

Assam

Faith in New Delhi

A FEATURE of the presently dormant agitation against 'foreign nationals' in Assam which has frequently been dubbed as anti-national and secessionist by Central leaders is how often and how persistently the leaders of the agitation have been demanding the enlargement and strengthening of the role of the Central agencies themselves in the region. Despite the apparent 'anti-Centre' postures of the leaders of the agitation, what they demand more than anything from Delhi is a greater role for Delhi in the region, even when this might mean to some extent a whittling down of the powers of the state government. Indeed, a touching faith in the Centre and a belief that the agencies of the Central government are more considerate of the 'safety and security' of the region and its people than the state government and its agencies have been marked features of the agitation.

For example, one of the demands put forward by the leaders of the agitation has been that the right to issue documents or identity cards to migrants and refugees from Bangladesh, till now vested in the state governments (including that of Assam), should be withdrawn and should vest entirely with the Centre. Of a piece with this demand has been the new demand, now reportedly part of the reformulated set of demands to be put before the Central leaders when the talks are expected to be resumed towards the end of this month, that the Centre should constitute foreigners' tribunals under the Constitutional provisions introduced during Emergency (the 42nd Amendment) which would in effect mean that the findings of the tribunals can be subjected to challenge only in the Supreme Court. The tribunals established in the 1960s under the Prevention of Infiltration from Pakistan Scheme had provided for their findings to be challenged in the high courts.

However, such manifestations of confidence and trust in the Centre's benevolence and the anxiety of the leaders of the agitation to return talks are unlikely to affect the Centre's calculations in Assam. The 'popular' Taimur ministry having served its constitutional purpose, the Centre does not at all appear to be in a hurry to resume discussions. Right now, the concern seems to be how best the rag-tag remains of the Congress(I), whose government had to resign following the withdrawal of the support of the group of MLAs from the tea-garden labour lobby, can win back the

support of that group, as well as of a few straggling independents and possible defectors to the AICP from the small CPI group, to be able to form a government. This revival of the 'political process' would not be possible if there were to be any agreement or even progress towards an agreement with the leaders of the agitation since part of the price to be paid for such an understanding has to be the dissolution of the existing assembly and the ordering of fresh elections, on the basis of revised electoral rolls.

Recent organisational developments in both AASU and the GSP (which have included some expulsions), suggest that both the organisations are keen to have the dialogue resumed. It is obvious that a resumption of the agitation on the scale and intensity of last year is going to be a difficult task; the deliberate suspension of the agitation earlier this year with a view, ostensibly, to enabling the students to prepare for and appear in the annual examinations has had its own inevitable consequence; for if the agitation could be suspended to enable the most active and vocal participants to take their examinations, it is difficult to see how the equally important need of the students to continue their studies regularly can be considered less pressing.

In other words, the leaders of the agitation at present appear rather more anxious than the Centre to return talks and arrive at a settlement, without appearing to yield. However, the 'object's' of the dispute, the large mass of migrants and refugees, legal or illegal, Hindu or Muslim, who are already in the region and have developed deep roots, are a factor which might upset all the neat calculations and formulas being worked out in Gauhati and Delhi.

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