

WHY DO POLITICIANS FEAR THE ARMY CHIEF'S COMMENTS?

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Speaking at a national seminar in Delhi on the North East, entitled 'Bridging Gaps And Securing Borders' on 21st Feb, the army chief, General Bipin Rawat, raised a few relevant issues. Some issues he raised were amalgamation of the residents of the region into our society, illegal immigration from Bangladesh and development of the area. His statement, "There is a political party, AIUDF (All India United Democratic Front), which has grown at a much faster time frame than even the 'BJP in India", came in for severe political criticism.

The criticism flowed mainly from opposition parties, Congress, AIUDF, Asaduddin Owaisi of the AIMIM and CPI. All claimed he was treading on political issues, which he should avoid. They felt that the army is losing its apolitical stature due the General Rawat's comments. The critics chose only specific statements and not the entire address. These critics have either been responsible for the present state in Assam or gained by the illegal immigration.

The army chief heads the force which is at the forefront battling insurgency resulting from erroneous and cheap political games. Soldiers die daily while politicians continue playing vote bank politics, J and K being a prime example. Stone pelters have been forgiven but pelting continues. Firing in self-defence is a crime, as also is not firing by adopting innovative methods as Gogoi did, while stone pelting to injure or kill is forgiven legally.

Someone must have the guts to tell the truth without fearing criticism. A soldier who seeks no

political favour, who has been witness to the impact of faulty politics and would fade away post retirement, has conveyed what many would desire, but hesitate. Politicians have over the decades been used to army chiefs who have accepted political blunders and remained silent while soldiers died. When truth begins to flow, politicians feel the army chief is crossing bounds. A search through history would prove every word he has uttered is correct.

What the chief implied was that within the same time span, AIUDF grew faster than the Jan Sangh of the 1980's, which was then viewed as a pro-Hindutva party. It was simply a comparison of two 'supposedly' religious political parties in different time frames, not a criticism of any specific party. This sudden rise of AIUDF implies an enhanced Moslem population in the state due to increased illegal immigration.

Mr SC Mullan, ICS, Census superintendent of Assam stated as far back as 1931, 'The most important event in the province.....has been the invasion of a vast horde of land hungry Bengali immigrants, mostly Moslems, from the districts of East Bengal'. On 10th Apr 1982, Mr Hiteswar Saikia, the Congress Chief Minister of Assam, stated that there were three million Bangladeshi illegal immigrants in Assam, only to commit a volte face two days later and declare there were no illegal immigrants, possibly due to pressure from the Centre. The present estimate stands at six million illegal immigrants.

The Congress government at the centre in 1983 to secure its vote banks, passed the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunal) act, specific to Assam. The act implied that proving the illegal status of an individual, was the responsibility of the state, the

opposite to any other part of the country. Further all who were residents of the state prior to Mar 71 were legal residents, as compared to 1948 for the rest of India. Thus, it became difficult to deport illegal immigrants and led to demographic change. The act was struck down by the Supreme Court as illegal in 2005.

On 8th Nov 1988, General SK Sinha, the then Governor of Assam wrote a letter to the President of India where he highlighted the impact of large scale illegal immigration into Assam from Bangladesh. He wrote, 'It (large scale immigration) poses a grave threat both to the identity of the Assamese people and to national security. Successive governments at the centre and state have not adequately met this challenge'. From five districts initially affected by demographic change, the figure has risen to nine, a worrisome fact.

No one backed or supported the army chief when he stated, 'We have to live with the people of the region, irrespective of their caste, creed, religion or sex. If we understand that, we will be able to live together happily'. Has a politician ever stated it? Most have sought votes on these grounds itself. Were they scared to praise this comment solely because it went against their vote securing strategy.

Having commanded 3 Corps, whose responsibilities are spread across majority of the region, he is aware of the dynamics of the area and its problems. He has seen the impact of changing demography first hand as also been witness to the violence which it has caused.

He was also conveying a message, that unless the government takes note, other states would be affected similarly. The latest to feel this pressure is J

and K, wherein large numbers of Rohingya's have settled around Jammu, almost encircling the town. Their presence has two major threats, akin to Assam, change of demography and national security.

The chief spoke as a soldier should, straight and to the point, after all he represents the force which has lost countless lives battling insurgencies caused by political blunders. The present criticism came only from those parties which backed illegal immigration or benefitted from it.

Rawat is neither a politician, who would beat around the bush nor throw the blame on previous governments nor opposition parties. He placed before the nation, facts which could always be verified. His critics scared of skeletons tumbling out of their cupboards, seek to deflect public attention. The army for once has a fearless leader, willing to call a spade a spade, whom we should be proud of, rather than seek to gag. The army is and will always be apolitical, but in a democracy has a voice which should be heard, not suppressed, solely because it bares political misdeeds. Finally, if politicians can insult the army at will, why can't it bare their skeletons?

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