

Creating New States in India: Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Uttaranchal¹

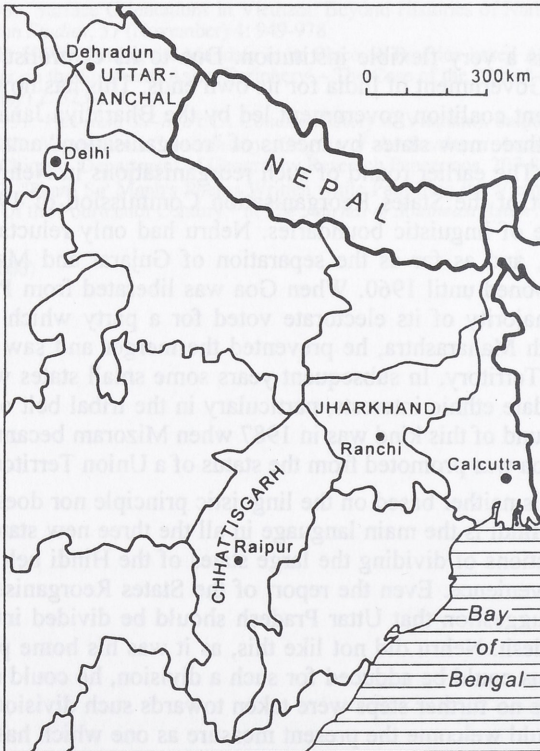
Dietmar Rothermund

Indian federalism is a very flexible institution. Due to its centralist bias it can be easily used by the Government of India for its own ends. This has now been demonstrated by the present coalition government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which has created three new states by means of "reorganisation" acts passed by the central parliament. The earlier round of such reorganisations in Nehru's times were based on the report of the States Reorganisation Commission of 1955 which followed the principle of linguistic boundaries. Nehru had only reluctantly agreed to this reorganisation, and as far as the separation of Gujarat and Maharashtra was concerned he postponed until 1960. When Goa was liberated from Portuguese rule in 1961 and the majority of its electorate voted for a party which advocated the merger of Goa with Maharashtra, he prevented the merger and saw to it that Goa remained a Union Territory. In subsequent years some small states were created in order to accommodate ethnic interests, particularly in the tribal belt of Northeastern India. The latest round of this kind was in 1987 when Mizoram became a state at the same time when Goa was promoted from the status of a Union Territory to a state.

The present round is neither based on the linguistic principle nor does it follow specific ethnic lines. Hindi is the main language in all the three new states. There have been earlier suggestions of dividing the large states of the Hindi belt for reasons of administrative convenience. Even the report of the States Reorganisation Commission contained a suggestion that Uttar Pradesh should be divided into Eastern and Western Uttar Pradesh. Nehru did not like this, as it was his home province. Since no linguistic reasons could be adduced for such a division, he could reject it easily. In subsequent years no further steps were taken towards such divisions in the Hindi belt. Thus one should welcome the present measure as one which has been overdue for a long time. But if the principle of administrative convenience would have been followed, the boundaries should have been drawn differently. A closer look at the actual boundaries shows that they follow a pattern determined by political interests. Two of them, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand, have a substantial share of tribal population, but their boundaries are not determined by that fact. The common denominator seems to be that all three states contain a large number of BJP-constituencies. Consequently the BJP hoped that it could provide the chief ministers of the new states. This happened in Jharkhand where Babulal Marandi, a former central minister, who

1 For a more detailed discussion of the evolution of Indian federalism see D. Rothermund, "Probleme des indischen Föderalismus" in: W. Draguhn (Hrsg.), *Indien 2001*, Hamburg 2001.

is a tribal (Santhal) was elected. Similarly Nityanand Swamy became Chief Minister of Uttaranchal. He is a Brahmin from Haryana, who has settled in Dehradun. In Chhattisgarh the BJP had also hoped to get a member of their party elected to this post. But after a hot contest and some defections from the ranks of the BJP, a member of the Congress Party, Ajit Jogi, who is a tribal and belonged to the Indian Administrative Service, emerged as the chief minister of that state.



Kartographie: Helga Nicksch, Südasieninstitut Heidelberg

Chhattisgarh: Fertile Crescent and Tribal Belt

Chhattisgarh is the largest of the new states in territorial terms. It covers 135,000 sq.km and has a population of 17,6 mill. (1991). It consists of 16 Eastern districts of Madhya Pradesh which has lost about one third of its territory as well as of its population in this way. This is not a crippling loss as Madhya Pradesh used to be India's biggest state as far as territorial extension is concerned. But the new state includes what used to be Madhya Pradesh's only steel town, Bhilai, and most of its

mineral resources and its largest forests. These forests are the habitat of a large tribal population in the Southern part of the new state. The central part from which the state derives its name Chhattisgarh (= 36 fortresses) has been known as a fertile rice bowl since ancient times. It is the home of an old peasant culture. A crescent-shaped area around the new capital, Raipur, traversed by the Mahanadi and Seonath rivers, provides an ecological niche in the otherwise barren highlands of India's central plateau. The three central districts Raipur, Durg and Bilaspur with 2.5, 2.3, and 2 mill. inhabitants respectively cover the major part of this fertile crescent.

The demand for a separate state in this area was not as vocal as that in the other two new states. Nevertheless the advocates of the new state can point to a resolution of the Raipur Congress Committee of 1924 which pleaded for a separate province. Not much was heard of it in the meantime. But there is no doubt that the people of this area felt neglected by the government of Madhya Pradesh in distant Bhopal. The railway line from Raipur to Bhopal via Nagpur traverses about 700 km. The wealth of this region in terms of agricultural output, mineral resources etc. was not reflected by the living conditions of the people. It remains to be seen whether the new status will lead to an improvement.

Jharkhand: Premier Industrial State of Eastern India

Jharkhand is the immediate Northern neighbour of Chhattisgarh. With a population of about 22 mill. it is the biggest of the new states. It has been cut out of Bihar which lost almost half its territory, a third of its population and about 60 per cent of its revenue in this way. Bihar has been India's poorest state so far, the truncated Bihar in its present shape will be even poorer. It is grossly overpopulated, has a large share of landless agricultural labour subsisting well below the poverty line and is plagued by intense social conflicts. Jharkhand will be glad to have got rid of this relationship. It has a large tribal population consisting of many different tribes. The movement for the establishment of a separate state was popular among the tribals. It started in the 1920s when the Oxford-trained Jaipal Singh made a strong plea for Jharkhand. In recent years Sibusoren, a prominent tribal (Santhal) leader, headed the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha. It seems that the central Defence Minister, George Fernandes, whose Samata Party has a stronghold in Bihar had promised Soren his support when he made a claim for the chief ministership. But Soren was thwarted in this endeavour by another Santhal, Babulal Marandi, who won the race. Marandi has given several important posts to tribals (e.g. Mundas) in his cabinet.

The tribal population of Jharkhand is concentrated in three districts in the Northeast of the state and in the five Southern districts, whereas the eight Northern districts have only a small share of tribal population. If tribal autonomy was the main justification for the creation of this new state, these Northern districts which are adjacent to Bihar could have remained with it. But it could be argued that some of them provide the bridge between the Northeastern and Southern districts. Nevertheless, the generous excision of Jharkhand from Bihar appears to reflect political considerations of the central government led by the BJP. In 1998 the central government had intended to topple the Bihar government by means of "President's Rule" but had failed

to do so, because the President had felt that this move was not justified. Cutting Bihar down to size may be a compensation for this frustrated move.

Jharkhand in its present dimensions emerges as the premier industrial state of Eastern India. It includes the steel cities of Jamshedpur and Bokaro and the Dhanbad-Jharia coalfield. Its capital, Ranchi, is the home of major public sector industries producing heavy machinery. It is very rich in natural resources and could attract large scale investment. If the state government seizes this opportunity it may do very well, indeed.

Uttaranchal: Forests and "Sons of the Soil"

Uttaranchal is the smallest of the new states and Uttar Pradesh from which it has been separated will hardly feel its absence, except for the fact that it contains all its beautiful hill stations. It encompasses the 13 Northwestern districts of Uttar Pradesh with a total population of about 8 mill. It has hardly any tribal population, therefore tribal autonomy and welfare could not be adduced as a reason for creating this state. But there are two vital issues on which the people of this area and the government of Uttar Pradesh did not see eye to eye. The first one which is of long standing concerned the control of the forests which are the main assets of this region, the second — much more recent — issue was the reservation of a large proportion of posts for members of the Other Backward Castes (OBCs).

State control of the forests has been a contentious issue ever since colonial times. The state authorities protected the forests against encroachments by the local people, but in recent times timber merchants got official concessions for exploiting the forests. The local people started a movement to stop this. They embraced the trees so as to prevent their being cut down. This Chipko Movement gained international acclaim and contributed to political mobilisation. But it would have hardly sufficed to support the claim for a separate state. This was achieved by the second issue which affected the whole population of this region. In 1994 the government had implemented the policy of reserving 27 per cent of posts in public service for the OBCs in addition to the 22 per cent already reserved for the scheduled castes. In the plains of Uttar Pradesh OBCs make up a large section of the rural population and are thus very important as voters for the political parties which wish to rule that state. In the hilly districts which now belong to Uttaranchal, there are hardly any OBCs. Thus the reservations should not have concerned the people living there. But they were afraid OBCs would migrate from the plains to the hills in order to claim the reserved positions there, thus depriving the local people of their chances. The creation of a separate state was the only means of protecting the "sons of the soil" against this kind of immigration.

The BJP represents in general the higher castes of Northern India which have been bitterly opposed to OBC-reservations. It has refrained from articulating this opposition openly, because it did not want to alienate potential OBC-voters. It therefore stressed Hindu solidarity which could also appeal to OBCs. But if it could support its clientele among the non-OBCs by creating a new state like Uttaranchal — a move which was not overtly directed against the OBCs — it would certainly not

miss such an opportunity. Making use of Indian federalism in this way is a far cry from the initial aim of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh — the precursor of the BJP — which wanted to abolish federalism and convert India into a unitary state. One could welcome this conversion to "creative" federalism, but one could also see it as a move towards "gerrymandering" India.

"Gerrymandering" India?

The term "gerrymander" is composed of the name Gerry and of half of a word referring to spotted animal called salamander. Elbridge Gerry was Governor of Massachusetts in 1812 when he invented the method of re-arranging the boundaries of electoral districts in such a way as to suit the interests of his party. Caricatures of the "Gerrymander" appeared in the press at that time and the term soon became a synonym for electoral trickery.

By creating three new states at the same time, the BJP-led central government revealed that the common denominator seems to have been a stratagem very much like Governor Gerry's measure. It remains to be seen whether other reorganisations will follow. There are some obvious candidates such as Vidarbha in Maharashtra and Telengana in Andhra Pradesh. Vidarbha was part of the Central Provinces in colonial times, but when linguistic principles determined the reorganisation of states, it was obvious that it should be attached to Maharashtra. Similarly Telengana, the Telugu-speaking main part of the erstwhile princely state of Hyderabad was attached to Coastal Andhra, the major part of the Telugu linguistic region. Now since linguistic principles no longer determine the reorganisation of states, there is no reason why the claims of Vidarbha and Telengana should not be taken into consideration by the central government. But the crucial test would be whether this would suit the interests of the BJP-led coalition. At present there would be no obvious reason for supporting Vidarbha, and Telengana would remain under Chandrababu Naidu's control as long as his support is of crucial importance to the survival of the central government. Any shift in political allegiances may well lead to another round of "gerrymandering".

In the long run such exercises may even strengthen Indian federalism, although they are not designed for this purpose. When Indira Gandhi delinked national elections from state election in 1971, she did not do that in order to promote federalism. She wanted to run the national elections as a personalised plebiscite and was very successful in this way. After her victory she pronounced the strange anti-federal doctrine that state governments of other parties than her own had forfeited the mandate of the electorate. But, in fact, by delinking national from state elections she fostered the growth of regional parties. Those who "gerrymander" state boundaries in order to serve the interests of their own party may get immediate rewards, but there is no guarantee that such new states remain their strongholds for all time to come. The emergence of Ajit Jogi as Chief Minister of Chhattisgarh is a case in point. Once a state has been created it will develop along lines which may not follow the plans of its creator. But it will certainly add a new element to Indian federalism.