

GAPS Series

Working Paper : 1

August 2004

Political Articulation and Policy Discourse in the 2004 Election in Andhra Pradesh

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Acknowledgements:

Thanks are due to Rajen Harshe, Jos Mooij, Arun Patnaik, S Ramanadham, D Venkat Rao and KC Suri for their comments and to V Anil Kumar, D Subba Rao and Vijay Sekhar for their research help.

Abstract

In the Andhra Pradesh elections of 2004, policy discourse displayed a plebiscitary character. The defeat of the TDP government has been interpreted as a ‘vote against anti-people reforms’. The discourse analysis of the election campaigns of different parties, however, shows that except for the Left no mainstream party made this election a contest on reforms. The crisis-centric discourse of the Congress displayed possibilities for new discursive coalitions and political alliances, as concerns of marginalised groups gained prominence.



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K Srinivasulu

The electoral defeat of the Telugu Desam government in Andhra Pradesh has been sought to be interpreted as a verdict on its economic reforms agenda pursued since mid-1990s¹. The basis of such an interpretation is the reduction of the TDP's strength from 180 members in the earlier house to its all time low of 47 and the enhancement of Congress tally from 91 members in the earlier house to 186 this time². The examination of this claim is important because of the serious implications it is likely to have to the political discourse and actual process of macro reforms in the State. The crucial questions are: can such a sweeping inference be drawn from the electoral outcome? How was the electoral agenda framed and what were the positions of different parties on the economic reforms in the electoral discourse?

Electoral performance of political parties involves a complex process and a multivariate analysis is required to understand it. The factors that are decisive in the making of an electoral outcome are the organizational strength of parties, structure of party competition, nature of the political alliances, forms of political discourse and appeal, strategies of

¹ The interpretation that the election results are a rejection of the economic reforms and World Bank loans is put forward by the Left and not by the Congress.

² While the Congress- Telangana Rastra Samithi- Left alliance gained 48.37 percent vote, the TDP-BJP alliance still retained 39.66 percent vote. Despite its poor performance, the TDP continues to be a formidable political force with a strong electoral support and organizational structure.

mobilization, and their impact on alignment of social forces and support bases of parties. Thus political and policy discourse forms one of the determining factors of the electoral outcome. The AP elections provide a useful vantage point to reflect on the relationship between elections and policy issues that have wider political significance and implications³. For AP under the TDP regime had been in the forefront of the economic reforms among the States in the Indian federation.

This paper seeks to examine the significance of policy issues and position of different parties vis-à-vis the marginalised social groups in the policy discourse in the 2004 elections in AP. The analysis here is presented in four sections. The first section discusses the theoretical concerns and perspective of this paper. Section two briefly reviews the shifts in the policy framework of the TDP regimes with a view to contextualise the subsequent developments. The third section analyses the policy discourse during the 2004 elections. Section four concludes the paper.

I

Discourse defined as "an ensemble of ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to phenomena," [Gasper and Apthorpe 1996: 2] helps us in appreciating how problems or issues are perceived and framed, and how certain problems are prioritized vis-à-vis others. If ideological perception is an important aspect of political activity and mobilization, discourse analysis helps us in analyzing the ideas that are crucial to the making of representations of social phenomena and giving political meaning and priority to a particular perception and representation vis-à-vis others.

The model that has been dominant in the field of policy studies is the linear model. In the linear model policy process is viewed in terms of stages - agenda setting, policy formulation and decision-making, implementation and impact evaluation placed in a

³ Just to cite one example of the wider impact and larger political and policy implications of the Congress victory in AP, the promise of free power to agriculture sector, which is considered to be the major factor for the defeat of the TDP, prompted the AIADMK government in Tamil Nadu to implement free power for agriculture sector. Similar demands are voiced in other States as well.

linear sequence. This model viewing policy making as a rational process privileges the place and position of the so-called experts in policy processes. The intricate technicalities in policy analysis and formulation are assumed to be incomprehensible to the ordinary people therefore the latter's participation could only be very minor and limited. In this model, the policy-making is assumed to be an objective and value neutral exercise and by implication the policy experts become bearers of objectivity.

Discourse theory, however, assumes that policy making is an intense political process involving various social groups with different perceptions and interests. Policy decision processes are influenced by the competition among these groups and their capacities, and relative strengths and weaknesses are critical to it. But these groups, more often than not, do not do this separately. To be effective they make attempts to gather wider support by identifying commonality in interests - long-term and short-term - in argument and narratives and forge what can be called discourse coalitions. This is possible only through discursive deliberations involving inclusions/exclusions and contestations over ideas, interests and truth claims. The discourse analysis makes us sensitive to contestation and conflict between different discourse groups in a diversity of situations, sites and spaces.

Discourse analysis also helps us in overcoming the economistic-reductionist limitations of the orthodox Marxism that attributes causal primacy to categories of class and class interests. Two central issues that are rendered rather simplistic by a large corpus of Marxist analyses are the categories of truth and power [Hall 2001]. Discourse analysis instead of assuming truth claims to be springing exclusively from class positions views them as socially constructed thus open to contestation and challenge. Therefore one can only talk about regimes of truth rather than a truth. Similarly, the grand notion of power as being vested in one location - a class or institution- and flowing in a top-down manner is contested; discourse theory highlighting the 'micro-physics of power' [Hall 2001] emphasizes the significance of local and micro contexts, institutions, networks, strategies and practices in policy analysis.

There is a tendency in a society like ours to view policy making as an official arena where only the bureaucracy, political elite and certain influential sections of the industrial and business class play a key role. It is true that the elite have clear advantage in terms of influence and access to policy processes involving agenda setting, networking, lobbying, information channeling and decision-making arenas. The concerns of marginalized sections of society go un-represented because of weak civil society, lack of information and inaccessibility to the channels of communication with the policy-making bodies.

For the above reasons, the electoral arena assumes significance. Elections provide important spaces for a debate on policy issues that tend to draw clear and sharp distinctions between political parties, different policy options and popular choices. The emergence of States as distinct political theatres in the post-Emergency period and increasing electoral competition has compelled the political parties and political elite to expand the possibilities for their engagement with the marginalized groups and their social networks which are mostly informal.

With this perspective, in this paper we seek to examine the structure of policy discourse in the 2004 elections in AP with a focus on the concerns of the marginalized groups, their articulation, their reflection in the discourses of the contending political parties and discursive aspects of electoral agenda setting. If elections are the occasion when the marginalised groups matter then it is necessary that social scientists study how these groups perceive themselves and are perceived, how their concerns are shaped and received and what spaces are available (become facilitated and actually get activated) and gravity in the elite engagement with their concerns and their sense of participation as a result of the interaction with the political elite. An examination of these aspects helps us in furthering the expansion of the space and scope of this interaction so that better democratic and pro-people policies can be made possible.

II

The emergence of the TDP [Srinivasulu 1999; Suri 2004] as a major force in AP politics brought about a distinct policy orientation in the political discourse in the State. The

policy initiatives by the NTR government pertaining to the administrative and welfare arenas marked this. The major administrative reforms in the form of abolition of the traditional Village Officer system and the introduction of the mandals in the place of the Panchayat Samithis were meant to strike at the support base of the Congress and expand the opportunities for the ambitious backward class political elite to accommodate them [Srinivasulu 1990].

The welfare policies played a major role in the shaping of the popular perception of and support to the TDP. The TDP could acquire pro-poor and pro-farmer image mainly because of its populist policies like Rs 2 a kilo rice scheme⁴, Janata cloth scheme and subsidized power supply to the farm sector. The weaker section-housing scheme was quite a visible one that contributed to the popularity of the TDP regime.

The Naidu regime made a decisive departure from this legacy of NTR by reformulating and replacing them with alternative policies in its drive towards the liberalization of the State economy. The much-publicized *Janmabhoomi* programme, launched by the Naidu government with the twin objectives of facilitating grassroots involvement in the developmental process and making the administrative machinery accountable to the people was supposed to reflect the shift. This programme was meant to take the administration nearer to the people (*Prajavaddaku Palana*) and evolve micro-plans by identifying their needs, assessing the availability and requirements of resources. The execution of the plans thus chalked out were sought to be implemented by actively involving the local people through *shramadanam* (voluntary work) and mobilization of resources by the people themselves.

In tune with the economic reforms, the Naidu regime launched a number of programmes to promote need-based self-help among different target groups. Thus Water Users' Associations were formed to take care of water management, school committees were entrusted with the responsibility of maintenance and supervision of schools, *Vana Samrakshana Samithis* (Forest Protection Committees) were formed for the protection

⁴ For an assessment of this scheme during NTR's first tenure, see, Olsen (1989).

and management of forests. Apart from these, women self help groups were encouraged. The more visible and successful among them are those formed under the DWCRA (Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas) programme. Though DWCRA programme has been in existence in the State, what the Naidu government had done was to give it the form of a movement: activating the existing groups and encouraging the formation of new ones. As part of this campaign, DWCRA *bazaars* were held in Hyderabad and also in different towns in the State. The DWCRA programme was thus accorded high priority by the TDP government with the local administrative machinery geared up to make it a success.

Further, the TDP government introduced a series of schemes purportedly for the development of marginalized social groups with an emphasis on skill development and marketing support. The *Deepam* scheme, under which the members of the DWCRA were provided with cooking stoves and gas cylinders, meant to encourage women's self-help groups, became quite popular with the womenfolk. Another popular scheme was the *Adarana* scheme under which tool kits were provided to the artisans and occupational communities to enhance their productivity. *Roshini* scheme for the Muslims, under which financial provision was made for the construction of *shadikhana*s (marriage halls) and renovation of old mosques, *Cheyutha* scheme meant for the handicapped were all launched prior to the 1999 elections [Srinivasulu 2003]. What is to be noted underlining these community identity specific schemes and subsidies is the political strategy aiming to co-opt the marginalized caste -communities by rearticulating the identity political agenda brought on to the center of political discourse of the State by the BSP, some CPI (ML) groups and the dalit and backward caste organizations during the 1990s⁵.

III

The following developments form the context of the 2004 assembly elections and therefore are relevant to the electoral discourse.

⁵ For an analysis of the CPI(ML) and dalit movements in AP, see, Srinivasulu (2002).

1. There has been a sharp polarisation of the political spectrum between the TDP-BJP alliance on the one hand and the Congress-TRS- Left alliance on the other. This obviously has led to the sharpening of the discursive contestation in the electoral campaign.
2. This election has seen the marginalisation of small parties like the BSP, Maha Jana Front⁶, etc., which had significant discursive presence earlier.
3. The intensity of political competition and the compulsions to co-opt the identity politics facilitated and expanded the space for policy issues in the electoral discourse and participation.

The discourse in the 2004 election is built around the performance of the TDP regime during its nine-year tenure. The TDP, as is well known, is a highly personalised party therefore there has been an overt and excessive focus on the persona of Naidu. In fact, he has assumed an iconic status with regard to the State-level economic reforms in the international and national press and in the eyes of international donors and captains of domestic big business.

The Naidu regime sought to cultivate a pro-reform image for itself with all the hype [Mooij 2003]. What distinguished it from the other pro-reform State governments was not only its open commitment to the reforms agenda but more importantly its effort to justify reforms in a larger ideological framework. In this narrative the 'global' was a strategic point of reference to judge the state of the AP's economy and all the criteria of such judgment - i.e., competitiveness, efficiency and good governance - are being drawn from the neo-liberal global discourse. Accordingly, the development of the State is seen in relation to the opportunities opened up by globalisation. The emphasis on the information technology and bio-technology as the priority sectors is informed by the

⁶ The Maha Jana Front (MJF) is a conglomerate of the backward caste and Dalit organizations with grassroots support base.

above perspective. Further, it is this preoccupation with the global which underlines the regime's political criticism of the Left as redundant in the context of globalisation⁷.

Governance reforms thus were identified as an important precondition for the development of the State. The term SMART (Simple, Moral, Accountable, Responsive and Transparent) was popularized to send across the message that the government was serious about the governance reforms to simplify procedures, to speed up decisions and to create efficient and transparent service delivery mechanism. The TDP regime thus built up a discourse based on reform-development -good governance - global integration narrative⁸.

The 2004 elections in AP display a plebiscitary character. Conducted in the aftermath of the assassination attempt by the CPIML (People's War) on Naidu at Alipiri near Tirupati, the entire electoral campaign got centred on him. Naidu only facilitated this by declaring this election as a referendum on his nine-year rule. The TDP thus invested all its resources on Naidu. Within the above pro-liberalization framework, the agenda for election was set by the TDP in sharply polarized terms of law and order versus violence and anarchy, separatism versus integration of the State and stability versus instability.

Law and Order vs. Anarchy:

This election, preponed by nine months prompted by the expectation of a sympathy wave following the assassination attempt brought the question of Naxalite violence in the State onto the political agenda. The debate on the Naxalite question is clothed in terms of law and order versus backwardness and deprivation. It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that the TDP's approach to this issue has largely been informed by the law and order perspective. The number of so-called encounter deaths during the TDP regime and absence of any comprehensive socio-economic programme to tackle the issue of the sub-regional backwardness and socio-economic deprivation of the lower sections in the backward regions of the State are the pointers.

⁷ This shift has serious political implications and import in view of the fact that the TDP has seen a highly populist policy regime under NTR and the projection of a pro-development image assumes significance as it seeks to highlights the decisiveness on the part of the regime to make a departure from the NTR's legacy.

⁸ For a statement of Naidu's views, see, Naidu with Ninan (2000)

The violence and counter- violence in the State by the Peoples' War and the police has reached almost maniac proportions. Responding to this violence, a forum, *Poura Spandana Vedika*, comprising of civil rights activists and journalists at the initiative of a former civil servant, sought to advocate and push for a dialogue between the government and the Peoples' War Group (PWG). The premise on which this dialogue was supposed to be based is that the Naxalite problem should be viewed as a serious socio-economic issue. The recalcitrant attitude and lack of patience created serious hurdles and led to the eventual failure of this attempt to initiate dialogue despite the initial enthusiasm and promise.

In the post-Alipiri period, with the TDP going aggressively against PWG, the Congress and the TRS along with the parliamentary Left opted to view it as a social issue. The initiative by the citizens' forum could be seen echoing the larger sentiment in the Naxalite influential areas. It is fairly well known that the people, especially the youth, in the Naxalite dominated villages of Telangana are subjected to tremendous hardship. The unlawful detentions, torture, extortions and fake encounters are reported by the civil liberties organizations and the media. If the perennial drought and unemployment have been serious concerns of people here then the police repression has only added to their woes. The citizens' forum has been instrumental in bringing forth these concerns onto the political discourse and policy arena. The impact of this on the Congress and TRS' stated position on the process of dialogue with the PWG is unmistakable.

By posing the Naxalite issue in extremely negative and hostile terms, the TDP could only sharpen the polarization of the discourse in terms of development versus anarchy. Accordingly the TDP projected itself as a party that stood for development and the Congress and the TRS as against it and for anarchy. As the electoral campaign progressed, with its top leadership as well as its grassroots cadres subjected to tremendous insecurity through threats and actual killings and its organizational network virtually paralysed by the PWG, the TDP sharpened its criticism of and hostility towards the PWG. With its hostile stand the TDP lost its maneuverability, which is crucial to the shaping of the discourse.

Separatism vs. Integration of the State:

Another contentious issue that was pursued by the TDP government is related to the demand of the Telangana State. The Telangana issue has been brought back after more than three decades on to the mainstream political discourse by the TRS formed in 2001 by a former TDP leader, K Chandrasekhar Rao. In the last three years this issue picked up momentum and assumed electoral significance. If the performance of the TRS in the panchayat raj elections⁹ held in 2001 was an indication of its growing popularity, then the popular response to its rallies and meetings further demonstrated it. This obviously had an impact on the TDP's support base.

To further compound the problems of the TDP, the Telangana issue came to symbolise the condensation of serious policy concerns pertaining to agriculture, drought, irrigation and of course Naxalism, as large pockets of Telangana are perennially drought prone, agriculture here suffers from lack of irrigation. This region, which has the Naxalite presence in almost all the districts, is therefore subjected to tremendous repression by the State. By raising the Telangana question, the TRS sought to reflect all the above concerns.

The Telangana issue posed a challenge not only to the TDP but also to the Congress. A section of the Congressmen from Telangana forming the 'Telangana Congress Forum' have been raising the issue of statehood to the Telangana region. This voice in the Congress grew in prominence as the TRS expanded its network and social base. With the demand for the Telangana State both inside and outside the Congress gaining prominence, the Congress High Command was forced to respond by promising to constitute a second States' Reorganisation Committee (SRC)¹⁰. With this the ground was prepared for the electoral realignments in the State.

⁹ The TRS won 1,043 MPTCs and 84 ZPTCs. For an analysis of the panchayat elections, see, Suri (2001).

¹⁰ The first SRC headed by Justice Fazal Ali recommended for the formation of the Hyderabad State comprising of the Telugu speaking districts of the Telangana region, "along with Bidar district, and the Munagala enclave in the Nalgonda district belonging to the Krishna district". See, *Report of the States Reorganisation Commission*, 1955, P. 257.

The Congress always contested elections in AP on its own, while the TDP from the beginning forged alliance with one or the other of the non-Congress forces. With the change in the Congress national policy in favour of forging electoral alliances¹¹ to confront the NDA, the ground was cleared for the alliance with the TRS and the Left. What brought these parties together obviously was the main goal of defeating the TDP-BJP alliance. But differences among them on the statehood for Telangana along with other issues have been equally important while the Congress continuously harped on the Second SRC, the Left all along rejected the demand. The differences with the Left are reflected in the TRS putting up its candidates against the Left in some places.

On the other side of the political spectrum, while the TDP's stand has been against a separate State of Telangana, the BJP on the contrary found itself in an awkward position. For the State BJP had taken a pro- Telangana stand with its slogan of 'one vote, two States' in its resolution in the Kakinada conference. But since its alliance with the TDP in 1999 it was forced to keep it in abeyance. Given the fact that the BJP has greater presence and influence in Telangana as in comparison to coastal Andhra, it is a risk that the State BJP was to take with a view to improve the prospects of the NDA government at the Centre. Thus the BJP argued that though in principle it was in favour of small States, in the context of alliance politics it was forced to confine itself to the NDA agenda.

The discourse on Telangana therefore is marked by the internal dynamics and tensions of alliance politics. Given the fact that Telangana has been an emotive issue, the parties even when they are opposed to Telangana State had to exercise caution. Though the terms of discourse on Telangana have been clearly spelt out and battle lines clearly drawn, there could be noticed a perceptible difference in the tone and tenor of the political stands of parties on it between two phases of election- the first phase held on April 20, covering the Telangana region and parts of northern Andhra and the second

¹¹ The Congress Party in its Shimla resolution, reconciling to the emerging scenario in which the BJP benefited with its electoral alliances with the anti-Congress parties, decided to forge electoral alliances to form a broad front against the BJP-led NDA. Thus the Shimla session tried to undo the harm caused by Panchmari resolution, which prevented the Congress from forging any alliances.

phase of poll held on April 26 covering remaining coastal Andhra and Rayalaseema regions. While during the first phase of campaign the TDP's chief campaigner Naidu emphasised the need of an integrated State of AP and reeled out what the TDP had done and promised to do if elected for Telangana, in the second phase campaign in coastal Andhra he sought to rake up Andhra sentiment by suggesting how separate State of Telangana would lead to a water war as Telangana would demand a share in the river water resources¹² and fertile and irrigated coastal Andhra would be forced to suffer.

Stability vs. Instability:

The third theme that dominated the TDP's electoral campaign was the question of political stability. The TDP, as it has done continuously in its two decade long history, equated the Congress rule with political instability. The Congress' track record of frequent change of chief ministers, internal factional infighting, interference of the party High Command into the State affairs were played on by the TDP leadership to paint a picture of instability in the Congress rule. The Congress and its allies countered this discourse by pointing to the 'real' instability in the AP economy and society under the TDP rule. The destabilization of agriculture and handloom sectors, which constitute the main sources of employment, caused by the gross neglect of these sectors during the TDP's nine year rule was the theme that the Congress emphasised in its campaign. Holding the TDP government responsible for the suicides of the farmers and artisans, the Congress and its allies put the TDP and its *Supremo* on a public trial.

These broad positions on the questions of law and order, integration and stability have informed the TDP's position on specific policy issues like agriculture, handlooms, power, etc, in the fiercely fought elections. The TDP by going in for the early polls, apparently aimed at seizing the initiative, set the agenda for the electoral debate. This initial advantage could not be sustained and in fact turned out negative as it sought to define the electoral discourse in terms of sharp polarities. If the closed structure and the implicit negativity in the TDP's electoral campaign were striking then the Congress

¹² *The Hindu* (Hyderabad Edition), March 3, 2004.

displayed a greater openness and inclusiveness in terms of agenda. This made the Congress party look more responsive to newer issues and demands from below.

Framing and Naming: Congress Policy Discourse

Policy discourse can be compared with story telling. It should have a beginning, story line, narrative structure and ending. The entry point in the Congress campaign in AP was the suicides of farmers and accordingly it built up a narrative that identified the phenomenon of farmers' suicides with the TDP rule. The crisis in the agrarian sector during the last four years, and the absence of any effective intervention into this by the TDP government was projected as a clear instance of insensitivity of the TDP regime.

A serious public debate on such a grave situation was sustained due to the efforts of the media¹³, farmers' organizations and the Left parties. In spite of the prolonged public debate on this issue there was no viable action on this front. The only visible government response was one of denial of any such suicides; the suicides if any have been attributed to personal, family or health reasons¹⁴.

The following could be identified as the causes of the agricultural crisis, the brunt of which is borne by the small and marginal farmers, mostly belonging to the backward castes:¹⁵

- i) Failure to control the spread of low quality and spurious seed, fertilizer and pesticides by fly-by-night companies;
- ii) Near total collapse of agricultural extension services which would have helped the farmers with timely and necessary advice;
- iii) The failure of agricultural credit system forcing farmers to go in for private moneylenders at high interest rates;

¹³ The role of *Vaaritha*, the Telugu daily is noteworthy in this regard.

¹⁴ In fact a BJP union minister from AP even went to the extent of attributing the suicides to 'indigestion'.

¹⁵ Reports of Farmers' Commission of Experts on Agriculture in Andhra Pradesh and *Vyavasayaranga Parirakshana Aikya Porata Vedika*, Hyderabad, 2002.

- iv) High rise in the cost of agricultural inputs especially hike in the power tariffs impacting the dry land cultivation in Telangana and Rayalaseema regions;
- v) Decline of marketing support for farm products leading to huge losses; and,
- vi) Lack of and in fact decline of irrigation facilities as a result of receding of water table in dry land areas and drought conditions in large parts of the State.

The most important line in this story, given the TDP's firm stand on the power sector reforms, is the galvanizing of the agitation against power tariff hike in 2000. Immediately after the 1999 elections, the incumbent TDP government hiked power tariffs by claiming its victory as a popular approval of its reform package, which included power sector reforms. The above agitation, which got rallied in Hyderabad, was quelled by the TDP resulting in the death of two protestors and injuries to 26 of them. This was meant to be a signal of what was in store for such protesters. Further, government's resolve was made clear through its refusal to roll back the power tariff hike.

Critical to the intensification of the public discourse on these issues was the *Praja Prasthanam Padayatra* undertaken by Y Rajasekhara Reddy (YSR) as the leader of the opposition in the State during the summer of 2003. Covering 1500 kms on foot, YSR could bring about a critical shift in the political discourse and State politics. Firstly, he emerged as a charismatic leader of the party. Dressed in white shirt, dhoti and a turban¹⁶, walking in the mornings and evenings and resting under the shelter of thatched huts and roadside *shamianas*, YSR could easily establish rapport with simple and poor rural folks. YSR's self-projection and image was in sharp contrast to that of Naidu clad in shirt and pants and guarded by heavy security.

Secondly, through *padayatra*, YSR could not only gain public image and sympathy but could activate the Congress cadre by boosting up their morale. Thirdly, the *padayatra*

¹⁶ It is interesting to note that the generation of politicians not only in the Congress but also across the parties wearing dhotis is fast disappearing. YSR is perhaps the only very well known dhoti clad politician in his age group in the State.

gave an opportunity to local groups and activists to represent their problems to the leader of the Opposition and by rallying the elements critical of the Naidu regime, YSR could bring the grassroots issues pertaining to agriculture and handlooms, etc. into public gaze and sustain a critical debate on government priorities like IT, BT and Formula One car races and neglect of issues of employment and livelihood. The *padayatra* all along provided for *impromptu* discussions on one-to-one basis with YSR enquiring the village folk about their problems and consoling them. The *rachhabanda or adda*¹⁷ participation reduced the gap between the political elite and the popular classes and facilitated communication between them. The value of this becomes very noticeable when it is seen in comparison to the nature of participation in the TDP's high profile *Janmabhoomi*. Though started with a promise, soon the *Janmabhoomi* lost its voluntary participatory character and became a formality as the TDP cadre and local bureaucracy came to dominate it.

YSR by undertaking *Jaithra yatra* on the eve of elections held almost a year after his initial *padayatra* was only renewing his popular contact and pledge to alleviate their conditions. Such *yatras* were made a famous mode of popular contact by NTR in the State politics with all the dramatics and glamour associated with it. Naidu had a big disadvantage in this respect. Traveling in helicopter and protected by a security cover he could not counter the populist image accumulated by YSR. On the contrary, he ended up reinforcing the image of being hi-tech, IT savvy.

If *padayatra* was an education for YSR as he could learn about the problems at the grassroots, then the *Jaithrayatra* was used as a means to come back with promises based on the feedback during the *padayatra*. These *yatras* were seen as reminiscent of the ones NTR¹⁸ was famous for and reminding the voters how far the TDP under Naidu

¹⁷ A dalit activist insightfully characterized it thus emphasizing the informality and personalized nature of the dialogue.

¹⁸ YSR's *padayatra* and *Jaithrayatra* was reminiscent of what NTR did after he established the TDP in 1982. This is a channel Naidu could not afford to use because of high security threat perception. While in the case of Naidu the distinction between the leader and the people was quite conspicuous, YSR could effectively blur such demarcations for the time being and create a space for the people to interact with him freely.

has moved away from the founder's policies¹⁹. This had come to be a very important and effective strategy of communication for the Congress to establish rapport with the popular classes and for the latter to have informal dialogue with the political elite.

Women and DWCRA:

It is well known that women have been the strong and reliable supporters of the TDP government. If NTR resorted to populist *adapaduchulu* (sisters) rhetoric to consolidate the TDP base among women, Naidu following the poor performance of his party in the 1996 parliamentary elections found in DWCRA (Development of Woman and Child in Rural Areas)²⁰ an instrument to strengthen the women vote for the TDP. By extending an overwhelming patronage to the DWCRA women, Naidu could create a viable political constituency for his regime. This is the constituency that was the major factor behind the TDP's victory in the 1999 elections. And this constituency was continued to be relied upon for the victory of the TDP in the 2004 elections as well. Precisely for this reason the Congress had to make special attempt to address the women, especially organised through the DWCRA programme.

The Congress discourse with regard to the DWCRA groups can be described as one based on a dual strategy. Firstly, the Congress tried to demystify the TDP's projection of the women as a monolithic group to forge an identity - in which the DWCRA was a major instrument - by referring to their internal differences; the Congress appealed to women belonging to the agricultural families who as such were also suffering on account of the policies of the TDP government. This strategy could be described as an attempt

¹⁹ It is instructive to note that NTR continues to be remembered as a pro-poor CM for his Rs. 2 kilo rice and housing for the poor schemes. The interviews by the *TV 9*, a Telugu news channel, with the rural poor during the elections brought this out. Curiously enough there were instances when people compared YSR with NTR.

²⁰ DWCRA is a central government programme meant for the development of rural women and children started in 1980. The Naidu regime hit upon and activated these groups since 1997 following its disappointing performance in the 1996 elections. The DWCRA almost assumed the dimension of a movement with the network claiming 3.7 lakh groups in the State. The social significance of this programme, apart from economic empowerment that is the stated objective, lies in building up their self-confidence and making them visible in the public sphere.

at the demythification of women as an autonomous social group based on coherent identity. Secondly, keeping in view the fact that the Naidu regime accorded top priority to the DWCRA through liberal allocation of funds, the Congress went a step ahead by promising loans to the DWCRA groups at the interest rate of three percent, which is far below the rate of interest under the TDP government.

Congress-led Discourse Coalition

What is involved in the Congress' campaign, which following Hajer [1993], could be called the 'mobilization of bias.' By making suicides of farmers and weavers a signifier of a deep crisis and making the TDP's policies responsible for this a political judgment in the form of popular verdict was sought. The narrative contains multiple story lines - drought, Telangana's backwardness (resulting in the demand for a separate State implied), TDP's surrender to the World Bank. The condensation of the discourse in the term 'crisis' is noteworthy. In other words, crisis had become a short hand expression of the seriousness of what was rotten in the State of AP. It is true that the issue of the crisis during the TDP regime is not as simple as stated by the adversaries. But it may be noted that simplification of the problem is a rhetorical device that is often put to an effective use to convey clear political messages.

The concept of discourse coalition defined as an "ensemble of a set of story lines, the actors that utter these storylines, and the practices that conform to these story lines, all organized around a discourse"[Hajer 1993: 47] is useful in this context. The electoral discourse pursued by the Congress and its allies is characterized by differences in terms of story lines or rather versions of story, narrative styles and rhetoric. What is common to them all is that the chief antagonist in the story is Naidu. These different versions of the story begin and in fact substantially revolve around Naidu. In all of them the narrative on agrarian crisis occupies a major space. But in each of them, the narrative assumes different twists and turns and the finale is explicitly different. As we shall see, despite these differences there is an underlying political necessity recognized by all of them that the TDP must be defeated and the premise on which that is possible is to

accept the Congress as the leader of the alliance. Therefore it may be suggested that the political alliance between the Congress, TRS and the Left be considered as a discourse coalition as well.

The concept of discourse coalition could be expanded to include a wide range of initiatives, organizations and social groups. Thus the acute perception of the crisis in a majority of social groups - apart from farmers and weavers, the students, unemployed youth and especially the teachers and NGOs - and an unprecedented sense of insecurity felt by a large number of them led to the widening of the discourse coalition associated with the Congress. Thus farmers' and workers organizations, students and youth organizations²¹, teachers and employees associations²² overwhelmingly identified with the Congress coalition sharing its narrative topography, in spirit if not in detail.

The TRS, the Left and other organisations pursued their own story lines that are different from each other and distinct from that of the Congress. It is curious to note that sometimes their narrative structures and especially the closures they aimed at were not compatible with each other. The TDP's counter-strategy was to highlight these differences and contradictions and draw the attention of the voters to how these differences camouflaged or played down by the alliance partners could play havoc in the State politics. In spite of all this if the alliance is voted to power then it can only be seen as a vindication of the points of convergence in the discursive narrative.

TRS and Telangana Demand:

To illustrate the above argument, let us look at the discursive persuasions of the TRS and the Left. The narrative on Telangana build by the TRS and the different discursive

²¹ There is wide spread disgruntlement among the unemployed youth on account of the ban on recruitment in the government sector. The only departments which continued to recruit were the police department and to some extent the school education as *vidya* volunteers thanks to the DFID funding under the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP).

²² The general perception among the employees was that if the TDP comes back to power it would in its pursue of reforms would wind up pension scheme and lower the retirement age apart from a vigorous implementation of the voluntary retirement policy.

groups even when they have serious differences with the former²³ has an almost predictable storyline. That the Telangana region has been backward and the coastal region has developed phenomenally and that too at the cost of the Telangana region; that the backwardness of Telangana is the logical outcome of the developmental policy pursued by the political elite from the Andhra region; this is evident in almost all the sectors - in irrigation, education, health, etc. According to this narrative the regional unevenness has increased with the coming into power of the TDP, which is clearly a party of the coastal neo-rich, and during the last nine years of the Naidu regime it has reached huge proportions. In this narrative there is a silence on the Congress party's role but this is sought to be effected by highlighting the culpability of the TDP. But it cannot be said that the Congress has been exonerated. What is significant here is not the factual veracity of the above construction but how through the deployment of rhetorical devices and powerful imagery it is sought to be imprinted on the popular memory as an irrefutable 'fact.'²⁴ The backwardness of Telangana and innocence of Telangana people (which is portrayed not as a lacuna but celebrated as a positive quality) become emotive devices through which mobilization is attempted. What is noticeable about the present discourse on Telangana, in contrast to that of the 1969 movement, is the deliberate underplaying of the anti-coastal Andhra sentiment²⁵. The choice of target has been the TDP and its policies. Such a critique has a positive correlation if not conformity with the critique of the TDP by other parties in the coalition.

²³ The Telangana Aikya Vedika, a non-election front, has emerged as a major voice since the late 1990s striving to educate popular classes through a variety of activities. Telangana Jana Sabha of the CPI(ML) (People's War) and Telangana Jana Sanghatan of the CPI(ML) (Janashakti) and Telangana Maha Sabha are the CPI(ML) wings that actively advocate the Telangana issue.

TRS is an electoral beneficiary of the groundwork done by these organizations.

²⁴ There has been a proliferation of propaganda literature on Telangana in the form of booklets and pamphlets. Most of them have *dagapadda*, *vanchita* (meaning 'deceived', 'duped' emphasising the conspiracy factor in the Telangana backwardness). For instance, *Vanchita Telangana* by D Sangameswar Rao, Nymisha Publications, Hyderabad, 2004.

²⁵ The TRS leadership has repeatedly clarified this aspect. The argument thus runs that the TRS is only for the State of Telangana and is not against the migrants who have come here for livelihood. It is this non-hostile approach that is the reason for the absence of pro-Andhra backlash, despite the attempts at this by certain interests during the elections.

But there are also serious differences and curious convergences among the coalition partners. While the State Congress maintained a studied silence on the Telangana issue - giving credence to the TRS' claim that it has reached an agreement on the issue with the AICC - the Left, especially the CPI (M) sticking to its linguistic nationality thesis, has taken a firm stand to oppose the demand. The Left instead proposed a special package for the development of the backward regions. There has been a strong convergence between the Left and the TDP on their stand on Telangana²⁶. But the points of divergence and disagreement that occupied larger discursive space have overshadowed this common ground.

The Left and the Economic Reforms:

The Left's discourse covers a wider policy space and situates the TDP regime in the macro-policy context. Thus the conditionalities of the World Bank and the accumulation of external borrowings during Naidu's tenure became issues hotly debated in this election. The Left, during its six years of separation from the TDP, virtually conducted a public trial on this issue through pamphlets, booklets, public meetings and agitations. Along with the Left parties, a number of citizens' initiatives like, for instance, the Forum Against Globalization (FAG) comprising of activists, academics and journalists have played a key role by bringing out booklets and informative pamphlets with analyses of the implications of liberalization to the vulnerable and marginalized communities.

It is true that Naidu's regime has seen a whopping increase in loans amounting to Rs. 50,084 crores. But the fact of the matter is that the external loans amounted to only Rs. 15,364 crores of which loan from the World Bank was Rs. 8,922 crores. The World Bank has become a short hand expression of the reforms face of the regime and that too with a stigma attached to it. The ground was thus prepared for the populist discourse. Not lagging behind the Left, the Congress also made it an election issue peppering it with emotions. Thus asked YSR in his road shows and public meetings: "Where has this

²⁶ The parliamentary Left's position on Telangana in terms of rigidity equals that of the TDP. It is an evidence of the sharpness of the differences that they not only surfaced into the open but also led to the fielding of TRS candidates in the constituencies allotted to the Left as part of the pre-electoral understanding.

huge money gone? What did the farmers get? How many irrigation projects were built?" The answer was obviously in the negative. This rhetoric went well especially with the rural electorate.

In the same refrain the standard claim of Naidu that his government enhanced the stature of the State among international donors and brought huge funds for the development of the State has been clearly turned up side down. The Congress' response to this claim is simple, straight and matter of fact one. All the borrowings made in the name of development have gone into the pockets of '*pacha chokkalu*' (yellow shirts), the TDP cadre, who like 'bandicoots' have not only swallowed up the developmental funds but also the rice allotted by the central government for the Food for Work Programme (FFW). It may be noted that there has been a remarkable change in the TDP's organizational structure under the leadership of Naidu. While NTR ran the party on the strength of his charisma and popularity, Naidu lacking both sought to build his organizational base on managerial lines through an elaborate network based on distribution of spoils. Thus the organizational base of the TDP at different levels began to comprise of people belonging to the class of contractors, builders and even speculators. This needless to say is in sharp contrast to the Congress, which counts in its ranks the traditional dominant caste elite and professional *pyravikaars* (power brokers). This contractor class, for whom politics is primarily a business proposition, the developmental work and even the FFW programme has become a 'feeding channel'.

The TDP's image in fact took a clear beating with the surfacing of scams involving pilferage of the rice meant for FFW programme. It may be noted that the State government was allotted 55 lakh tons of rice estimated to be of worth rupees 5500 crores by the center for drought relief work. The scams of rice 'recycling'²⁷ that were in reference when YSR declared, "while the farmers grew emaciated the TDP men became fatter by eating away government funds meant for development and drought relief like bandicoots."

²⁷ The process by which, the food grain allocated for the 'Food for Work' programme instead of reaching the poor, gets back into the open market is called recycling. There was reported to be a widespread practice of such recycling and in most cases it is the local TDP men benefited from this.

Thus when the Congress and the Left raised the issue of 'disappearance' of the loans meant for development the political message was loud and clear.

This put the TDP clearly on the defensive. The already accumulated voter fatigue with the persona of Naidu was further intensified when he made it a point to paint a picture of *Swarnandhra* (Golden Andhra) through a series of live telecasts of the review of the performance of different departments on the private TV channels.²⁸ The numbers that were reeled out during these reviews not only made no sense to the every day life experiences of large sections of population but increased their distrust of the TDP regime.

Closures:

Every story must have an ending - preferably an optimistic one. The discourses of the different parties suggest happy endings. In this sense the TDP is clearly at a disadvantage for being in power for nine long years its closure is only too obvious and has nothing to offer prospectively except promising to continue its earlier policies with a different accent.

The Congress' discursive diagnosis suggests a series of solutions. The most significant of them is the promises of the free power supply to agriculture. It may be recollected that Congress made the promise of free power supply to agriculture sector during the 1999 elections as well. But it was an indication of the low credibility of the party that it could not gain much on this count. During the last few years, by joining popular grassroots initiatives and keeping the debate on agriculture live in the assembly and other fora the Congress gradually gained a pro-people image for itself.

Like in 1999, the TDP tried to neutralize the Opposition campaign with all the resources at its command. Naidu, through TV advertisements and in his speeches sought to convey the message that the Congress' promise of free power was impractical and irresponsible.

²⁸ These programmes tried to project an 'Andhra shining' image in correspondence with perhaps not to lag behind Vajpayee's 'India shining'

For free power would only mean no power, as there would be no power left to supply. Thus he warned, "We will end up using transmission lines for drying cloths."²⁹ Free power will throw fiscal discipline to winds. Naidu repeatedly told his audience that this was the reason why Sonia Gandhi never referred to this promise.

Power is crucial to farmers in dry land areas in Telangana and Rayalaseema. There are estimated to be around 22.82 lakh pump sets in these two regions. The impact of hike in power tariffs has been quite disastrous on the poor and marginal farmers.³⁰ The power subsidy is justified on the ground that it would cost the state exchequer only rupees 300 crores whereas the expenditure incurred on the publicity by the TDP government was estimated to be above rupees 350 crores. This is the reason why this promise went well with the farmers and the poor households.³¹

The electoral discourse in the State has historically shown a high proclivity for populism. This is largely because of the sharp political polarization and the intense electoral competition the State has seen since the early 1980s. But none of the elections have ever seen any informed debate - except for an inclination to score points in the debate - on the desirability and viability of populism as the basis of public policy. Thus the populist turn in the promise of free power. The entire farming community is treated as a suffering lot and the internal differences are glossed over. When as a matter of fact the farming community is highly differentiated and the strata that have suffered as a result of the governmental negligence and apathy are the small and medium farmers. The discourse on free power also raises certain other important issues. The most important one pertains to the propriety in pursuing such a promise given the fact that the crisis of the dry land farming to a large extent is due to the phenomenal decline in the ground water, which in turn is a result of an unchecked bore-well digging. The free power supply would only worsen the situation for the poor and marginal farmers and play ecological havoc as there would be much more intensive water exploitation by the big land owners. Perhaps a comprehensive debate is required on the control over ground water usage and the

²⁹ *The Hindu* (Hyderabad Edition), March 20, 2004.

³⁰ "Power bills have equaled the house rents" has become a common middle class refrain.

³¹ Free power was also promised to single bulb households.

regulation of the cropping pattern in tune with the agrarian ecological conditions of different regions. These issues found no place in the electoral debate. TDP's argument against the free power promise was also largely in the nature of a techno-economic objection based on its non-viability (because of the cost factor and the inability to maintain quality supply) rather than based on the invocation of a larger perspective.

The narrative of the Congress-led alliance was woven around the theme of evil and anti-people rule (interestingly in the speeches of YSR and KCR, the TDP rule is referred to as *Dusta* and/ or *Narakasura*³² *palana*) under which all the sections of the society had suffered therefore it is time to end it. There are interesting sub-plots or narratives in the story line of the Congress which are basically meant to further cement and expand the process of forging a social coalition that would win it power. If the free power promise to agriculture and poor households (along with a package consisting of whole lot of other promises like completion of irrigation projects, supply of quality seeds, subsidized fertilizer and pesticides, loans at a low interest rate, revival of extension services, etc.) is meant to stabilize its support base among the farmers and poor households then the promises to weavers to ameliorate their conditions with regulation of yarn supply, revival of Janata scheme and creation of credit and marketing facilities, to the employees to do away with harassment³³ and creation of employment to the educated youth through recruitment to the vacancies in the government accumulated as a result of the ban on recruitment during the TDP tenure³⁴. Thus the social unrest and discontent against the TDP rule is sought

³² Interestingly it echoes the slogan of NTR in the 1994 assembly elections that he would kill *Sarasura* (the demon of arrack) by putting his first signature on the prohibition order immediately after taking oath of office. YSR made similar promise with regard to the free power order and kept it by signing in the order immediately after assuming the office of CM in the huge public presence in the Lal Bahadur Stadium in the capital city.

³³ It is interesting to note that the *Janmabhoomi*, considered to be highly prestigious by the Naidu regime, has been seen as a major source of inconvenience and harassment by the subaltern ranks or the 'street-level bureaucracy.' [For the concept of street-level bureaucracy, see, Lipsky (1980)] The bureaucracy is kept on their toes through regular and close monitoring. For these reasons, there is a sense of suffocation in the bureaucracy.

The teachers have been subjected to humiliation by being made to undertake 'all kinds of surveys'. Field notes.

³⁴ The list of promises includes the revival of Public Sector Enterprises, etc.

to be tuned by the Congress to forge a social base with the promise of specific packages to each of them.

The discourses of the TRS and the Left have predictable closures. Though they differ with the Congress in detail and final goals, the immediate objective, which is the defeat of the TDP, weighed over them.

Since the TRS owes its existence to and has built up its political image on the demand of statehood to Telangana, its narrative of the major issues, crisis in dry land agriculture, suicides of farmers, unemployment problem and the insecurity and lawlessness in the Telangana countryside are argued to be due to the neglect of the region as a result of the political and economic dominance of the coastal Andhra elite. The solution to the problems of the Telangana region is suggested to be possible only through the statehood. The major obstacle to this is stated to be the TDP. The alliance with the Congress is premised on the recognition of the need for the Telangana State. Despite the multiple voices in the Congress on this issue, there was an attempt by the TRS to project the acceptance of its demand by the Congress High Command.³⁵

The parliamentary Left, which built up a sustained critique of the TDP's economic reform agenda, made the conditionalities of the World Bank, the 'surrender' of the TDP government to the Bank and the neglect of agriculture leading to the agrarian crisis and farmers' suicides, and unemployment as the main issues in its campaign. The review of reform agenda and reprioritization of sectors, interests and subsidies were the main demands of the Left. The discourse coalition forged by the Congress, as suggested earlier, accommodated these issues in its macro-narrative. The closure of the Left thus coincided with that of the Congress. The electoral alliance forged by the Congress therefore was also substantially a coalition of discourses, narrative and story lines, and closures.

³⁵ KCR sharing platform with Sonia Gandhi during the election campaign in Telangana districts is shown as suggestive of the Congress High Command's sympathy to the TRS' demand.

IV

The policy discourse in 2004 election in AP displayed a plebiscitary character. This was because of the dominance of the TDP by the persona of Naidu and political investment of the party in terms of its image, resources, choices and risks in him. For this reason the defeat of Naidu's regime, which gained an iconic status with regard to the State-level economic reforms, has been interpreted as a 'vote against anti-people reforms.' The discourse analysis of the election campaigns of different parties clearly shows that except for the Left no mainstream party made this election a contest on reforms.

The dominant discourses of the Congress and the TDP are framed in terms of crisis vs. development. While the TDP's development centric discourse in view of the multiplier effects of demand for demonstration of proof hypothetically remained a closed option, the crisis-centric discourse of the Congress campaign displayed possibilities for new discursive coalitions and political alliances. Because of the discursive centrality of crisis, the concerns of the marginalized groups gained prominence in the electoral campaign of the Congress and its allies. Through a continuous focus on the suicides of the farmers and weavers to demonstrate the TDP's insensitivity to the people's anguish, the Congress sought to deepen the legitimacy crisis of the TDP regime.

Popular initiatives and grassroot organizations can play a crucial role in policy discourse. The more dynamic these organizations are the more pressure they exert on political parties to respond to their issues. If any party fails to do that it can only do at its own risk and loss of legitimacy. We find such organizations playing a catalytic role in discursive terms in this election - against the TDP for its closed discourse and in favour of the Congress because of its discursive openness. The presence of these initiatives is evident in the three crucial issues of rural crisis, Naxalite question and Telangana demand that dominated the electoral debate this time. All the above issues have been shaped and presented as social questions pertaining to the marginalized sections (in the TDP's discourse they were treated as administrative or law and order issues) and interestingly have been inclusively presented as part of the discourse of crisis.

Generally, reference to historical personalities and legacies is a strong element in the political discourses. In this respect the TDP clearly had a disadvantage. While the Congress invoked the legacy of Indira Gandhi and promised *Indiramma rajyam*³⁶ (Indira Gandhi's rule) the TDP could not draw on NTR's popular legacy because of its move away from NTR's legacy had been decisive.

It is necessary to distinguish between the cooption of the subaltern concerns by the dominant structures for electoral gains and providing of spaces to marginalized groups so that they can participate in policy discourses. It may be suggested that the 2004 election in AP has shown certain degree of convergence of these two processes of cooption by the dominant and carving a space for themselves by the marginalised. The sustained activities of the subaltern organizations have played a key role in making the crisis visible and central issue in the electoral discourse. Further they could be seen expanding the spaces in the policy discourse as these organizations were accorded visibility and promised a role in the policy making in the form consultations and involvement in the deliberations.

The Congress' promise of involvement of the farmers' and weavers' organizations in the formulation of policies for agricultural and handloom sectors and the *Poura Spandana Vedika* with regard to the Naxalite issue are important indications of expansion of policy spaces for the marginalized and their concerns.

³⁶ *Indiramma rajyam* signified *garibi hatao*, land reforms and rural welfare. There are tensions between the legacy and populist styles of Indira Gandhi and NTR (for instance, NTR marginalised the land reforms question), the Congress was careful not to refer to them. In fact it may even be suggested contextually that the Congress could benefit from the Naidu regime's distance from NTR by repeatedly highlighting it.

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