

Herald the Hunting Dogs that Are Grey in Colour

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Eighteen 'naxalites' have been killed in 15 'encounters' in Andhra Pradesh this year till the end of June. And now the state government has announced its decision to constitute an 'elite corps of police—a force of some 1,000, to be called 'Greyhounds—to fight the 'naxalites'. The consequences of this creation, if it ever takes place and is let loose in the villages and the forest areas, can be imagined.

MAY 1988 has been an eventful month for NTR's government and his Telugu Desam party. The 6th annual convention of the party—called *Mahanadu* by its obsessively tradition-conscious founder—was held on the banks of the Krishna river from May 22 to 28. Heritage is perhaps a better word than tradition, for it is not so much the ritual form as the burden of *parampara* that weighs upon NTR. He sees himself as one who is carrying forward the heritage of all the kings who ruled over the Telugu people during the last two thousand years. The institutions of the polity, of the administration and of his party are conceptualised and named after the institutions of old. But of course there is always the farcical element that is inevitable when history is forcibly made to repeat itself.

The word *Mahanadu* according to historians of the Chola period of south Indian history, stood for both a territory, and the periodic assembly of the dominant landed gentry of the territory. The gentry used to gather in an assembly—the *Mahanadu*—once in a while to decide upon issues connected with the expenditure of the surplus extracted from the subordinate cultivators; and land grants to brahmins, temple construction, water courses, distribution of cultivable wastes among aspiring cultivator?, etc. At a period of history when the centralisation of authority in the kingdom was weak, it was these assemblies of the landed gentry that dispensed with people's lives and happiness. That NTR chooses to call the annual assembly of his party *Mahanadu* is probably an unwitting piece of symbolism, but is very apt—nevertheless.

However—and here the symbolism turns farcical—we are no longer living in a period of weak centralisation. The King is now an all-powerful man and it is he who dispenses with people's lives and happiness, or about as much of it as he can with a landlord-contractor-trader class as

his social base and a budget that is just about twice the size of the annual deficit in the union government's budget. And so, while the *Mahanadu* of old was not only a powerful body but also a corporate entity, the *Mahanadu* of NTR is a silly caricature. It is more a fair than a party congress. The assemblage spent much of the week-long session watching cock-fights, bullock-cart races and assorted rural games; seeing NTR's films as well as what are called 'folk' cultural programmes from 8 am till 12 noon each day in improvised theatres, of which there were as many as six; trying their hand at competitions in *rangoli* (for women), eating idlis and carrying grain bags on the back (for men), running races (for both sexes) and archery (for boys); amusing themselves at the miniature zoo made up of a tiger, a lion, a bear, a stag and a few other animals brought from the Hyderabad zoo; and acquiring merit in the meanwhile by touching NTR's feet if and when possible. The venue for the fair was on the banks of the Krishna river, at the border of the Krishna and Guntur districts. It was named Satavahanapuram, following the common historiography of Telugu nationalism which considers the Satavahanas as the first Telugu kings, though it is not clear what, if anything at all, was Telugu about them. The administrative machinery of the Krishna and Guntur districts was mobilised on a large scale to equip Satavahanapuram with conveniences such as 3,000 electric lights of various kinds, two transformers' and three emergency generators to light them with, 360 taps to provide water to human beings and cattle, a hundred toilets, six theatres, a stadium for games, a miniature zoo, umpteen arches and stalls and approach roads, and thatched huts built in accordance with traditional *vastu* principles for the leaders to rest and reside in. The departments of electricity, roads and buildings, public health, water works, civil supplies and the

police were mobilised in their entirety for this purpose. The collector of Guntur district, a young man by name Jannat Hussain who is known for his irascible temper which is directed impartially towards both the people and the politicians, was disinclined to force his administration into all this activity which was no part of its duty. He was promptly transferred.

About the only serious thing the delegates did during the week-long assembly was to squabble over the nominations of office-bearers of the party and its mass organisations. But even this squabbling was within the limits of the legitimate: it was followers of the two sons-in-law that quarrelled, and both of them in the name of the father-in-law. The latter, however, has displayed an uncanny ability in playing the two factions one against the other, an ability that the late Indira Gandhi would herself have complimented for its dexterity. For a long time the younger one, Chandrababu Naidu, then general secretary of the party, appeared to have a firm lead over the elder, Venkateswara Rao, who was only president of the youth wing. But suddenly the former is deprived of his post and the latter is made health minister. But before any conclusion can be drawn from this change, Chandrababu Naidu is back to prominence, nominated chairman of the Karshaka Parishad, a 'farmers body' floated by the government, which is likely to become a significant creation of NTR's reign. Congressmen have expressed resentment that this body which has official status and is likely to be handed over the running of various agricultural and marketing institutions and schemes, is at the same time being run as if it is the farmers' wing of the ruling party. A Congressman has even approached the High Court against the nomination of the chief minister's son-in-law for the chairman's post, and the High Court has stayed any extension of his term beyond six months. Their fear is understandable, in the context of the rapid consolidation of the dominant landed classes, and the need that every party feels to find a constituency for itself within this consolidation. NTR had a head start in this matter from the very beginning, and the Karshaka Parishad can be a significant leap forward, unless he makes a hash of it as he is apt to.

All this really fits in well with the running of the party's annual congress in the manner of a village fair presided over by the benign gentry. The comedy, however, was relieved by a fear that haunted the Telugu Desam leaders throughout that

week. It was the fear that the naxalites would attack the gathering and kill the leaders. The fear was given substance by the incredible security arrangements made at public expense for the personal safety of the Telugu Desam leaders. On the day of the final public meeting on May 28, the security was provided by 6,000 police personnel, including two officers of the rank of DIG, 25 superintendents of police and assistant SPs, 50 deputy superintendents of police, 140 inspectors and 450 sub-inspectors. One does not know whether this list is confined to the visible policemen, i.e., the khakhi-clad variety, or it also includes the invisible armed men of the anti-naxalite squads. The reason shown for this heavy security was the retaliatory violence indulged in by the CPI(ML) (People's War) group after a young but prominent leader of theirs, Daggu Rajalingam, was killed in an 'encounter' at Warangal on May 11. The police broke open the door of a house in which he was staying and killed him as well as the householder, Santosh Reddy. His party indulged in widespread arson in protest against this killing. They burnt down dozens of RTC buses, a few tahsil offices, railway stations, microwave stations and even a telephone exchange. Though up to that time—and even afterwards for that matter—their targets had been marked by the quality of being inanimate (when the buses were burnt the passengers were asked to get down, and in quite a few cases a touching flourish was added by distributing all the money in the conductor's bag among the passengers), the Telugu Desam leaders were not sure that would remain so forever.

And hence the security. Yet it is strange that the police did not desist from 'encounter' killings at least for the duration of the *Mahanadu*, lest the situation get aggravated. On the contrary, five persons were killed in four 'encounters' during the *Mahanadu* week, even as apprehension was repeatedly being expressed of a naxalite plot of retaliation. One should infer either that the apprehensions were put on for public consumption or that the free hand given to the police in NTR's rule is so free that it does not care for the convenience of the donor. Going by the evidence on hand one is tempted to draw the latter conclusion.

18 persons have been killed in 15 'encounters' this year, till the end of June. 17 of them belong to the People's War group and one, a youth by name Sahadev Reddy of Sirsilla, to the CPI-ML group identified by the name of the late C P Reddy. The boy was picked up by the police on May 25, tortured severely during that day, and killed. It was announced

that there was an 'encounter' on May 26 at the village of Dharmaram where the 'extremists' tried to set on fire the Tendu leaves being procured by the forest department, and Sahadev Reddy died in that 'encounter'—Students who demonstrated later at Hyderabad against this killing were lathi-charged and dispersed. The stories of the remaining 17 deaths are variations on the same theme. Some were picked up, tortured and killed, some were confronted in an inconvenient position—sitting or sleeping in the open—and killed instantly, some were killed while running away, and some were trapped in houses behind closed doors which were broken open as in Rajalingam's case.

And there were a few persons—at least three as far as we know—who were tortured brutally and killed and even an 'encounter' was not announced. One was a Lambada youth by name Meghya of Mustyalapalli in Warangal district; he was picked up during December 1987 and tortured for a long period in detention. His father met the superintendent of police and petitioned for his son's safety. On January 23 the boy died, and the police hanged the dead body with his own shirt from an electric transformer in the middle of Warangal town. They let the body hang there as a public threat for more than 12 hours before taking it down and announcing that some unfortunate youth had committed suicide in a most novel fashion. When the boy's father met the SP again the gentleman told him: "we have sent your Meghya to the clouds (*Megh*)". The second was Bhikshapati, also of Warangal district, whom the CPI claimed as their activist. The police, however, claimed that he was an 'extremist'; he was also picked up at the end of last December, and a few weeks later his dead body with its face chopped out of recognition was discovered in a shallow well. The third was Rajender, a one-time activist of the People's War group. He was picked-up by the police of Peddapalli and a few days later his dead body was found in the fields outside his village.

Naturally, therefore, the Telugu Desam leaders had cause to fear an attack during *Mahanadu*. The press also pestered them to announce their policy for tackling the naxalite 'menace' as it is called. Since the leaders of our country have not yet learnt to tell the press that they do not have a policy when they do not have one, there were random pronouncements during that week from the chief minister, the home minister, the chief secretary and the director general of police. The stated content of the policy varied from person to person, depending upon how much need each felt to be populist and how much each could afford to be populist. NTR, who refuses

mulishly to acknowledge that he made a mistake during his innocent first days in calling the naxalites patriots and asking them to join him in his effort to capture the *Lal Qila*, continued to say that he would invite them for talks; the home minister, however, clarified that the invitation would not be extended to the People's War group but only to the other groups; his own inclination, however, was against any talks with any of them, for he said simultaneously that all of them would be wiped out in a year's time; the officials, for their part, would say nothing about the talks but reiterated their decision to ask for more sophisticated weapons and gadgets: there was talk of giving commando training to the police, equipping them with vehicles and wireless sets worth 2.5 crore rupees, requesting the centre to send some more CRPF forces, and to give permission to the police to use grenades. Buta Singh, who visited Hyderabad in this period for the meeting of the Southern Zonal Council, promised help without committing himself to anything in particular. The police officials also talked cryptically of 'a well-knit strategy' and a 'co-ordinated plan', whose details, of course, could not be divulged.

But there was one concrete decision that was churned up from all this confusion. This was the decision that an 'elite corps of police' would be formed to fight the naxalites. A force of 1,000—an oversized battalion—would be constituted and would be named 'Greyhounds'. This was announced on June 6 and was widely publicised in the press. The Telugu press quite unnecessarily rendered the breed name into Telugu with the unseemly translation 'hunting dogs that are grey in colour', one OS them going to the extent of inventing the Sanskritised title *Dhusravarna Jagilam*. The police themselves would not have found this very amusing, since 'dog' is the common abuse that militant political activists have always used to describe policemen. However they will probably take comfort from the promise that "... this elite force is to be equipped with modern weapons, bullet-proof jackets and other special equipments", as an official press release puts it. The consequences of this creation, if it ever takes place and is let loose in the villages and the forest areas, can be imagined.

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