

Irrigation, Agrarian Change and Local Politics in South Telengana, 1960-1996

V.Anil Kumar*

This paper deals with the impact of irrigation on agrarian change and local politics in the period, 1960 to 1996 in the irrigated region of South Telengana, Andhra Pradesh. The article is based on a primary survey and two village case studies from Miryalguda Mandal of Nalgonda District, South Telengana. The paper is , is based on two village studies and a primary survey in the irrigated part of South Telengana, shows that though during 1960-96, the process of commercialization, which resulted from canal irrigation, strengthened the position of the dominant castes/classes, small and middle peasantry continued to survive.

The paper discusses the contradictory nature of agrarian change with the peasantry persisting but increasingly faced with problems of survival and the consequences of sharpening economic inequalities. Finally, while concluding, article points to a policy implication: irrigation alone, without agrarian reform, cannot lead to progressive change and for more equitable agrarian change, both irrigation and agrarian reform are needed.

* Institute for Social and Economic Change, Nagarbhavi, Bangalore. E-mail: anilkumar@isec.ac.in

This article deals with the impact of irrigation on agrarian change and local politics in the period, 1960 to 1996 in the irrigated region of South Telengana, Andhra Pradesh. The article is based on a primary survey and two village case studies from Miryalguda Mandal of Nalgonda District, South Telengana¹. The paper discusses the contradictory nature of agrarian change where the peasantry has persisted, despite the change over time, but is faced with increased problems of survival and economic inequalities. Our methodological attempt in this paper is to integrate qualitative accounts with a quantitative study.² But the emphasis throughout the paper is on qualitative study and qualitative change. In the following, firstly we present an overview of the article; secondly we discuss the results of sample statistical survey; and thirdly, we present the village case studies where we trace in detail the processes of agrarian change as they are reflected in commercialization, changing social relations of production, tenancy arrangements, migrant labour and local politics. Finally, while concluding, article points to a policy implication that irrigation alone, without agrarian reform, can not lead to progressive change and for more equitable agrarian change *both* irrigation *and* agrarian reform are needed.

Irrigation came to the Miryalguda region in 1967 with the construction of Nagarjuna Sagar Project (NSP) on Krishna River. With the onset of irrigation the entire region shifted from millets, pulses and castor to rice mono cropping. Paddy, which used to be grown only under tanks and to a lesser extent under wells, now is cultivated on the entire village land and by all the classes of cultivators. Though this began in 1967 the major shift to commercial production of paddy appears to have started only from early 1970s when the Borlaug package of HYVs (high yielding varieties) was introduced. It was the beginning of green revolution in this region. The HYVs also necessitated the purchase of fertilisers and pesticides. The consequent high yields were often being sold in the market. Thus in this region the major impetus to commercial production came in the 1970s. But the change in the other productive forces came in the early 1980s when tractors entered the scene in a major way. In the 1980s the purchase of tractors by all the big landowners, mostly on subsidised Bank loans transformed the technical aspect of the agriculture

drastically. Tractors replaced the bullock and the plough, not only of the landlords, but also of the small and middle peasants as tractor hire became increasingly a common practice. Tractors came to be used not only at the time of ploughing (on piece rate contract) but also for threshing and winnowing purposes. This process of tractorization benefited the tractor-owning landlords to a large extent.

The dominant Reddy caste landlords have all purchased tractors and modernised their farms so as to keep them in tune with the intensification of cultivation that is associated with the commercial paddy production. The tractorization in turn helped them make their own agriculture productive and efficient and also helped them earn cash-incomes in the form of tractor-hire; but not all landlords succeeded in doing this. In these villages of irrigated region the landlords are from of Brahmin, Reddy and Velama castes. The Brahmin and Velama caste landlords, who could not do the above, declined and their holdings dwindled; therewith their socio-political influence.

Agrarian Change: Polarization and Persistence

Has agrarian change led to polarization of agrarian classes? Have the small and middle peasantry disappeared? How has the landlords' power in local politics affected during 1960-1996? Has there been qualitative change in agrarian relations? Though the assured canal irrigation made the landlords' economic position stronger, one caveat is necessary here. Only those dominant caste landlords, who have adapted themselves to the changed agro-economic and agronomic situation, have kept up their position intact. Those who have not, declined. The successful landlords had to be efficient on both fronts: in managing production relations on farms as well as exchange relations with the urban market. Certainly Reddy caste landlords who have strong caste solidarity within and across villages succeeded most in the process. Supra-village contacts helped them socially, economically and politically.

Production relations too have changed. Casual labour is predominant and preferred most by landlords. There is *jeetham* labour i.e., annual farm servant labour, but it too cannot be called a labour-tying practice. No *Jeetha* stays put to a landlord for more than a year. But despite the *Jeetham* labour, how are the general agricultural production relations? The production relations are capitalistic at the economic plane i.e., at the work place, on the farms and while hiring labour etc. but at the level of the general social relations, in terms of rigid caste hierarchy and in the space of everyday social relations, there are strong elements of traditional social and political power. The landlords in irrigated region are accumulating capital and re-investing it. They are reinvesting in agriculture, in terms of buying tractors and related in puts, and more than that they are investing the capital made out of agriculture in urban businesses, such as private finance companies, real estate businesses and trading activity. The landlord class also does not face problems because of social reasons such as heavy dowries during marriages; owing to the rise in land prices. The only process, which affected the landlords negatively and led to the deconcentration of landholdings, is the process of family partitioning. It is because of family partitioning that we cannot find land concentration at a scale that it existed around 1960.

The two village studies that we provide below of Yadpalle and Gudur show that both the processes – persistence of the middle, small peasantry – and the increasing polarisation between classes – are taking place. The middle and small peasantry, which comes mostly

from backward castes, has not sold out its lands to the big landlords and disappeared. On the other hand the small and middle peasantry too has benefited from the two processes a) the deconcentration of big land holdings – a process whereby landlords of some castes e.g. Brahmin and Velama landlords in Gudur, sold their land to backward castes; and b) from the process of irrigation.

But along with this process, polarisation too took place; polarisation in the sense that the landlords have not expanded the land under their control, but have increased the capital intensity of their farms. It is in that sense that the economic inequality between different classes has increased. In the following the village studies provided illustrate the qualitative change; the quantitative survey that we conducted in the *same* villages also corroborates the main arguments of the paper. Below we first discuss the results of primary statistical survey of the same two villages and then turn to qualitative studies.

Primary Statistical Survey

To have a quantitative idea of the scenario of agrarian change, a primary survey was conducted in the same villages where more qualitative, anthropological studies were conducted. A proportionate stratified random sample of fifty households in each of the two villages Yadpalle and Gudur was taken. The sample comprised of five identified major agrarian classes: marginal peasants, small peasants, middle peasants, rich peasants and landlords. The criterion for defining classes was ownership of land; we did this being well aware that the acreage –definition of agrarian classes is controversial³; we believe that extent of ownership of land is to a large measure valid indicator of class position of the households, particularly in the irrigated areas. The World Agricultural Census (WAC), basing on whose data the sample was prepared, also provides data in acreage terms and the sample used herein is based in the 1995-96 data of WAC for the region under study. The primary survey provides data on the above mentioned aspects for four decadal points(1960,1970,1980,1990) covering the period 1960 to 1990, whereas the qualitative accounts provide information of agrarian change up to 1996. Despite these variations both quantitative and qualitative accounts are supportive of each other.

While discussing the caste status of classes, which is discussed below, we classified the different castes and sub castes into three categories: the Scheduled Castes, the backward castes, and ‘other’ or upper castes. In the following we present the discussion of survey results under four sub-headings, namely: i) Land ownership pattern among different peasant classes; ii) Percentage distribution of land among different peasant classes; iii) The average size of land holding among different peasant classes and lastly, but most importantly, iv)The caste composition of different classes;

i) Land ownership Pattern Among different peasant classes

In the two villages discussed below the statistical data we gathered through primary survey shows different and mixed trends. Land ownership pattern presented in Table -1 for five different classes shows that marginal peasants in the irrigated region (39 sample households) owned and controlled 24.9 acres in 1960; whereas in 1990 the land they controlled was about 25.70 acres. This was only an increase of about 0.8 acres. Small peasants (40 sample households) held about 77.7 acres in 1960. In1990 they held and controlled about 67.32 acres. This is a drop of 10.37 acres. The small peasants have in

fact between 1960 and 1990 lost some of their land. Middle peasants (11 sample households) in the irrigated region owned and controlled land of about 30.78 acres in 1960. In 1990 they held land of about 39.94 acres. This is a gain by middle peasants of about 9.16 acres. Rich peasants in the irrigated region (6 sample households) owned and controlled 113.52 acres in 1960; whereas in 1990 they controlled only 58.50 acres. Here is a drop of about 55.02 acres of land ownership. Landlords in the irrigated region (4 sample households) controlled 84 acres in 1960; whereas in 1990 they controlled about 94 acres. This is a gain of about 10 acres. Landlords have obviously gained during the period, 1960-1990⁴.

Table: 1

Land ownership pattern among different peasant classes over the period 1960-1990

Peasant classes	Land owned				No. of House holds
	1960	1970	1980	1990	
Marginal peasants	24.9	18.7	29.82	25.70	39
Small Peasants	77.7	65.91	54.48	67.32	40
Middle Peasants	30.78	52.77	32.14	39.94	11
Rich Peasants	113.52	80.47	56.5	58.50	6
Land Lord	84	74	84	94.00	4
Total	330.9	291.85	256.94	285.46	100

Source: Primary Survey.

ii) Percentage distribution of land among different peasant classes

Percentage distribution of land between different peasant classes within the sample as presented in the Table -2 shows that the marginal peasants have increased their share of land from 7.52 percent in 1960 to 9.00 percent in 1990. However this is not a steady increase and there are ups and downs over time. In 1980 for example the marginal holdings were about 11.60 percent and they have between 1980 and 1990 decreased: from about 11.60 percent in 1980 to 9.00 percent in 1990. There is not much change in the percentage of land owned by small peasants in the irrigated region. Small peasants owned about 23.50 percent in 1960; where as in 1990 they held about 23.60 percent. This is an increase of about 0.10 percent. The middle peasants in the irrigated region have fared better than small and marginal peasants. In 1960 the middle peasants owned land of about 9.30 percent; in 1990 this has increased to 14 percent.

The rich peasants of the irrigated region however have shown a trend different from that of middle peasants. In 1960 the rich peasants held land of about 34.30 percent. In 1990 this has decreased to 20.50 percent. The landlords however have increased their land

ownership between 1960 and 1990. They held about 25.38 percent in 1960. In 1990 this was about 32.90 percent. That means there is an increase in land ownership by landlords, particularly in the irrigated region. The situation becomes clearer when we look at the average size of the holding among the peasant classes.

Table: 2:Percentage of distribution of land between various peasant classes over the period 1960-1990

Peasant Classes	1960	1970	1980	1990
Marginal Peasants	7.52	6.40	11.60	9.00
Small Peasants	23.50	22.60	22.20	23.60
Middle Peasants	9.30	18.08	12.53	14.00
Rich Peasants	34.30	27.57	21.98	20.50
Land Lords	25.38	25.35	32.69	32.90
Total	100	100	100	100

Source: Primary survey.

iii) Average Size of Holding among different Peasant Classes

The average size of holding among five peasant classes provided in Table -3 shows that the average size of the holding among the marginal peasants of this irrigated region has increased from 0.63 acres in 1960 to 0.65 acres in 1990. This increase is too small to call it an increase indeed. The middle peasant holdings show a different trend in the irrigated region. The average size of holding among middle peasants was 2.79 acres in 1960 and it has increased to 3.63 acres in 1990. This surely is an indicator of increase in land ownership among middle peasants. Rich peasant holdings in the irrigated region, according to the data we have, have as indicated above decreased. The decrease is from 18.92 acres in 1960 to 9.75 acres in 1990. This was drastic indeed. Interestingly the average size of the holding has not decreased among the landlords of the irrigated region. In fact it shows an increase from 21 acres in 1960 to 23.50 in 1990. The average size of the holding among the small peasants has however seen a decline from about 1.94 acres in 1960 to 1.68 acres in 1990.

Table: 3:Average size of the holding among the different size classes over the period 1960-90

Peasant Classes	Average size of the land holding in acres			
	1960	1970	1980	1990
Marginal Peasant	0.63	0.47	0.76	0.65
Small Peasant	1.94	1.64	1.36	1.68
Middle Peasant	2.79	4.79	2.92	3.63
Rich Peasant	18.92	13.41	9.41	9.75

Land Lord	21.00	18.50	21.00	23.50
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Source: Primary survey.

iv) Class/ Caste composition among different Peasant Classes

Our survey results also provide information about caste/class relationship. In this region, among the marginal peasants interviewed i.e., out of 39 households, nine of them belonged to scheduled caste and a bulk i.e., 30 of them belonged to backward caste grouping. In the small peasant class of irrigated region, out of 40 sample house holds, five are in scheduled caste grouping and again a bulk, i.e., 34 of them are in the backward caste grouping; and there is only one small peasant house hold which belonged to the 'other' or upper castes. In the middle peasant class in the irrigated region, out of 11 sample households, none belongs to Scheduled Castes and nine belonged to backward castes and two belong to upper castes. In the rich peasant class in the irrigated region, out of six sample house holds, none belong to Scheduled Castes and three, (i.e., exactly 50percent) belong to backward castes and another three, i.e., the rest of the 50percent belong to the upper castes. Among the landlord class households, four of the sample households, all of them belong to the upper castes. The landlord class in this region is 100 percent upper caste. The data pertaining to the region shows that there is cent percent association between caste and class at the upper end of the class spectrum: i.e., vis-à-vis the landlords. But vis-à-vis the lower end of the class spectrum one finds a mix of Scheduled as well as backward castes. But it is also true that the presence of upper castes among marginal peasants is zero.

Table: 4:Class/Caste composition in the sample (No. of HHs)

Peasant Class	Scheduled Caste		Backward Caste (classes)		Other Castes (Forward Castes)		Total Households
	Households	%	Households	%	Households	%	
Marginal Peasants	9	23	30	77	0	0	39
Small Peasants	5	12.5	34	85	1	2.5	40

Middle Peasants	0	0	9	81.81	2	18.19	11
Rich Peasants	0	0	3	50	3	50	6
Land Lords	0	0	0	0	4	100	4
Total	14		76		10		100

Source: Primary survey.

The trends brought out through primary survey are mixed but the major contention that we attempt to make in this article, that there is a strengthening of landlords and at the same time persistence of small and middle peasantry is also evident in the two case studies of Yadpalle and Gudur that follow.

Case Study-I: Yadpalle

The village Yadpalle belonged to *Diwani* or *Khalsa* system of land tenure during the Nizam rule⁵. The *Diwani* or *Khalsa* system resembled the *Raiyatwari* system of British Raj. It is not clearly known as to what was the agrarian structure of the village during the Nizam period. But oral historical accounts of the peasants from the village inform us two things. One, there was considerable land concentration in the control of a handful families; who were mainly Reddys. Two, these Reddys and the other castes of the village owned allegiance to a distant *dora* of a village, namely Babusahebpur. Oral accounts inform us that the Reddy *deshmukh* of Babusahebpur had lands ranging from 50 to 300 acres-in nearly sixty villages. This *deshmukh* also exacted *vetti* from the service castes and Scheduled Castes on occasions such as marriages, deaths/funerals in landlord families etc., Babusahebpur *deshmukh* also had lands in Yadpalle of about sixty five acres. But he as a *dora* did not have his personal presence; and this made some difference. In the absence of the *dora* it was the local land owning families, which held the control of the village affairs. The *patwari*, *malipatel* and *policepatel posts*⁶ were in the hands of the local Reddy families. Besides, during Nizam period, land ownership was also concentrated in the hands of Reddy families. It appears that between 1900 to as late as 1950 two Reddy families had holdings of about 400 and 250 acres each. Besides these, there were eleven Reddy families in the village with holdings larger than 100 acres.

There are two points to consider here. Firstly, overtime there was a tendency for these large holdings to get divided during family partitions. Secondly, there was a tendency also for some of these holdings to grow in size. This resulted, *inter alia*, from the particular practices of these land-owning families, such as lending in kind (i.e., grain). This system is known as *naagu* system through which grain was lent out on the basis of compound interest in grain⁷. Often grain-surplus landlords lent out grain to marginal and small peasants on *naagu* basis and as oral historical accounts inform us many small and marginal peasants ended up by losing their land to the Reddy landlords in their inability to pay back in grain the *naagu* interest.

All in all, by 1960, two families had land in excess of 200 acres and eleven families had land around 100 acres. All these were Reddy caste families. Besides these there were holdings between three to twenty acres held by many backward caste families. Of the total village cultivated land of 2250 acres, by 1960, around 1500 acres was in the hands of thirteen Reddy families. Rest of the 750 acres of land was divided up among backward

caste families of middle, small and marginal peasants. Although family partitioning led to some dilution of land concentration the above was the situation obtaining in 1960.

The crops that were grown prior to the near total shift to rice farming following the advent of canal irrigation were: millets, pulses, groundnut and castor. It is the construction of Nagarjuna Sagar Dam on Krishna River that changed the entire scenario.

Canal Water and Commercialization

Canal water came to Yadpalle village in 1967. The entire mandal Miryalguda and twenty-four villages in it came under Nagarjuna Sagar Dam canal irrigation. The region *in toto* shifted to rice mono cropping. All the erstwhile-unirrigated land came under irrigation for at least one crop. The second crop was cultivated most often but was dependent on the extent of rains in any particular year and the release of waters for second crop from NSP dam. There is no shift to triple cropping of rice in this area. The advent of water and assured irrigation led to dramatic change in three aspects: a) commercialization b) tractorization and c) increasing labour demand.

Commercialization of production took place with only one crop, i.e., rice/paddy. Paddy was earlier grown in this region as part-subsistence and part-commercial crop. Assured irrigation now turned paddy into a major marketable crop for all classes of landowners.. The coming of Borlaug package and HYV seeds in mid-1970s boosted this activity. Market increasingly penetrated the production process with seeds, fertilisers and pesticides being regularly bought from the urban market and produce being sold in the same urban market. Most interesting change came about in the land market. Irrigation brought in major impetus to land prices⁸. Before 1967 in this village the price per acre of land was between Rupees 60-100 depending on the soil, location, fertility etc., in early Seventies the prices jumped to between Rupees 3,000 to 4,000 per acre. By 1980 the land price per acre was on average Rupees 1, 00,000. And by 1996 the price per acre of land was around 1, 50,000 Rupees. This is quite high by local and regional standards.

It is not only the prices of land but also the availability of land, which became crucial. As land became valuable no one wanted to part with it; and as land for sale is scarce the prices went up. The dominant landowners have realised this and have taken care to safeguard their economic viability; with the increasing intensification of productive activity most of them shifted from bullock ploughs to tractors. Tractorization strengthened their position in turn.

There were two tractors in the 1970 in the village. These were owned by, and catered to, the lands of the two big landlords who owned more than 200 acres of land. In 1970s tractors took no part in the harvesting of paddy. But situation changed by 1980. Eleven other landlord families who owned large holdings also acquired tractors. The purchase of these was financed as loans mostly by the ADB (Agricultural Development Bank) branch of the SBI (State Bank of India) on easy half yearly instalments. By 1980s the nature of agricultural activity too changed. Harvesting of paddy increasingly became dependent on tractors. Particularly the threshing, winnowing and transporting activity became increasingly mechanized and the entire village used tractors. Tractors came to be used even by the middle, small and marginal peasants. These above activities were added to the ploughing activity of the tractors; and the tractors of landlords were not only used for

working on their own farms but were also hired out on regular basis. Thus tractors not only helped make their agriculture more efficient and productive but also brought in cash incomes. Thus by 1990 the number of tractors was close to thirty. Some backward caste rich peasants too bought tractors on Bank loans. In 1996 tractors owned by backward caste rich and middle peasants were about seven.

Agrarian Change and Local Elites

The dominant Reddy families in the village Yadpalle have benefited from the process of change unleashed by canal irrigation. During the period 1960-1996 they have moved from rain dependent subsistence agriculture to intensive, market oriented commercial agriculture. The *patels* as they are traditionally known have also shown remarkable adaptability to intensification of production and commercialization. The only process, which affected them negatively was family partitioning. From thirteen dominant families they have increased to thirty-two families. In 1996 only two of these families held land holdings nearer to 100 acres; thirty of them held landholdings between twenty to forty five acres.

The dominant *patel* families have tractorized their farms, commercialized production and of late also started spreading their interests into urban businesses. Though it should be mentioned that the spread into trade, merchandize and tertiary activity, such as private finance companies, is relatively new, point is that the *patels* of Yadpalle are spreading into these sectors not by disposing their lands but on the profits made on them.

More importantly it should be mentioned that the landlord class transformed itself from a backward land owning class dependent on relatively unprofitable crops such as castor, millets, pulses and groundnut to a modern landlord class which double crops paddy, markets most of the produce and reinvests surplus either in urban properties, businesses or in luxury consumption.⁹ In production relations too the Reddy landlords increasingly make use of either casual labourers or they make use of *Jeetham* labour i.e., annual farm servants. And in peak agricultural seasons, such as those of transplanting and harvesting, they almost as a rule depend on migrant labour. The wage for male casual worker per day in 1996 was Rupees forty. The female wage for casual labour was around Rupees twenty-five. The annual contract wage for *Jeethas* increased from about Rupees 4000 per annum in 1980 to Rupees 7,000 per annum in 1995. The *Jeethas* were also offered a loan worth Rupees 2000 to 5000 (depending on demand) free of interest; and some of the landlords did charge two percent interest per annum. It may be noted here that no obligation is there on the *Jeetha* to stick to the same landlord after each year. In this arrangement there is, without any doubt, *debt relation*, but *no debt bondage*. It is important to mention here the point that the *patels* have, between 1960-96, combined the traditional social power of being dominant caste with modern economic power. A brief look at the village politics confirms this.

In the 1959 village gram Panchayat elections, a local communist party leader was elected. The CPI (which was till then united) was only shortly emerging from the Telengana armed struggle. But from 1964 to 1990 the local Reddy landlords ruled the village with complete dominance. Because in the Gram Panchayat elections during the entire period 1964-1990 Yadpalle Reddys used their caste and money power as freely as possible to get their caste members elected. Every time they used liquor, and money to win over the

voters in elections; besides this, as we see below, there are also other important aspects of the economy of the village.

From Sharecropping to Tenancy

There was tenancy in the Yadpalle village right from the 70s onwards. But initially till early 80s it was in the form of sharecropping.¹⁰ In this system tenants used to cultivate about 150 acres of land in the village. The landowners who rented out their lands on sharecropping basis were mainly the Reddy landowners. But gradually by 80s, particularly by mid-80s, the system changed and landowners started preferring fixed-rents in grain. The shift worked in favour of the landlords because under fixed-rent arrangement landlords have no risk of investing in the fertilisers and pesticides. Besides the landowners had also not to bother themselves with the general crop situation, yields and crop outcome, which may change owing to other contingent factors. The landlords collect the fixed amount of grain at the end of the harvest irrespective any kind of contingencies in cultivation. The grain rent per acre/per crop season was about six to seven bags of paddy in 1985, and till 1988. By 1996 the rent went up to twelve to thirteen bags of paddy per acre/per crop. When calculated in cash terms the tenant pays rent in grain (i.e., twelve bags of grain) worth Rupees 3,600 per acre/ per season according to current grain prices. The landlords presently are aware of this and increasingly are also pressing for fixed-rents in cash, instead of grain rents. Mostly it is the big landlords who rent out their lands. And mostly it is in this village the toddy tapper caste peasantry, which rents in land. The toddy tapper peasants have a regular supplementary income from sale of *toddy* (local liquor tapped from *toddy* trees), which provides them with some sort of financial cushion. The rented holdings were generally from about two acres to five acres. Occasionally they were even up to ten acres. Thus during the period 1960 to 1996 the change was as below:

Figure: 1. Changes in tenancy in Yadpalle (1960-96)

Sharecropping —————▶ Fixed-rent in grain —————▶ Fixed-rent in cash.

This is the general tendency in tenancy. The trend towards fixed-rent in cash on paddy crop has only just begun and it for sure appeared to be the future form. At the time of field work the predominant form of payment was payment in grain only. A look at the tenancy flows shows that it is not only the small and marginal peasants who rent in land from big landowners; it is also some of the big landowners who rent in land from other big landowners. This happens mainly because it relieves the renting out big landlords from the task of personal cultivation and enables them to spare their time for urban businesses, politics and employment. Thus the tenancy flows are three fold as are presented below.

Figure 2: Tenancy flows in Yadpalle

Rents out

Rent in

- | | | |
|--|---|--|
| a) Big Reddy landowners
(Above ten acres of holdings) | → | Small backward caste
peasantry (Below ten acres
of holdings) |
| b) Big Reddy landowners | → | Big Reddy landowners |
| c) Small backward caste
peasants | → | Small backward caste
peasants |

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It is interesting that there was no renting in of land by big landlords from small peasants owners. This process of reverse flow was also unlikely to emerge as there was enormous competition for land among the small and middle backward caste peasantry, which, indeed was resulting in regular upward revision of rents.

The above shifts in tenancy mean increasing security for the landowner and increased insecurity and vulnerability for the tenant. No tenancy agreement is a written or registered agreement and there is no legal security of any sort. All the arrangements are on the basis of oral agreements. Thus eviction of tenants was not much problem. But the point is that neither the tenant nor the landowner wants to do away with the agreement. The situation is that the tenant holds on to the plot in the face of cumulative disadvantages and insecurities and landowner maintains the relation because he is able to avoid those disadvantages and insecurities. This was in spite of the fact that the region is irrigated and water supply is assured. In the village totally about 350 acres of land was under tenancy agreements in 1996. We now turn to the situation of migrant labour.

Migrant Labour

The canal irrigation enhanced labour demand tremendously. Before the advent of canal irrigation local labour sufficed the local demand. But rice double cropping and intensification of agricultural practices has made local labour inadequate for the local demand. Consequently migrant labour started pouring in. Every year around 500 labourers come to Yadpalle village during transplanting and harvesting seasons. If only one crop, i.e., if in rainy season alone, is cultivated they come twice. But if two crops are cultivated in two seasons of an agricultural year the migrant labour comes four times. The migrant labour is coming to the village since 1970 whence major shift to irrigated farming began. In 1996 one landlord proudly told this author that he is employing migrant labour for past twenty-four years. And that he is getting the migrant-labour through the same 'mestri' or middleman.

Migrant labour comes to the Miryalguda canal irrigated region from the adjacent drought prone Mandals of the Nalgonda district. Chronic drought and consequent lack of employment drives the labour of nearby Mandals such as Devarakonda, Chandur, Nakrekal and Motkur to work in the villages of entire Miryalguda mandal. Generally a 'mestri' from the drought prone villages first visits canal irrigated region villages and establishes a contract with the landowners of the irrigated villages. Then he goes back and brings in the labour. Migrant labourers generally come along with their families. They are given the cattle sheds of the landlords to stay.

The payment for the migrant labour is done on piece rate basis. It is according to the contract, which the 'mestri' strikes with the landowner. The earnings of a male labourer in 1996 were about ten to twenty kilograms of paddy each day. His earning varied from ten to twenty kilograms because the migrant labourer not only works in the day but also works during harvesting in the nights. Generally in cash terms what a male labourer earned per day worked out to Rupees forty to Rupees seventy per a twenty- four- hour day. Female labourers earn about half of that. But as a rule almost all the times the migrant labourers are paid in grain rather than in cash. Usually in each season the migrant labourers stay from about forty days to two months. Unlike what one predicted there was not much of 'mestri' exploitation. Often the 'mestri' is one among them and one who works with them.

Earlier, i.e., till mid-80s migrant labour used to come only from the relatively less developed areas of the Nalgonda district but since mid-80s the labour also comes increasingly from some districts of 'Andhra' region such as Prakasham and Guntur. They are also adjacent to Miryalguda as the entire irrigated region is the border region of the Nalgonda district with coastal Andhra districts. Most labourers who come are either Dalits or Dalit-Christians. Thus the intensification of production, double cropping and extension of production in terms of cultivation of grazing lands has created large demand for labour. This has happened in spite of tractors and their labour saving use.

Agrarian Change and Local Politics

As we mentioned earlier by 1996 the Reddy landlords of the village have to a great extent consolidated their position economically and politically. Socially also they have not been challenged by lower castes or lower rungs of peasantry. The state intervention also strengthened their position economically: firstly, in terms of canal irrigation and secondly, in terms of loans and subsidies for tractorization. NABARD (National Bank of Agricultural and Rural Development) guidelines to local ADBs (Agricultural Development Banks) clearly stipulate that either twenty-five acres of single-crop land or twelve acres of double-cropped land should be provided as guaranty for loans to purchase tractors. Obviously it is the Reddys in this village, who had such lands and they have utilized the facility. By 1995 of 2,250 acres of canal irrigated land in the village nearly fifty five percent of the land was in the hands of Reddy landlords. Many have by passed land ceiling act through paper partitions. The total land owned by backward castes i.e. toddy tappers, yadavas etc. was to the tune of forty percent land. The rest of five percent land was owned by Scheduled Castes and Tribes; politically too, as mentioned earlier, Reddy landowners have ruled the roost till 1990.

But there was change in 1995. In June 1995 gram Panchayat elections the village Sarpanch seat was reserved for backward caste woman candidate; and the MPTC membership seat was reserved for Scheduled Caste candidate. With this it was inevitable that leadership changes hands from Reddys to backward castes and Scheduled Castes. But the change was not dramatic. The local Reddy *patels*, who by 1995 were divided along party lines between Congress and Telugu Desam Party (TDP), have put up for contests the candidates that are pliant to them. TDP *patels* have put up a Yadava woman for Sarpanch candidate and Congress *patels* have put up a toddy tapper caste woman. The TDP Yadava caste woman won the election with the support of the branch of the CPI

(M) in the village. At the time of this study TDP and CPI (M) worked in an alliance of National Front.

Case Study –II: Gudur

The Village Gudur under Nizam rule belonged to the *Jagirdari* system. It was under a Velama caste *deshmukh*. The *deshmukh* controlled considerable land in the village. Out of 2411 acres of total land¹¹ of the village from 1900 to as late as 1940, the *deshmukh* family had about 400 acres of land in its control. Besides the Velama *dora*, there were other land owning families in the village. These were three Brahmin *karanam* households, which also held the *Vatans*. One *karanam* was *patwari* of the village and another *karanam* was *malipatel*. The *kotwal* or *police patel* post was in the hands of the Reddys. The Brahmin *karanam* families controlled around 500 acres. The Reddy patels held land to the tune of 1000 acres. These Reddy families were more numerous (around thirty) and each had around twenty to forty acres of land. Reddy families were settled in a separate hamlet of the village, in which they live till today. The rest of the land (around 500 acres) was owned by the backward castes such as *yadavas*, toddy tappers etc. in the form of small and marginal holdings. The situation obtaining in 1960 was however somewhat different. Because in this village the Telengana armed struggle (1945-51) did make a dent on the agrarian structure. Clashes and violence over land control took place in this village. Some land was distributed among lower caste small and marginal peasants. Particularly around 200 acres of land of the Velama *dora* was distributed. One *karanam* Brahmin was shot dead. The excess grain in the granaries of the Velama *dora* was distributed. By 1960, all in all, the Velama landlord had about 200 acres of land of which was later partly sold to the Nizam Sugar Factory (110 acres) established nearby in the late seventies and remaining partitioned among the three sons. Brahmin *Karnams* held around 300 acres and Reddys held on to their 1000 odd acres. Thus by 1960 out of 2411 acres of total land around 1500 acres was in the hands of: the Velamas (200), Brahmins (300) and Reddys (1000). These formed around thirty five families; while the remaining 910 acres was owned by the rest of the village, i.e., mostly backward castes. Scheduled Castes were only marginal landholders and basically agricultural labourers.

Canal water and commercialization

The canal water came to this village in 1967. With the coming of the NSP water entire village shifted to rice mono cropping. The village tank came to be filled by the NSP water and the land under it was cultivated for two crops (551 acres). The rest of the 1900 acres is cultivated certainly for one crop and the second crop depends on the extent of rains and release of waters from the NSP. In the absence of canal water for the second crop the villagers switch over to pulses.

Much like in the earlier study, in this village too irrigation brought about changes in three important aspects: a) general commercialization, b) tractorization and c) increasing labour demand. Of this first we deal with the commercialization and tractorization aspects.

Following the pattern in the entire irrigated region in this village too commercialization took place basically with paddy. Irrigation turned paddy into a major marketable crop. All classes of cultivators took to producing paddy for market. While water came in 1967,

the HYV seeds arrived in 1970s. These improved productivity and yield almost doubled. But with these the intensity of agricultural operations too increased. The cultivators needed first to invest in fertilizers, seeds and pesticides; then the cultivation of HYV crops required more agronomic care, such as weeding more often, guarding against new pests, intensive monitoring of crop etc., than was needed earlier. The yield depended on all these factors. Some of these aspects are important because even in an iniquitously distributed land situation not all landlords – not of all castes – emerged successful from intensified, more rigorous commercialised agriculture; the commercialization process involved two important aspects a) more intensive care and management of agriculture and b) more intensive interaction with the urban market. Only those who could perform both the tasks efficiently survived the vagaries of the market quite irrespective of how much land they owned. In this village it is basically the Reddy caste landowners who showed the capacity to manage both farms as well as markets. The Velama and the Brahmin *karanam* landlords failed in this and consequently overtime they had to dispose much of their land.

The Reddy landlords tractorized their farms early. They brought tractors for two purposes: a) for using them on their own farms and b) for hiring out. By 1980s the availability of tractors in big number- around twenty five – transformed the entire agricultural scenario of the village. Not only the peasants who owned bigger holdings hired tractors on their farms but also even small peasants owning less than an acre used tractors for ploughing. Tractors replaced the bullock, bullock cart and the plough in more than one way. The number of tractors in the village in 1996 was thirty-nine. Of these the tractors owned by the Reddy patels were thirty-three. One Muslim peasant owned one tractor and rest of the five were owned by backward caste peasants.

Another aspect of commercialization, which affected the village economy, was the land market. The price of land increased much in the same way as in Yadpalle¹². In 1960s the price per acre of land was around Rupees fifty to Rupees eighty. In this 1970s, after the advent of irrigation, the price was around Rupees 2000 to Rupees 3000; in the early eighties the price per acre was Rupees 65,000. By 1990 the price per acre went up to Rupees 1, 00,000 and in 1996 it was around Rupees 1, 50,000. But what is interesting is that in spite of the rise in the monetary value of the land not all landlords succeeded in keeping it under their control adapting to the changed agro-economic and agronomic situation.

Agrarian Change and Local Elites

As mentioned in the earlier section this village had three types of dominant land owning families. Between 1960 and 1990 these have fared disparately. The Velama *doras* have sold around 110 acres of land to the Nizam Sugar Factory in the late seventies and monetarily benefited from it. They did not invest the money in agriculture but they transferred it to urban pursuits. The remaining land around a hundred acres was partitioned among the three sons of Velama *dora's* family and overtime they too disposed it. Presently the Velama *dora's* family holds about twenty-five acres. Their socio-

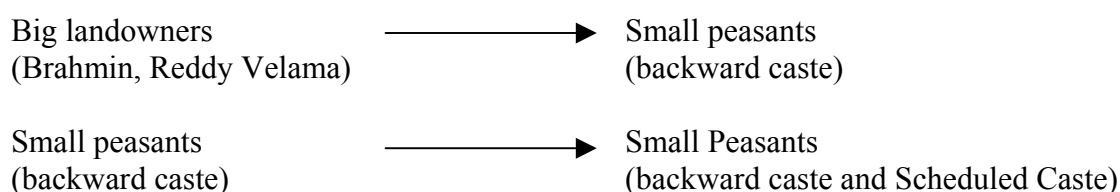
political influence too declined owing to economic down slide, political unimportance and social challenges from below.

The *karanam* families could have strengthened their economic position during the period 1960 to 1996 but they too have sold much of their land to backward castes and to new settlers from 'Andhra' (i.e., coastal Andhra) districts of Guntur and Krishna¹³. The latter, who are generally more rigorous at farming practices, came to the region anticipating Krishna water to this region. Thus the *karanam* families too lost much of their lands. Presently the three *karanam* families together own around thirty-five acres. The process of decline among *karanam* families took place because of dowries during marriages and because of general wasteful consumption patterns. Even though at present the village revenue officer is a descendent of the *karanam* family he does not command much social and political power or influence.¹⁴

Tenancy Situation

Tenancy is an important aspect to agricultural economy in this village too. In the entire irrigated region tenancy in terms of fixed rent (per season/per crop) in grain came into existence in late seventies; prior to that the prevailing practice was sharecropping. The sharecropping practice was same as described in the case of Yadpalle. The shifts in tenancy too are similar. Though assured irrigation certainly reduced the possibility of total crop failure, the ensuing process of commercialization made agriculture vulnerable to market fluctuations. The landlords who wanted to spend their time on non-agricultural pursuits (and thereby are unable to conduct intensive personal cultivation) increasingly shifted to renting out land for fixed rent in grain. In this village generally the tenancy flows are from:

Figure 2: Tenancy flows in Yadpalle



As mentioned earlier, fixed-rent tenancy allows landlords, particularly Reddy caste landlords in this case, to spare their time for urban jobs, businesses and also politics. The Reddy landlords of this village are very active in the provincial and Mandal level politics and the wherewithal and time for the politics comes from their tenanted peasantry. The land rents in the early eighties were about five bags of paddy per acre/per season. It was about eight bags of paddy (per acre/per season) in late eighties. In 1996 the rents were about ten to twelve bags of paddy (per season/per acre) depending on the soil, location etc of particular plot of land. For second crop generally the tenants pay one to two bags less. There doesn't seem to be much trend toward fixed-cash rents in this village; but if that is the tendency in nearby villages there is no reason why it will not appear in this village also.

Generally the tenants, who are mostly from backward castes, reported losses. The holdings they cultivate are integrated completely into the market and therefore are vulnerable to a large extent to its fluctuations. They have to hire tractors for ploughing and for much work at the time of harvesting, from the same landlords who rented out lands. Besides these, small and marginal peasants also have to buy all the farm inputs – seeds, fertilisers, weedicides and pesticides – in the market. The prices for the finished product (i.e., paddy) are generally at low ebb when they sell the product; they sell mostly at the peak seasons, i.e., immediately after the harvest, and cannot afford to store the grain and wait till the prices climb up. Owing to these reasons many of the tenants interviewed complained that the only benefit they have is the straw, which they get after the harvesting and which is useful for maintaining a few milch animals and covering the roofs of their thatched huts. But it is necessary here to remind us that the majority of landlords still cultivate their farms on their own; and tenancy, despite being a conspicuous feature, is not an overwhelming one. The total tenanted land in the village was only 300 acres. Now we turn to the increase in labour demand.

Migrant Labour

We mentioned in the section on commercialization that one of its features was the increase in labour demand. With the switch over to rice mono cropping the demand for labour too increased. The local agricultural labour, consisting basically of Scheduled Caste labourers (also to some extent backward caste labour) fell short of the demand. Consequently migrant labour poured in. In this village around 500 to 600 migrant labourers come every year. They come four times if paddy is double cropped and two times if only single crop is cultivated. The migrant labour comes not only from the backward Mandals of Nalgonda district but also from the adjacent coastal Andhra districts. In this village it comes mostly from an adjacent mandal called Macharla and is known as ‘Macharla labour’. Nearly three fourths of the migrant labour comes to meet the demand of the Reddy landlords. Rest of the one fourth works for the remaining part of the village. The wage and working conditions of migrant labour are the same as they are in Yadpalle.

Local Politics

In this village politics for Gram Panchayat elections always swung from one side to the other. The dominant castes, Brahmins, Velamas and Reddys-always stood for Congress party and the backward castes to a large extent stood for the CPI (M). The earlier elections, after the initiation of Gram Panchayat, from 1959 to 1975 were won by the Reddy *patels* from the Congress Party. From 1975 onwards the CPI (M) started organising in the village. But the political arena in which the local Reddys participate is a larger one. Twice the Reddy candidates from this village have won the State Assembly elections. Thus this fact makes them within the village, a formidable force.

The CPI (M), which organised on issues of wage labour and better remunerative prices for farm produce has attracted the support of the backward castes. Interestingly, the Scheduled Castes, who form majority of the agricultural labourers, support the Congress party. In the 1995 Gram Panchayat elections the village Sarpanch seat was reserved for a

backward caste candidate. The CPI (M) candidate won the election with a thin majority. In the village everybody agrees that had the Gram Panchayat Sarpanch seat not been reserved, certainly a Reddy candidate would have won it. The local politics demonstrate two things: a) the economically strengthened dominant castes, who got strengthened owing to irrigation and consequent agrarian change, safeguard their socio-political dominance and b) even the political policy of electoral reservations can be successful only if it is backed by political mobilisation from below.

Conclusion

This article discussed the impact of irrigation on agrarian change and local politics in South Telengana, Andhra Pradesh, India with the help of two case studies and a primary statistical survey. It is argued that the process of agrarian change that followed the introduction of irrigation though strengthened sections of landlords has not led to clear cut polarization of agrarian classes. The argument was that there was escalation in economic inequality between agrarian classes, and polarization in that sense, on one hand and persistence of lower rungs of peasantry, that is facing increasing problems of survival, on the other. We have shown that the agrarian change is characterized by shifts in tenancy arrangements, influx of migrant labour and increasing penetration of market. The agrarian change has also led to the continued hold of dominant landowning castes over local politics. The state induced political change in local politics too required political mobilization from below. This article also shows that irrigation without agrarian reform can strengthen inequalities and progressive agrarian change requires both irrigation *and* agrarian reform.

[The fieldwork for this research was done during the months of May to July in 1996 and the primary statistical survey was conducted in 1998. The farmers' suicides which are occurring in the countryside at present in Telengana, and Andhra Pradesh in general, began in 1997 and fall outside the purview of this paper. I have discussed the agrarian crisis and farmers suicides in a separate paper.]

Notes

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²The argument for methodological integration between qualitative and quantitative methods is made by Martin Bulmer and Donald P. Warwick (Bulmer and Warwick: 1993).

³ The critique of acreage criterion is made by Utsa Patnaik (Patnaik: 1987).

⁴ This fact indeed strengthens the general argument in the sense that the qualitative strengthening of the power of landlords indicated by this fact is more than the amount of land transferred. Therefore the indication of land transfer to landlords does not disprove the overall argument.

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- ⁵ The three different systems of land tenure were *Diwani* or *Khalsa*, *Sarf-e.khas* and *Jagirdari* systems. Each had distinct systems of tax collection and denoted different types of land ownership rights to the peasants under them.
- ⁶ These posts were called *vatans* and the system of administration through these was called *vatandari* system. This hereditary system of village officers was subsequently abolished by the Telugu Desham Party in early eighties.
- ⁷ This information is based on interviews with peasants in the village.
- ⁸ Figures are based on interviews with peasants during village study and were crosschecked with village administrative officer and other villagers.
- ⁹ For example three of the Reddy landlords owned cars and almost all Reddy families in the village owned houses comparable to that of the urban upper middle class.
- ¹⁰ In sharecropping, in this region, the tenant bears all the burden of labouring on the farm, in addition to that he brings the seeds and sows the crop; landlord on the other hand bears the expenses of fertiliser and pesticides. After the harvest the crop is shared fifty percent each by the tenant and landlord.
- ¹¹ The figures are from village *Pahani* or revenue records and figures of land transfers are based on interviews in the village cross-checked with village revenue officials.
- ¹² The figures of changing land prices over time are collected from interviews with peasants and other villagers and were crosschecked with village revenue officials.
- ¹³ Enterprising farmers from Coastal Andhra Pradesh have settled down in many parts of Telengana wherever there are fertile soils, good water supply and profitable farming opportunities. This is the case with the other Telengana districts as well.
- ¹⁴ The socio- political influence of *vatandari* (*vatan* holding) Brahmins and Karanams declined with the abolition of those posts itself and also owing to economic decline. Partially the abolition of these posts was also a political move of Telugu Desham Party in the eighties to break the political hold of these elites in Telengana who largely supported the Congress Party.

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Author's E-mail: anilkumar@isec.ac.in