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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

DEMOCRACY sometimes teaches strange lessons, and the strangest of them all is currently being acted out in the remote North-eastern state of Assam. Since January 6, when the ruling party announced its ill-fated decision to go through with elections in the state, the once-placid Brahmaputra valley has been transformed into a bloody battlefield.

Till last week, the death toll in the pre-poll violence stood at exactly 60, a heavy price to pay for what can eventually only be a facade of legitimacy. Tragically, the final toll cannot but be higher as the violence, and emotions, escalate. In fact, the visual impact of the pre-poll scenario bears little resemblance to an orderly, democratic election, as Correspondent CHAITANYA KALBAG, who spent 10 days touring the riot-torn valley, discovered.

Travelling almost 1,000 km through the state's worst-hit districts, Kalbag and Photographer BHAWAN SINGH encountered constant signs of the election's violent undercurrents. For two days, they were unable to hire a vehicle to travel outside Gauhati because cars were being forcibly requisitioned by the Government for election duty. Travel after dark was fraught with danger because all moving vehicles were stoned first and questioned later. The most ironical was Kalbag's journey back to Delhi. He returned on a deserted Indian Airlines Airbus which had been chartered by the Centre to ferry another reluctant planeload of government employees and Indian Administrative Service probationers to the distant state for election duty.

Emotion has never run higher than it does now and it has succeeded in clouding logic. Says Kalbag: "There are no moderate opinions left. Everybody has something angry and emotional to say. Whether they are for or against the elections, everybody speaks in extremes." But the most disheartening sight for Kalbag, who has visited the region frequently on previous assignments, was the sight of the beautiful Brahmaputra valley, pockmarked for the first time with bomb blasts and bullet holes, bristling with the guns of the paramilitary forces. Singh shot the cover picture while on a tour of Kamrup district. Driving on a highway near Pathshala, he caught sight of flames from a distance and stopped the car. Running through adjoining fields, Singh was able to shoot just two frames before the police—one of whom is seen in the cover picture signalling Singh not to take pictures—stopped him. The burning building turned out to be the local State Electricity Board office set aflame on the afternoon of February 10 by people whose identities are unlikely ever to be established.

WITH ASSAM threatening to blow up, a drama of another kind was being enacted in another part of the country. Climaxing two years of blood-chilling crime, Phoolan Devi announced her decision to surrender to the Madhya Pradesh authorities at Bhind. To cover the event, Correspondent SUNIL SETHI and Photographer PRAMOD PUSHKARNA drove to Bhind through the night. From his post at Bhopal, SREEKANT KHANDEKAR made tracks for the surrender location while correspondent ANAND SAGAR filed from Lucknow, giving details of the dacoit's career in crime in Uttar Pradesh where she carried out most of her operations. Pushkarna's colour pictures are the first of their kind to see print.

