

Managing Ethnic Diversity and Substate Nationalism in the World's Largest Democracy

JACK LIDDALL compares the examples of nationalist movements in Punjab and Tamil Nadu to reveal complex relationships with the Indian state.

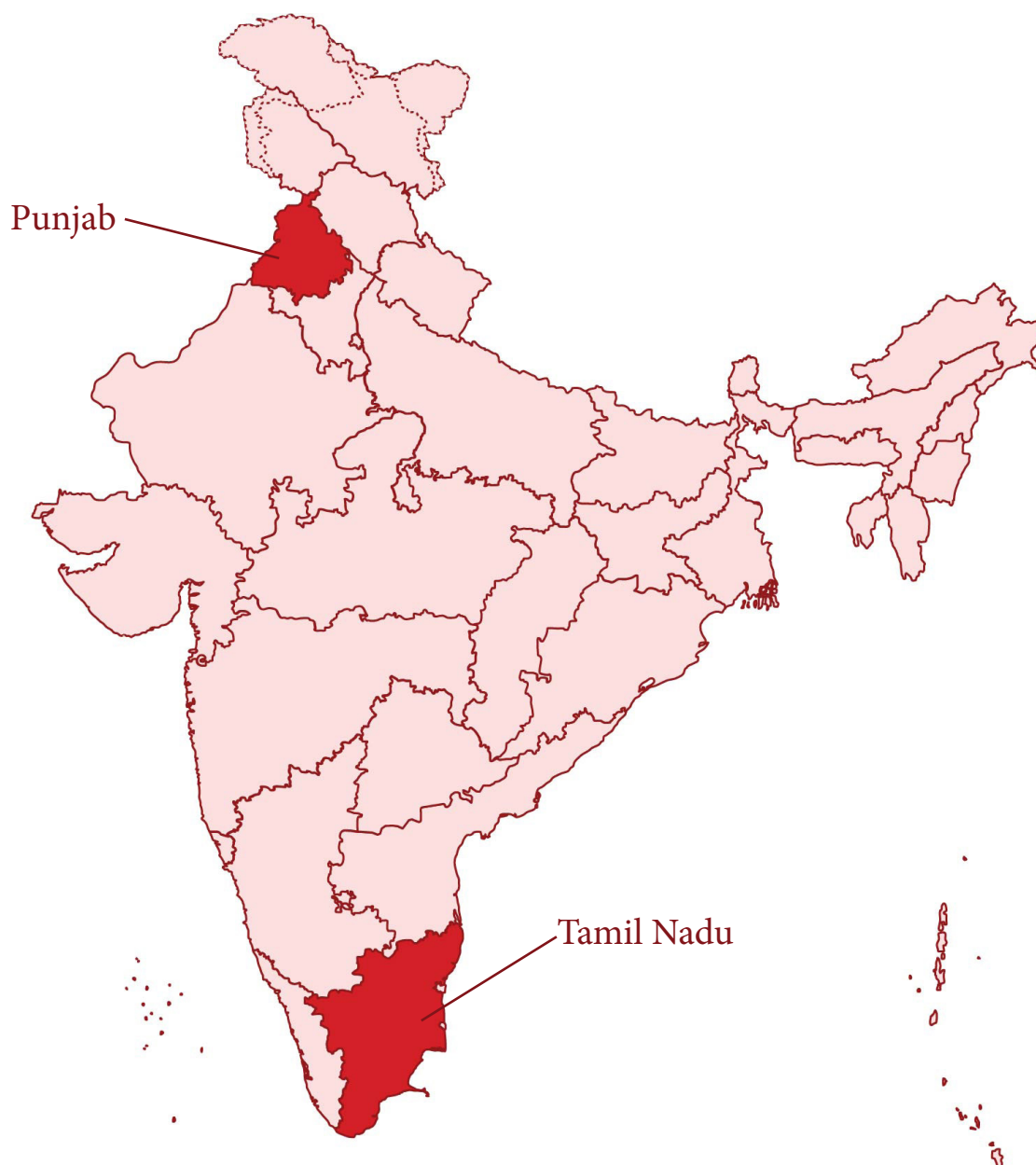
India is incredibly ethnically diverse in terms of language, religion, caste and tribe (Swenden 2012, 614). Indian federalism, designed after extreme post-independence violence, prioritises a strong Centre: the post-independence regime sought to prevent the disintegration of India owing to such regional diversity. Indeed, within its states and union territories, people often feel more connected to, and 'nationalistic' about, their region, language, culture, or history. It is in this context that we often find citizens claiming agency for themselves and for their regional communities within the wider Indian polity, seeking to secure greater self-rule or a greater regional influence over the national Indian state.

This article will critically compare the Indian state's ('Centre') management of ethnic diversity in Punjab and Tamil Nadu (TN), paying particular attention to the decades in which both experienced nationalist and even secessionist movements. To do so, the concepts of 'self-rule' and 'shared rule' are used as comparative indices (Elazar 1987, 5). Following an overview of the literature on federalism and defining terms, this article overviews the Punjabi and Tamilian contexts. The working hypothesis is that where self-rule and shared rule are stronger, ethnic conflict is less likely to follow. Overall, in Punjab, ethnic diversity has been managed by weak self-rule and shared rule, whilst in TN, the opposite is more generally true.

Theories of Territorial Management

Ethnic conflict management theories can be placed on a spectrum from 'integrationist' to 'accommodationist' approaches (McGarry et al. 2008, 44). Both approaches posit that a state should reject 'coercive assimilation' and implement a degree of federalism—that is, more than one level of government in which various powers may be devolved or divided amongst a state's constituent units (Ibid, 45; Swenden 2016, 491-492).

Accommodationists advocate multinational federalism where substate territories are coterminous with ethnic boundaries and endorse constitutionally entrenched division of powers (McGarry et al. 2008, 47-48; Ibid, 492). Perhaps the purest form of accommodationist management of ethnic diversity is ethno-federalism, in which at least one constituent unit of a state is associated with one ethnic group (Adeney 2017, 126-129; Bakke 2009, 291). The ethno-federalist framework overlaps considerably with Stepan et al. (2011, 7-8)'s theories in their conceptualisation of 'state-nations': there is recognition of more than one cultural identity and a federal organisation based on ethno-cultural cleavages. Conversely, integrationists such as Snyder (2000, 327), Cornell (2002, 246-247), Bunce and Watts (2005, 12), and Roeder (2009, 208), have each argued that ethno-federations are unworkable because they threaten a state's integrity by inculcating feelings of separateness and providing minorities with institutional apparatus to secede.



The locations of Punjab and Tamil Nadu on a map of the states and union territories of India.

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Crucially, Bakke (2009) and Adeney (2017) argue that the success of ethno-federalism is wholly dependent on central government approaches (Adeney 2017, 126-129; Swenden 2012, 624) and the context in which it is implemented (Bakke 2009, 291). Indeed, this article examines the degree of self-rule and shared rule afforded to Punjab and TN and its effect on ethno-federalism's success. In his seminal work, Elazar (1979) characterised federalism as a 'combination of self-rule and shared rule,' with self-rule referring to the autonomy a region has over its own territory and shared rule to the influence regions have over decisions taken at the federal level (Elazar 1979, 3-5; 1987, 5). The

working hypothesis is that management strategies which undermine self-rule and shared rule foment ethnic tensions.

Case Studies

In Punjab, 80 percent of the population speaks Punjabi and 60 percent are Sikh, in a majority Hindu India (Adeney 2017, 134; Bakke 2009, 296-297). In post-independence Punjab, the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) party led a Sikh nationalist movement demanding greater decision-making autonomy, as stated in its 1973 Anandpur Sahib Resolution (ASR) (Leaf 1985, 477-78). Following interventionism

and militarism under Congress central governments, the movement grew increasingly secessionist and Punjab found itself in a state of insurgency between 1984 and 1993 (Adeney 2017, 139; Singh 1993, 94). Over 250,000 security personnel were mobilised, and 30,000 individuals died (Singh and Kim 2018, 433).

In TN, 84 percent of the population speak Tamil and 90 percent are Hindu (Adeney 2017, 135). Post-independence, the Dravidian movement, largely driven by linguistic nationalism, culminated in calls for a separate nation in which Tamil non-Brahmins (lower castes) would be a majority (Ibid, 117-118; Swenden 2016). Yet, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) (comparable to Punjab's SAD) has since been labelled a 'centric-regional' party, becoming well-integrated into the wider Indian political system without major conflict after coming into regional power (Koab and Hussain 2016, 119; Kohli 1997, 18).

These narratives raise the question: why have Punjab and TN had such contrasting experiences of the Indian ethno-federalist project?

Self-Rule

As Bakke (2009, 292) and Hechter (2000, 143) posit, if a region has decision-making competence over areas that are important to them (e.g. education and language), then it can feel recognised and contain separatism. Heightened ethnic tensions began in Punjab with the shift to a centralising impetus under the 1970s and 80s Congress administrations, downgrading self-rule. The ASR is compelling evidence that central intervention in Punjab was not only a regular occurrence but a key grievance (one left unaddressed, unlike Tamil grievances, which were placated by electoral alliances and linguistic concessions, as explored presently). The ASR's first resolution asserts that 'it has become imperative that the Indian Constitutional infra-structure should be given a real federal shape by redefining the central and state relations...[India needs] the progressive decentralisation of powers' (Singh Bal 1985, 15). This indicates how the Centre's overriding ethnic

management strategy was an imposition—a strategy which proved repugnant for Sikh elites and their political following. A further demand of the ASR was that the Centre 'bring a parity between the prices of the agricultural produce and that of the industrial raw materials so that the discrimination against such states which lack these materials may be removed' (Singh Bal 1985, 12).

Again, demonstrating Sikh objections to centralisation of decision-making, this resolution highlights the specific grievances as related to the Centre's imposition of unpopular agricultural policies, e.g. land reform placing a seven-hectare limit on farms (Leaf 1985, 477). The Centre's response in managing these SAD demands was to condemn calls for greater autonomy. In the Indian government's White Paper on The Punjab Agitation in the 1980s, it responded to ASR demands by asserting that the propositions it contains 'are at total variance with the basic concept of the unity and the integrity of the nation...These cannot be accepted even as a basis for discussion' (Government of India 1984, 17).

This government response demonstrates the Centre's unwillingness to protect regional autonomy or even engage in a consultative negotiation with SAD on the understanding that changes could be made to the current Centre-state relationship. Similarly, the White Paper asserts that '[t]he people of India do not accept the proposition that India is a multi-national society' (Ibid). This contrasts



The Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) party flag in English.

revealingly with the 1986 letter written by SAD leader Harchand Longowal, pleading for regional autonomy, that ‘India is a multi-lingual, multi-religious and multi-national land’ (cited in Chadha 1986, 7).

The central approach would only intensify as the 1980s progressed, following the imposition of ‘President’s Rule,’ where state government was suspended altogether. It is important to acknowledge, however, Punjab’s particularly bloody secessionist movement. In 1984, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ordered central security forces to storm Punjab’s sacred Golden Temple in what was called Operation Blue Star. This led to the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards and further riots in 1984 (Adeney 2017, 139). The Punjabi secessionist movement is a critical intervening factor in the ongoing relationship between regional and central power.

Overall, the Centre’s approach clearly aligns with the anti-accommodationist rhetoric which can be placed on O’Leary et al’s (2008) spectrum as rejecting state-nation policies. It dismantles Stepan et al. (2011, 7-8)’s peace-reserving precondition in which there are ‘multiple but complementary identities,’ demonstrating the Centre’s indifference for Punjabi autonomy.

In TN, nationalists were accommodated much more effectively. Whilst the DMK and its splinters developed separatist demands, these were all but abandoned following the 1971 state elections (Koab and Hussain 2016, 126). Indira Gandhi’s Congress accepted a minority of the seats in the assembly, on the condition that Congress took the seats in federal elections (Ibid). This gave DMK the power and leverage to maintain and demand further self-rule, unlike the SAD in Punjab who continually faced not just impositions from the central government, but also, as we shall see, impositions from President’s Rule (Ibid).

Moreover, the Centre often accepted the linguistic demands of the Dravidian movement. When DMK encouraged followers to burn the national flag of India in August 1955 in response to the announcement that Hindi was to become the official national language, the President announced that Hindi would not be imposed in the South (Ibid). Similarly, when DMK launched a protest against the President’s announced intention in 1959 to make Hindi an official language, the Centre’s Home Minister denied that was the case (Ibid). Upon conceding that Tamil was ‘co-equal’ to Hindi and English, ethnic conflict subsided (Kohli 1997, 20). Instances of President’s Rule also provide a fruitful



Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) party flags in Madurai, Tamil Nadu

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comparative index between Punjab and TN. Punjab has seen a disproportionate level of President's Rule, topping the list for the number of days a state or union territory has spent under Article 356 (Adeney 2007, 116). In TN, there too have been impositions of President's Rule, but to a lesser extent: 1,137 days, compared to Punjab's 3,518 (Ibid).

In TN too, however, there are some exceptions to note. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, fighting for Hindu Tamilian independence in northern Sri Lanka, majorly influenced TN's politics. Rajiv Gandhi (former Prime Minister and Indira Gandhi's son) was assassinated by those directly involved with Tamilian nationalists in Sri Lanka (Gupta 2019). Whilst a policy of self-rule has been more clearly pursued overall in TN, the specific histories of both Punjab and TN are important to remember in understanding when and how more integrationist policies have been implemented.

Thus, whilst the Punjab's SAD was drafting the ASR in 1973 after the degradation of self-rule, the DMK and its ilk had already dropped its secessionist demands upon feeling that the Centre had provided it with enough opportunity to remain distinct and autonomous within the current Indian territorial arrangements.

Shared Rule

Cederman et al. (2015) theorise that ethno-federations can preserve peace 'but not if they institutionalise majoritarian forms of government [at the Centre],' indicating the conflict-reducing potential of power-sharing with ethnic minorities (Cederman et al. 2015, 362). In Punjab, Sikh nationalists often felt alienated from central power. Demonstrating this most acutely is the manner in which Rajiv Gandhi's government reneged on its promises in the 1984 Rajiv-Longowal Accord, which made concessions to Sikh demands (Singh 1993, 94). Yet this apparent divergence from the centralising strategy was short-lived. From 1986 to 1987, the transfer of land from neighbouring Haryana

to Punjab was suspended, President's Rule was declared, river water supply to Punjab was reduced (while Haryana doubled its supply) and an All-India Sikh Gurdwaras Bill was never introduced (Ibid).

It is telling that the number of terrorist killings in Punjab, which was reported as 275 in 1984 by *India Today*, decreased to 64 in 1985 following the agreement of the Accord, but spiked to 620 in 1986 after the Accord was nullified (Bobb 1987, 10; Mudgal 1988, 17). This demonstrates the significance of shared rule, as ethnic tensions decreased when Sikh nationalists thought a negotiated agreement was going to be implemented. This accommodationist Accord, an example of Stepan et al. (2011)'s 'state-nation' policies (recognising 'collective and individual rights') was undermined, with Rajiv Gandhi describing all Sikh autonomist activities as 'very specifically an attack on the integrity and unity of India' at a 1986 National Integration Council meeting (Government of India 1989, 32). It represented the abandonment of what could have been the building of shared rule apparatus. Indeed, Patiala's Sikh missionary organisation released a series admonishing the Centre for dishonouring the Accord, illustrating the perception of many Sikhs that any inroads for influence at the Centre had been dismantled by broken promises. '[Following military interventions] then came the so-called "healing touch" that culminated in July 1985 in the "Punjab Accord" ... but the Accord goes phut' (Guru Nanak Dev Mission Series 1985, 1). The 'healing touch' would have been the Centre proving its ability to share power, to consult regional actors and implement co-decided agreements; yet shared rule proved weak.

Contrastingly, in TN, the Dravidian movement dropped its secessionist impetus as Tamil nationalist political parties gained access to power, even at the Centre itself. In the 1971 parliamentary elections, Indira Gandhi's Congress accepted a minority of the seats in the state legislature in an arrangement with the DMK, giving the DMK significantly more leverage to influence central decisions, unlike the

SAD in Punjab who continually faced President's Rule (Koab and Hussain 2016, 126). Similarly, in 1984, an All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) Congress coalition won 53 percent of the votes and 78 percent of assembly seats (Stepan et al. 2011, 133). In terms of cabinet representation, from 1952 to 1989, only three parties held ministerial portfolios—Congress, the Janata Party and the AIADMK (Ziegfeld 2012, 76). It is significant that the only regionalist party to hold a Centre position in this period was a Dravidian party: two ministers in the albeit short-lived Janata Party government in the 1970s (Ibid). Overall, while Sikh nationalism became secessionist in response to federal interventionism, the Centre co-opted Tamil nationalist interests, linking to Stepan et al's 'ideal type' of a state-nation where autonomist/secessionist parties can govern in federal units and are 'coalitionable' at the Centre (Stepan et al. 2011, 8).

However, it is easy to over-emphasise the autonomy and shared rule given to TN and to mischaracterise it as a wholly intentional, centrally-sanctioned development. The Indian North-South divide has seen the Centre engage more actively, socially, economically, and politically, with Northern states (Sharma 2018). Indeed, just as many Prime Ministers and Presidents have come from Punjab (one of each) compared to the entirety of Southern India. This has perhaps seen TN develop a de facto autonomy from the Centre.

A Changing Picture?

The Centre's management of ethnic diversity has changed but some continuities prevail. The Centre has included regionalist parties more in forming government, as India has seen the pluralisation of the party system. From 1991 to 1999, regional parties' vote share increased from 26 percent to 46 percent (Ziegfeld 2012, 69), boosting incentives for central politicians to pander to regional actors (to the SAD and Dravidian parties' benefit). From 2004 to 2006,

the DMK not only came to control the state but was the third-largest party in the central Congress-led alliance (Stepan et al. 2011, 136). Since 1997, a SAD-Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) alliance has dominated Punjab and SAD participated in the BJP-led central governments from 1998 to 2002, becoming a 'centric-regional' party like Dravidian parties (Singh and Kim 2018, 437; Stepan et al. 2011, 98). Previously low levels of shared rule appear to have augmented.

However, this apparently increasing accommodationist nature must be qualified. The 2014 national elections challenged the sustained coalition phase of the party system, as the BJP won an outright majority (282 of 543 seats in the lower chamber, increasing to 303 in 2019), whilst Congress obtained less than 20 percent of the vote (Schakel, Sharma and Swenden 2019, 332). This highlights the contingency of party politics as a mechanism for ensuring accommodationist strategies for managing ethnic diversity. The BJP, a Hindu nationalist party, emphasises a unitary concept of the nation centered on Hinduism (Adeney and Bhattacharyya 2018, 420; Swenden, 2016, 510-11), perhaps threatening cultural pluralism. However, the BJP majority party system is not as territorially even as the 1952 to 1989 Congress-dominated party system(s), performing exceptionally well in Hindi-belt states but poorly in the South (Schakel, Sharma and Swenden 2019, 333-4). In 2014, the BJP won 208 seats in just eight states and won just one seat in both Punjab and TN respectively (Ibid).

Thus, the future of regionalist parties (i.e., DMK and SAD) is still very much to be written: the undoubted shift to a new dominant party system which could exclude them is tempered with evidence that regionalist parties' resistance remains the potential key to BJP decline.

Conclusion

In Punjab, where self-rule was weak and where federal-level co-decision was sub-par, ethnic conflict

ensued. In TN, where policy concessions were made and power-sharing arrangements consolidated, ethnic conflict was avoided. More widely, these findings support the scholarship which marks ethno-federalism as neither intrinsically effective nor ineffective, but instead asks: ‘what are the conditions under which federalism can help contain separatist conflicts?’ (Bakke 2009, 292). Ethno-federalism is what a state makes of it.

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