



# Power & Politics

PRABHU CHAWLA

**I**F YOU think work is bogging you down, that you are left with no time to indulge in your favourite pastimes, spare a thought for the good doctor. Rarely does the Prime Minister, any prime minister for that matter, spend almost the entire day in Parliament. But Dr Manmohan Singh did it twice last week, listening to speeches from MPs on both sides of the aisles as he prepared to reply to the Motion of Thanks to the President's address in both houses of Parliament. Last Friday, Manmohan skipped his usual home lunch and hung on in Parliament. When it was his turn to speak, with uncharacteristic aggression, he disarmed his foes and surprised his friends. His two interventions in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha reflected his new avatar as a politician inferior to none.

The acerbic and often sarcastic nature of his discourses ensured that the image of him as a prime minister without any political power was a thing of the past. The normally soft spoken Singh proved beyond doubt that after nearly six years in the hot seat, he has developed a hide thick enough to engage in ill-tempered political debates with the likes of L.K. Advani, M.M. Joshi, Sushma Swaraj or Sitaram Yechury. In fact, the Congress couldn't have found a better tactician to take them on.

And he did it with panache. Advani's poisonous barbs at the Prime Minister's "adventurous diplomacy" were enough provocation to make the Prime Minister's response equally lethal. He threw his weight around, played to the gallery, paused for the resounding applause and went on to deal a few killer blows. When the opposition leader quoted a long article from an American magazine to suggest that "clandestine efforts were on under US pressure to hammer out a pact on Kashmir" and demanded that Parliament be kept in the loop, Manmohan retorted: "First you tell me how many times did Jaswant Singh (BJP foreign minister) hold secret negotiations and talks with Strobe Talbott (former US deputy secretary of state)? And how many times did he come and explain what was going on behind the scenes to Parliament?"

For the past six years, the opposition has seen Manmohan as a leader without political power, given the task of leading a team chosen by someone else. He was perceived as a ruler who wasn't free to formulate policies that have a domestic political fallout. But the reiteration of his resolve to pursue long term policies vis-a-vis Pakistan, China, fiscal discipline and Maoists ignoring the political damage

these may cause at home in the short term proves just one thing: the party stands solidly behind him. So be it the privatisation of mines, the large scale retrenchment in the Communications Department, the decision to resume dialogue with Pakistan or even the withdrawal of petroleum subsidies, he has managed to put to rest all speculation that the party will hound him into reversing the policies.

As usual, he was dressed in his trademark *kurta pyjama* jacket and sky blue turban, but it was clear he had shed the financial wizard's robes as his speeches centred more around politics than economics. Thanks to the rare unity among the opposition

benches, not seen in a long long while, Advani got massive applause, but it was Manmohan who had the last word. If his demeanour is any indication, Manmohan appears to have dropped his earlier decision to let his work do the talk. Now he chooses to brag about his work and even his trusted people and ministers are surprised over Singh's newly discovered strategy of offence being the best form of defence.

In his second term, the Prime Minister has been asserting his ideology and imposing his chosen individuals on the system. Without tinkering or interfering with the political hierarchy, Singh drafted retired civil ser-

vants and corporate leaders and technocrats in key policy panels and bodies to lay the blueprint for future economic and political governance.

He has drafted over 50 retired civil servants and business leaders to advise the government on issues varying from climate change to security to infrastructure. You wouldn't see their pictures in the newspaper pages, but most of them are going about their jobs in a very quiet manner. And though they are mostly non-political, most of them are better connected politically than many of the leading Congress leaders. Even if they deliver and none else does, Manmohan would stand vindicated.



L.K. Advani



R.PRASAD

## Doctor in control

### Kerala and Bengal are poles apart

**LAST WEEK, A.K. Antony** flew off to Trivandrum. No surprise, considering that his family still lives in the Kerala capital. But what did come as a surprise was that he had gone to inaugurate the new headquarters of a local Malayalam TV channel which is owned by — now get ready for this — the CPM. The Congress and the Marxists may have tangoed in Delhi but in the two party system that exists in Kerala, the two have been at each other's throats for more than 53 years.

Antony shared the dais with arch political rivals, the Marxist chief minister V.S. Achutanandan and the powerful state secretary Pinarayi Vijayan, among others. I would think it's as unthinkable as Mamata Banerjee lighting the lamp at a Marxist function in Kolkata or Buddhadeb Bhattacharya dropping by at Mamata's place on her birthday.

But my Mallu friends say that despite their bitter, often bloody rivalries, the political class does not look at political opponents as people below respect. A friend tells me that when K. Karunakaran, then leader of the Congress-led opposition turned 70, the Marxist government organised a public felicitation programme attended by thousands of Congressmen and Marxists. More recently, when the state CPM secretary's son got married, the entire top brass of the Congress was in attendance though Pinarayi Vijayan remains the Congress's bitterest enemy.

Contrast this with the same stock in Bengal. Jyoti Babu used to address Mamata as "that 420", and she paid back recently by refusing to attend his funeral. Mamata says to hell with protocol and refuses to attend a function presided over by Manmohan Singh in Kolkata because Buddhadeb Bhattacharya is seen sharing the dais with the Prime Minister. Such hysterical outbursts help none. Mamata should know that some amount of political decency will help remove the ordinary citizen's disgust with politicians.

**MINISTER of state for parliamentary affairs V. Narayanaswamy** is a much harried man in Parliament on Friday afternoons. It's at 3.30 pm on Friday that the Lok Sabha moves what are called Private Members Bills. As opposed to government bills that are moved by ministers after due deliberation in the cabinet, Private Members Bills are moved by individual members, often without even informing the party that he or she belongs to. Neither the government, nor the MPs take these bills seriously, and not one such bill has received the assent of the house in the last 40 years.

Most often, MPs remain absent when their turn comes to move the bill. Some of the more determined ones insist on a debate if only to prove a point, at the end of which they withdraw the bill. But a member can, if



### Absenteeism of ruling party MPs can be deadly

he wants, insist on a vote and there have been times when large scale absenteeism of MPs has brought the government close to embarrassment because in a thinly attended house, the opposition had more MPs than the treasury benches. Most of the bills are innocuous but you can never rule out an MP, with nothing but mischief in mind, moving a bill, say, calling for the "abolition of Article 370 in Kashmir". Many MPs have moved such bills aimed at embarrassing the government.

Though Sonia Gandhi's recent missive to her party men to take their

V. Narayanaswamy

work more seriously centred around Question Hour which kicks off the day's proceedings, I am sure that the Congress high command is not unaware of the many times when the government came perilously close to a loss of parliamentary face due to the sheer laziness of its MPs during Private Members Bills.

That's why Narayanaswamy has to be hyperactive on Friday afternoons. It's no easy job to ensure members' presence. With the house going into weekend recess, most MPs, particularly those from the south and the east, are in a hurry to get back to their homes and choose an early evening flight. Is it any wonder that absenteeism amongst MPs is higher than among students at university?

**HELL HATH** no fury like a woman scorned. It gets worse when a clutch of them are scorned — by other women. The dirty politicking of our major political parties pales in comparison with the kind of muckraking that goes on in what are known as "Better Halves" associations of babudom. We have, for example the Indian Foreign Service Wives Association, the IAS WA and the IPS WA. Now if you think these are kitty party groups that meet up once in a while to admire each other's perfect coiffure, perish the thought. Elections to the IPS WA were held recently. The wife of the IB director is the ex-officio chief of the IPA WA, so elections were held for other posts.

As expected, the wives of many senior officers were in the electoral fray and nearly 50 members were present for the voting. With so many high profile wives throwing their hats into the ring, there were frayed tempers that stopped just short of fisticuffs, with a clear divide being evident between spouses from the north and others from the rest of the country. I wish the badshahs of TV sting were around to capture the scenes on hidden cameras. The fear was such that wives of junior level officers, exposed to this kind of thing for the first time, felt terrified. Wonder why none of them thought of dialing 100, the police control room. Just like their husbands, even the wives are mastering the art of "politricks" very fast.