

THE BOUNDARY DISPUTES

In this unit, so far you have read how and why water, a vital natural resource, has been a cause of major disputes between some states of the Indian Union. Now, you will read about territorial boundaries as a source of conflict among certain states of our country. You might have, during the course of your studies, come across references about the longstanding tension between the states of Maharashtra and Karnataka over the rightful ownership of the district of Belgaun, between Punjab and Haryana over the Abohar-Fazilka Tehsil or about several such cases involving two or more states. Infact, the creation of certain new states in the last few years—Uttaranchal, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh for instance—was partly a recognition of the longstanding problem of contesting territorial boundaries. The issue is complex and vexed and its roots can be traced to India's colonial past.

13.3.1 A Colonial Legacy India, as we known it today, has traversed a chequered path from ancient times. The boundaries of its constituent geographical units have been continually changing. However, till the advent of the British it was not really a nation-state, as the term is understood and the frequent changes in territorial limits did not amount to much. The British, in pursuance of their own colonial agenda, set about defining and redefining geographical limits and this created problems, the lingering effects of which can be felt till today. These effects can be felt even internationally. For example, India's boundary disputes with Pakistan, China and Bangladesh. This was essentially because our colonial masters were guided primarily by the consideration of facile governance and towards this end, they focused on administrative aspects rather than linguistic/cultural etc. unification. The result was a mismatch between people's personal identities and the territories they inhabited. It was left to the central government of free India to rectify the damage caused by the British colonialists' sectarianism and short sightedness.

13.3.2 Territorial Issue in the Post – Colonial Period The central legislature – the Parliament – was empowered by the constitution 'to create new states or merge old states or parts of such states or alter their boundaries in future'. It may interest you to know that even during the tenure of the Constituent Assembly the specially created and convened body to draft free India's constitution—demands had been raised for a linguistic reorganisation of states, the assumption being that linguistic commonality is an index of a common culture and thus, states created on the basis of a common/unifying language would be more homogenous and thus, conducive to effective governance. However, at that time, the founding fathers of the Constitution had postponed the demand for a linguistic reconfiguration on the ground that the newly formed country might plunge into chaos and turmoil. But soon after independence, the government of Jawaharlal Nehru – India's first Prime-Minister- changed tacks. Possibly, it felt that there was no other way out. Thus, it had to cope with the agitation for an Andhra state.

According to the Linguistic Provinces Commission, the demand first raised in the coastal regions of Andhra had become "a passion" and "ceased to be a matter of reason". Immediately after the First General Election (1951-52), the Andhra Pradesh Provincial Congress Committee (APCC) had passed a resolution for the creation of a separate Telugu speaking state. The then Madras state also came in the

picture and the State Congress Committee there endorsed the creation of the proposed new state. Initially, the Central Government under Nehru tried to checkmate this demand, but the death of Potli Sriramulu, a venerable Andhra Congress leader who went on a fast into death precipitated matters.

Finally, in 1953 a new and separate Andhra state was formed by carving out the Telugu speaking areas of the erstwhile bi-lingual Madras state.

The creation of Andhra gave a fillip to the demand for a further linguistic reorganisation of states and the government ended up setting a three member States Reorganisation Commission in 1953 to look into the whole question of altering old/creating new state boundaries. The Commission submitted its report in 1955 and its major recommendation was the creation of new states in the South of the country. In 1956, the States Reorganisation Act was passed. However, consequent to the passing of this act, no really new state was created as such. What actually happened was the integration of several formerly princely states on the basis of language. For instance, the new state of Andhra Pradesh was a coming together of the erstwhile Part B State of Hyderabad and the old Andhra state.

Similarly, the new state of Karnataka was an amalgamation of the old Part B Mysore state and territories transferred from the former Madras and Bombay states. But from the 1960s onwards, the process of creation of new states got going. Thus, in 1960 itself the state of Bombay was partitioned to create the new states of Maharashtra and Gujarat. Similarly, in 1966 the new state of Punjab was created. We have already mentioned about the creation of the new states of Uttaranchal, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand in recent times. It is important to mention here that during the period, the north-eastern part of the country also underwent a major reorganisation. Thus, in 1963 the state of Nagaland and in 1972, the state of Meghalaya were created. The demand for the creation of new states has not ceased in post-independence India.

Demand for a separate Vidarbha state has been a longstanding demand of an influential section of populace in Maharashtra, but has not been conceded so far. Similarly, though the demand for a separate hill state of Uttaranchal gained fruition, a similar demand for a separate state of Western U.P. (Harit Pradesh) has not been legitimised so far. As we mentioned before in this unit, territorial reconfiguration has been a complicated issue. And even when given a concrete shape, it has not been an answer to every citizen's aspirations. To cite a very prominent example, though the newly created state of Andhra Pradesh brought together the Telugu speaking people dispersed in different parts of South India, the new state since its inception has faced the problem of prolonged agitation for another new state of Telangana. Similarly the creation of new states in the North-East has not resolved territorial disputes. The demand of Nagas to bring Nagas of three different states into a single "Nagalim" is among such examples. A look at a well known case relating to the dispute between Maharashtra and Karnataka over Belgaun, may throw some light on the vexed question of altering/creating territorial boundaries.

13.3.3 An Example Belgaun Dispute: An Example The district of Belgaun is currently located in the state of Karnataka (North-West) and borders Maharashtra as well as Goa. Approximately, 20% of the local populace is of Maharashtrian origin. Atul Kohli observes “the issue of whether or not the areas with Marathi pluralities, especially the town of Belgaun, should be transferred from Karnataka to Maharashtra continues to be one of the central political issues in this district”.

The roots of the Marathi-Kannadiga conflict over the district of Belgaun-as with many such conflicts – are directly attributable to the linguistic reorganisation of states in India after independence. Belgaun district consists of a mixed population of Marathi and Kannada speakers. After the formation of Maharashtra state, some parts where Kannada was spoken got transferred to Karnataka, but some Marathi speaking pockets were also transferred to Karnataka. Belgaun is one such district which has a population of Marathi and Kannada speakers.

The cause of these displaced Maharashtrians has been spearheaded for more than four decades by the Maharashtra Ekikaran Samiti (MES). It has stood for transferring selected Marathi dominated areas of Belgaun (especially the town of Belgaun) to Maharashtra. The case of the MES is based on two premises:

i) Language and ethnicity – the criteria for the reorganisation of states.

ii) Alleged or real discrimination against Marathis in education and employment (particularly government service).

The Kannadigas, especially those resident of Belgaun Town, lay claims to the area on historical grounds. Mainly, that the town of Belgaun had always been an intrinsic part of a district that was chiefly Kannada speaking. A third and no less significant factor in the longstanding conflict has been the political compromise effected by the then central government. That is, some Kannada speaking districts of the old Hyderabad state were given to the new state of Andhra Pradesh in exchange for Belgaun being given to Karnataka.

Thus, as Atul Kohli has remarked “the MES’s argument on linguistic grounds, the argument of Kannadigas on historical precedent, and the national decision based on political considerations all combined to set up the basic matrix within which the conflict has evolved”.

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