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Talk of dynastic politics futile, focus on people's problems: Pawar to PM

**EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE**  
PUNE, JANUARY 13

STATING THAT there was nothing wrong in a politician's son becoming a politician, NCP national president Sharad Pawar on Saturday asked Prime Minister Narendra Modi to focus on problems besetting the masses, rather than wasting time on speaking about dynastic politics.

Responding to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's remarks in Nashik regarding dynastic politics on Friday, Pawar said, "The Prime Minister said we should break free from dynastic politics. Now what is dynastic politics? A doctor's son becomes doctor, a trader's son becomes trader and farmer's son becomes farmer. If a politician's son comes to politics, then how can we call it dynastic



NCP president Sharad Pawar

politics? And therefore, the Prime Minister should not waste time speaking about dynastic politics, he should address the key issues affecting people."

Pawar said he had no objection for not being invited for inauguration ceremony of the Ram temple in Ayodhya but would certainly visit the temple at a later stage. "I have not been invited for the Ram temple inauguration event. I have no objection. But I will certainly visit Ayodhya after January. Lord Ram belongs to everyone," Pawar said while addressing a farmer rally in Junnar taluka of Pune district.


Rumours, says Cong's Deora on speculation he is joining Shinde Sena

**PRESS TRUST OF INDIA**  
MUMBAI, JANUARY 13

SENIOR CONGRESS leader Milind Deora Saturday dismissed as "rumours" speculation that he was on his way out and would join the Shiv Sena led by Maharashtra Chief Minister Eknath Shinde.

Deora, who recently made his displeasure over the Shiv Sena (UBT) staking a claim to the Mumbai South Lok Sabha constituency public, told reporters, however, that he is holding discussions with his supporters.

"I am listening to my supporters... Haven't taken a decision yet," the former Mumbai South MP said when asked if he



Congress leader Milind Deora

was chalking out a plan with his supporters. These are rumours, he said while responding to a query on reports in some sections of the media that he was quitting the Congress to join the Shiv Sena led by Eknath Shinde.

The Uddhav Thackeray-led group had staked a claim to contest the Mumbai South constituency, represented by Deora before 2014, in the upcoming general elections, which has not gone down well with the Congress leader.

Maldives President

The comment by Muizzu, seen as a pro-China leader, came amid a diplomatic row with India over social media posts by three of his ministers against Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

"This ocean does not belong to a specific country. This (Indian) Ocean also belongs to all countries situated in it," he said, in an apparent jibe at India. "We may be small but this doesn't give them the license to bully us."

"Though we have small islands in this ocean, we have a vast exclusive economic zone of 900,000 square km. Maldives is one of the countries with the biggest share of this ocean," the local Sun Online portal quoted Muizzu as telling reporters after arriving from China.

Muizzu's five-day state visit to China was his first after assuming office in November last year. He held talks with President Xi Jinping and the two countries signed 20 agreements.

"The two sides agree to continue firmly supporting each other in safeguarding their respective core interests," said a joint statement issued at the end of Muizzu's talks with the top Chinese leaders.

"China firmly supports the Maldives in upholding its national sovereignty, independence and national dignity, respects and supports the Maldives' exploration of a development path that suits its national conditions, and firmly opposes external interference in the internal affairs of the Maldives," the statement said, without referring to any country.

In his media briefing in Male, Muizzu said China has granted \$130 million in assis-

stance for his country.

He said the bulk of the amount will be spent on redeveloping Male's roads.

Also, China's Ambassador to Maldives Wang Lixin said Maldives will receive support for more development projects from Beijing if they align with President Xi's initiatives.

Wang, who accompanied Muizzu on his visit to China, said: "During this visit, the two heads of state have announced the elevation of our bilateral relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership. This will provide a strong political guarantee for the future cooperation between the two countries."

Muizzu's visit to China was marred by the diplomatic row with India over derogatory remarks by his ministers against Prime Minister Modi and the release of a report by the EU Election Observation Mission of Maldives that said the ruling coalition of Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) and the People's National Congress (PNC) deployed anti-India sentiments and attempted to spread disinformation in the 2023 presidential elections in which Muizzu won.

The EU report cast a shadow over Muizzu's Presidential election last November as he contested as part of PPM headed at that time by former pro-China President Abdullah Yameen, who is currently serving a prison sentence for corruption.

During Muizzu's visit to China, the two countries also signed an agreement to allow Maldives' national airline, Maldivian, to conduct domestic flight operations in China.

FROM PAGE ONE  
Kharge named chief of Opposition alliance

the convenor pending consultations with the three senior leaders who stayed away citing pre-occupation.

Interestingly, it was Sitaram Yechury, General Secretary of the CPM — TMC's bitter rival in West Bengal — who proposed the names of Kharge and Kumar for leadership roles at the virtual meeting. Yechury was backed by CPI counterpart D Raja and others also agreed with some suggesting that Banerjee, Thackeray and Yadav should be consulted.

While sources said Akhilesh Yadav had conveyed before the meeting that he would be on board with the decisions taken by the leaders, there is apprehension on whether the West Bengal CM would agree. When contacted, a senior Trinamool Congress leader merely said "no comments."

Sources said Kumar was visibly upset when the suggestion came that the consent of those who were not present should be taken.

Senior JD(U) leader Lallan Singh, who was present in the virtual meeting, earlier told others that Kumar was not an aspirant for the convenor post, a stand that the JD(U) had been articulating publicly for some time. In private, the JD(U) has been of the view that Kharge be appointed the chairperson and Kumar the convenor — a North-South combination which, it feels, will send a positive signal

to the people in the absence of a prime ministerial face for the bloc.

JD(U) leader Sanjay Jha later told reporters that Kumar has "not given his consent" to the proposal to make him convenor. Leaders of some of the INDIA bloc parties claimed that the Trinamool Congress is not really enthusiastic about the idea of appointing Kumar as the convenor.

Pawar told reporters in Pune Kumar's name was suggested for the post of convenor at the meeting but the Bihar CM was of the view that a team of party chiefs should be formed and that there is no need to appoint a convenor.

"Everyone unanimously agreed on the name of Kharge. All the allies wanted the chairperson to be from the Congress, the leading party in the bloc," said a leader. Sources said Sonia Gandhi suggested that if the Congress is appointed chairperson of the bloc, then a non-Congress leader should be made the convenor to send a right political message.

Sources in the JD(U) claimed Kumar suggested that the opinion of the TMC and SP on his name as convenor should be taken before taking a final decision. AJD(U) leader claimed that Kumar has declined the offer and "by turning down the proposal of the convenor... he has kept an option open for him. He may make some announcement

during a rally on January 24."

Among those who attended the meeting were Kharge, Sonia, Rahul Gandhi and KC Venugopal; Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M K Stalin and his party colleague Kanimozhi; RJ'D's Lalu Prasad and Tejashwi Yadav; NCP's Sharad Pawar; Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal and his AAP colleague Raghav Chaddha; JMM's Hemant Soren, Yechury and D Raja. Sources said Thackeray informed the meeting that his party colleague and Rajya Sabha MP Sanjay Raut would attend but he could not as he was traveling.

The meeting saw the Congress urging INDIA allies to join Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra which he is beginning from Imphal Sunday. Rahul told the leaders that he would write personally to all the leaders inviting them to be part of the yatra.

While Banerjee skipped the meeting, the tussle between the TMC and Congress in West Bengal was mentioned. This has reached such a pass that the TMC declined to participate in seat-sharing talks with the national alliance committee of the Congress, signalling that it was not willing to concede two or, at best, three seats to the Congress, an offer which the state Congress has already rejected.

Kharge later said the leaders had a fruitful discussion.

"Everyone is happy that the seat-sharing talks are progressing in a positive way. We also discussed joint programmes in the coming days by INDIA parties. I, along with Rahul Gandhi, invited all INDIA parties to join Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra at their convenience..." he said in a post on X.

On seat-sharing, sources said that all the parties were of the view that the exercise should be completed as soon as possible. Talking to reporters in Pune after attending the meeting, Pawar said that Kumar's name was suggested for the post of convenor, but the latter was of the view that a team of party chiefs should be formed and that there is no need to appoint a convenor. Pawar added there was no need to project any face for the upcoming Lok Sabha polls as the leader can be chosen once the results are declared.

"We will select the leader after the elections and we are confident of providing an alternative. In 1977, Morarji Desai was not projected as the prime ministerial face by the opposition," PTI quoted Pawar as having said.

"For the Lok Sabha seats in Maharashtra, seat-sharing was discussed and we will announce once it is finalised," he said. The INDIA bloc meeting decided on a committee that will plan joint rallies of the allies all over the country, he said.

PoK visit: India says unacceptable

serious note of the "highly objectionable" visit.

"Such infringement of India's sovereignty and territorial integrity is unacceptable," it said, adding: "Foreign Secretary has lodged a strong protest with the British High Commissioner in India on this infringement."

The statement reiterated that "the Union Territories of Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh are, have been and shall always remain an integral part of India".

During her trip to Mirpur, Marriott held meetings with the business community and officials. A significant portion of the population from the area had migrated to the UK in the 1950s and 1960s. A sizable chunk of its population holds dual British and Pakistani citizenship.

"Salaam from Mirpur, the heart of the UK and Pakistan's people to people ties! 70% of British Pakistani roots are from Mirpur, making our work together crucial for diaspora interests. Thank you for your hospitality!" she posted on X Wednesday.

The UK High Commission in Islamabad also posted a video on X, showing Marriott visiting a business enterprise in Mirpur and speaking with a local football team.

In October last year, in the wake of US envoy to Pakistan Donald Blome's visit to PoK, New Delhi had conveyed a similar message to Washington, regis-

tering its "strong objection" and urging the international community to respect its "sovereignty and territorial integrity".

Blome had visited Gilgit-Baltistan, which India considers part of undivided Jammu & Kashmir. He had visited several recreational places and projects of the United Nations Development Programme. Blome also met the Deputy Speaker of the Gilgit-Baltistan Assembly, Sadia Danish, and a Member of the Assembly, Rani Sanam Faryad.

The Indian government has often reiterated India's claim on PoK, especially in the wake of the abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019, which stripped Jammu & Kashmir of its special status.

During the recent Winter Session of Parliament, Union Home Minister Amit Shah told the Lok Sabha that 24 seats have been reserved for PoK as the territory "is ours". He was speaking during a debate on the Jammu and Kashmir Reservation (Amendment) Bill, 2023 and the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation (Amendment) Bill, 2023.

A few months back, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh had said PoK "is, was and will remain a part of India" and that the Pakistan government will achieve nothing by repeatedly claiming it. He had emphasised that the illegal occupation of the PoK does not give Pakistan any locus standi.

Why Nitish said no

■ Despite a clear hint from the Congress, when it didn't announce Nitish as convenor last week, the JD(U)'s leadership, sources said, was in a spot. Injury got added to this insult when Congress chief Mallikarjun Kharge, asked about Nitish's position, was sharp in his response — he asked if this was a "KBC (game show) question". JD (U) chief spokesperson KC Tyagi led the JD (U) charge by asking the Congress to "show some urgency" in taking major decisions. Tyagi's aggressive posturing reportedly did not go well with Congress, especially JD(U) asking for INDIA yatra, rather than Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra. So when the Congress has finally made the offer, JD(U) leaders sense it lacks conviction.

■ Nitish Kumar, sources said, has always pushed for a consensus regarding his role in the coalition. "He had reservations about Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee meeting Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal before the last meet of the INDIA bloc in Delhi. And when Banerjee proposed the name of Kharge for leading the Opposition, it further upset him." This is why he asked for a consensus at Saturday's virtual meeting on the issue of a post for him.

■ Adept at political posturing, Nitish Kumar will continue to keep the Congress guessing. Until now, he has declined to echo the Congress's line of staying away

from Ayodhya temple consecration ceremony and remains non-committal. At the same time, he seems to be waiting for Congress to offer him a more "substantive" role in the coalition. "Nitish expects Congress to talk to all important allies and convince him to accept the convenor position with a definite role", said a JD (U) leader.

■ Finally, JD (U) wants to focus on raising its EBC (Extremely Backward Classes) pitch, which is the main takeaway of the Bihar caste survey, that showed EBCs as the largest social group accounting for 36.1 per cent of the population. To celebrate EBC icon and former CM Karpoori Thakur's birth centenary on January 24, JD (U) leaders will attend a celebration two days earlier at Karpoori Thakur's paternal village, Karpoori Gram. The state government is preparing for a mega function on January 24.

Though the government organises this function every year, the centenary celebrations, sources said, could see some important announcements from the CM. Besides, JD (U) has also been holding Karpoori Charcha at regular intervals across the state. Said party spokesperson KC Tyagi: "We are offering our own counter narrative to BJP's aggressive agenda combining Ayodhya temple opening and labharthi schemes. We will go to the public with the Karpoori symbol and the Nitish model of governance".

Assault of sadhus latest BJP-TMC flashpoint in Bengal, 12 arrested

in Uttar Pradesh, were asking for food during a stopover when rumours spread that they were trying to abduct minor girls.

This "misunderstanding", police said, prompted local residents to attack the three sadhus, vandalise their car, and also assault a driver and a cook accompanying them. Police are yet to reveal the identities of the accused.

"Facts are being misrepresented from certain quarters about a recent incident in Purulia. The facts, on the afternoon of January 11, there was a misunderstanding between three Gangasagar-bound sadhus with three local minor girls near Kashipur over language problem. The girls got scared and local people manhandled the sadhus and damaged their vehicle, alleg-

ing a kidnapping attempt," a police statement read.

"Police promptly intervened and rescued the sadhus. Twelve people have been arrested on the basis of a specific case. All possible assistance was rendered to the sadhus," police said.

One of the sadhus, Madhur Goswami, said that had the police not come in time, "we would have been killed". "The mob did not ask anything and started beating us. We did not file an FIR because we didn't know anyone there," he said.

The BJP alleged the accused had links to the TMC. In a social media post, the party's IT cell head Amit Malviya wrote: "...In a Palghar kind lynching, sadhus traveling to Gangasagar for Makar Sankranti were stripped and beaten by crim-

inals, affiliated with the ruling TMC. In Mamata Banerjee's regime, a terrorist like Shahjahan Sheikh gets state protection and sadhus are being lynched. It is a crime to be a Hindu in West Bengal." TMC's Shahjahan Sheikh is an accused in the attack on a team of ED officers during a search of his house in North 24 Parganas earlier this month.

BJP MP Jyotirmay Singh also met the sadhus on Sunday.

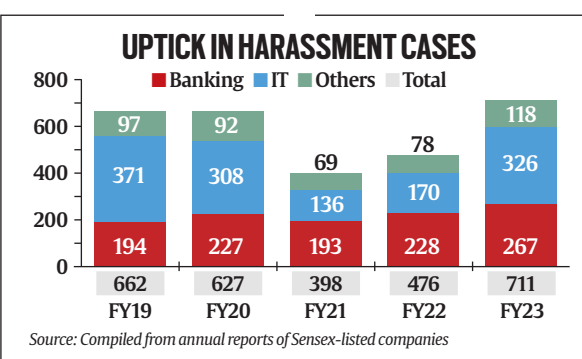
TMC leader Sushmita Dev said, "When it comes to women's security and dignity of women, the BJP has failed again and again. Members of the BJP IT cell have been embroiled in the rape case of BHU-IIT. When it comes to women wrestlers, BJP has failed to protect them. We have seen the

ghastly case of Bilkis Bano."

The West Bengal BJP questioned Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's "deafening silence" and asked whether "these Hindu Sadhus are not worthy of your acknowledgment?" TMC's Sashi Panja said BJP leaders were "falling back on their age-old practice trying to make it a political incident".

On Saturday evening, Malviya posted another video and wrote: "Another horrific video of sadhus being lynched in West Bengal has emerged, in which a man wearing fatigues is seen beating the modestly dressed sadhus, with their backs to the wall, mercilessly. Has Mamata Banerjee ordered the police to identify this man and charge him with attempt to murder or is she first checking his religion?"

Harassment cases at BSE firms



The data also shows a marked decline in cases in the pandemic years of FY21 and FY22 — 398 and 476, respectively. Experts said a lack of awareness and incomplete company policies may have failed to capture instances of online sexual harassment.

At telecom company Bharti Airtel, of 69 cases of sexual harassment reported in the last five financial years, at least 27 resulted in the firing of the accused personnel. By disclosing the action taken in such cases, in addition to the mandatory disclosures of cases received and resolved, Airtel was an outlier among Sensex firms.

Experts said the number of cases reported during the pandemic years likely dipped as employees may not have been aware of the ways in which sexual harassment can take place in online settings. "During Covid-19, we saw a huge rise in online harassment. Women were being forced to switch on their videos at home and comments like, 'Have you just come out of the bath?' or 'Your hair is still wet, it looks so nice' were being passed," said Anju Kapur, National President, Anti-Sexual Harassment Council at Women's Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

"I don't have to be in the proximity of a person to bring in a claim of sexual harassment. Even if there's a sexually coloured remark or message on a Zoom call, that is enough to bring it within the ambit of The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013," said Mumtaz Bhalla, advocate and partner, Economic Laws Practice.

Moreover, several companies updated their policies on sexual harassment to account for the work-from-home setting much later into the pandemic. For instance, only in FY23 did Tata Steel modify its Prevention of Sexual Harassment (PoSH) policy to take into consideration online meetings being attended from home and places other than offices.

Once reported by an employee, a case of sexual harassment is investigated by the Internal Complaints Committee established at each company, as mandated by the law. Most companies included in the Sensex — a benchmark index of the thirty most traded company stocks — do not disclose the results of such investigations in their annual reports, with the exception of Bharti Airtel. In the last five financial years, allegations were substantiated in 46 of the 69 cases reported at the company. Besides the firing of the accused personnel in 27 cases, other action included either counselling or a written warning.

"The ICC at each company has to file an annual report with a designated district officer every calendar year. Every company has to disclose five things. Two of these are the number of complaints received and the number of complaints resolved during the year, both of which are also disclosed in the company's annual report. Three additional things they have to report are — number of complaints pending for over 90 days, training programmes conducted during the year and action taken for each complaint, if any," said Vishal Kedia, founder of ComplyKaro, a PoSH compliance and consultancy firm.

According to Kapur, companies should be required to disclose more information in their annual reports for greater accountability.

"Typically an ICC is supposed to recommend action to the employer as it cannot take action on its own. Now, what if the employer doesn't take the necessary action? We find that in most cases, there is no action taken at the end of the day," she said.

Between FY19 and FY23, a total of 2,874 cases of sexual harassment were reported at Sensex companies. In FY23, 593 out of 711 sexual harassment cases — an 83 per cent share — were reported at 11 Sensex companies in the IT and banking sectors. The share of cases reported at IT and banking companies has remained consistent during the last five fiscal years.

"The younger generation, like Gen Z, is much more aware of their rights. They are more vocal about what they think and are a lot more empowered because of social media. Therefore, in these sectors, we see higher numbers being reported as compared to the manufacturing sector," said Kedia.

Among the other companies in the Sensex, Tata Steel reported 31 cases in FY23 compared to 20 in FY19. Tata Group-owned Titan reported 12 cases in FY23 compared to 8 in FY19. On the other hand, Reliance Industries and Bajaj Finserv reported no case over the last five financial years. JSW Steel reported one case. In FY23, the share of women employees in Reliance Industries stood at 19.3 per cent while for Bajaj Finserv the figure was 18 per cent. Women in JSW Steel represented only 5 per cent of the workforce.

"The trend shows awareness is increasing and that women are feeling more empowered to come forward. Still, whatever numbers we are pulling from the annual reports will be a drop in the ocean because even today, companies are not very comfortable giving these numbers reported. If given a choice, they would not want to report," said Kedia.

While IT firms saw a slight drop to 308 cases in FY20 compared to 371 in FY19, the number of cases reported in FY23 increased again to 326. During the pandemic years of FY21 and FY22, these companies reported 136 and 170 cases, respectively. IT companies included in the Sensex are Infosys, HCL Technologies, TCS, Tech Mahindra and Wipro.

Compared to FY19, cases reported at Wipro, TCS and Infosys in FY23 came down by 51 per cent, 44 per cent, and 26 per cent, respectively, to 70, 49, and 78 cases. At HCL Tech, however, the figure increased by 400 per cent to 55 cases. In Tech Mahindra the number of cases reported increased by 185 per cent to 74.

For the six banking companies included in the Sensex — HDFC Bank, ICICI Bank, Axis Bank, IndusInd Bank, Kotak Mahindra Bank and State Bank of India — 267 cases were reported in FY23 compared to 194 cases in FY19, a jump of 38 per cent. Compared to the IT sector, banking services were viewed as essential during the pandemic, due to which a significant chunk of employees continued to work from office.

In FY23, 68 cases were reported at HDFC Bank alone, which recorded an increase of 172 per cent from FY19. IndusInd Bank recorded an increase of 250 per cent to 21 cases, Kotak Bank an increase of 104 per cent to 55 cases, and SBI an increase of 77 per cent to 46 cases. Both Axis Bank and ICICI Bank recorded a drop of 33 per cent and 27 per cent each to 34 and 43 cases, respectively.