



THE ROLE WOMEN IN TELANGANA ARMED STRUGGLE

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INTRODUCTION

The "Telangana Armed Struggle" occupies a unique place, not only on the history of India but also in the history of the people's Liberation struggle of the World. During the Second half of 18th Century the Bourgeoisie (middle class) industrial workers and peasants fought liberation struggle throughout the Europe against the Monarchism and Feudal Despotism under the slogans of "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity".

Women Participation In Telangana Armed Struggle

The 1940's mark a new phase in the politics of Hyderabad state. The struggle, issues raised and the ideology that supported this all heralded a new and radical phase. Moving from demands for freedom of social expression and organization, which were essentially concerns of the Urban middle class of Hyderabad, the focus now was on the forms of oppression, the feudal nature of the state and the compulsions necessitating shift of activity from the Urban and Semi-Urban areas to the rural villages.

These trends necessarily affected women's organizations, compelling hard choices. While most of the women leaders and organizations, given their class character, opted out of this radical phase, a few Hyderabad organizations like the Navjivan Mandali made conscious decisions to support the Communists. By the end of 1940's women's participation in the urban and the rural areas was legitimized by the spaces created for them or the opportunities they created for themselves.¹ Two divergent and seemingly parallel trends emerged, a legitimate public space for participation for the Urban middle class educated women, a process that was supportive and facilitated by society. And its opposite if one could call it a space in which women held a central position but yet could not publicly articulate grievances since they were and are often considered illegitimate.

Given the feudal nature of society in which women irrespective of religion or caste were in Purdah or had little opportunity for knowledge of the outside world, it is truly significant that in the first half of 20th century that women of Telangana region gradually and yet progressively expanded their sphere of activities and political participation, moving from welfare and recreational activity to active involvement in radical armed struggle at the other end of the spectrum.²

It is also important to note that the nature of women's participation changed at this juncture. During this period the participants were primarily poor agricultural labourers.

It is pertinent here to take a brief look at the feudal nature of agrarian social relations in Telangana region. The basic feature that dominated the socio-economic life of the people of Hyderabad and especially in Telangana was the unbridled feudal exploitation that persisted till, the beginning of the Telangana armed peasant struggle.

Out of the 53,000,000 acres in the whole of Hyderabad state about 30,000,000 acres i.e. about 60 percent were under Governmental land revenue system called Diwani or Khasla area, about 15,000,000 acres i.e. about 30 percent were under the Jagirdari system, and about 10 percent as the Nizam's own direct estate i.e. sarf-e-khas system.³

The income or loot from the peasantry from the sarf khas area, amounting to Rs. 20,000,000 annually was entirely used to meet the expenditure of the Nizam's family and its retinue. The whole area was treated as his private estate. He was not bound to spend any amount for economic and social benefit or development of people's livelihood in

that area. The peasants in these areas were nothing but bonded - slaves or total serfs under the Nizam. Even whatever little rights existed in the diwani area was denied to them.

The Jagir areas constituted 30 percent of the total states. In these areas, Paigas, Samasthanams, Jagirdars, Ijavadars, Banjardars, Muktedars, Inamdars, or Agraharams were the various kinds of feudal complexes. Some of these used to have their own revenue officers to collect the taxes they used to impose.⁴ Some of these *Jagirs, Paigas* and *samasthanams* especially the biggest ones had their own separate police, revenue, civil and criminal systems. They were subfeudatory states, under the Nizam's state of Hyderabad which was itself a strong native state under the British princely states.

Women played an important role in the Telangana struggle. They participated actively in the land movement, in agricultural labour wage struggles, in seizure of lands and grain, against the "Briggs Plan" of evacuating the Koya, chenchu and lambadi people from their hamlets in the forest areas, or from their scattered hamlets in the plains. They were with their husbands and brothers fighting the Razakars and Nizam police. They had joined the militant political squads and underwent all the difficulties and joys of the life in the forests and hills and in the fields, in rain and in sun. They acted as couriers, as political agitators, and in new centres as organizers of people's movement and mass organizations.

They were the worst victims of the brutal tortures and atrocities committed by the Razakars and Nizam's and later Indian police and military. They had to face molestation and rape, apart from beatings on a large scale. They had to see their babies and children tortured and killed before their very eyes. They had to see their beloved husbands or brothers hunted and arrested and killed. They had to suffer all this, remaining in their own houses and villages, looking after what was left behind, the very young and the very old when their men folk had to fight to escape the fury of the army and police attacks, or had gone to join the fighters and the guerrillas in far-off secret places.⁵

The story of their heroic and stubborn resistance in defence of their personal dignity, against molestation, torture, and rape, is an inspiring one. Their awakening to new social equality, to a new moral and cultural life, their stubborn fighting quality, gives us a glimpse of that tremendous revolutionary spirit and energy that is smouldering in womenfolk.

It was Chakali Ailamma in Palakurthy village, Jangoan taluk who was the first in bitter fight to retain her land and crop from being seized by the *Deshmukh*. She inspired her whole family of sons and daughters to be with the Party through thick and thin. Her house had been the centre of *Andhra Mahasabha* and Communist party activities against the landlords. She fought not only for her personal case - this only symbolized and signaled the beginning of the mighty struggle of the Telangana peasant.⁶ In Miryalagudem taluk, in Mukundapuram village, the Sahukar had got Kummari Mattaya tortured to death because he refused to give up the land he had recovered from this Sahukar. His wife took up the challenge. She stuck to the land and refused to surrender. She was brutally raped by the police but still she refused. She roused the people to support her and succeeded in retaining the land. In Vadapalli centre, a lambadi peasant was killed because he too refused to surrender the recovered land to the landlord. But his wife took his place and succeeded in cultivating that piece of land in spite of the police terror.

In Kondrapolu village, another lambadi peasant cultivating a two acre wet land plot, that too, a recovered piece was done to death by landlord Dattudu. Here again his wife came forward and succeeded in defending her right on land.

In Subaramigudem, Golla Muttayya was killed for not surrendering the piece of land he was cultivating, but his wife stepped in and continued the cultivation and did not allow the enemy to seize the land.

In Moddulukunta, a lambadi took possession of a piece of land from landlord Ramakrishnanna who tried to seize it with the help of the police. The lambadi was beaten to pulp and forced to leave his house and farm. But his wife refused and persisted. She cultivated it and succeeded in carrying the harvest to her home.

Veeraram, a lambadi peasant and his wife resisted their land being sized by the landlord's men and the police. The police trampled on the women who was pregnant and she died. It was a fact that tens of thousands of women stood along with their men folk in this struggle for land.

A great percentage of agricultural labourers are women. They are in very large numbers, perhaps as many as the men themselves, because they too have to earn if they are to get even one meal for their children and themselves. They cannot rely on their men's earnings. As such it is not surprising that women participated in large numbers in all agricultural labour strikes, or in seizure of grain from landlord's and *deshmukhs* warehouses and gadis.⁷

In the Kondrapalli centre, and other neighboring centres in a large number of village, agricultural labourers went on strike for increase of their daily wages to four seers from the then existing 2 or 3 seers. In the demonstrations, women in large numbers participated with flags in their hands. Ultimately to force the landlords to come to a settlement, they had to raid and start seizing grain. The landlords were forced to concede the demands.

There were women who staying in their own villages, defended their homes, fought against the oppressors and the police and suffered immensely, but went on fighting. Many demanded to be taken into the guerrilla squads, to the forest area, maybe partly under the pressure of the enemy attacks as the only method of escape. The party admitted only a few women into the forest areas and even fewer in the guerrilla squads. Yet there were quite a number of women in various jobs, both in the political and militant fields in both the forest and plain regions.

The village women folk aided the guerrilla squads in their raids. They provided the squad members with water and food while the battles raged for hours together. Women went in disguise to gather information about the military camps and passed it on to the squads. They also participated in battles with pots of chilli powder, kept vigil on the routes of the police and killed them. Hundred of such raids occurred all over Telangana.⁸

During the Nizam days in 1946-47 the Nizam police and levy officials raided the villages of Akunur and Machireddypalli in Jangoan taluk. They raped a dozen or more women. This incident was taken up even by Congress leaders as a major issue, as an insult to the honour of womenfolk and as a disgrace to national honour. Padmaja Naidu was in the forefront of that agitation and a huge wave of anger swept the whole country.

In Ragipadu (Suryapet taluk) a woman who had delivered only three days before, was raped. In Narigudem (Bhuvanagiri taluk) a woman who had delivered a day before, was raped. In Tangunta, a woman in advanced pregnancy was raped. In Yenapadu, of Bhuvanagiri taluk, and in Pushpapur of Khammam taluk even girls of 10 years were raped.

Reports of women being raped by 5-10 military police men at a time were innumerable. More than 100 women died of brutal raping. In the first year itself reports showed more than a thousand women being raped. It will be no exaggeration to say that in all these three years of the police and military terror regime a few thousand women were raped.

But the women and the people waged a continuous and bitter fight against this barbarous attack on women, beat back the police in many cases, and saved them from this torture.⁹

Soldiers from Nawabpet village (Jangoan) camp went in civilian dress to Vaddicherla village unarmed and raped women. The people of the village got wild. Hundreds of people surrounded the house which the soldiers had entered. While two escaped the other two were beaten to death.

In Proddutur village the military raided and after beating up villagers, shot dead four local militants. They tried to catch some women, but all the rest of the women of the village surrounded them and got their sisters released.

In Madarugudem, Miryalagudem taluka, the wife of the local organizer, Balakoti was caught hold of by the military. She resisted and fought back, and escaped from their clutches.

In Jalalpuram an armyman tried to rape a pregnant woman. She talked to him to get him into room and then bolted it from the outside and gathered a crowd of women.

When the armed police were attacking the villages of Balemula, Patasuryapet, Mallareddygudem, Devarapalle and in a number of other places, women were at the side of their men, handing them stones for their slings. Along with their men folk they faced brutal lathi-charges and firings.

In the Mallareddygudem fight, a woman who was supplying stones standing by the side of her husband, was shot dead. Women resisted their men folk being spirited away in Lorries and demanded that they should accompany them and face all the consequences. The police could move only when they took the fighting women in the Lorries along with their men folk.

In the Kottagudem Koya hamlet, in Gundala area, in September 1950 the men and women of the whole village resisted the military atrocities and in that fight killed a subedar and three of his men and seized their guns. After this when the military came in large force in whole village had to take shelter in the deep forest. That was the heroic way the women lived through the ordeal, not even allowing their children to cry out, will always rouse admiration and be an example of the determination and stubbornness of which women are capable.¹⁰

In Rajaram centre, a man and woman of a *lambadi tanda* were taken to the camp, the police suspecting them of helping the guerrillas. They were made to stand up for days and nights without food and water. When they fell down, a little water was given and as soon as they became conscious was again made to stand up. Their legs became swollen, but even after this torture both of them would have rather given up their lives than give any information about the guerrillas. The enemy then let them off.

It was a common feature in the whole fighting area that women took extraordinary precautions to look after the guerrillas and squads, sheltering and billeting them in their houses and in a large number of cases keeping night or day vigil while the guerrillas or leaders were sleeping or resting.

The women fed guerrillas and party organisers at any time of the night or day with great care and affection. They took food and supplies to the guerrilla hideouts in the forests on hills and suffered horrible tortures and indignities when they were found out.

In the village of Bendalapadu, a peasant woman Rajamma was caught. She and her husband were tortured with red hot irons, her waist and hands were branded as if wearing ornaments but not a single word did she utter about the squads. The charge was that she was taking food to the squads in the forests.

In this struggle, women had participated equally along with the men and due to this it became easier for the gram committees, Sangham and party to campaign against the age old ideas prevalent in the society that women were inferior to men. Women were elected to village Panch committees.

As mentioned earlier the Urban Women's Organizations in Hyderabad split on issue of support to the growing radical movement.

In 1945, there were two rival meetings of the *Andhra Mahasabha*. One was held at Warangal and was attended by non-Communists. The other was held at Khammam and was attended by Communists and

their sympathizers. Both the groups discussed the problems of popular Government, representation for different religious groups, problems of peasants and agricultural labourers etc. It must be noted that these were also the last important meetings of the two wings of the Andhra Mahasabha. While the liberals slowly became a part of the state branch of the Indian National Congress, the radicals joined hands with the Communist party.¹¹ Within the Congress also there were two groups consisting of conservatives and progressive-nationalists. The women who were active in the nationalist movement and also in the welfare and reformative activities gradually developed into diverse groups because of the influence of the Communist ideology. The organizations like the All India Women's Conference had stopped its relations with the activities of the Andhra Mahasabha saying that the Andhra Mahasabha had links with the Communists. The Navjivan Mandali had links with the Communists and they worked very actively in the war time and at the time of floods and also in the dalams in the freedom struggle. The women from the *Andhra Yuvathi Mandali* who were very active in nationalist politics were the founder member of the institution Yellapragada. Sita Kumari. Burgula Anantha Lakshmi had participated in the *Mahasabha* conference. Though Anantha Lakshmi participated in the politics earlier, after independence she stopped her activities. She was not keen on involvement in political activity. She was very interested in the Andhra Yuvathi Mandali Activities. Her aim was to see it as an individual self-sufficient institution and it was fulfilled. Even now she continues to visit the institution.¹²

Smt. Sita Kumari was very interested in politics. She pioneered the ideas which she propagated and in the process she became the member of the Legislative Assembly. The organized Satyagrha movement launched by the States Peoples, Conference in 1938 was only the beginning of the people's struggle. It was at such time that the Communist party called upon the All India Trade Union Congress, the All Hyderabad Students Union and the women who were organized in a few towns, to join hands with the *Andhra Mahasabha* and to come out boldly and protect the life of the people. Men and women prepared themselves to face the Nizam. Women played an important role in the Telangana Armed Struggle. They who had suffered and starved under the regime of extortions of the Nizam and the *Deshmukhs*, now saw the possibility of a new life, and they actively participated in the land movement, in the seizure of the landlords' grain, and in the struggle for higher wages. They fought the Razakars and the Nizam's police and later the Indian Army, standing shoulder to shoulder with their men.¹³ Ordinary women in the villages heroically defended their land. It is a well known fact that tens of thousands of women stood along with their men in this struggle for land, women formed a large percentage of the participants in the agricultural labour strikes. In demonstrations, the women with red flags in hand came in large numbers and finally they participated in seizing the grain of landlords who were then forced to concede their demands of four 'seers' of grain as daily wages, raising it from the prevailing rate of two or three 'seers'. Even though the women had hitherto not been drawn politically into the movement or politically trained, they now rose to great heights of heroism and sacrifice in the course of the struggle.¹³ Not only did they fight in their villages and their homes, but many demanded to be taken in the guerrilla squads and fight in the forests. The leaders admitted only a very few women into the forest area and fewer in the guerrilla squads. Mallu Swarajyam who was active even as a young girl in the Andhra Mahasabha, later joined the Communist movement and organized men and women to participate in the Telangana struggle.

The Navjivan Mandali, a composition organization mainly of non-Telugu women of whom there was a large number in the city, did splendid work in the city. Among the most active was a young village girl from Marathwada, named Padma Deshpande. She played an important role in organizing the activities, going from school to school and taking the message of the demonstration to the girl students. Another individual who played a significant role was Sarojini from Dhoopet, who was a hard working and devoted worker. She was not only in the forefront of the struggle for the introduction of food rationing but also took the responsibility of writing and distributing the ration cards, working day and night through the Mahila Navjivan Mandali. She earned great popularity and she used all her organizational talents to rouse women against the activities and the injustice of the Razakars. She gathered around her a good number of sympathizers who were a big asset to the anti-razakar movement.¹⁴

N. Sathyavathi working in the *Andhra Yuvathi Mandali* was interested in working among Telugu speaking women and their orga-

nization. Yashodaben was another member of the Navjivan Mandali during the Razakar period. When the people's anger was mounting against their atrocities she played a dominant and inspiring role¹⁵. She was a leading spirit directing the activities of the Navjivan Mandali. The story of Jamalunissa Begum, fondly called Baji is not only inspiring but also significant because in those days Muslim women never participated in any movement that opposed the Nizam. In 1926-27 she decided to give up the purdah and to boycott foreign clothes. She invested all the Rs. 10,000 she got from her insurance policy to start an Urdu paper which for all purposes was a paper of the Communist party. This brave Muslim woman carried out her revolutionary mission courageously in a situation where hardly any Muslim woman dared to support the great Telangana Armed struggle or the Communist party which was its spearhead. In this great struggle women showed their courage and fortitude and in the process liberated themselves from the feudal chains that had bound them down for centuries. But, the reason so many women participated in leading the struggle was due to the good work done among women and by the women cadres. From the beginning of the forties a mass organization of women was built.¹⁶

Pramela Mahendra one of the active comrade in Hyderabad, says that the general atmosphere helped the Communist programme. Their programmes were for the entire womenfolk irrespective of caste and creed. There was no friction among members.

CONCLUSION

Communist women gave a new turn to the women's movement. Most of the organisations of women comprised of the middle and upper-middle and their membership was limited in numbers. The way in which Communists worked and the way Navjivan Mandali became popular did bring credit to its members. It helped the Communist party to gain popularity in the city. For the first time peasants, workers, the downtrodden in the bustees in urban areas, the agricultural women, lower middle class women, side by side with lower middle-class intellectuals and activists all converged into a massive stream. The women's organisations became a big mass movement involving town and countryside. The significance of the movement was the building of a movement which questioned the very basis of the society founded on exploitation, inequality and indignity. It demanded a socio-economic transformation of society.

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