

Cause, Effect and Excuses: the Narayanpet killing and its aftermath

There must be many who thought after the Narayanpet killing, 'now the Government is going to ban the Maoists'. It is an entirely understandable feeling, but entirely illogical.

Understandable because there is much that is objectionable about that killing. There should be, even to those who are not opponents of revolutionary politics. The issue of violence is not fruitfully discussed if it is posed as an issue of violence *per se*. Such a discussion soon becomes sterile. It is more fruitfully posed in terms of justice in the means and ends equation; a sense of value for human life as such, even the life of one's political enemy; an attitude of responsibility in the matter of extreme choices; proportionality in dealing out violent justice, etc. The Narayanpet killing can be faulted on all these counts. The Makthal MLA Chittem Narsi Reddy's clan does consist of men who are most politely described when they are called factionists. Gadwal is a miniature Rayalaseema, and its destinies have been dominated at will by the 'D.K. Brothers': Samarasimha Reddy and Bharathasimha Reddy, the latter of whom is the husband of the Narsi Reddy's daughter D.K.Aruna, the present MLA of Gadwal. There is little the brothers have not done to further their power. Secondly, the Maoists' allegation against Narsi Reddy's son Venkateswara Reddy, namely that he is the protector of spurious toddy business, may very well be a posthumous excuse invented along the way, but it is a fact that it is the area running north from Gadwal along the border with Karnataka that sees the highest incidence of deaths due to adulterated toddy in the State. People die like flies here.

Yet, Narsi Reddy himself was not in any real sense a credible candidate for the appellation 'enemy of the people', unless all politicians are put in the class, and as for the others who died in the random shoot-out, it is doubtful that the Maoists even knew all their names, let alone their crimes. It is evident to those who will not be apologists for the Maoists that the Narayanpet killing was intended to terrorise the Congress Party and Government, and that is why it had to be a reckless massacre.

But the feeling is illogical, nevertheless. The ban will not give the State Government one little bit more power than they already have today to tackle naxalite violence. And it will definitely hinder any reasonable response to the criticism many have been making, namely that handling naxalism shall not be reduced to handling naxalite violence. The A.P.Public Security Act is a rather mild law, as penal laws go. The maximum punishment under the Act is three years imprisonment. It does not carry the obnoxious provisions such as *in camera* trials, shifting of the onus of proof onto the accused, making confessions given to a police officer admissible in evidence, etc., as did TADA and POTA. What is objectionable about that Act is not that its provisions are harsh, but that it is a political instrument disguised as penal law. What it proscribes is not violence – which has been proscribed ever since the birth of the State in history – but social sympathy and political like-mindedness with the view point and the aims of the Maoists. The ban on the

Revolutionary Writers Association (RWA) is proof of this, if proof were needed. As such, its targets will not be the armed cadre such as those who killed the MLA, Narsi Reddy and eight others. The targets will be the ordinary masses who have their own reasons for sympathising with the naxalites, and the intellectuals who find themselves ideologically persuaded by Mao's thought. And human rights activists, writers and social analysts who will question the State's tendentious vilification of the naxalites, and its inhuman strategies for handling them.

Yet, it is not as if the Narayanpet killing has no real relevance to the action that unfolded subsequently, namely the ban imposed on the Maoists. It has helped to justify the ban in the minds of an overwhelming section of the people. It has helped to show the Maoists in the image that the Government likes: cruel, sadistic killers, callous in their indifference to human life, drunk as they are with a self-righteous image of themselves and their vocation. This may not be a fair image, in general, but there have been so many instances of their conduct that support such an image, that the effect is understandable.

And so, in a sense, the Maoists will be paying for their thoughtless act. It is unlikely that they will regret it, for it is their wont to regard severe repression as the normal state of affairs. But the question is not whether they can take the ban in their stride. Their organisation being almost entirely underground, they may have little difficulty in doing so. And they have never been particularly concerned that their actions may bring the police down upon their supporters. The question is what it will do to democracy in the sense of a regime assuring freedom of political choice, freedom from arbitrary police action, freedom to agitate to better one's life, etc. It will certainly not do any good, and if Y.S.Rajasekhara Reddy is patting himself on the back for having cleverly used the Narayanpet outrage, he must be informed that cleverness in the service of undemocratic strategies is not only no virtue, but is not good policy either, as his predecessor who thinks he is the cleverest fellow going around discovered to his mortification.

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