

HISTORIC STEP TO UNITE OPPOSITION: RAHUL GANDHI, NITISH KUMAR MEET

PATNA: CONGRESS DARPAN

New Delhi: In another attempt to stitch together a united Opposition front ahead of the 2024 general election, top leaders of the Congress, Janata Dal (United) (JDU) and Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) met in Delhi today to explore the possibility of putting up a united fight against the ruling BJP.

The meeting was attended by Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, party president Mallikarjun Kharge, Bihar Chief Minister and JDU leader Nitish Kumar, and Bihar's Deputy Chief Minister and RJD chairperson Tejashwi Yadav. JDU president Rajiv Ranjan Singh, RJD's Rajya Sabha MP Manoj Kumar Jha and Congress leader Salman Khursheed were present at the meeting too.

According to sources, the leaders decided that the Congress will reach out to its allies, such as the DMK and the NCP, while Nitish would initiate talks with parties that are against the BJP, but have maintained a distance with the Congress, such as Trinamool Congress, Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and the Bharat Rashtra Samithi.

Once there is a broader consensus, a larger meeting of Opposition parties will be held where a strategy to counter BJP will be chalked out, the sources said. Mr Kumar and Tejashwi Yadav will be meeting AAP leader Arvind Kejriwal this evening. JDU chief Singh will also be present.

Addressing the media after the meeting, Mr Kharge said it was "historic" and that they aim to unite all opposition parties for the upcoming polls. Nitish Kumar and Tejashwi Yadav are visiting Delhi

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was "historic" and that they aim to unite all opposition parties for the upcoming polls. Mr Gandhi said a "historic step" had been taken to unite Opposition parties. "It is a process, it will develop the Opposition's vision for the country," he said. The Bihar Chief Minister, who is visiting Delhi, said the attempt is to unite as many parties as possible and work together. Ahead of the meeting, Mr Kumar called on RJD patriarch Lalu Prasad Yadav, who is recovering at his daughter Misa Bharti's residence. The Congress president tweeted from his official handle that the Opposition leaders had pledged to raise the people's voice and provide new direction to the country. "We will protect the Constitution and save the country," he tweeted in Hindi. Mr Kharge has also spoken to DMK president and Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin and former Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray earlier. As the 2024 Lok Sabha election draws closer, Opposition parties have been exploring new equations to take on the incumbent BJP. However, while some parties have cleared their stand on the question of joining a front, others

have sent out mixed signals. The Trinamool Congress, for example, had initially announced that it would contest the Lok Sabha polls alone. Party chief and Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee had made the remark after her party lost a by-election. The Trinamool had alleged that the defeat was a result of an understanding between the Left, the Congress and the BJP. However, the party appeared to be changing its stand after Rahul Gandhi was disqualified as an MP following his conviction in a criminal defamation case over his "Modi surname" remark. Soon after, Ms Banerjee called upon Opposition parties to unite and throw the BJP out of power. Another key Opposition force that is yet to make clear its stand on joining any front is the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). The party recently got national status and is in power in Delhi and Punjab. Speaking to the media earlier this month, party leader and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal said people's unity, not Opposition unity, was important. He also said that if parties say they have come together to defeat someone, people don't like that



BJP CAN'T STOP ME FROM...: RAHUL GANDHI IN FORMER CONSTITUENCY WAYANAD



PATNA: CONGRESS DARPAN

New Delhi: For the first time since his disqualification as an MP from the Lok Sabha, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi today visited his former constituency, Wayanad in Kerala. Flanked by his sister and Congress general secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, Mr Gandhi was seen waving to his supporters at a roadshow called 'Satyameva Jayate' in Kalpetta town.

"They (BJP) can take my house and put me in jail, but they can't stop me from representing the people of Wayanad and their issues," he said at a rally.

Mr Gandhi said only an MP tag has been taken away from him, but being their representative meant a lot more.

"Member of Parliament is a tag. It is a post. So, BJP can take away the tag, the post, the house, and they can even jail me, but they cannot stop me from representing the people of Wayanad. I am surprised that even after so many years, BJP has not understood its opponent. They do not understand that their opponent will not get intimidated. They think I will get scared by

sending police to my house or that I will be disturbed if my house is taken away," he said.

Stressing that he has been fighting the BJP for "quite a few years", Mr Gandhi said they have been unable to understand his struggle, "that their opponent doesn't get intimidated, doesn't get scared with police".

On him having to vacate his official residence in Delhi — he is obligated to vacate as he is no longer an MP — he said he was "happy they took my house".

"I don't like to live there," he said, adding that he has seen how many people in Wayanad lost their houses in the floods and how they fought.

"Four years ago, I came here and became an MP and for me, the campaign was a different type of campaign. In the regular campaign, you go and speak about policies and what should happen. But in 2014, this campaign was different. There was affection and Kerala made me feel a part of the family and as their son. I thought quite a lot, and I've been an MP for a few years now. MP means to be a people's representative, you have to understand the emotions, sufferings, and needs of people," he said.

Hundreds of United Democratic Front (Congress—led state opposition alliance) workers lined up at Kalpetta for the roadshow holding the Indian flag. Many people across all age groups could be seen gathered on the roadside to welcome Mr Gandhi as he travelled to the public meeting venue on a truck accompanied by his sister and senior party leaders from Kerala.

A Surat court recently convicted Rahul Gandhi in a 2019 defamation case for his jibe at PM Modi over his last name — which he shares with fugitive businessmen Nirav Modi and Lalit Modi — in the run-up to the 2019 general election. "How come all thieves have the common surname Modi?" he had said in Karnataka's Kolar. The two-year sentence disqualified Mr Gandhi from a Lok Sabha membership, and he was seen packing bags to vacate his official residence in Delhi.

A sessions court in Surat granted him bail and put his jail sentence on hold till the court takes a call on his appeal challenging the order of the Surat magistrate. The next hearing is on April 13.

The Congress called it a "con-

spiracy" to silence the leader, who has been dogged in his attacks on PM Modi and has been the de facto head of the main opposition party for nearly a decade. The BJP called the move legal and questioned if Mr Gandhi wanted a special law for his family. The Congress leader was in hot water again after a tweet sporting the names of former Congress leaders, who either joined the BJP or ended decades—old ties with the grand old party, along with that of businessman Gautam Adani. The names shown in the picture included Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, former MP Ghulam Nabi Azad, Union Minister Jyotiraditya Scindia, leader Anil Antony and former Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Kiran Reddy.

Himanta Biswa Sarma said that he would file a defamation suit against Rahul Gandhi over his tweet linking him to the Adani Group. "Whatever Rahul Gandhi has tweeted, it is defamatory. So once Prime Minister returns from Assam we will respond to the tweet and definitely, there will be a defamation case in Guwahati," he said



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