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The Delimitation Dilemma — Can India's Federal Compact Survive Its Demographic Divide?

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The Delimitation Dilemma — Can India's Federal Compact Survive Its Demographic Divide?

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"India's population dividend is becoming a political liability. How should the delimitation process be reformed to be fair to states that achieved population control? Does political representation require population parity?"

India is heading toward a constitutional collision. On one side sits the constitutional mandate for periodic delimitation — reallocation of Lok Sabha seats based on population after each Census. On the other sits a demographic reality that threatens to punish the states most responsible for India's human development success. How the government navigates this tension in the coming years will determine whether India's federal compact holds or fractures along its most revealing fault line: the north-south axis.

THE ARITHMETIC OF INJUSTICE

The arithmetic is stark. Delimitation was frozen after the 1971 Census — Article 82 provides for delimitation, but the 42nd Amendment (1976) froze the number of seats based on 1971 population until 2001, and the 84th Amendment (2002) extended the freeze until after the first Census following 2026.

That window is now approaching.

If seats are reallocated purely on 2021 Census (or the delayed 2024 Census) population data:

Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh would gain 40–60 additional Lok Sabha seats

Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka would lose proportional representation

This outcome would be constitutionally correct — but politically and morally perverse. Tamil Nadu achieved replacement-level fertility (TFR ~1.7) through decades of investment in female literacy, healthcare, and economic development. Kerala is ageing at rates comparable to Western Europe. These states will effectively be taxed — in political representation — for their development success.

THE FEDERAL COMPACT AND ITS LIMITS

India's federal compact rests on the principle of equal citizenship: a vote in Rajasthan should count as much as a vote in Kerala. Delimitation based on population is meant to uphold this principle.

But federalism also rests on the principle of cooperative partnership between states and the union — a relationship of trust, not just arithmetic. If southern states — which contribute disproportionately to India's GDP, income tax revenues, and export earnings — find their political voice diminished because they governed themselves more responsibly, the compact is fraying.

The Fifteenth Finance Commission (2021-26) partly addressed this by using 2011 Census data for horizontal tax devolution rather than incentivising rapid population growth. But it also introduced a 'demographic performance' indicator (rewarding states for achieving lower fertility). The delimitation question is harder to finesse through fiscal transfers.

OPTIONS ON THE TABLE

Option 1: Increase Total Lok Sabha Seats The 91st Constitution Amendment (2003) fixed total Lok Sabha seats at 543. If the total is increased — to, say, 750 or 800 — new seats can be allocated to high-population states without reducing the seats of low-population states. This would preserve southern representation while acknowledging northern demographic growth.

Limitation: A larger House raises legitimate concerns about legislative efficiency and cost. The existing Sansad Bhavan can accommodate ~900 MPs in the new building.

Option 2: Composite Index for Seat Allocation Allocate seats based on a composite of population, area, contribution to GDP, and development outcomes rather than population alone. This is the approach used by the Rajya Sabha (different seat-sharing formula than Lok Sabha).

Limitation: It would require a constitutional amendment (Article 81) and is politically contentious — Northern states are unlikely to accept it.

Option 3: Constitutional Guarantee of Minimum Seats Guarantee every existing state a minimum number of Lok Sabha seats (their current allocation) while adding new seats for population growth. This would require a constitutional amendment but avoids reducing any state's absolute representation.

Limitation: Could create very large population disparities per Lok Sabha constituency between states.

THE RAJYA SABHA DIMENSION

The Rajya Sabha allocates seats to states not strictly by population but by a formula that gives smaller states more proportional representation than they would get on population alone. India could consider restructuring the federal balance — strengthening the Rajya Sabha's legislative role and increasing state representation there

— as a counterbalance to population-driven Lok Sabha changes.

Germany's Bundesrat model — where state governments directly participate in federal legislation, with veto powers on certain laws — offers one template. A stronger Rajya Sabha could assure southern states that their voices in federal policymaking are protected even if Lok Sabha numbers shift.

THE DEEPER QUESTION: WHAT IS REPRESENTATION FOR?

The delimitation debate ultimately asks a deeper question about the purpose of political representation. Is it to ensure equal numerical representation for each citizen? Or to ensure that each state's distinct concerns — cultural, linguistic, economic, environmental — are heard in national deliberation?

India's founding fathers chose a more complex answer than pure numerical equality. The Constitution's scheme — reservations for SCs/STs, special provisions for NE states, linguistic reorganisation, autonomous district councils — reflects the recognition that arithmetic equality can produce substantive inequality when applied to a diverse society.

The delimitation challenge is the next test of this wisdom. A purely numerical solution risks producing a national parliament that is more representative of India's poorest and least-governed regions — potentially at the cost of its most developed ones. That trade-off must be made consciously, with political compact and constitutional amendments that states can accept — not imposed through a technical arithmetic exercise that ignores decades of demographic governance.

CONCLUSION

India's north-south demographic divide is not a problem to be solved — it is a reality to be governed. The delimitation question will test whether India's political class has the imagination to find a solution that upholds the principle of equal citizenship without punishing development success. The alternative — a protracted constitutional confrontation between northern and southern states over political representation — would be corrosive to the idea of India as a single political community.

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGE PEDIA

DELIMITATION — CONSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK:

- Provision: Article 82 (Lok Sabha delimitation after each Census)
- Total Lok Sabha seats: 543 (fixed by 91st Constitution Amendment, 2003)
- Original freeze: 42nd Amendment (1976) — based on 1971 Census; valid until 2001
- Extension: 84th Amendment (2002) — freeze extended until first Census after 2026
- Next delimitation: Based on 2021 Census (delayed — may be 2024/25 data)

DEMOGRAPHIC DIVERGENCE — KEY DATA:

- TFR: Tamil Nadu ~1.7; Kerala ~1.8; Karnataka ~1.7 (all below replacement)
- TFR: Bihar ~2.9; UP ~2.7; Rajasthan ~2.5 (above replacement)
- Replacement-level TFR: 2.1
- Northern states share by 2051: 52.7% | Southern states: ~17%
- Kerala 60+ population by 2036: 23-25%

FINANCE COMMISSION AND POPULATION:

- 15th Finance Commission: Used 2011 Census data (not 2021) for horizontal devolution
- Introduced 'demographic performance' indicator — rewards lower fertility states
- Raised southern states' devolution share slightly vs. previous commission

FEDERAL REPRESENTATION OPTIONS:

- Option 1: Increase total Lok Sabha seats (new Sansad Bhavan can accommodate ~900 MPs)
- Option 2: Composite allocation index (area + population + development)
- Option 3: Constitutional minimum seats guarantee per state

RAJYA SABHA — STATE REPRESENTATION:

- Total: 245 seats | 238 elected (state + UTs) + 12 nominated
- UP: 31 seats (highest) | TN: 18 | Kerala: 9
- Upper house does not face the same proportionality pressures

CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENCES:

- Article 81: Composition of Lok Sabha
- Article 82: Delimitation after each Census
- Article 170: Composition of State Legislative Assemblies
- 42nd Amendment (1976): Inserted Directive Principles re population control
- 84th Amendment (2002): Extended delimitation freeze

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

- Germany Bundesrat: Upper house representing state governments directly; veto on federal laws affecting states — one model for India to consider
- Finance Commission: Article 280; constituted every 5 years; recommends tax devolution formula
- Currently: Southern states contribute ~35-40% of GST collections but receive ~30% of devolution
- Delimitation Commission: Statutory body under Delimitation Act; headed by retired SC judge

Sources: Indian Express, The Hindu, Insights on India

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