

A double-edged sword

There has lately been a revival of the classic debate on how subnationalism is good for social welfare, triggered by the controversy surrounding the long-standing demand for an official State flag for Karnataka. None of India's 29 States except Jammu and Kashmir have a flag of their own. The matter is complicated by the fact that the Constitution maintains a conspicuous silence on the issue. The clamour for a separate flag among a section of the Kannadigas thus assumes wider political salience, insofar as the assertion of underlying subnational identities is concerned.

A multi-ethnic polity sharply polarised along linguistic, religious and caste lines, India is no stranger to subnationalist impulses. Initially wary of accommodating regional demands, primarily owing to the bitter experience of Partition, India's central leadership embarked on an audacious project to reconfigure the country's political map based on linguistic criteria: Telugu-speaking areas coalesced into Andhra Pradesh, Malayali-speaking areas into Kerala, Kannada-speaking areas into Karnataka, etc. in the 1950s. More and more states were added to this kitty — Maharashtra and Gujarat joined in 1960, followed by Punjab and Haryana in the mid-1960s. This project has continued up till today, with Telangana being the most recent addition. Most of these states are creations of hard-fought political struggles waged around the idea of a shared ethnic identity. The tenacity of civic bonds among the members of a political community, some scholars maintain, explains why some states have fared well on social development indicators while others still struggle to break out of their vicious trap of backwardness. However, new research in political science shows that not all civic associations are benign; some help foster the democratic ethos while others endanger democracy by reinforcing its majoritarian impulses. This is true as much at the level of the region as it is at the level of the nation.

High levels of subnationalism may have driven higher levels of social welfare in the states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, but they have also spawned violent ethnic conflict in many others: Gujarat and Maharashtra have witnessed some of the worst ethnic riots unleashed against their religious minorities and immigrants, respectively, in post-Independence India; Assam has periodic bouts of xenophobic violence targeting alleged Bangladeshi settlers.

One only needs to flip the pages of history to realise how nationalism, by its very nature, has the idea of exclusion built into it. How nations or subnations deal with these exclusionary aspects is a question that the subnationalist argument shies away from addressing. It is important to ask whether Gujarat's Muslims are part of the Gujarati asmita (pride), or whether migrants from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar feel a close affinity to the Marathi manoos. The 'othering' of those who do not form an integral part of the subnation warns us of the dangers of subnationalism, and how it can engender serious democratic deficits in an otherwise vibrant and plural democracy.

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The new U.S. Fed Chairman is unlikely to opt for policies that might upset the President's plan

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