



India: Diversity Unleashed and Federalised

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The year was 1946. India's approach to its diversity was being passionately debated in its newly created Constituent Assembly, which was drawing territories into a new federal democracy. In the years previous, Mahatma Gandhi had mobilized a mass movement – termed nothing more than a “geographic expression” by Winston Churchill – through his non-violent strategies. Crafting a new union was now the task at hand, and it meant grappling with India's age-old linguistic, cultural, and religious diversities. Initially there was a reluctance to recognize diversity as an ordering principle, born of a fear of “excessive federalism.” The assertion and consolidation of movements with strong regional roots eventually brought diversity centre-stage, compelling leaders to rethink the foundations of India's unity.

The full force of linguistic and cultural diversities began to be felt in the early years of the Republic. The demand for the linguistic reorganisation of independent India was accompanied by an equally vigorous push for a common language to serve as a *lingua franca* for the Union. At a time when predictions of imminent disintegration and collapse of the Union were rife, political adjustments, mediated by the electoral process, saved the day.

The official language issue was resolved by a compromise which retained English indefinitely as a link language. The 14 states created in 1956 have grown to 28 today, and the 14 languages recognised by the Constitution have increased to 22. Diversity ceased to frighten; it had been federalized. The fear of federalism also gradually diminished as a strong Centre consolidated itself.

Despite its extraordinary lengthy detailing of many issues, the Constitution remained ambiguous and ambivalent when it came to the organisation of diversity. While it firmly endorsed the respect of diversity in the chapter on rights, it stopped short of detailing its institutional articulation in terms of federal structuring. It conferred the power to recognize diversity on the Union, but left it to the states to manage its socio-political consequences. Two key principles characterised India's approach to diversity: asymmetry and accommodation.

Not all ethnic identity related issues were resolved with ease and amicably settled, and many antagonisms persist. They concern mainly the frontier states of Kashmir and Nagaland, as well as the neighbouring states of Mizoram and Manipur. Resorting to asymmetrical federalism helped attenuate tensions in some cases, while special status provisions and generous financial concessions and incentives were also deployed to facilitate integration in the more intractable cases. The search for solutions was essentially a search for adjustments that could be made on both sides. For the Union, its sovereignty and integrity was paramount, and all solutions were worthy of being considered subject to this proviso. For the autonomy movements, the path of negotiations was open provided they did not seek militant secession.

Over the last two decades, the federalization of the party system has thrown up new challenges for governance, even as it gave more space to voice diversity. Regional political parties have succeeded in capturing power in many states, and their contribution to the consolidation of federal democracy is noteworthy. The consolidation of federal coalitions and the *de facto* emergence of proportional representation have given new strength to the unity in diversity principle.

While long established socio-cultural diversities still persist, they seem less threatening today than the growing income disparities generated by rapid growth of certain regions and sectors of economic activity. The crisis of agriculture in several states and related food security issues pose a new set of challenges and tensions under economic liberalisation. Vertical and horizontal fiscal transfers appear to be engaged in a constant race to contain emerging cleavages and disparities. Threats to internal unity due to strains on social harmony and cohesion are seen as new challenges for the federal polity.

What challenges for governance does the persistence of the caste system pose? The dream of a caste-less society seems as elusive as that of a class-less

society, partly because both are so closely linked. An intricate system of quotas and reservations in various sectors, designed to promote a more egalitarian society has not produced any significant threats for unity, although they continue to generate political tensions and disorder. In addition to the earlier quotas for scheduled castes and tribes, a new quota for other backward castes in educational institutions and government employment has been legislated.

While it is relatively easy to detail India's diversity, it is far more difficult to explain the many ways in which its unity has been constructed and maintained. The solidarities engendered within the political class by six decades of intensely competitive electoral processes are one means by which an underlying order is preserved. Barring militant movements from the extreme-left, most identity-based parties have used their mobilization capabilities to capture power through the ballot. New connective tissues such as the national passion for cricket, the popularity of Bollywood films, and the rapid spread of telecom firms have given pan Indian discourse a new impetus. The contribution of a unified judiciary headed by the Supreme Court, which enjoys high public esteem, is also a reinforcing factor for unity.

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It negotiates and grants asymmetry to constituent units, provided the basic framework of the Constitution is respected. In their negotiations with movements demanding greater autonomy, the recurring practice of central government leaders has been to allow extensive autonomy provided it is in conformity with the Constitution. Diversity has thus been federalized in diverse ways, retaining the essence of the federal principle but displaying remarkable pragmatism in adjusting it to suit Indian realities. This process of adaptation has been built on the bedrock of electoral democracy. Protest movements have gradually metamorphosed into political parties, assured that the election commission would give them a fair chance at the polls. Ancient diversities, celebrated through the ages, have been given a federal shape and form which enable them to survive and prosper.