



RACE COURSE ROAD

PRABHU CHAWLA

Lucknow Speechfest Showcases Lost BJP

All political parties, except the BJP, have chosen their slogans and fixed their agendas for the Uttar Pradesh Assembly polls. As Mayawati wooed farmers and Mulayam Singh Yadav held district-level agitations, the BJP leadership descended on Lucknow for a speechfest on national issues. Both print and electronic media mostly ignored them as Baba Ramdev monopolised mindspace and media space. The BJP did political yoga beside the Gomti River on the Ram Temple issue, forgetting that its leaders consider it an issue of political convenience and not ideological conviction. The party has failed dismally in reviving itself in a state it had once ruled—59 MPs from Uttar Pradesh supporting the NDA government. It is now left with 10 MPs and fewer than 50 MLAs in the state.

After much haggling, BJP President Nitin Gadkari appointed Kalraj Mishra as the chairman of the Campaign Committee. He is depending on a survey conducted by a novice psephologist whose poll predictions on Assam went haywire. A collective BJP leadership in the state is needed, comprising Rajputs, Brahmins, backward castes and Dalits to counter the upper caste-dominated Congress, the Dalit-led BSP and the Muslim-Yadav combination in the Samajawadi Party. The BJP's local cadres favour Rajnath Singh, Mishra, Uma Bharti and Swami Chinmayanand. The youth want Varun Gandhi in the team. But the cabal at 11 Ashoka Road sneer at local leaders; a Bhumihar—a community that hardly matters in the poll calculus—has been made UP state president. Most central leaders are blocking Bharti's comeback, fearing a challenge to their clout in Delhi. Varun is considered immature and acerbic; his rising popularity has become his major liability. It is tragic that both Atal Bihari Vajpayee and L K Advani—who created BJP's GenNext after nurturing it for 60 years—are forced to watch helplessly as the inheritors not only destroy themselves, but also the party.



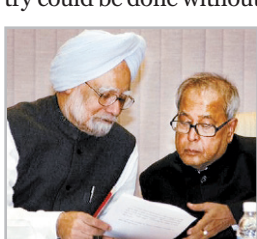
Advani (left) and Gadkari

Mamata Clones PMO in Bengal

Mamta Banerjee may not have enough experience to run a big state like West Bengal, but she believes that the size and aura of the Chief Minister's Office (CMO) will do it for her. According to the Writers' Building grapevine, Banerjee has ordered the creation of the most powerful CMO the state has ever seen. Since she is suspicious of most West Bengal cadre IAS officers, a senior Railway Ministry official will manage the CMO. Besides her principal secretary, it will have over a dozen other secretaries and joint secretaries, most of them from the railways and the Trinamool. She seeks to replicate the structure of the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). In the PMO, various officials are assigned to monitor specific ministries. PMO officials vet specific proposals which are then sent back to the concerned ministers after the prime minister's approval. Banerjee is determined to replicate the same in her own state. If she succeeds, all her ministers and their decisions will be monitored by the CMO. Didi has already received the personal details of over 100 aspirants. Instead of using the state intelligence machinery to check their antecedents, she has drafted her political aides for a thorough investigation of each one of them. Banerjee is still relying on instinct and style.

Singh Goes by Seniority

The crises-plagued UPA government is caught in a bureaucratic logjam, unable to formulate a policy to fill vacant secretarial positions. Interestingly, it made two appointments after Finance Secretary Sushma Nath retired last week. Since Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee was busy with crisis management and the West Bengal elections, and no reshuffle in his ministry could be done without consulting him, the prime



Manmohan (left) and Mukherjee

minister found a simple and temporary solution. Revenue Secretary Sunil Mitra, a West Bengal cadre officer, has been made finance secretary though he retires by month end. Similarly, when Sudhir Chandra, chairman of the Central Board of Direct Taxes, retired on May 31, Prakash Chandra, who will be retiring by August

has replaced him. Following the expenditure secretary position falling vacant, Disinvestment Secretary Sumit Bose was moved to North Block and given a double job. It is clear that Pranab has not been able to get hold of dependable civil servants yet. So, he followed the golden rule—when in doubt just follow seniority—which keeps everyone happy. Even the prime minister did the same thing last month when he chose the senior-most civil servant Ajit Seth as cabinet secretary.

Seth Warms up With Baba Crisis

While the media focused only on the four Cabinet ministers led by Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee and Cabinet Secretary K M Chandrasekar when they visited the airport to meet Baba Ramdev, incoming cabinet secretary Ajit Seth and Alka Sirohi, secretary, Department of Personnel escaped notice. The presence of Seth was significant. Since he is hardly ever seen in public or noticed attending important government meetings, none noted his presence or his role. Seth is currently an Officer on Special Duty and will take over from Chandrasekar who retires on June 16. The prime minister felt it would be a great beginning for the new chief of the bureaucracy to be involved in the resolution of a complex political crisis. Seth—who hasn't handled any sensitive assignment in his 35-year career—must have learned some important lessons in how to change positions while dealing with difficult situations in his two-and-a-half hour encounter with Baba Ramdev.