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 State. 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.

DEGENERATING 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 rehabituated " 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 depression in the city. 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 it must be said that the absence of 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
regular practice to stage weekly de-
monstration marches in protest of
threats of retrenchment.

FAITH IN RECONSTRUCTION PROJECTS

West Bengal is like a volcano. Politi-
cal 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 convinc­
ing New Delhi of the potential dan­
ger 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" rehabili-
tation. 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 in-
dustries. 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 ac-
cording to plans. All this will, evi-
dently, take time. Meanwhile, the
problems of unemployment and of
population pressure grow acute
daily. West Bengal, like Punjab,
has been the worst sufferer of parti-
tion. But the completion of
Bhakra-Nangal has made the solu-
tion 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 con-
vinced that the State's problems can­
not be solved without a re-distribu-
tion 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 indus-
trially. Re-distribution of State
boundaries, as desired by West Ben­
gal, may solve this State's problems
arising out of the gradual shrinkage
in its agricultural and non-agricul-
tural sectors. But even the most
robust optimist doubts whether

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 alloca-
tion of resources between the Centre
and the States, it is agricultural pro-
gress that can help any State. Though
not widely known, it is a fact that
West Bengal's land revenue is small-
er than many States. Within its
existing borders, the scope for in-
dustrial expansion is limited. There
will be scope for industrial expan-
sion if West Bengal's territorial
claims are accepted. But this is ex-
tremely doubtful. And, then, in-
dustrial 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 expan-
sion, West Bengal, with its "re-
fugee" and immigrant non-Bengali
labour population, seems doomed to
subsist as a problem State for quite
awhile.