



POWER & POLITICS

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THERE is only one thing worse than being remembered and that is not being remembered at all. This is a dilemma that President Pratibha Patil faces as she enters her fourth year in office. The record books will, of course, show she is the first woman president of the republic, though hers has been a rather unremarkable stint till now.

But it would appear from some of her recent engagements that she is keen to make a mark and is busy making up for lost time. According to a senior bureaucrat, far from being a rubber stamp, Patil is on her way to becoming an "activist president". And coming as she does from an agricultural background, it was just as well that she chose the subject of farming for a recent extensive brainstorming session with experts.

Last week, she summoned Union agriculture minister Sharad Pawar, Union food processing minister Subodh Kant Sahay, the agriculture ministers from Punjab, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Haryana, the last represented by chief minister Bhopinder Hooda who holds the portfolio, besides 50-odd experts, a few dozen bureaucrats from the agriculture ministry and vice-chancellors of about 20 agriculture universities around the country, along with Dr M.S. Swaminathan, to Rashtrapati Bhavan for a "colloquium on approach to sustainable farming in rain-fed areas".

I know that is a mouthful, which many ministers from the states had difficulty comprehending. But the fact that the president frequently departed from her prepared text and made extempore remarks meant she knew what she was talking about. The brainstorming session that started around 5 pm went on till about 10 at night and at the dinner that followed, the president mingled with her guests where she is said to have touched on a whole range of subjects.

What makes Patil different from her predecessors is that despite spending a lifetime in politics, she lived in relative political obscurity until her election in 2007. She was a minister in the Maharashtra government but the media began to notice her only when some of her relatives began to indulge in activities that fall under the purview of the Prevention of Corruption Act.

Sonia Gandhi is said to have zeroed in on her only after coalition partners of UPA-I failed to reach a consensus on anyone else. As such, she was neither expected to scale the heights nor plumb the depths that some of her predecessors had in the past 60 years.

There was the humble Rajendra Prasad, the first president. He was followed by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, scholar,

philosopher and teacher. Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed is best remembered for signing the Emergency proclamation, allegedly without bothering to even glance through the document, though ironically he was a lawyer by profession.

There was Neelam Sanjiva Reddy, who lost to V.V. Giri in 1969 and came back eight years later to occupy the high office. There was also Giani Zail Singh who opened up the palace on Raisina Hill to the *aam aadmi* and whose backslapping ways with even visiting heads of state left mandarins in the foreign office red faced.

In 60 years and since, there have been men of eminence who occupied the office and some who, amid all the pomp

and ceremony, forgot the presidential script.

In more recent times, it was our good fortune to have APJ Abdul Kalam whose unconventional style led to him being dubbed the "People's President". My most abiding memory of Kalam'sab was when he arrived to address a conference organised by *India Today* magazine in 2004.

He came with a power point presentation, but somewhere along the way, crossed cables or whatever, the system malfunctioned.

Before his ADC or the retinue from Rashtrapati Bhavan could react, Kalam'sab was already on the podium floor, fixing the cables and I still remember the deafening applause from the

vast gathering that greeted the president when the screen came alive.

President Patil is not as tech savvy as Kalam. But of late, in between hosting visiting presidents and releasing the occasional postage stamp, she has been taking serious interest in subjects ranging from judicial reforms to development of the north-eastern states.

Her sudden interest in all things has set tongues wagging and her adversaries are spreading word that she is aiming for another term.

If that happens, she won't be just India's first woman president but also first since Rajendra Prasad in 1950 to serve a second consecutive term.

Wait two years to know.



Illustration: ARYA PRAHARAJ

A pro-active President

Rahul should do a Rajiv for the CWG

AS New Delhi, and indeed all of India, braces for that impending embarrassment called the Commonwealth Games, the government has acted. But it is too little and too late. The Congress core committee has decided not to act against Suresh Kalmadi and instead keep a "serious watch" on him. That means the bad guys will continue and we can at best hope that they will be collectively hanged once the Games are over.

Though there is a chorus for a new high-powered committee to take charge, it is easy to understand why any sane person would hesitate. It would take nothing less than a miracle to clean the mess that is Kalmadi's making.

Some say only Rahul Gandhi can save the Games and India's honour and therefore want him to take over. Rahul is actually already a member of an apex committee set up by the government as far back as March 4, 2005, just a year and a half after New Delhi won the bid.

As per the gazette notification issued then, the apex committee had the overriding power and responsibility to oversee and coordinate the CWG 2010 and its mandate included seeking accountability from the Organising Committee that Kalmadi heads.

The committee was headed by Sunil Dutt and, later, those who followed him as sports minister. Among its 35 members were Ratan Tata, Rahul Gandhi, Kapil Sibal, Sachin Pilot, Vijay Malviya, P.T. Usha, Anand Mahindra and Milkha Singh. It would take an RTI application to find out if the committee met even once. If it had, it is doubtful if Kalmadi would have been able to inflict this shame on the country.

Twenty-nine years ago, in a similar situation, Indira Gandhi asked Rajiv Gandhi, then a young MP, to take over the task of readying a woefully underprepared New Delhi for the Asiad 1982.

Those games were one of the best ever. With exactly 48 days to go for the CWG, it may appear too late, but Rahul should still give it a go.

CABINET Secretary K.M. Chandrashekar has got two extensions to his tenure. By the time he retires next year, he would have occupied the country's top bureaucratic post for more than four years, the longest by any CabSec in recent times. One of the reasons that he is asked to continue in office is the innovative programmes that have been devised for the bureaucracy during his tenure.

Some months ago, I had written in these columns about how he had initiated information technology courses for bureaucrats. He resorted to this after an internal survey found that several senior members of India's steel frame did not even know how to log on a computer.

Now comes Chandrashekar's latest: compulsory bi-annual medical check-ups for all senior officials. The CabSec's decision follows the massive cardiac attack that Vijay Raman, special director general of the CRPF, suffered recently. Both Prime Minister Manmohan Singh

CabSec plays the doctor

and the home minister P. Chidambaram have expressed concern over the health of senior officers in sensitive positions.

Manmohan recently spoke with Raman's wife and thankfully, the 1975-batch IPS officer from the Chhattisgarh cadre is on his way to complete recovery.

Raman had the cardiac attack after the Maoist attack in Dantewada, that took the lives of nearly 75 personnel and dealt a body blow to the

morale of the paramilitary forces. Raman is no exception.

The government's slipshod polices are putting the toughest of officers under severe pressure and the toll often takes its effect on their families too. There are about 15 wings of the government whose heads are perpetually walking the razor's edge and their health is a major cause of concern for the government.

Barely a year ago, Surendra Nath, an IAS officer serving in the directorate of enforcement who was handling several key cases of money laundering involving politicians and businessmen, died on duty, unable to withstand the contrary pulls and pressure. The risk of physical and mental strains that accompany such sensitive postings cannot be overestimated and the CabSec's latest directive hasn't come a moment too soon.



THE Prime Minister may be struggling to get the civil nuclear liability Bill passed though it emerged last weekend that the BJP, which was earlier as unrelenting as the Left in its opposition to the Bill, may finally be coming around.

The BJP's stand is that the sector should continue to be controlled by the government and state-owned firms and its leaders say the government has agreed not to allow private firms to operate nuclear power plants for "the next 20 or 30 years". But there is one private industry that is already thriving in and around the sites of the proposed plants.

The plans of friends, relatives and supporters of some of the UPA coalition partners to get into the mega buck nuclear business may have to be put on hold because of the Congress-BJP deal but some relatives of powerful UPA ministers from the south are on a land acquisition spree in parts of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Andhra to establish ancillary units that will supply spares for the huge nuclear stations. As a result, the price of land in places like Kudankulam in Tamil Nadu is said to have quadrupled in the last two years. There is every likelihood of the nuke Bill being passed before US President Barack Obama touches down in Delhi.

If it doesn't, no matter. The money is already in the bank.