



Pranab, overwhelmingly

Mukherjee has drawn support across a divided polity. It's an auspicious beginning to his presidency

WITH Pranab Mukherjee's election as the next president of India, the UPA government loses its most experienced minister, and the nation gains a president with immense political stature — who is best equipped to reduce Rashtrapati Bhavan's perceived remoteness from the political landscape. In a nation that reinvents and renews itself through its politics, constantly and vigorously, the aloof and apolitical president has always been something of a misnomer. Under Mukherjee's watch, it is just as well that the myth is poised for a burial.

In a political career spanning over four decades, Mukherjee has earned a reputation, most crucially, for his ability to play the bridging role. Over the years, as the system's connecting points have frayed, Mukherjee has served as a credible link between governance and politics, between party organisation and government, and between government and opposition. It is this ability to reach out — and to be heard — that resulted in his presidential candidature gathering support from across the political fence, be it from the SP, Shiv Sena or the JD(U), more enthusiastically, it even seemed, than from his own party. Mukherjee's skills as a consensus-builder along with his famed memory and deep knowledge and understanding of constitutional principle and practice will help to shape his presidency. Presi-

dent Mukherjee will face manifold challenges, and not just in government formation in 2014, if no party or alliance gets a majority. There are settled conventions to guide the president in situations of a fractured verdict. It is extremely unlikely that any future president of India, much less Mukherjee, will flout them. But there will be other, un-foretold tests. And in those, Mukherjee can be counted on to act with wisdom and restraint, with an awareness of the possibilities and powers of his office and also a keen sensitivity towards its boundaries and limitations. Should India's politics grow more fragmented, with Mukherjee as president, Rashtrapati Bhavan is likely to be the home of perspective, stability and calm.

Purno Sangma has lost the race, but not before he drew attention to himself as a "tribal leader" and raised untiring objection to Mukherjee's candidature. His challenge will be remembered for its undaunted vigour. Meanwhile, the Congress will want to read larger and hopeful things in Mukherjee's election though the party and its coalition look embattled even as its candidate posts a large victory. The time for partisan celebration or stocktaking, however, will come later. This moment is about India getting a president who has drawn support from across the fragmented political spectrum and who, citizens, regardless of political affiliation, can trust to do the right thing.