

Reddys, Kammas and Telangana

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Reddy-Kamma rivalry has defined politics in Andhra Pradesh in both the Congress Party and the Telugu Desam Party. The two communities used a pliant Telangana vote bank in their battles, but this option is now no longer available to them. Should that come in the way of the formation of a state of Telangana?

Take Andhra: there are only two major communities spread over the linguistic area. They are either Reddis or the Kammas. They hold all the land, all the offices, and all the business.

– Ambedkar 1955

Caste is an important factor in the political history of Andhra Pradesh and remains critical for political mobilisation. Most scholars have pointed out the hegemony of the Reddy and Kamma castes.

– Sri Krishna Committee (SKC) Report: 410

The Reddys and Kammas continue to hold economic and political power and are likely to continue to play an influential role in future decisions regarding the state.

– SKC Report: 310.

Caste and Party Politics

A Reddy-Kamma alliance with the Reddys playing a dominant role has become the leitmotif of the Andhra Pradesh (AP) Congress. This control is based partly on numerical strength, dominant status in villages and economic power. As for numerical strength:

...the regional distribution of upper castes varies with Coastal Andhra having the highest proportion at 32%, followed by Rayalaseema at 24% and Telangana having the smallest proportion at only 11% (SKC Report: 380).

Of the 11 cabinets formed from 1956 to 1980, the Reddy contingent supplied an average of 26% of the total with the brahmins (7%), Kammas (8%) and Kapus and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) (28%). This was in line with the general dominance of the Reddy community in the seven assemblies (with an average strength of 294 seats) during the period 1957 to 1985, when they had an average of 25% of the seats with brahmins getting 9%, Kammas 14% and backward castes 17%. While all this was going on, during the same period there was a total collapse of brahmin presence in the seven assemblies (from 23 to 11 MLAs) as well as in the same 11 cabinets (from 23% to 6%) (Reddy 1989: 305-06).

However, it is an odd but incontestable fact that a Kamma has never been a Congress chief minister. This is significant in that

the Kamma community from 1953 until 1983 had almost totally supported the Congress Party with votes, funds and media support. That was to change with the advent of the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), which, in its turn, has had only Kamma chief ministers till date! While the Congress has some Kamma support and the TDP Reddy support, they largely reflect the interests of the dominant castes that control their fortunes. However, as Carolyn Elliott (1970) comments, these Reddy-Kamma equations are unstable and tend to fall apart.

The TDP victory in 1983 and again in 1985 – with massive majorities in Telangana – broke the old power relations and ensured 10 odd years of TDP rule. As the SKC says:

The rise and subsequent long rule of Telugu Desam Party, led/dominated by the Kammas of Coastal Andhra, further consolidated Telugu identity, while successfully suppressing the demand for a separate Telangana state (SKC Report: 342).

During the TDP reign, it was obvious that the Rayalaseema Reddys were under severe pressure, especially with Chandrababu Naidu's successful attempt at playing the modernist politician publicly while fulfilling the dreams of his vested interest lobby. His period also saw the rise of Kamma power in Rayalaseema.

The entry of Y S Rajasekhara Reddy (YSR), who became leader of the opposition in 1999, altered the strategy of the Congress Party.

For by 1999, caste-based voting had become the fact of AP politics: survey data showed that 87% of Kammas and 62% of the "Peasant Other Backward Castes" in AP voted for the TDP while 77% of the Reddys, 64% of the scheduled castes and 60% of Muslims for the Congress (Suri 2002: Table 6). This meant that the overall election result rested with the other communities such as Kapus, "Service OBCs" and scheduled tribes who voted almost equally for the two major parties (ibid) and could swing the very fine division of the floating vote (10%) which decided which party will get the majority of seats in the assembly.

The emergence of other caste groups such as the Kapu-dominated Praja Rajyam Party (PRP) destabilised the electoral scene. The PRP proceeded to take away nearly 12% of the TDP vote share and ensured the

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victory for the second time of the Congress Party and YSR.¹

However, the re-emergence of the Telangana movement as a major mass movement meant that the equations within the Congress Party and the state – now dominated by YSR and the Rayalaseema Reddys – had to be addressed. YSR and the Congress had backed the movement as a way of enticing the Telangana voters away from the TDP and this worked well for the party in 2004 and 2009. For the dominant castes in Telangana – Reddys and Velmas – had been forced by the strength of the movement to fall in line with the separate statehood demand. This was commented on by the SKC:

The Telangana upper castes have thrown in their lot with the rest of the region in their demand for separate Telangana as they see greater political and economic opportunities for themselves in a separate state. The leadership of the movement remains with the upper caste while the mass following is provided by the SCs and OBCs (SKC Report: 380).

YSR could hardly afford to lose the newly acquired base in Telangana by conceding what he and the high command promised Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) and the all voters in Andhra Pradesh – a separate Telangana state. It may not have mattered to the Congress high command or the party but it mattered a lot to the Rayalaseema Reddy faction and their control of the state Congress Party and government. So the policy of “delay and deceive” was implemented. However all this unravelled with YSR’s death and the demand of his large faction to make his young son Jaganmohan Reddy chief minister – a demand not conceded by the high command of the Congress Party. By late 2009, the high command strategy in this context seems to be aimed at conceding Telangana statehood as a way of breaking the YSR faction.

Telangana Statehood

Under the guidance of the Congress high command, the political parties in the state agreed to a separate Telangana on 6 December 2009, and the union government agreed formally on 9 December 2009 and announced the decision to both houses of Parliament. After protests from Coastal Andhra and Rayalaseema regions this was followed by an attempt to divert the process by appointing the Sri Krishna Committee. Its report did nothing to sort out the issue but

on the other hand exposed the real agenda – to assist in reversing the Telangana statehood decision.

The recent resignations of 101 members of the assembly including nine ministers and 10 members of Parliament – all from Telangana – have caused a national sensation and threatens to destabilise the Congress governments both in Andhra Pradesh and in New Delhi – especially as the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government at the centre is shaky in the Lok Sabha. The crisis is now acute and needs to be solved.

The Telangana statehood issue has acted to unravel the caste-party politics in Andhra Pradesh. Despite the Reddy-dominated Congress Party and the Kamma-dominated TDP, the caste equations were relatively stable even if adversarial. The SKC comments very astutely on this issue:

The accommodation between these two regions has been in terms of political domination by Rayalaseema and economic domination by Coastal Andhra. Together the two regions have ruled the state through Congress and TDP political formations. Telangana feels dominated by the upper castes of these regions and its struggle is primarily to shake off their yoke (SKC Report: 390).

The SKC too expected that Telangana statehood would provoke the move for a separate Rayalaseema state: “The agitation for separation of Rayalaseema from Coastal Andhra may also start taking shape sooner than expected” (ibid: 451). It added for good measure: “The other combination of regions – Coastal Andhra and Rayalaseema together can also sustain themselves as a state; in fact they can also sustain themselves separately” (ibid: 121).

Kamma Anxieties

The collapse of the TDP and the rise of the Telangana movement brought a deep sense of concern to the Kamma notables in the Congress Party. They were reasonably happy with the TDP as they had their caste-based connections to its top leadership but YSR had sidelined them totally in their own party. With his death and the inevitability of the Telangana statehood, their latent anger burst forth.

Things had gone to the extent that the veteran Guntur Congress MP Rayapati Sambasiva Rao is quoted in the press as saying:

Kammas like me, my family, Eluru MP Kavuri Sambasiva Rao, Vijayawada MP Lagadapati

Rajagopal, Renuka Choudhary, have ceaselessly toiled for the party. Yet, Reddys and others tell the high command not to give any posts to Kammas. I spend nearly Rs 15 crore in every election. But what is the use as our services are not being recognised (*Times of India* 2010).

This then indicated that the powerful Coastal Kammas would perhaps be happy to have their own state where they could get rid of the Reddy domination of the Congress Party.

Rayalaseema Reddy Concerns

The Rayalaseema Reddys naturally are apprehensive that they will be unable to cope with the Kamma economic clout. The Rayalaseema Rashtra Samithi (RRS) president Kuncham Venkata Subba Reddy asked the UPA government to carve out Greater Rayalaseema before conceding the demand for statehood to the Telangana region. His idea of Greater Rayalaseema included Kadapa, Kurnool, Anantapur and Chittoor in Rayalaseema region, Vellore and Krishnagiri districts in Tamil Nadu and Raichur, Bellary and Kolar districts in Karnataka (*The Hindu* 2010). A land grab of quite a proportion!

Kotla Jaya Surya Prakash Reddy, son of a former chief minister and member of Lok Sabha from Kurnool is quoted as saying:

Our first preference is that the State remains unified. But if it is to be divided into two, then we do not want to stay with Andhra. We want a trifurcation and a separate state – Greater Rayalaseema (*Deccan Herald* 2009)

During the Telugu Desam and YSR regimes, a concerted grab of land in and around Hyderabad and Ranga Reddy districts had taken place of largely government lands or lands whose title was uncertain as they had earlier belonged to the Nizam’s *sarf e khas* (private estate), the Crown lands, Paigah properties and Wakf Board assets.

SKC comments:

A number of transactions may not be formal and registered. Another aspect of Hyderabad’s real estate industry is the formal linkage to political leadership, often from other regions in Andhra Pradesh. For example, LANCO, an infrastructure and real estate company is associated with Lagadapati Rajagopal, an MP from Vijayawada; the Gayatri Construction firm is associated with T Subbairami Reddy, a former MP from Visakhapatnam; and Transstroy, a

firm involved in building the Outer Ring Road, is associated with Rayapati Sambasiva Rao, the MP from Guntur (ibid: 319).

Politically powerful Kammas and Reddys shared the major “projects” among themselves with a lot more other bit players from Coastal Andhra and Rayalaseema picking up the rest (*India Today* 2011).

This is the real fear of these vested interests now vociferously opposing Telangana statehood (or at least with Hyderabad a part of Telangana) – that they may be divested of their ill-gotten lands in and around Hyderabad.

Possible Outcomes

Whatever the obstacles laid before it, the Telangana movement has got a life of its own and now dominates the villages with a popular base and there is nothing any politicians can do about it. Yet even after the process for statehood was completed by the Government of India, the awareness that without the Telangana vote bank, Coastal Kammas and Rayalaseema Reddys

would have to slog it out one-to-one makes all the non-Telangana politicians reluctant to give up on their hitherto compliant and tame Telangana vote bank.

The only logical and political acceptable solution is to divide the state into three.² Then the dominant Kamma and Reddy politicians will each have their own states, which they can develop them without their energies being sapped by this ridiculous caste cold war that they have been waging for half a century to everyone’s detriment.

NOTES

- 1 It soon merged with the Congress in 2011. Though it took place after YSR’s death, it is speculated that this was the logical conclusion of his subtle moves to consolidate Congress Party power.
- 2 The viability of the two units – Coastal Andhra and Telangana – is good. Rayalaseema may need assistance. See Pingle (2010).

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