

Does India need smaller states?

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The Indian 'model' of federalism has several marked differences from the classical federal models one finds in countries like the United States, Canada, and Australia. One notable difference has been the unilateral power of the union parliament to reorganize the political structure of the country by forming new states and to alter the areas, boundaries or names of existing states. Despite having the constitutional power, overwhelming concern for nation-building and economic reconstruction based on the development planning model, initially dissuaded the national leadership from conceding to demands for the creation of smaller regional states. Even states formed based on language, an accepted basis of the formation of independent nation-states in 19th century Europe. Only after India witnessed popular unrest, were linguistic states created in the late fifties and sixties, and this process remained incomplete. During the next three decades, only some of the centrally administered Union Territories were upgraded to full-fledged states while longstanding demands for the smaller states like Vidarbha, Saurashtra, Telangana, and Jharkhand remained in limbo.

DEMANDS FOR SMALLER STATES

The advent of new millennium saw the creation of three new states -- Chhattisgarh, Uttarakhand (originally named Uttarakhnad) and Jharkhand, carved out from the parent states of Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. More recently, India has witnessed a renewed assertion from

historically constituted regions for the creation of smaller states. A discernable shift in terms of federal thinking has accompanied this

Significantly, some of these regions have enormous populations comparable to countries of the global north in terms of territory and population. The regions include Telangana in Andhra Pradesh; Gorkhaland and Kamtapur in West Bengal; Coorg in Karnataka; Mithilanchal in Bihar; Saurashtra in Gujarat; Vidarbha in Maharashtra; Harit Pradesh, Purvanchal, Braj Pradesh and Awadh Pradesh in Uttar Pradesh; Maru Pradesh in Rajasthan; Bhojpur comprising areas of eastern Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Chhattisgarh; Bundelkhand comprising areas of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, a greater Cooch Behar state out of the parts of Assam and West Bengal.

MAKING SENSE OF THE ASSERTION OF REGIONS

This renewed demand for smaller states can be attribute to three factors. First, electoral politics in the 'post-Congress polity' has been marked by the politicization and mobilization of social cleavages along territorially confined lines of caste, religion and region by state-level 'ethnic' parties. Symptomatic of the federalization of the party system, even the 'national' parties with distinct regional characters increasingly adhere to region specific electoral campaigns and policies.

Second, centralized federalism under the shadow of the development-planning model failed to achieve its avowed aim of bringing about equitable development across and within the regional states. The subsequent transition to a neo-liberal market economy model based on competitive federalism (replacing cooperative federalism) has further accentuated regional inequalities in

terms of income and consumption begetting the perception of neglect and discrimination in the peripheral regions. Relatively developed regions within the larger states have invariably benefited more from the flow of private investment as compared to the regions on the periphery with disturbed law and order situations and poor economic and social infrastructure (Telangana in Andhra Pradesh or Vidarbha and Marathwada in Maharashtra).

Third, India has also been witness to what may be called the 'secession of the rich' as regions attracting huge private investments and registering impressive growth, have started resenting the dependence of relatively underdeveloped regions on the revenues transferred to them (for example, Harit Pradesh in Uttar Pradesh). Local elites complain of 'reverse' discrimination as other politically dominant regions manage to corner financial deals/grants/lucrative portfolios. In response, they want statehood with the full powers that entails

SHIFT IN INDIA'S FEDERAL IDEOLOGY

Three developments mark the shift in India's federal ideology. First, regional identity, culture, and geographical differences now appear to be better recognized as valid bases for administrative division and political representation as democracy deepens and widens.

Second, smaller states are being proposed on the grounds of good governance and development rather than merely on the linguistic or cultural principle was the case of the first two phases of reorganization.

Third, recently even dialect communities have been asking for their own 'territorial homeland' while underlining the cultural and literary distinctiveness and richness of the dialect (Bundelkhand).

ARGUMENTS IN FAVOUR OF SMALLER STATES

Does India need smaller states? Let us consider the following three arguments in favour. First, the argument that 'small is beautiful' does find resonance in the developmental experiences of the newly created smaller states. Factual analysis shows the development and efficiency argument does work in favour of the new states when compared with the parent states. During the tenth five-year plan period, Chhattisgarh averaged 9.2 percent growth annually compared with 4.3 percent by Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand averaged 11.1 per cent annually compared with 4.7 percent by Bihar, and Uttarakhand achieved 8.8 per cent growth annually compared with 4.6 percent by Uttar Pradesh. Arguably, getting 'a territory of their own' unleashes the untapped/suppressed growth potentials of the hitherto peripheral regions.

Second, comparatively smaller but compact geographical entities tend to ensure that there is better democratic governance, as there is greater awareness among the policy makers about the local needs. Smaller spatial units having linguistic compatibility and cultural homogeneity also allow for better management, implementation and allocation of public resources in provisioning basic social and economic infrastructure services. A relatively homogeneous smaller state allows for easy communicability, enabling marginal social groups to articulate and raise their voices.

Third, smaller states provide gains for the electorates in terms of better representation of their preferences in the composition of the government. In a patronage-based democracy like in India, the amount of the transfer of state resources/largesse a constituency/region gets depends crucially on whether the local representative belongs to the ruling party. Understanding this electoral logic of patronage distribution, the electorates of a smaller region have a propensity to elect representatives with preferences more closely aligned to those of the bigger region within the state. Such a motive, however, would no longer operate once the region constitutes a separate state.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST SMALLER STATES

One also needs to address and negate some of the oft-repeated apprehensions raised against creating smaller states.

First, reminiscent of 'partition anxiety', many fear the rise of regional and linguistic fanaticism as threats to national unity and integrity. A global surge in ethno-nationalist conflicts serves to rekindle these fears. No region has ever experienced secessionist movement after being reorganised as a separate state except for a brief time in Punjab.

Second, many believe that bigger states ensure cohesion and stability; however, there are myriad forms of political violence going on unabated in the big states (eg. Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal). In these cases, violent movements are expressions of a demand for recognition, justice and autonomy; relatively homogeneous smaller states would always be better poised to provide a wider range of policies in response to local conditions.

Third, smaller states (like mineral rich Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand) are often viewed as being much more vulnerable to the pressures of the corporations and multi-nationals due to their small-scale economies and the greed of the newly emergent regional elite. Now, if this is so then what explains the presence of coal mafias and land sharks in the bigger states like Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka? Corruption or political wheeling-dealing in high places is not confined to the smaller states as any discernable observer of Indian states would be able to tell.

Fourth, political expediency and opportunism rather than the objective evaluation of democratic and developmental potential are said to be involved in the making of new states. Even if this was present in some instances, it is not the norm. Certain principles have always been adhered to without exception with the establishment of states in the past. The demand for a new state: a) is not to be communal or secessionist in nature; b) should have popular support and enjoy a broad consensus; c) should be agreed upon by the parent state, d) aims at the creation of socially and economically viable state.

THE WAY OUT

The federal polity of India does need to accommodate the ongoing demands for smaller states. In most regions, even if the local, urban entrepreneurial/middle classes (with a hidden class agenda in some cases) lead the demands, these demands represent the democratic aspirations of the hitherto politically dormant, neglected and discriminated masses from the peripheral regions.

For democratically negotiating such demands, a second state reorganization commission must be constituted by the centre. The commission must have the quasi-judicial power to ascertain a set of objective and coherent criteria (not lopsided political considerations) that can be uniformly applied, like in the case of the state reorganisation commission set up in 1953. It could be a constitutional body to oversee transparency of the consultation process.

SUMMING UP

Federalism as an idea and a process enriches democracy in a multi-national/cultural country like India, as it tends to promote democratic values and temperament by recognizing, accommodating and protecting diverse regional identities and rights. The creation of smaller states would contribute to the federal agenda of enhancing democratic development based on decentralized governance and greater autonomy for units.