

ANDHRA PRADESH

'Telugu' Encounters

K B

EVERYTHING is Telugu in Andhra Pradesh these days. A canal proposed to be constructed to carry water from the Krishna and Penna rivers to Madras city has been named 'Telugu Ganga'; no matter that the eminent (but not altogether disinterested) irrigation engineer-turned-Congressman K L Rao, lias openly doubted the existence of any water at all to be carted to Madras, our southern Bhagiratha is hell-bent on digging the canal and demonstrating to the world the legendary (it is alleged) magnanimity of the Telugu nation; when the same gentleman camps at Vijayawada to conduct the first conference of his party, his thatched (but prudently well-furnished) camp house is called 'Telugu kutirani'; and there is a threat hanging in the air that the state is going to be renamed 'Telugu Nadu', to rhyme with 'Tamil Nadu' rather than 'Uttar Pradesh', in the interest of Dravidian solidarity.

And so it is but fair that murders by the police in the name of 'encounters' should hereafter (so long as NTH and his heirs rule) be called 'Telugu encounters'. There have been three such murders in the state since NTH came to power, two in Adilabad and one in Warangal.

I

"We are shown photographs of prominent naxalites, dacoits, etc, and given instructions that if we find them we are to kill them... So-and-so [he mentions a naxalite leader] works in the region where the IV Battalion, to which I belong, is stationed. But our paths have never crossed. If they had, he would have 'got murdered' by now."
— A head constable of A P Special Police, in charge of the police camp at Ratnapur.

Ratnapur is a god-forsaken Gond hamlet of Adilabad district, right on the western border with Maharashtra. It consists of about 30 huts set with surprising neatness in four rows. Though it is only about 30 kms to the west of Adilabad town, it is remarkably 'inaccessible'. There is a motorable kuccha road up to half the distance, and then a thickly dust-laden (in summer) cart-track upto Kosai, beyond which at Umri the truck runs into a hill whose sides are covered by forest, and which is too steep for any cart to climb. Ratnapur is at the top of this

hill, so inaccessible that, according to our head constable, "nobody comes here expecting the naxalites", and following them the police, of course.

The district gazetteer of Adilabad claims that 40 per cent of the land area of the district is covered by forest, but that is part of the comfortable official mythology in which forests are conjured out of denuded waste land by retrospective proclamation. About India as a whole it has been estimated that only a third of the officially declared forest cover is actually forest, and that must definitely be true of Adilabad. There is some forest left along the eastern and western borders of the district, but very little in the central part, which saw a mini-rebellion (led by Komram Bhim) for tribals' rights over forest land as late as 1940. As one travels down the Chadrapur-Ifyderabad highway from Wankidi through Asifabad (the centre of the 1940 uprising) to Lakshettipet, one sees very little that can be called a forest proper, except along the slopes of the Manikgarh hills.

The denudation of Adilabad and the dispossession of tribals constitute a pincer which has haunted the Gonds (the major tribe of Adilabad) for nearly six decades. The forest lands cleared by the Gonds were made over by the Hyderabad state to non-tribal landlords who would not even allow the Gonds to continue as tenants but brought more 'efficient' peasants from outside; the incentive for this dispossession was — and continues to be — the rich black soil of Adilabad which makes cotton cultivation lucrative for the landlord and revenue-spinning for the state. Together with this came the commercialisation and 'protection' of forests, which deprived the tribals of their traditional right over forest land and produce. The effect that 'protection' of forests has on shifting cultivators is well known. The heedless state fences off the land currently under cultivation and declares all the rest 'protected'; and so, when the time comes to leave the current fields fallow and shift to new areas, there is no place to shift to. Thus, either the tribals are forcibly converted into settled cultivators without possessing the technical equipment necessary for it, or they have to fell

forests and face repression from the state. This was the contradiction that led to a short uprising in 1940 at Babajhari and Jodenghat near Asifabad.

Today, the average Gond is no longer a shifting cultivator; but it would be wrong to believe that this is because the benevolent state has solved the tribals' problems. Discussing the Indravelli massacre of April 20, 1981, an ITDP official remarked with a superior sneer that all this talk about tribals' land problem is born of ignorance since in Adilabad the average tribal has a 5 or 10 acre holding on which he grows cotton and jowar and is not a jhum cultivator. There is a large amount of perverse truth in this. Having forced the unprepared tribal into the status of a settled cultivator, and having massacred those who were unwilling to be thus transformed, the government of the Nizam of Hyderabad sanctified this forcible baptism into civilisation by giving pattas to the tribals on a large scale. But since the Gonds were not provided with the technology — irrigation and fertiliser — necessary to consummate the transformation, they could not but seek new land off and on. Without wells, tanks, and credit for fertiliser, depending entirely upon nature for their cultivation, this was inevitable. And the state (both the feudal Hyderabad state and Socialist Republic of India) has, with a prudent benevolence, allowed them to be sporadically given pattas for forest land cleared, though only after considerable harassment, and as at the belief that he was talking to speak of political brokers of various hues. In the spiteful words of a prosperous advocate of Sironcha in Maharashtra (across the Pranahita river from Adilabad), "even if the tribals pull down the tahsil office and plough the foundations, they will get patta". In actual fact, the pseudo-benevolence of the state goes limping after the tribals' need for fresh land, leaving a gap for bribes, cases, harassment, and as at Indravelli in 1981, a mass-scale massacre.

But let us get back to Ratnapur and our voluble head constable, whose volubility was a misguided consequence of the belief that he was talking to newspapermen. The 30 Gond families of Ratnapur have their 5 or 10 acre plots on the hill, which extends into a plateau on top. There is not a single well on the hill, not even a drinking water well. The only well close by is near Umri down. The hill, but that is used only for drinking water. The head

constable complained (this was in the hot days of April) that every day he and his constables had to quarrel with the people to get a bucket of water for a bath; needless to say the policemen invariably win the argument.

On their princely patch of land the Gonda grow cotton and jowar; the jowar they eat, and the cotton they cart all the way to Adilabad to sell. What do they get for it? "Whatever the shahukar gives"; that is about Rs 350 to 400 per quintal whereas the Gonds believe that they should get at least Rs 500 if growing cotton is to be remunerative. Thus the tribals are pushed into debt, again to the shahukars of Adilabad, who charge anything from 25 to 100 per cent interest. Each family of the hamlet is indebted, with the outstanding debt ranging from Rs 1,000 to 5,000. Sooner or later, after goats, jewellery and cattle are lost, this will lead to appropriation of the debtor's land, though there may not be any registered transfer; indeed the debtor himself may not have patta for the land he has alienated.

It is all these factors that make continuous search for land inevitable for the Gonds, and brought revolutionary politics to the remotest hamlets. One morning, some 'naxalite' activists reached Ratnapur, held a small meeting and talked to the Gonds. They — according to the Gonds — told them to fell the trees of the forest and clear land for themselves. This was not the first time they had come to the village, but it was the first time they got into trouble. The police patel of Ratnapur, Chenchuram, is himself a Gond and no better-off than the others. But his official position had made him a police agent; he got into a quarrel with the activists, and later went down the hill to Umri, picked up the police patel of that village (who is also a Gond) and went to Kosai from where he called the police. The police came at 3 o'clock that night. Their prey were sleeping in the open, outside the hamlet, along with some Gond boys of the hamlet. The police opened fire straight away at the sleeping people. When they got up and tried to run away, the police fired again. This time they hit a Gond youth by name Atram Ashok. He died in hospital the next day. The police then put out the story that some naxalites raided the village and were chased out by the villagers and in the fight the naxalites killed Atram Ashok. To buttress the story the district collector went to Ratnapur (an unlikely feat, if there were no guilty conscience involved), gave Rs 1,000 ex-gratia to Ashok's wife (they were

married barely eight months prior to his death), and promised the people guns to protect themselves from the naxalites. Their being no takers, a police camp was set up as a substitute.

II

From the forests, hills and black soil of Adilabad to the dusty red plains of Warangal is a long way, especially if one is not a winged animal; Wardhanapet taluka in the eastern part of Warangal is a backward taluka of a backward district. A large number of lambadas live in this taluka as well as neighbouring Narsampet; their clusters of houses are attached as hamlets to mainly non-tribal villages, with each village usually having a large number of hamlets attached to it. For example, Enugallu has 14 hamlets under it; (and it was in one of these 14 hamlets that the second of NTR's encounters took place, on April 16, 1983. The victim was Mamidala Hari-bhtishan; he was a madiga (ehainur) by caste, in spite of the fancy Sanskrit name. (Harijans of Telangana generally have names which are as elemental as their lives; feudal culture would no more allow them to have what it regards as fine names than it would allow them to dress well) But the name was deceptive, for his was an elemental personality, a heroic rebel-figure risen from the masses; he had the untameable militancy that only activists thrown up by the oppressed classes possess.

He belonged to Nallabelli, about 10 kilometres from where he died. There was a landlord in his village who had about 150 acres of land and refused to let go even one acre under landceilings; in January 82. Hari-bhtishan led the landless of his village to occupy 30 of those surplus acres; he beat up a SI of Police who intervened at the behest of the landlord. He was arrested two months later, confined for a long period at Nekkonda PS and tortured inhumanly. They burnt him on the hip and ankle with a red-hot poker. He carried the marks on him till his death. When he came out on bail, the police made at least two attempts on his life, but he escaped narrowly; and he invited death at their hands by working among the naturally militant lambadas of the area.

These lambadas are almost exclusively poor peasants, having about 2 to 3 acres of dry land on which they grow jowar, chillies and sometimes groundnut. Most villages in Telangana have tanks for irrigation but tank water does not reach even the poor peasants of the village proper, not to talk about tribal living in attached hamlets. For

the last two years these lambadas of Wardhanapet and Narsampet talukas have been facing severe attacks from arrack contractors, who suspect them of illicit manufacture of arrack. The suspicion is not groundless, for the lambadas do 'cook' arrack from jaggery. The monopolisation of the arrack contract over large areas by powerful groups of contractors has led to a sharp increase in the price of retail arrack (from about Rs 15 per litre to Rs 25 to 30 per litre), and the poor have no choice but to make their own brew. To prevent this the contractors maintain well-fed gangs of hoodlums who conduct lightning raids on the hamlets, thrash people, abduct men and women, confine them at the arrack contractors' headquarters at Narsampet town, and extract 'fines' from them; the women are made prey to the lust of the hoodlums. Last year, an enquiry revealed, within the space of two months a total of Rs 40,000 were collected in this fashion from just nine hamlets. The lambadas are obviously incapable of shelling down such huge amounts, and so most of them have sold goats, sheep, and the year's stock of grain to meet the demand.

It is widely suspected that these arrack contractors and the landlord of his village had a hand in getting Haribhushan killed by the police. On April 16 he was sitting in a hut at Chandragiri Tanda, one of the 14 hamlets under Enugallu, talking to some people. There were two women, Huni and Lakshmi, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, waiting outside the hut. They wanted Haribhushan to settle some private dispute of theirs. The police came dressed in the guise of frog-catchers and sent a boy to call their prey out of the hut. He came out, saw them, and started running away. They fired at him and hit him in the leg; as he picked himself up and started running again they closed in on him and finished him off. They then put out the story that there was a fierce exchange of fire in which Haribhushan was killed and all the policemen escaped without a scratch on the skin.

The authorities did not stop at that. As soon as the district collector declared an executive magistrate's enquiry, the police arrested the two lambada women, Huni and Lakshmi, and kept them hidden somewhere. A week of going around all the police officers of Warangal was of no avail, and so a habeas corpus petition was filed for the women. They were then remanded to jail, for almost three weeks on charge of having given shelter, to the deceased. The police got a confessional statement

(Section 164, Cr PC) recorded from them, in which they were inside to say, among other things, that they did not witness the killing. The bewildered women probably did not know what was happening to them.

It was only after thus muzzling the only witnesses that the police allowed even the magisterial enquiry (which is a routine affair, and has never served any purpose) to take place. It was conducted on August 29 and 30 by an RDO at Narsampet town. On 29th the town was filled with police, one jeep continuously circling the bus stand, keeping an eye on who was entering the town. The tahsil office, where the enquiry was held, looked like the frontyard of the police headquarters. The CI of police, Narsampet, doubled as attender to the RDO and obligingly ushered into his room those who would like to depose before the enquiry, after first carefully noting down their names and addresses. When this outrage was objected to, the RDO exclaimed with impassable innocence: 'but there are no policemen in my room!' Like the vedantin contemplating the purity of his soul blissfully ignorant of the dirt around, the RDO was unconcerned about the CI eavesdropping at the door and the DSP at the window: for was not his room free of khakhi? When the objection was persisted in, he reluctantly condescended to recognise the mundane reality, and promised that it would be remedied the next day. In actual fact, the police strength was doubled the next day. The reason: the DSP feared that the students of the local junior college who had boycotted classes in protest against Hari-bhushan's killing, would bomb the tahsil office and kill the RDO!

III

Maharashtra rewards Adilabad police: ... Sri Rahim, SP of Adilabad, received at Chandrapur on 3rd September the reward [announced by the Maharashtra government] on behalf of the five policemen who braved their lives and participated in the encounter [in which an extremist by name Sudhakar was killed] at Pinnaram village in Chennur taluka of Adilabad district.

— News item in *Eenadu*, 9.9.83.

This is certainly tin odd bit of news in these parochial days, with the states quarreling about river water, electricity, and Reserve Bank loans; were there no brave policemen in Maharashtra that five 'outsiders' should be rewarded? But indeed there are. The SP of Gftdchiroli district, for example, heroically arrested 13 students in their teens this summer at Sironcha and proclaimed to the world that he had

captured much-wanted 'naxalwadis'; he has no doubt been suitably rewarded.

Pinnaram, like Ratnapur, is a village on a hill; but it is at the eastern border of Adi'abad. The Pranahita, a tributary of the Godavari, separates Adilabad from Maharashtra in the east, with the old Sironcha taluka on the other side; a few miles inside Adilabad is a low range of hills covered with forest. Pinnaram is a small village (though not as small as Ratnapur) on the hills. It is about 10 kms from Chennur town, and 8 of these 10 kms are a cart-track through the forest, interspersed in this season by streams. As at Ratnapur there is no irrigation except what the rain gods provide, which is however sufficiently plentiful to make paddy the principal cereal crop. The revenue department very picturesquely describes such wet land as 'aasman tari' ('tari' means wet land, and 'aasman' of course, is the sky). The sarpanch, Narayan Singh, and his brother the police patel Ransi Singh, are the only substantial landholders in the village, each having about 20 acres of 'aasman Jari'. Their community is called Rondili, and they claim to be descendants of Rajput immigrants from Bundelkhand. All the others in the village are toiling peasants of various sizes, or landless labourers. The landless work as daily wage labourers or as farm-servants to the land'ords and rich peasants; since there is good grazing in the forest, the government bias given them loans for cattle, and this has encouraged many of them to become botaidars (share-croppers). The share is fifty-fifty of the produce, but barring the seed, which is also shared fifty-fifty, the share-cropper has to bear all the other expenditure. But there being no irrigation at all, the agricultural season *does* not last more than three months, and all the three categories of the landless are jobless for nine months in the year. During this period, they live on work provided by the AP Forest Development Corporation (which has teak plantations all along the 36 Ian road from the mining town of Mancherial to Chennur), and by picking beedi leaf for the Tendu contractors' The wages paid to the agricultural labourers are abnormally low, even compared to the plains villages of Adilabad, not to mention the more developed districts to the south.

Pinnaram is one among a string of villages following the banks of the Pranahita — Parepalli, Sirsa, Babbar-chelka, Raja ram, etc. The Government of Maharashtra has long alleged that 'extremists' from Andhra are crossing the river and causing trouble in

Sironcha; and the Press has dutifully sung the refrain by periodically publishing inspired reports about naxalites from Andhra crossing the Godavari and its tributaries into Sironcha and Bftstar and causing disaffection among the tribals there. It is this orchestrated scare that is behind the recent 'encounter', for the peasant movement in these villages of Chennur taluka has itself been of a temperate character with not a single reported (or even alleged) incident of violence. Indeed, after killing Sudhakar, the police could find no violent colours to paint him with, and had to borrow cases from Maharashtra.

Sudhakar's real name was Palle Kanakaiah; far from being a fire-breathing naxalite, he was a heart patient with a diseased valve. A disciplined organiser, he had built a peasant movement in these villages around issues like distribution of waste land to the landless; increasing the wages of fann-servants, the share of the bataidars, and the piece-rate paid by the Tendu contractors for a bundle of beedi leaves; and the corrupt practices of the forest employees. 200 acres of waste land was distributed to the landless, the rate for picking beedi leaf went up from 8 paise to 12 paise per bundle, and the bribe paid to the forest employees for turning a blind eye to goats grazing in the forest was brought down from Rs 15 to Rs 5 per goat per year in one or two villages. And the struggle for higher agricultural wages was about to be taken up this year. Sudhakar had earned the goodwill of all the poor people of the villages, and the grudging respect of the rich. At Pinnaram, a wide cross-section of the people recall with tears in the eyes that they could not swallow a morsel of food the day he was killed.

He was killed by the police on August 30. He had come to the visage early that morning and held talks about the struggle for higher wages with the wage-labourers and bataidars. At noon, the labourers left for the fields, and Sudhakar and a comrade of his came on to the road that leads from Pinnaram down the hill to Parepalli, two kilometres away. They saw four plainclothes constables walking up the way. Either somebody had informed them or they were on a routine patrol. Sudhakar turned left and ran in'o the village, while his comrade turned right and escaped into the forest. The policemen chased Sudhakar as he ran past the harijans' huts. Most of the able-bodied men and women were in the fields, but one family witnessed the chase. Ponnala Buchanna, his nearly Wind wife, and

pregnant daughter Ankamma saw with their very eyes the armed policemen chasing Sudhakar. He went past the harijans' huts and into a jowar field. The thickly planted eight-foot high jowar stalks would make any 'exchange of fire' out of the question' As a matter of fact, within fifteen feet after entering the fields Sudhakar collapsed: either his diseased heart valve gave way or he tripped against a jowar stalk. The police then caught up with

him and shot Him dead. Bucchanna's family, as well as the peasants in nearby fields, heard exactly two revolver shots; and according to an inquest witness, there were exactly two wounds on Sudhakar, one on his thigh, and another which had ripped through his belly. There was thus none of the heroic 'encounter' for which the policemen were rewarded by the Maharashtra government. Sudhakar was hunted down and killed like a wild animal.

— a habit encouraged by the delays in the accrual of income from the sale of crops. Moreover, the reluctance of banks to convert short-term loans into medium-term loans when farmers face genuine financial difficulties in repaying loans has contributed to the higher figure of overdues.

No doubt, timely repayment of loans is necessary to ensure recycling of funds to promote rural development by financial institutions. Mounting overdues of agricultural loans will choke the credit channel and slow-down the pace of financing and the tempo of rural development.

Curiously, however, this concept of "overdues" to ensure recovery and recycling of funds is used by commercial banks only for loans advanced to agriculture. Loans given to small-scale and other industries operated by the cash-credit system, are not bound by the compulsion to recover. This is ironical, because the extent of sickness among industrial undertakings underscores the sheer misutilisation of bank funds and the unsatisfactory return flow of funds from sick units. Some bankers have, therefore, argued that overdues of agricultural loans are not so serious as the sinking of vast amounts of bank credit in sick industrial units. At the end of June 1981, for instance, bank loans aggregating Rs 1,453 crore were locked up in 422 sick units enjoying bank credit limits of Rs one crore and above. Similarly, Rs 322 crore of bank loans were locked up in 22,360 small-scale sick industrial units. Indeed, while the bulk of agricultural overdues are recoverable, prospects of recovering loans given to sick units are dim, since India's sickness in the market situation becomes chronic.

Committees appointed by the Reserve Bank, to examine the role of financial institutions in rural development, have ascribed the high overdues to the recurrence of floods and droughts, misutilisation of loans, inadequate return from investment, poor infrastructural facilities, unforeseen expenses of borrowers arising from sudden and serious illness, death, etc, in the households, as well as a lack of earnestness among the bank staff for the recovery of the loans, and a wilful default by the borrowers. An in-depth study of the overdues in 70 branches of 19 commercial banks quoted by CRAFTICARD. round factors such as wilful default misutilisation of loans, and inadequate income accounting for 84 per cent of the overdues and factors such as defective appraisal and poor supervision and

AGRICULTURAL CREDIT

Government's Due

(By a Special Correspondent)

THE problem of overdues of agricultural credit, which has impaired the healthy growth of co-operative banks, is now rapidly spreading among commercial banks. Overdues in the repayment of agricultural loans and advances granted by the commercial banks have progressively increased from about Rs 200 crore during the year ended June 1976 to Rs 605 crore during the year ended June 1980. The same had further climbed to Rs 972 crore at the end of June 1982 — a near four-fold increase in six years.

In its report, the Committee to Review Arrangement for Institutional Credit for Agriculture and Rural Development (CRAFTICARD) has already exposed the magnitude of the problem in relation to loans given by the agricultural co-operative credit societies. As on June 30, 1978, according to the report, there were 12 million defaulting members, accounting for 58 per cent of the indebted members of primary agricultural credit societies (PACS) in the country. The overdues of PACS have increased from Rs 322.40 crore in 1970-71 to Rs 809.62 crore in 1977-78 — accounting for 43.3 per cent and 45 per cent of the demand and outstanding loans, respectively, at the end of June 1978. The overdues rose to Rs 908 crore at the end of June 1979, forming 45.2 per cent of the total loans outstanding. Nothing has changed this trend in subsequent years.

As for the agricultural loans disbursed by the commercial banks, while the absolute amount of overdues to them has been rising over the years, recovery has curiously tended to stabilise around 50 per cent of demand. During the seventies, recovery moved in a narrow range — between 53 per cent in a year of bumper agricultural production to 48 per cent in a year of

poor harvest. A high rate of recovery of agricultural loans is difficult to achieve at the aggregate level, because of the vulnerability of agriculture to the vagaries of weather which cause wide fluctuations in production from year to year, inadequate marketing facilities, and the predominance of small and marginal farmers. There are significant regional variations too. Punjab, Haryana and Kerala achieve a recovery of 60-70 per cent, compared with 35-40 per cent achieved by the eastern and north-eastern states. Within the eastern and north-eastern states, the performance levels of individual banks differ, pointing to the possibility of achieving a higher rate of recovery if banks with a high incidence of over-dues can be made to improve their performance.

Commercial banks have generally fared better in the recovery of short-term loans than in the recovery of term loans. For the year ended June 1980, the proportion of recovery to demand in term loans was only 16 per cent, as against 57 per cent in short-term loans. One plausible reason for this difference could be that farmers are well aware that they can get fresh short-term loans every year only if they repay the earlier loans regularly. With term loans, however, only a part of the loan need be repaid each year and this can be conveniently postponed till the expiry of the loan period without serious consequences.

It is possible that the available data contain an overestimate of the overdues of agricultural loans disbursed by commercial banks. For, under the existing loaning system, farmers are required to repay the loans in instalments within a stipulated time. Failure to do so merely results in an accumulation of overdues, and many borrowers have thus got into the habit of paying only after the expiry of repayment period