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The politics of poetry

K. Damodar Rao explores Telangana poetry, whose origin and goal is revolution.



The Telangana movement offers a classic example of the oppressor-oppressed equation in that a coloniser need not be a foreign ruler. In the post-independence situation, he could be a neighbour with power and voice. Telangana's intellectuals, writers, activists, poet-performers, employees and students are actively engaged in this process of decolonisation. These are the 'Frontline Formations,' providing strength and substance to a people's movement.

In the 1969 Telangana agitation, and again since the year 2000, hundreds of people, especially the youth, lost their lives. . . A poet captures the agony of a mother who has lost her son: *From shrunk breasts/I offered life-source./Will you go like that without a bother for me?* ('Dear Children!' by Narayana Swamy)

The merger of the region into the state of Andhra Pradesh in 1956 was a source of trouble from the beginning. Vajjala Shivakumar portrays what this meant for the people here: *All mergers are not unions/For the meeting point of two opposite poles/there is no fusion-measure./In the irreconcilable juxtaposition/word will not have value./greetings will not last long.*

Within 10 years of the merger, fissures surfaced and it took the form of a mass movement of 1969 Telangana agitation. The Telangana movement was a unifying principle at many levels. The larger identity absorbed all other identities with all categories of people getting involved, irrespective of class, community, age and gender. B. Venugopal Reddy offers vignettes of the

long-drawn struggle in ‘The Rival’s Reign’:Struggle for every water-drop/Must be ingrained in the soil.../A new language of explosion is heard now/Telanganamu Telanganamu...

Post-colonial and post-national societies accommodate multiple identities. Besides, even a single individual could proclaim different loyalties and associations. Amartya Sen saysthat, in each social context, there are a number of viable and relevant identities which one could assume in terms of their acceptability and importance (‘Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny’). Ambati Srinivasa Raju presents the identity conundrum in the changed context:Speaking Hindi, one is a Rajasthani/another, a Bihari./Speaking the same language/I cannot become an Andhrite./That’s why, I assert my Telangana identity./our Telangana community.(‘What is a Community?’)

Telangana is now witnessing a cultural and literary Renaissance. It reminds one of the Renaissance that preceded and accompanied the Nationalist Movement. While historians are busy collecting inscriptions and analysing data, literary historians are engaged in collating the earliest literary works and cultural forms that appeared in Telangana. An interesting phenomenon is that many writers have become literary activists as well. Thus, we haveMungili: Ancient Literature of Telangana(2009), compiled and edited by Sunkireddy Narayana Reddy, a pioneering effort offering glimpses of hundreds of writers from ancient times — the Satavahana age, Chalukya and Kakatiya ages — to writers of end-18th century Telangana. Anthologies such asPokkili(ed. Juluri Gowrishankar),Mattadi(eds. Sunkireddy Narayana Reddy and Ambati Surender Raju)Munum(eds. Vemuganti Muralikrishna et al),Upiri(eds. Potlapally Srinivasa Rao and Anishetty Rajitha) bear testimony to the process of writers donning the role of activists.

Sunkara Ramesh has accomplished the mammoth task of bringing out yearly volumes ofTelangana Kavithafrom 2006 to 2010. English translations from these five anthologies have also been published under the title,Scent of the Soil: Selections from Telangana Kavitha 2006-2010(ed. K. Damodar Rao). Beginning with Kaloji Narayana Rao’sNaa Godavain 2001, we have seen a number of compilations of individual accomplishments. Eminent litterateur Samala Sadasiva’sKavya Sudhaas well asJayanthi, a literary magazine’s special piece on him (2011) are glowing tributes to a son of the soil who led the cultural revival from the front.

Telangana has a rich tradition of folk/oral literature and the poet-composers are re-creating the rhythms from that vast treasure trove. Poet-performers like Gaddar, Andesri, Goranti Venkanna and Vimalakka have led the resurgence with their songs and performances all over the region. Of all the art forms, it is the song that reaches people effectively. Cultural performances have become popular among the masses in the last ten years.

Hyderabad has been the political and culture capital of Telangana. It has been a part of the Telangana culture right from the Nizam days. Geographically, it is surrounded by Telangana districts on all sides. Vadtya Pantulu Naik, in his poem ‘Displacement’, laments the plight of abanjarawoman:For years now.../Without getting down where she is headed/Displaced from where she is seated/She is continuing to board the bus./Giving way to others and getting down!

This is a metaphor for Banjara Hills, a posh locality in Hyderabad now, and Telangana in general.