

Reddy brothers turn Bellary into BJP minefield for Congress

Bellary, India's richest mining town, has turned into a war zone. Mining tycoons Gali Somashekar Reddy of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Anil Lad of the Congress are flexing money and muscle power to grab the prestigious constituency in north Karnataka in the second phase of assembly elections Friday.

A bastion of the Congress for decades, Bellary has seen a tech-tonic shift when it was annexed by the BJP under the tutelage of its famous Reddy brothers - Lok Sabha member G. Karunakara Reddy, state legislative council (MLC) member G. Janaradhan Reddy and former city mayor Somashekar, the undeclared warlords of the thriving multi-billion rupee mining industry in this backward district.

To meet the growing demand for steel by China in the run up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the iron mines in Bellary-Hospet terrain with rich ferric content (64 percent) have turned into a money spinner for stakeholders, including politicians, police and middlemen by exporting tonnes of iron ore and steel products every day over the last five to six years.

Ever since Congress president Sonia Gandhi chose to contest from Bellary in the 1999 parliamentary poll, only to give up the seat a fortnight after winning it against the formidable Sushma Swaraj of BJP so as to retain the Amethi Lok Sabha seat in Uttar Pradesh, the saffron party has been able to turn a sizeable electorate away from the Congress. It opened its account in 2004 from the district.

Though the Congress came to power after the 1999 assembly poll in the state, its government could not fulfill the poll promises made by Gandhi, especially the Rs.30-billion Bellary package, as it was caught in the vortex of crises during its five-year term.

Riding on the anger of Bellary people over Gandhi's 'betrayal' and her government failure to deliver, the BJP succeeded in displacing Congress in the voters' consciousness to reap victory in the 2004 general elections.

With the powerful mining lobby building bridges with the authorities for patronage and favours, the Reddy brothers occupied the centre stage of Bellary politics by getting their BJP win 30 seats in the 35-member local body election subsequently.

When the Congress and Janata Dal-Secular (JD-S) formed the first coalition government in the state in June 2004, the Reddy brothers' stranglehold in the mining business was threatened by their business rivals.

Having dug deep into the booming mining business, the Reddys have decided to take on the rivals by asserting their supremacy in the allotment of mines and grant of license to extract the iron ore through contracts.

The booming iron/steel export business also lured the Janata Dal-Secular (JD-S) leaders, including family members of party supremo H.D. Deve Gowda, into the mining industry after his son H.D. Kumaraswamy brought down the Congress-led government in January 2006 and joined hands with BJP to form the second coalition government in the state.

When JD-S mines minister M. Chennigappa tried to clip the wings of the Reddys, Janardhan went to town accusing Kumaraswamy of having collected Rs. 1.5-billion in bribes from illegal mining firms four months after the latter became the chief minister.

As there was no love lost between the Reddys and the Gowda family, the battle for one-upmanship in the neo-rich Bellary led to a free-for-all between the BJP and JD-S although they shared power.

When the BJP nominated Somashekar for the Bellary seat, the Congress lost no time in wooing Anil Lad into the party from BJP and fielding him to strike at the Reddys by using another mining tycoon, who hails from the neighbouring Sindur town.

Having strayed into the BJP minefield and got cornered by its campaign that Lad was as an outsider in Bellary and a turncoat, the Congress succeeded in getting JD-S candidate Diwakar Babu to withdraw from the contest to prevent a division in non-BJP votes.

'Our arch rivals, the JD-S and Gowda family, who dared to finish us off, have conceded defeat even before the first ballot was cast by allowing Babu, a former minister, to withdraw from fray as the Congress, forced to field Lad, did not have a viable candidate,' Janaradhan told IANS.

Declared as a 'hypersensitive' constituency by the poll panel, Bellary is set for an epic battle between the two mining magnates, who are filthy rich and own a fleet of cars, mansions, villas and jewellery.

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