

The Genesis of Telugu Desam Party and the Role of N.T. Rama Rao

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ABSTRACT

In the 1960s many regional political parties started taking roots across the length and breadth of the country to challenge the hegemony of the Indian National Congress and capture the popular mandate from it. However the same was not visible in the State of Andhra Pradesh. It took another two decades for a regional party to emerge in Andhra Pradesh. TDP which was established in March 1982 by its founder President, N.T. Rama Rao won the elections in January 1983, just nine months after its inception. The people of Andhra Pradesh who were vexed with the corruption and misrule of the Congress party in the State gave the mandate in favor of TDP with the hope that it would be a panacea for all evils plaguing the State. NTR, who became the first chief Minister from the TDP Party, became autocratic in his style of functioning both as the President of the TDP as well as the Chief Minister of the State of Andhra Pradesh. His style of functioning made many leaders leave the party. He lost power in 1989 and was in opposition till 1994. He won the elections subsequently but lost power in 1995 as he was overthrown by his own family members led by his son-in-law Chandrababu Naidu. With that, an era of NTR came to an end in the State Politics. This research study is a modest effort to understand the genesis of TDP and the role played by NTR in its genesis and the political personality of NTR.

In the 1960s, a process began in several states of India—a process of the emergence of alternative political parties that challenged the hegemony of the Congress rule and wanted to end its dominance. However this process was not witnessed in Andhra Pradesh then and it got much delayed and it took its roots only in the early years of 1980s. This is really baffling because there was electoral support from the people to the anti-Congress opposition

even during the 1950s and it was stronger in the State of Andhra Pradesh when compared to other States. In the neighboring State of Tamil Nadu, the Dravidian parties outmaneuvered the Congress party and came to power. Even this development did not provide inspiration and impetus to the anti-Congress opposition in the State. It was only during the early 1980s, under the leadership of matinee idol, N.T. Rama Rao that a new regional party, Telugu Desam Party (TDP) had its genesis in March 1982. The party did not take long to come to power and it occupied the echelons of power in January 1983, much to the surprise of all. It was a kind of record for a political party to come to power just nine months after it took its birth. This is perhaps a record in the history of political parties just not only in India but also across the world. The timing of the setting of the Telugu Desam very was apt. The ruling Congress party was plagued by internal quarrels, corruption and similarly the non-Congress opposition in the state presented a dismal picture of hopeless division and decay. This provided a conducive environment for the TDP to come to power like a tidal wave sweeping the Congress out of power in the January 1983 elections that were held in the State.

The TDP did not have any antecedence of any sustained social movement or struggle unlike other political parties in the country like the DMK in Tamil Nadu, the National Conference in Jammu and Kashmir, Asom Gana Parishad in Assam and Shiv Sena in Maharashtra. It neither had any leader trained in any ideology nor many leaders who had honed their skills in the rough world of politics and likewise it also did not have any formidable party organisation. It was initially thought that the TDP was just a passing phase in the political landscape of Andhra Pradesh, however, proving its critics wrong, the party has shown a lot of endurance and resilience. After the 1984 parliamentary elections, the party became the

single largest opposition party in the Lok Sabha surpassing all the other so-called national parties. Though the party lost bitterly in the elections that are fought in 1989, it bounced back to power in 1994 but to lose power again in 2004 elections. Thus, this party witnessed both highs and lows in the electoral politics of Andhra Pradesh State and acted as both the ruling party and the main opposition party as its fortunes fluctuated.

It was fondly hoped by many that this party would not survive for long and even its founder President NT Rama Rao was also under the same illusion that it would not survive him and he often quoted that 'the TDP came with me and will go with me'. However, the party, apart from proving critics wrong, also disputed the belief of its founder President and continued to play a preponderant role in the State politics of Andhra Pradesh sometimes as a ruling party and sometimes as an opposition party.

In August 1995, a revolt was witnessed in the Telugu Desam Party where the party president, N.T. Rama Rao was deposed from power by the very legislators who won the elections in 1994 through his charisma and on his party ticket. N.T. Rama Rao died a disillusioned man and Chandrababu Naidu, his son-in-law took up the reins of the party and has been controlling the destinies of the party since then. As was hoped and believed by many, the party did not disintegrate, rather gathered strength by day and it captured power again in 1999 even in the absence of its founder president, NT Rama Rao.

Apart from being a force to be reckoned in the State politics of Andhra Pradesh, the TDP played a very defining and an important role in shaping power-sharing arrangements at the national level in the early 1990s. In the 13th Lok Sabha, the TDP had won the rare distinction of being the largest State party in India both in terms of votes polled and the seats won and the largest party in the National Democratic Alliance after the Bharatiya Janata party. When it comes to the State politics of Andhra Pradesh, the TDP remains to be a formidable force and the national parties have no choice but to coexist with it, either as partners, contenders or friends

for the sake of gaining power or to act as opposition to it. Despite its defeat in 2004 elections and 2009 elections, it continued to be a force to be reckoned with and it bounced back to power in 2014. Though it fared in the elections very badly in 2019, it happens to be the main Opposition party in the State.

The emergence of TDP in 1982 brought in a new era in the politics of Andhra Pradesh State. It heralded in far-reaching changes on the political landscape of the State along with the nature of the political competition. Earlier the politics of Andhra Pradesh was just an arena for the warring factions of the leaders of Indian National Congress party and the leaders of this party took the people for granted and were insensitive to the wishes and aspirations of the people of the State. The arrival of the TDP changed all that and the Congress party could not take the people for granted anymore. The genesis of TDP led to the creation of awareness among the people of the State and political indifference among the people especially the Backward Classes was giving way to political activism on the part of the people. A two-party system had come to stay in the State of Andhra Pradesh and a bipolar electoral context started happening within a few years of the birth of TDP. The participation of the people in political activities started increasing and the polity and policy making started becoming more democratic with regard to providing an opportunity for the electorate to choose between political parties which are earnestly trying to win the mandate of the people.

The TDP also posed a formidable challenge to the old political elite and a new brand of relatively better educated, dynamic young men and women which included a large number of doctors, lawyers, engineers, graduates and professors entered the political arena and started contesting elections to become the representatives of the people.

An earnest attempt is made in this research study to examine and focuses on the emergence of TDP and the role played by NT Rama Rao in its genesis, the crisis in the party, the political personality of NTR and the ignominious exit of the founder President of the party.

The Emergence of the Telugu Desam Party

Till the emergence of TDP, the Congress party in the State of Andhra Pradesh was considered to be invincible and the sensational victory of the TDP in January 1983, just merely nine months after its inception as a political party, startled many seasoned politicians and political analysts. There have been many viewpoints and interpretations for the emergence and success of the Telugu Desam Party in the very first election that it contested. Each of these perspectives harp upon one other aspect or the other for the emergence of the Telugu Desam party. The problem, however, is that each of the perspective claims to supply a comprehensive explanation for the birth of Telugu Desam party. Here efforts are made present these different interpretations or perspectives related to the emergence of Telugu Desam Party.

The most popular narrative stresses upon the age old theme of the unending animosity between Kammas and Reddies, the two main predominant peasant communities in Andhra Pradesh. This has been a quite popular narrative and has been subscribed to by many people and this has been the case since the time of Selig Harrison. The narrative says that ever since the inception of Andhra Pradesh as an independent entity in 1956 the Congress party ruled the State and Reddies who constituted the most influential chunk in the Congress Party held sway over the party and the State. Kammas tried to come to power through the Communist party initially and later tried to make other parties their springboard to come to positions of power but without much success. They were longing for power and the birth of TDP was like a Manna for heaven to them and they supported the party to the hilt. However, political scientists like Rasheeduddin Khan (1969 and Carolyn Elliott (1970) did not subscribe to this view and they argued against this view with ample evidence.

Another interpretation pertaining to the genesis and coming to power of TDP is that the alliance between the Kammas and the numerically strong peasant and Backward Castes (BCs) was responsible for the TDP to come to power and for the subsequent consolidation.

Some of the TDP leaders also subscribe to the view that it was only because of the votes that were cast by the Backward Classes that the TDP came to power and they form the backbone of the party ever since the party came to power in 1983 elections. This narrative also harps upon the fact that the peasants among the Backward Castes were alienated from the Congress party due to the policies that were pursued by the Congress party under the leadership of Mrs. Indira Gandhi from 1970 onwards. The land reforms that were heralded by her and the pro-Dalit rhetoric that was indulged by Mrs. Gandhi gave the impression to the Backward Castes that Mrs. Gandhi was pampering and trying to court the Dalit community and was forming an alliance of national upper castes and the Dalits to undermine the importance of provincial leaders and the Backward Caste people who were hailing from the intermediate castes and had an intention to tighten her grip not only over the Government but also her party through this alliance. As a result, an overwhelming majority of the Backward Castes, who constituted nearly 40% of the total population of Andhra Pradesh State decided to seek their fortunes with the newly formed TDP and supported NT Rama Rao in most of the elections held in the State. This feeling of alienation was further accentuated by the perception among the Backward Classes that very little was done by the Congress for the welfare of the Backward Castes, even though there was a huge proportion of the disadvantaged section among the Backward Castes that was seeking the support and help from the Government. The phenomenal representation of the Backward Castes in the Legislative Assembly of Andhra Pradesh after the emergence of Telugu Desam Party was the result of the Party's strategy to challenge the Congress by courting the Backward Community.

The third interpretation of the emergence of TDP subscribes to the view that the decay of Congress party in the State of Andhra Pradesh and the clamor for self-respect among the people of Andhra Pradesh were the main reasons for the coming of TDP to power in Andhra Pradesh. The unbridled centralization of power that took place during the time of Indira Gandhi not only eroded the autonomy of the State in both the party and the

government matters but also wounded the pride of the people of the State. This hurt caused to the self-respect of the people of the State made them to support the newly formed TDP. In order to keep the ambitious leaders in the State under check and to make them depend upon the Congress High Command at the Centre, Mrs. Indira Gandhi encouraged factionalism in the State and changed the Chief ministers at will especially during the period 1978-82 and this was felt as an insult to the Telugu pride. The State Congress leaders were considered to be the stooges and puppets of the Congress leaders at the Centre and they were prepared to stoop down to any level to curry favors with the Congress high command. This revolted against the Telugu pride of the people and it could be observed in the election campaign in 1983, NT Rama Rao the founder of the party stressed upon the self-respect and the nationalism of Telugu people. He called upon the people to hold high the self-respect of the Andhra people and the honour of the Telugu speaking people by defeating the Congress party and thereby teach a lesson to the Congress high command and its leaders.

The fourth interpretation regarding the origin of TDP takes refuge in the political economy approach. According to this perspective, a class of neo-rich and regional bourgeoisie had emerged in the State of Andhra Pradesh since independence by siphoning off the agrarian surplus and started turning its economic clout into political one. The policies that were pursued by the Central Government under the Congress party were not in consonance with the interests of this class, regional bourgeoisie. The policies were catering to the interests of the national or bourgeoisie. As a result there was a clash of interests between the national bourgeoisie and the regional one. This sometimes resulted in tensions in centre-state relations and the demands for state autonomy and the regional bourgeoisie embraced the newly formed Telugu Desam Party because it was hoped by them that it would protect and promote their interests. Some extended the logic further saying that this regional bourgeoisie was mainly represented by the Kamma community because it was this community that became economically strong and formidable by accumulating

agrarian surplus and then by subsequently investing in industry, hotel, cinema and liquor business gained additional clout. The community was disappointed because there was a lot of incongruence between the economic clout and the political influence they were wielding. The birth of TDP provided the right opportunity for them to jump onto its bandwagon and consolidate their political clout.

Each of these perspectives presents a partial truth regarding the reasons for the origin of Telugu Desam party and its subsequent consolidation. A complete picture can be arrived at by having a combination of views pertaining to these perspectives.

One thing is amply evident that when NTR launch his political party, Telugu Desam party, the time was quite opportune because the Congress party was in complete disarray and vast chunks of population had deserted the party and the support base was considerably shrunk. The people were obviously satisfied with the corruption, misrule and inefficiency of the Congress leadership. However, the non-Congress opposition was too fragmented to take advantage of this opportunity and the doors were left wide open for NTR to seize the opportunity and win the hearts of the people. Apart from that, the popular craze and the cinematic appeal of NTR was another important contributing factor for the formation and success of Telugu Desam party. The people were enchanted of the Robin Hood image that NTR had donned in the films and were obviously impressed that he would deliver the goods. The media, especially the newspapers like *Eenadu* give ample coverage and good publicity to the campaign of NTR and all these factors in combination resulted in TDP coming to power.

Leadership Style of N.T.Rama Rao

When we think of the evolution of the Telugu Desam party over the years, we find two distinct phases: one was when NTR headed the party during 1982-95 and the other, when Chandrababu Naidu, his younger son in law of NTR assumed the leadership of the party and the government. The party depended upon the leadership of

NTR during the first phase. Telugu nationalism was the popular plank on which the support of the people was mobilized. The party also demanded for more autonomy to the state and also to the populist welfare policies and schemes that were being practiced by the NTR government. On the other hand, Chandrababu Naidu made an attempt to bring about a shift in favor of good governance paradigm taking into cognizance the rapid changes that were taking place in the field of administration. By showing the performance of the TDP government, the Telugu Desam party got the right to mobilize support from the people. The two leaders of the party namely, NT Rama Rao and Chandrababu Naidu during these two different phases presented contrasting styles while leading the party as well as the government.

Now let us discuss the style of leadership of NT Rama Rao.

NT Rama Rao strode like a colossus both with regard to the government as well as the Telugu Desam Party. He was as powerful as any populist leader across the world could be. He was of the firm perception and strong belief that the victory of TDP in 1983 was solely because of him and the efforts that he had put up for bringing the party to power. He mesmerized the people by saying that he was on a God-sent mission to render service to the people of Andhra Pradesh. According to him, his opinion was the opinion of the party because he believed he was the personification of the party. He treated himself not capable of doing any wrong. His commands were law because he was the embodiment of the popular will of the people. He was the party patriarch. He was addressed as *anna garu* (elder brother) in both public gatherings as well as in private conversations. All the party leaders and activists were his brothers and sisters. He declared himself as *rajarsi* (philosopher king) and began wearing the robes of a *Sanyasi*. Because of his untraditional behavior, some treated him as an enigma and others regarded him as a bundle of contradictions.

One problem that has been persisting in Indian politics since long is that the popular leaders who come riding the waves of popularity to power in the name of protecting and promoting democracy tend to become

autocratic and dictatorial as time rolls on. Same was the case with NT Rama Rao. He was no exception to this rule. Two contradictory elements could be observed in him. Probably influenced by the many mythological roles that he had played in the films and because of coming to power with thumping majority just within nine months of the establishment of the Telugu Desam Party, he was under an impression that he was a demi-god and like the autocratic rulers of the past, he subscribed to divine right to power and similarly as he was working in an environment of democracy he also believed in working among the people and by combining these two features a new hybrid of autocracy was observed in his behaviour. The evolution of the TDP as a party also showed how a democratic upsurge among the people could be cleverly manipulated in the name of mass democracy to establish an autocratic regime.

Although NT Rama Rao had an opportunity to build TDP on democratic lines he chose to do it the other way. He considered himself to be a kind of demi-god and the party organisation as an extension of himself. He did not give any importance to the party leaders and the party cadre because he knew very well that in the eyes of the people it was he who mattered the most and nobody else. He declared categorically that there was no number two either in the government or the party. It is understandable that for a man with an oversized ego like NTR no one can be above him or on par with him but he said that there was no one below him too. This is because if this is accepted then there is someone next to him either in authority or position then it would make his position only relative, only one of degree, which was unthinkable for him.

NTR criticized the Congress party for lack of inner party democracy. His party, however, was no different. NTR was also guilty of the same charge and he emulated the Congress party as far as the dynastic politics was concerned. He did not allow inner party democracy to flourish in his party too. He got himself declared as the President of the party for life. As the President of the party, he treated it to be his prerogative to nominate all the top functionaries of the party which included

executive committee, members of politbureau, and the heads of other wings of the party. Similarly, the President also nominated the party functionaries of the district levels. The TDP also functioned exactly the same way the Congress party was functioning. The TDP President was also behaving the same way as the Congress High Command nominated leaders of the Pradesh Congress Committee and the Congress Legislature party, although the farce of election was nominally enacted.

The leaders who did not appreciate the ways of NTR or who were critical of him had no choice but to leave the party. Those leaders who considered themselves to be number two in the party could not sustain in the party for long. For example, N.Bhaskar Rao who considered himself to be number two in the party found himself stifled in the party and left the party by splitting it in 1984 to become the Chief Minister for a short while with the support of the Congress party. When the TDP led by the NTR won the election in 1985, N.Bhaskar Rao went into oblivion. Likewise, another leader, N.Srinivasulu Reddy who treated himself to be number two in the party also left the party in 1987 because he also was suspected of harboring ambitions for the number two position in the party. Similarly, many other leaders who were confidants of NTR left the party one by one because they found the atmosphere in the party very suffocating. Some of them like P.Upendra, M.Padmanabham, K.Jana Reddy, Renuka Chowdhury, V.Nageswar Rao etc. either left the party or were expelled from the party for antiparty activities.

NTR's style of functioning as Chief Minister also was not much different from the way he acted as party President. As soon as he came to power, he took a unilateral decision of reducing the retirement age of the government employees from 58 to 55 without taking the government employees into confidence. Just before the assembly elections in 1989, he dismissed all his ministers and constituted a new Ministry with all the new faces. All these issues provided the Opposition with the proverbial stick to beat the ruling party with.

NTR lost the elections in 1989 and was in Opposition for five years till 1994. However, he did not care much for these happenings and he rode to power on a popular wave in 1994 and the Congress party recorded its worst ever electoral performance since the formation of the State. People probably seem to have a tendency to forgive their heroes of their eccentricities and idiosyncrasies and that probably is the reason why NTR came to power with such thumping majority in 1994.

In August 1995, the TDP and its founder President, NTR faced the worst crisis since the inception of the party. NTR was removed both as Chief Minister of State of Andhra Pradesh and the President of TDP in the revolt that was led his own son-in-law, Chandra Babu Naidu. The removal from power of NTR was his own making. This happened because of the policies that were followed by him. NTR was unsparing in his criticism of the Congress party for perpetuating the family rule both within the party and within the country but was no different from the Congress President. He pursued the same thing in his own party even more vigorously throwing the democratic norms to high winds. He designated his actor-son, Balakrishna to be his political successor. Two of his sons-in-law who were occupying two crucial posts in the party could not digest this wish of NTR and as a result rose in revolt against him and the younger son-in-law namely, Chandra Babu Naidu with the help of the sons of NTR, deposed him from power and then took up the mantle of running the State as Chief Minister and running the TDP as its President.

The immediate reason that was given by the rebellious leaders of the party for staging the revolt was that the newlywed wife of NTR, Laxmi Parvati was interfering too much in public affairs and the interference was causing too much damage to the party and the government and as a result it was intolerable and they were left with no choice but to rebel against the party President for protecting the interests of both the party and the government. When NTR was overthrown in 1984, there was a lot of turmoil in the state and it led to mass agitation to 'Save democracy'. In 1995, there was much pity and sympathy from the people to NTR but

there was no mass upsurge. He toured across the length and breadth of the State explaining to people the injustice and the treachery that was meted out to him by his own kith and kin and asked the people to revolt against them. There was however not much of a response from the people and NTR died a disillusioned and heartbroken man in January 1996.

There are many reasons for the lack of popular response and revolt from the people for the overthrowing of NTR in 1995. Firstly, the people treated the entire episode as a family drama and family episode where all close family members of NTR namely, his sons, his daughters and his sons in law played a crucial role in overthrowing him. In fact, one of his son-in-law namely, Chandrababu Naidu became the Chief Minister after removing his father-in-law, NTR. Secondly, there was growing disillusionment with the policies pursued by NTR. It was widely believed that populist schemes that were being implemented by NTR were proving to be burdensome, and antidevelopment. People saw in Chandrababu Naidu, an economic visionary and pragmatic leader who had his views in step with the global paradigm of economic development. Thirdly, most of the ministers and MLAs in the NTR dispensation could not put up with the humiliations and helplessness that they were facing under the leadership of NTR. They had an axe to grind because they believed that they were denied the opportunities to use their power to protect and promote their own interests and accord patronage on their supporters. No wonder that out of 216 MLAs that the TDP had in the Andhra Pradesh State Legislative Assembly, 190 MLAs supported Naidu in the struggle for power and Chandrababu Naidu assumed the twin offices of the party president of the TDP and the chief ministership of State of Andhra Pradesh. It marked an end of an era of the politics of charisma and populism.

Conclusion:

The arrival of the TDP changed entire political screen of Andhrapradesh and the Congress party could not take the people for granted anymore. The genesis of TDP led to the creation of awareness among the people of the State and political indifference among the people

especially, the Backward Classes was giving way to political activism on the part of the people. A two-party system had come to stay in the State of Andhra Pradesh and a bipolar electoral context started happening within a few years of the birth of TDP. The participation of the people in political activities started increasing and the polity and policy-making started becoming more democratic with regard to providing an opportunity for the electorate to choose between political parties which are earnestly trying to win the mandate of the people. The TDP also posed a formidable challenge to the old political elite and a new brand of relatively better educated, dynamic young men and women which included a large number of doctors, lawyers, engineers, graduates, and professors entered the political arena and started contesting elections to become the representatives of the people. The leadership style of NTR and his strong blind believes finally dethroned him from the party president post and made a clear way for economic visionary N. Chandra Babu Naidu as party president. At eventually we can conclude that the evolution of the TDP as a party also showed how a democratic upsurge among the people could be cleverly manipulated in the name of mass democracy to establish an autocratic regime.

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