

HARYANA

Governor's Disgrace



EIGHTEEN hours after Haryana Governor Ganapatrao Devji Tapase committed the most undemocratic *faux pas* in India's political history, he was cowering on a sofa in the Chandigarh Raj Bhavan's

large reception hall. "This is Haryana!" yelled apoplectic Lok Dal MLAs, eyes blood-shot, neck veins bulging, pressing around the diminutive Tapase in a knee-touching, eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation. "The bullets are going to fly," they chorused, "blood's going to flow!"

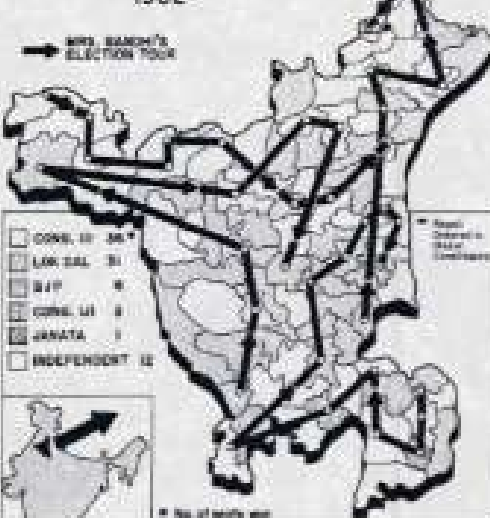
Tapase is 73 years old, suffers from herpes, wears a perpetually pained expression, and seems incapable of engaging in coherent conversation. As the verbal assault intensified, led by Lok Dal leader and chief minister-aspirant Devi Lal, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader Dr Mangal Singh, and lawyers Parkash Singh Daulta and Maharaj Singh, Tapase could only mumble in protest. At one point, as his hand involuntarily rose to touch his chin, it was brushed brusquely aside by Devi Lal. Growled the hefty Jat leader as he tweaked the governor's chin: "You slave of Indira Gandhi, do you think you can get away with what you've done?"

It was incredible political drama, a savage satire on electoral politics, and Tapase had only himself to blame for the mess. That Monday's fracas in the august gubernatorial residence only peaked a sordid week-end. The sequence began the previous Friday, May 21, when the future of power in the 90-seat Haryana Assembly hung precariously in the balance with the Congress(I) winning 35 seats and the Lok Dal 31. Partner in an uneasy poli alliance

with the Lok Dal, the BJP won six seats.

Large Turnover: The head-hunt for securing a majority began then, with the Lok Dal-BJP combine claiming the additional support of three Congress (Jagjivan Ram) supporters, one Janata M.L.A. and half-a-dozen independents. In a state where party programmes and performance have long ago lost meaning, where legislators solicit buyers

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like strumpets in a sleazy brothel, and where the buying and selling of assembly seats must constitute the industry with the largest cash turnover, it was symbolic that the Congress(I) should move its men *en masse* to Delhi to "decide" the leadership issue.

So it was that on Saturday, May 22, while Devi Lal rushed to and from the Raj Bhavan, first to demand the dismissal of the Congress(I) ministry and then to press his own claim for the chief ministership, the

squat and swarthy incumbent of that post, Bhajan Lal, was himself trying to convince the High Command—which meant Indira Gandhi and her son Rajiv—that he was the only person who could deliver the goods.

The bargaining at 1 Safdarjung Road and at Haryana Bhavan in Delhi went on well into the afternoon. After all, Bhajan Lal had established an utterly amoral and unscrupulous track record during his chief ministership, right from the moment he walked over with 40 Janata MLAs into the Congress(I) camp soon after the 1980 general elections.

Worse, it was clear that Haryana's voters hadn't forgiven the largest-ever defection in that citadel of defection. Ten of Bhajan Lal's 14 ministers had been thrashed in the elections on May 19, and of the 21 hard core followers he secured tickets for, 16 were wiped off the electoral slate.

Foul Choice: In the end, faced with the fact that it had failed to establish a majority by fair means, the Congress(I) was forced to plump for the foul choice of letting Bhajan Lal loose in the market-place of legislative flesh, and he was "unanimously" elected leader of the Congress(I) Legislature Party.

At just about that time, Governor Tapase was telling Devi Lal in Chandigarh to physically parade his supporters in the Raj Bhavan on Monday, May 24, so that he could verify the coalition's claims of majority. In what was an orchestrated move, Devi Lal was chosen to spearhead the Opposition's bid for power.

Within hours of receiving the go-ahead in the sweepstakes from Tapase, Devi Lal's son Om Prakash, aided by Akali Dal leader and former Punjab chief minister Prakash Singh Badal, had succeeded in shepherding most of the coalition's MLAs into the swank Hotel Shivalik at Parwanoo in Himachal Pradesh, right across the border from Kalka. Designating himself the "independent-in-chief", Lachhman Singh strutted around the holiday resort, supervising the hideaway's creature comforts.

It was all very hush-hush, a scenario Mario Puzo could base his next novel on. At a big group of colourful Nihang Sikhs and a contingent of other Badal-assigned guards, armed to the teeth with swords and guns, kept intruders away and the precious legislators inside the hotel, Devi Lal frantically tried to rope in more men on his side.

Trump Card: Meanwhile, Bhajan Lal was playing his trump card. That hot Sunday, May 23, the wily political trader returned from Delhi in the Haryana Government's twin-engined Beechcraft at 3 p.m., and hurried to Raj Bhavan. An hour and a quarter later, Bhajan Lal emerged and smugly told newsmen that he would have something for them in a while. A little later,

Bhajan Lal after his swearing-in: a coup d'état



persistent reporters forced Tapase to spill the beans: that he would swear Bhajan Lal in by 6.30 p.m. "Haven't you received the notification?" he asked.

Events unfolded with indecent haste thereafter. Tapase went back to his office for a confrontation with five Lok Dal leaders, who had been kept waiting while the governor worked things out with Bhajan Lal and Haryana Chief Secretary Ishwar Chander. Then, Tapase came out to swear in a Bhajan Lal clad in natty *sherwani* and *churidars*, to raucous cries from close to a thousand supporters. Moments before the ceremony, Bhajan Lal performed the farcical duty of resigning along with his cabinet from the previous government. The political *coup d'état* had an air of having been arranged well in advance.

FROM the very beginning, the political dice had been loaded in Bhajan Lal's favour. Haryana's infamous chief minister belongs to the Bishnoi community in Rajasthan, a deeply religious sect that fanatically protects wildlife in the Udaipur region. The same zeal seems to have been used by Bhajan Lal in acquiring that ultimate two-legged animal, the Haryana legislator.

His forte is the psychological soft-sell, and Bhajan Lal is a very good psychologist. His admirers and enemies both admit that he can pick out a man's weak spots and strike stealthily at them. "He's so good to you, so solicitous, so polite and anxious to woo you that you don't even realise you've been purchased," says a man who is sure to become a minister in Bhajan Lal's new cabinet.

Factions: Currently, the Congress(I) in Haryana is divided into so many camps, it could easily be called a coalition. Apart from Bhajan Lal's group, there is former state party president Harpal Singh's group; former minister of state Dalbir Singh's group; Union Agriculture Minister Rao Birendra Singh's group; Bansi Lal's formidable group; Chaudhury Chand Ram's Harijan group; and Chiranjee Lal Sharma's Brahmin group. There is also the Jat leader, Shamsher Singh Surjewala, a loyal Congressman who was elected in spite of attempted sabotage by Bhajan Lal and later tried to stake his claim to the chief ministership.

It was ironical, and indicative of the imperatives of defection politics, that Surjewala was ultimately forced to propose Bhajan Lal's name in Delhi for leadership of the legislature party. In contrast with the miserable performance of Bhajan Lal's men, Bansi Lal got seven of his eight candidates elected—including his son Surinder Singh, who won from Tosham with the largest margin, 25,628 votes.

The key to power lay with the independents, who won 12 seats. At least eight of these were Congress(I) rebels, denied party tickets at the last moment, who had nevertheless defeated the official candidates. It was humiliating for the Congress(I), but the party had to eat crow, dangle ministerships as bait, and buy back the very people it had kicked aside a few weeks earlier. Bhajan Lal's list, submitted to Tapase on May 23, had 41 names—and these included six independents: Rahim Khan from Nuh, Lachhman Dass Arora from Sirsa, Chada Singh from Nilokheri, Sharda Rani from Ballabgarh, Rajender Singh from Kaliana, and Lachhman Singh from Kalka.

Example: Lachhman Singh symbolises the machinations of defection politics. After roundly abusing Bhajan Lal in public, and participating in every high-profile Lok Dal gambit, Lachhman Singh suddenly failed to sign the memorandum, signed by Devi Lal and his 44 men to prove the coalition's strength on May 24. When the coalition's MLAs were driven in a tourist bus directly from the Parwanoo 'camp' to the Raj Bhavan that afternoon for the physical parade the governor had demanded and then pre-empted, Lachhman Singh was missing.

Devi Lal was told by some supporters that the shifty Sikh had been arrested early that morning at Kalka in connection with a shooting incident during the campaign in Pinjore town. By evening that day, Lachhman Singh had proclaimed support for Bhajan Lal. This was the very man who, 48 hours earlier, had loudly boasted: "Bhajan Lal rang me up from Delhi and asked me how much money I wanted. I asked him: how much could I buy him for?"

Another great turnabout was executed by Col Rao Ram Singh's Congress(I) group.

Speaker of the last Assembly, he had quit the Congress(I) with his supporters after a feud with Rao Birendra Singh. His victories in the Ahir belt—and the defeat of Birendra Singh's people such as Rao Bansi Singh, Rao Dalip Singh and Sumitra Devi—had cracked Birendra Singh's hold.

Shifting Scenes: Ram Singh, who had once in "self defence" fired into a crowd mobbing him, joined Devi Lal in berating Tapase on May 24. But as he also met Rajiv Gandhi "to give him details of Rao Birendra's defectors", the shift was already in the making. After the Devi Lal party bussed down to Delhi to meet President Sanjiva Reddy, Haryana police rudely awakened Ram Singh in Haryana Bhavan and confronted him with the shooting incident. Later, both Bhajan Lal and Devi Lal barged in to drag him away and retreated only when he pulled out his revolver. Hours later, Ram Singh said he was "reviewing" his support for the Lok Dal-ur alliance, and added that he was going to meet Mrs Gandhi.

Devi Lal also needed to hang on to his independents, among them Hukam Singh from Salhawas and Sampat Singh from Bhattu Kalan, both former Lok Dal members who had been denied tickets but had won anyway. The Lok Dal also gathered independents Ram Singh from Radaur and Roshan Lal Tiwari from Kaithal, just before the party legislators' meeting on May 22. But the most precious trophies were Phool Chand of Mullana and Lal Singh of Naraingarh.

There was talk of guarding the legislators, and Badal offered the shelter of a gurudwara and Nihangs. Lal Singh's and Phool Chand's wives tried to 'rescue' their husbands from Devi Lal's clutches—the implication that they had been kidnapped was

Tapase with Devi Lal and Mangal Sein: eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation



repeated by Tapase himself when he tried to pooh-pooh Devi Lal's majority claim. Lal Singh nearly slipped away with his wife, but Devi Lal shepherded him back on to the bus outside the governor's residence.

It was a dreary ending to the confrontation with Tapase, who had kept the group waiting for nearly two hours while he consulted Joint Legal Remembrancer R.K. Gupta about the constitutional aspects of the Devi Lal camp's foremost demands—that Tapase ought to summon the Assembly immediately and force Bhajan Lal to prove his majority.

Sorry Chapter: Tapase predictably rejected this request later, and it was clear that Bhajan Lal had more than a month to woo, buy and coerce support for his minority government. It was an extraordinary ending to a sorry chapter, a mess worsened by the

sworn in, when asked how many MLAs his party could buy, he cockily told INDIA TODAY: "Do you think those who sell themselves are going to tell you?"

Sure enough, when Bhajan Lal's 18-member Cabinet was sworn in on May 27, the independents got four cabinet posts, and three ministries of state: Lachman Singh, who had shown the crooked path of defection to his fellow independents, was followed by Sharda Rani, Phool Chand, Rajinder Singh, Lal Singh, Chanda Singh and Rahim Khan. And, although Ram Singh had denied that Bhajan Lal was trying to force him to join by holding out the threat of arrest, the ex-speaker meekly went over. Even more painful for Devi Lal was the defection of a full-fledged Lok Dal MLA, Brij Mohan Singla. Hypocritically, the Congress(I) decided to re-admit all the de-

In the end, it was a moral blunder. Tapase's part, and that was glossed over. legal experts tried to justify his action. PM Minister Indira Gandhi called on President Reddy on May 25 to list several 'precedents' for reposing faith in the largest single party in the event of a legislative stalemate.

But the Congress(I) failed to respond to the point that if Tapase's questionable yardstick was used, Kerala Governor J.V. Venkatachellum would have had to ask a leader E.K. Nayanar to form a government, since his was the largest single party in the newly-elected Assembly. Yet, Venkatachellum had bestowed power on the Congress(I)-led United Democratic Front—a very sort of loose coalition that Tapase doubted would hold together in Haryana.

Election Fraud: It was clear therefore that in Haryana—and in neighbouring Himachal Pradesh—the Congress(I) had used the levers of power in Delhi to run minority ministries down the electoral throat. Once Bhajan Lal occupied the ministerial chair, he could easily hold cabinet posts before prospective defectors. Simply put, the proceeds of the sale of tickets to prospective candidates were now partly being used to buy defectors—leaving a profit for future transactions.

Tapase is due to retire from his post in October this year. An old Harijan Congress(O) follower of Morarji Desai, he served in Desai's Bombay cabinet. On the stormy Monday in Chandigarh's Raj Bhavan, he was reminded bluntly by the Lok Dal leader that he had been appointed by the Janata government, that he had swallowed the insult of being transferred from Uttar Pradesh to Haryana in February 1980, and that he was a Harijan governor who should consider that there were 11 Harijans among the Opposition MLAs.

Although no one, not even President Reddy, could undo the damage Tapase had wrought, there was no doubt that the governor had set a new and disturbing precedent in a state where legislators can be bought over the counter, where a man like Gaya Lal switched sides four times on a single day in 1967, and Hiranand Arya (now a Lok Dal MLA) six times within 36 hours a year later. Worse still, despite the voters' rejection of defectors, despite the defeats of most of Bhajan Lal's hand-picked men, Indira Gandhi and her son have been forced to fall back upon that archetypal defector.

A fraud has been perpetrated on Haryana's voters; they have got a government they don't deserve, a government of men with no morals or ideology, willing to sell their elected posts to the highest bidder in this auction of ill-bred horse-flesh.

—CHAITANYA KALBAG in Chandigarh



Lok Dal MLAs entertain independent Lal Singh (centre) while rifle-toting guard keeps watch

governor's blunder of hastily bestowing chief ministership on Bhajan Lal. If Tapase had waited until after Devi Lal's men's identification parade on May 24, to announce that he favoured the largest party over the largest coalition, he would have been on firm ground for Article 163(2) of the Constitution clearly states that the governor's decision about ministry formation "shall be final and the validity of his decision is not open to question in a court of law".

Although the Congress(I) backed down a little and announced on May 26 that the Assembly session would be summoned much before Tapase's deadline, it was clear that Bhajan Lal had already succeeded in luring back enough independent MLAs to form a majority government. The day after he was

fecting independents into the party, revoking the 6-year suspension slapped on them when they stood as independents.

Clear Signals: What will be interesting is how Bhajan Lal accommodates minister-aspirants from the other Congress(I) factions. Independent Lal Singh had signalled his intention clearly during the opposition MLAs' noisy encounter with the governor when he told reporters: "Even if Bhajan Lal forms a ministry with the majority, I shall then ask my voters which side I should support, and if they say Bhajan Lal, then I will join him. Write this also: that Devi Lal has got me here only because he had promised me a ministership." Significantly, Lal Singh who was a deputy minister in the outgoing cabinet, has been promoted to minister of state.