

CIVIL RIGHTS

UNDER NTR REGIME



I have bought a ticket
and seen the drama of your democracy.
I have earned the right now
to hoot and shout at your theatrics

—Paash

PEOPLE'S UNION FOR DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS
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In 1983 when Nandamuri Taraka Ramarao led his Telugu Desam Party to power in Andhra Pradesh, he symbolised 'the rise of regionalism in Indian politics'. There was talk of devolution of power and decentralisation of a highly centralised state. The liberal opinion in the country hailed it as trend towards democratization. Today, six years later, NTR is the chairman of the National Front, leading the opposition. But in the meantime the focal point of conflict between contending political parties has shifted away from issues of democracy. Civil rights and concentration of power no longer occupy a central place.

Instead fraud and forgery, corruption and crime at high places command all attention. This report, part of a series (see PUDR report *Citizens Guide to Rajiv's India*), presents the Telugu Desam's record on civil rights.

Chronology of Deaths

	Custodial	Encounter	Police firing	Total
1983	1	3	12	16
1984	27	0	30	57
1985	16	34	8	58
1986	19	20	1	40
1987	24	29	3	56
1988	20	62	44	126
1989	5	37	-	42
(upto May)				
Total	112	185	98	395

(Note: Some of the deaths in police firings listed in 1984 relate to the one month period when the defector government led by Nadella Bhaskara Rao was in power)

The record presented here sharply brings out the continuity that marks the previous Congress rule and the Telugu Desam rule. Thus the AP Suppression of Disturbances Act, brought by an unelected government in 1948, invoked by the Congress in 1969-76, continues to be in force. Presently 1.6 million people live in its shadows. The National Security Act (NSA) brought by Indira Gandhi in 1980 was used more than thirty times by the Telugu Desam government. The detainees include leaders of the Government. Employees Union and Dalit Mahasabha. In 1985, Rajive Gandhi government proclaimed The Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention Act (TADA). Presently there are 1500 people facing prosecution under the Act in the state. Its well known victims include the poet Varavara Rao and Dr. K. Balagopal, general secretary of APCLC. In 1968 the Congress government began the practice of killing of political activists in cold blood and later claiming that they were killed in 'encounters'. In the fourteen year period, 1968-1982, more than 250 activists were killed in these encounters. In the last six years under Telugu Desam 185 people were killed in encounters. In recent times they have increased to staggering proportions. In the seventy weeks from January 1988, 99 people were killed in encounters ! Death in police custody used to be a rare occurrence in the past. In the last six years 112 people were killed in police custody, including four women and two babies. In addition 98 people were killed in police firings.

The continuity in the Institutionalisation of state violence is only one part of the story. The NTR regime also contributed many innovations to the process. The open abetment and encouragement to upper caste violence is one such. The accused in the infamous Karamchedu massacre for instance practically got off scot free. Instead, the dalit leaders who took up the case of the victims themselves became victims of state violence. In fact this kind of attack on those who champion the rights of others has become common under the Telugu Desam government.

In the last four years, seven APCLC leaders were implicated in false cases, two of them under TADA, (two) major attacks took place on the civil rights activists and three leaders, Gopi Rajanna, Dr. A. Ramanadham and Japa Laxma Reddy, were killed. But perhaps the most dangerous contribution of the regime is the phenomenon of **Missing**. Police pick up people and thereafter all traces of them disappear. Friends and family members keep following every lead they get for months and years. Some times they feel relieved when they discover the corpses. In May 1988, a young activist Meghyam was arrested in Mustyalapalli, Warangal. Officially his arrest was never acknowledged. But a few days later, citizens of Warangal on an early morning found his body, hanging from the power transformer at the main chowrasta of the city. The body, in a semi naked state was kept hanging by the police for a whole day. But not all parents are as 'lucky' as those of Meghya. There are many who are still searching for their sons and daughters. Altogether 27 people are 'missing' since NTR came to power.

The only rationale offered by the government and its apologists to this increasing assault is the Naxalite violence. This rationale is patently false. Of the 98 people killed in police firings, none, according to the official account, are connected with the Naxalite movement. So is the case with 107 of the 112 people who died in police custody. These are ordinary people, farm servants and peasants, students and unemployed youth, hotel workers and rickshaw pullers, factory labour and small traders, petty thieves and prostitutes, beggars and other destitutes. Of the 185 people killed in encounters only 90 people were underground activists. That is to say that only in these latter cases the theoretical possibility of a genuine encounter exists. But even here in a number of cases the activists were picked up from their hideouts, and tortured to death. The remaining 95 people were all ordinary peasants, tribals and miners from the Singareni coal belt. Yet the government, helped by a section of the media, has built a caricature of Naxalite violence to justify its own lawlessness.

In August 1984, it may be recalled, NTR was thrown out of power as a result of the defections engineered by Indira Gandhi with the help of Governor Ram Lal (who presently keeps the company of NTR in the National Front). NTR himself was arrested in the agitation that followed. A month later he came back to power. Few months after he ordered elections to the state assembly and again was elected. It was after this second coming that his contempt for democracy became more striking. Altogether in the 308 weeks that he has been in power (from January 1983 to May 1989 excluding four weeks), 395 people were killed and 27 remain missing as a result of state violence.

It is not only the scale of violence nor the extraordinary rate of killings that is important. It is also the brazenness with which people are being killed week after week. The brazenness is part of a process where criminals were not only given political protection but also bestowed with political authority. Thus a legislator who was accused in a case of bomb throwing and booth

The Other Side of the River

Girijans or adivasis in Andhra Pradesh are among the worst victims of NTR government's disregard for democratic norms. Recently the government brought an amendment to the Regulation I of 1970, which had prohibited transfer of land from the tribals to the non-tribals. The Regulation, brought in the wake of Srikakulam movement was never effectively implemented and current estimates of alienated land put it around 57 percent of the land in scheduled areas of the state. The new amendment legalises all such transfers. This legislative assault on the adivasis is part of the larger attack on their right to live with dignity. Most of the state's 3.1 million tribals live in the northern arc of the state in the Godavari valley. Some of this forest belt is also the scene of the Naxalite movement. As a result the government pumped battalions of AP Special Armed Police, along with Centre's CRPF battalions into the region. As many as 420 armed police camps were set up at one time or the other in the last six years in the tribal areas. In Chintapalli in the summer of 1987, 40 tribal hamlets were burnt down by the police and the villagers were regrouped. In the past four years about 450 tribals were arrested under TADA. And 42 of the 185 people killed in encounters were tribals.

Who are the Terrorists?

In September 1984, Phillip, a 25 year old quarry worker and suspect in a theft case, was arrested by Macherla (Guntur) police. A few days later he died as a result of torture. The police claimed that he died of jaundice. APCLC took up the case and pursued the magisterial enquiry over his death. It was helped by the fellow workers of Phillip. They all belong to a temporary settlement, Srirampur Tanda, near Macherla. Many of them are migrant quarry workers as the region Palnadu, is famous for its stones. Others among the settlement are shepherds. Almost an year later TADA came into force in the state. Promptly the police arrested nine shepherds and quarry workers under the Act, for 'waging war against the legally elected government'. They languished in jail as getting bail under the Act is very difficult. The case went on for four years. Finally on 28 July, this year, the designated court at Guntur upheld the defence argument that 'they were charged by the police as an act of revenge against their role in assisting APCLC in the case of custodial death of Phillip'. They were all acquitted. But there are still 1500 other 'terrorists' in the state facing charges under the Act.

capturing was made the Home Minister of the state ! It is this process that is coming to an age with the recent government decision to arm private citizens to maintain law and order in the villages.

Equally important is the licence given to policemen. The licence to kill was given, initially, to suppress the Naxalite movement. The policemen were promised promotions and rewards. As a Sub Inspector was reported to have said 'if you sow seeds, you reap harvest, if you kill a radical, you get promotion'. And thus policemen were allowed to violate all constitutional norms. Take the case of Madhu of Warangal, a twenty year old student activist. He was summoned to the police station one day in August 1988. His mother worried about his safety personally met the SP. He told her 'if you don't see your son by this evening, you will see his dead body by tomorrow'. As a matter of fact what she saw next day was only the charred remains of her son's body. Prompted by such licence and inspired by the rewards, policemen began killing anyone and then branded them as Naxalites. 51 such 'dreaded Naxalites' killed in encounters remain unnamed and unidentified while their killers got all the promised rewards. The licence later was extended to civil rights activists. The Policemen involved in the killing of Dr. A. Ramanadham and Japa Laxma Reddy got scot free. The next in the line were ordinary citizens. Even by the government's own account, about 206 people killed in the last six years have no connection whatsoever with the Naxalite movement. In fact the government appears to have lost its willingness and ability to arrest this process. In February 1986, four women were picked up by the Vijayawada police. They were accused of indulging in soliciting. One of them, Mudigonda Padma, was also in an advanced State of pregnancy. The police called a barber to the police station and got their heads shaved. The incident created widespread revulsion and protest. The government ordered an enquiry. NTR himself called it a 'barbaric act'. Three years later now, the exalted Superintendent of Police involved in the incident is made a DIG!

This is the depth to which state violence has sunk in NTR's reign. But the true degeneration of the state is now being obscured by the cacaphony of current scandals. It is imperative for us to rescue the voice of democracy.

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