

“EVEN EXPEDIENCY SHOULD NOT VIOLATE DECENCY”

Ramakrishna Hegde talks about Janata dissensions, the governance of Karnataka, his own political views and his health.

By Rohini Nilekani and Vir Sanghvi

Imprint: *Can we start by talking about the present state of the Janata party? With the recent infighting and the internal dissensions, there is this feeling that your party is back to the situation that prevailed between 1977 and 1979. Do you think this is fair?*

Hegde: I don't know why it is so but dissensions appear to be an integral part of Indian politics. It is not a question of dissensions between two parties — even intra. And no party is free from such fights. Some say: “Look, the BJP, the CPI, the CPM don't have these troubles.” But it is not so. They just don't come out. Leaders of the Janata party are outspoken. That creates problems.

When I was Janata General Secretary, I would tell my colleagues: “Look here, what you want to say today, say it tomorrow. And what you want to do tomorrow, do it today. Apply your mind.” After all, God has given something here (*points to forehead*) to every human being. We are not animals — we have thinking power.

But no, they must immediately come out with a statement regardless of whether it is a national problem or a party problem. This has been happening all along, and our party is not immune to this virus. And yes, it has affected the party.

The recent developments are really unfortunate and I guess it happened merely because of a communication gap and misunderstandings between friends. I only hope that it won't become a matter of prestige. After all, the party's prestige is more important than that of any individual.

You said that the BJP and others have

also had internal dissensions, but rarely have they been of this magnitude. Nobody has ever accused Vajpayee of buying votes, for instance.

You know this is not the only accusation that he (Subramaniam Swamy) has made. And he made this accusation when somebody else had done. He picked that up. That only shows that he has no personal knowledge and therefore, he doesn't have any credibility. He also said all kinds of things about Mr Vajpayee.

Yes, but those were to do with his personal life. The accusation against Chandrashekhra is that he bought votes.

It is the personal prejudice that affects the politics. And that has been the bane of Indian politics — personal ambition, personal prestige and personal prejudice. And most of our leaders have never been able to subordinate the personal factor when they discuss the politics of the country.

Around a year ago, after Chandrashekhra had finished his padayatra, people were talking about him as the obvious candidate for Prime Minister. And there was the suggestion that Janata was the natural party of government. Well, all of that seems to have been forgotten now.

There will be such ups and downs in the prospects of every party. If we win a few by-elections then our credibility will go up again. Basically speaking, I don't think that there has been any difference during the last year or so. Actually, but for a few developments — Bihar and West Bengal for instance — Janata party's

credibility has not gone down. In Karnataka, for instance, it has not suffered.

But don't you think that by accepting people who broke away from the original Janata party and brought down the Janata government, you are institutionalising an instability that could lead to a similar scenario once again?

This is (*smiles*), and should be, viewed in the context of one basic belief and approach and that is: every human being commits mistakes and he learns from these mistakes.

Oh, come on!

You don't take it seriously? (*Smiles.*)

Do you really believe that at this age they are going to learn from their mistakes and become good boys overnight?

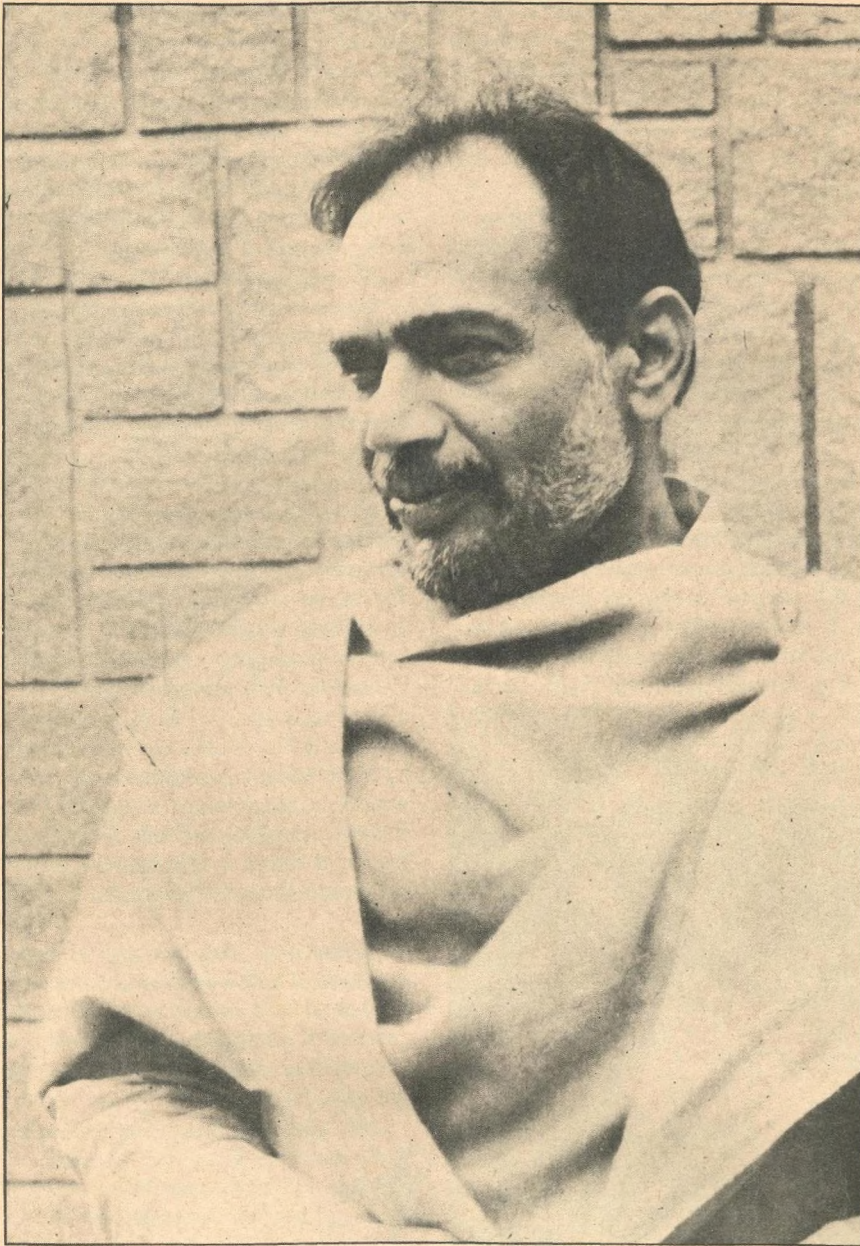
(*Smiles.*) That is one. And the second is: in politics, expediency — whatever might be the claims of any political leader, irrespective of such claims — expediency becomes an important factor, which drives us to make certain compromises.

But where does the compromising end? Does it extend to buying MPs and MLAs?

No. That allegation is not true (*laughs*). There should be a limit to expediency. Even expediency should not violate decency. One can be expedient but at the same time be decent. One should not be outrageously immoral.

So it's a matter of degree?

Certainly! Honesty is a matter of degree. Integrity is a matter of degree.



You've been Chief Minister of Karnataka for nearly 18 months now. Are you happy with what you've achieved?

Yes and no.

Why 'no'?

Mainly because of personal and domestic reasons. My health has deteriorated. I used to have very good health. And sometimes, I do feel that — working under these severe constraints — have we been able to do as much as people expected? I cannot go on explaining: "These are our problems, these are our constraints, these are our limitations," etc. But I

have to say that we have not done as much as was expected. That's why I feel sorry: having taken over this responsibility, if I'm unable to fulfil the aspirations of the people, then it is a matter of great regret.

Any specific instances where you think you haven't, as you say, fulfilled the aspirations of the people?

I have not been able to — so far — completely eliminate administrative corruption. Political corruption — yes! There are no allegations against any minister. But though administrative corruption has come down quite a bit at the higher level, at the lower level it

is still there.

It also took an unduly long time for us to bring in several measures. This can be explained away — there was undue delay at the Government of India level and so on — but I'm not happy.

So I'm not satisfied mainly in these areas but there has been — to an extent — a qualitative change in the approach, the attitude, and the behaviour of those who rule this state.

You also have to walk a tightrope between several caste and community pressure groups, plus the MLAs.

These are the facts of life. But when you say 'pressure groups', it is not the communal and caste pressures that I attach much importance to. I tell them: "I have no caste." That is the last thing I care about. When I take any decision, that factor is totally absent from my mind. But there have been other pressures. The BJP — for instance — have made a statement about conditional support. Now, I really can't understand that. Either they support or they don't support.

Well, it's the 1977-79 Janata government all over again, isn't it?

Exactly. You know, my anxiety has been that Karnataka should not be a repetition of the history of 1977-79. These are the pressures that give me mental strain.

Do you think it gives me any happiness when I see the mumblings and the mutual recriminations among Janata leaders at various places? I feel very bad.

Can we talk about your own political views? How would you describe your beliefs?

Normally, the phraseology used is right, left and centre. This makes no sense. Even words like socialism, communism and capitalism are now out of date (*laughs*).

Okay. Can we take your views on certain specific things? For instance, do you support the public sector?

I am not dogmatic about it. I have no such commitment to it. I believe that if there is honesty and discipline among the employees then public sector can be run better than the private sector. What we must

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appreciate is the total absence of self-interest. But it should not mean disinterest. At the moment, those who work there are not kept long enough. Anybody achieves something — he is not given a pat on the back. Anybody ruins something — he is not punished. How can industrial enterprise prosper like this?

Therefore I am not against the public sector as such but I am against inefficient public sector.

What are your views on private taxation?

I view taxation from two angles: as a source of government revenue. And secondly, as an instrument for removing inequality. Now, from the point of view of the first angle, I would say that it should never cross the point of diminishing returns.

In the Indian context, what would that be?

The highest slab should not exceed 50 per cent.

And where would that start? At what kind of income?

You mean what would be the rate?

No. I mean 50 per cent on an income of a lakh? Or 50 per cent on an income of Rs 50?

At the highest.

Yes, but at what stage would the highest slab start?

No, there will be slabs.

I understand that, but what I want to know is at what income level would the highest rate be levied?

At any level. If you have Rs 10 lakh then it should not increase 50 per cent.

And if you have one lakh?

I believe that income tax should not be such that the bread-earner cannot contribute. Otherwise he will evade. And this is what has happened today. We have made our people dishonest because of unrealistic, exorbitant tax rates.

Even as Finance Minister of Karnataka, I always reduced taxes and rationalised the structure. And I've done the same as Chief Minister.

Also, take some film artistes or

painters who reach the height of Hussain or Gujral. They have to save, and we must see if it is going to be a regular source of income. If they earn for just three years and you extract 70 or 80 per cent, then I don't believe in this kind of tax.

Suppose something happens to a film star. Somebody throws some acid on his face — finished! And that film star will be totally useless for any other job. You have to make allowances for that sort of thing.

You know, our taxation system is totally unimaginative.

Can we shift to foreign policy? What do you think should be India's policy? In broad, general terms.

I believe in dynamic neutrality. We are still a developing country. We have our own problems. The less we get involved in international politics, the better for us. Panditji had that kind of



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image even before Independence. Therefore he had that kind of equation — he could talk to many world leaders at the same level. But we don't have any such leaders. The Prime Minister is very good at international politics — I don't underrate her — but we should not give the impression of being aligned to any country.

All our energies and all our resources must be utilised in building up a strong India. You know China is not prosperous, but China is strong. Therefore, it is considered as a third bloc. We could have taken that place. But we have never done it.

What about Punjab? Are you in agreement with Chandrashekhar in opposing the Golden Temple action?

You know, we've both been misquoted. What I'd said was that the action seemed inevitable because the Prime Minister delayed even thinking of finding a solution. So what I said was that what could have been cured by a mild dose of medicine now required a surgical operation. All India Radio misinterpreted this to say that the Chief Minister of Karnataka has welcomed the military action.

Does that mean that you accept that the surgical operation was necessary? That there was no way of handling this other than sending battalions into the Golden Temple and all but destroying the Akal Takht?

I think that there was no other way. You know, we had to pay the price. But this will leave a permanent wound. Sikhs are not like Assamese. They are very close to Delhi and they hold a strategic position. And they are not only brave but also proud. They have fought for our country in every war. We should appreciate their sense of pride.

And after all, who created Bhindranwale?

Giani Zail Singh and Sanjay Gandhi?

Everybody knows. Now for their silly mistake — I don't know, it was probably deliberately done — for their short-term political gain, the whole country has to pay.

These days people have begun to talk of you as a national leader. Now assume that — somehow — you

became Prime Minister, what would be your five major priorities?

(Smiles.) That's a hypothetical question.

All right. Assume that after the next election, the Prime Minister asks your advice. What would you tell him to do?

That depends on the situation obtaining at that time.

No, that's a short-term view. There are basic priorities in India, surely, that don't vary that much from year to year?

Well, the basic priority is employment. Poverty in our country is because of employment. Second is education. We have to change the whole system of education totally. The third is our economy in general which means power, steel and the basic industries. And the fourth would be defence policy.

Would you change our defence policy?

Yes. We have to be much stronger than what we are. It is not just allocating more resources. As I mentioned earlier, we have to be strong, like China.

What would you do with education?

The present system is not suited to our country. After 16 years of precious life and about Rs 20,000 - 70,000 invested, we get a youth who is totally unable to stand on his own legs.

So what would you do?

I would immediately require every youth of this country to work for two years in the army.

You sound like Vajpayee.

(Laughs.) You just compare the NCC boys to other boys. Very well-behaved.

I don't see how it will help. Two years in a village, maybe.

That can be done only through the army. They will join the army and will be made to work in the villages or wherever.

And at the end of these two years, how will they be better qualified to be employed?

Most of our youths go astray when they join a college because they go from one atmosphere to another. Most of them come from rural areas. And in the army they will be subjected to the rigours of discipline. And there will also be some kind of physical training and that will create a sense of equality. Caste, class, rural and urban — everybody will be the same. Whether it is my son or somebody else's.

The greatest weakness in this country is the lack of the sense of oneness. That is why regional parties are coming up and our youths become susceptible to appeals in terms of caste, community and region.

A defence question. If Pakistan had a nuclear bomb, what should a Prime Minister of India do?

You know actually, we have to do everything to defend ourselves. If it comes to that, we should also not hesitate. . . .

There has been a lot of macabre



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speculation about your health. Can we, once and for all, put on record exactly what is wrong with you?

(Smiles.) Well, I started losing my voice five months ago and I thought it was only a temporary phenomenon. But it persisted. Then I had a check-up here. I went to Bombay and had another check-up. And they put me on medication and said: “After four weeks we would like to examine you again.” I went there after a month or so and they had a laryngoscopy. They found a white patch on the right vocal chord, a small, button-sized patch.

So they removed it and a biopsy showed that it was non-malignant, but it was characterised as ‘atypical cell’. That is cells although, at the moment, non-malignant, over a period could possibly turn malignant.

Is it true that you are going to the US for treatment?

If we can get the treatment that we want, then why should anybody go? I would not go.

So, are you going?

No, no.

Definitely?

I don't want to go. (Pause.) Unless the doctor says that it is not possible to treat it here. Even there (America) our own doctors treat you. (Laughs.)

So what do the doctors say? Is it going to get better?

This time I went to Bombay and saw them. And they found it was improving. They want to make sure that it doesn't grow again. So they asked me to stop smoking. So I've given up after 40 years of continuous smoking! I used to smoke 20 cigarettes a day!

What brand?

You know when I was in college, they used to have those beautiful cans of 555. But after that, Dunhill.

Expensive tastes.

Well, Dunhill is milder. (Smiles.)

How do you feel now?

Much better. There is some strain and discomfort while talking but otherwise, I'm much better now.