North–South Divide – Reconciling Growth, Representation, and Equity in India

Mains: *GS II – Issues pertaining to federal structure| GS III – Economy-regional development*

Why in news?

A widening divide between the Peninsular States such as Tamil Nadu and Kerala, and the northern Hindi heartland including Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, reflects a deeper structural imbalance and this divide, if not addressed through careful institutional design and social reform, risks becoming a destabilising fault line within the Indian Union.

What are the key aspects of the divide?

- **Socio-Economic divergence –** Southern states have higher literacy rates, superior healthcare systems, and more developed industrial/IT sectors, acting more like upper-middle-income regions compared to some parts of the North.
- **Demographic penalty –** South India successfully implemented population control, but now fears that parliamentary seat reallocation (delimitation) will reduce their political influence, rewarding northern states for higher fertility rates.
- **Fiscal imbalance –** Southern states argue they contribute more to the national treasury but receive lower proportional returns compared to northern states, creating economic friction.
- **Political differences –** Politics in North India is often dominated by national-level issues and the BJP's Hindutva ideology, while South India often prioritizes regional autonomy and has shown resistance to Hindi-centrism.
- **Regional misalignment –** The divide threatens to make southern states less relevant in national decision-making, which may trigger demands for greater autonomy and put pressure on federal unity.

How the structural divide emerged?

- **The southern and western states** – They are often referred to as the Peninsular region—have achieved higher levels of industrialisation, urbanisation, and human development.
- Indicators such as literacy rates, life expectancy, and per capita income in these states often approach those of upper-middle-income countries.
- **The northern states** – In contrast, “Great Indian Plain,” comprising states like Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, and Chhattisgarh, continues to lag behind on most development metrics.

- These states are characterised by high population growth, lower educational attainment, and weaker health outcomes.
- The divergence is stark: per capita incomes in southern states are often double or triple those in the northern belt.
- This asymmetry has created a unique situation where economic productivity is concentrated in regions that are not proportionately represented in political structures.

What is the Political Representation and the Delimitation Challenge?

- **Political implications** – With the next Census and subsequent delimitation exercise on the horizon, concerns are rising about the political implications of demographic disparities.
- States in the Hindi heartland have higher population growth rates and are likely to gain a larger share of parliamentary seats.
- Conversely, southern states that have successfully controlled population growth may see their relative representation decline.
- This creates a paradox: regions that contribute more significantly to the economy risk losing political voice.
- Such an imbalance could lead to perceptions of fiscal injustice, where economically advanced states feel overburdened by redistributive policies that benefit less developed regions.
- The tension between "tax contributors" and "beneficiaries" may intensify, potentially undermining cooperative federalism.
- **Comparative perspectives –** Globally, stable federations such as the United States, Canada, and Australia exhibit a broad alignment between economic strength and political representation.
- However, historical examples like the USSR and Yugoslavia demonstrate the dangers of sustained imbalance between economically productive regions and politically dominant ones.
- While India's context is distinct, the underlying lesson is clear: prolonged structural asymmetry without adequate institutional safeguards can fuel discontent and fragmentation.

What are the challenges with the south?

- **Growth without inclusion –** While much of the discourse focuses on the grievances of southern states, it is equally important to recognise their internal challenges.
- Despite impressive economic growth, many southern states face a "middle-income trap," where growth has not translated into equitable distribution of wealth.
    - **For instance,** although Tamil Nadu boasts high per capita income, wage disparities remain significant.
- Agricultural labourers and informal workers often see limited benefits from economic expansion.
- Similarly, wealth in states like Karnataka and Telangana is heavily concentrated in urban centres such as Bengaluru and Hyderabad, leaving rural areas relatively underdeveloped.
- This uneven distribution highlights the extractive nature of growth, where gains are

captured by a narrow elite rather than being broadly shared.

- **Persistent social inequalities –** Economic advancement in the South has not fully addressed deep-rooted social issues.
- Caste discrimination, gender inequality, and weak enforcement of rule of law continue to persist across regions. Even in relatively developed states, disparities in education and social mobility remain significant.
    - **For example**, certain districts in southern states exhibit lower literacy rates than districts in northern India, challenging the assumption of uniform progress.
- Issues such as patriarchy and social exclusion cut across regional boundaries, underscoring that economic growth alone is insufficient for holistic development.
- **Migration and the question of integration –** Inter-state migration has emerged as a natural response to regional disparities. Workers from northern states increasingly move to southern cities in search of better opportunities.
- While this trend contributes to economic dynamism, it also raises questions about social integration and political representation.
- Migrants often remain politically tied to their home states, limiting their influence in their new places of residence.
- This creates a class of "internal outsiders," who contribute economically but lack a corresponding political voice.
- Over time, this disconnect may strain social cohesion and complicate regional dynamics.

What should be done?

- **Rethinking the federal compact –** The current situation calls for a reimagining of India's federal structure. The traditional approach of fiscal transfers and centralised policymaking may not be sufficient to address emerging challenges. Instead, a more nuanced framework is needed—one that recognises both regional diversity and interdependence.
- This includes:
    - Strengthening institutions that promote transparency and accountability
    - Encouraging states to invest in human capital and inclusive growth
    - Designing fiscal policies that balance equity with efficiency
    - Promoting dialogue between regions to address mutual concerns
- **The need for a new social contract –** Ultimately, the resolution of the North–South divide lies not just in political adjustments but in a broader social transformation.
- The goal should be to create a system where prosperity is widely shared, and opportunities are accessible to all citizens, regardless of region.
- The southern states must focus on deepening inclusivity and addressing internal inequalities, while the northern states need sustained investment in education, health, and infrastructure to accelerate development.
- At the national level, policies must aim to harmonise growth with representation, ensuring that no region feels marginalised.
- **Digressive proportionality –** One proposed solution to this dilemma is the concept of "digressive proportionality."
- This model seeks to balance population-based representation with regional equity.
- Larger states would have more seats overall but fewer representatives per capita,

while smaller or less populous states would enjoy relatively higher representation per person.
- Such a system ensures that no single region dominates the political landscape purely due to demographic weight.
- It offers a middle path between strict proportionality and equal representation, thereby strengthening national unity while preserving federal balance.

What lies ahead?

- India stands at a critical juncture where demographic realities, economic disparities, and political structures intersect.
- The North–South divide is not merely a regional issue but a reflection of deeper systemic challenges.
- Addressing this divide requires a balanced approach that combines institutional innovation, inclusive development, and constructive dialogue.
- Mechanisms like digressive proportionality, coupled with a renewed focus on social equity, can help bridge the gap.
- The future of the Indian Union depends on its ability to transform this fault line into a foundation for cooperative growth.
- Only through a shared commitment to equity and unity can India realise its aspiration of becoming a truly inclusive and prosperous nation.

Reference

The Hindu| North South Divide

