



Research Paper

Statehood Demands after Telengana: Politics of Agitation in the Koshal Region in Odisha

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ABSTRACT: *Telengana stands on the threshold of achieving of its 60- year- old dream of statehood. But the outpouring of rage among people in the other regions of Andhra Pradesh and the revival of the demands for new states across the country pose a severe challenge to the ruling Congress Party. The demand for separate state in various parts of the subcontinent mainly arises out of identity, region, language, culture, caste, class and economic underdevelopment. However, it is in this context that this paper makes an attempt to highlight on how movements for separate statehood started immediately after the declaration of Telengana to be 29th state of India and more specifically the paper focuses on the agitation of the Koshal region to form a Koshal state in Odisha. The paper very briefly suggests the bare need of the Second States Reorganization Commission so as to tackle all these demands.*

Keywords: *Agitation, Koshal, Statehood, Telengana, Trigger*

I. INTRODUCTION

The decision of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) to divide Andhra Pradesh (AP) and to grant statehood to Telengana as the 29th state has sparked protests for statehood across the country. This triggered several groups in different parts of the country to launch strikes and protests to give new momentum to their own long-standing demands for separate states. Dormant demands for separate states have suddenly re-emerged as a grave challenge for the reluctant state governments. What follows, in this regard, for demanding separate statehood in various parts of the subcontinent mainly arises out of identity, region, language, culture, caste, class and economic underdevelopment. The steps towards creating Telengana, recognizing all aspirations of the majority Telugu speaking districts of Andhra Pradesh, has reinvigorated new hopes for the leaders of the other parts of the country to start movements for separate states.

II. TELANGANA TRIGGERS STATEHOOD DEMANDS ACROSS INDIA

A number of leaders associated with the demand for separate statehood- of Gorkhaland, Bodoland and Vidarbha in particular- have already started their agitations. The closure of public offices, schools and educational institutions and disruption of daily life in West Bengal and Assam are indicative of the desire and desperation of the people for separate states for their regions. Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM) chief Bimal Gurung has resigned as the chief executive of the Gorkha Territorial Administration (GTA), which was set up in 2011, to press his party's demand for Union Territory status for the Gorkhaland area of the Darjeeling hills. The GTA, as a regional autonomous council, had started functioning from August 2012 following a tripartite agreement between the Government of India, the West Bengal Government and the GJM. Similarly, through their call for a state bandh, rail blockade and the disruption and destruction of life and property, the leaders of Bodoland and the All Bodo Students Union in Assam have already intensified their struggle for Bodoland. The Bodo Territorial Council (BTC), which was formed in 2003 after the Bodo leaders ended their armed struggle, is now considered incapable of addressing the demands of Bodos, the Karbis, the Dimasas and the Koch-

Rajbangshis. The demand for statehood for Vidarbha too has re-emerged, with Vilas Muttemwar, the Congress leader from Nagpur, urging his party leadership to create a Vidarbha state (Sarangi 2013:19).

The list of statehood movements in India is very long. In the northeastern state of Manipur, the Kuki tribal people are campaigning for a Kukiland and in the Coorg region of Southern Karnataka state there is support for a separate state for Kodagu people. And Mayawati, the powerful opposition leader in the country's most populous state of Uttar Pradesh, has renewed a demand to divide the state into four smaller units i.e. Harit Pradesh or Paschim Pradesh, Awadh Pradesh, Purvanchal and Bundelkhand.

The demand for carving out a state of Saurashtra from Gujarat is likely to be an issue in the coming elections. The region did have its own identity and was known as the United State of Kathiawar, a conglomeration of princely states. In 1948, it was renamed Saurashtra following persuasion by Ballabhbhai Patel. In 1956, it was merged with Bombay state and subsequently merged with Gujarat state in 1960. The demand for Saurashtra was first raised in 1966 and, then, more seriously, in 1970-71 by an advocate Ratilal Tanna, who was an aide of former Prime Minister Morarji Desai. In 2001, after the earthquake in Kutch, the demand was again made but gathered no steam until 2009 when a Congress MP from Porbandar raised the issue again.

Omar Abdullah, the present Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir said "Telengana state may spur statehood demand for Jammu region". Reacting to the Congress's decision to carve out Telengana from AP, Abdullah said "doing so without a States Reorganization Commission would mean creation of a new state in the country by succumbing to agitational pressure" (India Today, Srinagar, August 3, 2013).

However, in the light of the above reactions as reflected in different regions of the country, the article tries to highlight on how the Telengana issue brought a simmering agitation in the Koshal region affecting the state politics in Odisha? and what are the reasons behind the agitation for demanding a separate Koshal state?

III. POLITICS OF AGITATION IN THE KOSHAL REGION

The creation of Telengana triggered a simmering agitation in the Koshal region demanding a separate Koshal state. The Koshal region or otherwise known as western Odisha basically comprises 10 districts including Sambalpur, Jharsuguda, Sundargarh, Bargarh, Kalahandi, Nuapada, Deogarh, Sonapur, Boudh and Balangir with a population of about 2.5 crores. On August 10, nearly 42 organizations from 10 districts of the Koshal region met in Balangiri and chalked a plan to take forward the movement for Koshal state. The Koshal State Co-ordination Committee, which was formed at the meet, has called a strike in the Koshal region on August 26 to press its demand for a separate Koshal state. The Koshal Kranti Dal (KKD), an emerging political party which was formed in 2007, played an active role in the agitation.

The 12-hour bandh call given by various outfits, demanding a separate Koshal state, paralyzed normal life in western Odisha on August 26, even as lawyers in the region continued with their agitation for a high court bench. While road transport came to a grinding halt in most parts, train services were partly affected. Majority of the educational institutions, government offices and commercial establishments remained closed for the day in 10 districts. "It was a complete and spontaneous bandh as most social outfits, citizen bodies, caste societies and students in the region extended their support to the bandh", Koshal State Coordination Committee leader Pramod Mishra said (Times of India, August 27, 2013). Activists were seen picketing in Sambalpur, Jharsuguda, Sundargarh, Bargarh, Kalahandi, Nuapada, Deogarh, Sonapur, Boudh and Balangiri districts. Markets, banks and other government offices remained closed while several heavy vehicles were stranded on highways passing through the region.

The Sambalpur-Puri Intercity was stalled at Sambalpur Road station for about two hours as activists blocked the railway tracks. Trains passing in the region got delayed by two to four hours. In Bargarh, activists blocked the road by burning tyres. The bandh evoked mixed response in Rourkela. While Rourkela Steel Plant (RSP) functioned as usual, movement of private vehicles in the city was normal. However, educational institutions and markets largely remained closed.

Leaders from several political parties decided to boycott forthcoming Urban Local Body (ULB) elections. The leaders also supported the 'western Odisha bandh' call given by several Bar Associations protesting against the delay in setting up the High Court bench. The continuing agitation for a permanent high court bench in western Odisha and resurrection of the demand for a separate Koshal state for the region threaten to whittle away ruling Biju Janata Dal's (BJD) base in the state's 10 western districts ahead of the Assembly elections barely a year away. In Kalahandi, a western Odisha district, the tribals have turned against the government and rejected the Niyamagiri bauxite mining project which was being supported by the BJD. The situation can be taken advantage of by the opposition parties- the Congress and the BJP.

Currently the Congress Party holds 17 of the 36 Assembly seats in western Odisha followed by 15 of the BJD. The BJP has only three seats but the party is showing the promise of rising once again taking

advantage of the government's lop-sided policies. While the Congress is primarily trying to tap into the tribal vote bank, the BJP is targeting all sections raising the vexed issue of western Odisha's grinding poverty and the loot of its mineral resources to feed industries in the coastal belt. The people of western Odisha are also cut up with the BJD government for having dropped two ministers from the region- Puspendra Singh Deo and AU Singh Deo. This has reduced the number of ministers from the region in Naveen Patnaik's Cabinet. "There is no denying that anti-government feelings are running high in the region. The people now want a separate state. The Naveen Patnaik government is going to pay a heavy price in the next elections for neglecting this region", said KKD leader, Pramod Mishra (Dixit 2013).

IV. REASONS FOR DEMANDING A SEPARATE KOSHAL STATE

It is in the above context, the question arises here is that, why the Koshal region demands a separate state? In order to find out the reasons behind the demand for a separate Koshal state, we have to take into consideration of the problem of regionalism emerged immediately after the merger of princely states into the state of Orissa in the late 1940s.

Geographically, the state of Orissa may be divided into two main regions viz. the coastal plains and the highland. These two distinct areas homogenous in certain defining criteria may be easily distinguished from each other. Under all India demarcation these two regions come under the Eastern Coastal Plains and the Coastal Hills and Plateau regions respectively. The plains which stretch over about one fourth of the total geographical area of the state are the densely populated part and contain almost half of the total population of the state. It is a relatively developed part of the state as regards communication, literacy, education, urbanization and industrialization. Early spread of education in this part which constituted the British administrated area has given rise to a middle class which have come to dominate the administration in view of their overwhelming majority in Government jobs. The Congress leadership as well as that of left parties also comes from this region. On the other hand the highland which is about seventy five percent of the total geographical area of the state constitutes the backward areas. The percentage of literate and educated persons, urbanization and industrialization is low compared with that of coastal plains. What is more significant in the politics is that the backward classes particularly the Scheduled Tribes are in overwhelming majority in the region and are concentrated in certain pockets. All the areas of this region formerly comprised the native states and the zamindaris. Further the northern districts of Sundargarh, Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar which are close to the Chota Nagpur plateau form a distinctive part of the highland. Apart from geographical feature there are some other characteristics of the region such as tribal and backward character of the population, mineral resources, spread of Christianity and rapid growth of industrialization and urbanization etc which distinguish this part from other parts of the state (Mishra 1988:424).

The highland region on the whole is not politically dominant in the state. The leadership of the government of Orissa has been mostly enjoyed by the people belonging to the plains. Out of the ten persons who have acted as the Chief Minister of Orissa from 1952-1977, only two of them belong to the highland. Moreover, this region has very poor representation in the council of ministers of the state excepting in a few ministries formed during this period. In a competitive system all these conditions are very much favorable for the growth of regional rivalry in the state (Mishra 1988:425). The friction between the two regions has given rise to a series of unfortunate clashes, controversies and demand for constitutional safeguards. There have demands to bifurcate the state into Kosal and Utkal constituting the coastal districts into a union territory. Mobilization of student and non-student youths pressing for regional demands is a process of articulating regionalism of the highland. A remarkable development in this direction was the formation of a United Front, known as the Paschim Orissa Sammukshya in 1973 consisting of all the non-Congress parties of the region. The Front condemned the governmental leadership coming from the plains and accused the government of making uneven regional investments and deliberately fostering regional imbalances in the state (Mishra 1988:429).

The articulation of regional consciousness in western Odisha originated since times of merger of princely states in Odisha. On the eve of merger, the rulers of Patna, Kalahandi and Sonepur launched counter-mobilization to resist merger and to form a separate political identity of their own. Meanwhile, the then premier H.K. Mahtab made frantic political efforts to amalgamate the states on linguistic basis. Meanwhile the Kalahandi State Legislative Assembly in its first sitting on 12 August 1946 passed a resolution disapproving the amalgamation of Odisha states. At the conference of 14 December 1947, the Patna ruler pressed for joining of Odisha states with Eastern States Union. The Government of India, however, strongly opted for merging Odia-speaking states with Odisha. At a last resort then, the rulers of Patna, Kalahandi and Sonepur insisted on some form of local autonomy. They alleged that in the absence of local autonomy, power would be totally concentrated in the politically more advanced coastal people, i.e. the 'Katakias' and the Sambalpur states would be completely deprived (Chhada et al. 2011:18).

Katakias and Sambalpur spread the Mahakoshal movement. Later, Angul and Kandhmal were added to demand a Mahakoshal (i.e. greater Koshal) province. It may be noted here that the idea of Koshal province at this stage was based on Odia regional Identity and not on separate linguistic identity. However, with the merger of Odisha states the hopes for Koshal province were buried. Immediately, anti-merger agitation broke out in some key areas of Sambalpur states. Pro-union and anti-corruption slogans were raised at the behest of the ruling chiefs. The Government of Odisha took precautionary measures to prevent any untoward happenings. It follows that the anti-merger resistance marked the beginning of regionalism in Odisha. The pre-merger lobby was identified with coastal region and the anti-merger move was identified with western Odisha.

Close on the heels of the anti-merger resistance came the agitation against the construction of the Hirakud dam. Local chiefs and land owning class of the western region played a vital role in the agitation. Foundation stone was laid at Hirakud in Sambalpur district. But at the same time it led to the submerging of land inhabited by poor persons of the western region. It also involves large-scale displacement and evacuation of people (Supakar 1988:7-8).

Another significant factor for the origin of regionalism was the emergence of the political party called Ganatantra Parishad. The loss of power after integration of states motivated them to launch a regional political party. A few Congress dissidents and disgruntled Prajamandal activists joined hands with the rulers. Within a very short period of time, the party spread through the ex-states areas. Its rise further accentuated regional animosity. It filled the minds of the people with the impression that Congress leadership was biased towards coastal Odisha.

Displacement of people at the time of Rourkela Steel Plant construction in the district of Sundargarh also contributed to the rise of regionalism in Western Odisha. Along with these factors, there were also other factors responsible for the rise of regionalism. The rise in the price of rice caused acute economic hardship to western Odisha people. The sudden transformation of administrative also created considerable stress and strain among the local people of western region. The administrators who were sent by the provincial government, descended in the western region like conquerors and each one of them seemed to feel that he was a little 'Maharaja' (K.V.Rao 1965:101-110).

Post-merger Odisha reveals striking regional cleavages particularly between western Odisha and coastal Odisha. However, there is seemingly a natural difference between the two regions in terms of history, culture, and linguistic/dialectal affiliation. A number of factors may be attributed for the growth of sub-regionalism in Odisha like i) historically, coastal Odisha is associated with the Utkal-Kalinga empires and western Odisha is identified with the Koshal kingdom. The historical record which these empires/kingdoms left behind and the nostalgic sentiment they create in recent times contributed to the growth of sharp regional divide between these two regions; ii) the culture of western Odisha differs significantly from that of coastal districts. The culture of western Odisha is known as the 'Sambalpuri culture' where as the culture of coastal Odisha is dubbed as 'Odia' or 'Kataki' culture. The factor which causes cultural diversity in Odisha is the presence of a sizeable tribal population and out of the total tribal population, quite a large number is found in western Odisha which makes growth of regionalism. The dance style along with the folk songs is also different in these two regions. So far as the festivals are concerned, some typical festivals like Nuakhai, Puspuni, Karamasani, Puo-Juntia, and Bhai-Juntia are observed in western Odisha which are quite unknown to the coastal people; iii) the people of western Odisha speak Sambalpuri as their mother tongue which is regarded as regional or colloquial variation of Odia language. Sambalpuri-Odia speech can be easily distinguished from coastal Odia speech. The difference is noticed at the lexical and phonological levels. The Odia language spoken by the coastal people is referred to as 'Kataki speech' by the western Odisha people and that of Sambalpuri speech as 'adivasi language' by coastal people; iv) socio-economic factors like geographical and demographic, agricultural, employment and occupation, education, health care, infrastructure and urbanization are the root cause of regionalism in Odisha; and v) political cleavages has also promoted regionalism in Odisha. Politics in Odisha assumed new dimensions after merger of princely states with Odisha province. The active participation of ex-princes in Odisha politics led to the formation of Ganatantra Parishad, a regional party, was a significant development in creating political cleavage and regional antagonism. The office of the Chief Minister has been mostly hailed from the coastal region. Between 1952 and 2009, only three Chief Ministers belonged to western Odisha and also this region has a very poor representation in the council of ministers of the state. Along with these factors, marginalization of Koshali/Sambalpuri culture, language and literature as another important factor leading to sub-regionalism and to the support for a separate state. The demand for Koshal state has risen in Odisha mainly on the ground of underdevelopment and state- led discrimination against the region.

V. CONCLUSION

However, what follows from the above statehood demands across the regions in the country, there is a bare need of Second States Reorganization Commission so as to tackle all these demands. In fact, as early as 1997, when the demand for the formation of Uttarakhand out of the hill area of Uttar Pradesh was made, V.P. Singh, who was then the leading dissident member of the ruling party, had come out with the demand for the Second Reorganization Commission. Uttarakhand became a separate state in November 2000. Now that the emergence of Telengana has been officially announced, the chorus for more states is bound to become loud in the days to come. If the smaller states being suitable for better administration are accepted, then there is certainly a case for a Second Reorganization Commission for considering all these demands. But where it will stop? Can India, in its present state of economy, afford this colossal amount of expenditure and administrative confusion? Does the identitarian politics based on region, caste, class, gender, language or ethnicity enable or disable a particular kind of economic development in a culturally diverse and institutionally federal country such as India? These are perhaps the pertinent questions that need to be thoroughly thought out at the very outset so far as the present statehood demand is concerned.

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