

## India's Tryst with Destiny II

By Anil Shrivastava

Mohandas Karamchand (Mahatma) Gandhi is considered the father of the nation of the post-independent India. The title of his autobiography is 'The Story of My Experiments with Truth.' For the last 62 years, India has very aptly experimented with keeping its incongruent and strife-ridden states under the banner of 'The Republic of India.' It has been a very worthy and noble experiment, but it is time to evaluate the facts based on lessons learned and examine if the Indian subcontinent will be more viable as a union of independent states vs. the status quo. Though it may be blasphemy in many Indians' eyes to quote Churchill, nonetheless, Churchill said, "India is a geographical term. It is no more a united nation than the Equator." Churchill was wrong. The Indian subcontinent, for most of its existence, has been a union of nations. This essay is an attempt to explore whether India should revert to a union of autonomous and independent states each having its own language, religious majority, culture, food habits, ideology and independence or should its leaders and citizens have a change of heart to keep the republic intact.

For the most part, India has always been a nation made up of various kingdoms, princely states, territories and provinces. It was never a united country except for a few brief periods. The Maurya Empire ruled almost all of the Indian subcontinent (including present Afghanistan) except for the southern tip between 321 BC and 185 BC. Between 320 AD and 550 AD, the Gupta Empire ruled all of North India except the northwest. That period is also known as the 'Golden Age' of India. The Mogul Empire ruled over all of India except for the present Kerala and Tamil Nadu states in the 1700s during the Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb's time.

The British ruled India with two administrative systems. One was 'Provinces' and the other 'Princely States.' About 60% of the Indian subcontinent's territory was Provinces and 40% were Princely States. Provinces were British territories completely under British control. Princely States were states in British India with a local ruler or king

with honorary titles like Maharaja, Raja, Maharana, Rana, Nizam, Badshah and other such titles meaning king or ruler in different Indian languages. These rulers were subjected to the British Empire. These two types of administrative systems were the result of the British East India Company's attempt to annex the whole of the Indian sub-continent and make it into a British territory.

The strife and incongruity of various Indian states came to the surface after the independence in 1945. The Hindus and Muslims killed each other in hundreds of thousands. The north tried to impose Hindi as the national language of India on the south. There were violent incidents in Tamil Nadu and even open protests for secession. India's languages – the basis for drawing many state boundaries – are often mutually unintelligible.

The animosity is not only confined to north vs. south. The two big Indian States, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka have been embroiled for decades in a confrontation over issues that range from water-sharing to contested borders to their respective tongues' pedigrees. "These are differences between neighbors, not nations," says celebrated Indian writer U.R. Anantamurthy. "But there is a danger of linguistic-based states beginning to assert themselves as nation-states." The northeastern state of Nagaland is fighting neighboring Assam over a chunk of land where 100 people were killed by the dueling state police forces in 1985. An entire mineral-rich district of Karnataka is claimed by Maharashtra, one of over a dozen such territorial disputes. In addition to that the Maharashtrians (or the Marathas) view themselves as a separate nation and are resentful of the immigrants and job seekers from other states who, according to them, are diluting their culture and language.

These conflicts come on top of the insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir, the country's only Muslim-majority state. There are also pro-independence movements of varying strength in places like Tamil Nadu and Assam. Religious clashes erupted in recent years from Gujarat in the west to Orissa in the east.

Many of the relatively progressive states resent people of other states as they fear and resent the

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following:

- Dilution of their local culture and language
- Imposition of a central rule that has an overrepresentation of the northern states based on their population
- Sharing of their local revenue and resources with underdeveloped states where the people are considered to be lazy
- Unwillingness of the people of the northern states to learn southern languages

One reason some parts of India want to break away from the union is that they do not trust the central government to play fair. Their mistrust has been further fuelled by the decision of the central government to dismiss the government of the southern states at their whim. India's constitution allows the prime minister to impose direct rule from Delhi on the pretense of maintaining law and order in a state. Successive governments have abused this power to satisfy the narrow interests of party politics and thwart the intent of the state's voters.

One possible scenario to quell these conflicts and bring peace and unity is to dissolve the concept of one Indian Republic and make India a union of various independent states and territories. The new Indian Union may choose to become an economic and political union of all its independent states committed to political and economic integration. Thus every state will have its own language, culture and independent home rule. The outsiders can travel freely to any state and can work in any state without interfering in the internal governance and laws of the host state. If a state wants the immigrants of other states to learn their language or respect their culture, that should be honored.

The Indian Union should ensure the freedom of people and goods. It should maintain a common policy on trade, a common currency, a common space program, defense and foreign policy.

Many Indians, especially the Punjabis, Sindhis and Bengalis lament the partition of India. As a next step, Bangladesh and the present Indian state of West Bengal should be merged as one independent nation. Similarly, the present Indian state of Punjab and the Pakistani ruled Punjab should become

another independent nation. The present Pakistani Sind can also join the Indian Union along with all of Kashmir.

However, there are caveats and risks to the above premise. The treatment of minorities by the individual independent states may become a human rights nightmare. Based on the history of communalism and discrimination cases, there is a distinct possibility of attacks against the minority and immigrants. India is marred by conflicts and riots on the basis of language, religion, caste and heritage. There may be the possibility of even aggression against the neighboring states to assert hegemony resulting from age old disputes over distribution of water, minerals and other scarce resources.

Every possible solution has its own limitations and so has the status quo. India is at the verge of becoming a super power both economically and militarily. The political instability and the internal strife are India's greatest barriers in becoming a world class power. It is in India's interest to realize the reality of the situation and come to a solution to end the acrimony. There are other impediments to India's progress such as poverty, lack of sanitization, threat of terrorism, poor infrastructure and corruption, but none is as detrimental to its progress as the internal strife and mistrust of each other. India is at a crossroad – at a juncture where it has to have a 'tryst with destiny' again. The Indian subcontinent has never emerged as a world power and has remained subservient to its aggressors due to the internal bickering, mistrust and mutual betrayal. No matter what be the shape, form and constitution of the subcontinent, the history must not be repeated at any cost.

