



ASSAM

The Difficult Years

A STUDY OF POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN 1979-83

T.S. MURTY



HIMALAYAN BOOKS
NEW DELHI

"When a thinker can boast that, whether wilfully or by Act of God (in an insurance company's usage of that phrase), he is unconscious of any plot, rhythm, or pattern in his panorama of the universe, he is telling us in effect that he is at the mercy of whatever pattern, rhythm or plot may be in invisible occupation of his professedly empty, swept, and garnished mental house."

—A.J. Toynbee in *Study of History*

"Historians who have become disgusted with the work of copying out other people's statements, and conscious of having brains, feel a laudable desire to use them, are often found satisfying this desire by inventing a system of pigeon-holes in which to arrange their learning. This is the origin of all those schemes and patterns into which history has again and again, with surprising docility, allowed itself to be forced."

—R.G. Collingwood in *The Idea of History* (1946)

"The man who has not communicated to his fellow human beings by publication or by private circulation, a story of past events, whether kinetic narrative or a static monograph, is not a historian. But the best historian is he who combines research with the telling of a story."

—G.J. Renier in *History—Its Purpose and Method* (1950)

"Philosophers are much readier to say what the historians ought to be doing than the historians are to say what they are doing. Historians are clearly the worse for that: I should not like to say how much worse, for there are other artists such as practitioners of the art of war, who are allowed to practise their arts without theorising about it. Perhaps the historians may have some of the same latitude."

—Richard Pares in *The Historian's Business* (1961)

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Preface

NEWS about north-east India or Assam rarely used to receive prominent coverage in national dailies. This has drastically changed during the last three years. Nowadays there is bound to be some news-item or other published concerning Assam, and the rest of the region, in every major Indian daily. The increase in coverage, however, is yet to be availed of by research scholars. If this is due to problems of technique and methodology, the problems have to be surmounted to the extent possible. Where they cannot be, one has to work within these limitations.

The necessity for a comprehensive and objective account that is academic in the non-pejorative sense of the word is there. Again, that necessity will not be diminished even if there is a White Paper on Assam. Butterfield holds that all forms of official history should be regarded with the greatest caution, critical alertness and unremitting scrutiny. Whether one does or not, a White Paper is never a substitute for a research worker of some experience giving a connected account of what happened. A research study is at the same time better than (because of its comprehensiveness), and weaker than (because no scholar can guarantee what he says is the last word, as every White Paper must claim) the account the Government publishes. The White Paper will be more accurate, while dealing with the correspondence or discussions behind closed doors, but there are a number of other things which it will not be referring to. For instance, the tussle that takes place between politicians, the jockeying for power which precedes the installation of a popular Ministry, problems regarding electoral rolls, aliens, support or lack of support to the movement by a particular section at a particular period, are all unlikely to be dealt with in a Government publication.

What is happening in Assam can have effects other than strategy and security, serious as they are; or even oil production and forest produce. The question of East Bengali immigrants into Assam is not peculiar to Assam and similar situations exist elsewhere in India. What is happening in the Brahmaputra Valley can have influence on the persons who have left for Occupied Kashmir now trying to come back; or even Tamilians leaving Sri Lanka, and Indians leaving East Africa.

The few books and booklets that have been published on recent happenings in Assam are useful; but a person who reads them feels impelled

irresistibly to a particular conclusion; and the fact that the writer wants him to come to that conclusion, is evident from the beginning itself. What I am attempting in the following pages has a different purpose and methodology. The reader is asked to make up his own mind. The account is factual, and as objective as one can make it. It is not pro-AASU, it is not pro-AGSP, it is not pro-Assam Government, nor pro-Union Government. The book is not an exposé either. There is no giving out of any startling new items of information; no writing down of gossip or rumour. No key-holes have been peeped through, nor what the butler saw listened to. It is history as available to the public and not history which is also secret history. What has been drawn on is public knowledge, and practically all of it is fairly easily available to an experienced research worker.

Statistics regarding infiltration have not been given; lacking the material and perhaps the will also to do so. Dr. Roy Burman had made an educative study of it. His conclusion is that substantial immigration has taken place; though the numbers may not be as large as are claimed by some, or as small as are claimed by others. Even accepting that empirical functionalism has to have statistics to explain suicide, I have not found any statistics which I would have been happy to say I had verified and whose approximate validity I could establish. As and when statistics appear as part of the narrative, they have not been omitted either.

The bibliography is a 'select' one. The few books which have appeared on the Assam agitation that are well-known have been included. Apart from books, there have been a very large number of articles in various magazines and journals, the *Assam Tribune* and the national dailies.

A final word of caution. In this account of developments during 1979-82, I have chosen in places to put down the events as they are claimed to have happened. While doing so, the partisanship or the subjectiveness has not been edited away or paraphrased out. If there are references to 'police atrocities', it is what the AASU has said; and if Bengalis are reported 'driven out', it is what official sources in West Bengal claim. The agitation leaders 'carrying on with the agitation for agitation's sake' or a 'foreign hand being found involved' is what Government spokesmen claimed on occasions. They have not been toned down or deleted. They are also history. That such opinions were expressed, is a part of what happened; and that they had to say so, will be a help in our getting needed insights.

The Difficult Years is almost contemporary history and contemporary history will not have the logic, the neatness in understanding, the conformity to patterns, that the passage of years gives to things. Motives, forces which may or may not have existed and of which the actors in a particular course of history were unaware, can be attributed or tagged on; when a scholar deals with a particular period of time, after having the benefit of hind sight. But, what we know about medieval England is based on the Holinshed chronicles. Much of what we know about the Mughals is dependent on the

Akbar nama, *Babar nama* or *Alamghir nama*, as the case may be. If they did not record what was happening around them, we would be knowing much less now of what did happen. In fact, I would put it differently and say that if Churchill did not write the history of the Second World War when he did; it might not be possible to write such a book now even if there was another Churchill who was alive and fit enough to undertake the stupendous task.

The present work on Assam is only a part of a larger project, which hopes to deal with all the five States and two Union Territories of north-east India during the post-Independence period. The Nehru Memorial Fund are helping me to undertake this overall study of the region. I am grateful to them. In addition, I have to acknowledge the help received from R.N. Duggal, R.L. Standefer, K. Bhaskara Rao, Sreedhar Rao, R. Yusuf Ali, Ravindra Babu, as well as the ICWA library and the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses. Neither the Nehru Memorial Fund nor the others referred to have any responsibility for the opinions expressed or the data incorporated in the present work.

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T.S. MURTY

Introduction

ASSAM has an area of over 78,500 sq km. The 1971 census gives its population as 14.6 million. As of now, the State is bounded by West Bengal, Arunachal, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura. To the north, the State has a common boundary with Bhutan, while part of the Assamese districts of Goalpara and Cachar adjoin Bangladesh. The State now comprises the districts of Goalpara, Nowgong, North Lakhimpur, Kamrup, Sibsagar and Dibrugarh, all in the Brahmaputra Valley proper; as well as Karbi Anglong, North Cachar and Cachar farther on. The capital earlier used to be at Shillong (now in Meghalaya), but was shifted to Dispur, a suburb of Gauhati, after Meghalaya separated from Assam in 1972. The overwhelmingly large part of the population is plainsmen, mostly Hindu and Vaishnavite. There is a substantial Muslim minority. Goalpara district has a large Bengali-speaking population, while Cachar is almost entirely Bengali-speaking. The tribal-inhabited areas are located mainly in Karbi Anglong and North Cachar. Except in Cachar, Assamese is the language most widely spoken. The language has a number of words of Sanskrit origin and currently uses a script identical with the Bengali script.

† Ancient Assam figures prominently in early Sanskrit works as Kamarupa. Towards the end of the 13th century, Assam was conquered by the Ahom, a people generally regarded as having migrated from the present Thailand. After they came to Assam and settled down there, the Ahom were converted to Hinduism. Assam was briefly under Burmese occupation at the beginning of the 19th century. The East India Company drove the Burmese out and after the conclusion of the 1826 Treaty of Yandabo, incorporated Assam in the Company's territories. Assam was twice amalgamated in Bengal, by the British. However, on both occasions, it proved unworkable and the area reverted to being a separate province.

Right from the 19th century onwards, there has been a steady influx of immigrants from Bengal into Assam, and the total number of persons of Bengali origin now in the State is variously estimated as from a quarter to a half of the total population. Assam has had very little of communal trouble, in the sense of friction between Hindus and Muslims. However, there have been a large number of occasions when clashes occurred between Bengalis and Assamese.

At the time of Independence, Assam included what are now the Union Territories of Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram and the States of Nagaland and Meghalaya. In fact, prior to the partition Assam was even bigger; a substantial chunk of the province having gone to East Pakistan in 1947.

Since Independence, Assam has produced several persons who have made their mark outside the State, including at the national level. F.A. Ahmed was President of India. D.K. Barooah was President of the undivided Congress Party. Bishnuram Medhi was Governor of Tamilnadu and M.M. Choudhury Governor of Punjab. M. Haq Choudhury, Renuka Barkataki, Bipinpal Das and Bedabrata Barua were members of the Central Council of Ministers, as N.R. Laskar is now. Among administrators, U.N. Sharma was Chief Secretary of Himachal Pradesh, while D.N. Barua is now Chief Secretary of Manipur. S.K. Datta was a Secretary to the Government of India. More recently, Biren Kumar Bhattacharya has been the recipient of the Jnanapeeth award, while Bahar ul-Islam is a Judge of the Supreme Court. S.K. Bhuyan was an authority on the history of north-east India, as is H.K. Barpunjari now. Bhupen Hazarika's contributions in the film field are known.

Assam had been ruled uninterruptedly by the Congress, from Independence upto 1978. The Chief Ministers were Gopinath Bardoloi, Bishnuram Medhi, B.P. Chaliha, M.M. Choudhury and finally S.C. Sinha. The Congress lost the 1978 Assembly elections. Since then, the State has had a Janata Government under Golap Borbora, a short-lived Assam Janata Dal Ministry headed by J.N. Hazarika, a long spell of President's rule, then a short-lived Congress Ministry headed by S.A. Taimur, another period of President's rule and a second short-lived Congress Ministry under K.C. Gogoi. From March '82 onwards, Assam has been under President's rule.

During the period 1973 to 1981, Mr. L.P. Singh was Governor of Assam and concurrently Governor of Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura and Meghalaya. As Governor of north-eastern States, he was the Chairman of the North-eastern Council, a co-ordinating body for all the States and Union Territories of north-east India. In August '81, this arrangement of a common Governor for all the five States was given up. Instead, there is now one Governor for Assam-Meghalaya and another for the remaining three States. The present Governor of Assam and Meghalaya is Mr. P. Mehrotra.

The premier educational institution in Assam is the Gauhati University. There are two other Universities, the Dibrugarh University and the Agricultural University at Jorhat. For the region as a whole, there is the North-east Hill University located at Shillong.

The student community in Assam has played a leading role in several of the mass movements that Assam went through since Independence; and the present anti-foreign nationals agitation is spearheaded by the All Assam Students Union, popularly referred to as AASU. Apart from AASU, the other participants in the negotiations between the Union Ministry of Home

Affairs and the agitation leaders is the Assam Gana Sangram Parishad, often known as AGSP. The Parishad is the Co-ordinating Committee for the various organisations which support the agitation. The Assam Sahitya Sabha, to which practically all the notable figures among the Assamese intelligentsia belong, is a prominent member of AGSP.

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