



RACE COURSE ROAD

PRABHU CHAWLA

UPA II in a Tizzy over Transparency

For the UPA government, transparency is the new survival mantra. Defence Minister A K Antony's credibility eclipsed that of his colleagues when he said the nation was going through a transparency revolution. Antony is perceived as both the face and voice of the Congress Establishment. Simultaneously, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh directed the cabinet secretary to issue a six-page circular to all ministers asking them to declare not only their moveable and immovable assets but also their interests in corporate entities, if any. This isn't the first time. It is a routine question after budget sessions of Parliament, but has been met with indifference or partial compliance reports. The administration blocked all RTI queries on ministerial assets. The PMO put their assets list on the Government website. According to insiders, the new order came after civil society leaders made their assets public. Ironically, most ministerial declarations are near-repeats of what they submitted to the Election Commission in 2009. The Government's competitive transparency has now irked chief ministers and their cabinet colleagues. The political class is now desperately seeking lawyers and chartered accountants to keep their Assets and Liabilities Register in proper shape to avoid public ire but so far no one has declared imported cars or luxury palaces. They are also fuming over the leadership's surrender to civil society leaders—whose own hunger for political harakiri is insatiable. Some ministers grumble in private that the time is not far away when they will be asked to make public their lunch and dinner menus too. Sonia and Manmohan would rather ride the transparency revolution even if means leaving others behind.



Antony

Alagiri Brings Back the Aggression

The DMK wasn't going to withdraw its support to the UPA government anyway. After M Karunanidhi's emergency party meeting in Chennai last week, the party's strategy now is to fight for their jailed leaders legally, and assert its authority in the Government. Lacking work in their own state, its ministers are spending more time in their offices. The Government got a taste of DMK's veto power when the Empowered Group of Ministers on Petroleum Product Prices had to postpone a meeting following Fertilisers Minister M K Alagiri's surprise intervention. The EGoM was to clear an increase in the prices of cooking gas, diesel, kerosene oil and petrol to offset losses of the state oil companies. But a 12th increase in less than a year would only add fuel to the fire of inflamed public opinion. The Centre raises over 18 per cent of its revenue from taxes on petroleum products. Pranabda and his market-friendly advisers don't want the state to lose revenue or look for alternative sources to raise money. Alagiri spoils the party by making it clear that the DMK wasn't in favour of raising prices as it would have an adverse impact on fertiliser prices. Alagiri, who has been accused of ignoring his ministry, ambushed the prime minister by attending all Cabinet meetings and shooting off detailed letters on ministerial issues. Alagiri's interference is the first visible bite of a wounded ally. No wonder, with one sun setting in the south, the other son is rising again in the Capital—and he has no skeletons in his cupboard.

NCP Goes About its Business

As the DMK asserts itself, the Nationalist Congress Party—another important UPA ally—is engaged in a war of nerves with the Congress leadership. With both Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar and Minister for Heavy Industry Praful Patel under attack from a section of the Congress, the NCP decided to take one step backward for two steps forward later. Their 12th anniversary celebration in Maharashtra was meant to be a gala affair but Pawar converted it into a sober political



Pawar (left) and Patel

meet. He advised his daughter Supriya Sule—a Lok Sabha MP and Kanimozhi's best friend—to keep a low profile. Pawar kept the Congress guessing by keeping quiet on Ramdev. His

party also scored by formally demanding that the century-old Dadar Railway Station be renamed Chaityabhoomi Railway Station, which is associated with the Dalit messiah Baba Ambedkar. Pawar has also sent ominous signals to the Congress by cosying up to opposition leaders like the TDP's Chandrababu Naidu.

Manmohan's Baba Hangover

On the face of it, the Government seems to be celebrating the abortion of the Ramdev movement. In private, it is scurrying to unearth moles within the establishment who were leaking confidential information on Operation Baba. The PMO is baffled by how the media was informed about the supposedly secret airport visit of the four ministers accompanied by senior bureaucrats to meet Ramdev, something he had decided only that morning. They were instructed to send him back from the airport itself. Pranabda was furious at the presence of TV vans and journalists. He escaped the cameras, but other ministers and babus couldn't duck. An angry Pranabda asked the IB chief about the leakage. The hapless intelligence chief is in no position to disclose information as it involves a Union minister. According to IB sources, a cellphone call from a minister to the media was the leak and the PMO was briefed about it. Meanwhile, the police failure to monitor Baba's movements after midnight has worried the home ministry. Once the police swooped down on the dais, Baba disappeared and was untraceable for nearly two hours. They caught him later, but imagine what could have happened had the Baba got away!