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Lantern-lit boats Littered on the sea Which one will take me? towards the end of his life in 2003, strapped to a hospital bed in Apollo Hospital in New Delhi, V. P. Singh read out to me a couple of poems he had written. "One morning I woke up very early, and looked out of the window," V. P. Singh mused, "I saw lantern-lit boats sail towards me."

VP's kidneys had got damaged in 1994 after a dharna at Mumbai's Flora Fountain. He was now tied to the dialysis machine every second day. Then he got myeloma, a form of blood cancer, which damaged 50 per cent of his bone marrow. The doctors advised chemotherapy—but he managed to avoid it. He was in a reflective mood that day. Suddenly, he said, "All my life I scribbled... 'Now,' he added, "I need an eraser."

"You come to a stage when you ask—what is the meaning of all this?" After going out of power in 1990, he had gone back to painting and writing poetry, which he had started to do in his earlier years—first in Hindi, then in English, between interludes of dialysis.

The Mandal messiah was looking back at his life's journey. Some of the images he saw now inhabited his poems. "I used to play with paper boats in my childhood... When you are finishing your journey, you are reminded of your... paper boats."

Suddenly I found about My childhood paper boat

It signalled 'Come it's time to go.'

A 'secular' VP, party leaders'- joke

The massive wooden door creaked loudly as the prime minister walked into the room for the cabinet meeting. His colleagues, who were waiting for him restlessly, looked up expectantly. The cabinet meeting had been called to discuss Mandal, but many of them did not know this. It was 6 August 1990, a hot and muggy day in Delhi. Long to be remembered—and cited—afterwards, V. P. Singh was dressed in an immaculately starched white kurta-pyjama. His attire normally indicated the role he saw for himself at that particular moment. When he donned his shervani and winter cap, the head

Mandal Kamandal



Vishwanath Pratap Singh was arguably the most controversial prime minister India has had. Undoubtedly, he was chaotic or politically crafty. He could be tough. But there was also an emotional side to him, which his poetry reflected—and it defined this complex personality. VP was a contradiction in many ways—feudal and yet not feudal, a loyalist and rebel at the same time, a man of character and a political hypocrite. Many who knew him well said that it was impossible to know the 'real' VP or where his loyalties lay. While he was a loyalist par excellence in his early phase of his political career, he would often say in later years that there was "no such thing as loyalty in politics", it was all about the convergence of interests.

What V. P. Singh did, no one else who had left the Congress over the years had managed to do. Neither Chandra Shekhar, nor Sharad Pawar, nor Ramkrishna Hegde, nor Mamata Banerjee, nor Jagan Mohan Reddy. They too had, like VP, severed relations with the Congress leadership in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s in the last century, and also in the twenty-first century. Hegde, Pawar, Banerjee, Reddy went on to replace the Congress in their states and become chief ministers, ironically sometimes in alliance with the Congress they had quit. Chandra Shekhar had become prime minister at the head of a rump supported by the larger, dominating Congress.

VP's successor marked the end of the rule of the Nehru-Gandhi family. No member of India's first family, has since then, till the time of writing, led a government.

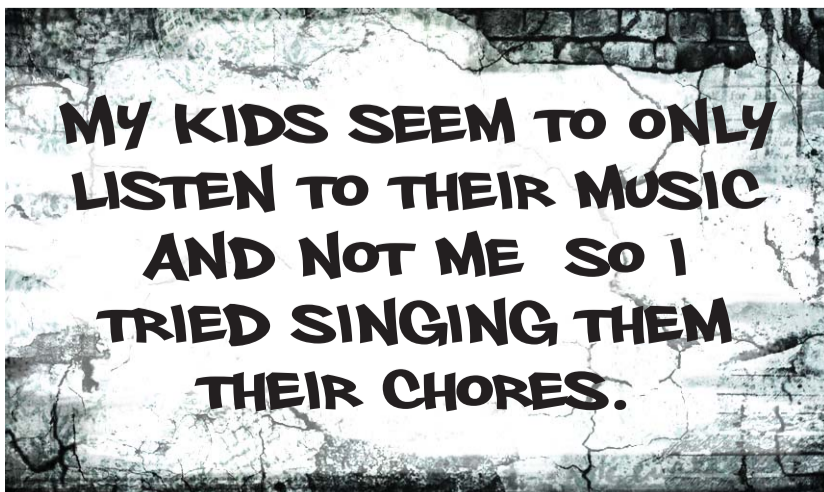
of government, the chief administrator, was on display. It would also signal a 'secular' VP, party leaders would joke.

When he dressed in a white kurta-pyjama, the politician in him came to the fore. The ministers had trickled in for the meeting earlier in the afternoon. Alighting from their cars outside South Block, which housed the PMO, they walked in and took the lift up to the room on the first floor where cabinet meetings were normally held. The officials had already taken their seats by the time the ministers began to arrive. B. G. Deshmukh, the principal secretary to the prime minister, sat next

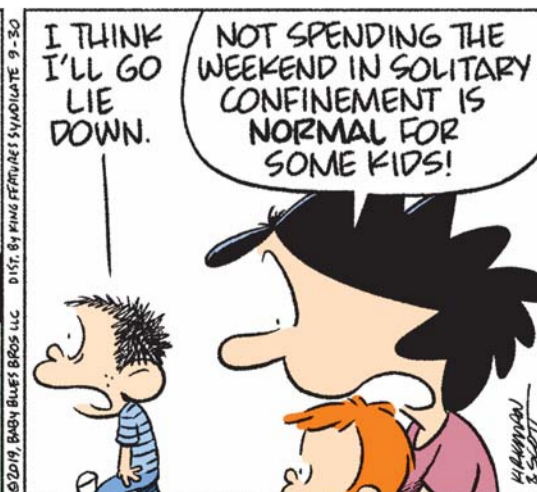
usually informal. Ministers and officials felt free to speak up. As he himself once put it, in an uncharacteristic moment of candour, "I never had problems in my cabinet. It was the party which proved to be my undoing."

It was clear to everyone present that V. P. Singh was determined to push through the decision that very day. All he wanted was the formal approval of the cabinet. The meeting did not last very long, Jaipal Reddy recalled. When it was finally all over, V. P. Singh declared, "This, then, is the consensus." He looked around at his colleagues, and said, "The cabinet approves the decision to implement the Mandal Commission's recommendation for job reservations for the backward classes."

THE WALL



BABY BLUES



By Rick Kirkman & Jerry Scott

ZITS



By Jerry Scott & Jim Borgman

How Prime Ministers Decide

PART:3

#POLITICS



V. P. Singh, the crafty prime minister who remade Indian politics

S. N. Singh, VP's personal secretary, almost in tears, 'Even Rajiv Gandhi did not humiliate Raja sahib (V. P. Singh) like this

The V. P. Singh government was precariously balanced as was evident from the day one. The reporter dashed out of the Central Hall of Parliament shouting, "It is Devi Lal for PM." He was rushing to file his copy. He worked for the wire service United News of India (UNI), and was headed to the press room on the first floor. Everyone within earshot was flabbergasted. They had expected Vishwanath Pratap Singh to be the new prime minister. It was under his leadership that the National Front, a coalition built by V. P. Singh, had won the most seats in the recent general election. Almost instantly, the news wires were humming: 'Devi Lal is the new prime minister of India.' Devi Lal, the maverick Jai leader, was the chief minister of the state of Haryana.

A couple of people standing next to me groaned in disappointment. It was 4.10 p.m. on 1 December 1989. I was taken back by this turn of events. I had just come to parliament after meeting



Om Prakash Chautala, Devi Lal's oldest son. He had been leading the campaign to make his father prime minister. A journalist colleague, Harish Gupta, whom I had bumped into, was with me. We had found Chautala eating lunch. He did not look up from his thali to greet us. He looked morose, was monosyllabic in his responses, virtually admitting that the game was up for his father—and that V. P. Singh would be prime minister. All day, there had been frenetic

political activity in the country's capital. At 28, Lodi Estate, V. P. Singh's residence, hundreds of people had hung around Devi Lal had projected V. P. Singh for prime minister all through the election campaign in 1989. But, after the polls, he decided to make a bid for the top job himself. An agitated S. N. Singh, VP's personal secretary who had been with him since his early days in Allahabad, remarked, almost in tears, "Even Rajiv Gandhi did not humiliate Raja sahib (V. P. Singh) like this. Some of the Janata Dal leaders have ganged up against him..." he added, his voice trailing off. They were determined to deny VP what many across the country felt was his due—India's prime ministership.

Elsewhere in the capital, Haryana Bhavan was also buzzing with activity. The day had started very early for Devi Lal. He had been camping in the national capital for some days. Devi Lal did viewed himself as the kingmaker

in the loosely knit group of political parties that had fought the election on a common platform—until he began to glimpse the possibility of becoming prime minister himself. Politicians, journalists, academics, and political activists who had worked for the defeat of Rajiv Gandhi, walked in and out of Haryana Bhavan that morning, hoping to confer with Devi Lal.

There was another hive of activity at 14, Akbar Road, the residence of Arun Nehru, at one time the most powerful minister in Rajiv Gandhi's government until Rajiv sacked him and he made common cause with V. P. Singh. He had stayed by VP's side after their exit from the Congress in 1987 and helped craft the Janata Dal in 1988. He had just been elected to the Lok Sabha from Bilharu in UP, and had emerged as VP's right-hand man in those days. "I told VP two...days before the election (of the leader), leave this to me and you stay out of it," Nehru told me.

V. P. Singh's name continues to arouse passions—reviled by some, revered by others. Some see him as a cunning politician who in a desperate attempt to retain power let a genie out of the bottle which could not be put back. Others call him the messiah of social justice, and that is the way he liked to see himself. "Some run governments," he told me, speaking about the processes he had unleashed. "I ran history. It will define governments and coalitions in the time to come."

World Octopus Day



Octopuses are worthy of appreciation for a number of reasons. First of all, they are one of the earth's great survivors. Indeed, despite their relatively short lifespan, octopus fossils date back more than 300 million years, meaning that they pre-date even dinosaurs. They are also believed to be highly intelligent. With around 500 million neurons located in their brains and arms, they are able to bypass their instincts, learn lessons and solve problems. Some of them have even been seen to be creative, by using discarded coconut shells and making them into mobile homes. Ingenious!

The problem lay not with the arithmetic, but with the chemistry between the leaders.

President R. Venkataraman had been waiting for the Janata Dal and its allies to choose their leader, who he could then invite to form the new government. The doors of the domed Central Hall were now shut. In the general election just concluded, the country's grand old party, the Indian National Congress, had been trounced. It had lost 217 seats of the record majority of 414 seats it had won in the 1984 general election. Yet, it had still managed to win 197 seats, the largest number of any of the parties contesting the polls. Rajiv Gandhi, the leader of the party—and the outgoing prime minister—had submitted his resignation to President Venkataraman on 29 November. He had decided not to stake his claim to form the new government despite leading

the single largest party in the Lok Sabha. This had ended the president's dilemma. Rajiv was clear he did not have the stomach to run a coalition government. No one in the Congress disagreed with Rajiv's decision. Not so with the winning side, the Janata Dal. It seemed to have the numbers, but there were squabbles over who would be leader. The Janata Dal that V. P. Singh had put together in 1988 had been victorious in 143 Lok Sabha constituencies. It could form the government with its allies—the ruling coalition would need at least 290 seats for a simple majority in the Lok Sabha. Prior to the elections, VP had put together the National Front, a coalition with the Janata Dal at the centre, supported by regional outfits—the

TDP of Andhra Pradesh, DMK of Tamil Nadu, AGP of Assam and a breakthrough faction of the Congress, the Indian Congress (Socialist). To VP's delight, the Janata Dal had managed a strike rate of 60 per cent in the polls. It had done particularly well in UP and Bihar where he had led the campaign. The party had won 54 of 85 seats in UP and got 32 out of 54 seats in Bihar. However, his southern allies had let him down. The TDP had got only 2 seats, and the DMK drew a blank. The Congress (S) got 1 seat. And the AGP got none. As the president waited for work from the Janata Dal, the party made no move to stake its claim to form the government. The problem lay not with the arithmetic, but with the chemistry between the leaders.

'Vishwanath if you contest, I will also contest,'

From 28 November to 1 December 1989, the struggle had intensified over who would be prime minister. V. P. Singh was the natural choice; it had been in his name that the elections had been won. But Devi Lal was eyeing the top slot. So was the old war horse Chandra Shekhar, who was determined to prevent VP from becoming prime minister. "Vishwanath if you con-

test, I will also contest," he told VP bluntly. He was not prepared to accept the leadership of a man he considered far junior to him. To him VP had been a courtier of the Gandhi family, when he had taken on the rich and powerful as the admiral "Young Turk" in the Congress and later battled Indira Gandhi herself during the 1975-77 Emergency. However,

when it became clear that he would not have enough support within the party, he decided to back Devi Lal. Devi Lal had funded most of the candidates; he was confident he would have their backing. As the delay over government formation grew, criticism mounted against the Janata Dal leadership for its inability to choose a leader a

V. P. Singh sprang up, 'I propose Devi Lal's name'

Finally, a meeting of the JDPP was called on 1 December in the Central Hall. His nostrils flared, his face was red with anger. He had been duped—and humiliated—publicly. The understanding, he said bitterly, as I talked to him, was that Devi Lal would be prime minister. That is what he had been told by both Biju Patnaik and Devi Lal. Orissa Bhavan only two hours earlier, nominations for the leader of the JDPP, V. P. Singh sprang up, "I propose Devi Lal's name," he said. It was immediately seconded by a smiling Chandra Shekhar. There was a shocked silence in the room. Since there was no other nomination, Dandavate declared Devi Lal elected. And the UNI reporter rushed out with his scoop before the rival agencies could beat him to it.

It was then that the tall and rustic Devi Lal rose slowly to his full height. He was casually attired in a white kurta and dhoti and a brown cardigan. "The election has been fought against corruption," he said slowly, "and the battle has been led by V. P. Singh." He continued: "Aur phir Haryana maen jahan mujhe log tau keh kar pukarte hain, main wahan tau hi ban kar rehna chahta hoon (In Haryana people know me as uncle and it is as uncle I want to remain in Haryana)," he said with a flourish. "I propose V. P. Singh's name as leader of the parliament party." Then he declared triumphantly, "VP hoga (VP is the winner)." The assembled parliamentarians broke into thunderous applause. Madhu Dandavate declared that V. P. Singh had been elected leader of the JDPP. "Kill, kill, kill earlier story," the wires buzzed again.

'Iska anjam acha nahin hoga- Chandra Shekhar

Chandra Shekhar now sat in a corner near the main entrance of Central Hall. His nostrils flared, his face was red with anger. He had been duped—and humiliated—publicly. The understanding, he said bitterly, as I talked to him, was that Devi Lal would be prime minister. That is what he had been told by both Biju Patnaik and Devi Lal. Orissa Bhavan only two hours earlier, nominations for the leader of the JDPP, V. P. Singh sprang up, "I propose Devi Lal's name and I would second him," Chandra Shekhar said. He then flounced out of parliament, and headed to his 'ashram' at Bhandra in Gurgaon. Biju Patnaik rushed after him to placate him.

"Biju came to see me and offered me the deputy PM ship," Chandra Shekhar revealed. "Later," Devi Lal called me and offered me any portfolio. I refused." When Chandra Shekhar became prime minister eleven months later, after the V. P. Singh government had been toppled, Patnaik said to him. "Arrey Ballia, if I had known you would run a government like this, I would not have done what I did. He was referring to double-crossing me," Chandra Shekhar added. The charge, on the formalist's part, was that V. P. Singh as prime minister, had been worked out in Orissa Bhavan only a few hours before the JDPP meeting. It had been decided that VP would first propose Devi Lal's name and he in turn would crown VP. That is how VP became the seventh prime minister of India.

If Devi Lal had been in your cabinet, VP asked Yadav, 'saying the things he had been saying, what would you have done?'

On 1 August 1990, V. P. Singh sacked Devi Lal from his ministry. "I was in favour of asking him to resign," VP was to say many years later. "But Biju Patnaik and Arun Nehru...told me...you have to be tough. Sack him. They knew a sack would make the break irrevocable." An agitated UP chief minister Mulayam Singh Yadav had been an early election opponent. Paradoxically, V. P. Singh did not always believe for Mandal. "I had (once) asked him about his views on reservations," Dinesh Trivedi recalled. Even as late as 1987-88, VP was of a different view: "Even if you have 100 per cent reservation, it won't make a dent," VP had replied. "How many people will get jobs? Where are the jobs?" In those days, he did not talk about reservations. He would talk about increasing jobs

in the market." The Janata Dal's 1988 election manifesto included Mandal as one of its promises. The OBC MPs of the party, especially those from UP and Bihar, who were a significant proportion of Janata Dal MPs, were for Mandal. It was just a matter of when it would be implemented. With the war in the ruling Janata Dal now out in the open, VP knew that if he had to save his government, he had to push back with something big. With Devi Lal's exit, the stage was now set for Mandal—the implementation of the recommendations of the Mandal Commission Report, which advocated 27 per cent reservations for the socially and educationally backward classes in central government jobs. "Mandal was the realization of the Janata Dal politically," VP was to say of his

decision years later. The political history of independent India might have been different had Rajiv Gandhi and V. P. Singh not fallen out in 1987. VP might not have become prime minister and the story of affirmative action for the OBCs might have taken a different trajectory. Their relationship was marked by periods of great camaraderie as well as deep mistrust and bitterness. When Rajiv Gandhi contested the Lok Sabha election in mid-1981 from Amethi in UP, VP went there to campaign for him. He was chief minister of the state at the time. "I have seen them lie down on the same charpy on a tour of Amethi," recalled H. R. Bhardwaj, the Congress politician. "I remember this distinctly. We were electioneering in Amethi, and Rajiv was drawing huge crowds."

We were at this guest house near the canal, where we had stopped for refreshments. There was time only for half an hour's rest. Rajiv and VP had a dip in the canal. But there was only one charpy to rest on. Both of them lay down on it in their kachcha-bani-

...I made the Janata Dal. I am the one who has spent the money on the elections. -Devi Lal

As I through the election campaign, Devi Lal had projected V. P. Singh for PM. But within hours of the election results being declared on 28 November 1989, he had changed his mind. Chandra Shekhar had encouraged him to make a bid for prime ministership. He was moving through Om Prakash Chautala. Devi Lal began to visit visitors. "What is the Janata Dal without me?...I made the Janata Dal. I am the one who has spent the money on the elections." As Devi Lal ambled around the lawns at Haryana Bhavan, his mind went over the bitter argument he had had the previous evening with the Janata Dal leader Som Pal. Pal, who was related to him and called him Mamaji (uncle), had quit the Congress along with VP—and made a strong pitch to make him PM. "Mamaji, all through the campaign, you had said again and again that V. P. Singh will be prime minister," Pal had reminded Devi Lal. "Now stick to what you had promised," Chandra Shekhar plans to contest (for the leadership of the JDPP), Devi Lal had countered. "The numbers are stacked heavily against Chandra Shekhar," Som Pal shot back. "We have done our arithmetic. He then reeled off the names of MPs who could be expected to go with Chandra Shekhar and with Devi Lal—they were in a minority. "But Chandra Shekhar is not agreeing," Devi Lal had persisted. "And your man (VP) does not want (a) contest." V. P. Singh wanted to be elected unanimously. A contest would divide the party at the outset, he said.

He did not want the government to start on a discordant note. VP would have won hands down. But he was apprehensive about other factors at work. Industrialists had sent their representatives to Delhi without the results, armed with big money. They were putting up the newly elected MPs in five-star hotels to influence them. These were powerful businessmen against whom VP had carried out raids for tax evasion and financial misdoings when he was finance minister in Rajiv Gandhi's government. He suspected that they were now conspiring with Chandra Shekhar and Devi Lal to deny him the party leadership. "Though many of the Janata Dal MPs wanted him to be PM, their loyalties might get divided, if it came to a vote. For Devi Lal had funded the campaign of many."

As he mulled over the events of the last hours, it was becoming clear that Devi Lal had asked him to rush back to Orissa. VP As a plan began to take shape in his head, he asked to speak to some of the leaders loyal to him. If he wasn't going to get the top job, he had to strike a hard bargain. First, he called up Som Pal, and asked him to come over immediately. A Jat, not

known to mince his words, Pal came straight to the point. He had the sop to Devi Lal. "If you support VP as PM...you can become the deputy prime minister. We can talk about it." But the wily Devi Lal already knew that. He had heard that V. P. Singh was ready to make him deputy prime minister. Som Pal was not the only person who had told him this.

Devi Lal's eyes were now set not just on the deputy prime ministership. He also wanted to be home minister. Suddenly, as if he had just made up his mind, he turned to Som Pal and said, "Send Arun Nehru to me." So far he had refused to talk to Nehru, who was acting on behalf of VP. Som Pal rushed out of Haryana Bhavan to find Arun Nehru.

For, by July 1990, Arun Nehru was disillusioned with the government—and vocal about his dissatisfaction: "It has now become very difficult to remain in this government or to run it." While in London, Nehru had revealed what was on his mind to Kuldip Nayyar, the Indian high commissioner in the UK. "VP is a self-consuming target. We decided to utilize him. We knew he would destroy Rajiv Gandhi first and in the process, he will destroy himself." Kuldip Nayyar told me this afterwards, the senior Janata Dal politician Surendra Mohan said to me. "In other words, the way would be cleared for Nehru for the top job." The move by the Jan Morcha group to go back to the Congress was corroborated by others.

Arun Nehru had got in touch with Rajiv sometime in May-June 1990, confirmed Fotedar. He (Arun Nehru) was constantly giving Rajiv information about what was going on in the Janata Dal. VP was aware that his former colleagues had opened up channels of communication with Rajiv Gandhi—and confirmed this later. "I had asked VP why the Janata Dal had collapsed so quickly," the former Congress politician Dinesh Trivedi told me. He was close to Arun Nehru, having quit the Congress and joined the Janata Dal. Ask your friends the he was referring to the Jan Morcha leaders. VP replied cryptically. He then added, "Arun Nehru and all of them wanted to go back to the Congress." This was in the pre-Mandal (days), Trivedi told me. Arun Nehru and his group had moved through M. L. Fotedar and Captain Satish Sharma. "When Rajiv realized that the government could collapse, he hurried (up) the process." H. R. Bhardwaj also revealed that Rajiv Gandhi had asked him to rush back from London in June 1990, saying the "VP government is going," VP used to be wary of Arun Nehru (and what he might do). K. N. Govindacharya remarked, "He was not so worried about what Rajiv Gandhi would do."

ans after bathing." In the 1970s, and till the mid-1980s, VP's loyalties to the Gandhi-Nehru family, first to Sanjay, then to Indira, and finally to Rajiv Gandhi, was unquestioned. Before she was assassinated, Indira had expressed the hope that VP would be part of Rajiv's core team. She saw his clean image and loyalty to the Nehru-Gandhi family as an asset.

VP's elevation as the chief minister of UP was one of those quirky lucky breaks that came his way, thanks to his loyalist persona. When Indira refused to agree to Sanjay becoming the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh in June 1980, as we saw Chapter 1, Sanjay chose VP to head the country's largest state. Initially, VP was reluctant to take over as chief minister. But he allowed himself to be persuaded by Sanjay and took charge on 9 June 1980—just two weeks before Sanjay died in an aircraft. Being a reluctant politician as opposed to one who was seen to be grasping power was a strategy he would use to great effect during his political career.

Quotes options

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Indira Gandhi had liked V. P. Singh from the beginning. He was devoted to her and looked upon her as his political mentor. When the excesses of the

1975-77 Emergency began to be probed, and dozens of Congress leaders turned against her, VP stuck by her.

The political history of independent India might have been different had Rajiv Gandhi and V. P. Singh not fallen out in 1987. VP might not have become prime minister and the story of affirmative action for the OBCs might have taken a different trajectory.

"To be continued..."