

ANDHRA PRADESH

Rayalaseema: Waiting for a *Rshyasrnga*

K Balagopal

'ROADS indicate culture' says a doubtful maxim inscribed by the Public Works Department on a roadside stone slab in Anantapur district. But though 'culture' is not precisely what is indicated, the epigram is perhaps unintendedly apt; for the road in question goes on to Bellary in Karnataka, and it is to the canal-irrigated lands of Bellary that thousands of indigent labourers from Anantapur have trudged" along this very road in search of work and sustenance. The cotton-growing black soil of Bellary under the Tlingabhadra project, colonised by enterprising Kamma cultivators from coastal Andhra, is the nearest thing to Promised Land for poor and landless peasants of drought-ravaged Rayalaseema. No matter that the very exodus has brought down the wage rate for picking cotton from Rs 10 to 5 and even 3 per day, they trudge on nevertheless, for this Promised Land has promised them not Paradise, but just one meal every day, which is three times what they can get in their villages.

Rayalaseema—the Land of the Rayas (of Vijayanagar)—has always been a land of predators. The word Raya—like Raja, Rana, etc—indicates feudatory status, but the Rayas of Vijayanagar were nobody's feudatories when they could help it. At the height of their prowess they ruled over a substantial part of the Deccan, and of the Tamil plains. To Nilakantha Sastry, the arch-brahmanical historian of South India, theirs was the warrior Hindu State par excellence. It was after their decline that their feudatories, the nayakas and the paliagars, took over, the latter of the two being the closest Indian approximation to Chinese war lords. These armed gangs of predators, sometimes (but not necessarily) camouflaged as revenue collectors, ravaged Rayalaseema until they met more than their match in the British. However, and in spite of the 'law and order' pretensions of the unctuous British bourgeoisie, the land continues to be ruled by illicit arms, country-made bombs and soda-water bottles (the poor man's Molotov cocktail). Armed gangs of landlords (delicately called 'village factions') fight it out over every issue and no holds are barred. It is thus that everything—from Excise or Civil Supplies contracts to election results—are decided in Rayalaseema. One Telugu Desam legislator from Rayalaseema who tried to export this culture to Hyderabad—thinking in all innocence and quite rightly that what is good for Kurnool, Cuddapah and Anantapur should be good enough for Hyderabad—took along with him this February a jeep load of explosives to help his party win the Hyderabad Municipal Corporation elections; his enterprise created much sensation

and considerable embarrassment to his leader N T Rama Rao, resulting (oddly enough) not in his expulsion from the party but the transfer of the Police Commissioner of Hyderabad who mistakenly thought that he was only doing his duty in arresting the legislator along with his jeep-load of explosives. N T Rama Rao thought otherwise; he declared in public that if only the police had been more co-operative he and his electoral ally the CPI(M) would have won the Corporation elections, and as punishment transferred the Police Commissioner.

This is an aside, however.

The point is that this culture of armed gang-fights and drought go together. The Reddys are the dominant landed community of Rayalaseema, as of Telangana; and unlike the Kammas of coastal Andhra who are a relatively homogeneous community in their historical origin, the Reddys are an extremely heterogeneous lot. A proper historical study of the formation and evolution of this community would in fact reflect comprehensively the entire agrarian history of Andhra from the feudal period onwards. At one end the community received its dominant component from the first feudal overlords who subjugated the community of original village settlers and went on to establish powerful dynasties; a component of lesser status was the class of village headmen, the *gramani* of classical Sanskrit, though not in the classical form but as they cut themselves free from the village community with the aid of the feudal hierarchy. Until very recently the village headman was called a 'Reddy' in Rayalaseema even when he was a brahmin by caste. At the other extremity the caste expanded steadily by continuously absorbing upstart *Kapu* cultivators (equivalent of the Maratha *Kumbhis*), among whom it was a signification of rise in social status to call themselves Reddys. This absorption took place until such recent times that in Telangana, for instance, the peasants among the Reddys usually describe themselves as *Kapus* (the term being a caste name as well as a generic term for cultivators). The point, anyway, is that the Reddy landed gentry of Rayalaseema contains among its varied elements a component that is as capable of agrarian enterprise as the Kammas of coastal Andhra, who are celebrated in this regard. But if they have without exception chosen other and less delicate methods of appropriating their share of the social surplus, and if they are able to find unemployed gangs of youth to act as their henchmen, that is primarily because of what may be loosely called an ungenerous nature. I say 'loosely' because how much of this ungenerosity is 'natural' and how much is a consequence of

predatory misrule is an arguable question. The undeniable natural disadvantage is that much of Rayalaseema—especially Anantapur district—is in a rain-shadow region of the Deccan plateau and gets well below the average rainfall in the country. Anantapur district has a normal rainfall of 544 mm, which is said to be the second lowest in the entire country. But what impact exploitative rule has had on this natural disadvantage is difficult to pinpoint. There is evidence from British administrative and revenue records that drought has been a consistent phenomenon in Rayalaseema from the middle of the 18th century. About 30 drought years are identifiable from the reports between 1756 and 1947. The British, however, made the mistake of maintaining detailed records; their predecessors, our Rajas and Nawabs, maintained none. And therefore the history of pre-British India easily gets mixed up with myths, the more so if the myths are indeed to sustain the pride of a nationality, as is the case with Telugu nationalism and the Kingdom of Vijayanagar. Though Vijayanagar straddled an area that is difficult to classify in terms of twentieth century sub-nationalism, the kings were Telugus, and therefore the magnificence of Vijayanagar has become an integral part of the modern Telugu identity. It is regarded as a period of peace and plenty, of munificent kings and contented people, and so on. This unlikely golden age is supposed to have lasted well into the 19th century, until the consequences of British rule destroyed it. The good old days are recalled by local scholars and leaders with nostalgia. However, since these scholars are mostly brahmins who held *srotriyam* villages until 1950, and the leaders without exception are Reddys with substantial landholdings whose ancestors must have been village headmen if not actually paliagars, it is difficult to know how much of the lost glory is their own ancestral glory, and how much of their lament is disinterested. The history of drought in Rayalaseema is inextricably entangled with Telugu nationalism, feudatory nostalgia' and *srotriyam* scholarship.

Having said all this, it must be added that popular memory—as distinct from ruling class nostalgia—cannot be fully discounted. The people *do* remember that even thirty or forty years ago, things were much better than now; and the official statistics, that 17 of the last 33 years have been years of drought for the district of Anantapur, tell the same story. Perhaps it is a reasonable inference that however unreal past glory might be there *has* been a further deterioration in recent decades.

Which brings us to Anantapur, mid-1986. The devastation of this district is pathetic. Miles upon miles of dry red soil alternate with the equally dry black beds of the tanks and streams, including the river that was poetically named Pinakini but is commonly known as Pennar. The river was, within the memory of the grey-haired generation, called

the river of corpses (*Peenugula Penna*); such was the ferocity of its floods; today it is a joke of a river, and not because its upper reaches have been dammed. The dam is there—the Upper Pennar project at Perur in Anantapur district—but nobody has seen a single drop of water or a patch of wetness in its reservoir for the last seven years. There is a mythical debate being carried on in the local Press that farmers of Karnataka in the upper reaches of the river have been constructing check dams across the streams that flow into the Pennar, thereby robbing Anantapur of its water; perhaps it should be put down to the habit of blaming one's neighbours for otherwise inexplicable misfortunes.

The same is more or less true of the two other medium scale irrigation projects of the district—the Bhairavunitippa and Chenarayaswamygudi projects. In addition, the 1,245 irrigation tanks, the pride of Anantapur, have been dry for the last three years and the 56,000 odd irrigation wells fitted hopefully with electric or diesel pumpsets went dry by the middle of the kharif season of 1985. Bores were dug at the bottom of the wells, upto depths of 70 to 150 feet but only one bore out of ten was a success. These occasional successes account for the odd patch of green that takes the visitor by surprise. But even here it is neither paddy nor groundnut (the principal wet and dry crops respectively of the district) that are being grown but mulberry crop, an adjunct to sericulture.

The consequence is that the farmers are impoverished, deep in debt. They have borrowed from every conceivable source of finance, from the commercial banks to the co-operative societies to private money-lenders. The last are lending money at interest rates ranging from 2 to 4 per cent per month. They have pledged their land, gold, houses, and anything else they might have. But their most pathetic loss is of cattle. Of the 9 lakh cattle in the district close to 5 lakhs are either dead or sold at ridiculously low prices to butchers—in either case irrevocably lost to production. Even if it rains this June, as the papers are heroically predicting, the farmers have neither seed nor bullocks to cultivate the land, nor any unpledged property to get fresh loans.

The lot of the landless is worse, of course. Those who are young enough have migrated to Bellary, Tumkur, Vijayawada, Bangalore, and some say even Bombay; the destination is decided by the nearest road or rail junction. If your village is close to Guntakal, you can get a train to Bombay, and so you migrate to Bombay. If it is in the western talukas, then it is Bellary and if the southern talukas then it is Bangalore. It makes no difference because wherever you go you earn just enough to feed yourself, and nothing extra for those who have stayed back home. As for those who have stayed back, they are starving, skipping two meals where they eat one,

The predators are active, needless to say. Congressmen all, having ruled and held ministerial berths for many years, the Reddy-Kamma divide has left them on the wrong side of the power question with the coming to power of the Telugu Desam. With the shamelessness that is the special quality of 'Congress culture' they are crying themselves hoarse over the injustice done to Rayalaseema. They have formed All-Party Action Committees, Vimochana samitis, Praja samitis and what not. They have enforced Rasta Rokos and bandhs. But the people trust them no more than they trust the government. The curse of the Congress(I) in Rayalaseema is that given a 'golden oppor-

tunity', the chance of a century, so to say, it is unable to enthuse the people to gather behind it. But perhaps that is as the Congress(I) would have it, for any such enthusiasm on the part of the people would probably scare the Congressmen out of their wits.

Everybody is therefore waiting for the rains to come—each for his own reason. The farmer and the labourer, so that they may live; the government, so that it may be relieved from the tension of not doing anything; and the Congressmen, so that they may be preserved from the burden of running a crusade. But there is no *Rshyashnga* around to bring rains.

BANGLADESH

Day of the Dacoits

Badruddin Umar

A GENERAL election was held throughout Bangladesh on May 1. This election, not unexpectedly, has turned out to be the most controvertial in the history of elections in this region. No sooner the voting came to a close in the afternoon of the 7th than everybody started shouting at the top of his or her voice that the election had been rigged by their opponents in the worst possible manner. In fact, there was rigging all round.

The actual turn-out of voters was the minimum in this general election. It happened for two reasons. First, a general lack of enthusiasm for elections arising out of a lack of confidence in the efficacy of elections as a method of bringing about any real and meaningful change in the existing economic and political situation. Secondly, widespread terrorism which was let loose by the government-backed Jatiya Party in most areas and by other parties and even independent candidates (mostly belonging to certain parties which boycotted the elections) wherever they were in a position to do so. It is because of this widespread terrorism that the Awami League and its eight-party alliance described the elections as unmistakable dacoity or robbery. Considering the way in which voters were scared away by bomb explosions, forcible occupation of polling centres, destruction of election camps of electoral opponents, seizure of ballot papers and casting of false votes, the elections cannot possibly be described in any other way. There is no doubt that in all this the Jatiya Party has emerged as the greatest dacoit and the most-hated villain. But others are no angels. That the Awami League did the same kind of dacoity wherever it could is also true. In fact, a statement to this effect has been issued to the press by the Jatiya Samajtantric Dal which, interestingly, happens to be one of the eight parties which formed an electoral alliance with the Awami League. The Jamaat-i-Islami has also level-

led the same charge against both the Jatiya Party and the Awami League. The Jatiya Party itself charged the Awami League with creating terror and rigging the election by false voting and demanded re-election in about thirty constituencies where the Awami League candidates have won. It sounds like a thief shouting "thief, thief on being caught. But rigging of elections by the Awami League in a number of constituencies, or dacoity committed by them, is also quite true. In fact, May 7 was a day of dacoits in the political life of Bangladesh.

The practice of open rigging in Bangladesh began in the general election of 1973 when the Awami League leader and prime minister, Shikh Mujibur Rahman decided not to allow any other party candidate to get elected. In a completely free election Awami League would have won about 250 seats. But in 50 other seats other party candidates and independents were in stronger positions and would have been elected in the absence of rigging. But Sheikh Mujib was adamant and he took all administrative measures, let loose terrorism and manipulated election results in order to secure election victory only for Awami League candidates. Consequently, no other political party candidate got elected, except one each from J S D and Jatiya League, though a considerable number of opposition candidates actually secured much larger number of votes.

There were riggings during elections held under Ziaur Rahman's martial law. But at that time political movements were at a low ebb and the Awami League was still very discredited, disorganised and weak with no other strong political party around. It made election rigging easy and rather peaceful and Ziaur Rahman managed to get more than eighty per cent votes in his presidential election and a two-thirds majority for his party, the BNP. Rigging was also there during Sattar's election and Ershad's 'yes/no' vote