

Two 'Missing' Women of Karimnagar

K Balagopal

Two young activists of a women agricultural labourers' organisation were abducted and killed in the reign of N T Rama Rao who never thought of controlling the police; the enquiry into their 'disappearance' was ordered and brutally frustrated in the reign of Chenna Reddy who made vocal but empty promises of restoration of political control over the police; and it continues now in the reign of Janardhan Reddy who has come to power in perhaps the most unspeakably cynical exhibition of political gangsterism Indian democracy has witnessed.

THE process by which quiet ordinary people become rebels and then revolutionaries is a fascinating one. One often wonders what qualities the peasants of China or Vietnam possess that made massive revolutionary movements possible in those societies. The answer is: none, if one is searching for qualities that peasantry situated in similar circumstances in other countries do not possess. And this is what makes the process of transformation of quite mundane individuals first into social rebels and then into organised revolutionaries all the more fascinating. It is perhaps necessary to dwell a little on this social process, as an antidote to the narrow-minded political culture prevalent within the Left in this country, a culture in which politics is reduced to strategies --d tactics, and political criticism is reduced to allegations and counter-allegations of grand conspiracies or even plain character-assassination, whose nadir is physical liquidation.

The story of two 'missing' women activists of Karimnagar district has become quite well known in Andhra Pradesh, thanks to the brutal way the late government of Chenna Reddy dealt with the inquiry the high court ordered into their disappearance. Vasantha and Sujatha, young women in their early twenties, were activists of a women agricultural labourers' organisation, Vyavasaya Coolie Mahila Sangham, an organisation attached to one of the smaller naxalite factions of the state. They were picked up by the police on November 3, 1988 and July 1, 1989 respectively, and have vanished from police custody. They are two among the 40 or 50 naxalite cadre and sympathisers who were rendered 'missing' by the state's police during the reign of India's version of a Latin American despot, N T Rama Rao.

Vasantha's personal history is alluringly

vague. Her parents are known to be middle class people, one rumour being that her father is a magistrate or lawyer of Khammam district. That is rendered credible by the fact that they have never spoken up, notwithstanding the frequent mention of her case in the Press: only a middle class family with its ridiculous notions of respectability would maintain that kind of a brutal silence. Anyway, some unknown persecution at home—or perhaps some incompatibility of her personality with the institution called 'home'—drove her out at the young age of about 20. She spent the next one year wandering about the state, making quite a nuisance of herself with her eccentric behaviour and her determined search for contacts with the naxalites. She is heard of in Nalgonda, where she camps in the house of an elderly civil liberties lawyer and insists that he *must* get her to meet the naxalites, or else she will not leave his house for ever. She eats and sleeps in his house and pesters him with this request. Those being the days of N T Rama Rao's reign when the mere mention of the desire to meet a naxalite could get one killed, the lawyer refuses; and indeed, he entertains a completely understandable suspicion that she has been sent by the police to trap him. How he gets rid of her persistence—and embarrassing presence in a middle class brahmin household—one does not know, but she—or at least a nameless girl who answers to her description—turns up next at Anantapur with a similar request. She embarrasses and raises the suspicion of a lot more people there without attaining any better success. Finally she lands up at Karimnagar where she finds a naxalite group willing to trust her. She is asked to organise the Vyavasaya Coolie Mahila Sangham with the help of Samala Sujatha of Sirsilla, another young woman. It must be added that this organisation is the first

attempt by any naxalite group in AP to organise *women* agricultural labourers. The quantity of repression it has faced is such that there is little scope for discussing the achievements of this venture.

PROTOTYPE AND REALITY

Almost the first activity they take up relates to a village called Garshagurthi, located hardly 15 kms from Karimnagar town. That village is one of a cluster dominated by a landlord called Srihari Reddy, whose goons made a special target of women. One of their victims was Dadi Mallamma, a sturdy middle-aged woman who has just now become a grandmother. Contrary to the image of silent suffering and dim-witted innocence purveyed by the Shyam Benegal type of films on peasant movements, Mallamma is—like most peasant women—articulate to the point of being almost garrulous, and intelligent in a worldly-wise way to the point of being almost clever. The progressive film prototype of peasants is not so much a reflection of reality as of the inability of middle class sensibilities to sympathise with the oppressed unless they are inarticulate and uncomprehending to boot.

Mallamma is neither, and she is admirable for that, except that it makes it necessary to fill in the gaps of what she decides to tell. Her family had had a property quarrel with her husband's cousins, co-parceners of his ancestral property, and had filed a case in a civil court. In the meantime, however, the other party decided to take the help of Srihari Reddy to settle the matter by force. One night in February 1988, Srihari Reddy's goons attacked her house and beat up her and her daughters. She was not only thrashed mercilessly, but dragged out of the house, disrobed and beaten in the street. Her story of how she strove to hide herself in some house and get hold of some clothes to cover her naked flesh with, and how the goons frustrated her attempts, would make pathetic reading, except that there is no trace of self-pity in Mallamma's voice as she recounts the story. But she *does* insist that somebody gives her justice, for the police only very reluctantly framed a charge-sheet against the assailants, all of whom were acquitted by the court.

Shortly afterwards, the Vyavasaya Coolie Mehila Sangham enters the picture, with the publication of a leaflet demanding justice of Mallamma and protection to the poor from the goons of Srihari Reddy and the police who have colluded with him. Mallamma's caution directs her to him-

claim any role in bringing the Sangham to the village; indeed, she blandly disclaims any acquaintance with the Sangham and its office-bearers Vasantha and Sujatha except by way of the consequences to her own life of their interference in the matter. Only her watchful eyes betray the certainty that even if it was not she who brought the Sangham to the village, she welcomed it quite heartily; and her choice of expressions betrays the possibility that from a natural desire for justice in the immediate conflict, this self-possessed peasant woman who very cleverly hides behind the presumed stupidity of peasant women, has graduated to a deeper understanding of social conflicts and their resolution. In any case she will not allow her caution to prevent her from talking freely of the consequences that visited her after the publication of the leaflet. To speak of the injustice one has suffered is a legitimate act, if one has the necessary courage, but it is not at all a legitimate response to oppression to invite 'outsiders' into a village dispute rather than get it arbitrated by elders, and that too the kind of 'outsiders' who have a topsy-turvy view of the world, and so it is better to be watchful while talking of such matters to strangers, or before a court of law.

On the night of November 12, 1988 a party of plainclothes policemen raided Mallama's house. They first knocked on the door, and when she asked who they were, they answered that they were policemen from Vemulawada police station. She retorted from behind the closed door that her village comes within the limits of Karimnagar (rural) police station, and that there was no reason for the Vemulawada police to visit her. When they insisted that either she opens the door or they would break it open, she hastily complied and in a state of panic started calling out the names of the policemen of Karimnagar (rural) police station, some of whom she knew by name. But the assailants were new to her, and they barged in and beat her up mercilessly, abusing her all the while for having got the leaflet issued. She is still to recover from the beating they gave her. Even as she curses the policemen for the beating they gave her, she likes to pretend that this is the first she ever heard of the leaflet.

The next day she went to Karimnagar to lodge a complaint with the police. At the police station she saw one of the goons of Srihari Reddy, who questioned her about the leaflet. She disclaimed all responsibility for it, and wants you too to believe that she had none. For better effect she now looks at you intently and adds that if those girls had not needlessly interfered in her life, she would have been

spared the beating at the hands of the police as well as the humiliation of visiting a police station which is so unbecoming of a self-respecting Kapu woman like her. You can accept this statement at face value and arrive at uncharitable conclusions about what the masses think of revolutionaries, or else you can defend the 'interference' of 'those girls' as a necessary attempt at political justice by selfless individuals, and watch the consequences. The moment Mallamma is convinced that you are sincere in your appreciation of those girls and are not a clever fellow sent by Srihari Reddy or the police to trap her, the look of watchfulness drops from her eyes, and she comes out in warm words to defend their action. It is in that flush of unguarded warmth that she breaks into the language that convinces you that this Kapu woman so concerned about what her caste-people will say about all this is in reality way beyond all such inhibiting considerations.

Mallamma's attempts to get a case booked against her assailants came to nought. After a few persistent visits to Karimnagar, she was told by a deputy superintendent of police—a fat brahmin—is all the description she has of him—that it was some policemen who had beaten her, and she had better forget about it since no case was going to be booked against them, try as she might. What had actually happened was that about nine days prior to the assault, on November 3, 1988, the police had arrested Vasantha. Inspector Mogiliah of Vemulawada circle, a brute of a man with a special hatred for people's movements, and a close henchman of landlord Srihari Reddy, is believed to have personally arrested her. She was detained at Karimnagar and tortured very badly till November 12. Then she was brought to Garshagurthi on the night of November 12 in a jeep. She was kept in the jeep outside the village while the policemen dispatched by Inspector Mogiliah raided Mallamma's house and beat her up. Later they raided the houses of two more persons and beat them up also. They were also sympathisers of the Sangham's activity, and the beating up was meant to humiliate Vasantha, for she had to helplessly watch her people being thrashed.

'BECOMING A NAXALITE.'

That is the last anybody ever heard or saw of Vasantha. There is an unverified rumour that her dead body—in a highly decomposed state—was found near a hillock at Gattubuthkur during the first week of January 1989, but even the police have not mentioned this in their reply to the high court's notice to them in a habeas corpus petition. Her 'disappearance' left

Sujatha to carry on the campaign. She was joined in her work by another young peasant woman of Garshagurthi, Kankana Narsamma. Narsamma is a younger version of Mallamma, sturdy, strong and determined. The people of the village have a story about why she 'became a naxalite'. It appears that she was quite a normal girl until she got married. Soon after marriage, however, her husband started having an affair with another woman. Narsamma tried all means available to mend him, from cajoling him to inviting the counsel of caste elders. When all efforts failed it is said, she became spiteful and 'joined the naxalites' to take revenge against him and his mistress. However, since she has not as yet taken revenge against them, and moreover has withstood the most brutal torture from the police and continues to be a 'naxalite', it appears that this explanation misses something. How much of this explanation the people themselves believe is a moot question, and some of them undoubtedly offer it in the same spirit of caution that directs Mallamma's narration of her experience, but most people do believe that it is the truth. An act of personal revenge is a legitimate response from a wronged person, a necessary and harmless outlet allowed by oppressive society, whereas social revolution is not. And this legitimacy is not merely an external impediment to people's actions, but an internalised framework of 'subaltern' consciousness as well. Oppressive societies determine a framework of legitimacy within which rebellion is to confine itself, and popular conceptualisation of rebellion is frequently effected within the parameters of that framework imposed from above and internalised in the course of the socialisation of the individual. To describe this as "what the people themselves think" of the rebellion is misleading. The people never think or act 'autonomously' in the true sense of that expression. On the contrary, for popular consciousness to break out of the constraint of legitimacy imposed upon it requires organised political work, and is rarely a spontaneous consequence of the very fact of subalternity.

Narsamma is a prototype of the kind of courageous women who have come forward in their hundreds with the spread of the naxalite movement in Andhra Pradesh. Whether to seek revenge against the other woman or for a higher purpose she joined the Vyavasaya Coolie Mahila Sangham and became the right hand of Sujatha after Vasantha's 'disappearance'. And so when inspector Mogiliah started hunting for Sujatha, his eyes naturally fell on Narsamma as the person most likely to reveal the whereabouts of Sujatha, if tortured sufficiently.

On February 18, 1989 Narsamma was arrested and detained till about March 15 at Vemulawada and Huzurabad police stations. Inspector Mogilaiah personally took her from village to village, beating her and asking her to reveal the whereabouts of Sujatha. For part of this period, another activist by name Subhash, a youth in his twenties, was also detained and tortured to the same end. And one day—the day prior to Shivratri is how Mallamma recalls it—Maliamma is again brought to Vemulawada police station and is asked to identify Narsamma, which she safely does since they belong to the same village. Mallamma is beaten further to reveal the whereabouts of Sujatha. Unable to bear this harassment she gives a bribe of Rs 5,000 to the inspector and saves herself. She is let off, but Narsamma and Subhash are implicated in a murder case and sent to jail.

Narsamma came out on bail later. On July 1, 1989 she was to meet Sujatha at a place near the village of Gumlapur under Choppadandi police station limits. While she was coming towards the spot of the rendezvous, she saw Sujatha being picked up by the police and taken away in a jeep. If she had been less fortunate she would have been taken away as well. And that is the last anybody has ever seen of Sujatha. Narsamma naturally got scared and went underground. The police obtained a nonbailable warrant from the court against her for having jumped bail, hunted for her and caught hold of her on October 4, 1989 at the village of Up-paramallyal. She was taken round a number of police stations—Boinpalli, Vemulawada, Sirsilla, Gangadhara, Karimnagar—and tortured most inhumanly. She was given the notorious roller-treatment. She was made to stand with her midriff in contact with the sharp edge of a table, and violently pushed onto the table from behind, so that she suffered haemorrhage inside her stomach and vomited blood. For some reason the police decided to leave her alive, and sent her to jail after about 17 or 18 days of such ill-treatment.

In the first week of 1990 Narsamma came out on bail once again, and approached civil liberties people to see what they could do about the 'disappearance' of her two comrades. A habeas corpus petition was filed in the high court, and as usual the police replied that they had never heard of Vasantha and Sujatha, and had certainly not arrested them. Such denials are commonly accepted by the courts at face value and habeas corpus petitions are dismissed, but in this case some merciful inspiration led the high court to order an enquiry into the allegations. The district judge of Karimnagar was asked by the high court to record the evidence in the matter and send a report..

SOLIDARITY IN UNACCOUNTABILITY

The principles of natural justice rule out the possibility of any *in camera* recording of evidence in such an enquiry; though it is perhaps inappropriate to apply those principles to the benefit of anything as unnatural as the police, the law is majestically impartial, and hence the district judge of Karimnagar proceeds with the enquiry in an open court. What transpires in consequence is best quoted from a petition filed later by the petitioner in the high court:

... I appeared before the enquiry along with my advocate on the first day of the enquiry, i.e., 17th March 1990. Mr Mogilaiah, the inspector, requested the judge to give him time to employ a lawyer on his behalf. The judge gave a week's time and adjourned the enquiry to 24 March. We noticed that Mr Mogilaiah had entered the hall with a revolver wrapped in a newspaper, and there was an armed policeman in plainclothes carrying a sten gun, standing right at the door of the court hall. I and my counsel drew the attention of the judge to this fact and pointed out that the threatening presence of armed policemen in the court premises would deter witnesses from entering the court freely and deposing fearlessly. The judge took notice of this fact and said that he would at least ensure that thereafter no policeman would be present in the first floor of the court building where the district judge's court is situated. Afterwards Mr Mogilaiah in an informal chat with newspaper reporters said that if the lop people in the civil liberties movement are liquidated then this headache of enquiries would not be there.

Unfortunately, on the date of the second sitting, i.e., 24 March, the police presence increased manifold. About 90 policemen, nearly half of them armed with sten guns and other automatic weapons, were swarming all over the court. Ten of them, all carrying sten guns, were standing right outside the district judge's court hall. Some were guarding the paths leading into the court from the sides and behind. Some were perched on trees. The

atmosphere was so terrifying that even the advocates of Karimnagar Bar were scared to enter the court. Mr Mogilaiah himself went around the court corridors pointing his revolver at people. In such conditions there could be no question of witnesses entering the court or deposing before the enquiry.

A single police officer, to save his skin, is able to mobilise the entire force so easily and so lawlessly. Such is the state of solidarity in unaccountability that the Indian police have achieved.

The high court then transferred the enquiry to the chief metropolitan magistrate's court at Hyderabad. This judicial officer took a clear stand that armed policemen could not come into the court building, and that the respondent should come unarmed. Inspector Mogilaiah, a man who has committed four murders in uniform, stood shivering in court and said that he would be killed in the very court hall if his gunmen were removed. He even alleged that this whole enquiry was a conspiracy hatched by the civil liberties people and the naxalites to drag him to court, disarm him, and kill him. The judicial officer, to his credit, was unmoved. Thereafter the police officer showed no interest in the enquiry except to produce an alibi as an after-thought late in the proceedings.

In the event, it was not the inspector whom the enquiry killed, but young Subhash. The enquiry officer fixed March 25 as the date for recording the evidence of Dadi Maliamma, Narsamma, and other witnesses to the arrest of the two girls. Subhash, on behalf of his organisation, requested office-bearers of APCLC to go to Garshagurthi and take Maliamma to Hyderabad to get her statement recorded; he himself would contact Narsamma and other witnesses of Gumlapur and bring them to Hyderabad. Maliamma was contacted, taken to Hyderabad, and gave her deposition in a courageous exhibition of a determination to have her say, un-

SAMEEKSHA TRUST BOOKS

Selections of Articles from *Economic and Political Weekly*

General Editor: Ashok Mitra

Poverty and Income Distribution

Edited by

K S Krishnaswamy

While there has been, over the years, a perceptible increase in per capita income and expenditure and possibly some decline in the incidence of poverty in India, what still remains is massive and of a kind that is not remedied quickly or smoothly. Even with radical policies, the shifts in income and occupational structures to make a serious dent on it will take more than the rest of this century. In the welter of recent exchanges between the government and the opposition as well as between planners and market advocates on the strategy of growth, these issues, have been largely obfuscated. It is therefore more than ever necessary today to recognise the magnitude of the problem and the inadequacy of the measures adopted so far to deal with it.

pp viii + 420 Rs 240

Available from

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Bombay Delhi Calcutta Madras

On this 41st anniversary of the Republic Day, Maharashtra rededicates itself to ushering in economic and social justice to all its people, and especially the Adivasis, Dalits, the landless poor and women. Development programmes towards this end taken up strive for the prosperity of all.

Programmes at a Glance

- ★ Ambitious Rs. 100-Crore Horticulture Development Programme introduced to render fallow, waste and rain-fed land profitably productive;
- ★ 65 Growth Centres identified and steps initiated for establishment of 94 mini industrial estates to boost industrial development of backward areas. Participation of Non-Resident Indians secured for establishing 75 industrial units to benefit from their prosperity and expertise;
- ★ Programme for creation of six lac jobs through cottage industry in villages during the Eighth Five-Year Plan finalised in collaboration with Maharashtra State Khadi and Village Industries Board;
- ★ Debt relief of over Rs. 500 crores granted to lacs of eligible farmers and artisans;
- ★ Maharashtra's pioneering and prestigious Employment Guarantee Scheme re-oriented to channelise manpower to bring about lasting rural development;
- ★ Time-bound Special Action Plan brought into operation to expedite all-round development of Adivasis of Gadchiroli, Chandrapur and Dhule Districts;
- ★ Maharashtra takes initiative to make the Konkan Railway Project—a boon for the multi-faceted development of the State's 720 km. long coastal area—a reality by contributing towards its cost in a big way;
- ★ Complete works and writings of Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar to be published during their current death and birth centenary celebrations, respectively;
- ★ Reprinting of the popular edition of 'Dnyaneshwari' during the celebration this year of 700 years of writing of the epic. Sant Tukaram's masterpiece 'Gatha' also to be reprinted.

=====

READ '*LOKRAJYA*' REGULARLY

Annual Subscription Rs. 25/-

Single copy Rs. 3/-

=====

mindful not only of the consequences of her effort, but also of the judicial officer's impatience with her evident lack of a sense or that august institution's notion of relevance and irrelevance. And yet she had no reason to worry about the consequences, for she had deftly left enough unsaid to have her excuses ready in case inspector Mogilaiah were to pay her home a visit later in the week. It was a task that would have daunted a lesser person, but this illiterate peasant woman handled it with dexterity, and left asking the civil liberties people whether "it came out all right".

In the meantime, on the evening of March 24, Subhash and Narsamma who were on the job of locating witnesses to Sujatha's arrest at Gumlapur, were accosted by the police at the village of Kolimikunta near Karimnagar. Narsamma managed to escape, but Subhash was caught. Narsamma contacted the press at Karimnagar, and they in turn contacted their offices at Hyderabad and civil liberties people with the apprehension that an 'encounter' was likely. Attempts were on at Hyderabad to contact the director general of police. In the meanwhile, right in the midst of these efforts, Subhash was shot dead. The police recorded his arrest at Choppadandi police station and took him to Sirsilla, ostensibly for 'interrogation'. On the way they killed him and declared that he made an attempt to snatch a policeman's revolver and escape, and was killed in the scramble that ensued.

The enquiry merrily goes on, and now a third government is in power. The two girls were abducted and killed in the reign of N T Rama Rao who never thought of controlling the police; the enquiry into their disappearance was ordered and brutally frustrated in the reign of Chenna Reddy who made vocal but empty promises of restoration of political control over the police; and it continues now in the reign of Janardhan Reddy who is in no position to control the police. The way Janardhan Reddy has come to power is perhaps the most unspeakably cynical exhibition of political gangsterism the brief history of Indian democracy has witnessed. The tensions generated by the BJP's Ayodhya campaign, and Muslim resentment at the widespread destruction of 'masjids', 'dargahs' and 'idgahs' during the time of Advani's arrest and the first 'kar seva' at Ayodhya, were cynically used by the dissidents in the Congress(I), frustrated by the refusal of Rajiv Gandhi to dethrone Chenna Reddy, to create the worst communal massacre in the history of this state. And then Chenna Reddy was pulled down for his failure to maintain order and communal harmony. The 'high command' then bowed to their wishes,

and the dissidents got together to propose Janardhan Reddy's name as their unanimous choice to succeed Chenna Reddy. The moment this arrangement was made, the killing stopped in Hyderabad, as if by the wave of a magic wand. Janardhan Reddy took oath with bloodstained hands, and almost immediately the director general of police took over the reins of the government's 'naxalite policy', as

it has come to be called. The swift change indicates that the gangsters in power at Hyderabad have neither the capacity nor the intention to evolve a political response to the naxalite phenomenon, and are only too willing to hand over the headache to the police. It is in this regime that the next act in the enquiry into the disappearance of the two women activists of Karimnagar is to unfold.

Distortion of Census Data on Scheduled Tribes

Sharad Kulkarni

There took place large-scale distortion in the 1981 census in many states in respect of enumeration of members of the Scheduled Tribes. Use of the census data will lead to wrong conclusions about, for instance, the rate of growth of population of tribals in general and of specific tribes, increase in literacy rates among tribals and rise in urbanisation.

SOCIAL SCIENTISTS use census data with a sort of reverence. They are used to study socio-economic changes. They are also used to formulate and evaluate policies of the government. All such data are accepted without correction. Even demographers try to correct the data only in respect of age and this error is supposed to creep in because of preference for certain digits. Census data are on the whole regarded as authentic.

One can imagine the consequences when a large number of respondents deliberately provide wrong information to the enumerators who generally record it without verification. Such large-scale distortion took place in the 1981 census in many states in respect of the enumeration of members of the Scheduled Tribes. The population of the Scheduled Tribes in India increased by 41.60 per cent during the decade 1971-81 as against 24.69 per cent increase in the total population including that of the Scheduled Tribes. It is necessary to analyse the causes of this abnormal growth of the tribal population and to caution the unwary scholars who may use the data believing them to be correct and trustworthy.

Table I shows the population of the Scheduled Tribes as recorded in the 1971 and 1981 censuses. It can be seen that states like Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra have recorded an abnormal increase in the population of the Scheduled Tribes. It is necessary to explain in some detail the factors responsible for this abnormal increase in the tribal population.

The term tribe has never been legally defined in India. The British administrators realised the necessity of enacting special laws for the tribal communities. Regulation XIII of 1833 declared Chota Nagpur a non-regulated area. In an appendix to the Scheduled Districts Act of 1874 (14 of 1874) an exhaustive list of the districts declared as Scheduled is given. Local governments were empowered, with the previous permission of the Governor-General, to exclude these districts from the operation of enactments made for the province (Section 3)

The Government of India Act of 1919 empowered the Governor-General in Council to declare any territory in British India to be a backward tract and to direct that any act or a part thereof shall not apply or shall apply to such territories with specified exceptions or modifications.

This was continued in the Government of India Act of 1935. Special provisions were made for the administration of excluded areas. The power to declare any area as excluded or partially excluded was given to the Governor-General in Council (Sections 91-92).

Thus under British rule there were special provisions for the areas inhabited by the tribal communities and not to the members of specified tribes. Laws were linked to areas and not to tribes.

However, for the first time in the 1935 Act, a provision was made for some representation for backward tribes in the Provincial Legislatures. A list of backward tribes was notified in 1936 for all the provinces except Punjab and Bengal (The Government of India (Provincial Legisla-