

## SPECIAL REPORT

FOCUS ON NORTH-EAST

# Assam: Why the Minority Govt Continues

Not because it wants to solve the foreigners issue

**I**N Assam, a Chief Minister who is unpopular in her own party is being kept on, a minority government is being propped up, and the powers that be seem uninterested in solving the foreigners issue. In Manipur, the Assembly has been suspended while the Congress(I) works to buy back its deserters, return to power, and stave off exposure of its complicity in mind-boggling corruption. Honesty and peace have no place in the schemes of Congress(I) politicians in these troubled states, only personal enrichment and skulduggery. And Delhi is actively involved in this gigantic deception. Chaitanya Kalbag spent a week in Gauhati and Imphal last fortnight to investigate. His reports:

**W**HEN Anwara Taimur's Ministry survived through the budget session of the Assam Assembly last fortnight, it was because the centre flagrantly violated parliamentary ethics and saw to it that a Congress(I) government remained in the troubled state. The survival of the 46-member ruling Party, clearly a minority in a House of 121, was itself unprecedented.

Even more blatant was the manner in which Governor LP Singh promulgated the Appropriations Bill (vote on account) Ordinance before the Assembly was adjourned *sine die* and prorogued. Blatant, because the Opposition had passed two cut motions on the Assam budget, thereby defeating the Government constitutionally. A Home Ministry spokesman in Delhi even went so far as to say the Government had fallen. Yet, the Governor was persuaded to issue the Ordinance so that a Congress(I) government would remain. A spokesman of the Prime Minister's secretariat meanwhile said that the ministry had not fallen since the Assembly had "passed the Appropriations Bill". Only in the event of President's Rule can a Governor pass such an Ordinance.

In any case the vote on account is valid only for four months, at the end of which the Taimur Ministry will again have to face the House in order to get the budget passed. What will happen then? Another Ordinance? Obviously, Mrs Gandhi wants to keep her Party in power at any cost.

The truth is, a bumbling politician like Anwara Taimur got to be Assam's CM, heading a minority Government, only because the Centre knew that President's Rule cannot last beyond a year, and that year had almost run out



Mrs Taimur with Saharia: rivals for power

when Mrs Taimur took over on 6 December. During President's Rule, the Congress (I)'s strength went up from eight to 46, because mass defections were engineered. There is no Constitution, as far as the Congress(I) is concerned, in Assam.

**L**AST fortnight, as Assam's students dutifully appeared for their examinations and the agitation neared the end of a long lull, agitation leaders were livid about the fact that they had been upstaged by the Prime Minister. "The agitation is now being used by Mrs Gandhi for her personal self-aggrandisement," said an agitation leader.

Of Mrs Taimur's 45 colleagues in the Assembly 26 have, so far, signed a petition to Mrs Gandhi, asking her to remove Mrs Taimur forthwith from

the Chief Ministership. The petition charges many ministers of corruption involving "huge sums of money", deprecates Mrs Taimur's haughty behaviour, and accuses her husband of interference in Government.

Mrs Taimur certainly was an odd choice, considering Assam was passing through such a crisis. She was 'nominated' by Pranab Mukherjee, upstaging Yashpal Kapur's nominee Hiteswar Saikia. Which was ironical, because Mrs Taimur was once Saikia's deputy minister. When NEW DELHI interviewed her on 29 March, Mrs Taimur said there was no basis for the rumour that she was going to be unseated. All searching questions had to be passed on to Home Minister Ramesh Saharia, who was present. Ironical again, because Saharia is one of the dissident leaders (Finance Minister Keshub Gogoi is another).

The manner in which the ministry was saved is still resounding in the corridors of Dispur, Assam's administrative capital. Four members of the

Plains Tribals Council of Assam (P-TCA), one of the sponsors of the no-confidence motion that came up on 24 March, have as much as admitted that they were bought off, and so switched, at the very last minute, to vote for the Government. Mrs Taimur's hands were vastly strengthened by carpetbagger Yashpal Kapur, who had earlier stopped by, placing, it is alleged, a huge monetary *carte blanche* at her disposal.

Troubleshooters Narayan Dutt Tiwari and Prem Khandu Thungon, aided by INTUC boss NK Bhatt, helped persuade eight disgruntled Cong(I) MLAs—representing tea-garden labour—to desist from mischief. No less persuasive was Special IGP Samar Dass, who went beyond the call of duty and whisked incoming Congress(I) MLAs to the Dispur hostel



complex, where they were told to fall in line, or else.

**CPM's case:** The CPM, which along with its allies the CPI, the RCPI and the SUCI, abstained from the no-confidence vote, thereby saving the ministry, was accused of selling out, of concluding a secret deal—support in Assam in exchange for continuance in power in West Bengal, Tripura and Kerala. Sarat Chandra Sinha, leader of the Congress(U) group, even said that the CPM wanted to launch a new daily, and the Congress(I) would be financing it.

The truth lay elsewhere. The CPM and its allies abstained because they were terrified. The ministry's collapse would mean re-imposition of indefinite President's Rule, rejuvenation of the agitation, and cold-blooded attacks on Left Parties' workers. That there was no deal was evident from the fact that the Congress(I) staged a violent anti-Left Front demonstration in Calcutta on 30 March. The Leftists abstained in the interests of their own survival, not Mrs Taimur's.

That, too, was not for lack of intimidation of Leftist MLAs by agitation leaders, who secretly visited the former before the no-confidence vote and ordered the toppling of the Government. The Dispur complex (which includes the Assembly, the secretariat, and MLAs' houses) is heavily guarded—security that did not prevent unknown culprits from exploding two bombs outside opposition MLAs' houses on 18 March.

Special IGP Dass, a Bengali from Cachar who was brought in precipitously just before the Assembly convened (replacing an efficient officer called Mihir Barua) was accused in the Assembly by Janata deputy leader Dulal Chandra Baruah of involvement in the bomb blasts. "These bomb blasts, and others before them, have been engineered by the Government in order to oppress and suppress the legitimate agitation," says Baruah. "Dass and Mrs Taimur's husband were in room 82 in the MLAs' hostel an hour before the first blast on the 18th."

Mrs Taimur hasn't helped any by her behaviour. Her closest adviser AF Golam Osmani does not know anything about the Brahmaputra Valley. He represents Silchar, capital of the predominantly Bengali Cachar district. And Cachar is not exactly looked upon as 'patriotic' by agitationists. To top this, Osmani is a defector—he was in the Janata Ministry as well, and he is charged in his own party-men's petition of being very corrupt.

Most of the 46 Congress(I) MLAs, anyway, are defectors, and this exposes the duplicity of Assamese politicians. These gentlemen have been gifted no less than 43 chairmanships of state corporations.

**N**OT that Mrs Taimur has ignored her other constituents. She is the first Muslim Chief Minister in Assam since the 1940s, when Mohammad Saadulla ruled a much bigger state. And Muslim politicians are suspected in Assam of having strong vested interests in immigration from Bangladesh. Witness the way Mrs Taimur has exacerbated antipathy against Muslims:

- All seven deputy superintendents of police appointed since Mrs Taimur's takeover are Muslims.

- Mrs Taimur's principal private secretary is a Muslim.

- Revenue Minister (a key post) is Mohammed Idris.

- Forest and Civil Supplies secretary is Arif Ali.

- Abdul Mohib Mazumdar was made Advocate-General. However, there was a big uproar because he had superseded NM Lahiri (Adv-Gen of Meghalaya) and JP Bhattacharjee (Adv-Gen of Nagaland) who were nominees of dissident Congress(I)



LP Singh: willing to be bent by Congress (I)

leaders Keshub Gogoi and Ramesh Saharia. Mazumdar was forced to resign.

- Mrs Taimur's husband is director of transport. An attempt was made to give him the directorate of Land Revenue—another sensitive post.

- Both Speaker Sheikh Chand Mohammed and Deputy Speaker Ghiasuddin Ahmed have invited Opposition ire. Speaker Mohammed took the unprecedented step on 30 March of reversing his own order, allowing the Taimur Ministry to withdraw a supplementary demand rejected by a voice vote and thus sidestepping a crisis that would have meant definite resignation by the Ministry.

And the Taimur Ministry has actively supported the All Assam Minorities Students Union (AAM-SU), a counterpoint to the AASU-led agitation, and the Citizens Rights Pre-

servation Committee (CRPC), both of which are mobilising anti-agitation sentiment.

The result? The agitation, which was mainly anti-Bengali, has turned communal now, against the Muslims. But the Congress(I) will benefit, ultimately, from this. Even supposing Mrs Taimur were removed and given some sop, Muslim sympathy will have overwhelmingly turned towards the Cong(I) by then. If then an Assamese Chief Minister is installed, Assamese feelings will 'be assuaged'. But the minorities will have had enough breathing space to mobilise, recoup strength, and 'organise for a strong counter-agitation, should the agitation itself be resumed.

What ought to have been done by the ministry was to take urgent steps to improve the state's economy, and to head towards an amicable solution of the foreigners issue. Instead, more than three months have been spent on ensuring the ministry's survival, and never have horses been traded at a higher price. Now, a little more secure, the government intends to carry out mass transfers of Assamese bureaucrats, who are largely sympathetic towards the agitation. This will only end up in increased tension, while the root cause will remain.

**Govt duplicity:** Sources in Gauhati indicate that the Government may not really want to solve the problem quickly, for two reasons:

- An open border will facilitate large-scale smuggling, in which Congress(I) leaders are alleged to have a hand. Huge quantities of foodgrains are allegedly smuggled out to Bangladesh. A merchant called Motilal Kothari, for instance, is the eighth-biggest grain merchant in India, with a yearly turnover of over Rs 4 crores. Assam's grain business is certainly not that vast.

- Mukti Bahini chief 'Tiger' Siddiqui is known to be organising a guerrilla band owing allegiance to Sheikh Mujibur Rehman's memory and committed to overthrowing General Zia-ur-Rahman. Siddiqui is known to have been in Assam two years ago for a long period, and his men are reported to be undergoing training even now in Assam's *char* areas (where most immigrants have settled), occasionally foraging across the border.

Meanwhile, although the agitation is ostensibly off now, it may be resumed soon—and in a far more dangerous manner. Golap Borbora, 56, leader of the Janata Legislative Party and former CM, makes no secret of his sympathies here.

"Forty-seven CRPF battalions are currently stationed in Assam," he says. "Even Gandhiji's 1942 agitation lasted only a year and a half. The agitation is not finished. Mrs Taimur professes sympathy for the minorities, and she will certainly not stop im-

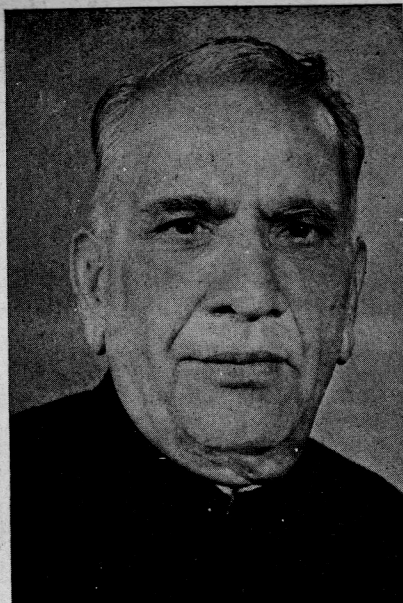


migration. Even the Berlin wall has not stopped people from escaping Communist East Germany."

There is the shadowy, and sinister, role being played by the Special Services Bureau (SSB), a loose organisation whose members are trained in guerrilla tactics and were originally intended to counter possible Chinese infiltration. Nishikanta Changkakati, director-in-charge of the Assam SSB, who had earlier implicated by the Bhatnagar Commission of involvement in riots in Dibrugarh in 1972, is alleged to be helping members of the secretive North East Region Students Union (NERSU), whose aims are not entirely patriotic.

Then there is Biraja Nanda Chaudhury, a former SSB official, who along with his daughter Rita (who is called the Ajitha of Assam—Ajitha Nair is one of Kerala's most celebrated Naxalites) has been arrested and is under interrogation in Dibrugarh, has confessed to organising the Jatiya Rakkhi Bahini, a paramilitary organisation that was training at two camps near Margherita, and was involved in most of the attacks on minorities.

**Costly delays:** There are many more straws in the wind, and they all point towards a renewal of the agitation,



*Vyas: a poor choice for Governor*

most probably in a violent form. And yet, the Centre continues to procrastinate.

The coming as Governor of Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Nagaland and Tripura, of Ram Kishore Vyas will not help improve this explosive situation.

Vyas, who is in his seventies, is a hard-bitten Rajasthani politician. He is the leader of the powerful Brahmin Lobby in his state. And he is being shunted off to the North-east only because the Congress(I) High Command does not want him to rock Jagannath Pahadia's boat.

What the North-east now requires is a younger, efficient and conscientious bureaucrat, not a politician like Vyas who will be wearing his party loyalty on his sleeve, and will presumably be interested only in protecting Congress(I) interests in the region. Moreover, Vyas's political knowledge extends only to Rajasthan. He knows nothing about the North-east, and cannot be expected to learn too much at his age. Clearly, then, another potentially disastrous choice.

What is clear from all this is that Mrs Gandhi, and the Congress(I) want to protect their interests in Assam come what may. Even the possibility of violence is being anticipated by organising counter-violence. As one intellectual said in Gauhati last week: "Mrs Gandhi has set fire to a huge bale of hay in order to roast a small potato." The problem is, she may never be able to put out the flames.

## MANIPUR

# Why the Congress(I) Wants Power Again

**Because it is so deeply involved in corruption**

**T**HE No 1 Public Enemy in Manipur is not insurgency, it is corruption. And the man running the state government now—Gian Chand Baveja—seems determined to crack down. Baveja, 56, a low-key bureaucrat, arrived in Imphal on 8 March to take over as Adviser to the Governor (President's Rule was imposed on 28 February). "The corruption here is incredible," said Baveja in an interview with NEW DELHI. "Sanctions are issued in the last week of March just as the financial year is about to end. Unutilised funds then find their way into politicians' pockets. There is definite collusion between politicians and traders."

Baveja has already made his presence felt. Within four days of taking over, he ended a crippling private transport operators' strike that had pushed prices of essential goods to dangerous levels. Next, Baveja cracked down on a racket involving senior Congress(I) politicians—a dirty trade in rapeseed and palm oil. Vast quantities of these oils were routinely allot-



*Baveja: will he be allowed to crack down?*

ted to Manipur (the March quota alone was 200 tonnes of rapeseed oil and 150 tonnes of palm oil) and then sold on the sly to private traders in West Bengal—at an enormous profit. Baveja stepped in to allot the March quota to the Manipur Wholesale Cooperative Society.

Even Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had to take cognisance of this huge racket. She sent Home Secretary SMH Burney to Imphal in January to investigate. Soon afterwards the CBI instituted a full-scale enquiry. Many vital documents, however, are reported missing.

Baveja has ordered quick action on more than 750 corruption cases registered by the state's Vigilance Cell against politicians and bureaucrats. Some examples:

- Chief Minister Dorendra Singh quit on 17 November. On 25 Nov, he summoned seven cabinet colleagues to an urgent meeting (three senior ministers were not in town). The caretaker cabinet (for that was what it was) proceeded to create 462 posts in the Agriculture Department, 45 in the Industries Department, and 200 in the Education Department. Orders were issued the next day. Rishang Keishing was sworn in as CM on 27 Nov, and the new cabinet promptly filled up all the posts by taking money. The price-tag for the post of Agricultural Officer: Rs 5,000.

- Johnson Haokim, ex-minister and one of the 11 defectors from the Congress(I), publicly told newsmen