

Linguistic Nationalism in the Telugu-Speaking Madras Presidency (1913-1956)

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Abstract

Religious nationalism dates back to the sixteenth century, while linguistic nationalism emerged around 1870, reflecting the differing political and economic landscapes of traditional and modern societies. Traditional communities were agrarian and decentralised, while modern societies became centralised and industrialised, enhancing literacy and interaction with institutions. This made language vital for negotiating resources, leading to demands for official recognition of ethnic languages, often opposed by dominant groups. Linguistic nationalism has spurred ethnonational movements in regions like Quebec, Belgium's Flanders and Wallonia, Swiss French and German-speaking areas, and among Dravidian communities in India. Areas organised by language tend to have a stronger sense of identity, as movements for linguistic reorganisation foster solidarity and a common bond among people, reinforcing their shared struggle for identity. This article attempts to understand the formation of Andhra Pradesh, the first linguistic state, after the dissolution of the Madras Presidency.

Keywords: language, identity, nationalism, South India.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nationalism as a mass political movement developed its unique ideology of “seeking or exercising state power” (Breuilly, 1993). Linguistic nationalism that emerged after 1870 can be attributed to the diverse politico-economic landscapes of traditional and modern societies, characterised by centralisation, industrialisation, and literacy, which facilitated resource accumulation and increased interaction with official and unofficial institutions. As a result, language became a crucial tool for negotiating interactions. This led to a widespread demand for recognising various ethnic languages as official (DeVotta, 2004). Linguistic nationalism has historically been stronger in areas where states were organised along linguistic lines after a prolonged struggle for reorganisation that reflected linguistic solidarity, shared struggle, and a sense of common identity (Kumar, 1991). Throughout the twentieth century, South Asia experienced a significant rise in the advocacy for the recognition of ‘mother tongues.’ However, language is complex, particularly as a national marker because of the history of multilingual societies where geographical and linguistic borders merge, producing a complicated picture. Language reflects the rights and identities of communities and their broader socio-cultural hierarchies through which “the politics of language incorporates a multiple struggle on one terrain- about language, in language, for language” (Pollock, 2003; Sarangi, 2015). This makes a nation a linguistic unit and linguistic community (Jespersen, 1954; Bhaba, 1990).

This commitment led to public protests and other displays of emotional attachment to one's mother tongue across India (Mitchell, 2009). The Indian National Congress acknowledged the significance of

language as early as 1921, and in 1928, the Nehru Report recognised the desirability of establishing linguistic provinces. Although Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru accepted the principle in the Constituent Assembly on November 27, 1947, the mobilisation by linguistic communities was initially viewed as a threat to the nation and denounced as parochial, chauvinist, and anti-national. Despite this resistance, the States Reorganisation Commission (SRC) was established in 1955 and largely supported reorganising India's administration based on language (Oommen, 1999; Majeed, 2003). This article will deal with the emergence of linguistic nationalism that strove to form a separate Telugu-speaking Andhra Pradesh, leading to a recognition of their culture and language.

2. The Andhra Movement (1913-1952)

Language plays an important role in forming an independent nationality. National identity refers to the identity of the citizens of a country with their own country's historical and cultural traditions, moral values, ideals, beliefs, national sovereignty, and so on. It is manifested as individuals or groups believe that they belong to a country as a political community (Liu & Turner, 2018). During British rule, provincial languages were subsidiary to official languages. The national political consciousness sprouted first in Bengal after the declaration of the Bengal partition in 1905. The Telugu speakers opposed the Bengal partition and the proposed separation of Ganjam and Vishakhapatnam from the Madras Presidency (The Madras Standard, 1903). Moreover, literati Gurujada Sriramamurti's Kavi Jivitamulu (Lives of [Telugu] Poets), adorned a preface addressing Telugu desa bhasa abhimanulu or "those having affection for or pride in the language of the Telugu country." The term abhimanulu later came to be synonymous with patriotism (Mitchell, 2009).

The Andhra Movement was part of the freedom struggle, and leaders like Pattabhi Sitaramayya expressed the need for a separate university for the Telugus back in 1910. The movement began on May 20, 1913, when the Andhra Conference (which came to be known as Andhra Mahajana Sabha or Andhra Maha Sabha) held its first meeting in Bapatla and hoped to utilise the Telugu Congress to achieve a separate Telugu province (The Hindu, May 28, 1913). The delegates differed on whether to raise the question of a separate province for the Telugus. The Telugu non-Brahmins, fearing the divisiveness of such a move, joined the Tamils of Nellore and Chittoor to oppose the demand for an Andhra province (The Hindu, June 8, 1913). The second Andhra Conference held at Bezwada in April 1914 passed a resolution by an overwhelming majority that it was desirable to constitute the Telugu-speaking areas of the Madras Presidency into a province. To foster the Andhra Movement, the Andhra Patrika moved its office from Bombay to Madras and became a daily newspaper instead of a weekly one. In the same year, the Congress took up the question of Andhra province and reorganised its provincial units based on language. The third, fourth and fifth Andhra Conferences held each year from 1915 to 1917 at Vizagapatnam, Cocanada, and Nellore, respectively, witnessed strong disagreements regarding separate state formation. It was alleged that the leaders had not reached out to people, especially the lowest caste groups (Rajagopal, 1985).

The creation of the Andhra Provincial Congress Committee (APCC) in 1917 was a major stepping stone towards the formation of Andhra. Moreover, the Montagu-Chelmsford Report (1918) suggested redrawing the state boundaries or creating new provinces based on vernaculars, smaller and homogeneous units. Alongside, Diwan Bahadur D. Seshagiri Rao Pantulu proposed a separate Andhra University. In this regard, Sasi Bhusana Rath commented:

Sir, this resolution seems to have been brought with the idea of solving the Andhra Province question.

This resolution is brought in to establish the claim of the Andhras for an Andhra Province. A university for the Andhras is sought not because the present University of Madras has really outgrown its dimension, not because that it does not satisfy the needs of the Andhras, but because the Andhras want a province of their own.... (Madras Legislative Council Debates, September 2, 1921)

Despite all arguments, on October 15, 1920, the Madras University Senate proposed the establishment of at least one university for each linguistic area within the Presidency and on April 26, 1926, Andhra University was inaugurated in Vijayawada (Narayana Rao, 2017). However, problems arose as some Andhra leaders proposed Madras City to be a part of Andhra, while the Tamils opposed the idea of a separate state (Thirumali, 2013). The question of affiliation of the Rayalaseema districts to the Andhra and Karnataka provinces became an issue for the Congress. Another difficulty was to persuade the regional leaders to join the movement, who were reluctant due to differences in regional developmental patterns with the coastal districts (AICC Papers, 1938-39).

However, the famous Sri Bagh Pact signed on November 16, 1937, bridged the gap and proposed measures to provide opportunities for both regions (Kumar, 1994). The Andhra Movement in its final stage glossed over all sorts of differences between the three ecological regions of coastal Andhra, Rayalaseema and Telangana and became a “mass expression of the regional patriotism of all Telugus” (Harrison, 1968).

Considering the multinational character of the country, the Communist Party of India (CPI) suggested in 1943 that the struggle for linguistic states was not for disrupting the unity of India, but “for the fullest flowering of the democratic culture of all the peoples speaking different languages and the development of their languages and literature” (Peoples Democracy, 2020). Interestingly, Mahatma Gandhi was in favour of carving out linguistic states with words of caution and in one of the issues of Harijan, he commented:

The Congress Working Committee had been discussing the question of reconstitution of provinces on a linguistic basis. The Congress had already adopted that principle and had declared its intention to give effect to it constitutionally as soon as they came to power, as such redistribution would be conducive to the cultural advancement of the country. But such redistribution should not militate against the organic unity of India. Autonomy did not and should not mean disruption or that hereafter provinces could go the way they chose, independent of one another and of the Centre. If each province began to look upon itself as a separate, sovereign unit, India’s independence would lose its meaning and with it would vanish the freedom of the various units as well.... The redistribution of provinces on a linguistic basis was necessary if provincial languages were to grow to their full height.... (Harijan, February 1, 1948).

However, Jawaharlal Nehru was not in favour of this as he feared linguistic provinces would hamper national solidarity. Nehru’s initial hesitation in acceding to the demand for linguistic states was due to his fears, anxieties, and dilemmas over narrow sectarian and exclusive feelings using the language of cultural nationalism (Khilnani, 2002). Ambedkar, on the other hand, supported linguistic provinces and as the chair of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution, emphasised this issue in his writings and speeches. He justified it by pointing out certain political advantages that would benefit the functioning of a democratic society. He believed this would promote unity and stability by fostering a common language and culture. Additionally, in his essay Needs for Checks and Balances: Articles on Linguistic States, Ambedkar warned against the potential exploitation and communalism that could arise from dominant language groups and urged caution in balancing the use of different languages within the country (Ambedkar, 2017; Sarangi, 2015).

The Working Committee of the Azad Hind Grandhalayam, Rebala, passed a resolution stating that the formation of a separate Andhra province was the keystone for the cultural and economic progress of the Andhras (AICC Papers, 1945-47). The Dar Commission, appointed by the Constituent Assembly on December 10, 1948, supported the Andhra demand for a separate state (Krishnamoorthy, 2016). But serious criticisms were posed against the Dar Committee's recommendations, which led to Congress's appointment at its Jaipur session, consisting of Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel, and Pattabhi Sitaramayya (J.V.P.) to examine the matter once again. The J.V.P. Committee recommended the formation of a separate Andhra State with undisputed Telugu areas and advised giving up Madras' claim (Ratnam, 2008).

Nevertheless, the decision to implement it was delayed. In such a situation, Potti Sreeramulu, an ardent follower of Mahatma Gandhi, came out in support and commenced a fast unto death on this issue on October 19, 1952. With his demise on December 15, 1952, after fasting for fifty-eight days, turmoil and unrest began throughout Andhra (Krishnamoorthy, 2016). Considering the tight corner and exasperation of the masses, Sri. K. Venkaiah, MLA, Public Department, passed a resolution that stated:

This State Assembly strongly feels that the separation of the Madras State and the formation of Andhra and other Linguistic Provinces has been delayed for a very long time and overdue. This Assembly deeply realized that the 44-year-old demand of the Andhra people for a separate Andhra province can no more be overlooked in the interests of maintaining the friendly relations between the peaceful development of all the component linguistic parts of the Madras State. This Assembly recommends to the Government to request the President of the Indian Republic to take immediate steps for the separation of the Madras State into linguistic states such as Andhra, Tamilnad etc., with undisputed areas, and the solution of the disputes arising out of separation through an arbitration Committee or any other democratic method (G.O. No. 328, 1953).

Following this, Jawaharlal Nehru, the Prime Minister of India, made a statement on March 25, 1953, regarding the establishment of the Andhra State. He said:

On December 19, 1952, I informed the House that the Government of India had decided to establish an Andhra State, consisting of the Telugu-speaking areas of the present Madras State, but not including the city of Madras, and that the Government were appointing Mr Justice K.N. Wanchoo, Chief Justice of the Rajasthan High Court, to consider and report on the financial and other implications of this decision and the questions to be considered in implementing it. Mr. Justice Wanchoo conducted this enquiry and presented his report on the 7th February 1953. The basic considerations which have to be kept in view are that an Andhra State has to be established and that it should consist of the Telugu-speaking areas of the present Madras State. Further, that the city of Madras is not to be included in the proposed Andhra State. The Andhra State, therefore, is to consist of what might be called the undisputed Telugu-speaking areas of the present Madras State. The Andhra State will consist of the following eleven districts: Srikakulam, Vishakhapatnam, East Godavari, West Godavari, Krishna, Guntur, Nellore, Kurnool, Anantapur, Cuddapah, Chittoor. The government are of the opinion that the site of this capital should be determined by the Andhra people themselves through their Legislative Assembly....the new Andhra State will be inaugurated on October 1, 1953...a Boundary Commission or Commissions will be appointed some time after the establishment of the Andhra State to determine the exact boundaries of that state and to recommend such adjustments as may be considered necessary in regard to the boundaries of the state with the residuary state of Madras and the Mysore State (File No.53/19/53, 1953).

Following this, the Andhra State Bill was drafted and passed in the Madras Legislative Assembly. Regarding it, Sri Vavilala Gopalakrishnaiah commented:

We are glad that after a long struggle and so much sacrifice by martyrs like Potti Sriramulu and others, we are now having before us a Bill for the setting up of the Andhra State to be introduced in Parliament, and which is to be recommended by the Madras Legislature for being accepted by the Parliament.... (Madras Legislative Assembly Debate, July 14, 1953)

Jawaharlal Nehru declared in the Parliament regarding the formation of the Andhra State on October 1, 1953. It was decided to locate the state capital at Kurnool in Rayalaseema because it was nearer to the coastal districts and possessed raw materials in abundance (G.O. Ms. No.2233, 1953). On the other hand, the High Court was established at Guntur in Andhra Pradesh (Kumar, 1994).

3. The Visalandhra or Greater Andhra Movement (1953-1956)

The formation of Andhra Pradesh in 1956 was not solely based on linguistic reasons or voluntary mass support but rather on manipulative political strategies. The state's creation did not reflect a united regional or communal motivation but highlighted personal conflicts and financial concerns. The newly formed Andhra State was rife with internal contradiction, primarily focused on its survival as vested interests vied for power. This led to the idea of Vishalandhra, driven by the belief that it could address issues related to the state capital, and financial crisis, and foster broader social and caste solidarities to overcome disunity among caste groups. So, the formation of Andhra Pradesh was shaped by personal and community interests (Thirumali, 2013).

The proposal of Visalandhra or greater Andhra first came from the Circar districts. The Andhra Rashtira, as it was conceived at the second Andhra Mahasabha Conference in 1914, was supposed to include all the contiguous Telugu areas in the British Provinces and the Nizam's Dominions. In 1931, when the British accepted federation as a goal for the provinces and native states, the Andhras of the Madras Presidency developed the idea of bringing together Telugu speakers under one administration. The Andhra Desa map, originally drawn in 1912, reappeared in the press on the Andhra Day Celebrations on March 24, 1936. The Ugadi festival was celebrated on the same day as an occasion for all Andhras of Rayalaseema, Korlarseema (Telugu-speaking area in Mysore), the Circars, and Telangana to express their linguistic unity. G.V. Subba Rao, the editor of the periodical Goshti, declared in one of his poems: "Circar, Andhras, Rayalaseema And the Telangana, All are one; All are Andhras, Proclaim this from house-tops, Without fear- without fear" (Krishnamoorthy, 2016).

The Andhra Congress Swarajya Party aimed for this and put it in its election manifesto. Towards the end of 1937, the Principal of the Andhra University colleges, Prof. M. Venkatarangayya, visualised an "ideal" Andhra Province. Like the coastal districts, the Andhras of Hyderabad demanded the same. By the 1930s, the Nizam Andhra Maha Sabha, led by President M. Hanumantha Rao, rallied for the Telugus in Telangana. With the dawn of India's independence and the accession of Hyderabad to the Indian Union, the impetus to demand Vishalandhra doubled. By 1949, the merging of the Circar Districts, the Rayalaseema region, and the Telangana Districts became obvious. To bolster the effort, A. Kaleswara Rao, one of the foremost Andhra leaders who worked for Vishalandhra, formed the Vishalandhra Mahasabha on November 26, 1949, with headquarters at Vijayawada (Narayana Rao, 2017).

After the formation of Andhra State in October 1953, the demand for creating other linguistic states gained momentum. On December 22, 1953, Nehru announced in the Lok Sabha the decision to set up a

States Reorganisation Commission (hereafter SRC) under Fazal Ali to examine “objectively and dispassionately” the whole issue of state reorganisation (Rao, 1978). The Commission did not discourage the creation of states on the principle of a common language. The SRC stated the argument for the merger of Andhra and Hyderabad (i.e., the Nizam’s Dominions) as it would bring into existence a State with a considerable hinterland, large water and power resources, adequate mineral wealth, and valuable raw materials. It was also believed that this would solve the difficult and vexing problem of finding a permanent capital for Andhra; the twin cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad being very well suited to be the capital of Vishalandhra. The Commission made clear its intentions within the perception of the linguistic community that it was one of the reasons why Andhra wanted Vishalandhra. But at the same time, it concluded that the unification of Telangana and Andhra should happen willingly and that it was for the Telangana people to make the decision (Thirumali, 2013).

The erstwhile united CPI vociferously advocated the formation of Vishalandhra (Crossroads, July 27, 1952). The central committee of the party laid down the policy in a resolution passed as early as December 30, 1952, stating:

The Communist Party holds that the formation of linguistic states is part of the struggle of the Indian people for democracy.... Moreover, this is essential for the fullest flowering of the democratic culture of all the peoples speaking different languages and the development of their language and literature. This is also necessary for laying the firm and secure foundation for building the unity of India, on the basis of democracy for and equality of all the various people who would voluntarily cooperate in the common endeavour of building a prosperous, progressive and democratic India (Madras Legislative Assembly Debates, November 22, 1955).

The central committee of the party laid down the policy in a resolution passed as early as In this regard, the Communist leader E.M.S. Namboodiripad opined:

No democracy can exist where a foreign language is used for this purpose. A democracy must be well-informed and must be able to understand and follow public affairs in order to take an effective part in them. It is inconceivable that a democracy can do this if a foreign language is used. It becomes essential, therefore, to conduct the business and politics of a country in a language which is understood by the masses.... Hence it becomes more desirable for provinces to be regrouped on a principle.... (New Age, October 2, 1955).

However, there were oppositions to implementing SRC recommendations and one of the principal causes seemed to be the apprehension of domination of coastal Andhra over Hyderabad in terms of education and job opportunities. This led the Andhra and Rayalaseema leaders to unite to fulfil the merger with Hyderabad. Leaders such as Tanguturi Prakasham, Neelam Sanjeeva Reddy, Pusapati Vijayaram Gajapathi Raju, and Kadapa Koti Reddy expressed the belief that Vishalandhra was the only solution to the political and financial crisis concerning the future of the state. They openly expressed their conviction that Vishalandhra would not only provide a state capital but also access to the abundant resources of Telangana (New Age, October 19, 1955).

Moreover, regarding putting boundaries, the Hon. Sri Subramaniam suggested certain principles:

Firstly, boundary line may be continuous one and isolated pockets should be avoided to the extent practicable.

Secondly, the village should be the unit for consideration and partition of villages should be avoided.

Thirdly, villages with over 50 per cent Telugu-speaking people should be incorporated in the Andhra state to the extent practicable and vice versa.

Fourthly, due consideration may be given to geographical features such as hills, forests and rivers as constituting natural boundaries between two States and to economic features such as irrigation sources and their ayacuts being in the same State (G.O. No.2910, 1955).

When the matter came for discussion in the legislative assembly, most Telangana legislators favoured unity with Andhra. Nevertheless, as the hardcore leaders supporting separate Telangana State continued to oppose the idea of Vishalandhra, the Congress High Command convened a meeting of the Congress leaders of both regions and came out with a “Gentlemen’s Agreement” signed on February 20, 1956, assuring Telangana in matters of revenue, education, government service, employment, and power sharing. A proposal was made to constitute a Regional Council for Telangana. It was also agreed that if the Chief Minister (CM) hailed from Andhra, the Deputy Chief Minister would be from Telangana, and vice versa. Moreover, it was decided that two out of the five important ministerial portfolios would be offered to Telangana. Jawaharlal Nehru finally inaugurated the unified state of Andhra Pradesh on November 1, 1956 (Pingle, 2010; Srikanth, 2011).

4. Conclusion

The freedom struggle in India was important against colonialism and germinated the concept of nationhood by effectively integrating diverse regions into one entity called India. However, after gaining independence, India experienced violent movements driven by subnational identities, showing the strength of regional aspirations. It is important to note that both pan-Indian sentiment and regional aspirations have always played a crucial role in shaping India. The anti-colonial struggle unified all regions and helped to stand up against the British. However, after independence, the nation-building process necessitated the reorganisation of the areas based on cultural factors and the elevation of their importance. As a result, there was a surge of sub-nationalist movements in the immediate post-independence period (Nag, 2011). For India, every section of the people, including its territory, common historical traditions, language, and economic life, was supposed to be recognised as a distinct nationality with the right to exist as an autonomous state within the Indian Union or Federation. But this recognition did not necessarily mean actual separation. The boundaries in South India were in close conformity with traditional linguistic regions (Brass, 1990). However, these tendencies were not communal, although the language question was tied to the idea of community (Leaf, 1976). The linguistic identification of people with their regions was a sign of a democratic upsurge in independent India (Kaviraj, 2015).

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