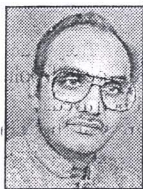


# Feeding regional aspirations

## GUEST COLUMN

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THE DEMAND for smaller states needs to be understood better, not brushed aside — even if the leaders spearheading the campaign are a disgruntled political lot.

Six undercurrents for “smaller” states today include: (1) distinct geographical and cultural identities, (2) depleting natural resources and increasing unemployment problem, (3) visible infrastructure development and their imbalanced location (4) increased exposure to modern media of communication, (5) Panchayat Raj initiatives for decentralised governance and (6) competitive politics. More recently, with declining water flows in rivers, sharing irrigation water has become a sore issue as never before. Ignoring these sensitivities will only mean encouraging separatist elements.

Earlier efforts to take care of some such sensitivities were not followed up earnestly, consistently and transparently. Such efforts included setting up of a Regional Authority or a Board, sharing

by turn of certain elected positions, holding at least one session of state legislature in the other region, entitling of “locals” for employment and even special budgetary allocation. But these have not helped in appeasing emotions and dispelling apprehensions.

To add to these is frequent elections where winning is all that matters and at any cost. What else explains the tendency that even after several decades of existence of linguistic states, some regions continue to feel neglected. The extensive reach of mass media, unlike a couple of decades ago, has not helped with any healing touch. In fact, it is contrary. Both Telengana and Vidarbha are examples. As backwardness and apprehensions of people were responsible for periodic separatist agitations, has there been any change in this regard? Latest Centre for Media Studies (CMS) study has interesting revelations.

Almost half of Telengana people do not consider themselves better off economically compared to ten years ago. Half of Telengana people, in fact, two-thirds in the case of educated ones, do not think Andhra Pradesh is more “unified” or “integrated” today than it was 10

years ago. Feelings in Vidarbha are no different. What measures are taken, by the government and outside, to avoid such a feeling?

Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister and TDP chief Chandrababu Naidu has been talking and reiterating for some time that a smaller state (of Telengana) is not good for development.

But do leaders advocating a separate state reflect the feelings of people? Not more than one-third of voters in Telengana think so. In fact, nearly half of Telengana voters feel that leaders, who are advocating a separate state, are promoting their own interests. In fact, 58 per cent of graduates think so. The trend is similar in urban and rural areas. Nevertheless, most of them support the idea of a separate state.

There is no consistent and reasoned campaign by political parties or civic society today in favour of a unified state as a few years ago — both in Vidarbha and Telengana. The TDP and Shiv Sena perhaps are an exception. Both in Vidarbha and Telengana about a quarter of people are against separation. But they are not vocal. Also, more than a quarter of people would like to

see some other option be explored instead of pursuing separation.

About 41 per cent do not support the idea of a “separate Telengana”. In fact, half of urban voters do not support a separate Telengana. Nearly 30 per cent has no idea or not sure. Unlike in Telengana, a much higher percentage of voters in Vidarbha think that they are economically better off today than they were ten years ago. Nevertheless, three-fourth of the people polled think that districts in Vidarbha region have been neglected. That is how 70 per cent of voters, across all sections and communities, support the idea of a separate state of Vidarbha. About 23 per cent do not support while 34 per cent of voters think there is no other way than formation of a separate state. Little over half of voters, however, feel that some other option should be explored. Three-fourth of Marathas support a separate Vidarbha state. Relatively more in urban, as in Telengana, support a separate state idea. And, also more among educated ones.

How can we expect the states to remain intact and unified if there is no civic society spirit sustaining integration? Today it is Vidarbha or Telengana, tomorrow it could be any other State. ■

— The author is a well-known psephologist