**‘Making party speak in one voice is our biggest challenge. Contrary views from leaders give us a very poor image’ | The Indian Express**

‘Making party speak in one voice is our biggest challenge. Contrary views from leaders give us a very poor image’ Summary. Ajay Maken,AICC general secretary and head of the partys communication department,speaks about the impact of social media,why it is too early to announce a PM candidate and why Modi has his facts wrong. Related. Manoj C G: How difficult is your job as head of the Congresss communication department? It is difficult because the Congress is a big party and perhaps no other party is as geographically spread out. We have people from our party with different mindsets on different issues. So making all of them speak in one voice as Rahulji said in the communication workshop we held on July 22 and 23 is the biggest challenge. Making all the Congress spokespersons and the entire party speak in one uniform voice throughout the country is the biggest challenge. In the present era of social media and electronic media being active 24 hours,contrary views from different leaders project a very poor image of the party. The impression that goes out is that the party doesnt work as one cohesive unit. As you have rightly said,historically,this has been a tradition in the Congressdiverse opinions with people speaking openly on different issues. It has worked well for the Congress. With electronic media and social media so active,we cannot afford different voices on important issues because in that case,the projection of the party is that of too many voices and indiscipline. This is a message which we wont like to go out. We need one cohesive voice,one cohesive direction. Muzamil Jaleel: We know that in the BJP,Narendra Modi is the leader being projected. Why is the Congress not putting out its prime ministerial candidate and telling people that this is the person who is going to lead if they come to power next? In 2004,we never announced Manmohan Singhji as our prime ministerial candidate but he was appointed PM after that. In 2009,we announced Manmohan Singhji as our prime ministerial candidate only on the day we released our manifesto. So,where is the need now to announce our PM candidate when elections are so far away? Second,the BJP also has,so far,not announced its prime ministerial candidate. Still,even to appoint Narendra Modi as the party campaign committee chairman,they faced many difficulties and dissensions. When the time is opportune,well announce,well take a decision and well let people know. We have not done so in the past. And again,we have an active prime minister and the party and the government have worked in cohesion and we have done well. Muzamil Jaleel: So,who is going to lead the Congress in the elections? Will it be Sonia Gandhi,Manmohan Singh or Rahul Gandhi? We will let you know. It is too early to answer these questions. The party will take a decision and we will let you know when the decision is taken. Muzamil Jaleel: Why is it that both your president and vice-president,Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi,dont want to face the media? They hold no press conferences,give no interviews. We are a 127-year-old party. We have spokespersons. We have the communications department and we do most of the speaking for the party. This has worked quite well for us in the past too. So when to speak and when not to speak and what to speak is something which is the prerogative of our leaders and they will do that at the opportune time. Unni Rajen Shanker: There is a difference. You have always had spokespersons but the Congress president would speak to the press. But the Congress president is speaking to the press as frequently as they used to do earlier. There is no change. Historically,they used to speak at public meetings which used to be covered by the press. Even now,this is the case. This is not the way a person or a leader should be judged. He or she provides leadership in many different ways. The Prime Minister holds regular Cabinet meetings and gives directions there. The Congress president holds her CWC meetings and Rahulji addresses,meets us regularly. Every party has its own culture,every partys leaders have their right to run the party as they want. Manoj C G: The party is now taking on the social media. You are telling your spokespersons to be more aggressive on corruption and on policy. Isnt it too late in the day? I dont think it is too late because in the last elections,I dont think social media was as important. Even now,social media hasnt reached the point where it can change the course of the results. In Karnataka,if you notice,social media failed to create an impactand Karnataka is an urbanised state. Abantika Ghosh: You mentioned that you havent picked your prime ministerial candidate and neither has the BJP. But when you tend to reply to everything that Narendra Modi says,in a way you are elevating him to that status. Is that a calculated move to divert the discourse from corruption to secularism,where the Congress feels more comfortable? No,I dont think so. If you look at my earlier press conference,I didnt utter a word about communalism or secularism. Narendra Modi is no longer just the Chief Minister of Gujarat,he is the chairman of the BJPs campaign committee. So as campaign committee chairman,if he levels some false allegations or tries to portray a false picture of the ruling party,it needs to be countered. In my press conference in Pune,I countered (Modi) on three aspectseducation,sports and tourism. The facts and figures he gave were absolutely wrong. When he says that China spends 20 per cent of its GDP on education,he is absolutely wrong. It was 3.93 per cent of its budget whereas in the Eleventh Plan,during the UPA regime,we spent 4.02 per cent. In their own NDA regime,they spent just 1.67 per cent. The total budget for education in 2003-4 before we came to power was just Rs 6,008 crore. This year alone,it is Rs 58,000 crore,and this is just general education. The gross enrolment ratio in higher education has increased. Gross enrolment ratio in primary education has increased from 62.5 to 85 per cent… So,it is not that we dont have anything to say. We have had a success story which we would like people to know. He (Modi) said about the Olympics that this was the most successful Olympics weve had. Out of 83 people who qualified for the Olympics,not even one was from his state. In the National Games in Jharkhand in 2011,of the 444 gold medals,Gujarat didnt get even one. And Gujarat was ranked 28th on the list. In tourism,he was telling us how to do well. The share of Gujarat in domestic tourism is just 2.5 per cent and it is 14th in the country in international tourism. So if the chairman of the BJPs poll campaign committee is saying something which is factually incorrect,that needs to be countered. Vandita Mishra: The Congress has always had a problem with communication and reaching out,more than the BJP. One of the reasons is that the BJP was an opposition party,a contender which felt the need to explain itself,which the Congress has not felt. As the head of the communication cell now,do you find a resistance in the party to move forward? In the Congress,we need many people as spokespersons who we would like to be well versed on issues,for which we organised this (the spokespersons) workshop. We invited spokespersons from different statesfive spokespersons from each state,15 from NSUI and 15 from Youth Congress. The average age was 41. So we are in the process of selecting some people from these 225 whom we could further train on subject matters. They are all relatively young people and very energetic,enthusiastic,willing to learn and willing to fight for the party on issues. So,once this exercise is over,well find many more people speaking in one voice and many younger elements from within the Congress party taking up this difficult challenge of bringing to the fore positive work done by the government. Vandita Mishra: When the Congress seems to speak in different voicesfor instance,Digvijaya Singh always does sois this choreographed or does it just happen? It is not choreographed. It is something which you may call spontaneous but not choreographed because the official version of the Congress party always should,will and does come from the communication department. If the party feels that the views of Digvijaya Singh are different from the views of the party,it clarifies that. It clearly shows that these things are not choreographed and the party clarifies whenever (there is a need). Muzamil Jaleel: For instance,in the Batla House encounter case,there were two voices that came inP Chidambarams and Digvijaya Singhs. So what is the partys real stance? The real stance is that the court has taken a decision and now law will take its own course. This is something which was under investigation,it is an important issue and you should let the investigating agencies and courts complete their own processes. Rakesh Sinha: Are you a possible successor to Sheila Dikshit in Delhi? This is something the party has to decide and the party has given me this very important opportunity. I was made a Cabinet minister and now Im here as the general secretary in charge of the communications cell. Also,I am with Rahulji in his election co-ordination committee team,which again is a very important duty. So my hands are full and I am more than happy with the job I have been given. I am not looking here,there or anywhere else. Besides,I think Sheilaji is doing a great job as Chief Minister of Delhi. In the past 15 years of her governance,Delhi has seen a lot of development and growth. So,there is no reason why she should not be again elected for the fourth consecutive term and serve Delhi further. apurva: Does the Congress have a strategy to counter the Aam Aadmi Party? As far as Delhi is concerned,they dont have a base. The way they are propagating is going against them. Delhi is a different city. In Delhi,you cant,without any base,criticise someone and get votes. Delhi has a different electorate. I dont think people take them seriously. We would never like India to have a polarised mandate in terms of religion or caste because this is something that will go against the development of this country and it is not something which is inclusive. This is not something that the Congress party will ever subscribe to. We would never like any election to be polarised on the basis of caste or religion. Apurva: The BJP continuously uses the Gujarat model of development to showcase whatever Modi does. Is Delhi a counter to that? Not just Delhi,we have got Haryana and Maharashtra also. Congress-ruled states are doing much better than Gujarat is. In social sectors,Gujarat is way behind16th in health and 12th in education. The Planning Commission had reprimanded Gujarat for its failures in social sectors. So our duty as the ruling party is to showcase our own growth under the UPA and under the Congress-ruled states and let the BJP speak about their own models and leave it to the people to decide. Rakesh Sinha: Does the party see Modi as a robust opponent? More than our party,he has to take care of people within the BJP. L K Advanis resignation letter didnt say good things about him. And Sushma Swaraj coming away on the day of his coronation indicates that so many things are wrong in the party. So he has to take care of these people in the BJP. D K Singh: There is a constant demand for placing police under the Delhi state government. Do you think it will make any difference? The Delhi Police has many things to do. It looks after law-and-order problems and traffic problems,besides security. I think local law and order and traffic can be handed over to the Delhi government. But again,I am saying this as a Delhi politician. The decision has to be taken by the Delhi government,by Parliament and by amending the Constitution. The security aspect though can be left to the Central government,because Delhi has the President,Prime Minister and foreign diplomats staying here. DK Singh: Do you think the BJP and Congress are not good at carrying coalition partners along? I think the electorate will have to answer what exactly they want. If they throw up fractured mandates,as it has been post 1989,these problems will keep coming up before the two national parties because if the electorate wants two big parties to rule,the voting pattern has to change. As national political parties,we have to deliver and simultaneously,you have to also follow the coalition dharma. So this is a tightrope walk the principal party in a coalition has to follow. Harish Dugh: Expenditure on social subsidies is hurting the economy. Is this going to continue? People fear that fiscal deficit will go up if we spend more on social sector subsidies. But we have brought down the fiscal deficit to 5.2 per cent and this year,the target is 4.8. As far as food security is concerned,the total money spent on food subsidy when we came to power was. Rs 25,181 crore. Last year,it was Rs 90,000 crore. This year after the food security ordinance,it will be Rs 1,24,727 crore. But with Rs 1,24,727 crore,the additional burden would be just. Rs 24,800 crore because it also includes the money which we used to spend on ICDS and the midday meal scheme. Food security was a promise we made to the people of this country in 2009. We should not be criticised for fulfilling one of our manifesto promises.