



RACE COURSE ROAD

PRABHU CHAWLA

The New, Inside-Out Free Market Strategy

The Planning Commission, socialism's surviving symbol, has become the most sought after post-retirement *sinecure* for retired babus and market-friendly academics. The marketwallas' new mantra: if you can't demolish it, join it. Former Cabinet Secretary K M Chandrasekhar joined this elite group last week when he was appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Kerala Planning Board with Cabinet rank. As Cabinet Secretary, he had pushed the Prime Minister's economic reform agenda for four years. We



Ahluwalia

expected Chandrasekhar to get a better posting, but he chose to settle for a post in his home state with massive clout and access to both the Central and State governments. Ever since the Deputy Chairperson of the Planning Commission acquired political authority, civil servants and academics have been lobbying hard to be appointed as members. The current Deputy

Chairperson Montek Singh Ahluwalia's enormous clout is the benchmark. Ahluwalia, who is the 24th Deputy Chairperson since Independence, will be breaking all records by completing a second term. He will be the first non-political person to stay in the job for a decade and also attend all Cabinet meetings as a special invitee. Barring three, all attendees are either planning ministers or politicians. Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee started the practice of inviting the Planning Commission Deputy Chairperson to Cabinet meetings—Jaswant Singh and then K C Pant. Both were former Cabinet ministers and Vajpayee sought their guidance. But neither enjoyed the influence over government policy that Montek does. The commission is flooded with former World Bank officials. It is the Planning Commission that has devised and framed policies that encourages an enhanced role for the private sector at the cost of the government. Private-Public Partnership in the social sector is the most favoured instrument to boost the private sector. Taking the cue from her husband, Isher Judge Ahluwalia had accepted the deputy chairpersonship of the Punjab Planning Board in 2005 when the Congress was in power. A couple of years later, N K Singh, her former finance ministry colleague, joined Nitish Kumar's government as the Deputy Chairperson of the Bihar Planning Board. Since all Planning Board Deputy Chairpersons are expected to attend all meetings of the Planning Commission and the National Development Council held in Delhi, the emerging New Planners Club will soon become yet another non-elected parallel power centre dictating the economic agenda.



The Chewing Gets Tough for Maken

Is Union Sports Minister Ajay Maken fighting a losing battle? Ever since he mooted legislation to reign in the sports mafia by fixing the tenure and age limit of sports administrators, an unofficial multi-party power coalition is plotting to thwart Maken. The minister's cabinet note suggesting drastic changes in rules and regulations regarding sports body elections got a boost after the Commonwealth Games scams were exposed. Since the Government had no power to remove a sports official, the sports ministry brought in a model Bill to ensure greater transparency and accountability. The new rules will force most sports administrators to quit and hand over management to professionals. Currently, players are treated like dirt while sports managers splurge on travel and hotels abroad. Maken's clean-up crusade has rattled many, including some senior political leaders who met recently to chalk out a strategy to counter him. But Maken is no Uma Bharti or Mani Shankar Aiyar who espoused sports reform but were forced to either withdraw or lose their jobs. Happily, both youth and his High Command appear to be on his side for now.



What's with Thakurs and Minorities?

Most Congress leaders are baffled over the conduct and utterances of AICC General Secretary Digvijaya Singh. Even Congress allies are embarrassed with his vocal stance on minorities and Naxalites. Now a bizarre but interesting explanation for this behaviour has surfaced which says that only Thakurs with Congress backgrounds have taken up cudgels on behalf of the minorities. Since they are obsessed by religious rituals and most follow a baba or a deity, Thakurs go out of their way to prove their secular credentials in the



Digvijaya Singh

party. It began with Thakur leaders like V P Singh and Arjun Singh. Both chased and wooed the minorities. Even former Samajawadi Party leader Amar Singh made no bones about his passion for minorities. Arjun Singh converted his HRD ministry into a major source of funding for various minority institutions and NGOs who promoted

his agenda. V P Singh lost his prime ministership but didn't compromise on his love for minorities. In fact, he firmly believed that only an upper caste Hindu can win Muslim trust as they don't have a national leader of their own. Diggy Raja, a distant relative of both Arjun Singh and V P Singh, perhaps believes that the minority plank is the only way to stage a comeback.



Maran Paranoia Comes Full Circle

Union ministers from the DMK are paranoid about security and privacy. M K Alagiri and Dayanidhi Maran avoid visiting Chennai, and are also careful about government employees who visit their offices to handle the maintenance of infrastructural amenities like telephones. Until recently, Alagiri was thinking of replacing the rotary telephone of the RAX (secret) line in his office. Since the Intelligence Bureau handles the RAX exchange, Alagiri has decided to use his fingers to make secret phone calls rather than get tapped.