



POWER & POLITICS

PRABHU CHAWLA

IT'S MANY achievements — and failures — notwithstanding, the Right to Information Act which came into effect during the early days of UPA-I was truly a feather in the government's cap. Yet, take a closer look now and you will see that just five years after the landmark legislation was enacted, the RTI is more a whimper and less the bang that the government promised.

The rot begins at the top. The provisions of the RTI Act are diluted or blatantly ignored to ensure that the political class doesn't come under the scanner. The readiness of the government to reveal the assets of ministers seems to be inversely proportional to the public curiosity to know the same.

Here are the rules. The Code of Conduct for ministers says that a person, before taking office as a minister, shall "disclose to the Prime Minister or the chief minister (as the case may be) details of the assets and liabilities and business interests, of himself and members of his family". Similar rules exist for MPs of both Houses. While contesting polls, candidates have to declare their assets before the Election Commission, the details of which are then made available on the commission's website. Later, MPs file declarations to the presiding officers of the two Houses. These, too, can be accessed via the RTI route. But when it comes to ministers, the goalposts are shifted. I am told that most ministers regularly comply with the prime minister's directive to file annual declarations, but for reasons unknown, the PMO doesn't place these in Parliament.



W. Habibullah

Two weeks ago, as a result of an RTI query, the Lok Sabha secretariat wrote to the PMO to say that since ministers' declarations are made directly to Prime Minister, "it is felt that the instant reference is not required to be placed before the Hon'ble Speaker, Lok Sabha". A similar letter went to the PMO from the Rajya Sabha. Shorn of 'bureaucrat-ese', what this means is that the presiding officers of the two houses are not privy to information about ministerial assets. It's easy to guess why someone wants to hide something. The question is: Who?

Ask Wajahat Habibullah, who as the Central Information Commissioner is the custodian of RTI. He put the ball into Parliament's court. There are more RTI applications on the subject of ministerial wealth than anything else, but RTI activists — the media, lawyers and public — spirited citizens are constantly being stonewalled by the PMO and the Cabinet Secretariat, both of which maintain that details of ministerial wealth are personal matters and therefore cannot be divulged. So much for transparency in government.

As if that weren't bad enough, here is more proof to show that the RTI is as good as dead. Incredible as it may seem, the

government has no idea of the number of people who enjoy the perks and comforts of ministerial office while not being ministers in the government. You'd think the CabSec will know, but ask and you will be told to knock on the doors of the Ministry of Home Affairs. *India Today* magazine filed an RTI in July 2009 seeking to know the number of such people and details of offices they held and their perks.

The CabSec forwarded the application to the ministry of home affairs (MHA). The MHA in turn sent us a reply saying that "the status of Union cabinet minister on a person, is processed by individual administrative ministries/depart-

ments for approval of the Prime Minister directly. A centralised list is not maintained by this ministry. You may approach the individual ministries and departments in respect of organisations under their administrative control."

Earlier this year, we tried our luck again. Once again, the CabSec forwarded the application to MHA. Last month, the home ministry informed us: "...the status of union cabinet minister on a person, is processed by individual administrative ministries/departments for approval of the Prime Minister directly. A centralised list is not maintained by this ministry."

A year later, nothing changed, not even a comma. Well placed sources tell me that there are as many people enjoying ministerial perks as there are ministers in the Union council, which at last count was over 75. All of them are allotted bungalows in Lutyens Delhi, driven around town in official cars with a red beacon light and entitled to official staff of nine, whose salaries are paid by the government.

Considering that each MP costs the country nearly ₹40 lakh a year, the cost of these ministers-without-ministries can be imagined. That's perhaps why the government exercises the Right to Conceal.



R. PRASAD

RTI as Right to Conceal

V-P plan can make it tough for ministers

I HAD in these columns earlier written about some path-breaking changes that Rajya Sabha chairman Hamid Ansari and the Lok Sabha speaker, Meira Kumar were planning for the two Houses of Parliament. The changes centred on the question hour with which the day's business begins and were two pronged: making MPs take parliamentary duties seriously and making ministers more responsive to questions from the members.

Last Monday, when the General Purposes Committee of the Rajya Sabha met, Ansari presented a proposal which many ministers may not welcome. This involves the random selection of 10 questions from the 20 that are listed for the day for ministers to reply. Ministers will answer in the order their names crop up in the lottery. Ansari felt this is the best way to make ministers attend the sessions. Some months ago, Ansari had raised ministerial hackles when he ordered that all starred questions be answered even if the MP who raised the question was absent. His new suggestion will make it virtually impossible for ministers to play truant.

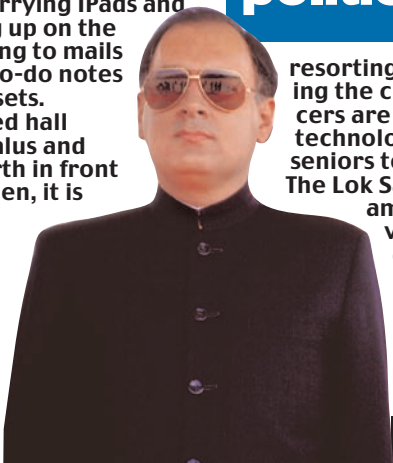
Another proposal, more radical, involves shifting question hour from its current 11 am start to 3 pm. Of late, question hour has degenerated into 60 minutes of acrimony that often descends into chaos. The changes in rules of parliamentary procedure were aimed at giving the government a chance to conduct serious business during the earlier part of the day.

But the plans have come a cropper as the BJP is not in favour of it. "Parampara ko thodna nahin chahiye", one of the leaders is supposed to have said. It's a spurious argument. Some years ago, the BJP backed the government when the presentation of the annual budget was shifted from 5 pm to noon. Its opposition to the shifting of question hour only means one thing: The party has no intention to surrender its right to disrupt Parliament.

IF RAJIV Gandhi, who ushered in the computer era, or Atal Bihari Vajpayee, during whose regime India picked up speed on the hi-tech highway, were to drop by at Parliament's Central Hall, they would feel more than proud. Just a decade ago, you could count the desk-top savvy MPs on your fingertips. Now the place is crammed with young MPs carrying iPads and Androids, catching up on the latest news, replying to mails and jotting down to-do notes on their tiny handsets.

In the high domed hall where once the Lalus and Mulayams held forth in front of fawning partymen, it is the GenNext MPs who now draw all the attention.

Even inside the two Houses, they turn to their little handsets the moment they realise that one of the seniors is



Rajiv Gandhi

Gizmos are helping bridge the political divide

resorting to a filibuster. Taking the cue, presiding officers are encouraging the technologically challenged seniors to take to the gizmos. The Lok Sabha is expected to amend its rules to provide state-of-the-art gadgets to members from January 2011.

Rajya Sabha MPs who have completed half their term have been given the option to

return their e-wastes such as old laptops, desktops and even antiquated mobile phones and take the latest gizmos. Existing rules give the MPs of the Upper House an entitlement of ₹1.5 lakh for computers and peripherals but rules are soon to be amended and the hon'ble members may soon be walking around with stuff that could even be the envy of geeks. The gizmos have helped bridge the political divide, at least among young MPs.

So if you see Jyoti Mirdha, Meenakshi Natarajan or Jitin Prasad working the keypads, it's quite possible that they are exchanging notes with Dushyant Singh. The first three are from the Congress and Dushyant from the Opposition but they exchange information and ideas on social issues and share with each other the problems in their constituencies. Politics will forever be divisive but it is heartening to note that gizmos are uniting politicians.

SITTING in her palatial Poes Garden Bungalow in Chennai or perhaps even farther in her estate in the Nilgiris, Jayalalithaa must be having a quiet chuckle at the fratricide that she has triggered in the UPA. For a while now, Jayalalithaa had been planning to hold a rally against price rise in Tiruchirappalli, but try as she did, she was not able to get a suitable venue. The local DMK government ensured no land was made available to the AIADMK supremo. One phone call to old friend Mamata Banerjee was all it took and the AIADMK was allowed to use railway land in Tiruchi for the rally.

The two are old friends, having been partners in the first Vajpayee government and more recently, Jayalalithaa sang Mamata's praise after the railway minister unveiled her last budget. But Mamata probably did not anticipate the repercussions. Now DMK boss and Tamil Nadu chief minister M. Karunanidhi is furious and retribution has been swift. DMK ministers at the Centre have been asked to sit over or worse, reject all requests from the railway minister or her ministry. Things are so bad that though both sit on the same side of the parliamentary aisle, ministers from the DMK and the Trinamool Congress do not even acknowledge each other, much less exchange greetings.