

Meham in Nandyal

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The gangsterism Congress(I) goons led by a galaxy of party leaders exhibited at Kurnool, the district headquarters, during nominations week and P V Narasimha Rao's silent endorsement of the criminality would have destroyed his political reputation had either the political situation been different or the critical instincts of our liberal intelligentsia been truly honest and impartial. But today PV is the consensus man and the Indian ruling classes are desperately hoping that he will cement the yawning fissures within their ranks.

WHAT Mcham did to Devi Lal and his son—nothing much in a material sense, true, but quite a lot by way of a spoilt reputation—Nandyal should in all fairness have done to P V Narasimha Rao by now. The gangsterism his partymen exhibited at Kurnool, the district headquarters, during the nominations week (October 11 to 18) and his silent endorsement of their criminality would have destroyed his political reputation if either the political situation had been different or the critical instincts of our liberal intelligentsia been truly honest and impartial. The situation, however, is not different, and our vocal urban intelligentsia is vocal only about certain issues and certain people, Devi Lal—whatever his power hunger and his lack of scruples—has stood for the interests of the rural rich, which makes his unscrupulousness an easy target for the urban intellectuals' moral outrage.

PV is different. He is the new consensus-man the Indian ruling classes have discovered. Everybody is hoping against hope that he will somehow perform the magic of cementing the fissures within the ruling classes that have grown to yawning proportions. They hoped Rajiv Gandhi would do it but found to their disgust that he was too small-minded to even visualise the task; they then put all their hopes on V P Singh and were happy to find some confirmation of their hopes in the beginning, which explains partly why they were all so angry with him when he brought up the 'divisive' Mandal Commission. And now they are all looking to PV to do the job. Such is the miracle desperation can work that the image of PV created and publicised in the last few months has little resemblance to what the politically knowledgeable public in Andhra Pradesh knew him to be until he had the prime ministership thrust on him. He was a proverbially indecisive per-

son, afraid to offend even rogues, accommodative of even scoundrels, lacking totally in assertiveness, and so on. That is what he was held to be, and indeed that is what he is. But the desperation of the ruling classes for a consensus-maker has transformed him into an elderly statesman, a cool, moderate, balanced, altogether very capable person. The absurdity of this image will dawn on them soon with another crisis of hope as happened with Rajiv Gandhi and V P Singh, but in the meanwhile his reputation is a holy cow. And so the press writes of Nandyal as if what happened there was just some more of the intimidation and violence that has attended all electioneering in recent years.

In Andhra Pradesh there is a supplementary reason for the silence, a certain unstated feeling that at long last we have a Telugu man as prime minister—what if nobody among Telugu speaking people thought very highly of him till yesterday—and we should not spoil things for him by focusing disproportionately on petty things like abduction and assault of prospective candidates intending to contest against him. In any case, it is always possible to pretend that PV, cultured and reportedly the rather learned brahmin that he is, is above such things and it is the uncouth Reddy goons of Rayalaseema who are responsible for the gangsterism. Nandyal, after all, has illustrious history. Neelam Sanjeeva Reddy of the Janata Party was sent to parliament from Nandyal in 1978 in an election in which all other seats in the state were swept by the Congress of Indira Gandhi. He won, not because the people of this corner of Rayalaseema reasoned differently from the rest of the state, but because the Reddy landlords of this region decided to get him elected come what may, and did so by transporting in lorries all suspected Congress voters—dalits, in particular—to the

Nallamalai forest of the Krishna river valley, and keeping them there till the polling was over. Sanjeeva Reddy went on to become president of the republic and played a role that matched in dubiousness the way he was elected to parliament.

But it is no secret that the gangsterism this time round was sanctioned by union law minister Vijaya Bhaskar Reddy and directed personally by his nephew Kothakota Prakash Reddy, one of the secretaries of the pradesh Congress(I). And Vijaya Bhaskar Reddy would certainly not risk the prime minister's reputation without consulting or at least informing him. PV has never had a political base of his own even in his native district of Karimnagar and the only way he can survive is by depending on one faction or other of the warring gangs of landlords, contractors and real estate brokers that make up the Congress(I) in this state. If, this time, he has willingly put himself in the hands of the warlords of Rayalaseema there is no doubt strong enough reason for that.

And the reason has started unfolding itself. The warlords decided that they would get PV elected unanimously from Nandyal. The Telugu Desam Party cooperated with them, ostensibly because Telugu pride dictated that a Telugu prime minister contesting to complete the formality of getting elected to parliament should not be opposed; however, it is hinted at by those who know better that there is a more ignoble *Quid pro quo* involved, pertaining to the business and real estate affairs of the TDP leaders. The CPI(M) ridiculed the TDP leaders' stand, but nevertheless decided not to set up a candidate. The CPI too followed suit. These two parties, for all their frequent expression of concern about democracy, have, in recent years, always been more concerned about not involving themselves in activity likely to destabilise the polity than any democratic principles. Only the BJP and two Marxist-Leninist groups set up candidates to oppose PV. And Motkuru Narsimhulu, a dalit MLA who was elected to the assembly as an independent, also filed his nomination with the intention of campaigning about Chundur. The Congress(I) leaders tried to 'reason' with these people and dissuade them from entering the contest but they were not willing to listen to this kind of 'reason'.

Apart from a feudal pique at any opposition to their decision to get the prime minister elected unopposed from their fiefdom, the warlords had another reason for being upset at the possibility of contest. That is their fear that somebody

would get one of the opposing candidates murdered and get the election countermanded. Sudhakar Babu, chairman of Kurnool municipality, who played the role of principal aide to APCC(I) secretary Prakash Reddy in the disgraceful drama of abducting the prospective candidates and keeping them in confinement till the nominations were closed, explained this fear in rather absurd terms to one of his astonished victims: "You know how certain foreign hands are intent on destabilising India; they killed Rajiv and now we are afraid they will kill one of you to get the election delayed and make it impossible for our PV to continue as prime minister?"

But the foreign hand, assuming that there is one long enough to reach across the southern bank of the Nallamalai forest and get to Nandyal, would find lots of local competition. Cuddapah, the neighbouring Lok Sabha constituency (which is also going to polls this time) saw one independent candidate murdered last time to prevent the very ambitious Y S Rajashekhar Reddy from entering parliament. Otherwise he would perhaps have been one more addition to the already substantial community of Telugu ministers in PV's government. The hand that did it, far from being foreign, was very much native, in fact very much Telugu. The TDP leaders, terribly frustrated at not being allowed by Congressmen to go around and campaign for their candidate, picked on the most defenceless independent candidate and murdered him to spite Rajashekhar Reddy. What happened thereafter was even more macabre. The TDP leaders hoped that the dead man would be discovered by the police and the elections countermanded, but it was the Congress(I) people who discovered the dead body. They hacked at the corpse's face with an axe to make it unrecognisable and pushed it deep into some bushes by the roadside. The TDP leaders panicked when they found no news of the candidate's death in the next day's papers and started making anonymous phone calls to the press reporters at Cuddapah about a corpse resembling such and such candidate having been seen at such and such place. The reporters, not wanting to offend Congressmen, who are incomparably stronger than the TDP in this region, refused to take the calls seriously unless the callers identified themselves. Finally, in an act of reckless desperation, TDP leader Tulsi Reddy himself rang up the reporters and asked them whether they had not heard about the corpse he had been hearing about. In the meanwhile Rajashekhar Reddy rang up the reporters and told them without any preamble not to take rumours of corpses seriously since,

he had reason to believe that the corpses were unrecognisable. By this time the police too heard the rumour, but were unwilling to take any decision, for on the one hand Rajashekhar Reddy is one of the unanointed monarchs of Cuddapah district, and on the other he is the leading dissident in the state's Congress(I) and therefore a thorn in the flesh of chief minister Nedurumilli Janardhan Reddy. So the local police safely conveyed the rumour to Hyderabad and sat back awaiting instructions. Janardhan Reddy, with the sharp instincts of a professional go-between, which is what he essentially is, saw a good chance to undo his rival. He sent an IG of police (also a Reddy from Cuddapah district, incidentally) to go and get the body identified and get the election countermanded, which he did quite efficiently. Cuddapah was then graciously offered to PV as a safe seat by Rajashekhar Reddy but PV preferred, for reasons of his own, to be obliged to Vijaya Bhaskar Reddy rather than Rajashekhar Reddy and so the sitting MP of Nandyal, one Gangula Pratap Reddy, was persuaded to resign and offer the seat to PV. Rajashekhar Reddy is trying again from Cuddapah.

Such is Rayalaseema, and that is why it sounds so fatuous to hear talk about foreign hands'. Indeed, if the Congressmen were worried only about foreign hands they would not have indulged in precautionary gangsterism on this scale. It is the native hands that they are really worried about. Not the Telugu Desam Party this time, for the TDP has decided that it stands to gain nothing by obstructing PV, but the various contending Congress factions, which are willing to do anything to spite each other, unmindful of consequences. Congress gangsterism is such that they would not hesitate to precipitate a major crisis by getting the Nandyal poll countermanded if one or some of them felt threatened by the gain that is going to accrue to, say, Vijaya Bhaskar Reddy, by PV getting elected from Nandyal.

If this fear of independent candidates getting murdered is the—so to speak—rational element underlying the gangsterism, the rest is typical warlord arrogance. We, the lords of Kurnool, led by the union law minister, have unanimously agreed and brought the prime minister all the way to Nandyal to get properly elected and anointed, and how dare these petty people oppose our common desire? These are the very words with which they berated the prospective contestants in their captivity; and they are sufficiently indifferent to the requirements of civilised appearance to express themselves in identical language to the press.

And here is how they set about their task, PV filed his nomination on October 10. From the 11th to the 18th a gang of 50 to 60 goons camped permanently in the sprawling collectorate complex at Kurnool, the district headquarters, where the nominations had to be filed. The camp was based in the premises of the district information and public relations office, but the gang swarmed all over the complex in search of their prey. Hand in glove with them were the police, who were present in equally large numbers and who put at their disposal the arms, the intelligence and the lawful authority they possessed. These unauthorised occupants of the premises made no attempt whatsoever to be inconspicuous. The district collector and other revenue officials, all of whom are executive magistrates, have their offices in the complex, and could not but see the gang camping there, but they chose not to notice what they saw. Their standard reply to all criticism has been that they "received no written complaint from anyone about any unauthorised presence or unlawful activity on the premises". The gangsterism thus having been officially rendered invisible, there was nothing else to hinder it. All those who were suspected of trying to file nomination were abducted and kept hidden in a place called Madhavi Lodge, owned apparently by a relative of Vijaya Bhaskar Reddy. They were abused, in some cases beaten badly, and guarded by armed toughs until October 18, the last day for the filing of nominations. And there was no subterfuge in all this. The gang that camped in the collectorate complex was personally led by a galaxy of Congress(I) leaders: APCC(I) general secretary, Prakash Reddy; Kurnool municipal chairman, Sudhakar Babu; MLA from Pathikonda, Seshi Reddy; MLA from Kodumuru, Madangopal; former MLC, Raghuram Reddy; the MP who vacated the seat for the prime minister, Gangula Pratap Reddy; and Vijaya Bhaskar Reddy's son, also named Prakash Reddy. They were present on the spot and personally did most of the kidnapping and beating.

Hanumantha Reddy, one of the victims, is a senior lawyer from Atmakur, a taluk town at the edge of the Nallamalai forest. He is a lawyer with 15 years practice, and a political opponent of local MLA Buddha Vengal Reddy of the Congress(I). Having been in and out of various non-Congress parties over a long period, he decided to contest against PV as an independent this time (after the unnerving experience that followed, he has recently joined the BJP). On October 14 he went to Kurnool along with about 15 of his friends and followers

to file his nomination. The gang tried to stop him but he evaded them and went into the collectorate building. But when he tried to obtain the nomination forms he realised to his terrible frustration that he had not after all succeeded in evading his obstructors. He was sent running from one room to another. The officials were evidently acting in collusion with the Congress(I) goons, for all the prospective candidates had this experience of being made to run around from room to room for the papers and being abducted by the goons who lay in wait *en route*. Hanumantha Reddy was accosted by APCC(I) secretary Prakash Reddy in the office of the district revenue officer (who is an additional district magistrate). Prakash Reddy pulled him by his shirt collar. Some others joined Prakash Reddy, lifted up Hanumantha Reddy bodily, beat him with rifle butts and took him away. In the lawns outside Hanumantha Reddy found all the other Congress(I) leaders sitting in chairs as if it was their personal piece of property. They asked him why he had entered the contest. When he said that he wanted to expose the problems of his taluk through the campaign, they told him impertinently that there were other ways of doing that. They suggested a meeting with Vengal Reddy to discuss the problems of his taluk, but he refused to meet the MLA. Then they suggested a meeting with a more respected and elderly Congressman.

Being in no position to assert his right to contest regardless of what anyone thought of it, he agreed to this absurd suggestion. But it was only a ploy to get him out of the collectorate complex. He was put in a jeep and taken straight to the lodge where all the victims were to be incarcerated. He was *one of the first* to be lodged there, but he soon had company. One was Sheelam Sanjeeva Reddy, president of an outfit called Rayalaseema Rytu Sangham, who had decided to contest the election to focus attention on the neglect of Rayalaseema by the Congress governments; he was accosted by a circle inspector of police opposite the collectorate building on the 15th and handed over to the Congressmen who beat him up, put him in a jeep, and brought him to the lodge. One was an astrologer from Kakinada who had decided to enter the contest as a protest against the non-inclusion of astrology as a teaching subject in our universities. The poor man had the kind of experience his stars perhaps never foretold. There was one more godman: a teacher from Hyderabad by name Mastan Vali who was confined for three days in the collectorate itself and was rescued by the BJP candidate's entourage; one person from Gwalior whom the experience seems to have shocked into

silence, for he has gone back after his release without saying a single word to any one; and a few others.

On the evening of the 16th the detainees were shifted to the house of a former vice-chairman of Kurnool municipality, on the banks of the Handri river. From there they managed to escape on the night of 18th, the last date for the filing of nominations, after the captors had relaxed their vigil somewhat, Sanjeeva Reddy managed to reach Hyderabad in a lorry, and told the press about his experience. That was when the sordid incidents became public knowledge. Hanumantha Reddy merely went back to Atmakur where he found that the Bar Association refused to condemn what had happened to him, and his friends only said 'you asked for it'. He does not dare to go to Kurnool to even to attend the district sessions court, and has joined the BJP perhaps with the hope that the act will save him from further harassment.

The press reporters of Kurnool knew what was happening but they could not pick up the courage to write about it. Only one of them, an assistant reporter of *Eenadu*, a local youth by name Suryaprakash, decided to make an effort. Being a little audacious he decided that he himself would file a nomination and report the consequences. He had a rather strange experience. He went to the collectorate complex at 10 am on October 18. To file the nomination he had to obtain a certificate from the appropriate revenue official verifying his address which was in Kurnool town itself. Strangely, this turned out to be impossible. One official sent him to another, and the other told him the right man was on leave. He finally went to the collector himself and asked him to kindly verify his place of residence from the voters list, but the collector refused. His argument was that his duty was only to accept duly filled forms and not to help people fill them for that would amount to supporting the candidature! As Suryaprakash stood near the door of the collector's room pleading with him, Sudhakar Babu, the municipal chairman, waiting outside the room hidden from the collector's view, tried to grab the youth by the back of his shirt and pull him out. Suryaprakash pulled himself free and in the attempt nearly fell at the feet of the collector, who pretended ably that nothing untoward was happening. Suryaprakash, by his own account, gave vent to his frustration in choice abuse aimed at the collector and again demanded that he should be allowed to file his nomination unmolested. The collector replied that if he got the right certificate from the right official the nomination would certainly be accepted, but he could in no way help if the prospective candidate dared not go out

in search of the right official for fear of being abducted outside the door of the collector's office. Suryaprakash sat out the whole day in the collector's office and left after closing time, when he had no further reason to fear abduction, for that was the last day for nominations. Outside the collector's office he met the municipal chairman and asked him out of curiosity why they were so intent on preventing nominations. That was when Sudhakar Babu gave his speech about 'foreign hands'.

In allowing the RIP and ML candidates and the sitting MLA Narsimhulu to file their nominations, the gangsters were in part recognising their limitations but in part also they were not unduly perturbed because they felt these candidates could look after themselves and would not get killed. It was the independents they were worried about, and come the evening of the 18th they were satisfied that they had safely abducted and hidden all the independents. But they realised a couple of days later that they were mistaken. I Koti Reddy, a high court lawyer from Hyderabad, a close friend of TDP leader Upendra, who had been one of the central government's legal advisers during the National Front government, had managed to file his nominations as an independent. He had gone to Kurnool in the car of one Ravindranath Reddy, a notorious landlord of Mahbubnagar district, and BJP MLA from Alampur, who happened to be a close relative of his. At Kurnool he went into the collectorate along with the entourage of the BJP candidate and was mistaken by the gangsters for a 'dummy' candidate of the BJP. It was two days later that they realised their mistake, and they immediately took revenge.

On the evening of October 21, in the heart of Hyderabad city, a large number of Congress(I) goondas attacked Koti Reddy's son and smashed their car, shouting 'did his father think he was man enough to contest from Nandyal' The son went to the police station at Kacheguda in the city to lodge a complaint. By the evening he found that he was being treated as a criminal and not a complainant. The police made out that the attack was a sequel to a brawl the youth was involved in some time ago and had nothing to do with the father's politics. They abused him for giving a false complaint. Father and son realised that in spite of all their big connections they were up against the kind of shameless collusion that they did not have the stomach to light. A week later Koti Reddy announced that he was withdrawing from the contest at Nandyal.

That is how India's latest prime minister, the first from south India and all that, is entering parliament.