
Communism and the Telengana Movement of 1946

Emily D. Moreno

Emily Moreno is a graduate student from Grayslake, IL. Her focus is World History, mainly the Middle East and Asia.

Human rights are an integral part of human society. They allow people the freedom to make choices, and they protect individuals from coercion by the state or a host of other threats. There are many places on earth, past and present that have created, agreed to, and formulated different conceptions of human rights. Through much of the twentieth century, India's strict caste system violated all notions of human rights. The lowest caste, *Dalits*, more commonly known as "untouchables," were subject to disproportionate human rights violations. As journalist Julie McCarthy explained:

For millennia, caste has been the organizing principle of society in India. Determined by birth, caste draws distinctions between communities, determining one's profession, level of education and potential marriage partner. Privileges are reserved for the upper castes and denied the lower ones. The lowliest in this pecking order are the Dalits, once called 'untouchables' as they are consigned by the Hindu hierarchy to the dirtiest occupations. It's a sizable community of some 200 million people. The word Dalit comes from a Hindi word meaning 'oppressed, suppressed, downtrodden.'¹

Those labeled "untouchable" saw their basic human rights violated through the caste system. The *Dalit* class had no way to move up in Indian society and culture. During the last years of the British occupation in India, after World War II, resistance movements spread, and Indians demanded independence. Many joined the charge for Indian independence, none more famous than Gandhi, and none more notorious, in western and capitalist eyes, than the Communist Party. The main communist goal was to unite India and create a Marxist state that would benefit all people. While many places in the world condemn communism for its excesses, there were times that communism benefited the people of India. The rise of the Telengana Movement of 1946 was one such time. The underlining goal was to help the people of Telengana rebel against the Nizam regime and establish basic human rights for all. The main actors and benefactors of the rebellion were the peasants of Telengana. Without the help of the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the communist ideals of granting and protecting fundamental human rights, the Telengana Movement of 1946 would have never transpired or succeeded.

The Telengana Movement of 1946 was one of India's most historic and important developments. It helped the world understand the treatment of India's rural peasantry and the injustices of the caste system. While many scholars agree that the Telengana Movement was important, there remains disagreement on when the movement started, whether communist involvement was necessary and how successful the movement of 1946 really was for the Indian people. Historians Barry Pavier and I. Thirumali both agree and disagree when it comes to the

¹ Julie McCarthy, "The Caste Formerly Known as 'Untouchables' Demands a New Role in India," last modified April 16, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2016/08/13/489883492/the-caste-formerly-known-as-untouchables-demands-a-new-role-in-india>.

Telengana Rebellion. For one thing, both believe the movement started much earlier than 1946. Thirumali theorizes that the movement may have started in 1938 and ended in 1948, a ten-year life span instead of the original six years that most historians contend. In Thirumali's article, "The Political Pragmatism of the Communists in Telengana, 1938-1948," he argues the movement began with the arrival of communism in India and that it was both a success and a failure. Its success came through its ousting of the Nizam regime and the creation of the Andhra Maha Sabha (AMS), a people's organization. However, to Thirumali, the movement was also a failure due to the party's semi-abandonment of the labor castes. As Thirumali explains:

The Party moved primarily according to the pressures and evolved and was shaped by the understanding and perspectives of the dominant participants i.e., rich peasant castes. The Communists did not pay attention to the underlying caste solidarities in a tradition-bound and caste-ridden Telengana society which caused dissensions in the movement, particularly during the Indian Union's military action. The labor caste groups resented and disassociated themselves from the party, dominated by the upper caste peasants and either became inactive, or organized themselves separately.²

Pavier, on the other hand, believes the movement started in 1944, when tensions were extremely high, and the Nizam regime attempted to forcefully maintain an autocratic state. Pavier's book, *The Telengana Movement, 1944-51*, brands the movement an outright failure due to the Communist Party's inflexible politics, which remained unchanged from the 1930s into the 1950s. With such differing viewpoints, many historians find it difficult to assess the movement. While Pavier and Thirumali believe that the Telengana Movement started much earlier than 1946, the scholarly consensus on the topic is that it started on July 4, 1946, when Visnuru Ramachandra Reddy, a hated landlord of the Jangaon district, was stopped from taking land from a peasant woman. In response, he hired a group of thugs to attack those who dared try to interfere, thus sparking violence and a rebellion.³

Telengana is nestled in the princely state of Hyderabad, a southern state within India, ruled over by the autocratic Nizam. Telengana was an agricultural region, home to many peasants. The state of Hyderabad was created in 1724 and ruled over by the Muslim Asaf Jah family on orders of the British, who oversaw the Hindu-majority state. During the Telengana rebellion that lasted from 1946 to 1951, the Nizam ruler at the time was Asaf Jah VII, who also happened to be the last of the Asaf Jah to rule Hyderabad before it was brought fully into India.⁴ "The politics of the state were built on a combination of this economy, autocracy, and religious communalism. The Hyderabad state, was an agglomeration of territories carved out by Asaf Jah, Mughal subedar of the Deccan, from the collapsing [Indian] empire," wrote Pavier.⁵ With this odd makeup, the descendants of Asaf Jah were able to rule successfully over Hyderabad, even with Britain invading and colonizing India.

Under Nizam family rule of Hyderabad, the caste system, languages, and laws were slightly different from those of the majority of India under British occupation. One example of the differences between India and the state of Hyderabad was its relation to land wealth and the caste system. Unlike other places in India, the caste system of Hyderabad was organized around agriculture, labor, and how much land a person owned. This applied to the higher caste system

² I. Thirumali, "The Political Pragmatism of the Communists in Telengana, 1938-1948," *Social Scientist*, 24, no. 4/6 (April-June, 1996):164-183, 179-180.

³ Akhil Gupta, "Revolution in Telengana 1946-1951 (Part One)," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, last modified March 30, 2018, <https://read.dukeupress.edu/cssaame/article/4/1/1/538>.

⁴ Gupta, "Revolution in Telengana," 26.

⁵ Barry Pavier, *The Telengana Movement 1944-51* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1981), 64.

which centered on land ownership more than it did on *Brahmans* (priests that are the highest caste in Hindu culture). Under the landlords was a peasant class. According to A. Satyanarayana, “An examination of the hierarchy of caste system and occupational structure indicates that some castes were obliged to work as cultivators and agriculture became their main occupation, hence they were known as peasant caste, they accounted for about 28 percent of the total population in Telengana in 1931.”⁶ The peasantry formed under a harsher and rigorous system that stifled any chance of improving one’s standings. Peasants were forced into labor and were heavily taxed to subsidize the higher classes.

Many peasants were ruled over by landlords called *Deshmukhs*. “Their origin lay in the administrative reforms of Salar Jung I, prime minister of the Hyderabad State in the 1860s and 1870s. The reforms included the state assuming the direct collection of land revenue in the government administered areas,” according to Pavier.⁷ Before the *Deshmukhs* reforms, in order to pay for taxes, land was auctioned off which allowed farmers a chance to accumulate as much land as they possibly could in order to boost their status. This created the formation of both the *Deshmukhs* and the *Vetti* (forced labor), mainly peasants from the rural areas of Telengana, who were forced into labor by the landlords seeking workers to maintain the lands they owned. Because of the success of the *Deshmukhs*, who effectively combined land-lording with moneylending, the group had “a deciding influence on the policy of the Communist Party of India during the struggles of the 1940s.”⁸

To further complicate matters, there were five subclasses of peasantry in Telengana during the Nizam rule: rich, middle, poor, and the *Bhagela* (similar to the “Untouchable” caste), and the *Vetti*. The wealthy Telengana peasantry were,

“distinguished from a landlord by the use of family labor in cultivation. The rich peasant farm requires the use of paid laborers. It has more land than can be worked by the family unit, and produces a surplus above the level needed to maintain the family. In the case of Telengana the rich peasants used this surplus, mainly rice and grain-lending. This was the route by which a rich peasant family could grow into a landlord family if they were allowed to. The rich peasant complaint was that they were as much subject to illegal exactions and the depredations of landlord-controlled officials as anyone else.”⁹

The middle-class peasantry was similar to the richer peasantry class with some slight differences. For one, the middle-class peasant family had enough land to satisfy their needs, money and status wise, but they also could become part of the labor force. They were more prone to having larger families, and some lived a “hand-to-mouth” existence. If a disaster hit or some type of economic or societal issue came up, they could turn to the rich peasantry or landlords for loans.

The poor peasantry and the *Bhagela* were worse off. They had little to no land, and their fate most often was forced labor. A landless class, the *Bhagela*, were looked on as a part of the “untouchables.” They usually worked for the *Deshmukhs*, with barely any rights or pay. Considered inferior in both mind and status, the *Bhagela* were barely paid, if they were paid at all. The *Vetti*, unlike the *Bhagela*, basically served as slaves.

⁶ A. Satyanarayana, “The Quartet of Thugs; Caste and Power in Rural Telengana,” in *Statehood for Telengana: Essays on Telengana Agitation, History, Culture, and Society*, ed. KY Reddy (Hyderabad: Deccan-Telengana, 2010), 30.

⁷ Pavier, *The Telengana Movement*, 3.

⁸ Pavier, *The Telengana Movement*, 4.

⁹ Pavier, *The Telengana Movement*, 13.

“*Vetti* (sometime called free compulsory labor), was rather different in that it was raised generally from all the rest of the villagers who were not sufficiently wealthy to resist the *Deshmukhs* demands. Often there were a number of *Madiga* (an untouchable caste) families in the village who were hereditarily attached to the *Deshmukhs* and performed a number of duties, but these were not the same as the general levy. *Vetti* was demanded without notice or payment, and consequently there was no limit to the amount of labor that might be extracted.”¹⁰

The treatment of peasants and the peasant caste system of Telengana became one of the many catalysts that resulted in communist involvement and creation of the Telengana Movement of 1946. The deplorable state of the peasantry in Telengana forced people to think in terms of human rights and humanitarianism. Such thoughts led many to communism. This allowed the Communist Party of India to infiltrate the rural areas of Telengana and gain the support of the peasantry.

Articulated by Karl Marx in works such as *The Communist Manifesto*, the ideals of the communist movement spread across the globe in the early twentieth century, creating revolutions and new forms of government in pursuit of an equality that neither benefitted the rich nor belittled the poor. The earliest communist groups in India emerged during the 1930s in the Warangal district before they spread out across India. In the late 1930s, connections were forged between different communist groups. In 1941, the Telengana Regional Committee of the Communist Party of India formed, led by a man named Peravelli Venkataramaiah. Then the first Warangal District Committee came into existence in 1942.

When news of the treatment of peasants in Telengana reached the CPI, party officials saw the potential for a rebellion which could prove the party’s strength, help it forge alliances, and possibly gain an entry point into the Indian government. “The communist organizations were formed among the educated elite of the rural rich in Telengana and the urban middle class of Hyderabad city. They transformed the landlords’ Andhra Mahasabha (AMS) into a people’s organization with pragmatism, ideological commitment and a sense of sacrifice,” wrote Thirumail.¹¹

Revolts and rebellions, in fact, had already started in Telengana long before the CPI ever showed up in the rural area. Many peasants felt anger and resentment towards the Nizam rule and attempted, like the rest of India, to gain their independence from the dynasty. Before the Communist Party of India came to the rescue, the Nizam of Hyderabad seemingly had nothing to worry about. Earlier revolts had been shut down, allowing the Nizam to continue to rule over Hyderabad with the support and help of the British and his Muslim supporters. This made it hard for India to unite. It was not until the CPI stepped in to create a successful revolt that the Nizam began to worry. In order to maintain his rule, the Nizam needed to turn to people from similar origins, namely the Muslim population residing in Hyderabad. “Economically tied to the dynasty and regime, it was no hard task to organize urban Muslims from the petit-bourgeoisie to fight for the regime—especially if the only alternative appeared to be unemployment and impoverishment,” wrote Pavier.¹²

The Nizam had every reason to fear the Communist Party of India, for the CPI helped the Telengana peasants to organize and coordinate their demands for freedom, justice, and basic human rights. Once the Communist Party had made its way into Telengana, it “formulated the demands of the people, transformed the class issues into political issues in an attempt to bring about unity

¹⁰Pavier, *The Telengana Movement*, 8-9.

¹¹ I. Thirumail, “The Political Pragmatism of the Communists in Telengana, 1938-48,” *Social Scientist*, 24, no. 4/6 (April-June, 1996): 164-183, 164.

¹² Pavier, *The Telengana Movement*, 64.

among the anti-feudal classes to overthrow the landlord/Nizam regime.”¹³ The Nizam, fearing the growing mobilization of the peasants of Telengana, and their communist backers, began taking extreme precautions in an attempt to quell the movement before it could get out of hand.¹⁴ Having already sent his police, the Nazim then called upon the armed guard, granted to him by the British Empire, to subdue the communists and their followers. According to the “Policy in India: Memorandum by the Secretary of State for India,” under the third clause of paramountcy: “In certain treaties, notably that with Hyderabad, there are particular provisions for the maintenance of a protective force by the British Government for these purposes.” The Nazim thus had access to British forces. “The Treaty with Hyderabad provides that this force shall consist of not less than 5,000 Infantry and 2,000 Cavalry with 4 field battalions of Artillery.”¹⁵ The CPI decided to split its focus into two groups, the urban middle class in the cities of Hyderabad and the rich rural peasantry in Telengana. Spreading the word through newspapers, pamphlets, poems, and songs, the communists projected their message to the peasants of Telengana, calling on them to rise up and demand equal rights. While the Communist Party used both rural and urban societies in their quest to create a movement, their main focus was on the rural peasantry of Telengana, among whom there was much anger and desire for change.

The Communist Party of India’s focus on the peasantry of Telengana proved a smart move. On the one hand, rural peasants were put in a tougher predicament than the urban middle caste workers. While the urban middle class did have troubles, the peasant caste had, especially with forced slavery, worse problems due to India’s social structure.

Early on, however, as communism began to spread in Telengana, many of the peasants were weary of the CPI and what it stood for. In 1940, the communist movement had set up shop all over Telengana with the creation of the AMS (Andhra Maha Sabha), which was the third branch of the Communist Party. This organization became focused primarily on the plight of the peasants of Telengana and what should be done to help them. They were a voice for the voiceless, and the AMS helped gain support from the hesitant peasant caste community in Telengana and Hyderabad. The AMS stood not only for the much needed promotion of basic human rights in India, but they also stood for an end to imperialism, support for a socialist government, and for the destruction of the class and caste separation. With the creation and help of the AMS, which allowed many of the rural peasants a safe space to discuss their grievances with the caste system and the Nizam’s rule, the CPI was able to unify the rural peoples of Telengana under the flag of communism. “The very method of their [communists] work in the villages improved the consciousness of the people through people’s united strength. Between 1941 and 1943, they established a strong bond, perturbing the landlords and the government equally,” explained the Secretary to India.¹⁶

During 1945, the Communist Party of India created a plan to help the peasant caste in Telengana. The strategy featured four main points that coincided with the communist agenda. The first of the four points was to ban Vetti extraction and slave labor. The second point was to dismantle the collection of taxes and fines, allowing everyone a chance at financial stability. The third point emphasized the return of land held by landlords acquired through illegal means, and the fourth strengthened Patta rights and the oversight of the landlords to prevent illegal taking of land. “The agitations and self-assertions of the *Vetti* workers, small peasants, and the cultivators of *jagir* (special tenurs) lands made the communists attempt a broad unity of the oppressed and the

¹³ Thirumail, “The Political Pragmatism,” 164-183, 164.

¹⁴ Thirumail, “The Political Pragmatism,” 167.

¹⁵ Cabinet: India and Burma Committee, Paper I.B, “(46)50, Policy in India Memorandum by the Secretary of State for India, December, 18, 1947, in *The Transfer of Power: 1942-1947* vol. 9, ed. Nicholas Mansergh, et. al. (H.M.S.O, 1980), 371-377.

¹⁶ Cabinet: India and Burma Committee, Paper I.B. (46)50, Policy in India Memorandum by the Secretary of State for India,” 171.

exploited,” according to a memoranda written by the secretary of state of India.¹⁷ At first glance, relations between the Communist Party of India and the AMS seemed stronger than ever, though in fact, cracks began to form throughout the party.

Before 1946, the Communist Party of India and the AMS had begun to feel pressure from both the Indian government and the people they were trying to protect and help. As the Communist Party of India gained support and power in the Telengana area, many government officials, like the Nizam, began to fear the power the Communist Party exuded. Around this time, many people in the Indian government came together in an attempt to create an Indian Constitution and independent country—with the aim of driving out the British. In a letter to Lord Pethick-Lawrence, Sir W. Croft fretted about the British leaving India and plotted to preserve what little Britain still had. He hoped Britain would resist leaving without implementing rules that would continue to favor Britain even after independence.¹⁸ It was also around this time when the AMS began to adopt nationalistic views, much different from the views of the Communist Party. AMS also began to plot against the Communist Party, attempting to ban communists from Congress and weakening its hold over Telengana. Through the use of newspapers and pamphlets, the AMS began a propaganda campaign of vilification against the Communist Party. The aim was to take control over the Telengana region. But why had the AMS, a group created by the communists to help give the people of Telengana a voice, betray its communist patrons? The answer can be found among the *Deshmukhs*. Many landlords loyal to the Nizam and fearful of growing communist power, began infiltrating the AMS. Some won elections to lead the AMS, and from there, gained the upper hand in a growing power struggle between the nationalists and the communists. When Konda Venkata Ranga Reddy was elected to a seat as part of the AMS council, there were mixed feelings. As contemporary British observers noted, Reddy’s stance was very nationalistic in every sense of the word.

“He [Reddy] attempted to divert the debate to more abstract issues, advocating ‘good will towards all classes’ and ‘all around progress of the Andhraites, be they zamindars or peasants, capitalists or laborers’ in a bid to present the AMS as the organization of all classes. Consequently, he could not convince the fighting rural poor how the ‘progress’ of the tenants and Vetti workers could be achieved along with the ‘progress’ of the landlords. Further, he did not even maintain political or class neutrality. Instead, he took a stand against the Communist AMS workers immediately after his election.”¹⁹

While there were still people in the AMS loyal to the communist cause, Reddy saw them as a threat and moved to eliminate them and communism altogether from Telengana. The Indian government and the Nizam dynasty also feared the Communist Party, which was gaining support in rural areas. Meanwhile, the Indian government was debating a new constitution and how to deal with the British Empire. During the time of the AMS split and growing in-house fighting with the Communist Party, the Indian government sought to move ahead. A memorandum was created by the Secretary of State for India, dealing with both the Cripps Offer of 1942 and the creation of the Muslim League. The document also focused on the Nizam of Hyderabad and his refusal to assimilate Hyderabad into India to create a whole country.²⁰ At first, the Communist Party was willing to humor the right-leaning AMS, for it still had some support on the left, mostly the laborers

¹⁷ Cabinet: India and Burma Committee, Paper I.B. (46)50, Policy in India Memorandum by the Secretary of State for India,” 177.

¹⁸ Sir W. Croft to Lord Fredrick Pethick-Lawrence, January, 7, 1947, in *The Transfer of Power: 1942-1947*, vol. 9, 478-480.

¹⁹ Sir W. Croft to Lord Fredrick Pethick-Lawrence, January, 7, 1947, in *The Transfer of Power: 1942-1947*, vol. 9, 478-480.

²⁰ Note of an Interview between Cabinet Mission, Field Marshal Viscount Archibald Wavell, and the Nawab of Bhopal, April, 2, 1947, in *The Transfer of Power: 1942-1947*, vol. 7, ed. Nicholas Mansergh, et. al. (London: H.M.S.O, 1980), 83-87.

and peasants whom the right blatantly ignored. For a short time, the party backed away from openly challenging the Nizam to prevent an outright panic, while still focusing on its goal for independence and human rights for the rural peasantry of Telengana. It was not until 1944 when things began to change for the Communist Party.

By this time, the Communist Party of India had integrated itself into the lives of the rural peasantry of Telengana for almost a decade and had won over many of the peasants. It was not until 1944, when the CPI and supposed nationalists split, that the communists were able to showcase the power they had over the Telengana community, sparking fear and awe from both the Indian government and the nationalist party. Angered by the fact that most of the people of Telengana sympathized with the Communist Party, the nationalists decided to take control of the AMS in order to thwart the work of the CPI. Nationalists believed that if they took control of the AMS, they would be able to control Telengana.

Unfortunately for the AMS, the charisma, the work, and the time communists put into its efforts to help the people of Telengana gained them the sympathy and support of the people and allowed them to continue to rise in power. Even when nationalists attempted to stop CPI meetings with the threat of force, the communists persevered, with the support and backing of the rural peasantry and laborers. At that point, the Communist Party of India believed it had subdued the Nationalist Party. Now the communists were free to pursue their original plans of disbanding the Nizam regime and taking a place in Congress to promote their communist agenda. The Nizam regime, the Nationalist Party, and the Indian government increasingly feared the Communist Party, and they did everything in its power to deter them from gaining even more power. When a few rebel leaders were attacked by an angry landlord, who was denied the chance to obtain land from a poor peasant woman in the summer of 1946, the communists used this as a catalyst to move forward with their rebellion against the Nizam rule. Combining peaceful protests, the communist teachings of Lenin, and the use of guerrilla warfare towards the Nizam's police and army, the Communist Party successfully created a revolution that would turn the tides for the peasantry and for communism as a whole.

The Communist Party of India was the driving force in creating the Telengana Movement of 1946. Members integrated themselves into the Telengana community with the promise of creating better lives for the rural peasantry overall. Thus began the Telengana Movement that lasted from July of 1946 to 1951. The Indian government, the nationalists, the Nizam regime, and the British government, all came to understand the strength of the Communist Party of India. In 1947, the British government knew the Nizam and Hyderabad were lost causes. In a letter to Lord Pethick-Lawrence, the viscount explained that since the British Empire was finally leaving India, the British believed the Nizam would be fine on his own, though they knew it was a lost cause.²¹ The movement's limited success offers an inside look at the treatment and grievances of the rural peasant class in Telengana. Playing on societal and class conflicts in Indian society, the CPI made major advances in Telengana. The main cause for the rebellion was the Communist Party's ability to gain the trust of the local population with the promise of a future grounded on human rights.

²¹ Field Marshal Viscount Archibald Wavell to Fredrick Lord Pethick-Lawrence, February, 26, 1947, in *The Transfer of Power: 1942-1947*, vol. 9, 816-817.