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## Role of civil society and student movements in the Telangana statehood agitation

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### Abstract

The Telangana statehood agitation represents a significant chapter in India's regional political movements, characterized by a unique coalition of civil society actors and student-led mobilizations. This study explores the critical role played by these groups in shaping the discourse and momentum of the Telangana movement, which culminated in the formation of India's 29th state in 2014. Civil society organizations, including NGOs, intellectual groups, and regional advocacy networks, provided ideological direction, policy critique, and grassroots mobilization. Simultaneously, student groups, particularly from institutions like Osmania University, emerged as the emotional and activist core of the movement, organizing mass protests, strikes, and awareness campaigns. Their collective efforts challenged established political hierarchies and brought national attention to longstanding grievances related to regional identity, underdevelopment, and perceived injustices. This paper analyzes how the convergence of civil society and student activism not only sustained the agitation over time but also transformed it into a broad-based, people-centric movement. It also reflects on the implications of such mobilizations for democratic participation and regional autonomy in India.

**Keywords:** Telangana movement, civil society, student movements, Osmania university, Kakatiya university, TRS, TJAC, regional identity, cultural assertion, grassroots activism, sub-regionalism, non-political mobilization, statehood agitation, federalism in India, democratic participation, social movements, NGOS, regional disparities, peaceful protest, public engagement

### Introduction

The Telangana statehood movement stands as one of the most significant and sustained regional agitations in post-independence India. While political parties such as the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) played a central role in articulating the demand at the legislative and electoral level, the momentum and moral force behind the movement were largely driven by the active involvement of civil society organizations and student movements. Civil society—including NGOs, cultural activists, rights groups, and media collectives—provided critical platforms for advocacy, public education, and non-violent protest. Parallely, student communities, especially those from Osmania University and other regional institutions, emerged as the backbone of mass mobilization, organizing protests, rallies, and awareness campaigns that galvanized public sentiment across rural and urban Telangana. This article aims to explore the contributions of these non-political actors in advancing the Telangana cause. It examines how student unions, civil society groups, and cultural organizations worked both independently and in collaboration with political forces to sustain a movement that spanned decades. The study also aims to assess the impact of grassroots mobilization on the democratic process, and how the Telangana struggle exemplifies the power of people's participation in shaping statehood and identity within the Indian federal framework. democracy such as universal adult franchise and equality for all. According to CBR guidelines, Political Participation is the sum of broad range of activities through which people express their opinion and thought in the various political process and take part in the decision making process. While according to Jan. W. Deth, Political Participation is the activities of people that affect politics.

**Historical Context of the Telangana Movement:** The demand for a separate Telangana state has deep historical roots, dating back to the formation of Andhra Pradesh in 1956 through the merger of the Telugu-speaking Telangana region of the erstwhile

Hyderabad State with the Andhra State. Although this unification was seen as a linguistic necessity, it soon gave rise to fears of political and economic domination by the more developed Andhra region. These concerns were partially addressed in the Gentlemen's Agreement, which sought to safeguard Telangana's interests—but its non-implementation fueled growing dissatisfaction. The first organized agitation for Telangana statehood began as early as 1969, when students and employees led widespread protests against perceived neglect and injustice. Despite its intensity, the movement lost momentum due to political compromises and lack of sustained support. Over the following decades, regional disparities in development, employment, irrigation, and education persisted, deepening the sense of alienation among the people of Telangana. The revival of the movement in the early 2000s marked a new phase, characterized by broader participation beyond political parties. While the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) under K. Chandrashekar Rao played a leading role at the political front, what made the movement uniquely powerful was the involvement of non-political groups—civil society organizations, cultural associations, writers, journalists, and particularly students. This shift toward mass participation gave the agitation a democratic character, making it not just a political demand but a people's movement rooted in cultural identity, historical grievances, and aspirations for equitable development.

### **Emergence of Civil Society Participation**

One of the defining features of the Telangana statehood agitation was the robust and wide-ranging involvement of civil society organizations, which added depth, direction, and legitimacy to the movement. As the agitation matured beyond political slogans, NGOs, human rights groups, women's organizations, and voluntary forums became instrumental in channelling public discontent into constructive and sustained activism. Several NGOs working in the fields of rural development, social justice, and education began highlighting the regional disparities faced by Telangana in terms of access to resources, infrastructure, and opportunities. Human rights groups focused attention on the discrimination and repression faced by protestors, while women's organizations raised their voices against the gendered impact of underdevelopment in the region. These groups collectively broadened the scope of the movement by linking the demand for statehood to issues of equity, dignity, and social justice.

Civil society participation was further strengthened through public awareness campaigns, academic seminars, cultural events, and village-level meetings that informed and educated people about Telangana's historical injustices. Poets, writers, and cultural activists revived local folk traditions and used songs, plays, and literature to invoke a collective sense of identity and pride in Telangana's distinct cultural heritage.

Moreover, civil society groups made effective use of media and emerging digital platforms to mobilize support. Social media became a key tool for disseminating information, organizing events, and unifying diverse voices across the region and the diaspora. Through these platforms, civil society actors could bypass mainstream political filters and directly engage with the masses, making the movement more inclusive, transparent, and participatory. In essence, civil society played a critical role in democratizing the

Telangana movement, turning it into a people-centric agitation rooted in lived experiences and collective memory, beyond the confines of political rhetoric.

### **Student Movements and University Involvement**

Students have historically been at the forefront of social and political change in India, and the Telangana statehood agitation was no exception. The student community, particularly from institutions like Osmania University, Kakatiya University, and Palamuru University, played a crucial and catalytic role in revitalizing the movement and turning it into a powerful mass agitation. Osmania University, in particular, emerged as the nerve centre of the student-led protests. With its historical significance as an intellectual hub in Telangana, the university became a symbol of regional pride and resistance. Students organized mass rallies, sit-ins, and hunger strikes, demanding justice and equitable development for the Telangana region. Their activism not only mobilized public opinion but also drew national attention to the issue. To coordinate efforts and unify voices across different institutions, Joint Action Committees (JACs) were formed in universities and colleges. These JACs brought together students from various ideological backgrounds and acted as platforms for discussion, strategy, and protest planning. They ensured that the student movement was both organized and sustained over a long period, often working in collaboration with civil society and political entities but maintaining their independent voice.

The forms of protest adopted by student groups were diverse and impactful: from symbolic gestures like chain hunger strikes and candlelight marches to massive processions and road blockades. These actions were largely peaceful but deeply effective in drawing attention to Telangana's cause. Students used social media and local media channels to broadcast their message, bridging the gap between urban campuses and rural communities. What made the student movement particularly powerful was its moral conviction and raw energy. Young people demanding their rightful share in development and dignity of identity added emotional strength to the agitation. Their commitment and sacrifices—some even laying down their lives—cemented the student community's role as the backbone of the Telangana statehood struggle.

### **Cultural Assertion and Identity Formation**

A powerful dimension of the Telangana statehood movement was the assertion of a distinct cultural identity that had long been overshadowed or diluted within the unified Andhra Pradesh. As the demand for a separate state gained momentum, poets, artists, folk performers, and intellectuals played a transformative role in reinforcing Telangana's unique historical, linguistic, and cultural heritage. The cultural front of the movement was spearheaded by people's poets and writers like Goreti Venkanna, Deshapathi Srinivas, and Ande Sri, whose evocative songs and verses became anthems of resistance and pride. These literary figures helped frame the Telangana struggle not merely as a political or economic issue, but as a fight for identity, self-respect, and cultural dignity. Their work rekindled a collective memory of Telangana's rich traditions, struggles, and resilience.

Folk art forms, which had been neglected or marginalized, experienced a resurgence. Artists used Oggu Katha,

Bathukamma celebrations, Burrakatha, and street plays (nukkad nataks) to communicate the movement's message in a language and style accessible to the rural masses. These performances, held in public squares, schools, and village centres, were more than entertainment—they became tools of political education and emotional bonding, fostering unity and awareness across class and caste lines.

The revival of Telangana culture was not limited to rural expressions. Urban cultural platforms and digital spaces also celebrated Telangana dialects, cuisine, festivals, and folklore. Art exhibitions, film screenings, and cultural festivals highlighted the region's diversity and richness, countering the long-held narrative that Telangana was backward or culturally inferior. This cultural assertion became a unifying force, creating a strong emotional connection among people who felt neglected within a larger political entity. It helped foster a sense of belonging and pride, especially among the youth, and provided a deep-rooted moral justification for the demand for a separate state. In doing so, the cultural movement complemented the political and civil society efforts, shaping a holistic and people-driven path toward statehood.

### **Coordination between Civil Society and Political Leadership**

One of the distinctive features of the Telangana statehood movement was the strategic coordination between civil society groups and political leadership, which helped sustain the agitation over a long period and prevented it from becoming a purely partisan cause. While political entities like the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) and Telangana Joint Action Committee (TJAC) played formal roles in articulating the demand in legislative and electoral platforms, civil society organizations operated independently, yet in a manner that supported the broader objectives of the movement. There was significant interaction and collaboration between non-political actors—students, NGOs, cultural groups, rights activists—and political figures, particularly during key phases of the agitation such as mass rallies, bandhs (strikes), and public outreach campaigns. The Telangana Joint Action Committee (TJAC), though initiated with the involvement of political figures, gradually evolved into a broad-based platform that included students, employees, lawyers, doctors, and other professionals, allowing civil society voices to gain visibility and legitimacy.

Civil society played a crucial role in maintaining pressure on political parties to remain committed to the cause, especially during moments when compromises or delays seemed possible. Their watchdog role ensured that the issue stayed alive in public discourse and did not lose its essence in electoral politics. Importantly, civil society groups helped keep the movement inclusive and grassroots-driven, resisting any attempt to monopolize the agenda by a single party or leader.

By organizing independent cultural programs, protest marches, awareness campaigns, and academic discussions, these groups preserved the democratic spirit of the movement. They brought in diverse perspectives and grounded the demand in local realities rather than narrow political gains. This coordination, while not without tensions, allowed the Telangana movement to emerge as a multi-dimensional, participatory struggle that balanced political strategy with people's aspirations. In essence, the

interaction between civil society and political leadership ensured that the statehood movement retained its legitimacy, momentum, and moral strength, ultimately contributing to the creation of the state of Telangana in 2014.

### **Challenges Faced by Civil Society and Student Groups**

While civil society organizations and student groups played a pivotal role in sustaining and broadening the Telangana statehood movement, their journey was fraught with numerous challenges that tested their resilience, unity, and strategic direction. These challenges emerged both from external pressures and internal complexities inherent in a large, decentralized movement.

One of the most significant hurdles was state repression. The government often responded to protests and gatherings with heavy-handed tactics, including arrests, lathi charges (baton attacks), curfews, and preventive detentions under various legal provisions. Activists, students, and professors who voiced support for the Telangana cause were frequently targeted with police surveillance and legal cases, intended to disrupt the momentum and deter mass mobilization. Osmania University, a hotbed of student activism, was often subjected to intense police presence and clampdowns, limiting free expression and assembly.

Another challenge was the need to maintain unity and coherence among a diverse array of groups. Civil society in Telangana was not monolithic—students, NGOs, women's organizations, employee unions, and cultural activists all had different methods, ideologies, and priorities. Ensuring that these groups remained focused on the common goal of statehood, without splintering due to internal disagreements or ego clashes, was a constant effort. Disagreements over leadership roles, protest strategies, and political alignment occasionally surfaced, threatening the collective strength of the movement.

Moreover, as the agitation gained momentum, it also witnessed a rise in emotional intensity and public frustration, especially during periods of political indecision or delay. The challenge for civil society and student leaders was to balance the passionate calls for justice with the need to uphold non-violent methods of protest. At times, spontaneous outbursts of public anger risked derailing the peaceful nature of the movement, forcing organizers to constantly engage in damage control and reaffirm the commitment to democratic resistance. Despite these obstacles, civil society and student groups showed remarkable adaptability and moral strength. Their ability to withstand suppression, sustain dialogue, and uphold inclusiveness contributed immensely to the credibility and success of the Telangana statehood movement.

### **Achievements and Legacy**

The role of civil society and student movements in the Telangana statehood agitation left a profound impact on the trajectory of the movement and set a powerful example for democratic activism in India. Their collective efforts not only strengthened the demand for a separate state but also amplified the public voice, deepened grassroots participation, and ensured that the movement remained people-centric rather than merely political. One of the key achievements was the mobilization of mass public opinion in support of Telangana. Civil society groups succeeded in transforming what was once seen as a regional or elite demand into a broad-based people's movement. They used

innovative methods of protest—such as folk arts, poetry, public discussions, and digital media—to ensure that the cause reached every corner of the region. This expansion of civic participation revitalized democratic engagement and reaffirmed the power of non-political actors in shaping public discourse.

Their sustained pressure and constant presence in the public sphere helped bring the Telangana issue into national consciousness. While political negotiations were being held in Parliament and party forums, it was the energy on the ground—from students, teachers, artists, NGOs, and ordinary citizens—that kept the issue alive and demanded a timely resolution. This grassroots legitimacy was crucial in compelling national leaders to recognize the genuineness of the Telangana demand.

The legacy of this movement also resonates beyond the borders of Telangana. The non-violent, participatory, and culturally rooted methods adopted by civil society have served as an inspiration to other sub-regional movements in India, such as those in Vidarbha, Gorkhaland, and Bundelkhand. The Telangana experience demonstrated that inclusive, multi-sectoral activism, when combined with political will, can bring about meaningful structural change. In essence, the civil society and student participation in the Telangana movement not only contributed to the creation of a new state in 2014 but also enriched India's democratic fabric by empowering citizens to claim their rights, assert their identity, and shape their future through collective, peaceful means.

### Conclusion

The Telangana statehood movement is not just a political milestone in India's federal journey; it is a powerful example of how grassroots activism, driven by civil society and student groups, can redefine the contours of democracy and governance. These non-political actors played an indispensable role in sustaining the movement over decades, ensuring that the demand for a separate Telangana did not fade into silence, even when formal political mechanisms failed to deliver. The contribution of civil society—comprising NGOs, human rights organizations, cultural bodies, women's groups, professionals, and media collectives—was not limited to mobilization alone. They played the dual role of pressure-builders and conscience-keepers, raising awareness through creative protest methods, cultural assertion, public dialogues, and independent campaigns that placed the Telangana demand within the larger framework of justice, equality, and constitutional rights. Their efforts kept the issue in public discourse, forced political parties to stay accountable, and built a moral case that transcended electoral calculations.

Equally pivotal was the role of student organizations, particularly from institutions like Osmania and Kakatiya Universities. Their energy, sacrifices, and intellectual commitment brought urgency and legitimacy to the movement. From organizing hunger strikes and mass rallies to leading academic discourses and forging ideological clarity, students proved that youth are not merely the future of a region—they are its present drivers of change. Together, these forces contributed to a unique, participatory model of statehood agitation that was rooted in democratic principles, cultural pride, and regional identity. The Telangana experience revealed that federalism in India is not static but dynamic, capable of responding to genuine

grassroots demands when they are expressed with unity, consistency, and non-violence.

As Telangana embarks on its journey as a separate state, it is essential to recognize that the role of civil society does not end with the achievement of political goals. Their continued involvement is critical in ensuring transparent governance, social equity, environmental sustainability, and protection of marginalized voices. The same civil engagement that brought statehood must now be directed towards building a just, inclusive, and participatory Telangana. In a broader sense, the legacy of the Telangana movement offers valuable lessons for other sub-regional movements across India. It underscores the need for responsive governance, balanced regional development, and above all, the centrality of citizen participation in a functioning democracy. Preserving and nurturing civil society in the post-statehood era is not just important for Telangana, but for strengthening the democratic and federal fabric of the Indian Republic as a whole.

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