



POWER & POLITICS

PRABHU CHAWLA

I AM not the betting kind, but if for a change, I were to indulge in it, I'd put some money on the next bizarre thing that could happen in the BJP. I have come to this conclusion after watching over the past few months, a series of extraordinary happenings in the main Opposition party. It's been six months since Nitin Gadkari took over as the party president and promised to take the BJP back to its glory days. As an outsider from Nagpur, he was said to be the most qualified man for the job, un beholden to any faction and uncorrupted by the dirty intra-party fights that frequently erupted in the Central office. Gadkari was seen as the party's best — and last bet. Has the chance slipped by already?

All pointers suggest yes. Two months ago, Gadkari appointed a new team of 121 office-bearers that included 13 vice-presidents, 10 general secretaries, 15 secretaries and a treasurer. Barring the last, no one still has a clue what he is supposed to do since there has been no allocation of work. Many states, including crucial ones such as Bihar are going to polls in the next few months, but there is no central election committee in place yet. Normally, the presidents of state units are elected before the national president is chosen, but here we have seen the reverse happening. And Gadkari's choice of party chiefs for the Delhi, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh units don't exactly inspire confidence among the rank and file.

Delhi was once the BJP's pocketborough but after three successive defeats to Sheila Dikshit, the party seems to have lost the will to fight. What else could explain the elevation of little known Vijender Gupta as the Delhi BJP chief? His only claim to fame is that he was trounced by Kapil Sibal in the Lok Sabha elections. Similarly, not even hardcore Gadkari fans think that Surya Pratap Shahi in Uttar Pradesh and Prabhakar Jha in Madhya Pradesh are the panacea for the party's ills in the two big states.

In Bihar, the tussle between warring factions ended with C.P. Thakur being appointed party chief. He appears to be the best choice, but the likes of deputy chief minister Sushil Modi and Rajiv Pratap Rudy are said to be raising the banner of revolt. The party's daily flip-flops in Jharkhand would have been comical if the matter weren't so serious. Gadkari was tasked with discovering the Advanis, Modis, Shekhawats, Mahajans and Uma Bharatis of the future. Instead BJP cadres are livid that Gadkari is persisting with the Brahminical hierarchy in the party both at the Centre and in the states.

One of Gadkari's first pronouncements after being elected to office late last year was that he won't allow himself to be remote controlled. Yet that is precisely what is happening. The oligarchy that's held the party in a vise-like grip for the past 20 years continues to call the shots, knowing that Gadkari is yet to negotiate his way through the bad, bad ways of New Delhi politics. With the main opposition too busy fighting its own internal battles, it has no time to take on the government. Is it any wonder that the government takes demands from its allies and other supporters more seriously?

Contrast this with the Yadav

combine. With 25 MPs, Mulayam and Lalu command the support of just about a fifth of the BJP's strength in the Lok Sabha. Yet it is the two Yadavs who seem to dictate the agenda and with whom the government chooses to enter into dialogue and discussions.

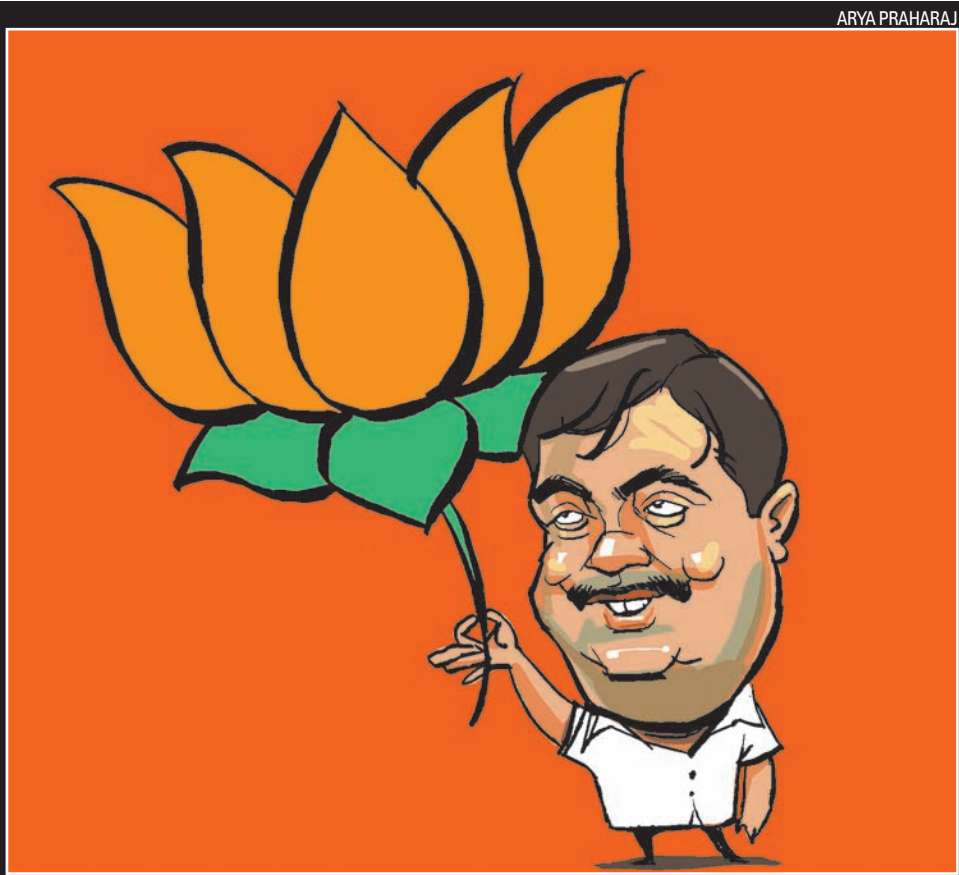
All decisions taken in the recent past seem aimed at placating the voluble Yadavs. When they protested against the women's reservation Bill, the government chose to put it on the back-burner after getting it passed in the Rajya Sabha. When the Right and the Left joined hands to move cut motions on the finance Bill, the government quietly weaned the

SP and the RJD away and got the motions defeated. Subsequently, the two supported the government on the nuclear liability Bill.

Led by two highly individualistic and egoistic leaders, the parties united on a mission and found a slogan. The BJP has neither. Its leaders are happy flitting from one TV studio to another to run the government down when they should have been doing the job in Parliament. The party which once took the lead in setting the tone for debate, it seems, is yet to recover from the debris of back to back electoral debacles. With an Opposition such as this, who needs allies?



Vijender Gupta



ARYA PRAHARAJ

Not quite the one

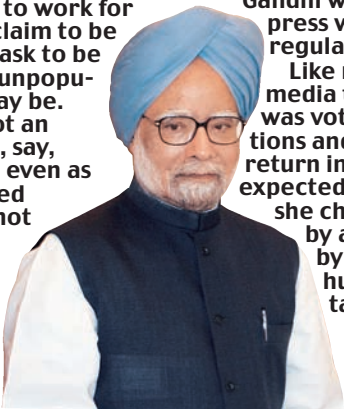
Ministers' scramble for the RS

WITH THE Election Commission announcing June 11 as the date for elections to fill 57 Rajya Sabha seats, time is running out for some high profile ministers who may start to feel the employment pinch. Anand Sharma's term in the Rajya Sabha has already ended and those of Ambika Soni and Jairam Ramesh are ending by July. Accommodating three Union ministers is a huge task for the Congress. Last week, when a senior Union minister from Tamil Nadu met Sonia Gandhi, she gave a clear hint that only loyal workers will be sent to the Rajya Sabha. "You can suggest, and I welcome it, but please do not insist that A, B or C should be accommodated or X, Y and Z should be kept out" was Sonia's blunt reply to the minister.

It's almost certain that Sonia will get one of the two seats that are up for grabs in Punjab but ensuring seats for Jairam and Anand is going to be a tough task for the Congress leadership. The two are as different as chalk and cheese. Jairam talks and talks and talks, while Anand maintains a low profile while quietly going about his job. In the latter's case, the Congress is now said to be exploring options in Rajasthan since in Haryana, which was also looked at as an option, Congress MLAs don't seem to be very eager. It is after a long time that state legislators are openly defying the authority of the high command to make known their preferences for the Rajya Sabha.

These are the first signs that the AICC is losing its grip over the state units. The Andhra Congress is dead set against renominating Jairam and one of the reasons is said to be that he showed disrespect by not turning up for the funeral of the late chief minister Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy. All Reddy MLAs, it is being said, will skip the voting on June 11. Chief minister K. Rosaiah, who is just about settling in office after months of initial turmoil may find himself running into turbulence again.

SO MANMOHAN Singh has finally decided to go public, even if it means getting damned. Next Monday, the Prime Minister will address what is only his second formal press conference in six years. Normally, the news would have followed his press conference, but the very fact that the announcement of the event itself was considered breaking news by TV channels says a lot about our democracy. We elect our politicians to work for us and they cannot claim to be private citizens and ask to be left alone, however unpopular a government may be. And Manmohan is not an unpopular ruler like, say, George W. Bush. Yet, even as his ratings plummeted after Iraq, Bush did not avoid the press and kept his monthly date with the media. Contrast this with our prime ministers. All of them, including



Dr. Singh is known for being media-shy.

Who is afraid of the big bad press conference?

Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who was among the most popular prime ministers, kept the press at arm's length. Ironically, it was Indira

Gandhi whose contempt for the press was legendary, who regularly met the press.

Like millions of Indians, the media too rejoiced when she was voted out in the 1977 elections and after her triumphant return in 1980, she was widely expected to shun the press. But she chose to settle scores not by avoiding the press, but by inviting and then humiliating them. I had a taste of this once when I

once accompanied Suman Dubey, then *India Today* managing editor and Sumit Mitra, Special Correspondent to attend one of her news conferences. Mitra asked her: "Madam, how do you assess the performance of your (Congress) general secretaries?" She assumed that the question was specifically about Rajiv Gandhi who had just completed a year as a party GenSec.

You could see the rage in her eyes as she ordered us out of the hall. Manmohan is too gentle a soul to act in a similar fashion. But considering the smoke shrouding several controversial decisions of his government, the Prime Minister should seize the opportunity and try to clear the air.

THERE was a time when the only portraits hung in ministerial chambers in Lutyens' Delhi were those of the President and the Prime Minister. But times have changed and where once a minister served in the cabinet at the pleasure of the prime minister, in today's coalition set up, it is no more the PM's prerogative to pick his cabinet colleagues. They are imposed on the prime minister chosen by regional chieftains whose support is necessary to prop up the government. The changed power equations are reflected on the walls of ministerial rooms. The rooms of DMK ministers have photographs of poet saint Thiruvalluvar and Karunanidhi. In the office room of S.S. Palanimanickam, there is a huge photo of Murasoli Maran with the words *Ennude Gurunathan* (My Guru) inscribed and I am told that on entering his office, the minister actually stands in front of the portrait with folded hands for two minutes before taking his seat. The whole of Bengal may be celebrating the 150th birth anniversary of the state's most famous son Rabindranath Tagore, but for the Trinamool Congress ministers, the presiding deity is Didi. G.K. Vasana has one huge picture of Sonia Gandhi and one of his late father, G.K. Moopanar. Jairam Ramesh's theme is his portfolio, Environment, so there are lots of pictures of animals, mountains — and even a volcano.