



POWER & POLITICS

PRABHU CHAWLA

LATER this month, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh will leave behind spiralling prices, the Maoist menace, feuding cabinet ministers, Mamata's tantrums and other niggling issues and head for Toronto, the Canadian financial capital to attend the G-20 summit. It will be his 47th foreign tour since he first took office in May 2004 and his 12th in the first year of UPA II. With the impending trip, Manmohan will be on course to win the frequent flier award for being India's most travelled prime minister in the last quarter century, outstripping the 46 official trips that Rajiv Gandhi made during his tenure as Prime Minister between December 1984 and December 1989. Rajiv was young—just 40—when he set out to sell a new vision of India to the world and was a frontline participant, particularly at nuclear disarmament summits.



Rajiv Gandhi

Since then, the Berlin Wall has collapsed, the world has changed a lot and today international summits are dominated by the likes of G-20, G-8, ASEAN, et al. Those who keep a regular tab on these would have noticed that Manmohan has been a regular fixture at all such high tables. He made 35 tours in his first tenure, averaging one every six and half weeks. But the frequency has picked up in his second tenure where he's already averaged a trip every four weeks. Manmohan's fondness for being constantly on the move is understandable. Opponents at home may accuse him of being a puppet in the hands of the party's power centre, but on the world stage, he has been hailed as a visionary and a man who is in total control.

In fact, at the last G20 summit in Pittsburgh in the United States held at a time when the world economy was faced with its greatest challenge in more than a generation, President Barack Obama had singled out Manmohan as "a wonderful man and a visionary who has done a tremendous job of guiding India along the path of extraordinary economic growth". Other leaders have been no less fulsome in their praise for the prime minister who is so much in demand to address international gatherings that he is forced to send regret notes to almost half a dozen invitations every month. When he finally lays down office, we know that there is an alternative career awaiting him like so many former heads of governments.

Is it any wonder then that Manmohan would rather be

somewhere in cooler climes abroad where he is the recipient of such abundant and effusive praise rather than at home where he is pilloried day in and day out by opponents whose knowledge of economics is at best fleeting? In any case, Manmohan doesn't have much of a political role to play at home.

He finds domestic politics as complicated as some of the dyed-in-the-wool politicians would find economics, which is Manmohan's strongpoint. On the political front, the Congress party is run from 10 Janpath. At the government level, the Union cabinet is on auto pilot with not just ministers from alliance partners but even those from the Congress taking their own decisions on all mat-

ters relating to their departments without as much as consulting the PMO. Manmohan would have loved to dabble in the finance ministry, but with Pranabda, under whom he served in the ministry more than 25 years ago, heading it once again, the prime minister doesn't have much of a role to play there either. In fact, it is just as well that Manmohan appointed a low profile, non-assertive person like S.M. Krishna as the minister of external affairs. It gives him the space he needs to operate on the international arena.

If the latter years of Manmohan's first term was characterised by his obsession with selling the nuclear deal, in his second term, he appears keen to

be seen as someone who had the vision, the will and the courage to shape history.

The government's initiatives on Kashmir and the resumption of talks with Pakistan are clear pointers that Manmohan wants to leave a lasting legacy. And now he heads for Toronto, knowing fully well that with a doctorate in economics, he is more qualified than the other 19 heads of states or governments with whom he will rub shoulders, to talk about the complex subject of international finance. So despite India's puny share of world trade, when Manmohan speaks, the world will listen. How he would wish he is listened to with the same rapt attention back home.



Frequent flier

An unlikely saviour for Jharkhand

THERE are governors and governors. Some are like N.D. Tiwari, the former occupant of the Hyderabad Raj Bhavan. Like moths drawn to light, they are drawn to controversy and meet with an unceremonious end. In Tiwari's case, he was caught by hidden cameras having a romp in the gubernatorial bed with two masseuses and was shown the exit door. Then there are others like MOH Farook. Of the 30 governors across the country, the Jharkhand governor is the least controversial although he presides over a state which has had a surfeit of political controversies in recent times. Two of his predecessors, Prabhat Kumar and Syed Sibtey Razi were summarily sacked after they got embroiled in the state's murky politics. Farook took over as governor just after Shibu Soren became chief minister last December and politics in the state has slipped from the gutter to the sewer level since then. Farook must count his blessings for having lasted so long without a smear to his name.

It was bad enough working with a maverick like Shibu Soren. But now that the state is under president's rule, Farook is the de facto chief and considering the mess that Soren and his team have left behind, he has got his hands full. As a three term chief minister of Pondicherry—the first as early as 1967—he won't be found wanting in experience. He is determined to use his time as administrator to order a clean up. His first move is to hold Panchayat elections, which have never been held since the state's formation ten years ago, this September. He has also made the Ranchi Raj Bhavan open house on Mondays for people to bring their grievances directly to him while Wednesdays are reserved for meetings with state secretaries. Last week, he did the rounds of Delhi, meeting Manmohan Singh, Sonia Gandhi and home minister P. Chidambaram and armed with their thumbs up, is getting down to business. For the sake of that blighted state, more power to his elbows.

IN THE old days, India's only jeep manufacturer and the handful of light motor vehicle makers used to dread elections. That is when political parties flexed their muscles and virtually hijacked hundreds of brand new vehicles from their yards for use in the campaign. These were of course returned to the companies after the polls, but in a condition that no buyer would want to risk buying it.

Times have changed and with all political parties now flush with funds, vehicle manufacturers actually look forward to elections these days. Sales are brisk and with supply unable to keep up with demand, they are even charging premiums for early delivery. Assembly elections are due in Bihar later this year and a windfall awaits the handful of SUV manufacturers in the country.

More than a hundred candidates — independents and those from mainline parties — have ordered bullet proof SUVs that cost anything between Rs 20 lakh and Rs 40

Election jackpot for automobile companies



lakh each from the manufacturers. Many more have purchased the vehicles and handed them over to enterprising tin-shed entrepreneurs who flourish in parts of eastern Uttar Pradesh to customise the vehicles according to individual needs. Admitted, several districts

in Bihar are Maoist affected and candidates need all the protection that they can afford. But the irony here is that most of the candidates are buying the fortified vehicles not out of fear of threats from extremists but from their own political opponents.

Until now, only the chief minister, some members of his cabinet and senior secretaries were accorded bullet proof convoys, but at the rate at which orders are going out for these vehicles, I reckon that up to 300 candidates will be going around campaigning in bullet proof vehicles with security cover being given by their own private armies. It's a sad comment on the level of politics being practised in the world's largest democracy.

IN OVER three decades that I have covered politics and government, I have found K.M. Chandrashekhar to be the most proactive cabinet secretary. I have in the past written about and lauded the many initiatives that he had taken to make the bureaucracy more responsive and in tune with the changing times. Last week, his term was extended by another year and you will be wrong if you think it was done for the good job he has been doing. In one stroke, the government has effectively put an end to all hopes that at least three senior secretaries—Ashok Chawla of finance, urban development secretary M. Ramachandran and P.J. Thomas of telecom — had of becoming the chief of the country's civil services. For long, rumours had been swirling that the government would go to any extent to appoint Pulkot Chatterjee, a 1974 batch officer currently with the World Bank in Washington, as the CabSec. Chatterjee, for the uninitiated, is a 10 Janpath loyalist who worked in the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation and in the early years of the UPA was in the Prime Minister's Office, serving as a link between the PMO and 10 Janpath. His elevation now would have involved the supersession of half a dozen officers of the 1973 batch. By giving Chandrashekhar another extension, the government has got around this little inconvenience.