

## Subnationalism not a threat

Along with the rhetoric of nationalism, India is also witnessing the re-emergence of subnationalism as a political idea. Interestingly, this is emerging most strongly from Karnataka, which is neither ruled by a regional party nor has shown any significant separatist or secessionist tendencies in the past. The key issue of contention is regarding a [separate State flag for Karnataka](#). While Karnataka has had an unofficial yellow-and-red flag for almost 50 years, the government is now considering adopting an official State flag. The other issue is the protest against the imposition of Hindi, most notably on the signboards of Namma Metro stations in Bengaluru. Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah has strongly come out in support of the State flag and [against the use of Hindi signboards in the Metro](#).

Even if the narrative around Kannadiga pride is impelled by the government with an eye on the upcoming Assembly polls, the larger questions around identity it raises cannot be ignored. Given the multiple identity markers, the key challenge is to foster a shared political community that also accommodates the multiple aspirations of a diverse population. This is important as an aggressive nationalism seeks to engulf any alternative ideas of self-identification. The counter-narrative hence brings into question the place of linguistic and cultural rights in a plural society with a federal Constitution.

Historically, the nationalist movement had furthered a pluralistic idea of India. While the Indian National Congress had demanded language-based provinces during the freedom movement, the experience of religion-based Partition made the Nehru government wary of adopting linguistic States in the early years after Independence. But with the enactment of the States Reorganisation Act, 1956, linguistic States became a reality. Further, the Official Languages Act of 1963 prevented the planned transition of India's official language from English to Hindi. These key legislative moves ensured that Indian national identity is not homogeneous.

The Kannada flag, et cetera

India also does not follow a classical majoritarian form of democracy. While the first-past-the-post electoral system tends to favour ethnocultural majorities, there are also certain group-based fundamental rights provided in the Constitution, such as in Articles 29 and 30. Part XXI of the Constitution has a set of special provisions for certain States and sub-State regions, while the Fifth and Sixth Schedules give special institutional measures for the administration of areas with high Scheduled Tribe populations.

While India does not neatly fit within political scientist Arend Lijphart's framework of a consociational system (providing for formal power-sharing arrangements between different social groups), it possesses a flexible constitutional order that enables creative solutions to subnational aspirations. The creation of new States based on varied grounds has not been too arduous in independent India. Hence, Alfred Stepan, Juan Linz and Yogendra Yadav argue that India may be classified as a "state-nation" which respects "multiple but complementary" sociocultural identities and provides constitutional mechanisms to accommodate political claims arising out of these identities. Such a constitutional order has been central to our endurance as a nation state for 70 years.

The accommodation of linguistic and cultural diversities does not merely help maintain the integrity of India's national boundaries, but also promotes positive social outcomes. In *How Solidarity Works for Welfare*, Prerna Singh has argued that subnationalism is positively linked to social development. Using multiple research methods, she demonstrates that greater the level of subnational solidarity, higher will be the State's commitment to social welfare. Kerala's success is

the most striking example. She contrasts Kerala and Tamil Nadu with Uttar Pradesh, a development laggard with little subnational solidarity, to argue her point.

With hyper-nationalism on the rise, it is important to reassert the pluralistic character of the Indian nation state. While nationalism conventionally privileges one sociocultural identity over others, India's pluralistic nationalism celebrates the coexistence of multiple identities. The assertion of subnational pride in States like Karnataka counters attempts at advancing the homogenising narrative of Hindi-Hindu-Hindustan. As long as subnationalism is not secessionist, or aimed at othering sections of the population, it should not be viewed as a threat, but rather as a constitutive element of India's plural democracy.

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