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"Chair by accident

A prime minister who did his best in an impossible situation”

by S L Rao

"Betrayal of Trust", "stab in the back", "not God or Oracle", "suspicious timing", were only some of the phrases thrown by Congress party persons at Sanjaya Baru for his book, "The Accidental Prime Minister". The immediacy of the epithets demonstrates the overwhelming power of the Congress President Sonia Gandhi over her party (and the UPA government). Baru has responded with dignity.

Unlike in other countries, departing Indian government officials have not usually written about their experiences in the administration. In other countries they keep detailed diaries, copy important documents, and release their book as soon as they can, preferably while their boss is still in office. Most of our Ministers live for the present and are neither concerned with lessons for the future from history, nor can write. Our bureaucrats follow the Mafia principle of Omerta, Silence. Baru is an economic researcher, strategic thinker and journalist. Presumably in order to stay away from the stringent secrecy rules, he kept few notes, did not use any documents of government, wrote from memory supported by some notes, and cross-checked dates and events thorough media archives. The accusation that the book was deliberately released before a major election has two aspects: it would lead to publicity and record sales, and would fuel the campaign of opposition parties. The book is indeed a best seller. One writes to be read by as many as possible. The Opposition making use of the book was inevitable. Baru had understood that the book would be released after the elections.

This is a timely book. It restores some of the severely damaged reputation of Manmohan Singh, and that he was ineffective. It helps us understand why he could not discipline his Ministers even when they were robbing the country or when they made comments that were contrary to his stated policies. It shows that he was a true servant of the Congree party President, who allowed his views to be overridden by Sonia Gandhi. Sonia gave the Prime Ministry to Manmohan Singh but not the power and authority to make policy

or appoint Ministers and top bureaucrats, or to discipline them. She may even have violated the law by being shown and commenting on government files meant for the Prime Minister. The book confirms that Singh lacks social and networking skills, is a buttoned-up person who does not respond to criticism.

Released as he nears the end of his office, the book demonstrates with many examples, the Prime Minister's grasp of complex issues, and his attempts to carry people and parties with him. It emphasized that the political authority lay with the Congress Chief. Ministerial appointments were at her behest while coalition party Chiefs nominated their quota of Ministers. The Prime Minister had had to agree. Appointments to key bureaucratic posts in the Prime Minister's office or of the National Security Advisor followed this rule. Ministers took instructions from Sonia Gandhi. Her emphasis was on loyalty to the Family, not on expertise or administrative competence. This led to the deterioration in many Ministries and large-scale theft by Ministers.

Dr Manmohan Singh had an impoverished and deprived childhood. His intellect, many scholarships, and energy, propelled him upwards. Contrary to general belief he was always for a more open economy, demonstrated by his PhD thesis on India's export pessimism. His stint as Secretary General of the South South Commission convinced him of the need to liberalize controls. He succeeded in putting India on a growth path, not just as a technician implementing Narasimha Rao's vision. He prepared himself like a student to deal with complex issues like the nuclear agreement with the USA.

He was Prime Minister of a government of coalition parties, and not just the Congress. His political skills were good as demonstrated by his negotiating, at Sonia Gandhi's behest, an alliance with the DMK, accused of complicity in Rajiv Gandhi's murder, and with who the Family did not want to negotiate. He saw it as his duty to keep the coalition partners informed of major decisions. He maintained good relations with leaders of all his coalition partners. Sharad Pawar and Laloo Prasad were his strongest supporters on difficult policy issues. They backed him when some in the Congress party wanted to replace him.

Baru says that major decisions were taken by Sonia; including Ministerial appointments, and allotments of portfolios. Incompetent Ministers in the

important Ministries of Home and Defence (Shivraj Patil, Sushil Kumar Shinde and Antony) damaged the law and order situation, and dealing with insurgencies. Defence has suffered under Antony as Minister who postponed modernizing the armed forces. Telecom, Coal, Railways, Environment, became market places for the wealth accumulation by some Ministers.

Since Ministers or their portfolios were not his decisions, he only took full responsibility for the probity of himself and his immediate family; not of his Ministers. They were the responsibility of the Congress or the coalition parties who appointed them. The many scams in ten years of the UPA were due to Prime Minister and party Chiefs not watching for straying Ministers and disciplining them.

In his first public address in 2004 Manmohan Singh emphasized the need for administrative reform for effective and clean governance. His diffidence about his authority over Ministers prevented administrative reform. His innovation of appointing Groups of Ministers (GOMs) to debate and advise on important policies was good in developing policies after considerable examination. His initiative to empower many of them diluted the final authority of the Prime Minister. So did proliferation of GOMs (from 50 in 2007 to many more). He quoted the maxim of “never yielding space” in government, but GOMs led to his abandoning a lot of his turf.

Other ‘accidental’ Prime Ministers-Charan Singh, Chandrasekar, Deve Gowda, Inder Gujral served for short periods and none for more than a year. Manmohan Singh has had a ten year term, second only to Nehru in continuous office. But as Sonia’s servant he conceded all political authority to her. Many times this led to wrong appointments of Ministers and bureaucrats, or to policies which he did not favour, and that he accepted without demur.

He was uncomfortable in addressing audiences or media. He did not take responsibility for crooked or incompetent Ministers because he did not appoint them. He was seen to tolerate massive scams by many of them. He initiated the farmer loan write off of Rs 72000 crores in UPA 1, and did not protest at the massive social expenditures that the party President thrust on government. This was the man who as Finance Minister had stabilized the fisc. He must have realized the consequences of continuing high deficits, in

the continuing high inflation, declining savings and investment and no employment growth. The Congress may lose the elections besides causing untold misery to millions.

Manmohan Singh was a better Prime Minister than Sonia Gandhi could ever have been. She has no knowledge of concepts, of the complexity of India, nor the education or experience of governance. Manmohan Singh was highly qualified for the job, but his personality was not. While he projects a learned and clean image abroad, in India he is uncommunicative and cold. He did preside over many years of high growth. Despite depicting gently Manmohan Singh's shyness, inarticulation, and discomfort with confrontations, Baru succeeds to some extent in rehabilitating Manmohan Singh's image. He was a very qualified man, an honest Prime Minister, who accepted an impossible situation.

What the book does not say is why Singh stayed on as PM for ten years when he was not able to lead his government. What prevented him after being responsible as Baru says for the big win in 2009, from putting Sonia Gandhi in her place, or resign? History will judge him a weak man who should not have been Prime Minister. Baru's book fails to convincingly show this conclusion to be wrong. (1319)