

# Alarming turn to Assam confrontation

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The happenings, of the last few days in Assam have clearly shown that the police repression and the agitators' belligerence have been increasing in direct proportion to each other.

The use of force by the state police and CRPF during the last two days to subdue the population in major towns in the Brahmaputra valley is quite significant. And the police reaction to any resistance put up is more repression resulting in a vicious circle. The situation has become particularly dangerous as the CRPF jawan in Assam today is a harassed man. For over a year he has been on active duty day and night humiliated, hated and a social boycott. The tension is telling. According to a government officer: "Mercifully

there has not been a case of a policeman breaking down under tension and becoming trigger-happy. But it can happen any moment."

The agitators, on the other hand, are increasingly indulging in jeering at the jawans or even direct physical attacks on policemen. Stone-throwing is on the increase. The policemen retaliate strongly. When they get an opportunity they give vent to all the months to rent up frustration.

At Gauhati on Saturday a knife was thrown at a CRPF patrol by an unidentified miscreant. The patrol went on a rampage. About six young men found in the locality were beaten up. Another was arrested. The police then arrested a senior gazetted officer in whose house they suspected the assailant had hidden. There are more

such cases which indicate that tension has already mounted to alarming proportions.

A posse of policemen found four youths loitering.

near the Uzan Bazar area, a stronghold of the agitators. The boys were roughed up after questioning and sent away. A Punjabi business executive was caught by policemen as he was walking back home after a night show. "They were already beating up about a dozen persons. I tried hard to explain that I was an innocent passerby. What perhaps saved me was my north-Indian diction," he says.

Dilip Kumar Sharma, a shopkeeper in the Chandmari area, was accused by a cyclist of having deflated his tyres for moving around on the rasta-roko day. He was dragged to the police station, beaten up badly and later released on bond.

It is difficult to say whether this violence is predetermined or not. On the face of it, it may seem that the tension of a long and thankless vigil is telling on the policemen.

"You have to consider the state of mind of a CRPF jawan who may have had six postings in this year including places like Ahmedabad and Aligarh. He has not seen his family all the time and is hated by the local population. He can only be expected to blame the local people for his plight and try squaring it up with them," said an officer.

So observers emphasise that it is necessary at this juncture for both the Government and the agitators to relax a little before the situation reaches a point of no return.

In fact much of the problem is caused by the fact that both the state administration and the agitators are now fighting a battle of prestige which has gone to ridiculous lengths. While the agitators are overdoing the agitation in preparing for the tripartite talks, the Government is congratulating itself on managing to keep the highways and rail tracks open during the rasta-roko even though few people ventured out.

In Gauhati empty rickshaws were taken in processions from one part of the city to the other under heavy police escort. The state government was satisfied at having been able to run a number of long-distance buses many of which had only one or two passengers.

Observers fear that unless there is intervention from higher quarters of the Government and the right-thinking Assamese intelligentsia with some sway over the agitation leadership, a situation may arise where negotiations will become irrelevant.

According to a Gauhati lawyer: "Things have reached a pass in Assam where the bigger issues involved in the agitation have taken secondary place to the confrontation between the state administration and the agitators and the sooner an end is put to this the better."

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