

Asymmetric federalism

- Diversity and plurality call for an arrangement that can pave the way for accommodation and integration reflected in the existing system of asymmetrical federalism.
- India is not the only country with asymmetrical arrangements in its federal setup
- The capacity to accommodate various social groups and their interests makes India a thriving federal democracy as it displays enormous asymmetric characteristics.

Protecting diversity

- While constructing an asymmetrical framework, our founding fathers chose the salad bowl approach instead of the melting pot approach.
- Recognizing the existing pluricultural society in India necessitated such a choice
- An asymmetrical constitutional setup is indisputably necessary for a multicultural and multinational country such as India to protect the rights of the community and the minorities.
- While in every federal nation the former is based on the territorial and demographic sizes of the constituent units, the latter characterizes the

Constitution's extension of legislative and executive powers to the constituent units.

- So when we find representation of States in the Rajya Sabha based on their population, it is a political asymmetry.
- That is why States such as Uttar Pradesh have 31 seats in the Rajya Sabha, whereas Meghalaya and Mizoram have just one each.

Self-rule within shared rule

- We find constitutional asymmetry in Article 370 (now diluted) and in the special provisions and powers extended to Nagaland, Mizoram and others in the omnibus Article 371
- Article 371 requires the State legislature's permission before implementing any parliamentary law to exemplify asymmetrical provisions protecting the religious and social practices, customary laws and procedures of Nagas and Mizos.
- In addition, creation of the Autonomous District Council as per the Sixth Schedule also acknowledges the socio-cultural, political and historical rights of the tribes of the Northeast, thereby facilitating the provisions of self-rule within the scheme of shared rule.
- Furthermore, the Indian asymmetrical setup has evolved to

include another type of asymmetry, i.e. Union Territories (UTs). Their establishment is in line with the spirit of federal asymmetry.

- UTs were too small to be declared as States or could not be merged with a neighbouring State due to prevailing cultural dissimilarities, inter-State indifferences, extensive isolation and other specific needs, as in the case of National Capital Territory (NCT).
- Among all the UTs, Delhi, Puducherry and Chandigarh are distinct examples. Since 2019, we now have Jammu and Kashmir as a UT with a legislative assembly and Ladakh as a UT without.

On fiscal arrangements

- Another significant asymmetry is the fiscal arrangements enshrined in the Constitution.
- When transferring funds from the Centre to States, statutory transfers are made based on the recommendations of the Finance Commission.
- Also, while the Central government entirely funds specific Central sector development schemes in India, the cost of implementing centrally sponsored schemes to bring about welfare is co-shared by both the Centre and sub-national units.

- Asymmetrical federalism will continue to have its relevance in the future because to pave the way for cooperative federalism we must be able to accommodate various groups and provide them with a share in the governance of the country at the same time.

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Foreign policy and moral leadership

- For India, the challenge today is to define its unique foreign policy identity, and shape the contours of its engagement with an increasingly chaotic world.
- India can address this by reclaiming its moral leadership in the region and beyond.
- India has long given up on non-alignment, and its legatee concept 'of strategic autonomy.
- While it is not wrong to argue that in an increasingly chaotic world, self-help is unavoidable, and moral arguments or policies alone will not take nations very far especially those located in hard geopolitical situations, it is also not inaccurate to argue that nations and leaders who can provide moral leadership have a special place in the comity of nations.

- It has been keen on participating in global institutions, including the UN Security Council (which it has been kept out of), it has made significant contributions to various types of international organizations, international or intergovernmental, and it has been a keen participant in various global efforts at addressing common global challenges.
- India's reluctance over building institutions in its 'periphery' which can sustain democratic values and economic integration has come back to haunt the country given how Beijing's predatory economic practices have managed to sway the region so effortlessly.
- Our loss (or wilful renunciation) of moral agency in foreign policy has a number of consequences.
- For one, our ability to build peace or mediate for global peace has vastly diminished
- Second, contemporary India's pursuit of its interests is hardly backed by normative arguments but by material power or exploitation of great power contradictions or playing the balance-of-power games.
- India will soon become the most populous country in the world, but it will hardly be a demographic superpower;
- It is set to be the world's sixth-largest economy but it is still too poor to spend for global peace, stability or maintenance of world order
- The argument is not that India must relinquish its hard national interests, but that moral arguments have the power to highlight the appeal of our national interests even more.

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Local government empowerment

- Local government system obtained constitutional status only through the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments, which mandated panchayats and municipalities, devolved a range of powers and responsibilities and made them accountable to the people.
- These amendments, which came into force in 1993, were revolutionary; they changed the scope and extent of India's democracy.
- From a mere 4,000 MLAs and MPs, the number of our elected representatives exploded to nearly 3.2 million.
- We progressed from being representationally sparse to one of the most intense democratic participatory systems envisaged.

- Scope was provided for the participation of women and the marginalized sections of society in government.
- A three-pronged strategy is used to cripple the local government system. Every local government needs to have organizational capacity, by way of staff such as engineers, office staff and social mobilisers.
- Staffing of local governments is scanty
- Second, local governments are starved of money.
- The Union Finance Commissions have made desirable recommendations, but the pitifully low finances that are devolved to local governments, not more than 5% of the divisible pool of Union taxes, come with conditionalities that bind them to specific uses.
- Furthermore, these funds are tied down by restrictive procedures that give officers control over local government expenditure decisions, through cheque signing conditionalities.
- Funds meant for the mandated duties of local governments are diverted to parallel corporate structures that perform these duties without accountability to, or consultation with the people.
- The Smart City 'Special Purpose Vehicle' is a particularly ill-reputed example.
- Third, technology is a much-loved tool of bureaucrats to centralise the delivery of local services, much to the detriment of local decision-making

Observed changes

- Urban NGOs have sprung up, which educate and exhort urban citizens to take a greater interest in urban governance. There are many good examples of local action in practice.
- Second, there is a growing failure of local services being delivered by line departments.

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