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ASSAM'S ANGUISH

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Deccan Herald By S. VISWAM

A VISIT to Assam these days can leave distressing memories, not because it is an unenjoyable experience in itself but because one finds the people of the State in a highly demoralised and helpless position, unwilling to promote an atmosphere of intensified confrontation with the Centre but being willy nilly forced to do so.

"Assam today is a Police State. What else can it be when the Government resorts to a show of force on the flimsiest pretexts? a journalist asked me in Gauhati last Sunday, and the reasons he adduced for his assessment appeared strong enough to warrant his bitterness against the present State administration.

Mutinuous mood

By the time this article appears in print, the State would have run through the first half of the 36-hour all-Assam bundh called by the leaders of the agitation on the foreign nationals' issue. And all through the remaining days of this month, Assam is likely to be tense because of the large number of rallies which have been planned to be staged in various district headquarters and towns. It is only when one travels through the length and breadth of this beautiful lush green State that one realises the contradiction between the placid external calm and the simmering discontent and mutinous mood of the people.

The call for the 36-hour bundh and the organisation of State-wide rallies might perhaps never be given but for the tactless handling by the State administration of a simple, uncomplicated situation. By the show of excessive police and CRP force, by the cordoning off of the Judges Field Maidan where the agitation leaders planned to hold a mass rally, and by denying permission for the holding of the rally itself, the administration seems to have precipitated a situation which was eminently avoidable.

Overreaction

Journalists and several others, including some agitation leaders and students, say that the rally would have passed off peacefully and nothing more would have been done at the meeting than the issuance of a call for a more positive, sincere and meaningful response from the Centre to the plight of the Assamese. By banning it, the administration sought to assert itself in a situation where no such assertion was called for since the objective of the agitation leaders was not to mount an offensive against the State administration but to make a renewed plea to the Centre for greater understanding.

The administration, however, felt that the holding of the rally

itself would constitute an affront to established authority. It reacted to it in the only way in which insensitive administrations react to popular movements: by displaying their determination to crush it.

On the day of the rally, the administration pressed into service nearly a quarter of the State's police force. There was just no way the agitation leaders could have held the rally other than to resort to violence and stone-throwing. This would have led to more serious consequences. The agitation leaders say that the experience of the movement of the last two years ought to have convinced the administration that the student leaders have shown themselves to be quite capable of maintaining discipline and order among the public, and it should have left the task once again to the students rather than display excessive police force.

Great expectations

The damage has, however, been done, and the State is, by all accounts, in for a further and possibly longer period of tension and confrontation. The call for the bundh and the holding of mass rallies in defiance of ban orders, according to the agitation leaders, has to be assessed against the background of the frustration in the camps of the All-Assam Students Union (AASU) and the All-Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) over the prolonged delay in finding an acceptable solution to the current crisis. They argue that the very fact that they have travelled to Delhi 14 times in the last year and a half and have patiently participated in talks with Central Government representatives ought to establish their bona fides. They contend that if they have nothing to show to their own people after 14 tortuous rounds of negotiations, are they not justified in holding a mass rally to explain to them the correct state of affairs?

High hopes had apparently been raised in Assam prior to the fourteenth round of talks in New Delhi. The general expectation in the State was that some workable basis would be found for a settlement and that some of the more important demands of the agitation leaders would be conceded. Such expectations could not obviously have risen unless the Central Government representatives had given an indication in that direction. When the talks were "adjourned" — the factual position was that the talks "collapsed" but neither side wants to use that term for fear that doors for further negotiations would be shut permanently — the agitation leaders returned to the State with the impression that the Centre was either not serious or was unable to meet the Assamese demands, and that all it was interested in doing was to prolong the

negotiations with a view to wearing down the students' patience.

There is, of course, a great deal to be said in favour of the Centre's predicament too in the sense that a solution which can take care of the constitutional, international and "physical" problems of detection and deportation of the foreigners is just not available. To be fair to the agitation leaders, it needs to be said that they too are aware of the difficulties of the Centre and declare their willingness to be accommodating. But their main grievance seems to be that they find the Centre more interested in perpetuating the status quo than in initiating any action that would carry credibility to the people and thus make them more responsive to the Centre's difficulties where major questions affecting constitutional and international obligations are involved. It is largely because of the lack of confidence in the Centre's motivations that there is today in Assam an all-pervasive sentiment of defiance and demoralisation combined which is bound to lead to enhanced confrontation in the days ahead unless the Centre intervenes once again.

A factor that is being strongly held against the Centre is its refusal to make Gauhati the venue of the next round of talks. The Centre contends that the venue makes little difference as long as the problems can be thrashed out in an atmosphere of mutual understanding. The agitation leaders feel that it is not possible for the Central representatives to understand the mood of the Assamese people and the intensity of their emotions unless they leave the airconditioned comfort of their offices. In fact, the latest communication from the Home Secretary rejecting Gauhati out of hand as the venue for the next round of talks has angered the student community more than even the State administration's conduct on the day of the rally.

Discontent

The Assam tangle is no doubt complex, and it is acknowledged on all hands that instant solutions are impossible. Nevertheless, the fact remains that Assam is today seething with profound discontent. The people no more hope of securing justice from New Delhi. This is a truth which cannot be wished away merely because Central leaders, from the Prime Minister downwards, keep assuring the Assamese that a solution can eventually be found to the foreigners' issue. In such a situation, far greater tact needs to be displayed by the Centre and the State administration in dealing with the agitation leaders and the State people than it has shown itself capable of in the last 20 months or so. The Centre's persistent attempts to restore the Congress (I) to power in the State is

a tragic manifestation of the lack of understanding of the popular sentiment. And this tragedy is underscored by the fact that the ex-Chief Minister, Mrs. Anwara Taimur, continues to reside in the State Guest House, under strict security vigil, and dare not be seen in public! It is true that many Congress (I), Congress (S) and even Opposition leaders are not held in high public esteem, but this does not justify the current Central attempts to reinstate Mrs. Anwara Taimur's minority Government in the State. Fortunately, the Governor, Mr. Parkash Mehrotra, has said that he is not in favour of a minority Government which carries within it the potential of instability. But this has not stopped the Central attempts nonetheless. What is even more galling to the students is what they allege to be the deliberate instigation by the Congress (I) of organisations claiming to represent minority interests to issue anti-agitation statements and calls for boycott of pro-agitation rallies. The merits or demerits of the Assam agitation on the foreign nationals issue apart, a great deal has in fact been achieved during the last few rounds of negotiations, but by and large the people of the State do not seem to understand the implications of the proposals already agreed to by the Central representatives. It is not easy to fathom why there should be such a communication gap, but this reporter found that many of the people he talked to were not aware of the extent to which a meeting ground has been discovered between the agitation leaders and Central officials.

Communication gap

For instance, it was not generally known that the Government had agreed to the detection of all foreigners on the basis of the Constitution and the relevant laws as exist today, namely, the Citizenship Act of 1955, the Foreigners Act 1946 and a Passport Act 1952, and that in doing so the National Register of Citizenship of 1951, the electoral rolls of 1952 and land records (patta and final jama-band) shall be made use of. Nor was it known that the AASU and the AAGSP had agreed that those foreigners who had entered Assam between 1-1-51 and 31-12-60 should be allowed to stay on humanitarian considerations.

The basic point, however, is not whether one side is insisting on acceptance of unreasonable proposals or another side is pleading helplessness. The point is that the delay in settlement is contributing to a sense of alienation in Assam, and this is showing signs of extending to all the neighbouring States also. "The Centre does not understand us, leave alone care for us," is the refrain one hears in Assam, Meghalaya and Manipur. The setting up of the North-East Zonal Committee has made no impact on public sentiment at all. The growing alienation needs to be checked before further emotional separation takes place.

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