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April 25, 2026

Counted, Not Weighed: What Delimitation Asks

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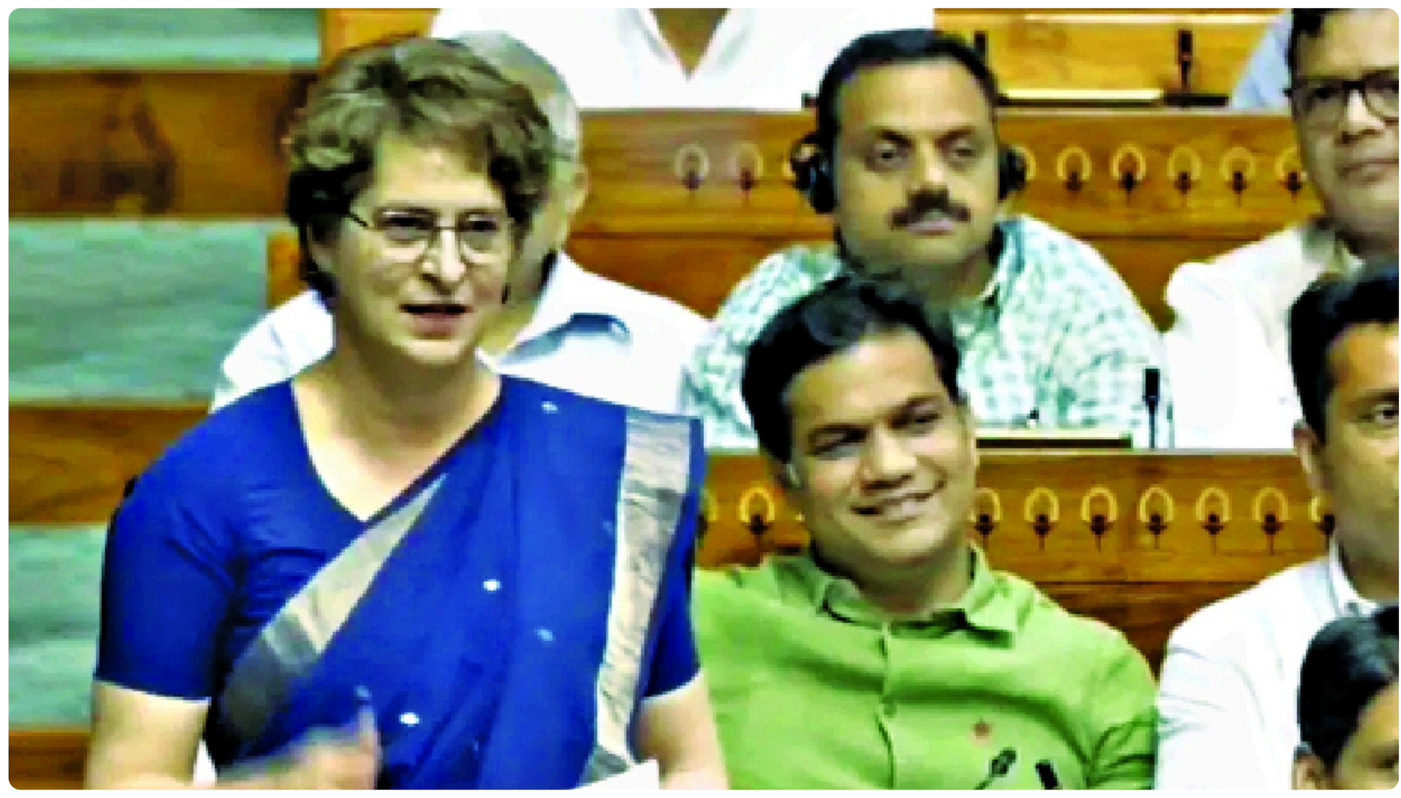

Democracy, as a formal system, is indifferent to what produced the vote it counts. This indifference is usually a virtue, for it is what prevents the powerful from assigning themselves additional weight. But there are circumstances in which this same indifference becomes its own form of injustice: when the system's arithmetic rewards precisely the communities that declined to invest in their own people, and penalises precisely those that did. India is approaching one such circums acquired both urgency and a specific political shape.

On April 17, 2026, the Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill was defeated in the Lok Sabha. Of the 528 members present, 298 voted in favour and 230 against, leaving the government 54 votes short of the two-thirds majority a constitutional amendment requires. The Delimitation Bill, 2026 and the Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill were subsequently withdrawn. Opposition speakers framed the package as a backdoor rewrite of federal arithmetic; the government called it democratic correction. Neither characterisation resolves the harder question, which the bill's defeat has deferred but not answered: when the constitutional freeze on parliamentary seat allocation expires this year, what principles should govern the redrawing of India's political map?

The 42nd Constitutional Amendment of 1976, passed during the Emergency, locked Lok Sabha seat allocation to the 1971 census. The logic was framed generously: give lagging states time to bring their human development indices in line with the rest of the country, so that population growth would not become the sole engine of parliamentary power. The 84th Amendment in 2001 extended this freeze to the first census after 2026: fifty years of grace. The implicit promise embedded in this arrangement was convergence. The question the architects of the freeze did not ask, or did not ask loudly enough, was whether the states being granted this grace had any real intention of using it. Convergence is not a policy outcome; it is an act of intent. It requires societies to examine what they have been doing, decide that it is insufficient, and change. That kind of change is not commanded by constitutional amendment. It is chosen or refused, and across fifty years, the choice was predominantly refusal.

On virtually every indicator of human development, the gap between North and South India remains wide, and on several it has proved stubbornly resistant to closing. The freeze was designed as a corrective; it has functioned, instead, as a deferral. If delimitation proceeds now on a purely population-based formula, the Carnegie Endowment's projection of a Lok Sabha expanded to approximately 848 seats on 2026 population figures shows Uttar Pradesh alone gaining 63 seats and Bihar 39, while the five southern states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana would see their collective share of the House fall from roughly 24 percent to under 20 percent. States that lagged on every development metric would gain the most political weight. States that led on every metric would practically be penalised for having done so. The structural implications of the defeated package extended further still. Expanding the Lok Sabha from 543 to 850 while holding the Rajya Sabha fixed at 250 would have shifted the ratio between the two houses from roughly 2.2:1 to 3.3:1, reducing the Rajya Sabha's weight in presidential [illegible] and in any joint sitting of the two chambers. The Rajya Sabha [illegible] population-weighted expansion of

the other chamber that dilutes the Council's relative strength is not only a seat-count change but a rearrangement of the federal balance itself.

The statistics that explain this outcome are not the record of geographic fortune; they are the record of accumulated decision. SRS 2021 data places Tamil Nadu's Total Fertility Rate at 1.5 and Uttar Pradesh's at 2.7. Kerala's literacy rate stands at 95.3 percent against Bihar's 74.3 percent. Mean years of schooling average 6.5 years in the South against approximately 4.25 in the North, a fifty-percent gap produced not by soil or rainfall but by where two societies chose to direct their resources across generations. South Indian families allocate up to 40 percent of household income to education; North Indian families spend 10 to 20 percent, from a per capita income base less than a third the size. The average per capita income across the five southern states runs to approximately Rs 3.4 lakh annually; Bihar's is roughly Rs 70,000 and Uttar Pradesh's just over Rs 1 lakh, a gap of nearly five-fold at the lower end. Household income surveys for Bihar and Uttar Pradesh include substantial remittances from residents working in other states; India's total domestic remittance flow, estimated at close to Rs 3.5 lakh crore annually, moves disproportionately from prosperous states into Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan. The underlying gap in locally-generated income is wider still.

Education loan data makes the disparity unmistakable. Kerala receives 852 education loan applications per lakh of population annually. Bihar receives 30. Tamil Nadu's rate is 341; Uttar Pradesh's, 44. Kerala's rate is roughly twenty-eight times Bihar's, Tamil Nadu's nearly eight times Uttar Pradesh's.

These figures deserve a moment. Taking an education loan means a family has decided that the education of its children is worth going into debt. It means prioritising a future over a present. The South does this at a rate utterly disproportionate to its population, not because its families are wealthy enough to absorb any debt easily, but because the commitment to education has become a cultural constant that income alone does not explain. The North, with agricultural land more fertile than the South's, asks for education loans at roughly one-twentieth the southern rate. The South's advantage is not resource endowment but the decision, made repeatedly over generations, to invest in human beings rather than simply produce more of them.

What this divergence has cost the South, and what it has subsidised in the North, is visible nowhere more clearly than in the fiscal architecture that connects them. CBDT data for 2021-22 shows Karnataka contributed approximately Rs 1.26 lakh crore in direct tax collections, Tamil Nadu Rs 86,000 crore. U[illegible] 000 crore and Bihar Rs 6,000 crore. Under Finance Commission [illegible] percent of the sharable pool flows

to states weighted primarily on poverty and population criteria, channeling a substantial portion of southern tax revenue northward to fund the infrastructure and welfare programmes of states that contributed a fraction of what they received. The roads, the dams, the welfare schemes taking shape in North India are significantly funded by the taxes of people who live in the South. The South has been paying, quietly and continuously, for the North's development. The Finance Commission's redistribution formula has never asked what kind of society produced the surplus it redistributes, because asking that question would require asking which society examined itself and which did not. A democracy that avoids that question in its fiscal architecture will not suddenly face it in its parliamentary arithmetic. A population-based delimitation would add political dispossession to fiscal dispossession, completing a double penalty on the communities that built what everyone else spent.

Harder still is what the population data conceals about gender. The United Nations Population Fund estimates that nearly 4.6 crore women are missing from India's population, overwhelmingly from North and West India, the demographic residue of decades of sex-selective discrimination. NFHS-5 records Karnataka's sex ratio at birth as 978 females per 1,000 males, above the natural level of 952; Haryana's is 893 and Uttar Pradesh's 941. A purely population-based delimitation would extend more parliamentary representation to precisely those states where the suppression of daughters has simultaneously inflated certain demographic counts while eliminating others. What makes this particularly sharp is the political packaging in which the 131st Amendment arrived in Parliament: it was presented as a vehicle for women's empowerment. Reserving 33 percent of seats for women in a Lok Sabha where the states with the worst records on women's survival would wield the most aggregate influence is not a contradiction that critics of the bill were unjustified in highlighting. A society that erases its daughters and then presents its headcount as a democratic credential is not demonstrating vitality; it is performing the oldest substitution: compensating through accumulation what is absent in quality.

A society's demographic record is the shadow of its inner choices. The South's current record is not inheritance; it is achievement. The South once cast the same shadow.

The South was not born progressive. Tamil Nadu and Kerala were among the most caste-stratified, hierarchically rigid societies in the subcontinent well into the twentieth century. What changed them was reform: the Dravidian movement's social revolution, the temple entry agitations in Kerala, radical public investment in education, a political willingness to break from orthodoxy even at the cos[illegible] society that has organised itself around the inherited hierarchy[illegible] authority of religious custom is

expensive; it costs status, comfort, and the comforting certainty of an unchanging world. The South paid that cost. The currents of social and religious reform that swept Maharashtra, Bengal, and the South in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries found no comparable footing in the Hindi heartland, not by accident but by a resistance repeated quietly and persistently across generations. The North received these reform currents and set them aside. Its social organisations, its public culture, its religious practices have, in important respects, grown more entrenched and more resistant to examination over the same fifty-year period in which they were supposed to be converging with the South. What the North refused was not resources but examination.

In this context, the "grow your population" narrative circulating with renewed intensity across parts of the Hindi heartland is not demographic strategy; it is the ego's oldest reflex dressed in civilisational language: when examination is declined, accumulation is offered in its place. The Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister's recent widely-discussed statement on population growth, citing concerns about demographic aging, belongs to the same reflex in a different register: the anxiety of a society that has successfully developed and now watches its relative political influence diminish as others multiply. A society watching its developmental achievements translated into political diminishment will reach, almost inevitably, for the one instrument the system still rewards. But this is the logic of a community that has stopped asking what it can build and begun counting instead what it has. It is also a logic the historical record repeatedly refuses to confirm. At the Battle of Plassey in 1757, Siraj-ud-Daulah's army of fifty thousand outnumbered Clive's three-thousand-strong force seventeen to one, and lost. Numbers, without the education and institutional investment that transforms numbers into capability, do not constitute power; they constitute a census. Today, roughly 1.6 crore Jews command a disproportionate presence in science, law, medicine, and geopolitics not because they outbred their neighbours but because, facing existential threat across generations, they chose to invest relentlessly in the quality of each person rather than the quantity of their population. Fewer than 5.5 crore South Koreans, rebuilding from a war that left them among the poorest peoples on earth seventy years ago, made the same choice under different pressure; their economy now ranks among the world's largest, their companies lead in semiconductors and shipbuilding, their universities produce research of global weight. Numbers did not give either people what they have. The decision to build each person did. The question India's lagging states will have to answer is not how to grow their numbers further but what kind of society those numbers are meant to represent.

There is a harder question bate that the debate keeps circumnavigating. When a demo s it counted? A body. That is the

operational definition every modern franchise proceeds on, and it is what produces the impasse. A body is produced by biology, and biology answers to appetite. If political weight accrues to whichever community produces more bodies, the most reliable route to political power becomes the most primitive one, which is to breed. In such an arithmetic, the Buddha, who fathered one son before walking out of the palace to examine his life, is outvoted by any householder who fathered twelve without once pausing to examine anything. This is the mathematics that any pure-headcount democracy cannot escape, and it is why every functioning federation has quietly admitted some principle other than headcount into its design. The Indian tradition itself, from the Upanishads forward, has insisted that a human being is not reducible to a body, that what makes a person a person is the capacity for self-examination, and that a life which has declined examination is barely a life at all. If that is even partly true, headcount is measuring the wrong variable. A vote that reflected what each society had done with the bodies it was given, the daughters welcomed or erased, the schools built or left unbuilt, the inheritance examined or protected, would be a different instrument altogether. No democracy has yet dared to build one, and perhaps none ever will. What is still within reach is to refuse to pretend that the headcount is a measure of civilisation. It is a measure of biology. The question worth asking before the next map is redrawn is not which states have grown their population fastest but which states have grown their people.

India is not the only democracy to have grappled with this tension, and the international record is instructive precisely because every major federal system has resolved it by rejecting strict population arithmetic. The European Union built degressive proportionality into its parliamentary design, giving smaller member states more seats relative to their population so that their voice survives beside the larger ones. Germany's Bundestag balances constituency-level proportionality with state-level minimum guarantees, acknowledging that strict arithmetic equality can produce its own distortions in a federal arrangement. The United States Senate gives every state two seats regardless of population, a design explicitly intended to prevent pure demographic weight from dissolving the federal compact. What links these very different solutions is a shared recognition: population is one variable in a democracy, not the sovereign one. A federal union in which one category of states can permanently outvote another on every matter of national consequence, not because their governance record is stronger but because their numbers are larger, does not remain a genuine federation for long. The South is not a foreign country that has been annexed; it is a constituent of the Indian union that has a legitimate claim to equal weight in the decisions that govern that union. Poet-ph[illegible] Western democracy held that it

counts people without weighing them. For India today, the remark reads less like a borrowed philosophical observation and more like a domestic diagnosis.

A Delimitation Commission constituted under a simple-majority Act requires no constitutional amendment and is passable by any future government; it could proceed to redraw all 543 constituencies on population alone. The southern states' anxiety is not manufactured regional sentiment; it is a rational response to a structural inequity that the political system has preferred to paper over for half a century. That the projected pattern of seat-gains falls almost entirely within the governing party's strongholds, and the projected pattern of seat-losses almost entirely within states where the governing party has struggled to establish itself, is a coincidence too large to politely ignore. Pointing it out is not in itself an argument against reform, and numbers are what they are; but the coincidence is a feature of the field on which this debate is being conducted, and any honest reading of the debate has to hold it in view. The anxiety matters not only for its own sake but for what it signals about the federation's health. When a group of states that contribute disproportionately to the country's fiscal base begins to feel that their contribution is not reflected in their political standing, the conditions for genuine federal strain are already present. This is not secessionism; it is arithmetic. And it is arithmetic that a functioning democracy should want to address rather than defer.

A workable alternative exists within the current constitutional framework. Increasing state assembly seat allocations in the North would improve local representation without disturbing the federal arithmetic of the Lok Sabha. The more consequential reform is to attach Lok Sabha seat revision to measurable convergence rather than to the passage of time. A 2051 framework could set threshold benchmarks that northern states must demonstrably approach before their parliamentary weight is permitted to grow: total fertility rate at or below 2.1, female literacy above 85 percent, sex ratio at birth above 940, and per capita income at least 60 percent of the national average. States meeting these thresholds would earn increased representation proportionate to their population; states falling short would retain their current allocation until they close the gap. The corrective logic of the original freeze would finally acquire the force it has always lacked. The original freeze asked for convergence and attached no consequence to its absence; it was a purely external constraint applied to societies that had not chosen to change internally, which is precisely why it failed. A 2051 framework must be different in kind, not only in duration: structural reward must follow demonstrated internal investment, not the passage of time alone. This is not a proposal to silence the North or to make its representation contingent on the South's approval. It is a request that expanded politica[illegible]emonstrated investment in the people who generate it, rather th[illegible] default.

India's most globally competitive industries, its highest-performing institutions, its cities that have made it visible in the world economy, are concentrated in the states that would lose relative political weight under a population-based reallocation. This is not a coincidence of geography but the direct consequence of where specific societies directed their resources across specific decades. A delimitation that diminishes the political standing of those societies is not simply an injustice to them; it is a statement about what India believes political standing should be based on. A country that wants to earn its place in the world as a knowledge economy cannot build that future on a political architecture that the builders of its knowledge economy will experience as a systematic penalty for having built it. What the next Delimitation Commission decides will either honour fifty years of sacrifice by communities that chose the harder path, or confirm what they have begun to suspect: that in this democracy, the harder path was never worth the effort. What is at stake is not only the political standing of five southern states, but the question of whether the Indian republic intends to remain a country that rewards self-examination, or a country that rewards only its refusal.

This is not the design of a better India. It is a refusal to ratify a worse one.

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