

## From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

### Devi Lal brings his show to town

*The birthday bash was big, but the opposition is still far from looking like an alternative to Prime Minister Gandhi.*

On Sept. 25 a rising star on India's opposition political horizon, Devi Lal, celebrated his 75th birthday in style. At the New Delhi Boat Club, the traditional venue for all sorts of demonstrations in the heart of the capital, at least 300,000 people, along with most of the opposition leaders, assembled to wish Devi Lal a happy birthday.

Devi Lal, a Jat leader (a community of farmers in northern India noted for their aggressiveness), does not celebrate this annual event in such a grand fashion normally. But this year, there is a general election around the corner. In the absence of any opposition leader who can garner support of all the others, Devi Lal is considered a rising star.

This is highly unusual since Devi Lal is chief minister from Haryana, a small state tucked in between Delhi and Punjab, and thought unlikely to deliver a leader who would be acceptable to the rest of India. But, things have gone rather well for the Jat leader lately.

Devi Lal's finest hour came in June 1987, when under his leadership the Lok Dal (B) swept into power in the Haryana state Assembly elections. The ruling Congress (I) Party was nearly wiped out, making Haryana the only state in the Hindi belt to come under non-Congress (I) rule.

The victory was sweet revenge for Devi Lal. His aggressive and popular campaign humbled two of his protégés, Bansi Lal and Bhajan Lal—both chief ministers of Haryana earlier, who had betrayed Devi Lal. Devi Lal, a farmer's son, began to position him-

self as a serious contender for higher posts.

For a while V.P. Singh, the former chief minister of Uttar Pradesh—the most populous state and known for producing prime ministers—and finance minister in the first cabinet of India's current prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi, held sway within the opposition's leadership ranks, after his parting of the ways with the Congress (I). But Singh's hesitant postures led him nowhere. The hard-core opposition leaders in the Hindi belt—Chandrashekhar in Bihar and Ajit Singh in Uttar Pradesh—were busy cutting each other down to size.

Seeing his chance, the wily Jat leader made friends stay at the center of the stage, however small it may be.

That is not to say that Devi Lal is leading a resurgent opposition, or has become acceptable to the masses of India—oreven to his newly cultivated friends. He has his hands full in his little state. Typically for Indian politics, Devi Lal's sons also rose in the state political scene and are engaged in a bitter war against each other.

Last October, Devi Lal astounded all when he resigned from the chief ministership, ostensibly to play a greater role in national politics. The real story was that Lal's decision came about after sharp differences with his eldest son, Om Prakash Chauthala, who now has a major power base in Haryana.

Lal was persuaded to withdraw his resignation, and it is now clear that he has accommodated his eldest son. This has made his younger son, Ranjit Singh, most unhappy. Singh, also po-

litically potent in Haryana, did not even go to his father's birthday bash, reports say.

It would be unfair, however, to say that Devi Lal's political activities are wholly centered around his family. Brought up as a congress member, as most Hindi belt opposition leaders were and are, Devi Lal has brought to the fore a number of politicians, at least three of whom became chief ministers. All three left him over the years, and only recently one, Rao Birendra Singh, has returned to the fold. In 1979, while Devi Lal was Haryana chief minister, one of his protégés, Bhajan Lal, mustered the support of a majority of the state assemblymen to dethrone him. Three years later, the drama was reenacted; the main actors were again Bhajan Lal and Devi Lal.

In 1985 Devi Lal set up the Haryana Sangharsh Samiti, with mass support in the state. This organization helped him the most in reviving his political life.

The Boat Club show was impressive—what the locals call a real *tamasha*, an entertaining farce. Devi Lal's volunteer force, dressed in green shirts and green trousers, behaved well that day, to everyone's relief. The opposition leaders were elated at the show of people's strength. Ramakrishna Hegde, the former Karnataka state chief minister, whose star began to wane when New Delhi exposed his involvement in illegal wiretapping, gave the battlecry to fight the Congress (I) as a united opposition in the coming elections.

Devi Lal, who had earlier said he would like to see "a farmer's son" sitting in the prime minister's chair, refrained from voicing such thoughts publicly on this auspicious occasion. *Tamashas* notwithstanding, the opposition is still a long way from looking like an alternative government to Rajiv Gandhi's.