

Vol. XI
Number - 4

ISSN No.2320-7019
January, 2022

EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION

A Multidisciplinary International
Peer Reviewed/Refereed Journal

APH PUBLISHING CORPORATION

Role of the Women in the Telangana Armed Struggle

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From popular imagination to legal discourse, women's bodies are characterized as *victims of violence* more often than perpetrators. There is a good reason why this narrative exists; it informs the protection of women and children in warfare, internalizes understandings of gender power dynamics, and to some extent, enables survivor-centric sexual assault policies. It is, however, not entirely intersectional as it obscures the agency of women engaging in violence.

In revisiting mid-twentieth century Telangana, a poignant challenge to this narrative comes out in the militant women of the Telangana Armed Struggle. By pushing against what has been termed as a "formula for erasure and banalisation," understanding women's agencies in militancy and violence is central to amplifying the voices of caste and class oppressed peoples.

The Telangana Armed Struggle was an anti-feudal and anti-caste movement against the Nizam of Hyderabad's oppressive regime, and later that of Independent India. In many ways, it was inherently feminist—with numerous women leaders advocating for socio-political reform not limited to caste justice, labour protection and women's freedom. The armed movement lasted from 1946 to 1951 and was one of the first major labour uprisings following India's Independence in 1947.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In the princely state of Hyderabad, people belonged to three broad linguistic identities—Telugu, Kannada and Marathi. The Telugu-speaking Telangana region constituted over 50% of the state (including the capital, Hyderabad). With the Nizam, Mir Sir Osman Ali, and Muslim elites at the top of the state's exploitative hierarchy, caste-Hindu Zamindars (landlords) and money-lenders physically and sexually exploited agricultural labourers, perpetuated Vetti (bondage), charged exorbitant interest on cash and grain loans, and forcibly evicted small-landowners. Lower-caste and Dalit-Bahujan women formed a large section of the six-million strong agricultural labour force and were slated to not benefit from India's Independence.

Since 1938, the Hyderabad state witnessed a marked growth in dissent, particularly among students and youth, against the Nizam as well as British colonialism. The Communist Party of India (CPI) was significantly involved in propagating a specific type of anti-imperial nationalism that overthrew tyrannical social institutions perpetuating labour abuse.

To aid the decolonisation and revolutionary process, local functionaries of the CPI such as the Andhra Maha Sabha (AMS) were established to enable village mobilization through Sanghams (local committees) against the *zamindars* and Razakars (Paramilitary militia of the Nizam). By the 1940s, Sanghams proliferated much of present-day Andhra Pradesh and Telangana and became centres of village political organization against the landlords. Often, village 'republics' taken over by Sanghams would redistribute land to the peasantry, much to the chagrin of the wealthy landowners and Razakars.

The Telangana Peoples' Struggle (also known as the Telangana Peasants' Struggle or the Telangana Armed Struggle) was an anti-feudal and anti-caste movement against the Nizam of

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