

## Social origins of the peasant insurrection in Telangana (1946-51)\*

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The revolt in Telangana and the adjoining districts of the Andhra delta was one of the two post-war insurrectionary struggles of peasants in India.<sup>1</sup> It was launched by the Communist Party of India (CPI) as a sequel to the shift in its earlier policy of collaboration with the Congress giving way to a strategy of encouraging or initiating insurrectionary partisan struggles. The revolt began in the middle of 1946 and lasted over five years till it was called off in October 1951. It resulted in land reform legislation that produced some perceptible changes in the agrarian social structure of the region.

The Telangana peasant revolt is often considered as paradigmatic and has attracted widespread attention.<sup>2</sup> In this paper we shall examine both its general and specific features. The focus will be mainly on the structural setting and the class character of the revolt and on the specific historical conditions that shaped its character.

To very briefly outline the framework of the study, we define as 'peasant' anyone who earns his livelihood from cultivation of land; the class of absentee landlords and rentiers are, however, excluded. Peasantry is not itself an internally homogeneous social category. The contradictions existing within a peasant or agrarian society and its internal differentiation and conflicting interests have been viewed here from the Marxian angle of 'class' and 'class conflict'. The model of agrarian classes consisting of the 'rich', 'middle', and

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<sup>1</sup>The other was the Tebhaga movement in Bengal, 1946-47 which has been discussed by me elsewhere (Dhanagare 1973 : 316-59).

<sup>2</sup>Thus, Moore, Jr (1965 : 380-85) discusses only the Telangana rebellion and ignores all other instances of peasant struggle in contemporary India (1920-1950).

'poor' peasants in addition to the landless labourers is usually drawn from the works of Lenin and Mao Tse-tung. However, its application to the Indian and specially to the Telangana situation calls for caution. First, like all other social classifications, this model is also regionally specific. Here the extent of property owned in land becomes a crucial variable. We have considered peasants owning 25 acres of land (or 10 acres of irrigated land), or more, as rich, those having an average (in that region) holding or below as poor and the rest as middle peasants. Secondly, we also realize that in India a host of social cleavages other than class, such as caste, kinship or ethnic ties ('community type bonds') cut across the economic class situations. Our use of the term 'agrarian class' does not imply that these primordial loyalties are either non-existent or play no part in class formation. In other words, it implies Marx's notion of 'class in itself' i.e., unity of economic interests only and not his notion of 'class for itself'. We do not suggest that those who occupy the same class position are necessarily aware or politically conscious of their collective interests.

## I

### LAND CONTROL AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE IN TELANGANA UNDER THE NIZAMS

Hyderabad was one of the largest princely states in India before independence. A political structure from medieval Muslim rule had been preserved intact till the state merged into the Indian Federation in 1948 (GOI (i), Smith 1950 : 27-28). After the advent of the British in India, the Nizams in Hyderabad simply retained in form a semblance of sovereignty which they exercised with the tacit consent of the representatives of the British Crown. Right from the troubled days of the Mutiny (1857) through the two world wars, the Nizams liberally contributed to and ardently supported the British Empire.

The Hyderabad state covered a substantial part of the southern plateau in the Indian peninsula. Its total area was some 82,000 square miles; its predominantly Hindu population totalled 18.6 million in 1951. There were three linguistic regions in the state: (i) Telangana—nine districts of Telugu-speaking people; (ii) Marathwada—five districts of Marathi-speaking people; and (iii) three Kannada-speaking districts. The first formed a majority of 47 per cent in the total population while the other two regions shared the rest except the 12 per cent accounted for by Urdu-speaking Muslim (Qureshi 1947 : 30-31).

The agrarian social structure in Hyderabad was like a page out of feudal history. There were two main types of land tenure:

(i) *Khalsa* or *diwani* tenures implied what in some parts of India is called *raiyyatwari*, that is the peasant proprietary system. About 60 per cent of the

total land was held under these tenures in 1941. The landholders were not called owners *per se* but were treated as *pattadars* (registered occupants). The actual occupants within each *patta* were called *shikmidars*, who had full rights of occupancy but were not registered. As the pressure on land grew, the shikmidars, previously the cultivators, began to lease out lands to subtenants (*asami-shikmis*) for actual cultivation. The latter were tenants-at-will having neither legal rights in land nor any protection against eviction (Narayan 1960 : 58-59). As we shall see later, the process of subinfeudation had steadily penetrated deep into the system of raiyatwari tenures, particularly from 1920 to 1950.

(ii) There were some special tenures called jagirs. *Sarf-e-khas* was obviously the most important of them being assigned to the Nizam himself as Crown lands. Scattered in several parts of the state, these covered a total area of 8,109 square miles (1,961 villages), and fetched revenues totalling about 20 million rupees, which met the Nizam's household, retinue and other expenses and also partly met the cost of his army (Khusro 1958 : 4-5; Roth 1947 : 1-2).

There were various other types of jagirs, besides *Sarf-e-khas* but their details are not relevant for our purpose. The jagirdari system of land administration was the most important feature of the political organization of Hyderabad. The Nizam created his own noblemen and bestowed on them a distinguished rank and order—each with a large grant of land. In return the trusted noblemen undertook to maintain an army for the Nizam to rely on in time of need. These jagirs were thus typically feudal tenures scattered in different parts of the State, including 6,500 villages and covering some 25,000 square miles, about a third of the state's total area (Qureshi 1947 : 112-18). Over the years the number of jagirdars steadily multiplied. In 1922 there were 1,167 jagirdars in the Nizam's dominion; in 1949 their number had gone up to 1,500 (Khusro 1958 : 4).

The conditions were, however, far more oppressive on the jagir lands than on the *Sarf-e-khas*. The civil courts had no jurisdiction over the former and therefore the jagirdars and their agents were free to extort from the actual cultivators a variety of illegal taxes and thus to fleece them. The conditions remained practically unchanged until the jagirdari system was abolished in 1949 (Khusro 1958 : 5).

The khalsa land produced no better alternative. On such lands, *deshmukhs* and *deshpandes* were the hereditary collectors of revenue for groups of villages. As the system of direct collections was introduced in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, these intermediaries were granted *vatans* (annuities) based on a percentage of the past collections. This only propped up their position in the agrarian hierarchy. Very often the *deshmukh* landlord—a figure roughly half-way between the bureaucratic official and the feudal

seigneur—himself became the newly appointed village revenue official or had at least an access to land records. His influence thus permitted him to grab lands by fraud which, in countless instances, reduced the actual cultivator to the status of a tenant-at-will or a landless labourer.

Nowhere in Hyderabad was the feudal exploitation of the peasantry more intense than it was in the Telangana districts.<sup>3</sup> Here some of the biggest landlords, whether jagirdars or deshmukhs, owned thousands of acres of land each. Such concentration of land ownership was more pronounced in Nalgonda, Mahbubnagar, and Warangal districts than elsewhere (Sundarayya 1972a: 9-18). Significantly, it was this region which was the locus of the peasant insurrection in 1946-51.

In the local idiom these powerful jagirdars and deshmukhs were called *durra* (also spelled as *dora*), meaning 'sir', 'master' or 'lord of the village'. A *durra*, often a combination of landlord, moneylender, and village official, traditionally enjoyed several privileges including the services of occupational castes in return for some payments either in cash or in kind. But he tended to exact these services free owing to his power and position (Gray 1970: 119-20). Such exactions had become somewhat legitimized by what was known as the *vetti* system under which a landlord could force a family from among his customary retainers to cultivate his land and to do one job or the other—whether domestic, agricultural or official—as an obligation to the master. The *vetti* exactions were thus a symbol of the dominance of landlords in Telangana. Most of the agricultural labourers, on whom the *vetti* obligations fell, were from the lower and untouchable castes of Malas and Madigas (Sundarayya 1972a: 12-14).

Like the *vetti*, the system of *bhagela* serfdom was prevalent in Warangal and Nalgonda districts. Similar to the Pannaiyals of Tanjore or the Dublas of Gujarat, the *bhagelas*, drawn mostly from aboriginal tribes, were customary retainers tied to their masters by debt. Working as domestic or menial labourers, they could never repay the debts and hence had to work for their masters generation after generation on a pittance. Legislation passed in 1936 to limit and curb *bhagela* serfdom had remained largely ineffective (Qureshi 1947: 72-73). It seems that the *vetti* and *bhagela* arrangements were perversions of the traditional Hindu *jajmani* system which was based on the principle of reciprocal exchanges. Its Telangana variant was highly exploitative, being based on the economic power wielded by those *jajmans*, like *durras*, who owned land.

Among the substantial landowners and *pattadars* in Telangana districts, Brahmins were once predominant. With the rise of the Reddis and Kammas

<sup>3</sup>The nine districts of Telangana are: Adilabad, Hyderabad, Karimnagar, Khammam, Mahbubnagar, Medak, Nalgonda, Nizamabad, and Warangal.

—the two notable castes of peasant proprietors—the influence of Brahmins as a landowning caste declined, although in the field of politics they continued to be powerful. Komtis, a caste of traders and moneylenders, had considerable influence on the economic life in the countryside. From the turn of the century, however, Marwadi *sahukars* gradually penetrated rural Telangana and established their ascendancy as moneylenders although the Komtis still remained on the scene as traders, shopkeepers, and merchants. The bulk of the rural masses—poor peasants, unprotected tenants, share-croppers, and agricultural labourers—came either from lower untouchable castes, such as the Malas and Madigas,<sup>4</sup> or from tribal groups like the Hill Reddis, Chenchus, Koyas, Lambadis, and Banjaras.<sup>5</sup> These tribal communities had long-standing grievances against the government on account of its taxes and levies, against moneylenders and revenue officials who usurped their lands, and also against private contractors who exploited the tribal labourers in the forest-works, on construction sites, or in mines and collieries (Furer-Haimendorf 1945: 5-7, 39-46, 66-75).

Two important aspects of the agrarian economy of an otherwise backward region like Telangana must be noted here. First, the development of irrigation facilities and cultivation of commercial crop was taking place since the late nineteenth century. The main commercial crops of Telangana—ground-nuts, tobacco, and castor-seeds—were grown in Nalgonda, Mahbubnagar, Karimnagar, and Warangal districts. Both the total acreage and the produce of commercial crops increased steadily and after 1925 commercial farming assumed an increasingly greater importance in the regional economy (Narayan 1960: 27-41). Secondly, the development of commercial farming was not, however, matched by any corresponding growth of towns, of industrial enterprise, and markets, nor even of transport and communication facilities. Consequently, the cultivators had to depend almost entirely on urban moneylenders, traders, merchants, and businessmen who controlled the few and highly centralized markets in Telangana for the sale of their produce. Local retailers, agents, and village *sahukars* helped the urban commercial interests in securing the produce from the cultivators and thus managed to have a share in the profits of the marketing enterprise.

Land alienation increased considerably between 1910 and 1940, particularly during the economic depression, when much land, previously owned

<sup>4</sup>For the economic activities of the various caste groups in Telangana villages, see Dube 1965: 57-73.

<sup>5</sup>The 1951 tribal population in Hyderabad state as a whole accounts for 1.90 per cent of the population, a higher proportion than in the past. The increase was more striking in Nalgonda, Warangal, Adilabad, Khammam, and Mahbubnagar districts than elsewhere and was notable in case of the Koyas and Hill Reddis. See GOI (ii): 249, and also (vii), IX, Part II-A: 158-59.

by tribal peasants, passed into the hands of non-cultivating urban interests, mostly Brahmins, Marwadis, Komtis, and Muslims (Furer-Haimendorf, 1945: 41-43). Economic investigations carried out in 1928-30 showed that in Warangal district alone nine per cent of the total land and 25 per cent of the irrigated land had changed hands. Most of the land thus transferred went either to big landlords and deshmukhs or to sahu-kars (from the Marwadi and Maratha castes), traders and non-cultivating pattadars who dominated the economic life of the district (Iyengar 1930: I,34).

As a result of the growing land alienation many actual occupants or cultivators were being reduced to the status of tenants-at-will, sharecroppers or landless labourers. This trend dominated till 1930 or so. Thereafter, the proportion of non-cultivating occupants and of cultivators of land, wholly or mainly unowned, began to decline. Owner-cultivators and agricultural labourers, on the contrary, steadily increased in number in Hyderabad state as a whole. Their proportions in 1951 were 61 and 25 per cent respectively (for details see Narayan 1960: 10). These shifts in the agrarian class structure point to the gradual development of the rich peasant sector of the agrarian economy.

Significantly, the decline of the number of non-cultivating occupants and the increase in the number of cultivating owners and landless labourers were more marked in the Telangana districts, particularly in Mahbubnagar, Nalgonda, Nizamabad, and Warangal (Iyengar 1951: 37).

The rise of the 'rich-peasant' sector, however, did not supplant the 'landlord-tenant' sector of the rural economy completely.<sup>6</sup> The absentee landlords were very much there though their number was declining after 1930. Nor did it signify any fundamental change in the modes and relations of production. In fact, where rich pattadars held holdings too large to manage, they tended to keep a certain amount of irrigated land to be cultivated with the help of hired labourer and turned over most of their dry lands either to bhagela serfs or to tenant cultivators on very high produce rents (Bedford 1967: 126-27, 150-52).

What was happening on the agrarian scene in Telangana from the last quarter of the nineteenth century till 1930 or so could be summed up thus: the system of subsistence agriculture had undergone a gradual transformation giving way to the new market or cash economy, without any corresponding change in the social arrangements on land. The modes of production and exchange remained pre-capitalist or semi-feudal and emerged as the major source of discontent among the poor peasantry. During the economic depression (1929-34) even the well-to-do cultivators, substantial pattadars

<sup>6</sup>Alavi (1965: 245-55) has distinguished three different sectors of agrarian economy, namely: (i) landlord-tenant, (ii) rich peasant-labourers, and (iii) subsistence sector.

or rich peasants, were badly affected owing to the fall in wholesale prices. Although the prices recovered slightly between 1936 and 1940, they were not even half as high as the price level of 1922. Throughout the 1930s, therefore, the cash incomes of all those cultivators who produced for the market fell considerably. The price-trends strengthened the position of moneylenders and traders who tightened their grip on indebted small pattadars and tenants. A committee appointed in 1939 for investigating the status and conditions of tenants in the State recommended a minimum tenurial security but without any results till 1945. Fearing accrual of tenants' occupancy rights on their lands, the landlords had resorted to large-scale evictions of tenants. A Tenancy Act, passed in 1945, remained practically a defunct piece of legislation (R.V. Rao, 1950 : 618) which only further aggravated the agrarian discontent.

The number of landless labourers in Hyderabad increased phenomenally in the first half of this century. The first Agricultural Labour Enquiry (1951-52) estimated that over 42 per cent of the rural population of Hyderabad was engaged in agricultural labour (19.5 per cent with and 22.6 per cent of them without land) (GOI, (vi) : 56 and (vii), I-A : d-e). The proportion of agricultural labourers was much lower in 1929-30 when the first rural economic enquiries were conducted in some of the districts of Hyderabad state (Bedford 1967 : 123). The landless labourers did not constitute a homogeneous class. Not only was their caste and ethnic composition complex, but also several occupational categories such as rural artisans, craftsmen, and tenants-at-will were swelling their ranks. Widespread seasonal unemployment and acute competition for work kept the agricultural wages low in Telangana. Towards the end of the Second World War food prices, which increased faster than the wage rates, affected the conditions of landless labourers adversely and augmented their distress further (Iyengar 1951 : 216-17).

## II

### POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT IN HYDERABAD AND MOBILIZATION OF THE PEASANTRY IN TELANGANA FROM 1936 TO 1946

The despotic rule of Nizam VII permitted neither political freedom nor any representative institutions. Harassment of suspected political activists, detention of leaders and potential agitators were so common forms of repression that a straightforward political movement was almost ruled out in the state till 1930 or so. However, after 1920 several members of the intelligentsia and liberal professional class in Hyderabad, inspired by the Indian national movement, formed three different cultural-literary forums, one each for the three linguistic regions of the State. The Andhra Conference, which operated in the Telangana districts, was set up in 1928 and began to mobilize

public opinion on issues like administrative and constitutional reforms, schools, civil liberties, recruitment to services, etc., reflecting partly the regional economic and political aspirations and partly the urban middle class and elitist character of the new political commotion (Sundarayya 1972a : 18-19).

Congressmen and their sympathizers operated chiefly through the three 'mask organizations'. Political developments in India in the thirties prepared the background for a nascent movement for constitutional reforms in Hyderabad also where the political conditions were being slightly liberalized. The Hyderabad unit of the Congress started a satyagraha in 1938 for political reforms. But the agitation came to be dominated by the Arya Samaj and the Hindu Mahasabha and the Congress, acting on Gandhi's advice, abandoned it to lessen political confusion (GOI, (iii) -a and -b : 1-4; Tirth 1967 : 93-107). The rise of the Hindu nationalist opinion was clearly a reaction to the growing dominance of the Majlis Ittehad-ul-Musalmin—a communal organization of Hyderabad Muslims committed to the idea of Muslim supremacy—in the State's politics (Wright, Jr. 1963 : 234-43).

During the Second World War, the Andhra Conference expanded its network, in the Telangana villages by taking an active interest in agrarian problems such as vetti labour. Just across the border, in the Andhra delta districts of the Madras Presidency, a political movement for unification of all Telugu-speaking regions into a separate Vishalandhra was launched by the Andhra Mahasabha. In the Telangana region the branches of Andhra Conference and Andhra Mahasabha functioned in close collaboration (Bedford 1967 : 196-97). Following the satyagraha the Congress was banned in 1938, and so was the CPI, with the result that the Andhra Conference and the Andhra Mahasabha had the entire field of politics wide open for their activities.

The communists arrived on the Telangana scene only during the latter half of the war period. They had been active in the delta districts since 1934 when the Andhra CP was established. The party drew its strength from the famous caste of Kammas—well-to-do peasant proprietors—for whom other political alternatives did not exist as their archrivals—Brahmins and Reddys—dominated the Congress. (Harrison 1956 : 378-404). Between 1928 and 1933, Professor N.G. Ranga had laid down a framework of regional level peasant organizations which, later in 1936, were affiliated to the All India Kisan Sabha, CPI's front organization. This, for the CPI, was the period of the 'United Front' strategy which made strange political alliances possible and helped it to infiltrate the Congress and the Congress Socialist Party and to capture a host of peasant organizations all over India, including those in the Andhra delta. Consequently the Indian Peasant Institute, started by Ranga at Nidubrolu, imperceptibly turned into a training centre

for CPI cadres (Ranga 1949: 76). By 1940 the communists were firmly entrenched in the Andhra delta politics. During the ban (1940-42) they operated through 'front' organizations like the Kisan Sabha, Andhra Mahasabha, and so on. But the rich Kamma *Kulaks* formed the class base of the Andhra CP and provided the party with funds and workers (Harrison 1962: 204-10).

The growing influence of the communists in the delta naturally had its spill-over in the adjoining Telangana region; this was visible in the changing complexion of the leadership and of the workers of the Andhra Conference. Some of the newly emerging leaders had earlier participated in the civil disobedience movement (1930-32) and later in the Hyderabad satyagraha (1938). But they could no longer look to the Gandhian Congress for ideological orientation and guidance as the Congress itself eschewed mass movements and refrained from committing itself to a definite economic and political programme. The young radical elements within the Andhra Conference therefore turned to communism and converted the cultural forum into a mass militant organization—a united front of the youth, peasants, middle classes, and workers—against the Nizam's government (Sundarayya 1972a: 19-20).

Economic conditions of the different strata of Telangana peasantry had deteriorated, first due to the depression and later due to the war. The peasant groaned under the tyranny of landlords, *deshmukhs*, and *sahukars*, an unsympathetic police force and an unfair revenue, judicial, administrative machinery that added misery to his poverty. Any organization espousing his cause could have won his gratitude and support. Through the Andhra Conference young communists voiced the peasant's grievances, paid more and more attention to the agrarian problems in Telangana, and mobilized opinion in favour of abolition of landlordism and the oppressive *vetti* system.<sup>7</sup> But before 1940 the Andhra Conference had done practically no work to build a peasant organization as such. Students, leaving college, were being recruited to the party cadres but the organizational network of the Conference and the Mahasabha until 1942 was dominated by some liberal and moderate politicians. The agrarian radicalism that the communists vocalized on the Conference platform made little impact on the rural masses before them. But after the Government of India lifted the ban on the CPI in 1942, the communists were able to oust the right-wing elements and establish their hold on the Andhra Conference and the Mahasabha. The process was complete when, at the Bhongir session of the Andhra Mahasabha, two young

<sup>7</sup>For details of the initial attempts of the Andhra Conference for mobilizing the peasantry, see 'The Communists in Hyderabad', Part III (in series), *The statesman* (Calcutta), 11 May 1950, 8.

communists, Ravi Narayan Reddy and Badam Yella Reddy, were elected as the President and Secretary respectively (Sundarayya 1972a : 20-21).

The agrarian slogans and demands of the communists included abolition of vetti, prevention of rack-renting and of eviction of tenants, reduction in taxes, revenues and rents, confirmation of occupancy (patta) rights of cultivating tenants, and so on, which naturally attracted the poor peasants, tenants, and labourers to the Andhra Conference. All the same, till 1945 even the communists did not 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 (Sundarayya 1972a : 27). But the pro-government campaigns like 'Grow More Food', and translation of the Marxist classics into Telugu and their distribution in the Telangana countryside continued to be their preoccupations (Sheshadri, 1967 : 389-90). Between 1944 and 1946, the Andhra communists organized annual conferences of the All India Kisan Sabha (Vijaywada, 1944), All India Students' Federation (Guntur, 1946) and Railwaymen's Federation (Secunderabad, 1946) making Andhra the citadel of the CPI. However, all these enthusiastic activities could not go very far in building up a mass following in the countryside and in mobilizing the peasantry into a revolutionary organization.

Between 1944 and 1946 the communist activities did spread far and wide in Nalgonda district, enmeshing numerous villages in the Bhongir, Suryapet, Jangaon, Nalgonda, and Huzurnagar *talukas*. Soon after capturing the Andhra Mahasabha and the Andhra Conference, the communists lowered their membership fees so as to draw large numbers of agricultural labourers, poor tenants and small landholders closer to their ideology and programme. The effort paid some dividends. Apart from Nalgonda, the Andhra Conference gained considerable ground in Warangal and Karimnagar districts. All over Andhra and Telangana membership enrolment figures for all the CPI-led organizations showed remarkable improvement (Harrison 1960 : 222).

As in Andhra, the leading communists in Telangana were, by and large, wealthy landholders, pattadars of substantial holdings, and men of some hereditary standing in their villages and talukas. Both Ravi Narayan Reddy and B. Yella Reddy, referred to earlier, were prominent landlords. D. Venkateshwar Rao, leader of the Suryapet taluka, could be cited as yet another example. Of course, not all the Telangana communists were landholders. Some, like Dr Raj Bahadur Gaur and Mukaddam Mohiuddin, came from the urban intelligentsia (Bedford 1967 : 201-2). They had shown some generosity toward poorer sections of the peasantry whom, in fact, they hired either as tenants on temporary leases or as agricultural labourers. Hence both in Andhra and in Telangana the class interests of the leading communists lay in promoting a class alliance between the rich and small

holders, tenant cultivators and the landless labourers against those isolated landlords and rich landholders who were either inconsiderate to their tenant-cultivators or paid poor wages to their labourers. Such a class alliance remained the central theme and concern of the Telangana communists as was evident in their radical agrarian demands made subsequently.

Another issue concerning food scarcity had arisen in 1946. The shortage of food was partly the result of the growing cultivation of commercial or cash crops. Until the war ended no measure whatsoever was taken to curb the extent of commercial crop production (Qureshi 1947 : 284-94). This resulted in high consumer prices and in an acute food shortage. The government's bid to resolve the food crisis by rationing and by procuring foodgrains through a compulsory levy only aggravated the general agrarian discontent (Sundarayya 1972a : 304-5). 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 (Bedford 1967 : 210-11). The worst affected were the poor peasants and landless labourers. Those rich and middle peasants who were being subjected to harassment under the procurement levy regulation had every reason to make common cause with the poor whose wages did not increase at the same rate as prices. A stage was thus set for a class alliance and spontaneous peasant upsurge in early 1946 in Telangana. The agrarian social structure was certainly conducive to an insurrectionary movement, but the post-war political developments and economic crisis provided an impetus to a sustained peasant revolt that lasted nearly five years.

### III

#### THE BEGINNING AND GROWTH OF THE TELANGANA INSURRECTION: JULY 1946 TO SEPTEMBER 1948

The communist effort to build strong party bases yielded good results in Nalgonda and Warangal districts which were their strongholds. Between 1942 and 1946 their influence among poor peasants, tenant-cultivators, and landless labourers grew steadily. In certain parts of these districts the Nizam's writ had virtually ceased to run at the beginning of 1946. The officials as well as the landlords who did not pay 'protection money' were afraid of visiting those areas of their jurisdictions or estates where the communists had established strongholds (Zinkin 1962 : 62). The presence of a number of landlords owning large estates extending over thousands of acres of land had facilitated the expansion of communism in this area (Sundarayya 1972a : 15).

In the post-war crisis, the local branches of the Andhra Conference, called *sanghams*, launched village level struggles for better wages for labourers and

against the vetti labour, illegal exactions, evictions and also against the newly imposed grain levy. These struggles were located mostly in the Nalgonda district on the estates of some of the most notorious landlords and deshmukhs. Militant action in this early insurgence included a few isolated instances of forcible seizure of the lands of those landlords who had evicted some Lambadi (tribal) tenant-cultivators and also involved non-compliance of the demands of vetti labour, illegal taxes, and the procurement levy. The extent of the peasants' spontaneous action did not always carry the approval of sangham leaders. The landlords either fled to safety, resorted to litigation, or summoned their own goondas and the police to deal with the rebellious peasants. Many pitched battles occurred between the two sides (Sundarayya 1972a : 28-35).

One such major incident occurred in July 1946 when over a thousand peasants, armed with lathis and slings, took out a procession in a village that formed part of Vishnur Deshmukh's estate. The hired goondas of the landlord fired at the procession and killed Doddi Komaryya, the village sangham leader and injured a few others. The procession, now turned into an angry crowd, went to the landlord's house which was about to be set on fire when the police arrived and dispersed it. Komarayya's martyrdom sparked off the conflagration and thus marked the beginning of the Telangana insurrection (Sundarayya 1972b : 11-12).

It is significant that by the end of July 1946 peasant resistance and militant action against landlords, deshmukhs, and village officials spread to some 300 to 400 villages (in Nalgonda, Warangal, and Khammam districts) which, the communists claimed, were under their control (Sundarayya 1972a : 39). The CPI press launched a massive propaganda campaign, voiced the demands of the Telangana peasantry, and exposed the oppression and brutalities.<sup>8</sup> The propaganda was further intensified after October 1946 when the Andhra Conference was banned by the Nizam's government. Several hundred CPI workers were arrested and more police reinforcements sent to the troubled areas. But so determined was the resistance that the landlords and deshmukhs found it difficult to get the villagers to perform vetti; small holders did not hand over a part of their paddy crop as required under the procurement levy regulation and foiled all the coercive attempts of village officials; and landless labourers and evicted tenants sat tight on the lands they seized (Bedford 1967 : 213-22). In all, some 156 cases of assault were registered by the police against peasants, and some 10 rebels in four separate incidents of police-peasant battles were killed by the end of 1946 (Sundarayya 1972a : 38).

<sup>8</sup>Numerous reports and despatches that appeared in *The people's age* (Bombay) from 1 May to 31 December 1946 bear this out.

The salient features of the insurrection in its initial phase could be summed up thus: large masses of peasants spontaneously participated in the struggles directed against the government, landlords and deshmukhs and their agents. The insurgents had neither firearms nor the training required to use them. A few volunteer groups had come into existence. They were not well-organized guerrilla squads as such, but were rather extempore formations in response to the situation. Initially, therefore, the revolt was spasmodic. The communist or Andhra Conference sanghams and *dalams* (batches) acted as morale boosters for the peasant action but beyond that, there is little evidence to suggest that they had succeeded in channelling the spontaneous upsurge into systematically planned offensives. The emphasis in the slogans being on a variety of agrarian matters, already referred to, all the strata, whether rich and small pattadars, cultivating tenants or landless labourers, were united. The peasant militancy till the end of 1946 had not turned into a cataclysm but whatever violence occurred in the process of resistance it was the doing of poor peasants, including the tribal Lambadi elements. (Sundarayya 1972a: *passim*). Although a few isolated areas of Warangal, Karimnagar, and Khammam districts were under the rebels' influence, in general the stage on which the first scenes in the insurrectionary drama were acted was undoubtedly Nalgonda district, mainly the Suryapet and Jangaon talukas.

Mere agrarian slogans of purely local relevance were not enough for the Telangana communists. Major events and constitutional developments in 1946-47 were shaping the political future of India, whereas the destiny and future status of Hyderabad, like all other princely states of the subcontinent, hung in suspense. As mentioned earlier, until 1946 or so the communists did not come out openly against the Nizam's autocracy and feudal political structure, but any further silence on such vital issues would have only alienated them from the masses. Inside Hyderabad the people were being swept by the new tides of nationalism and political freedom that gathered momentum with the announcement in February 1947 regarding the transfer of power in India. But the British gave the princely states an option between remaining autonomous and joining either India or Pakistan. On the eve of independence all the princely states, except Hyderabad, Junagadh, and Kashmir, had exercised the option (Menon 1956).

In Hyderabad the Nizam, the Muslim nobility, and also the Majlis-i-Ittehad, which rallied the bulk of the ruling minority, wanted to preserve the state's autonomy. The Hindu majority, however, wanted its merger with India so that they could enjoy political freedom and participate in the processes of self-government. The parleys that took place between the Nizam's government and the Indian government both before and after the transfer of power reflected the conflicting aspirations of the powerless majority and the ruling

minority of the state. Communal propaganda and the fanaticism of the Ittehad, and to a certain extent of the Arya Samaj and the Hindu Mahasabha, led to a sudden deterioration of the communal situation which was at its lowest ebb when a 'Standstill' Agreement was signed in August 1947 by the Hyderabad and Indian governments (Menon 1956 : 319-29).

As the above political developments were taking place, the communists aligned with the anti-Nizam and pro-merger forces including the Congress, the only known, if not well-organized, body of the nationalist opinion in the state. The Congress embarked on a satyagraha to seek the merger of Hyderabad. The communists, despite their inherent dislike for Gandhian agitational methods, had to go along, but, perhaps, they never anticipated that the state's accession to India would ever become a reality.<sup>9</sup> Their involvement in the peaceful and non-violent satyagraha caused them considerable embarrassment in view of the fact that they had already launched the peasant insurrection on the Telangana front. The setback to the communists due to the alliance with the Congress was perhaps more than psychological. In course of the satyagraha, the Congress and communist workers began to cut down toddy trees partly as a symbolic defiance of the Nizam's government, for whom the trees were an important source of excise revenue, and partly as propaganda against toddy drinking which the Gandhian ethic prohibited.<sup>10</sup> The communists, however, later realized that by cutting down *toddy* trees they were depriving a great many active members of their own dalams and sanghams of their livelihood. Fearing a withdrawal of their support to the insurrection the communists soon dissociated from the satyagraha and the alliance with the Congress (Sundarayya 1972a : 57). A radical wing of the Congress led by Swami Tirth was, in fact, drawing closer to the communists and their insurrectionary tactics, but the political cross-pressures within the Congress prevented him from cultivating the relationship any further. Consequently, the alliance practically ceased to operate in January 1948 (Tirth 1967 : 168, 196-97).

The growing militancy and power of the Majlis Ittehad were evident in the activities of the Razakars, a para-military voluntary force organized by Kasim Razvi, the leader of the Ittehad. In January 1948 more than 30,000 Razakars were enrolled and by August 1948 their number was about 100,000 (GOI, (iii), c : 1 and d : 31). As the peasant insurrection was spreading in rural Telangana, the Nizam's government sent batches of Razakars, sometimes with, but many a time without, any police or army, in order to deal with the recalcitrants and to protect the frontier as well as the distressed landlords

<sup>9</sup>See 'The Communists of Hyderabad', Part III, *The statesman*, 11 May 1950, 8. For details of the Congress satyagraha see Tirth 1967 : 179-83; and also Laik Ali 1962 : 30-37.

<sup>10</sup>Some 19,000 toddy trees were cut down during the satyagraha. See *The statesman*, 9 September 1947, 7.





gana leaders were technically operating (Sundarayya 1972a : 179). It is also significant in this context that the ban was not reimposed (Bedford 1967 : 277), a fact which has gone unnoticed in all the accounts of the insurrection prepared recently by those communist leaders who were directly or indirectly involved in conducting the insurrection. Nevertheless, it seems reasonably clear that the removal of the ban facilitated the work of securing arms and ammunition, from whatever sources possible which the squads and dalams needed badly if they were to hold on to their positions in the face of a serious offensive by a well-trained superior army.

#### IV

#### THE DECLINE OF THE INSURRECTION

On 13 September 1948 the Indian army marched into Hyderabad and within less than a week the Nizam's representatives surrendered. The Nizam outlawed and banned the Razakars and lifted the ban on the State Congress. On India's part the 'Police Action' was taken to put an end to the conditions of anarchy within the state and to ensure the internal security of the neighbouring Indian territory. The 'Police Action' was, therefore, unsavoury but essential (Menon 1956 : 341-82). However, it became apparent later that the Indian government's concern over the undemocratic feudal regime of the Nizam and over the Razakars' terrorism was really secondary to their fears of the Telangana peasants' insurrection and of the possibility of a communist capture of power right in the heart of the Indian territory. The apprehension was not expressed openly until February 1949 (GOI, (iv), 1-71), but it is more than likely that it contributed to the Indian government's intervention far more than any other consideration.<sup>12</sup>

As the Indian army was advancing and rounding up the Razakars, the communist dalams on the Telangana front acquired a large amount of arms and ammunition abandoned by the latter (Menon 1956 : 384). This naturally strengthened the rebels' position but only for a while. Once the Razakars were overpowered, and a military administration set up, the offensive was immediately directed at the peasant rebels in the troubled districts of Telangana. Describing the extent of the repression Sundarayya (1972a : 199) writes: 'In more than 2,000 villages of Nalgonda, Warangal, Karimnagar, Khammam and Hyderabad districts . . . 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'.

<sup>12</sup>Evidently, 'The immediate intention of India's forces in Hyderabad was (a) to round up the communists in the south-eastern districts; (b) to go round, taluk by taluk, tracing out the Razakars and disarming the population so that the Nizam could be retained as the head of State' [GOI, (iii), e. No. 937 : 2, emphasis added].

Fighting with the Indian army over 2,000 peasants, and party workers, were killed. By July 1950 the number of communists and active participants detained had reached 10,000 (Pritt 1950 : 319-20). This should suffice as an index of the degree of intensity of the insurrection.<sup>13</sup>

The army action had successfully liberated Hyderabad and, at least apparently, fulfilled the political aspirations of the people by ending the feudal and anachronistic reign of the Nizam and by paving the way for the state's integration in the Indian Union. The people welcomed the troops enthusiastically and their attitude to the Telangana insurrection changed drastically. The Telangana revolt was no longer a liberation struggle but became mainly the peasants' partisan struggle (Sundarayya 1972a : 425). Similarly, in less than a year after the Indian military took over the administration of Hyderabad, it issued the Jagir Abolition Regulation (August, 1949) and appointed an Agrarian Enquiry Committee to recommend a comprehensive land-reform legislation. These seemingly progressive measures were taken promptly but primarily with the intention of neutralizing the communist influence among the rural masses (Menon 1956 : 385, Khusro 1958 : 12-13).

September 1948 to October 1951 (when the insurrection was called off) was essentially the phase of decline but somewhat paradoxically it was also the most significant phase since it revealed the strength and the weakness of the Telangana revolt.

Who were the principal participants in the Telangana insurrection? What were the social origins of the squad leaders, party workers, and the men who fought? Why did they resist at all? Was it the question of their immediate grievances and privations that stirred the peasantry into the violent resistance or was it the broader and ultimate issue (of radically transforming the system) that motivated the rebels? Finally, why is it that, after a sustained fight for nearly five years, the withdrawal of the struggle became indispensable? These are some of the questions which we shall try to answer, although some of the answers that follow must be treated as tentative in the absence of ampler and still more authentic source material than has been available to us.

It seems reasonably certain that the Telangana revolt was not staged by peasants of a single agrarian stratum. Its adherents had a mixed class character (Harrison 1956 : 390). As mentioned earlier, the leading communists of the Andhra delta and Telangana were well-to-do peasants and

<sup>13</sup>Sundarayya has produced a complete list of 2,517 'martyrs of the struggle'. However, not all of them were killed by the Indian Army; some were killed by the Razakars. See Sundarayya 1972a : 447-506. M. Rao (1973 : 6) claims that some 4,000 communists and peasant fighters were killed either in the encounters or in prison-camps.

came from either the Kamma or the Reddy caste of peasant proprietors.<sup>14</sup> It was, therefore, basic to the interests of rich peasants, who dominated the party, that all other subordinate agrarian classes, such as the small holders (middle peasants) and the tenants and sharecroppers (poor peasants), quite as much as the landless labourers, formed an alliance and launched a combined offensive against the handful of big absentee landlords whose power and dominance could not be threatened otherwise. The multiple grievances of all the sections of the peasantry during the post-war economic crisis had opened up the possibility of such an alliance.

From the beginning of 1946 the communists began a three-pronged attack on the enemies of the peasants: first, they wanted to put an end to the vetti and demanded wage increases. Second, they condemned the large-scale eviction of tenants and demanded both abolition of landlordism and a moratorium on all debts. Third, the communists adopted a dual policy on the question of 'the procurement of grain through compulsory levy'. On the one hand, they deplored the landlords' and deshmukhs' evasion of the levy regulation and their hoarding and profiteering. On the other hand, rich peasants, well-to-do and small holders, who supported the party, were encouraged to withhold the grain-levy (Sundarayya 1972a: 54-59). Such a three-fold appeal alone could hold the diverse agrarian class interests together. The alliance was certainly not free from conflicting interests or cross-pressures. For example, the demand for increased wages was bound to affect the well-to-do peasants whose primary interests lay in keeping the wage level down and avoiding the grain levy. But those rich peasants who were with the party and had sympathetically met the demands of their sharecroppers or labourers were treated as 'neutralized' and their lands and paddy stocks went unscathed (Harrison 1956: 391).

As the insurrection developed, the poor peasants (particularly the tenants and sharecroppers) and the landless labourers began to seize lands from the landlords and deshmukhs and to occupy waste-lands which later they distributed among themselves. In deciding which surplus land to seize, the sangham leaders made liberal concessions to the rich peasants who sided with the rebels. Ceilings on landholdings were also generously fixed. Initially the ceiling was fixed at 500 acres; it was reduced later to 200 acres and then to 100 dry acres and 10 wet acres. These revisions, which were already effected by mid-1948, when the final phase had not yet started, made two things abundantly clear. First, the spontaneous seizure and distribution of land

<sup>14</sup>For example, C. Rajeshwar Rao, M. Basavapunniah, N. Prasad Rao, M. Hanumant Rao, C. Vasudeo Rao were all Kammass, and P. Sundarayya, Ravi Narayan Reddy, and B. Yella Reddy, who were directly involved in conducting the insurrection, were all Reddies. They were either rich landowners themselves or came from such families. See Harrison 1956: 381-82; Sheshadri 1967: 388.



the communist dalams and revolting against the oppressive system they had nothing to lose and everything to gain.<sup>15</sup>

The role of the rich peasants was anything but revolutionary. In the first two years of the insurrection, they gained a great deal from the alliance. Thus, they were able to ward off the grain-levy. But despite the gains, many of them were reluctant to increase the wages of their own labourers in pursuance of the party directives. After the army take-over, the grain-levy issue was no longer focal anyway. Moreover, as the grip of the military administration tightened, and the troops began to suppress the dalams ruthlessly, some rich peasants, while continuing to be apparently loyal to the party, providing food and shelter to the squad-leaders and guerrillas, also acted as informers to the army and the police. (Sundarayya 1972a : 125, 259).

The role of the middle peasants could not be researched into adequately and therefore we shall be able to say little. Our sources, however, do not suggest that the middle peasants played any spectacular part. On the whole, they did not constitute a very significant social category in Telangana either numerically or politically. Thus, the poor peasants and the labourers were the backbone of the resistance right from the beginning and till the very end.

Some data on the local (village) level leaders (see Sundarayya 1972a : 354-90) active either in actual squads or in *samitis* enable us to examine the social character of the leadership. Sundarayya has sketched life-histories of some 80 squad and party leaders who were killed while fighting the army. Unfortunately, the details of their social origin have not been recorded by him uniformly. Occupation has been mentioned in 47 cases : of these 12 were 'rich' peasants, four 'middle' peasants, seven 'poor' or 'small' landholders (including tenant cultivators), 20 agricultural labourers and allied groups, and four others, including a village patel.<sup>16</sup>

Most of these leaders were recent followers of the party. Only five of them had come in contact with the CP or the Andhra Conference/Mahasabha prior to 1946 : nine joined the party in 1947 while a great majority joined the dalams and sanghams in course of the insurrection itself between 1948 and 1951. This confirms, at least partially, the point made earlier that the Telangana revolutionary movement was not a product of a sustained political organization of peasants, and that the participation of peasants as well as of

<sup>15</sup>Sundarayya's account, almost in entirety, supports the contention that the Telangana revolt was predominantly the poor peasant and landless labourer's affair. See Sundarayya 1972a : 90-91; Bedford 1967 : 232.

<sup>16</sup>Here we have relied on the occupational descriptions given by Sundarayya and have grouped them into five categories, on the assumption that his subjective judgment about the 'rich', 'middle', and 'poor' peasants etc. at least broadly corresponds with the objective meaning given to these concepts in this paper. The 'allied groups' in the fourth category include shepherds, toddy-tappers, hunters, ferry-driver, and handloom weaver which normally form part of the rural proletariat.

their leaders was spontaneous.

This brings us to the most important question as to why the withdrawal of the insurrection became necessary. Disunity in the class alliance and the military repression constitute only a part of the story. The intra-party differences over the ideological issues and over the broad objectives of the revolutionary struggle in Telangana should provide us some clues. After the 'Police Action' in Hyderabad, a section of the CPI leadership, the Ranadive group, which had earlier hailed the Telangana insurrection as 'a big landmark in the Communist movement', openly disowned it. Their objection was that the predominantly peasant upsurge did not conform to the classical notion of the 'leadership of the proletariat'. Moreover, their naive hope that the working class in the cities all over the country might rise simultaneously with the Telangana peasants did not materialize (Kautsky 1956: 49, 57). At the ideological level, the question whether the Telangana revolt was 'anti-landlord', 'anti-Nizam (and therefore pro-liberation)', 'anti-bourgeoisie, anti-imperialist and therefore anti-Indian Army', 'the agitation for Vishalandhra' or whether it was uneasy mixture of two or more of these, was never settled.

The Andhra Committee of the CP, which was responsible for directing the upsurge in Telangana, defended strongly its reliance on the peasantry in the revolutionary movement. This, it argued, was in keeping with the Maoist theory of 'new democracy' which propounded a multi-class alliance as the correct strategy for advancing the socialist revolution in colonies and semi-colonies.<sup>17</sup> No matter what the ideological polemics, the practical dilemma of the Andhra and Telangana communists was whether or not to continue the insurrection. The final split came on precisely this issue; Ravi N. Reddy, B. Yella Reddy, and C. Rajeshwar Rao favoured abandonment as they saw in the struggle symptoms of degeneration into 'left adventurism', and 'infantile disorder' or 'individual terrorism' (C.R. Rao 1972: 24-25). On the other side were P. Sundarayya and M. Basavapunniah who criticized the former for their 'right reformism' and advocated continuation of the struggle as a peasant partisan struggle. The latter thought that without continuing the fight, the party might lose the ground gained and the goodwill earned through the seizure and distribution of lands and through the 'village soviets'. The Indian army's presence enabled the landlords and deshmukhs to recapture some of their lands. An abandonment of the struggle would be tantamount to political surrender and betrayal of those peasants who stood resolutely behind the party fighting till the end (Sundarayya 1972a: 177-82, 391-400; Basavapunniah, 1972 (I): 6-7 and (II) 4,10). These intra-party

<sup>17</sup>For details of the differences between the Central Committee of the CPI and the Andhra Committee see Kautsky 1956: 60-80. For the 'Theory of new democracy' see, Mao Tse-tung 1967, II: 339-80, and IV: 411-23.



leaders who were under detention (Ram 1962 : 45-55). Although very little is known as to what passed between him and them, it is not without significance that soon a number of detainees were released by the government. Within months (i.e. in October), the CPI formally declared the struggle withdrawn. The preparations for the first Indian elections, under the Constitution recently adopted, were under way. The prospects of the ban being lifted were in view, and the CPI hoped to participate in the elections, test its political strength and try the constitutional alternative for consolidating the gains of the five-year long insurrection.

Although the CPI in Andhra and Telangana won impressive electoral victories (Gray 1968 : 409-10 : M. Rao 1973 : 4-6), they could do little in introducing any radical changes or modifications in the land reform legislation which was then afoot in the Hyderabad assembly. Jagirdari 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 surrendered their lands voluntarily. They and the landless labourers now found it increasingly difficult to secure land from landlords and rich pattiadars on tenurial lease for cultivation (Nair 1961 : 58-68).<sup>19</sup>

The judgment about the success or failure of a revolutionary movement is not easy to pass as it depends largely on the meaning we give to the words. If seizure of power and sustaining it for a considerable period of time is taken as the touchstone of success then, perhaps, no other peasant revolt or movement in India was more successful than the one in Telangana. If, however, a lasting dent in the agrarian structure and change in the conditions of its principal participants are viewed as the criterion then perhaps the Telangana insurrection was not more successful than other peasant resistance movements in India (Dhanagare, 1973 : 406-26). Like all other movements, though, the Telangana struggle too has become the source of legends and inspiration for the radical left in India. Recently there has been a renewed interest, academic as well as political, in the study of the struggle. Its silver jubilee, celebrated by all the shades of Communist parties in India, however, became an occasion for mutual mud-slinging, but that must be left out of this paper.

<sup>19</sup>Khusro (1958 : 24, 40-42), however, claims that the Telangana upsurge not only speeded up the land reform but also helped create an awareness of their rights among the tenants. Under the provisions of the land reforms the tenants of Telangana, more than their counterparts in Marathwada region, asserted their rights.

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