

Exploring the Demand for New States

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The increasing demand for new states raises a number of questions with regard to the well-being of India's federal democratic polity. There are four measures that must be considered while devising any framework to address the issue of federal reorganisation. These are: the constitution of a permanent State Reorganisation Commission, amendment of the Constitution to ensure that the demand for a new state emanates from the state legislature and not at the centre, examination of economic and social viability rather than political considerations and clear-cut safeguards to encourage democratic concerns like development and governance rather than religion, caste and language as valid grounds for a new state.

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Of late India has been witnessing struggles around the assertiveness and conflicting claims of identity groups, and of struggles amongst them. These struggles are often along regional lines primarily due to uneven development and unequal access to political power.

Regionalisation of Polity

Let us refer to three factors responsible for bringing local/regional demands into sharp focus.

First, the changed mode of electoral representation has led to assertiveness of the hitherto politically dormant regions. The political articulation and mobilisation along caste/ethnic/language-based social cleavages undertaken by these newly emergent state/region level parties remain territorially contained and rarely cross the regional lines.¹ Also, the national parties with distinct regional characters increasingly adhere to region-specific electoral campaigns and policies.

Second, growing regional inequalities in terms of income and consumption in the post-reforms period have accentuated the perception of neglect and discrimination. Coastal regions/developed regions have invariably benefited more from the flow of private investment as compared to the regions at peripheral locations, those with disturbed law and order situations, and those with poor economic and social infrastructure.

Third, we have what may be called ironically the "secession of the rich", even the rich regions within constituent states, attracting huge private investments and registering impressive growth, have started resenting the continued dependence of relatively underdeveloped regions on the revenues transferred to them (i.e., Harit Pradesh). The local elites complain of "reverse" discrimination as often the elites from the other politically dominant regions manage to corner financial grants/deals/lucrative portfolios.

As a consequence of the above processes, India's federal ideology has registered a marked shift reflected in the following three developments.

First, regional identity, culture, and geographical differences now appear to be better recognised as a valid basis for administrative division and political representation.² Separate statehood movements are no longer being stigmatised as parochial, chauvinist and even anti-national as was done in the past.³

Second, the shift is visible in the way the new states are now being proposed on the grounds of good governance and development rather than on the language principle that had, ostensibly, guided state formation during the first phase of the reorganisation of states.⁴

Third, the dialect communities of late have been asking for their own "territorial homeland" while underlining the cultural and literary distinctiveness and richness of the dialect, i.e., Bundelkhand, Ruhelkhand, and Mithilanchal.

Creation of New States

The newly-found assertion of the regions and consequent shift in terms of federal thinking led to the creation of the three new states of Chhattisgarh, Uttaranchal and Jharkhand carved out from the parent states of Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar respectively in November 2000. Significantly, this new wave of reorganisation was supported by all parties; in particular by the two polity wide parties. The latter's support could be attributed to the emergent highly competitive political environment, marked by the declining ability of any one party to win power at the centre on its own and also the concomitant rise of regional/state level parties reflecting the regional concerns.

Emergence of New Demands

With the centre agreeing in principle to consider the demand for the creation of a separate Telangana state in December 2009, old and new demands for redrawing the boundaries of the states have been coming up thick and fast with increased intensity including those of Coorg in Karnataka, Mithilanchal in Bihar, Saurashtra in Gujarat, Gorkhaland and Kamtapur in West Bengal, Vidarbha in Maharashtra, and also 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 UP and MP, a Greater Cooch Behar state out of the parts of Assam and West Bengal.

All Those in Favour

Let us consider the following four arguments in favour of new smaller states.

First, Partition anxiety in the form of the threat of Balkanisation that hounded the leadership at the time of decolonisation no longer exists. Except Punjab, no region has experienced secessionist movements after getting reorganised as a constituent state. None of the regional movements in recent India including Uttaranchal, Jharkhand or Chhattisgarh displayed any serious separatist intent, and with the exception of certain struggles in the north-east (such as Bodoland, which has a moderate group seeking statehood and a more extreme group demanding secession), neither do most of the other contemporary regional movements in India demanding separate statehood.

Second, the argument that “small is beautiful” finds resonance in the developmental experiences of the newly created states. The development and efficiency argument works in favour of the smaller states. Economic integration sought under a centralised development planning model on the failed promise of bringing about equitable development across the regions has acted as an incentive for political separation. Political conflicts like those in Telangana or Gorkhland have been breaking out over failed redistribution policies as the difference in terms of income distributions within regions keep increasing, and the gains from agreeing to remain part of the parent state seem small for the marginal regions. In the case of the three new states mentioned above culture or ethnic factors were added as instrumental factors for mobilisation but arguably, decades of underdevelopment was the driving force behind the movement. One can argue the same for the ongoing movement in Telangana, Vidarbha, Gorkhland and Bundelkhand, among others. The growth record of the recently created states has been highly

encouraging in this context. Every newly created state has recorded more than double the growth rate of the parent state during the Tenth Five-Year Plan period. For instance, Chhattisgarh averaged 9.2% growth annually compared with 4.3% by Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand averaged 11.1% annually compared with 4.7% by Bihar, and Uttarakhand achieved 8.8% growth annually compared with 4.6% by Uttar Pradesh.⁵ Similarly, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand are seen as emerging industrial hubs in the country. The

evidence seems to lend credence to the proposition that their separation unleashed the suppressed growth potentials of these backward regions and the creative energy of the people.

Third, the better democratic governance argument is based on the assumption that comparatively smaller geographical entities ensure greater participation of all the stakeholders which eventually deliver prompt, flexible, effective and efficient actions under greater accountability and awareness about the local needs (*Sarkar*

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Apke Dware). The presence of linguistic compatibility, and cultural homogeneity goes a long way in solving specific problems of regional discrimination and unequal access to state power. Moreover, overall management, implementation and allocation of public resources in provisioning of basic social and economic infrastructure services in geographically smaller spatial units are more evenly and equitably distributed. Furthermore, the smaller states enjoy a comparative advantage of better public-private partnership in mobilisation of local skills, development of local transport, health, and energy, which are of crucial importance for overall development and growth of various regions in a state. The much celebrated “Kerala model” of socio-economic development provides the necessary momentum to the sentiment for smaller states.

Fourth, redrawing political boundaries brings forth gains for the electorates in terms of better representation of their preferences in the composition of the government. In democracies like ours, the amount of transfers that a constituency gets depends crucially on whether the local representative belongs to the ruling party. It explains as to why when they are part of the same state, the smaller region would vote strategically to elect representatives with preferences more closely aligned to those of the bigger region. Once they constitute a separate state, however, this motive would no longer operate as the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies-National Election Studies detailed data relating to socio-economic composition and traditional voting patterns in assembly elections in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh in 1993, 1998 and 2003 clearly show.

The Naysayers

Now let us consider the following set of arguments against the demand for new smaller states.

First, giving in to the demand for new states can have threatening implications for federal democracy as it may lead to regional and linguistic fanaticism. In a diverse country like India, national integration becomes difficult when each different cultural, social and lingual group asks to live as a “compact group in a separate

region”. The global surge of ethno-nationalist conflict has served to rekindle these fears.

Second, an uncritical acceptance of the unending demands for new states would recreate a situation like that of more than 560 princely states at the time of independence. It is with great difficulty that the states like Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh comprising of princely states have become political communities having a territorial identity (notwithstanding the presence of the regions).

Third, political opportunism has been involved in the creation of the states. The major political parties act primarily by expediency and opportunism rather than, as is claimed, by an evaluation of the democratic and developmental potential of the smaller states. As discussed above in the context of the three newly created states, the two polity wide parties, namely, the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have in the past resorted to the redrawing of the map for political gains at the cost of the parties with regional base.

Fourth, the newly created smaller states like Jharkhand with a smaller number of legislators have often faced Goa-like situations with political instability giving birth to political corruption.

Fifth, at a time when the involvement of state level political parties and leaders with the interests of national and international corporate capital has increased in an unprecedented way, global capital prefers smaller mineral-rich states like Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand for investment. Not only do the small-scale economies of the states diminish their bargaining capacity but the greed of the newly emergent regional elites makes them more vulnerable.

Sixth, raising demands for a new state like in the Hyderabad centric Telangana region may actually mask partial and elite interests and manipulation as the entrepreneurial elites and the middle classes look for greener pastures, i e, contracts, real estates, job opportunities and career advancement, etc, which might not be clear at the moment.

Seventh, economic viability is an issue which has never been a consideration in demarcating the states in India. The eight

states of the north-east are dependent upon the centre for meeting 80% of their annual budget expenditure and are accorded the status of special category states. The mechanism of financial transfers from the centre accentuates feelings of dependence among the beneficiary states besides creating resentment among the larger but low-income states like Bihar who have also been asking for the same preferential treatment. In fiscal terms, duplication and multiplication of institutions – capitals, assemblies, ministries, courts, and administration – adds to the long-term cost factor.

Eighth, even in political terms, in a conflict situation like in the case of the ongoing Naxal violence in five states, it is a small state like Chhattisgarh that becomes critically much more dependent on the centre to meet the armed challenge than say a bigger state like West Bengal or Andhra Pradesh.

Finally, there is the constitutional question as the parent states have absolutely no say in the matter. Constitutional provisions (Articles 3 and 4) can be easily used to redraw the political map of the country by the ruling party at the centre because of its majority in the Parliament. The say of the states is merely confined to the reference of the matter by the president to the “would be affected states” merely for the sake of eliciting its opinion before making a recommendation, which is not even binding. There is no proposal for referring the matter for the second time to the affected state(s) even if substantial changes have been made by the centre in the legislative bill at the time of its introduction or during the course of debate. Under Article 4 the resultant amendment would require a simple majority. Under Article 225 such legislation cannot be invalidated by a court of law on the grounds that the recommendation of the

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president was not taken before introducing the bill in the Parliament.

Critical Questions

A few pertinent questions that confront us all and are concerned with the well-being of the federal democratic polity of India are: does another wave of reorganisation provide a road map to quicker growth and development in a “transforming” India? How long can the political class afford to ignore the aspirations of the masses in the marginal regions as the voices get louder? Does their salvation lie only in the division of the states or can there be better alternatives? In case division is the only option, what should be the minimum viable economic size of a state? To what extent should political consideration be allowed to outweigh economic consideration? Any break-up is always emotionally and politically wrenching for the people involved. What may be the remedial measures? Finally, will the creation of more states strengthen our federal polity or will it lead to further interstate conflict as has happened in the context of the creation of Punjab and Haryana. Disputes concerning river water sharing, capital (Chandigarh) division and border demarcation have lingered on for more than four decades without any solution in sight. And it is not an isolated case.

Towards a Policy Framework

The following four measures may be considered while looking at an appropriate policy framework to address the present impasse.

First, a permanent entity called the Second State Reorganisation Commission may be constituted as a constitutional body with quasi-judicial power. The commission may be asked to ascertain a set of objective and coherent criteria to consider the demand for a new state. The Second Centre-State Relations Commission or Inter-State Council may also be involved.

Second, popular support can be ascertained by amending the Constitution so that any legislative measure to alter/diminish/increase the territory or creation of a new state should emanate from the state legislature and not at the centre. The minimum would be that the view of the parent state legislature be *necessarily* ascertained

before the president recommends the bill even if the view is not binding.

Third, economic and social viability rather than political considerations must be given primacy. Parent states that lose out in terms of physical and human capital may be adequately compensated.

Fourth, there should be certain clear-cut parameters and safeguards to check the unfettered demands that are now cropping up in the wake of the Telangana episode (why Jharkhand and not Telangana?). It is better to allow democratic concerns like development, decentralisation and governance rather than religion, caste, language or dialect to be the valid bases for conceding the demands for a new state.

NOTES

- 1 While asked to prioritise their loyalty in the National Election Studies conducted by CSDS-Lokniti, Delhi in 1996 and 1999, 53.4% and 50.7% of the respondents/voters respectively expressed their first loyalty to region rather than to India whereas only 21% and 21.4%, respectively put their loyalty first to India than to region they belonged to.
- 2 Despite earlier agreeing to the linguistic formula for the formation of provincial Congress committees based on linguistic regions as early as in the 1920 Nagpur session and reiterating it in the Nehru Report (1928), there was initial hesitation on the part of the Congress leadership about the demand, which was reflected in the Dhar Commission (1948) and the JVP Committee reports both rejecting such demands on linguistic basis. Linguistic regionalism was feared to give birth to divisive/secessionist tendencies inimical to the nation-building agenda. Congress defence against agreeing to the reorganisation was also that the

development planners acting with political rationality and neutrality would be able to take the geographical, cultural and remaining linguistic diversity of the large states into consideration and deal with it.

- 3 Arguably such apprehension is not evident in the Constitution which provides for a great degree of flexibility given to the Parliament under Article 3 to decide the bases on which new states are to be created, i.e. geography, demography, administrative convenience, language, ethnicity (read tribalism) or culture.
- 4 Subsequent to the agitation in erstwhile state of Madras which led to the creation of Andhra in 1953, Justice Faizal Ali headed the First State Reorganisation Commission (SRC) was constituted. SRC followed four principals while considering the demands: (a) the preservation and strengthening of the unity and security of India, (b) linguistic and cultural homogeneity, (c) financial, economic and administrative considerations, and (d) the successful working of the five-year plans. Based on its recommendation, the Parliament passed the States Reorganisation Act (November 1956) redrawing the boundaries of states on a linguistic basis vide Article 3 of the Constitution of India. This was followed by other reorganisation exercises undertaken in the 1960s, most importantly, the break-up of Punjab into separate states of Punjab and Haryana in 1966. In this first wave of reorganisation of states, it was the linguistic principle that was applied. In the case of undivided Assam, however, the smaller states were created due to the fear of the imposition of Assamese as an official language that triggered the demand for smaller states like Nagaland or union territory like Mizoram. Subsequently in the 1970s even ethnicity was considered as the basis for the territorial reorganisation involving the north-eastern states. States created afterwards in the 1970s and 1980s were either created on ethnic basis (like Meghalaya, Manipur and Tripura) or were simply raised from centrally administered units to statehood (Goa, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh).
- 5 Same holds true about the track record of Punjab and Haryana. Haryana, which was much behind Punjab at the time of its separation in 1966, today is ahead of Punjab in per capita income and economic growth.

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