

## Belagavi: Behind the renewed tension lies a long disputed history

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Paper - III  
(Internal Security)

- ❖ The Mahajan Commission constituted by the Government of India in 1966 said some 200 border villages could be integrated with Maharashtra but rejected the state's claims on Belagavi city.

An unresolved inter-state dispute between Karnataka and Maharashtra dating back to the period of Independence and reorganization of states on linguistic lines in 1956 has stirred renewed unrest in the Belagavi region of Karnataka after Maharashtra authorities made fresh claims on the state's Marathi-speaking areas, including Belagavi. Since the language issue has political resonance beyond Belagavi in both Karnataka and Maharashtra, all parties have a stake in the fight. The Karnataka Rakshana Vedike (KRV), a pro-Kannada organization that is otherwise without a political base, enjoys tacit support from the entire political spectrum in Karnataka.



### Role of Political Parties

With Karnataka going to elections next year, the ruling BJP, which does not want to be painted as an anti-Kannada party, is making all efforts to convince Maharashtra's BJP-Shiv Sena government to not allow the situation to escalate. Meanwhile, both pro-Marathi groups in Maharashtra and pro-Kannada groups in Karnataka are questioning the BJP for failing to support their respective causes.

### Current Trouble

Tension began building last week ahead of a scheduled Supreme Court hearing on November 30 on a fresh Maharashtra plea claiming parts of Belagavi district. The matter was ultimately not taken up, but on December 1, pro-Kannada groups protested in Belagavi against the alleged beating of a student for waving a Karnataka flag during a festival at a local private college.

A proposed visit by two Maharashtra ministers to some of the disputed areas on the Maharashtra-Karnataka border to meet pro-Marathi groups on December 3 provoked anger in Karnataka, with pro-Kannada activists asking the state government to not allow the delegation to visit Belagavi and villages in the district that are claimed by Maharashtra. The Maharashtra delegation ultimately first postponed their visit to December 6 and then canceled it amid calls for restraint from BJP leaders in Maharashtra.

Karnataka Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai had earlier said: "In view of the current situation between the two states over the border dispute, it is not advisable for the Maharashtra ministers to visit Belagavi. This message has been conveyed by the Karnataka Chief Secretary to her counterpart of that state through a fax message." On Tuesday, dozens of activists of the KRV attempting to reach Belagavi were detained by police at a border checkpoint. Some KRV activists pelted Maharashtra vehicles with stones.

### Recent Tensions

Since 2012, when the winter sessions of the Karnataka legislature began to be held in the Belagavi region, the MES has organized protests called 'Maha Melava' rallies outside the venue to press for the unification of Belagavi with Maharashtra. Last year, the MES organized a protest rally outside the Suvarna Soudha, the legislature building in Belagavi, without permission from the police and the district administration.

### When did the controversy start?

Ever since the State Reorganization Act was passed by Parliament in 1956, there has been a dispute over the inclusion of some towns and villages bordering the state in Maharashtra and Karnataka. The Act was based on the findings of the Justice Fazal Ali Commission appointed in 1953. On November 1, 1956, differences emerged between the formation of Mysore State, later renamed Karnataka, and the neighboring Bombay State, later Maharashtra State.

### Steps taken to resolve the Belgaum dispute

**Four-member Committee:** In 1960, the two states agreed to set up a four-member committee with two representatives from each state. However, the committee could not reach a unanimous decision.

**Mahajan Commission:** The Government of India constituted the Mahajan Commission in 1966 under former Chief Justice Mehar Chand Mahajan. The commission in its report gave 264 villages in the disputed area to Maharashtra and 247 to Karnataka. However, the commission allowed Belagavi to remain with Karnataka. While Maharashtra rejected the report, Karnataka demanded status quo.

**Supreme Court:** In 2006, the Maharashtra government filed a petition in the Supreme Court, claiming the city of Belgaum. To avoid this, Karnataka has invoked Article 3 of the Indian Constitution to argue that the Supreme Court does not have jurisdiction to decide the boundaries of states, only Parliament has the power to do so. Maharashtra has invoked Article 131 of the Constitution, which states that the Supreme Court has jurisdiction in matters relating to disputes between the central government and the states. On this, the Supreme Court said that the issue should be resolved through mutual negotiations and that linguistic criteria should not be considered as it may create more practical problems. The Supreme Court is currently hearing the matter.

### Historical Significance of Belgaum:

Belgaum city of Karnataka has historical importance. Congress session was held in Belgaum in 1924 which was presided over by Mahatma Gandhi. Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak started his 'Home Rule League' movement in the year 1916 from Belgaum itself.

Shiv Sena leader Vijay Devani who had traveled from Kolhapur to participate in the rally, was sent back by the Belagavi police. MES activists gathered at the venue clashed with Kannada activists.

In Kolhapur (Maharashtra), a Karnataka flag was burnt in protests, and the issue was raised in the Karnataka Assembly. Reports also emerged of a statue of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj being defaced in north Bengaluru by pro-Kannada activists. On December 17, pro-Marathi activists allegedly damaged a bust of Kannada warrior icon Sangolli Rayanna in Angol in south Belagavi. Pro-Marathi activists also allegedly threw stones at Karnataka government vehicles.

## **A Long, Violent Tussle**

The essential claim of the pro-Marathi groups is that Belagavi is a largely Marathi-speaking region — many parts are exclusively Marathi-speaking — and should be a part of Maharashtra instead of Karnataka. The Marathi groups claim that nearly 45 percent of the Belagavi district is Marathi speaking; pro-Kannada groups, however, say Marathi speakers are only around 35 percent, which is on par with the Kannada-speaking population.

At the time of Independence, Belagavi (then Belgaum) was part of the Bombay Presidency. The MES came into existence in 1948 with the sole aim of pushing for the integration of Belgaum with the state of Maharashtra. The region was, however, integrated with the state of Mysore (now Karnataka) during the reorganization of states on linguistic lines.

Over the decades that followed, the MES became a strong political force in Belagavi on account of its support among the sizable Marathi population in the region — which has enabled it to consistently win seats in the Karnataka legislature and to even control Belagavi city on occasion. The MES enjoys the support of the Shiv Sena (both factions), Congress, and NCP in Maharashtra. Chief Ministers of Maharashtra have often backed the integration of Belagavi with Maharashtra. In one of the worst incidents of violence over the border dispute, nine people were killed in 1986 in police firing in Belagavi during protests backed by political leaders from Maharashtra.

## **Mahajan Commission**

The Mahajan Commission constituted by the Government of India in 1966 said some 200 border villages could be integrated with Maharashtra but rejected the state's claims on Belagavi city. Karnataka governments have passed multiple resolutions endorsing the Mahajan Commission report.

## **Demand of Maharashtra and MES**

Maharashtra and MES have in the past demanded that Belagavi be declared a Union Territory. In 2005, the MES-led Belagavi City Council passed a resolution to approach the state and Centre for integration of Marathi areas in Belagavi with Maharashtra. The Karnataka government of the Congress and JD(S) ordered the dissolution of the BCC over the move, and Kannada activists blackened the face of the MES mayor of Belagavi over the resolution.

### Expected Question

**Que. Consider the following statements-**

1. The Belgaum Congress session of 1924 was the only session of the Congress held under the chairmanship of Mahatma Gandhi.
2. Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak started his 'Home Rule League' movement in the year 1916 from Belgaum itself.

Which of the above statements is/are correct? Committed To Excellence

- (a) 1 only                                      (b) 2 only  
(c) Both 1 and 2                              (d) Neither 1 nor 2

**Answer : C**

### Mains Expected Question & Format

**Que.:** Explain the ongoing disputes between Maharashtra and Karnataka regarding Belagavi and its reasons. Throw light on the efforts made by the government to solve them.

**Answer Format :**

❖ **Introduction (40-50 words)**

Why it is currently in the news.

❖ **Main Body (140-150 words)**

Explain the reasons for this dispute and the efforts made to resolve it.

❖ **Conclusion (40-50 words)**

Give your balanced opinion on the solution of this problem.

**Note:** - The question of the main examination given for practice is designed keeping in mind the upcoming UPSC mains examination. Therefore, to get an answer to this question, you can take the help of this source as well as other sources related to this topic.