

FLUID BOUNDARIES: ON BORDER DISPUTE BETWEEN KARNATAKA AND MAHARASHTRA

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The dispute between Karnataka and Maharashtra over areas that both States claim to be theirs has become nasty and noisy in recent weeks, even leading to violence. Karnataka Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai and Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis — both from the BJP — have crossed swords publicly. Campaigners for the merger of Karnataka's Marathi-speaking areas with Maharashtra upped the ante this week by organising a conference in Belgaum. Maharashtra politicians wanted to attend it but were stopped by the police, leading to a flare-up, possibly as intended by the invitees and the organisers. Karnataka's practice, since 2006, of holding the winter session of the Assembly in Belgaum, is itself an assertion of its authority over the place. Recently, Mr. Bommai reiterated Karnataka's claim over 48 villages of Sangli in Maharashtra, drawing a sharp rebuttal. With exchanges getting increasingly provocative, Union Home Minister Amit Shah has told the Chief Ministers to dial down the rhetoric and wait for the Supreme Court to adjudicate the matter. The Court is seized of the matter, but it can only do so much as the underlying factors that originated along with the 1956 linguistic reorganisation of Indian States are not easily amenable to technical and legal solutions.

Carving out political units that neatly correspond with various linguistic groups is impossible in India. As a result, almost all States have linguistic minorities that are accorded special rights. The Maharashtra-Karnataka row fundamentally arises out of a lack of appreciation of that reality. In 1957, Maharashtra claimed 814 villages and the three urban settlements of Belagavi, Karwar and Nippani in Karnataka; Karnataka not only rebuffed Maharashtra's claims but also began to claim areas in Kolhapur, Sholapur and Sangli districts in Maharashtra. Elsewhere, Maharashtra and Telangana are caught in a dispute across their border, in Chandrapur and Asifabad districts, respectively. Reports of populations wanting to have their places shift from one State to another have emerged in recent weeks. In the Northeast, some boundary disputes between States have cost lives. It is wise to defer to the Court's decision on any dispute, but harmony can be achieved only through embracing and promoting a political culture that is respectful of diversity that cannot be neatly demarcated. Fluid political and cultural boundaries criss-cross the landscape of India. If new fires are lit through divisive politics, the judiciary can do very little. That will be a double engine failure.

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