

THE WEDNESDAY INTERVIEW | RAM VILAS PASWAN

'We need a long-term strategy to address agricultural distress'

The Lok Janshakti Party leader on the story behind the NDA's Bihar pact and the chances of a non-BJP, non-Congress federal front

SOBHANA K. NAIR

Days after finalising the seat-sharing arrangement in Bihar for the 2019 general election with allies Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Janata Dal (United), Union Minister of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution and Lok Janshakti Party president Ram Vilas Paswan takes stock of the electoral prospects of the National Democratic Alliance and of the proposed Opposition front to take on the NDA, and talks about his impending retirement. Excerpts:

■ You reached an understanding for the 2019 Lok Sabha polls with the BJP and the JD(U) after a tussle, forcing your party to deliver an ultimatum. What was the sticking point?

to the 2019 polls. So doesn't the Bahujan Samaj Party-Samajwadi Party in U.P. and the Congress-Rashtriya Janata Dal alliance in Bihar worry you?

Each party wants to fight on more seats but that does not mean that we had any differences with the BJP or the JD (U). The word "ultimatum" was used by the media to refer to our talks, but we have always maintained that it is an internal matter of the alliance. It has been effectively settled and well ahead of the elections. We will fight the 2019 elections under the leadership of Narendra Modi. I had said it in 2013 and let me repeat it again, there is no vacancy at the top.

■ There's an assumption that the number of seats the BJP has conceded in Bihar is because of its waning popularity.

That is not true. We never believe or indulge in bargaining. All we asked for was seven seats [of the 40 Lok Sabha seats in Bihar], the same number we contested in 2014. What created confusion were media reports of a four-plus-one formula [four Lok Sabha seats and one Rajya Sabha seat for the LJP]. These reports were not contradicted by the BJP. This was creating unrest among our cadres, which is why my son Chirag said the issue needed to be settled at the earliest.

■ Many say that Bihar and Uttar Pradesh hold the key

The BSP-SP alliance will have no impact on the NDA's electoral prospects. I can give you in writing that Mayawati and Akhilesh Yadav together will get only five seats. My declaration is based on my analysis of the 2009 Lok Sabha elections, when I lost the Hajipur constituency for only the second time in my career. [The LJP had snapped ties with the Congress just before the elections to join hands with Lalu Prasad's RJD.] What was the reason for this loss? The Muslim vote. The Congress is always the first choice for a Muslim voter. They vote for anyone else only if Congress is not in the race, now as reports indicate the Congress is unlikely to be part of the Mahagathabandhan, then the decisive vote of the Muslim minority will be divided. The SP-BSP alliance is banking on three vote blocs - Muslims, Yadav and Dalits. Muslim votes will be divided between them and the Congress, Yadavs alone can't get them through. There are two strands among Dalits too. One is Jatavs who blindly follow Mayawati and the other is Paswan, Pasis and so on, who are with us. Also, both parties will fight on 40 seats each, so what about other 40 wannabe candidates from their respective parties? Were they here for a charity show? They will have to deal



R.V. MOORTHY

with rebellion too. To top it, the Congress will fight all the 80 seats [in U.P.]. Even if the Congress cuts 1 lakh to 50,000 votes in each constituency, then how will the BSP-SP alliance stand?

In Bihar, there is no threat to the NDA. The Opposition alliance keeps spreading rumours that they are talking to Ram Vilas Paswan. I have never spoken to Lalu Yadav. Three diseased people together can't make a healthy individual. There are already murmurs within Manjhi's party (Jitan Ram Manjhi's Hindustani Awam Morcha); Upendra Kushwaha (Rashtriya Lok Samata Party) is waiting with bated breath for power; Sharad Yadav exited the JD(U) with much fanfare, now we don't hear much from him, do we? We will win more than 35 seats in Bihar.

■ The Congress seems to be cashing in on the Modi government's failure to address growing agricultural distress by offering loan waivers. Will this have an electoral impact?

● You can form any front right now, but once the question of leadership arises, everyone will run away

If a person is in pain, a painkiller can give him temporary relief, but the germs do not die. For the short term, loan waivers work well. But we need a long-term strategy. In Madhya Pradesh, for example, there is no doubt that Shivraj Singh Chouhan came up with pro-poor policies. He started the practice of bonus per quintal of produce. There was a view that businessmen benefitted more from this policy because they were bringing in produce from other States to sell in Madhya Pradesh. I was against the move and eventually the Central government decided to stop the bonus. It is obvious that the farmer was disappointed.

■ Who do you blame for this disappointment?

It is not a question of blaming anyone. Decisions are

made by experts, IAS officers, intellectuals, they have their way of doing the arithmetic. A politician who comes from a village or a farmer's home will have a different outlook. When we calculate the minimum support price (MSP), we consider the input costs alone and never take into account the cost of the land. The Prime Minister, BJP president Amit Shah, and the Agriculture Minister have to deliberate on the crisis. The politicians think through their heart and the bureaucracy works through its head. It is a systemic failure, and we should think how to change this system.

■ Do you think tall promises like 2 crore jobs each year made by Mr. Modi and Mr. Shah will be their undoing?

Why blame Prime Minister Modi or Amit Shah, this Pandora's box was opened in 1991. Who was the Finance Minister then? Manmohan Singh. Before liberalisation, there was a mixed economy. There were enough jobs in the government sector. You opened the floodgates, and

now that the waters have entered, how will you stop that? For 24 years, you did not bother which way the country was going. Now in 2014, when the Modi government took over, you are asking, where are the jobs? There were more government jobs earlier and thus more security, now everything is privatised.

■ But Manmohan Singh did not promise 2 crore jobs.

No, every government makes promises. Didn't Indira Gandhi say "garibi hatao"? Did Congress implement it? If anyone is to be blamed, it is the Congress government which is to be blamed the most.

■ From being seen as anti-farmer, the Modi government is also battling the perception of being anti-Dalit.

This is a wrong claim. The biggest example is the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, which was passed during the Rajiv Gandhi government and that too after relentless protests by many of us in Parliament. Thirty years later someone went to the Supreme Court and got the law diluted. Even then no political leader really took a lead to protest against it, neither me nor Mayawati. A purely organic and voluntary wave of protests started on its own spurred by social media. And one must remember that for the first time 10 to 12 Dalit protestors were killed in such a protest, more than the casualties during the Mandal agitations. So obviously, there was pressure on all political parties to act.

We also took a tough stand, Chirag served an ultimatum to the BJP. The Modi government acting swiftly,

amended the Act to maintain the status quo.

Now the people who called the Modi government anti-Dalit started accusing him of being anti-forward. In Madhya Pradesh, they [BJP] paid for it. It is easy to assign labels, but my question is, which government has done anything for Dalits and backwards?

■ As an astute observer of Indian politics, which election in the past will you compare the 2019 election to, 1977 or 1996?

Whatever may be the results in 2019, one must remember that people have learnt lessons from the past. The question is, what kind of government do you want? Do you want a three-month government? The Deve Gowda and I.K. Gujral governments were in power for less than a year each; V.P. Singh was Prime Minister for 11 months; and Chandra Shekhar was in power for seven months.

Wherever there is a direct fight between the BJP and the Congress, the Congress manages to win. The recent Assembly elections in three States are examples, there may have been factors such as anti-incumbency which worked against the BJP. Though vote share between the two was almost same, still the Congress managed to pull through.

The prime difference is that in 1977 all the parties had come together to fight under one umbrella and the symbol of the Janata Party. That situation does not exist today. Now each party wants to fight on its own. Look at Mayawati. She had demanded a high number of seats in Madhya Pradesh from the Congress and then went on to fight on her own. Then she joined hands with the Congress even without being

asked.

The Telangana Chief Minister and Telangana Rashtra Samithi chief, K. Chandrashekar Rao has been talking of a non-BJP, non-Congress Federal Front. Would you ever consider joining that?

I will be where I have been. If you ask me to play an astrologer, then I would say that the NDA will form the government. Once the elections are over, who will consider Rao as a leader? Will Mamata Banerjee or Chandrababu Naidu work under him? You can form any front right now, but once the question of leadership arises, then everyone will run away. Janata Party, that was born from the very womb of the Emergency, could not sustain itself in the face of personal ambitions and egos. Do you think any other front will survive?

■ Will you contest the 2019 Lok Sabha polls?

No, I will not fight the 2019 polls. I have been contesting from Hajipur since 1977 and I have done a lot for the constituency. I had always thought that once I complete 50 years in politics I will take a step back. Now I have a son who is also in politics. If I continue to stand around him, overshadowing him like a banyan tree, how will he grow? I have seen other leaders who can't help but compete with their sons too. I am not like that.

Look at Lalu Yadav, he is remote-controlling his party from behind bars. I do not believe in that. There has been a demand from the constituency that my wife should contest from the seat but she too has refused the offer. We will have to take a call on who will replace me in Hajipur.

SINGLE FILE

Boost to plain packaging

More countries are adopting the tough measure in order to curb tobacco consumption

R. PRASAD

This year, Thailand and Saudi Arabia will join a growing club of nations introducing plain packaging of tobacco products. They are the first in the Asian and Arab regions, respectively, to adopt the tough measure in order to curb tobacco consumption - from September in Thailand, and May 1 in Saudi Arabia's case

In December 2012, Australia became the first country to introduce plain packaging following the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) guidelines. It has also been implemented in France and the United Kingdom (both 2016), Norway and Ireland (both 2017) and New Zealand and Hungary (both 2018). It will be implemented in Uruguay (2019) and Slovenia (2020). The move is under process or being considered in 14 more countries.

Plain packaging standardises the appearance of tobacco products. Other than brand and product names displayed in a standard colour and font style, it prohibits the use of logos, colours, brand images or promotional information. Besides increasing the effectiveness of health warnings, the idea is to reduce the attractiveness of tobacco products, with no scope for using packaging to advertise and promote consumption.

Understandably, the tobacco industry was opposed to Australia's plain packaging initiative. But the ruling by the World Trade Organisation (WTO), in June 2018, favouring plain packaging, has struck a blow against the tobacco industry. The WTO panel, while rejecting the notion that Australia had unjustifiably infringed tobacco trademarks and violated intellectual property rights, said the plain packaging law led to "improving public health by reducing use of and exposure to tobacco products".

With the legal hurdle to tobacco control being cleared, one is optimistic that countries, including India, which were undecided, can take steps to introduce similar legislation. In India, tobacco is the cause of about one million deaths annually.

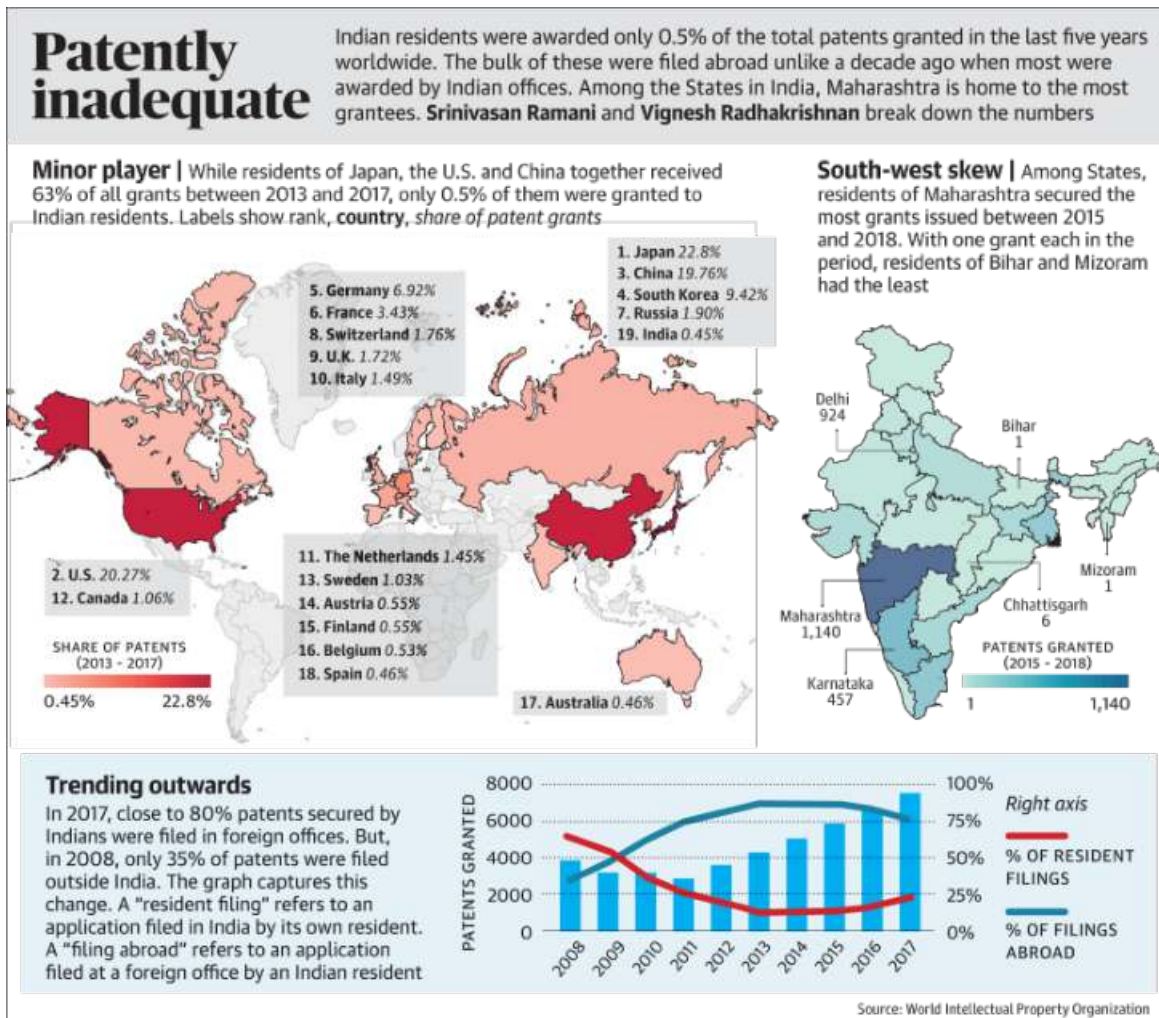
In April 2016, India increased the size of graphic pictorial warnings, by 85%, on the packaging of tobacco products (both front and back). The percentage of users in India who thought of quitting because of such warning labels increased sharply to 62% (cigarette), 54% (bidi) and 46% (smokeless tobacco users), according to the Global Adult Tobacco Survey 2016-2017, when compared with the survey results of 2009-2010. Likewise, tobacco use among those aged 15-24 years showed a six-percentage point reduction (18.4% in 2009-10 to 12.4% in 2016-17). The number of tobacco users dropped by eight million.

Along with higher taxes and large pictorial warnings, plain packaging can serve as a tool to deter new users and prompt existing users to quit. Here is the proof: plain packaging along with other measures led to 0.55 percentage point reduction in smoking prevalence in Australia, translating into at least 1,18,000 fewer smokers.

The writer is the Science Editor of The Hindu



DATA POINT



FROM The Hindu ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO JANUARY 2, 1969

Israel rejects UN Council censure motion

Israel last night [January 1] virtually rejected the Security Council's unanimous resolution censuring it for last Saturday's [December 28] attack on Beirut airport. It described the resolution as a reflection of the 'moral, political and juridical bankruptcy of the world body'. The Israeli delegate's response was also seen as an indication that Israel would defy the recommendation that reparations be paid to Lebanon for the damage done to planes and installations at Beirut airport. The Security Council earlier condemned Israel for its pre-mediated action in violation of its obligation under the Charter and the cease-fire resolution and considered that such acts of violence endangered the maintenance of peace. Issuing a 'solemn warning' to Israel that if such acts were repeated the Council would have to consider further steps to give effect to its decisions, the Council also considered that Lebanon was entitled to appropriate redress for the destruction suffered, the responsibility for which has been acknowledged by Israel.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JANUARY 2, 1919.

Park Fair Fire. Loss of Life and Property.

The Madras Park Fair, opened much against popular wishes and in the teeth of united opposition of the City Fathers and a section of the Press, came to an unhappy termination last night (January 1). Fireworks were widely advertised all through the City. People assembled in large numbers at 8 P.M. His Excellency the Governor was also present to witness the tamasha. At about 11 O'clock when the display of fireworks was about to close, one of the pots burst, scattering thick sparks all round. The fire engine shed was the first to catch. The petrol kept there for the use of the engine also caught fire. As the fire engine could not be easily brought out, the task of extinguishing the fire was rendered difficult. A few buckets of water could not suffice. Fire engines were telephoned for. But before their arrival the fire spread from stall to stall to the south. Nine booths including the engine-shed were ablaze, the metal-ware stall, the Amrutanjan Depot, the Temperance booth, the confectioner's shop, the Trash Bazaar, the lottery booth and the fruit and flower bazaars.

CONCEPTUAL Inflation targeting

ECONOMICS
This refers to an approach to monetary policy where the primary mandate of a central bank is to manage the rate of price inflation in the wider economy. Economists who support inflation targeting believe that a stable inflation rate is essential to keep the economy fully employed while protecting the value of the currency at the same time. Central banks with an explicit inflation targeting mandate usually have a target range of inflation. They try to keep inflation within the target range by adjusting the economy's money supply. The policy of inflation targeting, which was first introduced in some European countries in the 1970s, became a popular approach in the 1990s.

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