

Assam agitators groping for new strategy

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As the agitation leadership and the law and order machinery in Assam gear up for the next round of the agitation on the foreign nationals issue one is inclined to ask: does this mean that all the gains and goodwill achieved at the recent rounds of talks have been finally nullified?

There are optimists among well-informed observers who still think all is not lost. But the general impression is that, given the extent of the general feeling of alienation in the Brahmaputra valley, the anger of the agitation leadership against what it calls the police and CRPF atrocities, and the Government's resolve to counter the agitation with full force, it will not be long before things get irretrievably out of control.

Those who have watched the Assam agitation since it began say there was at no stage so much bitterness among the Assamese population as one sees now. For the first time they are having a real brush with authority and the experience has not been pleasant. Added to this is the feeling that the centre has used the time gained during the talks to consolidate the law and order machinery which is now strong enough to look at the agitators with disdain. This is exactly the atmosphere for extremism to prosper observers say.

The last few rounds of bandhs

have seen a new trend. While they succeeded in paralysing normal life, the Government maintained the essential services, managed something like 60 to 70 per cent attendance in government offices and almost completely prevented picketing. A feeling is growing that the bandh is losing its significance as an instrument of popular pressure. That is why, sources say, the agitators have decided on a major change in strategy by calling for 36-hour civil disobedience, beginning on the morning of December 14.

This, observers say, is the agitators' second effort this year to draw people out in an active defiance of authority. The first attempt met with only partial success, as not many people came out to block the roads. The agitators' explanation, however, is that there was no need of squatting as most of the private and government vehicles were off the roads. But if that was the objective they need not have called for a road-blockade. A bandh would have ensured this.

On the other hand, notwithstanding the law and order machinery's confidence about being able to handle any situation, the Government will be making a mistake if it read too much in its relative success so far in handling the agitation. Sources say the events of the last three weeks have helped perpetuate an impression in higher Government circles that the agitation can be put down by force. This, obser-

vers feel, will be a very dangerous presumption.

Observers point out that in Assam extremist activity has increased every time the main thrust of the agitation has been blunted. It seems the extremists and the AASU-AAGSP men are still operating independent of each other, with the latter decisively dominant. But as time passes and people get more alienated and angry, the situation will change.

The AASU-AAGSP leaders realise this. That is why they have been groping for a new strategy. Observers attach significance to the fact that the AASU-AAGSP leaders have not so far condemned the recent acts of sabotage and bombings which have claimed at least three lives. Earlier, condemnations from them had been prompt and strong.

The AASU leaders are on record as having said that they will have to think of an alternative to peaceful agitation if the Government "persisted with the use of lathis and bullets." They may not yet endorse violence but, observers feel, if they go in for some relatively desperate measures, it will not be fair to blame them entirely.

Even senior functionaries of the Government admit that the reason why the Government will try to contain the agitation is not that the sympathy for the agitation is waning. It is more because the population in the

Brahmaputra valley is not used to being treated harshly and the CRPF has spread a scare. This will inevitably have a backlash.

The agitators too are in a difficult spot, said a source close to the agitation leadership. "In the course of this agitation one thing has led to another. When we began, nearly two years back, we could not imagine we will be at this pass. Now, since it has been a spontaneous process, there is no knowing where we will be tomorrow."

The agitators also realise that if they start the agitation with full momentum again, things are going to be difficult and they have to contend with stiff police retaliation. One of them sums up: "Now is the real test. It was different earlier when the administration made no secret of its sympathy for the cause. Picketing was then a picnic. It may mean bloodshed now."

It is with this realisation that the agitation leadership will eagerly await the response to its call for civil disobedience.

The law and order machinery, meanwhile, is keeping its fingers crossed. Apparently, its strategy will be to pack the state transport buses, rails and ferries generously with policemen to ensure that there is no ticketless travel. But that will make confrontation a distinct possibility, particularly now that the agitating mobs take delight in jeering at the CRPF men.