



# A Fight Against Feudal Exploitation and for People's Liberation

**K. Sudhakar**, Assistant Professor of History, SRR Government Arts & Science College (Autonomous), Karimnagar

## Abstract

The Telangana People's Armed Movement (1946–1951) represents one of the most sustained agrarian uprisings in twentieth-century India. Emerging within the princely State of Hyderabad under the rule of Mir Osman Ali Khan, the movement articulated peasant resistance against entrenched feudal hierarchies, exploitative tenancy arrangements, bonded labour practices (vetti), and political authoritarianism. Initially reform-oriented and mobilisational in character, the struggle evolved into organised armed resistance under the ideological influence of the Communist Party of India, working through the platform of the Andhra Mahasabha. This article analyses the socio-economic foundations, organisational trajectory, gender and caste participation, institutional experiments in rural governance, and long-term implications of the movement. It argues that the Telangana uprising was not merely a regional confrontation but a transformative episode in India's democratic evolution, influencing agrarian policy and rural political consciousness in the post-independence period.

**Keywords:** *Telangana Armed Movement; Agrarian Relations; Vetti; Peasant Mobilisation; Hyderabad State; Rural Democracy.*

## Introduction

The historiography of India's freedom struggle has traditionally privileged anti-colonial resistance against British authority. However, within princely states, parallel movements unfolded against indigenous autocratic regimes and semi-feudal agrarian systems. The Telangana movement occupies a distinct position among such struggles due to its duration, organisational coherence, and structural impact.

In Telangana, agrarian relations were marked by unequal land distribution, insecurity of tenure, and coercive extraction. Political participation was severely restricted. Under these circumstances, peasant discontent gradually crystallised into organised collective action. The movement's trajectory—from petitions and peaceful mobilisation to armed resistance and experiments in village-level governance—offers insight into how socio-economic grievances can transform into broad democratic assertions.

## Agrarian Structure and Feudal Authority in Hyderabad State

Hyderabad State retained hierarchical agrarian arrangements well into the mid-twentieth century. Large estates were held by jagirdars, deshmukhs, and local doras who exercised extensive economic and administrative powers. Tenants cultivated land under insecure conditions and were frequently subjected to arbitrary rent increases and eviction.

The agrarian system was characterised by:

- High rents and grain levies
- Extra-legal cesses and forced collections
- The practice of vetti (unpaid compulsory labour)
- Limited legal safeguards for tenants
- Social discrimination against lower castes

The absence of representative institutions further reinforced elite dominance. Administrative mechanisms often aligned with landlord interests, leaving peasants with minimal avenues for grievance redressal. These structural conditions laid the groundwork for organised mobilisation.

## **Immediate and Structural Causes**

### **1. Tenurial Insecurity and Rural Indebtedness**

Concentration of land in a narrow elite intensified socio-economic stratification. Tenants lacked written contracts, and eviction remained a constant threat. Debt dependence on landlords and moneylenders deepened subordination.

### **2. The Vetti System**

Vetti symbolised everyday coercion. Rural households were compelled to provide unpaid labour for agricultural, domestic, and ceremonial purposes. Resistance to vetti often invited punitive reprisals. The demand for its abolition became a central unifying slogan.

### **3. Political Authoritarianism**

The Hyderabad administration offered limited civil liberties. Following Indian independence in 1947, political uncertainty and the question of accession amplified tensions. Popular aspirations for responsible governance intensified.

### **4. Organised Political Intervention**

The transformation of the Andhra Mahasabha from a cultural forum into a political platform was decisive. Guided by the Communist Party of India and leaders such as P. Sundarayya, systematic political education converted dispersed grievances into coordinated collective action.

## **Phases of the Movement**

### **Phase I (1944–1946): Reformist Assertion**

The early stage emphasised lawful and collective protest. Village meetings, petitions, rent resistance, and refusal to perform vetti marked this phase. The psychological barrier of fear began to erode as peasants experienced the strength of solidarity. Though largely non-violent, this phase laid the organisational infrastructure for subsequent developments.

### **Phase II (1946–1948): Armed Self-Defence and Rural Administration**

Escalating repression triggered the formation of self-defence squads (dalams). Armed confrontation expanded across several districts. In areas where landlord authority collapsed, village committees emerged to manage local affairs.

- Distribution of surplus land
- Regulation of wages
- Settlement of disputes through informal courts
- Protection of villagers from coercion

Such measures represented experiments in decentralised rural governance. The integration of Hyderabad into the Indian Union in September 1948 marked a major political shift, though resistance continued briefly thereafter.

### **Phase III (1948–1951): Reassessment and Withdrawal**

Post-integration, altered political conditions necessitated strategic reconsideration. Continued armed struggle became increasingly untenable. In 1951, the leadership formally withdrew the movement. Nevertheless, its social transformations endured beyond its organisational conclusion.

### **Participation of Women and Marginalised Communities**

Women's involvement expanded the movement's social base. They acted as organisers, messengers, cultural mobilisers, and occasionally as combatants. Participation facilitated greater public visibility and challenged patriarchal constraints within rural society.

Dalits and backward caste communities actively engaged in mobilisation, linking class struggle with resistance to caste-based oppression. The movement thus intersected economic justice with social dignity, broadening its emancipatory scope.

### **Socio-Economic Impact**

- Significant decline of vetti practices
- Redistribution of certain categories of surplus land
- Improved bargaining position of agricultural labourers
- Weakening of arbitrary landlord authority
- Heightened rural political awareness

While not all redistributive gains were permanently institutionalised, the emergence of rights-conscious rural communities constituted a durable outcome.

### **Historiographical Reflections**

Scholars have interpreted the movement through multiple lenses—class struggle, regional nationalism, and democratic awakening. Debates persist regarding the continuation of armed resistance after Hyderabad's integration and the long-term sustainability of village-level reforms. Yet there is broad consensus that the Telangana movement represents one of the most extensive agrarian mobilisations in modern India.

### **Legacy and Contemporary Significance**

The experience of Telangana influenced later discussions on land ceilings, tenancy reform, and decentralised governance. It contributed to shaping regional political consciousness and democratic participation in rural India. The movement's memory continues to inform discourses on agrarian justice, social equality, and grassroots democracy.

### **Conclusion**

The Telangana People's Armed Movement (1946–1951) emerged from deeply unequal agrarian and political structures within Hyderabad State. Through progressive mobilisation, armed self-defence, and institutional experimentation, it challenged feudal authority and articulated alternative visions of rural governance. Although formally concluded in 1951, its broader impact transcended its immediate timeframe. By fostering collective agency among peasants, women, and marginalised communities, the movement contributed significantly to India's democratic and agrarian transformation. It remains a landmark episode in the history of people's movements in modern India.

### **References**

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