



A Study On Caste And Land Access In Telangana (1883–1948): An Agrarian Perspective

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Abstract

This paper explores the intricate relationship between caste and land access in Telangana during the period 1883 to 1948, under the dominion of the Nizam of Hyderabad. The study investigates how the caste structure played a decisive role in determining agrarian hierarchies, land distribution, tenancy systems, and social power. Drawing on a rich collection of archival materials, district gazetteers, revenue records, and first-hand accounts, this paper critically examines how dominant castes particularly the Reddys, Velamas, Deshmukhs, and Brahmins—consolidated control over extensive agricultural lands through a combination of historical privilege, state patronage, and customary practices. These castes were frequently positioned as Deshmukhs (revenue landlords) and village headmen (Patels) under the Nizam's administrative system, which granted them not just control over land, but over labor, taxation, and justice in rural areas. This caste-based agrarian inequality laid the foundation for the peasant unrest that culminated in the Telangana armed struggle. The paper provides historical insights into the deeply entrenched socio-economic structures that continue to influence Telangana's rural landscape.

Keywords: Telangana, caste, land tenure, Deshmukh, Nizam, Dalits, agrarian structure, Feudal State, peasantry.

Introduction

Between 1883 and 1948, the Telangana region then part of the princely state of Hyderabad witnessed a complex intertwining of caste and landholding patterns. Land ownership was not merely an economic resource but a symbol of caste privilege and political authority. The Nizam's feudal administrative framework entrenched caste hierarchies, empowering upper-caste elites and marginalizing the lower castes, particularly Dalits (then referred to as Depressed Classes). The village community has been recognised as a unique entity widely from the village of West Europe, the 'mir' of Russia, the German 'mark' or the Chinese village. Various efforts are made to locate the causes of the emergence of this unique unit of rural life in India.

Concept of land, caste in Telangana

Geologically, the present day Telangana lands are situated atop the 'Gondwana Formations Tectonically, it is the most stable rock formation; free from earthquakes, oceanic turmoil or river shifts. During the Tertiary Times (more than 50 million years ago), Dinosaurs roamed this land. Coal mines are later developments due to convulsion of earth crust. Geographically, the Deccan plateau, bound by river Godavari and Krishna is studded with innumerable streams, jungles, caves along with a rich flora & fauna

The intersection of land, caste, and political power has played a crucial role in shaping the socio-political landscape of Telangana, especially during the period of late colonial rule. Between 1883 and 1948, Telangana then a part of the princely state of Hyderabad under the Nizam's dominion witnessed significant socio-economic transformations. The control over land became a vital determinant of social hierarchy and access to power, intricately tied to caste identity. The monumental work on the Indian village done by Henry Maine attracted the attention of social workers, literatures and Historians. The contribution of the Metcalfe about Indian village community, which has been unchanging through the ages, also attracted the various sections of the people in perceiving the unique characteristics of the village. The historical research shows that even in the remote past the early races of the India such as the Kolerians, Dravidians and the Aryans, with those history we have to some extent, acquainted invariably grouped themselves into villages as soon as they passed through the pastoral or nomadic stage and took to settled agriculture. In the beginning these village groups were merely the outcome of natural and social needs rather than the result of any thought-out system of administration.

Caste system

Caste in India an artificial chopping off the population into fixed and definite units, each one prevented from fusing into another through the custom of endogamy. Thus, the conclusion is that Caste In India is inevitable endogamy which is unique character. Caste is considered in Indian sub-continent as a peculiar social category. But caste is hardly analysed by social scientist as an economic category, though its manifestation is social and the essence of its purely economic. Infact, the first social anthropologists who had examined caste had introduced the concept of 'jajmani' for the first time in 1930's (H.W.Wiser) analysed the transactions between different castes in a village as purely economic. The real transactions between 'dwijas' (Brahmins and Kshatriyas) and Non-dwijas and among the survival caste and untouchable caste were found to be purely economic in nature. The studies of H.W.Wiser on Kalimpur village regarding the understanding the nature of the caste reveals that, the values are translated as returns on each castes property, the concept of caste as an economic category will be cleared. However, the Hindu caste as property has certain limitations. The character of property as a thing to exchange with others or sell it to outsiders is very much limited here. Caste being a property of a group of people can be utilized for the advantage of the members of the group. This has also been used for the exploitation of others and also empowering one's own group. These concepts have been used here to understand the economic power of the dominant caste in India.

Caste in Hindu social order is based on the principles of grades inequality. I t may not be an exaggeration to say that not many people understand the significance of this principle. The social system based on inequality stands on a different footing, from a social system based on graded inequality. It is a pity that caste even today has its defenders. The defences are many. I t is defended on the ground that, the caste system has another name for division of labour and if division of labour is necessary feature of every civilised society, it is argued that there is nothing wrong in the caste system. But truely the caste system is not merely a division of labour. It is also a division of labourers civilised society undoubtedly needs division of labour. But in no civilised society is division of labour accompanied by this unnatural division of labourers into water tight compartments. Caste system is not merely a division of labourers which is quite different from division of labour. It is a hierarchy in which the divisions of labourers are graded one above the other.

Agricultural

The rise of the village is bound up with the rise of agricultural economy in history. The emergence of village signified that, man passed from the nomadic mode of collective life to the settled one. This was basically due to the improvement of tools of production which made agriculture and settled life on fixed territorial basis possible and necessary. In different parts of the world human race, that passed from the nomadic hunting and food gathering stage to that, based on robing hoe on agriculture and thereafter on settled plough agriculture carried on by means of craft, animals, has been one of the most difficult and complex problems in the field of social interest. With the invention of the plough, man could develop stable agriculture, the basic source of

assured food supply. With this the nomadic life of the human being has been ceased. No longer men roamed in herbs from place to place in search of means of substance. The settled and a defined territory and organised villages were based on agricultural economy. Agrarian communities, with villages as their fixed habitation and agriculture as their main occupation, came into existence. This event was the landmark in the history of mankind inaugurating a higher phase of social existence.

Agriculture assured the community for the first time, a relatively stable food supply in contrast to previous stages of social life. While food supply derived from such sources as hunting, fishing, fruit gathering and shifting hoe agriculture had always been insufficient food grain and other types of food products derived from plough agriculture could be counted upon and also be stored for use in the emergency period, thereby assuring relative food security for the future. In the agricultural phase, the struggle for existence became relatively less acute for man. Further, at certain stage of the development of agricultural economy due to the greater productivity in agricultural sector, a section of the community could be liberated from the necessity of participating in food production and could therefore concentrate on secondary industrial and ideological activities.

This gave momentum to the growth of technology, arts, science and philosophy. It also brought the significant transition slowly in the social organisation of humanity. The stage of social organisation founded kinship and clan to that based on territorial ties. With the development of agriculture, at a certain level mankind took a leave from collectivist than society to territorial civil society. With its distinct multi-class social structure and the resultant institutions of the State. Civilisation began with the development of agriculture.

The village was the first settled form of collective human habitation and the product of growth of agricultural economy. This historically gave birth to rural society and from the surplus of its food resources flourished the town which subsequently came in to existence. In the history of people living in different parts of the world, different types of the villages emerged with the rise and spread of agriculture. This was mainly due to, difference in geographical environments in which those people lived. Further, settlers of the early village also underwent changes in time, due to it~ subsequent technical, economic and social invasions. Marx Weber argued that India had a stable and unchanging society because of the caste system. Caste separated education from craft, segregated skills and destroyed individual ambitions. This prevented economic mobility and created firmly stable, but stagnant economic structure.

Forms of Cultural Expression of Caste Domination and subordination

Following are some of the prime cultural expressions of the caste order exerted on the lower castes precisely outcastes subjecting to subordination.

Vetti

The practice of vetti is widely recognized as a remnant of the old feudal order that historically dominated Telangana. It was one of the primary forms of labor exploitation inflicted upon deprived castes, particularly the so-called untouchables and, in some instances, members of service castes. Vetti involved unpaid or underpaid bonded labor, where individuals and their families were compelled to serve upper-caste feudal landlords, often without any legal recourse or protection.

Vetti functioned both as a social custom and an economic mechanism of subjugation. In many cases, individuals from marginalized castes who borrowed money from feudal landlords, and subsequently failed to repay, were forced into labor as a form of repayment. This practice evolved into a system of debt bondage, in which laborers received only minimal compensation typically small quantities of grain, or a nominal amount of money sufficient only for subsistence. The remainder of their labor value was appropriated by landlords under the pretext of loan repayment.

Bhagela system

During the times of Nizam the vetti was termed as Bhagela. This was predominantly seen in the Telangana region. In the Bhagela system, the workers usually were called as 'Paalerlu'. These people used to be paid their salary money in advance and then serve the land lords. Outcastes, tribals and people from service castes were also some time employed as Bhagelas. This system does not involve any working hours. Paaleru had to be available throughout the day.

A Paaleru is said to be available for the landlord throughout the day and night. His daily routine starts by early morning and continues till late night doing various agricultural as well as other personal and household works of the feudal lord. Paaleru used to be given food in a separate plate which was allocated to him. Food was thrown from a height without touching the plate. Water used also to be poured from a height without touching the glass, as touching them would be considered as impure. The practices of both untouchability guided by the brahminical values as well as exploitation of the labor is also observed simultaneously happening in this practice.

K Ramaswamy (1996). The Govt. Of Andhra Pradesh vs H.E.H., The Nizam, Hyderabad on 22 March, 1996. The first contention raised by Shri Sitharamaiah, learned senior counsel for the appellant is that by operation of Section 3 of the Ceiling Act which came into force in relation to Andhra Pradesh on February 17, 1976, no

person shall be entitled "to hold" any vacant land in excess of the ceiling limit on and from that date. Section 4 envisages ceiling limit and every holder of vacant land in excess of the ceiling limit shall file a statement on or before six months from February 17, 1976. By conjoint operation of Section 6, Rule 3 and Form I, holder must specify vacant land which he desires to retain within the ceiling limit. Satyanarayana. A (2007), Another important source of my study, based on Society, Economy and Polity in Modern Andhra (2007), written by A. Satyanarayana the first section of this book is about the agrarian society and economy. It traces the evolution of the dominant class of landlords under British Rule, their relationship with tenantry and their eventual decay with the advent of the market economy to which they were unable to adopt themselves. These essays focus upon the material basis of upper caste power and authority at the grass roots level in the rural Telangana during the pre-1948 period. Barry Paviar, The Telangana Movement 1944-51 (1981), explains the Deshmukhs and their dominant position in the rural economy.

Abbasayulu, Y.B. (1978). Scheduled Caste Elite, Department of Sociology, Osmania University was the foundational text that explores the sociological aspects of Dalit lives in Telangana state. In essence, he is optimistic about to bring the social change in the lives of Scheduled caste communities in Andhra Pradesh. In a democratic society equal opportunities must be provided to all its citizens for effective participation in the decision-making process as same deprived groups were made to participate in the decision-making processes. This paved the way for the emergence of scheduled caste elite. Thirumali Inukonda (2003) Against Dora and Nizam People Movement in Telangana 1939- 1948 written by Thirumali Inukonda, in this book, an attempt is made to present the socio- cultural aspects of Telangana history that presents categorically the ruthless exploitation by the doras, the chillarollu and Kapu, in terms of class relationships, traditional leadership and their conflicting life patterns. The crucial to the movement was the transformation of the deshmukhs as doras and consequent imposition of traditional leadership and authority of domination. He also articulates the ruthless exploitation from the grassroots. The consistent resistant forms have also been articulated how the peasants and labourers blindly did not agree the domination of Doras, and it provides the evidences of people's movement in Telangana. Panasa Adinarayana (2017) Political Part Deshmukhs And Deshpandes Under The Hyderabad State. The socio-economic life of the people of Hyderabad and especially in

Telangana was the unbridled feudal exploitation that persisted till, the beginning of the Telangana armed peasant struggle. The gradual separation of Hyderabad from the Mughal Empire was accomplished before the death of the first Nizam in 1724 A.D.

Need and Significance of the Study

Understanding historical caste-based land inequality in Telangana is crucial to addressing present-day disparities in rural development. The period 1883-1948 represents the foundation of agrarian oppression that led to later political mobilizations and reforms. This study is significant in identifying historical injustices and contributing to the discourse on equitable land distribution and rural empowerment in Telangana.

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze the historical patterns of land ownership in Telangana during the period 1883–1948.
2. To study the role of caste in determining land access and agrarian relations.
3. To study multi-dimensionality of caste and to integrate the caste system into the analysis of agrarian relations.

Research Questions

1. What were the historical patterns of land ownership in Telangana between 1883 and 1948, and how did they affect rural power structures?
2. How did caste influence access to land and shape agrarian relations in Telangana during this period?
3. In what ways did the caste system influence various aspects of agrarian relations in Telangana, and how can its multiple dimensions be analyzed within the rural economy?

Methodology of the Study

Research in social Science is an undertaking in which logical and systematized techniques are employed. For the study of the present topic the historical method was considered relevant. The historical method constitutes a very deep and intensive investigation into the data which is already available. Further, it involves the application of the scientific method to historical problems. Therefore, the historical techniques of critical scrutiny and analysis are adopted in this study for drawing information from source material. The proposed study employs the methods that followed by a combination of historical, descriptive, empirical and analytical approach in addition to the time-tested Case Method. The proposed study articulates different parameters and paradigms. The study focuses on the agrarian structure and the land holding pattern in Telangana during Nizam's rule broadly corresponded to the caste system.

Source of the Data

The study is based on Primary and Secondary Sources of Data. The sources are very important for conduct research on Land, Caste and Power in Telangana (1883-1948). Both the primary and secondary are important for research work.

Primary Sources: It depends on Annual Administrative reports of the department of Agriculture, H.E.H the Nizam's Government General Administrative reports and Area under tenancy surveyed by the Tenancy Committee, and Caste and Occupation census Reports Hyderabad. During Nizam period, particularly Mir Osman Ali Khan period there are several Reports and Files are published and preserved in different libraries and Archives throughout India these reports and files are very much helpful for the research. The sources for the study can be classified mainly under the Agricultural Reports, Agricultural Statistics, Cotton Manual, Trade Statistics, Statistical Records, Commerce and Industries Department Reports, Customs Department files, Census Reports and Gazetteers etc were very useful for the research.

Secondary Sources: For Secondary Sources, I would like to make use of available material including books and visiting libraries. The English and Telugu Books of contemporary and later are very much useful for study the agrarian conditions in the State. The Indian History Congress Proceedings, South Indian History Congress Proceedings, Andhra Pradesh History Congress Proceedings, Itihas, Indian Economic and History, the History, Contemporary History, Agrarian Economic History reviews and other general, magazines are very helpful for the work.

Cultivation in Telangana Region during 1927- 1931

Food Crops

In Nizam's Dominions the food crops were grown only for the states self-sufficiency. Market control over food crops, lack of irrigational facilities and poor transport system were but a few reasons which hampered the trade.

Oil Seed Crops

The Telangana region utilised 6,064,616 acres for the cultivation of oilseeds, constituting 52% of the total area designated for oilseed crops in Hyderabad state. The entire area utilised for tillage was 11,667,040 acres, constituting 14% of the overall agricultural land in Hyderabad state.

Cash Crops

The cultivation of cash crops is primarily aimed at facilitating trade and export activities. The revenue of the Nizam's Dominion experienced a notable increase. The expanse dedicated to cash crop agriculture within the

Nizam's Dominion throughout the Quinquennial period of 1927-31 encompassed 16,583,807 acres, representing approximately 20% of the overall total crop area.

Table 1: Distribution of Holdings

S.No.	Size of Holdings (Acres)	Number	Area percentage
1	1 acre & below	11.4	0.4
2	1.1 to 2.5	11.4	1.3
3	2.5 to 4.0	13.2	3.5
4	4.1 to 10	20.0	10.2
5	10.1 to 25	28.0	31.5
6	25.1 to 50	11.6	27.9
7	Over 50	4.4	25.2

Average size 14.1 acres all holdings estimate number 1.7 million.

Table 2: Agricultural Families and Holdings

Particulars	All	Land owners	Tenants	Labourers	
				With land	Without land
Percentage of families	81.2	34.9	4.2	19.5	22.6
Average sizes of family	4.9	5.3	5.1	5.2	4.2
% of holdings held	92.0	55.5	6.7	29.8	-
% of area held	96.8	74.9	8.1	13.8	-
Average size of holding Acres	17.0	19.0	16.9	6.5	

According to the tables described earlier, a significant portion of the landowners, 36% to be exact, were poor peasants who controlled a mere 3.5% of the total area, with 56% of those same individuals owning a mere 15% of the land. A mere 44% of the populace was the rightful owner of the remaining 85% of the land. Just 4% of the people, or 25% of the land area, had an estate larger than 50 acres. Roughly a third of the land was owned by 28% of the population, who had 10 to 25 acres. Middle peasants make up around 11% of the population, and wealthy peasants own 25–50 acres, or about 28% of the land. A possible description for the remaining 4% of the people, who held more than 50 acres and ½ of the total land, is "Doras." These "Doras," who possessed over 20% of the entire area hundreds of acres could be considered proprietors, holding 50% of the land.

Feudal State

It was evident that the agrarian structure in Hyderabad state was reminiscent of mediaeval feudal history. However the predominant land tenure system in the state was Ryotwari. The number of sizable landlords who owned vast tracts of land was staggering. In 1948-9, it was reported that approximately 550 Pattedars, who possessed 60 to 70% of the total cultivable land in the three districts of Nalgonda, Mahboobnagar, and Warangal, owned more than 500 acres land. The peasants were exploited by the Jagirdars, Paigahs, and Samsthanams, who collected illegal exactions and excessive taxes from them. Firmana, issued by the Nizam, forbade 82 types of unlawful exactions. Due to the lack of enforcement of the firmana, landlords continued to collude in their unlawful extractions with the Government officials

Conclusion

The agrarian history of Telangana from 1883 to 1948, under the feudal rule of the Nizam and his intermediaries, presents a grim narrative of exploitation, domination, and resistance. The rural landscape was dominated by powerful Deshmukhs, Jagirdars, and Samsthan chiefs, who, with the support of the state, controlled vast tracts of land and wielded unchecked authority over the peasantry. The socio-economic and administrative framework was designed to serve the interests of the ruling elite, while the bulk of the population, mainly comprising lower castes, tenants, and landless laborers, remained impoverished and subjugated.

At the heart of Telangana's rural society lay a rigid feudal land system that closely corresponded with caste-based hierarchies. Land ownership was concentrated in the hands of dominant castes—particularly Reddys, Velamas, Kammas, and Brahmins—who emerged as parasitic rent-receiving classes, while the vast majority of cultivators, predominantly from Dalit and backward castes, were reduced to the status of tenants-at-will or vetti laborers. Agricultural production, though central to livelihood, remained technologically backward, and inequality in land distribution, irrigation access, and subsidiary employment opportunities exacerbated rural distress.

Feudal intermediaries such as patels, patwaris, Deshmukhs, Deshpandes, and Sardeshmukhs enjoyed hereditary rights over land and administration. They not only amassed wealth through land control, money lending, and trade, but also perpetuated social domination through coercion, evictions, and illegal exactions. The vetti system a particularly inhumane form of unpaid, caste-based forced labor symbolized the everyday degradation and loss of dignity suffered by Telangana's rural poor.

The peasantry and the people of Telangana had been struggling against the forced labour, illegal exactions, evictions by the feudal lords, deshmukhs and jagirdars. The agrarian social structure is closely corresponded to the structure of landownership, power and authority. Agriculture was and is, considered to be the main

source of livelihood to the bulk of the population. But the agricultural methods were primitive and imperfect. The better soils are cropped regularly; the inferior soils are discarded. Agricultural production is very much determined by the factors like the size of landholdings and pattern of land distribution, irrigation facilities, type of cultivation and methods employed etc.

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