

Smaller States a Great Idea, But Insecure Congress Will Not Act



Not taking a decision is also a decision. Both Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Congress Chief Sonia Gandhi seem to have taken a leaf out of former prime minister P V Narasimha Rao's book. Manmohan is Rao's precious gift to the Congress party and the nation, and the prime minister has mastered his mentor's art of governance. Rao was famous for either delaying decisions or referring contentious issues to committees and commissions. Sonia may like to forget or ignore the Rao chapter in Congress history but the prime minister is taking full advantage of his former teacher's legacy. One rule amended is: When in doubt, pout. Manmohan doesn't believe in action, only belated reaction. From acting against A Raja to mishandling the Lokpal Bill, the premier has been forced by an invisible hand to take the call. He has successfully crossed many hurdles but not without getting his reputation muddled. While his Government grapples with rising inflation, a ferocious civil society and a furious judiciary, Manmohan and Sonia are again politically paralysed—this time by the Telangana crisis.

Even as a large number of Andhra Congress leaders defy the High Command's might, the duo is unwilling to bite the bullet, though willing to be hit by it.

For the economist in Manmohan, a smaller state makes economic sense. For the politician in Sonia, it is another opportunity to create yet another fiefdom. The Telangana agitation's intensity makes it clear that it won't subside in a hurry. It has multi-party support, and is spearheaded by students and opinion-makers. While political compulsions may be driving the sustained T-campaign, the arguments put forward make sense. Ever since Andhra Pradesh was formally created in 1956, the people of Telangana have been protesting against the forced merger. Even the first States Reorganisation Commission (SRC) headed by Justice Fazal Ali was opposed to idea of merging Telangana with Andhra Pradesh on economic grounds. In its report, the SRC very categorically stated: "After taking all these factors into consideration, we have come to the conclusions that it will be in the interests of And-

hra as well as Telangana, if for the present, the Telangana area is to constitute into a separate state, which may be known as the Hyderabad State with provision for its unification with Andhra after the general elections likely to be held in or about 1961 if by a two-thirds majority the legislature of the residency Hyderabad State expresses itself in favour of such unification."

The SRC's advice was rejected by then prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Andhra Pradesh's powerful Congress leaders. Fifty-five years later, Nehru's blunder

come to divide all big states into smaller ones. If the US, with less than one-third of India's population, can have 50 states, why can't India be divided into at least 40 smaller units? It will ensure better governance and facilitate regional leaders to become stakeholders in the development of their own areas.

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has come home to roost at his granddaughter-in-law's doorstep. The impression that only affluent coteries in Andhra Pradesh can hold the central leadership to ransom has gained ground in the state. Most of these own huge swathes of real estate and numerous business establishments in Hyderabad; they fear eviction if a new state is born. Andhra Pradesh was carved out on a linguistic basis. The fact that people speaking the same language are fighting for a separate state is a clear indication of the economic and administrative impulses behind the agitation.

The T-struggle underlines the growing clamour for smaller states. As India grows annually by over 8 per cent, the benefits are not being distributed equitably. Smaller states like Goa, Sikkim, Kerala and Himachal Pradesh have scored well in social sectors like health and education. Despite having a smaller share of the GDP, they have created more wealth than many of the bigger states. Both politically and administratively, it is easier to manage smaller states. The time has

come to divide all big states into smaller ones. If the US, with less than one-third of India's population, can have 50 states, why can't India be divided into at least 40 smaller units? It will ensure better governance and facilitate regional leaders to become stakeholders in the development of their own areas. Economic and political power is concentrated in the hands of a few who are now feeling insecure. For them, the creation of more states means the emergence of a new corporate and political leadership that could challenge the established order. More states are facing the demand for smaller states: Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Mayawati has sought the division of her state into three smaller units. A powerful mass movement is building up for the creation of Vidharabha in Maharashtra and a new hill state in West Bengal. It is tragic that even genuine demands for new states have been conceded only after violent political agitations. For example, the Punjabi-speaking state of Punjab was created in 1966 after years of protest. The NDA government saw historical reasons

and created three new states—Chhattisgarh, Uttarakhand and Jharkhand—because prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee saw an opportunity for his party to gain power in smaller states. Until now, the Congress hasn't been able to return to power in the above states.

The fear of the unknown has crippled the Congress High Command and the prime minister. They genuinely feel that new states will weaken the Congress and strengthen regional parties. They also anticipate the rise of new regional satraps who will not be dependent on the Congress High Command for survival. Those who favour smaller states argue that the Congress should grab the opportunity—it gives the party a chance to absorb new leaders in new states, which will eventually help the Congress to grow. However, the leadership prefers to rule only in Delhi, even if it means losing all other state capitals either to Congress rebels or its adversaries. Herein lies the reason for the current state of indecisiveness at the top.

prabhuchawla@newindianexpress.com