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Redefining Representation: The case for a fairer delimitation in India

Redefining Representation: The case for a fairer delimitation in India



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Delimitation is the process of redrawing the boundaries of territorial constituencies in a state for the Lok Sabha and Legislative Assemblies to ensure fair representation. Since populations grow and shift over time, this process helps maintain balanced representation so that each MP or MLA represents roughly the same number of people. To fix this, a Delimitation Commission, appointed by Parliament, steps in to adjust constituency boundaries. India has redrawn these boundaries based on the 1951, 1961, and 1971 censuses.

Delimitation seeks to uphold the democratic principle of equal representation, ensuring that every vote carries the same weight. Governed by Articles 82 and 170 of the Indian Constitution, the process has historically balanced representation across states. However, as India prepares for the anticipated 2026 delimitation, debates have intensified over the potential shift in political power between North and South India. Historically, the Election Commission of India has increased Lok Sabha seats after each census. However, through a constitutional amendment in 1976, the government froze the number of seats at 543, preventing states with high population growth from gaining a disproportionate advantage.

Impact of population growth on representation

The hope was that over the next 50 years, the fast-growing population of the northern states would improve human development indices to balance national progress. However, the opposite has occurred, and North India has fallen further behind. If delimitation resumes now, the Lok Sabha could expand to around 850 seats, significantly increasing North India's political dominance and potentially disadvantageous South Indian states that have made significant strides in India's development.

Proportional representation is cited as one of the principal arguments favoring delimitation. It makes sense on paper—larger population states should have more representatives in Parliament. But when the principle is pitted against the backdrop of economic and social contributions, it starts to fray.

Total Fertility Rate: The numbers tell the story

Census of India projections say that 70–80% of new seats will be allocated to North Indian states that are lower on human development indexes. The statistics paint a stark picture. States like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar have populations that have grown faster than Tamil Nadu and Kerala, where growth is more controlled. NFHS-5 (2021) data shows Tamil Nadu's Total Fertility Rate (TFR) is 1.6, while the TFR in Uttar Pradesh remains at 2.7.

Education Inequality: A stark contrast in literacy rates

If delimitation is solely population-based, South India's controlled population growth will come at the expense of low representation despite its stronger economy, superior administration, and higher literacy levels.

The statistics demonstrate the unfairness. Kerala has a literacy level of 96.2%, whereas Bihar stands at 61.8% based on Census 2011, NSSO 2020-21. South Indian states have historically been pioneers in administration, education, and economic production. Still, they would be penalized for their success under a purely population-based division, while states with weaker educational and economic development would be rewarded with increased political power. This is not just an imbalance—it is a fundamental inequity.

Investment in education: Where the priorities differ

Education spending further illustrates this disparity. According to ASER 2021, South Indian families allocate up to 40% of their income toward education, whereas North Indian families spend only 10–20%. Additionally, 70% of all education loans in India are taken in South India, with only 15% in North India. This is not merely a function of wealth but reflects a stronger cultural and economic commitment to education and skill development in the South.

The Federal revenue imbalance

Despite contributing significantly to India's economy, South India receives a disproportionately smaller share of central resources, raising concerns about

fairness in fiscal distribution. Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Telangana are among the largest revenue contributors, yet tax redistribution policies favor high-population, low-income states in the North. Finance Commission Reports (2021-22) highlight that Karnataka contributed ₹1.26 lakh crore in revenues, Tamil Nadu ₹86,000 crore, while Uttar Pradesh and Bihar contributed only ₹23,000 crore and ₹6,000 crore, respectively. However, the Northern states continue to receive the bulk of central funds for infrastructure and welfare programs.

Earnings Gap: Per capita income comparison

A stark contrast is also evident in per capita income. The average per capita income in South India stands at ₹2.25 lakh, while in North India, it is significantly lower at ₹70,000—including remittances earned by North Indians working in the South. Without these external earnings, the actual per capita income in Northern states would be even lower, highlighting a critical economic divide.

Innovation and industrial growth: The widening gap

Beyond direct economic output, South Indian states have emerged as global innovation hubs, with cities like Bengaluru, Chennai, and Hyderabad leading in technology and startup ecosystems. Meanwhile, much of North India faces industrial stagnation and underdevelopment, further widening the economic divide.

This systemic imbalance in revenue generation, resource allocation, and investment in human capital penalizes states that have prioritized governance and progress while rewarding those lagging in key development areas. A fairer approach that acknowledges economic contributions alongside population-based demarcation should be introduced, without penalizing progressive states for making the right choices.

This divide is not only economic but also social.

Gender Disparity: Life expectancy and sex ratio

While South India has made strides in education, gender equality, innovation, and governance, most of North India continues to struggle with deeply ingrained societal challenges that limit progress in some areas. The sex ratio at birth is a key indicator of socio-economic development—Kerala reports 1,048 females per 1,000 males, while Haryana and Uttar Pradesh stand at 926 and 940, respectively (NFHS-5, 2021). The United Nations Population Fund (2021) estimates that over four crore women are “missing” from India’s population, predominantly in North and West India due to sex-selective discrimination.

A call for a more balanced delimitation process

There is still time to correct. Instead of leaping into precipitate parliamentary seat redistributions, a more graduated and fairer process is needed. Emphasis should be placed on increasing the size of the state assembly of MLAs instead of altering Lok Sabha representation overnight. North Indian states should be provided 20–30 more years to improve human development indicators before altering national representation. State governance reforms in low-performing states should be encouraged instead of rewarding population growth.

Governance reforms must take priority over simply allocating more seats based on population growth. If not approached cautiously, delimitation could impact India’s federal balance and heighten regional disparities. India faces a choice—either to incentivize development or risk creating structural imbalances. India’s democracy must be built on progress, governance, and economic contribution—not just population size. A fair system should reward progress and encourage development in lagging regions. If India aims to be a global superpower, it must empower those driving its growth—not silence them.

Delimitation must be approached with a nuanced strategy that recognizes both population size and developmental contributions. A well-balanced framework that promotes governance improvements alongside fair representation will ensure India’s democratic integrity and equitable growth.

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