East Bengal Refugees

Refugees from camps in other States are returning to Calcutta because they cannot adjust themselves to the new environment. There is also a renewed influx of refugees from East Bengal. Drastic social and economic changes in the State are necessary to rehabilitate them.

India is a land of vast distances. There are sharp variations in climate in different parts of the country, even as the habits and traditions of the people in various parts differ widely. But there is unity in diversity. Religious festivals and ceremonies are not necessarily similar in all the parts of the country. But their underlying theme is the same. In details, they vary. But in essence, they mean and signify similar themes and motives.

Although Durga Puja is celebrated mainly in Bengal, Dassara is observed throughout India. Divali, again, is a festival which is familiar in all parts of India. But the ceremony differs in details in various parts of the country. In Bengal, the Goddess Kali is worshipped on the day when the dark fortnight ends. Throughout India, the non-Bengali Hindu business community observes the occasion as the beginning of the new business year.

Festival of Lights

But the Festival of Lights is observed throughout India. Its meaning and significance are the same everywhere in India. It marks the end of autumn, and the beginning of winter. In India, festivals have close associations with the climate and the various seasons. By the end of autumn, the harvests have been gathered. The barns are now full. The toil is over. And the people are in a mood to enjoy themselves.

It begins with the festival of the Nine Nights. It ends with Divali. And on Divali day, at the darkest hour of the dark fortnight, the oil lamps are lit to lead the people on to safety during the long wintry nights ahead. These oil lamps signify hope. Even as they dispel darkness they are symbolic of the people's faith that good will overcome evil. It is this, and similar other common beliefs, that unite India, although habits, customs and the institutionalised religious functions are different in different parts of the country.

West Bengal will be plagued with problems as long as it exists. Partitions may have aggravated its problems; but it did not create them. Throughout history, cynics say, it has been a problem State. Bengal, the pandits recall, was an area which the Pandavas disapproved of. They visited many parts of India in their incognito state. There are traces of their wanderings in the Elephanta Caves, according to one theory, in Bombay in the west to Manipur in Assam in the east. But there is no trace of their stay or passage in Bengal. Bengal is, indeed, popularly deplored as a desh forsaken even by the Pandavas.

A 'Problem State'

West Bengal lives up to its tradition. In Calcutta, today, troubles and problems are of daily occurrence. If the city's workers are not shouting slogans in streets, its Marwari population is staging a demonstration against cow slaughter. If, on any day, there is no labour trouble, one may be sure of something unseemly happening in the Assembly. If there is no social or economic or political disturbance, the city's attention may be diverted to the resumed influx of East Bengal refugees.

Most of Calcutta's social, economic and political troubles are aggravated by the refugee problem. In the last two months, there has been a revised influx of refugees from two directions. Some of the inmates of refugee camps in the neighbouring States are coming back to Calcutta. These are the old refugees. They complain about the uncongenial and strange surroundings in which they are being forced to live. They have made an effort. But, they admit, they have not succeeded in acclimatising themselves to the new environment.

Most of the East Bengal refugees are now habituated to the climate and conditions in and around Calcutta. But they really do not seem to feel happy anywhere west of Khulna. That is why they are returning to Calcutta from refugee camps in the neighbouring States. They were given land. But they complain that they cannot live in, or cultivate, the soil that they do not know. Some of them were helped to set themselves up in some occupation. They tried; but failed to fit in, because the type of artisan work they used to do in East Bengal is different from what they are now being asked to do.

The 'Deserters'

These deserters, as they are officially called, from the rehabilitation camps of the neighbouring States pose problems which are different from those of the incoming refugee from East Bengal. They do not crowd around Sealdah. They start squatters' colonies in Calcutta's streets. They naturally cluster around Auckland House, the Ali-pore headquarters of Government's rehabilitation department. They ask for fresh loans. They do not get loans. But Government takes them back again to some rehabilitation centres within the State.

They reveal poignant signs of frustration and incompetence, even as they deepen the doubt whether Government will ever succeed in rehabilitating them. Unlike the Sindhis and Punjabis, the East Bengal refugee lacks adaptability. West Pakistan refugees can be found in all parts of India. They may not like the employment they get or the place they now live in. But they are not the grousing type. They somehow manage to fit into their new surroundings. The East Bengal refugees' incapacity to adapt themselves is the main obstacle to their rehabilitation.

East Bengal Exodus

It is not the resumed influx of these refugees which is now drawing attention to the refugee problem. There has been influx of refugees from East Bengal for the last few months. It began in July. In the second half of September the influx increased appreciably. Daily arrivals at Sealdah station averaged about seven hundred persons. The daily average continues at four hundred persons. Sealdah has, again, become a crowded railway terminus. Neither are these refugees too willing to go to Government relief centres.
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COMMUNITY. With the onset of depression, the economic disadvantages are felt acutely then by the minority community, the authoritarian regime in Eastern Pakistan is alleged to have connived at a policy of economic discrimination against East Bengal Hindus. In recent months, there have been many cancellations of licences and agencies in oil and petrol held by East Bengal Hindus. As the depression has deepened, there has been a tendency to pursue a more vigorous policy of economic discrimination against Hindus.

This is the broader politico-economic background against which the resumed exodus of East Bengal Hindus has to be viewed. It is clear that even after seven years of partition, the East Bengal Hindus do not feel economically secure in their homeland. It is this basic aspect of the problem which needs detailed investigation during the proposed joint tour of East Bengal by the Minority Ministers of India and Pakistan. But the resumed influx of East Bengal refugees into Calcutta is a fresh reminder of the need for Authority in this country to be prepared to deal with the refugee problem on a more permanent basis.

PROMPT ACTION NEEDED

Some months ago, New Delhi assured Calcutta that with the virtual completion of the problem of rehabilitation of West Pakistan refugees, its attention and resources would be concentrated on the problem of rehabilitating East Bengal refugees. In the third week of November, the Rehabilitation Ministers of West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Assam and Tripura will meet in a conference to discuss the problem of East Bengal refugees. Both the Union Rehabilitation Minister and his adviser will attend this conference.

They will meet not to formulate, but to implement, a plan for rehabilitating East Bengal refugees. Some months ago, a Committee of Ministers, composed of West Bengal's Chief Minister and the Union Ministers of Finance and Rehabilitation, examined the problem in detail. They recommended an outlay of Rs 32 crores for the current and the next two financial years on refugee rehabilitation? The forthcoming conference of Rehabilitation Ministers will formulate a plan for the phased implementation of the recommendations of the Committee of Ministers.

Rehabilitation of East Bengal refugees will not be easy. It will take time. It will not be completed or prove successful unless it is dovetailed into the West Bengal Government's plans for the encouragement of small townships and small-scale auxiliary industries. Even then, it is doubtful whether the problem can be solved satisfactorily without bringing about certain drastic changes in the social and occupational pattern of West Bengal. It would be futile to ignore the enormity of the task. But it would be equally suicidal to ignore the sinister implications of the problem. Like the displaced persons from West Pakistan, the East Bengal refugees will have to be settled and rehabilitated. Authority must assume this responsibility and discharge it with speed.
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