

WALKING WITH DESTINY

Nadendra Bhaskar Rao



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By
Nadendla Bhaskar Rao

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Second Edition

June, 2011

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Price : Rs. 200/-

Publisher :
Sarvadharm Nilayam, 245,
Jublee Hills, Road No.18
Hyderabad - 500 033
Phone : 040-23608885
Cell : 9704608885

Printed at
Kala Jyothi Process Pvt. Limited
R.T.C.'X' Roads, Musheerabad
Hyderabad - 500 020
Phone : 040-27645536.

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chapter 1

Walking with Destiny

Why this book.....

I come from a respectable family of agriculturists from Guntur district. I enjoyed a flourishing legal practice in Hyderabad. The spirit of service to fellow-beings is deeply ingrained in me. It is this noble trait that has impelled me to give up the lucrative practice and join the Congress with its hoary traditions and glorious history.

I distanced myself from the party after I had noticed the distressing trend of individuals growing at the expense of the organisation and becoming too big for it, leading to its gradual eclipse. Personal agenda subordinated collective party interests. Recognising the need for a regional party against this depressing scenario, I sowed the seed for the birth of the Telugu Desam and nurtured it. History repeated here too. Hero worship, sycophancy, arrogance, ignorance and other undesirable tendencies became the bane of the new party.

As a self-respecting man, I could not fit in the stifling confines of the Telugu Desam and returned to the relatively freer atmosphere of the Congress party. I held many positions in the party -of an

ordinary worker, general secretary, MLA, MP, Minister and finally, of the Chief Minister. I had never compromised on principles and values or wavered from the right path. Nor had I mortgaged the party or Government interests to favour anyone. I believed, in thought, word and deed, that people, the party and the Government were above the individual.

However, people with perverse mindset do strange things. They betray you for their own ends, level allegations, launch vicious campaign and make the righteous man a sacrificial animal. All these happened to me in much the same manner. I had silently suffered many wrongs. Many hard truths, too shocking for people to understand, let alone digest, lay hidden in the depths of my heart. A lifetime might not suffice to bring to light the horrible facts. I thought I should attempt to blow the lid off at least some of them to rebut attempts to distort history. Hence, this modest effort.

In times of pain and anguish, books provide one the much-needed balm. How true was Mahakavi Dasaradhi. In those difficult times, I confined myself to the library where the books became my life-breath.

My childhood and early memories

I was born on June 23, 1935 in the Kugler hospital in Guntur to Pitchaiah and Venkayamma. There is an interesting story surrounding my

name. My sister, Anasurya, was informed of the happy tidings at the sun-rise, though I was born the previous evening. Therefore, it seems, she named me Bhaskara Rao after the Sun-God.

Donepudi , along the banks of the Krishna, in Kollur mandal of Guntur district is my native village, seat of my childhood and early education. It was once known as Dronapuri. It boasted of rich and fertile soils yielding abundant harvest. I was proud that my Donepudi basked in prosperity and affluence. For their part, the people led a dharmic life, setting many example to others. Those days, Malayalaswamy of Yerpedu ashram, who did penance in the caves of Tirumala, visited our village as part of his mission to propagate spiritual values among the masses. The God-man from Kerala had set up 'Omkarashram' on the banks of the river abutting our village. His philosophy and teachings had a strong and lasting influence on my impressionable mind.

Those were days of the White Man's rule. Our village of about 5,000, hardly had transport or communication facilities. We lived in our small world and regarded our school as the fountain of ultimate knowledge and wisdom. Old timers used to say a bag of paddy cost Rs two, but I remember it as Rs 6 per bag. I also recollect Acharya N.G. Ranga holding a meeting in our village under petromax lamps and exhorting the farmers to agitate for Rs 10 a bag.

Portrait of village life

We had age-old Ramalayam and Sivalayam. My father, an ardent Rama bhakta, would take us to these temples on festive occasions. A handful of rich farmers owned hundreds of acres and lived in big bungalows. As was the fashion those days, the prosperous farmers used to hire caparisoned elephants, horses and camels belonging to the Raja of Challapalli for marriage procession. It was a thrilling experience. The shrewd Raja, who owned large tracts of land in the vicinity, sold them off, sensing which way the social winds were blowing. People rarely ventured out of the village, be it for studies or marital alliances.

The Potharaju temple in the centre of the village had always fascinated me. People used to perform abhishekam to him with 101 vessels praying for relief from the oppressive heat of Rohini karte marking peak summer. Lo and behold. Rain would follow soon. My young mind could not fathom the mystery.

Facilities like electricity, telephone, radio etc were post-independence developments that the people of those days did not know or imagine. A rich landlord had a radio set powered by a 10-kg battery. He would allow us in to listen to the news, if he were in good mood. The nearest railway station, Bhattiprolu, was three miles away and one needed to walk all the way, whether one headed for Kollur or Vellatur.

Eco-conscious folk

Our village got high school, largely due to the efforts of Pamulapati Venkata Krishnaiah Chowdary, chairman of the district board. He came to our village with an offer to sanction it if we parted with five acres situated in the chinthala topu (tamarind treve). An elderly man in the crowd rose and wanted to know the fate of the large flocks of birds if the trees were hacked. 'No. Thanks', he told him bluntly. As a young boy, I was a witness to this. Looking back, I marvel at the eco-consciousness of the people of those days.

Kollur and Vellatur were witness to religious and spiritual activities due to the sizeable presence of Brahmins. In contrast, agriculture-dependent Kammass and the weaker sections constituted the bulk of Donepudi population. Each lived in isolation of the other with a sharp dividing line. One could not even draw water from the well belonging to the other group. My happy childhood was spent amid lush fields, canal bunds and the banks of the Krishna where I played and frolicked. I watched in child-like fascination at the school of cranes and other avians that flew overhead in eye-catching formation. The wonderful spectacle remains eternally enshrined in my mind's eye. It is a pity that the present-day children should go to the zoo to watch the very birds that routinely flew over our skies. I am also amused at the innocence of today's grandchildren who want to

see the rice tree! At the same, a nameless pain also bothers me.

The coming of the new agricultural season always filled me with great joy. It meant everything new - farm workers, farm implements and tools. I cherished those moments. Transport facilities hardly existed. For us kids, the occasional sight of a lorry with a coal-fired boiler in our village was something we never missed. The poor cleaner would turn the handle relentlessly as if his intestines would burst before the engine revved up and roared. How we wished to start the lorry and drive.

The karanam, munasabu and other village functionaries used to live in our close neighbourhood, drawing a salary of five to ten rupees a month. It may sound ridiculous, but is true. Yet they led a respectable existence with the modest remuneration.

Discipline and tradition

My father, a taskmaster, would wake us up at dawn and teach mathematics, in which I was never too comfortable. I always wondered why did God create mathematics! In contrast he could effortlessly reel off multiplication tables in seconds. It amazed me how he and the people of his times perfected them. How did father master mathematics? Here is an interesting story. He had a long tuft on the head which his teacher tied to

the ceiling with a string. Whenever he bowed to doze off, the string would tug him back, rendering sleep impossible. That was how they studied under a naked wick lamp and got by rote the complex multiplications.

As with mathematics, so with the epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharatha. My father would recite any number of slokas and poems from them, to our great surprise and wonder. I feel ashamed that I could not inherit a fraction of his talents.

There was a time-lag between sowing and de-weeding operations when farmers and labour had little work. They used to while away the free time with song and gossip or resolve petty disputes in a relaxed atmosphere. They would busy themselves entwining jute fibre to make ropes for the cots or to draw water from the well. Our village did not have a hospital or a veterinary dispensary. The conventional mode to treat a minor injury was to wash it with urine! So much for our backwardness and ignorance. These people were yet happy and without a care, probably because they lived in close communion with nature.

I still remember my school days and teachers, Subrahmanyam, Kantha Rao and the Telugu teacher from Repalle whose name I cannot recall. We nick-named him ' Dumuvulu mastaru'. He is no more, but the pleasant memories linger. I am

eternally grateful to him and other teachers. I still remember their lessons. My father used to cultivate endowment lands along with our own and bought small pieces of additional land with the savings. My father liked to eat only hand-pounded rice, as did most people those days.

My God-fearing parents, father in particular, used to be pre-occupied with puja and rituals. We had to sell away our house as well as lands after father's business in foodgrains and turmeric in partnership with Munagala Lakshmaiah led to huge losses. We bought a smaller mud house on the main road where we continued to live. Like most women of the farming community, mother used to be busy all day paving the floor with cow dung paste or milking the cow, making butter, feeding the cattle and doing a host of other things. Fortunately, present-day women are spared this ordeal because hassle-free cooking range and other gadgets are available right at their doorstep. Ramaiah, the village quack, used to effectively treat us for any ailment by just feeling the pulse and making the right medicine then and there.

We used to partake in minor post-harvest activities for fun. I wonder if a poet can match the underlying mood, the melody and the emotion in the songs of the simple rural folk. While in the fields, we used to watch cranes flying in a unique 'V' formation. Their number used to be invariably 13. Strange!

Our family

I am the youngest of four siblings. Anasurya, the first born, was married to Pamidimukkala Balakotaiah of Vellatur, a farmer who managed a rice mill too. My eldest brother Janardhana Rao worked in Revenue department in Telangana while Sri Ramamurthy, next to him, helped my father in agriculture. Those were the days when big farmers looked down upon small farmers and their children. It anguished our tender minds. People were judged by the extent of the land owned and the income earned. Things have not changed much since. We got out of such an unfortunate plight with great difficulty.

I and my childhood pals, Rama Rao, Subba Rao and Chittemma, would go to the private teacher, carrying a lantern. Even as we grew up, our school was upgraded into high school. One day, my elder brother Janardhan Rao brought home a gramophone. People of our and nearby villages had never heard of it. They would make a beeline to our house to listen to the wonder-machine while my father proudly declared 'my elder fellow brought it'.

I was crazy about pets - dogs and pigeons, and longed to have them. Faced with a firm 'no' from parents, I stole three rupees to fulfill my wish. I put the pigeons in a tin box, but the cat made a nice meal of all of them. I was found guilty on three

counts - stealing money, smuggling in the birds and exposing them to the cat, and thrashed roundly.

Andhra Kesari Tanguturi Prakasam Panthulu was given a rousing reception on his visit to our village. 'My God. What a felicitation', I wondered as a child. Lok Nayak Jaya Prakash Narayan was also welcomed in the same manner. He made enquiries about our living conditions and sought details about farming. NG Ranga and Bharati Ranga , regular visitors, won our hearts by identifying themselves with our problems. They had a lasting impression on my tender mind.

Seeing the Mahatma

My father was an ardent Congress party follower who once went all the way to Madras to listen to Gandhi at the Marina beach. Memory is still green of how he had carried me on his shoulders for a darshan of Gandhi at Tenali railway station. Gandhi came to Tenali thrice, each time my father journeyed 20 miles to attend his meetings. People glorified the sacrifices of the freedom-fighters. Kolla Tayamma, a pregnant woman of Tenali, shouted patriotic slogans, courted arrest and gave birth to the child in the prison. Gandhi, who heard of this, called on the bold lady at her house. History reveals that more women from Tenali had participated in the nationalist movement than from any other part of the country. Gandhi toured Tenali area to

compliment the brave women. The youth too were baptized into the movement with vigour.

Veeramachaneni Satyanarayana and Tirumala Rao, our relatives, used to work in Guntur on a salary of, it may amuse you, just Rs 20. They used to commute by train. Some people were of no non-sense type. Believe it or not, the litigants would go right up to the Privy Council even on a farcical issue like the neighbour diverting rainwater into the complainant's house! Sometimes I feel that today's educated urban, in contrast, reconcile, rather than react to any situation.

I learn that we Nadellas had migrated from Challapalli in Krishna district to Donepudi on the other side of the river. I always felt that the surname 'Nadella' did not sound well and that something was a miss. I made it 'Nadendla', the place in Krishna district from where we might have originated. Little did I or our people dream that this very name would one day create a sensation all over the country! While at Bandar, I had no difficulty dining with the Brahmins, since they too had this surname.

My father was a devout God-fearing man who adhered to certain principles and seldom harmed anyone, even under provocation. Here is a story about his tolerance and magnanimity. An arrogant farmer had egged on his well-fed bulls for a fight with father's frail animal. Father was shaken when the badly injured animal limped home and died at

his feet. Instead of confronting the powerful landlord or turning over the carcass to the butcher, he gave it an honourable funeral. The landlord continued, unprovoked, his atrocities, driving his cattle into others' fields or removing jingle bells from their bulls. Soon, the farmer and the family became paupers in the same place where they held brutal sway. My father never uttered a word against them, secure in the knowledge that the Lord Supreme was the ultimate judge and that pride goes before fall. I, for one, did not know whether it was divine retribution or evil begetting evil.

The Power of Truth

At another time, I was stiff-scared to find a deadly cobra swaying its hood right behind my father in the fields. Even as he assured me there was nothing to fear, the snake slithered away causing no harm. It was a mystery - a mystery I could not unravel. We also had a ferocious stud bull which would not allow the farm labour or my brothers to come anywhere near, but would meekly bow and go away on seeing father. My young mind could never understand the phenomenon, but at this stage I can only attribute it to the power of Truth, personified by the God.

My father used to borrow money to meet family exigencies, for which a note was neither offered nor asked. He would repay it on time even if the

heavens fell. Such was his reputation for honesty. Today's promissory notes are a direct fall-out of the decline in moral and ethical values in the society. Funny stories used to do the rounds in the High Court. It seems that litigants would take fingerprints of their victims while they were asleep under a tree shade and go to the court seeking justice! Once bitten, twice shy. So goes the adage. When the extra careful victims slept with their hands wrapped in cloth, the smarter litigants would take toe-prints! These stories could best be fragments of imagination, but all the same reflected the unhealthy trends like selfishness, greed and corruption, creeping into the society. When evil enters the mind, the man falls deeper and deeper into the abyss. This is the eternal truth.

On August 15, 1947, we kids joyfully went round the village on bullock carts festooned with flags and buntings, although we hardly knew what independence meant. The village atmosphere was vibrant with the youth engaged in cart race, cock-fights etc on the one hand and in playing badminton, kabaddi etc on the other. Gales and storms were common to our river-side village because of its proximity to the sea. They often played havoc with the cattle-sheds. It was heart-rending to see dumb animals perish in the storm. We used to relax with a book leaving the plough and milch animals to graze in the fields. These happy images always linger in my mind. Who does not treasure childhood memories?

Marriage celebrations

Those times were different. Wedding processions for the bride and the groom featured palanquins and menas instead of cars. It was indeed a sight to see the bride taken round on palanquin while the sturdy bearers chanted 'ohom ohom' to ease the burden of weight. Men and women would flock to see the newly-weds in the grand procession and talk about it for days. Marriages used to last full five days with a lot of fanfare and pomp unlike today's hurry burry affairs. Rich breakfast, sumptuous lunch and dinner were served. The middle class wedding would be a three-day affair. The poor would satisfy themselves with a simple ceremony. Some people indulged in lavish spending on marriage for the sake of false prestige and ruined their lives.

A relative had finalised marriage alliance in neighbouring Krishna district. Our people entertained, for some reason, reservations about alliances with that district. We from the groom's party attended the marriage celebrated in great style. Guests were served table meals with pure ghee and mango juice, unheard of 60 years ago. These people, we wondered, should be fabulously rich and speculated about the hefty dowry in the offing. The highly expected windfall for our bridegroom was a mere seven acres of not so prime land.

Sankranti. The very mention of this festival of harvest conjures up colourful images of Rangoli patterns (mutyala muggulu) in front of the courtyard, passing visits by the Haridasu singing the praise of Sri Hari, ornately decorated Gangireddulu (oxen) and the eagerly-awaited Budabukkalavadu. We children used to enjoy every bit of what was typically Telugu culture. Dressed in the manner of Sage Narada, the Haridasu went round the village singing keertans in praise of the Lord and accepted humble offerings from the people. Budabukkalavadu sported budabukkalu (damarookam) which adorns Lord Siva. He used the percussion instrument for an interlude between his pronouncements for the future.

We also had those days pellilla perayyalu, our own version of match-makers, who tracked eligible young men and women in the area, gathered details and helped in finding suitable match for them. Washermen and barbers used to be paid in kind.

As a child, I enjoyed watching 'gudise padavaIu' (house boat) plying in the canal. During the Raj, the Englishmen used to come with families to inspect the canal bunds. These bunds would often breach during the flood season. Large reservoirs like Srisailam, Nagarjunasagar and Alamatti did not exist then to impound water. People would watch in awe and fear as the swollen Krishna

breached canal bunds and caused extensive damage to life and property. The British officials would live in the house boats and initiate action to plug the breaches. All they expected from the people was a chicken for their meal. You may like to call it bribery or just a gesture by people.

Visit by a policeman was a rarity. There was hardly any need for him since no offences were reported. But when a constable did appear, the village elders would get up to greet him. The elders would bow respectfully and greet top officials like the collector with folded hands.

The Real Public Servant

Varma, a selfless and transparently honest man, took the pains to go to Tenali and lobby with the engineers for a bridge across the Krishna canal at Donepudi. Before the bridge came, people used to swim across at great risk. Varma had earned a permanent place in their hearts. School teachers ordered us to wash milch animals or do minor farm work for them. Parents did not mind this because the poor teachers earned a meagre Rs 10 to Rs 30 a month. It sounds funny that these people are associated with the adage - 'if you cannot earn a living, take up teaching'.

We kids feasted on a variety of seasonal fruit and enjoyed playing in the lap of nature. Vegetable cultivation was unknown in the villages. Snake gourd, bottle gourd and ridge gourd were raised

near hay stacks. Pappu or Dhal, chutney and ghee formed the menu when vegetables were not available. Pappu and Dappalam, another delicacy, were a must in marriage feast. One reason maybe why girls of marriageable age, are often asked 'when are you treating us to pappu and dappalam? Non-vegetarian food was a rarity. Chicken or meat was served on special occasions like the visit of the son-in-law.

My father was not just an upright and honest man, but adhered to customs and traditions inherited from his elders. Temples were open to the Dalits, although a few may have had reservations. The Dalits used to hold him and other elders in esteem. On seeing my father, a Dalit would respectfully hide the toddy pot behind his back. Come festival time, mother would prepare finest delicacies like garelu, boorelu, ariselu and lovingly watch us hog them eagerly. How can I forget those sweet memories.

My village boasted of a number of temples. In fact, those days no village was without at least one temple. Temple culture was much in evidence in the coastal areas of Andhra and Tamil Nadu. Rich farmers owned mango and sapota orchards while children of middle class farmers were content with relishing thaati munjalu and thegalu, both products of palm tree. We also enjoyed eating groundnut mixed with jaggery brought by Vysya traders.

Our teachers organised many fancy programmes, including 'Mock Parliament' session with me as the Speaker. I was already class and school leader. Seeds of leadership were thus sown in my boyhood itself. I sported black badge and organised class and even examination boycott in 1952 when Potti Sriramulu made the supreme sacrifice for separate statehood for the Telugus. I was fired with patriotic fervor.

My elder brother had settled down in Visakhapatnam while the other is still in Donepudi, doing agriculture. Their children are well settled. Sister Anasurya, now 87, lives in Vellatur with children and grand-children. I know little about her marriage. Of course, I remember well the marriages of my brothers.

Taking to the Water

We learnt swimming in the Krishna canal holding on to the tails of buffaloes. I was once swept away by the swirling water, but someone had saved me by pulling me up by my waistband. I enjoyed diving into the canal from the bridge. Our school was in due course upgraded but we wrote examinations in Kolluru. I stayed with relatives in Kolluru for my SSC examination.

My father was not just an ideal farmer but one deeply involved in spiritual pursuits. He was thorough with the epics the Ramayana, the Mahabharatha and the Bhagavatham and

interpreted them to suit the needs of people who came to him for direction and guidance. He brought us up on the path of dharma and piety, by example and precept. Faith, devotion and concentration were indispensable for acquisition of knowledge and intellectual advancement, he would often say. He was thus my Teacher. His values and life-style were my inspiration. In short, he was a complete man. I was too young then to know his greatness, but later years unfolded to me his extraordinary personality and the distinctive qualities. A brave heart, he faced many challenges but did not compromise on truth. A good Samaritan, he would unhesitatingly render help to the needy. That was his culture and upbringing. On the other hand, my mother used her time and energies in running the house, taking care of the family, the children and their interests.

As a boy, I was guilty of a mistake. Poornachandra Rao, a blind boy, was my classmate. He was brilliant in studies. In childhood ignorance, I would call him 'guddoda' (blind man). I realised that the God was not sympathetic enough to the boy. Instead of sympathising with his handicap, I ridiculed. Those memories still haunt me as I realise how much my words had hurt him.

Human relations have undergone radical transformation over the decades, creating chasm between man and man. Having come from an ordinary family which believed agriculture to be

the noblest occupation, I got an opportunity to serve as Agriculture Minister. How come? It is nothing but the will and benevolence of the Divine. The God had ordained thus.

Whatever the positive impact of the industrial revolution in Europe on the mankind, we can still draw comfort from the systems developed and devices invented by our forefathers. Let us take, for instance, the grinding stone or the use of cow dung cake as fuel, all part of every day rural life. They stand testimony to their intellect and inventive genius.

Early Influence of Politics

Politics cast a bearing on my life even during the student days. I was greatly influenced by the 1952 agitation for separate statehood for the Telugus. I had believed that a separate state was a must for the progress and development of Andhras. I was not politically well-informed or knowledgeable, but what I read in papers or heard from the elders made me plunge headlong into the 1952 movement spearheaded by Potti Sriramulu, ignoring my father's warnings. Did I not enthusiastically participate in the independence celebrations years ago?

It was while transporting paddy to the rice mill at Bhattiprolu that I heard the shocking news of the assassination of Gandhi by Nathuram Godse on January 30, 1948. I was crest-fallen. In 1951,

when I was studying in Donepudi , the State politics were riven by two groups of Congressmen, one led by NG Ranga and the other, by Neelam Sanjiva Reddy. Vijayawada was the hub of political activity.

Here I may mention about what really was a major problem those days, but may sound insignificant to you now. One had to cross the Krishna river in boats and ferries to reach Vijayawada at great hardship and inconvenience. The dam built by Sir Arthur Cotton was in existence, but was not designed to allow vehicular movement. Boats and punts were the only means. This problem was overcome with the construction of the Prakasam Barrage which facilitated both vehicular and pedestrian traffic. Those were the days when elections in Vijayawada attracted State-wide attention. The Congress suffered a vertical split as Ranga was defeated and left the party along with Prakasam.

The events of my childhood shaped my later life and the seed for a career in politics was sown at that tender age. This is the first chapter of my early life - one that may determine the course of my future.

College days and politics

Bandar or Machilipatnam was the cradle of the nationalist movement and the fount of culture. It produced many freedom fighters and men of letters. One of them was Bhogaraju Pattabhi Sitaramiah, a tall figure in the Congress party. He had chronicled the history of the Congress party and thereby endeared himself to the people and the party. The credit of founding Andhra Bank went to Pattabhi Sitaramaiah and his associates. Another legend who strode Bandar like a colossus was Mutnuri Krishna Rao, Editor of Krishna Patrika, whose writings inspired politicians, intellectuals, litterateurs and the common people alike.

After I passed what was then called 'school finals' in 1953, my father wanted that I should move to Machilipatnam for higher studies. Who does not aspire to study in a place so steeped in history. I joined the prestigious National College.

Our principal was Varadachari, an eminent Sanskrit scholar. It was said President Rajendra Prasad was so impressed by his erudition at the World Sanskrit Conference in Tirupati that he performed 'pada seva' (washing the feet) to Varadachari. Sivakamaiah, our vice-principal,

taught English and kavi padusha Puvvada Seshagiri Rao, Telugu. Nori Radhakrishna Murthy, our economics lecturer, later joined the Indian Police Service.

Bandar, a port town, remained district headquarters even after independence. The Nizam ceded Bandar to the British. The Nizam used to trade with other countries through this port they used to call 'Bandar gaah'. It was because of this connection that Khasim Razvi, the Razakar leader, boasted to the Nizam and his followers that his sword brooked no challenge and that he would wash it only in Bandar port. The town acquired the name, Machilipatnam, because of abundance of fish ('machili' in Urdu). The British shortened it to Masula which also was in currency till recently. Machilipatnam, tucked away in a corner, lagged behind the railway junction town of Vijayawada which witnessed rapid growth and development. During the Raj, the white rulers camped in Bandar. There was another college in the town, but my father, patriotic to the core, preferred the National College started by the nationalist leaders. Logically, I should have studied in my native Guntur district, but did not because the town was plagued by water scarcity and diseases.

While in Bandar I lived in Godugupeta and made friends with Ramanaiah Naidu, legislator. He was affectionate to me. We boys used to eat in Rami Reddy- Ammamma mess, paying Rs three a

month. Every week, by turns, we would contribute rice, pulses, salt etc to the pool. They used to call it a 'mess' in those days itself. I would cross the Krishna, take a bus to Bandar via Challapalli. I would stop by at Challapalli to fulfil my fancy - peeping at the Rajah's high pedigree dogs, rabbits and deer through a hole in the palace gate. Having studied all along in Telugu, I became nervous in the college where the medium was English. I even considered returning home, but at the instance of some friends, went to one SSR Murthy, a prominent English teacher, to learn grammar.

Madras State elections

Bandar was also said to be notorious for rowdy elements. We saw a photo at a studio and wondered if the man in the picture did not look like a rowdy. Getting wind of this, some musclemen rushed to our college to thrash us. There were two groups in our college, one sympathising with the Congress and the other with the communists. There would often be clashes and arrests. We sought the help of one rowdy nicknamed 'Sunnam' because of his ability to reduce his victims to 'sunnam' (limestone powder). Thus, we did dabble in politics in our college and ignored sports.

I was still in Bandar when U. N. Dhebar was elected president of the All India Congress Committee at Avadi session near Madras. I treasure the memories of listening to Dhebar's speech and meeting him during an election

campaign in Bandar. The communist party launched a high-profile campaign that Putchalapalli Sundarayya would form the Government with Tarimela Nagi Reddy as the Finance Minister and Chandra Rajeswara Rao as the Home Minister. Their meetings were well-attended. G. Varalakshmi, leading actress of the day, campaigned for the communists.

The Congress took the elections in the composite Madras State elections as a prestige matter. Top leader S. K. Patil came from Bombay with full paraphernalia to campaign for the party. The elections threw up a hung Assembly with different parties and disparate groups. Jawaharlal Nehru stepped in to clear the mess by proposing C. Rajagopalachari's name for the chief ministership. He was not a member of either House. The Governor, Sri Prakasa, later nominated Rajagopalachari to the Upper House to legitimise his appointment as the chief minister. Fearing injustice in a composite State, the Telugu-speaking people claimed a part of Madras city where their population was dominant. A committee was formed to go into the issue, but its verdict went against the Telugus.

Bowing to the growing demand, the Government of India agreed in principle for creation of linguistic states. Rayalaseema and Circars reached an agreement under 'Sribagh pact'. People thought it was all the handiwork of Rajaji. Under this pact, the new state would have

the capital in one place and the high court in another. The Fazl Ali Commission, formed for the purpose of the new state, favoured Vijayawada as the Capital city, but the Congress leaders were apprehensive that the communists, who had a sizeable presence in the area, would gain upper hand. They brought pressure on the party high command not to locate the Capital there. NG Ranga suggested Tirupati for the Capital while Tenneti Viswanatham and Gouthu Latchanna plumped for Visakhapatnam. On Neelam Sanjiva Reddy's advice, Prakasam settled for Kurnool. People maintain even now that had Vijayawada been made the Capital in view of its central location, it would have progressed by leaps and bounds.

Kavi Samrat abused

Viswanadha Satyanarayana, a towering figure in Telugu literature, was then teaching in SSR & CVR College of Vijayawada. He gained fame as the author of the voluminous 'Veyi Padagalu'. Our college arranged a function to honour him. A group of irate students accosted him at the entrance, abused him in filthy language and threw stones. 'Veyi Padagalu' was included in the syllabus as the non-detailed subject for them. 'How can we study the book when each sentence runs to 70 to 80 lines' was their grouse. Taking the incident in his stride, Viswanadha took a swipe at the boys at the felicitation function. 'I have already been honoured at the gate. Why again here ', he asked.

College days and politics

'The boys here appear to be quite gifted', he remarked sarcastically.

I was witness to many such incidents at Bandar. I failed in one subject in F. A. second year (plus two stage) but cleared it in the supplementary examination. Instead of idling my time, I visited my eldest brother, Janardhana Rao, then working as tahsildar in Warangal. I had seen the thousand-pillared temple in my earlier trips. Warangal town then had a number of tongas. It being a forest area, many locals and rich shikaris enjoyed hunting wildlife. The shikaris would visit my brother as he was the tahsildar there.

My brother suggested that , instead of losing the academic year, I join Vivek Vardhini College in Hyderabad which admitted students passing the supplementary examination. He got me enrolled in the college. A couple of us stayed in the outhouse of one Shahbuddin Ahmed Khan, a Barrister and Mayor, in Troop Bazar, near our college. Khan and J. V. Narsing Rao, president of Pradesh Congress, were good friends. We used to go to a hotel at Moazzamjahi Market for a cup of pauna chai, thick and undiluted. The Gandhi Bhavan also was close by. Even while in the college, politics exerted strong pull which I found difficult to shrug off. I made acquaintance with Narsing Rao and Valluru Basava Raju (V. B. Raju) popular as 'Apara Chanakya'. M. Satyanarayana Rao and Uppunuthala Purushotham Reddy were my classmates and Palavai Goverdhan Reddy our

junior. Satyanarayana Rao, Rao Saheb as we called him, was already married. He rose to become general secretary of the AICC, president of the PCC and Minister. Purushotham Reddy and Goverdhan Reddy also became Ministers. Another class fellow was Adusumilli Panduranga Rao, who like me came from Andhra area. He too was inclined to joining politics, but took to legal practice. I was introduced to the Deputy Chief Minister, Neelam Sanjiva Reddy, who visited our college at the instance of MSR, Purushotham Reddy and Goverdhan Reddy. We also had the privilege of listening to a brilliant speech by V. K. Krishna Menon, Union Minister.

Vivek Vardhini College, managed by Maharashtrians, was the fount of political consciousness and had groomed a number of youngsters for the nationalist movement. It was credited with supplying 'oxygen for the liberation movement of Telangana'. Satwalekar, a soft-spoken man and a visionary, was our principal. His wife was a renowned doctor belonging to a patriotic family. PS Rao was a fine English teacher. Many were the unforgettable moments of days in the college.

Police Action in Hyderabad

Most of the spirited young men who fought for liberation of Telangana were from the Reddy Hostel or the Nizam College. A galaxy of leaders

like Ravi Narayana Reddy, Konda Venkata Ranga Reddy, Madapati Hanumantha Rao, Mandumula Narasinga Rao, Baddam Yella Reddy, Arutla Ramchandra Reddy, Bhimreddy Narasimha Reddy roused the people to fight the tyrannical rule of the Nizam. Telangana was liberated following Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel's far-sighted decision to order Police Action.

In the valiant struggle for liberation, many activists of the movement were shot dead by the Nizam's Army and the Razakars. Villages were looted and burnt down and women molested during the reign of terror unleashed by Khasim Razvi and his band of Razakars with the tacit support of the Nizam. Marri Channa Reddy would often recall these atrocities. Channa Reddy and his family moved to Vijayawada for safety and PV Narasimha Rao to Nagpur during those harrowing days. The police action began on September 13 and ended on September 18 enabling the people of Telangana to breathe free.

I remember the statement of the Chief Minister Burgula Ramakrishna Rao that an acre of land was worth Rs 4000 in Andhra region against only Rs 400 in Telangana area. If the people of the two regions came together, Telangana also could prosper agriculturally. Channa Reddy and Konda Venkata Ranga Reddy disagreed with him. Aggressive by temperament, Channa Reddy launched a movement for separate Telangana state.

Visaalandhra movement

Burgula tried his best to persuade Nehru that Visaalandhra, bringing together the Telugus from different regions, was imperative. Nehru was not convinced, because he was not aware of any such demand.. 'We do not even know whether the people want it or not', he wondered. Burgula immediately contacted his Home Minister Digamber Rao Bindu on phone and asked him to organise a public meeting . 'Sir. We and communists braved lathi blows for Visaalandhra. Those opposing it are very few', Bindu replied.

Armed with this, Burgula met the Union Home Minister, Gobind Ballabh Pant, convinced him about his case and used his good offices to get Nehru to address a public meeting in Nizamabad. It was at this meeting that Nehru made the historic announcement about Visaalandhra.

We friends used to frequent Sultan Bazar known for the landmark Clock Tower and Andhra Book House nearby. The clock tower was the rallying point for the anti-Nizam forces which held meetings and demonstrations there. In fact, the campaign for Andhras under one roof dates back to the founding of Sri Krishnadevaraya Andhra Basha Nilayam in Sultan Bazar in 1901. The City Congress office was next door. Eminent men like Nayani Venkata Ranga Rao, Raja of Munagala, Madapati Hanumantha Rao, Raja Bahadur Venkatram Reddy , Kotwal of Hyderabad, were

behind the starting of the Library, which in the course of time became a beacon for those fighting the Nizam. These forces derived great strength from the people's support. The brave people of Telangana wrote a golden chapter in history when they faced the might of the Nizam's army with country-made fire-arms, spears and chilli powder.

Burgula was the moving spirit behind the VISAALANDHRA movement. He led a team of his Cabinet colleagues and MLAs to Bezawada Gopala Reddy, Chief Minister of Andhra State, and succeeded in convincing him and also the Government of India. In the larger interests of unity of the Telugu-speaking people, he sacrificed the Chief Minister's post. This large-hearted gesture should never be forgotten. In the developments that followed, he was sent to Kerala as Governor. Had he been nominated to the Rajya Sabha, Ramakrishna Rao would have become the Home Minister in Nehru's Cabinet. This did not happen because of the unhelpful attitude of Neelam Sanjiva Reddy. It was very unfortunate.

The people of Hyderabad were not influenced by caste or religion until after the advent of our people from Andhra when they became tools of power politics. It will be interesting to note that Sanjiva Reddy was the Deputy Chief Minister in the Cabinet of Bezawada Gopala Reddy. When Andhra Pradesh was formed, Gopala Reddy became member of the Sanjiva Reddy Ministry. Neither considered it *infra dig* to work under the

other. They were above narrow considerations, their only concern being the welfare of the people and the development of the State. Konda Venkata Ranga Reddy was offered the Deputy Chief Minister's post. Stalwarts like Kala Venkata Rao were in Sanjiva Reddy's Cabinet. The general public also fostered a broad-minded catholic outlook.

Channa Reddy, who was out of the Congress for some time, organised a public meeting addressed by C. Rajagopalachari. He returned to the parent party and held several key positions in the party and the Government. I happened to attend the meeting held on a vacant ground in Kothi. Andhra Bank building now stands in that place. Sanjiva Reddy went to Delhi as party president at the behest of Nehru and Damodaram Sanjivayya was named the Chief Minister. The state of party affairs was such those days that Kasu Brahmananda Reddy had to intervene in his capacity as the Chief Minister just to get Kakani Venkata Ratnam accommodated in the Pradesh Election Committee.

Mysore Café, Brindavan Hotel on the Nampally station road, Vasant Vihar in the Abids, Dwaraka Hotel in Lakdi-ka-Pul alone used to offer accommodation to people coming from our region. Some others managed accommodation in the MLA quarters.

As a students whenever I visited the Abids, I

could see only cars belonging to the 'Nizam nawab', hardly those of any others. Another sight in the city was of carriages drawn by sturdy mules. Life as a whole and our studies in the metropolitan culture of Hyderabad was hassle-free.

Visaalandhra became an issue in my student days itself. Separate Telangana protagonists burnt down the car of the Chief Minister Burgula Ramakrishna Rao, an ardent advocate of an integrated State for the Telugus. He lived in Shah Manzil now renamed Raj Bhavan, the official residence of the Governor. As supporters of the Visalaandhra movement, we used to meet Burgula. We were awe-struck by the imposing interiors of the Shah Manzil. Paintings depicting events and personalities of the Nizam era enhanced the elegance of the ornate- looking hall.

Sastry - a towering personality

I often heard from old-timers about the key role played by S. N. Sastry, a prominent journalist, in Hyderabad's accession to the Indian Union. I had the good fortune of meeting him. Many were the anecdotes and events of those days that he recalled for my benefit. The Government of India's Agent General in Hyderabad, K. M. Munshi, used to stay in what is now 'Rashtrapati Nilayam' in Bolarum in the Cantonment area. It was said that he would give his assessment of the ground situation to the Union Home Minister, Vallabhbhai Patel, on the basis of critical inputs provided by S. N. Sastry.

Such was Sastry's ability to analyse developments. He knew most of the Prime Ministers (that was how Chief Ministers were known) in the Nizam's State and maintained close contacts with them. The Police Action, on the whole, went off smoothly.

On the suggestion of friends, I joined Evening Law College in Tilak Road after completing B. A. in Vivek Vardhini College. At the same time, I pursued Diploma in Local Self-Government. By the time I finished Law, my qualifications read thus: Nadendla Bhaskara Rao, B. A. , LL.B., LSGD.

I and Adusumilli Panduranga Rao enrolled as members of the Riding Club for fun and occasionally enjoyed horse-riding.

A Muslim friend introduced me to Ramchandra Reddy, Deshmukh of Visunur. Sri Satya Sai Baba used to visit Ramchandra Reddy's house. The Puttaparthi Baba personally conducted my marriage with Lalitha B. A. in 1959. Her parents Vasireddy Venkaiah Choudary and Laksmi Devi, were devotees of Baba. Venkaiah Choudary was a distinguished lawyer who earned his doctorate in law in London and practised law in Madras, Guntur and Hyderabad.

chapter 3

Early phase as lawyer

With the Law degree in hand, I looked around for a job. With none forthcoming, I joined as apprentice under Challa Kondaiah, who later became the Chief Justice, and then as the junior of Duvvuri Narasa Raju in 1961.

I began independent practice, but my mind was never in it. With the help of Sri Satya Sai Baba, my father-in-law got me appointed as personnel manager in Rao Insulators in Bangalore. It did not take me long to realise that the job in a private company did not fit in with my avowed objective in life. I was back in Hyderabad in six months. How could I go back to the bar again?

Hearing about vacancies in the World Health Organisation (WHO), I went to Delhi in the hope of landing a job with the help of influential friends. Dr. Naidu was then working in the External Affairs Ministry and G. V. Subba Rao was planning officer for Asia region at the UNICEF. I intended to utilise the good offices of Damodaram Sanjivaiah, already an established leader in the Congress party. I also made acquaintance with Col. Raju, Member of Parliament from Rajahmundry. He was a Minister in Nehru's Cabinet. Col. Raju was earlier personal physician of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose.

Another new acquaintance was Kotha Raghuramaiah, who wielded a lot of clout in our area. However, the collective efforts of these people were of little avail as an Australian walked away the prized job. I was crest-fallen.

I was a familiar figure, thanks to my active involvement in the Youth Congress activities. People would treat me with affection and respect. I would look wistfully at the Teen Murti House, where Jawaharlal Nehru lived, as I passed by it on my way to the residence of G. V. Subba Rao. Horse riding in Teen Murti compound was a regular habit of Nehru. I watched him many times. I was in Delhi when his death plunged the entire country in grief. The people could not digest the passing away of free India's Prime Minister for 17 long years. Few leaders had endeared themselves to the people as closely as Nehru had. He was universally acclaimed as a great statesman, a friend of the masses, a leader par excellence. The country found itself in a quandary. Dr. Naidu informed me about the tragedy at 8:30 in the morning and took me to the Teen Murti House. Only J. B. Kripalani was seen standing near the body. Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Nehru's sister, was yet to arrive from Bombay. I could vividly recall the picture on that fateful day.

Gulzari Lal Nanda, then Home Minister, was sworn in the interim Prime Minister. Who can uphold Nehru's lofty values and continue his

Early phase as lawyer

legacy? That was the question most widely debated those days. The Congress high command named Lal Bahadur Shastri to be the full-fledged Prime Minister. I attended Nehru's funeral, paid tearful homage to the great leader and prayed for him. Many such memories remain engraved in my mind. I pondered about my own future. Some people complimented me on my abilities, but all the same I was denied the kind of recognition I expected, both in Hyderabad and my own region.

Back at the bar

People in politics cannot do without tact and diplomacy. Knowing that these traits were woefully lacking in me, I decided to return to the bar, this time taking the job in right earnest. Hard work and dedication soon earned a name for me. My successes endeared me to the clients and enhanced my standing among the lawyers. I was accepted on a par with the stalwarts. I was the youngest among the handful of leading lawyers. I scored significant victories arguing against renowned adversaries. I used to charge the clients moderately. Those days fees ranged between Rs 500 and Rs 2000 - almost a world of difference from today's astronomical demands. I had half a dozen assistants, including two stenographers. I believe the God alone conferred upon me this status. On account of this elevation, I also incurred the jealousy of some people.

Early phase as lawyer

I followed professional norms in letter and spirit and adhered to ethical values. As a successful lawyer, I also earned a lot. Knowing my abilities, Boddepally Rajagopala Rao (veteran leader of Srikakulam district and former MP) gave me a brief against N. G. Ranga in the High Court. While taking it up, I decided that the case alone mattered, not the fame or the status of the adversary. In view of my connection with politics, most of the cases brought to me related to politics. It was again politics that enhanced my popularity as a lawyer.

Naturally, I was considered as a Congress lawyer. In the Sixties, we formed 'Young Lawyers Association'. Neelam Sanjiva Reddy came from Delhi to inaugurate it. We offered free legal advice to the poor.

I could not remain isolated from politics despite pre-occupation with the legal practice. The urge to gravitate to politics was overpowering. I was already member of the all India Congress Committee as well as of the Pradesh Congress Committee. I was closely watching political developments and the changes sweeping the country those days.

I was one of the APCC members who had emphatically maintained in 1968 that unless Kasu Brahmananda Reddy stepped down as the Chief Minister immediately, the ongoing Telangana agitation would not subside. The Government had

even considered arresting me. I was a success lawyer and dynamic politician. It was only natural that that the Congress party recognised my abilities. Surprisingly, I was nominated to represent the distant Srikakulam district, where the Vamsadhara flowed, in preference to the Krishna catchment, where I studied in Donepudi and Bandar, or to Hyderabad. I was then supporting Neelam Sanjiva Reddy.

The Youth Congress Days

I attended the Pachmarhi session of the Youth Congress at the behest of Palavai Goverdhan Reddy, then president of the State unit. Indira Gandhi, a past president of the Youth Congress, addressed the session as the Prime Minister. Narayan Dutt Tiwari, who later became Chief Minister of UP and Uttaranchal and the Governor of Andhra Pradesh, had just then been elected president of the Youth Congress.

In the wake of differences between Indira Gandhi and Kamaraj Nadar, the party held separate sessions in Gujarat and Maharashtra. I could not forget the momentous occasion. As member of the executive committee of all-India Youth Congress, I invited our general secretary, Tarakeswari Sinha to tour our State. We addressed some meetings. Around the same time, the party split into the official Congress and the organisational Congress, following the controversial decision to nominate Neelam Sanjiva Reddy as the candidate for the presidential election.

With the decent income from practice, I bought 50 acres of land on the Karimnagar road, another 10 acres in Patancheru industrial area, apart from

a couple of house-sites. I also built a house in Hyderabad, in addition to the one I live now. I was flush with money. It needed to be invested judiciously. Legal practice was the only source of income. I successfully argued a case in which two persons of Vijayawada were convicted of murder and saved them from the gallows.

The Telangana agitation was at its peak in 1968-69. Many youngsters had lost their lives. Many of us felt that Kasu Brahmananda Reddy should step down immediately if the integrity of the State had to be preserved. With the situation deteriorating, Indira Gandhi flew down to Hyderabad and unseated Brahmananda Reddy.

Separate Telangana Agitation

Capping many rounds of parleys and intense debate, P. V. Narasimha Rao was named the new Chief Minister. Reacting to the Supreme Court verdict on the Mulki issue, Narasimha Rao said it put a finality to the issue. This hasty and thoughtless observation triggered hostile reaction from the people in Andhra region and divided the Cabinet as well. The separate Andhra agitation had the blessings of veterans like Kakani Venkataratnam, B. V. Subba Reddy, P. Basi Reddy and Battina Subba Rao. Many leaders rebelled against Narasimha Rao and took to the streets to intensify the agitation.

One night I received a call from Ch. V. P.

Murthy Raju, Minister in Narasimha Rao's Cabinet, about the death of Kakani Venkataratnam, who was also in the Cabinet. Kakani had a soft corner for me. I tried to contact Narasimha Rao on phone. Then I rushed to Ananda Nilayam (official residence of the Chief Minister) in my Fiat and woke him up. I pleaded with him to rush to Vijayawada at once and pay last respects to the departed colleague. Otherwise, it would be difficult to save the Government. I tendered this advice as a sincere Congress worker, anxiously watching the alarming developments.

Narasimha Rao ignored my advice. Afraid of facing the wrath of the people in Andhra, he instead called an emergency Cabinet meeting to adopt a condolence resolution. Content with this token display of sympathy, PV restrained other Ministers also from going to Vijayawada. It was a blatant act of cowardice.

V. V. Giri, who was President, wondered how could a Chief Minister, who lacked courage to attend the last rites of his own colleague, be expected to govern the State and exerted pressure on Indira Gandhi to sack him. The President's Rule followed.

The Government of India sent Haris Chandra Sarin, a retired IAS officer, as Advisor to the Governor. A shrewd and dynamic officer, capable of quick decisions, Sarin soon endeared himself to

all sections with his style of efficient functioning. He advised Indira Gandhi to appoint Jalagam Vengala Rao as the Chief Minister. Vengala Rao, he said, would be acceptable to Telangana and Andhra regions. This was done.

Meanwhile, another calamity overtook the country in the form of Emergency, plunging it in chaos. Political leaders were put behind the bars.

Indira and the Congress routed

The emergency had a disastrous fall-out on Indira Gandhi and the Congress in the 1977 elections to the Lok Sabha. The leader and the party were routed. She nominated Kasu Brahmananda Reddy as president of the party. Brahmananda Reddy expelled her from the party blaming her personally for the election debacle. Vengala Rao, then Chief Minister, heartily endorsed the action. Ironically, she was thrown out by the very person she had chosen to be president.

No wonder, they say, inscrutable are the ways of Destiny. Indira Gandhi was all alone. Even her trusted lieutenant, Kotha Raghuramaiah, deserted her to join Janata Party, peeved at the elevation of Brahmananda Reddy as the Congress president. One wondered how Indira Gandhi, who had held the office of prime minister, could face the new challenge. She was not the one to be cowed down by adversity.

Following the landslide victory in the Lok Sabha elections, Morarji Desai was made the Prime Minister on the advice of Jai Prakash Narayan. Neelam Sanjiva Reddy became the Speaker and later the President. Jagjivan Ram and Charan Singh were senior members of the new Janata Party Ministry.

Channa Reddy, who was the Governor of Uttar Pradesh, who was not on best of terms with Charan Singh, resigned his post and returned to the State politics. He was then toying with the idea of joining the Janata Party.

M. Ramchandra Reddy, an advocate, introduced me to Channa Reddy. Soon our friendship became stronger. One day Channa Reddy asked me if I could mobilise a few hundred party workers from Vijayawada and for his part, he would organise party men from Telangana region. He suggested that we convene a meeting in Hyderabad where future course of action could be formulated. Vengala Rao was the Chief Minister and the Janata Party was in power at the Centre. Channa Reddy was still weighing the possibility of joining the Janata Party. Pidathala Ranga Reddy, Kotla Vijayabhaskara Reddy and some seniors were vehemently opposed to supporting Indira Gandhi. So were Bhavanam Venkatram and Gade Venkata Reddy, now MLA from Bapatla. They walked out of the meeting saying they would have nothing to do with Indira Gandhi. I was keenly following these developments.

Regional party mooted

Channa Reddy, Ramachandra Reddy and I, after thorough deliberations, convened the meeting attended by about 300 workers. Some speakers felt that Indira's stock had gone down and that she would be a liability. Channa Reddy favoured a regional party for the State, but the cadre present was not sure if the idea was workable. Even leaders like Prakasam and N.G. Ranga had almost forfeited their identity by starting regional party. They were in a quandary as to the future if they left the Congress. Some leaders asserted that they part with Indira. 'Would she allow you to become Chief Minister', they demanded to know of Channa Reddy. I was clear in my mind that our survival and future was linked to Indira Gandhi. So we must sail with her.

Party men visiting me would repeatedly say it was possible to form the Government in the State if Indira Gandhi was persuaded to leave the Congress party and start her own. I regularly briefed Channa Reddy about these developments. Channa Reddy's confidence in me was growing by the day as he felt that all my predictions were coming true. 'What Bhaskar says sounds convincing, but Indira Gandhi cannot be trusted', Channa Reddy felt.

Around this time, Devraj Urs deputed one Mrs. Prasad of Delhi to hold discussions with Channa Reddy in Hyderabad. After meeting Channa

Reddy, his aides and S. N. Sastry of Eenadu, she made a proposal. Channa Reddy invited C. Jagannatha Rao and me to join for lunch to discuss her proposal. I rejected outright the proposal for a joint regional party for Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh as unsuitable for us. I and Jagannatha Rao minced no words to insist that we stay with Indira Gandhi considering the people's overwhelming confidence in her leadership. This was also in the best interests of the State. Channa Reddy was unable to come to a conclusion.

A week later, Mrs. Prasad informed Urs that Channa Reddy was dithering because of the stiff opposition voiced by 'a youngster Bhaskara Rao' and that Urs should lose no time in going to Hyderabad. Urs flew down to Hyderabad by a special plane. Channa Reddy invited me, Jagannatha Rao and Sastry for the luncheon meeting with Urs. We discussed threadbare the political situation and the need for a regional party. Urs, who saw me at the lunch, remarked 'This young man seems to be prophetic in his words' and made enquiries about me with Channa Reddy. I reiterated my stand more forcefully. I advised them to split the party, throw out Kasu Brahmananda Reddy and bring back Indira Gandhi to the centre-stage. Indira's party will be our party, I said firmly. They had no choice but to bow to the sheer force of my argument. I also reiterated my stand on forming regional party and the futility of such a venture.

Catastrophic cyclone

A few days before the meeting, the coastal areas were battered by the worst cyclonic storm and tidal waves known to history on November 19, 1977, spreading devastation particularly in Krishna and Guntur districts. Thousands of people and animals were killed. It caused unprecedented loss of property and extensive damage to crops. I wanted Channa Reddy to visit the area and console the people in distress, but he was reluctant. He felt he might not be welcome there in view of his tirade against the Andhra people during the Telangana agitation. I allayed his fears and got him to make the trip. Me, Channa Reddy and the chairman of the Warangal zilla parishad extensively toured the affected areas in Diviseema and Guntur district. The situation there was horrendous. It was Nature's macabre Dance of Death. Our heart bled for the sufferings of the people. There was no power supply nor availability of drinking water. Trees were uprooted. Dead bodies were piled in heaps and reeked of foul smell. The bloated bodies were beyond recognition. The survivors were dazed and shocked beyond words. We wondered why the sea had wrought such havoc. We returned to Hyderabad with a heavy heart.

Indira Gandhi also visited the area to console the cyclone-hit families. Despite being out of power and a victim of political witch-hunt, she chose to share the woes of the people who had steadfastly

supported her and to express sympathy with them. People lined up all along the route to welcome her. As the area was without power, they welcomed her holding petromax lamps. The enthusiastic reception proved Indira Gandhi's magical hold on the people. Channa Reddy who saw this for himself briefed Devaraj Urs also.

Channa Reddy and Urs met Kamalapati Tripathi in Delhi to suggest that the party should be split and the Indira faction declared as the real Congress. Tripathi was not willing, but a few more rounds of persuasion brought him round. Party seniors cautioned Indira Gandhi against taking any hasty move. She was in a fix, but did not stop consultations with her close aides.

The new party is born

Towards the close of 1977, S. N. Sastry, who was posted to New Delhi as Eenadu correspondent, met Indira Gandhi and told her that time was ripe to strike. Hers was the real party and she should unfurl the flag of the new party, he told her. Emboldened by this, she proceeded to Vithalbhai Patel House with Devaraj Urs and unfurled the new flag. This is the real Congress, she declared, and named it Indira Congress. The gathering cheered her wildly.

Abdul Rehman Antulay was general secretary of Indira Congress and Buta Singh joint secretary. Instructions were issued to raise Rs 50,000 each

for the Party Fund for setting up State units. Channa Reddy, then in Delhi, asked me to arrange for Rs 50,000 immediately. I drew Rs 10,000 from my wife's account and sent the cash to Delhi through Mallikharjun. Channa Reddy returned after getting clearance for his nomination as the president and mine as the general secretary of the State unit of the Indira Congress.

We convened a meeting in the Gandhi Bhavan. None of Channa Reddy's followers turned up. They even refused to attend. We got our intimate associate Tirupurana Raghava Das to preside. We were the speakers.

Very soon, the exodus from Vengala Rao's Cabinet began with some Ministers resigning and joining our party, one by one. Indira Gandhi had already nominated Channa Reddy as the president and me as the general secretary of AP unit of the party.

The Indira Congress surge 1978

Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka legislatures went to the polls in the first week of March 1978. We in the Indira Congress did not have enough resources to fight the elections. We formed a committee to select candidates. Senior politicians of the day were quite skeptical about the winning prospects of a fledgling party like ours. Some Ministers in the Vengala Rao Cabinet were already with us and many enthusiastic youngsters joined our ranks. We did encounter problems selecting the right candidates, running the campaign and organising publicity material. A new party has its own blessings. Where else can newcomers find opportunity to enter politics? People were yet unconvinced about Indira Gandhi's ability to pull off a victory. Nobody gave the party a ghost of a chance.

I and G. Rajaram were also drafted on the election committee. We could not find anyone to contest in Srikakulam. We picked a bus conductor. P. Rajagopala Naidu from Chittoor district demanded four seats for the Kamma community and recommended four young aspirants, including Nara Chandrababu Naidu. I was asked to look into their background. I got favourable reports except

in respect of Chandrababu Naidu. The only positive point in the report on Chandrababu Naidu was that he had championed the cause of the Kammas vis-à-vis the Reddys in Sri Venkateswara University in Tirupati. Channa Reddy cleared Chandrababu's name as he was willing to bear poll expenses to a tune of Rs 5,000.

Chief Minister Jalagam Vengala Rao stayed on with Brahmananda Reddy faction. Together they finalised the candidates for the party and the Janata Party, in power at the Centre, also fielded candidates. Both parties brimmed with confidence. Not many even bothered about the Indira Congress.

Channa Reddy decided to contest from Medchal. Logically, I should have contested from Tenali, Duggirala or Vemur in my native Guntur district, but Channa Reddy was keen on fielding me from Vijayawada II as no leader in Krishna district was prepared to back the Indira Congress. Not many in the party were pleased with the choice.

Seat of stalwarts

Vijayawada was not just the centre of Krishna district but a political hub for the entire coastal area. Many leaders from different parts of the State had successfully contested from Vijayawada. One need not be necessarily from Vijayawada, Channa Reddy reasoned with me. Vijayawada voters were

politically well-informed and discussed even international developments, whether in New York or Moscow. While I was happy to contest from a seat earlier adorned by such stalwarts as Ayyadevara Kaleswara Rao and Dr. T. V. S. Chalapathi Rao, I was also aware that winning was no easy job. A number of friends, party men and intellectuals cut across caste, religious and regional barriers to secure my victory. Vijayawada was once a bastion of the communists, but people saw me through. The Indira Congress won the popular mandate.

Election of CLP leader

The high command sent Uma Shanker Dixit to Hyderabad as observer to oversee election of the legislature party leader. Rajaram was keen on becoming the Chief Minister and capable of pulling strings with Indira Gandhi. Channa Reddy also enjoyed the blessings of party seniors in Delhi.

Some felt it was unfair to bypass Channa Reddy, who led the party to success, in favour of another. They brought pressure on Indira Gandhi not to consider anyone else. For the sake of record, Dixit took individual opinion of all MLAs. I proposed Channa Reddy's name and suggested that he would be made the Chief Minister. Other MLAs too followed suit. Of course, there were some who were badly affected by the 1969 Telangana agitation led by Channa Reddy.

Indira Gandhi was our mascot and the only weapon in the election campaign. She drew unprecedented crowds wherever she went. We did not have to mobilise crowds. They waited for hours to listen to her. She reached Vijayawada at 2 in the morning, nine hours behind schedule. It being too late, I requested her to come again, which she did a few days later. What a response? What a turn-out? She herself was confounded by the enthusiastic support. We were convinced that nothing could stop us. Our baffled rivals could not read the pulse of the people. As the daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru, as former prime minister and a tall leader who led the country on the path of progress, Indira Gandhi won the heart of the voters. She strained every nerve to win the elections.

Channa Reddy entrusted the campaign to me on a shoe-string budget. We had no resources, nor were donors inclined to contribute. They were skeptical of our prospects. Believe it or not, our assistance to the candidates was not enough to buy a single meal! They won solely on the name of Indira Gandhi.

Story of Hand Symbol

Here is some interesting episode. The senior pontiff of the Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham happened to be in Madanapalle when Indira Gandhi visited the town. In an audience with the Kanchi Swami,

she sought his advice on the election symbol. The Mahaswami merely raised his hand by way of blessing. Yes. We decided instantly that 'Hand' should be our poll symbol. It turned out to be our talisman. Not many people know of this episode. Most of us had already filed our nominations and the Hand symbol was allotted to us in time. Our rivals and some officers made fun of our symbol asking us 'have they given you the hand?' We had the last laugh when people gave us a huge mandate.

The common man felt that the Janata Government had harassed Indira Gandhi in many ways. It appointed commissions of inquiry and made her run around the courts. She was humiliated without even consideration that she was a woman and once the prime minister. The people condemned this witch-hunting and longed to see her again as the prime minister.

Most of our newly-elected members were first-timers who rode to victory on the name of Indira Gandhi. The Channa Reddy Government took office on March 6, 1978. Channa Reddy wanted the Speaker's post for a Kamma. I being too young for the post, he asked me to get Divi Kondaiah Choudary's consent for the post. He agreed.

I could perceive some change in Channa Reddy's attitude to me after the election. It was said he was prone to listening to tale-bearers. Some

worthies were bent upon scuttling my entry into the Cabinet. These 'Mayala Marathis' (evil-minded elements) were on the crooked job. Chanumolu Venkata Rao and Pinnamaneni Koteswara Rao, who won on the Congress (R) ticket, went to meet Channa Reddy, accompanied by Akkineni Nageswara Rao. Their mission was simply this: 'Do not take Bhaskara Rao who is from Guntur district. Never mind if our Krishna district is not represented in the Cabinet'. They wanted to derive maximum mileage from the close friendship between the actor and the Chief Minister. They were afraid that if I were taken into the Cabinet, they would be relegated to the political dustbin.

People are not always what they appear to be, unless the mask is removed. Channa Reddy once asked me to telephone a leading actor for contribution to the party fund. Obviously smarter than the politicians, the actor made it known he was not at home. NG Ranga and KLN Prasad of the Brahmananda Reddy faction, applied pressure at New Delhi level to sabotage my chances. They settled for Koneru Ranga Rao as their choice from Krishna district.

The campaign against me apparently had some effect. Channa Reddy inducted me only as a Minister without Cabinet rank. I had no choice. But within a couple of months, I was elevated to the Cabinet rank with major portfolios. This was surprising indeed, considering the fact that many

people, jealous of my growing importance and popularity, carried tales to the Chief Minister.

Channa Reddy had a brainwave. He decided to admit MLAs from the Brahmananda Reddy Congress and the Janata party and entrusted the job to me as the Minister for Legislative Affairs. D. L. Ravindra Reddy and Siva Reddy from Cuddapah had easy passage, but Y. S. Rajasekhara Reddy had to wait for some time, because Channa Reddy entertained some reservations about Rajasekhara Reddy who also won on Cong R ticket.

The all India Youth Congress planned to organise a training camp in Nagarjunasagar. Ramachandra Rath was president and Ghulam Nabi Azad secretary. The Chief Minister left the job of making arrangements to me and Bhavanam Venkatram, who was also Minister. Indira Gandhi flew in by a regular flight from Delhi. We received her at the airport and motored down to Nagarjunasagar.

The fateful prediction

On our way back, she sat in the front seat while I and Channa Reddy were in the rear. I told Indira Gandhi 'Madam, there is an astrologer here who predicts your come-back as the Prime Minister. I can ask him to come, if you please'. His name was Nageswara Sastry. She was not inclined at first, but agreed. Being a highly traditional man and believer in customs, Sastry did not want to sit face

to face with her and make the prophecies. He sat down on the floor and made some notings on a paper. Instead of addressing her by name, he referred to her as 'Nandivardhanam' (Rose Bay flower). 'Nandivardhanam will become Prime Minister again', he said, 'but before that she will be in jail for three days'. Sastry also forecast that her son would die in an air crash, the Morarji Desai Government would fall and Parliament dissolved. We were stunned. We disagreed with the astrologer, saying it was simply impossible. But, Sastry stuck to his guns. Indira Gandhi was shaken when she heard about the fate of her son. She anxiously enquired if there was some way to protect her son. Sastry sent her a 'yantram' (talisman) through me.

The Central Government fell plumb on the day Sastry had forecast. Indira Gandhi was in prison for 8 days, instead of 3 as predicted by him. As doting mother, Indira performed many rituals with the yantram to save her son. Who can alter the course of Destiny?

Indira Gandhi summoned Channa Reddy, me, Hashim Ali and Mallikarjun to Delhi amid reports of desertions from the Janata party. She used to live in a private house belonging to Mohd. Younus. We met her there. Sanjay Gandhi literally grabbed me by the hand and drove me to his office with V. Hanumantha Rao in the rear seat. Naturally, any Chief Minister was bound to view it with a mix of

pain, jealousy and even anxiety. Channa Reddy was upset by the extra friendly manner in which Sanjay Gandhi whisked me off in his car.

Honestly, nothing had transpired between me and Sanjay. He just wanted to show his office and exhort us all to work together. That was enough to drive a wedge between me and the Chief Minister. His attitude to me changed overnight. He would suspect everything I did. The chasm widened. Differences arose between Channa Reddy and Indira Gandhi, although they did not surface. Channa Reddy misread the relations between Sanjay Gandhi and me and harboured needless suspicion. My Delhi trips further fuelled these misgivings.

In the context of rapid erosion of the Janata Party strength in Parliament, Channa Reddy, I and other leaders met the President Neelam Sanjiva Reddy and informed him that a change of Government appeared inevitable. Janata Party leaders countered this. Sanjiva Reddy asked Y. B. Chavan to form the Government after the fall of Morarji Desai Ministry, but he was not willing. It was widely expected that Jagjivan Ram would be invited to form the Government, but Sanjiva Reddy instead appointed Charan Singh as the new Prime Minister. Everybody expected Charan Singh to meet Indira Gandhi for support in the motion of confidence in Parliament, but personal pride and ego came in the way. He failed the floor test. Fresh

elections had to be called with Charan Singh as the care-taker Prime Minister.

Widening rift with Channa Reddy

T. Anjaiah and a few other seniors who had lost in the 1978 Assembly elections used to visit me on and off because of my proximity to the Chief Minister. I could not but entertain them. After all they were our party men. Channa Reddy cautioned me against some leaders, including Anjaiah, but I could not appreciate the full import of his warning. I did not know what was brewing.

One day Channa Reddy asked me to clear the MLA quarters of non-members. I did not know who he had in mind, may be P. V. Narasimha Rao. As the Minister for Legislative Affairs, I told the officer concerned to evict the non-members whoever they be. PV had to vacate the quarter. This might be one reason for PV's vindictive attitude to me.

Channa Reddy was born in an ordinary agricultural family, but his personality exuded grandeur, majesty and attraction. He loved to lead a royal life and fulfill every desire. Accordingly, he planned to have his sasthipoorthy celebrations in a grand style. This provided enough grist to the mill of his detractors who went to New Delhi in a delegation and gave Indira Gandhi a blown-up account of the celebrations. They succeeded in widening the already yawning wedge between the

two. I had already fallen foul of Channa Reddy, thanks to the Sanjay Gandhi episode. As consistent supporter of Channa Reddy, I had to adopt a low profile under the circumstances. Meanwhile, his detractors stepped up the campaign backed by some Union Ministers from the Telangana region. I found myself alone. To me only Anjaiah seemed to be friendly, but I realised that he too had nursed ulterior motives.

My proximity to Sanjay Gandhi led to rumours that I might take over as the Chief Minister, causing further heart-burning among my enemies. In fact Channa Reddy and I used to function like father and son in perfect tandem. We went to Delhi before the parliamentary elections. I went to meet Sanjay Gandhi, but instead found Indira Gandhi. She told me that fighting the election was a costly affair and that we should also share the burden. As desired by her, Channa Reddy, Devaraj Urs and I took it up as joint responsibility. The Hyderabad-bound aircraft stalled on the runway in Delhi. Channa Reddy, remembering miraculous escape from an air accident sometime ago, hurriedly switched to another plane.

Back in Hyderabad, I extended financial help to my colleagues in the youth Congress and the parent body to fight the elections. It put a great strain on our meagre resources. People who had won the elections and risen to important positions had conveniently forgotten that they owed it to

financial support from Channa Reddy and me. Far from showing gratitude, they targeted Channa Reddy with a missionary zeal to malign him.

Anjaiah's role

Indira Gandhi rehabilitated Anjaiah, who had lost the Assembly election in Musheerabad, in the Rajya Sabha and accommodated him in her Cabinet as the Minister for Labour. Not satisfied, Anjaiah set eyes on the Chief Minister's gaddi and stepped up the campaign against Channa Reddy. I had treated Anjaiah all along as a friend and colleague, but never did I suspect his intentions.

Channa Reddy reacted to the hostile propaganda by sacking seven to eight Ministers who he had suspected of being hand in glove with his detractors. Some people saw my hand too in the plot. Our relations turned sour as Channa Reddy grew increasingly jealous of my equation with the Central leaders.

The Secunderabad Lok Sabha seat fell vacant when Morarji Desai was the Prime Minister. P. Shiv Shanker was actively lobbying for the post of advocate-general. P. Ramchandra Reddy, then Advocate General, was opposed to it. He reminded Channa Reddy that Shiv Shanker was the counsel for Vandemataram Ramachandra Rao in his election petition against Channa Reddy. The Chief Minister reached an agreement for withdrawal of the petition, under which Vandemataram would

be made the Chairman of the Official Language Commission and Shiv Shanker as the party candidate for the Secunderabad Lok Sabha by-election. I was in charge of the campaign for Shiv Shanker. The by-poll became a proxy fight between Morarji Desai and Indira Gandhi. Indira Gandhi, who was in Hyderabad for an election meeting, suggested to Channa Reddy that they visit my house.

I was not aware of the plan. I hurriedly arranged for a sandalwood garland and asked my wife to garland the guest. Indira Gandhi complimented me on my good work. She was sure of victory. Channa Reddy, who waited outside with others, might have felt slighted. Added to this was the hype about me as 'the Rising Star'.

Then came the shocking news of Sanjay Gandhi's death in an air crash. We rushed to New Delhi and remained there till the last rites. We met Rajiv Gandhi. He knew little of politics. Nor was he interested. The same man later became not only the Prime Minister but the hope of the nation. I returned to my routine work as Minister.

Channa Reddy was seething with anger that Anjaiah had hatched a plot to unseat him when Indira Gandhi invited him to join her Cabinet. Anjaiah and my name were doing the rounds for the chief minister's post. Anjaiah asked me to meet Indira Gandhi and propose his name for the chief

minister's post and mine for the deputy chief minister's. I did not oblige.

The moment had finally arrived. Anjaiah took over as the Chief Minister after Channa Reddy stepped down. All of us were anguished. It was a nightmare and a black day. Channa Reddy was beyond compare. Anjaiah could not even hold a candle to him. We wondered if Anjaiah knew, much less have, the credentials to hold the high office and how he thought he was capable of governing the big State. People dubbed the Chief Minister and the Government inefficient. Anjaiah became the butt of jokes even among the general public.

There were three reasons for Anjaiah's choice. First he was Sanjay bhaktha, second he belonged to the backward classes and third, six more months were left for a Telangana leader to continue as the Chief Minister. P. Shiv Shanker advised Indira Gandhi to appoint him.

One day, Anjaiah dropped a bombshell. He did not belong to the backward classes and that his full name was Tanguturi Krishna Reddy! Indira Gandhi was surprised and pained at the turn. Central Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao prevailed upon Indira Gandhi to appoint Anjaiah and was thereby responsible for the sorry state of affairs.

Anjaiah drew a flak for launching programmes without consulting the high command. He was quite reluctant to induct me into his Cabinet,

despite getting full cooperation from me. He took me in under pressure from the high command. He gave me unimportant portfolios and humiliated me in other ways. He was also forced to prune the Jumbo Cabinet by dropping 20 ministers. He could not get rid of me in the reshuffle. On the other hand, he had to allot the important portfolio of Agriculture. I became a red rag for him. Six months later, he sent me an unsigned letter asking me to resign, followed this immediately with the signed one. Why was this happening to me. I decided to investigate.....

It had transpired that a legislator from Krishna district, jealous of me, filed a petition in the High Court, in the name of a villager whose signature had forged, that Anjaiah was not eligible to hold the office. He cleverly shifted the blame on me to please Anjaiah. The judge dismissed the petition, but the petitioner's counsel used his clout to delay the verdict by a day. The legislator rushed the same night to the Chief Minister and informed him that I (Nadendla Bhaskar Rao) filed a petition against him. He advised Anjaiah to square it up with the judge. Anyway the petition was dismissed. For all the pains the legislator took, Anjaiah reciprocated with a mere 'Bahut shukria saab'. Another motive for dropping me was a grim forecast by an astrologer that a 'fair-complexioned man from Guntur' would become the chief minister. Anjaiah took in K. Keshava Rao on the same day I resigned.

Sordid goings-on

I rushed to Delhi the same evening and briefed Indira Gandhi about the sordid goings-on in the State. She was surprised. 'I have not asked him to drop you. Was it not the Home Minister Prabhakar Reddy that I wanted to resign? I have only asked him (Anjaiah) to run the administration efficiently'. Anjaiah's style of functioning not only became a laughing stock, but became a huge liability to the high command.

Around the same time, Rajiv Gandhi was on a visit to Hyderabad. While proceeding to another place, he asked the Chief Minister, who accompanied him, to get off the aircraft. This incident was distorted by the press, which became a talking point everywhere. They created an impression that highers-up in Delhi were annoyed by the defiant attitude of Anjaiah who was expected to obey the high command. Anyway, The Centre decided on a change of leadership on account of inefficient functioning of the Anjaiah Administration.

Then came Bhavanam Venkatram. He was a member of the Legislative Council. C. Jagannatha Rao, who was appointed the Deputy Chief Minister, was also member of the Upper House. This signaled a new era in State politics. There is another interesting aspect to this. Some Union Ministers from Andhra Pradesh convinced the high

command that the party would win the next elections with a big majority if Bhavanam was chosen for the CM's post. Their argument was Venkatram represented a dominant caste group in the State while his wife belonged to another caste group, equally powerful. Together they would bring a windfall for the Congress. I was not taken in Bhavanam Venkatram's Cabinet also. I confined myself to reading and attending to personal work.

Indira Gandhi was disheartened after watching the listless functioning of the Bhavanam Government and sent Kotla Vijayabhaskar Reddy as the fourth Chief Minister of the State. People were fed up with his administration too.

Birth of the Regional party

The urge to float a regional party took deeper roots in me in the prevailing political climate. Bhavanam's decision not to take me in his Ministry was a blessing in disguise. In a way, it catalysed my decision to form the regional outfit.

The stage was set for the new party. I started working in that direction. Having won the Assembly seat on the Congress ticket, I decided to resign. Among those who supported me in forming the regional party were fellow-MLAs, Gadde Ratthaiah, C. Narayana and Adeyya. They were not enthusiastic about quitting the Assembly. Since it was not morally or ethically correct to hold on to the seat after leaving the party, we decided to resign.

When the moment actually came, the three leaders backed off saying it was not necessary to resign for the sake of a party that was yet to take birth. I quit the Assembly in early 1982.

I was drawn to politics as early as in my student days and was actively involved in the Youth Congress and the State politics. My thoughts and plans were totally focused on politics. I did nothing but closely watch the changing

political alignments. I was not depressed by the political developments overtaking the State.

A new idea flashed across my mind. When Channa Reddy had mooted the idea of starting a regional party, I had said the time was not ripe yet, but now I felt it was a crying necessity. There were other things to consider. Andhra politics are distinctively different. Will the people bless the new party over an established party like the Congress. Six months slipped by as we talked about Anjaiah's style of functioning, his frequent trips to Delhi and his Government's rapidly falling stock with the masses. Enough was enough. It was time to act. I received clear feelers from my friends, well-wishers and the general public that now was the time to start the regional party.

Spadework begins

I got down to the job in right earnest. I made a serious study of the manifesto and other programmes of the DMK and the all-India Anna DMK parties to help me draft the rules, regulations and the constitution of the new party. This was kept a closely-guarded secret. To ensure this, I dictated the basic framework, philosophy and other aspects to my wife to maintain the secrecy. Some well-wishers like Ramamohana Rao, son of the late Kakani Venkataratnam, Adusumilli Visveswara rao and ACY Reddy, chairman of the Rajahmundry municipality, cautioned me that I could not single-handedly manage the job and that I should enlist

some more people. Otherwise, they warned, I would meet the fate of those who had ventured in the past and come to grief. I would stand discredited. I might at best win some seats on my own steam, but never enough to form Government.

I recognised that people looked for a change, for a party that could fulfil their aspirations with a new philosophy and approach to problems. I wasted no time. I started discussions with Bezawada Papi Reddy, Inampudi Chakradhar about the nitty gritty of the venture. I got encouragement from many people.

Enter NT Rama Rao

I was in my office when Daggubati Chenchuramaiah, my friend, called up to say 'my brother-in-law will speak to you'. He explained it was N. T. Rama Rao. They became relatives through 'kunda marpidi, a practice in which the brother and sister in one family are in given in marriage to those in the other. This was in 1982. 'Brother', Rama Rao's voice filtered through, 'You have been wronged and humiliated by the Congress party. I have a shooting schedule near your house tomorrow. I will pay a courtesy call, if it is all right with you'. I said 'welcome'. We exchanged pleasantries and talked about this and that. While he got up to depart, I told him 'I heard that you are planning to join politics. I also understand you are trying for the Rajya Sabha seat. We are forming a regional party. You are

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welcome to join us'. He hastily replied he would not entertain such ideas until his sashtipoorthy. We knew that the seed for his entry into politics was sown that day itself.

I knew little about N T Rama Rao other than that he was a prominent film actor known for portrayal of mythological roles. I had no personal acquaintance. We were on the same flight at Tirupati when he came up to me and invited me to his house in Madras for tea. I promised to make it some other time. That was our first meeting.

On another occasion, as Agriculture Minister I had camped in Annavaram guest house and was preparing to leave when Rama Rao, accompanied by my friend Ramakrishna of Kakinada, dropped in. The meeting was brief, as I was in a hurry. Producer Visveswara Rao, who was related to Rama Rao, invited me to be the chief guest at the 100th day celebration of a NTR-starrer. Director Pullaiah and Tapi Dharma Rao were also seated on the dias. I squirmed in the seat in embarrassment as Rama Rao fired broadsides at the Chief Minister Channa Reddy. Looking at my plight, Tapi Dharma Rao quipped 'Bhaskar has a lion's heart'. I hosted dinner to a select gathering of cine artists, doctors, lawyers etc in connection with the 'sashtipoorthy' celebrations of Channa Reddy. Rama Rao and Nageswara Rao also turned up. On account of a sudden downpour, we had to move everything from the lawns into the house.

In that confusion, I could hardly notice Rama Rao. He had finished his dinner and left.

On March 23, 1982 (the day our party was formed), he came from Madras and drove straight to my house. This time too, I did not have time to extend proper hospitality to him. Some newspapers tried to project me in bad light. They said that I went to Ooty and personally brought him to Hyderabad to join the new party. This was unfair and sad. I had never pressured him to join our party. It was not necessary. We had already finalised the organisational structure, identified people and fixed responsibilities. Rama Rao arrived at this juncture.

Rama Rao used to be in touch from Ooty or Chennai despite hectic shooting schedules. He would enquire about how many MLAs were ready to join him and the cost of fighting the election etc. Tired of answering the same questions every time, I asked him why he needed to know all the details. He could instead join the party if he was interested.

Well-wishers and seniors like Papi Reddy, Chakradhar, Gadde Rattaiah, C. Narayana, Adeyya, Kakani Ramamohana Rao, Adusumilli Visveswara Rao, Jayaprakash, ACY Reddy would often visit me as a gesture of solidarity. I mapped out everything on paper - party programmes, marking right men for right jobs in every region of the State, names of prospective secretaries with

addresses and assigning tasks to different party workers.

The first item was development of the State. Other subjects related to give and take between the party and the ruling party at the Centre, unemployment problem, farmers issues. We incorporated these items in the party plan after consulting all concerned. 'Success guaranteed', the elders blessed me. Like the elders cautioned before, doubts also started gnawing within about my ability to manage single-handed. I was in a fix. On the one hand these doubts pulled me back and on the other, the burning desire egged me on.

Rama Rao used to spend much of his free time in the studio. On his invitation I dropped in at his place. I heard his wife and children making hurting comments, within earshot, about my efforts to drag Rama Rao into politics. I felt bad. I had never invited Rama Rao to enter politics. He visited me on his own. We were planning to launch regional party. True, knowing about his interest, we said, he could join our party. At that time he ruled it out until his sashtipoorthy. Now why this back chat?

We did not know why Rama Rao, who enjoyed immense popularity and wealth as a leading film actor, intended to join politics. He had suffered on account of income tax raids and at the hands of corrupt officials. He was denied accommodation in Government guest house because it was already

reserved for a minister. These experiences might have hurt his ego and drove him to politics or just the lure of a position of power and authority. Each drew own inference for Rama Rao's motive to join politics.

Rama Rao had scaled dizzy heights of stardom. Would it not have implications for others in the field if he joined politics. I had in mind the possibility of Akkineni Nageswara Rao, another cine stalwart, contesting against him as the Congress candidate. I wanted Rama Rao to check it out.

He offered to talk to Nageswara Rao over dinner the same night and invited me to join. I declined. 'Brother. Nageswara Rao has made it clear he has no plans. He advised me also not to join politics', he telephoned to me after the dinner meeting. I Rung up saying 'Oh. well. If that is the case, it is up to you'. I dropped the issue at that.

Muhurtham for the launch

We held many meetings about starting the party. We asked a Godman from East Godavari district to fix auspicious muhurtham. He fixed it at 2:15 p.m. of March 23, 1982 and assured us that people would come in a surge at the mere tap on their door. On that day, an ad hoc committee was formed with me as president. Rama Rao drove straight from airport to my house for the meeting. He was accompanied by Chenchuramaiah. I learnt

later that Chenchuramaiah had tried to prejudice Rama Rao's mind against me. That was his nature.

In deference to Rama Rao's age - he was some 15 years my senior, I offered my chair and took another next to it. My gesture did not go down well with C. Narayana, Gadde Rattaiah, MLAs, and others. They came for the launch of a new party, but not to see the leadership handed over to cinema stars, they burst out. It did not augur well for the party. They minced no words in expressing their disapproval. I reasoned with them that Rama Rao was the topmost actor with a large fan following and fame. These could be gainfully harnessed for the benefit of the party. Let us not object, I appealed to them. They might have relented, but were far from convinced. Rama Rao took me aside during the break. 'Brother. How much cash do you have? How much do we need to put up 300 candidates? How do we raise the funds?' he asked me anxiously. I asked him not to worry. These things could wait.

The appointed hour arrived. We got women to light the traditional lamp to mark commencement of the function and render the Telugu anthem 'Maa Telugu Thalliki Malle Poodanda'. Rama Rao and others arrived. Finding the room too small to accommodate the large number of people, we moved to the lawns of the MLA quarters. The meeting was rounded off with 'Cheyyetthi Jaikottu Telugoda - gathamentho ghanakeerthi galavoda'. MLAs present in the hostel watched the

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proceedings spell bound from their rooms. ACY Reddy, municipal chairman, Vasantha Nageswara Rao, T. Jeevan Reddy, samiti presidents, Irigineni Tirupati Naidu had already issued statements intending to join. So did Annabathuni Satyanarayana, chairman of Tenali municipality. We kept some names ready for christening the new party.

I asked Rama Rao as an elder, to indicate a name for the party. 'Ours is Telugu Desam (land of the Telugus). Let us name it 'Telugu Desam', he said casually. Some people laughed derisively. 'You do not seem to be capable of even selecting a name. You seem to think a regional party is like a cinema', they taunted us. I ignored it and announced that Rama Rao would be the president of the party. Kommareddy Suryanarayana, MP from Eluru, wondered how could puppeteers start a party. You are all a bunch of incompetent and inexperienced nobodies. You do not even know what name to give to your party. Do you have the guts and the strength to take on the Congress party', he asked sarcastically. The same day, a newspaper tycoon telephoned to me and desired to speak to Rama Rao. He sent S. N. Sastry, senior journalist, to my house for that purpose.

I explained to Rama Rao how important it was to cultivate the press for its continued support. I then gave the phone to him. Some journalist friends advised me against having Rama Rao as the party president. I brushed aside their

objections, keeping in view the party's winning prospects and the need for a radically new campaign style capable of winning the hearts of the masses. As for myself, I had earned name and money as lawyer. I owned three plots in Jubilee Hills and built two houses. I had enough resources for my activities. We were on the look-out for office space in the centrally located Indira Park area. Rama Rao offered to house the party in his studio complex since he faced security problems elsewhere. I said 'yes'.

Designing the Party flag

We had planned to bring out a booklet containing the ideals and the philosophy of the party. How should the party flag be like? Rama Rao, who was present along with leaders, favoured the auspicious yellow. It should also feature the hut, the plough and the wheel to identify with the farmer and the industrial worker. We and our followers dedicated ourselves to the task before us.

The party office was located in the studios where a furnished room was arranged for me exclusively. Rama Rao's office was next to mine. He would meet visitors and fans and fulfill shooting commitments during the breaks. Having the office in the NTR studios had its own disadvantage. The party invited ridicule for identifying itself with cinema folks. Nevertheless, we decided to continue the office there.



**Bhaskar Rao receiving Indira Gandhi at the
Vijayawada Canal Guest house in 1978**



**Bhaskar Rao flanked with Indira Gandhi when she
visited Divi Seema which was devastated by the
cyclone in 1977**



Former Chief Minister Sri Nadendla Bhaskar Rao in Conversation with AICC-I Chairman, Former Prime Minister Sri Rajiv Gandhi, during his transit visit from Madras to Delhi, at Begumpet Airport



Bhaskar Rao representing Khammam Constituency as Parliament Member, with Sonia Gandhi along with other MPs from Andhra Pradesh in 1998



Bhaskar Rao & Bullipantulu (Gopala Krishnaiah, MLC) with Sanjay Gandhi in Chennai, in 1979



Bhaskar Rao with Chief Minister Dr. M. Chenna Reddy as a Cabinet Minister



**Bhaskar Rao addressing the meeting of ICR in 1979.
Seated next is Prof. N.G. Ranga, M.P.**



Bhaskar Rao with Rama Rao during the public meeting at New MLA quarters On March 29, 1982.



Bhaskar Rao with Rama Rao during the public meeting at Nizam College grounds, April, 1982



Governor Sharada Mukharji adminstering the oath of secrecy to Bhaskar Rao as Law & Legislative Affairs Minister, for the first time, in the Cabinet of Dr.Chenna Reddy on 10th March 1978



Governor K.C. Abraham, administering the oath of secrecy to Bhaskar Rao as Agriculture Minister in the Cabinet of Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Anjaiah in 1981



Governor Ramlal, administering the oath of secrecy to Bhasker Rao as the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh on 16 August 1984



**Andhra Pradesh Governor Ramlal, Chief Minister
Nadendra Bhaskar Rao & Mukassir Shah**



**Bhaskar Rao with Gandhiji's grand daughter Tara
Gandhi Bhattacharya**



**Akkineni Nageswara Rao & Bhaskar Rao with
Gandhiji's grand daughter Kulkarni**



**Bhaskar Rao with Netaji Subhash Chandrabose's
daughter Anita Plaf (At New Residence 'Sarva
Dharma Nilayam')**

Whatever the detractors might say, people enthusiastically extended full support to all our programmes and turned up in thousands. We announced that the party flag would be unveiled by Rama Rao at a public meeting at the Nizam College grounds on April 11. Lakhs of people gathered at the venue when I and Rama Rao arrived in a huge rally through the main streets of the city. The gist of our speech was that a new era had dawned in the history of the Telugu people and that no force on the earth had the power to stop the juggernaut.

Rama Rao labeled the meeting 'Mahanaadu' after the linguistic practices and traditions prevalent in Tamil Nadu where he had spent much of his life. I once asked Telugu scholar Diwakarla Venkatavadhani the meaning of Mahanaadu. 'There is no specific meaning. Such expressions are catchy. The Tamils use them. You too can adopt. There is no harm', he replied. The party executive was on the dias - T.N. Sadalaxmi, G. Rattaiah, C. Narayana, V. Tulasiram, Aditya, Bezawada Papi Reddy and I. We conducted workers meeting and adopted resolutions, apart from conducting the grand public meeting at the same venue.

Putchalapally Sundarayya had earlier charged us with polluting politics. He questioned the need for a new party. These questions were answered in our speeches at the Nizam College meeting. We spelt out the reasons for starting a regional party,

our campaign to oust the inept and incompetent Government and our plans to transform the State. We promised to invigorate the sluggish administration with the induction of new blood by involving the educated, the youth and the experts.

I was the first speaker in all our meetings. Rama Rao, who had no political background, would pick up points from my speech and elaborate them in his own style. People appeared convinced 'here is new blood. They can deliver the goods'. They lavished their love and support on us even more generously. Of course, jealous people who could not digest our popularity spat venom, continuing with the refrain 'this is a cinema peoples party' to please their leader Indira Gandhi.

Restoring the Telugu pride

We did not float the party just to spite another party. It was motivated by a genuine desire to offer something new to the people and to develop the State. People from the South were disdainfully referred to in New Delhi as 'Madrasis'. We should erase this false and deprecating impression from their minds. The Telugus should develop a distinct identity and recognition of their own and make everyone in Delhi and across the country know their greatness. We planned to have Telugu milestones all along the highway to Delhi and also to conduct the affairs of the Government in the mother tongue of the people. This was the gist of our fiery speeches and the people cheered us wildly.

Birth of the Regional party

The second Mahanaadu was held in Tirupati in the blistering summer heat of May, a month after the Hyderabad Mahanaadu. We left the job in charge of Veeraraghavulu Naidu of Tirupati. We flew down from Hyderabad to address workers meeting where a large gathering was present to join the party. We were told that pickpockets from Chennai would come whenever big public meetings were held in the temple town. They demonstrated their sleight of hand and relieved us of our purses.

We were taken round the town in an open jeep before reaching the venue. Minutes before the start, Harikrishna and Veeraraghavulu Naidu created a disgusting ruckus insisting that Rama Rao should speak first instead of me. Contrary to their expectation, Rama Rao cut a sorry figure not knowing what to speak. On earlier occasions I spoke first and he culled some points from my speech and developed on them in his characteristic style. Those who did not know of his handicap, felt it would be an affront to Rama Rao if he were to speak after Bhaskara Rao. They felt disappointed when Rama Rao's speech lacked substance and spirit.

That being Rama Rao's birthday, we had darshan of Sri Venkateswaraswami at Tirumala and proceeded to Chennai for overnight stay at his house. His son Balakrishna saw us off at the airport the following morning. Back in Hyderabad,

we settled down to serious party work. Believing that the elections might not come in the near future, Rama Rao would snatch some time off to fulfill pending film commitments.

I would stay most of the time in the office devoting all my time for strengthening the party and meeting functionaries. We planned to hold a meeting in Nizamabad, the first such in a district centre. We picked a couple of dynamic youngsters to be in charge of party programmes - Mahipal Reddy and Papeswara Rao for Nizamabad, Veerarghavulu Naidu for Chittoor, Seethaiah for Guntur and V. Rambhupal Choudary for Kurnool. It was not easy for party in-charges to raise funds for holding meetings. We had to choose financially sound people for the job. The party cadre gave us a rousing reception in Nizamabad. We were taken through the main thoroughfares in an open jeep. Our daily schedule included workers' meeting in the morning and a public meeting in the evening. People thronged our meetings in large numbers wherever we held them.

On a trip to Kurnool, the party in-charge Rambhupal Reddy and others put up large cut-outs, arches and welcome hoardings for us. B. V. Mohan Reddy, local leader, complained to Rama Rao about certain cut-outs featuring me prominently. Then on, he had continuously created a rift between me and Rama Rao. Cinema people might be enamoured of the cut-outs and banners, but they held little fascination for me. By lending

an ear to Mohan Reddy's complaints, Rama Rao had caused further widening of the differences. S. Ramamuni Reddy organised a meeting in Cuddapah which again was a huge success. Thus our meetings drew unprecedented crowds everywhere.

An estimated six to seven lakh people had attended our Guntur meeting. This unnerved the opposition leaders like Putchalapally Sundarayya who continued to dub the regional outfit as 'drama party' and 'cinema party'. Deep in their hearts, they were much worried about the catastrophic consequences of the popular surge on them and their parties.

Chandrababu's vain boast

Nara Chandrababu Naidu was a Minister of State in the Congress Government. Since he was son-in-law of Rama Rao, he was worried that his loyalty to the Congress might be suspect. Presumably to prove his loyalty, he said he would contest against Rama Rao if the party asked him to. This was how he tried to fool the public.

Although I did not share the view that our party lacked the cadre to convert the immense popular goodwill into votes, I nevertheless believed that it was necessary to bring together other opposition parties to avoid split of the non-Congress votes. Convinced by my argument, Rama Rao invited Sundarayya, P. Babul Reddy,

Nallamala Giriprasad and other leaders for dinner to discuss the issue. They appeared lukewarm to the idea and even looked at it with some suspicion.

We carried the exercise further by visiting Sundarayya and holding another round of talks with other leaders. In the event of an alliance, the CPI demanded 120 seats and the CPM 55. Did we slog day and night to reach people in the most remote villages only to hand over seats to these parties on a platter? We came back asking them to think it over.

Well-wishers like Tatineni Prakasa Rao and ABK Prasad intervened and held talks with Sundarayya and others. Our understanding was that they demanded 55 seats, but they did not seem to soften a bit. Against this distressing background, the newspaper magnate, himself a communist party card-holder at one time, stepped in to foil the game. He saw to it that the Telugu Desam did not reach an understanding with the communists. I had thought as a compromise we could offer them 45 seats, but that was not to be because the media businessman threw the spanner in the works.

Mistake Regretted

On account of my close ties with Neelam Rajasekhara Reddy and Chandra Rajeswara Rao, I gave a brief idea to them about the developments. The senior communist leaders made it clear that State-level issues were handled by the State

leaders only and that the central leadership did not interfere. It was another thing that soon they realised the mistake and regretted it. It was clear to us that certain media tried to harness the unprecedented turn-out and popular response to the Telugu Desam to further their business interests by giving full coverage.

The newspaper magnate invited me and Rama Rao for tea. I did not know the motive. We chatted for a while. The newspaper owner had at one time been very close to me. He brought me a gift from Germany and recalled how he remembered me during his trip abroad. 'How many times had I wished to see you as the Chief Minister', he told me.

Rama Rao utterly lacked political experience. He had no idea of caste and communal groupings obtaining in the State. By offering sound advice on selection of candidates, the media baron sought to get a firm hold on Rama Rao and thereby run a 'shadow government'. He did not at all like my control over the party. He, therefore, poisoned his mind against me by carrying tales and making allegations. He sought to benefit from Rama Rao's lack of political experience. None might object to this, but it would certainly be a serious matter if his agenda were to derail the party's lofty ideals and objectives. I was more experienced and had earlier been a Minister. They thought they could get firmer grip on Rama Rao and the party if they

got me - a thorn in their flesh - out of their way. They sowed seeds of poison and stoked the embers to create a raging fire to separate us.

That day, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who later became the Prime Minister, was guest at the newspaper owner's house. We were also invited to join. I advised Rama Rao against attending the party since the BJP was often seen as a communal party. I told him 'if we go to the party, it will create misgivings among the Muslim brethren who constitute 9 per cent of the population in Telangana and 4 per cent in Andhra. We cannot afford to be distanced by them'. Heeding my advice, Rama Rao informed the host about his inability to attend. This angered the media baron.

Briefing the Minorities

We attended a gathering of Muslim leaders, spiritual heads and others at the residence of Siddique, an architect. Sultan Salahuddin Owaisi, Mohammed Ibrahim Bin Masqati, Siddique and others were present when we spelt out our party philosophy, our commitment to secularism and respect to all faiths. I answered their queries. Impressed by my articulation, Rama Rao said 'Brother, we have done the right thing by not attending the newspaper man's party'.

From then on, the newspaper man developed enmity with me. I did not know why. There could be one reason. Chief Minister Channa Reddy was

offended when the newspaper magnate invited the Governor, Sharada Mukherjee, to inaugurate his eenadu office in Vijayawada. Channa Reddy had heard about allegations against the chit fund company and asked me to find out. Strictly, the subject did not fall in my purview. But I asked the Home Secretary to ascertain the facts and report. I gave the feedback to the Chief Minister. The Home Secretary might have told the newspaper man that he acted under instructions from me. But none ever knew that it was the Chief Minister at whose instance I initiated the action. In fact, no action was taken against the company. Since the chit fund company was under the same management as the newspaper, the owner might have borne grudge against me. I could not see any other provocation.

He started a campaign to malign me by carrying stories satirising my actions, creating misgivings among the public and leveling false allegations. Rama Rao and I were touring together and addressing meetings. He plotted to separate us. I could not stand it any longer. Should I watch helplessly in the face of unrelenting mud-slinging? Was it fair to mislead the people just to spite us? Be that as it may.

We continued our joint tours. Rama Rao attended to shooting schedules whenever time permitted while I was totally confined to party work. On account of his pre-occupation with the

cinema industry, he had neither the time nor the inclination to read books or newspapers. As he had little time to follow political developments and other goings-on in the country and outside, he would depend on me for inputs.

The first phase of our publicity was not only successful, but rewarding in that it enabled us to move closer to the people, understand their problems, their joys and sufferings and to create an awakening among them. We were about to begin the second phase when jealous elements and vested interests like the newspaper magnate argued that instead of undertaking joint tours, we should travel separately, that is, if one of us campaigned in coastal areas, the other should focus on Telangana. The motive to divide us was obvious. They made Rama Rao believe that separate tours would benefit the party. The villain of the piece was a stranger from New Delhi who won Rama Rao's confidence and tendered advice from time to time. He had deftly played the roles of Mahabharatha characters, Salya and Sakuni, in breaking our unity. After he had lost power in 1995, Rama Rao had said the newspaper man had intentionally ruined him by the misleading advice. He confessed that he had made a big mistake by heeding to the advice and thereby wronged Bhaskara Rao.

Enter the Delhi Stranger

Rama Rao decided to refurbish an old van and

Birth of the Regional party

tour Andhra region. He named it 'Chaitanya Ratham'. One day Kotha Raghuramaiah's nephew came to me, accompanied by the stranger, requesting that he be admitted into the party. I directed them to meet the party president. Rama Rao tried to dissuade them saying that he and Bhaskara Rao were tirelessly touring the villages without knowing what was in store. Why should he take the risk? The stranger was not the one to give up. Rama Rao could not say 'no' when he reappeared at the second leg of the tour. For my part, I was touring the Telangana region, eating from my tiffin box, interacting with farmers, leaders of caste groups and others on the fields, in their homes and on the roadside. I tried to understand their problems and answer their questions. During our joint tours, it was not easy to get accommodation in guest houses. Sometimes we got it as I was a former minister.

We were on a tour of Adilabad and Karimnagar districts. It was suggested that we could save a lot of time if we swam across the Godavari instead of going by road. At one stage, we found the waters too deep. The anxious party workers literally bore us to the other side, reflecting their great affection for us and the resentment against the Government of the day. Lakhs of people were waiting to hear us. We returned to Hyderabad by train after addressing the meeting.

Elections were round the corner. There was little time. Vested interests again got busy trying

to create a rift between us. I was concentrating on party work while Rama Rao divided time between party work and unfinished films. At the same he kept himself abreast of all developments.

In the course of our tours, we decided to have lunch in harijanwadas, instead of in the guest houses, understand their living conditions and strive to mitigate their hardship. The idea was to become one with them. We were greatly encouraged by the fact that the general public, the women in particular, helped us to make party meetings a roaring success.

I was then 14 years younger to Rama Rao. Party workers were unable to catch up with my brisk pace in the padayatras and followed me in scooters and cars. This agility flowed from my passion to meet everyone and visit everywhere.

One day Chandrababu Naidu came rushing to the Chief Minister Bhavanam Venkatram and said anxiously ' Rama Rao and Bhaskara Rao appear like sounding our death knell. We should do something drastic to save the party. Otherwise, we will be finished'. Bhavanam Venkatram related this incident to me later.

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chapter 7

Telugu D̄esam landslide

I toured extensively in Telangana and coastal districts to explain the need for the regional party and its programmes. I was on a padayatra in Pedanandipadu village of Guntur district when general elections to the Assembly in January 1983 were announced.

N.T. Rama Rao, who was touring in another part of the State, asked me to rush to Hyderabad. I was in Narasaraopet when my friend Innaiah recommended Dr. Kodela Siva Prasada Rao, a dynamic young man, for Narasaraopet seat. He was initially reluctant, but relented upon persuasion by friends and well-wishers. I included him in the list of probable candidates.

I noted down the names of a number of selfless, committed, educated young men and women with good background during my interactions. Rama Rao did the same exercise in his tours. Included in the list were the names of people we interacted with or were suggested by the locals, friends and well-wishers.

The newspaper baron, who aspired to have a say in the matter, also came up with his own list using his resources and the network of correspondents for the purpose. He never lost an

opportunity to influence Rama Rao to favour his list.

The selection of candidates was just a two-man affair done in utmost secrecy. I and Rama Rao sat down in a room with the lists. We rose above personal considerations, the sole motive being to ensure success in the election. 'Brother. There is nothing like your candidates or mine. All are our people'. This was the spirit in which the process was conducted. The election notification was issued and the dates were announced. We got down to selecting the candidates as soon as we returned from the tours.

Politically naive

Rama Rao thought whoever sat in the left were the leftists and those sitting in the right were the rightists. That was the level of his political understanding and knowledge. There was no need to know, because he was totally involved with cinema and construction activities. Our objectives and ideals being the same, we decided to select educated people to contest the elections.

Prathibha Bharati, a young dynamic woman and daughter of a high court judge, joined me in the padayatra in Srikakulam district and endeared herself to the people by her camaraderie. I noted her name in the diary for a reserved seat. Rama Rao felt that it was necessary to consult her father before finalising her name. When I sounded her

father, who I knew well, he was not enthusiastic. They did not have the resources to fight the elections. I talked him round to finally agreeing. I also informed him that Prathibha Bharathi was the first candidate to be selected as we thought it auspicious to begin the exercise with a woman. Thus, we finalised the list in four days. We made a few changes based on the inputs provided by the district convenors and coordinators.

At this juncture, Maneka Gandhi, who floated Sanjay Vichar Manch, flew down from Delhi and desired to have seat arrangement with us. I knew Sanjay Gandhi well, but not her. When a woman leader offered to join the campaign, we could not say 'no'. She asked for 10 seats, but settled for five. Maneka and I addressed a meeting in Tuni. Latchu Dora, a popular local leader, was to be our candidate for the seat. Instead, he recommended Yanamala Ramakrushnudu, a young advocate representing the dominant Yadava community. We finalised his name, as also of Raja Kannababu, who was with the party from its inception. Likewise, Rama Rao also spotted the probables during his tours. The selection process went on without a hitch. We decided to accommodate the newspaper magnate where his candidates stood a bright chance of winning.

NTR had cold feet

Our new party was handicapped by lack of resources and material required for the campaign.

We knew we did not have the where with all to match our powerful rivals in terms of men, material and most important, money. Unnerved, perhaps by these challenges, Rama Rao developed cold feet and told party treasurer, Tatineni Prakasa Rao he would quit. 'I can't manage. It is a headache. I do not know politics. I made a mistake. I am going. You shoulder the burden', he said in a mood of utter frustration and pessimism. Prakasa Rao informed me about this. I immediately raised rupees four lakhs and deposited it in the party fund to create confidence in the rank and file and to restore Rama Rao disturbed mind. Some party seniors succeeded in restraining Rama Rao from leaving the field. How would outsiders know all this?

Funds started flowing in. Gudavalli Seshagiri Rao contributed Rs 5000 before the selection of candidates was taken up. Another man donated a piece of land in Gandipet. Neither of us allowed these internal issues of the party to become public. For some people, money and business are everything. Not for me or for Rama Rao. Then who is this man who habitually poked his nose in our affairs? I could see this newspaper man's anxiety to reach out to Rama Rao over my head and serve his interests. He had supplied badges and banners for the party. To be fair to him, despite his business obsession, his daily gave considerable publicity to our party.

As we completed the selection process and were getting ready for the campaign, Rama Rao dropped another bombshell. He wanted to back out from contesting the elections. The desire to become the Chief Minister was strong in him, but he was diffident about his own prospects in the elections. What if he lost? His image would be dented beyond repair. These fears plagued him. They were, however, not wholly unfounded. Some elderly sympathisers of the party made cynical predictions. Daggubati Chenchuramaiah himself refused to contest the elections as he did not give the party a ghost of a chance. These might have prompted a demoralised Rama Rao to say 'Brother, count me out. Some friends are saying I can get elected (in a by-election) after the party comes to power'. He was not confident that the party could ride to power. He was also worried about the loss of face and prestige if he were to lose. These fears haunted him.

As for me, I had no option to contesting, win or lose. It was a do or die situation. I had been a Minister and had left the Congress party unable to stand Anjaiah's style of functioning. I had nowhere to go. I must sail with the party I started. It was different with Rama Rao. He had the support of the film industry and a large base of fans. Win or lose, he would remain afloat. What about me?

I told Rama Rao that it was not proper to back

out at this stage after we turned over the reins to him to lead the party. It would also send wrong signals to the public if the party leader himself did not contest. It would do the party no good. I also told him his thinking was flawed.

Encashing NTR charisma

I wanted N.T. Rama Rao to become president of the party because his cine glamour would benefit the party, as it ultimately did. Otherwise, it would be impossible for a political green horn like him to win. Of course, these days money can make anything happen. The Telugu people are great film buffs who take for real the fights, dialogues and other scenes on the screen and react accordingly. They were mesmerised by NT Rama Rao's acting, personality and dialogue delivery. Many fans, who went to Tirupati, would proceed to Chennai for a glimpse of their matinee idol. Rama Rao commanded even devotion because of his identification with the mythological characters.

People who were not fortunate enough to go to Chennai had their desire fulfilled now. They were able to see their idol in flesh and blood right in their midst, thanks to his tour across the length and breadth of the State. Topping it all was their seething anger against the Congress high command and the manner in which it changed the chief ministers in the State. Impressed by Rama Rao's hard-hitting speeches, they carried the

Telugu Desam to a landslide victory in the elections. Another interesting aspect of the elections was that workers and sympathisers of the Congress and all other parties voted for the Telugu Desam. An analysis of the voting patterns would make this clear.

What would have been the scenario had Rama Rao not been in the picture? People were already fed up with the Congress. I could emphatically say that if not victory, the Telugu Desam would at least have emerged as a powerful opposition in the Legislature. The defeated candidates might have lost with wafer-thin margin. The popular mood was such at the time. Fielding our candidates in all the constituencies was the key to my poll strategy.

We floated the Telugu Desam with the lofty ideal of the Telugu people transcending sub-regional barriers to come under the unified umbrella of Andhra Pradesh. We thought NT Rama Rao alone could achieve this as his fans were spread over the entire State. This was the reason we wanted him to contest from each of the three regions of the State. My sole intention was to preserve the integrity of the State and to let the Delhi rulers know the identity, the greatness and the self-pride of the Telugus. I encouraged Rama Rao to contest from the three regions in view of the wide-spread star image and fan following. He agreed to file nomination from Nalgonda in Telangana and Tirupati in Rayalaseema regions,

Telugu Desam landslide

but oddly enough, was dead set against contesting from his own native Gudivada in the coastal region. Adusumilli Visveswara Rao, I and some others put maximum pressure on him to change his mind, saying it was a grave mistake to shy away. At last, he agreed and I personally ensured that he filed the nomination for the Gudivada seat.

As planned, I filed nomination from my own constituency, Vemuru, in Guntur district.

People, our strength

Our only strength was the people. They supported us whole-heartedly. It did not matter that we did not have enough resources. They did not just wish our victory, but strove hard to ensure it. That was the kind of mass awakening our party had generated. Added to this was their growing disenchantment with the ways of the Congress party and its Government. They were convinced that only a regional party could reflect, articulate and fulfill their aspirations. Generous donations to the party were used to help the financially-weak candidates while not even a paisa was given to those who were better placed.

I and Rama Rao hit the campaign trail. Joined by Maneka Gandhi, I started the campaign in Srikakulam district while he travelled in his Chaitanya Ratham in another part of the State. I told Brahmananda Reddy we were sure to bag 200 seats and asked him what he, as a senior politician,

thought about it. 'You are trying to pull a mountain with a strand of hair. If it comes, well and good. Otherwise, all you lose is the strand of hair', he said in a contemptuous tone.

Spotles selection

By choosing the educated and the professionals like doctors, lawyers and engineers as our candidates, we not only attracted the people to our side but left nothing for the rivals to criticise our nominees, all new to politics and with spotless character. We did not want to confine ourselves to our respective constituencies. Leaving Kommineni Seethaiah to look after my campaign in Vemuru, I and Rama Rao separately and extensively campaigned for the party candidates. We could not rope in the communists, however much we wished to. Ours was a new party and theirs an established one. Ego stood in the way of an understanding between the two. Our only ally was the Sanjay Vichar Manch. We worked together without a hitch.

We were greatly benefitted by Rama Rao's cine glamour, body language, style and delivery of speech that cast a spell on people and stirred their consciousness. People virtually rained votes on us. The magnitude of the mandate was such that Narayana Goud, our victorious candidate from Himayatnagar, died immediately after hearing the happy news. He could not bear the joy. I had just

returned after winning from Vemuru. We both consoled the bereaved family. This done, we got down to the task on hand - Cabinet formation.

Several people tried to capitalise on Rama Rao's lack of knowledge of political affairs to gain a hold on the party. He was not comfortable having to deal with an experienced politician like me. It was easier for these people to drive the wedge between us. Rama Rao was already besieged by suggestions and advice, mostly bad advice, from different quarters. He was a confused man. They spared no opportunity to prejudice his mind against me. Never was a well-meaning advice offered.

Weaknesses and foibles

Rama Rao was no angel. He too suffered from human weaknesses and foibles. He fell into their trap. As a result.....

Some people recommended inclusion of anti-Bhaskara Rao MLAs in the Cabinet while some others even prepared a list with names of MLAs. He kept the list with him. He let the cat out of the bag, unwittingly, during our discussion on the Cabinet formation. Everyone waited anxiously while we finalised the list. The Delhi Stranger and a few others tried to make a case for their inclusion, but we responded with a firm 'no' at the very outset. He warned Rama Rao that the newly-elected MLAs would be loyal to me and therefore, he should

protect his flock from poaching. They succeeded in projecting me as a villain, while conveniently white-washing my positive side.

A combination of factors - my efforts to start the regional party, support of my MLAs and MPs, NTR's charisma, selection of candidates - led to a landslide victory for the regional party. Even so, my detractors were not impressed. Like Tweedledum and Tweedledee, they acted in tandem to create misunderstanding between me and Rama Rao. Their idea was to fulfil their agenda through Rama Rao and towards this end, they worked night and day.

Regional party in the saddle

It was an unforgettable chapter in the annals of the State's history. People looked forward to it with great expectations. It was the first meeting of the legislature party held in the Jubilee Hall in Hyderabad on January 7, 1983. I proposed that N. T. Rama Rao be the leader of the legislature party while P. Mahendranath seconded it. The election was unanimous.

The party did not have a secretary or a general secretary or even an executive committee. The working committee was disbanded. NT Rama Rao was everything. He was the supremo. Even so, we had worked together. We urgently needed a secretary to present the legislature party resolution to the Governor and to request him to invite Rama Rao to form the new Government. I penned the letter, signing it as secretary, and presented it to the Governor, K. C. Abraham.

The following day, Rama Rao and I were together, just two of us. He had by then developed some notions about me. He had already with him the names of the Cabinet aspirants antagonistic to me. Need we say that the names were sponsored by none other than the newspaper management.

The newspaper magnate had advised Rama Rao not to take me into the Cabinet. He could instead consider me for the Speaker's post. I had already sensed that something was brewing. I maintained a dignified silence. This was not anyway the right moment to make an issue.

"Brother. How should we go about it', Rama Rao asked me as we sat down for the exercise. I spelt out the general principles governing the Ministry-making and said it was entirely up to him to choose the Ministers. Elaborating the do and don'ts, I said the Cabinet strength should be small, not exceeding 12 or 14 Ministers. Since both of us belonged to the same caste and he was the Chief Minister, it was not necessary to have another person of the same caste. I suggested that he could induct two Reddys each from Telangana and Andhra region, a Brahmin, a Harijan, a tribal, a backward classes candidate and a woman member. I also said a Muslim from Andhra region should be taken because hitherto Muslim ministers had all been from Hyderabad only.

Ministry-making exercise

After noting down the points, he said 'Brother. It all looks perplexing. You name them. I have no objection. I will take anyone you recommend'. He struck off the list with him and entered in his diary the names I indicated. When the name of NallapuReddy Sreenivasul Reddy came up, i said

we should consider Bezawada Papi Reddy as he was one of the founding spirits of the party. We opted for Sreenivasul Reddy in view of his legislative experience, lack of which proved a handicap for Papi Reddy. We picked P.Mahendranath as he represented the dominant Harijan group in Telangana.

In this context, I asked Rama Rao not to force me to join as I had thrice been a Minister. 'You run the Government, I will render advice whenever needed', I said in all seriousness since I regarded the party as more important than a Minister's post. 'What?', he burst out, ' the Cabinet without you. I cannot imagine it. No. I will not be Chief Minister. How can I handle the Assembly? How do I know the rules and procedures of the Legislature? I do not even know how to answer questions. You have guided the party this far. Now what will be my fate if you back off '. He sounded pitiable.

Perhaps the Delhi Stranger might have set eyes on my Cabinet seat. Rama Rao refused to be sworn if I did not join. 'I can't handle this. Take any portfolio, I have no objection. Take all the portfolios', he said in some disgust. He took me into the Cabinet in spite of my protests that I was happy that I had accomplished my mission and I wished for nothing more. My name figured next to his in order. I chose the non-controversial Finance portfolio, but he tagged Electricity, Commercial Taxes and wondered if I could do also with Revenue. I declined.

Regional part in the saddle

As we were discussing the matter, the Evil Gang descended. One of them emphasised the need for a trustworthy man in the Cabinet who could handle files and assist him. He even named the man for that slot. Rama Rao told me about this. I reminded him that our party had consistently opposed the policy of inducting non-legislators into the Ministry. We would become a laughing stock if we, as the party in power, repeated the mistake. If he was keen on accommodating him, he could be fitted in some other capacity. He saw the point. Rama Rao did not indicate who he had in mind for the Cabinet berth, I guessed it could be the Delhi Stranger. I made it clear to Rama Rao that the strength of the Ministry should not exceed 15. The small Rajagopalachari Cabinet should be the ideal and not the discredited Jumbo Cabinet of Anjaiah. Rama Rao put so much of pressure on me that I had no choice but to accept. I finalised the Cabinet formation single-handed. We had to keep out some aspirants, even though they were very close to me, in order to adhere to the guidelines.

Top Secret List

Rama Rao noted down the 14 names. We decided that the list should remain confidential except for the would-be Ministers. We personally handed the list of Ministers to the Governor. I returned home after advising Rama Rao to talk to them in person. We finalised the portfolios between ourselves and submitted it to the Governor. We

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did not allow the Ministers to participate in the exercise, nor had anyone demanded a particular subject. It was a great moment when a new party wedded to the aspirations of the people and committed to the development of the State assumed power after defeating a deeply entrenched party of 100 years. None clamoured for this portfolio or that. There was no need too.

We gave the list of Ministers to a police officer with instructions to bring them to Rama Rao's house. The Ministers themselves were not aware till that moment. Nobody knew who was going to be in. The would-be ministers were advised to conduct themselves in tune with their new status and position.

The Chief Secretary called on us at Rama Rao's studios to know about the timing of the swearing-in ceremony. Rama Rao asked him to make arrangements for the ceremony at the Fateh Maidan (Lal Bahadur) stadium on January 9, 1983. The Governor would be invited there to administer the oath of office and secrecy to the new Chief Minister and other Ministers. Earlier ceremonies were held in the Raj Bhavan, but this time it was done with fanfare in the midst of the people. Police officers were seen enquiring about the names and portfolios of the new Ministers. They too were curious to know. I mention this to give an idea of how closely the whole exercise was kept secret.

Some people attempted to analyse the factors

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for the phenomenal success achieved by the regional party in such a short time. The Congress party had constantly supported and patronised a dominant caste group to the detriment of another equally dominant group in the State. The weaker sections also felt neglected. This feeling took deep roots in these neglected sections and they vent their anger with a massive mandate for the new party.

People who had sided with the Congress till then had to switch loyalties to the new dispensation. I had resigned membership of the Assembly before starting the new party, as I was elected on the Congress ticket. Such a step was uncommon those days. It could possibly have been the first time in the country. I dared to float the regional party and take on the combined might of the State and the Central Governments.

At the helm for the first time

For the first time, a regional party, translating the hopes and aspirations of the people, had come to power. The new Government took office at the colourful swearing-in ceremony in front of the people. Akkineni Nageswara Rao, another idol of cine-goers, and Rama Rao's son-in-law, Nara Chandrababu Naidu, were seated on the first row. Naidu had till then been a Congress Minister. A nameless fear and anxiety gripped me. Was it a premonition of bad times to come?

Regional part in the saddle

Even though he was a Minister in the Congress Government, Chandrababu Naidu had wielded his clout as Rama Rao's son-in-law to get the Telugu Desam ticket for some of his followers in Chittoor district. Veeraraghavulu Naidu, district convenor, was heart-broken when the party side-lined him and gave the ticket to his wife. It was a ploy to deny Veeraraghavulu Naidu a place in the Cabinet should he win. Chandrababu Naidu also thought it was easier to defeat a woman candidate. Even if she had won, it would not be difficult to foil her chances of joining the Cabinet.

Chandrababu also ensured that the regional party put up Venkatarama Naidu, a weak candidate against him. What a clever understanding between the father-in-law and the son-in-law! The regional party was started to oust the Congress from power. Now none other than the president of this party chose to field a weak candidate to facilitate his son-in-law's victory. Does it not prove that blood is thicker than water? Mahabharatha, which is known as Panchama Veda, is full of such episodes of favouritism involving Bheeshma, Dronacharya, Aswaththama and others. Does it behove Rama Rao who quoted lofty scriptures in his films? I have no words to decry this. Chandrababu was anyway known for skull-duggery since his college days.

Venkatarama Naidu, considered a weakling, dealt a crushing blow to Chandrababu Naidu,

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leaving him to lick the wounds. Venkatrama Naidu, like other candidates, rode on the crest of a popular wave. People blessed our candidates everywhere. Chandrababu Naidu used his position as NTR's son-in-law to interfere in the selection of our candidates. He should have known that riding two horses was no easy job.

Chandrababu's defeat could be attributed to the untiring efforts of the Telugu Desam cadre which mobilised the people against him. Instead of complimenting the party workers for their splendid work, Rama Rao distanced them all holding them responsible for the defeat of his dear son-in-law. He acted in a foolish and stupid manner, devoid of reason. The dedicated party workers felt crushed under this humiliation.

Shameless U-turn

Strangely enough, on the eve of the swearing-in ceremony, Chandrababu Naidu turned up at the in-laws' house and announced, without an iota of shame or pride, that he would join the Telugu Desam. His behind-the-screen machinations continued until he overthrew his father-in-law in 1995.

Rama Rao and I turned to administration in right earnest. We would discuss every issue and file and pass orders after due deliberation. The first three months saw a positive change in the Secretariat and other Government offices. Officers

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developed a sense of discipline. The Government functioned without scope for corruption.

Chandrababu snubbed

One day Chandrababu Naidu came to me, accompanied by Madasu Gangadharam of Nellore district, wishing to join the Telugu Desam. 'The party president is none other than your father-in-law. You settle it between yourselves. Don't drag me into your arangetram programme', I told them bluntly. Chandrababu Naidu was no stranger. He used to come to me on and off when I was Minister in the Channa Reddy Government. He invited me to be the chief guest at some functions in Chandragiri constituency. He would often deride Rama Rao in a disrespectful tone. I showed little interest and told him it was their family matter. Then he changed the topic and complimented me on my beautiful bungalow. 'I will see you again when I become a Tata or Birla', he said while departing. The remark seemed totally out of context and occasion.

Chandrababu dropped in at my house when I was preparing to leave for the first meeting of the Telugu Desam Legislature Party in Rama Rao's studios on January 21, 1983. He taxed my patience with tell-tales against Rama Rao.

I was already late by 15 minutes for the meeting by which time Rama Rao had finished his address. Sreenivasulu Reddy spoke next. The

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thrust of his speech was that he had no objection to Rama Rao admitting his political foes into the party. I was taken aback. 'Would the Telugu Desam Party become a limited company?' I wondered.

I gathered that in his speech, Rama Rao had said veteran leaders like Gouthu Latchanna wished to lend their services by joining the party and that they should be welcomed. Chandrababu Naidu also was among those desiring to join the party and that he too should be taken into the party fold.]

In my speech, I said my dream of starting a regional party was fulfilled. The party had won the election. That was all I wished. Rama Rao took me into the Cabinet although I wanted to opt out. The victorious members owed their position to the hard and dedicated work of district level cadre. Rama Rao knew none of them. Nor did he know who should be inducted into the Cabinet. I made my displeasure clear. "I do not want to continue as Minister. I am resigning. You choose anyone in my place. It is enough if you continue as the Chief Minister", I told him bitterly. My speech caused a flutter among the MLAs who had no clue 'why Bhaskar Rao spoke like that'.

Admission opposed

Had I spoken about Rama Rao's intention to betray the party by admitting Chandrababu

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Naidu, the MLAs assembled there would have literally bundled him out in the fit of anger. Rama Rao would have lost the authority to continue as the president of the party and leader of the legislature wing. He had already tried to persuade elder son-in-law and his father to endorse Chandrababu's admission. Finding the mood not conducive, Rama Rao lost his patience and threw tantrums. Should the party slam the door on them simply because they were from the other side. He persisted with this silly, illogical argument. The press was present. The next day, Eenadu came out with an editorial 'Jaamaatha dasamagraha' (son-in-law, the tenth Planet or evil spirit) criticising the move to admit Chandrababu Naidu. Other papers also opposed it. The MLAs at the meeting seethed with anger. I told Rama Rao he should not have lost his cool. I suggested that a five-member committee be set up to examine the issue. It was formed.

Brazen Nepotism

Annoyed by the turn of events, Rama Rao asked me to take over the meeting as he had to rush to the Secretariat. He had created a mess at the very first meeting. He had conveniently forgotten the past and unabashedly showed his weakness for the son-in-law. Naturally, the MLAs cultivated a strong dislike and aversion for their leader. It turned out later that he did not go to the Secretariat, nor was there any meeting. It was just

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a drama. He wanted to avoid drawing flak from his own MLAs.

Chandrababu Naidu camped in Rama Rao's house a day before the swearing-in ceremony. Chatting with some leaders, Rama Rao mooted the admission of certain leaders into the party, but stopped short of mentioning Chandrababu by name. Everyone knew who he had in mind. Watching the goings-on, the outspoken Bezawada Papi Reddy exclaimed 'kammaga undayya kamma rajyam' ('How sweet is the Kamma rule'), punning on the word 'Kamma'. What fate had befallen him who had once worked with stalwarts like Jaya Prakash Narayan, he lamented in self-pity. How could a man who dared to contest against his father-in-law be admitted? Turning to me, he said 'you at least should have the sense to dissuade him. We joined the party because of you. Not that we had any illusions about Rama Rao's knowledge of statecraft. If we do not nip these ugly trends at this stage, we will have to face serious problems in future'. He stormed out. At the same time, Venkatrama Naidu who defeated Chandrababu Naidu in the election, threatened to hang himself if Chandrababu was allowed into the party. By treating the issue as a minor issue, Rama Rao had antagonised his own legislators. He flared up when I tried to counsel patience.

'The elderly man might have unknowingly made a mistake. We should take it in our stride

instead of making an issue' I tried to placate them. 'Anyway the matter is before the committee. Let us wait', I said.

Power drunk

Rama Rao was those days busy overseeing construction of his son's house in Jubilee Hills. He came out to greet me and said 'Brother. I am under terrific pressure from my daughter to admit Chandrababu. What shall we do? I am caught in a nasty fix'. I did not know how to respond.

If I had succumbed to weakness or selfishness, we would have overthrown Rama Rao then and there. The media would surely have pictured me as an immoral, untrustworthy and ungrateful man. My culture and upbringing held me back. We gave our blood and sweat for the sake of the party and its success. Did we take all the pains just to invite contempt and ridicule from the people and our rivals? I pondered over these thoughts. On our way back, Rama Rao asked me 'Brother. Who are these MLAs. Are they not here because of my grace? Why are you giving so much importance to them? '.

This is how human psychology works. Power goes to the head. It breeds arrogance. How else can we describe Rama Rao's actions. Instead of realising that the MLAs were angry because of his thoughtless policies, he found fault with me. Yes. They might have just been non-entities till the other day, but now they were MLAs , duly elected

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by the people to make legislations. It was not proper to belittle them. You thoughtlessly tried heroics and cut a sorry figure. I advised him thus and said we could talk about it during our flight to Bangalore the following morning.

Rama Rao was implacable. He took me to task on the phone for allowing the MLAs to speak for so long. I asked him not to get agitated since the committee was on the job. We should focus on our official responsibilities. He was in no mood to listen.

One could well imagine how much pressured Rama Rao was by the family. He was by temperament very emotional, liable to lose the capacity to reason and think. He would do anything in a fit of impulse. On board the flight, I once again tried to explain to Rama Rao it was necessary to enlist the participation and cooperation of the MLAs and that he should not offend them.

Raghupathi, a Telugu man in the Ramakrishna Hegde Cabinet in Karnataka, arranged a meeting in Bangalore for the local Telugus. The main purpose of our visit, however, was to attend the conference of the Chief Ministers of the Southern States'.

NTR's strange logic

The main focus of the conference was to ask for a greater share of the Central resources for the

development of the States. This was necessary since most of the resources were with the Centre and the States, especially the southern states, had limited scope for resource mobilisation. Rama Rao was unable to get the thread of the proceedings. Instead, he advanced an astonishing theory that the Centre was just a myth. 'Where is the Centre without the States?', he asked. The finance ministers of the southern states also participated in the conference.

In response to these demands, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi appointed a Commission headed by Sarkaria to examine the question of devolution of central resources and powers to the States and make recommendations.

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.G.Ramachandran, said Chennai faced a severe shortage of rice and requested for supplies from Andhra Pradesh. Rama Rao lost no time in assuring him. He asked senior officials to take prompt steps to rush the supplies as Andhra Pradesh was surplus in rice.

Back from Bangalore, we turned our attention on administrative matters. We decided to supply the Krishna water to meet the drinking needs of Chennai in line with the inter-statement agreement signed by Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh to divert 15 tmc. ft. for the purpose. It was a joint commitment to Tamil Nadu.

We discussed the matter with J. Raja Rao, Chief Engineer, Major Irrigation. The mode of carrying the water was a major problem. We considered supply by a pipeline. The 350-km long pipeline to Chennai would run through arid zones of our State. There was the risk of the people en route breaking the pipeline for their own use. The idea was dropped. Instead we decided in favour an open channel. Tree and fruit plantations could be raised utilising the soil moisture from the running channel. In flood season water could also be given for irrigation, thus benefiting our farmers.

Raja Rao said under the Bachawat Tribunal award on the sharing of the Krishna waters, Andhra Pradesh was at liberty to take up any number of projects on the river until the year 2000 a.d. We would not encounter any inter-state problem if the channel was taken up. Based on this assurance, we decided to begin work. We had promised during our tours to solve the drinking water shortage in Chittoor district and also agreed to help Chennai tide over water crisis.

But The Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. G. Ramachandran, seemed to be in a tearing hurry. He was under tremendous pressure in the Assembly to act because Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's promise to provide 15 tmc ft. remained unfulfilled. He landed in Hyderabad at short notice. Rama Rao received him at the airport and asked me to join them at the guest house. Our State

did not have resources enough to take up the project. There was no way I, as Finance Minister, could adjust funds. Our financial position was far from comfortable. I was helpless. The project was then estimated to cost Rs 500 crore to Rs 700 crore. It was scheduled to be completed in three years.

MGR - man in a hurry

I had to tell MGR that we did not have a dime. But, he was not the one to give up easily. He was bent upon returning to Chennai with some firm commitment from us to face the Assembly back home. He and Rama Rao reached an understanding that Tamil Nadu would allot Rs 30 crores to start with and Andhra Pradesh would chip in with Rs 5 or 10 crore. Where was the money? Rama Rao had an idea. He said we could raise money by disposing of old equipment and machinery lying in Srisailam and Nagarjunasagar projects sites. Wow, what a novel idea, I muttered to myself.

We decided to complete the project before the other states raised objections. In the name of supplying water to Chennai, we also wanted to benefit our farmers. I wanted to discuss the proposal with the Chief Minister. We wanted to name it 'Rayalaseema Rythu Canal'. He landed in Chennai with the message to the people 'I have brought water '. Before emplaning to Chennai, MGR invited me to the dias and garlanded me and

Rama Rao. 'I am your fan', MGR told me at the meeting. He prompted the Tamil Nadu Minister for Power to write a letter in which he too said he was my fan.

Rama Rao then proceeded to the Press Club to announce project, without letting me know of it. We agreed on 'Rayalaseema Rythu Canal', but he changed the name to 'Telugu Ganga' on the spur of the moment. The press felt the name sounded rather odd. 'Our is Telugu Desam. So the project is Telugu Ganga', he explained.

We went to MGR's residence in Chennai. He hosted us lunch where he praised me to the skies that I was the chief architect of the regional party which rode to power defeating the powerful Congress. It was an extraordinary feat considering that the situation in Andhra Pradesh was different from that in Tamil Nadu where a lot of groundwork was prepared. The anti-Brahmin sentiment translated into a regional outfit known as Dravida Kazhagam and then Anna DMK. Unlike in Tamil Nadu, regionalism did not play a role in AP. "You are the one who sowed the seed. I appreciate you for that. Our friend Rama Rao joined as a cinema actor. You are the sole architect. That is why I congratulate you. I am your fan", he said in the presence of Rama Rao.

MGR organised a public meeting in Chennai to mark the symbolic launch of the Telugu Ganga

project. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi handed over a cheque to Rama Rao on behalf of the Tamil Nadu Government. Rama Rao passed on the cheque to me and I to the Chief Secretary. That day, MGR received us at the airport and drove us to the guest house.

NTR's antics

Apart from Indira Gandhi, MG Ramachandran and NT Rama Rao, the Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Irrigation Ministers of Maharashtra and Karnataka, the Union Minister for Water Resources, Ram Niwas Mirdha, and many other leaders were present. Rama Rao kept on waving to the crowd even as Indira Gandhi spoke. There was some commotion. Indira Gandhi was clearly annoyed by this distraction.

It was programmed that the Chief Ministers of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh would jointly lay foundation for the project at four places. They travelled in separate helicopters. Rama Rao invited me to join, but I declined. Instead, Sreenivasulu Reddy accompanied him. As for the project, I somehow felt that we had bitten more than we could chew.

One day I asked Rama Rao how did he plan to complete project and if it was possible at all. His reply exposed his understanding of the subject. 'No big deal, brother. Just give my fans crowbars and baskets and they will dig up the canal', he said

Regional part in the saddle

casually. I did not know whether to laugh or cry. Did he think it was cinema shooting? I wondered.

Naidu gets toe-hold

Meanwhile, the project cost escalated many times over though water had yet to flow in the canal and reach Chennai. It was the case of counting chicken before they were hatched. Telugu Ganga was grand only in its name. Validity of the Bachawat Tribunal Award lapsed in 2000 a.d. Karnataka started raising objections about the project. It was the result of undue haste exhibited by MGR on the one hand and equally over-enthusiastic response to it by Rama Rao on the other. MGR wanted to go down in history as the man who brought drinking water to Chennai while Rama Rao nursed hopes that the people of Rayalaseema would always remember him for doing what successive Governments had not been able to, namely, providing irrigation facilities. A fortune had been spent on the yet unfinished project. Both States had suffered on account of the unimaginative and impulsive actions of their leaders. It should have been preceded by proper technical, financial and administrative feasibility studies by experts.

Meanwhile, Chandrababu Naidu stepped up pressure on N. T. Rama Rao for admission into the Telugu Desam Party. He did not deem it necessary to leave the matter to the party or to

appreciate that in a democratic polity decisions could not be taken arbitrarily by an individual. He appeared to believe it was just a matter between a man and his son-in-law and that it was obligatory to fulfill the wishes of the son-in-law. The party or the workers had no role to play. He was also not bothered about the reaction of the public. He had lorded it over in the film industry and thought he could do it in politics too. Without my knowledge, he called Sreenivasul Reddy and other members of the committee to examine Chandrababu Naidu's admission and got their stamp of approval. The Delhi Stranger was sent to obtain my signature. I had told Rama Rao 'if you want to ruin the party like this, there is nothing I can do'. I signed the paper and flung it away in disgust. 'We declared from housetops our opposition to dynastic politics and family intervention in party affairs. What are we doing now. Will we not fall in popular esteem? This will certainly affect the party in the long run'. So saying I retired to my room. The Delhi Stranger relayed our conversation to Rama Rao, adding his own spice. The expected, however, happened. Chandrababu Naidu's wish was granted and he was enrolled as party worker. Thus the curtains came down on the sordid drama.

Regional part in the saddle

Style of functioning - whimsical decisions

The abrupt reduction of the age of superannuation of the Government employees from 58 years to 55 was the most damaging of Rama Rao's ill-advised and hasty decisions. This was clearly due to his lack of administrative experience coupled with the mulish obstinacy to have his way in everything.

He had this habit of going to sleep at 7 in the evening and rise at the unearthly hour of 3 in the morning. This he called 'Brahmi muhurtham' when he took major decisions. Pseudo- intellectuals and cronies would turn up at this hour to offer so-called brilliant suggestions about governance, most of which had proved disastrous. It started with the Delhi Stranger and grew up into a coterie, the latest entrant being Nara Chandrababu Naidu and others who switched loyalties from the Congress to the ruling party. The coterie gained strength with the arrival of Chandrababu. They firmed up the grip over Rama Rao by ingratiating into his favour.

Rama Rao asked me to come to his Assembly chambers one day. 'Brother. I understand that

Channa Reddy raised the retirement age of Government employees for dubious reasons. I have decided to reduce it to 55 years', he said. I wanted to know who gave this advice and said it was not at all correct. As Minister in the Channa Reddy Government, I was party to the decision. I told Rama Rao I could not endorse the step. There was no hanky-panky in the decision to raise the age limit. I warned him that Government might run into serious troubles if he went ahead with the move.

He brushed aside my objections. His argument was that the decision would create a lot of vacancies which could be filled with younger people, whose hopes the party had raised. He asked me to endorse his plan. Knowing his obstinacy, I silently walked out. A few days later, he instructed senior officials to implement the order with immediate effect. The Chief Secretary and other officials told him it was not possible to put it to effect in mid-month and it could take effect only from the first of the following month. I had always wondered who could have tendered that disastrous advice. Could it be the newspaper magnate? No. He warned Rama Rao that he had made a big blunder. Who else? Yes. The piece of immature advice could have been tendered by Chandrababu Naidu. The immediate backlash of the action was sudden souring of relations with the employees who had only recently given the regional party a huge mandate.

NTR style of functioning - whimsical decisions

Paralytic reaction

Government activities came to a virtual standstill. Employees idled away while the files piled up in heaps in the offices. Advancement of retirement age came like a bolt from the blue to the hundreds of employees and their families. Some died of shock, while for many others life became a sudden void. A dark future stared at them. How would they live without a job and get the children educated or married? These worries haunted them.

These questions did not trouble Rama Rao in the least. As Panchatantra says, stupid people do not see or listen to reason. Having played havoc with the lives of the employees, he asked his Ministers to go the people and justify his action as one taken in their best interests. He wanted to prejudice the people against the employees. He asked me to go on a tour to convince the people. I refused initially, but had no choice to agreeing.

I reluctantly went to Kakinada. The officers cursed me, Rama Rao and the Telugu Desam Government in the foulest language. 'Did we give the massive mandate to humiliate us like this?', they asked, boiling with rage.

There is a personal angle to the drama. My own brother, Janardhana Rao, who was a gazetted officer, had lost his job overnight. He left with bag and baggage tormented by fears of a dark future

awaiting the family. He did not directly broach the matter with me, but I knew how much mental anguish he might have undergone. I was helpless. What could I do? I sat silently with bowed head as the agitated employees showered abuse on me and the Government. Far from sympathising with my lot, Rama Rao felt that I had failed to convince them. From then on, he started suspecting me.

Passing the buck

Sensing the emotional outcry against the decision, Rama Rao passed the buck to me without any scruples. He said the decision was not personal decision, but taken on my advice! As member of the Channa Reddy Cabinet, I was responsible for enhancing the retirement age to 58. For various reasons, I left the Congress to start regional party. Why would I bear vengeance against the same employees over night. I had never signed or even noted in the Finance department file proposing reduction of retirement age. Nor had I dropped hints or sent feelers to the effect. Yet Rama Rao chose to mercilessly target me. I was projected as the villain. He said those interested could inspect the files. This, I believed, was the handiwork of the crafty son-in-law and his associates. The press seized the opportunity with both hands to malign me further in the eyes of the public by carrying baseless allegations and unwarranted criticism.

The officers knew me well. They also knew that

the charges leveled against me were unfounded and that it was part of a vilification campaign. However, my detractors kept a hawk's eye on my movements and actions. They suspected that I was hand in glove with the officers. I could not even imagine doing such things. Anyway, the employees went to the Supreme Court. The Government filed an affidavit before Justice O. Chinnapa Reddy that it was misled by the Finance Minister. The apex court was not impressed by the shallow argument. It ruled that the decision was in the domain of the Chief Minister, not the Finance Minister, and that the Government should not only take back the prematurely retired employees but pay them back wages to a tune of Rs 70 to 80 crores. It was a slap on the face of Rama Rao. Truth could not be suppressed forever. Rama Rao had to bear the cross for the serious blunder which had played havoc with the lives of the employees and their families.

The whole issue was the result of Rama Rao's administrative incompetence coupled with his weakness to entertain and give credence to tale-bearers.

Once tasted, they say, the thirst for blood never abates. Rama Rao, who tasted absolute power and authority, was not content with the lowering of the retirement age. He thirsted for more sensational measures, a habit that followed him from his cinema days. He was convinced that as the Chief Minister, he was supreme and that his

word was law, whether in the party or in the Government. He conducted the affairs of the State in this manner.

Blow to village administration

I was in Tenali when Rama Rao telephoned me to rush back for an important meeting in the evening. He offered to send a helicopter to pick me. I was worried, not knowing what bombshell he would drop next. Even before I met him, two junior ministers informed me that the Chief Minister had decided to abolish the institution of the grama karanams and munasubs (village officers) in Andhra region and of the Patel and Patwaris in Telangana.

Sreenivasulu Reddy and the Chief Secretary, G. V. Ramakrishna were also present. Ramakrishna pleaded with me and Sreenivasulu Reddy to intervene and dissuade the Chief Minister from taking the drastic action. Karanams, munasabs, patels and patwaris were the pillars of the village administration and that without them, the system would collapse. This system had been in vogue since the days of the British. They were representatives of the Government, regardless of the party in power. These functionaries were the only source for collection of land revenue and crucial details relating to land holdings and a host of other subjects. Their services were indispensable. The Government would run into serious problems if the system was tinkered with.

NTR style of functioning - whimsical decisions

We spared no effort to explain the dangerous implications of the abolition and to request him not to rush with the move. He was deaf to reason and logic. 'Brother. Unless we abolish the system we will not get votes. Patwaris are sucking the blood of the masses in Telangana. They should go', he insisted. He had obviously been influenced by the advice of the inexperienced junior ministers, one belonging to West Godavari district and another to Nalgonda. We told him that he would regret if he listened to the ministers who knew nothing about administration. He nursed an illusion that people would not take notice of him if he did not satisfy their hunger for sensation. We suggested that Rama Rao could experiment with the decision in one or two pilot taluks. Rama Rao, who revelled in keeping the people and the Government on tenterhooks, put his foot down. Gone was the whole system with a single stroke of the pen.

CS blamed

The Chief Minister held the Chief Secretary responsible for the delay in implementation and went to the extent of attributing motives because he belonged to the same caste group as the hereditary village officers. He went to Kothagudem to resolve an issue in Singareni Collieries Company, accompanied by the Chief Secretary and Ch. Harirama Jogaiah, one of the two junior ministers, who egged on Rama Rao to abolish the

village officers system. Rama Rao ticked off the Chief Secretary in abusive terms in the presence of the Minister. He demanded to know why his decision was put on hold. Ramakrishna tried to explain that alternate arrangement would have to be made before the system was scrapped, for which some time was necessary. New village officers should be trained. They had to be acquainted with revenue records like adangal and their importance. 'No. I am not interested in your excuses. I want implementation here and now', he said firmly.

The following morning, the Chief Secretary Ramakrishna dropped in at my house to brief me about the encounter with the Chief Minister. 'I do not want this job. I am quitting', he said in disgust and walked off without even having coffee. He left straight for New Delhi. I was disturbed. The Chief Secretary might have been annoyed by the rash, ill-advised actions of the Chief Minister without caring about its implications for the public.

The press also devoted space to the issue. What if the decision threatened the very survival of the Government, I pondered. Rama Rao could always go back to the cine world. What about me? I was Minister three times in the Congress party. I resigned unable to face humiliation and floated the regional party. I steered it to power. Now the same party was plagued by intrigues, indiscipline,

NTR style of functioning - whimsical decisions

nepotism, capricious decision-making and the autocratic style of running the Government. I could snap my ties with the Telugu Desam as if it were a blade of grass. But would I enjoy the same goodwill and support from the people? These thoughts troubled my mind. I was in a fix. People in such situation would be prone to taking rash decisions.

I never had any illusions about Rama Rao's political or administrative acumen. I had hoped to run the administration in the name of Rama Rao and serve the people. I had not bargained for this situation. It became clear that Rama Rao lacked dedication or purity of purpose. Having moved with him closely, I could understand his unique personality, his weaknesses and beliefs. He would be the first to claim credit for success and to pass the buck when things turned awry. I pondered whether such a person could be trusted with running the affairs of the State. People had seen only his majestic personality. They had no opportunity to see the ugly face behind the mask.

Betrayal of trust and friendship were deeply ingrained his mentality. It took me time to realise this. He was capable of, as the Telugu adage goes, dumping the raft after crossing the stream. I and I alone was guilty of bringing him into politics and installing him in the highest position. I paid the price for it. I feared that this would happen one day or the other.

N.T. Rama Rao nursed the feeling that he was wronged by the karanam of his native Nimmakuru in Krishna district in the issue of patta for his lands. The press had reported that in order to spite an individual, Rama Rao had dismantled the whole set-up of village officers. God only knew the truth. You could not mend an obstinate mule.

Road bridge, a missed opportunity

We in the Government committed a major blunder in respect of a road bridge project. Thousands of vehicles plied both ways on the Prakasam Barrage across Krishna river at Vijayawada. As the heavy traffic posed a threat to the safety of the barrage, we decided to construct another road bridge. Keeping the long-term needs in view, I proposed a four-lane bridge to facility the voluminous traffic between Vijayawada and Guntur. I had not gone abroad, but I read about these wide bridges connecting cities in the United States. I proposed a similar bridge at Vijayawada. The Union Ministry of Surface Transport approved our proposal but suggested that the Minister concerned, Kotla Vijayabhaskar Reddy, also participate in the foundation-laying function.

Rama Rao shook with anger. 'Who is this fellow? The Centre is only a myth. How can Indira Gandhi send her man for our function'. He gave another demonstration of his nasty temper, political immaturity and arrogance. He rejected

the four-lane proposal and decided in favour of two-lane bridge. It was a very hasty and narrow-minded reaction. He did not realise how much loss we would suffer by foregoing the benefits of a wider bridge. I declined Rama Rao's invitation to attend the foundation laying function. Sreenivasulu Reddy was present. Rama Rao could not possibly stand his presence. He might have personal differences with Vijayabhaskar Reddy, but he should know that Reddy should be present in the capacity of the Union Minister.

What a folly to rebuff the Centre's offer to share the project cost? Is this the way to run the Government affairs? Was it not self-defeating. I told Rama Rao he had erred in the matter. Government would have saved a lot of money by constructing the four-lane bridge. The estimated cost was low at the time. With the bridge unable to handle the increasing traffic, Government was forced to take up another bridge, known as Sri Kanaka Durga Varadhi, at great cost. This was the best example of what happened when people in power failed to display far-sightedness.

Meanwhile, hangers-on and cronies continued to pay obeisance to the leader in the wee hours of morning (brahmi muhurtham) and inflated his ego with fulsome praise. I was never in the habit of visiting Rama Rao at that time. The coterie put dangerous ideas into his fertile brain. 'You started a party and rode to power in nine months. You

wiped out the Congress. You only have to wish. You could one day become the Prime Minister'. This was their refrain. His ego thus bloated, Rama Rao lost no time in spelling out his plan to form the 'Bharata Desam'.

All-India designs

We had decided to hold the party's first mahanadu after coming to power in Vijayawada. Without my knowledge, Chandrababu Naidu, the Delhi Stranger and others egged on Rama Rao to invite leaders of all opposition parties to the mahanadu as a step toward forging an anti-Congress front. The BJP, which won only two seats in the Lok Sabha elections, and other parties saw this as God-sent opportunity. They jumped on the NTR bandwagon and looked up to him as a Messaiah come to save the country. They rushed to his side like migrating birds from Russia and China flocking to the Kolleru Lake every year. The very same people who dismissed Rama Rao as a grease-paint artiste and ridiculed his political ambitions were now preparing to attend the mahanadu.

Well. At this juncture the couterie intensified the efforts to widen the differences between me and Rama Rao. They knew that unless I was out of the way, they could not firm up the grip over Rama Rao and the party. I was by birth and culture a Congressman. So I should be shown the door.

They told Rama Rao that he had come to power on the strength of an anti-Congress vote and that the party should try to bring all opposition parties together against the Congress. This should be the main agenda of the Mahanaadu. The key strategists here were Chandrababu Naidu and the Delhi Stranger. Some of these great men had no qualms in joining the very same Congress and enjoying high positions.

Top on our manifesto, when the regional party was formed, was the item that, in the larger interests of the State, it should cultivate cordial relations with the Centre, whichever party was in power. Contrary to this, efforts were now on to gang up the anti-Congress forces against the Centre. Efforts to unite the opposition parties continued at the public meeting to mark NT Rama Rao's birthday. The regional party organised a conclave of the opposition party leaders at the APSEB guest house near Vijayawada, to which I was reluctantly allowed. Stalwarts from all major parties were present. I had no role in organising the meeting, the whole show being orchestrated by Chandrababu Naidu and the Delhi Stranger. I was a mere spectator.

Jagjivan Ram, MGRamachandran, Sharad Pawar, Chandra Rajeswara Rao, H. N. Bahuguna, Raghunatha Reddy and others were present. The BJP was left out as a communal party while the others considered themselves secular. This



Bhaskar Rao's Parents Pitchaiah, Venkayamma



Bhaskar Rao with his wife Smt. Lalita on the day of swearing in ceremony as Minister for the first time on 10 March 1978



Bhaskar Rao's Parents-in-Law
Dr. Vasireddi Venkaiah Chaudary (Barister), Laxmi Devi



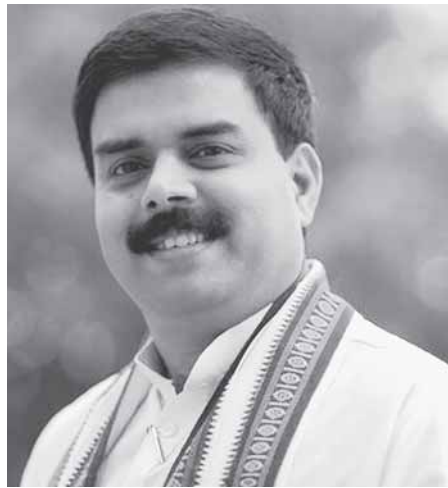
Bhaskar Rao's Brothers & Sister
Younger Brother Sri Ramamurthy (Farmer),
Elder Brother Janardhana Rao (Retd. Gazeited
officer, Vizag), Elder Sister Anasuryavathi
(Vellaturu), Bhaskar Rao on the occasion of house
warming ceremony



**Nadendra Bhaskar Rao as High Court advocate
(1962-1978)**



Bhaskar Rao's Elder Son Nadendla Muralidhar



**Bhaskar Rao's Younger Son Nadendla Manohar
(M.L.A. Tenali constituency) Now Speaker of the
A.P. Legislative Assembly**

meeting was held at the hill-top guest house of Vijayawada thermal power station. An attempt to move a unanimous resolution against Indira Gandhi was thwarted by MG Ramachandran who said it was not wise to adopt a confrontationist line against the Centre. Each could mind its own business. The tone of the resolution was accordingly diluted.

Rama Rao's motive was clear. If the resolution against Indira Gandhi was unanimously adopted, he could, on the strength of it, build a formidable front against her and come to power at the Centre. He had joined the regional party and by his charisma and cinema glamour formed the Government within nine months. In the same manner, he might have thought, he could repeat the feat at the national level.

* * * * *

The Downward Swing

Half a million 'Prekshaka Devullu', as Rama Rao liked to refer to the audience, had attended the public meeting in Vijayawada with a lot of expectation and enthusiasm. Chandrababu Naidu and the Delhi Stranger tried their best to see that I was denied the opportunity to preside. They argued that since I and Rama Rao belonged to the same social group, it was desirable to ask Bezawada Papi Reddy to preside.

Their plan went awry. Unfortunately for Papi Reddy, he did not know the speakers, their political affiliations or the background. He faltered while introducing them to the gathering. Noticing this, Rama Rao came over to me and said 'Brother. It is a mistake. Do not think otherwise. Please come and preside over the meeting'.

I introduced each speaker with a brief life sketch, his role in politics and contribution to the public life. The leaders and the audience alike were impressed by the way I conducted the proceedings. Karnataka Chief Minister Ramakrishna Hegde also was present. Some leaders could not speak for want of time. We had to cajole some and apologise to some others. It was not difficult to pacify Sharad Pawar because of my equation with him.

MGR desired to speak first as he had to rush back to Chennai. He made a non-controversial speech avoiding any critical reference to the Centre. Two things stood out. First, Rama Rao celebrated his birthday amid pomp and fanfare in the presence of lakhs of people and second, he utilised the occasion to bring together all the top leaders of the national parties on a single platform. Both were remarkable. The common refrain of the speeches was the scathing criticism of Indira Gandhi. It was significant that the anti-Indira Gandhi line was reinforced by Jagjivan Ram and H. N. Bahuguna, once senior leaders of the Congress party. Makineni Basavapunniah and Chandra Rajeswara Rao, senior communist leaders, also were present. Ironically, leaders who had only some months ago treated the Telugu Desam as untouchable were now eager to jump on its bandwagon.

We returned to Hyderabad to find the old city rocked by communal violence. We toured the old city area and consoled the affected people. We took all steps necessary to restore order and provide assistance to the affected.

Dressing down to NTR

I did some plain speaking to Rama Rao about the Vijayawada meeting. I told him I did not like his ways. I warned him that discontent was brewing among the cadre over the admission of

Chandrababu Naidu and others into the party. Rama Rao had at that time excused himself and asked me to preside over the meeting while the resolution admitting them was adopted. Not content with their induction, Rama Rao accorded them a status on a par with the founder-members of the party. This amounted to insulting the cadre. I told him frankly 'I never knew the scale of your weakness for the son-in-law. I thought you were above these pulls of family bondage. You created a situation where I had to become a party to it. Had I known your fatal attraction for the kin, I would never have invited you into politics'. What was the programme we agreed upon when the party was formed and what was happening now, I asked. Contrary to this, Rama Rao not only organised the opposition conclave in Vijayawada but enthusiastically announced more such conclaves at the national level. How would it benefit the State. I told him he was under the influence of some evil forces leading him up the garden path.

A few days later, Bezawada Gopala Reddy dropped in at my place. I was briefing him about the political developments that led to the formation of the regional party when the phone rang. Rama Rao was on the line wanting to know if I would join him at the public meeting organised by the communist party in Guntur. 'The communists had treated us with disdain. They spurned our offer of

poll alliance. Why should we attend their meeting. We will look like buffoons in the midst of those red flags. We need not go', I told him. He requested me in so many ways, but I stood firm. "If you do not come, I too will not go', he said. 'That is your business', I countered. I also made it clear I had nothing to do with such meetings.

State- level communist leaders capitalised on the strain in our relations and spoke against me. In the same way, some BJP and the Janata Party leaders in the Assembly also fished in the troubled waters to drive a wedge between us. They had become national leaders now, thanks to their dubious skills of intrigue and manipulation. Rama Rao did not forgive me on the Guntur meeting issue. I did not bother much.

Efforts to poison his mind continued. I did not take any hasty step although many thoughts crossed my mind. I came out of the Congress to form the regional party and guide it to a stupendous success. Why should I leave the party?

Transfer episode

A loyal party worker from Vijayawada came to me complaining about serious harassment by his officer. Knowing his services to the party, I wrote a letter to the concerned Minister recommending that the officer be transferred if the rules permitted. The Minister obliged and transferred the officer. The officer approached the

Kankipadu and Jaggayyapeta MLAs for help. The two MLAs roused the ego and pride of Chandrababu Naidu. 'Who is running the Government. Your father-in-law or Bhaskara Rao? If Bhaskar Rao is running the show, what are we all for, the Chief Minister, you and the MLAs?' they taunted Chandrababu.

I was answering questions in the Assembly when Rama Rao summoned me to his chambers. 'Brother, did you order this transfer?' he asked me in a sombre voice. 'Yes. I recommended it on the request of a loyal party worker, only if the Minister had no objection and the rules permitted it'. Rama Rao remained silent.

After everyone left the room, I gave a piece of my mind to him. Here was a man who had served the party with dedication. All he wanted was a small help. I recommended transfer of the officer only if the Minister had no objection and the rules permitted. 'Can't we do this little help . What is wrong with it. Is it proper to question me in the presence of colleagues and MLAs. We cannot run the administration if you interfere in petty matters. If you do not know how to govern, ask me. I cannot order, recommend or cancel transfers at the pleasure of your son-in-law, Chandrababu Naidu'. I lashed out at him thus. The manner in which Rama Rao presented me as a criminal before the MLAs awakened my slumbering pride. I could not contain myself. Rama Rao did not know

administration or politics, nor was he willing to learn. He had this bad habit of acting on hear-say and viewing people with suspicion and mistrust.

At this point, the Chief Secretary, Shraavan Kumar, entered. 'Get lost', I shouted at him. I lost control of my temper. I was not in a position to worry about the consequences. 'I can't carry on like this any longer. Please yourself. I am resigning'. I threw the file aside and stormed out, straight to my house. Chandrababu Naidu came running after me to placate, but I told him I had nothing to do with Rama Rao.

'Anna. You know his nature. You took pains to nurture the party to this stage. The party will suffer if you rush with resignation just because he too is hasty and impulsive. As the Finance Minister, you are supposed to host dinner to the MLAs. What will they think', he pleaded. He succeeded in persuading me to withdraw the resignation. It was my responsibility as the Finance Minister to receive the legislators at the dinner.

Rama Rao suddenly sprang it on me. 'Brother. Let us share the power', he said. I was taken aback. 'As the Chief Minister, you are the power centre. I have no desire to share power'. I told him not to act on silly advice by some Tom, Dick or Harry. The prestige of the administration and the party would suffer. 'I did not want to join the Cabinet.

Yet you appointed me as the Finance Minister and subjected me to humiliation and sufferings'.

A few days later, J & K Chief Minister Farookh Abdullah attended a dinner hosted by Rama Rao. He treated me on a par with Rama Rao. I might have been a minister in Rama Rao's Cabinet and younger in age, but he knew I was politically more experienced and mature. In fact, at the dinner table, he told me that Rama Rao lacked even minimum knowledge of administration and governance. There are any number of such episodes about Rama Rao's ignorance and naivette.

Rama Rao and I could run the administration in perfect understanding and coordination for the first three months. It was smooth sailing. The Administration was free of corruption. Soon enough, Chandrababu Naidu gained grip over the Government.

NTR's snide attack on me

The Chief Minister was addressing the officials in the Secretariat when I stepped in. 'I will not tolerate traitors and corrupt people', he ranted. I knew I was the target. He came out clean, unwittingly, when I sought to know the reason for his outburst. Annabathuni Satyanarayana, Tenali MLA, complained that I recommended proper police bandobast for a meeting by K. Rosaiah, Congress leader and former minister in the town. He wanted to know what I had to say. How silly

and unwarranted. I was not the Home Minister, nor had I given instructions to the police. I was not even aware of Rosaiah's meeting.

Instead of checking it out with the Director-General of Police, he sought to expose me in the presence of a gathering. I told him these incidents helped to strengthen rumours that relations between us had turned sour. The basis for suspicion was that Rosaiah and I were ministers in the Channa Reddy Government. I was elected from Tenali in 1989, defeating Annabathuni of the TDP. Rosaiah had sanctioned Rs five lakhs as relief to the college run by the defeated TDP candidate, which was damaged in the cyclone. As the local MLA, I should have been informed. I was not.

Rama Rao viewed Rosaiah as an enemy because he was a Congress leader and Minister in the Channa Reddy Government. How do the ordinary people know the intrigues and nefarious back room activities of people in power? The villain of the piece in this case was Annabathuni. He wanted to please NTR and become Minister. Back-biting and tale-bearing were part of power politics. I told Rama Rao it would do him no good if he took notice of every silly issue.

Ignoring my advice, Rama Rao went ahead with opposition meetings in Kolkatta and Srinagar. In the process, Rama Rao might have

developed contacts with national leaders, but was he able to read their motives. The opposition leaders knew that they could not anyway challenge Indira Gandhi. Now they entertained dreams of achieving this by coming together and rallying behind Rama Rao.

Image-boosting show in Kashmir

As part of the publicity drive, a team of legislators was sent to Srinagar ahead of the opposition conclave. Their job was to fall at the feet of the party supremo as soon as he landed at the airport. This was merely a rehearsal for the unfolding drama. Press people were also flown to Srinagar to praise Rama Rao to the skies and hail his initiatives for the opposition unity. This was just a publicity stunt to boost his image and project him as bigger than the other leaders at the conclave. As for the opposition leaders, their idea was to shoot at Indira Gandhi from Rama Rao's shoulders.

Rama Rao saw enticing visions of himself in the Prime Minister's chair. After becoming the Chief Minister in just nine months, he thought, it would not be difficult to ascend the Delhi throne with the support of the opposition parties. Everyone nursed his or her own dreams quite oblivious to the realities. It did not take long for them to see the man, who they regarded as Messiah, in his true colours.

The people there did believe that Rama Rao was a demi-God, Bhagwan Ram and a Messiah. The press quoted even the Supreme Court judge Krishna Iyer as hailing Rama Rao as a Messiah. The whole thing was a mischievous drama, co-directed by Chandrababu Naidu and the Delhi Stranger.

The Telugu Desam had just assumed office when Indira Gandhi flew to Sriharikota from Chennai to witness the rocket-launching programme at the ISRO. Rama Rao proceeded to Sriharikota by helicopter. I declined his request to join him. He stopped over at Tirupati to offer worship to the Lord of Seven Hills. He appeared suddenly in saffron clothes taking the people and the press by surprise. He explained he was deeply disturbed by the report of the gang molestation of a 11-year old girl. He became sick of life. 'Hence I turned sanyasi and donned the saffron robes', he said.

He proceeded to Sriharikota in the same dress in tune with his penchant for sensationalism and attention-grabbing. This was how he wanted to spice up politics. Some Union Ministers were also present at Sriharikota. Rama Rao suffered from a fixation that he was and should be numero uno wherever he went. Indira Gandhi came there as the Prime Minister. Rama Rao did not conduct himself as behoved a Chief Minister. The Prime Minister felt distracted in her speech when Rama

Rao repeatedly waved to the crowd and it responded with whistles and catcalls. I learnt later that Indira Gandhi was irritated by Rama Rao's puerile pranks.

Back in Hyderabad, he telephoned to say that he was not treated properly at Sriharikota. I went to his house to find out. I was not surprised by the new attire, but feared what ominous developments it could lead to. 'I should not have gone there. It would have been enough if as Finance Minister, you represented us. I was unnecessarily dragged into it', he grumbled.

Rama Rao was shocked that I did not react to his new dress. I did not feel it necessary.

Shamshabad lands affair

Rama Rao had acquired 200 or 300 acres of land in Shamshabad near Hyderabad many years ago. He had sold it off as he was not able to manage the property. That apart, his father died in the same area, he explained. After becoming the Chief Minister, Rama Rao asked the Labour Minister, Ramachandra Rao and Ramaswamy, MLA, to negotiate for the return of the land for Rs 10 lakhs that he received from the buyers. They bluntly refused and sent a legal notice to Rama Rao to register it. Angered by the refusal, he threatened to teach them a lesson declaring the property and also his lands in Nimmakur village as surplus under the ceilings law and distribute them among

the landless poor. He was chased away by the villagers when he landed in a helicopter. Rama Rao proceeded to nearby village and asked the revenue officials to distribute the land. Well. That was how our dear Chief Minister's mind worked.

On the way back, he stopped to address a meeting. He descended from the helicopter dressed like Swami Vivekananda abandoning the saffron robes. It puzzled me how he had survived in the film industry with that weird and bizarre mentality. He must have thought that since he came from the 'make believe' world of cinema, he could get away with the antics in real life and politics.

We were motoring over the Prasad Colour Laboratory in Hyderabad when he asked me 'why should 10 acres be given to them. Do you know what a colour lab is?' All I knew was that L. V. Prasad had come to the Chief Minister Channa Reddy, accompanied by A. Nageswara Rao. Channa Reddy favoured the idea of a colour lab in Hyderabad as part of the efforts to move the cinema industry to the State. Prasad explained that producers would be reluctant to move to Hyderabad unless colour facilities were provided. It was a disputed land at the time. A decision was taken to allot it for the colour lab. Years later, LV Prasad built one of the biggest eye hospitals in Asia on the same land.

Rama Rao raised similar objection to allotting

30 acres to the Appollo Hospitals on the ground that five acres was sufficient for the hospital. I too agreed. He ordered that an order reducing the allotment to five acres be issued. At this juncture, the hospital management, accompanied by Chandrababu Naidu, came to prevail upon Rama Rao to maintain status quo. Rama Rao got the Cabinet approval for retention of the original extent of 30 acres. When I questioned him about the u-turn, he brushed it aside lightly. The unseen hand of Chandrababu Naidu was at work in every Government order.

On his first visit to the US, Rama Rao was met by Mahesh Yogi who proposed to set up a sprawling ashram in Nagarjunasagar area and asked for 2000 acres for the purpose. Rama Rao appeared inclined. The land fell under reserved forest. I remembered the widely reported controversy over Mahesh Yogi in Madhya Pradesh. The Government there barely saved its skin. I told him about this, but Rama Rao was mentally prepared to allot the land at nominal rate to Mahesh Yogi. I also told him that the Government of India proposed to locate an atomic power station in the area and requested for land, for which survey was also completed. I warned him again, but it fell on a deaf ear. Meanwhile, the differences between us widened and the file gathered dust.

Axe falls on Labour Minister

Another horrible incident was the sacking of

The Downward Swing

the Labour Minister, Ramachander Rao. What was his crime? Soon after becoming the Minister, he had performed the marriage of his son. A woman legislator fed Rama Rao with a blown-up account of the grand ceremony and complained that the high-profile marriage was performed with the money amassed by corrupt means. Acting on this hearsay, Rama Rao sent a CID officer as decoy to trap the Minister by putting an envelope containing Rs 10,000 on the Minister's desk. The press featured it prominently.

I and Rama Rao were in Chennai to accept the Rs 30-crore cheque from MG Ramachandran for the Telugu Ganga project. Someone telephoned to me about the raid on Ramachander Rao's house. I was shocked. I asked Rama Rao whether he knew about it. 'Yes, brother. You do not know. Our party is losing image, corrupt people have infiltrated. We make him Minister believing him to be honest. He makes money and celebrates marriage in great style'.

I cancelled scheduled trip to Narasaraopet and proceeded to Hyderabad to talk to Ramachander Rao. 'Sir. I am not guilty of any crime. Police officer Appa Rao placed an envelope on my table and lured me into gossip. They recorded the conversation', he broke down. He was branded as corrupt and sacked without a valid reason. Ramachander Rao was my close associate. Chandrababu Naidu and the Delhi Stranger did not like this and plotted

his ouster. Many people who met me later confirmed this.

Sagging party image

Many of us felt anguished by the development. Rama Rao summoned his ministers and played the tape recorded by the CID. None of us knew how to react. Even Sreenivasul Reddy silently walked away with a saddened look on his face. Only two of us were present when I asked Rama Rao what he sought to achieve by such actions. He came clean. 'Brother, the party image is sliding. That is why I stage-managed this. This is no big issue. What can these people do if we are to-gether'. I was upset. I asked him if it was morally justified to punish the father when the daughter was still in her bridal attire. 'Do you think people will condone your action?' I shot at him angrily. He reiterated that there was no other way to restore the party's sagging image. It lingered in my mind for long. Later, I was informed that Chandrababu Naidu had scripted Ramachander Rao's downfall.

We and some others were engrossed in a discussion when Chandrababu Naidu came in. Rama Rao waved him away. I was surprised. "Let him come in. You have been taking his advice also. What is wrong if he joins?' I asked him with a pinch of sarcasm. It pricked him. He did not expect that.

Transport Minister Satyanarayana came from a very ordinary family in Warangal district. Some

of his friends gifted a black and white television set (Colour TVs were yet to come) for his children. I did not know how Rama Rao came to know. Based on hearsay, Rama Rao abused him for buying a colour TV the moment he became a Minister. He tried to dismiss Satyanarayana from the Cabinet. I was told the case was also referred to the Lok Ayukta.

Basava Tarakam, wife of Rama Rao, became sick in January 1984, a year after the party came to power. She was to be taken to the US for treatment. According to the rules in vogue, Ministers and officers and their spouses were eligible for an assistance of Rs 40,000 for medical treatment abroad. Open heart and coronary bypass surgeries in the country were rare. As Finance Minister, I sanctioned Rs 40,000 as Government aid to Rama Rao for his wife's treatment in the United States.

We planned a big public meeting in the Lal Bahadur stadium to celebrate the first anniversary of the Telugu Desam Government. I was scarcely aware that a drama was about to unfold. The Governor and a number of VIPs were present. I noticed a nervous-looking Rama Rao sitting next to me, instead of the place earmarked for him.

Assassination drama

Mridangam virtuoso Yella Venkateswara Rao was captivating the audience with scintillating

display of his skills. It was at this juncture that a stranger lunged at Rama Rao with a dagger in hand and shouting 'Indira Gandhi zindabad'. In the scuffle that ensued, Rama Rao suffered a cut in the thumb. He showed the bleeding finger to the shocked gathering. In the confusion, my spectacles fell off. The whole thing was over before I retrieved them.

Ignoring my plea to rush to the hospital, Rama Rao proceeded to the dais, complimented the artiste and left for his house. I jumped into his car. Rama Rao went into the kitchen and returned after bandaging the wound with citrus juice. I forcibly took him to the NIMS. At the entrance, he turned to me and asked me to go home as it was time for dinner. It sounded mysterious. He went in alone. From then on, it was his habit to show the bandaged finger and tell people how he had providentially escaped the assassination attempt by Indira Gandhi's men. Governors, Chief Ministers and other VIPs flocked to console him. He also reaped a rich harvest of public sympathy.

Rama Rao's followers, including Chandrababu Naidu and the Delhi Stranger, tried to link my name with the attacker since he belonged to my native Guntur district. It did not work. So the case was registered against the accused. I was not called for examination although I was an eye witness. I was just beginning to understand the conspiracy.

Rama Rao appeared before the court. In a great

exhibition of forgiveness, he appealed to the judge to spare the accused, Mallela Babji. Rama Rao successfully enacted the drama, but I saw through the game. Mallela Babji telephoned to me one day. According to him, a senior police officer, who later became a Minister in Chandrababu Naidu's Cabinet, and Chandrababu engaged him to enact the drama for which he was offered Rs three lakhs and employment. He was positioned near a police officer behind the VIP lounge to carry out the task. Babji was from Guntur district. I knew such dramas were common in cinemas, but I never imagined them happening in real life.

Babji thrashed

After release from the jail, Babji pestered Chandrababu Naidu for the promised money. Instead, Chandrababu Naidu got him appointed as a temporary attender in Guntur Zilla Parishad chairman, Sakkurthi Ramaiah's office. Babji was removed after some time. He was beaten black and blue and kicked out for demanding Rs three lakhs, he told me on phone.

Babji once telephoned to seek an appointment. I did not want to get into the muddle. I told him my house was watched by the police and the CIDs and he would be in trouble if came over. A few days later I read in paper about his suicide in Vijayawada. On the basis of suicide note, the local inspector of police booked criminal case against

the Chief Minister, Chandrababu Naidu and the Superintendent of Police. The Director-General of Police rushed to Vijayawada and admonished the inspector for daring to book a case against the Chief Minister himself. He tore up the papers and suspended the inspector.

Vangaveeti Mohana Ranga, Vijayawada MLA, opened this can of worms in the Assembly, forcing the Government to appoint Justice Sriramulu Commission to investigate. The One-Man Commission summoned me to appear before it as an eye-witness. The defence counsel panicked when I started relating the day's happenings. He tried to object saying 'Rama Rao's goose will be cooked if you go on like this'. The judge overruled the objection and allowed me to proceed. 'Are you afraid of Rama Rao', the lawyer asked me. I told him not to act smart and that I had practised for 16 years in the High Court. I warned him against trying his tricks with me again.

Rama Rao refused extension to the Commission of Inquiry as he was displeased with it for recording statements against him. The Commission, which had already completed its work, ruled that the whole thing was a drama. The report gathered dust in the Secretariat, but the press played it up.

Turn-coat judge

I read an interesting story in the newspapers recently that Justice Sriramulu had joined the

Telugu Desam. Hats off to Chandrababu Naidu for his manipulative skills, I must say. Chandrababu Naidu explained that Justice Sriramulu was admitted in 'intellectuals' category. It was surprising that the man who ruled that the attack on Rama Rao was a drama should be drawn to the Telugu Desam.

The inspector, who was suspended and harassed by the Government, had settled down in Visakhapatnam after retirement as additional superintendent of police. He narrated the whole story to me. I am placing them before you, the reader, for your judgment.

Rama Rao left for America with 'Sri Venkateswaraswami dollars' and kumkum bharanis for the Telugus there. He was asked to undergo some heart-related tests and angiogram. Was he not supposed to garner NRI investments for the State? Not even a small industry had come up.

On return, Rama Rao coolly dropped a bombshell at a meeting of officers. He told me he would have to go to the US again for a second angiogram. Nothing wrong, I thought, in going for medical treatment. On an application by Rama Rao, the Chief Secretary circulated a file for sanction of Rs three lakhs for the purpose. The Chief Minister would be accompanied by the security officer. With the Finance Secretary

clearing it, I as Finance Minister signed on the file. I wondered whether it was necessary to go to the US for angiogram which was a minor procedure. No officer had mentioned in the file that Rama Rao's condition was serious or that it warranted surgery. The file did not contain even doctor's certificate.

Rama Rao was advised by some that he should entrust his responsibilities to a senior minister while he was abroad. Chandrababu Naidu shot down the idea saying the Chief Minister would run the Government from the US through fax. Rama Rao, however, did not operate from the US. Directions to the administration emanated from Chandrababu Naidu's house only .

I was sitting with the reporters in my chambers when a call came from Rama Rao, his first after going to the US. 'Communal riots appear to have broken out in the old city of Hyderabad, endangering peace and order. Put them down firmly', he told me. He said the operation was over and that he had just been wheeled out of the operation theatre.

I was disturbed by the communal violence. I wondered who should be fanning hatred between the communities. I decided to visit the old city for firsthand information. By then Chandrababu Naidu had already taken over the reins of administration. On his instructions, the Chief

Secretary told me against undertaking the trip in view of the highly volatile situation there. I told him it was not fair to sit back when the old city was burning. Accompanied by a few ministers, I toured the affected areas and tried to instill confidence in them. The situation came under control after our visit.

No to Jampani sugar factory

Channa Reddy had laid foundation for the cooperative sugar factory at Jampani in Guntur district. Nannapaneni Venkata Rao mobilised share capital from the people. After his death, the factory was named after him. I was Minister at the time, but I could not arrange funds for the factory. I succeeded only after the Telugu Desam came to power and I became the Finance Minister. I asked Rama Rao to inaugurate the factory which was located in my constituency. The factory was then headed by Alapati Dharma Rao of the Congress. Rama Rao refused to inaugurate unless the Congress-dominated society was sacked. I told him that Dharma Rao and the society were duly elected by the farmers. If the society was superseded, they would go to the court and get a stay. That would be a blow to our Government. He did not relent.

The real reason for this was the running dispute between the district MLAs and Dharma Rao. Chandrababu Naidu scripted the drama

offering full support to the party MLAs. This was a drama within a drama. I had to inaugurate the factory myself.

I was on a tour of West Godavari district when Mullapudi Harischandra Prasad, then in the Congress party, invited me to a function. I accepted. Rama Rao tried to make a big issue of it. He got the press to write that I was hobnobbing with the Congressmen. Ironically, the same Rama Rao befriended Harischandra Prasad after sometime and tried to set him against me.

Upendra's defeat

Rama Rao had boasted that he could make even a twig win an election. His candidate, P. Upendra, lost the Assembly by-election in Hyderabad. When reminded of the boast by the media, he had no answer. He stood with bowed head. When a combination of factors like opportunities, political climate and fate led to victory, Rama Rao attributed it to his own greatness. When the same factors turned adverse, he looked elsewhere for excuses. Even in his acting days, Rama Rao had personally campaigned for a candidate in Pithapuram and the man could not save even his deposit. He thought that people would rain votes simply because of cine glamour.

If the Telugu Desam had won a massive mandate in the election, it did not redound to the credit of Rama Rao or me alone. The time and

prevailing conditions favoured the party. First the people were disenchanted with the inept Congress Government and strongly desired a change, second Rama Rao's charisma and leadership helped.

Rama Rao could not talk without putting the foot in his mouth. It became a habit. He would divert visitors and favour-seekers to Chandrababu Naidu believing him to be Jack of All Trades. He had stopped talking to me or taking me into confidence on any official matter. Things had come to such a pass that Chandrababu Naidu organised training camps for the MLAs over the head of Rama Rao.

NSR s request

My Cabinet colleague Nallapureddy Sreenivasulu Reddy came to me with a request to help his friend bidding for a contract at Yeleswaram project. He said the contractor had supported him in a big way during the elections, but had since fallen on bad days. Although belonging to Krishna district, he was engaged in mining business in Nellore district.

I sent the file to the Chief Minister with suitable recommendation, but the file idled on his desk. On discreet enquiry, I understood that Chandrababu Naidu, two legislators from West Godavari and Krishna district wanted the work to go to a Hyderabad-based contractor. They told the Chief Minister that the contractor would

contribute liberally to the party fund, but I complicated the matter by my notings in the file. The Chief Minister rejected the file. This was the first time he rejected my file. Sreenivasulu Reddy came with the file and asked me to personally get the Chief Minister's signature. I was not in the habit of lobbying. I re-circulated the file with the same recommendation.

The file remained with Rama Rao for 15 days. He never spoke to me during this period. One day, he telephoned with a terse message 'Brother. I have signed your file'. I asked him which file he referred to. 'The file where you granted exemption from the general freeze. I have sanctioned Rupees three crores'. I said Rupees three crores was no big deal. The contractor was once a very wealthy man. Now he was broke and could not even marry his children. I granted exemption because Sreenivasulu Reddy made a personal request.' Anyway I am glad you cleared it', I told him.

God only knew how much was siphoned off by Chandrababu Naidu and his men in the Yeleru project which became a big scam. A proper inquiry had not been ordered so far. Only a fair probe would bring out the truth.

Studio irregularities

Rama Rao had requested the Chief Minister Vijayabhaskar Reddy for permission to construct two cinema theatres in his studio in Bakaram and

for conversion of the area from industrial to commercial zone. This was before had entered politics. Meanwhile, general elections were held and the Telugu Desam rode to power. Rama Rao sent a request to Vijayabhaskar Reddy, through some intermediaries, to discreetly give an ante-dated approval to his application. Vijayabhaskar Reddy politely declined to oblige. The Chief Secretary and the Secretary, Municipal Administration, also refused.

The real story behind this was ..

In 1975, the Chief Minister Jalagam Vengala Rao allotted a site in Bakaram industrial area to Rama Rao at a nominal rate. The AP State Film Development Corporation sanctioned Rs 8 lakhs for construction of the studios. Those days Government liberally granted land to encourage the film industry to shift from Chennai to the State. Nageswara Rao also was allotted land in Banjara Hills for construction of Annapurna Studios. Rama Rao had encroached adjacent Government land and built commercial complex on the main road, contrary to the purpose for which it was allotted to him. Government regularised the encroachment with a compounding fee of Rs 20,000. Immediately after becoming the Chief Minister, he signed the file reducing the compounding fee to Rs 1,000 and converting the industrial zone into commercial one. By this act, Rama Rao lowered himself in the

esteem of the people. This episode was widely reported in the press.

Producer D. Rama Naidu and actor Krishna submitted application for allotment of land. The file came to me. As Finance Minister I recommended that they be allotted land at the same rate fixed for Rama Rao and Nageswara Rao in the past. Rama Rao objected to it that the rate fixed years ago was not valid now. I told him that the applicants could go to court alleging discrimination and get a favourable verdict if the rate was revised upwards. He agreed. Today, the two studios are vibrant and flourishing.

At one time we in the Channa Reddy Government took many steps and offered incentives to encourage the film industry in Hyderabad. But Rama Rao, who came from the industry, did precious little in the matter due to professional jealousy against his erstwhile colleagues in the cine field. He was not favourably disposed to allotting land to the producers. For my part, I issued orders that the policy of allotting site to film entrepreneurs be continued. How hollow the lofty monologues of Rama Rao on the silver screen now sounded, I thought.

Akademis scrapped

On a fine day at 'brahmi muhurtham', Rama Rao decided to abolish cultural akademis - AP

Sahitya Akademi, Sangeeta, Nrutya and Lalita Kala Akademis and replace them with better set-ups. He had not taken the Cabinet nor the senior ministers into confidence in the matter. Narla Venkateswara Rao was also among those who advised scrapping of the akademis. Not only him, but film fans and others became advisers and converted the administration into a 'make believe' world. They had little respect for the Government. In effect, the people also lost respect for the administration.

Rama Rao nursed a grouse against the management of a newspaper which was highly critical of him and his policies. He ordered demolition of the hotel owned by the same management for widening the road. The hotel owner, who was also Member of the Rajya Sabha, approached me and asked for a few days time. I advised my Secretary Sarma to hold it for sometime because the new Government should not get into controversies. The owner got stay order from the court.

Sometime later we drove down the road when Rama Rao noticed the building and said 'Brother. I ordered its demolition but you granted stay'. I told him I did not grant any stay and that the owner got it from the court. I also said our Government had just assumed office and that we should not invite trouble by unpopular actions. We could attend to irregular constructions after the

Government was well entrenched. We should focus on fulfilling the promises made to the people. The said hotel belonged to the management of Deccan Chronicle.

I counseled Rama Rao not to be vindictive against the press. It was free to write whatever it wanted to. 'They wrote against me and carried a caricature showing me as a fox. Did I attack them? They are ruining themselves by misusing the privilege of freedom given to them. It is not for us to interfere'.

I was attending the function of Siddipet Bar Association along with the Chief Justice and the Opposition leader in the Assembly , A. Madan Mohan, when I received a police message asking me to rush to the Legislative Council which was then in session. I was told that the Chief Minister was unable to answer the questions by the opposition leaders leading to an uproar. I should therefore return at once. Syed Mukassir Shah was the Chairman of the Legislative Council which had an array of stalwarts - brilliant and articulate. Jupudi Yegnanarayana, Konijeti Rosaiah, Moturu Hanumantha Rao, Makineni Basavapunnaiah, V. Rama Rao and one-time Minister Dandu Sivarama Raju. Each one a warrior ready to take on the Government. They would miss no opportunity to corner Rama Rao and put him on the mat.

One day, they asked Rama Rao if he was 'a

Rajarshi or just a Maharshi?' He replied he was a 'Rajarshi'. Many odd and sometimes repulsive matters used to come up for discussion in the House.

Abolition of the Legislative Council

Cornered by the opposition members during question time and unable to handle tricky situations in the Upper House, the Chief Minister introduced a bill abolishing the Legislative Council.

I had explained to him that it was possible to get elected to the Legislative Assembly by several means - money power, muscle power, goodwill or by merit. The Constitution-makers had created the Legislative Council recognising the need for proper representation to different castes, communities and other sections like professionals, intellectuals and artistes. The Upper House would offer mature counsel to the Government in policy and decision-making and help it serve the people better.

I signed an Excise department file on the wrong advice by an officer. It created a flutter in the Council. The newspaper baron declared a war on me leveling bribery charges against me. N.T. Rama Rao was caught in the pincer grip of the opposition. Rama Rao was faced with Hobson's Choice - should he stand by me or support the newspaper owner. I was not at fault. The officers said it was their mistake and that I had nothing to do with it. The files were placed before the Chairman of the

Council for perusal by the members. The opposition parties raised the pitch in order to divide me and Rama Rao. Ultimately, Rama Rao stood by me in the controversy.

The opposition was full of praise for me for my budget speech and for the way I handled their questions. Rama Rao was present during my three and half hour speech. The opposition leaders said hitherto they were under the impression that Rama Rao was running the Administration and the efficient hand of Bhaskara Rao was now clear to all. Their motive was clear - to drive a wedge between us. But the hot-headed and arrogant Rama Rao failed to see through the game. He lorded it over in the cine filed, but he failed to realise that politics was an altogether different ball game where one could not have one's way all the time.

The bitter experiences - ridicule and humiliation - he had endured in the Legislative Council had hurt his pride deeply. He decided to abolish the Upper House and forwarded the resolution to the Government of India. The Centre accepted it without even urging the State Government to think it over again. The people in power at the Centre might have seen no harm in winding up the Council because neither their men nor the party was in power in Andhra Pradesh.

Blunder after blunder was committed because of Rama Rao's lack of political experience. The price

of milk, a daily necessity of the common man, was abruptly raised because of Chandrababu Naidu's advice that the AP Dairy Development Corporation should be run on commercial lines. Similarly scholarship money given to the scheduled caste, the scheduled tribes and the backward classes students was reduced. Chandrababu Naidu's other decisions also were arbitrarily implemented without any discussion.

Devanathan episode

Rama Rao appointed one Devanathan as his adviser according him a status on a par with Minister. Devanathan was Rama Rao's lawyer and income tax consultant while in Chennai. As the Chief Minister, Rama Rao's word was law. What was Devanathan's job? He was supposed to take care of Rama Rao's business interests and income tax affairs. Needless to say he was paid from the State exchequer. Rama Rao thought Government was his personal domain. He committed a number of mistakes and led the Government to the brink of the precipice.

Another misadventure was the creation of 'Dharma Mahamatra', a quasi judicial body, headed by E. V. Rami Reddy, a former IAS officer. It was intended to strike terror among the members of the bureaucracy who sought to question Government's decisions. Having seen the fate of no less a man than the Labour Minister

Ramachander Rao, the officers chose to lie low. The Chief Minister went after officers who demanded bribe from him before he entered politics and gave them hell. One such victim was C. N. Sastry, a retired IAS officer.

The Government's functioning underwent a drastic change after the Telugu Desam Legislature Party cleared the admission of Chandrababu Naidu. The press criticised Chandrababu's new-fangled ideas of administration and his interference in it. Rama Rao ignored them all. The elder son-in-law was the convenor of the youth wing and the younger one pulled the strings from behind. The 'Rajakota rahasyam' (palace intrigues) became public knowledge. Gajjela Malla Reddy used to have barbed flings at the father-in-law and the son-in-law duo in his popular column 'Punyabhoomi' in Eenadu.

Those were the days when Chandrababu Naidu on one hand scuttled implementation of the promises made to the people while on the other, Rama Rao whiled away time spitting fire and venom on the so-called corrupt officials.

Rama Rao, who had blasted the Congress for its wrong policies, had no qualms in repeating some of them. The Telugu Party had scoffed at the practice of fielding the spouse to fill the vacancy caused by the death of an elected leader. Now the leader unabashedly followed the same practice

whether in the elections to the local bodies or others. We shouted from housetops against dynastic politics and promised the people that the Telugu Desam would be free of it. Our leader spared no occasion to describe the people as 'naa devullu' and promised to dedicate himself to their service. The people were impressed by the pompous cinematic monologues. This was just a drama. The press complimented Rama Rao for playing his part well in political games and the one-act play.

Rama Rao threatened to put down groupism in the party with an iron foot even as his darling sons-in-law led rival factions within the party. The warning sounded hollow. They tried to prevent my followers from attending my meeting in Vijayawada.

Fascist trends

They used the Delhi Stranger as puppet for sometime, but the plan was to ease out all outsiders from key positions in the party and turn it into a family concern. Does not this fascist outlook remind one of Adolf Hitler? One would not have failed to notice the distinctly Hitlerian style of administering the oath of loyalty in Rama Rao's administration of pledge to party workers. Rama Rao was the Telugu Desam and the Telugu Desam was Rama Rao. There was no place for anyone other than him and the family. Rama Rao built a barrier around himself and referred everyone,

ordinary public or partymen, to Chandrababu Naidu. It was a clear case of power going to the head.

The national press and the State press showered praise on me for the unique way I presented the State budget in the Assembly in 1984. My two-hour speech was greeted with thumping of the desks by the members. Rama Rao chose to remain in the Secretariat. How could a Chief Minister fail to be present during the Budget speech? Would it not send wrong signals? There could be only one reason for this. He could not stomach fulsome praise for me.

I followed this with an even longer speech in the Legislative Council. Veterans and all members hailed my speech and complimented me. The Appropriation Bill was thus passed.

Chandrababu Naidu, the Delhi Strangers and their cronies lost no time in poisoning Rama Rao's mind giving distorted account of the happenings. Rama Rao felt it was an attempt to belittle him in the Council. Rama Rao's wounded pride was further festered when the coterie wondered who would care for him now that Bhaskara Rao was gaining popularity and recognition as an able leader. Added to this was the casual observations by opposition leaders that the budget speech had made clear who the real leader of the party was. Rama Rao was a mere vote-gatherer, but the real

man was Bhaskar Rao. This was their game plan to create differences between us. It was at this juncture that I wanted to resign as the Finance Minister, but had to take it back and be present for the dinner.

A wonderful resolution was introduced at the May 1983 mahanadu in Vijayawada proposing that new entrants to the party be treated on a par with the senior and founding members of the party. This gimmick, obviously of Chandrababu Naidu, reminds one of the camel and the tent story. His idea was to move up the ladder gradually.

Strategic exit

Rama Rao and I were present when the resolution was introduced, but he made a discreet and strategic exit when it came up for discussion, leaving me to preside over the meeting. He did not want to be involved and get bad name when the issue of his son-in-law's admission came up. He got the resolution adopted. Rama Rao's tactics reminded one of the Mahabharatha episode where Arjuna and Duryodhana came to Lord Krishna for a favour. Arjuna waited at the feet of the Lord who was asleep and Duryodhana at the Lord's head. Lord Krishna winked at Arjuna and gave the first hearing to Duryodhana, although he wished to favour Arjuna. Hats off to his acting abilities. No wonder Rama Rao was called 'Nata Ratna'. The resolution was adopted, but the cadre from

Chittoor district loudly protested the admission of Chandrababu Naidu. But who cares?

Chandrababu Naidu utilised the newly-granted authority to hold training and orientation programmes for the legislators to gain complete hold over them and the party. Consequently, regular party activities came to a near halt. Chandrababu's ascendancy was comparable to Vamana's modest request for three steps which proved fatal to King Bali.

Yellow fever at Vizag mahanadu

The coterie was ready with its resolutions when mahanadu in May 1984 at Visakhapatnam. I had arrived by train and Rama Rao by air. Rama Rao was already there in the hut built for himself. Perhaps it may be more dignified to describe the 'gudise' (hut) as a 'parناسаala'. As a lover of khadi, I always dressed in khadi shirt and dhoti. I noticed a barrel of yellow water. Chandrababu's men dipped the shirts of the cadre in yellow water, the party colour. I wondered what this extreme regimentation was. As soon as I stepped in, Rama Rao led me out saying 'Brother. Let us go. It is already late'. I already guessed that Chandrababu Naidu put Rama Rao on the wrong track.

Rama Rao was a Hitler fan and would often tell me that the German leader was a great orator. Sreenivasulu Reddy, other ministers, Bezwada Papi Reddy, senior leaders, members and non-

members of the State executive were already seated on the raised platform. I chose to take a seat in front of the dias while Rama Rao climbed on to the dias. He was furious at what he saw - a number of people who were not members of the executive committee. They had no business to be there. He growled like a lion. The message was clear. People jumped from the dais out of sheer panic, some sustained minor injuries in the process. I wondered if this was not a prelude to what lay in store.

Rama Rao did not brief me about the resolutions, most of them sponsored by Chandrababu Naidu. Rama Rao's speech that day really sounded like Hitler's for its fascist tone and tenor. Addressing the MLAs, he said some of them acted and talked as they wished. Those who wanted to remain with the party could do so. Others were welcome to leave. He had carved MLAs out of non-entities. He could make a blade of grass win an election from any constituency if he so desired, he boasted.

It sounded less like political speech than a dictator's ranting. He seemed to believe that he was everything in the party and that others were just orphans. The whole effort was aimed at terrorising the MLAs and beating them into submission. Is this the way to treat MLAs?' I listened calmly with the head bowed.

The Governor's institution

We reassembled for the evening session when Rama Rao suggested that I move a resolution calling for abolition of the institution of the Governor. 'What', I said, 'this is wrong. We all came to power only through the Constitutional office of the Governor'. I explained to him further that we had sworn allegiance and loyalty to the Constitution and the Governor was its creation. The Governor had the authority to dismiss us at once for the anti-Constitutional move. Adopting the resolution would be asking for trouble. I wondered whose brain wave it was and said 'no' point blank. He dropped the idea. He got the other routine resolutions adopted amid applause. By the end of the Visakhapatnam Mahanadu, the honeymoon with the people appeared to be over. He faced open criticism from the people, some of whom felt he was unfit to rule. I continued to offer proper advice, from time to time, in running the administration to ensure that he did not commit blunders, but the coterie put him on the wrong foot with its own advice.

We did not meet often those days. I would not call on him at his residence unless it was necessary. I did not start the regional party to commit mistakes or to make Rama Rao commit them. Of course, Rama Rao was capable of committing his mistakes unassisted or at the instance of the sons-in-law. The party was started to counter the step-

motherly treatment of the State by the Central Government and other autocratic policies. It had drifted from this agenda. The party image reached a danger level, thanks to the leader's high-handedness.

I had included women's right to property in the party manifesto. Women could be independent if they were given an equal share in the paternal property. However, in his cinematic style, Rama Rao hijacked the issue and claimed total credit for it. The pucca housing scheme for the poor was also authored by me.

I was on a tour of East Godavari. The Collector, Agarwal, took up a commendable housing scheme for the poor. I inaugurated a colony and was impressed. He explained to me that he had taken up construction of 10,000 houses in the district. Later I discussed the issue with the Chief Secretary. I asked him to formulate a scheme for construction of 10,000 to 20,000 houses in every district for which funds could be obtained from the HUDCO. I asked him to involve the bankers too. That was how the pucca housing scheme in the State came into being.

Rs 2 a kg rice scheme

Turlapati Satyanarayana, secretary in the party office, suggested that we introduce a subsidised rice supply scheme on the lines of the rupee a measure programme pioneered by C.N.

Annadurai in Tamil Nadu. I talked to the Revenue Secretary in this regard. He discouraged the idea as the proposed scheme would account for a huge chunk of the budget leaving little or no funds for other welfare or development programmes. I explained the pros and cons of the scheme to Rama Rao and Satyanarayana. Brushing aside my advice, Rama Rao went ahead with it. Having done it, he should at least have studied the modalities of implementation in Tamil Nadu and other aspects. Annadurai had clearly mentioned that the rupee a measure of rice would be limited to the slum-dwellers of Chennai.

The over-enthusiastic Rama Rao hastily announced to the press that it would be implemented throughout the State. The Government had to commit itself to the huge burden. Predictably, other programmes ground to a halt as the lion's share went to the rice scheme. Thus even a good scheme floundered on account of hasty, thoughtless unplanned execution.

Equal rights for women in paternal property could become law only if half the States in the country were in its favour and a bill to the effect amending the Hindu Law should be adopted in Parliament. Contrary to this, the bill was got cleared in the State Legislature and the President's Assent secured for it. It hardly helped the women. There was no such provision in the Hindu Law. The State legislation would not stand judicial

scrutiny. My pious intention of benefitting women had thus ended in smoke. Any plan should be properly discussed, the pros and the cons examined and loopholes plugged before implementation. No purpose would be served by viewing everything from political and publicity angle. The same attitude characterised the formulation and implementation of the women's rights, Rs 2 kg rice and housing schemes. The Telugu Desam or Rama Rao had little else to talk about in the public meetings. He was in no mood to listen to my sane advice. The rice scheme was diluted and altogether abandoned. Other essential commodities were also not available in the ration shops. For Rama Rao what mattered was image-boosting and publicity. In fact, pucca housing scheme was incorporated in Indira Gandhi's 20-point programme long ago, but the people were led to believe that it was the benevolence of Rama Rao, the sole architect of the scheme.

I had believed that I could somehow manage to bridge the widening communication gap with Rama Rao. I realised I had erred. My plight was like that of a man who put his head in the lion's mouth and tried to get out of it.

I had mentioned before Rama Rao's trip to the United States to bring NRI funds for the industrialisation of the State. He had come back empty-handed. On return, he drew flak for his controversial statement that American roads were

c leaner than bathrooms in India. On one occasion, Rama Rao confessed that he had ordered demolition of the Rajya Sabha Member's hotel at the instance of the newspaper baron.

Rama Rao had long since stopped entertaining suggestions from the Cabinet colleagues at the Cabinet meetings. Chandrababu Naidu was the focal point of power and an extra-constitutional authority. His writ ran. As a result, the Ministers became mere figure-heads. They hesitated to take initiative in any matter for fear of adverse reaction.

Queen Elizabeth's visit

Queen Elizabeth II was on a visit to India in 1984. The British Council, which took up construction of its Library building opposite the Secretariat in Hyderabad, was keen on the Queen inaugurating it. Knowing well of the royal visit, Rama Rao ordered demolition of the building for contravention of building rules. The Minister for Municipal Administration rushed to me with the news. "You write favourably in the file. We can look into the violations after the Queen's visit", I told him.

The Queen included Hyderabad in her itinerary due to some nostalgic memories of the cantonment area. The ego in Rama Rao gained upper hand. 'I am the Government here. How can the Queen inaugurate', he thought and ordered demolition of the upper floor of the building the

same evening. The concerned official came to me and wailed 'Sir. The British Library people are cut up with us. The Chief Minister is not agreeing to let them off with a penalty'. I asked him to send the file to the Chief Minister with his recommendations and be done with it. The building stands this day in the same condition - a mute witness to the imperiousness of the ruler.

The Governor invited Rama Rao and me to the dinner he hosted in honour of the visiting Royal Guest. This was done in consultation with the British officials accompanying the Queen, in tune with the protocol procedure. The Secretary, Finance, is an important figure in the United Kingdom. The same importance was accorded to me as the Finance Minister. Chandrababu Naidu was furious at my being equated with the Chief Minister. He raised objections. The Governor personally intervened to resolve the issue by inviting five other senior Ministers for the dinner, again in consultation with the British officials.

One may wonder why the Governor needed permission of the British officials to extend invitations. It was part of courtesies under protocol. Newspaper played up an incident at a dinner hosted by the Governor when one of the Ministers was accompanied by a woman instead of his wife. The protocol is to avoid such embarrassing situation.

My son Manohar returned from Holland via

London, after playing in a tennis tournament. He said people in London talked in a belittling manner about the Chief Minister for sporting an ear-ring. He said in the West they were called 'punks'. I had never discussed this with Rama Rao. However, I briefed him about what my son had told me and advised him to remove it in view of the Queen's impending visit. Fortunately, he heeded to my advice, removed the ear-ring. On the whole, The Queen's visit went off without a hitch.

To America again

Rama Rao left for the United States a second time in June 1984, again promising to garner NRI funds for setting up industries in the State. This time he was accompanied by an intelligence officer. This man's and objective was to create a chasm between us and consequently drive me out of the Cabinet. I had no enmity with him. He was only doing the job entrusted to him by Chandrababu Naidu. He was perhaps afraid that he might fall foul of the Chief Minister if he did not obey his son-in-law. I did not know how many raids he had carried out and collected money on Chandrababu's instructions. He belonged to the Orissa cadre, but I got him transferred to Andhra Pradesh during Channa Reddy's tenure due to unrelenting pressure from the from the family of Rayanam of East Godavari district. Nice way of acknowledging gratitude, this officer. Later, he became Chairman of the AP Public Service Commission.

Y. B. Chavan, then chairman of the Finance Commission, was in Hyderabad. Rama Rao and I put forward the views of the State. A veteran politician, Chavan reported to Indira Gandhi that no love was lost between us and that our relations were rather odd.

Rama Rao nursed strong grievance against officers. He resented raids by Income Tax officials on the residences of film actors. I do not know if a raid was ever conducted on his house.

I in my capacity as Finance Minister met the Union Finance Minister, Pranab Mukherjee, at the residence of one Bulli Panthulu in Hyderabad. Let me place before the readers what transpired there. After discussing politics, he said 'Bhaskar Raoji, it seems you only have the majority following among the legislators' and left. Sometime later, Vijayabhaskar Reddy dropped in at the same place and said 'You are the leader of the Kammas, not Rama Rao. I learn this after talking to Kammas and general public. You are our hope'. He lulled me thus. Being basically a Congressman, I listened to these words and left the place.

I went to Delhi once to seek central assistance for drought relief. This was not to the liking of Rama Rao. I met Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee who promised to release the funds, but advised me to meet the Prime Minister also. They wanted to know if I desired to meet her at the

residence or in the office. I replied I would like to see her in the office. The Prime Minister immediately sanctioned Rs 83 crores. So far so good. She monitored the rumblings and dissidence in the Telugu Desam party from time to time through her intelligence sources.

'Bhaskar. Why does your Chief Minister speak like that. He made a scene at the National Development Council meeting by blaming me and leading a walk-out by other Chief Ministers. It had never happened before. What is this behavior?' she asked me. She recalled that I left the Congress as it ignored my claim to become the Chief Minister. She wanted to know why, having set up the regional party and guided it to victory, I chose to allow Rama Rao to become the Chief Minister, forsaking my own claim. 'Should not the State develop and prosper?', she asked.

'Madam, I am a Congressman from the childhood. I have great regard for Nehruji and you. I formed the regional party in the best interests of the State. It would amount betrayal of the people if I or Rama Rao acted contrary to this spirit', I told her. Rama Rao's unseemly conduct at the National Development Committee meeting came in for all-round condemnation. I also told her that I would not hesitate to loudly protest and part company with Rama Rao the moment he drifted from the regional party's philosophy, ideals and objectives.

'You meet Moopanar and others. Be in touch with them. I will send Moopanar wherever you want to meet him. Be cautious. Rama Rao seems to have a cruel mentality. Keep this to yourself. Do not discuss this with anyone, particularly P. V. Narasimha Rao', she warned after listening to me.

Antagonising the Centre

The Telugu Desam rode to power and Rama Rao became the Chief Minister due to changed political re-alignments in the State. Emboldened by this success, Rama Rao raised the pitch against the Centre and the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in typical cinema style. Having come to power in just nine months in the State, he might have thought it was not difficult to repeat the feat at the Centre and become the Prime Minister. He indulged in cheap criticism of the Prime Minister.

Meanwhile, the opposition parties at the national level, frustrated by inability to oust Indira Gandhi, found a new Messaiah in Rama Rao. They were under an illusion that the Telugu Desam owed its stupendous success solely to Rama Rao. They did not know the men and women behind the effort and the factors that contributed to the success. Leaders of the national opposition parties who ridiculed party started by a film star were now eager to join his bandwagon. Sounds odd, does it not?

Rama Rao telephoned from the United States

asking me to visit riot-hit areas of the old city of Hyderabad and bring the situation there under control. But the Chief Secretary would not allow me to go. Someone must have advised him to stop me. All the same, I and a few other ministers toured the affected areas and took some relief measures. The Chief Secretary did not implement them. I wrote a letter to the Chief Minister bringing this to his notice. It was not even acknowledged.

Efforts were on to get me out of the Cabinet. In fact, a busy body even extracted a promise from the Chief Minister. However, Rama Rao had not come to a decision yet. Having learnt the ropes of administration and the conduct of business in the legislature from me, he might have decided to dump me as no longer useful.

These things do happen in cinema world. How long would an assistant director continue under the director? He would leave once he learnt the trade. Similarly, Rama Rao must have decided to part company. I always wondered why he should force me to join the Cabinet and now develop such dislike for me. He could not stand my sight. The newspaper owner vigorously pursued his agenda of my dismissal from the Cabinet.

Flag-hoisting

The Chief Secretary issued orders to the Collectors to unfurl the tri-colour on August 15,

citing instructions from the Chief Minister who was still in the US. Nallapureddy Sreenivasul Reddy felt humiliated. He came to me with a suggestion that I should do something about it. He wondered how a senior Minister like me chose to remain silent. He sent the Chief Reporter of Indian Express to me to pursue the matter. How could officials hoist the national flag on Independence Day instead of the democratically-elected representatives of the people? Sreenivasul Reddy could not digest this. He asked me not to take it lying down. He asked me to take a bold step and they would all stand by him. He sent the Chief Reporter of Indian Express again.

On his way back home, Rama Rao stopped at Mumbai. Chandrababu Naidu sent a handful of MLAs to receive him at Mumbai. The idea was to poison his mind by carrying tales against me before he reached Hyderabad. I received him at the Hyderabad airport, exchanged pleasantries and proceeded to the Secretariat to attend to my work.

My letter to the Chief Minister protesting against the decision advising the Collectors to unfurl the flag was consigned to the dustbin. In that letter I had mentioned that as elected representatives of the people, the Ministers should participate in the flag-hoisting function.

Sack order

Angered by this, Rama Rao held discussions with some Ministers and close associates and came

to the conclusion that my action was improper. With Chandrababu Naidu adding fuel to the fire, a letter recommending my dismissal from the Council of Ministers was sent to the Governor. Several friends cautioned Rama Rao against this step and tried to dissuade him from acting on it. Rama Rao, immature as he was in politics, gave credence to the tell-tale stories of the Chandrababu Naidu gang and decided to dismiss me.

Devilal was elected leader by parliament, but he made V.P. Singh the Prime Minister and himself became the Deputy Prime Minister. The same VP Singh sacked Devilal as the Deputy Prime Minister.

A friend of mine telephoned from the Raj Bhavan to alert me about the letter recommending my dismissal. 'You formed the party, made him the leader and put him on the throne. How can an actor, who by a turn of luck becomes chief minister, sack you? How can you just sit tight?' he asked me in his own style.

Having forced me to join his Cabinet, he now conspired to lower me in the public esteem. My blood boiled at this. I reached home and dashed off the letter of resignation to the Governor and the Chief Minister.

My letter of resignation and the Chief Minister's letter recommending my dismissal were both before the Governor.

* * * * *

chapter 11

Taking over as Chief Minister 1984

Three other ministers, S. Ramamuni Reddy, Mutyala Satyanarayana and T. Jeevan Reddy, quit the Cabinet within an hour of my submitting the resignation to the Governor. The Government Chief Whip followed suit.

I had not made any move to garner support, yet no fewer than 90 MLAs rushed to me and offered to stand solidly behind me. They were furious with the Chief Minister for his cowardly act of dismissing me. They signed a letter withdrawing support to Rama Rao's leadership. Mine was the ninety-first.

The Rama Rao camp was rattled by this development. He was perhaps complacent because Chandrababu Naidu had assured him that not more than a handful of MLAs would go with me. He vented his anger on Chandrababu Naidu in the foulest language for misleading him. Chandrababu Naidu rushed to the New MLA quarters to herd the MLAs into his fold, but I was informed that the party workers there assaulted him up.

The following morning the MLAs trooped to

my place before proceeding to the Raj Bhavan to meet the Governor at the appointed hour. Our message to him was brief and pointed. "We are withdrawing our support to the Chief Minister N. T. Rama Rao'. The pressmen were present. The Legislature Secretary also was on hand to help verify if my supporters were indeed MLAs. Of course, the verification did not take place. However, the followers of Sreenivasulu Reddy and his brother, who were among the signatories, went back to the NTR camp. Yet we submitted the letter with the 91 signatures. Some of them were once in the Rama Rao Cabinet and the Chandrababu Naidu Governments. What can we say about such men of clay. They evidently lacked the morals, the character and the commitment for the welfare of the public.

Things would have been different had the Governor acted immediately on our representation and handed the Government to us. The delay caused panic among the MLAs. We submitted the representation to the Governor on the morning of August 15, 1984. The same evening, the Delhi Stranger sought his appointment for 60 to 70 MLAs backing Rama Rao. The Governor had not seen them. Had he done that, he would have known how many MLAs were with Rama Rao. The Governor, in that case, would not have put the 30-day deadline to prove my strength on the floor of the Assembly. The anti-defection law was yet to

be enacted. Even if it were, it would not have invited the provisions of the law since 90 MLAs constituting about 50 per cent of the total strength of the party MLAs were with me.

Great Betrayal

Charan Singh had managed to become the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh with the support of only 40 MLAs and later became the Prime Minister with some MPs from Chandrasekhar and VP Singh camps. Don't the so-called champions of democracy remember this? They never faulted Charan Singh for doing this.

None had ever known, nor would ever know, how Rama Rao had betrayed me. Different yardsticks are used to measure different people. The press was blatantly partisan. Is it not its responsibility to hear both sides before sitting in judgment? What will happen to the society if its verdict is influenced by the press? The Governor examined our letter withdrawing support to Rama Rao and the letter supporting him. He invited me to form the Government as other opposition parties also extended support to me.

Invitation to form the Cabinet

The leader of the opposition, A. Madan Mohan, was at the Raj Bhavan. I told the Governor that I was not interested in hankering after the Chief Minister's post. He could offer the invitation to

Madan Mohan. Our group would extend outside support to his Government. The Congress high command rejected the proposal and advised the Governor to invite me. What is wrong with this? How many times had it not happened in our politics?

I and my people reached the Raj Bhavan the following morning on the invitation of the Governor. The opposition parties had submitted to him letters supporting me. The Governor had erred in granting an interview to Rama Rao at the time of the swearing-in ceremony. Rama Rao and his men blocked the Governor's way and prevented him from administering the oath to me. The Governor then asked the Commissioner of Police present there to clear the way for him. The Commissioner willfully arrested Rama Rao, put him in the police van, got photographs taken and moved all of them to the police station and registered their names. This was a drama enacted by the Commissioner K. Vijayarama Rao, who later became Minister in the Chandrababu Naidu Government. Rama Rao had admitted that he did not enjoy majority in the Assembly. The Governor had asked him to step down. Rama Rao had lost his majority and I gained it. There was no dispute about it. There was nothing to fault the Governor for.

Precious time was lost in the scene created by Rama Rao and his men with the result that raahu

kaalam had set in. I was reluctant to take the oath on this count, but the Governor was firm. He said there was no Government at the moment and that there could not be any constitutional vacuum. The Governor administered the oath to me during the inauspicious rahu kaalam. It suited Rama Rao well because he too, like me, had strong belief in astrology. He knew the Government, which took office in rahu kaalam, would fold up on its own.

Police chief rapped

The Governor admonished the Commissioner of Police in my presence for mishandling the morning situation and bringing bad name for him. He also said the Commissioner acted thus to generate sympathy for Rama Rao. I told the Governor it was not the right thing to invite me on the one hand and to give appointment to Rama Rao on the other hand, both at the same time. Any way, we missed the golden opportunity of swearing in at the auspicious time. I was the only one to take the oath.

Well-wishers and friends advised me to hold a camp for the loyal MLAs to avoid poaching by Rama Rao's supporters. I did not entertain the idea as I thought it was not in my grain to resort to such mean and anti-democratic practices. I had great respect and intrinsic faith in the integrity of my followers. I did not want to herd them in a camp. I had heard of such camps organised during

the gram panchayat and municipal elections where the members were taken to a secret destination, out of bounds of the rival group, and released after the crucial polling. I did not want to hold anyone captive. Those who wanted to stay with me could do so. If somebody wanted to leave, who was I to stand in the way?

We submitted our letter signed by 91 MLAs on August 15. The same day I was elected leader of the legislature party. The Governor did not act on this until the morning of August 16 when he invited me to form the Government as he was convinced that I enjoyed the majority. The opposition parties too had given letters extending their support. On August 15, when Rama Rao was still in the saddle, some MLAs who had signed the letter supporting me, were lured to the other side and confined in his studios.

Political analysts had at the time averred it was a great mistake, in fact, a historic blunder on my part, not to have held the camp for the MLAs. They still hold the same view. I have clear views and convictions about politics. I had never entered politics to seek high positions or accumulate wealth. My crusade against Rama Rao was only in line with my values and principles. Khadi dress symbolised purity not many might know that I am a sanyasi in khadi. It was unconstitutional and undemocratic to hold MLAs in captivity.

NTR - ready to pack up and go

After the Governor invited me to form the Government, Rama Rao had no choice. He abused Chandrababu Naidu in foul language and made up his mind to pack up and go back to Chennai. But leaders of some opposition parties restrained him. They infused courage in him to meet the challenge. Rama Rao followers attacked the houses of MLAs loyal to me and destroyed their properties. Families were physically attacked. The unfriendly press was also not spared. Shaken by the developments, some of my MLAs switched loyalties and danced to the tune of NTR. They enjoyed royal comfort in the enemy camp.

Newspaper reports and photographs showing Rama Rao in a police jeep earned a fund of popular sympathy and goodwill for him. The newspaper baron used his clout to mobilise the media representatives from New Delhi to come to Hyderabad and put them up in luxury hotels. He had successfully brainwashed them to believe that I and my Government posed a grave threat to democracy and that Indira Gandhi was at the bottom of it all. The media-generated sympathy came ironically at the juncture when the gullible people were getting fed up with the NTR's misrule. Rama Rao used his natural skills of acting and rhetoric to capitalise on the new-found sympathy.

The opposition parties planned a public

meeting at the Nizam College grounds on August 17 to protest against the so-called murder of democracy. The Commissioner of Police refused permission to Rama Rao and Chandrababu Naidu for the meeting, perhaps to impress me or demonstrate his loyalty. I summoned him and asked him to give the permission, saying in a democracy everyone had a right to hold meetings. "They may at the worst heap abuse on me. Let them. What is wrong?", I told him.

A number of state and national leaders of the opposition parties attended the public meeting at the Nizam College grounds. Among them was Choudhury Charan Singh. Rama Rao turned up unshaven and dressed in lungi and banian, wearing a distinctly sick look. Charan Singh was disgusted by Rama Rao's antics and the drama enacted at the meeting. He left the place annoyed.

The Great Delhi Parade

As a follow-up to the meeting, the captive MLAs were taken to Delhi to parade them in the national capital. I was the Chief Minister at the time. If I had nursed any evil intention, I could have stopped the train, detained and held them captive. I could have seen to it that the train was deliberately delayed. Was I so helpless? As a democrat, I would do nothing of the kind. It was not in my grain. I did not think that my supporters were so helpless that they could not break out of Rama Rao's hold.

They might have other ideas. Who then am I to object. If they were determined to stay with Rama Rao, there was nothing I could do.

Instead of lodging them in the Andhra Pradesh Bhavan, the MLAs were taken to function halls booked by the BJP. They were accommodated there until they were paraded before the President Zail Singh. Some MPs and MLAs from other States sported AP badges during the show of strength to make the President believe that they were all from Andhra Pradesh. Around the same time, the Governor Ramlal telephoned and asked me to come to the Raj Bhavan with my MLAs. Some of my men were on tour and some others defected to Rama Rao camp. I went to the Governor with the available MLAs. He made a check of them. At the Rashtrapati Bhavan, Rama Rao enacted the drama with the support of the opposition parties to demonstrate his support to the President. The opposition parties targeted Indira Gandhi in harsh terms, as they saw her hand behind the conspiracy.

After the show at the Rashtrapati Bhavan, the MLAs were flown to Bangalore in special aircraft, bypassing Hyderabad, along with the so-called saviours of democracy like the opposition leaders, Rama Rao, his sons-in-law and their cronies. The TDP managers then shifted the MLAs to Mysore and again to the Nandi Hills like the cat which moves its kitten from place to place. The MLAs were put up in luxury guest houses and taken on sight-seeing trips.

Taking over as Chief Minister 1984

The Constitution clearly lays down that in the event of a Government losing its majority in the Legislature, the Governor has no option but to invite another party or group enjoying majority. That being the clear legal position, it is wrong to create disturbances and enact dramas to whip up public sympathy. Rama Rao and his men sought to create an impression that the entire opposition parties stood behind him like a rock. It was also wrong to entertain the view that the opposition supported him just because he was wronged. They had other ideas.

Opposition has other ideas

The opposition parties had found Indira Gandhi too tough a nut to crack. They had neither the strength nor the guts to dislodge her. Rama Rao's dismissal came in handy for them to mount a war against her. They wanted to shoot her from Rama Rao's shoulders. Poor Rama Rao was blissfully ignorant of the opposition designs.

The question was not whether the Governor's decision was right or not. The opposition singled out Indira Gandhi for condemnation. If they thought I was wrong, they should criticise me, not Indira Gandhi who had nothing to do with the matter. This was a problem concerning a State. The Centre had nothing to do with it. There was no need to blame the Governor, either. The anti-defection law was not in vogue. The MLAs had not defected to another party. They had merely

replaced the leader while remaining in the same party. Yet the opposition condemned Indira Gandhi for masterminding the change in the leadership and the Government in the State. They made a big issue of it in Parliament and demanded the recall of the Governor.

Atal Behari Vajpayee was among those leaders who had raised a shrill demand for the recall of the Governor at the time. He became the Prime Minister. He had no qualms to direct the Bihar Governor to induct Nitish Kumar as the Chief Minister although he did not command majority in the House. How could he justify this? Anyway, Nitish had to resign after failing the trust vote. Did Vajpayee demand recall of the Bihar Governor? No. Why then this doublespeak? What kind of rajneethi is this? This was not heard of even in the Mahabharatha and the Ramayana.

The MLAs returned to Hyderabad after enjoying the hospitality of Ramakrishna Hedge in Karnataka. Some of them came back to me with signed letters of support. Among them was the Speaker Tangi Satyanarayana and the Deputy Speaker, Bhim Reddy. I was the Chief Minister at the time.

Governor Ramlal was recalled, whatever the reasons. P. V. Narasimha Rao spoke to me on RAX and asked for my choice of his successor. Already television was scrolling the news of Shankar Dayal

Sharma's appointment as the Governor of Andhra Pradesh. 'You have decided to send Shankar Dayal Sharma. Why do you ask me? You appoint anyone you like', I replied in a mood of resignation.

Governor replaced

Shankar Dayal Sharma was no stranger to me. I knew him well. We met at the VIP lounge of the Hyderabad airport. As Finance Minister I was bound for Vizag. Sharma, who arrived to attend a meeting in Medak, waited for his hosts to receive him. When none turned up, I arranged a car for his use until he returned to Delhi. We met again in Delhi at a farmers' rally addressed by Indira Gandhi. Some worthies, who got wind of his appointment as the Governor, carried tales against me to Shankar Dayal Sharma. So, Sharma who came here with a prejudiced mind, ordered me to take M. Baga Reddy as the Speaker. The Speaker's and the Deputy Speaker's post became vacant after Satyanarayana and Bhim Reddy joined the Cabinet.

Normally, the senior most member of the House is chosen for the post of the presiding officer. When I took over as the Chief Minister, Sultan Salauddin Owaisi was the senior most member. The Governor asked me to summon Baga Reddy then and there, without giving me time to ponder or even to discuss with the officers. I did not know what the idea was. It was not fair to displease the

Governor who had just been appointed. Disagreeing with him could lead to unpleasant consequences too. Accordingly, we opted for Baga Reddy.

PV Narasimha Rao telephoned to ask who advised me to choose Baga Reddy. I explained the situation to him in detail. He pulled me up for blindly following the dictates of the Governor. Vijayabhaskar Reddy also called me on phone to say that I made a big mistake and that I should have at least consulted him.

Meeting with Sanjiva Reddy

In spite of these pressures, I remained calm and carried on with running the administration. Meanwhile, riots broke out in Anantapur and police opened fire on the mob resulting in some deaths. I flew to Bangalore by a helicopter and drove on to Anantapur to restore peace and order. After taking necessary steps, I met the former President Neelam Sanjiva Reddy and apprised him of the situation in graphic detail. Bhim Reddy, some MLAs from the district and others were also present. He sympathised with my lot.

I explained to him the circumstances leading to the formation of the regional parties, its philosophy and objectives, the choice of the charismatic Rama Rao as the president and how he had let down the ideals of the party and converted the party and the Government into the

family pocket borough. Rama Rao pursued a single-point agenda of criticising Indira Gandhi day in and day out. The party manifesto clearly spelt out friendly relations between the State Government and the Centre, whichever party was in power. But Rama Rao clearly violated this principle. By his foolish actions, Rama Rao had not only become a laughing stock but a dictator who would not listen to anyone. I also told Sanjiva Reddy that the MLAs, fed up with Rama Rao's attitude and its bearing on the future of the party, became prepared to effect change in the leadership of the legislature party as well as the Government. Under these circumstances, I had agreed to take over the leadership.

I requested Sanjiva Reddy to give elderly suggestion to Rama Rao to free the MLAs from his captivity. They could choose their leader without fear or favour, me or Rama Rao. I was not keen on continuing as the Chief Minister. I asked him to tell Rama Rao that holding MLAs captive would amount to undermining the basic values of democracy. 'If Rama Rao agrees to this, I will instantly submit my resignation here and now', I had said.

'How sane and mature are your thoughts even at this young age? Rama Rao is expected to call on me. I will talk to him', he assured me after listening to my account. The same evening, we returned by helicopter.

Rama Rao met Sanjiva Reddy shortly afterwards. Sanjiva Reddy advised Rama Rao to set the MLAs free and that in a democracy, they were at liberty to choose their leader. Rama Rao bluntly told him that if he released the MLAs, they would all go to me and that he would be in a soup. There was no question of setting them free, he told the aged leader.

Sanjiva Reddy later telephoned to me. 'You are correct. He is an obstinate fellow. He does not listen to anybody. I told him to please himself'. He also had a dig at the press, the national and the State level media, for distorting facts. He had never heard of MLAs being held captive and forced to vote against their wish. These things happened only at the gram panchayat and samithi level. It did not behove Rama Rao or any leader to reduce the legislators to the panchayat level. He was much anguished.

Governor prejudiced

As I said before, Shankar Dayal Sharma came here much prejudiced against me by the wrong feeding given by the Delhi Stranger and others. He viewed every action of mine with suspicion. It was quite improper on his part to advise me to provide protection to such and such a person or premises. I had never indulged in criminal activities nor patronised them. People know who encouraged Chandrababu Naidu or endorsed his

actions. It is natural for criminal minds to see others in the same light. I had suffered a lot at the hands of such elements, but never tried to harm them.

* * * * *

Setting the House in Order

I had initially inducted three Ministers to my Cabinet and added some more after Shankar Dayal Sharma took over as the new Governor.

I want to place on record some significant steps I had taken during the 30-day stint as the Chief Minister. These were in the nature of setting the house in order after Rama Rao made a mess of it with his puerile and immature decisions. Several of these ill-advised measures adversely affected the common man and threatened to damage the future of the Telugu Desam party. I took liberal steps to help all sections of the society, particularly the youth and the poor.

It is my misfortune that the press saw red in every action of mine and accused me of amassing wealth through corrupt means. It was clearly misled by my detractors.

Government employees, particularly the teachers, had been the backbone of the Telugu Desam right from its inception and were principally responsible for the party getting a massive mandate. But, within days of assuming power, Rama Rao repaid the debt of gratitude in a most cruel manner by unilaterally reducing the

age of their retirement from 58 years to 55. One stroke of the pen dealt a death blow to the employee fraternity. Overnight, they turned bitter enemies of the party and the Government and waged a battle against this fascist measure. They boldly faced repression and harassment.

Recognising the need to win back the trust of the employees, I decided to revoke the monstrous government order on retirement age and restore status quo. It came into force on August 23 coinciding with the birth anniversary of Andhra Kesari Tanguturi Prakasam Panthulu.

Unholy Diversion of Funds

Popular sentiment and the concerns of devotees had no place in Rama Rao's heart where money alone mattered. He passed a draconian order that the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD) part 30 per cent of its income, coming from the devotees, to the State Exchequer. This spurred angry reaction from the devotees not only from within the State but from all over the country. They termed it 'Tughlak act' and sought legal redress. I believed that the Government had no business to interfere in religious matters and revoked this order too. I fulfilled people's desire by restoring the funds to the TTD.

The AP Dairy Development Cooperative Federation had over the years run into huge accumulated losses on account of misuse of funds

and corruption during the Congress rule. To offset this, it periodically revised the milk prices with no regard for the purchasing capacity of the average consumer. The Telugu Desam, which came to power, could not stem the rot and continued with the same policies. Rama Rao ignored popular demand to reduce milk price. I conceded their just demands by reducing the milk price by 30 paise per litre.

Rama Rao Government had failed miserably in implementing the Rs 2 a kg rice scheme for the poor. Rice millers had a field day making crores of rupees by diverting the stocks to neighbouring States. This caused a severe shortage of rice within. The quota for green card holders was watered down. Instead of 20 kg per month, it was reduced to only 5 kg per head. As soon as I took over, I ordered 25 kg per month per family regardless of the members. It provided much relief to the poor people.

Scheduled caste, scheduled tribe and backward classes students in the welfare hostels had been agitating for a hike in mess charges for the past 20 months. Rama Rao did little except to deliver cinematic monologues to satisfy them. I raised the mess charges from Rs 125 per month to Rs 175 and the grant for high school students from Rs 85 to Rs 100.

Lakhs of toddy tappers had been agitating for

years in support of their demands. They opposed auctions where toddy tappers cooperatives operated. They argued that the cooperatives should have the right to auction toddy in line with the 'toddy for the tapper' principle. Veteran leader Gouthu Latchanna had even resorted to fast unto the death. At this juncture, I solved their pending issues and rendered justice.

Lakhs of orphan children roamed the streets begging for food and in search of shelter. They led a life of hunger and hardship. Rama Rao waxed eloquent on their plight and promised to wipe their tears. In effect, nothing was done. I sanctioned two orphanages in every district and released funds.

DMM - an Instrument of Torture

The Dharma Maha Matra was another creation of the Devil's mind. This institution was aimed at bringing corrupt politicians including ministers, MLAs, and senior Government officials to the book and punish them. This was in addition to 'the Lok Ayukta' constituted by an act of the Legislature. Rama Rao planned to use this agency to harass people inimical to his interests. Suspension of some officials by the Dharma Maha Matra caused a flutter among the bureaucracy. Officers became hesitant to take any initiative, resulting in gradual paralysis of the administration. Rama Rao had proved he did not lag behind Tughlak in this regard. As soon as I took charge, I buried the

Dharma Maha Matra fathoms deep, never to surface. I restored the morale of the officers.

The minorities had played a key role in the Telugu Desam's rise to power which had promised them a bright future. But after coming to power, Rama Rao and the officialdom adopted an unfriendly policy of neglect. The party thus alienated the minorities. Another classic case of burning the raft after crossing the stream. I constituted the 'Minorities Finance Corporation' and released adequate funds for its activities.

The old city of Hyderabad across the Musi inhabited mostly by the minorities remained a sensitive area - backward, neglected and prone to communal tension. It also bred criminal activities threatening peace and order in the area. At my instance, a long-term development plan was formulated for the old city. I sanctioned Rs 10 crore for the purpose.

A lot of irregularities and malpractices took place in the publication of results and valuation of examination papers of 10th class and intermediate students in the year 1984. Confusion was worse confounded by the malfunctioning of computers. This affected a large number of students and their parents. Rama Rao rejected their repeated demand for adding grace marks. I sanctioned 3 grace marks and raised the seat strength in colleges to accommodate the successful candidates. It

benefitted thousands of students.

A large number of students moved out of the State to pursue engineering and other professional courses in view of very limited number of seats available in the 13 engineering colleges in the State. They had to shell down lakhs of rupees by way of donation. Against this backdrop, Rama Rao enhanced the fees for engineering students by Rs 5000 imposing a heavy burden on the parents. I not only raised the number of seats to 245 but reduced the enhanced rate from Rs 5000 to Rs 3000. I also gave 20 per cent quota of seats to private managements while withdrawing the annual recurring grant payable to them. This resulted in the saving of Rs 7 crores. By increasing the seats to 245, I also saved an outgo of Rs 25 crores to other States by way of donations and fees.

Fillip to Minorities

I was familiar with the old city's history of communal clashes from my days as lawyer. I discussed the issue threadbare with intellectuals and concluded that education provided the key to the problem. The misguided youth could thus channelise their energies positively. Soon after becoming the Chief Minister, I was taken in a rally to the old city and felicitated. Salahuddin Owaisi, the local MLA, and others pleaded for sanction of medical and engineering colleges. I hoped that this could help minimise communal violence and enable

the youth to change their ways, study and get jobs. As a follow-up, I asked concerned officials to examine the issue in depth. They warned me that if the colleges were given to the minority institutions, the Government would not be allowed to interfere in their functioning in any manner. The Constitution provided for this safeguard. I saw no harm in giving the institutions complete freedom to manage their own affairs, moreso when the Government was not obliged to give any grants. Accordingly, I sanctioned the medical and engineering colleges for the minorities. Similarly, I sanctioned a medical college for the Christian minorities. In the past, Brahmananda Reddy had allotted Government land in Darus Salaam area in Hyderabad for the Muslims. I also allotted 10 to 14 acres of Government land in Saidabad to them. I am happy to note that the Owaisi family is running a hospital and an attached medical college and engineering college in that area. I am also convinced that there is a marked change in the attitude of the Muslims and their relationship with the Hindus. This is a good sign.

This positive development is not by any means due to the efforts of the earlier Congress Governments or of the NT Rama Rao administration, but solely due to my initiative in sanctioning these colleges. The Christian minorities also were given similar encouragement, but they could not make use of the opportunities.

The Telugu people are great cinema-buffs. Theatre-owners made hay on their weakness for the silver screen. We all know that Rama Rao and his relatives own a number of theatres in the State. He introduced the slab system which enabled theatre owners to make a fortune while burdening the average cinema-goer. I provided relief to the common man by scrapping the slab system.

Sops to the farmer

I also scrapped the purchase tax of Rs 10 per ton collected by the factory managements from the sugarcane growers and ensured that the money so collected was refunded to the farmers. The income from purchase tax was pocketed by the factory owners.

Farmers and agricultural labour in the dry land areas suffered untold hardship on account of the acute drought in 1984. I provided succour to them waiving energy charges on 5 hp motors for one year. The drought also caused severe drinking water shortage. To tide over this situation, I ordered release of water from irrigation canals to tanks and also to feed crops under these tanks. I also deferred collection of IMS loan dues until March 1985.

The Rama Rao Government steeply increased the tax on tourist bus operators who passed on much of the burden on the passengers. My Government reduced the tax from Rs 250 per seat

to Rs 150. This provided considerable relief to the tourists.

Thousands of freedom fighters had sacrificed everything during the independence movement. Some of them later got elected to the Legislative Assembly or to the Council. These leaders had selflessly served the country without expecting any reward. In recognition of their services, the ex-MLAs and MLCs were sanctioned a pension of Rs 250 to Rs 500 per month. Rama Rao, who did not know the meaning of sacrifice or the freedom struggle, abolished the pension scheme one fine morning. He did not know how to honour or repay the debt of gratitude to those patriots who had forgone comforts of youth, wealth and life for the country. One can find close similarities between him and Mohammed Bin Tughlak. I restored the pension to the former legislators.

Relief to artistes

Those in the field of performing arts, literature and culture felt very happy at the elevation of one of them - Rama Rao - to the high office of the Chief Minister of the State. They saw golden visions of a bright future with the fellow-artist at the helm of affairs. This dream was shattered when Rama Rao ruthlessly scrapped the various cultural akademis. Poet laureate Dasaradhi died of shock after the post was abolished by Rama Rao. I revived all the akademis as well as the post of the poet laureate.

The Congress as well as the Rama Rao Government ignored the interests of Rayalaseema on the issue of supplying Krishna waters to Chennai. I issued orders that certain features of the Telugu Ganga project inimical to their interests were removed. I also sanctioned Rs 10 crores to speed up execution of the pucca houses for the weaker sections.

The Congress Government had appointed Muralidhar Rao commission to study the problems of the backward classes which constituted 45 per cent of the State's population. Years had passed, but the Rama Rao Government dragged its feet in tabling its report in the Assembly or acting on its recommendations. Rama Rao, who had come to power with the support of the backward classes, forfeited their goodwill. I immediately implemented its main recommendation of 25 per cent reservations and offered to place the report in the Assembly for discussion.

The annual all-India industrial exhibition, organised every year by the Telangana Graduates Association, in Hyderabad is a popular event drawing people and traders from all over the State and outside. Government had leased what is known as the Exhibition grounds to the Exhibition Society. The lease period expired in 1983, but the NTR Government refused to extend the lease and instead, tried to reclaim the site. This had hurt the sentiments of not only the people of Hyderabad

but of Telangana region as a whole. Rama Rao had little time for others problems. His obsession was to stage one drama or the other and to keep the people constantly on tenterhooks. I passed orders renewing the lease to the society, much to the delight of all concerned.

Another decision was to enhance the ex-gratia for the APSRTC employees from Rs 750 to Rs 1000. A number of B. Ed colleges were permitted to meet the shortage of trained teachers and to improve literacy rate in the State.

Houses sites to MLAs

The Congress Government had taken a policy decision to allot house-sites to legislators in Hyderabad at concessional rate. Rama Rao abolished the practice causing deep disappointment to the newly-elected MLAs of the Telugu Desam. I conceded their just demand and ordered allotment of house-sites to the MLAs.

Rama Rao and his friends like the BJP instigated violent attacks by hired goondas and anti-social elements on the houses of MLAs supporting me during the change of leadership. I sanctioned compensation to the legislators whose property was damaged. Similarly, communal outfits like the BJP utilised the Ganesh immersion festival on September 9, 1984 to attack and destroy the properties of minorities. I sanctioned Rs 10,000 as grant coupled with low interest loans to traders

whose properties were damaged in arson. This was necessary to safeguard secularism.

I also scrapped the much hated detention system in the colleges under Osmania University. This system was in vogue only in Osmania University. Rama Rao ignored the demand for its abolition. I conceded the students' demand. After all, I too was once a student.

Dispute over Flag

It is a well-known fact that the party symbol and the flag were finalised by me, Rama Rao and a few others. After he was unseated as the Chief Minister and I took over, dispute arose over the claims for the party symbol and the flag. We went to the court for justice. I was pained by the outcome. The judge, who had heard the case and gave the verdict in favour of my opponents, lost no time in resigning his post and joining Rama Rao's camp. He later got elected as the party MLA.

Good or bad times do not last forever. I heard from my followers and other people that Rajaiah had confessed to my party men that as the judge, he had wronged me under the influence of tempting offers of the other group. He was repentant. Hearsay accounts had it that Rajaiah was offered, in exchange for favourable judgment, a seat in the Assembly and the Finance portfolio in the Cabinet. He fell for it. Later, people in the know also confirmed this. I am not attributing motive to the

court. I am only placing before the readers what had been brought to my notice and what I believe could be true. The judge was, as promised, made the party MLA, the Minister for Finance and later Member of the Lok Sabha. What further proof was required?

In spite of pressures and tensions natural to the high office, I tried to run the administration as efficiently and honestly as possible. I had an experienced secretary in Sarma who used to process important files and put them up for my signature.

The bore well story

One such file required special mention. A bore well was sunk in my private residence. The file charging the expenditure to the Government account was on my desk. I referred it to the Chief Minister since it was not proper to me to sanction bore well in my own house. It remained pending until it was put up to me, this time as the Chief Minister. I ordered the file to be closed and that my wife would pay for the work. The Chief Secretary and other secretaries present were happy and desired that this was how the administration should be. I appointed B. N. Raman as the Chief Secretary during my tenure.

I was accessible to the officers and the visitors. The doors of the Chief Minister's peshi were always open. Several aggrieved officers met me to relate

their plight after being unceremoniously and unwarrantedly suspended or punished. Several of them suffered without salary. I directed the Chief Secretary to look into the cases with sympathy and reinstate them in genuine cases.

Rama Rao was in the United States when the Chief Secretary, Shravan Kumar, sent me a file for approval. It related to constructing a helipad in Rama Rao's Gandipet residence for which Rs 20 lakhs was necessary for works and another Rs 40 lakhs for security and bandobast arrangements, that being the Chief Minister's residence. As the Finance Minister, I referred the file to the Finance Secretary. The Finance Secretary noted in the file that the rules permitted sanction of maintenance costs only for one residence of the Chief Minister or the Ministers. This being the second house of the Chief Minister, maintenance grants could not be sanctioned.

Now, this was a sensitive and ticklish issue. I referred the file to the Chief Minister since the issue concerned him. This infuriated the Chief Minister. He abused me, the Chief Secretary and the Finance Secretary at an officers meeting. Chandrababu Naidu added fuel to the fire by further poisoning his mind against me. This further embittered the relations between us. I told the Chief Secretary I would always abide by the rules and never violate them.

* * * * *

chapter 13

August 1984 and the aftermath

The Centre had recalled the Governor Ramlal and appointed Shankar Dayal Sharma in his place. I expanded the Cabinet after some of the Legislators returned to my fold.

I had to choose Baga Reddy as the Speaker under pressure from the Governor, but Baga Reddy left the Assembly complaining of severe chest pain. I made Sultan Salahuddin Owaisi, who was then the senior most member of the House, as the Speaker. This meant that the House had to be reconvened for which, I was informed, at least three days notice was required. The 30-day deadline given to me to establish my strength on the floor of the Assembly would expire by that time.

The Governor spoke to me on the RAX phone asking me to submit resignation having failed to prove my strength within the stipulated time. I briefed the Cabinet about this development. We were not at fault. Rama Rao had scuttled our attempts to move the resolution on the trust motion in the House. Rama Rao insisted that the resolution be put to vote immediately without debate, while I wanted the condolence motion be taken up first, as was the regular practice.

I went to the Governor with the resignation

letter, but urged him not to give the opportunity to Rama Rao since he had blocked the resolution. I suggested a brief spell of the Governor's rule with the House kept in animated suspense paving the way for free and fair voting by the members. He was in no mood to listen. He was prejudiced against me and my Cabinet.

Panic in the House

A tense atmosphere prevailed in the Assembly that day. Bhim Reddy, MLA from Anantapur turned up with a pistol. I persuaded him to put it away as it was a crime to come to the House with a firearm. He was shaking with anger at Rama Rao and his rowdy gang who had caused extensive loss and damage to his property, and threatened to kill Rama Rao. I threatened to resign then and there if he did not surrender the weapon. I grabbed the pistol from him and led him into the House. Meanwhile, somebody burst a cracker, forcing adjournment of the House without taking up the resolution. There was no opportunity for free voting. The Rama Rao camp won the day by creating panic and projecting the action as exemplary and moral. Indira Gandhi also was worried by these sordid developments.

Rama Rao held his MLAs in captivity in Karnataka and received them at the State border and personally escorted them in a convoy of buses. This is something I am not capable of. An accomplished actor, Rama Rao excelled in real life

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acting too. He pretended to be a heart patient, weak and feeble, and conned gullible women into believing and sympathising with him. Some people even planned to build a temple for him. He was a good actor, but never a fair minded person. People believed him, because he came from the world of make believe. He had succeeded in projecting me as a villain and he as paragon of all virtues. The lay public might fall for it, but those in the know could analyse and see what lay behind the mask.

Ultimately my Government resigned and Rama Rao reinstated as the Chief Minister. Rama Rao had till then walked with the aid of a stick, as if he would totter and fall down due to weakness. In the process, he attracted the attention of a sympathetic public in and outside the State through a friendly media. He cast off the stick and walked with the characteristic majesty the moment he regained power. I was baffled how the public accepted this. The Governor declined to grant appointment to my representative who carried the letter urging him to declare the Governor's rule with the Assembly in suspended animation. One could understand the pressure on him to install Rama Rao.

The reinstatement of a dismissed Government was a strange phenomenon. The Union Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao conspired against me. He had sent N. G. Ranga, KLN Prasad and Yelamarthi Nayudamma, director of central leather research

institute, Chennai to Indira Gandhi to plead on behalf of Rama Rao. They assured Indira Gandhi that Rama Rao would never oppose her thereafter. Indira Gandhi, who seldom changed her mind once a decision was taken, agreed to reinstate Rama Rao. Thus PV's diplomacy succeeded. KLN Prasad pretended to be on my side during this drama.

NTR cringes before Indira

Rama Rao later met Indira Gandhi in Delhi and explained that he was new to politics and its nuances. He promised her that he would not take a stand against her or the Central Government and fell at her feet. Who does not know this drama? What a u-turn for a man who had left no opportunity to berate Indira Gandhi. It goes to prove that for the sake of power, people stoop to any depths. For her part, Indira Gandhi appeared not to bother about the turbulent events, as if she had forgotten or had nothing to do with them.

Indira Gandhi sensed that Rama Rao might opt for dissolution of the Assembly and fresh elections. In the event, nobody could have faulted the Governor if he gave me an opportunity to form the Government. But Rama Rao managed to get the Assembly dissolved without much difficulty, thanks to the cooperation of some central ministers.

I tried to press my case again with the Governor. He made me wait and sat with Rama

Rao in another room where he signed the order, thus dissolving the House within hardly 18 months and imposing heavy burden of fresh elections on the people. This is the Governor's good sense. He came back to me and explained he was helpless as PC Alexander, the Prime Minister's Secretary, put pressure on him to act. Our elders ganged up to play this sordid drama to malign me in the public eye.

It never happened in a constitutional set-up, be it in the country or in any State, that a Government was dismissed while the opposition leader held the MLAs hostage and the same leader formed the next Government and won the vote of confidence. I do not know what democratic principles and norms were applied in the case. After assuming power, Rama Rao reversed some of my decisions and eased out my officers. He imputed corrupt motives to me. This is a clear jaundiced view. Who does know how Rama Rao stacked his ill-gotten wealth in cinema cans?

I had not amassed wealth by corrupt means. I constructed houses and acquired house-sites and farms solely from my income as lawyer. After coming to politics, I sold away properties from time to time. I had not taken money from anyone. Whatever came to me as election funds went back to the people. I had not pocketed a single pie. Only a corrupt man like NTR sees red in others.

With the sole intention of undermining my

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popularity with the masses and finishing my very existence, Rama Rao ordered two commissions of inquiry into charges of abuse of power and acquisition of properties by corrupt means. Both the commissions, one headed by a retired judge of the Supreme Court and the other by a former judge of the High Court, did not indict me on any count. The Krishna Rao Commission noted that I as the Chief Minister should not have permitted the Ganesh immersion rally to proceed via Moazzamjahi Market. Regulating the rally was the Police Commissioner's job, not the Chief Minister. The officers might have failed to brief the judge properly.

Krishnaiah, a retired judge of the Supreme Court, was a great fan of Rama Rao, whom he described as a 'Messaiah'. When such a person was appointed as the commission of inquiry against me, I went to the court and got relief. Meanwhile, the term of the commission ended. Another judge was appointed at his instance, but that again was a fiasco. I was thus protected by the God's grace.

Attack on Studios mooted

Many of my MLA had suggested that we attack Rama Rao's studios and free the MLAs held captive there. Even the Governor Shankar Dayal Sharma made such a suggestion. I summoned some senior officials for their view. What they said left me crest-fallen. They said if the attack was mounted, about 20 MLAs would be killed and apart from that,

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Rama Rao's men in the studios were ready with swords and other weapons. I did not quite know whether to laugh or cry. I asked the Commissioner why he hesitated to bring back my MLAs from the custody of Rama Rao. He told me bluntly it was not their job.

I was anguished by his attitude. I brought him to Hyderabad from the naxalite-affected forest areas in the fond hope that he would be of great help to me. I appointed him as intelligence officer. To my misfortune, he acted as intelligence man for Rama Rao, Chandrababu Naidu and the Delhi Stranger.

I was in a miserable plight like the pitiable elephant in distress in Gajendra Moksham. I hated myself for trusting such people. Why should I continue as the Chief Minister when I could not protect my own MLAs. I became philosophic and decided not to proceed with the attack on the studios. OK. Let the MLAs who signed their support to me vote freely in the Assembly, never mind if they did not vote for me, I thought.

Some of the MLAs, held captive in the studios, later said I should have gone ahead with the attack on the studios in which event they would come out in my support. They also told that the police had deliberately misled me about the danger of MLAs getting killed during the raid. The police was hand in glove with Rama Rao.

I was not obliged to convene the Assembly when a good number of MLAs were held captive. Instead of taking the line that the House could not be convened unless the MLAs were freed, the Governor in his wisdom chose to call for my resignation for failing to prove my majority within the deadline. Rama Rao took over the reins of power. We MLAs set off on a tour of the State to explain to the people how the press had distorted the facts and painted me as the villain of the piece. The Governor was the foremost among the people who advised me to hold my supporters together. Chandrababu Naidu and his men persistently put hurdles in our way by feeding the media with false information about the impending enquiries against me.

Meetings disrupted

Our first meeting was in Tirupati. After darshan of the Lord, we reached Chandrababu Naidu's Vishnupriya Hotel where welcome arches festooned with chappals greeted us. At Alipiri, Chandrababu's brother, Ramamurthy Naidu and his men rained stones on our convoy and abused a woman member in foulest language. We reached the venue of the meeting where a large crowd had gathered to hear us. Ramamurthy Naidu and his gang set fire to the stage and let loose a reign of terror. Chandrababu Naidu masterminded the plan from Hyderabad by keeping in touch with the police and his men. We staged a protest dharna

before the police station. Next day, we organised the meeting at the same place. A good crowd was present. Fearing that we would expose their misdeeds, Chandrababu Naidu and his hirelings tried to create problems wherever we scheduled meetings while police looked the other way.

Indira Gandhi was in Hyderabad when we returned from Tirupati. A number of party leaders and others met her. M. M. Hashim, who was a Minister in the Channa Reddy Cabinet, wondered why Indira Gandhi had chosen to install Rama Rao. She could at least have opted for the Governor's rule. She held PV Narasimha Rao responsible for the decision saying he gave her a scary account of the episode leaving her no choice. Hashim briefed me about this conversation in detail.

At Warangal, a leader who became Minister by my grace led the attack on our meeting. I was hit by a stone. A few others were also injured. We got the wounds stitched in hospital. I mocked at the Collector and the Superintendent of Police for their handling of the law and order situation. The Nalgonda meeting went off well. The Visakhapatnam meeting was a resounding success despite stone-pelting organised by a hotel magnate. China Kapu and his associates organised a massive rally at Subrahmanyam Maidan in Rajamundry. A Minister boasted that my bones would be broken if I dared to come to Eluru. I took up the challenge and went there. I personally saw the

Superintendent of Police, other senior officials directing stone-pelting by anti-social elements. A huge stone was hurled at me with an intention to finish me. It hit my leg. The police and the rowdies joined hands in an unholy alliance. The opposition parties condemned the incident and demanded that the Government not disrupt our meetings. They tried to wash their hands saying 'what can we do. The people are teaching them a lesson'.

The same fate visited Rama Rao when Chandrababu Naidu backstabbed him. He stood isolated with none to support or sympathise. The same opposition now backed Chandrababu Naidu to the hilt. We do not know their motives. I am mentioning this to underscore that retribution catches up with the sinners sooner or later.

Detention at Guntur PS

We received rousing welcome at Vijayawada by 'Nagaralu', the backbone of the Congress in One Town area. An estimated two lakh people gathered at the venue the following morning. The local police was given strict instruction to see that the meeting did not take place at any cost, even if it meant opening fire to disperse the crowd. Adusumilli Jayaprakash, the local MLA who supported me, was detained by the police. I was prevented from the reaching the dais in view of the law and order situation. Lathi-charge was resorted to disperse the crowd. Well. This was the great heroic act of Chandrababu Naidu.

At Guntur, the whole district assembled for my meeting. I was detained at the guest house and taken to the police station. I was not allowed to address the meeting. The enraged mob turned against the police. We cannot forget the support extended by Gadde Rattaiah and his wife, Krishnaveni. Some rowdies at the instance of a prominent BJP leader, who became a central minister later, put up used chappals and broomsticks across the welcome arch. Such shameless characters are passing off as great leaders in our great democracy.

One newspaper ran a tirade against me with missionary zeal. It called upon the people to greet me and my men with chappals and broomsticks. What else is this if not brazen abuse of the freedom of the press? They successfully scuttled my meeting in Guntur.

We reached Hyderabad via Nagarjunasagar the following morning for a meeting with the Governor at 9:30 a.m. It could not materialise on account of the shocking news of the assassination of Indira Gandhi. The Governor rushed to Delhi. We too followed. The whole nation mourned her death.

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The Congress Home-coming

We, sixty to 70 MLAs, proceeded to Delhi and witnessed the last rites of Indira Gandhi. I broached the idea of joining the Congress party at that juncture, but my MLAs shot it down and insisted that we maintain our identity as a separate group. Otherwise, I would have talked to Rajiv Gandhi and joined the Congress party the same day.

Meanwhile, Assam went to the polls. N.T. Rama Rao campaigned for the Asom Gana Parishad. There was no change in his attitude. Indira Gandhi was no more. Emboldened by this, he resumed his attack on the Congress with an eye on the Prime Minister's seat.

Rama Rao successfully conspired to get the Assembly dissolved, after the death of Indira Gandhi. Rajiv Gandhi desired my group be given some tickets, but some State leaders colluded with PV Narasimha Rao and others to sabotage it. I had no option but to float the 'Prajawamy Telugu Desam party' and contest the elections. We knew what the outcome would be, yet we went to the polls on a matter of conviction and principle. But the people could not bless the party, mesmerised, as they were, by the cinematic approach of NT

Rama Rao who projected me as a demon in the eyes of the public.

In some places, democratic practices were subverted. Rigging, intimidation and other malpractices were resorted to ensure that I in particular did not win at any cost. In the Malakpet constituency, where I contested, the police enforced a curfew-like situation to discourage voters. In the booths where they feared I got more votes, they switched off lights to replace the ballot boxes with empty ones. The police officers brazenly sided with Rama Rao who rewarded them suitably.

Chandrababu Naidu was elevated as general secretary of the party in 1986 around the time elections were held to the Municipal Corporation of Hyderabad. The ruling party resorted to rigging and other malpractices. Kandula Sivananda Reddy of Cuddapah was caught with bombs. The BJP had prepared a 100-point charge-sheet against Rama Rao and spurned his offer of seat-sharing for the polls. Angered by this, Rama Rao in his campaign likened the BJP to the mongrels which craved for the left-over food.

Series of Setbacks

Setbacks stared the Government in the eye. The Supreme Court ordered immediate payment of compensation to the prematurely retired Government employees. Village officers showed little interest in their work. Influential sections

were gradually distancing themselves from the Telugu Desam and the Government. Law and order situation deteriorated. The subsidised rice scheme became a failure. The Revenue Minister, NallapuReddy Sreenivasul Reddy , was sacked unceremoniously. His only crime was to question the authority of Chandrababu Naidu.

Annoyed by the dismissal, Sreenivasul Reddy went to the town with serious personal allegations against Rama Rao and Chandrababu Naidu. He accused Chandrababu Naidu of collecting Rs 2.45 crore from the arrack bottling syndicate for the 1984-85 elections and also from the Godavari Plywood company. Another allegation related to unauthorised acquisition of 177 acres of land in Nellore district. He and Harijan MP, Penchalaiah, toured the State campaigning against Rama Rao and his son-in-law.

Dronamraju Satyanarayana had filed writs in the High Court leveling 107 charges against Rama Rao and Chandrababu Naidu. The High Court found prima facie evidence in respect of seven charges and directed a comprehensive probe. The State Government filed a special leave petition in the Supreme Court which reserved its judgment. One of the judges on the bench, Justice Savyasachi Mukherjee, met with untimely death.

Row with the Governor

After Shankar Dayal Sharma successfully

The Congress Home-coming

completed his work, he was succeeded by Kumudben Joshi as the Governor. Rama Rao made a number of written complaints to the President against her. A resolution of the Assembly advising her to limit the Raj Bhavan expenditure was forwarded to the President. The Chief Minister had reason to do this. He was angered by the Governor taking her own sweet time to act on the file appointing Chandrababu Naidu as the chairman of the Karshaka Parishad and made a big issue of it. The High Court struck down the appointment. When Rama Rao's plans to appoint Justice Rajendranath Agarwal as the Lok Ayukta failed, he had planned to scrap the very office. But the High Court struck down this order too. Strangely, Justice Agarwal was on a three-member commission of inquiry appointed by the State Government to look into the charges leveled against Rama Rao and Chandrababu Naidu. The other two on the commission were Sundaresan, a retired IAS officer, and G.V. Chalapathi Rao, a retired Accountant General.

Rama Rao was quite annoyed by the Governor Kumudben Joshi's frequent complimentary references to the Rajiv Gandhi Government at the Republic Day speech in 1988. He suspended senior officers, Santhanam, Muralidhar Rao, B. Danam, AVS Reddy for allegedly tendering advice to the Governor. Pavitran, a senior IPS officer, was also suspended in a similar fashion. He confronted the

Governor on the issue of appointing vice-chancellors.

On one occasion, the Governor summoned the Chief Secretary, Shravan Kumar, to admonish him in front of other officers for failing to make proper arrangements during the Prime Minister's visit. It was said those days that Shravan Kumar would listen to none except Rama Rao.

Too pro-active

Another point of friction was the Red Cross Society, of which the Governor was the chairperson and the Chief Minister the vice-chairman. Rama Rao did not like the efficient and pro-active involvement of Kumudben Joshi in running the Society. Her Secretary, V. Chandramouli, was also actively involved in the work. Rama Rao did not like the Governor making extensive tour of the districts. Kumudben Joshi revived 'Chetana', a society started by her distant predecessor, Sharada Mukherjee, to help eradicate the socially evil system of Jogins prevalent in Telangana. The Telugu Desam leadership frequently complained to the President about her activities and described her as 'the handmaiden of the Central Government'.

Rama Rao cast aside norms of governance and indulged in cheap gimmicks which might have impressed the lay public, but left the intellectuals disgusted. Rama Rao sensed that his and the party

prestige was plummeting in the wake of the Karshaka Parishad fiasco. He felt a big gimmick to divert the attention of the people alone would salvage the situation. He used his birthday in 1988 to dazzle the public. The city was dotted with huge cinema cut-outs showing him in mythological and other roles. Hoardings tracing important milestones in his life were erected. Billboards displaying his photographs, horoscope and other personal details were seen everywhere in the city. 'Desh ki Neta NT Rama Rao' banners fluttered at the venue of the celebrations. The week-long carnival was summed up by Amarnath K. Menon in 'India Today'. The public show, as stated before, was to get over the uneasy feeling of the party and the leader losing popular appeal.

Rama Rao renamed his studios, spread over 14 acres of government land at concessional price, as horticultural gardens to circumvent the land ceiling law and get exemption under the law. Meanwhile, Chandrababu Naidu was on a tour of the State, accompanied by Ministers. Although not holding any position in the Government, he called the shots everywhere, reducing the Ministers to mere dummies.

NTR Stumped by Delhi Stranger

At the national level, the Delhi Stranger busied himself bringing together all non-Congress forces including the BJP and trying to dislodge the

Congress Government at the Centre. He had successfully organised opposition conclaves in Vijayawada and other cities outside Andhra Pradesh. I did not attend these conclaves as I strongly believed that a regional party should restrict its mandate to the State and maintain cordial relations with the central government. What started as the demand for more powers and central assistance reached the stage where the opposition parties made it a single point agenda to bring down Indira Gandhi Government. Very soon, the non-Congress Front split in two - one, a combination of the Janata Dal (U), the Congress (S), Democratic Socialist Party, Rashtriya Congress and some other splinter groups and the other, the National Democratic Alliance of the BJP and the Lok Dal. Rama Rao was the chairman of the pre-split National Front and V.P. Singh its convenor.

Devilal became the Chief Minister of Haryana in 1987. He and others put up Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer as the candidate for the presidential elections. However, R. Venkataraman, the Congress nominee, had won. Meanwhile, Rama Rao's dreams of becoming the Prime Minister were fading away. Rajiv Gandhi moved VP Singh from the Finance to the Defence and finally out of his Cabinet. This development led to VP Singh, Arun Nehru, Mufti Mohammed Sayeed, Arif Mohammed Khan, Chidambaram gravitating toward the Front. They

raised the weapons deal issue and alleged kickbacks in the purchase. The AP Bhavan became a nerve centre for the activities of the opposition parties. Buoyed by the success of the DMK in the Tamil Nadu elections, the opposition members of the Lok Sabha resigned en masse to force early elections. Rama Rao's outbursts against Rajiv Gandhi backfired. Newspapers condemned his utterances and branded him as a separatist. The Newstime had said in its editorial in October 1989 'we deem it our duty to expose Rama Rao and that he is a menace to the unity of the country. There was no place for people like Rama Rao who termed the Centre as a 'myth'.

Rama Rao rushed to the Rashtrapati Bhavan with great enthusiasm for the swearing-in ceremony of V. P. Singh, hoping that he would be made the Deputy Prime Minister. Instead, Singh made Devilal the Deputy Prime Minister and accommodated the Delhi Stranger in his Cabinet. Rama Rao stormed out of the Rashtrapati Bhavan at being passed over for the Deputy PM's position. He attributed the setback to manipulations by the Delhi Stranger.

PV and Rama Rao had cordial relations right from 1984. Rama Rao believed that PV was instrumental in his reinstatement as the Chief Minister. There was an unwritten understanding between them - to prevent me from becoming the Chief Minister at any cost.

Rama Rao did not put up any candidate against Narasimha Rao in the Lok Sabha by-election in Nandyal in 1992. He had ready explanation to the people for not opposing Narasimha Rao. He said the people had the rare opportunity to make a Telugu man as the Prime Minister. It was a boon for the State to have a Telugu man at the helm in Delhi. But the real reason was to repay the debt of gratitude to Narasimha Rao for his help. The gullible people swallowed the explanation.

The honeymoon between the two came to an end after Narasimha Rao's election. The game was over since each had helped the other. An astute politician and master strategist, Narasimha Rao went on to split the Telugu Desam parliamentary party to retain his majority in the Lok Sabha. Thus both vied for the 'best back-stabber' title.

Rama Rao was nervous about facing the Assembly. Added to this fear was the sustained attack by opposition leaders like M. Venkaiah Naidu and S. Jaipal Reddy cornering him on Vishnupriya Hotel owned by Chandrababu Naidu. The Chief Minister found himself on the mat. As far as my knowledge went, it was a poramboke land which Chandrababu Naidu got allotted to a man or created papers to that effect and purchased it from him. With the issue snowballing into a major controversy, Chandrababu Naidu sold the hotel to the chairman of the Cuddapah zilla parishad chairman. The whole issue was hushed up.

Back in the Congress

I joined the Congress party, along with the cadre, in 1989 at the instance of Rajiv Gandhi. Channa Reddy became the president of the PCC a second time. I was in Delhi when Rajiv Gandhi telephoned to me to contest from the Vemuru Assembly constituency. I went to the Gandhi Bhavan to collect the B form, but Channa Reddy's advisers handed me B form to contest, instead from Tenali. People who did not want me in the Assembly thought I would lose in Tenali, but contrary to their expectations, I had won with a big majority.

The Congress won the elections and Channa Reddy formed the Government. Rajiv Gandhi telephoned to Channa Reddy recommending my name for inclusion in the Cabinet. Channa Reddy was averse to the idea. I too was not very keen, having been a Minister and even Chief Minister before. I turned stoic in the light of these developments and lost interest in politics. Rajiv Gandhi then sent me to Karnataka as the party in-charge. I busied myself with the political developments in Karnataka.

The former chief ministers were seated on the front row, as per protocol, at the swearing-in ceremony of the new Governor, Krishan Kant, at the Raj Bhavan. The protocol officer escorted NT Rama Rao to his seat next to mine. Finding me

there, he literally jumped, like a startled gazelle on seeing the tiger, and ran out to another row. He pulled the former Speaker, P. Ramachandra Reddy, from his chair and sat down, three rows away from me. The gathering roared in laughter when Brahmanda Reddy told Rama Rao 'Come on, man. I am here. Bhaskara Rao will not harm you'. Rama Rao did not respond, pricked as he was by guilt of betrayal.

Square One

It was back to square one in the State. Channa Reddy stepped down within a year. Another man came in his place. People were disheartened by the Congress game of musical chairs. People gave me a big mandate in Tenali, but I could not live up to their expectations of the petty local politics and groupism. As a MLA, I had undergone eye operation at Government cost. When another operation became necessary, the Chief Minister K. Vijayabhaskar Reddy refused to bear the expenses on account of paucity of funds.

I had mentioned before that the commission of inquiry appointed by the Rama Rao Government into charges against me found me not guilty. Strangely, the Congress Chief Minister N. Janardhana Reddy decided to go in appeal against the verdict of the commission. I could not understand why Janardhan Reddy harassed me, the party legislator, in this manner. I had never

sought any favour from him. Vijayabhaskar Reddy, who succeeded him, ordered his Commercial Taxes Minister, K. Bapiraju, to carry out raid on Orchid restaurant run by my son. I came to know this from none other than Raju himself. My own party seniors had harboured so much jealousy and hatred for me.

I was also aware that PV Narasimha Rao repeatedly branded me in front of the Karnataka leaders as a 10, Janpath loyalist. At the time of Vijayabhaskar Reddy taking over the Chief Minister a second time, some of my friends wanted me to throw the hat in the ring. Narasimha Rao had commented that I could spread my tentacles far and wide in just one month as the Chief Minister. If I were given an opportunity to rule for two and half years, neither the Congress party nor its leaders would be left, even for 'sample'. Well that was his opinion of me.

The rot set in again in the State. Three Chief Ministers were replaced. The Congress became weaker after Vijayabhaskar Reddy took over. Unfortunately, the day Vijayabhaskar Reddy was named the Chief Minister, the party men in the State saw the writing on the wall and sang, in their hearts, Jana Gana Mana! The Telugu Desam leaders celebrated the occasion exchanging sweets to herald the impending return of the party to power. I was unable to understand why the party leadership effected frequent changes of the chief

ministers without regard to the sentiments of the people. He could not also understand the logic of an 'apara chanakya' like P V Narasimha Rao sending Vijaybhaskar Reddy to the State again as the chief minister.

The Congress was routed in the Assembly elections and even many stalwarts, intellectuals and the seemingly invincible leaders bit the dust.

I bat for Sonia

Meanwhile, elections to the Lok Sabha also were round the corner. I wondered if the Congress could win with an aged leader like Sitaram Kesri as the party president. I went to Delhi and impressed upon the high command the need to turn over the leadership reins to Sonia Gandhi if the party had to win. I did some pretty tough talking. I knew that the top leaders were at one time or the other chief ministers who did not see eye to eye on any issue and often wrangled among themselves. The party would not be able to offer a unified face to the people. I resigned from the party in a mood of frustration and returned. One day George Fernandes dropped in to take over his party in the State and contest the Lok Sabha elections from Tenali. He said I could join the BJP also, in which he would talk to Vajpayee. I told him that I was basically a Congress man. It was not an easy decision to join any other party. It required a thorough introspection. Later I went to Delhi and

told Fernandes I would remain with the Congress and not join his party or the BJP.

Sonia Gandhi, who came to know of this, felt very happy and asked me to join her press conference. I said the party had become enervated and lifeless under the leadership of Sitaram Kesri and unless the baton was handed to Sonia Gandhi, there was no salvation for the party. The Congress party's survival and future was linked to its association with the Nehru family. Other seniors in Delhi and former chief ministers and union ministers picked up the thread and forcefully demanded that Sonia take over the leadership.

Sonia's call to contest polls

Sonia Gandhi's secretary telephoned from 10, Janpath to convey her wish that I contest the Lok Sabha elections from Vijayawada as I was familiar with the constituency. The party did not want to re-nominate the sitting member. Vijayawada was politically a highly sensitive and volatile constituency. I represented to the high command that I may be allowed to contest instead from Tenali where a large number of relatives, well-wishers and friends lived and his native village was part of the constituency. Ignoring my request, the high command allotted Tenali seat to P. Shiv Shanker, a rank outsider, simply because a good chunk of voters belonged to his caste and that he would on the strength of the party image.

The party leaders asked me to contest from Khammam, known citadel of the communists. Their calculation was that the constituency had a large number of voters belonging to my caste. If I won fine, if not the defeat could be attributed the dominance of the communists. I agreed to contest. An untoward incident took place in Hyderabad when I went to Khammam to file nomination papers. A youth congress leader, who failed to get the party ticket for the same constituency, raided the Gandhi Bhavan with his supporters and set fire to the furniture. I wondered if this would affect my prospect. I took the plunge regardless and came out winner. Two reasons could be attributed to my resounding victory, the first, voters' disenchantment with the communists and the second, my own complete identification with the people. I was nominated to a parliamentary committee and this brought me into closer touch with Sonia Gandhi.

The Congress party had voted with other parties in the no-confidence motion against the BJP Government. Subrahmaniam Swamy of Chennai was the spirit behind the move, having influenced Jayalalithaa to withdraw her support to the Vajpayee Government. When the Government fell, some people egged on Sonia Gandhi to stake claim before the President to form the next Government. But Mulayam Singh, Laloo Prasad Yadav and leaders of some other parties refused to back her claim. In effect, the Congress

could not form the Government. Consequently, the huge burden of another election fell on the public.

I expected that we all would be allotted the same seats, but I was instructed to contest from the Secunderabad parliamentary constituency. I lost. I knew I would. Some consolation that I polled 4.15 lakh votes.

I used to meet Sonia as executive member of the parliamentary party. She hinted that she would send some X as president of the Pradesh Congress Committee. I told her party prospects in the elections would be bleak under his leadership and cited reasons for it. 'No. no. We all have to work together for victory'. The Congress was defeated in the elections.

Later she called me and gracefully admitted her mistake. Sometimes were compelled to take certain decisions knowing well the consequences. My defeat in Secunderabad rankled. I was unable to digest the defeat. I wanted to contest from Tenali, the high command asked me to contest from Khammam and when I won from Khammam, they shifted me to Secunderabad. The high command had to bear the cross for this, victory or defeat. I refrained from active participation in party programmes, except when specifically invited to a meeting.

In these circumstances, I turned to books for solace. I found shelter and comfort in my library.

Settling scores with Delhi Stranger

Meanwhile, having got Sreenivasul Reddy out of their way, father-in-law and son-in-law combination targetted the Delhi Stranger for applying the axe. Both of them were furious with him for not only worming his way into VP Singh's Cabinet, but scuttling Rama Rao prospects of Deputy Prime Minister. The Delhi Stranger was no less smart. Thus the game of one up-man ship began. Chandrasekhar formed the Government after VP Singh stepped down. It was during his rule that Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated. Later, PV Narasimha Rao assumed the reins of the Congress party and the Government with the support of Sonia Gandhi. His was a minority Government. With the help of a Rajya Sabha member, he could lure some TDP MPs to his side and continue in office.

Even while maintaining proximity to Rama Rao, the Delhi Stranger managed to split the party MPs and with the help of Chidambaram, led the break-away MPs to support Narasimha Rao's Government. Newspapers provided saturation coverage to these developments. The Delhi Stranger thus outwitted the wily Chandrababu Naidu. Chandrababu looked for the right moment to strike back.

His master plan was to get complete hold over the party by reducing Rama Rao to a mere puppet,

after eliminating any challenge to his authority. The first blow was aimed at me, the founder of the party, then Sreenivasulu Reddy and now the Delhi Stranger. He went to Delhi and used his clout with the leaders there to coolly pull the carpet from under the feet of the unsuspecting and complacent Delhi Stranger, who was eased out of the Ministry.

After the death of his wife, Rama Rao became a loner, isolated and neglected by his own sons and daughters. It did not matter that he was the Chief Minister. He married again. The press covered these developments in detail those days.

Chandrababu Naidu was alarmed by the growing influence of the second wife on his father-in-law even as one newspaper ran the campaign that the Chief Minister was reduced to a mere puppet in the hands of the woman who ran the affairs of the State by proxy. Rama Rao did nothing to erase this impression. Ensnared by her, he could not contain her growing interference in government and party matters. History and puranas are full of such episodes. Party workers and the legislators were worried by the uneasy developments. The press added to their fears. While on a tour of West Godavari, Rama Rao said it would nice to have woman as the chief minister. This caused ripples in political circles as well as in the general public. Rama Rao's sons and daughters were yet to cope with the bereavement. The MLAs seethed with anger at the leader's actions.

Chandrababu Naidu succeeded in bringing these discontented people together. Even the elder son-in-law, Daggubati Venkateswara Rao, who had little love for Chandrababu, joined his bandwagon.

Revolt brewing

Chandrababu Naidu successfully moved the dissident MLAs to Hotel Viceroy as a safe haven for his activities. The hotel was owned by P. Prabhakara Reddy, son of the Janata Party leader, Babul Reddy. He also planted stories in the media that Rama Rao had received money for revising the arrack policy and for awarding contracts for power projects. A furious Rama Rao made up his mind to sack Chandrababu Naidu, but held himself back for the sake of his dear daughter.

Chandrababu Naidu exhorted the MLAs that Rama Rao could not be tolerated any longer and that he should be dislodged. The MLAs were impressed by his concern for the party, for the sake of which he was prepared to bring down his own father-in-law. They were ready for the kill. Look at the picture in Visakhapatnam. Chandrababu Naidu loyally followed Rama Rao on his tour, pretending to be loyal and totally unaware of the sordid conspiracy. Back in Hyderabad, he sent five or six ministers to Rama Rao with a message that the party was unhappy with his ways and that he should change them. Or else, they would not hesitate to bid goodbye. His eyes red with anger,

Rama Rao threatened them that he would dissolve the Assembly.

The son-in-law gave an exhibition of political acumen. He deftly used Rama Rao's threat to not only hold his flock together but roped in more MLAs to his camp in Hotel Viceroy. Rama Rao could not understand the abrupt u-turn taken by the hitherto friendly press. The newspapers, which had glorified him in the past, wrote nasty reports and editorials against his political and even personal life. He was like a caged tiger. He could not digest the people detesting him in such a manner. The people had once worshipped him as a demigod in whom they saw Lord Rama, the poorna purusha. They could not stomach their Rama marrying another woman. Rama Rao suddenly fell in their eyes.

Snubbed by own party

Rama Rao and wife drove in the Chaitanya Ratham to the Hotel Viceroy and made a moving , emotional appeal to the MLAs to come out. The Telugu thammullu responded with stones, chappals, boos and catcalls in filthy language. The MLAs gave him a fitting lesson for what he did in 1984. The coupled grieved over its lot. Even the most powerful Ravana met his end because of weakness for woman. It was uncommon for the new-found solidarity in a family, as witnessed in Rama Rao's. The underlying motive was to protect

property and other interests from falling into the hands of the second wife. While sons and daughters were angry at the second marriage at this age, the sons-in-law and daughters-in-law burnt with jealousy at the prospect of Rama Rao bequeathing his legacy - power, position and property - to his new wife.

The Governor directed Rama Rao to prove his strength on the floor of the Assembly. In a fit of emotion, he submitted his resignation, but filed a writ in the High Court that he had not resigned and continued as the Chief Minister. Rama Rao failed to prove his majority. Chandrababu Naidu was installed as the Chief Minister. The Nandamuri family was satisfied with the induction of NTR's son, Harikrishna, in the Cabinet. Rama Rao leveled serious charges of corruption against Chandrababu Naidu at a press conference. He also said Chandrababu Naidu amassed wealth to a tune of Rs 200 crores and demanded 'cut' from the people who met the Chief Minister.

I rued the day I invited Rama Rao to enter politics and my party. He lacked moral values and integrity, totally at variance from the characters he had portrayed on the silver screen. He betrayed me, hijacked my party, my prestige and projected himself as a Messaiah and me the villain. He could not face me politically. He misled the people with his rhetoric.

Points to ponder

When my supporters withdrew support to his Government, Rama Rao made a big fuss that democracy was murdered in the daylight. He hit the streets whipping up public sentiments and mobilising all opposition leaders in the country in his support. Why did he not rouse the people against Chandrababu Naidu who in a most immoral manner seized both the party and the Government from him? Why did he not call opposition leaders for help. Because, blood is thicker than water. Chandrababu Naidu was, after all, his daughter's husband. What did the big fall of this once powerful man show. That his time was up and it was time for him leave. That was the message of Destiny. None was exception. Arjuna, for all his valour and skills of archery, was powerless when Lord Krishna urged him to protect His men. Had not the Lord Himself met the end at the hands of a Boya?

I was hurt when Advani addressed me 'Bashiruddin' to express his displeasure at my sanctioning engineering and medical colleges to the Muslim minorities. I took it in my stride because Advani is a honourable man and an intellectual. The great Vajpayee had to stand guard at Rama Rao's studios to protect the captive MLAs. Where have all these gone when Chandrababu Naidu unscrupulously overthrew Rama Rao as the Chief Minister? The BJP and the left parties had

cried wolf that I was a blood-thirsty villain, both in thought and action. What happened to them when Chandrababu Naidu backstabbed Rama Rao. How many people had not tarnished my image and pelted stones just to please Chandrababu Naidu and become Ministers.

Inspiration for the book

The readers are familiar with one version of those days' events. This humble effort of mine is to present to the readers other side of the story which remained obscured so far. It is only to clear my name that I am placing the facts before you. Analyse and come to your own judgment. I swear by the God that I had never intended to betray the people of the State or entertained such thoughts. I had never resorted to corrupt or immoral methods to acquire wealth or had favoured my sons or relatives to further business interests. I had not misused my office to secure jobs for my sons or to help them get rich.

Was it wrong for me to assume leadership when 90 legislators raised a banner of revolt against the Chief Minister Rama Rao's style of functioning. I had led the revolt because I felt it was justified. I started the regional party, nurtured it and earned fame and name for Rama Rao. I offered leadership to Rama Rao as I wanted to capitalise on his immense popularity for the party's victory in the elections. I had advised Rama Rao to refrain taking

erratic actions and decisions and correct himself. He did not heed to the advice. When the 90 MLAs could not bear Rama Rao's autocratic behavior and rebelled against him. I assumed leadership of the revolt.

Unfortunately, the revolt was viewed in a wrong perspective. Backstabber is one who stays with the leader and betrays him. I resigned from the Cabinet and stood up to Rama Rao, unlike Chandrababu Naidu who pretended to be loyal to Rama Rao and yet ditched him. Initially the communist parties backed Chandrababu Naidu to hilt and later the BJP sailed with him. A former Union Minister, who once threatened to bind Chandrababu in chains and put behind the bars, happily hobnobbed with him and shared the same public platform many times.

I have come across many people in the journey of my life who had let me down or had harboured jealousy and hatred in their heart. I am watching the course of their lives.

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About the author

The author of the book Nadendla Bhaskar Rao was born in a middle class farmers family. His commitment, hard work and struggle elevated him as an eminent High Court advocate short span of his career.

His zest for public service and democracy drove him to step into Congress party as a worker and rise to several heights - President of Nijalingappa Yuvajana Congress in 1965, Executive Member of the Indian National Youth Congress in 1966, Andhra Pradesh Congress Committee member in 1968, APCC General Secretary in 1977 in pursuit of service to society.

He became instrumental in establishing the Indira Congress party in the state and became its first General Secretary. Elected to AP Assembly from Vijayawada in 1978 and held several crucial portfolios successfully in the Dr. M. Channa Reddy ministry.

Instrumental in founding the Telugu Desam regional party in 1982. Elected to Assembly in 1982 from Vemur constituency and held Finance portfolio in Rama Rao's cabinet.

In 1984 August became Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh and ushered in unique administrative measures.

Bid Good Bye to TDP and successfully contested to Assembly from Tenali in 1989 and Khammam Lok Sabha seat in 1998 as a Congress Candidate.

Bhaskar Rao, an extraordinary personality who always strived for social betterment and progress of weaker sections of society.

He is a person always immersed in well being of the poor and down-trodden and a propagator and protector of Dharma

*Dr. Velaga Venkatappaiah
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