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POLITICAL DIARY

Gogoi's Assam challenge

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President's rule in Assam was extended by six months from December 30. Constitutionally, there was no great urgency in installing a "popular" Government in the State. A Constitutional crisis would have arisen if no Government was formed by June 30, 1982. The Constitution provides for a State under President's rule for an unspecified period at a stretch.

Under the Congress, particularly under Mrs Indira Gandhi's Prime Ministership, such rule, once imposed, often prevailed for periods well exceeding a year. When Mr Morarji Desai was the Prime Minister a Constitutional amendment was passed debarring the Centre from keeping a State under President's rule for more than a year at a stretch.

Late in 1980, Mr L. P. Singh, the then Governor of Assam, put in office a Congress(I) government headed by Mrs Anwara Taimur. This was done a few days before the expiry of the permissible one-year period of President's rule. Mr Singh had done this after rejecting the claim of Mr Sarat Chandra Sinha, leader of the party known as the Congress(Socialist). The Leftists, particularly the CPI(M), had then adopted an ambivalent attitude.

Mrs Taimur's government fell when the Leftists, who constitute a bloc of 23 in a House of 118, opposed it during the Budget session. The Appropriation Bill could not be passed. The Governor certified it and thereby set a precedent in India's Parliamentary history.

A few months ago Mr L. P. Singh was replaced by Mr Prakash Mehrotra as Governor. Mr Singh, a retired I.C.S. man, knew that he could not hope for any more important office than that of a Governor. Not so Mr Mehrotra. A former M.P., he is a devout follower of Mrs Gandhi. He never rose beyond the middle rank of leaders in the Congress(I). Governorship cannot be the ultimate aim of a politician of his age, especially of one who has come to enjoy Mrs Gandhi's confidence. Any Congress(I) member in his position would consider Governorship merely as a stepping stone to Ministership, preferably at the Centre under Mrs Gandhi. Mr Mehrotra's future depends upon what he is able to do for the Congress(I) in Assam.

Both Constitutional urgency and

political necessity were behind Mr L. P. Singh's decision to put a Congress(I) Government in office. For Mr Mehrotra the urgency in ushering in a Congress(I) Government was political. He has on his own admission invited Mr Keshab Chandra Gogoi to form a Government even though he knows that the leader of the Congress(I) Legislature Party does not have a majority. He has told the press that he has allowed Mr Gogoi to form a Government because he leads the "single largest party" in the Assembly. He was indeed in such a hurry that he had Mr Gogoi sworn in at short notice at night. Even after eight days of being sworn in, Mr Gogoi was unable to constitute his Council of Ministers. This is a difficult task. The Chief Minister has to satisfy the many groups in which his party is divided and, at the same time, throw enough baits of office to draw in more MLAs who are on the borderline to show a majority.

The Governor rejected Mr Sarat Chandra Sinha's claim to form a Government not because he had been unable to claim majority support but because, as the Governor himself said, the support extended to him by some MLAs was "unstable" and because some groups in the Left and Democratic Alliance would not join his Government. He has condescended to say, however, that he will invite Mr Sinha to form a Government if he can show on the floor of the Assembly that he has majority support. This procedure was, of course, not necessary for him to follow in swearing in Mr Gogoi. It would, he knew, have been presumptuous on his part to ask Mr Gogoi to show him the programme he proposed to carry out, as he had done when, a few months ago also, Mr Sinha had wanted to form a Government as the leader of the Left and Democratic Alliance.

The Alliance leaders and particularly Mr Sinha have been angered by Mr Mehrotra's behaviour. The Governor, they say, is guilty of "unprincipled imposition" of a minority Government on the State. "The Governor", says Mr Sinha, "brazenly retracted his own promise not to impose a minority Ministry." Mr Sinha, who has spent his life in the service of the Congress, should know better than many others that the Constitution has two faces, one for the Congress(I) and the other for the parties opposed to it.

A Governor, particularly of the type of Mr Mehrotra, has to say one thing to the non-Congress(I) parties and another to the Congress(I). If he does not do that, not only will his political future be dark, he will, like Mr T. N. Singh, be shunted out of office. A Governor has to be a political operator for the party by whose grace he comes to occupy such a supposedly dignified office.

It is, however, in the fitness of things that Mrs Gandhi has chosen Mr Gogoi to head the Assam Congress(I) Legislature Party and its Government and that Mr Mehrotra has displayed extreme eagerness to put the mantle of Chief Ministership on him. The Congress(I) Legislature Party is a party overwhelmingly of defectors. Mr Gogoi is one of this tribe's famous politicians. He was returned to the Assembly on a Janata ticket in February 1978 and was a Minister in Mr Golap Borbora's Janata led Government. When that Government fell, he promptly joined Mr Jogen Hazarika's Assam Janata Dal and, once again, became a Minister. When this Government, too, went out of office, he switched his loyalty to the Congress(I). After Assam had been through almost a year of President's rule, Mrs Taimur formed a Government. Mr Gogoi was in her Cabinet. Now, he has become Chief Minister himself.

Mr Mehrotra would not allow Mr Sarat Chandra Sinha to form a Government, one reason cited by him being that some MLAs had extended to him "unstable support". How stable was the support extended to Mrs Taimur by some groups when she was called upon by Mr L. P. Singh to form Government? The collapse of her Government during the Budget session provides the answer. But the Governor was then inviting the Congress(I), not any other party or combination of parties, to form a Government. That yardstick was inapplicable in the case of a non-Congress(I) alliance, even assuming that Mr Mehrotra was honestly advancing the plea of "unstable support" by some MLAs.

Mr Mehrotra's other argument to keep the Left and Democratic Alliance out of office was that some groups would not join a Government formed by it. In other words, it is obvious, the Governor knew that the groups he was speaking of would back a Government as members of the

Alliance without joining the Government itself. India does not lack in instances of Governments functioning without all its supporting groups having representation in Cabinets. In 1967, Mr Dharma Vira dismissed the United Front Government headed by Mr Ajoy Mukherjee in West Bengal and installed as Chief Minister a defector from the Front, Dr Prafulla Chandra Ghosh, whose group constituted a tiny minority in the Assembly but had the backing in the Assembly of the undivided Congress of those days and some small groups. But, then, the Governor at that time had to keep the Front out of power, whatever the means adopted. Dr Ghosh's regime was intended to be an interim one to pave the path for the Congress to return to power in a future election. That Mrs Gandhi's, and hence Mr Dharma Vira's tactics produced a different result in 1969 is another matter.

Mrs Taimur had been made leader of the Assam Congress(I) Legislature Party after the Congress(I) central leadership had done permutation and combination of caste, linguistic, racial and religious composition of the Assam Assembly and decided that she had the fairest chance to run a stable Government. This proved illusive not merely because the Leftists went against her. Her tenure was made miserable by factional quarrels within her party based not on political principles or programmes of work but on caste differences.

Mrs Taimur did not give up leadership of the Assam Congress(I) Legislature Party of her own will. She had given every indication of sticking to the post, but she was obliged to resign by Mrs Gandhi whose voice alone matters, if we ignore the role being played by Mr Rajiv Gandhi from behind the scene. In fact, Mrs Taimur was under instruction to propose the name of Mr Gogoi in her place. This facade of unity did not last a minute. Four MLAs of the party forthwith resigned saying that Mrs Taimur had been "removed from leadership of the party without any reason". Three of them also announced their decision to support Mr Sinha's claim. Mr Gogoi, it appears, has greater troubles ahead of him from within his party and from the constituents of the Left and Democratic Alliance than had Mrs Taimur.