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Antecedent Nationhood, Subsequent Statehood: Explaining the Relative Success of Indian Federalism

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Can power sharing be an institutional device for stability and peace? The contributions to this volume by David Lake and Donald Rothchild (Chapter 5) and Philip Roeder (Chapter 3) serve as a cautionary tale. Against the rising international trend toward power sharing, they pitch evidence of the overall failure of such decentralization since the end of World War II. They discover an important and disconcerting paradox. To achieve peace and political stability, the diplomats and intellectuals of the world appear increasingly to rely on dividing powers between the units and subunits of a state, or between communities; but the evidence that such power sharing has worked in the past is remarkably thin. Normatively, the world is progressively embracing power sharing as an idea; empirically, the catalog of power sharing is blotted with failures. Indeed, power sharing, argue Lake and Rothchild and Roeder, may do more harm than good. Instead of facilitating peace, it may instigate greater violence.

Why might that be so? The crux of their argument is that in the developing world, or in countries coming out of a civil war, there is typically no stable equilibrium between the majority and minority communities. Credible commitments cannot be made. The arrangement over a period of time tips either toward centralization (and defeat of minorities) or toward secession. Power sharing, in short, is a highly unstable political arrangement. It leads, according to Roeder, to “a knife-edge equilibrium,” but the power-sharing arrangement itself increases the fragility of this equilibrium. Decentralization is unstable, argue Lake and Rothchild, because the minority fears for its future or the majority finds it difficult to commit credibly to maintaining this institutional form.

Our chapter is not about whether this argument is on the whole correct. We assume that as a statement of the central tendency of the institutional

landscape of the developing and ex-Communist world, their argument is right.¹ Our chapter will concentrate on what appears to be an exception, India, and single out one part of its power-sharing design. There are other power-sharing practices in India as well,² but we will focus on federalism. It is central to how the most powerful units of Indian politics—the center and the states—have interacted with each other. It is also in many ways central to the analytic enterprise of this volume.

Over five decades old by now, the Indian federation has worked reasonably well. Though it cannot be called a perfect example of a smoothly functioning federal system, it has survived its crises and moved further along. Problems have come from both sides. States have sometimes seriously challenged central authority, and there have also been periods in India's political life when the top central leaders proposed greater centralization as a solution for the country's many problems and tried to translate such beliefs into action. However, rebellious attempts have on the whole not succeeded, and centralizing periods have been short-lived.

More than anything else, two enduring continuities—geographical and constitutional—sum up the overall success of Indian federalism. Since independence, India has not experienced a secession, though it has witnessed a few secessionist movements here and there; there has been no replay of the terrible partition of 1947. India's constitutional continuity also calls our attention. The federal features of India's constitution, debated over several years in the constituent assembly and promulgated in 1950, remain intact. The constitution has gone through several amendments, but no amendment has altered the basic outlines of center-state relations permanently in favor of the center. Indeed, the current situation is the obverse of a centralizer's dream. If anything, the polity is becoming more and more decentralized. In the 1990s a third layer of government at the local level was added to the two-tier governmental system that had consisted of a center and mostly linguistically based states; *de facto*, if not *de jure*, powers of state leaders and governments have manifestly increased; and several new states have been carved out of the existing ones, with a clear possibility that some more may emerge before long.

Such developments would have alarmed a leader like Indira Gandhi, India's prime minister for about 15 years between 1966 and 1984 and its principal centralizer after independence. "The stronger the states, the weaker the nation" was often her argument. Over the last 10 years or so, no important political force—the states, the center, the political parties, the bureaucracy—

1. For a different view, see Bermeo 2002.

2. Most of them are summarized in Lijphart 1996 and Lijphart 1999. We do not, however, draw the conclusion Lijphart does; namely, that India's power-sharing practices make it a consociational democracy. In our view, India is a majoritarian democracy with some strong power-sharing features.

has made a powerful case and mobilized opinion in favor of centralization. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a party that used to favor a much more centralized polity when it was out of power, also became an advocate of greater federalism during its first terms in power (1998–2004). For all practical purposes, federalism has become the routine commonsense of Indian politics.

What accounts for such a state of affairs? Several arguments are available in the existing literature (Dasgupta 2001; Kohli 1997; Manor 2001). Instead of reviewing them, we opt for a different analytic path. Engaging the framework provided by Lake, Rothchild, and Roeder, we wrestle with India's political and institutional history. This combination has generated two arguments. We contend that the applicability of their argument depends on:

1. how far the sense of nationhood, or "nation-ness," has gone before federal arrangements are formally worked out or negotiations over them take place; and
2. whether the ethnic structure is bipolar or multipolar, whether identities are cumulative or crosscutting, and whether, as a consequence, there are permanent majorities and minorities in a country.

India's freedom movement lasted almost three decades (1920–1947), mobilized millions of people, emphasized a nonviolent overthrow of the British, and built links across the various regions. It turned India from a civilization to a nation. To be sure, nation building did not stop in 1947; nor was it fully successful in that a new nation, Pakistan, was carved out of British India. Nation building remains an ongoing political project of independent India, but we argue that the existing sense of Indian nationhood has kept linguistic federalism from producing the consequences predicted for federations in ethnically divided societies by Lake and Rothchild and for ethnofederations by Roeder. It is with the arrival of independence that the actual business of institutional details, including federalism, was negotiated in the constituent assembly. The antecedence of nationhood over state formation, we argue, changed the bargaining framework of the center and states dramatically. In their dealings with Delhi, India's subnational units, with isolated exceptions, have *voluntarily* chosen not to break the nation over the distribution of power and resources. The nation was constructed by India's freedom fighters after a long and arduous struggle launched against the might of the British Empire. State governments take pride in the shared history of that struggle and, in their dealings with the center, have resisted brinkmanship that would jeopardize this.

Moreover, India is multipolar in its ethnic structure, has crosscutting identities, and the country's notional majority community is so internally divided that the term "the ethnic majority" makes little political sense. Given such a situation, the metaphor of "knife edge equilibrium" does not capture the

essence of the bargaining problem. For in a multipolar and crosscutting structure, majorities and minorities can be constructed in several shifting ways, “*the majority*” and “*the minority*” do not confront each other in a do-or-die battle, and desperation born of a permanent future loss is easily avoidable.

Though we have a twofold explanation, we would assign primacy to the first one. Our intention is not to imply, or suggest, that the second explanation is reducible to the first. In our analysis, antecedent nationhood is basically an overarching factor. It is like the sun that bathes all trees that come in its way, but the trees are not the sun’s creations. Without the prior sense of nationhood, the dispersed and crosscutting identities may not have acquired the meaning they do, but the multipolar and crosscutting ethnic structure is not a product of nationhood.

One more point should be noted before we develop our argument. Though apparently contradictory, our argument does not fundamentally refute the analytic proposals of Lake, Rothchild, and Roeder. This is so for two reasons.

First, their large-*n* studies yield, as most such studies do, arguments primarily about the central tendency, not about the cases that may be located away from that line. Statistically speaking, so long as outliers do not constitute a separate mode, they do not undermine a central tendency. All they suggest is that the central tendency may not be able to summarize—precisely and well—the entire distribution of data points. Until we are proved wrong, India appears to be an outlier. Second, speculating theoretically about the exceptions to their analysis, Lake and Rothchild in chapter 5 tantalizingly suggest that “decentralization is likely to be most stable and effective when there are multiple regions with numerous crosscutting political cleavages.” And in contrast to Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan’s (1996) focus on the “state-ness” problem, Roeder notes that no institutional arrangement is likely to hold together peoples who do not want to live in the same state. That is, prior to state-ness problems, there are a host of nation-ness problems (Roeder 1999). These imaginative theoretical concessions quite neatly anticipate our arguments about India.

Indian Federation: Principles, Form, and Record

Following Stepan (1999), we would like to call India a “holding together” federation, not a “coming together” federation. The United States is the prime example of the latter. Coming-together federations, according to this formulation, involve the participation of formally sovereign units in an agreement that pools their sovereignty for the purpose of collective security and economic gains. The Indian federation, an example of the holding-together

model, brought under one roof subunits that did not enjoy complete sovereignty over their affairs, hence their bargaining power in the process of state creation was limited. The Indian union, when it adopted the federal model, did so through an act of the constituent assembly, and not as an agreement between the different composing units. The center is, therefore, envisaged as an enforcer of this arrangement and is typically endowed with more powers than in the case of the coming-together federations such as the United States and Switzerland.

In India, though the powers of states are clearly laid out in the constitution and the state governments can be quite powerful, the center has extensive and constitutionally assigned powers over them. We outline below the basic principles of the federation, the constitutional distribution of powers, and our overall assessment of India's federal record over the last five decades.

The Linguistic Principle

India in 1947 was comprised of three politically and geographically distinct groups of territories: (1) the provinces governed directly by the British; (2) over six hundred princely states of varying sizes, which fell within the British domain but were not directly administered by the British; and (3) the tribal territories, which were also more or less autonomous under British India. Compressing these areas into a single political entity and devising a power-sharing arrangement was never going to be easy. The challenges were addressed in part by creating a federation that included states, whose boundaries would correspond to populations with important cultural similarities.

But which federating logic should be used? India's leaders wrestled with this question. As it turned out, language in most of India and tribe in the seven small northeastern states became the key principle. Of all of India's cultural identities, these two were the only geographically based. Religion and caste tend to be unevenly spread all over the country.

Because language was the rationale for statehood for most parts of India, the federal scheme came to be called linguistic. Each state has its own official language; central government business is conducted either in Hindi or in English.³ More than 12 languages are spoken by an overwhelming majority of people in their respective states (Table 10.1). Language forms the basis of most Indian states.⁴ With the exception of Hindi (which is the lingua

3. The term "official language" is to be distinguished from another term, "national language." An *official language* in India refers to a designated language approved for official transactions of the state mainly at the administrative levels and for formal political communication. A *national language* implies a much wider range of communication.

4. English, Sanskrit, and Sindhi are also included in the Eighth Schedule for political or historical reasons. An additional seven languages are each spoken by more than one million people (Breton 1997, 192–196).

Table 10.1. India: Linguistic profile of the population, 2001

Language	Percentage of population
Hindi	40.2
Bengali	8.3
Telugu	7.9
Marathi	7.5
Tamil	6.3
Urdu	5.2
Gujarati	4.9
Kannada	3.9
Malayalam	3.6
Oriya	3.3
Punjabi	2.8
Assamese	1.6
Other	4.6

Source: Census of India, 2001.

Note: The total population of the country on 1 March 2001 was 1,027,015,247.

franca in six states), each of the major languages is both the main language in a single state and is rarely spoken outside that state.⁵ (The exceptions to this are located within the northeast—Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, and Tripura.)

Major language groups were simultaneously given a direct stake in the Indian system and separated from each other. Their stake came in the form of a politically legitimized regional subnationalism. A political party in the states of Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, or Karnataka, respectively, would be hard pressed to come to power in that state without invoking commonly held notions of Tamil, Gujarati, or Kannada cultural pride. But language groups are also separated because claims supporting Tamil heritage, for example, are meaningless outside the state of Tamil Nadu. Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and castes can be found in most states, but not the speakers of Tamil, Gujarati, or Kannada. Thus, ethnic entrepreneurs could not easily construct

5. The 1951 census reported 845 languages and dialects in India, but the designation of a language or dialect is both subjective and political. The 1961 census mentioned 1,642 "mother tongues" as reported by Indian citizens, but did not clarify the meaning of "mother tongue." Citizens sensitive to the political meaning of language enumeration have used the census strategically. During the 1950s and beyond, upper-caste Sikhs pressed for a revision of the Punjab state boundary such that a majority of the population spoke Gurumukhi (rather, they claimed to write it, for script is the main difference between Gurumukhi and Hindi). In response, Hindus and lower-caste Sikhs who were opposed to the proposed state reported in the 1961 census that they spoke Hindi. For more details, see Brass 1973.

large political coalitions based on shared language across state lines to challenge the federation.

Language made great sense from a regional perspective, but what about language communities that do not speak the state's official language? Each state in India has substantial populations not speaking the state's dominant or "official" language (Table 10.2). First, Articles 29 and 30 of the Indian constitution guarantee that all children may receive primary education in their "mother tongue" and that the state government may not discriminate against educational institutions on the basis of the language of instruction. Second, Article 351 mandates a Special Officer for linguistic minorities who will serve as a watchdog over these communities' social and cultural rights. Despite these cultural protections, great pressure for regional assimilation remains.

From an all-India perspective, multiple languages as a basis of state communication seemed problematic to begin with. For greater national cohesion, Article 351 directs the central government to promote Hindi "so that it may serve as a medium of expression for all the elements of the composite culture of India," and Article 343 provides for English as an official language only for a period of fifteen years. In practice, however, the challenge of several official languages was not as intense as the challenge of quelling social mobilization that followed the hasty attempts to delegitimize regional language groups and introduce Hindi as an all-India language. After the early and adverse experiences, the central government has limited its efforts at Hindi evangelism, and every fifteen years Parliament reinstates English as an official language. Basically, a multilingual India has been accepted as a reality, especially after it became clear that the linguistic formation of states had led to a decline in language-based violence.

The choice of linguistic identities as a basis for statehood in the federation, thus, was not simply an act of far-sighted statesmanship. Many of India's most violent social mobilizations in the post-independence period were organized along linguistic lines. The first linguistic state, Andhra, was created in 1953 following riots touched off by a "fast unto death" by a linguistic promoter.⁶ As it finally emerged, the linguistic basis of federalism was a synthesis of principles, pragmatism, and learning through experimentation.⁷ Though the Congress Party had agreed in theory that language would be

6. Andhra was comprised of the Andhra-speaking portion of Madras province. It evolved into Andhra Pradesh in 1956, when the Andhra-speaking portion of neighboring Hyderabad was added. That portion, known also as Telengana, was the site first of a violent communist secessionist struggle and then of a violent Muslim secessionist one. Linguistic statehood effectively lowered the Telengana problem to a simmering level, where it has remained—unresolved but, by and large, nonviolent.

7. For a description of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's vacillations, see King 1997.

Table 10.2. India: Linguistic profile of the population, by state, 1991

State	Largest Language Group			Second Largest Group			Third Largest Group		
	Language	Speakers	Percent	Language	Speakers	Percent	Language	Speakers	Percent
Andhra Pradesh	Telugu	56,375,755	84.8	Urdu	5,560,154	8.4	Hindi	1,841,290	2.8
Arunachal Pradesh	Nissi/Daffla	172,149	19.9	Nepali	81,176	9.4	Bengali	70,771	8.2
Assam	Assamese	12,958,088	57.8	Bengali	2,523,040	11.3	Bodo/Boro	1,184,569	5.3
Bihar	Hindi	69,845,979	80.9	Urdu	8,542,463	9.9	Santhali	2,546,655	2.9
Goa	Konkani	602,626	51.5	Marathi	390,270	33.4	Kannada	54,323	4.6
Gujarat	Gujarati	37,792,933	91.5	Hindi	1,215,825	2.9	Sindhi	704,088	1.7
Haryana	Hindi	14,982,409	91.0	Punjabi	1,170,225	7.1	Urdu	261,820	1.6
Himachal Pradesh	Hindi	4,595,615	88.9	Punjabi	324,479	6.3	Kinnauri	61,794	1.2
Karnataka	Kannada	29,785,004	66.2	Urdu	4,480,038	10	Telugu	3,325,062	7.4
Kerala	Malayalam	28,096,376	96.6	Tamil	616,010	2.1	Kannada	75,571	0.3
Madhya Pradesh	Hindi	56,619,090	85.6	Bhili/Bhilodi	2,215,399	3.3	Gondi	1,481,265	2.2
Maharashtra	Marathi	57,894,839	73.3	Hindi	6,168,941	7.8	Urdu	5,734,468	7.3
Manipur	Manipuri	1,110,134	60.4	Thado	103,667	5.6	Tangkul	100,088	5.4
Meghalaya	Khasi	879,192	49.5	Garó	547,690	30.9	Bengali	144,261	8.1
Mizoram	Lushai/Mizo	518,099	75.1	Bengali	59,092	8.6	Lakher	22,938	3.3
Nagaland	Ao	169,837	14.0	Sema	152,123	12.6	Konyak	137,539	11.4
Orissa	Oriya	26,199,346	82.8	Hindi	759,016	2.4			
Punjab	Punjabi	18,704,461	92.2	Hindi	1,478,993	7.3	Urdu	13,416	0.1
Rajasthan	Hindi	39,410,968	89.6	Bhili/Bhilodi	2,215,399	5	Urdu	953,497	2.2
Tamil Nadu	Tamil	48,434,744	86.7	Telugu	3,975,561	7.1	Kannada	1,208,296	2.2
Tripura	Bengali	1,899,162	68.9	Tripuri	647,847	23.5	Hindi	45,803	1.7
Uttar Pradesh	Hindi	125,348,492	90.1	Urdu	12,492,927	9	Punjabi	661,215	0.5
West Bengal	Bengali	58,541,519	86.0	Hindi	4,479,170	6.6	Urdu	1,455,649	2.1

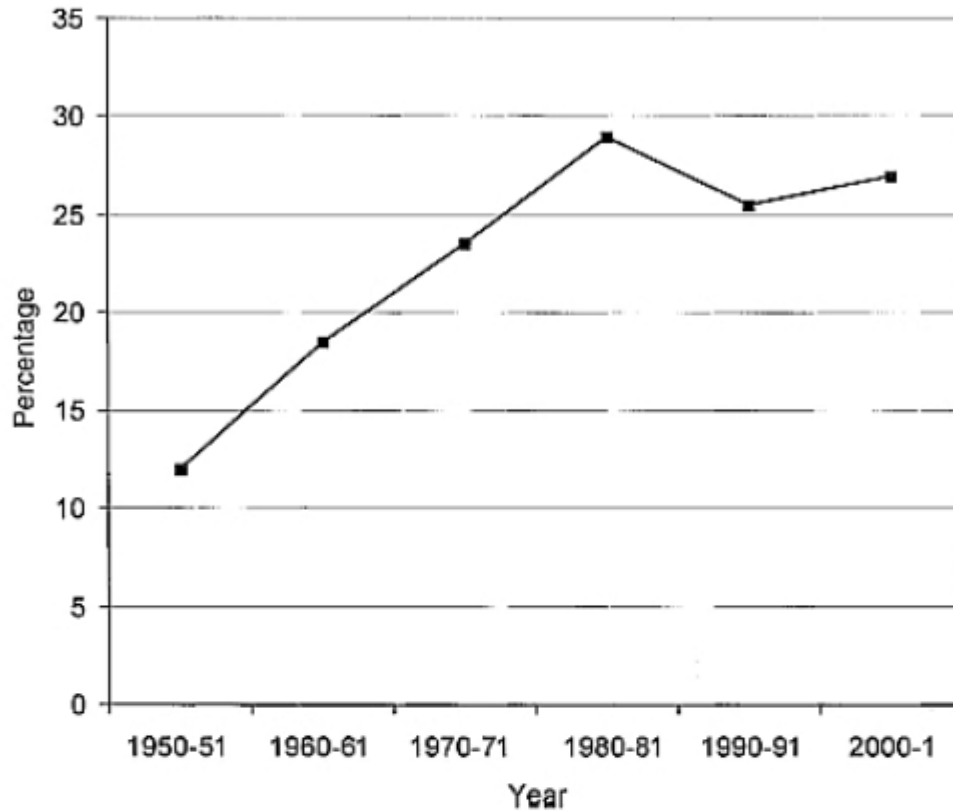
Source: Census of India 1991, Statement 3, Paper 1 of 1997—Language

the federal principle as far back as the 1920s, this principle was given concrete institutional and administrative form only following linguistically based social mobilization in the 1950s. And the first round of successful linguistic federalization generated support for additional linguistic states later. By the late 1960s, India's state boundaries had been fundamentally reorganized along linguistic lines. Today India comprises 28 states and 7 union territories (Figure 10.1).

Figure 10.1 India: States and territories, 2002



Figure 10.2 India: States' share of national tax revenue, 1950–2001



states. The constitution offers extensive formal authority to the national parliament to reorganize states. These provisions enable parliament by law to admit a new state, increase or diminish the area of any state, or alter the boundaries or name of any state. The exercise of these powers requires that the president, a nominal head of government under India's parliamentary system, make a recommendation to this effect and that the president ascertains the views of the legislature of the concerned state.

The part of the constitution that has generated the maximum, and often bitter, debate covers Articles 352 through 360. These are the emergency provisions, when the country begins to function more or less like a unitary state. On taking effect, these provisions concentrate all power in the hands of the center. They can be invoked in situations of national- and state-level emergencies. The national emergencies are broadly defined as financial emergency, external threat to the state, and cases of internal disturbance.

The worst abuse of emergency powers at the national level took place in June 1975 and continued until March 1977. The then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared an emergency under Article 352 on the grounds of internal disturbance. During the term of the emergency, the 42nd amendment

was passed, which made the constitution more centralized. More than 60 clauses of the document were affected. Later, after the post-emergency electoral defeat of Indira Gandhi and the Congress Party in 1977, the 43rd and 44th amendments corrected the imbalance introduced by the amendments that had been voted in by a docile parliament. The emergency was the only time in India's post-independence history when most of the country's opposition leaders were sent to prison on charges of undermining internal order. India's parliament as well as state governments had become the central executive's rubber stamp.

Under the provision of Article 356, among the most controversial parts of the constitution, the center has at its disposal a most potent instrument for intervening in state politics. In the event of a state-level breakdown of the constitutional machinery, Article 356 allows for the invocation of "President's Rule," whereby the president, on the recommendation of the union cabinet, can assume the normal powers of a state, remove a state government, dissolve the state legislature, and empower the union legislature to exercise the respective state's power for a temporary period.

Over the past five decades, Article 356 has been used on more than a hundred occasions. The Sarkaria Commission, appointed by the government of India to investigate the abuse of this provision found that out of 75 cases until then, only in 26 was its use clearly justified or inevitable. The pattern, however, changed in the 1990s, when the frequency of President's Rule and the use of Article 356 declined significantly. In 1994, the Supreme Court ruled—in the *S.R. Bommai* case—that a proclamation under Article 356 can be judicially reviewed, and the central government would have to reveal to the court the relevant material justifying its decision to exercise its power under the provisions of this article. The president has also of late exercised his constitutional privilege to return to the cabinet the executive request to impose President's Rule on a state. Over the past decade, three such requests have either been denied or sent back for review.

These interventions, by the Supreme Court and president, have seriously reduced the risk of arbitrary central intervention in state politics and begun to restrain central leaders from using exceptional powers for partisan purposes. A political consensus that the use of Article 356 should be minimized is beginning to emerge in India, which appears to have made federalism deeper and more secure.

What Kind of Success?

If we use the criteria of "coming together" federations to judge how Indian federalism has done, the case of Indian success would not be clear-cut. As already stated, the center has on many occasions violated state-level authority, though each such violation has been constitutionally justified in terms of

Article 356. The “coming together” criteria, however, are not the best ones to use here, for Indian federalism is based on “holding together” principles. In this respect, it is quite different from the U.S. model. States did not create a center in India. Rather, it would be more appropriate to say that for efficient and inclusive governance, the center, and a constituent assembly, created the states as they came to be.

On the “holding together” measures, as well as in a comparative third-world perspective (which would include the ex-Communist world today), Indian federalism has on the whole been a substantial, if not a spectacular, success. Consider the following four “indices”:

First, India’s 1950 constitution, which laid down the federal framework, has not been overthrown, and its legitimacy only occasionally challenged by states. On the central side, Indira Gandhi did seek to challenge the overall principles of federal functioning, but the centralization she attempted has long been reversed (Brass 1991). Her favorite argument, that if states became powerful the nation would be weakened, has disappeared from the political sphere. Central leaders over the last decade have instead argued that the more powerful the states become, the lesser would be the governance problems for the nation as a whole. More new states have been voluntarily created, not resisted, by the center. In 1957, India had 14 states; in 1971, the number had grown to 17, and in 1981 to 23; by 2001, there were 28 states.

Second, language riots, which preceded the formation of linguistic states and continued through the 1960s, have precipitously declined since the emergence of linguistic states (Wilkinson 2000). Language—a source of great conflict in the 1950s and 1960s—is no longer a divisive political force in India.

Third, there has been no serious threat to Indian nationhood since 1947. As explained later, there have indeed been four exceptions—Nagaland and Mizoram in the northeast, and Punjab and Kashmir in the north. But two facts should be noted. First, none out of the remaining states has ever raised the banner of secessionist revolt. Second, at no point did more than two insurgencies rock the polity simultaneously. The worst year was 1990: The insurgency in Punjab had not quite died out when the insurgency in Kashmir burst on the scene. Even at this moment, a mere 3.5 percent of the national population, spread over these two states, was affected. In other instances, the affected population constituted a smaller percentage of the total.

Fourth, dispute resolution mechanisms between the center and states have become institutionalized. The disputes are settled either in the National Development Council, which is the forum for bargaining over investment funds, in the Finance Commission, which is the forum for distribution of national revenue, or in the highest reaches of ruling political parties. If nothing works, all units of the federation have learned to accept the

Supreme Court's judgments. In some institutional arena or the other, disputes get resolved, and problems managed.

After all is said and done, the greatest objective of India's federation was to hold the nation together without giving up the division of powers between the center and states. Whatever its other deficiencies, Indian federalism has certainly achieved its paramount objective.

Nation Making before State Formation

For an analysis of the success of Indian federalism, independence in 1947 is not the right starting point. Of inescapable analytic importance is the freedom movement that preceded independence. The movement was led, foremost, by Mahatma Gandhi and by a political party, the Indian National Congress (Congress Party hereafter), that Gandhi helped transform into a vast, continent-sized, mass-based organization in the 1920s.

Why should we start with India's freedom movement? For the purposes of this chapter, it acquires significance in light of what we know to be the new conventional wisdom in the field of nationalism. Nations are not naturally occurring entities; they have to be politically constructed. The scholarship on nation making in Europe has forcefully brought this point out. Peasants, as Eugen Weber (1976) tells us, were turned into Frenchmen by a conscription army and public schooling. Similarly, Linda Colley (1992) argues that for Britain a common enemy in Catholic France, shared Protestantism, and the empire, turned a highly divided society, especially its English and Scottish constituents, into a British nation over the course of little more than a century (1707–1837).

In the first half of the 20th century, India, an old civilization, was also turned into a nation for the first time in India's history. A *civilization* is by definition a cultural entity, which India had been for centuries. A *nation* is both cultural *and* political, which India came to be only in the 20th century. Nation making, in a formulation often attributed to Isaiah Berlin, is like building a political roof over one's cultural head.⁹

Our argument must commence with India's nation-building history, or at least its most pivotal hour starting in 1920 and lasting until 1947. The political roof over the long-lasting cultural configuration called India was constructed in opposition to the British. Peasant armies, or the public schools, were not the principal institutional vehicles of nation making, as in France.

9. The exceptions, of course, are the so-called ideological nations, where political ideas, not culture, constituted the bedrock of nationhood. The examples are the United States, the former Soviet Union, and the former Yugoslavia. For a brilliant discussion of how ideological nations are different from nations based on culture or ethnicity, see Samuel Huntington 1981, chap. 2.

Rather, the Congress Party played a functionally equivalent role.¹⁰ Two aspects of nation making during the freedom movement had serious implications for the functioning of Indian federation later: *what* kind of nation was built, and *how*? We turn to each in turn.

Imagining the Nation

The leaders of India's freedom movement—the founding fathers—recognized diversities as central to India as a nation. They subscribed to what is now known as the “salad bowl,” as opposed to the “melting pot,” view of the nation.¹¹ India's leaders, including Gandhi and Nehru, gave it a different name: “unity in diversity” or “composite nationalism.”

Indeed, “unity in diversity” became the master narrative of Indian nationhood. It not only guided the freedom movement, but the Indian constitution, born after independence, institutionalized this spirit. Birth in India or naturalization was to be the sole legal criterion for citizenship, and acceptance of Indian culture the only political criterion. To underline the point that accepting Indian culture (not religion or race or language) was all that was required to be an Indian, Mahatma Gandhi presented a remarkable formulation about Indian nationhood: “It is not necessary for us to have as our goal the expulsion of the English. If the English become Indianized, we can accommodate them” (Gandhi 1938, 59). Thus, even the colonizers were welcome if they transformed their cultural condescension for India into an acceptance of it and chose to live in the country.

Caste (a hereditary social status), religion, language, or social background could not be used to deny anyone citizenship rights. The state, on its part, was to operate above these concerns. All religions, caste, and linguistic groups would enjoy equal status and freedoms in the eyes of the law. It is difficult to imagine the effectiveness of the freedom movement and the federal project without calling attention to the public and repeated proclamation of these principles of inclusiveness by India's political leaders. Time and again, these principles have been questioned and challenged in some quarters. However, their survival and continued acceptance bears testimony to their success since their inception.

The rationale for this narrative came from a reading of Indian culture and history, which was explicitly and repeatedly articulated in politics by the

10. Political parties have played this role elsewhere as well. In the former Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe, a political party was engaged in nation making but not on the basis of conciliation and democracy. Because their nation building was based on coercion, it was not clear how deeply a Croat felt for Yugoslavia, or how ardent a Georgian or an Estonian was for the Soviet Union. The principles embraced by India's Congress party were different.

11. For a longer treatment of the ideas about Indian nationhood, see Varshney 2002, chap. 3; and an earlier essay, Varshney 1993.

leaders of the freedom movement. It was not the only reading of Indian history possible, but the leaders elected to concentrate on it, partly because they believed in it and partly because that was the only historical interpretation, which, when deployed in politics, promised unity rather than disunity.¹² Ideas of syncretism, pluralism, and tolerance, they argued, have historically defined Indian society and culture.¹³ Several religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism—were born in India, and in its history, India also repeatedly received and accommodated “outsiders”—Parsis, Jews, and “Syrian Christians” (followers of St. Thomas, arriving as early as the first century). In the process, and partly as a consequence, contended the founding fathers, syncretistic forms of culture have become part of India. Apart from syncretism, which represents a merging of cultures, pluralism and tolerance have been the other features: different communities, finding their niche in India, fell into mutually acceptable principles of interaction while keeping the core of their identity intact.

In keeping with this salad bowl view of the nation, the freedom movement committed itself to a linguistic Indian federation as early as 1921. It is conceivable that if the leaders had insisted on a “one language, one nation” formula, there would have been as many nations in India at the stroke of British departure as in Europe today. Unlike Europe, language was systematically delinked from the concept of nation. Multiple languages and multilingual leaders were seen as an inevitable part of nation building in India.

Putting the Idea into Practice

How were these ideas about the nation put into political practice? The 1920s were a transformative moment, when mass politics emerged in British India under Mahatma Gandhi’s leadership. Before Gandhi, the Congress Party, born in 1885, was for all practical purposes a lawyers club, which made constitutional appeals for more rights from the British in the Queen’s English. It did not formulate clear ideas about nationhood.

Upon his arrival on the scene, Gandhi transformed the freedom movement by altering the character of the Congress Party and its agenda. First, he convinced the party that the British were unlikely to be impressed with demands for independence unless they were confronted with a mass movement. Therefore, it was time for the Congress Party to embrace mass poli-

12. Why other ideas could not take root is a fascinating counterfactual. Hindu nationalist ideas, defining India as a Hindu nation, were certainly in the air, but they remained on the periphery of the independence movement, never capturing its heart.

13. The best source for the secular nationalist construction is Nehru’s *The Discovery of India* (1990). Syncretism, pluralism, and tolerance are the main themes of Nehru’s recalling of India’s history.

tics and lead a mass movement. Second, Gandhi emphasized social transformation as an essential accompaniment to political freedom. Hindu-Muslim unity, the removal of *untouchability* (the very low status accorded some castes), and *swadeshi* (think Indian, buy Indian, wear Indian) had to become an integral part of the party's agenda. To these were added other projects, including women's rights, increased attention to tribal areas, labor rights, and prohibition. Not all of these efforts met with equal success, and most of these issues still persist as challenges, but a substantial beginning was made. The initiatives took the form of different organizations and movements between the 1920s and 1940s. A nationwide mass-based movement was launched, and people from many walks of life and most parts of the country came to join it. Slowly but surely, a sense of a distinct political unit began to emerge from what was till then a highly politically decentered country.

The Congress Party was the focal point of the important activities in this period of momentous change. Its growth in stature was accompanied by a widening of its agenda and an increase in its capacity. The party opened district and provincial offices. It spread to small towns and even villages, recruited cadre, attracted local elites and notables, and organized and ran national and local movements. It conducted internal elections for choosing its office bearers and saw itself as an embodiment of the spirit of nationhood. Aware of the diverse cross-section it was trying to attract to its fold, it pitched itself as an inclusive organization, in which even the dissenters were invited and had a place. They could hope to hold office, provided they were prepared to convince the organization to tilt toward their view.

The adoption of this strategy gave the Congress Party a preeminent place in the political arena. It attracted many strands of views, not always complementary. The Congress Party had vigorous and sometimes public debates, but a commitment to inclusiveness and procedures precluded the appearance of any other major national party. The Muslim League did eventually appear as a challenger, but only in Muslim-dominated electoral districts, and there too, not without considerable struggle.

The Congress Party in the last 27 years of the freedom movement (1920–1947) had developed an umbrella-like character. This had a significant bearing on its preparation for federal governance, at least in the crucial early years after independence. The different state units of the party, where it existed, were organized on the linguistic principle, and the party came to be a federation of these units. All this while, the party was learning the difficult process of balancing national-level demands with local ones. It expected to be voted to power after independence, and by the time it did, it was already on its way to learning the art of making the federal game work. A cohort of regional leadership had arisen within the party. They represented both the aspirations of their respective regions and the commitment of these regions to the national project.

Another defining characteristic of the Congress Party's dominance of the freedom movement was its adoption of a nonviolent form of struggle. Gandhi's commitment to civil disobedience and nonviolence, and its adoption as a policy by the Congress party, ensured that even calls for violent response to British repression were never sponsored by the Congress Party. Since there were other groups who took the opposite view, violence, both anti-state and interethnic, did erupt, but the Congress Party was quick to denounce it and often worked against it, even when it sometimes meant opposing the popular sentiment. The outcome of this stance was that, violence was delegitimized as a means of attaining political objectives.

We would like to suggest that a peaceful freedom movement with local power centers is better suited to federal governance than a violent one. In the latter case, organized violence is not unlikely to emerge as a dispute settlement instrument, once the movement has to take on the task of governance. (Afghanistan is faced with this problem today, among other things.) Since power sharing is an ongoing conflict resolution exercise, afflicted with the credible commitment problem, especially in the early stages, having peaceful norms of dispute resolution are a nontrivial determinant of its success. Consider the following counterfactual: If the Congress Party had a military wing, it could have posed a challenge to the authority of the central state as center-state and interstate disputes arose, or certain regional power centers within the Congress Party challenged the authority of the central leadership in independent India. Such outcomes cannot be ruled out in a holding-together system, which is contingent on a stronger center and therefore more prone to political dissatisfaction, even disenchantment, in the states, especially in the periphery. As it turned out, demands for linguistic reorganization were made through the use of agitation politics, not armed rebellion. On the whole, armed rebellions were crushed, and could be legitimately crushed given this prior background, in the first 20 to 30 years of Indian independence.

Finally, a word about India's partition in 1947, especially as it concerns federalism. The partition of the country did not result from the inherently unstable equilibrium of a federal system; it came about because the question of who would legitimately represent Muslims could not be answered in a way that would satisfy the warring parties. Despite its umbrella-like character, the Congress Party was unable to win over the Muslim community fully. In the end, a significantly large proportion of Muslims embraced the Muslim League, which championed the call to create the state of Pakistan.

Indian Muslims were a religiously defined, not a linguistic, group. They spoke the languages of the regions in which they lived. The so-called Muslim Question in British India, therefore, was by definition not a federal question. The Muslim League wanted a federal and consociational democracy; the Congress Party argued in favor of a federal and majoritarian democracy, with

a bill of minority rights built into the constitution. The Muslim League claimed the right to be the sole spokesman of Muslims; the Congress argued against a “one-community, one-party” principle, saying it also had Muslim support, and that other parties in the future could gain Muslim support as well. The consociational versus majoritarian struggle evaded a satisfactory resolution, leading to India’s partition in 1947 and the birth of Pakistan.

Cleavages: Dispersed and Crosscutting

A second reason for the success of Indian federalism has to do with the country’s ethnic configuration.¹⁴ The latter helps federalism for two reasons. India’s ethnic structure is *dispersed*, not centrally focused, and the identities *crosscut*, instead of cumulating. Let us draw out the implication of each.

A Dispersed Ethnic Structure

To Donald Horowitz (1985) we owe an important analytic distinction between *dispersed* and *centrally focused* ethnic systems. Identities in dispersed systems are locally based, and there are many such identities; the centrally focused systems have fewer salient identities that, moreover, pervade the entire country. In dispersed systems, generally speaking, ethnic conflict remains localized and does not have a national spillover. This gives the center room to maneuver, for it can deal with one group at a time in one part of the country without worrying about the nightmare of the entire federal system collapsing. It can even mobilize the support of some states while it takes on one of them. In centrally focused systems, because of the nationwide prevalence of the cleavage, conflict tends to escalate all through the system and stakes go up, saddling federalism, or federal prospects, with the kind of bargaining and credibility problems and the resultant disequilibria that Lake, Rothchild, and Roeder identify (see Chapters 5 and 3).

The Tamil-Sinhala conflict in Sri Lanka, the Malay-Chinese conflict in Malaysia, and the pre-1971 conflict in East Pakistan, it can be argued, have been centrally focused. In East Pakistan, the outcome of the conflict was the breakdown of federalism followed by the disintegration of the country. In Sri Lanka, the different proposals on the possible federal arrangements have met with repeated resistance from the majority community. And in Malaysia, there occurred a significant change in the power-sharing principles following the Malay-Chinese riots of 1969. Here the fear of the dilution of the Malay character of the country led the government to increase the

14. We use the term *ethnic* in its broader sense, by which we mean any cultural *ascriptive* identity, actual or imagined. For why we should have this larger view, see Horowitz 1985.

Malay presence across all arenas, making the arrangement more Malay dominant.

Compare these examples with India, where most ethnic cleavages are regionally or locally anchored. Most languages, as already explained, have a geographical homeland, and, with the exception of Hindi, each language is the majority language in one state only. Linguistic conflicts are thus typically confined to a single part of the country, not threatening the entire country, which means that the center is not necessarily pushed toward centralization as a strategy.

More generally, other kinds of ethnic and religious conflict also have the same localized character. The Sikh-Hindu religious cleavage was restricted to the state of Punjab and to parts of North India. The insurgency in Kashmir has not spilled out of the Kashmir valley to include all Muslims. Many were killed inside the northeastern state of Assam in the early 1980s but not outside. The “sons of the soil” movement, led by the Shiv Sena in Bombay in the 1960s and aimed at limiting employment in the state to those born in the state, did not attract recruits outside the state of Maharashtra; and so on and so forth.¹⁵

The all-pervading caste system also rules out the appearance of a centrally rooted cleavage. The caste system is national in concept but local in experience. There are no nationwide castes that recognize each other as co-ethnics. When members of a caste group organize and unite, it happens typically at the state or substate level, and more often than not, it generates a counter-reaction on the part of other castes in the same state, thereby splitting state politics rather than building a cohesive and united state-level force against the center.

Conflicts never cease to break out in India, sometimes giving the impression that the political system, including federalism, is coming apart. Yet violence goes away before long, the state returns to normalcy, and the center manages to hold. Even when an ethnic party leading an insurgency confronts the central government, the central characteristic of dispersed systems remains. Unable on the whole to mobilize support beyond the state, the insurgents end up facing the central government in its full coercive might. Unlike an escalating conflict in a centrally focused state, in a dispersed system even an insurgency gets bottled up in a fragment of the country. Normal rules of federalism are suspended in the area of insurgency, while the rest of the country continues to function under routine federal processes. The system of federalism as a whole is not gravely threatened.

15. Only lately, in the highly diverse northeastern states, have a half dozen or so small insurgent groups begun to coordinate their activities against the Indian state. However, the support of these movements remains locally based in different tribes. Moreover, in most cases, the demands and bargaining positions of these groups are also different from each other.

Crosscutting Identities

Analytically separable, but equally important for the longevity of federalism, is the crosscutting nature of Indian identities. India has four major attributes of ethnic diversity: language, religion, caste, and tribe. We have already provided an account of the linguistic diversity and its manifestation. Similarly the religious landscape is marked by multiplicity and variety. Indeed, in spite of being a nation with a Hindu majority, India is a land of many religions and faiths (Table 10.3). Even among the Hindus, there is a large diversity of subfaiths and belief systems.

As briefly argued above, the caste system, which is common to almost the entire country, is also defined by subdivisions. There are three metacategories of caste—upper, middle (also called other backward castes [OBCs]), and the Scheduled Castes (formerly called “Untouchables” for their low status) (Table 10.4).¹⁶ The last two, viewed as historically deprived, constitute a majority by a huge margin, but the upper castes have by and large dominated the nation’s political, social, and economic landscape. This,

Table 10.3. India: Religious profile of the population, 2001

Religious group	Percentage of population
Hindus	80.5
Caste Hindus	64.5
Scheduled-Caste Hindus	16.0
Muslims	13.4
Christians	2.3
Sikhs	1.9
Buddhists and Jains	1.2
Others	0.6

Source: Census of India, 2001.

Table 10.4. India: Caste composition of the population

Group	Percentage of population
Upper Castes (such as Brahmin)	16.1
Middle Castes (or Other Backward Castes [OBCs])	43.7
Scheduled Castes (formerly “untouchables”)	14.9
Scheduled Tribes	8.1
Non-Hindu Minorities	17.2

Source: India 1981, pt. 1, vol. 1, p. 56;
Varshney 2002, 58.

Note: Since no caste census has been taken since 1931, the figures above are best guesses, not exact estimates. They are sufficient to show the overall magnitudes, however.

16. As already stated, caste is essentially a local category, and there are thousands of castes in India. With some qualification, however, they can be grouped together in larger, metacategories. The metaclassification is also known as *varna* classification.

however, has now begun to change, as democratic forces and increased social and economic mobility have taken effect, and the "lower castes" have risen.

Tribes constitute 8.1 percent of the population (see Table 10.4). The tribes in India, like the linguistic groups, are geographically concentrated. Their numbers are the largest in central India and the northeast of the country. There are hundreds of these groups, each with a distinct identity.

Given the geographical concentration of language and tribe, they could in principle provide states with a firm resolve and a source of great power against the center. That does not, however, happen. First of all, in each state, linguistic minorities exist, making a statewide linguistic unity hard to achieve (see Table 10.2). Moreover, as Tables 10.2 and 10.5 show, linguistic and religious groups do not coincide in most states, with some exceptions discussed later. As a result, religion seriously crosscuts the political potential that language (or for that matter, tribe) might theoretically create for brinkmanship on the part of a state. Though census data on caste have not been collected

Table 10.5. India: Religious profile of the population, by state, 2001 (percentage of each state's population)

State	Hindus	Muslims	Christians	Sikhs
Andhra Pradesh	89.0	9.2	1.6	0.04
Assam	64.9	30.9	3.7	0.1
Bihar	83.2	16.5	0.1	0.02
Chhattisgarh	94.7	2.1	1.9	0.3
Goa	65.8	6.8	26.7	0.1
Gujarat	89.1	9.1	0.6	0.1
Haryana	88.2	5.8	0.1	5.5
Himachal Pradesh	95.4	2.0	0.1	1.2
Jammu and Kashmir	29.6	67.0	0.2	2.0
Jharkhand	68.6	13.8	4.1	0.3
Karnataka	83.9	12.2	1.9	0.02
Kerala	56.2	24.7	19.0	0.0
Madhya Pradesh	91.1	6.4	0.3	0.2
Maharashtra	80.4	10.6	1.1	0.2
Manipur ^a	46.0	8.8	34.0	0.1
Meghalaya	13.3	4.3	70.3	0.1
Mizoram	3.6	1.1	87.0	0.03
Nagaland	7.7	1.8	90.0	0.1
Orissa	94.4	2.1	2.4	0.04
Punjab	36.9	1.6	1.2	59.9
Rajasthan	88.8	8.5	0.1	1.4
Tamil Nadu	88.1	5.6	6.1	0.01
Tripura	85.6	8.0	3.2	0.03
Uttar Pradesh	80.6	18.5	0.1	0.4
Uttaranchal	85.0	11.9	0.3	2.5
West Bengal	72.5	25.2	0.6	0.1
Delhi	82.0	11.7	0.9	4.0

Source: First Report on Religion: Census of India 2001.

Note: ^a Excludes Mao Maran, Paomata and Purul Sub-divisions of Senapati district in Manipur. Rows do not sum to 100, for other, smaller religions are not listed.

since 1931, it is well known that caste also cuts across language groups. Thus, both religion and caste often cause splits within a state's boundaries, turning intrastate issues into a more enduring form of politics than a confrontation with the political center.

A typical Indian will almost always stand at the intersections of multiple identities. The first language of a Muslim could be Hindi, Urdu, Bengali or Tamil, depending on which state she lives in. It is the same for a Hindu. Moreover, the Hindus have a number of caste identities, which for the sake of simplicity can be categorized under the first three metacategories listed in Table 10.4. However, castes manifest themselves differently across the states. For example, a North Indian who is a member of the scheduled castes will differ from a South Indian of similar caste designation. The same is true for other castes. Being a Brahmin in North India is very different from being a Brahmin in South India. Caste names, histories, languages, and rivalries all differ as one travels the length and breadth of the country.

In such a diverse landscape, political entrepreneurs use different organizing principles for mobilizing people, and therefore two outcomes become remote. First, the center-state cleavage becomes difficult to activate. Second, cross-state alliances between similar groups do not materialize.

In the few Indian states where identities are cumulated instead of cross-cutting, the most serious center-state clashes have occurred, including secessionist movements. Religion, language, and geography coincide in such cases, and caste differences are not as central as they are elsewhere in the country. The majority community of Kashmir is not only Muslim, otherwise a minority in India, but the region of Kashmir is also linguistically different and geographically distinct from the rest of India. Moreover, caste distinctions do not exist among the Kashmiri Muslims—not in any rigid sense at any rate. In the state of Punjab, the Sikhs, a minority in the country overall, constitute a majority and their first language is Punjabi, which also therefore makes them linguistically different from the rest of the country. Moreover, compared to the Hindus, caste distinctions are also minor among the Sikhs.¹⁷ Finally, in northeastern India, some states, especially Nagaland and Mizoram, are not only tribe-based, but those tribes are linguistically as well as religiously distinct from the rest of Indians. Their respective vernaculars are the first languages of Nagaland and Mizoram, not Hindi, and both are Christian-majority states (see Table 10.5).

It is in these states with cumulated identities that the attempts at secession have been made. Note, however, that with the exception of Punjab,¹⁸ the Congress Party during India's freedom movement was not allowed by the

17. Indeed, the Sikh religion was born in 1499 partly in rebellion against the caste hierarchy of the Hindu social system.

18. This makes the 1980s insurgency in Punjab especially analytically complex. For a recent interpretation, see Singh 2000. For earlier history, see Brass 1973.

British system to penetrate these states. The problem thus may be doubly serious, going a long way toward explaining the drive for secession in them. Identities tend to cumulate in Kashmir and the northeastern tribal states, and the nation-making enterprise did not reach them.

Conclusion

If we are right, the framework provided by Lake, Rothchild, and Roeder is applicable to a particular kind of analytic space. It appears to work best when nationhood is either weak or nonexistent, and the ethnic structure of a country is bi- or tripolar and identities cumulate. The strategic problems in such a situation can make federalism an unstable equilibrium, pushing it toward either centralization or secession.

We have argued that India does not belong to this analytic space. First, an embrace of cultural diversities in the very idea of nationhood and a political implementation of that idea through organizations, especially the Congress Party, during the long freedom movement changed the framework within which India's center and states bargained after independence. The same political party ruled both the center and states after independence, and internal federalism was one of its key organizational principles. Rather than a shaky equilibrium, India's federalism developed a cooperative character. Many political battles were fought by the states against the center, but few were taken to the brink of breaking nationhood. Embracing diversities, the center did not generally seek to obliterate the many identities of Indian citizens, regions, or states.

Moreover, the dispersed and crosscutting nature of India's ethnic configuration also contributes to the survival of federalism. Had the identity structure been bipolar—reducible to “the majority” and “the minority”—and had the identities been cumulative in nature, battles over federalism could have acquired deadly political proportions. There are so many ways to construct a majority in India, both in states and the nation as a whole, that remarkable fluidity is lent to the majority-minority framework of politics. In Indian politics, permanent majorities are virtually inconceivable.

This is not to say that problems have not occurred. Where identities cumulate and/or the freedom movement was not allowed to penetrate, demands for succession have arisen. These, however, have remained limited in number and restricted to pockets, and through a combination of elections and coercion, the Indian state has been able to contain them.