

## ANDHRA PRADESH

## 'Missing': Telugu Desam Style

K Balagopal

A DOCUMENTARY on post-Allende Chile, made by an Australian producer, tells a gruesome tale of 'missing' persons. About 2,500 leftist opponents of the regime have been 'missing' in that country, and this tale is about two of them, one a leader of a teachers' organisation. The events that follow their 'disappearance' have a bizarre familiar ring. The friends and comrades of the 'missing' persons accuse the government of having picked them up and done away with them. The government at first denies the fact. The teacher's colleagues hold a protest meeting at his college, at which his teenaged son makes a speech; he warns them that they must do something before his father becomes one more corpse floating anonymously down the river. A few days later, a couple of dead bodies *are* discovered floating down the river. They are identified as those of the two missing men. The democratic-minded public rises in protest, led by a church-based human rights group. Predictably, government-sponsored righteous Christians demonstrate outside the church, accusing the priests of preaching communism in the name of human rights. The priest is at that time actually telling the congregation inside that atrocities like beating up demonstrators, nightly raids on poor slum dwellers, etc, cannot be accepted silently. The government for its part goes on air with the statement that unnamed international terrorists or revolutionaries or whatever, who cannot forgive failure, must have killed these men for having failed to make a revolution in Chile; and that all this noise about human rights is merely an attempt to kill a second bird with the same stone by putting the blame for their crime on the Chilean government. The denouement—the government bowing to the pressure of public opinion and accepting its crime—is untypical of such situations and testifies more to the strength of the democratic opposition in Chile than to anything paradigmatically inherent to state terrorism as such.

What is remarkable is how events, ideas and abuses repeat themselves thousands of miles away. While the phenomenon described as 'missing' has been made famous by the police and military establishments of the South American dictatorships, there is nothing specifically Latin about it, except to the extent that quantity makes a difference to quality and conscious intention lends significance to both. Making people 'disappear' is one of the universal methods employed in maintaining law and order, safe-

guarding national security and protecting public peace. When the police or other security forces kill some one, it is always a matter of choice whether they describe the killing as something palatable to law and morality or pretend that they have never seen the victim and that he has just vanished. But when making people 'disappear' becomes a conscious strategy pursued by the state to eliminate political opponents, it becomes significant. Death is death, but there is something specially chilling about an unrecorded and unacknowledged killing. An announcement of a death in (say) an 'encounter'; a date, a time and a place of killing; a story—even a fabricated one—of the clash; and an enquiry—even an eyewash—into the event, offers some sense of security, even if it makes no real difference to the dead body. But when people just disappear and turn into unidentified corpses discovered on a river bank or a railway track—or worse still vanish for good without leaving a trace behind—then that is a qualitatively different situation altogether.

Andhra Pradesh has been famous for 'encounters' for more than a decade and a half. About 450 political activists were killed upto 1977; after a gap of three years, the 'encounters' picked up again after 1980, continued after NTR came to power in 1983, and increased in frequency by a marked jump after his re-election in 1985. 55 political activists have been killed in this state in 'encounters' starting with January 1985, and there is no sign of a let-up in the near future. In each case, there is first an announcement of an armed 'encounter' between the victim and the police, followed sometimes by vivid stories of the alleged incident; then there follows an inquest and a magisterial enquiry, by a tahsildar or higher revenue official; the press is full of statements and counter-statements, allegations and investigations, by the victim's comrades, journalists, the government and civil liberties organisations; and as a finale, a cash award is given to the brave police officer who has committed the murder. In summary, killing someone in an 'encounter' is not all that simple and straightforward. In a given combination of circumstances it can even turn into a headache for the government, as happened for instance after the lifting of the Emergency, when the government was forced to institute a judicial enquiry into 'encounter' killings.

This realisation appears to have dawned on the AP police in recent times; and the

more the press and civil liberties organisations raise a hue and cry about 'encounter' killings, the more the police have been tempted to discover new ways of getting rid of naxalite activists. And making people just 'disappear' is the easiest alternative. What began seemingly casually in December 1984 has now started revealing the contours of a strategy. There have been at least six cases of naxalite activists being picked up by the police and either just disappearing or turning up as dead bodies, seemingly victims of 'accidents'. How many more have already suffered this fate is not known—indeed going unrecorded is simultaneously the horror of the phenomenon of 'missing' and its convenience for the state.

On October 12, 1986 two persons were picked up from a lodging house in Vijayawada. One of them was Dr Prasad, at one time a medical practitioner of Rajahmundry who had become a full-time activist of a naxalite group. The other person is believed to have been produced before a magistrate somewhere in Karnataka but Prasad himself has definitely disappeared. One rumour is that on November 28, he was shot dead at Addateegala in the East Godavari forest; but the police have not announced an 'encounter'. Instead they have just been denying that they ever arrested him. And just as the news of his 'disappearance' was making the rounds in the state, two unidentified and unclaimed dead bodies turned up in Karimnagar district one day, floating down the Kakatiya canal of the Sriramsagar project on the Godavari. To this day the identity of the dead bodies remains to be established, and whether one of them could be the 'missing' doctor of Rajahmundry remains a possibility.

They could have been two others also: Benjamin and Sukhjeevan Reddy, radical activists of Hyderabad, were picked up in November 1985 on the outskirts of the city. For about six months after the arrest the police unofficially acknowledged their arrest, that is to say admitted to their friends and relatives that the two young men were with them, though to a *habeas corpus* petition in the High Court they replied that they had never arrested them. But some time around the middle of 1986 the police began to deny any knowledge of the arrest even in private. To this day the two young men have not been seen, and it is highly unlikely that they are still alive and in detention in some lock-up a year and a half after their arrest.

Some instances, however, are clearer: one was Sheikh Imam, an activist from a poor Muslim family of Warangal. He was arrested, tortured to death and the dead body was thrown under an express train on April 22, 1986. The next day the police 'discovered' the dead body, conducted an inquest and announced that an extremist car-

rying explosives and arms had slipped and fallen under the train, trying to board it in a hurry. This young man has actually been hunted for by the police of Mahabubabad taluk for at least two years, and they had repeatedly threatened in the presence of witnesses that they would kill him if they found him. A less categorical case is that of Yakaiah, a harijan youth, again of Warangal. He was a student of a technical institute in the town, and was staying at one of the Social Welfare department's hostels for students of the scheduled castes and tribes. These hostels, suspected of being 'hotbeds of extremism', in the language of the police, are regularly subjected to nightly raids by the police all over the north Telangana districts, especially Warangal and Kahmnagar. Yakaiah was picked up on November 17, 1985, was known to have been kept in a police station in Warangal for some days, and then just vanished. For some time there was a rumour that an anonymous dead body was burnt by the police near a hillock to the south of the town, and the dead body could have been Yakaiah's, but the police have vehemently denied it and there is no way of proving anything.

To continue with the analogy of Chile, when there was a protest against the abduction and 'disappearance' of Dr Prasad, what the police did was to first of all deny the arrest, and then take vengeance against the protestors by arresting S S C Bose, a civil rights lawyer of Vijayawada, twice within the space of one month, and that too under the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act. The first time he was charged with inciting hatred against the state by publishing leaflets against police atrocities, and the second time the accusation was that he had tried to coerce the state by conspiring to set on fire a bus of the Road Transport Corporation. The charges owe their peculiarity, of course, to the fact that to bring a charge under the Terrorist Act, it is necessary to allege that the crime—whichever it is—was committed with a view of coercing the state or creating 'enmity between two communities. While it is the latter of the two predicates that has been mainly operative in Punjab, for which the Act was purportedly made, the rulers of Andhra realised quite soon (as far back as October 1985, in fact) that the former gives them a golden chance to put inside all manner of inconvenient people under the Terrorist Act. I am not aware how blithely the Act is being used in Punjab, but its use in AP, if properly documented, is bound to beat all records for arbitrariness in the implementation of laws which are arbitrary to begin with. Certainly, one has not heard of lawyers who do the *vakaalat* of Khalistan activists, or those who work for civil liberties, being held under the Terrorist Act in Punjab, but in Andhra that

is happening left and right.

To get back to our theme, there is strong reason to believe that making people 'disappear' is not a casual phenomenon but a conscious strategy being pursued by the police in the face of rising protest against more conventional police methods of getting rid of people. For the method is being employed also against ordinary criminal suspects; exact numbers, dates, names and places are difficult to give—that is precisely the main intention in pursuing this strategy—but there are frequent allegations in the press by kith and kin of ordinary criminal suspects that so-and-so has been picked up by the police and has 'disappeared'. Some times the

allegation turns out to be a false alarm, or else it has the hoped-for effect of forcing the police to produce the person in court. But there *have* been a few cases where the allegation has remained ominously suspended in the air.

Perhaps it proves—if it proves anything at all—that the more we succeed in exposing state terrorism, the more devious forms it adopts; and then the more difficult it becomes to fight it. One can either draw a pessimistic moral or a lesson of caution from this, and it is by no means a matter of indifference which of the two one chooses to draw.

## Women and the Burden of Child Health

Vimal Balasubrahmanyam

AT a workshop during a recent convention in Hyderabad on 'Healthcare as if People Mattered' one participant narrated how she and a group of high school students tried to impart knowledge about oral rehydration therapy (ORT) to low income and poor women. One response they encountered was very significant.

Some mothers felt that compared to giving a *goli* for diarrhoea, ORT seemed time-consuming and created even more child care responsibility for an overworked mother. The buying of a drug could be delegated to any member of the family, even a young child, while careful and periodic preparation of the OR solution has to be done by the mother only; a drug needs to be given only once or twice, unlike ORT which has to be done round the clock. ORT requires the continued presence and concentrated attention of the mother which is not possible if she is engaged in wage labour, particularly in the unorganised sector; and even if she a housewife, it makes further demands of her time and energy in an already overburdened schedule.

This is not to deny the importance and efficacy of ORT. But the demands which ORT makes of mothers has to be acknowledged, particularly as ORT is most needed by the poorest who are working for survival.

This perception of ORT by the overworked mother is just the sort of thing which could be taken advantage of by the drug industry to push irrational and harmful anti-diarrhoeal drugs. Those who talk of ORT as the miracle solution to diarrhoea deaths never mention that if a poor woman is to administer ORT to a sick baby, she can do so only if she has a right to paid leave of absence from her work, and if her domestic responsibilities are shared by other members

of the family.

Since the early 80s, with UNICEF having adopted 'child survival' as its slogan, child health strategies are being promoted based on the concept of children's rights and mother's duties; that mothers need to be 'empowered' with knowledge; once empowered, it is up to them to carry out the child health programme; and if they do not, because they cannot, they will have only themselves to blame for not preventing death and disease in their babies.

Take breast-feeding for example. This November it was announced that the government would ban all baby food advertisements in the media as part of its breast-feeding promotion programme. Which is excellent, but why is there no mention of legislation and social welfare provisions to make breast-feeding a feasible option for working mothers? Neither in 1981 when the WHO/UNICEF Code on Breast-feeding was adopted, nor now, five years later, has the government uttered one word about this women's dimension to the breast-feeding issue.

UNICEF's child survival strategies, envisaged as 'GOBI' (i.e., Growth monitoring, Oral rehydration, Breast-feeding, and Immunisation) seem to assume that all these years babies have been dying needlessly because of the ignorance of mothers regarding these four aspects of child care. Once 'taught', these women (who are apparently assumed to have limitless energy and all the time in the world) are simply waiting to be mobilised for Operation Child Survival. Those who talk big about child health at seminars and international conferences don't give more than a passing thought to the reality of women's lives even though they expect that all these child health programmes should be carried out by mothers.