

EXPERT VIEW

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TWO STATES UNITED BY THE SAME POLITICAL CULTURE

Telangana state was formed two years ago after decades of aspirations and political movements. As the two state governments of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana are nearing the middle of their first term, this is a good time to take stock of the political developments in both states.

The most happy feature of the past two years is the complete disappearance of the bitterness, animosity and polarization that marked the events leading up to the partition of the state. People in both states have realized that life goes on as usual irrespective of political drama and manufactured emotions. The leaders, too, deserve credit for this return of goodwill and bonhomie between the Telugu-speaking people of both states. In particular, Telangana chief minister K. Chandrashekar Rao played a crucial role in dousing the flames of parochialism and restoring amity among the people of both states.

The unhappy feature of the past two years is that both states are increasingly mired in a crass, monopolistic, feudal political culture, treating public office as personal fiefdom and exercising arbitrary, despotic power. The dominance of vote-buying and money power in Telugu politics has been well known for nearly two decades. But the one common feature of legislative politics in both states amply illustrates the completely amoral and cynical approach to public office. In both states, most of the elected opposition has been decimated with wholesale defections to the respective ruling parties. These defections are partly because of the private economic interests of the politicians who need government patronage to participate in plunder.

As election expenditure in both states has reached alarming proportions, with candidates for the assembly election often spending ₹5-10 crore, and as the maintenance of a mercenary political infrastructure has become frightfully expensive, most legislators feel orphaned and helpless in opposition. The sole purpose of getting elected to the legislature is to have a direct or indirect role in the executive branch of the government. The job of a legislator has paradoxically very little to do with legislation and holding the government to account. It is the executive clout that enables massive corruption in contracts, transfers and postings, land allotments, allocation of natural resources, and extraction of tributes in police cases or private disputes.

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As a result, there is a desperation to be with the ruling party in order to earn multiples of investment in electoral politics. The other fac-

tor promoting defections is the total disregard of elected governments to the rule of law, equity and fairness. By a variety of stratagems, the sections suspected to have voted for the opposition legislator and the constituencies electing opposition parties are denied equal access to many welfare or developmental programmes. Even the relatively public-spirited legislators not seeking earning opportunities through proximity to power feel compelled to defect in order to nurture their constituencies. As a result, in both states, there are wholesale defections with virtually no legislative opposition left.

The third feature of both states is a continuation of pre-2014 populism and policies. On the one hand, both states have fallen prey to reckless freebies and short-term populism at the cost of long-term public good; there is hardly any serious strategy to promote equity through quality education and healthcare. On the other hand, both states are also following pragmatic economic policies to boost private investment, vying with each other to attract entrepreneurs. This combination of populism with pragmatism is somewhat similar to many other states in contemporary India. But the real reform of deregulation, elimination of discretion and arbitrariness, fair competition for natural resources, bureaucratic accountability, efficient delivery of services and effective delegation and empowerment are either absent or glacially slow.

Finally, a brief mention must be made of Andhra Pradesh's grievance against the centre in respect of the special status promised. The "special status" was a code for three outcomes: meeting the revenue deficit arising out of the partition of the state; assistance for infrastructure, institutions and a new capital city; and tax incentives for a definite period for new investments.

With the 14th Finance Commission awarding revenue deficit grant, and with assistance for many institutions, the capital city and the Polavaram project in the pipeline, the first two promises have been honoured. The tax incentives promise remains unfulfilled. The central government and Andhra Pradesh should act with wisdom and restraint to address the thorny issue in a complex federal system. A special provision can be made to provide tax incentives for investment in the two backward regions of Rayalaseema and north coastal Andhra Pradesh. One way to make it palatable is to identify 100 backward districts of India and give similar tax incentives to all of them for a finite period.

Either way, this thorny issue must be addressed with sensitivity and fairness before politics of grievance holds Andhra Pradesh in its grip, and leads to alienation and unrest.

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