

ANDHRA PRADESH — I

Murder of a 'Radical'

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LARGE parts of Warangal district present a desolate landscape which no poet — or peasant — will ever get excited over. Rocky soil, huge and startlingly bald boulders which pretend to be hills, endless thorny bushes which apparently even goats find unappetising, and an occasional grove of tamarind trees — this is the recurring picture. The Godavari runs past the district, but unlike Karimnagar, Warangal is yet to benefit from the river; barring one or two big tanks, most of the paddy cultivation is under small tanks or wells. The only improvement modernisation has brought is HYV seeds and the extension of electricity to villages, which has increased the acreage of paddy cultivated under wells. But for that, the district remains much as it was in the days of the last Nizam. Perhaps one other difference is that these days villages have telephones, which makes it that much easier for the landlords to call in the police, and generally to keep them informed — a convenience that the harassed Deshmukhs did not have in the forties. But that is a different dimension of the story.

Pisara is a medium-sized village in Ghanpur, one of the most backward tulukas of Warangal. It is at the meeting point of two strings of villages which lie along two arcs starting from the Warangal-Hyderabad road. As one approaches Pisara, the bushes and rocks get depressingly predominant and beyond the village, the world apparently comes to an end, for there are neither any roads nor anything seemingly edible in that direction. RTC buses run to Pisara from Warangal quite frequently along both arcs, not because Pisara is important, but because it lies at the end of a string of villages. Most of the houses of the village are either thatched or tiled, the only exceptions being those of the landlords and a trader (who probably trades in chillies, which are grown plentifully in the region). Add two or three dusty roads, innumerable lanes, and a sculpted image of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi manufactured by some cruel artist, and you have the picture of an innocent village of Bharat, the injured angel of modern mythology.

Hut backwardness does not stop with dusty roads and snotty kids who give

a vociferous farewell to the RTC bus as it leaves the visage. It does not even stop with the solitary Upper Primary school imparting something resembling education to the children of the village. Nor does it find its starkest expression in the utter lack of proper medical facilities, which forces the villagers to travel all of 55 kms to Warangal to get even routine medical treatment. It permeates the social relations and spurs somewhat severely the idyllic quality of Bharat, where everyone is supposed to be one with the others, and all equally concerned about procurement prices.

Pisara is dominated by three Reddy brothers who have, between them, two sons and about 300 to 400 acres of land. (I am being cautious; ask the harijans of the village, and they will put it at 500 acres.) Given the notoriously unfathomable character of patwaris' records, there is not much sense asking how much of it is patta land, how much is held benami, and how much is recorded officially as 'cultivable wastes' or whatever. Yet these Reddy landlords are not called 'doras' for the punctilious people distinguished between landlords who take no part whatsoever in cultivation and exercise feudal social domination, and those who have a cultivators' past and even today are not above setting hand to plough (metaphorically speaking, of course). Only the former category of landlord is called a 'dora', the latter is an 'asaim' or a 'patel', irrespective of how much land he might have. The three Reddy brothers of Pisara were actually affluent cultivating peasants at one time but apparently managed to grab the lands of a Deshmukh of old times, whose tenants they were, and who lost his lands in Jugirdari abolition. Just one of the three, Tirupati Reddy, has 200 acres. These Reddys would, perhaps, be described by most 'academics as 'capitalist farmers', for they grow cash crops (chillies), cultivate HYV paddy under wells operated by electric motors, and use plenty of fertiliser. They grow HYV seeds for the National Seeds Corporation, and are said to make a flourishing business of it. One of them even has a small-scale cement pipes manufacturing concern on the Warangal-Hyderabad road. But let us follow the people and refer to them by the

academically indeterminate term 'patels'; for, until the start of our story, each of them used to get their lands cultivated by about 20 to 30 farm-servants (paleru), paid miserably low wages, and more or less tied to the landlords by an interest-free advance at the beginning of the year. The farm-servants' time is at the patel's disposal, and the amount of work they do has no relation to what they are paid (an invariable concomitant of capitalist relations), but is instead determined exclusively by the patels' needs. If we divide their living time into labour time and free time *a la* Marx, then their free time is no more under their control than their labour time. Vetti (begar) is unknown in Warangal. For the peasant uprising of the late forties took care of that, but the general authority of the patels is undisturbed. For instance, a poor peasant by name Mallainh once purchased two acres of land against the wishes of the landlords, and was harassed until he sold it back. Another, a rich peasant by name Chandra Reddy (who has about 40 acres of land of varying quality) was not very obedient, and as a consequence, the patels got 14 of his acres declared 'surplus' under the ceiling act (while they themselves own land many times the upper limit of the ceiling!). True, communists continued to exist in Warangal after the late forties, and in the recent assembly elections the CPI even set up a candidate from Ghanpur, but as a Telugu writer once remarked, around the mid-fifties, the communists stopped biting and started barking; and nobody has as yet died of dog-bark.

Until the start of our story, there was only one person in the village who openly questioned the authority of the patels. He is a school teacher who bus no politics other than a partiality for the poor. He did not form any peasants unions, he did not lead strikes, all he did was to agree to act as an elder and settle the internal disputes of the poor and thereby make it unnecessary for them to approach the landlords to sit in judgment. This itself is a significant injury to the authority of the landlords, for the unquestioned right of arbitration has always been among the most powerful weapons in the hands of feudals in Telangana.

Resistance to the patels moved a step forward and went down to gut issues about two years ago. That was when the 'Radical Party' entered the village and started organising the farm-servants for higher wages. The name the party gives itself is CPI(M-L)

(Peoples War), but all over Telangana the people know it as the 'Radical Party'. The name derives from the mass organisations of the party, 'Radical Students Union and Radical Youth League which, with their annual 'go to villages' campaigns, have been instrumental in carrying the party's message to villages. The word 'radical' is impossible to render accurately into Telugu, but it has now become part of the vocabulary of the poorest strata of people who know no other word of English. In Warangal and Karimnagar (if not elsewhere) everybody knows what a 'radical' means, and that includes the police too; for the first question they ask any troublesome youth is: are you a radical?

The young man who organised the Rytu Coolie Sangham at Pisara was one Rama Rao, alias Ramana. He was a native of Kazipet, the railway junction, where his mother works as a sweeper in the railway yard. A harijan by caste, he took his bachelor's degree in commerce from a college in Warangal, and worked for some time in the railways in Khammam district. His ability at organising workers was so irksome that he was removed from service, and he came back to Warangal to work in the peasant movement in Ghanpur taluka. His coming had strongest impact on the farm-servants of Pisara village. Earlier, their wages used to be about Rs 200 in cash per year (plus a similar amount as an interest-free advance) and about 25 kgs of jowar per month in kind. Women agricultural labourers used to get only Rs 2 to 3 as wage per day. After the formation of the Sangham, all the wages have moved up by about 50 per cent.

The patels' reaction was immediate. The police were called in to handle the active members of the Sangham. During the last one year, the police raided the village three times. The first time they picked up five persons, dropped two of them at the outskirts of the village, and took the other three to Madikonda police station. They were kept there for three days and beaten repeatedly. They were given what has passed into journalistic parlance as 'roller treatment'. The performance was repeated during the second raid. On both these occasions, there was no immediate 'provocation'; the police were obviously on a general offensive- to nip in the bud! this nonsense of forming Sanghams and demanding higher wages. That is probably why they did not foist any false cases, they merely beat up the arrested persons. One of them, Survaiah, was beaten so badly that one of his arms

is still in a useless condition, and he is unable to earn his livelihood. The third time they raided the village they had greater provocation. One night, a peasant of the golla (shepherd) caste, Ramaiah by name, fell into a freshly dug well in the fields of his master Konda Reddy, son of Adi Reddy, the eldest of the three 'patels'. He was taken to a hospital, where he died. Since he was a poor peasant with two young sons and a daughter, the people of the village, under the leadership of Rama Rao, demanded that Konda Reddy should give some land in compensation to the bereaved family. The next day the police again raided the village, entered houses, manhandled and abused women, threatened them with revolvers, and demanded that they reveal Rama Rao's whereabouts.

Actually, none of the achievements of the Sangham constitute a major economic assault on the landlords; but they certainly did question (though they did not succeed in breaking) their authority. And authority is as central to feudal domination as profit is to capitalist relations. Today, where earlier each of the landlords had 20 to 30 farm-servants working for him, there is not a single person in the willing to work as a paleru. All the land of the patels is now 'given for a share', i.e., it is share-cropped. The economic Joss apart, the self-assertion of the poor that is involved in this affront was intolerable to the patels. This is particularly visible in the case of the fatal accident to Ramaiah.

And so Rama Rao was murdered. The series of police assaults, in a situation of insufficient politicisation and brittle organisation, had weakened the poor. A section of them were weaned away from the Sangham and made henchmen of the landlords. Some of them had even been prominent militants of the Sangham earlier. The landlords appear to have got Kama Rao murdered by them a couple of days prior to Sankranti (which falls on January 14). He was axed to death, his face disfigured, and the body thrown into a dry ditch. Some goatherds discovered the body on Sankranti day, and the news reached the police. In all probability the police knew who he was, and also who had killed him, but to this day they have made no serious attempt to get the body identified. Instead they waited — and are waiting — for some more prey. Rama Rao's friends and comrades realised rather slowly that it was he who had been killed. They put up wall-posters in Kazipet town, offering red salutes to him. That was how his mother Rellam-

ma came to know of his death. She, her daughter-in-law Yadamma, a neighbour called Venkatamma, who is said to have had a boot-legging past and was therefore a woman-of-the-world, and two other women, were taken to the place where the body had been buried by the police after getting the post-mortem done. The date was January 24, fully 12 days after the murder.

It is not clear how the police came to know of this visit. The harijans of Pisara are firmly convinced that their landlords rang up the police and told them. In any case, as the women were returning along a foot-path, they were stopped by four police constables. The boys who were escorting the women ran away. The police beat Venkatamma there it self and took them to a neighbouring village where an SI was waiting in a jeep. The women were bundled into the jeep and taken to Madikonda police station, about 3 kms from Kazipet. The women were kept there till night fall and beaten badly. Venkatamma was beaten particularly savagely. The SI wanted to know: "Your caste and their caste are different; why did you come with them?". One week after the incident, Rama Rao's mother Yellamma still had visible bruises on her body. Venkatamma and Rama Rao's wife Yadamma were made to stand with their hands held up, pressed face-to-face against the wall of the lock-up, and were thrashed with lathis. Later in the night, after the SI left, Yadamma (a young girl, hardly twenty years old) was threatened by a constable that she would be raped by all the policemen present there. The women were shown a photograph of the dead man, but since the face had been disfigured, they could not recognise it. But Yadamma recognised the clothes of the dead man as her husband's. Yet, the police made no attempt to get the identification confirmed by taking the women to the grave. They continued to treat the women with utter contempt. The stinking clothes of the dead man were thrown on Venkatamma's face.

During all this ill-treatment, the police had only one question to ask: who were the boys who had brought the women to the place where the body had been buried? That night they were allowed to go back to Kazipet. Two days later, on Republic day (the people refer to it as 'flag-saluting day') the women were again called to Madikonda police station. But it was neither to confirm the identification nor to hand over the remains of the dead man to his mother and wife, but only to enquire once again: who brought you to that place that day?