

THE WEDNESDAY INTERVIEW | BHUPESH BAGHEL

# 'I don't think we should be talking to Naxals'

The Chief Minister of Chhattisgarh on tackling Maoism, the Congress party's revival in the State, and his government's strategy to strengthen the rural economy

VARGHESE K. GEORGE

Bhupesh Baghel, the new Chief Minister of Chhattisgarh, is considered one of the architects of the Congress's victory in the recent Assembly election. In a free-wheeling interview, he talked about how he rebuilt the Congress after being appointed president of the party State unit in 2014, his agenda for governance, and approach to tackling Maoist violence. Excerpts:

**What explains the impressive performance of the party in Chhattisgarh?**

Historically, the Congress has been strong in the State. When Ajit Jogi became the Chief Minister of the newly formed State in 2000, people did not like him, for whatever reasons. This is the first time that we fought without Jogi. That is the first reason.

When I was made party president in 2014, I realised that by the time of the 2018 election, the BJP would have finished 15 years in office, and it would have all the resources... We had lost the Assembly three times and parliamentary elections three times. Congress workers had fallen into dependency due to repeated failures. We had absolutely no resources. We had no leadership. All our leaders - Mahendra Karma, V.C. Shukla, Nandkumar Patel... the entire leadership was lost in a tragic way [in a Maoist attack in 2013]. I brought into the party's leadership a host of leaders between the ages of 35 and 50. In some districts, I made NSUI [National Students Union of India] leaders DCC [District Congress Committee] presidents. We observed that the BJP had turned a good section of the State administration into their blind followers. We brainstormed. The conclusion was, unless we activate our booth-level network, we have no chance of beating the BJP's tactics. We decided that we must have at least 10-15 people in each booth, who cannot be lured or threatened. In all 90

constituencies, we did training programmes two times.

**What could be the lessons for the Congress from Chhattisgarh for its revival in other States?**

We started with whatever we had, to launch agitations against the government. In June 2014, as soon as the Narendra Modi government came to power, in our State, poor people saw a reduction in ration cards. We mobilised the affected people. There were localities where we got up to 3,000 people to file complaints. The success of the campaign gave a new lease of life to the organisation, our workers found new enthusiasm, and people found new trust in the Congress. Then we took up the issues of farmers. We asked them to not sell any grain, to force the government to listen to them, on December 1, 2014. There are 1,400 agriculture societies. They did not procure a single grain that day. That increased people's trust in us even more.

In this fashion, whatever issue concerned the people, we took it up and led the struggle. Some were successful, some were failures. The government tried to suppress us. That gave us the strength to fight. Congress workers began educating people on the issues. What we used to discuss at the State level began to be talked about in mohallas, pan shops, tea shops. All sections of the society: the poor, the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes, traders, farm-



ers, government employees... we fought for all of them. We went to jail numerous times, got out and restarted the struggle. We never gave up.

**You have just one of the 11 Lok Sabha seats in the State. Do you hope to reverse the score in 2019?**

We are planning to make it 100% in our favour. In the Assembly we won three-fourths, but in 2019, we will win all the seats.

**How are you planning to select candidates for 2019?**

Rahulji always says workers must have a say in candidate selection. For the first time, the screening committee for candidate selection went outside Delhi this year. Screening committee members went to each district, took the opinion of party workers. This time we will do the same thing: ask the party workers for their opinion on candidates for the Lok Sabha polls. We will seek their opi-

**Rahulji went to the mandir, masjid, gurudwara. That gave a message to the public that the Congress is not a party solely for the minorities and it is not against Hindus.**

nion on issues that they want raised. On both questions - candidate selection and issues - the final decision will be in accordance with the wishes of our workers.

**Rebel candidates could not cause much harm to the Congress as they did in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. How come?**

Jogi used to stay in the Congress and harm the party candidates. The first thing was to show him the way out. We were talking to the BSP [Bahujan Samaj Party] in the meanwhile; we were very keen to have them on our side. Just as we were talking, Jogi and the BSP declared an alliance. We have been say-

ing for a long time that Jogi is the B-team of Raman Singh. That was proven again. Mayawati goes to fight elections in those places where she can harm the Congress. She does not fight where it can be damaging for the BJP. We campaigned on that issue, and people believed us.

**What does this say about Rahul Gandhi's leadership?**

After he became Congress president, we won the elections in three States at one go. These victories have established him as a national leader.

**Have you managed to woo sections such as the OBCs who were traditionally not with the Congress?**

It is true that we lost the SC votes in some measure. But among the OBCs, our support grew. Also, among traders and the upper class.

**Mr. Gandhi's strategy for revival includes a special outreach to the OBCs.**

**Chhattisgarh perhaps shows that the approach is working?**

Yes, without a doubt. The same OBCs are also farmers. Rahulji kept farmers at the centre of his campaign. Farmers as a class cut across all castes, but nationwide, the OBCs constitute the maximum numbers among them.

**But their representation in the Congress has not been adequate.**

It used to be low. But see how their representation is growing now. OBCs feel that they are respected in the Congress, both in the organisation and in the government.

**How has Mr. Gandhi's temple visit helped you, if at all?**

The BJP has continuously run a false campaign against the Congress, that this is only a party of the minorities. The reality is that from the beginning, the Congress has believed in the concept of equal respect for all religions. You observe whatever religion you want, but also respect the feelings of those who believe in other faiths - that has been the Congress's philosophy. But the BJP tried to make the Congress a minority party. And they reaped the benefits of that. So Rahulji went to the mandir, masjid, gurudwara... he went to all places. That gave a message to the public that the Congress is not a party solely for the minorities and it is not against Hindus.

**You have proposed a new slogan for the State: Narawa, Garuwa, Ghuruwa, Bari. What is this all about?**

See, the farm loan waiver was essential and we did that. But that is only a tem-

porary relief. We need to revive the rural economy and make it sustainable. For improving the living standards of the farmers, we have given this slogan: *Chhattisgarh ke chaar chinari, narawa, garuwa, ghuruwa, bari*. Narawa is rivulets. There is no dearth of water in Chhattisgarh, but we need to get that to the farms. The second point [garuwa] is livestock. At one time, cattle were an integral part of the rural economy, but now they are a liability. They roam around the place, destroy crops. We need to turn them into a strength. We need to keep them at one place and provide fodder. We will use the dung for organic manure and cooking gas. Our dependence on chemical fertilizers can be brought down. Stubble burning is a major issue. We can turn that into fodder. The third component [ghuruwa] is recycling. We want to create a virtuous cycle for strengthening the rural economy so that *bari* [farming] becomes profitable all over again. We also plan to set up food processing facilities across the State.

**Another key challenge before Chhattisgarh is Maoism. How do you plan to deal with it?**

Guns are not the solution. But I don't think we should be talking to Naxals. I think we should be talking to the victims of Naxalism. We need a political, economic and social approach. For 15 years, Raman Singh tried one path. Now, after Jammu and Kashmir, we have the maximum number of paramilitary forces in the country, in Bastar. From three blocks, Maoists are now in 15 districts in 15 years.

**Chhattisgarh has also been very harsh on civil society organisations and activists.**

Yes, also journalists. They were put in jail. The law was misused. All this needs to be evaluated and reformed.

**Will you roll back the hostility towards civil society organisations in the State?**

We will discuss with all. We will ask them what is the way forward. Why are the tribals in the grip of such fear?

**Are you planning a purge in the State's bureaucracy?**

Those who work as if they are BJP activists will face the consequences. Those who want to work as per the law will be protected and promoted. We need to tell them that your accountability is to the administration, but also to the people at large, not only to a handful of companies or industrialists.

**You were chosen above three others as Chief Minister. Is there any lingering tension between you and them?**

Where you have four candidates, that means we were working with a model of collective leadership for the last five years. But only one can be Chief Minister. Now the government will also run under the same collective leadership. We are not going to be separate. Rahulji always says all sections of society must feel that the government is mine.

**Will you be vacating the post for a colleague after half the term?**

Listen, I am Chief Minister as long as the party wants me there. It could be one day, one month, two years, or five years. Any time the party wants me to vacate, I shall do so happily. But there is no formula of any kind.

SINGLE FILE

## Many miles to Mecca

The government's proposal to ferry Haj pilgrims between Mumbai and Jeddah is an exercise in anachronism

M.A. SIRAJ



The Central government's proposal to ferry Haj pilgrims between Mumbai and Jeddah calls for a serious rethink, notwithstanding its laudable intention of providing an opportunity for poorer pilgrims to travel to Mecca. On the face of it, the move looks ill-conceived and appears to be

an exercise in anachronism.

The current arrangement for the Haj pilgrimage by the Haj Committee of India has worked well ever since sea voyages were phased out in 1995 and the Haj administration was decentralised. Flights from 21 cities in India take pilgrims to Jeddah in 6-8 hours. Pilgrims have to spend a maximum of six days in and around Mecca to carry out the core rituals of the Haj. Most pilgrims also stay for 10 days in Medina, the Prophet's adopted city. The Haj Committee schedule stretches across 40 days.

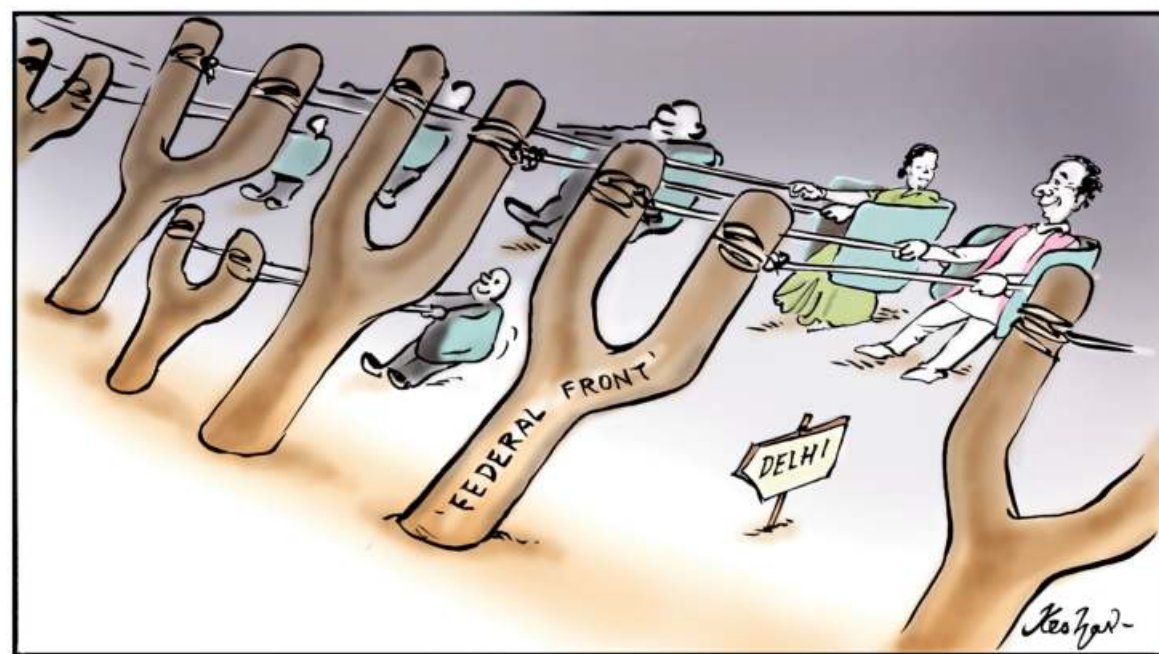
It is doubtful whether any sea voyage would take less than eight days for an average pilgrim between Mumbai and Jeddah. The most modern vessels travel at a speed of 20 nautical miles an hour. Given this speed, the journey between Mumbai and Jeddah (2,400 nautical miles) would require at least five days if weather conditions are favourable, which is not always the case. Normally, a passenger vessel carries 4,000-5,000 people. This means pilgrims at both ends will require a day to complete the formalities of customs and immigration. Add to this a day's journey by train to Mumbai from the pilgrim's point of origin.

In contrast to flight arrangements, the sea route entails centralisation of Haj arrangements. It presupposes that all pilgrims will be clustered in Mumbai for embarkation. Flights from provincial capitals had drastically eased the rigours of passage to the holy cities. Haj houses had come up in State capitals and were taking care of regional clusters.

Besides being anachronistic, sea voyages were discarded as they were misused by cartels in Mumbai. Children were ferried from States such as West Bengal, Bihar and Assam for organised begging in holy places. Some of them were passed on to unscrupulous elements to be used in camel races. There were also instances of poor women being lured by persons posing as their *mehram* (blood relative or guardian for the journey) who instead trapped them in domestic servitude work in West Asia. The restoration of ships would reopen the floodgates for misuse yet again.

The authorities need to assess the cumbersome formalities involved in reintroducing sea voyages. In Malaysia and Indonesia, Haj Boards mobilise savings, invest them in profitable ventures, constantly add dividends to deposits, and charter flights through open bidding. Such measures could be thought of as alternatives to sea travel, which has outlived its utility.

The writer is a journalist based in Bengaluru



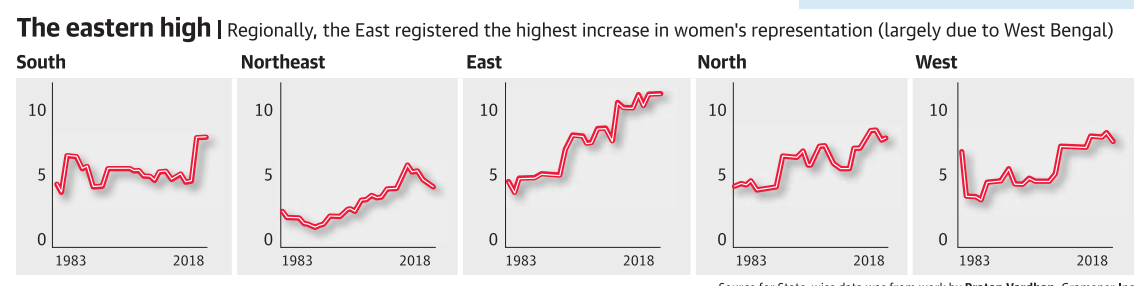
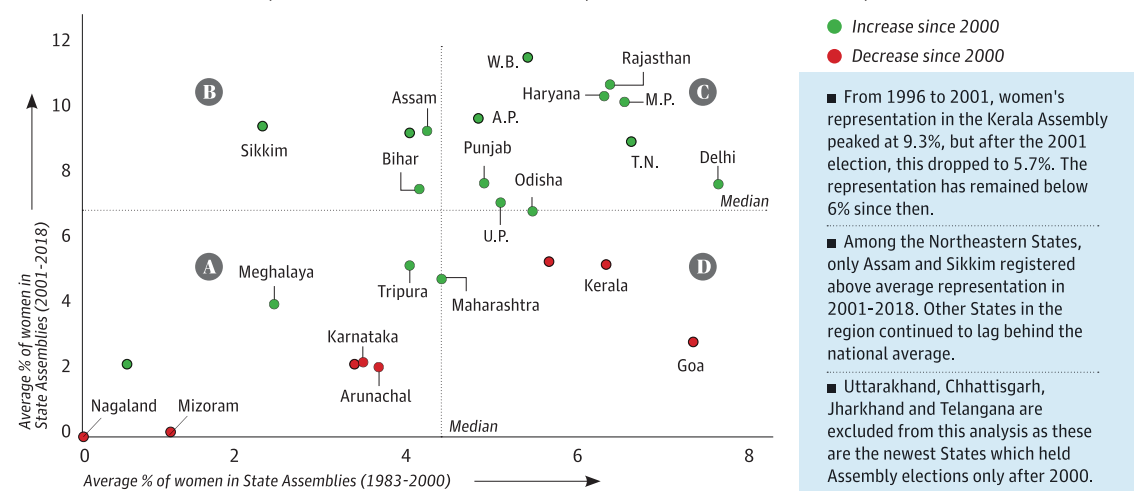
DATA POINT

### More women lawmakers

Women's representation in State Assemblies registered an across-the-board increase in the last 18 years (2001-2018) in comparison to the previous 18 (1983-2000). Today, Haryana has the highest proportion of women MLAs, 15% of the Assembly. Nagaland continues to have zero representation. In Goa, the share of women MLAs reduced substantially from the previous period. Vignesh Radhakrishnan analyses the data

State-wise changes

- A Relatively low representation before and after 2000
- B Relatively low representation before 2000, but higher since then
- C Relatively high representation before and after 2000
- D Relatively high representation before 2000, but lower since then



FROM The Hindu ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO DECEMBER 26, 1968

### Astronauts back in grasp of earth's gravity

Apollo-8 astronauts Frank Borman, James Lovell and William Anders, on their return from a spectacular whirl round the moon, to-night [December 25] sped back into the grasp of earth's gravity at 23-09 I.S.T., after successfully breaking free of lunar gravity. Their spaceship dashed unerringly "right down the corridor" towards a Friday morning (9-21 p.m. I.S.T.) landing in the Pacific Ocean. Apollo-8 zipped through the "equi-gravisphere", the zone where the gravity pulls of earth and moon are equal. The craft was flying at nearly 4,800 Km. an hour when it passed through the neutral zone some 3,23,000 Km. from earth and 62,500 Km. from the moon. It had remained in the moon's gravity field for a total of 44 hours 9 minutes.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO DECEMBER 26, 1918.

### German Revolution.

There is a good deal of controversy in German newspapers as to who financed the revolution. The Berlin Soviet executive admits that it reached half a million marks through a mysterious man named Eltich who was subsequently arrested on an unstated charge. Mueller, Chairman of the Berlin Executive, says that it is uncertain to whom this money originally belonged. Meanwhile, Joffe, Bolshevik ex-Ambassador in Berlin, is sending out wireless messages insisting that Russia supplied the money and that the people's Commissaries, Barth and Haase have known that this is true. Joffe declares that Doctor Coher, at present Russian Under-Secretary of State for Justice, was authorised by the Russian Bolshevik Government to spend a million and a half marks to organise the revolution, then, six million roubles to further it and that altogether twenty-four million marks had been placed at the disposal of the German Revolutionaries by Russia.

### CONCEPTUAL Collective action problem

ECONOMICS This refers to a phenomenon wherein the actions of individuals driven by their own self-interest works against the interest of the group as a whole. The free-rider problem, where something that is in the interest of a group does not happen because each person in the group simply tries to offload the costs onto other members, is a common example of it. The idea was proposed by American economist Mancur Olson in his 1965 book *The Logic of Collective Action*. Critics of the idea believe that the collective action problem is often the result of the absence of clearly defined property rights that are absolutely necessary for markets to coordinate complex social exchanges.

MORE ON THE WEB

A full circle of rehabilitation

<http://bit.ly/traffickingvictims>