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ASSAM: bridging the gap

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THE proclamation imposing Central rule on Assam has been revoked and a new Ministry sworn in. It may appear on the surface that the termination of President's rule implies a return to normalcy and that the worst of Assam's troubles are over. It would be well to bear in mind, therefore, that, simultaneously with the assumption of office by the new Ministry, the AASU (All-Assam Students' Union) and the AAGSP (All-Assam Gana Sangram Parishad) have reiterated their earlier decision calling for a 24-hour "total non-cooperation" movement to protest against the installation of a Congress(I) Ministry "with the support of legislators who were elected on the votes of foreigners." The sponsors of the agitation have once more urged the people of Assam as well as all employees of Government, semi-Government and non-Government establishments to respond to their call and register their protest against the formation of the Ministry without resolving the problem of foreigners. Work in the State and Central Government offices has, moreover, remained paralysed since November 24th, when the employees embarked on an indefinite non-cooperation movement demanding fulfilment of their charter of demands. It is clear, therefore, that it was no more than to fulfil a technical constitutional requirement that a Ministry had to be installed, and the auspices under which it has assumed office do not encourage optimism.

Is it to be assumed then that there has been no progress throughout this past, tempestuous year in the resolution of the Assam tangle? Have the series of parleys at Shillong, Gauhati and New Delhi proved infructuous and are we back again to where it all began? And is it the leaders of the agitation who are to be blamed for a posture of rigid intransigence or the Government for an excessive dependence on strong-arm tactics?

But it would be uncharitable to infer either that the efforts to find a solution have been insincere or that they have proved entirely abortive. Where, however, the Government have failed is in their assessment of the degree of public support behind the movement. The bureaucratic approach in such situations is generally to underestimate the popular will,

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to brand such agitations as the doing of an irresponsible handful of fire-brands who can best be put in their place by a show of firmness. It is an approach that has time and again needlessly and tragically deferred the getting to grips with problems in the north-eastern hill-regions in the hope that, with the efflux of time, they would solve themselves.

There have been stages in the negotiations over the foreigners' issue when there were signs that a solution would not be far distant. The leaders have made it categorically clear that their concern is with "foreigners" only, and not with non-Assamese who are Indian citizens. This in itself is an important gain and indicative of a healthy national approach that is not always or everywhere in evidence in the country. They have also shown appreciation of the human side of the issue and have been restrained in their references to deportation of illegal entrants and their removal to other states. With such a spirit of accommodation and reasonableness on their part, the resolution of differences should not have been insuperable. It is apparent, therefore, that, somewhere along the line, things have been done and said that have resulted in a loss of confidence both on the part of the Government and of the leaders of the movement.

If it is the expectation that the installation of a Ministry will provide a cushion for diverting the ire and animus of the student leaders from the Central Government, such expectation will be quickly disabused. It will soon become evident how long the Ministry will survive, despite enlistment of the law and order machinery of the State for its support and protection. And although the adjoining hill States are suffering the repercussion of the Assam disturbances in the shortage of essential supplies (for the transit of which Assam is the only inlet) and are outwardly deplored the agitation, yet there is, beneath this outward protest, a deep empathy with the Assam apprehension that any further increase in the influx of foreigners will see an end to the cultural identity of the entire north-eastern region.

The installation of a Ministry will no doubt create a divide with the leaders of the agitation. But the days of dividing and ruling are long dead, and, unless the apprehensions of these strategically vital north-eastern States are both appreciated and allayed, they may well join together to create conditions necessitating the imposition in the future of a permanent army of occupation. What the leaders of the agitation want is an assurance that (1) the most stringent measures will in the future be enforced to prevent further influx, and (2) if, despite such measures, any person should succeed in infiltrating into Assam from Bangladesh, the system of checks and cross-checks will be made so comprehensive and thorough that there will be no possibility of his evading summary deportation or getting his name entered in the electoral rolls, as has been the practice in the past.

The discussions that have taken place have borne fruit in narrowing down differences and a settlement seemed near with the tentative suggestion of 1967 as the year upto which entrants from Bangladesh would

not be disturbed. The AASU and AAGSP, however, have indicated that such entrants, even if citizenship is conceded to them, should be in possession of identity cards so that there should be no risk of any confusion with subsequent entrants. It is an accepted fact that infiltrators have in the past succeeded in manipulating citizenship for themselves through impersonation and other illegitimate stratagems, and there is genuine need therefore to devise a water-tight machinery whereby subsequent infiltrators may be prevented from becoming unobtrusively absorbed in the population with the connivance, if not active assistance of their relatives and friends on the Indian side of the border. Whether this would most effectively be achieved by the issue of identity cards or by the preparation of an official record of all post-1951 entrants or by any other administrative device is a matter that should be dispassionately examined, with the clear understanding that the requirement of possessing an identity card should be considered no more derogatory to a person's status as a citizen than the possession of a ration card. It has to be admitted without reservation that there were far too many loop-holes in the procedures hitherto followed that facilitated illegal entry and swelled the number of persons in Assam who had in law no right to citizenship status. The leaders of the movement are justified, therefore, in insisting upon a tightening up of the procedures to ensure against their abuse.

While the Government of India must in equity grant the Assam Government such financial and other assistance as may be required to meet the problems of unemployment and such like consequent upon the heavy influx from across the border, the other States of the Union must also be prepared to share Assam's burdens. The process of identifiability of entrants—and determination of date of entry—may be long and laborious, but when at last the enquiries have been completed and more accurate statistics are available, each State must readily accept the quota allotted for rehabilitation within its territories, so that Assam may feel assured that the country as a whole is behind her in her critical predicament and that each State is stretching itself to its utmost, despite its own difficulties and constraints, to relieve her of her burden.

The danger, however, is that, in its assessment, prompted by wishful thinking, that the movement is petering out, the Government will take no serious initiative until its hands are finally forced. Never have India's north-eastern frontiers, either before or after independence, experienced such turbulence and discontent. But if there has been loss of confidence, it is not yet too late for both sides to make amends. The agitators have nothing further to gain in obstructing the flow of oil. They have made their point and a gesture of magnanimity on their part will help remove the impression of irresponsibility and lack of a national sense that is harmful to their cause and discourages sympathy. The Government on its part is big enough, and strong enough, not to stand too much on ceremony. The issues are now clear and the differences have been substantially narrowed. If there is will enough, the gap can still be bridged.

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