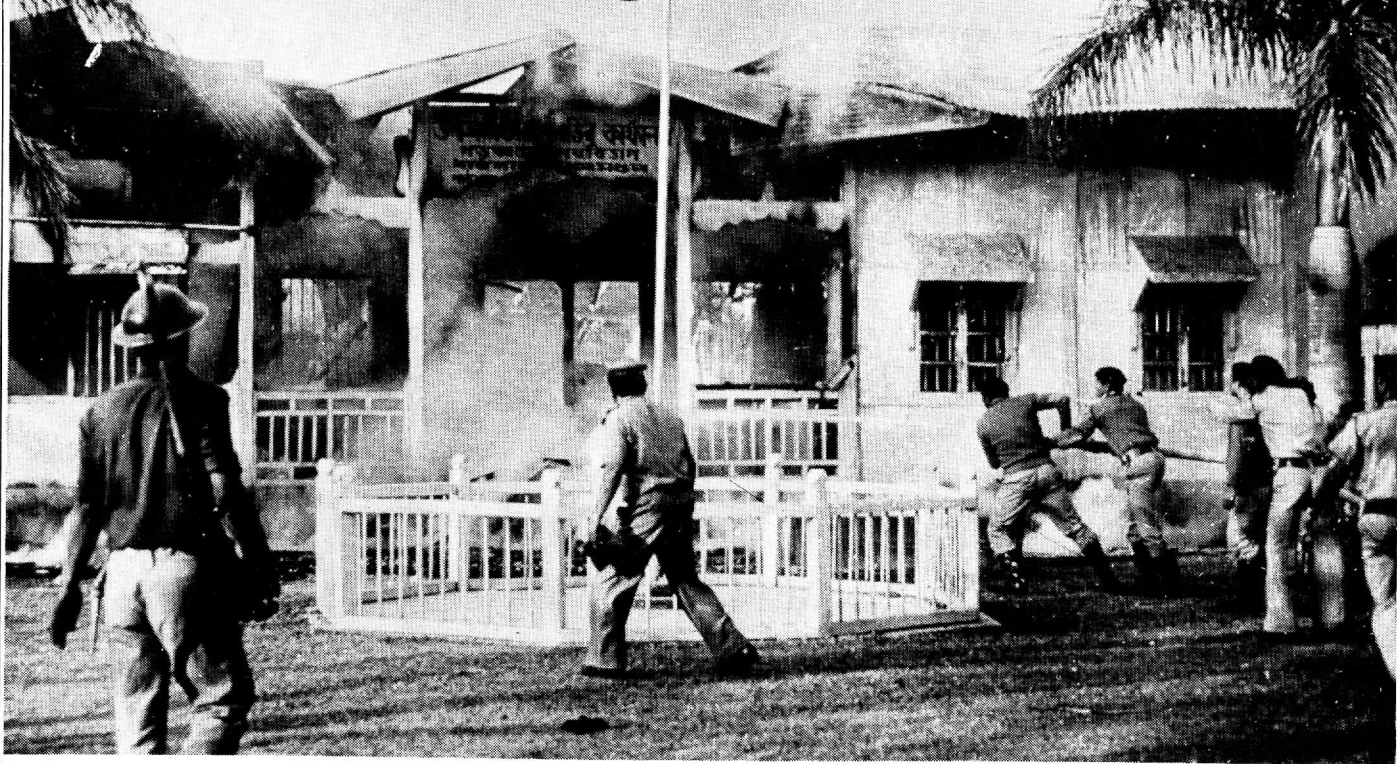


# The Burning Of Assam



**The fuse has been burning for almost four years and the mood in the state has passed through all the faces of anger, despair and belligerence to arrive, on election eve, at the explosive.**



GAUHHATI has become unrecognisable. Once the citadel of *lahe lahe*, the Assamese philosophy of languor and peaceability, the capital now rumbles with a subterranean rage. There is no election in sight—no posters, except at the odd street corner, watched over by a khaki brood of riot-clad paramilitary soldiers, no jeeps careening around the lanes with blaring loudspeakers, no soap-box oratory in the maze of byways. Fifteen kilometres down the Gauhati-Shillong road, behind miles of barbed wire and a cordon sanitaire of machine-gun-toting Border Security Force (BSF) personnel, the Secretariat and the MLA's Hostel plays uneasy host to the few bureaucrats who have violated the orders for a non-cooperation movement until election end, and to the scared huddle of Congress(I) candidates who are supposed to be out haranguing voters.

Such fear is not surprising, for the Assam elections are being held in unbelievably violent circumstances. The fuse has been burning for almost four years, and the mood in the state has passed through all the faces of anger, despair and belligerence to arrive, on election eve, at the explosive. As campaigning drew to a close on February 12 and Mrs Gandhi's Air Force Mi-8 helicopter touched down in the playground of Netaji Vidyapeeth at Maligaon, on the outskirts of Gauhati, it was clear that the prime minister was holding a bomb that threatened to explode in her hands. In what must have been her most cautious, security-encircled campaign ever, Mrs Gandhi took a hard line towards the agitators, saying that her government was determined to protect the minorities in Assam, and that they could not be dispersed from areas where they had been living for years.

But the fact remained that apart from the Congress(I), only the Left parties and the

Congress(S) were contesting the elections; the other major national parties, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Janata Party and the two Lok Dals had boycotted the polls in protest against their illegality. The confrontation deteriorated into civil disobedience and virtual civil war.

**Decimated Electorate:** Never before in independent India's history has the exercise of an electorate's franchise been less free and more unjust. Although 86.7 lakh voters are expected to go to the polls on February 14, 17 and 20, the actual turn-out may not be more than a fifth of that figure. The election will almost certainly be normal in Cachar district, whose dominant Bengali population has consistently opposed the agitation and supported the Government's stand on immigrants. Cachar accounts for 15 seats in the 126-seat Assembly, and at least 61 more are to be filled from the districts of Goalpara, Kamrup, Nowgong and Karbi Anglong, which have very large concentrations of

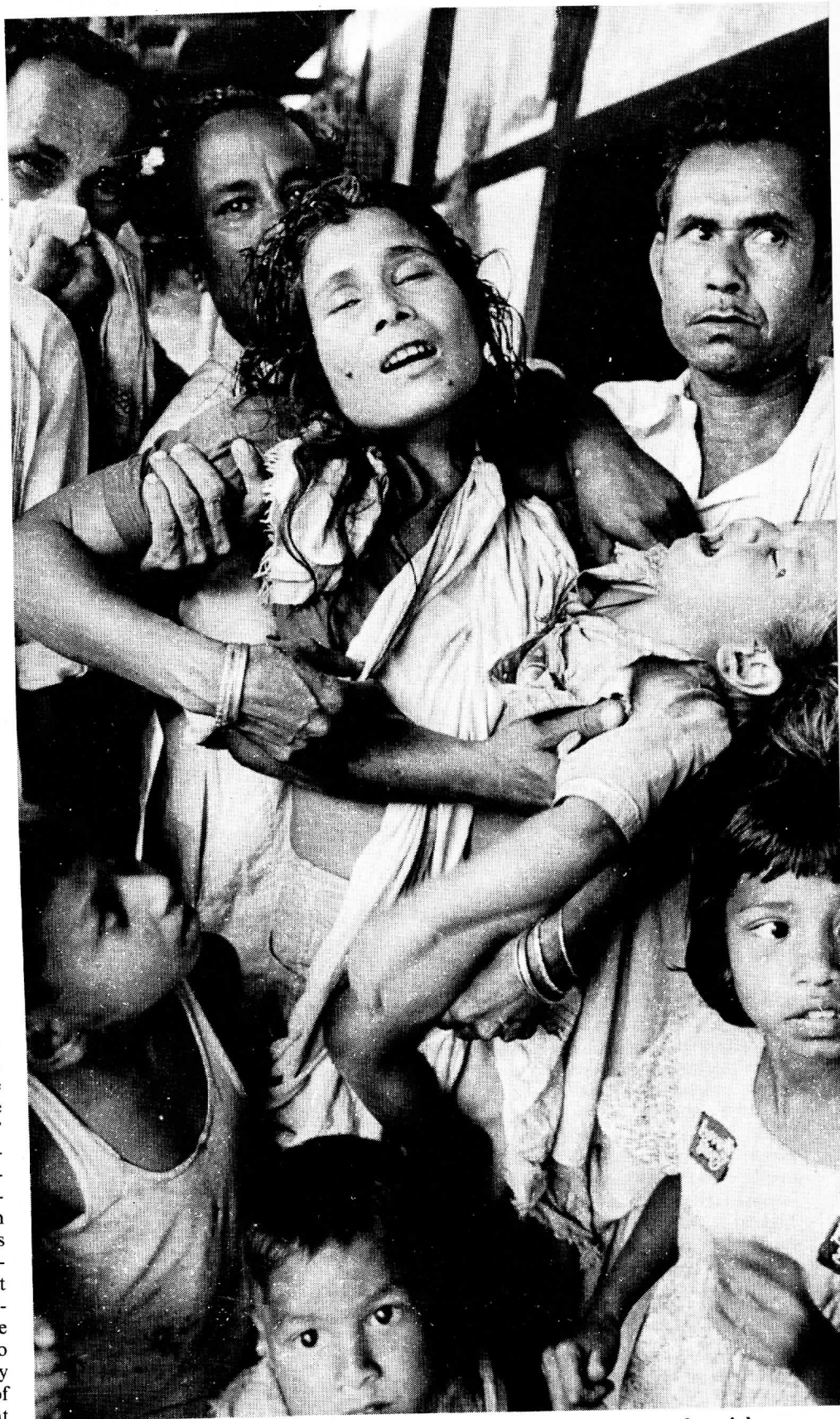
immigrant Bengali Muslims and Hindus. Large numbers of 'minority' voters, however, are expected to abstain from voting because of fear of reprisals.

Indira Gandhi is trying to impose her own brand of politics on Assam, but the state is ruled by mobs of violent anti-election agitators. Tension and fear crackle at Baihatta, 26 km from Gauhati on the road to Mangaldoi. Sullen knots of townspeople stand around, their faces hostile as the sparse traffic whips past. Every time a pebble rattles against a speeding car's mudguard, it sounds like the first throw in a fusillade.

Sipajhar town, a little further down the road, is totally deserted. This area had spawned the first frenzied violence on February 2, and curfew has been in force for four days since. Trapped on the town's outskirts is a tense queue of trucks, guarded by Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) men. Three buses are strewn across the highway, their burnt-out shells framed by toppled trees that form a road-blockade. A small wooden bridge stands burnt at both ends, patched together later with rough planking. "The mobs are insane," says the BSF platoon commander nervously, fingering the safety-catch of his self-loading rifle. "Last night we had to hold off 500 people screaming at us to quit the bridge."

**Mob Violence:** Mangaldoi town is the subdivisional headquarters in this cruelly afflicted part of Darrang district. Outside the police station stand more than 500 riot-clad men of the BSF and the CRPF. The previous day, four people had been killed in police firing at Tangla, 45 km ahead of Mangaldoi, when a furious mob attacked the police station there. A BSF contingent had to force-march into Tangla to impose an indefinite curfew, because all the bridges leading to the town had been burnt.

Subdivisional Officer Jitesh Khosla and Superintendent of Police N. Ramachandran are desperately trying to muster enough labourers so they can repair the approaches to Tangla. "There are 460 wooden bridges in my subdivision," says Khosla. "How can we protect every one of them? The mobs have burnt down sub-deputy commissioners' offices in Tezpur and Mangaldoi, all land records are destroyed. How can the agitationists hope to throw out the foreigners if all evidence is destroyed?" Adds Ramachandran morosely: "Not one Assamese from this region is willing to help us restore communications to Tangla. We've had to recruit Muslim immigrant labourers from Dalgaoon." Dalgaoon, 25 km away, happens to be the constituency of Anwara Taimur, who headed a minority Congress(I) ministry through 1981. An Assamese inspector of police comes up to tell Ramachandran that the labourers, stuffed into three requisi-



An agitator's bereaved widow and her children: victims of senseless violence





**Muslim maulvis and Hindu priests, recite memorial service for 'martyrs'. A tiered memorial plaque topped by the distinctive AASU flag is showered with flowers by mourners.**

tioned buses, refuse to move unless they are fed and paid. "They haven't eaten a morsel since yesterday," he says, "and if they refuse to cooperate you can forget Tangla."

Khosla and Ramachandran figured prominently in the trouble that broke out on February 2. The villagers near Sipajhar insist that the two entered Dakhin Chuburi village and arrested and beat up suspected agitationists. The two men were surrounded by a mob wielding axes and *daos*; Khosla ordered firing, and five men were injured. A little away, another mob attacked four Assam policemen guarding the Saktola bridge. Circle Inspector Ghanakanta Handique fired two sten gun rounds and two rounds of revolver fire. When his ammunition ran out, he ran to take refuge in a car parked close by. The car was dragged down a grassy verge, smashed with bamboo poles, and Handique was set upon, his eyes gouged out, his right leg broken in a dozen places, and then his body doused with petrol and set on fire. Handique killed three men before he died.

He was not the only policeman to die in mob violence; at least half a dozen others were killed in the frenzied fortnight before the elections. Handique's death was all the

more poignant because he was an Assamese himself, and the mob's fury had increased because of that. At the Burha outpost, 18 km from Mangaldoi, four Assam police constables held a mob of 500 at bay for two hours on February 2, before they were relieved by a CRPF platoon. Only one agitator, Kulen Sarma, was killed in the firing at Burha, but it was held up as another example of police brutality. All over Assam, however, the police were finding themselves targets of mob fury. "They have lost all fear for the *lal topis*," said a sub-inspector at the Mangaldoi Police Station, "and they don't realise that we are ourselves grief-stricken at having to kill our brothers."

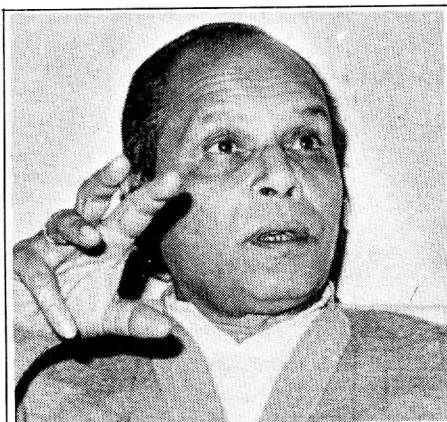
**Mass Mourning:** A dirt track branches off the highway between Saktola bridge and Sipajhar, and it leads to a huge crowd milling around half a dozen pandals thatched with banana leaves. In a circle sit a group of Muslim maulvis and Hindu priests, reciting a memorial service. A tiered memorial plaque topped by the distinctive All Assam Students Union (AASU) flag is showered with flowers by mourners.

The meeting is the *adyasradh* for Kadir Ali, one of the 'martyrs' killed by Circle Ins-

pector Handique. Premeshwar Sarma, the local AASU leader, who is evading a warrant for his arrest, assumes the spokesman's role. "The people thought they would get a solution peacefully," he says angrily. "We will use all possible force to stop the elections. We are prepared to give our lives. Look at the people's determination—even when they were surrounded by police firing at them, they continued to set fire to the Saktola bridge. We are prepared to walk to Gauhati by foot through the fields, but we will destroy all the bridges."

"Look at this crowd," says another young man. "Both the Hindus and the Muslims are mourning Kadir Ali. We have all sworn to oppose this tyrant government, the Hindus with fire in their hands, the Muslims with their eyes on the crescent moon."

A similar meeting is being held at Bardolguri village, 15 km away, to mourn five other victims of police firing. Nareshwar Medhi, joint secretary of the Karmachari Parishad in Mangaldoi, says that all district employees have heeded the call by AASU and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) for an 18-day non-cooperation movement from February 5. "The Govern-



**"I came from Mymensingh before Partition but the agitators will say I am a foreigner. We have been forced to organise ourselves and we will vote for our survival on the land we have tended with our blood and sweat."**

—ABDUL WASID AHMED, panchayat employee in Khondokopara

ment is trying to arrest us so that they can take us for election duty," says Medhi, "but we are all hiding. I was transferred to Cachar district and then suspended when I refused to go. Now there is a warrant out for me under the National Security Act (NSA)."

**Repressive Measures:** The NSA is just one of the many laws used by the despairing Assam Government to cow down recalcitrant employees. The Assam Executive Magistrates' (Special Powers) Act, 1983, empowers any district-level official with the right to arrest an agitationist and keep him imprisoned for six months. The Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA) has been used to arrest thousands of government employees who have refused to obey orders. Section 144 has been clamped on the entire state. By last week, Assam had been flooded with 55 battalions of the CRPF, and 36 battalions of the Haryana Armed Police, the Rajasthan Armed Constabulary, the Provincial Armed Constabulary of Uttar Pradesh, the Assam Police's armed sections, the BSF, and the Home Guards. At a conservative estimate they added up to a total of 1.5 lakh armed men in uniform to enforce law and order—one man for every 57 voters.

"The sleeping tiger has been awakened," says Sarada Kumar Saharia, an advocate in Mangaldoi, "and we will see how elec-

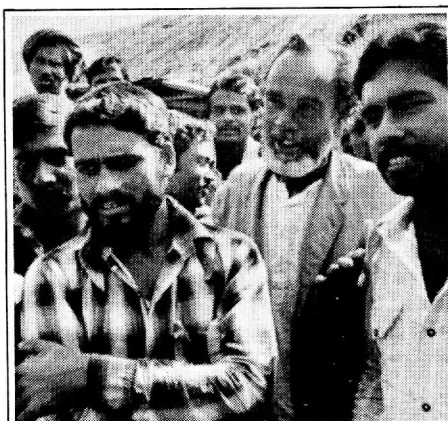
tions are held here. We are not fools—every clerk in Mangaldoi listens to the BBC for the correct news." Saharia reads out from an AASU bulletin: "*Dhar jharo dhar bhai, aru sabar samai nai, chai thakute mukhat kebol, dhori kajal chhai*" (take up your brooms, brothers; there is no time to waste; we have been watching for too long; our faces have been blackened with ashes).

**M**ANGALDOI was where it all began in early 1979, and the man who most directly helped in bringing the foreigners' issue into raging controversy was Hiranya Kumar Bhattacharyya. Deputy inspector general (DIG) of police (borders) at that time, Bhattacharyya's undisguised involvement with agitation leaders led to his imprisonment under the NSA for a year from January 1981.

Dismissed from service, Bhattacharyya lives today in the Beltola area, 5 km beyond Dispur. The ex-DIG's voice is full of venom and twisted logic, and it rings through the luxuriously appointed house called 'Wilderness'. Bhattacharyya's role in Assam's recent history began after the Lok Sabha member from Mangaldoi, Hiralal Patowary, died and a by-election had to be held to fill the parliamentary seat.

On May 9, 1979, Janata chief minister Golap Borbora ordered Bhattacharyya to detect any foreigners (illegal immigrants from Bangladesh) on the Mangaldoi voters' list. In a very short while, the DIG located precisely 47,658 'foreigners'. The election department had only 10,000 printed forms for entering objections to names included in the voters' list, so Bhattacharyya got 40,000 more forms cyclostyled. "I found 14,406 foreigners in Anwara Taimur's constituency alone," says Bhattacharyya proudly, "and remember, she won in the last election with a majority of 9,206 votes."

**State-wide Reaction:** The uproar over the Mangaldoi rolls sparked off the state-wide anti-foreigners movement that has snowballed into today's macabre situation. In August 1979, after the Lok Sabha was dissolved, Borbora asked Bhattacharyya to extend his detection operation to 80 Assembly segments of six Lok Sabha constituencies in Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Barpeta, Mangaldoi, Tezpur and Diphu; later, Assam's Chief Secretary R.S. Paramasivam—also recalled from the state in disgrace for his sympathies with the agitationists—ordered Bhattacharyya to check out the Gauhati, Dibrugarh and Jorhat constituencies. By early 1980, Bhattacharyya and his zealous policemen had located no less than 5,87,000 foreigners in these constituencies. "I went strictly by the National Register of Citizens, 1951, and the voters' rolls for successive elections," claims Bhattacharyya. "Under the



**"Satyagraha has taken new forms in Assam—black-outs, janata curfews, bandhs. But we are confused and hurt now: How can we have non-violence when atrocities are committed every day?"**

—BIRENDRA KUMAR BHATTACHARYA, Jnanpith award winning novelist

Foreigners' Act, the onus for proving citizenship rests on the suspect."

Last fortnight Bhattacharyya was travelling through Assam's tea-garden areas, trying to persuade the labourers, the *cha banua hampraday*, to abstain from voting. "We are accused of being a communal movement directed only against immigrant Muslims," he bursts out, "and of over three lakh foreigners driven out between 1958 and 1976 not a single man was Hindu, I agree, but from the 5.8 lakh foreigners I helped detect, 55 per cent were Hindus. Every Hindu means a vote for the communists. The entire Brahmaputra valley, once an oasis of nationalism in this desert of insurgency, is surrounded by Marxist expansionists and Bengali cultural expansionists. If Mrs Gandhi wants to retain Assam as a colony, the reaction will be proportionate. Assam is no more a federating unit of the Indian Union, but an occupied territory."

Every important agitation leader in Assam is currently underground, and everybody, intelligence sources included, agrees that the Government committed a grave blunder by arresting all the major AASU-AAGSP leaders the moment their plane touched down at Gauhati's Borjhar airport on January 6, after their talks with the Centre in Delhi had failed. The arrested leaders,



chiefly AASU's President Prafulla Mahanta and General Secretary Bhriгу Phukan, were recognised as moderates. "Their arrests have allowed the extremists to take over the movement," says a highly placed intelligence official, "and they have gone underground."

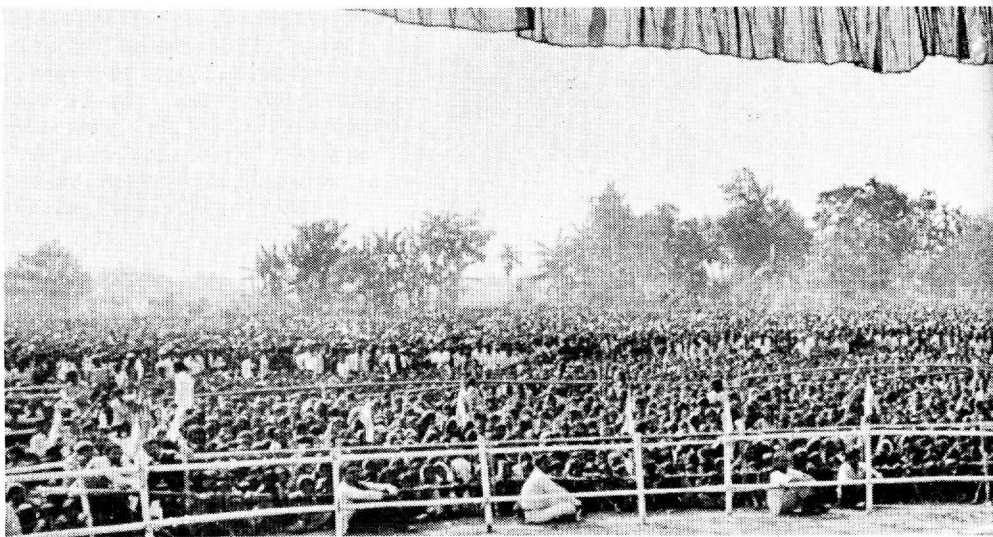
**Planned Strategy:** Within AASU itself, the arrested leaders' posts have quickly been filled by the second rank. Mahanta's work is now looked after by Nagen Sarma, and Phukan's by Nurul Hussain. Arup Bardoloi has taken over Biraj Sarma's place in the AAGSP hierarchy, and Convenor Atul Bora has been replaced temporarily by Pabindra Deka.

Inside a room in the Gauhati Medical College sits a group of 20 students, all of them on the run from police, and either in charge of local AASU units or the All Gauhati Students Union (AGSU). Mohammed Niki-bur Zaman, president of the All Kamrup District Students Union (AKDSU), says that they are all busy organising the anti-election campaign. "The movement is spontaneous," he says, "after all, three years have passed and today there is a renewed phase. Right now our plans extend only until the elections, and we are doing everything possible to thwart them. After the elections there will be a new movement, a new programme; we will see that the newly-formed government cannot continue."

Dr Kamalakanta Kalita, general secretary of the Gauhati Medical College (GMC) Junior Doctors' Association, admits that there has been a lot of violence. "We condemn violence, but there are bad elements everywhere," he says. Bijon Kumar Mahajan, vice-president of the AGSU, says that the movement leaders have been amazed at the numbers in which people are coming out to obstruct the election process. "We are very sure that the turn-out on polling days will be miserable," he says.

**Coordination:** At Alochoka village, near Sipajhar, Atul Goswami describes how the agitationists have organised in the districts. "All communication, since press censorship was imposed, is through cyclostyled bulletins or word of mouth," he says, "but we manage to communicate orders and plans for janata curfews and black-outs." Goswami is the AASU adviser for Darrang district; he says that all the 43 executive committee members of AASU have fanned out into the districts to coordinate the agitation's present phase. "Essentially, the foreigners' issue is political," says Rajya Sabha independent MP Ajit Kumar Sarma in Gauhati, "and although the agitation leaders do not harbour political designs now, a large number of boys are getting very good political training in the districts."

Whether the total compliance with the leadership's calls for janata bandhs, janata curfews, or even janata 'arrests' of violators,



Mrs Gandhi addressing a meeting in the minority-

and city-wide black-outs, is due to fear or support, the passions the elections have aroused among the Assamese are ferocious. Late on February 5, barely a hundred yards from the Sadar Police Thana in Gauhati, a group of young women take out a torchlight procession, shrilly shouting anti-election slogans. Suddenly a police black maria swoops down on the intersection and a burly inspector jumps out with his lathi-wielding men. The processionists melt as suddenly as they

appeared, throwing away their flaming torches; every house in the locality is plunged into darkness as the lights are simultaneously switched off, leaving the policemen stand in utter darkness, looking warily about them.

A little distance away, in the GMC Hospital, visitors are conducted to beds with placards on them, announcing the history of each patient's martyrdom. In one ward lie Paresb Deka, Kanti Deka and Jyotish Deka, all injured in police firing at Chenga, near Barpeta, on January 23. In another lie two victims of firing near Sipajhar on February 2—Jadab Nath, whose spleen has been removed, and Golok Nath, whose right leg has a bullet embedded in it.

But the largest cluster of anxious people hovers around three men, covered from faces to feet with severe third-degree burns. Prahlad Sarma, Chitra Barua and Tapan Barua, say the agitation leaders, were tossed by CRPF men into the fire that had engulfed the block development office at Sipajhar on February 3. The Government insists that the three young men were burnt while they were setting fire to the office building. Their charred bodies are topped by tents of red blankets, and the doctors are trying to locate a vein in Chitra Barua's badly-burnt skin for an intravenous drip. Prahlad Sarma dies the next evening. The hospital ward becomes a pilgrimage spot in Gauhati.



**"We are doing everything to thwart the elections. After that there will be a new movement and we will see that the newly-formed government cannot continue."**

—M.N. ZAMAN of the All Kamrup District Students Union

**T**HE CONGRESS(I)'S controversial candidate for the Barpeta Lok Sabha seat lives in a house in the Muslimpalti area in Barpeta town, guarded by a company of CRPF and Bihar Military Policemen. Baharul Islam resigned from the Supreme Court on January 13 to fulfil his "duty to the people of Assam". Later last month, two bombs placed below his car exploded, but



minated area of Moirabari: restricted campaign

Islam was left unscathed. Now Islam parks his car in the secure compound of the Circuit House, guarded by another platoon of security men.

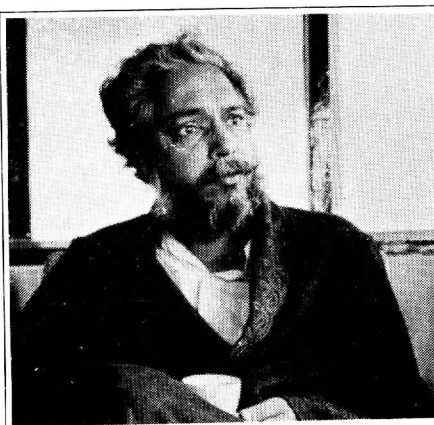
The road to Barpeta through Howli town is singularly bereft of electoral campaigning, although Barpeta lies in Kamrup district and within a strong borough of immigrant Bengali voters. Every shop in the Howli market has a black flag hanging outside to protest police firings in the area. Barpeta was once the stronghold of Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, finance minister in Bimala Prasad Chaliha's ministry and later a Central minister who rose to the Presidency of the nation before the Emergency. Along with Moinul Haque Choudhury, Ahmed is alleged by agitation leaders to have directly encouraged large-scale immigration of Muslims from Bangladesh into the char areas bordering the Brahmaputra, not very far from Barpeta, in order to build up vote banks for the Congress. In December 1979, large-scale violence broke out in Barpeta when the late President's widow Abida Ahmed travelled under heavy guard to file her nomination for the 1980 Lok Sabha elections.

Fifteen kilometres from Barpeta, a dusty track branches off the highway towards Borbala village, where Baharul Islam addresses a meeting. On the way back his car is flagged down by clusters of people, but, his handkerchief placed daintily over his mouth to ward off the dust, Islam gestures to his driver to speed on.

**Incognito:** Finally, the Islam campaign machine stops at a spot on the highway to talk to the newsmen chasing him. It consists of a battered Ambassador car, with Islam sandwiched in the back seat between two security men, another rifle-holding guard

sitting in the front seat, and followed by a bus carrying 50 CRPF jawans. There is no Congress(I) flag on the car, no loudspeaker, and Islam looks worriedly around at the countryside as he talks.

"I am going to Baliguri village, near Kalgachia, for another meeting," he says, "and my security men say it is better to return to Barpeta by sunset." Islam thinks Assam's agony can be solved only by a "new leadership thrown up from the youth". A



**"If Mrs Gandhi wants to retain Assam as a colony, the reaction will be proportionate. Assam is no more a federating unit of the Indian Union, but an occupied territory."**

—HIRANYA KUMAR BHATTACHARYYA, a former DIG

long-time resident of Gauhati and a one-time Socialist, Islam has clearly been allotted Barpeta to draw on Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed's vote banks. "My opponents accuse me of not belonging to Barpeta," he says, "but this is false. I was born in Rangiya—70 km away—and came often to Barpeta as a lawyer. I even campaigned for Fakhruddin sahib here. I am sure I'll win with god's grace."

God may ultimately decide to keep Barpeta's tradition alive and send Baharul Islam into the House of the People. But he faces a stiff challenge from another 'outsider' Muslim candidate, A.F. Golam Osmani. Osmani switched from the Janata to become Anwara Taimur's ablest lieutenant in the Cachar region during her ministry. Today he is contesting the election as an independent candidate, supported by the Left and Democratic Alliance (LDA). Osmani was also one of the progenitors of two organisations set up to protect the Muslims' interests after the agitation began—the All Assam Minority Students Union (AAMSU) and the Citizens' Rights Preservation Committee (CRPC).

**Confident Contender:** Dressed in a natty suit and a silk scarf, Osmani is holding court outside his campaign office at Howli, his jollity in sharp contrast to his opponent's godly ways. "I have been getting tremendous public support," he says, "and the Congress(I) is desperate. Union Railway Minister Ghani Khan Chowdhury has said in meetings in this area that the Muslims will be thrown back into Bangladesh if they do not vote for the Congress(I). But the violence has prevented me from visiting some areas in my constituency."

Osmani admits that in mixed Assamese-Bengali areas there might be no voting at all because the Bengalis would be afraid of reprisals. Nripen Saha, who migrated from Mymensingh in East Bengal at the time of Partition, says that he will not vote in order to stay on in Howli.

It is clear that the Muslims are unsure about whether to vote at all, and if so whom to vote for. Many of them tend instinctively to favour the Congress(I). Mohammed Hakimuddin, a tobacco and lime vendor at Hatejana village near Nalbari, says that he will vote for the independent candidate, Ismail Hussain Khan in the Howli Assembly constituency, but prefers Baharul Islam for the Lok Sabha seat. "The majority of the Muslims will vote for the Congress(I)," he says, "so why waste my vote?" At Khondokorpara village, Hassan Shahid, a law student in Barpeta, says that only the Congress(I) can solve the Assam problem. But Tajuddin Ahmed says that Muslim voters surrounded by Assamese have been advised not to vote at all.

The Bengalis are caught in a cruel dilemma. Throughout the agitation, anger



against them has frequently flared into senseless violence, and they realise too that the problem of the foreigners is intractable and insoluble. The tendency among the community, therefore, has been to stick together along religious lines, the Muslims preferring to place their fates in the hands of the Cong-

ress(I) and the Hindus veering towards the communists. "We have to think of the Congress(I)'s interests," says Abdul Ahmed, Wasid a panchayat employee who is looking after the party booth in Khondokorpara. "If things continue like this the Assamese will throw us out at gunpoint. We will never

allow that. I came from Mymensingh before Partition, but the agitators will say that I am a foreigner. We have been forced to organise ourselves, and we will vote for our survival on the land we have tended with our blood and sweat."

**Minority Vote:** The Congress(I) is

## THE AGITATION

# Heart Of The Matter

**T**HE CRUX of Assam's anti-foreigner movement is: who is a foreigner? And the state is in turmoil because the Government and the students have been unable to decide on agreed criteria. Complex and multiple laws, the open border with what is now Bangladesh and electoral compulsions have compounded the problem.

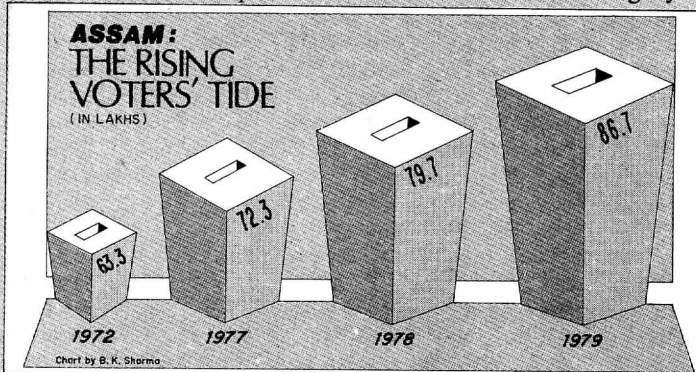
The genesis of the movement lies in Partition, when hundreds of thousands of refugees from East Bengal streamed into the areas that presently constitute Assam, West Bengal, Tripura, and Bihar. Until 1971, the Central Government's implicit policy was to give shelter to all Hindu refugees and to deport all Muslim infiltrators from East Pakistan. After March 25, 1971, however, the Government of India and Bangladesh agreed that all further migration into India would be treated as infiltration and all such infiltrators whether Hindu or Muslim, would be deported.

**Initial Encouragement:** Immigration from East Bengal was initially encouraged by Sir Mohammad Saadulla's Muslim League ministry during World War II, so that the lush Brahmaputra valley's *char* areas bordering the river would be settled for the Government's 'grow more food' campaign. The torrent of migration that began then has still not stopped, and the Assamese repeatedly quote a British census official's fear in 1931 that "in another thirty years Sibsagar district will be the only part of Assam in which an Assamese will find himself in Assam."

The unchecked influx of East Bengalis into Assam after Partition led to the passing of the Immigrants Expulsion (from Assam) Act, 1950, allowing only those displaced by civil disturbance to come to Assam. This act was repealed in 1957; of 7.65 lakh people registered under

it, only 1.43 lakh applied for citizenship. The Nehru-Liaquat Pact then agreed that all those who returned to Assam by December 31, 1950 would be considered as Indian citizens.

This agreement in actuality did not adhere to Article 6 of the Constitution, which says that those who came to India after July 19, 1948 must apply for citizenship. The All Assam Students Union (AASU) and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) have from the time the agitation began in early 1979 insisted that the best cut-off date would be 1951, when a National Register of Citizens was drawn up.



The foreigners problem has been compounded by the array of laws that govern citizenship—the Constitution itself, as well as the Foreigners Act of 1946, the Passport Act of 1952, the Citizenship Act of 1956 and the Restricted Areas Act of 1963.

**Abnormal Increases:** The figures for illegal immigration, detection of foreigners, and their deportation have varied over the last four years, and both the agitators and their opponents have large data banks to prove their points. Between 1951 and 1961 Assam's population increased by 36 per cent, well above the national average of 24 per cent, and Paper 1 of the Census Report in 1963 says that at least 2.2 lakh illegal immigrants appear to have settled down in Assam. Between 1961 and 1971 Assam's population increased by 35 per cent, again well above the national average. Between 1951 and 1971, however, the Government officially deported only 1.9 lakh persons, leaving 2.8 lakh acknowledged aliens in Assam. Between 1972 and 1978, 99,580

Bangladeshi nationals were deported, more than 60 per cent of them Hindus.

By January this year, the AASU-AAGSP leaders had had seven rounds of tripartite talks with the Government and opposition leaders, and 21 rounds of talks with the Centre since early 1980. Officially, the Government has agreed to March 25, 1971 as the cut-off date, implicitly agreeing to the deportation of all migrants since then. The agitation leaders, however, have not been able to get the Government to agree to disenfranchisement and dispersal in other parts of India of all those who entered the state illegally between 1961 and 1971—whose

numbers are unknown since no attempts have been made to detect them. At the last round of talks, the Government took the position that until the 1965 war with Pakistan, successive waves of migration to Assam had taken place and on humanitarian grounds such migrants could not be displaced.

The only other authoritative indicator of abnormal population increases in Assam comes from the electoral rolls. From 63 lakh voters in 1972 the figure leaped to 72 lakh in 1977, 79 lakh in 1978, and 86 lakh in 1979. Moreover, between 1951 and 1971, the number of Assamese-speaking people grew by 79.6 per cent; one explanation for this is that lakhs of immigrants chose to give Assamese as their mother tongue. The agitation leaders fear that if a census is held, the Assamese-language figures will drop dramatically if the immigrants should choose to revert to Bengali.

Although no precise estimates exist about the numbers of aliens in Assam, the agitation leaders have worked out, using possible birth rates and progeny, a figure of 7.8 million for all illegal residents in Assam. The Government of course rejects this figure but privately, government officials fear that the final number of potential deportees might approach the 2 lakh mark—and that will be an international problem with no prospect of cooperation from the Ershad regime in Dhaka.

banking heavily on the Muslim vote in the elections, but that vote may not be as predictable as before. The agitation itself has sapped the Muslims' morale and generated fears of a bloody confrontation if the 'foreigners' are sought to be thrown out at a future date. Nevertheless, 26 per cent of the nominations filed this time are by Muslim candidates, against 18 per cent in the last assembly elections in 1978. At least 32 of the Congress(I)'s 126 tickets have gone to Muslims, and the party's dependence on minority votes is reflected in the other ticket allocations too—nine to Scheduled Caste candidates, 17 to Scheduled Tribe candidates, five to the hill tribes, 25 to the other Backward Classes, 5 to tea garden labour, and three to immigrant Nepali candidates.

Indira Gandhi's election tour of Assam reflected this sectarian dependence. Warned by intelligence reports that the situation was extremely dangerous, she struck all Assamese areas off her itinerary. The meetings she addressed were all in Goalpara, Kamrup, Nowgong, Karbi Anglong and Cachar districts—all heavily populated by immigrant Bengali Muslim or Hindu voters and tribals. Even in Gauhati, on February 12, Mrs Gandhi chose to land inside the Maligaon Railway Stadium on the outskirts of the city for her last meeting. Maligaon is a Bengali suburb, and is already cut off from the rest of Gauhati by a wall of anger and hatred.

Worse still, Anwara Taimur's stewardship of the state has lost the Congress(I) valuable support. The tea-garden labour lobby, which Taimur antagonised, had demanded 16 tickets but was given only five, and the Assam Cha Mazdoor Sangh (ACMS), traditionally aligned with the Congress(I), has revolted against the party this time, with its units in Tezpur, Golaghat, Jorhat and Dibrugarh refusing to cooperate in the elections. The Jammat-ul-Ulema-e-Hind (JUHH) has not been given any tickets either, and only the pro-Taimur Muslims have bagged the maximum tickets.

**Eroding Support:** The indigenous Assamese Muslims and the followers of Mohammed Idris, finance minister under Taimur, have also turned against the party. The JUHH, in addition, has become increasingly friendly with the extremist Jamait-e-Islami, and even the AAMSU and the CRPC have moved out of the Congress orbit with

the exit of leaders like Golam Osmani from the party. "The Muslims in Assam have also noticed how Mrs Gandhi refused to meet the Muslim MP's who had wanted to discuss the rising tide of communalism with her," says a Muslim leader in Gauhati, "and also her belated visits, on the eve of her trip to Assam, to Meerut, Aligarh and Baroda to express sympathy for the minority victims there."

Neither is the LDA facing an easy task. On February 7, the LDA's first major election rally in Gauhati was sought to be scuttled by a day-long bandh called by agitationists. Sharad Pawar, leader of the Congress(S), which with 37 candidates is the leading cont-

**S**HEELKUMAR Lalchand Khosla was appointed as Assam's chief electoral officer (CEO) in September last year, long before the talks with the agitation leaders broke down. Ever since the elections were announced on January 6, Khosla has been working 15-hour days from his office in the Janata Bhavan at Dispur to superintend and execute the elections.

"We had to get ballot papers printed in presses outside Assam and fly them down," says Khosla, "and one of my major problems has been to get enough personnel to man the election machinery. Even then, against a requirement of at least six people per polling booth, we will be able to provide only three."

Polling will take place in 12,280 booths, and this means a requirement of at least 36,000 people. The non-cooperation movement, however, has led to government employees all over Assam refusing to perform election duty—leading to the mass induction of employees from 35 Central ministries, the Bihar Government, and even Indian Administrative Service (IAS) and Indian Foreign Service (IFS) probationers. Dozens of specially chartered Indian Airlines flights have been landing in Gauhati with their cargoes of shanghaied election personnel.

**Staggered Schedule:** Even so, polling has been spread over three days, each polling day separated from the next by two-day intervals. "This is in order to facilitate movement of personnel from one area to another in case we fall short of people," says Khosla. On February 14 polling was to cover 6,305 booths in 62 constituencies; the schedule of February 17 was 3,392 booths in 37 constituencies, and 2,583 booths in 27 constituencies on February 20.

Even Khosla admits that polling in at least 30 constituencies may be "very difficult", but he is clear that even if a single vote is cast in a constituency it will make for a "legal" election. Khosla's major brainwave has been to arrange lavish compensation for government officials or policemen killed or injured while on election duty—the first time in India's history that such incentives have been offered. Each gazetted officer's family, in the event of his death, will get Rs 1 lakh, and each non-gazetted officer's Rs 50,000.

Such compensatory rules, however, expire at midnight on February 22, and will not cover post-electoral risks. Disablement is



Muslims at one of Mrs Gandhi's rallies

**The Bengalis are caught in a cruel dilemma. Throughout, the anger against them has flared into senseless violence. The tendency, therefore, is to stay along religious lines—the Muslims preferring the Congress(I) and the Hindus the communists.**

ender in the alliance, failed to turn up. Only E.M.S. Namboodiripad of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) and Inderjit Gupta of the Communist Party of India (CPI) came from outside to canvass support. Judges Field, where the rally was held, can take up to 15,000 people but only a tenth of that number turned up for the rally, and the field was ringed by Assam Police and CRPF men. Anti-election meetings addressed by politicians like the BJP's Atal Behari Vajpayee, the Janata Party's Ravindra Varma, the Democratic Socialist Party's Raj Narain, and the Lok Dal's Charan Singh, on the other hand, were able to draw much larger crowds.



being compensated under the Workmen's Compensation Act. In addition, all government employees from outside Assam have been offered generous daily allowances, an extra month's pay—and in Bihar, full salary payment to the next of kin until retirement age in case of death. Many of the employees thus brought in, realised the gravity of the situation only after they were transported to their stations in the districts. At Moriani, on February 9, 67 Bihar employees refused to perform their duties unless all their benefits and insurance sums were doubled.

**Bloody Toll:** In the 10 days after February 2, the toll in the anti-election agitation had shot up to 70. In a matter of weeks, the *desbhaktas* of the Assam movement had nearly doubled their roster of martyrs, begun when the first victims of police firing died in early 1980. Every evening when the setting sun thrusts a flaming orange tongue into the grey, placid waters of the Brahmaputra, groups of Gauhatiians gather on the riverbank to renew their pledge to fight the 'last battle of Saraighat'. Saraighat was the spot across the Brahmaputra, now reached by a huge road-and-rail bridge, where the legendary Ahom general Lachit Barphukan had repulsed the invading Mughal army.

Four years of suspended agony have returned Assam to a bloodier square one, and no other individual is perhaps better qualified to observe this agony than Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya, Assamese novelist, short story writer and poet, who won the 1979 Jnanpith Award for his body of work. In his house, high up on a hill facing the Raj Bhawan, Bhattacharyya says his feelings are summed up by what one of Macbeth's fief lords, Ross said when the king's tyrannies became unbearable: "Alas, poor country almost afraid to know itself. It cannot be called our mother, but our grave."

"A non-violent movement presupposes certain preconditions," says Bhattacharyya, "like civil liberties, and press freedom. The Government has used an array of anti-satyagraha tactics—not allowing processions and restricting freedom of expression. So we require inventiveness, and satyagraha has taken on new forms in Assam—back-outs, janata curfews, bandhs. But we are very confused and hurt now: how can we have non-violence when atrocities are committed every day?"

**Suppressed Anger:** Bhattacharyya feels the elections have driven discontent underground. "And there is no genius like Gandhi or Jayaprakash Narayan to give such discontent an outlet," he points out. "The moderate leaders have been jailed, but even then the forms of the agitation are still largely peaceful. In Jorhat, for instance, a citizens' committee has been formed to expose atrocities and to call upon the people to remain



**A brainwave has been to arrange lavish compensation for government officials or policemen killed or injured while on election duty.... In the event of a gazetted officer's death his family will get Rs 1 lakh and a non-gazetted officer's Rs 50,000.**

sober. But anger against the system is growing."

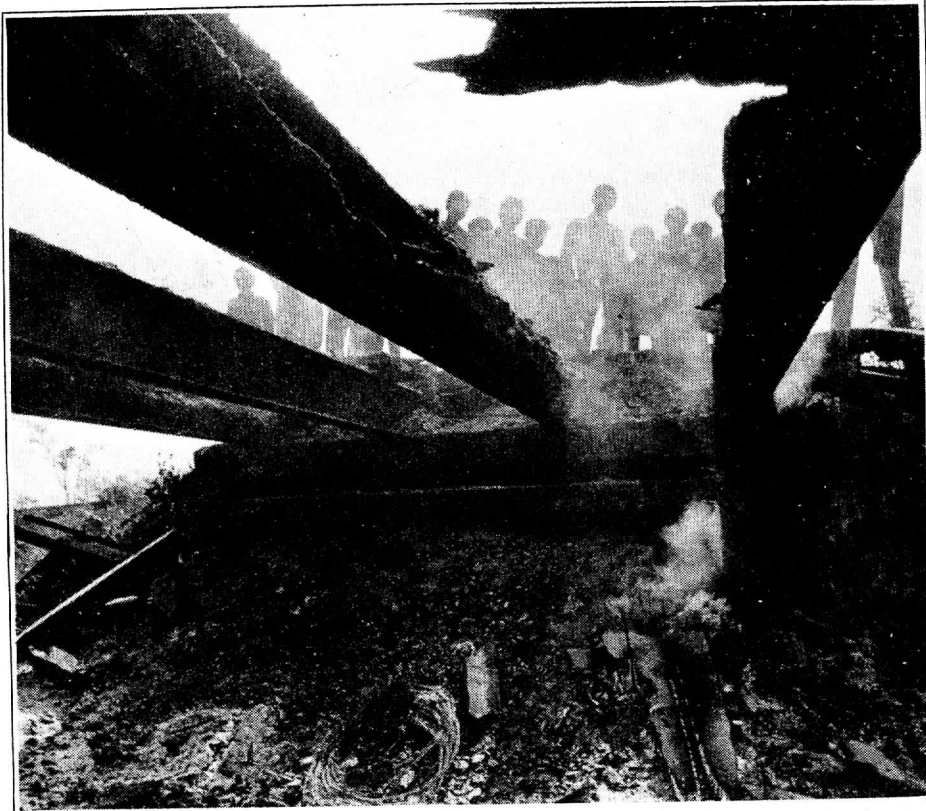
As a mass movement, Bhattacharyya says the Assam agitation has drawn a far greater response than even JP's Bihar movement in 1974, and has lasted longer than any programme launched by Gandhi himself. "Yet, we recognise that we are dealing with the existing political system," he says, "and I feel that the best thing in that case would be to link up with a brother movement. Such a linkage is difficult to visualise just now."

**W**HAT does the future hold for Assam? Bhattacharyya speaks cautiously when he says: "Whether the growing alienation will result in a break with Indian cultural traditions, to which Assam is still bound, is difficult to say." But Ajit Sarma, MP, is more forthright: "Even if the elections are held technically," he says, "the consequences will be terrible. I am afraid that the movement will become continuously violent. Once the nation loses the loyalty of

the Brahmaputra valley, in five years we will lose the entire North-east."

There is no doubt that the current spate of violence promises to extend through election week and beyond. Intelligence sources had warned the Centre that the time was just not right for holding elections, and a senior intelligence official says that in not more than 40 constituencies can valid elections be held at all. Yet, Indira Gandhi has turned a deaf ear to the danger and the repercussions. Her chief advisers consist of Governor Prakash Mehrotra, who wears his Congress(I) loyalty on his sleeve, Special Secretary in the Union Home Ministry P.P. Nayyar, whose only distinguishing antecedent is the chief secretaryship of Bihar under Jagannath Mishra, and Samar Das, inspector general of police in charge of intelligence.

Das, who gained notoriety during Anwarul Taimur's regime when he helped persuade opposition MLA's to defect to the Congress(I), has contradicted every negative intelligence report. Violence is sought to be



**There is a definite pattern to the Assam violence and the agitators were taking care to burn all bridges to polling booths, block development offices and schools so as to cut off reinforcements or polling parties.**

minimised, and only bridges that are totally burnt are reported. Das has also seen to it that his younger brother Ranju Das is posted in Dispur as deputy inspector-general in charge of security.

**Clear Pattern:** There is a definite pattern to the Assam violence, and last fortnight, the agitators were taking care to burn all bridges providing access to polling booths, block development offices, and school-buildings, so as to cut off reinforcements or polling parties. Dozens of subdivisional headquarters have been funnelling valuable information to the agitation leaders. Extremist leaders of the movement like AASU's Vice-President Atul Koch, adviser Nagen Sarma, and Pabindra Deka of the AAGSP are eluding arrest and master-minding the moves in this violent gamble. Prabin Gogoi, who heads the shadowy Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chhatra Parishad, a paramilitary wing, is also underground, and Joy Nath Sarma, who headed the Swechha Sevak Bahini (SSB), the movement's terrorist wing,

is under arrest but has set up an organisation that is now entrenched in every district.

The SSB is being actively aided by former officials of the Special Services Bureau, a government-created guerrilla outfit designed to thwart Chinese infiltration in the '60s. Biraja Nanda Choudhury, an explosives expert who had set up training camps near Margherita in Upper Assam, was arrested on January 31 at Dibrugarh. Intelligence sources believe, however, that the agitationists are getting liberal supplies of bitumen from sympathisers in the Public Works Department for fuelling arson, gelatine from the Border Roads Organisation depots in neighbouring North-eastern states, and grenades from Mokokchung in Nagaland. Dissemination of propaganda has become extremely sophisticated, and in Darrang district, a group of young agitationists trained in guerrilla tactics in Burma is reported to be girding itself for a far more violent post-election programme.

**Fearful Consequences:** The emotional

effects of the election will create fearful ripple effects within Assam's fragile social structure. The agitation itself promises to become much more violent and disruptive if the elections go through. "Each MLA will become a target for assassination, and we will impose a people's government on Assam; the ministry will have to fall in a very short time," says an agitation leader in Gauhati.

Violent as the passions aroused by the elections were, they also spawned a chain reaction of grief. All along the road towards Nalbari in Kamrup district on February 9 stood young men and women with garlands in their hands, waiting to pay homage to the men who had died the previous day in police firing near Piplabari village as their bodies were taken to their homes. At Piplabari, Mahesh Chandra Talukdar's seven children and stunned wife loudly mourned the farmer's death. Talukdar was among a 5,000 strong crowd that had gone on the rampage and had attacked a police van the previous day.

But the social schisms are clear, and they run through the length and breadth of the state. The Bengali region of Cachar—which voted in the only two Lok Sabha members out of 14 from Assam in 1980—is now sundered totally from the valley and Upper Assam, and sources say that the Government might even think of trisecting the state into the valley, Cachar, and an autonomous tribal district. Within the valley itself, however, the gulf between the Assamese, the immigrant Bengali Muslims and Hindus has never been wider than it is at the moment.

Long before the final results of the polling come in, the decision of the Assamese people is clear—an angry, emotional and violent rejection of the democratic process as the Centre sees it. Once again, the Government has failed to assuage feelings and chosen to increase the alienation of an entire—and strategically vital—region. Already, essential supplies to the rest of the North-east by rail or road have thinned to a trickle because of violence and road blocks. The flow of oil from Upper Assam, resumed forcibly in 1981, has once again been halted.

Propped up by an army of paramilitary troops, consoled by a Constitution that is being conveniently interpreted to suit political expediency, Indira Gandhi may have capped a lengthening list of blunders last fortnight by committing her biggest mistake in Assam. The tragedy is that the prime minister will not be asked to pay the price for her myopia. The cost will be extracted from the nation's collective will and faith in a just democracy.

—CHAITANYA KALBAG in Gauhati