

Movement for Telangana State: A Struggle for Autonomy

The demand for a separate Telangana state goes back more than half a century and has its roots in systematic and widespread discrimination against the region by the ruling elite of Andhra Pradesh and by successive state governments.

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Over the past decade a movement for separate statehood has been going on in Telangana. The nature and the socio-economic context of the movement for statehood is not fully appreciated outside the region though it offers so many possibilities to explain different dimensions of the Indian political system.

Before 1947, Telangana was part of the Hyderabad state. The princely state of Hyderabad under the Nizam consisted of three linguistic regions: Marathi, Kannada and Telugu. Telangana—the Telugu speaking region of Hyderabad—has acquired a distinct identity and history. In 1948 the union government integrated the Nizam state into the Indian union after an armed action popularly known as the “Police Action”. Later it was further integrated with the Telugu speaking region of the Andhra region, which was a part of the Madras Presidency until 1953.

The demand to preserve the identity of the region with the creation of a separate state started immediately after independence in reaction to the treatment meted out to Hyderabad by the central government. People thought that their socio-economic conditions would improve after the integration of the region into the Indian union. But they were disappointed and disillusioned with the administration. “After Police Action, officials were brought here from the coastal districts and the districts of the then Madras Presidency, for administrative convenience”.¹ These officials displayed a condescending attitude towards the local people and treated Hyderabad as

an occupied territory. N M Jaisoorya who was a member of parliament in the early 1950s from Hyderabad noted, “People have been looted apart from being oppressed and insulted by the outside officials”. This behaviour led to an agitation against non-mulkis (outsiders) in August 1952. The agitation known popularly as the ‘mulki’ movement lasted for over one month. Students from all over the region actively participated in the movement which was suppressed by the authorities.

The 1952 agitation is significant because it shaped the attitude of the people towards the issue of state reorganisation. Though the demand for a separate Telangana state had its roots in the Mulki movement it was not articulated by the political groups until the question of state reorganisation became a reality. The States Reorganisation Commission (SRC) was constituted by the government of India in 1953.

Reorganisation of States

Aligning themselves with the students, even the Congress and socialist parties took a stand against the formation of Vishalandhra. Intense debates took place on the issue in the Congress Party. Subsequently the demand for separate Telangana gained acceptance. “Seven out of ten Congress Committees and 73 out of 105 Congress delegates were in favour of it. The state executive of the Indian National Trade Union Congress and ten members of Parliament also lent their support to the demand.”² The reasons for the opposition were listed by the SRC. “One principal cause of opposition to

Vishalandhra”, according to the SRC report, “seems to be the apprehension felt by the educationally backward people of Telangana that they may be swamped and exploited by the more advanced people of coastal areas”.³

Taking these factors into consideration the SRC felt that any safeguards to protect the interests of the Telangana in Vishalandhra may not work. The commission stated that “neither guarantees... nor constitutional devices, such as ‘Scottish devolution’ in the UK, will provide workable (models) or meet the requirements of Telangana during the transition. Any thing short of supervision by the central government over the measures intended to meet the special needs of Telangana will be found ineffective.”⁴ Therefore the commission recommended that Telangana should continue as a separate entity.

In spite of the recommendations made by the SRC report, Congress leaders from coastal Andhra continued their demand for Vishalandhra not only to satisfy the Telugu sentiments but to resolve the economic problems faced by coastal Andhra. It was felt that Vishalandhra will “solve the difficult and vexing problem of finding a permanent capital for Andhra”.⁵ Another factor was that “if independent political jurisdiction, namely, that of Telangana, can be eliminated, the formulation and implementation of plans in the eastern areas in these two great river basins (Krishna and Godavari) will be greatly expedited”.⁶ It was also felt that the “existing state of Andhra has likewise no coal, but will be able to get its supplies from Singhereni (located in the Telangana region)”.⁷ It may be noted that the commission had come to a conclusion after considering a “complete cross-section of public opinion”.⁸

The Andhra leaders not only supported Vishalandhra but also actively pursued it. To begin with they appealed to the Telangana leaders to give up the idea of a separate Telangana state. Way back in 1950 itself the Andhra Congress Committee declared

this committee (ACC Executive) is not unconscious of the undeveloped state of Telangana both economically and culturally and hasten to assure our brethren in

Telangana that it will be the special concern of future government of Vishalandhra to pay special attention to their legitimate interests and rights and their effective share in the administration of that government and to develop such progressive economic and social institution as will pave the way for the establishment of a cooperative common wealth.⁹

After his election as the first chief minister of the separate Andhra state, Bezawada Gopal Reddy repeated the same appeal. The Andhra leaders were even prepared to give written safeguards and guarantees to Telangana people.

In the beginning, the central leadership was not in favour of Vishalandhra. In October 1953, Nehru criticised the idea of Vishalandhra “as bearing a tint of ‘expansionist imperialism’ ”.¹⁰ But subsequently he changed his views due to pressures from the leaders of the Andhra region. The Andhra region was actively involved in the national movement. Hence the Congress leaders from the region had strong ties with the national leaders. They used their contacts to persuade Nehru to accept the demand for Vishalandhra. The struggle for representative government led by the Hyderabad State Congress in the erstwhile Hyderabad state remained outside the national movement. In fact the Hyderabad State Congress was not part of the Indian National Congress. Therefore the Congress leaders from Hyderabad had only tenuous contacts with the national leaders. After the central government took a firm decision to form Vishalandhra, the protagonists of the separate state could not continue their battle any further as Chenna Reddy, a staunch separatist admitted, “Nehru’s stature loomed large. It was difficult to oppose him. Now we believe that we had made a mistake. Had we insisted for a separate state, without fear, it would have emerged”.¹¹ Thus Vishalandhra was formed through manipulation with the active involvement of the central government.

Experiments with Regional Committee

Under these circumstances to placate the opposition to Vishalandhra in the Telangana region the leaders of Andhra offered certain safeguards. Through an agreement, known as the “Gentlemen’s Agreement”, certain safeguards were guaranteed to Telangana.

It promised that “for (the) Telangana there will be a regional standing committee of the state assembly belonging to that region – legislation relating to specified matters will be referred to the regional committee”.¹² The regional committee was conceived as a constitutional body to deal with matters relating to planning and development, public health, sanitation, primary and secondary education, regulation of admission to educational institutions, prohibition, sale of agricultural lands, cottage and small-scale industries, agriculture, cooperation and markets.

The regional committee failed because the region lost control over the administration. Political authority passed into the hands of the coastal elite. In the integration of Telangana with Andhra, the K V Ranga Reddy, Chenna Reddy and Burgula Ramakrishna Rao group played an important role. All these leaders of the Hyderabad State Congress were, however, completely marginalised thereafter. In the election of the new chief minister “(the) opinion of the legislators was ascertained at Kurnool and Congress factions of Telangana did not play any major role”.¹³ B Ramakrishna Rao was sent out as a governor and Chenna Reddy was not included in the ministry.

“More powerful men from the Andhra area now dominated the political scene and the Telangana leaders had to play the supporting role”.¹⁴ By the end of 1959, Sanjiva Reddy emerged as the most powerful leader of the Congress Party using the panchayat raj system to consolidate his position. Later Brahmananda Reddy followed the path laid down by his political mentor. Through the panchayat raj institutions, a network was established up to the village level.¹⁵ Similarly the elections to the party organisations too were abandoned from 1962 onwards. “A new system of distributing various organisational posts on the basis of factional strength without elections was evolved”.¹⁶ There was little scope for any independent leadership from Telangana. Most of the political leaders were surviving with the support of leaders from coastal Andhra. In this political process the regional committee could not operate as an autonomous body.

The new administrative structure created after the 1948 police action too was not well suited to implement the Gentlemen’s Agreement. Besides recruiting the non-domiciles the government rules too were flouted to favour non-locals in promotion. The process has given Andhra

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employees full control over the administrative machinery.

Political authority cannot be sustained unless social forces back it. There were distinct differences in the evolution of the socio-economic situation of both the regions. While a well-defined middle class and a strong rich peasantry emerged in the Andhra region as a consequence of the growth of irrigation, development of modern education system and social reform movements, in the Telangana region oppressive political institutions prevented any social transformation. "What have been merged are not merely two regions but two different, incompatible systems and historical experiences".¹⁷ It is against this historical context that the elite of the Andhra region could establish its hegemony over the state. The safeguards guaranteed by the Gentlemen's Agreement could not offer any protection to the Telangana region.

It was in this context that the movement for a separate state originated in 1968 led by students and employees. The central government resolved the crisis by changing

the Congress leadership. But the demands of the region remained unfulfilled.¹⁸ Subsequently, bowing to the pressures from the coastal Andhra region, the centre abolished all the safeguards guaranteed through the Gentlemen's Agreement. The regional committee provided a platform for voicing protest, not to secure justice. Even that small space to ventilate their grievances was lost.

Transfer of Resources

By establishing hegemony over the state the Andhra elite could divert resources to their region. The irrigation policies illustrate the discrimination showed towards the Telangana region. In the First Plan prepared by the erstwhile Hyderabad government, nine projects were proposed for irrigating 38 lakh acres in all of Hyderabad. Out of this the Telangana region would have got about 26 lakh acres. If the Hyderabad state were to continue, all the schemes constructed would have diverted nearly 1,000 thousand million cubic feet (tmc) of Krishna and Godavari

water to irrigate the fields in Telangana.¹⁹ But today as per the records the region gets hardly 277 tmc of water. In reality it is far less.

The process of development has been disrupted ironically by the policies pursued by successive governments of Andhra Pradesh. Irrigation was given priority by the governments in AP. An amount of Rs 18,730.35 crore was spent in the five-year plans on irrigation between 1956 and 2005. The lion's share in the public expenditure on irrigation was allocated to major and medium irrigation. These projects accounted for nearly 90 per cent of the amount spent on irrigation.²⁰ As a result of the emphasis on the major irrigation, the net area under tank irrigation in Andhra Pradesh declined from 10.68 lakh hectares to 5.67 lakh hectares between 1955-56 and 2001-02.²¹ In contrast, the net area irrigated by canals went up from 12.92 lakh hectares to 15.62 lakh hectares between 1955-56 and 2001-02, most of it in the Andhra region. The deterioration of the tank irrigation system has had an adverse affect on Telangana more than the other

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regions because tanks have been the backbone of Telangana agriculture. Nearly 66 per cent of the total irrigated area in the Telangana region in 1955-56 was under tank irrigation. Due to neglect the net area irrigated under tanks in the Telangana region has gone down from 4.47 lakh hectares to 1.26 lakh hectares between 1955-56 and 2004-05.

The loss of the area under tank irrigation has not been compensated by allocation of river waters. In fact, the benefits of major irrigation have gone to coastal Andhra. The total area under canal irrigation in the entire Telangana region is much less than the area irrigated under canals in Guntur district alone. In the absence of state investment in irrigation, farmers of the Telangana region depend on well irrigation. In Andhra Pradesh the area irrigated by wells/bore-wells has gone up from 2.84 lakh hectares to 19 lakh hectares between 1955-56 and 2004-05. As far as the Telangana region is concerned, the figures for the corresponding period are 1.16 lakh hectares and 11.24 lakh hectares. Nearly 80 per cent of the area irrigated in the Telangana region in the year 2004-05 was under wells/bore-wells.

Nearly 73 per cent of the bore-wells and dug wells sunk during 1994-95 and 2000-01 were in the Telangana region.²² Energised motors are a prerequisite to draw water from the bore-wells. Under these conditions, the dependence on electricity has increased in the Telangana districts. It is important to note that the farmers in the Telangana region have spent huge amounts to secure their own irrigation facilities. Studies have shown that in the areas irrigated by groundwater the expenditure incurred by the farmers on irrigation is very high. In the Telangana region, the surpluses in the agriculture have been siphoned off to dig wells leading to a major crisis in the agrarian economy of the region. In canal irrigation the expenditure on the irrigation is borne by the state.

Successive state governments have not taken any steps to correct the imbalances. Even under 'Jalayagnam' – the irrigation policy of the present Congress state government – the discrimination continues.²³ Twenty-six projects are contemplated under Jalayagnam to irrigate 59 lakh hectares, of which 43 lakh hectares will be in the Andhra region. Only 16 lakh hectares in Telangana will be irrigated. Almost all the projects being taken up in Telangana are lift-irrigation schemes.

Under such schemes, only drip and sprinkle irrigation is permitted according to the latest policies of the government. If these policies come into operation, farmers have to spend large amounts to buy the sprinkler systems to get the benefits of irrigation. These figures do not indicate the basic purpose of Jalayagnam. The main thrust of the programme is to construct the Polavaram and Pulichintala projects and widen the sluices of Pothireddypadu head regulatory of the Srisailem dam to divert Krishna and Godavari water to the Andhra region. If these projects are completed, Telangana will lose its share in the river water permanently.

In addition to providing irrigation the state also facilitated the green revolution in the coastal Andhra region because it is a well endowed region.²⁴ The Telangana Regional Committee voiced its protest against the government's policy way back in 1961. In its report the committee argued, "it is true that to obtain intensive results, districts with potentialities and possibilities should be selected, but from the general point of view of removing the imbalances from area to area and from district to district the backward districts should also get some consideration in such schemes".²⁵ In the green revolution pockets, inputs were supplied at subsidised rates. Thus, state investment helped the rich peasants in the coastal regions to generate surpluses in agriculture. The government has created facilities to invest these surpluses in real-estate, films, hotels, education, hospitals and the industrial sector.²⁶ The Telangana region provided land and resources for these commercial activities. Apart from exploiting the resources of Telangana for the benefit of the Andhra region, there has been a process of marginalisation of Telangana dialect and culture.

Telangana has thus been converted into an internal colony as a result of the economic development process pursued by successive governments. Its resources have been diverted and utilised for the development of other regions. The movement for separate statehood seeks to articulate the demand for a fair share in the resources. It is an outcome of injustice meted out to the region by the successive governments in Andhra Pradesh. Separation is seen as the only answer to these grievances.

Since all the political parties as well as the administrative machinery are dominated by the coastal Andhra lobbies, there is no

space for the people of the Telangana region in the political arena to articulate their grievances. In view of this situation, the movement for statehood emerged outside the political arena in the realm of civil society. It originated due to the efforts made by the middle class intellectuals and social activists. Political leaders responded to the demand only after the movement gained wide support from the people. The present phase of the movement led by various civil society groups started in 1989 and intensified from 1996 onwards. The Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) was formed only in 2001, after the movement gained strength. It has given political expression to the movement. The civil society groups are active even now without joining the TRS, thus providing sustenance to the movement.

The movement has now gained wide support among the people of Telangana. In the recent by-elections to the Karimnagar parliamentary constituency, located in the Telangana region, people voted for TRS irrespective of their political affiliations only to show that they support the demand for separate Telangana. Even in the 2004 elections people expressed unambiguous support for the Telangana demand. In response to popular demand, 30 political parties, having a strength of 299 members in Parliament, declared their support for the formation of the Telangana state. Yet, the Congress Party heading the UPA is not able to deliver a decision on the issue. The party seems to be more concerned about the support from the Andhra elite rather than the aspirations of the Telangana people. **EPW**

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Notes

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- 19 See the First Five-Year Plan of Hyderabad State.
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- 21 All the figures on the area irrigated under different sources are culled from *Compendium of Area and Land Use Statistics of Andhra Pradesh: 1955-56 to 2004-05*, Directorate of Economic and Statistics, Government of AP, Hyderabad.
- 22 See *Third Minor Irrigation Census, 2000-01 of Andhra Pradesh*, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of AP, Hyderabad.
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