



ROLE OF WOMEN IN TELANGANA PEASANT ARMED STRUGGLE 1946-51

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Abstract

This article will focus on Telangana armed struggle, which is one of the important topics. Introduction The contradictions existing within the socio-economic structures of India had contributed to the birth of several peasant movements in different parts of the country. The peasant armed movement took place between 1946 and 1951 in the Telangana region of the former princely State of Hyderabad. It was a multilingual State of three linguistic areas namely Telangana (eight districts), Marathwada (five districts) and Karnataka (three districts). The Telangana region comprised almost half the area of the State.

Introduction

The contradictions existing within the socio-economic structures of India had contributed to the birth of several peasant movements in different parts of the country. The Telangana Peasants Armed Struggle which was led by the communists was the first independent trend in the history of Indian Communist movement. The seeds of formation of Hyderabad communist party in 1940 lay in the propagation of peasant and other problems in an organized manner led by, first, the Nizam Andhra Jana Sangham and later by Nizam Andhra Maha Sabha through their publications such as Vettichakiri, Nazarana, Varthakasangham, etc., and their Ryot Sanghams. But as the responsibility for these problems lies with the ruling elite the Mahasabha had focused its attention on political affairs too from its 1937 session. Immediately the Mahasabha, hence, was not permitted to hold sessions by the Nizam's government. But, during the next year i.e. in 1938, the Hyderabad State Congress was formed and observed Satyagraha against the Nizam's government ban on it before its inception for obtaining responsible government.

Women played an important role in the Telangana struggle. They actively participated in the land movement, in agricultural labour wage struggles, in seizure of landlords' grain, against the 'Briggs' Plan' of evacuating the Koya, Chenchu and Lambadi people from their hamlets in the forest areas, or from their scattered hamlets in the plains. They were with their husbands and brothers, fighting the Razakars and the Nizam police and later against the Congress Razakars and Nehru's armies and the police. They had joined the military and political squads and underwent all the difficulties and joys of life in the forests and hills and in the fields, in the rain



and in the sun. They acted as couriers, as political agitators, and in new centres, as organisers of peoples movements and mass organisations.

They were the worst victims of the brutal tortures and atrocities committed by the Razakars, the Nizam's and Nehru's police and military. They had to face molestation and rape, apart from beatings on a large scale. They had to see their babes and children tortured and killed before their very eyes. They had to see their beloved husbands or brothers hunted, arrested and killed. They had to suffer all this, remaining in their own houses and villages, looking alter what was left behind, the very young and the very old, when their menfolk had had to flee the villages to escape the fury of the army and the police attacks, or had gone to join the fighters and the guerrillas in far-off secret places.

Peasant Movements: Telangana Peasant Struggle (1947-51)!

This movement was launched in the state of Andhra Pradesh against the former Nizam of Hyderabad. The agrarian social structure in the Nizam's Hyderabad was of a feudal order. It had two kinds of land tenure systems, namely, raiyatwari and jagirdari. Under the raiyatwari system, the peasants owned patta and were proprietors of the land; they were registered occupants.

The actual cultivators of the land were known as shikmidars. Khalsa lands were chieftain's land and out of revenue collected from these lands, personal expenses of the royalty were met out. The Deshmukhs and Desbpandes were the hereditary collectors of revenue for khalsa villages. In jagir villages, the tax was collected through jagirdars and their agents. Both the jagirdars and the Deshmukhs wielded immense power at the local level.

The region of Telangana was characterised by a feudal economy. The main commercial crops, viz., groundnut, tobacco and castor seed, were the monopoly of the landowning brahmins. The rise of Reddis and peasant proprietors further strengthened the high castes and prop-ertied class. The non-cultivating urban groups, mostly Brahmins, Marwaris, Komtis and Muslims, began to take interest in acquiring land. Consequently, the peasant proprietors slided down to the status of tenants-at-will, share-croppers and landless labourers.

Following were the main causes of the movement:

(1) The Nizam's former Hyderabad state had a feudal structure of ad-ministration. In the jagir area, the agents of the jagirdar who were the middlemen collected the land taxes. There was much of op-pression by the jagirdar and his agents. They were free to extort from the actual cultivators a variety of taxes. This condition of ex-ploitation remained in practice till the jagirdari system was abolished in 1949.



On the other hand the khalsa land or the raiyatwari system was also exploitative though the severity of exploitation in the khalsa system was a little lesser. In the khalsa villages, the Deshmukhs and Deshpandes worked as intermediaries.

They were not in the pay-roll of the jagir administration; they were only given a percentage of the total land collection made by them. The Deshmukhs and Deshpandes then developed a habit to cheat the peasants by creating fraud in the land records. This, in countless instances they reduced the actual cultivator to the status of tenant-at-will or a landless labourer.

In both the systems of administration, i.e., jagir and khalsa, the peasants were exploited by the intermediaries appointed by Ni-zam. High taxes, fraud with the record and exploitation resulted in creating discontent among the poor peasants.

(2) Yet another cause of peasant movement in Telangana was the exploitation of the big peasants. D.N. Dhanagare informs that the jagirdars and the Deshmukhs had thousands of acres of land in their possession. The families of these big peasants and their heads were called Durra or Dora.

It means, the master or lord of the village. Dhanagare says that the Dora exploited the small peasants and agricultural labourers. This exploitation, in course of time, became legitimised with the big farmers. It was considered to be the privilege of the Dora to exploit the masses of peasants. Dhana-gare observes:

Such exaction had become somewhat legitimised by what was known as the vetti system under which a landlord or a Deshmukh could force a family from among his customary retainers to cultivate his land and to do one job or the other—whether domestic, agricultural or official, as an obligation to the master.

(3) In the whole former state of Nizam a system of slavery, quite like that of Hali of south Gujarat, was prevalent. This system was known as Bhagela. The Bhagela were drawn mostly from aboriginal tribes who were tied to the master by debt. According to Bhagela system, the tenant who had taken loan from the landlord was obliged to serve him till the debt is repaid. In most of the cases, the Bhagela was required to serve the landlord for generations.

(4) The Reddis and Kammars were notable castes who traditionally worked as traders and moneylenders. They exercised a great deal of influence in the countryside. They wanted to pull down the dominance of Brahmins as agriculturists in the state.

(5) The Telangana region was economically backward. The development of agriculture depended on the facilities of irrigation. The commercial crops could hardly be taken without irrigation facilities. Though, the lack of irrigation was realised by Nizam and he provided irrigation facilities to the peasants both in khalsa and jagir villages. But, these facilities were largely cornered by the big farmers.



(6) Land alienation was not new to the former Hyderabad state. Between 1910 to 1940 the frequency of land dispossession increased. On the one hand, the land possessed by the non cultivating urban people, mostly Brahmins, Marwaris, and Muslims increased and on the other hand the tribal peasants got reduced to the status of marginal farmers and landless labourers. Describing the impact of land alienation on the poorer peasants D.N. Dhanagare writes:

As a result of growing land alienation many actual occupants or cultivators were being reduced to tenants-at-will, sharecroppers or landless labourers ... in fact, where rich Pattadars held holdings too large to manage, they tended to keep a certain amount of irrigated land to be cultivated with the help of hired labour and turned over most of their dry lands either to Bhagela serfs or to tenant cultivators on very high produce rents.

The Telangana peasant unrest did not erupt over night. It looks about three to four decades. Actually, till 1930, the poor condition of the peasants had reached its culmination. Meanwhile, there had been much transformation in agricultural economy.

The Telangana economy, which was only subsistence economy, had grown into market economy by the 1940s. With the change in capitalistic agricultural economy, there was no change in the status of the tenants and share-croppers.

Actually, the modes of production and exchange remained pre-capitalist or semi-feudal and emerged as the major source of discontent among the poor peasantry in Telangana. On the other hand, with the termination of Second World War, there was a terrible fall in wholesale prices. The price trends strengthened the position of moneylenders and traders who tightened their grip on indebted small Pattadars and tenants.

One of the bitter consequences of the forces of change has been an increase in the number of agricultural labourers. It appears that there was enough discontent among the lower segments of peasantry. Peasants were only waiting for some opportunity to engineer some insurrection.

The course of events that led to the Telangana peasant struggle can be described as under:

(1) The Telangana peasant movement was engineered by Communist Party of India (CPI). It is said to be a revolution committed by Communists. The Communist Party started working in Telangana in 1936. Professor N.G. Ranga had laid down the regional level peasant organisation in Telangana.

This regional organisation was affiliated to the All India Kisan Sabha an organ of CPI. Within a period of three or four years, say by 1940, the CPI had established its roots in the former Hyderabad state. During the period from 1944 to 1946, the Communist activities increased in several of the districts of Hyderabad. A proper framework was, therefore, prepared for launching a peasant movement in Telangana.



(2) The next event which took place in Hyderabad and more actu-ally in Telangana was the famine of 1946. All the crops failed and there was a crisis of the availability of fodder. The prices of food, fod-der and other necessities of life increased.

This was a crisis for the tenants and the sharecroppers. Actually, the year 1946 provided all opportunities for engineering the peasant struggle. In the early July 1946, the peasants resisted the government orders. Militant action was taken by the CPI-led peasants.

(3) The CPI made an objective to mobilise the peasants. It took up a campaign to propagate the demands of the lower peasants. By the middle of 1946, the Communist propaganda was fully intensified and covered about 300 to 400 villages under its influence.

The movement during this period was slow but the peasants showed enough resis-tance to the government dictates. However, it must be mentioned that in the mobilisation of peasantry, only Telangana local peasants partici-pated.

(4) The second conference of CPI was held in March 1948. It re-solved to give a revolutionary turn to the peasant movement in Telangana. The peasants later on were organised into an army and in-termittently fought guerrilla wars. Writing about this part of the course of events of Telangana peasant struggle Hamza Alavi observes:

...Telangana movement had a Guerrilla army of about 5,000. The peasants killed or drove out the landlords and the local bureaucrats and seized and distributed the land. They established governments of peasant 'soviets' which were integrated regionally into a control or-ganisation. Peasant rule was established in an area of 15,000 sq. miles, with a population of four million. The government of the armed peasantry continued until 1950; it was not finally crushed until the following year. Today, the area remains one of the political strong-holds of the Communist Party.

(5) Besides the peasant agitation, a parallel discontent was also tak-ing place in Hyderabad. A para-military voluntary force, organised by Kasim Rizvi, was taking its roots. The members of this voluntary or-ganisation were known as Razakars. This organisation was against the peasants. The peasants consolidated their movement in the face of the oppression of Nizam, activities of Razakars and the authority crisis in Hyderabad.

(6) On September 13, 1948, the Indian army marched into Hyder-abad and within less than a week the Nizam's army, police and the Razakars surrendered without resistance. The police action, taken by the newly framed Central Government of independent India, was very quick to suppress the peasant movement. D.N. Dhanagare elabo-rates the police action as under:

On India's part the 'police action' was taken to stop the Razkar fren-zies as they not only created anarchic conditions within the state but also posed a serious threat to the internal security of neighbouring In-dian Territory. The police action was, therefore, unsavoury but



essential ... once the Razakars were overpowered, and a military ad-ministration set up... the offensive was immediately directed at the peasant rebels in the troubled districts of Telangana. The superior In-dian army spared no measure to suppress the communist squads.

The peasant movement in Telangana had to be withdrawn. Actu-ally the police action gave a death blow to the Communist-led Telangana peasant movement. In this struggle, the movement had to suffer a lot. Fighting with the Indian army over 2,000 peasants and party workers were killed. By August 1949, nearly 25,000 Commu-nists and active participants were arrested; by July 1950 the total number of detainees had reached 10,000. This should suffice as an in-dex of the intensity of Telangana peasant's struggle.

The Telangana peasant movement continued for about five years. Its outcomes can be enumerated as below:

(1) The struggle had the participation of a mixed class of peas-antry. Though the rich peasants, mainly the Brahmins, had their involvement in the struggle, the major achievement was that the struggle for the first time brought together the tenants, sharecroppers and the landless labourers. This was by all means a very big achieve-ment of the struggle. The Kammar and the Reddy castes who belonged to the rich class of peasants though gained enough but the movement consolidated the strength of poor peasants, particularly the tribals, who were the victims of vetti the bonded labour.

(2) Yet another benefit of this struggle was in the favour of the Communist Party. The Communist, for a long time to come, exer-cised their hegemony over the entire state of Hyderabad.

(3) Though the Communist Party, as a whole, benefited from the Telangana peasant struggle, it had its own losses also. Ideologically, the party got split from top to bottom. One group of Communists supported the struggle while other decried. The second group argued that the struggle was in no case less than terrorism. Writing about the division of Communist Party during the struggle, P. Sundarayya writes:

It is relevant to mention here that during the course of the struggle, particularly during the phase of its last two years, the Communist Party from top to bottom was sharply divided into two hostile camps, one defending the struggle and its achievements and the other denouncing and decrying it as terrorism, etc.

Those who opposed this struggle had even openly come out with the press, providing grist to the mill of the enemies in maligning the struggle and the Communist Party that was leading it. This sharp political ideological split, though enveloping the entire party in the country, was particu-larly sharp and acute in Telangana.



(4) So far the demands of the poor agricultural classes were concerned the movement was a failure. Surely, there were some gains to Kammar and Reddy—the rich peasant but the gains of the poor peasants such as sharecroppers were quite meagre.

The Telangana peasant struggle, it must be boldly said, was from above and not from the peasants themselves. No single agrarian stratum initiated the movement. It was all the handy work of the Communist Party. Despite the failure story of Telangana struggle it must be admitted that it was a source of inspiration for the Communists as a whole in the country. D.N. Dhanagare very rightly makes his conclusive statement about the outcome of the movement when he says:

Telangana insurrection was no more successful than other peasant resistance movements in India. Like all other movements, though, the Telangana struggle has become the source of legends and inspiration for the radical left in India. Recently, there has been a renewed interest, academic as well as political, in the study of the Telangana struggle, its silver jubilee celebrated by all shades of Communist Party in India, became, however, an occasion for mutual mud-slinging; but that must be left out of this study. Women And Armed Revolution: The Telangana Peoples' Struggle (1946-51)

From popular imagination to legal discourse, women's bodies are characterized as victims of violence more often than perpetrators. There is good reason why this narrative exists; it informs protections of women and children in warfare, internalizes understandings of gender power dynamics, and to some extent, enables survivor-centric sexual assault policies. It is however, not entirely intersectional as it obscures the agency of women engaging in violence.

In revisiting mid-twentieth century Telangana, a poignant challenge to this narrative comes out in the militant women of the Telangana People's Struggle. By pushing against what has been termed as a "formula for erasure and banalisation," understanding women's agencies in militancy and violence is central to amplifying the voices of caste and class oppressed peoples.

The Telangana Peoples' Struggle (also known as the Telangana Peasants' Struggle or the Telangana Armed Struggle) was an anti-feudal and anti-caste movement against the Nizam of Hyderabad's oppressive regime, and later that of Independent India. In many ways, it was inherently feminist—with numerous women leaders advocating for socio-political reform not limited to caste justice, labour protection and women's freedom. The armed movement lasted from 1946-1951 and was one of the first major labour uprisings following India's Independence in 1947.

Historical Background

In the princely state of Hyderabad, people belonged to three broad linguistic identities—Telugu, Kannada and Marathi. The Telugu-speaking Telangana region constituted over fifty per cent of the state (including the capital, Hyderabad). With the Nizam, Mir Sir Osman Ali, and Muslim elites at the top of the state's exploitative hierarchy, caste-Hindu zamindars (landlords) and money-lenders physically and sexually exploited agricultural labourers, perpetuated vetti



(bondage), charged exorbitant interest on cash and grain loans, and forcibly evicted small-landowners. Lower-caste and Dalit-Bahujan women formed a large section of the six-million strong agricultural labour force and were slated to not benefit from India's Independence.

Since 1938, the Hyderabad state witnessed marked growth in dissent, particularly among students and youth, against the Nizam as well as British colonialism. The Communist Party of India (CPI) was significantly involved in propagating a specific type of anti-imperial nationalism which overthrew tyrannical social institutions perpetuating labour abuse.

To aid the decolonisation and revolutionary process, local functionaries of the CPI such as the Andhra MahaSabha (AMS) were established to enable village mobilization through Sanghams (local committees) against the zamindars and Razakars (Paramilitary militia of the Nizam). By the 1940s, Sanghams proliferated much of present-day Andhra Pradesh and Telangana and became centers of village political organization against the landlords. Often, village 'republics' taken over by Sanghams would redistribute land to the peasantry, much to the chagrin of the wealthy land-owners and Razakars.

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Women in Arms

One of the most popular leaders of the movement was Chityala Ailamma (Chakali Ilamma), who asserted the rights of the lower-caste labouring classes, and specifically women, to cultivate their own land and reject caste-Hindu supremacy. As a Bahujan labourer, her militant defiance to the Razakars inspired hundreds of women to join the armed struggle. Ailamma's pioneering dissent became a rallying call for peasant women to defy gendered domestic expectations, as well as structural oppression at the hands of the land-owning caste-Hindus.

Women And Armed Revolution: The Telangana Peoples' Struggle (1946-51)

Notably, women's revolutionary activity in the Telangana struggle was in contrast to their upper-class and caste-Hindu counterparts in the 1920s armed revolution against the British. Peasant women in 1940s Telangana militancy were overwhelmingly disenfranchised by caste, class and educational and political opportunity. However, they played greater roles in planning and mobilization, while leading Sanghams, which doubled as village defence squads, in armed raids.

Ironically, women of the Telangana movement seldom get their due credit while the likes of Suniti Chaudhary, Bina Das, Durga Devi and Pritilata Waddedar have comparatively lasted longer in public memory. Women of the Telangana movement are conversely memorialized as a mass, and not individual actors.



In 1989, the Stree Shakti Sanghatan published a collection of oral histories, We were making History... of dozens of female combatants, exposing powerful expressions of empowerment. Truly, the gun-toting female cadres of the movement also represented a uniquely violent female reclamation of political space. As a result of the movement, many women were venturing outside their homes alone during the nighttime for the first time in their lives, training with village defence squads, and traversing forests and formerly unfamiliar geographies.

Telangana Peoples' Struggle, Women revolutionaries, Labour movements

A revolutionary, Latchamma recalls that she defied her husband to join the village defence squad and faced immense brutality at the hands of the Razakars, however she notes that old and young women looked out for one other and solidarities between female revolutionaries strengthened their resolve.

Moreover, women appropriated domestic objects like brooms, pestles, knives, slings and chilli powder as battle weapons with remarkable success. While the CPI and AMS provided rifle training to female fighters, women individualized their experience as violent combatants with new weapons.

A feminist reading of the struggle emphasizes the particularities and not just the roles or contributions of Dalit-Bahujan, and lower-caste women. By bringing the home and domestic into the conflict, whether through ingenious weapons or resistance against masculinist oppression, women of the Telangana struggle expanded the platforms of what female dissent looked like and what it meant to be a violent revolutionary woman.

The ancillary outcomes of the CPI's and AMS's mobilization of women included political and literary awareness since Sangham meetings featured talks and updates about imperial conflict (especially during World War II) and political developments in Northern India. While it is true that the CPI carved ideological and physical space for women to carry out violence, women designed revolutionary activity through their agencies.

Conclusion

Following the bloody annexation of Hyderabad by the newly independent Indian state in 1948, the Nehru government launched an offensive against the rebelling peasants. The intervention of the Indian army saw over 3 lakh people tortured and nearly 50,000 arrested and kept in detention camps (5,000 of which were imprisoned for years on end). The Indian armed forces brutally crushed the movement by October 1951. However, there were fleeting successes of the rebellion, including the abolition of vetti and land redistribution among the lower-castes.

Indeed, the movement expanded the spaces and platforms where and how women engaged in politics, but more importantly it expanded notions of who could engage in politics, that too violently.

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