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WHY ASHOK CHAVAN

The appointment of Ashok Chavan, who had to resign as CM in the wake of the Adarsh housing society scam, as Maharashtra Congress chief marked a comeback for the 60-year-old leader. Almost four years after he was picked, Chavan is set to face his biggest test in the coming elections. In the 2014 elections, he was one of the only two

Congress candidates elected to the Lok Sabha from Maharashtra. Chavan also ensured that his own bastion of Nanded withstood the BJP onslaught. While the newly resurgent Congress is confident, the PCC chief admits the trick for the Lok Sabha and Maharashtra Assembly polls will be in forging alliances



"BJP is worried due to losses in three states, and of Opposition coming together. Besides, they are weighing how much of Modi's charisma is left. But we hear preparations for simultaneous polls are on. We are prepared

KAVITHA IYER: What is the status of Opposition unity in Maharashtra? Will you get everyone on board or do without one or two smaller parties?

Our attempt is to see that the 70 per cent votes that got split in the 2014 elections (across India) are not split this time. In the last elections, the BJP vote share was around 30-31 per cent... It was because everyone else fought separately that the BJP came to power. Our attempt is to see that all the other secular-minded parties come together. We will have a Common Minimum Programme and will rope in like-minded parties such as the CPI, CPM, Swabhimani Shetkari Sanghatna, Bahujan Vanchit Aghadi (Prakash Ambedkar's outfit), the PWP (Peasants and Workers Party) and of course the NCP, which is a bigger partner. We also have the RPI Kawade and Gavai groups.

Of course, all of them have their own demands. However, by next week, we should be able to finalise our alliances... Everyone realises the need to come together. The situation in other states too will have a reflection on what happens in Maharashtra, but by and large we will see to it that major parties fight polls on a common platform against the Shiv Sena-BJP.

KAVITHA IYER: The arithmetic from the Uttar Pradesh bypolls of 2018 favoured Opposition unity. Will Prakash Ambedkar and the AIMIM not joining you cost you dearly?

Our major hindrance is the MIM. We have been categorical that we could not ally with Prakash Ambedkar if they had a tie-up with the MIM. I have had six-seven meetings with Ambedkar and told him to make his stand clear. Recently, Owaisi (AIMIM president Asaduddin Owaisi) in his rally at Nanded said that if he is a problem in an alliance between Ambedkar and the Congress, he will step back and not contest the Lok Sabha polls in the state. This could be a major turnaround for us.

SANDEEP ASHAR: Owaisi's statement had a rider, that his party would not contest if the Congress agreed to the number of seats that Prakash Ambedkar was demanding.

We have not discussed concrete numbers as of now. We have to also share seats with other allies.

SHUBHANGI KHAPRE: The talks between the Congress and NCP seem to be hurdle-free, unlike in the past. Is it true that the NCP has accepted the Congress as the big brother and also given an assurance that after the 2019 Assembly elections, it would be okay with you as the chief minister?

First of all, Rahul Gandhi is talking to Sharad Pawar, and Sharad Pawar has a good equation with the Congress president. Rahul Gandhi also holds him in high regard... That has paved the way for an alliance in Maharashtra... As far as Maharashtra's arithmetic is concerned, I have led a coalition government as CM, and there was never any problem. We are trying to destabilise the current BJP regime in several ways. As far as CM is concerned, the party will decide after meeting the legislators. The CM issue does not arise now.

SHUBHANGI KHAPRE: Will the Congress-NCP alliance continue for the Assembly elections?

Yes, why not? In a number of districts, the NCP is strong, and in a number of districts, we are strong. I feel that an alliance will help us. It is a win-win situation for us.

TABASSUM BARNAGARWALA: What changes do you think Priyanka Gandhi's official entry into politics will bring for the Congress?

Priyanka Gandhi has earlier held responsibility for Rae Bareilly and Amethi. She has leadership qualities, she resembles Indira Gandhi... She has also performed many functions in the party, not from the front but from behind the scenes. Now that Rahul Gandhi has taken this initiative, it will have a positive impact on the general political scenario in the country.

SANDEEP ASHAR: In the Congress-NCP now, who is the face of the alliance and who is the big brother?

In terms of seat-sharing, there is no question of bigger brother. People call us co-brothers, or *judwaa*. People will decide who will win seats. Whoever wins the greater number of seats is the bigger brother. Last time, the seat-sharing was 26:22... it will be almost close (this time)... The old formula with minor changes is expected.

SANDEEP ASHAR: Who will be the face of the coalition?

Ultimately we have only one face across the country. That is Rahul Gandhi. We don't

'Ultimately we have only one face across country. That is Rahul. We don't have regional leaders'

Ashok Chavan is hopeful of finalising alliances soon, claims Priyanka's entry will have national impact, says Cong has no problem fielding Muslim candidates, 'if winnable', tackles the Adarsh scam cloud over him, and clarifies Cong stand on Sanatan Sanstha



Maharashtra Congress chief Ashok Chavan with Associate Editor Kavitha Iyer in *The Indian Express* newsroom in Mumbai. Nirmal Harindran

have regional leaders X or Y. We have seen it in the three states. Ultimately it came down to who will lead which state, in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan. The decision was taken after much consultation. It will be the same here. It is teamwork, not one person's effort.

Of course, as the PCC president, I am the chief of the party in Maharashtra and it is my responsibility. But ultimately, the party president decides.

ZESHAN SHAIKH: Nanded is your stronghold. It has nine constituencies and over 25 per cent of its population is Muslim. At one point, it had a Muslim MLA, who won two-three times. But, since your emergence, no Muslim has ever been given a ticket by the Congress in Nanded... Is the Congress hesitant about giving tickets to Muslim candidates in Maharashtra?

You have a wrong perception. Since Mr Modi took over as PM, things have changed for the worse. We are not working as a democracy. Everything is centralised in the PMO, there is surveillance, control, so much deceit... We have seen Supreme Court judges come out in the open... CBI chiefs are being managed... We have had three RBI governors in five years... University curriculum is being changed... Even in journalism, we have experienced this... At the Sahitya Sammelan, invitees were turned down because they didn't follow the government line (The Akhil Bharatiya Marathi Sahitya Sammelan revoked the invite to writer Nayantra Sahgal)... From *achche din* to Rs 15 lakh in bank accounts, to minimal support price to law and order to *Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas*, these are all slogans...

As for the issue of minorities... we are very careful, especially in Nanded. In the Nanded Municipal Corporation, the Congress has 73 corporators out of the 81 seats we contested. The mayor is of one community, the deputy mayor of another, and the standing committee chairperson of another community. Muslims also have adequate representation in zila parishads and corporations and other places. Even regarding MLAs, we keep in mind that adequate representation is given to SCs/STs and other minorities... Abdul Sattar is a face of the minority from Marathwada.

In Nanded, if it is possible (to field a Muslim candidate), why not? I will be happy to accommodate someone from the minority communities if the chances of winning are good.

KAVITHA IYER: This election will coincide with extreme drought in Maharashtra. The government has

already given an unprecedented loan waiver. How do you expect rural Maharashtra will react?

It is an unprecedented loan waiver announcement. They announced waiver of around Rs 34,000 crore for around 89 lakh farmers. Even after two years, the money is not in their bank accounts... I have travelled now over 6,500 km across the state, talking to people. I have been asking, 'Tumche paishe milale ka? Karz maaf jhaali ka (Did you get the money? Was your loan waived off)?', and hardly a single hand is ever raised. It is all on paper... When we gave loan waivers, within a few days the money was utilised to waive off the loan. I have been Revenue Minister, I know the guidelines to be followed.

The government has also announced a number of schemes for districts and talukas that are facing water scarcity. But once the schemes are announced, nothing happens... Merely announcing a scarcity has not helped Maharashtra... Drinking water has become a very serious problem, collectors are not approving proposals which local MLAs have asked them to clear... We sent a proposal for my district three months back but till date, nothing has happened.

SHUBHANGI KHAPRE: What is the difference between the present state government and the Congress government when it comes to agricultural reforms?

The present ministers and Chief Minister do not have a background in agriculture. How many ministers in this government have any ties with agriculture? These are all urban people. There is no full-time agriculture minister. The first major issue is that these people don't understand the basic problems in the farm sector. The second issue is that the CM made a mistake in his figure for farmers who needed a loan

waiver and the amount to be waived off. Where did this figure come from? The government makes an announcement and then makes clarifications and then adds 10 other conditions to it. The third issue is that if everything is okay, why is the figure of farmer suicides the highest in Maharashtra?... The contrast is stark in a department once headed by Sharad Pawar... There is no result in all the schemes the government has announced. Minimum support price is not available in any village shop.

SANDEEP ASHAR: In urban areas, the Marathi votes have clearly gone away from the Congress, with the Shiv Sena and MNS emerging in local polls. How will you attract the Marathi voters when local regional parties are wooing them with talk of 'Marathi asmita (pride)'?

This is correct up to some extent. Rahulji wants to maintain a general balance in representations, and this time the Congress



will try to give representation properly... Our agenda is development, and it will continue. We are more interested in talking about it, not caste, community.

VISHWAS WAGHMODE: Many people criticise the Opposition for being complacent and lethargic. What stops them from raising the volume against the government's mismanagement?

A number of issues have been raised in the House. In Nagpur, we had a huge *morchha*. The Leader of Opposition has taken up issues. But the attitude of the government at the Centre and in the state is adamant, it is to protect their people.

SANDEEP ASHAR: How real is the fear of agencies being used to silence people? Is that behind the reluctance to confront the government?

There is nothing like that... (But) if you see, major machinery is being used by the state and Centre. Why has no BJP person been arrested apart from in one or two cases where courts intervened? Is it that only the Opposition is at fault? Police stations do not register FIRs without the government saying so. These things are happening *khule aam* (openly).

MOHAMED THAYER: It is charged that when your government was in power, it did not take action against radical outfits like the Sanatan Sanstha?

We never interfered in any probe. Nor did we put pressure on investigating officers or public prosecutors. The Malegaon case is an example, be it Sadhvi (Pragya) or Lt Col (Prasad) Purhoit. When Rohini Salian was the public prosecutor, she said there was a lot of pressure on her... We have never protected the Sanatan Sanstha. Maybe, at that time, their activities were not on that big a scale and they were (just) being observed, but today, when things have gone from bad to worse... The Sanatan Sanstha basically has the ideology of the BJP and RSS.

MOHAMED THAYER: But when the Congress was in power, a dossier recommended to the Centre that the Sanatan Sanstha be banned. After that, one heard nothing about it.

I think Mr (Sushil) Shinde was the Union home minister at the time. A lot of things are weighed before a decision is taken. I don't know why it didn't happen, nevertheless then the Sanatan Sanstha was not at the forefront, as it is today. They have got a lot of political support...

SANTOSH PRADHAN: Will there be

simultaneous elections in the state and at the Centre?

They (the BJP) are weighing the situation. Because of water scarcity, people in the rural areas are not happy. They are also worried due to the results of the three states where the Congress won. They are worried that if we (the opposition parties) contest together, they will end up losing. Besides, they are weighing how much of Modi's charisma is left. We hear that arrangements are being made for simultaneous polls. We are prepared for it.

TABASSUM BARNAGARWALA: In 2005, the Congress government had banned dance bars. Subsequently, in 2006, 2013 and 2015 and now, the Supreme Court has ruled in favour of dance bars. The state has seen two governments since then, but neither has taken measures to ensure their rehabilitation.

It's a verdict of the Supreme Court, so I won't comment. No educated person would support the dance bar issue because people were not happy with the way the bars functioned. But, the present government failed to monitor the case properly. Similar (mismanagement) happened on the Maratha reservation issue. There has been a deliberate attempt to delay the issue so that it stretches up to the elections. We feel there could be a secret understanding between the dance bar owners and the government. We don't know.

SHUBHANGI KHAPRE: You have worked with several Congress presidents, how different is Rahul Gandhi compared to Sonia Gandhi?

Every president has his or her style of functioning. She (Sonia) performed very well; the Congress came to power both in the state and at the Centre. When it comes to Rahulji, we have seen success in three states, he has done a lot of hard work.

Rahulji's style of working is totally different. With the Shakti app, he is directly in touch with the booth-level workers. Appointments are being made in consultation with the workers. He takes suggestions on whom to appoint as block or PCC president. It's like an opinion poll. We get letters every day, to which we have to respond on time. It's like a corporate firm, we have to finish our task in a fixed time limit.

SANDEEP ASHAR: The shadow of the Adarsh housing society controversy still hangs over you. Your opponents are likely to use it to target you.

As I have stated in the past, it (the Adarsh controversy) was an accident that happened in my life. I've somehow survived. I do not know about the future. Since the matter is sub-judice, I don't want to go into the merits of the case. But it has never affected my style of working. Every state Congress president enjoys the full confidence of the Congress president. I wouldn't be here if I did not enjoy his confidence.

SHUBHANGI KHAPRE: There is talk that the Congress will work out some covert understanding with Raj Thackeray's outfit.

Let's get this straight. Any sort of political understanding with the MNS is out of the question. Their functioning style is different. They beat up people to get things done.

SHUBHANGI KHAPRE: Do you feel the Maratha reservation card will work in the BJP's favour?

Maharashtra is a progressive state, and my experience is that if you maintain the right caste balance, things work out just fine. The Congress believes in taking everyone along, maintaining the right balance.

LAXMAN SINGH: The BJP's IT cell has been facing some music for being overly aggressive and abusive on social media. The Congress IT cell too has attracted some criticism of late.

There is no question of replicating the BJP's social media model. But if a false allegation is hurled against us, we've to respond to it in an aggressive fashion.

