

Censorship by Force

A 'Telugu' Prescription for the 'Yellow' Virus

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ABOUT a year and a half ago, what is called Indian Public Opinion was taken aback when it came to know that N T Rama Rao—who then led and even now leads the Parliamentary opposition to the Congress(I)'s authoritarianism at the head of a thin and progressively decimated phalanx of unsuccessful and suitably humble leaders—had devised a Press Bill for Andhra Pradesh which copies verbatim the notorious Bihar Press Bill, the most authoritarian thing the Congress ever tried to impose upon the people of India. There were condemnatory articles in the press, shocked letters to the editors, snide remarks from unsuccessful rivals of the opposition, sententious editorials in the dailies—and nobody took seriously NTR's straight-faced protestation that he intended to use the legislation only against the 'yellow' press. Their arguments, of course, were weighty and serious but to NTR the whole thing must have seemed terribly unjust. Why can't a man use a little bit of the power he has taken so much trouble to acquire, especially for such a noble cause as fighting scurrilous journalism, without every Tom, Dick and Harry who cannot get elected even to a municipal council preaching democracy at him, must have been more than he could fathom. NTR's logic has always been that your democratic credentials are measured by the number of votes you can poll, and therefore there is nobody more democratic anywhere and at any time in a parliamentary democracy than whoever is at that time in power; in the instant case, himself. He, it is true, did not devise this dialectic for it was used before him by others, like Indira Gandhi for instance, but with him it sums up comprehensively the meaning of democracy, and forms the solid foundation of his arrogance. Whether this perspective on democracy qualifies him for being counted among—leave alone at the head of—the Left and Democratic forces is a separate question altogether.

Public opinion, however unjust, is public opinion nonetheless and NTR therefore shelved the Press Bill. No doubt not entirely by accident the shelving coincided almost exactly with the brutal murder in Vijayawada of 29-year old Pingali Dasaratharam, editor of the most successful 'yellow' venture. He was stabbed repeatedly with a knife on the evening of October 21, 1985. Murder, of course, is a well known short-circuit for repressive legislation, though some times, like with any short-circuit, you are liable to do some damage to yourself too. In this case, however, neither NTR nor his home minister—whose involvement in the killing was alleged by the dead man's mother—got

hurt. The police instead hit a second bird with the same stone by arresting two ex-associates of Dasaratharam—by that time editor and assistant editor of a rival publication—for his murder; they attributed the crime to rivalry, and have only this week charge-sheeted them.

It was generally expected by those who regard themselves as knowledgeable in these matters that this murder of one editor and the murder charge on a couple of others would put an end to the 'yellow' rags. The supposition was based on the assumption that scruples, convictions and courage go together and as the publishers of these magazines lack the first two they cannot possess the last. The supposition erred, perhaps, in not realising that profitability can well substitute for convictions in generating the courage required to withstand such violence; and the 'yellow' press continues to flourish.

NOT A FRINGE PHENOMENON

For these publications circulate widely and are very profitable. Indeed, they circulate so widely that it is doubtful that they can legitimately be called 'yellow' for that description carries overtones of clandestine circulation and a shame-faced clientele, neither of which applies to the 'yellow' press of Andhra. Their contents, needless to add, are offensive in every sense of the term: in bad taste, obscene, untruthful at least by half, and full of vulgar innuendo and suggestive phrases. Any attempt to seriously analyse their contents is bound to severely tax even moderately squeamish sensibilities. The general scheme of any item in these publications is that you pick up a juicy bit of information—whether you can prove it or not—from the lives and activities of public personalities: politicians, film stars, businessmen and high profile administrators; add a lot of unspecific and preferably lascivious rumours to it, and write down the combination in deliberately overstated, obscene and offensive language. For instance, a news item about a Congress leader trying to get a Telugu Desam ticket would run somewhat like this; 'That well known eunuch who pimped faithfully for the Nehru family all these years now wants to get into the brothel house at Hyderabad by licking NTR's behind'.

During the last five to six years about two do/en such periodicals have come up in the state; they give themselves fantastic names like *Encounter*, *Commando*, *Caligula*, *Blood Hound*, *Nuisance*, etc (for some reason they are mostly christened in English).

Dasaratharam was editor of *Encounter* and his murder-accused are editor and assistant editor of *Political Encounter*. Printed on cheap newsprint and with perhaps no expenditure other than meagre salaries to the staff, they are a profitable venture, and are worth all the tribulations their publishers may have to undergo once in a while, including an odd murder or murder rap.

But where do they get their readership from? Indeed, the question is coterminous with the equally mysterious popularity of Telugu films, for in recent times they are equally offensive—not just obscene but offensive across the board. And taken together they constitute such a major phenomenon—a mix of unethical profit-hunting, vicarious and collective exhibitionism, self-expression of popular anger, diversionary ideological offensive by the state and ruling classes, institutionalised provision of a 'safe' catharsis to social frustration, effective acculturation in anti-democratic values by titillating packaging—that it would be a most exciting topic for sociological investigation, if we had had any genuine teaching or research in sociology being done in our universities. As it is one can only grope for an answer. And to arrive at the answer the first step is to get rid of middle class/upper caste values, whose instinctive reaction is to reach for the Indian Penal Code, that is to say, dub the whole lot obscene under 292 IPC and arrest the publishers. But given the wide and unabashed readership they command and the common sense fact that it makes no sense to call lakhs of people obscene, it is necessary to search for the roots of this mass obscenity.

ROOTS OF MASS OBSCENITY

The roots appear to lie in the facts that; (i) though the overall literacy rate is increasing painfully slowly, the more than 2 per cent growth rate of population implies a substantial increase in the volume of literates, many of whom, for want of anything better to do, are acquiring more learning than they would have in better circumstances; like all newly literate people—partly because they are mostly young—they have a fascination for printed information and are a good market for any one who cares to cater to them; (ii) these newly literate and educated sections live and work (or do not work) in such conditions that on the one hand they are not given to puritanical squeamishness and on the other they bear the brunt of ruling class oppression and are therefore—once again especially because they are mostly young—much more uninhibited in their expression of anger than even the theoretically most extreme intellectual with his jaded radicalism, secure living quarters and sanitised university job; (iii) they belong to a culture that, unlike the intellectual's positivist rationalism, does not regard a piece of information as unauthentic merely because it has not been reduced to bare numbers; the statement 'that

well known eunuch who pimped faithfully for the Nehru family, etc, etc', makes as much sense to them as the alternative; 'Mr X, who was with the Congress party between 1964 and 1986 and resigned in the latter year, is now trying for a Telugu Desam ticket in the forthcoming assembly elections'; (iv) and finally—and this time on the objective side of the argument—the public and private lives of our 'public' figures have reached such depths of corruption and depravity that sanitised reporting cannot really do justice to them; even at such an august level as the Fairfax and Bofors affairs, can one honestly say that the matters are most aptly captured by the polite and polished prose our English press puts on? To put it bluntly, the 'yellow' press merely reflects a very 'yellow' public life.

Perhaps the first person to consciously recognise the emergence of this potential market of neo-literates was Ramoji Rao, industrialist (if fruit drinks and bottled pickles can be called industries), advertiser, financier, hotelier, publisher and currently filmmaker. He started the daily *Eenadu* in the seventies, and it has gone on to become the largest circulated Telugu daily. Since it is a newspaper and caters to the traditional middle class as well as the newly literate sections, it could not take full advantage of all the possibilities opened up by the emergence of the new market. But the paper is uncompromising in not distinguishing between facts, rumours, wishes, suggestions and innuendo. It has used this suppleness very effectively in building up NTR, bringing him to power in 1983 and keeping him there. Subsequently all the Telugu dailies have taken to this style-of-reporting, with the paradoxical effect of perhaps stabilising the circulation of the English dailies, which stick to more traditional ways of reporting and are therefore found more congenial by the traditional middle class.

But as I said the compulsions of a daily newspaper make it impossible for even the altered Telugu press to fill in the newly created void. Film journals did it for a while, but it was the arrival of the 'yellow' press that really satisfied the hunger. And here it is the late Dasaratharam who must be credited with the genius of a pioneer. With Dasaratharam it became a common sight to find lower middle class first-generation-literate youth going around with a garish copy of a 'yellow' periodical in one hand. Like most people who begin bad things, he himself appears to have been a good and honest man. He was of a poor-brahmin background and had given up his studies in high school. It was with honest anger and naturally abusive style of expression that he began his periodical *Encounter*. If one makes due allowance for the lack of the value of sanitisation of information and the lack of squeamishness born of poverty, then there was much that was authentic and hurting to the rulers in what he wrote. And that

his readers believed in his integrity is evidenced by the wide sympathy his murder evoked. His imitators who came later, however, are mostly more professional 'yellow' scribes and some are probably even blackmailers. It was Dasaratharam's *Encounter* that ostensibly occasioned NTR's Press Bill and the failure to get it passed was avenged with his murder.

As an aside, it is a genuine challenge to the democratic forces how to face this phenomenon of 'yellow' journalism. To dismiss it as 'yellow' is to miss the point that it is *not* a fringe phenomenon: as I have said the periodicals are not bought, sold and read clandestinely. The whole affair is very much open and the readers appear to feel no consciousness of indulging in anything unseemly. How to wean away the readership from this virus is a genuine problem. The problem came up with films and film songs but wherever the Communists have been active—especially the CPI(ML) groups in recent times—their cultural troupes have at least locally made an impact that meets the challenge of the films head-on. But it is in the sphere of the written word that the progressive cultural movement remains a fringe—and too musty and boring usually to be called *avant garde*—phenomenon. To cover up for this failure by calling the yellow press 'lumpen' is to play into the hands of the ruling class which can equally use that description for genuine mass journalism.

POLICE ACTION

Which brings us to the denouement of the story—or at least of the first act. If the Press Bill could not be enacted, and the murder of one 'yellow' editor plus a murder charge on another two could not put a stop to the encumbrance, the rulers had to—and did—think of a third way. That was to stop the sale of the publications. At the two major coastal Andhra towns of Guntur and Vijayawada the police swooped down upon the sellers of the publications and arrested them under section 292 of IPC. At Vijayawada the arrests were made on March 22, 24 and 25, 1987 and at Guntur on April 3. The advantage the police had was that though the sellers are large in number, they are mostly small men—*paan, bidi*, cigarette and soda shopkeepers. They could be conveniently detained in lockup and threatened. There are, however, two things to note about the timing of the arrests: one, they took place just after the completion of the Mandal elections, as if the police were waiting for the elections to be over before taking action; two, the arrests were preceded by the publication in the February 3 number of one of the magazines, *Political Encounter*, of a story in which the superintendent of police, Vijayawada (urban police district), was accused, collecting huge bribes from liquor shops and bars as a consideration for not raiding them, and was further described

quite pointlessly as a eunuch.

But of course arrests and cases would not be enough; section 292 is a bailable offence and the shopkeepers had to be given bail and let off immediately. The trial will take a year or two, and moreover the prosecution perhaps will not be stupid enough to insist that the writings be recognised as obscene and the *paanwallahs* punished for selling them; for section 292 covers not only the sale of obscene publications but also the exhibition of obscene posters, including Film posters, and film producers, distributors and exhibitors being among the most important personages in Andhra's provincial ruling class, no prosecutor would miss the imprudence of asking the courts to set a precedent that could inconvenience them.

In any case all this will take too long and is too cumbersome for the police of this state who believe in—and are honoured for— instant results. So the police—under the leadership of the superintendent of police, Vijayawada, who was personally affected—supplied the *paanwallahs* with a list of 20 'yellow' publications and told them plainly and bluntly that—law or no law, freedom or no freedom—they would not sell these publications henceforth. The Guntur Town Paan Beedi Cigarette and Soda Sellers Welfare Association (for such a thing exists) asked the police in real anger whether the prohibition was legal; they probably have not heard of Article 19(1) (g) of the Indian Constitution, but some deep traders' instinct must have told them that business is a universal right, constitution or no constitution. They also appealed to the AP Paanwallahs Association—their apex body—to please intervene and safeguard their right to sell the publications. The executive committee of that association, however, met in an emergency session in Vijayawada on April 5, 1987, and after quoting the Guntur town association's appeal at length and apparently in appreciation, went on to resolve contrary wise that the *paanwallahs* of the state would henceforth desist from selling the publications listed by the police.

However, a resolution is only a resolution, and *apaanwallah* presumably does not lose much by being expelled from the association for violating it, and the periodicals continue to sell fitfully. If this unforeseen hurdle has stumped the police, they are yet to show it.

When corresponding with the Circulation Department, subscribers are requested to mention their subscription numbers.