

Defending the faith

The state bureaucracy is working hard to preserve its reputation for being reform-minded and efficient.

BY PANKAJ AHER

Last month, when the high-profile chief of the Maharashtra State Electricity Board (MSEB), Ajit Nimbalkar, opted for a transfer after the government changed, his successor was chosen in the strangest manner.

The story goes that Michael Pinto, then managing director of the Maharashtra State Finance Corporation, was sounded out for the post by a prominent Bombay infrastructure-contractor and relative of Chief Minister Manohar Joshi. By protocol, that is the job of the chief secretary or any other senior secretary.

A little before that, industries secretary B K Agarwal, who was known for his closeness to former Chief Minister Sharad Pawar, was abruptly transferred to the department of textiles and cooperation.

Political moves like this would have stunned any other bureaucracy into a familiar state of inertia. In Maharashtra, the mandarins of Mantralaya, the state secretariat, have worked out an "orientation programme" of sorts for the new incumbents in government. "They are picking up very fast and are pleasant to bureaucrats," says a senior secretary kindly.

Adds a principal secretary, "Ministers like Hashu Advani (finance), Pramod Navalkar (transport), and Sudhir Joshi (revenue) have been ministers or have lead the opposition in the Assembly and the municipal corporation. Hence they are conversant with the working of the official machinery. They understand terms and concepts like programme, budget, plan and non-plan. Only the CM is at a relative disadvantage."

Apart from the standard briefings, one of the first lessons the ministers are learning is cutting down the time they spend with visitors. When work piles up, many of them shift from Mantralaya to Vidhan Bhavan, the Assembly building, where entry is strictly regulated. "We are being mobbed," complains one cabinet minister.

There are reasons for the bureaucracy's anxiety to teach the new ministers the business of government as quickly as possible: it has a reputation to keep as India's most reform-minded and efficient administration in these liberalising times. Says a secretary, "There was a fear in our minds initially that given the nature of the Sena and the fact that the two parties had failed to secure a majority, the government would find it easy to adopt a populist stance to consolidate its support base. Thankfully, they have refrained from this."

The bureaucracy is all too aware of its reputation. "In many ways, the reform process in the state predates the reform process at the Centre," says a senior secretary.

Even as it heaves a collective sigh of relief at the fact that the minority government hasn't decided to turn populist and anti-industry (see page 3), it is trying to imbibe the principles of total quality management that have become all the rage with industry in this western state. As other states start gearing up their administrations to attract more foreign



BUILDING ON A STRENGTH

In Mantralaya, the state secretariat, bureaucrats are anxiously briefing their new ministers.

tance, Arun Bongirwar, principal secretary, industries is hoping to improve on the state's backward area policy, which has seen companies like Videocon turn into mega-corporations in less than a decade. "It is still difficult to take industry to backward areas," says Bongirwar,

people to look at efficient use. Grandiose schemes like piped water or creating storage will not solve the problem. Better use of resources is the fundamental aim of reforms." There are other new concerns, too. "Is the consumer benefiting from the process?" asks a senior secretary.

The current focus of the reforms, he points out, is on profit for the entrepreneur. It should shift to ultimate benefit to the consumer. "Is the quality consciousness of international markets coming here or are we merely paying international standard prices for Indian standard goods? These are the questions we have to answer now."

The power of the bureaucracy in Maharashtra is also evident in the fact that many of their concerns are political in nature. Some grumble about how the politicians have been inefficient in selling reforms to the common man. Says one, "Politicians do not try to communicate to the people the positive side of the process."

On its part, the new government is well aware of the power and utility of the bureaucracy and apart from the Enron-related transfers, has been careful to stay away from the mass transfers that

characterise most new regimes. In fact, when the labour commissioner was due for a routine transfer, labour minister Sabir Sheikh immediately got the order revoked on the ground that it would affect the functioning of this department.

The orientation process isn't entirely a one-sided affair either. Even as they spoke approvingly of the government, few were willing to go on record. The bureaucracy is also learning to read the government - quite literally in some cases. Recently, the secretary of a ministry under the Chief Minister, was puzzled by a file that had just come back from the CM's office. Opening it to see what instructions had been noted, the secretary saw the single word in Marathi. "Adesh" scrawled in the margin. The word literally translates as "order," that much the secretary knew. But order what? Should he put out an executive order on the subject for the minister's approval? Or was the word a synonym for OK?

It didn't take him long to work it out. "There are times when it is difficult for the Chief Minister to say no to some supporters, so he might use words that can be open to interpretation," the secretary explained understandingly. The bureaucrats understand this and act accordingly - or more precisely do nothing about it till clear instructions are issued or the matter is clarified face-to-face."

Chuckles another secretary, "Maybe this is the impact of the long association with the Sena chief and the reference in the party to any of his decisions as 'Balasahebancha Adesh' (Balasaheb's order)."



Michael Pinto (left), who recently took charge of MSEB and B K Agarwal, who was transferred as industries secretary were the two major changes when the new government came to power.



A SMALL-SCALE SHAKEOUT

investment, Maharashtra's bureaucrats are trying a spot of hard self-assessment. "The bureaucracy is becoming increasingly undisciplined," says a senior secretary sternly.

Others are looking at ways of improving their role as facilitators. For ins-

adding, "New methods of attracting investment have to be devised."

Another "thrust area," to put it in bureaucratese, is using resources more efficiently. "Water, electricity are state subjects," says a senior secretary, "but the state policy is not oriented to compel

Curriculum vitae

Profiles of Maharashtra's key bureaucrats.



ARUN LAXMAN BONGIRWAR
Principal secretary, industries

Bongirwar (52) is from the 1966 IAS batch. An MSc from Nagpur University (1963), he has put in stints in the districts from 1967 (Ratnagiri) to 1973 (Wardha). He has experience in trade and industry since he was deputy secretary in the government of Maharashtra, Industries & Labour Department, from June 1973 to August 1974, and has headed the small scale industries corporation. Was Development Commissioner of the SEEPZ before taking charge as principal secretary, Industries, in May, 1995.



VENKAT CHARY
Principal secretary, finance

A holder of multiple degrees (MCom, LLB and MA in Economics and Finance), Chary joined the IAS in 1964. One-time collector, Buldhana, he was also secretary to the Maharashtra State Electricity Board (MSEB), and vice-chairman and managing director of the Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation. He has served as secretary to the Maharashtra Chief Minister and as chairman of the Forward Markets Commission. He took charge as finance secretary in September 1994.



YASHWANT S BHAVE
Development Commissioner (Industries)

Bhave joined the IAS in 1972 after completing his MSc from Nagpur University in 1970. He was selected a Lucius Littaur Fellow (1990) for academic excellence after completing his Masters in Public Administration from Harvard. He has been the collector (Bombay) and CEO, Maharashtra Industrial Development Corporation. He assumed his current post in March, 1993 and likes swimming, badminton and computers.



VISHWAS DHUMAL
CEO, Maharashtra Industrial Development Corporation

Dhumal (46) is an MA in Political Science (Pune University, 1970) and an LLB (Bombay University, 1972). He joined the IAS in 1973, and has since undertaken various assignments. Once the assistant collector, Niphad, he was also Under Secretary, Department of Agriculture. In 1992, he earned his MA in Economics from the University of Manchester.



MICHAEL PINTO
Chairman, Maharashtra State Electricity Board

Fifty-two-year-old Pinto is an MA in Sociology (Delhi University) and a Master of Public Administration (Harvard). From 1965 to 1966, he worked as a management trainee with Hindustan Lever.

A member of the IAS batch of 1966, he was assistant collector, Nashik, from 1967 to 1970. Besides other important positions, he also put in a stint as minister (Economic) at the Indian Embassy at Paris from July 1989 to December 1992.



PRABHAKAR DATTARAYA KARANDIKAR
Managing director, Sicom

The 46-year-old heads the state's nodal agency for foreign and NRI investment. Academically brilliant, Karandikar (he holds an MA degree in Political Science from Ferguson College, Pune) joined the IAS in 1973. From being assistant collector, Sawantwadi, he has held various responsible positions including that of the Joint Director of Industries, Mantralaya and CEO OF Maharashtra Industrial Development Corporation. He has been managing director, Sicom, since February 18, 1994.