

Telangana Movement Revisited

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I AM neither a social scientist nor do I have the courage to describe myself a 'revolutionary socialist', in other words, I belong neither to the category in which Dhanagare (December 18, 1982) gallantly includes Barry Pavier (and gets an unpleasant rebuke in return) nor to the category in which Barry Pavier makes bold to include himself. If, nevertheless, I am chancing my arm in commenting upon Pavier's cavalier tract on Telangana ("The Telangana Movement, 1944-51") and his presumptuous comments on Dhanagare's review of the book (March 5), that is out of a fear that nobody with better credentials is going to do so. The fear is prompted by the fact that Dhanagare, the acknowledged academic expert on Telangana, is so unsure of himself that he manages to render 'vetti' as bonded labour and suggests with an insufferable politeness that perhaps Pavier has not given enough importance to it in trying to understand Telangana. Such politeness, to paraphrase a historian of mathematics speaking of Spinoza, would be engaging were it not exasperating.

I am entirely in agreement with the second paragraph (and perhaps only the second paragraph) of Pavier's comments on Dhanagare's review. To express myself in a language that will match (but not outdo) Pavier's own, his book is neither social science nor science of any kind, but a polemical brew concocted out of Trotskyist theoretical prescriptions and political proscriptions. Like all bad polemics his argument begins at the end and runs in reverse seeking its way through history by picking up convenient facts and statistics. Where neither is available, the gap is filled in with a skilful use of evocative and suggestive phrases and forceful assertion,

The Telangana peasant uprising was a failure. The question is: why did it fail? It is with a prefabricated answer to this question that

Pavier starts, and not, as Dhanagare innocently imagines, with a desire to understand why Telangana happened. There is — and has been — a world capitalist system of which Hyderabad was an integral part. The Hyderabad economy was subject to the ebb and flow of the crises of the world capitalist system and their resolution. The specific link was the export of groundnuts and castor from Telangana (and cotton from Marathwada), which grew apace since the start of this century. This link imported the Great Depression into Hyderabad and led to a severe fall in prices, culminating in the 'first crisis' faced by the peasantry of Telangana as a result of which their indebtedness increased and they lost much land to the Deshmukhs. The Deshmukhs themselves wanted this land to cultivate groundnut and castor which again became remunerative after 1934. The 'second' crisis came with the inflation and food shortage of the Second World War period. It led to further indebtedness on the part of the peasantry and further alienation of their land by the Deshmukhs who used it to cultivate peanuts and castor which had appreciated tremendously in value due to the lubrication needs (I suppose) of warring Europe. This set the stage for the Telangana peasant uprising.

Upto this point there is nothing uniquely Trotskyist about it, since capital-fetishism is a disease common to a wide spectrum of radical intellectuals. But at this point Trotskyism enters Pavier's argument in a predictable manner. The capitalist Deshmukhs had their counterparts in the rich peasants who resented the way the Deshmukhs cornered all the developmental infrastructure provided by the Nizam's government. They also resented the fact that they alone had to contribute to the grain levy collected by the state in the 40s, whereas the Deshmukhs escaped the burden using their influence.

They were, therefore, raring to fight the Deshmukhs, and along came the communists to help them. Armed with the class-collaborationist Stalin-Mao theory of Popular Front (generally referred to as United Front these days) they included this rural bourgeoisie in the Front, which inevitably led to its failure. Now one only needs to work this logic backwards to realise how the point of departure — peanuts and castor — is necessitated by the pre-conceived explanation.

Land-Grabbing

Until the Administrative reformation of Salar Jung I (initiated in the 1870s) the Deshmukhs appear to have been revenue farmers. The reforms consisted in giving pattas on land to individuals (not necessarily cultivators) and settling land revenue with them. The Deshmukhs were given 'vatans' of a few villages in proportion to the revenue they had earlier collected. But, not satisfied with that, the Deshmukhs used their influence to grab large chunks of land during the survey settlement. This started the process of land-grab in Telangana, much before the cultivation of exportable crops. The first round of the settlement came to an end by the turn of the century, and by that time much of the monopolisation of land was complete. Along with this the state started collecting land revenue in cash, which introduced indebtedness of the peasantry and probably further increased land alienation. I say 'probably' because it is doubtful in the extreme that land alienation through formal debt was an important medium of land-grabbing by the landlords. Manipulating land records, forcible occupation on various pretexts, allegation of tax default and such like misdemeanours — these are generally held to have been the most important means used by the landlords. (Using the term Deshmukh indiscriminately is misleading. Though the biggest landlords were Deshmukhs, there were others, both revenue-sharers like makhtedars, and those who were not shares of revenue but owed

their domination to occupation of huge quantities of land.) Among the various pretexts used, one could be non-payment of some petty loan, but even that was not a formal cash loan on land security of the kind that gets recorded in government reports. Basing himself on Kesava Iyengar's report of 1929-30,¹ Pavier himself comments that in the 12 villages surveyed in Warangal district, only 9 per cent of the land had changed hands during the previous 25 years, and (as a look at the report reveals) only 2 per cent was alienated against debt. Secondly, the Deshmukhs and other landlords were not the most important money-lenders. The report shows that out of the 48 cases of debt on land security, by far the most frequently incident class of money-lender was Komti (bania) shahukar (10 cases), and what is described as a Telanga raiyat' (24 cases). Reddy raiyats and shahukars occur in only 5 cases. (Since Reddys are mentioned separately, the Telanga raiyats', whoever they may be could not have been landlords, almost all of whom were Reddys.) If it is thought that even if the

landlord himself is not the money-lender, the land may be alienated to him in order to obtain cash for payment of the debt, the report negates such a supposition, since it shows that by far the largest recipients of alienated land are individuals belonging to what are called 'cultivating classes'. Once again, whoever these persons might have been, they could not have included among themselves the landlords, who were non-cultivating if nothing else.

Actually, the most important mechanism of Jand-grab by the landlords was the periodic survey settlements during which land freshly brought under cultivation by the peasantry as well as uncultivated land was grabbed using their influence with the officialdom. Added to this was the forcible seizure of peasants' land, for which non-payment of tax, refusal to do vetti, default on loan, or inability to pay the fine imposed by the landlord (in his capacity as arbiter of village disputes), or any such alleged 'misdemeanour' could be used as an excuse. I doubt that Pavier is unaware of this, but his whole thesis is so tied up with the

cash crops-international capitalist crisis-indebtedness-alienation syndrome that he cannot afford to note it. But let us pursue Pavier's argument further.

Regarding the Depression of 1930, Pavier notes that between 1930 and 1939, indebtedness increased by 89 per cent in Telangana. He has no estimate of the land (if any) alienated against it. On the other hand, speaking of the same crisis, Sundarayya- says that the landlords did grab peasants' land during the period, but mentions as the most important cause the peasants' inability to pay the revenue demand. As a supplementary cause he adds the grain loans given by the landlords against which they grabbed large chunks of land. About the second World War crisis, Pavier's information is that indebtedness increased by 120 per cent in Telangana; this time he is able to give an estimate of land alienated against this debt, but the figure he quotes is disastrous for his argument. For only 7 per cent of the land changed hands during 1934-49, and only 1 per cent due to indebtedness. But what happened to the debt? If it was

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not redeemed with land, what did the peasants pay against it? The answer is, anything, including their freedom. The mantle of cash-crop entrepreneurs that Pavier hangs on the Deshmukhs makes him search for land alienation, but the Deshmukhs themselves grabbed all manner of objects — grain, cattle, gold, ornaments, usable goods of any kind. If nothing was available the peasant would sell his freedom and become a bonded labourer (bhagela, jeetagadu). Indeed, the report of Kesava Iyengar quoted above shows that whenever debt on land security amounted to just 12,000 rupees, debt on non-land security amounted to more than Rs 2 lakh. Of this the most frequent is personal security (about 50 per cent of the cases), and the next is crop security (25 per cent).

Let me not be mistaken. It is far from being my contention that the landlords did not grab land. They certainly did. But the connection that Barry Pavier seeks to establish between land-grab, cash crops, international capitalist crises, and indebtedness (sometimes explicitly, sometimes by suggestion, and generally by treating these four aspects to the exclusion of every thing else that is relevant to the understanding of Telangana) needs something more credible than a revolutionary socialist's say-so if it is to be convincing. The landlords started grabbing land in the 1870s and kept grabbing land right through to the 1940s, crisis or no crisis, castor or no castor. Crises might have increased the phenomenon, but to treat them as the genesis is misleading. Economic crises, leading to a greater inability to pay taxes, to pay the fines imposed by the landlords, to bear one's share of the cost of ceremonial celebrations in the landlords' household, and so on, would make the peasantry vulnerable to dispossession from land on various counts. But they were neither the origin of the phenomenon, nor even demonstrably the 'last straw'; they merely contributed to a process inherent in the structure of feudal Telangana. Nor did the process have any visible connection with cash crops. The landlords

grabbed cultivable land to extract rent (cash, kind, and labour rent) from the peasantry; they grabbed forest and bush land to extract grazing rent (pullari in Telugu); and they grabbed marginally cultivable land to prevent the landless from acquiring land — a prerequisite for feudal social domination. It certainly takes a remarkable capitalist-fetishism to believe that land is grabbed only to grow crops. This unstated assumption is so strong in certain radical academic circles that they will no doubt soon enshrine it as a dogma (to replace 'Stalinist' dogmas, of course) that peasants cannot rebel if there are no exportable cash crops around. R S Rao is quoted by a friend as having said that our academics have gone wherever capital has gone. Not only that, wherever they have gone they have hunted out capital, weighed it, measured it, labelled it, and all but cultured it, and convinced themselves and each other that they have understood the world. Much of the confusion arises from the implicit belief that pre-capitalist societies and social relations have no internal dynamics capable of leading to a rupture, but only the penetration of capital can achieve change.

But let us take a more detailed look at the connection between cash crops and land-grab.³ Pavier gives details showing the increase of acreage under groundnut between 1939 and 1945 (page 35 of his book). Actually, the increase was much more radical between 1935 and 1939, and affected not only groundnut, but also castor, but Pavier is interested only in the increase in the later period since that appears to have been at least partly at the expense of foodgrains thereby tying in with his thesis of indebtedness and land alienation. But between 1935 and 1939 acreage under groundnut increased nearly three-fold, by 1,27,000 acres in Warangal, and by 1,42,000 acres in Nalgonda. In contrast, the increase was only 30,000 acres in Warangal and 90,000 in Nalgonda, between 1939 and 1945. Where did this increase come from? Did the landlords bring into cultivation land classified as 'cultivable waste' but actually under the cultivation of the

poor, thereby depriving them of land? Or did they grab the patla land of peasants? Before we come to either conclusion, let us note that compared to the 1 lakh and odd increase in acreage under groundnut, fallow land (much of it landlords' land) ranged from 3 to 6 lakh acres in Warangal and 4 to 8 lakh acres in Nalgonda. Indeed, consistently during the three years 1935, 1939 and 1945, fallow lands were larger in acreage than culturable wastes, on occasion even up to 4 times in magnitude. In Nalgonda both culturable wastes and fallow land, increased between 1935 and 1939. Consequently, with such amounts of fallow land on hand (ranging from 7 to 20 per cent of total surveyed land) it is difficult to believe that the increase in acreage under groundnut (2.5 per cent of surveyed land in Warangal and 3.5 per cent in Nalgonda) must have entailed aggressive alienation of peasants' land. The lands monopolised by the Deshmukhs and other landlords included rocks, stones, bushes, forests, sandy wastes, tank beds, stream beds, and of course dry land and marginally cultivable land. Much of it was never cultivated. Speaking of Adilabad, the anthropologist Heimen-dorff mentions that the non-tribal landlords who grabbed thousands of acres of land kept nearly 70 per cent of it uncultivated. The landlords of Warangal and Nalgonda were no different. If they wanted to grow peanuts they could have found plenty of suitable land in their own possession. Contrary to Dhanagare's assertion (apparently his own inference from Pavier's thesis), the landlords never brought "all the fallow land under castor and groundnut cultivation", nor even much of it. The landlords of Telangana were plunderers in whom it is difficult to recognise the anesthetised capitalist version manufactured by Barry Pavier. They lived, not on profit, but on rent on monopolised land, and a variety of feudal exactions, the most characteristic of which is vetti, the bane of feudal Telangana.

Vetti

Vetti is not bonded labour; its sanction lies not in usurious debt,

as in the case of debt-bondage, but in custom and brute force. It is not even corvee as understood in European feudalism, where the peasant had to perform labour service on the landlord's fields. Vetti included that, but went well beyond it. All the toiling castes of the village had to supply free of charge to the landlord whatever products or services they produced. I will not describe it in detail since there is a good description in Sundarayya's book. In addition the landlord would sit in judgement over village disputes and collect fines from the offending party (often from both parties). He would demand gifts from the villagers on special occasions, and contributions to the coat of ceremonial functions in his family. More generally, anything in the village that attracted the landlord's eyes had to be handed over to him. From all these the rich peasants were no more exempt than anybody else. Those who recall those days say that it was not the Deshmukh's monopoly of the capital provided by the Nizam that angered the rich peasants, but the fact that they, more than anybody else, were likely to possess things which the landlord would grab. They did not dare to buy a sturdy pair of bullocks, build a good house, or even grow a lush crop. Plunder, and not profit, was the watchword of the feudals of Telangana. borne estimate of its magnitude can be had from recent experience. After the start of the Karimnagar peasant struggle in the last decade, *the* people of some villages computed the amounts their landlord had plundered from them in this fashion, and came up with totals like Rs 2 to 3 lakh! Considering that Karimnagar's landlords of yester-years would look petty compared to the landlords of the forties, the amounts the latter plundered can only be guessed at. All the debts recorded in Kesava Iyengar's reports would not add up to a fraction of it. And what connection this loot (either in its magnitude or variation) had with the international capitalist crises is yet to be demonstrated.

These feudal exactions and the feudal tenurial relations (together with bonded labour, or the bhagela system) constituted the twin

oppressions that crushed the people of Telangana for about seventy years. Without understanding the nature, the contradictions, and the dynamics of this oppression we cannot understand the impact (however much or little) that the so-called international capitalist system had on the economy of Telangana. To take it as a dogma that the only dynamics it could have is what the international system imparted is of little use in understanding why Telangana happened.⁴

I do not wish to comment on Barry Pavier's conclusions regarding the failure of the movement. The conclusions are inherent in his premise since the premise is actually deduced from the conclusions. Perhaps the signal virtue of Pavier's non-contribution is to remind us that the job of understanding Telangana still remains unfinished. All the books that have appeared till now are partly descriptive and partly polemical, Pavier's is no exception, though his polemics is different from those of the communist leaders who preceded him, and the description is of the kind that will impress university-trained intellectuals who are taught to believe that only those social relations can change the world which are capable of being tabulated and statistically analysed. In pre-capitalist societies, the "relations that men enter into in the social production of their life" are immensely varied. Much of it remains in the memory of those who lived through those days, many of whom are still around. We should perhaps be grateful to Barry Pavier for reminding us that they will not be around for ever and at least now a serious attempt should be made to understand Telangana.

Notes

- [I am grateful to A Bobbili for helpful discussions.]
- 1 "Economic Investigations in the Hyderabad State, 1929-30".
 - 2 P. Sundarayya, "Telangana People's Struggle and Its Lessons".
 - 3 The information given below is taken from the Statistical Year-Books of the Hyderabad government for the years Fasli 1344, 1348 and 1354 (AD 1935, 1939 and 1945).
 - 4 For example, take the sharp increase in the acreage under

cash crops between 1935 and 1939. The 'obvious cause is the revival of the international market after the depression of the early thirties. But a second look at the Year-Books referred to earlier shows that the same period witnessed another remarkable change' Between 1935 and 1939 there was a massive resumption of inams by the Nizam's government. The area resumed was 6,15,000 (about 80 per cent) in Warangali and 6,75,000 acres (about 84 per cent) in Nalgonda. This was obviously promoted by a desire to augment the treasury. Now since the inams were mainly held by big landlords who kept much of their land fallow, the resumption *it* followed by given pattas to peasants, would naturally give rise to an increase in dry-land cultivation. Of course, it is not my contention that this is what really happened. There is not enough assertions.

France's Austerity Measures

FRANCE has introduced a broad range of austerity measures to accompany the devaluation of the French franc in connection with the European Monetary System realignment of March 21, 1983. The measures are expected to reduce domestic demand by some billion francs and to almost halve the trade deficit in 1983, while bringing it into balance by the end of 1984. The programme also foresees a reduction in the Central government's budget deficit, originally put at F 118 billion for 1983, by about F 20 billion through a combination of spending cuts and new taxes, including, in particular, an increase in the duty on gasoline in line with the decline in oil prices. In addition, the deficits of public enterprises and local authorities are to be reduced by about F 11 billion through increases in electricity, gas, telephone, and rail rates of an average of 8 per cent, and through slow-downs in investment and stock-building in these sectors. To help finance the social security system, the plan also provides for the introduction of a new levy of 1 per cent on taxable incomes and for increases in the duties on alcoholic beverages and tobacco. In addition, the government is introducing a number of measures intended to increase savings, voluntary and enforced.