

U-turns on Telangana

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- By Gautam Pingle

The Telangana statehood has many sympathisers. The NDA-appointed Pranab Mukherjee Committee received letters of support for Telangana from Mr I. K. Gujral, Mr Chandrasekhar, Mr V.P. Singh and Mr H.D. Deva Gowda (all former PMs) and also from Mr Lalu Yadav, Ms Mayawati, Mr Sharad Pawar, Ms Mehbooba Mufti, Mr George Fernandes, and Mr Prakash Singh Badal. Mr Yadav understood what was driving the movement.



He wrote: "The people of the region have been fighting for it for more than a half-a-century. It is a people's movement in real sense. This movement has always been solidly backed by every section of the people of the region. Intellectuals, government employees, students remained although, as the backbone of the movement. And now, it has percolated down to the agrarian sector and the working classes.... The people of this region strongly feel and they have every reason to feel so — that they can no longer live in the integrated state of Andhra Pradesh with self respect and dignity."

All these were non-Congress leaders. The BJP has always been consistent supporters. But the NDA was prevented in granting statehood to Telangana only because, as Mr Advani wrote in his memoir, of objection by Mr Chandrababu Naidu and the TD — its major coalition partner. Since 2009, however, the TD and Mr Naidu has also supported Telangana statehood. The Congress has in 2004 and again in 2009 promised statehood for Telangana in its election manifestos. The riddle is why was there the delay since at least 2009?

The answer may lie in two significant actors holding opposite views at the same time. Mr Naidu and Y. S. Rajasekhara Reddy were candidates for the post of chief minister in Andhra Pradesh in 2009. One can understand their desire to rule the state while promising to divide it — this sort of hypocrisy comes easily to Andhra politicians.

However, the present Union home minister, Mr P. Chidambaram, is now the main actor in the final phase of Telangana statehood movement. It is interesting to recall that as early as 18th May, 2003, he wrote in the Indian Express referring to the Bibek Debroy-Lavash Bhandari Report that: “The report makes out a nearly uncontestable case for small states. With hindsight it is possible to say that the divisions of Punjab and Maharashtra were wise decisions; otherwise would Haryana and Gujarat have recorded such impressive development?”

He went on to say: “In my view, there is a strong case for the creation of Vidharbha (out of Maharashtra, population 9.67 crore) and Telangana (out of Andhra Pradesh population 7.57 crore). Uttar Pradesh and Bihar should also be further divided.”

Mr Chidambaram five months later again in Indian Express on October 5, 2003 wrote an article headed “A Telangana State May be Answer to Deal with Naxalite Menace”. Therein he said: “Surprisingly the Naxalite movement has survived in Andhra Pradesh. It has found sanctuary in the districts of Telangana and in the border districts of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. It is not a co-incidence that these and the most backward, poor and neglected districts in these three states. Successive chief ministers of Andhra Pradesh have tried different measures to stamp out the movement but with little success.”

Praising Mr Naidu’s “good understanding of economic principles” he also stated that he was a “trier and doer”. But, “despite his good intentions, the Telangana region remains backward. It is the story of the chicken and egg. On one hand, the region remains backward and neglected because it is torn by strife caused mainly by the Naxalites. On the other hand, the region is hospitable to the Naxalites because it is backward and neglected.”

He thought: “Someone — or something has to break this logjam”. He went on, “the answer does not lie in police action. Perhaps there may be an answer if the people of the region are empowered in a different way, and new opportunities are created for the disaffected sections to gain political power and a say in the governance of the region.” Mr Chidambaram concluded: “Strange as it seems, the option of a new state of

Telangana may turn out to be the answer to deal with the menace of Naxalite terrorism.” To prove his point, police data indicate that while in 2003 there were 923 Naxalite related incidents and 326 fatalities, after the announcement by him of Telangana statehood on 9th December 2009, the year 2010 saw only 183 incidents and 47 fatalities from Naxalites.

If Mr Chidambaram holds the same view as cited above, he should rubbish at once the conclusions of the Chapter 8 of the Srikrishna Committee written by Mr V.K. Duggal, the former home secretary, sent to him in a sealed cover which takes exactly the opposite view. While Mr Chidambaram sees statehood as a solution to Telangana’s poor governance, underdevelopment, backwardness and neglect as well as a counter to Naxalism, Mr Duggal says that statehood would result in poverty, backwardness, unemployment and Naxalite and terrorism and communal riots.

Who is right? Mr Chidambaram or Mr Duggal? Is the decision a personal one of a few actors or a fulfillment of solemn promises to 40 million people of Telangana?