

FT BIG READ. INDIAN POLITICS

Successive governments have long avoided an issue that could inflame deep-rooted divisions between the poorer, more populous north and the wealthy, sparser south. Will Modi take the risk?

By John Reed and Aditi Bhandari

Redrawing India's electoral map

In a country where most people weigh their words before criticising their powerful leader Narendra Modi, Tamil Nadu's top politician MK Stalin is surprisingly blunt.

The southern state's chief minister claims that Modi's Bharatiya Janata party, whose political stronghold is in northern India, has been treating people in wealthier states — mostly in the south — as “second-class citizens”.

His bold accusation comes as India reopens the politically explosive issue of “delimitation” — a redistribution of parliamentary seats allocated by proportional representation to reflect the country's growing population.

Because of sensitivities around deep-rooted regional divisions, successive governments have postponed the overhaul for more than five decades. India last reapportioned seats in 1973 when its population was about 548mn, less than half the 1.4bn plus it is now.

But with the latest freeze on the issue due to lapse next year, delimitation is again rearing its head, prompting politicians from the south, led by Stalin, to raise the alarm.

“We suspect the BJP-led union government is planning to systematically scale down the parliamentary representation of the performing states, and deny them the political rights of getting due dividends for their exemplary performance and smart social investment,” Stalin, whose leftist late father named him after the Soviet dictator, tells the Financial Times.

If a redrawing of parliament based on population goes ahead, southern states will face a significant swing in the balance of political power towards more populous, and poorer, northern states. If it is delayed, the north will continue to be under-represented in parliament.

At stake, some Indians say, is the federal bargain that holds together the world's most populous country, in which the economic performance and social outcomes between north and south — where much of India's IT and manufacturing industries are concentrated — are increasingly diverging.

It also presents the Modi government with one of the most delicate political challenges since he took power in 2014.

“This might be the most important moment since independence [in 1947],” says Palanivel Thiaga Rajan, Tamil Nadu's IT minister and a leader of Stalin's Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) party. “It's going to affect, profoundly, the future of the country, and a lot of people in [New] Delhi are very worried about it because it has the risk of putting a match to the tinderbox.”

Fears that the south will lose influence has prompted an unusual show of unity among its states. Stalin in March convened a meeting attended by political leaders from seven states worried about delimitation, who urged the “Centre” as Indians call their national government, to again freeze the issue.

“If the Modi government obliges us and extends the freeze on delimitation for another 25 years, we would welcome that,” Stalin tells the FT in an interview that included written responses to questions. “But the kind of government that it has been, and its approach since 2014, does not indicate a willingness to heed the rightful voice of the states.”

Stalin is calling for a “middle ground”, one that would ensure the populous northern states and performing southern states have the right political balance in parliament.

But Yogi Adityanath, chief minister of India's most populous state, northern Uttar Pradesh — which would be likely to gain the most from population-based delimitation — has accused Stalin of pursuing a “stoking regional divisions”.

The issue has profound political overtones for India's future: while opposition parties like Stalin's DMK govern in most of the south, Modi's BJP controls most of the north. The BJP would certainly benefit if delimitation of the Lok Sabha, the lower house of India's parliament, gives the north more seats. His critics think the better-than-expected campaign by the opposition in last year's election — which stripped Modi's party of its parliamentary majority for the first time in a decade — might prompt him to go ahead with delimitation.

But the redrawing of India's electoral map is just one item on a growing list of the social, cultural and economic grievances that are increasingly tugging at the fabric of India's union.

Tax is a significant flashpoint: when tax revenues are collected at a state level, New Delhi redistributes them based on a fiscal federal model under



Prime Minister Narendra Modi's BJP controls most of India's northern states, which include Uttar Pradesh, right, and would benefit from a redistribution of parliamentary seats. But this push for 'delimitation' has prompted politicians across the south, including the state of Tamil Nadu, left, to speak out

FT montage: AFP/Getty Images

which an “equity principle” is sometimes invoked. So most northern states receive more money than they pay in.

If the north gets a greater say in setting economic policies and divvying up taxes, southerners worry it will muffle their voices in national politics permanently. “We will have taxation without representation,” says one senior government official in Karnataka state, one of India's wealthiest per capita, who asked not to be named because he did not have authorisation to speak to media.

“I don't think India is at risk of breaking apart,” says Louise Tillin, a professor of politics at the India Institute, London's King's College. “But the upcoming delimitation question is already focusing minds on the sustainability of the current federal bargain, both on the political and the economic front.”

When India's founders began drafting a constitution for one of the planet's most culturally diverse countries, they chose a federal model — albeit one with a strong centre. “It establishes a dual polity with the union at the centre and the states at the periphery, each endowed with sovereign powers,” BR Ambedkar, considered the father of the constitution, said in 1948. “The union is not a league of states.”

After throwing off British colonial rule, India's founding leaders were struggling to absorb princely states that had enjoyed political autonomy, while resisting secessionist pressures in places like Hyderabad and Kashmir, which is disputed with Pakistan.

Advocates of Indian federalism, then and now, say it is the glue that binds the nation together, because it gives state leaders flexibility in setting policies, and voters room to voice their will in between national elections.

The constitution also provided for delimitation: Article 82 of India's basic law allowed for the readjustment of constituencies in the lower house after every census. But in 1976, Indira Gandhi, the strongwoman leader of the now

opposition Indian National Congress, chose to freeze the reweighting of seats for 25 years, arguing that delimitation would be a negative incentive for family planning, her signature policy. “It would be unfair to penalise states which have succeeded in controlling population,” she said in a parliamentary debate, foreshadowing the very complaints politicians like Stalin are raising today.

In 2001, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who headed India's first BJP-led government, postponed delimitation by another 25 years. In the decades since, richer states have continued to lead India in controlling their fertility rates. These include all of India's southern states, plus outliers in the north and west, including Maharashtra, Gujarat and Punjab, the last of which joined Stalin's recent meeting in Chennai.

In Tamil Nadu, population control has converged with better policies on education, health and the empowerment of women to produce faster economic growth than in lagging states. It is one of several states, mostly in the south, where the total fertility rate is running below India's replacement rate of 2.1, meaning that its population will have shrunk since the 2011 census.

Its GDP per head is now well above the national average, but populous northern states such as Uttar Pradesh, whose GDP per head is roughly on a par with Nepal's, suck up the lion's share of tax revenues. For every rupee Tamil Nadu sends to the union government in New Delhi, it only gets about 30 paise (the equivalent of cents) back in taxes, grants and other schemes, whereas for every rupee Uttar Pradesh sends it gets back nearly 5 rupees.

“Vast inequality between regions is now a feature, not a bug, of the economy,” says Yamini Aiyar, a senior visiting fellow at Brown University. “I don't think the founding fathers got it wrong, it's that economic growth has been unequal, and it is putting pressure on existing federal arrangements.”

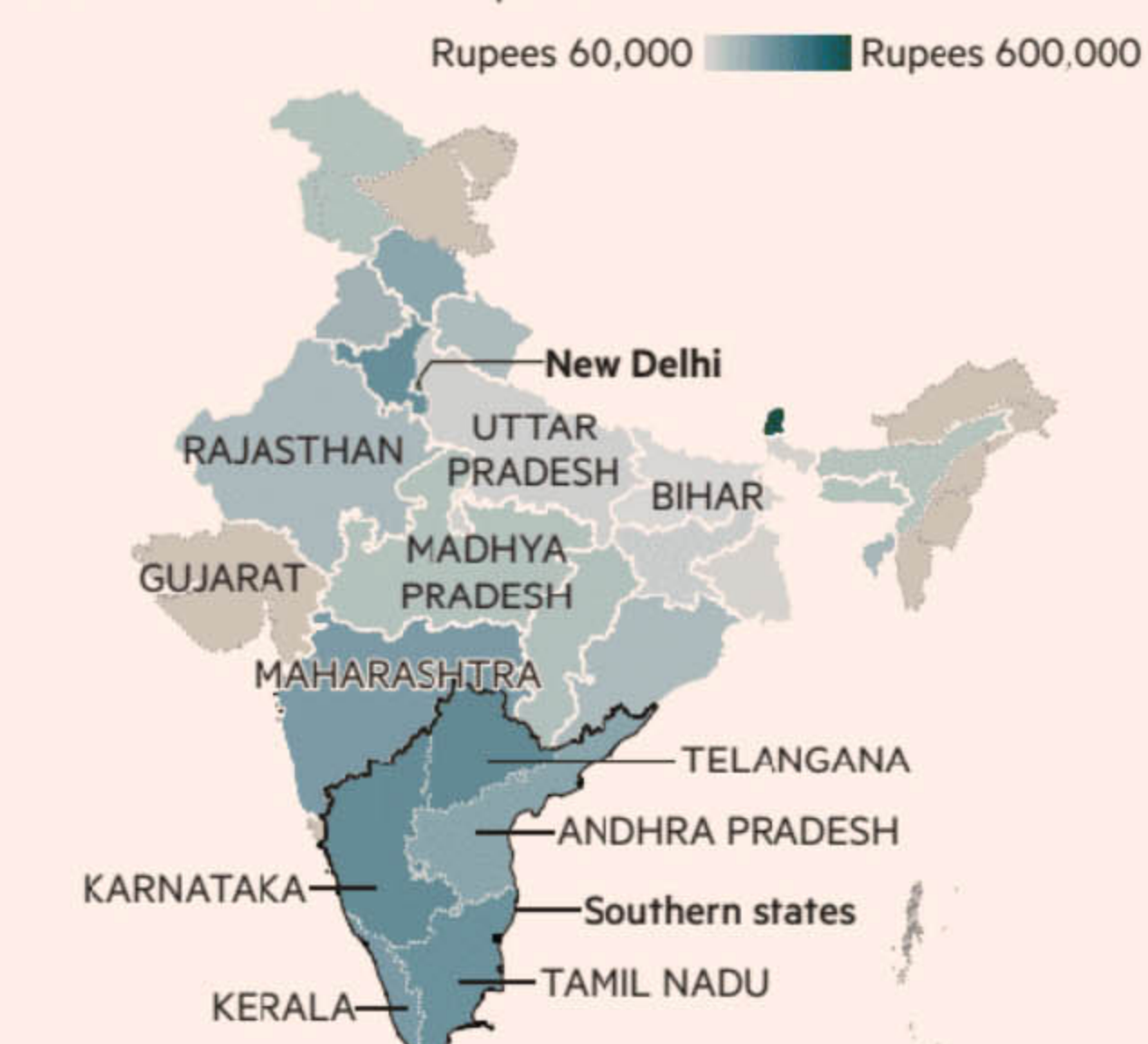
Northern states like Uttar Pradesh, despite benefiting from generous infrastructure and other funds from the centre, have continued to trail behind their southern counterparts. But their representation has stalled too: with delimitation frozen for so long, each of the state's 80 Lok Sabha (lower house) MPs represent on average 3mn people, compared with Tamil Nadu's 39, who on average represent just over 2mn each.

“If the assumption was that development would even out over India, it didn't happen,” says N Ram, director of The Hindu Group, which publishes a leading Chennai-based national newspaper. “That ship has sailed, and it's going to be a huge political problem.”

“It would mean penalising states, especially those in the south, that have done well in development and in

The southern states have a higher GDP than some of the larger northern states

Net state domestic product (NSDP) per capita
2023-24 data at current prices



Sources: Humanitarian Data Exchange (Boundaries); Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation • Data for some states including Gujarat has not yet been released. Data for Jammu and Kashmir refers only to the union territory

lowering the population rate. And it would also mean rewarding the laggards politically,” he adds.

Modi's political opponents have speculated that he might call for a new census soon in order to carry out delimitation before the next national election, scheduled for 2029. India deferred its last census, planned for 2021, because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

“The freeze expires in 2026, so they could do it ahead of the election,” says Rajan, Tamil Nadu's IT minister.

“Our chief minister is already starting to take charge because we can't be sleeping at the wheel.”

Southerners who distrust the BJP's intentions have taken note that the lower house of India's new parliament building, inaugurated in 2023, has capacity to seat 888, significantly more than its current tally of 543 MPs, suggesting that the chamber was designed with an expansion in mind.

They also point to what they claim is gerrymandering in a delimitation carried out in Jammu and Kashmir after Modi revoked its special constitutional status, in which mostly Hindu Jammu gained six seats and the mostly Muslim Kashmir valley just one.

While the Modi government has only laid out in broad terms how it would pursue delimitation, most analysts expect an increase in the number of seats in the Lok Sabha that would see more allocated to the north.

“By 2050 on current population trends, the number of seats held by southern states could come down to 10 per cent” from about 25 per cent now,

says Salem Dharanidharan, a DMK spokesperson. “We might have 1,500 parliamentarians and only 150 from southern India.” This could, he adds, “create a trust deficit in democracy”.

With a backlash brewing, home affairs minister Amit Shah, Modi's most powerful deputy, told parliament last month that “no state will face injustice in the delimitation process”.

BJP politicians accuse their opponents in the south of stoking regional tensions to distract from their own problems.

“We are very clear that delimitation is not going to be based on a population formula, and the party has said that multiple times,” K Annamalai, the BJP's state president for Tamil Nadu, tells the FT. “The honourable prime minister [Modi] and Amit Shah both said it will be based on a pro-rata basis.”

The “hue and cry” over delimitation, he says, is being fanned by Stalin and other politicians in his party to distract from their own challenges around law and order, alleged corruption, and a liquor scam in which some DMK leaders were implicated.

Modi's critics in the south, however, believe the BJP wants to weaken federalism and their own powers. Notably, the ruling party is championing a “One Nation, One Election” model of holding national and state elections on one day every five years, rather than on a rolling basis, as is the case currently.

While the BJP has advocated the change for cost and efficiency reasons, opposition parties claim it would undermine the political autonomy of individual states. Stalin has called it an “attack on democracy”.

The regional tensions have awakened longer-running cultural complaints too. In Tamil Nadu, where most schoolchildren study Tamil — the state's official language — and English, the conflict has resurfaced as the DMK resists the BJP's push to introduce a “three-language policy” that would enforce the study of Hindi, the most widely spoken language of the north.

Tamil Nadu has a past history of secessionism in politics, and witnessed riots over the imposition of Hindi in the 1960s. New Delhi is now withholding education funds from the state in an effort to get its way.

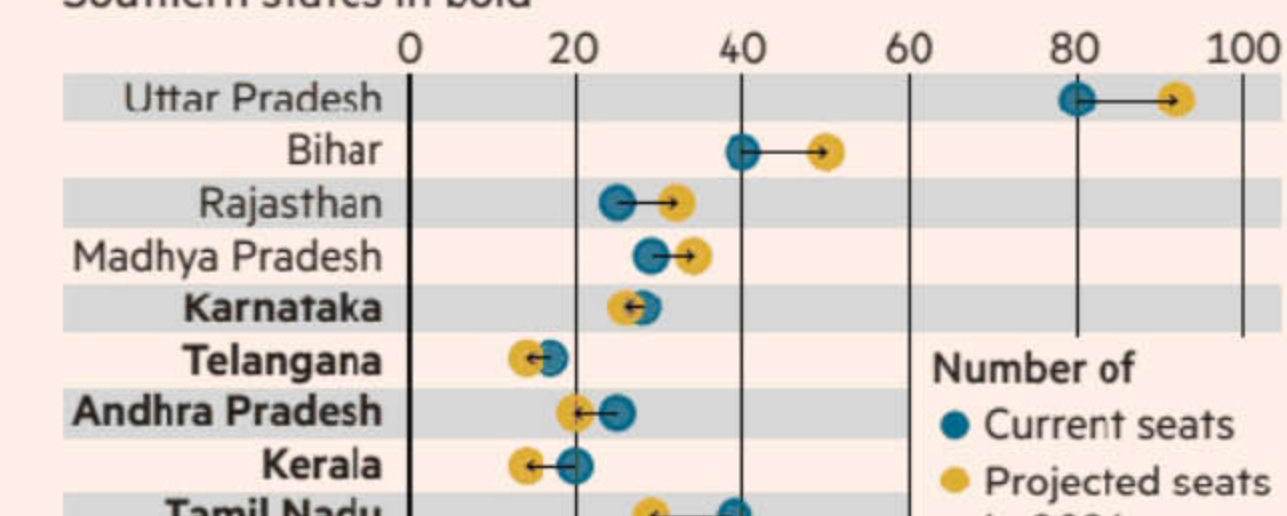
Further meetings of the “joint action committee” that convened in Chennai last month are planned in Hyderabad and other southern cities.

Southerners are insisting that their relative weight in parliament not be diluted — or that the issue be postponed for another 25 years.

“A middle ground must be maintained in the event of an increase in the overall tally of the parliament,” says Stalin. “Otherwise, let us freeze delimitation by another 25 years to undertake a massive consultation to ensure fairness and balance.”

If Lok Sabha seats are apportioned by population, the southern states stand to lose

Selected states that could gain or lose two or more seats, ranked by change in total number of seats
Southern states in bold



Source: Seat projection analysis by Shruti Rajagopalan of George Mason University and Maxwell Tabarok of Harvard University • The calculations are based on the authors' population projections and the assumption that the total number of Lok Sabha seats remains the same