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## T R I B U T E

### **In the Spirit of the Telangana Movement: Mallu Swarajyam, 1930-2022**

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In the death on March 19, 2022, of Mallu Swarajyam, India lost a peoples' leader with a long and active association with left-led agrarian and women's struggles. With her passing, the last living link with the leadership of the great Telangana armed peasant revolt of the 1940s has been severed. She died at the age of 92 of complications arising from pneumonia in a hospital in Hyderabad. She remained active till shortly before she took ill and was admitted in hospital. In the last years of her life, although she was not as mobile as she would have liked to be, she kept abreast of national developments, and being much in demand as a public speaker, would address public meetings wherever she could. Her spirited and inspiring speeches always drew upon her own experiences of struggle and the lessons to be drawn from them.

Swarajyam acquired legendary status as a participant in the Telangana agrarian uprising when she was only in her teens. She joined the Communist Party at the age of 16 in 1946 and was inducted as a member of a communist guerrilla squad during the armed struggle against the police and army of the Nizam of the pre-Independence princely state of Hyderabad. The Nizam's army was made up of the infamous Razakars, an armed volunteer force, which worked closely with the feudal landlords of Telangana.

Her extraordinary life mirrors the great social upheavals and transitions of the 1940s and beyond – the armed uprising of the poor peasantry led by the Communist Party against feudalism and for land in Telangana; the merger in 1948 of the princely state of Hyderabad with the Indian Union; the fallout of the great betrayal by leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru and Vallabhai Patel, who reneged on their promises to honour the demands of the Telangana peasantry after merger; the continuation of guerrilla warfare by the Communist Party between 1948 and 1951, ending with the call for

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the cessation of the armed struggle; and finally, the start of a new phase of political activism for the Left. This phase saw the return of representatives of the same oppressor classes against whom the Telangana peasantry had taken up arms to positions of constitutional power through newly established democratic practices.

Swarajyam's early life (the years from about 14 to 20), were not merely the most eventful, but also left the deepest impact on her. Swarajyam carried with her a profound understanding of the economic and social workings of agrarian feudalism and its transformation in Telangana. This derived from her personal experiences as a woman born into a feudal family, as also from her political involvement against the social and economic iniquities of the system and the myriad forms of bondage that it let flourish.

In a lengthy interview with me, conducted in 2000, Swarajyam said that she was never sure about the date of her birth, but it was probably in 1930, the year of the Salt Satyagraha led by Mahatma Gandhi. Her father was a feudal landlord of comparatively small landed wealth, and was therefore driven in his short life by the overriding ambition of somehow gaining status and acceptance in the world of the big zamindar. His death at 40 not only cut short that dream but sunk the family fortunes. One fallout of this was that the education of the girls in the family, of which her father had approved, was stopped. The second was that the customary bonds that tethered the women to her father's writ loosened, especially when her mother took over the responsibility of managing the land and family. Swarajyam described Sokkamma, her mother, as a "manavtavadi" (humanitarian), and outspoken, even to her husband, in her condemnation of injustice. Sokkamma named her third daughter in honour of the spirit and ideals of the freedom movement.

The year 1942 was a watershed year for the family, a year when "everything changed," Swarajyam would recall. This was the year in which the Telugu translation of *Mother*, the novel by Maxim Gorky, created a stir within the home, while outside the big movement against *vetti* (forced labour) was launched by the Andhra Mahasabha, a moderate anti-Nizam platform with which the Communist Party, in its early phase, worked. These two seemingly unrelated events were in fact closely linked: the book and its moving story of maternal courage enthralled the women of the house and predisposed them to the aims of the anti-feudal mass movement that was gathering strength around them. Swarajyam was introduced by her brother to the activities of the Andhra Mahila Sabha, the women's wing of the Andhra Mahasabha.

An incident involving a peasant woman called Ailamma in 1944 gave the anti-feudal peasant movement a powerful push. Ailamma had been dispossessed of her land by the Visnur Deshmukh, a big landlord of Kadavendi village. The Sangham organised a march to the *gadi* (fortress-like home) of the zamindar, who opened fire on the protestors, killing an activist called Doddi Kumarayya. "I have never seen a

movement spread as rapidly at any time after that,” Swarajyam said. “And it was because of an environment of solidarity against landlordism”

Unlike the many campaigns and programmes that were led by the Congress, the achievements of the Communist-led Telangana struggle have never been fully acknowledged, far less celebrated, in popular history or classroom texts. This is not surprising. What the Communists achieved, however briefly, in the course of the anti-feudal struggle is part of a story that India’s post-Independence rulers would gladly have seen erased and forgotten. For a period of 12 to 18 months, according to the classic account of the Telangana struggle by the Communist leader P. Sundarayya, *gram raj* (rural democracy) was established in a large swathe of the Telangana region – it covered 3000 villages over an area of 16,000 sq miles, and a population of three million. The hated landlords were driven from their *gadis*, and almost a million acres of their land were confiscated and distributed to the landless. Evictions, usury, and forced labour were stopped, minimum wages enhanced and enforced, loans cancelled, new marriage laws implemented, and new and progressive cultural practices popularised.

Women were represented at all levels in this massive social movement. Swarajyam was a member of several committees, but remembers in particular her role as an organiser of the women’s struggle committee, when she had to recruit and train women on how to resist attacks by the Nizam’s police forces. Famous in the annals of the struggle was the attack, in which Swarajyam took part, on a Razakar camp located within the fortress of a landlord named Jannareddy Pratapareddy, a big landlord of Errabadu village. The siege went on for a day without the *gadi* surrendering. An elderly participant then hit upon the idea of throwing a large smoking ball of grass with chilli powder inside into the *gadi*. “The entire Razakar camp, plus the landlord, his family and retainers surrendered and laid down their arms,” Swarajyam would remember. “There were celebrations in 60 villages!”

A sense of hope and confidence in the democratic and socialist credentials of the Nehru government lay behind the popular support for the new government’s decision to send in the army to liberate the state of Hyderabad from the Nizam. However, after the suppression of the Razakars, when the well-equipped Indian army was ordered to train its guns against the poorly-equipped people’s guerrilla units, the latter were no match for them. Six months after the merger of Hyderabad with the Indian Union, the Communist Party took the decision to retreat with most of its forces into the jungles, build a base amongst the tribal people, and defend the gains of land reform. Twenty-year-old Swarajyam was among those who went into the jungle-base in the Godavari Forest, which spread over parts of Khammam, Warangal, Karimnagar, and Adilabad districts. “The jungle was to become the centre of the guerrilla struggle and we were to continue the fight till India was liberated,” Swarajyam said.

She spent the years between 1948 and 1951 in the forests with the guerrilla forces, the toughest and most exciting period of her life. From an Area Committee Organiser, she became the commander of a *dalam*, an armed unit, a post of great responsibility. Even before this, under the Nizam's administration, Swarajyam (or Rajakka, as she was called), was a feared figure with a price of Rs. 10,000 on her head. She was known in the enemy camp as the girl communist who, like a Rani of Jhansi, rode a white horse across the land.<sup>1</sup>

After much internal discussion in the Communist Party, the Telangana armed struggle was called off in October 1951. Swarajyam was just 21, and somewhat unprepared for the kind of political work that the new situation called for. She however took up her new responsibilities "in the spirit of a guerrilla fighter," she used to say. She was asked by the Party to work in Suryapet, then a part of Nalgonda district. In the same year she married a party comrade who had also been a military commander in the jungle, Mallu Venkatanarasimha Reddy.

Swarajyam joined the Communist Party of India (Marxist) after the split in the Communist Party of India in 1964. She stood and won from Tungaturthy constituency in the Andhra Pradesh Assembly elections in 1978, and, as a Member of the Legislative Assembly, worked hard for her constituency. In these years she also helped build the women's movement in her state. The first State conference of the Mahila Sangham was held in 1971 in Nalgonda and Swarajyam was elected President. In the decade after its founding there was a big growth in the Mahila Sangham in membership and reach. She was a founding member of the All-India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) in 1981, and became the President of its Andhra unit from 1981-2001. She was a member of the CPI(M) State Committee and was elected to its Central Committee in 2002.

Swarajyam considered herself, till the end, a "field worker of the movement." Reflecting on her life during her interview with me, she said: "I have learnt from the people and it is they who have given me the strength to do whatever I did. The spirit of the Telangana struggle is with me."

<sup>1</sup> The Rani or Queen of the Kingdom of Jhansi who became famous for her resolute opposition to British rule, and for her role in rallying her people against the British during the uprising of the Indian people in 1857.