

# Political Articulation and Policy Discourse in Elections

## Andhra Pradesh, 2004

*In the Andhra Pradesh elections of 2004, policy discourse displayed a plebiscitary character. The defeat of the TDP government has been interpreted as a 'vote against anti-people reforms'. The discourse analysis of the election campaigns of different parties however, clearly shows that except for the Left no mainstream party made this election a contest on reforms. The crisis-centric discourse of the Congress displayed possibilities for new discursive coalitions and political alliances, as concerns of marginalised groups gained prominence.*

K SRINIVASULU

The electoral defeat of the Telugu Desam government in Andhra Pradesh (AP) has been sought to be interpreted as a verdict on its economic reforms agenda pursued since mid-1990s.<sup>1</sup> The basis of such an interpretation is the reduction of the TDP's strength from 180 members in the earlier house to its all time low of 47 and the enhancement of Congress tally from 91 members in the earlier house to 186 this time.<sup>2</sup> The examination of this claim is important because of the serious implications it is likely to have to the political discourse and actual process of macro reforms in the state. The crucial questions are: can such a sweeping inference be drawn from the electoral outcome? How was the electoral agenda framed and what were the positions of different parties on the economic reforms in the electoral discourse?

Electoral performance of political parties involves a complex process and a multivariate analysis is required to understand it. The factors that are decisive in the making of an electoral outcome are the organisational strength of parties, structure of party competition, nature of the political alliances, forms of political discourse and appeal, strategies of mobilisation, and their impact on alignment of social forces and support bases of parties. Thus political and policy discourse forms one of the determining factors of the electoral outcome. The AP elections provide a useful vantage point to reflect on the relationship between elections and policy issues that have wider political significance and implications.<sup>3</sup> For AP under the TDP regime had been in the forefront of the economic reforms among the states in the Indian federation.

The analysis here is presented in four sections. The first section discusses the theoretical concerns and perspective of this paper. Section two briefly reviews the shifts in the policy framework of the TDP regimes with a view to contextualise the subsequent developments. The third section analyses the policy discourse during the 2004 elections. Section four concludes the paper.

### I

Discourse defined as 'an ensemble of ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to phenomena',<sup>4</sup> helps us in appreciating how problems or issues are perceived and framed, and how certain problems are prioritised vis-a-vis others.

If ideological perception is an important aspect of political activity and mobilisation, the discourse analysis helps us in analysing the ideas that are crucial to the making of representations of social phenomena and giving political meaning and priority to a particular perception and representation vis-a-vis others.

The model that has been dominant in the field of policy studies is the linear model. In the linear model policy process is viewed in terms of stages – agenda setting, policy formulation and decision-making, implementation and impact evaluation placed in a linear sequence. This model viewing policy-making as a rational process privileges the place and position of the so-called experts in policy processes. The intricate technicalities in policy analysis and formulation are assumed to be incomprehensible to the ordinary people therefore the latter's participation could only be very minor and limited. In this model, the policy-making is assumed to be an objective and value neutral exercise and by implication the policy experts become bearers of objectivity.

Policy-making, contrarily, is an intense political process involving various social groups with different perceptions and interests. The policy decision process is influenced by the competition among these groups and their capacities, and relative strengths and weaknesses are critical to it. But these groups, more often than not, do not do this separately. To be effective they make attempts to gather wider support by identifying commonality in interests – long-term and short-term – in argument and narratives and forge what can be called discourse coalitions. This is possible only through discursive deliberations involving inclusions/exclusions and contestations over ideas, interests and truth claims. The discourse analysis makes us sensitive to contestation and conflict between different discourse groups in a diversity of situations, sites and spaces.

The discourse analysis also helps us in overcoming the economic-reductionist limitations of the orthodox Marxism that attributes causal primacy to categories of class and class interests. Two central issues that are rendered rather simplistic by a large corpus of Marxist analyses are the categories of truth and power.<sup>5</sup> Discourse analysis instead of assuming truth claims to be springing exclusively from class positions views them as socially constructed thus open to contestation and challenge.

Therefore one can only talk about regimes of truth rather than a truth. Similarly, the grand notion of power as being vested in one location – a class or institution – and flowing in a top-down manner is contested; discourse theory highlighting the ‘micro-physics of power’<sup>6</sup> emphasises the significance of local and micro contexts, institutions, networks, strategies and practices in policy analysis.

There is a tendency in a society like ours to view policy-making as an official arena where only the bureaucracy, political elite and certain influential sections of the industrial and business class play a key role. It is time that the elite have clear advantage in terms of influence and access to policy processes involving agenda setting, networking, lobbying, information channelling and decision-making arenas. The concerns of marginalised sections of society go un-represented because of weak civil society, lack of information and inaccessibility to the channels of communication with the policy-making bodies.

For the above reasons, the electoral arena assumes significance. Elections provide important spaces for a debate on policy issues that tend to draw clear and sharp distinctions between political parties, different policy options and popular choices. The emergence of states as distinct political theatres in the post-emergency period and increasing electoral competition has compelled the parties and the political elite to expand the possibilities for their engagement with the marginalised groups and their social networks which are mostly informal.

With this perspective, in this study we seek to examine the structure of policy discourse in the 2004 elections in AP with a focus on the concerns of the marginalised groups, their articulation, their reflection in the discourses of the contending political parties, the role of various agents – public intellectuals, civil rights organisations, NGOs, media – and discursive aspects of electoral agenda setting. If elections are the occasion when the marginalised groups matter then it is necessary that social scientists study how these groups perceive themselves and are perceived, how their concerns are shaped and received and what spaces are available (become facilitated and actually get activated) and gravity in the elite engagement with their concerns and their sense of participation as a result of the interaction with the political elite. An examination of these aspects helps us in furthering the expansion of the space and scope of this interaction so that better democratic and pro-people policies can be made possible.

## II

The emergence of the TDP<sup>7</sup> as a major force in AP politics brought about a distinct policy orientation in the political discourse in the state. The policy initiatives pertaining to the administrative and welfare arenas marked this. The major administrative reforms in the form of abolition of the traditional village officer system and the restructuring of the large middle tier panchayat samitis and introduction of the mandals in their place were meant to strike at the support base of the Congress and expand the opportunities for the ambitious backward class political elite to accommodate them.<sup>8</sup>

The welfare policies played a major role in the shaping of the popular perception of and support to the TDP. The TDP could acquire pro-poor and pro-farmer image mainly because of its populist policies like Rs 2 a kilo rice scheme,<sup>9</sup> Janata cloth scheme and subsidised power supply to the farm sector. The weaker section-housing scheme was quite a visible one that

contributed to the popularity of the TDP regime.

The Naidu regime made a decisive departure from this legacy of NTR by reformulating and gradually phasing out them in his drive towards the liberalisation of the state economy. The Janmabhoomi programme, launched by the TDP government with the twin objectives of facilitating grass roots involvement in the developmental process and making the administrative machinery accountable to the people was considered to be the most prestigious and of course much-publicised programme. This programme was meant to take the administration nearer to the people (‘Prajalavaddaku Palana’) and evolve micro-plans by identifying their needs, assess the availability and requirements of resources. The execution of the plans thus chalked out are sought to be implemented by actively involving the local people through ‘shramadanam’ (voluntary work) and mobilisation of resources by the people themselves.

In tune with the economic reform, the Naidu regime launched a number of programmes to promote need-based self-help among different target groups. Thus water users’ associations were formed to take care of irrigation needs, school committees were entrusted with the responsibility of maintenance and supervision of schools, vana samrakshana samithis (forest protection committees) were formed for the protection and management of forests. Apart from these, women self-help groups were encouraged. The more visible and successful among them are those formed under the DWCRA (Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas) programme. Though DWCRA programme has been in existence in the state, what the Naidu government had done was to give them the form of a movement: activating the existing groups and encouraging the formation of new ones. As part of this campaign, DWCRA bazaars were held in Hyderabad and also in different towns in the state. The DWCRA thus accorded high priority by the TDP government. As a consequence, the local administrative machinery was also geared up to make it a success.

Further, the TDP government introduced a series of schemes purportedly for the development of marginalised social groups with an emphasis on skill development and marketing support. The ‘Deepam’ scheme, under which the members of the DWCRA were provided with cooking stoves and gas cylinders, meant to encourage women’s self-help groups, became quite popular with the womenfolk. Another popular scheme was the *Adarana* scheme under which tool kits were provided to the artisans and occupational communities to enhance their productivity. *Roshini* scheme for the Muslims, under which financial provision was made for the construction of *shadikhana*s (marriage halls) and renovation of old mosques, *Cheyutha* scheme meant for the handicapped were all launched prior to the 1999 elections.<sup>10</sup> What is to be noted underlining these community identity specific schemes and subsidies is the political strategy to co-opt the marginalised caste-communities by rearticulating the identity political agenda brought on to the centre of political discourse of the state by the BSP, some CPI (ML) groups and the dalit and backward caste organisations during the 1990s.

## III

The following developments form the context of the 2004 assembly elections and therefore are relevant to the electoral discourse.

(i) There has been a sharp polarisation of the political spectrum between the TDP-BJP alliance on the one hand and the Congress-TRS-Left alliance on the other. This obviously has led to the sharpening of the discursive contestation in the electoral campaign.

(ii) This election has seen the marginalisation of small parties like the BSP, Maha Jana Front,<sup>11</sup> etc, which had significant discursive presence earlier.

(iii) The intensity of political competition and the compulsions to co-opt the identity politics facilitated and expanded the space for policy issues in the electoral discourse and participation.

The discourse in the present election is built around the performance of the TDP regime during its nine-year tenure. The TDP, as is well known, is a highly personalised party therefore there has been an overt and excessive focus on the persona of Naidu. In fact, he has assumed an iconic status with regard to the state-level economic reforms in the international and national press and in the eyes of international donors and captains of domestic big business.

The 2004 elections in AP thus display a plebiscitary character. Conducted in the aftermath of the assassination attempt by the CPIML (People's War) on Naidu at Alipiri near Tirupati, the entire electoral campaign got centred on him. Naidu only facilitated this by declaring this election as a referendum on his nine-year rule. The TDP thus invested all its resources on Naidu. Reflecting this spirit, the agenda for election was set by the TDP in sharply polarised terms of development versus violence and anarchy, separatism versus integration of the state and stability versus instability.

### Development vs Anarchy

This election, advanced by nine months prompted by the expectation of a sympathy wave following the assassination attempt brought the question of Naxalite violence in the state onto the political agenda. The debate on the Naxalite question is clothed in terms of law and order versus backwardness and deprivation. It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that the TDP's approach to this issue has largely been informed by the law and order perspective. The number of encounter deaths during the TDP regime and absence of any comprehensive socio-economic programme to tackle the issue of sub-regional backwardness and socio-economic deprivation of the lower sections in the backward regions of the state are pointers.

The violence and counter-violence in the state by the Peoples' War and the police has reached almost maniac proportions. Responding to this violence, a forum, *Poura Spandana Vedika*, comprising of civil rights activists and journalists at the initiative of a former civil servant, sought to advocate and push for a dialogue between the government and the Peoples' War Group (PWG). The premise on which this dialogue is supposed to be based is that the Naxalite problem should be viewed as a serious socio-economic issue. The recalcitrant attitude and lack of patience created serious hurdles and led to the eventual failure of this attempt to initiate dialogue despite the initial enthusiasm and promise.

In the post-Alipiri period, with the TDP going aggressively against Peoples' War, the Congress and the TRS along with the parliamentary Left opted to view it as a social issue. The initiative by the citizens' forum could be seen to be echoing the larger sentiment in the Naxalite influential areas. It is fairly well known

that people, especially the youth, in the Naxalite dominated villages of Telangana are subjected to tremendous hardship. Unlawful detentions, torture, extortions and fake encounters have been reported by the civil liberties organisations and the media. If the perennial drought and unemployment have been serious concerns of people here then the police repression has only added to their woes. The citizens' forum has been instrumental in bringing forth these concerns onto the political discourse and policy arena. The impact of this on the Congress and TRS' stated position on the process of dialogue with the PWG is unmistakable.

By posing the Naxalite issue in extremely negative and hostile terms, the TDP could only sharpen the polarisation of the discourse in terms of development versus anarchy. Accordingly the TDP projected itself as a party that stood for development and the Congress and the TRS as against it and for anarchy. As the electoral campaign progressed, with its top leadership as well as its grass roots cadres subjected to tremendous insecurity through threats and actual killings and its organisational network virtually paralysed by the PWG, the TDP sharpened its criticism of and hostility towards the PWG. With its hostile stand the TDP lost its maneuverability, which is crucial to the shaping of the discourse.

### Separatism vs Integration

Another contentious issue that was pursued by the TDP government is related to the demand of the Telangana state. The Telangana issue has been brought back after more than three decades on to the mainstream political discourse by the TRS formed in 2001 by a former TDP leader, K Chandrasekhar Rao. In the last three years this issue picked up momentum and assumed electoral significance. If the performance of TRS in the panchayat raj elections<sup>12</sup> held in 2001 was an indication of its growing popularity, then the popular response to its rallies and meetings further demonstrated it. This obviously had an impact on the TDP's support base.

To further compound the problems of the TDP, the Telangana issue came to symbolise the condensation of serious policy concerns pertaining to agriculture, drought, irrigation and of course Naxalism. As large pockets of Telangana are perennially drought prone, agriculture here suffers from lack of irrigation. This region, which has the Naxalite presence in almost all the districts, is therefore subjected to tremendous repression by the state. By raising the Telangana question, the TRS sought to reflect all the above concerns.

The Telangana issue posed a challenge not only to the TDP but also to the Congress. A section of the Congressmen from Telangana who have formed the 'Telangana Congress Forum' have been raising the issue of statehood to Telangana region. This voice in the Congress grew in prominence as the TRS expanded its network and social base. With the demand for Telangana state both inside and outside the Congress gaining prominence, the Congress high command was forced to respond by promising to constitute a second states' Reorganisation Committee (SRC).<sup>13</sup> With this the ground was prepared for the electoral realignments in the state.

The Congress always contested elections in AP on its own, while the TDP from the beginning forged an alliance with one or the other of the non-Congress forces. With the change in the Congress national policy in favour of forging electoral alliances



to confront the NDA, the ground was cleared for the alliance with the TRS and the Left. What brought these parties together obviously was the main goal of defeating the TDP-BJP alliance. But differences among them on the statehood for Telangana along with other issues have been equally important while the Congress continuously harped on the second SRC, the Left all along rejected the demand. The differences with the Left are reflected in the TRS putting up its candidates against the Left in some places.

On other side of the political spectrum, while the TDP's stand has been against a separate state of Telangana, the BJP on the contrary found itself in an awkward position. For the state BJP had taken a pro-Telangana stand with its slogan of 'one vote, two states' in its resolution in the Kakinada conference. But since its alliance with the TDP in 1999 it was forced to keep it in abeyance. Thus the BJP argued that though in principle it was in favour of small states, in the context of alliance politics it was forced to confine itself to the NDA agenda.

The discourse on Telangana therefore is marked by the internal dynamics and tensions of alliance politics. Given the fact that Telangana had been an emotive issue, the parties even when they are opposed to Telangana state had to exercise caution. Though the terms of discourse on Telangana have been clearly spelt out and battle lines clearly drawn, there could be noticed a perceptible difference in the tone and tenor of the political stands of parties on it between two phases of election- the first phase held on April 20, covering the Telangana region and parts of northern Andhra and the second phase of poll held on April 26 covering the remaining coastal Andhra and Rayalaseema regions. While during the first phase of campaign the TDP's chief campaigner Naidu emphasised the need of an integrated state of AP and reeled out what the TDP had done and promised to do if elected for Telangana, in the second phase campaign in coastal Andhra he sought to rake up Andhra sentiment by suggesting how separate state of Telangana would lead to a water war as Telangana would demand a share in the river water resources<sup>14</sup> and fertile and irrigated coastal Andhra would be forced to suffer.

### Stability vs Instability

The third theme that dominated the TDP's electoral campaign was the question of political stability. The TDP, as it has done continuously in its two decade long history, equated the Congress rule with political instability. The Congress' track record of frequent change of chief ministers, internal factional infighting, interference of the party high command into state affairs were played on by the TDP leadership to paint a picture of instability in the Congress rule. The Congress and its allies countered this discourse by pointing to the 'real' instability in the AP economy and society under the TDP rule. The destabilisation of agriculture and handloom sectors, which constitute the main sources of employment, caused by the gross neglect of these sectors during the TDP's nine-year rule was the theme that the Congress emphasised in its campaign. Holding the TDP government responsible for the suicides of the farmers and artisans, the Congress and its allies put the TDP and its supremacy on a public trial.

These broad positions on the questions of development, integration and stability have informed the TDP's position on specific policy issues like agriculture, handlooms, power, etc, in the fiercely fought elections. The TDP by going in for the early polls, apparently aimed at seizing the initiative, set the

agenda for the electoral debate. This initial advantage could not be sustained and in fact turned out negative as it sought to define the electoral discourse in terms of sharp polarities. If the closed structure and the implicit negativity in the TDP's electoral campaign were striking then the Congress displayed a greater openness and inclusiveness in terms of agenda. This made the Congress Party look more responsive to newer issues and demands from below.

### Framing and Naming: Congress Policy Discourse

Policy discourse can be likened with story telling. It should have a beginning, story line, narrative structure and ending. The entry point in the Congress campaign in AP was the suicides of farmers and accordingly it built up a narrative that identified the phenomenon of farmers' suicides with the TDP rule. The crisis in the agrarian sector during the last four years, and the absence of any effective intervention into this by the TDP government was projected as a clear instance of insensitivity on the part of the TDP regime.

A serious public debate on such a grave situation was sustained due to the efforts of the media,<sup>15</sup> farmers' organisations and the Left parties. In spite of the prolonged public debate on this issue there was no viable action on this front. The only visible government response was one of denial of any such suicides; the suicides if any have been attributed to personal, family or health reasons.<sup>16</sup>

The following could be identified as the causes of the agricultural crisis, the brunt of which is borne by the small and marginal farmers, mostly belonging to the backward castes:<sup>17</sup> (i) failure to control the spread of low quality and spurious seed, fertiliser and pesticides by fly-by-night companies; (ii) near total collapse of agricultural extension services which would have helped the farmers with timely and necessary advice; (iii) the failure of agricultural credit system forcing farmers to go in for private moneylenders at high interest rates; (iv) high rise in the cost of agricultural inputs especially hike in the power tariffs impacting the dry land cultivation in Telangana and Rayalaseema regions; (v) decline of marketing support for farm products leading to huge losses; and; (vi) Lack of and in fact decline of irrigation facilities as a result of receding of water table in dry land areas and drought conditions in large parts of the state.

The most important line in this story, given the TDP's firm stand on the power sector reforms, is the galvanising of the agitation against power tariff hike in 2000. Immediately after 1999 elections, the incumbent TDP government hiked power tariffs by claiming its victory as a popular approval of its reform package, which included power sector reforms. The above agitation, with an impressive rally in Hyderabad, was quelled by the TDP resulting in the death of two protestors and injuries to 26 of them. This was meant to be a signal of what was in store for such protesters. Further, government's resolve was made clear through its refusal to rollback the power tariff hike.

Critical to the intensification of the public discourse on these issues was the *Praja Prasthana Padayatra* undertaken by Y Rajasekhara Reddy (YSR) as the leader of the opposition in the state during the summer of 2003. Covering 1,500 kms on foot, YSR could bring about a critical shift in the political discourse and state politics. Firstly, he emerged as a charismatic leader of the party. Dressed in white shirt, dhoti and a turban,<sup>18</sup> walking in the mornings and evenings and resting under the shelter of

thatched huts and roadside shamanas, YSR could easily establish rapport with the simple and poor rural folks. YSR's self-projection and image was in sharp contrast to that of Naidu clad in shirt and pants and guarded by heavy security.

Secondly, through the padayatra, YSR could not only gain public image and sympathy but could activate the Congress cadre by boosting their morale. Thirdly, the 'padayatra' gave an opportunity to local groups and activists to present their problems to the leader of the opposition and by rallying together elements critical of Naidu regime, YSR could bring to the forefront grass roots issues pertaining to agriculture and handlooms, etc, into the public gaze and sustain a critical debate on government priorities like IT, BT and Formula One car races alongside its neglect of issues of employment and livelihood. The padayatra all along provided for impromptu discussions on one-to-one basis with YSR asking the village folk about their problems and consoling them. The rachhabanda or adda<sup>19</sup> participation reduced the gap between the political elite and the popular classes and facilitated communication between them. The value of this becomes very noticeable when it is seen in comparison to the nature of participation in the TDP's high profile 'Janmabhoomi'. Though started with a promise, soon the Janmabhoomi lost its voluntary participatory character and became a formality as the TDP cadre and local bureaucracy came to dominate it.

YSR by undertaking *Jaithra yatra* on the eve of elections held almost a year after his initial padayatra was also renewing his popular contact and his pledge to alleviate their conditions. Such yatras were made a famous mode of popular contact by NTR with all the dramatics and glamour associated with it. Naidu had a big disadvantage in this respect. Travelling in helicopter and protected by a security cover he could not counter the populist image accumulated by YSR. On the contrary, he ended up reinforcing the image of being hi-tech, IT savvy.

If padayatra was an education for YSR as he could learn about problems at the grass roots then the *Jaithra yatra* was used as a means to come back with promises based on the feedback during the padayatra. The *Jaithra yatra* was seen as reminiscent of the one NTR was famous for and reminding the voters how far the TDP under Naidu had moved away from the founder's policies.<sup>20</sup> This had come to be a very important and effective strategy of communication for the Congress to establish rapport with the popular classes and for the latter to have informal dialogue with the political elite.

What is involved the Congress' campaign is following Hazer,<sup>21</sup> what could be called the 'mobilisation of bias'. By making suicides of farmers and weavers a signifier of a deep crisis and making the TDP's policies responsible for this a political judgment in the form of popular verdict was sought. The narrative contains multiple story lines – drought, Telangana's backwardness (resulting in the demand for a separate state implied), TDP's surrender to the World Bank. The condensation of the discourse in the term 'crisis' is noteworthy. In other words, crisis had become a short hand expression of the seriousness of what was rotten in the state of AP. It is true that the issue of the crisis during the TDP regime is not as simple as stated by the adversaries. But it may be noted that simplification of the problem is a rhetorical device that is often put to an effective use to convey clear political messages.

The concept of discourse coalition defined as an "ensemble of a set of story lines, the actors that utter these storylines, and the practices that conform to these story lines, all organised

around a discourse"<sup>22</sup> is useful in this context. The electoral discourse pursued by the Congress and its allies is characterised by differences in terms of story lines or rather versions of story, narrative styles and rhetoric. What is common to them all is that the chief antagonist in the story is Naidu. These different versions of the story begin and in fact substantially revolve around Naidu. In all of them the narrative on agrarian crisis occupies a major space. But in each of them, the narrative assumes different twists and turns and the finale is explicitly different. As we shall see, despite these differences there is an underlying political necessity recognised by all of them that the TDP must be defeated and the premise on which that is possible is to accept the Congress as the leader of the alliance. Therefore it may be suggested that the political alliance between the Congress, TRS and the Left be considered as a discourse coalition as well.

The concept of discourse coalition could be expanded to include a wide range of initiatives, organisations and social groups. Thus the acute perception of the crisis in a majority of social groups – apart from farmers and weavers, the students, unemployed youth and especially the teachers and NGOs – and an unprecedented sense of insecurity felt by a large number of them led to the widening of the discourse coalition associated with the Congress. Thus farmers' and workers organisations, students and youth organisations, teachers and employees associations<sup>23</sup> overwhelmingly identified with the Congress coalition sharing its narrative topography, in spirit if not in detail.

The TRS, the Left and other organisations pursued their own story lines that are different from each other and distinct from that of the Congress. It is curious to note that sometimes their narrative structures and especially the closures they aimed at were not compatible with each other. The TDP's counter-strategy was to highlight these difference and contradictions and draw the attention of the voters as to how these differences camouflaged or played down by the alliance partners, could play havoc in the state politics. In spite of all this if the alliance is voted to power then it can only be seen as a vindication of the points of convergence in the discursive narrative.

### TRS and Telangana Demand

To illustrate the above argument, let us look at the discursive persuasions of the TRS and the Left. The narrative on Telangana build by the TRS and the different discursive groups even when they have serious differences with the former<sup>24</sup> has an almost predictable storyline. That the Telangana region has been backward and the coastal region has developed phenomenally and that too at the cost of the Telangana region; that the backwardness of Telangana is the logical outcome of the developmental policy pursued by the political elite from the Andhra region; this is evident in almost all the sectors – in irrigation, education, health, etc. According to this narrative the regional unevenness has increased with the coming into power of the TDP, which is clearly a party of the coastal neo-rich, and during the last nine years of the Naidu regime it has reached huge proportions. In this narrative there is a silence on the Congress party's role but this is sought to be effected by highlighting the culpability of the TDP. But it cannot be said that the Congress has been exonerated. What is significant here is not the factual veracity of the above construction but how through the deployment of rhetorical devices and powerful imagery it is sought to be imprinted on the popular

memory as an irrefutable 'fact'. The backwardness of Telangana and innocence of Telangana people (which is portrayed not as a lacuna but celebrated as a positive quality) become emotive devices through which mobilisation is attempted. What is noticeable about the present discourse on Telangana, in contrast to that of the 1969 movement, is the deliberate underplaying of the anti-coastal Andhra sentiment. The choice of target has been the TDP and its policies. Such a critique has a positive correlation if not conformity with the critique of the TDP by other parties in the coalition.

But there are also serious differences and curious convergences among the coalition partners. While the state Congress maintained a studied silence on the Telangana issue – giving credence to the TRS' claim that it has reached an agreement on the issue with the AICC – the Left, especially the CPI(M) sticking to its linguistic nationality thesis, has taken a firm stand to oppose the demand. The Left instead proposed a special package for the development of the backward regions. There has been a strong convergence between the Left and the TDP in terms of their rigid opposition to the Telangana demand. But the points of divergence and disagreement that occupied larger discursive space have overshadowed this common ground.

### The Left and Economic Reforms

The Left's discourse covers a wider policy space and situates the TDP regime in the macro-policy context. Thus the conditionalities of the World Bank and the accumulation of external borrowings during Naidu's tenure became issues hotly debated in this election. The Left, during its six years of separation from the TDP, virtually conducted a public trial on this issue through pamphlets, booklets, public meetings and agitations. Along with the Left parties, a number of citizens' initiatives like, for instance, the Forum Against Globalisation (FAG) comprising of activists, academics and journalists have played a key role by bringing out booklets and informative pamphlets with analyses of the implications of liberalisation on vulnerable and marginalised communities.

It is true that Naidu's regime has seen a whopping increase in loans amounting to Rs 50,084 crore. But the fact of the matter is that the external loans amounted to only Rs 15,364 crore of which loan from the World Bank was Rs 8,922 crore. The World Bank has become a short hand expression of the reforms face of the regime and that too with a stigma attached to it. The ground was thus prepared for the populist discourse. Not lagging behind the Left, the Congress also made it an election issue peppering it with emotions. Thus asked YSR in his road shows and public meetings: "Where has this huge money gone? What did the farmers get? How many irrigation projects were built?" The answer was obviously in the negative. This rhetoric went well especially with the rural electorate.

In the same refrain the standard claim of Naidu that his government enhanced the stature of the state among international donors and brought huge funds for the development of the state was clearly turned up side down. The Congress' response to this claim was simple, straight and a matter-of-fact one. All the borrowings made in the name of development have gone into the pockets of 'pacha chokkalu' (yellow shirts), the TDP cadre, who like 'bandicoots' have not only swallowed up the developmental funds but also the rice allotted by the central government for the Food for Work Programme (FFW). It may be noted that

there has been a remarkable change in the TDP's organisational structure under the leadership of Naidu. While NTR ran the party on the strength of his charisma and popularity, Naidu lacking both, sought to build his organisational base on managerial lines through an elaborate network based on distribution of spoils. Thus organisational base of the TDP at different levels began to comprise of people belonging to the class of contractors, builders and even speculators. This needless to say is in sharp contrast to the Congress, which counts in its ranks the traditional dominant caste elite and professional pyravikaars (power brokers). This contractor class, for whom politics is primarily a business proposition, the developmental work and even the FFW programme has become a 'feeding channel'.

The TDP's image in fact took a clear beating with the surfacing of scams involving pilferage of rice meant for FFW programme. It may be noted that the state government was allotted 55 lakh tonnes of rice estimated to be of worth Rs 5,500 crore by the centre for drought relief work. The scams of rice 'recycling'<sup>25</sup> that were in reference when YSR declared, "while the farmers grew emaciated the TDP men became fatter by eating away government funds meant for development and drought relief like bandicoots." Thus when the Congress and the Left raised the issue of 'disappearance' of the loans meant for development, the political message was loud and clear.

This put the TDP clearly on the defensive. The already accumulated voter fatigue with the persona of Naidu was further intensified when he made it a point to paint a picture of *Swarnandhra* (Golden Andhra) through a series of live telecasts of the review of the performance of different departments on private TV channels.<sup>26</sup> The numbers that were reeled out during these reviews not only made no sense to everyday life experiences of large sections of population but increased their distrust of the TDP regime.

### Closures

Every story must have an ending – preferably an optimistic one. The discourses of the different parties suggest happy endings. In this sense the TDP is clearly at a disadvantage, having been in power for nine long years, its closure was only too obvious and had nothing to offer prospectively except promising to continue its earlier policies with a different accent.

The Congress' discursive diagnosis suggested a series of solutions. The most significant of them was the promise of the free power supply to agriculture. It may be recollected that Congress made the promise of free power supply to agriculture sector during the 1999 elections as well. But it was an indication of the low credibility of the party that it could not gain much on this count. During the last few years, by joining popular grass roots initiatives and keeping the debate on agriculture live in the assembly and other fora, the Congress gradually gained a pro-people image for itself.

As in 1999, the TDP took on its stride to oppose this with all the resources at its command. Naidu, through TV advertisements and in his speeches sought to convey the message that the Congress' promise of free power was impractical and irresponsible. For free power would only mean no power, as there would be no power left to supply. Thus he warned, "We will end up using transmission lines for drying cloths."<sup>27</sup> Free power will throw fiscal discipline to winds. Naidu repeatedly told his audience that this was the reason why Sonia Gandhi never referred to this promise.

Power is crucial to farmers in dry land areas in Telangana and Rayalaseema. There are estimated to be around 22.82 lakh pump sets in these two regions. The impact of hike in power tariffs has been quite disastrous on the poor and marginal farmers.<sup>28</sup> The power subsidy is justified on the ground that it would cost the state exchequer only rupees 300 crore whereas the expenditure incurred on the publicity by the TDP government was estimated to be above rupees 350 crore. This is the reason why this promise went well with the farmers and the poor households.<sup>29</sup>

The electoral discourse in the state has historically shown a high proclivity for populism. This is largely because of the sharp political polarisation and the intense electoral competition the state has seen since the early 1980s. But none of the elections have ever seen any informed debate – except for an inclination to score points in the debate – on the desirability and viability of populism as the basis of public policy. Thus the populist turn in the promise of free power. The entire farming community is treated as a suffering lot and the internal differences are glossed over, when as a matter of fact the farming community is highly differentiated and the strata that have suffered as a result of the governmental negligence and apathy are the small and medium farmers. The discourse on free power also raises certain other important issues. The most important one pertains to the propriety in pursuing such a promise given the fact that the crisis of the dry land farming to a large extent is due to the phenomenal decline in the ground water, which in turn is a result of an unchecked borewell digging. The free power supply would only worsen the situation for the poor and marginal farmers and play ecological havoc as there would be much more intensive water exploitation by the big land owners. Perhaps a comprehensive debate is required on the control over groundwater usage and the regulation of the cropping pattern in tune with the agrarian ecological conditions of different regions. These issues found no place in the electoral debate. TDP's argument against the free power promise was also largely in the nature of a techno-economic objection based on its non-viability (because of the cost factor and the inability to maintain quality supply) rather than based on the invocation of a larger perspective.

The narrative of the Congress was woven around the theme of evil and anti-people rule (interestingly in the speeches of YSR and KCR the TDP rule is referred to as 'Dusta' and/or 'Narakasura'<sup>30</sup> palana') under which all the sections of the society had suffered therefore it was time to end it. There are interesting sub-plots or narratives in the story line of the Congress which are basically meant to further cement and expand the process of forging a social coalition that would win it power. If the free power promise to agriculture and poor households (along with a package consisting of whole lot of other promises like completion of irrigation projects, supply of quality seeds, subsidised fertiliser and pesticides, loans at a low interest rate, revival of extension services, etc), is meant to stabilise its support base among the farmers and poor households, then so are the promises to weavers to ameliorate their conditions with regulation of yarn supply, revival of Janata scheme and creation of credit and marketing facilities, to the employees to do away with harassment<sup>31</sup> and creation of employment to the educated youth through recruitment to the vacancies in the government accumulated as a result of the ban on recruitment during the TDP tenure.<sup>32</sup> Thus the social unrest and discontent against the TDP rule was sought to be fine tuned by the Congress to forge a social base with the promise of specific packages to each of them.

The policy discourse in 2004 election in AP displayed a plebiscitary character. This was because of the dominance of the TDP by the persona of Naidu and the political investment of the party in terms of its image, resources, choices and risks vested in him. For this reason the defeat of Naidu regime, which gained an iconic status with regard to the state-level economic reforms, has been interpreted as a 'vote against anti-people reforms.' The discourse analysis of the election campaigns of different parties clearly shows that except for the Left no mainstream party made this election a contest on reforms.

The dominant discourses of the Congress and the TDP are framed in terms of crisis vs development. While the TDP's development centric discourse in view of the multiplier effects of demand for demonstration of proof hypothetically remained a closed option, the crisis-centric discourse of the Congress campaign displayed possibilities for new discursive coalitions and political alliances. Because of the discursive centrality of crisis, the concerns of the marginalised groups gained prominence in the electoral campaign of the Congress and its allies. Through a continuous focus on the suicides of the farmers and weavers to demonstrate the TDP's insensitivity to the people's anguish, the Congress sought to deepen the legitimacy crisis of the TDP regime.

Popular initiatives and grass roots organisations can play a crucial role in policy discourse. The more dynamic these organisations are, the more pressure they exert on political parties to respond to their issues. If any party fails to do that it does so at its own risk and loss of legitimacy. We find such organisations playing a catalytic role in discursive terms in this election – against the TDP for its closed discourse and in favour of the Congress because of its discursive openness. The presence of these initiatives is evident in the three crucial issues of rural crisis, Naxalite question and Telangana demand that dominated the electoral debate this time. All the above issues have been shaped and presented as social questions pertaining to the marginalised sections (in the TDP's discourse they were treated as administrative or law and order issues) and interestingly have been inclusively presented as part of the discourse of crisis.

Generally, reference to historical personalities and legacies is a strong element in the political discourses. In this respect the TDP clearly had a disadvantage. While the Congress invoked the legacy of Indira Gandhi and promised Indiramma 'rajyam' (Indira Gandhi's rule) the TDP could not draw on the popular legacy of NTR because the party's move away from it had been decisive.

It is necessary to distinguish between the cooption of the subaltern concerns by the dominant structures for electoral gains and providing of spaces to marginalised groups so that they can participate in policy discourses. It may be suggested that the 2004 election in AP has shown certain degree of convergence of these two processes of cooption by the dominant and carving a space for themselves by the marginalised. The sustained activities of the subaltern organisations have played a key role in making the crisis visible and a central issue in the electoral discourse. Further they could be seen expanding the spaces in the policy discourse as these organisations were accorded visibility and promised a role in policy-making in the form of consultations and involvement in the deliberations.

The Congress' promise of involvement of the farmers' and weavers' organisations in the formulation of policies for agricultural and handloom sectors and the 'Poura Spandana Vedika' with regard to the Naxalite issue are important indications of the expansion of policy spaces for the marginalised. [24]

Address for correspondence:  
srinivasuluk@sify.com  
srinivasuluk2004@yahoo.com

## Notes

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- 1 The interpretation that the election results are a rejection of the reforms and World Bank loans is put forward by the Left and not by the Congress.
- 2 While the Congress-Telangana Rastra Samithi-Left alliance gained 48.37 per cent vote, the TDP-BJP alliance still retained 39.66 per cent vote. Despite its poor performance, the TDP continues to be a formidable political force with a strong electoral support and organisational structure.
- 3 For instance, the Congress victory in AP prompted the AIADMK government in Tamil Nadu to implement free power for agriculture sector.
- 4 Des Gasper and Raymond Apthorpe, 'Introduction: Discourse Analysis and Policy Discourse' in Raymond Apthorpe and Des Gasper (eds), *Arguing Development Policy: Frames and Discourses*, Frank Cass, London, 1996, p 2.
- 5 See, Stuart Hall, 'Foucault: Power, Knowledge and Discourse' in Margaret Wetherell, Stephanie Taylor and Simeon J Yates (eds), *Discourse Theory and Practice*, Sage, London, 2001.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 K C Suri, 'Telugu Desam Party: Rise and Prospects for Future', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XXXIX, Nos 14 and 15, April 3-10, 2004.
- 8 For details, see M Kistaiah (ed), *Administrative Reforms in a Developing Society*, Sterling, New Delhi, 1990.
- 9 For an assessment of this scheme during NTR's first tenure, see, Olsen, Wendy K, 'Eat Now and Pay Later: Impact of Rice Subsidy Scheme', *Economic and Political Weekly*, March 28, 1989.
- 10 For an analysis of the 1999 elections, see, K Srinivasulu, 'Party Competition and Strategies of Mobilisation: An Analysis of Social Coalitions in Andhra Pradesh' in Paul Wallace and Ramashray Roy (eds), *India's 1999 Elections and 20th Century Politics*, Sage, Delhi, 2003.
- 11 The Maha Jana Front (MJF) is a conglomerate of the backward caste and dalit organisations with grass roots support base.
- 12 The TRS won 1,043 MPTCs and 84 ZPTCs. For an analysis of the panchayat elections, see, K C Suri, 'Andhra Pradesh: Setback for the TDP in Panchayat Elections', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XXXVI, No 41, 2001.
- 13 The first SRC headed by Justice Fazal Ali recommended for the formation of the Hyderabad state comprising of the Telugu speaking districts of the Telangana region, "along with Bidar district, and the Munagala enclave in the Nalgonda district belonging to the Krishna district". See, *Report of the States Reorganisation Commission*, 1955, p 257.
- 14 *The Hindu* (Hyderabad edition), March 3, 2004.
- 15 The role of *Vaaritha*, the Telugu daily is noteworthy in this regard.
- 16 In fact a BJP union minister from AP even went to the extent of attributing the suicides to 'indigestion'.
- 17 Reports of Farmers' Commission of Experts on Agriculture in Andhra Pradesh and *Vyavasayaranga Parirakshana Aikya Porata Vedika*, Hyderabad, 2002.
- 18 It is interesting to note that the generation of politicians not only in the Congress but also across the parties wearing dhosis is fast disappearing. YSR is perhaps the only very well known dhoti clad politician in his age group in the state.
- 19 A dalit activist insightfully characterised it thus emphasising the informality and personalised nature of the dialogue.
- 20 It is instructive to note that NTR continues to be remembered as a pro-poor CM for his Rs 2 kilo rice and housing for the poor schemes. The interviews by the TV 9, a Telugu news channel, with the rural poor during the elections brought this out. Curiously enough there were instances when people compared YSR with NTR.
- 21 Hajer, Maarten A, 'Discourse Coalitions and the Institutionalisation of Practice: The Case of Acid Rain in Britain', Frank Fisher and John Forrester (eds), *The Argumentative Turn in Political Analysis and Planning*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1993.
- 22 Hajer, Maarten A, *ibid*, p 47.
- 23 The general perception among the employees was that if the TDP comes back to power it would in its pursuit of reforms wind up pension scheme and lower the retirement age apart from a vigorous implementation of the voluntary retirement policy.
- 24 The Telangana Aikya Vedika, a non-election front, has emerged as a major voice since the late 1990s striving to educate popular classes through a variety of activities. Telangana Jana Sabha of the CPI(ML) (People's War) and Telangana Jana Sanghatana of the CPI(ML) (Janashakti) and Telangana Maha Sabha are the CPI(ML) wings that actively advocate the Telangana issue. TRS is an electoral beneficiary of the ground work done by these organisations.
- 25 The process by which, the foodgrain allocated for the 'Food for Work' programme instead of reaching the poor, gets back into the open market is called recycling. There was reported to be a widespread practice of such recycling and in most cases it is the local TDP men benefited from this.
- 26 These programmes tried to project an 'Andhra shining' image in correspondence with perhaps not to lag behind Vajpayee's 'India shining'
- 27 *The Hindu* (Hyderabad edition), March 20, 2004.
- 28 'Power bills have equalled the house rents' has become a common middle class refrain.
- 29 Free power was also promised to single bulb households.
- 30 Interestingly it echoes the slogan of NTR in the 1994 assembly elections that he would kill Sarasura (the demon of arrack) by putting his first signature on the prohibition order immediately after taking oath of office. YSR made similar promise with regard to the free power order and kept it by signing in the order immediately after assuming the office of CM in the huge public presence in the Lal Bahadur stadium in the capital city.
- 31 It is interesting to note that the *Janmabhoomi*, considered to be highly prestigious by the Naidu regime, has been seen as a major source of inconvenience and harassment by the subaltern ranks or the 'street-level bureaucracy'. (For the concept of street-level bureaucracy, see, Michael Lipsky, *Street-level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*, Russell Sage Foundation, New York, 1980.) The bureaucracy is kept on their toes through regular and close monitoring. For these reasons, there is a sense of suffocation in the bureaucracy. The teachers have been subjected to humiliation by being made to undertake 'all kinds of surveys'. Field notes.
- 32 The list of promises includes the revival of Public Sector Enterprises, etc.

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