

IN DEFENCE OF CIVIL RIGHTS

Three years ago, on the morning of 3rd September 1985, a fifty three years old doctor and civil rights activist, Dr. A. Ramanadham, was shot dead by the Warangal police. Civil liberties and democratic rights organisations all over the country observe this day as Civil Rights day. What follows is a report on the life of Dr. Ramanadham and the situation in Andhra Pradesh which led to his death, and where till today, civil rights groups are under constant attack from the state. Though restricted to Andhra, the reportage can be seen as what the future holds for the rest of the country.

Dr. Ramanadham was born on October 16, 1933 in Muslikuntla a small village in Mahira Taluq, Khammam district of Andhra Pradesh. He was the first person in his family to aspire for a higher education and thus had to face immense opposition on his way to become a doctor.

He worked in government hospitals in Warangal for a few years, and later in primary health centres in Warangal and Khammam districts. He left this job in disgust at the rampant corruption and unethical practices and set up his own children's clinic in Warangal in 1968. This year marked the beginning of his involvement in various social issues. His clinic became a supportive center for a number of people involved in a variety of problems and issues.

A few years later, in early 1974, he along with some friends, formed the APCLC in Warangal. Around the same time he also organised a people's clinic in Warangal. The clinic was shut down after the Emergency was declared in 1975, and Dr. Ramanadham, along with other civil rights activists was arrested. He was detained for three weeks at the Pakala reserve forest camp where he witnessed the tortures and death of several young men arrested during the Emergency. His eye-witness accounts were later to become important to the Tarkunde Committee report and the aborted Bhargava commission on the encounter killings in Andhra Pradesh during the Emergency. After three weeks he was shifted to the Warangal Central Prison, which serves as the main prison for five north-western districts of Telengana.

After the emergency was over and normal life resumed for the APCLC, Dr. Ramanadham became an important activist. He became vice-president of the APCLC ~~the~~. Apart from activities in the civil liberties movement he was also continuously engaged in social activity as a doctor and as a sensitive human being.

Warangal at that time was witnessing a movement for higher agricultural wages and other demands. Widespread repression on this movement by the Warangal police had started. With APCLC, Dr. Ramanadham was actively involved in exposing the Warangal police. After NTR came to power in 1984, the police were given tremendous illegal powers. The chain of violence that they started has continued to this day.

In 1984, 24 people were tortured and killed in police lock-ups all over the state. 39 people were killed in police firings and beatings. In 1985, about 35 people were killed in fake encounters, 18 were killed in police lock-ups and 9 died in police firings. Apart from these hundreds of people were illegally arrested and tortured, mass raids were conducted on villages in which houses and property of hundreds of agricultural workers and poor peasants were destroyed. Women in particular were singled out as targets—they were gang raped in police custody, stripped, tortured and paraded in the streets.

Throughout this period the APCLC was one of the few consistent voices in Andhra raised against these incidents. Through fact-finding reports they systematically exposed the violation of the rights of the people by the police. In fact practically every custodial death in the state has been investigated by them. This earned them the wrath of not only the local vested interests but also the police and the state government. Attempts were first made to label the APCLC as an extremist front organisation. False cases on these grounds were instituted

against several APCLC activists. Dr. Ramanadham and other activists were arrested in January 1985 on the grounds of distributing arms to the naxalites. Around the same time another APCLC activist and lawyer, Gopi Rajanna was killed by goondas.

On the evening of September 2, 1985 a sub-inspector of the Warangal police, Yadagiri Reddy, was shot dead by unidentified assailants at Kazipet railway station. Next morning his body was carried in a funeral procession which was attended by the district SP, DIG and several armed policemen. As the procession was passing Dr. Ramanadham's clinic on Jaya Prakash Narayan Road, a section of the policemen broke away from the procession and entered the clinic. When they found Dr. Ramanadham, they shot him at point blank range. He died shortly after reaching the hospital.

Within two hours of his death the state level police at Hyderabad had already concocted a story that Dr. Ramanadham was killed by extremists. This was even carried by a national news agency (which does not have a Warangal office). The police stuck to this story despite extensive reports in all local and state-level newspapers of the true facts. The police version was also supported by the state home minister in the Legislative Assembly. Faced with mounting pressure within the state from APCLC and other organisations the government had to finally order a CBCID enquiry. The report of the enquiry was not made public but it is learnt that they came to the conclusion that the 'assailants remain unidentified'.

But neither the police repression in Andhra nor the attacks on civil liberties activities stopped here. The next year, 1986, 15 people were killed by torture in police lock ups and 13 were killed in police 'encounters'. 3 people died in police firings. In Warangal the remaining APCLC activists were threatened. Some of them had to leave their jobs and go out of the district. Others were forced to become inactive. In neighbouring Karimnagar

advocate Mallikarjuna Rao was tortured and forced to resign from APCLC. Other members were threatened and also forced to resign. By the time civil rights organisations all over the country were observing the first death anniversary of Dr. Ramadham as Civil Rights Day, the sole member of APCLC in Karimnagar was the 65 year old Japa Laxma Reddy. A veteran of the Telengana peasant struggle, Laxma Reddy was an important functionary of the CPI and later the CPI(M) till the late sixties when he left the party and active political life. He re-entered public life in 1974 when he joined the Karimnagar unit of the APCLC. On 7 November 1986 armed police entered his house in the early morning and shot him dead.

Despite eye-witness accounts by his family members, the police issued a statement that he was killed by extremists.

In the past two years the violence on civil liberties has continued. Even in the state capital, Hyderabad, the police have disrupted APCLC meetings and beaten up activists. Hearings of the Human Rights Tribunal were disrupted by Police, in the presence of two retired High Court judges. Members of the APCLC and the OPDR have been implicated in cases ranging from the murder of Yadagiri Reddy to 'conspiring to overthrow the lawfully elected government'.

And the police violence has continued unabated. In 1987 a total of 67 people have lost their lives at the hands of the police. 3 were killed in police firings, 29 were killed in 'encounters', 24 were killed in police lock ups. The remaining 11 are in a new category created by the police - they are those people who were picked up by the police and are now 'missing'! The police claim that they have no idea where these people are. It is possible therefore to assume that if they are not already, they will very soon be dead.

With introduction of the Terrorist Act at the centre and its use for Andhra Pradesh by the State Government, there was a qualitative change in the nature of repression by the Andhra police. For the Terrorist Act firstly it is not even necessary that a crime be committed - it is enough to establish intent; This is quite easy for the police to establish since they can normally arrange enough false witnesses and in any case trials are held in camera. Secondly even minor crimes under pre-existing laws become terrorist crimes under the Terrorist Act. All that is required is to prove that the accused had not committed the crime, (or was not intending to commit the crime) for personal gain or reasons, but was doing it to spread hatred among classes or communities of people, or to excite disaffection against the lawfully elected government. Thus a trade unionist organising a strike or a journalist exposing corruption can be found guilty of terrorist crimes! The act inverts the principle of natural justice by laying the responsibility of proving innocence on the accused!

It is in the context of the simultaneous increase in lawlessness of law enforcing authorities and growth in the number and intensity of draconian laws, that Civil Rights Day is being commemorated this year!

PEOPLE'S UNION FOR DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS , 3 SEPTEMBER, 1988