

Questioning Linguistic States

A half century after the reorganisation of India on linguistic lines, the older is being questioned.

The United Progressive Alliance government's in-principle nod on 9 December for the formation of the new state of Telangana which will be carved out of Andhra Pradesh was not unexpected even if the timing caught most political players off guard. At the time of writing though the centre has been compelled to put the issue once more on the back-burner.

The States Reorganisation Commission (SRC) of 1955 had misgivings about the integration of Telangana into "Vishalandhra" on grounds that for subsequent decades continued to agitate the residents of the Telangana region and fuelled demands for a separate state. Grievances have persisted over lopsided development in Andhra Pradesh where the Telangana region suffers from higher rates of poverty and unemployment, insufficient health facilities, inadequate irrigation and a perceived expression of cultural superiority on the part of the coastal Andhra and Rayalaseema regions of the state. Most of the political parties in the state barring the Communist Party of India (Marxist) had at some point of time agreed to or demanded the creation of a separate state, arguing that this was the only recourse left to address the grievances of the people of Telangana.

The SRC recommendations set the stage for a linguistic organisation of the provinces/states in the country, though the commission did also take into account politico-geographic, cultural and administrative factors in making its recommendations. Linguistic organisation was at the time a leap in the dark; a government fearful of fragmentation and separatism soon after Independence therefore moved with some caution. However, these fears were belied as Indian federalism was not weakened by the new administrative make-up of the country. That was because despite a strong centre appropriating financial and administrative powers, linguistic organisation of the states bestowed a certain degree of cultural autonomy on the constituent units creating what some political scientists called a consociational democracy.

The objective of states reorganisation was to create a federated structure that had an overall developmental and politico-economic logic driven from the centre, but which balanced the priorities of development with the need for cultural, regional and linguistic autonomy that was guaranteed by the division into linguistic states. Not that this division was smooth – there existed linguistic minorities within states which have experienced misgivings due to local chauvinism or neglect of their language. In some cases, new states were later formed based on these grievances.

But in recent years the demands for and agreement on formation of new states has been based on different criteria. This was evident in the creation of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Uttarakhand in the earlier part of this decade and in the demand for Gorkhland from West Bengal, all of which have deviated from the linguistic rationale routine. New demands – such as the call for trifurcation of Uttar Pradesh as proposed by state chief minister Mayawati – have centred on "administrative" concerns.

It should be possible to address grievances arising from administrative lapses and socio-economic neglect by the establishment of dedicated regional administrative bodies, or, if necessary, by autonomous councils, as mandated through the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, that are already in place in some parts of the country. But the logic and result of private capital-led development – with unevenness and inequality built into it – which has been followed by all states has only stoked the claims for statehood in regions such as Telangana.

The formation of new states such as Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Uttarakhand has not necessarily resulted in the grievances that led to their birth being addressed. Promises of dedicated socio-economic development have more often than not been belied by the lack of steady governance and decent administration – as in Jharkhand. The governments have also been unable to deal with basic issues in a sensitive manner – as in Chhattisgarh where the state administration has been singularly inept in responding to the decades-old adivasi resentment and has instead chosen, with the centre's support, a violent law and order approach. However, the failure of the government of the new states does not, of course, mean that continuation of the undivided set-up would have made any difference to the welfare of the residents of the individual regions – the previous administrative order did not deliver, which was why the new states were formed.

The relative failure of the new administrative units to address regional grievances has not deterred more demands for statehood, which when they gain political legs are difficult to resist, as the UPA government has realised vis-a-vis Telangana. A second SRC is being proposed by some political parties to address the many claims to statehood. The Congress Party is among those which have asked the government to set up such a body. If at all the UPA government does constitute another SRC, it would have to study the need for reorganisation by looking at all aspects of development, stability, and the political viability of new administrative units.