



THE COMMUNISTS AND THE TELENGANA PEASANT INSURRECTION (1946-1951)

ROMAN BORGHAIN ¹

¹ RESEARCH SCHOLAR, DIBRUGARH UNIVERSITY, ASSAM.

ABSTRACT:

Telengana peasant revolt is one of the major peasant insurrections in India led by the Communists. It was an armed insurrection by the peasants during 1946 to 1951 in Telengana region of former princely state of Hyderabad. The peasants were exploited and dehumanized by the big landlords and the policies by the Nizam of Hyderabad. After independence of India, Nizam decided to remain independent and patronized atrocities by the Razakars force. Under the guidance of Communist Party of India (CPI), the peasants of Telengana raised arms which resulted bloodbath and the death of hundreds of people. Communist guerrillas fought against the forces of Nizam and the mighty Indian army. After Hyderabad was captured by Indian army, Communists gradually lost the mass base and ultimately decided to withdraw the armed insurrection in 1951. This peasant insurrection sparked lots of controversies and brought the plights of peasants into limelight. This paper attempts to analyze the role played by the communists in this historic peasant insurrection in the Telengana region of India.

KEYWORDS:

PEASANTS, LANDLORDS, NIZAM, RAZAKARS, EXPLOITATION, TELENGANA, PEASANT INSURRECTION, CPI, COMMUNIST GUERRILLAS.

THE AGRARIAN STRUCTURE

The area of the State of Hyderabad was some 82,000 square miles and its population was 11.1 million in 1901 which had gone up to 18.6 million by 1951.¹ The agrarian social structure of Hyderabad was very much dominated by the landlords. There were two types of land tenures in the state- *khalsa* or *diwani* and *jagirs*. *Khalsa* or *diwani* tenure which was also known as *raiayatwari* implied as the peasant proprietary system and almost held 60 percent of land in 1941. In this system land holders were treated as *pattadars* or registered occupants while the actual occupants were called *shikmidars* who had occupancy rights but not registered.² On the other hand *jagirs* were some special tenures and *sarf-e-khas* was the most important one being assigned to the Nizam himself as crown lands.³ *Jagirdari* system was the most important feature of land administration of Hyderabad. The *jagirdars* and their agents were free to impose taxes on the peasants according to their wish. In *khalsa* system the *deshmukhs* or *deshpandes* were the biggest landlords the kingpin of exploitation of the peasants.

The Telengana region of the state of Hyderabad comprised of nine districts namely Adilabad, Hyderabad, Karimnagar, Khammam, Mahbubnagar, Medak, Nalgonda, Nizamabad and Warangal. In Telengana districts, the exploitation was more intense by the big landlords, *deshmukhs*, and *jagirdars*. People were deprived of the land ownership and instances like forceful transfer of land ownership were common. Land ownership by the big landlords were concentrated in the areas namely Nalgonda, Mahbubnagar, Warangal and Nizamabad which were later became the hotbed of Telengana peasant insurrection. In Telengana districts, the rise of *Reddis* and *Kammas* as the two

dominant castes of peasant proprietors reduced the influence of *Brahmins*. The *Komtis* and the *Marwadi sahumkars* were influential, the former as traders, shopkeepers and merchants and the latter as money-lenders.⁴ The peasants, tenants, share-croppers and agricultural labourers basically belonged to the untouchable castes such as *Malas* and *Madigars* or from tribal groups like the *Hill Reddis*, *Chenchus*, *Koyas*, *Lambadis* and *Banjaras*.⁵

Land alienation was a major problem for peasants in Telengana districts. The peasants were ignored and alienated because majority of the peasants were in miserable condition and they belonged to untouchable or hill tribal castes. In between 1910 to 1940, the land ownership of the poor peasants belonged to untouchables or tribals was forcefully transferred to the big landlords and to the *Brahmins*, *Komtis*, *Marwaris* and *Muslims*.⁶ Land alienation resulted in increasing number of landless labourers and the big landlords became dominant in the agrarian class structure in the Telengana districts.

POLITICAL SCENARIO AND THE COMMUNISTS

The Nizam of Hyderabad was indeed a despotic ruler and people had no political freedom. In 1928, an organization called Andhra Conference was established which mainly operated in Telengana districts. It served as a platform to mobilize people against the exploitation of landlords and Nizam. Gradually Andhra Conference expended its network in the villages of Telengana districts by taking up the agrarian issues.⁷ In 1934, Andhra Communist Party was established and gradually extended its reach to Telengana region. The *Kammas*, basically peasants, were the source of strength of Communists while *Brahmins* and *Reddis* dominated Congress.⁸ Congress in Hyderabad was

not much concerned about the plight of the peasants and there was no commitment from their end for agrarian reform. In most cases they failed to raise their voice for the betterment of the peasantry. It is interesting that Congress were very much concerned about the growing influence of Communist in the State of Hyderabad, particularly in the Telengana districts. The communists came closer to the peasant masses by raising voices for their cause and offering leadership in their struggle. In such a scenario, Congress was trying to make space of their own by diminishing the Communists' popularity. Congress leader Acharya Vinoba Bhave was in fact in there for the pacification campaign and to spread anti-communist propaganda among the peasantry.⁹ In 1938, the Hyderabad unit of Congress launched a *satyagraha* for political reform which prompted the Nizam to ban them. Later on CPI too was banned (1940-1942) which paved the way Andhra Conference to dominate the politics of Hyderabad.

During the ban, Communists in Andhra were funded and supported by rich *Kammas* and they operated with help of All India Kishan Sabha, Andhra Mahasabha and so on.¹⁰ In 1942, the ban on CPI was lifted by Government of India and soon they became influential over Andhra Conference and Andhra Mahasabha. The Communists became powerful in Telengana region and influenced the leadership and workers of Andhra Conference too. But they had to deal with the raids on their party offices and party workers by the goons which were openly encouraged by the all-India Congress leaders like Dr. Pattabhi Sitaramayya and N. G. Ranga. Their constant and ceaseless work on people's issues, close ties with the people through thick and thin, that enabled the Communists to rally 100,000 people at the All India Kishan Sabha Conference in Bezwada in 1944 and the next year, 50,000 to the Provincial Kishan Sabha Conference in Tenali.¹¹ Influenced by the Communists, Andhra Conference gradually became a mass militant organization against the Nizam Government.¹² The young communists of the organization raised their voice against the exploitation of peasants by the big landlords, *deshmukhs* and *sahukars*. Demands for abolition of landlordism and oppressive *vetti* system (forced labour and exactions)¹³ became strong in Telengana districts. In between 1944 to 1946, the Andhra Communists organized annual conferences of the All India Kishan Sabha, All India Students' Federation and Railwaymen's Federation making Andhra the citadel of CPI.¹⁴ But the Communists subtly refrained from openly raising their voices against the Nizam till 1945. They increased their membership all over Andhra and Telengana who were basically landless labourers, poor tenants and small landholders.

TELENGANA INSURRECTION AND COMMUNIST GUIDANCE

From 1946 onwards, *sanghams* (local branches of Andhra Conference) launched village level struggle against the exploitation of peasants and landless labourers. This struggle became intense with instances of the seizure of property of the big landlords and *deshmukhs*. In July 1946

thousands of peasants armed with *lathis* (sticks) and *slings* rallied in a village which was under Vishnur Deshmukh's estate.¹⁵ The hired goons of the *deshmukhs* killed a *sangham* called Doddi Komarayya and injured many which ultimately marked the beginning of Telengana peasant insurrection. This armed struggle made the Communists dominant in some 300 to 400 villages in the districts of Nalgonda, Warangal and Khammam. Propaganda card was played by the Communists and the fight became more intensified when Andhra Conference was banned in 1946 by Nizam's government. People of Telengana districts spontaneously joined the struggle against the Nizam and landlords. They realized that not the promises of the landlords but a collective armed struggle can liberate them and fulfill their necessities. Nizam tried to suppress the peasants with iron fists and arrested hundreds of CPI workers. In the meantime India became independent on 15 August 1947 but Nizam had already expressed his desire to remain independent. Almost all the political parties except Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen urged Nizam to join the Indian Union but on 27 August 1947, Nizam declared independence of Hyderabad. A paramilitary voluntary force called Razakars was organized by Kasim Razvi, the leader of Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen.

In the beginning Congress and the Communists worked together and led the campaigns such as refusal to pay taxes on land and on Palm and Date trees and non-payment of customs tax.¹⁶ As a result the police and the Razakars terrorized and murdered people including the Communist workers. The Nizam was in fact unable to check the Razakars' action. On the one hand Razakars and police forced the villagers not to cooperate with Congress and Communists and on the other hand Congress and Communist volunteers forced the villagers not to cooperate with the government.¹⁷ Due to the ongoing clashes between the communists and the forces of Nizam, many migrated to towns and other parts of Indian Union. The Communist leadership ultimately decided to launch armed insurrection and guerilla warfare for the cause of the peasants in Telengana region. The Andhra Communist Party supported the Telengana Movement and by the end of 1947 they succeeded in distributing the land of rich landlords among the poor and established local rule in about 3,000 villages.¹⁸ But the Razakars were not ready to give up easily and launched punitive measures by arresting suspected and potential agitators, terrorized the innocent and in fact targeted the women. The Nizam and his government were reduced to mute spectator and left with no option but to support them. The Communist dominated Telengana region was primarily targeted by the Razakars and police force. During the course of revolt, peasant masses were subjected to humiliation and indignities. The women were molested by the Nizam's Razakar forces. The communist too in response resorted to armed insurrection and formed groups of volunteers called *dalams* to fight against them. The peasantry of about 3,000 villages in an area of 16,000 square miles, mostly in the areas of Nalgonda, Warangal and Khammam successfully fought against the forces of Nizam.¹⁹ A parallel

administration was established by the Communists in the vast region of Telengana which increased the intensity of the armed insurrection. The seized lands were distributed among the landless labourers and the tenants and the guerrilla squads protected the areas under their control. Forced labour was halted and the suppressive forest officials were compelled to leave the nearby forest areas. Thousands of peasants, students and party workers joined the armed insurrection in Telengana.

INTERVENTION OF INDIAN ARMY AND DECLINE OF INSURRECTION

In May 1948, Hyderabad government decided to lift the ban on CPI which ultimately facilitated the Communists in gathering arms and ammunition from various sources in order to hold on to their position against the combined force of police and Razakars. Taking note of atrocities and mass killing, Government of India deployed Indian army into Hyderabad. Looking at the advances by the army, Nizam's forces and the Razakars surrendered without any resistance.²⁰ The communist *dalams* took the opportunity and gathered sizeable amount of arms and ammunition abandoned by the Razakars. Indian army then targeted the communist squads and almost 2,000 peasants and party workers were killed in fighting against the former.²¹

Indian army's intervention ultimately ended the feudal reign of the Nizam and hence liberated the state of Hyderabad. The Razakars menace was curbed and the Razakar leaders, Kasim Razvi and others were put behind bars.²² In less than a year the Hyderabad administration issued the Jagir Abolition Regulation in August 1949 and appointed an Agrarian Enquiry Committee for land-reform in the state. It was aimed at reducing the influence of communists and gradually peoples' attitude towards Telengana insurrection changed considerably. Meanwhile Congress became the main adviser to the military government and landlords and rich peasants along with a large number of populations supported them. This was against the Communists' gain in state and in response the Andhra Provincial Committee decided to revitalize the armed struggle against the Nehru's armies. Guerrilla warfare was resumed and communist squads penetrated deep into the forest-tribal areas. It was necessary to defend the gains of Telengana peasantry against the attempts of *deshmukhs* and landlords who were trying to regain their position and seized lands with the help of the army.²³ The army began to kill and arrest the communist guerrillas and their supporters which made the communist fighters helpless. To name a few, Suryapet-Khammam-Manukota areas stood firm for continuing the armed struggle and defending the gains of the Telengana struggle. Peasant masses of Telengana region were ultimately victim of torture by the army. In such a scenario it became impossible for the Communist Party to continue the armed struggle difference of opinion emerged among the party leaders. During the last stage of Telengana peasant insurrection, the Communist party from top to bottom was sharply divided into two camps, one defending the struggle and its achievements and the

other denouncing and decrying it as act of terrorism.²⁴ Due to decreasing mass base and the aggressive nature of the army the party realized that it is not similar to fight against the Government of India alike they did against the government of Nizam. Hence they tried to bargain some concessions for its leaders and guerrilla volunteers which failed to yield and desired result. Ultimately Communist Party unilaterally deciding to withdraw the armed struggle unconditionally in October 1951.²⁵

CONCLUSION

The Communists mobilized the people against forced labour, exploitation by the landlords, land alienation, untouchability and other social evils. Telengana peasant insurrection was the example of communist movement on the ideology of class conflict. The support from the Andhra Communist Party became the driving force of the insurrection. From the beginning of 1946, the Communists began a three-pronged attack on the enemies of peasant. Firstly, they wanted to end the *vetti* labour system and demanded wage increases. Secondly, they condemned the large-scale eviction of tenants and demanded abolition of landlordism. Thirdly, the communists adopted a dual policy on the question of the 'procurement of grain through compulsory levy'.²⁶ They were basically trying to achieve the agrarian class interest through those demands. When the insurrection developed the seizure of the lands of big landlords by the Communists squads changed the environment and enlarged the scope of the revolt. But the latter stages of development many rich peasants distanced themselves from the insurrection and the agricultural labourers, tenants and small holders were left to carry on. There was also difference among the Telengana Communist leaders as prominent leaders like Ravi Narayan Reddy, B. Yella Reddy and C. Rejeswar Rao disassociated themselves from the struggle and later criticized the insurrection. Ravi Reddy in fact termed the act of land seizure as 'ill conceived' and urged for the withdrawal of the insurrection.²⁷ In such a scenario Andhra and Telengana communists were in dilemma whether to continue the insurrection or not. But leaders like P. Sundarayya and M. Basavapuniah advocated for the continuation of the struggle as they considered that the party may lose the mass base which they gained through the insurrection. Hence the intra-party conflicts among the Communists in the later stages contributed towards the decline of Telengana peasant insurrection. The present ideological and organizational split in the Communist Party of India can be traced back to the differences in the thinking of the party's leadership during the last phase of Telengana insurrection.²⁸ While CPI considers the armed struggle in Telengana as undesirable, CPI (M) justified the same as a partisan peasant struggle but not as a liberation struggle against the then Government of India. On the contrary Revolutionary Communist party firmly justified the insurrection and considered the use of arms as necessary for the revolution.

By leading peasant struggles in the various pockets of the country, Communists became a considerable force in

Indian politics. Their involvement and guidance made them popular among the peasant masses in India. In fact this popularity helped them to be the major opposition party in Indian politics when Congress was overwhelmingly dominant after independence. The Communists played vital role in the Telengana peasant insurrection. On the one hand Telengana insurrection helped the left movement in India to be in forefront and on the other hand communist involvement brought the plight of the peasants into broad daylight and attracted the attention of national politics.

REFERENCES

1. D. N. Dhanagare, 'Social Origins of the Peasant Insurrection in Telengana, 1946-51', in Ghanshyam Shah, ed. Social Movements and The State: Readings in Indian Government and Politics-4, New Delhi, Sage, 2011, pp. 91-124.
2. Ibid., p. 94.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. 96.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p. 97.
7. Ibid., p. 100.
8. Ibid., p. 101.
9. P. Sundarayya, 'Telengana', in A. R. Desai, ed. Peasant Struggles in India, New Delhi, Oxford, 1985, pp. 532-36.
10. Dhangare, op. cit., p. 101.
11. P. Sundarayya, 'The Communist Movement in Andhra: Terror Regime-1948-51', in A. R. Desai, ed. Peasant Struggles in India, New Delhi, Oxford, 1985, pp. 545-64.
12. Dhangare, op. cit., p. 101.
13. P. Sundarayya, 'Hyderabad State-its Socio-political Background', A. R. Desai, ed. Peasant Struggles in India, New Delhi, Oxford, 1985, pp. 537-44.
14. Dhangare, op. cit., p. 102.
15. Ibid., p. 105.
16. K. Ranga Rao, 'Peasant Movement in Telengana', in M. S. A. Rao, ed. Social Movements in India: Studies in Peasant, Backward Classes, Sectarian, Tribal and Women's Movement', New Delhi, Manohar, 2012, pp.149-68.
17. Ibid., p. 159.
18. Ibid., p. 160.
19. Sundarayya, op. cit., p. 533.
20. Dhangare, op. cit., p. 110.
21. Ibid., p. 111.
22. Ranga Rao, op. cit., p. 162.
23. Sundarayya, op. cit., p. 567.
24. Ibid., p. 535.
25. Ranga Rao, op. cit., p. 163.
26. Dhangare, op. cit., p. 112.
27. Ibid., p. 114.
28. Ranga Rao, op. cit., p. 149.