

Bhagya Reddy Varma: A Pioneer of Social Justice, Cultural Revival and Dalit Rights, Dalit Movement in the Telangana Region

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ABSTRACT

In India caste is the cultural reality. Domination, subordination, status, humiliation, untouchability, violence, deprivation and hunger are important cultural forms that are deeply associated historically with the caste system. However, these forms vary in degree from region to region as well as caste to caste in their deployment. Indeed, subordinate caste groups are more territorial. Even the pan-Indian dominant castes' cultural forms are largely marked by their region. In other words, in India, region and its ecology are crucial in shaping the caste culture as well as the relation between the castes. Also, caste and its relation both with dominant and subordinate castes have been shaping and reshaping throughout history. Importantly caste culture itself becomes a source for such a change. This paper shall confine itself to the Dalits of the Telangana region of Hyderabad State, which was ruled by Nizam rulers under the British paramountcy. The Dalits of Telangana had historically evolved a particular culture and identity. Also, their relation with other subordinate and dominant castes was largely different from that of the other regions of India. They experienced diverse caste practices in the region. It was precisely because the region was, to some extent, free from direct Brahmanic cultural influence. The Reddy and Velama feudal systems combining Brahmanic values had evolved different caste practices in the Telangana region. Beside the untouchability, the Dalits of Telangana were subjected to vetti (free labour), bhagela/jeetham (forced labour) and jogini (temple girl) practices. These practices forced dalits into a perpetual subalternity. However, the agency comes from this subalternity for their new self-consciousness and identity politics under the Nizam rulers. The roots of the Telangana Dalit movement can be traced back to the erstwhile Hyderabad state of the Nizam Dominion, particularly in the early twentieth century when a platform emerged to display Dalit strength in the form of a conscious, self-confident as well as politically active neo-class of outcastes. This was one of the fundamental developments of the period. Bhagya Reddy Varma (1888-1939) laid the foundation for the Dalit movement in the Telangana region. This paper focuses on Bhagya Reddy Varma, who was a pioneer of the Dalit movement in the Telangana region.

INTRODUCTION

The dalit movement in Hyderabad state had two specific objectives. One was to reassert the cultural past of the dalit, and the second was to reform the community on the values of the colonial modernity. The cultural assertion of the dalit in the state began with the open revolt of Bhagya Reddy Varma on the Hindu cultural imperialism. Bhagya Reddy Varma was the ideologue of the dalit movements in Hyderabad state. However Arigay Ramaswamy, B.S. Venkat Rao and B. Shyam Sunder played equal roles in the movement. Bhagya Reddy was born in 1888 in Hyderabad to poor dalit (Mala) parents. His original name was Madari Bhagiah. Later on he called himself Bhagya Reddy as he learned that his community was ruled before the advent of Aryans.

The title Reddy (derived from redu means ruler) is used by the Reddy caste of the Deccan as suffix to their name in order to claim their ruling past. Although such acts appeared to be naive but it had powerfully contested the social engineering of the caste-Hindus. This attempt indeed turned the caste-Hindu social order upside down. This was apparent when Suravarm Pratapa Reddy questioned this in his Telugu daily Golkonda Patrika that 'if every one called himself a 'Reddy' who were the original Reddies?'

Following Bhagya Reddy, many dalits and subaltern castes used the Reddy title as suffix to their name. The Varma title was given to Bhagya Reddy by the Arya Samaj in recognition of his social service to Hindu society, but later on he gave up

this title on the suggestion of north-Indian dalit activists as they felt embarrassed to call him every time with a Brahmanic title.

Role of Bhagya Reddy Varma in Adi Hindu Movement

Adi Hindu Movement started in Hyderabad state against untouchability and caste discrimination. The pioneer of this movement is Madari Bhagya Reddy Varma. Bhagya Reddy Varma was born on 22nd May 1888 in Hyderabad. He was the second child of Madari Venkaiah and Rangamamba. Due to some small issue he left home during his childhood. Joined a Roman Catholic brothers tennis court as a Picler boy. He worked in their family and managed home. In the year 1912 he joined as Electrical Engineer in Electrical Department. In 1906 itself he founded Jagan Mitra Mandali. The important aim of mandali is to impart education to Dalits. He is known for establishing several organisations for the emancipation of Dalits.

For any battle to be won, the soldier must first know how to fight it. And for the soldier to learn how to fight a battle, he must first know that a battle is set to take place. Equivalently, for a people to be mobilized on a mass scale towards a cause, they must first be informed of the cause. Communication, therefore, played a role of unimaginable importance in furthering Indian Enlightenment.

Mass literacy is a gift of the modern times. The enlightenment period did not consist of a mass that was majorly literate and thus the task of dispersing information became a hurdle in the way of social movements. One of the methods that was used to tackle this problem, during colonial times, was public newspaper readings, where a person who could read, would narrate to a crowd the happenings of the community. There was however, a limitation to this practice as informing is not the same as communicating. Communication is what helps mobilize the crowd and push them towards a cause to fight for.

The Age of Enlightenment has helped communication take diverse forms so social movements can be vast and inclusive. For example, folklore and performances based on long-followed traditions and cultures, speak to a larger crowd than mere newspaper readings. An instance of this can be observed in the folklore practices of Telangana, namely, the Burrakatha, Harikatha etc. One of the activists who picked up on the power of these methods of storytelling to engage the masses was Bhagya Reddy Varma.

The formation of Jagan Mitra Mandali in 1906 by Bhagya Reddy Varma had sown seeds of cultural assertion of the dalits in the state. The Mandali had played a crucial role in creating a cultural unity among the dalit communities particularly in Hyderabad city. This was done through Harikatha Kalakshepam (oral narration). The Harikatha is a traditional performing art that narrates the stories of their goddess. It was staged by the traditional performers of the dalit communities mostly by Jangam and Dakkali communities. This was now converted into a cultural revolution where this art was used to rearticulate the history of dalit communities. Through this art the dalits were taught that they were the original inhabitants of this land and the Aryans were the foreigners who had come from central Asia. The Harikathas were generally performed in the evenings and followed by lectures by dalit activists, particularly by Bhagya Reddy Varma who greatly inspired the community to reassert the pre-Aryan culture. He also published number of booklets and pamphlets on the greatness of pre-Aryan culture, suppression and destruction of pre-Aryan culture by the Aryans and how the Aryans were responsible for the present hunger and humiliation of the dalits. This literature was widely distributed among the community. The Panchama and Adi Hindu Gazette (monthlies) played a crucial role in spreading new consciousness among the dalits.

Bhagya Reddy also preached vegetarianism among the dalit communities. It had its roots in Buddhism. He was greatly influenced by Buddhism and celebrated Buddha Jayanti on every Vaishaka Pournami day from 1913. Also he directed the dalits towards Buddhism and to follow Panch Sheel which is the basis of Buddhist morality, rationality, righteousness and non-violence. As part of Buddhist non-violence against animals he took up the animal protection campaign actively in the city. To this end, he formed The Deccan Humanitarian League and impressed the Nizam to ban cow slaughter on the day of Bakrid in 1920. With these activities he got wide support from the caste-Hindus, particularly from the Jain community of the city. Their support continued even when he took up the dalit liberation movement in the state. Indeed their financial and moral support was crucial in expanding his activities among the dalits. This strategy was indeed helpful to reform the community and take it towards modernisation. Importantly it was crucial to expunge the stigmas attributed to their community and stand with dignity and honour before the larger society. This consciousness led the dalits to carve out a new identity for themselves.

A Pioneer of Social Justice, Cultural Revival and Dalit Rights

Bhagya Reddy Varma and his early life was influenced by the Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj movements, which fought against the discrimination of oppressed sections and against differences in the general public. Due to this influence, as he came of age he took to questioning and fighting against the social hierarchy which separated Non-Dalits from Dalits. He

changed his name from Madari Bhagaiah to Bhagya Reddy Varma, adding suffixes 'Reddy' and 'Varma' to his name, to challenge the social construction of the caste system as these names were, and continue to be, associated with higher castes.

Social identity theory highlights the overlap between self-based identities and social identities, thus bringing to light the importance of organizations that fight for the upliftment of people. Bhagya Reddy Varma founded multiple organizations that fought to further the betterment of the Dalit people. 'Jaganmitra Mandali' was the first organization that was the face of the Dalit movement in Telangana. Through his time as the leading body of this organization, he realized and actualized the importance of communication in social movements. He advocated for literacy, believed that students must be taught in their mother-tongue, promoted Dalit literature and poetry, and planted seeds of thought amongst the people regarding the questionable equitable nature of Hinduism as a religion. One of the major steps that was taken as part of his efforts to communicate to a larger crowd the problems of the current system was using a form of native folklore called the 'Harikatha' and the 'Burakatha'.

The Power of Story telling: Harikatha

Harikatha is a traditional folklore format that is practiced more often than not in rural Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. The culture of Harikatha began as a form of entertainment that people would engage in when the daily tasks of a household revolved around agriculture and the importance of education had not yet been recognized. It was one of the first forms of entertainment much prior to the digital age. It usually involves a single performer (sometimes more), dressed dramatically to catch the audiences' eye, engaging in elocution narration, sometimes singing in between, to convey messages regarding themes that revolved around religion or mythological stories. As time has passed and society has changed, the power of such formats of folklore have been discovered as they garner huge crowds. With the advent of colonial rule, Harikatha began being used to not only inform the people about the doings of the British but also to propagate messages of organizations that were fighting against the oppressor. By way of the organizations he founded (first the Jaganmitra Mandali and later, the Adi Hindu Social Service League), Bhagya Reddy Varma, used this very form of performance i.e., Harikatha to raise social consciousness and convey political messages. As an advocate for education, he organized regular Harikatha performances to awaken his fellow peers to the main causes of their backwardness being their ignorance and lack of literacy. He believed that education of the girl child is of utmost importance and so he played the founding role in starting telugu-medium schools in bastis (slum areas), many of which were dedicated to girls. He used regular harikatha performances as a medium to convince people to enroll their children in schools. As a result, children hailing from marginalized backgrounds were given easy access to, what is today every citizen's fundamental right; education.

In the year 1910 he started Vaidika Dharma Pracharam Sabha to create awareness among Dalits in religion and morality. In the year 1913 Arya Samajist Baji Krishna Rao conferred him with Varma title for his loudable social services. In order to bring consensus among different sub-castes, he used to organise Preeti Bhojanam programmes. He started the Swastika Volunteer Corps in the year 1912 to serve the Dalits.

In the year 1911 Varma formed Manya Sangham. Later in 1913 redesigned itself as the Adi Hindu Social Service League, which did yeoman service to enlighten people through public lectures, Harikatha kalakshepams on themes of pre-Aryan culture, and the publication of literature. The spirit of the social service league attracted several caste Hindus, and they actively associated with the league. Prominent among them were Justice C. Bal Mukund, Pandit Keshav Rao Koratter, Seth Lalji Meguji, Professor Wellington, and R.E. Repouku. Inspired by Brahmo Samaj, Reddy joined several Dalits into Brahmo Samaj. In the year 1913 he organised Buddha Jayanthi for the first time. Padmaja Naidu, Adipudi Samanatha Rao, Chandravark, etc., participated in these celebrations. He conducted this activity every year till his death. The last Buddha jayanthi he celebrated was on 25th May 1913 under the chairmanship of Raja Bahadur Rai Biwesomnath.

Bhagya Reddy Varma became a pioneer of the Dalit self-respect movement in Andhra also. In 1917 he presided over the first Andhra Desa Panchama conference at Bezawada. On the first day itself, he condemned the word Panchama and stated that this word was not there in the Vedas and Puranas and it is a creation of dominant castes to exercise their selfish motto of dominance. Also made it clear that Dalits were original inhabitants and hence replaced Panchama with Adi Andhra. Bhagya Reddy strongly believed that Dalits were not part of Hinduism. Due to the consistent efforts of Bhagya Reddy. The Madras Government issued a Government Order (GO) 817 on January 24th, 1922. The Madras Legislative Council adopted a resolution stating that the council recommends to the government that the term Panchama or Paraya used to designate the ancient Dravidian community in Southern India should be deleted from the government records and the term Adi Dravida in the Tamil and Adi Andhra in the Telugu districts be substituted instead." In Hyderabad state, also due to his efforts, the term Adi Hindu was accepted by the Nizam government, and referred to all the Dalits (Mala, Madiga, Dakkali, Dhed, Chamar, etc.) as Adi Hindu in the 1931 census report.

Bhagya Reddy Varma made an attempt to bring solidarity among Dalits and Bahujans. He founded Yadava Sangam under Srugam Sitaram, Sabari Sangham under Durgaiah, and Pardhi Sangam under Hanuman Singh. In 1925 he organised Adi Hindu Sabha under the leadership of Arundhathiys leader Subedor Sayanna. In 1925 itself he organised Matanga Janasabha under the leadership of Guntimalla Ramappa. Bhagya Reddy founded the Matangi Sabha in 1927 at Mallepalli. They passed resolutions against liquor & toddy consumption.

He made Secunderabad the centre and toured extensively in Karimnagar, Warangal, Khamam and Nizamabad, demanding rights for Madigas and Mudigonda Laxmaiah, an industrialist who extensively supported this movement and gave money to poor Madiga students. In the year 1937, Jambavarna Seva Samithi made efforts to create awareness among Arundhathiyas. Matanga Mahasabha leader Guntimalla Ramappa strived hard to bring unity among Dalits in 1932.

On July 10th, 1931, in the Adi Hindu Dharmika Sabha, Bhagya Reddy gave a call to bring amity among different sub-castes among Dalits. He presided over the Adi Hindu conference held at Nagpur in May 1933.

Bhagya Reddy participated in the meetings of Andhra Maha Sabha and made them adopt several resolutions to bring reforms to the society. In its first meeting held at Jogipet on 3rd, 4th and 5th March 1930, Suravaram Pratap Reddy presided over and proposed resolutions on educational facilities to Adi-Hindus, whereas Bhagya Reddy gave a call to remove untouchability. Varma also spoke in the second meeting at Hyderabad. In the 1934 Khammam conference. Bhagya Reddy also conducted Adi Hindu gymnastic competitions under the presidentship of Kodi Ramamurthy. In 1925, to encourage youth, he conducted painting, drawing and craft exhibitions at Prem Theatre, Hyderabad.

Bhagya Reddy attended several meetings and conferences in other parts of India too. One such meeting he participated in was the Divyajnana Samajam meeting held on 15th December 1917 at Calcutta, where he spoke about how Brahmanism caused the degradation of Dalits. Mahatma Gandhi was present at the conference and praised him for his interest in the upliftment of the downtrodden. Later Gandhi visited Adi Hindu Social Service League and Adi Hindu School in the year 1929.

In 1920 several identity movements took place in Northern India. All India Adi Hindu (Depressed Classes) conferences were organised in places like Delhi, Alahabad, Lucknow and Nagpur. Varma attended all these conferences as a delegate from Hyderabad state and Andhra. He attended the Adi Hindu special conference also held at Delhi on 24th February 1928. In the year 1930, on 16th November, Varma participated in the 8th session of the All India Adi Hindu (Depressed Class) conference held in Mayo Hall at Allahabad. The conference demanded a representative from the Adi Hindu background in the central as well as state provincial legislations. Reddy also participated in the Adi Hindu conference and several other meetings in 1936 at Vijayanagaram. In February 1938 at Kakinada. On 22nd September 1937 the Nizam government constituted a committee for reforms. In the same year, Bhagya Reddy conducted a meeting and requested the government to allocate two seats to Adi Hindus.

The Hyderabad Dalit movement had developed intrinsic relations with the larger Dalit movements in colonial India from the 1930s, particularly with the Marathwada Dalit movement. All the prominent Dalit leaders of the state were strong followers of Dr B.R. Ambedkar, who had a special interest in Hyderabad state and its Dalits owing to the Nizams' pro-Dalit position as well as committed Dalit leadership. He visited Hyderabad five times on various occasions. Ambedkar, in fact, was sponsored Rs 500 per month for his political activities by the Nizam ruler after the second Round Table Conference in Britain. This brought him closer to the Hyderabad Dalit movement. Bhagya Reddy Varma and Shyam Sunder emerged as national Dalit leaders. They were invited by many Dalit organisations across the country. Bhagya Reddy Varma addressed many annual conferences of the All India Adi Hindu (Depressed Classes) conference. He was also invited to address a Hindu reformer's meeting. In fact, he had good relations with Mahatma Gandhi. When Gandhi visited Hyderabad in 1929, he visited Adi-Hindu schools run by Bhagya Reddy as well as Adi-Hindu Bhavan and appreciated him for his tireless efforts for the liberation of the Dalits.

The Dalit reformers also made a serious attempt to liberate their community from the jogini/murali (devadasi) practice. Bhagya Reddy founded an organisation called Adi-Hindu Murali Nivarana Mandali to stop this practice. With the help of the state, he had largely suppressed this age-old practice. However, some conservative families were still practising it. Arigay Ramaswamy had fought against this practice tirelessly. He raided dedication ceremonies in Hyderabad and stopped them. He also encouraged Dalits to marry joginies, and many joginies got married. To create stronger unity in the Dalits, he organised marriages between sub-castes of the Dalit communities, particularly between Malas and Madigas. He was also the inspiration behind the inter-dining programmes in the Dalit community. These campaigns also received wider support from the caste Hindus of the Hyderabad city.

As a result of the Dalit activism, the Nizam government abolished the inhuman practices of vetti/beggar (free labour) and bhagela (bonded labour) in 1923 and 1944, respectively, in the state through separate acts. This afforded an immense relief to the suffering masses, and it undoubtedly emancipated them from the clutches of the merciless landlords. The Dalit activism also produced a considerable number of critical Dalit leaderships in the state. This leadership was crucial in taking the community towards modern politics and modernity.

The all-India political developments had begun influencing the Dalit movement in the state more apparently from the 1930s. In particular, the Poona Pact between Gandhi and Ambedkar and the subsequent announcement of a Communal Award providing representation to Dalits in the political bodies turned the Dalit movement in a new direction, which drove the community towards modern politics.

Thus, the all-India developments had an effective impact on the Hyderabad Dalit movement. The first political conference of the depressed classes of the Hyderabad State was organised by Bhagya Reddy in the Bolarum cantonment area of Secundrabad in 1931. Reddy was already acquainted with the larger Dalit political movement in the country. Indeed he presided over the Special Political All-India Depressed Classes Conference held at Lucknow in 1913. It was in this conference that Ambedkar was elected unanimously as the sole and true representative to speak on behalf of the nine crores of depressed classes in India. This empowered Ambedkar to present the Dalits' case before the Minorities Subcommittee.

The conference also reiterated the demand for a separate electorate for depressed classes. In this sense this conference was historic. Following this, Reddy began spreading his political campaign. Resolutions were passed in the Bolarum conference to demand the Nizam government abolish forced labour in the state and recruit Adi-Hindus in the military and police. Because of the continuous demand of the Dalits for political representations, the Nizam ruler, Osman Ali Khan, agreed to nominate one Dalit councillor to the Hyderabad Municipal Council as a beginning of quota politics in the state. Arigay Ramaswamy was elected by all the Dalit organisations based in the city, and his name was sent to the Nizam Government to nominate him as councillor of the Hyderabad Municipality in 1934.

When the Dalit movement was spreading in towns under the leadership of Bhagya Reddy and others, Vetti & Bhagela and violence against Dalit women were also increasing in rural areas. Ravi Narayan Reddy, Puchalapalli Sunderaiah, Devulapalli Venkateshwar Rao, Chandra Rajeshwar Rao and others spread communist ideology among people. Dalits and oppressed people in large numbers joined the "Dalams" formed at the village level to counter their exploitation. Dalits participated in the liberation struggles against the Jamindar system at various places in Telangana. Under the leadership of John, Dalits participated in large numbers, fighting against vetti and huge taxes in several villages, namely Kolanupaka, China Kadkur, Rajampet, Puligalli and Inkurti villages of Bhuvanagiri taluk of Nalgonda. In the year 1944, Dalits of Pammi Village of Warangal under the leadership of Andhra Maha Sabha struggled and re-occupied their lands from landlords and liberated themselves from vetti. Dalits of Tellerupalli village of Khammam fought against Jagirdar Amjad Ali, who was corrupt and got liberated from vetti. Dalits in Keshavapuram village of Huzurabad Taluk of Karimnagar fought unitedly against Deshmuk's oppression. In the year 1944 in Mahabubnagar too, Dalits successfully fought against Gadwal Jamindar's vetti system. As a result of the Telangana Armed Struggle, vetti was abolished, but the caste system continued. The communist party which fought with class consciousness could not find a solution to the caste problem.

Sri Bhagya Reddy Varma fought against untouchability in Hyderabad State and fought for the abolition of the Jogini and Devdasi systems in the society. He inspired by Dr B. R. Ambedkar and Jyotirao Phule; Varma raised his voice against discrimination by upper castes. Eventually, he also established the Adi Hindu ("Original Hindu"), a social organisation, to bring awareness to the Dalits. In 1906, he started Jagan Mitra Mandali to educate Dalits through popular folklore. Mandali worked on the social consciousness among untouchables. Later in 1911, he founded Manyang Sangham, which tried to create awareness among untouchables through literature and lectures. Bhagya Reddy Varma had launched a movement against the devadasi system, forcing the Nizam to declare it a crime. Bhagya Reddy Varma founded around 26 schools in the Hyderabad region for Dalits. The Bhagya Memorial Girls High School at Esamia Bazar, Koti, Hyderabad, Telangana, which he started in 1913, is still functioning. He established Dalit panchayat courts to settle disputes among Dalits. He chaired the All India conference of Scheduled Castes held at Lucknow on 27 and 28 December 1930 to support sending a delegation to the Round Table conference. Babasaheb Ambedkar was present in this meeting.

Bhagya Reddy's relentless activities and frequent travels affected his health. Krishna Swamy Mudiraj mentioned in his book Bhagya Reddy gave as many as 3348 public speeches. Bhagya Reddy's life is synonymous with the Adi Hindu movement. He strived hard to create awareness among railway employees, military soldiers, cloth merchants, contractors, workers and labourers. He breathed his last breath on 18th February, 1939. His death was a major setback to the Adi Hindu Movement and also to Dalits of Hyderabad.

CONCLUSION

Bhagya Reddy Varma was the pioneer of the Dalit movement in Telangana. He established the first organisation called 'Jaganmitra Mandali' in Telangana for the welfare of the Dalits. Another landmark organisation in the history of the Dalit movement was the 'Adi-Hindu Social Service League', and it was the first organisation which established a complete organisational body with its aims and objectives. He was dedicated to his life for the wellbeing of the Dalit and marginalised sections of society. He organised meetings, lecturers, bajans and Harikathas to educate and create awareness in the Dalit people on different issues of life. He was an inspiration to many Dalit leaders to establish organisations to fight against the caste system and to organise for their rights.

The caste system in India is very predominant, and it is deep-rooted. Dalit and marginalised sections are the untouchables, and they have segregated from the mainstream society. Mahatma Jyothi Rao Phule has started a fight against the caste system in India. In each state different Dalit leaders have emerged to fight against the caste system. The present paper explains about Bhagya Reddy Varma, who was a pioneer of the Dalit movement in Hyderabad state. He basically fights against the caste system and focuses on the eradication of social evils within the Dalit communities.

To achieve this goal, he established several organisations and worked with other caste Hindu organisations like Brahma Samaj and Arya Samaj. The Indian Enlightenment, as exemplified by the life and work of Bhagya Reddy Varma, demonstrates that the pursuit of knowledge, social justice, and individual liberty is not exclusive to any particular geographic region. Varma's innovative use of traditional storytelling techniques, such as Harikatha and Burrakatha, highlights the power of cultural expression in mobilising social movements. By adapting these ancient forms to convey contemporary messages, he bridged the gap between the social elite and the masses, making the Enlightenment accessible to a wider audience. His legacy serves as a reminder that the fight for social justice is not merely an intellectual endeavour but a deeply human one, rooted in shared experiences and aspirations. He believed that education is the only instrument to liberate the Dalits from social discrimination and give them emancipation and dignity in life.

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