

RAMAKRISHNA HEGDE: THE OPPOSITION'S NEW STAR

Over the last few months, Hegde has emerged as the Janata party's most impressive leader. Can he replace Chandrashekhar?

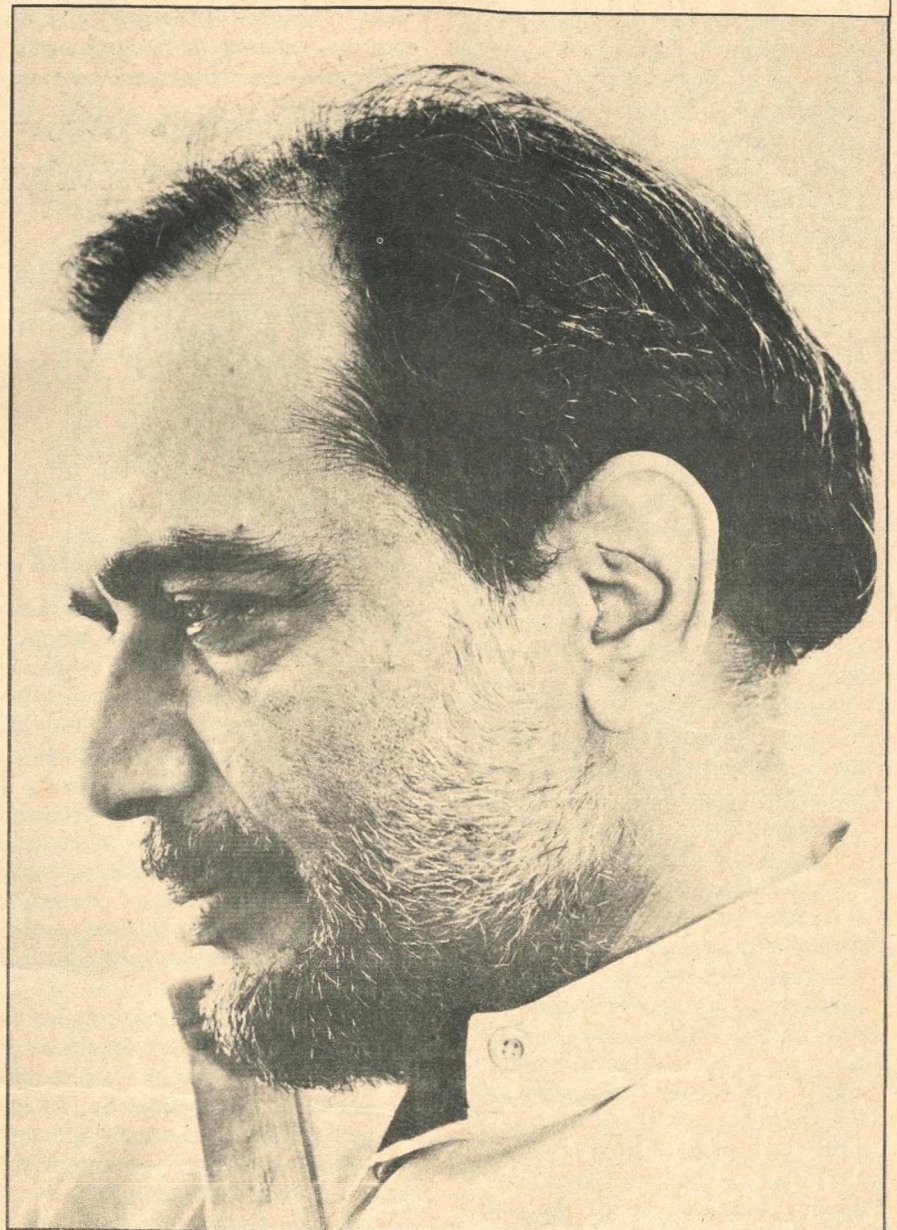
By Rohini Nilekani

CONSIDER THESE FACTS. The Janata party is rapidly running out of leaders. Chandrashekhar, who once seemed like the obvious Prime Minister-in-waiting has seen his credibility disappear. Allegations of corruption and incompetence continue to mount up. Add to this, unproven administrative ability — he has never in his life held ministerial office and his administrative record as party president has been a disaster. George Fernandes is widely perceived as a slippery customer, and besides, he helped break up the party the last time around. Biju Patnaik is a has-been, with a reputation for wheeling and dealing. Morarji Desai is a crotchety old man who has, in any case, announced his retirement. H M Patel is too old; moreover, he has no political base. Ravindra Verma is fighting with the party executive. Subramaniam Swamy has been expelled. And so on.

So who does that leave? Does the Janata have anybody with a reputation for honesty, with proven administrative ability, with a regional political base, and with the political skills required to hold so disparate a party together?

There is only one obvious candidate: Ramakrishna Hegde. And sure enough, in recent months, it has been Hegde who has done many of the things that Chandrashekhar should have. When Farooq Abdullah's ministry fell in Kashmir, it was Hegde who convened a

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PROFILE

meeting of Opposition leaders to discuss the Congress (I)'s new offensive. It was Hegde who was at the forefront when the Opposition called on Giani Zail Singh to complain about Mrs Gandhi's toppling strategies. It was Hegde who led the walk-out of Opposition leaders from the National Development Council meeting. And throughout July, it was Hegde who camped in Delhi and briefed the press on the Opposition's point of view.

Earlier, Hegde had emerged as the Janata party's canniest political leader. When state Congress (I) chief Veerappa Moily attempted to buy over MLAs and topple his ministry, Hegde had the offers tape-recorded and then, played the tapes to the press. When the Karnataka BJP unit threatened to withdraw unconditional support to his government, Hegde went over its head and secured an undertaking of support from Vajpayee. When the Janata party's Bihar unit revolted against Chandrashekhar's leadership, it was Hegde that it appealed to in the hope that he would get the party back on the rails.

It has taken Ramakrishna Hegde just 18 months to become one of India's best known and most admired Opposition leaders. His governance of Karnataka has won plaudits for its integrity and decisiveness in the face of severe odds, and his own honesty has not yet been questioned. Inevitably, people are talking of him as a future Prime Minister (among them, M V Kamath in *Imprint*, May 1984), the Southern candidate who everybody has been looking for.

Ironically, Hegde has never sought to project himself as a future leader of the party. Entirely loyal to his leader, he has been content playing Horatio to Chandrashekhar's Hamlet. And to be fair, he had not looked like a national leader till he was chosen as compromise candidate for the Karnataka Chief Ministership. Before that, he had played a variety of roles in a low-key and relatively undistinguished manner. He was Finance Minister of Karnataka, but lost out by sticking with the Congress (O) when the Indira wave swept the country in 1971. When the Congress (O) merged with the Janata in 1977, he got no political office and became instead, one of the party's general secretaries. His tenure as

General Secretary was also relatively undistinguished; he attracted little attention and won a reputation as a sort of cocktail party version of Chandrashekhar. In that sense, the elevation to the Chief Ministership of Karnataka in 1983 was perhaps the best thing to have happened to him. In this new role, he became the right man at the right place.

HEGDE'S FIRST SPELL in Karnataka politics brought him some success, though old Mysore hands still gossip about the allegations of corruption that haunted his tenure as Finance Minister. But then, the Congress (O) lost power after the split and he spent a long time in oblivion. In retrospect, it was perhaps fortunate that he was arrested

His career prior to his elevation to the Chief Ministership was undistinguished. In Delhi he was known as a cocktail party version of Chandrashekhar.

during the Emergency and lodged at Bangalore Central Jail. Though he now quips about having used that time to learn table-tennis and to try and give up cigarettes, more significant was the fact that such national leaders as A B Vajpayee, Madhu Dandavate and L K Advani were also in the same jail. During this period, Hegde grew, by association, from a mere Karnataka leader to a national politician. And of course, he was witness to the birth of the Janata party.

Hegde cut his Delhi teeth as General Secretary of the ruling Janata party. This was in 1977, after his first taste of defeat at the hustings. In that so-called Janata wave, Karnataka remained entirely immune. Hegde was defeated as Lok Sabha candidate from North Kanara. In the capital, however, he

was Morarji's protégé and Chandrashekhar's confidant. He busied himself with party diplomacy, for which he soon acquired a reputation. Meanwhile, away from state politics for the first time since 1954, he maintained remote control over party affairs in Karnataka.

In New Delhi, his background became an immediate asset. He was no stranger to the North. His much-vaunted prowess in Hindi had been picked up at Kashi Vidyapeeth, Banaras, where he took his Bachelor's degree. At Lucknow, he completed his MA and LLB at the turn of the '50s. Now he had a chance to practise his fluent Hindi on the Delhiwallahs. He picked up party chatter at the capital's cocktail circuits. He donned the national dress (*kurta*, *churidar* and a light shawl). He even discarded his playboy temperament for one more suited to Indian politics.

From general secretary to Rajya Sabha MP was a short step. By then Chandrashekhar especially, had come to rely on him. R K Hegde was elected to the Council of States in 1978. But even as an MP, he remained primarily involved with party affairs. By then, of course, the Janata had begun to destroy itself and needed these skills.

Hegde remained an MP till May 15, 1983, when his victory at Kanakpura legitimised his chief ministership of Karnataka. He apparently saw himself only as a stopgap arrangement in Bangalore. After all, the situation was extremely delicate. Nobody had expected the Janata-Kranti Ranga combination to win so many seats. With the public clamouring for a quick decision, there was no other consensus candidate who could emerge immediately. Even so, Hegde claimed that he did not want to be Chief Minister.

Also, his election came in for justified criticism on the grounds that he had not contested the polls. This imposition of a man from above smacked of Mrs Gandhi politics. But the press reaction was only mild. One editorial called him 'unprepared but not unqualified'. And in the last one-and-a-half years of his stewardship, many sceptics must agree, he has been proved the right man for the job. Several times the Congress (I) came close to dislodging the tenuous ministry. Often, only Hegde's wits have kept the regime in place. For instance, at the start of

this year's Assembly session, the toppling game was at its hottest. Moily and company had ideas of seeking a no-confidence motion. Hegde pre-empted that move by calling for a vote to test his party's strength in the House. Nowadays, the Janata government is more confident. Even so, no one is betting on a full five-year term just yet.

When Hegde talks about people learning from their mistakes (see interview) he could well be talking about himself. By all accounts, the man who returned to power in Karnataka was quite different from the finance minister of the '60s. The lessons Hegde seems to have learnt best were how to keep silent and smile. In sharp contrast to the reckless oratory of his predecessor, R Gundu Rao, Hegde's delayed deliveries have won him many rounds on the floor of the Assembly. Typically, says a source close to him, he listens first, and then smiles. The words come later, after deliberate thought.

In a system where defections are the order of the day, where the casual betrayal of the electorate no longer requires justification, Hegde stands out as a one-party politician. He became a Congress activist during the freedom struggle. When the 1969 split came, he chose to stay with his mentor, S Nijalingappa and the Congress (O). In spite of many overtures he has not drifted into the Indira camp. On one particular occasion during the Emergency, he was approached again. Even Veerendra Patil, his long-time Congress (O) colleague, wavered. (After opposing Indira Gandhi at Chikmagalur, Patil has now joined the Congress (I), and has been rewarded with a ministry.) At that time, Hegde reportedly said something to the effect of: "Our day will come, wait and see." His decision to stick with his party saw him out of power for many years but now it seems to have paid off.

Unusually again, Hegde is not communal. For one thing, he has no natural constituency. In India, that means he has no caste-based constituency. Unlike the Lingayats and the Vokkaligas, the two dominant communities in the state, Hegde, a Brahmin, has no ready vote banks. In that context, it is a shrewd move to keep communalism from becoming an issue. For instance, when selecting a constituency for the crucial Assembly election in 1983, he

deliberately picked on rural Kanakpura (urban Bangalore would have been a walk-over). The area, a Vokkaliga stronghold, has very few Brahmin votes.

Another story about ethnic constituencies has often done the rounds locally. Hegde's home constituency — the Sirsi-Siddapura belt from where he won his first Assembly seat in 1957 — has a Brahmin pocket that had supported him. Apparently B D Jatti, ex-vice-president, who then belonged to a rival faction of the Congress (O), saw Hegde as a potential threat. Hegde and Patil were then the henchmen of S Nijalingappa. When Jatti came to power as Chief Minister, he allegedly influenced the decision to turn Sirsi into a reserved constituency. The action did not hinder Hegde's career — he merely

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developed a following in Haliyal, instead.

The Janata government, and Ramakrishna Hegde in particular, has often talked of an experiment in value-based politics. As General Secretary of the party, Hegde personally co-ordinated the 1982 elections in the state. One of the platform promises made to the people was that they would get an honest government. Now Hegde himself admits that it has not been possible to wipe out corruption, especially at the administrative level. But at least the ministerial offices on the third floor of the Vidhana Soudha have not been a source of scandal. Anxious to consolidate his 'clean' image, Hegde made numerous transfers in the state, within six months of coming to power. According to Gundu Rao, more trans-

fers have been made in the past year than in the past 25 years. Reportedly, however, these changes have been made as part of a game plan. The idea is to move out persons with a reputation for dishonesty to posts which have no direct reflection on the state government. Within that framework, Hegde has also moved in honest people as heads of key corporations and boards. He now has a network of incorruptible chiefs whom he largely relies on while running the state.

ALL THIS does not mean that Ramakrishna Hegde is a saint. As he himself admits, honesty and integrity have become a matter of degree. In fact, rumours of shady deals and favours conferred by him during his term as finance minister still waft down political corridors. There is mention of his closeness to the liquor lobby. And the politicking required to keep his disparate team together can best be imagined. Gundu Rao claims that he has many corruption charges to level against the ministry. But as of now, Hegde stands by the Lok Ayukta (Prevention of Corruption) Bill, which is still awaiting Presidential assent. He challenges people to support any charges of corruption against him or his ministers with affidavits.

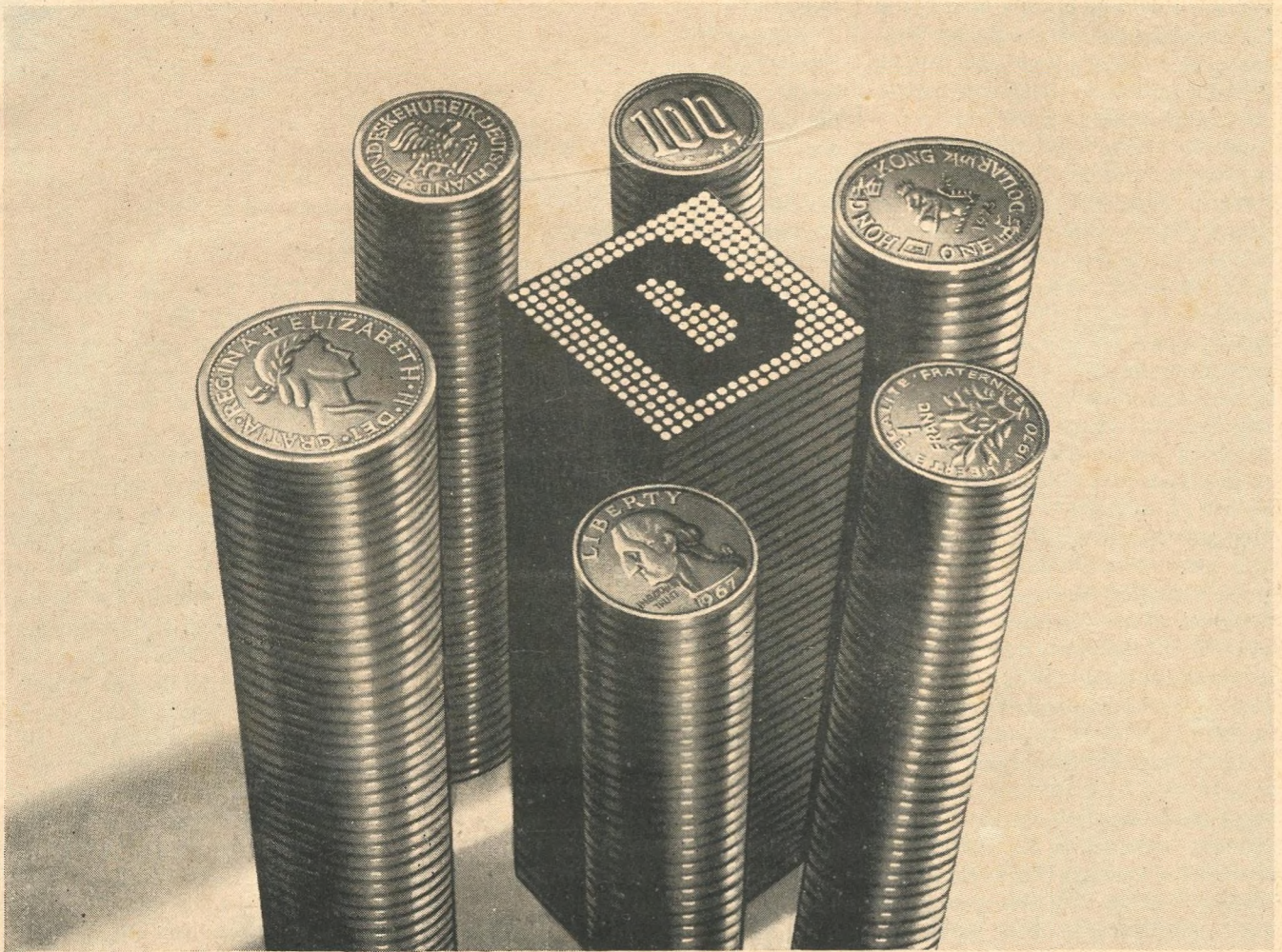
The press has been more than kind. Openly critical of the excesses of Gundu Rao, they allowed the frail new ministry to find its feet. Hegde used the breathing space to apply immediate antidotes. He did away with the fancy car, the fancier helicopter and the entourage of guards that the ex-CM had maintained. This found favour with the press. He also chose to live in his own home instead of the official residence — a move that was calculated to win many admirers. The fact that Hegde's own bungalow is sprawling and more than comfortable was not made much of.

In fact, Hegde has mastered the art of simplicity and makes sure everyone knows about it. Not that Hegde has been an ascetic — even today, stories of his taste for good living cannot be quashed. But to watch the simple clothes, the smiling eyes, the hands folded in a *namaste* to the voters, is to watch a performance that Gandhi and Nehru would have been proud of.

On a normal day, his lunch is

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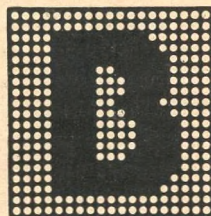
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brought from home, in a steel tiffin-carrier. Typically, it is eaten in the Vidhana Soudha office over a pile of files. Hegde is dressed and ready by six every morning. After the inevitable *darbar*, he leaves home around 6.30 for a walk, after which he goes on to work. His mother complains that she only gets to see her son on television. Understandably, that too is rare.

Nor does Hegde have any time for his friends and relatives from Sirsi. Agriculturists from the rich area nut belt, industrialists, lawyers, ex-fellow Rotarians — these people are among the staunchest supporters of the new government. It is to Hegde's credit that they have not found favour because of their friendship.

A professional colleague remembers their days at the bar in Sirsi. Hegde, newly returned from Lucknow, practised law for nearly a year. His lawyer friend recalls him as something of a radical, preaching better legal aid to the poor, offering free services to the ryots, etc. Few people know that he had also spent a year at Vardha with Vinoba Bhawe. His sister is still a *sarvodaya* activist.

Unusually for an Indian politician, Hegde has no penchant for astrology. When an astrologer wrote in from Dharwar for his horoscope, he received no reply. It was left to an aide to discover that Hegde's *patrika*, in fact, was missing. He did his own investigations and came up with the information that Hegde's birthday falls on August 29, 1926, and not 1927 as is supposed.

Hegde, if family members are to be believed, is something of a writer and maintains a meticulous diary. He has also contributed to several publications in the past, and was the brain behind the *Sirsi Samachar*, a paper still in circulation.

His friends and the press talk about his sense of humour. At a recent jamboree for politicians in Bangalore, he arrived dressed as a Sikh, complete with turban and Punjabi drawl. So convincing was the masquerade that he was promptly named Sardar Hegde Singh. It will be amusing to see if this works with the Northern electorate.

Unfortunately, Hegde's health may become a major hurdle in his career. When he came to office, he already had a painful stomach ulcer. But that was only the beginning. For weeks

now a nagging throat problem has turned into a possible nightmare. Doctors at Jaslok Hospital in Bombay operated on a white patch in his throat that was not immediately malignant. But Hegde admits, for the first time, that the possibility has not been ruled out entirely. Rumours are strong that he may go to the USA for treatment, if necessary. Hegde denies this. He must be aware that his detractors would regard this as a betrayal of the simplicity promise.

Immediately though, the illness has had little effect, other than to force him to stop smoking his favourite Dunhills and to relax his vocal chords by allowing others to speak for him. Opposition members quip that Hegde's ministers have made him 'dumb'. His doctors have advised him to rest his

His biggest problem has been his health. The white patch on his throat could turn malignant. He may have to go abroad for treatment.

voice at least once a week. Since vows of silence have a virtue all their own and since politicians are often known to have foot-in-the-mouth afflictions, this may prove to be a welcome relief.

But Hegde will have little time for rest. The coming months will be the toughest yet. The Congress (I) is bound to step up toppling activity, since it would not like Karnataka to be a Janata stronghold during the Lok Sabha elections. What has happened in Kashmir could easily happen in Karnataka. The true test of Hegde's mettle is still to come.

WHETHER HEGDE will actually amount to very much in the national sense remains to be seen. He is fortunate to be the Janata party's only Chief Minister, at a

time when the party desperately needs spokesmen. Moreover, with Chandrashekhar in decline, the field is clear for the emergence of a new leader. Plus, there is the Southern factor. Most Opposition leaders, including Vajpayee, have spoken of the need to elect a Prime Minister from the South. Of the existing candidates MGR and NTR are clearly ruled out: they are peculiarly Southern phenomena and seem a little bizarre to most Northerners. Kerala has produced no leader of consequence and the only other Karnataka leader with a national reputation is the fun-loving, former wrestler, Gundu Rao. In these circumstances Hegde is the obvious candidate.

What kind of prime minister would he make? Is he of sufficient stature to survive as a national leader? Opinions are divided. There are those who see him as sophisticated, urbane, and reasonable; an excellent combination when it is backed with shrewd political skills. On the other hand, his detractors argue that he is a shallow manipulator who is more fortunate than talented. They point to the confused and somewhat immature nature of his political views (see interview) and say that he is unimaginative and dull.

It is possible to make too much of Hegde. Some years ago the press showered Sharad Pawar with the same sort of hype (though 'honest' was not a description that was preferred in that case). Pawar has yet to prove that the praise was justified and Hegde may meet the same fate.

Generally, Janata party leaders seem to work best at the caucus level. George Fernandes seems utterly credible when he claims to represent the workers. Biju Patnaik's base in Orissa is taken for granted, and Chandrashekhar talks as though the Biharis all love him dearly. Alas, at national elections, when these claims are put to the test, they are found to be hollow.

Hegde's advantage is that despite his Southern base, he is not seen as the candidate of any one region or group. His appeal, if well cultivated, could cut across the old electoral calculations and give Janata a fresh, new appeal. Even if that doesn't happen, his emergence has come as a pleasant change in a political environment dominated by squabbling old, has-beens. ♦