

## RETRACING PALME'S STEPS IN INDIA<sup>1</sup>

I met Olof Palme many times since the 1960s in connection with my work in the United Nations against apartheid in South Africa. He was always so friendly to me that I felt it was not only because of our common detestation of apartheid but also because of his affection for my country.

I had the same feeling earlier when I had worked with another Swedish socialist leader, Mrs. Alva Myrdal, who had chaired the United Nations Group of Experts on South Africa in 1964. She had known India, having served as ambassador in Delhi where she earned the friendship of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru.

What, I wondered, was the source of Olof Palme's feeling for India?

The answer came in his Indira Gandhi Memorial Lecture in New Delhi in January 1986, shortly before his assassination, when he said:

“In 1953 I took part as a student representative in a seminar in Mysore, led by Dr. Zakir Hussain. Subsequently I travelled widely to Indian universities and cities. What I remember most is a visit to an isolated village. I followed a sociologist who was writing about the influence of modern civilisation on different types of villages. We went a whole day by bus from Bangalore, slept in a school house and walked another day up a mountain to the village. I stayed there for ten days, living in a section of the temple, following the daily life of the village. I became deeply impressed by the quiet dignity of the people. Whenever I hear talk about economic and political development, I return to this village near Bangalore as a reference point. That is where so much of the future is decided. As this happened in my most formative years, I will always carry a bit of India with me.

“When I came back to Sweden, the then Prime Minister, Mr. Tage Erlander, called me up and asked me to come to his office to tell him about India. I did so, and stayed - first as his collaborator, and subsequently as his successor.”

I became curious to locate the village where he had stayed. Enquiries in Delhi and letters to friends in Stockholm elicited no information.

Then, last September, I approached Anders Ferm, a close friend of Olof Palme and secretary of the Palme Commission, to seek his help to obtain the information from the archives of the Swedish government or the student organization. He could only obtain the itinerary of Palme's tour of India in 1953 and the list of people he had met, but there was no mention of the village.

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Then, at my request, a friend of mine wrote a letter to *Deccan Herald* in Bangalore seeking information from readers. My niece in Bangalore approached socialists in the hope that they could help. But to no avail.

Meanwhile, I went to the libraries in New York in search of the names of villages in Karnataka studied by sociologists around 1953. I found that an Indian sociologist, Mr. M.N. Srinivas, had made a study of a village near Mysore City and an American sociologist, Alan R. Beals, had surveyed a village near Bangalore. Neither fitted the description of Olof Palme. I informed Anders in January that I was giving up the search.

Anders spoke to Mrs. Lisbet Palme who recalled that Prof. Beals had corresponded with her husband many years ago. Anders then traced him to the University of California and Prof. Beals confirmed that Olof Palme had accompanied him. But the village was not the one near Bangalore but Udaparane in Salem district, Tamil Nadu, near the border of Karnataka.

In February, Anders relinquished his post as Swedish representative to the United Nations, took six weeks leave before his next posting as ambassador to Denmark, and flew to India to retrace the steps of Olof Palme. He visited Udaparane and wrote to me of his moving experience.

I wonder whether the Indian friends of Olof Palme should not install a plaque in Udaparane with his words, which remind me of Gandhiji:

“Whenever I hear talk about economic and political development, I return to this village... as a reference point. That is where so much of the future is decided.”