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Kakodkar at Sangh science lecture

Radhika Ramaseshan



Anil Kakodkar

New Delhi, March 25: Nuclear scientist Anil Kakodkar, who publicly fell out with HRD minister Smriti Irani a year ago after a row over IIT appointments, today shared the dais with another member of the Narendra Modi government at an RSS event.

What brought Harsh Vardhan and Kakodkar, who was a key member of Manmohan Singh's team that structured and put in place the nuclear deal with the US in 2007-08, together was science and technology. Vardhan, the minister of science, technology and earth sciences, is also a doctor.

Kakodkar, a former chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, was invited to deliver the Nanaji Deshmukh Memorial lecture, hosted each year by the RSS-affiliated Deendayal Research Institute.

RSS leader Deshmukh was an architect of the Janata Party government, of which the Jan Sangh - the BJP's predecessor - was a component. But he fell out of the Sangh's favour when he praised Rajiv Gandhi after the 1984 elections, so badly that he retired from politics and retreated to a community farm he created in Bundelkhand's Chitrakoot.

In 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi rehabilitated Deshmukh posthumously, releasing a compendium of his writings in the presence of RSS leaders.

The theme of today's talk was "Indian Tradition of Science", a topic Kakodkar was eminently qualified to speak on by virtue of being a founder of Vijnana Bharati, a non-profit body which describes itself as a "science movement" with "swadeshi" spirit and is underpinned on the belief that the "rapid strides in science and technology (in India)" must resonate with the country's "heritage" if the challenges it faces to become a welfare state have to be met.

Vijnana Bharati was established by K.I. Vasu, a scientist from Bangalore's Indian Institute of Science, and enlisted Kakodkar and former Isro chief G. Madhavan Nair among its patrons.

Sources confirmed Vijnana Bharati was aligned with the Sangh but clarified that its leading lights like Kakodkar were not *swayamsevaks* (volunteers) or *pracharaks* (whole-timers). "They are good people doing great work in their spheres," a Sangh source said.

He added that past invitees to the lecture included Sudarshan Iyengar, former vice-chancellor of Gujarat Vidyapeeth - a varsity founded by Mahatma Gandhi - and jurist C.S. Dharamadhikari, "who had nothing to do with the RSS". "Of course we will draw the line on inviting Leftists and Maoists," the source said, asked about the choice of speakers .

A profile prepared by the hosts on Kakodkar had high points like his initiatives in

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building the Dhruva reactor in 1998 after the Pokhran explosion and the ensuing international sanctions against India - but downplayed his role as an architect of the nuclear deal in the UPA regime.

The RSS and the BJP had rejected the deal, joining hands with the Left to oppose the passage of the legislation to approve the accord in Parliament. But once Modi backed the UPA project, the Sangh junked its reservations. "That's history," a Sangh source said today. Last year, HRD minister Smriti had rejected names of IIT directors proposed by a panel headed by Kakodkar. Kakodkar then quit as chairman of the board of governors of IIT Mumbai, accusing her ministry of adopting "too casual a process" for the appointments. Smriti denied the charge.

In his speech today, Kakodkar cited the gurukul tradition in "great universities like Nalanda and Takshila" as an example of indigenous "educational concepts". He said Kerala was home a few centuries ago to a school of math, set up by Madhavacharya, that thought up the idea of pi (the ratio of a circle's circumference to its diameter).

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