

**Working Paper 179**

**Caste, Class and Social Articulation in Andhra Pradesh:  
Mapping Differential Regional Trajectories**

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## Glossary of Terms

<i>Adivasi</i>	Aboriginal tribe
<i>Arrack</i>	Distilled liquor, often artisanal
<i>Bahujan</i>	Literally means 'majority'; this is a term brought in to the Indian political lexicon and popularised by the Bahujan Samaj Party
<i>Bancharai</i>	Village grazing and waste land
<i>Bandh</i>	Strike
<i>Banjar</i>	Waste land
<i>Bedakaal</i>	Eviction of tenants from land by landlords
<i>Beedi</i>	Country cigar
<i>Chappal</i>	Country leather sandals
<i>Crore</i>	Ten million
<i>Dacoity</i>	Gang robbery
<i>Dalam</i>	Armed squad
<i>Dalari</i>	Broker or middleman
<i>Dandugalu</i>	Fines and penalties imposed by landlords for settling disputes
<i>Deshmukh</i>	Revenue collector turned landlord (Hindu)
<i>Dharna</i>	Sit-down strike
<i>Dora</i>	Landlord
Emergency	The period from June 1975 to March 1977, when the constitutional state of Emergency was invoked; during this period civil liberties and democratic rights were suspended
<i>Gaddi vamulu</i>	Fodder heaps
<i>Gadi</i>	Residence of landlord
<i>Garibi hatao</i>	Poverty elimination
<i>Gherao</i>	A protest in which workers prevent employees leaving a place of work until demands are met
<i>Goonda</i>	Goon; thug
<i>Gram Panchayat</i>	Village <i>Panchayat</i> ; the third tier of the <i>Panchayat Raj</i> system
Green Revolution	The introduction of modern technological inputs and high yielding varieties of paddy and rice in agriculture in the late 1960s
<i>Gumpu</i>	Group
<i>Guntur palle</i>	The settlement of Andhra farmers in the Telangana countryside
<i>Inam</i>	Land grant made by the State in lieu of free services rendered
<i>Jagirdar</i>	Holder of land grant given for services rendered to the <i>Nizam</i> (Muslim)
<i>Jaithra Yatra</i>	Victory march
<i>Jajmani</i>	System of reciprocity of services and goods by different castes
<i>Jati</i>	Caste or sub-caste ; also used for nation
<i>Jeethagallu</i>	Farm servants
<i>Kalladar</i>	The employee of the tendu contractor who is in charge of <i>kallam</i>
<i>Kallam</i>	The place where tendu or <i>beedi</i> leaf is purchased by the contractor
<i>Kapudanam</i>	Farming
<i>Kisan</i>	Peasant
<i>Kulak</i>	Rich peasant
<i>Lakh</i>	One hundred thousand
<i>Lok Sabha</i>	Lower House of Parliament (Central Government)
<i>Mamool</i>	Gifts customarily demanded by the <i>dora</i>
<i>Mandal</i>	The restructured middle-tier of the <i>Panchayat Raj</i> system
<i>Mandal Praja Parishad</i>	The middle tier of the <i>Panchayat Raj</i> system in Andhra Pradesh

<i>Mulki</i>	<i>Mulki</i> literally means ‘native’. It refers to the agreement entered into at the time of the formation of the State of Andhra Pradesh in 1956, providing safeguards to the people of Telangana region in education and employment
<i>Nizam</i>	The ruler of Hyderabad State
<i>Paise</i>	One-hundredth of a Rupee
<i>Paleru</i>	Farm servant
<i>Palle</i>	Village or rural locality
<i>Panch</i>	A committee of five elders
<i>Panchayati Raj</i>	System of rural local government with three ascending tiers, viz., <i>Gram Panchayat</i> , <i>Mandal</i> or <i>Panchayat Samithi</i> and <i>Zilla Parishad</i>
<i>Panchayat Samithi</i>	The middle tier of the pre-TDP <i>Panchayat Raj</i> system; In the place of <i>Panchayat Samithis</i> a number of smaller units called <i>Mandals</i> were created by the TDP government in the mid-1980s
<i>Penta</i>	Organic manure
<i>Pettandar</i>	The dominant caste landlord/headman
<i>Pettandari</i>	Economic and social dominance
<i>Poramboku</i>	Government waste land
<i>Rasta roko</i>	Road blockade – a form of protest
<i>Ryot</i>	Cultivator
<i>Sangham</i>	Association
<i>Sarpanch</i>	Chairman of the <i>Gram Panchayat</i> – the lower tier of the <i>Panchayat Raj</i> system
<i>Shikam</i>	Tank bed land
<i>Taluq</i>	Sub-division of a district
<i>Tendu leaf</i>	The leaves of an ebony tree, gathered in India as a cheap tobacco substitute
<i>Upasarpanch</i>	Vice Chairman of the <i>Gram Panchayat</i>
<i>Varna</i>	The four-fold hierarchical ordering of the Hindu society into Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras; the ‘untouchables’, being outside the classical Hindu <i>varna</i> system, are seen as constituting the fifth or <i>panchama varna</i>
<i>Veedi</i>	Street
<i>Vetti</i>	Forced, unpaid labour
<i>Wada</i>	Locality
<i>Zamindar</i>	Large landowner, engaged by the British to pay land revenue and receive rent, and abolished after Independence
<i>Zilla Parishad</i>	Top tier corresponding to the district in the three-tier <i>Panchayat Raj</i> system

## Glossary of Castes

Adi-Andhra	Literally means the original people of Andhra; a term used by a section of the <i>dalits</i> especially in coastal Andhra to describe themselves
Baliya	A Lingayat business caste
Besta	A caste of traditional fisherfolk
Boya	Traditional hunter caste
Brahmin	The highest rank in the four-fold <i>varna</i> hierarchy
Chakali	Washer folk caste
Dalit	Untouchable caste
Dasu	Slave
Devanga	A weaver caste
Dudekula	A backward class Muslim caste
Dhobi	Laundry caste
Golla	Cattle breeder and backward peasant caste; Gollas are also called Yadavas
Gouda	Toddy-tapper caste
Harijan	Literally means, 'child of God'; the name given by M.K. Gandhi to the untouchables
Idiga	Toddy-tapper caste in Rayalaseema
Jangam	A shivite begging backward caste. Beda Jangam, Buduga Jangam and Mala Jangam are <i>dalit</i> castes
Kammari	Blacksmith
Kamma	A dominant peasant caste in coastal Andhra
Kapu	A dominant peasant caste in coastal Andhra
Koeri	A peasant caste in the Hindi belt
Komati	Trader caste, also known as Vaishya
Kshatriya	Ruler or warrior <i>varna</i> ; the second <i>varna</i> in the four-fold Hindu <i>varna</i> system
Kummari	Potter caste
Kurma	Shepherd and wool weaver caste
Madiga	Untouchable leather worker caste
Mala	Untouchable agrarian labour caste
Mangali	Barber caste
Munnuru Kapu	A peasant caste in Telangana
Mutrasi	Traditional fisherfolk caste
Padmasali	Weaver caste
Raju	Ex-warrior caste in coastal Andhra
Reddy	A dominant peasant caste
Relli	A <i>dalit</i> caste dominant in northern coastal Andhra
Sale	Weaver caste
Shudra	The lowest rank in the four-fold <i>varna</i> system
Telaga	A backward peasant caste
Uppara	Stonecutter caste
Vadla	Carpenter caste
Vaishya	Trader caste
Velama	A dominant caste
Vishwa Brahmana	Refers to a caste cluster comprising Kamsali (goldsmith), Kanchari (brass smith), Kammari (blacksmith), Vadrangi (carpenter) and Shilpi (sculptor)
Waddera	Caste of traditional well-diggers and stone-cutter/suppliers
Yadava	Cattle breeder and backward peasant caste; Gollas are called Yadavas
Yanadi	A semi-nomadic community of rat-catchers
Yerukala	A semi-nomadic caste involved in basket-making and pig-rearing

## Acronyms, Abbreviations and Definitions

AMS	Andhra Maha Sabha (Andhra Conference)
AP	Andhra Pradesh
APCLC	Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee
APDMS	Andhra Pradesh Dalit Maha Sabha
BAMCEF	All India Backwards and Minorities Employment Federation
BC	Backward Caste
BJP	Bharatiya Jana Party (a Hindu nationalist political party)
BSP	Bahujan Samaj Party (a <i>dalit</i> political party with a major presence in Uttar Pradesh)
CI	Circle Inspector of Police
CPI	Communist Party of India
CPI(M)	Communist Party of India (Marxist)
CPI(ML)	Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)
CRPF	Central Reserve Police Force
DARAKAME	<i>Dalita Rachayitala Kalakarulu Medavula Aikya Vedika</i> (Dalit Writers, Artists and Intellectuals Forum)
DMS	Dalit Maha Sabha (a <i>dalit</i> organisation in Andhra Pradesh, formed in response to the Karamchedu massacre, 17 July 1985)
Dalit Minority Prajaswamy Karyacharana Vedika	Democratic Action Forum for Dalits and Minorities, DAFODAM
DS4	Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangarsh Samithi (Struggle Committee of the Oppressed <i>Dalit</i> Society)
HYV	High Yield Variety
JNM	Jana Natya Mandali (cultural front of the CPI(ML))
Kula Nirmula Porata Samithi	Struggle Committee for the Elimination of Caste System
Kula Vivaksha Vyathireka Porata Samithi	Struggle Committee against Caste Discrimination
Mala Mahanadu	Mala Conference
MLA	Member of Legislative Assembly
MPP	Mandal Praja Parishad (the middle tier of the <i>Panchayat Raj</i> system in Andhra Pradesh)
MRPS	Madiga Reservation Porata Samithi (Struggle Committee for the Madiga Reservations)
NTR	N.T. Rama Rao
NRI	Non-Resident Indian
OBC	Other Backward Caste
PPP	Poor People's Party
PWD	Public Works Department
RCS	Rytu Coolie Sangham (Agricultural Labour Organisation)
RSU	Radical Students Union
RYL	Radical Youth League
SC	Scheduled Caste
SI	Sub-Inspector of Police
SP	Samajwadi Party (An OBC regional party in Uttar Pradesh)
ST	Scheduled Tribe
TDP	Telugu Desam Party (a regional party in power in AP)
TPS	Telangana Praja Samithi (Telangana Peoples' Committee)
UP	Uttar Pradesh

## Summary

Writings on the Green Revolution and agrarian change in India have postulated that the modernisation and development of capitalism in agriculture would lead to class polarisation in the countryside, paving the way for mobilisation and conflicts based on class. Quite contrary to this proposition, while the backward areas have seen agrarian class movements, the developed Green Revolution areas have witnessed caste and communal mobilisation. Explanations of this significant difference in social articulation must contextualise the regional trajectories of development and change in their historical specificities and also consider the objective nature of social polarisation consequent upon the political economy of development. Further, the dynamics of class and caste/community have to be examined in their concrete interrelationship with the provincial regime and the (re)configuration of social forces associated with it.

In this study, we take up the cases of the *dalit* movement in coastal Andhra and the agrarian movement in Telangana to examine why these regions have displayed different trajectories of social mobilisation. The crucial dimensions emphasised in the explanation here are divergent historical backgrounds, uneven regional development and the regime changes brought about by the Telugu Desam Party (TDP). Although the central issue articulated in these movements is related to land, caste and social dominance, their specific manifestation is determined by the nature of power relations, intensity of contradictions and political agency (e.g. communists in Telangana and *dalit* activists and organisations in coastal Andhra).

The study further examines the relationship between these movements and the macro-political process and the impact of the latter on the former. It is the logic of electoral processes and party strategies to co-opt the issues and active elements along with the internal differences and contradictions among the constituents of these movements (sometimes intensified by the mainstream political forces), which led to the schisms, fragmentation and decline of the movements.

# 1 Introduction

The post-Emergency period marks a new phase in the political history of India. It has seen heightened social and political articulation and an intense ideological contestation through a wide variety of issue-based mobilisations and struggles in different parts of the country. The farmers' movements, *dalit* mobilisation, the renewed struggles of the agrarian poor, women's discourse, and the new phase of student politics and civil rights articulation in a number of States, are all demonstrative of the vibrant civil society of post-Emergency India.

The State of Andhra Pradesh (AP) is no exception to this. A massive mobilisation of different sections of society, students and rural youths in particular, marked a new phase in grassroots politics in the State. The organisation and political articulation of the rural poor took a more visible form and moved to the centre of political discourse. These articulations posed an ideological challenge to mainstream politics in general and to the Congress Party, dominant in State politics since the formation of AP in 1956, in particular. Although the Congress Party remained in power in AP, its gradual loss of support among the lower castes/classes was visible, despite the Party's efforts to retain their support through special programmes and schemes, and by providing them with increased representation in the Party structure and electoral sphere. The emergence of the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in State politics, and its dramatic coming to power within less than a year of its formation, is demonstrative of the weaknesses in the support base of the Congress Party. It is therefore important to study these 'subaltern' movements.

Andhra Pradesh, comprising the three regions of coastal Andhra, Rayalaseema and Telangana, displays vast regional variations in socio-economic and cultural terms. Differences in historical backgrounds – Telangana was part of the princely Hyderabad State and coastal Andhra of the British Presidency – partly account for this. Even in terms of social movements and civil society articulation, these regions continue to display contrasting trajectories. While the 'backward' Telangana region has seen mobilisation of the rural poor and youth by the radical left on the basis of class, the developed coastal region has witnessed an emotional mobilisation on the socio-cultural identity of caste. The relationship of these subaltern mobilisations to the larger political processes – political parties, their social bases, regime politics, public policies, etc. – has been quite complex. The agrarian mobilisation by the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (CPI (ML)) groups in Telangana has seen changes over the decades. Broadly, two aspects can be identified in the State's response to these movements: i) public policy initiatives addressing the issues raised by them; and ii) repressive measures on them. During the early 1970s, the State's response to the agrarian movements was predominantly one of addressing the causes of rural discontent. We therefore see measures such as land ceiling acts and anti-poverty initiatives. This can be called the strategy of co-option. In the post-Emergency period, a clear shift towards a coercive strategy took place.

In an examination of the relationship of subaltern assertions and macro-politics, the TDP requires particular analysis, as its regime brought about a discursive shift. Moving away from agrarian reforms, the TDP emphasised populist policies that gave immediate relief but did not provide any substantial measures or long-term solutions to people's problems. In fact, the struggles for land distribution and higher wages experienced increased repression during this regime. Further, it is important to note that the reconfiguration of power relations in the countryside following the TDP's rise to power forms the context for the escalation of upper caste attacks on the *dalits*. The experience of the coastal region, as we shall see, amply supports this view.

The agrarian and *dalit* movements in AP brought the following issues onto both civil society and political agendas: land distribution; a proper wage increase for agricultural labour, farm servants,

*beedi* workers and tendu leaf collectors; and caste/class-based socio-economic oppression (of which *vetti*, or forced labour extraction, was an important dimension). However, the crucial question that remains is why these movements increasingly tended to display schisms, crises and decline.

By mapping the trajectories of social mobilisation in Telangana and Andhra, this paper aims to understand the significance of class and caste interests and the forms in which they have been articulated in these two regions. This study is based on a variety of documents that range from newspapers to political journals and academic writings. In addition, a large number of interviews were conducted with the activists and observers of the social movements and political scenario in the two regions of Telangana and coastal Andhra. A definitive study of the questions raised here requires a detailed field-based enquiry.

This presentation is made as follows. The second section deals with the historical backgrounds of the above two regions. The third section analyses the nature of State politics in the aftermath of the formation of Andhra Pradesh in 1956. The fourth part deals with the class dynamics of social mobilisation by the CPI (ML) groups in Telangana since the 1970s and in the fifth section, caste-based forms of articulation by the subaltern social groups in coastal Andhra are analysed by examining the *dalit* movement. The sixth section analyses these processes in relation to the macro dynamics of State politics, and the final section presents the broad conclusions of the study.

## 2 Historical Context

The Telugu-speaking State of Andhra Pradesh was formed in 1956 on a linguistic basis, following the recommendations of the States' Reorganisation Commission, headed by Justice Fazal Ali. It brought together the three regions of Telangana, coastal Andhra and Rayalaseema, each of which presented different historical backgrounds: the Telangana region was part of the erstwhile *Nizam's* Hyderabad State, whilst the latter two regions formed part of the British-governed Madras Presidency. This historical background is crucial to an understanding of the political economy of development and the trajectory of social and political processes in each of these regions. Further, these historical differences continue to inform the socio-political processes in modern Andhra Pradesh – the articulation of social forces, caste-class dynamics, the nature of social movements, patterns of social mobilisation, and so on.

Caste has long been an important dimension of social articulation and political mobilisation in the State. In the domain of electoral politics, caste assumed an active role as the basis of political grouping and the mobilisation of electoral support in the State. In terms of caste structure and articulation, the regions display significant variations. The Brahmins, comprising 3% of the population and ritually placed at the top of the caste pyramid, have historically dominated social, cultural and economic life. It is only in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century that we find a serious challenge to their supremacy, manifested in the form of specific caste articulations. The cultural assertion of the Vaishyas, Kammas, and other caste groups invariably took on an anti-Brahmin form of protest, as the Brahmin was the reference point to the caste order and its hierarchical structure (see Rama Krishna, 1993; Suri and Anjaiah, mimeo). The opportunities provided by colonial modernity – economic, educational and administrative institutions – were one catalytic factor that hastened the Brahmin community's move to urban areas and vocations; the 20<sup>th</sup> Century challenges posed by lower caste assertions and peasant movements to their traditional social position and privileges, were another. It is this process of peasant-caste consolidation and articulation that led to the Brahmins' marginalisation in the political field.

The Reddys and Kammas, comprising 6.5% and 4.8% of the State's population respectively, are the two politically dominant communities. Although the Reddys are distributed throughout the State, they are dominant in the Telangana and Rayalaseema regions. The Kammas, on the other hand, are traditionally dominant in the coastal districts of Krishna, Guntur and Prakasham; their presence in other regions is marginal. It is the control of these castes over agrarian resources such as land and water that has been the most important source of their economic and political power. As the major land-owning communities and occupants of important positions of a village, they have traditionally controlled village political life. In the post-Independence period, and especially following the Green Revolution due to the wealth it generated, they expanded their activities into other spheres of the economy, i.e. business, transport, contracts and industry (see Upadhya, 1988 and 1997).

Among the other peasant castes, the Velamas, Rajus and Kapus are important communities with considerable political significance in the State, although in numerical terms they constitute only a small percentage of the population and spatially are confined only to small pockets. While the Velamas are a politically influential land-owning community present in northern Telangana and northern coastal Andhra, the Kapus<sup>1</sup> are dominant in East and West Godavari districts.

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1. The Kapus of the coastal districts are distinct from the Munnur Kapus of Telangana. While the former are fairly prosperous, the political emergence of the latter, who are part of the OBC category, is a recent phenomenon.

The Other Backward Castes (OBCs), comprising 46.1%, constitute a very large proportion of the State's population (see Tables 1 and 2).<sup>2</sup> The process of economic development, State policies, the expansion of educational opportunities and the politics of patronage, pursued by the Congress Party under Indira Gandhi, resulted in a degree of change in the socio-economic position of some of these castes, such as the Goudas (toddy-tappers), Gollas (shepherds), Kapus and Padmasalis (weavers).

**Table 1 Percentage breakdown of total population of Andhra Pradesh by caste**

Forward castes	% of total	Backward castes	% of total	Scheduled castes	% of total	Others	% of total
Brahman	3.0	Baliya	3.0	Madiga	7.3	Muslims,	7.0
Kapu	15.2	Boya/Besta	0.7	Mala	9.7	Christians,	
Kamma	4.8	Chakali	4.2			etc.	
Komati	2.7	Devanga	2.1				
Kshatriya	1.2	Dudekula	0.4				
Velama	3.0	Goundla	2.0				
		Gavara	0.4				
		Golla	6.3				
		Idiga	1.0				
		Jangam	0.4				
		Kammara/	2.1				
		Vishwa					
		Brahmana					
		Kummari	0.9				
		Kurma	1.3				
		Munnurukapu	0.8				
		Mangali	1.3				
		Mutrasi	3.3				
		Sale	2.9				
		Telaga	5.2				
		Uppara	0.6				
		Waddera	1.8				
		Others	5.4				
<b>Total</b>	<b>29.9</b>		<b>46.1</b>		<b>17.0</b>		<b>7.0</b>

Source: *Census of India* (1921) and *Census of H.E.H. Nizam's Domain* (1921) in G. Ram Reddy (1989), p.269.

The process of realisation of their numerical strength and articulation of interests in political and economic spheres, especially in Telangana, became increasingly visible in the post-Emergency period. With the emergence of the TDP as a political counterpoint to the Congress Party, which was seen as Reddy-dominated, the politically ambitious OBC élite gravitated to the TDP. Thus, not only could they emerge strong enough to challenge the traditional land-owning Reddys in rural Telangana, but they also, due to the TDP's political patronage, found themselves accommodated in the structures of power and influence.

The Scheduled Castes (SCs), constituting approximately 17% of the population, form a major social constituency. The two most numerous sub-castes among them are the Malas and Madigas. While the former are preponderant in the coastal region, the latter are dominant in Telangana. Their respective traditional occupations are agriculture and leather work and together, they comprise the bulk of agricultural labour. 6% of Andhra Pradesh's population are tribals, who are largely concentrated in the forest areas of Andhra and Telangana regions. Muslims, who constitute under 7% of the State's population, have a distinctive presence in the urban and semi-urban unorganised

2. These figures are based on the 1921 Census, the last census when the caste enumeration was done. The Reddys were included in the broad category of Kapus (which generically refers to those involved in *kapudanam*, meaning farming) in the 1921 Census. See G. Ram Reddy (1989), p.269.

service sector in Telangana, Rayalaseema and parts of coastal Andhra, and have their own distinct impact on the politics of these regions.

**Table 2 Distribution of castes in Andhra districts during the Madras Presidency, 1921**

Caste	Ganjam	Vizag	Godavari	Krishna	Guntur	Nellore	Cuddapah	Kurnool	Ananthapur	Chittoor
Brahman	4.1	12.3	12.5	19.8	18.8	7.5	1.9	2.1	1.8	1.9
Kshatriya	1.6	13.1	19.4	23.6	3.3	2.3	3.5	0.8	1.2	10.7
Komati	6.6	7.7	5.4	14.9	–	7.5	4.9	7.6	4.3	4.1
Kapu/Reddy	5.7	19.6	9.8	7.7	5.1	7.1	7.2	4.1	4.6	6.4
Kamma	–	–	6.4	25.8	36.0	12.5	2.3	0.9	4.5	10.7
Velama	15.3	59.1	5.8	6.7	0.6	2.8	0.3	–	–	1.9
Sale	2.6	11.7	7.0	6.4	7.4	2.7	3.0	1.7	1.7	2.2
Golla	6.3	13.1	4.2	9.3	8.9	9.5	4.9	5.2	4.2	5.6
Baliya	4.6	7.1	4.5	2.3	6.4	14.3	13.2	10.3	10.4	19.0
Telaga	5.2	12.4	8.4	14.6	15.5	–	–	0.3	–	–
Mutrasi	–	–	0.3	4.5	3.3	4.7	1.8	0.7	1.7	4.7
Boya/Besta	–	–	–	–	–	1.5	4.5	4.5	6.0	4.3
Kummari	2.2	4.9	3.8	10.3	12.1	8.8	4.7	5.9	3.7	5.9
Uppara	2.9	2.9	5.7	21.9	11.0	–	7.6	10.5	11.4	1.9
Chakali	3.5	8.3	5.0	7.2	7.7	4.5	3.0	3.2	2.6	3.3
Mangali	4.8	14.5	7.3	9.9	9.6	5.6	4.8	5.7	5.7	5.7
Mala	3.8	8.0	15.4	18.3	7.4	9.6	3.3	2.7	1.3	8.7
Madiga	0.4	3.0	4.9	9.9	4.2	6.4	4.1	4.7	8.0	3.6

Source: Census of India (1921) in G. Ram Reddy (1989), p. 270.

## 2.1 Coastal Andhra region

The region of coastal Andhra is far more developed than the other two regions of Rayalaseema and Telangana. Crucial to the development of this region, and to the districts of Guntur, Krishna, East and West Godavari in particular, were the construction of irrigation projects across the Krishna and Godavari rivers in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century by the British colonial State. With a view to augmenting its revenue from agriculture, an extensive area was brought under cultivation: this led to the commercialisation of agriculture and the generation and accumulation of agrarian surplus (G.N. Rao, 1985). The impact of this could be witnessed in the growth of urbanisation in this region, as centres of commerce, education, culture and social reform were created. The growth of towns such as Kakinada, Rajamundry and Guntur in the coastal region has to be seen against this backdrop.

A significant aspect of rural transformation that has occurred since the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century is the differentiation of peasant society and the emergence of an enterprising agrarian stratagem belonging predominantly to the Kamma, followed by the Reddy and to a lesser extent to the Kapu, communities. The educated élites of these peasant castes were catalytic in the emergence of caste-specific assertion movements against Brahmin domination. They also played a leading role in the *kisan* movement and the anti-*zamindari* struggles by rallying the lower agrarian strata. Because of these struggles, which led to the abolition of the *zamindari* system and the tenancy reforms enacted in the early years of the post-colonial State, the *ryots* and tenants of these peasant castes gained access to most of the fertile lands. What is sociologically significant about this trajectory of change, and of immediate relevance to our analysis, is the polarisation of this class along caste lines across mass organisations, political parties or factions therein. While the Reddys joined the ranks of the Congress Party and waged struggles against Brahmin leadership, the Kammas gravitated to the Communist Party of India (CPI) and rose to positions of leadership.

A long-standing demand of the Telugu-speaking political élite of Andhra region was for a separate political identity from the Tamil-speaking majority in the Madras Presidency. In recognition of this demand, the Congress Party formed the Andhra Provincial Committee in 1917. It was only following an agitation for separate statehood in 1953, that the coastal and Rayalaseema regions were carved out of the composite Madras State and into the separate State of Andhra, with Kurnool as its capital.

## 2.2 Telangana region

The region of Telangana was part of the *Nizam's* composite Hyderabad State, which comprised of eight Telugu-speaking Telangana districts,<sup>3</sup> three Kannada- and five Marathi-speaking districts. In Telangana, given the historical specificity of the *Nizam's* dominion, the nature of socio-economic change and political trajectory took a different turn. A class of landed gentry, consisting of Muslim *jagirdars* and Hindu *deshmukhs* belonging to the Reddy, Velama and Brahmin castes, constituted the support base of the *Nizam's* rule. In sharp contrast to the Presidency areas, the State bestowed citizens with hardly any civil or political rights, whilst the landed gentry inflicted suffering on the rural population through the illegal eviction of farmers, the extraction of free goods and services (known as *vetti*), and much more significantly, the denial of people's dignity and self-respect.

The Andhra Maha Sabha (AMS) has been at the forefront of democratic struggles since the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In the beginning, it was dominated by pro-Congress Party elements, but by the 1930s it came under the control of communists who conducted a radical turnaround, by taking up issues such as the abolition of *vetti*, protection to tenants and the demands of 'land-to-the tiller'.

The anti-*Nizam* and anti-feudal peasant struggle, led by the communists through the AMS in the 1940s, was an important political development crucial to an understanding of political articulation in the subsequent period. Although all sections of the Telangana countryside involved in this struggle – peasant, artisan, service and labouring *dalit* castes – were mobilised around the issues of *vetti* and 'land to the tiller', it is sociologically instructive to note that it was the peasant caste of the Kapu-Reddys who dominated the leadership positions in the *dalams* (armed squads) and *panchayats*. The redistribution of the land of the Brahmin-Karanam, Reddy and Velama *doras* during the struggle was significantly influenced by the caste composition of the *panch* committees assigned with this task. Thus, while the lands of these *doras* were distributed among the Kapu-Reddy *ryots* and tenants, the common pastures and waste lands became the lot of the landless *dalits* and other lower castes (see Srinivasulu, 1988, Chapter 5).

After the withdrawal of the struggle, given the substantial decline in *dora* dominance following the struggle as well as the *jagirdari* abolition and tenancy reforms brought about by the State, most of the *doras* were disinclined to reside in their villages and disposed of their lands to their former tenants. Needless to say, the beneficiaries of these transfers were tenants and *ryots* predominantly belonging to the Kapu-Reddy cultivators' community. The *dalits*, who comprised the majority of *vetti* agrestic labour<sup>4</sup> on *dora* lands, remained landless even after the struggle (Srinivasulu, 1988).

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3. With the subsequent bifurcation of the district of Hyderabad into the urban district of Hyderabad and rural district of Rangareddy, the number of districts in Telangana has gone up to nine.

4. The labourers who are forced to provide free agrarian labour services.

### 3 Politics of Dominance and Co-option

The agrarian struggles in coastal Andhra and Telangana contributed to the emergence of a peasant stratagem belonging predominantly to the Kamma and Reddy castes, respectively. The Kamma peasantry, dominant in the deltaic districts of Krishna and Guntur (sites of the anti-*zamindari* struggles), and the Kapu and Reddy peasantry of Nalgonda and Warangal (centres of the Telangana peasant struggle), came to dominate the communist movement. Having gravitated to the undivided Communist Party and swollen its ranks, the families belonging to these communities remained with it and retained their left-wing identities, even as the electoral fortunes of the left dwindled after the formation of Andhra Pradesh (see Harrison, 1956, pp. 378–404; Elliot, 1970). However, this changed quite rapidly in the 1980s after the TDP came to power. In this section, we focus on the relationship between land, caste and politics, seen in the context of the historical processes discussed in the earlier section in their region-specific manifestations.

On the contrary, the Reddys of the prosperous coastal districts and Rayalaseema fought for leadership positions in the Congress Party against the Brahmins, who continued to dominate the party and government even after Independence. The formation of AP in 1956 marked the political rise of the Reddys in the Congress Party leadership, which was until then dominated by the educated élite predominantly of the Brahmin community. The polarisation of the dominant peasant caste élite along party lines therefore constitutes an important dimension of political articulation in the State (Harrison, 1956).

The Congress and Communist Parties constituted Andhra Pradesh's adversarial politics. Thanks to the militant peasant struggles and their participation and leadership of the popular social and cultural movements both in Telangana and Andhra, the Communist Party gained substantial popularity and respectability. What further enhanced the left's political significance was the communist agitation for the formation of 'Vishalandhra', a united Telugu State comprising Telangana, Andhra and Rayalaseema. This was part of an overall national policy of support for the creation of states on a linguistic basis.

The communists, along with the socialists and members of the Congress Party, were at the forefront of the agitation for Vishalandhra. It is noteworthy to observe that the Fazal Ali Commission, appointed to examine the question of linguistic states, recommended that the two Telugu-speaking regions of Telangana in Hyderabad and Andhra State should be kept separate, due to their historical backgrounds and different levels of development. Nehru also favoured the proposal of a separate Telangana State because of the potential problems such integration entailed.<sup>5</sup>

It is a vindication of their popularity that the Communist Party won 16.4% of the popular vote and 41 seats in Andhra in the 1952 elections of the composite Madras legislature, and 30.8% and 37 Assembly seats in the 1952 Hyderabad State elections. The Congress Party, on the other hand, established its lead over the Communist Party, by winning 30.7% of the popular vote and 40 seats in Andhra region and 38.8% and 44 seats in Telangana region of Hyderabad State.

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5. Despite these apprehensions, the leadership of the Congress Party in both Hyderabad and Andhra States favoured the creation of the State of Andhra Pradesh in 1956. To allay the apprehensions of the Telanganites, an agreement known as the 'Gentlemen's Agreement' was reached by the Congress Party leaders of these two regions. This agreement became the basis of the formation of AP. Some of the important terms and guidelines to protect the interests of less-developed Telangana for future party leadership and governments of the State were as follows: the implementation of *Mulki* rules in service matters in Telangana; the establishment of a regional council for the development of Telangana; the sale of agricultural lands in Telangana to be controlled by the Regional Council; the creation of more educational and irrigational facilities for the Telangana region; the Chief Minister to be from one region and the Deputy Chief Minister to be from the other region; the distribution of the cabinet position to the Telangana and Andhra should be in the proportion of 40: 60 and the former should be allocated two of the following prime portfolios of home, finance, revenue, planning and development, commerce and industry; separate provincial Congress Party committee for Telangana up to the end of 1962.

In the 1955 Andhra State elections, the Communist Party won a mere 15 seats, although they improved their electoral support by garnering 31.3% of the vote. In the Telangana region elections of 1957, held after the formation of AP, they won only 23 of the 65 seats they contested, with their popular vote declining by 4.5% (G.R. Reddy, 1989, p.280). From the mid-1950s, and with the formation of Andhra Pradesh in particular, the Communist Party started witnessing a decline in their support base, as the results of elections held subsequently showed. Thus Communist Party strength in both regions, contrary to earlier promises and expectations, was reduced quite substantially.

The reasons for the decline of the Communist and the rise of the Congress Party are quite complex. In view of our principal concern with the changing nature of adversarial politics, it would be instructive to emphasise the changing nature of class alignment and popular social forces in the region.

The Congress Party's political strategy in the early years of its rule was two-pronged. Firstly, it sought to co-opt the radical slogans of the left, which was a major ideological force in the State and a perceived potential threat to the Congress Party as the early elections in both the regions amply demonstrated, by evolving a strategy and programme that apparently incorporated but quite significantly diluted them in practice. Secondly, by creating new institutional structures and expanding and strengthening certain social classes, it sought to win over the support base of the left-wing opposition, by opening up alternative opportunities and thus transforming itself into a 'catch all' party.

Thus the reformist agenda of the Congress Party consisted of the abolition of the *zamindari* and *jagirdari* systems. It may be recollected that these systems of revenue collection, in which the intermediaries between the State and the peasant played a key role, came in due process to acquire an unparalleled position themselves, assuming all powers in the countryside. Although their assigned job was to collect revenue for the State, they tended to acquire and exercise law, order and judicial powers, thereby becoming States 'within the State' (see Khushro, 1958). Besides, as in other parts of the country, insecure tenancies were also prevalent in these regions (see Srinivasulu, 1988, Chapter 2).

These were the issues that assumed discursive centrality in the articulation of the peasant movements (see Desai, 1979). Immediately after Independence, the post-colonial Indian State sought to address peasant grievances by abolishing intermediaries and enacting tenancy laws. With these legal reforms, two of the significant issues in the radical agenda that was shaped in the pre-Independence period were co-opted by the Congress Party regime.

The importance of the Congress Party's agrarian reformism and its impact on rural social structures cannot be exaggerated. The beneficiaries of legislation implemented to remove oppressive landlordism and bestow rights of tenancy were members of the peasantry, the vast majority of whom also constituted the tenantry. Needless to say, they belonged to the Reddy, Kamma and Kapu peasant castes, while the *dalit* and other backward castes predominantly comprised the agricultural labour. In effect, this legislation brought about a certain homogenisation of the agrarian propertied class(es), by removing the gross and wide differences between the landed gentry and peasantry and thereby reducing the social polarisation and the objective conditions for sharp rural conflicts.

These reforms, initiated by the Congress Party with a view to legitimising its progressive image and co-opting the left's agenda, strengthened the party's social support structure by rallying those who benefited from them. The rich peasantry of the Reddy, Kamma and Kapu castes, which were the main beneficiaries of the above reforms, thus constituted the core support base of the Congress Party in the countryside.

The very fact of Independence created an atmosphere of optimism and hope towards Congress Party rule and the rhetorical promise of socialism among different social strata, and the charismatic personality of Nehru generally gave the party a progressive image. It was this popular mood that paved the way for the shift of electoral support from the left to the Congress Party.<sup>6</sup>

Crucial to a narrative of Congress Party politics and the consolidation of peasant caste dominance in the State is the *Panchayati Raj* system. This was introduced in Andhra Pradesh in 1957 and the first elections were conducted in 1959. The *Panchayati Raj* system in AP has a three-tier structure, consisting of the village (*Gram*) *Panchayat* at the bottom, the *Panchayat Samithi* in the middle and the *Zilla Parishad* at the top. The latter two tiers have some importance in the developmental field and significant amounts of funds are channelled through these structures for development purposes. These institutions thus came to be looked upon as, firstly, a mechanism to accommodate the élite's political aspirations, and secondly, a mechanism to provide access to funds and control over their distribution for development.

An examination of the first three *Panchayati Raj* elections conducted in 1959, 1964 and 1970 reveals that the Congress Party captured all *Zilla Parishad* chairmanships (except that of Nalgonda in 1964, which went to the CPI) and most *Panchayat Samithis* (A.N. Reddy, 1979). It was, as in the case of the State legislatures, the members of the peasant castes who captured these positions. In fact, it was through these institutions that the Congress Party consolidated its grassroots leadership base in the State, by accommodating a large section of the rich peasant élite in positions of power.

During the early decades of Andhra Pradesh's existence, the élite Reddy community's dominance over the Congress Party was almost total. N. Sanjeeva Reddy and K. Brahmananda Reddy, who ruled the State between 1956 and 1971,<sup>7</sup> were the most powerful Congress Party Chief Ministers the State has seen. The composition of the State Assembly between 1957 and 1967 shows that the Reddys (comprising between 25 and 28%) were the single largest group, whilst their share in the population was approximately 6%. They were followed by the Kammas, who comprised between 11.3 and 12.6% of the Assembly and just 4% of the population. One significant change, which in fact vindicates our argument that the political economy of change after Independence favoured agrarian castes, is the fact of the political decline of the Brahmins. From 6.6% in 1957 to 4.6% in 1967, the Brahmin presence in the State Assembly may seem to have declined only marginally, but when seen in a historical perspective, the decline is in fact quite substantial – prior to the formation of Andhra Pradesh, the Chief Ministers of both Andhra and Hyderabad were Brahmins, yet after 1956, the reins of power changed hands completely and came under the Reddys' control (see Elliot, 1970). The OBCs, who constituted the largest category comprising approximately 50% of the population, had a presence of just 13% in the Assembly. The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (STs) were not denied their share of representation because of constitutional safeguards. The minorities, around 7% of the population, had less than 3% representation in the State Assembly.

The composition of ministries during this period reflected the same trends. The Reddys, comprising more than 35% of the ministries with prime portfolios, were the dominant caste group. The Brahmins declined from 23% in 1956 to 6% in 1962. The other peasant castes such as the Kammas and Velamas in the cabinet increased from 7.7% in the first cabinet to 12.5% in 1962. The OBCs, SCs and minorities comprised a mere 7% during this period (G.R. Reddy, 1989, p.305). The

6. Besides the changes in the ideological and political context and the realignment of social forces, the significance of conjectural factors cannot be ignored. The death of Potti Sriramulu in a fast unto death in protest for a separate Andhra State, therefore, helped the Congress Party to completely hijack the issue from the Communist Party, and led to their gaining support among different sections, and from the educated middle classes in particular. A further help in consolidating support for the Congress Party was its success in bringing about an alliance with the Krishikar Lok party of N.G. Ranga and the Kisan Mazdoor Party of Tanguturi Prakasham, who had previously contested separately, to wage a common fight against the Communist Party.

7. Sanjeevaiah, a *dalit* from coastal Andhra, was Chief Minister of the State for a brief period between Sanjiva Reddy's two tenures. This arrangement was made due to differences between Reddy factions within the Congress Party. When they decided, he had to quit the post.

dynamics of disproportionate political representation unfolded and were manifested in increased factional groupings, creating tensions in the party in particular, and in the larger domain of politics in general.

### 3.1 Emergent contradictions and their political forms

The decade following the State's formation saw the emergence of contradictions inherent in the political economy of development, followed by Congress Party governments both at State and central levels. These contradictions can broadly be identified as, firstly, between the regional social classes and the pan-Indian capitalist class, the principal element in the regional class formation being the rich peasant-landlord class; and, secondly, between the dominant castes/classes and the working people. These contradictions assumed various political and social forms almost simultaneously and tended to reinforce each other.

The various forms and sites of expression of these contradictions could be identified as: i) regional movements; ii) CPI (ML)-led agrarian movements; iii) factionalism within the Congress Party along caste and regional lines; and, iv) caste movements.

One of the most significant forms of political articulation to shake the State was the movement for a separate State of Telangana (Seshadri, 1970; Gray, 1971). The movement, which began as an independent non-party expression with educated youths and employees as the main participants in the initial phases (joined later by rural people), was basically articulating the grievances of discrimination and injustice felt by these sections vis-à-vis the employees from the developed region of coastal Andhra. As the movement gained momentum in terms of spread and mobilisation, a section of the Congress Party leadership from Telangana joined and gave it an explicitly party-political dimension.<sup>8</sup>

The movement for a separate Telangana articulated the popular classes' grievances over the merger of a backward region with a developed region. It is, therefore, relevant to note that the political élite of the region that felt marginalised in the political arrangement that evolved after the formation of AP found in this an opportunity to bargain for a better political arrangement. The movement in the later phase came totally under the control of a faction of the Congress Party leadership led by M. Chenna Reddy. Popular support for this movement can be gauged from the fact that in the 1971 Lok Sabha elections, the Telangana Praja Samithi (TPS) won as many as 10 seats and received 14.3% of the vote. The movement dissipated due to the intolerance and high-handedness of the Congress Party high command and the compromise reached by the Congress Party faction in the leadership of the movement.<sup>9</sup> The generally shared view among the then youthful participants in the movement was that it was 'an act of betrayal'. This mistrust of the political élite continues to be bitter among the people.<sup>10</sup> What this movement, despite its failure, did to the Congress Party was to further crystallise the factions in the party along regional lines.

Another important development that has significance for Indian politics is the split that took place in the communist movement in the late 1960s. The initial division occurred in 1964, when the Communist Party split into the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI (M)). This was later followed by a further division and the formation of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (CPI (ML)). This development resulted in the poor peasantry and agrarian labour waging militant struggles in different parts of the country. AP also

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8. Interestingly, one of them, M. Chenna Reddy, who became the President of the TPS, was signatory to the 'Gentlemen's Agreement'.

9. In this struggle, which continued for three years, around 300 people, mostly youths, lost their lives.

10. Field interviews and discussion in Telangana districts of Karimnagar, Mahabubnagar, and Nalgonda.

witnessed the massive rise of agrarian struggles following a long spell of left-wing complacency. Given that India's economy was semi-feudal and semi-colonial, the CPI (ML) initiated the struggles in backward agrarian pockets such as northern Andhra and Telangana. In the context of the present discussion, it is relevant to note that these struggles demonstrated the limitations of the Congress Party government's agrarian reformism. The reforms had strengthened the hold of a new and perhaps more aggressive landlord class in the countryside, which combined its power of land ownership with caste dominance to exploit the opportunities opened up by democratic institutions and developmental channels. These struggles also revealed the limits of the promise of democracy to the depressed communities and the need to explore alternative forms of political articulation.

Following the separatist movement and the militant agrarian struggles, the Congress Party initiated certain organisational and leadership changes and a shift in its policy agenda, which had a significant bearing on State politics. These changes are not unique to AP but are part of the overall changes the party and its regime witnessed in the country following the 1969 split.

It must be noted that in the literature on Indian politics, there is a tendency to attribute the shift towards increasing centralisation of power and personalisation of decision-making in the Congress Party to, and to emphasise the personality of, Indira Gandhi. It is, however, important to note that the above response of the Congress Party was one of the choices objectively structured by the political economy of India, which led to the concentration of wealth and power in few classes. The logic of the political economy of development in the post-Independence period was such that, instead of resolving the unevenness inherited from colonial times, it further expanded it. The uneven development of regions and the uneven access to resources by different castes and communities (including the dominant ones), and the asymmetry in the availability of economic, social and political resources, mark the developmental process in post-Independence India (see Sau, 1981). The political developments and, in particular, the changing caste-class dynamics in the State since the 1970s, have to be appreciated against this background.

### **3.2 Political developments since the 1970s**

Two challenges thus faced by the Congress Party, were: a) the rise of factional struggles in the party and government; and b) the growing disillusionment among different sections of the popular classes with the Congress Party, notably in large sections of the rural poor.

In the early 1970s, as a result of, and as a response to, the above developments, a shift took place in Congress Party politics and strategy. This can be characterised as a combination of two attempts. The first was to move away from the dominant caste identity of the Congress Party leadership (in general and especially of the advanced regions), to a strategy that accommodated the peasant caste élite of the backward regions and of lower caste élite within the party and government in the States. The second was to move to a radical programme, consisting of agrarian reforms. The apparent justification for this first move was that the dominant landed interests in different States were proving to be a hindrance to pro-poor policies such as land reforms and the anti-poverty programmes launched as part of the *garibi hatao* (poverty elimination) drive initiated by Indira Gandhi. When carried into the political arena, the logic of this economic populism resulted in resistance from the dominant communities. However, Indira Gandhi's populism was in fact directed against the landed upper castes so as to weaken their hold over the Congress Party, because of their inclination towards Congress Party syndicate politics and their resistance to Indira Gandhi's radical slogans. It is relevant to note that, in the face of the dominant caste-communities' and the traditional Congress Party leadership's resistance, Indira Gandhi found it difficult even to market her *garibi hatao* slogan. Hence during this period, bypassing party channels, she resorted to direct communication with the people through bureaucratic channels and the government-controlled

media. It is an entirely different matter that this apparent radicalism proved to be symbolic rather than substantive.

In the specific context of AP, what seems to have prepared the Congress Party high command for the marginalisation of the dominant Reddy leadership from the Andhra region in the 1970s (all the Chief Ministers between 1956 and 1973 came from coastal Andhra and Rayalaseema), was the political image of being a Reddy-dominated party. What further facilitated the process of leadership change in the State's Congress Party and with less effective political backlash from the dominant community, was the built-in discontent over the suppression of regional aspirations in Telangana, which had accumulated over time. As suggested earlier, although the movement for a separate State of Telangana invited the spontaneous participation and support of educated middle class youths and the employed in the initial phases, the attention of other social strata was also soon captured. In the later phase of the struggle, the Telangana Reddy faction within the Congress Party joined the struggle and captured the TPS. Although this movement was successfully sabotaged and its leadership co-opted by the Congress party, it became instrumental in initiating a series of significant changes that formed the immediate backdrop for the shift in Congress Party strategy, wherein two important aspects could be identified:

- i) the decline of powerful leaders such as K. Brahmananda Reddy and the marginalisation of factions and lobbies of dominant communities from economically advanced regions, leading to the realignment of traditional lobbies within the Congress Party;
- ii) the initiation of institutional changes within the Congress Party, whereby a certain shift in the relationship between caste-region-faction and organisational representation was witnessed.

The replacement of powerful leaders by those without much of a support base, individual charisma nor following within the party, began to head the State Congress Party and government. It is precisely these individuals that the high command picked up and approved. Once initiated, this mechanism set in motion its own dynamics. As a result, the Congress Party high command had to intervene repeatedly in favour of the State leadership for every small trouble it faced and every small change in the State needed to be approved by the Congress high command. Thus, the factional groups were constantly looking for the support of the high command instead of fighting battles within the political theatre of the State. These two aspects mutually reinforced each other and contributed to the weakening of the Congress Party's organisation, leadership and support base in the State.

The shift in the factions' political fortunes, based on caste-region association, marked institutional changes within the Congress Party and thus marginalised the factions and lobbies of dominant communities from the economically advanced regions. It also provided political leverage to those from the less developed regions, within it to the dominant communities, and to some extent also to the 'weaker sections', thus signalling restructuring of the Congress Party.

This process was signalled by the Congress Party high command's replacement of K Brahmanda Reddy by P.V. Narasimha Rao, following the separatist movement. K Brahmanda Reddy was a powerful Chief Minister, whilst P.V. Narasimha Rao was a Telangana Congressman with neither a significant mass base nor a faction of his own. The most visible feature of this phenomenon was the repeated intervention of the Congress Party high command: instead of fighting their battles within the political theatre of the State, factional groups looked up for the blessings of national leadership. In the absence of an alternative political platform in the State, disgruntled factional leaders representing dominant caste-classes of the advanced regions remained within the Congress Party. The 1972 elections clearly demonstrate the political marginalisation of the dominant Reddy community within the party (Bersntorff, 1973).

Another facet of the transformation that took place in the countryside following the Green Revolution, was the emergence and consolidation of the market-related rich peasant class, which moved to the centre-stage of Indian politics and the political economy (Bardhan, 1984). In the ruling class coalition, dominated by big businesses and the industrial class, the rich peasantry was an important and fairly aggressive class. It depended on the level of its politico-ideological maturity and acceptability (which was in turn shaped by the historical context of the configuration of social forces), the extent and expanse of social crisis, and, of course, the leadership's ability to make use of available resources to create real or imaginary aspirations among the people. Given its subordinate position in the hierarchical power structure of the ruling class coalition and its aggressive class instinct, this class displayed an inclination for an agitational mode of articulation in the pursuit of its interests and for the enlargement of its share in State patronage, through budgetary and plan allocations. Although its major demand was for subsidies for agricultural inputs, such as electricity, fertilisers, high-yield variety seeds and remunerative prices for its produce, it displayed a tremendous organisational ability. It rallied the lower echelons of rural society through its populist, progressive postures on economic, ecological, gender and nationality issues, while at the same time sidelining land reforms and wage issues that directly concerned the rural poor. The agitations of this class, which assumed aggressive forms such as *rasta roko*, *rail roko*, *dharnas* and *bandhs* in Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh (UP), Punjab and Karnataka in the post-Emergency period, were christened 'New Farmers' Movements' (see Brass, 1994). Other facets of this class are clearly evident in the vigorous emergence of regional political parties, the manifestation of factional conflicts within the Congress Party, the discursive significance gained by the question of regional autonomy and the renewed debate on centre-State relations in the post-Emergency period. The shift in agitational and electoral politics since the late 1970s is evidence of the centrality of this class in the States, especially in those with experience of the Green Revolution.

What took place in Andhra was an aggressively enterprising version of this class, its enterprising nature being evident in its ability to explore newer possibilities and expand rapidly over the decades. In search of fertile land and irrigation facilities, members of this class migrated during the agricultural season, travelling as far as northern Telangana to places such as Nizamabad, Karimnagar and Warangal, even to Bellary and Raichur in Tungabhadra *doab* in Karnataka. There, they purchased or leased land to cultivate, returning to their native lands with the surplus at the end of the agricultural season. Their settlements are referred to as *Guntur palles*. Sociologically, the majority of this class belong to the Kamma, Reddy and Kapu castes of the Krishna-Godavari delta.<sup>11</sup> They have also entered into cinema industry and dominated its production, distribution and even exhibition; invested in education and contributed to its commercialisation and come to dominate even the media – both print and electronic. The families belonging to this class constitute a big chunk of the so-called NRIs – the Non-Resident Indians.

It was not until the late 1970s and early 1980s that the emergence of an educated and peasant middle class from OBC castes such as the Munnuru Kapu, Padmashali (weaver), Gouda (toddy tapper), Golla and Kurma (sheep rearing) castes took place. This was due to the State-sponsored developmental process, the Green Revolution strategy and the availability of education in rural society.<sup>12</sup> With their newfound wealth, they entered the rural credit system, co-operatives and small business. Thanks to reservations in education and employment, their educated youth also entered educational institutions as teachers and State bureaucracy in subaltern positions. This change in the

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11. The regular migration of Kamma and Reddy peasants from Guntur in search of green pastures has existed since before Independence – the black cotton and irrigated tracks of Telangana and Karnataka. Interestingly, this area, which was part of the *Nizam's* Hyderabad, is still referred to as '*Nizam's* area' in the coastal villages.

12. The traditional craftsmen of the Kummari (potter), Kammari (blacksmith) and weaver castes started to experience a decline in their importance and place in the agrarian rural economy as a result of the rapid changes in the production process, social relations and cultural practices. In the case of the dalits, the impact of the process of agrarian modernisation was very perceptible on the Madigas who, as a result of the decline of rural leatherwork, lost a major source of their livelihood and joined the ranks of agricultural labourers.

socio-economic scenario in the State infused confidence in these communities; as a result, they could stake their claims in local politics such as the *Panchayat Raj* institutions.

In the earlier period, the Congress Party successfully co-opted the agenda, issues and the militant peasantry through its strategy of agrarian reforms, and it was able to contain and reduce the influence of the left. Further, through electoral politics and the *Panchayat Raj* system in particular, it sought to consolidate its social support among different castes and classes. The political economy of development pursued by the Congress Party after Independence generated a new structure of contradictions. The principal aspect of this was the conflict between the dominant caste peasantry and the landless lower castes. It is this process of change that forms the context of the social articulation of caste and class in Andhra Pradesh.

## 4 Political Articulation in Telangana: Class Dynamics and Agrarian Struggles

The region of Telangana has seen class-based mobilisation of the landless and poor peasantry since the early 1970s. This section analyses the dynamics of the agrarian movement in Telangana region. We first discuss the split in the communist movement and the formation of the CPI (ML), whose understanding of Indian society as semi-feudal gave rise to the militant peasant struggles in the post-Independence period. Secondly, we look at the agrarian scenario in the Telangana countryside and, thirdly, we examine the development and the different phases of the peasant movement.

The class specificity of agrarian mobilisation in Telangana has to be seen in the historical context of anti-feudal struggle in this region. As discussed earlier, the region of Telangana was characterised by the presence of a class of large landlords, comprising the *jagirdars* and *deshmukh doras*, who constituted the support structure of the *Nizam's* State. Under the leadership of the communists operating through the Andhra Maha Sabha (AMS), the Telangana struggle of the 1940s rallied the entire rural population, cutting across caste and class distinctions in the fight against the oppression of these landlords and their practices of *vetti* (forced extraction of labour services and products), for example. The locus of the struggle was Nalgonda, parts of Warangal and Karimnagar, and Kamam districts.

It is important to note that the peasant revolt put an end to the feudal practices and the domination of this class of landlords. As a result of the injury to their pride caused by the peasant revolt, the landlords who fled away from their villages were generally disinclined to return to their native places, seeking instead to dispose of their lands to their erstwhile tenants and other farmers. Although this peasant struggle ended with the violent intervention of the post-Independence Indian State, and so could not bring about a radical transformation of the agrarian social structure, it succeeded however in paving the way for a certain degree of homogeneity in the upper crust of the landowners.

The areas of Telangana unaffected by the struggle of the 1940s continued to experience that period's feudal oppression until the 1970s. It is curious to note that even the new class of landlords that emerged in the post-Independence period resorted to old feudal modes of exploitation and oppression, as was evident in certain areas of Karimnagar and Warangal districts.<sup>13</sup>

It is this scenario that forms the backdrop of the peasant struggles waged by the CPI (ML) groups during the 1970s and 1980s in Telangana region. It is no exaggeration to say that the CPI (ML)-led peasant mobilisation was basically a response to the State's ineffective intervention in transforming agrarian social relations, despite its progressive agrarian legislations, and its failure to democratise rural social life. It may also be noted that the CPI (ML) groups established their support bases in the areas which were on the periphery of the earlier peasant struggle. In fact, in some of these areas, extreme forms of feudal exploitation and practices continued to exist until the Naxalite movement addressed them. In a substantial sense, the CPI (ML) agrarian movement completed the process that had remained unfinished since the 1940s.

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13. This was a result of the absence of any substantial resistance from the popular classes, due to the left's move away from popular struggles and towards parliamentary strategy, and the gradual and perceptible decline in its support base in the post-Telangana period.

## 4.1 The split in the communist movement

Critical to an understanding of the rise of Naxalite movement in the country is the split in the communist movement. The communists make sense of their politics in an overtly theoretical fashion and, unlike other political parties, the Communist Parties tend to explain their political moves in terms of fairly long-term historical processes. Thus, any explanation of the split in the movement must take into consideration a complex set of factors, even when a particular split could be the result of serious inter-personal differences or a growing incompatibility in the style of functioning of individual leaders – as it convincingly seems to have been the case with the CPI (ML), which has split into innumerable groups and factions since its inception less than 40 years ago.

Despite the multiple splits that the CPI (ML) has seen, there is broad agreement among these different parties/groups on the characterisation of Indian society and State (see Suri, 1993).<sup>14</sup> The CPI (ML) groups understand agrarian society as predominantly semi-feudal and characterise the Indian State as semi-feudal and semi-colonial.<sup>15</sup> Based upon this understanding, the Indian capitalist class becomes a comprador entity in active collaboration with the landlord class, dependent upon the metropolitan bourgeoisie. In the understanding of the CPI (ML) groups, the historical specificity and trajectory of development in India preempts the possibility of the development of capitalism in the countryside. Further, the peculiar intertwining of interests or alliance of the class forces of pre-capitalist agrarian society and the colonial structure that characterise societies that have been subjected to colonial rule, is supposed to be an objective historical fetter on the development of capitalism in these societies. Thus, the development of the Indian agrarian economy post-1947 has been characterised as the reinforcement of semi-feudal social relations.

This understanding of Indian society and State leads these groups to characterise the present phase of Indian revolution as a ‘New Democratic’ stage and to underline the continual need of anti-feudal struggles. According to the CPI (ML) parties, the principal contradiction in Indian society is between feudalism and the mass of poor peasantry and landless agricultural labour. The principal task of the agrarian revolution is to fight against and abolish the feudal class in the countryside and democratise the social relations therein.

The strategy thus formulated by the CPI (ML) emphasised the unity of the poor peasantry and landless poor, constituting a majority of the agrarian population, with the broad masses of working people against the feudal class. Nevertheless the emphasis is on the landless and small peasantry playing a pivotal role in the agrarian revolution. In this view, the struggles against forcible labour extraction, the eviction of peasants from their land, and the demand for waiving of rural debts, higher wages, restoration of common property resources (controlled by the landlords), and

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14. On the contrary, while the CPI understands Indian society as moving towards a capitalist path of development in which the national bourgeoisie plays a progressive anti-feudal and anti-imperialist role, the CPI (M) party characterises Indian State as one in the hands of the big bourgeoisie, which has entered into an alliance with the landlord class on the one hand and the imperialist forces on the other. Accordingly, while the CPI characterises the present stage of Indian revolution as ‘National Democratic’, in which the working class should collaborate with the capitalist class to further the process of anti-feudal development, the CPI (M) identifies the present stage as one of a ‘Peoples’ Democratic’ revolution, in which the working class and the mass of rural classes form a broad front of popular forces against the capitalist-feudal-imperialist combine. In other words, both parties emphasise the need of mass democratic struggles

15. Crucial to the semi-feudal characterisation is the identification of the following aspects as central to agrarian society in India: i) the stark unequal ownership and control of land with land concentrated in the hands of a few people and majority of the rural agrarian population remaining landless; ii) the predominance of a landlord class in rural society and their dominance over economic, political and socio-cultural life in the countryside; iii) the appropriation of agrarian surplus by these landlords from the peasantry and agrarian labour predominantly in the form of rent and extra economic forms of coercion; usury as a major source of enrichment of the landed gentry; iv) the low level of development of productive forces, i.e. of instruments and techniques of production; v) the wide prevalence of *bedakaal* or the eviction of tenants and poor peasantry from their lands and illegal occupation of their land by the landlords; vi) the use of caste as a form and site of social oppression as caste governs the landlords’ customary entitlements to *vetti* (unpaid) or lowly paid labour services and *mamools* (bribes) from different castes in the village; the untouchables or dalits, who constitute the bulk of agricultural labour being the most brutally subjected section of rural society.

distribution of surplus land, assume significance as a means to politicise the rural poor and pave the way for the democratisation of social relations through the abolition of the landlord class and its privileges.

Despite serious differences on the nature and strength of the landlord class, its interconnections with other classes in the ruling coalition, the place and tactical significance of parliamentary participation and its relation to armed struggle and the linkages and modes of transformation of land and wage struggles into political struggles, all of the CPI (ML) agreed on the following: that the 'agrarian revolution is central to the new democratic revolution' in India; that 'land to the tiller' was the central slogan of agrarian mobilisation; and that the organisation of the poor peasantry and agrarian labour, who constituted the backbone, was crucial to the agrarian revolution.

This understanding formed the basis of the Naxalbari movement in West Bengal and the Srikakulam movement in northern coastal Andhra in the late 1960s. In continuation of these revolts, which were put down violently, the CPI (ML) organised similar struggles in other parts of the country. The peasant struggles in Karimnagar and the tribal areas of Adilabad, Warangal and the Khammam districts of Telangana region in Andhra Pradesh have to be understood against this background of the split in the communist movement and the spread and expansion of CPI (ML) activity.

## 4.2 The agrarian scenario in north Telangana

To appreciate the spread of Naxalite activity in the districts of North Telangana during the 1970s, it is necessary to understand the agrarian conditions of this region. Socio-economic conditions in the Telangana countryside, despite the State's agrarian reformist intervention, presented a continuity of oppressive landlordism. The social ecology of this region presented extremely unequal land ownership patterns, and the dominance of landed exploitative social relations showed the implementation of the tenancy and land ceiling legislations in poor light.

In the early 1970s, most of the villages in the districts of northern Telangana were still dominated by *doras* or big landlords, as in the Telangana of the 1940s. Each *dora* usually dominated not only his native village, but also a cluster of villages. Two broad categories of landlords can be identified: i) absentee landlords, who fashioned themselves after the erstwhile *deshmukhs* and owned large tracts of land in the villages under his dominance; and (ii) resident landlords, some of whom were tenants to the earlier *deshmukh doras* or rich peasant-turned-landlords, with a direct interest in agriculture, supervising the cultivation of lands under their control. They belonged mostly to the Velama, Reddy and, in some cases, the Brahmin castes.

The relations of production are more crucial to the definition of this class than mere ownership and control of land, the principal criterion being the relation to labour. What distinguishes a landlord from a rich peasant is the fact that while the latter considers labour as a commodity and tends to enter into a market relation with labour, the former continues to resort to forcible extraction of labour through a series of customary obligations. In other words, it is force, customs and practices governed by caste rules, rather than contractual or market relations that bind not only the labouring and service castes but also the peasantry to a landlord.

The variety of labour services extracted by *doras* from different castes in the Telangana countryside could be classified into two categories. The first form is the one related to the production process; the second is that which takes place outside the production process. *Vetti* (forced labour), which was a predominant form of labour exploitation and subjugation in the Telangana countryside until the 1940s, when the peasantry and agrarian poor rose in revolt against such a practice, continued in its

form and spirit until the 1970s in certain pockets of northern Telangana, such as Karimnagar, Warangal and Adilabad. The term *vetti* refers to all forms of 'extra-economic' exaction of labour and goods.

The social origins of *vetti* can be traced to the Hindu *jajmani* arrangement (see Kolenda, 1978, pp. 46–54). As per the *jajmani*, there exists mutual co-operation and complementarity between different castes with defined occupations in agrarian society. Thus the peasant, artisan, service and labouring castes transact their goods and services in kind; terms and conditions are determined by local practices.

The *vetti* system can be defined as a deformed version of the *jajmani* relationship (Dhanagare, 1983, p.185). The violation of the principle of exchange and mutual co-operation is the quintessence of the *vetti* system, which prevailed in certain parts of Telangana until the 1970s. The peasants were required to supply *vetti nagallu* (a free supply of ploughs) for a requisite number of days to the landlord; demands were also made upon the peasants to supply *penta* (organic manure), regardless of their own requirements. Shepherds, who usually charged a certain amount to farmers for resting their flock of sheep on their farms during the night, were to rest *vetti mandalu* on the landlords land. Artisans such as blacksmiths (Kammari) and carpenters (Vadla) were required to repair the agricultural implements of the *dora* without any payment.

In the case of agricultural labour castes such as the Madigas and Malas (called *vetti Madigalu* and *vetti Malollu*), *vetti* services were to be rendered to the landlord for a requisite number of days on a priority basis during peak agricultural seasons, when there was a high demand for labour. Even when payment was made, it was less than what was paid by the rest of the farmers.

*Vetti* is not limited to services and goods related to agricultural production alone but quite significantly extends to domains outside the production process. Every caste had to supply its services and goods free of charge to the *dora*. Thus, the Goudas (toddy-tappers) had to reserve certain high yielding palmyra trees for the *dora*, tap them and supply the produce freely. The village Kummari (potter) supplied pots; Chakalis (washermen) and Mangalis (barbers), in addition to their caste occupation-related services, had to perform other household chores at the *gadi* (residence of *dora*).

Besides the eviction of peasants from their lands, what contributed to the landed property of the *doras* was their occupation of common property resources and government lands, such as *shikam* (tank bed land), *poramboku* and *banjars* (cultivable and non-cultivable government waste lands) and *inams* of village artisans. With the pretext of settling disputes, fines were collected, most often from both parties of the dispute. In addition, moneylending was a major source of income for them. Thus, the *doras* exercised their dominance in almost every sphere of social life – including the private lives of people in the village (see Andhra Pradesh State Committee, 1979).

Unlike those of the earlier generation, these landlords had access to the developmental resources allocated by the State. Thus they could reap benefits from the vast State funds allocated to the development programmes, agricultural extension services, agricultural co-operatives and rural banks. In addition, they controlled the civil, excise and forest contracts (see Srinivasulu, 1997).<sup>16</sup> With the introduction of the *Panchayati Raj* system, they could even gain a certain legitimacy by being elected onto local bodies.<sup>17</sup>

16. In northern Telangana, the presence of a long forest track bestowed landlords with an opportunity to enrich themselves by exploiting forest resources, mainly teak wood and tuniki leaf, which is used in *beedi* making (the *beedi* industry is a major sector, following agriculture in this region). Tuniki collection is a major source of income for the rural poor and tribals in the lean agricultural season.

17. Interview with B.S. Ramulu, former Secretary of Radical Youth League and a native of the Sircilla-Jagityal area.

One significant factor – often ignored or less emphasised in the accounts of the peasant movement – which catalysed a perceptual change in the outlook of the landlords on the one hand and the peasantry and the landless on the other, was the technological change in agriculture induced by the rural electrification of Telangana in the late 1960s. As a result of electrification, large tracts of land, left fallow earlier due to the lack of water resources, were brought into cultivation under bore well irrigation. The phenomenal rise in the number of bore wells also induced changes in the cropping pattern, which changed from coarse crops to paddy and other commercial crops, increasing the marketable surplus. This perceptible change in Telangana was accompanied by Indira Gandhi's populist politics, which at least symbolically undermined the political hold of the élite of dominant castes. This was not to result in the challenge of the dominant caste-class structure in the countryside. But Indira Gandhi, through her populist slogans of *garibi hatao* and land reforms, etc., definitely aroused the aspirations of the rural as well as the urban poor – the desire to own some land of their own being an important one. The failure of the Congress Party government in the State, as elsewhere, lay in their lack of political will to attempt to translate these promises into reality. This is on the one hand.

On the other hand, rural Telangana also witnessed another change in the late 1960s. With the entry of industrial products into rural markets, traditional, rural artisan communities experienced a gradual decline in their economic position and significance in rural society. Two numerically large communities that felt the impact of this competition on their livelihood patterns were the traditional handloom weavers and the Madiga leather workers. The former were affected by the entry of cheap powerloom products into the rural markets, which eroded their livelihoods and caused their entitlements to decline. This forced the men to shift to working with the powerlooms and their women to *beedi* making. Technological change in agriculture led to a decline in demand for leather chappals, as preference was given to industrially-produced chappals. This forced the Madigas to turn to agriculture as an alternative form of income. This only increased the pressure on agriculture and created surplus labour facilitating the landed classes' hold on the labour.

This scenario formed the backdrop of the agrarian unrest for the class politics and mobilisation in rural northern Telangana.

### 4.3 Agrarian struggles and class mobilisation

The history of the CPI (ML)-led agrarian movement in Telangana in the post-Emergency period can be divided into two phases. In the first phase, i.e. 1977 to the early 1980s, the emphasis was on mass mobilisation and popular forms of protest around the issues of landlord oppression and coercion, the practice of *vetti*, land to the landless, usury, etc. The second phase, the beginnings of which can be traced to the 1970s and relied upon almost exclusively since the mid-1980s, was the armed struggle phase.

Although the beginnings of peasant unrest were visible in the early 1970s, it is only in the post-Emergency period that an increased and expanded mobilisation of the agrarian poor was witnessed in northern Telangana. The defeat of the Congress Party government at the centre, a sense of relief from eighteen long months of Emergency rule, during which even minimum democratic rights were denied, paved the way for popular assertions from below.<sup>18</sup> Thus a new phase of agrarian political mobilisation took place in the late 1970s in the districts of north Telangana.

Critical to an understanding of this is the emergence of an educated section of the rural poor. While the developed coastal region has, in a substantive sense, produced two or three generations of

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18. The proceedings of the Bhargava Commission, constituted to examine the question of the violation of rights and fake encounters, put the Congress Party government in defence and infused a sense of confidence among the CPI(ML) groups.

educated lower class-castes, such as the OBCs and *dalits*, the rural lower class youth of the Telangana region entered the institutions of higher education for the first time only in the 1970s. This was due to the expansion of education, state support and scholarships to OBC, *dalit* and *adivasi* youth. These young people, for whom the oppressive conditions of the rural countryside were a matter of living experience, gravitated to radical politics in a significant way. The swelling of the ranks of the student and youth fronts of the CPI (ML) in the late 1970s was indicative of the restlessness of the post-Emergency phase of student politics in the State in general and in Telangana in particular. (KB, 1984; p.157)

The programme of the *Gramalaku Taralandi* or 'Go to villages' campaign, undertaken by the Radical Students Union (RSU), Radical Youth League (RYL) and the cultural front Jana Natya Mandali (JNM) to spread the message of agrarian revolution attracted these youths. Small groups comprising youths, students and cultural activists participated in this campaign. They moved from one village to another mingling with the rural poor, spreading the message through song, dance and speech. Rural folk forms were experimented with and brought into play in these campaigns. Similarities with the Telangana peasant struggle of 1940s were striking. These campaigns were instrumental not only in the spread of the movement but also in its consolidation through the establishment of the Rytu Coolie Sanghams (the peasant-landless poor organisations, RCS) in the villages.

By the end of the 1978, the RCS were established in most parts of Karimnagar district, Sircilla and Jagityal *taluqs* being the main centers. The RCS became instrumental in articulating the sharp polarisation that objectively existed in the countryside by organising the poor peasants, farm servants and agricultural labour against the landlords. Thus the RCS came to be seen as the organisational expression of the all the oppressed classes, especially the *dalits* in the countryside, capable of conducting a struggle against all forms of landlord class oppression.

Crucial to this phase of agrarian mobilisation was what has been described as *Jaitra Yatra* (Victory March). On 7 September 1978, more than 30,000 people from 150 villages, comprising farm-servants, agricultural labourers and toiling peasants, were mobilised in a march to Jagityal town, which culminated in a huge public meeting.<sup>19</sup> This was a turning point in the history of the peasant movement in Telangana. With this, new contacts were established, enthusiastic youths showed an interest in starting RCS units in their villages and the *Jaithra Yatra* was catalytic in the expansion of the organisational network and support bases for the agrarian struggle in the region.

#### 4.4 The Sircilla-Jagityal movement

The Sircilla and Jagityal *taluqs* of Karimnagar district were central to the peasant struggle in Telangana region during the post-Emergency period. These two *taluqs* saw initial attempts at agrarian mobilisation in the early 1970s, inspired by the Naxalbari and Srikakulam uprisings. The beginning of peasant mobilisation in this area is seen as a result of the spread of the message of revolution from the tribal areas to the plains. Heavy repression and the proclamation of a state of Emergency in 1975 imposed severe restrictions on popular mobilisation and open struggles. The lifting of the Emergency and the coming to power of the Janata Party at the centre drastically changed the political scenario in the country. The promise of improved civil rights paved the way for the Rytu Cooli Sanghams to come into the open and organise the rural poor for better socio-economic conditions.

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19. This has been described as unprecedented mass mobilisation on the part of the CPI (ML). As one of the activists of that time observed, participation in the march exceeded the expectations of the organisers and in fact was quite spontaneous. It became a turning point in the history of post-Emergency radical peasant politics in the State. Interview with B.S. Ramulu.

The issues focused upon and the demands put forward in these struggles can be broadly grouped into two categories. The first was the refusal to perform *vetti*, pay *mamools* and approach the landlord for arbitration of disputes, etc. The second category consisted of demands for higher wages, which were below the minimum wage prescribed by law, repayment of huge sums of money collected from the villagers as *dandugalu* (fines) and bribes taken earlier, and the return of lands forcibly seized from peasants, etc. Further, it was demanded that landlords pay reparations for past actions and exploitation.

Demonstrating the popular response, the Sangham forced landlords to yield to the former category of demands. The initial success in villages such as Nimmappally<sup>20</sup> in Sircilla and Maddunur in Jagityal demonstrated the possibility of organised protest succeeding in making landlords concede without much resistance. The spread of these success stories encouraged people in other villages to follow suit. It is no exaggeration to suggest that in the initial phases of the struggle, a mere call of 'social boycott' worked wonders, as this meant that, apart from stopping agricultural operations on the landlords' farms, no washermen or barbers would be available to provide (even paid) services at the landlord's *gadi*. This social boycott of the landlords by service castes in particular caused great inconvenience to their normal everyday lives (Karuna Kumar, 1984).

Thus, in the early stages of the peasant movement, 'social boycott' was used as the main form of struggle to exercise considerable social pressure on landlords and to isolate them in villages. The people in these villages stopped rendering *vetti* services, carrying disputes to the landlord and offering *mamools* and bribes. It is interesting to note that attempts were made to settle the disputes through public hearings.<sup>21</sup>

The success in this regard enthused people to push further for the second category of demands. What is noteworthy is the fact that in a number of places the RCS conducted public hearings to enquire into illegal exactions such as *mamools* and *dandugalu*, land-grabbing – both private and public or common – and landlord atrocities (Andhra Pradesh State Committee, 1979; C.V. Subba Rao, 1978). The landlords in these places were made to pay back huge sums to the people.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, attempts were made to settle disputes among the poor people. As said earlier, huge tracts of the *poramboku*, *shikam*, temple lands, forest lands and lands illegally held by landlords were distributed to the landless.<sup>23</sup> Further, the demand for an increase in the wages of agricultural labour, *palerus* (farm servants) and tendu leaf<sup>24</sup> collectors were articulated.

The main issues taken up in the villages during this phase of the struggle can thus be summed up as follows (K. Seetharama Rao, 2001, pp.172–3):

- i) abolition of *vetti*;
- ii) occupation of *poramboku*, *shikam*, lands under the control of temples and endowments, lands occupied by landlords through various illegal and manipulative methods;

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20. The attempt at the formation of the local RCS unit can be traced back to the early 1970s.

21. The practice of conducting public hearings can be traced back to the days of the Telangana peasant struggle of the 1940s. This practice gave ordinary people an opportunity to voice their grievances and complaints, which could be verified and judged without much delay. In the context of a social scenario such as Telangana of the 1940s and northern Telangana of the 1970s, sharply polarised between the landlord on the one end and the rest of the people on the other, the allegations levelled against the former went almost unchallenged. This experiment is not immune from excesses.

22. To cite one instance, in Israjpalle, the Rytu Coolie Sangham, formed in the last week of June 1978, besides succeeding in increasing agricultural wages and putting an end to the practice of *vetti* and *mamools*, also made the landlord repay the amount collected as fines and *mamools* in the past, estimated at Rs. 88,000. He was also asked complete the construction of a house that he had taken on contract. In spite of his initial refusal, he had to pay this amount after a few days of social boycott. T. Papi Reddy (1990), p. 166.

23. In Lothunur village, in addition to putting an end to *vetti*, *mamools* and fines, 95 acres of grazing land, under the illegal control of the landlord and for which he used to collect grazing tax, was seized by the agitating peasants. The landlord left the village as a consequence of the social boycott. T. Papi Reddy (1990)

24. Tendu leaf is used in *beedi*-making. The *beedi* industry is a major employer of women in Telangana district.

- iii) collecting *dandugalus* and bribes from village landlords and *pethamdars*;
- iv) conducting strikes for higher wages for agricultural labourers and *jeethagallu*;
- v) preventing landlords from selling off the lands declared as surplus as per the land ceiling act;
- vi) exposing and fighting the atrocities against and exploitation of tribals by forest officials, excise and *beedi* leaf contractors;
- vii) exposing and fighting against the corruption of village functionaries and local politicians;
- viii) demanding the proper implementation of welfare and development programmes;
- ix) re-occupation of forest lands in tribal areas appropriated by the forest department (in the name of reserve forest) and lands occupied by non-tribal landlords and money lenders and so on.

Given the substantial material interests involved in this, landlords opposed the demand to raise wages and surrender lands forcibly occupied from the peasants and the illegally controlled common lands. To achieve these demands, various forms of mobilisation and methods of protest such as demonstrations, *gheraos*, strikes, and, of course, social boycotts, were adopted by the RCS. As the movement expanded and the organisational structure of the RCS spread out following the *Jaithra Yatra* held in Jagityal town, the injury not only to landlords *pettandari* (domination) and pride but also to their material interests became substantial and expansive, and they sought to quell the unrest.

Reaction to the movement evolved in two phases. In the first, the landlords' response was local. They tried to organise gangs and use them against the peasant activists and to break the RCS network. Thus, beating up workers, raiding their houses and unleashing terror became a common feature of the landlords' reaction.<sup>25</sup> The landlords' resorting to violent means forced the RCS to shift away from its initial strategy of peaceful protest. The peasants organised resistance led to a further escalation of violence from the landlords.

The second phase of reaction to the peasant movement developed with the direct involvement of the State in the agrarian conflicts. As the movement expanded and an organised resistance was built up against the landlords, State reaction assumed a new form. Thus, the entire area was declared a 'disturbed' area, under the Suppression of Disturbances Act, 1948 (see Ram, 1978, p.1880). This act was enforced to tackle the spill-over effect of the Telangana peasant struggle on the region of coastal Andhra 'to make better provision for the suppression of disorder in the Madras Presidency', and defines a disturbed area as one 'for the time being declared to be disturbed area by a notification under section 3' (Ram, 1978). The section referred to conferred the powers to declare thus to the subjective satisfaction of the provincial government, which so decided must notify the same in the State Gazette.

Further, as per this Act:

'Whoever in a disturbed area commits any offence punishable under any of the following provisions of the Indian Penal Code may in lieu of the punishment to which he is liable under that code, will be punished with death: 307 (attempt to murder), 363 (kidnapping), 364 (abducting in order to murder), 365 (kidnapping or abducting with intent secretly and wrongfully to confine a person), 366 (kidnapping and abducting a woman to compel her marriage), 367 (kidnapping and abducting in order to subject a person to grievous hurt), 368 (wrongfully concealing or keeping in confinement a

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25. What happened in the middle of September 1978 in Chinmettupalli village illustrates the emerging scenario and the intensity of tension building up in the Telangana countryside. In this village the landlord's *goondas* tried to break the peasant organisation by creating terror in the hearts of the rural folk. 'The landlord, aided by his battery of *goondas*, raided the houses of peasants, ransacked fifteen houses and kidnapped ten activists' of the RCS. The RCS responded to this by organising a demonstration with a thousand people and 'surrounded the *gadi*, demanding the release of the activists. The landlord along with his nephew (another landlord of Bornapalli village), went upstairs and opened fire on the peasants, though the police were present, they did not prevent them and, as a consequence, eleven peasants were injured'. See C.V. Subba Rao (1978). For more cases of conflict in the villages, see T. Papi Reddy (1990).

kidnapped or abducted person), 376 (rape), 394 (voluntarily causing hurt in attempting robbery), 395 (dacoity), 397 (robbery or dacoity with attempt to cause death or grievous hurt), 398 (attempt to commit robbery or dacoity when armed with deadly weapons) and 436 (mischief by fire or explosive substance with intent to destroy homes).’  
(Ram, 1978)

The above offences, for which life imprisonment is the maximum punishment in the normal course, are liable for the death sentence in a disturbed area. The Act further specifies that ‘any magistrate, any police officer not the below the rank of sub-inspector can open fire or order opening of fire “or otherwise use force, even to the causing of death”, against any person who in a disturbed area acting in contravention of any law or order for the time being in force’. And further, it fully protects officials by imposing sanctions on the State government, preventing it from initiating any prosecution suit or other legal proceedings against any person in respect of anything done or purporting to be done in the exercise of his powers. This Act thus provides the functionaries of the State with absolute and unchecked powers.

This response is a clear instance of the State understanding rural tensions as ‘law and order’ problems and suppressing them through violent means, rather than going to the root of the problem, i.e. the socio-economic basis of rural unrest. This understandably generated its own dynamics: violence leading to further violence, without any light at the other end of the tunnel.

The two *taluqs* of Sircilla and Jagityal were declared ‘disturbed areas’ in the month of October 1978 under the Suppression of Disturbances Act, 1948. It facilitated the possibility of a collaboration between the police and the landlords, thus making the life of peasant activists that much more difficult as they had not only to face the landlords’ force but also the organised might of the State.

#### **4.5 The Peddapally struggle**

With the declaration of Sircilla and Jagityal *taluqs* as ‘disturbed areas’, attempts were made to extend and expand the movement to the neighbouring areas by forming RCS units. The movement in Peddapally *taluk* thus assumed importance as the next phase of the peasant struggle.

Peddapally, the third largest *taluk* in Karimnagar district, is important due to the two major Telangana industrial centers of Ramagundam and Godavari Khani, known for the thermal power project, coal mines, fertiliser and cement factories that are located there. It had a population of more than three *lakhs* in the 1970s, half of whom were workers. Agricultural labourers comprised only 55% of the workforce (C.V. Subba Rao, 1979).

This *taluk* also displayed iniquitous land relations. Making best use of the loopholes of land ceiling laws, the landlords, belonging predominantly to the Velama community followed by Reddy, Kshatriya and Brahmin castes, continued to own and control hundreds of acres of land. A study by the District Weaker Sections Association of the Congress Party identified 94 landlords with a land ownership of 70 to 400 acres, and stated that around 16,000 acres of land ‘was transferred to various fictitious names overnight’ in the *taluk* (Subba Rao, 1979, p.1869). In this *taluk*, two or more big landlords, often belonging to different castes, dominated many villages. Thus, many villages often presented a picture of ‘rigid caste divisions’ (Subba Rao, 1979). This was reflected not only at the grassroots level in political competition for political power, positions in *Panchayat Raj* institutions and for a share in the resources made available for agricultural and rural development, but also in the political factions at *taluk* and district levels.

What is paradoxical about this region is the fact that, despite the concentration of modern industries providing substantial employment to the labouring classes of the neighbouring villages, feudal relations of production were prevalent in the countryside. The following extract from a report on the peasant struggle captures the essence of social relations in agriculture in the countryside:

‘The *taluka* president of the Radical Youth League could think of only four landlords in the whole *taluk* who had tractors (in contrast to Jagityal where many landlords have turned modern). None of the landlords shows any interest in crops other than paddy and millets, and even then they do not go in for fertiliser-hungry high-yielding varieties but stick to the traditional ones. This is in spite of the fact that Peddapally now gets water from the Pochampad project (on the Godavari river), as a consequence of which the price of land has appreciated from about Rs. 3,000 to Rs. 20,000 per (wet) acre. Further, the clue for the absence of the impact of new wealth on the agrarian relations and prevalence of pre-capitalist agriculture could be seen as a consequence of the practice among the members of the landed gentry here to “either consume or ‘invest’” the surplus in mercantile activities rather than “to transform it into productive capital.”’ (Balagopal, 1982, p.814)

As the same report further observes:

‘Unlike the rich *kulaks* of Green Revolution Andhra, the landlords of Peddapally do not even invest in rice mills. Husking is done domestically, though many of them use machines for the purpose. Most of the surplus goes into PWD contracts (including the Pochampad canal itself), shops (the favourite being the ‘wine’ shops), and real estate in Karimnagar town or Hyderabad city.’ (Balagopal, 1982)

In spite of advanced industrial activity in the towns and this *taluk*, as in the case of Sircilla, Jagityal and most parts of Telangana, extra-economic forms of exploitation such as *vetti*, *dandugalu* and social and cultural degradation of the vast masses by the landed gentry were witnessed. This scenario in Peddapally created favourable conditions for the peasant struggle. If the repression the area of Sircilla and Jagityal necessitated an expansion of the area of struggle, then the emergence of a land market and a hike in land prices following the Pochampad project were also important factors in increasing the landless and poor peasantry’s hunger for land.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, the struggle in Peddapally was initially organised around two issues. The issue of repayment of people’s money, collected by landlords in the form of *dandugalu* and *mamools*, was a major demand in the earlier phase. The value of the exactions was estimated and the demand to repay that amount back to the people was made. In addition, substantial donations were also demanded from landlords as reparation for their unjust actions in the past.

The second important issue was that of the distribution of *porumboku* and *bancharai* (the village grazing and wasteland) to the landless. As discussed earlier, these lands were invariably in the hands of the local *pettandar* (see C.V. Subba Rao, 1979, p.1869).<sup>27</sup> After forcibly occupying these lands with the RCS’s help, an important aspect of the struggle was that these lands either be *equally*

26. Discussion with B.S. Ramulu. He emphasises the significance of this factor in his assessment of the post-Emergency peasant struggle in Karimnagar.

27. The first ever significant incident took place in Palthem village (population 3,000), in October 1978. The Khastriya landlord family, which dominated this village, was said to be in control of more than 600 acres of land; they also held more than 350 acres of forest land. The RCS took up the demand of distribution of this forest land. As part of this struggle and as a protest against the landlords’ continued control of the forest land, the RCS distributed a hundred cartloads of firewood in the second week of October. Later, agricultural labourers went on strike demanding a wage increase.

*distributed* on an individual basis among the landless or used for *collective farming* (see Balagopal, 1982, p.815).

The movement's major achievement lies in the fact that within the period of six months it took to expand, the practice of *vetti* and the collection of *dandugalu* and *mamools* completely stopped. The wages of agricultural labourers increased from Rs. 3–4 to Rs. 6–7 per day, whilst the increase was from Rs. 800 to Rs. 1,200–2000 per annum for a *paleru* or farm servant. In a number of villages, the *poramboku* lands were occupied. However, although around 600 acres were available to be occupied, the peasants were able only to cultivate 30 acres (C.V. Subba Rao, 1979, p.1871).

As the movement expanded in the *talug*, the reaction from the powers-that-be also increased. Police camps were set up in the villages that had seen hectic activity by the RCS. The methods of repression employed by the police for crushing the people:

‘... make a macabre reading. They destroyed crops by driving animals into fields ripe for harvesting or by stopping water supply and starving the crops (it is a general rule that water from the local tank has to pass by the landlords' field to reach other people's fields and so the police only have to enlist the help of the only-too-willing landlords to stop water supply to the peasants' crops); if a peasant has a motor to draw water from a well, they would smash the motor and throw it into the well; if a peasant went into hiding they would raid his house and throw clothes, utensils and bags of paddy into the well.’

(Balagopal, 1982, p.815)

## 4.6 Tendu struggles

The struggles in Manthani have a special place in the history of the Karimnagar peasant movement. Located on the easternmost part of the district, the *talug* includes 57% of all forests in the district. While the western part of Manthani consists of plains, the eastern part bordering Sironcha and Bastar in Mahadevpur area, is mostly forest area. It is this geographical specificity that gave rise to struggles around the tendu leaf issue.

Tendu leaf is used in the making of *beedis* (country cigars). Karimnagar and Nizambad are important northern Telangana districts with a large concentration of *beedi* manufacturing units owned by both outside manufacturers and local persons. Manthani's importance lies in the fact that its forest area is a major source of the tendu leaf and that it supplies the *beedi* factories in the district.

Tendu leaf collection is a seasonal occupation, taking place during the months of April and May. As this is the period when hardly any work is available for agricultural labourers, tendu leaf collection is the major source of sustenance during this lean season. Both children and women are engaged in this occupation in a major way.

Collected tendu leaves must be sold to a contractor at his *kallam*. The right to purchase the leaf is auctioned to contractors by the government. Although the unit of auction generally consists of four to five villages, contractors bid for more; in fact, a few major contractors dominate the whole exercise of auction. Contractors collect the leaves from the people through a network of *kalladars* (those who manage *kallams*).

The tendu is purchased in bundles of 100 leaves. The minimum rate for a bundle in 1975 was five *paise*. Even this was not paid properly and promptly. Contractors used to pay only four *paise* per

bundle. The poor people involved in the strenuous collection of tendu leaves had to give a requisite number of bundles as *vetti*, 'the first bundles brought to the *kallam* each day and one bundle each in the name of deities like Pochamma, Maisamma, etc.' (T. Papi Reddy, 1990, p.180). The people were made to suffer further on account of the mischief and corruption of the petty *kalledar* employed as a collection agent by the contractor. The *kalledars*, paid a miserably low salary, resorted to various devious methods to augment their income. Thus, in addition to the collection of their share of 'vetti bundles', *kalledars* used the rejection of bundles as a device to deceive people. The *kalledars* would pick up the bundles rejected as spoiled, and make money on them.

This scenario gave rise to the famous tendu leaf struggles of the late 1970s. The struggle was for putting an end to the system of extracting *vetti* bundles, for the unreasonable rejection of leaf bundles by the *kalledars*, and for the payment of five *paise* per bundle as per the government stipulation. Later, struggles were launched for an increase in the purchase rate from five to ten *paise*.

The struggle for higher piece rates and against the high-handedness of contractors and the petty corruption of the *kalladars* at the time of leaf collection was a regular feature of the CPI (ML)'s mobilisation strategy in the forest areas of northern Telangana districts such as Karimnagar, Nizamabad, Warangal and Adilabad. These struggles, in addition to those of women *beedi* workers, played a crucial role in preparing the ground and building a broad mass base for the CPI (ML) groups in this region.

The peasant struggle in Karimnagar was therefore central to the CPI (ML) movement in Telangana. The struggles in other parts of Telangana such as Warangal, Nizambad and Adilabad reflected the broad trends observed in Karimnagar, with slight variations in context, issues and mode of articulation. In the areas of Warangal and Adilabad with a large forest tract and tribal population, issues such as *vetti*, *dandugalu*, *mamools*, the distribution of common lands and the landlords' surplus land, and a wage increase for agricultural labourers and *jeethas* formed the core themes around which political mobilisation was attempted. In addition to these, issues such as the exploitation of tribals by excise and tendu leaf contractors, forest officials, moneylender-cum-traders, and the occupation of tribal lands by non-tribal landlords and money lenders were also important factors.

#### **4.7 The shift away from popular mobilisation**

With the spread of the movement and the open challenge posed by the CPI (ML) to the State machinery – especially to the revenue, police, excise and forest departments – and the State perception largely being governed by the 'law and order' framework, the State responded violently by treating the movement as a breakdown of law and order. The repression in the post-Emergency phase of the movement, beginning with the declaration of the areas in the thick of the movement as 'disturbed areas', assumed serious proportions by the mid-1980s, with frequent and large-scale 'encounters' reported.<sup>28</sup> Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Telangana region saw violence of unparalleled proportions. During this period, the killing of landlords, termed as 'class enemies', attacks on police stations, the destruction of government property such as buses of the State Road Transport Corporation, equipment and buildings belonging to railways, telephone exchanges and *mandal* offices, were witnessed with regularity.

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28. As a result of the work of the civil liberties organisations in the State, most of these encounters have come to be perceived as 'fake' or false. See reports in the various issues of the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee (APCLC) journal *Swetcha*, and also vocational reports in the *EPW*.

The peasant movement in Telangana began with an emphasis on mass mobilisation by the landless and poor peasantry, in addition to the artisan and service castes' articulation that indebtedness and low wages amounted to pre-capitalist forms of bondage and servitude. With increasing repression of agrarian mobilisation, the CPI (ML) gradually abandoned popular mobilisation and increasingly resorted to armed actions. With both sides of the spectrum relying on violence as a means to make their point, violence and counter-violence, without much exaggeration, became ends in themselves.<sup>29</sup> In contrast, the coastal region experienced subaltern mobilisation based on caste, which we shall examine in the next section.

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<sup>29</sup> The recent proposal and attempts by both the Government of Andhra Pradesh and the CPI (ML) Peoples' War (the most violent of the CPI (ML) groups) to enter into dialogue to resolve the problem of violence and the positive reception of this by popular opinion may show a way out of the decade-old history of political violence in Andhra Pradesh. The popular Telugu daily *Vaaritha* conducted a debate on the need for and the prospects of peace in the State.

## 5 The *Dalit* Movement in Coastal Andhra

Since the mid-1980s, the advanced and prosperous region of coastal Andhra has witnessed unprecedented mobilisation on the socio-cultural identity of caste by students, youths, employees and agricultural labourers belonging to the two major Scheduled Mala and Madiga castes. Although not new, mobilisation along caste lines, especially by underprivileged sections, can be seen as the beginning of a new phase in the social and political history of the State. While in the earlier period such mobilisation was limited and largely confined to the electoral sphere, the 1980s marked a new beginning in terms of politico-ideological discourse, organisational specificity and spatial spread.

It is important to ask why, contrary to the modernist scholarly prediction, the developed Green Revolution areas have seen caste mobilisation and conflict, despite polarisation along class lines. Is the coming to power of the TDP and the escalation of caste conflicts merely coincidental or are they substantially related? In this section we examine the dominant modernist perspective on caste to show why it is inadequate to understand the continual relevance of caste not only in electoral politics but also quite significantly in the people's everyday lives. Locating the riots on *dalits* within the context of the political economy of change, we examine the significance of the shift in the regime in AP (that is, the emergence of the TDP). We also analyse the nature and patterns of the anti-*dalit* riots by taking up three cases for detailed study, to understand how they led to the emergence and expansion of the Dalit Maha Sabha (DMS).

Crucial to an understanding of *dalit* mobilisation and politicisation is the organised attack launched against them by the Kammas of Karamchedu in Prakasham district in July 1985. The Dalit Maha Sabha, formed in response to this event of extraordinary violence, soon became the organisational expression of *dalit* assertion, spreading across the entire region. Educated and politically active elements responded to it, cutting across ideological moorings and even party affiliations.

The articulation of social and political forces increasingly assuming caste and community form, especially in advanced agrarian regions, has been an enigma of sorts for dominant social scientific perspectives and analyses. This is because caste has largely been viewed as a traditional social institution and its decline premised on the process of development and modernisation. Scholarly writings on the Green Revolution have, generally echoing this view, predicted that the process of agrarian development accelerated by the Green Revolution strategy would lead to the widening of socio-economic disparities and result in the intensification of class-based movements of agricultural labourers (see Frankel, 1971 and Sharma, 1973).

Thus, Francine Frankel commented that:

‘ ... the introduction of modern technology under the intensive areas and the high-yielding varieties program has not only quickened the process of economic polarisation in the rural areas, but it has also contributed to increasing social antagonism between landlords and tenants, and landowners and laborers. In all areas, the introduction of modern methods of production has accelerated the transformation of the rural economy from a subsistence way of life to a profitable set of business activities. Landowners are now more likely to be influenced by rough calculations of opportunity costs in determining whether or not to lease out part of their land, or cultivate directly, than by traditional sentiments of personal obligation to customary tenants, certainly, they do not hesitate to raise rentals in line with appreciating land values and/or to evict even tenants having long-standing cultivating possession of the land. Moreover, the land reform laws in all States, while largely abortive, have caused landowners to view tenants as potential

adversaries, and this has further contributed to the breakdown of permanent patron-client relationships.

The same tendency toward erosion in traditional attitudes of mutual dependence and obligation is also apparent in relations between landowners and laborers... Once again, there is not only growing economic disparity but also social polarisation between landowners and laborers. As impersonal bargaining arrangements replace customary patron-client relationships in the recruitment of farm labor, *old ideas of reciprocal (albeit unequal) obligation give way to new notions of opposing economic or class interests.*'

(Frankel, 1971, p. 197–8, *emphasis added*)

Further, she argued that:

'... the rapid progress of agricultural modernisation tends to undermine traditional norms of agrarian relationships based on the exchange of mutual, if noncomparable, benefits and services that have historically provided a justification for inequalities between the propertied upper and middle castes, and the landless low castes and Harijans. As traditional land-owning patrons increase their advantages by striking margins, yet neglect to fulfill their previous function of providing security to client groups, the legitimacy of existing - and growing - disparities is increasingly called into question. The potential impact on rural stability is all the more serious because radical parties openly proclaim their intention of transforming social tension into political conflict between the minority of prosperous landowners and the large numbers of sharecroppers and landless laborers.'

(Frankel, 1971, p.198–9)

It is true, as Frankel observed, that the Green Revolution was instrumental in the thorough erosion of social norms that governed traditional Indian society. If disruption of the traditional *jajmani* norms of mutual dependence and caste-governed obligations based on the principle of hierarchy is one aspect of the emerging rural scenario, then the commercialisation of agrarian relations creating a new notion of social and economic interests, is another aspect.

However, contrary to the prediction of scholars such as Frankel and Hari Sharma,<sup>30</sup> this new reality was not to result in social articulation premised on class.<sup>31</sup> In other words, rather than leading to a rise in agrarian class conflict, the post-Green Revolution period in fact led to an increase in caste articulation. Since the 1980s, therefore, the advanced Green Revolution belt of coastal Andhra has witnessed intense caste-based polarisation and mobilisation on both sides of the social spectrum, i.e. among land owning as well as labouring communities. Heightened caste awareness and mobilisation in the educated middle classes of upper castes, backward castes and scheduled castes dates from the 1970s.<sup>32</sup>

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30. Hari Sharma likened the post-Green Revolution scenario to the watermelon, 'green from outside and red inside', thereby pointing to its revolutionary potential. See Sharma (1973).

31. In support of her thesis that changes brought by the Green Revolution could lead to intensified class mobilisation, Frankel observed: 'Indeed, by the summer of 1970, both the CPI and the CPI (Marxists) had announced plans for a nationwide "agrarian struggle". "Land-grab" agitations were started in Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala. At the same time, *Naxalite groups were reported to be gaining ground among "landless peasants and youth" in the rice-growing coastal areas of Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, West-Bengal, and Orissa.* The Home Ministry in June found it necessary to formally caution six States – west Bengal, Bihar, Punjab, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, and Kerala – *about the activities of Naxalites who were said to be planning a "new, democratic" revolution on Maoist lines involving extensive class violence in rural areas*' (Frankel, 1971, p. 199, *emphasis added*).

32. As noted in the earlier section, while university and college campuses in Telangana witnessed the students' growing attraction to radical left politics, politicisation in coastal Andhra was along caste lines. By the late 1980s, with the announcement of reservations for OBCs by the TDP government following the recommendations of the Muralidhar Rao commission, caste divisions in educational institutions became a State-wide phenomenon. The developments following the Mandal only deepened these divisions further. Even left-wing student organisations such as the SFI, AISF and PDSU were divided on the issue along caste lines.

In spite of the significance of *dalit* mobilisation, based on caste-specific socio-cultural identity in the civil society arena and their important numerical constituency in electoral politics in the State, there are no important academic scholarly studies of this movement, except for occasional reports and analyses of events (D.N. Reddy, 1985; EPW, 1991; Srinivasulu, 1994a).

It is therefore relevant to inquire into the political and socio-economic basis of the *dalit* movement, and to examine the discursive shift brought about by *dalit* assertion and self-cognisance. In this section we examine the question of the formation of *dalit* identity and *dalit* movement in the State.

Crucial to the social transformatory project of this movement is the category of *dalit*. The concept of *dalit* does not refer to any single caste or group of castes; it is a relational category. Its reference point is the caste-specific relationship of dominance and subordination in Indian society. Thus the concept of *dalit* may be defined as a community of oppressed castes with specific experience of being treated as untouchables and being humiliated through the conscious denial of self-respect and honour by the caste Hindus.

This understanding of the category of *dalit*, brought forth by *dalit* movements in India in general and in Andhra in particular, informs our analysis and assessment of *dalit* articulation in AP. Following this, we examine the extent to which the movement has succeeded in forging an imagined community of *dalits*, and what political and ideological/cultural impediments such a movement of the subalterns had to face.

## 5.1 Conceptualising caste: towards a critique of the modernist perspective

The caste system is historically specific to Indian society. Though conceptualised in dominant thinking as a traditional, pre-capitalist and pre-modern institution and as a primordial marker of social identity, caste has not declined in its importance but rather proved to be more explosive than ever before.

The principal co-ordinates of caste can be identified as:

- i) hierarchy based on the principles of purity and pollution;
- ii) specification of occupation role specialisation;
- iii) endogamy; and,
- iv) social aspects of dominance-subordination.

The dominant thinking on caste is informed by what can be called the modernist perspective. This perspective offers a reading of caste distinct from the textualist reading derived from the Hindu classics. Caste is seen here as a pre-capitalist and pre-modern institution. The decline of its relevance and potency is predicated upon the process of the modernisation of Indian economy and society. In this view, therefore, the institution of caste would lose its basis with the consummation of the modernist project. The Nehruvian project, centred on the modernist nation State, visualised such a trajectory of transformation as an answer to the problem of caste (and even communalism) in Indian society. Quite interestingly, though differing in a significant way, by emphasising caste as an institution specific to India, the Ambedkarite perspective also places emphasis on State intervention to reduce caste oppression. Thus the importance of modern secular education, State institutions, and rapid industrialisation is emphasised here.

Quite contrary to the above assumption, the modernist project in India has in no way lessened the relevance and significance of caste and has in fact only increased its potency. Caste has been an important factor in the functioning of the democratic institutions of the modern Indian State and

especially the local State (for instance, in the *Panchayat Raj* system) in the post-Independence period (Rudolph and Rudolph, 1967; Chatterjee, 1993). It is necessary to note that castes placed at different levels of the social hierarchy have responded differently to the process of modernisation and democratic politics from local, regional to national levels.

The *varna* system is of no significance to an understanding of the present day caste situation except in broad ideological terms. Any attempt to examine the caste system by fitting it into the classical *varna* model would be of limited relevance in understanding its role in the socio-political processes of contemporary India. This is because the socio-economic position of different castes is determined by India's political economy of development (rather than mere traditional ritual hierarchy), as evolved during the colonial period and especially since Independence. Thus *shudra* castes, such as the Reddys, Kammas and Velamas have emerged into a dominant position in the production process and have successfully translated this into political and cultural domains. This, needless to say, involved a series of serious contestations. In the earlier period, the contest was between Brahmins and peasant castes. Now it is increasingly seen between dominant peasant castes and backward castes, on the one hand, and the former and *dalits*, on the other.

The crucial questions are, therefore: why does caste continue to hold its forte and retain its potency? In other words, why are the contradictions usually manifested in caste form? Further, even when issues such as language and region, etc. appear to be crucial, caste also continues to figure as an important factor. What are the weaknesses/lapses in the modernist project that have caused it to fail to live up to its own expectations?

An answer to these questions could be attempted by examining the very process of modernisation in Indian society, the disjunction in the caste-occupation relationship visualised by the modernist project being an important aspect of this process. While the process of transformation in the traditional occupational structure has been underway for a long period, especially since the time of colonialism, the changes now being witnessed are phenomenal and it is herein that we must find the reasons for the aggressive assertion of castes.

In the story of the displacement and marginalisation of traditional occupational communities, the introduction of the Green Revolution forms a decisive phase. If the Green Revolution could be seen as an important aspect of the transformative design of the post-colonial State, then it would be necessary to analyse its larger implications. Any attempt to assess the contemporary rural social scenario in coastal Andhra must make a critical assessment of the Green Revolution.

The Green Revolution strategy banked on capital-intensive technology as a means of increasing agricultural productivity. The introduction of high-yield variety seeds, chemical fertilisers, pesticides and tractors in Indian agriculture and the easy availability of banking capital to agriculture have long-term and serious implications for agrarian relations. This capital-intensive strategy has generated a marketable surplus and led to the commoditisation of the agrarian economy by creating land, credit, labour and agricultural product markets. As a result, sustainable and subsistence agriculture, which has evolved over centuries, and the *jajmani* relations of mutual dependence – though informed by oppressive class/caste relations – have systematically been eroded. The erosion of the ties of mutual dependence, which survived in varying degrees in different areas, has also led to a decline in caste-based elaborate patronage network based on.

Further, traditional occupations, which were closely allied with traditional agricultural practices and mutual obligations, lost their earlier significance in the rural economy. In their place, modern industrial products gradually made an appearance during the 1960s and subsequently came to dominate rural markets. For instance, the leather workers of the Madiga community were dependent on the agricultural community for carcasses to produce leather *chappals*, which they then supplied

to the community in return. On the one hand, they were affected by the entry into rural markets of *chappals* made in urban leather centres, and on the other, by the overall transformation of agrarian practices. Further, cheap rubber slippers largely replaced the *chappals* made by the local Madiga leather workers (see Jain, 1983; Srinivasulu, 1994b; Srinivasulu, 1996).<sup>33</sup>

Another instance of this process is the decline of handlooms. The phenomenal growth of powerlooms since the 1960s and the entry into rural markets of cheap powerloom cloth – synthetic cloth in particular – clearly paved the way for the decline of handlooms.<sup>34</sup> While handloom workers retained a market because of their specialisation, leather workers had no advantage of that kind. Either they had to leave their occupation to join the ranks of agricultural labour or move to the urban centres to work in the informal sector. It was only in certain areas such as Vijayawada where there was leather work available that the Madigas could settle in their traditional occupations, albeit as wage labourers. Thus instead of contributing in any significant way to the improvement of the livelihood conditions of these communities, the forces of modernisation succeeded only in marginalising them further.

It seems plausible to conjecture that the forces of modernisation's further marginalisation of communities already on the margins of society could invite or lead to an aggressive reaction in the form of caste and community identity assertion. It would be interesting to examine the contrast between the cause and effect, i.e. economic deprivation manifested in a distinctly non-economic form.<sup>35</sup>

In belated capitalist societies such as India, it is the State rather than class that has assumed a pre-eminent role in the process of economic transformation. Weak civil society, inadequate channels of communication on matters of social significance and the inability to provide society with ideological and intellectual leadership all demonstrate the capitalist class' historical and structural limitations. The question of socio-economic transformation was left inadequately addressed. The State cannot, due to its historical limitations and bureaucratic logic, undertake such an enterprise – and even if it does, it cannot fully succeed (see Srinivasulu, 1993).<sup>36</sup>

The State-centric strategy resulted in the following consequences. First, in correspondence with its strategy of industrial development, it was imperative to bring about necessary changes in agriculture. What resulted from this was the creation of avenues for the emergence and consolidation of an agrarian neo-rich class. But this class, being in a significant sense the creation of the State, could only be said to be capable of limited historical initiative and drive. The drive for the accumulation and diversification of surplus was seen in this class. However, for the creation and accumulation of surplus, the class finds convenient, and in fact bases itself on, pre-capitalist social relations, of which caste is an important dimension.

The second aspect pertains to the opening up of possibilities of a new freedom from bondage for agrarian labourers: a) freedom from labour obligations with the decline of the pre-capitalist production relations; b) freedom from the old mode of production and craft basis, which sufficiently opens up autonomy. However, this notional freedom is obstructed and restricted by the lack of sufficient alternative sources of employment.

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33. Field interviews with leather workers in Aler in Nalgonda and Vijayawada.

34. Stiff competition from the powerloom sector, the competitive advantage powerlooms have over handlooms in terms of the cost of production, and of course changing fashions influencing clothing preferences, are important factors which paved the way for the decline of demand for handloom cloth. (Jain, 1983; Srinivasulu, 1994b; and Srinivasulu, 1996)

35. The marginalisation and deprivation implied in the process of decline of *jajmani* relations signified not merely an economic phenomenon but in a substantial sense also contained symbolic meaning. For the *jajmani* system meant not simply mutual economic dependence but assigned specific cultural codes to each caste. *Jajmani*, therefore, was a moral economic order. The collapse of this meant the collapse of the old world of moral economy with no promise of an alternative world emerging so easily.

36. Following Gramsci, this could be characterised as a 'passive revolution', where the decline of pre-capitalist relations of production remains unaccompanied by a fuller transition to capitalism.

The third dimension relates to the lack of scope for a new identity to be ascribed to and accepted by only in rural areas but also extending to urban centres. Changes in the organisation of production have not therefore reduced the significance of caste; in fact caste seems to have assumed new avatars. Even when and where the possibilities of new identities are present, caste has remained a potential marker superscribed on other identities in the social script.

What further contributed to this are: i) the continuation of caste in large sectors of everyday life rituals around birth, marriage, death, etc.; ii) the further strengthening of community interactions and bonds; iii) the political use of caste as a mobiliser of popular support.

Caste-based articulations in general and the *dalit* movement in particular must be considered against this background.

## 5.2 The political economy of change and atrocities against *dalits*

Even after five decades of Independence, we continue to witness social, economic and political violence against *dalits*. Despite the fact that the Constitution of India declares India to be a sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic republic with liberty, equality and justice as its guiding principles, we are nowhere near the stated vision of the makers of the Constitution five decades later.

If increasing caste violence is symptomatic of the rising aspirations of the downtrodden and disadvantaged strata of our society and their challenge to the historically inherited and established structures of socio-economic, cultural and political dominance, then the violence is also an expression of resistance to these aspirations by the dominant powers-that-be.

In this context, the phenomenon of ‘atrocities on Harijans’<sup>37</sup> constituted a unique problem. As the most oppressed group in Indian society, forming the lowest level of the traditional social hierarchy, the *dalit* community continued to be subjected to socio-economic and cultural oppression. Although *dalits* or SCs are divided into numerous castes and sub-castes and reflect the country’s social, cultural and linguistic diversity, in economic terms they constituted the bulk of agricultural labour.

As a reflection of the process of socio-economic change, there was some change in *dalits*’ lives. A decline in their traditional occupations, considered menial and polluting by caste Hindus, forced *dalits* to move away from these occupations and join the ranks of agricultural labourers. This led to a marginal increase in their occupational diversification into modern sectors of economic activity.

However, modernisation had virtually no impact on most *dalits* in the countryside and it would not be an exaggeration to say that the impact of the developmental process on the life of an average *dalit* was extremely marginal and superficial. As far as the *dalits*’ economic conditions are concerned, land reform legislations, developmental programmes and policies, minimum wage legislation and social welfare policies had little influence.

The political economy of development in the post-Independence period, on the contrary, brought about a perceptible change in the physiognomy of social class-caste structures, giving rise to a new class of rich landlord and peasant landowners, who replaced the old *zamindar* class. A new generation of market-oriented upper caste and backward caste landed peasant proprietors thus

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37. This was the expression popularised by the English language press in the 1970s and early 1980s. (The ‘ex-untouchables’ of India are described by various denominations as Harijans, Scheduled Castes and dalits.) It was only in the late 1980s that the usage of the term ‘Harijan’ declined and shifted to the term ‘*dalit*’, which is largely due to the ideological ascendancy of the *dalit* movement and the *dalits*’ increasing refusal to be described as Harijans. This may be read as an aspect of *dalit* assertion.

emerged in place of the old upper caste landed gentry (Bardhan, 1984). This broad generalisation, with slight variations, captures the picture of socio-economic change in different parts of the country.

The process of consolidation of the new agrarian social structure contained within itself new dynamics of oppression and violence. State intervention and the process of development contributed to a change in the old system of patronage and *jajmani* relations, paving the way for commercialisation, money nexuses and commodification in the countryside. However, the dominant social classes consistently refused and resisted any changes in the lives of the labouring classes. Any assertion on the part of the latter was suppressed and the resources available to these dominant agrarian classes were used to this end. This political economy of agrarian change provides a clue to the incidents of atrocities against *dalits* and the violent suppression of their aspirations and mobilisation.

As a result, atrocities against *dalits* became a regular occurrence in the mid-1970s. Some of the most notorious incidents that received wide publicity in the media occurred in Belchi, Bajithpur, Jagganatha Puram and Vellipuram. These incidents clearly create the impression that the practice of untouchability and the conflicts between the landless *dalits* and the landowning caste Hindus assumed an uglier and more intense form. The post-Emergency period saw an increased incidence of violence on *dalits*, although this phenomenon was not new. Nevertheless, its increased and widespread occurrence must be seen as of serious concern and therefore requires analysis.

In the context of northern India, one of the significant reasons for this new turn was the consolidation of a peasant proprietor class, belonging especially to backward caste communities such as the Yadavas, Kurmis and Koeris. These communities formed the support base of anti-Congress Party regional political formations and, benefiting from the economics of agrarian development, emerged into a formidable social force (Prasad, 1980, 1991a and 1991b). Their numerical preponderance and close involvement with agriculture necessitated regular interaction with agricultural labourers, who belonged predominantly to the *dalit* caste. A difference can be noted in their style of domination, compared to that of the Brahmin, Bhumihaar and Rajput landed gentry. Historically, the latter were members of the gentry and their domination of *dalits* and *dalits'* subordination to them was perceived as customary. Further, the process of change in the Brahmin, Bhumihaar and Rajput-controlled areas had been very slow, if not dismal. In contrast, the members of the landed class of backward communities were considered upstarts who had mainly benefited from the agricultural development of the preceding decade or so. It is also necessary to note that the process of modernisation and development, which led to the rise of the backward caste communities, also impacted on the *dalit* community, though to a lesser extent. The neo-rich backward caste peasantry, imitating the upper caste landed gentry and its manner of dominance, seemed to expect *dalits* to show the same kind of obedience and subservience, and in the event of non-conformity tended to react in a more aggressive and violent way. The growing incidence of violence on *dalits* in the Hindi belt in the post-Emergency period may be traced to this new phenomenon (Sheth, 1979).

In sharp contrast to northern India, the State of Andhra Pradesh appears to stand out as unique during the 1970s. Though there were minor incidents of violence on *dalits*, they were not comparable to those in the States of northern India or even to those in the southern Indian State of Tamil Nadu, where major caste rioting took place in Kilvenmeni.

### 5.3 The emergence of the Telugu Desam Party

The emergence of the Telugu Desam Party initiated an important phase in the political history of the State. Modern Andhra politics had displayed an asymmetry between socio-economic and political processes. While the historical advance, resources and support extended by the State-directed developmental process crystallised a class of rural gentry with diversified interests, its representation in the power structure, promoted by the Congress Party in its uninterrupted rule over the State for three decades, was grossly disproportionate. The rural rich in the advanced coastal belt, belonging predominantly to the Kamma and Kapu communities, had for a long time nurtured the grievance of being politically marginalised in the State's Reddy-dominated Congress Party rule. Because of this sense of marginalisation, the Kammas easily gravitated to N.T. Rama Rao (popularly known as NTR), a popular cinema actor with a film career of more than three decades. NTR represented the Telugu Desam Party in 1982, rallied the support of Kammas across the political spectrum and came to power less than a year later in the 1983 Assembly elections. NTR thus became the State's first Chief Minister from the Kamma community.

The phenomenon of NTR and the emergence of the Telugu Desam Party and its coming to power gave the Kammas a sense of confidence and power, the implications of which were far-reaching at grassroots level in the countryside. In fact, the 1983 election itself was so crucial for the Kammas that they made a determined bid to come to power (Economic and Political Weekly, 1983).

With the emergence of the Telugu Desam Party, another significant change witnessed was the crystallisation of factions and social tensions in the countryside. In the pre-TDP period, the differential and conflictual socio-economic and political interests at grassroots level were articulated through factional groupings within the Congress Party (I). The Telugu Desam Party's emergence facilitated a rival axis to the Congress Party and successfully attracted and integrated into its fold one or other faction within the Congress Party. The Telugu Desam Party thus provided a legitimate organisational basis for the factional divisions and struggles within the dominant power politics.

Against this background, we examine the upper caste attacks on *dalits* through an analysis of the following three cases.

### 5.4 Atrocities on *dalits*: three cases

The centre of rural Andhra's political economy was formed by the rise of a new class of agrarian rich belonging to the Kamma caste, which enriched itself during the process of agrarian development and diversified into a wide range of non-agricultural economic activities opened up by the overall economic development. With the emergence of the TDP, this rich class placed its interests with the TDP and rallied the Kamma community by forging an identity of real or imaginary community aspirations. Economic and political power created a certain arrogance on the part of the Kammas and this led to a compounded intolerance to any form of resistance from the lower castes, especially the labouring *dalit* communities.

The following section explores the nature of these struggles by examining three cases of attacks on *dalits* in Karamchedu, Neerukonda and Chundur. These villages have acquired unparalleled notoriety not only because of the magnitude or scale of violence but also because of the involvement of upper caste people known to be well-connected to those in power; this proximity being a significant factor in these riots.

The following analysis is based on the documents of the various fact-finding teams that enquired into the specific incidents of attacks on *dalits*. Written in the immediate aftermath of their occurrence, they provide rich and graphic details of these incidents. In addition to these documents, journals such as *Dalit Shakti*, brought out by the Dalit Maha Sabha, are a very valuable source for the study of the context and details of the atrocities.

#### 5.4.1 Case I: Karamchedu

Karamchedu is a very prosperous village located 7 km from the busy commercial town of Chirala in Prakasham district. The total population of the village in the 1980s was around 13,600, of whom the Kammas comprised 6,000. The two SC Mala and Madiga communities constituted the next major castes with a population of 900 and 1,100 respectively. In the remaining population, Upparas, Dasus and Muslims were quite significant in number.

The total arable land in the village was 9,000 acres. Most of this land was owned and controlled by the dominant Kammas, who also owned around 2,000 acres in neighbouring villages. Benefitting from the irrigation facilities provided by the century-old, British-built Krishna and the post-Independence Nagarjunasagar canals, the fertile irrigated land was the major source of prosperity of the Kamma peasantry, which in the course of time diversified its wealth into business, rice mills, contracts, transport operation and film production. Thus Karamchedu counts among its natives some well-known film producers and businessmen. A significant proportion of Kamma farmers regularly migrated to other areas of the State and even to neighbouring States. They were a presence in Karimnagar and Nizamabad districts in Telangana and Bellary district in Karnataka, where they cultivated tobacco, cotton and other commercial crops on the leased or purchased lands.

It is interesting to note that, despite the diversification into urban economic activities and migration to far-off places, the Kammas of Karamchedu retained an active connection with the village by owning properties there and some migrant farmers' families continued to live there. In the case of the tobacco-growing migrant farmers, the product was brought back to the village for fine grading and sold in the major tobacco market of Guntur. It is easy to imagine, therefore, the wealth the Kammas accrued. According to the report of a Fact Finding Team which visited the Karamchedu village immediately after the carnage:

‘Of these various sources the most important are tobacco cultivation and paddy crop, and only for these two sources, there is some information, which would help to make a rough estimate of the annual income of this community in the village. Of the total produce from the paddy crop on the 11,000 acres of the village at least half would be the net accrual to the community which amount to about 1,37,500 bags of paddy, the market value of which works out to be about Rs. 1.37 crore. Based on the ‘barns’ used for curing the tobacco brought to Karamchedu, it is estimated that the total area of tobacco cultivated... would be about 10,000 acres. Given the average net income from an acre of tobacco as Rs. 5,000 the total earnings from tobacco cultivation works out to about Rs.5 crore. Assuming, conservatively, that the income earned from the rest of the other sources would be at least as much as the net accruals from the paddy crop (Rs. 1.37), the total annual income of the Karamchedu Kamma community works out to a staggering sum of Rs. 7.74 crore. The estimated 1,200 households with a population of 6,000, the average household income of community is about Rs. 65,000 and per capita income about Rs. 12,500.’

(Fact Finding Team, 1985, p.4)

The economic conditions of the *dalits*, who comprised the bulk of agricultural labour, contrasted sharply to those of the Kammas. While the annual payment for a *paleru* was just Rs.2,000, the daily wages paid to male and female agricultural labourers were Rs. 10–12 and Rs. 6–8, respectively. Needless to say, these wages were much lower than the minimum wage rates legally prescribed for this region.

Tenant cultivation existed on a significant scale in Karamchedu, with three kinds of tenancy practices present there. In the first kind of tenancy, payment, either in kind or cash, was fixed. In the second kind, sharecropping, tenants were entitled to half of the product. Under this system it was the duty of the share-cropper to take care of all the investment without any help from the landowner. Until the 1960s, when out-migration reached a significant scale, most tenants and share-croppers belonged to the Kamma community. The third system of tenancy, known as the ‘one-third system’, involved most SCs and Madigas. Landowners preferred the latter, as they were considered to be submissive; in contrast, the Malas were generally seen as assertive. Under this system, the tenant was actually a farm servant employed with an annual wage rate and was also allotted an acre or two for cultivation. The manure was supplied and expenses were paid by the landlord. At the time of harvest, the crop was shared with two-thirds going to the landlord and one-third to the share-cropper.

This ‘one-third system’ was obviously meant to ensure, and was in fact instrumental in supplying the landlord with a regular supply of labour, by enforcing the former’s bondage to the latter. According to the fact-finding report of a civil liberties’ organisation:

‘This servitude to the landlord, commences with the chiming of the temple bells (referred to by the Harijans as ‘*Hare Rama Ghanta*’) at 4.30 a.m. and extends up to 10 p.m. in the night thus making a total of 16 hours a day in which he works only two hours for himself or for his family. For this work he is paid a nominal wage of Rs.4 approximately in cash or in kind. This link between tenancy and labour for the landlord is against the tenancy laws and smacks of medieval serfdom. The nominal wage paid to him is very much below the minimum wages fixed by law and in essence amounts to forced labour.’

(Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee, 1985)

Any critical analysis of the Karamchedu massacre must be made against the background of this socio-economic structure.

### **Political tensions**

This oppressive socio-economic situation of clear social polarisation based on the relationship between caste and land contained seeds of crisis. On the one side was the increasingly rich class of Kamma landlords, and on the other, the poor, socially and economically degraded SCs. Yet it is curious to note that, instead of taking the form of an economic struggle for better wages and better terms of tenancy, the crisis assumed a cultural and ideological form. Although there had previously been minor skirmishes and tensions between the communities, these had not yet led to full-scale conflict. One obvious and significant reason for this was the decline in popular mobilisation by the traditional left, which in the aftermath of the Telangana Peasant Struggle had become increasingly involved in parliamentary electoral politics. This in turn, in a mutually reinforcing fashion, had actually paved the way for the decline of the left. This observation assumes significance in view of the fact Karamchedu was a bastion of the left until the 1960s, as the elected representatives to the State legislature and the national parliament belonged to Karamchedu. Curiously, one of the village’s rich localities, as a reminiscence of the earlier times, is still called ‘*Moscow veedi*’. With the enrichment and upward mobility of a significant section of Kamma peasantry, an important constituent in the United Front strategy which informed the left’s mobilisation in its anti-*zamindari*

struggles, the leadership coming from this class no longer found it to be in their interest to continue in communist politics. In fact, finding the latter to be against their material interests, they either left the party or diluted the local struggle by remaining in the party. Thus it is no surprise that the traditional parliamentary left counted amongst its leadership a significant proportion of the rich peasant stratum belonging to the Kamma caste in this region. This ground reality is thus reflected in the declining politicisation and organisation of the agrarian labourers.

Viewed against this background, it should be of no surprise that the agrarian poor found a different form of registering their discontent. The crucial occasion for the manifestation of this was the 1983 Assembly election, in which the TDP emerged as a major contender for political power. Until then, the political contest in Karamchedu had been organised within the Congress Party (I), which had ruled the State without interruption since 1956, as the left's presence was marginalised. With the emergence of the TDP, the scenario underwent a major change with Kammas in Karamchedu shifting their loyalty to the TDP and the SCs still vowing their allegiance to the Congress Party (I). The Kammas found the SCs, and particularly the Madigas, reluctant, or rather resistance, to translating their economic bondage into political loyalty by voting for the TDP, as a sign of revolt, unexpected of the *dalits*. This led to some tension but did not escalate into any major conflict. But *post facto* it would be no exaggeration to suggest that it caused sufficient injury to the cultivated pride of the dominant Kamma caste, which only waited for a pretext for retaliation.

The pretext was a trivial incident that happened on 16 July 1985:

‘What exactly happened was this – on July 16<sup>th</sup>, 1985 at about 3.30 p.m., a Kamma boy was washing his buffalo at the steps of the water tank of the *dalits*, and letting out the soiled water into the tank. He watered the buffalo, and threw the remains into the tank. A lame *dalit* youth objected to the way in which the drinking water was being spoiled. The Kamma boy reacted violently and beat him with the cattle whip. A young *dalit* woman who had come there to fetch water protested against this beating. She was also whipped and kicked. Another *dalit* intervened and averted further incidents.’  
(Fact Finding Team, 1985, p.9)

This was seen as a sufficient provocation for the Kammas ‘to teach a lesson’ to the Madigas. An attack was meticulously planned and executed on the morning of 17 July. Hundreds of Kammas were gathered, armed with axes, spears and clubs, most of them in an inebriated condition, to launch a full-scale attack from all sides on the *Madigapalle*. The fact that it was meticulously planned and that nothing was left to chance was evident in the way the whole operation was conducted.<sup>38</sup> To catch the Madigas unawares, a team was sent with a proposal for compromise, which was approved by a section of the Madiga youth. Even before they could sense the impending disaster, they were attacked.

‘What followed was an attack, well planned and executed, that went on for hours in which the Madigas regardless of age and sex were chased from their hovels, the Kammas used all likely forms of transport, scooters, tractors, etc., and the Madigas ran helter-skelter for their lives in all directions. The more likely place to hide was the *gaddi vamulu* (fodder heaps) in the fields. Even there they were not spared. The gory details of this are amply recorded by the various fact-finding committees and in the sympathetic accounts reported in the press. But what is important to note is the fact that finally this left six *dalits* murdered, three *dalit* women raped and many more wounded, some of them very seriously and the huts burnt, whatever little was with them looted.’  
(Fact Finding Team, 1985)

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38. It is said that news of the impending attack was known to the Kamma womenfolk, some of whom even leaked it out to their domestic servants who went to their houses in the early hours of that fateful morning. Field notes.

This incident, unprecedented in the history of the State, led the *dalits* quite understandably to react with anger, and forged solidarity among them. The middle class intelligentsia, cutting across social and political differences, extended their support to the Karamchedu victims. This was translated into an expression of solidarity for the Dalit Maha Sabha, the organisation that was formed in the aftermath of Karamchedu to lead the *dalit*'s movement to achieve self-respect, dignity and a decent position in society.

#### 5.4.2 Case II: Neerukonda

A major incident of rioting against *dalits* occurred in Neerukonda within a couple of years of the Karamchedu carnage. What come out strikingly in this case are its similarities with Karamchedu, both in caste composition, political specificity and of course the nature of organisation of the attack.

Neerukonda, situated a few kilometres from Mangalagiri town in Guntur district was, like Karamchedu, a Kamma-dominated village, both in terms of numerical preponderance and land ownership. With about 200 families, the Kammas were the biggest caste in the village, followed by the Malas whose households numbered around 150. Besides these two big communities there were 40 Golla families.

Unlike Karamchedu, Neerukonda was a dry rain-fed village. Most of the land in the village belonged to the Kammas, with half a dozen big landlords owning 50 to 100 acres. Due to agro-climatic conditions, the peasants there had long cultivated tobacco and, to a lesser extent, paddy.

The bulk of agrarian labourers there were members of the Mala community. They worked for low wages in the tobacco and paddy fields for the Kamma peasantry. The then prevailing wages for the grading of tobacco were around Rs.7 and Rs. 5–8 per day for weeding and transplanting, whilst the minimum wage fixed for Zone I agricultural regions such as Guntur was Rs. 13 per day (Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee, 1987).

Even these lower-than-minimum wages were reportedly not paid promptly. 'For tobacco grading the labourers are paid only after the entire crop is marketed. This means that often the labourers have to wait for six months before getting payment. The women complain that even for weeding paddy fields, they are only paid after the crop is marketed, which means a delay of at least 3 months' (Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee, 1987). This forced agricultural labourers to borrow money from landlords at high rates of interest. A high prevalence of indebtedness among agricultural labourers was noted precisely on this count.

As in most cases of attacks on *dalits*, the immediate cause of provocation in Neerukonda was rather trivial. *Dalits* conducting a marriage procession in the village were prevented by the upper castes and asked to confine their procession to the *dalitwadas*. To this effect, an agreement was reached but the unquietness prevailed.

The deeper causes of the Kammas' disgruntlement in Neerukonda were the labouring Mala's acts of assertion. For instance, they set up their own candidate in the 1981 local elections and showed that they were disinclined to follow the Kammas' political direction. This was seen as a case of lower caste disloyalty, which the Kammas were not traditionally accustomed to. The crucial event that decisively strained relations between the landowning Kammas and the labouring *dalits*, were the 1983 Assembly elections. As usual, the traditionally Congress-supporting *dalits* showed their preference for the Congress Party (I), while the Kammas overwhelmingly sided with the TDP. The coming to power of the TDP was of direct consequence to Neerukonda, as the local Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) got a ministerial berth in the TDP government. The local Kammas,

especially the youths, demonstrated their newly acquired power, evidence of which was the fact that ‘there have been six assaults in total. Each time a mob of youth would raid the Mala street with sticks and beat up the people randomly’ (Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee, 1987).

The Karamchedu incident, which had occurred a couple of years earlier, seems to have set a precedent for the way of tackling assertive *dalits*. Similarly to Karamchedu, the Kammas of Neerukonda also organised an assault on the *dalits* as a show of their strength. Armed with axes, spears and sticks, hundreds of Kamma youths attacked the Malas on 15 July 1987. One Yadav and four Malas were killed in this attack. One of the Malas killed was a sixty-year-old man.

After the carnage, fearing the overwhelming presence of the Kammas and their violence, the Malas moved to Mangalagiri and have lived in a colony there ever since. Thus, Neerukonda became another chapter in the history of upper caste violence against *dalits*.

### 5.4.3 Case III: Chundur

Chundur was a large village. It became a *Mandal* headquarters following the NTR government’s restructuring of the *Panchayat Raj* system in the mid-1980s. Located on the Chennai-Tenali railway line, 15 km from Tenali town, Chundur’s population was estimated at 5,800. The Reddys constituted a major community, accounting for about half of the village’s population. The next biggest community was that of the Malas, which accounted for a quarter of the village’s population. The Telaga (a BC community), Madiga, Yerukala and Yanadi castes also constituted significantly large numbers in the village population.

Like Karamchedu, Chundur had also benefited from the century-old Krishna canal. The assured irrigation made farm values high – said to be around Rs. 60–70,000 per acre. A look at the land distribution pattern provides important clues and insights into the emerging patterns of social tensions in the village. The total land under cultivation in Chundur was 2,400 acres, half of which was owned by the Reddys. Unlike Karamchedu, however, there were no major landlords; the rich peasants, needless to say, all belonging to the Reddy community, owned a maximum of 15–20 acres.

The Telagas, a major BC caste in the village, possessed around 250 acres, and Brahmins and Vaisyas owned 100 and 65 acres, respectively. The *dalits* as a whole had just 90 acres in their ownership. Unlike in Karamchedu, there was no wide prevalence of the practice of tenancy: this is evident from the fact that only 100 acres were held as lease holdings and shows that most of the land was cultivated by small owner-cultivators. The caste composition and land ownership made Chundur markedly different from Karamchedu (Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee, 1991).

What further differentiated Chundur from Karamchedu was the relatively high level of literacy and fairly large-scale employment among the *dalits*. It was estimated that there were around 200 matriculates and 15 postgraduates among the *dalits*; literacy was much higher among the *dalits* than the Reddys. The railways were the major providers of employment for *dalits*, and around 300 men were employed as fitters and gangmen. In addition, they were employed in the telephone department and banks. Employment in the public sector gave the *dalits* of this village a high sense of security and confidence.

The railway connection facilitated mobility for the *dalits* of Chundur. This seems to have played an important role in increasing the agricultural labourers’ power to bargain for higher wages, at least during the peak agricultural seasons. What was noticeable about the labour was the phenomenon of the *gumpu* contract labour system, i.e. a system in which labourers form a group and execute

agricultural operations on a piece-wise basis. Thus, labour groups could be found waiting at Chundur railway station in the morning to take trains to go to places as far as Chirala and Narasaraopet to work in both agricultural as well as non-agricultural sectors. They returned home the same evening.<sup>39</sup>

The *dalits* also displayed a significant presence in the political arena. Although both the Reddys and *dalits* traditionally supported the Congress Party (I), the upper castes did not take kindly to the *dalits*' political ascendancy to higher levels of the political ladder, such as the *Mandal Praja Parishad* (besides Chundur, four of the MPPs had *dalit* presidents), especially as a result of reservations to local bodies.

The socio-economic specificity of Chundur rendered the *dalits* relatively less dependent on the Reddys and, therefore, less vulnerable to Reddy domination and manipulation. Due to modern education, public sector employment and easy mobility due to the railway connections, the *dalits* of Chundur demonstrated a perceptible transformation in their lifestyle, a great sense of awareness of their rights and, accordingly, assertion. This obviously was not to the liking of the upper caste landowning Reddys not only of Chundur but also of the neighbouring Reddy-dominated villages. What happened on the fateful morning of 6 August 1991 has to be seen against these changes in the ground reality and the accumulated frustration of the local Reddy peasantry.

What initiated a series of events in a fast succession was a fairly trivial incident that occurred in a cinema hall. It may be noted that access to public places of entertainment and refreshment in Chundur, unlike in a large number of villages in other parts of the State, was less restricted – a fact symptomatic of *dalit* awareness in Chundur. A *dalit* youth, Ravi, studying in a postgraduate college in Nagpur, who went to a cinema theatre in Chundur 'rested his foot on a seat in front which was occupied by an upper caste boy Kurri Srinivas Reddy. A minor altercation ensued between Ravi and Srinivas Reddy when the latter abused the *dalit* youth in the name of his caste' (Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee, 1991).

This happened on 7 July 1991. In the following days, both the *dalit* boy and his father, who was a schoolteacher in a neighbouring village, were subjected to harrassment by the Reddys as a measure of retaliation. 'Fearing further reprisals from the upper castes, neither Ravi nor his father lodged any complaint with the police. *This was resented by the dalits who imposed a fine of Rs. 25... for submitting to the upper castes.*' This is illustrative of the fairly high level of awareness and assertion among the *dalits* of Chundur, who were markedly different from those of other areas in terms of education and employment. This obviously attracted a severe response from the Reddys and their supporters in the village and even from those of neighbouring villages. The following extracts from a fact-finding report give a graphic description of ensuing developments.

'On July 9, Reddys and Telagas formed into a committee and decided to enforce a social boycott of the *dalits* (Malas). The committee was again headed by the village *Sarpanch*. Since then, the *dalits* were not allowed to work in the fields of upper castes nor were they permitted to enter the upper caste locality. Land tenancies of the *dalits* were cancelled. The social boycott of the *dalits* led to tension and at this stage section 144 was promulgated in the village. While the upper castes engaged outside labour to work in their fields, the *dalits* left to places like Tenali and Ponnur in search of work. A 50 strong police picket headed by Tenali Rural Circle Inspector... was posted in the village since then.'

(Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee, 1991, pp.8–9)

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39. Field notes, Chundur.

The report narrates a sequence of events that clearly show that, while the Reddys of Chundur and their fellow castemen in the neighbouring villages were determined to show their might, the *dalits* also showed a will to retaliate. The presence of the police deterred them from a head-on collision. The prohibitory orders were lifted on 29 July, and in two incidents that occurred on 4 and 5 August, two *dalits* were attacked and injured and ‘the same night additional forces were rushed to Chundur even as prohibitory orders were reimposed in village’.

The final assault on the *dalits* came on the morning of 6 August. The ghastly incident was pre-planned and well-executed by the upper castes with the alleged connivance of the police officials present in the village.

‘One version is that a few *dalit* youth attacked and inflicted minor injuries on some Reddys... However this was blown out of proportions by the upper castes who spread the falsity that three Reddy men were hacked to death by the *dalits*... The upper caste men of nearby Valiveru, Manchala Munangivaripalam and Vellaturu villages were also mobilised for an assault on *dalits*. Around 11 a.m. Saibabu [the CI of police] and Vemuru Sub-Inspector Sheik Madarvali came to the *dalit* quarters and asked them to flee as CRPF men from Mangalagiri might raid the village to pick them up following a complaint lodged by the upper castes. *When the dalits were hesitant to leave the village the police virtually chased them away.* However all the *dalit* women stayed back.’  
(Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee, 1991)

What followed was reminiscent of Karamchedu. The only difference between them was that in Karamchedu the Kammas armed themselves to the teeth and chased the unsuspecting *dalits*, whilst in Chundur, the *dalits* were made to walk into a death trap:

‘The marauders, who came in tractors and scooters and were well armed, first caught the fleeing *dalits*, beat them with iron rods and killed them with daggers and axes. They then leisurely packed some of the bodies in gunny bags and dumped them in the Tungabhadra drain and irrigation canal. Though the final tally of deaths could not be clearly ascertained immediately as most of the bodies were thrown in the canal, but at least eight *dalits* are murdered in the heinous manner and many more injured in what could be described as an unparalleled case of brutality.’  
(Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee, 1991)

## 5.5 Patterns

Although we have selected three cases of attacks on *dalits*, the period of 1983–91, for which there is detailed information, saw a massive and regular occurrence of attacks on *dalits* (see Table 3). What can clearly be deciphered from the above incidents is a pattern that should provide insight into the larger processes at work. Most of the organised attacks on *dalits*, involving large scale mobilisation on caste lines and targeting specific *dalit* castes, occurred in the coastal Andhra districts of Prakasham and Guntur that are part of the Krishna delta. This was in sharp contrast to what was happening in Telangana.

**Table 3 Major incidents or atrocities on dalits**

Place of occurrence	Date of occurrence	Nature of the incident
Padirikuppam (Chittoor)	5 January 1983	Four <i>dalits</i> killed and 80 families rendered homeless following an attack by upper caste TDP supporters.
Karamchedu (Prakasham)	17 July 1985	Six <i>dalits</i> killed and three <i>dalit</i> women raped in a mass assault by hundreds of forward caste men of the Kamma caste.
Hasnapur (Adilabad)	13 June 1985 8 July 1985	Reddy landlords closely related to the MLA, Adilabad, killed two youth of the Dhobi and barber castes on these two days respectively, for refusal to procure a prostitute on their demand.
Avdhapur (Medak)	17 January 1986	Landlords belonging to the TDP set fire to 30 houses of <i>dalits</i> .
Neerukonda (Guntur)	15 July 1987	One elderly <i>dalit</i> murdered in a mob attack by men of the Kamma community.
Gudiada (Vizianagaram)	15 July 1987	One <i>dalit</i> labourer killed in a dispute over a small patch of tank-bed land by a mob of backward caste farmers led by a forward caste (Raju) Congress Party leader.
Dontali (Nellore)	27 August 1987	One person of a backward caste was killed in an assault by a gang of forward caste men.
Chirala (Prakasham)	13 August 1987	A principal witness in the Karamchedu murder case done to death by Karamchedu killers.
Bandilapalli	27 November 1987	Four <i>dalits</i> beaten and stabbed to death in an assault by a group of forward caste men.
Kodavatikallu	2 February 1988	<i>Dalit</i> labourer murdered by a landlord.
Beernakallu (Nellore)	19 January 1989	A <i>dalit upasarpnach</i> of the village killed by TDP landlord.
Gokarajupalli	16 January 1989	A <i>dalit</i> labourer killed by landlords.
Tangutur (Prakasham)	3 March 1989	A <i>dalit</i> woman raped and burnt to death by a forward caste TDP strong man.
Jabbargudem (Ranga Reddy)	27 April 1989	One <i>dalit</i> killed in a mass assault by the henchmen of a TDP landlord.
Pippara (West Godavari)	4 June 1989	One <i>dalit</i> killed in a mass assault by forward caste men led by village <i>upasarpnach</i> .
Chinakada (Vizianagram)	31 July 1989	Four tribals of one family killed by henchmen of a liquor contractor.
Pulivendula (Cuddapah)	16 February 1990	More than 150 houses of a ST set on fire and destroyed by a mob led by Congress Party (I) <i>Sarpnach</i>
Kanchikacherla (Krishna)	19 March 1990	<i>Dalit</i> farm servant killed by youth of a landlord's family.
Jeerupalem (Srikakulam)	21 May 1990	About 180 houses of fishing people set on fire at the behest of Congress Party (I) landlord.
Gutlapadu (West Godavari)	19 May 1990	Two <i>dalits</i> killed in a mass assault by forward caste men.
Reddypalli (Rangareddy)	12 February 1990	A tribal peasant burnt alive by men of a landlord close to local M.L.A.
Kothapulavandla Palli (Ananthapur)	6 June 1990	A <i>dalit</i> burnt alive by forward caste men.
Kaspa Gadabavalasa (Vizianagaram)	22 November 1990	Four tribals and a harijan killed in a mass assault by forward caste men.
Chillakallu (Krishna)	28 November 1990	A <i>dalit</i> SI of police shot himself dead due to casteist harrassment of CI.
Moodurallapalli (Kurnool)	18 March 1991	A <i>dalit</i> labourer beaten and stabbed to death by a mob of forward caste men.
Timmasamudram (Prakasam)	January 1991	<i>Dalits</i> driven out of the village by an attack of forward caste men owing allegiance to a TDP leader.
Chundur (Guntur)	6 August 1991	At least 8 and up to 20 <i>dalits</i> killed in a mass assault by forward caste men of six villages.
Gokarajupalli (Krishna)	3 August 1991	<i>Dalit</i> labourer killed by forward castes.

Source: Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee (1991), *Economic and Political Weekly* (1983).

The crucial question is: why did the prosperous deltaic countryside that witnessed agrarian transformation over the course of a century due to the development and expansion of irrigation facilities and, specifically since the late 1960s as a result of the Green Revolution strategy, become the site of barbaric violence quite contrary to the expectations of any logically reasoned sociological analysis? A critical reflection on this question is necessary not only to understand the dynamics of the specific processes at work in coastal Andhra but also to chart the tangled agrarian question in India.

As the analysis of the above cases clearly shows, there has been a massive growth of commercial agriculture in the coastal region, and this has increased the region's marketable surplus. The capital thus accumulated in agriculture has found its way into a variety of economic activities in the urban centres. The rich rural class has therefore, significantly, acquired a new urban face.

In contrast to this, the benefits of agrarian prosperity have not percolated to the agrarian poor. Indeed, the economic conditions of most labourers has worsened, with the wages remaining lower than those legally prescribed and the terms and conditions of tenancy and large-scale indebtedness to the landowners playing a crucial role in keeping the lower agrarian labour castes in a State of bondage.

The rise of the TDP in AP marked a reconfiguration of political relations, signaling the shift of political power in favour of the agrarian nonveau riche, especially to those belonging to the Kamma caste. This obviously has a symbolic significance to the Kammas, as a community cutting across socio-economic differences and especially in the rural areas where tensions had built up over a period of time.

This economic polarisation in the agrarian scenario has the sociological dimension of caste. The market-oriented and capital-accumulating class of peasantry almost uniformly belongs to a single caste in the village microcosm, i.e. either to the Kammas or the Reddys (or the Rajus or Kapus), and the bulk of agricultural labour equally belongs to the *dalit* Mala and Madiga castes. Thus the polarisation on class lines has a positive co-relation with caste.

On the other side of the social divide, i.e. among the *dalits*, there has been a process of change, especially with the benefits of modern education, transport and reservations reaching them. Due to the historical specificity of coastal Andhra, as suggested earlier, there has been a perceptible rise in general awareness and, as a result, an expression of assertion on the part of the *dalits* has taken place here. While the assertion may take many diverse forms in everyday life, its most explicit expression or manifestation, with definite and observable impact on the dominant castes, would be during elections, the most carnivalesque event in the life of a democracy. Further, the asymmetry between the economic position and political behaviour of *dalits* becomes clear, in the event of the rise of the Kammas to power in the State – which is a result of the resolution of the asymmetry between their enhanced economic position and low representation in political structures. The Karamchedu and Neerukonda massacres clearly show this: in both these places, where bondage existed through the widespread prevalence of tenancy and sharecropping and/or indebtedness, the *dalits* defied their Kamma masters' orders to vote for the TDP. With the defiance taking an explicitly political form, the Kammas resorted to assaults as a method of 'teaching a lesson' to the *dalits*. Chundur, though, differing quite significantly from these two cases in terms caste-specificity, agrarian relations and political affiliations, conforms to the general pattern of the upper castes' reaction to *dalit* assertion.

What this emergent scenario clearly points to is the fact that, in the event of the State's failure to radically restructure agrarian relations on the ground, the power emanating from the land could assume aggressively violent forms of reaction to any semblance of assertion of independence on the

part of the lower castes. These cases also further demonstrate the tardiness of the legal process, in spite of the impeccable legal provisions intended to prevent such reactions, leading to their ineffectiveness in the contest of economic powerlessness of the subaltern castes.

## 5.6 Dalit Maha Sabha

The formation of Dalit Maha Sabha (DMS) in 1985, following the Karamchedu massacre, is a crucial development in the recent history of *dalit* politics. Reaction to the Karamchedu event was overwhelming and unprecedented. It cut across the different shades of democratic public opinion and social constituencies. Support was not only political and ideological but also, significantly, material.

Chirala town, where the victims of Karamchedu took shelter, became a hub of activity, with *dalits* from different parts of the State and belonging to different political persuasions visiting the *dalit* camp there. The idea of Dalit Maha Sabha germinated from this. With the formation of the DMS, the struggle took an organisational form with the civil libertarian and advocate Bojja Tarakam as the president and the rationalist Kathi Padma Rao as the general secretary, and soon spread to other parts of the coastal region heralding the beginning of a State-wide movement.

## 5.7 Ideological contours

The *dalit* movement in Andhra Pradesh attracted wider intellectual support, due to this background of massacres in advanced pockets and an increasing middle class *dalit* presence in a wide range of civil society articulations, such as civil rights, Ambedkarite and caste associations and mainstream political parties. Its support base is thus reflective of the diversity in the *dalit* situation; it comprised of middle class employed, educated unemployed, political and social activists with as many diverse backgrounds as the political scenario of AP could present.

However, what is noticeable from the very beginning of the *dalit* movement's development and the expansion of DMS, is the tension between the different ideological orientations. This tension, though subtle in the early phases, became open, explicit and increasingly expressed in new organisational forms. The *dalit* movement attracted activists from different backgrounds: a) activists from the rationalist/atheist movement; b) youths from the traditional Ambedkarite movement; and c) youths with a distinctly Marxist background. Apart from them, a large number of youths with no clearly identifiable politico-ideological orientation, except for a shared experiential indignation against the upper castes, were also attracted to the movement. It is instructive to note that while the leadership came predominantly from the rationalist/atheist and Marxist traditions, the movement's support base consisted of people whose attachment to the cause was largely emotional. Thus these two distinct ideological orientations were reflected in the *dalit* movement, albeit in a very subtle fashion.

It must nevertheless be noted that the rationalist/atheist orientation, in contrast to the Marxist, displayed a fairly well-articulated critique of Brahmanical religion, its irrational practices, gods and goddesses and, of course, the caste system. In contrast, the Marxist tendency hardly paid any attention to religious practices. Treating them as part of the super-structural moment, Marxist theory and practice sought to predicate the resolution of the problem of religious practices, caste oppression and untouchability on the economic structure. Once the contradictions in the latter were resolved, it was expected that the former be (re) solved automatically.

The attacks on *dalits* in advanced agrarian regions definitely posed a major challenge to Marxist theory and practice. As far as the dominant Marxist mode was concerned, the problem of caste was either an enigma or a mere reflection of the class struggle between capitalist farmers and agricultural labour. The caste-specificity of rioting was merely epiphenomenal. What the *dalit* movement, especially in context of AP, brought forth with clarity was the need to address the question of caste in its specificity, since the unfolding social conflict involved caste-specificity; it could not, therefore, simply be seen as a class question, although the class dimension was closely related to it. In other words, the *dalit* movement brought the urgency of addressing the question of caste to the centre of political discourse in the State.

The impact of the *dalit* agenda on the political parties, cutting across the politico-ideological differences, was unmistakable. But the most significant impact of the *dalit* movement seems to have been on the left, both parliamentary and radical. A critical look at the *Dalit Shakti*, a fortnightly journal brought out by the DMS for about a year in 1987, clearly shows the sensitivity of the DMS leadership to the Marxist tradition: it attempted a sympathetic interpretation both of Marxism and of Ambedkar's writings. It would not be incorrect to see this as a reflection of the DMS leadership's intention to attract into their fold the youths influenced by the Marxist tradition. The *dalit* youths, the backbone of the radical left in the State, displayed a consistent track record of struggle and dedication. The rift in the radical left brought about by the *dalit* movement was quite perceptible, as a fair number of activists of the DMS were drawn from the radical left.

The APDMS manifesto, which reflected the influence of Marxism, could be read as a document that tried to balance Marxist and *dalit* perspectives. It implies that the Marxist perspective, with its central focus on class, aimed at ending class exploitation by paving the way for the annihilation of class itself. The *dalit* perspective's historical objective, on the other hand, was of caste annihilation. The DMS manifesto spelt out a nuanced position, which tried to blend the questions of caste and class. Thus it stated:

‘If the *dalit* movement has a caste(ist) perspective, it would instead of doing well would in fact do harm. The movement that should bring about social revolution would incite casteism. In the process of resolving social contradictions, we must formulate class perspective; those who want to destroy caste would not hand on to caste. To annihilate caste, the existence of caste should only be recognised.’  
(Andhra Pradesh Dalit Maha Sabha, 1987, pp.6–7)

In conformity with this position the manifesto argued that the *dalit* movement was a movement for ‘*boomi kosam, bhukthi kosam*’ (for land and for livelihood), and that it must learn from the oppressed people's history of struggle. Further, it stated that ‘to understand the oppressed class, it is necessary to understand the theories of social revolutions and apply them to the contemporary society’. This could be read as a clear reference to the thought of Karl Marx. It thus said: ‘the theories, struggles and practice of Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Dr. B.R.Ambedkar must be breathed into the movement. At the same time the class struggle theory which has emancipated the oppressed of the world must be balanced with’ (Andhra Pradesh Dalit Maha Sabha, 1987, pp.6–7).

The objectives of the *dalit* movement listed in the manifesto displayed the central aspects of the movement's anti-caste/anti-class perspectives:

- annihilation of casteism;
- removal of untouchability;
- ending caste contradictions within the oppressed classes;

- preparing the oppressed classes for social revolution;
- making the cultural revolution a success;
- continuing the struggle until nationalisation of land and property;
- enlightening people about the exploitative policies of the ruling classes so as to advance the peoples' struggle;
- making social revolution a success; and,
- striving for *dalit* and human rights.

The attempt to integrate and emphasise the question of class in the anti-caste perspective was a significant cause of tension in the ideological formation of the DMS. It may be noted that the initial positive approach towards Marxism could not lead to any sustained critical engagement with the Marxist theoretical perspective. In the absence of this, and in view of the parliamentary left's close proximity to the TDP regime, which was seen as a major factor in the phenomenal rise of atrocities on *dalits*, the movement distanced itself from Marxist influence. As the *dalit* movement expanded its sphere of influence, it got into the ideological groove of Ambedkarism, that too an orthodox version of it. What further contributed to it, it may be noted, was the intellectual left tradition's failure to negotiate with Ambedkar.

As a consequence, the *dalit* movement turned its attention away from the crucial issues of the political economy of caste. It may be argued, therefore, that the *dalit* movement became in a significant ideological sense, a movement for the self-respect of *dalits*. The fast developments in the *dalit* movement clearly show this.

## 5.8 Developments in the Dalit Maha Sabha

The tensions inherent in the DMS's objective *dalit* position, support base, leadership and ideology surfaced during their second party conference in 1988. The first conference, held in Tenali after the Karamchedu event at the height of the movement in 1986, represents the movement's harmonious phase. It is reflected in the perspective elaborated in the manifesto cited above. It was quite understandably the most radical phase of the movement, with the *dalits*' 'land and livelihood' issues identified as the objectives the movement should strive for. The period between the first and second conference saw some remarkable developments in the national situation. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which gathered momentum in north India, began to raise political ambitions among certain sections of the *dalit* leadership. The visit of Kanshi Ram to AP in 1987–8 to establish contacts with *dalit* leaders in the State had an impact on *dalit* politics. Questions of participation in electoral politics, which were not central to the DMS's initial statement, came up in their conference in 1988. The movement, whose initial chief objective was building a 'social and cultural movement', shifted its focus to the question of political power. One leader who seems to have opposed the tendency of seeing the BSP in a positive light was Kathi Padma Rao. Characterising the BSP as a '*dalit dalari*' (*dalit* brokers or middlemen) party he initially objected to any temptation on the part of the leadership to move not only towards the BSP but also even towards electoral politics. It is a different matter that he subsequently joined the BSP on the eve of the 1994 Assembly elections.

These issues formed the background of the 1988 conference and a split, centred on the personalities of Bojja Tarakam and Padma Rao, occurred in the DMS. The third and last conference was held separately in 1991 by the two groups, both of whom called themselves Andhra Pradesh Dalit Maha Sabha (APDMS): the Padma Rao group held its conference in Vijayawada and the other group,

headed by Tarakam, held theirs in Ongole. It is unfortunate to note that despite deeper underlying causes, the split should come to be seen as only an issue of differences between personalities.<sup>40</sup>

The crucial phase in the history of the decade-old *dalit* movement was the 1994 Assembly election. In this election, with the emergence of the BSP and the 'wave' (which turned out to be only a mirage) it appeared to have created, different sections of the *dalit* leadership, including the DMS, gravitated to the BSP. But the bang with which the BSP began ended in a whimper with its dismal performance in the 1994 State Assembly election (see Srinivasulu, 1999).

The BSP's poor electoral show, and of the leaders of the DMS in particular, in 1994 had a dramatic impact on the *dalit* movement. The move away from the stand that the *dalit* movement is a social transformatory movement and that it should not get into electoral politics, where a different logic is operative, did enormous damage to the movement. The direct experience of most *dalit* activists, who participated in the campaign of their candidates, of their leaders being absorbed by the electoral sphere, led to a credibility crisis of well-known *dalit* leaders. From this crisis, and gaining strength from the impasse in the movement, emerged the Madiga's caste-specific movement for an entirely down-to-earth SC categorisation for the purpose of reservations.

A perceptible social distance exists between the two major Mala and Madiga *dalit* untouchable castes. The Malas and Madigas live in separate *palles*, known as *Malapalle* and *Madigapalle*. Spatial separation therefore precludes the possibility of any substantial social interaction. Even if they come together during certain occasions and celebrations, it remains limited only to that event. It is, to give the devil its due, a testimony to the strength of the caste system that even in the event of *dalit* conversions to Christianity,<sup>41</sup> the ubiquitous caste system has not left them but remains strong and alive. It is clearly evident in the existence of separate churches for Malas and Madigas. It is said that even if the people of these communities happen to go to the same church, they sit separately.

This objective situation, in which a social distance existed between the Malas and Madigas, was further reinforced by the separate institutional structures and practices of Christianity, an active ideological force in the lives of ordinary *dalits*. The *dalit* movement should have tackled this situation, but instead, it failed to address it.

It is analytically important to note another significant aspect of *dalit* social and economic life, which played a significant role in reinforcing the differences in the structure of domination-subordination and the reproduction of labour process. This relates to the different approach of the dominant castes to these two labouring castes, which was premised on caste differences among *dalits*; other considerations being numerical strength, level of awareness or extent of subordination or servitude. Thus, the men of certain *dalit* castes were preferred to those of another as *palerus*, tenants and for giving loans. This logic was also at work in the upper caste attacks on *dalits*, as one caste was almost exclusively targeted in the attacks, while the other was totally left out.

These differences in ground reality were reflected in the social base of the DMS. Although DMS activists refuse to concede this, field research for this paper in both coastal Andhra and Telangana villages clearly supports this general inference. Discussions with activists at grassroots level lend credence to the argument that the subsequent emergence of separate Madiga and Mala movements was not a sudden development but a reflection of the objective reality as much as an outcome of the *dalit* movement and its inadequacies.

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40. Interview with D. Subba Rao, Guntur.

41. The dalits of coastal Andhra are predominantly Christians. They practice Christianity of various denominations.

The leadership and cadre of the DMS thus came predominantly from the Mala community. As a consequence, the initiative and activism of the DMS also came mainly from the Malas while the Madigas, even when present, played second fiddle to the Malas. As the field accounts suggest, the villages in the thick of the *dalit* movement continued to witness a social and political distance between the Malas and Madigas.

It would perhaps be absurd to attribute any ulterior motive to the Mala-dominated leadership of the DMS. Even the Madiga activists would emphasise that no such bias was found among the leaders. Broadly, it may be suggested that while the leadership was not conscious of the explosive potential of such unevenness and differences, its failure on this count was also responsible for subsequent developments.

When specifically asked about the relationship between the two communities, it is no surprise, then, that a Mala activist of the DMS (women's wing) remarked:<sup>42</sup>

'Anna (Kathi Padma Rao) tells us that we (Malas and Madigas) must be united always and fight against the upper caste people. If we don't get united they (upper caste) would benefit from this. But, in the village we never get together. They live in their own *palle*, we live in our *palle*. We never share our happiness and sorrows. It has been so for so long. Our children also never mingle with them. They go to school in our *palle* and Madiga children go to the school in their *palle*. Our leaders do not seem to understand this.'

Discussions and interviews with youths belonging to *dalit* communities, inspired by the demonstration of *dalit* collective strength at Shibhiram in Chirala and resolved to resist and fight the upper caste onslaught, yield similar narratives, with slight variations in locale, context, profile and timing.

However, different ground realities seem to have forced them to go their own ways. Yet whenever an event of brutality occurred, they came together and demonstrated their strength. This was repeatedly demonstrated in Neerukonda, Thimmasamudram, Chundur and in almost all cases of brutality.

From the above discussion, it may be possible to clearly delineate the specificity of the DMS's social base. An obvious precondition for it would be *dalit* consciousness among the SCs. Objectively, the untouchables are divided into a number of castes and their social life is governed by this separation. In their everyday life these separations and hierarchies are continuously reproduced. The concept of *dalit* as an imagined identity or community, invested with certain political meaning and potentiality, thus faced continuous interruptions, except perhaps when violence of huge proportions was inflicted. Even in the absence of this political consciousness, *dalit* leaders such as Padma Rao, popular as they are, remain heroes in the folklore of SC communities.

The *dalit* movement seems to have been largely influential and successful in politicising the educated youth. The overwhelming participation of *dalit* youths in both urban and rural areas demonstrates this. The consciousness brought to the youths could not percolate down to the lower classes of the *dalit* community. This became amply clear in the 1994 Assembly elections at the height of the *dalit* movement, when not even a single seat was won by any of the *dalit* leaders; and in fact all of them lost their deposits with the exception of Kathi Padma Rao.

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42. Interview in Karemchedu.

## 5.9 Summing up

It may be conjectured that one of the major drawbacks of a culturalist ‘self-respect’ orientation of lower caste movements is the unlimited/unrestrained outburst of anger/indignation against the ‘enemy’, i.e. the upper caste. The ‘self-respect’ and dignity of the lower castes, though very significant dimensions in any movement of theirs, addressed to the exclusion of any serious and sustained engagement with the materiality of cultural degradation, it seems, would only lead to the decline of the movement.

This is not to undermine the historical significance of the *dalit* movement in the State. The polarisation of social forces in civil society, the State’s response to *dalit* issues, and changes brought about by the movement, have largely been targeted and localised. Thus, for instance, some of the victims of the Karamchedu and Chundur massacres were given house sites and small pieces of agricultural land as compensation. However, in most cases *dalits* remain victims of the divide: they have to travel long distances in search of work as they are not employed in their own villages by the landlords.

The second important limitation of the *dalit* movement in AP relates to its failure to critically address the question of internal inequalities and hierarchies within *dalit* communities. There is a perceptible social distance between the two major Mala and Madiga *dalit* communities, and between them and others. This distance, based not only material issues, but also on casteist ideology, could of course be attributed to the pernicious caste system. It then becomes the responsibility of the ideologically conscious *dalit* movement to concretely address these internal problems, the resolution of which determines *dalit* unity. The pre-eminently cultural framework of the *dalit* movement could be said to be the reason, in its preoccupation with an imaginary delineation of *dalit* identity, for its inadequate attention to this crucial issue. It is a matter of serious enquiry that *dalit* articulation may in a sense find the echoes of the dominant caste ideological framework within itself. In almost all cases, the upper castes attacks selectively targeted only one *dalit* community and it is a matter for serious reflection that the dominant castes should evolve and follow a strategy of ‘divide and attack’.

In a historical society such as India, separation or division exist on a multiplicity of social markers; caste, tribe and ethnicity being some of the most volatile. The *dalit* movement’s lack of attention to the caste divisions within its own communities was a major cause of the increased Madiga demand for reservations,<sup>43</sup> which led to a political division between the Mala and Madigas for a common struggle and platform. It is a reflection of the *dalit* leadership’s complacency that the initial soundings of such separatist mobilisation could not find a response, and then it is a commentary on its shortsightedness that no adequate representation was given to the different communities. The major lesson to be drawn from the impasse in *dalit* articulation at the present juncture is that the lack of adequate attention to (if not failure to understand) the internal as much as the external, and the material as much as the cultural-ideological, issues could prove to be suicidal. If an anti-caste movement is to move anywhere near its goal of caste annihilation or even to resist Hindu caste dominance, it must be internally democratic, responsive to inner voices and vigilant towards emerging challenges.

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43. In its general sense, the reservation of a number of positions in the public administration and in elected bodies for those of defined characteristics (in the Indian context, defined according to tribe, caste and gender).

## 6 Social Movements and State Politics

As discussed above, social articulation in Telangana and coastal Andhra has assumed contrasting trajectories during the last couple of decades. Two questions stand out as important and therefore need to be addressed. First, why have the two regions displayed such different trajectories, with Telangana witnessing class movements and coastal Andhra caste mobilisation? Further, what has been the place and significance of caste and class in these regions, respectively? Secondly, what has been the impact of these articulations on State politics? In other words, how have mainstream politics and political parties responded to these articulations?

In this section we identify the reasons for the differences between the two regions. Further, we examine the impact of these movements on mainstream politics and the latter's response to these movements – either through neglect, co-option and/or coercion. A study of this dimension is important to understand the reasons (within or without) for the movements' drift away from their initial aims, the divisions in the movements (e.g. along sub-caste lines), etc. The 1994 Assembly elections (when the DMS leadership joined the BSP) and the post-NTR changes in the TDP are crucial points of reference for this narrative.

In the preceding section's analysis of the *dalit* movement in coastal Andhra, we address the apparent paradox between class polarisation and caste forms of articulation, and offer an interpretation of the increasing occurrence of upper caste attacks on *dalits* and *dalits*' attempts to resist this by organising themselves along caste lines. Crucial to this interpretation is the analysis of the nature of the coastal region's political economy of development. In the post-Green Revolution period, this region has seen a sharpening of class differences – with the land-owning upper castes getting richer and the landless continuing to be paid low wages, being denied their share in the new prosperity and continuing to be subjected to exploitation. Despite this, and contrary to the initial predictions of scholars, there has been some change in the *dalits*' class situation due to overall State intervention – the emergence of an educated and conscious middle class being an important dimension of this. In other words, change in the *dalit* situation impacted on the *dalit* consciousness and led to instances of assertion on their part along caste lines.

With the coming to power of the TDP, which made a substantial difference to the rural neo-rich in general and to the Kammas in particular in the coastal region, social polarisation assumed a distinctly political form. Political polarisation along caste lines in Kamma-dominated villages, with Kammas gravitating to the TDP and the SCs remaining with the Congress Party, refusing to follow the local dominant castes, was seen as sufficient indication of the *dalits*' disloyalty and assertion; the Kammas inability to tolerate and reconcile this reality constitutes the caste-specificity of the conflict in this region.

In contrast, 'backward' Telangana presents a different picture. Why could the DMS not spread to this region? In the absence of a movement similar to that of coastal Andhra, what have been the forms of *dalit* articulation assumed in Telangana? What have been the contextual specificity, form and trajectory of *dalit* articulation in Telangana?

An attempt to address these questions would not only contribute to an understanding of the different trajectories of the labouring lower castes' articulation, it would also be helpful in drawing a comparative analysis of these.

The *dalits*' political behaviour in Telangana displays quite a complex texture. While they have predominantly constituted the support base of the CPI (ML) movement, especially in the northern Telangana districts that remain the movement's strongholds, they have continued to show a

preference for the Congress Party (I) in the electoral arena. It is to the credit of the left-wing agrarian struggle in Telangana that the rigid rules of caste were substantially relaxed or diluted in the pockets where the movement was strong. Yet the movement remained predominantly economic and political. The absence of a clearly articulated social agenda undermined the movement's capacity to sustain the changes. The biggest achievement of the movement nevertheless lies in the removal of oppressive landlordism and customary *vetti* obligations.

Although caste has been central to semi-feudal forms of exploitation in Telangana (such as *vetti*, for instance), it has not received any explicit attention in the CPI (ML)'s agrarian politics. If this is partly because of the theoretical understanding of the communist parties, it is also because the issue of caste has been subsumed into the category of class, as the poor peasantry and agrarian landless who formed the core constituency of CPI (ML) mobilisation belonged to the *dalit* and lower backward castes. In other words, it is assumed that the problem of caste will be resolved with the elimination of *vetti* practices and the democratisation of agrarian relations.

The powerful presence of radical left-wing student politics and anti-feudal struggles in Telangana throughout the 1970s and 1980s could be cited as the main reasons for the absence of an autonomous *dalit* movement in Telangana. Although Ambedkar youth organisations have existed in the towns of Telangana, they have largely been ornamental and have confined themselves to the celebration of events such as Ambedkar's birthday. However, these organisations seem to play a crucial role in the decisions and the voting preferences of the community at the time of elections in areas where there is less CPI (ML) influence.

The differences in articulation in these two regions are thus closely related to contextual specificity and forms of contradictions. In the coastal region, the *dalit* response took caste-specific forms due to caste forms of social conflict, evident in the existence of and the attempts to retain upper caste domination, and the critical presence of a caste-conscious middle class among the *dalits*. In Telangana, however, the overwhelming presence of the CPI (ML) is what attracted *dalits* to class politics.

The study of Telangana region thus points to two trajectories of *dalit* articulation. Although as suggested earlier Telangana has not witnessed any autonomous *dalit* movement, the CPI (ML) agrarian struggle and its strategy of mobilising the agrarian poor has had an impact on the political consciousness of the *dalits* there. In areas that have come under the influence of the CPI (ML) movement, one could clearly decipher an awareness, especially amongst youths, of the caste dimension of the rural situation. This is despite the absence of any sustained ideological engagement with the question of caste by the ML movement. In areas that have not seen any organised challenge to the structures of dominance from below, *dalits* continue to conform to traditional patronage politics. These areas remain the Congress Party (I)'s stronghold and the Party draws its electoral support from the *dalit* communities.

Despite this, by the late 1980s and especially after the Chundur carnage with the Dalit Maha Sabha gaining visibility and legitimacy, the caste question surfaced within CPI (ML) groups as much as in the parliamentary left.

The proliferation of Ambedkarite youth associations in Telangana villages was visible in the 1980s and increasingly so in the 1990s.<sup>44</sup> However, given the paucity of resources (both material and intellectual), their activities were confined to the celebration of certain events such as the birthday

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44. A phenomenon quite visible in Telangana villages and which can be traced back to the 1970s, is the presence of youth organisations named after Subhas Chandra Bose. It is quite common to find a statue of Bose at the centre of a village. Bose came to symbolise youth power, especially in the image of the youth in small towns. With the development of an educated section among the *dalits*, Ambedkar increasingly became an icon symbolising their aspirations, struggles, future and the *dalit* youth gravitating around him. Thus, the statue of Ambedkar in the *dalitwadas* is a very common sight today.

and installation of a statue of Ambedkar. In the post-Chundur period, these organisations were active in paving the way for *dalit* articulation in Telangana to take the form of the Ambedkarite youth movement. The organisation that took Ambedkar's message of caste annihilation to the *dalits* was Dalita Rachayitala Kalakarulu Medavula Aikya Vedika (DARAKAME).<sup>45</sup> With the formation of DARAKAME in the early 1990s, which was the result of backward caste and *dalit* youth disillusionment with the CPI (ML) movement, especially on the question of caste, there began an ideological campaign in the form of regular discussions on the writings of Ambedkar and workshops for the training of *dalits* in the composition of song, story and speech. The impact of this process, though protracted and slow, definitely captured the imagination of the *dalit* youth, especially in the districts of northern Telangana. While the *dalit* youth of this region displayed an acute awareness of the need and enthusiasm for an ideological debate, partly because of the influence of the leftist movement and the need to critique it for its lack of engagement with *dalit* and caste questions, the *dalits'* general political behaviour has been broadly influenced by mainstream political parties and actors.

The left in general, and the radical left in particular, has witnessed a certain degree of what can be characterised as a 'crisis of identity' among its supporters, and especially among the *dalits* who constituted their core social support base in the Telangana countryside. Most of these parties were thus forced to respond to the conscious sections of the *dalits'* strong tendency of to carve out an autonomous space for themselves by forming and activating their own specific organisations. Thus the Dalit Minority Prajaswamy Karyacharana Vedika and Kula Nirmula Porata Samithi were set up by the CPI (ML) groups and the Kula Vivaksha Vyathireka Porata Samithi by the CPI (M). It is surprising to note that while mainstream parties such as the Congress and TDP have had separate cells for BCs and SCs further activated by caste movements in the State, it is only since the early 1990s that the left has begun to realise the need for separate organisations for these social groups. Nevertheless, this response is a reflection of the challenge posed by the *dalit* movement to the very standing, if not existence, of these parties among the *dalits*.

## 6.1 The *dalit* movement and hegemonic politics

During its decade and a half of history, the *dalit* movement, symbolised by the Dalit Maha Sabha, has led to the formation of *dalit* identity, especially in the districts of coastal Andhra. If the crystallisation of *dalit* identity has largely been the cause of the emergence and assertion of *dalits* as a social force in the civil society arena, then this process has also contributed to the sharpening of social polarisation and distance. This raises serious questions regarding the relationship between *dalit* identity and larger political processes. It is thus relevant to ask to what extent the *dalit* movement has been able to influence State politics either by setting the agenda or by influencing social bases of parties and leadership patterns?

The dominant mode of *dalit* support mobilisation after Independence has been based on the promises made to *dalits*, especially during the elections, of benefits such as reservations in education, employment and loans, etc. Congress Party populism typified the 'appeasement' mode of *dalit* mobilisation. In contrast, the BSP, on the other end of the political spectrum, has brought about a discursive shift in electoral politics by focusing essentially on the question of political power, to the exclusion of material issues. Kanshi Ram's slogan that 'political power is the master key that open all other doors' captures this shift.<sup>46</sup>

45. It means 'Dalit Writers, Artists and Intellectuals Forum'. The individuals, who came from the CPI (ML) movement, disappointed with its neglect of, or rather disinclination to, address caste and *dalit* issues frontally, played a key role in the formation of this organisation. Field notes.

46. It would be instructive to recapitulate certain basic details of the BSP'S history and ideology. The BSP, founded by Kanshi Ram on 14 April 1984, was preceded by the Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangarsh Samithi (DS4) and the All India Backwards and Minorities Employees Federation (popularly known as BAMCEF), formed in 1978. These two organisations played a crucial a role in rallying

The BSP's strategy of mobilisation is based on a narrative of Indian history and society that identifies the three Hindu Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya *varnas* as oppressors and the rest of Indian society as oppressed. Quite interestingly, this relationship is not defined in socio-cultural or economic terms, but principally in terms of the 'humiliation' suffered both historically and contemporarily by subaltern communities at the hands of the above communities. Thus, what is seen to be the unifying factor of an otherwise quite heterogeneous mass, is the humiliation meted out by the upper *varnas/jatis*. This is presumed to be a feasible and practically workable strategy, given the fact that the *bahujans* cannot be united on any other plank because of the absence of commonality or uniformity in their socio-economic profile or cultural identity, which is further compounded by linguistic variations in India.

What is significant about the BSP's discourse is the centrality of the concept of political power. In this view, socio-economic deprivation can only be addressed by capturing political power. Instead of political power seen as a derivative of control over means of production, economic deprivation is sought to be predicated upon the absence of political power. Thus, the BSP's ideology of change is premised on the proposition that once political power is captured, all other entitlements follow. Quite interestingly, the question of political power is seen essentially as one of arithmetic – putting together a majority (*bahujan*).

The entry of the Bahujan Samaj Party into AP politics in the 1994 State Assembly elections and the rallying of the Dalit Maha Sabha, its leadership and cadre around the BSP prior to this election were important developments in the history of the *dalit* movement. However, the BSP's failure to make a mark on State politics despite (or perhaps because of) sharp polarisation at ground level, raises serious questions regarding the electoral potentialities of *dalit* articulation vis-à-vis the hegemonic politics of the dominant political parties in the historical and political specificity of Andhra. Needless to say, any inquiry into social movements in the context of AP must address the relationship between the *dalit* movement and electoral politics.

In considering the relationship between the *dalit* movement and electoral politics, the following issues are important: i) terms of discourse; ii) agenda setting; iii) impact on the political parties and their strategies of mobilisation; and, iv) critical social support. In the following section, we examine the electoral process, specifically focusing on the 1994 Assembly elections. The 1994 elections are chosen as the point of departure for this analysis, because it was during this period that the *dalits* figured as a critical factor in the electoral calculations of the dominant political parties.

## 6.2 The 1994 Assembly elections

With the Dalit Maha Sabha emerging as a powerful organisation both in its spatial spread and in its ideological reach, a section of the DMS leadership seems to have harboured ambitions of entering into electoral politics.<sup>47</sup> A crucial turning point for this shift in *dalit* articulation in AP was the dramatic electoral performance of the Samajwad Party (SP)–BSP alliance in the 1993 Assembly polls in Uttar Pradesh. The formation of government by this alliance raised the DMS's leadership hopes, prompting them to explore the possibility of repeating the same in AP. As the SP and BSP

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the educated, employed and politically conscious elements among dalits in north India and especially in Uttar Pradesh. These forces, mobilised by the BAMCEF and DS4, prepared the ground for the launching of a political party in the form of the BSP. The BSP considers the concept of '*bahujan*' to be basic to its new conception of politics and its project of socio-political transformation in India. The concept of *bahujan* refers to a 'majority of the people'. The majority is constructed through the principle of the exclusion of the three Hindu Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya *varnas*.

47. A significant move in this direction was the formation of Poor Peoples' Party (PPP) by Kathi Padma Rao in the early 1990s. The formation of PPP, announced by Padma Rao without any consultation with the rank and file of the DMS, attracted resentment from the DMS cadre. It also, as DMS activists narrate, led to an intense debate among them as to whether it was an opportune moment to take such a step.

were identified with OBCs and SCs, this experiment also raised the political ambitions of the OBCs (and of the Yadavs in particular), who tried to bring in Mulayam Singh Yadav to AP to start an SP wing in the State. These moves were prompted by the AP Assembly elections in 1994.

The BSP's electoral ascendancy in UP made a dramatic difference to its reception during the 1994 elections in AP. Kanshi Ram's visit to AP in 1994 attracted wide publicity, as he successfully rallied the leaders and activists not only belonging to the *dalit* community but also to the politically marginalised élite belonging to the OBC and minority communities. Leaders such as Kathi Padma Rao, Bojja Tharakam and K.G. Satyamurthy, who represented different shades of *dalit* politics, gravitated to the BSP. Corresponding to this, the public meetings held by the BSP in Hyderabad, Vishakapatnam and Nalgonda in early months of 1994 turned out to be successful and attracted and aroused the interest of a cross-section of people – the *dalits*, of course, comprising the majority.

The popular excitement aroused by the BSP gave rise to considerable media attention. This, in a sense, worked against the BSP, as even insignificant differences among the BSP leaders – which seemed to be natural as the party's State leadership came from diverse backgrounds – were overtly and perhaps rather unduly focused upon. The *dalit* activists perceived the vernacular press as hostile to the BSP: proof of this, they claimed, was the undue focus on the party's internal problems, which had attracted further attention. The departure of Satyamurthy from the BSP on the eve of the 1994 Assembly elections was largely due to this. This perception does not seem to be an exaggeration, as even ordinary *dalits* came to be acutely aware of it.

This is not to suggest that the BSP was bereft of internal tensions. In a complex society such as that of India, characterised by asymmetry and unevenness, parties are bound to reflect the dynamics of macro social complexity. Two aspects directly relevant to the present discussion are the logic of unevenness informing regional and caste dimensions. If State leadership of the BSP, drawn largely from coastal Andhra, in contrast to Telangana, was one contentious issue, then the preponderance of Malas against Madigas was another. As subsequent developments simply demonstrated, these tensions were present in the BSP's organisational structure, albeit in a tacit manner.

The growth of the BSP was undoubtedly a critical factor in the emergent political scenario in the State. The BSP's role in arousing subaltern caste aspirations was critical. Alerted by the ground swell, or at least the prospect of it, the Congress Party (I) and the TDP, the major contenders for power in the State, seem to have attempted a substantial reformulation of their electoral strategy. The trajectory of political change in the State provides evidence of this. The DMS had little success in setting the agenda during the crucial State Assembly elections of 1989 and the Lok Sabha elections of 1991 – despite its influential position amongst the *dalits*. However, the BSP was successful in setting the agenda during the 1994 Assembly elections because of its potential to polarise *dalit* communities' social support.

In response to the challenge posed by the BSP, the Congress Party proceeded to conduct meetings with different castes. Thus the Congress Party followed the logic of caste arithmetic set in motion by the '*bahujan*' (majority) plank by the BSP, by promising reservations to different castes in education, employment and political office along with other caste-specific roles.

Beneath the apparently heightened caste polarisation and mobilisation initiated by the BSP and pursued by the Congress Party, the TDP pursued another process of agenda-setting and mobilisation. The principal aspects of this were a) prohibition; b) populist schemes such as Rs2 per kilo of rice; c) the subsidisation of the power supply to farmers.

The TDP's attempt to forge an alternative alliance by mobilising women, the rural and urban poor and the farming community was based on concrete promises to these constituencies. In sharp

contrast to the Congress Party (I) and the BSP's caste mobilisation, it could broadly be suggested that the TDP followed the strategy of class mobilisation (see Appendix for a review of the political and social context of the TDP's electoral strategy).

What contributed to the TDP's overwhelming victory in the 1994 Assembly elections<sup>48</sup> were the promises of prohibition, subsidised rice, free allotment of house sites and the supply of cheap cloth. These promises rallied large sections of the weaker sections, especially the SCs and OBCs. Crucial to an analysis of this appeal are the State-wide women's movement against *arrack* and the dilution of the subsidised rice scheme during the Congress Party regime. As a result, the Congress Party campaign that these welfare measures cut into developmental programmes did not find much support in the electorate. On the contrary, a combination of both the schemes captured the imagination of women's votes in rural areas, most of whom voted for the TDP. In this election, there seemed to be a perceptible shift of Muslim votes from the Congress Party to the TDP. This was partly because of the fact that during the TDP regime, the State was largely free from communal tensions and because the Muslims in the State perceived the Congress Party and the Bharatiya Jana Party (BJP) as equally responsible for the demolition of Babri Masjid.<sup>49</sup>

The performance of the BSP, which initially showed signs of emerging as a third force as its supremo Kanshi Ram generated euphoria among the SCs, STs and OBCs by raising the slogan of political power to *bahujans*, was dismal. It was anticipated that the BSP would be able to cut into the social support of both the Congress Party (I) and the TDP. But the BSP's poor performance was due to the polarisation of political support between the Congress Party (I) and the TDP; it could not win a single seat, though it contested from 218 constituencies. In fact, all except one candidate lost their deposits. Only 12 candidates secured more than 5,000 votes. What contributed to the failure of the BSP to take off in State politics were the internal differences, the inability of Kanshi Ram to coordinate and evolve an appropriate strategy, and, more significantly, the failure to cut into the hegemonic politics of the dominant parties in the State.

### 6.3 The post-NTR phase and *dalit* support

The post-1994 situation witnessed a series of developments that impacted on the character of the *dalit* movement and decisively affected the very direction of grassroots *dalit* mobilisation. These developments, the reasons for which were present in the very trajectory of the *dalit* movement, but remained subdued, and could not gain much currency even when they were raised, were catalysed by the electoral setback of the BSP experiment in AP. The *dalit* leadership, which joined the BSP promising to emerge as a significant force in State politics, if not capture power, raised the hopes of the rank and file of the DMS considerably. The dismal performance of the well-known *dalit* leaders became a cause of injury to the pride and self-respect collectively shared by the *dalit* youth.

The differences thus came into the open and were manifested in a variety of forms: mutual slander, group quarrels, open defiance, and so on. What was conspicuously missing was an objective assessment of the electoral process: an analysis of electoral strategy, strengths and weaknesses of mobilisation, etc. This was, in a significant measure, due to the lack of confidence or, rather, the

48. The TDP captured a massive 217 seats (251, if the share of its allies, CPI and CPM, is added) out of the total of 292 for which elections were held. The Congress Party won only 25 seats. The TDP and its allies received 49.5% of the vote, compared to the Congress Party's 33.2%. In the coastal region, the TDP won 105 seats out a total of 133, compared to the Congress Party's poor performance in securing only 10 seats. In Telangana region, the TDP won 69 seats out of a total of 107, whilst the Congress Party secured only 6 seats, the lowest ever. Out of a total of 52 seats in Rayalaseema region, the TDP secured 40 seats compared to 10 by the Congress Party. The TDP also established its strong presence in the SC and ST reserved constituencies. Out of a total of 39 SC seats, it won 28, while the Congress Party won only 2. The CPI and CPM, the TDP's allies, got 4 and 5 seats respectively. The TDP and its allies captured all 14 ST seats. The Congress Party failed to win even a single seat.

<sup>49</sup> Babri Masjid, the sixteenth century mosque in Ayodhya (in Uttar Pradesh), was demolished by Hindu fundamentalists on 6 December 1992.

moral diffidence of the leadership. The post-1994 situation saw schisms in the *dalit* movement – each splinter group giving its own account of the electoral process, its explanation for the debacle of BSP and justification of its role in the elections.

Out of this State of low morale and exhaustion emerged a powerful voice, the Madiga Reservation Porata Samithi (MRPS), a separate Madiga organisation, which made the sole demand for the categorisation of SCs into four groups. There are around sixty SC castes in the State (see Tables 4 and 5), with significant internal differentiation within them. This was not sufficiently addressed by the *dalit* movement. While the Malas and Madigas are major castes, others are numerically small. The caste differences and even conflicts between these major *dalit* castes,<sup>50</sup> as noted earlier, have been well known but not addressed by the movement (see N. Subba Reddi, 1950).

**Table 4 Scheduled caste population in the State of Andhra Pradesh**

	Total population	SC population	% of total
1981 Census	5,35,49,673	79,61,730	14.86
1991 Census	6,65,08,008	1,05,92,066	15.93

Source: Justice Ramachandra Raju Commission (2001) ‘Scheduled Caste Categorisation’, cited in *Andhra Pradesh Scheduled Caste (Rationalisation of Reservations) Act 2000*, Hyderabad: Dandora Publications.

**Table 5 Broad categorisation of the scheduled castes**

Group	Population	%
Madiga	37,37,609	46.94
Mala	32,63,675	40.99
Adi-Andhra	7,13,824	8.96
Relli	1,33,689	1.67
Unclassified	1,12,933	1.41

Source: Justice Ramachandra Raju Commission (2001) ‘Scheduled Caste Categorisation’, cited in *Andhra Pradesh Scheduled Caste (Rationalisation of Reservations) Act 2000*, Hyderabad: Dandora Publications.

Attempts to arouse caste identity among the Madigas can be traced back to the early 1990s. A Madiga section within the DMS tried to raise the issue of the Madigas being deprived of opportunities by the Malas. The Malas, who are numerically preponderant in the advanced coastal districts – Madigas are a numerical majority in Telangana – have historically been ahead of the Madigas. Due to Christian missionary efforts, exposure to the process of modernisation in the British-ruled Madras Presidency, and as a reflection of the overall developmental process witnessed in coastal Andhra, an educated Mala middle class has existed since the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. This historical advantage has worked in their favour and helped them to benefit from the special provisions provided for the SCs after Independence.

As a result, the Malas have a relatively greater presence in education, employment and politics. This situation has been presented by the MRPS as the result of the Mala’s cornering the benefits of SC reservations, in disproportion to the size of their population; this is projected to be the cause of the Madiga’s deprivation. The MRPS raised the issue of a legitimate and proportionate share for the Madigas. Thus, we witness the demand for the categorisation of SCs, for the purpose of the reservations, shaping into a major State-wide movement.

With the emergence of the MRPS as a major force (and as a counterpoint to it, the formation of the Mala Mahanadu by the articulate Malas), the crisis in the *dalit* movement reached its nadir. The vertical division of the *dalits* along caste lines has wider political implications. This must be appreciated in the context of post-NTR AP politics.

50. For a historical account of caste conflict amongst *dalits*, see N. Subba Reddi (1950)

The developments within the TDP, voted to power in the 1994 elections, like the removal of NTR from power, the consequent split in the party (the minority faction led by NTR and later by his widow, and the ruling group led by his son-in-law N. Chandrababu Naidu) and the demise of NTR, occurred in fast sequence between August 1995 and January 1996. In the subsequent period, the TDP faced three Lok Sabha elections (in 1996, 1998 and 1999), necessitated by the uncertainties of the hung Lok Sabha and unstable governments at the centre, and the State Assembly election in 1999. These elections have seen a rapid shift and alignment of political forces, the influence of the State on the dynamics of national politics (see Srinivasulu, 1999; Srinivasulu and Sarangi, 1999; Srinivasulu, forthcoming).

One of the important aspects of this situation pertinent to the present discussion is the powerful articulation and mobilisation of the Madigas. The TDP, it may be noted, could not succeed in carving out any significant support among the SCs during its first decade of existence – in fact, the SCs have displayed a strong preference for the Congress Party. The division in the SC community on caste lines provided the TDP with an opportunity. By supporting the demand for categorisation and by showing a preference for Madiga candidates in the SC reserved constituencies, the TDP (Naidu) carved out a space for itself among the Madigas, and to an extent struck a blow at the Congress Party (I). The deep Madiga-Mala divisions among the *dalits*, put *dalit* politics on a new trajectory, but facilitated the TDP, which was a catalyst in the growth of DMS, to carve out a new support base.

What the study of *dalit* politics seen in relation to the electoral domain clearly brings out is the fact of the marginalisation of *dalit* organisations in electoral politics. The intense adversarial identity politics – leading to sharp social polarisation and exclusivist ideological image and therefore to a general reluctance to accept such leadership – is one of the principal causes of *dalit* leadership marginalisation in the electoral domain, but the role of dominant parties and their strategies to divide or accelerate the divisions and co-opt and accommodate the issues and active elements of the subaltern movements, is at least as important.

## 7 Conclusions

In this paper we have examined the significance of class and caste on social mobilisation in Andhra Pradesh. The central question addressed here is: why have two of the State's major regions, Telangana and coastal Andhra, differed in terms of social mobilisation, as class-based agrarian movement and *dalit* mobilisation have been gaining ground in these two regions respectively?

The crucial coordinates emphasised in explaining the divergent regional trajectories are the differences in the historical backgrounds of these regions, brought together with the formation of the State in 1956, the continued unevenness in their development, and the changes in regime politics brought about by the TDP. The issue that is at the core of these movements is primarily the relationship between land, caste, and political and social dominance.

It nevertheless remains an enigma of sorts that, contrary to the predictions of scholars, a developed region such as Andhra should witness movements based on pre-modern social markers of caste, whilst in 'backward' Telangana they are based on agrarian class mobilisation.

The agrarian reformism of the Congress Party was a response to the peasant conflicts of the pre-Independence period. Though it aimed at the removal of gross inequalities in the countryside, in effect it only paved the way for the crystallisation of a new landed class. This new class, especially in the areas where there was little agricultural modernisation, perpetuated old feudal practices such as *vetti*, the collection of fines, right to arbitration, perpetuation of bondage through indebtedness, and denial of access to common property resources and minimum wages to agricultural labour, etc. It is this ground reality that the CPI (ML) groups, formed following the split in the communist movement, found conducive to organising the agrarian poor. In the context of mounting State repression, this movement, which began as mass mobilisation against landlords' oppression, was forced to resort to armed struggle. Thus, the prevalence of feudal forms of exploitation and the entry of agrarian communist militants into the Telangana countryside are the prime reasons for the rise of agrarian class movement in Telangana countryside. In other words, although there is a clear caste dimension to the feudal exploitation and social polarisation – landlords belonging to Reddy and Velama castes and the agrarian poor to the *dalit*, service and occupational castes – it is the theoretical primacy attached by the CPI (ML) to land ownership and economic dominance that gave the movement a distinct class character.

In contrast, in spite of the class polarisation in the post-Green Revolution period, the coastal region has seen the rise of caste awareness and mobilisation. Crucial to an understanding of agrarian politics in this region is the emergence and consolidation of the market related rich peasant class. This class has found itself in a paradoxical situation. First, while it has proved itself to be enterprising by modernising agriculture and diversifying the investment of its wealth into non-agrarian sectors, it has not been able to find a commensurate share in political power in the political structure of the Congress Party. Secondly, while it has been instrumental in the expansion of commercial forms of agriculture, it has resisted fully commercial relations in certain respects, seeking to retain bonded labour and resist wage increases. As a result, we continue to witness the prevalence of labour bondage, usury, sharecropping and the absence of the implementation of minimum wages in this advanced region.

The emergence of the TDP resolved some of the asymmetry between the economic position and under-representation in the political system of the neo-rich (especially belonging to the Kamma community) of this advanced region. This class, in the process of mobilising support for the TDP, sought to translate the economic dependence of the lower castes into political loyalty. The latter's resistance resulted in massive and well-organised riots against *dalits*. Crucial to this *dalit* assertion

are the emergence of an educated youth and a growing awareness of their rights. Further, with the decline of traditional entitlements due to the commercialisation of agrarian relations, the subaltern communities displayed a strong tendency to fall back upon their community resources, however meagre they might be. This strengthened caste bonds and identity in the rural milieu.

What is also crucial to an explanation of the caste-based mobilisation in this region is the marginalisation of left-wing politics. Coastal Andhra, a stronghold of the left, started witnessing a decline in its support for the left in the 1960s, and with the emergence of the TDP and the left's electoral alliance with it, the left even began to lose its ideological significance. The vacuum thus created provided space for caste organisations.

Thus, the economic marginalisation of subaltern communities in the Green Revolution areas, the decline of the left, and the TDP regime marking a reconfiguration of the political power relations form the background for the increased violence against *dalits* and caste forms of resistance to this. The cases of Padirikuppam, Karamchedu and Neerukonda clearly show this.

The Dalit Maha Sabha, formed in response to the Karamchedu massacre in 1985, increased its influence and became the organisational expression of *dalit* assertiveness. The 1994 State Assembly elections were an important turning point in the history of the *dalit* movement, especially from the point of the relationship between macro-political processes and the *dalit* movement. The DMS leadership participated in this election on the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) plank. The dismal electoral showing of the BSP, especially of the DMS leaders, shook the rank and file of the DMS. The impact of the electoral defeat could be seen not only in the schism and decline of the DMS but also in the fragmentation of the movement on sub-caste lines.

The Madiga Reservation Porata Samithi (MRPS) is as much a reflection of the objective social distance that exists between Mala and Madiga castes as the failure of the DMS to address these differences and inequalities. As the Madiga movement, demanding categorisation of the SCs for reservation purposes, emerged as a powerful voice, the TDP, which was not known for any significant support among the SCs, sought to carve out a space for itself among the Madigas by pledging support to the demand and showing a preference for the Madiga candidates in the SC reserved constituencies.

It is pertinent to note that with these developments, the *dalit* organisations, which could have emerged as a powerful voice in State politics and influenced the political and electoral agenda, have been reduced to a position where they can be manipulated, co-opted, controlled and subjected to the dynamics of macro-politics.

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## **Appendix The social and political context of the TDP's electoral strategy of 1994**

The viability and credibility of the TDP's electoral strategy in 1994 has to be appreciated against the background of the policy changes and social movements that occurred during Congress Party rule (1989–94). The Congress Party regime went back on the promises it made in the 1989 Assembly elections of continuing the 'rupees two a kilo' scheme and subsidising the power supply to agriculture and hiked the price of PDS rice and electricity charges in 1992. Needless to say, this was in tune with the liberalisation policies of the Congress Party government at the centre. Further, it also opened up a debate on populism vs. development, with a view to show how development had been adversely affected, by the diversion of fiscal resources to the maintenance of populist policies. This, of course, did not find much popular acceptance, as the outcome of the 1994 polls showed. Another important electoral plank of the TDP that attracted women voters was the promise of total prohibition. The movement against *arrack*, which began as a small protest in Nellore district and expanded soon to other districts of three regions of the State, was quintessentially a women's movement. This was a major movement in the history of the State and rallied women belonging to the OBC and *dalit* communities in the countryside in particular. The role of various organisations such as NGOs, the women's left, *dalit* organisations and, in the later stages, the TDP, in the mobilisation of the women in this movement was instrumental in the politicisation and sustaining of the movement. The nature of politicisation of course defies precise characterisation as these different organisations brought their own specific politics, perceptions and also problems to the movement at grassroots level. But what rallied them together was the central demand for prohibition.

In this context, it is imperative to mention the role of The *Eenadu*, the largest circulated Telugu daily in the State. From its inception in 1982, this newspaper was instrumental in the TDP's political projection and propaganda and can be credited, among other factors, for the TDP's success in the 1983 Assembly elections and the Congress Party (I)'s first ever political debacle in the State. The *Eenadu* took an editorial stand in support of the anti-*arrack* struggle. It generously provided space by publishing the news, views, stories and photographs of the activities of agitating women as well as writing editorials.

In this context, it is crucial to note the movement's politics of representation. In view of the plurality of the streams that joined the anti-*arrack* movement, the intervention of The *Eenadu* deserves attention for its double role. While on the one hand it provided wider visibility to the movement and empowered the agitating women by giving prominence to their activities, on the other hand it represented the movement as Gandhian and moralistic, pitted against the 'immoral' Congress Party regime. In other words, in The *Eenadu*'s representation of the movement, the specificities of the struggle in different locales were systematically erased and a homogeneous and monolithic character was imposed upon the movement. Further, attempts were made to limit the issues upon which the movement focused to the single issue of prohibition (while it in fact addressed a complex set of social issues such as domestic violence, deteriorating household incomes and women's entitlement to land) and the focus of the struggle was pinned down to the decision of the government as a central agency (when, in reality, civil society constituted the arena of the movement). As a result, anyone who could promise to concede the demand of prohibition could rally the support of the forces unleashed by the movement. Thus, the movement, which held a promise of larger consequence for civil society, was reduced to a single issue in electoral politics.

The TDP's entry into the anti-*arrack* agitation has to be seen against the movement's process of reconfiguration. The TDP was instrumental in the expansion of the sale of liquor in general, and of *arrack* in particular, during its first tenure in power (1983–90). The massive expansion in the sales network of liquor during this period was meant to augment the excise revenue, which in turn was channelled to meet the rising expenditure due to the subsidised rice. Moving beyond its earlier image, the TDP jumped into the fray in support of the agitation with the promise of total prohibition 'within one hour' after it came back to power.