Durgapur Steel Plant

ONE is amazed at the Bengali's capacity of saying "no" to anything and everything. In Calcutta, even a polytechnic student is expected to be familiar with the modern trends in art and literature. But the Bengali has become polytechnic-conscious. He is in favour of rapid industrialisation. He is aware that West Bengal must industrialise or perish. But when the Government introduces a Bill for the industrial development of West Bengal, the Assembly debating it clause by clause; the people disapprove of the measure.

There was a time when the Government in West Bengal could evoke sympathy by insinuating New Delhi's apathy to the development of West Bengal. It is significant that Dr B C Roy, West Bengal's Chief Minister, has by his actions made similar insinuations without evoking much support of the people. Not the average Bengali, but Calcutta's Marwari industrialists seem to lend support to Dr Roy in his implied stand that New Delhi is obstructing his plans for the industrial development of West Bengal.

Nothing would please a Bengali more than the construction of the Ganga Barrage at Farakka, or the erection of a soda ash and of a coke oven plant at Durgapur, or a steel plant at Durgapur. All these projects are essential for the economic, agricultural and industrial progress of West Bengal. Recent developments indicate that the prospects for the Ganga Barrage at Farakka and for the steel plant at Durgapur are now better. But the average Bengali is not happy about the way in which these projects are being planned.

CHIEF MINISTER'S PLANS

Dr Roy is a tall person. He now rules West Bengal from the tallest building in Calcutta. He is surprisingly active and agile for his age. He has no following among the people or in the West Bengal Congress Party. But he manages to continue as the Chief Minister of the Congress Government in West Bengal because of lack of any effective, combined opposition from the various Congress groups. He dominates his Cabinet. He exploits the comfortable Congress majority in the Assembly to secure the sanction for the measures he formulates.

His plans look sensible on paper. There is no doubt about his ingenuity. When he finds New Delhi opposed to his plans, he replies that he will push his projects through with the help of resources mobilised from within the State. So, in spite of New Delhi's reported opposition, his Government invites international tenders for the coke oven plant at Durgapur; he introduces a Bill in the Assembly for forming a Corporation, with powers to raise loans and issue shares, to execute his grandiose projects.

"NO," THE PEOPLE SAY

His predecessor would not have pursued some of his tactics. But his predecessor could have evoked enthusiastic support from the people for the policies and schemes which Dr B C Roy now pursues without any popular support or backing. All this because Dr Roy is widely suspected as the most non-Bengali Bengali. His alleged association with the Marwari business community is the main reason behind his unpopularity. He is openly accused of selling West Bengal to the Marwaris. So, the average Bengali says "no" to whatever he does or proposes.

This explains why the report that plans are well under way for starting a steel plant at Durgapur by the Birlas, in combination with a British firm, has not evoked much enthusiasm in West Bengal. Yet, there was sincere disappointment throughout West Bengal when it became known that New Delhi had accepted Rourkella as the site for the third steel plant in preference to Durgapur. Here, it is necessary to put on record that there is more enthusiasm even for Dr B C Roy's plans for a coke oven plant at Durgapur than the Birla-British proposed steel combine at Durgapur.

THE BIRLA PROJECT

A team of Russian steel experts is now in New Delhi. These Russian experts are having discussions with their opposite numbers in India on the proposed second State-owned steel plant in this country. There are unconfirmed reports that this plant may be located somewhere in Madhya Pradesh. In Calcutta, New Delhi's decision to choose Rourkella in preference to Durgapur as the site for a steel plant is not endorsed fully. There is resentment in some circles that Durgapur is to be bypassed even for the second State-owned steel plant.

There is, at the same time, surprise that, if New Delhi is of the opinion that Durgapur is not a suitable location for a steel plant, how could the Government sanction the Birla-British proposal for erecting a steel plant at Durgapur? According to reports, this private steel concern, sponsored by the Birlas in combination with a British firm, will receive financial aid from the recently-formed Development Corporation. Although the Government is not directly concerned in providing financial help to the proposed Durgapur steel plant, the question is being asked as to how the Government could sanction the location at West Bengal while it is against starting a State-owned steel plant there.

DURGAPUR STEEL PLANT

Wider issues are involved in the reported plan for erecting a private steel plant at Durgapur. These issues relate to the problems of demarcation between private and public sectors of the economy. Far more intriguing is the joint public, and private enterprise in any single industry. But the average Bengali is not as much interested in these problems of mixed economy as in the fact that non-Bengali private interests are proposing to start a steel plant at Durgapur. He is in favour of a steel plant at Durgapur, But he would prefer such a project to the State-owned so that he can have the maximum scope and opportunities for employment.

To avoid any possible misunderstanding, it is necessary to add a footnote. One of the most vital objectives of a correspondent is to interpret the people about whom he is reporting. This page is devoted to analysing the socio-economic events and their reactions among the people in this Suite. It is this writer's concern, and aim, to discern the people's responses to such developments. Observations made here do not necessarily imply that this writer accepts the popular theories and arguments, or that he endorses the people's responses to socio-economic developments without question, or that the people's reactions are always right.
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