

ANDHRA PRADESH

Anti-Reservation, Yet Once More

K Balagopal

SOUNDS of the future are sending their echoes backwards. As one reads the posters and listens to the arguments one is filled with an indistinct sense of unease, a premonition of the scenes that are going to trample along the streets of this land twenty, thirty or forty years hence; a prescience that is more akin to a feeling of *deja vu* in reversed time.

On the face of it there is nothing alarming about the picture; it is perhaps even slightly amusing. There are these hundreds of youths, boys and girls, well-fed and well-dressed, marching along the streets posters in hand and slogans on their lips. They are obviously more accustomed to picnicking than to agitating, for they are agitating as if on a picnic. Their slogans too do not belong to the world of Indian mass politics. They are, needless to say, mostly in English; and they have none of the sonorous resonance we are all accustomed to; instead they have the crisp brevity of stickers and ads.

The aplomb with which the agitation is being conducted is astonishing in itself. Not one agitation since NTR came to power has been tolerated so benignly; and never have the Andhra police smiled so much at agitators. Their hands must surely be itching to have a go at the agitators, for it must be said to their credit that they have always exhibited commendable impartiality in thrashing trouble-makers of any sort. But NTR has warned them in a well-publicised statement that "however much the anti-reservationists provoke the police, the police must not get provoked". Democratic rights are having their innings in Andhra. The agitators deflate the tyres of buses and police jeeps; they take out endless processions in Hyderabad, where prohibitory orders have been continuously in force for the last 17 years; one day they have a programme of travelling ticket less in buses all over the state, the next day they have a *bandh*, the third day a *rasta roko*, and so on. They are trying out all the agitational forms we have heard about and some more besides. If anyone wants to know what the future stateless society imagined by the communists will look like and how freely the people can exercise their democratic rights in such a society, he can walk into Hyderabad and watch it in action.

But since we are not living in a stateless society, there is something suspicious about this; and the suspicion gets strengthened when one observes that during the same period, a procession of fishermen protesting against the government's policy of contracting out fishing rights in irrigation tanks to wealthy contractors was mercilessly lathi-charged. This, of course, is not to mention

what is happening in rural Telengana in the name of suppressing the naxalite movement.

MURALIDHAR RAO COMMISSION

It all started with N T Rama Rao's decision to pull out of the Secretariat's cupboards the report of the Muralidhar Rao Commission on reservations to backward classes (BCs). The Commission had been appointed in January 1982 and had submitted its report in August that year. Nobody appears to have bothered much about the report all these years until NTR pulled it out recently with an eye to the ensuing elections to the Panchayat Mandals; and Muralidhar Rao himself passed away in the meanwhile with some question marks attached to his integrity.

The report, apart from being rather shoddy, is a very peculiar document. From the terms of reference it appears that the intention of the Congress government in constituting the Commission was either to comply with the letter of the recommendations of the Anantharaman Commission of 1970, which had recommended that the classification and quantum of reservations to the BCs should be reviewed after 10 years; or, worse, to actually identify at least a few backward castes which had 'progressed' using reservations during the last decade and delete them the list of beneficiaries. What Muralidhar Rao (who himself belonged to a backward caste) did was to ignore the terms of reference and set out to do all he could to help the backward castes, a decision that is difficult to find fault with, all things considered. He therefore refused to delete any of the backward castes from the existing list (with the exception of one section of the Kalingas of Srikakulam), but added nine more to the list instead. Since it would be a miracle if any backward caste had succeeded in pulling itself up to level with the Reddys, Brahmins and Kammars in a matter of ten years, it is difficult to find fault with this reluctance either.

What really got the goat of the forward castes however was that he recommended that the quantum of reservations for the BCs should be increased from 25 to 44 per cent. He supported this by a simple piece of arithmetic. The scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and minorities together constitute about 30 per cent of Andhra's population. The remaining 70 per cent is to be shared out between the BCs and the forward castes. Since no caste-based census has been taken after 1931, Muralidhar Rao chose to go by the estimate of the Mandal Commission, which had taken the forward castes to represent 17.58 per cent of the population.

Muralidhar Rao, who apparently did not care for decimals, rounded this off to 18 per cent, and deduced that the BCs therefore constitute 52 per cent of the state's population. He further estimated that about 8 per cent of the BCs manage to compete on their own steam with the forward castes. How he arrives at this estimate is rather obscure, for he has obviously not gone in for any kind of statistical exercise, and indeed total unconcern for any systematic procedure in arriving at numerical estimates is the hallmark of his effort; but it is indicative of the scruples he suffered from that he thought of estimating this figure at all. He then deducted this 8 per cent from 52 and arrived at the recommendation of 44 per cent reservation for the BCs. He must have breathed his last at peace with himself.

It is this arithmetic that infuriated the forward castes. Their argument is that Muralidhar Rao on the one hand accepts the Mandal Commission's estimate of the proportion of forward castes in the population, but on the other hand will have nothing to do with that Commission's criterion for backwardness; instead he jealously keeps out of the list of BCs some of the presently forward caste communities which might possibly become backward by the Mandal Commission's criterion. It is this suspension in the paradise of *Trisanku*, where they have neither the benefit of being reckoned backward nor the numerical advantage of being enumerated forward, that really enraged them. They have therefore been digging up the censuses of 1921 and 1931 and taking a head count of their ancestors to prove how numerous they were and therefore are. Understandably a lot of cooking up of statistics is going on in the process. Numerical accuracy is too fragile a thing to stand up to the exigencies of social conflicts. The forward castes have come up with the estimate that they constituted 33 per cent—and not 17.58 as Mandal would have it—in the year 1921, and therefore that the BCs also constituted another 33 to 35 per cent of the population and not 52. They achieved this miracle by counting the entire heterogeneous Kapu caste complex as forward castes, though half of those castes are backward according to the 1970 list. The truth is that notwithstanding the evident discrepancy between the Mandal Commission's well-defined criteria for identifying backward castes and Muralidhar Rao's lack of any criterion at all, it turns out that the population estimates of Muralidhar Rao are reasonably accurate, entirely by accident and in spite of himself. A careful computation of the 1921 census shows that the Hindu BCs (as classified in 1970) constituted about 42 per cent of the population then. To arrive at the current proportion, one should do three things: add the population of the denotified tribes as well as backward class Muslims and converted Christians; add the

population of the nine new castes recommended for inclusion in the list of BCs by Muralidhar Rao; and take account of the likelihood that the population of the BCs has had a relative acceleration of its growth rate, since it is generally known that the poor have had a higher growth rate of population than the rich in recent decades. Taking all these into consideration, there is no doubt about the BCs being more than 50 per cent of the state's population at present.

THE AGITATION

Whatever the facts, it is two months since the forward castes took to the streets. Officially all the political parties defend reservations, but on the sly it is the leaders of their student and youth wings that are leading the agitation. This is particularly true of the BJP, whose student followers in the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) constitute the bulk of the anti-reservation agitators, especially in the Telengana districts. The agitators have formed an organisation called the AP Nava Sangharshana Samiti (APNSS), as well as a Parents' Association. If all this appears to have some resemblance to the Gujarat anti-reservation agitation, that is obviously no accident.

Every reactionary social movement creates a myth that truly symbolises it, justifies it in its own eyes and in the eyes of the prevalent normative presumptions. The myth generated by the anti-reservationists of Andhra centres around a patriotic concern for 'merit'. The brunt of their ideological attack is that reservations destroy 'merit'. The ontological status of this thing called 'merit' is almost that of a physical substance that resides in different people in different quantities. It is the latent brahminism of our culture asserting itself. This 'merit' is measured accurately by the percentage of marks a student gets in his examinations; due recognition to 'merit' is necessary if the nation is to progress; and conversely, everybody who has this 'merit' is an asset to the nation. There is no need to labour the absurdity of these notions but they seem to be serving the purpose of legitimising the agitation in the eyes of those persons who would otherwise be unwilling to openly oppose reservations, whatever they may think of them at heart.

It is interesting that the anti-reservationists have chosen this myth in preference to certain more populist myths that they could have adopted; like for instance the large body of lower middle class among the forward castes, who could also do with a helping hand from the state. In the beginning it was argued for a while that reservations to backward classes are depriving the poor among the forward castes of their educational and employment opportunities, an argument that sounded reasonable enough to attract many people. It so happened that at this time an unemployed Reddy youth

committed suicide at Hyderabad. The Press put the news quite deliberately on the front page, and the anti-reservationists made much of it, implying that he had been killed by the policy of reservations in jobs to BCs. But the focus of their arguments has primarily been on 'merit', how it is destroyed by reservations, and the harm done to the nation thereby. Emphasis on such a non-populist and elitist myth is probably due to the preponderance of the RSS outlook among the agitators, an outlook that is known to dislike socialism so much that it will not even be populist.

And corresponding to the myth they have chosen, their campaign, though physically at a low key, is quite vicious in the arguments and notions it is spreading. All of a sudden the forward castes have collectively become meritorious and the rest of the people incompetents. It is Manu and Baudhayana resurrecting themselves with a vengeance, the oddity being that the identity of the agents of the resurrection, most of whom those worthies would have recognised as Sudras, would scandalise them. The image of the backward castes deliberately set up and propagated by the agitationists is that of worthless incompetents sneaking up from behind and depriving brilliant and deserving youth of college seats and jobs, and destroying the nation's prospects of achieving greatness. Some of the slogans printed on the posters they are carrying are quite offensive. In medical colleges they have put up pictures depicting a backward caste medical graduate removing a tooth instead of an eye; those who get seats and jobs on reservation make unreliable engineers and inefficient bureaucrats; and so on. And by way of relief, some of the slogans are amusing. One frequently printed slogan carries the plaint: 'Is it a sin to be born in a forward caste?'. The ironical justice of the question will strike anyone with a sense of history.

In spite of this viciousness latent in their campaign, they are having a field day. The state is uncommonly benign, and the Press is terribly friendly. Everything the agitationists do is described as 'imaginative', 'innovative', 'interesting', etc. Every day for the last two months every newspaper has been carrying front-paged photographs of the anti-reservationists doing all kinds of mundane things: taking out processions, sticking posters, deflating the tyres of police jeeps, polishing shoes and sweeping roads (which are among the novel agitational methods invented by them), and so on. Their meetings and Press conferences are reported in a most tendentious fashion. It is rarely that so much appreciative commentary is added to routine reporting in the daily Press.

THE REACTIONS

Two kinds of reactions are of interest, one that of the BCs and the other that of the Left. To put it simply, the BCs are ineffec-

tive and the Left is groping around. The reasons are perhaps to be sought in a proper understanding of what these anti-reservation agitations really signify. Reactionary social movements rarely mean what they say, nor signify what they pretend to. A failing of the Left has always been that it discusses issues within the terms and parameters set by the opposition, instead of dissecting the terms of the discussion themselves. So long as the discussion of the 'reservations question' keeps turning around unemployment among the lower middle class forward castes, the alleged monopolisation of the benefits of reservations by upper class BCs, or the question of 'merit', we may at best succeed in debunking a couple of myths, or salvaging our consciences by inviting all the poor irrespective of caste and creed to unite. But we will never understand *why* the anti-reservation movements are picking up just now, why they are being sponsored and led by propertied people who have no real need of a government job, why the lower middle class forward caste youth running behind the anti-reservationists are unable to realise that getting rid of reservations will not solve their problem of unemployment because it will not create more jobs, why (as some progressives bemoan in frustration) nobody is able to realise that socialism is the only solution to the problem, neither reservations nor 'open' competition. Take for instance the active participation of girl students in the agitation, certainly a rather unusual phenomenon. A bemused newspaper man who sits at his desk receiving Press notes is struck by the fact that most of the running around for the anti-reservationist is being done by the girl students; these girls, he says, will not be able to pursue careers anyway, whatever be their aspirations. Many of them will not even get as far as applying for jobs; and it is difficult to believe that they are worried about the jobs-to-be of their husbands-to-be; human beings are rational but not all that much. For the girls, especially these middle class forward caste girls, dowry and the macabre phenomenon called 'dowry deaths' are much more immediate problems that one would, by common notions of human rationality, expect to engage their attention more than reservations. And yet, he says, he has never seen them one-tenth as active in an anti-dowry campaign.

Another thing that has equally surprised observers is the inability of the BCs to unite and defend their rights. Muralidhar Rao estimated their number as 52 per cent of the population. Even the most rabid upper caste estimate puts their number higher than that of the upper castes. And yet, even as the APNSS of the upper castes is having a field day with its agitation, the counter-organisation floated by the BCs, the AP Sama Sangram Parishad (APSSP) has not only not created a notable impression, but it soon split into two and it is to be seen whether

the two put together will be any more effective than the original one. Unless one is to interpret this too as lack of 'merit' on the part of the BCs, one must discover the reason for this oddity.

The reasons appear to lie in (a) the nature of the caste system (its real nature, not the meaningless brahmin-kshatriya-vaishya-sudra classification of the Dharmasastres), and (b) the pressures generated by contemporary political economy. A large part of the history of India can be told in terms of the transformation of endogamous groups or communities (loosely called tribes) into castes. The caste continues to be endogamous, but the difference is that whereas the original community was an autonomous entity as a unit of production (including primitive direct appropriation of the fruits of nature), with at most relations of exchange with surrounding society the caste has a well-defined position within a larger unit of production. Each caste has an economic role for itself, though it is not immediately that each economic activity is served exclusively by just one caste. Since tribal communities are localised in their spread, it follows that it is most natural for castes to be localised and confined to small regions. This is a phenomenon that is easily observable with the backward castes: of the 100 and odd backward castes identified in AP, a very large number are confined to just one or two districts, or at most an eco-historical region of the state.

But two things happen at the point of and subsequent to the transformation. One is that the tribal community frequently splits into two, indicating a class division. A large number of castes, for instance, exist in pairs, one backward, and one forward, with the difference being indicated by a prefix. For instance there are two kinds of Balijs, two kinds of Kalingas and two kinds of Velamas, etc. The upper sections take to trade/cultivation, and the lower sections remain food gatherers or become labourers. The next thing that happens is that from within the upper sections of different communities spread across a large area, a class consolidation takes place, based primarily on substantial landholding or substantial trade. The rich among the various localised communities-turned-castes consolidate across the board as a fresh grouping. But the original characteristic of endogamy is carried forward and reproduced in what is essentially a class formation and so what should have become a class of substantial landholders becomes one more caste. This appears to be the genesis of all the dominant landed castes: the Reddys and Kammas of Andhra for instance. There is no other way one can account for the wide spread of these castes across the state, in contrast to the localisation of the BC cultivating castes, unless one believes that the good Lord in his wisdom created the castes according to *guna* and *karma* as He says in the Bhagavadgita.

Sometimes a secondary consolidation is attempted at a lower level, with the remaining middle level cultivating castes 'trying* to come together as another extensive caste; but in Andhra at any rate this secondary consolidation has remained incomplete. The Munnurkapus, Balijs, Telagas, Tenugus and Mutrasis are collectively referred to as Kapus but the consolidation has remained un consummated and the term Kapu as often refers to the profession of cultivation as to a caste or a caste complex (I believe the term Jat has the same status in parts of the North.) In contrast, the consolidation has been quite successful in the case of the upper cultivating castes; with the Kammas almost entirely so, but with the much more heterogeneous Reddys to a lesser extent: the Reddys of Rayalaseema do not intermarry much with those of Telengana (though there is no prohibition), and the Reddys of Nellore district are generally regarded as a sociological species all by themselves.

This historical reality lies behind the ability of the forward castes to attack reservations much more vigorously than the BCs are able to defend them. The difference is not merely in relative economic strength. The scheduled castes are on the whole much poorer than the BCs, but 'untouchability' and the predominant occupation of agricultural labour have given them an identity cutting across the regions which has enabled them in times of need to come together more effectively (as the aftermath of the Karamchedu killings of last July demonstrated), than the BCs have been able to do now. The localisation of the cultivating BCs in contrast to the wide spread of the landholding-upper castes, by the very nature of their historical formation, is the reason why agitations against reservations to BCs—whether in Gujarat or in Andhra—have not met with effective resistance from the beneficiaries. This, needless to say, is only a disability and not a determinate impossibility.

It is against this backdrop of uneven caste formation that we have had a certain amount of economic development in the post-Independence period. There has been some technological modernisation in agriculture and allied activities, and an attendant growth in trade, business and finance. A new rich class has grown around this development, a class based on landholding and trade. The basis of its enrichment is certainly the possession of property, but the rich among the landholding upper castes have made full use of not only their substantial landholdings but also the wide spread of the upper castes as a whole to appropriate the fruits of this development, especially to entrench themselves in the political superstructure which has grown over this process of development and which directs it. The caste connection has played a major role in apportioning the fruits of

development in favour of the rich among the upper castes.

It is their children, along with the children of brahmin bureaucrats and professionals, who are leading the anti-reservation agitation today. It is not an accident that the richest among them congregate in the professional colleges—Medicine and Engineering—and it is here that the anti-reservation agitation has taken its most offensive and vicious form. Just as their fathers used the extensive presence of their castes to dominate the provincial economy and political power structure, they are today using the same extensive spread of their castes to build a strong agitation against reservations to BCs. The relatively localised BCs, which never had the capacity to consolidate over a large area so that even the rich among them could never assert themselves in the economy and polity on par with the rich forward castes, are equally and for the same reason handicapped in countering the agitation.

The arrogant self-assertion of the new rich provincial propertied classes is a notable phenomenon of recent years, and its footprints can be discerned in various spheres of social life and struggle. Anti-reservation agitations are one such sphere. In this essential sense there is little difference between anti-reservation agitations and 'atrocities on harijans' as violent attacks on the rural poor are described by our Press. In rising to dominance and riches this new rich class used its extensive caste links to rope in its lower middle class caste-fellows as camp followers and voters to help it pull itself up, and now it is using the same lower middle class caste-fellows as foot soldiers in fighting the special privileges acquired by the BCs by dint of prolonged struggles. The fascist possibilities inherent in a wide-spread and rapidly-consolidating class of new rich are familiar to history; and when the class is provided with an army of potential foot soldiers—whether they are only 17.58 per cent of the population or more—as a consequence of the unique history of this country, the danger becomes more serious. The Left would do well to recognise that this is where the essence of the matter lies, neither in the obviously spurious question of salvaging 'merit', nor in the seemingly more rational question of unemployment and consequent frustration among youth. Reality is the last thing that should be taken at face value. Its rationality is Hegelian, not positivist. It becomes the duty of the Left to convince the lower middle classes among the forward castes, whose frustrations are as real as those of other poor people, to save themselves from becoming foot soldiers of fascism; if the Left confines itself to clichés like 'reservations will not solve the problem of unemployment', 'it is not caste but class that is decisive, it will be fiddling trite tunes while the *mohallas* burn.