

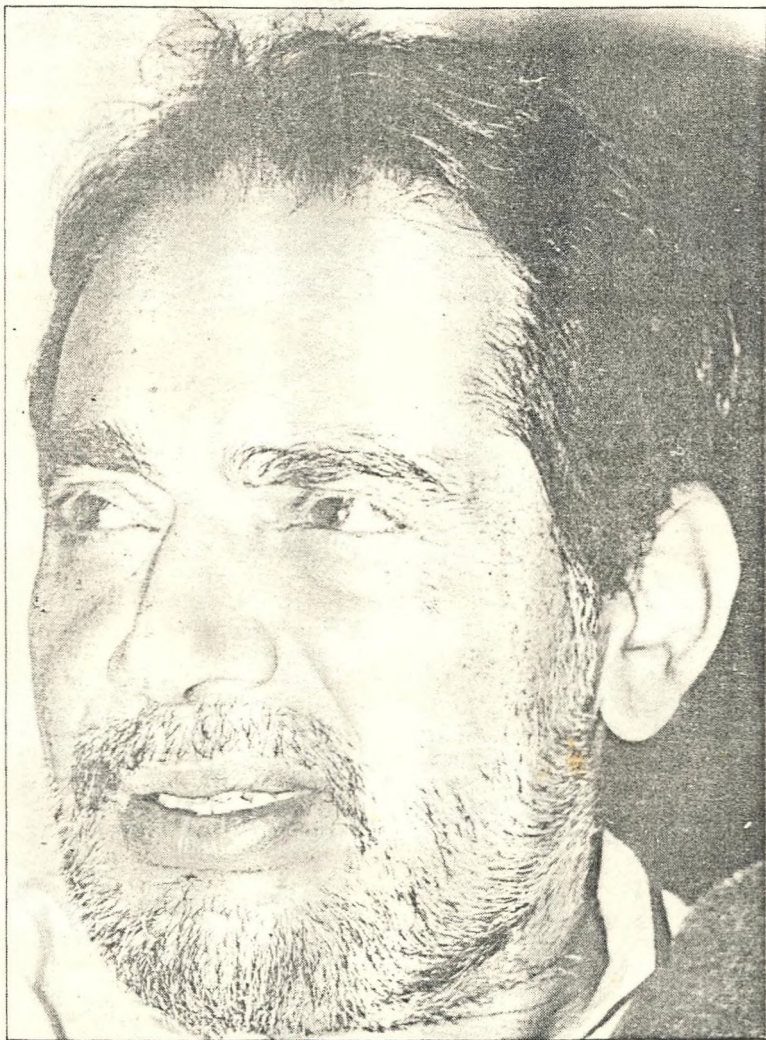
HEGDE'S THINK TANK

Four years ago, Ramakrishna Hegde, the chief minister of Karnataka, set up the Economic and Planning Council (EPC), a high-powered advisory body. How impressive has been this "super cabinet's" performance? What are its shortcomings?

If it had been an episode of *Yes Minister*, the bureaucracy would never have allowed Karnataka chief minister Ramakrishna Hegde to set up a think tank. A non-governmental body of experts to counter the influence of the civil service on the state cabinet? Preposterous, the 'ministerial yes men' would have said. Fortunately, the bureaucrats in Karnataka have neither the Machiavellian instinct nor the political power to intervene so dramatically, and in fact, have settled down to a peaceful coexistence with the Economic and Planning Council (EPC) as the think tank is called.

When Hegde first mooted the idea of the think tank in March 1983, the Opposition accused him of trying to enhance his image, and of currying favour with the intellectuals in the state. Many Janata Party leaders were also against the think tank, which they called a "super cabinet". They feared that it would undermine their authority. But after four years, the leaders have realised that their fears were unfounded. Although the think tank has master-minded a number of plans and offered many suggestions, it has not seriously interfered with the working of either the bureaucracy or the council of ministers.

Ramakrishna Hegde may have taken his cue from Kerala's Achuta Menon, who had set up a similar advisory body in the Fifties. In fact, the EPC's advisory functions are undertaken in other states by the state planning boards. One problem with state planning boards, however, is that they often degenerate into extensions of the bureaucracy, and cease to come up with fresh ideas. But no other advisory body has the glamour or the unqualified support of the CM of the state. The EPC has 12 permanent members, with Hegde as chairman and former Planning Commission member, Dr G.V.K. Rao, as vice-chairman. Four members including the chief secretary and the planning secretary one from the state government and the others are leading intellectuals as well as friends of the CM.



CM Ramakrishna Hegde: a 'New Deal' for his people

The think tank has the ears of the chief minister, who is said to listen avidly and faithfully to its prolonged debates, and of course, he in turn, has the collective ear of the cabinet. That is how many of the think tank's recommendations have found their way into state policy.