

Bombay, Maharashtra and Gujerat

In the ninth edition of this column, we discuss the reactions to the SRC Report , especially in the city of Bombay , the hub of the hub of India's financial and industrial activity and a product of Gujerati capital and Maharashtra labour'.

The much-awaited report of the States Reorganisation Commission (SRC) was submitted to the government on the 30th Septemebr,1955 and released to the Press on the 10th October. However, the key recommendations had been leaked to the print media of Bombay on the 28th September itself, using the cover of informed sources in the government. The Bombay government certainly had an inkling of the contents of the report as prohibitory orders on demonstrations and mass meetings for two weeks were imposed in the cities of Bombay and Poona from 28th September itself. However, even though administrative action prevented an immediate aftermath, the simmering tensions found expression in the coming together of almost all shades of political opinion: the Communists, the Praja Socialist Party, the Mazdoor Kisan Party as well as significant sections of the Maharashtra Congress itself under the banner of Samyukta Maharashtra Parishad. In fact, so strong was the popular upsurge that many leaders of the Congress party broke ranks with their national leadership on this issue. The Communist Party of India (CPI) also found itself walking on a tight rope, for while the Soviet leadership was cosying up to Nehru, the CPI had, till recently, been in complete favour of the linguistic self- determination. The Communist dilemma was indeed quite unique. For while they welcomed the SRC

recommendations with regard to the abolition of states under the Raj Pramukhas, as well as the establishment of linguistic states for the Malayali's, the Kannadigas and the Tamils, they were quite unsure of what to do with the SRC recommendations with regard to Maharashtra.

Meanwhile, the Commission did recommend a Marathi speaking state of Vidarbha, but Bombay was to be retained as a bi-lingual state, largely because the decision to delink Bombay itself from Maharashtra could not be taken. As Marshall Windmiller, a visiting political scientist from the University of California at Berkeley wrote in the September 1956 edition of the *Far Eastern Survey* '*Bombay, the hub of India's financial and industrial activity is the product of Gujarati capital and Maharashtra labour*'.

However, the resentment among the Marathi speaking population was at a crescendo, especially because they harboured the impression that the Marathi speaking unilingual state (Samyukta Maharashtra) was being denied to them on account of the entrenched interest of Gujarat faction within the Congress . Inside the Bombay state legislature, 111 of 118 Congress Marathi representatives submitted their resignations. The dogmatic statements and stern attitude of Morarji Desai, the then CM of Bombay did not help, and the leadership of the Maharashtra PCC itself found it difficult to endorse the decision the Congress High Command.

The Union Finance Minister CD Deshmukh resigned from the Cabinet and accused Prime Minister Nehru of 'cavalier and unconstitutional methods', and violence in Bombay became quite uncontrollable. There were two distinct phases of violence, first in November 1955, and then in January 1956. In the former, there were at least ten, and in the latter over a hundred deaths by conservative estimates.

Meanwhile the Congress Working Committee (CWC) tried to bring about many a compromise formulae, but the main contention was Bombay city, and the dominant view in the Congress High Command was that Bombay should be made a Union Territory, which is what the Gujerat MPs wanted. This was of course, totally opposed by the Samayukta Maharashtra Parishad.

What is interesting to note is that neither the Congress nor the Communist party could take a clear pan India position on linguistic states, even if the national leadership wanted to, because elections had to be fought in the state, and voters had to be mobilised on issues which affected them on the ground, rather than on abstract principles!

Moreover, for the Congress, the biggest challenge lay in the leadership contest amongst their own stalwarts: Morarji Desai (from Gujerat), SK Patil (from Bombay), Shankarrao Deo and Yashwantrao Chavan (from Maharashtra). They were all pulling the party in different directions.

Incidentally, it must be mentioned that one of the first, and more well thought out representations to the Linguistic Provinces Commission was submitted by Dr Ambedkar in 1948. In the document, Maharashtra as a Linguistic Province, he had argued that 'Bombay as a mixed state consisting of Maharashtra, Gujerat and Bombay should be done away with, and the state of Maharashtra be divided into four states having Bombay city, Western Maharashtra, central Maharashtra and Eastern Maharashtra. Among all of them, the most disputed subject was the fate of Bombay city, but Ambedkar preferred this option, not just to prevent the pressures from both Gujerat and Maharashtrians, but also as a safe haven for the minorities and the scheduled castes ... the minorities need an asylum, a place of refuge, where they can be free from the tyranny of the majority. If there was

a united Maharashtra with Bombay included in it, where can they go for safety?

(postscript : Gujarat has been deliberately spelt as Gujerat , for that is what it was spelt like in 1956)