

Telangana demand should be accepted

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The festering dispute regarding Telangana has severely damaged Andhra's political and economic governance, business and investor confidence. Wider consequences include disruption of communications and trade between North and South India. There seems to be no perfect solution. The best realistic solution should be found quickly, before the situation deteriorates even further and the whole nation suffers.

Separatism in a federal state isn't a new thing. In Canada, a separatist movement in Quebec culminated in a referendum in 1995, which was narrowly lost by the separatists. The Canadian system gives considerable autonomy to the provinces, and in recent times, public support for separatism has declined.

In Switzerland, the demand for the creation of a new canton (province) of Jura (largely French-speaking and Roman Catholic) from the canton of Bern (German speaking and Protestant) led to incidents of violence, before it was ultimately granted in 1979. Belgium is another case where cultural differences have led to a federal structure. In the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, the collapse of autocratic regimes led to separation of several provinces as independent entities, with major consequences for regional peace and stability.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Given India's tremendous cultural diversity, demands for separate States have surfaced at regular intervals. These demands arose from assertions of linguistic and cultural identity, or from perceptions of neglect and underdevelopment.

The most recent were the creation of Uttarakhand from UP, Jharkhand from Bihar, and Chattisgarh from MP. The Indian federal structure has been able to accommodate these demands for separate States for the past six decades. The precedent is that demands for separate States, if supported by the people in those regions, have been generally conceded by all the political parties concerned.

The Telangana region largely coincides with the former princely State of Hyderabad. After the annexation of Hyderabad in 1948, the State Reorganisation Commission's 1953 report noted "the unification of Telangana with Andhra, though desirable, should be based on a voluntary and willing association of the people and that it is primarily for the people of Telangana to take a decision regarding their future".

In 1956, an agreement was reached between Telangana leaders and Andhra leaders to merge Telangana and Andhra with promises to safeguard Telangana's interests. With the years, the issue of special provisions for protecting the interests of the people of Telangana remained a contentious issue. Telangana is the largest of three regions of Andhra Pradesh, covering 42 per cent of the area, and 41 per cent of its population. It had been part of the State of Hyderabad ruled by the Nizam, while the other regions were carved out of the Telugu-speaking parts of the erstwhile Madras Presidency.

A look at the economic indicators of districts does not show an overall lower level of development for the Telangana region. Both regions have uneven development, with more developed, as well as backward, districts.

Major political parties have sought to maintain their voter base in both regions, by trying to appease both sides of the divide.

POLITICAL ANGLE

In the 1990s, the BJP promised a separate Telangana state. In 2004, even the Congress promised the same, and entered into an alliance with the newly-formed Telangana Rashtriya Samithi (TRS).

Creation of a separate Telangana state was a part of the common minimum programme of the UPA-1 coalition government. The Telugu Desam Party (TDP) has also supported a separate Telangana state in 2008. Frustrated by slow progress, the supporters of Telangana have resorted to protests.

Given the promises made by political parties, and the precedents set in the case of demands for separate States elsewhere in India, it would seem unwise to not grant the demand for a separate Telangana State.

The time has passed for a solution based on decentralisation or autonomy for the region. However, special consideration needs to be given for the issue of the capital for both parts. Doing nothing would further exacerbate tensions and lead to increasing frustration, violence, and extremism.

One solution would be for Hyderabad to be the joint capital of both Andhra and Telangana, till such time as a separate capital can be established for Andhra, perhaps in the Vijayawada-Vishakapatnam economic zone. This will ensure that the two administrations would cooperate closely on matters of common interest. Both sides would have an interest in ensuring that the economic, business and investment climate of Hyderabad isn't damaged. If necessary, the Centre can play a constructive role in providing resources for any additional infrastructure needed for the joint capital. It should be obvious to both sides that close cooperation between Andhra and Telangana is crucial for the development of both entities.

India has created new States in the past. These include Gujarat and Maharashtra (1960), Nagaland (1963), Punjab and Haryana (1966), Himachal Pradesh (1971), Manipur, Meghalaya and Tripura (1972), Sikkim (1975), Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Goa (1987), and Chattisgarh, Jharkhand and Uttarakhand (2000). These have been responses to local aspirations.

There is some apprehension that creating Telangana would stimulate similar demands from some other regions such as Gorkhaland, Vidarbha, Purvanchal, Harit Pradesh and Bodoland. However, this argument is fallacious, as each such case has its own specific political dynamics and players. Some of the new States might well enjoy political consensus, and therefore, denying them would be unfortunate.

(The author is a former Ambassador to Cuba and Greece.)

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