



COVID-19 Crisis & Centre-State Relations

This article is based on [“COVID-19 Crisis and the Centre-State Relations”](#) which was published in EPW on 24/04/2021. It talks about the federal issues accentuated during the pandemic.

The history of federal relationship between the states and the centre in India can be exemplified by the terms like cooperative federalism, bargaining federalism or quasi-federalism.

However, in most of times, Indian federalism has been conflicting rather than cooperative, which can be reflected in, central government being discriminatory in its attitude towards the states with oppositional political background.

Recently, the tussle between Union & states over vaccine distribution, oxygen supply, availability of life-saving medicines, have not only bode well with the idea of cooperative federalism but also led to loss of many lives of the citizens.

Therefore, as Covid-19 demands unprecedented efforts to fight this pandemic, it is the duty of the government at every level to act in a concerted manner to save the country from this crisis.

Federal Issues Accentuated During the Pandemic

- **Case of Inconvenient Federalism:** On account of the Central government being the sole agency to regulate the production and distribution of the vaccine and oxygen, it was the exclusive responsibility of the centre to ensure adequate and judicious distribution.
 - However, many states are complaining of discrimination on distribution of the vaccination, supply of medicines, availability of oxygen, etc.
 - Moreover, the new vaccination policy, in the garb of relaxing controls, seeks to pass the burden on to the states as it makes the states responsible to procure vaccines directly from the producers and allows for differential price-setting.
 - This would not only add to the financial burdens of the states that are already squeezed but also could give rise to conflicts between different states.
- **Centralising Powers:** The centre had invoked the Epidemic Diseases Act and the Disaster Management Act, centralising the powers to deal with the pandemic.
 - However, state consultation is a legislative mandate cast upon the centre under these acts and binding COVID-19 guidelines are being issued by the Centre to the States.
- **Covid-19 Entering Rural India:** First wave of Covid-19 witnessed the mass exodus of the migrant workers into their home states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar.
 - Now, as these workers again had to reverse migrate to their home states, this has brought life of fears that Covid-19 entering into rural India.
 - Moreover, the sustenance of agricultural, industrial and construction activities would be difficult in the absence of a majority of the workforce in the backdrop of the lifting of restrictions, given these workers are going back to their hometowns.

- If both centre and state governments had taken lessons from the first wave, the devastating effects of this crisis could have been minimized.

Way Forward

- **Relaxing FRBM Norms:** The relaxation of limits imposed by the FRBM Act, regarding the market borrowings by the states, is a step in the right direction.
 - However, these borrowings can be backed by sovereign guarantee by the Union Government.
 - Moreover, the Union government can provide money to states so that they can take necessary action to deal with the crisis at the state level.
- **Real Cooperative Federalism:** A successful approach to tackle the crisis would still need Centre's intervention and guidance in a facilitative manner, where the Centre would communicate extensively the best practices across states, address the financial needs effectively, and leverage national expertise for scalable solutions.
- **Long Term Measures:** Management of disasters and emergencies (both natural and manmade) should be included in the List III (Concurrent List) of the Seventh Schedule.
 - Also, the government should consider making the Inter-State Council a permanent body.

Conclusion

The present situation suggests that one needs to go beyond the framework of cooperative federalism, which is basically based on the act of invoking and promoting participation of centre and the states in achieving the development of the nation as well as regions.

Drishti Mains Question

The framework of cooperative federalism should allow both the centre and the states to achieve all-round development of the nation without ignoring the development of the states. Comment.