

THE WEDNESDAY INTERVIEW | MALLIKARJUN KHARGE

‘Ayodhya will have no resonance with the public’

The leader of the Congress party in the Lok Sabha on the Assembly polls in five States, the need for Opposition unity, and the coalition government in Karnataka

VARGHESE K. GEORGE

Mallikarjun Kharge is leader of the Congress party in the Lok Sabha, Member of Parliament from Karnataka, and a former Union Railway Minister. In this interview, Mr. Kharge lists the major issues that the Congress is planning to bring up in the winter session of Parliament, explains why Congress president Rahul Gandhi is a challenger to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and says the Ayodhya issue will not fool the public. Excerpts:

What will be the major issues for you during the next Parliament session?

■ Rafale is at the top of our agenda. The government's blatant takeover of the CBI is another. The brazen attempts to undermine the RBI, issues relating to the agriculture sector, the distress that the government fails to address will be taken up, including issues related to Minimum Support Price. The undemocratic, illegal and immoral dissolution of the Jammu and Kashmir Assembly will be raised. Interference in the functioning of autonomous institutions will be raised. Let's see how the government and the Speaker respond. We shall try to persuade the Speaker to give priority to all these issues that concern the people and affect the functioning of our democracy.

Do you think the Congress campaign on Rafale is resonating with the public? The BJP says people don't care about what you say.

■ People at large are feeling cheated that a deal that was concluded during the UPA time at ₹570 crore per plane is being [taken forward] for ₹1,670 crore per piece. How can this be a non-issue? The Modi government is ordering only 36 jets, that too at a hugely inflated price. This is a matter of the country's defence and security. If the BJP says this is a non-issue, that itself exposes its attitude towards matters of national se-

curity and transparency.

You are a petitioner in the Supreme Court against the abrupt removal of the CBI Director by sending him on leave. You have raised procedural questions regarding the government's decision. But the court has not given attention to your plea yet. In what direction do you see the case going?

■ I don't want to comment on the Supreme Court's attitude and how it might look at my petition. I am a member of the committee that selects the CBI Director. The Prime Minister is the chairman of the committee. The Chief Justice himself is a member of the committee. The Act is clear that any selection must be made by the committee, and for any transfer or for taking any action, the committee alone has the power. The Act [Section 4A of the Delhi Special Police Establishment Act] is clear that before such actions, the government must consult the committee. How can the government unilaterally act, that too in the dead of the night, as it did? Even if there was an urgent need to ask the CBI Director to go on leave, the government should have called for a meeting of the committee and placed the facts before it. I don't want to comment further, but I am confident that the Supreme Court will see the point.

What is your assessment of the public mood in the five States that are going to



polls?

■ The Congress has a chance to win all the five States. Our cadres are working in full strength and with total commitment. You cannot but notice the formidable unity in the party.

But there are reports about widespread rebellion in the party in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh.

■ Ninety-nine per cent of our candidate selection has been bang on. There are a few instances here and there of those who could not be accommodated getting upset. But that is a minor glitch. Our feedback is clear that there is a groundswell of support for the Congress and severe anger against the BJP in all the five States. They are particularly angry with Modiji for demonetisation, GST and his failure to deliver on the tall promises he made to bring back black money, deposit ₹15 lakh in everyone's account, provide two crore new jobs. People are realising the dishonesty of his politics. Now he has announced

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one more *jumla* – that small and medium enterprises can get a loan in 59 minutes. Initially they believed him because he was new. Now people are telling him: you promised us *achhe din* and duped us; we want a return of the UPA days.

How do you think the Assembly polls will impact national politics?

■ Naturally, the State polls will have an impact on national politics. Though local issues dominate in these States, and national issues will come up more prominently in 2019, some boost will be there for the Congress from the results of these elections.

How has the ongoing campaign helped Mr.

Gandhi's image? Has he proven anything? Is he a serious challenger to Prime Minister Modi in 2019?

■ Yes, 100%. He has proved his mettle to be the leader of the country. Who is the BJP criticising? Who is Modiji targeting? It is only Mr. Gandhi and always Mr. Gandhi. No other party leader is attacked and abused by the BJP. The Prime Minister is scared of Mr. Gandhi and that is the reason why he is attacking him all the time. That in itself is proof that Mr. Gandhi has emerged as a challenger to Mr. Modi.

How do you see Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu's attempts to create a national understanding of all parties against the BJP? What will be the role of the Congress in any such emergent understanding?

■ Everybody should do their best to unite people against the divisive ideology of the Sangh Parivar and the BJP. We are all uniting because of the dictatorial functioning of

the Prime Minister and the ideology that he pursues, which is harmful for our country and people. He is trying to divide society to retain power. Any mobilisation against his dangerous style and ideology will have the full support of the Congress. And we are in the forefront of that resistance. We make sacrifices for the cause, as you saw in Karnataka. Though we had more MLAs in Karnataka, we gave the post of Chief Minister and all the important portfolios to a regional party. That shows how accommodating we are in our attempts to take all parties along.

Do you think the Karnataka model of supporting a smaller party for a larger cause can be replicated in other States or at the Centre in 2019?

■ Let's see. It depends on the situation, which could be different from place to place. And wherever that occasion arises, our high command will take a decision.

You personally had a legitimate claim to be the Chief Minister of Karnataka. Are you disappointed that the Congress gave the chair to a smaller party?

■ That does not arise now. Now, I am the leader of the Congress in the Lok Sabha. We have sacrificed our post of Chief Minister with a sense of duty to protect democracy, the Constitution, and the secular principles of our republic, for inclusive growth, and to oppose the forces that divide the country on the basis of religion, caste and language. My party took the right decision. There is no question of any disappointment. If our ideology makes progress, and our efforts to uphold these principles are successful, that is satisfying

for me.

Are you satisfied with the performance of the JD(S)-Congress coalition government in Karnataka?

■ It has been there only for a few months and you should give them some time before making any judgment. They are doing their best. Meanwhile, the BJP is instigating people to create disturbance in the State and destabilise the government. The government is working hard... the coalition will remain stable and complete its term.

Do you expect that some parties that are with the BJP will leave and join you?

■ Those who believe in the principles of secularism, fraternity and tolerance... if they realise their mistake of joining the BJP and come to us, we will welcome them. Those who believe in or support the RSS's ideology will continue with them; those who don't believe in that ideology will leave them.

You spoke about the Congress's opposition to divisive politics. Congress leader C.P. Joshi made remarks last week that were widely seen as betraying a casteist outlook. How do you explain that?

■ Mr. Gandhi has made it clear that such statements should not come from senior leaders of the party. He has since then apologised for his comments. So, that issue is closed, as he himself realised that it was a mistake.

Many non-BJP critics of the Congress also find merit in the argument that the Congress is largely an upper caste-party. How do you respond to that?

■ The Congress is the only

party that takes all the people into its fold. You will find minorities, Scheduled Castes, Other Backward Classes, upper castes in our leadership. Everybody is welcome in the party and everyone has an equal chance to rise to the leadership in the party. You tell me which party has such diversity among its leadership? During the Congress government, important portfolios went to members of the SC, OBC, and weaker sections. Contrast that with the current BJP government. Name one significant Ministry that is under the command of a Minister from a weaker section. The BJP talks big, but unless you entrust leaders from the weaker sections with important responsibilities, they will not be able to assert themselves as a community.

Former Congress chief Sonia Gandhi campaigned in Telangana last week. Will she campaign in 2019?

■ We will see. Telangana was a particular case, as many people requested her to campaign. She has a special bond with the people of Telangana and people consider her 'Amma'. After a lot of persuasion, she went there last week and huge crowds gathered to listen to her.

There is new mobilisation underway for a temple in Ayodhya. What impact will this have on national politics?

■ Every time there is an election, the BJP thinks of the temple. By March 2019, the elections will be announced. This is an attempt to mobilise their cadres ahead of the polls, like they have been doing for the last 30-40 years. But people are clever. You can't make all people fools all the time. So this will have no resonance with the public.

SINGLE FILE

Forest rights hold the key

Why it could impact the results in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh

ARVIND KHARE



Pundits are busy speculating about winners and losers in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. We will know for sure soon, but do past trends give any insight and is there something new this time?

Past trends in both States have been nothing short of dramatic, and this drama has always played out in the tribal reserved constituencies in M.P. Between the elections of 2008 and 2013, 27 Scheduled Tribes (ST) constituencies flipped in the State, i.e. the electorate voted for a different party than on the previous occasion. The same trend was noticeable in the 2008 election, but data are not strictly comparable. The percentage for flipped constituencies in ST areas was 58% while for the general electorate it was 51%. For the Scheduled Castes (SC) constituencies it was 40%. In Chhattisgarh, where the elections were much closer in 2013, the electorate flipped parties across the board. Overall 58% constituencies were flipped, including 55% in ST constituencies and 60% in SC constituencies.

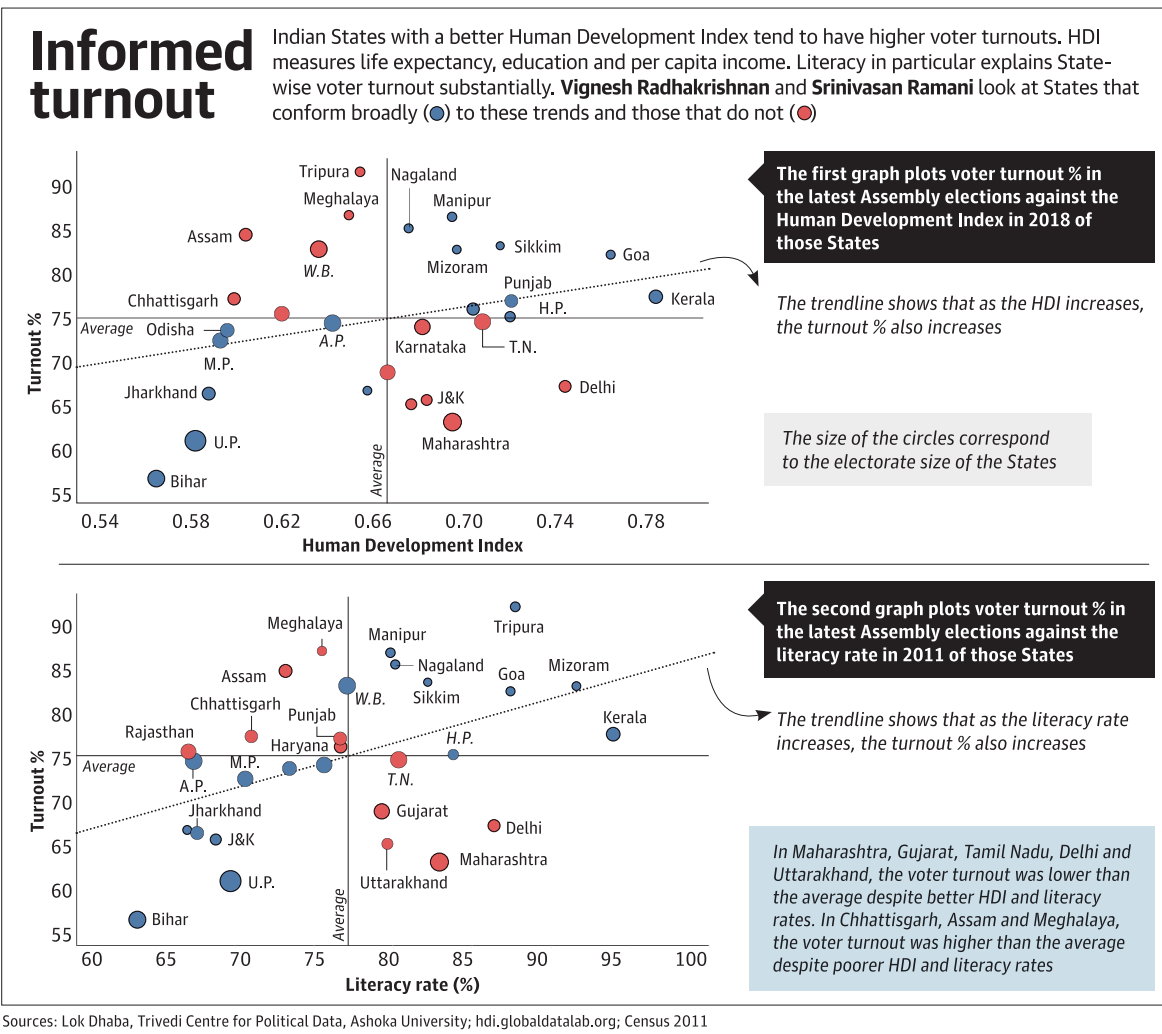
Although ST and SC constituencies comprise 32% and 39% of the total seats in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, respectively, the flipping of SC and ST constituencies led to no change of government because there was no preference for a single party. Overall, 22 constituencies flipped for the BJP, 24 for the Congress and one to another party in Chhattisgarh. In Madhya Pradesh, 67 constituencies flipped for the BJP, 43 for the Congress and seven for other parties. The voters essentially registered their unhappiness with their currently elected representatives. Their displeasure with all parties over many elections is apparent, reflecting a long history of broken promises.

This time, however, may be different for three reasons. First, there is a distinct clamour amongst the tribal communities for recognition of their collective rights on forests under the Forest Rights Act (FRA). They are more organised, forceful and have made it a political issue. Second, after years of demanding social and economic equality, without success, the Dalits have also finally crystallised their demand for the ownership of land of five acres per family. In numerous constituencies, they have joined hands with tribal communities for forest rights recognition as a means of getting collective rights to forest land. Finally, the FRA potential extends beyond ST and SC constituencies, enabling them to make common cause with other rural communities. In 174 out of 217 rural constituencies in Madhya Pradesh, the number of potential FRA rights-holding voters is more than the victory margin. In 69 out of 81 rural constituencies in Chhattisgarh, the number of potential FRA rights-holding voters exceeds the victory margins of the 2013 election. No wonder, FRA implementation figures prominently in the manifestos of major political parties. A combination of these factors may result in a different outcome.

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DATA POINT



FROM The Hindu. ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO NOVEMBER 28, 1968

Ceylon P.M. emphasises special ties with India

The Prime Minister of Ceylon, Mr. Dudley Senanayake, to-day [November 27] said with confidence that with the general common approach that existed between his country and India, "agreed solutions between us would not be difficult" on all problems of mutual interest and international issues. Mr. Senanayake was reciprocating the sentiments of warm and abiding friendship between the two countries expressed by the Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, while welcoming him at the Palam airport. Mr. Senanayake, who arrived here [New Delhi] on an eight-day State visit, was received by the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister, Mr. Morarji Desai, other Cabinet Ministers, diplomats and senior officials besides a large gathering of non-officials, Indians as well as Ceylonese.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO NOVEMBER 28, 1918.

The Tamil Lexicon.

(From an Editorial)

"Time is one thing and eternity is another", and lovers of the Tamil language have reasons to doubt if ever the Tamil Lexicon will see the light of day, if the present blundering policy is persisted in. The public have been following the progress (or the lack of it) of this grand enterprise with feelings bordering on disgust. Up to April 1918, a sum of Rs. 53,500 had been placed, we are told, at the disposal of the University for expenditure on the Lexicon. The Local Government have been further pleased to say that, according to present calculations, the Lexicon will not be ready for the press before January 1921 and that it is not possible to forecast with accuracy the further expenditure that may have to be incurred. If we are not mistaken, the first estimate of cost of the Lexicon was one lakh of rupees, and now that more than half that amount has been expended, may we ask the Syndicate and the Government whether any appreciable progress has been made with the work.

CONCEPTUAL
Moralistic fallacy

PHILOSOPHY

This refers to the fallacy of assuming that only what is morally good can be a part of nature. In other words, whatever is considered to be morally wrong is assumed to be unnatural by people committing the moralistic fallacy. For instance, it may be assumed that since violence is morally wrong, it is not a part of human nature. The moralistic fallacy is often considered to be the opposite of the naturalistic fallacy where people assume that whatever is prevalent in the natural world is also morally good by default. It is said to affect the acceptability of politically incorrect scientific research.

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