

INDIAN FEDERALISM AND NATIONAL INTEGRATION — A CRITIQUE

SANDEEP SHASTRI

It is the Union of India that is the basis of our nationality. It is in the Union that our hopes for the future are centered. The states are but the limbs of the Union, while we recognise that the limbs must be healthy and strong ... the strength and the stability of the Union ... should be the governing consideration.

*Report of the States Reorganisation
Commission (1955)*

The integrity and sovereignty of India must emerge from a conscious effort towards harmonization of the distinct linguistic, ethnic and cultural entities which constitute our great nation ... It is against this background that we consider it altogether relevant to solve expeditiously the problems of Centre-States relations.

— *Statement Released by
Non-Congress Parties,
Srinagar (October 1983)*

I

The Perspective

The dynamics of national integration, in the context of the Indian scenario has invariably been the principal focus of attention in any discussion of Indian politics. The nuances of national integration, its multi-track dimensions and manifold perspectives have often been subjected to a searching and indepth scrutiny. While scholars have emphatically endorsed the need to strengthen

the forces of national integration, there is a pitiable lack of consensus on the finer details of realising this integration.

The concept of national integration as applied to the Indian scene necessitates its analysis in the broader framework of the nation's historical traditions, present conditions and the interplay of varied social, economic, political, religious and cultural forces. When viewed from this perspective national integration would imply, achieving cohesion amongst the varied — at times divergent — forces and factors operating in the nation on the one hand, and coordinating the mental processes of the individuals that form a society on the other. Thus, national integration requires to be viewed, both at the operational (administrative) level and at the mental (intellectual) level.

Any analysis of India's national integration must take cognisance of the size of the nation and its in-built multi-faceted diversities at the social, cultural, economic and political level. At the socio-cultural level the forces of caste, class, region, religion and language need to be considered; at the economic level the rich-poor divide and the urban-rural dichotomy merits attention; and at the political level the internal structuring of power relations need to be borne in mind.

The present study confines itself to analysing the imperative need for national integration and the challenges to its realisation in the context of the working of the federal structure. At the outset, a framework needs to be outlined to provide for a direction oriented and purpose analysis. National integration is viewed as an integral part of the process of modernisation and nation building. It involves a consolidation of the national identity. National integration is;

... the breakdown of fragmented group — existence based on particularistic loyalties and its suppression by generalist loyalties to the total aggregation of the political community — a nation.¹

For national integration to be translated into a reality, it needs to be viewed as the basic philosophy of the system, its framework for reference, a fundamental instrument of action and the overarching guide to policy formulation. Its goal should be the harmonizing of the activities of diverse groups with each group

retaining its identity, bending together varied interests without demanding their total merger, consolidating the process of development, modernisation and change without overlooking the basic values and roots of the society, reconciling various demand without permitting it to lead to regimentation, and synthesising diverse opinions without any attempt at snuffing dissent. National integration, when viewed from the above parameters attempts at unity while recognising diversity. Unity *sans* diversity requires no integration; diversity *sans* unity forestalls and effort in the direction of even a semblance of integration. National integration signifies:

... cohesion but no fusion, unity but not uniformity, reconciliation but not merger, agglomeration but no assimilation, solidarity but no regimentation of the discrete segments of the people constituting a political community/state.²

The working of the Indian federal system, over the last nearly four decades needs to be analysed in the backdrop of the larger framework of national integration. The stresses and strains that the system has been subjected to — increasing trend towards centralisation on the one hand and the growing demand for state—autonomy on the other — have had their inevitable impact on the arduous process of national integration. This theme forms the focus of this study.

II

The Issues

The Constituent Assembly, in its approach to the federal question asserted that a fortified central authority was imperative to maintain the unity and integrity of the nation. Granville Austin eloquently outlines the practical realities that shaped the approach of the Constituent Assembly to this vital issue:

The exigencies of the present as well as the pattern of the past impelled the Constituent Assembly to create a strong central government...³.

The dominant mood in the Constituent Assembly on issues relating to federalism was summed up by Dr. Ambedkar while introducing the provisions of the Draft Constitution relating to this vital Issue:

... though India was to be a federation, the federation was not the result of an agreement by the States to join in a federation not being the result of an agreement, no State has a right to secede from it. Though the country and the people may be divided into different States for convenience of administration, the country is one integral whole, its people a single people living under a single *imperium* derived from a single source... The Drafting Committee thought that it was better to make it clear at the outset rather than leave it to speculation...⁴

Thus the federal framework erected by the Constituent Assembly provided for a strong centre. Even while tilting the power equation distinctly in favour of the centre, the Constitution provided for specific areas of influence and operation for both the centre and the states. Thus, the Constituent Assembly, keeping in mind the ground realities of India's political history and the need to preserve and cement the forces of political unity ensured the existence of a strong centre even while providing specifically for a measure of state autonomy. It was their fervent hope that the balance that they had so assiduously arranged, would strengthen the forces of national integration and pave the way for constructive and harmonious co-operation between the centre and the states, in the larger interests of national unity.

The premise that the strengthening of the centre was fundamental for effectively channelizing the forces contributing to national integration, was reiterated by the States Re-organisation Commission.⁵ Even while issues relating to strengthening the forces of national integration ranked high in the agenda of priority, the States Re-organisation Commission took into account the existence of strong linguistic and cultural forces within the nation. It stated in its Report that:

Linguistic homogeneity provides the only rational basis for reconstructing the states, for it reflects the social and cultural pattern of living obtaining in well defined regions of the country.⁶

Thus while the States Reorganisation Commission recognised the compulsions of having to reorganise states on a linguistic basis (it hoped that such a step would contribute to the strengthening

of national integration), the pre-ponderance of the centre and a specific focus on the need to strengthen the union continued to remain the dominant consideration. The statements of Jawaharlal Nehru (during the period when the demand for the reorganisation of states on a linguistic basis reached a crescendo) echoed similar sentiments. It was his belief that "provincial expansionism" would destroy the unity of the nation. He even threatened to resign if such issues assumed a high degree of priority.⁷ His own statement succinctly summarize his approach.

I can very well appreciate the desire in some parts of the country for a separate provincial existence... but sometimes we have to take first things first ... First priority must necessarily be to preserve the unity, strength and stability of India. *Everything that comes in the way of that may prove harmful.*⁸

Nehru's approach to boundary disputes was similar: ... it does not make much difference to me whether any internal boundry of the State is drawn here or there ... *There may be other things which may be more important.*⁹

Thus the working of the Indian political system, the attitudes of the political leaders, the stark realities of Indian politics and the crosscurrents that operated therein, contributed significantly to the evolution of independent India's federal traditions and experience. An increased degree of centralisation, in the working of Indian federalism was further accentuated by the inter-play of a variety of forces and factors.¹⁰ Invariably, primacy to considerations of national integration were sighted as the reason for this phenomenon.

The thesis of those who advocate greater consolidation of the powers of the centre (in the context of national integration) rests on certain fundamental convictions. It is opined that providing an impetus to the forces of nationalism was critical to strengthening national integration. Further, those criticizing the trend towards centralisation, were believed to represent the forces that were in favour of the rise of sub-nationalism. Greater state autonomy would further encourage such sub-national forces.

The advocates of a strong centre, are emphatic in their belief that any step in the direction of weakening the centre

would only open the flood-gates to eventual 'balkanisation'. A strong centre is the only panacea to stem the institutionalisation of sub-national loyalties, they assert. The imperatives of the past and the conditions of the present could push the system towards disintegration and negate the very ideals of national integration, in the event of centralisation not being effectively encouraged. The proponents of this approach assert that the bonds of nationalism need to be sufficiently strengthened and consolidated before permitting the sentiments of regionalism from gaining ground. The centre is believed to protect and project national integration while other centres of power would only encourage and abate the rise and growth of divisive forces:

These new constant forces will inevitably collide with regional and parochial demands ... the future is dependent largely on the degree to which the Centre can assert itself — not as a 'mix' of *contradictory regional involvements but as the supreme arbiter of the nation's interests.*¹¹

The Sarkaria Commission, also, commented on the rise of sub-national forces and viewed this phenomenon as being detrimental to the interests of the nation:

Very often the sub-nationalist sentiments which is initially based on linguistic, religious or ethnic groupings gains strength with a blend of economic issues such as those relating to ... economic backwardness. One of the most significant developments has been the rise of linguistic chauvinism, rearrangement of the boundaries of the States on linguistic basis ... resulting in fissiparous tendencies.¹²

The Indian National Congress which has consistently argued in favour of the pre-eminence of the central authority, has categorically stated that the nation was able to effectively counter the forces of disunity only because of the strong central authority. It has asserted that:

... the strength of the Centre cannot and should not be diluted in any manner whatsoever at any time in the forceable future. The 'strength' of the Centre,

however, is not a static concept. What is considered adequate 'strength' at a given time may well fall short of the needs thrown up at another time. 'Strength', therefore, should be taken as a function of effectiveness.¹³

In their memoranda submitted to the Sarkaria Commission, the Congress governed State Governments have also subscribed to this approach. A classic example was the approach of the then Rajasthan government which opined that:

Historically a weak Centre has given rise to fissiparous tendencies, on the other hand a strong Centre has held the country together. Now that centrifugal forces and such tendencies in form of linguism, regionalism, religious seperatism are rearing their heads, provisions which promote centripetal forces should not only be retained ... be further strengthened.¹⁴

Thus, the creation and strengthening of a strong central authority has been advocated by some as the principal device to consolidate the forces to national integration. However over the years, the demand for a greater and more meaningful devolution of power has been assertively and more stridently articulated as the only realistic solution to overcome the obstacles that confront the process of national integration.

The supporters of this view-point argue that the preservation of national unity and the process of consolidating the forces of national integration presuppose the acceptance of the manifold diversities present in the nation and the urgent need realistic and logical attempts to handle these diversities at the local level, by harnessing local initiative and utilizing local talent. Any attempt to tackle these diversities from a central point of control would only serve to heighten the tensions in the system. Given the inter-play of diverse forces, true integration would be possible only when authority was decentralised. A Document prepared by the Left Front Government in West Bengal (1977) draws attention to this fact:

In a country like India, with such diversities in race, religion, language and culture, national integration

can be achieved only through conscious voluntary efforts. *Devolution of power may help ward off fissiparous tendencies instead of encouraging them.* A strong and unified India can only be one in which the democratic aspirations and the *distinctiveness of the people of the different States are respected and not treated with disdain.*¹⁵

The pronounced centralisation that has characterised the working of Indian federalism, it is asserted, has negated the process of national integration. The centre has consistently attempted to expand and enlarge its power base. In this context, the Sarkaria Commission commented that those in power at the centre, "have been obliged to use diverse strategies and tactics, which were not always sound from long-term interests"¹⁶, to maintain their control over state-level forces. Many a time, the actions of the centre, its discriminatory approach towards some states,¹⁷ its lack of understanding of local problems, its abject insensitivity and the blatant misuse of authority *vis-a-vis* the States,¹⁸ have all distanced it from the people. This in turn has, it is believed, reversed the process of national integration. The divisive tendencies have been further compounded by such a short-sighted approach. Commenting on the ills of over-centralisation, the Sarkaria Commission averred that:

There is considerable truth in saying that undue *Centralisation leads to blood pressure at the Centre and anaemia at the periphery.* The inevitable result is *morbidity and inefficiency.* Indeed, centralisation does not solve but aggravates the problems of the people.¹⁹

Further, it is also argued that the strengthening of regional loyalty, in a political context, would marginalise communal and caste loyalties. Such a process would indirectly contribute to the ongoing process of national integration. Discouraging regional loyalty would only serve to further strengthen caste and communal feelings.²⁰ Thus, regional loyalty is viewed by some as a national asset.

It is also emphasised that it would be detrimental to the interests of national integration, if any attempt was made to force its pace. National integration, is a gradualistic process. The

narrow sectarian interests need to be fused and integrated, in a systematic manner with the broader national loyalty:

As a manifestation of the democratic demand, it is arguable that the rise of what are called 'parochial loyalties' probably are more primary, more inevitable and more 'legitimate' than the demands for ... agglomerative loyalties ... looked at from the angle of social-psychology probably the primacy of the 'parochial loyalties' and their prior 'integration, as a necessary pre-requisite for the stabilization of a rational and firm foundation of larger loyalties...'²¹

Further, the belief that the process of decentralisation would weaken the roots of the central authority has been questioned by those who espouse the cause of greater state autonomy. Those who favour decentralisation, are convinced that initiating such a move would not trigger off the process of disintegration. Conversely, it would further strengthen the foundations of national integration. Decentralisation, they argue, aims at fulfilling the hopes and aspirations of the people in a more purposive and meaningful manner. A Government which is in a position to effectively respond to the demands of the people would in its own way strengthen the process of national integration. The forces of national integration, when viewed from this perspective, gains strength when there exists a contented populace, that is satisfied with the performance of the administration. Contradistinctly a government which does not live up to the expectations of the people would be, in an indirect way, retarding the process of national integration. The advocates of decentralisation believe that the devolution of power would create the necessary congenial conditions for the efficient functioning of the administration. The erstwhile Janata Government in Karnataka, in its memorandum to the Sarkaria Commission, stressed this issue in no uncertain terms:

*The real cause for autonomy rests not on the claims of territorial rights of juridical entities or political parties but on the comprehension, based on experience that in a country like India a centralized polity is incapable of dealing with an unjust social order that is inimical to the democratic political process, and that is inherently unstable.*²²

Attention needs to be focused on the views expressed by two regional parties — the D.M.K. and the Shiromani Akali Dal, in their memoranda to the Sarkaria Commission. The views expressed in these documents, eloquently reflect the attitudes of these two leading regional parties which have consistently demanded greater state autonomy.

The election manifesto of the D.M.K., released prior to the 1967 General Elections, emphatically outlines the approach of the party to the issue of state autonomy:

The D.M.K. has taken upon itself the responsibility of seeing that *no region of the country dominates another region in the name of implementing integration ... (it) is determined to protect the rights of the States from being suppressed...*²³

The party further stated that its demand for state autonomy was rooted in the belief that it was the state government alone which could truly serve the people and live upto their expectations, because they were in constant contact with the people. Greater powers for the states was not for the purpose of enjoying the power but for working for the good of the people.²⁴ In its memorandum to the Sarkaria Commission, the party asserted that regionalism should not be labelled as something anti-national. Regionalism and sub-regionalism, it believed, were recognised by the constitution. It further added:

Wholesome freedom alone can keep India together and strengthen her from within and without ... the Union and the states, must have *complete freedom from mutual control ... This freedom is the soul of federalism.*²⁵

The Shiromani Akali Dal, through the Sri Anandpur Sahib Resolution (1973) and other declarations has frequently endorsed the principle of state autonomy in keeping with federal principles. It has appealed to the Central Government on several occasions, to:

... take cognisance of the different linguistic and cultural sections ... and recast the Constitutional struc-

ture of the country on real and meaningful federal principles to obviate the possibility of any danger to National unity ... and further enable the States to play a useful role for the progress and prosperity of Indian people ...²⁶

The Akali Dal believes that the rise and growth of distinct nationalities in India was an 'irreversible historical process' and was a healthy development that had to be welcomed. Such a phenomenon, in itself, the party felt, posed no threat to national integration. The real threat came from the 'Hindus — Hindi — Hind Chauvinists'²⁷ who wished to impose their religious and political domination throughout the nation. The solution lay in the formation of a:

... genuinely federal form of government where the federal level takes care of the common interests and aspirations of the united nationalities while the autonomous federating units cater to their distinct interests and urges.²⁸

Thus there exist two opposing view-points, with respect to the techniques and modalities to achieve national integration, through the federal process. While those who favour a strong central government believe that a powerful central authority alone can withstand the shocks and strains the system would be subjected to in the intricate and complex tasks of consolidating the forces of national integration, the advocates of state autonomy believe that the devolution of power and authority alone can safeguard and strengthen the forces of national integration.

III

Resolving the Paradox

Would the cause of national integration be better served by strengthening the central authority or by stressing on a greater degree of state autonomy appears to be the principal issue emerging from the above analysis.

National integration, as outlined in the framework, implies achieving cohesion among the diverse interests on the one hand and coordinating the mental process of the people on the other.

This remains the primary and principal focus. In this context it must be mentioned that the issue of Centre-state relations has over the years come to be highly politicized. The increasing emphasis on the need to further strengthen the centre on the one hand and the growing demand for greater state autonomy on the other has to be considered as part of the operation of the diverse and at times divergent forces in the political system. It appears, at times, that both the demands have been voiced with ulterior motives. The lofty explanations that often seek to justify the demands have seldom been matched by dedicated action. The widening gulf between the professed aims and actual actions would in no uncertain terms paralyse the process of national integration.

National integration is to a certain extent an attitude of the mind. Unless the people are convinced of the earnestness of the intentions of the government, no effort, however herculean, it may be, would help in cementing the forces of national integration. This integration is most threatened when 'rules of the game' are violated and defiled. A purity of intentions buttressed by a devotion to the accepted principles is the key to achieving national integration.

The Indian constitution, in its original form ensures the authority of the centre (to maintain the unity and integrity of the nation) and provides for sufficient state autonomy. The provisions, which were created under certain historical circumstances was meant to harmonise the relations between the centre and the states. It was hoped that these provisions would be scrupulously adhered to both in letter and in spirit. However these hopes have been belied. This poses the great threat to national integration.

The cause of national integration would be amply served when both the centre and the states deal with issues with a sense of sincerity, sensitivity and commitment. National integration would be severely threatened when those who wield power — both at the centre and in the states — give scant respect to rules, regulations and conventions. The bases of national integration are not institutions and processes alone, but the nurturing of mutual trust, confidence and consultation. National integration requires a spirit of dedication. Political competence tempered by

sagacity and a purity of intentions are verily the touchstone of democracy and the sentinels that will protect and preserve national integration.

NOTES

1. Rasheeduddin Khan, 'National Unity: Dimensions and Problems', *Mainstream*, Vol. 24, No. 21 Jan. 1986, p. 50. Emphasis added.
2. *Ibid.*, emphasis added.
3. Austin, G., *The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a Nation* Bombay, 1979, p. 190.
4. Constituent Assembly Debates, Vol. 7, p. 43. Emphasis added.
5. The statement drawn from the Report of the S.R.C. quoted at the start of this paper reflects this approach.
6. S.R.C. Report.
7. During British Rule, the Congress had accepted in principle the concept of linguistic states — 1920 — Nagpur session of the Congress where linguistic redistribution of provinces was accepted as a political goal. In the post independence period, public agitations and political calculations compelled Nehru, at a later stage, to concede the demand for linguistic states.
8. Nehru, Jawaharlal, *Letters to Chief Minister* 1947 — 64 New Delhi, 1985, Vol. 1, p. 93, 143. Emphasis added.
9. Lok Sabha Debates, Vol. 10, pt 2, col. 3493 — 514. Emphasis added.
10. Near one party domination till 1967, charismatic leadership in the Congress, financial dependence of the states on the centre and the impact of the planning process.
11. Thapar, Romesh, 'Moment of Criticality', *Seminar* Feb. 1967, p. 45. Emphasis added.
12. *Report of the Commission on Centre-State Relations*, New Delhi, 1988, pt. 1, p. 15, 16.
13. Memorandum submitted by the Indian National Congress to the Commission on Centre-State relations. Report of

the Commission on Centre-State relations, New Delhi, 1987, pt. 2, p. 663. Emphasis added.

14. Memorandum submitted by the Rajasthan Government Report, n. 13, p. 431.

16. Document on Centre-State relations, Government of West Bengal, *Journal of Constitutional and Parliamentary studies*, Vol. 20 No. 1-4 1986, p. 392.

16. Report, n. 12, p. 15.

17. Principally in the financial sphere.

18. Misuse of the office of the Governor for the dismissal of State Governments.

19. Report n. 12i p. 543. Emphasis added.

20. Younger Paul, 'The Cultural Argument for State Autonomy', *Journal of the Society for the Study of State Governments*, Vol. 4 No. 1 1971, pp. 36-46.

21. Rasheeduddin Khan, 'Self-view', *Seminar*, August 1970, p. 22.

22. Memorandum submitted by the Karnataka Government, *Report*, n. 13, p. 245-246. Emphasis added.

23. *D.M.K. Election Manifesto*, 1967. Emphasis Added.

24. *D.M.K. Election Manifesto*, 1971.

25. Memorandum submitted by the D.M.K., *Report*, n. 13, p. 729. Emphasis added.

26. Memorandum submitted by the Shiromani Akali Dal *Report*, n. 13, p. 859.

27. Memorandum submitted by the Punjab Government, *Report*, n. 13, p. 864.

28. *Ibid.*