

LOOKING BACK

## Revisiting Telengana (1946-1951)

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*[In the late forties communists under the banner of Andhra Maha Sabha (AMS), in addition to their historic armed Telengana rebellion against feudal landlordism and the Nizam's autocratic rule also campaigned vigorously for Vishalandhra, propagating the unity of all Telugu-speaking people through books, songs and pamphlets. Today Telengana is on the boil for altogether a different reason, rather a reverse cause—division of Telugu-speaking people on regional lines. And communists don't matter in this power game, they derive some comfort from their glorious past. T G Jacob and P Bandhu in their thought-provoking book "Reflections on the Caste Question : The Dalit Situation in South India" while elaborating the Dalit issues, narrates historical background of Telengana armed struggle and its spread between 1946-1951. We publish below some excerpts from the book, published and distributed by ODYSSEY, Harrington House, Peyton Road, Ootacamund-634001, The Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu (Price : Rs 375/US \$ 20)]*

Up to the mid-1940s the demands raised and struggles led, even by the communist-led Andhra Mahasabha, were largely reformist in nature. It took up struggles against *vetti* labour, illegal exactions by the village revenue officials (patels and patwaris), excessive taxation by jagirdars, against evictions and for re-occupation of lands taken away by the landlords for non-repayment of debts and other reasons, confirmation of occupancy (*patta*) rights of cultivating tenants, better wages for the labourers and so on. Till 1945, even the communists had not yet come out openly against the Nizam's autocratic rule, nor did their demands include a radical programme of distribution of land to the landless labourers.

It was the post-War political developments and economic crisis that gave an impetus to the more radical peasant upsurge that lasted nearly five years. The Second World War period and its aftermath saw an all-round food shortage. This shortage was partly due to the levy on foodgrains introduced by the government to support the war effort, and partly because the growing cultivation of commercial crops had decreased the area under foodgrain cultivation. To offset the shortages, rationing was introduced on commodities such as sugar, cloth, wheat, rice and kerosene. Procurement, which affected mainly the rich and middle peasants, was in effect an invitation to the police and officials to resort to fraud, corruption and favouritism. In collusion with them many landlords evaded the compulsory levy, hoarded foodgrains, and profited from the rising prices. The worst hit were the poor peasants and landless labourers. All this only aggravated the already existing general agrarian discontent. Those rich and middle peasants, who were being subjected to harassment under the procurement levy regulations had every reason to make common cause with the poor, whose wages did not increase at the same rate as the prices. A stage was thus set for a caste-class alliance and peasant upsurge in early 1946.

The targeted landlords fled, resorted to litigation but also used the police and their goondas to counter the rebellious peasants. As the peasant insurrection spread, batches of *Razakars* (a paramilitary voluntary force of the Majlis Ittehad,

a hard-core Muslim communal organisation) were also sent together with the army and police to quell the rebellion. As a result, the peasant struggles evolved into a full-scale armed revolt against the Nizam and his army. By 1947 a guerrilla army of about 5,000 was operating in Telengana. For a short while, after the British withdrawal in 1947, the Communist and Congress parties put up a joint front against the Nizam due to his refusal to accede to the Indian Union, but this United Front fell apart due to the persistence of the communists in continuing armed partisan warfare against the Nizam's government with the proclamation of a radical agrarian programme.

A powerful militia comprising 10,000 village squad members and about 2,000 regular guerrilla squads was formed. The majority of the squad members belonged to the oppressed castes, both men and women, while some were Brahmins and others were from the locally dominant Reddy caste. *Gram Rajyams* or village Soviets were set up in about 3,000 villages and they constituted a parallel administration. The Andhra delta was the supply base for the peasant struggle. The communists had their headquarters in Mungala estate, a territory surrounded by the Krishna district, and from there arms, funds, propaganda literature and party workers were smuggled in. Lands, forcibly seized, were distributed among the land hungry agricultural labourers and also among evicted tenants.

Despite the heroism and selflessness of women participating in the struggle—many of them becoming martyrs—patriarchal norms and attitudes continued to hold sway. Double standards continued to operate in relation to them. They were often seen as a burden and as responsible for creating problems by their presence.

The Nehru-led Congress government, in power after the withdrawal of the British, became extremely panicky at the advance made by the communist-led movement, which had gained control over one-sixth of the Hyderabad State by mid-1948. Fears of an independent communist state in the heart of India, with every likelihood of a spillover and spread-effect from this "base" to other parts of the country, led the government to break its one-year "Standstill Agreement," concluded with the Nizam of Hyderabad in 1947, and to send in the Indian Army for counter-insurgency battle in September 1948. Although the Indian Army was able to occupy most of the Nizam's territory within a very short period and establish military rule, it was almost another three years before it was able to crush the peasant rebellion. And ultimately, it was able to do this only because of the change in line of the Communist Party, its unilateral withdrawal of the armed struggle, and entry into the parliamentary system of governance by participating in the elections of 1952.

As in Andhra, the leading communists in Telengana were by and large wealthy upper caste landholders. Prominent communist leaders in the AMS, Ravi Narayan Reddy and B Yella Reddy, belonged to the landed upper caste sections. As in the Andhra delta regions, the class interests of the leading communists in Telengana too lay in promoting an alliance between the rich and small landholders, tenant cultivators and the landless labourers against those isolated landlords who engaged in a disproportionately high level of exploitation of their tenant cultivators and labourers.

The entry of the Indian Army on the scene and its crackdown on the insurgency brought to the surface the cracks in the alliance of rich peasants with the poor and landless. Already the dominant caste party leadership had self-confessedly made a number of concessions to the rich peasantry in the course of the land redistribution to the landless. Ceilings had been kept comparatively high; and while deciding which lands to seize liberal concessions had been made to those rich peasants who sided with the party. The central Party bosses only reluctantly concurred with land seizure and redistribution and would have preferred the movement to restrict itself to moderate goals like the abolition of illegal exactions, *vetti* and grain procurement levy, which were more in line with the interests of the rich peasantry.

After the military action, the rich peasants increasingly deserted the alliance and it was the agricultural labourers, tenants and small landholders (middle peasants), who carried on the insurrection. By remaining in the communist *dalams* (squads) and continuing to form their backbone, the socially and economically deprived Dalits and Adivasis showed that only they remained firm in their determination to attain a new social order.

The main point to keep in mind here is that there was a tremendous gap between the leadership of the Communist Party and the people, on whose behalf it was leading the struggle. In addition, the disunity within the Communist Party leadership and its lack of clarity over ideological issues and the broad objectives of the revolutionary struggle in Telengana also worked against its organised sustenance and success. The political formulations of the Indian party were often determined by the formulations of the International Communist Movement, and hence were not always sufficiently ground reality based. These kind of ideological and political confusions did not begin or end with the Telengana struggle. Even with the eclipse of the parliamentary Left and the rise of the militant non-parliamentary Left the same story continues in the post-Telengana period.

The Indian Communist Party under the leadership of P C Joshi had maintained its stand of loyal opposition and expressed confidence in the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru of the Interim Government in Delhi. It had also endorsed the Mountbatten plan of June 1947 as representing important concessions and new opportunities for "national advance"! At the same time, it advocated a United Front from above of all "progressive" forces including sections of the Congress, the Muslim League and the CPI for attaining genuine national independence. The communal, caste/ class and nationality questions left unresolved were glossed over. But the Nehru government, through its military action and atrocities against the people's movement in Telengana, clearly revealed its pro-monopoly bourgeoisie and pro-landlord face. It was flying in the face of these and other facts, if the central leadership of the Communist Party was still able to discern some "progressive" features in the post-'47 Indian state and government.

However the policies under PC Joshi's leadership met with increasing criticism for being reformist at various levels of the party, and the left radical group led by B T Ranadive secured a majority in the Central Committee of the CPI in December 1947. The Central Committee passed a resolution for an uncompromising attack on the bourgeoisie as a whole. The Nehru government

was denounced for its subservience to the Anglo-American imperialist camp. Differences came up between the party leadership at the central level and the Andhra branch of the Communist Party. B T Ranadive accused the Andhra State Committee of being influenced by rich peasant ideology and basing itself on the vacillating politics of the middle peasants. This was also the beginning of a struggle between the 'Chinese' line on the one hand and the 'Russian' line on the other.

Within the Communist Party one section represented by the Andhra Secretariat wanted to continue the struggle even against the Indian Army and thus wage an armed liberation struggle against the bourgeois-landlord government of the Congress Party. In the view of this section, the Indian revolution would differ from the classical Russian revolution. It would not follow the pattern of a general strike and armed uprising followed by the liberation of the rural areas, but would be in the nature of a prolonged civil war in the form of an agrarian revolution, establishment of liberated bases through guerrilla warfare, culminating in the capture of political power by a democratic anti-feudal, anti-imperialist alliance of workers, peasants and middle bourgeoisie under the dictatorship of the former two classes. The faction led by B T Ranadive, on the other hand, upheld a one-stage all-India uprising and overthrow of the government and immediate building up of socialism.

In the meantime, the International Communist Movement indicated through its official organ a new strategy for revolution in colonial and dependent countries, which was basically that of the just successfully concluded Chinese New Democratic revolution. As a result, the Central Committee of the Indian Party was again reorganised on this basis, but there was opposition within to the new line and to continuing the Telengana struggle. Finally, to resolve the stalemate advice was sought directly from the Soviet Communist Party. Stalin himself was approached by an Indian communist delegation for help in resolving the differences of opinion within the party. A new thesis on the Indian revolution emerged out of these discussions, which influenced the subsequent 1951 Party programme and Policy Statement. In this programme, the Nehru government was characterised as serving "mainly the interests of feudal landlords and big monopoly financiers, and behind them all, the vested interests of British imperialism." It envisaged the setting up a "people's democracy created on the basis of a coalition of all democratic anti-feudal and anti-imperialist forces in the country." The course of the Indian revolution would follow neither solely the Russian nor the Chinese path due to differences in the class composition in India from both. A secret document, known as the 1951 Tactical Line, envisaged the revolution to be basically an armed and not peaceful one, though it permitted selective use of parliamentary tactics.

The end of this struggle also marked a slow downslide in the popularity of the Communist Party, on an all-India level as well as in Andhra. Despite the revival of Communist-led militant struggles in the '60s and '70s, sporadically continuing to this day, the Party and its breakaway factions and splinter groups have never managed to get themselves out of an unending ideological morass and resultant confusions to forge a luminescent path for the emancipation of the oppressed castes and classes.

The political scenario in the Telengana and Andhra regions after the withdrawal of the Telengana armed struggle and the announcement of elections under the new Constitution was one of contention and rivalry between the Congress and communists, in which the latter slowly lost out to the former. The Congress successfully adopted a number of strategies to undercut communist influence in these regions.

Regarding land relations, that is, the important issue of landlordism, the Congress government of Madras moved to undermine communist support among the Andhra peasants by passing the Madras Estate Abolition and Conversion into Ryotwari Act. The legislation abolished all zamindari and inamdari estates and gave the ryots the *pattas* of their lands in over 33 percent of the land in the Andhra region. The communist leadership, on the other hand, emphasized the need for structural changes in the land relations, that is, land to the tiller and even nationalisation of land, while carrying out partial struggles over wages and distribution of surplus land to the landless.

Under the Andhra Pradesh (Telengana Area) Tenancy and Agricultural Lands Act, 1950, the jagirdar system was abolished, but in anticipation of comprehensive land reform legislation, many substantial landowners had resorted to subdivision and transfer of lands to avoid any losses on account of the ceiling provisions. Very few of the tenants actually registered themselves as tenants and claimed occupancy rights; a majority of them were either evicted from lands before the actual enforcement of the new statutes, or had voluntarily surrendered their lands. The Bhoodan movement launched at this point of time by Vinoba Bhave played a role in driving the peasants and labourers away from the violent path in the question of land redistribution. These reformist measures, while preempting more radical long-term solutions to the land question, temporarily brought large sections of the peasantry out of the fold of the communists. Furthermore, the growing identification of the Communist Party with the rich peasant sections in its membership, leadership, and espousal of issues also led to the erosion of its Dalit and Adivasi base. □□□