

Vidarbha: Telangana's cousin in distress

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The Vidharbha region of Maharashtra consists of six districts of the ancient Bhonsle kingdom of Nagpur (annexed 1853 by the British) and five districts of Berar (a province of the Nizam's Hyderabad State leased to the British in 1853). Both are known for their vast cotton-growing areas, and they formed part of the Central Provinces of British India.

Vidharbha has two-thirds of Maharashtra's mineral resources, three-fourths of the forest resources and is surplus in power. It covers 32% of the State and has a population of 20 million: 21% of the State population. It sends 10 MPs to the Lok Sabha and has 62 seats in the 288-member State Assembly. Nagpur is its major city.

On October 1, 1938, the Central Provinces Legislature passed a unanimous resolution to create a separate State of Mahavidharbha. The movement was seriously launched in 1947 when it was realised that, with the end of the British rule, Berar province would legally revert to the Nizam of Hyderabad.

By August 1947, political leaders came to an agreement, commonly known as the Akola Pact that contemplated Maharashtra with the two sub-provinces with separate legislatures and Cabinets, etc. It was a constitutionally unworkable proposition and soon disowned by all parties.

The Dar Commission in 1948 stated: "We are satisfied that public opinion is still in its formative stage in Vidharbha and it does not know its own mind. In these circumstances, it will not be possible to form a province of Maharashtra with Vidharbha".

The 1953 "Nagpur Agreement", signed by Y B Chavan, Morarji Desai and other politicians, envisaged a merger with Bombay State based on assurances and guarantees for Vidharbha and Marathawada.

The States Reorganization Commission, however, in 1955 recommended that Vidharbha should remain a separate State as it was financially sound and its people had a deep-rooted regional consciousness. Despite this, Vidharbha was merged with bilingual Bombay State in 1956 and since 1960 remained part of Maharashtra.

The reason was simple. The Samyukta Maharashtra Samithi (SMS) was gaining popularity for a State for all Marathi-speaking people and including Bombay City. In the 1957 General Election, the SMS won 101 seats out of 133 in Western Maharashtra, including 12 from Mumbai.

The SMS was a combine of the Communist Party and the Socialist Party. For the Congress, Vidharbha – where it won 62 out of the 66 seats - was crucial in retaining its tenuous hold in the Bombay Assembly.

The only way Congress could retain power in Maharashtra was by annexing Vidharbha before the strength of its Gujarat wing departed with the formation of Gujarat. The Nagpur Agreement had

established the guarantees for the regions. Its salient features were:

1. Vidharbha, Marathwada and Rest of Maharashtra (RoM) - would be treated as separate regions for all type of development and administration.

2. Allocation of funds would be on the basis of population but special attention will be given to Marathwada

3. The three regions would be given representation in proportion to population in (a) composition of government (b) admission to all educational institutions in vocational, scientific, professional or other specialised training (c) the services of all grades under government or government controlled enterprises.

4. People of Vidharbha would have the advantages derived from Nagpur, as the capital of their State, preserved.

Thus Vidharbha's history is similar to that of Telangana.

Marathwada's four districts were even part of Hyderabad State like Telangana.

Both mergers involved the linguistic angle, the Congress Party interest and, above all, purported to level the cultural, economic and political differences, which existed for hundreds of years. Even the conditions of merger; the Gentlemen's Agreement on Telangana is similar to the Nagpur Agreement. But, unlike the former, the latter was enshrined in Article 371(2) of the Constitution in 1956.

But, again, it was only in 1994 – 38 years later – that a Presidential Order was issued making, among other things, the Governor responsible for supervision and allocation of Plan funds to Vidharbha and Marathwada – again unlike in Telangana. But providing budgets was one thing and spending them another. The backlog (gap) between allocation and expenditure in the regions was great.

The “Dandekar Committee on Regional Imbalance” had given its recommendation in 1984, which had not been accepted by the State Government. Eleven years later another “Indicators and Backlogs Committee (IBC)” was set up in 1995 and reported in 2000 (another five years later!).

The Planning Commission, in its “Report of the Fact- Finding Team on Vidharbha” (RFFTV) of 2006 commented: “The delay in implementing the budgetary consequences of having willingly joined Vidharbha to Maharashtra in its very constitution as a State is by itself a measure of the inadequacy of the intentions of the Government of Maharashtra over the past more than a decade” (p.15).

In simple language, it means that Vidharbha (like Marathawada) was let down, betrayed and robbed of its promised budgetary allocations.

The IBC arrived at the total sectoral backlog of Rs.14, 007 crores as of 1st April 1994. The Table below gives the break up in crores of rupees (RFFTV, page 73).

	Vidharbha	Marathawada	RoM	Total
Irrigation	4083	2401	934	7418
Other sectors	2541	1604	2444	6589
Total	6624	4005	3378	14007

From 1982 to 2002, the irrigation backlog grew from 38% to 62% for Vidharbha and from 23% to 33% for

Marathwada, while for the RoM it declined from 39% to 5%!! By 2007, this backlog was 70% for Vidharbha, 30% for Marathwada and “nil” for RoM. The neglect was in the past, but also it continued to get worse.

The RFFTV states: “Other regions of the State which were behind Vidharbha at the time of Independence in irrigation development have now marched ahead in the post-Independence period” (p.88).

As far as power is concerned, the backlog of energy situation of pump sets, as of April 2005, for

Vidharbha was 215,099, for Marathawada 109,073, while RoM had an excess of 357,320 pump sets energised.

The RFFTV commented: "The common refrain is that though majority of electric power is produced in Vidharbha and energy requirement of Vidharbha in particular for energisation of agricultural pumps is not fulfilled as compared to Western Maharashtra (RoM)" (p.94).

It went on: "The reason for the enormous difference is not the water table level but the huge pendency of applications by farmers who have applied for electric connections" (p.95).

The idea that an underdeveloped region without its own political control can progress harmoniously within a dominating political system has proven to be false. The Telangana Regional Council was a short-lived experiment, killed deliberately as it was unacceptable to the ruling State elite.

For Vidharbha, with all the good intentions of the rest of Maharashtra, that merger also has not worked and discontent is rife. Both mergers are different - yet alike. As Leo Tolstoy wrote in Anna Karenina: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way".

Vidharbha and Telangana teach us the lesson that culture, politics and development is very local, and when such alliances do not work satisfactorily for over five decades, separation is better than continued bitterness.

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