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Physiognomy of some proscribed poems¹

*I did not supply the explosives
nor ideas for that matter
It was you who trod with iron heels
Upon the ant-hill
And from the trampled earth vengeance
Was born*

*It was you who struck the bee-hive
With your lathi
The sound of the scattering bees
Exploded in your heart and your shaken visage was
Blotched red with fear*

*When
The victory drum in the heart of the
Masses
you mistook for a person and trained your guns
Revolution reverberated from the four
horizons*

This poem was written in the Central Prison at Warangal by Varavara Rao in January 1985. That was the first of the three Januaries in succession that he would spend in jail; at that time he had been remanded to prison on three charges, applied one after the other, so that the total period of remand would be as long as possible; each charge

^{1 1} Agrarian Classes and Conflict, Perspective Publications, 1989

was applied after he came out on bail in the previous one. The gist of the charges was that he had supplied explosives to Naxalite youth and had organized a conspiracy to attack and kill a circle inspector of police. The inspector, as a matter of fact, was neither attacked nor injured, let alone killed. It was in an inspired poetic response to this charge that Varavara Rao wrote this poem confessing 'I did not supply the explosives, nor ideas for that matter'.

When he finally got bail on the three charges, police tried to keep him in jail by manufacturing an NSA warrant against him. If they had played it safe by just mentioning the same three charges as the grounds of detention -a time-honoured method of defeating bail orders- the district magistrate would have had no option but to sign it; but the police were a little too ambitious and added one more ground: that Varavara Rao had entered into a criminal conspiracy with underground Naxalites to kill some people; unfortunately the dates they chose for the conspiracy they invented in keeping with their contempt for veracity - were three days on which Varavara Rao was still in prison, and the district magistrate refused to issue the warrant of detention. For this and other similar indiscretions he was later in the year to be transferred to an obscure posting at Hyderabad.

Today Varavara Rao is one once again in prison at Secunderabad. He has been there for more than a year now. This detention is 'voluntary; for he had no other way of safeguarding his life from the murderous police of the state. He therefore got his bail in the decade-old Secunderabd conspiracy case cancelled and opted to go to jail. But the state is unrelenting in its witch-hunt of this most persecuted poet in India's recent history. The ground is prepared by policemen - the superintendent of police of Warangal, for instance - declaring in press interviews that he is no poet at all, but a rabble-rouser; and then a volume of non-poetry of this non-poet is proscribed by government through an order that is quoted in a press release but - nearly two months later - is yet to be published in the gazette.

Simultaneously the state places extraordinarily severe - and illegal - restrictions on him while he is in jail. There is no provision in the Prison Manual of AP to prohibit interviews for an undertrial prisoner with any class of visitors; the only provision is a punishment clause that allows the prison superintendent to cancel a prisoner's interviews for a specified period and that too only for infringement of prison discipline, and neither for the prisoner's political beliefs nor for any consideration related to the gravity of the charge s/he is accused of. And even this punishment is to follow the principles of natural justice, as emphasized by the Supreme Court of India in Sunil Batra vs Delhi Administration. Yet, Varavara Rao, who is not an NSA detenu but technically speaking only an undertrial prisoner, is being allowed interviews only with his wife and children, and that too with a special branch policeman sitting almost between them and taking down every single word of their conversation. Books sent to him by friends are frequently withheld and he is allowed to see only one newspaper and that too the one chosen by the jailor.

If all this seems maniacal and paranoid, then the only explanation is that it is so; as another poem in this proscribed collection says ('He got scared of the Earth'):

Heaping threats upon threats

Spreading fear upon fear

He himself got scared

He got scared of habitations

He got scared of water

He got scared of schools

He got scared of shadows

He shackled liberty

But when the hand-cuffs moved

He got scared at the sound.

It is difficult to think of a more apt commentary upon the poet's own persecution. But then the poet himself provides a fitting answer, in a poem dedicated to Benjamin Moloise: when the injustice of a regressed era throttles the billowing clouds of time:

Neither does blood flow nor tears

Lightning becomes thunder

Raindrops become a tidal wave

Mother Earth wipes her eyes

And the poet's message

Flows out from between the prison bars.

Persecution thus makes some kind of sense, and its futility is equally evident but one is still left wondering why the persecution must take form of proscription. Even if NTR's ingrained arrogance makes him insensitive to such matters, and the average policeman's hatred of writers (the viciousness of this feeling must be experienced to be understood) has an equally deadening effect on the imaginations of the higher-ups in the state's police, some bureaucrat or advisor somewhere (and NTR does have some friends who profess to believe in dialectical materialism and should therefore know some history) must have told the rulers of the state that even in the most extraordinary circumstances, proscription of poetry goes down badly with the articulate public. If they have nevertheless gone through with the ban, then there must be something extra in the poems that has hurt a particularly raw nerve. If one keeps in mind the fact that about the only thing that really touches a raw spot in the ego of NTR's administration is effective criticism of its police, then the full rationality of this unreason becomes clear.

For while the proscribed collections is called 'Bhavishyat Chitrapatam' ('Picture-frame of the Future'), its most trenchant and moving poems deal with themes, not of any

revolution, but police torture and killings. These are not perorations that describe the atrocities in gory detail (the highly sanskritised nature of literary Telugu makes it perilously apt for such thunderings) but poems full of irony, sensitivity and, of course, anger. The best of Varavara Rao's poems have the extraordinary quality of curving into themselves in a loop as they move forward, much like a circumferential point on a moving wheel, where a thoughtful involution rides an uncompromising objective movement that drives the focus of the involution forward. Being neither a poet nor a competent critic of poetry I would not venture to stake too much on the idea that this is perhaps what Marxist poetry should be like, but then his poetry itself is worth studying in any serious attempt to answer that question.

One poem that must certainly have hurt NTR's police is the one entitled 'butcher'; it is the tale told by a Muslim butcher of Kamareddy town who was witness to the killing of a 'radical' youth on May 15, 1985. The boy, a junior college student, was caught by the police when he was going around the town asking shop-keepers to pull down their shutters in protest against 'encounter' killings. They took him to a busy crossroads and beat him to pulp in public view with rifle butts 'as we beat a snake' in the words of the butcher. In Varavara Rao's poem he says:

I am a vendor of flesh

If you want to call me a butcher

then that is as you wish

I kill animals every day

I cut their flesh and sell it

Blood to me is a familiar sight

But

It was on that day I saw with my own eyes

The real meaning of being a butcher

*I too take lives
but never with hatred
I do sell flesh
but I have never sold myself*

*To me who kills goats every day
The meaning of the cruelty that
combines and conspires to take a life
Was revealed that day.*

Though the precise words, it must be added, are the poet's the thoughts belong to the butcher himself, whose deposition before the sub-divisional magistrate at Kamareddy must be among the most extraordinary of its kind.

But the poem that probably hurt the rulers most is 'Dance of Liberty', written in response to a speech made by the State's Home Minister in Karimnagar, at the height of 'encounter' killings and other brutal forms of police atrocities in the district. In that speech, the Home Minister Vasanta Nageshwara Rao, claimed that the state was now made safe for the untrammled play of liberty and freedom. The poet plays upon the Home Minister's unusual surname 'Vasanta' meaning spring. The spring god, in a macabre mood, invites the dancing girl of liberty to come and play Holi with blood:

*Dancing girl of liberty
come dance!
I have prepared the stage of Peace for you
I have prepared the cremation ground
for you*

In the shade of my hood

In the shade of my power

In the shade of the rulers' umbrella

Held aloft above my power

Dancing girl of liberty

Come dance!

The poem describes one by one the faked 'encounter' killings of that period and creates such a powerful image of blood-thirsty cruelty that it is difficult to think that rulers of the caliber that we have in this state would react with any urge other than the desire to proscribe the whole lot.

This speculation is about what really hurt the rulers of this state; what grounds they have chosen to indicate in the proscription order are as yet unknown and essentially not very relevant except for the purpose of challenging the order in a court of law. In the order they are bound to indicate grounds that will conform to whatever law the proscription is ordered under. In any case the courts in our country have never taken an unequivocal stand in the matter of freedom of expression. In this, as with the rest of the fundamental freedoms of bourgeois civilisation, the exceptional clauses in Article 19(2) to 19(6) of the Indian Constitution that allow the freedoms to be taken away have generally received juridical preference over 19(1), which allows the freedoms in the first place. Varavara Rao's collection, therefore, will probably stay banned - but then (and here is the most incongruous tail-piece you have ever heard) all the poems in the collection have been published in one magazine or the other during the last year or two, have been read, re-read and quoted, and the collection itself has already been reviewed in many Telugu dailies. Which only goes to prove that reason is of no consequence to feudal pique.