

The Srikakulam Story

NARAYANMURTHI

JUST change the date and place. It is the same story day after day and week after week. Naxalites are killed by the dozen in Andhra.

Way back in 1948-50, during the height of the Telengana struggle, it was the same story. Every day, there was news about an encounter and some guerillas were killed. But, it transpired, that communists were taken out of their beds, taken somewhere and shot. And the story was put out that they were killed in an encounter.

And how many police are being killed now? They can be counted on your finger tips. Perhaps, the Naxalites are fools and so inexperienced that they offer themselves to the armed police along with guns, ammunition, grenades—every conceivable weapon is mentioned—and there is no occasion for the police to be killed. At least the government wants us to believe all this. If Marxist and CPI leaders issue statements questioning the correctness of such stories, they need not be taken seriously. What is the strength they command among the people that their statements should be taken seriously?

To the newsmen who are hungry for news, it is readymade food. Go any day to the police and they have a story of an encounter with the Naxalites, it is the Naxalites who shoot first and the police return the fire, killing one or two. The columnists and special correspondents are all busy writing about the increasing menace, the danger to parliamentary democracy, the need to put down violence and so on.

The new Home Minister, who joined the Brahmananda Reddy Ministry after having got tired of abusing him for more than two years, is busy trying to divert the attention of the people from the Telengana agi-

tation to the Naxalite menace, posing it as a greater danger. Within a fortnight after being sworn in, he made a trip to Srikakulam to lend weight to the story he is putting out about this great danger. Even the Governor, in his opening speech to the monsoon session of the State legislature, characterised Naxalite activities as a "more fundamental threat to the peace and tranquillity of the State".

In reply to the Prime Minister, Mrs Indira Gandhi's letter in connection with the presidential election controversy, the Congress President, Mr Nijalingappa, said, "Deliberately and want only an atmosphere of suspicion and doubt has been created, a great deal of smoke has been generated without a speck of fire anywhere. Governmental power, history warns us, has this ability when the rulers choose to exercise it". Well said, 'Gappa! This aptly applies to the present situation in Andhra Pradesh where the Naxalite danger is being blown out of all proportions.

It is hardly one taluq and that too in the forest areas of that taluq in Srikakulam district and a couple of pockets in Khammam and Warangal districts where Naxalite activities are cited. According to the Deputy Chief Minister, Rs 100 crores worth of property, mainly, government property was destroyed in the seven-month-old Telengana agitation but not a single case is pending in any court, not one person is in government custody today except a handful of their leaders in detention. Whereas, for the activities of Naxalites in a couple of pockets, two thousand people have been arrested, dozens were shot dead, platoons of armed police are stationed in those areas. What for? To put down the Naxalites? No. It is to protect

the existing order of exploitation in those areas.

Let me quote copiously from the story of the special correspondent of the conservative daily *The Hindu*, who visited the area frequently and answered the most asked question: Why do Naxalites flourish in Srikakulam?

Origin of Movement

He traced the origin of the movement not to the inspiration of the Bengal Naxalites or the thoughts of Mao, but "to a trade union movement of Girijan (tribal) farm labourers in 1956". A group of school teachers working in agency villages built up the movement with processions and hunger-strikes across the years. "Even as late as three years ago, the Naxalite leaders who are now in hiding were organising hunger-strikes in front of revenue offices seeking government intervention for restoring land to Girijans". These demands were ignored until last year when the Chief Minister, who toured the agency villages, sent a special deputy collector to invalidate the land holdings of plainmen who have acquired vast stretches of Girijan land through exorbitant rates of interest on petty sums advanced.

How much of this land was cleared from the encroachers? "Only 77 acres" in the vast 500 square mile agency area in the district!

What about implementing the Debt Relief Regulation of 1958? "Till last week, not a single Girijan had his debt cleared by Government". "Not a single licence was sought for nor given all these decades" for moneylending, though the law prohibited a moneylender from giving loans to Girijans without a special licence issued by the District Collector.

Perhaps, the Government was magnanimous in distributing cultivable waste land which is its own? According to the correspondent, "Till last September (when this correspondent

visited the agency areas), the banjar lands distributed to Girijans in Agency areas came to 4,377 acres (to 1,075 families 111 villages). Last week, the figure was still stagnating at 4,377 acres.

Why? "Distribution of banjar land is a headache problem and revenue officials are subject to political pressures and strong local influences that inhibit quick decisions".

The Swatantra leader, Mr G. Latchanna, is most excited, more than the Congress, about the Naxalite "menace" and went all the way to talk to the Centre. Congress leaders are of course active all the while through the police machinery. It is not at all unnatural, for "the two parties derive their strength from the landlords and businessmen who have acquired vast areas of Girijan lands and who have charged exorbitant interest rates". "Some of the landlords have also brought strong political pressures on the district administration to go slow in matters where the Government's declared policy is in favour of the Girijans". (All quotations are from *The Hindu* dated August 8)

Much more need not be said about what the Girijans are fighting for and why the Naxalites are defending them. If the conditions of the Girijans were so shocking to the special correspondent of such a conservative paper, how much more shocking they must be who groan under them. But, they are not shocking to the new Home Minister, Mr J. Vengal Rao, for what he sees in the Naxalite activities is only the law and order problem, not the problems of the tribal people whose discontent the Naxalites are reportedly exploiting for their own political purposes.

Armed Struggle

Naxalites do not mince words; they mean what they say about armed struggle. Whether they are tactically correct, whether the manner in which they are going about in implementing their policy of armed struggle is proper, is another matter.

What kind of people they choose to attack is described by a prominent Congressman of that district and a former Congress legislator: "The problem with the Naxalites and the difficulty in isolating them from the people is this: they choose the most hated and worst exploiter of the people in a village. The whole village heaves a sigh of relief at his elimination and in their heart of hearts they are happy and feel indebted to the Naxalites, though, when police and other leaders go there, they shout about the Naxalite menace and so on".

What is therefore in danger in Srikakulam district or elsewhere is not the life of the common people, but the system of exploitation, the system of usurpation and it is this system and those few individuals and newspapers who have a vested interest in the continuance of this system that are shouting at the top of their voices about the Naxalite menace.

It is no wonder that the Home Minister has been talking openly of repeating the Nanjappa tactics employed during the Telengana struggle of 1948-50 period. Indeed, he is reported to have told Pressmen in his very first meeting with them after he became Home Minister that the best way to tackle the Naxalites is the Nanjappa Plan. He is implementing it with a vengeance. It is said here that if he could nab quite a few Naxalites during the last month, including doctors and students, it is not because of his intelligence system, but because of the betrayal of a top Naxalite leader who blurted out anything and everything he knew or did not know.

The CPI and CPI(M) have of course contested the story of the "encounters" and the arrest of hundreds of people styled as Naxalites, but how much of this is due to the fact that quite a few of their followers have been arrested as Naxalites, has to be seen.

The police drive has come in very handy to the exploiters who call every-

one whom they do not like in the village a secret supporter of the Naxalites and the police are always there to oblige them.

According to another conservative Telugu daily, *Andhra Patrika* (July 29) more than the Naxalite activities, the police are proving a headache to the traders and the people in and around the Parvatipuram area.

“It is the practice for Naxalites to write red letters to landlords and rich people. As soon as they receive such letters they rush for police help. The police who arrive to protect them start squeezing them in all sorts of ways. All their necessities have to be met by those who seek their protection. People have now stopped asking them for protection.

“Police have to be fed for only twelve anas per meal in hotels. Because this is a temporary force, the hoteliers get their money from the police authorities very late.... In some places, it has turned out to be begari (forced labour) to meet all the demands of the police.”

The correspondent of the *Andhra Patrika* also alleges that some top leaders in the district have a share in the “loot”, that they take a share from the Naxalites, keep quiet and so the Naxalites are having their way.

(To be concluded).