



India creates three new states

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The Indian federation took a very significant turn in November 2000 with the creation of three new states.

Although infrequent, the creation of new states is not unusual here. India has a long history of what is called “states reorganization”.

Language: the original basis for statehood

The formation of states on the basis of language was a pledge and a demand of the anti-colonial nationalist movements in India. The federal idea in India began to take shape on this vision.

The Indian National Congress (INC), as the main party of India’s independence, began to encourage the idea of linguistic states from the beginning of the 1900s. It officially endorsed the demand as early as 1920 when it reorganized its own party units on the basis of regional linguistic boundaries.

The nationalists pledged to reorganize India after independence on the basis

of the linguistic characteristics of the country. This pledge led to an awakening of interest in self-rule among various nationalities and ethnic groups prior to independence. Many of the post-independence movements for statehood had their origins in this pre-independence phase.

A dynamic period of change

When the Indian republic was established in 1950, there were 27 states of different status and powers.

During the first major territorial reorganization in 1956, the number of states was reduced to 14, largely on linguistic lines, each having equal powers and function.

But from then on, new states were created to accommodate India’s manifold diversity.

The first state created for linguistic reasons in the post-independence period was Andhra Pradesh, in 1953, after its legendary leader Sri Ramalu’s fast unto death. This prompted the Government of India to form the

States Reorganization Commission in 1953, and on the basis of its recommendations, to pass the States Reorganization Act in 1956.

As a result of this Act in 1956, India undertook the first major reorganization of states, and the reasons were strongly linguistic: the new federal units were created so that the states’ boundaries would better correspond with linguistic boundaries.

Since 1956, there has been a more-or-less continuous process of states reorganization. For most of this period, the creation of new states was based on both ethno-regional and linguistic characteristics. In the 1950s and the 1960s, language played the most determining role with the sole exception of the case of the creation of Punjab (1966) in which the linguistic factor combined with religion.

In the 1970s, India’s northeast (now comprising seven federal units) became an area of major states reorganization. Three new states were created as a political recognition of tribal identity.

New States and the Indian Constitution

The Indian constitution is quite flexible in its provisions for the creation of new states.

The Indian federation, constitutionally speaking, is an indestructible union of destructible states. The Indian Constitution (Articles 3-4) empowers the Union Parliament—the Lok Sabha (popularly elected Lower House) and the Rajya Sabha, (the Council of States)—to reorganize the states for territorial adjustment.

It is provided that Parliament may by law:

- form a new state by separation of territory from any state, or by uniting two or more states, or parts of states, or by uniting any territory to a part of any state;
- increase the area of any state;
- diminish the area of any state;

- alter the boundaries of any state;
- and alter the name of any state.

The legislative requirement on the part of Parliament to do so is by a simple majority, and by means of the ordinary legislative process. However, a Presidential recommendation for introducing such a bill is required, and the President is required, before the recommendation, to refer the bill to the legislature of the state to be affected by the proposed changes. The President is not bound to accept the view of the state legislature.

So far more than 20 Acts have been passed by the parliament to give effect to states reorganization. In the cases of the three new states, the constitutional procedures have been followed, and the legislative assemblies of the three affected states have debated the proposed changes for years before agreeing to them.

In the 1980s, another three states were created (two in the northeast, and one in the southwest).

One means by which a state is created is upgrading the status of a "Union Territory". Today there are seven Union Territories of different sizes and significance within the federation. Union Territories are directly ruled by the Central Government.

Historically, these Union Territories have often been the precursors of new states in India. Arguing that a Union Territory should be upgraded to a state has remained one means for ethnically significant people living within a given territory to pursue statehood. Statehood means more autonomous powers, and more freedom of action within the federation.

At the heart of demands for statehood has remained the urge for decentralization and autonomy for the protection of identity and for development.

New bases for state-creation

The creation of three new states—Chhatisgarh (carved out of Madhya Pradesh), Jharkhand (carved out of Bihar), and Uttaranchal (carved out of Uttar Pradesh)—has followed the conventional method of states reorganization in India.

In the formation of these states, however, language, as a symbol of identity, has played very little role.

The process of creation of Chhatisgarh out of the state of Madhya Pradesh has been peaceful, unlike that of Uttaranchal and Jharkhand. A movement for a state such as Chhatisgarh has existed from about the 1960s.

When the parent state of Madhya Pradesh itself was created in 1956, there was very little demand for a state of Chhatisgarh although the cultural distinctiveness of the people of the region was well-known.

The community which has spearheaded the movement for Chhatisgarh are the ex-Malgujas—the rich peasants who collected land revenues on behalf of the Maratha (indigenous rulers) and the British rulers—and who seek to become numerically powerful in a new state.

The most significant political aspect of the creation of Chhatisgarh was that, since 1993, the issue has been an electoral pledge of the two leading political parties, namely Congress and the Bharatiya Janata party (BJP, the leading partner of the National Democratic Alliance government in India). The immediate political beneficiary of the new state has, however, been the Congress, the party in power in the parent state, which played a very active role in the creation of the new state.

The new state of Uttaranchal was carved out of the northern mountainous regions of Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state (some 140 million in 1991). For the first time ever, ecology as the defining factor of ethnic identity played the most active role in the creation of a new state.

The creation of the state of Uttaranchal is the culmination of a ten-year long movement by the hill people for statehood. They sought autonomy to address the problems of economic development, and to protect their cultural distinctiveness born of the ecological distinctiveness of the region. Essentially, the lack of development in the hills defined the tenor of the statehood movement.

The rise of Uttaranchal has provided the minority hill people of Uttar Pradesh with the political institutions to transform themselves into a majority in a state of their own, in which they will play the major role in governance.

The state of Jharkhand, by contrast, is the culmination of more than a century of struggle by some tribal peoples in Bihar for the protection of their identity, for power over development in their region, and for a state of their own.

The ethnic bases of the new state are complex. Although they began to assert tribal identity some decades back, the tribal groups are no longer in the majority in this state of their "own". But they do constitute a significant element.

In the creation of Jharkhand state, however, regional underdevelopment and a sense of deprivation have combined with these tribal affiliations. And as in the other two cases,

language factors played no role in carving out the state.

Can statehood provide more democracy?

India's social and cultural landscape is dotted with various movements for statehood, rooted in communities' concern for their identities. There are such movements as:

- Harit Pradesh in western Uttar Pradesh,
- Vindhyaachal in Madhya Pradesh,
- Telengana in Andhra Pradesh,
- Vidarbha in Maharashtra,
- Kodagu in Karnataka,
- Gorkhaland and Kamtapuri in West Bengal,
- and Bodoland in Assam.

The federal structure of India since her decolonization has shown flexibility in politically accommodating the needs of diversity. Short of full statehood, various institutional measures such as the District or Regional Councils, Union Territories, and Associate State or Sub-State units have been the states' responses to ethnic grievances. In many cases, the statehood movements have grown out of dissatisfaction with those institutional measures.

This vast country contains complex diversity coupled with regional imbalances, social and economic inequalities, and mass poverty.

Statehood provides an institutional framework for autonomy and decentralization to respond to the need for development and the protection of identity. The three new states offer a tier between grassroots governance from below—an issue that has acquired considerable momentum in India since the 1980s—and the federal government at the top.

Still, the real effectiveness of statehood for underprivileged sectors must depend on the extent to which the powers and opportunities now made available are democratically devolved further down the strata of society. ☺