

"Reservation is not anti-merit but an effort to open up merit."

V.P. Singh

I have no interest in becoming Prime Minister: V.P. Singh

Vidya Subrahmaniam – The Hindu Saturday, Jul 15, 2006

In politics, yet out of it. That is V.P. Singh at 75. In an interview, he talks about his newest baby, the Jan Dal, and sketches out the ideal situation at the Centre — two coalitions, led by the Congress and the Left respectively, occupying both ruling and Opposition spaces. Excerpts:



V.P. Singh: "Reservation is not anti-merit but an effort to open up merit."

What prompted your re-emergence on the political stage at this point?

The media might think I have made a re-appearance but I have been busy all along — with farmers' issues, the rights of slum-dwellers, and so forth.

Unfortunately, the poor do not make news. The mainstream newspapers did not report any of my campaigns, so apparently I was nowhere. Now I have made a "re-

appearance" because I have taken up electoral issues. I personally think people's movements are more important. But reporters get excited only by electoral politics.

You did take a break from active politics.

That is correct. Till 1996, I was in active politics — at that point Prime Ministership came to my door. Thereafter, I did say that I will not be in active politics for five years. I wanted time for myself. I went back to my roots. At the same time, I did not disengage from issues. Disengagement from electoral politics does not mean disengagement from people.

You recently formed the Jan Dal, before that you were with the Kisan Manch. There is also the Jan Morcha. You were earlier in another Jan Morcha. All this is a bit confusing.

The Kisan Manch was formed four years back. It is a movement, a non-electoral forum for farmers, weavers and workers, open to NGOs and other individual volunteers. We fought to get remunerative price for potato farmers and payment of arrears to sugarcane growers. The Jan Dal, which was formed two months ago, is a political party. It is the political wing of the Kisan Manch.

The Jan Dal's main objective is to involve the farmers, weavers, workers and other deprived sections in the decision-making process. This can only happen if they reach the legislatures in large enough numbers. The old Jan Morcha merged into the Janata Dal to fight the general election of 1989. The new Jan Morcha is a political alliance of which the Jan Dal is one constituent; it includes, among others, Lalu Prasad's Rashtriya Janata Dal, Ram Vilas Paswan's Lok Janshakti Party, Indian Justice Party, the Communist Party of India (CPI), the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), and the Revolutionary Socialist Party. Our first electoral test will be the upcoming Assembly election in Uttar Pradesh.

How do you view the situation in Uttar Pradesh?

There is enormous unrest in U.P. with law and order in a state of collapse and miscreants on the rampage. Add to this the virtual corporate takeover of the State. A prime example of this is the Reliance mega power project spread over 2,500 acres of fertile agricultural land in Dadri. The State Government invited no competitive bids for the project, transferred the title deed without settling the price at which it would sell electricity, and subsidised 60 per cent of the cost of land. This is outright favouritism and misuse of public money. If this were not enough, the company is still to produce electricity. Land is not just a means of production, it is a place of sovereignty, it is a political issue.

Electorally where do you see the Jan Morcha in U.P.?

We have just started. Elections are about chemistry. If you catch the imagination of the people, it does not matter that you are a newcomer. Think of the response the Janata Dal got in 1989 — an infant in electoral politics, it went on to form a Government at the Centre.

Mayawati feels your Morcha will cut into Mulayam Singh's vote and benefit her.

Are voters commodities? Are they registered with one party? The very premise of your question is undemocratic.

Who are your voters?

We are for farmers, workers, and the most backward caste groups. But we are not against anyone. My purpose is a broader one — it is not so much about forming a government as about generating and sustaining a movement. We want a say in decision-making for the weaker sections. Governments come and go, movements last.

Two years ago, you supported Mulayam Singh. Now you have turned against him.

The purpose then was to oust the Bharatiya Janata Party. I supported the Congress for the same reason. Today there is no threat from the BJP.

Will you have an alliance with the Congress in U.P.?

The Jan Morcha is a multi-party alliance. I cannot decide for everybody. There are many parties in our front that are not favourable to the Congress — the CPI, the CPI (ML), and other smaller parties. I cannot let them down. Mine is not a vote calculation. We have come together for a cause. Those who are for a larger movement will stay with us. Others will move on. I'm very clear that if responsibility comes to us we will not shirk it.

However, even if we form a government, the nature of our movement will not change because no matter who is in power, there will always be a dichotomy between government and people. So I tell whoever wants to join me that we must be prepared to fight our own government on issues of concern to the common people.

Who is your Chief Ministerial candidate?

Our main aim is give a voice to the deprived. We will deal with the issue of Chief Minister when we come to it.

Will you take political office again?

I am in politics and when I campaign — as I will in U.P. — I do play a political role. But I will not contest. Why should I look for office? I was Prime Minister once and I declined the honour when it came to me a second time. You don't accept office that you have refused.

What is your strategy for the Centre?

We have started at the State level in the hope that the issues we raise will find broader resonance.

Is the Jan Morcha a precursor to the Third Alternative?

No. That is not how I look at it.

You broadly support the United Progressive Alliance at the Centre.

I support it on issues. I support the Government's good work on the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and the Right to Information Act. But I don't support its policies on slum-dwellers and farmers. The bulldozers that mowed down slums in the earlier regime are still on the job.

How do you see the future?

Even when I was in the Janata Dal, it was my endeavour to make both electoral spaces, ruling and Opposition, secular. That is the only way to squeeze out the BJP. I do not want the UPA Government disturbed now. Once the term gets over, ideally we should have two coalitions — one led by the Congress and other by the Left. One will be in office and the other in Opposition. Today in a way the Left is also performing the role of the Opposition, which is very good. This will ensure that the disgruntled do not go to the BJP.

What explains the decline of the BJP?

The BJP rose on emotion, which is not sustainable. The battle was between Mandal and Mandir. Mandal has outlasted Mandir. Mandir has waned. Mandal has been validated by every political party. Mandir does not originate from the Constitution, Mandal does. Fifteen years after I enforced Mandal, I feel vindicated by the endorsement it has received.

But the pro-Mandal forces are fractured and in different camps today.

Mandal is not a party, it is a movement. Look at the dramatic change in the composition of our elected bodies, from panchayat to Parliament. It is a macro process that has acquired its own dynamics. No matter which party forms a Government, it has to take the process further.

You advocated a referendum for Mandal II. Is it feasible?

I said put the entire package, including reservations in private sector, before the people. What is the point of debating the issue endlessly? Parliament has already approved The Constitution (93rd Amendment) Act, 2005. So either treat parliamentary endorsement as sufficient, or seek wider public opinion. True, we don't have a legal provision for a referendum but a government can always elicit public opinion.

Critics of Mandal II feel that educational reform should start in schools. Why is there is no political will for this?

I agree that reform at school level is the real answer. Introduce neighbourhood schooling. Give quality, affordable education to all. Let everybody go to the same school and there will be no need for reservation.

Today merit has become an obsession. Yet nobody raises questions when tuition fees are raised. The high cost of education makes it the preserve of the rich who go on to monopolise decision-making. The caste system is anti-merit, it restricts space for merit. By opening up this space, we release the merit potential of the whole country. If 20 per cent of the population can achieve so much, think of the possibilities that will come with 100 per cent participation. Reservation is not anti-merit but an effort to open up merit.

<http://www.hindu.com/2006/07/15/stories/2006071502981300.htm>