

## From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

### From frying pan to fire and back

*The seed of the destabilization in Andhra Pradesh was planted last year when the regional party, Telugu Desam, took power.*

A month-long bizarre episode in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh came to at least a temporary halt on Sept. 16 when the newly appointed governor, Dr. Shankar Dayal Sharma, recalled ousted Chief Minister N. T. Rama Rao (called "NTR") to form a new cabinet.

The problem had begun on Aug. 15 when N. Bhaskara Rao said he had collected a defector faction from NTR's Telegu Desam regional party and that NTR no longer had a majority. Bhaskara Rao then managed to get himself appointed chief minister in NTR's stead. But by Sept. 16, it was apparent that Bhaskara Rao did not have the majority of the state legislature and that he was attempting to postpone the vote that would expose him. The state governor acted accordingly and recalled NTR.

But the Andhra Pradesh drama is far from being over. The aborted toppling bid took place against a backdrop of serious communal disturbances, rampant religious obscurantism, and chauvinist anti-nationalism that has been unleashed in the state since NTR's regional party came to power in 1982.

Bhaskara Rao's parliamentary maneuver appeared to be an effort to pull the rug out from under the state's regional autonomist party and place Andhra Pradesh, on the eve of national elections, in the hands of the Congress-I party of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. If this was the plan, it seriously backfired.

On one level, NTR, a former matinee idol, was given a grandstand on which to play the innocent oppressed

victim of a corrupt central government determined to wield its authority, even if it means overriding democratic procedures.

Opportunists of every stripe—from the Indian opposition sectlets to international media like the London *Economist*—rushed to name the villains in the game. The least important was Bhaskara Rao himself, a well-known political thug who was thrown out of the Congress-I for corruption before he teamed up with NTR to "restore Telegu dignity."

But the greatest invective was reserved for Prime Minister Gandhi, who, her domestic and foreign opponents claimed, had masterminded the whole affair. To bolster their charges, the opposition press pointed to the dismissal of the elected Jammu and Kashmir government in July, which was encouraged by New Delhi as a national security move against the state governor's pro-Pakistani leanings in this Muslim state.

Mrs. Gandhi, however, has categorically denied any knowledge of the antics in Andhra Pradesh. The evenhandedness of the central government in the matter bears it out. The government forced a newly appointed governor of the state to call the state legislature to a vote. Bhaskara Rao had 30 days to come up with his claimed majority. When he overran that 30 days, Governor Sharma, after a brief telephone conversation with Mrs. Gandhi, told Bhaskara Rao to resign or face dismissal. He resigned.

On the more profound level, NTR's theatrics have the potential to

re-create a broad movement for regional separatism in southern India. For thousands of years, the southern Indians, who are mostly Dravidians and therefore the "original" Indians, believe that they have suffered from the humiliations delivered them by the invading northern Aryans. The south fought to stay out of independent India, to form its own state.

This deep mistrust of the "oppressive" central government was kindled anew by the NTR-Bhaskara row, and is being fed by the plethora of religious operations in the state that are run by the likes of the Harvard Divinity School. Within a few days of NTR's ouster, riots broke out in several cities, reportedly led by Naxalites (pro-Beijing communists) against the government, leading to numbers of dead. In one incident, a poor shopkeeper set fire to himself in protest of the government's alleged oppression of NTR.

NTR's own close association with reactionary religious fanatics makes him a potential threat to the state's stability. In the past month, he has brought under his wing the entire anti-Congress-I gang ranging from the Moscow-backed CPI and CP-M to the Hindu fanatics such as the BJP and Lok Dal. At one point, during his trip of protest to New Delhi after his ouster, he threatened to consolidate a national opposition against Mrs. Gandhi.

Within Andhra Pradesh, NTR was already losing ground during his 19-month tenure in office to religious fanaticism, fed by his own corruption and anti-nationalism. In the last year, a series of Hindu versus Muslim riots have taken place in Hyderabad. Even as late as early September, incidents of stabbing and looting in the city have continued. NTR's unholy alliance with the RSS-linked BJP is considered by many as a root cause of the disturbances.