

INTERVIEW | SHARAD PAWAR

'The desperation of Modi is visible'

NCP chief says BJP will not get the numbers, and others will have to come together like in 2004 to provide a stable government

ALOK DESHPANDE
VIKAS DHOOT

Nationalist Congress Party president Sharad Pawar speaks on the BJP's electoral discourse focussed on Hindutva, Pakistan and personal attacks on Opposition leaders, and asserts this indicates that Prime Minister Narendra Modi is frustrated. Excerpts:

From banter about nuclear weapons to strapping Rahul Gandhi on a missile or a fighter plane, what do you make of the BJP's recent electoral pitch?

ers. They always maintained the sanctity and dignity of the institution. But this gentleman has no qualms about it and can go down to any level possible for political gains.

■ The Prime Minister is confused. The Prime Minister is an institution of which one has to maintain the dignity. His campaign started with Hindutva. In 2014, it was development, and the people of the country thought, "Why not give an opportunity to him" and people supported him.

You referred to personal attacks against you, but you have refrained from a counter-offensive. Do you think that the Opposition's reluctance to match BJP's comments aimed at catching voters' attention could hurt?

■ Unfortunately, the ruling party has resorted to such techniques and it has worked in their favour in the past.

But what is his performance in five years? Farmer suicides, demonetisation, no industrial growth. And therefore, there are no specific points on which he can convince people to support him. That's why he is resorting to this, and then there are the personal attacks... on the Nehru-Gandhi family in the country, and in Maharashtra, on Sharad Pawar's family.

But I am sure people will realise. Ultimately, an election is an opportunity for political parties to reach out to people with their programmes, future plans. This was happening in India. Modiji has changed it.

You have participated in over 14 elections... have you seen such a level of discourse?

With a lot of first-time voters, do you feel the PM's pitch of nationalism and military aggression against Pakistan will attract the youth?

■ I have not seen a person occupying the PMO campaigning in such a manner. I remember the speeches of Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi and oth-

He did ask for votes based on actions taken after the Pulwama attack. He wants to exploit that sentiment because he has nothing else to tell voters.

What does the introduction of terror accused Pragya Singh Thakur as a BJP candidate indicate?

■ Modi wants to play the communal card and wants to exploit that feeling. But I doubt how much that will help him.

Since his first rally in Maharashtra, Mr. Modi has been targeting only you. You have been the sole major campaigner for the Congress-NCP alliance across the State. Is there a leadership vacuum in the State's Opposition?

■ Not really. I have always campaigned extensively, even when there were no helicopters. I like this. I have realised the danger of Modi's continuation. I feel it is my duty to create new leadership to protect the interests of the State.

At the same time, the danger is the authoritarian approach of Mr. Modi. He is also attacking my family. Is this a national issue or an election issue? Only a frustrated man can go to this level. It is the desperation of Modi that is visible.

Do you feel that the Election Commission is impartial, given its stance on some leaders' speeches and silence on the PM's invocation of the armed forces and other comments?

■ Not just that... Mr. Modi held a roadshow today after voting. There was no action. I won't comment on whether the EC has lost its credibility but yes, we were shocked. The EC seems to be not noticing what Mr. Modi is doing.

What has the Opposition learned from five years of government led by Narendra Modi?

■ We haven't learned much as an Opposition, but have surely learned how to use government machinery when one is in the government.

Modi wants to play the communal card and wants to exploit that feeling. But I doubt how much that will help him



• VIVEK BENDRE

With three phases over, what is your reading of the nation's mood?

■ I can say that the BJP will not get the required numbers. They won't form the government and others will have to come together like in 2004 and formulate a common minimum programme to provide a stable government.

Ultimately, we came to an understanding that we will complete the election process and then we will sit. I am 100% sure that after the election, we will come together.

Given your equations with other parties, you could be the glue to bring all Opposition leaders together...

■ I can provide the network to bring all the leaders together. We can definitely work on that, we are working on that.

Could you then be a PM candidate?

■ I am not insisting on any position. I have been a Minister for 25 years. That is enough. I will not accept any such offer. I am not thinking on that level. I will see to it that some good leader is being picked.

In 1967, when I was given an opportunity as a 27-year-old by the Congress, some seniors opposed the move. It was Yashwantrao Chavan who said it is our duty to prepare future leadership for the party. I think the same situation exists today.

It is the responsibility of me and my generation to create new leadership. We have to give opportunity to new youngsters.

Maharashtra CM Devendra Fadnis claims you chose to run away from contesting this time...

■ I stopped contesting polls in 2014. If he [Mr. Fadnis] is saying this in election rallies, then I must say he is extremely childish. He knows that I am a Rajya Sabha member. I have fought over 14 elections. And if he is making the statement then, it shows the level of his persona.

POLL POURRI



Free rides to polling booth

GUWAHATI

An autorickshaw driver in Guwahati has become popular on social media for offering free rides to senior citizens to and from two polling stations in his locality. "As a law-abiding citizen, I felt it was my duty to contribute in my own way to make people, especially the elderly, exercise their right to vote," Rupam Pathak said. Mr. Pathak has been riding an autorickshaw for a living for more than 20 years. The three-wheeler service in the city has been under stress because of competition from web-based car service agencies. Elections in the third and final phase of polling in Assam were held in four constituencies - Gauhati, Barpeta, Dhubri, and Kokrajhar - on Tuesday.

EVMs charm nonagenarians

PALAKKAD

Ammukkutty Amma and Kali Amma are in their nineties. They do not remember how many times they have voted and how many elections they have witnessed. But they voted on Tuesday with the same zest and excitement that one sees in first-time voters. They were the most senior voters at ALP School, Mangode, in the Thrikkadeeri panchayat area of Palakkad constituency. Both of them have voted at the same school ever since they started voting. Though they have polled most of their votes in ballot papers in the past, they agree that electronic voting machines have their advantages. It's good to vote in the machine and it's fast and simple, they said.



EC examining PM's speeches

NEW DELHI

The Election Commission on Tuesday said the speeches of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, which according to the Opposition parties violated the model code of conduct (MCC), were still being examined.

Asked about the status of complaints pertaining to Mr. Modi's speeches on April 1 and April 9 in Maharashtra, where he was alleged to have made references to the defence forces when making an appeal for votes, EC officials told the media that it had taken some time in getting the authorised translated transcripts of the statements. The Commission received the transcripts between April 14 and 16, following which they were being examined legally, in the overall context in which the impugned comments were made, said an official. The Congress has so far submitted seven complaints against Mr. Modi seeking action against him for the alleged violations.

Ferozepur ticket for Sukhbir

CHANDIGARH

The Shiromani Akali Dal on Tuesday announced that former Deputy Chief Minister and party president Sukhbir Singh Badal would contest from Ferozepur. The party nominated sitting MP and Union Minister Harsimrat Kaur Badal for the Bathinda constituency. Spokesperson Daljit Singh Cheema said there was a strong demand for Mr. Badal to contest from Ferozepur. "The core committee members of the party said it would not only send a positive message to the rank and file but also improve the prospects of the party," he said. Mr. Cheema said Ms. Badal had been fielded taking into view her performance as a Cabinet Minister. She will face Gidderbaha MLA Amarinder Singh Raja Warring (Congress), Bholath MLA Sukhpal Singh Khaira (Punjab Ekta Party) and Talwandi Sabo MLA Baljinder Kaur (AAP).



Best foot forward



Power of vote: M.B. Pranav, a differently abled student from Palakkad who is congenitally armless, getting his toe inked before casting his maiden vote at a school in Alathur panchayat in Palakkad on Tuesday. •K.K. MUSTAFAH

In Odisha's Balasore, Modi highlights Mission Shakti

Says India needs a strong government

SATYASUNDAR BARIK
BHUBANESWAR

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday said the previous Congress governments had failed to test India's anti-satellite missile capability as they were busy "protecting the interests of a family".

"The name of Balasore has been recorded in history for Mission Shakti which means India has achieved the power to destroy satellites in space within three minutes," he said at an election meeting in Balasore. "This is the Balasore from where the satellite was fired upon and in three minutes the satellite was destroyed. India became the fourth nation in the world to accomplish the feat."

Asserting that any Indian would take pride in India becoming a superpower on water, land, air and space, he said only the Opposition parties, desperate for power, were unhappy.

"They say Modi should not have done this and Modi

should have kept it secret. Should the accomplishment have been kept secret? Has it been achieved by harming anyone in a hush-hush manner or by looting somebody? Worthless and timid governments of the Congress had not tested such capability for so many years. The country needs a *majboot* (strong) government, not a *majboor* (helpless) one," he said.

"From mobile to missile, everything including information about weather, cyclones or GPS used by fishermen is controlled from space. If any rogue country launches an attack on our satellite, everything will come to a halt. Earlier governments had no concern about it because they were busy protecting the interests of a *namdar* (renowned) family. But for this *chowkidar*, country comes first," said Mr. Modi. "Anyone who wants to target our satellites will have to think 100 times, because the missile which was tested in Balasore is ready now," he said.

Son Vaibhav fills in for Ashok Gehlot in Jodhpur

Congress candidate is battling BJP incumbent to recapture a seat the Rajasthan CM had won five times since 1980

MOHAMMED IQBAL
JODHPUR

Riding on bumpy rural roads in the scorching desert heat through dusty villages of the Jodhpur Lok Sabha constituency, a young man clad in white kurta pyjama is making his debut in electoral politics with a pledge to make a difference in ordinary people's lives. While this may not be his first exposure to rural distress in his home district, he takes note of each issue raised by the villagers he meets with sincerity.

Vaibhav Gehlot, 38, son of Rajasthan Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot, is the Congress candidate in the constituency, which his father represented five times since 1980. On a campaign swing through about 20 villages of the Luni Assembly segment, the younger Gehlot appeared calm and self-assured, ready to counter his political opponents with facts and figures.

"The Marwar region has had a special place in the politics of Rajasthan ... but the way the Centre has neglected it

during the past five years is for everyone to see," Mr. Gehlot said at a campaign stop in Karwar village, which boasts several institutions built during the Congress's previous tenure in the State from 2008 to 2013.

Karwar Sarpanch Pappu Ram Bishnoi recalled the initiatives taken for the development of the region during the Congress's previous term. Pointing to institutions such as an Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), a National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) and the Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan Ayurveda University that had come up in the village panchayat area, Mr. Bishnoi credited their presence to the sustained efforts put in by the senior Mr. Gehlot.

"Vaibhavji will take forward the legacy of his illustrious father," Mr. Bishnoi said in his brief address at the meeting, as the villagers raised slogans in support of the Congress. Observing that he had raised the issue of the curtailment of sarpanches' powers in land-related matters, following the establishment of the Jodhpur



Political heir: Vaibhav Gehlot at a campaign meeting in the Jodhpur Lok Sabha constituency. •SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Development Authority in 2012, with the Gehlot scion, the local leader said he expected "Mr. Gehlot to help us out when he is elected an MP".

Former Union Minister Chandresh Kumari, who represented Jodhpur between 2009 and 2014 and now resides in Himachal Pradesh, sought the electorate's backing for Mr. Gehlot. The septuagenarian leader reminded villagers of Mr. Gehlot's

experience in politics both as a general secretary of the Pradesh Congress Committee and earlier as a Youth Congress leader. "He has struggled hard ... he has fought for you," she said.

In the small, remote villages of Luni and Mandor tehsils including Daijar, Paldi Maglia, Jakhron Ki Dhani, Popawas, Keru and Joliyali, Mr. Gehlot spoke of how the government led by Prime Minister Naren-

dra Modi had put the Barmer oil refinery in "cold storage" and had failed to provide two crore jobs to the nation's youth every year or bring back the black money stashed away abroad. "Bring the Congress to power at the Centre this time," he urged voters. "The survival of democracy is at stake."

As the residents of several villages complained of water scarcity, erratic power supply and lack of livelihood avenues, Mr. Gehlot noted the issues and promised action. Luni MLA Mahendra Bishnoi asserted that Mr. Gehlot, being the son of a 'Vikas Purush' (development icon), would ensure an "unmatched pace" of development that would bring prosperity to the region.

Some villagers sceptical

However, a section of villagers were sceptical and had reservations about the Congress's narrative.

"The younger Gehlot is not a man of the masses," said Pappu Singh Chauhan, a resident of Narwa village. "He has not risen from the grassroots.

Even if he is elected, he will need his father's guidance to gain a foothold in national politics. It remains to be seen how far he goes," he added.

Still, Mr. Gehlot is stepping into electoral politics with a distinct advantage. Of the eight Assembly segments in Jodhpur, the BJP won only two - Soorsagar and Phalodi - in the 2018 Assembly election. The swing in the vote share may dent the prospects of sitting MP and BJP candidate Gajendra Singh Shekhawat, who was a serious contender for the post of the BJP State president.

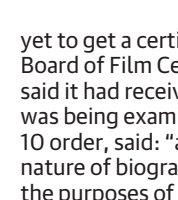
As Mr. Gehlot pledges to 'fight against injustice' and promises to be with the people of Jodhpur in their times of need, the villagers are reminded of the senior Gehlot's oft-quoted remark in the local Marwari dialect, *Main Thansu Door Koni* (I am not far from you). That comment had sent across a message to the Congress rank and file that Mr. Ashok Gehlot's rise in national politics ought not to be seen as his exit from the State.

Mamata biopic trailers removed

NEW DELHI

The Election Commission has got the trailers of a biopic on West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee removed from three websites for alleged violation of its directives.

Stating that the film was yet to get a certification from the Central Board of Film Certification, the Commission said it had received a report on the issue and it was being examined. The EC had, in its April 10 order, said: "any biopic material in the nature of biography/hagiography subserving the purposes of any political party or any individual entity connected to it, which is intended to, or which has the potential to disturb the level playing field during the elections, should not be displayed in electronic media including cinematograph during the operation of model code of conduct". According to the poll panel, 574 Facebook posts, 49 tweets, two YouTube videos and three WhatsApp messages have been deleted so far for the violations.



I hope I will not be forced to leave BJP by BJP itself. I am waiting for ticket, if not given to me I will do good bye to party

UDIT RAJ
BJP'S MP IN NORTH-WEST DELHI

