

From Nizam to Nation: Cultural History and Regional Identity in Telangana

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Abstract:

This paper examines the intricate relationship between Nizam-era governance, cultural production, and the emergence of a distinct Telangana regional identity across the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Drawing on historical records, ethnographic accounts, and political discourse analyses, the study argues that Telangana's bid for separate statehood was not merely a political or economic project but a deeply cultural one — rooted in the reclamation of suppressed folk traditions, linguistic distinctiveness, and subaltern memory that had been obscured during successive phases of Hyderabad State rule, post-integration Andhra Pradesh politics, and nationalist homogenisation. The paper traces how the Deccani composite culture under the Nizams created both opportunities for cultural preservation and hierarchies of exclusion that were later mobilised in resistance movements. Institutions such as Osmania University and vernacular print culture served as incubators of a Telangana consciousness that would crystallise in the 1969 and 2001–2014 agitations. Special attention is given to the symbolic deployment of folk festivals (Bathukamma, Bonalu), tribal narratives, and Deccani Urdu literature as instruments of identity assertion. The paper concludes that contemporary Telangana's cultural policy represents a conscious effort to archive and celebrate what the region's communities regard as historically silenced heritage.

Keywords: Telangana, Nizam, regional identity, cultural history, Hyderabad State, folk traditions, statehood movement, Deccani culture, Bathukamma, subaltern memory.

1. Introduction

On 2 June 2014, India gained its twenty-ninth state when Telangana was formally carved out of the erstwhile undivided Andhra Pradesh. The birth of this new state was the culmination of over six decades of political agitation, electoral contestation, and social mobilisation. However, to consider the Telangana movement solely in the terms of political science or economics, water-sharing, job reservation, or resource allocation, is to overlook something very basic; the driving engine of the movement was, to a large degree, cultural. It was fought over the field of word, memory, festival, and belonging.

This paper situates the formation of Telangana identity within the long arc of the Hyderabad Nizamate (1724–1948), the subsequent integration into the Indian Union, and the political developments that eventually produced a separate state. It argues that the Nizam period, often reduced in popular historiography to feudal excess or communal patronage, was in fact a complex cultural laboratory in which Deccani composite traditions — drawing on Persian, Telugu, Kannada, Marathi, and tribal inheritances — were both fostered and hierarchically arranged. The contradictions embedded in this cultural hierarchy subsequently became the raw material for Telangana's identity politics.

The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 provides a historical overview of the Nizamate's cultural landscape. Section 3 examines the socio-cultural composition of the Telangana region. Section 4 analyses how Osmania University and vernacular media catalysed a regional consciousness. Section 5 traces the

symbolic economy of the statehood movement. Section 6 assesses post-2014 cultural policy, and Section 7 offers conclusions.

2. The Nizamate: A Composite Cultural Order

The state of Hyderabad with the Asaf Jahi dynasty was in a special place in colonial India. Hyderabad retained, unlike the princely states which were culturally monolithic or administratively subordinate to provincial British authority, some cultural autonomy which resulted in what historians have referred to as the Deccani synthesis - a stratified amalgamation of the Bahmani, Mughal, and native Telugu, Marathi and Kannada cultures (Narayana Rao et al., 199 The Nizams, themselves, were Urdu-speaking Muslims who ruled over a mainly Hindu people which was a structural conflict that created incredible cultural output paradoxically.

Mir Mahbub Ali Khan (Nizam VI) and most importantly Mir Osman Ali Khan (Nizam VII, r.). Institutions that survived their regime were invested in from 1911 to 1948. In 1917, the establishment of Osmania University was a milestone in the process of indigenisation of higher education in India: the university taught in the mediums of Telugu and Urdu, as well as English (Sajjad, 2014). Telugu literary and cultural assertion in the territory of the Nizam took place through the Hyderabad Sahitya Prishad and the Andhra Mahasabha (founded 1921), which produced a generation of activists later to spearhead the statehood movement (Srinivasulu, 2002).

Simultaneously, the cultural order of the Nizamate had its exclusions. Planned Caste groups that followed the Harikatha and Burrakatha traditions (a genre of itinerant performance that combined narrative based on devotion and social commentary) were on the edge of official cultural acceptance. In Adilabad (Gond, Kolam) and in Khammam (Koya), tribal communities had rich oral and ritual traditions that state patronage did not pay much attention to. These subaltern cultures, precisely because they were excluded from elite recognition, became the repositories of a counter-memory that movements from 1969 onward would seek to dignify and mobilise (Ilaiah, 1996).

Table 1: Socio-Cultural Composition of Telangana

Community / Group	Approximate Population Share (%)	Primary Districts	Cultural Contribution
Telugu-speaking Hindus	56.3	Hyderabad, Warangal, Nizamabad	Folk theatre (Burrakatha), Bonalu festival
Urdu-speaking Muslims	12.7	Hyderabad, Nizamabad	Deccani Urdu literature, Qawwali, Biryani cuisine
Scheduled Tribes (Gond, Kolam, Lambada)	9.1	Adilabad, Bhadrabri Kothagudem	Tribal dance (Gusadi, Dhimsa), oral epics
Scheduled Castes (Madiga, Mala)	15.4	Mahbubnagar, Nalgonda	Leather craft, Harikatha tradition, Ambedkarite movements
Marathwada migrants & others	6.5	Mancherial, Kumuram Bheem	Cross-cultural crafts, weaving traditions

Note. Population share estimates are approximations drawn from the Census of India (2011) and the Telangana State Development Planning Society (2014). Cultural contributions are documented in regional ethnographic literature. Sources: Census of India (2011); Ilaiah (1996); Narayana Rao et al. (1994).

Table 2: Nizam Administration and Cultural Patronage

Nizam (Reign)	Period	Key Cultural Administrative Acts	Impact on Telangana Identity
Asaf Jah I (Mir Qamar ud-Din Khan)	1724–1748	Established Hyderabad as the capital; patronized Persian and Deccani art	Hyderabad is a cosmopolitan centre of Islamic scholarship
Mir Mahbub Ali Khan (Nizam VI)	1869–1911	Introduced railways; promoted Deccani Urdu; modernised judiciary	Growth of print culture and regional press
Mir Osman Ali Khan (Nizam VII)	1911–1948	Founded Osmania University (1917); patronized Telugu literature; built Hyderabad State Bank.	Institutionalisation of Telugu education within the Islamic polity

Note. Key acts and their cultural impacts are drawn from primary historical records and secondary scholarship. Sources: Sajjad (2014); Ramusack (2004); Srinivasulu (2002).

3. Language, Education, and the Formation of Regional Consciousness

The relationship between language policy and identity formation in Telangana cannot be separated from the broader Telugu linguistic nationalism of the twentieth century. The Andhra movement that agitated to establish a separate Andhra state on Telugu speakers of Madras Presidency was based on a unified Telugu identity, which by definition erased the specificity of Telangana in the Nizam era (Ramaswamy, 1997). When the States Reorganisation Commission (1953–1956) recommended merging Telangana with Andhra, it did so over the explicit objections of the Vishandhra critics who warned against the loss of Telangana's distinct institutional and cultural character.

The Gentlemen's Agreement of 1956, which accompanied the formation of Andhra Pradesh, promised Telangana safeguards in employment, education, and fiscal allocations. Its systematic violation became the central grievance of the 1969 movement. Yet the movement's cultural dimension was equally significant. Poets of the Digambara Kavita (Naked Poetry) movement — Nagnamuni, Nikhileswar, Jwalamukhi — wrote in a consciously Telangana idiom, rejecting the classicist Telugu of Andhra literati for a rawer, socially engaged vernacular (Tharu and Lalita, 1993). The 1969 agitation thus produced a distinctive counter-literary tradition that would be carried forward by subsequent generations.

Osmania University served as the institutional incubator of this consciousness. Its campus became the site of some of the most intense agitational activity during both the 1969 and the 2001–2014 phases of the movement. The university tradition of vernacular education and its heterogeneous student population (representing the Telangana districts, on the whole) meant that it was a crucible where regional identity was intellectually expressed and politically practised (Sajjad, 2014; Simhadri and Rao, 1997).

4. Folk Culture, Subaltern Memory and the Statehood Agitation

The most unusual aspect of what the Telangana movement did to the Indian political culture was perhaps its systematic glorification of folk and subaltern traditions as a source of political legitimacy. This was not merely rhetorical ornamentation but a strategic intervention in the politics of cultural recognition.

The Bathukamma festival — a floral offering ceremony celebrated by women of all castes in the Telugu lunar month of Bhadrapada — had long existed as a community practice but was relatively invisible in the official cultural calendar of undivided Andhra Pradesh (Rao, 2013). Activists and intellectuals of the Telangana movement reframed Bathukamma as the defining expression of Telangana womanhood and communal solidarity. When Telangana became a state, Bathukamma was declared a state festival and a public holiday, and the government began organising mass celebrations at Hussain Sagar Lake in Hyderabad.

Similarly, the Bonalu festival — dedicated to the goddess Mahakali — and tribal performance traditions such as Gusadi (Gond community) and Dhimsa dance (Savara community) were placed at the centre of a new state cultural calendar. The Telangana government's Department of Language and Culture established an extensive infrastructure of folk arts academies, annual awards, and documentation projects aimed at preserving what had been marginalised (Government of Telangana, 2016).

Burrakatha, a narrative performance tradition practised primarily by the Yadava community, became an instrument of social communication during the Naxalite period in the 1970s and 1980s, when performers used it to transmit messages of agrarian revolt and caste resistance. The government's post-2014 appropriation of such traditions was therefore received with ambivalence by some scholars, who questioned whether state patronage could preserve the oppositional vitality of forms that had always existed in tension with power (Ilaiah, 1996; Tharu and Lalita, 1993).

Table 3: Key Milestones in the Telangana Statehood Movement

Year	Event / Milestone	Cultural Significance	Key Actor(s)
1952	Mulki agitation (employment for locals)	Articulation of 'sons of soil' regional identity	Students, labour unions
1969	First Telangana Movement; formation of Telangana Praja Samiti	Popularisation of Telangana dialect poetry (Digambara Kavitva)	Marri Channa Reddy
2001	TRS founded; cultural symbols foregrounded in electoral politics	Bathukamma and Bonalu elevated as state symbols of Telangana aspiration	K. Chandrashekar Rao
2013	Parliament passes the Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act	Telangana folk songs are widely broadcast as liberation narratives	Congress Working Committee
2014	Telangana was inaugurated as India's 29th state (June 2)	State cultural calendar institutionalised; Telangana Talli image adopted	Government of Telangana

Note. Milestones are drawn from published historical and political science scholarship. Sources: Simhadri and Rao (1997); Srinivasulu (2002); Reddy (2011); Government of Telangana (2016).

5. The Political Economy of Cultural Symbols

The Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS), founded in 2001 under K. Chandrashekar Rao, was extraordinarily effective in constructing a cultural syntax for the statehood demand. Campaign materials, mass gatherings, and party iconography drew heavily on Telangana's folk aesthetic — the colours, floral motifs, and performative idioms of Bathukamma; the imagery of Telangana Talli (Mother Telangana), modelled partly on the iconography of Bharat Mata but with distinctly regional Deccani visual codes; and the rhetorical deployment of historical grievances narrated through the lens of cultural suppression rather than mere economic discrimination.

This cultural strategy served multiple political functions. It mobilised OBC (Other Backward Class) and Scheduled Caste constituencies for whom caste-inflected folk traditions were primary sites of community identity. It created an effective bond between the urban middle class and the rural communities whose traditions were being celebrated. And it provided a counter-narrative to the dominant Telugu cultural identity centred on classical Andhra traditions, reasserting the value of Deccani cultural difference (Reddy, 2011).

The Deccani Urdu dimension of Telangana's composite heritage also played a nuanced role. While the statehood movement was overwhelmingly articulated in Telugu and was identified with the region's Hindu majority communities, the historical Deccani Muslim contribution to Hyderabad's cultural life was frequently invoked — in references to the Charminar, the Golconda Fort, Hyderabad cuisine, and the Qawwali tradition — as evidence of Telangana's cosmopolitan distinctiveness relative to the rest of Andhra Pradesh (Sajjad, 2014). This was a delicate rhetorical act, given the demographic and political realities of post-2002 India, but it allowed the movement to present itself as heir to a pluralist Deccani inheritance rather than an exclusively Hindu-Telugu formation.

6. Post-2014 Cultural Policy: Institutionalising Identity

Since achieving statehood, the Government of Telangana has pursued an ambitious programme of cultural institution-building. The Telangana State Archives and Research Institute was mandated to recover and digitise historical documents relating to the region's pre-Independence administrative and cultural history. The Telangana Academy for Performing Arts was established to train and support practitioners of traditional folk forms. The Telangana Formation Day (June 2) ceremonies every year were meant to be massive cultural shows that are a mix of folk shows, literary conferences, and artist and scholar state prizes.

The government has also worked on the place-based cultural heritage by designating the Warangal Fort, the Thousand Pillar Temple at Hanamkonda, the Ramappa Temple (UNESCO World Heritage since 2021), and the historic Nizam-era buildings in Hyderabad as the main indicators of the civilisational heritage in Telangana. The Telangana Tourism Development Corporation has built these sites into a story of a heritage corridor, which shows the history of the region as an extension of the Kakatiya Kingdom to the Bahmani Sultanate, through the Nizamate, and into the present-day democratic governance (Government of Telangana, 2016; UNESCO, 2021).

Those against these policies have raised valid concerns. The process of institutionalisation of folk culture threatens to turn the traditions into fossils, which can only be given life through improvisation and ownership by the community. Critics say that the state-approved Bathukamma is now a media spectacle and not a living community ritual. Likewise, the discriminatory integration of Deccani Muslim legacy into an official Telangana cultural identity does not resolve the political and civic status of the minority Muslim communities of the region (Sajjad, 2014). These strains are not typical of Telangana, but they are also

indicative of a larger dilemma in postcolonial states everywhere that are trying to achieve and celebrate identity.

7. Conclusion

The story of Telangana's journey from Nizam's dominion to India's twenty-ninth state is, at its core, a story about the politics of cultural memory. The Nizam period bequeathed to the region a composite heritage of unusual richness — Deccani Urdu literature, Telugu folk performance, Islamic architecture, tribal oral traditions — and simultaneously created a hierarchy of cultural recognition that marginalised the region's subaltern and tribal communities. Post-1956 incorporation into Andhra Pradesh added a further layer of cultural dispossession, as Telangana's dialects, festivals, and folk forms were subordinated to a coastal Andhra cultural standard.

The statehood movement inverted this logic of hierarchy to that of utilizing cultural symbols as political legitimacy and solidarity of the community. This way, it established a new official cultural canon of Telangana - the one in which Bathukamma, Bonalu, Burrakatha, and traditions of tribal performance are projected into the role of regional heritage. Although this canon is politically useful and culturally important, it is also discriminatory and may be challenged by those communities whose experiences do not conform to this dominant narrative.

The cultural history of Telangana (since the Nizam, to the nation) is not, however, the history of mere recovery but of constant building. The identity of the region is still constructed and recreated in the process of engagement between the official memory and the practice of the living community, between the institutional patronage and the grass-roots creativity, between the legacies of the Deccani cosmopolitanism and the requirements of the contemporary democratic politics. It offers a rich case study for scholars of South Asian regionalism, nationalism, and the cultural politics of identity formation.

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