

Why Telengana? Why Now?

V ANIL KUMAR

Andhra Pradesh is now a divided state. The movement for a separate state of Telengana is fast gaining momentum. The reasons for this are economic and political as well as social and cultural. In their recent writings on Telengana, both C H Hanumantha Rao (*The Hindu*, January 8, 2007) and M Kodanda Ram (*EPW*, January 13, 2007) have explicated the economic, and to some extent, political reasons for the movement for separate Telengana. I want to argue here that the reasons are as much social and cultural as they are economic and political. Both the above writers argued that there is certain “hegemony” of coastal Andhra Pradesh and Rayalaseema over Telengana. The point however is that while hegemony operates in political arena, its roots are in the social and cultural spheres. A social and cultural explanation is also needed, in addition to the above, to understand why Telengana is under the above-said hegemony. These aspects are closely linked to political “dominance” and not just hegemony of coastal Andhra and Rayalaseema over Telengana. These social and cultural aspects are the phenomena of caste politics as they are articulated through political parties and the cultural aspects are the media and the Telugu cinema. I try to elaborate them below.

The political sociology of Andhra Pradesh clearly shows that two castes dominate the parties and party politics in Andhra Pradesh, namely the reddy and kamma castes. While the reddy caste largely operates through the Congress Party, the kamma caste operates through the Telugu Desham Party (TDP). The social composition of political parties

clearly reflects this. While the reddy caste has its social roots in all three sub-regions of Andhra Pradesh that is, in coastal Andhra, Telengana and Rayalaseema, the kamma caste has its social base largely in coastal Andhra and to some extent, in Rayalaseema. Among the reddy castes again the coastal Andhra and Rayalaseema reddy castes have been far more active and dominant in political parties than the Telengana reddy castes. While the reddy castes of Rayalaseema and coastal Andhra have largely participated in politics through the Congress Party, they have also been quite opportunistic in terms of political loyalties. If another party other than Congress, would come to dominance in Andhra Pradesh politics, without any surprise one can find a lot of reddy politicians in that party. While the Telengana reddy castes have been largely marginal in these intra-caste differentiations, they have largely followed the coastal and Rayalaseema reddy castes in Andhra Pradesh politics. Another distinct social feature of this community is that while it is a dominant caste, quite clearly as described by late MNSrinivas, its dominance in local arenas is supported by its landowning and semi-feudal social and political culture. It is an important factor in both political sociology and political economy of Andhra Pradesh.

Kamma Politics

The kamma caste from coastal Andhra on the other hand has largely been led by the TDP. It would be interesting here to note that while the kamma caste sees the TDP as its “own party”, the backward castes in Telengana have also largely been supportive of TDP earlier and even now. Despite this backward caste backing,

even in the regions other than coastal Andhra, the TDP largely represents the landed, film, real estate, and industrial interests of coastal Andhra entrepreneurs. The political trajectory of coastal Andhra however is to be viewed in two distinct phases: one the NTR period and two the post-NTR period. During the NTR period, the enormous charisma of one person called NTR mattered in political mobilisation. NTR learnt his politics of turning from cinematic hero to political hero and the rhetoric of Telugu self-respect and Telugu pride from the Tamil Nadu politics, and MGR, apart from the prevailing anti-Congressism of the time. The circumstances of Indira Gandhi’s authoritarian and manipulative politics, provided the context for the emergence of a new phenomenon called NTR and the party synonymous with his name: the TDP. Interestingly and thanks to this multifaceted, and somewhat eccentric, charisma of this leader the entire Andhra Pradesh provided support to this man. The kamma caste supported this and reaped much benefits from the ascendance of TDP.

The organisational man of the TDP, Chandrababu Naidu, only strengthened this tendency and when he found his father-in-law, NTR too inconvenient for his ambitions, pulled a palace coup and got himself into power. What followed in the ensuing period under the TDP of Naidu is the centralisation of power, consolidation of the economic power of kamma caste and defrauding all the international donors that came to give money to Naidu in the name of SMART governance and participatory development and so on. But what is cultural about all this?

With the coming of NTR, the Telugu (read coastal Andhra) culture and politics got inextricably intertwined. NTR, after all, was a film idol. He rode on the waves of the popularity of a film industry that produces films more prolifically than Hollywood. Unfortunately no research exists on this field. This industry, which is thoroughly based

on coastal Andhra, privileges and showcases the culture, the dialect and the social dynamics of coastal Andhra. A few families form a cabal around which the film industry moves. They are the heroes, villains and the buffoons of the circus called Telugu cinema. Why vent our ire on this? Because routinely this culture industry, popular all over Andhra Pradesh, humiliates Telengana language, its pronunciation of Telugu, its culture and its people. This is a routine practice for this industry, which has enormous financial stakes both in itself and in politics. And this industry is largely dominated by one caste: the kamma caste. And a few families within that, including, but not only, the NTR family from where Naidu comes. Even when this industry attempts to present the Telengana reality it is in grossly distorted terms, to say the least. That is why the latent abhorrence that Telengana people have towards the kamma politics not only requires a political/

economic explanation, but also social and cultural explanation.

Finally the media – the entire Telugu media, the Telugu newspapers, the TV channels and the weekly magazines and so on – are dominated by kamma entrepreneurs or emanate largely from the coastal Andhra and particularly from Vijayawada. All the Telugu publishing houses are concentrated in Vijayawada, including the publishing houses of CPI(M) and CPI. Therefore, the dissemination of knowledge, the forming of opinions and commonsense, and the spread of canards, mind you all this involves regular humiliation of Telengana language, dialects and cultural practices. The latent revulsion that Telengana people have is to all this. The current movement for Telengana is certainly caused not only by economic and political reasons, but also by the revulsion in the social and cultural spheres. The hegemony as a term itself is full of cultural connotations. And in the

case of Telengana the present situation requires the term in its full meaning. The ongoing anger of Telengana people and the movement requires a social, political-sociological and cultural explanation as does a political economy explanation. So far the reddy politicians of Rayalaseema and the kamma political entrepreneurs of coastal Andhra have been together able to contain, deflect or suppress the movement for Telengana by making up in their ranks. This time around things may be different. ■■■

Email: anilkumar@isec.ac.in

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