



## RACE COURSE ROAD

PRABHU CHAWLA

### *When Politics Mixes With Bureaucracy*

Are we heading towards a committed bureaucracy? Is the principle of merit-cum-seniority a thing of the past? The method used to choose new Home Secretary R P Singh—a well-spoken 1975-batch IAS officer from Bihar cadre—reflects the change. If media reports are correct, he was interviewed by the home minister first and then by the prime minister before being formally chosen to replace G K Pillai. For the past six decades, it has been the prime minister's prerogative to select the 90-odd secretaries for all the



**R P Singh**

ministries. He also appoints all intelligence chiefs, ambassadors and other important officials. Conventionally, only the prime minister interviews candidates for the post of the cabinet secretary. Once a cabinet secretary—usually the senior-most IAS officer—is in place, it is left to him to suggest candidates to fill up other vacancies. Technically,

the power to appoint officers above the rank of joint secretary lies with the Cabinet Committee on Appointments (CCA) comprising of the prime minister, home minister and the minister concerned. This practice, introduced by former prime minister Jawahar Lal Nehru, is meant to insulate all ministries against political influence and personal preferences of ministers. This system continued until the coalition era dawned in 1996, when weak prime ministers like H D Deve Gowda and Inder Kumar Gujral allowed allies to dictate their choices. However, Prime Minister A B Vajpayee restored the authority of his office and added a minor courtesy; he would consult the minister before announcing his decision. The practice underwent a drastic change after 2004, when powerful alliance partners like M Karunanidhi, Sharad Pawar, Mamata Banerjee, Lalu Prasad Yadav et al started to assert their right to choose secretaries. Manmohan compromised for the sake of Coalition Dharma. According to the bureaucratic grapevine, the cabinet secretary has been quietly instructed to take the concerned minister's prior approval before a secretary's name is forwarded to the prime minister for approval. Once the new procedure became public knowledge, many controversial civil servants lobbied with ministers to be appointed as secretaries without even having served at the Centre in any significant capacity. Congress ministers are following suit. Ever since the minister-secretary nexus acquired menacing proportions after 2G, the concept of an independent bureaucracy has collapsed. Now even a regional neta with dubious credentials can influence bureaucratic appointments through captive ministers.



### *Allies Make Manmohan Aggressive*

The patience of our ever patient prime minister Manmohan Singh is running out. Hemmed in by his own colleagues and harangued by the Opposition, he has decided to assert his authority. At the last Cabinet meeting, the Government couldn't take a decision on fertiliser policy because minister M K Alagiri was absent for reasons best known to him or his father. For the past few months, most alliance ministers have been avoiding Cabinet meetings even on issues that concern their own ministries, therefore causing delays in taking crucial decisions. When the cabinet secretary informed the prime minister of Alagiri's inability to attend the meeting, Manmohan said tersely, "Next time, please call the Minister of State if a Cabinet minister cannot attend". It was a remark also meant for Textile Minister Dayanidhi Maran of the DMK, to be conveyed to his party bosses. The prime minister isn't perhaps aware that Maran hardly matters in the party. The DMK, however, has decided to assert their chimeral authority through conspicuous absence than meaningless presence. The prime minister had inducted young, loyal Congress MPs as junior ministers in all ministries run by the allies in order to counter trouble. He has now signalled a new style of shadow boxing between the Congress and its partners.



**Meira Kumar**

### *Gender Games Begin Over Next President*

Though the election of the new President is due only in July 2012, the speculation about possible candidates is on—more about the candidate's gender than a name. With all parties vying to promote woman power in the government if not in the party, the possibility of yet another

woman replacing Pratibha Patil

cannot be ruled out. Since the Congress doesn't have the majority in Parliament to dictate a candidate, it will try to strike a consensus with the main opposition party, the BJP. While it will be difficult for the UPA to ignore Vice President Hamid Ansari's legitimate claim for elevation, the Congress may float Lok Sabha Speaker Meira Kumar's name for president; she is a Dalit too. It will be difficult for parties that have women chief ministers like Mayawati, Mamata and Jayalalithaa, and a woman leader of the Opposition, Sushma Swaraj, to oppose the choice of the soft-spoken daughter of Dalit icon Babu Jagjivan Ram.



### *Red Alert for Chewing Gum*

Chewing gum has now entered the political joke book. As the media speculated about its use as a bugging device at secret government meetings, various ministers and senior bureaucrats have decided to screen any visitor who chews gum. Some ministers even start their meetings with a joke about gum stuck under their tables. Last week's Cabinet meeting presided over by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh began on such a light note. Over half a dozen ministers were asking each other whether they have got their offices debugged. When the prime minister walked in, they stopped talking. Both Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee and Home Minister P Chidambaram were seen to be glum-faced.