

ASSAM

Reaping The Whirlwind

HITESWAR Saikia was last fortnight trying to settle into the hottest seat in India—the chief ministership of Assam. The diminutive, balding politician had been selected to lead a ministry that had obtained one of India's largest-ever majorities—91 seats out of 109. But the mandate had come drenched in blood, and ridden on an abysmally low voter turn-out, and the newly-installed Congress(I) ministers were clearly uneasy about the task confronting them.

Saikia was clearly being singled out by the Congress(I) Government in Delhi for his proven administrative ability—he had been an efficient home minister of the state between 1970 and 1977. But he was being asked to deliver a host of impossibilities—to repair

missioners of Darrang, Nowgong and Lakhipur, and the superintendents of police of Nowgong and Darrang. "Good sense will finally prevail," said Saikia, "and I am immediately tightening border vigilance to prevent infiltration by transferring the office of the IGP (Border) from Gauhati to Dhubri in Goalpara district, and by setting up a new DIG (Border) at Karimganj in Cachar district." Although Saikia said he would not increase security protection for ministers and party MLA's, who may be prone to attack by anti-government mobs, he nevertheless carried out substantial reshuffles in the state police administration.

But the chief minister, who suffers from poor health, faces the immediate problem of recognition by the Assamese. When ministers travelled to relief camps to oversee rehabilitation, entire areas they were

areas, supplies of rice could not reach quickly enough because of disrupted road links.

Another thorn in the ministry's flesh was the continuing hostility of the state bureaucracy, much of which had sided openly with the anti-election agitators. Although the agitationists' 18-day non-cooperation movement ended on February 22, government employees returned to work only in trickles; many had been dismissed or arrested for refusing to participate in election duties.

Rival Claims: Within the Congress(I) Legislature Party, Saikia faced trouble from Harendra Nath Talukdar, president of the state party unit. Talukdar had reportedly obtained the support of a majority of the MLA's, but the party high command in Delhi made its preference for Saikia clear.

Saikia denies that such differences exist.

Hiteswar Saikia is being asked to deliver a host of impossibilities:



- ▶ to repair the torn social fabric in Assam;
- ▶ to manoeuvre the agitators back to the negotiating table;
- ▶ to control the anarchic law and order situation;
- ▶ to contain communal and ethnic violence; and
- ▶ to deliver relief to at least 4 lakh people.

the torn social fabric in Assam, to manoeuvre the leaders of the anti-foreigners agitation back to the negotiating table, to control the anarchic law and order situation prevailing throughout the Brahmaputra Valley, to contain the growing communal and ethnic violence that continued to explode sporadically, and to deliver relief and rehabilitation to at least 4 lakh people displaced by the insensate carnage.

Careful Moves: During the first ten days of his ministry, Saikia moved cautiously, maintaining a studiously low profile and yet conveying an impression of determination. More than two weeks after the Assembly elections had climaxed with the blood-letting at Nellie, crippled communications and simmering ethnic disaffection ensured that the state provided happy hunting grounds for an array of agents provocateur.

While Saikia tried to defuse sentiment against the state police and the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) by asking for an estimated 15,000 soldiers from four army divisions to be deployed in seven trouble-torn districts, he also moved to tone up the administration by transferring the district com-

missioners of Darrang, Nowgong and Lakhipur, and the superintendents of police of Nowgong and Darrang. "Good sense will finally prevail," said Saikia, "and I am immediately tightening border vigilance to prevent infiltration by transferring the office of the IGP (Border) from Gauhati to Dhubri in Goalpara district, and by setting up a new DIG (Border) at Karimganj in Cachar district." Although Saikia said he would not increase security protection for ministers and party MLA's, who may be prone to attack by anti-government mobs, he nevertheless carried out substantial reshuffles in the state police administration.

Refugee Problem: The biggest headache confronting the ministry was the rehabilitation of the refugees uprooted by the violence. Sethi himself estimated that 2.3 lakh people had been forced to flee their homes throughout the Valley because of arson or terrorisation. Although Saikia asked the Centre to grant Rs 25 crore for relief measures, he got only Rs 5 crore. "Out of that," he said, "we will have to spend over Rs 1 crore just to restore communications."

More than 250 makeshift relief camps were set up to house the growing tide of refugees as the Government belatedly began to put its plans into operation. Inevitably, the relief operations were accompanied by allegations from both the Assamese and the Bengalis that they were being discriminated against by the administration. In many

"There was some interest in leadership," he admits, "but everybody is cooperating now. There are two ex-chief ministers, Anwara Taimur and Keshab Gogoi, in my Cabinet, and both are working very hard. My attempt now will be to ensure assimilation of all Assamese sections. The agitators are talking about 'indigenous' people. Who is indigenous? Even the indigenous people, the tribals, feel insecure today. I have repeatedly stressed that the doors are open to the agitators and I am willing to talk to them."

Meanwhile, intriguing trends were emerging in the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) post-election stand. Although agitation leaders said that their volunteers were concentrating on relief work until March 19, a series of belligerent statements streamed from their propaganda machinery, foremost among which was the demand that the state Government should not allow "foreigners" who had fled to refugee camps in West Bengal to return, and the repeated accusation that "indigenous" Assamese were being ignored by relief teams.

AASU President Prafulla Mahanta and AAGSP Convenor Atul Bora, who had been

released along with AASU General Secretary Bhriгу Phukan and other ranking agitation leaders on February 22 by the Gauhati High Court from National Security Act (NSA) detention, were busy touring the worst-affected Assamese areas in Nowgong district incognito, since there were fresh arrest warrants out for them.

Phukan emerged from concealment on March 6 to talk about strategy for the future. On March 3, AASU had confounded observers when it supported a bandh called by the

Plains Tribals Council of Assam (PTCA) in Kokrajhar in Goalpara district. The PTCA had contested the elections despite AASU's efforts to dissuade it, but party leader Samar Brahma Choudhury had suffered a humiliating defeat in his stronghold at Kokrajhar (East). Moreover, the PTCA is dominated by the Boros, who had clashed bloodily with anti-poll Assamese villagers in the Gohpur area in Darrang district.

Enlisting Support: Yet, the agitation leaders were plainly anxious to enlist the sup-

port of the tribals after the elections. Joy Nath Sarma of the Sweccha Sevak Bahini (SSB), AASU's "volunteer force", said that AASU did not agree with the PTCA's demand for a tribal Union territory called 'Udayachal'. "But we welcome support from anybody who shares our feelings against the foreigners," he said.

"The Boro Students Union and the Mishing Students Union support our anti-foreigners movement," said Phukan. "We have formed peace committees in the

ELECTIONS

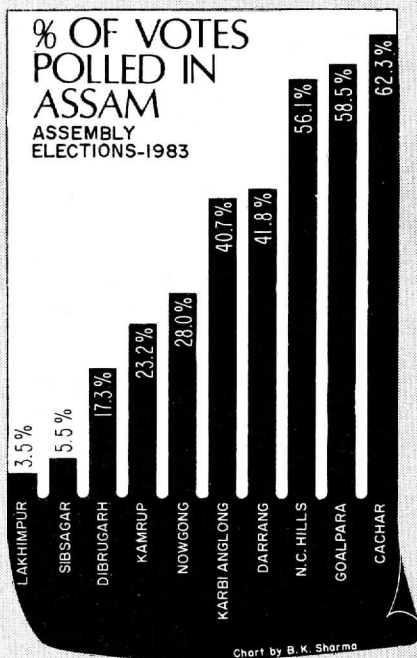
Winning On Points

THE FIGURES, for once, did not lie. When Chief Electoral Officer S.L. Khosla released detailed results of the Assam elections last fortnight, it was clear that the Congress(I) had swept one of history's most transparently illegitimate elections.

In the end the party secured 87 seats out of 105 for which polling could be conducted. It had earlier won four seats uncontested when no opposition candidate came up to file his nomination against the ruling party's men in the Patacharkuchi, Boko, Palasbari constituencies in Kamrup district, and the Mangaldoi constituency in Darrang district. The Left and Democratic Alliance (LDA) which had staked its political survival in Assam on the elections, won only five seats in a defeat characterised by the humiliating rout of the communist parties.

Diminished Electorate: State-wide polling averaged a miserable 32.76 per cent, versus 66.85 per cent in the 1978 Assembly elections. Both elections were conducted on the basis of the same electoral rolls—the basis for the agitation that has rocked Assam since 1979. Only in Cachar (62.31 per cent), North Cachar Hills (56.12 per cent) and Goalpara (58.47 per cent) was polling normal. In Kamrup and Nowgong districts, where the Congress(I) had hoped to draw out substantial pockets of Bengali voters polling nevertheless averaged only 25.61 per cent. The turnout was laughable in Sibsagar district (5.47 per cent), Lakhimpur district (3.49 per cent) and Dibrugarh district (17.31 per cent)—areas where the anti-election Assamese population dominated.

In 28 constituencies in the districts of Kamrup, Nowgong, Sibsagar and



Dibrugarh, the Congress(I) won 26 seats, the other two going to independent candidates, on an average voter turnout of 3.8 per cent. Dharmapur constituency in Kamrup, where the party's Dr Bhumi-dhar Barman won all 266 valid votes cast, was added to in notoriety by a string of other improbabilities. In the Bokakhat constituency in Sibsagar, Dharmeswar Hazarika won 1,418 of the 1,517 votes cast (total voter turnout: 2.56 per cent).

At Khumtai, Jiba Kanta Gogoi won 934 votes out of 987 cast in a total voter turnout of 1.53 per cent. At Titabor, also in Sibsagar, Joy Chandra Bora won 1,540 out of 1,691 votes cast in a total voter turnout of 2.48 per cent. At Bihpuria, Borgoram Deori won 425 of the 437 votes cast in a turnout averaging 0.69 per cent. The pattern was repeated at Dhakuakhan in Lakhimpur, where Ragnath Pamegam won 587 out of the 640 votes cast in a voter turnout averaging 0.85 per cent, and at Dhemaji where Durgeswar Patir won 327 of the 358 votes cast in a turnout

averaging a pathetic 0.40 per cent.

Adverse Conditions: In the end, polling in 16 constituencies had to be postponed indefinitely because of impossible conditions. Khosla said that re-polling would be held before June this year. Polling in the Biswanath constituency in Darrang district had to be countermanded when Congress(I) candidate Satya Narayan Ram was killed by anti-poll agitators on February 15.

The postponed polling led to the continuing vacancy of seven Lok Sabha seats out of the 12 for which by-elections had been held. All five parliamentary seats that could be filled were won by the Congress(I), three of them giving the candidates an average of 9.78 per cent of the total possible votes. At the bottom end, Tarun Gogoi won the Jorhat seat with 36,836 votes out of 6,76,595 registered voters in the constituency.

There were other milestones in this exercise of a "constitutional imperative". Polling averaged below 10 per cent in 30 per cent of the total constituencies, and below 20 per cent in 44 per cent of the total constituencies. The Patacharkuchi seat was won uncontested by tobacco-seller Rabiram Das in a constituency that has given Assam some of its best academic luminaries. Moreover, Patacharkuchi is dominated by upper-caste Assamese Hindus who are stoutly opposed to the elections, and Das happens to be totally dark horse.

Chief Minister Hiteswar Saikia won the Nazira seat in Sibsagar district with 9,005 votes out of a total of 13,065 polled; polling averaged only 22.56 per cent in his constituency. At Dibrugarh, former chief minister Keshab Chandra Gogoi won with 4,905 votes out of a total of 5,334 cast in a total voter turnout of 8.71 per cent. Only Anwara Taimur, another ex-chief minister, retained her Dalgaon seat in a predominantly immigrant area with 15,605 votes out of 33,099 cast. Even there she faced a reduced voter enthusiasm—in the 1978 elections she had won 23,028 votes out of 44,913 polled.

Gohpur area." Phukan was less forthcoming about AASU's plans, saying the executive committee would meet after March 15 to chalk out a strategy. "I feel our strategy should be changed," he said, "to fight a long-term battle. The atmosphere is altogether changed now."

AASU spokesmen, however, were anxious to point out that they represented all 'indigenous' Assamese—including the tribals and the tea-garden labourers who come mostly from Bihar and Orissa. By fortnight's end, a strange new alignment was visible when both the Boro Students Union and the

dominated by the pro-Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) youth wing, the Janata Vidyarthi Morcha, and to organise a demonstration to coincide with the inauguration of the seventh Non-aligned conference.

Barooah, who heads the Department of Political Science and Journalism in Gauhati University, has emerged as AASU's leading ideologue. The AASU delegation carried copies of a neatly-printed "open letter" to the heads of the non-aligned countries meeting in Delhi, and the students' first illustrated pamphlet in more than two years, titled 'Today's Assam: A Graveyard of Democracy'.



AASU leaders Phukan and Mahanta: intransigent stand

It is clear that the agitation leaders were seeking to keep up pressure on the Government by maintaining an atmosphere of rumour and panic, and by ensuring that violence continued in short staccato burst.

Lalung Darbar issued strong statements demanding expulsion of all foreigners from tribal lands. Although the Lalungs were directly involved in the Nellie massacre, they blamed a secondary tribe, the Saraniyas, for the carnage—and the PTCA said all violence against immigrants had been perpetrated by agitationists.

Propaganda Blitz: As the fortnight ended with a reduction in the daily deathcount, AASU launched a new propaganda blitz. Six members of the union, led by Dr D.P. Barooah, quietly entered Delhi on March 5. Their mission: to tie up with the Delhi University Students Union (DUSU), which is

The open letter was signed by Mahanta and Phukan, and marshalled a clever argument asking basically that the non-aligned countries raise the Assam issue in the conference "on humanitarian grounds". Citing the "grim tragedy inflicted on our people in the name of an exercise in democracy with indiscriminate use of bullets and bayonets", the letter said the Assam carnage was worse than the Sharpeville killings in South Africa decades ago that had "roused the democratic conscience of the international community". AASU also claimed that its stand on the aliens issue was "far more democratic than the post-war Potsdam Agreement of August 2,

SSB

Out For Blood

THE ATMOSPHERE in the darkened room is tense. One by one, the 10 men seated on cane sofas bring out a list of accusations against the "national press". "You have all played up the Nellie massacre," says one. "But Nellie's victims were all Muslims. What about Assamese Hindus killed in Gohpur? What about Assamese Hindus killed near Mangaldoi?"

The room is dominated by a bearded man sitting with a grim smile on his face. There is something innocuous about Joy Nath Sarma, 26, a certain underplaying of anger and hatred. But Sarma is the Sarva Adhinayak of the Sweccha Sevak Bahini (SSB), ostensibly the volunteer force of the All Assam Students Union (AASU), but in reality a well-organised paramilitary force that has very successfully carried out propaganda dissemination and military-style attacks on immigrant areas in Darrang, Nowgong, Goalpara and Kamrup districts in the Brahmaputra Valley.

Organised Violence: The SSB's lethal effectiveness was proved last fortnight when Darrang district authorities discovered a two-week-old massacre of immigrant Muslims in the Chawlkhowa Chhapuri area alongside the Brahmaputra. Chawlkhowa is not very far from Sipajhar town, where the first organised anti-election violence had exploded on February 2, and Sipajhar is only 10 km from Joy Nath Sarma's home in Saruthekerabari village.

Sporadic clashes between the Assamese and the immigrants near Sipajhar peaked on February 15, when Joy Nath Sarma's younger brother Daya Sarma led a large and armed attack on immigrants in Chawlkhowa Chhapuri, Dariaghati and Dhaulpur, attacking in three waves from Sipajhar, Rangamati and Kuruwa. Journalists travelling through Sipajhar on February 17—when polling was scheduled in the trouble-torn constituency—were invited to a cremation ceremony for Daya Sarma, and two of his lieutenants, Jatin Saharia and Arun Kumar Bora.

AASU members in Sipajhar, however, let slip that Daya Sarma had gone with a sten-gun to "rescue" some "kidnapped" Assamese from the immigrant villages. Implicit was the fact that he had killed, but the mourners were anxious to point

out that the immigrants had, after Daya's ammunition ran out, cast a fishing net over him and hacked him to death with daos (machetes).

The Chawkhowa operation was expertly executed. All access to the immigrant settlements had been cut off earlier by anti-election agitators. For more than two weeks no news of the massacre reached the outside world. Only on March 2 when two injured victims staggered into Mangaldoi, only 25 km away, did a police patrol set out for the massacre area.

Rising Toll: By March 5 the shocked district administration had discovered 194 badly decomposed bodies and skeletons, and officials estimated at least 300 more had been buried hastily by surviving villagers because of decomposition. Significantly, Chawkhowa is only 15 km from Nellie in Nowgong district across the Brahmaputra, and it had preceded the larger Nellie outrage by three days.

Stunned intelligence men in Gauhati are only now talking of the SSB's organisational skills. The Bahini's role in much of the frenzied ethnic violence that tore Assam apart last month had been conjectured. But sources now say that the Bahini has plans to keep up pressure through organised violence in the foreseeable future, too.

The SSB was quietly created in May 1980 by AASU to "identify foreigners". It took root initially in the Mangaldoi area, but spread rapidly to the entire Brahmaputra Valley. It was put in charge of drawing up plans to issue identity cards to "bona fide citizens". AASU announced on May 27, 1980, however, that the agitation would take "action in self-defence" against "minority attacks". This followed Assamese-immigrant clashes in Nowgong, Darrang, Kamrup and Goalpara districts the previous day when the All Assam Minorities Students Union (AAMSU) and the Citizens' Rights Preservation Committee (CRPC) organised a Demands Day and took out processions. At least 35 people were killed in group clashes and police firing, and the SSB began in earnest to prepare for a protracted armed struggle.

Throughout last month's violence, Sarma was being held in Silchar Jail under the National Security Act (NSA). But his cadres had been sufficiently prepared for action. His release under parole for a week was a pre-condition imposed by AASU for participation in the last round of talks with the Government in early January.

A militant member of the AASU executive committee, Sarma is a recognised

member of the Rashtriya Swyamsevak Sangh (RSS). After he obtained his law degree, he was appointed a lower-division assistant in the Assam State Electricity Board (ASEB) by his mentor Umanath Sarma, the then chairman of the board, who became president of the state Bharatiya Janata Party unit after he retired in 1981. The same year Joy Nath Sarma was dismissed from service for his overt involvement in the agitation.

Shadowy Connections: Sources say that SSB volunteers have built links with another shadowy underground organisation, the Jatiya Rakkhi Bahini (JRB), which is affiliated to the Jatiyatabadi Yuba Chhatra Parishad (JYCP), the youth wing of the right-wing Assam Jatiyatabadi Dal (AJD). SSB volunteers



Sarma: extreme views

have received weapons training from JRB men who have visited northern Burma for help from the rebels there.

SSB men are trained, say sources, to organise a sustained underground movement, to operate firearms, to plan and conduct raids on immigrant areas, to cut off communications to vital spots by burning bridges, snapping telephone lines and setting up road blocks, and to man an efficient communications system that relies on squads of "bicycle telegraph" men who carry SSB and AASU diktats to the remotest villages.

Sarma was released from NSA detention by the Gauhati High Court on March 2; the same day, however, he was rearrested under Case 28/83 registered under the Jalukbari Police Station. The Jalukbari case followed a police raid on

the AASU office in the Gauhati University campus on January 25, which broke up a meeting being held by fugitive AASU leaders with representatives of the Khasi Students Union from Meghalaya. At the meeting plans to cripple communications between Gauhati and Shillong during the elections were discussed.

On March 5, however, Sarma was released by the chief judicial magistrate (CJM) in Gauhati. "The Government does not know how to keep us in jail," laughs Sarma in his hideout near Rail Gate. "The Jalukbari case was registered on January 25, but my re-arrest on March 2 was confirmed by an executive magistrate under the Assam Executive Magistrates (Temporary Powers) Act, 1983, which was promulgated only on January 28. When I pointed this out the CJM had no option but to nullify my arrest orders."

Formidable Organisation: "Every SSB volunteer is a soldier of peace, a symbol of non-violence," says Sarma, "but we are also active guards of our motherland. Each district has two or more sub-divisional units, and between five and 11 regional units. Today we have totally more than 30 regional units in the valley and at least 15,000 volunteers."

Sarma accuses Indira Gandhi of fomenting differences between communities in Assam. "Immigrants have been settled in *char* areas under Indian Army auspices," alleges Sarma, "and in the early '70s the Government gave shelter to pro-Mujibur Rahman guerrillas of the Mukti Bahini to train in Assam. Today those men know our geography well, and have formed a secret Razakar Bahini that has infiltrated certain areas to raid and kill Assamese villagers. The Indian Government is giving Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) uniforms to these infiltrators and the Government is releasing fake CRPF men caught by villagers."

But the SSB knows its geography very well, too, and Sarma offers a hand-drawn map as evidence. Map-maker Deepak Das of the 'volunteer force' has autographed his creation, and the map shows large areas around Barpeta, in Kamrup district, that are shaded to show "heavily populated foreigner villages" that Sarma claims surround "threatened" Assamese pockets.

Last fortnight Sarma and his lieutenants were busy mapping out strategy from his "tactical headquarters". "It is a natural truth that all of us will die," he says, "but what Mrs Gandhi has unleashed will result in untold bloodshed. We will gladly die for a great cause."

—CHAITANYA KALBAG

1945", and ended by beseeching the heads of government assembled in Delhi to "consider how far the expression of grief by the international community over the Assam carnage should extend to the point of possible friendly succour on human rights considerations".

Efforts: In the event the AASU delegation got nowhere near any non-aligned leader, but its plans showed how far it was willing to go in order to embarrass the Government. The accompanying pamphlet, too, concentrated on Assamese victims of the violence that had ripped Assam apart last month, and ended with the current AASU slogan: "Save Assam today to save India tomorrow".

Barooah symbolises the confusing welter of political camps that infest the top ranks of the AASU leadership. Until the agitation began in 1979 he was an acknowledged member of the Communist Party of India-Marxist, but has now switched to a rigid stand against the Communists. Mahanta and Phukan head the moderate section, which is not averse to an eventual adjustment with the Central Government, and which carefully insists that all illegal immigrants after 1971, whether Muslim or Hindu, should be deported to Bangladesh.

But the moderates are facing increasing hostility from a strong lobby within AASU, led by Joy Nath Sarma, that supposedly has links with the Rashtriya Swyamsevak Sangh (RSS). This group has gained tremendous leverage during the elections, and makes a fine distinction between "refugees", meaning Hindus who ought by rights to be allowed to stay on in "Hindustan", and "infiltrators", who are by implication Muslims.

ATHIRD lobby is backed by the Communist Party of India Marxist-Leninist (CPI-ML)—in particular by the Vinod Mishra group of 'Bhojpur Naxalites' who are currently engaged in an active policy of "annihilation of class enemies" in the Patna-Gaya areas in Bihar. On March 4, two AASU representatives, Jayanta Das and Gulam Murtaza Ahmed, travelled to Calcutta to address a public meeting organised by the Indian People's Front, a countrywide organisation that is building up support among agricultural labourers and the unorganised industrial sector—and is affiliated to the Mishra faction of Naxalites. Nagen Sarma, an AASU adviser, says that there is nothing wrong in accepting support from the CPI(ML). "AASU is willing to take help from anybody who supports this national cause," he says, "but we are non-political and are not prepared to be exploited."

The BJP and the RSS have gained substantial support among the Assamese upper-caste Hindus who constitute the bulk of the agitators. In 1982 alone the state BJP unit, says Bansilal Sonee, party observer for the North-eastern region, gained 40,000 members. BJP President Atal Behari Vajpayee, along with Rajya Sabha MP Jaswant Singh, visited Assam for the sixth time last fortnight to visit refugee camps, and the state unit's vice-president Dr Jogeshwar



Graffiti warns: "Drive out foreigners from Assam"

There is a growing lobby within AASU that makes a fine distinction between "refugees" meaning Hindus who ought by right to be allowed to stay on in "Hindustan" and "infiltrators", who are by implication Muslims.

Mahanta, raised the curtain on the visit by claiming that "indigenous" Assamese in Nowgong district were in grave danger of being liquidated by "foreigners".

Off the busy Paltan Bazar area in Gauhati, in the local RSS headquarters at Keshav Dham, was the organisation's Akhil Bharatiya Bouddhik Pramukh (all India intellectual coordinator). Kupphalli Seetharamiah Sudarshan is a suave man with considerable knowledge of the situation in Assam. On March 8, Sudarshan chaired a meeting of local shakha heads and was given reports on the requirements in the relief camps. The RSS's Akhil Bharatiya Pratinidhi Sabha is meeting in Nagpur from March 18 to 20 to discuss how to "ameliorate Assam's agony". On March 5, the RSS headquarters in Delhi announced the formation of a 'Sangharsh Peedit Sahayata Samiti' to render aid in the strife-torn state.

Emerging Strategy: It was clear that the RSS is beginning to shape a strategy for

Assam that is finding favour with a major section of the agitation leadership. "I have been insisting that AASU should rethink its strategy," says Sudarshan. "I feel the agitators should concentrate upon foreign infiltrators. Refugees can be allowed to stay on humanitarian considerations. The Assam movement has to be made an all-India movement."

The RSS now has 200 shakhas in the North-east, says Sudarshan, with more than 130 in Assam alone. Sudarshan has been accompanied on his tours of disturbed areas by Dr Sujit Dhar of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). The VHP has been concentrating on Karbi Anglong district, trying to wean the tribals away from missionary influence. Last year it revived a tribal ritual called *bafangrangkher* that had been forgotten for 50 years and organised a big festival at Phoolani in Karbi Anglong.

The RSS is helping sharpen the ethnic divisions that have now permanently damaged the Assamese social structure. But there are other centrifugal forces at work, apart from the Assamese, the tribals and the Bengalis, in a process that might eventually result in a dismemberment of the state.

New Movements: Last fortnight reports indicated that the Ahoms are now girding up for a struggle to claim their own state in Upper Assam in the districts of Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Dibrugarh. The Ujani Ahom Rajya Parishad argues that this state should take in the outlines of the ancient Tai Ahom kingdom. The Ahoms ruled Assam for 600 years, and trace their descent to Buddhist Thais. Over the years they have been assimilated into Assamese society, but many Ahom leaders now privately argue that the Hindu Assamese in Assam were either imported from places like Kanauj in Uttar Pradesh or converted from within.

Simultaneously, there has been a move to revive the Phralung Buddhist cult among the Ahoms, who are otherwise part of Assam's Brahminical stream. The Ahoms have already demanded recognition as a Scheduled Tribe and reservation of Parliamentary seats under the tribal quota. When the Tai Historical and Cultural Society celebrated its silver jubilee in 1980, it invited the ambassadors to India from Thailand, Laos and Burma.

In Dibrugarh, a Tai language research institute is busy trying to revive the Ahom language, which has almost become extinct. Sources in Gauhati say that if the Ahoms become very militant about their demands it might create tremendous problems for the

Government, particularly because many Ahoms man key posts in the state administration. Chief Minister Saikia himself is an Ahom—Saikia is a military title bestowed by the Ahom kings on the commander of a hundred men.

As Union Home Minister P.C. Sethi paid a desultory two-day visit to Assam on March 11 and 12 to inspect relief measures, the Centre was clearly trying to cover up its mistakes in Assam with a series of transparent moves. While attempting to minimise the impact of the Assam holocaust on the rest of the country and abroad, the Government has tried to apportion blame. Conveniently, the three advisers to Governor Prakash Mehrotra are being blamed in calculated news "leaks" for not having handled the violence efficiently. The district administrations and the state bureaucracy too were singled out for censure. An overhauling of the intelligence set-up in the state was hinted at.

Soon after the elections ended, Sethi announced that future talks with the agitation leaders would include representatives from the minorities, the tribals, and the new Congress(I) ministry. Between the Government and the agitation leaders stood the Saikia Ministry—and the agitationists were adamant about not recognising the legitimacy of the new government. The stand-off was hostile and intractable, and the Government, sources said, would not give ground on the modalities of future talks unless the agitation leaders first held out an olive branch by making some token concessions.

As the fortnight progressed, it was clear that the agitation leaders were seeking to keep up pressure on the Government by maintaining an atmosphere of rumour and panic, and by ensuring that violence continued to crackle in staccato bursts. But Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's inclination has always been to not to succumb to such pressure, and she was taking a hard line on the continuing violence.

What is obviously required is quick, corrective and conciliatory action from both sides. Within the ravaged state itself, the Saikia Ministry finds itself caught in a vice, between a stubborn Centre and an intransigent movement. The experience of the last three years shows that 'popular' Congress(I) ministries in the state have utterly failed to touch even the fringe of the problem. With the Non-aligned summit out of the way, therefore, it was clear that the ball was firmly in Mrs Gandhi's court, and she would have to make the first move in this perilous minuet. —CHAITANYA KALBAG

CACHAR

Pulling Away



CACHAR district has always suffered from an agonising schizophrenia in regard to Assam. Overwhelmingly Bengali in both population and character, it has been totally alienated

from the Assamese 'mainland' over the last three years—only Cachar voters exercised their franchise in the 1980 Lok Sabha elections, and there is no sign of the anti-foreigners agitation. "Cachar is just like Bengal," says Monoranjan Dey, who owns a photographic studio in the Premtala area. "There is no trouble here, only peace."

Last month, the savage ethnic violence that tore the Brahmaputra Valley apart revived talk in Cachar of the Government's plans to partition Assam into Assamese, tribal and Bengali segments—the most obvious Bengali territory being Cachar (area: 6,962 sq km, estimated population in 1983: 2.5 million). When the Congress(I)-affiliated National Students' Union of India leader Partha Ranjan Chakraborty met Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on her electoral trip to Silchar on February 10, he asked her for a separate university for Cachar. Her response was to ask whether he wanted a Cachar university or a Cachar state.

Contrary Pulls: Ironically, the populous districts of Sylhet (now in Bangladesh) and Cachar were part of the Bengal province until 1874, when the British merged them

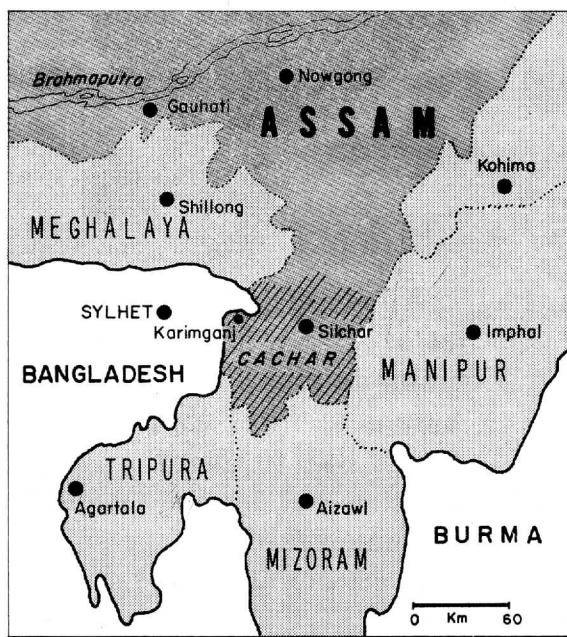
with the newly-annexed Assam in order to make that territory viable, economically and demographically. The Bengalis in the two districts however insisted that they would retain their affiliation with Calcutta university and high court—a factor that helped maintain a higher rate of literacy among the Assamese Bengalis. This dichotomy continued until 1947 and the Sylhet and Cachar district Congress committees owed allegiance to the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee.

A referendum in June 1947 in Sylhet resulted in that district's merger with East Pakistan. Sylhet had been Assam's most populous district, comprising almost one-third of the state's total population. Only three and a half police thanas from Sylhet were merged with the contiguous Cachar because they held a dominant Hindu population. But the Assamese were uneasy about Cachar's continuing presence in their midst; Ambicagiri Rai Chaudhuri, the founder of the Assam Sahitya Sabha, suggested that Cachar too should go to East Pakistan.

These contrary pulls surfaced at other times. When the States Reorganisation Committee under Fazal Ali, Hridaynath Kunzru and K.M. Panicker was at work in 1955–56, the Cachar Congress leadership demanded the district's separation from Assam. Eight years earlier, soon after Partition, there had been a demand that a composite 'Congress' state, 'Purbanchal' be formed from the Cachar, Manipur, Tripura and the Lushai Hills district of Assam.

"Sylhet was thrown out of Assam because it was dominating the Assamese," says Dr Lutfur Rahman, a former minister and an active member of the Congress(S). "Now they would like to throw Cachar out for similar reasons." A former principal of the Cachar College, Deba Brata Datta feels that the trouble lies elsewhere. "The seeds of this alienation were sown when the British merged Sylhet and Cachar with Assam in 1874," he says. "They did not think of the linguistic and cultural factors."

Legitimate Fears: Although many leaders of opinion in Silchar, Cachar's headquarters, feel privately that separation of the district from Assam is inevitable, there is also a strong section that opposes the move. A body called the Union Territory Demand Committee, led by Paritosh Pal Choudhury, has failed to gain



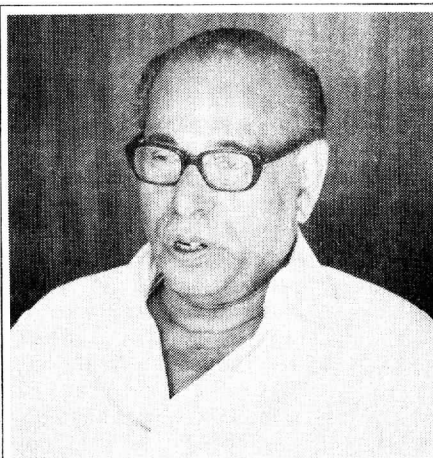
many supporters. "People will accept separation with resignation," says Dr Binay Krishna Bhattacharya, principal of Cachar College. "We must learn to live together, or perish." Mahitosh Purkayastha, who has on earlier occasions campaigned for Cachar's separation, now says: "What will we gain if we separate? There will be unemployment and pressure on land. Bengalis get the majority of jobs in the Brahmaputra Valley, in the railways, posts and telegraphs, coalfields, oilfields, banks and so on. Such opportunities will dry up."

Economically, Cachar is one of Assam's more backward districts. It contains 114 of Assam's 769 tea plantations, but its mainstay is rice cultivation. The anti-foreigners agitation has led to skyrocketing prices of all essential commodities in the district because of impeded movement through the Valley. And as far as employment goes, Bengalis from Cachar are already finding it difficult to get jobs in the Brahmaputra Valley. Covert discrimination in favour of "sons of the soil" has kept many public sector and governmental posts vacant, and in Gauhati University many departments have deliberately not been expanded so as to prevent Bengali candidates from getting jobs.

WHERE Cachar has most starkly differed from the Valley is in relation to language. The Assam Official Language Act, 1960, which made Assamese the lingua franca through out the state, was greeted by language riots in Cachar and in Bengali areas in the Valley. A formula evolved by Lal Bahadur Shastri, the then Union home minister, led to the insertion of an amendment that kept Bengali as Cachar's official language. In 1972, when Gauhati University decided to make Assamese the medium of instruction throughout the state, another strong movement in Cachar succeeded in retaining Bengali as the medium in that district.

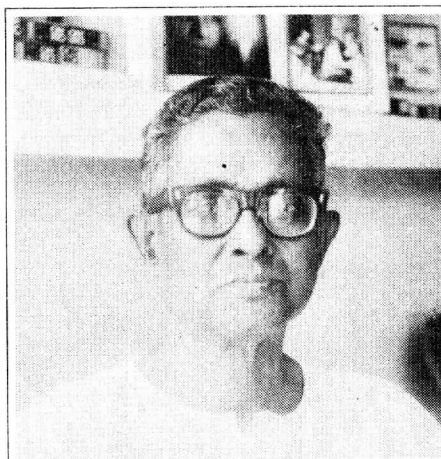
On December 30 last year, however, only a week before the elections were announced, the Assam Secondary Education Board (ASEB) issued a circular saying that Assamese would henceforth be a compulsory third language in all Cachar schools from class eight onwards. In contrast, schools in the Brahmaputra Valley continue to have Hindi as the third language. The Cachar Shiksha Sanrakshan Samiti sent a strongly worded protest on January 30, calling the move "academically unsound, discriminatory, undemocratic, politically motivated, impractical and unsuited to the needs of modern life"; and the directive has been kept in temporary abeyance.

Communal Cleavage: Sources in Silchar say that even if the Government does not bestow Union territory status on Cachar, it



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might still decide to merge the district with neighbouring Tripura, where the Bengali population constitutes 70 per cent of the total. Either move will almost certainly draw a strong protest from Cachar's Muslim Bengali population. The Muslims currently constitute around 35 per cent of Cachar's population, dominating the rural sector. Although Muslims occupy the top posts in the three Mahakuma Parishads (zonal bodies) that administer the district, they form a minority in the district administration. Both a separate Union territory status or merger with Tripura will result in a drastic reduction in Muslim influence.

The Muslim leadership in the district, therefore, favours continuation of Cachar in Assam—because, together with the immigrant Muslim population in the Valley, they can better safeguard their interests. Such fears have led to a firming of Muslim sentiment; in the recent elections, voters in Alkapur, Hailakandi and Silchar tended to favour Muslim candidates—preferably from the Congress(I)—in a clearly religious delineation. Even in Karimganj town, traditionally an opposition stronghold, a total newcomer to politics from the Congress(I) was voted in because he happened to harp on Muslim minority fears. As a result of such minority swings, eight of the 15 Cachar MLA's in the new Assembly are Muslims.

Losses: Educationally, however, Cachar has suffered the most because of the anti-foreigners movement in the Valley. Although educational institutions worked normally even at the height of the trouble in the Valley, Cachar's students lost the 1979-80 academic year because of examination cancellations and will now most probably suffer a loss of the academic year 1982-83 too; examinations for both schools and colleges, scheduled for later this month, have not been announced so far.

Discrimination against Cachar students in admissions to Gauhati University (a number of meritorious candidates for the physics post-graduate course had to be admitted last year only after Vice-Chancellor Jamini Choudhury intervened) has deepened Cachar's siege mentality. To add to their woes, Cachar's graduates have now been informed that West Bengal's universities will no longer grant admissions in post-graduate courses because Assam follows a two-year degree course system. Attacks on Bengali students in Gauhati University hostels have held back many parents from sending their children to the state capital.

"Basically, the Assam agitation has ended up in demanding the extirpation of all Bengali refugees because they are rivals in trade and employment," says Bijit Choudhury, head of the history department in

the Guru Charan College. "The Assamese feel that if Assam's Bengalis are united it will be very difficult for them to get a unilingual state."

Ethnic Rivalry: The growing Assamese-Bengali rift is summed up by a senior academician in Gauhati. "Suddenly," he says, "the Assamese have discovered that the Bengalis constitute the third largest linguistic community in Asia, after the Chinese and the Hindi speakers. In addition, looking at the political development in West Bengal, Tripura and Bangladesh, the Assamese feel that the Bengalis subscribe to two undesirable political schools—Marxist or authoritarian. So, fears about engulfment by the Bengalis have been cleverly played upon by the agitators."

Whether or not Cachar is ultimately separated from Assam, it will not solve the essentially heterogenic problems afflicting the state. Nor are the ethnic, cultural and linguistic divisions tearing Assam apart a new feature. As long ago as in 1792, when Ahom king Gouri Nath Singh begged the then Governor-General Lord Cornwallis to send his troops into the Valley to stave off external aggression, the British contingent that marched into Gauhati issued a proclamation saying it had come to protect and not to conquer the Valley, in both Assamese and Bengali.

In March 1901, when Lord Curzon visited Gauhati and was asked to grant Assam a permanent seat in the Imperial Legislative Council, he told the petitioners that "there was not found to be within this province that substantial community of interests which would render any one delegate truly representative of the whole.... The constituency is, in fact, too composite to admit of a permanent single mouthpiece" Cachar's Bengali population is today in a state of suffocating siege. But the miniscule Assamese population feels just as encircled as the Bengalis do in the state as a whole.

The simmering Assamese-Bengali incompatibility was symbolised once again last fortnight when the Purbanchal Bank, one of the state's largest, opened a new branch in Silchar. The agent of the new branch got hardly any accounts at all—because he is Assamese, and does not speak Bengali.

—CHAITANYA KALBAG

REFUGEES

Flight To Safety



ONE FALL-OUT of the February carnage in Assam has been the exodus of large numbers of refugees, fleeing in fear from the scene of the killings, into districts of West Bengal adjoining Assam. This is not the first time that such an exodus has occurred; four years ago, the first refugee waves came when the Assam movement

started for the expulsion of illegal foreign immigrants from Bangladesh. The last influx began in the wake of last month's elections. To assess the magnitude of the new outflow, and the mood of the refugees, Correspondent SUMANTA SEN and Photographer PRAMOD PUSHKARNA travelled to the northern districts of West Bengal to talk to refugees and officials. Sen's report:

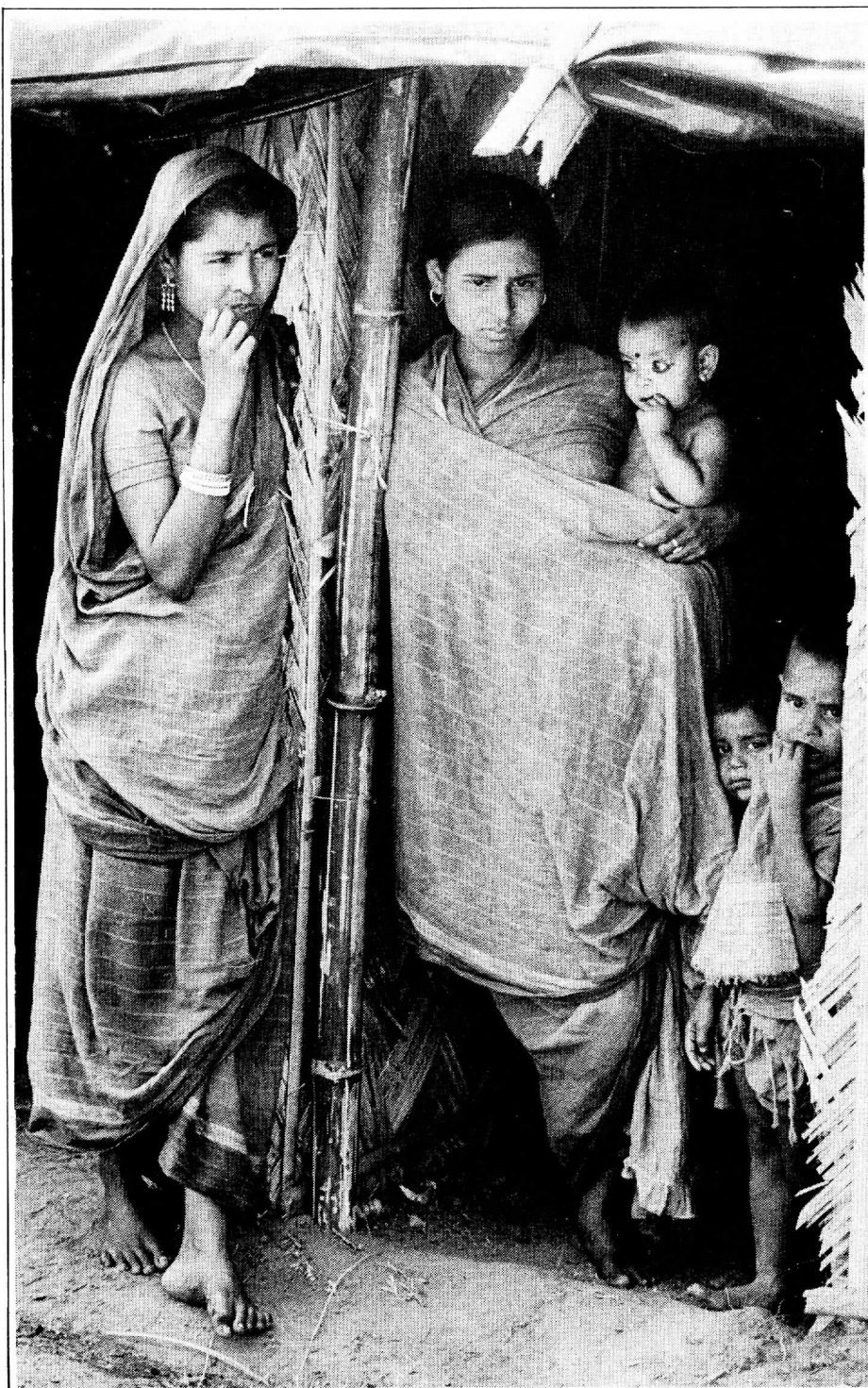
PICTURES BY PRAMOD PUSHKARNA



They continue to arrive at West Bengal's Alipurduar Junction railway station to be packed from there in lorries for their new refuge. Last fortnight around 10,000 had arrived with more on the escape trail.

THE LORRIES keep on coming along the dusty road like so many cattle trucks. They wind their way past the Kohinoor tea estate to a vast ground filled with rows and rows of polythene topped sheds. It is the Dangi II camp in Alipurduar started to house the hapless thousands from Assam forced out of their homes and villages in the wake of the communal carnage that has engulfed their state. They continue to arrive at West Bengal's Alipurduar Junction railway station to be packed from there in lorries for their new refuge. Last fortnight around 10,000 had arrived and there were reports of more being on the escape trail, the West Bengal authorities went about the task of increasing the accommodation which had originally been planned to house 12,000. Said Sub-Divisional Officer P.K. Chowdhury: "Our reports are that many more will come and we have to keep and feed them until the time they want to return."

And very few would like to go back. Just as the 8,000 who had fled their homes in 1980 at the peak of the anti-foreigner agitation in Assam are still housed at what has come to be known as Dangi I, just adjacent to the new settlement. For three years now they have been living in thatched huts that have become worn with age and subsisting on the weekly Government dole of 2.5 kg of rice and Rs 5 per adult which in official parlance is called "special gratuitous relief". Quite clearly it isn't much of a life but as Haridas Chandra Debnath, 40, explained: "There is no way in which we can agree to return to our native places in Assam unless we know we will not be driven out



They live in thatched huts, subsisting on the weekly Government dole of two and a half kg of rice and Rs 5 per adult as "special gratuitous relief". Quite clearly it isn't much of a life.

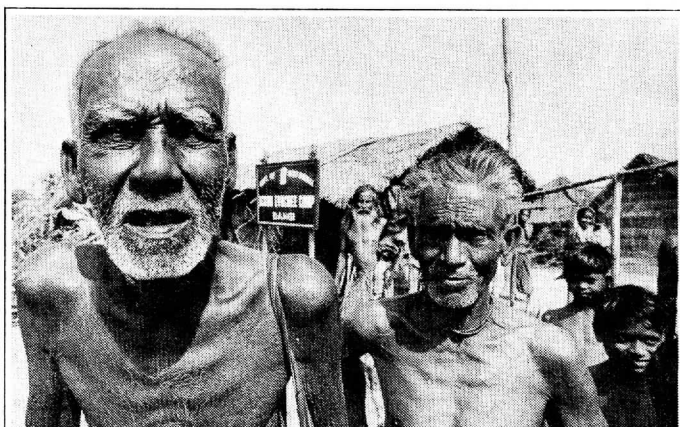
again." And at Dangi II, Narayan Chandra Roy, newly arrived from Baihata village in Kamrup district, said: "I swear I'll never eat Assamese rice again." Roy echoed his camp-mates who, while looking abjectly lost in their new surroundings, seem to share a common resolve: not to go back.

The pattern of the most recent wave also makes it clear that the bulk of the people have not left Assam temporarily. The graph at the hurriedly set up control room at the Alipurduar circuit house shows that the exodus began to gather momentum from February 27 onwards, a full week after the Assam elections and when the situation had eased a bit. The official explanation at the circuit house was: "Though alarmed at the rioting around them, these people chose not to run away in a hurry leaving behind everything. It is clear that they planned their exit, fairly certain that they will not return." As Prafulla Chandra Burman and Bhuvan Chandra Manidas, just getting off the lorry that brought them to the camp said they could have left their homes in Darrang district much earlier but deliberated their decision. Said Burman, "We should have come earlier but we could not do so as we needed some time to gather all our belongings and organise our departure."

Sorry Plight: But that even organised and planned departures can go awry was proved by the words of Naren Chandra Das, 38, who had to leave behind his two daughters. Das's story, told in his words, is typical. He said:

"On February 18, following repeated threats from the Assamese we Bengalis of Khoriali decided to cross over into West Bengal. But just as we were making our plans, our houses were attacked by people carrying torches and we made fast for the nearby jungles. Having reached there I found my 10-year-old son and an 18-month-old daughter missing. They, however, turned up the next day when we were about to proceed towards the railway station. We left the jungle and half-way through, at Dongpara, came across a riotous mob and in front of my own eyes my uncle and aunt were chopped to pieces with daos. We ran helter-skelter and later when we had reached the station, I found my daughters, one aged nine and another four, missing. As I looked for them, people told me they had seen my daughters lying on the ground with arrows in their back."

Asked why he himself had not turned back to look for his daughters, Das said: "Then it was a question of each person for himself." The betel-nut trader and small land-owner turned overnight into a refugee, shed tears for his daughters after he had



Said an old man Mahadeb Das: "The Assam authorities might have been cruel to us but we are sure that our fellow Bengalis will not act in the same manner."



At Dangi there are many broken families like Kanchan Bala Dey's who crossed from Nalbari with her children. With no information from her husband she is convinced she will never see him again.

reached the security of Dangi from the nightmare that is Assam today for the minorities.

Many of Dangi's newest inmates said they would have preferred to remain in Assam had they been more humanely treated there. As Hemendra Mohan Roy, of Goreswar village in Kamrup district, said: "We were due to go to the polls on February 20. Two days before that the situation became very tense with the Assamese repeatedly threatening us with dire consequences if we participated in the polls. The deputy superintendent of police and the circle inspector had come to our village and we complained of these threats and also the way in which the local thana officer was instigating the Assamese. Nothing, however, happened and we became the targets of attack which began soon after the officers had left."

Even so, Roy said he had no intention of crossing over into West Bengal and at first took shelter at the local Goreswar college where a camp of sorts had been started for people like us. "There we stayed in the open with nobody caring for us even when we were struck by a hailstorm. It was then that we decided to come to West Bengal as we realised that Assam no longer belonged to us," he said. Since then, Roy has learned that the Goreswar

camp had been set on fire by militants. Officials at the control room confirmed that incidents such as the destruction of the camp were also responsible for the somewhat late rise in the volume of exodus, as it comprised people who had decided to quit after making every effort to stay back.

Many of the camp inmates' stories made it clear that there were very definite and strong economic motives behind the

urge to get rid of the Bengalis. As Hriday Chandra Nabadas, 61, who came to Darrang district from Mymensingh in the then East Pakistan 18 years ago, said: "I bought five bighas of land for Rs 400 a bigha. Today the same land is valued at Rs 2,000 a bigha and for quite some time people like us who had bought land cheap were feeling a growing resentment about this among the Assamese. Now they have got my land."

DANGI is not new to receiving Bengali refugees from Assam. The first influx took place in the wake of the 1960 riots when a few thousands had been provided shelter. It included men like Narayan Chandra Roy who have been forced to become refugees twice over. But they had returned to Assam and, in Roy's words: "There was no reprisal then." Then came 1980 to be followed by the present exodus, clearly the biggest, and under by far the more hostile circumstances. As the bullock-carts brought in more bamboo poles for additional homes at Dangi II, it appeared once again that West Bengal, plagued as it has always been with refugees since 1947, would have to bend a little more to take on its latest and seemingly permanent burden.

Nabadas, interestingly enough, is a refugee for the second time. The first time he left home



"When we reached the station my daughters were missing. People said that they were lying with arrows in their backs." Asked why he had not turned back Das replied: "It was each person for himself."

at Mymensingh was in 1965 in the wake of the Indo-Pak war. "Then I was driven out by Muslims and this time I have lost my home to the Hindus," remarked Nabadas as he played cards with other refugees from the same village, perhaps the only way to while away the endless hours at their disposal.

As Nabadas and the others played cards, lorries continued to drive in throwing up dust storms. Many of the other inmates peered into the faces of the new arrivals to find out if those they had left behind in hurried bids to save lives, had come. And at Dangi there were many broken families like that of Kanchan Bala Dey who had crossed over with her children from Nalbari with no information about her husband Ranjit who was then away at Dumduma, 9 km away, visiting relatives. And Sudhir Das, a fish supplier from Mangaldoi, said he has yet to hear about his father who stayed a little distance away. And even as they looked among the new arrivals, people like Kanchan Bala and Sudhir Das appeared convinced they would not see their near ones again.

Grim Future: Though most of the inmates at Dangi are Hindus, there are also a fair number of Bengali Muslims all insisting that they had been living in Assam for generations and had nothing to do with "people who came during the time of Bangladesh." However, whether Hindus or Muslims the first thought as the tension of escape and arrival subsides is that of the future. Five rupees and 2.5 kg of rice a week certainly doesn't go a long way and as they look around for other means, the older inmates at neighbouring Dangi I come to their aid. Though the Government rules say that no refugee will be entitled to the special gratuitous relief if he stirs out of the camp, it is no secret that people from Dangi I have been going out to nearby Samuktola, 5 km away, or even Alipurduar, 15 km away, doing odd jobs here and there. And this is already causing tension with the local inhabitants unhappy at the fact that the refugees were seeking to eat into their meagre resources. The authorities at Alipurduar are aware of the goings-on and a senior police officer said: "While we do not fear any clashes with the locals, what is bothering us is that with the refugees continuing to stay they

will sooner or later start felling trees in the adjacent reserve forests as that is an easy way of making money. And in such a situation we will have to take action."

Actually after three years in the camp, the older inhabitants at Dangi I are slowly turning out to be a problem with increasing demands on the authorities who have already paid well over Rs 4 crore in terms of cash assistance alone on them, with no compensation from the Centre. Now the newly laid out hutments at Dangi II are a further incitement for complaints of neglect, particularly as

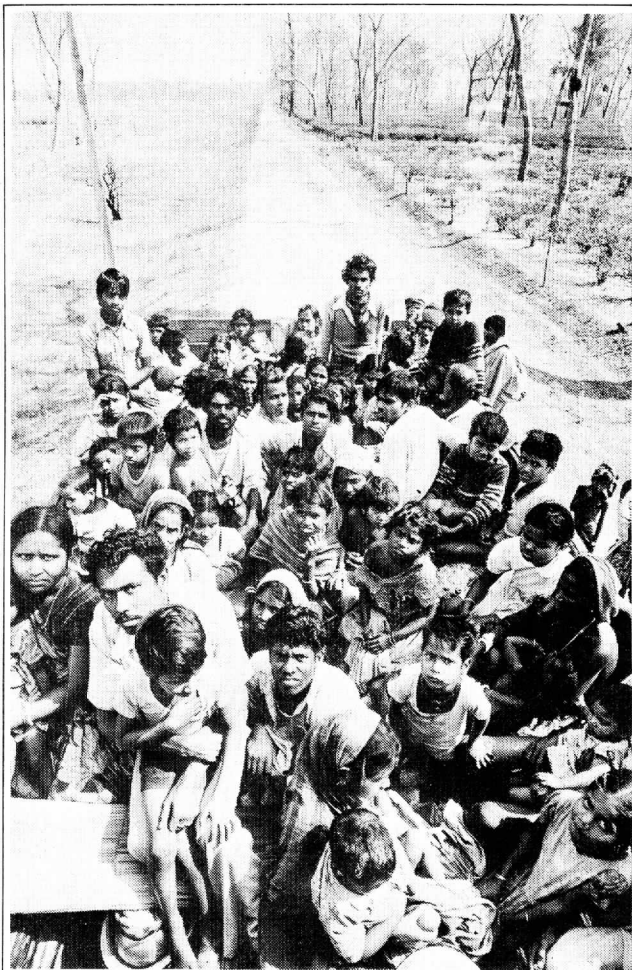
their own huts look dreary in comparison. Already such well-worn tactics like deputations to the district authorities have been resorted to and the dangerous feeling that is clearly growing is that "we have a right to this place, even though we are refugees". As an old man Mahadeb Das said: "The Assam authorities might have been cruel to us but we are sure that our fellow Bengalis will not act in the same manner."

Since it is not just one man's feelings, it became apparent last fortnight that if these refugees continued to stay then the West Bengal Government will have a lot on its hands which it could do without. And there is little that the Government can do about this as Chief Minister Jyoti Basu has been repeatedly saying: "On humanitarian grounds we can neither turn the refugees away nor can we help looking after them."

And secure with this knowledge they keep flooding in, three times a day by Arunachal Express, Assam Mail and Kamrup Express to Alipurduar Junction. For many of the refugees like Kuddus Ali and Isaruddin Mian of the Dhula area in Mangaldoi this train journey was their first—but it is a journey they are unlikely to forget in a hurry.

And the refugee problem does not end with the boundaries of the camps. There are definite indications, which even officials admit, that many more people have taken shelter with friends and relatives on the West Bengal side. In Hashimara, much farther from the Assam border, there are families who had provided shelter to their fleeing relatives from Goalpara. They are not the Government's concern but their continued presence could well lead to social tensions, reminiscent, even if poorly of what sparked off the agitation in Assam itself.

In a poverty ridden state like West Bengal, there are already murmurs of discontent. A hotelier in Alipurduar said: "We hope that the Government realises that these people from Assam are not the only ones with problems. A time may soon come when the 18,000 or more inhabitants of Dangi may well find themselves unwanted not only in Assam but elsewhere too." If this happens, many of the refugees will be back where they started from and, their lives will have come full circle.



Said a resident of Alipurduar: "We hope the Government realises that these people from Assam are not the only ones with problems. A time may come when the inhabitants of Dangi may find themselves unwanted elsewhere too."