

Origins of Telangana Movement in North America: A Chicago Perspective

THE ORIGINS

Chicago Telangana community was one of the earliest to initiate Telangana activities in North America. Our early efforts started in 1998. It was a time when the state of Andhra Pradesh was in international news with Chandrababu Naidu at the helm. Then prevailing view was that AP along with Hyderabad was rapidly developing with modern technology - the IT industry. But we knew firsthand that Telangana region of Andhra Pradesh was under severe distress with globalization coupled with severe drought. Unfortunately there was no mention of the problems faced by Telangana people in any of the media outlets. In addition, there was also the fundamental problem of not having a space to discuss Telangana issues in social discourse of our community in North America. The very word Telangana was considered a taboo. We were living with a suppressed identity and were not any different than Telangana people in India who were living under subjugation in many spheres, social, cultural and political.

EARLY EFFORTS

Our early efforts were focused on creating a space for discussing Telangana issues openly without inhibitions. None of the existing platforms such as Telugu organizations provided any scope for such debate. A small set of like-minded people started exchanging emails about Telangana and the issues of its underdevelopment. One of the primary drivers of the discussion was Sudhir Kodati living in New York. With his initiative, we submitted a memorandum to the chief minister of AP on the Adilabad Cholera epidemic in 1998 and the lack of government response to help the effected people.

Then we came across a newly emerging technology of Internet called eGroups (which was later acquired by Yahoo to become Yahoo groups). Being newly immigrated to US and not having large amount of financial resources, we felt it was easier to start a dialogue on the Internet with eGroups. This was a free service that could be easily used to create a forum for Telangana related discussions. The discussions we were having over email were now diverted to newly created discussion group called Telangana Discussion Forum (telangana and later tdf-discuss). This gave a concrete shape to our Telangana activities in North America. During the same time Sudhir organized a seminar with Prof Jayashankar in New York that lead to formation of Telangana Development Forum. Sudhir introduced me to Madhu K. Reddy and other participants of the seminar who later became core activists of the movement during later years.

The Chicago team was also instrumental in organizing a seminar in 2000 with Prof Jayashankar and Prof Janardhan Rao in Naperville, IL. Similar seminars were also conducted across many US cities. The seminar was a watershed event, and was seminal in many respects. They helped educate many Telangana NRIs about problems of Telangana such as poverty and underdevelopment. Factual information presented in the seminar demonstrated the backwardness of Telangana region in AP was a result of systematic discrimination of Telangana in United Andhra Pradesh. They motivated many

participants and generated a set of volunteers who were willing to work for the Telangana cause with sincerity and dedication.

BATHUKAMMA

It was in summer of 2003 when the recent phase of Telangana movement in India was just beginning to get popular, thanks to the years of hard work by many Telangana intellectuals. The newly formed TRS party in India under KCR's leadership had started mobilizing Telangana society. Yet for larger North American Telangana community, Telangana identity is yet to find a concrete expression. Our efforts to galvanize Telangana people since 1998 had good but limited success. We were unable to increase our reach to larger Telangana community. Moreover there was no women participation in any of the seminars or meetings. We wanted to breakout of this limitation and extend our reach to larger audience to facilitate a wider debate on Telangana.

At the same time there was another strand of thought process that was going through me for many years starting from 1997 when I was still doing my Doctorate in Canada. That thought process was about the marginalization of Telangana culture and slowly disappearing Telangana festivals and cultural practices. I remember my childhood days in my native village of Boenpally when we used celebrated Bathukamma and Dussera where whole village participated. For some reason Bathukamma festival has been neglected and marginalized. Many educated Telangana women were of the view that celebrating Bathukamma was not fashionable any more. I started thinking about the reasons why there exists such an opinion among our people. I then came to an understanding that this feeling among our people is a part of the result of systematic suppression Telangana society in general and Telangana culture in particular in the state of Andhra Pradesh for many years.

It was in this context, the idea of conducting Bathukamma festival publically took roots. When I broached this idea to a few friends Kishan Reddy, Purna Allamneni, Sreenath Chinnala, with whom I have been working for a few years on Telangana awareness, I got a very positive feedback. Sudhir Kodati encouraged us to go ahead with the plan. Every idea has to start somewhere, however small it may be. Hence we decided to take the next step and actually conduct Bathukamma festival. During this time Purna introduced me to Venkat Thudi who was also interested in our efforts which helped to form the first Bathukamma team in Chicago.

We had twin goals for conducting Bathukamma in Chicago. One, we wanted to make Bathukamma fashionable and popular again. Celebrating Bathukamma in US will not go unnoticed in India. This will help remove the stigma on this unique Telangana festival that only illiterate village folks play Bathukamma and not educated women in cities. Second, we wanted to involve Telangana women and families in US in building network of Telangana people. We firmly believed that women's participation will give a big boost for putting Telangana identity on a solid footing.

First task at hand was deciding a date and finding a place for Bathukamma festival in Chicago. Usually it gets cold in Chicago by October first week which was the real Bathukamma time in India. Hence we decided to conduct Chicago Bathukamma a couple of weeks earlier on September 28. We found a nice place in Blackwell Forest preserve in Warrenville, a suburban town of Chicago metro area. The park

was ideal place since it has a nice shelter to protect participants in case of rain and an open place for playing Bathukamma. It also has a lake nearby resembling the cheruvu in India.

One of the major challenges for us was making Bathukamma itself. We were not sure what kind of flowers we could get and how we could make Bathukamma. Luckily we found local flowers that could be substituted for traditional flowers used to make Bathukamma. Traditional flowers such as Gunugu, Gummadi, Thangedi, Banthi etc were replaced by similar looking local equivalents. Some of the people who actively participated and helped in First Bathukamma were, Venkat Juvvadi, Ravi Thokala, Sridhar Loka, L.R Rao. The event was simply superb - successful beyond our expectations. People from other nearby places such as Madison Wisconsin, Detroit Michigan also came to attend the event. It was one of the most gratifying moments of my life. It was an exhilarating experience to see women in Chicago playing Bathukamma to the tunes of songs that I heard decades ago. It brought back all my childhood memories. I am sure everyone in the event felt the same. First Chicago Bathukamma also had intended effect back home in India. Andhra Jyothy daily covered the event twice: once on September 30, following the event. It also ran a special section on the following Sunday edition with a title '**Ellalu Daatina Bathukamma**' on October 3, 2003. Sudhir Kodati, one of the attendees from New York, subsequently with the help of other friends conducted Bathukamma in various major cities including Toronto, Detroit, New Jersey, and Bay area. The rest is history. Now it is hard to find a U.S. city or town that does not have a local Bathukamma nearby that a Telangana family cannot attend. In some US Cities such as Bay Area, New Jersey, Chicago there is no single park facility that can accommodate the large number of attendees for Bathukamma. As a result these cities are now conducting multiple Bathukamma events each year.

TELANGANA NIGHT

Telangana society was undergoing a historical cultural awakening in India. But in North America we were still catching up to the times that were changing. Telangana people in America celebrate many "Telugu" festivals with "cultural" activities conducted by various Telugu Associations. Most of these events primarily depict themes based on Telugu movies which are not only superficial, but also devoid of any Telangana culture. A Telangana person naturally does not feel being part of it. But there were not many opportunities or platforms for them to celebrate Telangana culture. At the same time Telangana society in India is exhibiting enormous rich cultural revival. Many old Telangana folks and non-folk traditions and art forms were being revived. Every town or village in India, small and big started conducting Dhoom Dhaam - a Telangana cultural festival. Then it occurred to us Chicago Telangana activists and volunteers: what is preventing us to conduct a cultural night purely based on Telangana?

As soon as we got the idea, it did not take long for us to plunge into action. First important task was to find a place to conduct the event. Since we did not have access to large sums of financial resources, we had to find a place that is affordable based on small contributions we ourselves could make for the event. We found 'Barn Recreation Centre' - a facility provided by Naperville City Park district which met our requirements. Once we reserved the hall, the next big item on the agenda was food. To limit our expenses, we decided to request core volunteer families contribute food in potluck style.

Next challenge was finding people to perform cultural programs focused on Telangana themes. It was specially challenging for us since most of the people we know do not have this type of talent. Only person who has the talent and interest in singing was Ravi Thokala. With great difficulty we were able to lineup few programs with children and Ravi Thokala.

Since we had shortage of programs with live performers, we wanted to leverage some pre-recorded Telangana songs. We found the song "Jaya Jaya he Telangana" written by Andhe Sri which was appropriate for the occasion. The song depicts Telangana and its rich history and culture in a powerful way. We found an audio recording of the song on the Internet. But we wanted a visual component that enhances the audio song. To this end, we collected pictures from various sources such as Ravinder Reddy's picture book, Bharath Bhushan's Bathukamma collections, Thota Vikuntham and Laxman Ale's paintings, and Maddi Surender's personal collections. We also included some pictures from Chicago Bathukamma. We finally created a video of slide show with the above visual content that matches the theme of the song. One major problem we had was that we could not combine the audio and video content into single video in time before Telangana Night. When we exhibited the video on Telangana Night, we manually coordinated two video players to get audio and video together. Amar Karmilla later took the same song and visual content and created a better, more integrated song for Boston Telangana Night in 2007. It is one of the most popular Telangana video on YouTube even today.

The Telangana Night event was a huge success exceeding our expectation. It proved that there was an enormous appetite among Telangana NRIs to assert their cultural identity. They were looking for ways to express their interest. We just happened to provide a means for their desire. Telangana night as an idea was later adopted by Telangana NRIs in other cities across USA.

Bathukamma and Telangana Night are two events that were started in a humble way in Chicago and have become an annual ritual for most Telangana NRIs in North America. In addition to Chicago, in other major cities such as New York, Boston, Dallas thousands of people participate in these events every year. Chicago Team is proud to have initiated and contributed to the successful revival of Telangana festivals and culture in North America. Telangana families in many US cities started coming together, resulting in formation of various local Telangana Associations, particularly after December 2009. Chicago team has also formed CHITA (Chicago Telangana Association) to carry forward the original vision of celebrating and strengthening Telangana identity.