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Looking back at Telangana Uprising with Special Reference to women (1946—1951)

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Abstract:*The Telangana movement (1948-51) was an armed revolt of peasants under the leadership of the Communist Party of India against oppressive landlordism patronized by the autocratic rule of the Nizam of Hyderabad. The sufferings of the peasants intensified with the onset of the Second World War, as they were subjected to increasing numbers of exploitative taxes and levies and forced to perform 'vetty' (forced labour). The poorest strata of the peasantry were affected the most, as many of them were unable to bear the increasing burden of exactions, losing their land to the village moneylenders. Men, women and children from different discontented villages were organized by the Communists into armed guerilla squads to fight exploitative landlords and armed battalions of the Nizam called 'razakars', who were increasingly deployed for crushing the movement. Parallel governments were established in about 3000 villages in the region. P.C. Joshi, the then General Secretary of the Communist Party of India, provided inspiration for the armed struggle in Telangana. He arranged for the supply of arms and ammunition to the struggling peasants. He was supported in his endeavour by many military officers who gifted weapons free of cost and arranged for their shipment.*
Keywords *: Left-wing, Peasant, Uprising, Andhra mahasabha, Telangana, Razakars etc.*

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Introduction

The peasant armed movement took place between 1946 and 1951 in the Telangana region of the former princely State of Hyderabad. It was a multilingual State of three linguistic areas namely Telangana (eight districts), Marathwada (five districts) and Karnataka (three districts). The Telangana region comprised almost half the area of the State.

The seeds of formation of Hyderabad communist party in 1940 lay in the propagation of peasant and other problems in an organized manner led by, first, the Nizam Andhra Jana Sangham and later by Nizam Andhra Maha Sabha through their publications such as Vettichakiri, Nazarana, Varthakasangham, etc., and their Ryot Sanghams. But as the responsibility for these problems lies with the ruling elite the *Mahasabha* had focused its attention on political affairs too from its 1937 session. Immediately the *Mahasabha*, hence, was not permitted to hold sessions by the Nizam's government. But, during the next year i.e. in 1938, the Hyderabad State Congress was formed and observed Satyagraha against the Nizam's government ban on it before its inception for obtaining responsible government. [1]

A historic armed struggle was waged during 1946-51 by the people of Telangana, in the erstwhile part of the biggest princely State of India i.e. Hyderabad State. Initially, the struggle started as sporadic skirmishes by artisans and lower classes against a form of forced labour locally called *vetti*. At a later stage it was joined by peasant masses who greatly suffered due to the arbitrary and oppressive practices of feudal elements and the landed gentry. Finally, the movement was transformed into a Peoples' Armed Insurrection against the autocratic regime of the Nizam. The armed struggle, at its climax, turned into a 'Liberation Struggle' against the union government and petered off subsequent to the ushering in of a new constitution and democratic elections.[2]

Cause o the upheaval

Conditions worsened during the 1930s due to the Great Depression and a transition towards commercial crops. In the 1940s, the peasants started turning towards communism, organised themselves through the **Andhra Mahasabha** and began a rights movement, catalyzed by a food

crisis that affected the region following the end of the Second World War, the movement escalated into a rebellion after the administration and the *durras* attempted to suppress it. [3]

One major incident on 4 July, 1946 marked the beginning of the rebellion; a procession of over 1,000 peasants was fired at by the men of Vishnur Deshmukh in Kadavendi village of Warangal district, **Doddi Komarayya** who was the leader of the local sangham was killed and a number of others severely wounded. The group proceeded to and set fire to the residence of the Deshmukh before they were dispersed by the arrival of a contingent of armed police. In the following days, 200 acres of land in a neighbouring village were seized from the deshmukh's estate and redistributed by the peasants. [4]

The Nizam's former Hyderabad state had a feudal structure of ad-ministration. In the *jagir* area, the agents of the jagirdar who were the middlemen collected the land taxes. There was much of oppression by the jagirdar and his agents. They were free to extort from the actual cultivators a variety of taxes. This condition of exploitation remained in practice till the *jagirdari* system was abolished in 1949. [5]

Events of Unrest

Tensions mounted when Visnur Ramachandra Reddy, a hereditary tax collector, attempted to forcibly take land belonging to a member of a village sangham. He sent a group of 100 goons and 100 servants to forcibly gather the harvest. They were resisted by the local village sangham leaders and volunteers. The next day, six leaders of the sangham were arrested at the call of the landlord. On July 4, 1946, a procession was organised by the villagers protesting the violence and terrorism of the landlord's goons. As they approached the landlord's house, some of the goons opened fire on the procession, leading to the death of Doddi Komarayya, the sangham leader. News spread to the nearly villages. People came with hay and fuel to burn down the landlord's house. At this point, the landlord's son arrived with 200 goons. Sixty policemen also arrived on the scene, assuring the people that strict action would be taken against the goons. The crowd dispersed, and – despite the police assurances – the goons were handed back to the landlord, and cases were filed against the sangham leaders. [6]

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The death of Komarayya enraged the people, sparking a massive revolt amongst the Telengana peasantry, with people from neighboring villages marching, holding meetings in front of the landlords house, declaring: *"Sangham is organised here. No more vetti, no more illegal exactions, no evictions".* By the end of July, the movement had spread to about 300-400 villages across three districts. Several landlords and officials hurriedly left the villages. Volunteer groups were organised to defend peasants from attacks; their weapons were sticks and stones. [7]

Momentous changes were taking place both inside and outside Telengana. Not surprisingly, the larger currents of the independence movement were to shape the course of events inside Telengana more than the other way round. Changes were taking place in the communist movement too, both within India and on the international front. Here, the Telengana movement was of greater importance - it shaped the character of Indian communism as much as it was shaped by it. The armed struggle in Telengana went through two distinct phases. The first one, from July 1946 to September 1948, was a period of growth and expansion; however, after the Indian army invaded the region in September 1948, the movement was forced to retreat until it was called off in October 1951. The Doddi Komarayya incident sparked off a wave of protest that spread to 300-400 villages in the same month. A spontaneous movement seems to have emerged groups of villagers seem to have marched from one village to the next, and congregated to discuss problems of *vetti*, land eviction, and grain levies and their relation to zamindari. Then they would conduct processions that stopped at the landlord's house. At each village, some people would drop out of the group, having already come quite a distance from home. But new ones would take their place - in this way the enthusiasm and strength of the group remained undiminished.[8]

Involvement of the women

It was the beginning of a communist-led uprising which, between 1945 and 1951 was to involve three million people and three thousand villages. After Independence from the British the Nizam fell. The army forced the resistance movement into the forest. The Communist Party in India split between those who were Pro-Soviet and those who were pro-Chinese. Amidst heavy losses the Communist Party called off the struggle.

The militant peasant movement was broken and defeated. Its participants were abandoned to negotiate with everyday life and the incomprehension of their children. The forces which had decided their destiny were remote from Telangana. When the women's group, *Stree Shakti Sanghatana,* arrived to record the life-stories of women who had taken part in the Telangana people's struggle, they found that they were partly recording testimonies about how memory endures many years of defeat. Dudala Salamma asked, 'why did you all come this far?' She had grown old in the intervening years, given everything away and now could only walk with a stick. But she retained her memories: *'There is so much to tell - my story: a house, courtyard and all they looted -looted it all. I had a cot with headboard, woven with cloth tape and a large bed on it. It was a nice decent house. I fed the communists and they said "you fed them, tell us where they are", and tortured me. They hung me with ropes under my arms, sprinkled water on the ropes and put a spiked board full of nails under me. My feet were split into bits (crying). I was in bad shape. They tortured me so much.'*

Stree Shakti Sanghatana reflect: 'When Dudala Salamma returns with the urgency of a clock that must strike the hour to the pension that never came, she speaks not only of money, but also of a life that was given and a vision that was betrayed'. [9]

Women played an important role in the TPM. They actively participated in the movement for land, agricultural labour, wage struggles, and seizure of landlords' grain, Brigg's Plan of evacuating the *Koya, Chenchu,* and *Lambadi* tribes from their hamlets in the forest areas or from the scattered hamlets in the plains. They were with their husbands and brothers, fighting the Razakars and Nizam police and later again the Congress Razakars and Nehru's armies and the police. They had joined the military and political squads and underwent all kinds of difficulties and joys of life in the forest and hills and in the fields in rain and in sun. They acted as couriers, as political agitators and in new centers as organizers of people's movements and mass organizations.[10] While most of the women leaders and organizations, given their class character, opted out of this radical phase, a few Hyderabad organizations like the **Navjivan Mandali** made conscious decisions to support the Communists. By the end of 1940's women's participation in the urban and the rural areas was legitimised by the spaces created for them or the opportunities

they created for themselves. Two divergent and seemingly parallel trends emerged, a legitimate public space for participation for the Urban middle class educated women, a process that was supportive and facilitated by society. And its opposite if one could call it a space in which women held a central position but yet could not publicly articulate grievances since they were and are often considered illegitimate.

Given the feudal nature of society in which women irrespective of religion or caste were in Purdah or had little opportunity for knowledge of the outside world, it is truly significant that in the first half of 20th century that women of Telangana region gradually and yet progressively expanded their sphere of activities and political participation, moving from welfare and recreational activity to active involvement in radical armed struggle at the other end of the spectrum. It is also important to note that the nature of women's participation changed at this juncture. During this period the participants were primarily poor agricultural labourers.[11]

Women played an important role in the Telangana struggle, They participated actively in the land movement, in agricultural labour wage struggles, in seizure of lands and grain, against the "*Briggs Plan*" of evacuating the Koya, chenchu and lambadi people from their hamlets in the forest areas, or from their scattered hamlets in the plains. They were with their husbands and brothers fighting the *Razakars* and Nizam police. They had joined the militant political squads and underwent all the dificulties and joys of the life in the forests and hills and in the fields, in rain and in sun. They acted as couriers, as political agitators, and in new centres as organizers of people's movement and mass organizations.[12]

Women participated in large number in all agricultural labour strikes or in seizure of grain from landlords' and Deshmukhs' warehouses and *'gadis'*. In all the demonstrations and raiding women were in the fore-front shouting slogans with flags in their hands. Thousands of women workers in the Godawari forest belt participated in the struggle to increase the wages for pricking of *beedi* leaves. Among the strikes and struggles of agricultural labourers that took place in twenty villages during this period women were in the leading positions in the strikes. [13]

Atrocities and Hardships of Women

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

The story of their heroic and stubborn resistance in defence of their personal dignity, against molestation, torture, and rape, is an inspiring one. Their awakening to new social equality, to a new moral and cultural life, their stubborn fighting quality, gives us a glimpse of that tremendous revolutionary spirit and energy that is smouldering in womenfolk.[14]

When armed police were attacking the villages, women were at the side of their men, handing them stones for their strings. Along with their men folk they faced the brutal lathi-charges and firings. Women insisted that they would accompany their men folk in agitations and were ready to face any consequences. In many instances/cases police had to ultimately yield to the pressure created by women to free their men folk. In many fighting areas, women took extraordinary precautions to take care of the guerillas and squads, sheltering and billeting them in their houses and in a large number of cases, keeping day or night vigil, while the guerillas or leaders were sleeping or resting. The women supplied food to the guerillas and party leaders at any time of the night or day with lot of care and warmth.[15]

Women were more suppressed under this rule. Women were not allowed to feed their babies while working in the landlord's field. Women were repressed, not only in the field of free work or *Vetti*, but also sexually harassed and exploited. There were many examples of such supression; If the landlord fancied a woman, she was taken as a consort. Sleeping with the landlord on the first night was a compulsion to newly married women. It :was the landlords' prerogative. So peasant women. along with men,came into the *Andra Maha Sabha (AMS)* and started an armed

struggle against the 'oppressive feudal system and the fundamentalist militia of the Nizam- the Razkars"[16].

Repression by the state government and aftermath

On September 13, 1948, in a 'police action' aimed at countering the violence in Hyderabad, the Indian Army marched into the state. Within a week's time, the Nizam, the razakar squads and the police surrendered. Following the capture of the razakars, a military administration was set up under General J.N. Chaudhuri, and a military offensive was directed at the peasant rebels in the Telengana region. During the next three years, "in more than 2000 villages… 300,000 of people were tortured, about 50,000 were arrested and kept in (detention) camps for a few days to a few months. More than 5,000 were imprisoned for years".[17] The rebellion ended when the military administration set up by Jawaharlal Nehru's government unexpectedly launched an attack on the communes immediately following the annexation of Hyderabad to fulfil assurances given by V. P. Menon to the American embassy that the communists would be eradicated, leading to an eventual call for the rebels to lay down arms issued by the CPI on 25 October 1951.[18]

Conclusion

The impact of the movement was considerable: the land distribution scheme altered the lives of poor peasants in a fundamental way. Not only did land provide a secure basis for life, it provided employment, and very importantly, respect and credit. The *gram-rajyams* (also called "village soviets") were the effective government in the 'liberated' areas, controlling all juridical and administrative functions. At least among the guerillas, caste-distinctions broke down and patriarchal authority was questioned by women activists. New legislation was introduced: the Jagir Abolition Regulation of 1949 handed over all *jagir* lands to the state; and the Hyderabad Tenancy and Agricultural Lands Act of 1950 provided for extensive land reforms. These included the right to buy land on easy terms to tenants who had been cultivating it for over six years, and the granting of a ten-year lease to all tenants.

Over the long run however, the considerable gains made during this period could not be sustained. We have already seen that after the Indian government took control, the peasants managed to hold on to only waste lands or 'traditional lands'. All 'excess' land, that is, land seized from the big landlords, had to be returned. Very few of the tenants who could have legally claimed occupancy rights actually did: most of them were evicted before the new laws took effect. Of those "protected" tenants who remained on their land, only 55.5% were still on it a mere three years later, having either been bought out, evicted or having "voluntarily surrendered" their rights. Sundarayya reports that in 1972 - twenty years later - usury and indirect forced labour still exist in these areas. In some sense sense, the situation got worse: landlords adopted self-cultivation with the help of wage labor and refused to rent land out for tenurial cultivation. To evade the land-ceiling act, they distributed land among the family members, legally separating It while maintaining effective control. However, the worst features of the old system - *vetti* and the illegal exaction of "gifts" - decreased noticeably along with the abolition of jagirdari.

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