

Scindia makes his pitch for a syllabus

From KEITH FLORY

NEW DELHI, Friday. - When Mr Madhavrao Scindia addressed his first Press conference as Human Resource Development Minister, he chuckled when confessing to the difficulty in familiarizing himself with the likes of DPEP, DIET, SCERT, DRUs, VECs and so on. Now officials of the Department of Education are struggling to comprehend the jargon that he has brought into vogue — synergy groups, networking, category-specific action plans...

Perhaps not all of them will be required to come to terms with all the "hi-tech lingo", for there are other breezes of change sweeping through that wing of Shastri Bhawan. The Education Secretary is expected to be appointed the Chief Vigilance Commissioner, his successor is already in position. The Additional Secretary is due for promotion, and as many as seven Joint Secretaries too are preparing to make their exit.

Not that the Minister has shown them the door — except, perhaps, in one case — for their

terms at the Centre are running out, or they are ready to move up to higher level appointments. Coincidence all that may be, change it certainly is. Mr Scindia will soon have a fresh team at his command, some of its members selected to suit his style.

While there will always be varied reaction to change, nobody can deny that the HRD Ministry has come alive. Even critics of the new scheme of things admit that Mr Scindia, his comment at the Press conference notwithstanding, has "read the pitch" pretty quickly. And has been making all the right noises these past four months, something for everybody.

The Education Ministers of the States were impressed when he spoke of "partnership", the traditionalists thrilled at his calls for bringing "dignity back to the teaching profession" and making learning "joyful". And the modernists appreciated his suggestion to scrap examinations till Class VIII so as to avoid "the stigma of failure on an im-

pressionable mind".

It was not long before he stirred up some controversy when he spoke of boosting private sector involvement in higher education and had to repeatedly clarify that he had not meant privatizing existing institutions, that he was merely stressing the need for additional sources of funding, and was firmly opposed to any "commercialization" of education. He also had to stress that the Government's commitment

aspect of education.

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to education would never be diluted.

Not one to allow things to remain sluggish, Mr Scindia directed officials to prepare for a 24-hour TV channel dedicated to education, and, continuing in that state-of-the-art vein, called for interlinking the libraries of Indian universities with those abroad. He finally shook up the works when seeking "brainstorming sessions" and forming "synergy groups" to deal with each

those groups to enhance their social status.

Yet the need for the "think tank" approach cannot be written off as irrelevant. Several educationists have contended that for far too long has the subject got bogged down by a bureaucratic approach, little happening beyond those neat notings on the file. As one expert put it, "By involving the industrialists, the Minister has, at least put them on test. Are they will

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ling to accept a social responsibility?"

Not that the Minister has forgotten those generally considered "weak". He has called for boosting education among the minorities, announced an Urdu university to be named after Maulana Azad, and recommended special coaching classes for women from the backward sections seeking higher education.

"All the right noises may be fine, but translating jargon into ground realities is something else", say those who are a bit taken aback by Mr Scindia's approach. "There can be no improvement until the basics are set right, the States refrain from diverting funds earmarked for education, teachers take classes, schools have elementary facilities — in short, do what was supposed to have been done".

Certainly the Minister has created the impression of being a man in a bit of hurry. And that is where a distinct political element enters the picture. With him taking charge of the Mini-

stry less than a year before the **general** elections are scheduled, he has to "show something". If not results, then at least some drive.

In that there is much contrast between the Minister and his predecessor. Mr Arjun Singh had enough political stature to project himself to the forefront of the arena without using his Ministry as a catapult. Mr Scindia is not quite in that league as yet, and outside Madhya Pradesh his clout revolves around the reputation he earned for his efficient handling of the Railways and the not-too-poor-a-job in Civil Aviation and Tourism.

Unfortunately for Mr Scindia, not only does he face a demanding deadline, he is now ploughing a field in which it takes years for a seed to bloom. For him to gather a bouquet of educational roses would be much more difficult than getting the trains to run on time. Maybe as tall an onig as extracting something more than a cardboard smile from an Indian Airlines stewardess.