PEOPLES PULSE
an ear to the ground

Muslims of Telangana:

A Ground Report

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Muslims constitute 12.5% in Telangana according 2001 census (Rao, 2014). However, the issue that has gained prominence with the formation of Telangana is whether or not their social, political and economic position would improve, or will it further decline? What is the perception of Muslims about Telangana and their own future in this new state? Did they actively participate in the ten year long struggle for separate Telangana or were they indifferent or even opposed to it? If so, which were the sections among the Muslims that opposed the statehood and why? Is Telangana prone to communal polarization or has it in course of this movement become more secular and identifies with its composite culture that is often referred to as the Ganga-Jamuni tehjeeb? Does the idea of Samajika Telangana subsume the significance that needs to be accorded to this section of the population or has it neglected the question of Muslims, ignored the possibility of communal polarization in course of its mobilization and thereby, willy-nilly, contributed to the age-old anxiety among the Hindu population that continues to suffer with the perception of Muslim `dominance` during the Nizam rule? These were some of the questions that this survey addressed through purposive sampling, and through intense discussions with a cross-section of Muslims that included the leaders of various Muslim organizations, those belonging to the professional middle classes such as lawyers and doctors, journalists, political parties, and businessmen, lower middle classes such as school teachers, and those pursuing informal employment and self-employed youth and Muslims that constitute the urban poor. The survey was carried out in three districts of Telangana that included Mahbubnagar, Nalgonda and Warangal.i

The survey found that there is a clear polarization between the Muslims and the Hindus in Telangana. The polarization has in fact become sharper with the formation of a separate state because of the sizeable and concentrated population of the Muslims. The new aspirations of the Muslims for socio-economic benefits and political representation is being viewed by the dominant community as `aggressive` re-assertion by the Muslims, who were otherwise dormant and subdued in the integrated state of Andhra Pradesh. The crux of the problem begins with an intriguing issue of political representation that Muslims see as an immediate panacea for many of the problems plaguing their community, while Hindus perceive this to be an undue assertion and as communalization of the electoral processes taking `advantage` of their minority status. The entire argument for Muslim representation is based on the premise that Muslims should get tickets from the political parties in constituencies where their population is in a sizeable number, for instance in Bodhan in Nizamabad district where they constitute 39% or Mahabubnagar where they make for about 20% of the electorate. The argument being that Muslims should and rather would vote en-block for a Muslim candidate making his/her candidature viable and bring-in a winnability factor to their candidature. This Muslims perceive is a legitimate way for them to gain political representation when they are in a numerical minority. However, this strategy of en-block voting is perceived by the majority community as `vote-bank` politics and communal polarization initiated by the minority community. Hindus that we have interviewed in course of our survey therefore have argued that `if Muslims can vote en-block to a Muslim candidate what is wrong in Hindus voting en-block for a Hindu candidate`, (that too cutting across caste-lines which is considered to be a `progressive` move and further complicates the issue). The counter-argument to this by the Muslims is that Muslims are willing to vote for all political parties (except BJP) when they

offer tickets to Hindu candidates, but Hindus are unwilling to vote for Muslim candidates, irrespective of the political party that offers them the ticket.

It is this stalemate that has been witnessed in one of the major running controversy about Muslim representation in course of the decade-long political movement for the formation of a separate state. In Mahabubnagar district in 2009 Assembly elections Rajeshwar Reddy, who was active with the BJP & Praja Rajyam Party contested as an independent candidate, as BJP offered ticket to Padmaja Reddy, while TRS offered ticket to Mr.Ibrahim. Rajeshwar Reddy won the elections; he however passed away in 2010, leading to by-elections in 2011. After which, Congress offered ticket to a OBC candidate Muthyala Prakash, while TRS offered it to Ibrahim and BJP`s candidate was N.M.Srinivas Reddy. These elections witnessed a sharp polarization of votes between Mr.Ibrahim, and consolidation of Hindu votes for the BJP candidate Mr.Srinivas Reddy. The BJP not only campaigned for a separate state of Telangana but also against the `re-assertion designs` of the minority community. BJP`s MP Hema Malini came to campaign here and argued that `what we are witnessing in these elections is a India-Pakistan Match, now you decide whether you wish to support India or Pakistan`; Pakistan being a veiled reference to TRS candidate Ibrahim.ii Public processions resorted to slogans such as `Ek do ek do Muslim ko Phek do`. Some of the Muslims we interviewed recollected an incident where it was painted on a stray cow- `Ma ko Bachao`, which was let loose in the streets. This was again a campaign against beef eating by the Muslims. Prior to this some of the Muslim respondents recollected an incident where in the nearby Hanuman Mandir, some unknown people beheaded the statue of Hanuman. Muslims suspect that this was done by Hindus themselves belonging to the BJP or RSS, in order to escalate the tensions between both the communities. As a result, BJP`s candidate Mr.Srinivas Reddy won with small margin. Muslims pointed out that in the by-

election for 11seats, which was the high point in the agitation for a separate state, TRS won 10 seats and the only seat it lost was that of a Muslim candidate. One of our respondent Mr.Abdullah, a school teacher pointed out that even the Telangana Joint Action Committee (JAC), which is otherwise secular, campaigned here for the BJP candidate. While, TJAC has its own reasoning that it was important to take BJP on board since their support was indispensable if the Telangana Bill was to be passed in the Parliament.iii

The defeat of Ibrahim has been resonating across Telangana. In all three districts Muslim respondents referred to this issue of singular importance in understanding how the electorate is getting polarized across religious lines. However, it is important to understand that this process is historical in nature going back all the way to the fact that Telangana that was part of the Hyderabad State was ruled by Nizam (Gudavarthy 2014). The end to his rule was a bitter conflict that resulted in Police Action in which it is widely believed that about 2-3 lakh Muslims were killed and the atrocities committed by the private militia of Nizam- the Razakars. In fact `The Andhra Pradesh unit of BJP called upon people of Telangana and political parties there to celebrate September 17 as 'Telangana Liberation Day' to commemorate the region's freedom from erstwhile Nizam rule` (September 6, 2011, The Hindu). Muslims feel that they belonged to the ruling elite, and that Nizam was a secular ruler who gave land to the Hindus and made them Deshmukhs, started a great number of institutions such as the Osmania University, Osmania General Hospital, among others.iv However, he continues to be vilified as a despot. Muslims would argue that all kings were feudal in nature, but then while the legacy of Hindu kings is positively appropriated and preserved; Nizam alone is vilified for being feudal. This is squarely because he was a Muslim ruler. The aftermath of the ousting of Nizam has witnessed a drastic decline in the social, political and economic position of

the Musims. Urdu was removed as an official language, which made the modern education unavailable for the Muslims. Their percentage came down from 40 % in government jobs in 1950 to about 5% in 2010. They earlier owned land to the tune of 35% but now it is less than 4%, after they were displaced from the villages in course of the Police action, and these lands have been taken over by the Reddys and Velemas. Therefore, at the heart of the conflict with the Muslims is also the struggle own economic power that was wrested from them by the castes that are now dominant. Now about 70% of Muslims reside mostly in small towns and cities and pursue semi-skilled jobs such as mechanics, artisans, auto and bus drivers, plumbers, tailors, running road side tea stalls, while others with government jobs are mostly school teachers or police constables. Since they do not own land, and Telangana movement was essentially about land and water and agrarian crisis, its agenda did not directly appeal to the Muslims. Hasan Kalim, a school teacher in Nalgonda district sums up this despondency when he says `Aandha ko din kya raath kya, ek hi baath hai`, plight of Muslims in Telangana is just that, it will not make any difference as they are way too backward and socially marginalised to benefit from a smaller state. Subhan, an insurance agent in Mahbubnagar pointed out that `Hindus do not have dignity of labour, if they are educated they remain unemployed and do not work but even a post-graduate Muslim will drive an auto or work as a mechanic to eek out a living`. In contrast, Hari, a young lawyer pointed out that `since Muslims fend for themselves, they have to be aggressive to survive, and therefore they become very dominating and also courageous`.v

Muslim participation for a separate State oscillated between silent and dormant support among those in villages, to indifference among those pursuing semi-skilled jobs in the towns, to enthusiasm among middle class Muslims in professions such as lawyers and doctors and university and college teachers to

opposition by those residing in Hyderabad and those who support the Majlis Ittehadul Muslimeen (MIM) in districts. The popular perception among the Hindus again oscillates between angst that Muslims did not actively support the movement (one of the Hindu respondent Mr.Gopal Krishna in fact asked `Did even a single Muslim lose his or her life for Telangana?), and the possibility that once Telangana is realized, since they are concentrated, they would assert and `dream` about return to the `old times`.vi They believe after Urdu was removed as the official language Muslims never tried to `integrate` with the rest of the society, never studied Telugu or in English and that is the reason they lost out on government jobs, and not because they were ever explicitly discriminated. Many Hindu respondents argued, `what prevented them from coming out of Madrasa education and adopt modern education. Why are they so prejudiced against Telugu language? It is this unwillingness that many argue is what makes the majority community suspicious about them. They further believe in fact Telugu was neglected as a language under the Nizam. While, on the other hand Muslims themselves fear that Telangana will make them more vulnerable as there is a distinct possibility of growth of Right-wing forces including the VHP, RSS and the BJP.

It is partly true that many of the Muslims, especially those who are politically active do take pride in the leadership of Nizam, and the fact that he once patronized the Hindus. Mr.Md Abdul Hazim, District President of MIM in Mahabubnagar argued that `while Nizam gave lands to Hindus, in their rule they want to send us back to either Pakistan or Kabrastan`. He further added, Hindu rulers give us `either gali or goli`. He also observed that Hindus had no choice but to chose India as their nation during partition, while Muslims had a choice yet decided to stay back in Hindustan, `now who is more patriotic?`. Anees Muqthadar, President of AP Muslim Empowerment Forum in Nalgonda

district made an interesting observation that While Andhra region has regionalism, Telangana has Communalism. While in the Andhra region Muslims are referred to as `saheblu`, in Telengana they are derogatively referred to as `Turkollu` (those who came from Turkey). Economic development in Andhra region has integrated Muslims and backwardness in Telangana has lead to wide scale marginalization. Anees pointed out that in 2009, 4 Muslims contested from the Congress out of which 3 won, 4 from TDP out of which 1 won and 14 from the Praja Rajyam Party out of which none won the assembly elections, however there were only two candidates won from Praja Rajyam Party in the Telangana region out of which none of them belong to Muslim community. From Telangana region seven Muslims were elected, all the elected Muslim representatives belonging to MIM Party. He observed that after 2009, as they approached the formation of a separate state, parties have become reluctant to give tickets to Muslim candidates. He further observed that in Telangana communal polarization is near-complete, in which Khammam and Warangal districts are the least communal because of the presence of `Andhra culture` and Left parties, while Mahabubnagar is the most communal. All other districts lie in between with varying degrees of polarization around specific issues locally relevant.vii For instance, In Nalgonda we found that people at large, including the journalists believe that it is the hub and `hot-bed of ISI activities`. When we cross-checked this with a Muslim Doctor Zakir Hussain, he dismissed it and argued `how can a small town like Nalgonda have such activities, they can easily be caught, but people continue to believe these rumours`. To check this kind of ISI activities, Hindus, primarily students, launched a `Modi Sena`, along the lines of Shiv Sena.viii This polarization is not merely in elections but in economy, where contracts are not given to Muslims, customers don't buy from Muslim owned shops and Anees Muqthadar, said `I have even heard that Hindu and Muslim

children sit separately in schools in Nizamabad district`. Earlier, Abdullah, a school teacher, pointed out that `Muslims get naturally ghettoized because they wish to live around a Masjid, where they do namaaz for five times a day, and a Masjid cannot be built next to a temple in a Hindu dominated colony`. While, Kodandram, Chairman of TJAC observed that Muslims in the Andhra region got integrated after they lost their distinct identity, including their language- Urdu. `How is that less communal? In fact, he believes that the movement for a separate state has opened up space for dialogue with the Muslims, perhaps for the first time. They took active part and even took leadership positions. `There are now forums for them to air their views`, reminded Mr. Kodandram. This is partly true, while the enthusiasm seems to be limited to Middle class Muslims, who do feel that in Telangana they would get social, economic and in due course even political opportunities. For instance, Md.Abdul Wahab, a leading lawyer, was worried about the land value in Telangana that was very high as the rich from Andhra bought up all the land. Similarly, he observed that, `while all the judges are from the Andhra region, all the peons are from the Telangana region in the Courts`. He believed that Telangana will bring better employment opportunities for the next generation, drinking water, water for irrigation, among other things. Md.Wahab felt that people are not communal in their everyday life; it is only during elections that they get polarized. As an example he pointed out that majority of his clients were in fact Hindus.ix However, the gap between the Middle class and lower rungs in Muslim society is so wide that it is difficult to say whether those who are enthusiastic should be treated more as middle class respondents and less as Muslim respondents. Or can one reach the conclusion that better economic opportunities, which are what Telangana promises to bring will positively impact the Muslim society by creating a more enlarged middle class among them.

Political Parties and Telangana Muslims

It is important to note that Telangana issue is visualized quite differently by various political parties. While the TRS and to some extent even the Congress views it as a case of `internal colonization` by the Andhra capital, CPI sees it as a case of `backwardness` due to uneven growth intrinsic to capitalism and the BJP views it as a case of small state, and cultural assertion against alien- Muslim-rule. All parties are now, after the formation of Telangana, are speaking a language of inclusive development. However, within this frame the social section that has received the least attention and has fallen through the cracks is that of the Muslims. While Muslims perceive political representation as the most important solution for them, political parties have become increasingly hesitant as they suspect the winnability factor of a Muslim candidate and Telangana is witnessing an immediate consolidation and polarization of Hindu votes wherever Muslim candidate is given a ticket. `In the outgoing Assembly with the total strength of 294 members, there are only 11 Muslim members. They include seven from Hyderabad (all from MIM) and one each from Anantapur, Chitoor, Kadapa, and Guntur districts. There is just one Muslim MP (from MIM) out of 42 Lok Sabha members from the state in the outgoing house (Jafri, 2014). In fact, TRS supremo KCR made a rather uncanny public announcement that no Muslim would be given a ticket from TRS in 2014 Assembly elections as `they cannot win elections`. He added that he could think of giving them tickets in the next Assembly elections. Similarly, KCR had earlier announced that a Muslim would be made the Deputy Chief Minister but later retracted his statements. After these announcements and the previous history related to the candidature of Mr.Ibrahim, Muslims are suspicious about TRS and KCR in particular. Though many Muslim respondents said that he is not explicitly communal but certainly not a `reliable character`. Muslims feel TRS will finally go with the BJP, and

many cited the instance of Mr.Narendra (a former MP with the BJP and a known face of the RSS) joining the TRS. Though it is another matter that BJP finally aligned with the TDP, and TRS and Congress are fighting elections on their own in the forthcoming elections. Shahadat Ali, who is himself an active member of the LJP, argued that BJP is not the only communal party, in Telangana all other parties are following `undeclared Hindutva` by denying seats and not helping Muslims win elections. He pointed out that there is communal polarization in other states such as Uttar Pradesh, `but how come in every elections not less than 30 MLAs who are Muslims win elections and in Telangana not even a single Muslim candidate wins`. He felt that BJP only stokes the feelings that exist among the general public and in other political parties. He pointed to how BJP is now mobilizing unemployed youth by organizing `Hanuman Jayanthi`, and the `Modi phenomenon` is helping them consolidate. However, it looked like overwhelming majority of Muslims had decided to cast their votes for the Congress, which is what they have been doing in the past; as one of the respondents said voting for Congress `is now a habit for Muslims`. Congress under Rajshekar Reddy proposed 4% reservations for Muslims in jobs and educational institutions, while TRS promised 12%. Though the AP High Court struck it down, and it is pending before the Supreme Court.

In all of this the MIM party stands at the other end of the spectrum. MIM was the only party, along with the CPM, which explicitly and openly opposed the formation of a separate state of Telangana. MIM argued all through that formation of Telangana will strengthen the Sangh Parivar. They have a more aggressive posturing towards the majoritarianism of other political parties. One of their supporters Hasan Kalim, a school assistant said, `Muslims have been robbed by the Hindus, so why should Muslims feel if Telangana Hindus are in turn being robbed by Hindus from the Andhra region`. MIM has so far

exclusively focused on contesting only from the old city area of Hyderabad. In the previous elections they won 7 seats in the Assembly and 1 MP seat by the leader of MIM Assaduddin Owaisi. In the districts, MIM generally supports other political parties such as TDP or the Congress depending on the situation. Muslims themselves in the district do not vote for the MIM either because they cannot win seats on their own or because of an overwhelming fear that voting for the MIM invites anger and also possible attack from the Hindu community. One of the respondents said, `If we vote for the MIM in the Municipal elections, there is always the fear of Hindu backlash`. In fact, in the public meeting of the MIM that we attended in course of the survey, Assaduddin Owaisi made an explicit reference to this in arguing that `if you do not vote for the MIM out of fear of the Hindus, then remember tomorrow when BJP and Sangh Parivar grows there will be no one to blame except yourselves`. He made a plea to the Muslims to overcome their fear. Abdul Shafiq, a junior lawyer, pointed out that by supporting MIM, `we might win a few seats of ward members in the corporation but who will protect us after that`. While the Hindus pointed out that it is MIM which encourages sectarian mobilization, they often cited the speech by the younger brother of Asaduddin, Mr. Akbaruddin Owaisi, who made an inciting speech where he claimed that `if police remain mute spectators Muslims in India, can finish off the Hindus in less than 15 minutes`. Following which Akbaruddin Owaisi was arrested. Similarly, others pointed out that MIM does not allow any other political party to campaign in the old city and has a complete grip over the Muslims in this area. The Editor of Siyasat, popular news daily in Urdu pointed out that, the real reason why MIM opposed the formation of Telangana was because they have business deals with Andhra politicians, especially land deals. Much of the Waqf Board lands are occupied by Andhra builders and they pay a cut in exchange of that to the MIM. MIM itself indulges in land grabbing and

extends loans to poor Muslims and extracts high rate of interest. However, Mr.Jafri, MLC and the ideologue of MIM, pointed out that the reason for MIMs opposition is if backwardness is the reason for the formation of Telangana then Rayalseema too is backward, and therefore MIM demanded `RayalaTelangana`, that also includes sizeable population of the Muslims. Similarly, he also pointed out that as part of de-limitation many of the Muslim dominated areas are being reserved for the Scheduled Castes. The long-term agenda of MIM is to forge an alliance between MIM and dalits and the OBCs so that the hold of dominant Reddy and Velema castes is reduced. Further, he pointed out that MIM is powerful in Hyderabad, while bifurcation creates a problem for the status of Hyderabad city.

To conclude, the plight of Muslims is rather worrying in Telangana. They are socially ostracized, politically marginalized and economically weak. In spite of this majority community continues to perceive them as a threat, and as aggressive. In fact, they believe, as one of the Hindu respondent said, `Muslims are quite because they have been `put in their place`, otherwise they will begin to dominate the Hindus`.x Due to this perceived idea, there is no general sympathy for the Muslims. Various Muslim organizations have therefore demanded `reserved seats` as per their population, on a similar pattern as seats are reserved for the dalits. This they feel is the only way that Muslim leadership can emerge and change the existing plight, the way dalit leadership has done. Through out the survey, many respondents drew parallels between the situation of Muslims and dalits, and even urged for a similar act as SC, ST atrocities (Prevention) Act, in order to prevent the everyday attacks and humiliation of Muslims. Anees Muqthadar said, `as dalits cannot win from a general constituency even today, Muslim cannot win elections from a general constituency`. However, in contrast to this parallel, Riaz, general secretary of Mahajan Socialist Front pointed out that

`there is a possibility of dalits gradually shifting to BJP, In Mahabubnagar they have already formed BJP Dalit Morcha`. Alongside, physical safety and security remains their primary concern. It is intriguing that none of the respondents referred to either corruption or inflation as a major concern in the forthcoming elections. How democratic Telangana is going to be squarely depends on how inclusive it is going to be towards its Muslim population....

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End Notes

[i] The survey was carried out from 21st March to 25th March, 2014.

[ii] Communal polarization, some pointed out, sharpened in 1977 when a history-sheeter, Erra Satyam organized communal riots in Mahbubnagar. It is an irony that the town of Mahbubnager and its central market place greets with a statue of Erra Satyam being prominently located.

[iii] To counter this, and organize a show of strength Muslims organized `Muslim gharjana` in 2012 in Mabubnagar, where it was claimed about 10,000 Muslims took part. This was in support of Telangana, and against the wrong kind of propaganda against the Muslim community.

[iv] Doctor Zakir Hussain claimed that Osmania General Hospital in it's hey days before 1948 was ranked 6th globally.

[v] One Muslim respondent thought that if communal riots take place Maoists will gain ground in Telangana.

[vi] Riaz, General Secretary of Mahajan Socialist party, who is also contesting elections in Warangal, pointed out that 12 Muslim students committed suicide, though it is against Koran.

[vii] Waheeb, a journalist with Etemaad, a news daily close to the MIM, felt that Warangal was less communal because of a large number of Dargahs, `where Hindus and Muslims even today go together`.

[viii] More recently Film actor Pawan Kalyan , who has declared support to Narendra Modi launched his new political outfit by the name, `Jan Sena`.

[ix] In a lighter vein he added that, in fact Hindus think a Muslim lawyer will be more sincere in fighting their case, and vice versa. Similarly, Zakir Hussain, doctor in Nalgonda district pointed out that large number of his clients were Hindus.

x Bhaktha Vatsal, another Hindu respondent felt that `in the old city area, Muslims drive and come in the wrong way, and if you object to that, they begin to abuse you` This is one of very popular ideas about how Muslims in the Old city, near Charminar behave with the Hindus.