

*From the Calcutta End*

## Why West Bengal is a Problem State

**S** E V E N years ago, India became independent. Bengal was partitioned. Truncated, divided Bengal, West Bengal, became a problem State the day it emerged as a comparatively small State of free, independent, India. For seven years, the people outside West Bengal have been calling it a problem State. It may be a problem State. But the people of West Bengal resent such an attitude to, and description of, this State. They retort it is not their fault that it has been, and remains, a problem State.

West Bengal was always an industrial area. East Bengal was the former, undivided Bengal's granary. The two Bengals were complementary. They were complementary in more than one sense. Their economies were complementary. Each was dependent on the other for social, political and economic progress. Partition has destroyed all this. So, West Bengal and East Bengal have emerged as problem States in both India and Pakistan.

West Bengal is smaller in area than many other States. But it is the most industrialised State. There are more industrial workers in West Bengal than in any other State. This is a statistical fact. But the obvious conclusions that one is tempted to draw from this basic economic fact are not necessarily correct. West Bengal is not a rich state. It may or may not be decadent. But it is a decaying State. That is the main trouble about West Bengal's basic economic data. They need to be correctly interpreted. And the interpretation reveals that facts are far less promising than what the bare statistics seem to indicate.

### SLOW RATE OF GROWTH OF INDUSTRIAL LABOUR

Consider, for instance, this question of industrialisation. West Bengal still is the most industrialised State in India. But it is fast losing ground. In almost all the States, the rate of growth of industrial labour is faster than in West Bengal. Its implications are dismal. It is an undeniable, but disappointing, reflection of industrial stagnation in West Bengal. West Bengal has more industries than any other State. But the industries are not progressing. This, coupled with the rate of growth of population, is the

primary reason why the problem of unemployment is so acute in this State.

An economist may be provoked to add riders to this gloomy interpretation. He may argue that the comparatively slower rate of growth of industrial labour is not necessarily a distressing symptom. It would not be, had the process of rationalisation of industries in West Bengal been more rapid than in any other State. Unfortunately, no such assumption has any statistical basis. West Bengal's Chief Minister, Dr B C Roy, is an energetic advocate of rationalisation. Even the man in the street is familiar with the advantages of modernisation of industry. But one shudders to think of the political and social disturbances that will engulf West Bengal if rationalisation is not phased and planned with proper care.

### DEGAYING AGRICULTURE

Not only industry, but agriculture in West Bengal is also decaying. West Bengal is not only the most industrialised state. It has also become the State where more of the cultivable land is being cultivated than in any other State. It is good to know that there is maximum utilisation of available land. But it also means that there is no more land to bring under cultivation. That is why, the "refugees" cannot be settled. That is one of the reasons why the growing population cannot be gainfully employed. It is not only that the pressure of population on land is increasing. There are indications that there is regression even in agriculture.

### INFLUX OF IMMIGRANT LABOUR

These are gloomy enough facts. Far more gloomy is the fact that West Bengal's industrial labour is mainly non-Bengali. More people and workers immigrate into West Bengal than those who emigrate from this State. West Bengal's industry is not owned by Bengalis. A large portion of industrial labour in this State consists of non-Bengalis. Agriculture is showing distinct symptoms of regression. With derationing of food, and with the gradual lifting of controls, the secondary and tertiary sectors of occupation and employment are shrinking. There are the additional unrehabilitated "refugees" from East Bengal. It is

no wonder that West Bengal remains a problem State.

### MORE DEPENDENTS, FEWER EARNERS

Decay and regression are writ large on West Bengal. Employment is scarce. It is becoming scarcer in both the agricultural and the non-agricultural sectors. In West Bengal, "an increasing population is being thrown upon the earnings, of a decreasing number of earners." That is why, social, political and economic unrest grows. It is not surprising that there is intense economic discontent. What is really surprising is that it has not yet burst into a bloody revolution. Critics of the West Bengal Government insinuate that there is a semblance of social and political stability which is being artificially maintained by the Police State. The State retorts that oppression has never anywhere succeeded in suppressing revolution. It implies that the situation is slowly taking a turn for the better as its economic plans are being implemented.

### PEACEFUL ATMOSPHERE DECEPTIVE

Cynics may say that the absence of political and economic disturbances in the last few months is mainly due to the gradual lowering of food prices. Food has now been derationed. At the moment, food is easily available at lower prices. But there are other troubles brewing. Food may be cheaper now. But food derationing threatens the employment of about 120,000 employees. Attempts are being made to reabsorb them. More men will, admittedly, be needed to implement the West Bengal Government's plan for zamindari abolition. But that will create another set of problems.

A visitor to Calcutta may be impressed with the current peaceful atmosphere in the city. But he will be told that it has all the deceptive look of a lull before the storm. All seems to be quiet on the industrial labour front. But, then, one has already begun witnessing daily demonstrations by labourers for *Puja* bonus. More revealing is the silent demonstration that one notices as one enters big mercantile offices in Dalhousie Square: Peons and liftmen have "no retrenchment" badges pinned on their coats. Calcutta's office clerks have made it a

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regular practice to stage weekly demonstration marches in protest of threats of retrenchment.

#### FAITH IN RECONSTRUCTION PROJECTS'

West Bengal is like a volcano. Political and economic unrest may burst at any time. But the West Bengal Government pins its faith on its reconstruction projects. In and around Writers' Buildings, there is some satisfaction that the West Bengal Government has, after so many years, succeeded in convincing New Delhi of the potential danger of unrehabilitated "refugees." Their problems cannot be solved in a day. But the belief is growing that it is being tackled on proper lines now. New Delhi will spend more money on "refugee" rehabilitation. It will be done through community projects, and through the plans for encouraging rural, cottage industries.

West Bengal's hope lies in DVC. When completed, DVC will provide enough power for expansion of industries. Its progress has not been as rapid as anticipated earlier. It is no use discussing why DVC is not progressing according to schedule. But it is commonly agreed that West Bengal's problems will never

be solved unless DVC and the other Barrage projects are executed according to plans. All this will, evidently, take time. Meanwhile, the problems of unemployment and of population pressure grow acute daily. West Bengal, like Punjab, has been the worst sufferer of partition. But the completion of Bhakra-Nangal has made the solution of Punjab's problems possible in the near future. That cannot yet be said of West Bengal.

#### RE-DISTRIBUTION OF BOUNDARIES

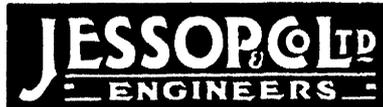
There are reasons to believe that the West Bengal Government is convinced that the State's problems cannot be solved without a re-distribution of the boundaries of the States bordering West Bengal. There are large Bengali "pockets" in Bihar, Orissa and Assam. West Bengal's claim is that these "pockets" must be incorporated into the State so that it can have both space to live and opportunities to develop industrially. Re-distribution of State boundaries, as desired by West Bengal, may solve this State's problems arising out of the gradual shrinkage in its agricultural and non-agricultural sectors. But even the most robust optimist doubts whether

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West Bengal will have the areas it claims,

#### DOOMED TO REMAIN A PROBLEM STATE

Within its present borders, there is not much scope of development in the agricultural sector. In a way, under the present system of allocation of resources between the Centre and the States, it is agricultural progress that can help any State. Though not widely known, it is a fact that West Bengal's land revenue is smaller than many States. Within its existing borders, the scope for industrial expansion is limited. There will be scope for industrial expansion if West Bengal's territorial claims are accepted. But this is extremely doubtful. And, then, industrial expansion in the enlarged West Bengal, may solve this State's employment problems. But the State's finances will not necessarily improve as long as the system of division of revenues remains as it is. With the State's meagre finances, with doubtful prospects of further industrial and agricultural expansion, West Bengal, with its "refugee" and immigrant non-Bengali labour population, seems doomed to subsist as a problem State for quite awhile.



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Builders of all types of Railway Rolling  
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