

Virbhadra Singh fighting 'survival battle' in pocket borough

Himachal Pradesh's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) sees its first real opportunity to wrest this pocket borough of union Steel Minister Virbhadra Singh in Saturday's by-election, thanks to infighting in his Congress party. In the past two decades Rohru voters have sent the former chief minister to the state assembly five times.

This was till he shifted to [New Delhi](#) by winning the Lok Sabha election last May.

He was hoping that his wife Pratibha Singh, a former MP, would be the party nominee in the by-poll. He is peeved that the ticket went to greenhorn Manjit Singh. Pratibha Singh won't be able to contest for the seat again because it is going to be reserved for the Dalit community.

Manjit Singh is up against the BJP's Khushi Ram Balnatah, who has lost four assembly elections to Virbhadra Singh -- in 1993, 1998, 2003 and 2007. Before that, the seat was represented by independents and by the Janata Party (in 1977).

The denial of nomination to Pratibha Singh has triggered shadow boxing within the Congress. The BJP hopes this will cause disgust among Congress voters.

BJP Chief Minister Prem Kumar Dhumal, now into his second round of campaigning here, told IANS: 'We are going to rewrite history by winning Rohru. The infighting within the Congress benefits us. Of course, good governance and the development plank will also help our party.'

Six ministers of the Dhumal government are camping in the constituency to woo voters. Balnatah is pleading with voters to give him one last chance to take his seat in the Himachal legislature.

'I am asking the voters to give me a last chance to serve them. My victory will ensure all-round development of the constituency because the BJP government still has more than three years of governance left,' he said.

Denying the charges of infighting, state Congress chief Kaul Singh Thakur said: 'The party will win both the Rohru and Jawali assembly by-polls. The statements of Virbhadra (after his wife was denied the ticket) have been played up by the media. He is campaigning aggressively for the party.'

Virbhadra Singh -- still called Raja Saab here -- has clarified a number of times that he will work for the party candidates but he should not be blamed for any loss.

His bete noire and Leader of Opposition Vidya Stokes has reacted by saying: 'Credit would go to Virbhadra Singh if the party wins.'

Political observers say 75-year-old Virbhadra Singh is fighting a 'survival battle'. If the party loses Rohru, his detractors will be active again and will hold him responsible for the defeat.

'I would be extremely hurt if the party loses (Rohru). Our rival's victory will be like a Pakistani flag over an Indian fort,' Virbhadra Singh told IANS.

The Congress candidate for the Jawali byelection is former minister Sujan Singh Pathania. He faces

the BJP's Baldev Raj Chaudhary. The election was called after former legislator Rajan Sushant moved to parliament.

There are 70,416 voters in Rohru and 75,541 voters in Jawali assembly constituencies.

Vishal Gulati (© IANS / India eNews)