

INTERVIEW | DHARMENDRA PRADHAN

'There is a pro-Modi wave in Odisha'

Union Petroleum Minister says people of the State will vote for the BJP in both the Lok Sabha and Assembly elections

NISTULA HEBBAR

Union Petroleum Minister Dharmendra Pradhan speaks about the BJP's electoral prospects in Odisha, where the party hopes to gain ground, and the induction of leaders from other parties, including the Biju Janata Dal. Excerpts:

How do you look at this election? There are reports that while for the Lok Sabha, there may be a preference for Prime Minister Modi, and for the Vidhan Sabha, Naveen Patnaik is still the top choice...

That is not the indication that we have got from the first phase of polling that just concluded, in four Lok Sabha and 28 Vidhan Sabha [seats]. The ground reports are something else. This is a perception spread by some friends that Odisha may differentiate [between] the [elections to the] Lok Sabha and the Assembly. Never in the history of Indian elections has the voter differentiated thus.

There is a pro-Modi wave in the State, and the Prime Minister has appealed to the voters to elect a BJP-led government at both the Centre and the State. Mr. Naveen Patnaik is facing huge anti-incumbency.

Wouldn't it have been useful to project a face for the State?

That is not necessary. We have experimented with that model too in certain States, but our experiences in the past five years, say in Haryana, Maharashtra, even in Uttar Pradesh, have shown that it is not necessary to project a chief ministerial candidate. There were five phases of the U.P. polls, Yogi Adityanathji was not a prominent figure in any of the campaigns of those phases. He became the Chief Minister, so it doesn't matter. The party is emerging in Odisha, and we are equals and it is not the right time to project a face.

People believe in Prime Minister Modi, and his consistently increasing support base over the past five years will be beneficial to the party.

The BJP hopes to grow, but it seems more from inductions from the BJD from which you have poached many leaders...

In election time, partyon main adlaa badli hoti hai (there is movement from party

to party). In 2014, when there was a huge Modi wave across the country, the party could not do well in Odisha.

When Amit Shahji took over as party president, he sat down with us and analysed the entire issue and what were the challenges. We found that we have to expand the organisational base, if we are to convert the support for Prime Minister Modi into seats for the party.

To do this, we did two things: increase our own activities, go to the people, agitate on people's issues, and to reach the social welfare policies of the Modi government to the people. Secondly, include good people from other parties in the BJP.

Why just BJD, if you look at our candidate list, we have given ticket to more than 25 influential Congress-backed ground people for the Assembly polls.

This is because they took more votes than us in the last round of polls, but due to the lacklustre [performance] of the Congress and the feeling that their party was in compromise mode with the BJD, they came to us to give a real fight and protect their constituency's interest. We have given ticket to Prakash Mishra,



People will give a befitting reply to Naveen Patnaik in these polls

ex-D-G, CRPF, and Aparajita Sarangi, an ex-IAS [officer], neither of whom belong to any political party; to Sambit Patra, who is a national face.

You are the best known face from the BJP in Odisha. Why didn't you contest?

My party is in an evolutionary process, and I am required to oversee the campaign. I am campaigning morning to night for all our candidates, the nitty-gritty of coordinating work. The party has given me so many things and I should not impose my personal desires over the requirements of the party. I took a conscious decision not to contest.

Mr. Patnaik has alleged

discrimination over not being able to implement KALIA while the Prime Minister Kisan Samman Nidhi is under way...

Who has stopped him from implementing the KALIA scheme? Mr. Patnaik is a frustrated person currently. He is accusing the Election Commission of being part of the Central government, whereas the EC has deferred the release of a biopic on Prime Minister Modi. He has been elected Chief Minister four times; when things were good for him, the EC was okay, now because of frustration he has joined the ranks of the mahamilawati (the adulterated) group. What has the EC asked for?

A list of beneficiaries was asked for and the budget allocation shown for the same. Relatives of senior Ministers made their way into the list of beneficiaries.

I am quoting their names: Vikram Aaruk, Niranjan Pujari, Sushanta Singh. Please ask about these three. KALIA was initiated for the financial year 2018-19, and there is no allocation. His only issue in the past 20 days is envy of Prime Minister Modi, instead of giving his report card of the past 19 years.

Mr. Patnaik has accused the BJP of not doing enough on behalf of Odisha over the Mahanadi water sharing dispute, even when there was a BJP-led government in Chhattisgarh...

He [Mr. Patnaik] has got the befitting reply to that during the panchayat elections in areas around the Mahanadi basin.

This attitude of his is just a stunt. Corrupt mining contractors, in league with people close to the Chief Minister, are running the State mechanism.

Mr. Patnaik is not in control and he is in a different mode.

Due to his failures, he is giving these alibis.

I challenge him to a debate. Day before yesterday, in the Bhubaneswar commissionerate area, a six-year-old girl was kidnapped and raped; her father went to the police station begging for her rescue, but the police did not arrive for four hours, after which local people broke the door of the accused's house, took the girl to hospital where she died.

This is in an urban area, imagine the plight in the interiors. People will give a befitting reply to Mr. Patnaik in these polls.

POLL POURRI

Heavy deployment of forces



KOLKATA

The Election Commission has deployed more Central Armed Police Forces for the second phase of polling in West Bengal on Thursday. The EC has deployed 195 companies of the central forces in Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Raiganj Lok Sabha constituencies. In Raiganj, 64 companies have been deployed, special police observer Vivek Dube told presspersons after meeting district officials in Raiganj on Tuesday. According to the EC, about 80% of the booths in the three Lok Sabha seats will have central forces.

Rajnath files papers in Lucknow

LUCKNOW

Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh, who filed his nomination papers for the Lucknow seat



on Tuesday, holds assets worth about ₹4.62 crore. The election affidavit puts his immovable assets at ₹2,97,30,580. In addition, there are moveable assets of ₹1,64,58,260.61. His wife, Savitri Singh, has

moveable assets worth a little over ₹53 lakh. While the Minister has ₹68,000 in cash in hand, his wife has ₹37,000. Mr. Singh owns a .32 bore revolver and a double-barrel gun. PTI

Women-run poll centres

CHANDIGARH

Haryana is all set to get 'Sakhi Matdan Kendras' in each Assembly segment to disseminate the message of women empowerment. These centres will be exclusively run by women and no male personnel

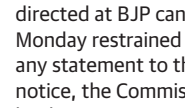


would be present. Haryana's Chief Electoral Officer Rajeev Ranjan on Tuesday said that this initiative would go a long way in spreading the message in society that women could not only participate in the elections but also conducted them in an efficient manner. "Extensive steps are being taken to increase participation of women in the democratic system," he said.

EC serves notice on Azam Khan

NEW DELHI

The Election Commission on Tuesday issued a show-cause notice to Samajwadi Party leader Azam Khan for prima facie violation of the model code of conduct on multiple occasions, asking him to furnish his reply within 24 hours. Taking cognisance of Mr. Khan's allegedly objectionable comments



directed at BJP candidate Jaya Prada, the EC on Monday restrained him from campaigning or giving any statement to the media for 72 hours. In the notice, the Commission cited the Samajwadi Party leader's utterances during five public meetings from April 5 to 12, saying that they prima facie amounted to violation of the model code and the Representation of the People Act.

Sidhu's comment sparks row

PATNA

Cricketer-turned-politician Navjot Singh Sidhu has stoked a controversy by urging Muslim voters of a Lok Sabha constituency in Bihar with a sizeable population of the minority community to vote en bloc and defeat Prime Minister Narendra Modi. His comments at a rally in Katihar, where he was canvassing for veteran Congress leader and former Union Minister Tariq Anwar, drew an angry response from the BJP, which urged the Election Commission to take suitable action against him. "Do not consider yourself as being in a minority. You constitute the majority here. You are about 64%. Do not fall into the trap laid by people like Owaisi [president of the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen]," Mr. Sidhu said. PTI



Yogi visits Hanuman temple

LUCKNOW

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath offered prayers at the famous Hanuman Setu



temple here on Tuesday, a day after the Election Commission barred him from electioneering for 72 hours for likening the ongoing Lok Sabha polls to a contest between 'Ali' and 'Bajrangbali.' The Chief

Minister spent about 25 minutes at the temple and was seen bowing before the deity and sitting with folded hands to recite "Hanuman Chalisa." He refused to take questions from the mediapersons, following the poll panel's gag order. Ali is a revered figure in Islam. 'Bajrangbali' is another name for Lord Hanuman. PTI

#AbHogaNYAY is not just a slogan, it's the Congress party's commitment to the people of India

RAHUL GANDHI
CONGRESS PRESIDENT



[CAMPAIGN TRAIL: RAJ BABBAR]

Fatehpur Sikri takes a star turn

Congress banks on actor's charisma

OMAR RASHID
FATEHPUR SIKRI

Around noon, the cavalcade of SUVs cut into Ikhtara village, which boasts a splendid view of the Lucknow-Agra Expressway. The two-hour delay did not deter the enthusiasm as the local people, mostly Thakurs, rushed to greet their guest, honouring him with garlands of flowers and ₹10 notes and wrapping a traditional turban around his head.

"I am fighting on a different equation. I was born and brought up here [Agra]. And I have worked here as an MP," Raj Babbar told *The Hindu*, as he approached one of the verandahs. "They are asking me, how many votes do I have of my caste and community," he said as he then addressed the villagers. "I said to them, listen ... they (waving at the people) are my caste, kin and creed," said Mr. Babbar in Hindi in the local accent.

It was met with loud cheers and clapping.

However, Fatehpur Sikri is witnessing a different battle this time, where the underdog Congress is relying primarily on the charisma and son-of-the-soil image of its Bollywood star-turned-politician Babbar. While the BJP has fielded a Jat, the BSP has a Brahmin.

The third key community in Fatehpur Sikri are the Thakurs. They dominate Ikhtara.

Jiten Kumar, the village pradhan's son, is among those enamoured of Mr. Babbar - not the Bollywood star but the former Agra MP (1999 and 2004). "From the concrete road, drinking water tank and electricity connections, everything done here was during his period," Mr. Kumar said.

Mr. Babbar's outreach among the Thakurs was bolstered after two popular former BSP MLAs from the

community, Surajpal Singh and Dharampal Singh, recently defected to him. And unlike previous elections, there are no Thakur candidates in the fray.

But not all are impressed.

Netrapal Singh, a farmer, is firmly behind Prime Minister Narendra Modi and dismisses Congress president Rahul Gandhi's credentials. He doesn't care much for the BJP candidate, Raj Kumar Chahar, who has lost three consecutive Assembly elections and was once an aide of Mr. Babbar himself.

"Only Modi can take the country forward. Others talk of only Muslims and want to mortgage national interests," Mr. Singh said.

The BSP is placed poorly this time after its former MP Seema Upadhyay, a popular Brahmin face, was denied ticket.

Except for the Jatav voters, there is little enthusiasm for her replacement, Bulandshahr MLA Bhagwan Sharma, alias Guddu Pandit, an outsider who does not enjoy a good image.

With the Brahmins alienated from the BSP, Mr. Babbar has been making inroads. Rajveer Lavaniya, a Brahmin who heads a potato farmers outfit, recently quit the SP to support Mr. Babbar.

Mr. Lavaniya said a panchayat of 10-12 farmer outfits extended support to Mr. Babbar after he assured them he would set up a potato processing unit, get them the right price and help farmer's children get free education.

The Bharatiya Kisan Union (Rashtropati) is also backing Babbar. The Muslims too appear to be tactically supporting Mr. Babbar as he seems stronger than the BSP to defeat the BJP, said Irfan Salim of the Bharatiya Muslim Vikas Parishad.



With the voters: Raj Babbar, Congress candidate from Fatehpur Sikri, at Choto Ikhtara in Agra Rural. ■ RAJEEV BHATT

Vintage Kolkata



On wheels: A campaign on cycle rickshaws in Kolkata on Tuesday. ■ ANI

[BATTLEGROUND: AGRA]

Divided Dalits lend BJP an edge

With two 'outsiders' battling for the reserved SC seat, BSP banks on coalition arithmetic

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
AGRA

"What did Mayawati do for her caste? At least Mulayam Singh provided jobs to his people! She only built elephants," says Bhimsen, a grocer in the Kutlupur locality of Agra.

While he is spiteful of Ms. Mayawati, Mr. Bhimsen, who belongs to the Kori (Dalit) caste, is enamoured of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and praises him for the Balakot air strike and for doing in "five years, what was not achieved in 70".

But there is also a communal factor to his choice.

"The Congress made Muslims sit on its head, Modiji brought them down to ground," he says.

A few kilometres away at Phulwali Gali, close to a communally sensitive area, Rakesh Kumar, also a Dalit (Nai), runs a men's grooming parlour. So who is in contest? BSP vs BJP? "Only Modi! No contest. Bua-Bhatija (aunt and nephew) would have been squabbling today but due to their fear of Modi, they came together to oust him," Mr. Kumar speaks of BSP chief Mayawati and Samajwadi Party leader Akhilesh Yadav.

Moving around Agra, one of U.P.'s 17 reserved seats, one finds a distinct pattern of non-Jatav Dalits rallying behind the BJP, while at the same time being critical of Ms. Mayawati.

How Agra voted in the past

Vote share of major parties in the 2017 State polls in the five Assembly constituencies within the Agra Parliamentary seat:

Seat	BJP	Congress	BSP	SP
Etmadpur	48.34	NA	31.71	15.46
Agra Cantonment	44.77	NA	26.44	25.59
Agra South	51.51	18.15	26.54	NA
Agra North	58.55	NA	21.15	15.92
Jalesar	44.14	NA	19.4	33.41



Reflective of the internal fractures within the Dalit community in U.P., the BSP has never won Agra, despite the constituency being home to more than 3 lakh Jatavs - Mayawati's caste and the core of the party's support base. The Jatavs represent an overwhelming 56% of the State's Dalits.

And it is this polarisation of the non-Jatav voters, along with the large Bania business community, that the BJP is relying on to retain the seat for the third time in a row. However, the SP-BSP-RLD alliance has changed the arithmetic, with the likely consolidation of the over 3 lakh Muslim voters.

Agra also has a substantial number of Yadavs in two segments - Jalesar and Etmadpur - making it the perfect test case for traditional vote banks of the alliance and the BJP.

Kartar Singh Bharti, a Jatav and senior advocate who lost the 2012 mayoral polls by a thin margin, believes this is the year the elephant (the BSP's symbol) will conquer Agra. Seated in the gallery of his hotel in the Chippitola area near the Agra Fort, he says his community will vote passionately this time to make Ms. Mayawati the Prime Minister. But he is bothered by the trend among the non-Jatav Dalits. "These castes could not connect to the Ambedkarite movement and hence can be pulled in by the BJP," Mr. Bharti says. The prominent Dalit castes in Agra are Khatik, Dhobi, Valmiki, Kori and Dhanuk.

The contest here is between the BSP's Manoj Soni and State Minister S.P.S. Baghel of the BJP. Both are battling an 'outsider' tag. Mr. Soni is a Jatav bu-