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Grim Portent in Assam

EVENTS in Assam are moving rapidly towards the inevitable denouement. On Saturday last the state government took the decisive step of declaring the whole of Assam, except North Cachar, a "disturbed area" and of invoking the Armed Forces (Assam and Manipur) Special Powers Act. The next day the President promulgated the Essential Services Maintenance (Assam) Ordinance empowering the government to ban strikes in services designated as 'essential'. Though it was announced on this Thursday that the Prime Minister would visit Assam on Saturday to hold discussions "with a broad spectrum of people", these discussions are unlikely to be any more fruitful than the ones she has already had with the leaders of the Assam agitation. Everything, therefore, points to a crack-down by the government on the people of Assam, once the hurdle posed by the order of the Assam High Court staying the operation of the "disturbed areas" notification is got out of the way.

Taken together, the various measures invoked by the government add up to the most complete suppression of democratic rights and freedoms and of the rule of law, short of a formal declaration of a state of emergency. The Disturbed Areas Act empowers any magistrate or police officer not below the rank of sub-inspector (and comparable ranks in the armed police and the Assam Rifles) to shoot to kill any person found contravening prohibitory orders in force. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act provides for the use of the armed forces in aid of the civil administration and gives powers to the armed forces to search any place and arrest without warrant and even shoot to kill any person who is suspected to have committed or is expected to commit a cognisable offence in areas declared as "disturbed". The Maintenance of Essential Services Ordinance provides for punishment by rigorous imprisonment upto one year and fine upto Rs 2,000 of any person who goes on strike in any of the designated 'essential' services, or who instigates or incites others to go on strike or who extends support to a strike in monetary or other forms. The Ordinance provides for summary trial of offenders under it and for arrest without warrant of anyone who is suspected of having committed an offence under the Ordinance. In addition, of course, the government can at any time invoke its powers of preventive detention to imprison people without trial.

It is remarkable that the opposition political parties have mounted no protest against this awesome array of draconian measures taken by the government, not even those parties which have been in season and out of season crying out that the threat of authoritarianism presented by the Congress(I) and the government headed by Indira Gandhi constitutes the principal danger before the country. According to one newspaper report, the CPI(M) chief minister of West Bengal, when asked about his reaction to the declaration of Assam as a "disturbed area", avoided making any comments apart from saying "let Mrs Gandhi now take appropriate measures". Three days later, at the conference of Governors and Chief Ministers in New Delhi, the West Bengal chief minister is reported to have "expressed his full support for the stand taken by Mrs Gandhi on the Assam issue". Apparently, authoritarianism in relation to Assam is not such a bad thing after all.

This is a measure of how alienated all the political parties have become from the developments in Assam. Already, the so-called 'national' political parties are largely irrelevant to the political life of the other north-eastern states and union territories. The same process seems to have been set in motion in Assam as well. What is particularly significant in this context is that none of the political parties has come out openly against the demands of the agitation in Assam — the identification and expulsion of 'foreigners' from the state. Even the Assam state committee of the CPI(M) had passed a resolution in September last year calling for the detection of foreign nationals and their expulsion from the state. In that sense, the difference between these parties and the leaders of the agitation in Assam is only over the cut-off year to be used: the latter insist that those who have come to the state after 1951 be branded 'foreigners' and appropriately dealt with, while the former argue that this treatment be meted out only to those who have come after 1971.

None of the parties have, however, had the courage to say that the whole approach which focuses on identification and expulsion of foreigners as the central issue is one which will cause immense hardship to very large

numbers of mostly very poor people who have already had to endure much suffering. According to one estimate, even with 1971 as the out-off year something like 1.2 million people would be in danger of being branded as 'foreigners' and uprooted from the state. This approach also sanctifies government actions (such as issue of identity cards to people, setting up of tribunals to identify and deport 'foreigners') which will give vast arbitrary powers to the State machinery and open the way for encroachments on the people's rights and freedoms which should be thoroughly unacceptable even to old-fashioned liberals, not to mention marxists and communists who claim to understand the class character of the government and the State.

None of the parties have also had the courage to point out frankly that the basic problems of lack of development and growing unemployment in the state, which have lent undoubted mass support to the present agitation in Assam on the question of 'foreigners', are the outcome not of the influx of 'foreigners' but of the lopsided development policies followed by the political set-up in power in the country. On March 22 the Prime Minister had announced with a flourish the setting up of a committee of ministers to devise measures to quicken the pace of development of the north-eastern states. In the midst of all the kudos being heaped upon the Prime Minister as she gets ready to crush the Assam agitation, no one seems to have bothered to find out if in the six weeks since then this committee has met at all.

West Bengal

A Friend in Delhi

A Correspondent writes:

WEST BENGAL'S Left Front government brought off the other day a financial coup of sorts when the redoubtable Union Finance Minister, R Venkataraman, conceded in so many words that the banking system had 'not given the state a fair deal. This has been one of the main points that the state, especially its minister in charge of the finance portfolio, Ashok Mitra, has long been trying to impress on New Delhi. Venkataraman's admission was like the first fruit of the campaign.

The issue forms part of the larger controversy over Centre-state relations which, the present West Bengal regime can be said to have originally kicked off and has since then kept alive. Not all the darts that it has let off in this

shadow-fight have hit the target or have been well taken. But this banking issue has been different; the state has all the statistics in its favour and that has given it a lot of leverage.

Venkataraman had promised the state leaders to come down to Calcutta at the earliest and talk with them about their problems. This he did; as soon as parliament was adjourned, he came on a two-day visit to the city and met ministers, bankers and also members of chambers of commerce. He did not beat about the bush; he heard the points and felt that something ought to be done about them. And though the immediate outcome was nothing more than the formation of a permanent working group comprising representatives of banks and the state government, he gave indication that his ministry would like to restore the balance, now lacking so badly. Whether all this graciousness will endear him with the Delhi power elite — which does, not seem to have much love for the Leftist government — remains to be seen.

The Union Minister made it clear that he did not want to join issues with the state administration. He declined to comment on some of the proposals that the West Bengal government had put forward like those for setting up a separate state-owned bank on the lines of the State Bank of Jammu and Kashmir or taxing the entire income from tea under the agricultural income tax and keeping the whole of the proceeds for itself. He said he would look into these matters when they officially came to him.

But he was quite unequivocal in agreeing with the state government that it had been left a long way behind the national average in terms of the spread of the banking network or expansion of credit. Against the all-India average of one bank branch for 20,000 people, in the state it is one rural or semi-urban branch for every 35,000 rural or semi-urban people. This is so even though the number of bank branches has gone up in the state from 505 in June 1969 to 1,994 in June 1979; of this increase, nearly 42 per cent has been in the rural areas. Still, as many as 18 block headquarters are without a bank office.

One of the more strident charges made by the Left Front government is that bank deposits are being siphoned off from the state — and Venkataraman's own figures more than upheld the point. The credit-deposit ratio of the rural branches comes to 35 per cent against 55 per cent for the country as a whole; for the semi-urban branches, the corresponding figures are 24 per cent and 47 per cent. Venkataraman said: "I

note with great concern that the pace of deployment of bank credit in this state has not been commensurate with the growth of deposits with the result that the credit-deposit ratio or the credit+investment: deposit ratio has shown a declining trend for quite some time now". He told the bankers to take immediate steps to jack up the ratios to 60 per cent

Other major points that came up at his meeting with the bankers were: agriculture accounts for only 31 per cent of the priority sector advances in West Bengal against 43 per cent for the country; the differential rate of interest scheme accounts for just 0.23 per cent of the aggregate credit in the state whereas it is supposed to be at least one per cent; the priority sector advances in the state come to just about 20 per cent against the target of 40 per cent for the country by 1985. Venkataraman also deplored that many of the banks had not even cared to complete their staffing pattern needed making the rural thrust.

How long it will take for all the plans and targets as laid down by the Union minister to be realised will depend on how much pressure is kept up on the implementing and monitoring authorities. If all this is treated as just another one-shot affair — which some banking rop-hats would like to believe it was — then the whole thing would soon lapse into the vegetating *status quo* that has characterised this field so far.

Textile Industry

Devotion to Free Market

THE Market Research Wing of the Textiles Committee attached to the Office of the Textile Commissioner, Government of India, has been undertaking what it calls a Consumer Panel Project to build demand projections for textiles. The first report, based on data for 1974 and 1975, was published some time ago. Now the results for the next two years, 1976 and 1977, have been released. Normally, this would not have attracted much attention. However, in this instance the statistical results have been interpreted in such a way as to make out a case for encouraging the production of high-priced textiles at the cost of handloom-cloth.

According to the study, per capita consumption of all fabrics is projected to rise from 11.97 metres in 1976 to 13.78 metres in 1980 and further to 15.5 metres in 1988. However, the rise in demand for the cheaper varieties of cloth, it is claimed, will be nominal, while that for the costly varieties