

# Assam minus Cachar proposed

BY KULDIP NAYAR

NEW DELHI, NOV. 8.—The Union Government has informally proposed to the leaders of the Assam movement that it is prepared to cut off Bengali-speaking Cachar from Assam and make it a Union territory, so as to give the Assamese-speaking population a clear majority in the State.

The Assam leaders' immediate reaction has not been favourable. Their argument is that it would make the State smaller.

After holding several rounds of talks with the movement leaders, the government feels the main stumbling block is the thinking on the part of the leaders that if "foreigners" continue to stay in the State, the Assamese-speaking population will become a minority.

The census figures of 1961 and 1971 (there was no census in 1981) show that nearly 62 per cent of people in the State have mentioned Assamese as their language. This Assamese-speaking population includes 25 per cent Muslims who have come from across the border since 1951. The interference is that they have given Assamese as their mother tongue in order to escape detection because there is less harshness shown towards Muslims as compared to Hindus.

The Assam movement leaders are reportedly afraid that once the dust settles and the foreigners' issue is cleared up, the Muslims from the other side would revert to their mother tongue—Bengali. In that eventuality, the 62 per cent Assamese-speaking population might be reduced to 37 per cent or somewhere near it, depending on the number of Muslims owning up in favour of Bengali. The Bengali-speaking population in Assam is around 17 per cent.

The Assamese fear that they may become political orphans in their own State, with the "foreigners" holding the balance. Cachar has a population of 27 lakhs and 99 per cent of them are Bengalis. If this territory is cut off from Assam, which is said to have a population of around 1.9 crores, the Assamese-speaking population will enjoy a clear majority.

The student leaders recall that Assam was once a big State. First Nagaland was cut off, then NEFA and the dif-

ferent hill States. Their impression is that their troubles started when their State began to shrink. However, they are opposed to the loss of Cachar through further dismemberment though they realise that the entire Cachar population is against their movement.

PTI and UNI add: Two major Opposition parties, the Janata and the BJP, are not attending tomorrow's government-opposition meeting on Assam, saying that they had not been taken into confidence on this issue—a charge rejected today by the government.

The Janata Party followed the BJP in announcing that it would not participate in the meeting with the home minister, Mr Zail Singh, who will represent the government along with some other Union ministers.

The meeting would be an "exercise in futility," it said, adding that the Opposition had not been taken into confidence on Assam.

A report from Gauhati says the Assam agitation leaders are determined to hold their central rally at the Judges' Field here on November 10 despite the government's denial of permission.

The all Assam Students Union president, Mr Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, and its general secretary, Mr Bhriгу Kumar Phukan, in a joint statement today reiterated their decision to hold the rally and appealed to the people to join it peacefully and conduct the proceedings "with supreme discipline" to give, what they called, a "fitting reply to the malicious propaganda of the mercenaries of democracy."

Meanwhile, the non-Congress (I) Opposition alliance parties in Assam will approach the Governor, Mr Prakash Mehrotra, for an appointment with him on November 10 to stake their claim for forming a government in the State.

The parties which were scheduled to meet the Governor today to submit their list of supporters, could not do so as Mr Mehrotra was away in Delhi. He is likely to return here tomorrow. The Opposition parties will meet in Gauhati tomorrow to discuss their strategy on ministry formation, a spokesman of the alliance said.

## IDBI to aid Assamese entrepreneurs

From Our Staff Correspondent

GAUHATI, NOV. 8. — The Industrial Development Bank of India is prepared to extend financial and other assistance for training prospective entrepreneurs of Assam and "expose them to the industrial culture in more industrially advanced States."

This assurance was given by Mr M. N. Pal, IDBI chairman, in his discussion here with State government officials.

In view of the industrial backwardness of Assam, it was generally agreed that to start with, there should be some joint sector ventures of the State government and experienced industrialists from outside. After such industries had been set up and run for some time the government might pass on its shares to local entrepreneurs. Some units might be started as joint ventures between outside industrialists and local entrepreneurs.

Mr Pal suggested that after the government had made up its mind and decided upon the package of incentives, it could convene meetings of industrialists in Bombay, Calcutta and other places and persuade them to start industries in Assam.

It was agreed that there was vast scope for starting some industries in State based on the downstream products of Bongaigaon Refinery and forest resources beside consumer-oriented industries.

However, as a precondition for these concepts, peaceful conditions should prevail in the State to attract finance and experienced industrialists, they said.

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