

## Reorganisation of Indian states

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The rise of ethnic nationalism and subsequent ethnic political movements in many developing States can be accredited to the legacy of Western colonisation and de-colonisation. In countries sharing such a history, State-building has generally preceded nation-building, thus providing ethnic movements the right atmosphere in which to operate.

Colonisation periods had created multi-ethnic administrative entities. These were placed under sovereign States during the de-colonisation phase, thereby creating 'artificial' multi-ethnic States without first establishing any political desire of constituent ethnic groups. Attempts at State-building therefore occurred before the more difficult task of nation-building was carried out. This would in the long run alienate hundreds of ethnic nations within borders that had by then come to define the 'State'.

Ethnic plurality was by and large manageable before de-colonisation. This is because nationalist movements that existed had developed a common political agenda of achieving independence from colonial rule. This collective unity was possible due to colonial exploitation and dominance and not because of a concrete expression of common 'political will'. Consequently, different ethnic groups found little in common once the goal of independence had been achieved and the common enemy had departed.<sup>1</sup>

After 1945, the United Nations used the concept of national self-determination to bring about an end to colonies. This incorporated two essential elements: the right to secession and the right to independent Statehood. However, the UN preferred that people in the colonies "exercise this right once and for all and never again, without disrupting the territorial integrity of the colonial entity." The implication was that the political and territorial map of the world would be firmly established once the process of de-colonisation ended.<sup>2</sup> Hence, States in South Asia were born lacking internal cohesion and faced not just ethnic but also religious polarisation. As a result, one finds in countries like India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan a plethora of interrelated conflicts which do not just threaten societal peace, but also the fabric of the State.

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Since the Cold War ended, conflict resolution has required strong management of ethnic identities for domestic and international peace as well as for democratic development. Interdependence and globalization have strengthened the cause of ethnic and religious nationalists. Increasingly, demands for extensive autonomy or even separation from the mother country are becoming common. Containing such demands within national boundaries has become a matter of 'life and death' for many ethnically and religiously diverse States.<sup>3</sup>

Needless to say, such diversity can be problematic if it comes with economic and social imbalances. India is a country with over two thousand ethnic groups that speak more than sixteen hundred languages and dialects.<sup>4</sup> Shortly after independence, Mahatma Gandhi himself wrote that the government "should hurry up with the re-organisation of linguistic provinces."<sup>5</sup> The idea was to consolidate cultural concerns for active political participation in the national movement.

Jawaharlal Nehru, however, was not persuaded. In the aftermath of partition, Nehru felt that any further division of India could shake the country's stability. But, his stance could not prevent movements for linguistic autonomy from gaining momentum. Nehru, who had felt the ire of Telugu protesters during his 1952 election campaigns, told parliament on May 22: "Even though the formation of linguistic provinces may be desirable in some cases, this would obviously be the wrong time."<sup>6</sup>

It was in this backdrop that on October 19, 1952, Potti Sriramulu, a devout follower of Mahatma Gandhi, began a fast-unto-death in demanding that a separate state be carved out of the province of Madras for its Telugu-speaking population. After abstaining from food for fifty-six days, Sriramulu died and his dramatic sacrifice became instrumental in the linguistic re-organisation of Indian states.

In December 1952, Nehru was forced to concede to protesters' demands as he announced the formation of a separate Andhra state. This would lead to the formation of a States Reorganisation Commission (SRC) in 1953 which was charged with 'preservation....of unity and security of India'. In its subsequent work, the SRC rallied against 'excessive deference to narrow loyalties' and recommended a division of India based on dominance and geographical concentration of ethno-linguistic communities.<sup>7</sup>

### **First reorganisation of states**

Once the principle of states based on linguistic characteristics had been accepted, the first major reorganization of Indian states occurred in 1956. The state of Andhra Pradesh was formed by merging Andhra with part of Hyderabad. Bombay was formed by merging Kutch, the Saurashtra union and part of what had formerly been Bombay. Kerala was formed by merging most of the Travancore-Cochin union and part of Madras. Madhya Pradesh was formed by merging Bhopal and the Vindhya Pradesh union. The state of Mysore was formed by merging Coorg and Mysore as well as parts of the former states of Bombay, Hyderabad and Madras. Punjab was expanded by adding Patiala and the East Punjab states to its former territory.<sup>8</sup>

The States Reorganization Commission appointed by the Prime Minister in December 1953, while suggesting reorganization of states for the rest of India on the basis of linguistic homogeneity, discarded the demand for the formation of a separate Punjabi-speaking state. The Akali Dal representing the Sikhs of Punjab launched an agitation for reorganisation of the province on the basis of linguistic homogeneity into separate Punjabi- and Hindi-speaking Punjab and Haryana, respectively. Prime Minister Nehru took a tough line against the Sikh agitation for a Punjabi state and declared that he would not concede the demand even if, as a consequence, he had to face a civil war. The leaders of the agitation were imprisoned for long periods.<sup>9</sup>

When a war between India and Pakistan seemed imminent in 1965, Sant Fateh Singh, the President of the Akali Dal, refusing to suspend the agitation affirmed that “the country is dear but Punjabi Suba [state] is dearer.” The new prime minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri, came to an understanding with the Akali leaders that their demand would be approved if they let India first take care of the challenge from across the border. A new state of Punjab with an area of 50,255 sq. kilometres came into existence under the Punjab Reorganization Act No.31 of 1966 on September 18, 1966.<sup>10</sup>

## **Second reorganisation of states**

Within a decade of the first reorganisation it became clear that language alone was not a suitable criterion. The second reorganisation focused on the state of Assam in northeast India which posed a diverse set of issues for Indian leaders and had been left largely untouched by the SRC.<sup>11</sup> The Indian northeast is a patchwork of tribal and mixed linguistic communities. During the British Raj, neglect and seclusion had left the people of this region resentful and suspicious of all governments that had since sought to apply control from New Delhi.<sup>12</sup> The overlapping of the

Naga and Mizo tribes across India's borders with Burma and China exemplified the close link between issues of ethnic autonomy, national security and territorial control in this area.

The solution was found in the second reorganisation of Indian states in the 1970s when the northeast was split up and several new states were created following the establishment of Nagaland in 1963. Statehood was conferred upon Himachal Pradesh on January 25, 1971, and on Manipur, Meghalaya and Tripura on January 21, 1972. The Kingdom of Sikkim joined the Indian Union as a state on April 26, 1975. Over a decade later, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram became states on February 20, 1987. This was followed by Goa on May 30, 1987.<sup>13</sup>

The recent growth of India's economy coupled with its strong democracy since independence has increased the demand for regional and ethnic autonomy from certain segments of society. Demand for state division was initially motivated by the inequitable development in areas within states. Ethnic groups are most likely to begin a political movement "when they receive less than they feel they deserve."<sup>14</sup>

Relative deprivation may lead to ethnic political movements through four stages. First, ethnic groups have to be aware that deprivation in society subsists. Second, they have to be aware that their miserable conditions are not experienced by other groups who may in fact be benefiting at their expense. Third, ethnic groups have to be conscious of the injustice they face due to their deficiencies. And, finally, they must realize that political action could change the state of affairs in their favour. The stage is then set for mass political activity and revolt.<sup>15</sup>

### **Third reorganisation of Indian states**

Division due to unequal development opportunities within large states was relevant particularly to those formed by the BJP-led national government. In the year 2000, three new states were created; Chhattisgarh (November 1) was created out of eastern Madhya Pradesh; Uttaranchal (November 9) which has since been renamed Uttarakhand, was created out of the hilly regions of northwest Uttar Pradesh; and Jharkhand (November 15) was created out of the southern districts of Bihar.<sup>16</sup> Uttarakhand, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh are culturally distinct and had undergone less development compared to other parts of the larger states they belonged to. Caste and tribal elements that are generally regarded to be signs of backwardness, were significant in the politics that shaped the separate states of Jharkhand and Chattisgarh, while the electorate for Uttaranchal was primarily upper caste.

Even with prevalent corruption, the former two with their tribal and mineral-rich regions have done much better since breaking away from Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, respectively. Uttarakhand, the hill state which broke away from the gigantic Uttar Pradesh, is also being rapidly industrialised and growing at a compounded 9.3% rate over the past five years compared to 6.3% for UP. The separation and subsequent growth in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Uttarakhand has justified claims that they were neglected when they had been parts of large states. Needless to say, their experience may well lead to similar demands from other areas.

### **The Case of Telangana**

Most recent demands for state reorganisation have come from the people of Telangana. In a replay of history, K Chandrasekhara Rao, a leader of the Telangana Rashtra Samiti (TRS), used his 11-day fast to force New Delhi into announcing a separate Telangana state consisting mainly of what was earlier the state of Hyderabad.<sup>17</sup> In Telangana, where socioeconomic deprivation and political exclusion were causing much frustration, this demand for a separate state had been persistently expressed for over fifty years. Language and culture are no more a crucial point of identity; it is economics which now determines the dynamics of Indian federalism.

Telangana and Andhra speak the same language but have contrasting economic interests. In fact, the latter is accused of exploiting the former's resources.<sup>18</sup> There are ten districts in Telangana, nine in Andhra and four in Rayalaseema. Out of these, seven districts in Telangana, three in Andhra and one in Rayalaseema are severely backward. Telangana provides 45 per cent of the income but consumes just 28 per cent of state funds as its share. Moreover, its cause for concern was strengthened when it did not see a single completed development project in the previous five years when several projects were completed in Andhra and Rayalaseema.<sup>19</sup>

India's Union Minister of Home Affairs Mr. P. Chidambaram announced on December 9, 2009, that the government intended to start the process of forming a separate Telangana state. K Chandrasekhara Rao thus ended his 11-day fast on the hospital bed, expressing his delight that it was a "true victory of the people of Telangana".<sup>20</sup> As supporters of separation celebrated the central government's decision, those from the coastal regions of Andhra and Rayalaseema regions protested. On February 3, 2010, the government announced the formation of a five-member committee which would look into the issue of bifurcation of the state.<sup>21</sup>

New Delhi has decided to consult all political parties before making a decision for the division of Andhra Pradesh. The pressing reason for this delay is the concurrent opening of the proverbial Pandora's Box with the government's initial announcement that has mobilized more groups and led to multiple dissenting voices. Calls for Gorkhaland to be carved out of West Bengal, Maru Pradesh from Rajasthan, Vidarbha from Maharashtra and Harit Pradesh, Purvanchal and Bundelkhand from Uttar Pradesh are all being made as separation from the state enters into a new, more dramatic phase.<sup>22</sup> It remains to be seen how the situation pans out, but suffice it to say that current demands for reorganization of Indian states comes from a complex picture involving religion, language, ethnicity and economics.

## Notes & References

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- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*
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