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8. Maiden President's Rule in Odisha : A Historical Analysis of Political Events & Circumstances leading to the Imposition

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In the early days of newly formed Republic of India, the traditional province of Odisha was a laboratory of political experiences. Odisha became the first linguistically organized state on 1st April, 1936 under the colonial regime. First election was held for the Odisha Legislature in 1937 which gave the Congress party massive majority. But on the issue of leadership the State witnessed one of the bitterest political rivalry. In the year 1939, the Congress Ministry under the leadership of Biswanath Das resigned leading to the imposition of Governor's Rule in the State. Subsequently, the factional feud in the Congress witnessed defection and formation of new parties like Forward Block and Orissa Congress Swarajya Dal. Up to independence, hardly, there was political stability in the then Odisha. It was only, in the election of 1946 congress secured absolute majority under the leadership of Harekrushna Mahtab. However, this was short-lived, in the post-independence era the Congress party got anew political rival from the feudatory states called Ganatantra Parishad. The new political reality was very costly for the state in the post-independence era. Beginning with 1961 up to 1980 there was constant turmoil in the political arena of the province. Series of president rule like pre-independent era governor rule was imposed. This essay endeavor to look into the circumstances and events responsible for the political instability of Odisha during in the early years of the republic of India.

Regionalism and Odisha

Odisha became a separate province fulfilling the regional urge in the State. Regionalism is essentially a product of India's diversity. But Odisha experienced a type of sub-regionalism. Infact, sub-



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regionalism has its roots in historical and geographical factors¹.

The people of feudatory states of Western Odisha strongly feel that they have a distinct culture and disassociated themselves from the culture of coastal tract. There was a sense of neglect and exploitation by the officialdom which is dominated by people of coastal Odisha in the post-merger days. This feeling was the one of the sole cause for the rise of the Ganatantra Parishad². Though there was geographical merger between western hilly tracts with the coastal plain yet in fact, the merger widened the gulf between the two regions. Unfortunately the party in power did not notice this new development. The politics in Odisha would have taken a different shape, had some important princes from the merged areas been included in the cabinet of the Congress Government³.

The formation of the Ganatantra Parishad representing a largchunk of the State under the leadership of erstwhile princes exploiting the local sentiment began the years of instability in Odisha⁴. The Ganatantra Parishad was not a feudal party although it was widely perceived as such. It was a 'Centrist Party'. It rejected the extremism of both Right and Left . "The Ganatantra Parishad was the best example of Tory Democracy' to have grown in India "⁵ The party promised democracy and clean administration. It gave a call to fight against the alleged dictatorship of the congress.The result was manifested in the 1st general election of the country in 1951-52. In spite of the legacy of freedom struggle, the Indian National Congress performed unexpectedly in Odisha. Despite having no electoral experience the Ganatantra Parishad could throw a formidable challenge to the Congress. The political scene in the state changed radically.The General Elections of 1952 and1957 exhibited a strong electoral base for the Ganatantra Parishad which denied the Congress a comfortable majority in the StateLegislature

Background of 1st President Rule in Odisha

The afore mentioned paragraphs make clear that there was political instability in the state from the start. Due to a lack of sufficient electoral support, the state had to deal with political crises from the beginning of the parliamentary government. The Ganatantra Parishad received 20.4% of the vote and 31 seats in the inaugural election. However, the Congress could not obtain the necessary majority and could only secure 67 seats in the House of 140. The Parishad rose to become the main adversary. It



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was extremely important during the time between the first general election and the second general election. The state was governed by a congress party, with Naba Krushna Choudhury serving as its head. But his party management was not up to scratch. Mahtab, on the other hand, had better control, working through his lieutenants Biju Patnaik, Biren Mitra, and NilamamRoutray, who were all located in the Raj Bhawan of Bombay. The government of Choudhury was challenged by socialists, communists, and the aspirational Ganatantra Parishad. Additionally, there was a conflict between Mahtab and Biswanath Das within the congress's faction.

In the interim, Biju Patnaik was invited to join the government and take over the development plan for Odisha by Chief Minister Naba Krushna Choudhury. However, Biju Patnaik declined the offer after seeing that others were eager to join the cabinet. The Mahtab fury, which the Choudhury government also benefited from, was directed at him for having a greater impact on state politics through his persona, his tactics, and his ability to shape public opinion through his favourite publication, the Prajatantra, a major print outlet in the state. In addition to Land Reforms, disagreements between Choudhury and Mahtab also arose over the Anchal Administration, the Kendu Leaf policy, and other matters. By engaging in dissident activity and making the shortcomings of the Choudhury government public through the media, Mahtab employed Dinabandhu Sahu, Biren Mitra, and Banamali Patnaik to topple the government. Additionally, Choudhury's interest in the Bhoodan movement, Ashram Schools for Tribal People, and some of his Ministers' involvement in subjects like the addition of Odia speaking tracts and the promotion of sports activities caused the administration to become preoccupied with unimportant issues. There was not enough time to focus on more significant concerns with socioeconomic ramifications.

Due to significant changes made to the Hirakud dam project, the initial five-year plan was unable to function in Odisha. This, delayed irrigation and electricity production, lost revenue, recurrent flooding, and ineffective administration. During the devastating flood of 1955, the breakdown of government was evident. The unrepaired embankment and ineffective relief management revealed the governance's flaws. Congress's reputation was impacted. Unpleasant situations were produced by public uproar. Ministers suffered open assaults. State-managed agitation resulted from the State Reorganisation Commission's report that rejected the merging of the two feudatory states of Saraikela



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and Kharasuan. Public declarations were made by the chief minister and the PCC president. The declining law and order situation and the loss of center-owned property in the state alarmed the Congress High Command. In the state, there was a reign of terror brought on by arson, looting, murder, robbery, and deaths from police shooting. Because of the danger, ministers had to shelter them on the grounds of Raj Bhawan in Cuttack.

The environment appeared tense, and all indications of the imposition of President's Rule were present. A sizable portion of the congress demanded Mahtab's recall and a change in the leadership. However, the demand was ignored by Congress Chief Dhebar and Prime Minister Nehru, who could acquire facts concerning Mahtab's hand in the replacement action. Instead, it was claimed that Mahtab Congress's support base had become weaker as a result of dissident operations under its active encouragement. Mahtab received letters from both Dhebar and Nehru criticising his position. But the media turned against Mahtab, asking how a Raj Bhawan's grounds could be utilised for petty political purposes. Mahtab responded to Nehru by reminding him of the contribution he had made to the state's unification and accusing Choudhury of obstructing everything he had done to advance the state. He further disclosed that he had angered Biswanath Das and Nityanand Kanungo by defending Choudhury. He claimed that rather than being the result of dissident actions, a government known for passivity, ineptitude, and corruption was to blame for the collapse of the Odisha government during the flood and later during the campaign against the State Reorganization Commission Report. He asserted that the Congress would not fare well in the upcoming general election unless the administration was completely revamped. He strongly pleaded for the imposition of President's Rule and appointment of a strong Governor like Chandulal Trivedi.

The leadership problem in Odisha became severe, but given the complicated circumstances, the subject of replacement also became crucial. Biswanath Kanungo did not win Nehru's favour. Maulana Azad, who was in charge of the party's affairs in the Eastern states, was certain that a leadership change was required. Mahtab and Maulana struck up a conversation, and Maulana disapproved of Mahtab's proposal to impose President's Rule. Mahtab was persuaded by Maulana to accept the command of Odisha.⁶



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The state administration's reputation had already reached its lowest point. Choudhury was adamant about quitting after several shocks. Nehru was concerned about his future. Nobody has the ability to save the capsized boat but Mahtab. President's Rule was the available substitute. Since Odisha was a state governed by the Congress and a central rule replacing a Congress government could reveal the party's weaknesses, the High Command had to prevent a central rule. However, the opposition against Mahtab was just as adamant and wanted Choudhury to carry on. Everything hinged on Choudhury, who made the decision to resign with the same strength.

The political crisis made Mahtab's wily nature and ability to persuade his opponent of his innocence clear. However, Choudhury was generally a reserved person. He was becoming repulsed by Mahtab's group think and sleazy politics. Due to pressure from the upcoming election, the congress leadership chose to remove Choudhury, who was in the mood to resign. Choudhury resigned from his positions in Congress and as chief minister. Then he departed for Angul in order to live a life free of politics while remaining fully committed to the Sarvodaya Movement. On October 19, 1957, Mahtab became Chief Minister after resigning as governor. Many people harshly criticized Mahtab for this action. A political scientist opined "Had not power-hunger obsessed Mahtab the history of Odisha would have flown through different course and he himself would have been a different man"⁷.

In 1957, the Second General Election was conducted. However, the outcome of the election could refute all of the projections. Even Mahtab, who was renowned for his methods, suffered at the hands of the elector. Politics and lack of government during those years were abhorrent. Only 56 seats were won by Congress, leaving it needing 15 more to form the government. Mahtab's political aspirations took a significant hit from the assembly election results. Since he was transferred to Delhi and refused permission to return to state politics following the First General Election, the political situation has persisted. When Mahtab became interested in taking back control, the political crisis was made worse by the dissident activity within the party that was trying to survive. But the results of the election were brand-new issues for both him and the party. Dissident activity and internal conflict were to blame for the party's failure. The electoral math, though, was different. There were only 51 legislators in the Ganatantra Parishad, thus 20 more were required but were not accessible. Only Biju, who separated himself from Mahtab as he prevented his political ascent, came to the aid of his political mentor; he



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was able to collect the support of CPI, Jharkhand, and a few others to give Congress, led by Mahtab, the necessary 15 votes to pass legislation. Four members of the Parishad switched to Congress, and six of the seven independents joined. Thus, to retain power at any cost a new kind of intense politicking and furious horse-trading were witnessed. Even to remain in power members were bribed so that they will vote for the party in power.

F G Bailey⁸ in his work on Odisha published under the title '*Politics and Social Change - Orissa in 1959*' wrote that the ministry showed disproportionate tenderness to even the least of its supporters. Mahtab was developed as a result of the ongoing political crisis. Because he was the only person responsible for the party's building tension, he found that housekeeping was not a simple task. It was unheard of for him to pursue a political vendetta against famous congressmen like Surendranath Patnaik, Pabitra Mohan Pradhan, and Bijoy Pam because they had all supported Choudhury. The post-election situation called for forbearance. At the same time, his own people started to feel unappreciated. Biren Mitra, the head of the PCC, an associate of Mahtab with CPI backing, was unable to be included in the Mahtab cabinet⁹. Similarly, Dinabandhu Sahu and Mahtab had a disagreement about something that ultimately became the basis for one of Mahtab's corruption claims.

One of the darkest eras in political history of Odisha was the Second Assembly. It was unheard of elsewhere how the government managed the economy and how licence, quota, and permit raj took over all manner of democratic norms and ideals. When the concerned minister was unwilling, even the chief minister complied with a mine owner by awarding him a lease. At the Chief Minister's request, the file was requested from the minister, and an order was then given. According to media reports, mine owner Sri Serajuddin was well known for supporting politicians.

Mahtab was embarrassed by factionalism as well. Due to the absence of six members and one minister on election day, one of the two Congress candidates who were expected to win one of the three open seats in the Rajya Sabha Cross voting or manipulating preference voting resulted in a defeat, which PSP, with only 11 members in the House, was able to avert. He was prompted to request permission from the Congress High Command to resign because of this type of political dispute, which even someone like Mahtab could not handle. An impending loss on the House floor was avoided before



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such authority was granted, albeit at a very high cost. Members were bought off, and several opposition members were imprisoned. Such kind of drama bringing constitutional democracy into a mockery deserved imposition of President's Rule to save the face of the constitution.

Mahtab when wishing to stepdown because of slender majority in the assembly said that it had 53 congress legislators and 11 new entrants along with 7 other members making 71 supports in a House having the then strength of 136. But in the letter to the Governor¹⁰. Mahtab wrote that the House be dissolved under Article 174 of the constitution. This was contested by Sri R N Singh Deo, the leader of opposition who staked his claim.

The claim of opposition leader to form the government was supported by the CPI. The Central Executive Committee of CPI at its meeting in New Delhi said the Government led by H K Mahtab sought to retain itself in office by all manners of thoroughly unprincipled and corrupt practices including recourse to bribery and intimidation¹¹. It opposed any move to impose the President's Rule and it asked the Governor to offer every assistance and opportunity for coming into existence of an alternative government.

Mahtab, thus, brought up the President's Rule question twice. He once called for Choudhury's removal. On another occasion, it attempted to save his political reputation. The political crisis in Odisha, which was brought on by the unreliable election results, spilled over into the constitutional issue. In the case of Odisha, both the Congress and Ganatantra Parishad were powerful enough to establish the government with the help of outsiders or by enticing other parties to defect. After defections, the Ganatantra Parishad has 48 members as opposed to the 53 members of Congress.

One of the ills of the Indian parliamentary system is political desertion. The first defection is credited to Odisha in the political vocabulary. He was Sri Bira Kishore Behera, and he defied the government as early as 1937. Political defection turned into a disease after 1967. However, this was the era when politics was influenced by ideals. The political environment in Odisha was truly sick. There were 14 defectors in the First Legislative Assembly, with the Independent party having the most, followed by Ganatantra Parishad. While the Congress welcomed 47 defectors into its ranks, Ganatantra Parishad



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only received 3. The party in power now has the appropriate amount of seats in the legislature thanks to independents and non-congress parties defecting. The second Assembly had a very poor outlook for forming ministries; Congress needed 15 members to secure a majority in the legislature. Other parties and Independents backed the ruling party. However, in order to obtain the secret number, Congress encouraged defection. Five members of the Ganatantra Parishad, one member of the Communist Party of India, and four members of the Independents were permitted to join. However, 8 of its members left during this process, and the majority joined Ganatantra Parishad.

As a result, the Second Assembly painted a dismal political picture of the state's democratic system. In contrast to Mahtab, who recommended imposing President's Rule to remove Choudhury from his position as Chief Minister in the closing moments of the First Legislative, Mahtab recommended imposing the central rule after observing both sides of the horse trading that prevented him from obtaining a comfortable majority.

There were several intrigues surrounding Mahtab's resignation offer and the opposition leader's claim to form the government. Due to the tight friendship between its leader Jaipal Singh and Biju Patnaik, the Jharkhand group declared its entire support for Mahtab. When examining Mahtab's resignation, which stated that he intended to resign despite having the majority, the governor of Odisha, a former cabinet secretary, noted that the imposition of President's Rule and the dissolution of the assembly were not feasible as long as the ruling party had a majority in the House. He visualised the issue as a leadership crisis. At the same time he asked the leader of the opposition to give the Governor a proof of majority support. He also gathered the information that no political party was in favour of the imposition of the President's Rule. There was continuing fear that if there will be defection from congress the dissolution of the House will be done. The fence sitters avoided defection and the leader of opposition couldnot furnish the list of support. The role of the Governor in the manner of handling the political crisis emerging out of resignation of Mahtab was criticised by Sri Singh Deo. He claimed that Mahtab's claim that he still had majority support was false and pointed out that throughout constitutional history, governments have frequently resigned in the face of majorities. He added that several of the Ganatantra Parishad members who had previously defected to Congress were eager to do so but were being imprisoned prevented them from doing so. Despite having the majority's support,



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he was unable to provide the names. The Governor was doubtful. Even Sri Singh Deo went so far as to claim that Raj Bhawan was using a double standard by asking Sri Mahtab to form a ministry even though he lacked the necessary resources. But the Governor in his letter to Sri Singh Deo explained how he was not convinced about majority support behind him from the documents given to the Raj Bhawan.

In an unprecedented move the Governor wrote back to Mahtab that “since you enjoy majority support and your party won by election and no political party favoured central rule he should withdraw his resignation in the larger interest of the state.”¹²

On May 9, 1958, Mahatab expressed his desire to quit because he had lost the favour of his party's high command. He was so smart that he used the resignation drama and confinement politics to threaten the lawmakers with dissolving the parliament. He also revealed Sri Singh Deo's shortcomings, including his inability to handle the parties' favourable support. He didn't push for resignation because there was no other option, and he returned to his work. Thus, a certain instance of President's Rule in the state was prevented since the Chief Minister's resignation prevented him from giving the Governor the authority to inform the President that he had lost the majority and resigned. Further Sri Mahtab created a political scenario of threat of dissolution which prevented non-congress opposition to enlist their support to the Leader of opposition to form an alternate government. By doing this he also gave a new signal to the party High Command that Mahtab still commanded majority support in the House.

The high drama that prevented Ganatantra Parishad from assuming power by imposing the President's Rule and dissolving the House came to an end as Mahtab had intended. However, the kind of opaque politics that had been in place over the previous year and a half could not be quietly affected by this. The political fact was that there was no chance of establishing a stable political order because the state had been ripped apart by the congress and Ganatantra Parishad. The Ganatantra Parishad ruled the western highland tracts while the congress was clearly present in the coastal Odisha. Due to a lack of emotional integration between the hill and coastal communities, the congress was unable to advance in the hill districts. The hilldistricts voted predominantly for the Parishad whereas the coastal districts



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largely supported the congress and both are more or less of equal strength. It followed, therefore, that neither the congress nor the Parishad was in a position to assure political stability to the state.”¹³

The congress circle was thinking in terms of a congress and Ganatantra Parishad merger in the larger interest of the state This idea gained ground when Biju Patnaik, a close associate of Mahtab met some of the ex-rulers with whom he had bitter dashes few months ago explaining the rationale behind the thesis which congress was formulating then The first step in this regard was a coalition government of congress and Ganatantra Parishad. Initially the Congress High Command was cool towards the high-thinking approach. But Biju Patnaik could convince the decision makers. AICC approved it and “Pandit Nehru said at a Press Conference in Delhi that the proposed coalition was based upon the acceptance of the congress programme and objectives, the Nagpur resolution in particular and the foreign policy by the Parishad, the Nagpur resolution in particular and the foreign policy by the Parishad”¹⁴ The observations of Pandit Nehru was supported unanimously by the members of state congress legislative wing.

Pandit Nehru further stated that Ganatantra Parishad was the natural representative of the tribal people of hilly tract of Odisha. The socialist programmes of congress meant for the development of tribal tracts was naturally a Parishad friendly programme though Parishad was known for its opposition to socialistic pattern of society agenda of the congress.

Despite disagreements among the major players in the Parishad, Singh Deo supported the coalition's stance because he believed that by wielding power, the Parishad could expand its sphere of influence. Mahtab and Singh Deo's optimistic outlook finally resulted in the development of the phrase that congress and the Parishad will follow a policy of "Unity of purpose and unity of action." On May 22, 1959, the alliance took power, with Mahtab serving as the Chief Minister and Singh Deo as the finance minister. "We are resolved to put a stop to the existing unstable conditions for the realisation of our beloved aim of a great and wealthy India in which Odisha will play a distinguished role," Mahtab and Singh Deo said during their oath of office.¹⁵

Mr P K Deo, Ex-ruler of Kalahandi and a founder of Parishad who did not like the idea of the



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coalition reacted in a different tone. He said "It is a great relief to the people of Odisha that the congress regime has come to an end and I hope it will be for all time to come"¹⁶ Sri Surendra Nath Dwivedy, the PSP stalwart did not approve of this opportunistic coalition. He said that "the only motive behind this unusual coalition is to share power together"¹⁷

Though a coalition was formed, the political crisis was not resolved despite the political arrangement that was made to maintain legislative stability. Mahtab began to consider Patnaik's contribution, and he reasoned that by persuading the High command to accept the coalition theory, Patnaik had made room for him in the Delhi circle. Mahtab was distrustful of Biju's moves, and the person who could have helped to build a coalition was denied the minimum which he deserved. The same old issue of denying Biju, Biren, and Nilamani access into the Council of Ministers cropped up.

The sinister partnership between Congress and Parishad quickly developed a gap. Along with other difficult issues for both parties, it was the ratio between the parties in the creation of the ministry. Mahtab and Singh Deo wanted the coalition to remain even though the conflict was permitted to continue. Mahtab handled the situation expertly like a skilled strategist. He always kept an eye on Biju. He began looking into the financial dealings of Biju, Biren, and Nilamani, the three people who had raised the flag of insurrection against Mahtab, in an effort to restrict him.

The idea of forming a coalition was put forth to put a stop to the ongoing political crises and to dispel rumours that a central government would be imposed, but ambition and personality conflicts made the coalition conflict-ridden and the catalyst for new political crises every day. Mahtab's strategies to reveal his rivals' dubious business dealings only succeeded in rendering them inactive in the halls of power. However, despite being politically satisfied, Biju Patnaik continued to propose development initiatives in the state's overall benefit without abandoning his flamboyant manner. He did that because he promised the High Command that a stable political system in Odisha would facilitate the extraction of the state's secret treasure and lead to prosperity. His proposal for a quick industrialization of all thirteen distinct regions was ideal since it would eliminate regional disparity. In order to increase productivity and make the peasants self-sufficient, he pushed for agro-based industries. Everything he suggested was done in the context of a socialistic social structure, which was the central political goal



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of the party in power.

When both of them turned to public statements, the Mahatab-Biju dispute went beyond the boundaries of acceptable political behaviour. Additionally, the press received access to the correspondence between the two letters. Mahtab was accused by Biju of acting selfishly and disregarding the ideals of others. Mahatab responded by claiming that he was well-versed in politics and would never be influenced by the purported idealism of any individual without first checking out their background. When the alliance finally reached its breaking point, Biju wanted to dissolve it. Mahatab aspired to hold onto his position of authority. Parishad's lack of enthusiasm for Congress goals infuriated the Congress High Command. It created a three-person committee to investigate the merger and continuation of the coalition ministry, with Banamali Patnaik serving as its chairman. Mahtab informed AICC Chief Sanjiv Reddy to resign in anticipation of a bad judgement. Additionally, he wrote to Shri Pant, the home minister, who was reputed to be close to Sri Mahtab. Unexpectedly, he also disagreed with Singh Deo by abandoning the position in favour of Sri Biswanath Das, a decision that Singh Deo disapproved of.

The three-member committee in its report suggested that the coalition should end its journey after the state budget is passed, giving around one year for the preparation for election. Thus the committee was positive for central rule before the next general election in the state. The report of the committee was approved by the PCC and resolved that “the Leader of the Congress Assembly party be requested to approach the Governor for President’s Rule for the period between the dissolution of the ministry and the formation of the new ministry after the General Election”¹⁸

On February 13, 1963, Biju Patnaik overcame Banamali Patnaik, a supporter of Mahtab. The result demonstrated Biju's standing inside the party and the party's support for ending the alliance. After calling Mahtab on the phone on February 14, 1961, he wrote to him and demanded that the coalition ministry stop immediately. Following ten days of political speculation and hysterical discussions about a different ministry under Biju and a Congress government without Parishad. In the end, Parishad leader Singh Deo decided against moving further with budget preparation because it might be pointless if the coalition is ousted and replaced by another administration. Mahtab who had become



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helpless and lost interest in continuing as the Chief Minister resigned on February 21, 1961.

Explaining the reason for such a move Mahtab said “that in a parliamentary democracy a coalition ministry should resign sometime before the general election so that the groups forming the coalition might be free to work in furtherance of their party interests”¹⁹

The governor of Odisha, Sri Y N Sukhtankar, informed the leaders of the opposition parties, particularly the Ganatantra Parishad, about the creation of a substitute ministry. They all stated that they were unable to do so because "Odisha was ready for Article 356." The state was placed under President's Rule on February 25, 1961, making it the sixth state to do so. Additionally, the Legislative Assembly was dissolved²⁰. Additionally, the Assembly Speaker's position was terminated. When the Assembly was dissolved, this functionary was demoted from his position for the first time in independent India's history.”²¹

On March 8, 1961, a motion asking the Lok Sabha to approve President's Rule in Odisha was introduced. After two days of discussion, it was adopted. It has been long anticipated that the President's Rule, the first of its sort in Odisha, would be imposed. Since the announcement of the election results in 1957, the potential application of this clause has been up for grabs. However, it was hoped that the new experiment would last for the remainder of the legislative term when the coalition of the Congress and Ganatantra Parishad was formed with a total of 111 members in a House of 140.

When there was no other option but to say goodbye to each other, the Chief Minister's attempt to prevent a few congress party members from pursuing ministerial positions and the ambition of a few of those legislators to become ministers took a turn. Personal ambition, personality conflicts, and an unholy coalition, notwithstanding ideological disagreements, likely had a major role in the factors leading to the imposition of the central Rule, which was a first of its type. It was still in effect for 118 days.

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