

# From Reform to Revolution: Raise and Fall of Dalit Movement in the Telangana region

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## **Abstract:**

Telangana region of Hyderabad State is considered one of the cradles of Dalit enlightenment in the Indian peninsula; much earlier than the independence, and before the merger in India, Dalits organized with a progressive, reformistic agenda in erstwhile Hyderabad State. Jagan Mithramandali (1906) is considered the first rallying point for former untouchables, and the legacy of the independent Dalit movement continued till the communist parties started their activities in the region. Among early consolidations, Manyasangham (1911) the Adi-Hindu movement provided an ideological base on the philosophy of equality and a strategy for the Dalits to do better in everyday life. The movement also nursed a political culture for organized protest among the Dalits to fight for their civil rights. After the 1930s, the activities of Andhra Jana Sangham and Andhra Mahasabha appear to be addressed the social and cultural issues related to Dalits that have hijacked the agenda of the Dalit movement. This paper gives a preliminary understanding of the early Dalit movement in the princely state. Further, the paper explains how the communist parties hijacked the whole issue and subjugated the Dalit movement and its reformist agenda; both Telangana Peasant Armed Struggle to the popular Maoist-Naxalite movement.

**Index Terms - Dalits, Hyderabad State, Adi Hindu, Telangana Armed Struggle, Communists-Naxalite Movement**

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

### **The Early Dalit Movement in Telangana**

The roots of the Telangana Dalit movement can be traced back to the erstwhile Hyderabad state of the Nizam Dominion, particularly in the early twentieth century when a platform emerged to display Dalit strength in the form of a conscious, self-confident as well as politically active neo-class of outcastes. This was one of the fundamental developments of the period. Bhagya Reddy Varma (1888-1939) laid the foundation for the Dalit movement in the Telangana region (Yagati Chinna Rao, 2003). In 1906, Varma founded an organization called Jagan Mitra Mandali and started to work on awakening social consciousness among the untouchables. He organized regular Harikatha (a kind of cultural performance) to convince them that they were the genuine and unique inhabitants of the country and that the others had migrated into the country from Central Asia for their livelihood, and that the main reasons for their backwardness were their ignorance and illiteracy (Abbasayulu, 1978). The Mandali also organized inter-dining or *Preeti bhojanam* among all untouchables. This helped give rise to a feeling of oneness among them and brought them together to fight for the betterment of their brethren (Yagati Chinna Rao, 2003).

In 1911, Varma founded Manya Sangam'. The principal aims and objectives of this organization were to educate all children of the untouchables, to eradicate child marriage, and to eliminate the 'Devadasi' known as 'Jogini' or 'Basavi' tradition, which was widespread in the community (Venkata Swamy, 1955) This helped awaken social consciousness among the Dalits. Being the biggest princely State in the Indian subcontinent, Hyderabad state, under the Nizam's rule, provided the sub-stratum for one more unique development in the Dalit movement. The Dalits of Hyderabad owned an 'Adi-Hindu' theme, according to which they were the offspring of the original inhabitants of this country who were the rulers and owners of the land of this land of their birth before the arrival of the Aryans to the country. The Manya Sangam, established by Varma, was renamed Adi-Hindu Social Service League in 1922. The Madras government accepted the request of the Dalits to be addressed by their regional name, prefixing Adi to it, i.e., Adi-Andhra, Adi-Dravida, etc. Varma organized the first All-India Adi-Hindu Social Service Conference in Hyderabad, which was held from March 29 to March 31, 1922. The three-day conference was attended by Dalits from different regions (Yagati Chinna Rao, 2003).

During this phase, other personalities like Arigay Ramaswamy (1885-1973) were pivotal to Dalit activities in the early period. Ramaswamy established the Adi-Hindu Jatiyonnati Sabha in 1924 and supported it as a substitute organization for the Adi-Hindu Social Service League. This organization aimed to remove the immoral appellations regarding the identity of Adi-Hindu and non-Aryan egalitarian traditions (Gail Omvedt, 1995). Madari Adaiiah started another Manya Sangam. He urged the community to abandon liquor and eliminate the Jogini system; he also preached against animal sacrifice and child marriage (Venkataswamy, 1955). Since 1920, most of the all-India Adi-Hindu (depressed classes) conferences were held in north or central India – Delhi, Allahabad, Lucknow, and Nagpur. They enabled networking among regional Dalit leaders from various parts of the country. These leaders were M.C. Rajah of Madras, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar of Bombay, Swami Atchutanand of Kanpur (U.P.), Babu Shiva Prasad Rajak of Bengal, Babu Virrath Devi Das of Delhi, and Manishi Dev of Punjab.

In 1931, around the time of the Second Round Table Conference, a special political session of the All India Adi-Hindu conference was held in Lucknow. Bhagya Reddy Varma presided over this conference, which representatives from all over India attended. The most momentous declaration of the conference was the recognition of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar as the sole and true representative to speak on behalf of Adi-Hindus (untouchables) in India; a resolution passed unanimously. The second important resolution, adopted collectively, reiterated the demand for a separate electorate with sufficient weightage to the Adi-Hindu community. The 1931 census in Hyderabad created a dynamic debate in the country when it reported a division among untouchables concerning their orientation towards Hinduism (Census of India, 1931). While organizing several conferences and political negotiations with the Nizam state in the 1920s and 1930s, the Dalit movement there witnessed cultural struggles among the Dalits. Many accused the so-called sympathizers of the depressed classes of trying to create divisions among the untouchables.

Again, in May 1933, Reddy Bhomi Navayuvakka Mandali of Nagpur organized a conference presided over by Varma. This was Varma's last active participation in the Dalit movement, as his health worsened shortly afterward. The movement took a back seat with his death in 1939. Besides, the strength of the Congress and Communist parties in the fight against Nizam's rule, coupled with internal differences among the Dalit leadership, did not give much scope for independent Dalit organizations to grow. As a result, the movement became weak. Divisions in the movement, the founding of rival Adi-Hindu organizations, and rival reformist caste panchayats produced occasional physical confrontations and fights between factions (Chandraiah, 1992). B.S. Venkata Rao had differences with Arigay Ramaswamy and later with Subbaiah. Rival organizations denounced Varma for being partial to the cause of the Malas and creating differences within the movement. Due to this dimension of the Adi-Hindu movement, there emerged an independent association of the Madigas, which also received caste Hindu assistance. The Arundatiya Mahasabha became the organization of the Madigas to first put forth the community's demands independently of those of the other communities. The differences were more due to personal rivalry than ideological or political differences. However, the shifting equations among the Dalit leaders confused the Dalits about whom to support. They had no option except to join the famous Communist and Congress parties (Gail Omvedt, 1995).

The early Dalit movement was focused on equity and self-respect and had a reformist agenda. It attempted to mainstream Dalits and issues related to the community, such as untouchability and social exclusion. To counter the discriminative attitude of Hindu society, the Dalit leadership, particularly Bhagya Reddy Varma, put forth the notion of the Adi-Hindu. They outlined an idealized vision of social equality and the past power and glory of the untouchables. 'Self-assertion' was an essential principle of the Adi-Hindu movement. Exploring the identities of self-assertion and empowerment that the Adi movements espoused, Nandini Gooptu says that by declaring the untouchables to be the true masters of the land, the Adi-Hindu preachers cultivated in them a sense of entitlement to rights and power at the same time as they heightened awareness among them of their historical deprivation. The stress on *Atma Gyan* (self-knowledge) and introspection as the source of independent knowledge (and not knowledge circumscribed by impositions from the higher castes) also enabled the exposition of a distinct, autonomous, proud, and even defiant self-identity of the untouchables. The Adi-Hindu movement provided not only an ideology of radical equality and a strategy for the Dalits to do better in everyday life but also nursed and grew a political culture for organized protest among the Dalits to fight for their civil rights.

## Dalits and Telangana Peasants' Armed Struggle

With the decline of the Dalit movement in Telangana, there arose the need for a revolutionary movement to address the rights of landless agricultural laborers, mostly belonging to the Dalit, Adivasi, and Dalit Bahujan communities. The Telangana peasants' armed struggle was a peasant rebellion between 1946 and 1951 against the feudal lords of the Telangana region and later against the princely State of Hyderabad. Agrarian relations were formally classified under the Ryotwari *and* Jagirdari systems. In the Ryotwari system, the landholders were not called owners but were treated as *spattadars* (registered occupants). As pressure on land grew, sub-leasing became popular, and those who took the land on sub-lease later became genuine cultivators. The majority of the Jagirs were in the nature of *Sarf-e-Khas* or crown lands and were used as the Nizam's private property; other Jagirs were typically feudal tenures. A class of landed gentry, consisting of Muslim Jagirdars and Hindu Deshmukhs belonging to the Reddy, Velama, and Brahmin castes, locally known as Dora, played a dominant role in the community. Because of their economic and political standing, they could easily subject the poor peasantry to extra-economic coercion through the *vetti* system. Agricultural laborers and poor peasants of the Mala and Madiga caste groups were the immediate victims of the *vetti* system. Another practice was the Jogini system, in which Dalit women are sexually exploited in the name of tradition. They were slaves in the landlords' houses and were used by the landlords as concubines (Jacob and Bandhu, 2002).

Andhra Jana Sangham, the first exclusive social organization of Telugus in Telangana, was formed in 1922 to propagate Telugu literature and culture. In its 1930 conference, the Sangham rechristened itself as Andhra Mahasabha. This organization pushed for the social and cultural advancement of the people of Telangana. It aimed to revise the education system, adopt the mother tongue of Telugu as the medium of instruction, discourage child marriage, eradicate untouchability, and gain their due place in society for the untouchables. The Andhra Mahasabha (AMS) became the main organization through which Congress and the Communists began to function in the 1940s. The AMS had been taking up the demands of the rural poor and the prosperous peasantry in the Telangana region. It agitated for the reduction of land taxes and debt relief, apart from calling for the abolition of *vetti* (Dhanagare, 2002). The AMS, under the leadership of the Communists, organized armed struggles against feudal landlordism and the Nizam's autocratic rule in Telangana.

By the late 1940s, the Nizam rulers, in order to protect their power, created a private army called the *Razakars* (state paramilitary wing). However, matters took a new turn with India attaining independence in 1947 and the subsequent refusal of the Nizam to join the Indian Union. The CP (Communist Party) called for a guerilla struggle against the *Razakars* and the government forces by forming village defense committees and providing arms training to *Dalams* (armed squads). Several hundred volunteers received training in guerilla warfare. The guerilla struggle spread to several villages in Nalgonda, Warangal, Khammam, Karimnagar, Medak, and Adilabad. The administrative machinery of the Nizam came to a standstill, and a parallel administration described as *Gramraj* in the local dialect and as 'Village Soviets' by the Communists was set up in nearly 4000 villages. By August 1948, it was claimed that about 10,000 peasants, students, and party workers were active in the village squads and some 2000 in the mobile guerrilla units. In the process of the struggle, one million acres of land was to be taken; out of this, nearly one-tenth was government-held forest and wasteland, but that land had not been granted to the landless people. In all this, however, the actual role of Dalits in the struggle appears to have been a subordinate one.

Most of the workforce in the *Dalams* came from the untouchable castes of Malas and Madigas and from among the tribals (Gail Omvedt, 1994). In the struggle against the government, all these groups were forced to work and fight collectively without any distinction of caste and creed; as a result, the fight against the evil of untouchability became easier after this struggle. In the guerrilla squads where equality and mutual respect were strictly practiced, this change could be seen, particularly among the youth and women. Women, especially from the scheduled castes and the tribal peasantry, played a crucial role in the Telangana movement. They fought against the landlords and police by providing shelter and care to the underground revolutionaries. They also fought for their land and wage enhancement. They were the messengers and the links between the leaders of the movement. The Telangana movement brought about a new kind of sensitivity among the peasantry. It was a fight for the self-respect of the poor, to bring them on equal terms with the others. This struggle emerged out of the experiences of deprivation and humiliation of the poor peasants, their women, and their children (Dhanagare, 1983).

Ilaiah (2004), examining the Communist movement, observed that the entire Telangana armed struggle could not produce a single Dalit leader or ideologue. The Communist political platforms were only available to the upper castes, mainly to the Reddy, Brahmin, and Velma intellectuals. But even though they played a subordinate role and did not throw up a single leader from their midst, the Dalits did become a revolutionary force in opposing the dominating, upper caste cultural humiliations heaped upon them and daring to fight against the landlords. Not only that, the Dalits continue to be a driving force in the ongoing armed struggle in Andhra Pradesh, particularly in the Telangana region. This is despite various governments having implemented several welfare programs for them. This spirit of struggle among the Dalits owed immensely to the Telangana peasants' armed revolution. Dalit awakening can be considered a positive contribution to the armed struggle of Telangana. A vast majority of rural Dalits acknowledge this.

Though the Telangana peasants' armed struggle was a peasant rebellion against the feudal lords of the Telangana region and the princely State of Hyderabad, it helped Dalits to understand the importance of land and power. The peasants' struggle brought some socio-cultural changes among the Dalits. They did lack leadership, but this lacuna was filled up in the next phase of revolutionary movements.

When India became independent on August 15, 1947, the ruler of Hyderabad State, Mir Osman Ali Khan, the seventh Nizam, preferred to retain the State as an independent entity. This was also a period of internal unrest in the State. On one side, the feudal lords exploited the peasantry; on the other, the people revolted against the feudal system and the autocratic rule of the Nizam. Under those circumstances, the Government of India compelled the Nizam to merge Hyderabad State with the Indian Union through an armed intervention on September 17, 1948. In 1952, elections to the state assembly were held, and a popular government assumed power, with Dr. Burgula Ramakrishna Rao heading it as Chief Minister. To merge Telangana and Andhra, the 'Gentlemen's Agreement' was signed on February 20, 1956, to safeguard the rights of Telangana. On November 1, 1956, Andhra Pradesh was formed under the States Re-organization Act.

The major issues discussed throughout the pre-Independence phase concerning the liberation of the Dalits continued to pose a grim challenge to India's post-colonial State. Instead of resolving the issues of caste prejudices and untouchability, upper-caste Hindu violence against Dalits increased after Independence (Sanjay Paswan and Paramanshi Jaideva, 2004). Land reforms have been formulated in India from time to time to diminish inequalities in society. In the case of Andhra Pradesh, numerous land legislations have been framed to accommodate Dalits in the agrarian sector. The following are the most significant of them: the Andhra Pradesh (Andhra Area) Estates Land (Reduction of Rent) Act, 1947; The Madras Estate (Abolition and Conversion into Ryotwari) Act 1948; The Andhra Pradesh (Telangana Area) Tenancy and Agricultural Lands Act, 1950; the Andhra Inams (Abolition and Conversion into Ryotwari) Act, 1956; the Andhra Tenancy Act, 1956; The Andhra Pradesh Ceiling on Agricultural Holdings Act, 1961; and The Andhra Pradesh Land Reform (Ceiling on Agricultural Holdings) Act, 1972.

During the same period the well-read and employed Dalits embarked on the installation of statues of Dr. Ambedkar and celebrated his birth and death anniversaries; these activities became the essential tools for Dalit mobilization in the 1950s and 1960s. Above all, post-the 1970s, the political process brought about by Indira Gandhi established a direct relationship between the Congress and the Dalit *wadas*. This led to a perceptible impact on Dalits in every facet of life. To further education among the Dalits, the government authorities opened up many S.C. welfare hostels, and, through the reservation, a small section of educated youth was paid a regular salary. However, among the Dalit elites, consciousness was restricted to only the process of Harijanisation, which did not include education, employment, or marginalized leadership on its agenda. This provided a space for the Naxalite movement, which attracted members not only from the newly emerged middle class, university-educated youth from both upper and backward castes, who professed a progressive Marxist ideology, but also the marginalized Dalit youth who were reluctant to follow the caste-based discriminations in the villages.