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INDIAN DEVELOPMENT

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41

Being Dalit, Being Modern: Caste and culture in Hyderabad State

Bhangya Bhukya

Associate Professor, Department of History, School of Social Sciences, University of Hyderabad, Gachibowli, Hyderabad, Telangana State

Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
2014

NMML Occasional Paper

Published by

Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
Teen Murti House
New Delhi-110011

e-mail : ddnehrumemorial@gmail.com

ISBN : 978-93-83650-53-8

Price Rs. 100/-; US $ 10

Page setting & Printed by : A.D. Print Studio, 1749 B/6, Govind Puri Extn. Kalkaji, New Delhi - 110019. E-mail : studio.adprint@gmail.com

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Being Dalit, Being Modern: Caste and culture in Hyderabad State*

Bhangya Bhukya

The dichotomy between modernity and pre-modern loyalties or identity politics has been a major concern of our academia. The experience of caste-based identity politics in India exemplifies that it is very much part of modernity as it was a response to colonial modernity. Above all it was very much taking place in modern times. Modernity and identity politics are thus integral or interdependent despite the contentious relation between them. Identity politics is not simply self-assertion against the grand homogenisation of modern nation and state that reinforced Hinduism in a newer way, but also an attempt to carve out a place within it. In turn this socialises public spaces and a democratic process—those which were constructed and being operated within the dominant caste ideology.[1] In this sense caste-based identity politics in colonial India was full of contradictions, as it was often intertwined through the language of regional sub-nationalism and religious nationalism, or some times through nationalism itself. This is largely because of the dynamics of regional caste politics. Each region in India is dominated by one or two particular castes, not necessarily a Brahman caste, and the subaltern castes adopt different strategies to deal with them.[2]

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* Lecture delivered at a conference titled 'Rethinking Deccan History: Religion and culture through history in remaking and fashioning regional identities', held at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, 15–16 March 2013.

[1] M.S.S Pandian, *One Step Outside Modernity: Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere*, (Amesterdam/Dakar: SEPHIS), 2002, pp. 1–25.

[2] G. Aloysius, *Nationalism without a Nation in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 55–78.

In India caste is the cultural reality. Domination, subordination, status, humiliation, untouchability, violence, deprivation and hunger are important cultural forms that are deeply associated historically with the caste system.[3] However, these forms vary in degree from region to region as well as caste to caste in its deployment. Indeed, subordinate caste groups are more territorial. Even the pan-Indian dominant castes' cultural forms are largely marked by their region. In other words, in India, region and its ecology are crucial in shaping the caste culture as well as the relation between the castes. Also caste and its relation both with dominant and subordinate castes has been shaping and reshaping throughout the history. Importantly caste culture itself becomes source for such a change.[4]

This paper shall confine itself to the Dalits of Telangana region of Hyderabad State which was ruled by Nizam rulers under the British paramountcy. The dalits of Telangana had historically evolved a particular culture and identity. Also their relation with other subordinate and dominant castes was largely different from that of the other regions of India. They experienced diverse caste practices in the region. It was precisely because the region was to some extent free from direct Brahmanic cultural influence. The Reddy and Velama feudal system combining Brahmanic values had evolved different caste practices in the Telangana region. Beside the untouchability, the dalits of Telangana were subjected to *vetti* (free labour), *bhagela/jeetham* (forced labour) and *jogini* (temple girl) practices. These practices forced dalits into a perpetual subalternity. However the agency comes from this subalternity for their new self-consciousness and identity politics under the Nizam rulers.

Combined with the modern education, modern bureaucracy and census enumeration, the dalit subalternity was fundamental

[3] Surinder S. Jodhka, *Caste* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 171.

[4] Susan Bayly, *Caste , Society and Politics in India. From the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 25–63.

in forming new consciousness among them. Although the Nizam rulers were generally emulated with medieval politics, the colonial model of modernity was apparent from the middle of the nineteenth century in Hyderabad State. Particularly, there was cross-pollination of cultural ideas between the British India and Hyderabad state. In fact, the Hyderabad and Secunderabad cities had first provided space for the emergence of dalit consciousness and politics in the Deccan. The railways accommodated considerable number of dalits in labouring jobs. At the same time mass education was steadily progressing in the state. Dalit families who escaped from the clutches of rural Telangana feudals and migrated to Hyderabad city had utilised these new avenues and liberated themselves. Thus the urban centres where feudal caste practices were minimal had provided space for the dalits to think and act independently. The educated and semi-educated dalits endeavoured not only to reform the community on the line of colonial modernity but also to carve out a unique identity within the caste society.[5] These articulations and assertion were first dalit autonomous democratic movements in India in the pre-Ambedkar era. However they remained unexplored for various reasons.

The existing studies on the Hyderabad dalit movement are largely confined to examine the internal contradiction and politics of the dalit movement, or to prove the urban character of the movement in the state.[6] This paper aims to examine the ways in which the social landscape of Telangana region evolved and as to how the colonial model of modernity in Hyderabad impacted the new consciousness of the dalit communities. And how this new consciousness and identity politics were crucial in socialising modern public spaces and democratic processes in the state.

[5] Chinna Rao Yagati, *Dalit Struggle for Identity* (New Delhi: Kanishka Publisher, 2003).

[6] Simon Charsley, 'Evaluating Dalit Leadership: P.R. Venkatswamy and the Hyderabad Example', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 37, No. 52, December 28, 2002–January 3, 2003, pp. 5237–5243; Yagati, *Dalits Struggle*, p. 107.

Social landscape of Telangana

Social landscape of the region is important to understand the social practices and social position of communities in India. The identity of the region is, indeed, strongly rooted in its social landscape and vice versa. Caste in India was not simply produced by Hindu religious texts but shaped by ecologies, languages, religion, modes of production and political system.[7] In this sense, caste in Telangana is different from the other region as the regions in India conditioned by particular socio-economic and political practices. The socio-economic life of the Telangana region is generally characterised by feudal practices which involves ruthless exploitation of masses through the caste relation. The exploitation of the subordinate castes in India occurs through social relation rather than economic relation. One is exploited and made poor and subordinated perpetually because of low status of his/her caste. There was a continuous conflict between castes and communities. A range of autonomous castes and communities were subordinated by the dominant castes throughout the history of Telangana. The dominant castes further imposed a series of restriction and humiliating practices on the subordinated castes to ensure the subordination perpetually.[8]

Telangana has been basically a region of adivasis, nomads and pastoral communities and service and artisans castes. The geographical setting of the region, indeed, provided home to many such communities. It has occupied almost the centre of the Deccan plateau. The Sahyadri hills that run along the north were home to rich forests. Karimnagar, Adilabad, Warangal, Khammam, Nalgonda and Mahbubnagar districts were particularly covered to a large extent by forest. These forests were found at the source of the rivers Godavari, Krishna, Tungabhadra, Manjira, Maner, Wardha and Pranhita. Adivasi and pastoral and service communities such as Gonds, Rajgonds, Kolams, Nayakpods,

[7] Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India*, p. 29.
[8] V.T. Rajshekar Shetty, *Dalit Movement in Karnataka* (Madras: The Diocesan Press, 1978), p. 2.

Kondareddis, Koyas, Chenchus, Gollas, Kurmas, Waddiras, Madigas, Mudiraj, Goudas and Munnurukapus began their civilisation in these forests. The nomadic Lambadas and Mathuras who had occasionally been visiting these forests from the medieval period for cattle grazing and exchange of goods were also settled in these forests permanently. The hills, forests and rivers shaped the social and economic life of these communities significantly. The social and economic life of these communities had taken a tragic shape under the Reddy and Velama feudal system during the medieval period and the same has been continuing down into the twenty-first century.

The Velamas came from the north of the Narmada river in search of settlements. Initially they worked as army men and local chiefs under the Kakatiyas.[9] Almost around the same period the Reddy Nayaks came from the coastal county in search of land, owing to widespread intra-community conflicts in the Andhra region and became powerful local chiefs under the Kakatiyas. After the collapse of the Kakatiyas the Velamas and Reddys emerged as independent rulers at Rachakonda and Kondavidu respectively, and had control over large parts of the Telugu-speaking areas.[10] Further under the Qutb Shahis they consolidated as ruling aristocracy of powerful chiefs and magnates blending the required Hindu and Muslim ways of life. They were given ruling positions and titles and used to not only control the masses but also to bring waste land into cultivation by forming new villages.[11] When it comes to Nizam rule they transformed into modern landlords (locally called doras) with legal rights under the ryotwari system. The Reddys and Velamas who were acting as deshmukhs, deshpandyas, maktadars and other revenue agents in the old system were parcelled huge amount of lands by the state when their *watan* right was abolished by the new revenue

[9] Syed Siraj Ul Hassan, *The Castes and Tribes of H.E.H. the Nizam's Dominions* (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1989), pp. 635–36.
[10] H.K. Sherwani and P.M. Joshi, *History of Medieval Deccan*, Vol. I (Hyderabad: Andhra Pradesh Govt. Text-books Press, 1973), pp. 520–22.
[11] *Statement of Agenda for People's Telangana* (Hyderabad: People's Telangana Foundation, 2007), pp. 3–4.

policy. Beside this they also grabbed vast tracts of land in the villages using their nexus with officials. Many of them also honoured with village police patel and Karnam. From the early twentieth century the Kammas (another dominant peasant caste) of the Andhra also began settling down in Telangana as big landlords occupying vast tracts of land in the Godavari areas.[12]

The Sudra upper caste immigration thus had developed a distinctive social and economic system in Telangana which was rooted in brahmanical values. Although the presence of the Brahman caste in the region was minimal, the caste practices were very much widespread in the region. The dalits of Telangana were worst victims of these practices. Particularly vetti, bhagela/ jeetham and jogini practices reduced the dalits to a sub-human position. Vetti practice was in existence from medieval period in Telangana. Under the regimes of the *doras* all most all the castes were subjected to vetti including Brahmans. However the dalits were worst victims of this practice. Each dalit family was forced to send one person to do vetti in the houses of doras and village officials. Their jobs includes cleaning of houses of patels, patwari, mali-patel or deshmukh, carrying reports to police stations, taluk office, keeping watch on the village chavadi and the poundage, cleaning the village chavadi, and serving the official on their visit to village. The dalits involved in shoe making, tanning of leather, making of leather accessories for agricultural purposes were forced to supply these to the landlords free of cost to the doras, while the other castes had to pay for their services.[13]

Another practice attached to dalits was bhagela *or jeethagadu*. It is difficult to translate precisely what these terms mean. It signifies a sort of bonded labour with limited freedom. A large number of dalits were employed on these terms. Every landholder maintained a number of *jeetagallu* depending upon the land area

[12] Bhangya Bhukya, *Subjugated Nomads: The Lambadas Under the Rule of the Nizams* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2010).
[13] P. Sundarayya, *Telangana People's Struggle and its Lessons* (New Delhi: Foundation Books, 2006, reprint of 1972), p. 7.

and workload. This institution had been in existence for a long time in the state. Remuneration was generally yearly and in kind, besides interest-free advances on occasions such as children's marriages and festivals, and for daily needs like clothing and *gunta chutta* (a kind of cigar). The practice was that once a jeetagadu registered with a landholder it was difficult for him to extract himself; sometimes the bond extended to his children.[14] Each landlord would have ten to fifty bhagelas—the larger the number of bhagelas, the higher their status and influence in society. Pratap Reddy of Ghanapur village of Mulugu taluka in Warangal district had forty-three bhagelas on his one thousand or more acres of land.[15]

Jogini/murali (devadasi) was another heinous practice in the dalit communities. Unmarried dalit girls were dedicated to local goddess and they were being used by the caste-Hindus. This practice existed from the medieval period. Joginis were leading a disgraceful life of prostitution.[16] The important atrocious practice imposed on dalits across the subcontinent was untouchability. The dalits of Hyderabad had begun waging war against these practices. The modern education was crucial in creating such a consciousness.

Educational Development and Social Awakening

From the late nineteenth century, Hyderabad State began to pay more attention to the general welfare of the people, although serious political reforms were initiated only at the end of the Nizam's regime. The last Nizam, Mir Osman Ali Khan played a crucial role for the development of education in the state. Unlike the British colonial ruler, the Nizam endeavoured to develop an indigenous education system in the state combining both English

[14] S. Kesava Iyengar, *Economic Investigation in the Hyderabad State 1929–1930*, 5 vols (Hyderabad-Dn: Government Central Press, 1931–32), III, p. 13.
[15] Ibid., p. 202.
[16] P.R. Venkataswamy, *Our Struggle for Emancipation* (Secunderabad, Universal Art Printers, 1955), pp. 24–26.

and Daccani cultural values. Importantly it was a synthesis of both old and new. Although the medium of instruction was in Urdu which was official language of the state, English was taught as second language from the school level. The last Nizam, indeed, paid special attention to get all the important science and engineering books translated into Urdu. In this sense one can see a true nationalist in him.[17]

From the 1880s onwards, many educational institutions were established in the state. The total number of schools in the state in 1872–73 was 141 in the districts and fourteen in Hyderabad city.[18] Over the following decades there was a remarkable growth, and by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century the number of schools were one thousand and this rose to 4,500 by 1936 while the aggregate number of pupils had risen from 65,000 to 3,27,000. When the last Nizam, Mir Osman Ali Khan ascended the throne in 1911 the total expenditure on education was nine and half lakhs and this was increased to over a crore by 1936.[19]

In the beginning, the dominant peasant castes began taking advantage of the educational opportunities. However the subaltern castes also later on began realising the importance of education and sent their children to school. Indeed the last Nizam had put special efforts to spread education among them. Apart from the general school, special schools were established for women, tribal and depressed castes.[20]

There were 97 Depressed castes or Harijan castes according to 1931 census in the state. Out of the 20,02,290 total dalit

[17] *Modern Hyderabad*, talk given on 10th March 1936 at the Indian State Broadcasting Station, New Delhi, by Sir Akar Hydari, Finance Member, the Nizam Government (published by Government of Hyderabad, year not mentioned), p. 2.
[18] Sheela Raj, *Mediaevalism to Modernism: Socio-Economic and Cultural History of Hyderabad 1869–1911* (Bombay: Popular Prakash, 1987), p. 250.
[19] Ibid., p. 4.
[20] Ibid., p. 5.

population in the state, 10,65,153 were in Telangana.[21] Hyderabad city had 1,00,450 dalit population in 1941.[22] The Nizam Government established a Trust for the development of education and welfare of the depressed castes, which was chaired by the Finance minister. Out of the eight members of the Trust four were representatives of depressed castes.[23] It is reported that more than two and half crores of rupees were spent for the welfare and educational development of depressed castes annually during the last years of the Nizam rule. In 1945 there were 186 special depressed class schools in the state, in which medium of instruction was Telugu. In the same year 8,764 depressed class boys were studying in these special schools and another 7,500 in the general schools. Education was generally provided free of cost till primary level to all. However, for tribal and depressed communities it was provided free of cost from primary to university level. Besides this they were also provided with hostels facility and scholarship in order to encourage them in education.[24] The depressed caste students were also awarded scholarship to study abroad.[25]

This rapid growth in education occurred against a backdrop of what was known in Hyderabad State as the *mulki* (local) and non-*mulki* (non-local) controversy. The mulkis were local people of the state and the non-mulkis were outsiders—men brought in to reform the Hyderabad government. The mulki and non-mulki percentage of civil officers (total 476) in 1886 was 52 and 42 per cent respectively, and 5 per cent were European officials. A considerable number of non-mulkis were imported into the state during the Prime Ministership of Salar Jung I from north India, particularly from the United Provinces. Until the late nineteenth

[21] *Census of India 1931, Vol. XXII, H.E.H. the Nizam's Dominions (Hyderabad State),* part II (Hyderabad-Dn: The Government Central Press, 1933), p. 221.
[22] *Census of India 1941, Vol. XXI, H.E.H. the Nizam's Dominions (Hyderabad State),* part III (Hyderabad-Dn: The Government Central Press, 1945), p. 610.
[23] Venkata Swamy, *Our Struggle for Emancipation*, p. 386.
[24] W.V. Grigson, *The Challenge of Backwardness* (Hyderabad: Government Press, 1947), p. 106.
[25] Venkata Swamy, *Our Struggle for Emancipation*, p. 224.

century, non-mulkis had no access to political power, but later on they became quite influential in the state and began holding political posts as well. The local Muslims as well as the Hindus were not prepared to tolerate this.[26] The growth of education had by the early years of the twentieth century produced increasing numbers of unemployed youth in the state who blamed their failure on the alleged discrimination by the state against mulki. The educated youth of the dominant peasant castes, particularly the Reddy, Velama and Kapu, formed their own caste associations from the beginning of the twentieth century, and these identified themselves with the mulki agenda.[27]

The establishment of Osmania University in 1918 led to an escalation in these conflicts and also opened doors for communal politics. Both Hindus and non-mulkis opposed the introduction of Urdu-medium classes in the university as they felt that this was done deliberately to encourage local Muslims to fill administrative posts. In the process Muslims were denied access to them.[28] A new dimension was added to these conflicts when the Arya Samaj supported the caste-Hindu peasants. The Arya Samaj was established in the state in 1891 and converted itself into a political platform from the beginning of the twentieth century in order to protect the interests of the Hindus.[29] This gradually encouraged communal conflict in the state. In response to the Arya Samaj, the Ittehad-ul-Muslimin (generally called the Razakars) came into being in 1927 to protect the local Muslims' interest. These interlinked conflicting groups and communities had support from across and beyond the state and various groups

[26] Karen Leonard, 'Hyderabad: Mulki-Non-Mulki Conflict', in Robin Jeffrey (ed.), *People, Princes, and Paramount Power: Society and Politics in the Indian Princely States* (Delhi, 1978), pp. 74–75.

[27] G. Sudharshan Reddy, 'Caste Associations and Social Change in Andhra 1900–1925' (M. Phil thesis, Osmania University, Hyderabad, 1986).

[28] Leonard has argued that this was deliberately done by non-mulki officials in order to divert the mulki-non-mulki politics. See her 'Hyderabad: Mulki-Non-Mulki', pp. 65–106.

[29] *The Freedom Struggle in Hyderabad, 1885–1920*, com. Committee of History of the Freedom Movement in Hyderabad (4 vols, Hyderabad-Dn: 1957), III, p. 54–60.

began entering the state in support of their own religious communities and castes.[30]

Interestingly these developments led to the emergence of identity politics in the state. As mentioned in the preceding paragraph the dominant castes were organising and forming their caste association from the beginning of the twentieth century, whereas the subordinate castes were started organising themselves only from the 1920s. However the depressed caste movements were more widespread in the state than in the Telugu-speaking areas of Madras Presidency. The last Nizam recognising the importance of preservation of these communities' history and culture had encouraged them with lavish donations for organising their community meetings. Many community associations were running schools for their community children with the government aid, beside articulating and representing community aspirations and demands.[31]

Reasserting Dalit Self

The dalit movement in Hyderabad state had two specific objectives. One was to reassert the cultural past of the dalit, and the second was to reform the community on the values of the colonial modernity. The cultural assertion of the dalit in the state began with the open revolt of Bhagya Reddy Varma on the Hindu cultural imperialism. Bhagya Reddy Varma was the ideologue of the dalit movements in Hyderabad state. However Arigay Ramaswamy, B.S. Venkat Rao and B. Shyam Sunder played equal roles in the movement. Bhagya Reddy was born in 1888 in Hyderabad to poor dalit (Mala) parents.[32] His original name was

[30] Ian Copland, 'Communalism in Princely State: The Case of Hyderabad, 1930–1940', *Modern Asian Studies,* 22: 4 (1988), pp. 794–94.

[31] Bhangya Bhukya, *Subjugated Nomads. The Lambadas under the Rule of the Nizams* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2010).

[32] He could not complete his schooling owing to financial problems. He started his life as housekeeper at the home of a barrister, worked as an electrician and as Inspector with Electricity Department but resigned this job in1920 and devoted his full time to social activism.

Madari Bhagiah. Later on he called himself Bhagya Reddy as he learned that his community was ruled before the advent of Aryans. The title Reddy (derived from redu means ruler) is used by the Reddy caste of the Deccan as suffix to their name in order to claim their ruling past. Although such acts appeared to be naive but it had powerfully contested the social engineering of the caste-Hindus. This attempt indeed turned the caste-Hindu social order upside down. This was apparent when Suravarm Pratapa Reddy questioned this in his Telugu daily *Golkonda Patrika* that 'if every one called himself a 'Reddy' who were the original Reddies?' Following Bhagya Reddy, many dalits and subaltern castes used the Reddy title as suffix to their name. The Varma title was given to Bhagya Reddy by the Arya Samaj in recognition of his social service to Hindu society, but later on he gave up this title on the suggestion of north-Indian dalit activists as they felt embarrassed to call him every time with a Brahmanic title.[33]

The formation of Jagan Mitra Mandali in 1906 by Bhagya Reddy Varma had sown seeds of cultural assertion of the dalits in the state. The Mandali had played a crucial role in creating a cultural unity among the dalit communities particularly in Hyderabad city. This was done through *Harikatha Kalakshepam* (oral narration). The Harikatha is a traditional performing art that narrates the stories of their goddess. It was staged by the traditional performers of the dalit communities mostly by Jangam and Dakkali communities. This was now converted into a cultural revolution where this art was used to rearticulate the history of dalit communities. Through this art the dalits were taught that they were the original inhabitants of this land and the Aryans were the foreigners who had come from central Asia. The Harikathas were generally performed in the evenings and followed by lectures by dalit activists, particularly by Bhagya Reddy Varma who greatly inspired the community to reassert the pre-Aryan culture. He also published number of booklets and pamphlets on the greatness of pre-Aryan culture, suppression and destruction

[33] J.B. Gautham, *Bhagyodayam: Maadari Bhagya Reddy Varma, Life Sketch and Mission* (Hyderabad: Adi-Hindu Social Service League Trust, 1991), pp. 7–8; Venkataswamy, *Our Struggle for Emancipation*, p. 2.

of pre-Aryan culture by the Aryans and how the Aryans were responsible for the present hunger and humiliation of the dalits. This literature was widely distributed among the community. The *Panchama* and *Adi Hindu Gazette* (monthlies) played a crucial role in spreading new consciousness among the dalits.[34]

Bhagya Reddy also preached vegetarianism among the dalit communities. It had its roots in Buddhism. He was greatly influenced by Buddhism and celebrated Buddha Jayanti on every Vaishaka Pournami day from 1913. Also he directed the dalits towards Buddhism and to follow *Panch Sheel* which is the basis of Buddhist morality, rationality, righteousness and non-violence. As part of Buddhist non-violence against animals he took up the animal protection campaign actively in the city. To this end, he formed The Deccan Humanitarian League and impressed the Nizam to ban cow slaughter on the day of Bakrid in 1920. With these activities he got wide support from the caste-Hindus, particularly from the Jain community of the city. Their support continued even when he took up the dalit liberation movement in the state. Indeed their financial and moral support was crucial in expanding his activities among the dalits.[35] This strategy was indeed helpful to reform the community and take it towards modernisation. Importantly it was crucial to expunge the stigmas attributed to their community and stand with dignity and honour before the larger society. This consciousness led the dalits to curve out a new identity for themselves.[36]

Although the existence of Chatur Varna system in Deccan is mere reality, the dalits were roped into the varna system and considered as Panchama Varna which is the lowest strata within the Hindu Varnasrama system. The Nizam government also designated the dalit communities as Panchamas. This was questioned by the dalit communities on the ground that they did

[34] Gautham, *Bhagyodayam*, pp. 9–11; Venkataswamy, *Our Struggle for Emancipation*, p. 31.
[35] Gautham, *Bhagyodayam*, pp. 10–12.
[36] Ibid., p. 16.

not belong to the caste-Hindu society.[37] In fact, dalits of the state declared a crusade on Hinduism. They proclaimed that Hinduism means belief in hereditary caste, varnashrama and untouchability. No Hindu can repudiate these dogmas and no self-respecting member of the dalit community will ever agree to call himself a Hindu, because accepting Hinduism is accepting untouchability. They demonstrated that how the dalits were outside the Hindu fold and how a division existed between them as Savarnas and Avarnas historically. And the Savarnas' argument that the dalits were part of the Hindu fold was purely political and was born by the communal politics in the state. Further they stated that they would not accept Hinduism unless the Savarnas repudiate all the shastras and other holy scriptures and wage a war against it. They felt that the Savarnas would not do it and even if they did, the dalits would not embrace Hinduism because of historical reasons.[38]

In order to avoid the derogatory names of the dalit communities given by the caste-Hindus, the dalit communities claimed themselves as Adi-Hindus asserting that they were the original inhabitants of India. This was also to say that the Hindus (Aryans) were the foreigners and came from central Asia to this land. In 1922 the Madras government had recognised the Telugu and Tamil dalits as Adi-Andhra and Adi-Dravida respectively. Similar demands were put before the Nizam Government by the dalit communities. Inspired by the act of Madras Government, Bhagya Reddy renamed his Manya Sangham, which was established in 1911 to spread cultural consciousness among the dalits, as Central Adi-Hindu Social Service League in 1922. In the same year other dalit leaders such as B.S. Venkat Rao had established Adi-Dravid Sangam and Arigay Ramaswamy had established Adi-Hindu Jatiyonnati Sabha. Under the banner of these organisations, the leaders organised a number of propaganda meetings and demonstration in the state to educate the dalits on

[37] Ibid., p. 4.

[38] B. Shyam Sunder, *They Burn The 1,600,00,000 Untouchables of India* (Hyderabad: Samantara Book House, 2009, reprint 1987), pp. 35–36.

this demand and to bring pressure on the Nizam Government to recognise them as a separate social group from the caste-Hindus. The Nizam government had ultimately agreed to the demand and enumerated dalits of the state as Adi-Hindus in the 1931 census.[39]

However the dalits of the state continued to claim their territorial identity by designating themselves as Adi-Andhras, Adi-Karnatakas, Adi-Dravidas and Adi-Maharastras. This was consciously done to claim that they were the original inhabitants of their respective linguistic regions. As I have mentioned in the preceding section, the Sudra upper castes were immediate threats to the dalits. It was necessary to dalits to curve out a regional identity as well to corner the Sudra upper castes in their respective region. At one level Adi-Hindu was used to express their national identity whereas the linguistic identities were used to express their regional identity.[40]

The dalit leaders of the state articulated and imagined their community identity and questions beyond the borders of the state. It is said that the princely states were different from the British India and characterised by autocracy and underdevelopment. However the consciousness of the communities was at its highest stage in the state. The ideological boundaries between princely states and British territories were fluid, and there was cross-pollination of their socio-cultural and political movements.[41] Particularly there was no boundary in terms of ideas between the Telugu-speaking regions of the Hyderabad state and Madras presidency. Indeed the Hyderabad dalit movement inspired the Andhra dalit movement. The first Andhra dalit major conference held at Bezawada in 1917 was presided by Bhagya Reddy Varma. In his speech he condemned attributing the term Panchama for dalits and suggested the organisers to use the term Adi-Andhra. This made the Andhra dalits to rearticulate their identity as

[39] Gautham, *Bhagyodayam*, p. 11; Venkataswamy, *Our Struggle for Emancipation,* pp. 12–14.
[40] Gautham, *Bhagyodayam*, pp. 11–12.
[41] Bhukya, *Subjugated Nomads*, p. xiii.

Adi-Andhras.[42] Kusuma Dharmanna, a prominent Telugu poet and dalit leader was equally popular in the Telangana region. His famous poem *Nalla Dorathanam* which is a critic of caste-Hindus' domination in the region greatly inspired the dalits of Telangana. He also addressed many meetings in Telangana.[43]

The Hyderabad dalit movement had developed intrinsic relations with the larger dalit movements in colonial India from the 1930s, particularly with the Marathwada dalit movement. All the prominent dalit leaders of the state were strong followers of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who had a special interest in Hyderabad state and its dalits owing to the Nizams' pro-dalit position as well as committed dalit leadership. He visited Hyderabad five times on various occasions.[44] Ambedkar, in fact, was sponsored Rs 500 per month for his political activities by the Nizam ruler after the second Round Table Conference in Britain. This brought him closer to the Hyderabad dalit movement.[45] Bhagya Reddy Varma and Shyam Sunder emerged as national dalit leaders. They were invited by many dalit organisations across the country. Bhagya Reddy Varma addressed many annual conferences of All India Adi Hindu (Depressed Classes) conference. He was also invited to address a Hindu reformer's meeting. In fact he had good relations with Mahatma Gandhi. When Gandhi visited Hyderabad in 1929, he visited Adi-Hindu schools run by Bhagya Reddy as well as Adi-Hindu Bhavan and appreciated him for his tireless efforts for the liberation of the dalits.[46]

As mentioned above the reforming of the community on modern lines was one of the main concerns of the many dalit leaders. Liberating the community from social stigmas imposed by caste-Hindus and taking the community towards modernisation was central to all the dalit leaders of the time. Bhagya Reddy

[42] Gautham, *Bhagyodayam*, p. 4.
[43] Ibid., p. 12.
[44] Venkataswamy, *Our Struggle for Emancipation*, pp. 75, 502.
[45] Nizam's Political Dept. (confidential), Round Table Conference, File no. Cxcix, 1933, ff. 1–20.
[46] Gautham, *Bhagyodayam*, pp. 19–20, 28.

Varma is father of the social reform in the state. Besides fighting against untouchablility, vetti and jogin/murali practices he focused more on dalit education. He started his mission by setting up a lower primary school in 1910 at the office of Jagan Mitra Mandal, and this number rose to 26 benefiting 2,500 pupils of dalit communities by 1933. Almost all the dalit leaders used to run special schools for the dalits. Bhagya Reddy also sought to transform the dalits through the Arya Samaj and Brahma Samaj in the beginning but soon realised that it was impossible to change the mind-set of caste-Hindus. He organised a band called Swasty Dal Volunteer Corps in 1912 on the ideals of Buddhism to serve the dalits in difficult times.[47] Shyam Sunder also formed a similar band called Bhim Sena, a self-defence force based on truth and justice.[48]

Untouchability was mainly seen as a product of caste-Hinduism. When Gandhi proclaimed that untouchability did not have Hindu textual sanctions in 1921, the dalit leader of Hyderabad had written a lengthy letter explaining with examples how Hindu texts were the source of untouchability.[49] However there was wider support to this issue from the caste-Hindus across India. It was precisely because of caste-based politics born out of the Poona Pact and subsequent proclamation of Ambedkar to leave Hinduism. Since the Muslims were the ruling community, these developments had greater effects in the state. Thakkar Baba, General Secretary of All India Harijan Sevak Sangh rushed to Hyderabad in 1933 and set up its unit in the state with the help of both caste-Hindus and dalits. This was followed by Gandhi's visit to Hyderabad to campaign against untouchabiltiy, B.S. Venkat Rao and Arigay Ramaswamy were called by Gandhi and were asked to support the Harijan Sevak Sangh in the state.[50] The Arya Samaj and V.D. Savarkar were also actively involved in the anti-untouchability campaign.[51] It should be underlined here

[47] *Ibid*., pp. 14–18.
[48] Shetty, *Dalit Movement*, p. 3.
[49] Ibid., p. 43.
[50] Venkataswamy, *Our Struggle for Emancipation*, pp. 52–53, 62.
[51] *Ibid*., p. 292.

that the Gandhi's harijan movement was not to liberate the dalits but to reform Hinduism. However the dalit leaders were strategically using it to promote education among the dalits. It appears that the dalit leaders utilised every opportunity to liberate and develop the dalits. They used Andhra Mahasabha to fight against the vetti. It was formed by caste-Hindus to protect socio-economic and cultural interests of Telugus in the state. When its first conference was held at Jogipet, Medak district, in 1930, Bhagya Reddy had participated in it and proposed a resolution to urge the Nizam government to abolish vetti.[52] The Andhra Mahasaba continued to fight against vetti and the bhagela system throughout. Because of this, a great number of dalits rallied around the Andhra Mahasaba when it transformed into a political platform and waged an armed struggle against the Doras in the Telangana villages.

The dalit reformers also made a serious attempt to liberate their community from jogini/murali (devadasi) practice. Bhagya Reddy founded an organisation called Adi-Hindu Murali Nivarana Mandali to stop this practice. With the help of the state, he had largely suppressed this age-old practice. However some conservative families were still practicing it. Arigay Ramaswamy had fought against this practice tirelessly. He raided on dedication ceremonies in the Hyderabad and stopped them. He also encouraged dalits to marry joginies, and many joginies got married. To create stronger unity in the dalits, he organised marriages between sub-castes of the dalit communities, particularly between Malas and Madigas. He was also inspiration behind the inter-dinning programmes in the dalit community. These campaigns also received wider support from the caste-Hindus of the Hyderabad city.[53]

As a result of the dalit activism the Nizam government abolished the inhuman practices of vetti*/beggar* (free labour) and bhagela (bonded labour) in 1923 and 1944 respectively in the state

[52] Gautham, *Bhagyodayam*, p. 36.
[53] Venkataswamy, *Our Struggle for Emancipation*, pp. 24–26.

through separate Acts. This afforded an immense relief to the suffering masses and it undoubtedly emancipated them from the clutches of the merciless landlords.[54] The dalit activism also produced a considerable number of critical dalit leaderships in the state. This leadership was crucial in taking the community towards modern politics and modernity.

Towards Modern Politics

The all India political developments had begun influencing the dalit movement in the state more apparently from the 1930s. In particular the Poona Pact between Gandhi and Ambedkar and subsequent announcement of a Communal Award providing representation to dalits in the political bodies turned the dalit movement to a new direction which drove the community towards modern politics. It is ascribed by P.R. Venkataswamy, an active dalit leader in the state, that

> there were no political rights of the Depressed Classes to think of during those autocratic days of Feudal Government in the State. But the agitation of our brethren in British India for political right influenced our political thoughts. It was through the persistent efforts of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar the political conscience was awakened in the Depressed Classes.[55]

Thus the all India developments had an effective impact on the Hyderabad dalit movement. The first political conference of the Depressed Classes of the Hyderabad State was organised by Bhagya Reddy in Bolarum cantonment area of Secundrabad in 1931. Reddy was already acquainted with the larger dalit political movement in the country. Indeed he presided the Special Political All-India Depressed Classes Conference held at Lucknow in 1913. It was in this conference that Ambedkar was elected unanimously as the sole and true representative to speak on behalf of the nine

[54] *Ibid*., p. 211.
[55] *Ibid*., pp. 45–46.

crores of depressed classes in India. This empowered Ambedkar to present the dalits' case before the Minorities Subcommittee. The conference also reiterated the demand for a separate electorate for depressed classes. In this sense this conference was historic.[56] Following this Reddy began spreading his political campaign. Resolutions were passed in the Bolarum conference to demand the Nizam government to abolish forced labour in the state and the recruit Adi-Hindus in military and police.[57] Because of the continuous demand of the dalits for political representations the Nizam ruler, Osman Ali Khan agreed to nominate one dalit councillor to the Hyderabad Municipal Council as a beginning of quota politics in the state. Arigay Ramaswamy was elected by all the dalit organisations based in the city and his name was sent to the Nizam Government to nominate him as councillor of the Hyderabad Municipality in 1934.[58]

The proclamation of Indian Government Act of 1935 and the subsequent election to legislative assemblies in British India intensified the political activities across India. It was during this year a bill called Mr. Vaidya's Bill for the expansion of the Hyderabad Legislative Council was under consideration. The depressed classes of the state under various banners organised themselves and demanded ten seats in the Council as they constituted 30 lakhs population including tribal communities in the state. Beside the ten reserved seats, depressed classes should be free to contest from any other constituency. The members of the Council should be elected directly on the basis of separate electorate.[59]

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[56] Gautham, *Bhagyodayam*, p. 32.

[57] *Ibid.*, p. 33.

[58] Arigay Ramaswamy was employed with Secundrabad Railways as Ticket Checker and he resigned this job in 1930 to work for the dalit community as a full timer. He was involved in bricks business but was spending most of the time for the community and emerged as the most popular dalit leader. See Gautham, *Bhagyodayam*, p. 35.

[59] *Ibid*, p. 40; Venkataswamy, *Our Struggle for Emancipation*, pp. 89–90.

Simultaneously, in 1937, the Nizam Government also announced that it would appoint a committee to consider the constitutional reforms of the state. The committee was headed by Aravamudu Aiyangar, and was called the Aiyangar Committee. Yet, this disappointed the dalit leaders as no dalit representative was nominated to the Committee. The dalit organisations made a number of representations in this respect to the Nizam Government but it did not yield any fruit. However they submitted their demands to the Committee. The subject of the demands includes: constitutional fundamental rights to all citizens, constitutional protections to minorities, reservation in state employment and representation in state legislations' bodies. Also the candidates for the reserved seats should be nominated by the dalit associations. Each community should be represented even if it is a joint electorate with reservation of seats; if it is separate electorate dalits should have a representative of their choice; there should be local self government in which at least the two-third members of Municipal committees are elected directly and seats should be reserved for dalits proportionate to their population; village Panchayat also should be elected directly and the Panchayat officer should be appointed by the government.[60]

When the Constitutional Reform Committee announced its recommendation in 1939 it was a blow to the dalits as they were given five seats out of the total 85 seats with joint electorates. The dalit leaders questioned that the Muslims who constitute 11 per cent of the population were given 50 per cent seats in the legislation, whereas the dalits who form 18 per cent of the population were given only five seats. This led to a revival of the dalit political activism in the state. All the organisations condemned the Nizam government through newspapers, pamphlets and hand sets.[61] Rallies, mass-demonstrations and public meetings were organised by dalit leaders to educate their communities on the injustice meted out to them. The Depressed Class Association alone organised 57 huge public meetings across

[60] Ibid., pp. 100, 106–108.
[61] *Ibid*., p. 137.

the state. This spread the dalit movement in the districts in a big way. Such campaigns and propagandas were crucial in spreading modern democratic politics among the dalit communities. Despite the dalits' protest, the Government did not consider their legitimate demand for proportionate representations in the Legislative Assembly.[62]

There were however diverse opinions among the dalit leaders on constitutional reforms. The Scheduled Caste Federation which was largely run by Ambedkariats in the state had rejected the reforms outrightly. The Depressed Class Association accepted them in full. It was a major organisation in the state after the disintegration of Adi-Hindu Social Service League owing to death of its legendary leader Bhagya Reddy in 1938. The Arundatiya Matunga Mahasabha which was working for the protection of rights of the Madigas (a major dalit community in the state) demanded five more seats for dalits. Similar mixed responses were expressed by the dalit organisations. In fact this echoed ideological differences between the dalit leaders as well as between associations. Sometimes these differences were also echoing on the lines of sub-caste, as there was competition between individuals as well as between sub-castes to grab political positions offered by the new set-up.[63] The caste Hindus in Andhra Mahasabha and Congress party were indeed proliferating these differences further by instigating dalit leaders one against the other. Pulli Ramaswamy, one of the important dalit leader, was used by Congress against B.S. Venkat Rao. He was encouraged to quieten the Depressed Class Association and to form the Hyderabad State Harijan Congress. Such cases were more apparent after the police action in Hyderabad as the political uncertainty was getting cleared and attempts were being made to form a responsible government.[64]

Although many new associations began mushrooming after the introduction of constitutional reform, which opened the door

[62] *Ibid*., pp. 264–265.
[63] *Ibid*., pp. 290–291.
[64] *Ibid*., pp. 402, 297, 369.

for modern politics in the state under the suzerainty of the Nizam, the Depressed Class Association and the Scheduled Caste Federation emerged as the dominant dalit organisation in the state. The Scheduled Caste Federation was a split group of Depressed Class Association. Its founder and leader J. Subbaiah disagreed with the pro-Nizam stand of the Depressed Class Association and formed it in 1942, but it was functioning as an extension wing of Ambedkar's All India Scheduled Caste Federation. Whereas the Depressed Class Association under the leadership of B.S. Venkat Rao and Shyam Sunder had adopted a complete pro-Nizam position and endeavoured to curve out a greater space for dalits in the Nizam Government.[65]

The dalit–Muslim axis was a novel development in the dalit movement of Hyderabad. Although it was apparent in other parts of India, it was a fundamental character of the Hyderabad dalit movement. Shyam Sunder was the architect of this alliance. He felt that this had tremendous potentialities, after making a deep sociological research into the problems of both dalit and Muslim communities. Such an alliance, it was felt, would be beneficial to both the communities.[66] Nizam also recognised the importance of the dalit communities' support to his government particularly during the transfer of power. On the occasion of the silver jubilee celebration of his rule, he pronounced that

> In my view there is none who should be regarded as low, nor do I recognise any community to be high or low, much less untouchables as long as they are good. I consider them all as equal in as much as they are human beings. Being educationally backward and economically poor, they deserve greater consideration at the hands of my Government, especially in view of the fact that they form the bulk of the people in my State. I am sure then this section of my people will take its proper place in the comity of communities.[67]

[65] Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution. Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India* (New Delhi, Sage Publication, 1994), pp. 295–298.
[66] Shetty, *Dalit Movement*, p. 5.
[67] Venkataswamy, *Our Struggle for Emancipation*, p. 281.

This had created a great hope of liberation of the dalits in the state. Ambedkar also appreciated the Nizam's positive attitude towards dalits. Dalits held that justice and social, economic and political rights could never be expected from high caste Hindus who reduced them to virtual serfdom in the state. They also doubted the integrity of Congress towards dalits as it was completely headed by caste Hindus. However the dalits were using the alliance strategically. It is very clear from Shyam Sunder's words that religion and its conversion was not the foundation of the dalit–Muslim unity but their common flight under the caste-Hindu feudal system. He opposed the conversion of dalits either to Islam or Christianity or even to Buddhism. He said dalits were just cooperating with Muslims, and this should not be read as dalits' conversion to Islam. He believed that dalits had no religion and hence there was no question of conversion. The conversion would not liberate the dalits. However he never failed to attack caste Hindus for driving dalits into the arms of other religions. A great deal of literature was produced on these lines and spread among the dalit and minority communities.[68]

The end of the year 1946 was a new beginning in the history of dalit modern politics. It was in this year five dalits were nominated by the Nizam to the Legislative Assembly and two other dalits namely B.S. Venkat Rao and P. Laxminarayana were elected from the general constituency. Subsequently Venkat Rao was raised to the position of Education minister.[69] The elected members used this opportunity to improve the social and economic conditions of their community. The first achievement in this regard was influencing the last Nizam ruler to establish an education trust with one crore for the education development of the dalits. This was a stepping stone in the modernisation process of the dalits in the region. It came as a boom to the vulnerable dalits. A chain of schools and hostels were established for dalit children across the state. They also brought pressure upon

[68] Shetty, *Dalit Movement*, pp. 8–9.
[69] Venkataswamy, *Our Struggle for Emancipation*, p. 290.

the Nizam government to distribute forest and waste lands to dalit families on a war footing.[70]

However, the dalit politics began fading owing to larger developments in the state as well as in India. Particularly the Indian government's police action on Hyderabad in 1948 had serious impacts on the dalits' movement. Following the police action dalits were subjected to serious repression by both armed forces and local landlords because of their pro-Nizam stand. The landlords evicted the dalits from their assigned lands distributed by the Nizam and took them back. Notwithstanding this repression, many dalits took shelter in Congress or its affiliated Harijan associations. Venkat Rao was arrested. Shyam Sunder escaped the wrath of the military government as he was sent by the Nizam to Europe to represent Hyderabad's right to independence before the U.N.

However, an interesting alliance was emerged between the dalits and communists at the time of the 1952 elections in the state. Although it was against Ambedkar's liking, it was beneficial to the dalits at least for a short period. The Scheduled Caste Federation (SCF) allied with the Progressive Democratic Front (PDF) (the front organisation of banned communists) and contested in the election. PDF won 36 seats out of the 45 contested seats in Telangana. Two of them were former members of SCF. In addition ten socialist dalits allied with PDF's own seats, while SCF itself won five assembly seats and one Parliament seat with the help of PDF.[71] However the merger of Telangana into Andhra State in 1956 had consolidated Reddy feudalism further in the region. In the newly formed Andhra Pradesh feudal Reddy leadership which blended with modern politics had not only crushed down the Communist Party but also dalit politics in the State by early the 1960s. It was during this period many dalits began sheltering in the Communist Party as grassroots' activists as the electoral alliance had already set a stage for such migration,

[70] Ibid., p. 306.
[71] Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, pp. 313–316.

although a considerable number of dalits had gone into the Congress fold.[72]

Dalit activism has revitalised in a newer way from the 1990s. The self-assertion of the dalits from 1985 in rural Andhra Pradesh resulted in a series of group killings of their community member by the Sudra upper castes. This clubbed with the Mandal Commission movement and created a new consciousness of caste. The implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations in 1990, which aimed to provide reservation to Other Backward Castes, divided India for the first time into two social blocks, with anti-and pro-Mandal agitations mushrooming across the country. On the other hand the Madiga sub-community of the Scheduled Castes also started Madiga Dandora, a movement aimed at catalysing the Madiga community, which was active in village life, but backward in education and employment. The Madiga Dandora insisted on sub-categorisation of the SC community, as the lion's share of affirmative action was going to another SC community, the Malas, who had benefited from missionary activity. Through its long-drawn struggle, the Dandora has re-imagined the notion of caste. The debates produced by the 1990s phenomenon has questioned and rejected the colonial and nationalist and Hindu religious understanding of caste. Caste consciousness is now a live force in modern India. Above all it is a crucial tool to gain an entry in modernity.[73]

The educated and semi-educated dalits thus had begun mobilising and organising in the state from the early twentieth century. The movement apparently aimed to achieve two important goals. One was to reform the community through modern education and take it towards modern politics. The second was to re-imagine the communities' history and identity and carve out a new position within the caste-Hindu society. The new

[72] Thirumali, Inukonda, *Telangana-Andhra: Castes, Regions and Politics in Andhra Pradesh* (New Delhi: Aakar Books, 2013), pp. 92–102.
[73] K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu, *No Alphabet in Sight. New Dalit Writing from South India* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2011), pp. 4–14; also see Bhukya, *Subjugated Nomads*, pp. 246–247.

identity was first imagined through the territorial identity by asserting as *adi-andhras* (indigenous Andhras). Also simultaneously a pan-Indian identity was carved out by asserting as *adi-Hindus* (indigenous Hindus). These contentious imaginations of the dalits had thrown the peasant dominant castes of the region in a serious crisis as it challenged their existence in the region. These assertions destabilised the caste practices and paved the way for social and political democracy in the region. This was true when the depressed castes' representatives were also nominated for statutory committees, advisory boards, Constitutional Reform Committee and Legislative Council in the state. Above all, this awakening provided a powerful means for them to claim a new role and place in the polity and society that came into being with the decolonisation of India. And for such a transformation the agency comes from the community (dalit) itself. In this sense asserting dalit identity is not being traditional or backward but being modern.