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Democracy at a Crossroads: Rethinking Delimitation in India

Delimitation serves to protect a simple and powerful principle: that every vote should carry the same weight. Delimitation is primarily governed by Articles 82 and 170 of the Indian Constitution, and it defines electoral boundaries to adjust to population changes over time. However, there's a problem: The Indian government has done several censuses since 1971, but the number of Lok Sabha seats is still at 543. Why? Because the Delimitation Act of 1971 has capped how many seats can increase, and that cap is still there.

This freeze was to prevent the high-growing population states from gaining a disproportionate advantage, mainly in the North, when other states were struggling to stabilize population growth and improve human development indicators.

It was estimated that the rapidly increasing population of the Northern states would, over the next 50 years, lift human development indices and ensure equitable development for the entire nation. However, the opposite has occurred; the majority of the northern states remain behind; in fact, the gap has increased further. If delimitation started from scratch today, officials estimate the Lok Sabha to have more than 850 seats. The bulk of the new seats would end up belonging to North Indian states, significantly increasing their political influence and weakening the influence of more developed and better-governed Southern states.

Proportional representation based on population may look fair on paper. Practically, it may become the cause of serious unbalancing consequences unless corrected by measures of an economic, educational, and administrative character. It may be estimated that 70-80% of the additional seats would go to North Indian states, which include many states with poor development performances in crucial sectors.



For instance, the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) of Tamil Nadu is 1.6 while that of Uttar Pradesh is 2.7 (NFHS-5, 2021). Literacy in Kerala is 96.2% while in Bihar it is 61.8% (Census 2011, NSSO 2020–21).

Economic imbalances are also the bedrock of such imbalances. South India remits far more to national treasuries. Karnataka has remitted ₹1.26 lakh crore, Tamil Nadu ₹86,000 crore, Uttar Pradesh ₹23,000 crore, and Bihar a meager ₹6,000 crore as per Finance Commission Reports (2021–22). Nevertheless, central welfare and infrastructural spending continue to pour into the Northern states.

A huge difference can also be seen in per capita income. South Indian mean is ₹2.25 lakh, and the North is significantly lower at ₹70,000, even considering remittances from

Northern migrants who are employed in the South. Education spending mirrors the gap as well. Southern households spend up to 40% of their income on education, whereas 10–20% is spent on education in the North (ASER 2021). Surprisingly, 70% of educational loans in India are taken from the South, which suggests a greater focus on education and skill development.

Places like Bengaluru, Chennai, and Hyderabad now lead the world in innovation and technology, while large regions of North India face industrial stagnation and underdevelopment

While South India has made great strides in education, women's empowerment, entrepreneurship, and educational delivery systems, many pockets of North India remain mired by entrenched social issues that impede progress in key areas. The Kerala sex ratio at birth is 1048 women per 1000 men, while in Haryana and Uttar Pradesh the ratio stands at 926 and 940 women for every 1000 men, respectively (NFHS-5, 2021). The UN Population Fund (2021) has estimated that more than 40 million women are "missing" from the Indian population, mostly in the North and the West, due to sex discrimination.

It is not too late to make the corrections. Instead of plunging headlong into the redistribution of Lok Sabha seats, India can follow a gradual, equitable path. Increased size of state legislatures can be utilized for intra-state representation without disturbing federal balance. North Indian states should be provided 20–30 years to raise their human development indicators before the national representation is redistributed.

Reforms in governance have to come first, instead of increasing the number of seats just on the basis of population growth. Incautiously handled, delimitation is capable of skewing India's federal balance and increasing regional disparities. India has a choice to make—the choice of incentivising development, or the risk of making structural imbalances prevalent. An equal system would reward growth and encourage development in regions that are lagging. If India wants to become a world power, it must empower the areas leading national development, not undermine them.

Delimitation must be performed through a nuanced process that considers both the number of people and development contributions. A fair system that expands governance improvements and fair representation will, in turn, sustain India's democracy and equitable development.

(Acharya Prashant, a modern Vedanta exegete and philosopher, is a national bestselling author, columnist, and founder of the PrashantAdvait Foundation. An IIT-IIM alumnus, he is a recipient of the OCND Award from the IIT Delhi Alumni Association for outstanding contribution to national development.)

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