

Seshan in Kurnool

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Indian electoral democracy has undoubtedly led to a lot of political awakening among the poor and the oppressed, and even a certain amount of empowerment of these classes. But in its principal aspect it has functioned less as a means of ascertaining and enthroning the will of the majority than as a means of sharing out patronage, power and property among the rich and the powerful. From the village sarpanch to the MLA, most of the elected representatives today are leaders of gangs armed to the teeth, and the consequent terror is a decisive factor in deciding elections.

THE Chief Election Commissioner of India evokes a lot of absurd images. An un-constitutional temper dedicated to a constitutional passion, a cantankerous arbitrariness forever insistent about rectitude and propriety in others, met from the other side with solemn arguments about breach of constitutional authority by politicians who recognise no constitutional basis for the authority they exercise, and who have so efficiently shaped the electoral process into an instrument of power and plunder that they find it infuriating that a mere public servant can upset the rules devised and smugly worked out among themselves, for themselves and by themselves: that is surely a setting that can only call forth images of absurdity. What enrages politicians so much about Seshan is that he is so much like them; arbitrary, arrogant, an unruly bully when he can get away with it and a model of humble rectitude when the courts pull him up. And while perforce the two of them debate the matter in terms of a dubious disjunction between, legality and popular sovereignty, one may more fruitfully reflect that it is in the nature of human affairs that all right things are attempted by the wrong people; that it takes excesses to make moderation possible; that reason is given a hearing only when it is taken to unreasonable lengths; and that it is prohibited to human beings that right things may be achieved by right persons using right means advocated to just the right extent.

Seshan looks (at least in his photographs) and behaves so much like a bull that one is tempted to call him a bull in a china shop, except that Indian politics is no chinaware, neither in fragility nor innocence (and one is of course not talking of aesthetics). One could describe his effort at electoral reform as tilting at windmills, except that the windmills themselves are so genuinely scared that there is evidently something to his effort that is not merely quixotic. One could see in him a sadhu preaching to a dacoil gang, but this is one sadhu who speaks the dacoits' language. One could call him a tool rushing

in where angels know better, but then a lot of angels appear to look forward with genuine hope to what this fool can do.

One could, therefore, do worse than to take Seshan a little more seriously. It requires no great intellectual effort to recognise that while he may trim the excesses of electoral combats a little, he cannot finish the task of making India a full-fledged electoral democracy. But that little is firstly, not worthless by itself, and secondly, in all human effort at reform and change, what is often more important than the material alteration achieved is the value-system generated thereby, for that value-system creates an altered culture that shapes future social behaviour. Human beings live by the values their culture believes in, and the creation of new values, the consolidation of a new value-framework for human social behaviour, which will in turn impel people to take on the systemic obstacles to change, is what every effort at change principally achieves. The change achieved can only be slight in the case of a lone effort by a cantankerous individual whose intentions are not always very straight or very clear, but it is nevertheless worth taking seriously. In particular, it is important to look at the cultural and systemic obstacles that Seshan's effort, taken deservedly or not it face value, will have to face, in the hinterland of Indian democracy.

The people of Kurnool district in the Rayalaseema region of Andhra Pradesh have had election after election forced upon them, while the discerning among them know better than anybody else that their society and culture are least ready for electoral democracy of any kind. First, the parliament member from Nandyal resigned and the people were directed to elect the nation's prime minister to parliament, and with a record lead to boot. And then Vijaya Bhaskar Reddy, the member of parliament from Kurnool and union law minister, was made chief minister of the state, which meant that he too had to be elected to the state assembly. Panyam was vacated for him and the people were directed

to elect the chief minister ("otherwise there will be no development for Kurnool"). They did their best and did elect him, but the 'big man' was not happy with the votes he did not get. He said in public meeting after public meeting after getting elected, that he knew who had campaigned against him and would 'take care of them, whether they are high or low'. And then, of course, the parliament seat of Kurnool vacated by him had to be filled, and who should be the Congress candidate but his son? It was his seat that he had vacated, the better to serve the people, and who should the inheritance go to but his dear son, whether according to the Hindu or any other property law? And so the people of Kurnool were directed to elect the son to parliament on May 26 this year, and they have dutifully done so, except that he scraped through with a rather small lead. So base is the people's ingratitude, even to men that have served them for decades and are bent on serving them for ever, from father to son, from father to son, from father to son...

ELECTIONS IN KURNOOL

But that is not our story. Our story is what exactly does the electoral process mean in a district like Kurnool; and what must happen before electoral democracy becomes a thing of substance there; and how little of it comes within the purview of the Election Commission, whether that consists of one, two or three members; whether there is a chief among them who is more equal than the others; and whether that chief will be Seshan in perpetuity. This is of course not at all to say that what the EC can do is altogether immaterial, nor that the recent debate about its reconstitution is a vacuous debate. The people of Kurnool themselves did not think so during the by-election this May. The least literate of them had heard of this miracle man called Seshan who had put the fear of the law in the hearts of the lawless lords of their lives, and they were so curious to know what the creature looks like that when Seshan stopped off at a small town in Kurnool constituency on the way to Mantralayam (he seems to visit gods as frequently as politicians do), villagers flocked around as if he were a film star.

Jagadurti is a village off the Hyderabad-Bangalore national highway. It is ruled by former sarpanch Lakshmi Reddy, an elderly man, an uncle of sorts of chief minister Vijaya Bhaskar Reddy. This old man evidently belongs to an era that pre-dates even notional democracy, for he takes pride in the fact that there is little of it in his village. No sir, nobody campaigns for any party other than the party he supports—which happens to be the Congress but could well

be the Telugu Desam Party some day—in his village. It has never happened, and it would be improper if it ever did happen. He himself sits as the poll agent inside the booth, and people show him the stamped ballot paper before consigning it to the box. It has always been so. It is a tradition of the village, and it would be improper if anybody violated it today. Will the opposition party find a poll agent in the village? Well, nobody from the village would actually sit as an opposition agent in the village, for that would also be improper and contrary to the traditions of the village. But since it is said that according to some statutory vanity all candidates have a right to have their agents in every booth, even if they are so poorly off that nobody from the village will sit on their behalf, well then, they can get an agent from outside and he would be treated as an honoured guest, according to the village traditions. But such an agent should in turn respect the village traditions and not behave impolitely. That would be improper. Finally, he has heard of some stupid electoral rule or fancy that all the votes of a village cannot be cast for a single candidate, even if the village has no tradition of differing in such matters, and that if there is hundred per cent unanimity there will be a repoll, which he thinks is utterly stupid and undemocratic, but as such is the law, he himself sees to it that the opposition candidate gets the last 10 per cent of the votes. The people will be directed to vote for the worthless fellow.

This is not an isolated village. There are plenty of villages in the district where landlords who are close relatives or followers of the chief minister rule life with such completeness. What happens to those who resist their authority? They can be killed. They can be banished from the village and their property destroyed or seized. It should not be thought this violence is committed by some paid agents or hirelings of the landlord. The landlord's loyal following would normally consist of quite ordinary villagers who would lynch the disobedient with a genuine sense of outrage. There is for instance this complaint made by the Telugu Desam Party to the Chief Election Commissioner about the SI of police, Kodumur, who they alleged had forced a TDP supporter to remove the party flag and banner from his house. The SI's explanation is that the man's village is close to the chief minister's native village Laddagiri, right on the road in fact, from Laddagiri to the mandal headquarters, and so if this man continued to sport TDP insignia he would cause needless provocation to the men of Laddagiri passing by, and as the loyalty of that village to Vijaya Bhaskar Reddy's family is well known, that would have fatal consequences. That is why, the SI insists, he had advised the TDP supporter, in his own interest and as part of the policeman's official duty to prevent cognisable offences, to remove the party banner and flag and "silently vote for

the TDP in the anonymity of the polling booth if he wanted to", an act of thoughtful charity and dutiful policing that the TDP leaders misunderstood. Whatever the honesty of the policeman's explanation, the fact that he chose this as a credible explanation reveals a lot about society in rural Kurnool.

There is another Lakshmi Reddy, an even closer uncle of the chief minister, who rules over the village of Lakkasagaram. This is an airtight monarchy into which not a single whiff of liberty has ever entered. Even N T Rama Rao on his electoral visits to the area would pass by this village and hold meetings elsewhere. A stranger who enters the village cannot and will not be allowed to talk to the residents directly. The residents themselves would be either too scared to talk or would regard such liberty quite sincerely as an outrage. Any talking that is to be done will be done by Lakshmi Reddy, and that is that. It would be difficult to convince many (though mercifully not all) people of the village that there is anything wrong in this.

It can be argued (and landlords frequently do argue) that quite apart from the last 10 per cent or so of the votes that those who rule the village will themselves direct to be cast for the opposition in case of uncomfortable unanimity in the village, there is nothing at all to prevent at least the courageous of the dissenters from voting for the opposition in the anonymity of the polling booth (and if you do not have the courage, why ever should you dissent?). The possibility certainly does exist, and seems to have been utilised in sizeable measure this May, going by the final result. And the possibility has certainly been enhanced by Seshan. The earlier practice was either that the voter shows the stamped ballot paper to the landlord's agent sitting inside the booth before putting it in the box; or that the polling agent would himself stamp each ballot paper and hand it over the voter to personally put in the box, as a token of democracy; or worse still that four or five of the landlord's men would themselves stamp all the ballot papers (including some in favour of the opposition) without troubling voters to come all the way to the booth, and put them all in the box, in the presence of the gaping poll officials. And there would be no opposition agent sitting in the booth to protest; or if there is one and that one did protest, or if the representatives of the opposition candidate came there and protested, there would be bomb-throwing and violence and possibly a murder or two. Seshan's insistence on deploying large contingents of paramilitary at the booths, and on strictly preventing big groups of persons from moving around on poll day has encouraged the TDP to send its agents from outside the district to each booth to protest at every malpractice. They could not prevent all impersonation, for the agents from outside could not possibly know who is who in each village, and where they did

try, in Vijaya Bhaskar Reddy's native village Laddagiri, they were physically driven out of the village. Yet the presence of the police and the opposition poll agents did cut down the rigging in most villages. The decision of the Election Commission not to count votes booth-wise, which would reveal which locality voted sizeably for whom, also gave courage to the voters to exercise their choice more freely than ever.

LIMITED CHANCE

All this has helped, and many have publicly acknowledged the victory of Seshan in making the recent by-election to the Kurnool parliament seat more democratic than any election before it in the district. And yet elections are not won by voters deciding in the secret of their hearts whom to vote for and exercising that choice in the secret of the polling booth. The liberty to campaign and create a climate of opinion in favour of the opposition candidate is an essential aspect of electoral democracy, and this is where the rules and procedures of the Election Commission are of little help against the entrenched social terror exercised by the armed landlords. It is impossible to provide heavy police escort for every campaign meeting of every candidate in every village. And even if that were possible, that would only apply to the campaign meetings held by outsiders coming to the village, meetings of the kind that are by their nature possibly at most once in each village of a constituency even in the most intense campaign. One cannot think of any security at all for villagers living in the village and campaigning by word of mouth in the village. Even if they go unmolested prior to the poll out of fear of the action that the very arbitrary and unpredictable Seshan may take, after the poll is over, the result is declared, Seshan's men are back in Delhi, and Seshan's jurisdiction over the happenings in Kurnool is terminated, there can and will be retaliatory murders and arson targeted at those in the village who openly sided with the opposition candidate. Tell anti-Congress voters in Kurnool to exercise not merely their vote but the whole gamut of their political liberty freely, and they will ask you in return: "Will you be with us in the village after the poll is over? You won't? Then don't advise us".

Apart from the liberty to differ from the 'big men' of the village and openly express the difference, what is even more basically required is a culture in which such liberty is recognised and prized. Whereas what prevails in Rayalaseema is a culture in which the human traits of loyalty and faith are tied to the feudal-patriarchal mode of society, so that the liberty we are speaking of may well be seen as an illegitimate disloyalty to the natural leaders and elder of society, and would be recognised as legitimate only if there is an opposition faction within the

dominant class to whom the loyalty can be transferred. Existing conjointly as this trait does with a proneness to violent expression of anger, which is again sharper in Rayalaseema than elsewhere, it can mean that the desire for individual liberty may attract violent hostility from one's own fellow creatures, persons of one's own class, caste and family. Even in factional conflicts among followers of different Reddy landlords, the violent anger and hatred that can and does divide close kith and kin is startling to an observer unfamiliar with the specific mode of feudal culture dominant in Rayalaseema.

If we leave aside the generality of the feudal-patriarchal culture, not every village of Kurnool or any of the Rayalaseema districts answers completely to the above description. There are plenty of villages where some degree of freedom from social terror does exist. But there are equally plenty of villages which landlords such as the two Lakshmi Reddys described above rule totally with their gangs armed invariably with country-made bombs, and often also guns. Over the last decade and half, Rayalaseema warlordism has constituted itself into a structure that has MLAs and ministers at the top, civil and excise contractors, smugglers and less reputable businessmen at the middle, and village landlords at the base. It determines and dominates all spheres of political as well as civil society. Chief minister Vijaya Bhaskar Reddy has for long been a seemingly gentlemanly operator situated in the upper echelons of this warlord structure, though after becoming chief minister he has shown that he possesses quite ungentlemanly fangs in addition to a gentlemanly demeanour.

The guns at one time used to be mostly illegal weapons acquired or made at home. The bombs, of course, are made locally, and (Manmohan Singh, please take note) if the manufacture is legalised and its extent properly estimated it would make a sizeable addition to the GDP of Rayalaseema without any further investment. The people themselves joke that bombs are as cheaply available as putrefied vegetables. But in the last five years or so guns have also multiplied in number and gun licences are easier to obtain now as quite a few of the warlords have risen to important positions in the state government. Vijaya Bhaskar Reddy, Mysooru Reddy and Diwakar Reddy (from Kurnool, Cuddapah and Anantapur districts, in that order) have been and are in powerful positions. And the principal Congress dissident, Y S Rajasekhara Reddy from Cuddapah is an archetypal warlord. Gun licences are therefore much easier to obtain, with their own men at the top. You commit a murder and apply for a gun licence as you fear retaliation, for the police have 'falsely implicated you in the case'; the kith and kin of the deceased apply for a gun licence exhibiting the corpse of the man you have

slain as proof of a bona fide threat to life. As both of you have your own men as MLAs and ministers at Hyderabad, both get gun licences in due course. The granting of such licences is supposed to be preceded by a local police enquiry concerning the applicant's criminal proclivities, but such inconveniences are easily avoided. As policemen bemoan these days, "these fellows do not even give their home addresses in the application. They give a Hyderabad address and get hold of some MLA or minister who ensures that the local police dutifully certify that the man has no criminal record locally and get the licence, and it is only when we see the fellow going around with a gun back home that we realise he has gone and got a gun licence".

The point is that this weaponry increases the terror they exercise. The terror is a means of property acquisition; it is a means of political power and patronage. All manner of petty local bullies gather around these armed lords, and constitute a formidable obstacle to any democratic assertion, whether electoral or otherwise.

These armed gangs are anachronistically described as "rural factions" in police and administrative parlance, though they have evidently outgrown their origins in village factionalism. It is a paradox that they are today seen (though not always vocally condemned) as an obstacle to democracy and development, for it is precisely the kind of political democracy and the kind of economic development that India has had that is at the root of the evolution of warlord gangs from their pre-independence roots in what may be properly called village factionalism. Village factions born of conflict between Reddy landlords (but also a few non-Reddy landlords and elders of close-knit castes as the Boyas, too) over property and power (and some times women) have a long history in the Rayalaseema districts. Every slight, imagined or real, had to be avenged as viciously as every substantial challenge to one's power, property or prestige. Assault, murder and burning of houses and cornstacks was the principal means of the assertion of one's strength and 'manhood'. And, of course, each such attack had to be avenged with equal 'manliness' from the other side. This meant the creation of hereditary enmity that went on from generation to generation, often until one family was either exterminated or driven out of the village. It also meant the creation of loyal gangs from out of poorer castemen and lower castes by each warring side, and as the gangs indulged in mutual violence, subsidiary enmity between fresh families lower down the social scale would be created. These gangs (even today) are different from urban mafias in two respects: one is that they are made up not of professional criminals but peasants (though they do involve themselves in illicit activity such as smuggling forest produce, growing opium

or making liquor illegally), and the second is that what binds the gang to the master is not only pecuniary or other material benefit (though there is often plenty of it) but also an intense feudal loyalty, the loyalty owed as a matter of traditional 'dharma', to the 'elders' of the village, which means either upper caste landlords or the hereditary elders of each caste, especially the tight-knit castes such as the very militant and clannish Boyas. Over this factionalism was super-imposed another trait that Rayalaseema inherited from the anarchy that followed the demise of the 'warstate' of the Rayas of Vijayanagar: the rule of armed chieftains (sometimes called 'polegars') over groups of villages, a few or hundreds in extent, a rule that amounted to little more than plain plunder by the chieftain and his violent gang of castemen and followers.

The British did their bit to subdue this two-tiered feudal structure of violence, or at least to come to terms with it. They failed, no doubt because for them it represented merely a problem of public order and crime. But political democracy and economic development of the post-independence period has peculiarly enhanced, politicised and modernised the phenomenon. Indian electoral democracy has undoubtedly led to a lot of political awakening among the poor and the oppressed, and even a certain amount of empowerment of these classes. But in its principal aspect it has functioned less as a means of ascertaining and enthroning the will of the majority than as a means of sharing out patronage, power and property among the rich and the powerful. It has functioned too as a means of recanalising the forms of traditional power and property into modern channels. And therefore, the violence of the armed landlord factions has fitted neatly into electoral combat, while the sanctity and the position of an 'elected representative' has lent ideological legitimacy as well as some amount of 'state power' to the erstwhile armed lord. From the village sarpanch to the MLA, most of the elected representatives today are leaders of gangs armed to the teeth, and the consequent terror is a decisive factor in deciding elections.

QUARRY-BASED ECONOMY

As for economic development in Rayalaseema, the semi-arid region has little potential for growth based on agricultural prosperity. It is on the other hand rich in minerals and commercially valuable slab stone, and hence quarrying and processing is a major economic activity. This rough work suits the rough culture of the region, and it was soon enough discovered that whoever controls the gun and the bomb also controls the quarry-based industry and trade. The guns and the gangs that had first come into being in village factional fights turned their attention—just as they turned their attention to electoral

politics—to the quarrying and polishing of stone. The units are allowed to be owned and operated by harmless entrepreneurs- (it is too much of a bother looking after the economics of running the enterprises) and the armed warlord gangs step in as protectors' and collect tolls on every piece of material quarried or shifted out.

And then there are the civil and excise contracts offered by the public sector economy, such as contracts for the laying of roads, the digging of canals and the vending of liquor in retail. Indeed, everything monopolised by the state, whether it is forests, public works or liquor, creates contractors in its execution, transport and retail vending, and if you can drive out all competitors at the auction you can take the contract for a high profit margin, and then either execute it, or (if that is too much of a bother) subcontract it out to somebody else. Once again, therefore, the bomb and the gun helped to create a monopoly in public works and other contracts. Territory is parcelled out among the warlords into zones where none competes against another, and if any outsider enters the fray he is either politely bought out or abruptly bombed out.

Thus the economy and politics of post-independence India helped develop the feuding village factions into big mafias that use armed terror as a decisive means of dominating politics and the economy. And also, gradually, the whole of social life. All social problems and conflicts end up at the palatial houses of the warlords, to be decided with the threat or infliction of violence, and according-to the very primitive notions of equity, morality and fairness that the warlords possess. Disputes of property, contract, marriage, divorce and every conceivable familial and inter-personal problem finds an abrupt and final resolution there; The problems are robbed of their delicacy, sensitivity, robbed of their social, political and ethical dimensions and reduced either to the customary feudal-patriarchal notions of rectitude or—one does not know whether this is worse or better—mere calculation of factional political advantage.

It is in such a society that we are speaking of the Election Commission's dicta. Till now, in faction-ridden villages of Rayalaseema, the people have had some freedom only when two gangsters are at loggerheads, thereby giving the people a chance to 'play one devil against the other' as the people themselves say. But looking at it this way involves romanticising the people as helpless victims of armed gangs, whereas a lot of them are, simultaneously and knowingly, loyal partisans in the warfare. They are not an innocent entity waiting to be liberated from the mafias but are in sizeable measure faithful and conscious participants in the violence and the terror that robs their society of democracy and justice. One may then (following a strong current philosophical

fashion) question this notion of democracy and justice as alien, occidental or elitist, but the test is not an eclectic relativism that decrees to each what they believe they want, but whether a given social structure and culture, and the way they mould human traits in society, are conducive to the promotion of a life which assures the full development of each person (concurrently with the full development of all). If this criterion too is described as a western value, one can either point out that there is a grain of it in the Buddha, or else say so much the worse for the east-west dichotomy.

Without the notion of a democracy and justice that transcends the feudal-patriarchal culture of Rayalaseema, the only freedom available to people within the culture, a freedom that they exercise with great violence, is the freedom to change masters and suffer more violence in the process. The May 26 by-election in Kurnool saw explicit group violence and police firing at the village of Eerladinne. This village is close to Kothakota, the native village of Prakash Reddy, nephew of the chief minister. Only a few years ago, this bearded young man was regarded as Vijay a Bhaskar Reddy's political heir. Government officials in Kurnool did his bidding though he was not even an MLA. And it was this man that master-minded the shameless drama of abduction and wrongful confinement of prospective candidates at the time of P V Narasimha Rao's Nandyal election. He was also at the forefront of the massive rigging that heralded the prime minister's entry to parliament. It was predicted that this Prakash Reddy would rise to heights in the state's politics.

But he was only a nephew and not the son. That was his tragedy. For the chief minister does have a son, Suryaprakash Reddy by name, apparently a good-for-nothing in political warfare, but a son nevertheless. Gradually the son rose and the nephew set, and when the son was openly promoted as the Congress candidate for the Kurnool by-poll, the nephew defected to the eager Telugu Desam Party, which habitually waits at the back door to lap up disenchanting Congress gangsters as they come out, and spends time in the interval lecturing the people about the evils of the culture of the gun promoted by the Congress in Rayalaseema. Having joined the TDP, Prakash Reddy vowed to defeat the chief minister's son.

Eerladinne is one of the half a dozen villages in the neighbourhood of Prakash Reddy's native Kothakota, that were entirely under that man's thumb. They had lived in feudal peace, voting and living as Prakash Reddy desired. The obedience, as we have said above, is due partly to the traditional and willing loyalty that a powerful Reddy commands, and partly to the terror induced by the proximity of his guns. When such leaders switch parties, the people too normally

switch their electoral loyalties. Thus soon there was the strange sight of all the walls in Kothakota being adorned with yellow-coloured posters of a smiling N T Rama Rao, whereas that man would not have been able to do so much as hold an election rally in the village in the past.

But Eerladinne alone of the domain of Prakash Reddy did not switch over completely. A couple of local Reddys decided to stay with the chief minister, and so the village split into two, one section passionately loyal to Prakash Reddy in his new apparel and the other full of a new-found passion against him. As it happened, the election booth was located near the houses of those loyal to Prakash Reddy. On poll day, when the renegades went to vote the loyalists deliberately picked up a quarrel with them and chased them away with a rain of stones and sticks. But the renegades were not deterred. They regrouped by afternoon and went in a bunch in a couple of tractors and voted for the Congress, defying the loyalists' wrath. This defiance is undoubtedly a democratic assertion, but in the interest of another Reddy, And moreover soon they may have to pay heavily for it if the Telugu Desam Party comes to power, a not unlikely eventuality in the coming elections, in which case Prakash Reddy is bound to become a powerful man.

Not all of India is Kurnool, but there is a little bit of Kurnool in the most civilised part of the country. And there are, of course, whole regions of the country, including certain metropolitan slums, that are no different from Kurnool. What ever form and meaning we give to electoral democracy as an instrument of representative government, the social structure and culture of a sizeable part of India is a hindrance to it. Much change needs to take place at the level of social structure and culture before it can become genuinely representative, once again whatever formal alterations may be made. While this has been so for a long time, the fast deterioration of the political establishment that we see today has its concomitant in an increasing resort to suppressive violence by the rich and the powerful, a violence against which the unorganised weak have no defence unless they happen to be part of a rival gang.

This situation is enough to defeat any bureaucratic attempt to make democratic political choice in elections a reality. To say this is not to advocate defeatism but to point out that the task of evolving a genuine representative democracy in India is much bigger than would be deduced from the debate centred on P V Narasimha Rao's childish attempts to cut Seshan to size. It is a much more difficult, cultural and political task than voting against the constitutional amendment dreamt up by a prime minister whose imagination cannot rise above that of a village patwari.