Public Good or Private Gain?
The Battle for Andhra's Medical Colleges

SAMBAIAH GUNDIMEDA

The proposed transfer of 17 newly sanctioned government medical colleges in Andhra Pradesh to private operators under a public–private partnership model has triggered statewide mobilisations. Set against N Chandrababu Naidu's market-led governance and Y S Jagan Mohan Reddy's welfare-driven investment, the conflict foregrounds redistribution, reservations, and democratic accountability, questioning whether education and healthcare will remain public rights or be subordinated to profit.

"Why should our children's dreams be sold for someone's profit?" demanded a retired schoolteacher in Markapuram, his voice breaking yet unyielding. What began as a lone cry has, within weeks, swelled into a rallying refrain across Andhra Pradesh (AP). Tens of thousands poured into the blistering September heat, all standing shoulder to shoulder in defence of the public good. Their anger is directed squarely at Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu's move to hand over 17 newly sanctioned government medical colleges to private operators under a public–private partnership (PPP) model (Janyala 2025). The teachers' anguished question captures the mood of the moment: institutions built on sacrifice—land donated by local communities, funds drawn from the public exchequer—cannot be surrendered to the calculus of corporate profit.

The state's response was telling: baton charges, arrests, and the sight of women, medicos, and young students being dragged by the police (*Sakshi* 2025). Yet these scenes of repression did not weaken the resolve of the demonstrators. If anything, they infused the movement with greater urgency, for the people understood that what was at stake was not a technical policy detail but the very principle of whether education and healthcare would remain rights of citizenship or be reduced to commodities for sale. The sense of outrage stems not only from the loss of material assets but also from the symbolic erasure of the public itself: the displacement of the idea that institutions of learning and healing are expressions of a collective ethos, not market opportunities to be monetised.

This is why the agitation has transcended partisan boundaries and ideological divides. While the Yuvajana Sramika Rythu Congress Party (YSRCP) gave the first call of *Chalo Medical College*, the movement has grown into something far broader. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Jai Bheem Bharat Party have lent their organisational strength and ideological clarity, framing the protests as part of a wider struggle against privatisation. Student organisations, such as the Students' Federation of India and the Progressive Democratic Students' Union, have galvanised campuses, brining students to the streets and placing youthful energy at the centre of the protests. Medicos, Dalit and Adivasi groups, teachers' unions, and village elders have added their voices, weaving together a coalition as diverse as it is determined. Rarely in recent memory has AP witnessed such a convergence of forces. It is bound not by electoral calculation but by a common conviction: that education and healthcare are not favours bestowed by the state but constitutional promises, hard-won rights that cannot be bartered away in the name of efficiency. The protesters insist that to defend these rights is not an act of charity but a moral obligation.

The Long Shadow of Naidu's PPP Vision

At the centre of AP's present dispute stands Naidu, whose political identity has long been bound up with the project of market-led modernisation. PPPs were a central plank of his *Vision 2020* framing and subsequent policy practice, in which state land and civic resources were recast as strategic assets to be leveraged to attract private capital and global investment. This is not merely an administrative preference but a political strategy: the state is projected as investor-friendly, its legitimacy measured by the scale of private commitments it can mobilise.

Across Naidu's tenures, this political project acquired an architectural shape—from information technology parks in Hyderabad to the grandiose Amaravati scheme—in which PPPs were both method and metaphor. Amaravati, in particular, serves as a cautionary emblem: a vision of a world-class capital built through

Sambaiah Gundimeda (*sambaiah.gundimeda@krea.edu.in*) teaches at the School of Interwoven Arts and Sciences, Krea University, Sri City, Andhra Pradesh.

land deals and large-scale concessions, whose postponement and cost escalation exposed how PPP dreams can calcify into contested landscapes of exclusion and distrust. The uneven returns of these ventures—glittering enclaves alongside persistent public deficits—have fuelled scepticism about whether PPPs in AP reproduce inclusion or entrench new forms of dispossession.

The political logic matters because it reshapes the meaning of "partnership." Under a regime that privileges capital as the prime mover of development, partnership risks becoming a mechanism of public-asset alienation rather than public-interest stewardship. When collective land and taxpayer resources are mobilised to underwrite projects, whose governance is calibrated to private revenue horizons, social priorities—health, education, reservation-driven access—are liable to be subordinated to market logic. The controversy over the medical colleges must therefore be read not as an isolated policy choice but as a continuation of a polity-wide shift: PPP has become the fault line between competing visions of growth and the anxieties of dispossession it generates.

Jagan's Counter-model: Public Investment as Welfare

By contrast, Y S Jagan Mohan Reddy's approach placed public provisioning at the centre of his political project. The sanctioning of 17 new government medical colleges under his administration was presented as a deliberate welfare intervention—an attempt to expand capacity, remedy doctor shortages in underserved districts, and embed affordable tertiary medical education in regions long neglected by private providers. The rollout was a symbolic claim that the state would deliver social goods directly to citizens.

The financial arithmetic of that project was significant: each college was projected at roughly ₹500 crore and envisaged on about 50 acres, yielding an aggregate investment in the order of ₹8,500 crore (*Hindu* 2025). Even if only a portion of funds had been expended before the change of administration, the programme signalled a political choice to build public assets rather than outsource their delivery and management. For many communities, the laying of foundation stones was not a mere spectacle but an affirmation of belonging that signalled an official promise of investment in the futures of the children of farmers, small traders and first-generation aspirants.

Naidu's subsequent decision to place these nascent colleges under PPP is therefore experienced by many as more than fiscal pragmatism: it is read as a repudiation of the redistributive logic that animated Jagan's policy. Where Jagan sought to democratise access by enlarging the publicly owned seat base, the new move recasts institutions conceived as public entitlements into sites for private management. That symbolic reversal—the conversion of public promise into potential private profit—is central to why the protests have resonated so widely.

Pragmatism or Pretext?

Proponents of the PPP model, including key figures within Naidu's administration and industry lobbies, defend the move not as an ideological crusade but as a painful fiscal necessity. Their argument is compelling on its surface: the state exchequer, stretched thin by multiple commitments, simply lacks the estimated ₹1,500–₹2,000 crore required annually to operate and staff 17 new institutions. In this narrative, PPP is the only pragmatic tool to avoid letting valuable infrastructure—built with public land and money—lie fallow. The model on paper, they contend, is not a wholesale giveaway. The state retains ownership, private partners bring capital and managerial "efficiency," and the public gains modern facilities without further draining its treasury. They point to successes like the Krishnapatnam Port as evidence that PPPs, under strict regulation, can be a win-win (*New Indian Express* 2025). From this vantage point, the protests are a tragic case of good-faith pragmatism being misread as malign intent; the choice is framed not between public and private but between functional colleges and empty buildings.

However, this analogy, while intuitive, fractures under scrutiny. Ports and toll roads are commercial ventures that operate on user fees and market principles. Health and education, as affirmed by the Constitution under Articles 21, 41, and 46, are fundamental rights and a mechanism of distributive justice. The state's duty is not merely to provide a service, but to ensure its delivery is equitable, affordable, and guided by social justice, not profitability. The moment corporate managers control operations, the core mission shifts. The imperative to generate revenue will inevitably dictate outcomes: fee hikes that exclude the poor, the neglect of unprofitable but essential specialities, and admission processes that become opaque and favour the affluent. The "efficiency" offered is not in serving more patients or teaching more students, but in extracting more value from them. AP needs no reminder of this dynamic; the state's experience with exorbitant private medical college fees and capitation quotas is precisely what the 17 government colleges were meant to overcome. The PPP model, far from being a solution, threatens to reintroduce the very disease it was supposed to cure.

The dangers are clear. Once corporate managers control operations, profitability dictates outcomes: fees rise, unprofitable services are neglected, and access is rationed. Doctors and staff face the clash between public duty and revenue targets. For students of modest means, the result is exclusion. Private medical education

in India has long been synonymous with exorbitant fees, opaque admissions, and compromised standards. AP has witnessed this first-hand, and the expansion of government institutions was designed to redress such inequities. PPP threatens to reverse that achievement. It is therefore unsurprising that opposition to PPP extends well beyond YSR Congress ranks. The agitation reflects anxieties about the erosion of public goods and the dismantling of social mobility. The issue is not merely the fate of 17 colleges but whether health and education will remain rights owed by the state or be reduced to services sold in the marketplace. At stake is the deeper question: Does the state exist to shield citizens from the inequities of the market, or to deliver them to it under the guise of efficiency?

Reservations, Redistribution, and Perils of Privatisation

To confine the debate over the PPP model to mere fiscal prudence or managerial efficiency is to profoundly misapprehend its stakes. The controversy strikes at the very heart of the constitutional principles of redistribution and representation. Public institutions are irrevocably bound to implement reservations for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes (OBC)—a mandate that serves as a critical conduit for historically marginalised communities to access professional education and attain positions of dignity and service. These quotas are not administrative conveniences; they constitute the very architecture of social justice, a deliberate corrective to centuries of exclusion.

The transformative potential of this framework is both palpable and quantifiable. A single government medical college, with its complement of departments, can annually graduate scores of doctors from reserved categories. Extrapolated across the 17 institutions sanctioned under Reddy's administration, this represents nearly 1,000 students from marginalised backgrounds admitted each year. Over a five-year period, this pipeline would produce close to 5,000 doctors from Dalit, Adivasi, and OBC communities, a transformative infusion of talent poised to recalibrate not only the medical profession but the very social fabric of the state (*Hindu* 2025).[1]

Privatisation, however, imperils this prospect with insidious efficacy. Even if quotas were to remain nominally intact within a PPP framework—a generous assumption—their enforcement becomes fragmented and accountability diffuse. The inherent logic of profitability will inevitably take precedence over social justice. Soaring fees, opaque admission processes shrouded in "management quota" discretion, and the relentless pressure to monetise services conspire to render access a cruel illusion for first-generation aspirants. Thus, ladders of social mobility are reconfigured into gated enclaves, and education—a constitutional right—is debased into a transactional commodity.

Choosing the Compass of Governance

The struggle over these 17 colleges has transcended a mere dispute over fiscal models to become a battle for the soul of governance itself. This contest is not simply about institutional ownership, but about meaning and memory: will these colleges endure as instruments of egalitarian redistribution, or be refashioned into commercial ventures where social justice becomes an expendable footnote?

For the protesters, the answer is self-evident. These institutions are not inert infrastructure but monuments of collective sacrifice and ladders of social mobility, embodying the constitutional promise that education and healthcare are rights rather than commodities.[2] To surrender public institutions to private control is to hollow out this promise, stripping them of their spirit and breaking faith with decades of hard-won progress. While the government speaks the language of fiscal prudence, the protesters articulate a different moral logic, of justice, dignity, and belonging. Ultimately, the contest over these 17 medical colleges is a struggle over the social purpose of public institutions: whether they will remain mechanisms of redistribution, representation, and democratic inclusion, or be reconfigured around corporate priorities and revenue imperatives. Evidence from India and elsewhere shows that neo-liberal reforms and privatisation often deepen exclusion, weaken affirmative action frameworks, and convert public goods into stratified markets of access (Kumar 2021; Tilak 2014). The protests therefore assert that efficiency cannot be pursued at the cost of equity and that public institutions must remain anchored in constitutional commitments to social justice rather than market profitability.

NOTES

1 On this, see the interview with Vadde Sobhanaadreeswara Rao, a former member of Parliament (1991–96) and minister of agriculture in the 1999–2004 Naidu government (*Eha Rayalaseema* 2025).

2 Based on the author's interaction with the protesters opposing the privatisation of medical colleges in Macherla, Palnadu district, Andhra Pradesh, on 12 November 2025.

REFERENCES

Eha Rayalaseema (2025): "Vadde Sobhanadreeswara Rao Reaction on Chandrababu PPP Model," *YouTube*, 1 December, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z4YnKkTB6Js.

Hindu (2023): "Jagan to Inaugurate Five Medical Colleges in Andhra Pradesh on September 15", 15 September, https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/andhra-pradesh/jagan-to-inaugurate-five-medical-colleges-in-andhra-pradesh-on-september-15/article67307988.ece.

— (2025): "PDSU Protests against Privatization of Medical Colleges in Andhra," 20 November, https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/andhra-pradesh/pdsu-protests-against-privatisation-of-medical-colleges-in-andhra/article70303762.ece.

Janyala, Sreenivas (2025): "Political Storm over Building Medical Colleges under Public-Private Mode in Andhra, CM Naidu Says Govt Will Have Full Control," *Indian Express,* 16 September, https://indianexpress.com/article/india/medical-colleges-public-private-model-andhra-pradesh-chandrababu-naidu-10252907/.

Kumar, Bagesh (2021): "Discrimination in Indian Higher Education: Everyday Exclusion of the Dalit–Adivasi Student," *Contemporary Voice of Dalit,* Vol 15, No 1, pp 94–108.

New Indian Express (2025) "CM Naidu Pushes for PPP Model to Accelerate Development and Attract Investments", 25 April, https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/andhra-pradesh/2025/Apr/25/cm-naidu-pushes-for-ppp-model-to-accelerate-development-and-attract-investments.

Sakshi (2025): "Juttu Patti Eedchesi …Colour Patti Laagesi [Pulled by the Hair and Forcibly Grabbed by the Collar]," 19 September, https://www.sakshi.com/telugu-news/andhra-pradesh/protests-against-privatization-medical-colleges-2569668.

Tilak, Jandhyala B G (2014): "Private Higher Education in India," *Economic & Political Weekly,* Vol 49, No 4, pp 32–38.