

**CONDEMN INDIAN ARMY FOR RAPING
OUR MOTHERS AND SISTERS IN ASSAM**

Graffiti near the Deputy Commissioner's office in Gauhati: severe alienation

ASSAM AND THE NORTH-EAST

The Danger Of Secession

GET out Indian dogs," reads the terse message on a public wall at Dibrugarh, the bustling town in upper Assam hemmed in by miles and miles of tea gardens. On board the Fokker Friendship from Jorhat to Tezpur, another tea town on the north bank of the swirling Brahmaputra, a passenger looks below at the valley's chequerboard through the dusty afternoon haze, and murmurs something about the "eighteenth war of Independence".

The traveller was referring to the 17 successive invasions carried out into Assam by the Mughals, all of which were repulsed by Lachit Borphukan, the legendary general of the Ahom kings of Assam. Lachit is the name that still electrifies the masses. Holding

Lachit's banner aloft, the state currently fights its "eighteenth war" against "invading" foreigners.

While the majority of the Assamese people still consider themselves to be Indians, ambitious politicians steer the course of the five-month-long movement against "foreigners" dangerously close to secessionism. On August 15, the national flag was burnt at public places in several towns of the state. On January 26, Assam's citizens boycotted all official celebrations and assembled instead at streetcorners to fly atop the same mast as the tricolour, the colour of the All Assam Students' Union (Aasu). The Aasu, which is spearheading the present movement, has on its flag a green contour map of Assam with a mailed fist thrown in.

Frenzy: As hatred and resentment smoulder like a slow fire along the 470-mile-long course of the Brahmaputra, most other parts of north-eastern India (total area: 2,55,000 sq km) are rocked by an anti-Indian frenzy (INDIA TODAY, Dec 16-31, 1979).

In Meghalaya (area: 22,000 sq km), about 2,000 refugees, mostly Bengali-speaking, are still sheltered in protected camps at Shillong, the hill-state's picturesque capital. The town, famous for its beautiful women, bracing climate and good bars, is now a pale ghost of its past. At the gorgeous Pinewood Hotel, rows upon rows of vacant suites fill the heart of the chance tourist with gothic visions. Down the slope, in the colourful Laitumukhra area, charred re-



mains of houses belonging to the Bengali-speaking minorities bear witness to the traditionally hospitable Khasi people's new xenophobia.

In Manipur (area: 22,000 sq km), the Meitei plainsmen living in the state's central valley have been agitating for succession since long. Their China-trained People's Liberation Army, along with a less-politicised urban guerrilla band, has claimed 40 lives during the past six months. In Mizoram, fresh reports of illegal collection of taxes by the outlawed Mizo National Front have been reaching the Union Government.

In Nagaland, two Maoist rebels, T. Muivah and Izec Swu, have regained complete control over the underground Naga Federal Government and have begun a new recruitment drive among the Naga youth from their camps across the Indo-Burma border. In spite of repeated requests, the Burmese authorities have failed to arrange for frequent patrolling of the area.

Parleys: With the lilliputians getting at its limbs, the Indian Government, like

Lemuel Gulliver of Swift's fantasy, is slowly waking up to the persistent pinpricks on its north-eastern flank. Last month, Mrs Gandhi sent her one-man army, Yashpal Kapoor, to Assam in what turned out to be a major breakthrough. Kapoor, who humoured the militant students like an indulgent uncle, brought them to Delhi and had them closeted with Mrs Gandhi for talks.

In Delhi, the students, led by Prafulla Mohanto, the bearded president of Aasu, basked in self-glory as they insisted on speaking to Mrs Gandhi in Assamese and used an interpreter. Spurning an invitation to visit Raj Ghat to place a wreath at the memorial of Mahatma Gandhi, a student leader snapped at Kapoor: "Have we come here on a picnic?" Back in Gauhati, they addressed a press conference to reaffirm that the agitation would continue.

The one crore Assamese-speaking people of Assam (estimated population: 1.89 crore) are currently engaged in a grim struggle to weed out 50 lakh "infiltrators" who originally came from Bangladesh and Nepal. The "infiltrators", 90 per cent of whom speak Bengali, are allegedly threatening the political and cultural existence of the Assamese people.

Unimpressed by the logic of all the past bilateral agreements between Delhi and Dacca, undeterred by the dangerous possibility of creating about 50 lakh stateless persons in a powder-keg world situation, the leaders of the "Assam movement" are determined not only to go ahead with their agitation but to spread the flames all over the north-east.

Alienation: The extreme geographical alienation of the region from the rest of the country is significant. It takes over 46 hours and a change-over from broad-gauge to metre-gauge to cover by rail the 1,928-km distance between New Delhi and Gauhati, Assam's capital. There is no direct air-link between the two cities, and the air fare is a staggering Rs 871. From Delhi, the "seven sisters" look alike in one mental blur.

The alienation is now complete, working both ways. The movement for deportation of "foreign infiltrators", raging for five months now, has become the convenient peg on which to hang all syndromes of this alienation. The Centre's perplexity over the Assamese demand is being interpreted as its apathy. The seemingly polite exhortation: "Assamise yourself if you want to live in Assam," is now commonplace.

THE Assam movement is a revolution by consent where almost the entire society seems to be up in arms. The secretaries belonging to the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) send their wives and children to picket and court arrest. The Assamese-speaking resident manager of the joint sector Oil India Limited says he would have been "the first to court arrest" if he were free to do so. The suave but emotionally

high-strung co-proprietor of the state's biggest newspaper chain, *Assam Tribune* (aggregate daily circulation: 94,000), Pradip Barua, 36, says his blood "boils". Bhupen Hazarika, the famous singer, sings hymns in praise of the movement. Deepa Hazarika, 43, the stunningly beautiful proprietress of Assam's largest travel agency, rues the loss of business following the movement but says she does not mind it "as an Assamese".

Flashpoint: Observes a senior non-Assamese bureaucrat in the Assam Government: "On the surface, the agitation looks peaceful because there is no resistance within the state. The administration has turned into jelly, the party politicians have developed cold feet. You're up against an entire society, like the anti-Hindi agitation in Tamil Nadu or the movement in Telangana. It's not a problem that can be solved by men in khaki."

The movement reached its flashpoint when armed hordes in trucks and buses and on foot went about setting houses on fire and killing people at the two sub-divisions of Nalbari and Barpeta in Kamrup district for three days between January 5 and 7. On January 18, police opened fire on an unlawful assembly in front of Oil India's main office at Duliajan, 45 km from Dibrugarh in Upper Assam. Four persons were killed. Within 30 minutes, Robi Mitra, the Bengali-speaking geologist who was in charge of the office that day, was decoyed out of house and pelted to death.

According to Assam's Chief Secretary, R. Paramshivam, 40 people were killed in mob violence at Nalbari and Barpeta. One of them was a Central Reserve Police constable and another was an Assamese Hindu boy, while 25 of the victims were Bengali Muslims and 13 Bengali Hindus. "The figures speak for who is fighting whom in Assam," observed a non-Assamese non-Bengali police official.

But the leaders of the movement think otherwise. "Ours is a patriotic, peaceful and non-violent movement," pompously asserts student leader Mohanto.

Aasu claims to represent 75 per cent of Assam's 13 lakh school and college students including children at the primary level. Girin Barua, the president of Asom Jatiyotabadi Dal, promptly attributes all cases of arson and rioting to nebulous, ill-defined "anti-Assam" forces trying to "divert attention". Dr Jogeswar Mohanto, the Assamese principal of Gauhati Medical College and a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons, Edinburgh, bends over backward to "prove" that a Bengali doctor clubbed to death within hospital premises on December 12 was the victim of a crime of passion.

The word "*bahiragat*" (foreigner) is a stigma that each Bengali living in Assam carries on his head. He has to prove his nationality by producing an Indian Citizenship Certificate (ICC), a re-

quirement which may catch unaware most Indians including ministers, judges and senior bureaucrats. There are dark hints thrown that 25 per cent of the staff in the state's secretariat are "foreigners". The Aasu calculates, and the overwhelming majority of the Assamese gentry devoutly believes, that every fourth man in Assam is a "foreigner" and, therefore, needs to be deported.

While the students, who really represent the tip of Assam's iceberg of resentment, are still ready to reason it out with the Centre, the elders are not. The movement is organised under a steering body called the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (Aagsp), comprising 11 constituents of which Aasu is but one.

Said Nibaran Bora, 59, the president of the most strident member-group of Aagsp, Purbanchaliya Lok Parishad: "We want to put pressure on Mrs Gandhi to rescind her two agreements with the Dacca regime in 1971 and 1974. We know Bangladesh is not going to kiss these people as they walk back. In fact, President Zia-ur-Rahman might call in the Chinese, or the Americans, if pushed to the wall. With the Soviets already in the saddle in Afghanistan, this might provide an excellent plea to the Sino-American axis to open another front. But we've no option. This is a matter of survival."

The "Cause": The movement has strong sentimental overtones fostered by a massive turnout of women. Teenage girls squat on railway tracks alongside boys in front of oil refineries throughout night. The entire



Angry women picket oil installation

state performs mourning rites for the four Assamese killed in police firing at Duliajan. In Dibrugarh, car-owners get their number plates written in Assamese character instead of the Roman if they wish to save their windshield from being smashed to pieces.

Its other manifestation is a hysterical obsession with the "cause." During January, the *Assam Tribune* spent 75 per cent of

its front-page space on news of the movement. At clubs and private parties, all conversation ultimately leads to the "happenings." The people remain unperturbed even though diesel stocks dry up, kerosene disappears, classes are not held, mail and telegrams do not reach their destinations. "The same thing happened in 1942," said Nilim Barua, 20, economics student at Cotton College, with touching simplicity.

As days go by, more and more people are getting involved in the movement. Nearly all Assamese members of the state Government staff (number: 1,06,660) sympathise with the movement.

Equally impressive is the identification of the Central Government employees, the transport operators, and employees in coal, oil and the miniscule engineering industry. The students have lost an academic session in the state's engineering and medical colleges. Says Navakanta Barua, an Assamese poet who teaches English literature at Cotton College: "During these enforced holidays, I'm only trying to translate Push' in —another anguished soul."

Fuel Shortage: The ^{harsh} spin-off from the movement is the fuel crisis that has gripped the entire north-east. This is caused by picketing at vital points along the 710-mile-long pipeline that carries Assam's annual yield of 4.6 million tonnes of crude oil from the upper Brahmaputra valley to Barauni in Bihar.

The picketing, which goes on round the clock, has mainly stopped the outflow of crude from the pumping station at

ECONOMY

The Sick Sisters

INDIA's seven north-eastern states resemble, economically, a chronically ill patient who leaves the doctor scratching his head. The transfusion of Rs 6,000 crore as assistance from the Centre into this region since Independence has failed to have the desired effect. During 1978-79 alone, the Centre poured Rs 500 crore into these states.

In spite of this, six out of 10 families in Assam, and every second family in Meghalaya, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, Manipur and Nagaland lives below the poverty line as against the nationwide average of four families. While this region produces over 60 per cent of the country's tea and over 35 per cent of its oil, it also imports over 80 per cent of its food, clothing, heavy and light machinery for small-scale industries from other states.

As regards industry, this corner of the country presents a sorry figure. It has only 21 large and medium-scale industrial units—and of these, eight are under construction—

out of over 15,000 throughout the country. Though labour is cheap and coal plenty—coal reserves: 927 million tonnes—even small-scale entrepreneurs have stayed away. Total investment in 1,75,000 small-scale industrial units in India is Rs 1,200 crore. The north-east's score: 3,000 units with an investment of a paltry Rs 15 crore.

Agricultural Backwardness: The gross factory output per worker is also hopelessly low. At Rs 305 per annum, it compares unfavourably with Punjab's Rs 2,000 plus, Maharashtra's Rs 2,200, and a national average of over Rs 1,200. Moreover, only 4 per cent of the region's 2.96-crore population is engaged in industry. The national figure in this regard is 20 per cent.

In the field of agriculture the situation is no better. Assam, with 18 per cent of its cropped area under irrigation, accounts for only 2 per cent of the nation's foodgrains production. The share of the other six states is less than 7.5 per cent. The green revolution too seems to have left the region

untouched. Between 1971 and 1977, the per acre yield of food grains rose by over 18 per cent nationwide but it increased by only 10 per cent in the north-east. Fertiliser consumption per hectare of cropped area here is a mere 3 kg—a tenth of the Indian average—as against over 100 kg in Haryana and Punjab.

The development of agriculture and industry at snail's pace has naturally had its effect on the per capita income. Not one of these states figures in the list of top 10 states in India as regards per capita income. With a per capita income of Rs 852 per annum (at current prices) Assam, the largest state in the region, is placed well near the tail-end of the list.

Infrastructure: The growth of per capita income has also been lower than the national average. While the Indian's per capita income increased by over 315 per cent (at current prices) between 1961 and 1980, the north-east registered an increase of only 260 per cent. Moreover, the Gross Domestic Product of the region during this period rose by only 2 per cent—half the national growth rate.

In the absence of any major rise in the incomes, trade and commerce have also failed to take off. This has led to a limited

Narengi, six km from Gauhati, and transportation of finished products from neighbouring Noonmati, where a refinery is located. The picketers, apparently guided by employees of both Oil India Limited and the Indian Oil Corporation, show remarkable skill in identifying the key valves that guide the flow.

THE action, instead of punishing the rest of the country, has merely boomeranged on the north-eastern states. This is because Assam crude accounts for only an eighth of the crude oil that the country guzzles. At Imphal in Manipur, petrol was selling at the blackmarket price of Rs 12 a litre. The power plant (110 MW) at Namrup in upper Assam had to shut down production as there was no supply of natural gas from Duliajan oilfields. In Gauhati, each public bus is allotted only 10 litres of diesel in a day.

There is a general sense of dislocation all around, affecting social life at all levels. The lifestyle of the *koi hai* crowd of tea planters has also run into trouble. Faced with local opposition, club meets were

cancelled this year at the 20 planters' clubs in the Brahmaputra valley. At Boroi Club in Darrang district, the New Year's Eve party was interrupted by a group of students who demanded the disco session to be stopped "in view of the current situation."

Population Rise: However, there is an undeniable element of immigration into Assam from across the Bangladesh border. During 1971-80, the north-eastern region's population rose by 29 per cent and Assam's by 31.5 per cent while the country's population marked a mere 18 per cent increase. Many of those who had crossed into India during the liberation struggle in Bangladesh never returned. A small percentage of those who had been deported moved back into Assam, like the proverbial bad penny, after securing back-dated citizenship certificates through bribery from the Cooch Behar district of West Bengal.

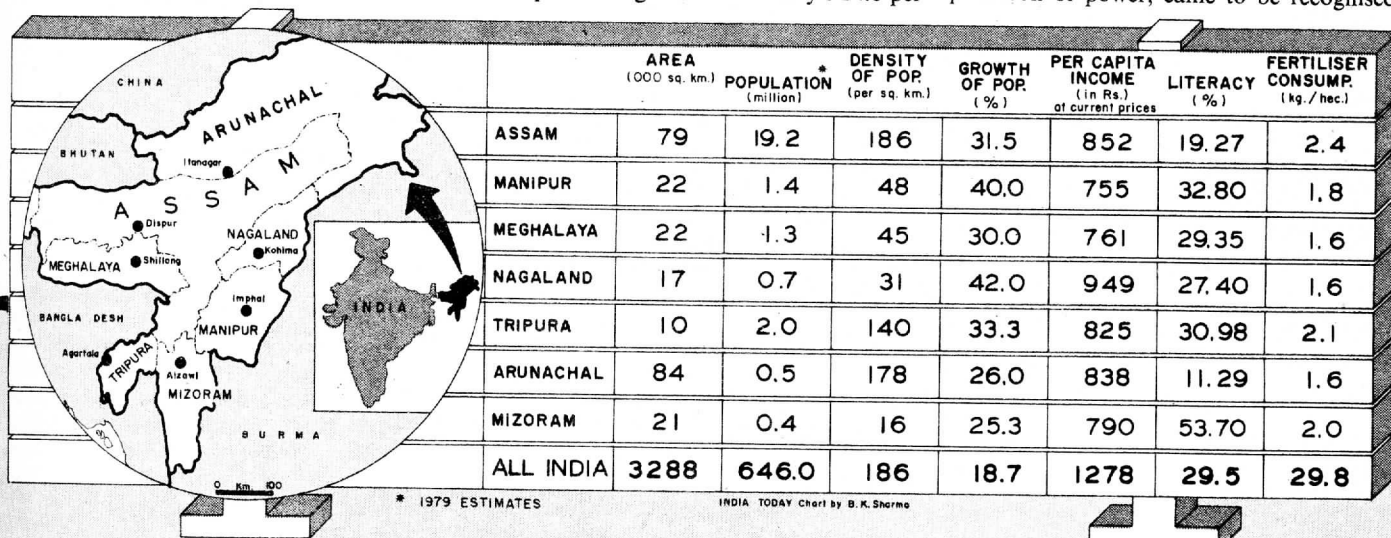
But immigration into Assam during the seventies was certainly not as extensive as that during the earlier decade when the state's population took off at a sharp speed of 35 per cent against the country's 24.8 per

cent. A part of it was later legalised by the Indira-Mujib agreement which provided that Indian citizenship could be granted to immigrants from former East Pakistan if they had come in before March 25, 1971, and took residence in India for at least six months.

However, those who had come into India before July 26, 1949, automatically became Indian citizens. Those who had entered the country between that date and March 25, 1971, were not entitled to it automatically but could get it as a privilege.

In fact, very few of the immigrants before 1971 bothered to secure citizenship certificates. Lured by the prospect of land, hounded by communal violence back in East Pakistan, they came in thousands through Assam's southernmost district of Cachar and easternmost district of Goalpara. The politicians in power did not object as the immigrants voted en bloc for the Congress.

Political Factor: Assam, which sent many leaders to occupy places in Delhi's pantheon of power, came to be recognised



employment potential and too many youths with time on their hands and no jobs. Of the two lakh unemployed registered with the employment exchanges in the region only 7,000 could find jobs in 1977-78. In effect, only 4 per cent of the unemployed could find work. The corresponding figure for the country in this year was over 13 per cent.

The communication, transport and banking facilities are also meagre. Forty per cent of India's villages are electrified; but in the north-east when darkness falls, electric lights go on in only 10 per cent of the villages. These states account for over 7.5 per cent of the country's area, but only 2,200 km of 60,000 km of railway lines have been laid out here. As far as banking facilities go, the region has only one branch for a population of 32,000, as against an Indian average of one branch for 20,000 people.

Fixing Responsibility: Central Govern-

ment officials disown any responsibility for the region's backwardness. "What more can we do?" asks a senior official in the Finance Ministry. "The Centre provides 60 paise out of every rupee of government expenditure in these states."

Officials in New Delhi point out that the local administrations have not been able to chalk out any viable strategy for economic development. Also, the state governments have failed to mobilise their internal revenue. This now accounts for only 25 per cent of Assam's annual plan outlay and only 10 per cent of the annual plan outlays of Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Meghalaya. In Uttar Pradesh and Bihar—both of which are also not too well off—the percentage of internal resources exceeds 60 per cent of the state Government's expenditure. The Central Government's outstanding loans to all the seven states stood at over Rs 1,000 crore in 1977-78.

But leaders of the north-east region accuse the Central Government of ignoring what they feel is their rightful claim. Instead of putting up large-scale processing units for oil and tea in their region, they point out, these heavy industries have been installed in other states—Bihar and West Bengal. Says an Assamese academic: "Sure, we do receive 75 per cent of the finance for the annual plans from the Central Government. But we also spend 80 per cent of our incomes on products imported from outside. While the Central Government has made about 20 per cent of its investment in Maharashtra and Gujarat, we in the north-east have received barely 5 per cent of it."

While the states and the Centre argue over who is responsible for the region's poverty the people are not getting any richer. And the current agitation cannot be expected to help things either.

—PRABHU CHAWLA



Students spell out their message: Assam for Assamese



Mrs Gandhi and Home Minister Zail Singh with students: one minute's silence

as a bastion of the Congress largely through these votes. Drawing endless cheques upon these "vote banks," Devkant Borooah, the former Congress president, once gratefully alliterated a paean of praise to "Ali, Coolie, Bangalee, *nak chepta Nepali*" (Ali: the Muslim; Coolie: the Bihari tea garden labourer; Bangalee: the Bengali Hindu who is too frightened to alienate the ruling party; *nak chepta Nepali*: the snub-nosed Nepali who occupied forest land).

The immigrants were not resented as long as they swam with the current. However, in 1978, they showed the first sign of going against it. The Congress was defeated. The Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), which had never won a single seat in the past, bagged as many as 11. Other Left parties bagged 13 seats. The 126-strong Assembly witnessed for the first time as many as 34 Muslim members.

While the traditional Congress politics of Assam suffered a rude jolt the Janata euphoria too did not last long. The Marxist consolidation in neighbouring Tripura and West Bengal, and persistent inroads made by the CPI-M-controlled Centre of Indian Trade Unions (Citu) in the tea gardens bred in the mind of Assam's political elite a siege mentality. Twirling his goatee, Hiren Gohain, the Marxist academician of Gauhati University contemptuously said: "The name of Jyoti Basu is the ultimate red rag to the Assamese bull."

THE earliest sparks that stoked the the present fire were seen in Gauhati University in 1978 when pro-Marxist students were beaten up and many of them were forced out of hostels. However, the battle-drums rolled as late as last May when 46,000 foreigners were "detected" in the single parliamentary constituency of Mongoldoi on the north bank of the Brahmaputra.

Since then, the national parties have been rendered irrelevant in the Assamese context. From their ashes, and also from the ranks of the Socialist Party's Assam unit, a host of regional parties have risen. Two such

parties to be catapulted almost overnight to popularity are Asom Jatiyotabadi Dal (Assam Nationalist Party) and Purbanchaliya Lok Parishad (Eastern People's Forum). They have gained respectability by drawing into the vortex of the movement Assam Sahitya Sabha, a politico-literary organisation which had a glorious past but has now become, says Gohain, "a refuge of literary hacks and people past their prime."

While they have provided the brain, the brawn has obviously come from the students who joined ranks and forged links quickly from the level plains of Goalpara to the tea gardens of upper Assam, in the shadow of the Naga Hills.

The Aasu, which has a few efficient organisers in its front ranks, now operates like a well-oiled machine from its headquarters in Cotton College, Gauhati. Its spacious office room is the hub of brisk statewide activity. On its wall is painted a larger-than-life portrait of the legendary Assamese general Lachit Barphukan. Two buses, "requisitioned" by them, carry student picketers every morning to the Indian Oil Corporation's refinery at Noonmati, seven kilometres from Gauhati. The picketers sit in shifts and are well looked after by local traders who ensure a liberal supply of tea and snacks. Donations are supposedly voluntary.



Girin Barua: "change the Constitution"

So is the payment of Rs 10 per car for painting on the rear windshield the battle-cry of the movement—*Jai Ai Asom* (pronounced as *ahom*)—victory to mother Assam.

Strident: With regionalism steadily building up, a peculiar breed of "Assamese nationalism" is engulfing the valley. Its main proponent, Asom Jatiyotabadi Dal, is raising its own volunteer force. Says Girin Barua, the Dal president: "My party demands that each person staying in Assam must have two certificates of citizenship, one for India and the other for Assam."

Barua, 48, who played Ranji Trophy cricket for 16 years and still loves to pose for photographs with a county cap on, was unperturbed when told that dual citizenship was against the Constitution. "Get the Constitution changed then," was his reply.

However, intelligence sources aver that the Dal has already put together a pocket-size Jatiya Rakshi Bahini (National Guards) in upper Assam. Elements have been drawn from retired ranks of the Special Security Bureau (SSB), a counter-insurgency unit operating under direct supervision of the Union Home Ministry.

Purbanchaliya Lok Parishad, presided over by Nibaran Bora, is still more strident in its localism. Bora, a former Socialist who advised tea garden-owners on "labour relations" till recently, is the "think tank" of the movement. Thumping the table, and shaking his salt-and-pepper head, Bora dramatically argues how "India" exploited Assam over the years. He resents deployment of paramilitary units in Assam, and demands withdrawal of the "Indian Army" from "Assam's soil". Mrs Gandhi, he says, must express her regrets publicly for police firing at Duliajan, though "regretting is not in her blood".

Of all the groups currently engaged in fishing in the Brahmaputra's troubled waters, Bora's Purbanchaliya Lok Parishad is the best organised. Its area of operation stretches to other north-eastern states as well, particularly Meghalaya and Manipur, where secessionist sentiments run high.

Complaints: However, the present anger

against India is not bred out of sheer paranoia. The need for major investment in the whole region has been constantly bypassed by the Centre (*See box page 40*). The latter's apathy grew stronger after India's debacle in the China war of 1962 which rendered such investment "unsafe". Since October 1977, the entire region has been declared industrially backward. Though 7.5 per cent of the country's population lives in the area, the investment in even small-scale industries is a little over 1 per cent of the total.

Though Assam produces 4.6 million tonnes of crude oil in a year, which is a third of the country's production, its revenue from oil is pegged by a ridiculously low royalty of Rs 42 a tonne. Assam Sahitya Sabha argues: "Every year we get Rs 22 crore as royalty for Rs 840 crore of crude oil! The difference alone would have raised Assam's per capita income by Rs 454 every year."

The 756 tea estates of Assam grow 26.3 crore kg of tea worth Rs 400 crore. The bulk of it is sold and distributed in Calcutta and London by a system of auctioning that brings no benefit to the state. The state's plywood industry, with an aggregate turnover of Rs 80 crore, employs only 25 per cent Assamese in its work force. The per capita credit sanctioned by banks in Assam was as low as Rs 38 in 1976 whereas Maharashtra received Rs 443. The per capita income in Assam was Rs 852 last year, far short of the national figure of Rs 1,236. The number of jobless has risen steadily. There are 2.5 lakh persons enrolled in Assam's employment exchanges now.

Economic Tangle: Sitting in the glow of a gentle fire at the North-Eastern Council's office in Shillong, development planners lament over the lack of entrepreneurship in Assam. They show the instance of Punjab where the Centre has not invested much, again due to strategic reasons. They compare Assam's penury to Punjab's dazzling record. They cite the case of Bihar, which has a couple of steel plants, not to speak of the refinery and a huge heavy engineering complex. "Has it solved the problem of Bihar's backwardness?" they ask.

While bureaucrats seem to have thrown up their hands in despair, planners too have not come forward to solve the region's economic tangle. No technology has been developed to build cheaper roads, to provide more drinking water, to harness the hundreds of rivulets and streams. The high amounts of loan and grants-in-aid have been largely eaten away through graft and corruption.

Corruption in the tinier states of the region is the inevitable fall-out of an unstable polity. In Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh, out of 240 Assembly seats, the ruling groups command not more than 135 of them. Legislative parties often switch allegiance en bloc, to weave conveniently in and out of powerful national parties.

Tainted Millions: In north-east India's sickening ideological vacuum, political power

begets corruption faster than the spread of bacteria. Currently an investigation is in progress against Manipur's present and former chief ministers, Nagaland's former finance minister, a former minister of Arunachal Pradesh and the former development minister of Manipur. One of the chief ministers of the region has shamelessly appointed five of his brothers-in-law to important posts. A former minister built assets worth Rs. 22 lakh in less than two years.

The region is full of contractors who literally reek ill-gotten gains. The ministerial affluence comes from kick-backs on contracts awarded to them by devious means. The massive central assistance (*see box page 40*).

instead of developing the area, disappears down the bottomless pit of north-east India's contractor-ridden economy. The flourishing markets of smuggled goods thrive in Aizawl and Imphal as an inevitable byproduct of the region's all-pervading corruption.

While the ruling elite applies itself with Mormon-like zeal to making millions, the opposition groups fume and fret for the lost opportunities. It is these people who mouth radical rhetoric, spread chauvinistic ideas and exploit the inherent simplicity of the tribals. A case in point is Meghalaya where Martin Narayan Majaw, the shrilled advocate of Khasi localism, forcibly resisted the monitoring work for a hydel project



Rohini Debnath with family: fear of being deported

Who's A Foreigner?

ROHINI Debnath, 50, and Jamini Debnath, 55, along with their 11 other family members, have been declared as foreigners by the authorities in Assam. They stand the risk of being eventually deported from India to Bangladesh where the government is unlikely to take them back.

Jamini Debnath, a Hindu cultivator, moved into Kamrup District of Assam through Goalpara in 1946. Rohini came in 1950. The brothers settled down at Rangapali in Nalbari subdivision of Kamrup. While Jamini stuck to the plough, Rohini passed his school leaving examination in 1955 from the local Dhamdhama High School. He passed his BA and MA examinations in history from Gauhati University

and was sent to Utkal University near Bhubaneswar to do his B.Ed on an Assam Government scholarship. He is now the headmaster of Dhamdhama High School.

Jamini need not carry an Indian citizenship certificate to prove his bona fide as he came in before Independence. But Rohini, who moved in after the stipulated date of July 26, 1949, is technically a non-citizen as he never cared to apply for a citizenship certificate.

Posing for a photograph with a dozen family-members in the courtyard of his own house, and scratching his head, Rohini asked his brother in fluent Assamese: "Were we prepared for this contingency?"

RANBAXY'S GARLIC PEARLS

Contain the pure extract of raw garlic, without the smell. And in easy-to-digest, soft, gelatin capsules.

RANBAXY'S GARLIC PEARLS

- Help relieve gas and indigestion, ease heartburn.
- Reduce high cholesterol levels.
- Help ease disabling joint pains.
- Prevent and control recurring coughs and colds.

RANBAXY'S GARLIC PEARLS

A product of Ranbaxy Laboratories—a trusted name with the medical profession.

Take two pearls twice daily-regularly



**The natural way
to all-round health.**

in the state. Majaw, who is now in the opposition, told INDIA TODAY: "We don't want chimneys and cables and factory sheds to clutter up our forests. We don't want that hundreds of non-Khasi workers should set up camps here and disturb the solitude of our hills."

Cultural Links: The cynicism spread by them spreads across the society like a dab of ink on blotting paper. It is fostered by the hamfisted handling of the situation by the Delhi bureaucracy. Planners and officials in the capital tend to wallow in the fond belief that the Indian culture is *homogenous* forgetting that Assam is really the gateway to south-east Asia and the people of the region are connected, both ethnically and psychologically, to the Tibeto-Burman and Chinese cultures across the border.

The local people are not impressed by the idyllic calendar-type image of north-east India. The Meiteis of Manipur, though officially labelled as Hindus, are now searching for their roots in the tangled history of Thailand. They are searching for their script which was taken away from them in the 16th century to be replaced by the Bengali script. The Ahoms of Brahmaputra valley demanded only recently a separate homeland, Udayachal. At least some Nagas demand a sovereign Nagaland for the 10-lakh Naga population living in India and Burma. As late as 1965, Laldenga, the mercurial leader of the Mizos, wrote: "We Mizos are a free people. Ours is a free society. It has nothing in common with the caste-ridden, idol-worshipping Hindu society of India."

The British left the north-east alone, and opened up only a part of it for colonial exploitation of the region's resources—tea, coal and oil. The rest of the area was marked off with over 1,000 miles of a cordon sanitaire called the "inner line". After Independence, the Indian Government merely pursued the same policy. It was caught on the wrong foot as insurgency exploded in Nagaland (1956) and Mizoram (1966). The Indian Army "grouped" villages like the British Army had done to subdue Malaysian insurgents. It levied punitive taxes, and issued identity cards to citizens. It only widened the gulf of separation.

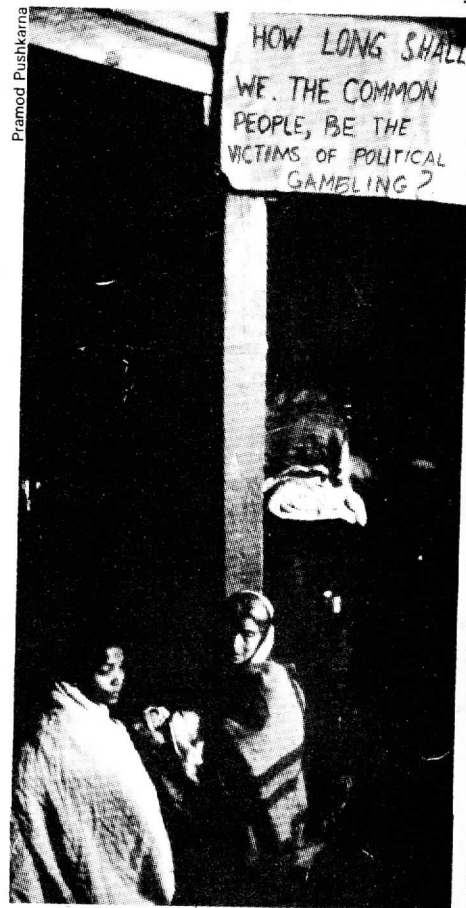
The unrest in the north-east is already casting its shadow on India's geographical integrity. So long, the Indo-Aryan non-tribal population of the Assam valley was India's only cultural bulwark in the region. It helped cushion separatist sentiments and asserted the presence of India in a Mongoloid labyrinth.

Chinese Interest: Assam's present alienation from the rest of the country will have far-reaching effects. It will at least provide China with a gilt-edged opportunity to foment fresh trouble in the area. In 1962, a few Dafia tribesmen of Arunachal Pradesh showed the routes to the invading Chinese Army. As late as 1977, training in arms was given to rebels from Manipur and Nagaland at camps run by the Chinese near Lhasa

in Tibet. At Borkol in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, where the rebel Mizos set up camps last year, the presence of Chinese experts was frequently reported.

With India already established as a formidable military power, China may not risk a direct confrontation with it. But such constraints do not end China's quiet search for a sea port—an access to the Indian Ocean via the Bay of Bengal. The pockets of insurgency in India, Burma and Bangladesh, if joined together, may provide an excellent corridor between Yunan in China and the Burmese port of Akyab along an 800-mile-long crescent formed by the Arakan-Lushai-Patkai hills.

The Assamese today recall that they



Bengali refugees: no place to go

were thrown into India not by choice, nor following military defeat, but through arrangements between the British and the Burmese king at Yandaboo in 1822. The Nagas remember that they had told the Simon Commission that they would prefer to be left alone rather than being ruled by "black kings" just in case the British decided to leave. The Mizos make the point that they were about to be declared a "crown colony" in 1947.

With the shadow of the dragon lengthening across such a confounding scenario, wonders a former member of Parliament from Assam: "Should we brief our cartographers in advance?"

—SUMIT MITRA