

CITY

Meet Bala Nandgaonkar, the Sena candidate to take on Sena defector Chhagan Bhujbal



BATTLE FOR MAZAGAON CONSTITUENCY

By Manuwant K. Choudhary

THE decision of the Shiv Sena to field Mr. Bala Nandgaonkar as its candidate from Mazgaon constituency, against Congress minister and Sena defector Chhagan Bhujbal, has come as a surprise in political circles. The Sena had made this seat a prestige issue and the candidate it has chosen to claim it is somewhat nondescript.

The Mazgaon constituency assumes significance as when the sitting MLA, Mr. Chhagan Bhujbal, defected from the Shiv Sena and joined the Congress Party, Mr. Bal Thackeray had vowed to have Mr. Bhujbal defeated at all costs. Mr. Bhujbal had won on a Sena ticket twice, in 1985 and 1990.

Sena leaders have tried to explain away their choice by claiming that Mr. Bhujbal can be defeated by even a relatively unknown Shiv Sainik. Though it is being pointed out that none of the Sena big guns want to risk their position by crossing swords with Mr. Bhujbal on his home ground. We met Mr. Bala in his personal office at Nesbit Road, Mazgaon. We asked him why the Shiv Sena decided to field a 'weak' candidate like him? "I do not know what you mean...*shayad main woh nahin khata hun jo aur log khate hain. Main sirph khana hi khata hun.*"

That Mr. Bala was an ardent admirer of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was evident even before we entered the office. Instead of the saffron, the billboard bore the name of Dr. Ambedkar and anyone would mistake it for the office of one of the components of the Third Front.

What was an admirer of Dr. Ambedkar doing in the Shiv Sena? He replied, "I belong to a caste called *Rohida Charmkar* (cobbler) but Mr. Bal Thackeray does not even know my caste. I am not against Mandal but I do feel that reservation should be need-based and not caste-based.

For the past 15 years I have been working as a senior security officer for Air India and I can afford to send my children to Don Bosco and I am also aware that many of my Marathi colleagues have to send their children to municipal schools. The days are gone when the upper castes did not eat along with the lower castes. And even then there are examples of Dr. Ambedkar and Mahatma Phule who excelled in their fields purely on merit."

Mr. Bala defends his candidacy, "My strength is that I am a social worker and not a politician. I am a corporator from ward number 31 and I defeated the Congress/RPI candidate by 3,750 votes. All communities voted for me. I am also responsible for the building of the Shiv Sena shakhas in the district of Ahmednagar. During my campaign I will not speak against Mr. Bhujbal but against the Congress Party. There is no need to speak against Mr. Bhujbal as everyone knows what he is. At least he should have resigned from the Sena seat before joining the Congress Party. I had worked to get him elected."

Will the Muslims vote for the Shiv Sena? Replies the SS candidate, "The Shiv Sena is not against the Muslims nor is Balasaheb. We are only against those Muslims involved in the bomb blasts. We are not against those Muslims who love India." Why then have the various Muslim leaders announced their support to the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Third Front? "I have met the leaders of the Ulema Council and there is a change taking place in their attitude towards the Shiv Sena. After all it is we who have to live in peace together. Mr. Kanshiram and Mr. Mulayam Singh will return to Uttar Pradesh."

It is also well-known that many vote for the Shiv Sena more out of fear than any belief in what the party writes in its manifesto. Says Mr. Bala, "It is true that people fear the Shiv Sena. And why not? But Shiv Sena does not stand for 'goondaism'

as is being understood. Our shakhas work as 'Nyay Mandirs' and if a Muslim girl reports to us that some Hindu boy has misbehaved then we punish the boy. Everything that happens here is reported to Balasaheb. It is only natural for the wrong-doer to fear us."

What is Shiv Sena's strategy to beat Mr. T. N. Seshan's election code of conduct? He replies smilingly, "In fact Mr. Seshan has done us a big favour. Our expenses will reduce considerably and I will be doing a door-to-door campaign. People already know what the Shiv Sena stands for."

With all the parties looking more or less alike the Sena's decision to field Mr. Bala has a lot to do with the thinking in its leadership that in assembly elections it is the local issues that matter. As a corporator this is what Mr. Bala has to show, "The water tank for the Bandarwalla Hill had a 275 horse power motor pump since 1952. I raised the issue in the BMC that the population of Mazgaon has multiplied several times since then and the pump should be replaced. Now two 400 horse power pumps have replaced the old one. I have got the old Gamdevi Road repaired and given water to the locality where the sitting MLA Mr. Bhujbal belongs."

Mr. Bala regrets that he is only "HSC pass" and that his pre-occupation with politics prevented him from doing further studies. But surely Mr. Bala should have no regrets as he is not just a member on the standing education committee but he is also the deputy chairman of the BMC Teachers' Association.

His election promise is that he will reduce the price of rice and wheat (if necessary by importing it from Andhra Pradesh). But Mr. Bala is no NTR as he is still unmarried. And with the elections just around the corner, marriage is the last thing on his mind. Being only 35, age is surely his biggest strength.