

A new governance model for Telangana

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It would certainly help if in the first five or ten years the new state had a Telangana United Front government which included all political parties and which then would dedicate itself to bringing about fast development for the neglected region, says Dr Gautam Pingle in the final part of a two-part series on the new state.

Part I: The battle for Telangana: A historical perspective

With the long sought for statehood for Telangana at hand, it is necessary to remember the sacrifices of over 600 students who died due to police bullets in 1969 and their heirs a generation later, who numbered over a 1,000 and who committed suicide to draw attention of the Congress high command to the promises it made on December 9, 2009 to Parliament and the people of Telangana.

While some people blow themselves up in order to kill innocents; these innocents killed themselves for the cause of Telangana and left their families and friends devastated and having to cope with the loss of a loved one.

This should remind our current Telangana leaders that they carry a heavy responsibility to see that these extraordinary sacrifices are not in vain and those delayed dreams are achieved in the fastest and most efficient way possible.

To do this a new model of governance may be needed. We need to develop our villages, rural road networks, minor irrigation, provide 24 hours power supplies to all villages and towns, primary education and health care, vocational and technical education of our youth and assist in them in finding jobs and livelihoods. It is very tall order and cannot be performed by making speeches and conducting government from a distance from the state capital.

The need for a separate state is basically to build a new political entity within the limits of the Constitution to assist people develop themselves and create more capacity for development. There is no better way for a people deprived of development -- historically and recently -- to advance. Yet what will be its governance pattern? Will it only repeat the old model -- more development for the relatively developed and politically important districts?

The Constitution limits the governance model -- a governor, and legislative assembly, maybe a legislative council and a cabinet. One cannot do anything about the Governor -- who is representative of the President and government of India and the assembly which represents the people. But the council could be dispensed with.

What is needed is to develop the state quickly and equitably across districts and even with only ten districts, the allocation of funds and collection of revenue can be issues decided by power plays. The Telangana leadership should not discriminate against various districts but must take political and bureaucratic administration closer to the people. The cabinet model as practiced may need rethinking. The minister is supposed to make policy and the bureaucrat to implement it.

What happens in reality is the bureaucrat is asked to make policy and the minister implements it in his own way after ensuring the policy is favourable to the interest he represents. The tension between the

two -- minister and bureaucrat; policy and implementation -- make for poor and inefficient governance. The problem, it seems, is with the type of cabinet structure we have been seeing. The competition by ministers and bureaucrats for 'good' posts is only an expression of their intention to derive illegal gains from administering that portfolio.

What does the Constitution say about the cabinet, or more formally, the council of ministers? Article 163 says "(1) There shall be a council of ministers with the chief minister at the head to aid and advise the governor in the exercise of his functions, except in so far as he is by or under this Constitution required to exercise his functions or any of them in his discretion." No more, no less.

It does not say there should be minister of finance or revenue or tourism etc. It therefore gives scope for the council of ministers (15 percent of the assembly strength) to be reshaped by appointing ministers who are appointed to a district portfolio. That is, there will be a minister for Warangal, one for Nizamabad etc. At the state capital, the chief minister -- who will have sole responsibility for law and order and justice -- will be assisted by three core ministers for finance, expenditure and administration.

The rest of the portfolios will remain with the district ministers who, assisted by a devolved bureaucracy, will implement the policy decided by the cabinet. They will be responsible for all the functions of government within the district subject to the overall guidance of the chief minister. They will have an annual district budget -- revenue and expenditure and targets for achievement in all fields -- which then will be reallocated on the basis of assembly constituencies.

The district minister will be an elected representative from the same districts and a small district committee consisting of all the district MLA's will assist him or her regularly and perhaps a wider district council including the panchayat raj elected representatives can meet less regularly.

This will ensure that the elected representatives will have full responsibility to manage the development and administration of the district and their own constituencies and that too in direct view of their constituents who will be able to see them at close quarters and interact with them and secure the satisfaction of their needs. The ministers and MLAs will be more interested in staying in their constituencies where the 'action' will be concentrated rather than hang around the state capital.

Similarly most of the IAS and state bureaucracy will be transferred to the districts to carry on the business of the government in their respective domains and portfolios rather than be concentrated at the state capital politicking for better posts. They campaign for 'better' districts -- but that is not something to worry about at this stage.

Cabinet meetings will be held once a month in the state capital to review progress and performance. Assembly sessions will go on as usual with the CM and core ministers will answer all questions -- with district ministers offering input for specific district level issues.

In this schema, the assembly session will be mild and quick and businesslike as there is nothing much to agitate about. If opposition MLAs have any matter to take up about their constituencies, they will do it more effectively in their district committee.

Only with state level policy and budget issues, will the assembly play a vital role. This can be systematised by making policy making more transparent. Thus policy such as it is will be largely considered by a state planning and policy board consisting of a mix of ministers, bureaucrats and subject specialists. Once it is drafted and discussed in public hearings it will be re-drafted and taken to cabinet and then to the assembly for discussion and approval/rejection.

The main problem will be to find MLAs prepared to be chief minister and core ministers, as their constituencies will feel their absence and this may reflect in adverse vote at the next election!

It would certainly help if in the first five or ten years the new state had a Telangana United Front government which included all political parties and which then would dedicate itself to bringing about fast development for the neglected region.

This would require a considerable effort. It is now time Telangana politicians of all political hues started to think of good and direct governance rather than acquiring the spoils of government.

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