

The secrecy behind Telangana's Chapter 8

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Telangana Opinion.

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What made the government include a secret chapter in an apparently public exercise? Here's a history of what happened so far

THE JUDGEMENT of the Andhra Pradesh High Court in the case of the Srikrishna Committee's secret Chapter 8 reveals what amounts to a conspiracy involving many personalities, in an attempt to fool the 40 million people of Telangana. It did not take much – only a fair and independent judiciary – to cast light on the dark places that the Srikrishna Committee has hidden its nefarious secret 'note'.

This led the high court to state: "If one has any doubt about the hidden opposition of the Committee for formation of Telangana, that stands removed with this note." Still, that is now in the past – a dark and terrible phase that has destroyed the reputation of an eminent personality and the integrity of the government of India, and has damaged the reputation of the Congress high command. Let us recall the history of the Telangana movement, before we address the future.

In 1956, when the merger with Andhra Pradesh was forced on Telangana, its people were just coming out of feudal dependency and the invasion, or liberation, by the Indian army. Soon after, they faced the most serious Communist revolution in history of the country, which was crushed by the army. The people then were innocent of politics and ignorant of the machinations of the politicians.

They trusted their sovereign, the Nizam, and he failed them. They went along with their natural leaders – their feudal aristocracy and the urban intelligentsia who had been frightened by the sudden transition and the Communist threat. Despite their better instincts, the ruling elite of Telangana reluctantly followed Nehru even after he reversed his position on retaining a united Hyderabad state, then again on an independent Telangana. Nehru assured them on March 5, 1956, at Nizamabad: "Ek masoom bholi bholi ladki ko ek natkat ladke ke saat shaadi kiya jaa raha hai, chahe toh woh milke reh sakte hai ya bichad sakte hai (an innocent girl is marrying a naughty boy. If they wish to, they can stay together; or they could separate.)"

There was a gentleman's agreement – in those days a gentleman kept his word even if it meant his death. What no one, least of all the Telangana leaders, knew was that the Andhra leaders were no gentlemen. They were aggressive politicians bred in the traditions of the British Raj and the provincial politics of the then Madras Province since 1935. Words for them were only a convenience. They broke every promise they made to three generations of Telangana people; and the Telangana people watched open-mouthed at this extraordinary behaviour because they didn't want to believe the worst.

The penny dropped late in 1969. By this time – 13 years after merger – the middle classes in Telangana had grown in number, they got themselves educated and demanded their fair share of the jobs. Their revolt was combined with the agitation of Telangana irrigation engineers who exposed the scandal of Telangana's Nagarjuna Left Bank canal being deprived of water, the delay in taking up the Pochampad project, and the diversion of Telangana surpluses to Andhra.

All this drove the movement for separation forward. Politicians jumped on the bandwagon but despite their electoral success in 1971, when the time came and the Congress high command issued a diktat, they meekly folded and accepted the idea that a man from Telangana as chief minister, PV Narasimha Rao, would make a difference.

Now it was the turn of the Jai Andhra movement of 1972. The reluctance to allow reservation of Telangana jobs for Telangana residents, the refusal to accept a Telangana chief minister, the drastic land ceiling laws that threatened to dispossess the kulaks and big farmers of Andhra, all this combined to fuel the Andhra separatist movement. At that point, bifurcation would have been met with great approval in both regions.

Indira Gandhi decided against it. No one knows why. No one dared to ask her. So, once again, a member of the Nehru family gave assurances, which proved to be worthless. Two thousand or more students had died in police firing, many thousands defected to Naxalism, and tens of thousands went to the US – a land that gave them a brighter future than their own.

After thirty years, this current movement began. This time it was driven by a revolt of the children of working class and peasant families – families that had invested their money and their hope in the education of the children with hopes for employment. But liberalisation led to a dearth of government jobs. It now meant that every village in Telangana was now on the warpath – quietly, firmly and steadfastly – for a separate Telangana.

They hoped that when it came, their children's future would be better. The rapid growth of post-liberalisation business, the rise in land prices, the scams in allocation of land in and around Hyderabad, and the influx of settlers from Andhra, all made for a potent brew. It had to explode and it did – in the Telangana fashion – quietly and mostly at their own cost – 600 students have committed suicide in protest till date.

It is time to accept the inevitable with good grace. The people of Telangana are neither devils nor intent on revenge for past wrongs. The past is gone; nothing will bring back to life the martyrs. Telangana will come quickly and go on forever

Before the victory of the National Democratic Alliance, the Bharatiya Janata Party (bjp) promised four new states including Telangana. But when in power, it created only three new ones and left Telangana out. Why? Said LK Advani: "A peculiar situation has arisen in the case of the demand for a separate Telangana, a demand which is as old as the formation of Andhra Pradesh in 1956. The bjp has backed this demand. However, we could not do anything in this regard since the Telugu Desam Party, which supported the Vajpayee government between 1998 and 2004, was opposed to it."

By 2004, the Congress and the United Progressive Alliance (upa) capitalised on the Telangana sentiment to drive the Telugu Desam Party (tdp) and the bjp out of power. It promised that "The upa government will consider the demand for formation of a Telangana state at an appropriate time after due consultations and consensus'. It won and so did the upa. After the election, the polity favoured statehood for Telangana. This included the upa and, of course, the bjp, which was liberated from the embrace of the tdp. The tdp, which opposed a separate Telangana, was thrown out of power in Andhra Pradesh. So it must be assumed that the entire Andhra electorate voted for bifurcation in 2004. The President in his address to the Joint Session of Parliament in 2004 stated: "The upa government will consider the demand for the formation of a Telangana state at an appropriate time after due consultations."

IN 2005, former prime minister Chandra Shekhar said, “The demand for a Telangana state is a genuine demand emanating from the aspirations of the people. Telangana has all the qualities that a self-sustaining state needs: economic viability, public support, unique cultural traditions, optimum geographical size, and relevant historical context”. Another former prime minister, VP Singh, stated: “Any delay in clinching the issue will not only cause erosion of credibility of the present government but will also force the people of Telangana to go back to the agitation mode.”

A third former PM, Inder Kumar Gujral, recalled history: “Over the years – ever since the Indira Gandhi era – I have felt that the formation of this state would go a long way to end many agonies and sufferings of the people in this region and provide opportunities for their socioeconomic development” Sharad Pawar, strongman of Maharashtra, added: “The demand of the people of Telangana for a separate state is not a new or sudden development. It has been there for more than five decades. The grievances of the people of the region are real and their demand for a Telangana state is genuine.”

Lalu Prasad understood what was driving the movement. “The people of the region have been fighting for it for more than a half a century. It is a people’s movement in a real sense. This movement has always been solidly backed by every section of the people of the region.

Intellectuals, government employees and students remained all through as the backbone of the movement. And now, it has percolated down to the agrarian sector and the working classes. The people of this region strongly feel, and they have every reason to feel so, that they can no longer live in the integrated state of Andhra Pradesh with self-respect and dignity.”

Mayawati played it even more boldly. She said: “The demand of the people of Telangana for a separate state is not a new or sudden development. It has been there for the last five to six decades. Any further delay in forming the state of Telangana will send wrong signals to the people.” To add, as chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, she wanted her own state divided into four separate ones to help development and to devolve power closer to the people. An extraordinary politician, she is.

If in 2005, the political will for a separate Telangana was unanimous, why did it not happen? While earlier the bjp could do nothing due to the opposition of the tdp, now the Congress high command could do nothing due to the opposition of YS Rajasekhara Reddy, the then chief minister.

The Congress dodged the issue throughout until 2009; it repeated its promise for a separate Telangana in the General Election of 2009; won the election again even though the tdp, now chastened, supported a separate Telangana in its manifesto. But once again the Congress was busy dodging the issue when suddenly the leadership in Andhra Pradesh was changed by an act of god.

Telangana became a vote bank, with over a third of the assembly seats, for the tdp and the Congress and they found the promise of statehood the only way to capture it. Yet, if they granted statehood, they would lose that vote bank and would have to slog it out in the remainder of the Andhra state.

The situation has now become fluid and after further agitations, the Andhra political parties agreed to Telangana statehood and the Congress Legislature Party passed the decision on to their party president Sonia Gandhi.

Sonia Gandhi decided in favour, the union cabinet resolved to do so and the historic announcement of home minister P Chidambaram on December 9, 2009, followed: “The process of forming the state of Telangana will be initiated. An appropriate resolution will be moved in the state assembly.” The next day he announced this to the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha.

Some Andhra leaders sparked off an agitation and this time it was not Jai Andhra as in 1971 but it looked more like 'Seemandhra politicians and businessmen want to rule Hyderabad'. The Srikrishna Committee was then set up to distract the Telangana population. It did not work and it is over and done with. Even before the Srikrishna Committee Report was exposed, some distinguished Andhra intellectuals issued an open letter. It is written with great balance and grace and wisdom. They asked for emotional oneness.

It is time to accept the inevitable with good grace. The people of Telangana are neither devils nor intent on revenge for past wrongs. The past is past; nothing will bring back to life the martyrs to the cause; nothing will return these children to their grieving parents and families. Telangana will come quickly and go on forever, but the flood of tears will dry slowly, very slowly.

The only prayer is that more young persons do not die for the cause. After the wasted and bitter experience of the Srikrishna Committee, we have now returned to the position as of December 9, 2009 when Sonia Gandhi accepted Telangana. She is the third member of the Nehru family to decide the fate of Telangana. Third time lucky, they say.

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