

'HIMACHAL MANIFESTO PROMISES ARE NOT REVDIS, WILL AID DEVELOPMENT'

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Elections, Election Commission and the Electoral Reforms in India Incl. Political Parties

On the last day of campaigning for the Himachal Pradesh Assembly election, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader and Union Information and Broadcasting Minister Anurag Thakur speaks on the contest, *revdis* and rebel candidates. Excerpts:

Going into the Assembly election, what do you think are planks on which the BJP is campaigning on?

A straightforward comparison with the previous Congress regime would show how the development of Himachal Pradesh was neglected, and many of the Central schemes suffered because of procrastination. For example, the AIIMS in the State was in gestation for four years, the Central University also took as much time, many hydroelectric projects were also delayed.

When there was a Congress government at the Centre and the State, in fact, the special category status to Himachal Pradesh was revoked, and it was when Prime Minister Narendra Modi *ji* came to power, it was restored, even though there was a Congress-led government in the State. The Congress has always put roadblocks in the way of development and the double-engine government that the BJP has given on the contrary has fast-tracked it.

It is being said that the BJP is again having to depend on the face of Prime Minister Modi and the double-engine government rhetoric to overcome local challenges.

We are proud of having Modi *ji* as our leader, the most popular leader across the world. We speak specifically of double-engine government in Himachal Pradesh, however, because in a hill State, the role of the Central government is extremely important in terms of infrastructure and development challenges and having Modi *ji* at the Centre, a Prime Minister who looks upon Himachal Pradesh as a second home has been crucial.

The Jairam Thakur government has also done good work in terms of important top-ups of Central schemes. They launched HimCare as the Centre launched Ayushman Bharat, Grahani Yojana along with the Ujjwala cooking gas scheme of the Centre. The good work in both the Centre and the State is being seen in Himachal Pradesh.

Speaking of welfare programmes, Prime Minister Modi has steadfastly said he is against freebies or 'revdi', but many of your party's manifesto promises seem like handouts.

They are not freebies or 'revdi' for the clear reason that almost all will give rise to women-led development and improvement, in steady terms, of women's health and economic empowerment. For example, the manifesto says pregnant women will be given Rs. 25,000 State-aided maintenance which will help in combating widespread anaemia and malnutrition prevalent in women; 33% reservation in jobs will lead to empowerment of women; bicycle for school-going girls and scooters to college-going girls are important, as in hill States getting from one point to the other is especially hard. Things such as creation of eight lakh jobs, or a 2% interest rate subvention to self-help groups are not a handout. All of these promises are not handouts or freebies but measures that will have a consistent, positive impact on development indicators.

Your party has seen an unusually high number of rebels this time around, especially in the crucial districts of Kangra and Mandi. With very tight contests in the past, do you think this will affect the BJP's chances?

Look, nobody wants rebel candidates and every effort was made to reason with people to withdraw their candidature, but, with the widespread belief that the BJP was winning these elections, there were many aspirants and it is unfortunate that at some point you can't persuade all to fall in line. I believe, however, that the people of Himachal Pradesh will not waste their votes, they will vote only for the BJP's official candidate.

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