

## BOOK REVIEW

ASSAM : The Difficult Years by T.S. Murty, New Delhi : Himalayan Books, 1983, xvi+293 pages, Rs. 150.

It is very difficult to review a book which is just presentation of events and developments around an issue within a specified time frame and the reader is asked to make up his/her own mind to draw his/her own conclusions. Normally such books give a boring reading in that most of the events/developments are covered by mass media as current news. Even opinion and personal predelictions therein are also focused in the mass media. But T.S. Murty's book, lengthy though, *Assam: the Difficult Years* seems to have obviated this boredom. The book is a detailed account of developments in Assam during 1979-82, the most turbulent period in Assam's history. The author sets out specific purpose and methodology for his book. The objective is to compile so much of scattered materials on Assam for future research. The compilation, according to the author is comprehensive and objective not to be found in an official white paper or a research study as such. The methodology is also to some extent non-conventional. He has attempted to put down the events as they are claimed to have happened by conflicting interest groups. The partisanness or the subjectiveness has not been edited away. The auother claims that the book is almost contemporary history of events as it happens.

As background, the author notes in the preface that the present work on Assam is only a part of a longer project, which is expected to deal with all the five states and two Union Territories of North East India during the post-Independence period.

The volume in 246 pages text contains eleven chapters arranged in chronological order dealing with convenient subperiods undre suitable titles. Chapter 1 covers the period April-December 1979 during which the signs of unrest among the Assamese students over,



among others, the alleged infiltration of foreign nationals, were becoming evident, these issues came to the limelight following the 1977 General Elections and 1978 Assembly elections which brought the Janata Party to power both at the centre and in some states including Assam. The chapter under the title Twilight of the Janata shows how a general movement for over all socio-economic development spearheaded by the Assam Students (All Assam Student Union-AASU) snow-balled into a serious political crisis as crisis within the Janata deepened in 1979. It is interesting to note that events as as narrated by the author, during this period presaged many subsequent events. For example, the Centre's insistence, albeit under a different regime, to go ahead with Mangaldai by-election in the face of stiff opposition from the students precipitated the crisis during this period as also did Mrs. Gandhi's insistence for holding the mid-February 1983 Assembly election lead to Guhapur and Nelhie massacres.

Chapter 2 under the title Getting Acquainted (January-March 1980) unfolds other interest groups in the crisis, on the one hand, and the initiation of bipartisan meeting between the Centre and the Agitation to get to know each others view, on the other. But as revealed in chapter 3, things no longer remain in their formative stage and attitudes and postures begin to crystallise over the period April-July 1980, during which the centre attempted at an administrative solution (in terms of tackling law and order situation). The Muslim minority even within the AASU backlash in reaction to AASU's apparently anti-Muslim postures and activities. It is during this period that AASU not only starts non-cooperation movement but also resorts to economic blockade against the Centre which paralysed the state administration and had severe implications for the Indian economy.

July-September 1980 (Chapter 4) seems to provide some breathing space in that agitation remain suspended, a joint proposal for initial talks between the Agitation leaders and the opposition leaders was made by Congress U, the Janata and the BJP. More importantly



mediation efforts were undertaken by a third party of Mr. Dorendra Singh, Chief Minister of Manipur. Through a series a mediation talks between Mr. Singh and the Agitators, it appeared that an agreement was in sight. But things in reality were taking a different directions. The author quotes different sources to show that either Mr. Dorendra Singh overstepped his briefing from the Centre or there was a communication gap between the two so that the agreement so far reached in principle soon collapsed and things had to be given a fresh start.

The next three months of September-November 1980 (Chapter 5) were characterized by the author as Talks and Turbulence. As many as eight rounds of talks took place between the Agitation leaders and the Centre side by side with agitation, sometime stepped up, sometime at a low key. The author in this chapter also sheds interesting insights into the difference of opinion between the moderates (AASU President and General Secretary) and the hardliners (younger AASU members and Assam Gana Sangram Parishad members) in point of stepping up of agitation. This period also witnessed *gheraoing* of Assam MLAs on the one hand and lifting oil blockade on the other.

Chapter 6 covers a relatively longer period of December 1980—June 1981 during which the first Congress (I) ministry of Syeda Anwara Taimur since the 1977 General election debacle, reigned over the crisis. The installation of the new popular ministry of Anwara Taimur was opposed and protested by the opposition parties in the form of no-confidence motion and cut motion on the budget in the Assembly, and by the AASU-AGSP in the form of non-cooperation and subsequently blockade of oil and other goods.

Chapter 7 covers the period, June 1981 to January 1982 during which President's rule was effective for the second time. The period was eventful in that long series of formal and informal meetings were held. The author quoting different official as well as private sources shows how one set of difference cropped up as another was somehow resolved. Agitation continued in the meantime in the form of road



blockade, travelling without tickets etc. Bilateral talks continued upto November 1981. Then on Centre's initiative and agitators' agreement, there was an agreement to tripartite talks involving the opposition leaders.

Chapter 8 entitled Keshab Gogoi Ministry covers the first quarter of 1982 which witnessed the end of a second round of President's rule, a series of inconclusive tripartite talks, fall of the Gogoi ministry to be followed by a third round of President's rule. The author takes pains to point out differing views as to why the Gogoi ministry collapsed.

April-July 1982 period (Chapter 9) has been characterised, rightly so, by the author as a period of Unquiet Wait. Tripartite talks were held in early April but they were not resumed until after more than four months. Nor did the Government follow up its decision to start detection and deportation of the so called illegal infiltrators either. On the agitation side too, there was a lull until June-July when it again became active. It is during this period that apprehensions were expressed from different quarters as to the likelihood of a constitutional impasse when third round of President's rule expired in March 1983.

A sense of urgency was observed among the parties involved during August-October 1982 (Chapter 10) as time was running out for finding an acceptable solution within March 1983 when election had to be held to avoid a constitutional impasse. The author narrates at length the factors that made the sense of urgency. At the same time, the author also laments a general lack of public awareness of this urgency of resolution of the problem. In any case, a sense of accommodation was observed during August-September 1982. The author is right in his observation that it appeared from the August, 25 resumed talks that a solution was nearer than ever. Agreement was reached on four major points including the principle that 1951-61 entrants in Assam would be regularised. But disagreement cropped up over the composition and mandate of the proposed tribunal, eligibility of voting and actual functioning of the tribunal with respect



to the election date. The Centre expressed categorically that it would go ahead with the election. The Centre also maintained that it would be an untenable proposition to seek the removal from electoral rolls of names of foreigners who had come across the border and settled in Assam before 1961-71 and became eligible for citizenship. The Government was prepared to go through the process of detection of foreigners and deleting their names for the electoral rolls but would not like to deny the right of voting to those who were eligible for citizenship. The agitation leaders, insisted on the other hand that identification was the primary task. They were willing to consider the matter of dispersal as open for further discussion but names of identified foreigners should be struck of the electoral rolls, the author narrates. This the Government not agree to and the meeting was adjourned till early October 1982.

October-December 1982 period (Chapter 11) was a period of confusion in that there were cautions optimism, renewed agitation, another two rounds of talks and Government's preparation with firm determination for holding Assembly elections in February 1983 side by side with attempts for constitutional amendments. The opposition claims they offered their cooperation for necessary constitutional amendments while the Centre alleged that such cooperation was not forthcoming in time. In the confused situation of Assam Government's calling the troops and Assam bandh called by the agitators, the proposed December 2, 1982 talks were cancelled paving way to renewed agitation in the face of government's continued preparations for election. Toward the conclusion of the Chapter, the author adds a postscript in which he rightly speculates that much of what would happen in the future would depend on what happened during mid-February 1983, the Centre fixed election dates. And what happened (not covered by the book) during mid-February was one of the ugliest bloodbath in North-East India's history.

The book, therefore, is a valuable document by itself with its comprehensive compilation of events in Assam during 1979-82. The minutest event or shade of opinion was not lost sight of the author. He quotes sources for narration of events and depiction of opinion.



Whatever has been said by somebody or whatever has been reported by some media has been compiled in the book to provide ingredients for historians. The documentation value of the book has been further enhanced by addition of a number of appendices on results of 1977 parliamentary election, 1978 assembly election, 1979-parliamentary by-election, 1980 parliamentary election, party position by names in Assam Assembly as of 12 March 1978, party position in Assam Assembly as of 14 December 1980, the Immigrants (Expulsion for Assam) Act 1950, PIP-scheme, Central Instruction on Immigrants and finally, Calendar of events of agitation from 8 June 1979 to 23 November 1982. Reprinting the relevant pages of the original Indian Constitution has made imaginative covers of the book.

The review would be incomplete if however certain short-comings of the book are not pointed out. In the first place, the book gives a truncated picture for 1979-82. Except for a two-and-half-page introduction, the book does not say anything on the genesis of the problem. Nor was it the objective of the book. But the interoductory remarks in Chapter 1 gives the impression that the crisis started all with the 1977 General Elections. History tells that similar crisis on foreigners' issue is not new in recent history of Assam. Similarly the accounts of events in the book ends with the first week of January 1983 when Assam was sitting on a powder keg exploding in mid-February 1983. Also judging by the subsequent events one may say that the difficult years were not over by 1982. And many more difficult years may lie ahead. Perhaps another volume would be warranted to cover the subsequent period. But it is diffucult to fore see how it would fit in the longer project sponsored by the Nehru Memorial Fund.

Finally a minor point. Though the author claims that he has tried to portray events as they have claimed to have had happened, at times it becomes difficult to trace the source of the statement and the readers become confused as to whether it is the author's or some one elses view. Barring these few points, the book is a praiseworthy contribution to contemporary history of Assam.