

The Importance of Being BRAJESH MISHRA

ALTER EGO: Mishra virtually makes up Vajpayee's mind for him on major issues

The Sangh, key ministers and NDA allies hold the principal secretary responsible for the crisis in the Government. Yet, he enjoys Vajpayee's trust. The inside story.

■ by Prabhu CHAWLA

BRAJESH MISHRA LOVES PRESS CONFERENCES and there was more than a trace of the usual imperiousness on his face as he strutted into Delhi's Shastri Bhavan last week. The relevant and irrelevant sections of the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) in tow, the 72-year-old principal secretary to the prime minister wasn't in an explaining mood. His bulbous eyes gleaming defiantly, jaw jutting out and lips curled in a half sneer, Mishra was not just addressing the press, he was taking them on. Furious at the accusations levelled at him after the *Tehelka.com* tapes shook the Government, he wasn't protesting his innocence, he was asserting it.

Few politicians would have got away with such pugnacity. But Mishra did. Not merely because he was sure of his facts but because he had the full backing of the prime minister. His message was simple and forthright: I will stay as long as the prime minister tells me to; I will go if it strengthens his hands. The unstated theme—I remain indispensable to Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Then, before the stunned hacks could recover their composure, Mishra walked off, in triumph.

It could well be the bravado of a man effecting his last stand. But Mishra, frankly, couldn't give a damn. At the best of times he is cocky and adversity doesn't change him much. If Vajpayee represents the benign face of the Government, Mishra epitomises its raw abrasiveness. For a man who has been a diplomat for 34 years, there is nothing diplomatic about Mishra.

As principal secretary, national security adviser, the special envoy to France for strategic dialogue and member of countless committees established by the prime minister, Mishra is arguably one of three most powerful individuals in the NDA Government. Some would say the most powerful. No other principal secretary—not even the redoubtable P.N. Haksar who served Indira Gandhi—has acquired such an awesome profile or been at the centre of such controversy.

Last week, Mishra was not only targeted by the Opposition but also by sections of the Government and the Sangh Parivar. RSS chief K.S. Sudarshan called for "competent" people to be appointed to the PMO; two Samata Party MPs tried to link the party's return to the Government with Mishra's removal; and Shiv Sena mouthpiece *Saamna* wanted both Mishra and Officer on Special Duty (OSD) N.K. Singh sacked. Many cabinet ministers met Vajpayee and, without specifically seeking Mishra's removal, urged him to take a serious look at his office.

The disorientation in the ranks was understandable. Since he joined the PMO on March 19, 1998 as Vajpayee's personal nominee, Mishra has set his own rules: that he won't be yet another faceless bureaucrat. He is the voice of a prime minister who, despite his legendary communication skills, has inexplicably lost his voice. Mishra doesn't merely speak for the PMO, he speaks for the prime minister. Somewhere along the line, Vajpayee allowed the two to become indistinguishable.

Mishra first made it so on May 11, 1998, by being the only man in the Government to address the media after the Pokhran blasts. According to the PMO, he did it on Vajpayee's instructions. It set the tone of an uninterrupted innings that has divided the Government, strained Vajpayee's relations with his party and the Sangh Parivar, and created an image problem for

COURTESY HT



Mishra hasn't made the PMO the expert body it should be. He has brought in largely middling officials who play second fiddle.

the Government. Powerful Union ministers, including Home Minister L.K. Advani, Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha, External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh and NDA convener and former defence minister George Fernandes have at various times let their displeasure with Mishra be known to Vajpayee.

It hasn't made an iota of difference. An unmoved prime minister has let it be known he would rather quit than succumb to pressures for Mishra's removal. He has harped on his unfettered right to choose his personal staff, a principle no one can fault. Unwilling to press home the point, Mishra's detractors have effected a tactical retreat. But once the din of the Tehelka scandal recedes, the issue is certain to reappear.

Why does Mishra invite such hostility? The answer lies in his overweening desire to grab the limelight, so far the prerogative of elected politicians. Mishra is the only principal secretary who can't resist media glare. He loves appearing on TV talk shows and holding forth on subjects ranging from economic reforms to nuclear diplomacy. After becoming principal secretary, he has addressed three press conferences and appeared on TV talk shows on more than 150 occasions. During Vajpayee's foreign tours, it is Mishra who briefs the media, never mind the presence of even the foreign minister. He exudes the confidence of a man who thinks he was born to rule.

Political and bureaucratic circles believe that Mishra has

WOESOME TWOSOME: Mishra (left) is the one-man super-MEA and with Singh's induction economic policy too is under the PMO

taken full advantage of Vajpayee's introvert and laidback personality and has gradually usurped his public role. He has become the public face of the Government. Since Vajpayee rarely speaks his mind in official meetings, it is Mishra who makes up the prime minister's mind on crucial issues. Says a senior cabinet minister: "Sometimes we get the impression it is Brajesh, not the prime minister who has the final say."

That's not an inaccurate assessment. If Vajpayee doesn't know how to say no, Mishra is incapable of taking no for an answer. He has definite views that he insists others must endorse. If there is resistance, he does the next best thing—take charge himself by riding roughshod over departmental niceties.

It is this cockiness that is at the heart of an ongoing tussle between two parivars: the Sangh Parivar and the prime minister's parivar. Mishra hasn't been able to establish a comfortable relationship with the majority of cabinet ministers. His former colleagues in the BJP have stopped dealing with him because he has been insensitive to their compulsions and denied them access to their leader. Yet, his position remains secure. What is the reason?

The uncharitable version is that Mishra has been able to feed on Vajpayee's sense of vulnerability. He appears to have successfully convinced the prime minister and his family that his job is only to look after their interests. He claims to keep Vajpayee fully informed. Consequently, he enjoys unhindered and unlimited access to the prime minister's household, including its dining table. He visits the Vajpayee home at 3 Race Course Road at least twice each day and even shares an evening drink

ON AND OFF THE RECORD

BRAJESH MISHRA'S CV
Age: 72

- 1951: Joins the IFS. Is sent to Cambridge University as a trainee.
- 1951: Returns to India and joins the Pakistan desk in the MEA.
- 1957-60: Works in Indian missions in Rangoon and Brussels.
- 1960-64: Deputy secretary, HQ.
- 1964-69: Deputy permanent representative in Indian mission to the UN.
- 1969-73: Charge d'Affaires, Indian Embassy, Beijing.
- 1973-77: Permanent representative to the UN, Geneva.
- 1977-79: Indira Gandhi shunts him out as ambassador to Jakarta.
- 1979-81: Foreign minister A.B. Vajpayee appoints him permanent representative to the UN.
- 1987: Retires from service.
- 1991: Joins BJP, appointed convener of the party's foreign affairs cell.
- 1998: Becomes principal secretary to Prime Minister Vajpayee.

AGAINST

- L.K. ADVANI**
Home Minister
Resents Mishra's open interference in security matters.
- JASWANT SINGH**
Foreign Minister
Believes Mishra torpedoed his foreign policy initiatives.
- K.S. SUDARSHAN**
RSS chief
Thinks Mishra represents MNCS.
- Y. SINHA**
Finance Minister
Mishra posted key officers in ministry.
- G. FERNANDES**
Ex-defence minister
Dislikes Mishra's parallel HQ.

FOR

- RAM VILAS PASWAN**
Communications Minister
Mishra has backed him on policy shifts like telecom.
- PRAMOD MAHAJAN**
Parliamentary Affairs Minister
Had Mishra's backing on all administrative matters.
- R. BHATTACHARYA**
PM's foster son-in-law
Is totally dependent on "uncle".
- M.M. JOSHI**
HRD Minister
He inducted Mishra into BJP.
- S. YADAV**
Aviation Minister
Took Mishra's help to fight Fernandes.



Principal secretary coordinates with all ministries

National security adviser

PM's special envoy on foreign affairs

Graphic by YOGESH CHAUDHARY

with Ranjan Bhattacharya, Vajpayee's foster son-in-law. Mishra is the principal secretary but in an act of Brahmanical bonding, he has also become a part of the Vajpayee household.

No one questions Mishra's loyalty to Vajpayee or his integrity. Nor is there any doubt that by freeing Vajpayee from details, he leaves him free to focus on the big picture. But there is a perception he also exploits Vajpayee's trust to ram through an agenda that is at variance with the collective wisdom of the Government. Senior ministers are miffed that he keeps them in the dark even on subjects relating to their own ministries.

Jaswant has been most affected by this unilateralism. He and Mishra have strong disagreements on key issues involving India's relationship with the US and China. Officials have witnessed verbal exchanges between the two in Vajpayee's presence. During the prime minister's visit to the US last year, Jaswant wasn't shown the texts of his speeches. It was only after Jaswant made an issue of it that Vajpayee asked Mishra to send the speeches to him before they were finalised.

The problem is Mishra considers foreign affairs to be his own turf. He has got Vajpayee to reverse diplomatic appointments made by Jaswant. Recently, it was decided that N.K. Singh would be sent to Canada as high commissioner. But within 24 hours of Jaswant leaving on a foreign tour, Mishra ordered the file to be kept in abeyance. Previously, there were differences between the two over the choice of India's ambassador to the US, with former foreign secretary Lalit Mansingh becoming the compromise choice. Two years ago, when Vajpayee appointed Jaswant, the then Planning Commission deputy chairman, as his special envoy to the US, Mishra had to be placated with the post of special envoy to France.

During the past three years, Mishra has made several trips abroad without any prior consultation with the foreign min-

PAST PRINCIPAL SECRETARIES



P. C. ALEXANDER 1981-1985
Served both Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi as principal secretary. In mid-1985, he was forced to resign after it was discovered that two members of his personal staff were involved in a spy ring.



B. G. DESHMUKH 1985-1990
Among the most durable of senior bureaucrats, he served under three prime ministers—Rajiv, V.P. Singh and Chandra Shekhar. Resigned in 1990, a month before he was due to retire.



A. N. VERMA 1991-1996
Wielded awesome power during P.V. Narasimha Rao's tenure. Vetted his boss' appointments and was known to keep even ministers waiting for days for a meeting with Rao. Economic czar.



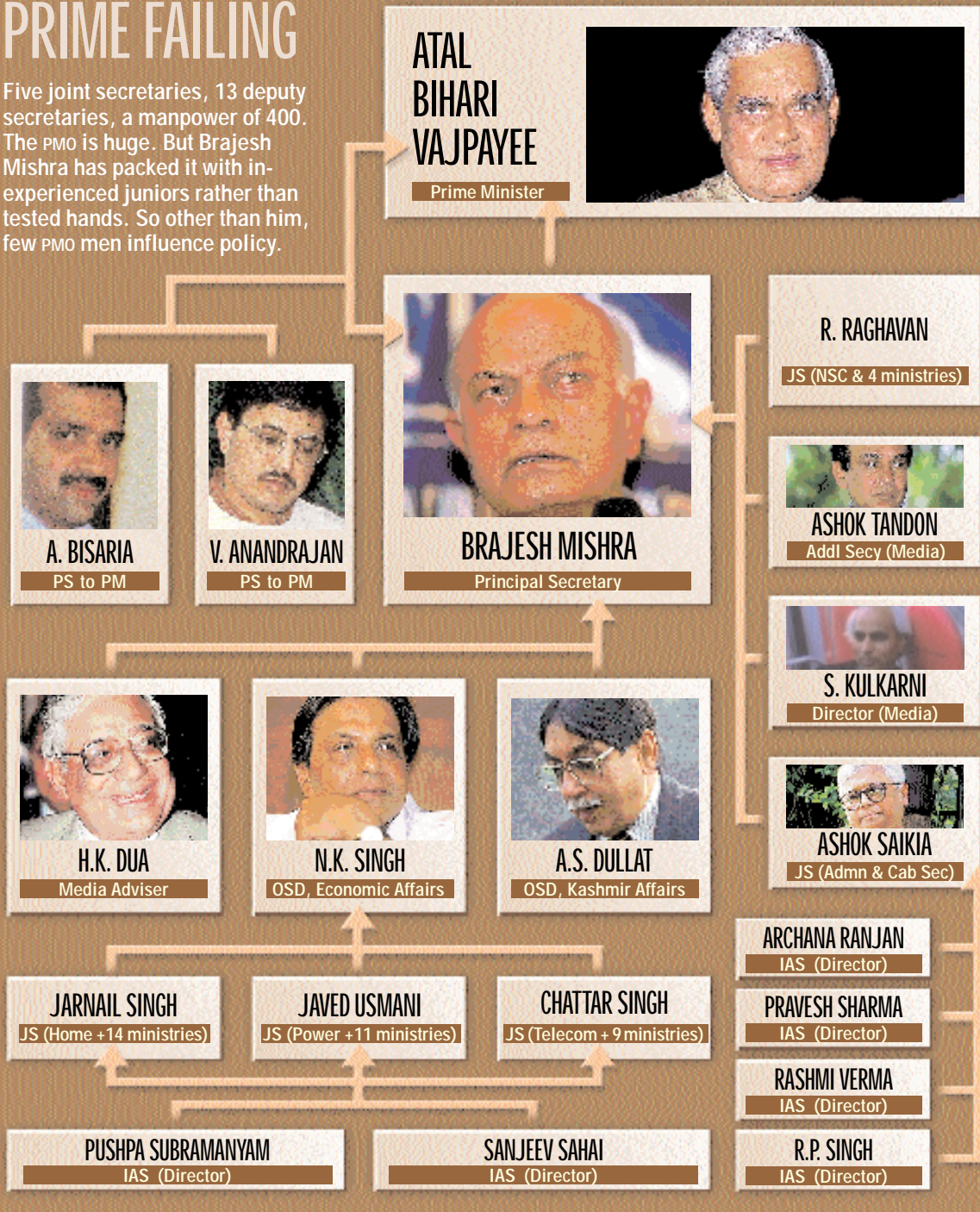
SATISH CHANDRA 1996-1997
As chief secretary of Karnataka, he had a good rapport with chief minister H.D. Deve Gowda. Known for his integrity and honesty, he shifted to South Block when Deve Gowda moved to Delhi.



N. N. VOHRA 1997-1998
The former home and defence secretary was director of the India International Centre in Delhi when fellow Saturday Club mate I.K. Gujral beat all odds to become the prime minister.

PRIME FAILING

Five joint secretaries, 13 deputy secretaries, a manpower of 400. The PMO is huge. But Brajesh Mishra has packed it with inexperienced juniors rather than tested hands. So other than him, few PMO men influence policy.



Graphic by YOGESH CHAUDHARY

ister. He runs his own innovative diplomatic channels that bypass existing institutions. In 1998, he used the Hinduja brothers to organise a meeting with British Prime Minister Tony Blair. He has been conducting his own back-channel diplomacy with Pakistan without taking either Advani or Jaswant into confidence. He has even utilised the help of the Reliance Group to establish his links across the border.

Using his position as national security adviser, Mishra has tread on Advani's toes. He has packed the National Security Advisory Board with his own people. Though the Department of Kashmir Affairs was reverted to the Home Ministry in 1998, Mishra has been taking an undue interest

in the state without going via the ministry. The PMO, however, claims that Advani has always been kept informed. But two months ago, the Home Ministry came to know of the appointment of A.S. Dullat as OSD to the prime minister on Kashmir affairs from the newspapers. It was interpreted as Mishra's bid to bring Kashmir under his direct charge.

Mishra has also annoyed Sinha by pitting Singh against him and packing his ministry with PMO-nominated officials. In October last, when Sinha wanted to change key officials, he wasn't given a choice. He argued his case with Mishra for three hours but finally accepted Ajit Kumar, Mishra's candidate, as finance secretary. The PMO also prevailed in the

SHARAD SAXENA



NEPAL AND BEYOND: Mishra is obsessed with foreign policy

choice of heads of various financial institutions.

Initially, Mishra dabbled in foreign policy, a subject he was familiar with. However, with the induction of Singh in the PMO in 1998, Mishra found in him a powerful ally in managing politics and the civil service. The PMO soon became the fulcrum of all activities on the economic and diplomatic front. Singh persuaded Vajpayee to head various working groups on economic matters. Over six such groups were appointed and both Singh and Mishra became its members. This move gave Singh a legitimate excuse to summon officials

Vajpayee's family believes only Mishra is beyond reproach.

from ministries and influence their decisions. It also provided Mishra the luxury to focus on politics and diplomacy.

Ironically, apart from Singh, Mishra never encouraged the induction of other senior officials into the PMO. Vajpayee's PMO is perceived as one institution that lacks both talent and expertise. Under Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi, the PMO was manned by stalwarts like Manmohan Singh, Gopi Arora, R. Vasudevan, H.Y. Sharada Prasad, Montek Singh Ahluwalia, Ronnen Sen and Arjun Sengupta. All were experts in their own fields. Now barring IAS officer Ashok Saikia, who enjoys Vajpayee's trust, Mishra has drafted a motley crowd of ex-journalists and middle-level civil servants. By keeping the PMO weak, he has emerged stronger.

The Tehelka tapes may have stirred Vajpayee but it hasn't shaken his confidence in Mishra. The principal secretary's show of defiance last week was shrewdly prefaced on the belief that no responsible section of the NDA would seriously press for his removal now because it would affect Vajpayee's standing. Even his detractors want to delink Mishra's removal from the Tehelka issue. Which explains the whispers about a Rajya Sabha seat and a cabinet berth. Depending on the pressure on Vajpayee, it may or may not happen. But for Mishra, that's the breathing space he needs to successfully conduct his business as the prime minister's hit man. ■

N . K . S I N G H

Supercrat in his LABYRINTH

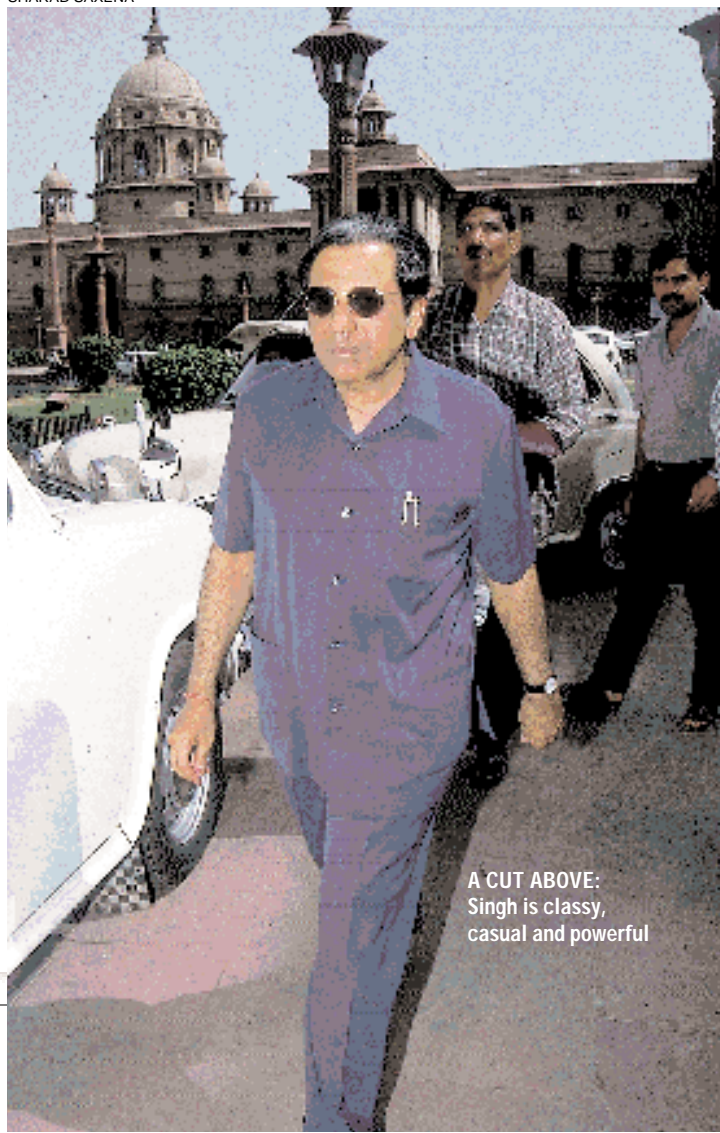
The economic policy wizard gets defensive

■ by Prabhu CHAWLA

THERE ARE 240 SECRETARIES TO THE GOVERNMENT but he is always a cut above—in style, networking and power. The subdued lighting and rich Persian silk carpets distinguish his room on the first floor of the PMO at South Block from the staid top chambers of the capital's bhavans. There is a classy casualness about everything on him, be it the Hermes tie or the Patek Philippe watch. Nand Kishore Singh, secretary to the prime minister till January and Officer on Special Duty (OSD) at the PMO, is too powerful a man to be seen telling before television cameras: "I am clean." A 1964 batch IAS officer of the Bihar cadre, son of Sir T.P. Singh, ICS, and married into the Jodhpur princely family, he is perched too high to stoop and defend himself before the media. Yet, the great leveller of egos that the Tehelka aftershocks became, last week

Singh is a survivor par excellence and a consummate power player.

SHARAD SAXENA



A CUT ABOVE: Singh is classy, casual and powerful

“Nandu” goose-stepped in tow with his boss Brajesh Mishra to appear before the media in a joint self-exoneration bid. And that despite his name figuring nowhere in the Tehelka tapes.

At the press conference, Singh was evidently proxying for Mishra on economic issues, of which he (Singh) is in charge at the PMO. Much of Singh’s arguments were rebuttal of the charges hurled at the Government by former secretary E.A.S. Sarma, which were lapped up by the media. It is not true, as Singh said, that the Centre was planning to accord a counter-guarantee to the Hirma power project in Orissa, promoted, among others, by Reliance Industries Limited (RIL). Nor was there any hanky-panky in awarding the national highway project contracts, and the PMO was in no way involved in setting up a fertiliser project in Oman, which was “initiated by the previous government”.

However, it was while defending the PMO against the charge of bending the telecom policy to the advantage of its “friends” that Singh tied himself in knots. The allegation was that the PMO had allowed the fixed telecom service providers limited mobility through wireless-in-local-loop (WLL) technology, thus exposing the cellular service providers to unexpected and unjust competition. Their loss on account of the old licence fees was computed at Rs 7,500 crore. Singh argued that the PMO had no hand in it.

The facts are somewhat different. The demand for limited mobility of fixed phones was indeed turned down by the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) in June 1999, when Justice (retd) S.S. Sodhi was at the helm of the regulatory body. Subsequently, TRAI members got the marching orders and a new body was set up under the chairmanship of former State Bank of India chief M.S. Verma. While the brand-new TRAI was toying with policy changes, Singh called, on October 11 last year, a meeting of the Group of Secretaries on telecom. It was on the recommendation of this group operating within the PMO that the recast TRAI gave the green signal to WLL use. It took just four weeks for the decision taken in Singh’s room to be processed in the DOT and reach TRAI for consultation. The main beneficiaries of this decision include RIL, the largest player in the emerging basic-service market, and Himachal Futuristic Communications Limited (HFCL), which tied up with a host of foreign telecom companies to provide basic services. The Government decision was decried by all major cellular operators, though nobody had the courage to point a finger at the PMO. On his part though, Singh asserts that he never directed the DOT to refer to TRAI the issue of Short Distance Charging Area (SDCA) which has created an up-

roar against cellular operators.

A consummate power player, and known to be an efficient officer, Singh loves flattery, particularly from corporate czars who never tire of complimenting him as the “true architect” of every budget. Singh accepts the toast with a Bonaparte-like chin-raising, which, in turn, creates heartburn amongst his colleagues. If he has still survived in power, it is because of his great capacity to outsmart even powerful enemies. In 1998, when Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha was eager to see him out of his ministry as revenue secretary, he triumphantly walked across Vijay Chowk to enter the most powerful office of the land. Since then he and Ahluwalia have become a permanent target of criticism for the inner core of the Sangh Parivar, notably the Swadeshi Jagran Manch. The duo was accused, among other things, of cosyng up to MNCs. Ahluwalia then got shunted out of the Finance Ministry to the nondescript Planning Commission. But Singh was too high for the Sangh’s reach.

He proved his power of survival as recently as January,

when Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee announced to his ministers that Singh wouldn’t be seen at the PMO after his retirement on January 31. A “Save Nandu” lobby immediately sprang into action. Commerce Minister Murasoli Maran was sounded out by Mishra if he could recommend Singh for ambassadorship to the WTO, but Maran’s reply was a resounding “no”. External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh was then persuaded to send him to Canada as the high commissioner. But Singh, reluctant to leave India, sought the help of Disinvestment Minister Arun Shourie to plead for him with L.K. Advani, the powerful home minister. Advani gave his nod to Shourie for appointment of Singh to an innocuous post in India. Much to his dismay, he saw Singh back in the PMO, in the same room as before, and with the same power.

A survivor par excellence, Singh served as special assistant (SA) to the late L.N. Mishra when he was in charge of the Ministry of Foreign Trade (later renamed Commerce Ministry). The Tulmohan Ram scandal broke in that period, but it didn’t touch Singh. In the Emergency he was SA to pro-Sanjay Gandhi commerce minister D.P. Chattopadhyay and hit it off famously with Indira Gandhi’s powerful SA R.K. Dhawan. However, in the post-Emergency hunt for Dhawan’s lieutenants, Singh remained unnamed. He flitted with practised ease in the Finance Ministry under Manmohan Singh, P. Chidambaram and even Sinha for a while. It is to be seen if he can do an encore when he’s the target of not only the Opposition but also a sizeable section of the ruling BJP. ■

HIS MASTER’S CHOICE: Singh (left) lobbied to stay on in the PMO



SIPRA DAS

Contrary to his assertions that the PMO had no hand in changing the telecom policy, the move had been initiated by Singh.