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Status of Chhattisgarh, Uttarakhand and Jharkhand after division

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Abstract

India acceded to the global changes by initiating economic reforms. Liberalization of the economy had unshackled new centers of political interest and influence. A retreat of the central state meant greater latitude for the state and local level constituencies and a shift in the locus of decision making to the regions. In foreign policy, it meant realignments in the region. In the 1990s, a new reactive connection had emerged between rising Islamic and Hindu extremism, Indo-Pakistan relations, and the conflict over Kashmir. A weak and unstable Pakistan was even more dangerous to India's control over its borders in the north and the west than an aggressive Pakistan, driven by resurgent Islam. While these shifts altered the context of anxiety over Border States, the rise of Hindu nationalism led by the BJP and of powerful ethnic and caste parties in politically important states within India altered the basis of domestic politics.

Keywords: Third Wave, BJP, domestic politics and Hindi-Hindu

Introduction

The trends that had become visible in the 1980s - the decline of Congress, the rise of Hindu nationalist forces, the emergence of coalition governments, the regionalization of politics, and the de facto dispersion of power it brought about, accelerated in the 1990s. The third federal reorganization, this time in the Hindi-Hindu heartland of India, should be viewed against the backdrop of these changes. Shifts were also evident in the intellectual and ideological arenas in response to the end of the Cold War and the 'Third Wave' of democratization based on market economy. Three arenas of policy were immediately affected by these shifts: the economy, foreign policy, and public debate ^[1].

The era of coalition government had arrived, and that of Congress with its easy majorities at the center had ended. What did these changes mean to the federal equation and to the governance model that had operated under the earlier era of Congress's dominance? In the post Nehru-Gandhi years, the contest for power involved three national level actors, the resurgent BJP, a congers of regional parties representing a coalition third force, and, the Congress. The latter was weak but was able to still cobble enough seats in Parliament to influence that could or could not form a government in New Delhi. This was then the decade of unstable coalition rule and frequent elections in which all three actors formed successions of governments in India: the Congress between 1991 and 1995, the coalition of regional parties in 1996-1998, the BJP for thirteen days in 1998 and then again in 1999, but this time in coalition with regional parties willing to support it in exchange for dropping its 'Hindutva' agenda. One may characterize the 1990s as a decade when ethnic and caste based regional parties became more closely integrated into the central government with corresponding influence to dictate the course of policy ^[2].

The second reorganization focussed on the division of the state of Assam in North-East India. Representing a different set of issues for Indian leaders, this region had been left largely untouched by the SRC. To begin with, it was a patchwork of tribal and mixed linguistic communities. No neat divisions along the lines of the earlier reorganization were possible. The colonial legacy had created a special set of problems. The North-east was the least integrated region in the territorial and administrative sphere of British India.

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¹ Acharya Sunil. 'Insurgency in Nagaland,' in Datta, P., ed., the Northeast and the Indian State: Paradoxes and a Periphery, New Delhi, Vikas, 1993, pp. 223-230.

² Baruah, Sanjib, 1999, India against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Press.

The British had followed a policy of neglect and seclusion that had left the region resentful and suspicious of all governments that had sought to control the North-East from New Delhi. Decades of missionary conversions among the tribal population had enlarged the gulf between people residing in the plains and those residing in the hills. The overlapping of the Naga and Mizo tribes across Burma and the India-Chinese border closely linked the issue of ethnic autonomy to national security and territorial control. The Indian state, thus, had to integrate within its federal union a vastly diverse and underdeveloped northeast. This task was made more difficult because China claimed parts of this area (Arunachal Pradesh). Indian leaders were faced with the task of reconciling the conflicting goals of democratic accommodation and security requirements. The answer was found in dividing Assam into seven separate province states^[3]. The leaders of the separate Jharkhand movement argued that as long as the region remained 'divided into four states, and centers of decision making remain in Patna, Calcutta, Bhuvaneshwar, etc., the people of Jharkhand region will continue to be victims of cultural suppression and economic exploitation. The efforts of the government for a balanced development have utterly failed and the people are not ready to wait any longer. The central government accepted the proposal to form an Autonomous Council modeled on the pattern of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (with limited executive and legislative powers) but the three affected states - Bengal, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa - rejected the formation of Jharkhand from parts of their territories. Only Bihar passed a bill to form a separate Jharkhand Area Autonomous Council in 1994 (Bihar Gazzette 1995). Once the bill was passed, the emergence of a separate state from within Bihar was a foregone conclusion. But no other state boundaries had been altered^[4].

In conclusion, it might be useful to return to the questions raised in the introduction. Was there a grand design in the provisions that governed the creation of new states? Were these federal reorganizations motivated largely by electoral calculations or for immediate gain? And did they aggravate or mitigate ethnic conflicts? The first reorganization had undoubtedly extended the democratic dispensation by creating many new centers of regional power with autonomous jurisdiction. It corrected the embedded pro-center bias of the Indian constitution. The first reorganization was based on accommodation of ethno-linguistic and cultural communities, which have since then occupied a pre-eminent place in Indian politics and in the Indian model of governance. This model was more suited to an empire-state than a modern nation-state. But that was the only way India could integrate its diversity and its democratic character. While the first reorganization affected the Indian nation as a whole, the second effort at federal reorganization focused on one region, i.e., the North-East. Electoral calculations were no doubt important in the 1970s, but they were not the only reasons for the division of Assam. While the first reorganization breathed life into the governance model of relational control and interlocking balances, the second reorganization sought to protect that design by giving new states a stake in India's territorial

integrity^[5].

We might ask if such a strategy was compatible with India's avowed commitment to democracy. The answer would have to be a conditional affirmative. Commitment to a federal democracy did not prevail over the imperatives of territorial unity. In fact, the latter became the touch stone for granting provincial autonomy in Border States. In the rest of India, as the third reorganization shows, grant of autonomy was less controversial and turned on the calculations of party competition and elections. Could India have evolved a different model of federalism than the one it actually followed? Many have argued that India could have avoided separatist violence and challenges to its territorial integrity, had it been an 'aggregate of politically organized territories'. While the moral argument behind this advocacy is sound, we are not told how India could have become such an entity^[6].

There would have been no India had it been conceived as an aggregate of quasi-sovereign states. India was exactly such an aggregate of princely states and directly ruled provinces in 1947. Should it have continued in that vein? Would such an India have been more democratic and respecting of human rights? History does not provide an answer to this question. The founding leaders of India thought it necessary to carry forward with what Mahmood Ayoob has described as the 'primitive accumulation of power' which all societies are required to carry out if they are to form a state. The coercive character of the state cannot be denied. By the same token, if there is no state there can be no democracy. This is not meant to minimize the deleterious impact of centralization evident during the 1970s and 1980s in India. Nor is this meant to justify state oppression. The attempt here is to understand, not absolve leaders of the kind of choices they made. The Congress governments under Indira and Rajiv Gandhi did much that was grossly wrong. It is important nevertheless to avoid the trap of simple dichotomies, i.e., oppression versus human rights, big government vs. small government, centralization vs. decentralization, and nation vs. State. For countries that are simultaneously pursuing democracy, development, and territorial unity, choices are hardly ever between neat pairs of opposites. They are more than likely to be between: more or less democracy, more or less development, and more or less autonomy^[7].

Each trade-off demands a price in terms of compromise with some other, equally desirable goal. Debates about the creation of new states have been erroneously conducted within the misleading, polarized perspective of centralization and decentralization. Centralization needs to come first because we do not know how to build a democracy without a state. Moreover, these polarized perspectives ignore the syncretic model of governance India had created in the mid-1950s, combining autonomy to regions and layered order, within an overarching political universe. Whether led by Congress, Janata, or the BJP, all governments in India have to return to this model - or forfeit the right to govern. The creation of new states was a key element in the success of this model.

⁵ Chadda, Maya, *Ethnicity, Security and Separatism in India*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1997, P-177.

⁶ Chadda, Maya, 'Talibanization of Pakistan's Democracy', *World Affairs* (New Delhi) vol. no. 3, 1999, pp. 98-116.

⁷ Chadda, Maya, *Building Democracy in South Asia: India. Nepal. Pakistan*, Boulder, CO., Lynne Rienner, 2000, P-213.

³ Bomwall, K. R., *The foundation of Indian Federalism*, Bombay, Asia Publishing House, 1976, P-167.

⁴ Brass, Paul, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison*, Newbury Park, California, Sage, 1991, p-54.

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