**Being a party spokesperson no longer a flippant matter**



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They are no longer cynically called the 5 o'clock follies. With the media becoming more and more demanding, the evening press briefings by various political parties, earlier characterised by insipid monologues by insignificant partymen, are gaining in importance.

So much so that these tete-e-tetes at twilight are getting much newspaper space. The major parties have told their spokesmen to make briefings as interesting and informative as possible.

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| **"The press is not at all hostile towards us. On the other hand it is very cooperative."*V.N. Gadgil*** |

Communication with the public, the politicians seem to have realised, is not just a question of throwing a few barbs at opponents, responding to a reporter's insistent query or blandly reacting to an event. It's much more. And so, these days, briefings are being handled adroitly by those who have some experience at skirting uncomfortable questions, a ready wit and a macroscopic overview of political developments.

Everyone's in the fray, from senior journalists who have seen governments fall like packs of cards to occasionally self-righteous greenhorns who haven't lost their milk teeth. Says Janata Dal(S) spokespersons. P. Malviya: "Earlier only experienced journalists would toss questions at us. Now even raw recruits subject me to grilling."

Being a party spokesperson is not a flippant matter, demanding as it does a clear head, the hide of a rhino, and willing subjection to the new, less benign, laws of political existence. Even the Congress(I), for the first time in its long and chequered history, has had to appoint an "official spokesman", taking the cue from the British Labour Party which created this post after going into opposition in 1951.

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V.N. Gadgil is the first party spokesperson who does not hold the general secretary's post. And Petroleum Minister, S.P. Malviya always finds time for the daily round of exchanging flak.

The men of the evening hour readily admit that theirs is an onerous task, this daily confrontation with scribes. Earlier, only a major political development would enthuse correspondents to troop lazily to the party offices.

At the 24, Akbar Road AICC(I) headquarters during those heady days of 1987 when the party was being buffeted by V.P. Singh's revolt, there was no regular briefing. The Congress(I) found its new role of being sharply watched by newspersons uncomfortable and found no reason to aggravate the discomfort by daily powwows.

But the current media boom - which has ushered in an age of edgy competitiveness for news - and the advent of video newsmagazines, have lent an air of seriousness to the evening briefings. Laments Murli Manohar Joshi, BJP general secretary who briefs the press on most important occasions: "It is no longer possible to get away with a faux pas. You are trapped on celluloid."

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| **"It is no longer possible to get away with a faux pas. You're trapped on celluloid."*****Murli Manohar Joshi*** |

A seasoned journalist recognises the differences between various spokespersons and handles them with varying degrees of geniality, or otherwise. Each spokesperson has his own distinctive style and his own way of going about the job.

It is difficult to believe, for instance, that the soft-spoken and diminutive Gadgil can actually go on the offensive and demolish opponents. But he regularly continues to prove that he can snipe Without being nasty.

What has made him stand apart from the crowd is his sharp wit and his subtle sense of humour. After the withdrawal of the BJP's support to the National Front government, he remarked: "From the intensive care unit, the patient has been shifted to the terminal ward."

Sometimes, he gives in to plagiarising phrases, but with due contextual changes. In his memoirs, for instance, well-known BBC commentator Robin Day, wrote that after his heart attack he was like a passenger in the departure lounge whose flight had fortunately been delayed.

Gadgil used the metphor to devastating effect during the recent political crisis: "The Government is in the departure lounge and the flight will not be delayed on November 7" (the day the V.P. Singh government lost the confidence motion in Parliament).

Gadgil's caustic humour is the result of his "British training" during his years in London. He is an avid observer of the Westminster scene. But what he doesn't seem to have absorbed from the British is a stiff upper lip and often takes a dip into droll, if titillating, metaphors.

Commenting on V.P. Singh's sudden broadsides against the BJP during the final count-down for his government's collapse, the suave Pune wordmoister said: "After living in sin for 11 months, he is claiming that he is a virgin." Still, you cannot fault Gadgil for being loud or crude.

Janata Dal spokesperson Jaipal Reddy is Gadgil's polar opposite. He had his political initiation as president of the Osmania University's students' union, and moved to national politics after four successive terms in the Andhra Pradesh Assembly.

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| **"In the midst of briefings I often feel I am being examined by seasoned lawyers."*****S.P. Malviya*** |

He is as boisterous as Gadgil is low-key and his lexicon is peppered with flamboyance. His expressions are colourful and alliterative rather than witty.

During the St Kitts forgery controversy, he nimbly traced Rajiv Gandhi's evolution from "Mr Clean to McClean" (managing director of the defunct bank on the Caribbean island). He enumerated the "four stages of the Congress(I) somersault" on the Mandal Commission report thus:

"From initial approbation to ambiguity to ambivalence to final antagonism." For him, the Janata Dal(S) formed by the breakaway Chandra Shekhar faction, is for all practical purposes Janata Dal (Rajiv). It is a party of "disrupters, defectors and deserters".

With his love of verbal pyrotechnics, Reddy seems to be enjoying his assignment. He recalls with a wry smile Devi Lal's argument during the Dal presidential election that he should not be in the contest 'because Jaipal Reddy has no replacement as the party spokesman'.

He says that the job of his Congress(I) and BJP counterparts is a great deal easier - one being a "monolithic party, only one viewpoint is to be taken care of, and the other, being a "disciplined party, only a given party line has to be articulated".

In this context, he refers to the tightrope walk he had to perform on the Meham issue: "Though we could not take an official stand, I had to keep the party at a distance from Chautala."

Terming the Meham imbroglio as the most difficult situation he has had to face as the Janata Dal spokesperson, he now feels that after the split, his task has become less sweaty and exhausting: "My job has become simple and, therefore, crude."

A spokesperson, Reddy feels, has to be a "professional politician", in the sense that he himself has "no other vocation". He strongly speaks against the "recent tendency to hire experts". This is obviously an oblique, and not particularly kind, reference to former newspaper editor M.J. Akbar's appointment as assistant to Gadgil.

Says Reddy: "For this job, one needs to have the ability to conceptualise and articulate with precision. This cannot be done by a non-political person. He can at best be the spokesman for Pepsi Cola."

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| "**For this job, one needs the rare ability to conceptualise and articulate with precision."*Jaipal Reddy*** |

This kind of verbal high drama is missing at the 11 Ashoka Road headquarters of the BJP, probably because the party's views are too rigid to lend themselves to individualistic grotesquerie.

No newsperson expects either an "inside story" of a crucial party meeting or one leader speaking off-the-record about another. Says BJP spokesperson K.L. Sharma: "We had to toil hard to get into the news. Earlier, only Advani and Vajpayee got the coverage; other leaders were not taken seriously by the press."

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Things changed for the better only after the party did a study of "press psychology". "Now we give newsworthy handouts which evoke positive responses," says Sharma. They are undeniably rabble-rousing. The party's views on Punjab and the Kashmir Valley ("Terrorist camps in occupied Kashmir must be strafed") make instant headlines.

But the BJP too has its twilight man to enliven briefings when they get too dull. Murli Manohar Joshi, who is usually busy with organisational work in the states, bobs up in the party's newly-upholstered press room in the wake of big political developments.

As the results of the last general election were coming in bringing spectacular success for the BJP he was asked whether it would 'prick' their conscience to support V. P. Singh who had refused to share the platform with the BJP.

He answered with equanimity: "In politics one has to be ready for both pins and pricks." One of his claims to notoriety is that he taught V.P. Singh at Allahabad University. Joshi laughs away allegations that his former pupil had gone astray. "I taught him physics, not politics. Phir bhi, sau me se aisa ek aadh nikal hi aata hai (Out of a hundred, one or two do turn out thus)."

Malviya, a close associate of Charan Singh, is an old hand at this job. He makes sure that the smile remains on his face however barbed the questions are. The day the Janata Dal(S) gave papers in reply to the Lok Sabha Speaker's notice on floor-crossing from the parent party, a reporter asked if he was hoping to rope in some more Janata Dal MPs.

With a little twist he assumed a patronising air: "If they come on their own they are most welcome. If the entire party wants to merge we do not have any objection." Malviya displays a remarkable humility in his relations with the press: "I am more afraid of the pen than the sword. With the sword you can finish an individual but with the pen the entire government."

Handling newshounds is no easy job, and each party spokesperson has to do his homework rigorously. "I think of the lines while taking my morning walk," Gadgil says in an unusually confessional mood. Reddy formulates his strategy for the day immediately after reading the morning papers. The stern BJP, however, allows no individualism.

Senior party functionaries like J.P. Mathur, K.R. Malkani, Jay Dubashi, Sharma and Joshi hunker down together to prepare the brief for the spokesperson. They even decide who will brief the press. Despite periodic grouchings about the bias of the press from all political quarters, these spokespersons have had very little experience of being misquoted.

"We are being fairly reported," says Sharma. Gadgil thinks that the "press is not hostile at all. It is rather very cooperative". As speculation was soaring regarding the possibility of the Congress(I) participation in government, Gadgil ended his evening briefing with a one-line statement that Rajiv Gandhi would apprise President Venkataraman of the party stand on government formation.

This evoked a barrage of questions. Gadgil sat smilingly and said: "I have made a statement and you are free to draw your inferences." The uncharacteristic bluntness surprised many. The next day he explained: "If I answered your questions there was a risk of prejudicing the President's decision."

Some spokespersons even enjoy their evening rendezvous. Says Malviya: "In the midst of the briefing, I often feel that I am in the witness box being cross-examined by seasoned lawyers. I tell myself that my replies have to be very proper."

Now, with the current political instability and sensitive issues like Ram Janmabhoomi on the agenda, the 5 p.m. tight-rope walk for party spokesmen has become even more tricky.

<https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/special-report/story/19901231-being-a-party-spokesperson-no-longer-a-flippant-matter-813456-1990-12-31>