

A DOMINANT CASTE AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY ON FACTIONALISM IN RAYALASEEMA

Chinna Rangaiah, Dandu * Nyamath Hussain, Shaik * *

INTRODUCTION:

Rayalaseema has historically been marked by a significant prevalence of factionalism, particularly in the Kadapa, Kurnool, and Anantapur districts. Political leaders in this region have often used this violence to fulfil their political aspirations. Notably, the late Dr. Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy, a prominent figure who capitalised on factional violence, served as Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh from 2004 to 2009 (Balagopal, 2004). Factionalism is often romanticised in cinema, which frequently depicts these faction leaders wielding power and influence to exert control over their villages and save their villages from other factions, with lower caste followers often clashing on behalf of their leaders, underscoring the complexities and loyal-ties between leaders and their followers.

The Kadapa district has been an epicentre of factionalism, seen as the most infamous conflict between the Y.S. Raja Reddy and D.N. Reddy factions, which is remembered for the considerable violence it inflicted on the district, resulting in numerous fatalities (Balagopal, 1996). During the 1980s, factionalism was characterised by political conflicts between the Congress and the Telugu Desam Party (TDP). However, the political landscape shifted after the bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh in 2014 and the establishment of Telangana State, which led to a decline in Congress's influence in Andhra Pradesh. Former factional politicians from Congress subsequently aligned with the newly formed Yuva Jana Samithi Rythu Congress Party (YSRCP) and TDP, perpetuating their factional rivalries within these new political contexts.

Factionalism manifests in various forms across the country; at the village level, it often involves competition for power, prestige, and dominance, while in the political arena, it entails struggles among party members for critical positions within their organisations. Several studies have addressed factionalism at national, regional and village levels with political scientists such as Siegel and Beals (1960a, 1960b), Levine (1961), and Epstein (1962) focusing on the analysis of inter-factional conflicts. In contrast, Lewis (1954) and Nicholas (1965) examined the structural organisation of factions, while J.S. Yadava (1968)

* Doctoral student, Department of Sociology, University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad, India

* * Doctoral student, Department of Sociology, University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad, India

concentrated on the organisational aspects. Building upon these studies, the present study analyses political violence in the Kadapa district through a sociological lens. Sambatur village in Kadapa district has been selected as a case study to investigate the ramifications of factional violence. This village is particularly pertinent due to its experiences of factional killings in 1998 and 2000, which greatly affected a significant segment of its population.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Several studies conducted over the past six decades, including "Village Life in North India" (Lewis, 1958), "Tribe, Caste and Nation" (Bailey, 1960), "Factionalism in a Haryana Village" (Yadava, 1968), "Dynamics of Factions in Maharashtra" (Hiramani, 1979), and "Factionalism, Social Structure, and Politics in Rajasthan" (Nagla, 1984), have examined and categorised the phenomenon of factionalism into two primary types: those that investigate factions at the village community level and political party alignment.

The first category of studies primarily explores village social organisation to identify groups that consciously seek to enhance their interests by acquiring socio-political power. Conversely, the second category focuses on one or more political parties to elucidate intra-party and inter-party divisions, emphasising the mechanisms by which power is acquired for the benefit of their members. Such investigations typically address power dynamics at regional or national levels.

An analysis of both studies reveals that various criteria have been employed for a unified classification of factions. Recruitment is generally identified as a foundational criterion for faction formation, while the permanence or temporality of factions serves as another distinguishing factor. Micro-structural analyses focus on how factions are delineated by criteria such as caste, kinship, and lineage and speculate factions as enduring entities. In contrast, macro-structural studies regard factions as problem-oriented phenomena, implying they are temporary, interest-driven, and transcend caste and kinship divisions.

The literature indicates a significant gap in comprehensive sociological studies encompassing village factions and their social, political, and economic functions. There is an imperative for such research in regions characterised by factional phenomena, particularly to elucidate the evolving nature of factions within the political context of India. In this regard, the proposed study of factions in the Rayalaseema region of Andhra Pradesh, known for its intense and violent factional dynamics, is anticipated to contribute substantially to the existing body of literature.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research methods were primarily employed to achieve the objectives of this study. Data was collected in Sambaturu village from March to May 2018. A sample comprising 30 respondents from diverse social backgrounds were interviewed, including

seven women and 23 men. Among the female respondents, two, a wife of one victim and a mother of another, were directly connected to families affected by factional violence. The remaining five women were villagers with no direct ties to factional groups. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews designed to elicit relevant information. A snowball sampling technique was utilised to identify appropriate participants for the study. In addition to primary data, secondary sources from vernacular books, academic journals, official reports, and newspaper articles were used. This secondary data provided essential context and bolstered the findings of the study. It was instrumental in establishing connections and facilitating comparisons between the micro-level and macro-level analyses of factionalism in the Rayalaseema region. The study employed a structural-functional theoretical framework to understand better the existing structural dynamics of factional groups in Kadapa.

THE VILLAGE PROFILE AND CASTE RELATIONS

Sambaturu is located approximately 29 kilometers from the district headquarters and within the administrative boundaries of Kamalapuram Mandal in the Kadapa district. The Sambaturu Village Panchayat comprises three smaller settlements: Sambaturu, Munukoni Palli, and Chennam Palli. Sambaturu village is bordered to the north by Chennam Palli, Munukoni Palli, and the Penna River; to the west by Kogatam village; to the south by Nallalingaya Palli; and to the east by Kamalapuram. According to the 2011 Census of India, the village has 343 households, with a population of 1,374. The village is characterised by its multi-caste with a significant presence of Reddy households. The village comprises eight caste groups- 78 Reddy, 4 Balija, 85 Yadav, 5 Chakali, 1 Mangali, 80 Dudekula, 87 Madiga, and 3 Mala families.

Sambaturu is notable for its history of factionalism, which has persisted since India's independence. Violent confrontations have characterised the village, colloquially referred to as "godavalu," between two prominent factions, the Meegada and Putha factions. These conflicts, primarily between the two Reddy families, have endured for over three decades, perpetuating a cycle of violence related to land disputes and political power.

Factionalism has been a long-standing issue in this region; its nature and intensity have evolved over the years. Before the 1980s, factional conflicts typically arose from disputes over village supremacy and familial disagreements. However, with the emergence of the TDP, a regional political entity in Andhra Pradesh, the dynamics of factionalism underwent a significant transformation, leading to increased clashes during elections. Although faction leaders did not possess direct access to political power, they generally aligned with the political leader of their constituency and supported them during elections. A clear distinction exists between faction leaders and political leaders. In contrast, most faction leaders focused their activities within the village or Panchayat; the rise of the TDP

in the 1980s facilitated the evolution of faction leaders into political figures.

The caste in the village is considered a system of service relations. The dominance of the caste has shifted from one caste to another (Beteille, 1965). As Beteille said in his work in Sripuram village, we can observe such a scenario in Sambaturu. The Reddis in the village are traditional agriculturists, who own most of the agricultural land and house sites. They are the Jajmans for other lower castes.

The caste groups of Sambaturu have traditionally been related to one another through the mutual obligations of the Jajmani system. The lower castes work as agricultural labourers in the fields of Reddis. These lower castes receive money or grain for their work from each Jajman (Reddy) in a year. However, these Jajmani relations have started collapsing over the decade or so.

In Sambaturu, only the Reddis and SCs are involved in factionalism. The village's Backward Classes (BCs) pose a peculiar challenge in understanding their role in factionalism and its related violence. Unlike the SCs, the BCs are comparatively socially and economically advanced and do not depend on the Reddis for work. Most BCs hold a small amount of land and indulged in their caste occupations, which acted as a means of livelihood. They are not ritually impure; hence, there are no restrictions on access to financial transactions with the Reddis and other castes in the village. Considering these historical, social, and economic reasons, BCs did not get involved in factionalism. They are known for avoiding open support for any political party or taking sides with factional leaders in the village. Instead, they maintain cordial relations with both factions to safeguard their economic survival. Yadav, a 45-year-old BC respondent, aptly sums this up: "We are not active in politics or elections, though we usually support both. However, our community interests are more important than politics."

FACTIONALISM IN SAMBATURU

The term 'faction' describes the *Vargam* group at the Rayalaseema region's village level. The constitution of a *Vargam* is contingent upon the caste composition of the village; however, it predominantly comprises members from the dominant caste of Reddis, led by a cadre of oligarchic leaders known as *Nayakulu*, who form a relatively stable core. Political cohesion has historically been maintained in smaller villages. However, recent trends over the past five years indicate a burgeoning propensity for these smaller villages to fragment into their distinct factions (Lewis, 1954). In Sambaturu, the term "faction" explicitly denotes the political conflicts between Reddis. About 22.7% of the households comprise Reddis, the dominant caste in the village. The Reddis exercises significant socio-political and economic influence over the village. Faction leaders among the Reddis actively engage in political affairs and are principal instigators of factional politics in the village. The Reddis in

the village were divided into two factions, Meegada and Putha, with allegiance towards TDP and Congress, respectively.

The factional violence in the village between 1998 and 2000 involved two groups: the Meegada faction, associated with the TDP, and the Putha faction, aligned with the Congress. The Meegada faction led by Ramakrishna Reddy (male 65 years old), a prominent agricultural landlord, and comprised notable figures such as the late Prabhakar Reddy, a Senior Technical Officer in the local Mandal office; Sudhakar Reddy (male 58 years old), a supervisor at a District Cooperative Bank in Kadapa; Raja Reddy (male 48 years old), a Village Revenue Officer; and Bhaskar Reddy (male 58 years old), a bank employee. At the time of the incidents, these leaders were in their fifties, relatively well-educated, and enjoyed incomes surpassing the village average.

Conversely, the Putha faction, headed by Cheppal Reddy (male 65 years old), consisted of six leaders, all of whom were contractors and agricultural landlords. Cheppal Reddy's sons, also active faction members, were in their mid-forties. The first incident was precipitated by members of the Putha faction who sought to undermine Prabhakar Reddy's reputation by disseminating rumours regarding the misappropriation of village development funds, corruption associated with village festivals, and intimidation during electoral processes. Such provocations intensified existing animosities within the village. During the 1998 Panchayat elections, the Putha faction orchestrated the assassination of Prabhakar Reddy to manipulate the electoral outcome. Nevertheless, Ramakrishna Reddy of the Meegada faction was elected as Sarpanch, and Saraswathamma, the widow of the late Prabhakar Reddy, was elected as a ZPTC member. In the wake of Prabhakar Reddy's murder, the Meegada faction filed legal proceedings against the Putha faction, necessitating regular court appearances from both groups. Despite numerous attempts by the Meegada faction to retaliate, they were unsuccessful in their endeavours. Two years following the first incident, members of the Putha faction were en route to a court hearing when they were ambushed by the Meegada faction using improvised explosive devices and other weaponry. This attack occurred in 2000 at Bojjavaripalli, near Proddatur, resulting in the brutal killings of seven Putha faction members. Subsequently, 36 individuals, including hired personnel, were arrested from both factions; however, all were acquitted due to insufficient evidence (The State of Andhra Pradesh vs Meegada Sudhakar Reddy and Others, 2008). Eventually, the Meegada faction was compelled to vacate Sambaturu under police pressure and the threat of retribution from the Putha faction.

The main village area serves as the epicentre of political and factional activities. The Congress faction is predominantly concentrated in the main village, whereas the TDP faction holds sway in the main village and *Palem* (Dalit settlement). The Reddis residing in

the village receive support from SCs, who share their allegiances with the two factions. Although geographical proximity and kinship networks such as hamlets, lineages, or households are not determinative of factional affiliation, they remain intertwined and influential. In everyday discourse, village inhabitants refer to one another as brothers, fostering a sense of solidarity; however, this trend is not evident in practice. Notably, families of the same lineage do not typically affiliate with different factions, contrasting with other areas in the district where familial members residing in the same household may support differing factions.

Evidence of submissive attitudes among lower caste households is prevalent, driven by multiple socio-economic factors. For instance, one respondent from the SCs who demonstrated allegiance to the Congress *vargam* subsequently experienced a loss of patronage from the TDP *vargam*, which affected their relatives residing in adjacent villages, drawing them into the ensuing conflict.

The lower castes lack political activism, often maintaining neutral positions regarding factional politics. They generally operate as a unified entity in electoral contexts, discreetly aligning with a Vargam in exchange for promises. This support, however, is frequently variable, contingent upon the evolving political landscape and personal relationships between faction leaders and caste representatives. As pointed out by Praveen Kumar Reddy, a Contractor and relative of a member of the Meegada faction, "The BCs are acutely aware of factional dynamics and their implications, resulting in a reluctance to commit to any singular faction out of fear of potential discrimination should opposition factions gain power. During elections, they (BCs) meticulously negotiate with leaders from both factions, surreptitiously promising electoral support to one".

Village faction leaders remain vigilant to higher-level political developments and are adept at forming strategic alliances with vital politico-administrative figures as circumstances dictate. These leaders play a crucial role in linking faction members with higher political authorities, including Members of Parliament (MPs) and Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs), as well as with local administrative offices, police, and judicial institutions as required.

Faction members and other villagers rely significantly on their leaders for assistance with police, judicial, and local administrative issues. Leaders also endeavour to connect their factions with non-affiliated villagers and members of adjacent smaller villages, positioning local faction leaders as political intermediaries advocating for their preferred candidates during elections. They typically rely on support from members of the same caste while striving to persuade individuals from other caste groups within the same village or adjacent villages to align with their faction or its leaders.

CHANGING POWER RELATIONS

Since the inception of TDP, Reddis has been strategically affiliated with both (major) political parties. This shift has resulted in the increasing use of violence as a means of consolidating political power, often targeting individuals or groups perceived as threats. Political parties, recognising the utility of factionalism for their electoral advantage, have refrained from intervening to mitigate factional conflicts. Consequently, incidents of factional violence escalated following the enactment of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments.

In the realm of village politics, particularly within local body elections, SCs and BCs have often found themselves subordinate to the hegemony of the Reddis. While the amendments mentioned above created opportunities for increased representation of women in local governance, women and lower castes have remained largely politically inactive. When positions, such as Sarpanch and MPTC, are reserved for SCs, and BCs, the candidates are compelled to demonstrate allegiance to Reddis. Without such loyalty, the Reddis may withdraw their support or actively undermine the candidate's authority through coercive measures and the leverage of upper caste networks. Thus, lower caste members hold 'de jure' positions, yet the Reddis operate as the 'de facto' members, establishing their control over political affairs while maintaining distinct caste hierarchies. As previously noted, each caste engaged in inter-caste service relationships, and the introduction of education, migration, and social awareness among lower castes have significantly contributed to the gradual dissolution of Jajmani relationships. The previously entrenched dependency of SCs on the Reddis for employment has begun to diminish as educational opportunities and reservations have facilitated access to new job markets for lower castes. SCs, once perceived as bonded to Reddy households due to perpetual indebtedness, are increasingly seeking independent employment. This transformation has altered the socio-economic fabric of the village, weakening the jajmani relations between castes and fostering a more complex social structure that challenges traditional hierarchies.

CONCLUSION

The factor contributing to the decline of factions associated with physical violence in the Rayalaseema region is the withdrawal of dominant caste groups from factionalism. They recognise the importance of financial resources, time, and, more critically, the profound impact of losing loved ones. This phenomenon has also coincided with the disengagement of dependent castes, such as SCs and BCs, from factional affiliations.

Dominant castes have acknowledged the erosion of their political and economic foundations due to factionalism and have sought alternative strategies to mitigate their losses. Members of these dominant castes have adapted their survival strategies to enhance their advantages, including exerting control over available natural resources. Additionally,

they continue to maintain their political power over lower castes by monopolising government projects and welfare schemes and selectively distributing these benefits to chosen allies. Although dominant castes may publicly espouse egalitarian sentiments asserting, for instance, that "we are all equal" or "we care for your interests" they ultimately dictate the allocation of state resources, thereby exercising significant control over lower caste communities.

In contrast, lower castes have experienced a process of empowerment facilitated by affirmative action policies and access to education. This empowerment has led to social movements influencing state and national politics. Consequently, there has been an increased awareness of opportunities, employment, and welfare schemes, fostering greater independence from upper caste structures similarly, the lower castes engaged in robust caste association activities aimed at community development. As a result, the political consciousness among them intensified, significantly altering the political landscape of local governance.

Drawing from the findings, the paper examined how various factions' influence has transformed the dynamics of power and caste politics. The inter-caste relationship and interactions in the villages have undergone certain evolutions regarding hegemony and dependencies. There is a notable shift in the exercise of power by the upper caste groups over the lower caste communities, employing new forms of oppression and exclusionary practices. Thus, despite the decline of violent factions in the region, the economic and social status of lower caste communities remains unchanged, mainly due to persistent inequalities in resource distribution and entrenched caste relations.

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