

A Year of 'Encounters'

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For the last two decades it is the myth of democracy vs dictatorship that has constituted the ideology through which the ruling classes of India have conducted their internal squabbles. In fact, as the squabbling increases the conflict has less and less to do with democracy, though we hear more and more talk about it. It seems to be a law of political behaviour that the more ruling classes quarrel among themselves the less regard they can afford to show for people's rights.

THAT N T Rama Rao should be nominated the first democrat of the nation—for that is what one presumes his selection as the chairman of the National Front makes him—during the very year in which his government's record of 'encounter' killings has surpassed that of even the Emergency days, would perhaps be regarded as a shameful paradox in any country other than ours: for have we not been blissfully tolerating as prime minister a man whose probity is in doubt—and whose respect for truth is not even in doubt—for more than a year after the allegations against him first crossed the dividing line between rumour and certainty?

And yet the record must be stated, especially because of the widespread hypocrisy that prevents people from talking of the atrocities and the misrule of the opposition parties. There is prevalent in this country this unverified myth of a democratic opposition, that is projected as an alternative to the authoritarian misrule of Rajiv Gandhi's Cong(I). Not just today, but for the last two decades it is the myth of democracy vs authoritarianism—*dharma* vs *adharna* as the more *desi* of our politicians put it—that has constituted the ideology through which the ruling classes of India have fought their internal squabbles. This is the ideology with which first Indira Gandhi and then Rajiv Gandhi were fought at the centre, and NTR himself faces it each time a dissident faction springs up within his own party. This is not to say that these individuals were not—and are not—undemocratic, nor that this way of projecting the conflict does not reflect a certain desire for greater democracy on the part of the people: indeed, but for the presence of such an aspiration, such a projection would never have become necessary in the first place. But as far as the protagonists are concerned, that is not the point at all. As the squabbling increases, the conflict has less and less to do with democracy but we hear more and more talk about it. Indeed, the very fact that the squabbling is increasing makes all of them—rulers and the opposition—further undemocratic. It is a law of political

behaviour that the more the ruling classes quarrel among themselves the less regard they can afford to show for people's rights.

I

NTR's appointed task was to gain acceptability as the common representative of all sections of the propertied classes of Andhra Pradesh in their conflict with big capital over the terms of the resolution of the current crisis in the redefinition of the economic structure, and—concomitantly—in the sharing of the country's natural resources and the surplus pumped out of the working masses. In this he has been a miserable failure from the word go. To begin with there has always been a section within the regional rich who have held—and hold—that the problem can be sorted out and a smooth restructuring achieved, within the superstructure built over the last four decades; politically, that is to say within the Congress Party, celebrated as an all-class party by admiring analysts. Not being able to carry these sections need not be counted as a failure, but NTR's true failure lies in his inability to carry with him even all of those who believe that a certain degree of confrontation with the superstructure is necessary if their interests are to be safeguarded in the alignment that is to take shape. Instead, he is seen as merely a gangleader who is bent on getting the most that is possible for his henchmen. Disenchantment with him started within a year of his coming to power and it continues to grow apace. In the given ideological idiom, it takes the form of accusations of casteism. People who openly rally in the name of one caste accuse him of being partial to the *kamma* caste. Since the well-to-do among the *kammās* are numerous and very rich the charge sticks easily. But on the other side of the coin, it is only where the caste that is the focal counterpoint of the opposition carries with it an image of toil and hard work that the exercise carries a degree of credibility. Those who tried to rally in the name of the Reddys had a difficult time. The most humorous part of Dronamraju Satyanarayana's widely reported writ petition in the A P High Court

was his ridiculous plea that the Reddys are being oppressed in NTR's rule. And when N Sreenivasulu Reddy—once upon a time a servile admirer of NTR—found himself being humiliated and demoted from his status as number two in the cabinet and turned dissident and was forced to leave the cabinet, he had no takers for his plaint that the Reddys—are getting an unjust deal, since the landlords, contractors and businessmen of his caste and his district are among the most powerful and influential persons in the state. And so he had to hold his tongue and beat an ignominious retreat to the Congress(I), which has, incidentally, nominated another Reddy from Nellore as its PCC(I) president.

But the latest phenomenon, Mudragada Padmanabham—yet one more 'clean' dissident—has had an easier time rallying in the name of the *kapus*. The word *kapu* has many meanings. Etymologically it means husbandman, a meaning that comes out clearly when landlords say 'our *kapus*' referring to their farm servants or attached peasants. The feudal attachment is made explicit when the term *paali kapu* is used to refer to attached labour. But when an independent cultivator proudly describes himself as a *kapu* it merely denotes a hard-working cultivator without connotations of servitude or attachment. *Kapu* is further a caste name as in *Toorpu kapu*, *Munnur kapu*, or just *kapu*; and finally it is a common appellation for these and a number of other castes like *Baliya*, *Telaga*, *Tenuga*, *Mudiraj*, etc, whose occupation—the statistical mode—is cultivation, though there are quite a few labourers at one end and big landholders and businessmen at the other. Thus the caste is an ideal candidate for populist consolidation. A cinema hall and rice mill owner like Mudragada Padmanabham, a publisher and film-maker like Dasari Narayana Rao and a mafia gangster like Vangaveeti Mohana Ranga Rao, Cong(I) MLA from Vijayawada, whose *forte* is the out-of-court settlement of disputes concerning finance and property through threats—and perpetuation—of physical violence, find it easy to talk of injustice done to the *kapu* castes under NTR's rule and to rally people behind them in the name of the *kapu* caste-complex.* And these are not just three individuals but representatives of a sizeable class of the upper cream of the castes from coastal Andhra. Whether they can gloss over for long the fact that they have been addressing only the forward caste *kapus* of the Krishna and Godavari deltas, and that too mainly the Godavari delta where over a large area it is the *kapu* landholders, businessmen and contractors who constitute the dominant class, and that the backward caste *kapus* who are numerous in the Telangana districts are

* This report was written before Mohana Ranga Rao's murder in Vijayawada on December 26.

neither addressed nor affected by their rallying cry, and are even likely to be hostile since their major demand is that the forward caste *kapus* must be notified as backward, is a moot point. But what is more relevant is that such consolidations would never have taken place had NTR risen to his task, which he has never shown any capacity to do.

It may be said that the failure lies in the objective situation and not in NTR's incompetence. Indeed, that may be said of Rajiv Gandhi too, who is being attacked with such viciousness not because he is corrupt but because he is incompetent. Had his competence in serving the necessary interests been higher his corruption would not have mattered so much. The new national consensus that everybody is hoping for is no where in sight and nobody has an inkling how to set about discovering it, and they are all, understandably, angry with the young leader on whom so many hopes rested three years ago. He, for his part, has made the happy discovery that the economy has carved out for itself a path of least resistance suited to the logic of its structure and all that he needs to do is to prod it along a little by liberalising procedures here and there. His enemies are not really against this, but they only want much more of a systematic restructuring and the writing of new equations to take place; and they are wild with him for not taking the task seriously. NTR's failure is on par. Those who made him and brought him to power wanted him to lead the regional elite to a position of strength in the new alignment; but instead of offering such a creative and collective leadership he is content to concentrate on the shortsighted enrichment of those who are close to him and his sons-in-law; with no thought for the collective interest he uses the administration to serve the interests of his faction and encourages them to indulge in unseemly conflicts and bloodshed against the people as well as their rivals. Instead of the single-minded Telugu nationalism that his promoters promised, what has resulted from five years of NTR's rule is a fractious and violent polity. In a regime that speaks the regional idiom the region is torn by the internecine conflicts of the elite, and their violence against the poor. A regime that seeks to make as much wealth as possible and as fast as possible for its faction can only be vicious towards the masses. And where the masses are of such political temperament that they do not offer themselves meekly for oppression and exploitation, the result can be extremely violent.

II

On August 23, 1988 a youth by name Sathu Madhu who ran a *kangan* shop in Warangal town was asked by the police to report at a local police station. He had had a past as a 'radical' but had given up active politics and was leading the life of a petty shopkeeper. The police, it seemed, wanted to only question him and send him home; or at least that is what the youth told his

mother before leaving home for the police station. When he did not come back immediately, his mother got apprehensive and met the superintendent of police to ask him about her son's whereabouts. He replied: 'by the evening your son will come home, or if not, then tomorrow his dead body will come home'. The police killed him that night, whether in the process of 'questioning' him or in fulfilment of their quota of 'encounter' killings, one does not know, and announced to the press the next day that there had been an 'encounter' near Warangal town and an unidentified naxalite was killed.

Golla Devaiah(23) and Potarala Bhoomaiah (27) were two peasants of Karimnagar district. The former belonged to Govindaram and the latter to Mothukurraopet. They were sympathisers of the Rytu Coolie Sangham, and had in the past been arrested and implicated in false criminal cases. They were regularly attending court in those cases, and were otherwise living in their villages, looking after their cultivation. On July 10, the police picked them up from Govindaram, took them outside the village, and shot them dead. It was announced to the press that a group of armed naxalites attacked the police and the police returned fire, resulting in the death of two unidentified naxalites.

During the night of October 29, the police of Nizamabad district said, they confronted an armed group of naxalites in the village of Korpul, where the naxalites were allegedly campaigning for reduction in the price of country-liquor. There was, the police said, an exchange of fire, in which one unidentified naxalite died and a constable was injured. What really happened was that in the exchange of fire that took place outside the village, no one died but one constable was injured. The police searched fruitlessly for the naxalites for a while, and unable to find them, came back to the village in an ugly mood, caught hold of a harijan peasant by name Lachchaiah who was known to be a sympathiser of the naxalites, took him out of the village and killed him. He was the 'unidentified' naxalite.

The police of Karimnagar district said that on September 14, an 'encounter' took place in a mango grove near the village of Raghavapuram, in which a naxalite by name Rangula Sambaiah was killed. In fact, Sambaiah was not a party activist; he was a peasant who sympathised with the naxalites. The police tried to arrest him and implicate him in some crime. To avoid the torture that would be an inevitable concomitant of it, Sambaiah left his village and sought shelter in the house of some relatives of his at Mandamarri, Adilabad district. The police caught hold of his relatives in his native village and tortured them to reveal the whereabouts of Sambaiah. They did, and the police caught hold of him, killed him for the trouble he had given them, and threw the dead body near the mango grove outside his village, and proclaimed to those who would believe that there had been an 'encounter'.

On October 14 the police of Warangal

district are supposed to have received information about some naxalites holding a meeting with tribals in the village of Muthapur in the Eturnagaram forest region. They went to the place, they said, and asked the naxalites to come out of the house in which they had gathered. Instead of obeying, the naxalites fired upon the police from the house; the police returned fire (into the house, one presumes) and killed two naxalites, a man and a woman. However, the next day an amended version is announced, declaring that the woman was not a naxalite, but a tribal by name Vanka Lakshmi. What really happened was that the police, on receiving the information, came to the house where the gathering was taking place, and straightaway opened fire at the youth who was standing sentry outside. The machine gun fire not only killed him, but hit the tribal woman Vanka Lakshmi in the back of her head. She was neither a naxalite nor a part of the gathering that was taking place in the house. She was merely walking down the road, away from the house, when the bullets coming from behind caught her unawares.

On October 29, at about noon, a gathering of tribals, forest officials, and naxalite activists, who were thrashing out issues connected with illegal cultivation in the forests, was attacked by the police. The place was Ravulapadu in East Godavari district. About 120 tribals from neighbouring villages and 8 officials were present there. The police party led by the DSP of Rampachodavaram and consisting of about 25 CRPF jawans, fired with automatic weapons at the naxalite activists. Mangaraju alias Suranna, a tribal activist, was killed immediately and Seeta was injured severely. She died two weeks later in hospital. So indiscriminate was the police firing that they injured a forest ranger, A Suryanarayana Raju, who was hospitalised for a long time.

In the early hours of November 20 the Warangal police is supposed to have 'encountered' an armed group of naxalites at Jaggannagudem, and killed three of them, two women and a man. The women were Poolamma and Jayamma and the man was Sambu Reddy. This killing has perhaps shocked the state more than any other incident. For, Poolamma was known to and loved by the people of the Eturnagaram forest region for more than a decade as a dedicated Rytu Coolie Sangham leader. Affectionately called 'Arunakka' by the masses, she led their democratic struggles for wages and land. It was under her leadership that the wages for agricultural labour had increased from Rs 5 for men and Rs 3 for women to about Rs 15 to 20 per day; and the wages for picking beedi leaf had also increased from 10 paise per bundle to 26 paise per bundle. She was a familiar figure to the revenue officials whom she would frequently approach with demands relating to land *pattas*. And she was equally familiar to the police whom she would directly approach every time any of her activists or the people were arrested. That such a person could be murdered by NTR's

police is an indication of the depths to which the regime has sunk.

What really happened was that on the morning of November 20, Poolamma, along with 19-year-old Jayamma and Sambu Reddy, was seen leaving the village of Jaggannagudem. A gathering of her party's activists had apparently been taking place at some spot outside the village. The police must have got wind of this, and they followed Poolamma and her companions. They reached the place where the gathering was taking place and opened fire on the activists. Most of them escaped, but Poolamma and the two who were with her stopped and told the police that they were prepared to get arrested. But the police would not pay heed. There was a long argument, at the end of which the police beat up all three of them and shot them dead.

But perhaps the really worst incidents have been occurring in Adilabad district. Here it is youth of the Gond and other tribes who are being picked up from their villages and killed in cold blood. This year 54 persons have been killed in 'encounters' in Andhra Pradesh; of these 54, while about 13 are activists of CPI-ML groups, the rest are peasants, youth and students; 17 of these are tribals, mostly Gonds from Adilabad

district. Their killing is part of a deliberate strategy of terrorisation through which the state hopes to strike at the roots of CPI-ML movement.

Here are a few of the stories: During the annual Nagoba festival of the Gonds, which usually falls in the month of January, the police picked up three Gond youth. After about two weeks of torture, two of them were killed on January 28 and the third person on February 4. Both the killings were announced as that 'unidentified naxalites' killed in an 'encounter'. On October 16 the police picked up a Gond youth by name Rajaram from the fields where he was working. His mother Rajubai, who later revealed the fact, was witness to the arrest. Two days later, Rajaram was killed and it was announced that there had been an 'encounter' near Kuptighat and an 'unidentified naxalite' was killed. The same was the story of Madavi Somu, who was also picked up from his village and killed and proclaimed as an 'unidentified naxalite' killed in an 'encounter' at Chintaguda on October 3. The reason why so many of the victims have to be described as 'unidentified naxalites' is precisely that they are not naxalite cadre: if their identity is revealed, that fact will come out.

executive committee of the union, both the president and the general secretary of the union belong to Congress(I). It was strange that the CPI(M) and CPI combine could be defeated in the last annual general election of the union. This is not the general feature obtaining in West Bengal. Even the local MLA belongs to the CPI(M).

Immediately after the lock-out, the labour minister of the Left Front government issued a statement to the effect that the lock-out was illegal. The government did not, however, formally declare the lock-out to be illegal which it had the power to do under the ID Act.

The union demanded unconditional withdrawal of the lock-out. The management, on the other hand, placed certain conditions which were really humiliating for the withdrawal of lock-out. Though several conciliation meetings were held, called by the labour minister and the labour commissioner, the management squarely refused to lift the lock-out unless the conditions put forward by the management were accepted by the union. The management's contention was that the factory at Batanagar was not yielding profits. Bata has several units in India. The factory at Batanagar, according to the management, is running at the cost of other units.

The management's plea of loss is not believable. From the annual report of Bata India for 1987, it is seen that profit before taxation is about Rs 70 million and the amount available for appropriation at the end of the year is Rs 40 million. The report also states that "the turnover for the year has been Rs 2,595 million, an increase of 14 per cent over the year 1986 and the profit Rs 70.2 million before tax which is significantly higher than the previous year's profit before tax of Rs 40.1 million". Batanagar is the biggest of all the units of Bata India. So the management's contention that Batanagar is running at a loss and at the cost of other units cannot be true. The union spokesmen state that the same plea is put forward by the management in the case of other units. The management was out to teach the union a lesson. Generally, the union submits a charter of demands over which disputes are raised, but in this case the procedure was revised. The management submitted a charter of humiliating conditions. It refused to lift the lock-out unless the union accepted its terms.

The management issued statement after statement reiterating its contention which the union failed to successfully counter with alternative facts and propaganda. It was only engaged in a defensive battle for avoiding some of the preconditions put forward by the management for lifting the lock-out.

SILENT SPECTATORS

The Left Front and its government and the CITU and the AITUC were almost silent spectators in the whole situation. They could not organise any solidarity movement worth

Lessons of Two Major Industrial Disputes in West Bengal

By a Special Correspondent

Two major long drawn-out industrial disputes in West Bengal, the lock-out by Bata India and the strike in Dunlop, involving some sixteen thousand workers in all, have raised many serious questions, especially regarding the role of the Left Front and its government led by the CPI(M).

IN government of India's terminology, industrial disputes mean both strikes and lock-outs, though the two are diametrically opposite things. Whereas strikes mean offensive of the workers against employers, lock-outs mean offensive of employers against workers.

In West Bengal, in recent times, there were two big industrial disputes, one a lock-out by Bata India, a multinational concern employing about ten thousand workmen, and the other a strike by the workers of Dunlop Rubber Company, employing about six thousand workmen. Both were long drawn-out, though the Bata lock-out was more prolonged. The two industrial disputes have posed many serious questions, especially regarding the role played by the Left Front and its government led by the CPI(M). We shall deal with these disputes one by one.

Bata Lock-Out

At first, let us take up the case of the lock-out by Bata. The management suddenly declared a lock-out on July 9, 1988. Before

declaring the lock-out the management complained of indiscipline by the workers. This allegation was, of course, denied by the workmen.

The workers are organised in a single union known as the Bata Mazdoor Union. Since its formation forty years ago, different political forces have worked in the single union which is almost a unique feature as there is a multiplicity of unions in almost all industries. The union is recognised by the management.

The union is affiliated to AITUC from the very beginning. The union is strong and has a long tradition of struggle. As it is the sole bargaining agent, an overwhelming majority of the workers are organised under it. The leadership of the union has been in the hands of different persons belonging to different political parties including the CPI(M) which was in the leadership prior to the last annual meeting. But in the last annual general election of the union, held more than a year ago, the Congress(I)-AICP combine defeated the CPI(M) and CPI combine. Though the CPI(M) elements are in the ex-