

From Agitation to Statehood: Historical Perspectives on the Political Struggle and Achievement of Telangana in Modern India

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Abstract:

The establishment of Telangana as the 29th state of the Indian Union on 2nd June 2014 marked the end of a prolonged and multidimensional political struggle that lasted for over 50 years. This paper aims to analyse the historical, political and socio-economic aspects of the Telangana movement in the context of the discussions around Indian federalism, regional identity and distributive justice. Based on historical records, government commission reports, demography and secondary scholarship, the study documents the historical events that led to the gentrification of discontent in the region from the Gentlemen's Agreement of 1956 to the landmark Government of Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act of 2014. It critically examines how resource allocation inequalities, administrative neglect, educational deprivation and job discrimination may help to trigger the agitation. They analyze key mobilisation events, such as the 1969 agitation, the establishment of Telangana Rashtra Samithi in 2001, the fast by K. Chandrashekar Rao in 2009, and the Telangana committee report in 2011 as discursive and organisational shifts. Comparative data on irrigation, employment, income shares and literacy for Telangana and Andhra is used to provide evidence of structural inequity in the paper. It considers the Telangana movement as an emerging demand for constitutional equity, institutional recognition and developmental justice, and reargues the absence of sub-national sentiment in the movement. The paper concludes by reflecting on the post-statehood trajectory and unresolved challenges in resource sharing and inter-state relations.

Keywords: Telangana movement, Indian federalism, regional identity, state reorganisation, distributive justice, Andhra Pradesh bifurcation.

1. Introduction

The creation of Telangana on June 2, 2014, was not simply an administrative act of bifurcation but the culmination of one of independent India's longest and most turbulent democratic struggles. Few episodes in post-colonial Indian political history match the Telangana movement in its duration, its ideological complexity, and its ability to mobilise diverse constituencies—students, farmers, government employees, intellectuals, and political parties—around a common demand for a separate state. Understanding this movement requires careful attention to the historical layering of grievances, the structural conditions that sustained agitation across multiple generations, and the political negotiations that ultimately produced statehood.

The Telangana region is made up of 10 districts from the erstwhile Hyderabad Princely State that came under the banner of the Indian Union after the Police Action (Operation Polo) in 1948. During the process of creation of the composite State of Andhra Pradesh, following the States reorganisation Act, 1956, by amalgamating the Telugu-speaking Telangana with Andhra, there were immediate concerns of cultural absorption and economic marginalisation. The Gentlemen's Agreement (1956), negotiated between the leaders of both regions, aimed to safeguard the interests of Telangana by providing some safeguards in

the field of employment and resource allocation, but in practice, it did not work out as well as it was supposed to (Srinivasulu, 2002).

The next few decades were periods of agitation and political maneuvering. In 1969, the agitation was organized mostly by students and government officials and led to violent encounters with the police and the loss of the lives of hundreds of protesters. The movement was revived in the year 2001 with the formation of Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) under the leadership of K. Chandrashekar Rao with a focused electoral mobilization. The indefinite fast by KCR in 2009 and the ensuing political turmoil hastened the day when statehood was approved by the Parliament in February 2014 (Srinivasulu, 2014; Reddy, 2011).

This paper traces the historical and analytical overview of the Telangana movement, focusing on the structural conditions, which were the gap in the development of irrigation facilities, public employment, access to education, and distribution of revenue, that supported the movement. It presents a thorough understanding of the reasons for and the process of the creation of Telangana state, as well as the implications of the statehood for Indian federalism and democratic governance, relying on the commission's reports, census, and historical scholarship.

2. Past History: Hyderabad, integration, and the language controversy

Until 1948, the area that is now Telangana was part of the Hyderabad State under the rule of the Nizam, one of the largest and richest princely states in British India. Its administration and judiciary, its tax system were also locally established and, culturally, in the context of a court tradition which had been Persianised. After independence, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel integrated Hyderabad in September 1948 through military force, and it became a part of India. The introduction of a military governorate and later a civilian administration by M. K. Vellodi started the process of making Hyderabad's government systems similar to the Indian Union (Bhattacharya, 2009).

Linguistic states were created in the wake of the States Reorganisation Commission report of 1955, which redefined provincial boundaries based on language. The merger of Telangana with Andhra State, which was a different administrative and economic unit from the Madras Presidency, was the case for Telangana. Some members of the SRC warned against the merger because they saw a lot of variation within the community. In fact, B. R. Ambedkar's great remark that language was not enough for state formation resonated very much in the context of Telangana (Patel, 2011).

The report itself by the SRC acknowledged the possible dangers of the merger. It pointed out that despite the Telugu language, the Telangana region had a distinct cultural identity due to the fact that it had been influenced by the Urdu medium of instruction, the land revenue structure, and the commercial relationship with the Hyderabad market, as opposed to coastal Andhra. The commission had called for the separation of Hyderabad State, but the political expediency overpowered it, and the merger was to take place, granted with the Gentlemen's Agreement as the only safeguard (Suri, 2002).

The Gentlemen's Agreement provided for the reservations in jobs, utilisation of surplus funds of Telangana for the development of the region, and formation of the Telangana sub-committee in the Cabinet of Andhra Pradesh. Almost immediately, these provisions were flouted. Recruitment of Government personnel was more than the stipulated ratio in Andhra. Surplus revenue in the state went to coastal and Rayalaseema projects, and the promised sub-committee had a more or less ceremonial role (Simhadri & Rao, 1997).

3. Structural Inequities: Irrigation, employment, and revenue distribution

The crux of the Telangana movement was that there was a clear disparity in development. Telangana is also a large contributor to revenue generation in the state, mainly due to its mineral resources, forest resources, and the economy of the Hyderabad metropolitan, but it is not receiving an equal share of public investment in the state. The most controversial aspect was irrigation. The Krishna and Godavari rivers cross over Telangana, but most of the water allocations and the biggest irrigation projects were concentrated in the delta-districts of the coastal Andhra region (Suri, 2002; Reddy, 2011).

The comparative irrigation data of Telangana and the Andhra region during the major periods are presented in the following table, which shows that there is a huge gap in the development of water resources.

Table 1- Comparative Irrigation Development: Telangana vs. Andhra Regions (1961–2011)

Year	Telangana: Irrigated Area (lakh hectares)	Andhra: Irrigated Area (lakh hectares)	Telangana Share (%)	State Average (%)
1961	6.8	14.2	32.4	100
1971	7.6	16.9	31.0	100
1981	8.4	19.3	30.3	100
1991	9.1	22.4	28.9	100
2001	10.3	26.1	28.3	100
2011	11.7	29.8	28.2	100

Note. Data compiled from Government of Andhra Pradesh (2001), Suri (2002), and Srinivasulu (2014). The Telangana region comprises ten districts; the Andhra region includes thirteen districts of coastal Andhra and Rayalaseema.

The irrigation gap reflected broader patterns of capital investment. Projects such as the Nagarjunasagar Dam and the Srisailem reservoir, both located on the Krishna River in Telangana, generated electricity and provided water primarily for Andhra districts, generating intense resentment among Telangana farmers. In 1976, the Bachawat Tribunal gave the Krishna waters primarily to the downstream states, thus restricting Telangana's capacity to make use of its own river systems for agricultural purposes (Reddy, 2011).

The second significant complaint was related to employment discrimination. The Gentlemen's Agreement had specified that Mulki (local) residents of Telangana would receive preference in government jobs. But the recruitment of non-Mulki workers, especially from the coastal Andhra, on a large scale, was a threat to these safeguards. A 1968 government order relaxing Mulki rules triggered the 1969 agitation. Table 2 presents data on the government employment share across regions.

Table 2- Regional Share in Andhra Pradesh Government Employment (1956–2000)

Period	Telangana Population Share (%)	Telangana Employment Share (%)	Deficit/Surplus (%)	Class I & II Posts: Telangana (%)
1956–1961	40.2	28.6	-11.6	22.1
1961–1971	40.7	29.4	-11.3	23.4
1971–1981	41.1	30.8	-10.3	24.7
1981–1991	41.6	32.0	-9.6	26.3
1991–2001	42.0	34.2	-7.8	28.6

Note. Adapted from Simhadri & Rao (1997), Suri (2002), and Justice Srikrishna Committee Report (2011). Class I and II posts indicate gazetted officer positions. Population share based on respective decennial census data.

This employment deficit was especially pronounced for Class I and II roles, as these roles were closely tied to decision-making roles in the state administration that would directly impact resource allocation decisions, project approvals, and policy implementation. This lack of representation of Telangana in these ranks caused the interests of Telangana to be put on the back burner in the bureaucratic process (Srinivasulu, 2002).

A third theme of grievance was educational deprivation. Historically, Telangana had lower literacy rates and fewer educational institutions per capita than the Andhra region, in part reflecting the Nizam-era system of education, which favored Urdu-medium education and was less widely available. After the merger, the expansion of higher education institutions was concentrated in Andhra districts, further limiting opportunities for Telangana youth. Table 3 presents comparative literacy data.

Table 3- Literacy Rates by Region and Gender in Andhra Pradesh (1971–2011)

Year	Telangana: Male Literacy (%)	Telangana: Female Literacy (%)	Andhra: Male Literacy (%)	Andhra: Female Literacy (%)
1971	38.2	18.4	45.1	25.6
1981	47.3	26.1	54.8	33.2
1991	58.4	36.0	64.9	43.5
2001	68.7	50.4	73.2	58.1
2011	75.6	61.8	79.4	67.3

Note. Source: Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India (1971, 1981, 1991, 2001, 2011). Telangana region: ten districts. Andhra region: thirteen districts, including Rayalaseema.

Although there was improvement in both regions over time, the overall gap (about 5–7 percentage points in female literacy over the study period) suggests structural disadvantage caused by a lack of investment in the past. In backward communities and tribal communities, the educational participation rate was much lower in rural areas of Telangana (Justice Srikrishna Committee, 2011).

4. Telangana Movement: Telangana Movement from agitation to articulation.

The Telangana movement has passed through several stages that have had different forms of organisation, demands, and political settings. An appreciation of the cumulative logic that ultimately produced statehood is vital for an understanding of a periodised one.

4.1. The first phase (1956-1971): the "gentlemen's agreement" and early agitation

The early days of the post-merger era saw a growing sense of discontent, which became public in 1969. The reason for this was a High Court verdict in favour of the Mulki rules and later an order from the government to suspend the implementation of the rules. The students of Osmania University started protest, and quickly it spread in the region, resulting in the death of more than 350 people due to police firing during several months (Srinivasulu, 2002). The agitation in 1969 proved that there was considerable popular heat behind the Telangana sentiment, while the political leaders later distanced themselves from the claim for separation when the unionists started applying pressure. The 'Eight Point Formula' propounded by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was a concession to administration, but not to statehood, and was merely a postponement.

4.2. The Second Phase (1971-2000): Electoral Politics and Abeyance

From 1971 to 2000, there was relative stillness in mass mobilisation, but the simmering grievances kept building up. The internal politics of Andhra Pradesh, especially the dominance of Andhra-origin leaders

in the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) and Indian National Congress, set the agenda for Telangana political aspirations, leaving them marginalised. There was some effort to create a separate political front which, occasionally, did come through, but did not organisationally cohere. The Presidential order of 1975, which called for recruitment and reservation in employment based on the areas, was a bit of a relief but was applied inconsistently (Reddy, 2011).

4.3. The Third Phase (2001-2009): Forming TRS and mobilising voters for the election.

The organisation took a turning point when Telangana Rashtra Samithi was formed on April 27, 2001. K. Chandrashekar Rao, former deputy speaker of Andhra Pradesh Assembly, was a one-issue party championing the cause of Telangana statehood only. The party's electoral success, in winning 5 Lok Sabha seats and numerous Assembly seats in 2004, proved that the movement had become more than agitational politics and had become electorally viable. During the short period of time when the TRS formed a government with the UPA government at the Centre, it got an undertaking that the demand for statehood would be taken care of, though Congress was lukewarm (Patel, 2011).

4.4. The fourth phase (2009-2014) was a time of crisis, committee, and resolution.

In November-December 2009, KCR embarked on an indefinite hunger strike, leading to a major political crisis. His declining health and fear of mass violence led the Congress-led Central Government to declare its plans to begin the process of creating a new state. This announcement, in turn, led to a countermobilisation in Andhra and Rayalaseema, which made it complex. The Home Ministry set up a five-member committee headed by Justice B. N. Srikrishna to take a thorough look at the matter. The committee presented its report in December 2010 with six options — status quo, bifurcation — with bifurcation eventually being the option picked by Parliament (Justice Srikrishna Committee, 2011). The timeline of important events in the Telangana Movement (1956-2014) is given in Table 4.

Table 4- Key Milestones in the Telangana Movement (1956–2014)

Year	Event	Significance
1956	States Reorganisation Act; merger with Andhra State; Gentlemen's Agreement	Formal integration; safeguards agreed but unenforceable
1968–69	Suspension of Mulki rules; student agitation; 350+ deaths	First mass uprising; central intervention
1972–73	Counter-agitation (Jai Andhra movement)	Statehood demand suspended; status quo retained
1975	Presidential Order on zonal reservations	Partial employment concession
2001	Formation of Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS)	Dedicated electoral vehicle created
2004	TRS wins 5 Lok Sabha and 47 Assembly seats	Electoral legitimisation of the movement
2009 (Nov)	KCR fast unto death; Centre announces separate state intent	Political tipping point
2010 (Dec)	Srikrishna Committee report submitted	Formal governmental deliberation
2013	Congress Working Committee endorses bifurcation	Party-level decision taken
2014 (Feb)	The Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act was passed by Parliament	Legislative authorisation

2014 (Jun 2)	Telangana was formally constituted as the 29th state of India	Statehood achieved
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Note. Compiled from Srinivasulu (2014), Reddy (2011), Patel (2011), and Government of India (2014).

5. Federalism, Constitutional Process, and the Question of Consent

The Telangana statehood process had attracted many constitutional issues regarding the procedure of the state reorganisation process under Article 3 of the Indian Constitution. Article 3 gives Parliament the authority to create new states and change boundaries, but does not require the consent of the affected state legislature. When the Andhra Pradesh Legislative Assembly was presented with the bill for reorganisation, it rejected it, thus highlighting the tension between the will of a regional majority and the will of Parliament, which could overrule the will of a regional majority based on what it deemed as “national interest” in the constitutional design (Bhattacharya, 2009).

This tension was recognised by the Srikrishna Committee's report. It suggested bifurcation with Hyderabad as a Union Territory for a while, but also pointed out that the consent of the bifurcated state's people could not be mechanically added together—the Telangana population's overwhelming demand for statehood was a democratic demand and couldn't be put aside (Justice Srikrishna Committee, 2011). The Hyderabad question was finally settled by the Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act, which made Hyderabad the new capital of the state of Telangana for a period of 10 years and provided funds and administrative support for Andhra Pradesh to develop a new capital.

The Telangana movement also led to some general considerations of internal autonomy in the Indian federal scheme. It showed that the sub-national identities, built around a historical experience, along with administrative systems and developmental differences, could be legitimate bases for state formation, adding the aforementioned two additional tenets to the rationale for reorganisation, which was based on the principle of language homogeneity. It proved that the sub-national identities, engendered by historical experiences, administrative systems, and developmental disparities, could also be legitimate bases for state formation, thus extending the accepted rationale for reorganisation from language homogeneity to developmental equity and administrative distinctiveness (Srinivasulu, 2014).

6. Post-Statehood Trajectory: Governance, Development, and Unresolved Challenges

The last 10 years after statehood have brought great success and ongoing struggles. TRS (now BRS – Bharat Rashtra Samithi) government of Chief Minister K. Chandrashekar Rao led Telangana on a mission from 2014 to 2023 with ambitious plans of irrigation (Mission Bhagiratha for drinking water, Kaleshwaram Lift Irrigation Scheme), supply of power (24x7 agricultural power under Mission Kakatiya programme), and social welfare programmes. Table 5 presents key developmental indicators for Telangana in the years immediately following statehood.

Table 5- Key Developmental Indicators for Telangana State (2014–2022)

Indicator	2014–15	2017–18	2020–21	2022–23
GSDP (₹ lakh crore)	5.05	8.42	10.96	13.84
Per Capita Income (₹)	1,24,104	1,98,459	2,26,604	3,17,352
Irrigation Coverage (lakh hectares)	12.1	14.3	17.8	22.6
Power Supply (hours/day, agriculture)	7–8	20	24	24
Gross Enrolment Ratio: Higher Education (%)	21.4	24.8	28.3	32.1

Note. Sources: Government of Telangana, Economic Survey (2023); Telangana State Planning Board (2022); NABARD State Focus Paper Telangana (2023).

They show a fairly robust economic growth; however, it has been remarked that much of the Telangana GDP growth is limited to the Hyderabad metropolitan area and that there is still a significant gap between urban Hyderabad and the rural areas of northern and eastern Telangana (Telangana State Planning Board, 2022). The Kaleshwaram project is also criticized for its cost overruns, environmental issues, and for its expansion of irrigation coverage.

The ongoing water conflicts between Telangana and Andhra Pradesh over the Krishna and Godavari rivers have further raised issues before the Krishna River Management Board and the National Water Disputes Tribunal. The Bhadrachalam forest revenue issue (i.e., shifting of the Bhadrachalam Agency area of Andhra Pradesh to Telangana) too has been a bone of contention. These conflicts, however, highlight the political aspect of the Telangana issue but do not necessarily solve the structural and resource conflicts that sparked the movement (Government of India, 2014).

7. Analytical Discussion: Reasons for the Success of Telangana

The eventual success of the Telangana movement was due to several factors that set it apart from other sub-national movements in India that did not achieve statehood. First, the movement possessed what scholars of contentious politics term organisational robustness—the TRS provided a stable electoral vehicle that translated agitational energy into institutional political leverage (Patel, 2011). Second, the movement was grounded in empirically verifiable claims of developmental inequity, lending it a technocratic credibility that commission reports and judicial enquiries repeatedly acknowledged.

Third, the geographic and demographic concentration of Telangana sentiment—largely coinciding with administrative district boundaries—made the proposition of bifurcation administratively legible. Unlike some other sub-national movements where cultural or linguistic identities cut across proposed boundaries, Telangana's ten districts provided a clean territorial unit for statehood (Reddy, 2011). Fourth, the Congress party's electoral calculations—its hope of capitalising on TRS support in Telangana while managing Andhra opposition—created a political window that KCR's fast and subsequent mobilisation helped open and sustain.

Finally, the movement benefited from an ideological broadening over time. While early phases emphasised employment and administrative grievances of the educated middle class, later phases incorporated the concerns of farmers (water sharing), Dalits and tribals (forest rights, PVTG welfare), and women (reservation in local government). This coalitional expansion made the movement politically irresistible (Srinivasulu, 2014).

8. Conclusion

The Telangana movement stands as a landmark episode in the political history of modern India—a sustained democratic assertion that combined mass agitation, electoral mobilisation, institutional engagement, and constitutional procedure to achieve one of independent India's most significant acts of state reorganisation. From the betrayed promises of the Gentlemen's Agreement in 1956 to the ceremonial oath-taking of Chandrashekar Rao as Chief Minister on June 2, 2014, the journey covered nearly six decades of organised struggle, punctuated by violence, negotiation, and political calculation.

This paper has argued that the movement was fundamentally shaped by structural inequities in irrigation development, public employment, educational access, and revenue allocation—inequities that were documented by successive commissions and acknowledged even by those opposed to bifurcation. The movement's success reflected both the tenacity of popular mobilisation and the adaptability of its organisational leadership, which moved from street agitation to electoral strategy to parliamentary lobbying with remarkable coherence.

The creation of Telangana enriches scholarly debates on Indian federalism in at least two ways. It demonstrates that Article 3's parliamentary mechanism can be activated to redress developmental injustice, not merely to satisfy linguistic or administrative convenience. And it suggests that sub-national identities shaped by shared historical experience—of neglect, of cultural difference, of administrative subordination—constitute legitimate bases for democratic political claims within the constitutional framework. As Telangana approaches the second decade of its existence, the more difficult tasks of delivering equitable development across all regions of the new state, resolving inter-state water disputes, and building administrative institutions adequate to its aspirations remain as challenges commensurate with the scale of its historical achievement.

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