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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Beyond the North-South Rhetoric – Delimitation, Federalism, and India's Democratic Balance



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CURATED & WRITTEN BY



Bharat Choudhary

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

[linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat)

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Will delimitation based on population punish states that successfully implemented family planning? How can India ensure southern states retain their fiscal and political voice?"

WHY IN NEWS

With the constitutional freeze on delimitation set to expire in 2026, the debate over redrawing Lok Sabha constituencies based on updated population data has intensified, pitting northern states poised to gain seats against southern states that fear losing political representation despite their higher economic contributions and successful population control.

THE EDITORIAL ARGUMENT

- 1 Population-based delimitation rewards demographic failure:** States that failed to control population growth — primarily in the Hindi heartland — stand to gain the most seats, while southern states that achieved replacement-level fertility decades ago face a relative decline in political voice.
- 2 Fiscal contribution vs. political representation:** Southern states contribute **35-40%** of India total GST collections and a disproportionate share of corporate and income tax, yet face shrinking representation in the Lower House under a purely population-driven formula.
- 3 Federalism under strain:** A Lok Sabha where the Hindi heartland commands an even larger majority can push through legislation — from budgets to constitutional amendments — with or without southern consent, undermining the spirit of cooperative federalism.
- 4 The 16th Finance Commission offers a partial answer:** The introduction of a **10% GDP contribution** criterion in horizontal devolution marks a step forward, but fiscal adjustments cannot fully compensate for the loss of legislative power that delimitation would cause.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE FREEZE

The 42nd Amendment (1976) and Its Logic

During the Emergency, Parliament enacted the **42nd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1976**, freezing the allocation of Lok Sabha seats on the basis of the **1971 Census**. The rationale was explicit: states actively pursuing family planning should not be penalised with reduced representation while states with unchecked population growth gained seats.

This freeze was extended by the **84th Constitutional Amendment Act, 2001** until the first Census after **2026**. At that time, legislators assumed that by the mid-2020s, India would have achieved demographic convergence across states — a prediction that has only partially materialised.

Demographic Divergence Today

The divergence between northern and southern states has, in many respects, widened rather than narrowed. The **Total Fertility Rate (TFR)** in states like Bihar (**2.98** as per NFHS-5) and Uttar Pradesh (**2.35**) remains well above the replacement level of **2.1**, while Kerala (**1.8**), Tamil Nadu (**1.8**), and Andhra Pradesh (**1.7**) achieved below-replacement fertility over a decade ago.

STATE	TFR (NFHS-5, 2019-21)	PROJECTED SEAT CHANGE (POST-DELIMITATION)
Uttar Pradesh	2.35	+48 (from 80 to ~128)
Bihar	2.98	+30 (from 40 to ~70)
Madhya Pradesh	2.13	+10-12
Tamil Nadu	1.8	+2 (from 39 to ~41)
Kerala	1.8	-1 (from 20 to ~19)
Andhra Pradesh	1.7	+3 (from 25 to ~28)
Karnataka	1.7	+8 (from 28 to ~36)

Uttar Pradesh alone could gain almost as many seats as the combined loss in relative share of southern states. In a house where each MP casts one vote, the Hindi heartland would have an even greater ability to shape national legislation.

THE FISCAL FEDERALISM DIMENSION

Southern States as India Economic Engine

The five southern states — Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh — collectively account for roughly **30% of India GDP** while constituting about **20%** of the national population. Bengaluru alone contributes more income tax than several northern states combined.

Despite this, the **15th Finance Commission** formula, with its **45% weight on income distance**, channels a larger share of devolved resources to lower-income states. Southern states receive approximately **15-17%** of devolved funds despite contributing **35-40%** of central tax revenue.

The 16th Finance Commission Response

The **16th Finance Commission** (chaired by Dr. Arvind Panagariya, covering 2026-31) introduced a **10% weight for state contribution to GDP** in its horizontal devolution formula — the first time economic output has been directly factored in. This has marginally improved the shares of Karnataka (+0.48 percentage points), Kerala (+0.46), and Andhra Pradesh (+0.17).

CRITERION	15TH FC WEIGHT	16TH FC WEIGHT
Population (2011 Census)	15%	—
Area	15%	—
Forest and Ecology	10%	—
Income Distance	45%	—
Tax and Fiscal Effort	2.5%	—
Demographic Performance	12.5%	—
GDP Contribution	—	10% (new)

While this represents progress, southern leaders argue that fiscal adjustments are no substitute for legislative power — money can be allocated differently, but laws are made by majority vote.

THE CONSTITUTIONAL DILEMMA

Article 81 and the Principle of Proportional Representation

Article 81 of the Constitution provides that states shall be allotted seats in the Lok Sabha in such a manner that the ratio of seats to population is, “so far as practicable,” the same for all states. This was the explicit principle the 42nd Amendment suspended for five decades.

Strictly adhering to this principle post-2026 would mean reallocating seats proportional to the **2031 Census** (assuming the delayed 2021 Census is scrapped in favour of the next decadal count). The result would be a dramatic northward shift in political power.

Arguments For and Against Pure Population-Based Delimitation

ARGUMENT FOR	ARGUMENT AGAINST
“One person, one vote” demands equal representation per capita	Penalises states that successfully implemented national population policy
Northern states are underrepresented relative to their population	Rewards failure to invest in education, health, and women empowerment
Constitutional mandate under Article 81	Undermines cooperative federalism — southern states lose incentive to perform
Democracy requires periodic redistricting to reflect demographic reality	Could trigger secessionist sentiments; already visible in “South India vs North India” rhetoric on social media

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS AND ALTERNATIVES

A Bicameral Adjustment Within the Lok Sabha

Several constitutional scholars have proposed splitting the Lok Sabha into **two chambers** within the same house — one chamber allocated by population (satisfying Article 81) and another allocated equally across states (like the US Senate model), with legislation requiring passage in both. This would require a constitutional amendment but would preserve both democratic representation and federal balance.

Weighted Devolution as Compensation

Under this model, delimitation proceeds based on population, but the **Finance Commission permanently assigns higher devolution weights** (e.g., 15-20% for GDP contribution) to states that lose relative seat share. The logic: if you lose political voice, you gain fiscal autonomy.

Capping Total Seats

Rather than redistributing existing **543 seats**, the Lok Sabha could be **expanded to 700-800 seats**, giving northern states their proportional seats while keeping southern states at their current numbers. This avoids the politically toxic narrative of “taking away” seats. The Lok Sabha has not been expanded since 1977, and the current strength was designed for a population of **550 million** — India now has **1.44 billion** people.

The 50-50 Formula

A compromise formula giving **50% weight to population** and **50% to other factors** (state area, per-capita income, human development indices, fiscal discipline) could soften the blow of pure population-based delimitation while still moving toward proportional representation.

WAY FORWARD

The delimitation exercise is not merely a technical redistricting — it is a foundational test of whether Indian federalism can accommodate vastly different demographic trajectories within a single democratic framework. A purely population-based formula risks alienating the very states that drive India economic growth, while indefinite freezing denies northern populations their rightful representation.

The most promising approach combines **moderate Lok Sabha expansion** (to 700+ seats), a **hybrid delimitation formula** that weights population at 60-70% alongside development indicators, and a **permanent fiscal compensation mechanism** through the Finance Commission. The **Rajya Sabha** must also be reformed — giving it greater legislative teeth as a true chamber of states could offset any northward power shift in the Lok Sabha.

India cannot afford to let this debate **devolve** into regional antagonism. The solution lies in institutional design that rewards both demographic responsibility and democratic representation — not one at the expense of the other.

UPSC RELEVANCE

42nd and 84th Constitutional Amendments; Article 81; Article 280; Finance Commission composition and criteria; Delimitation Commission (Articles 82, 170); TFR data from NFHS-5

MAINS GS-2:

Issues and challenges pertaining to the federal structure; Delimitation and its impact on representation; Fiscal federalism — Finance Commission recommendations; Cooperative vs. competitive federalism

INTERVIEW:

North-south divide, democratic representation vs. federal equity, political economy of delimitation

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGE PEDIA

DELIMITATION — CORE DATA:

Constitutional basis: Articles 81, 82, 170; Delimitation Act, 2002

Freeze on seat allocation: 42nd Amendment (1976) based on 1971 Census

Extended by: 84th Amendment (2001) until first Census after 2026

Current Lok Sabha strength: 543 seats (last expanded 1977)

Last delimitation exercise: 2002-2008 (readjusted boundaries within states, did NOT reallocate seats between states)

Delimitation Commission: quasi-judicial body; orders have force of law; cannot be challenged in court

PROJECTED SEAT CHANGES (POPULATION-BASED):

Uttar Pradesh: 80 to ~128 (+48)

Bihar: 40 to ~70 (+30)

Kerala: 20 to ~19 (-1)

Tamil Nadu: 39 to ~41 (+2 but relative share drops)

FISCAL FEDERALISM DATA:

15th Finance Commission vertical devolution: 41% of central tax revenue to states

16th Finance Commission: retained 41%; added 10% GDP contribution criterion

Southern Five (TN, KL, KA, TS, AP) contribute ~35-40% of GST collections

Southern Five receive ~15-17% of devolved funds

16th FC gains: Karnataka +0.48 pp, Kerala +0.46 pp, AP +0.17 pp

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA (NFHS-5, 2019-21):

National TFR: 2.0; Bihar: 2.98; UP: 2.35; Kerala: 1.8; TN: 1.8; AP: 1.7

Replacement-level TFR: 2.1

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

16th Finance Commission chaired by Dr. Arvind Panagariya (period: 2026-31)

15th Finance Commission chaired by N.K. Singh (period: 2021-26)

India population (2024 est.): ~1.44 billion

US House of Representatives: 435 members for ~335 million people (1 per ~770,000)

India Lok Sabha: 543 members for ~1.44 billion (1 per ~2.65 million)

Article 280 mandates Finance Commission every 5 years

Sources: [The Hindu](#) , [The India Forum](#) , [Business Standard](#) , [PIB](#)



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[linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat)[Read Full Article on Ujiyari →](#)<https://ujiyari.com/editorials/2026/03/north-south-divide-delimitation-federalism/>

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