

Kidnapped!

The daring ambush of eight IAS officers by Naxalites in Andhra Pradesh has exposed the vulnerability of the administration in coping with extremism

As dusk settled over the quiet hills around Pulimetta, S. R. Shankaran, principal secretary to the Andhra Pradesh government, and M. V. K. C. Sastry, the East Godavari district collector, with six other officials and a posse of clerks and

peons headed for their jeeps after the 700-strong *sadasa* (tribal assembly) had dispersed. Sunday, 27 December, had been a pleasant day. The tiny hamlet, surrounded by thick deciduous forests, was just the place to be in, even though it meant transacting official business on a holiday. The *sadasa* had lasted all day,

and the tribals were considerate enough to realise the administration's limitations in solving many of their problems. Of course, a lot more had to be done: the tribals needed to be rescued from the clutches of moneylenders, better medical facilities to bring down the mortality rate, clearer demarcation of tribal and forest lands, more schools and monetary help. But what had already been accomplished by the team of dedicated district officials—Sastry and his officers—was enough to do the Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA) in Andhra Pradesh's East Godavari district—a stronghold of the Naxalites—proud.

Going over what they had seen and heard at the *sadasa*, Shankaran, (who is not a district officer but chose to accompany the others because of his experience and interest in the area), Sastry, Manohar Prasad, the officer on special duty, Girijan Coffee Cooperative and P. Vijaykumar, the ITDA officer in the area (who is the son of the Bihar Governor P.



A way-side market in East Godavari district: a Naxalite stronghold

Venkatasubbiah) appeared happy with the result. Hard work and sincerity had helped some 25,000 acres of land in the agency area had been brought under lucrative cashew cultivation that would yield a good Rs 8,500 per hectare and tribal farmers were being given a crop maintenance allowance of Rs 100 per acre and a large section of the 2,000-km long forest-tribal land boundary had already been redemarcated and the tribals allotted fresh land pattas and permanent rights. Pushpa Thampi, the coy sub-collector of Rajamundry, her husband, Reddy Subramaniam, the sub-collector of Rampachodavaram, and T. Radha, the joint collector of East Godavari all seemed impressed, too. The officials were all from the IAS, except for Manohar Prasad who is from the state cadre. Together they form the *creme de la creme* of the state's administrative talent. They made their way to the four jeeps with their staff and drove off along the dusty, bumpy path

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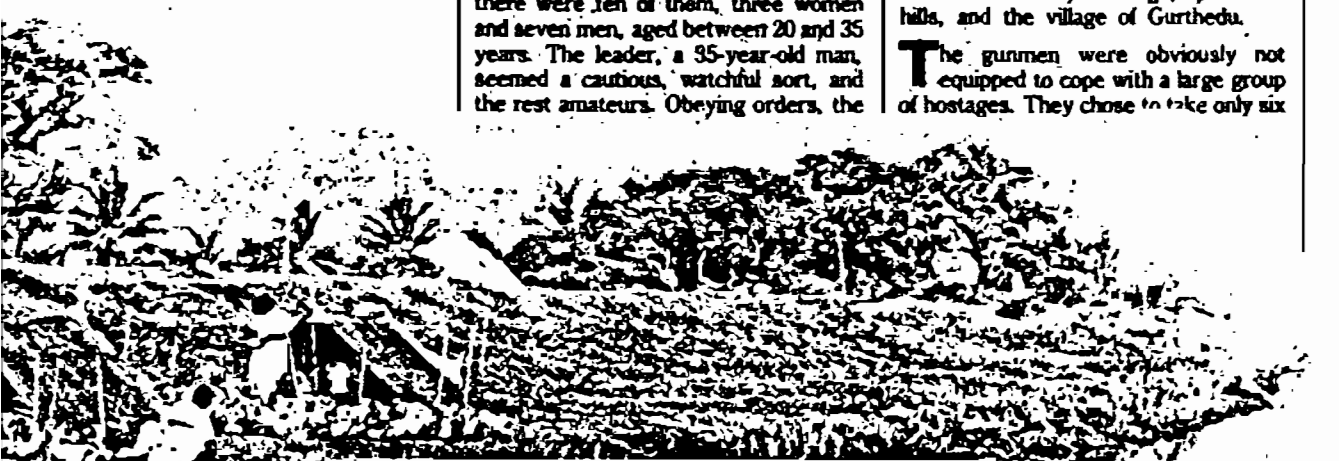
that led to Rampachodavaram and on to Rajamundry.

The vehicles had hardly travelled within ten km of Maretnalli when a group of armed persons, dressed in olive green, leapt out of the forest, screamed extremist slogans, trained their old Point 303s at the drivers and forced the unescorted convoy to a halt. As the group came in full view, Sastry saw that there were ten of them, three women and seven men, aged between 20 and 35 years. The leader, a 35-year-old man, seemed a cautious, watchful sort, and the rest amateurs. Obeying orders, the

officials scampered out of the jeeps and lined up for a quick roll call. They seemed to know all the officers' names, but wanted them to identify themselves. The extremists had obviously been tipped off about the officials' visit to Pullimetta, unscheduled though it was, and had planned to kidnap them for ransom. But what exactly they wanted, the officials were not too sure.

Even as the officials were trying to read their captors' minds, the leader of the gang announced that they wanted eight of their colleagues who had been nabbed and lodged as undertrials in the Rajamundry Jail released. The eight included six men—Godavalli Venkatarishna Prasad (19), Ram Narendra (33), Venkataraman (45), Pannoji Parameshwar (26), Warkapur Chandramouli (25), Pulli Venkataiah (21)—and two women, Laxmi (21) and Padma (19). All of them had been rounded up in police raids at three different places. The Naxalites wanted them handed over at a convenient exchange point, somewhere between where they would go, up into the hills, and the village of Gurthedu.

The gunmen were obviously not equipped to cope with a large group of hostages. They chose to take only six



Reddy Subramaniam (right) with his wife Thampi (back to camera)



Sastry addressing a press conference



Shankar (foreground) with Kannabiran

of the top officials, letting the medical officers, clerks, peons and drivers go free. They also released two officers, Radha and Thampi, to carry their messages to the government, and prove how well-intentioned they were. But along with the release of the officers rang out a firm ultimatum: "Release the prisoners or else the hostages will suffer the consequences." Thampi and Radha, along with the frightened 25-odd staff, drove some distance through near-darkness, took the tar road and sped toward Rajamundry to break the news. Some of them stayed back at Gurthedu to keep a watch from there.

The extremists got ready for a battle of nerves. The officials already had blankets and mufflers with them, and the group picked up enough rice and sambar from the nearby ashram school to last them a couple of nights. They walked through the forest, towards the hills around Gurthedu, as darkness fell over the area. After walking some distance, the Naxalites and their hostages set up camp to retire for the night. Lighting bonfires was taboo, lest they be detected. But the officials and extremists appeared to get along well. "All the while, we kept talking about the local people and their problems," collector Sastry said. The gunmen were obviously well-informed and educated. "We told them how much we can do, and they told us how much they can do," Sastry recalled with a smile. Sometimes the argument dragged on through the night. If anything, the intellectual stimulation had helped the nervous officials to handle the situation better.

After his release two days later, Shankaran had condemned the kidnap-

ping as an amateurish act, but he could not hide the deep impression the young men and women had made on him with their profound knowledge of and concern for the problems of the tribals. "They seemed to know everything," another official admitted. Remarkd K.G. Kannabiran, the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee (APCLC) activist and allegedly a Naxalite sympathiser. "The fact that the youngsters could converse and argue for long hours with senior officials is proof of their understanding and intelligence."

By the morning of 28 December, panic set in. The state government learnt about the kidnap but refused to disclose any information. The first to broadcast the news was the BBC, at 5.20 am, followed by the UNI. Later, AIR announced it in its 6 pm bulletin. And by the morning of the next day the sensational episode had made country-wide headlines. This was the first ever kidnap of such a large group of IAS officials, one of them a principal secret-

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ary, who had already been due for transfer as director of the famous Lal Bahadur Academy of Administration in Mussorie. The central and state governments began formulating their first response, the Centre taking the hardline, and the state, the soft line. A company of CRPF men, including 20 crack commandos, was flown down to Vishakapatnam, from where they were sent on their way to Rampachodavaram in three buses. On the other hand, the state government's industries secretary, B.N. Yugandhar, began discussing with the chief secretary, Shruvan Kumar, and senior policemen the possibility of using the good offices of the APCLC chief, Kannabiran, to open negotiations with the Naxalites. "I have no objection," Shruvan Kumar had reportedly said.

"I would like to emphasize," Kannabiran said later, "that I had not gone on my own, as Shruvan Kumar now claims, but with the full consent and approval of the government." Both the DG of police, Ramamohan Rao, and Shruvan Kumar now maintain that he had not negotiated with the extremists as an official representative. As Kannabiran says, it is the administration's only way to save itself the embarrassment of having to admit that they were unable to solve the problem on their own and had to take the help of somebody who is antagonistic to the state. "They call me a Naxalite," the lawyer said, "because I take up the cases of the oppressed." The truth about his involvement in the negotiation, he explained, is that he had told his friend Yugandhar, who had approached him for help to get the officials released, that he would come

into the picture only if he was requested to do so in writing. When this was not forthcoming, and Yugandhar kept insisting Kannabiram to intervene saying that he had discussed it with Shraavan Kumar and it was "okay", the APCLC chief wanted the "discussion" minuted and wanted to keep a copy of the minutes. "I have a copy", he claimed, "and will use it at an appropriate time." Earlier, around midnight on 27-28 December, when Yugandhar telephoned the civil liberties lawyer about the kidnap, the former was aghast that Shankaran and Sastry had been taken hostage and was afraid of consequent police reprisals against the tribals.

On 29 December, the lawyer and the state industries secretary travelled by train to Rajamundry and proceeded to the jail. Curiously, the eight Naxalites were in custody without anything on record about their arrest. The cases against them were yet to be registered. But now that their release had become the precondition of saving eight precious lives, the government had decided to hasten the judicial process. After the two reached Rajamundry, the eight undertrials were rushed to court, identified for their offences, and released on bail. Ironically, placing the charges against them on record was the only way they could be freed.

Meanwhile inside the jungle it was late in the evening. The hostages and their captors had been walking all day, and the strain had begun to tell on Shankaran. The hostages and their captors had been warm and friendly towards one another. "The radio was our only means of getting information," said Reddy Subramaniam, one of the hostages. "Everything seemed to be going smoothly," he recalled, "till they heard what was broadcast over the 5 pm AIR news bulletin. A team of commandos were on their way to the forests. One of the demands of the Naxalites had been that there should be no police presence. They had been so friendly all along, but suddenly, they seemed to have transformed. They were silent, their looks changed. The news came again on the 6 pm and 6.15 pm bulletins. We were lined up almost instantly. There was no way we could reason with them. One of them told us: 'Now we have you. We will keep just one of our men with you and hide. When your police comes, we will lose just one man, but your casualties will be eight.' We felt a chill in our spines. The whole group as such was not amateurish. The leader was slightly better than the others. But if the government had sent commandos in helicopters, then we were certain we

would be shot. Suddenly, all hope seemed to evaporate. We rated our chances 50-50 then." A troubled Sastry looked around for a pen and paper, and scribbled out a letter to Yugandhar, requesting the police to be kept out of the neighbourhood and advise the administration not to "act"—at least for the sake of its officers. The letter was delivered by one of the hostages—assistant collector Narsingh Rao, who walked as fast as he could to Dartagadda.

Yugandhar and Kannabiran waited in vain for a signal from the extremists. But nothing seemed to be happening. "If nobody turns up," said one of the men they had brought from jail, "we would be glad to return to prison." That was enough to scare the civil servant. So when Narsingh Rao appeared out of the darkness with the letter from Sastry—and the extremists' cold warning of massacre—Yugandhar reacted with a mixture of relief and fear. The most

important thing to do then, he recognised, was to keep the bosses in Delhi and Hyderabad at bay. Once he had assured the government that the crisis would be resolved only if the police stayed out, and news of the police being kept away was broadcast, the gunmen appeared satisfied.

Identified as members of the People's War Group (PWG), the dominant Naxalite group in the area, the extremists had completed their mission with remarkable ease. The incident has boosted the morale of the Naxalites and demoralised the administration. "The fear of being kidnapped for ransom will now prevent honest, hardworking officers from travelling into the interior without informing the police, or taking police escorts," said a government official in Kakinada, the East Godavari district headquarters.

Such a situation would make the police more powerful. Of course, bureaucrats, especially from the IAS, have their own reasons for opposing the concentration of powers in the hands of the police. But can an officer in charge of tribal welfare actually get any work done without winning the confidence of the tribals? The police is a symbol of repression. Armed guards can only serve to frighten the poor. So scared are the tribals of the police that they even hesitate to confide in administrative officials. When the news of Shankaran and Sastry's kidnaping had spread, some 500 villagers had gathered in Gutchedu—not because they were deeply concerned about the officials' fate but about their own. If there is anything they dread, it is the wrath of a reckless police force. It has been a practice, since the days of Vengal Rao's violent rule, for the police to "raid" tribal villages to root out extremists. The "raid" is actually an orgy of loot and arson—like the one on 2-3 May, 1987, when 680 tribal huts were burned down in Chetapalli.

One shameful aspect which has come to light after the incident is the insensitivity of the central government towards its dedicated officers. The kidnapping episode gave the Centre a splendid opportunity to establish a case for President's Rule. Even today the CRPF and the commandos continue to wait for instructions in their camp at the Girijan College Grounds in Rampachodavaram. One of them confided: "I'm sure the officers here are in league with the extremists. They just got themselves kidnapped because they wanted to get their men out of jail. We know we won't be asked to do anything."

Nirmal Mitra/Hyderabad

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