

Regional development boards for AP?

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The issues of unacceptable regional disparities exist in all the large States of India. In the case of regions in Maharashtra, guarantees were enshrined in Article 371(2) of the Constitution enacted in 1956, which said:

"Notwithstanding anything in this Constitution, the President may, by order made with respect to the State of Maharashtra or Gujarat, provide for any special responsibility of the Governor for: (a) the establishment of separate development boards for Vidarbha, Marathwada, and the rest of Maharashtra or, as the case may be, Saurashtra, Kutch and the rest of these boards will be placed each year before the State Legislative Assembly; (b) the equitable allocation of funds for developmental expenditure over the said areas, subject to the requirements of the State as a whole; and (c) an equitable arrangement providing adequate facilities for technical education and vocational training, and adequate opportunities for employment in service under the control of the State Government, in respect of all the said areas, subject to the requirements of the State as a whole."

But only on 30th April, 1994 (38 years later) did the Governor issue an order titled "Development Boards for Vidarbha, Marathwada and the Rest of Maharashtra Order, 1994".. These three Development Boards were constituted, initially for a term of five years which was given further extensions and the date was advanced till April 2010.. The Board members were appointed by the State government. Each Board consists of two Members of the State legislature, one member of local authority and five expert members. The Divisional Commissioner, Chairman of the State Planning Board (ex-officio), one Additional Divisional Commissioner (Member-Secretary) complete the Board.

Activities of the Boards included: (1) Ascertaining relative levels of development in different sectors. (2) Assessing impact of various development efforts, (3) Submission of Annual Reports to the Governor and the State Legislature and (4) Participation in planning process of the state. Thus no real power was granted to the Boards

The total sectoral backlog (between allocation and expenditure) for the three regions, of Rs. 14, 007 crores as of 1st April 1994, was as follows:

1994 in Crores	Vidharbha	Marathwada	RoM	Total
Irrigation	4083	2401	934	7418
Other sectors	2541	1604	2444	6589
Total	6624	4005	3378	14007

By 2007, the backlog was as under:

2007 in Crores	Vidharbha	Marathwada	RoM	Total
Irrigation	2496	721	0	3217
Other sectors	605	542	1109	2256
Total	3101	1263	1109	5473

It has taken almost 13 years to reduce the backlog of 1994 to a third and that too unevenly between regions. Presently this backlog which is being considered for liquidation by March 2010 is only the backlog calculated as on 1st April 1994! Since 1994 more backlog would have been added but has yet to be calculated.

It is clear from the recent experiences of Development Boards in Maharashtra, with all the constitutional guarantees and Governor's specific responsibilities, the problem of underdeveloped minority regions catching up with the developed majority region will not be solved without full political control under a separate statehood.

What is now being contemplated in certain circles in New Delhi as an alternative to full statehood for Telangana is a sort of partial statehood. That is a Telangana Regional Board with a huge grant for the development of the region will be offered as a substitute.

The Board will receive constitutional authority to regulate recruitment, postings and promotions of all government staff, including police and revenue officials. The Board will plan, oversee and implement development projects and other government services such as irrigation, power, roads, schools and health care.

It will also get powers to administer land sales and transfers and safeguard the interests of the sons of the soil. The Board's jurisdiction will naturally include Hyderabad city and the surrounding Rangareddy district, where there have been reports of illegal sale of government and Wakf lands. The State capital will be moved to Gunjur.

Who will administer the Board? It is likely that the Governor will chair the Governing Council which will consist of 11 other members elected directly from each of the 10 Telangana districts and one from Hyderabad city. This would be a good thing as MLAs and MPs have their own commitments to the political parties and also to the legislative organs to which they have been elected. It will also prevent ministerial interference from both Telangana and Seemandhra ministers in the State Cabinet.

The Board will be accountable to Parliament through the Union Ministry of Home Affairs. It will also place its annual reports and action taken reports before the Assembly for information and not for discussion as Parliament will have that sole prerogative of control over the Board. Government officials in Telangana will not be transferred to other regions, and IAS, IPS and IFS officers will have to choose the Telangana sub-cadre.

Annual plan and non-plan budgets will be received directly from the Union government which will approve the same, subject to Parliamentary sanction. The Board will exercise all regulatory functions and collect all taxes and carry out all expenditure in Telangana as per the budget approved by Parliament.

All this effort to make the Telangana Board model achieve better results than the Maharashtra Boards end up almost like conferring statehood. What is more, it is even more complicated than statehood as it raises all sort of issues, such as river water allocation.

And what happens to those from the region who are elected to the State legislature? What role do they have if the elected members of the Board have the real power? Would it not be more attractive to be a member of the Board than of the Assembly?

Vidarbha and Telangana teach us the lesson that culture, politics and development are very local, and when such alliances do not work satisfactorily for over six decades, separation is better than continued bitterness. After the States Reorganization Commission, some 14 States were created in the Northeast, North and Central India. If the boards were so effective, then why is it that these new States were created instead of 14 more regional boards?

The idea that an underdeveloped region without its own political control can progress harmoniously within a dominating political system has proven to be false earlier in Telangana, and also in Vidarbha and Marathwada.

A further complication of this Board model is that it is not acceptable to the Telangana movement or to the political parties supporting Telangana. The Congress Party should bear in mind that this Board or any other arrangement requires the consent of two-thirds of Parliament members. Here the BJP is an important player, being already committed to Telangana statehood. It could easily win a great deal of support in Telangana by voting this proposal down.

As much as trifurcation is the solution to Andhra Pradesh's lopsided development, it is also the only alternative to Maharashtra's failed experiment with Boards. With Sharad Pawar now acknowledging the justice both of Telangana and Vidarbha statehood, one does not need further evidence for this conclusion.

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