

Foreign Nationals In Assam:

A Close Look

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The people's movement against the illegal presence of about 45 lakh foreign nationals from East Pakistan / Bangladesh and Nepal has stepped into its third year. Thanks to the Government of India's obduracy, the problem still remains unsolved, though as many as fourteen rounds of talks have been held between the Government and AASU-AAGSP. The main reason for the breakdown of the talks time and again has been the Government of India's refusal to see the problem as anything else but a threat to the ruling party's vote banks, and it is this myopic view which has resulted in Assam's sufferings over the last three years.

The Government of India, though mouthing pious notions about a national problem, is still to admit the creation and existence of a national calamity caused by the uncontrolled and unregulated influx of foreign nationals from over the international borders into this part of our country. But for the movement launched by AASU-AAGSP, this national problem could have gone unnoticed, perhaps forever. Sri Charan Singh's Government of course, turned a deaf ear and a blind eye to the problem, and the present Government headed by Sri-mati Indira Gandhi would rather have us believe that the problem is not all a serious one, if her own pronouncements, the speeches of her Home Minister and other party functionaries are taken even with the proverbial pinch of salt. Ironically enough, the bulk of the infiltration has taken place during her stewardship of the nation since the early sixties, when the State was also ruled by her party, the Congress. It is this party which is solely responsible for the calamity we are facing, the root cause being its mad lust to cling to power with the vote banks of foreign nationals.

One of the vital points discussed during the tortuous negotiations was the adequate policing of the borders to prevent further infiltration. We would recall the statement made by the Home Minister of India on the floor of Parliament on the 17th November, 1980. Among the many solemn commitments made to the people of Assam, one related to border security. By this state-

ment, the Government of India is committed to secure the international borders in Assam against further infiltration.

Against this backdrop, what we find is that the Government of India is still negotiating—if that is the word that can be used—the security of the border with AASU-AAGSP, a full year later. This single fact should speak volumes for the Government's sincerity in tackling this national problem and its concern for the indigenous people of Assam and the other north-eastern States. (Let not our brothers and sisters of our neighbouring north-eastern States forget that if Assam is overrun, their own States will surely follow suit). Since when has the security of our international borders become the subject matter of "negotiations"? Or, does the Government of India intend to seal the borders against further infiltration only if we submit to its terms—terms which are sure to lead to our social, linguistic, cultural and political extinction?

We can only pray that the Government will not negotiate with us before mobilising the Army should an invasion similar to the one of 1962 occur in future. To add insult to injury, that mouthpiece of the Government, the All India Radio, solemnly assured us during its 9 PM broadcast on October 31 last that the Government had agreed to appoint a Commission to go into all aspects of border security. A Commission of Inquiry is all that the people of Assam can expect after all the tortures, humiliations, mud-slinging and name-calling that they have undergone during these last two years.

Another strange thing that we have noticed during the course of the negotiations is the positive reluctance of the Government of India to recommend to the Chief Election Commissioner that the Election Commission should undertake an intensive revision of the electoral rolls to delete the name of each and every foreigner who has been registered as a voter. Whenever

this subject comes up, the Government first of all talks about a "cut-off year", then in the same breath, about humanitarian considerations, international agreements and national commitments. In spite of our best efforts, we have not been able to extract from the Government how the right to vote is connected with these pieties. And what is still more wondrous, the Chief Election Commissioner, a direct offspring of the Constitution who must have sworn to honour and uphold it when he assumed office, now seems totally unconcerned that 20 lakh foreigners have wormed their way into the electoral rolls, though he himself expressed profound fears about this very disease back in 1978.

To sum up, what are not negotiable commodities, in spite of the Government's most arduous attempts to prove the contrary, are the hard facts of life the right of franchise is confined to Indian citizens exclusively, and that policing and protection of international borders has perforce to be done by the Government of India to effectively ensure that unauthorised and illegal border crossings into the country are prevented. We would rather think that the Government of any other sovereign nation would be ashamed to bargain on these two counts with a section of its own citizens.

No sensible person could ever believe that a sovereign independent country could confer citizenships on foreigners in clear violation of its own laws and statutes. Yet, this is precisely what has happened in this part of our country. The Government of India has issued and has caused to be issued lakhs of citizenship certificates to Pakistani citizens, in clear violation of sections 5 and 12 of the Citizenship Act as interpreted by a High Court. Similarly, the State Government has settled lakhs of foreign nationals on land reserved for tribals, in violation of laws enacted by the State Legislature itself to protect tribals in their own belts

and blocks.

When confronted with these unpalatable truths during the last round of 'formal talks' in May and July last, the Government had no answers. It is this embarrassment that that the Government has wished to skirt and circumvent by calling for 'informal discussions'. Several rounds of such discussions have already been held — the last one in Delhi in October — when the AASU-AAGSP have very rightly decided not to participate in 'informal talks' any further. The Government only answer to the draft proposals of AASU-AAGSP has been that the Assam agitators have taken as 'extreme stand'. What exactly is 'extreme' about the proposals is still to be clarified. In line with the Government's policy of double-speak all along, Sri Makwana has said (in Parliament) that the proposals would need several Constitutional amendments. The actual truth is that all that the draft proposals have stressed is the enforcement of existing laws to prevent further infiltration and the identification of foreign nationals who have already entered the country illegally and are voting in our elections illegally.

Not being able to counter AASU-AAGSP logic, the Government of India has now embarked on an all-out war with the people of Assam. Permission for the mass rally proposed on November 10 by AASU-AAGSP was denied, though permission was granted to the BJP shortly before this. Similarly, the so-called Left-Progressive parties of Assam were also given permission to hold a rally on November 25. (Of course, this rally was not held because it was called off at the last moment by its sponsors for reasons best known to them). When AASU-AAGSP decided to hold the 10th November rally all the same, the Government adopted extraordinary measures to prevent it. The site of the rally was occupied by hundreds of armed policemen, ticket holding passengers were forcibly off-loaded just because they happened to be travelling towards Guwahati on a particular day, a doctor's car was damaged by policemen when he was just a mite slow in

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obeying the CRPF's orders to stop and turn back, a State Transport bus driver was ruthlessly assaulted by the CRPF, and hundreds of unarmed men women and children were beaten and assaulted by hooligans in uniform deployed by the State.

Workers and employees in this part of our country are not allowed to raise their voices against tyranny and oppression even outside their times of duty. Their leaders have been arrested under the National Security Act just for this piceaallo. In this part of our country — a country which claims itself to be the world's largest democracy — public meetings or any other form of dissent are strictly forbidden.

When a democratically elected Government chooses to use strong-arm methods on its own citizens to stifle protests against oppression, the obvious conclusion is that the rulers have been defeated by the ruled. The lesson of 1977 seems to have been forgotten. Well, 1977 has gone, and so has 1981. If 1982 has come, can 1983 be far behind?