

SIPRA DAS

In a bid to shape up for the 2004 poll, Sonia leads a major revamp aimed at fortifying the party's grassroots

HAND SHAKE



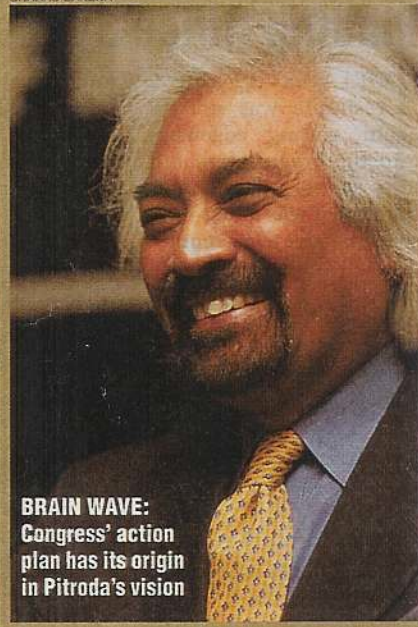
POWER POINT: Sonia's unrivalled leadership is a plus point for the party

■ by Lakshmi IYER

IN 1986, TELECOM WIZARD Satyen a.k.a. Sam Pitroda put in 100 hours on a roadmap to modernise the Congress party that was headed by his good friend and then prime minister Rajiv Gandhi. Pitroda was inspired by Rajiv's seminal speech at the Congress' centenary celebrations in Mumbai the previous year where he said he wanted to make the party "a movement to modernise India". As a ruling party with a four-fifths majority in the Lok Sabha, the Congress had the chance, but failed to grab it. Within a year, Rajiv was bogged down in Punjab and then in Sri Lanka—and the momentum was lost forever.

Seventeen years on, the Congress finds itself in less happier circumstances, and Rajiv's widow and party President Sonia seems keen to trudge a

SHARAD SAXENA



BRAIN WAVE: Congress' action plan has its origin in Pitroda's vision

few steps down the road that Pitroda had marked out. The initiative has, of course, come from US-based Pitroda who has updated his Congress Rejuvenation Plan, the document he first prepared in 1986.

In December last year, he approached Sonia and her son Rahul with an omnibus proposal to recharge the Congress batteries. The plan involved bridging the gap between "the leader—clean, honest, hardworking, modern, dedicated, focused"—and the large number of people who "want to overcome the hurdle of vested interests, and party brokers who resisted change".

As a first step, Pitroda recommended the setting up of professionally

managed IT-enabled party offices across India—631 in all, including one at the AICC level, 30 at the PCC level and 600 at the district level—to draw the youth. With the party ruling in 16 states and a fragmented polity at the Centre, the feeling was that the Congress should use its focused and unrivalled leadership to its advantage.

By any political yardstick, Pitroda's plan was unconventional. Some of the party old guard have not forgotten that it was Rajiv's implicit faith in a few close advisers, most without any political moorings, that led to his quick downfall five years after a spectacular launch. Pitroda was one of the advisers. So, unlike her husband, Sonia was circumspect. Not only did she put his unorthodox proposals through the party scanner, but also insisted that the plan, at least in public perception, must not be associated with Pitroda. Several sen-

the grassroots level—there was little difficulty in pushing it through the old guard. In fact, many now feel the POA is a godsend to rev up a desultory organisation for the Lok Sabha elections next year. The meeting of block Congress committees held in Delhi in March—the first such party exercise ever—was one of the first offshoots of the plan. Many more are expected to follow.

AS per Pitroda's suggestion, six committees have been set up to draw up roadmaps for implementing the modernisation plan and the division heads have been given a mid-June deadline to submit their reports. The six panels include Audit, to be headed by Pranab Mukherjee, Vision (Manmohan Singh), Alliances (Ghulam Nabi Azad), Organisation (Motilal Vora), Training (Ram Niwas Mirdha) and Communications and IT (Margaret

He, however, declined to comment on the delinking of his name from the modernisation plan. "I will not say anything now," he said. Party circles insist Pitroda should consider himself lucky if even half of his plan is implemented.

It will be a while before the POA begins to yield results. Beyond engaging the public attention, Sonia has been quietly bracing for the coming elections. She has ordered a one-day workers' convention for all block, district and state members before June 15. The emphasis is on the formation of panchayat committees to ensure the presence of the Congress in every village. It may turn out to be a good strategy considering the Congress' fortunes have shown signs of revival in West Bengal, where it performed better than the Trinamool Congress in the panchayat elections earlier this month. Karnataka, where the party is strongly placed, has become the first state to have

PARTY SCANNER: Senior party leaders head six committees to draw up roadmaps by June

MANMOHAN SINGH: To formulate a long-term strategy for the modernisation of the party to meet future challenges.

GHULAM NABI AZAD: To assess electoral alliances in states.

PRANAB MUKHERJEE: To ascertain if the Congress needs third-party audit of its performance.

RAM NIWAS MIRDHA: To prepare a blueprint for a training programme for the workers.

MARGARET ALVA: To use technology as a tool for improving the party functioning.

MOTILAL VORA: To assess the cost of modernisation.



Manmohan Singh



Ghulam Nabi Azad



Pranab Mukherjee



Ram Niwas Mirdha



Margaret Alva



Motilal Vora

ior leaders were unlikely to take kindly to third-party prescriptions. So Pitroda's rejuvenation plan metamorphosed into the Congress Plan of Action (POA). Though largely drawn from Pitroda's plan, it also relied on inputs received by Sonia from other sources from time to time. As Salman Khurshid, who is in-charge of programme implementation in northern India, says, Pitroda is "just one cog" in the vast precepts that have been made available to the Congress president.

Nomenclature apart, since the Gandhis liked some of Pitroda's ideas—Sonia is said to have been particularly taken by his emphasis on building a strong and sustainable organisation at

Alva). The audit panel, for instance, will examine whether a third-party audit of the party's accomplishments, membership drive and public image would be acceptable to the Congress. Curiously, Mukherjee, when contacted in Kolkata, denied knowledge of any such appointment. It is likely he missed the intimation as he has been away from Delhi because of the panchayat polls.

If the plan succeeds and the Congress fortunes do see an upswing, it is highly unlikely that Chicago-based Pitroda will return to India to claim credit. Pitroda, however, is delighted that things are finally beginning to move. "I am happy the panels have been set up," Pitroda told INDIA TODAY from New York.

3,000 such panels. Explains AICC General-Secretary K. Vayalar Ravi, who is in-charge of the state, "We managed to achieve our target by including all those who contested the panchayat elections."

In the first, and only, general elections that Sonia led in 1999, the Congress returned its worst tally ever. But it cannot be denied that the grand old party under Sonia has retained 16 assemblies in the five years that she has been at the helm. The Pitroda Rejuvenation Plan may have metamorphosed into the Plan of Action, but Congressmen are convinced that if it has to bounce back to power at the Centre next year, innovative party-building measures will do no harm. ■