

## ANDHRA PRADESH-I

## Defeat in Victory

K Balagopal

THE press has hailed it as a repeat mandate for N T Rama Rao but his party's victory in the recently concluded panchayat (upper tier) elections is not all that spectacular. Compared to the 1985 assembly polls he has actually fallen short of maintaining his hold in terms of the percentage of posts won, while the Congress(I) has pulled itself up almost double; partly at NTR's expense but mainly at the expense of the other opposition parties. Barring the CPI(M), and that thanks to the party's alliance with NTR, all the others have come a sad cropper. The Congress(I) did even better in the municipal elections which were held simultaneously, winning more than half the 95 municipalities, including the corporation of Vijayawada.

Differential percentages of votes are being calculated and comparative graphs drawn up by determined analysts who are never daunted by the fact that their graphs have never been good for extrapolating to future elections—about the only genuinely useful purpose a graph can serve, if you count out its intimidatory value to the uninitiated—but there are many other things worth analysing. Like why NTR chose to restructure the panchayat system with a seemingly meaningless subdivision of the middle tier from panchayat blocks to much smaller panchayat mandals; why he has chosen to have direct rather than indirect elections to the posts of mandal presidents and zilla parishad chairmen; why, indeed, he has at all chosen to have elections right in the middle of a happy and unlikely-to-be-disturbed five-year assembly term; why he has been denied victory precisely in the Krishna delta that nurtured his party in 1983; and finally why the almost simultaneous restructuring of grassroots democratic structures in Karnataka and Andhra have just about as much of a likeness as the Mad Hatter's raven "and the writing desk.

NTR's wisdom has always been a dubious thing but he certainly has had intelligent advisers. And somebody must have made it clear to him quite early in his rule that political power just does *not* consist of getting into the top seat, which is about all he achieved with the massive victory he got in 1983. The seemingly tidal wave-like victory left behind it the foundations and pillars of the power structure—in the gram panchayats, the panchayat blocks, the zilla parishads, the town municipalities and the three corporations at Hyderabad, Visakhapatnam and Vijayawada—intact either in the hands of the Congress or in the hands of an *ad hoc* administration formed during Congress rule. Then there was the Patel-patwari duo in the villages—called by

different names in different parts of the country but the base pillar of the state structure in rural India at least since the time of Feroz Tughlaq—committed heart and soul to 'Congress culture', especially in Telangana and Rayalaseema. And finally there was the bureaucracy with its manifold links with the Congress party and its leaders at all levels from the state secretariat to the headquarters of the remotest tahsil. True, a part of this structure—especially in the Krishna and Godavari deltas—had defected to NTR's side in 1983 and had contributed to his victory but that was only a small part. And if NTR had any illusions that with the cash box in his tight fist these antipathic structures could cause him no harm he was soon disabused of the illusion when the non-gazetted officers (NGOs) of his government went on a strike immediately after he came to power in 1983. He crushed the strike with the ruthlessness of a novice and has had his hands full with the fight against these diverse left-overs of Congress rule ever since. The patels and patwaris he abolished with a stroke of the pen, and was hailed for this significant anti-feudal measure by the two communist parties which were his allies then; as for the other dragon—the bureaucracy—NTR has had many inconclusive rounds of fencing with it. He is known to ill-treat senior IAS officers who have neither the gumption nor the unity to get together and tell him where he gets off; and his relation of mutual hatred with the NGOs is a fact of administrative life in this state. When they went on a 58-day strike recently he got their leaders arrested under the National Security Act for using abusive language against him (he said as much to press reporters who asked why a preventive detention act had to be used against middle class salaried employees) and got some of them terminated without an enquiry under article 311 (2) (b) of the Indian Constitution. But perhaps he now has cause to rue his rashness, for his enmity with the NGOs must certainly have contributed to his loss in the recent municipal elections.

Soon after coming to power in 1983 NTR took on a long struggle to displace the Congress(I) from the zilla parishads and the municipalities. The mixed success he had in this endeavour convinced him of the need to go in for elections across the board; and he also seems to have realised that defeating the Congress is not just a matter of having elections to all the grassroots democratic institutions; it is necessary to shake the structure at some point if the thousands of threads that are built into it are to snap and make way for his mandate. Having direct elections to the top posts would cut through

some of the threads but more of a restructuring was felt to be necessary. The gram panchayats he could not tamper with and the zillas, the districts, are too much an inalienable part of our cultural topography to be disturbed and reorganised. He hit at the middle tier: the panchayat blocks were divided into smaller panchayat mandals, called mandal praja parishads, each consisting of about 12 to 15 villages, and the revenue taluks were also replaced by the revenue mandals to coincide with the panchayat mandals. The zilla parishads, for the sake of rhyme, were renamed zilla praja parishads. The ostensible reason for the structural change was to make the panchayat and revenue headquarters accessible to the people, as if the inaccessibility lay in distance and not in corruption, callousness and incomprehensible rules and procedures. Anyway the recent victory in the elections to the posts of presidents of 1,058 mandals and 21 zilla praja parishads has put the seal of success on his schemes and that is what really counts.

But all this liveliness in the grassroots democratic structures needs a second look. A major problem facing the Indian ruling class is the need to expand its base by accommodating aspiring sections of the propertied classes from below. The path of development pursued for the last four decades is usually described as a failure but it really depends upon what one means by success and failure. It certainly has enriched a lot of people and raised hopes in many others. These others may be only 'middle class' in the meaningless empiricist classification commonly employed; but in politics what matters is the position in the social structure and the power that results from it—not income directly. And while a landlord of a backward area may be economically no better off than an upper division clerk in government (a cause of much self-lament), he has more power and aspiration for power than the clerk can ever have or aspire to.

The objective need to expand at the base and accommodate these aspirants has generated a lot of debate in recent times about decentralisation of power, grassroots democracy, and so on. Proponents of these ideas may be entirely innocent of class partialities—not all of them are, by the way—and may honestly believe that they are advocating decentralised democracy, Gandhism or *bharatiya sanskriti* as against monolithic-bureaucratic-centralised-occidental structures. How they delude themselves is their affair, but what they are actually achieving is to provide room in the power structure for recently enriched sections of the propertied classes, especially in the villages.

But there is no unique method of accommodation. One, and a rather extreme one, is to actually hand over a lot of administrative responsibility and finances to them, as Hegde appears to have done in Karnataka. The common run of democratic intellectuals

are full of admiration for Hegde for this reform. The class-blindness that affects admirers of 'decentralisation' is remarkable, especially since many of them are perceptive critics when it comes to analysing other aspects of the system. Decentralisation of this type just means more power in the hands of the rural and small town rich, and in the hands of more of them; whereas earlier they had to work their interests into the structure of state or national politics now they can have more of their interests served and more directly. This is not an evil and may even check some forms of 'authoritarianism' to use a convenient term, but one thing it does imply is a greater likelihood of repression of the rural poor. Those who admire decentralisation of power should realise that there is no getting away from this reality in the given structural context. Ask any agricultural labourer or poor peasant and he will tell better than any Gandhian what it means if his landlord actually and directly controls the administrative and financial structures of 'rural development'. The co-operative movement has already given enough indication of what it does mean.

NTR chose the other method, which does not even have the merit of honesty: create a large number of foci of power—like the 1,000 and odd panchayat mandals—so that more people may aspire for positions of power; arrange so that they are elected directly by the electorate so that they are spared the insecurity of no-confidence motions and such-like headaches; but keep decision-making authority and finances strictly away from them. What this power minus finances and decision-making means is best described as broker's power. As it is, especially since NTR came to power, this is all the power that everybody from gram panchayat sarpanches to ML As have had, and this is the only power that NTR wishes to delegate. All decisions are taken by the state government or by bureaucratic bodies and the finances are exclusively handled by the chief minister; the elected representatives of the people then are merely go-betweens who run from their constituents to the government and no doubt make some money in the process. In fact, even this is rather tortuous: the people's representatives often do not even approach the decision-makers straight. All significant requests are to be routed through the Telugu Desam party, especially the chief minister's youngest son-in-law Chandrababu Naidu, an able and hard-working political operator who was once upon a time Congressman and is now the general secretary of his father-in-law's party.

That this complex of structural and political factors lay behind the elections must have been apparent to the seasoned Congress leaders. When the patel and patwari posts were abolished the Congressmen did not dare protest though they must have smarted at the sudden loss of their support base in the villages. The changes in the panchayat

and revenue structure, they realised, would upset the web of links they had carefully built over the decades and nurtured, and therefore they reacted angrily, though once again the apparent 'democratisation' resulting from the changes stumped them. Their only real option was to participate actively in the elections and see how much they could salvage from the wreck. This they did, heart and soul. One indication of their seriousness is the number of prominent leaders who contested the chairman's posts for the zilla parishads: a notorious liquor contractor in West Godavari, an authentic warlord in Nalgonda and in 'communist, Khammam remembered from the days of the lelangana uprising, the very son of Vengal Rao, union industries minister, PCC (I) president, and a vicious anti-communist. The Congress(I)'s candidates for the chairman's posts in West Godavari, Krishna, Nalgonda, Khammam and Kurnool districts would be normally regarded as good enough or cabinet posts.

It must be acknowledged that all things—especially its own debasement—considered, the Congress(I) performed well. While the Telugu Desam won 632 of the 1,058 mandal presidents' posts and 18 of the 21 zilla parishad chairmen's posts, the Congress(I) won 338 mandal presidents' posts and the remaining 3 zilla parishad chairmen's posts, including those of Krishna and Guntur districts, which are the most politically conscious in the bourgeois sense, that is to say the most electorally conscious (in the sense that you can talk electoral politics to any one picked up in the streets here and get a firm opinion about who is with whom, why, since when and how long). A better measure of the Congress' success is that 338 out of 1,058 is 31 per cent whereas their seats in the assembly are only about 16 per cent. More satisfying for them must be their victory in a majority of the municipal councils including the corporation of Vijayawada.

In keeping with the structural and political importance of the elections they were accompanied by a large amount of verbal violence and quite a lot of physical violence. And in keeping with the irrelevance of the electoral process to the purported purpose of governance there were no issues of public importance involved either in the electioneering or in the voting. Severe and recurrent drought is perhaps the major problem facing the state right now, followed by police lawlessness as a close second. But neither the campaigners nor those who voted for them appear to have felt that electioneering in a representative democracy must have something to do or at least say about these things. The reason why election forecasts based on solid reasoning normally go wrong is that those who do the forecasts never vote, and in lieu of participation in what they are making a study of, they base their analysis on the received ideology which says that people elect representatives fit to solve their problems. It is by now well

recognised that the representatives themselves do not believe in this; it is time to realise that the people—barring perhaps school teachers for whom it is an occupational conviction—too perceive no real connection between elections and responsible governance; or at least no more than there is between the habitual celebration of the harvest festival of *sankranti* and the actual business of harvesting in a state that is under the 'green revolution' in about 10 per cent of its area and under drought in the rest. Or even between the recently imported celebration of the north Indian festival of *holi* and the invocation of spring, which is less a season than a figure of speech in south India.

But violence there was, and a fair amount. At least seven persons died in clashes and there was large-scale booth capturing, ballot snatching and use of explosives and flit arms, especially in Krishna, Guntur, Karnool, Cuddapah, Khammam and the Godavari districts. Many of the candidates, especially in the Rayalaseema districts where the illicit manufacture of explosives is a household industry, were recorded rowdy-sheeters. The Telugu Desam government got some Congress leaders of Kurnool arrested during the electioneering under the Anti-Goonda Act, NTR's own preventive detention act meant for prevention of bootlegging, prostitution and such-like unseemly activities. The High Court—which probably would not have minded if they had used the more decent National Security Act—found this a little too shocking and quashed the detentions. In realisation Vengal Rao threatened to have Telugu Desam leaders' houses raided by tax officials.

Parallel to this physical violence was the unprecedented trading of choice abuses, not by ordinary cadre, but by NTR and his ministers on the one side and Vengal Rao on the other. The Telugu Desam's general secretary even appealed through the press to Rajiv Gandhi to please stop Vengal Rao from using bad language. The rapid proliferation of Telugu dailies which have nothing better to report than this slanging match has egged them on; you abuse your opponents roundly today in an election meeting attended perhaps by 100 people and next morning joyfully watch all your abuse dutifully printed by at least four newspapers which together reach nearly 10 lakh gross subscribers, which probably means at least 30 lakh gross readers and perhaps 20 lakh net readers. The absolute vulgarisation of politics, which makes no pretence of issuing manifestoes and debating programmes, is ably matched by an equally vulgarised press.

Formally, NTR has won; a closer look shows that what he has lost is significant, if not in terms of numbers then in terms of location. The loss in the municipal elections indicates an accentuation by misgovernance

of the normal phenomenon that urban voters, who receive more information, generally tend to vote against the party in power. A more significant loss is in Krishna and Guntur districts. It was the highly class-conscious gentry of the Krishna delta that planned and created NTR; it was also they who were disillusioned first when he turned out to be much less efficient than they expected in serving their interests. They now

dream wistfully of the Hegde or the Jyoti Basu that might have been. But meanwhile their creation has caught the fancy of the rest of the state and they watch helplessly as their Telugu Desam party runs through the electorate of distant Adilabad where neither the Marwari traders in the towns nor the Gondi and Marathi speaking tribals in the forests understand one sentence of the language and sentiments of NTR's speeches.

## ANDHRA PRADESH- II

# Mandal Elections and the Police

Tanushree Gangopadhyay

"NTR will certainly win the elections. He is selling rice for Rs 2, building houses for the homeless, brought down the electricity rates in the rural areas to a phenomenal Rs 30 from Rs 300 per month—but he has sent half of Andhra Pradesh behind bars or killed them", a very candid overview of the pre-poll situation made by a villager when a team of journalists visited Karimnagar district a week prior to the Mandal Praja Parishad elections in early March.

NTR in a desperate bid to win the rural bastion made tall populist promises, while deliberately ignoring basic issues of minimum wages, exploitation of labour, forest rights, etc. Two CPI(ML) groups operating in this district have become the targets of the state repression. Telegu Desam Party's opportunistic policies was evident from its poll alliance with the CPM in the mandal elections in the state on the one hand and on the other they let loose a rein of terror on the CPI(ML) branded as 'naxalites' and 'extremists' denying them basic rights. A special police wing headed by an Inspector General of Police (IGP) has been constituted for witchhunting the CPI(ML) activists and sympathisers. The Andhra Pradesh Disturbed area act operating in Karimnagar district has provided a cover for repressing any such democratic movement. Ryotu Coolie Sangham (RCS) a peasant and agriculture labour organisation of the C P Reddy led CPI(ML) party had been very active in this area for almost two decades. State repression on the activists and members is so tremendous that the four candidates who had contested elections in Sircilla taluka declared 'disturbed' have filed nominations as independants and had joined a democratic front. Systematic attempts at suppressing the movement was taken up and the candidates were prevented from filing nominations and also from campaigning. Police machinery was used to campaign against them. The police threatened the electorate with dire consequences if they voted for independent candidates as they suspected them to be 'naxalites'. Candidates were constantly interrogated and confessions demanded from about their affiliations. Barring a few stray wall writings and a few symbols on the wall, there was no evidence

of their party's campaigning.

Boumaiya, an RCS activist who contested elections as an Independent from Kondraopet constituency was very tense when he talked to the journalists team. He was prevented from filing nomination papers on February 18, 1987 and was detained at the police station. He was released only after a dharna was staged by the villagers. He was also prevented from taking out an election procession on March 4, a week before elections. Police came and interrogated him regularly and his movements were restricted though he had a lot of support from his village as well as the neighbouring ones.

In contrast to the deliberate attempt to suppress the Democratic Front candidates, Congress and Telegu Desam Party vied with each other in their vulgar poll campaign. The roads and village squares were full of their banners and their symbols. Every village had a cycle, TDP symbol, with bulbs adorning it. Jeeps carrying taped speeches of their respective leaders blared on the microphone created more of a cacaphony. However people collected to listen to the mud-slinging indulged by either side and taped songs in the Mananatyamandali' folk style singing adulations of their own parties. To add to the folk flavour the parties used female voices. AP Congress president Jalagam Vengal Rao's speech blared away a string of abuses directed at NTR and his party. "NTR prachandachandaia... (NTR is a big crook) and has emptied the state treasury.. " NTR in turn took a dig at the Congress party's bad performance. The electronic revolution helped further the cause of all these political parties and taped messages replaced the actual presence of the leaders who would have had to come to these electrified villages through the almost non-existent roads on such undulating terrain. NTR's 20 feet cut outs made by his film studio made up for his physical absence, while he was busy campaigning in coastal Andhra Pradesh.

Campaigning in 27 mandals out of 57 in Karimnagar we were told was banned. This was denied by the IG police, 'naxalite branch', as baseless. However when this team went to Padira in Yeiladartipet mandal, there was no sign of campaigning. The absence of banners and wall writing was conspicuous in contrast to vulgar campaign elsewhere, A Congress jeep came in briefly stealthily while

we talked to some villagers. Villagers were terrified to talk to the team. However a few started talking later on gaining confidence that we did not belong to police. The extent of terrorisation in this place can be gauged from the fact that the village Sarpanch K Malla Reddy, an APCLC activist was barred from visiting the village. Reddy accompanied the team from Hyderabad and broke journey at Siddipet, in adjoining Medak district without disclosing his identity. Added to the ban on campaigning in the Yeiladartipet mandal, the high court struck down the reservation for this constituency reserved for the OBC. This area obviously poses a threat to the Vellama and the Reddy communities who filed a writ petition in high court and won.

The means of livelihood are so meagre in this rocky undulating terrain and very fragmented landholdings that most of the villagers are dependent on the landlords. This area has seen several upsurges and movements for increasing wages. RCS has been very active, and after the repressive policies particularly after 1983 the activists have virtually gone underground or have suffered. Though they could get rid of 'vettichakri' or bonded labour, other forms of 'palcru' or yearly serf still exist. Government has legitimised it by laying down an annual salary of Rs 3,600 but in fact they get paid only Rs 1,500 in addition to long and uncertain hours of work. In some villages the entire dalit community work as 'paleru'. This works as a great hindrance to any wage struggle, as the 'paleru' is forced to work. After tremendous struggle the daily agriculture wage could be increased to Rs 5 for women from Rs 2, and for the males upto Rs 15 from Rs 10. The wide gap in wages was explained as being because women worked two hours less than the nine hours put in by men.

Forests have been a great source of corruption here and the high-handedness of the forest officials has increased. Collecting fuel wood traditionally a women's job has been taken over by men in many villages where the terrorisation of forest gaurds have increased.

Organising bidi workers has posed a threat to the traders and contractors. It has strengthened the nexus of the contractors, traders, factory owners, politicians, and the state machinery. Through their various struggles, RCS has managed to raise the wages to Rs 12.20 per thousand. It is very difficult to organise the workers as bidi rolling is a home-based industry, where the family is the unit. Women and children are highly exploited. Traders make huge profits, workers are denied facilities of health and other benefits stipulated by law. Unionisation of bidi workers posed a great threat to the trade and hence the intimidation and repression. Many women were terrified of rolling bidis for fear of being beaten up and harassed. After a long struggle, the piece wage rates of picking bidi leaves was fixed at 25 paise per 100 leaves from two paise a decade back. The Andhra Pradesh government forest department has just eliminated