

Saurashtra and Kutch: States of Gujarat?

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<http://www.thehansindia.info/News/Article.asp?category=1&subCategory=5&ContentId=22234>

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At Independence, Sardar Patel persuaded all 222 rulers in Saurashtra to form Saurashtra State. Some of these states, almost the size of jagirs elsewhere, were too small for future development. Junagadh had to be annexed as its Nawab opted for Pakistan.

The border princely State of Kutch was put under Central administration. Mainland Gujarat, which had been directly administered by the British, and the princely State of Baroda were made part of Bombay State. A separate Gujarat State was not on the agenda then.

The States Reorganization Commission (SRC) recommended the division of Bombay State into Maharashtra (with addition of Hyderabad-Marathwada) and Gujarat (with the addition of Saurashtra and Kutch). However, Vidarbha was added to Bombay State.

This altered the demography and politics against the Gujaratis; so Saurashtra and Kutch were also added to Bombay State! But the Maharashtrians who wanted a separate State were not happy, and their agitation continued. And soon the Maha Gujarat movement also began and, by 1960, Bombay State was divided into Maharashtra and Gujarat (Mainland Gujarat.

Saurashtra and Kutch). In new Gujarat, Saurashtra politicians held power. This helped Saurashtra swallow the bitter pill of lost statehood but population and politics would soon put the Mainland Gujarati elite in control.

The Saurashtra peninsula had always been a separate entity. Even physically it was cut off from the mainland by the sea link between the head of the Gulf of Kutch to the head of the Gulf of Cambay. The 1812 earthquake closed that link and left behind a low depression with the Nal Lake as a reminder of past geological and geopolitical reality.

Kutch was almost an island, cut off from Sind by the Great Rann to its north, on its east from the mainland by the Little Rann and by the Gulf of Kutch on its south and the Arabian Sea to its west. It had its own history and culture. It was geographically a part of Sind and a part of the Indus River delta where a branch of the river, till the 1812 earthquake, flowed into the Great Rann.

The Sultans of Gujarat ruled only in the mainland with Saurashtra and Kutch paying tribute but autonomous in all matters. The trade and commerce of Saurashtra and that of Cambay was a vital part of the Mughul Empire.

It was also here that the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca began and ended. The British played the same role and left the Saurashtra princes and the Kutch ruler more or less to their own.

There has been extraordinary progress of all Gujarat regions, except perhaps the tribal districts. Even these have lately been doing well in terms of development. The gigantic Narmada project brings water to the entire mainland and branch canals take its water to Saurashtra and even Kutch.

Gujarat's per capita income in 2010-11 at Rs 64,000 compares favorably with the All-India figure of Rs 46,000. The population below the poverty line (2004-05) is only 17% compared with the All-India figure of 28%.

In rural areas, it is 19 % for Gujarat and 28% for All-India. Gujarat's urban population (reportedly 50% of the total of 5 crores) has only 13% poor compared to 26 % for All-India. By 2010, agriculture, forestry, fishing and mining sectors together employed only 2% of the total workforce.

But these sectors have grown by a phenomenal 12.9% per annum between 1999 and 2009. Industry gives employment to 41% of the workforce and services make up the remainder! In 2000, Saurashtra had 66,166 small-scale units, while Kutch had 4,780, out of a State total of 2, 51,088.

Surat's diamond-cutting industry, the huge fertilizer, petrochemical and oil refining sector and the rush of industrialists to set up in Gujarat is well known. The State is well on its way to achieve its full economic potential. Gujarat's Diaspora, which spread all over the world, is a resourceful and effective force for the all-round development of the State.

Gujarat has a vibrant agriculture, producing in 2008-09 cotton (7 million tonnes), wheat (3 million tons), sugarcane (15 million tonnes), groundnut (1.4 million tonnes) and milk (8 million tons). Saurashtra and Kutch have nearly 10 lakh hectares under irrigated cotton cultivation and five lakh hectares devoted to irrigated wheat.

Its groundnut cultivation and oil-milling sector is a critical national sector. Extensive cultivation and marketing of seed cotton for cotton growers in Punjab and elsewhere is also an important activity.

This agricultural progress was a result of the irrigated area increasing between 1999 and 2008 by 38 lakh hectares in the mainland and an equal 38 lakh hectares in Saurashtra and Kutch – with the tribal districts seeing an increase of 4.6 lakh hectares. However, most of the irrigation in Saurashtra and Kutch is well-irrigation while the mainland has canal irrigation also.

Gujarat has six major cities – Gandhinagar (political capital), Ahmedabad, Vadodra, Surat in the mainland and Bhavnagar and Rajkot in Saurashtra. It has 42 ports along the long coastline (including Kandla in Kutch) and 13 airports. It has a 2,200-kilometer integrated gas grid.

Its installed capacity of power generation is 13,908 MW from 24 power stations in the State and even five outside the State! Its 18,000 villages are supplied with 24-hour, three-phase power and a water grid connects 9,600 villages. There is no shortage of power.

Despite all these extraordinary developments, the statehood movements for Saurashtra and Kutch are neither dead nor dormant.

The movement for restoration of Saurashtra State has seen mobilizations in 1966-67, 1970 and 1971. In 2001, the banner was raised again by trade and industry circles as a reaction to the poor allocation of earthquake relief and rehabilitation.

In 2005, it revived again, this time led by the Saurashtra Oil Millers Association (SOMA), which felt the State government had neglected the region, its groundnut farmers and oil millers.

In 2009 (partly triggered by the Union Government's decision to grant Statehood to Telangana), the Saurashtra Sankalan Samithi returned to the issue supported by 300 business, industrial and social associations of Saurashtra and Kutch.

The issues were about inadequate infrastructure, including lack of SEZs and other complaints. A former Minister complained: "People from Saurashtra are often taunted with titles such as "kathiawadi" and "via Viramgam"". Kutch also claims that it contributed Rs. 700 crores to State revenues and Rs. 1,500 crores to Central revenues and did not get back enough in development.

Saurashtra makes similar and larger claims. The BJP MP and the BJP Saurashtra-Kutch in-charge, Vijay Rupani, is quoted as saying: "In Gujarat, one cannot miss balanced growth. The demand for separate statehood for Kutch never became a movement because people never found a need. Since the BJP has come to power, there has been an overall growth of the regions, be it Saurashtra or Kutch".

Yet, if the Congress Government in Delhi is to concede statehood for Telangana, Vidarbha and the four new States out of UP, can Saurashtra-Kutch, despite their development in recent times, be far behind? The demand for statehood is not always based on economic deprivation – real or perceived.

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