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## IMAGINING TELUGU LINGUISTIC NATIONALISM

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**Abstract:** India as a nation is constituted of nationalities. Among them, the Telugu nation is located in South India. The idea of sub-national consciousness was more like the colonized nation. In 1956, Andhra Pradesh emerged as a linguistic state based on the state reorganization act which merged two Telugu-speaking regions: Andhra and Telangana. Andhra is located on the Coastline of the Bay of Bengal whereas the Telangana region is in the Deccan Plateau. In the movement for separating Andhra's statehood based on the Telugu language, poets and literary persons played an important role. They evoked the glory of Andhra's history and culture. In this paper, I propose that Telugu bilingual elite constructed an imaginative Telugu nation called "Vishalandhra". The nation was supposed to speak for all the Telugu-speaking people and regions, which were historically different. In this imagination, the motherland was greater than heaven, "*janani janma bhoomischa swargadapigariiyasi*" evokes the glory of Andhra's history and culture. This paper aims to understand the formation of the Andhra region through cultural consciousness coming through literary culture. The paper will also attempt to locate the poetics and politics of the dramatic literature in the formation of Andhra.

**Keywords:** Imaging nation. Linguistic regions. Cultural hegemony.

**Resumo:** A Índia como nação é constituída de nacionalidades. Dentre elas, a nação Telugu está localizada no sul da Índia. A ideia de uma consciência subnacional era mais parecida com a nação colonizada. Em 1956, Andhra Pradesh emergiu como um estado linguístico baseado no ato de reorganização do estado que fundiu duas regiões falantes de Telugu: Andhra e Telangana. Andhra está localizada no litoral da Baía de Bengala enquanto a região de Telangana encontra-se no platô de Deccan. No movimento de separar o estado de Andhra baseado na linguagem Telugu, poetas e literatos desempenharam papel importante. Eles evocaram a glória da história e cultura de Andhra. Neste artigo, proponho que a elite bilíngue Telugu construiu uma nação Telugu imaginada chamada "Vishalandhra". Supostamente, a nação deveria falar por todas as pessoas e regiões falantes de Telugu, que eram historicamente diferentes. Nessa imaginação, a terra mãe era maior que o céu, "*janani janma bhoomischa swargadapigariiyasi*" evoca a glória da história e cultura de Andhra. Este artigo busca compreender a formação da região de Andhra por meio da consciência cultural que vinha por intermédio da cultura literária. Este artigo também é uma tentativa de localizar as poéticas e políticas da literatura dramática em formação de Andhra.

**Palavras-chave:** Nação imaginada. Regiões linguísticas. Hegemonia cultural.

## 1. Introduction

O, humble men! The gleaming history of Andhra has not perished, open your hearts and read it - Rayaprolu Subba Rao (SUBBARAO, 2013, p. 56)

This poetic stanza is from "*Probodham*" (admonition) written by poet Rayaprolu Subba Rao<sup>2</sup>. The emphasis was on reading, the literature as a part of regional consciousness. As it is clear from the meaning, he wrote the poem to mobilize people for Andhra. The poem was part of the demand for special statehood for Andhra province on a linguistic basis. Poets and literary persons like Subba Rao tried to mobilize people by showing inequality and exploitation. The emphasis was on how the Tamil ruling class had captured all resources, employment, irrigation projects, and educational institutions in the Madras province in British India. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Andhra's people realized their backwardness in the multilingual state of Madras. They saw their future in the Telugu-speaking region. Keeping the aspiration of a special province based on Telugu-speaking people, the first Andhra Maha Sabha (AMS) conference was held in 1913 at Bapatla in Guntur District to achieve the status of a special province. Though the movement for a separate Andhra saw many ups and downs along with the Indian freedom struggle, it achieved its height after the death of Potti Sriramulu<sup>3</sup> in 1952, who died while doing fast-unto-death for the demand. This led to the violent upheaval and subsequent formation of Andhra. The Prime Minister then, Jawaharlal Nehru, declared the formation of the Andhra state on 1<sup>st</sup> October 1953. After that, the leaders of Telugu focused on forming *Vishalandhra* (united Andhra Pradesh) by merging the Telangana region.

In the movement for a separate Andhra based on the Telugu language, poets and literary persons played an important role. They evoked the glory of Andhra's history and culture. They asked Andhra people to read the glory of Telugu. They used the Telugu language and literary archives to make their points. The movement was disseminated in the public sphere through printed books and booklets. Andhra was evoked as the motherland. Andhra was

conceived as a physical as well as a metaphysical entity. In this regard, G. Aloysius argued that the region is socially constructed. He aptly says that “the study of the region starts with the consideration of the physical, but very soon the investigation moves to other planes such as culture, economy and politics” (ALOYSIUS, 2013, p. 12). All these factors generally influence the regional formation. Culture is one of the important factors which has remained ignored in the region studies discourse. Culture works as a catalyst in regional formation; it becomes a conscious shaping force through which one imagines a region. It shapes individuals and the collective formation of groups and identities in a region. It can be argued that the region is reproduced in culture. This paper aims to understand the formation of the Andhra region through cultural consciousness coming through literary culture. This paper will map out the various ways the region Andhra was imagined, constructed, and reproduced. The paper will closely examine dramatic poetry and theatre performances, which played a crucial role in the formation of the regional consciousness.

Andhra Pradesh was formed based on language in which literature played a vital role. I would like to demonstrate how Telugu drama constructed the idea of the region. The paper will also attempt to locate the poetics and politics of the dramatic literature in the formation of Andhra. It will also examine the various ways this literature was disseminated in the region with the help of theatre. For this purpose, I will analyse popular *padya natakam* (verse drama) and the plays of the *Praja Natya Mandali (PNM)*, the branch of the Indian People’s Theatre Association in Andhra Pradesh. I will focus my analysis on plays and kinds of literature where the demands for separate Andhra figured prominently. These were part of the great mobilization of the demand for Andhra. PSR. Apparao’s *Telugu Nataka Vikasam* (1967) offers useful historiography of Telugu theatre. The work discusses the emergence and expansion of literary drama from the end of the 19th century till the formation of Andhra Pradesh (APPARAO, 1967). The study of David Shulman, Velcheru Narayana Rao, and B. Kameswara Rao provides methodological tools as well as the historical background of the literary imaginations of that period. (SHULMAN and VELCHERU, 2002) B. Kameshwara Rao’s work *Andhra Padya*

*Patanam* (Reading Telugu Padyam) (RAO, 1957) is useful for the analysis of *padyam* aesthetics. Broadly, the paper will examine the politics of language with a focus on theatre concerning the formation of Andhra Pradesh as a cultural region and state.

## 2. Region and its reiteration

The appellations 'Andhra', 'Tenugu', and 'Telugu' respectively refer to 'nation', 'geographical area', and 'language'. They refer to the people who live in a certain geographical space, their language, and their nation. The region Andhra is in the middle of north India and south India. The location makes it a place that has mixed language and culture. Telugu comes from the proto-Dravidian language that has its roots and contiguity with Tamil and Kannada. Although, in terms of cultural exchanges, Sanskrit hugely influences it. Almost sixty percent of Telugu words are drawn from Sanskrit. While Sanskrit has influenced Telugu, Telugu has humanized Sanskrit. According to some critics, Telugu pronunciation reduced the Sanskrit language's harshness and the roughness of the Tamil language. It becomes sweeter and more appealing. The poet and king Krishna Devarayalu from the 16th century praised it as "*desha bhashalandu Telugu lessa*" (Among country languages Telugu is great) (KRISHNA, 1907).

India as a nation is constituted of nationalities. Different regions have different languages and cultures. Every region can be seen as a nation, or sub-nation, because of its cultural, political, and economic distinctions. In the nation-state system, they are the political regions. In comparing the nationalities based on language and culture, the modern nation is a new phenomenon. Recent scholarship asks us to question the origin of the idea of the mother tongue lying in pre-colonial times by dismantling the discourse of linguistic nationalism. Rama Sundari has traced the recent constitution of the modern linguistic community (MANTHENA, 2014, p. 338). The path-breaking work of Benedict Anderson has also reiterated the argument that how "the nation is an imagined political community. And how that constitution is - inherently limited and sovereign" (ANDERSON, 1983, p. 6). He has pointed out

that the imagined communities were intellectual constructs, which relied on the imagination. Drawing from these readings, I propose that Telugu bilingual elite constructed an imaginative Telugu nation called *Vishalandhra*. The nation was supposed to speak for all the Telugu-speaking people and regions, which were historically different. From time to time, they were bifurcated and united through different zones. The conceived political and linguistic unity was already based on fragmentations.

The movement for Andhra as part of the Home Rule movement led by the Indian National Congress. It was further fuelled by the hegemony of Tamil-speaking areas under Madras' presidency. Andhra intelligentsia was feeling a sense of inferiority to the Tamil region. To counter this hegemonic presence, they reinvented the “past glory” of Telugu culture. The Telugu intelligentsia tried to bring two different regions together. On the one side, it was the Telangana region which was part of Hyderabad state under the Muslim rulers. They imposed Urdu as a language in the administrative and educational system for a long period. On the other side, there was the Rayala Seema region. It was a dry zone. Under British rule, it has been named Ceded. Rayala Seema was earlier not agreed to join in special Andhra province movement. After the Sribagh pact<sup>4</sup> (1937), it agreed to join the movement. The movement for Andhra was trying to bring four different ecological and cultural zones: Coastal Andhra, Rayalaseema, Telangana, and *Uttarandhra*. According to Aruna, “these cultural zones also indicate that the concept of region and regional consciousness existed much before the nation and nationalism became euphoric” (BOMMAREDDY, 2003, p. 108).

### **3. Telugu Region in Poetry**

Existing works of literature of the movement for separate Andhra conceived a romantic idea of the nation: beautiful land, golden past, happy people, and beautiful language. It was an aestheticized idea of a region much more in common with the idealized notion of the Indian nation. This was foregrounded in three different ways. First was the idea of the region as the

motherland. As it was expressed in Rayaprolu Subbarao's, *Desa bhakti* poem, *ee desamegina*:

Whichever country you go to, wherever part you step in  
Whatever alter you ascend, whatever people say  
Keep praising your motherland Bharathi  
Keep your nation's honour in high (SUBBARAO, 2002, p. 233).

The idea of sub-national consciousness was more like the colonized nation. In this imagination, the motherland was greater than heaven, "*janani janma bhoomischa swargadapigariiyasi*". The region was mobilized invoking the primordial roots of culture. In his well-received poem, Viswanatha Satyannarayana imagines the past glory of the local kingdoms through *Kondaveedu pogamabbulu*, the Clouds of Kondaveedu. He also eulogizes the intellectual attainments of the poets. The poet smells, the *paurusham*, manly fashions of the Andhra children in the clouds of Kondaveedu from his former birth memories. Poet feels that the Andhra civilization remains to tell something to present the Andhra people's inertness. The clouds here, symbolically, represent the fame, desire, and imagination of the poet which he would like to evoke the nostalgia of the past.

The second was evoked by juxtaposing Telugu speaking region against the Tamil region. Poet Puttaparti Narayanacharyulu in his *Megha dutham* (the Cloud Messenger) sends the cloud as a mediator between a prisoner and his beloved. The beloved lives in Srikakulam, Andhra border. The prisoner asks the cloud to send a message to her while he describes the root map. He describes several Andhra towns, hills, and rivers. This poem evoked the memories of the Andhra history and culture through different ecological-geographical places of Andhra. The poet successfully created an aesthetic experience of *Telugu Desam* (Rayala Seema, Telangana, and Andhra). Fascinatingly, the poet's idea of the region flows like lyrics and music flouting with clouds, imagination, and reality. The poet compared the region and its history with beauty, love, and romance. The prisoner separated from his beloved creates *vipralamba*

*sringar*. In this connection, he sees love everywhere, in every object and material.

Telugu fraternity was against the political and cultural hegemony of the Tamils at the time. The other important reason was the increasing influences of Dravidian, non-Brahmin movements in the Madras Presidency. Andhra intelligentsia dominated by Brahmin castes was not comfortable with the development. They were unable to assert their identity and culture.

The third important reason was the regional disparities and marginalization of Telugu-speaking people. However, this sense of aesthetics was challenged by the new sensibility of Modern Dalit poet Gurram Jashuva who wrote a poem called *Gabbilam*, the Bat. Using the metaphor of *Meghadootham* in his poem the bat becomes a messenger between God and Dalits, the untouchables. While Gurazada's love for the nation undermines the question of caste, class, religion, and gender hierarchies, Jashuva's poem was a sharp critique of that image of a region. It can be argued that the movement for Andhra, dominated by upper castes elites while trying to mobilize people based on language, fails to understand "*Desamante matti kadoi, desamante manusuloi*", that the nation is not about the soil, but it is about people.

#### **4. Nation, Language, and Padya Natakam**

Playwright Chilakamarthi Lakshminarasimham had sung a *padyam* – 'where India becomes a milking cow, while Indians were crying like lambs Shrewd British shepherds draw milk by tightly holding the mouths of lambs' (BHARATHI, 2001, p. 58) spontaneously at the end of the meeting in Rajahmundry in 1907, during the Indian National Movement. With one *thetageeti padyam*, he explains the suppression by the colonial regime. It has followed the meter that gives rhythm to words used in daily speech. He compared the Indian nation to a cow and Indians as lambs, imperialists as shrewd shepherds. This *padyam* appeals masses.

The modern public sphere in India emerged in the colonial cities built on the model of the European empire. Three things that constructed the public sphere in the Andhra region were: the nationalist movement, the education

system, and modern theatre. They were drawing from each other. In 1860, the first Telugu drama was written in a conventional style under the influence of English. However, there was no theatre until the Dharvada theatre company toured Andhra Pradesh in 1880. Taking inspiration from the Dharvada Company, the reformist Kandukuri Veeresalingam Pantulu staged a farce in Rajahmundry with his students. Many plays of this period remained as dramatic literature and were not staged for several reasons, for example, Gurazada, in the preface to his *Kanyasulkam*, says, “it is a popular prejudice that the Telugu language was unsuited to the stage” (GURAZADA, 1986, p. XII) They were debating about the mode of language one should use for literature and theatre writings.

While some of the conventional playwrights used mythological themes and wrote in verse, the English-educated men writers rejected the style and theme. They argued that if the literature must reach ordinary people, then writers need to use the language of everyday life. Gurazada, who argued for the inclusion of the spoken language in the educational system, says, “my own vernacular for me is the living Telugu, Italian of the East, in which none of us ashamed to express our joys and sorrows, but some of us ashamed to write well” (GURAZADA, 1986, p. XV).

The Andhra *padya natakam* (verse drama) has more than one hundred year’s history. The performers adopt the mythological characters of Krishna, Duryodhana, or Harischandra and, standing in front of the European-painted curtain, sing the *padyam* for hours. They used to have ornamentation with flaring costumes. The audience in ecstasy would have to ask them “once more”, the performer would sing once more for them. The phenomenon of *padya natakam* continues till now, but it does not remain very popular. But the theatre convention set by *padya natakam* remains relevant in popular imageries. For example, if one says we are theatre artists, common people ask, “do you sing *padyam*?” The poetry that must be sung remains a criterion to follow. In the Telugu literature classroom, when it comes to teaching poetry, Telugu teachers still try to sing the *padyam*. A popular perception was created that A Telugu *bhashabhimaani*, a man of passion for his mother tongue Telugu,



feels that even an uneducated Telugu person can also easily say at least four Telugu *padyam* that was the greatness of Telugu. The popular *padya natakam* like Satya Harischanda, Goyapakhyanam, Pandavodyogam, and so on, still have been demanded in Telugu theatre, like Jatra in Bengal and Odisha. Surabhi theatre family group also continues their conventional theatre practice with *padyam*. Yet, how this tradition of singing *padyam* start in Telugu Theatre and what was its role in regional and national politics?

During the movement for Andhra, *padyam* singing was a new phenomenon in modern Telugu theatre. But *padyam* as a form of poetry was very old. It was a core form in classical Telugu poetry. Classical Telugu poetry started in the 11th century with a translation of Sanskrit Mahabharata by Nannayya. While translating *slokas* he invented a new meter called *padyam*. The form was musical and performative. While brining *padyam* aesthetics, Shulman and Rao say, 'Nannayya's adaptation of the *champu* style also implies a particularly active, participatory role for the listeners (SHULMAN and VELCHERU, 2002, p. 11). This poetic tradition continued for centuries by taking different shapes and rhythms.

Andhra has been geographically located somewhere in middle between the North and South India. Therefore, both Dravidian and Sanskrit literary traditions influenced it. Telugu emerged from Dravidian and is evident in Andhra civilization as it is in the Telugu language (Ibid, 2002, p. 3). The Scholar Kasinadhuni Nageswara Rao in his *Andhra Vanmaya Charitra* observes that Sanskrit vocabulary also negotiated with the structure of the Telugu language. Many Telugu poets Tikkana and Srinatha reworked the Sanskrit texts into Telugu. The 16th century poet Ramarajabhushana wrote about the Telugu world, *bahulandhrokti maya prapancham* created by these poets. By the end of the 19th century, this Telugu world was re-created by Telugu dramatists.

The modern Telugu drama started with the prose form of writing. The drama is in conversation form among characters. This form was new to Telugu literature. Literary giants like Kandukuri Veereshalingam, who was called 'gadya Tikkana' (Tikkana of prose), enormously contributed to Telugu language and social reform. The enlightenment started in the Telugu language

in 1853. The sensibility of that enlightenment first came in literature. With the printing press, manual scripts written on palm leaves got printed into books. They were made available for wider circulations. The people of Andhra were very much aware of their past through the book called *History of the Andhra* published by Vignana Chandika Mandali in 1910. At the same time, English education gave them rational thinking. The encounter with English culture and debates offered them a new critical view to evaluate their traditions and cultures. Educated men like Kandukuri started the reform movement by eradicating the social evils of the Brahmanical society. He used theatre as a medium to carry out his reform. Telugu playwrights gradually began to develop a play structure, following western and Sanskrit models of theatre. Some of them translated plays from these languages into Telugu. Theatre scholar, Appa Rao termed the period from 1886 to 1900 a developing period of theatre. Gradually theatre performances started in Bellary and Circar districts as entertainment. When theatre emerged as entertainment, commercial adventures and capital investment started. The investors started searching for various methods to draw an audience to the theatre. They invested capital in music, scenery, and proscenium theatre. As part of the experiment, they also re-introduced *padyam* to theatre because of their appealing quality of musical rhythm. The period also saw a major shift in education by the British government. The British government decided to give education to Indians in their mother tongues. They were surprised by noticing two types of dialects, the dialect spoken in daily speech and the dialect taught in a classroom. Dr. Grierson argues that

The vernacular has been split into two sections- the tongue which is understood by people, and the literary dialect is known only through the press and not intelligible to those who do not know Sanskrit. Literature has thus been divorced from the great masses of the popular and the literary classes (DAKSHINAMURTY, 1998, p. 40).

The distinction between literary dialect and spoken dialect led to a regime of distinction in aesthetics. The poets and reformers were split into two

groups. They started two movements; one is the movement for literary dialect and the second movement for spoken dialect. While the traditional pundits wanted to keep literary dialect in the education system. They argued that these social reforms are harmful to the Telugu language and society. They accused the people who are writing in spoken dialogue and called them “*gramya*”, uncultured people. The linguistic scholar Dakshinamurty mocks these pundits' arguments that, if people start reading and writing the spoken dialect, there will be possibilities for regional prejudices and special state movements (DAKSHINAMURTY, 1998). Another section of pundits who were reformists argued that spoken dialogue is the best for education. They argued that spoken language will give easy access to acquire knowledge. They also added that the usage of spoken language in education will make learners happy because the language would be the language of their hearts. Theatre was one of the battlegrounds for these arguments. These Pundits and reformists choose drama as a medium to prove their arguments. For this purpose, they have translated and adapted mythological and historical texts into dramatic forms. They wrote in standard literary dialect. Another section of pundits tried to focus on contemporary social problems which they were facing in their daily life. In his preface of *Kanyasulkam*, Gurazada argues that “modern life which presents complex social conditions is neglected by playwrights except for purposes of the broadest farce and poverty of invention is manifested by the consultant handling of threadbare romantic topics” (GURAZADA, 1986, p. XIII). Gurazada rightly argues that the complexities of the modern social life do not reflect in modern Telugu theatre, instead romantic themes like truth, justice, to protect the refuge whatever may come, i.e., these perennial problems were focused. Thus, the question arises: why only *Kanyasulkam* was considered a landmark in Telugu theatre? There are many reasons for it. In *Kanyasulkam*, he created a complex inner world of the society and psychological reality of the characters which was in parallel with the modern sensibility. This could not be done by mythical dramas although they were well-received plays. Plays like *Pandavodhyogam*, *Satya Harischandra*, *Gayopakhyanam*, and others

created another world. They could not bring the complexities and crisis of the society and the region.

Before regionalism sprang into Andhra social sphere, many of the theatre societies/companies used to have names including 'Hindu' and 'Nation'. For instance, Hindu *nataka Samajam* (Rajahmundry), Bandaru National theatrical society, and so on. Indian nationalist movement and Andhra movement staged in the 1920s to 1930s brought historical themes in theatre specifically rooted in the region. They had an opportunity to deal with the history, and to prove the backwardness of the region. Kolachalam Srinivasa Rao, the playwright, argued that "it is easy to imagine and write mythological plays, and if we talk about historical themes, people don't know about history, that can creatively interpret and educate audience" (APPARAO, 1967, p. 265). His popular play "Fall of Vijayanagara" was banned in 1918. The play indirectly criticized British Rule, even though the theme dealt with the conflict between Hindu and Muslim kings. Historical themes are different from history, because, playwrights interpret the story with their ideology. Historical plays like Prathaparudriyam of Vedam Venkataraya Sastry, Bobbiliyuddam of Sripada appealed to the masses of the Andhra.

## 5. Utopic region

Theatre and literary practices went through a turmoil phase during the movement for a separate Andhra based on the Telugu language. *Padya natakam* lost its glory because of its intrinsic fault. Bereft of innovations, it was producing the basis of its faults, i.e., monotonously repeated plays. In the name of competition, actors dominated the stage with their glory and the final cause of the capital manipulation of the contractors. When cinema becomes an attractive art form for the masses, all the theatre auditoriums turn into cinema halls. Social changes in the thirties produced new poets like Srisri. He brought a new school of poetry along with the formation of the Progressive Writers Association (PWA) and the Communist movement (1935) in India. His *Maha prasthanam* had created a tremendous impact on the minds of youth (RAO, 1994, p. 256). In his *Maha prasthanam*, he calls upon people for another world,

A different world, a different world  
A different world is calling!  
March ahead, push ahead...  
Onward we march! A different world  
A great one  
Pervades the whole earth!  
Roar like a great wind, Flow like a swift thought!  
Burst forth like a dark cloud full of rain  
Move on, march ahead! (SRISRI, 1984, p. 17).

What was this another world or the different world? What kind of region, Srisri was proposing? Of course, it was different from the *swarajya* or special Andhra province or the Dravidian state. Srisri idea of the region was an egalitarian region, a society of an inclusive space. In the hegemonic political situation, Srisri was dreaming of the ideal state which did not exist in physical form. His region was a utopia.

Srisri goes opposite of the traditionalist who wanted to evoke the glories of the medieval Andhra and great Telugu culture. Whereas Srisri wanted to traverse the future. This attracted the youth of Andhra. Unlike the earlier great poets, he saw poetry everywhere, in a puppy, in a matchstick, in a piece of soup. He appeals to people that “only you should have a poetic inspiration... see if you have the sight, write if you have the word.” [SRISRI, 1984, p. 30]. He wanted to get free from lexicons, classical grammatical compositions, and meters. He opposed the way history was written. As a Marxist, he said, history has nothing to do with kings, and their war dates and queen's love stories:

Look at the history of any nation  
What is there to be proud of?  
The entire history of the human race  
Is one exploiting the other!  
The mighty have turned the meek  
Into slaves!  
Murderers have made a name  
In history as rulers of the earth! (SRISRI, 1984, p. 73).

This is entirely different from what the Telugu propagators of the movement for the separate Andhra were imagining. Instead of writing about

people's history and culture, they were seeking pride in classical poets and rulers. Poets and playwrights used to praise the glory of Andhra, *Andhra prasasthi*. In one of Gullapalli Narayana Murthy's plays, *Andhra Jyothi* (1940), a character admits the pathetic situation of the present Andhra province compared with the past. The playwright eulogizes the past to bring the problem of the present:

The valor of the Kakatiya dynasty who rule all over Katakam, the talent of Krishnadevaraya who rule Vidyanagara make victory in all quarters, the heroism of Vengi Chalukyas, the campaigning of the Palnati heroes, the leadership of Nayaka kings, war talent of Kamma heroes, the ferocity of Reddys, oh! Mother of Andhra! These all perished in oblivion, what state you are facing now? What happens to your independence, arts, literature, and statesmanship? You who make a king carry your palanquin, you are the goddess of money who did port business with Romans... today Andhra people become living corpses. Andhra becomes a graveyard. Andhra's manly manner had died, and there is no nationality remained in them (NARAYANAMURTY, 1940, p. 13).

Here playwright intended to excavate the past. This could be read in the light of Joseph Roach's "Cities of the Dead", their "aim was to excavate the past that is necessary to account for how we got here and the past that is useful for conceiving alternatives to our present condition" (ROACH, 1996, p. 25). While the character publicizes the Andhra movement, the playwright tried to evoke the memories of the heroic history of Andhra through the character, particularly on the audience. But, Srisri in his *Mahaa Prasthanam*, imagines "*maro prapancham*", another world. He did not want to count kings, who get into the palanquin, he counts the people who carry it. He evokes the history of the oppressed. The elite's ideas of linguistic state icons were kings and classical poets. Further, as Kellner puts it, 'During the feudal period, ideas of piety, honour, valour, and military chivalry were the ruling ideas of the hegemonic aristocratic classes' (KELLNER, 2013, p. 4). During the Andhra movement, instead of talking about the social reality of the period, poets took up these imaginative themes by legitimizing dominant societal interests. Srisri adopted the social reality in his poetry. He has also influenced and shown a new path in

literature and performing arts. Srisri raised the issue of nationalism and the Andhra movement and addressed what the movement failed to address. That was the immediate problem of the common people. He was deeply rooted in Marxist politics. He tried to question the hegemony of capitalist forces above nationalism and regionalism. He made remarkable changes in the political and cultural spheres of Andhra Telangana in the decades of the 40s and 50s. His poetry performed an active role in the Andhra movement and Telangana Armed struggle (1946-51) led by the Communist Party of India.

In 1943, the Communist Party of India established its cultural wing Praja Natya Mandali<sup>5</sup> (PNM) to spread its socialist ideology among the masses. They tried to unify people against the capitalist and fascist forces local and international by using people's art forms like Burra Katha<sup>6</sup>, *Veedi Bhagavatham* (Street Theatre), and *Pagati Vesham* (daytime performance), of old cultural revivals of the region. The progressive movement led to two major changes, first not more relying on classical Telugu language and classical themes and the second was the marginalized art forms at stages forefront. The Communist activists and artists fought for the region what Srisri imagines *maro prancham* (another world), against the real Oppressors. PNM re-imagined the region different from the elite-brahminical imagination of Andhra. It tried to bring medieval *desi* region culture which was used by Shiva-s against Brahmin ideology. The artists used a wide range of themes from the local histories like *Palnati veera charitra*, *Alluri Sitharamaraju* Burra Katha to the international issues like Tatyana Burra Katha, Hitler Veedi Bhagavatam to portray radical reactionaries. The future region for the Communists and progressive were what they used to call, *kooli rajyam* or *karmika rajyam*.

They also influence the nationalist movement. They brought radicalism to fight the capitalist state. In Telangana, they fought against the Nizam by adopting armed struggle. And in Andhra, they fought for the demand of a democratic special state. However, there were a lot of ambivalences in their political strategies and cultural struggles.

## 6. The politics of land and language: *Maa Bhoomi*

*Maa Bhoomi* (Our Land) (1946) is a play on the historic Telangana Armed Struggle (1946-1951) written by Sunkara Satyannarayana and Vasireddy Bhaskara Rao. It was widely performed by more than 125 groups of PNM in the years 1947-1948. PNM was vibrantly active in the political scenario of Andhra and Telangana. The playwrights historicize the events of struggle in dramatic structure. The play tried to bring the history of violence, suppression, and sacrifice of people in performance to gain support for the movement. A Historical event emerged as performance in *Maa Bhoomi*. It would be interesting to find out what efficacy it had on the movement for the separate Telangana. How did it help that Andhra and Telangana as regions transformed into a single linguistic entity called *Vishalandhra*?

The Telugu word *Bhoomi* refers to land, a piece of the cultivated area by a family or a community. *Bhoomi* also gives an identity to the human being. It is part of their existing physical entity as well as a product of their physical labour and imagination. At a collective level, it is a political territory and an environment. It encompasses human emotions build around it. A person in general or a farmer in particular cannot be imagined without land. In a feudal society, the land is the symbol of the power hierarchy. It becomes an instrument of social and economic control. The ground politics in Andhra and Telangana was built around the land. Land distribution was one of the core demands of many progressive movements. The question of land also prominently appears in the cultural enactments of the regions. Telangana peasants faced unbridled feudal exploitation during the Nizam rule. Sixty percent of the land was under the *Raiyatvari* system, thirty percent of the land was under the *Jagirdari* system and ten percent of the land was directly under *Nizam*, called *sarf khas*. The tax collected from *serf khas* area would directly reach the Nizam and the Nizam was not expected to spend any welfare facilities in these areas. *Jagirdari* system was in sub feudatory areas and common people in those areas did not have any right on the land. They used to collect more than ten times extra tax from the land tillers. The *Deshmukhs* as tax collectors used to be helped by *patwari* and agents. They would grab and own thousands of cultivated lands



from the peasants. Because of the bad harvest, peasants used to face a lot of difficulty in paying unfair taxes. On peasants' crops, landlords would lend money with high interests. Apart from this, there was a strong presence of *vetti* (bonded labour). Andhra Mahasabha (1928) and the Communist party came to support peasants. They formed *Sangam* (union) in every village and later they became the epicentre of the armed struggle movement.

The play deals with the story of a village in which the protagonist with his *Sangam* (union) members fights against the exploiters. The playwrights brought many historical narratives and dimensions to the story that can epically map out the entire peasant struggle. The protagonists in the play are poor peasants, agriculture labours, shepherds, and the rest of the castes of the village. Unlike many other plays, the leaders of the Communists Party did not appear in the play, and they do not preach the ideology separately. This approach of the playwrights might have come from their peasant experiences. The political consciousness of the characters makes difference in their struggles.

To create a sense of identification of exploitation and solidarity among the oppressed was one of the main aims of the play which the play has successfully done. It does not mean that the Communist activists did not realize the question of language. When the characters sing, the playwright imposes the idea of *Vishalandhra*. In the fifth act Kamala sings a song when *Sangam* informed her that *Deshmukh* is going to attack:

If three crore (thirty million) of Andhras fight unitedly  
We shall form *Vishalandhra* by breaking chains  
(SATYANNARAYANA, 2015, p. 90)

The playwrights delineate many circles of aspirations. On the ground level, characters fight against the exploitation and bonded labour of *Deshmukh*. They wish to till their land. In end, they gained it after struggle and sacrifice. The play theme is a victorious story of the Telangana struggle; therefore, its resemblances can also apply to the play. While Sundarayya expresses the achievements in the Telangana movement,

During the course of the struggle, the peasantry in about three thousand villages, covering roughly a population of three million in an area of about 16,000 square miles had succeeded in setting up gram raj based on fighting village panchayats (SUNDARAYYA, 1973, p. 4).

The Party emancipates the villages and establishes a people's state at a village level by distributing lands. At a community level, they established an egalitarian state. At the same time, they emancipate the state from the autocratic rule of the Nizam. For this, while they were still struggling (1946), they imagined the linguistic state Vishalandhra. There is a big gap and difference between the *gram raj* and *Vishalandhra*. The characters seek support from the Telugu brethren from other regions. The playwrights from Andhra and Andhra Communist party also actively worked in Telangana Movement. Telangana movement saw its major upheavals in two districts: Warangal and Nallagonda. They are adjoining districts of Krishna and Guntur of Andhra. These Andhra Districts, as Rao puts it, 'become very popular among the urban middle class by vociferously championing the cause of the establishment of a separate Andhra province' (RAO, 1994, p. 311).

The realism in Telugu theatre comes through Raghava<sup>7</sup> acting and from the writings of P.V. Rajamannaru with the influence of Ibsen. The intervention of Andhra Nataka kala Parishat (1929) was also important. It was established to protect theatre from the contractors of *padya natakam* and cinema. The PNM took the lead with a realistic portrayal of characters in *Maa Bhoomi*. The success of the play was praised by many scholars and activists. Telugu theatre critique Srinivasa Chakravarthy says that *Maa Bhoomi's* play Praja Natya Mandali took forward the revolutionary light enlightened by Raghava in 1925 and was shaped under the conscious political, and cultural conditions of the country (MIKKILINENI, 1965, p. 516). The play gave more than a thousand shows by various groups, but the fact is that these shows were not performed in Telangana region due to coercion. This along with other political and cultural activities of the Communist Party was suppressed by the Nizam military. In Telangana, peasant struggle activists themselves create songs and performances, as Sundarayya says,

Many songs were written about every problem, about big incidents during the struggle, about martyrs, the atrocities of the enemy, their defeat, and so on. These were not written by learned poets; they were from ordinary people in the form of folk songs. These songs, very melodious and rousing to the masses, were sung everywhere and at any time, whenever it was possible and necessary (SUNDARAYYA, 1973, p. 21)

The use of art forms mainly folk forms for politics primarily started after the formation of IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association). Telangana region's folk art forms did not come under so many influences of the colonial regime. On the other side, Andhra province had a rich history of modern theatre culture from the 1880s onwards. Apart from that PNM uses people's art forms to inspire people for the nationalist movement. The involvement of Andhra Communists in the Telangana movement also means that there was a diffusion of many cultural ideas from one side to the other (DHANARAJU, 2015, p. 3). A mixture of progressive poetry and people's art forms generate a new kind of progressive culture during the struggle. This can be observed in the play *Maa Bhoomi*, a shepherd Yalamanda sings a song in *golla suddulu* form.

Sheep's (*gotralu*) history Shepherds know  
Shepherd's history sheep know  
But Wolves know the history of both of them

Deshmukh's history Jagirdars know  
Jagirdar's history Deshmukhs know  
But both of their histories Andhra Mahasabha know  
(SATYANNARAYANA, 2015, p. 72).

Oral culture and folklore emerged as vital tools for the proletarian movements. This will make it easier to reach the masses rather than realistic theatre or literary art where the activists were illiterate. Not only illiterates, but everyone easily is attracted by folk art. This was proved in the later movements. However, as a proscenium play, *Maa Bhoomi* drew the attention of the Telugu audience. It attracts the audience to the dreaming aspirations of *Vishalandhra*

rather than its basic goal of seeking the support of the Telugu people in the Telangana armed struggle.

Telangana had been liberated from the autocracy of the Nizam rule with police action of the Indian state in 1948. Soon, it came under the rule of the Indian military. After the suppression, Communists withdrew from the armed struggle movement in 1951. The PNM was banned in 1948 by the Madras Congress Government. Artists of the group were arrested and harassed.

## 7. Conclusion

The cultural legacy of PNM was obscured and severely criticized by Telugu theatre scholars<sup>8</sup>. According to some critics, it gives support to the pseudo-progressive, cinema melodramatic, Parishat stereo message-oriented theatre to Telugu drama. *Maa Bhoomi* playwrights imagine the *Vishalandra* with the background of the Telangana armed struggle. Communist leaders and elite Andhra capitalists formed the *Vishalandhra*, an imaginative region in the illusion of a people's democratic state. Within the short period of this illusion of dreamland, the crisis appeared in the vision with the hegemony of the capitalist, feudalism of Andhra. As result, the political theatre culture had to take a new position in the changing political cultural scenario.

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## NOTAS

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2. Rayaprolu Subba Rao (1892-1984) was one of the pioneers of modern Telugu literature. He wrote poetry with western influences romanticism and nationalism. His *desa bhakti*

(patriotism), *Tenugu thalli* (mother Telugu), and Andhra poems praise the Andhra glory. He introduced the platonic love concept to Telugu literature. He received Kendra Sahitya Academy Award and Kalaprapurna.

3. Potti Sriramulu (1901-1952) was popularly known as amarajeevi (immortal being) who was a disciple of Gandhi. He participated Indian national movement and imprisoned. The British government denied the long-standing demand for special statehood. The people of Andhra believed that the Indian Government fulfilled their demand. After independence, the Dar commission (1948), and the JVP report also deny for the formation. Seeing this in action, Sriramulu decides fast-unto-death. He starts it on 19th October 1952 in Madras and continued till his death on 15th December. After his death, the Andhra movement becomes a mass movement.
4. Sribagh Pact: the people of Rayala Seema are suspicious about, they will not get fair treatment in the Andhra province. To protect their interests, Andhra and Rayala Seema's political leaders made this agreement.
5. Praja Natya Mandali [a unit of the Indian Peoples Theatre Association- IPTA] entered the cultural scene of Indian theatre and started engaging with people's art forms and local musical traditions in their performances.
6. Burra Katha: Burra Katha is a semi-literary art form used by marginalized caste groups to praise and propagate the Shiva religion in medieval Andhra. The form narrates a story in singing and dialogue mode. The main narrator of the performance tells the story, besides him, two *vanthalu* [accompaniments] listen to the story and react to incidents. It has one storyteller and two listeners. The form has very active performers and audience relationships.
7. Ballary Raghava (1880-1946) was a popular actor and playwright. Raghava brought realism in padya natakam. He recited padyam according to the mood and feeling of the playwright's intention.
8. Peddi argues that

...reason for the obscurity of Praja Natya Mandali in the history of world theatre, where there is a trend of people's cultural movement with a strong leftist ideology, there was an opposition to proscenium and hence, performance mostly based on the tradition was developed (PEDDI, 2003, p. 216).

This criticism is partially right, political performances have to stir the emotions of the audience and make them think. It will be possible from both traditional and proscenium settings.