

Andhra Elections: What Happened and What Did Not Happen

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The voting statistics do not show that it was the cheap rice scheme and prohibition that were primarily responsible for the Telugu Desam Party's phenomenal victory. What is striking is not the increase in TDP votes, but the fall in Congress votes by as much as 12 to 14 percentage points.

SOMEBODY has remarked tongue-in-cheek that the two-party system has come to stay in Andhra Pradesh. The characteristic feature of this much hankered after state of political grace is that there are two hardly distinguishable political formations each with its own constituency of loyal voters, while the non-loyal voters shift from the one to the other in sufficient measure from one election to the next to ensure that governments keep changing with predictable regularity, if not an entirely predictable periodicity. Critics lacking in the blessed spirit of charity will call it a Tweedledum-Tweedledee political system, but it is no doubt better than having a single Tweedledum ruling in perpetuity. For one thing, while the general social and political character of the government remains the same from one change to the next, there is some check on how cavalierly the rulers can play games with the people. Congressmen of Andhra Pradesh who took their power for granted got a shock this time that they have not recovered from even a month afterwards.' Secondly, the competition for the votes of the elusive voters who sit on the fence and amuse themselves by voting this way once and that way the next time does lead to however partial an attempt to meet the dire needs of the voting public at large, a healthy fall-out of political uncertainty that Manmohan Singh's admirers describe as populism. Blessed is this populism without which many more would have starved to death in this land which is marching from brahminical cruelty to capitalist cruelty, from the rule of dharma to the iron rule of the International Monetary Fund. And thirdly, there is this thing called empowerment of the powerless that everyone talks of a lot these days. One is not talking of the gratuitous empowerment that the CPI and CPI(M) are enjoying in Andhra Pradesh this season, but the empowerment of what the Supreme Court has with unfelicitous contempt described as the 'creamy layer' of the dalits and the backward castes. For all its much despised creaminess this class or class-fraction would have had little chance of coming close to

positions of power if a Congress clone such as the Telugu Desam Party had not come about and afforded the dynamic among the lower castes a chance to play one party against the other and push themselves into positions of power in this party or that. This too, of course, is 'populism', for it is not necessarily congruent with the most efficient use of the nation's resources that is the ruling dogma of today's India.

All this is not to say that alternatives to the Congress such as the Telugu Desam Party are the best that could have happened in this best of all possible worlds, for that would be taking a needlessly pessimistic view of an admittedly imperfect world. For the deadening effect that this replication of the Congress by other names has on the political culture of a people is an incalculably vicious consequence of the emergence of charismatic fakes such as N T Rama Rao. The purpose of this prologue, rather, is to caution against contemptuous attitudes towards 'populism' on the one hand, and on the other against the inability to see that in human affairs desirable ends can and frequently do realise themselves in seemingly immaterial, utterly uninspiring and even incongruous changes. The human historical agent is no match for its own glorious aspirations, and as much progress in its affairs (as well as resistance to retrogression) is wrought by incongruous irrelevancies as by revolutionary planning and firmness.

It is necessary also to caution against a third attitude, which is being developed into a whole myth by CPI(M) circles. This is to read in the recent victory of the Telugu Desam Party a rejection of P V Narasimha Rao's economic reforms. The CPI and the CPI(M) are at liberty to collect all manner of political creatures - including Congress clones, crooks and opportunists who would rather be in the Congress than outside it - around them; and in this free world one cannot prevent them from christening this motley grouping a left and democratic alliance or a national alternative or whatever; but one should firmly insist that they stop interpreting reality to suit their tactics. Assuming that the TDP won on a vote for cheap rice, that only

indicates popular resentment at rising prices and hungry stomachs. It is part of an unfortunate culture of interpretation that has become common with marxists to argue that since the recent spurt in prices is a consequence of economic liberalisation, the vote against price rise is objectively a vote against liberalisation. The gap between this reductionist interpretation and the actual consciousness of the people is an abyss that renders the interpretation a particularly bad case of wishful thinking. It is the wishful realisation of two elusive desires: one, that the people at large should recognise that economic reforms are bad for them, and should consciously reject them; and two, that the left forces should succeed in leading the people to the realisation.

It is of course a matter of delight to believe that the Telugu people stood up firmly against the prime minister's regressive economic policies and gave the old man a resounding rebuff for having presumed that because he is a 'child of the Telugus', the state would vote by him in a time of crisis. It is indeed true enough that the sentimental response that he expected (he used the word *bidda* which means daughter rather than son in his native Telangana, and in general Telugu usage connotes the child in its dependent and helpless aspect) was not forthcoming from the electorate. And yet, happy though one would be to arrive at such a conclusion, there is little reason to see the defeat of the Congress as principally a rejection of the prime minister's presumptuous appeal for support to his structural adjustment policies. Of the three reasons offered for the victory of the TDP — rejection of the economic reforms, vote for NTR's cheap rice and prohibition policies, and infighting of the Congress - the third and the least glamorous appears to have been the most significant, however reluctant we may be to accept such unromantic conclusions. Economic reform in the abstract was an irrelevant matter not only because the people at large are far from being aware of its implications and conscious in rejecting it, but also because NTR is hardly anti-liberalisation. He is like most Congressmen, as much a convinced advocate of the philosophy of the market as he is utterly feudal in his cultural attitudes, and the Telugu Desam Party has never spoken out against liberalisation as such, though it has put to skilful electoral use the consequent price rise.

The cheap rice scheme has no doubt attracted people, and quite rightly, whatever may be said by persons who are worried about budgetary discipline. The question of budgetary profligacy cannot be divorced from the larger question of how and on what basis the nation's resources are being shared out, and when that is left either to the bureaucrat-politician nexus or the laws of the capitalist

Jungle. In neither of which the weak have any place, they are bound to seek protective schemes from the government on pain of voting it out, especially because what such schemes eat into is administrative or infra-structural investment of a kind that does not solve their food and employment problems, except by way of an unredeemable assurance.

Much the same can be said about prohibition. The movement for total prohibition that appeared on the scene in Andhra Pradesh after country liquor (arrack) was banned in 1993 upon pressure from the rural women's struggle, was in fact not a movement to match the earlier anti-arrack struggle. The modern variety of inebriating fluid called IMFL is a middle class, lower middle class and organised working class men's addiction, and while women of these families are as much its victims as women of rural labouring classes are of arrack, they did not come out into the streets as the latter did. The total prohibition agitation was a meetings and seminars affair promoted through the press by Eenadu, a paper that combines anti-Congressism with a determined effort to recreate lost legitimacy for the state's ruling elite. And yet, both the main political parties were fearful of the appeal the issue may have for women voters. Men are evidently never fully sure that the weighty arguments they offer (ranging from reasons of common sense to those of fiscal sense) for their inability to cure themselves of the addiction to drink as a habit and their addiction to the business of drink as a very lucrative economic activity, will ever convince women who suffer physically, emotionally and economically from it. And so NTR jumped in and declared that he would impose total prohibition within half an hour if he was voted to power, and the Congress chimed in saying that (though nobody believed them) they too would do so in due course, no matter that both the parties are chockful of manufacturers and vendors of liquor, licensed or illicit.

And yet, voting statistics do not show that it is the cheap rice scheme and prohibition that were primarily responsible for NTR's phenomenal victory. The percentage of votes the TDP and its allies got this time was not substantially higher than what they got last time, though as the polling percentage was higher this time, it means that a larger proportion of the electorate voted for them. What is striking is not the increase in TDP (plus allies) votes, but the fall in Congress votes, which appears to have been as much as 12 to 14 percentage points. A small part of these votes went to the TDP, another small part went to the BJP and the BSP, but the major part of it went to Congress rebels. This cornering of votes by Congress rebels is a very significant fact revealed by the voting statistics. The Congress has truly become a veritable jungle of clawing and biting wild animals which are unmindful

of the possibility that they will destroy the species in the process. No tears need be wasted over this, but their unconcern is a study in depravity. In district after district it was senior Congressmen who first of all played all possible dirty games to get candidates of their choice nominated, and when they failed against the wily Congress president who can play as dirty games as any of them, they set up their own candidates against the official nominees, or otherwise queered the pitch for their party. Members of parliament Dronamraju Satyanarayana in Visakhapatnam. Vizianagaram and Srikakulam districts; Magunta Subbarami Reddy in Nellore and Prakasam districts; Y S Rajasekhar Reddy in Cuddapah and Anantapur districts; Rayapati Sambasiva Rao in Guntur district; Ganga Reddy in Nizamabad district; former union minister Jalagam Vengal Rao in Khammam district and smaller fry elsewhere did their worst to get Congress candidates defeated. Their success in this effort was the most significant factor in deciding the huge margin of the Congress' defeat.

It is not that but for this the Congress would have won. The prohibition, the cheap rice scheme and general disgust with the Congress had done enough to stabilise the normal TDP vote and to decide the minds of the fluid voters. But for Congress infighting, it appears the TDP would in any case have won but with an unspectacular margin that would have left no scope for the largely misplaced encomiums the Telugu electorate is receiving for its perspicacity, firmness and wisdom, nor any room for myth-making about popular rejection of the structural adjustment policies.

II

Apart from the price rise, and resultant deterioration of living conditions, the other significant issue in the elections was whether and to what extent persons of scheduled castes, tribes and backward castes would come into positions of power in the changed context of post-Mandal politics. Such an aspiration can be dismissed as seeking power 'within the present oppressive system' as many Marxists have done, but since it is precisely one of the oppressive characteristics of the present system that positions of importance and authority are denied (both by virtue of the socio-economic structure and by conspiratorial tactics) to persons of the lower castes, such an aspiration is not a desire for change 'within the system' but is an attempt to dent the system along at least one dimension. This much is true, whether one believes that this will induce course generalise itself into a larger assault on the system in all its oppressive dimensions, or one suspects that it will end with a widening of the social base of the Indian state and capital. Indeed, which of these will happen is not something that can be predicted beforehand.

The victory of the SP-BSP in Uttar Pradesh on the basis of an explicitly anti-Hindutva campaign inspired many dalit activists in Andhra Pradesh to join the Bahujan Samaj Party and try to build it into a major political force in the state. Kanshi Ram, too, took a lot of pains to campaign in the state. The dalit movement has developed into an important political force in AP in the last decade, and a very sizeable part of the movement joined the BSP, unfortunately bringing with it its internal contradictions too. The other sizeable stream to join the BSP (especially in the Telangana districts) was that of former naxalites, of whom K G Satyamurthy and Chiranjeevi are the most prominent.

Nobody expected the BSP to win many seats in the elections, though BSP leaders, in imitation of the dominant political culture whose tone is set by the Congress, made vastly exaggerated claims about the seats they would win and the policies their government would adopt; and while the overstatement was very evident, most people were wary of cautioning them for fear of being dubbed anti-dalit, a term of abuse as potent today as 'petit bourgeois' was in the heyday of the now faded glory of communism. As it happened, the BSP won no seats and indeed it lost its deposit in all but one constituency, the exception being Bapatla in Guntur district where Katli Padma Rao, founder-general secretary of the A P Dalit Mahasabha did quite well.

But the entry of the BSP into electoral politics of Andhra Pradesh in a big way signifies not the possibility of immediate political power but the shifting of dalit political consciousness from the agitational arena to the electoral arena and its consolidation therein as a political party. If the BSP leaders had acknowledged this distinction, disciplined their claims accordingly, and concentrated on organisational work and on the elaboration of the full logic of their principal campaign slogan: 'vote hamara, seat tumhara - nahin chalega, nahin chalega', they need have caused no disappointment to their hopeful followers and sympathisers at the end. They spoilt things by neglecting organisational work to the point that they went through the elections without any organisational structure at all, dependent solely on Kanshi Ram's image and the appeal of their ideology; by making no attempt to set right the internal divisions which soon became public in ugly scenes at the time of seat allotment; and by allowing disenchanted SC and BC leaders from the Congress and TDP for whom the dalit activists have no regard to enter the party and acquire importance in it.

The other outcome expected from the entry of the BSP was that whether the Congress won or the TDP won, more persons from the lower castes would attain positions of political importance, which also would be

a social advance irrespective of what one thinks of the Congress and TDP as political parties. For the first time perhaps in the history of the Congress Party, backward caste and scheduled caste leaders talked openly about the injustice done to the lower castes by the Congress leaders in the allotment of seats and offices. Though they would add the ritual declamation that Kanshi Ram was an adventurer and that the Congress alone would solve the problems of dalits under the leadership of P V Narasimha Rao. 'great friend of the weaker sections', it was evident that they owed their new-found courage to that very adventurer and not to the great friend of the weaker sections. On the other hand, the Congress leadership became jittery at the large turnouts that attended Kanshi Ram's public meetings in the beginning. Vijaya Bhaskar Reddy, the Congress chief minister of the state, mobilised Congress leaders of each of the toiling castes to hold rallies of that caste at Hyderabad to which he himself would be invited as chief guest and would promise all things under the sun to that community: subsidised yarn to weavers, quarries to stone cutters, excise contracts to toddy tappers, etc. As ticket-distribution day neared, grand promises were made that a large proportion of the Congress tickets would be given to persons of the lower castes.

And simultaneously, upper caste leaders for the first time started acknowledging caste openly. They gave up the earlier pretence that they had been dominating politics by virtue of sheer merit. Brahmins held meetings at Vijayawada, Nellore and Hyderabad in which one demand was that they should be allotted the tickets to certain specified constituencies, as the brahmin population therein was sizeable. This is the kind of argument that in the past only Muslims, Christians or backward castes would have used, and would have been branded narrowly casteist or sectarian by brahmins. Kamma Congressmen who have always felt overwhelmed by the Reddys in that party held a meeting and resolved obliquely that all castes should be given tickets in proportion commensurate with their 'Importance', which in their case means not only numbers but also economic power, of which they have plenty. And the Reddys took visible pains to explain away their embarrassing preponderance in the Congress. Thus bahujan politics had achieved the first victory that any rebel movement aspires for: to force the dominant groups to dump their myths and acknowledge the hidden aspects of reality.

Unfortunately, the opportunities opened up by these developments slipped away as elections neared. with the visible decline in the euphoria surrounding the BSP. The Congress and TDP leaders soon felt quite reassured, and not many more seats were allotted to the SCs and BCs than is usual.

And in N T Rama Rao's new cabinet, the number and the importance of the posts given to the SCs and BCs is not Very different from the past. A beginning has, however, been made in the matter, and the future can witness more significant changes if the BSP leadership draws the requisite lessons from this experience.

III

And there was plenty of violence, too. Rayalaseema warlord gangsterism has in the last few years become a major topic of lament in Andhra Pradesh. One reason could be the legitimacy problems it creates for the rulers, especially in view of the democracy vs violence antithesis that dominates their discussion of naxalism. Another reason is the growing awareness of democracy and democratic rights among the people of Rayalaseema. A third reason is the growth of the gangsterism into a major cancer in recent years, with its transmutation into an instrument of money-making and political advancement. Violence, as a consequence, has accompanied all recent elections, as has the exhortation that the violence should be - and the promise that it will be - contained in the interests of democracy. This time could the fear of Seshan - of his arbitrariness rather than the legal authority of the Election Commission, of whose exact extent nobody including Seshan is clear-restrained the contenders somewhat, but nevertheless there was plenty of rigging, bomb throwing and killing. At Dhone in Kurnool district, from where Vijayabhaskar Reddy contested, all the village factions united to rig the polls in the then chief minister's favour, and there was none left to protest in the villages. Alampur in neighbouring Mahbubnagar district saw a triangular fight that held up electioneering in the faction-ridden area to the most ludicrous light. The Congress candidate was a recent convert from the Telugu Desam Party, and the Telugu Desam candidate conversely a recent convert from the Congress, both of them Reddy factionists from Kurnool district, transported to Mahbubnagar district as a solution to the impossible seat-distribution problem. The third candidate was the sitting BJP MLA, also a Reddy factionist. but a local man. As a local voter described the three in helpless humour, one makes bombs in his house, one on the terrace and one in the basement'. The three of them made such thorough nonsense of the polling process that the entire constituency had to have a repoll, certainly an unusual thing.

But an entirely humourless terror stalked northern Telangana this time. The obstinate attempt by the People's War Group (PWG) to obstruct the poll campaign at all cost, and the determination of the police to thwart this attempt equally at any cost led to a spate of violence in which more than 50 lives were

lost. Neither those who believe in electoral politics nor those who reject it would reckon it worth so many lives. The PWG asked the people to boycott the polls as usual and also threatened the contesting candidates not to campaign, on pain of physical violence (they made an exception from this ban on campaign for the CPI (ML) candidates and the BSP candidates). Those campaigners who violated this rule had their vehicles burnt and their bones broken. The police moved in, not merely to protect the contestants from this violence, but also to defeat the PWG's political tactics and ensure that votes are polled in large numbers. This much has happened in past elections too. The ostensible purpose of the police has been to ensure that voters can vote freely and fearlessly', though it is a matter of common knowledge that while, the PWG has violently prevented the contestants from exercising their legitimate right to campaign, it has not interfered with the people's right to vote, in case they choose to disobey the PWG and go and vote. But this time round, no bones were made about the real purpose of the police: they were not there to merely protect the contestants' right to campaign and the voters' right to vote, but to defeat the entire political effort of the PWG *vis-a-vis* the elections, no matter that it is no part of their job to do so. The police held meetings in village after village in which inspectors would openly threaten people that if they did not vote, their ration cards would be withdrawn, the electricity connection to the village would be cut and their children would be denied social welfare scholarships. It was certainly an odd way of giving confidence to voters who may wish to defy the PWG's direction.

To aid the AP police, a large number of CRPF and BSF men were dumped in the PWG-influenced districts. A particularly vicious and drunken lot of paramilitary commandos were brought from the Punjab and stationed in Karimnagar district, apparently because more terror must be inflicted to ensure that votes are polled in the prime minister's native district. The way these Punjab commandos behaved is testimony to what can happen if the police are allowed to develop into a lawless force in the name of suppressing political or social lawlessness. Drink and women were the principal interests of these commandos. They drank everything they could lay their hands on, pawed women in village lanes, raped a vegetable-seller in Ramagundam, and succeeded in driving women off the streets in panic wherever they were stationed. When the harassed people complained to the local police, those worthies who are usually a terror to everyone, expressed helplessness and suggested that the women keep to their homes until 'those fellows leave the district'. Not to be outdone, men of a CRPF platoon stationed at Kataram raped another woman,

a dalit labourer by name Salamma, who was however helped by press reporters to go to the district collector and superintendent of police and lodge a complaint. The administration ordered an enquiry by a woman IPS officer who managed to coerce the victim to say that she had not been raped by anyone but had got drunk and fallen, and then started eliciting the 'background' of the pressmen who had taken interest in the matter.

The strategy adopted by the police to defeat the PWG's intentions was to gather from each village youth known to be sympathisers of the PWG and bold them hostages from about a month prior to the day of polling. The implicit threat was that they would be objects of retaliatory killing if the PWG indulged in excessive violence. And these youth were also meant to be lined up before polling stations and compulsorily made to vote on polling day, as a demonstrative exhibition of the success of the police in defeating the intentions of the People's War Group. Not many people in this country would perhaps believe that about 3,000 youth were thus held like slaughter animals in police custody for the whole month of November. The PWG, for its part, as if to challenge the police to kill the hostages, senselessly landmined two vehicles carrying policemen and killed 16 persons including a few civilians, in the last week of November.

The first incident was at Lenkalagadda, an interior village of Karimnagar district, in which some Punjab commandos travelling in a tractor were blown up and killed along with the tractor driver and the local sub-inspector of police; and the second incident happened right near Warangal town, and on a stale highway to boot, killing paramilitary men of the AP Special Police. The second landmine was apparently intended for the Congress government's municipal administration minister Madadi Narnsimha Reddy, an old enemy of the PWG, but he escaped and a police escort vehicle was hit.

This macabre challenge was expectedly taken up by the police and there ensued a killing spree in which 35 persons were shot dead. 34 in Warangal and Karimnagar districts and one in Nizamabad district. Most of them were picked up from home or place of work in the full view and against the protests of their kith and km and colleagues and shot dead within a few hours in some neighbouring village. Oddly enough the police did not kill any of the 3,000 suspected sympathisers already in their custody. That would not create enough of terror, and it is terror that the police want. So they went one step worse, and picked up youth who had not even been considered to have enough links with the PWG to merit prior detention and killed them. All the killings except one were the handiwork of the local police, the one exception being worthy of detailed

mention. The victim was a 45-year old dalit woman. Manthana Rajamma of Lakkepur in Karimnagar district, mother of five daughters and a son. On the afternoon of November 29 some Punjab commandos from Gajulapalli camp went to Lakkepur on a raid, searching for hidden naxalites or hidden ammunition. They were fully drunk on toddy and heavily armed with automatic weapons. When they approached Rajamma's house she tried to leave by a side door for she was alone in the house and was scared at the prospect of the search. But they spotted her and by signs asked her to come back. They entered the house and found one of the two rooms locked. They asked her to open it. As the terrified woman fumbled with the key for a minute, one of the impatient commandos aimed his gun at her and shot her right through her back. The bullet killed her, went through the locked door and emerged out of the other wall to lodge in the wall of the neighbour's house. The drunk commandos then went out telling the horrified villagers: 'buddi mar gayi'.

This killing went on till December 3, and polling in north Telangana was on December 5. On the previous evening the youth in custody were sent home to vote and get votes polled in their villages the next day, and come back again to report at the police station the day after polling. The implied threat again was that if not enough votes were polled, the youth could be killed. Indeed, the threat was not left implicit. It was stated bluntly. In any case, there was quite heavy polling in the north Telangana districts and all Congress heavy weights including the prime minister's son and his in-law lost massively. The losers themselves attributed their defeat at least in part to the methods adopted by the police (with their sanction, of course, though they would dishonestly put all the blame on the police after their defeat).

In the course of this blood bath, the main issue between the two armed contenders was left undecided: how many people would have voted, and how many would have boycotted the polls, if they had had peaceful conditions for the exercise of their choice? And in the interests of what great principle had so many lives been lost?

IV

The final question that remains is: What do elections signify in the new politico-economic consensus of the ruling classes? Economic liberalism does not render political power irrelevant, for what it nullifies is not governmental authority but governmental social responsibility. The Indian state of the 1990s is not a powerless political entity, not the ideal of 19th century liberalism. What it is freed from is only responsibility for the welfare of the people. The rest of its authority and responsibility is intact. And so it continues to be as profitable to be in the

business of politics as in the days of the licence-permit raj; perhaps more so, for lots of money is flowing into the country now both in the private and public sectors: and with globalisation the stakes of all politico-economic activity is pushed up and computed in worthier currencies than the good old rupee.

Politicians' hunger for political office has therefore increased and not decreased, and the private wealth they have at their disposal has also increased with the multiplication of economic opportunities available to the propertied classes. They have therefore fought tooth and nail to get tickets from winning parties and have used the most shameless means to get elected. It is trite to say that political morality has never been as low as this, for it gets lower and lower day by day and is always lower than it has ever been. And the contingent human imagination which (for all its pretensions to unlimited vision) is bound by experience and possible extrapolation believes on each day that it has sighted the nadir, but what it has seen is only the murkiest depths it can imagine, the nadir of its imaginative capabilities.

The norms laid down by Seshan to discipline campaigning and to limit campaign expenditure to legally permissible limits has meant reduced publicity expenditure for the candidates, which has actually hurt the newcomers like the BSP and parties like the CPI(ML) groups which participate in elections, for wide publicity for their views, slogans and symbols is crucial for them rather than the Congress and TDP. For the latter the expense saved on this account has meant more to spend on unaccounted activity, such as the eleventh-hour distribution of cash and liquor which is a common feature of Indian elections. Votes were paid for at an unprecedented rate this time but whether they were successfully purchased is difficult to tell. In any case, the Telugu Desam Party is not 'yesterday's baby' (to borrow Seshan's memorable caveat about himself) and can spend as much as the Congress, and so it probably made no difference in the end.

But what elections mean for the voters in the new era is that this is one of the times they can put pressure to force the political system to be answerable to their needs, no matter that such answerability is called 'populism' these days. As the social responsibility of the government has been officially discarded, it must be enforced by the collective assertions of the people. One such possible moment of assertion is election time, when the threat of voting politicians out of power can help bend official policies. Perhaps it is the recognition of this possibility that has by a peculiar cognitive jump turned itself into an interpretation (only partially true) of the disastrous defeat of the Congress in the Andhra Pradesh elections this time.