

Assam: long wait before salvation

By Shekhar Gupta

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GAUHATI:

"Press cables will keep coming but broad gauge and Jodighopa bridge will never come," quipped a teleprinter operator in the Gauhati Telegraph Office. The cynicism stems from the fact that the extension of broad gauge to Gauhati from new Bongaigaon and construction of a second bridge across the Brahmaputra near Gogighopa in Goalpara district are the most evergreen stories in the regional press. The State Government, the North-Eastern Council at Shillong, the Governor and the Railway authorities keep making claims periodically about the progress of the projects and newsmen, keep wires burning. But how these organisation and the Governor's Secretariat manage to sell repeated extensions of deadlines as claims of progress is a marvel in the art of publicity.

Jogighopa bridge and the broad gauge are not the only promises the people of Assam and the other States in the North-Eastern region, connected with the rest of the country through Gauhati, have become cynical about. There is the completion of the Bongaigaon refinery and petrochemicals complex, years behind schedule. There is the obvious escalation in costs and the industrial complex still shows no sign of substantial progress. Then there is the Kopill power project on Assam-Meghalaya border with similar history of delays, escalation in costs and frequent alternations in original plan.

Delay in major and vital projects is a nationwide phenomenon but the people of Assam seem to have run into relatively greater misfortune. Apart from the usual bureaucratic delays, shortage of building materials and corruption, they are losing by sheer default.

Assam has not had an effective political leadership for years, to give direction to a demoralised bureaucracy. Thus the State's case has not been pleaded strongly enough in Delhi. For a backward State like Assam there is no alternative but to look forward to the Centre for giving impetus to development.

The State's own resources have not been tapped properly at all and the private enterprise from outside the State sees no incentive in investing in a trouble-prone State. In such a situation only a go-getting Chief Minister with a foothold in Delhi would have been able to achieve a breakthrough. As things stand, Assam does not stand the chance of getting someone like that for at least another year.

With political leadership more or less non-existent in the recent past the only person who tried to plead Assam's case with Delhi was Mr. L. P. Singh, who, during his seven-and-a-half year tenure as the Governor of the five North-Eastern States, acquired the nick-name of "Letter-posting Singh". Officials in Shillong still talk of the prospects of his making it to the Guinness Book for writing the largest number of "DOS" (Demi-Official Letters) in a given period of time.

The ex-bureaucrat's main weapon was his letter which he addressed by the dozen every week to various Central Ministries, undertakings and semi-Government bodies involved in development projects in the region. He achieved some success indeed by nagging the Ministers and officials with

constant reminders. He confessed at a news conference in February: "Sometimes they get so fed up with my reminders that they are forced to do the job." An equally steady stream of reminders was maintained by the Raj Bhawan to the Chief Ministers of the five States. But this is nearly all the heli-borne Governor could do taking time off from his never-ending hopping between the capitals of his trouble-prone States. This was persistent, sincere prodding, but nothing like the bulldozing methods of a Bansilal or Kairon, which fetch funds and attention from Delhi.

The political vacuum that exists in Assam would not be filled merely by the replacement of Mr. L. P. Singh by Mr. Prakash Mehrotra, a politician Governor who has some say in the Congress (I) circles. This has become evident with the near-failure of his attempts to get the proposal of a Rs. 42-crore road bridge across the Brahmaputra near Tezpur converted into the one for a rail-cum-road bridge. He met the Union Railway Minister specially to make this demand some time back and a fortnight later the Minister announced in Parliament that there would be no change in the original proposal. Taking a leaf out of his predecessor's book now, Mr. Mehrotra too has written to the Railway Minister seeking a change in the decision.

But Assam hardly stands the prospect of getting a stronger spokesman in near future. True some activity has been going on in the political circles at Gauhati in the direction of formation of a new Ministry. But whoever leads it, it will inevitably be a rag-tag and bob-tail outfit. Even if the Congress (I) High Command concedes the dissident demand of a change in the ACLP-I leadership in exchange for the return to the party of the five prodigals of the Tea Labour Group (affiliated, to Assam Cha-Mazdoor Sangh) and a couple of others, the party's strength will not go beyond 50 in the Assembly with an effective strength of 120.

Political observers think there is very little scope for any large-scale defection for, had that been possible, the Congress-I would have been able to purchase some relief for itself during the rounds of torrid political crisis in March and finally in June when the Taimur Government packed up. Any Ministry-making then, will be possible only with the help of the 23-strong Leftist Group which will extract a heavy price for its support. In this situation, thus, even if a Ministry is formed it will be for the sole purpose of averting a constitutional crisis, a contingency which saw Mrs. Anwara Taimur suddenly in the saddle last December. In fact, this will be no more than a caretaker Government. And the non-Left parties stand nearly no chance at all.

Any salvation for the people of Assam, politically speaking, will wait till the revision of electoral rolls and fresh elections which, in any case, will be possible only after a compromise on the foreign national problem. Till then Assam will have to endure the plight of a State in suspended animation.

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