

A Study on Promises and Prospects for Tribal People in a New Telangana State

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Abstract

This article examines the goals and concerns of the Scheduled Tribe people of Telangana, who believe that they have been denied their rights and entitlements since the Nizam era and have been consistently ignored. The "democratically elected governments" that are now in power, which are controlled by the upper castes and landowners, have continued to abuse certain groups. Is it possible to put a halt to the pillaging of the indigenous people? Is it possible that the establishment of a separate state for Telangana would result in the development of a set of plans that will guarantee social justice for them? Will it result in a more positive interaction between people of tribal and non-tribal backgrounds? This paper is an effort to provide answers to these issues in a manner that is both rational and reasonable.

Keywords: Democracy, Scheduled Tribes, Landlords, Telangana region, Upper castes.

Introduction

"Tribes makes our lives better, and leading a tribe is the best life of all".

Seth Godin

There has been political activity toward the creation of a separate state of Telangana for some time. Perceived betrayals and exploitation by both its own and neighboring areas' peoples have contributed to this. Ironically, the leading political groups and parties are mostly run by people from higher castes, who have been known to disregard the rights and demands of the indigenous people who have lived in this region for millennia, in contrast to others who may have arrived at this location only a few decades ago.

The author is addressing the hitherto speechless indigenous people of the area, the genuine local inhabitants and sons of the woods. A monument of the tribal hero Komaram Bheemu is being mooted for the Tank Bund region of Hyderabad, but how many people know about the cause he championed and how it may be realized?

They (the Telangana separatists) are hell-bent on ending the region's tragic history of betrayal, exploitation, and injustice once they achieve their goal of creating a new state for the people living there. Very well! But when the new political regime does emerge, the issue becomes: can it safeguard the fundamental rights and aspirations of the region's indigenous population, both in theory and in practice?

The Andhra Pradesh (AP) government has a history of boasting about the Integrated Tribal Development Agencies (ITDA) and the millions of rupees it has spent on the welfare of the tribal population. The question of how much of the allocated monies has gone toward enhancing the lives of the intended recipients and how much has gone missing is a reasonable one.

There are a lot of young, naive tribal people in this area, and militant groups like the Maoists are always looking for "talent scouts" to take advantage of the tribal people's sense of inferiority. Consequently, we must make every effort to comprehend and resolve the

historical and political factors that have contributed to this unfortunate situation. The three sections of this essay are an effort to put the facts in the right context and help find a fair and cooperative solution to this problem.

Part, one examines how the Nizam state actively facilitated the entry of colonial money, which led to the alienation of land. Part two details the many initiatives taken by the postcolonial state to right historical wrongs and halt the alienation process. In the last section, it is argued that the state has yet to entirely succeed in eradicating land alienation.

Historical Precedents

The indigenous people of a certain tribe have always deferred to their leaders and lived according to their unique system of customary law. Their manner of life was never dictated by outside forces since they were (and still are) peaceful, harmonious people who lived in perfect harmony with nature. Even if natural resources are abundant in tribal regions today, the indigenous people who live there are impoverished and subject to a never-ending cycle of injustice, treachery, and exploitation. With an average family holding of 3.69 acres, the over five lakh tribal households residing in the state's scheduled villages would have been justifiably proud owners of 18,48,209.30 acres of land today.^[1]

It is crucial to thoroughly investigate and analyze the plight of the tribal population living in the tribal regions of Andhra Pradesh, especially in the Telangana region, in light of the current state policy that fails to appropriately address their worries and grievances. To research land policy in tribal communities, it is necessary to understand the causal link between the objectives of capital penetration and the commoditization of land. According to R S Rao's (1982)^[2] analysis, these interests may be categorized into three primary areas: need for raw resources, expansion of market links, and reinforcement of state authority.

During the early 18th century, when the Nizam ruled the Telangana region, the local tribal people were mostly isolated from the outside world.^[3] (Rao and Rao 1982). But in the years 1800–1850, when the British had already established their dominance over the Nizam's Circar provinces, they began to organize land surveys and settlement efforts in Andhra Pradesh.^[4]

Eventually, in the second part of the 18th century, the state of the Nizam began leasing out vast portions of tribal territory to strangers. The Nizam leased out portions of his property to British colonial trade interests to increase his land income; this was particularly true in the forest regions of Telangana, where raw materials were plentiful.^[5] Thus, in 1844, a railway line was built from Hyderabad to Paloncha for mining activities, causing a qualitative and structural shift in the Telangana tribal lands. The Adilabad forest lands were better linked to the outside world after the Chandrapur–Balharshah railway route was opened in 1929. The Gonds and other tribal groups in the Adilabad area faced difficulties with land retention due to the advent of forest conservation efforts in the 1920s and 1930s.^[6] This led to a growing sense of insecurity among the tribal population regarding their permanent patta (landowning) rights. The non-tribal and non-cultivating peasant groups migrated faster due to the extraordinary increase in communication and transportation capabilities. The land became a commodity due to these circumstances, which led to the colonization of resources and properties, a decrease in the ratio of tribal land to ownership, and the alienation of the original farmers.

The lives of the innocent tribal people were devastated when strangers gradually made their way into their territories, ensnaring them in a never-ending cycle of debt. They were compelled to sell their land to non-tribal wealthy peasants, landlords, moneylenders, merchants, and feudal lords under British legislation and the tax system. Ironically, to pay off their debts, many of the indigenous people were relegated to living on the land that had been theirs before.

So, the tribal people's land gradually became owned by non-tribal peasants, who, from the 1950s, were owned by landlords and district accountants known as Deshmukhs and Deshpandes, respectively. Consequently, the "de-peasantisation" of the tribals occurred when civil society emerged, bringing with it laws, courts, and other apparatuses.

Reasons Behind Land Alienation

As part of their methods, the landowning classes oversaw the annual clearing of huge swaths of forestland to make way for farming. This immense denudation of forests was also part of their system. Because of these things, the indigenous people were estranged from the woods. Lessening the likelihood of further legal issues, landlords exercised caution in certain locations. The de-scheduling of certain tribal lands always threatened the very survival of the tribal people, leaving them with no choice but to relocate.^[7]

It was inevitable that the revenue authorities, particularly the Patels (village heads) and the Patwaris (village accountants), would falsify records to benefit the non-tribals during the settlement operations survey. All of the data would point to the non-tribal occupancy and control of the properties before the protection laws were promulgated in 1949. The government of India found that the tribal people had very little land.^[8]

Changing land records was the first and most common way that estates were alienated. "The significant consequence of the unsatisfactory state of land records was that the tribals were never legally recognized as owners of the lands which they cultivated"^[9] according to the National Commission for the Development for Backward Areas. Considering the potential risks associated with inadequate record-keeping, Verrier Elwin^[10] noted that "no proper records of rights had been prepared" in the majority of inaccessible and ex-zamindari regions, which included vast swaths of territory. It has been twenty years since he made this comment, and yet nothing has been done to fix this mistake.

False transfers are the second kind of land alienation that has been documented. The Union Home Ministry Study Team's study from May 1975 revealed that there had been widespread, fraudulent, and unlawful transfers of ownership of tribal territory. It is still reportedly happening, according to the Planning Commission's Working Group on Tribal Development, even though safeguards were put in place to return land to the tribal people. Most of the time, it seems that they are the result of fraudulent transactions.^[11]

Thirdly, land may be alienated via mortgaging or leasing it. Because they lacked other assets, the tribal people had to borrow money from merchants, feudal lords, and wealthy peasants. In exchange, they were always asked to pledge either land or gold. It was quite unusual for the non-tribals to redistribute the properties that many impoverished tribal peasants had leased to them.

In areas without accurate land records, new arrivals also used encroachment as a means of displacing the indigenous people from their homelands. Existing laws required the restoration of all tribal lands that had been sold or mortgaged within a certain year, but many non-tribals were able to get around this by "antedating" the so-called property transactions, which gave them stronger claims to the lands in question.

Another method of evading legal consequences was to forge a marital partnership. After allegedly marrying tribal women, non-tribal males would buy vast tracts of arable land and have them recorded in their names. Because of these marriage partnerships, non-tribals were able to gain political clout and seize the traditionally held positions of local authority. There were several areas of AP where tribal families would fictitiously adopt non-tribals. "The acquisition of lands in the names of non-tribal boys, who become tribal suddenly after the execution of the bogus adoption deeds in the name of a tribal person was another

important method used by the non-tribals to grab tribal lands," writes Dhanam^[12] a tribal administrator.

The Indian Constitution mandates that the government must safeguard scheduled tribespeople from any kind of exploitation and should prioritize their economic and educational needs. The government of Andhra Pradesh passed many rules to safeguard tribal lands in scheduled regions, using the authority granted to it under Paragraph 5(2) of the Fifth Schedule in the Indian Constitution.

The transfer of ownership rights is the last step in the alienation process, which often begins with a land lease or mortgage. The lands were farmed by non-tribals even if the official documents showed that the ownership belonged to tribal members in certain instances. Even though the impoverished tribals had several offspring, the rationale for settling certain claims against them was that they did not have any successors. In addition to the aforementioned legal flaws, lower-ranking revenue officials used other backdoor tactics to transfer the lands to non-tribals.^[13]

Land Transfer Regulations

The Land Transfer Regulation (LTR) has been successfully implemented, reuniting the tribal people with a substantial amount of land. You may find all the information about the restored land under this regulation up to the end of June 1995 in Table 1.

Table 1: The land that was restored by this regulation until June 30, 1995

1	Cases of non-tribal occupation of land in scheduled villages	5,750
2	Extent of land involved (under col no I)	2,455.23 acres
3	Cases in which inquiries were initiated under LTR.	57,150
4	The extent of land involved (under col no 3) acres	24,589.23
5	No of cases disposed of	48,234
6	Extent of land (under col no 5)	2,17,574.24 acres
7	No of cases disposed of in favour of non-tribal	23,702
8	Extent of land (under col no 7)	1,18,486.51 acres
9	No of cases disposed of in favour of tribal	24,532--
10	Extent of land covered (under col no 9)	99,087.73 acres
11	No of cases in which land was restored to tribals	20,233
12	Extent of land covered (under col no 11)	68,520.98 acres
13	No of cases pending disposed	2,100
14	Extent of land covered (under col no13)	7,653.43 acres

“Source: National Seminar on ‘Scheduled Tribes and Social Justice,’ Department of Tribal Welfare, Government of AP, Hyderabad, 29-30 July 1995.”

Table 1 produces noteworthy results. It highlights the disparity between (i) the actual number of cases (and extent of land involved) of non-tribals occupying scheduled village land, (ii) the number of cases (and extent of land involved) that were investigated under the LTR, and (iii) the number of cases that were resolved and the extent of land involved. At 24,532 for tribals and 23,702 for non-tribals, the number of cases decided in favor of each group is about equal. The amount of land at stake, however, is drastically different: 1,18,486.51 acres for the non-tribals and 68,520.98 acres for the tribals. Another irrelevant

point is the extent to which the tribals have truly reclaimed the land that is now formally theirs.

Unauthorized transactions, including the transfer of land in the names of tribal women and farm staff using faux tribal credentials, as well as other forms of land occupancy (such as sharecropping, tenancy, mortgage, and leasing), were common among the non-tribal peasants.

In addition, under the AP Scheduled Areas Land Transfer Regulation, 1959, some non-tribal peasants were able to stay on the land after the competent authority issued the eviction decree because they found enough ways to get around the rules.

Political Movements

Tribal conflicts in Andhra Pradesh have deep roots in the region's history of resistance to "outsiders" attempts to subjugate indigenous peoples and their traditional practices. The local authorities often resorted to using their greater military might to subdue the tribals since they were always seen as a rebellious group. When the indigenous people of a region felt their rights were being infringed upon, they would rise out in rebellion, whether it was against the local Hindu kings or the British colonial government.

In 1940, a tribal chief called Komaram Bheemu led the Gonds of Adilabad in an armed uprising against the Nizam's rule. In the Khammam district, Koyas rose up for the same reason.^[14] The muttadars, who were tasked by the government with enforcing law and order in a cluster of villages, subjected the innocent Koya and Konda Reddi tenants to brutal and dubious means of intimidation.

In the Dhanora reserve forest region, the Gonds have launched a campaign under Bheemu in an effort to save their arable land from foreigners and corrupt Nizam government forest officers. The social structure of tribal landholdings was severely disrupted by the migration of landlords, moneylenders, and businessmen into tribal territories in the 1940s. An educated Gond leader named Bheemu went to a highland hamlet called Babjere to try to resolve the conflict between the local Kolams and Gonds. Armed violence ensued when forest officials were ordered to evacuate the area despite their lack of proper documentation. Even having the permission papers to reside in a neighboring hamlet, Bheemu traveled to Hyderabad and came back. Nonetheless, the arable land remained in the hands of the non-indigenous people.

The Communist Party of India (CPI) led an effort to mobilize the tribal populations of the Telangana regions from 1946 to 1951. Protests arose in response to exploitative tactics, such as the unlawful collecting of dues.

When the tribal people of the plains were being exploited by the village officials and landowners from the plains, the CPI in certain portions of the taluks of Illendu and Khammam spread to the forest regions. They were extorted by forest authorities who would not let them gather firewood or other resources without paying bribes. Organizing and teaching the people was a huge challenge for the party.

Although the struggle against exploitation persisted in Adilabad from 1946 to 1970, no major tribal movement occurred during that time. The confiscation of tribal land was the central issue in the widespread tribal uprisings orchestrated by communist organizations in the Warangal, Khammam, and Karimnagar districts of Andhra Pradesh. In many regions, the communists were able to provide land to the indigenous people. The Gonds were inspired by this movement, even if it did not reach Adilabad.

The communist leaders' influence pushed the tribal movement into an aggressive phase in the late 1970s. Instead of taking a constructive approach, the administration resorted to harsh means to quell the demands, which included the restitution of their land. Thirteen

tribal members lost their lives in the Indravelli event, which occurred as a result of this kind of government.⁵ This was the turning point when the movement became violent.

Post-Independent Situation

Investigating the post-independence situation of the indigenous people is our next priority. The governments of India and the state passed many laws to ensure the safety of these forest dwellers. Nonetheless, their livelihoods and land connections remained unchanged. Landlords maintained control over their properties because of gaps in the Acts. Haimendorf^[15] asserts that non-tribal individuals, hailing from coastal districts' delta regions, indoctrinated the tribal people into alcoholism and plotted to seize their territory. Legislation enacted with the intention of benefiting indigenous communities was ultimately ineffective. Social scientists and federal and state governments alike must ask, in light of this hard truth, if the reservations and laws passed to protect indigenous people are having the desired effect. The effectiveness of the welfare and development programs for the indigenous communities may be seen in these little towns. Tribal females are being sold like commodities, and the tribal people are already suffering without even having their basic needs met. Malaria, diarrhea, starvation, AIDS, and other pandemic illnesses are afflicting thousands of indigenous people. Because the indigenous people do not know their rights, some people are taking advantage of their vulnerable situation. Everyone in the tribal community should be aware of how bad things are for them, and they should speak up for what's right.

Conclusion

Efforts to better the lives of indigenous people have been made by federal and state administrations alike since independence. Nehru came up with a plan that would allow the tribal people to benefit from economic development without suffering widespread cultural upheaval and displacement. These days, a Tribal sub-plan and special area plans run by bodies like the ITDA are the primary tools for dealing with AP's indigenous communities. Social alienation has resulted from outside forces' interference with and disruption of the traditional way of life of the tribe, particularly in the agricultural sector. The previous social and economic order was upended by the advent of private property. The establishment of wood-based sectors in the era after independence has enabled this process to continue, including paper, lumber, and furniture making. The AP government has enacted many land regulating acts, but they have been unable to halt the trend. Also, several wood-based businesses in and around Telangana have been awarded licenses by the state government, despite the fact that cutting trees has been forbidden.

Many ST people are now relegated to subsistence farming and factory work on the same land they formerly controlled. Since the primary goal of the 1980s movement was the reacquisition of lands that the tribe had previously controlled, it is easy to understand how land loss related to the tribal movement.

Even in the Telangana movement, the tribal leaders' concerns were never adequately addressed, despite their best efforts. Their aspirations have been undermined due to the lack of adequate representation. Many tribal leaders believe that the current system of exploitation would persist regardless of whether AP integrates, splits, or trifurcates (there are even calls for a separate Rayalaseema state!). Even when the Telangana state is formed, the fundamental issue of land alienation remains unresolved as they have not received enough assurances from the primary leaders of the Telangana state movement.

The leaders of the Telangana statehood movement have been rather vocal about their desire to improve living conditions for all residents of the area by creating a separate state. Is there a plan to help the local Scheduled Tribe population? Can we imagine a peaceful and wealthy nation that chooses to ignore the plight of these people?

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