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Upper Caste Violence: Study of Chunduru Carnage

The killing of 13 dalits by upper-caste men in Chunduru on August 6, is a crime of monstrous proportions committed by upper-caste men. The event is a sign of the bitter struggle for the dalits in the days ahead. It is imperative for the pro-dalit forces to study the incident carefully in order to provide an analytical understanding of the genealogy of the Chunduru massacre.

THE importance of a positioned analysis becomes evident once we try to establish the factual accuracy of a particular event. E H Carr, in the first of his Macaulay lectures, says of facts accessible to a historian:

Facts are... [not]... like fish on the fishmonger's slab. They are like fish swimming about in a vast and sometimes inaccessible ocean; and what a historian catches will depend, partly on chance, but mainly on what part of the ocean he chooses to fish in and what tackle he chooses to use—these two factors being, of course, determined by the kind of fish he wants to catch. By and large, the historian will get the kind of facts he wants. History means interpretation [Carr, E H, *What Is History?*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1961, p 23].

We may see in our analytical enterprise, an extension of Carr's history as an interpretative recording of events. However, his insights regarding history writing and facts must be extended to meet our special requirements: facts concerned with such events as the Chunduru carnage are after all verbal accounts by observer/actors, immersed and deeply involved in the day-to-day life processes which led to the incident. These accounts themselves are interpretations of nuances and details constantly erased and redrawn *post hoc*, in order to accommodate the latest in the series of occurrences. The perspective of these accounts will reflect the choice of the observer/actor/historian who records and assimilates them as part of her or his daily effort to comprehend and carry on the struggle. Whether the latest event is the killing of a landlord, or the harassment of an upper-caste woman, the layers of interpretation pile on furiously—inflecting, or even *establishing* the fact and the whole process of which it is a part, to suit the interests of the spokespersons, their caste and class allegiance. A positioned analysis, given the caste cultural constitution of the incident, therefore, would imply that we do not hesitate to adopt a perspective which serves the in-

terests of the dalits.

In the study of an incident of casteism like this one (or of communalism), it becomes clear, with a little experience and study, that the 'truth' which is finally effected and seen 'in print' is always the version which is backed by the privilege of caste to whisper it into the ears of the police, and by the arrogance to dictate a caste loaded interpretation to the press. The weaker one is, the less the likelihood of a 'fair' hearing. After all, the police, political and administrative office, and press reportage and editing are predominantly upper caste, ruling class preserves. The way official records are written, events understood, actions taken and reports filed by the government, police and the press are deeply infused with an upper caste bias—sometimes benevolent, often callous, malignant, or downright criminal. For us therefore, fairness would imply a trust of dalit sources. Needless to say, it would be essential to pay attention to facts from all available sources in accordance with the inherent and definitive requirements of analytical reporting.

We will attempt to approach the problem by first briefly describing the event and then posing questions. Possible answers will be sought in the historical, geographic, economic and socio-political background of the problem of caste as specifically relevant to the Chunduru incident.

ESCALATION OF TENSION

The cinema theatre in Chunduru has two classes of tickets, the floor class and the chair class. Both are paid for, but caste culture insists that the dalit purchases the floor class ticket and the upper caste viewer the chair class. On July 4, Govatota Ravi, a dalit graduate, decided to purchase a cinema ticket in the chair class, departing from and challenging the tradition of untouchability. The offence committed by

Ravi, as related (recast) after the carnage, is that he crossed his legs, which then touched an upper caste viewer in the chair ahead. Upper caste (in this case Reddy) arrogance could not countenance the blow to their privilege and attempted to beat Ravi up, who retaliated with the help of his friends.

That night, Ravi's father, Govatota Bhaskara Rao, a dalit school headmaster in the neighbouring village of Munnangivaripalem, and his wife who worked in Chunduru, fearing for their son's life, sent him off to Nellore. Reprisal was swift, and Bhaskara Rao was dragged from school the next day and tied to a pole. He was thrashed until he disclosed his son's whereabouts, and revealed the date of return. A reception party awaited Ravi on July 6, and beat him up severely. He was forced to swallow liquor and taken to the village police station. Ravi was accused of harassing upper-caste women in an inebriated condition.

The upper-caste men demanded that the family should leave the village. The dalitwada, however, unitedly supported Ravi's family and insisted that the latter should not submit to this humiliation. Ravi and his family however had enough and left the village, fearing for their lives. The Reddys saw this aborted show of solidarity among the dalits as an affront to their supremacy and decided to boycott the dalits from that day on. This resulted in unimaginable hardship to the latter with no field work coming their way. And, as the electricity supply and access to the water tank 'naturally' had to be by way of the upper-caste section of the village, the boycott meant water and power at the whim of the vindictive upper castes. 'Naturally', there was no doctor or medical store in the dalit quarter. Even access to palm leaves to refurbish the thatched roofs of dalit houses was denied. Added to this, travel to other villages to work meant that the day began at four in the morning and ended at 11 at night, the gruelling physical load being doubled for women who had to work in the neighbouring villages, manage the house and provide for the children under trying conditions. Many households suffered a drastic reduction in incomes. Some dalit families here, apart from those who are wage labourers, cultivate lands on tenancy basis. The going flat rate paid is Rs 3,000 to Rs 3,500 per acre per year after which the family grows the crops and makes a profit. As part of the boycott, the landowners refused to permit the dalits to work in the fields which the latter had rented, and in many cases, did not return

the money paid as rent for the land.

The resulting tension saw the police sub-inspector Srinivasa Rao assigned to handle the problem. Srinivasa Rao, a backward class officer himself, saw through the game and decided to protect the dalits. It was stated that he made rounds every day in order to detect and foil foul play—there was no dearth of such attempts on the part of the upper castes. Power was regularly shut off two or three hours in the dalitwada every evening. One day, on some pretext, upper-caste men came armed to the dalitwada to attack the residents, who quickly prepared to retaliate. Srinivasa Rao opened fire in the air to disperse the groups. During this process, circle inspector Saibaba, reputed to be strongly anti-dalit, took charge of the police station. The allegations that he was planted by upper-caste political manoeuvring are entirely plausible. He, with the connivance of the Reddy power group, managed transfer orders for Srinivasa Rao.

THE INCIDENT

On August 6, when the event took place, Saibaba and five sub-inspectors were in the village. Srinivasa Rao, who had still not been relieved from Chunduru, was deputed to the water tank on the pretext that an attack on upper-caste school children was taking place there. Around 11 a.m., the police party (without Srinivasa Rao), under the leadership of Saibaba told the dalit men to leave their houses as they were about to be attacked by the upper castes. Saibaba and his cohorts instructed the men to run west towards the Tungabhadra canal, in order to escape. The dalits did so, and found gangs awaiting them with knives, axes, spears and gunny bags. In the span of an hour, at least six dalits were killed and their bodies mutilated. These were put in the bags, tied to rocks and thrown into the water. Three of the dalits who tried to escape were caught and killed in the surrounding fields. When the women in the dalitwada heard the screams, and approached the police who were still nearby, they were reassured that the sounds were made by cattle which were being chased around the area.

RETALIATION

The water flows swiftly and it was possible for naval divers to retrieve six of the bodies. We were told that four gunny bags were seen floating out into the Bay of Bengal, at the nets spread out across the canal mouth to catch fish. The bags had snagged in the nets and were seen floating away when the nets were raised. Other three bodies were found in the fields nearby.

The autopsies were conducted in Tenali. One doctor, Ravichandra who participated in the performance of the nine post-mortem operations, a dalit himself, committed suicide out of depression. One Parashudda Rao, died of heart attack when he saw his brother Ramesh's body among the dead.

By this time, August 8, the surviving dalits had taken refuge in the Salvation Army church in Tenali, which is 20 kilometres away from Chunduru. They decided to take the 11 bodies—those killed in the carnage, the doctor's, and Parashudda Rao's—in a procession from Tenali. The collector, on behalf of the government, offered five acres of land near Chunduru for the burial and for the monument the dalits wanted to build (the dalits in this village and surrounding area are predominantly Christian—as also the deceased and missing.) The procession which began with three lorry loads at Tenali, swelled to a strength of about 15,000 people from the surrounding area by the time it reached Chunduru.

The dalits wanted to bury the coffins in the village and this was being negotiated on the outskirts. At this juncture, many haystacks in the village were set afire, most probably by the landlords, who wanted the burial outside the village. It is highly plausible that this arson was initiated to give the police and the collector a pretext to stop the procession from entering the village. Negotiations broke down and the dalit procession entered the village. In the emotional storm, some more haystacks and a few thatched roofs were set on fire by the enraged processionists. There was probably some looting, but it is difficult to establish this with any veracity. The one aged Reddy farmer who had not fled, died, perhaps in a retaliatory attack. (It is interesting to note in passing, that the press, which had spared the reader the gory pictures of the murdered dalits, decided to splash the picture of the Reddy farmer's body across the front pages.)

The main road runs from one end of the village to the boundary road between the dalitwada and the upper-caste section. One thatched house belonging to an upper caste person, at the junction between the main road and the boundary road was demolished and the 11 coffins were buried at the site. There are plans to build a monument there. (At the time of writing this report, however, Aravinda Rao the IGP had arrested nine of the dalits including Kathi Padma Rao, a Dalit Mahasabha leader from the region, who was the first to arrive at the village after the incident. Aravinda Rao gave a press statement that the arrests were made to prevent breach of peace in Chunduru, because of the tension over the construc-

tion of the monument.)

The event raises many questions, and they proliferate even as they are asked. What made this happen? Was it caste arrogance, or upward mobility? Is caste arrogance based on age old privilege and prejudice? Is upward mobility only an attribute of the dalits? What has happened is also not quite clear—except for the murders themselves. What is this kind of thinking, this emotion which can feel so outraged, so threatened, so insulted that it can plan in a cold-blooded fashion, the massacre of so many people? What again is the other kind of thinking which demands dignity—for which 13 dalits laid down their lives? It is necessary to look at the backdrop on the basis of which some of the answers may be hazarded.

BACKGROUND

Geographically, Chunduru village is part of the land irrigated by the Krishna canal system, in the rich Guntur district which is a Kamma (landowning caste to which NTR belongs) stronghold. In this region, there is a belt of eight villages, Oliveru, Chunduru, Modakuru, Pedda Parimi, Chinna Parimi, Mamidipalli, Tottimpulli and Angalakuduru, which are Reddy dominated. These villages are extremely traditional and conservative in their social outlook especially when compared to the people of the Kamma caste in the surrounding areas. The people in this belt practise untouchability even today. In the villages Oliveru, Chunduru and Modakuru, endogamy among the Reddys has strengthened clan loyalties and conservative behaviour. On the 'lower' caste side, while the other villages have smaller dalitwadass the Chunduru dalits number slightly less than half of the total population of 5,800. They were thus trying to assert themselves with a measure of stability.

The annual Dassera drama enacted in the villages of this region symbolises the traditional prestige of the ruling classes/castes. In one such drama, hosted by the Reddys of Chunduru in 1990, the dalits who normally sat segregated on one side of the audience, tried to break the rule and mingle with the upper castes. The Oliveru and Modakuru Reddys who were present objected strenuously and averred that if the Chunduru Reddys could not take care of caste privilege, they themselves would initiate moves for the preservation of untouchability. According to the dalits, about Rs 40,000 was collected then by the three villages for the purpose of buying arms to enforce caste superiority. Hearsay has it that another Rs 1.5 lakh set aside for the purpose of building a temple was also used to buy arms. While the weapons and accessories used for the

massacre were in no way sophisticated enough to cost almost Rs 2 lakh, we cannot rule out the possibility of more sophisticated weapons being stashed away, or of their planned acquisition. If, as the dalits believably aver, the governmental machinery was lavishly greased to ensure smooth co-operation during the massacre, this could also be a hefty item of expenditure met from the Reddy war fund.

Socio-economic development in the coastal areas around and including this village has been rapid. Canal irrigation, multiple cropping and increasing social wealth have contributed to a transformation of dalit occupations. The age old 'vettichakiri' (bonded labour) system has given way to the 'rythukooli' (wage farm labour), which in turn has been replaced by a system of 'kavuludhari' (tenancy) farming as a common mode of earning a living for the dalits. The extent of the socio-economic transformation is also reflected in the fact that many of the dalit women have given up menial housejobs in favour of field work during the last three years. More than 20 per cent of the Reddy land is cultivated through tenancy. The normal crop in this area is 'vari' (paddy) and 'minumulu' (black gram). The renting of land has become necessary even for the upper-caste farmers, who want to reinvest increasing proportions of their wealth in agribusiness, non-agricultural and urban industrial projects. It is worthwhile noting here that the economic need of the upper-caste landowner to rent out his land, provides a basis for the social contradiction arising out of the increased wealth of the 'vetti' turned 'rythukooli' turned tenant farmer.

Chunduru is connected by a railway line to Tenali. The dalits, along with the upper-caste population, travel to neighbouring villages and to town in order to engage in paid work. The railway itself provides many stable jobs for the dalits, thus increasing the standard of living. This mobility in geographic terms inevitably has led to a broadening of the dalit perspective, leading to criticism and challenge of caste dominance in the village. The possibility of travelling to other villages to work during the social boycott is another saving effect of the railways.

Education is another factor which has cut both ways. About 200 to 300 dalit youth of this village are presently going to school, of which about 20 are girls. Recent details published in the *Indian Express* [August 20, 1991, Hyderabad, p 5] have revealed that the dalits in the Guntur district, unlike those in the other villages are better educated than the rest of the castes, mainly due to the presence of many missionary schools and colleges

in the area. Many dalits in the region, Govatota Ravi included, have fought their way through to a university education. There are more than 10 postgraduate dalits in Chunduru, while none of the Reddys are even graduates. The dalits have non-agricultural jobs, both white and blue collared. Economically however, the dalits are still worse off than the Reddys because of their negligible landholding in the village. Barely 78 of the 2,420 cultivable acres of the land belong to the dalits. The Reddy's own 1,220 acres.

Untouchability is alive and healthy in the main high school in Chunduru, which is a school run with government aid by Reddy patrons. In this school, dalit children are made to sit on the floor, while the upper-caste children sit on chairs. The dalits stated that the teachers ignored their children, and the curiosity which moves a child to learn was not cultivated from the start. If the child survives this parody of education up to matriculation, he or she is not allowed to write the examination by force. There is, however, a primary school in the dalit area of the village.

Christianity is another major influence in the area. Tenali has been an important centre of Protestant and Catholic teaching since the British period. The proportion of dalits who have converted themselves is quite high. This is in keeping with a long history of the dalit search for an alternative religion, evidenced early on by Jotiba Phule's attraction to Christianity (he did not get converted), and later, Ambedkar's espousal of Buddhism. It need not be reiterated that Christian ethics of individual salvation, and accessibility of a place of worship, can be more congenial than a restrictive caste system to a modern dalit.

A source of great strength for the dalits has been the emergence and strengthening of the Dalit Mahasabha. This is evident in the difference between the train of events at Karamchedu in 1985, and Chunduru in 1991. In Karamchedu, the dead were buried at Chirala, where the surviving dalits took refuge. None of the guilty were punished by the courts. The main accused Chenchu Ramaiah was killed by the People's War. None of the dalits returned to Karamchedu. In Chunduru, the act of retaliation and of burying the bodies in the village was a palpable source of strength and courage to the dalits who have decided to go back and face the challenge in spite of their terrible loss of precious lives. The strength of the Dalit Mahasabha procession itself with the support of progressive and civil rights groups was no doubt a major shot in the arm for an almost dead dalit morale in Chunduru. In contrast to Karamchedu, the criminals were absconding from

Chunduru since the day of the massacre, and more and more of the Reddy landowners seemed to be leaving the village for safer, albeit temporary, places of residence.

Thus it is evident that this region of Andhra is not at all part of the mythical changeless face of rural India. On the contrary, the process of change is what has boiled over, precipitating the carnage in Chunduru. The violence of the upper-caste reaction must be seen as one extreme outcome of the tremendous insecurity of a section of the ruling class, saddled with a cultural apparatus which has outlived its function, under the onslaught of a stormy modernisation. There is no doubt that the discomfort over the Mandal Commission report also feeds into the structuring of the violent reaction. Evidence for the upper-caste anti-egalitarian and therefore by implication anti-reservation bias can be seen in the persistence of untouchability in the day-to-day operation of the high school in Chunduru. Understanding the fundamental (if not necessarily stated) continuity between the upper-caste reaction to Mandal and the Chunduru incident makes it possible to divine the overarching strategy being given shape by random, but purposeful actions. The upper castes are, with increasing determination, attempting to perpetuate their ruling class status by inflecting and modulating the process of modernisation to suit their historically specific needs. It is crucial, therefore, for the dalits to realise that faintheartedness at this stage will only lose the battle, resulting in yet another interminable epoch of upper-caste/ruling class hegemony. The changed conditions of oppression will be a traditionalism reconstituted to reflect the ideological requirements of conservative industrial development.

Progressive forces would find it useful to recognise the signs of turmoil in advance. This forewarning would help them initiate measures to defuse catastrophic situations which emerge in the battle to gain control of the momentum of change, and to assist the dalits to force new developments to take a progressive shape suitable to their own interests. It would, therefore, be worthwhile to briefly describe the sites of conflict, as they emerged in relief against this background of development, in the context of Chunduru.

SITES OF CONFLICT

As many as three different dalit sources stressed that the main symptom of upper-caste irritation was seen in response to fairly innocuous but essentially egalitarian social institutions which have arisen in

contemporary rural society. The major sites of conflict and sources of tension have been observed to be buses, tea stalls, cinema halls and classrooms.

Segregation in the village persists in spite of the urban pressure to mingle. Students of upper castes and dalit background, who may be friends in Tenali where they study, could very well speak to each other, eat and drink together as long as they are in town. Once they get back to Chunduru, they part ways and do not even share a cup of tea in either house. Urban influence, however, slowly promotes the breaking of barriers and rules.

When a dalit can enter a tea stall in Tenali, he begins to wonder why he cannot do so in the village. And one day he does—to the irritation and chagrin of the upper-caste patron, who begins to wonder how this young 'untouchable' has gained the courage when his grandfather still sits outside on the floor and sip tea. This is clearly perceived as a threat to the continuance of supremacy of the rural elite. To add to the felt insult and insecurity, the dalit is no longer dressed in a way which signals his social inferiority—he is smartly dressed, neatly groomed and well behaved. All the signs of prestatation are subtly erased, and often even reversed, in this harmless encounter. On the day this team was in Tenali, there was news that tension was high in Modakuru because some dalit youth had recognised a Reddy from Chunduru at a tea stall. This event highlights a different fact: modernisation and politicisation unite the dalits just as it does the upper-castes in the sharpening conflict of social, political and economic interests.

The introduction of the bus route is another source of tension, not only in the Chunduru region. The initial novelty of travelling by bus quickly wears thin and the vehicle soon gets overcrowded. The corporation bus service provides seats to those who get into the bus first—and it is an even chance that the dalit does. The upper-caste traveller who gets in later has to stand while his traditional social inferior gets to sit throughout an often gruelling journey. Not surprisingly, there is much resistance and resentment against this reversal of social status, and in one case, the upper-castes have even been known to demand the withdrawal of the bus service from the village. This apparently extreme reaction in the face of progress should be seen as a move to reject a development which does not permit the favourable transformation of rural upper-caste hegemony in the modernising moment.

There is no need to reiterate the tension in the dalitwada regarding the strong upper-caste bias in schools as it has

already been dealt with. It is quite clear, as indicated earlier, that the upper-caste rural elite would much rather persist in an inequitable system of education, which would promote through a malpractice which is as systematic as it is automatic, the stereotype of the dalit as an incapable, lazy species which is only good for manual labour in the fields. It is only through this (well known and expertly practised in the European colonies and in the southern US) inflection of development can upper-caste rural dominance perpetuate itself.

The cinema hall deploys the most uncontrollable (by the rural elite) tensions in many subtle and obvious ways. Mainstream film themes, mostly urban based, have protagonists who are paragons of egalitarian but masculine, aggressive behaviour and models of social mobility. The hero expresses the ideological needs of the city. Needless to say, the caste of the protagonist is whitewashed by a cinematic code which cannot but correspond to and inflect the upper-caste, ruling class ideology which informs its perspective. The undying popularity of the 'poor boy meets rich (upper-caste) girl and both live happily ever after' storyline clearly reflects the desire for upward social mobility. This is underscored by the profitability implied in the compulsive repetition of the theme. Alongside this storyline, we must position the repetitive sub-theme of aggressive harassment of women by the villain, epitomised by the inevitable rape scene, and also by his holding the heroine hostage at the end of the film. The villain is now increasingly popular as an anti-hero. Another ubiquitous behaviour model we must take account of is the ambivalence of the protagonist towards the heroine portrayed regularly in an impossible courting sequence laced with romanticised harassment.

There are multiple effects of this kind of cinema. A caste, class and gender segregated reality of life, evident in the politics of the floor and chair class in the Chunduru cinema hall, contradicts the egalitarianism and the social mobility fantasised in the film narrative and imagery. One effect of course, is the additive effect of cinema's influence on the attempt to redefine boundaries—as evident in Ravi's action of purchasing a chair class ticket. There are more along the gender dimension—the firm establishment of upper-caste norms of beauty and sexual attractiveness; the strengthening of a desire, already extant among, both the urban and rural dalit men, for marriage into 'higher' castes; a conception of courtship as primarily 'eve teasing'; retaliation against (and displacement of) the different

and wearying forms of caste injustice through harassment and extreme violence against women; and lastly (but obviously without exhausting all the possibilities) the tensioned imbrication of the cinematized codes of masculinity and the socially embedded codes of caste in the relationship between upper-caste and dalit men.

This complex problem, which is already knotted and tangled, is further complicated by the fact that the upper-caste men see the attempt of the dalit man to marry upward, or worse still, to have 'illicit' sexual relations with an upper-caste woman, as forms of caste aggression. A recent news item reported the hanging of a dalit man in Uttar Pradesh for the crime of having an affair with an upper-caste woman. It is also not uncommon as evidenced by the case of the Reddy complaint to the police against Ravi that fictitious charges of harassment are trumped up against dalit man, which then serve as a blank permission slip for unfettered 'retaliation'. It is quite clear that dalit harassment of upper-caste women gains sympathy for the upper castes across the board, while upper-caste aggression against dalit women, often extreme and unremitting, but naturalised by caste privilege, regularity and lack of protest, goes unnoticed.

The upper-caste men themselves are, obviously, far from egalitarian in their relationship with women—the worst atrocities against women, regardless of caste, are most often rooted in the upper-caste cultural concept of masculinity. This observation is illustrated with stunning clarity in the recent incident at Chelkurti in Nalgonda district. A Reddy woman fell in love with a Golla (BC) man and eloped with him. Upper-caste masculinity, in defence of caste privilege, expressed itself in the punishment meted out to the woman by the Reddy men: she was stripped by her relatives and paraded naked in the village for four hours.

The dalit men in their turn, also see upper-caste women as accessible vulnerabilities in the armour of caste. Women too, respond in caste specific ways to harassment. Rebuffal of attempts at 'courtship' using denigrating language, and abuse, not unknown even against caste equals, can take on an especially vicious twist when the man is a dalit. Reaction to harassment, can take on and strengthen a strong caste/class bias.

The relationship of upper-caste masculinity towards dalit masculinity and the former's expectations of the latter are most clearly seen in the variants of the explanations given by the Chunduru upper-caste and dalit sources for the exact detail of Govatota Ravi's behaviour which evoked upper-caste ire. Dalit sources say

that Ravi crossed his feet as he sat in the chair: class, and that they touched the clothes of an upper-caste man by accident. He is said to have promptly apologised, but obviously without any assuaging effect. Upper-caste sources say that Ravi put his feet on the chair in front of him, and his feet touched the shoulders of the man in the next seat in the row ahead. When the man asked him why he was doing this, Ravi is said to have retorted—“why do you look backward? Look forward at the screen!” Thus, the ‘problem’ in the upper-caste and the—as yet unreflective—dalit perspective was that Govatota Ravi did not cross the line which demarcates caste privilege in a suitably humble way. His posture, legs crossed—or thrown up on the back of the chair ahead—accepted in a westernising culture as a sign of confident masculine abandon, was too much a signifier of a (caste) free spirit for upper-caste comfort.

Clearly, even in an issue as complex as this, we can perceive the struggle of the rural upper-caste to convert his privilege into a form suitable to the modernised rural socio-economic structure. The urban technological, economic and ideological basis of the cinema, however, leaves the institution in imperfect control of the upper-castes and open to challenge by the dalits.

The gender bias of cinema, and of the social practice in which it is immersed, use, contest and reshape femininity as experienced by upper-caste and dalit men and women. Femininity, masculinity, the choice of sexual or marriage partners, ‘licit’ and ‘illicit’ relationships, and women and dalits as targets of aggression, are all complex nodes constituted and deployed as ‘sites’ of conflict according to the needs of the struggle to take the future.

Another very important paradigm of conflict which emerges in the context of dalit self assertion in different villages with unfailing regularity, as it did in Chunduru, is the installation of the statue of Ambedkar. When the dalits of Chunduru wanted to install the statue of Ambedkar along with the existing statues of Subhas Chandra Bose and Potti Sriramulu, the upper castes resisted strenuously. The dalits however succeeded in installing the statue, and the upper castes see it as a defeat. The root of the problem here should be seen not only as the statue itself, but to signify metonymically, all the symbols and actions which express the dalit desire to see themselves, and to be recognised by society, as a people with a history and tradition of their own. A distant but relevant example is the incident with respect to the Buddha statue lying in the Hussain Sagar in Hyderabad. Channa

Reddy, the chief minister when an accident sunk the statue in the lake expressed the feeling that the Buddha statue could very well be replaced by a statue of Vinayaka, as it was more relevant to the lake’s cultural function as an immersion site during the Ganapati festival. It should be recognised here that the decision to install the Buddha statue on the rock in the middle of Hussain Sagar was a shrewd political move by N T Rama Rao, who clearly had the dalit vote bank in mind. Thus Channa Reddy’s expressed idea regarding the Vinayaka statue can be clearly read as an almost instinctive upper-caste response to let drowned idols lie submerged—especially if they mean something to dalit self assertion. Again, at the heart of the incident at Chunduru, the upper-caste refusal to permit the burial of the coffins in the village, and the continuing resistance to the installation of a commemorative monument, though having more urgent and ominous overtones, is fundamentally a similar conflict.

As this report is being completed, *The Times of India* of August 29 (Bombay edition) carries the news item captioned ‘Lower caste cop stoned to death’. The policeman, Ambadas Savne, a Mahar, was killed for taking shelter in a temple on a rainy night. The upper-caste men in the temple, interrupted the ‘bhajan’ in progress and murdered Savne, stoning him, beating him with sticks and banging his head against the temple walls. His colleague is reported to have said that Savne had brought a statue of Ambedkar to be installed in the village, and this was disliked by the upper-caste villagers, who were also practising untouchability in connection with the common well used for drinking water.

This upper-caste intolerance of the dalit impulse to history is not unique. Colonial suppression of black culture has been documented and brilliantly analysed by Frantz Fanon, as part of the strategy of European dominance to erase the cultural strength of the colonised in Africa. A comparable political process has been documented in relation to India’s past. British imperialist thinking and administrative practice were based on ethical and political constructs and strategies which reflected the bourgeois ideological concept of a universal human nature. Such an administrative practice was designed to support and further the economic exploitation of the sub-continent. As it did so, this practice, in conjunction with the various facets of imperialist thought and writing, shaped the consciousness of the colonised Indian according to the stereotype of a cunning and devious ‘native’ with no history to speak of. A similar moment was also

palpable, albeit more subtly, in the supercilious response of many white people in America, as recently as in 1985 when Martin Luther King’s birthday was declared as a national holiday.

Suppression and annihilation of independent cultures is part of the central strategy of oppressive forces to subject exploitable peoples. Indeed, this primary political action of dehistoricising the oppressed is a uniform and almost instinctive act of all modern oppression. It has been tenably maintained, that rather than being a completely conscious one-way strategy, suppression of oppressed cultures is, at least partly, a direct correlate of the ideological reshaping and sharpening of an oppressor class self consciousness. At the same time, the subjected peoples too at a critical historical juncture, express the desire for an independent culture and history with unfailing regularity. A clear recognition of the political relevance of this form of self expression will go a long way in ensuring that the supporting hand of the progressive forces does not miss its mark.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

When this team visited Tenali, barely four days after the incident, the dalits who had fled from Chunduru were in the church. The men were in a moderately militant mood. One of us was asked “What do you think we should do next?”, and another aggressive question directed at us was “What are you going to do with this information other than publishing it?” It seems as if the cohesion of the church community on the one hand and dalit unity on the other had provided a base for the transformation of the initial shock, grief and fear into anger and aggression. As stated earlier, the retaliation and the burial of the bodies in the village was a definite boost for the morale of the dalit men. While the apparent disunity among the leadership visibly disturbed the dalits of the coastal region, the emergence of a strong ML presence and the political support they provided to the victims seems to have positively affected the course of developments. The future shows signs of being less bleak, especially with the support of progressive groups in the area.

Chunduru has become a melting pot for the different political forces and there are the inevitable parties like the TDP who seek to make political capital out of the incident. The victims of the carnage have been politically mature in their response to the overtures of the different vote seekers. They refused to see N T Rama Rao of the Telugu Desam, as they refused to meet N Janardhan Reddy, the chief

minister. They also refused the relief measures offered by the Reddy government, which consisted of an acre of land, a lakh of rupees, and pucca housing for each of the affected families. They immediately recognised it as a bribe offered to them, to let the criminals of the village and their accomplices among the police and administration go unpunished. They have refused to accept the relief measures until such time the Chunduru criminals and their cohorts have been awarded an acceptable punishment.

There seem to be signs that unlike after the Karamchedu incident in 1985, the rich among the upper-castes in the region are trying to convert the Chunduru episode into a communal incident between the Hindus and Christians. Evidence for this hypothesis can be found in the attack on the Andhra Christian College in Guntur on August 17 by an upper-caste organisation calling itself the 'Sarvajanaabhyudaya Samithi'. Speculations regarding the involvement of the BJP are rife. The question of BJP involvement, covert or otherwise, cannot easily be answered by direct proof. However, if the BJP ideology is recognised as an ideology of fundamentalist conservative national progress, it can easily be understood that this party need not covertly stoke the caste furnace (as an external operator) in order to achieve communal 'benefits'. The ranks of the BJP would be filled with the likes of the landlords of Chunduru, and their urban counterparts—not necessarily as murderous as the former, but definitely sharing the same concepts of what is desirable, what must be preserved, and how privilege must be transformed in order to be retained in the force of progress. The perceptual apparatus would be the same, and hence the threatening experience of egalitarianisation of social practices would also be shared. There is no need to speak of *support*, when the party draws its ideology from the privileged castes. At the same time, a politically street-smart party like the BJP would realise that its future ultimately depends on the support of the dalit vote bank and hence its irresolvable dilemma, expressed in its almost farcical call for caste unity after the Chunduru carnage. However, it would be realistic to acknowledge that a possible BJP strategy to communalise the caste problem (flowing naturally out of an upper-caste ruling class ideology) would depend on some shrewd reckoning of how favourable the split of a dalit vote bank caused by such a communalisation would be; and such a calculation would inevitably be on a regional basis. It would be superfluous to reiterate that the dalits should for their part, resist a communalisation of caste issues, as it would

be fatal to their interests.

In favour of the dalits, however is the fact that the radical left is seeing the caste issue as central to the problem of rural oppression, and the caste struggle is being to be recognised as an integral part of the class struggle. This recognition and consequent action has drawn mass support from the region and has led to a greater ideological fusion on the side of the left,

and among the people of Chunduru.

[This report on the Chunduru incident is prepared by the Samata Sanghatana, an organisation of academics, activists, feminists and other professionals, committed to the cause of dalit self assertion. The report is based on information gathered by a team consisting of K Ilaiyah, John Wesley, K Sajaya, K Uma, R Srivatsan and M Shatrugna which visited Tenali and Chunduru on August 10, 1991.]

Child Labour among Digaru Mishimis of Arunachal Pradesh

Krishna Chaitanya

Even in remote border areas child labour is flourishing. What is required to combat this is vigorous and sustained intervention by the government for economic upliftment of the tribal, more so, considering that the region concerned happens to be a sensitive border state in the eyes of the government of India.

ARUNACHAL PRADESH, the farthest north-eastern state of the country has 20 major tribes and about 100 sub-tribes. Digaru Mishimi, a Mishimi sub-tribe inhabits the Dalai Valley in Lohit district. Dalai Valley a hilly tract lying along river Dalai stretches from village Chipru, around 12 kms from Hayuliang, a sub-divisional headquarter in the Lohit district to village Taflagam on the right flank of the river and village Aphumna on the left side. The Indo-Tibetan international border is about 60 kms away. The valley is a circle, with the circle office at Changlongam about 65 kms from Hayuliang.

Since independence and specially after the Indo-Chinese conflict of 1962, Arunachal has witnessed tremendous development activity and its socio-economic and political life has undergone a sea change but not for the Digaru Mishimis. They remain steeped in poverty, illiteracy, and misery. Child labour is rampant here.

The main occupations of Digaru Mishimi child labourers are portage, hunting, fishing and participation in cultivation.

Carrying loads for government officials and army personnel from Changlongam to Hayuliang and from Hayuliang to Changlongam, a 65 km long hill track, and for the army patrol party, which regularly goes up to the border, is the main occupation of the child labourers. Among the child porters, girls are more numerous.

Another occupation of female children is helping parents in cultivation and hawking vegetables, maize, corns, eggs and similar items to government officials in exchange for rice, sugar, tea and other

foodstuffs. Little girls aged between six and eight years cover as many as 15 kms to barter their goods and then return to their native villages the same day. What they get in exchange is their earning and an account is kept of their 'daughters' earnings by fathers. If after marriage, a girl suffers from financial hardship, she asks her father for help on loan basis against what she had earned for her father before her marriage.

Male children, apart from farm labour and portage also engage in hunting and fishing. Children in their early teens armed with their traditional weapons 'dab' go to forests, sometimes travelling 50 kms, where they lay traps for wild cat, deer and other wild animals. It not only provides them meat to eat but also fetches them some cash by sale of meat skin and 'kasturi' (musk) which are in great demand by the 'palus' (outsiders).

There is a primary school at Changlongam and a secondary school at Metengliang, about 30 kms from Changlongam. For a population of only

TABLE I: LEVEL OF EDUCATION AMONG DIGARU MISHIMI CHILDREN

Level of Education	Male Child Respondents (in Per Cent)	Female Child Respondents (in Per Cent)	Total
Up to class IV	10	—	4
Up to class III	5	—	2
Up to class II	15	—	6
Up to class I	10	13.33	12
Illiterates	60	86.67	76