

*Assam Disturbances: I**Bongal Kheda Again*

K C Chakravarti

THE recent unfortunate happenings in the Brahmaputra Valley (known as Assam Valley) of the State of Assam remind one of the Direct Action Day organised by the Muslim League regime in pre-Independence Bengal. The State Language agitation was started by job-seekers in Assam, and the force underlying the agitation is essentially economic. In the oil refinery at Gauhati many non-Assamiyas, not necessarily outsiders, are holding good positions. In the Brahmaputra bridge construction, under a private Indian firm, most of the engineers and technicians are non-Assamese. In the railways, which is an Indian Government enterprise, many Indians of non-Assamiya origin are employed. These non-Assamiya Indians in general and the Bengalis in particular are an eyesore to Assamiyas.

**NOT BIRDS OF PASSAGE**

Outside Assam, an Assamese is one who lives in Assam whatever may be his mother tongue. In Assam, however, Assamiyas or Assamese are those who speak Assamiya and live in the six districts of the Brahmaputra Valley. The non-Assamese are those natives of Assam who live in the remaining five districts of Assam and whose mother tongue is not Assamiya or Assamese. They include the Bengalis of Cachar and Goalpara, the Hindi-speaking tea plantation labourers and the hill people like the Khasis of Shillong. Besides these natives of Assam who are not birds of passage, there are many Bengalis, mostly from East Bengal who have settled in all the important towns of the Brahmaputra Valley. Some are displaced persons from East Bengal. Many of them have cleared jungles, opened up communications, started cultivation and rehabilitated themselves in the interior of the Brahmaputra Valley.

In the towns of Gauhati, Tezpur, Nowgong, Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia etc, almost half the population consists of Bengalis. They have their own clubs where Bengali plays are

staged. Many of them own cinema houses where Bengali pictures are shown. Bengali dailies from Calcutta enjoy a large circulation in these towns. In some of them Bengali schools are flourishing well. Many Bengalis are thriving as doctors, lawyers, teachers, clerks and occasionally as traders.

**DIRECTED AGAINST NON-ASSAMESE**

These Bengalis in general and the Bengali employees of the oil refinery at Gauhati in particular have of late become objects of hostility and humiliation. In the past they used to be jeered at and sometimes even assaulted and stabbed. The culprits, very often, would be students. They were being incited by Assamese job-seekers and protected by college and university authorities. The local police often felt helpless; and just before the language agitation started, the Inspector-General of Police had on one occasion to come with his police force from Shillong to arrest a student from the University area.

The word *Bongal* is used in a wide sense in Assam. It does not refer to Bengalis alone. It embraces all outsiders. The movement known as *Bongal Kheda* sponsored by Assamese job-seekers to drive out non-Assamese competitors, assumed the air of a dignified and respectable agitation when the Assam Sahitya Sabha demanded that Assamese must by law be made the exclusive State language for the entire territory of Assam. The Assamese people belonging to all shades of opinion, who love their mother tongue more than anything else like most other people in India, at once began to support the movement.

**CHALIHA'S MOVE OPPOSED**

Many of Chief Minister B P Chaliha's political and personal rivals knew that this could not be done but they supported the move knowing that Shri Chaliha would go down in prestige and popularity in the Assam Valley. The issue of the State language was discussed at a meeting of members of the As-

sembly Congress Party when all non-Assamese members opposed it. Before the matter came up for final decision by the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee, Shri Chaliha made an announcement in the Assembly, explaining why at this stage Assamese could not be made the State language. The stand taken by Shri Chaliha was bold and wise, but, as I had indicated in *The Economic Weekly* of May 7, 1960, it did not seem likely that Shri Chaliha would be able to control his followers for long, the forces against him being too strong.

To put pressure on Shri Chaliha, however, the agitators intensified the movement, and the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee eventually passed a resolution in favour of Assamese, non-Assamese members opposing it. As the non-Assamese areas of Assam began to protest, the agitators, backed by all sections of the Assamese public, resorted to violence and intimidation trying successfully to coerce the Chaliha Government to call an emergency session of the Assembly for introducing the Bill.

**ASSAMESE UNANIMOUS**

The way in which the agitation was organised reminds us of the Calcutta riots staged under Muslim League Government in the pre-Independence period. On the language issue, which practically aims at driving the Bengalis from the Assam Valley, all Assamese are unanimous. Congress and non-Congress leaders, politicians of all shades of opinion, Rightists, Leftists, Hindus, Muslims, poets, priests, men of letters, sober educationists, unruly students—all have wonderfully cooperated. The town of Gauhati was divided into a number of zones. Zonal leaders were stationed with their student followers in each zone. If the police entered one zone, the other zone would become active. In fact some Government officials too—Assamese and non-Assamese—have made their own contribution, each according to his capacity, either through active participation or through inaction.

The strongest opposition to the Assamese came from the Bengalis of Cachar and the hill people from the four Hill Districts of Assam. A conference of Bengalis and hill people, held at Silchar, vehemently protested against the Official Language Bill, but what is astonishing is that the Assamese did no violence to them. Victims of the Assamese violence were the Bengalis of the Brahmaputra Valley, not of Cachar and the Hill Districts. These Bengalis of the towns of Gauhati, Tezpur, Jorhat, Nowgong, Dibrugarh, etc. were living there for long and could he said to be well-settled. Knowing the Assamese language, they had openly and publicly lent their support to Assamese, Yet they were assaulted and stabbed, their houses burnt and their properties looted. Even their women were not spared. So, at bottom, it was really not the question of adopting Assamese as the State language. It was the old *Bongal Kheda* movement in a new form. The Bengalis living in the Assam Valley and thriving in various walks of life were to be driven out and their places taken by the Assamese.

**VIOLENCE NOT CHECKED**

The method adopted in all these acts of violence and intimidation was also like that of the pre-Independence Muslim League Government of Bengal. In the town of Gauhati as elsewhere, the Bengalis live in compact areas in large numbers. They are really not so helpless. Once the Assamese mob attacked them, they would ably defend themselves. When the attack was repulsed, the police would intervene. The Bengalis who defended themselves would be arrested. Section 144 and curfew would be imposed. When the Bengalis were attacked the police would remain inactive but when they repulsed the attack and became violent the police would become active. It is curious that when violent attacks were organised on a mass scale by the Assamese leaders, not a single Assamese was kept under detention!

There are Bengali officers and Bengali police but they are helpless, and they have been assaulted and stabbed. While Section 144 was in operation at Gauhati, a mob of some 100 persons entered the District Magistrate's bungalow, dragged him out and stabbed him. The

Deputy Inspector-General of Police who was there was also not spared. These two officers happened to be Bengalis. Instances of many other Bengali officers, including police authorities, being assaulted and stabbed have been reported. After this event, the police opened fire, and a student was killed. His body was allowed to be carried by bus from Gauhati to Sibsagar, a distance of about 200 miles. Along this long route excitement and violence prevailed unchecked. For a number of days law and order had completely broken down in the Assam Valley.

**STUDENTS MADE USE OF**

Bengali clubs and schools were burnt. At one place, the houses of some six hundred Bengalis in one compact area were looted and set fire to. It is difficult to believe that such large-scale violence could have been let loose without cooperation from various sections of the Assamese people, including the Assamese police.

In season and out of season political leaders, both Congress and non-Congress, advise students not to participate in active politics. Here on the language issue and in the drive

against Bengalis, the Assamese leaders made use of students without any scruple. Congress leaders of Cachar, who are opposing the adoption of Assamese, were also freely employing the students though not a single case of stabbing death or arson has been reported from Cachar,

**LIFE WILL BE INTOLERABLE**

The State Language agitation aims at two things. One is to squeeze out the non-Assamese from the Brahmaputra Valley. In this they will be successful. The Assamese sentiment being what it is, it likely that the non-Assamese will find life intolerable in the Assam Valley. To a non-Assamese postal clerk, railway station master or an employee of the Central Government, life in the Assam Valley, subject to hate and ridicule on all sides, will be worse than what it is in Pakistan. He can never feel that he is living in a State which forms part of India.

The second aim of the State Language agitation is to impose Assamese on the non-Assamese of the five districts of Assam. In this there will be no success. Even with the manipulation of census operations, the

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Assamese are only about 55 per cent of the total population. A State, according to the States Reorganisation Commission, can be regarded as unilingual if 70 per cent or more of the population speak one language. According to this principle, Assam cannot be unilingual.

To impose Assamese on the people of Cachar or of the four Hill Districts where, except for State Government employees no Assamese lives, will be

an insult and an act of force which will be vehemently opposed. The Bengalis of Cachar may be ignored but not the hill tribes. The Naga Hills District formed part of Assam but the people there have felt provoked to rise in revolt. There is no doubt that if similarly roused, the remaining four Hill Districts too will follow suit.

The Assamese feeling for their language is, however, extremely

strong, and they will not stop till they have made Assamese the official language, whatever the cost or consequence. In that case the Assamese who number some forty lakhs in all, and who live only in the six districts of the Brahmaputra or Assam Valley, will have to seek a separate State of their own,

Silchar,  
July 7.

## Assam Disturbances: II

# Tragedy of Political Tactlessness

P C Goswami

IN the present territory of Assam (excluding the Naga Hills) Assamese is the mother, tongue of about 57 per cent of the population. Among the minority language groups, the Bengalis account for about 19 per cent of the total population. Barring Cachar district, the Bengalis constitute only a small proportion of the population. Spoken Bengali of the Cachar district is as different from Bengali as it is from Assamese. There are scores of dissimilar tribal languages or dialects, but none of these is spoken by more than 5 per cent of the population. In certain hill districts, including the Naga Hills and the NEFA, Assamese is the principal or only medium of inter-tribal or inter-regional communication.

Much has been said about the reliability of the census figures of 1951. It is possible that the census figures of 1931 were cooked up under the guidance and active co-operation of Bengali officers who were at the helm of affairs at the district level at that time. If Bengalis outnumber the Assamese even in the Brahmaputra Valley, it is surprising that they are subject to violence from the Assamese! The question of the accuracy of the 1931 and 1951 census figures was considered by the States Reorganisation Commission, and more reliance was placed by it on the 1951 figures,

Bengali has been declared as the State Language for the Darjeeling District of West Bengal where it is spoken only by about 16 per cent of the population. So there should be no hesitation in declaring Assamese

as the State Language of Assam for fear of offending the people of Cachar and Hill Districts, particularly when adequate safeguards are provided for the minorities. If the present boundary of Assam stands in the way of giving the Assamese language its rightful status, it would be proper to change the boundary as has been done in other parts of India.

Although there has been a persistent demand from the Assamese public for recognition of Assamese as the State Language since 1950, those in authority tried to shelve the issue. The Congress Party tended to ignore the demand and others, to exploit the situation. Delay in deciding the issue caused frustration and anger among the Assamese and encouraged opposition from the non-Assamese, particularly Bengalis.

### UNWISE STATEMENT

The leader of the Opposition in the Assam Assembly moved a resolution in the last budget session for declaring Assamese as the State Language. Many Congressmen favoured the move. The resolution was talked out. Chief Minister Chaliha declared on the floor of the House on March 15, 1960 that the demand to make Assamese the State Language must come from the non-Assamese. This impractical and unwise statement was the cause of all the subsequent happenings in connection with the language agitation. Meetings and demonstrations were held all over the State either to support or oppose the claims of the Assamese language. Non-Assamese residents (including Bengalis) of the Brahmaputra Valley, where they are greatly outnumbered

by the Assamese, openly supported the cause of the Assamese. But in areas where the non-Assamese are in majority, (e.g. the Hill Districts, Cachar District and few railway towns like Lumding, Mariani) organised efforts were made to thwart the move. At all places students took the most active part.

The opposition to Assamese came mostly from the Bengalis who constitute the most vocal and educated section among the non-Assamese. Although most of the Hill Districts (except Mikir Hills) opposed Assamese and favoured English, their opposition was not so bitter. The Hill people, in general, did not organise any meetings or demonstrations to oppose the move, mainly because of the fact that they were more interested in achieving a separate hill state of their own than in frittering away their energies on the language controversy.

### CONCESSION TO MINORITY GROUPS

Owing to the pressure of public opinion, the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee had to adopt a resolution defining its polity. The Pradesh Congress Executive met in April last and decided that Assamese should be adopted as the State Language in the Brahmaputra Valley forthwith and that the *status quo* should be maintained in the rest of Assam. Assamese was to be adopted in Cachar and the Hill Districts only when the people there were prepared for it. The APCC resolution thus gave the maximum possible concession to the minority language groups.

In May 1960, Chief Minister Chaliha indicated that Government