

Karamchedu: Second Anniversary

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July 17 was the second anniversary of an event that has done much to shape political awareness in Andhra Pradesh in recent times: the Karamchedu killing of 1985. What has kept the issue alive and a thorn in N T Rama Rao's side is the birth of an organised dalit movement as a result of Karamchedu. The Dalit Mahasabha was formed in September 1985 and is an active and growing movement today

ONE way of marking history is by the anniversaries of events of injustice; of suppression, of pillage and of loot. It is certainly more moral than marking history by the anniversaries of coronations; and more rational than marking it by the birth, death, revelation or flight of a prophet,

July 17 this year was the second anniversary of an event that has done much to shape political awareness in Andhra Pradesh in recent times: the Karamchedu killing of 1985. Close relatives of the chief minister's son-in-law, Venkateswara Rao, a doctor, led a brutal assault on the Madigas of the village, killing six men and raping three girls. The assault was remarkable for its brutality that is not captured by the figures of the casualties: you can knife a man to death, or you can smash his skull with an axe, break his limbs, and dig a spear into his groin. The two are equally effective ways of committing murder, but when the latter is preferred, the choice conveys a message independent of the fact of the killing.

At least 200 'youth' (including some non-youth) participated in the raid, but the police case names just 92; 72 of them have been arrested (in most cases this verb is a euphemism for voluntary surrender by the accused, after months of effective evasion and a final guarantee by somebody close to the CM that everything would be all right); and the rest are still absconding. Since the landed gentry of Karamchedu have landed relations wherever there are irrigation canals in this state, as well as in border districts like Hospet of Karnataka, 'absconding' is not all that difficult nor financially troublesome.

DALIT MAHASABHA

That would perhaps have been that, had NTR's stars been brighter. Things shaped themselves somewhat differently, however. Protests and protest meetings by

civil liberties and other democratic organisations sustained the issue for a while, and then there were the Congressmen who regard the life and death of hanjans as their private demesne into which upstarts like the Telugu Desam Party had better not intrude. They made a lot of noise which was caught by the Press but were otherwise ineffective since the public has little faith in the Congresses bona fides. But what really kept the issue alive and made it a thorn in NTR's side was the birth of an organised Dalit movement as a consequence of Karamchedu. Springing straight from the Karamchedu killing, the Dalit Mahasabha was formed, inaugurated formally at Chirala on September 1, 1985. Its first convention was held at Tenali on February 16 and 17, 1986 and today it is an active and growing movement.

The movement was fortunate in having from the start two leaders who were well known and respected in their own Tight for many years before Karamchedu. They are Katti Padma Rao and Bojja Tarakam, currently general secretary and president of the Mahasabha, respectively. Padma Rao belongs to the tradition of organised rationalism that has long been a significant movement in South India. Rationalist and atheist associations—for all their dissensions and splits—have a sizeable membership and a larger audience, especially in the coastal Andhra districts. Padma Rao, who teaches Sanskrit (a peculiarly appropriate vocation for a dalit and a rationalist) in a college in Guntur district, is a leading rationalist, and within the rationalist movement has been a spokesman for the Marxist approach to the criticism of religion. Tarakam was even closer to the Communist movement, and was for some time an activist of Virasam, the Revolutionary Writers' Association of A P. As a lawyer, he was active in the civil liberties movement in the state, until he accepted a government pleader's job in

1983 and quit active association With the democratic movement.

Karamchedu brought these two men into the streets. Tarakam resigned his government pleader's job and Padma Rao more or less suspended teaching to settle down at Chirala and organise the victims of the assault, who have refused to go back to the village and have built a colony for themselves at Chirala. Slowly, the protest against a particular assault built itself into the Dalit Mahasabha, whose formation on September 1, was attended by about three lakh dalits and sympathisers. Today the organisation has active district-level units in Srikakulam, Visakhapatnam, West Godavan, Guntur, Prakasam and Nellore districts in addition to ad hoc bodies in Hyderabad city and Krishna district. In Nellore and Srikakulam districts it even has mandal level units. It has just now started bringing out a fortnightly called *Dalit Sakti*.

THE CASE

Meanwhile the police, after about a week's initial apathy during which they played genial host to the teams of journalists, politicians and others who visited Karamchedu, began arresting—or rather, accepting the voluntary surrender of—one accused after another. The Crime Branch of the state's CID was entrusted with the investigation and they have made up a case against 92 persons. With the plea that the accused are very influential people and justice would be difficult to obtain in their native district, the state itself got the case transferred to the Sessions Court at Guntur—where the accused are perhaps even more influential. One thing the police have steadfastly refused to consider is the possibility that the chief minister's relatives-by-marriage might be directly involved in the killing or the conspiracy behind the killing. The Madigas have said that a conspiracy did take place the previous night in a liquor shop in the village; Venkateswara Rao himself was abroad at that time but the Dalit Mahasabha has alleged that his father, Daggubati Chenchuramaiah, was personally involved in the conspiracy. Since the police have refused to investigate this, and have moreover left out many of the assailants from the list of accused, the Dalit Mahasabha has filed a private case naming 140 accused. The preliminary enquiries are over, with 94 witnesses having been examined. 104 of the accused, including Chenchuramaiah, have appeared in court, and the case is ready for registration. For their pains the Dalit Mahasabha

people have been suitably honoured by the state government. A big public meeting of theirs at Vijayawada was brutally lathi charged on October 6, 1986 and Padma Rao was humiliatingly taken into custody under the National Security Act.

Both with the police case and the private case, the accused—and in collusion with them the state—have been delaying matters as much as possible. Since only 72 of the 92 accused in the police case have been apprehended, the commitment was delayed and was finally done only this year, after splitting the case against the 'absconders'. The Dalit Mahasabha has a legitimate complaint here. The families and properties of the 20 absconders are all very much in Karamchedu and very much intact. If a poor man had committed even a small crime—much short of murder and rape—and had absconded for two years, by now the police would have locked up his entire family, laid his fields waste, plundered his house and forced him to surrender. The Karamchedu absconders are, however, enjoying all the civil liberties everybody has been fighting in vain for all these years. Even with the private case, only 104 of the 140 accused have presented themselves in court. Warrants have been issued for the rest but the police either will not or cannot execute them. Meanwhile the accused have applied for the private case to be transferred to some other court in the district, and as an interim benefit, have got the proceedings stayed.

Even as this is going on, and as the dalits and other democratic forces are getting ready to observe the second anniversary of Karamchedu, what does NTR do but make his son-in-law from the village a cabinet minister! Venkateswara Rao, who was president of the party's youth wing (the party's general secretary is another son-in-law) was made minister for health just a week before the anniversary.

NEERUKONDA

The man he displaced from the cabinet was M S S Koteswara Rao, also a doctor, who had held the health portfolio from the first victory of the Telugu Desam Party in 1983. He belongs to Neerukonda, Guntur district, another Kamma-dominated tobacco-growing village like Venkateswara Rao's Karamchedu. As if to underline the non-change in the cabinet, a brutal assault on dalits took place at Neerukonda on July 15, 1987, just two days before the second anniversary of Karamchedu. Early in the morning of July 15, a mob of about 150 youth from landed families of the Kamma caste raided the Mala street of the village, went on a rampage with axes, spears and sticks,

killed 60 year old Manne Seshaiyah and severely injured four others. The dozen or so principal assailants were close relatives of Koteswara Rao, even closer, than the assailants of Karamchedu had been related to Venkateswara Rao. And the method of assault was ominously similar to that of Karamchedu.

The village and its social structure are worth commenting upon, if only because in the unending debate about India's agrarian economy and agrarian struggles everybody can find support for his favoured theory in this village. You can find market-oriented agrarian capitalism intensifying class antagonism and sharpening class struggle; alternatively, in the same data you can see agrarian capital that is not agrarian but bureaucrat in its origin simultaneously serving the needs of commercial cropping and age-old usury. You can find a situation paradigmatic of caste-struggle theories, with a scheduled caste fighting the caste-oppression of a forward caste, and a backward caste caught between the two getting split neatly into one half that is with the scheduled caste and the other half that is with the forward caste; alternatively, in the same data you can find a basic conflict between labour-exploiting rich landholders and the toilers whose labour is exploited, with caste being used by both as a political instrument, by the former to recruit into its fighting forces relatively smaller landholders who may have only a marginal economic conflict with the labourers, and by the latter to mobilise extended sympathy and support going beyond the village, beyond the region, and beyond the specific economic conditions of the conflict; the even split between the two contending parties of the backward caste can then be seen as proof that the 'caste-factor' is actually a class-struggle factor, a political factor.

Unlike Karamchedu, Neerukonda is not a canal-irrigated village. But the soil however is rich and both paddy and tobacco are grown on well-irrigated and rain-fed land. According to the statistics provided by the village's sarpanch, there are about 1,500 persons of the Kamma caste in the village; most of the Kammas are just middle farmers but there are a few families that own above 50 and upto 100 acres of land. Another 1,800 men, women and children belong to the Mala caste, a scheduled caste. Some of the Mala families have some land but the large majority work as daily wage labourers. Being essentially a rain-irrigated village, Neerukonda cannot sustain them with work throughout the year, and they therefore migrate to the cotton-growing parts of Guntur district when it is time for cotton-picking, a fact that the landed

farmers do not like very much. Sandwiched between these two are about 300 persons of a caste that used to be called plain Gp11a at one time but likes to style itself Yadava these days. Whatever they call themselves, they are no longer keepers of milch cattle but middle farmers, poor farmers or labourers. There are other castes in the village but they had no part in the recent conflict.

The wage-rate paid to the labourers, as everywhere in the country, is well below the legal minimum wage. This part of the state is classified as Zone I in the Minimum Wages Schedule, and minimum wage for agricultural work is Rs 13.20. What the labourers are actually paid in Neerukonda ranges from Rs 5 to 8 for weeding and transplanting paddy, and Rs 7 for grading tobacco. This much is routine. What is not so common is that payment of wages for tobacco grading is done, not daily at the end of the day's work, but once in a lump sum, after the crop has been marketed and exchanged for cash. Taking the cue from tobacco farming, the same is being done to the women labourers who weed the paddy fields. They are also paid only after the grain has been disposed of in the market. If they go to the farmer's house to demand payment before that, they are abused and physically pushed out.

CO-OPERATIVES AND USURY

But, somebody will ask, don't you have agricultural co-operative banks in Andhra, and don't they provide farmers with working capital, *taqavi* or crop loans, precisely for the purpose of purchasing fertiliser, pesticides and labour power? Of course we have and they do. *Taqavi* loans, in any case, are as old as the Mughal *padshahi*, and why would a modern welfare state—especially a green revolution show-piece region within it—not have agricultural co-operatives? We even had state-wide elections for these bodies at the end of this June and counted about a dozen fatally broken heads, about three times as many fractured and bleeding limbs, and property worth lakhs of rupees burnt down or otherwise laid waste in what are politely called 'electoral clashes', before the ballot papers were all counted and added up. But what the rich farmers of Neerukonda are doing is to employ these loans—instruments of peasant capitalism for some observers, of Junker capitalism for some others, of a co-operative commonwealth for yet others, and non-capitalist path of development for the rest—for a very ancient purpose: usury. It is a beautiful system. Landlord A does not pay his labourers their wages daily; the indigent labourers go to landlord B for a loan, and he lends them as much as they

need/as much as they are due from landlord A, whichever is less, at an interest that ranges from 36 to 60 per cent per annum. He, of course, is using the crop loan he has taken from the co-operative bank for this purpose. But what do *his* labourers do? They go to landlord C, etc. Being a finite circuit, you can close the two ends and you have a lovely system by which (at least in theory) *all* the farmers use *all* their crop loan for usurious purposes, and yet agricultural development in the form of cultivation of export-grade tobacco goes on unimpaired, anti-imperialism thrives with the export of the tobacco to the Soviet Union and the co-operative movement flourishes, broken heads, bleeding limbs and all.

The upshot of this system is that most of the labourers are indebted to the landlords, some owing Rs 1,000, some more and some less. This is one thing that gives them a sense of helplessness and insecurity. The July 15 assault was the sixth one since the panchayat elections of 1981, and each time the Malas have just laid back and taken the beating mutely. As the previous assaults employed only sticks, there were no casualties, but this time, undoubtedly under the influence of Karamchedu, the assailants used axes and spears, and the result was much more serious.

Until 1981, the village was 'peaceful' in the sense that the gentry decided what was good for everybody and the others obeyed. In spite of some Communist influence among the labourers until the early sixties, the village was a 'Congress village'. In 1981, elections to the gram panchayats were held for the first time after many years, and the Malas made bold to set up a candidate of their own. They lost, but the village was never the same again. With the formation of the Telugu Desam Party in 1983, most of the Kamma farmers turned to it, and one of their men even became a minister; in the first elections a majority of the Malas also voted for the new party, but quite a few of them did not, and that hurt the egos of the landlords. They started taunting the Malas and the Malas reacted by turning further away from the TDP. Pretty soon, clashes between the Mala labourers and the Kamma landholders started erupting regularly, with the Yadavas split between the two. Since the immediate flash-point in most of the clashes was the taking out of processions by the Malas in the caste-Hindu areas of the village, the 'elders' of this and neighbouring villages evolved an 'agreement' by which the Malas' processions would confine themselves to their own street, and the others would restrict themselves to their part of the village. This seemingly equitable agreement actually

means that the Malas stick to one street whereas the others can go around the rest of the village; and in any case the agreement amounts to the practise of un-touchability; specifically it is a crime under section 4(iv) and 4(x) of the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955. Yet it has been in force for six years in the native village of NTR's health minister!

MEANINGLESS JUDICIAL ENQUIRY

Early this July, NTR dropped this health minister from his cabinet (for reasons in no way connected, needless to add, with the practice of untouchability in his native village) and gave that post to his son-in-law from Karamchedu; it is alleged by the TDP that upon hearing of the change, the Malas of Neerukonda celebrated by breaking coconuts as an offering to God (the offering was made in the local Church, by the way, most of the Malas being Christians!). The Malas deny this half-heartedly, since the celebration—like Sikhs offering sweets upon Indira Gandhi's death—has been converted into an excuse to justify the July 15 assault. It may be presumed that they *did* celebrate, and why not? This celebration, real or imaginary, rankled with the ex-minister's men and they were waiting for an occasion to take revenge. The occasion came in the form of a violation of the old agreement, when a marriage procession of the Malas went into the caste-Hindu areas of the village. On the evening of July 14 the Kamma youth warned the Malas saying, 'tomorrow you will get it'. Such warnings preceding assaults were so common that the Malas took it in their stride, much as peasants in a flood-prone area take the devastation in their stride, as part of life's burden. Some of them left the village early the next morning, but others stayed on, thinking they would take the beating, get the wounds dressed and carry on with their chores. Not only these labourers, the sub-inspector of police, Mangalagiri, also took the rumour casually. His police station is accustomed to visiting the village after each assault, and booking a case, not of assault and attempt to murder against the assailants but an equitable case of rioting on an equal number of persons from both sides. On the morning of July 15 the SI came casually to the Village, presumably in the hope that the ugly business would be over and he could write down his FIR and go back. To his horror he discovered that this time the assailants had behaved untraditionally and had used axes and spears in addition to sticks; they had already murdered 60 year old Manne Seshaiyah and were chasing some others across the fields. Seshaiyah was killed most brutally.

He was returning after answering a call of nature when he saw the assailants on the rampage. He took refuge in the house of a Yadava. That man's daughter Mariamma, a young girl barely in her teens, barred the door with her outstretched arms when the assailants came and pleaded with them to spare 'grandpa' as she was accustomed to calling Seshaiyah. The assailants pulled her aside, smashed open the door and axed and speared Seshaiyah to death. The other four, Bejjam Devaratnam (40), Sikha Nageswara Rao (45), Chukka Veeraswamy (35) and Korra Rosaiah (22) were caught up with in the fields and severely injured. They will take long time to recover. It is perhaps to be counted to the credit of the SI that after recovering from the initial surprise at the unexpected brutality of the attack, he took the injured men immediately to hospital, and thereby at least saved a couple of lives. If he was a bad policeman, he was at least a good boy scout.

But the investigation has proceeded most tardily; the first two men arrested by the police were a Yadava who was involved along with the Kammass in the attack, and a dhobi who had nothing at all to do with the attack. The real assailants were not apprehended by the police until they themselves decided to surrender. For the first few days they hid in a neighbouring village at night and came home during day time; on the way they would hoot at and threaten any of the Malas they saw. But in spite of the heavy presence of policemen in the village they were not apprehended. Instead the police, as at Karamchedu two years ago, played host to the visitors who arrived in droves—civil liberties teams, Dalit Mahasabha leaders, opposition leaders, and of course a lot of gleeful Congressmen who have never had it so good, with all these attacks upon harijans in the villages of TDP ministers.

And now the routine starts. NTR's first reaction was to announce a judicial enquiry, which was the most meaningless thing to do since the victims had already given a detailed list of the assailants and all that needed to be done was to hunt for them—for which purpose trained police dogs were certainly more appropriate than retired judges. The FIR, anyway, mentions 17 persons by name and more than a hundred unidentified assailants. Perhaps because of the widespread protest, they have not made it a case of rioting as in the past. We should emphasise *the yet*, for the sarpanch of the village has started floating a possible amendment, in the form of a cyclostyled letter circulated widely alleging that it was the Malas in collusion with some Yadavas that had planned and assaulted the Kammass, and

what the Kammas did was to drive them back into the Mala street; he even has the audacity to add that when they were chasing the Malas back, the Mala women pleaded with them to desist, and they obliged; and further that Manne Sessaiah pleaded with them not to attack him since he was not a party to the conflict and they magnanimously spared him; but just then 'somebody' assaulted Sessaiah from

behind and kitted him. The tone of the document clearly suggests that the 'somebody' was a harijan, and that Sessaiah, an expendable old man, was killed so that the blame could be put on the minister and his people. It is to be seen how long the state Will take to add this version on to the real story and make an even-handed case of rioting out of the assault.

V C Shukla's case is in a way much simpler: his performance as the union information minister during the Emergency when he gagged, bullied and punished anyone suspected of harbouring a weakness for a free press still stands out in public memory in unredeemed luridness.

Marxist tactics no doubt permit making temporary use of unsavoury characters—in or from the opposing camp—in the interest of revolutionary struggles. It is, however, no part, of Marxist, or for that matter any intelligent, tactics to allow oneself to be used by personalities with questionable credentials. If the Marxists or the Lefts allow themselves to be inveigled into a supportive posture vis-a-vis Singh, Nehru, Shukla type of politicians, they will only succeed in damning the cause of the left and democratic front!

Let us now turn to some of the remaining forces in the 'non-communist' Opposition spectrum. First of all, the Lok Dal led by Bahuguna and Devi Lal. The first point to note in this case is that this party is linked up with the BJP in the coalition government in Haryana. Will it be made a pre-condition to this party's admission into the left and democratic alliance that it severs its links with the BJP? If not, then how to prevent similar linkages in other states or with other parties? If this type of 'subsidiary alliance' with BJP is permitted, then why—or how—should it be banned vis-a-vis Akalis, or some Muslim League or Kerala Congress factions? And if this turns out to be the general pattern, then what remains of secularism, the cornerstone of democracy in the present Indian context?

Moreover, is the Haryana branch of the Lok Dal(B) which is the party's main fortress itself free of Hindu communalism, particularly vis-a-vis the Sikh question?

Finally, the question of the titular head of this party, H N Bahuguna's past performance of repeated fence crossings does not bespeak of any serious commitment to principles—left, democratic, secular or otherwise—apart from self-serving! Similarly, is not Devi Lal, the real power in this party, very closely identified with the Jat kulak interests—a fact which leaves little room for any suspicions about his real commitment to a left-democratic programme which has to have radical agrarian reforms and struggles against caste oppressions as a pre-eminent plank?

According to all indications, more particularly the fact that it is in alliance with the Telugu Desam Party in Andhra Pradesh, it is presumable that the CPI(M) visualises N T Rama Rao as an important partner in the projected alliance. The mythological overtones and narrow-minded localism apart, NTR, the sole leader of the TDP, runs his government

Call for Mid-Term Poll and the Left

Ajit Roy

There is as yet no real basis for the formation of a left and democratic front on a national scale. A hard and informed struggle is necessary for creating this basis and the Left should use the period available before the next general elections to launch such a struggle, instead of trying to hasten the elections prematurely

THE CPI(M) general secretary, E M S Namboodiripad's call for mid-term polls, endorsed subsequently by the CPI National Council and taken up by the CPI(M)'s West Bengal state committee for active public campaign, appears to have emerged as the central political slogan for mass mobilisation for the immediate future. While the slogan has all the trappings necessary for dramatic appeal as well as a plausible political justification, the overall correctness of the call can be assessed only on the basis of a deeper and rigorous examination. For, in Marxist tactics, elections have to be viewed not merely, or even mainly, as a standard constitutional remedy for a critical development. Elections have to be viewed, says Lenin, "in connection with a definite political situation". In the particular context of the present Indian situation, this criterion concretely means a realistic evaluation of the prospect of, not only securing the defeat of Rajiv Gandhi and his Congress Party, but also the emergence of a really radical alternative as the winner, or even as a powerful opposition bloc in the newly elected House, based on an appropriate platform.

It is certainly possible to defeat the Congress(I) if all the opposition forces, even excluding AIADMK and the National Conference of Jammu and Kashmir, would join hands. It may even be possible to achieve this without any electoral agreement with the BJP, Akali Dal, Muslim League and other avowedly communalist/sectarian forces. If the so-combined opposition enters into an agreement or some sort of electoral arrangements with the dissident and/or expelled Congressmen, whose ranks may grow as the polling

process advances, then the present ruling party's ouster will be doubly assured. So far neither the CPI(M), nor the CPI has come out with any elaboration of their prospective electoral tactics. Let us, therefore, examine some of the possible linkages. First of all, the question of electoral arrangements with the dissident Congressmen who are now strutting at the centre of the national political stage, namely, Raja Saheb V P Singh, Arun Nehru, V C Shukla and so on. What does their opposition to Rajiv Gandhi represent besides their personal equation with him?

QUESTIONABLE CREDENTIALS

V P Singh has attracted a lot of popular adoration primarily as a crusader against corruption. But, how strong and deep-rooted is his crusading zeal? Even a political novice will not believe that secret Swiss bank accounts, kick-backs from defence purchases and so on actually began in recent months. Public memory is really not so short as to forget the series of stinking scandals during the imperious regime of Rajiv Gandhi's mother. What had V P Singh said or done in the past two decades, apart from loyally serving the imperial dynasty from various positions of authority? How are his current populist articulations any different from the 'left-of-centre' postures that Indira Gandhi had periodically effected and her son is now spasmodically striving to assume?

Coming to the next stalwart among the 'rebel' Congressmen, Arun Nehru, what are his credentials apart from his career in an MNC and his authoritarian exercises as Rajiv Gandhi's minister for internal security?