

Dalit Defiance

The latest massacre of Harijans in an Andhra Pradesh village and the aftermath of this gruesome event, marks in some ways a departure from previous outrages in the state and elsewhere. First and most important, the carnage in Chundur, near Vijaywada, has provoked retaliatory attacks by the Dalits on the houses of upper caste landholders. Second, such was the gruesome nature of the killing that the doctor who carried out the post-mortem examination, himself a Harijan, was so traumatised that he has committed suicide. Third, politicians of different hues have demanded a judicial inquiry and the resignation of the Andhra Pradesh chief minister, other ministers and the deputy speaker alleged to be responsible for the carnage. Those making the demand include important Congressmen, in particular those belonging to Scheduled Castes. Finally, even as legislative shenanigans have intensified in Andhra Pradesh, and Mr N. T. Rama Rao and others seek to make political capital out of the tragedy, the leader of the People's War Group, Mr K. G. Satyamurthy has announced the formation of a "Samatha Volunteer Force" to defend Dalits. These are predictable developments. For too long have gruesome atrocities been perpetrated but the conscience of the nation is, alas, calloused. Noises have been made routinely after every such event, judicial inquiries have been ordered as in this case, dramatic visits have been made by VIPs to the scene of the crime, most memorably by Mrs Indira Gandhi to Belchchi in Bihar on elephant-back, but rarely have the guilty been punished or follow-up action taken. The message of Chundur is that the Dalits have had enough of hypocrisy.

This should be a serious warning to a government which has just held lengthy deliberations to devise methods to check what it sees as the Naxal menace. The fact is that the latest incident has occurred in the Prime Minister's home state, ruled by the Congress over which he presides and where caste antagonisms are so intense that even the most trivial incidents, such as a Dalit accidentally brushing his foot against an upper caste body in a cinema hall, can provoke massive reprisals. Under such circumstance, faith in the rule of law is bound to be severely eroded. Only exemplary punishment of the guilty, suitable compensation to the affected, salutary political measures to cleanse the administration of disgraceful casteism, and sustained social action from below can restore faith not only in the Indian state but in the fundamental principles on which it is based. Chundur proves that India has a long way to go before it can live up to them.