

INTERVIEW | DEVENDRA FADNAVIS

'We will probe treatment of Pragya if she complains'

Maharashtra CM says she is a victim of a false narrative; will investigate 'inhuman' actions of State ATS if a complaint is submitted

SHARAD VYAS
MUMBAI

Ahead of the last phase of elections in the State, Maharashtra Chief Minister **Devendra Fadnavis** speaks about the rationale behind the BJP's decision to field Pragya Singh Thakur from Bhopal and the party's nationalist pitch and its campaign attacks on NCP chief Sharad Pawar. Excerpts:

The documents recovered by central agencies from Ms. Thakur speak of turning India into a Hindu rashtra. Is ticket to her a step in that direction as the party believes she was falsely framed?

■ First and foremost, we will, like all other complaints, probe any complaint of inhuman treatment she faced during interrogation by the Maharashtra ATS (Anti-Terrorism Squad). As the Home Minister of the State, it is my responsibility to look into complaints of misbehaviour.

Secondly, we believe the cases against her are false and the party has relied on the investigation carried out by the NIA, which has clearly declared this case as made-up, without any incriminating evidence against the *Sadhvi*. You see, the narrative of Hindu terrorism was spun in late 2008, when the perceived persecution of the minorities was at its peak following multiple blasts across the country. Since the minorities felt victimised and started moving

away from the Congress and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), a counter-narrative was brought forward and the term Hindu terror was coined.

Ms. Pragya Singh Thakur is our answer to that narrative, which had demeaned the 2,000-year-old Hindu religion. Those who gave trouble to her, those who persecuted her – she will provide an answer to that.

So are you saying there is no Hindu terrorism and it was all right for her to insult ATS chief Hemant Karkare?

■ No, not at all. The term Hindu terrorism does not exist as far as the BJP is concerned. Having said that, she should not have made the remark against Mr. Karkare, a fine officer who made the supreme sacrifice defending the nation. Despite all her pain and suffering, it is not all right to speak the way she did.

While even seasoned leaders make a mistake, my suggestion to her would be to show restraint in the future...

and the party has communicated the same to her too.

Is it right for her to seek votes on account of the alleged atrocities suffered at the hands of ATS officials?

■ Like I said, it is the responsibility of the prosecution under the CrPC (Code of Criminal Procedure) to press charges against her and prove their theory. Since they did not press, she came out on bail and contested, just like Mr. Rahul Gandhi is out on bail and contesting, although the two cases are completely different. The narrative against her was even being pushed by the public prosecutors. This larger conspiracy to defame Hinduism and the made-up case against her will surely be exposed in future. I will, in fact, if and when a complaint comes – like all other complaints to the Home Minister of the State – look into the alleged ill treatment meted out to her in the ATS offices.

Why is the BJP's second term

The term Hindu terrorism does not exist as far as the BJP is concerned

campaign for Prime Minister Narendra Modi focussed on nationalism instead of the five years' development efforts?

■ Please bear in mind the two narratives [nationalism and development] are playing out intermittently in this Lok Sabha [campaign]. It is just that sometimes, one gets more prominence over the other depending on the day's rhetoric. Having said that, nationalism is relevant because the people are feeling that fervour in their hearts. The feeling has only been compounded following the manifesto the Congress party presented to the nation: talking of reducing the presence of the Army in Jammu & Kashmir, tweaking the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, erasing sedition (124-A) from the law books. In such a scenario, na-

tionalism is an issue. It also becomes an issue when the alliance [Congress's] partner talks of having two Prime Ministers – one for J&K and another for the rest of the country. Finally, when nationalism is an agenda globally – even in the United States and Germany, where borders are an issue – why not in India?

What is your assessment of the party's chances as some pollsters expect a 30-40 seat loss from 2014?

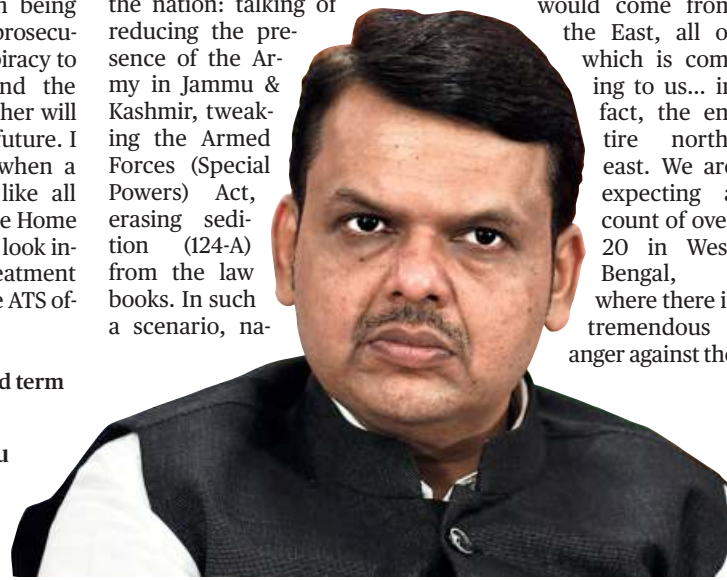
■ Firstly, I don't think we will lose 30 to 40 seats. If anything, much of our gains would come from the East, all of which is coming to us... in fact, the entire north-east. We are expecting a count of over 20 in West Bengal, where there is tremendous anger against the

incumbent Chief Minister. Even Odisha and part of Tamil Nadu would vote for us. We should not have any problem going past our 2014 mark.

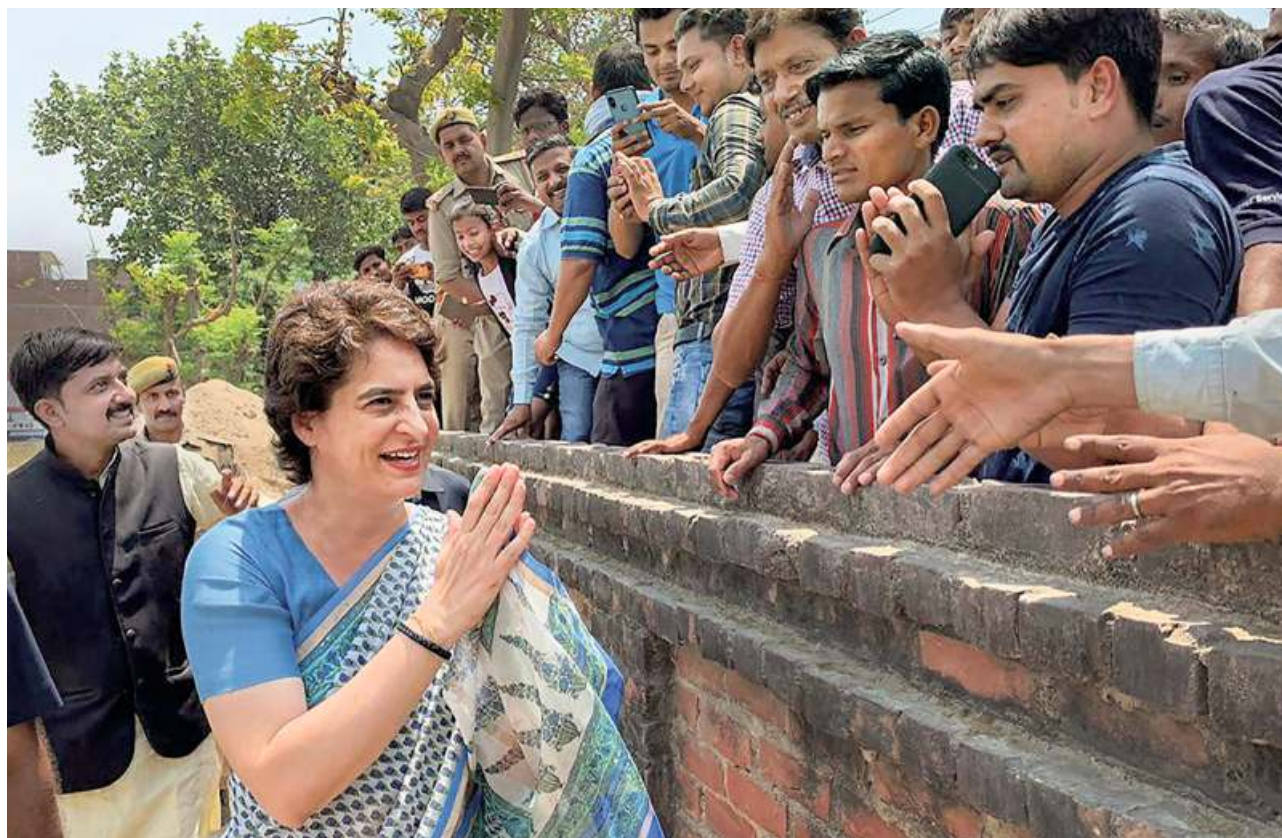
It seems Maharashtra Navnirman Sena chief Raj Thackeray is setting the agenda in Maharashtra, while your party is busy attacking NCP's Sharad Pawar?

■ We have decided not to respond to him [Raj Thackeray] at all, since we believe the MNS meetings will not change voters' views. Earlier, he had shown documents establishing a meeting between our NSA and the Pakistani envoy but it turned out the document was old... from 2017. Then, he claimed the Pakistani F-16 was never downed as per the Pentagon but that too was proved wrong. Like this, there are a '50 unsubstantiated videos' of him circulating, should we also put those out without any context? [Mr. Raj] would tie up with Congress and NCP for the Assembly elections since he is aware his politics is finished.

As for Mr. Pawar, we are responding to him since he is the self-designated leader of the *mahagatbandhan* of the Opposition parties and fighting his last big fight.



Breaking down the walls



Support line: Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra during an election campaign in Fatehpur of Uttar Pradesh on Wednesday. ■ PTI

[IN FOCUS: BHOPAL]

Bhopal mirrors the battle of competing narratives

While BJP pushes a mix of aggressive Hindutva and strident nationalism, the Congress talks about unemployment, farm distress

SANDEEP PHUKAN
BHOPAL

The battle for the Bhopal seat reflects the larger conflict between two competing narratives that is playing out in the 2019 Lok Sabha election.

The BJP, which has been winning this Hindi heartland seat since 1989, is pushing a mix of aggressive Hindutva and strident nationalism.

On the other hand, the Congress, buoyed by its win in the Assembly elections last December, is talking about unemployment, farmers' distress and development.

At South Avenue – an up-market housing complex of 188 apartments in Gulmohar colony – BJP candidate Pragya Singh Thakur was scheduled to address residents but was two hours late.

Yet, a group of residents, including many women, waited patiently. The tag of being a "terror accused" in the 2006 Malegaon blasts case hardly made a difference here.

"Both Swami Aseemanand [acquitted in the Ajmer dargah and Samjhauta Express cases] and Pragya Thakur have been cleared of all charges," says B.M. Khandelwal, a former president of the residents' welfare association.

When informed that the BJP candidate remains an ac-



Bristling battle: Congress candidate Digvijaya Singh addressing a public meeting at Suraj Nagar, and BJP candidate Pragya Singh Thakur going on a roadshow at Jawahar Chowk. ■ A.M. FARUQUI

cused, an explanation was at hand. "We want Modiji for the development work, and to make him Prime Minister again we have to send as many BJP [MPs] as possible," he says.

Amid chants of *Bharat Mata ki Jai*, Ms. Thakur, accompanied by Alok Sanjar, MP, was welcomed with garlands and bouquets. Those welcoming her, project Ms. Thakur as someone "tortured" for nine years in "false cases".

'A crusade' "I am calling this a *dharm yuddh* (crusade) against someone who calls Hindus as terrorists," Ms. Thakur says. "By defeating him, we will be

defeating the *sutradhar* (narrator) of such a description against Hindus."

There is neither any mention of her vision for Bhopal's development nor any controversial utterance after her comments on the 26/11 martyr Hemant Karkare and the Babri Masjid demolition stoked controversies.

After the Election Commission officials registered a case, Ms. Thakur's party has not only advised her restraint but also fielded Mr. Sanjar as a "dummy candidate" to avoid any last-minute crisis. "There are no apprehensions regarding Pragyaji but we always keep a back-up,"

says Mr. Sanjar, who secured more than 7 lakh of the 11.3 lakh total votes polled in 2014.

Of the eight Assembly constituencies under the Bhopal Lok Sabha seat, five were won by the BJP in the recent Assembly polls. And the BJP does not want to leave anything to chance. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh has stepped in to counter a campaign officials registered a case, Ms. Thakur is an "outsider", as murmurs ripple even through the BJP's ranks.

"It is going to be a one-sided election as it is being fought on Hindutva and *rashtrabad* (nationalism)," says Surjit Singh Chauhan, chairman of the Bhopal Municipal Corporation



Voter turnout in the third phase of the Lok Sabha election was more or less similar to the trends seen in the 2014 election. Five States registered an increase among the 13 that went to polls. The third phase featured the largest chunk of seats (117) in the fray compared to all other phases

VOTING IN DROVES

State	No. of seats	Turnout in 2019 (%)	Turnout in 2014 (%)
Assam	4	84.47	82.88
Bihar	5	59.97	60.13
Goa	2	74.82	77.02
Gujarat	26	63.91	63.6
Jammu & Kashmir	1*	12.86	
Karnataka	14	68.03	66.57
Kerala	20	77.68	73.89
Maharashtra	14	62.17	62.08
Odisha	6	70.63	72.43
Tripura	1	83.61	83.41
Uttar Pradesh	10	61.33	61.7
West Bengal	5	81.83	82.61
Chhattisgarh	7	68.66	69.67
Dadra & Nagar Haveli	1	79.59	84.05
Daman & Diu	1	71.83	78.01
Overall	117	67.98	

* Voting was held only in some booths in Anantnag constituency

POLL POURRI

Perform or perish in Punjab



CHANDIGARH

The Congress has decided to raise the bar by fixing responsibility for the victory of its candidates on Ministers and MLAs, Chief Minister Amarinder Singh said on Wednesday. "The decision has been taken by the high command under the leadership of Rahul Gandhi to achieving Mission 13 in the Lok Sabha election," he said in a statement. The Ministers who do not succeed in ensuring victory, especially in constituencies they represent, would be dropped. The MLAs will not be given ticket again.

EC acts against online posts



NEW DELHI

The Election Commission's coordination with social media groups for taking action against fake news and contents violating poll rules has so far resulted in the removal of 628 online posts. Since the Model

Code of Conduct came into force, 574 Facebook posts have been taken off for various reasons. In all, 468 political posts were detected during the silence period as provided under the Representation of the People Act and deleted from Facebook.

Polling in Patkura on May 19

BHUBANESWAR

Polling for the Patkura Assembly constituency in Odisha, adjourned following the death of Biju Janata Dal candidate Bed Prakash Agarwalla, will be held on May 19. As per the previous schedule, polling was to have held in Patkura on April 29. According to an Election Commission notification on Wednesday, the last date for filing nominations will be May 1. Scrutiny of nominations will be taken up on May 2, and May 4 will be the last date for withdrawal of nominations. Polling will be held between 7 a.m. and 6 p.m. on May 19.

EC a puppet of BJP: Congress



GUWAHATI

The Congress in Assam has accused the Election Commission of being the BJP's "puppet". State Congress president Ripun Bora on Wednesday said the panel had been partisan. "The Commission ignored several complaints of poll code violations by the BJP. This shows it has become a puppet," he said. The government machinery, he said, is partial towards the BJP. "But all their efforts will not save the BJP from defeat. The fact that the turnout was more than 81% indicated the people want change," he said, adding the Congress would win at least eight of the 14 seats in Assam.

'EVM criticism selective'

JAIPUR

BJP leader Prakash Javadekar on Wednesday targeted opposition leaders who have raised doubts over the functioning of EVMs, asking them how it is possible that the voting machines function well when they win and don't when they lose. The Union Minister cited the results of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan Assembly polls in December last year to say that opposition parties have been selectively raising the issue of malfunctioning of EVMs. "How come EVMs were good when the opposition won elections in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh? (And when) other parties formed governments in Kerala, West Bengal, Telangana and Tamil Nadu?" Mr. Javadekar said at a press conference in Jaipur. "When they lose, they start questioning EVMs, saying they are faulty," he said. ■ PTI

Amar Singh predicts BJP win

LUCKNOW

The BJP will form the next government with a majority as nationalism has taken over casteism in this Lok Sabha election, former Samajwadi Party leader and Rajya Sabha member Amar Singh said on Wednesday.

He attacked the SP leadership, accusing party patriarch Mulayam Singh of "doublespeak" and ditching him. "The BJP will be able to form a majority government at the Centre as this time nationalism has taken over casteism and the scenario has changed in favour of Narendra Modi," he said. Speaking about the difference between the 2014 and 2019 elections, Mr. Singh said there was a 'NaMo' wave in 2014, but this time people will vote for him for the work he had done. ■ PTI

Didi will again be angry today, seeing the immense support for BJP in West Bengal

NARENDRA MODI
PRIME MINISTER

