

A Chauvinistic Movement

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In the less advanced North-East and Eastern Indian States, regionalism has been a significant social factor frequently casting its ugly shadow on local politics as well. Thus the Nagas and the Mizos have raised their voice against the people of other Indian communities, looking upon them as aliens. In Assam, Bengalis and non-Assamese businessmen have suffered acute persecution.

Neither the local governments of these areas, nor the Union Government could counter the growth of such centrifugal trends within a federal set-up, because their tentative efforts to remove the yawning economic disparity between the local people and the settlers, did not go far enough.

It may be argued that Bihar, West Bengal and Orissa, the larger East Indian States, have remained, broadly speaking, immune from the virus of chauvinistic movements that go against the spirit of the Indian Constitution, in which the right of a citizen to settle down and work anywhere in India has been enshrined. A reason for this is, in Bihar and Orissa, the State Governments have in practice yielded to the pressures of regionalism already. Employment for local people in both official and non-official establishments is ensured by policy, or tacitly.

The one solitary, promising exception was Bengal. In Calcutta, 75 per cent of the 2,00,000 or so private cars are owned by non-Bengalis, while 60 per cent of the population of the commercial part of the city speak Bengali as a second language. Nevertheless, like the Maharastrians in Bombay, Bengalis had no trouble in getting along with the more prosperous settlers, although they did always claim a debatable cultural superiority that got them into occasional trouble in the north.

The recent growth in the activities of Amra Bangali, (we are Bengalis) in West Bengal and among Bengalis in the North-Eastern States, has changed the situation. West Bengal seems to be falling in line with the other States.

Even on paper, the aims of the Amra Bangali are on a radically different plane from those of similar other organisations. The members of the highly disciplined, well-knit group are working for the creation of Bangalistan, a nebulous territorial concept embracing West Bengal, Tripura, Nowgong, Cachar, Goalpara (in Assam), Bhanbad, Ranchi, Hazaribagh, Dumka, Rajmahal (in Bihar), Jhapa (in Nepal), Bangladesh, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Leftist parties in West Bengal and elsewhere have alleged that the idea is fundamentally American, an allegation denied stoutly by Amra Bangali spokesmen. It has been claimed by Bangladesh political circles, including the late Moulana Bhasani, that Bengalis should have a free nation of their own. He gave a call to this effect after the liberation of Bangladesh, but it evoked little Indian response.

Then western news media announced plans among a section of politicians in Bangladesh and India to create a "Bangasam," comprising the two truncated Bengals plus Assam. It was even argued that with its coal, jute, oil and iron ore together with its vast agricultural potential, the area should be adequately self-sufficient. The point of all this is that whatever its merit, the idea has been thought out in some detail and some quarters are working for its fruition.

On its other demands, the Amra Bangali is no different from other apparently similar organisations. It wants employment of Bengalis at all levels of government and private undertakings, use of Bengali as the main language, and "nationalisation" of non-Bengali-owned industries. It has no headquarters, although much of its activity seems to emanate from Krishnagar, capital of Nadia district. According to some reports, a provisional government of the republic of Bangalistan is already working on two fronts in West Bengal: removing Hindi from signboards, etc. and selecting shadow MPs and MLAs.

Members of the group have marched with lathis and other weapons in Calcutta, raising economic slogans, aimed at striking responsive chords in the economically depressed urban and rural poor. One view is that Amra Bangali is a wing of the Ananda Marg. But this is denied by the members. The fact is, a number of Marg mem-

bers have resigned and accepted membership of the AB. Whether they maintain old links or not, is not known. Among its leaders are men of the teaching community and the legal profession. Meetings are held regularly, at appointed places. A fortnightly journal is published clandestinely. The strength of the group however, is not known.

Following the recent developments in Tripura it would seem that the AB is entering an expansionist phase. Recently it held a rally in front of the CPI (M) office in Calcutta, the swiftness of which took even such hardened leaders as Mr. Promode Das Gupta by surprise.

Political parties and leaders, from Mr. Jyoti Basu to Mr. P. R. Das Munshi, have denounced the AB and its chauvinistic slogans. Members of the group fared miserably wherever they participated in elections. By and large Bengalis refused to take them seriously. However, they are in a position to-day to organise marches and deface Hindi sign boards and demonstrate against the most popular party in West Bengal, the CPI (M). The evidence, therefore, is not wholly reassuring from a long-term point of view. In part the growth in the activities of the AB is symptomatic of the larg-

er economic and political dis- that has blighted the en North-East from Nagaland Bihar.

There is the largest number of unemployed in West Bengal and 70 per cent of its nearly five crore people are below the poverty line. These people would be good raw material for the AB to work on. They have seen over three decades, the failure of successive State Governments, governed by the left or the non-left, to solve their basic problems. The Centre was something far away. They might see in the AB the only effective group speaking for Bengal. Official action against it, would make it more popular and lack of action too would have exactly the same effect, in the long run.

Its present confrontation is with the CPI (M) and for all their public pronouncements, this would certainly gladden the hearts of other political parties which find it difficult to shake off the domination that the CPI (M) enjoys at present. The conclusion that stands out clearly is that unless the Union Government takes more interest in the region, the entire North-East would come apart at the seams.

A Special Correspondent
in North-East.

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