

Identity Politics and Statehood Movements in India

Rajat Ganguly
(Murdoch University, Australia)

Introduction

This study explores the reasons behind the political mobilization of minority ethnic groups in support of separate statehood status within the Indian federation to be achieved by breaking-up existing states.

India is fast emerging as a major regional and global power. The socio-political stability of India is thus directly relevant to India's national interest. However, ethnic conflicts continue to jolt the Indian political landscape. How India manages its diversity and meets the challenges posed by ethnic conflicts will largely determine its future stability, wellbeing and development trajectory. A key hypothesis of this study is that the administrative break-up of India into smaller states/provinces is not a bad thing and will not lead to the balkanization of the country. Rather, small states may lead to greater satisfaction of ethno-nationalist aspirations, economic and administrative efficiency, democratic deepening and strengthening of federalism, stakeholder participation in local/provincial development, and opportunities for delivering good governance. Hence, statehood arrangements may offer a way of managing India's ethnic diversity and separatist challenges.

We define an ethnic group as either "a large or small group of people, in either traditional or advanced societies, who are united by a common inherited culture (including language, music, food, dress, and customs and practices), racial similarity, common religion, and belief in common history and ancestry and who exhibit a strong psychological sentiment of belonging to the group" (Taras and Ganguly 2006: 1). Moreover, ethnic groups can be either homelands societies or diaspora communities. Homelands societies usually make territorial claims over the area where they live based on long-term residence. By contrast, diaspora communities are mostly concerned with protecting and promoting the political, economic and socio-cultural rights and opportunities of their members in a foreign country (Esman 1994). In this study, we are concerned only with homeland societies.

Research Puzzle

In the aftermath of independence, even as Indian political elites accepted ethnic plurality and worked to promote and strengthen such diversity, they agreed that national integration and national development required the creation of a secular and federal polity.

Elite consensus on the need to create a secular state had existed prior to independence. The debate after independence therefore shifted to the specifics: what kind of secularism is to be promoted and how to obtain the right balance between accepting the preferences of the majority community while at the same time protecting the interest of the minorities. In this context, as constitutional provisions and practice indicates, Indian secularism does not mean the strict separation between church and state but rather the recognition and promotion of all religious communities by the state (Hardgrave, Jr. 1993).

The idea of a federal polity also had historical roots and "was envisaged as a project to ensure reasonable national agreement across regions and communities to support and develop durable political order" (Dasgupta 2001: 54). But at the same time, Indian leaders were mindful of the dangers of federalism in the form of ethnic secession and balkanization of the state. Hence, as Ambedkar stated in the Constituent Assembly, "though India was to be a federation, the federation was not the result of an agreement by the states to join in a federation, and that the federation not being the result of an agreement no State has the right to secede from it" (Constituent Assembly Debates, Vol VII: 43, quoted here from Dasgupta 2001: 56). Indian federation was therefore to be a "division for convenience of administration while the country continued to be one integrated whole" (Dasgupta

2001: 56). The main benefit of India's federal design then was to be that it would allow the state to accommodate ethnic plurality and encourage cultural distinctiveness without allowing any one ethnic group to dominate at the national or federal level. It was also anticipated that cultural conflicts within each state would seldom spill over into other states. The Centre could thus compartmentalize and more effectively manage centre-state frictions and contain conflicts within states more easily (Hardgrave 1993).

Along with constitutional provisions, the political party system that evolved in post-independence India was designed to manage ethnic differences and conflict. During the freedom struggle, the main political organization was the Indian National Congress. The Congress was a large democratic 'umbrella' organization that included groups, interests and opinions of various shades, colours and regions. Broadly, it espoused socialist democratic ideology and populist welfarist policies. As the vanguard of the nationalist movement, the Congress naturally emerged as the dominant political party after independence. Although India adopted a multi-party system, for the first two decades after independence the Congress' hold over Indian politics was almost total. But from the mid-1960s onwards, India gradually witnessed the growth of regional parties and some were able to challenge the Congress in state elections by tapping into ethno-linguistic, religious and regional sentiments. The Congress, under Indira Gandhi's leadership, increasingly resorted to undemocratic, illegal and draconian measures to retain its monopoly over political power at the centre and in several states. This creeping authoritarianism, which criminalized the Indian polity, politicized the bureaucracy and security agencies and rode roughshod over opponents of the Congress party, eventually resulted in a suspension of democracy in 1975 with the declaration of the Emergency. Forced by popular pressure to withdraw the Emergency and hold national elections in 1977, the Congress party lost power for the first time at the centre against an opposition consisting of a coalition of smaller national and regional parties. Over the next three decades, the phenomenal rise of regional parties and leaders, the gradual weakening of the Congress both politically and organizationally, the emergence of the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the formation of weak coalition governments at the centre have collectively contributed a great deal to the outbreak and spread of ethnic conflict in India.

India's choice of development model after independence was also aimed to contain and mitigate ethnic problems and conflicts. The model was based "upon a system of indicative plans within a mixed economic structure in which both private capital and a state-owned public sector" played a major role (Currie 1996: 793). The major objective of the model was to "promote rapid and balanced economic growth with equity and justice" (Dandekar 1988, quoted in Currie 1996: 793). This commitment to social welfare accorded a significant role to the Indian centre in the socio-economic development of ethnic communities and allowed it to directly regulate both politics and economy in India. In practice, however, development of different ethnic groups and regions of the country was hardly balanced, thereby raising feelings of relative deprivation across communities and provinces.

In spite of the best efforts of Indian leaders to create institutions, structures and processes to deal effectively and fairly with ethnic aspirations and demands, ethnic conflicts occurred with regular frequency in India. The administrative reorganization of the Indian state that was carried out in the 1950s strengthened ethno-linguistic and regional identities by accepting the demand for the creation of provinces based on broad ethno-linguistic criteria. Such demands had been voiced before independence but never acted upon by the British for fear of strengthening ethno-nationalist sentiments. In the traumatic initial post-partition years, the Indian government too was hesitant to endorse the idea of ethno-linguistic provinces out of fear that this could lead to the balkanization of the country (Phadke 1974; Brass 1994). But in 1953, the States Reorganization Commission was established, which eventually led to the enactment of the States Reorganization Act of 1956. Under this Act, 14 states and 5 Union Territories were set up. Subsequent reorganizations and creation of more new states essentially followed the basic principle that major ethno-linguistic groups ought to have their separate states within the Indian Union.

The states reorganization of the 1950s did not put a stop to demands for the creation of new states based on notions of ethno-linguistic and regional 'identity'. For example, in 1960, mainly due to the agitations of Marathi and Gujarati speaking populations of the state of Bombay, the Bombay Reorganization Act was passed and the linguistic states of Maharashtra and Gujarat were created. Similarly, in 1966, the Hindi-speaking state of Haryana was created by dividing the Punjab. In the northeast, the Indian government finally tried to bring the Naga insurgency to a close by accepting the Nagas' demand for a separate state; hence, in 1962, three districts of Assam were detached to create the new state of Nagaland. In the early 1970s, three further new states—Meghalaya, Manipur and

Tripura—were created in the northeast. The demands for new states, however, did not stop there. In West Bengal, the Gorkhas of Darjeeling and the Rajbanshis of Cooch Behar have for long agitated for the creation of a separate Gorkhaland and Kamtapur. In Assam, the Bodos have made a similar demand. The Telengana agitation in Andhra Pradesh, the movement to create Vidharbha in Maharashtra, and the demand for a separate state of Jammu are all cases with relatively long histories of political agitation.

In the past decade, a few of these movements succeeded in their quest for separate statehood when the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government in New Delhi authorized the break-up of Madhya Pradesh to create Chattisgarh, Bihar to create Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh to create Uttaranchal. While these successes are noteworthy, equally striking is the relatively large number of similar movements that are waiting in the wings in several other states. Further state break-ups thus look inevitable in the future. Already the on-going statehood agitations in various parts of the country have resulted in turbulence and violence in national, state and local politics. If these agitations remain unresolved, they have the potential to further destabilize the country and adversely affect socio-economic growth and development.

Research Questions, Hypotheses & Design

The main research questions that this study will address are:

- Why has there been a growth in separatist sentiments among minority ethnic groups in different parts of India? What reasons lie behind the formation and persistence of the statehood movements and demands?
- What is the probability of success of statehood movements in the context of the Indian central government's recent decision to sanction the break-up of three existing states to create three new ones? Would separate statehood actually work to make life better for the people of the state? What would be the consequences of state break-up for those states that are to be broken up to create new states?

Given India's ethnic diversity and the causal complexity of ethnic conflicts, it is useful to regard ethnic political mobilization as the product of convergent causal conjunctures—this is the idea of “chemical causation”, first developed by John Stuart Mill, which suggests that a phenomenon emerges from the intersection of appropriate conditions; if any one of the essential ingredients are absent, then the phenomenon does not emerge (Ragin 1987). This is the approach that we wish to follow in this research project.

Drawing on a wide ranging theoretical literature, one can argue that four broad causal conditions usually have a bearing upon ethnic political mobilization, movements and agitations:

First, ethnic groups' fear of assimilation or cultural dilution and unfulfilled national aspirations may spark ethnic political mobilization and conflict (Glazer and Moynihan 1975; Enloe 1973; Horowitz 1985; Smith 1986; Armstrong 1982; Connor 1972, 1973; Heraclides 1991).

Second, the process of modernization, by inducing large scale population migrations, by raising standards of literacy and aspiration levels, and by forcing ethnic groups to live in close proximity to and compete with other groups for rewards and resources, may sharpen ethnic groups' socio-political awareness and increase their capacity to politically mobilize for collective action (Enloe 1973; Horowitz 1985; Gurr 1993; Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Rokkan 1970).

Third, unequal development of ethnic groups, poverty, exploitation, lack of opportunity and threat to existing group privileges may engender strong feelings of relative deprivation among ethnic groups and spark ethno-political movements and agitations (Gellner 1969; Hechter 1975; Hechter and Levi 1979; Galtung 1974; Krippendorf 1979). Conversely, rapid economic growth may offer an economic lifeline to ethnic groups and incentivise the creation of economically and administratively viable small states in direct relationship with the central government within a federal polity (Hannan 1979; Nielsen 1985; Ragin 1977; Tilly 1978; Becker 1994; Alesina and Spolaore 1995).

Finally, political factors such as the endemic mal-governance, rise of regional political parties and formation of weak coalition governments at the centre may also contribute significantly to the outbreak of ethno-political movements (Gurr 1993, 1994, 2000; Fukuyama 2004).

How have these causal conditions combined to produce ethnic statehood agitations and demands in India?

It is possible to hypothesize that although states in post-independent India were reorganized on the basis of ethno-linguistic criteria, the policy failed to eradicate the problem of 'entrapped ethnic groups' as many newly created states within the Indian federation continued to include peripheral ethnic groups that were linguistically and culturally different from and politically and economically subordinate to the majority ethno-linguistic communities that wielded power in the states (Hardgrave and Kochanek 1990: 123-44). Many of these entrapped ethnic groups had strong nationalist aspirations of self-rule within the Indian polity and were expectant that the States Reorganization Commission would consider their case with sympathy. When that did not happen, these groups felt frustrated and aggrieved. In the years following the states reorganization, these ethnic groups came to resent their endemic poverty and underdeveloped status. They were also fearful of losing territorial control over their 'traditional homeland' as a result of modernization and migration. Consequently, these ethnic groups became convinced that they were being deprived (deliberately or otherwise) by the dominant communities that controlled the state and local governments. Such perceptions often convinced entrapped ethnic groups that the state's political institutions, mired in corruption and other kinds of mal-governance practices, has either done very little to solve the socio-economic ills confronting the group or been responsible for creating and preserving the group's marginalized, exploited and subordinate status. The only option left then was to politically mobilize and agitate for the creation of their own state, which would satisfy the group's nationalist aspirations and help it to retain political/legal control over its traditional ethnic homeland, allow the group to enter into a direct relationship with the Indian central government for economic assistance, and provide group members with the opportunity to fully participate in and benefit from the Indian neo-liberal economic revolution that began in the early 1990s (Ganguly 2005: 467-502).

Since this study is both explanatory and exploratory in nature and analyses historical and contemporary events, we have chosen comparative case studies as our preferred testing strategy. Comparative case studies will allow us to empirically verify our hypothesis in an analytically in-depth and holistic manner, which would then prove useful in developing a general theory of ethno-political mobilization for separate statehood within India. This approach will also allow us to identify and explain why and how the various causal conditions have combined to produce ethno-political mobilization in support of separate statehood in each of the cases under scrutiny. That way, the study will identify key similarities and differences across the cases, which will help in designing policy interventions aimed towards conflict management. Comparative case studies will further allow evidence to be collected from a variety of primary and secondary sources, thereby enabling the researcher to provide an analysis that is rich in detail and which captures the complexities associated with the ebb and flow of ethno-nationalism over a long time period.

The following cases have been selected for study: Gorkhaland (West Bengal); Bodoland (Assam); Telengana (Andhra Pradesh); Vidharva (Maharashtra); Panun Kashmir (Jammu and Kashmir); Harit Pradesh and Bundelkhand (Uttar Pradesh). All of these cases have long and complex histories. However, as organized political movements calling for separate statehood and willing to indulge in violent campaigns, these agitations have grown in strength and acquired political saliency over the past three decades.

Significance and Innovation

The attention of Indian security experts, scholars and practitioners as well as the national and international media has mostly remained focused either on secessionist ethnic insurgencies (such as in the Kashmir Valley, Punjab and Indian Northeast) or on an ultra-leftist Maoist insurgency that has strengthened and spread rapidly across the length and breadth of the country. In the process, inadequate scholarly attention has been given to an equally important development that has affected several states in India: that is, the political mobilization of minority ethnic groups in support of separate statehood status *within* the Indian federation to be achieved mainly by breaking-up the existing states. Already, several of these statehood agitations have produced significant levels of

violence and conflict, which has destabilized local and regional politics and undermined socio-economic development. If left to fester, these agitations collectively could raise the spectre of the balkanization of India and possibly lead to ethnic civil war. A key significance of this study therefore is that it aims to provide a proper analysis and understanding of the causes of 'separate statehood' agitations and their ramifications for security and development in India.

A second significance of this study is that it links existing theoretical research on ethno-political mobilization to empirical cases of ethno-political agitations for separate statehood in India. Theoretically driven research on ethno-political agitations for separate statehood in India has been sparse in contrast with ethnographic accounts of ethnic agitations, which are fairly vast and provide a richness of details about specific cases. Also, very few studies have analyzed the causes of ethnic separatist agitations in a comparative way in order to identify key similarities and differences between the cases. Understanding the broad similarities and differences in the causes and consequences of such conflicts is crucial for effective policy-making aimed towards ethnic conflict management. This study will therefore fill a void in the scholarly literature on ethnic statehood agitations in India.

Finally, an innovative aspect of this study is that in epistemology, it rejects the more populist primordial and instrumental notions of ethnic identity and ethno-political mobilization. The primordial perspective regards ethnic identity and ethno-political mobilization as biologically determined phenomena whose meaning is determined by nature, while the instrumentalist viewpoint is that ethnic identity is simply a tool that is manufactured, invoked and manipulated by ethnic entrepreneurs for individual and collective political ends. Instead, this research project leans more towards the constructivist argument that ethnic identity and ethno-political mobilization are enduring social constructions, products of human agency and choices, designed to achieve collective socio-political objectives under certain objective circumstances (Jackson and Penrose 1993).

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