

POWER & POLITICS

PRABHU CHAWLA

POLITICS, they say, is the art of the possible. Just four months after the two sides went through a messy divorce, the BJP and the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha are together again and Arjun Munda was sworn in as chief minister for the third time last Saturday.

That the Congress cried foul, and called it an "unholy alliance" was something expected, but what came as a surprise were inspired leaks from party bigwigs about the BJP being a house divided on the matter and of L.K. Advani being so miffed that he was planning to give the swearing-in a miss.

If it is true that Advani and other senior leaders at 11, Ashok Road, are upset and angry at the turn of events, that may have a lot to do with the fact that, perhaps for the first time ever, the senior party leaders were absolutely in the dark about the quiet moves that were being made to put a government in place in Ranchi.

The decision was taken by the RSS leadership which had decided a long time ago that the sensitive state, which is both a theatre for conversions and a playing field for Naxalites, cannot be allowed to slip into the hands of 'pseudo-secularists'.

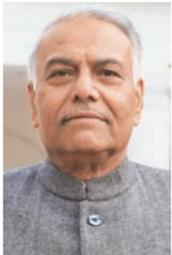
The RSS, based on inputs from its frontal organisations in the state, had decided that since it were the tribals, whom the JMM claimed to represent, who were the primary targets of conversion, the BJP had no options but to make some compromises for the bigger cause. The RSS believes that only a tribal-dominated government led by a tribal leader would be able to resist forced conversions.

To recap: Relations between the two parties had turned sour in May when the JMM, which formed the government in alliance with the BJP after the assembly elections in Jharkhand last December threw up a hung assembly, voted in favour of the Manmohan Singh government against the BJP-sponsored cut motions in parliament.

An angry BJP withdrew support to the Shibu Soren-led government. The BJP-JMM's has been a love-hate relationship. When a non bailable warrant was issued against Soren, the coal minister in the UPA government in 2004, the BJP stalled Parliament for days together and even petitioned the then President APJ Abdul Kalam to dismiss the minister.

Politics has turned a full circle and not only are the two parties supping once again, even Soren and Arjun Munda, once sworn foes, are now camp mates.

Once the RSS was certain that another government could be formed, it went about it in a very hushed manner. The reason that no more than a handful were privy to the goings-on was because the last time a reunion was attempted, it was sabotaged by elements at Ashoka Road who spread the canard that the party will concede leadership to the JMM.



Yashwant Sinha

This is humbug, because when efforts were made in July and MLAs sounded out, 13 of the 18 BJP MLAs had said they would support a new government conditional to it being led by Munda.

Yet, for reasons that only the central leadership knows, it propped up Yashwant Sinha, an efficient administrator no doubt, but who is seen in the Jharkhand context as some sort of a cultural misfit.

Evidence of the internal sabotage was strewn all around and the RSS was clearly determined not to let it happen a second time. The entire operation was a well kept secret.

Though the BJP constitution says the party's choice of a chief minister is decided by the party's Parliamentary Board, there is also a clause that allows the party president to take a decision if an emergency arises. Nitin Gadkari and Rajnath Singh, trusted soldiers of the RSS, had worked quietly on the MLAs of both parties as well as those belonging to the JMM.

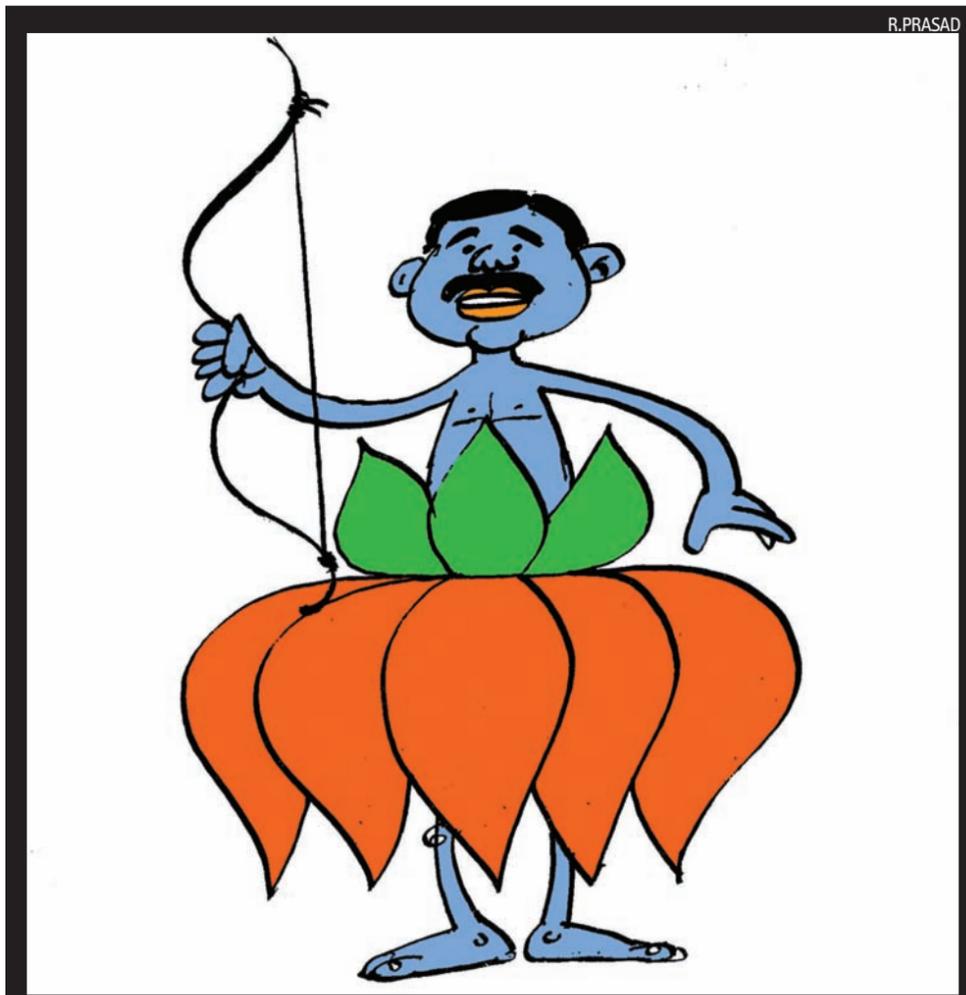
The legislators were warned about the prospects of dissolution of the assembly and the possibilities of central rule under a Congress regime in New Delhi.

Even as they were in touch with important leaders in the

state, they never divulged the shape and contours of the new government nor did they give out details of the time frame within which the operation was to be carried out.

His two earlier terms put together, Munda had served less than three years as chief minister. The quicksand that Jharkhand politics is, it will be foolish to speculate how long he will stay in this third innings.

To hard core BJP sympathisers, that is less important than the fact that for the first time, the RSS not only stepped in but did so decisively. That's not good news for the bosses at Ashoka Road.



Just for Hindutva

There is a lot in a name for aviation

CIVIL aviation minister Praful Patel is not a man to sit over files. He disposes them quickly, even if they are related to contentious issues like the renaming of airports.

For example, when the ruling DMK in Tamil Nadu wanted the Madurai airport to be named after Pasumpon Muthuramalingam Thevar, an important leader of the powerful Thevar community, Patel readily agreed, not unaware of the fact that Madurai is the constituency of M.K. Alagiri, the Union minister for chemicals and fertilisers and son of M. Karunanidhi.

He treats even opponents with the same respect. When the Akalis demanded, Patel agreed to rename Amritsar's Rajhansi International Airport as Guru Ramdassjee International Airport and the upcoming International Civil Air Terminal Complex near Chandigarh as Shahid-e-Azam Sardar Bhagat Singh International Airport.

The Union defence and home ministries have given their consent to the renaming of the three airports and the Cabinet is waiting for the ministries of finance, tourism and the Planning Commission to revert. As many as 27 airports have been renamed in the last few years. With most airports around the country being modernised, there is going to be a clamour, particularly from political parties for renaming them and if Patel has to keep everyone happy, he will have to concede every demand.

My sympathies are for the poor airline pilots and crew. Imagine a commander who flies an airliner into a city one day and returns the next week to find the airport has a new name.

I am all for honouring our heroes, political or otherwise. But there are better ways to do that than by frequently changing the names of airports. My suggestion: just call them Mumbai International, Chennai International, Kolkata international, whatever. That is, of course, hoping that the names of these cities — earlier Bombay, Madras and Calcutta — will not be changed again.

DESPITE assertions by leaders of both the Congress and the DMK about the glue that binds the two, speculation is rife in New Delhi and Chennai about impending cataclysmic changes.

There is both heartburn and joy, depending on which side of the fence you are on, and the unpredictable Jayalalitha is the cause for both. With the assembly elections in Tamil Nadu due next year, the lady from Poes Gardens seems inclined to return to the Congress fold and is said to be keen to mend fences with I0 Janpath.

For that to happen, she realises that the best route taken is via the friends of Rahul Gandhi. She is already in touch with some of the younger leaders of

J. Jayalalitha



Cong mulls changing partners as Amma turns on her charm

the Congress and though she is keeping all her cards close to her bosom, do not be surprised if she catches a flight to the capital on December 9 to greet Sonia Gandhi on her 64th birthday.

Before the 1998 general elections, she had termed the prospect of a Sonia prime ministership as a "national tragedy".

Yet, a year later, Jayalalitha sent political temperatures soaring when she rushed to the Capital and attended a lunch in honour of Sonia, whom she had avoided meeting

for the previous five years.

A few weeks after the two had shared a sumptuous and much publicised meal, the Vajpayee government lost its majority in the Lok Sabha and was voted out by the thinnest of margins.

For the Iron Lady, such visits are not about courtesy alone. In 2001, when the former Congress veteran G.K. Moopanar, who had broken away from the party to form the Tamil Manila Congress, was terminally ill, she drove to his house to inquire about his health and emerged from the meeting with an AIADMK-TMC alliance pact. We will wait till December to know about the rabbit she pulls out this time.

□ THERE is proof that the best of intentions of the Prime Minister of his cabinet ministers can be thwarted by the nexus of bureaucrats and powerful politicians. Last week, the government cleared the appointments of chairmen and executive directors of many public sector banks nearly six months after the finance ministry had prepared a list and sent it to the government.

But even this came about only after 40 MPs wrote to the Prime Minister demanding an inquiry into the delay. That the delay happened despite finance minister Pranab Mukherjee's directive to fill up the vacancies at the earliest is mystifying, to say the least.

Fingers are now being pointed at a senior bureaucrat in the Department of Personnel and Training who sat on the papers for more than three months only to raise a mountain of queries later. Finally, it took the intervention of TKA Nair, the Prime Minister's principal secretary and Omika Paul, OSD to Pranab to get things moving. The DoPT official was given a dressing down by the PMO, though less a month later, he was promoted as Union secretary.

The grapevine has it that the delay was due to the pressure from Congress politicians in Uttar Pradesh to appoint a certain gentleman as chairman of one of the banks though the man in question was technically not eligible for the job. Now you know why there will be no inquiry.