



RACE COURSE ROAD PRABHU CHAWLA

Ratings Race Prompts Rethink in Congress

Normally, the Congress and the Prime Minister ignore results of opinion polls, even the excessively unfavorable ones. But of late, Congress supporters and the members of the Prime Minister's think tank have been minutely dissecting various surveys to spot trends that may need timely corrections for the 2014 polls. However, the party and the Prime Minister's supporters seem to have different agendas. While Manmohan's promoters are looking at ways and means to salvage his plummeting popularity, the Congress party is busy spotting a potential threat to heir apparent Rahul Gandhi. Though he tops the list of popular candidates for prime minister, Rahul's popularity rating hovers around 20 per cent as against Sonia's mere 10 per cent. Both the Congress and the Prime Minister's Office are seriously concerned about the rising acceptability of Narendra Modi—their prime political target for the past few years. Not only has he beaten both Manmohan and Sonia in a recent opinion poll, but he doesn't seem to be considered a pariah among the minorities in most parts of India. More Muslims support him for the top job than they do even for Nitish Kumar. Congress analysts feel Modi's popularity could go up if Atal Bihari Vajpayee's name is excluded from the list. In some major states, Modi outscores Rahul. Even in Rahul's *karambhumi* Uttar Pradesh, the BJP, Uma Bharati and Gujarat's chief minister are drawing more voter attention than the Congress. What is bothering the party is that the losses suffered by both Sonia and the Prime Minis-

ter are not being converted into gains for Rahul. The Congress is now revising its strategy to promote and strengthen Brand Rahul by totally disassociating him from the follies of the prime minister and his Government. Rahul was advised to distance himself from the Anna-led Lokpal Bill movement, but was encouraged by his counselors to instead visit the families of the farmers who were recently killed in police firing in Maharashtra. Soon, a new roadmap for resurrecting both Brand Manmohan and Brand Rahul will be unfolded in the form of massive media and public relations exercises. But the focus will be more on the future and less on present.

More Grist for Pranab's Mill

If withdrawal of Pranab Mukherjee from heavy political duties is any indication of changing political equations, the Prime Minister has now entrusted him with more economic responsibilities. Last week, Pranab held a joint meeting with C Rangarajan, chairman of the Prime Minister's Advisory Council on Economic Affairs, and D Subbarao, Governor, Reserve Bank of India, to review the performance of the economy. Normally the Prime Minister presides over such meetings. Earlier, Pranab had summoned leading corporate honchos to discuss how to bring the ailing economy back on track. For the past few months, Pranab was the one tackling all the political problems of the UPA Government. He was the chairman of the drafting committee which formulated the government's Lokpal Bill. Though he was present along with the Prime Minister at the AICC office on Independence Day to brief Rahul Gandhi, he has been keeping away from various other political parleys. From all indications, both the Prime Minister and the Finance Minister will be confined to Government, and leave politics to those who will be part of the future Cabinet.



Ambika Takes a Different Line

It is mandatory for all ministries to release massive newspaper ads on the occasion of both the birth and death anniversaries of Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Nehru. On August 20—former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's 67th birth Anniversary—over a dozen ads carrying his pictures and statements were carried by over 200 publications in the country. But the one that stood out was issued by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting headed by Ambika Soni. The half-page ad contained an excerpt from one of Rajiv's speeches which read: "The democratic way of nation building requires patience, perseverance and a spirit of conciliation." Since Sonia has been leading the attack on Hazare's movement from the front, the advertisement took all Congress leaders by surprise because all the other advertisements from different ministries carried only inane messages from the former Prime Minister. According to senior officials

of various ministries, they were instructed by their ministers last month to raise additional funds for the campaign. But none of them were directed to choose for publication any particular part of Rajiv Gandhi's speeches. The ministers simply approved the text and the photograph put up to them by their babus. But I&B Ministry officials were directed to pick up the lines by the minister herself, which indicated a change in the Government's attitude. Comparing Rajiv's name to an olive branch was, however, lost on Team Anna. Surprisingly, not one ministry controlled by the allies, and ministers considered close to the Prime Minister, could find the necessary funds to pay homage to the departed leader.

India First is Manmohan Edict

While the government's recently launched austerity drive has come a cropper, the Prime Minister has decided to ground his ministers and senior civil servants for the time being. He had been quite liberal with his colleagues and allowed most of them to go on foreign jaunts, even to attend frivolous seminars and meetings. He had also allowed External Affairs Minister S M Krishna to spend extra days abroad, even after his official work was done. Now, the message has been sent out that no minister will leave the country during the current Parliament session. In case of any emergency, only a senior official from the concerned ministry will fly out, and that too for the minimum possible period. The first victim of the Prime Minister's missive was environment Jayanthi Natrajan who wanted to go to Brazil for a three-day official visit. Manmohan vetoed her visit, to send out the clear signal that even UPA allies will be given a similar treatment. The PMO had got a whiff that some important ministers were trying to stay away from the country to avoid Heat Hazare.