

Assam Situation: What Has Gone Wrong

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November instead of being cold for Assam became warm. The Government acted unwisely by denying the agitators the elementary right to hold the central rally at the Judges' Field in Guwahati on November 10. It ignited the fuse and the non-violent bomb burst in and around the city in the shape of a dozen mini-rallies. A central and disciplined rally is always better than such mini-rallies where words are usually less inhibited. The advantage of a central rally is that there only the representative speakers speak. The administration adopted the same tactics to prevent the rally as had once been adopted earlier by its Bihar counterpart in Patna Gandhi Maidan to stop a mighty JP rally. The CRPF jawans stationed in Assam started using their lathis freely that day onwards. Indiscriminate State violence however failed to prevent the 36-hour Assam bandh started on November 19, the Path bandh programme on November 30 and the week-long "illegal" rallies in between. Unnecessary violence caused the death of a young boy at Dhing on November 19 and took the life of an ex-serviceman at Bheleguri on November 30. State violence appeared in many forms: lathi charge, firing, beating by chasink and abusing. Abuses were significant. One CRPF official asked a medical student whether he was an Assamese. When he replied in the affirmative, he was ruthlessly beaten. To the officer to be an Assamese to be an offence. Why the official behaved in such a manner and sullied the name of Indian state? There must be something seriously wrong in the instructions given or the man has poor understanding of Indian culture. What has gone wrong? Perhaps the whole democratic framework. Perhaps the policy of the administration. One does not know.

Tactics of defusion has degenerated into tactics of oppression. These tactics are: overuse of police and CRPF methods, interested propaganda and communication on behalf of the Government and actions against students and workers participating in the programmes. These tactics not only go ill with a peaceful movement but erode its very basis. The overuse of police methods has given rise to the bomb cult at the popular level for

State violence and terrorism are twins. Education and persuasion are better methods but neither the ruling party nor the administration has made use of these methods. The AIR is the chief means of governmental propaganda and communication. Its news bulletins distort facts and truth and therefore propaganda or communication is not effective. People disbelieve what the AIR says to please its bosses. Ironically the BBC news bulletins are today more relied upon in Assam. The remedy to this aberration is to restore the credibility of news bulletins through objective presentation of news and principled comments. Actions against students and employees have become counter-productive. Sometimes actions are taken not on the basis of rules or law but on the basis of political dictations of ruling party leaders. Rules or laws are thus subverted. Moreover there are some moth-eaten rules and laws which no longer correspond with the contemporary reality. These are not discarded for the lack of a spirit of innovation on the part of the executive. The remedy to the situation lies in a change of approach. The Government should sit with their employees and consult the agitation leaders to evolve a procedure of resolving disputes keeping the administration running and ensuring people's participation in the development work even in the midst of the agitation. Self-discipline is always better than superimposed discipline. All formal punishments should be withdrawn and an atmosphere created to change the relationship between the people and the administration. I have a feeling that if the right kind of approach is made, then the leaders of the movement will respond to it. Old tactics should be immediately replaced by democratic tactics. The Government should not borrow from reactionary politicians the idea of dividing people into communities or castes. They should rather encourage the people to talk amongst themselves to resolve their disputes if any. This is the surest and quickest way of restoring lost communal harmony.

The origin of popular violence as typified by the cult of bomb has not so far been specified. During the month of November, a number of

bombs burst or detected at several places. In one case when a bomb exploded in the veranda of a private residence at Guwahati, an innocent woman lost his life. One has to realise that such acts of violence always demoralise the people who are the main stay of any movement or Government. The authors of violence usually believe in secrecy and conspiratorial behaviour which is against the very spirit of democratic public life. The adoption of terroristic tactics by a movement or by a conscious elite ultimately undermining the popular mass support for a cause. While the movement leaders are not all angles, they have been consistently adhering to the path of peaceful struggle, and I have a feeling that they would not yield to the temptation of terroristic violence either out of frustration or out of ideological confusion. Because masses will never support violence. The sources of terroristic violence have not so far been identified. Some feel that the sources are outside the movement and are no friend of the movement. However it would be wiser on the part of the society and the Government to make an impartial and judicial inquiry into all incidents of violence, both State and terroristic, to identify the sources. There should be also a sincere debate on the means to be adopted by society in achieving its proclaimed aims, and resolution of disputes.

The foreigners issue can be solved by peaceful means. There is a fair agreement on principles among the two parties, but the approaches seem to be different. If the nation (which includes both the people and the political parties) so desires, it can effectively mediate and bridge the gap between the two approaches. The genuine Assamese feeling that their language, culture, territorial area, population structure, and right to a linguistic State with its obvious bearing on the citizenship rights and duties need protection and constitutional safeguards have to be provided. Despite the Government's commitment on the issue, there is no firm declaration on these specific points by Parliament and the political

parties. The present Constitution is vague on these matters. Such a declaration may be a prelude to the restoration of mutual confidence among the parties. After all the issue is basically a small nationality problem. This is the best way to halt the drift towards a situation of increasing confrontation. The Bengali leaders, instead of constantly harping on the theme of minority rights, would do well to concede that minority rights in Assamese territorial area can be fruitfully enjoyed only when they recognise the majority rights of small Assamese nationality as a historical necessity and make due adjustments. This is the only way to settle the century old dispute between the two nationalities. The details of such an adjustment can be worked out only if the leaders of the two communities sit together and thrush out a solution.

The nation would do well to concentrate all its persuasive power to settle the Assamese-Bengali problem for good. For the alternative is to carry on the hair-splitting debate on the cut-off year, with the Government insisting on 1971 and the movement leaders insisting on 1961. The only solution feasible at the end of this debate is to accept two cut-off years, one for Assam and the other for the nation. A compromise cut-off year is often dangled as another probable date for solution. The details of the negotiations carried out in 14

rounds of talks are not available, but the impasse is there for all to see. If this impasse continues and the Government wants to stick to 1971 as the cut-off year, the confrontation is likely to continue. At the moment, both sides are in battle array and the movement leaders have announced a fresh programme of noncooperation.

The time has come for all to recognise that there is a serious lack in the situation. The national leaders seem to be in the retreat. Had Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal or JP been alive today, they would have surely come to Assam to talk directly to the masses. Distant talking and wild accusations from afar hardly help matters. The nation must