West Bengal—Bihar Merger
Hallahal follows Amrit!

(Contributed)

APART from yielding an ideological dividend in reversing the trend towards linguistic destruction of the nation, the proposal for the merger of Bengal and Bihar hailed so recently as constituting a new dawn of hope does not seem at first sight to have any particularly attractive features, and has been so assessed by the general public at least in Bengal. The widespread, if partial, acceptance of this idea e.g. by Punjab, Andhra etc., seems however to indicate that the above appraisal is somewhat unfair. The multi-purpose development of any region often requires one to transcend political frontiers, and when the regions are constituted like West Bengal and Bihar this necessity becomes the more compelling. As the slope of the country is from West to East, the rivers flow in that direction, so that while development projects can be sited only in Bihar much of the benefits e.g. those arising from flood control or irrigation can accrue only to West Bengal; even the demand for electricity at present arises largely in the latter area. Each State if separate can “beggar” its neighbour but only at the cost of beggaring itself. Joint projects, e.g. the D V C. function inefficiently due to the strains and stresses of compromise working, and individual works e.g. The Mayurakshi Project, which depended on the good-will of one party, left the other in the position of a suit for with its attendant bitterness and frustration, while Bihar in this instance felt it was being imposed upon in providing sites for schemes which were not of the slightest interest to her.

In the particular problem of West Bengal-Bihar there are two or three other features which impose union as the only solution. Thus the vast Gondwana mineral tract extends through the hearts of both States, and communications, labour administration, taxation policies, industrial operations, etc. have to be integrated for maximum efficiency. It will be recalled that some time ago there was a proposal for a centrally administered State for this area and the arguments in its favour should not be forgotten. In addition there is the problem of inter-State migration. Apart from those in the predominantly Bengali speaking border areas, there are thousands of Bengalis who have gone to Bihar in professions or services, while there are nearly a million Biharis in West Bengal working in the mills and factories. At present there is admittedly little tendency to discriminate against these migrants in either State, but if bitterness is allowed to grow unchecked till it ends in physical conflict, economic life could be paralysed, and much misery brought to thousands of innocent people. The Border difficulties, with inextricably mixed peoples and enclaves of linguistic groups, also impose union rather than separation.

Political Difficulties

Naturally merger will not be easy. A Purva Pradesh including these States as well as Orissa and Assam if formed might have been more attractive, as no particular group could be predominant, but in its absence, two serious difficulties from the point of view of the Bengalis emerge:

(a) The fear of being swamped by the Hindi speaking majority of Bihar.

(b) The fact that the Revenue per capita in West Bengal is double that of Bihar, so Union presupposes a subvention to the latter.

The average Bihari I think tends to fear that he will be swamped in the services and professions by the more educated Bengalis, in spite of Dr Sri Krishna Sinha’s assurance that he was prepared to hand over the four crores of Biharis into the great and able hands of Dr B. C. Roy without any safeguard. In addition, the main problem of Bihar being casteism, free influx of Bengalis might merely result in the establishment of yet one more clamouring group accentuating rather than reducing the problem. The apprehension of a subordinate alliance as in the pre-1911 days must have been dispelled by the fact of the Biharis as a whole should be debated by the Upper House only: a procedure for demarcating such

The above recital shows the inescapability of some sort of safeguards. The mere creation of two Regional Councils of Bengal and Bihar within the Union with their own Budgets and Administrations will be fruitless, as it might merely create two conflicting groups with no union worth the name. It would, in my opinion, be preferable to divide them into 5 or 6 regions, some of which at least would include areas from both States so that facing common and similar local problems, of purpose and joint endeavour could arise. Thus the North Bihar and North Bengal areas have very similar terrain and similar difficulties, while even the Maithili dialect of North Bihar is similar to that of Bengali. Union should certainly confer unity on this area. Central Bihar and Jharkhand would have to be separate and individual States. In the same way we could have two Bengali States Of say Calcutta and West Bengal, while a sixth comprising the industrial area from Jamshedpur to Durgapur could be a joint Bengali-Bihari one, like the first.

In this way there would be four sub-States which would be purely mono-linguistic and two which would be bilingual. The population of Bihar is certainly of the order of 40 millions and that of Bengal only 26, but as lies been shown in a recent pamphlet, with the expected influx of Hindus from East Pakistan, and allowing for the Bengali population now living in Bihar, it is probable that the disparity will be greatly reduced. If these sub-States are so formed as to have approximately equal population (of say 10 to 15 millions) one could have a Union Legislature with equal numbers of representatives from each which It might be hoped would tend to lessen the Bengali-Rihari difficulties. If this is not wholly agreed to, the States should have a Bicameral Legislature, in the Upper House of which at least, the number should be equalized. Any proposals which affect Bengalis or Biharis as a whole should be debated by the Upper House only: a procedure for demarcating such
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problems would also have to be agreed upon.

Regarding the financial problem one can imagine that apart from Calcutta City, the revenue arising in the rest of West Bengal must be more or less at the Bihar level. If so one could easily have a financial arrangement by which a subvention from State revenues would be given by Calcutta State to those carved out of the former West Bengal areas only, while Central finances could be similarly distributed on the basis of the actual expenditure in different areas at present. While this will certainly require analysis and study of facts the difficulties are by no means insuperable.

The Biharl's fear of being swamped in the services can be stilled by having a certain quota of local recruitment and certain local services. As a quid pro quo for the immense numbers of wage-earners in West Bengal some concessions might be necessary from Bihar, but with the spread of education there it is doubtful whether their fears really have any justification.

Certain statutory standing bodies, e.g. a Development Corporation for the Union as a whole, will have to be established. Thus it has been said that the allocations for the Second Five-Year Plan, as already made, will stand- This seems short-sighted; not only might the merger impose its own planning, but the third and the fourth Plans are yet unborn and linguistic patriotism must be guarded against even in those stages. If a Committee composed of say one representative of each State is formed, such difficulties will be probably minimized.

A three-tier State with numerous petty administrations might be considered both cumbrous and un-economic, but actually constitutes the simplest and most practical solution of our difficulties. Thus as the disputed areas will be mainly within the Joint sub-States of Mitnila or Industria, a decision on these can be avoided. The financial problem is also solved as Indicated earlier. Smaller groups e.g. the Tribes of Jharkhand can get an opportunity of ordering their own lives, while the splitting of Bengal and Bihar will inhibit any over-shadowing cultural conflicts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zones</th>
<th>Average Price of Food grains per seer.</th>
<th>Income of Industrial workers (Monthly)</th>
<th>Income of Agricultural workers (Annual)</th>
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<tr>
<td>North India U.P</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>83 1/9 Rs.</td>
<td>551 Rs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>East India Assam</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>96 3/8 (Gauhati)</td>
<td>601</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bihar</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>92 13.3 (Jamshedpur)</td>
<td>534</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orissa</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>59 12.8 (Berhampur)</td>
<td>340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Bengal</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>70 8/4 (Calcutta)</td>
<td>622</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All India</td>
<td>--</td>
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<td>447</td>
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*Average monthly wage in U.P.—Labour Gazette

The subjects to be assigned, and the revenues to be controlled at each level will require detailed consideration, but clearly items like Local Administration, Health, Education, Police etc. must be with the new sub-States. The Union should be chiefly concerned with development programmes, refugee rehabilitation, communications, etc. and will largely have to depend upon grants from the Centre and subventions from the sub-States, though certain heads of revenue e.g. Land Revenue, Forests, Stamps and Registration etc., in which by themselves the revenues arising in West Bengal and Bihar are approximately equal, might be assigned to it as well.

Economic and Cultural Conditions

It has been urged that with the Bengalis constituting a minority there is a danger of Bengali culture dying out. This merely shows a lack of vitality and self-confidence; Polish literature and culture survived centuries of partition and foreign rule. Moreover safeguards can be provided for this as well. Thus we can attempt to teach both languages in our schools; all children whose mother tongue was Bengali to learn as a second language, either Maithili or Hindi, at their preference, and vice versa, for say at least the first six years in school.

Education should be imparted in the language prevalent in the locality though of course denominational schools would be permitted but only under well recognised conditions. Three court languages viz., Hindi, Maithili and Bengali would also have to be recognised, and the local languages permitted in all matters in which regional languages are now used. In competitions for State services a certain minimum quota from each State could also be laid down, though of course a fair proportion should be filled by open competition.

With these safeguards one can well imagine that the Bengali culture will be enriched with the interaction of Hindi far from being impoverished- The latter which has borrowed much of Bengali even in the past should gain immesurably with its universalisation.

A more important difficulty is the economic one. Agricultural wages are considerably lower in Bihar, Orissa and U. P. than in West Bengal, so the mills and factories of Calcutta are manned from these areas only, and the pressure is sufficient to lower the industrial wage level there. The differential between local agricultural and industrial wage rates is too small to persuade the Bengali agriculturist to leave his fields for the factory, as will be seen from the table below. (Taken from 'The Ministry of Labour Agricultural Labour Enquiry Report on Intensive Survey of Agricultural Labour').

The Bengali agriculturist is not really more prosperous; prices are sufficiently high to equalize the level of real incomes, so unless some way of reserving occupations is found, industrialisation will bring no prosperity to West Bengal. As the forman or supervisory class is drawn ultimately from unskilled labour, middle class unemployment also will remain unaffected.
The possibilities of restrictions on non-Bengali labour must however be discounted. There are none today and any attempt to impose these in future would be retrograde, leading to great dissensions rather than unity. We may at best attempt to reserve a proportion of the supervisory posts in all industries for local inhabitants but this will have to be done cautiously. Obviously then, the merger will not by itself affect unemployment, but with the vast spread of development projects and consequent industrialisation that will become possible, one hopes there will be a gradual amelioration.

One of the basic conditions for the success of the scheme is the removal of any sense of antagonism among the peoples concerned. Apart from teaching the language of both groups to all, it is necessary to have a unified population as well, to some degree. It is therefore suggested that co-education should be introduced in all the schools as far as practicable and some sort of incentive to intermarriages between Bengalis and Biharis given. This need not necessarily take the form of cash prizes but encouragement can be given in other ways e.g. by easier entry into Government service for such persons. While details will have to be worked out the principle itself is not a matter of detail.

Above all it must be realised that there is no alternative, the scheme must succeed. Unlike in other nations, with our communal and linguistic and caste separatism, there is no tie of common blood amongst us, the unity imposed by a shared tradition and a common history is wearing thin, and as Bombay has just demonstrated, any moment this India that is Bharat might break up into a thousand fragments. An English poet wrote of the Soviet Union in 1922:

"Of the dark Past
A child is born.
With Joy & Fear
My heart is torn.
Still in his cradle
The Living lies.
May Love and Mercy,
Unclose his eyes
Shall we fail for want of a little
Idealism?"