

NATIONALISM AND THE CRISIS OF FEDERALISM

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Issues and Challenges Pertaining to the Federal Structure, Dispute Redressal Mechanisms, and the Centre-State Relations

Several Chief Ministers have recently complained about the growing crisis of Indian federalism. The [central government backing out of its legal commitment to compensate for Goods and Services Tax \(GST\) shortfall](#) is one ground for this complaint and just the tip of a dangerous iceberg. A deeper problem lies in a flawed understanding of nationalism and the government's disregard for democratic principles. Federalism can function only in the hands of those with a grasp of India's democratic nationalism. Both are indispensable and neither works properly without the other.

Two broad conceptions of nationalism developed in the subcontinent before India achieved Independence. The first, the idea that a community with a strongly unified culture must have a single state of its own, bifurcated into two nationalisms. One defined culture in *ethno-religious* terms and was articulated by the curiously similar Hindu Mahasabha and the Muslim League. Hindus and Muslims were separate nations and needed states of their own. For the Hindu Mahasabha, Indian nationalism simply had to be Hindu nationalism. This primacy of Hindu identity potentially had adverse consequences not only for religious but also linguistic minorities, including those Hindus who viewed their mother tongue as important as their religion. For Hindu nationalists, Hindu identity permanently outweighed being Tamil or Punjabi.

Comment | [Reaffirm cooperative federalism](#)

The second manifestation of the same conception was articulated by sections of the Congress party which too saw the nation as defined by a common culture whose adherents must have a state of their own. But this common culture was not ethno-religious. It was defined instead by shared historical experience, the struggle against British colonial rule, and developed through an interpenetration of ideas emanating from different cultural sources. For want of a better term, call this second nationalism, *civic*. More inclusive than any ethno-religious nationalism, its secular, composite content is qualitatively different from Hindu or Muslim nationalisms.

However, surprisingly, its basic form is not unlike Hindu nationalism. It too conceives common culture in terms of a strong idea of unity that marginalises or excludes other particular identities. A civic Indian identity, shaped at best by a thin composite culture, trumps other public identities, including linguistic ones.

A third nationalism accepts that communities nourished by distinct, territorially concentrated regional cultures have the capacity to design states of their own as also educational, legal, economic, and other institutions. They possess self-governing rights. Yet, they eschew independent national aspirations, seeing themselves as constituents of a larger, equally significant common culture with another state that belongs to everyone. Indeed, they build on this shared culture and come together to consolidate the nation. Occasional conflicts between the common culture of the central state and distinct cultures of constituent states are admitted but mechanisms to prevent them are also created. This may be called a *coalescent* nationalism consistent with a fairly strong linguistic federalism; The central state associated with it is not multi-national. At best, it is a multi-national state without labels, one that does not call itself so; a self-effacing multi-national state.

The Hindu Explains | [India's asymmetric federalism](#)

In the 1930s, all three conceptions circulated among political elites in India. By the 1940s, however, coalescent nationalism was submerged by the other two. After Partition, India rejected ethno-religious nationalism but its ruling elites, obsessed about the dangers of further fragmentation, began to view with suspicion the political expression of even linguistic identities. No one was more uneasy with this than Jawaharlal Nehru himself who wondered if a federation structured along ethno-linguistic lines might tempt politicians to mobilise permanently on the basis of language and divert attention from issues of material well-being. Second, like religious identities, it might 'freeze' linguistic identities and increase the likelihood of inter-ethnic violence, encourage separatism and eventually lead to India's break up.

Thus, when the Constitution came into force in 1950, India adopted unitary, civic nationalism as its official ideology. Though a federal arrangement was accepted, the second tier of government was justified in functional terms not on ethical grounds of the recognition of group cultures. The security and unity of India were cited as the primary reason. A unitary mindset shaped by the experience of a centralised colonial state was resurrected and it seemed that the idea of a coalescent nationalism with multi-cultural federation was lost forever. A special commission to examine this issue concluded that language-based provinces were 'not in the larger interests of the Indian nation'. Yet, another committee, that included Nehru considered the recommendations of the commission and felt that while 'the present is not an opportune moment for the formation of new provinces, if public sentiment is insistent and overwhelming, we, as democrats must submit to it'.

Comment | [The fragility of India's federalism](#)

Before long the unitary arrangement and the conception that underpinned it proved inadequate. The third nationalism on the backburner came right back into the game as India shifted its allegiance slowly to a system of states that rejected the wholesale absorption of ethnic identities into a larger civic identity. This happened when the fledgling Indian democratic state was forced to encounter mass politics. Demands for autonomy, for sharing political power were immediately made by regional leaders. The issue of linguistic States became the focus of popular agitation forcing the creation, in 1953, of the State of Andhra for Telugu-speaking people. Soon after, a commission to reorganise States on a linguistic basis was set up.

The committee argued that justice requires the creation of partially self-governing States that recognise all major linguistic groups. Besides, their creation improves administrative efficiency, deepens democracy, and alleviates anxieties of regional minorities induced by fear of linguistic domination. Since domination eventually invites resistance and conflict which undermines the nation-state, only federalism can block language-based majoritarianism, contain conflicts and strengthen Indian nationalism. Only coalescent nationalism creatively combines claims of unity with claims of recognition of diverse cultures. A robust democratic arena allows the play of complementary multiple identities, and through dialogue, discussion and negotiation, helps to resolve disputes.

Comment | [The Indian Constitution's unitary tilt](#)

Following the Committee's recommendations, States were reorganised in 1956. Soon mass agitation forced the division of the province of Bombay into Maharashtra and Gujarat. In 1966, Haryana was separated from Punjab to become an independent state. Much later, States such as Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Uttarakhand were carved out. India slowly became a coalescent nation-state, moving from the 'holding together' variety to what is called the 'coming together' form of (linguistic) federalism. This meant that regional parties were stronger than earlier in their own regions and at the centre. This sowed seeds of a more durable centre because it was grounded more on the consent and participation of regional

groups that, at another level, were also self-governing. Indian federalism also attempted to remove its rigidities by incorporating asymmetries in the relation between the Centre and different States; treating all States as equals required the acknowledgement of their specific needs and according them differential treatment.

Comment | [A change that hit federalism, inclusion](#)

This coalescent nationalism has served India well, benefiting several groups in India. True, it has not worked as well in India's border areas such as the North-east and Kashmir. But their problems can only be resolved by deepening not abandoning coalescent nationalism. Indeed, the Indian experience shows that whenever the Centre has been non-manipulative, treated politicians and people of regional States with respect, the entire polity works smoothly. On the other hand, whenever regions are treated disrespectfully, and norms of democratic functioning abandoned, then powerful, even violent, forces have been unleashed leading to grave instability.

Comment | [In 'act of god', coercive not cooperative federalism](#)

The contemporary crisis of federalism is due to the attack on coalescent, democratic Indian nationalism by a conceptually limited and morally weak idea of Hindu nationalism. Unless this offensive is curbed, and these trends reversed, I fear we might begin to see major cracks in our distinctive nationalist project. That would be nothing short of disastrous for the Indian republic.

Rajeev Bhargava is Professor, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), Delhi

You have reached your limit for free articles this month.

To get full access, please subscribe.

Already have an account ? [Sign in](#)

Start your 14 days free trial. [Sign Up](#)

Find mobile-friendly version of articles from the day's newspaper in one easy-to-read list.

Move smoothly between articles as our pages load instantly.

Enjoy reading as many articles as you wish without any limitations.

A one-stop-shop for seeing the latest updates, and managing your preferences.

A select list of articles that match your interests and tastes.

We brief you on the latest and most important developments, three times a day.

*Our Digital Subscription plans do not currently include the e-paper ,crossword, iPhone, iPad mobile applications and print. Our plans enhance your reading experience.

Dear reader,

We have been keeping you up-to-date with information on the developments in India and the world that have a bearing on our health and wellbeing, our lives and livelihoods, during these difficult times. To enable wide dissemination of news that is in public interest, we have increased the number of articles that can be read free, and extended free trial periods. However, we have

a request for those who can afford to subscribe: please do. As we fight disinformation and misinformation, and keep pace with the happenings, we need to commit greater resources to news gathering operations. We promise to deliver quality journalism that stays away from vested interest and political propaganda.

Dear subscriber,

Thank you!

Your support for our journalism is invaluable. It's a support for truth and fairness in journalism. It has helped us keep pace with events and happenings.

The Hindu has always stood for journalism that is in the public interest. At this difficult time, it becomes even more important that we have access to information that has a bearing on our health and well-being, our lives, and livelihoods. As a subscriber, you are not only a beneficiary of our work but also its enabler.

We also reiterate here the promise that our team of reporters, copy editors, fact-checkers, designers, and photographers will deliver quality journalism that stays away from vested interest and political propaganda.

Suresh Nambath

Please enter a valid email address.

Subscribe to The Hindu now and get unlimited access.

Already have an account? [Sign In](#)

Start your 14 days free trial [Sign Up](#)

You can support quality journalism by turning off ad blocker or purchase a subscription for unlimited access to The Hindu.

[Sign up for a 30 day free trial.](#)

END

Downloaded from **crackIAS.com**

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com