

# Power & Politics

PRABHU CHAWLA

**S**OMETIME in May, when UPA II completes a year in office, Manmohan Singh will do something he has done only once in his five and a half years as prime minister. I am reliably told that he will address what is only his second "formal" press conference in the capital. The first happened in May 2005 when the UPA completed a year in office and Manmohan released the first "Report to the People", which was a detailed compendium of the programmes initiated in the government's first year. Though similar reports have been compiled annually since, there have been no formal launches. But two months from now, the prime minister is expected to release the sixth volume for which a news conference is being scheduled.

In any functioning democracy, there are frequent interactions between the rulers and the media. The British Prime Minister routinely interacts with the press. Apart from regularly addressing press conferences, the US President keeps an annual date with the White House Correspondents Association where the interaction is more banter than business.

Compared, what's happening in India is the closest thing to censorship. Manmohan has been in office since May 2004 and has formally met the press just once. Atal Bihari Vajpayee was perhaps the most popular PM we have had in the last quarter century. He knew a lot many journalists personally but was averse to addressing them as a crowd. It wasn't always like this. Jawaharlal Nehru routinely held conferences and was on first name basis with several senior journalists, many of whom had unrestricted access to Teen Murti Bhavan, the official residence of the first prime minister.

Indira Gandhi was blessed with boundless charm and even more cunning and used both in equal measure in her frequent dealings with journalists. In her early years, she met up with journalists almost every month, but as her popularity began to wane in the early 1970s, she began to avoid the media. Morarji *bhai* was in office for only two and a half years, but began two New Year's days with a press conference.

After her triumphant return to power in 1980, Indira began to befriend the media again, holding a news conference every quarter at Vigyan Bhavan. Considering that there was no love lost between the host and the guests, these interactions witnessed much hand-wringing, incisive questions and sharp-tongued responses.



Indira Gandhi

Yet, Indira always welcomed everyone with a smile. A permanent curiosity of her press conferences was that the privilege of asking the first question always belonged to a gentleman from a little known Urdu evening paper published from Chennai. Many of us couldn't figure out the reason for the special chemistry between the two—one who was then considered the world's most powerful woman and the other a hack from an obscure newspaper—until a veteran journalist told us that the Urdu paper had been founded by a Congressman who was a close associate of Motilal Nehru. Rajiv's interactions with the media weren't

as frequent as Indira's and that may have had something to do with the fact that he had his own group of friends in the media. Yet, until Bofors began to weigh him down, he did meet the media at least twice a year. After Rajiv, the tradition has taken a toss.

Vishwanath Pratap Singh was so busy balancing allies from the Right and the Left that he found little time. Chandrashekhar's interactions happened on a daily basis, but were limited to four or five close "journalist" friends and were held invariably at his *kutir* on South Avenue where he chose to live even after becoming prime minister. P.V. Narasimha

Rao was perhaps the last one who tried to keep the prime ministerial tradition. His five-year term saw as many news conferences, which is not bad going considering that after December 6, 1992, he was no media darling.

Hopefully, in about two months, we will see Manmohan treading the same path as his mentor. I am told the prime minister truly believes that he has earned enough credits to flaunt the Progress Report at a press conference before live cameras and hundreds of unruly newshounds. Let's hope it is only the first and that many more press conferences will follow.



## The best foot forward

## Gadkari loses fight at start of innings

*THERE is something rotten in the BJP and it has taken barely three months for Nitin Gadkari to show that he is not the man for the clean-up job. This is the only conclusion I can draw from his exercise last week to recast the BJP's team of office-bearers. The party's youngest ever president evidently thinks that the road to Raisina Hill starts at Nagpur. Of the 200 named to help him revive a demoralised and demolished party, over 75 are from the RSS stable. Thirty per cent are either Brahmins like him or from Maharashtra. Add a dash of Bollywood retirees and you have a prescription for self-destruction.*

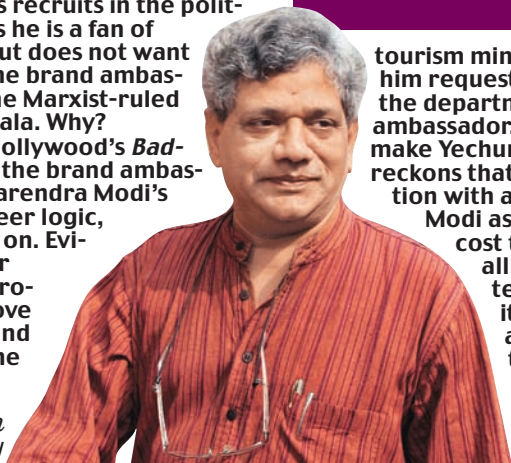
*As its president, Gadkari was supposed to lead the BJP from the front but he has chosen to be led by the same set of losers. He was expected to present to his kartas and karyakartas a basket of ideas and an ideology that would revive its right-wing national agenda. While the Congress confidently looks forward to a future under Rahul Gandhi and his brand ambassadors, Gadkari fell back on poor cousin Varun and the likes of Smriti Irani. Gadkari's team reflects the extent of the rot.*

*Two successive electoral reverses don't seem to have taught any lessons and he has chosen to depend on the same set of televangelists who have never fought elections or have a record of only losing and are themselves responsible for the party's defeat. It's an oligarchy that's in place consisting of about 20 leaders who are more bothered about securing their own future than the party's. If the party is in power, they make sure they are ministers; out of power, they become office-bearers. Gadkari was supposed to be the talent scout who would discover the Vajpayees, Advanis, Modis, Shekhawats, Mahajans and Uma Bharatis of the future. A second-rung leader himself, Gadkari would have justified his elevation had he done so. Instead, he has fallen back on those a rung below him.*

**A MAN is known by the company he keeps. By that logic, Sitaram Yechury, who relishes the company of Amar Singh who, in turn, is "like family" to Amitabh Bachchan, should be good pals with the Bollywood superstar. But perish the thought. The former Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) activist, who was among CPM's first campus recruits in the politburo admits he is a fan of Bachchan but does not want him to be the brand ambassador for the Marxist-ruled state of Kerala. Why?**

**Because Bollywood's *Badshah* is also the brand ambassador for Narendra Modi's Gujarat. Queer logic, right? Read on. Evidently, after Bachchan professed his love for Kerala and Keralites, the state**

Sitaram Yechury



## Bachchan hit by Yechury's political correctness

**tourism minister wrote to him requesting him to be the department's brand ambassador. Enough to make Yechury see red. He reckons that any association with a man who sees Modi as an icon would cost the CPM-led alliance dearly in terms of minority votes in the assembly elections next year. Bachchan is an icon in Kerala as he is**

**anywhere else in the country or abroad and the votes of the literate people of the state are not likely to be swayed either way by star endorsements. Last year, the CPM expelled one of its MPs, Abdullah Kutty, after he praised Modi's industrial policies. Kutty joined the Congress and won the last Lok Sabha election from a predominantly Muslim constituency thumping a former Marxist partymate.**

**When L.K. Advani's book *My Country My Life* was released in Kerala last year, the chief guest was Kerala's top film star Mammootty, aka Mohammed Kutty. Yechury's assessment of minority votes is an insult to the community's collective intelligence. And it's laughable when you consider that the only popular election that Yechury himself contested was more than three decades ago while a student at JNU.**

**It is such absurd calculations that make even many CPM leaders say the party's future is behind it.**

**RAJ Thackeray, eat your heart out. Take a leaf from the original architect of regional politics and learn how to be a better Indian. Last week, Tamil Nadu chief minister M. Karunanidhi won the hearts of Biharis by hosting a mass thanksgiving lunch for construction labourers who built the new Tamil Nadu Assembly building in Chennai. His decision to acknowledge the efforts of thousands of migrant workers from Bihar has earned praise from friend and foe alike. The newly appointed Bharatiya Janata Party spokesman Ravi Shankar Prasad as well as arch foe Lulu Prasad lauded the 86-year-old DMK patriarch.**

**Even the normally reticent Jayalitha is said to have confided to an aide that the Kalaingar has killed all enemies with a single stone. For years now, unskilled workers from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh have migrated to Tamil Nadu in search of a living and many found work in the construction sector where strict working and living conditions have ensured that their lives now are better than the ones they left behind.**

**Karunanidhi was among those at the forefront of the anti-Hindi agitation that gave rise to the Dravidian parties and is to a large extent responsible for the Congress being out of power in the state for more than four decades. The paper tiger cubs of Mumbai should draw some lessons from the magnanimity and large-heartedness of the DMK boss.**