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Re-organising Indian States: What is going on in Telengana?

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Abstract

The idea that the Telengana region of the state of Andhra Pradesh, which was historically part of the princely state of Hyderabad, should be constituted as a separate state, has a long history. The announcement on 9 December 2009 by the Home Minister of India that ‘the process of forming the state of Telengana would be initiated’ has, however, provoked uproar across the state. Whereas, before the 2009 elections all the major parties of Andhra supported the formation of Telengana, all are now divided on the question, and agitation continues. This paper explores the background to the dispute, the reasons why many of the people of the region seek separation, and its implications for thinking about the territorial reorganisation of Indian states. The paper argues that creating smaller states may not be the best way of tackling growing problems of regional inequality across India.

Introduction

At around midnight on 9 December 2009, the Home Minister of India, Mr P. Chidambaram, emerged from a meeting of the core committee of the Congress Party – presided over by the All India Congress Committee (AICC) President, Mrs Sonia Gandhi – to announce that ‘the process of forming the state of Telengana would be initiated and an appropriate resolution moved in the Andhra Pradesh Assembly’.

Telengana is a semi-arid region including ten of the 23 districts of the South Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, the fourth largest in the country in terms of area and fifth in terms of population, with its capital in Hyderabad, latterly celebrated as one of the high-tech hubs of India. Hyderabad lies well within the Telengana region that Mr Chidambaram seemed to be proposing should become a separate state, and its future is a critically important aspect of the ensuing controversy.

Within a few hours of his announcement as many as one hundred members of the Legislative Assembly of Andhra Pradesh from the other regions of the state – Coastal Andhra, and Rayalseema - from his own Congress Party, as well as from opposition parties (the Telugu

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Desam Party (TDP) and the Praja Rajyam), had submitted their resignations to the Speaker of the Assembly, in protest. Popular protest erupted throughout the state – both in support of the creation of the Telengana state, and in fierce opposition to it – and has continued over the six weeks that have elapsed since then, in spite of the ‘clarification’ issued by the Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, on 11 December 2009, when he said that the government would show ‘no haste’ in the bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh. This was followed with a subsequent statement by the Home Minister on 23 December 2009 that put the formation of the new state on hold until such time as consensus on the matter is achieved. A meeting of all the major political parties of Andhra Pradesh with the central government on 5 January 2010 agreed that peace and harmony should be restored whilst consultations continue.

In spite of these moves, agitation goes on. An indication of its intensity across the state is that so many buses have been destroyed by now in protest actions that the Andhra Pradesh State Road Transport Corporation has had to raise its fares. The negative impact on business in Hyderabad – reflected in the decision of the influential Confederation of Indian Industry to shift the venue of its prestigious Partnership Summit to Chennai – has already been substantial. The purpose of this note is to explain the background to the agitation for and against the possible new state, and to comment upon its significance.

The Formation of Andhra Pradesh – A Contested Process

Figure 1: Districts of Andhra Pradesh



[The proposed Telengana State would include Adilabad, Nizamabad, Karimnagar, Medak, Warangal, Khammam, Rangareddi, Hyderabad, Nalgonda and Mahbubnagar].

The nine districts of the state of Andhra Pradesh in what is known as Coastal Andhra, and the four southern districts that make up the Rayalseema region, were part of the Madras Presidency of the British Indian Empire. Telugu speakers from these regions were so well

represented in Madras itself (now Chennai, the capital of the state of Tamil Nadu) that it was often described as a Telugu city. The ten districts (listed above; see Figure 1) proposed should constitute the new state of Telengana, on the other hand, were part of the princely state of Hyderabad, where Urdu was the official language, and they have experienced a very different political history. The ruler of the state of Hyderabad, the Nizam, sought to maintain his independence when the British rule came to an end in 1947, and by that time the Telengana region was already the site of an armed peasant struggle led by the Communist Party, against landlordism.

It was only as a result of military intervention in what was described as a 'Police Action' by the Government of India late in 1948 that Hyderabad was merged into the Union of India – though the Telengana peasant rising was not finally quelled until 1951. In 1952, the Congress Party won the first elections in the state and set about implementing land reform. By this time there was already considerable feeling in Hyderabad about the takeover of government jobs by people coming in from the previously British administered Andhra region, who were better equipped in terms of education and experience, and about their purchases of land against which there was an agitation in 1952. Though a proposal for the formation of a separate state for Telugu speakers had been approved by the Madras Assembly in 1937, it was only after the death from his fasting protest of the Gandhian Potti Sriramalu, that the central government was finally persuaded to concede the principle of state formation on linguistic lines. The state of Andhra was formed in October 1953 from the northern districts – those with a majority of Telugu speakers – of what was by then the Madras state, with Kurnool as its capital. This was the first new state to be established on the base of language; and it was in the context of this development that in December 1953 the Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, set up the States Reorganisation Commission, generally known as the Fazal Ali Commission, after the name of its Chairman. In its report, published in 1955, the Commission examined the case for the merger of the new Andhra state and the Telengana region. It recognised considerable advantages in the merger, emphasising in particular the merits of bringing the development of the Godavari and Krishna rivers under unified control, but it also recognised the distinctive identity of Telengana and drew attention to the legitimate fears of its people. 'Telengana claims to be progressive', it said, 'and from an administrative point of view, unification it is contended is not likely to confer any benefits'. The Commission saw major administrative problems, relating to the fact that Telengana, though it had a less developed economy, nonetheless generated a revenue surplus, while Andhra 'faced a financial problem of some magnitude'. Finally the Commission recommended that Telengana should be constituted as a separate state, to be known as Hyderabad, but 'with provision for its unification with Andhra after the general elections likely to be held in or about 1961, if by a two-thirds majority the legislature of the residuary Hyderabad state expresses itself in favour of such unification'. This recommendation – and the hostility of the Prime Minister – notwithstanding, unification went ahead and Andhra Pradesh was brought into existence in November 1956. The fears of the Telengana people were sought to be allayed by a '*Gentleman's Agreement*', signed by political leaders from the two sides, concerned with protecting educational and employment opportunities, and development resources for natives of Telengana.

A History of Unequal Development?

This agreement came to be widely perceived in Telengana, however, as having failed, and discontent finally gave rise, in 1968-69, to a movement for a separate state and to widespread violence. A political settlement of the dispute over the status of Telengana was only arrived at

in 1973, in a *Six-Point Formula* that set up a programme for the accelerated development of the backward regions of Andhra Pradesh, and divided the state as a whole into zones, in each of which preference was to be given to local candidates for state government jobs. This took the wind out of the movement for a separate Telengana until the 1990s, when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) promised a separate state if it came to power – though it reneged on this promise in 2000, at the time of the formation of the new states of Chattisgarh, Jharkhand and Uttarkhand, because of the hostility to the proposal of its coalition partner from Andhra Pradesh, the TDP.

The resentments of the Telengana people have never gone away, and the Hyderabad Forum for Telengana, which brings together intellectuals, teachers, artists and activists, argues forcefully that Telengana contributes disproportionately to the total revenues of Andhra Pradesh (and not only because of the presence of the city of Hyderabad within its bounds), whilst receiving a less than proportionate share of state expenditure. The expansion of Hyderabad and the wealth of the city, it is said, do not trickle out to the remainder of the region, but have rather benefited people and businesses from the Andhra region. The Forum further argues that agricultural growth in the region depends heavily on private investment in (groundwater) irrigation, where Coastal Andhra benefits from the public irrigation systems of Krishna and Godavari – the catchments of which lie mainly in Telengana. And it implies that it is the lower profitability of agriculture in Telengana which largely accounts for the fact that about two-thirds of all farmers' suicides reported in the state between 1998 and 2006 were in the region. The provisions of the *Gentleman's Agreement* and the *Six-Point Formula* have never been honoured, it says, and the proposals for the development of 'backward areas' have ended up by equating those of Telengana with other parts of the state, so nullifying its (generally agreed) claims to special status. Meanwhile, the self-respect of the Telengana people is persistently denied through the treatment of Telengana Telugu as inferior to Coastal Telugu, by the sidelining of Telengana Muslims through the marginalisation of Urdu, and through the common treatment of people from Telengana by the Andhra film industry either as villains or buffoons.

The position of the Forum with regard to the long history of Telengana grievance was supported editorially in South India's most respected English language daily, *The Hindu*, when it opined that 'Decades of neglect and denial of opportunities, especially in education and employment, have left the Telengana region of Andhra Pradesh underdeveloped and backward' (9 December 2009). *The Hindu* went on to argue, however, that separation is not the answer to problems of regional underdevelopment in Andhra Pradesh or elsewhere: 'The problem of uneven regional and inter-state development is one of the major challenges rising India faces but there is little to suggest that smaller states will make for a more even process of development'.

The Politics of the Current Agitation

The immediate reason for the Home Minister's quite dramatic announcement of 9 December 2009 was that Mr K. Chandrasekhar Rao, the leader of the Telengana regional party, the Telengana Rashtra Samiti (TRS), had on 29 November 2009 launched a 'fast unto death' in a bid to secure a separate state. As Rao's health deteriorated in the full gaze of television and of press cameras, violence in Hyderabad escalated. On 7 December 2009, the Congress Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, Mr K. Rosaiah, convened a meeting of all the political parties of the state, and the minutes of the meeting show that all those concerned with the exception of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the All-India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen and the

Lok Satta (none of which commands very much electoral backing), supported the move to initiate the process of forming a State of Telengana by tabling a resolution in the Andhra Pradesh Assembly. This was the basis for Mr Chidambaram's statement. But very rapidly thereafter, the agreement unravelled as all the major parties split on regional lines, with representatives from Coastal Andhra and from Rayalseema opposing, and those from Telengana itself supporting the proposal, in response to pressures from their constituencies. The two major opposition parties of the state, the Telugu Desam Party and the Praja Rajyam soon reneged on their support for the move towards separation, but are split regionally, which is also the case of the Andhra Pradesh Congress Party.

In many ways these are very surprising developments. In the General Election of mid-2009, and the Assembly elections that took place at the same time, the TRS was rather comprehensively defeated, and there did not seem to be so much life in the separatist camp at that time. What has happened since then has followed from the death of the strong Congress Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, Mr Y. S. Rajasekhara Reddy, in a helicopter crash in September 2009, which left a political vacuum in the state, and in this context, the decision of K. Chandrasekhar Rao to undertake his fast, interpreted by commentators as a last bid to restore his political credibility.

Chandrasekhar Rao was once a leading light of the TDP – the powerful regional party that was in office in Andhra Pradesh from 1995, under the leadership of Mr Chandrababu Naidu, until being defeated by the Congress, led by Mr Rajasekhara Reddy, in 2004. Chandrasekhar Rao was evidently piqued by Chandrababu Naidu's unwillingness to grant him a cabinet seat, and he floated the TRS as a movement in 2001, and then formed the party in 2002. The TRS did fairly well in both Lok Sabha and state Assembly elections in 2004, in alliance with Congress, and the TRS formed part of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government at the centre. In the 2004 elections the Congress included a commitment to the creation of a Telengana state in its manifesto, and the same commitment was made in the Common Minimum Programme that was later agreed to by the UPA with the Left parties. It was the failure of the government to honour these promises that led Rao to take his party out of the Alliance in September 2006.

Thereafter the TRS came near to breaking up, and there was much dissatisfaction with Rao's leadership – while Rajasekhara Reddy proved successful at encouraging defections from the party. When the TRS tried to force the creation of a Telengana state in 2008 through the resignation of all its MPs and legislators, leading to by-elections that were cast as being a referendum on the establishment of the new state, it lost badly. Rao's surprising decision to ally with the TDP in the 2009 elections to both Lok Sabha and Assembly (the TDP having shifted its position from hostility to support for the creation of Telengana in December 2008) also back-fired quite spectacularly – evidently being seen by the electorate as an opportunistic manoeuvre. It seems that the uncertainty in Andhra politics after the death of Rajasekhara Reddy gave Rao an opportunity to rebuild his leadership after all these reverses. In this he has been able to capitalise on the fact that before the 2009 elections all the major parties supported the formation of Telengana and then on the subsequent prevarications on the part of the Congress.

The Congress leadership has been criticised for its failure to honour the commitments made in 2004, and again in the party's 2009 manifesto, to the creation of Telengana through a process of consultations and consensus. For some commentators, Mr Chidambaram's

announcement on 9 December 2009 recalled the high-handed way in which the party – to its own detriment, in the end – had treated Andhra Pradesh in the 1980s. It has been said that the announcement went beyond what Chandrasekhar Rao himself had expected, surprising the Andhra Chief Minister K. Rosaiah as well. And there is understandable speculation that the intention was both to win support in Telengana and to undercut the TDP (by stealing supporters from it in Telengana, and taking advantage of its loss of credibility elsewhere in Andhra). If this was the case then the stratagem has blown up in the face of the party.

Another speculation is that the decision taken on 9 December 2009 reflected the authority of the All-India Congress General Secretary Mr Rahul Gandhi who is said to be interested in and generally supportive of the idea of having smaller states. Whatever the underlying calculations, the Congress has been forced to backtrack and renew its commitment to ‘consultations and consensus’ – though the latter is now hard to imagine, given the regional splits in all the major parties of Andhra Pradesh and the *voltes-face* performed by Chandrababu Naidu of the TDP and Chiranjeevi, the founder and leader of the Praja Rajyam.

The Implications of the Telengana Agitation

The Home Minister’s announcement of 9 December 2009 gave an immediate boost to those seeking to carve out new states elsewhere in India. The first to move was the Gorkha Janmulthi Morcha which aims to create an ethnically defined state (Gorkhaland) in the Darjeeling region of West Bengal, and which announced a ‘fast unto death’ agitation to achieve its objective. On 12 December 2009, the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Ms Mayawati, announced her Bahujan Samaj Party’s support for the trifurcation of Uttar Pradesh (UP), with the eastern part of the state to become Poorvanchal, the western to become Harit Pradesh, and the remainder, together with six districts of Madhya Pradesh, to become the new state of Bundelkhand. Other demands, of which only the most prominent were those for the creation of a separate state of Vidharba in the eastern region of Maharashtra, and for Bodoland, to be created in Assam, followed soon after. Some of these demands, like that for Gorkhaland, are ethnically based, but socio-economic backwardness is the main reason for their advancement.

Arguments for reviewing the territorial organisation of Indian states were boosted by the creation of the three new states of Chattisgarh, Jharkhand and Uttarakhand by the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government in 2000. The suggestion is that smaller states will be more efficient and will provide for social justice in backward areas. The experience of the three new states created by the NDA is however, equivocal. The Hyderabad Forum for Telengana points to the evidence that Chattisgarh, Jharkhand and Uttarakhand have achieved higher rates of growth than those that were targeted for them by the Planning Commission in support of its case that ‘Telengana would prosper as a smaller state’. Others, on the other hand, refer to the evidence of political shambles in Jharkhand, and to the failures of successive governments there, as well as in Chattisgarh to deliver socio-economic development or to adequately tackle the problems posed by Maoist attacks in both states. The one firm conclusion that may be drawn is that the creation of smaller new states is not necessarily the best and is certainly not the only way of tackling regional disparities.

Sources: This note is based on a reading of the Indian press, including especially *The Hindu* and the news magazine *Frontline*. The position of the Hyderabad Forum for Telengana is set out in detail in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 9 January 2010.