

Shake hands and make up

Chief minister Ramakrishna Hegde and the dissidents, led by H.D. Deve Gowda, have called a truce. But, given the belligerence of both sides, how long will it last?

Last week, SUNDAY wondered whether Ajit Singh, the new young president of the Janata Party would accept Ramakrishna Hegde's resignation. This week, the answer is in. Yet another of Hegde's resignation dramas has drawn curtains prematurely. It was upstaged by a bigger story: the transcript of the phone conversation between Ajit Singh and Janata rebel leader H.D. Deve Gowda, that appeared in the *Indian Express* on 10 July.

The timing was devastating enough to look suspiciously like a deliberate plant. It came on the eve of Hegde's departure to Delhi for the crucial Janata Parliamentary Board meeting. Worse. It was carried along with the full text of Hegde's conditional resignation to Ajit Singh.

Neither Deve Gowda nor Ajit Singh denied the authenticity of the telephone tape. Deve Gowda shrugged, "What was new in that tape? I had already announced publicly that I had spoken to Ajit Singh and he had said there were no official candidates." In fact, the tepid transcript gives little evidence of a grand conspiracy between the two to outmanoeuvre Hegde. But never mind. Singh seems to have walked into a trap. The most offending line in the conversation is Ajit Singh's, "Wonderful. If you win, all these problems will go away," in response to Deve Gowda's misplaced confidence in the victory of dissident candidates (in the 3 July elections to the Legislative Council). Ajit Singh may not be able to live that down too easily. His only hope is that the controversy dwells on the more serious issue of telephone-tapping. In a curiously downplayed report, the *Express* quoted Ajit Singh blaming chief minister Ramakrishna Hegde for tapping the telephone of his colleague, Deve Gowda. If that report is correct, it is a charge.

In fact, there is a persistent suspicion that in spite of the *Express*' reference to central government sources, the transcript came from Bangalore. Who stands to gain the most from exposing a nexus between Ajit Singh and Deve Gowda ask the cynics. Obviously, it is the chief minister.

The chief minister, of course, loudly denied his involvement. In fact, he tried to give yet another tape episode the political mileage he had extracted from the Veerappa Moily-Byre Gowda tapes. This time he was much more subdued. But he is still the injured innocent. "You know, even my phone is tapped," he said in Bangalore. So will he not lodge a protest with the central government? "I have done it so many times, what is the use?" he replied. Hegde's first response was that he was, in principle, against the tapping of phones. He also added that the mechanics of phone-tapping made it difficult for the tap to be done at the state level.

The controversy over the ethics of phone-tapping will no doubt linger on. But the transcript had its expected impact. At least on Ajit Singh. At the Parliamentary Board meeting, the Janata chief had lost much initiative. Suddenly, the "we can't impose a solution in Karnataka" excuse was dropped.

With deliberate cunning chief minister R.K. Hegde tried to reduce the serious matter of dissidence to a simple issue of discipline. But it is not likely that the hardcore dissidents will go for such a ploy



Hegde being welcomed by loyalists on his return from Delhi: triumphant

Together, the party heavyweights worked out a sort of an agreement. Both the loyalists and the dissidents were asked to observe a two-month truce. Meanwhile, the board loudly endorsed its faith in the Ramakrishna Hegde government. That incidentally was one of the conditions in Hegde's letter to Ajit Singh. The board also authorised or, as the dissidents would have it, ordered the chief minister to do what he could to patch things up. It proposed disciplinary action committees both at the central and state levels. These committees would go into dissident-raised issues, such as the controversy over the 'expulsion' of six MLAs and the dissolution of the Mandya and Hassan units.

Only those who believe in miracles will think that matters end there as far as the Karnataka dissidence is concerned. Ramakrishna Hegde is trying to convince himself that they have. At a press conference right after his return from Delhi, he gave the impression that the problems were behind him. He expressed happiness that the board had given him the go-ahead to act on his



H.K. Rajashekar

own.

With deliberate cunning, the chief minister tried to reduce the serious matter of dissidence to a simple issue of discipline. But it is unlikely that the hardcore dissidents will go for such a ploy. Already, rumours are that the dissidents wanted to make their displeasure over the board's decisions public in Delhi itself. But they were somehow restrained.

Naturally, the dissidents who went to Delhi returned disappointed and somewhat embarrassed. It appeared as if the crestfallen Ajit Singh had withdrawn his subtle support to them. Worse, he had opted in favour of the chief minister. But some dissidents like to think otherwise. Expelled MLA M.S. Narayan Rao pointed to the party constitution. And since the constitution showed that the expulsions were illegal, they would have to be revoked. "Besides," he added, "the board did not contradict Ajit Singh's statement that there were no official candidates for the 3 July elections."

Other dissidents, however, admitted that the Delhi agreement had only proved that the Janata high command was totally ineffective. Obviously Chandra Shekhar and Ajit Singh are unprepared to follow through with their argument that these matters should be

Dissidents Ramaiah and Siddaramaiah: failed mission

resolved in Karnataka itself. The logical conclusion of that argument would of course have led the state party to a split. Surprisingly, Deve Gowda did not go to Delhi. And not very surprisingly, he had allowed himself to be outwitted again. Earlier, Hegde had let loose the idea that Deve Gowda was a party-breaker. This time, someone had exposed his rumoured conspiracy with Ajit Singh.

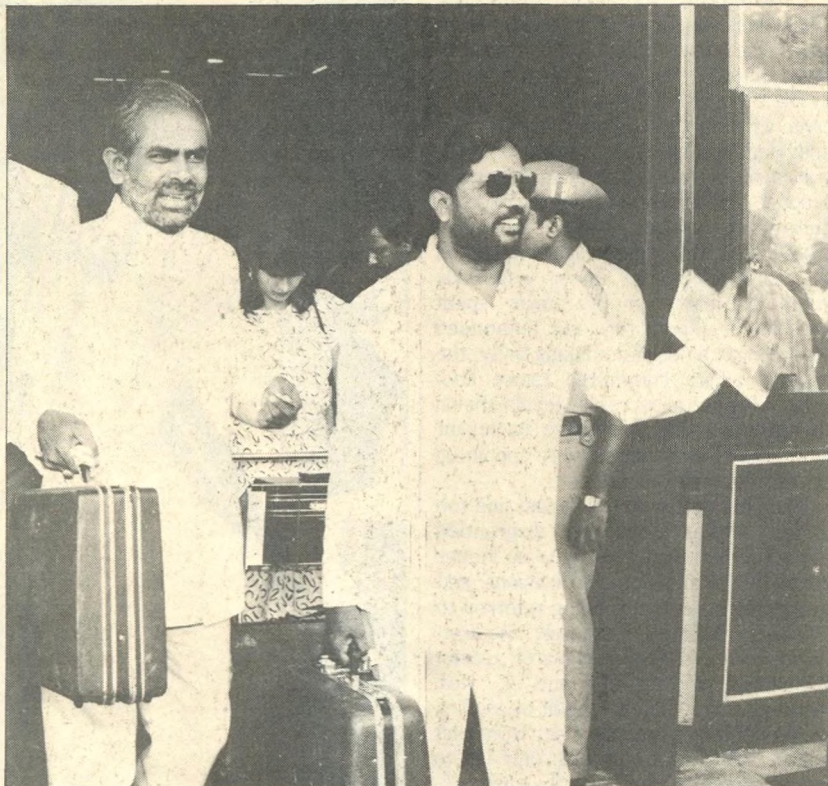
A cautious Deve Gowda is once again holding talks with Hegde. But what will that achieve? Months and months of talks and more talks have yielded precisely nothing, to the dismay of the dissidents, who have willy-nilly hitched their carts to Deve Gowda's horse. And Deve Gowda, always stoic on the record, is as aggressive as ever off the record. This time, however, he seems a little more optimistic. He is happy about the disciplinary action committees. "Originally, I had proposed the idea," he claims. Deve Gowda says the ball is now in Hegde's court.

He is right. From now on, it is Hegde's responsibility to undo the damage done to the Janata Party. He has received what he has so insistently demanded: the green signal from the party's high command (if that's what it is). He can no longer fume that his own party leaders are against him. He seems to have accepted that. "I will begin the process of restoring unity," he told the press.

But Hegde has to do more than that. He has to be the mature statesman and go more than halfway to meet the dissidents. He now has to make the grand healing gestures. At the moment, the chief minister does not seem very conciliatory. He insists that the six expelled MLAs cannot be immediately restored as that will mean giving in to the forces of indiscipline. Tough talk, though he might have to change his stance as the days go by.

Some hardcore dissidents are convinced that it is already too late. It is impossible for the chief minister to reform himself, they say. He has to go. It is the same argument once again. Hardly the makings of a successful truce. But there is one theory that can accommodate their point of view. It is not a new theory but some dissidents still cling to it. That is, that the only reason why the Parliamentary Board openly backed Hegde was to give him elbow room. So that he can quit honourably as chief minister in a few months. With Ramakrishna Hegde's track record, that may, however, be wishful thinking.

Rohini Nilekani and Prakash Belawadi/Bangalore



H.K. Rajashekar