

FEDERALISM AND DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION: AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

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INTRODUCTION

One of the paradoxes of recent political history has been India's success as a democracy. Of all the countries that emerged out of colonialism in the post-World War II era, India has the unique record – beside some very small countries like Mauritius and Belize – of having nurtured social and political inclusion continuously for almost seven decades – aside from a very small, nineteen-month interregnum (June 1975 - February 1977), when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi clamped internal emergency and suspended fundamental rights. What makes the unlikely success of Indian democracy even more of a mystery is that India started as an extremely poor, ethnic and religiously diverse country, which led many – including Winston Churchill – to argue that India was as much of a nation as the Equator was.¹ India took to universal adult franchise from the very first election held after achieving independence. Others, like the historian Ayesha Jalal have held that – in view of large-scale poverty, and economic inequality – India cannot be called a *substantive* democracy, that at best it is a *procedural* democracy that holds elections. Many have also argued that India is not a federation in the classic sense of the term since the Union has a preponderant role, and that in any case, this was not a case of units coming together and forming a federation.² These criticisms have an element of truth but are exaggerated. Though incomplete, India's federal democracy has emerged as a powerful instrument of social, political and economic inclusion that should serve as a model in the globalisation of

democracy with particular relevance to large, diverse countries since it is built on platforms of horizontal and vertical cooperation, where pluralities do not degenerate into majoritarianism since consensus and positive discrimination in favour of the historically social disadvantaged are firmly embedded in the political architecture of the State.

INDIA – AN UNDERESTIMATED DEMOCRACY

Until quite recently, many serious observers of India were convinced that due to the country's bewildering ethnic, religious, linguistic and social diversities and the widespread poverty and persistent armed insurgencies, it was only a matter of time that the country as a single, political entity would break up. This sentiment was best reflected in what Selig Harrison, the respected American journalist who was based in India for many years and seen as a sympathetic observer, wrote in 1960 that "the odds are wholly against the survival of freedom [...] the issue is, in fact, whether any Indian state can survive at all."³ Of the two countries that emerged out of British India, Pakistan was seen as both cohesive and a better economic prospect as compared to India. Besides India's adoption of socialism and of planned economy, its growth rate in the 1950-1980 period was sub-par, 3.5 % per year, and it was not seen as a significant economic player on the world scene. Its policy of equidistance from both the blocs (led by Soviet Union and the United States of America) during the Cold War, and the mutuality of interest with the erstwhile Soviet Union in its immediate neighbourhood, placed it in conflicting positions with the western democracies on a range of issues. This meant that while there was considerable support for assisting India to meet its economic challenges (until the Vietnam War and USA's desire to align strategically with China against the Soviet Union), the unprecedented politico-social transformations taking place in India passed under the radar. Observers like Harrison misunderstood that importance of caste was an instrument of political mobilisation. Rather than leading to permanent

divisions, such mobilisation actually made sense only in the context of building horizontal alliances with other multiple caste groups to obtain power at the local and provincial level.

What happened instead was that acting on universal principles drawn from western societies, scholars were "often prone to fall for a general presumption of crisis in multi-ethnic developing democracies" that "have endured in defiance of the grim predictions made in the literature during the early decades of their emergence".⁴ That one third of people living in democracies and 40 % of people living in federal countries are Indians is a fact that has not attracted adequate attention of political scientists.⁵ Developing this idea of political scientists not being able to understand the Indian record of democratic governance, it has been argued that this unease about India's socio-economic record is because of "suspicions that India's success on diversity and democracy may be too good to be true".⁶

So is it appropriate to call India a democracy? Federalism and development cooperation would be relevant only after this proposition is established. India's free and fair elections need no certification. It sees regular changes of incumbents, both individuals and as parties / ruling groups, without the losers questioning the impartiality of the process. Can it be argued, as Ayesha Jalal has done that India and Pakistan should be placed on the same level because on her opinion "elections are deceptive and unreal"?⁷

It has been argued that obviously "equality strengthens democracy" but that "inequality does not make it impossible".⁸ The *elective* principle should not be underestimated. The only way that "societal objective can be determined is through competitive elections, not by authoritarian means, however laudable". When Robert Dahl's two-fold principles of contestation and participation are applied,⁹ India passes the test. Ruling parties at the Union and in different states have lost elections, despite control of the government machinery. Franchise is freely and fairly exercised; India emerges as an exception to the conceptual framework of democracy requiring homogeneity and high income.¹⁰

Nevertheless, is India really an exception? A group of scholars looked at 141 countries over the period 1950-1990. In all, there were 238 regimes, 105 of which were democratic and the rest (133) were authoritarian. Of these 238 regimes, 41 saw a transition, from authoritarian to democracy and vice-versa.¹¹ Of all the indicators looked at, per capita income was the best predictor of democracy; in 77.5 % of the cases, it predicted that a country with a high per capita income was a democracy. No other predictor – religion, colonial legacy, ethnic diversity, international political environment etc. – came close to it.

India is the biggest outlier, falling in the 22.5 % group that was a democracy despite not having a high per capita income. If one looks only at the decolonised countries, India's case becomes even more exceptional: the others in the group are Mauritius, Belize, Jamaica, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. Besides size, all the others have a much higher per capita income. In fact, India should have been a dictatorship for the entire period if income basis was a fail-safe indicator. There are other exceptions, e. g. South Africa, Taiwan, Chile, Portugal and Spain. Mexico, as per data, should have become a democracy in the 1950s, not in the 1990s. If India is the biggest exception on the low-income side, Singapore is the biggest surprise on the high-income side.

Looking deeper into the study, there is a reasonably robust link between growth rates and probabilities of democratic breakdown. Countries that grew at less than 5 % had a much greater chance of such breakdown than countries that grew at greater than 5 %. Again, India was an exception during the years 1950-1980 when its economy grew at 3.5 %. The study also drew a distinction between the emergence of a democracy and its survival. The causes of emergence were many, e. g. wars, death of a dictator, economic shocks, foreign pressure, end of colonial rule etc. However, economic growth was key to survival as a democracy. There was no causal relationship but patterns were clearly identifiable. It must be kept in mind that "statistical arguments tend to be probabilistic, not deterministic."¹²

There are both structural and contingent factors for the success of democracy in India.¹³ Structurally, since the dominant strain of the national movement for freedom was democratic, the Constitution sought "to represent the views of the many than the opinion of a few". Contingently, India was lucky to have a leadership that was ready to get rid of the "dead wood of traditionalism"; a political elite that shunned authoritarianism.

Where India was fortunate, was that its cleavages were not just class but also "language, religion and caste".¹⁴ Horowitz has argued that there is "conceptual difference between dispersed and centrally focussed ethnic structures".¹⁵ Keeping this paradigm in mind, "India's identity structure is dispersed, not centrally focussed; and identities cross-cutting, instead of cumulating".¹⁶ Where identities are centrally focussed, conflicts "tend to escalate throughout the system". On the other hand, in dispersed systems, ethnic conflicts tend to remain localised, with the centre able to handle one conflict at a time, "without worrying about the nightmare of having the whole polity getting affected".¹⁷

As we will see later, since linguistic groups are concentrated geographically, the approach to them has been accommodative. Caste groups on the other hand are localised; they "typically split state politics, generally not allowing any given state to become a cohesive, united front against the centre".¹⁸ The crosscutting nature of Indian identities, traditionally and shaped by the national movement and the Constitutional provisions, has tended to dampen conflicts. There have been, and continue to be, a number of armed insurgencies but the "intensity of conflict rarely reveals a level constituting an existential threat to the entire nation".¹⁹

INDIAN CONSTITUTION – DEMOCRATIC AND FEDERAL

To better understand India as a democracy, one should look at its constitutional arrangement of power between Union and the States as well as its balance between the fundamental rights of

individuals and the enabling provision of positive discrimination to the historically socially disadvantaged groups. Parallel to this structure, which retains its core features even as it has shown considerable flexibility in adapting to changed circumstances, exist developments in politics, social relations and economics that have interacted with each other and the resultant impact on the federal democracy that India has developed into.

The word federalism does not appear in the Indian Constitution; rather the Indian nation is defined as a *Union of States* with sovereignty resting in the people. The Indian Constitution, which came into effect on January 26th 1950, was the product of multiple influences. There were developments in constitutional governance that the British were forced into introducing under pressure from the national movement for freedom. Separately, the Indian leadership was developing their own ideas on what the government of free India should look like. The government of colonial India introduced the system of diarchy in 1919, in what was known as the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms, which led partially elected legislatures based on restricted franchise that had jurisdiction over a limited number of transferred subjects. It was to be reviewed after ten years. Congress boycotted the subsequent Simon Commission (1927-1928) and instead, along with the Muslim League, it set up the Motilal Nehru Committee that recommended a federal form of government with a bill of rights, a supreme court and linguistic provinces. The last is particularly important and was consistent with the resolution of the Belgaum session of the Congress (1920) that had first proposed this. Contrary to the arbitrary borders of Indian provinces then prevailing, which were based on historical accidents of British conquest of different kingdoms and principalities, the Congress party set up its provincial committees based on linguistic lines.

The governance structure of this Act was largely modelled on the Government of British North America (Canada) Act 1867, and in turn greatly influenced the Constitution as eventually adopted. The draft Constitution was introduced in the Constituent Assembly

on November 4th 1948 and adopted on November 25th 1949. It was discussed threadbare not only in the Constituent Assembly but also in provincial councils, premier's conferences, representatives of Chambers of Princes and in the media.²⁰ It is a federal constitution as it satisfies Dicey's definition, viz., "distribution of the forces of the State among the coordinate bodies each originating in and controlled by the Constitution".²¹ There is separation of powers and checks and balances between the executive, legislature and judiciary (horizontal) and between the Union and the Provinces / states (vertical). Unlike the US system which is presidential and whose federal features arose out of the failure of the Articles of Confederation (1777), India can be said to be parliamentary federalism or executive-federalism since the executive is anchored in the legislature. As in Canada, it ties in Locke's separation principles with *selective federative features* namely the Union-States division of powers but *ensuring supremacy of parliament*. It has been said that the Indian Constitution embodies three sets of Contracts: between the People and the State, between the three organs (executive, legislature and judiciary) at the Union and state levels, and between the Union and the states.²²

At the core of the Indian Constitution are popular sovereignty and social justice. The long freedom struggle that emerged over decades moved out of meeting rooms of elites and involved the people at large. Freedom from colonialism or sovereignty meant equality for all. This in turn created a modern nation that was conscious of social inequalities and "the undesirability of caste constituted the background for the growth of democratic aspiration and political consciousness".²³ Hence, on one hand, there can be no discrimination on grounds of religion, caste, ethnicity or sex, the State can make special arrangements or positive discrimination for persons belonging to socially disadvantaged communities. Initially, such provisions were limited for the scheduled castes (SCs) and scheduled tribes (STs), but have gradually been extended for the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in terms of government jobs and

educational opportunities. Reservations in the legislatures are still restricted to the SCs/STs.

Two sets of developments have over the decades strengthened the democratic and the federal features of the Indian State. The first was the "success of the popular movements for linguistic re-organisation of states". This "offered a reassuring principle of legitimisation of regional governance as ways of reducing the distance between the citizens and government".²⁴ So, while on one hand, the Indian Constitution did not recognise ethnicity except in so far as it made special provisions for the traditionally socially disadvantaged communities, and the Indian State was based on pure territoriality, it did allow for "moderate accommodation of group demands, especially demands based on ethnicity, and some decentralisation strengthen democracy".²⁵ Though the Belgaum Congress (1920) had accepted this decades before India became free, Nehru as prime minister was reluctant to move on this. This was partially understandable as the circumstances accompanying India's freedom were traumatic – partition of India, mass migration and killings, integration of 565 princely states which led to police action in Hyderabad and the Kashmir conflict. India also faced considerable economic stress and the adoption of central planning meant the need for a strong centre. However, Nehru was forced to concede the Telugu demand for Andhra (1953) and this led to the States Reorganisation Commission. The stage was set for the creation of linguistic states, and later on grounds of ethnicity (tribal states of North East), accession to India (Sikkim), colonial history (Goa), and regional backwardness (Uttarakhand, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and the latest, Telengana).²⁶ India started with seven states at independence; it now has 29 states and 7 federally run territories of which two (Pondicherry and Delhi) have elected governments with varying powers. The Indian State "has proved to be fairly responsive to the demands for relatively autonomous Statehood".²⁷ This massive re-arrangement of the sub-national governance arrangements, far from adding to centripetal pressures actually ended up creating a robust

federal union, since linguistic reorganisation created "cohesive cultural and political units [...] effectively cooperating through a broad spectrum of federal bodies".²⁸

The second development is unique: the democratisation of the Indian polity and society. While the emergence of a large middle-class is given, what is even more fascinating is "the rising aspirations and assertions of social groups for a share in political power as well as economic resources and benefits from the State".²⁹ In the Indian context, political democracy was not enough and the adoption of universal suffrage in an illiterate and exceedingly poor society combined by features of the Constitution, and of laws adopted post-independence, that tried to carry out social engineering, led to social empowerment on a large scale. Of the two countries that began their journey in August 1947, carved out of the same block, India alone has seen the broadening and deepening of democracy. It was clear that "the democratic idea has penetrated the Indian political imagination, and began to corrode the authority of the social order and of a paternalistic state".³⁰ The institutionalisation of political equality has been established quite substantially, which is even more remarkable considering that this has happened "in a society which was hierarchical, stratified and highly exclusionary". Accordingly, it has been asserted that the "accommodation of those who mount powerful challenges by granting them greater autonomy and / or a share of resources has been central to the strengthening of democracy".³¹

Paradoxically for political scientists, this is because the "level of conviction in democratic processes is inversely related to wealth, status and power", because the "struggles within democracy in India are primarily for equality and inclusion".³² It is the *ordinary people* who defend democracy from those who "seek to subvert it". Participation on democratic processes empowers the disadvantaged who are then able to transcend their *social location*. This process picked up momentum in the 1990s through what has been identified as the "second democratic upsurge".³³ Political participation, accelerated

by the Mandalisation process,³⁴ broadened and those belonging to the socially underprivileged moved into the politic arena in a big way, so much so that the profile of the participants "differs not only from India's own past but also from that of most existing democracies".³⁵ While on one hand it has meant that the rural areas, and poorer people, see turnouts greater than those obtained in urban areas, and among the better off, on the other hand, this gradual process of democratisation has led to a "reduction of social privilege". Therefore, though "the dominant classes discover new ways of reinforcing their hegemony, the march of democracy is inevitable". This is because the "constitutional premises of equality are bound to reverberate in other domains".³⁶ The result was that not "only did India feel more democratic, but democracy itself began to feel more Indian".³⁷

INDIAN FEDERALISM AND DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

Several other procedural and substantial developments have pushed the federal and democratic agenda and contributed to a "sustainable mode of development cooperation" between the Union and the States.³⁸ For various political and economic reasons, India saw a move towards centralisation for the first 32-33 years, yet which has since reversed itself. However, the collapse of one-party near monopoly of power and the rise of regional parties to power not just in their states but also as part of the ruling coalition saw the fulcrum of power move away from the centre.³⁹ This meant that the Union's propensity to use Article 356 of the Constitution dealing with breakdown of the constitutional machinery in a state to destabilise governments headed by opposition parties was muted. The Supreme Court's judgement in the SR Bommai's case (1994) made such action by the Union government open to legal challenge, effectively making it an exceptional instrument that the Constitution originally intended it to be. This has restored a much-needed balance in federal relations.

The other development that has made the Union and States partners in development cooperation rather than unequal patron-clients have been the economic reforms. Central planning meant that public investment driven by the Union was the major factor in determining where investment flowed. The politicisation of investment flows and other distortionary policies like freight equalisation etc. reduced states to become clients of discriminatory Union decisions, which results in sub-optimal development outcomes. India, faced with economic collapse, opted out of central planning and gradually deregulated economic policies. On the one hand, states competed with each other to attract private investment flows, which has led to a widening of inter-state disparities. On the other, this has forced the Union and States to come together and try and improve the investment climate across the country. The adoption of a common Value Added Tax (VAT), for example, through the mechanism of the empowered group of state finance ministers was a major achievement. Failure to agree on replacing VAT with a nation-wide common Goods and Services Tax (GST) is seen as a major national failure, highlighting the need to overcome politically inspired roadblock that is damaging the national economy.

A complex constitutional architecture has developed through political changes and developments as well as judicial pronouncements; this has led to "a negotiated balance between the general, regional, sub-regional needs, sentiments, support and demands". Rather than a "distributive theory of power", this is an expression of a "productive theory". Developmental federalism in the Indian context has led to agents, despite of their mutual problems, collaborating leading to their "expanding a common pool of capability". The best example of this was the adoption of VAT, and which has received a major boost through the Union's abolition of the Planning Commission and its acceptance of the recommendations of the Fourteenth Finance Commission (FFC).

FISCAL FEDERALISM

Federalism is a multilayered structure with decision-making shared by all levels of government; empowering people politically; directly elected local government officials thereby making them accountable to citizens. Local governments (municipalities and panchayats) are part of the Constitution with the enactment of the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution (1992). Traditionally speaking, federalism has three components, specifically political, administrative and fiscal federalism. Politically and administratively, India has established itself as a federal country, but how does it fair in terms of fiscal federalism? Does the evolving structure support development cooperation within the federation?

The Planning Commission, abolished by the present government in 2014 and replaced with the NITI (National Institution for Transforming India) Aayog, was neither a Constitutional body nor a statutory one; it was a creation of a resolution of the Union cabinet. It reported to the Prime Minister, who was both its Chairman and its Minister. The NITI Aayog is the same in these respects so it can be nobody's case that this change has in any way adversely affected the federal equilibrium or that it will lead to an increase in centralisation in the office of the prime minister. Nevertheless, where it differs from the Planning Commission is that it actually seeks to give the states a role in its management, and creates a mechanism to sort out regional issues. Unlike the unitary nature of the Planning Commission, the NITI Aayog has a governing council whose members are Ministers of states and Lt. Governors of union territories. Further, it can constitute regional councils on "specific issues and contingencies impacting more than a state or a region".

Now there is no need for state plans to be approved by the NITI Aayog, which is essentially a think-tank. Further, this artificial distinction between plan and non-plan expenditure in the Union Budget had become meaningless. A better categorisation can be between capital and recurrent expenditures. The NITI Aayog is a platform that brings the Union and the states to determine national priori-

ties; it is to champion the interests of states by having the latter nominate an officer who would work with the Aayog; bring about greater coherence and coordination between ministries in the Union government; form time-bound action-oriented sub-groups of states with common interests, problems and regional projects; a think tank for Union and state governments using in-house expertise and pool of external domain experts; monitor implementation of development programmes and projects; assist states in preparing development plans for villages upwards and aggregate them; and collect and disseminate best practise that would lead to greater development effectiveness.

The decision to accept the recommendations of the Fifteenth Finance Commission (FFC) is revolutionising the relationship between the Union and the states and is making cooperative federalism a reality. The founding fathers of the Constitution realised that in a vast developing country like India that was in the process of initiating, generating and sustaining economic growth, governments, both Union and in the states, would evolve. The government would take on new responsibilities, the balance between the Union and the states would undergo changes across time and sectors. Therefore, a fixed formula of devolution would lead to restricting the flexibility that the governance structure and processes would require along the way. They also had in mind that, though the states would have the major responsibilities in meeting social and economic challenges, it was administratively and politically more convenient to collect revenues through agencies of the Union government. Sensibly, they mandated the establishment of a Finance Commission once every five years that would give its recommendations to guide fiscal devolution every five years. No permanent body meant no baggage and successive finance commissions have exercised both independence and pragmatism while making their recommendations. Unfortunately, the Planning Commission had hijacked the fiscal devolution process through an administrative fiat in 1970 that give it the final say in the allocation of plan (development) funds.

The abolition of the Planning Commission in this context has been referred to as the "strongest statement of intent" that the Modi government was "serious about restructuring Centre-state relations and strengthening the principles of co-operative federalism".⁴⁰

What has changed is that the FFC has moved beyond incrementalism when it recommended that 42 % of tax revenues devolve to the states, from the existing 32 %. To put it in perspective, the two previous finance commissions had devolution numbers going up by 1 % and 1.5 % respectively. When one adds the other transfers, well over 50 % of all Union tax revenues would now devolve to the states.

CONCLUSION

The Indian narrative is an ongoing one with many innovative features that have been largely successful in developing a platform of development cooperation based on "the countervailing pressures of regional autonomy and interregional bonds that are essential for a robust federal system".⁴¹ There are still major questions on poverty reductions and quality of life where the system has underperformed but which, if recent trends are an indicator, points to a much better future.

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NOTES

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- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Ganguly, Sumit: *Introduction*, in: *The State of India's Democracy*, ed. by Sumit Ganguly, Larry Diamond and Marc K Platner, New Delhi 2007.
- ¹⁴ Varshney, Aushutosh: *Battles Half Won: India's Improbable Democracy*, New Delhi 2014.
- ¹⁵ Horowitz, Donald: *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, Berkeley 1985.
- ¹⁶ Varshney: *Battles Half Won*.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.

- ²⁰ Singh: *Indian Federalism: An Introduction*.
- ²¹ AV Dicey's seminal work, *Introduction to the Law of the Constitution*, first published in 1885, has seen many editions, and is considered the classic pioneering work on the structure of the common law Constitution. Montesquieu's separation of power, while widely accepted as an appropriate mechanism for democratic governance, was derived from his misreading of the British Constitutional structure and practice.
- ²² Singh: *Indian Federalism: An Introduction*.
- ²³ Weiner, Myron: *The Struggle for Equality: Caste in Indian Politics*, in: *The Success of India's Democracy*, ed. by Atul Kohli, Cambridge 2001.
- ²⁴ Gupta: *Democracy, Development and Federalism*.
- ²⁵ Kohli, Atul: *Introduction*, in: *The Success of India's Democracy*, ed. by Atul Kohli, Cambridge 2001.
- ²⁶ Both Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh have the added tribal element. Creation of Telengana is a violation of the spirit of linguistic states but has history behind it—being ruled by the Nizam and not directly by the British.
- ²⁷ Gupta: *Democracy, Development and Federalism*.
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- ³⁴ Prime Minister V. P. Singh on August 15th 1990 independence day speech announced that there would be reservation in government jobs for the Other Backward Castes (OBCs), acting on the basis of a report of commission led by B. P. Mandal (1978). Castes identified as OBCs, some of whom had been economically empowered by land reforms and had started asserting themselves politically, were now able to combine forces and emerge as the most important political force in most of northern India.

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- ³⁷ Keane, John: The Life and Death of Democracy, New York 2009.
- ³⁸ Gupta: Democracy, Development and Federalism.
- ³⁹ This was most visible in the UF governments (1996-97) of Prime Ministers H. D. Deve Gowda and Inder Gujral. A regional party, the Trinamul Congress was the second biggest component of the second UPA government that assumed office in 2009.
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