

Gowda fighting his biggest political battle as he completes 75

Haradanahalli Doddegowda Deve Gowda, former prime minister and currently Janata Dal-Secular president, Sunday completes 75 years - 55 of them spent in active politics. He is busy waging, and relishing, the biggest political battle of his life - the ongoing Karnataka assembly polls.

Gowda has hardly any time or inclination to celebrate his 76th birthday.

The JD-S chief's ambition is limited to garnering adequate number of seats in the polls to the 224-member Karnataka assembly in order to dictate terms to national parties - the Congress and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Almost totally marginalised in national politics after his short-lived prime ministership in 1996-97, Gowda is fighting to remain relevant in Karnataka politics before passing on the mantle to his children. He has four sons and two daughters.

Two sons have been active in politics and one of them, H.D. Kumaraswamy became chief minister in 2006 aligning with the BJP, seemingly going against the wishes of the staunchly secular father. After some drama of suspension and threat of expulsion from the party, Gowda blessed his son for 'saving the party from being destroyed' by the Congress.

Kumaraswamy, who is in his 40s, is the unannounced heir apparent, pipping his elder sibling H.D. Revanna who had to be satisfied with being a minister in the younger brother's cabinet.

When he became prime minister by accident in 1996, his party had just 16 members in the Lok Sabha. He will now be more than satisfied if he manages twice that number in the state assembly.

Gowda firmly believes that neither the BJP nor Congress will get clear majority and will need his help to rule the state.

He is putting his age to good use during electioneering for the three-phase polls. Voting has taken place for 155 seats in two phases, 89 seats on May 10 and 66 on May 16. Balloting for the remaining 69 seats is on May 22 and results will be out on May 25.

Unmindful of the searing May heat, Gowda has been touring the state to drum up support for his candidates, telling the voters that this is his last electoral battle and national parties like the Congress and BJP are no good for the state!

He is derided by the Congress and BJP for playing to regional sentiments after being prime minister of the country. Gowda brushes off the snide comments saying that it is not new to him and he has been ridiculed and written off many times in the past as well.

It is difficult to understand the man and his politics. As prime minister he went to Davos, Switzerland, where high priests of capitalism and globalisation gather annually to network to expand their business empires, to sell India as an investment destination.

But back in Karnataka he has been having a running battle with IT majors like Infosys and Wipro, questioning their need for huge tracts of land and accusing the previous Congress government

headed by IT savvy S.M. Krishna of giving them fertile farm land at throwaway prices.

Gowda has also not let go of any opportunity to stall the ambitious Bangalore-Mysore Infrastructure Corridor project being executed by a private consortium. The project envisages a top class multi-lane road to reduce the running time between the two cities to slightly over two hours. Now it takes over three hours to cover the 139 km.

The project will also have large self-sufficient townships along the corridor.

Gowda and his sons are opposing the project on the ground that around 4,000 acres of excess land has been given to the promoters by the Krishna government. Their opposition continues though both the state high court and the Supreme Court have cleared the project.

His detractors, who are many in the state, say Gowda and his sons will oppose any project from which they do not stand to gain. If the controversy is over land, it is tailor-made for Gowda as opposing projects furthers his self-styled image of 'Mannina Maga' (son of the soil), a humble farmer who knows the value of fertile land and a friend of the farmers and rural poor.

Gowda acts as if the more the urban-oriented attack him, the better. He ticks off such people, particularly political leaders, as 'entities built up by the media' who matter little otherwise.

Exactly a week after he completes 75 years, results of the ongoing poll will be out. Gowda will be hoping the outcome will be the icing on his 76th birthday cake.

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