

# **NATIONALISM AND THE CRISIS OF FEDERALISM**

**Unless the attack on coalescent, democratic nationalism is curbed,  
cracks might appear in a distinctive Indian project**

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.

## **Three nationalisms**

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.

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.

## **Being linguistically federal**

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'.

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.

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.

### **States as equals**

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.

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.

### Meanings of Difficult Words:

- ❖ **nationalism** (noun) – it refers to a system (with narrow set of ideas) created by a group of people who believe their nation is superior to all others. It is also a perception of national superiority and an orientation toward national dominance- called as chauvinism (excessive nationalism).
- ❖ **federalism/ federal framework/ system** (noun) – a system of government in which establishments such as states or provinces share power with a national government.
- ❖ **coalescent** (adjective) – combining/merging together (to form a unified whole).
- ❖ **curb** (verb) – control, contain, restrict, limit.
- ❖ **distinctive** (adjective) – unique, exclusive, special/particular.
- ❖ **project** (noun) – plan of action, campaign, program, activity.
- ❖ **back out** (phrasal verb) – renege on, go back on, fail to honour, retreat from, withdraw from (a commitment).
- ❖ **commitment** (noun) – vow, promise, pledge, contract/deal/decision.
- ❖ **compensate** (verb) – recompense, repay, pay back, reimburse (for any revenue loss).
- ❖ **shortfall** (noun) – deficit, inadequacy, deficiency, shortage.
- ❖ **ground** (noun) – reason, factor, basis, rationale, premise.
- ❖ **the tip of the iceberg** (phrase) – if something is the tip of the iceberg, it is a small part of a much larger issue. This phrase is being used while talking about a problem.
- ❖ **lie in** (phrasal verb) – be present, be contained, exist.
- ❖ **flawed** (adjective) – defective, faulty, distorted, inaccurate.
- ❖ **understanding** (noun) – comprehension, interpretation, perception, conception, grasp.
- ❖ **disregard** (noun) – indifference, non-observance, negligence, lack of attention.
- ❖ **in the hands of** (phrase) – in the possession of.
- ❖ **indispensable** (adjective) – essential, necessary, needed/required; significant, important.
- ❖ **bifurcate** (verb) – split, divide, separate.
- ❖ **ethno-religious** (adjective) – relating to the connection between religion and ethnicity.
- ❖ **conception** (noun) – idea, concept, notion.
- ❖ **articulate** (verb) – express, voice, communicate.
- ❖ **curiously** (adverb) – mysteriously, surprisingly, unexpectedly.
- ❖ **primacy** (noun) – importance, priority, preference, first place.
- ❖ **potentially** (adverb) – likely, may be, possibly, probably.
- ❖ **adverse** (adjective) – unfavourable, disadvantageous, bad.
- ❖ **consequence** (noun) – result, outcome, effect; ramification, repercussion.
- ❖ **linguistic** (adjective) – relating to language; lingual.
- ❖ **outweigh** (verb) – be greater than; offset, cancel out.
- ❖ **manifestation** (noun) – display, demonstration, appearance, expression.
- ❖ **section** (noun) – part, division, branch, wing.
- ❖ **adherent** (noun) – follower, supporter, advocate.
- ❖ **interpenetration** (noun) – a process of merging/combining together.
- ❖ **emanate from** (verb) – arise, originate, stem, derive.
- ❖ **want** (noun) – lack, absence, non-existence, unavailability.
- ❖ **civic** (adjective) – public, community.

- ❖ **inclusive** (adjective) – all-embracing, overall; all-inclusive, comprehensive.
- ❖ **secular** (adjective) – non-religious.
- ❖ **composite** (adjective) – combined, mixed, complex.
- ❖ **qualitatively** (adverb) – in relation to the qualities of something.
- ❖ **conceive** (verb) – think up, devise, come up with, formulate.
- ❖ **in terms of** (phrase) – with regard to, regarding/concerning, in connection with.
- ❖ **marginalise** (verb) – treat as insignificant, treat as unimportant, neglect.
- ❖ **at best** (phrase) – simply, merely, only.
- ❖ **trump** (verb) – outdo, outperform, be better than.
- ❖ **nourish** (verb) – encourage, boost, nurture, foster; help/assist.
- ❖ **distinct** (adjective) – separate, different, individual, unconnected, detached.
- ❖ **design** (verb) – originate, create, plan, formulate, think up.
- ❖ **self-governing** (adjective) – independent, sovereign, autonomous.
- ❖ **eschew** (verb) – abstain from, refrain from, give up, forgo.
- ❖ **aspiration** (noun) – desire, hope, wish, ambition, goal.
- ❖ **constituent** (noun) – integral part (of a united whole).
- ❖ **belong to** (verb) – be owned by, be the possession of, be held by.
- ❖ **build on/upon** (phrasal verb) – use something as a basis/base for; be based on, rely on, turn to, trust in.
- ❖ **consolidate** (verb) – strengthen, make stronger, reinforce, fortify.
- ❖ **occasional** (adjective) – infrequent, irregular, periodic, uncommon.
- ❖ **admit** (verb) – accept, acknowledge, confess.
- ❖ **mechanism** (noun) – procedure, process, method/technique.
- ❖ **consistent with** (adjective) – compatible, agreeing, in harmony, in tune/line with.
- ❖ **multi-national state** (noun) – a sovereign state that comprises two or more nations or states. This contrasts a nation state, where a single nation accounts for the bulk of the population.
- ❖ **self-effacing** (adjective) – apprehensive, frightened, lacking courage.
- ❖ **elite** (noun) – high society people; the group of most powerful people in a society.
- ❖ **submerge** (verb) – hide, conceal, veil, suppress.
- ❖ **obsess about** (verb) – be continuously worrying about something.
- ❖ **fragmentation** (noun) – breaking, separation, disintegration.
- ❖ **suspicion** (noun) – misgiving, doubt/qualm, distrust, scepticism.
- ❖ **tempt** (verb) – provoke, rouse incite, persuade.
- ❖ **mobilise** (verb) – (of resources) bring into use.
- ❖ **material** (adjective) – concerned with money or physical possessions.
- ❖ **well-being** (noun) – healthy state/condition, prosperity.
- ❖ **material well-being** (noun) – having enough food, assets, work.
- ❖ **freeze** (verb) – hold something at a fixed level.
- ❖ **likelihood** (noun) – probability, chance, possibility.
- ❖ **inter-** (prefix) – between.
- ❖ **separatism** (noun) – dissension, nonconformity, dissent/faction.
- ❖ **break up** (noun) – the division of something (e.g. expenditure) into separate parts.
- ❖ **come into force** (phrase) – come to effect (a new law, rule, change etc.).
- ❖ **unitary** (adjective) – relating to a system of government in which power is provided to the central government.
- ❖ **ideology** (noun) – beliefs, ideas/opinions, principles.
- ❖ **tier** (noun) – grade, level, step, echelon.

- ❖ **centralised** (adjective) – controlled by a single authority.
- ❖ **resurrect** (adjective) – restore, revive, bring back.
- ❖ **opportune** (adjective) – favourable, promising, advantageous.
- ❖ **insistent** (adjective) – persistent, determined, unyielding; constant.
- ❖ **overwhelming** (adjective) – very great/large, huge, enormous.
- ❖ **submit** (verb) – agree, consent, accept.
- ❖ **underpin** (verb) – support, strengthen, fortify, buttress.
- ❖ **back burner** (noun) – delayed consideration of an action; A state of being postponed, deferred or given lower priority.
- ❖ **on the back burner** (phrase) – having low priority.
- ❖ **allegiance** (noun) – loyalty, faithfulness, devotion.
- ❖ **wholesale** (adjective) – extensive, total, complete, sweeping.
- ❖ **fledgling** (adjective) – emerging, beginning, developing.
- ❖ **encounter** (adjective) – come up against, face, confront.
- ❖ **mass politics** (noun) – Mass politics is the situation in which political decisions are made by a symmetrical aggregation of the actions of a large number of individuals. Mass politics is defined in terms of formal equality while democracy is defined in terms of equality of actual political power.
- ❖ **autonomy** (noun) – independence, freedom; self rule.
- ❖ **set up** (phrasal verb) – establish, start/begin, inaugurate, create.
- ❖ **besides** (preposition) – in addition to, apart from.
- ❖ **deepen** (verb) – increase/intensify; exacerbate, aggravate, inflame, worsen.
- ❖ **alleviate** (verb) – reduce, control, mitigate/moderate.
- ❖ **undermine** (verb) – reduce, diminish, impede, hinder.
- ❖ **nation-state** (noun) – nation-state is a sovereign/independent country (state) where the great majority of people are conscious of a common identity and share the same culture.
- ❖ **majoritarianism** (noun) – a philosophy that states that a majority (sometimes categorized by religion, language, social class, or some other identifying factor) of the population is entitled to a certain degree of primacy (priority) in society, and has the right to make decisions that affect the society.
- ❖ **diverse** (adjective) – including people from a range of different social and ethnic backgrounds.
- ❖ **robust** (adjective) – strong, powerful.
- ❖ **arena** (noun) – a place of activity.
- ❖ **carve out** (phrasal verb) – establish, develop a career or position for oneself.
- ❖ **sow** (verb) – plant, seed (a crop).
- ❖ .
- ❖ **ground** (verb) – establish, set, settle, root.
- ❖ **consent** (noun) – agreement, assent, permission/approval.
- ❖ **rigidity** (noun) – hardness, inflexibility, severity.
- ❖ **asymmetry** (noun) – lack of equality, non-uniformity, unevenness, lack of symmetry.
- ❖ **non-manipulative** (adjective) – not exercising control on other person to one's advantage.
- ❖ **polity** (noun) – a politically organized society.
- ❖ **disrespectfully** (adverb) – impolitely, badly-manneredly, rudely.
- ❖ **unleash** (verb) – let loose, release, set free.
- ❖ **grave** (adjective) – terrible, awful, alarming, gloomy.
- ❖ **contemporary** (adjective) – modern, present-day.
- ❖ **due to** (phrase) – because of, owing to, on account of, as a result of.
- ❖ **conceptually** (adverb) – notionally, unpragmatically, speculatively, hypothetical
- ❖ **nothing short of** (phrase) – nothing less than.