

## Candidate Sangma

The presidential contest may be more riveting for its process, less for its outcome

**N**OW that the BJP and some of its NDA partners have formally declared support to P.A. Sangma as their candidate against Pranab Mukherjee, the contest for president has been joined — and rightly so. The case for consensus was always a spurious one. It sought to impose an artificial agreement on an obviously fractured polity. It tried to reduce the presidential office to an apolitical, if not symbolic, berth — to be swaddled and insulated from the pull and tug of real political differences. Of course, even now, a contest is guaranteed but its outcome seems foretold. Yet, in as much as it promises to reveal glimpses of the reworked political map ahead of the parliamentary polls in 2014, it will be a riveting contest. With the math apparently loaded in his favour, Mukherjee may be everyone's favourite, but take your eye off the presidential race at your own peril.

Some of the realignments have already been forced out of the backrooms. The two main alliances, UPA and NDA — or for that matter, the Left Front — have shown an inability to hold. If the Congress's largest ally in the UPA, Mamata Banerjee, struck a contrary note on Mukherjee, the BJP has been unsuccessful in throwing the entire weight of the NDA behind Sangma.

Then, even as the BJP seems increasingly distanced from old allies Shiv Sena and JD(U), it appears to be bridging the gap with erstwhile partners BJD and AIADMK, who promoted Sangma's candidature in the first place. There are other straws in the 2014 poll wind. In the run-up to the presidential contest, the initiative has clearly rested with the regional parties, which have vigorously marked out their separate stands and measured out their distance from, or proximity with each other, and vis-a-vis the UPA and NDA. They have acted according to their own calculus, on their own terms. So far, it is the regional forces that have taken on the Congress in the presidential arena. The BJP, convulsed with its internal crisis stoked by inner-party jostling or by the posturing of its ally, has looked like a latecomer and a wannabe.

Essentially, as power shifts to India's regions, there will be multiple and varied political calculations at work on every national issue and it would be naïve to expect the political tidiness of an older time. The boundaries of alliances are becoming increasingly permeable. The coalition dharma itself is being redefined and in this the smaller partners are taking the lead. A new politics is here and the contest for president is a fascinating pretext for its unfolding.