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Land, Society and Agrarian Change in Telangana: A Historical Analysis of Feudalism, Peasant Movements and Rural Transformation (1900–1970)

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Abstract

The agrarian history of Telangana between 1900 and 1970 represents a significant phase in the social, economic and political transformation of modern India. During the early twentieth century, the region formed part of Hyderabad State under the Nizam and was characterised by a complex agrarian structure comprising jagirdari, inam and ryotwari systems. Concentration of landownership, exploitative tenancy, indebtedness, caste-based inequalities and forced labour contributed to widespread rural dissatisfaction. These conditions shaped the relationship between landlords, cultivators and agricultural labourers and eventually encouraged organised peasant resistance. The Telangana peasant armed struggle of 1946–1951 emerged as a major challenge to traditional landlord authority and became one of the most significant agrarian movements in Indian history. The integration of Hyderabad into the Indian Union in 1948, followed by the abolition of jagirdari and the introduction of tenancy legislation, initiated substantial changes in land administration and rural power relations. The formation of Andhra Pradesh in 1956 and subsequent agricultural development policies further influenced the region's agrarian structure. This paper examines the relationship between feudalism, landownership, peasant movements and rural transformation from 1900 to 1970. Based on historical documents, government reports and scholarly literature, the study argues that agrarian transformation in Telangana resulted from the interaction of peasant mobilisation, political restructuring, legislative intervention and changing rural economic relations.

Keywords: Telangana, agrarian history, feudalism, jagirdari, peasant movements, land reforms, rural society, Nizam, agricultural labour, rural transformation.

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1. Introduction

In rural Telangana, livelihood, economic security and social power is land- historically, land has been the main source of livelihood. The ownership and control of agricultural land not only affected the economic relations of the rural community but also influenced their social status, political power and access to opportunities in institutions. In the early twentieth century, the Nizam – Hyderabad State, governed Telangana, where the Asaf Jahi dynasty ruled. Dissimilar from the British governed areas of the Madras Presidency, its agrarian structure developed in a distinctive political-administrative setup.

The Telangana rural economy was marked by jagirdari, inam and ryotwari land-tenure arrangements made for it. This setup resulted in different intermediaries between the state and actual cultivators. In a number of territories, the powerful zamindars exerted an influence on agriculture, land revenue and vaguer dealings. Peasants often faced exorbitant rents, insecure tenancy, indebtedness and forced labour.

Agrarian inequality closely related to caste relations and unequal access to productive resources. The guarantee of landownership provided economic security and social authority, whereas landlessness and insecure tenancy increased the vulnerability of dalit agricultural labourers. The compulsory, unpaid labour was termed vetti and was one of the most conspicuous forms of exploitation of the peasantry.

A peasant resistance movement emerged during these conditions in the 1930s and 1940s. The Telangana peasant armed struggle started in 1946 and ended in 1951 and was against the oppressive landlords. It is an important episode in the story of agrarian movements in India (Dhanagare, 1974; Sundarayya, 2006).

The incorporation of Hyderabad State in the Indian Union in 1948 and the abolition of jagirdari brought a significant change in land administration. The Hyderabad Tenancy and Agricultural Lands Act, 1950 and other legislation sought to enhance the status of cultivators and regulate landholding. The change from a traditional agrarian structure to a regulatory system was not an instantaneous or uniform one.

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The establishment of Andhra Pradesh in 1956 brought about changes in regional administration, agricultural development and allocation of resources. Between 1956 and 1970, Changes in Agricultural Infrastructure, Irrigation, Land Legislation and Rural Economic Relations in Telangana. However, unequal power relations continued to affect the allocation of resources.The main objective of the study is to explore the interface between landownership, social hierarchy, peasant resistance and rural transformation in Telangana between 1900 and 1970. It will specifically examine the nature of agrarian institutions under the Nizam, causes and consequences of peasant mobilisation, the impact of land reform after independence and the changing character of rural society.

The research employs historical and qualitative analysis methodologies, which are based on secondary literature such as government reports, census publications, legislative documents as well as historical accounts. It takes a chronological approach with thematic interpretation. The Hyderabad Agrarian Reforms Committee Report (1949), Census of India publications, Hyderabad Tenancy and Agricultural Lands Act (1950) and established studies of the Telangana peasant movement are of particular significance. This research does not claim to be based on original fieldwork or new quantitative data. It is a critical synthesis of established historical evidence to explain changes in agrarian relations.

2. Landownership, Feudalism and Agrarian Relations in Telangana (1900–1946)

In the early 20th century of the Telangana region, the agrarian structure was shaped by Hyderabad State's political and administrative arrangements. The Nizam's administration had separate land tenure but it affected the revenue collection, cultivation rights and rural power. The key arrangements were Diwani or Khalsa lands, jagirs, inams and other intermediary tenures. Each category had different characteristics of administration and revenue.

The Diwani arrangement referred to state-controlled revenue collection while a jagirdari arrangement provided a holder with the rights to collect revenue. Lands acquired through inam were typically meant for religious, charitable services or other purposes. Because of these different arrangements, the relation between landholder, cultivators and revenue authorities witnessed marked variations. As per the Census of India (1961), jagirs constituted about one-third of the erstwhile Hyderabad State. It is necessary to clarify that 'occupancy' or 'revenue

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assignment' is different from absolute ownership. The jagirdars normally had assigned revenue rights and not absolute proprietary ownership over each occupied holding.

There was a strong connection between land ownership and power distribution. Deshmukhs, deshpandes, jagirdars and other powerful landholders occupied key positions in rural administration. Land records, revenue collection, agricultural credit activity and local institutions strengthened their authority over local society. In different regions, farmers relied on influential landowners for getting farmland and other productive resources.

The deshmukh system influenced power relations in the countryside. Deshmukhs were associated with revenue administration and social power over localities through landholdings. Their authority spanned a range of activities including production of crops, village administration, and local economy. The jagirdari system also gave significant powers to intermediary powers over rural people. Through these institutions, resources got concentrated and the unequal relationships between landlords and cultivors were developed.

The system of landlordism was commonly referred to as coercive production. Peasants often farmed land owned by landlords or other landholders, but not necessarily as owners. The ability of local tenants to continue farming land thus depended on customary understandings, local power relations and the terms of landlords. Landless farmers were economically secure because they owned agriculture equipment. Agriculture production was profitable. The vulnerability of farmers is aggravated by their indebtedness, especially on account of crop failure and scanty rainfall.

The social organization of rural Telangana reflected the relationship between caste and landownership. Typically, those in ownership or control of land entities tend to exhibit higher economic and political influence than other social groups. Thus, Dalits and similar other backward and disadvantaged social categories were disproportionately represented in the landless labourer category and other economically vulnerable occupational categories. Caste-oriented discrimination limited availability of land, credit and education. As a result, agrarian inequality cannot merely be understood in economic class terms; caste and social status were

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equally important in determining access to resources and opportunities (Beteille, 1974; Dube, 1955).

Vetti or compulsory and unpaid labour has been one of the most exploitative features of the rural economy. As a result of this practice, the landlords, village officials, and powerful persons claiming the labour of low-income individuals and families, did not pay adequate wages. The duties may apply to farming operations, transport activities, household work and other tasks. The dependency of labouring communities was reinforced with Vetti and the economic and social freedom was directly denied.

The agricultural system had a close linkage between tenancy, indebtedness and social dependence. Farmers without adequate financial means frequently borrowed from their landlords and moneylenders. Not being able to pay back loans in several instances increased their economic dependence and weakened their bargaining power. Generational economic exploitation sustained in areas where these relationships were formed.

Emergence of the social and cultural organisations in the 1920s and 30s helped develop agrarian consciousness which we see today. From 1917 to 1936 the Andhra Jana Sangham and later the Andhra Mahasabha provided a common platform for discussion on educational opportunities, the Telugu language, administrative and rural grievances. At first, they focused on cultural and educational issues. Over time, though, their focus widened to agrarian problems like exorbitant rents, forced labour and the insecure position of cultivators.

The Andhra Mahasabha played a key role in linking rural grievances with organised politics. Members of the Communist Party participated in its activities and began to support peasant-based associations. These organizations provided cultivators with opportunities to discuss their problems together, resist illegal exactions, and demand improvements in land relations.

The shaping of peasants' consciousness took place in historical conditions of rural exploitation. The social environment generating agrarian resistance was marked by land concentration, insecure tenancy, inequality based on caste, and forced labour. The agrarian structure of the region during this time was not only a land revenue administration system but also a structural

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social authority which governed the day-to-day lives and livelihood opportunities in rural areas of Telangana.

3. Peasant Movements, Telangana Armed Struggle and Political Transformation (1946–1956)

The Telangana peasant armed struggle that began in 1946 posed a considerable challenge to the agrarian and political structure. The phenomenon's inception can be traced to landlord domination, exploitative tenancy, forced labour, indebtedness, and the limited opportunities available to poor cultivators. The movement initially arose out of local resistance, but later the political claim-making of the peasants, agricultural labourers and organised political activists.The confrontation at Kadavendi in 1946 due to the activities of the landlord's agents and local peasant resistance became an important catalyst in the growth of the movement. The agitation later spread to a number of neighbouring districts like Nalgonda, Warangal and Karimnagar. The Communist Party of India played a key role in mobilising peasants through a network of village-level sanghams and political contacts.

The movement's main demands were an end to forced labour, protection from arbitrary eviction, reduction of exorbitant rents and refusal to obey oppressive landlord demands. Peasants organised collectively to resist oppression and assert their rights over cultivated land. Different villages developed alternative arrangements for decision-making and the distribution of resources. The struggle between peasant organisations, landlord forces and state became increasingly armed in character over time.

Another important aspect of the struggle was the involvement of women. The women participated in communication, mobilisation, organisational activities and resistance. The act of engaging with the state challenged not only landlord hegemony but also created gender relations within peasant society. As a result, the movement developed a larger social significance than the agricultural land question.

The Telangana struggle's historical significance lies in its bid to challenge the agrarian establishment. It sought to delegitimize the oppressive practices of landlords, and create greater awareness of land rights and social justice. Dhanagare (1974) states that the movement emerged

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from specific agrarian and class conditions whereas Sundarayya (2006) elaborates on the organisational development and political experiences.

The incorporation of Hyderabad State into the Indian Union/Indian Dominions in September 1948 was a monumental event. The Indian military action, called Operation Polo or the Police Action, put an end to Nizam's independent political authority and brought Hyderabad under Indian control. Nevertheless, the peasant struggle did not come to an end since agrarian struggles and political situations continued after integration. The Communist leadership called off the armed struggle in October 1951. The struggle led to considerable change in political consciousness and intensified demands for reform in the relations of land. It affected agrarian reforms that followed thereafter. Nonetheless, it is essential to separate the political implications of the movement and the laws that were introduced post-integration. The pressure of the peasant resistance generated the need for change, and actual restructuring needed separate administrative and legal action.

The discontinuance of jagirdari was one of the earliest important institutional reforms. The Hyderabad (Abolition of Jagirs) Regulation, 1949, provided for the resumption of jagirs with effect from 15 August 1949. Through this measure, the power of intermediary revenue holders was curtailed and former jagir territories were brought under a greater administrative umbrella. But, the abolition of jagirdari did not automatically realize the comprehensive redistribution of land to landless cultivators.

In 1949, the Committee on Hyderabad Agrarian Reforms was appointed to study the agrarian structure in Hyderabad to make… Its suggestions played an influential role in the Hyderabad Tenancy and Agricultural Lands Act of 1950. It specified protected tenancy, rent regulation and restrictions on certain land transfers, among other things. It aimed to empower farmers and ensure them a more secure tenure.

The Hyderabad Abolition of Inams Act, 1954, enacted subsequent to this, made further changes in the landholding institutional structure. Inam lands, which had historically been associated with various types of grants, were included within a new framework of land administration. These

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laws helped to lessen the intermediary tenure arrangements gradually, although they were not always implemented.

Accordingly, the period between 1948 and 1956 was thus a transition from traditional agrarian institutions to a regulated system of land administration. A significant success was the elimination of the rights of intermediaries and the introduction of tenancy protections. Earthly changes were however incomplete, for there were continued unequal distribution of land, disputes over ownership and difficulties in enforcing legal protections.

The merger of Telangana with Andhra State to form Andhra Pradesh was yet another significant political and administrative change that came into effect on 1 November 1956. The merger might have been on the basis of linguistic reorganisation, but Telangana had a different historical experience and agrarian structure. The variations between the two areas continued to matter for arguments about farming growth, watering, area funding and official representation.

Between 1946 and 1956, peasant resistance, political integration and legislation converged, making the decade distinctive. These developments changed the institutional system in rural Telangana but did not eliminate the existing social and economic inequalities of the old agrarian system immediately.

4. Rural Transformation, Agrarian Reforms and Conclusion (1956–1970)

The agriculture-based economy and rural society of Telangana underwent further changes during 1956-1970. The creation of Andhra Pradesh gave a unified administrative framework for the Telugu-speaking regions which has opened new arenas for regional planning, agricultural investments and institutional building. Yet, the historical differences in land tenure, irrigation infrastructure and agricultural conditions did affect the shaping of Telangana.

The production of agricultural commodities in Telangana during this period continued to be predominantly influenced by rainfall, traditional tanks, and wells and agricultural credit. Tank irrigation system was traditionally important for sustaining cultivation especially in regions of uncertain rainfall. For this reason, the repair and production of tanks were crucial for agriculture.

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The state of the traditional irrigation infrastructure and varying water availability impacted agricultural productivity of districts differently.

A farmer's economic resource invariably determined the pattern and distribution of irrigation facilities. Larger farmers are generally better able to afford wells, farm equipment and improved cultivation techniques, whereas small farmers and tenants have less cash to invest. As a result, all rural households did not benefit from agricultural modernisation.

In the post-independence era regulations were promulgated concerning agricultural holdings. The Andhra Pradesh Ceiling on Agricultural Holdings Act, 1961 had been an important legislation for deconcentration of agricultural land holding. Implementing land ceiling regulations was tough due to the land records and ownership disputes, exemptions and administrative capability.

Earlier tenancy reforms had mixed results as well. The provisions of protected tenancy improved the legal status of various cultivators. However, the actual exercise of these rights depended on local power relations and availability of reliable land records. The effectiveness of legislative safeguards was limited in lots of cases by landlord resistance and informal arrangements. So long as the right of intermediaries to receive revenue is not abolished, landlord power will not be completely extinguished.

Changes in agricultural labour relations also transformed rural society. The significant developments included the decline of traditional forced labour practices and the growth of regulated employment relationships. However, low agricultural wages, dependency on seasonal employment and landlessness continued to affect weaker communities.

Caste and landownership stayed an influential relationship. Despite legislative changes in land administration, social inequalities continued to shape access to agricultural resources, credit and public institutions. The experiences of Dalits, agricultural labourers, small cultivators and marginal farmers were therefore different from those of established landholding groups.

The period also saw the general expansion of the administrative and developmental institutions dealing with agriculture. The focus of public policy has increasingly shifted towards agricultural

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extension, cooperative credit, rural infrastructure, and development programmes. However, their impact relies on institutional capacity, financial means and the degree of motivation of the local authorities to implement measures.

It is important to note the difference between the abolition of traditional agrarian institutions and equitable rural development in history. The legal basis of agricultural relations was affected by the elimination of jagirdari, regulation of tenancy and introduction of Land Ceiling Laws. The reforms did not automatically resolve rural poverty, unequal landownership or the vulnerability of agricultural labourers.

The history of Telangana from 1900 to 1970 has five important findings. Initially there was a unique agrarian structure under Nizam in the form of jagirdari, inam and Diwani in the region. Secondly, control over land, as caste hierarchy, social authority and political power. Forced labour, exploitative tenancy and indebtedness led to organised agrarian consciousness. The period 1946-51 Telangana armed struggle challenged and sought to destroy the traditional power of landlords. Fifth, the legislation and administrative restructuring after independence ushered in a major transformation, but unequal access to land and agricultural resources remained an important feature of rural society.

The research shows agrarian transformation in Telangana was not merely the by product of legislative action. Peasant cooperation, political change, social resistance and institutional reform facilitated the emerged of the process. According to Joseph a peasant movement which questions the existing rural authority enacted land legislation which affixed and regulated farming. The establishment of Andhra Pradesh in 1956 altered the administrative and developmental atmosphere in which the Telangana rural economy functioned.

To sum up, 1900 to 1970 was a significant phase in the agrarian history of the region of Telangana. The area transitioned from a conventional agrarian framework marked by tenant revenue rights, landlord control, and uneven tenancy to a more regulated framework of land management. Nevertheless, change was not complete as the abolition of feudal institutions did not automatically mean no unequal land distribution, no caste-based discrimination or no rural poverty. Over the years, it has been proved that just making change in land laws is not enough to

make agrarian reforms a success. Equal access of productive resources must be ensured coupled with institutional accountability. Additionally, disadvantaged rural communities must also be provided with opportunities. Telangana's agrarian history has a great contribution in understanding the relationship between land, social justice, peasant resistance and rural development in contemporary India.

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