

Historical review of Belgaum Dispute

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Belgaum Dispute

A history of political uncertainty, troubled people and their language....

The boundary dispute between Karnataka (then called Mysore) and Maharashtra arose over the demarcation of the boundary between the two States by the States Reorganisation Act, 1956.

Located near the borders of Maharashtra and Goa, Belgaum became a part of the Bombay Presidency after Independence. In 1948, the Belgaum municipality requested that the district, having a predominant Marathi-speaking population, be incorporated into the proposed Maharashtra State. However, the State Reorganisation Act of 1956, which divided states on linguistic and administrative lines, made Belgaum a part of the Mysore State¹.

It is often said that Marathi, as we speak today was originated from *Prakrit*. The first ever stone carvings in Marathi are found in this area. This *Maharashtri Prakrit* was commonly spoken until 875 CE and was the official language of the Sātavāhana Empire. The first written evidence of Marathi is a document found in Karnataka which dates from 700 CE. The earliest known written form is on the copperplate of *Vijayaditya* found in Satara, dated 739 C

Unification of Karnataka

The unification of Karnataka was politically one of the most excruciating processes in the reorganisation of states along linguistic lines. Except for the old Mysore state, the rest of present day Karnataka has been carved out of four erstwhile regions – the Bombay-Karnataka, Hyderabad state of the Nizam, Madras province and Coorg

Mahajan Commission:

Maharashtra leader Senapati Bapat resorted on hunger strike demanding the government to form a commission which would address border dispute. At Maharashtra's insistence, the Government of India constituted the Mahajan Commission on 25 October 1966. The commission was headed by the third Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of India, Meher Chand Mahajan.

V.P. Naik, Maharashtra's Chief Minister at that time, announced in public on 9 November 1967 that Maharashtra will adhere to Mahajan Commission's report, regardless of the outcome. The commission, upon review of Maharashtra's claims, recommended the exchange of several villages in Belgaum district between the two states, but rejected Maharashtra's claim on Belgaum city

The Mahajan commission received 2240 memoranda and interviewed 7572 people and submitted its report. Maharashtra had asked for 814 villages besides Belgaum. It was given 262 villages including Nippani, Khanapur and Nandgad. Mysore State had claimed 516 villages, of which Maharashtra admitted that 260 were Kannada-speaking ones. It was awarded 247 villages including claim to Solapur. (*Map and a list of Villages is attached*)

¹ Mahesh Gavaskar, EPW March 2003

Maharashtra insisted on 1951 census, as the dispute had arisen due to States Reorganisation Act of 1956. According to 1951 census the percentages of Marathi-speakers (with Kannada-speakers in brackets) were as follows:

Belgaum city: 60% (18.8%) Shahapur: 57.0% (33.2%)

Belgaum cantonment: 33.6% (20.6%) Belgaum suburbs: 50.9% (21.8%)

The Mahajan commission, however, used 1961 census. According to maps of 1961 census, Belgaum was surrounded by Kannada speaking areas on all sides. The Maharashtra Government rejected the Mahajan Commission's report claiming that it was biased, illogical and against the wishes of the people.

S.M. Joshi

S.M. Joshi in his autobiography (मी.एस.एम) mentions that the struggle has its roots in the 1921 District Congress committee decision to not include Belgaum in the Maaharashtra.

During the deliberations about the border area, leaders from Maharashtra failed to negotiate its needs for the region. Also, after 1956 the determination and force with which the communists in this border region fought for Belgaum was lacking in the Communists from Mumbai. They never seemed to have felt the issue so strongly after the Mumbai was included in Maharashtra.

Maharashtra Ekikaran Samiti

Maharashtra has a long-standing dispute with Karnataka on the status of Belgaum district in north-west Karnataka. Belgaum was merged into Karnataka, based on historic facts. The Maharashtra Ekikaran Samiti (MES) came into being in 1948 for the sole purpose of getting Belgaum into Maharashtra. Since 1957, all the MLA's from Belgaum are from MES. Since 1985 Belgaum City Council has only had Marathi Mayors.² Wielding a significant presence in the region, the MES emerged as the majority party in the Belgaum City Council (BCC) in the 1980s and remained so until the dissolution of the council by the Karnataka Government in 2005.

MES claims that since 1980's Govt. of Karnataka has had policies aiming to increase Kannada dominance in the disputed region.

In a move to assert its right over the city, and to quell criticism that Karnataka was neglecting the northern areas of the state, the state Government in September 2006 convened a five-day Assembly session in Belgaum. It was the first time the Assembly was meeting outside Bangalore. The Government also declared that Belgaum would be made the second capital of the state and that a mini-Vidhan Soudha would be built there, besides declaring that a joint legislative session would be held there annually.

On January 16, 2009, the nine-day winter session of the Karnataka legislature began in Belgaum, amidst vociferous protests by the MES.

Karnataka Rakshana Vedike (KRV)

² Belgaum Special Issue, TarunBharat,

Translated as Karnataka Protection Forum, is a pro-Kannada, non-partisan organization located in the state of Karnataka, India. It has more than 5 million members enrolled from around the world spanning to about 12,000 branches across Karnataka in all 29 districts.

KRV claims that it is not against the Marathi people, and that its opposition is limited to the Maharashtra Ekikaran Samiti, which it alleges, is run by a "few individuals with vested political and commercial interests". Whereas the MES claims that the alleged mass base of KRV is a fiction and in reality the KRV is a group of goons which are placed by mine owners believe that MES is a threat to their power in Belgaum region.

Attempts by Congress led Government of Maharashtra

In December 2005, attempts were also made by Congress led government at the Centre to rekindle discussions on the boundary dispute with the Chief Ministers of Maharashtra and Karnataka and the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. But even this effort proved futile as Karnataka continued to press for the implementation of the report and Maharashtra continued to stake its claim on Belgaum city and few other parts of Karnataka.

Finally, on 15 March 2006, the Maharashtra government filed a petition in the Supreme Court. Maharashtra staked a claim over Belgaum city citing, in its opinion "the feeling of insecurity among the Marathi speaking people living in Karnataka, in the recent days". Belgaum district along with Belgaum city continues to be a part of Karnataka state while Maharashtra awaits the Supreme Court's verdict.

The Solutions

There have been a few way outs for this dispute over the years.

1. Make this disputed region a Union Territory³
 - a. Balasaheb Thackeray (Shiv Sena had supported this view)
2. Should be included in Goa.
 - a. During 1970-80
 - b. Due to geographical proximity
 - c. Shiva Sena had organized a march on Maharashtra Vidhan Sabha with this slogan.
3. Should be included in Karnataka
 - a. The Congress Govt. in the center is seemingly of this view.
 - b. Out of question for any political party in Maharashtra.

A broad view needs to be taken about the disputed area. Maharashtra also needs to consider that there are Kannada speaking bilingual regions in Maharashtra and we give their language and their culture its due respect. We should further take a stand against the atrocities by the Karnataka Govt. against the Marathi population in the region. Both the states should allow these bilingual regions some special provision for conserving their bilingual nature.

Belgaum Today

³ मी एस. एम autobiography of SM Joshi

Belgaum is the commercial hub of north Karnataka. It is an important location for vegetable trading, fish, wood & mining resource trading in north Karnataka. Rich deposits of bauxite are found in Belgaum district, and have led to the creation of the (HINDALCO) Indian Aluminium Company for production of aluminum. Additionally, uranium deposits have recently been found in Deshnur, a small village near Belgaum⁴. The strategic location of Belgaum, with access to Maharashtra, Karnataka and Goa, offers tremendous business potential.

The most widely read newspaper in Belgaum is a Marathi paper *Tarun Bharat*.

Over the years, Marathi language schools in the Belgaum region were closed down; the student is not allowed to learn Marathi even as his second language; the Marathi signboards were taken down; all legal documentation, forms and letters are in Kannad ONLY. By these means amongst others, the Karnataka government is promoting Kannada culture and Kannad language in region which boasted its bilingualism so that it can claim that the dominance of Kannada in the region⁵.

What should Maharashtra NavNirman Sena (MNS) do?

It has been observed that the youth in the disputed region is attracted by the figures like Shivaji, by the MNS philosophy. They can be mobilized through their youth groups. Considering the plight of Marathi speaking populace in the disputed area,

1. MNS should attempt to chronicle the atrocities against the Marathi speaking population which will build a case against the Karnataka government.
2. Should propose a referendum in the disputed area.
3. Build linkages with the MES

⁴ www.belgaum.nic.in

⁵ Belgaum Special Issue, TarunBharat