

SEPARATION IS NO SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM OF REGIONAL IMBALANCE IN DEVELOPMENT

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The States Reorganisation Commission completed the task of reorganisation of the states in India on the basis of language. But, two other tasks remained: the problem of very large states, and the related problem of "one language, one state", instead of "one state, one language", which was what that Commission had created. Over time, discontent developed in many states about unequal regional development. The Fact Finding Committee on Regional Imbalance in Maharashtra identified imbalance on individual aspects of development, mainly with the district as a unit, and formulated a step-by-step approach to its eradication by identifying the physical quantum of imbalance and successively bringing the lagging districts to the state average level. Unfortunately, this approach does not appear to have been properly followed in the last two and half decades. The lack of development of inter-regional social empathy, as reflected in the attitudes and concerns of the political entities, appears to have led to the persistence of the feeling of neglect. That can be a basis of separation. But, creation of one or two separate states by itself can not solve the problem of regional imbalance and neglect, unless persistent effort is made in that direction. Proper decentralisation of power and resources to the Zilla Parishads and lower levels alone can atone for this.

Two decades after the movement for the bringing together of all adjacent areas where the bulk of the population were speaker of a particular language started in Orissa towards the end of the nineteenth century, the Indian National Congress, in its Nagpur session in 1920, passed a resolution constituting its provinces for its provincial committees on linguistic basis. The British government followed this up in 1936 by constituting three separate provinces, Orissa, Bihar and Sindh, on the basis of the languages spoken, namely, Odia, Hindi and Sindhi, respectively. In independent India, Andhra and Madras (Tamilnadu) were formed as two separate linguistic states in 1952. The acceptance of the States Reorganisation Commission's report by the Government of India in 1956 led to the formation of a number of separate states, most on the basis of language. The basic approach appeared to be: 'one language, one state', except for Hindi that had multiple states. There was another exception: the bilingual Bombay state. This was undone in 1960, when two separate unilingual states of Maharashtra and Gujarat were constituted. But for irritants of pockets of areas inhabited by people speaking one

language being left in some other adjoining state, the reorganisation of Indian states on linguistic lines appeared almost completed.

But, two other problems appeared to remain: the problem of very large states and the necessity of 'one state, one language' instead of 'one language, one state', the two being essentially related. Professor K.M. Panikkar, a member of the States Reorganisation Commission (SRC), had, in a minute of dissent [Government of India, 1955], strongly pleaded for the breaking up of the state of Uttar Pradesh into at least two states, on the ground that such a large state, in terms of population, with very heavy representation in the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha, would be counter to the health of the democratic federation of India. The matter was taken up by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (who, due to ill health, had not been able to make his presentation before the Commission or publicly at that time) in a book-let written in December 1955. While supporting Prof. Panikkar's proposition, Dr. Ambedkar went forward and advocated the splitting up of large states like Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Maharashtra into smaller and more manageable

homogenous unilingual states. He proposed three separate states of western, central and eastern Uttar Pradesh, two separate states of north and south Bihar, two separate states of northern and southern Madhya Pradesh and three separate states of western, central and eastern Maharashtra, besides a city state of Bombay. Ambedkar argued that while 'one state, one language' was a proper approach, there is no justification in insisting on 'one language, one state', as the SRC appeared to have done. Besides avoiding the very great weight of a single very large state in the central Parliament, a point forcefully made by Prof Panikkar, such small states will lead to better organisation of administration and provide better training ground for politicians in the government and legislature. Regional differences, often of differing historical origins, often tend to be overlooked in a unified large single state.

Like always in such matters in our country, these suggestions were then ignored, but taken up later, piece meal, at long intervals. Thus, Punjab was split into three smaller states in 1980 and Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh were divided into two separate states each, at the turn into the present century: Chhattisgarh was separated from Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand was separated from Bihar and Uttarakhand, a small part of Uttar Pradesh, from that state (remember Ambedkar). Now, there is a renewed demand for Telangana in Andhra Pradesh, for Vidarbha in Maharashtra and one or two others in other regions. The present Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh has advocated splitting the present state of Uttar Pradesh in to five separate states. There are strong advocacies for the constitution of a separate state of Bundelkhand, consisting of parts of Uttar Pradesh and adjoining Madhya Pradesh.

The reason for such renewed demand for separation of part of a single unilingual state and of a very large state is that there is a strong feeling in the region demanding separation that it has been neglected by the state government in matters

of socio-economic development which even today is the primary responsibility of the state government. The contents of this socio-economic development are not always clearly specified and often they appear to differ, depending on the groups of the discontented that advocate separation.

A little over two and half decades after the formation of a separate state of Maharashtra, such discontent in large parts of the state led to the strong advocacy for the setting up of regional development boards, which had been written into the Constitution, to advise the governor of the state who will make allocation of resources for remedying the imbalances. As a result, the state government constituted a fact-finding Committee on Regional Imbalances in Development in the State, under the chairmanship of Prof. V.M. Dandekar and consisting of a number of independent academics and some senior officers of the state government. I was one of the members.

The first two tasks before the Committee were to define development and to identify regions. After considerable discussion, the Committee came to the conclusion that only such socio-economic provisions which were the responsibility of the state will have to be examined for the purpose. In matters that were dependent on private investment and enterprise, the role of the state is largely negative - to suggest what shall not be permitted where. As for regions, the Committee realised that in the matter of provision of every socio-economic facility by the state in all habitations, rural and urban, looking at the aggregative two or three or four regions will not be helpful for the state to address itself in regard to resource allocation for its provision. The question will remain: how are the resources to be allocated to the individual habitations that lack such provisions. Therefore, it was decided that, by and large, the district shall be the unit for identification of deficit in each provision. In matters where the provision at the state level was

very poor, it would be more appropriate to take the taluka or the block as the unit for identification. From such district level data, aggregation for broad regions can be presented; but the unit of identification and action has to be the district.

The next question tackled was one of measurement of imbalance in matters of development of the districts. Since there was a large number of matters of development action by the state, beginning with provision of all-weather roads to villages and towns, of primary and secondary schools, of primary and district health centres to provision of flow irrigation and agricultural development programmes, it became clear that imbalance in regional development has to be measured separately for each such provision and remedial action provided for each separately. Aggregating all these into a single measure of imbalance of development of the district would be a meaningless exercise from the point of view of the state's action in remedying the imbalance.

The basic provisions had to be provided in every village. Flow irrigation had to be provided to all the land in the district that could be potentially irrigated by such projects. The data collected by the Committee showed how many villages/towns had the facility in complete measure and the extent of shortfall. One approach to remedying the shortfall would have been to start with the district with the largest percentage of villages without the facility in the state, and suggest that the district be brought to the next lowest level first. The same approach could then be followed for the next round. But it was realised that this ran the risk of most districts with no financial provision for the facility until the lowest district had come up to the next lowest level. This would be politically and socially untenable. So it was decided that the districts that were below the state average for the particular facility in the villages should first be identified and then the extent of shortfall in each such district be calculated. The state should provide resources to bring

the villages in each such district to the level of the state average. Each such district would receive funds in proportion to its shortfall from the state average. The years taken to bring the districts to the level of the state average would depend on the budgetary provision made by the state legislature for the purpose every year. Once the necessary number of villages without the facility are provided with it to bring the district position to the level of the state average, the state average should be calculated again. This will naturally be higher. And the same approach to allocation of resources for the purpose to bring the districts below the new state average will naturally cover a larger number of districts than earlier. In this manner the successive state averages would increase, until all districts are covered fully by the facility.

This manner of calculating shortfalls from the state average successively, for each item of socio-economic facility, has the advantage that no district will be without some financial provision for some or other facility in any year. For, it was most unlikely that the same set of districts were below the state average in regard to all facilities. The chances of unhappiness at the district level with such approach would therefore be eliminated.

The Committee's report showed the physical shortfall for the first round in case of every facility. The Committee also made a calculation of the cost of the first round of action for every facility, on the basis of the average cost for creation of such facility estimated by the concerned state department, on the basis of prices prevalent in 1983. These could be aggregated to show the amount of expenditure in the first round that would be involved, for the state government and the legislature to judge and make provision for. It is obvious that the proper shortfall was physical; the monetary expenditure will change from year to year due to changing prices. The real shortfall, in physical terms has to be seen and shown every year for every facility.

And finally, the Committee said that if this approach is accepted by the state government and the state legislature, there will be no need for the regional boards, since there will be no further work for them in this matter.

But this report and the recommendations were not fully accepted by the state government. The Regional Boards were created. They followed their own lines of measurement and recommendation. The Governor had the unenviable task of reconciling their recommendations and suggesting allocations to the state government. There was always a reference by the government to a financial backlog for the regions. It is difficult to understand how this figure came to be calculated, certainly not in terms of the Committee's first round estimates at 1983 prices!

The result is, the problem of regional imbalance persists in Maharashtra. When recently the State's Home Minister was appointed the guardian minister of Gadchiroli district, his first reaction on visiting the district was the inadequacy in development work in the district. This inadequacy is in regard to the very same basic provisions about which the 1983 Committee had made its suggestions. This is symptomatic of the inadequate provision of these facilities two and half decades after that Committee's recommendations, fifty years after the creation of Maharashtra and sixty years after the creation of the Republic of India.

It is no surprise, therefore, that there is a renewed demand for the creation of Vidarbha. No one has taken the trouble to present up-to-date data on the lines of the Report of the Committee on Regional Imbalance to show how Vidarbha or any other region in the State has suffered from negligence. This is because perceptions of negligence continue to be unclear, sometimes different. There is an overall lack of trust in the political leadership of the successive governments of the state. The ministers of the

state government coming from one region have little knowledge of the problems in other region and do not appear to show interest in these and sympathise with the regional people and their problems. Most of them have no social contact or relation with these regions. One is reminded of what Ambedkar wrote in 1955: 'It is a vast area and it is impossible to have efficient administration by a single state... Even from the point of view of the Marathas why should there be this consolidation? What affiliation has a Maratha of Satara got with the Maratha of Aurangabad? What affiliation has a Maratha of Nasik got with Maratha of Ratnagiri? What care and interest a Maratha of Satara is going to bestow upon the problems of the Maratha of Aurangabad? What care and interest a Maratha of Nasik is going to bestow upon the problems of the Maratha of Ratnagiri? The consolidation has no meaning and can serve no purpose'. Ambedkar does not refer to Vidarbha. But, today one can add: what relation do people from western Maharashtra have with the people of Bhandara and Chandrapur? The people from Ratnagiri possibly at best know that Bhandara grows rice; but nothing else, including how and when. It is a vast state with highly regionalised societies, with little connection between one another. It is no wonder that at the level of cabinet responsibilities and political organisation, there is little real understanding of the people and their problems from other regions. Even half a century after the formation of united Maharashtra this remains the situation. And, this appears to be at the root of the renewed demand for separation.

A separate state will greatly minimise these problems of lack of understanding, social cohesion and sympathy. In fact, one wonders if with the separation of Vidarbha, there will not be a demand, at some interval, for separation of Marathwada. It was this that led Ambedkar to suggest three states, not two.

Another useful result of multiple Marathi speaking states is also possible. With 'one language, one state', the fear of regional chauvinism, so detrimental to the Indian Union, was expressed by people like Ambedkar. While Marathi has not become the sole official language of the state and the courts, manifestations of such chauvinism are already visible. More than one Marathi speaking states is likely to be a check on such tendencies: There is little possibility that both the people and their leaders in all Marathi speaking states will speak the same language and raise the same slogans.

However, whether there are two Maharashtra or three, the problem of regional imbalance will remain, if it is not properly understood and systematic action taken to eradicate it. The mere formation of a separate state is no solution to this problem. Moreover, even after the solution to the problem of imbalance in development is taken care of by adoption of the approach suggested in the Report of the Committee on Regional Imbalance, there will be new emerging problems. The best way to handle these is decentralisation

of responsibilities and resources at the district level, as was very well tried out under the Zilla Parishad Act of 1961. Unfortunately, the party in power destroyed it after ten years of very encouraging operation, because the Ministers and MLAs felt neglected in their constituencies. This arises out of lack of understanding of the responsibilities of the elected representatives of the three tier system. The surest way of avoiding emergence of regional imbalance in development due to poor understanding of local problems and possibilities is to empower the elected local bodies with powers and financial resources to take decisions on local problems and handle these in their best considered ways. We must learn from our past mistakes and take steps early enough for their redress.

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