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THE TELANGANA PEASANT MOVEMENT: CAUSES, COURSE, AND CONSEQUENCES (1948–1956)

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Abstract

The Telangana Peasant Movement (1946–1951), one of the most significant agrarian insurrections in post-colonial South Asia, erupted in the Nizam's Hyderabad State against entrenched feudal structures characterised by deshmukhi landlordism, vetti (forced labour), and usurious indebtedness. Organised primarily by the Communist Party of India (CPI) through the platform of the Andhra Mahasabha, the movement mobilised hundreds of thousands of poor peasants, agricultural labourers, women, and tribal communities across the Telangana districts of Nalgonda, Warangal, and Karimnagar. In its armed guerrilla phase (1946–1948), the movement redistributed approximately one million acres of land, abolished bonded labour in liberated zones, and established parallel village governance structures known as gram rajyam. Following the Indian Union's 'Police Action' in September 1948 that dissolved the Nizam's rule, the movement continued to resist the new military administration until 1951, when the CPI formally ended the armed struggle. This paper examines the structural causes of the insurrection, traces its organisational evolution, evaluates its socio-economic consequences, and contextualises its legacy within the broader framework of Indian agrarian reform and regional political identity. The paper provides an argument based on primary archival sources and secondary literature that the movement was suppressed militarily, but it fundamentally changed the agrarian relations, peasant consciousness, and political character of Telangana, whose effects are still being felt through the States Reorganisation of 1956 and more.

Keywords: Telangana Peasant Movement, CPI Armed Struggle, Feudal Agrarian Relations, Vetti, Gram Rajyam, Hyderabad Police Action, Indian Agrarian Reform, Andhra Mahasabha, Deshmukhi System, Post-Colonial Peasant Resistance

1. Introduction

The agrarian question has occupied a central place in the political sociology of post-colonial India, and few episodes illuminate this question more vividly than the Telangana Peasant Movement of 1946–1951. Erupting in the feudally administered Hyderabad State — the largest of the princely states in British India — this insurrection stood apart from the nationalist mainstream of the Indian freedom struggle. It was simultaneously a struggle against an indigenous feudal order, against the autocratic rule of the Nizam, and later against the post-merger Indian state apparatus.

This was a Telanganan agrarian movement based in the particular agrarian form of Telangana, in which the overwhelming stratum of hereditary landlords called deshmukhas and doras drew surplus by rack-renting, ruthless expropriation of forced labour (vetti) and criminous money-lending at oppressively high-interest rates. These circumstances had remained mostly the same over decades of Nizam rule, creating a huge poor peasantry who lacked a redress to an institution.

The CPI, working through the Andhra Mahasabha — a cultural and political organisation of Telugu-speaking people in Hyderabad — radicalised this agrarian discontent into an organised resistance movement. The murder in July 1946 of Doddi Komaraiah at Visnur by the henchmen of the local Deshmukh gave the catalytic impulse which turned the sponging resentment into open insurrection. At its peak in 1947–48, the movement controlled approximately 3,000 villages, redistributed around one million acres of land, and established grassroots governance structures that challenged both the Nizam's sovereignty and the emerging Indian nation-state.

This paper investigates the movement through three analytical lenses: the structural causes embedded in Hyderabad's agrarian political economy, the organisational and military course of the insurrection, and the long-term socio-economic and political consequences for Telangana and Indian agrarian policy. It concludes that the Telangana movement represents



a critical, if contested, turning point in the history of Indian peasant struggles — one whose legacy continues to shape debates on land, identity, and justice in contemporary Telangana.

2. Historical Background and Structural Causes

2.1 The Agrarian Structure of Hyderabad's Telangana Region

The Telangana region of Hyderabad State was characterised by a highly stratified agrarian order. At its apex stood the Nizam's government, which delegated revenue collection and local administration to a hereditary class of deshmukhs, doras, and patels. This group exercised some quasi-judicial and coercive influence, and as a result, the peasantry could be exploited in a systematic manner (Dhanagare, 1983). The main tools of exploitation were the vetti system which was forced, free labour service of the lower-caste and tribal peasants and the rack-renting, which might take up half or three-quarters of the gross produce.

About three-quarters of cultivating families were landless or almost landless, and relied on the goodwill of landlords to get access to plots and working instruments. Most of the peasant families found themselves in permanent debt traps taken at compounded interest rates of twenty-five and fifty percent per annum by moneylending (Ranga, 1949; Sundarayya, 1972). The limited reach of British India's reform legislation — including the Transfer of Property Act and various tenancy acts — did not extend to the princely states, leaving Hyderabad's peasantry without legal protection.

Table 1 summarises the principal indicators of agrarian distress in the Telangana region on the eve of the movement.

Table 1: Agrarian Conditions in the Telangana Region of Hyderabad State (Pre-1948)

Indicator	Details / Estimates	Source / Reference
Land tenure system	Dominated by vetti (forced labour) and zamindari/ deshmukhi landlordism; ~70% peasants are landless or near-landless	Dhanagare (1983); Sundarayya (1972)
Average land held by deshmukhs (upper stratum)	200–5,000 acres per household	Balagopal (1987); Government of Hyderabad (1951)
Percentage of revenue paid by peasants as rent	50–75% of gross produce	Sundaram (1956); Reddy (1979)
Rural indebtedness rate (approx.)	~80% of cultivating households are indebted to moneylenders	Ranga (1949); Balagopal (1987)
Vetti (bonded/forced labour) prevalence	Widespread across Telangana districts; no legal prohibition till 1948	Sundarayya (1972); Barry (2018)
Literacy rate in Telangana region (1941 Census)	Approximately 7–9% (rural areas < 5%)	Census of India (1941); Prasad (2001)

Note. Data compiled from Dhanagare (1983), Sundarayya (1972), Ranga (1949), Balagopal (1987), and the Census of India (1941).



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2.2 Political Context: Nizam's Rule, the Razakars, and the CPI

In addition to the economy, the political landscape of Hyderabad was determined by the authoritarian leadership of Nizam Mir Osman Ali Khan, who did not want to belong to the Indian Union after the country attained independence in 1947. His administration was increasingly dominated by the Razakars — a paramilitary organisation of the Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen — which terrorised Hindu and minority communities and suppressed organised political dissent. The CPI, which had been the most organisationally active political force among Telangana's peasantry through the Andhra Mahasabha, operated in a hostile dual environment: persecuted by the Nizam's government and the Razakars on one side, and periodically at odds with the Indian National Congress on the other (Barry, 2018).

The Andhra Mahasabha, founded in 1930 for cultural promotion of Telugu identity, had by 1944 come under substantial CPI influence under leaders such as Ravi Narayan Reddy, Baddam Ella Reddy, and P. Sundarayya. Its village-level network provided the organisational infrastructure through which agrarian grievances were eventually transformed into political mobilisation. The death of Komarajah in 1946 crystallised this potential into action, precipitating the formation of armed guerrilla units known as dalams.

3. Course of the Movement

3.1 Phase I: Agrarian Agitation and Guerrilla Mobilisation (1946–1948)

The movement unfolded in clearly delineated phases. The first stage (1946–1948) was marked by agitation of peasant groups against certain grievances, namely, vetti extraction, eviction, and debt, soon developing into armed opposition. Dalams, who were mostly young men of lower caste and poor peasant background, were trained in guerrilla tactics. By 1947, the movement had firm control over about 3000 villages in the Nalgonda, Warangal, and Karimnagar districts (Sundarayya, 1972).

It is at this stage that this movement engaged in a radical agrarian programme. Deshmukhs and Doras were expelled from the villages; they also lost their lands, estimated at an annual rate of about one million acres, in favour of landless peasants and farm labourers. In free territories, vetti was eliminated. Disputes in the village were decided in village courts (gramer rajyam), which also cancelled usury debts and tenancy. It was the first experience in living memory when lower caste and tribal communities had some grounds to gain some local governance (Dhanagare, 1983). Women were also involved in a large number where they created auxiliary units that dealt with grain stores, intelligence transportation, and protest marches.

The movement also carried with them what Prasad (2001) refers to as a literacy and conscientisation campaign - the setting up of night schools in the liberated villages, which doubled up as a political education forum. Considering that the rural literacy levels in Telangana were less than five percent in 1941, this aspect of the movement had a tremendous transformative potential.

3.2 Phase II: Post-Police Action and Military Suppression (1948–1951)

A military operation that radically changed the circumstances of the movement was the 'Police Action' of September 17, 1948, by the Indian government: the ending of the sovereignty of Nizam and the annexation of Hyderabad to the Indian Union took place in a remarkably brief period of time. The immediate expectation of many CPI cadres and peasant activists was that the new democratic government of India would recognise and consolidate the movement's agrarian achievements. Instead, the government of Hyderabad (now under military governance led by General J.N. Chaudhuri) launched a systematic military suppression of the CPI-led guerrillas.

The anti-guerrilla campaign combined military operations with mass arrest of activists, banning of the CPI, and reversal of informal land redistributions. According to Sundarayya (1972), approximately 3,000 CPI cadres and peasant activists were killed between 1948 and 1951, and over 10,000 were imprisoned. The government's strategy was to restore 'law and order'



— which in practice meant restoring the authority of the landlord class, though within a constitutional framework that would eventually accommodate some land reform.

This period heightened internal conflict inside the CPI on whether it would carry on the armed struggle or move to parliamentary politics. The Cominform's 1951 directive encouraging Communist parties in newly independent nations to pursue electoral strategies, combined with the exhaustion of guerrilla capacities, led the CPI to formally withdraw from armed struggle in the Telangana Thesis of 1951 (Reddy, 1979).

Table 2: Chronology of Key Events in the Telangana Peasant Movement (1946–1956)

Year	Phase	Key Development
1944–46	Pre-agitation	Andhra Mahasabha radicalises under CPI leadership; vetti protests escalate in Nalgonda, Warangal
July 1946	Spark event	Murder of Doddi Komaraiah (Visnur, Nalgonda) by Visnur Deshmukh's men; triggers mass CPI mobilisation
1946–48	Guerrilla phase	Dalams (guerrilla squads) formed; redistribution of ~1 million acres of land; abolition of vetti; village courts (gram rajyam) established
Sep. 1948	Police Action	Government of India 'Police Action' integrates Hyderabad into Indian Union; Razakars disbanded; Indian Army replaces Nizam's forces
1948–51	Repression	Military campaign against CPI guerrillas; ~3,000 CPI cadres killed; ~10,000 arrested; major leaders go underground
1951	CPI withdrawal	CPI formally abandons armed struggle (Telangana Thesis); shift to electoral politics following Cominform directives
1952	Elections	First general elections; CPI wins 41 seats in Hyderabad State Assembly — one of its strongest showings nationally
1956	Reorganisation	States Reorganisation Act merges Telangana into Andhra Pradesh; agrarian legacy debated in the new state

Note. Compiled from Sundarayya (1972), Barry (2018), Balagopal (1987), and Reddy (1979).

3.3 Phase III: Electoral Transition (1951–1956)

The CPI's transition from armed struggle to electoral competition proved remarkably productive in the short term. In the first general elections of 1952, the CPI — contesting on a platform that emphasised land reform, anti-feudal legislation, and Telugu linguistic identity — won 41 seats in the Hyderabad State Legislative Assembly, making it one of the strongest CPI performances in any Indian state at that time (Balagopal, 1987). This electoral success reflected the depth of the movement's



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organisational penetration into village society and the continuity of peasant loyalty to CPI-affiliated candidates even after the armed phase had ended.

It was also the time that the Hyderabad Tenancy and Agricultural Lands Act of 1950 was enacted to formally abolish vetti and provide some form of tenancy protection, the political unavoidability of which the pressure of the movement had rendered a partial, still disputed, achievement.

4. Consequences and Legacy

4.1 Agrarian Reforms

The most short-term impact of the movement is that it led to the partial reorganization of agrarian relations in Telangana. Even though much of the redistributed land was reverted back to landlords after 1948, the cost of unconditional restoration in the democratic environment of independent India was prohibitive. The Hyderabad Tenancy and Agricultural Lands Act (1950) and later acts, such as the Andhra Pradesh Land Reforms (Ceiling on Agricultural Holdings) Act, 1973, were direct reflections of the movement agenda, which gave eventual lawful support to the tenancy security and redistribution of land (Sundaram, 1956).

According to scholars, including Dhanagare (1983), it is due to the continuous pressure created by the Telangana movement that the post-independence state government held little incentive to even undertake even small land reforms that were actually affected. The movement, therefore, worked as a structural force that re-established the limits of the politically feasible in agrarian laws.

4.2 Political Consciousness and Electoral Legacy

Perhaps more durable than any specific legislative outcome was the transformation of political consciousness among Telangana's peasantry. The movement created a generation of local leaders — from lower castes, tribal communities, and the poor peasantry — who had administered village-level governance and experienced collective agency. This cadre sustained a left political organisation in Telangana for decades.

The electoral breakthrough of 1952 was not merely a statistical achievement; it demonstrated that organised agrarian movements could translate into sustained democratic power. This legacy fed into the broader tradition of non-Congress opposition politics in Telangana and contributed to the region's distinctive political culture — characterised by a strong tradition of peasant and working-class mobilisation — that differentiated it from the Seemandhra coastal districts of Andhra Pradesh even after the 1956 merger.

4.3 Women, Tribal Communities, and Dalit Inclusion

The movement made significant, if incomplete, strides in the inclusion of historically marginalised groups. Women's participation — in protest marches, guerrilla support networks, and village court proceedings — challenged patriarchal norms within the peasant community itself. Though formal gender hierarchies were not dismantled, the movement's legacy contributed to the subsequent robust mobilisation of women in Telangana's cooperatives and self-help groups (Barry, 2018).

Tribal groups of people, such as Kolam, Gond, and Lambada, took an active part in the movement, and the gram rajyam courts gave tribal grievances an extent of institutional voice over landlord encroachment on forest land. Nevertheless, even after the movement, structural caste and tribal deprivation continued, and researchers like Balagopal (1987) warn against exaggerating the depth of these benefits in terms of transformation.



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Table 3: Socio-Economic Outcomes of the Telangana Peasant Movement

Domain	Outcome	Assessment
Land redistribution (guerrilla phase)	~1 million acres redistributed informally	Partially reversed after 1948; consolidated by 1972 Land Reforms Act
Abolition of vetti (forced labour)	De facto abolished in liberated zones by 1947	Formally abolished by Hyderabad Tenancy & Agricultural Lands Act, 1950
Debt relief to peasants	Village panchayat courts cancelled usurious debts in liberated areas	No permanent statutory basis until post-merger reforms
Electoral mobilisation	CPI: 41/175 seats in Hyderabad (1952)	Demonstrated peasant political agency; later fed into non-Congress opposition
Women's participation	Significant involvement in protest marches, grain storage & intelligence networks	Laid groundwork for subsequent women's self-help mobilisation in Telangana
Dalit & tribal inclusion	Kolam, Gond, Lambada communities integrated into gram rajyam courts	Limited structural gains; caste hierarchies remained entrenched

Note. Assessment synthesised from Dhanagare (1983), Sundarayya (1972), Balagopal (1987), Barry (2018), and Sundaram (1956).

4.4 The States Reorganisation Act (1956) and Beyond

A new twist to the legacy of the movement came with the States Reorganisation Act of 1956, which introduced the Andhra State-Telangana merger to form Andhra Pradesh, thus complicating the legacy of the movement even more. The merger was seen by many Telangana activists and scholars as a betrayal (based on Andhra Pradesh Congress interests), which posed a threat to the particular socio-economic benefits and political culture created by the movement. The later Telangana Agitation of 1969 and the eventual establishment of the separate state of Telangana of 2014 should be interpreted, in part, as late effects of the particular historical consciousness of the region, the 1946-51 peasant movement being one of its building blocks (Prasad, 2001).

5. Analysis and Theoretical Perspectives

Theoretical assessments of the Telangana movement have occupied a significant place in the scholarship of agrarian studies and subaltern history. Two principal interpretive traditions can be identified. The first, represented by scholars such as P. Sundarayya (1972) and D.N. Dhanagare (1983), situates the movement within a classical Marxist framework: the movement



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is analysed as a revolutionary agrarian uprising whose defeat was attributable to a combination of imperialist manipulation, Congress anti-communism, and internal CPI tactical errors regarding the timing of the armed withdrawal.

The second tradition, linked with the scholarship of subaltern studies, and subsequent authors like K. Balagopal (1987) and Srinivasulu (2002) critiques the CPI vanguardism and hold that the movement itself, despite rallying around subaltern communities, was trapped within the party-based model of organisation of the CPI. In this view, the inability of the movement to establish permanent autonomous institutions at the level of the peasantry, that is, independent of the party, is the reason behind the fast loss of most of its achievements after the armed retreat.

The third, more recent, is the one in which Barry (2018) leads the pack in forecasting gender and tribal aspects by emerging because mainstream historiography has historically underestimated the value of women and tribal actors to the formation of the movement and the organisational foundation it maintained throughout the repression era.

These interpretive controversies indicate the greater interest in the Telangana movement as a trial case of what agrarian revolutions with arms can and cannot accomplish in the context of a democratic post-colonial state. It shows that sufficiently prolonged mass mobilisation can result in irreversible changes in the political opportunity structure - despite the fact that the immediate military aims of an insurrection are lost.

6. Conclusion

The Telangana Peasant Movement of 1946–1951 stands as a watershed moment in the agrarian and political history of post-colonial India. Born from the structural violence of feudal exploitation — vetti, rack-renting, and usurious indebtedness — and catalysed by a specific act of landlord brutality, the movement mobilised a mass constituency of poor peasants, agricultural labourers, women, and tribal communities in the largest armed agrarian insurrection in independent India's early history.

Its achievements during the guerrilla phase — land redistribution, abolition of bonded labour, and the establishment of village governance structures — constituted a radical social experiment that briefly inverted centuries of agrarian hierarchy. The fact that it could only be suppressed by the Indian state highlighted the boundaries that the Nehruvian developmental state had when it came to social transformation through the bottom up. However, oppression did not remove the legacy of the movement. The Hyderabad Tenancy and Agricultural Lands Act (1950), the CPI's electoral breakthrough of 1952, and the sustained political culture of peasant and working-class mobilisation in Telangana all attest to the movement's long shadow.

The movement also raises enduring theoretical questions: about the relationship between armed struggle and democratic politics, about the capacity of the post-colonial state to accommodate radical agrarian demands, and about the place of subaltern women and tribal communities in canonical histories of peasant resistance. These questions, far from being resolved, remain live in contemporary Telangana, where debates about land, caste, and regional identity continue to animate political life.

To conclude, the Telangana Peasant Movement was not just an unsuccessful revolution. It was, as Dhanagare (1983, p. 214) observed, an unfinished transformation — one that altered the terms on which agrarian relations, peasant politics, and regional identity would be negotiated in Telangana for generations to come.

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