



Daughters Of The Soil - Women Freedom Fighters In The Telangana Movement (1969– 1975): A Historical And Analytical Study.

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Abstract

The Telangana Movement (1969–1975) represents a crucial phase in post-independence India's regional political history. While the agitation for a separate Telangana state has been widely studied, the role of women participants remains underexplored. This paper examines the contributions of women activists, leaders, students, and grassroots participants in the movement. It argues that women were not passive supporters but active agents who shaped the social base, ideological framework, and cultural expression of the agitation. Despite their significant involvement, patriarchal structures and historiographical biases marginalized their contributions. This study attempts to reconstruct women's participation and situate it within broader debates on gender, regional identity, and political mobilization.

Keywords

Telangana Movement, Women Activists, Sadalakshmi, Eswari Bai, Gender History, Regional Politics, Social Movements, 1969 Agitation

Introduction

The Telangana Movement of 1969 emerged as a response to regional disparities within the state of Andhra Pradesh, formed in 1956 after the merger of Telangana with Andhra. Issues such as employment discrimination, violation of Mulki rules, and unequal resource distribution triggered widespread discontent.

The movement gained momentum under the leadership of the Telangana Praja Samithi (TPS) and witnessed mass mobilization of students, employees, and civil society. Within this broader framework, women emerged as significant participants—particularly after June 1969, when organized female participation intensified, including the observance of “Telangana Women’s Day.”

Historical Background: Legacy of Women's Resistance: Women's participation in the 1969 movement cannot be understood in isolation. It draws from earlier traditions of resistance in Telangana, especially: The Telangana Armed Struggle (1946–51), Anti-feudal and anti-Nizam struggles, Grassroots peasant mobilizations. These earlier struggles created a political culture where women engaged in activism, mobilization, and resistance. This legacy influenced the readiness of women to participate in the 1969 agitation.

Nature of Women's Participation: Women's participation in the Telangana Movement (1969–1975) can be broadly categorized into four dimensions: Political Leadership and Representation - Several women leaders actively participated in the movement, both within legislative institutions and in mass mobilization.

Sadalakshmi

A key figure associated with TPS, she mobilized marginalized communities and even led the movement at certain phases. She demonstrated personal commitment by mobilizing resources and actively organizing meetings.

Eswari Bai

A prominent Dalit leader and MLA, she participated in protests and represented the intersection of caste and regional identity.

Sangam Lakshmi Bai

A Member of Parliament who supported Telangana statehood and actively participated in agitation activities. Other leaders included Sumitra Devi, Shantabai, and Rani Kumudini Nayak, who participated in protests and mobilization efforts. These leaders challenged both political marginalization and gender barriers.

Student and Youth Participation

Students were the backbone of the Telangana Movement, and women students played a crucial role: Women from educational institutions, especially Osmania University, organized protests, rallies, and strikes.

On August 6, 1969, out of 53 arrested protesters, 38 were young women, indicating their active involvement. Women students Led demonstrations, Participated in boycotts, Faced police repression. Their participation marked a shift from domestic roles to public political engagement.

Mass Mobilization and Protest Participation: Women actively engaged in various forms of protest. Satyagrahas and hunger strikes, Rail and road blockades, Public demonstrations and rallies.

A significant moment was June 17, 1969, observed as Telangana Women's Day, when women organized large-scale satyagrahas demanding statehood. Women also participated in Dharna movements, Jail bhara campaigns, Community mobilization. Their presence expanded the movement from elite leadership to a mass-based struggle.

Cultural and Ideological Contributions.

Women played a vital role in shaping the ideological framework of the movement: Through folk songs, poetry, and cultural performances, and by spreading political awareness among rural women, reinforcing Telangana identity and regional consciousness. Cultural activism became a powerful tool for mobilization, especially in rural areas where literacy levels were low.

Grassroots Participation of Women

Beyond prominent leaders, the movement witnessed large-scale participation of ordinary women like Housewives, Agricultural labourers, Rural women. These women Participated in protests, Supported activists logistically, Spread awareness at the village level. Their contributions ensured that the movement penetrated deeply into society, transforming it into a people's movement rather than a purely political agitation.

Challenges Faced by Women

Despite their active participation, women faced multiple challenges: Patriarchal Constraints, Limited access to leadership roles, Social restrictions on women's public participation, Expectation to prioritize domestic responsibilities.

State Repression: Women activists faced arrests and imprisonment, Police violence and lathi charges, Legal cases and harassment. Their participation required significant courage in the face of repression.

Marginalization in Leadership-Although women participated actively, few reached positions of prominence. Historical accounts note that while many women were involved, they were often sidelined in leadership roles and recognition. Historiographical Invisibility Mainstream histories of the Telangana movement were

Focus predominantly on male leaders, underrepresent women's contributions, treat women as secondary participants.

This invisibility reflects broader gender biases in historical writing. The historiography of the Telangana Movement reveals a significant gender gap. Early narratives emphasize political leaders and organizational structures, Women's roles are often mentioned only briefly, Feminist historians argue for a re-evaluation of women's contributions. Women's participation was substantial but under-documented, grassroots activism is often ignored in official histories, oral histories are crucial for reconstructing women's experiences. Thus, a gendered re-reading is essential for a complete understanding of the movement.

Significance of Women's Participation-Women's involvement had far-reaching implications: Expansion of Social Base for Women's participation. Its broadened the movement beyond elite politics, Included rural and marginalized communities, strengthened mass mobilization.

This is made intersection of Gender, Caste, and Region, Leaders like Eswari Bai highlighted. The link between caste oppression and regional inequality, The need for inclusive social justice.

Democratization of Protest. Women's participation Made the movement more inclusive, strengthened democratic values, encouraged collective action.

Legacy for Future Movements: The role of women in the 1969 movement: Inspired later phases of Telangana agitation (1990s–2014), contributed to the emergence of women's organizations and its also strengthened feminist political consciousness.

Compared to other regional movements in India, Telangana saw significant student-led mobilization, Women's participation was visible but less institutionalized, Leadership remained male-dominated only due to many social causes. This reflects a broader pattern in Indian political movements where women's contributions are often underrecognized.

Conclusion

Women in the Telangana Movement (1969–1975) were integral to its success. From political leaders like Sadalakshmi, Eswari Bai, and Sangam Lakshmi Bai to countless unnamed students and rural women, their contributions shaped the movement's trajectory. However, their roles have been marginalized in historical narratives due to patriarchal biases and lack of documentation. Recognizing women's participation is essential not only for historical accuracy but also for understanding the democratic and inclusive nature of the Telangana movement. A gender-sensitive historiography is therefore necessary to restore women's rightful place in the history of Telangana's struggle for statehood.

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