

past their sixties and have little following among the middle and small peasantry. Others in the state government like Vilasrao Deshmukh are new-comers to politics. By contrast Pawar has deep roots among the middle and small Maratha peasantry in Marathwada, western Maharashtra and certain districts of Vidarbha. A large number of his party's legislators have been elected to the state Assembly from rural constituencies.

Pawar will not find it difficult to strike a political bargain with the R S Gavai faction of the RPI. Major Dalit Panther factions are among Pawar's supporters. Sharad Joshi and his Shetkari Sanghatana are similarly expected to be sensitive to Pawar's political interests. On many occasions recently, Pawar has been the main speaker at farmers' rallies organised by the Shetkari

Sanghatana, When the Congress(S) convention was in session at Aurangabad Sharad Joshi suspended his 'rasta roko' agitation in Marathwada to enable Pawar's followers to travel to Aurangabad.

At the same time, Pawar has close contacts with leading young industrialists in Bombay, Pune, Aurangabad and other major cities in the state as well as in Delhi. Many of these industrialists are known to be in the good books of the prime minister. It is now upto the prime minister to determine Pawar's role in the Congress(I). And it should not be surprising if Rajiv Gandhi decides, now or some months later, that he needs a chief minister in Maharashtra of his own age group, sophisticated and 'modern' in outlook—unlike the S B Chavans, Nilangekars and Vasant Rao Patils.

## ANDHRA PRADESH

# Murder of a Veteran Democrat

**K Balagopal**

HE was an affectionate and lovable old man. His weather beaten face always managed to have just three days' growth of stubble, and he had the habit of stroking it contemplatively while talking. With 40 years' contribution to the left and democratic movements behind him, and that too in ever-turbulent Telangana, he commanded a recognition and reluctant respect that he was confident would save him from the worst-intentioned enemy. Even the Razakaars could not kill me when I was much younger; nobody will touch the hair on my head today' he would frequently tell well-wishers. He reckoned wrong there. What Kasim Rizvi's Razakaars could not do, and what the 200 odd landlords of Karimnagar supplied with arms by the state during the last five years did not dare to do, N T Rama Rao's police could and did. They pulled him out of his house in the early hours of this November 7 and shot him dead point-blank.

Japa Lakshma Reddy was a peasant through and through. He belonged to Algunoor, 5 kms from Karimnagar town and on the banks of the Maner, a tributary to the Godavari. He had about 10 acres of land and a house in the village. In the late forties, as a young man in his twenties, he joined the Telangana peasant uprising. It was precisely peasants of his class (and frequently also his caste) that formed the most visible and vocal core of that uprising. He could recall till his last days how peasants of his class burnt with resentment at the obscene exploitation and plunder they were subjected to by the Deshmukhs, how they were devastated—of land, cattle and gold—by the inflation years of the second world war, and how as a consequence they all turned to communist politics. And he would end his recollections invariably with the caution that it was precisely this class that had lost its enthusiasm for the struggle after Nehru's troops entered Hyderabad, and this loss of spirit contributed significantly to the calling off of the struggle. He himself was one

of those who did not lose spirit, then or ever.

Not being very much educated in a formal sense (he gave up studies as an intermediate student) he worked mainly as a courier for the movement in those days, carrying messages between leaders and cadre of the underground. Being a courier is a risky business, as anyone who has ever been one will testify. If you are caught, the police know very well that you know a lot, and also that you are a nobody for the outside world and you can be tortured merrily without raising the sort of fuss or retaliation that torture of a prominent leader would call for. In the recent naxalite movement in Andhra, perhaps the worst victims of police torture have been couriers. Lakshma Reddy was one of the lucky ones who came through unscathed; he was luckier still to escape the wrath of the Razakaars whose viciousness was worse than that of the police and the military for it was compounded by communal passion. He was fond of recounting a story of an encounter he once had with a Razakaar: that man had a gun in hands and Lakshma Reddy walked plumb into him; he was too scared to turn back and run and so stood rockstill and commended himself to God. The Razakaar, on his part, mistook this immobility for the self-assurance of an armed man, got scared in turn, dropped his gun and ran for life.

After the withdrawal of the armed struggle by the CPI, Lakshma Reddy worked in the party for a long time. He was in the Karimnagar District Committee of the party from 1950 to 1959. He was elected sarpanch of his village panchayat and served in that post for 10 to 15 years. He quitted the party in 1959 but joined an independent Marxist group that formed itself in the district in 1962, as part of the ferment that preceded the split in the CPI in 1964. It remains a matter of some doubt whether the naxalbari uprising found an immediate supporter in him, for he was, as I said, a peasant through and through and talked in terms of events,

impressions and morals years and days. But, certainly, the escalating 'encounter' killings of the early seventies found a vocal protestor in him, and when the civil liberties movement took off in Andhra, he was one of the first to join it. Today the civil liberties movement is staffed by academics, journalists and lawyers, but when it started in Andhra in the early seventies it was poets—led by Mahakavi Sri Sri—who were at the forefront. When Sri Sri, as the first president of AP Civil Liberties Committee (APCLC) visited Karimnagar in 1974, Lakshma Reddy was the person who took upon himself the burden of organising a civil liberties meeting.

## BUILDER OF CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

But he really discovered the vocation of the evening of his life in the civil liberties movement after the lifting of the Emergency. The year 1978 saw the notification of two (subsequently subdivided into four) talukas—

Jagtial and Sirsilla—of Karimnagar as 'disturbed areas' under the AP Suppression of Disturbances Act; and much earlier the Godavari forest region of Manthani and Mahadevpur had been declared 'disturbed'. To take upon oneself the task of organising a civil liberties movement in such a place requires a lot of guts and determination and Lakshma Reddy had these qualities in good measure. He was one of the builders of the civil liberties movement in Andhra. A number of young people of Karimnagar—lawyers and college teachers—were inspired as much by him as by the imperatives of the situation to join the civil liberties movement. He watched them—and helped them develop into good activists, and guided them in his capacity as president and secretary of the Karimnagar district unit of APCLC. Later he watched them being assaulted, arrested, tortured and killed, and being forced to resign from the organisation, but himself withstood the onslaught to the end. The state realised that with some people the only way to silence them is to silence them for good, and it did just that to him.

For civil liberties organisations in India, 'fact-finding' has from the beginning been the major task. I do not think civil liberties organisations in any other country do as much fact-finding as they do in India. The Indian village is no longer economically self-contained but that only means that goods enter and leave the village, not that people, ideas and news are exchanged in any significant measure with the outside world. News of violation of people's rights, especially, remains within the village—except to the extent that it is wafted out of all shape on the breeze of rumour—unless somebody from outside takes the trouble to uncover the facts and report them to the world. And if the violation in question is not a casual or local phenomenon but deliberate and considered state policy, the difficulty of even fact-finding gets compounded by fear. Over the years fear has become almost a physical presence in the villages of the 'disturbed' areas of Karimnagar. Even to talk to journalists or civil liberties people has become a dangerous thing. The most surprising thing

about the Arwal massacre of Bihar was that the survivors talked frankly to journalists and civil liberties people; what was possible in Bindeswari Dubey's Bihar would be impossible in NTR's Andhra. If you talk to them today the police will come again tomorrow, pick up those who have talked, and thrash them. And so, if the police have raided your house and destroyed it brick by brick and tile by tile, you tell civil liberties people with a straight face that you destroyed the house yourself out of a maniacal whim. If the police have picked up your son and are torturing him and are likely to kill him, you say that you don't know where your son is. If the police have beaten you black and blue because they want you to hand over your son and you either cannot or will not oblige, you pretend that the blue-black welts on your body have been there since birth. In a situation of this kind, to make people talk is an effort all by itself. You cannot make them talk if you carry a questionnaire with you. Instead you talk about the rains and the crops, about goats and sheep and the new diseases they are dying of, you tell them your caste and hunt up your relations in the village; and may be half an hour of such effort will make people loosen up; they will then tell you how the police destroyed their houses, pulled down the roofs and walls, drove cattle into their fields, threw grain and clothes and anything they could lay their hands on into the well, how they beat them and tortured them, mounted them upon rollers and trampled upon them, slung them in a bundle between two chairs and thrashed them, how they abused the women in unprintably vulgar language and threw down old people and children from the cots—they will tell you how the police did all this, and if you ask them why they will also tell you that their only crime was that they happened to be sympathisers of the naxalite groups.

Lakshma Reddy was an expert in making people talk. He was, for all his political sophistication, one of them and quite consciously remained one of them; he spoke their language and their idiom; and if he disagreed with their cultural presuppositions where they did injury to democratic notions he did so without a sense of alienness or a rupture. The people recognised him as one of their own and shared with him confidences—including political confidences—which they would not normally share with outsiders.

#### HUNTED MAN

If all this made him a valuable person for the democratic movement, it equally made him hateful to the anti-democratic forces. Not only he but all the civil liberties activists of Karimnagar and Warangal districts became objects of attack. On January 12, 1985 Gopi Rajanna, advocate of Jagtial, was shot dead outside his house by RSS elements carrying arms given to them by the state to defend themselves from 'extremists'. After

that, one after another, civil liberties activities of the two districts, all of them lawyers, lecturers and doctors, were attacked viciously. Dr Ramanadham of Warangal was shot dead by the police on September 3, 1985. Others were locked up, tortured, beaten and threatened that if they did not give up civil liberties work and resign from APCLC they would suffer worse. Their houses and their land would be devastated; they would lose their jobs and they would not find anybody to even rent them a house to live in; the advocates among them would find their clients being threatened to take back the *Vakaalat*. The threats were so systematically enforced—by an unholy combination of the RSS and the police—that almost all the civil liberties activists of the two districts resigned from the organisation, practically at gunpoint. There were just two or three exceptions and Lakshma Reddy was not only one of them he was the most visible of them. Until a few days before his murder statements signed by him continued to appear in the press, alleging that so-and-so was being held in illegal custody by the police and there was danger of his being killed in a fake 'encounter'. Over the last decade or so of its existence, the civil liberties movement in Andhra must have saved countless lives by such timely press releases. And this is one task that Lakshma Reddy refused to be coerced into desisting from. "We may be unable to hold public meetings, print leaflets or investigate into police atrocities and illegal killings; but nobody is going to stop us from letting the world know of illegal detention—and a possible encounter killing" he would say. And he had the confidence that his age and long standing as a public figure would save him from being killed at least, come what may. He continued to hold this belief even after the police warned him more or less openly. Last year the Karimnagar police floated an organisation bearing the unwieldy name: Forum for Extremist and Radical Victims Association (with the inspired acronym FEAR VICAS). The organisation consists of police informers, suspended cops, some lumpen elements and ex-landlords deprived of their fangs by the CPI(ML) movement. The main purpose of this organisation was to function as a counter-civil liberties organisation, disturbing civil liberties meetings, threatening civil liberties activists, petitioning the government for more police camps and more police stations, for more sophisticated arms to the police, etc. On May 23 this year they gave a call for a bandh of Karimnagar against naxalite violence. That day plainclothes police led by the SI, Lower Maner Dam police station, raided Lakshma Reddy's house at a time when he was not there, manhandled his son, and threatened that their father would be killed. Lakshma Reddy, however, decided not to be browbeaten by such threats. The police waited for their chance to attack him.

The chance came in the form of the

murder of Buchi Reddy, DSP Peddapalli, by some naxalites, on the evening of November 6. Whatever the reason for killing him, the daily press, fed on filmi stories of revenge, came up with the calculation that three 'encounters' accounting for nine deaths had taken place in the area under the jurisdiction of this DSP during the last two years; (adding with some relish the incorrect piece of melodrama that he had personally participated in the killings—one report even going to the extent of saying that he personally 'hunted down' the naxalite activists); and that hundreds of houses of naxalite activists and their sympathisers had been destroyed and razed to the ground in the four talukas within his jurisdiction; and that therefore the naxalites had killed him in revenge. Oddly enough, these reports in the press, which is normally by no means sympathetic to the naxalite movement, have unwittingly done a lot to justify the killing of the police officer in the eyes of the public, and to weaken the objections of political critics who saw it as a piece of senseless heroism.

Anyway, the instant reaction of the police was to kill a civil liberties activist, just as they killed Dr Ramanadham at Warangal last year when some naxalites killed the SI of Kazipet. In the early hours of November 7 the police visited all the ex-civil liberties activists of Karimnagar and took two of them, both advocates, into custody. They were let off later, but for Lakshma Reddy, who had refused to quit the civil liberties movement, was reserved a different fate. Four policemen in plainclothes went in a white coloured Ambassador car to his house at Algunoor and knocked on the door. The time was about 4 am. Lakshma Reddy opened the door. The policemen bolted the door behind him, one of them held his hands and the others shot him dead. His son recognised an SI of Karimnagar among the assailants and gave the name to the press. The young man was so outraged that he even took out an axe and threatened to go to Karimnagar and kill the SI. It was with difficulty that people around restrained him. But two days later he was forced by threats whose nature one can easily guess to retract and say that he did not recognise anyone. Taking advantage of his retraction the police sent summons to the reporter of the Telugu daily *Andhra Jyoti*, which had published a report quoting Lakshma Reddy's son; the reporter was summoned to the office of the Circle Inspector, Husnabad, to give the police the information he possessed! The threat remain implicit in the summons, of course, that once he goes there the information will be extracted from him by means other than mere questioning. Indeed, this implicit threat is the real purpose of the summons: once such summons are accepted by the journalist community as normal, it becomes a very effective method of preventing the publication of news of lawless behaviour by the police.