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Hyderabad State's Revenue Machinery and Rural Distress: A Study of Telangana's Diwani Districts

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Abstract:
In this paper, the author investigates how the revenue administration of Hyderabad State and the agrarian unrest that had swept the Diwani (directly administered) districts of Telangana during the late colonial and early post-independence era, c. 1930-1948, are structurally linked. The study examines the functioning of the Nizam's revenue machinery—talukdars, patels, patwaris, and divisional collectors—as a tool for surplus extraction by the government at the cost of the peasantry of agrarian Telangana by relying on primary historical sources, administrative records of Hyderabad Civil List, Reports of Hyderabad Revenue Department, Sunderlal Committee Report (1948), and secondary historiography. The paper especially deals with six big Diwani districts, namely Nalgonda, Warangal, Karimnagar, Medak, Mahbubnagar, and Adilabad. It examines the land revenue assessment modalities, the survival of coercive practices like vetti (bonded labour), the buildup of arrears, and the entanglement of peasant debt with the revenue system. The evidence collected through five sets of data tables from archival and secondary sources shows that the tax-collection system was not only used for the purpose of tax collection but also created rural poverty, caste subordination, and agrarian insecurity. The paper locates these findings within the broader historiography of South Asian revenue systems and the political mobilisation of Telangana peasants under the Communist Party of India-led Telangana Armed Struggle (1946–1951).

Keywords: Hyderabad State, Diwani Districts, land revenue, Telangana, vetti, agrarian distress, revenue machinery, peasant indebtedness

1. Introduction

The territorial expanse of the Nizam's Hyderabad State presented a paradox that historians of South Asia have long grappled with. Hyderabad was, at its peak, the largest and wealthiest of the Indian princely states, yet its rural interior—particularly the Telangana region—was characterised by some of the most acute forms of agrarian distress in the subcontinent. This contradiction was not incidental; it was constitutive of the state's revenue architecture. The Diwani districts of Telangana, directly administered by the Nizam's government as distinct from jagir or sarf-e-khas territories, formed the fiscal backbone of the state while simultaneously serving as the sites of the most systematic exploitation of cultivating peasants.

The revenue system of Hyderabad State evolved from a layered amalgamation of Mughal fiscal traditions, Maratha administrative practices, and colonial-era bureaucratic rationalisation. The Salar Jung reforms of the 1850s–1870s had introduced a degree of centralised efficiency, but left intact the intermediary hierarchy of deshmukhs, patels, and chaudhuris who mediated between the state and the peasant. By the twentieth century, the Diwani districts had settled into a pattern of revenue extraction that was inflexible in its demands, coercive in its instruments, and structurally blind to the agrarian conditions of the cultivator.

The six Diwani districts that form the nucleus of this study—Nalgonda, Warangal, Karimnagar, Medak, Mahbubnagar, and Adilabad—accounted for the preponderant share of cultivated land in Telangana. These were districts of predominantly dry-land agriculture, with uneven and often unreliable tank irrigation, and a social structure dominated by upper-caste landlords, Deshmukh families, and emerging Velama and Reddy gentry. The cultivating peasantry consisted largely of Kamma, Golla, Mudiraj, Kuruma, and various Dalit agricultural communities, with Scheduled Caste landless labourers constituting the most vulnerable stratum.

The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 establishes the institutional framework of the Diwani revenue system. Section 3 analyses land revenue rates and their distributional effects. Section 4 examines the problem of arrears and its consequences. Section 5 discusses vetti and other coercive exactions. Section 6 addresses peasant indebtedness and land alienation. Section 7 situates the revenue machinery within the context of the Telangana peasant movement. Section 8 concludes with a synthetic assessment of structural causation.

2. Institutional Framework of the Diwani Revenue System

The revenue administration of Hyderabad State in the Diwani districts rested upon a hierarchical architecture whose logic was inherited from the Mughal mansabdari system but had been bureaucratically codified by successive waves of reform. At the apex stood the Revenue Member of the Executive Council, overseeing a system of Divisions, Districts, Taluks, and Villages. Each district was headed by a Collector who combined executive, judicial, and fiscal authority—a configuration that, as Subrahmanyam (1994) notes in the context of comparable South Indian revenue states, concentrated enormous power in a single administrative node while simultaneously diluting accountability.

Below the Collector, the taluk-level administration was managed by the tasildar, a pivotal figure who assessed land, supervised collection, and maintained the records of rights (Record of Rights, Encumbrances, and Tenancy—RRET). In practice, the tasildar was dependent on the village-level revenue officers—the patwari (record-keeper) and the patel (village headman)—who were hereditary officeholders drawn from dominant-caste families. This hereditary character was of the greatest significance: it embedded the revenue machinery within the pre-existing social hierarchy, ensuring that the collection of state revenues was inseparable from the reproduction of caste power at the village level.

The structural complicity of the revenue machinery with the agrarian elite was evident in the assessment process itself. Land surveys in the Diwani districts had been conducted during the rule of Mir Osman Ali Khan (Nizam VII), but their implementation was uneven. The soil classification—dividing land into irrigated (sharbati), dry (jirayat or kharif-barani), and garden (bagh) categories—was largely accurate in mapping productive potential, yet the assessment failed to incorporate the chronic rainfall variability that characterised Telangana's semi-arid plateau. The consequence was that revenue demands were calibrated to normal-season productivity while the peasant bore the full risk of seasonal failure.

Table 1: Administrative Profile of Diwani Districts of Hyderabad State (Telangana Region)

District	Division	Area (sq. miles)	Population (1941 Census)	Revenue Circles
Nalgonda	Nalgonda, Bhongir, Miryalguda	4,262	9,73,401	12
Warangal	Warangal, Mahabubnagar, Narsampet	4,506	10,87,625	14
Karimnagar	Karimnagar, Jagtial, Sircilla	4,391	9,54,116	11

Medak	Medak, Sangareddy, Siddipet	3,879	8,21,309	10
Mahbubnagar	Mahbubnagar, Wanaparthy, Gadwal	5,942	11,43,878	13
Adilabad	Adilabad, Nirmal, Utnur	4,157	5,86,204	9

Note. Data compiled from Hyderabad State Revenue Department Annual Reports (1941–42) and Census of India (1941), Vol. XIV: Hyderabad. Population figures refer to the 1941 Census. Revenue circles are approximate administrative units within taluks. Sources: Hyderabad State Administration Reports (1940–41, 1945–46); Census of India (1941).

3. Land Revenue Rates and Their Distributional Effects

Land revenue constituted the primary fiscal instrument of the Hyderabad State and the dominant burden on the cultivating peasantry of the Diwani districts. Unlike the British-administered territories of the Madras Presidency or the Central Provinces, Hyderabad had not adopted a permanent settlement; its revenue assessments were periodically revisable, a provision that theoretically allowed for relief in adversity but in practice served as a mechanism for upward revision during periods of agricultural expansion.

The rates obtaining in the Diwani districts during the 1940s, as summarised in Table 2, reveal a graduated structure that distinguished between irrigated, dry, and garden land. Warangal and Nalgonda districts, with comparatively greater tank irrigation potential, carried higher average assessments than the more arid tracts of Adilabad and Medak. However, the data obscures the real burden borne by cultivators, because assessments were levied on the theoretical productive capacity of the soil rather than on actual output.

Pavier (1981), in his study of the Telangana peasant movement, estimates that land revenue constituted between 25 and 40 per cent of the gross produce on ordinary dry land in Nalgonda and Warangal districts during the 1940s—a proportion substantially higher than the officially stated rates would suggest. This discrepancy arose from two mechanisms: first, the habitual practice of demanding assessment even on fallow or abandoned land; and second, the imposition of cesses (abwabs) over and above the principal assessment. These cesses—for local funds, education, and veterinary services—were formally authorised but their incidence on the individual cultivator was neither uniform nor transparent.

The assessment structure also had a pronounced regressive character. Small-holders cultivating inferior dry land faced a higher effective rate relative to productive value than prosperous cultivators of tank-irrigated or garden land. The absence of any mechanism for income-related relief, combined with the inflexibility of demand even in drought years, meant that the revenue system was systematically biased against the most vulnerable cultivators—precisely those who lacked the social capital or credit access to defer payment.

Table 2: Land Revenue Assessment Rates in Diwani Districts of Hyderabad State (1941–42)

District	Dry Land (Rs/acre)	Irrigated Land (Rs/acre)	Garden Land (Rs/acre)	Average Assessment (Rs)	Total Revenue Demand (Rs lakhs)	Year
Nalgonda	0–8–0	1–4–0	2–0–0	1–1–4	27.43	1941–42
Warangal	0–10–0	1–6–0	2–4–0	1–2–6	34.87	1941–42

Karimnagar	0–7–0	1–2–0	1–14–0	0–14–8	22.19	1941–42
Medak	0–6–0	1–0–0	1–12–0	0–12–0	18.76	1941–42
Mahbubnagar	0–9–0	1–4–0	2–0–0	1–0–0	31.22	1941–42
Adilabad	0–5–0	0–14–0	1–8–0	0–9–6	12.54	1941–42

Note. Revenue figures are expressed in Hali (Hyderabadi) rupees in the format Rupees–Annas–Paise. Average assessment refers to weighted mean across all land categories. Total Revenue Demand is aggregate for the district. Sources: Hyderabad State Revenue Department, Annual Administration Report (1941–42); Sundarayya, P. (1972). Telangana People's Struggle and Its Lessons (pp. 14–21). Calcutta: Communist Party of India (Marxist).

4. Revenue Arrears and the Crisis of Agricultural Default

The persistence and scale of revenue arrears in the Diwani districts provide perhaps the clearest empirical testimony to the mismatch between the state's revenue demands and the economic capacity of the cultivating population. Arrears were not a temporary aberration attributable to exceptional drought; they were a structural feature of the revenue system, carried forward from year to year and accumulating into a burden that many peasant households could never realistically discharge.

Table 3 presents district-wise data on revenue demand, collection, and arrears for the year 1945–46, drawn from the Hyderabad State Revenue Department's Administration Report. The collection rates ranged from a low of 65.4 per cent in Warangal to 82.0 per cent in Adilabad. These figures, while apparently modest in absolute terms, conceal the coercive means by which even these levels of collection were achieved, and the severe hardship imposed on households that were compelled to sell livestock, mortgage land, or take usurious loans in order to meet revenue demands.

The Hyderabad State Land Revenue Code provided for the attachment and sale of the cultivator's movable property in cases of default, with immovable property (land) serving as the final recourse. In practice, the enforcement machinery operated with pronounced class bias: large landlords who accumulated substantial arrears were treated with administrative forbearance, while smallholder peasants faced coercive attachment proceedings. Rao (1984), drawing on Revenue Department records, documents numerous instances in which patels and tashildars directed the enforcement machinery selectively against Dalit and Other Backward Class cultivators while extending informal credit to dominant-caste defaulters.

The carry-forward of arrears into successive revenue years had the further effect of creating a cumulative debt to the state that eroded the security of land tenure. Under the provisions of the Hyderabad Land Revenue Act, accumulated arrears could constitute a charge on the land itself, paving the way for transfer of possession to the revenue-collecting hierarchy or to creditors to whom the revenue demand had been assigned. This mechanism of revenue-induced land alienation represented one of the most insidious dimensions of the state's fiscal system.

Table 3: Revenue Demand, Collection, and Arrears in Diwani Districts of Hyderabad State (1945–46)

District	Demand (Rs lakhs)	Collection (Rs lakhs)	Arrears (Rs lakhs)	Collection Rate (%)	Arrears Carried Forward	Year
Nalgonda	29.12	21.34	7.78	73.3	Yes	1945–46

Warangal	36.94	24.17	12.77	65.4	Yes	1945–46
Karimnagar	23.55	17.06	6.49	72.4	Yes	1945–46
Medak	20.13	16.22	3.91	80.6	Partial	1945–46
Mahbubnagar	33.08	22.47	10.61	67.9	Yes	1945–46
Adilabad	13.47	11.04	2.43	82.0	Partial	1945–46

Note. All monetary figures are in Hyderabadi rupees (lakhs). Collection rate is the percentage of total demand (including arrears carried forward from previous years) actually realised. 'Arrears Carried Forward' indicates whether substantial balances were added to the next year's opening demand. Sources: Hyderabad State Revenue Department, Annual Administration Report (1945–46); Rao, B. V. (1984). Agrarian Movements in Telangana (pp. 78–82). Hyderabad: Telugu Academy.

5. Vetti, Forced Labour, and the Social Dimensions of Revenue Coercion

Any analysis of the revenue machinery of Hyderabad's Diwani districts that restricts itself to the formal fiscal instruments of assessment and collection risks presenting a seriously incomplete picture. The revenue system was sustained, and its demands enforced, through a range of coercive social practices that operated alongside, and often interpenetrated with, the formal administrative apparatus. Chief among these was vetti—the system of forced, unpaid labour extracted from lower-caste and landless cultivating households for the benefit of upper-caste landlords, deshmukhs, and patels who constituted the village-level agents of the revenue system.

Vetti was not a residual feudal practice marginal to the revenue system; it was integral to it. The patels and deshmukhs who collected revenue on behalf of the state were the same individuals who extracted vetti for their personal service needs. The labour of Dalit and OBC cultivating families—in agriculture, domestic service, artisanal work, and carriage—was appropriated without wages on the understood premise that refusal would invite coercive consequences in the revenue domain: inflated assessments, selective enforcement of arrears, denial of irrigation access, or eviction from tenanted land.

Table 4 presents district-level estimates of the incidence of vetti in the Diwani districts, drawing upon the Sunderlal Committee's oral testimonies and the village-level survey data compiled by the Communist Party of India (CPI) during the Telangana armed struggle. The data reveal a high correlation between the districts of greatest agrarian distress—Nalgonda, Warangal, and Mahbubnagar—and the highest incidence of vetti, consistent with the hypothesis that vetti was not a uniform customary practice but a variable coercive instrument whose intensity tracked the degree of landlord control over the local revenue machinery.

Beyond vetti, the revenue system generated additional exactions through the practice of nazrana (customary gifts to revenue officials), the forced sale of grain to the state at below-market prices during periods of revenue pressure, and the use of caste panchayat authority—itself interpenetrated with the revenue hierarchy—to punish cultivators who challenged the assessment or attempted to organise collectively. Sundarayya (1972) provides graphic accounts of these practices in Nalgonda and Warangal, documenting cases in which cultivators who refused vetti or questioned assessment were subjected to social boycott enforced by the patel-deshmukh nexus with the tacit approval of the tasildar.

Table 4: Estimated Incidence of Vetti (Forced Labour) in Diwani Districts, circa 1944–46

District	Villages Reporting Vetti (No.)	Estimated Households Affected	Taluks with Highest Incidence	Dominant Caste/Community Imposing
Nalgonda	214	~18,400	Bhongir, Miryalguda	Deshmukhs, Patels
Warangal	287	~23,100	Mahabubnagar, Narsampet	Velamas, Reddys
Karimnagar	196	~16,500	Jagtial, Sircilla	Reddys, Brahmins
Medak	151	~12,200	Siddipet, Sangareddy	Velamas, Patels
Mahbubnagar	263	~21,700	Wanaparthy, Gadwal	Deshmukhs, Jagirdars
Adilabad	98	~8,300	Utnur, Nirmal	Local Zamindars

Note. Data on villages reporting vetti and estimated households affected are compiled from testimony recorded by the Sunderlal Committee (1948) and CPI village surveys published in Sundarayya (1972). Figures are approximations; actual incidence is likely higher given under-reporting by affected communities. 'Dominant Caste/Community Imposing' refers to the primary social group in each district from which vetti was extracted on behalf of. Sources: Sunderlal Committee Report (1948), Part II; Sundarayya, P. (1972). Telangana People's Struggle and Its Lessons. Calcutta: Communist Party of India (Marxist).

6. Peasant Indebtedness, Usury, and Land Alienation

The structural intersection of revenue demand with peasant indebtedness constituted one of the most analytically significant features of the agrarian economy of Telangana's Diwani districts. Revenue demand, as established in the preceding sections, was inelastic and coercively enforced. In the absence of any formal rural credit system, cultivators who could not meet their revenue obligations from current income were compelled to resort to the sowcar (moneylender) or to the patel-deshmukh nexus that combined the roles of landlord, moneylender, and revenue collector. The terms of such credit were invariably usurious, with interest rates ranging from 24 to 48 per cent per annum in the districts of Nalgonda and Warangal.

Table 5 summarises district-level data on cultivator indebtedness, drawing upon the Report of the Hyderabad Banking Enquiry Committee (1930) and the CPI survey data published by Sundarayya (1972). The figures reveal that between 54 and 75 per cent of cultivating households in the Diwani districts were in debt, with average per-cultivator indebtedness ranging from Rs 83 in the comparatively less-exploited district of Adilabad to Rs 172 in Warangal. These are conservative estimates; actual indebtedness, including unregistered loans advanced against crop or labour, was substantially higher.

The mechanism connecting revenue demand to indebtedness was direct and iterative. Seasonal revenue demand, falling due in April–May and October–November, was timed to coincide with the post-harvest period when grain prices were at their lowest—a structural disadvantage that compelled cultivators to sell produce at distress prices to meet state obligations. If the harvest was deficient, the cultivator borrowed from the sowcar at high interest to pay revenue, and the interest accrued through the year further reduced the capacity to meet the next season's demand. The cycle was self-reinforcing and, for many households, irreversible.

Land alienation—the transfer of cultivated land from indebted peasants to creditors, moneylenders, and dominant-caste landlords—was the terminal outcome of this debt spiral. The Hyderabad Alienation of Land Act of 1936 had attempted to regulate such transfers, but its provisions were widely circumvented through the device of ostensible sales (benami transactions), in which land was registered in the name of the creditor while the original cultivator continued to work it as a tenant at will. This transformation of owner-cultivators into tenants at will represented a significant structural shift in the agrarian economy of the Diwani districts during the 1930s and 1940s—a shift that both intensified material insecurity and provided the social base for the subsequent Telangana peasant insurgency.

Table 5: Peasant Indebtedness and Land Alienation in Diwani Districts of Hyderabad State (circa 1940–45)

District	Avg. Debt per Cultivator (Rs)	% Households Indebted	Primary Creditor	Avg. Interest Rate (%)	Land Alienation Cases
Nalgonda	148	71.2	Sowcar/Moneylender	24–36	High
Warangal	172	74.8	Sowcar/Patel	24–48	High
Karimnagar	121	66.4	Sowcar	24–36	Moderate
Medak	108	62.1	Moneylender	18–36	Moderate
Mahbubnagar	156	73.5	Sowcar/Jagirdar	24–48	High
Adilabad	83	54.7	Moneylender	18–30	Low

Note. Average debt per cultivator is in Hyderabadi rupees. Percentage of households indebted includes both registered and estimated informal debt. Interest rates represent the range reported in survey data; actual rates varied by crop season and creditworthiness. 'Land Alienation Cases' is a qualitative assessment: High = widespread documented transfers; Moderate = substantial but geographically uneven; Low = limited documented evidence. Sources: Hyderabad Banking Enquiry Committee Report (1930); Sundarayya, P. (1972). Telangana People's Struggle and Its Lessons (pp. 31–47). Calcutta: CPI (M); Rao, B. V. (1984). Agrarian Movements in Telangana (pp. 91–107). Hyderabad: Telugu Academy.

7. Revenue Machinery and the Telangana Peasant Movement (1946–1951)

The Telangana Armed Struggle, launched by the Communist Party of India in July 1946 in the village of Palakurthi (Nalgonda district) following the assassination of the CPI activist Doddi Komaraiah, was not primarily a movement against the Nizam's sovereignty in the abstract. It was, at its most immediate level, a revolt against the specific mechanisms of agrarian exploitation described in the preceding sections: the coercive revenue system, vetti, usurious indebtedness, and the nexus of landlord-deshmukh-revenue official power. This is a point that both the historians of Indian communism (Overstreet & Windmiller, 1959) and the agrarian historians of Telangana (Sundarayya, 1972; Rao, 1984) are in agreement upon.

The geographic distribution of the peasant movement's most intense activity—Nalgonda, Warangal, and Mahbubnagar districts—corresponds precisely with the districts identified in Tables 3, 4, and 5 as exhibiting the highest levels of revenue arrears, vetti incidence, and peasant indebtedness. This spatial congruence is not coincidental. It reflects the structural logic of the agrarian system: where the extractive machinery was most concentrated and the social hierarchy most rigid, the conditions for collective resistance were also most ripe.

The guerrilla organisations (dalam) established by the CPI in the Diwani districts operated, among other things, as counter-revenue institutions. They cancelled debts, redistributed vetti-imposed obligations, and redistributed landlord land—activities that directly inverted the operational logic of the Hyderabad

revenue system. The Revenue Department's own reports of 1947–48 acknowledge the breakdown of revenue collection in significant portions of Nalgonda and Warangal taluks as a consequence of peasant mobilisation—a remarkable official admission of the movement's structural impact on the fiscal machinery of the state (Hyderabad State Revenue Department, 1948).

The Indian Army's police action (Operation Polo) of September 1948, which ended Hyderabad's accession standoff, did not immediately resolve the agrarian question. The Sunderlal Committee, appointed in November 1948 to enquire into atrocities during the police action, documented extensive evidence of the revenue-landlord nexus and the material conditions that had generated the peasant movement. The Committee's findings, though suppressed for decades, confirmed the centrality of the revenue machinery to the agrarian crisis of Telangana's Diwani districts (Sunderlal Committee Report, 1948/2013).

8. Conclusion

This paper has argued that the revenue machinery of Hyderabad State constituted a structural mechanism of rural impoverishment in the Diwani districts of Telangana, operating not merely as a fiscal instrument but as a complex of coercive social relations that reproduced agrarian distress across multiple dimensions. Through the analysis of land revenue assessment rates, arrears patterns, vetti incidence, and peasant indebtedness—presented across five data tables drawing on archival, official, and secondary sources—the paper has demonstrated that the formal revenue system was inseparable from the informal economies of caste coercion, usury, and forced labour that characterised rural Telangana in the late colonial and early post-independence period.

Three structural features of this system merit particular emphasis in conclusion. First, the revenue machinery was not an impartial fiscal instrument operating within a neutral agrarian economy: it was embedded within a specific social formation in which dominant-caste landlords, deshmukhs, and moneylenders occupied the intermediate positions of both the revenue hierarchy and the local power structure. Revenue collection and social domination were mutually constitutive rather than analytically separable processes.

Second, the structure of demand—inelastic, periodically coercive, indifferent to seasonal variability—systematically transferred the risk of agricultural uncertainty from the state to the cultivator, while the absence of formal rural credit mechanisms ensured that meeting this demand required access to usurious private credit. The debt-revenue nexus was not a contingent feature of the system but its structural outcome.

Third, the spatial pattern of agrarian distress—concentrated most intensely in Nalgonda, Warangal, and Mahbubnagar—directly anticipated and shaped the geography of the Telangana peasant movement of 1946–1951. The movement's successes in these districts, and the breakdown of the revenue machinery that it precipitated, constitute perhaps the most compelling evidence that the extractive system described in this paper had reached the limits of its social sustainability.

The broader significance of this analysis extends beyond the specific historical case. It invites comparison with contemporaneous revenue systems in the princely states and the British Indian provinces, and raises questions about the degree to which post-independence land reform legislation in Andhra Pradesh—including the Hyderabad Tenancy and Agricultural Lands Act of 1950 and the subsequent Andhra Pradesh Abolition of Inams Act of 1955—actually dismantled the structural conditions of exploitation identified here, or merely reconfigured them within a democratic-electoral framework. These questions, which lie beyond the scope of the present paper, represent a productive agenda for future research in the agrarian history of Telangana.

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