

This would have been more in the order of things, since Sikhs and Hindus of Punjab do not only speak the same language, but are also tied by kinship, having brothers and relations in both the communities. But when after all these years, even the Sikh intellectuals attach priority to their religious faith over loyalty to the more important political demands, the kinship seems to be a mirage, existing in a lunar landscape where a brother can be mistaken for an enemy.

Politics in India today has indeed entered a lunar phase, a phase of shadows, of penumbræ, where everything is mixed up, where as in a moon-lit landscape the ugly may look beautiful, where a criminal may appear to be a saint, where the nod of a fanatic monk can be taken as the supreme revolutionary directive. In a political scenario rendered chaotic by complete disarray of standards, where clannish separatism works in our blood like worms in the intestines, it is easy for organised groups of dedicated religious revivalists or chauvinists to deceive the people by rallying those who respond to them against some other community, holding up the latter as the cause of the former's problems. The revivalists dig up half-forgotten myths and legends that reinforce the divisions. The chauvinists pick up other linguistic communities as scapegoats and targets of attack.

One should not ignore the definite social, economic and cultural basis for such agitations - a basis created by government policies of uneven development. But then again, one should not confuse the base with the superstructure - the leadership.

Frequent mass response to such agitators (as in Assam) often leads some sections among the Left to mistake the agitations for anti-ruling class movements. In a situation where the Left is finding leadership fast slipping away from its hands, it is natural for different segments of the Left to grope for signs and symptoms that may provide hope for a radical change. The desire to discover socialism in Khomeini's Islamic fundamentalism, or anti-imperialism in the Assamese agitation against foreigners, is representative of such tendencies. The hope of the CPI(M) to radicalise the Akali movement by acquiescing in its religious demands (to the extent that one of its Politburo leaders who has been working as a conduit between New Delhi and the Akalis, has acquired the sobriquet 'Akali Marxist'), is yet another example. Similarly, since concepts of the Left (eg, egalitarianism, anti-congressism) often filter into the demagoguery of the Right, it provides some among the revolutionary Left with a chance to rationalise and seek protection from the onslaught of the Establishment behind the militant facade of the Right. The swelling of the ranks of the fundamentalist All-India Sikh Students Federation with ex-Naxalites is a pathetic example of this trend.

But every such effort by the Left is like the touch of a perverted Midas and prepares us for a new disappointment, a new leaden (in-

stead of a golden) episode. The little paradises of hope give way to the vast infernos of fear as Khomeini's Iran slips into anti-Communist Inquisition, as the Communists are hounded out by the Assamese chauvinists, as Bhindranwale orders the Communists to be put on the hit-list.

CHAUVINISM AND NATIONAL SELF-DETERMINATION

What needs to be understood is that revivalism - whether Islamic or Sikh fundamentalism with promises to revive an egalitarian society, or Assamese xenophobia reinforced by legends of ancient heroes, or Bengali chauvinism fed by memories of the 19th century, or Maharashtrian jingoism harking back to the heroism of Shivaji - can never be a harbinger of the movement for the self-determination of nationalities. Such revivalist agitations, usually led by emerging groups of aggressive and articulate seekers of fortune and privileges (the Hindu petty bourgeoisie in Assam; the Jat farmers in Punjab) manage to rally the masses - who are fairly docile to authority, whether religious or

ANDHRA PRADESH

Agrarian Politics by Other Means

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THEY' have tried a variety of means, and most of them simultaneously. They got themselves elected to the Assemblies, to fabricate suitably porous land reform legislation and thereby got rid of some acres of barren land; parallelly some other surrendered to Sarvodaya leaders with their anti-bureaucratic bhoodan rhetoric and got rid of some more acres of barren land; others sold their acres to their government to house the temples of India's development. With this, and with irrigation and fertilisers, they ran out of barren acres and so stopped talking about land reforms. The most remarkable change in recent platform rhetoric of our politicians is the marked absence of the land reforms theme. Nobody exemplifies this shift of the centre of gravity of Indian populism away from the land question better than N T Rama Rao. The manifesto of his Telugu Desam Party is a remarkably populist document, written in the most uninhibitedly sonorous prose; it promises many things to many people—mostly abstract things like honour to women and civilisation to the tribals—but the one thing it does not promise anybody is land. This, incidentally, should confound those who believe that NTR represents the 'capitulist' Kammas against the 'feudal* Reddys and Brahmins. The fact of the matter is that over the years land reform has ceased to be a necessary element of the ideology of the ruling classes, and has indeed turned into its opposite; a sufficient amount of horizontal

otherwise - through an appeal to traditional scriptures that promise equality and a millennium, and through a judicious application of terror. But because of their close ties with feudal and regressive elements these leaders slip back easily to positions of fortification of the conservative social structure and perpetuation of economic inequality. Given the narrow objectives of a privilege-seeking class and the easy path of popularity through exploitation of dan loyalties, an agitation that begins as anti-Centre soon degenerates into a linguistic or communal riot. What to the Left looked like a plea for the self-determination of a nationality becomes a reactionary cry of racial vengeance. Whatever changes might take place at the base, the feudal prejudices firmly implanted in the superstructure become the key motivating force.

As long as the Left refuses to fight the outrageous customs and prejudices that masquerade as religious faith or racial superiority, parasitic worms will incubate in the martyrdom of fanatics and muster the support of the masses, and abortions of the past hoping through the bogs of politics will continue to manipulate the course of Indian history.

redistribution at the upper levels has taken place all those whom the system could co-opt have been co-opted and so any further talk of land reforms has distinctly seditious possibilities.

Not that they were unaware of, or unprepared for, these possibilities earlier. They were quite aware and suitably prepared. The landlords of our country have always believed in Metternich's notorious formulation that 'war is a continuation of politics by other means'; and, as Lenin added, the other means are violent ones. Thus, while agrarian politics was sometimes debated in the Assemblies, at other times it was conducted with guns (both public and private) and more traditional weapons in the countryside. After all, one of the first things Nehru's newly independent army did was to put down the peasants of Telangana and bring the harried landlords back to the villages.

But there is one change that has slowly crystallised over the years, parallelly with the demise of the land reforms rhetoric and the rise of issues like remunerative prices and subsidised inputs. This is a certain objective homogenisation of the rural rich, a change that is vulgarly seen as the rise of the 'rich peasant. In reality the agrarian rich are subjectively quite a heterogeneous lot. Some of them are absentee landlords who maintain houses and vocations in towns, and visit villages only at harvest time, if that; the majority of them are mixed absentee and resident land'

lords who have business and protest on vocations in town but maintain one member of the family or a faithful retainer in the village to look after' me farming without actually setting hand to plough. Only a few are of the hard-working rich peasant entrepreneurial type invoked by that description. The actual cultivation is done either by tenants or sharecroppers or annual farm-labourers or daily wage labourers—usually a mixture of all these. They are exploited extra-economically through caste and debt-bondage and through the exercise of traditional social domination. The surplus they generate is not necessarily nor mostly invested in the village, but much it goes into the towns (a significant but prudently unmentioned aspect of the exploitation of 'villages' by 'towns'), while the required investment itself comes through state-financed development projects. This developmental infrastructure has vested in the landlords' hands a variety of sources of power and patronage, not to mention finance — from rural banks and credit societies to gram panchayats and Zilla Parishads. This power and patronage meshes neatly with traditional feudal authority over social life. As is well recognised, one of the distinctive characteristics of Indian feudalism was that the state was not only a protector of exploitation but a principal means of extracting the surplus as well. This is exactly the role that the 'modernising state' is playing in rural India.

All in all, this class of rural rich is the dominant pole of the peculiar semi-feudal relations spawned by imperialist capital impinging on traditional social relations, intent on commoditising the product without revolutionising the production relations. It is natural that such an unnatural class should be subjectively very heterogeneous, but objectively there is one thing that has over the years come to hold it together, and that is its price and cost consciousness. It regards effort as a cost and the product as a commodity, together to pump out a surplus. Across the land, this is one class that is rapidly becoming a class-for-itself; and its footprints are visible everywhere as it becomes conscious of its position and strength. And the more it becomes thus conscious the more it gathers behind it the genuine rich and middle peasants, to form a formidable army. Thanks to it, urban eyes are now turned towards the countryside. But what the urban eye sees is not reality, but an ideology, in the pristine Marxist sense of the term. It sees the harassed and exploited 'village' confronting the exploiting 'town'. What it does not see is that behind the smokescreen of verbiage created by the Sharad Joshi is, it is their very constituents—the agrarian rich—who are carting the wealth of the villages to the towns, to be invested in quite un-rural and un-Bharatiya activities like road contracts, liquor shops, and a son-in-law employed by the satanic GOI. What it also does not see is that these 'farmers' have two faces, one a democratic face that holds up traffic demonstrating en masse for remunerative prices or the

Agricultural Costs Commission, and the Other the ugly face of 'atrocities on harijans' as our caste-struck Press calls them. A reality that has not yet percolate into the consciousness of observers is that the 'farmers' who rode their tractors behind Sharad Joshi into Chandigarh are merely the other face of the Bhoomi Sena landlords of Bihar. They are part of the same class-for-itself that is taking shape across the land, and the very obvious differences between them are merely an aspect of the subjective heterogeneity of this class-to-be which has much more rapidly become a class-for-itself than a class-in-itself. The truth of this will come out the day Sharad Joshi, who appears to be busy in Punjab these days, catches the Kalka Mail at Chandigarh and buys a ticket to Patna.

The consequence of this for genuine peasant struggle (which can today only mean a poor peasant struggle) is that the enemy it face is much more formidable than the old type of feudal lords. It is formidable not only because it is numerically larger, organisationally better equipped, and organically placed at the heart rather than the periphery of the Indian Economy, but also because it is a *populist* class, a class that can pretend (and is very successfully pretending) to be a democratic class, which ensures that the various political parties and public opinion' can take its side with much more passion and much less of inhibition than in the case of the old-type feudals. The Indian agrarian revolution promises to be a very bloody one.

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The Budget session of the AP Assembly this year was less a Budget session than a naxalite session. The principal topic of discussion was naxalites, and the concern—for a change—cut across the political spectrum, embracing the Congress(I) and the Communists, the Bharatiya Janata party and the Majlis Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen (MIM). The government, again for a change, sympathised entirely with the Opposition, though the natural contradictions between the compulsions of being in power and those of being in Opposition led to quite bizarre and humorous paradoxes. For instance, one day the agitated Opposition wanted to discuss the matter of the Gond tribals, who are alleged to have been incited by the naxalite to the point of flying a foreign flag in an obscure village of Adilabad district; it occurred to none of these People's Representatives that to the Gonds Hyderabad is foreign land and the tricolour is a foreign flag. But to their chagrin the Chief Minister, in a dramatic throw-back to his celluloid days, took off on the melodramatic theme of 'innocent tribals exploited by outsiders', and gave an oration that thrilled even the jaded Press; in this piece of histrionics, he was no doubt aided by his total ignorance of the matter, for the only tribal he knows is the film-studio version, the paradigmatic primitive dressed in beads and bird-feathers. Thus

robbed of what should have been *their* rhetoric, the confused Opposition reacted with pique. A CPI legislator complained that while the Opposition wanted to discuss the 'naxalite menace', the Chief Minister was quite unwarrantedly dragging the tribals' problems into the discussion; and a Congress(I) legislator from Adilabad, hurt in a sensitive spot by the reference to non-tribal outsiders exploiting the tribals, wanted to know "whether only we are exploiting the tribals—how about the Tribal Corporations set up by the government?" In their resentment at NTR's unseemly melodrama, the communist forgot that he was supposed to be a communist, and the Congressman forgot that it was his government that set up the Tribal Corporations! But the positive outcome is that together all of them let many cats out of the bag.

But it was not only the Gonds. If the naxalites were confined to obscure tribals in far-away forests, that would not have worried the legislators very much. What worries them is that the naxalite have become a force in the plains, particularly the plains of Karimnagar and Warangal districts. And the agricultural labourers are becoming increasingly responsive to their politics, violence and all. That was the reason for the furore, which included a demand for stringent police action to ruthlessly wipe out the naxalites, for distribution of arms to 'responsible persons' in the villages, and for an in camera sitting of the Assembly and Council to thrash out the strategy and tactics of dealing with the naxalite menace'. Only the talk of a national government was missing to give it a war-like or civil war-like complexion. It does not seem to have struck anyone as rather humorous that those who profess to regard talk of violence as unconstitutional, un-Gandhian and even un-Marxian, should plead for the distribution of arms sitting *inside* the Assembly, the living flesh of the Constitution. But what did strike many as rather more than cynical is the virtuous pose of non-violence put on by the most unlikely people. There is not a single political party in our country which does not employ violence for sectional ends. The BJP and MIM, in their electoral violence that gets turned into communal violence in Hyderabad, were responsible for more than 90 killings during the last one year; the Congress(I) and the CPI(M), in their running warfare in Warangal, killed a total of about 50 followers and cadre of each other during the term of the previous Assembly. And it is these paragons of non-violence who want arms to be distributed to them to fight the naxalites, whose tally is nowhere near those numbers!

Anyway the government has been quite alive to its responsibilities, even without prodding from the Opposition. Starting last July, it has gone on a spree setting up armed police camps staffed by A P Special Police (APSP) constables in the villages of Karimnagar, Warangal, Nizamabad, Adilabad and Khammam districts. These

camps have now become part of the topography of north Telangana; there were about 80 of them last September, increasing to 100 in January and at present the number has gone beyond 120. About 20 new camps came up in the tribal belt of Adilabad alone during the month of April. And, it must be added, armed police camps in 120 villages effectively means continuous watch on five times that many villages. Finding APSP either insufficient in numbers or efficiency, the state government declared that it would borrow two battalions of CRPF Centre. One battalion or part of it came from Orissa and was quickly deployed in the police camps of Warangal district, and in some Karimnagar villages. Within one month of the deployment (on January 10), the CRPF constables beat to death a lambada peasant by name Amru at Borlagudem in the Mahadevpur forest of Karimnagar. Either because of this premature exhibition of their superior efficiency or because of some internecine disagreements within the Khakhi establishment, the CRPF men are now back in the barracks and APSP has taken over. Not to be outdone in efficiency, they too beat to death (on April 12) a peasant a harijan by name Pothaiah, at Gidda in Nizamabad district.

The arms the Opposition has demanded are in addition to these armed paramilitary men, and in addition to ever-willing policemen of the regular police stations. The landlords are apparently not satisfied with the violent assaults of these police forces on the rural poor. That they are not satisfied was apparent well before the demand for arms as the landlords of Telangana have been actively organising themselves to fight the naxalites. They did not wait for legislative sanction before arming themselves; rather, the legislators demand would only provide a legal cover for their murderous activities. But what is curious is that they did not have to form Bhoomi Senas and such like goon squads, like their Bihar counterparts. They have instead, a national party, and that too a party with a Mean' image ('The only party a decent man can belong to': Ram Jethmalanis last words), the Bharatiya Janata Party. It has surprised many that the BJP, which has never had much of a following in Telangana, should attract the attention of the landlords in search of a part to fight the naxalites with; but there is a reason behind the mystery. The Congress(I) and Telugu Desam have charismatic leaders but neither an organisation nor an ideology—exactly the two things required to wage class warfare, while a charismatic leader is alright for getting votes. And the BJP has both. It has organisation in the form of the RSS and the student wing, Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP); and it has the right ideology for winning over the middle sections—Hindu Dharma, subtly (and quite illogically) metamorphosed as Patriotism, which is the last refuge of the propertied classes because it is the false consciousness of the petit bourgeoisie, a class that has so little property

that it imagines the whole country as its own and falls in love with it. (It is, as an aside, a good study in the dominance of economic interest over even pride, that the angry young toughs of the *sudra* landlord families—mostly Reddys and Velamas—have been willing to swallow the indignities of Hindu Dharma and proclaim it as their ideology, if only it will help to convince the middle classes that the rebellious labourers are anti-national rabble intent on dismembering and destroying the Motherland.)

Thus equipped, the landlords are waging their war. The RSS weekly, *Jagrti*, regularly carries front-paged lies and slanders (apparently planted by the police because they tally with police FIRs) about the naxalite movement. They slander any individual who refuses to co-operate with them in the anti-naxalite tirade, even if he is not particularly friendly with the naxalites. He is hounded until he joins the chorus. Anyone alleged to be killed by the naxalites—even if he was only a goonda—is posthumously canonised into a martyr in the cause of Bharat Mata, and the BJP, in the company of Congress and Telugu Desam, celebrates his annual *shraddha* with a public meeting that ends in much raving and ranting against the naxalites. The worst part of it is that they pick on any policeman who is either not sufficiently cruel to the rural poor and the naxalites, or insists on even-handedly booking cases against the landlords too; they pick on him and spread the calumny that he is a naxalite front man in the police, an accusation that is calculated to send him scampering in search of his lathi and his revolver to set his record straight. Last December, ABVP even held a rally at Hyderabad and submitted to the Chief Minister (among other things) a list of police stations whose Inspectors were not cruel enough or partial enough to satisfy them. One of the reasons for the state government's decision to borrow the CRPF battalions was the persistent clamour, both by the BJP and the other representatives of the landlords, that lower-level constables are friendly with the naxalites and so it is necessary to bring in non-Telugu speaking policemen (who will not be able to establish communication with the local people).

They have not stopped with slander and propaganda. Landlords and their sons in the guise of BJP or ABVP go around in jeeps with guns and other weapons and attack naxalite cadre. They thrash them on the street, throw them into the jeep, and hand them over to the police who repeat the treatment once again and book them in some false case. In colleges ABVP cadre move around with revolvers and knives and attack pro-naxalite students and youth, in the full confidence that they are immune from police cases. A Circle Inspector of Police at Warangal frankly confessed to the father of a pro-naxalite student who was attacked and injured by ABVP boys: "we cannot help you until your son changes his polit-

ics". Many such students have had to quit college fearing these murderous attacks.

In this process the patriots have committed quite a few murders. They murdered three peasants and a student in Karimnagar and a student in Nalgonda. The number of peasants and students whom they have thrashed or stabbed to death is much larger. Scouring the streets in jeeps or in gangs, armed to the teeth, and backed by the police, they threatened to become quite a menace. There was even a controversial case of a girl student of Karimnagar district who was kidnapped and molested; the police blame it on ABVP and ABVP on the police (adding, as is their wont, that the police officer who blamed them is a naxalite front man). In reality it was done by a collusion of the two.

All this, of course, goes without mention in the Press and discussion in the Assembly. But when the naxalites retaliated and killed two of the most notorious of these landlord-patriots turned goondas, the entire State sat up and decried the murder of an advocate (one of them also happened to be an advocate). BJP advocates made tearful speeches in their Bar Associations and got the Courts boycotted in town after town. And that was also when all the People's Representatives in the Assembly started demanding arms to 'responsible persons' in the villages, to defend the 'people' against the naxalites.

The chorus goes on and on and will no doubt pick up in tone and strength as the landlords get organised on other fronts too. It is not without significance that one of the two BJP men killed by the naxalites was also a 'peasant' leader, being a district leader of the Bharatiya Kisan Sangh. Not only the BJP, but all the Parliamentary parties are trying to overcome their ingrained habit of regarding mass action as merely the formal inaugural prelude to electioneering, and to lead more has and Rasta Roko programmes and so on. The issues they are focusing on are quite typical of the agrarian causes championed by the landlords (though they concern a much wider section of the rural population): steady supply of power to villages, quick completion of irrigation projects, remunerative prices for cash crops, etc, though till now their attempts to stage mass demonstrations have been flops; they have just lost the habit of mass agitation. But that will no doubt not remain so for ever, and as the agrarian rich strengthen their leadership on this front, they will no doubt become much more violent on the anti-labour front. As it is, a typical Press report of the meetings of the BJP or Telugu Desam or Congress(I) leaders begins with an attack on the State (or Central) government for neglecting the 'farmer' accompanied by specific demands regarding pricing and power supply, and ends with an appeal to ruthlessly crush the 'naxalite menace'. This is likely to be the theme for the scenario to unfold over the next few years.