

Hegde's nemesis

H.D. Deve Gowda has none of Ramakrishna Hegde's charm, but his dissidence has finished off the Karnataka chief minister's national ambitions

At first, he was a trusted lieutenant in the new government, headed by a man with a clean, honest image. As a senior colleague and important minister, he was party to all government decisions and, therefore, shared responsibility for their success or failure. Gradually, however, things turned sour between him and the head of the government, whose clean, honest image began to fade. It was alleged that larger conspiracies were behind the differences that arose between the two. Finally, things came to a head. He resigned from the Cabinet even while proclaiming loyalty to his leader. Then things moved faster. With many dissidents rallying around him, he began to speak out strongly against the government at crowded public meetings.

A familiar story? No, we are not talking about the new Shahenshah of Allahabad. This is a smaller and, perhaps, sadder story. The protagonist is H.D. Deve Gowda, former public works and irrigation minister in Ramakrishna Hegde's Karnataka Cabinet. And the issue he has taken to the masses is not Bofors, but irrigation. Deve Gowda wants Ramakrishna Hegde to make irrigation his first priority, before time—and water—runs out for the state. It provides an excellent platform for the politician, especially in the rural constituencies. Deve Gowda's actions seem to suggest that he has the state's best interests at heart. He does not seem to be interested in the Delhi *gaddi*, like you know who. He does not even appear to be interested in the state *gaddi* (remember the Raja's protestations). His attitude implies that he just wants to save the self-respect of the state's farmers and the Janata Party.

The other story has just ended happily. But Deve Gowda's story is far from over. Although he has pushed the Janata Party in the state to the brink of a Jan Morcha type split, Deve Gowda's own credibility is nowhere near that of V.P. Singh's. For this, he blames vested interests, who he says have been trying to finish him off politically. And he may be right. In the past few months, two enquiries have been initiated into various allegations against him, no doubt with the blessings of

the chief minister. But both the corps of detectives and the Lok Ayukta have come up with relatively little against him, certainly not enough to damage his career.

Yet, Deve Gowda has a more severe limitation. He is seen as the leader of a faction group in the state: the dominant Vokkaliga community. If not for this, he might have assumed chief ministership back in 1983 itself. Then there would have been no need for compromise candidate Ramakrishna Hegde. Later though, he was seen as the logical successor to the Delhi-bound chief minister, except that Hegde kept everyone guessing about this all important question. And now that Deve Gowda has revolted, Hegde claims that he was always planning to nominate his former irrigation minister to the chief minister's post.

Poor Deve Gowda. In a sense he has been a victim not only of Hegde but also of Chandra Shekhar. The two go back a long way; the former president of the Janata Party has often used Deve Gowda as a pawn to checkmate Hegde's aspirations. Meanwhile, Hegde has used their relationship to allege grand conspiracies against himself. Deve Gowda staunchly denies any such conspiracies. Unfortunately though, he is not as cunning as his chief minister. He very transparently defends Chandra Shekhar saying, 'See what rewards he has got for making Hegde the chief minister.'

No doubt, he was fed up with all the campaigns against him. For, last March, the portly Deve Gowda, 55, decided to join the ranks of the Janata dissidents. Immediately, he became their *de facto* leader. Only a few days ago, he has boldly, if rashly, issued an ultimatum to the chief minister: reform within a month or face disastrous consequences.

Strong words from a man whom fellow politicians describe as timid. But this is Deve Gowda's biggest gamble yet. There is a bitter but fierce look in his close-set brown eyes. Will he go so far as to split the party? He says not. He says he has demonstrated his concern for the party by voting for the financial Bills in the state Assembly. Deve Gowda has always been a party faithful. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he has never changed sides. An original Congressman, he was with the Congress(O) until it re-emerged as the Janata in 1977. Recently, he celebrated his silver jubilee as a Karnataka legislator. Of his 25 long years in the Assembly, he has spent many in the Opposition, leading crusades against the government.

This crusade, however, is different. It is against his own government, a government that was once a flagship of the national Opposition. So what does Deve Gowda really want? Is he in the ring for a fight to the finish with Hegde? Or, is he merely raising the stakes for a compromise? One month should be enough to tell. Hegde is quite unlikely to change his style of functioning or his economic priorities in four short weeks. Then Deve Gowda's bluff—or otherwise—will be called.

But the Vokkaliga leader should not be underestimated. Today he is a man with a mission: addressing public meetings, drawing the battle lines. It is not quite the Kurukshetra of Allahabad yet. But the two stories could easily have similar endings and give Karnataka its own version of V.P. Singh.

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