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Telangana's Pak cousin

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- By Gautam Pingle

Bahawalpur state in Pakistan and Hyderabad state in India have interesting parallels.

Both states were founded in the early 18th century — Hyderabad in 1724 and Bahawalpur in 1727 — by Muslim dynasties.

Hyderabad's population was, of course, largely Hindu (85 per cent) while Bahawalpur's, largely Muslim (83 per cent). Both states were annexed by the new nation-states of India and Pakistan — Hyderabad in 1948 and Bahawalpur in 1951.

Each of these feudal states, while resisting democratic forces, managed to build schools, colleges and even a university. Railways were laid and irrigation encouraged. They had their own administrative and judicial system. They had their high court, Legislative Assembly, accountant general's office and public service commission.

In Hyderabad's case, it even had its own currency and Army. Both states stood out as financially sound. Like Hyderabad, Bahawalpur had surpluses of Rs 19.17 crore in 1954-1955, more than those of East Pakistan (Rs 3.27 crore) and North-West Frontier Province (Rs 1.19 crore) and Sindh (Rs 0.54 crore) and, of course, Punjab which had a deficit of Rs 0.88 crore.

The Telangana region of Hyderabad alone generated surpluses of Rs 51 lakh before it was merged with Andhra Pradesh.

When Bahawalpur was merged with other western provinces to make one unit — West Pakistan in 1954 — its surpluses helped stabilise West Pakistan and maintain financial comparability with East Pakistan. However, Bahawalpur does not seem to have gained much from the merger — which is no surprise.

Much of the government land seems to have been allotted to officers of the armed forces and bureaucrats from outside Bahawalpur.

Considerable passions arose in Bahawalpur over lack of consideration on irrigation matters. The Sutlej, which borders the former state, is reportedly dry, and much blame is placed on upper-riverine Punjab for this state of affairs.

When it comes to allocating the waters of the Indus — it is usually divided between North Punjab and Sindh and South Punjab (of which Bahawalpur is a part) gets step-motherly treatment.

Another grouse is of language. Seraiki, the language of South Punjab and Bahawalpur, is not quite Punjabi and there seems to be a feeling of disrespect for Seraiki as a result of the dominant Punjabi media and culture. All the ingredients of trouble were present at the time of the merger. These were aggravated when the West Pakistan unit was dissolved in 1970 and all the old provinces were restored — but Bahawalpur was not.

In the elections of 1970, the Bahawalpur movement (Mahaz) got five of the 12 national parliamentary seats and 10 seats in the Punjab Assembly. The candidates supporting a separate province got 80 per cent of the votes cast. But what with the separation of Bangladesh, this movement died down in the interest of preservation of Pakistan's shaky residual state.

About the same time, the Telangana agitation of 1969-70 also resulted in electoral majorities for the Telangana Praja Samiti in the general election of 1971 but again the movement was suppressed by a combination of betrayal by local leaders, the Congress Party considerations and assurances of future fair play.

Now again as the Telangana movement gains ground here, the Bahawalpur one has got going over the last two years. With the leadership of Mohamed Ali Durrani, the former federal information minister, all the four districts in Bahawalpur (Bahawalpur, Bahawalnagar, Lodhran and Rahim Yar Khan) have passed resolutions in favour of a separate Bahawalpur province.

This has triggered a wider movement for a separate Seraiki Province with the politically powerful Punjabi-speaking groups (Gujjars, Cheemas and Dogars) also backing either a revival of Bahawalpur province or a new all-inclusive Seraiki Province of the southern Punjab.

The most interesting part is that, unlike in the past, Punjabi settlers' leaders living in Bahawalpur provinces have supported restoration and also joined hands with the Seraiki speakers in the area.

The Pakistan's Prime Minister, Mr Yousaf Raza Gilani, a few months ago, spoke favourably of a Seraiki province. Babar Awan, Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP) leader and former law minister, at a press conference recently promised that the party would give "a (piece of) good news to Seraiki-speaking people during Ramzan". Many interpreted this to mean that the party, but not the government, is going to announce its support for a Seriaki province.

However, Mr Durrani objects to Bahawalpur being clubbed with the Seraiki areas and demands a separate state and has no objection to one for Seraiki. In our context this is like trying to club Rayalaseema with Telangana. More political machinations are to be expected there also!

The PPP and the Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid have an overwhelming presence in the southern districts of Punjab with 36 seats compared to the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz's 12. Comprising over a dozen districts, the region has around 50 national Assembly constituencies. What fairness could not achieve, political expediency seems to lend a hand.

Obviously, the movement towards smaller political units is alive and kicking both in Pakistan and in India. The parallels with Bahawalpur/Seraiki and Telangana are fascinating. Maybe this Ramzan will herald a gift to Telangana as well!

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