CPI(M) were evidently

swinging in different directions. At the same time as Bhattacharjee was ushering in what was perceived as a more 'liberal' attitude towards private and foreign capital in West Bengal, the Kerala government imposed a state-wide ban on the sale of colas manufactured by Coca-Cola and Pepsi following allegations that pesticide levels in the beverages were higher than permitted. The Achuthanandan government insisted that it was imposing the ban on health grounds and in public interest. The order was immediately challenged by cola manufacturers in the High Court, which lifted the ban in December 2006, but the state government appealed against the High Court order in the Supreme Court.

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Elections to the West Bengal assembly were held at the same time that Kerala was going to the polls. Unlike in Kerala, Chief Minister Bhattacharjee in West Bengal was consciously projecting a 'moderate', 'liberal' and 'new-left' image, arguing that the state needed rapid industrialisation and he would take whatever steps were necessary to ensure this—including inviting foreign investors and Indian big business to invest in the state.

Buddhadeb was trying to ensure a seventh successive term for the Left Front in the state, a unique feat in Indian politics if not in the world. The LF's political opponents had traditionally accused the left of 'rigging' elections through strong-arm tactics and intimidation of voters. It was further argued that over the years, the Left had won elections because its sympathisers control the local administration as well as the police force. They were, therefore, very pleased when the Election Commission announced the unusually elaborate measures it would take to ensure that the polls would be truly free and fair. Not only were elections in the state being conducted over five phases for the first time, the EC effectively kept the state and local administration out of all crucial poll-related activity.

The Left Front was livid at what it saw as an affront to Bengali pride and 'partisan' behaviour by the EC. The communists and their supporters had always claimed that they could not have manipulated the outcome of the polls simply because the votes that have been

cast against the left during seven successive assembly elections have accounted for close to half of the total valid votes polled. While accusing the EC of partisanship, the left also said the current elections would decisively settle the 'bogey' of rigged elections in the state.

The confidence of the left was not misplaced. In the 2006 elections, the vote share of the Left Front went up only marginally from 49.4 per cent in 2001 to 50.2 per cent. However, given the way the first-past-the-post, winner-takes-all electoral system works, the number of seats held by the Left in the 294-member West Bengal assembly went up impressively by 36 from 199 to 235.

One major reason for this was that the anti-Left vote was more splintered than in 2001. That year, the Trinamool Congress led by Mamata Banerjee had ditched the BJP and the NDA, and cobbled up an alliance with its parent, the Congress. The combine obtained 39.3 per cent of the total votes cast in West Bengal. The Trinamool ended up with 60 seats in the assembly and the Congress with 26 (plus three independent candidates supported by it). This time round, the Trinamool stuck with the BJP—which does not have much of a support base in the state—ending up with 28.9 per cent of the vote and 29 assembly seats; the Congress won 21 seats with two independent legislators supporting it.

The media projected the outcome of the elections as a major victory for the new-left policies of the Chief Minister, but a closer analysis of the elections suggests this is an incorrect reading of the mandate. In Kolkata, for instance, where Buddhadeb's liberal posture was supposed to have won over the middle class—traditionally hostile to the left—the Trinamool managed to retain much of its support base, while the left hardly increased its vote share (from 42.3 per cent to 42.5 per cent).

Bhattacharjee himself, however, seemed to view the victory as a vote for his policy of rapid industrialisation. On the day the election results were declared, he announced that the Tata group, one of India's largest business houses, had decided to set up a small-car manufacturing factory at Singur in Hooghly district of West Bengal. The project that the Chief Minister announced with such pride was to become a millstone around his neck within months. Another project, a proposed chemicals hub at a special economic zone (SEZ)



in Nandigram in East Midnapur district near Haldia port to be set up by Indonesia's Salem group, had already raised hackles within the Left Front when Buddhadeb had first talked about it during a visit to Singapore in September 2005. This too was to come back to haunt the Chief Minister and his party.

The proposed project of Tata Motors at Singur envisaged the manufacture of a 'people's car' that would cost Rs 100,000 each. The direct investment that was proposed was roughly Rs 1,000 crore (later, enhanced by Rs 500 crore) but it was argued that this investment would bring about additional investments in ancillary units. The car manufacturing plant together with the ancillary units was to come up in a complex spread over nearly 1,000 acres of land. Singur had been chosen by the Tata group over alternative sites because of its proximity to Kolkata (located 40 km away), its port and its airport.

The problem began when the West Bengal government started acquiring land for the project. It first claimed that over 95 per cent of the landowners had 'voluntarily' agreed to sell their land to the government. (In India, every state has a land acquisition act under which the state government can forcibly acquire land ostensibly for 'public' purposes under the 'eminent domain' legal principle.) The West Bengal government claimed that not only were landowners being compensated handsomely, even 'registered' share-croppers (*bargadars*) would be compensated. It was also claimed that local people would be trained so that they could be employed by the car factory or its ancillary units.

Many residents of Singur were evidently dissatisfied with what the state government was offering. Supporters of the Trinamool Congress (which controlled the local panchayat) as well as extreme-left Naxalite groups supported by social activists like Medha Patkar and author Arundhati Roy (who have been associated with the movement to rehabilitate the oustees of the Narmada dam project) started a movement against the government acquiring more land. The Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee government reacted by imposing Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code (that prevents more than four people from assembling at a particular place) to prevent Trinamool Congress leader Mamata Banerjee, Patkar and others from going to Singur.

On November 30, Trinamool MLAs vandalized the state assembly on the issue of compensation to farmers whose land was being acquired. What worsened the situation was, when, on December 2, the police fired tear gas and rubber bullets on protesters and physically prevented them from occupying part of the area earmarked for the car plant. Mamata went on a fast in Kolkata that attracted considerable attention. Various political leaders from New Delhi, from former Prime Minister V.P. Singh to BJP president Rajnath Singh and the President of India A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, appealed to Mamata to give up her fast which she eventually did after 25 days.

The state government's reaction to the agitation in Singur was to blame the agitation on sections of the right (Trinamool Congress and the BJP) and the extreme left (the Naxalites) to oppose the Left Front. But this line of argument was not convincing because many of the CPI(M)'s partners in the Front, notably the CPI, the RSP and the AIFB, were opposed to the manner in which the state government was acquiring land. Supporters of the argument espoused by Bhattacharjee and West Bengal Industry Minister Nirupam Sen argued that after two decades of successful land reforms, agricultural productivity in the state had plateaued—hence, what was required to create job opportunities was investments in manufacturing industry, such as the proposed Tata Motors plant. The government's critics pointed out that the very manner in which it had 'forcibly' acquired land and prevented its opponents from even travelling to Singur smacked of an 'authoritarian' and 'Stalinist' attitude. The same left that had argued in favour of a just and equitable policy of rehabilitating those ousted on account of the establishment of large projects, was now acting in a diametrically opposite manner. Academics and intellectuals who had traditionally supported the left—such as historian Sumit Sarkar—were most upset at the state government's stance.

What made matters worse for the Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee government was what happened soon afterwards at Nandigram in East Midnapur district. In this area, local villagers had begun organising themselves under the banner of the Bhoomi Uchchedh Pratirodh Committee (or a committee against land dispossession), when the Haldia Development Authority headed by CPI(M) MP Lakshman Seth 'notified' areas where land would be acquired for the proposed

SEZ to be set up by the Salem group. On January 3, 2007, the panchayat office and the police station was ransacked in response to the land acquisition notice. The same night, villagers in Nandigram dug up roads and erected barriers to prevent any ‘outsider’ from entering the area. All those who continued to support the CPI(M) were forced to leave their homes. (At both Singur and Nandigram, women were raped allegedly by supporters of their respective political opponents.) On January 7, there was a clash between supporters of the CPI(M) and those opposed to land acquisition resulting in seven people getting killed. Thereafter, Chief Minister Bhattacharjee acknowledged that the land acquisition notice should not have been sent and asked villagers to ‘tear up’ the notice. At public rallies, Bhattacharjee continued to justify the state government’s policy of acquiring agricultural land for industry while stating no land would be forcibly acquired. He said that if the people of Nandigram did not want an SEZ, the proposed chemicals hub would come up elsewhere.

As the villagers of Nandigram continued with their ‘blockade’ and prevented government officials from accessing the area, on March 14, the state government decided to gather a police force to enter the area (with the support of CPI(M) supporters). The government had clearly underestimated the resistance that would be mounted. Like in Singur, the police fired tear gas shells and rubber bullets—ostensibly because they were fired on—before opening fire. At least 15 people died that day. The event dominated national news for days, Parliament came to a standstill and life in West Bengal was paralysed on account of *bandhs* (or a general strike). The CPI(M) found it tough to justify the state government’s actions. As constituents of the Left Front threatened to ditch the CPI(M), Bhattacharjee and party bosses had to soften their position and acknowledge that the police action at Nandigram did more to damage the image of the party than any other event had in the recent past.

The Singur and Nandigram incidents were more than just an embarrassment for the West Bengal government or the state unit of the CPI(M). The party had for several years been accused by its opponents of indulging in doublespeak—of promoting economic reforms where it ran state governments while taking strident positions against the same reforms in New Delhi. However, it had never before faced such

a role reversal—a CPI(M)-led government was perceived as going out of its way to help big business and clamping down on the rights of the poor, while parties like the Trinamool Congress and the Congress were championing the cause of the ‘dispossessed’. As already stated, relations between the left and the Congress reached breaking point on the India–United States nuclear agreement in August 2007. For a substantial section of the left, opposing American ‘imperialism’ was as important as countering the communal politics of the Sangh Parivar.

The trajectory of left politics in recent years presents an apparent paradox. On the one hand, the left would like to believe that it has performed better than ever before in electoral terms because it has taken a ‘principled’ position on a host of issues including economic reforms. On the other hand, the left seems to be leaning towards a more ‘pragmatic’ approach towards reforms on the grounds that the prime duty of its state governments is to ‘alleviate’ the misery of the common man. Many erstwhile sympathisers of the left see in this clear signs of the communists turning increasingly into social democrats. Will the left then succeed by ‘ceasing to be the left’, as some believe? Or will the mainstreaming of the left mean that it starts increasingly resembling other faction-ridden political parties in the country?

## Chapter 8

# Friends in Need: Pages from the Past

The present phase of coalition governments at the level of the Union has thrown up a wide-ranging debate on what the nature of coalitions must be and what characteristics they should have if they are to prove long-lasting and stable. In particular, there have been suggestions that coalitions formed before elections are likely to be more stable than those cobbled together after the elections. Ideological cohesion within the parties of a coalition has also been seen by many as a reasonable guarantor of its longevity. Another proposition that has been put forward is that ‘outside support’, that is, political parties supporting a government on the floor of the legislature but not participating in it, tends to be a destabilising factor. Finally, it has been suggested by the BJP, among others, that if one constituent in a coalition is dominant in terms of size, such a coalition would last longer than one in which there are several small partners. It would be worth examining each of these propositions in light of the actual experience with coalitions in India.

In the context of the Union government in New Delhi, experiments in coalitions began only in 1977 with the Janata Party government headed by Morarji Desai; this was followed more than 12 years later when the V.P. Singh government was sworn in 1989. However, in the states, coalition governments have existed from the time the very first elections were held in independent India in 1952. While at first sight there may seem to be very little in common between the manner in which coalitions in the states and those at the centre have worked, there are nevertheless enough common features to make a study of coalitions in the states a worthwhile exercise. The early experiments with coalition politics in various states threw up methods and results that were not very different from what we are witnessing today at the centre. The fact that today there do exist some

stable coalition governments, notably in West Bengal, Tripura, Kerala and Maharashtra, suggests that there has been a process of learning which could be cut short at an all-India level if relevant lessons are drawn from history. This chapter traces the experience of coalitions at the level of the Union government and in the states. As will become evident, many apparently obvious guarantors of stable coalitions have not actually proved to be so.

## Coalitions at the Centre

While the first real coalition at the level of the Union government had to wait till 1977, three decades after independence, there was already, in 1969, a government led by a Congress that no longer had a majority in the lower house of Parliament. The situation arose thanks to a split in the Congress, which, in turn, was the culmination of a power struggle within the party, accelerated by the electoral setbacks during the 4th general elections of 1967. In the elections, the Congress was swept out of power in as many as nine states—Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Orissa, Madras and Kerala. The extent of the damage to the Congress' hold over political power was brought out in a telling comment which became popular at the time: for the first time since independence, one could travel from West Pakistan to East Pakistan (Amritsar to Calcutta) without once entering a state ruled by the grand old party of the Indian freedom movement.

The debacle aggravated factional fights within the Congress and heightened tensions between powerful party organisers and Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister. It also found expression in strong disagreements over some radical economic policies advocated by her, particularly by more conservative Congress leaders like Morarji Desai. This ultimately led to a split in the Congress which robbed the party of 62 Lok Sabha MPs, reducing it to a minority in November 1969.

For the first time, therefore, the ruling party in New Delhi did not have a majority of Lok Sabha MPs. Indira Gandhi's government, however, survived because of the support extended to it by the DMK, the Communist Party of India, the Akali Dal, the Muslim League and some independents. Thus, this was also the first occasion when the concept of 'outside support' was put into practice at the level of the

Union government, though, as we shall see later, similar experiments had already been tried out in some states. The tenure of the minority government came to an end in December 1970, when Indira Gandhi herself chose to recommend dissolution of the Lok Sabha and the holding of fresh elections. This too was unprecedented and the 4th Lok Sabha became the first to have not completed its full five-year term.

If Indira Gandhi's minority government between November 1969 and December 1970 is disregarded, the first real attempt at a coalition government at the level of the Union was made in 1977 when the Janata Party came to power. The party was itself a coalition of several pre-poll allies who had come together on the issue of opposing the Emergency.

The alliance that contested the March 1977 elections announced by Indira Gandhi after she suddenly lifted the Emergency comprised various political streams. In terms of its ideological moorings, the alliance can be broken up into four broad streams—those who had been in the Congress but had left the party at some point, the socialists, the right-wing Bharatiya Jana Sangh (or today's Bharatiya Janata Party), and a section of the left, notably the CPI(M) and some other smaller parties which, unlike the CPI, had consistently opposed the imposition of the Emergency.

Within the group of former Congressmen were people like Jagjivan Ram and Hemvati Nandan Bahuguna, who had been influential leaders within the Congress but had quit shortly before the elections on an anti-Emergency platform to form the Congress for Democracy (CFD). Then there were those who had been part of the erstwhile Congress (O), which was formed in 1969 when the Congress split thanks to a struggle for supremacy between Indira Gandhi's supporters and others in the organisation. During the Emergency, many of these leaders had been part of Jayaprakash Narayan's movement. One of these, Morarji Desai, ultimately emerged as the consensus choice to head the Janata Party government. A third constituent from among those who had once been within the Congress was the party led by Charan Singh, who was to later replace Desai as Prime Minister. Singh had, after quitting the Congress in 1967, floated his own party, the Bharatiya Kranti Dal, later renamed the Bharatiya Lok Dal (BLD).

Charan Singh had cultivated the peasantry, notably the Jats of western Uttar Pradesh and Haryana, as his political base.

Among the non-Congress streams within the anti-Emergency alliance were the socialists— followers of Ram Manohar Lohia and Acharya Narendra Dev—George Fernandes, Madhu Dandavate and Madhu Limaye being among the more prominent leaders of this group. Another was the BJS whose association with the RSS was to become the bone of contention within the Janata Party leading to the fall of its government. Finally, there was the CPI(M) and smaller left parties. The Janata Party that was formed after the 1977 elections and which assumed office was a coalescing of these various streams, barring the left.

After a little over two years, the contradictions within the Janata Party reached a climax with the non-Jana Sangh components of what was essentially a coalition disguised as one party insisting that those from the Jana Sangh must choose between loyalty to the RSS and loyalty to the party. Ironically, the ‘dual membership’ issue as it came to be known was raised most vehemently by leaders like George Fernandes of the socialist stream, who are today among the staunchest allies of the BJP. With the leaders of the Jana Sangh, among them Atal Behari Vajpayee (who was External Affairs Minister in the Desai Cabinet) and L.K. Advani (who was Information & Broadcasting Minister) refusing to give up their allegiance to the RSS, the Janata Party ultimately split and Morarji Desai’s government was reduced to a minority in the Lok Sabha.

The Congress stepped in to prop up Charan Singh as Prime Minister, with the left supporting him, but this proved to be India’s most shortlived government, that is, till the 13-day Vajpayee government in mid-1996. The Congress, which clearly sensed a rising tide of popular support, thanks largely to what was perceived as a disappointing performance by the Janata Party, decided to withdraw support to Charan Singh. Having held the post between July 28, 1979 and January 14, 1980, Charan Singh remains the only Prime Minister in India never to have faced Parliament, leave alone proving his government’s strength on the floor of the Lok Sabha.

The first major attempt at a coalition at the centre thus came to an end within two and a half years of its inception with the Janata Party



having disintegrated and the Congress sweeping back to power in the general elections held in January 1980, making admirable tactical use of skyrocketing onion prices and the popular disillusionment with a government that was seen as being too busy settling internal squabbles to govern. (Nearly two decades later, in November 1998, the price of onions again became a major political issue which benefited the Congress in assembly elections held in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Delhi.)

An interesting fact to be noted here is that despite the Janata Party alliance being essentially anti-Congress and drawing sustenance from diverse ideological groups, both the Prime Ministers thrown up by the coalition were from among those who had earlier been with the Congress. This was a pattern that was repeated in subsequent anti-Congress coalitions too, which is why Vajpayee was seen as the first truly non-Congress Indian Prime Minister. That former Congressmen should have led anti-Congress coalition governments is perhaps not as strange as it may seem, given the rainbow nature of these coalitions (with right and left groups supporting them). Under the circumstances, it is perhaps understandable that the only acceptable compromise solutions would have to emanate from the centrist political space. Since the Congress had a virtual monopoly of that space till the mid-1960s, it is not surprising that the compromises needed to form coalitions should have repeatedly been settled by placing former Congressmen at the helm.

The next coalition government at the Union level (though in a strict sense it was more a minority government supported by a coalition) was formed in December 1989 by the Janata Dal led by V.P. Singh, another former Congressman. In fact, Singh was Finance Minister and then Defence Minister in Rajiv Gandhi's Cabinet till he fell out on the issue of corruption in high places (including the scandals relating to the purchase of Bofors guns and German submarines from HDW). He went on to form the Jan Morcha, which later merged into the Janata Dal. The Janata Dal experiment had one very interesting feature—while both the BJP and the left extended support to it from outside, there was no arrangement before or after the elections between these two 'props' of the Janata Dal government. During the elections, the Janata Dal had separate electoral understandings with both the BJP and the left who contested against each other.

After the 1989 elections, the Congress emerged as the single-largest party in the Lok Sabha but was short by over 75 seats of the required majority. (As it has turned out, the 1989 elections were the first of six successive general elections which have not yielded any one party a majority in the Lok Sabha.) The Janata Dal, with its mutually antagonistic allies, had a comfortable majority, but since neither of its two allies was willing to share power with the other, it was left to run the government on its own with 'outside support'. Barring the brief tenure of the Charan Singh government, this was the first occasion when the ruling party on its own had less than one-third of the Lok Sabha seats.

The V.P. Singh government proved short-lived, once again thanks to a standoff with the BJP. The 10-month long tenure of this government proved a truly eventful chapter in Indian political history with major upheavals. The first of these was caused by the government's decision to implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission. With the anti-Mandal agitation having already set the tone for tension between the BJP and the Janata Dal, it was now the turn of the BJP to up the ante. It did so by launching the Ayodhya movement.

The upper-caste Hindu outrage at the V.P. Singh government's decision to implement the Mandal Commission report was effectively channelised by the BJP in the *Ramjanambhoomi* (birthplace of Rama) agitation. Party President L.K. Advani led his famous *rath yatra* across the country, and as communal clashes dotted the points on the map through which it travelled, there were growing demands for the government to stop its march. Posed against this was the BJP's threat that it would withdraw support if any such measure were undertaken. Even as the Singh government pondered its options, the Janata Dal governments in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh took strong measures. The government of Bihar, headed by Lalu Prasad Yadav, arrested Advani in Samastipur and stopped the progress of the rath to its ultimate destination, Ayodhya. In Uttar Pradesh, Chief Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav ordered a crackdown on those gathering in Ayodhya to welcome Advani. What followed was police action in which several died in firing and thousands were jailed.

The BJP then called for the dismissal of the Mulayam Singh Yadav government in Uttar Pradesh, failing which it threatened to withdraw support to Singh's government in New Delhi. With Singh sticking

to his stand that he would rather lose power than compromise on the issue of safeguarding secularism and the rule of law, the BJP ultimately withdrew support and Singh lost a vote of confidence in the Lok Sabha in November 1990. For the second time in a decade, an attempt to form a non-Congress coalition government at the centre had failed because of contradictions between the right-wing BJP and the others.

As in 1979, the fall of the coalition government in November 1990 was followed by a breakaway group of the Janata Dal forming a government with the outside support of the Congress. The group, which called itself the Janata Dal (Samajwadi) and was led by another former Congressman, Chandra Shekhar, had just 57 MPs in the Lok Sabha, all the others supporting it from outside. The JD (S)—which was to later split into the Samajwadi Janata Party led by Chandrashekhar and the Samajwadi Party headed by Mulayam Singh Yadav—thus became by far the smallest party to have headed a Union government. As with Charan Singh, so also with Chandra Shekhar, the Congress withdrew support within months on the flimsiest of pretexts. The plea given was that the Prime Minister had ordered police surveillance on Congress leaders including Rajiv Gandhi and thus betrayed their trust, a charge that was never proved.

Shortlived as the tenure of the Chandra Shekhar government was, the Congress found time to pressurise it into taking certain decisions that were to have an impact on the future course of Indian politics. One such decision was the dismissal of the state government of Tamil Nadu headed by M. Karunanidhi of the DMK. While Karunanidhi's government was clearly dismissed to serve the interests of the Congress and its ally in Tamil Nadu, the AIADMK, the ostensible reason for the dismissal, under the much-abused Article 356 of the Constitution, was the local government's allegedly poor track record in countering the activities of the militant Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). (The same plea was to be used seven years later in 1998 by the Congress to pull down another government in New Delhi, that is, the United Front government headed by I.K. Gujral.)

The Governor of the state at that time, Surjit Singh Barnala, a veteran Akali Dal leader and former Chief Minister of Punjab, refused to play along with the wishes of the central government, preferring

to resign rather than submit a report that would suit the Chandra Shekhar government's gameplan. This cemented a relationship between the DMK and the Akalis, both parties that have consistently argued for a more federal structure in India. The relationship between the two regional parties later proved useful to the BJP, but that's a different story.

The elections that followed in May–June 1991 again threw up a minority government with the Congress failing to secure a majority despite the sympathy generated for the party in the second half of the polling after Rajiv Gandhi's assassination on May 21 after one round of polling had taken place. The Congress government headed by P.V. Narasimha Rao managed to last its full term and in fact secure a majority in the Lok Sabha thanks to defections and parties switching sides, one such switch becoming the subject of a case of alleged bribery of MPs to vote for the government (which is detailed elsewhere).

After the May 1996 elections, which followed the end of Narasimha Rao's tenure, India saw four coalition governments come into being and fall in less than three years. The first of these four coalition governments was formed by the BJP in May 1996 and lasted just 13 days before the Prime Minister designate, Vajpayee, resigned after it became clear that he would lose the vote of confidence. Unlike in 1998, the BJP was unable to win over a single major party to support its government despite having been given the chance by the President on the grounds that it was the single largest party in the Lok Sabha. Its support was thus limited to its pre-poll allies like the Akali Dal in Punjab and the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra.

This was followed by the United Front government headed by H. D. Deve Gowda and supported by the Congress. The United Front was a post-election formation and consisted of 13 parties, many of which had alliances with some of the other constituents in individual states while contesting against other constituents. The single largest party in the Front was the Janata Dal with 44 Lok Sabha MPs, drawn mainly from Bihar, Karnataka and Orissa. The second biggest was the CPI(M). The other parties of the Left Front, the CPI, the RSP and the Forward Bloc, were also constituents of the Front. Among the others were several regional parties with bases in one state each like

the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh, the Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh, the DMK in Tamil Nadu, the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) in Assam, and the National Conference (NC) in Jammu & Kashmir.

With the UF making it clear that it would support neither a BJP-led nor a Congress-led government, nor even accept a sharing of power with the Congress, the onus fell on the Congress to support a UF government without participating in it, which it did. The CPI(M) too stuck to its earlier stand of not participating in a government at the centre, a stand which provoked heated debate within and outside the party. While the RSP and the Forward Bloc also adopted a similar stance, the CPI became the only constituent of the left to participate in the government. The result was that the two largest supporting parties—the Congress and the CPI(M)—were not part of the government.

There was, however, a distinction between the nature of support being offered from ‘outside’ by the non-CPI left and the Congress. While the former was not part of the government, it was part of the United Front, which had institutions like the Steering Committee, the Core Committee and the Coordination Committee to discuss issues and provide direction to the government. This was another novel step in coalition politics, the first time that parties joined a ruling coalition with formal institutions, but stayed out of government. The Congress, on the other hand, was neither in the government nor in the United Front. Its support was, to that extent, more along the conventional lines of outside support practised by the party on numerous occasions in the states and at the centre in the past.

Given the nature of the United Front, it was hardly surprising that there should be differences and in some cases even conflicts of interests between the partners. In particular, inter-state disputes were thorny, particularly the manner in which Karnataka and Tamil Nadu were to share the Cauvery waters, which remained a hotly contested question despite the government in both states being run by UF constituents—the DMK in Tamil Nadu and the Janata Dal in Karnataka. Similarly, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka had an ongoing dispute over the height of the Almatti dam that at one stage looked like snowballing into a major problem for the UF with

the Janata Dal government of Karnataka and the TDP-led Andhra Pradesh government at loggerheads. The fact that the Prime Minister was, in both these cases, from one of the states involved could have contributed to heightening hostility, but to the credit of Deve Gowda and the UF it must be said that though the issues were not resolved, they were not allowed to get out of hand either.

Predictably though, it was the Congress that was to queer the pitch for the UF government, this time on an even flimsier pretext, as detailed earlier. While Kesri's explanation for pulling down the Deve Gowda government clearly did not convince anybody, it provided the basis for another Congress-supported UF government to assume office. Inder Kumar Gujral thus came to head the third of four successive coalitions, none of which lasted more than 13 months. As we have seen, his government too was to be shortlived.

In the elections of February–March 1998 that followed, it was fairly clear to analysts, voters and pollsters alike that any party getting a majority in the Lok Sabha was a remote possibility. The result of that very widely held perception was a significant step forward in coalition politics in India. For the first time, the BJP decided to forge electoral alliances with as many regional parties as possible in a bid to capture power. Prior to these elections, both the BJP and the Congress had preferred to contest the bulk of Lok Sabha seats on their own and restrict alliances to a minimum in those states where they would otherwise be at a clear disadvantage.

For the 1998 elections, the BJP secured tie-ups with as many as 13 big and small regional parties spread over 10 major Indian states, which between them accounted for 373 of the 543 Lok Sabha seats. Its partners were the Akali Dal in Punjab, the Haryana Vikas Party in Haryana, the Samata Party in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal, the Biju Janata Dal in Orissa, the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra, the Lok Shakti in Karnataka, the TDP (Lakshmi Parvathi) in Andhra Pradesh, and five parties in Tamil Nadu—the AIADMK, the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK), the Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK), the Tamizhaga Rajiv Congress (TRC) and the Janata Party. There were several factors that dictated this coalition strategy from a party that had always been a proponent

of a unitary India and a strong centre, positions that would normally be a restraint on any large-scale alliances with regional parties.

One major factor was the perception that no party would be able to form a government on its own. Added to this was the BJP's own experience of its attempt to form a government which collapsed within 13 days without any fresh allies emerging after the elections. This helped in convincing the party that the only way of breaking its isolation within the political class was to build alliances before the elections rather than seeking them after the polls. A third factor was the recognition that the party had acquired the image of being confined to the north and west of the country and therefore not being well-placed to run a government in New Delhi. The BJP knew it had to shed this image of not being a pan-Indian party and could not do so on its own.

A crucial fourth factor lay in the party's electoral track record in many of the states where it sought alliances. Of the nine states in which it roped in regional partners, it had never won a single seat in Tamil Nadu or Orissa, which between them have 60 seats in the Lok Sabha. In West Bengal, which has 42 seats, it had not won a seat after 1952. In Andhra Pradesh, which also has 42 seats, it had only twice in 11 general elections won just one seat. In Punjab (14 seats), the party had last won a seat in 1962. In Haryana (10 seats), after failing to register a win in elections since 1977, it had won four seats in 1996 thanks to its tie-up with the HVP. In Karnataka, while the party had registered its first wins in 1991 and increased the tally from four to six in 1996, it was still a minor presence in a state that sends 28 MPs to the Lok Sabha. Thus, the BJP faced the prospect of winning no more than a handful of the 196 seats that these seven states have between them if it chose to go alone in the polls.

In Bihar, while the BJP had a significant presence and could bank on winning some seats on its own, the addition of the Samata Party's votes could prove decisive in a severely polarised state. Given the fact that Bihar then had as many as 54 Lok Sabha seats, the alliance was crucial to the BJP's prospects of forming the next government. The Samata Party's contribution to its vote base in UP would, of course, be very much less, but even a couple of extra MPs in a hung Parliament

could mean the difference between being in government and sitting in Opposition. Indeed, the events as they unfolded proved the BJP's calculations right.

The BJP did emerge as the single largest party in the 12th Lok Sabha, but with just 182 seats it was well short of the halfway mark of 272. With its electoral allies, however, it had 258 seats, putting it within striking distance of the target. Even so, that relatively small distance appeared for about a week after the elections to be quite a task. Ultimately, it took a break-up of the United Front on the issue of whether or not a Congress government should be supported before the BJP could breathe easy. After President K.R. Narayanan was satisfied that the BJP, while still short of a majority, had the support of more MPs than any other formation, he invited Vajpayee to form the government and seek a vote of confidence. The rest, as they say, is history.

The drama was, however, far from over. Even as the BJP and its electoral allies met to chalk out a National Agenda for Governance on the basis of which the government would be run, a block of 27 MPs from Tamil Nadu, led by the AIADMK, started bargaining hard for ministerial berths and other concessions. The AIADMK with its 18 MPs was the single largest ally of the BJP and commanded the allegiance of four other smaller allies from the state who between them had won another nine seats. This block delayed giving the letter of support to the Vajpayee government that had been demanded by the President to *prima facie* establish that it would have the requisite numbers in the Lok Sabha. Another ally, the Trinamool Congress, which had seven MPs, announced that it would support the government but not participate in it. Ultimately two of the smaller partners from Tamil Nadu, the MDMK and the PMK also took the same stand. The jitters that these developments caused in the BJP camp were somewhat eased by the indications from the National Conference and the TDP that they would abstain in the crucial vote of confidence. Another small party, which had contested the elections against the BJP alliance in Haryana, the INLD, promised the support of its four MPs to the Vajpayee government.

Even so, the numbers between the government and the Opposition were finely balanced. That necessitated a tacit understanding between



the TDP and the government under which a TDP member was elected as the Speaker of the Lok Sabha in return for which the 11 other TDP MPs ultimately voted in favour of the government in the vote of confidence. Just how crucial the changed stances of the TDP, the NC and the INLD (all of whom had opposed the BJP and the Congress in the elections) were can be judged from the fact that the vote of confidence was ultimately won by 275 votes to 263 with the three NC members abstaining. Even at this early stage, one of the BJP's electoral allies, Subramaniam Swamy of the Janata Party, had decided not to vote in favour of the government. The BJP in turn had already jettisoned one of its allies, the TDP (Lakshmi Parvathi) in Andhra Pradesh, clearly because of the extreme hostility between the two TDPs. With Chandrababu Naidu's TDP having 12 Lok Sabha MPs and Lakshmi Parvathi's party having drawn a blank, the choice for the BJP was clear, even if cynical.

The alliance continued to appear unstable with one ally or the other at frequent intervals threatening to withdraw support or 'reconsider' its support to the government if its demands were not met. While the AIADMK has been projected by the BJP as the sole culprit in this respect, the reality is that the independent MP Buta Singh was the first to quit the alliance, followed by the INLD. The Akali Dal at one stage in mid-1998, months after the government was formed, had announced that it would reconsider its support to the government if its demand for keeping Udham Singh Nagar out of the proposed state of Uttaranchal was not met. The Trinamool Congress too at various stages showed signs of unease and on one occasion pulled out of the alliance coordination committee protesting that the Prime Minister was not acting adequately on issues like the rise in prices of essential commodities. The spectacle of senior ministers like George Fernandes, Jaswant Singh and Pramod Mahajan rushing around from New Delhi to Chennai and Kolkata in a bid to placate angry allies became a regular feature for most of the tenure of the second Vajpayee government.

Under the circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the government fell when it did. The AIADMK had always been seen as being on the verge of pulling out of the alliance and it finally did in April. While the BJP has since attempted to portray this as the result of the party

and the government refusing to accept the AIADMK's unreasonable demands, the facts suggest a different story. Several ministerial portfolios were widely believed to have been demanded by the AIADMK and granted and several bureaucratic transfers and postings were so convenient for Jayalalithaa that the obvious inferences were drawn. If anything, the public perception is that the BJP was more than willing to accommodate the AIADMK supremo's whims till she made one demand too many.

In the vote of confidence that followed the withdrawal of support by the AIADMK, the rest of the BJP-led alliance held together despite speculation that some of the allies, notably the Samata Party, the Biju Janata Dal and the Akali Dal, may be heading for a split with factions from these parties likely to move over to the Opposition camp. Further, the BJP managed to win back the support of the INLD reportedly on the assurance that some populist measures for farmers would be adopted if the government stayed in the saddle. It also found a new ally in the DMK, which could not countenance the prospect of being on the same side as its rival, the AIADMK, and was apprehensive that any future government with the AIADMK as a partner may well dismiss its state government in Tamil Nadu.

Thus, the fourth successive coalition government in just over two years met the same fate as the others before it, but in doing so ushered in a fresh round of political realignments. The realignments continued as the parties prepared for the polls. The most significant of these was the decision of the TDP to drop the veneer of 'equidistance' from the BJP and the Congress. It forged an alliance with the BJP for the simultaneous Lok Sabha and assembly polls, though it decided not to formally join the NDA. The alliance worked to the benefit of both the TDP and the BJP, the former winning 29 of the 42 Lok Sabha seats in the state and the latter improving its tally from five to seven seats. The TDP on its own also obtained a majority in the state assembly. That this performance was despite the Congress increasing its share of the votes in the state is a pointer to the manner in which Chandrababu Naidu understood the electoral arithmetic. Significantly, the TDP, which emerged as the BJP's single biggest partner in the 13th Lok Sabha, chose not to join the government.

As in the case of the TDP in Andhra Pradesh, the DMK in Tamil Nadu cemented a formal electoral alliance with the BJP and its other allies. In the process, the tie-up between the DMK and the Tamil Maanila Congress had to be given a quiet burial, with the latter refusing to go along with the BJP. The TMC also made it clear that it would not be part of any alliance headed by Jayalalithaa. Since the Congress and the left parties in the state had already tied up with the AIADMK, the TMC had no option but to forge a 'third front' which included other smaller parties like the Puthizha Tamilagam (a party that appeals to the dalits of the state) and the Samajwadi Party. This front predictably failed to win any Lok Sabha seats.

Another significant political development took place in the Janata Dal. The party split down the middle, with one section led by party president Sharad Yadav choosing to join the NDA, while another led by former Prime Minister Deve Gowda refused to do so. Most of the senior leaders of the Janata Dal, including former Prime Minister I.K. Gujral, Ram Vilas Paswan, who had been part of several Union governments, and the then Karnataka Chief Minister J.H. Patel, were part of the Sharad Yadav group in the JD. This group merged with the Lok Shakti in Karnataka, headed by the late Rama Krishna Hegde, former Karnataka Chief Minister and Union Commerce Minister, and the Samata Party in Bihar, to form the Janata Dal (United). In effect, the JD(U) included practically the entire Bihar unit of the Janata Dal and a substantial section of the Karnataka unit, these being the only states in which the JD had influence. The formation of the JD(U) was yet another instance of the realignments that have periodically taken place within those who originally formed the Janata Dal in 1989. Both the Lok Shakti and the Samata Party were breakaway groups from the JD. Thus, while the formation of the JD(U) was at one level a consolidation of the Janata Dal, which had got scattered over time, what was interesting was that this consolidation was now in favour of the BJP rather than against it.

This consolidation certainly helped the NDA put up an impressive performance in Bihar, where the coalition won 41 of the 54 Lok Sabha seats. In Karnataka, on the other hand, the addition of Patel and his supporters to the NDA bandwagon seems to have damaged rather than helped the NDA's prospects. While the BJP-led alliance had won

16 of the 28 seats in the state in the 1998 elections, the tally came down to just 10 in 1999. Clearly, the anti-incumbency feeling against Patel's government had overshadowed any arithmetic advantage that may have accrued to the NDA. In fact, this was not an unanticipated situation. The BJP's state unit had consistently and vehemently opposed the proposed merger on the ground that the party would lose one of its key campaign issues—the non performance of the Patel government—on the eve of the assembly elections. The BJP's central leadership too saw the merit in this argument, but went on to add that it had little choice in the matter, since the Samata Party and the Lok Shakti had made it clear that they would brook no opposition from the BJP to the formation of the JD(U). The central leadership, therefore, prevailed on the state unit to accept Patel into the NDA fold in the larger national interests of the coalition.

In Haryana too alliances changed rapidly in the build-up to the 13th general elections. The HVP, which was ruling the state with the support of the BJP at the time of the vote of confidence in the Lok Sabha, was very quickly jettisoned thereafter by the BJP. The BJP withdrew support to the HVP government, precipitating its collapse and instead joined hands with the INLD. The link with the INLD's position on the vote of confidence in Parliament was all too obvious. The INLD had announced just two days before the crucial vote that it would vote against the Vajpayee government and would prefer a non-BJP, non-Congress Prime Minister like Deve Gowda, ostensibly because he would promote the interests of farmers. By the time of the actual vote, though, the INLD had switched its support to the Vajpayee government. It was hardly surprising, therefore, that the BJP soon thereafter supported Chautala's claim to form the government in Haryana. In the Lok Sabha elections that followed, the two parties fought in alliance, while the HVP and the Congress fought separately to the detriment of both. The results were a complete sweep of the 10 Lok Sabha seats from the state for the BJP-INLD alliance.

New allies, however, were not the only factor working in favour of the BJP-led NDA in the build-up to the 1999 general elections. An equally important development was a split within the Congress when Sharad Pawar, P.A. Sangma and Tariq Anwar were expelled and

formed their own party—the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP). While this had little or no impact in most parts of the country, it did radically alter political equations in Pawar's home state of Maharashtra. The NCP managed to win just six of the state's 48 Lok Sabha seats, but divided the traditional Congress votes sufficiently to allow the BJP-Shiv Sena alliance to win 28 seats and reduce the Congress tally to just 10. This was despite a considerable erosion in the BJP-Shiv Sena alliance's share of the vote which would have otherwise left the alliance with just a handful of seats from Maharashtra.

The process of political realignments did not end with the 1999 Lok Sabha elections. As with other regional parties, in the case of the NCP too the realities of state politics dictated the future course of action. In the simultaneous assembly and Lok Sabha elections in Maharashtra, the Congress emerged as the single largest party with 75 MLAs in the 288-member assembly. The BJP-Shiv Sena alliance won 125 seats while the NCP obtained 58 seats. The NCP, despite its professed opposition to Sonia Gandhi's so-called ambition of holding the post of the Prime Minister of India, realised that if it were to form a government in Maharashtra, the only way out was an alliance with the Congress. That is precisely what happened, but only after much political drama which included attempts to woo the 12 independent MLAs and those belonging to smaller parties like the Peasants and Workers' Party (PWP), the Republican Party of India (RPI), the JD(S), the CPI(M) and the SP. Even government formation took inordinately long on account of wrangling over ministerial positions.

The merger of the Lok Shakti with the JD(U) in Karnataka also ran into some rough weather after Rama Krishna Hegde was excluded from the Union Cabinet after having served in the second Vajpayee government as Commerce Minister. Hegde later held George Fernandes primarily responsible for his exclusion from the Cabinet and expressed unhappiness that Fernandes and Vajpayee had not shown a senior leader like him the courtesy of giving him some inkling of his exclusion from the Cabinet. A bitter Hegde claimed that Vajpayee looked a 'picture of sadness' when he met him. 'It seemed he [Vajpayee] did something he should not have done,' Hegde claimed.

It is worth noting that these internal wrangles within the JD(U) were also influenced by the reality of state politics. The party had a strength of 21 MPs in the Lok Sabha, of which 18 were from Bihar and just three from Karnataka. The JD(U) was also a party with an unusually high proportion of political heavyweights. As a result, there were at least five obvious contenders for a Cabinet berth from the party—Fernandes, Paswan, Sharad Yadav, Nitish Kumar and Hegde. It was obvious that Vajpayee could not afford to make them all Cabinet ministers without risking resentment from other partners in the alliance. At least one of these worthies would have to be dropped. The fact that the axe ultimately fell on Hegde could have been determined by political expediency: assembly elections were due in Bihar in February 2000, whereas they had just been concluded in Karnataka, Hegde's home state. Any dissension within the ranks of the JD(U) in Bihar could cost the NDA dear in the assembly elections, while the immediate stakes were lower in Karnataka, where the alliance was now in opposition to a Congress government with a comfortable majority. (Six years later in 2006, Karnataka politics saw a set of unusual twists and turns when the JD[Secular] led by Deve Gowda first opposed and then supported the BJP to form the state government after ditching the Congress. Deve Gowda first claimed that he was deeply saddened that his son H.D. Kumaraswamy had tied up with the 'communal' BJP to become Chief Minister of Karnataka. Thereafter, in a blatantly opportunistic move, former Prime Minister Deve Gowda supported his son and blamed the Congress for the break-up of its alliance with the JD(S)—once again, blood proved much thicker than political ideology, just in case there were doubts on this score.)

In Jammu & Kashmir, the National Conference continued with its transparently opportunist stance: it would fight elections on its own without becoming part of any alliance, but would unconditionally support New Delhi since the state depends heavily on the Union government for support in countering secessionist militants. As in 1998, therefore, the NC in 1999 contested all the six seats in Jammu & Kashmir, winning four of them, but had no compunctions in joining the NDA government when it was formed. Omar Abdullah once again became a junior minister in the third Vajpayee government. The NC parted ways with the BJP and the NDA before the 2004 elections.

A common feature of all these realignments in Indian politics was that they were responses to the compulsions of state politics. This was true of the allies of the BJP—the TDP, the DMK, the JD(U) and the INLD—each of which had been forced into joining hands with the NDA to combat their respective principal opponents in state politics—the Congress for the TDP in Andhra Pradesh and the JD(U) in Karnataka, the AIADMK for the DMK in Tamil Nadu, the RJD for the JD(U) in Bihar and the HVP for the INLD in Haryana. This was equally true in the case of the NCP, which ultimately joined the Congress in forming a government in Maharashtra. As already stated, the DMK left the NDA to join the UPA before the 2004 elections and in 2007, the TDP distanced itself from the BJP, came closer to the left and still believed in the significance of a ‘Third Front’ in Indian politics.

## Coalitions in the States

Despite the popular notion that coalition governments are a phenomenon of recent vintage in India, and that even in the states they do not date further back than the 4th general elections in 1967, the fact is that the first coalition government in India was formed as a result of the first-ever round of general elections held in 1952. That government was the one headed by the Akali Dal in what was then PEPSU (Patiala and East Punjab States’ Union) and covered some parts of the existing states of Punjab, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh. In two other states, Madras (comprising most of today’s Tamil Nadu, the Rayalaseema and coastal parts of Andhra Pradesh and the Malabar region of north Kerala) and Travancore-Cochin (South Kerala and parts of today’s Tamil Nadu), the Congress formed governments with the support of minor parties after it failed to win a majority of seats in the assemblies in the 1952 elections.

In both these states, communist-led coalitions formed before the elections had emerged as the largest blocks in the assembly, though the Congress was the single largest party. While the Congress under Jawaharlal Nehru was quite content to allow the Akalis to form the government in PEPSU, it was determined not to allow the communists to come to power in any state. The reasons for this were not purely

whimsical. The CPI in the 1952 general elections had emerged as the most potent opposition force, constituting the largest non-Congress group in both the Rajya Sabha and the Lok Sabha. In addition, the CPI-led alliance was the single largest block in the two southern states of Madras and Travancore–Cochin, as we have seen, and similar alliances were the major opposition in Hyderabad and West Bengal, while Tripura, which did not then have a legislature, had elected communist MPs from both its constituencies. Thus, unlike the Akali Dal, which was restricted to what is today Punjab, the CPI posed a threat to Congress dominance in large parts of south and east India.

In what over the years became the norm, the Congress was invited by the *Raj Pramukh* (as the Governor was designated) in Travancore–Cochin and the Governor in Madras to form the government, on the ground that it was the single-largest party despite being in a minority. In Madras, the Congress was able to win the support of smaller caste-based groups and the Indian Union Muslim League. But, it had to accept one of their demands and before it could do so the new-found allies insisted that they would support the Congress only if C. Rajagopalachari, the first Indian to become Governor General of India, headed the government. Since Rajaji, as he is better known, was not a member of the state legislature, he was nominated to the Legislative Council by the Governor, thus setting another dubious precedent. That the Congress should have stooped so low even in those early days, which are still seen by many as the era of principled politics, is explained by one of Rajaji's statements spelling out his priorities in no uncertain terms. He said, 'Communists are my enemy number one, I fight them from A to Z.'

Having successfully formed the government, the Congress then used it to consolidate its position in Madras. Rajaji had to quit within two years of becoming Chief Minister to be replaced by K. Kamaraj, another prominent Congress leader. However, a significant development in the interim ultimately consolidated the hold of the Congress on the Madras assembly. This was the carving out of the Telugu districts of the province to form a separate state (Andhra Pradesh) in 1953. Since these districts had elected large numbers of communists, their exit significantly reduced the communist strength in what remained of Madras, and thus helped the Congress.



What is more, even in the newly created Andhra Pradesh, the Congress was able to woo many of the non-communist groups in the CPI alliance to its side, including the leader of the alliance, T. Prakasam of the Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party (KMPP). As a result, in the mid-term elections in the Andhra province that were held in 1955, the Congress was able to lead a non-communist coalition to a resounding victory. Within the short span of time between the first general elections and the second in 1957, therefore, the CPI was considerably reduced in strength in both parts of the erstwhile Madras province and the Congress correspondingly strengthened.

In Travancore–Cochin, A.J. John became the Congress Chief Minister in 1952 and won over several small opposition groups to support his government. Among these was the Tamil Nadu Congress of South Travancore, a party championing the cause of the Tamil speaking ethnic majority in the southern parts of the province. E.M.S. Namboodiripad, the communist leader who was to later become the first elected communist head of a government in a Parliamentary democracy, had this to say about the alliances forged by John in Travancore–Cochin and Rajaji in Madras in his book, *The Communist Party in Kerala, Six Decades of Struggle and Advance*, ‘The new combinations led by John and Rajagopalachari were, in other words, the forerunners of the anti-communist combination that was to appear in Kerala in a short time.’ He also observed that Rajaji’s attitude towards the communists ‘was enthusiastically taken up by the Christian clergy in Travancore–Cochin, who organised the first anti-communist front in the country.’

Despite his attempts at consolidation, however, John lasted less than two years with factional and caste-based fights within his own party and the alliance forcing the dissolution of the assembly after the Tamil Nadu Congress withdrew support, reducing his government to a minority. This forced a mid-term election in 1954 in which the Congress was reduced to a minority and, unlike in 1952, the Opposition alliance had a clear majority in the assembly, despite the Catholic church for the first time openly campaigning and warning people against the ‘danger of communism’. This alliance consisted of the Left Front (the communists, the Revolutionary Socialist Party and the Kerala Socialist Party), the Praja Socialist Party (PSP) and the Tamil Nadu Congress.

It was clear, therefore, that the Opposition alliance would be called upon to form the government. The Congress had other ideas. It made an offer to the PSP leader Pattom Thanu Pillai. If the PSP was ready to form a single party government, the Congress suggested, it would be willing to support the government without sharing power. The PSP accepted the offer, breaking the electoral pact. Thus, with just 19 members in an assembly of over a hundred, the PSP formed the government. Ironically, as the largest of the parties that was not in the government, the Congress was officially recognised as the 'Opposition'. Within months, the PSP was split at the all-India level with the creation of the Socialist Party by Ram Manohar Lohia, which led to the split of the PSP in Travancore–Cochin too. The predictable result was the replacement of the 'single party' PSP government by a Congress-led government with the support of the Tamil Nadu Congress.

Against this backdrop came a significant development in 1956 which prepared the ground for the election of a communist-led government a year later. This was the creation of the state of Kerala as part of the country-wide exercise in creating new linguistically homogenous states. The new state of Kerala consisted of most of Travancore–Cochin and the Malabar districts of Madras. The addition of Malabar to Travancore–Cochin came as a shot in the arm for the CPI and a jolt for the Congress. In the 1952 elections, the Congress had won just four of the 30 seats in this region while the CPI–KMPP alliance had won close to half the seats.

Historic as it was, therefore, the communist victory of 1957 in Kerala did not come as a surprise. The CPI on its own won 60 of the 126 assembly seats and with the support of many of the 14 independents elected was able to form a government headed by Namboodiripad in April 1957. In just over two years, however, this state government was to become the first of many victims over the years of Congress rule in New Delhi. On July 31, 1959, President Rajendra Prasad, acting on the advice of Nehru's Cabinet, dismissed the state government despite its having a majority in the assembly, ostensibly because it had lost the support of the people. The move is widely believed to have been the handiwork of Indira Gandhi and a precursor to the strong-arm tactics she herself adopted after she became Prime Minister.

In the mid-term elections that followed in February 1960, the Congress managed to cobble together an alliance with the PSP and the Muslim League (which it had described as a ‘dead horse’ in the previous elections) and get caste organisations like the Nair Service Society to back its alliance. The results were a resounding victory for the anti-CPI alliance, but the price paid by the Congress was reinstating the PSP’s Pillai as Chief Minister. This was despite the fact that the Congress had 63 seats in the 126-member assembly while the PSP had just 20 MLAs. Kerala to date has not seen a single party government (barring the first minority PSP government). Coalitions have become the norm, but unlike the early experiments of the 1950s and 1960s, they are now more stable and most state governments last their full term. The coalitions too, which had seen repeated realignments, have now crystallised with the CPI(M)-led Left and Democratic Front on one side of the divide and the Congress-led United Democratic Front on the other.

The first major wave of coalitions in the states came in 1967, when the Congress lost power in nine states, in some as a result of electoral defeats and in others because of defections from its own ranks. Those who replaced it were different in each of the states, but in each case it was an anti-Congress coalition that came to the fore, except in Tamil Nadu, where the DMK won an absolute majority in the assembly on its own and the Congress, as events proved, was never again to form a government in the state.

In Punjab, the various factions of the Akali Dal were the backbone of the coalition, headed by Gurnam Singh of the Sant Fateh Singh group. In Bihar, a Samyukta Vidhayak Dal—which translates as the combined legislators’ group/party and was used as common nomenclature for the anti-Congress coalitions of 1967 in other parts of the Hindi belt too—was formed by the Socialist Party, the PSP, the Jana Sangh, the BKD, the Jan Kranti Dal (JKD) and the CPI. Mahamaya Prasad Singh of the JKD, which later merged with the BKD, was Bihar’s first non-Congress Chief Minister. In West Bengal two opposition fronts, one led by the CPI(M) and the other by the Bangla Congress came together to form a United Front government led by Ajoy Mukherjee. In Kerala, a United Front headed by Namboodiripad assumed office. In Orissa, the Swatantra Party, largely comprised of members of

the royal families of erstwhile princely states, joined hands with the Jana Congress, a breakaway group of the Congress headed by Hare Krishna Mahatab. R.N. Singh Deo of the Swatantra Party headed the coalition government.

In Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Haryana, the Congress initially formed the state governments, but was deposed from power within periods ranging from a week in Haryana to four months in Madhya Pradesh with defections from the Congress helping the Opposition alliance to come to power. In Haryana, the Congress had won a comfortable majority in the elections (48 out of 81 seats) but Chief Minister Bhagwat Dayal Sharma lasted barely a week before a big chunk of dissidents from the party led by Rao Birender Singh left and joined the Opposition. A United Front government was formed with Singh as the Chief Minister. In Uttar Pradesh, while the Congress failed to win a majority, it emerged as the single-largest party in the assembly and was therefore invited by the governor to form the government despite a well-publicised tussle for leadership between Chander Bhanu Gupta and Charan Singh. Gupta's government lasted for just three weeks and fell when Charan Singh with his followers formed the Bharatiya Kranti Dal and joined the Opposition ranks. The Opposition SVD alliance came to power with Charan Singh as the Chief Minister in April 1967.

In Madhya Pradesh, the Congress government led by D.P. Mishra was pulled down after four months following defections from the party. Among those who left the Congress and declared support to the Jana Sangh was Rajmata Vijay Raje Scindia of Gwalior. An SVD ministry, led by G.N. Singh and including Congress defectors, the Jana Sangh, the PSP and the Socialist Party, came to power.

Ironically, the trend of defections that had helped topple the Congress from many of these states soon worked in favour of the party with all the non-Congress state governments proving extremely unstable. In a little over a year the governments of Namboodiripad and C.N. Annadurai in Tamil Nadu were all that remained of the first major wave of non-Congress coalition governments. While in Madhya Pradesh the Congress had regained power with the support of defectors from the SVD, in Bihar, West Bengal and Punjab the Congress supported those who split the Opposition coalition's ranks.

Ultimately even these did not last and President's rule was declared in most of these states, bringing India's first major flirtation with coalitions to a dismal end. Subhash C. Kashyap, former Secretary General of the Lok Sabha, has calculated in his book, *The Politics of Power: Defections and State Politics in India*, that while 542 legislators had defected in all the Indian states in the decade 1957–67, the number of defectors in a single year after the 1967 elections alone was 438.

The fickle and unstable nature of coalitions in the state continued for the next decade till the CPI(M)-led Left Front came to power in West Bengal and Tripura in 1977. In the interim, West Bengal itself had seen a second aborted attempt at a United Front government. Other states like Bihar, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh had seen repeated attempts at forging coalition governments suffer the same fate.

The attempts at forging a Samajwadi Party–Bahujan Samaj Party–Left coalition in Uttar Pradesh in the early 1990s did not last and the BSP's successive attempts at coalitions with the BJP too proved shortlived. In Bihar, the seemingly secure alliance between Lalu Prasad Yadav's government and the left was shattered after Yadav's own party at the time (the Janata Dal) demanded his resignation for corruption charges and the left supported the demand. As a result, the newly created RJD of Lalu Yadav fought the 1998 Lok Sabha elections on a different platform from the Janata Dal and the left parties. By the time of the 1999 Lok Sabha elections, however, the left had veered around to the view that there was no option but to support the RJD–Congress alliance. Ultimately, though, while the CPI(M) joined this alliance, the CPI went it alone after differences with the RJD on seat-sharing within the alliance.

The CPI(M)-led Left Front in West Bengal, however, has stood the test of time, surviving intact and holding on to power since 1977. In Tripura too, the Left Front has remained united even when it lost power, as in 1988. In Kerala, the LDF in its new form, in which it has shed the Indian National Muslim League and acquired the CPI as a stable partner, has remained more or less unchanged for about a decade-and-a-half now, whether in power or in the Opposition. One major factor in the stable composition of all these alliances is the fact that the left has remained united in its practice, even when there have been public disagreements over specific policies or tactics.

Another stable coalition to have emerged is that of the Shiv Sena and the BJP in Maharashtra. There have been differences within the alliance, particularly on issues relating to power sharing, with the BJP harbouring the resentment that the Shiv Sena acts like a big brother in state politics and the Sena accusing the BJP of adopting a similar attitude in national politics, but the two partners have not yet parted ways and do not seem likely to for the moment.

## Conclusion

To return to the propositions that we said we would examine, it is quite clear that alliances made before the polls are not necessarily more stable than those that are struck after them. The Janata Party and Janata Dal experiments at the centre and several attempts in the states (like the Communist-PSP alliance in Travancore in the mid-1950s) severely undermine this proposition. Nor does experience bear out the contention that those who participate in governments are more reliable allies than those who support them from outside. The AIADMK was a part of the Vajpayee government as were the two factions of the Janata Party that ultimately fell apart in 1979. Instances of partners in government switching sides are numerous in state politics, particularly after the 1967 elections. Again, the size of the dominant partner in a coalition does not seem to provide any guarantees to its longevity (as is evident from the collapse of the V.P. Singh government in 1990).

The one proposition that seems to have been borne out by history is that ideological cohesion helps a coalition stay together. The Left Front governments as well as the Shiv Sena-BJP alliance are strong evidence of this. There is, however, a caveat to be added here. Mere unity of purpose in opposing a common enemy is not to be confused with ideological cohesion. Whether it was the anti-Congress combines of the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and 1980s or the anti-BJP combines of recent years, the existence of the common enemy has proved a weak cementing force.

It would also be simplistic to view mere pronouncements of a common agenda as evidence of ideological cohesion. Whether it was the Common Minimum Programme of the United Front, the National

Agenda for Governance of the second Vajpayee government, or the National Common Minimum Programme between the UPA and the left, these documents could not and cannot by themselves hold coalitions together. This can be put down to the fact that the documents contained little more than pious statements of intent, which would be hard for anyone to oppose, while leaving out contentious issues on which many of the partners had radically differing views.

The fact that many states have lived with coalition governments for decades indicates that the notion of the electorate getting disgusted with coalitions may be wishful thinking. This notion suffers from the limitation that it treats coalitions among political parties as an isolated phenomenon. The reality, however, is that in most states the current era of coalitions is only a reflection of the social churning that is taking place. As previously suppressed sections of the people seek to assert themselves, the correlation of forces is constantly changing.

However, the experience of the states does suggest that coalitions of political expediency could over time be replaced by those with an ideological cohesion. Therein lies hope, not of an end to the era of coalitions, but of the beginning of a phase of more meaningful and consensual coalitions.

## Chapter 9

# Friends in Deed: Governance and Stability

Have political coalitions led to better governance in India? This is not an easy question to answer, for the picture is complex. Everybody has her or his definition of what constitutes good governance, which would include a slew of issues or a wish list. One such list could run like this: lower incidence of corruption, greater transparency and accountability on the part of politicians and bureaucrats with fewer discretionary powers for them, greater federalism in the polity and economy, better distribution of the benefits of economic growth among the weaker sections and empowerment of those social sections which were less privileged in the country's caste-based society. The list would go on to include removal of the factors responsible for the world's largest population of the poor and illiterate living in India. In this chapter, we look at whether coalition governments have been able to reduce corruption in the country. The answer to this question is, 'Perhaps, but we are not sure'. The second question is whether coalition governments have brought about a greater degree of federalism (or de-centralisation) in India's polity and economy. The answer to this question is an unequivocal 'Yes'.

Some would argue that the fragmentation of the polity and the existence of coalition governments have brought about a slow and gradual process of cleansing. The fact that coalitions by their very nature involve a sharing of power between constituents makes it more difficult for any one constituent to misuse discretionary powers, this school of thought contends. Others would argue equally convincingly that the incidence of scams and scandals would continue to rise as politicians and bureaucrats scramble to make a fast buck in a situation in which instability convinces them that the loaves and fishes of office may be available only for a short period. Businessmen too may want to make the most of periods when politicians favourably inclined



towards them are in office. While both arguments have some merit, the issue cannot be settled through theoretical discussions. The answer to this conundrum will have to emerge from actual experience and empirical evidence. Clearly, there is not enough evidence yet to reach any definite conclusions. However, there are some pointers to the shape of things to come.

Sections of the judiciary, the media and non-governmental organisations have responded in the last decade or so to the public revulsion against corruption and have become increasingly activist. Some of the high and mighty, including former Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, former Union Minister Sukh Ram, former Chief Ministers Lalu Prasad Yadav and J. Jayalalithaa, among others, have faced corruption charges in court and a few have even spent time behind bars. Predictably, all these individuals claimed that the criminal charges against them were ‘politically motivated’. In December 2006, Shibu Soren, former Union Minister for Coal, became the first serving Union Minister who was jailed on charges of having allegedly conspired to murder his former private secretary who, in turn, had claimed that Soren had not given him ‘enough’ of the funds obtained during the ‘JMM’ bribery case detailed later in this chapter—Soren was released from jail nine months later after he was acquitted by a higher court.

The last four Prime Ministers of India who headed coalition governments, Manmohan Singh, Atal Behari Vajpayee, I.K. Gujral and H.D. Deve Gowda, would all claim that the governments they headed have been relatively free of corruption. If the number of scams that surfaced during the tenure of different Prime Ministers is any yardstick, such a claim from Vajpayee or Manmohan might appear a little thin. Deve Gowda and Gujral, on the other hand, can justifiably argue that no major scandals emerged during their tenure. The same claim can justifiably also be made by V.P. Singh who was Prime Minister in 1989–90. In marked contrast are the regimes of all Congress Prime Ministers with the exception of Lal Bahadur Shastri (1964–66).

There were, of course, charges of corruption levelled against particular ministers in the Janata Party government headed by Morarji Desai (1977–79) and the brief period thereafter when Charan Singh became Prime Minister in 1979–80. But there is no doubt that corruption struck deep roots in the Indian polity during successive regimes of Congress Prime Ministers when a single party dominated

Parliament. From the tenure of Jawaharlal Nehru (1947–64) to those of Indira Gandhi (1966–77 and 1980–84) and Rajiv Gandhi (1984–89), the country's polity arguably became more and more corrupt over time.

One of the important reasons why the Congress under Rajiv Gandhi lost the 1989 general elections was the general perception among large sections of the electorate that he was corrupt. This perception was, of course, assiduously propagated by Rajiv Gandhi's estranged Finance Minister and Defence Minister V.P. Singh. While he highlighted the instances of alleged kickbacks paid by Swedish armaments producer Bofors and German submarine manufacturer HDW to persons close to Rajiv Gandhi during his election campaign in 1989, Singh himself was projected by the media as the new 'Mr Clean' (a term that was ironically first used in India to describe Rajiv Gandhi in his first few months as Prime Minister) who would clean up the country's corrupt system of the sleaze associated with raising political 'donations'. During the year he was Finance Minister in Rajiv Gandhi's government, V.P. Singh's hand-picked officials carried out raids on many of India's leading industrialists, some of whom were arrested for violating foreign exchange and taxation laws.

It can be argued that since most coalition governments in India have been unstable, the shorter tenures of such governments have ensured that there has been a big scramble among influential functionaries to make as much money as possible through underhand means in the shortest possible time. An example of this phenomenon was witnessed during the short-lived government of Chandra Shekhar who became Prime Minister after the fall of V.P. Singh's government in November 1990. Barely four months later, the Congress headed by Rajiv Gandhi withdrew support to this government. Chandra Shekhar resigned in early March 1991 and served in a caretaker capacity till the general elections were conducted later that year in May–June. During this period, there was a flurry of accusations of corruption against government ministers.

In the last few months of the Chandra Shekhar regime, the President R. Venkataraman had to repeatedly intervene to ensure that the government did not award major contracts or enter into large financial obligations. So widespread was the perception of this government being corrupt that when Chandra Shekhar's Samajwadi Janata Party put up posters in the next elections saying, '*chaar mahine, banaam chaalis saal*' (four months versus forty years) in an

obvious attempt to compare the government's 'achievements' in four months with the Congress' 'failures' over four decades, the slogan was mischievously interpreted to mean that the functionaries of the Chandra Shekhar government had made as much money in four months as Congressmen had in forty years.

The five-year regime of P.V. Narasimha Rao (1991–96) was a period marked by a phenomenal rise in allegations of corruption being aired against people in high places. Scandal after scandal, including the country's biggest financial fraud related to trading in securities and involving stockbrokers like Harshad Mehta hit newspaper headlines month after month. No Indian Prime Minister has been personally accused of as many charges of corruption as Narasimha Rao was. Mehta had even alleged in an affidavit in February 1993 that he had personally delivered a large suitcase containing Rs 67 lakh in currency notes to the Prime Minister's residence in November 1991, as part of a 'donation' of Rs 1 crore to him. Mehta aired this allegation at a press conference in Mumbai in mid-June 1993. A month later, the 'minority' government led by Narasimha Rao faced a confidence motion in Parliament and the manner in which the vote was won became the subject of another scandal that led to a legal tangle in which allegations were levelled that particular MPs had been bribed to vote in favour of the government.

The phenomenon of 'judicial activism' became a prominent feature of public life in India during Narasimha Rao's government. After May 1996, the relatively weak Union governments that followed were all coalitions and the judiciary continued to assert itself to check acts of political corruption and abuse of power by the executive. The media too has played its role in exposing corruption. Even if coalition governments have been more transparent because of their very nature, coalition politics could have spawned new forms of corruption relating to opportunistic alliances.

Stories of 'bribes for votes' of MPs and 'horse-trading'—a peculiarly Indian term for engineering defections of political representatives—have been an integral part of India's political folklore since time immemorial. But it has always been a far more difficult task to prosecute and prove criminal charges against politicians in courts of law. Many politicians have been able to get away without punishment

for their misdemeanours even when strong circumstantial evidence has existed. The law-enforcing agencies, including the country's premier police investigation body, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), have a rather poor track record in successfully prosecuting errant politicians on charges of corruption. The fact that the CBI nonetheless has greater credibility than other police departments is because it has more often filed charges against politicians and other powerful people than has the police (controlled by state governments).

Still, it can be confidently asserted that more politicians have been arrested—even if for short periods—in recent years than in the past and there is greater public awareness today of the nexus between politicians and criminals. At least two prominent former Chief Ministers, Lalu Prasad Yadav and J. Jayalithaa, have had to spend time behind bars. Former Prime Minister Narasimha Rao was hauled up by a junior judge in the third quarter of 1996 and asked to personally appear and testify before a court of law in a cheating case involving an expatriate pickle-making businessman Lakubhai Pathak who had claimed that he had paid a sum of US\$ 100,000 in 1983 to an acquaintance of Narasimha Rao, 'godman' Chandra Swami, for a government contract which never materialised. The court, of course, had to be relocated from Tis Hazari in north Delhi to the Union government's conference venue Vigyan Bhavan in the central part of the capital where 'adequate' security arrangements befitting such 'dignitaries' could be provided. More than eight years later, Rao was acquitted by the Delhi high court.

A more far-reaching legal dispute involving Narasimha Rao was what came to be known as the 'JMM' bribery case. Rao had in July 1993 managed to convert the 'minority' character of his government to a 'majority' one thanks to the support of a batch of MPs, including four members of the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM). The allegation against Rao was that he and his associates paid bribes to these MPs to induce them to vote in favour of a government that they had been opposed to till that stage.

Narasimha Rao clearly did not want to head a 'minority' government. Cynical as he evidently was, the way out was an amoral one, if the allegations are true. It was in the belief that every individual—be he a representative of the people or someone else—had a price for which

he could be purchased. This was hardly the first time that defections or splits in political parties were being engineered, but Narasimha Rao probably thought he would be able to get away with it. And get away he did, for he managed to last his full term as Prime Minister. But the scar that this episode left on the body politic of the country may not have healed if successor governments had not been coalitions and hence, necessarily had to act in a far more transparent manner. Yet, the compulsions of coalition politics also saw politicians who had abused each other for years for their alleged acts of corruption, quietly burying the hatchet and striking opportunistic alliances to share power.

If Narasimha Rao survived five years as Prime Minister despite a host of corruption charges being levelled against him by his opponents, some of his erstwhile ministerial colleagues like former Communications Minister Sukh Ram managed to switch sides and align themselves with the BJP. Jayalalithaa, who claimed that the slew of corruption cases instituted against her by the DMK government were politically motivated, has changed her political partners periodically, from the Congress to the BJP, back to the Congress, and at the time of writing in September 2007, had become part of the UNPA 'Third Front'. The BJP had for decades claimed that it was the 'cleanest' political party in the country, but the compulsions of coalition politics evidently compelled its leadership to strike various kinds of alliances with individuals and parties it had earlier opposed on the ground that they were tainted.

Corruption in India is, to a great extent, a consequence of the highly discretionary system of bureaucratic and political control over public finances, which provides the opportunity and means for illegal rent-seeking. But, an important motive for corruption in public life, which goes beyond individual greed, is the illegal manner in which election campaigns are funded. The Election Commission has laid down spending limits for candidates of political parties fighting local as well as national elections. Though these limits have gone up in recent years, many have argued that these are still unrealistically low. At one stage, it had been calculated that the official limit on spending would not be sufficient for a candidate to mail an ordinary postcard to each eligible voter in his or her Lok Sabha constituency. This is

particularly true for large Lok Sabha constituencies like Outer Delhi, which has an electorate of over three million.

The contrary view, articulated among others by the late Indrajit Gupta of the CPI, is that such huge sums are not really required to conduct an effective election campaign for a few weeks. Any observer of the Indian political scene would vouch for the fact that much of the money spent on election campaigns is not 'legitimate'. A fair proportion is used for inducements like free country liquor, blankets, clothing and so on, distributed among the poorer sections within a constituency. Clearly, these are not accounted for in the expenditure statements that candidates have to submit to the Election Commission.

There is a point of view that suggests that coalition politics, because of its unstable nature, could reduce the amount of black money used in election campaigns. The argument runs as follows. Most of the illegal funds deployed by politicians for their election campaigns have to be raised from industrialists, traders and dishonest bureaucrats. Even if one assumes conservatively that Rs 3 crore is used in each Lok Sabha constituency by all the candidates put together, this would require over Rs 1,500 crore to be raised for each general election. Clearly, such a huge sum of money cannot be easily raised if elections are held at frequent intervals. At a meeting of the Confederation of Indian Industry organised after the Vajpayee government lost a vote of confidence in the Lok Sabha on April 17, 1999, prominent industrialist and Rajya Sabha MP Rahul Bajaj made this amply clear by publicly stating that politicians should not realistically expect donations from industry to fight elections every year. The instability that has characterised most coalition governments in India could thus have an unexpected but positive fallout by reducing the role of black money in election campaigns.

However, there is a counter-argument which runs like this. If an MP or a minister is of the view that elections would most likely be held frequently and party finances may be strained, he might well be tempted to make as much money as possible while in office. Hence, frequent elections may not in fact reduce the quantum of black money in politics, but merely change the manner in which it is raised—through individuals rather than through parties.

While there are a variety of factors which are responsible for the high incidence of corruption in India, in the context of coalition

politics what can be stated is that political compulsions have resulted in the BJP seeking and finding allies among politicians tainted by corruption charges. The party's association with Sukh Ram and Jayalalithaa is evidence of this fact. Still, one needs to emphasise what was stated at the beginning of this chapter: a coalition government is almost always likely to be more transparent than a government dominated by a single party and thus, less corrupt. It is not as if there are no corrupt individuals in coalition governments: this would be an utterly ridiculous proposition. But the fact is that the system of internal checks and balances that is integral to coalitions generally ensures greater accountability and hence, diminishes somewhat the scope for corruption.

India's value system is complex and there are no absolute standards of morality, not in traditional texts nor in real life. People distinguish between the more corrupt and the less corrupt, the corrupt and efficient person and one who is both corrupt and inefficient. A typical expression of this sentiment would be that a particular person receives bribes and does not do the 'work'—such an individual is 'worse' than the one who has to be bribed to work. It is also not uncommon to hear people suggest that a corrupt person who works is better than an honest one who does not.

A person who is perceived to be corrupt by others can be voted to power by his constituents because he is seen to be responsive to their aspirations. Examples of such politicians abound in India: former Railway Minister the late A.B.A. Ghani Khan Chowdhury, the late Kalpnath Rai, Lalu Prasad Yadav, Sukh Ram and Jayalalithaa, to name just a few. This phenomenon may not be directly related to coalition politics. Yet, in the new era of coalition politics in India, even if sections of the electorate are rejecting politicians who are considered 'non-performing', the same voters are willing to be more tolerant towards corrupt politicians who are seen to be doing 'something' for their supporters, even if that 'something' may be the assertion of a social identity if not creation of jobs and implementation of welfare projects. This is a reflection of the sense of alienation that four decades of stable governments have engendered among large sections of the population.

While the impact of coalition governments on the extent and nature of corruption in public life may be debatable, there is little doubt that federalism in Indian politics has been strengthened by the

composition of the last few governments. The tenure of the United Front government between June 1996 and February 1998 set the trend. For the first time in the country's political history, chief ministers of small and big states across the country were formally and overtly very much part of the decision-making process in New Delhi. The Inter-State Council, for instance, had become virtually defunct during Narasimha Rao's five-year regime and the UF made much of the fact that it was reviving this institution. The UF also had a formal panel of its chief ministers, who periodically met to chalk out the government's agenda and discuss contentious issues.

In the past, the Union government had often been accused of ignoring the aspirations of different states and regions. Centre-state economic relations were often under a lot of strain with regional leaders blaming New Delhi for being parsimonious in allocating and releasing funds to states. The Union government, in turn, would blame states for being profligate. These tensions, which would come to the fore at least once a year when the Planning Commission would finalise the annual plans of different states, subsided to a great extent during the UF government. The government's supporters would claim that for the first time in independent India, chief ministers of states across the length and breadth of the country would participate in formulating and shaping the entire nation's economic policies. While there is some basis to this claim, what complicated matters was the internal dissension among the constituents of the United Front over economic policies.

The NDA too had a coordination committee of its allies, although this body was seen as being less effective than the institutions of the UF in influencing the government's policies. Formal institutional arrangements are, however, not a necessary or a sufficient condition for greater representation being given to states in the political process and in economic decision-making. The attitude of the leadership also matters. The tenure of the NDA confirmed the feeling that the growing importance of chief ministers and other 'regional' leaders was not a passing phenomenon that began and ended with the UF's brief stint in power. During the UF's tenure, Chandrababu Naidu (Andhra Pradesh), Farooq Abdullah (Jammu & Kashmir), M. Karunanidhi (Tamil Nadu), Jyoti Basu (West Bengal), E.K. Nayanar (Kerala),



J.H. Patel (Karnataka), Dasarath Deb (Tripura), Prafulla Kumar Mahanta (Assam), and Lalu Prasad (Bihar) were Chief Ministers who all played an important role in national politics.

During the second Vajpayee government, besides Naidu and Abdullah who aligned with the BJP, influential CMs included Kalyan Singh (Uttar Pradesh), Prakash Singh Badal (Punjab), Bansi Lal (Haryana), and Manohar Joshi (Maharashtra). Other influential regional leaders included Jayalalithaa (Tamil Nadu), Mamata Banerjee (West Bengal), Naveen Patnaik (Orissa), Rama Krishna Hegde (Karnataka), Balasaheb Thackeray (Maharashtra) and others. In the third Vajpayee government, the list changed somewhat. Karunanidhi replaced Jayalalithaa while Chautala replaced Bansi Lal. In the UPA government, Karunanidhi, Lalu Prasad, Sharad Pawar, Ram Vilas Paswan, Shibu Soren and Ambubani Ramadoss (of the PMK) were among the regional heavyweights who wielded considerable influence. Despite the changes in personalities in different Union governments, what remained constant was the crucial role being played by leaders from many states in running the coalition.

So-called regional *satraps*, chief ministers or opposition leaders of particular states, are evidently exerting a greater influence on the working of the Union government in New Delhi in more ways than one. Historians could argue that the immediate post-independence period, specifically the tenure of Jawaharlal Nehru, saw regional leaders playing a crucial role in the formulation of various national policies. This trend declined both during Indira Gandhi's and Rajiv Gandhi's terms as Prime Minister. There are examples galore of how chief ministers were whimsically changed because of a diktat from Delhi. From May 1996 onwards, the trend of state leaders not being consulted by the Union government in policy formulation got reversed thanks to coalition governments.

The loosening of the reins of the unitary Indian state has certainly helped regional *satraps* gain greater access to power in New Delhi. At the same time, though, it has also strengthened long standing demands for the creation of new states from existing ones. This has created a rather piquant situation. While the dominant partner in the NDA coalition, the BJP, conceded some of these demands in the belief that it would be able to win popular support in the areas that would

constitute the new states, regional leaders were less than enthusiastic about such proposals since they believed the formation of new states would erode their political influence.

The Vajpayee government successfully carved out three new states: Uttaranchal (later called Uttarakhand) on November 9, 2000, Jharkhand on November 15 the same year, and Chhattisgarh on November 1. More interesting than the reactions from within these states were the apprehensions expressed by a key ally of the BJP, the TDP. The party opposed the creation of new states on the ground that this could trigger off similar demands elsewhere in the country—a fear that was well-founded since there has been a long standing demand to carve out Telengana from Andhra Pradesh. Similar demands for the creation of Vidharba from Maharashtra, Bodoland from Assam and Gorkhaland from West Bengal are enough reason for other regional leaders also to be sceptical. Advani had sought to reassure the TDP on this count and Vajpayee too made public statements asserting that no further proposals for new states would be considered, but the TDP remained at variance with the BJP's stance on this issue.

In the past, the war with China in 1962 and the wars with Pakistan in 1965 and 1971 had resulted in Congress governments tilting the polity in favour of a relatively strong centre, a trend towards centralisation that culminated in the Emergency. Thereafter, although Rajiv Gandhi headed a Congress government with a three-fourths majority in the lower house of Parliament from December 1984 for a period of five years, the Indian polity never became more centralised than it was during the Emergency. On the contrary, the forces at the periphery appear to have gained ground at the expense of those in favour of a stronger Union government. So much so that the BJP, once among the most vehement advocates of a unitary India and a 'strong centre', has now come to accept that coalitions are necessary to govern a country as large and as heterogeneous as India.

The past trend towards centralisation and concentration of power had also resulted in politicians from UP acquiring almost unquestioned dominance over national politics. Since power lay largely in the hands of the Prime Minister and since most Prime Ministers came from UP because of its sheer size, other states had relatively little say in

influencing politics in New Delhi. K.M. Pannikar, in his dissenting note to the report of the States' Reorganisation Commission, had voiced fears of 'the dominance of Uttar Pradesh in all-India matters'. For at least three decades after Pannikar made these remarks in 1955, expression of such sentiments were not uncommon.

Barring Morarji Desai's tenure as Prime Minister in 1977–78, till June 1991, all Indian Prime Ministers had originated from Uttar Pradesh: Jawaharlal Nehru, Lal Bahadur Shastri, Indira Gandhi, Charan Singh, Rajiv Gandhi, V.P. Singh and Chandra Shekhar. Thereafter, of course, the next three Prime Ministers came from outside Uttar Pradesh: P.V. Narasimha Rao from Andhra Pradesh, H.D. Deve Gowda from Karnataka and I.K. Gujral from (undivided) Punjab. Once again, the next Prime Minister Vajpayee, was from UP. Nevertheless, the trend towards decentralisation of power meant that his tenure did not mark a return to the days when UP dominated national politics. Manmohan Singh, who followed Vajpayee as Prime Minister, was also not from UP.

The point to note is that even as the Indian polity gets increasingly fragmented, sub-national and regional movements based on language would continue to exert themselves from time to time. Having agreed to the formation of Uttaranchal, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand, the Vajpayee government had to cope with renewed demands for the formation of Vidharba (out of Maharashtra), Telengana (out of Andhra Pradesh), Kodagu (out of Karnataka), besides Ladakh and Leh (out of Jammu & Kashmir). The list could well become longer as the years go by. For instance, sections of the population of the Cachar and Karbi Anglong regions of Assam (which had been given the option of remaining with Assam or joining Meghalaya in 1972) want their own state. The UPA government too faced pressure from the Telengana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) to form a separate state and when the government dragged its feet on the issue, the TRS became the first constituent of the UPA to break away from it in 2006.

Linguistic and cultural considerations have mattered—and will continue to matter—much more than administrative or economic factors as India's internal boundaries are redrawn. There are at least 33 languages in India spoken by more than a million people each. If linguistic considerations are to once again determine the redrawing

of state boundaries, can an arbitrary line be drawn which says, 'So far and no further'? What is more, it is important to remember that none of the three new states were formed for linguistic reasons; all of them being part of Hindi-speaking areas, though there are many different local dialects. A larger number of states may in itself not be an undesirable phenomenon, particularly if, like coalition politics, it reflects the diversity of the country.

It can be argued with some conviction that most demands for new states in India are in fact expressions of a feeling of alienation or of being exploited by a strong Union government and of being denied the right to determine their own destinies. Given this context, a question logically follows: is a coalition government likely to aggravate such feelings or assuage them? There is reason to believe that coalition governments are more likely to be in tune with the aspirations of smaller social and ethnic groups and hence be able to instil a greater sense of belonging to the Union while retaining their distinctive identities.

During Jawaharlal Nehru's tenure as Prime Minister, there were no formal arrangements of the kind that have come up during the tenure of the recent coalition governments. Yet, Nehru certainly involved leaders from different regions—C. Rajagopalachari from Tamil Nadu, Atulya Ghosh from West Bengal or Biju Patnaik from Orissa—in governing the country, arguably much more than any other Congress Prime Minister did. Therefore, if smaller states are to be periodically created and these are not to unleash divisive forces, then it is imperative that coalition arrangements at the level of the Union government are sufficiently responsive to local aspirations. In the recent political discourse in the country, much has been made of the distinction between coalition governments dominated by a single party and those in which no single party dwarfs the others. It can be contended that the second kind of coalition government (the one in which no party is dominant) is more likely to accommodate diverse identities and interests.

The survival of India as a Union of states is in itself an amazing account of the art and science of political reconciliation and accommodation. As coalitions dominate the composition of the Union government, it is perhaps time to turn an old adage on its head: Divided we stand.

## **Chapter 10**

# **Economic Policies: Pulls and Pressures**

Economic policies pursued by coalition governments should presumably be different from those devised by governments that are led by, or comprise, a single political party. A coalition government by definition includes a number of political parties or groups, big and small; therefore economic policies of such a government should under most circumstances not only reflect the diversity and heterogeneity of their combination, but also be the outcome of a consensus among the constituents. But this has not always been the case in India.

A claim is often made that currently there is considerable consensus among contending political parties in India on the broad direction of economic policies that have been followed by various Union governments since June 1991 when economic reforms were introduced by the then Finance Minister Manmohan Singh in the Narasimha Rao government. This claim is, however, difficult to substantiate. There was in the NDA government—and there continues to be in the UPA government as well—quite a lot of disagreement and confusion on the thrust and tenor of economic policy issues. Part of the chaos is a result of deep-rooted ideological differences that have existed (and continue to exist) among the disparate constituents of the NDA, the UPA and the parties supporting the latter and some of it is a direct consequence of the compulsions of coalition politics.

There is considerable evidence of the pulls and pressures of coalition politics on economic decision-making. One instance was the indecision on increasing the then officially administered prices of petroleum products in 1998-99. Whereas the United Front government had dilly-dallied and agonised for months over such a decision in 1997, the second Vajpayee government too succumbed to pressure from NDA partners not to hike the prices of petroleum products between March 1998 and April 1999. Eventually, just before the BJP-led NDA

coalition was sworn in to power in October 1999—exactly a day after the last round of polling—the then caretaker government of Vajpayee hiked the politically-sensitive price of diesel by a whopping 40 per cent in the face of a sharp rise in world oil prices.

The left has time and again succeeded in exerting pressure on the UPA government to either not increase the prices of diesel and petrol or to bring prices down depending on the manner in which international prices of crude oil have moved. The left repeatedly urged the Ministry of Finance to cut excise and customs duties on imported crude and, on occasion, the government obliged. Pressure from the left—as well as sections in the Congress—ensured that the government never increased retail prices of subsidised kerosene and rarely increased prices of liquefied petroleum gas used mainly for cooking, which is also subsidised. If the Ministry of Petroleum & Natural Gas had had its way, the government would have allowed public sector oil companies to raise prices of these petroleum products.

There has been a gradual convergence of political opinion on many economic issues cutting across party lines—with the exception of sections of the left—notwithstanding the fact that this consensus among opposing parties and formations has periodically broken down and keeps breaking down on particular issues. Within the largest political parties in the country, the Congress and the BJP, there has been internal divergence of opinion on economic policy issues.

The two major political formations that are opposed to the broad direction of the economic reforms followed by both the Congress-led and the BJP-led governments in New Delhi and not just the details are the left, comprising mainly the two communist parties, and the Swadeshi Jagran Manch (SJM), an offshoot of the RSS. Both have had to compromise on economic policy issues because of over-riding political compulsions. While the left may not have liked the direction of economic policy formulated by the United Front government, it could not threaten to withdraw from the UF coalition since that would have meant helping either the BJP or the Congress. A similar TINA factor constrained the SJM in its opposition to the policies followed by the BJP-led NDA government. Thus, the ideological pulls and pressures on economic policy issues have often taken place—and continue to take place—within political parties and their ideological fraternities rather than merely among them.

It can, therefore, be argued that instead of a genuine consensus on economic policy issues what is often witnessed is an illusion of consensus. This is on account of the fact that there are a number of similarities between the economic policy prescriptions espoused by the BJP and the Congress. Both parties now apparently reject the 'socialist' policies that were put in place in the 1950s by Jawaharlal Nehru—although, of late, there are signs that the economic programme of the Congress, or more precisely its rhetoric, is veering leftwards with the party reviving the 'garibi hatao' (banish poverty) slogan that was used by Indira Gandhi during the early-1970s. Both the Congress and the BJP today argue in favour of a more 'market friendly' policy package. It is a separate matter altogether that Nehru himself had advocated a 'mixed' economy for India, one that he saw as incorporating the best elements of both capitalism and socialism.

In practice, what happened was arguably a mix of the worst of both systems. Successive Congress governments (before the Narasimha Rao regime) set up an excessively bureaucratic economic system that stifled entrepreneurship and private initiative on the one hand and failed to provide primary education and basic health-care to the majority of Indians, on the other. While the rest of the world generally perceived Nehru to have tilted in favour of the Soviet Union and his economic policies to be socialist in character, his critics at home argued that he pandered to the interests of big business and thus encouraged capitalist practices.

What muddied the waters further was the spurious differentiation that was drawn between the 'public' and the 'private' sectors in the country. Virtually throughout the first half century after India became politically independent, public sector corporations served as the personal fiefdoms of politicians and bureaucrats in power—the state thus became the 'private' property of the privileged few. At the same time, private corporate groups prospered thanks to a generous infusion of funds from government-controlled banks and financial institutions. Thus, the losses of the public sector got translated into the profits of the private sector and, more often than not, the gap between the 'right' and the 'left' became obliterated insofar as economic policies were concerned.

While the BJP and the Congress today both loudly proclaim the virtues of economic liberalisation in public, there are in fact deep differences of opinion within both political parties on the direction and pace of economic reforms. What compounded the confusion is that when the BJP was the single largest constituent of the NDA coalition, as the largest Opposition party the Congress felt invariably obliged to criticise the NDA government's economic policies even if these were not substantially different from the policies that were pursued by the earlier Congress government headed by Narasimha Rao. The roles got reversed when the UPA came to power and the BJP became the largest opposition party.

The fact of a political party opposing another's policies for 'the sake of opposition' is also illustrated by the turnaround in the BJP's swadeshi rhetoric. Before the party came to power in March 1998, it had asserted that the economic reforms process had until then not been sufficiently pro-Indian. The BJP's slogan used to be, 'reforming the reforms', and the party argued that reforms had been overly sensitive to the needs of foreign investors and had not provided a level playing field for Indian industry. The BJP, the party's pre-election manifesto had proclaimed, would aim at an India 'built by Indians, for Indians'. Almost a decade later, most economic analysts would agree that the NDA government's economic policy thrust was not substantially different from what a Congress government would have followed.

While the manifestation of the 'India for Indians' view of the reforms was evident in the first budget of the NDA government presented by Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha in June 1998 (Sinha imposed an across the board hike of 8 per cent on all customs duties that was, subsequently reduced to 4 per cent), the same budget also reflected the compelling need for the government to assuage foreign investors to counter the impact of the economic sanctions imposed on India as a result of the nuclear tests conducted in May.

Within a year, the situation had changed radically. Swadeshi was no longer the flavour of the month in the BJP. After the return of the BJP-led NDA to power in October 1999, the government pushed through the bill to allow entry of the private sector—Indian and foreign—into the insurance business. The BJP had resisted a similar bill in 1997, proposed by Chidambaram, on the grounds that



the insurance business should be opened up initially only to private Indian firms. In 1999, it was not as if there were no sections within the Sangh Parivar which were opposed to the insurance bill. The SJM and the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, the trade union affiliate of the BJP, continued to have reservations. Yet, since 1997, the balance of power within the Sangh Parivar had clearly shifted in favour of the pro-reforms section.

Just as Sinha's first budget during the NDA government was derided by the reformists, his second budget (of February 1999) was hailed as one of the most 'pro-reform' budgets. For the first time, a Finance Minister had openly announced the government's intention to privatise public sector undertakings, not just disinvest shares in them. Sinha's budget speech also spoke of a 'second wave of reforms'. After he had to 'roll back' many of the proposals contained in his first budget, Sinha was severely criticised for bowing to populist pressures.

But this was not the only time Sinha bowed to pressure. He had to once again roll back his budget proposals in 2002 following strident criticism from his own colleagues in the BJP. Even the fact that his party lost the municipal elections in Delhi in March 2002 was attributed to the Finance Minister's anti-middle-class budget. The then vice president of the BJP, the late Sahib Singh Verma, put in his papers. Subsequently, there was tremendous pressure on Sinha from his party compatriots at the Goa meeting of the BJP's national executive in April 2002. Newspapers reported that there were vicious attacks on Sinha at the meeting. Earlier, he had rolled back half the proposed increase in the price of cooking gas. It was claimed that the Finance Minister and his officials tried very hard to preserve the 'integrity' of his budget. However, he was reportedly overruled by the then Prime Minister Vajpayee himself.

Budget proposals, as Sinha often stated, are not meant to be static. He claimed he had merely responded to 'public opinion'. But there were a few questions that remained unanswered. What prevented the Finance Minister from eliciting the opinion of the people at large during the series of pre-budget consultations he had with, among others, representatives of industry, the small-scale sector, trade unions,

farmers and economists? What stopped Sinha from seeking the views of his own party stalwarts, not to mention the BJP's allies in the NDA? Did he think he would be able to get away with a 'tough' budget without the support of his colleagues in the Union Cabinet and the Council of Ministers?

In a coalition government, decision-makers from the largest party should seek and find an area of consensus among the ideologically disparate constituents of the coalition. The rollback drama showed that the NDA clearly had a long way to go before it learnt the *dharma* of coalition politics.

The RSS and the SJM had been critical of some of the government's economic advisers who had held important positions in earlier Congress governments: individuals like N.K. Singh and Montek Singh Ahluwalia. During a public function organised by the SJM, George Fernandes (who was yet to be reinducted as Defence Minister at that juncture) flayed a report on employment that had been prepared by an official panel headed by Ahluwalia. Fernandes said the report should have been prepared in six months; instead it took two and a half years. Saying there was little in the recommendations of the report that would help create 10 million new jobs each year, Fernandes went on to derogatorily describe Ahluwalia as an 'acolyte of the World Bank'.

Though certain leaders of the RSS and the SJM were privately unhappy about the actions taken by the then Finance Minister Sinha to check a fall in the value of the Unit Scheme of 1964 (US-64) run by the country's oldest and largest mutual funds organisation, the government-controlled Unit Trust of India, they did not openly express their disagreement. However, others known to be close to the RSS were far less restrained in their attacks on the Finance Minister. Consider, for instance, an article written by management expert Bharat Jhunjhunwala that was published by the *Indian Express* (August 1, 2001). RSS chief Sudarshan had earlier extolled the virtues of Jhunjhunwala and suggested that it should be individuals like him who should be advising the government on economic policy issues rather than unnamed 'rootless wonders'. (Despite his influence, Sudarshan's advice was not heeded, at least not in this instance.)

In the article, Jhunjhunwala lamented that the BJP in power had not behaved very differently from the Congress. He wrote:

Any bureaucrat or minister can subvert governance to favour his near and dear ones and yet claim that he is clean. The BJP has continued with this ignoble tradition... the income tax department had issued notices to Mauritius-based FIIs [foreign institutional investors] seeking to deny them benefits of the Double Taxation Avoidance Treaty with that country because their head offices were located in USA or other countries. The Finance Minister intervened and instructed that a certificate of registration issued by the government of Mauritius was adequate and final proof of the FII's domicile and asked the income tax department to withdraw their notices. The Finance Minister's *babu* [daughter-in-law] was one beneficiary of the minister's intervention. Yet, this was considered clean because the Finance Minister had disclosed his interest to the Prime Minister. Whether the decision was taken in the interests of the country or the *babu* can never be answered....

Jhunjhunwala was hardly the only RSS sympathiser who attacked a top functionary of the Vajpayee government. Into this category fell former Chief Minister of Delhi Madan Lal Khurana and former BJP general secretary K.N. Govindacharya. Both were very critical of what they alleged were the Vajpayee government's moves to bend over backwards to accommodate the interests of the World Trade Organisation. Both were to be subsequently eased out of the party.

Even as the BMS, the SJM and, to a lesser extent, the RSS fretted and cribbed about the Vajpayee government's economic policies, these organisations stopped short of doing anything drastic that could have the potential of destabilising the government. Simultaneously, the BMS joined hands with trade unions close to the Congress and the communist parties on specific issues—for instance, on the issue of opposing the government's move to allow foreign firms to hold 26 per cent equity in companies manufacturing goods for the defence services.

During the 1980s, under the influence of individuals like Nanaji Deshmukh, the BJP used to claim that the party believed in what it called 'Gandhian socialism'. In 1991, after Manmohan Singh initiated his policies of economic liberalisation, there were quite a few BJP

leaders who argued that the Congress had ‘hijacked’ its economic agenda. Even as the confusion on economic policy issues continued in the BJP, the situation was not very different in the Congress. The same party that had earlier championed the cause of privatisation and had begun the sale of shares of PSUs found itself in a curious position in which it opposed the manner in which Bharat Aluminium Company (BALCO) was privatised.

That the Congress too was far from united on the composition of economic reforms was evident during meetings to review the party’s poor performance in the 1999 elections. The divide between the pro and anti-reform groups became all too evident when several senior leaders including the late Rajesh Pilot and Arjun Singh targetted Manmohan Singh for allegedly giving the party an anti-poor image. The reforms ushered in during Singh’s tenure from 1991 to 1996, they argued, had given the party the image of being concerned only with promoting the economic interests of the elite, while ignoring the concerns of the poor. Manmohan Singh predictably offered to resign from his position as Leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha and counter-attacked by asking why these leaders had chosen to remain silent for so many years. However, Sonia Gandhi ‘persuaded’ Manmohan Singh, who has a squeaky clean image, to desist from any such drastic step. Ironically, Arjun Singh went on to hold the important position of Union Minister for Human Resources Development in the Manmohan Singh government.

Within the Congress, a debate continued about whether India’s grand old party had lost much of its political support base because its policies of economic liberalisation were perceived by the electorate to be pro-rich. In a country where one out of four individuals still lives on less than one US dollar a day, policies that are not seen to be helping the poor can never ensure support for a political party, whatever be its true ideological complexion. When in opposition, the Congress could afford to speak in different voices. The BJP has not been dissimilar while opposing the Congress. When in power, however, both these parties have espoused economic policies that were by and large similar, although there are certain important differences.

For instance, the Congress-led UPA rejected the previous NDA government’s policy of privatising profit-making PSUs after a hue

and cry was raised over the manner in which former Disinvestment Minister Arun Shourie rushed through the privatisation of various government-owned properties, including petrochemicals manufacturer Indian Petrochemicals Corporation Limited (IPCL)—now part of the Reliance group—and the two Centaur Hotels in Mumbai. The opposition to the NDA's disinvestment plans also picked up after the Supreme Court ruled in September 2003 that the government could not privatise two major public sector oil companies, Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited and Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited, without parliamentary approval.

Apart from differences within political parties, another reason why the economic policies followed by coalition governments have not been significantly different from those followed during single-party rule is simply because such governments—before the NDA and the UPA governments—had not been around long enough to radically alter the broad direction and content of economic policy. Even when attempts were made to change direction, these were not followed through sufficiently as, till 1999, no coalition government had been able to present more than two successive Union budgets leave alone see through their implementation. The budget in India is used as an annual event that is not a mere presentation of the country's accounts, but an occasion for governments to propagate, shape and highlight their economic policies.

There are a variety of reasons which explain why the economic policies followed by coalition governments are not very different from those followed by single party governments. One explanation comes from sociologist M.N. Panini who has argued that the emergence of backward caste politics could have a direct bearing on economic policy (see *Caste: Its Twentieth Century Avatar*, edited by M.N. Srinivas, Penguin, 1997). The crux of Panini's argument is that since parties that project themselves as champions of the backward castes have focused on job reservations in government as a key element of their strategy, they must have a vested interest in the perpetuation of an economy in which the state continues to play a dominant role. To the extent that economic liberalisation seeks to do exactly the opposite—namely, to reduce the role of the state and enhance the role of markets—the OBCs would tend to be opposed to it. Conversely, the upper castes,

who see reservations as eroding their strength in the government, will tend to support liberalisation. This is because liberalisation encourages free competition and free competition in turn benefits those who are already endowed with skills and resources, in this case the upper castes.

While the argument is difficult to refute in theory, the actual politics of the OBC-dominated parties has not quite matched this theory. H.D. Deve Gowda and Chandrababu Naidu are obvious examples of leaders espousing the cause of OBCs who are also liberalisers. One reason for this rift between precept and practice could be that these parties are dominated by the most privileged among the OBCs. Hence, the sections that are in the leadership of these parties are not as underprivileged in terms of existing resources and skills as might be presumed. Another factor could be that while liberalisation may in the long run reduce discretionary controls and hence the ability of those in power to 'milk the system', in the short run this may not be the case. Some left economists, for instance, have argued that the economic reforms, far from reducing the scope for corruption, have only increased it while centralising discretionary powers (the proverbial single-window clearance for projects). Also, since the reforms entail the entry of the private sector into areas hitherto monopolised by the government, these areas can now yield 'kickbacks' that they would not have earlier.

A third important reason for the OBC-dominated parties not being as virulently anti-reforms as might be expected could be that most of these are as yet young parties. During their short lives, they have concentrated on building a political programme and have had little time to formulate a coherent long-term economic strategy. Their positions on economic policy, therefore, have varied from issue to issue and have been dictated largely by short-term political expediency.

While coalition governments have sought to change economic policy priorities, these attempts have met with mixed success. Moreover, the proposition that coalitions have not been able to significantly change the course of economic policies in India does not run contrary to whatever one perceives to be the relationship between political uncertainty and economic development. It seems

logical that uncertainty of any kind, including political uncertainty, is not good for economic development. There are others who would, on the contrary, argue that a period of economic adversity spurs the political leadership to take tough decisions that it may not otherwise take. True, the period of coalition governments in India has witnessed considerable political uncertainty. But it is far from clear that political instability has been bad for the economy. But more on that later.

The first non-Congress government in New Delhi in 1977 was headed by Morarji Desai, who had earlier broken away from the Congress headed by Indira Gandhi on account of a large number of differences, not the least among them being differences on economic policy issues. Morarji Desai was never enamoured of Indira Gandhi's socialist rhetoric and the ushering in of ostensibly radical land reform programmes, among other things. But the Janata Party government headed by Desai was not substantially different from its Congress predecessors insofar as economic policies were concerned, with a few notable exceptions of course.

While Desai was considered to be conservative and pro-capitalist in his economic ideology and outlook, the government he headed became better known for its 'leftist' stance. As Union Industry Minister, the 'socialist' George Fernandes, created a sensation when he told two of the world's biggest multinational corporations, Coca-Cola and IBM (once International Business Machines), that they should wind up their operations in the country unless they reduced their equity holdings in their Indian affiliates to less than 40 per cent under the provisions of the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act. Fernandes also actively advocated a 'small is beautiful' industrial policy and the Union government enlarged the list of items whose production was 'reserved' for small-scale industrial units. The same Fernandes who had compared sections of businessmen to vermin, however, also pushed through a controversial technical collaboration agreement between German multinational Siemens and India's government-owned Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited (BHEL), which is one of Asia's largest manufacturers of power equipment. This agreement was considered by many to be against the interests of BHEL.

Despite Fernandes' positions on various economic issues, the Janata Party government headed by Morarji Desai is not remembered

for having radically changed India's economic policies. If anything, there was considerable continuity in the policies followed despite the personal predilections of Morarji Desai and his Industry Minister. The Charan Singh government that followed Desai's government was avowedly pro-farmer. Charan Singh considered himself a leader of the country's farmers, although his support base was largely confined to the agriculturally prosperous districts of northern India, especially western Uttar Pradesh and Haryana. His shortlived government could do little or nothing to influence the Union government's economic policies, including its policies for the agricultural sector.

The second phase of non-Congress governments at the Union level started in December 1989 after the National Front government led by V.P. Singh came to power. Earlier, as Finance Minister in Rajiv Gandhi's government, V.P. Singh had pursued what many saw as a carrot-and-stick economic policy of sorts. On the one hand, he slashed direct tax rates, including personal income tax rates, arguing that the high income tax rates were effectively dissuading compliance among tax-payers and, in fact, encouraging more and more people to evade taxes. This apparently had the 'Laffer curve' effect of increasing revenue collections while bringing down the propensity of tax-payers to evade paying personal income tax. (Briefly, the Laffer curve effect is economic jargon that means a reduction in direct tax rates encourages more people to pay taxes, which, in turn, results in the tax net widening and revenue collections going up.)

This reduction in income tax rates would not have worked in isolation. V.P. Singh probably would not have been half as successful in raising revenues had it not been for his unstated policy of conducting raids against rich and powerful individuals accused of tax evasion. For a while, it seemed that lowly and often ill-paid tax officials had suddenly discovered a new-found confidence to book affluent and influential industrialists and sometimes even send them to jail for brief periods. The problem was that India's cumbersome and time-consuming legal system would ensure that many of those accused would be released on bail while litigation would continue and the process of prosecution would drag on for years. The other problem was that over zealous officials sometimes took vicarious pleasure in humiliating and harassing well-to-do entrepreneurs and traders on the ostensible plea that the law was above no individual.



During V.P. Singh's brief tenure as Prime Minister, veteran socialist from Maharashtra, the late Madhu Dandavate, served as Union Finance Minister. In the February 1990 budget, Dandavate sought to impart a leftward shift to the government's economic policies—taxes on affluent sections were upped and public sector enterprises were sought to be strengthened.

But well before the financial year was over, in November 1990, the V.P. Singh government was toppled and a Congress-supported minority government headed by Chandra Shekhar was installed in its place. A then little-known former bureaucrat from Bihar, Yashwant Sinha, became the new Finance Minister, a post he was to hold again more than seven years later in March 1998. The Chandra Shekhar government was very keen on presenting the Union budget, but the Congress under Rajiv Gandhi was adamant that the government should only present a vote-on-account and not a full-fledged budget. Since the Chandra Shekhar government was totally dependent on Congress support for its survival, it reluctantly agreed and in February 1991, Sinha presented a bland statement of accounts without any policy pronouncements.

The reason for the Congress not agreeing to the government presenting a full budget became evident less than a week after the vote-on-account was placed in Parliament. On March 4, 1991, the Congress suddenly decided to withdraw support to the Chandra Shekhar government apparently because a couple of policemen from Haryana were conducting a surveillance operation outside the residence of Rajiv Gandhi. This was also the time when international confidence in the Indian economy was on the verge of a collapse. Non-resident Indians panicked and began withdrawing their hard currency deposits from Indian banks. As the foreign exchange reserves dipped and the country's balance of payments started deteriorating, the caretaker government with Sinha as Finance Minister realised, much to its dismay, that there was a real danger of the country defaulting on its external financial obligations. For the first time in independent India's history, the Union government pawned a part of the official gold reserves.

This decision predictably raised a huge hue and cry. Indians, more than citizens of almost any other country, are crazy about the

yellow metal and the government's action sent out alarm signals to the public at large. Here was a caretaker minority government selling the country's most precious wealth to keep its head above water. Congress leaders like former Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee roundly criticised the government (which the party had been supporting just a few weeks earlier) for mismanaging the economy. Even Manmohan Singh, who had by then become Economic Adviser to the Prime Minister in Chandra Shekhar's government after the completion of his tenure as Secretary General of the Geneva-based South Commission, realised there were few options before the government to stave off a balance of payments crisis.

Even as the country was on the verge of defaulting on its external financial obligations, India went in for the 10th general elections in May 1991. By the time the P.V. Narasimha Rao government came to power the following month, the country's hard currency reserves had plunged to an unprecedented low and, at one stage, were equivalent to barely two weeks' import requirements. Inflation was also running at a high level by Indian standards of around 12 per cent (it reached a peak of 17 per cent later that year in September). This was, of course, the annual rate of inflation as measured by the official wholesale price index; the actual increase in retail prices to the consumer as measured by various consumer price indices was much higher.

Finance Minister Manmohan Singh, holding a political position for the first time after a long and illustrious career as an academic and a bureaucrat—he had headed the Planning Commission and the Reserve Bank of India—knew from the outset that he would have to act and act fast to avert an impending economic disaster. He first drastically devalued the Indian currency in two stages in early July—this was the first time since 1966 that the rupee was officially devalued by the government. With an eye towards obtaining a hefty 'structural adjustment loan' from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Manmohan Singh's first Union budget presented in July, dramatically altered the direction of India's economic policy regime. He slashed customs duties thereby reducing the protection given to domestic industry, while at the same time he sought to do away with the industrial licensing system and other controls on industry and trade. (More than a decade and a half later, former Finance Minister

of West Bengal Ashok Mitra alleged in a book that Manmohan Singh was appointed as Finance Minister at Washington's behest, a charge that was never substantiated though it created a political stir in early-2007.)

The 13-day government of Atal Behari Vajpayee in May 1996 took one major economic decision during its all-too-brief tenure: the decision to offer a counter-guarantee to Enron Power Corporation of the US, which was the first foreign company to set up a power project in the country at Dabhol near the west coast in Maharashtra.

Even as it became clear that the first Vajpayee government would not last for any length of time, the United Front had come together to arrive at a Common Minimum Programme which formed the basis of the formation of the country's first coalition government of its kind headed by H.D. Deve Gowda. The UF government received 'outside' support from the second and third largest political parties after the BJP, namely, the Congress and the CPI(M). While the Congress did not exert much influence in shaping the UF government's economic policies, the CPI(M) did manage to do so because of its presence in various committees set up to coordinate the activities of the 13 constituents of the government.

The Finance Minister in the UF government was the savvy lawyer-politician Palaniappan Chidambaram from the Tamil Maanila Congress. Chidambaram had served in two Congress governments under Rajiv Gandhi and P.V. Narasimha Rao. In the Rao government, Chidambaram had served as Union Commerce Minister. He was considered to be an enthusiastic liberaliser, an admirer of Manmohan Singh's economic policies (though on occasions he is said to have crossed swords with Singh at Cabinet meetings). As the man chiefly responsible for drafting the UF's CMP, it was not surprising that Chidambaram imbued it with a pro-reform stance.

It was inevitable that Chidambaram's economic ideology (and the policies that stemmed from it) would be opposed by the CPI in the UF government and by the CPI(M) in the coordination and steering committees. This was precisely what happened, although the differences of opinion never reached a head or caused a major crisis of governance. As pointed out earlier, one major reason for this was the dearth of options open to the left. However much the left may have

disagreed with the economic policy framework of the UF government, it could not do very much more than express its reservations. Having reached the conclusion that keeping the BJP and the Congress out of power was top priority, the left could not have actually withdrawn from the UF.

The most apparent evidence of the differences within the UF government on economic policy issues was the inordinate delay in arriving at a decision to hike the prices of petroleum products. For weeks on end, the committees attached to the UF government debated and deliberated on the issue and repeatedly failed to arrive at any decision. It had become obvious that the government's finances would become difficult to manage if the losses on the 'oil pool account' of the Union Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas continued to mount. The UF government realised it had been saddled with an unpopular decision that had become inevitable since the previous Congress government had failed to increase the administered prices of different petroleum products (because it believed that such a move would alienate the party from large sections of voters). The UF government did eventually bite the bullet, but only after considerable heartburn.

To those opposed to the UF, the government's procrastination was evidence of the inefficient manner in which a coalition government worked. As far as the UF government's supporters were concerned, the government had responded to popular sentiments and had extensively debated the pros and cons of the decision before it was taken. Another occasion on which Chidambaram's differences with the left led to a standoff was when he tried to push through legislation allowing private Indian and foreign firms to enter the insurance business (but more on that later).

The first budget of the UF government presented by Chidambaram on July 26, 1996 appeared to many to continue along the path laid out by Manmohan Singh. The process of reduction of import duties and de-bureaucratisation was sought to be continued. The government set up the Disinvestment Commission headed by senior bureaucrat G.V. Ramakrishna, who had earlier headed the official watchdog body for the country's capital markets, the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI). At one stage, Chidambaram stated that the government would 'invariably' accept the Disinvestment

Commission's recommendations. Later, however, the Commission found that it had been reduced to an advisory body that would only recommend the modalities of disinvesting the equity shares of specific public sector enterprises and not one which would be responsible for implementing and monitoring the entire process of divesting the government's stake in these corporations. Chidambaram's second budget, presented at the end of February 1997, was hailed by sections of the media as a 'dream budget' for it sought to reduce the incidence of income tax on individuals and companies while at the same time projecting an increase in revenue collections.

A month later, political upheavals ensured that the dream budget would soon turn into a nightmare. Congress President Sitaram Kesri pulled the rug from under Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda and had him replaced by I.K. Gujral. At one stage, in April 1997, it appeared that the budget would not be approved by Parliament but the crisis was averted. More than a year later, Chidambaram was to state that political uncertainty—and the toppling of two UF governments by the Congress—was responsible for destroying the confidence of investors as well as consumers, resulting in the projections contained in his budget going completely awry. He had assumed that the fiscal deficit as a proportion of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) would be contained at 4.5 per cent, but the actual figure by the end of the year worked out to more than 6 per cent. To be fair to Chidambaram, however, his predecessors and successors had also not been particularly successful in containing the fiscal deficit to the levels projected at the time when the budget proposals were announced. Another important reason why the UF government's budget calculations went haywire was the decision to accept many of the recommendations of the 5th Central Pay Commission, which recommended increases in the salaries and remuneration paid to government employees.

After Vajpayee became Prime Minister for the second time in March 1998, it was widely reported that he wanted Jaswant Singh to be the Finance Minister in his Cabinet. (Singh, who had served as Finance Minister during the first Vajpayee government in June 1996, had lost the elections from Chittorgarh in Rajasthan.) However, leaders of the RSS were not particularly happy with Vajpayee's

choice and 'persuaded' him to select Sinha for the position. Sinha had the unenviable task before him of preventing the growth rate of the country's economy, segments of which were slipping into recession, from slowing down further. Sinha sought to define his plans to kick-start the Indian economy through a series of rather vague statements-of-intent that payed ritual obeisance to the Vajpayee government's National Agenda for Governance. The agenda, like the President's address to Parliament spelling out the government's priorities, was full of pious pronouncements that were not just unexceptional and non-controversial, but predictably couched in the rhetoric of 'consensus' politics. The Finance Minister said the regular budget to be presented later would 'seek to impart the necessary stimulus to agriculture and industry, restore dynamism to exports, encourage larger flows of foreign investment...take decisive initiatives to improve the state of the infrastructure, strengthen the financial system...'. He said the 'inherent strength of our economy...has enabled us to hold our heads high and not succumb to the economic gales that have been sweeping through the Asian region.'

Meanwhile, within the BJP and the larger Sangh Parivar, a tussle was underway about what should be the government's economic policy thrust, with the swadeshi group on one side and the 'liberal' group on the other. The BJP, which had earlier sworn by Gandhian socialism, became critical of the Rao regime's economic policies on the ground that the economy had been exposed to international competition too quickly. Before the May 1996 general elections, the BJP would often say what India needed was technology for computer chips and not potato chips. In this regard, the BJP and some of its allies like the Samata Party (headed by George Fernandes who insists that he continues to vociferously espouse the cause of socialism) appeared to be speaking the same language as the two main communist parties. A large section of opinion within all these otherwise diverse political parties argued in favour of a slow, selective and cautious opening up of the Indian economy to international competition.

The pro-swadeshi argument that emerged in the mid-1990s could be summarised thus: The Congress government headed by P.V. Narasimha Rao with Manmohan Singh as Finance Minister had, since the middle of 1991, rolled out the red carpet for foreign concerns

and lowered import duties under pressure from multilateral funding agencies like the IMF. Since the bulk of the biggest Indian corporations, whether privately owned or controlled by the state, were midgets by world standards and needed government support (if not protection) to survive, leave alone prosper, domestic companies were severely handicapped. The argument further ran that governments the world over offer more than a modicum of support to local entrepreneurs, that the same developed countries which shout the loudest about free trade in global fora are the very nations which protect inefficient industries at home on account of the political influence wielded by home-grown industrialists and workers' unions.

There is a slightly more sophisticated variant of the pro-swadeshi argument, which draws on the analogy of the need for the *mai-baap sarkar* (literally, the mother-father government) to protect 'infant' industries from foreign competition. But what happens when the infant fails to grow up, to mature and then go into the big, bad world outside to make his or her living? What do parents do with their pampered, overgrown brats? Do they throw them to the wolves and hope for the best? Or should they adopt a more humane approach towards their spoilt offspring?

Those in favour of expediting the pace of external liberalisation of the economy contend that Indian industry has been protected too much and for too long. The fact that domestic capitalists were shielded from competition by the government's policies of encouraging import substitution at any cost, including building high tariff walls, resulted in consumers getting a raw deal. Thus, while corporate profits soared and official revenues remained buoyant, the least-organised segment of the economy, the consumers, had no choice but to make do with over-priced, shoddy products and sub-standard services.

Proponents of both points of view marshal reams of facts and figures to bolster their contentions. And, there is more than an element of truth in the arguments put forward both by the supporters as well as the critics of swadeshi.

Nobody would dissuade international capital from flowing into infrastructure projects, be these roads, bridges, ports or airports, particularly if such inflows also involve access to technology not available within the country. Yet it is also true that these are the very

projects that are not inherently profitable, that is, unless the risks are heavily underwritten by the government. At the same time, no Indian politician worth his salt can oppose foreign or multinational investors in today's situation, so long as new jobs are created. (For example, the longest-serving Chief Minister Jyoti Basu, a communist, had repeatedly urged multinationals to invest in his state of West Bengal, a practice that his successor Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee has continued with greater vehemence.) Yet, the debate on whether India can afford to adopt a selective approach towards foreign investments and keep such inflows out of particular areas, notably, consumer goods, is far from over. The chances are that whichever government is in power would hum and haw, move back and forth, while not excessively antagonising either local corporate bigwigs or representatives of multinational concerns.

Addressing his first formal meeting with corporate captains at the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) in March 1998, Finance Minister Sinha said low public investments in infrastructure had contributed to the economic slowdown even as he warned of 'hard decisions' to arrest the downturn in his forthcoming budget. At the meeting, Sinha recalled how his decision to mortgage the country's gold stocks in 1991 had saved the government from defaulting on its external financial obligations, even though it made him personally unpopular. Before his parleys with domestic industrialists, Sinha had spoken in Washington and London, where he sought to assuage apprehensions that his government's policy of swadeshi was protectionist and would dissuade foreign investors from coming to the country. Addressing representatives of the World Bank and the IMF, Sinha again attempted to allay fears that populist spending by his government would increase budgetary deficits.

Vajpayee too went on record stating that swadeshi did not mean 'we don't value direct foreign investment'. Speaking for the first time to industrialists in his capacity as Prime Minister in April 1998, Vajpayee told the annual session of the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) that he had 'inherited a weak, deficit-ridden economy, but I'm not complaining'. While stating that 'we cannot afford to play politics with the nation's economy any more,' the Prime Minister argued that the steps taken to free the economy since 1991 had not been backed by checks and balances. The social sectors of the economy as well as the



infrastructure had not improved. While outlining a 90-day agenda for action (which, as subsequent events showed, was not implemented), Vajpayee sought to explain what he meant when he claimed that there was an urgent need to ‘reform the reforms process’.

He said industry had three main complaints against the government—it felt the government was responsible for avoidable delays in setting up projects, that the government took too much and provided too little, and that the government was in areas of business ‘it had no business’ to be in. The Prime Minister went on to enumerate the three main complaints the government had about industry. He said industry did not share the government’s social responsibilities and that it preached the virtues of transparency to the government but did not itself operate in a transparent manner, nor did it fulfil its obligations to workers and consumers. Finally, industrialists wanted competition but not in the industries they were in. Vajpayee then identified the three complaints ordinary citizens of the country had against both industry and government. First, most people believed that government and business are hand-in-glove helping each other, the rest be damned. Secondly, it was perceived that both industry and government did not care about the real needs of the people. Finally, it was felt that there were two sets of the laws in the country, one for ordinary people and the other for politicians and industrialists.

Perceptive as these observations were, the track record of the Vajpayee government as far as economic policy went was quite different. A little over two weeks after the government conducted nuclear tests at Pokhran, on the first day of June 1998, Sinha presented the budget for 1998–99 that came to be derogatorily known as the ‘rollback’ budget. Never in the last half-century of independent India had any Union Finance Minister changed his own budget proposals as quickly and as drastically as Yashwant Sinha did in the first fortnight of the month. It seemed the maiden budget of the new government was jinxed. Sinha announced two major changes in his budget proposals in less than 24 hours. The first was the reduction in the prices of petrol from what had been stated by the Ministry of Petroleum. The second was the decision to halve the increase in the administered price of urea fertiliser. Then, 10 days later, the Finance Minister completely rolled back urea prices and at the same time, halved the proposed increase

in customs tariffs covering roughly one-third of the country's total imports. He also withdrew the withholding tax on foreign borrowings by Indian corporates.

The lobbying to make the changes in the budget came from various quarters, including industry associations, but the greatest pressure to roll back urea prices came from the BJP's own allies, notably the Shiromani Akali Dal of Punjab (the state which accounts for the lion's share of the country's total consumption of urea). Jayalalithaa was equally adamant about opposing any hike in urea prices. Thus, Sinha's hopes of redressing the growing imbalance in the pattern of usage of fertiliser (among the three principal groups of nutrients) in India, which had worsened on account of imperfect methods of pricing and distribution of subsidies, remained a pipedream.

By September 1998, the dissensions within the BJP and the Sangh Parivar over the government's economic policies appeared to be coming to a head. The criticism of the Vajpayee government's economic policies by the SJM became extremely strident, thereby embarrassing the BJP and its supporters no end. BJP spokespersons sought to distance the party from the SJM's position and argued that even in the past some of the views expressed by the SJM were different from those of the BJP. At the same time, late BJP spokesperson K.L. Sharma told journalists that the BJP-led government would seriously consider the opinions of the SJM.

The SJM was also peeved at the then Industry Minister, the late Sikandar Bakht's 'sudden' proposal that 100 per cent foreign-owned companies be allowed to manufacture cigarettes and tobacco products. The SJM argued that instead of encouraging such companies, the government should be discouraging smoking. On this issue, the SJM received support from former Mizoram Governor, Rajya Sabha MP Swaraj Kaushal, who also happens to be the husband of Sushma Swaraj, a Minister in Vajpayee's cabinet. Kaushal had stated that the decision to allow foreign firms to produce cigarettes 'defies the logic of swadeshi and was contrary to the BJP's stated policy of encouraging foreign investment only in 'core' areas like infrastructure. The SJM also pointed out that while the government was encouraging the manufacture of 'sinful' products, it had 'succumbed' to business lobbies by 'banning' the production of common non-iodised salt.

Manch spokesperson P. Muralidhar Rao said iodised salt was required only in areas where goitre is endemic and that common salt produced from sea water had certain properties that iodised salt did not possess. The SJM even claimed that it would launch a new 'salt satyagraha' on this issue.

The SJM also opposed the BJP-led government on other issues like the move to allow foreign equity in private companies wanting to enter the insurance business, 'needless' counter-guarantees given by the Union government to foreign-funded power projects and the Bakht-brokered deal to resolve a dispute between the government and Japan's Suzuki Motor Company on appointing the chief executive of Maruti Udyog Limited. The two, the Union government and Suzuki, were equal partners in the car manufacturing joint venture. Then, the SJM attacked the then Commerce Minister Ramakrishna Hegde's foreign trade policies, specifically the shifting of 380 items to the open general licence (OGL) list of imports and 140 items to the special import licence (SIL) list. These decisions were described as a sell-out to the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Much of the SJM's strategy is credited to Gurumurthy, a diminutive Chennai-based accountant and journalist turned economic ideologue. He is publicly very critical of the consequences of economic globalisation and opposed to the unfettered entry of multinational corporations. Gurumurthy was quoted by *Outlook* magazine as saying he would even start a campaign against western-style toilets.

As part of the Sangh Parivar, the SJM was clearly in a predicament because the BJP-led government had not really gone back on the economic reforms policies followed by previous governments. The BJP argued that it could not implement its own economic agenda since it was part of a coalition and had to go strictly by the National Agenda for Governance.

Towards the end of 1998, the BJP and the Sangh Parivar were racked with internal dissension on the issue of allowing foreign companies to enter the insurance business in the country. Insurance was the last segment of India's financial sector that remained barred to foreigners. On October 22, 1998, a high-powered group of ministers led by Vajpayee confidante Jaswant Singh (who was then Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission) arrived at a 'unanimous' decision

that foreign companies (including foreign institutional investors, non-resident Indians and overseas corporate bodies controlled by them) would be allowed to hold up to 26 per cent of the equity capital of privately-controlled insurance companies in the country. This was an important recommendation of a committee of Parliamentarians headed by Congress MP Murli Deora. A day before the group of ministers met, Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha said at a seminar on infrastructure that new legislation would be introduced in the coming (winter) session of Parliament in late November 1998 to set up and empower a statutory Insurance Regulatory & Development Authority (IRDA) to oversee the removal of the government's monopoly on the insurance business.

A section within the government was clearly of the view that in the situation which prevailed after the nuclear tests, a 'positive signal' should be sent to foreign investors by allowing them to enter the insurance business. Besides, it was argued that India needed to mobilise long-term funds for infrastructure projects. The Indian government, first under Jawaharlal Nehru and then under Indira Gandhi, had nationalised the life insurance business in 1956 and the general insurance business in 1972. Foreign firms were allowed to operate in very restricted areas like shipping re-insurance. The proposed IRDA bill was aimed at not merely allowing the regulatory authority to issue licences to new players from the private corporate sector but also to lay down stringent guidelines for them. The government had also intended simultaneously to introduce bills to amend the Acts of Parliament that govern the working of two giant, monolithic, state-owned organisations, namely, the Life Insurance Corporation (LIC) and the General Insurance Corporation (GIC) which has four subsidiaries: Oriental Insurance, National Insurance, New India Assurance and United India Insurance.

In 1994, an official committee (set up during the Narasimha Rao government and headed by the former Governor of the Reserve Bank of India R.N. Malhotra) had recommended that the government allow private firms to compete with these state-owned monopolies after the establishment of a suitably empowered regulatory authority. Thereafter, all successive governments dilly-dallied on the question of opening up the country's insurance business to competition

from private firms. In February 1997, P. Chidambaram, as Finance Minister in the centre-left United Front government, had allowed private companies to offer health insurance policies for the first time. In August 1997, the government headed by I.K. Gujral had moved the IRDA bill in Parliament but it was withdrawn after strident opposition, not only from the left parties (which were supporting the UF government then) but also from the BJP which made it clear that it would not be adopted. At that time, the BJP said that it was not averse to Indian companies entering the insurance business but was not favourably inclined towards foreign companies getting into this industry. On June 1, 1998, Finance Minister Sinha proposed in his budget speech that private domestic insurance concerns be allowed to enter this hitherto exclusive preserve of the government, leaving open the question of whether (and to what extent) international insurance companies could enter the fray.

By November 1998, differences in the Sangh Parivar over the issue of allowing foreign investment in insurance had reached a climax. RSS and SJM leader Dattopant Thengadi castigated Finance Minister Sinha at a public meeting and derogatorily dubbed him 'incompetent' and 'useless'. (There was more than a touch of irony in what Thengadi said, because it was the RSS leader K.S. Sudarshan who had reportedly persuaded Vajpayee to make Sinha the Finance Minister instead of Jaswant Singh who was Vajpayee's first choice for the post.) In early December, during a heated session of Parliament, arch political opponents from the left and the right came together to oppose the Insurance Bill causing considerable embarrassment to the government since, by then, the Union Cabinet had resolved to allow foreign companies to hold up to 26 per cent shares in Indian insurance companies.

At one stage it even appeared that BJP president Kushabhau Thakre might oppose the government's decision. He and other party functionaries had pointed out that when the UF government sought to introduce a similar bill in Parliament in August 1997, the BJP had staunchly opposed it. During a party meeting, Vajpayee had to publicly tell the then Youth and Sports Affairs Minister Uma Bharti (who had opposed the government decision on insurance) to shut up and not interrupt him. Following hectic parleys, the BJP finally

presented a united face; Vajpayee's view had apparently prevailed and the hardliners marginalised. But, by then, the damage had already been done. Though the Insurance Regulatory & Development Authority Bill was moved by the government, it could not be passed by both houses of Parliament and had to be shelved. The government had hoped to get the Bill adopted during the 1999 budget session, but it fell before this could happen. The bill was finally adopted by both houses of Parliament in the winter session of 1999 with the BJP and the Congress coming together. It was the first major economic decision taken by the third Vajpayee government.

Even as the government's decision to privatise the insurance industry and open it to foreign investors was facing resistance in 1998, the BJP-led coalition moved more cautiously to amend the country's patent laws to bring these in line with the norms laid down by the WTO. As in the case of the IRDA Bill, the government referred a bill to amend the Indian Patents Act of 1970 to a Parliamentary committee. In December, the Vajpayee government decided that it would try and convert the bill into law after the main Opposition party, the Congress, stated that it would support the amendment to the patent laws, subject to certain minor changes being incorporated. It was, after all, the Congress government under P.V. Narasimha Rao that had initiated policies in mid-1991 to open up India's economy and on the last day of 1992, the country had formally become a member of the WTO and had signed the agreement on TRIPS (trade related intellectual property rights).

India's laws on patents had allowed the patenting of manufacturing processes, not products, especially products like food, pharmaceuticals and agro-chemicals. As per WTO rules, India has to introduce product patents by 2005. Those in favour of the amended patent laws argued that these would attract new investments in companies producing pharmaceuticals and pesticides. The opposition to changing the country's patent laws came from farmers and social activists who argued that the new laws would not only lead to a sharp rise in the prices of medicines, but also cripple thousands of indigenously-owned small pharmaceutical concerns. With the Congress and the BJP united on the issue, the amendments went through in the Rajya Sabha in the December 1998 winter session. The government was, however, not able to present the bill in the Lok Sabha. At one stage, the then

Minister for Parliamentary Affairs Madan Lal Khurana had claimed that the presentation of the bill was delayed because the requisite approval of President K.R. Narayanan was late in coming, but a sharp rejoinder from the President resulted in the Minister hastily eating his words. The Patents Bill was eventually passed in the next session of Parliament, which was the budget session of 1999.

As has been already stated, there were contradictions galore as far as the thrust of economic policies were concerned not only in the ruling party but within the principal opposition party as well. Not everybody in the Congress was equally enthusiastic about the Bill to amend the laws on patents. While one section comprising individuals like former Finance Minister Manmohan Singh (who is often described as the chief architect of the economic liberalisation programme) was in favour of the bill, other Congress leaders argued that the party should not create an impression that it was supporting the fragile coalition government led by Prime Minister Vajpayee. The pro-change group in the Congress won the internal tussle. By this time, the Congress under Sonia Gandhi was trying to project itself as a rejuvenated political party and had become increasingly strident in its criticism of the economic policies of the Vajpayee government. 'Prices are rising, unemployment is rising...all this leads to an ominous situation,' the President of the Congress told party faithfuls at a meeting held in New Delhi. Boosting the morale of the Congress was an opinion poll predicting a clear win for the Congress if general elections were to take place.

In the aftermath of the February 1998 Lahore Declaration signed between Vajpayee and Pakistan Prime Minister Mian Nawaz Sharif, it was the turn of the Finance Minister to show that he too could deliver. Sinha's second budget, presented in February 1999, earned quite a few compliments even from his political opponents for simplifying the excise duty regime. He was able to walk a tightrope by keeping at bay both the hardliners within the Sangh Parivar (namely, the SJM) as well as the gang of liberalisers. More importantly, Sinha also paid lip service to the cause of a 'second wave' of reforms and promised that he intended to downsize the bureaucracy. One major component of the second wave of reforms was the government's decision not merely to disinvest its equity in public sector firms, but to privatise some of them.

Privatisation of this sort, however, ultimately took place only in 2000, when Hindustan Lever, the Indian arm of the MNC Unilever, bought a majority stake in Modern Food Industries, a public sector unit making bread and other food products. Subsequently, there were a few other 'strategic sales' of PSUs to private firms, including the sale of BALCO, Indian Petrochemicals Corporation Ltd (IPCL) and Videsh Sanchar Nigam Limited (VSNL). However, each of these sales was surrounded by controversy and the government's privatisation programme did not really take off, with the privatisation of oil sector PSUs in particular coming to a grinding halt. To begin with, two major oil sector PSUs—Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd (HPCL) and Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd (BPCL)—could not be privatised because of dissensions within the government. By the time the government did reach a compromise on the issue among its feuding ministers, it was overtaken by developments. Hearing a public interest petition, the Supreme Court ruled that HPCL and BPCL could not be privatised without obtaining the prior approval of Parliament, since these companies had been created under Acts of Parliament by nationalising the assets of foreign-owned oil companies in the 1970s.

The fact is that privatisation is a dirty word in the lexicon of many of India's politicians, union leaders and opinion makers. These sections were brought up to believe not only in the virtues of a socialist economy in which the public sector would attain the 'commanding heights' of the economy, but also in the merits of the government acting as the model employer. Many people in India are unsure about the benefits that would accrue from Margaret Thatcher-style privatisation. At one level, a large section of the intelligentsia is clear that the country's political leadership and its bureaucracy must not continue to run a host of loss-making ventures which own hotels and manufacture products ranging from bread and bicycles to automotive tyres and watches. Put differently, it is widely perceived (at least within the middle class) that the government has no business to be in such businesses, especially since the Indian state is doing a pretty bad job of providing what it should be providing—primary education and basic health care, among other services.



Having said this, the next question which arises is what needs to be done to close down, sell (transfer managerial control) or rehabilitate chronically ill public sector undertakings (PSUs) humanely while keeping in mind the interests of workers and the overall economic environment of a country in which large numbers are unemployed or underemployed. This is indeed the crux of the problem. As stated earlier, in 1996, the UF government had set up a Disinvestment Commission which, over a two and a half year period, recommended a slew of measures to tone up the functioning of over 40 PSUs. However, the UF government as well as the BJP-led government were rather sluggish in acting on the Commission's recommendations.

The NDA government failed to convince many about the efficacy of privatisation as a means of reviving the country's bloated and inefficient public sector enterprises. The fact that the disinvestment strategy pursued had concentrated largely on profitable PSUs certainly did not help. These companies are in dominant positions in their respective markets, have a high profile and thus, their shares are quoted at reasonably attractive rates. There were a number of problems with this strategy. While it was easy to sell the shares of profit-making PSUs, such sales could only be one-time events and did not address the problems of chronic loss-making PSUs. Besides, the government used the proceeds of privatisation/divestment to bridge the budget deficit. Such a policy was, to use a phrase coined by British Labour leader Jim Callaghan in referring to Margaret Thatcher's policies of privatisation, akin to selling family silver to pay the butler. Towards the end of his ministerial tenure, Shourie did decide to set up a National Investment Fund in which the proceeds of divestment would be placed for use in the social sector—the fund was subsequently operationalised when Chidambaram became Finance Minister in the UPA government, and, as stated earlier, the UPA government made the erstwhile Ministry of Disinvestment a division of the Finance Ministry.

There was a gap between rhetoric and practice on other aspects of reforms as well. For instance, after the government ostensibly dismantled the administered pricing mechanism (APM) for petroleum products on April 1, 2002, Petroleum Minister Ram Naik 'persuaded' the public sector oil companies led by the Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) to not increase petrol prices for three months despite a sharp

and sudden increase in international prices of crude oil from around \$ 20 a barrel to over \$ 27 a barrel. As a result, the oil PSUs incurred a huge loss of around Rs 200 crore per month, while privately-owned oil refining companies (including Reliance Petroleum) continued to receive prices for their products that were benchmarked to international rates.

The Vajpayee government's privatisation programme became particularly controversial after Arun Shourie took over as Union Minister for Disinvestment in August 2000. Shourie is a Minister with a difference. For one, he had a reputation of being absolutely clean. He also worked with amazing zeal. But in the process, Shourie also painted himself into a corner. He became the favourite whipping boy of many of his Cabinet colleagues and his ideological compatriots in the BJP, not to mention his allies in the NDA coalition. A former economist with the World Bank, erstwhile editor of the *Indian Express* chain of newspapers, and the winner of the 1982 Ramon Magsaysay Award for Journalism, Literature and Creative Communication Arts, Shourie was declared 'Business Leader of the Year' by the *Economic Times*, India's largest circulated financial daily. Business magazines regularly published his photograph on their covers.

Despite such impressive credentials, why did Shourie fail to forge a consensus about the need for big-ticket privatisation? Why did he find himself so isolated and why was he unable to convince his own government's ministers and supporters of the need to hand over managerial control of PSUs to private entrepreneurs? Shourie's privatisation programme was placed in cold storage not on account of his political opponents in the Congress or among the communist parties. His own colleagues in the Vajpayee government and his friends in the RSS proved to be the biggest enemies of his grandiose plans of privatisation. Other sections of the Sangh Parivar like the SJM and the trade union Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh also expressed their staunch opposition to Shourie's privatisation policies.

It appeared as if Minister for Petroleum and Natural Gas Ram Naik did not want his Ministry to lose control over HPCL and BPCL, the second and third largest oil refining and distribution companies in the country. Both companies are also profitable. Nor did the then Coal and Mines Minister Uma Bharti seem happy with the manner in

which the Ministry of Disinvestment sought to privatise the Orissa-based National Aluminium Company (NALCO). The entire political class in this eastern state—including the ruling Biju Janata Dal and its rival, the Congress—came together to oppose the privatisation of NALCO. The privatisation of NALCO, the world's lowest-cost aluminium manufacturer, was also opposed on the ground that the timing would be inopportune since international aluminium prices were at their lowest in the last five years.

It should be noted that both Ram Naik and Uma Bharti belonged to the BJP at that time though Uma Bharti was later expelled from the BJP. The same story was repeated in the case of Fertilisers and Chemicals Minister Sukhdev Singh Dhindsa (belonging to the Shiromani Akali Dal) and National Fertilisers Limited. After Videsh Sanchar Nigam Limited (VNSL)—once India's monopoly international telecommunications service provider—was privatised and management control handed over to the Tata group, the then high-profile BJP Minister for Communications and Information Technology Pramod Mahajan opposed the decision of VSNL's new private owners to transfer a large chunk of money to a Tata group company. Yet, curiously, none of these ministers ever publicly said they were opposed to privatisation. They merely contended they were opposed to the methodology of privatisation adopted by Shourie's ministry.

Besides Petroleum Minister Naik, the move to privatise HPCL and BPCL was staunchly opposed by Defence Minister George Fernandes. He had earlier written a letter to Prime Minister Vajpayee calling for a mid-course correction in the government's privatisation policy. Besides concurring with Naik that the petroleum sector was strategically important—India currently imports roughly three-fourths of its requirement of crude oil—Fernandes also said privatisation should not result in public monopolies being replaced by private monopolies.

All monopolies are bad but a private monopoly is certainly worse than a public one. After all, bureaucrats can be transferred and politicians have to get re-elected. However, a private promoter and his children's children can stay put for years on end and be accountable to no one. An example was the way in which the Reliance group took over the management of Indian Petrochemicals Corporation Limited (IPCL) in May 2002. After privatisation, the combined Reliance-IPCL conglomerate currently controls between 80 and 90 per cent

of the Indian market for a wide range of petrochemical products. (It seems strange to recall that in the mid-1980s, as editor of the *Indian Express*, Shourie had written a series of articles that were scathing in their criticism of Reliance and the Ambani family that controlled India's largest private corporate group—the industrial empire founded by Dhirubhai Ambani got bifurcated between his two sons Mukesh and Anil, after a series of acrimonious disputes.)

In early January 2003, the DMK, then a part of the NDA, issued a strongly worded resolution against the Vajpayee government's policy of privatisation and its alleged attempts to subvert the socialistic character of the country's Constitution. Political observers felt that the DMK's statement had been prompted by the attempts made by its arch political rival in the state, the AIADMK, to come close to the BJP and the NDA. (However, the DMK was to reiterate its strong opposition to privatisation when it later became a part of the UPA government and Chidambaram wanted to divest part of the government's stake in Neyveli Lignite Corporation.)

After its fifth national conference held in Hyderabad in the first week of January 2003, the SJM issued a resolution criticising virtually every aspect of the Vajpayee government's privatisation programme although the RSS-affiliated outfit maintained that it was not against disinvestment in principle. Stating that it had serious reservations over the procedures being adopted by the government towards the PSUs being sought to be disinvested, the SJM said it 'is convinced that disinvestment should not be the first option, but the last one, after all other alternatives have been exhausted'. It suggested that the government deal with PSUs on a case-by-case basis by following a sequence of logical steps that included de-bureaucratisation and corporatisation, diagnosis of problems and their solutions, strategic sale, valuation and share disposal.

Meanwhile, in January that year, the BJP's cell dealing with scheduled castes urged the party leadership to protect the interests of dalits who would be denied 'reserved' jobs after the management of particular PSUs passed into the hands of private promoters. At the meeting of the national executive of the BJP Scheduled Castes' Morcha, it was pointed out that the new owners of privatised PSUs would no longer feel obliged to fill up posts reserved for SCs as well as STs. A number of the dalit leaders of the BJP said during

the meeting that the underprivileged sections of Indian society were the worst affected by the changes brought about by the so-called economic reforms policies of the government. What was significant in this context was the noise made by the UPA government on the need for private enterprises to recruit more individuals belonging to the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes while refraining from making such recruitment legally mandatory (as has been detailed earlier in the book).

All over the world, privatisation has proved to be controversial. In India, it has become one of the most contentious and divisive issues that has confronted the NDA government led by Vajpayee as well as the UPA government headed by Manmohan Singh.

Changing labour laws is another area in which there were conflicting viewpoints in the Vajpayee government. The BMS is a leading trade union organisation and its representatives contend that it is 'independent' of the BJP. In the same breath, BMS leaders concede that they have close ideological affinity with the RSS. In February 1999, less than a year after Vajpayee had been sworn in as Prime Minister for the second time, speaking at a national convention of the trade union, BMS founder and veteran RSS leader, the late Dattopant Thengadi had used unusually harsh language when he described Finance Minister Sinha as an *anarth mantri* (literally, a minister who causes chaos) instead of *arth mantri* (or a minister who handles the economy). The octogenarian Thengadi did not stop there. In April 2001, the BMS founder again attacked Sinha in public, this time during a rally held at New Delhi's Ram Lila grounds. On this occasion, the Finance Minister was accused of being a 'criminal' for encroaching on the territorial preserve of the then Labour Minister, Satyanarain Jatiya, who also happens to be a BMS leader.

The provocation for the uncharitable remark was a reference in Sinha's speech on the last day of February announcing the proposals for the Union budget for 2001–02. The Finance Minister had stated that the government wanted to remove certain 'rigidities' in the country's labour laws by amending the Industrial Disputes Act to enable industrial establishments employing up to 1,000 employees to retrench workers without obtaining the prior permission of the appropriate government authority. The law as it stands grants

such a facility only to industrial organisations employing up to 100 workers. Sinha also mentioned the need to change the laws pertaining to contract labourers.

Thengadi's outburst reportedly upset Sinha so much that he threatened to resign. The Finance Minister was, however, persuaded not to put in his papers after various leaders of the RSS and the BJP (including the then party president K. Jana Krishnamurthy) distanced themselves from Thengadi's views and told him not to take the BMS leader's remarks seriously. Though the BMS leader's views were described as 'his own', the trade union body never formally disowned Thengadi's remarks. What happened instead was that Labour Minister Jatiya was removed from his post. This decision was widely interpreted by the media as having been taken because Jatiya was perceived to be opposing the 'reform' of the country's labour laws. In his book, *Confessions of a Swadeshi Reformer* (Penguin/Viking, 2007), Sinha regretted he did not get an opportunity to explain his government's position in this regard due to Thengadi's demise.

The Cabinet sought to approve a bill to amend the Industrial Disputes Act on the eve of the presentation of the Union budget for 2002–03 on the last day of February 2002, presumably to enable the Finance Minister to state that he had been able to fulfil the promise contained in his budget speech made a year earlier. That was, however, not to take place. Strong opposition to the move from many of Sinha's colleagues in the Cabinet ensured that the Industrial Disputes Act was not amended. (The UPA government has not even touched this issue knowing well the heat it would generate, especially among the left parties.)

The pulls and pressures within the NDA were evident again after Sinha's fifth budget was presented on February 28, 2002. History was repeated a fortnight later when Sinha had to again rollback his budget proposals. While he had announced a Rs 40 hike in the price of a cylinder of cooking gas, he had to halve the increase following intense pressure from the BJP's allies in the NDA coalition. Some of Sinha's colleagues in the BJP were openly unhappy with his proposals to increase the incidence of income tax on the middle-class and his decision to pare the interest rates on small savings schemes run by the government. Former Delhi Chief Minister and former BJP vice president the late Sahib Singh Verma resigned his post as BJP vice

president after his party received a drubbing in the capital's municipal corporation elections. Verma had publicly blamed Sinha for having antagonised middle-class tax payers by his budget proposals.

Subsequently, there was tremendous pressure on Sinha from his party compatriots at the BJP's Goa conclave. Newspapers reported that there were vicious attacks on Sinha at the party's national executive meeting. It was claimed that the Finance Minister and his officials tried very hard to preserve the 'integrity' of his budget. However, he was reportedly overruled by the Prime Minister himself. On April 26, 2002, Sinha removed the service tax on life insurance. He relaxed the provisions of Section 88 of the Income Tax Act to provide relief to tax payers with annual assessable incomes varying between Rs 1.5 lakh and Rs 5 lakh. He also helped the middle-class by partially restoring the manner in which income from dividends and mutual funds were taxed. These moves benefitted around one-seventh of the 28 million income tax assesseees in the country. The Finance Minister also reduced the excise duty rates on certain textile processes as well as products used by the middle-class, notably, umbrellas and bicycles.

Sinha claimed that the changes in the budget proposals would result in the national exchequer losing an amount in the region of Rs 2,850 crore. He was able to 'save face' because the reduction of the administered interest rates on small savings schemes was not reversed, nor was the new 'security' surcharge on income tax. The face-savers, however, could not help Sinha keep his job. Later that year, Vajpayee reshuffled his Cabinet and Sinha was shunted out to the External Affairs Ministry, while Jaswant Singh, Vajpayee's first choice for the job, finally became Finance Minister once again.

One of the first decisions taken by Jaswant Singh was to switch the portfolios of the two junior ministers (Ministers of State) in his ministry. This decision had to be reversed following a complaint by Shiv Sena supremo Bal Thackeray. The 'rollback' phenomenon had also afflicted Singh. Also, like Sinha, Singh unsuccessfully tried to persuade Labour Minister Sahib Singh Verma to bring down the interest rate on employees' provident fund deposits.

Jaswant Singh was an officer in the army before joining the BJP. He had served as Deputy Chairman, Planning Commission and Foreign Minister. In his second stint as Finance Minister—the first was in the short-lived Vajpayee government in May 1996—his first Union budget

was described as a populist one. One of his first public statements as Finance Minister was that he would try and place grain in the stomach of the indigent and money in the purse of the housewife (*'garib ke pet me dana, grihani ke batua me ana'*). Singh adopted a distinctly more populist stance than Sinha had. In particular, the middle-class was clearly targeted as a section that needed to be wooed back to the BJP's fold. How much of this was because of differences between Singh's and Sinha's economic strategy is a moot question, given the fact that Singh's sops to the electorate all came at a time when important elections, including the 14th general elections, were round the corner.

The 2003–04 budget—like all budgets before it—was certainly political. Nevertheless, it did contain some unpopular decisions. Though he repeatedly assured everybody that there would be no rolling back of his unpopular decisions, the new Finance Minister's arm was twisted by his own colleagues in government. In his budget speech, Jaswant Singh had said that in view of the likely increase in the prices of naphtha and gas—in view of the hike in the prices of all petroleum products in the run-up to the Iraq war—he wished to 'at least' contain the fertiliser subsidy bill. He, therefore, proposed that the issue price of urea be raised by a 'modest' amount of Rs 12 per 50 kg bag. The proposed increase in the administered prices of di-ammonium phosphate and muriate of potash was Rs 10 per 50 kg bag. This move was widely opposed by influential members of Singh's own government. Barely a fortnight after the presentation of the budget, on March 11, the Finance Minister announced in Parliament that he was withdrawing his proposal to increase fertiliser prices. The rollback virus had struck again.

Finance Minister Singh was eager to implement a new value added tax (VAT) regime that was considered to be far superior to the sales tax system that existed in the country. In his February 28, 2003, budget speech, he said the 'coming year would be historic' with states switching over to a VAT system. 'The central government has been a partner with the states, in the highest tradition of cooperative federalism, in this path-breaking reform,' he stated. Less than two months later, Jaswant Singh was singing a different tune. On April 24, he told the Lok Sabha: 'A poorly implemented VAT won't work. Therefore, VAT cannot be implemented unless all states adopt it together.'



What happened was that the Finance Minister could not go ahead with these tax reforms not so much on account of opposition from representatives of rival political parties, but because of staunch resistance from some of his own colleagues in the BJP (like Madan Lal Khurana). These BJP politicians took up cudgels on behalf of sections of traders who were against the implementation of VAT, an important reason being that the new system, it was felt, would check widespread tax evasion. Sections within the BJP also apprehended that VAT could result in an inflationary spurt in the short run that could spoil the party's electoral aspirations later in the year in states like Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi and Chhattisgarh. The BJP's political opponents have in the past derogatorily described it as a 'party of traders'. Chidambaram as Finance Minister in the UPA government was later able to gradually persuade almost all the 28 state governments and the legislatures of two Union territories to implement VAT after extensive consultations—a committee headed by West Bengal Finance Minister Asim Dasgupta did much of the groundwork in this regard.

The Finance Minister's intentions were also opposed by another of his Cabinet colleagues, Labour Minister Sahib Singh Verma. At a time when almost all interest rates in the country were ruling at their lowest levels in nominal terms in three decades, the board of trustees of the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) staunchly resisted a lowering of the interest rate on deposits from a level of 9.5 per cent per annum to 8 per cent. The EPFO has over 30 million industrial workers as its members. Now it may have made good economic sense to pare the interest rate on such deposits, but such a move would certainly not have pleased the workers and their leaders in the trade unions—particularly not at a time when job opportunities in the organised sector were growing at barely 1 per cent per annum and the ranks of the unemployed were swelling.

On May 31, 2003, after a considerable amount of haggling, the government lowered the EPF interest rate by 0.5 per cent to 9 per cent for that financial year. In order to sugar coat the bitter pill and not convey an impression that the government was against the interests of the working class, the central board of trustees of the EPFO agreed to pay a bonus of 0.5 per cent. This bonus, ostensibly paid to celebrate the golden jubilee of the EPFO, meant that the effective

rate of interest on deposits during the fiscal year would remain at 9.5 per cent. Among the biggest opponents to the move to cut the interest rate of EPF deposits were not just the left trade unions, but also representatives of the BMS.

(The issue of reduction in the interest rate on EPF deposits remains a contentious issue between the left and the UPA government. The former believes the government should, if necessary, subsidise the EPFO to ensure that workers are provided a form of social security. Those opposed to an increase in the EPF interest rate argue that an 'artificially high' interest rate on such deposits distorts the overall interest rate structure in the economy. Moreover, only a small section of the overall labour force in the country gains from higher interest rates since workers in the 'organised' sector comprise less than ten per cent of India's total workforce.)

What was not officially admitted by spokespersons of the NDA government during the first half of 2003 was that populism had become the order of the day and that no decision would be taken that could offend any interest group or lobby in view of the state assembly elections scheduled to take place later in the year, as also the forthcoming general elections. Deputy Prime Minister Advani acknowledged in a newspaper interview that 'the pace of reforms has been affected' and that this is 'an experience other democracies have gone through'. 'Everything that is economically correct may not be electorally popular,' Advani observed, adding that changes in labour laws 'will be slow' (*Business Standard*, June 2, 2003).

There were problems galore as far as the economy was concerned. Job opportunities were not expanding fast enough, the inflation rate had picked up and regional imbalances had widened. These issues were all politically sensitive and were being used by the Opposition to beat the government with. In such a scenario, the powers-that-were preferred inaction rather than risk acting decisively and offending one section of the population or the other.

It has often been argued that on account of a growing political consensus on many economic policy issues, the overall direction of economic reforms would not change even if there be political uncertainty or upheavals. Even if this is the case, what is apparent is that the momentum of economic reforms can never be sustained

without political consensus. Thus, in the absence of such a consensus, any government will find it extremely tough to open the country's doors wider to foreign investment, significantly lower interest rates on deposits in the employees' provident fund or privatise profit-making PSUs.

The point worth emphasising is that while it is all very well to talk about the need for sustaining the pace of economic reforms, this objective cannot be realised until and unless there is a broad-based political consensus within and outside the government to achieve such a goal. That consensus still eludes India.

One of the most obvious manifestations of the failure of the NDA government's economic policies was the growth of a 'food mountain' at a time when several states faced drought and even starvation deaths. The Food Corporation of India had around 60 million tonnes of foodgrain in its godowns in the middle of 2002. This was three and a half times the 'minimum buffer norm' of 17 million tonnes. The explanation for this problem of plenty lay in the fact that the Union government had been procuring increasingly higher quantities of wheat and rice—especially from—Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, and Andhra Pradesh—by regularly increasing the minimum support prices paid to farmers. It was no coincidence that four of the BJP's crucial allies in the NDA were major political parties in these regions—the Akali Dal, the INLD, the RLD and the TDP. More importantly, the support base of the SAD, the INLD and the RLD is predominantly among farmers.

Within two years of the UPA government coming to power, the 'mountain' of wheat had depleted on account of, among other reasons, exports and low procurement by government agencies because of a reduction in output. Consequently, in 2006, India imported 5.5 million tones of wheat (mainly from Australia) at a time when world wheat prices had firmed up. In March 2007, the government increased the minimum support price for procurement of wheat by Rs 100 a quintal (100 kilogrammes) to Rs 850 a quintal—the landed price of imported wheat was around Rs 300 a quintal higher. The issue of imports of wheat remained a politically controversial issue right through 2007. The BJP as well as the left criticised the UPA government for allegedly paying Australian farmers prices that were 'twice as high' as the prices paid to Indian farmers. Union Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar justified the imports of wheat on the plea that they were needed to

ensure the country's 'food security' and pleaded helplessness about the high wheat prices that were prevailing in world markets. In late 2006, the country also experienced shortages of pulses, wheat, fruits and vegetables resulting in their prices going up sharply. Inflation, as measured by the official wholesale price index, came close to 7 per cent in January 2007 while various consumer price indices rose by nearly 10 per cent over the previous year. Since high food prices affect the poor more than the rich, this kind of inflation directly translates itself into popular discontent. The electoral defeat of the Congress party in Uttarakhand and Punjab in February 2007 was attributed in part to high prices—as a matter of fact, Sonia Gandhi herself acknowledged that this was so at a party session to analyse the outcome of the assembly elections in the two north Indian states.

There was considerable concern about mounting inflation and 'overheating' of the Indian economy that had grown at over 9 per cent per year, two years in a row for the first time—also for the first time since 1947, the country's GDP had increased by an average of 8.5 per cent a year over a four-year period. The UPA government announced a slew of measures to contain inflation that included tightening money supply, hardening interest rates, stopping forward trading in wheat and rice, curbing exports and reducing customs duties on imports. But much of the damage had already been done.

The food economy is only one example of the kinds of compromises that a coalition government has to make merely to ensure its survival. But these compromises often extracted a heavy toll on the exchequer. Economic commentators like Prem Shankar Jha contend that with coalition governments becoming a 'permanent feature' of governance in India, the capacity of the government to impose short-term sacrifices on the people for long-term benefits has disappeared. In his book, *A Jobless Future: Political Causes of Economic Crisis* (Rupa, 2002), Jha has remarked:

The starting point for reviving the economy, making future growth sustainable, reversing the decline of employment in the organised sector and averting the threat of de-industrialisation is to admit that the 1991 [economic] reforms [initiated by Manmohan Singh, the then Finance Minister in the P. V. Narasimha Rao government] have failed. They have failed because they were left incomplete. This incompleteness is preventing India from becoming a beneficiary of globalisation and turning it into one of its victims....

To return to the economic policies of the UPA government, it became evident from the first budget that was presented in July 2004 by the government (Chidambaram's third as Finance Minister, the first two during the United Front governments in 1996 and 1997) that the influence of the left on important economic policies would be pronounced. With the financial year having begun in April, Chidambaram's budget was more of a holding operation than anything else. He announced a personal income tax relief that was welcomed by the middle class—barely 3 per cent of India's population pays personal income tax. More significantly, the budget imposed a 2 per cent cess on all central taxes to fund the government's primary and secondary education programmes.

In his next budget presented in February 2005, Chidambaram further rationalised the personal income tax regime with the intention of improving revenue collections. The Finance Minister said during a press conference after the presentation of the budget that he could not accept the fact that only 80,000 persons in the country officially declared an annual assessable income in excess of one million rupees. He added that his new tax proposals would widen the income tax net. Collections certainly improved over the following two years, enabling Chidambaram to adhere to targets of fiscal deficit and revenue deficit as a proportion of GDP that had been laid down in the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act that was notified soon after the UPA government came to power. The 2005 budget was more noteworthy for the new taxes it imposed on transactions in securities, on large withdrawals of cash from banks and on fringe benefits given to employees of corporate bodies. Also significant was the government's move to kick off the National Rural Employment Guarantee scheme (detailed earlier).

In the next two budgets presented by Chidambaram in February 2006 and February 2007, the left-of-centre stance of the UPA government continued. In his speeches, considerable emphasis was laid on what the government was doing for farmers and for rural development, agriculture, irrigation, providing drinking water, education, health-care and the physical infrastructure, like roads and electricity. In 2007, Chidambaram added a 1 per cent cess to fund higher education—essentially to provide funds to colleges and universities to increase the number of seats so that the promised

27 per cent quota for OBCs could be implemented. Chidambaram also imposed taxes on the booming information technology sector which had been somewhat of a 'holy cow' in the era of economic reforms.

As Railway Minister, Lalu Prasad Yadav became the toast of the glitterati for the financial turnaround of the Indian Railways—much of it due to the overall buoyancy in the economy, higher loading of freight and a surge in exports of iron ore to China.

On the issue of increasing the foreign direct investment (FDI) limits in sectors like insurance, aviation and mining, Chidambaram could not have his way because of the strident opposition of the left. He did, however, succeed in hiking the FDI limits applicable to private telecommunications firms from 49 per cent to 74 per cent against the wishes of the left and a section of the domestic telecom industry. On another important area, however, the UPA government—in this case, the Ministry of Industry and Commerce headed by Kamal Nath—had to accede to the demands of the left parties: this related to amendments in India's patent law that have a major impact on the pharmaceutical industry and the price of medicines, which have traditionally been among the lowest in the world in India. Kamal Nath also found himself caught in a controversy when he tried to open up the retail sector—India has more shopkeepers as a proportion of its population than any other country in the world—to foreign investment. FDI in the retail trade was in theory opened up only to a limited extent—single brand outlets, for instance, were allowed as were wholesale (cash-and-carry) operations in which the foreign investor does not directly deal with the consumer. However, international retail giants like Walmart entered India by tying up with local business groups, in this case the Bharti group, one of India's biggest private telecom service providers. The 'backdoor' entry of Walmart triggered a debate on the impact that FDI in retail could have on India's millions of small shopowners and hawkers. Sonia Gandhi wrote a letter to the Prime Minister suggesting that the impact be studied before the laws were relaxed.

A move by Kamal Nath's ministry that turned out to be even more contentious was the policy on special economic zones (SEZs). Under this policy, the government approved hundreds of SEZs all over the country, though many of these were simply existing export processing zones and free trade zones, some set up as early as the 1960s, being

reclassified as SEZs. What made SEZs really controversial was the fact these typically would involve acquisition of large tracts of land—in many cases fertile farmland. It became evident very soon that issues like the compensation that should be paid to farmers in such cases as well as rehabilitation and retraining those who had lost their land and their livelihoods would not be easy to resolve.

Even before the Singur and Nandigram incidents (detailed in the chapter on Left Parties) attracted national attention, during a conclave of Congress chief ministers held in Nainital in September 2006, Sonia Gandhi cautioned the government against acquiring farmland for setting up SEZs. Industrialisation, she said, should not jeopardise the country's agricultural prospects. This prompted Kamal Nath's ministry to immediately dash off letters to all chief ministers, advising them that they should not acquire fertile farmland for SEZs. Subsequently, he stated that land for establishment of SEZs should not be acquired by state governments but by the promoters of the SEZs themselves. The hue and cry over the SEZs policy resulted in the government deciding to work out a comprehensive rehabilitation policy for those whose land would be acquired.

In the past, the establishment of free trade zones or export processing zones had not created a controversy because these were government owned—such zones were not very different from industrial estates set up by state governments except that tax laws applicable to these areas were different making them 'foreign territories' within the country for the purpose of levying taxes. Moreover, unlike in the past, in the proposed new SEZs, generous tax concessions were granted not only to those who promoted the manufacturing or service ventures but to real-estate developers as well. Many of the proposed SEZs were to be set up by information technology firms that apprehended that they would be denied tax breaks after 2009 under the existing tax regime.

Apart from those whose land and livelihoods were to be taken away, it was not just the left or the BJP that opposed the new policy on SEZs. Even neo-liberal economists argued against the establishment of hundreds of SEZs. They pointed out that there would be nothing special about these 'special' economic zones unlike the few in China that had been set up over vast tracts of land near already-developed industrial cities like Hongkong and Shanghai. While the Reserve

Bank of India directed banks to loan funds to projects in SEZs at interest rates that were applicable to commercial real estate ventures, the chief economist of the IMF Raghuram Rajan apprehended that the new SEZs would not create new industries and employment opportunities but merely divert existing jobs to new locations. Finance Minister Chidambaram was particularly upset that the government would stand to lose huge amounts of tax revenues without major gains to the economy. Academicians sympathetic to the left, such as historian Sumit Sarkar, described SEZs as 'special exploitation zones' and said these would result in the 'biggest land grab in Indian history'. The difference, Sarkar added, was that unlike land-grab movements of the poor that had been witnessed in India, this time round land was being taken by the rich from the poor. In the final analysis, the SEZs were perceived as 'enclaves of prosperity in a sea of deprivation' that would widen the already-wide regional economic imbalances in the country.

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To return to the question raised in the early part of this chapter, has the period of political instability that followed the May 1996 elections, and which also coincided with the phase of coalition governments in New Delhi, been good or bad for the Indian economy? In a paper entitled 'Electoral Cycles and Economic Policies of Governments of India' by Kausik Chaudhuri and Sugato Dasgupta (*India Development Report 2002*, Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, Oxford University Press), it has been indicated that more investments take place when coalition governments are in power. One reason why this happens is because various regional interests are held together by 'generous distribution of infrastructure projects'.

Economist Surjit S. Bhalla wrote in the week before Yashwant Sinha presented his second budget on February 27, 1999:

Political instability does not matter. The conventional wisdom is that political wisdom is bad for the economy. In its survey of investment houses in mid-July [1998], 'Asia Pacific Consensus Forecasts' reported that the most unfavourable factor affecting the



economic prospects of India was ‘political uncertainty’ followed by international sanctions [after the nuclear tests of May 1998] and the Asian crisis. There is a different, more compelling view. Political instability is actually good for economic reform. The contention is that lack of political dominance means that politicians in power will make the extra reform in order to fight for marginal votes in a future election. And if political stability is present, the politicians are unlikely to make an effort because of their inherent ‘short-sightedness’, or complacency.

Bhalla cites what he calls six ‘pieces of evidence’ to support his claim that economic reforms occur when there is political instability and do not occur when there is stability.

The first example is from late 1984 when Rajiv Gandhi assumed his dynastic post with 415 seats or more than three-fourths majority.... Mr. Gandhi had talked of reforms and expectations were high. The rapidity with which the prospect of reforms disappeared can only be compared with the speed with which a BMW zooms towards 60 mph—or the speed with which Mr Gandhi reduced his party’s seats to less than half in late 1989 (197 seats in a 543 seat parliament). Second, the Narasimha Rao–Manmohan Singh reforms were undertaken by a minority government and amidst considerable political and economic uncertainty in 1991. Third, once Narasimha Rao got comfortable with a majority in Parliament (political stability) the reforms stopped. Fourth, the United Front government undertook significant reforms with the political disadvantages of two Prime Ministers in eighteen months....

Bhalla goes on to list the reforms made by the UF government: reduction in the maximum rate of personal taxes to only 30 per cent, rationalising of petroleum products pricing, movement towards privatisation (albeit painfully slow), beginning of deregulation of interest rates and movement towards capital account convertibility by easing gold imports. The fifth example is the change in the BJP’s position on spiralling onion prices before and after the November 1998 assembly elections. Before the elections, the party was complacent but not after it was roundly defeated in Delhi, Rajasthan

and Madhya Pradesh. Bhalla, who runs his own consulting unit, went on to extol the virtues of the Vajpayee government in his sixth and final example.

After the defeat [in the assembly elections], the BJP has been a changed economic and political animal, The Jekyll–Hyde reality of the BJP is now exposed, and exposed by reform [Jekyll] elements within the BJP. There is a liberal outlook on both political and economic matters. The Hyde wing of the BJP is still there, is still vocal, but it is being relegated to the sidelines. It is contended that this radical change for the better was precipitated by the impending ouster of the BJP—i.e. increased instability makes for good political and economic policy. Since December 1 [1998], the BJP has moved considerably forward on economic reforms—the beginnings of a cut in interest rates, the heightened concern with government borrowings and the fiscal deficit, introduction of reforms on insurance and the conviction that large-scale privatisation is needed are all hallmarks of a ‘new’ BJP.... When the history of BJP rule is written, it is likely that 1998 will be remembered as the year of the great BJP divide—and as the beginning of its *avatar* as a liberal reform party. The fringe elements of the BJP (lumpen elements who would like to take India back to the authoritarian, inquisition, sixteenth century political era and to leftist, protectionist, swadeshi economic policies) are being sidelined—they have nowhere to go. Why this was not realised earlier by the BJP is a mystery—though it must be said that the party caught on to the reality in less than a year.

These views can be countered since at the heart of the issue is what constitutes ‘real’ economic reforms. Bhalla’s praise for the BJP’s heightened concern for high government borrowings or high deficits may have been premature. No politician would agree entirely with the thesis that governments act only when pushed to the corner, that political instability would invariably lead to economic reforms. Some amount of instability may be good for keeping those in power on their toes and preventing them from becoming complacent.

How much political instability—or how little—is desirable is a far more difficult question to answer. As is evident, mere talk of reform is not enough. If these reforms are not perceived to be improving the lot of the majority of Indians, the electorate would throw out those who

initiated them. Witness the humiliating defeat that was suffered by the Congress party in the May 1996 elections or by the NDA eight years later in 2004. Even if nearly one-third of India's population remains functionally illiterate and even if at least one out of four Indians lives below the poverty line (whichever way one may choose to define it), the electorate of the country has shown time and again that it is capable of taking mature, considered decisions regarding those who claim to represent it.

Economist Deepak Nayyar and political scientist Pranab Bardhan (*Democracy in India*, edited by Nirja Gopal Jayal, Oxford University Press) have argued that the current political climate is not favourable for the kind of reforms being ushered in. Their arguments are not of the usual 'instability is bad for reforms' or 'populism versus reforms' variety. They make a rather more substantive point. Nayyar points out that the economics of markets excludes those without the requisite entitlements, whereas democracy seeks to include. This, he says, is the 'essence of the tension between the economics of markets and the politics of democracy'. He goes on to say that the economic reforms programme introduced in 1991 'was simply not related to the institutional framework of political democracy'. 'It was, therefore, neither shaped by political processes nor rooted in social formations, which could have provided constituencies in polity and society.' As a result, he goes on to add: 'In the sphere of economics, the old consensus has broken down while a new consensus has not emerged.'

Bardhan points out that the shift of political power from the centre to the states in recent years has been accompanied by a shift of power towards the intermediate and lower castes. This, he argues, means that the earlier practice by which economic decision-making was institutionally insulated, is getting eroded. The concern for group equity and group rights—as against individual rights—runs counter to the market philosophy and hence creates a context which is not favourable for reforms aimed at making the economy market-friendly.

In conclusion, the three broad propositions on the relationship between coalition governments and economic policies mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, bear reiteration.

First, there has been no obvious or clear-cut pattern in the relationship in India thus far. The performance of the country's

economy has not been noticeably different under different coalition governments from what it has been when single party governments have ruled India. Nor has the economic policy framework been significantly different.

Second, coalition governments have not been able to change certain structural imbalances in the economy: for instance, regional imbalances in economic development between the west and the east, the north and the south. Western India has done better than eastern India, the south has moved ahead much faster than the north in many respects. Has the presence of coalition governments made much of a difference in redressing these regional disparities in development? Not really. Certainly not as yet. While political parties have apparently come closer together on issues of economic ideology, the so-called 'consensus' on economic reforms has periodically broken down on crucial questions. Such questions relate to privatisation or revival of ailing PSUs as well as the speed at which the economy should be 'globalised' or exposed to international competition. Thus, even as parties have appeared to come closer to one another on economic policy issues, there is considerable internal dissension on economic policy issues within the the BJP and the Congress.

Finally, unlike Japan or Italy where the nitty-gritty of economic decision-making may not change that much with each new coalition government, in a developing country like India, politics has dominated—and will continue to exert influence over—every minor economic decision, from the price at which the Food Corporation of India should procure grain to the question of whether export of onions should be allowed at any given point in time.

# Chapter 11

## Looking Ahead

How long will the era of coalition politics continue in India? Is it never going to be possible for a single party, be it the BJP or the Congress, to dominate the country's polity? The answer to the latter question is relatively easy: it seems unlikely in the foreseeable future. The answer to the first question is a more difficult one. Is India then heading towards a two-party system? Certainly not in a hurry, if it is at all doing so. The country may remain multi-polar for quite a while. If anything, the polity could get even further fragmented in the immediate future. Will India then get accustomed to a polity where two broad coalitions dominate?

So what is 'new' about the era of coalition politics in India? The Congress ruled the country for more than four and a half decades because it had the character of a coalition. Under Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the party was a unique non-violent force against colonial rule and it represented almost all sections of society when India became politically independent in 1947. For the next 20 years, the coalition character of the Congress remained more or less intact. The umbrella nature of the Congress was first seriously challenged in 1967, but the manifestation of the symptom was largely restricted to state assemblies. A decade later, the Congress lost Parliamentary elections for the first time in independent India. With the benefit of hindsight we can now see that the process of a single party coalition giving way to more explicit coalitional arrangements had already begun.

It could be argued that but for two dramatic assassinations—Indira Gandhi's in 1984 and Rajiv Gandhi's in 1991—the decline of the Congress' electoral fortunes would already have reached an advanced stage as early as the second half of the 1980s. Perhaps the 'new' era of coalition politics in India would have started well before it ultimately did. Since there can be no counter-factual arguments to this hypothesis,

it might seem that it really does not matter whether we accept it or not. That is not quite true. If the elections of 1984 and 1991 are recognised as ones in which the Congress performed much better than it would have if no dramatic events had influenced them, the picture one gets is of a party that has been on a more or less steady decline since as far back as 1967 (remember the 1972 general elections were soon after an India–Pakistan war in which Indira Gandhi could bask in the glory of having contributed to the break-up of Pakistan, pushing domestic issues into the background). The elections of 1980–81 then become the only general elections since 1967 in which the Congress has come to power without the assistance of issues either extraneous to domestic politics (though one can quarrel with the description of an India–Pakistan war as being extraneous to Indian politics) or with cathartic events like the assassination of a Prime Minister.

Such a perspective must also mean that the decline in the fortunes of the Congress is not the result of mismanagement by one leader or the other, but has a more lasting structural basis. The foibles of individual leaders may have contributed to the process, perhaps even hastened it, but they cannot be held solely responsible for the decay. A question that arises from such an understanding would be whether the process is peculiar to the Congress or is more generic in nature. Could it be the case that the very model of a coalition within a single party has become unviable? The evidence certainly seems to suggest that this is the case.

Whether one sees the Mandal-Kamandal standoff as a cause of the fragmentation of the polity or as its consequence, what is undisputable today is that many parts of the country—in particular the Hindi heartland—are experiencing a sharpening of divisions within society, whether on the basis of caste, religion or ethnicity. It is difficult to see any party being able to hold together groups with such hostility towards each other for very long. A case in point was the BJP's attempt at forging a coalition between the upper-castes represented by leaders like Rajnath Singh and Kalraj Mishra and the intermediate castes represented by Kalyan Singh.

There are empirical reasons as well for foreseeing a reasonably long period of coalition politics in India. Historically, Parliamentary

elections in India have by and large delivered fairly decisive mandates in each state. It is another matter that since each state may have voted decisively for one or the other of two contending fronts or parties, the aggregate result may have thrown up an uncertain verdict. In 1996, for instance, the Janata Dal and its allies swept states like Bihar, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. The BJP and its allies had unquestioned dominance in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Maharashtra. The Congress and its allies secured equally decisive verdicts in Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and the north-eastern states. The net result was a hung Parliament with the single largest party, the BJP, getting less than one-fourth of the total number of Lok Sabha seats. This pattern of decisive state-level verdicts has begun to change. Uttar Pradesh no longer yields any one victor in Lok Sabha polls, nor do states like Maharashtra, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu or Andhra Pradesh always give clear mandates.

As for the much talked about bipolarity of the Indian polity, as we have already shown in such great detail, it is more wishful thinking than actual fact. In our earlier book that was published in March 2004, we had written:

Here's a thought that might have seemed shocking till not very long ago, but can by no means be ruled out any longer. We could in the near future, perhaps as early as the 14th general elections in 2004, have a Lok Sabha in which the BJP and the Congress put together cannot muster a majority. This may or may not happen, but it does not seem impossible as it once would have.

The 14th general elections saw the Congress and the BJP together obtaining just 11 seats more than the half-way mark of 272 seats. This trend is likely to continue. Few would be surprised if the two largest political parties in India fail to together win more than half the 543 seats in the Lok Sabha in the 15th general elections. Whether it's at the level of state assembly elections or polls to panchayat bodies, the top two candidates usually obtain around three-fourths of the total votes cast. But this 'bipolarity' at a local level, when aggregated across 28 states and seven union territories across the country, translates into a complex kaleidoscope of coalitions and shifting political formations at an all-India level.

There's a more difficult question to answer in the context of coalition politics: Will coalition governments necessarily remain unstable? That's a much tougher prediction to make. As the old saying goes, a week is a long time in politics. The proposition may be particularly true for the new, highly fluid and unpredictable phase that politics in the world's largest democracy is currently going through. What can be said though is that the sooner parties recognise that ideological affinity is the best guarantor of the longevity of alliances, the shorter will be the period of unstable governments.

Why are we not gripped by despondency at the thought of coalitions continuing to rule India in the foreseeable future? Given the conventional wisdom that coalitions tend to slow down decision-making and make official policy a prisoner of conflicting claims, it might seem that a future dominated by coalitions is quite a depressing scenario. But then, are these not the same 'problems' that are mentioned when democracies are compared with dictatorial regimes? That is no coincidence. Indeed, the reason why we are not alarmed by the thought that coalitions could be here to stay is precisely because they could make a major contribution to deepening and strengthening Indian democracy. If they have arisen because large sections of the people of India felt excluded from the process of development, they will survive only if they are able to reverse that exclusion. It is possible, of course, that the era of coalitions will make electoral politics more cynical, sectarian and opportunistic, but we are optimistic that the same groundswell of popular discontentment that rejected earlier regimes for not being responsive enough will prevent such a denouement, at least in the medium to long term.

The burden of expectations that coalition governments will have to bear is by no means small. At least one out of four Indians is steeped in poverty. That's one-fourth of nearly 1.2 billion people, almost equal to the population of the United States. More than two-thirds of India's population live on less than two US dollars a day. Almost half the population of India is denied basic education and health care. Nearly two-thirds of the country's girl children do not receive any education worth the name. Yet, India's institutions of higher learning, like the Indian Institutes of Technology and the Indian Institutes of Management, produce students who have made their mark the



world over. India entered the new millennium with nearly one-third of the world's computer engineers and a quarter of the world's undernourished. Academic Shiv Visvanathan comments that the problem with many of India's institutions of higher learning are that these have become transformed into intellectual assembly lines of the world, clearing houses for ideas, both good and bad, which the world gratefully accepts or summarily rejects.

There is a similar stark contrast in the area of health care. Nobody seriously disputes that the country's health care system needs drastic overhauling. The government used to spend more per head during the 1950s and 1960s than it does at present. The governments of India's less developed and smaller neighbouring countries have better health care facilities than large parts of the country (especially the north). Only Kerala has a health care system that is comparable to that in the US. On the other hand, there is no dearth of Indian doctors who have made it big in the US, while the British National Health Service is dominated by Indian doctors. Surely there is nothing basically wrong with the quality of education provided in the country's medical colleges. India's pharmaceuticals manufacturing industry is one of the few industries which is bigger than its counterpart in China. Yet the fact is that the Indian pharma industry produces and sells huge quantities of the kinds of drugs we don't really need: cough and cold mixtures and digestive aids are two examples. Many drugs banned in most countries of the world are freely sold in India—there is even a plethora of what doctors call 'irrational' formulations. While Indian companies export bulk drugs all over the world and some have expanded the frontiers of medical science with their research, the average Indian has no access to health care worth the name.

There is no dearth of such examples of the gulf between the achievements and possessions of India's elite and the poverty of resources among the rest. It is not without reason that India is seen as a land of amazing contrasts and contradictions. More often than not, this fact is stated with a sense of pride. It is time we recognised that those on the wrong side of these contrasts see the situation rather differently. Unlike in the past, they are no longer willing to lament their fate. They have chosen to express themselves and in the process

the Indian polity has got fragmented like never before. But the beneficiaries of this process—the small regional or caste-based parties—would take their support base for granted at their own peril.

The programme of economic reforms has used the disillusionment with the Nehruvian model of development as its moral justification. Ironically, however, whatever little consensus exists on the contours of the reform package is restricted to those who were not the worst sufferers of the controlled economy—the middle-class and those at the highest rungs of the economic ladder. As one descends that ladder, the consensus is replaced by scepticism if not suspicion, which explains why anti-reform measures are still labelled ‘populist’. The scepticism is not without basis. The have-nots have seen this same elite sell them the Nehruvian dream. They are understandably not too keen to trust the elite today when it tells them that the reforms will usher in a better tomorrow.

The exclusion, of course, is not only in the economic sphere. Almost one-third of the country’s citizens still suffer social discrimination on account of the caste system 60 years after Independence. The people of this country are divided along every conceivable line: class, religion, language, region, race, and overlapping all of these, the caste system. Unless India’s inequalities in terms of social and economic classes narrow considerably, the country will not be able to ‘develop’ or move ahead in the international arena, certainly not fast enough. It might seem difficult to sustain the people’s faith in a democracy that repeatedly fails to deliver even basic human needs to them. Conversely, many of the non-economic divisions in Indian society would conceivably become less oppressive and perhaps gradually disappear if the economic divide is reduced.

That then is the challenge facing coalition governments of the future. It is certainly a huge challenge. Coalitions, however, are arguably better equipped to face up to the challenge than any single party in India at the moment.

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