UNIT 5   STATE AUTONOMY*

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5.0   OBJECTIVES

This unit deals with the concept and issues of state autonomy in a federal political setup and seeks to explain the response of the Indian State to the issue of state autonomy. After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- Explain the conception and basis for autonomy demonds;

- Discuss the main features of politics relating to State autonomy;

- Expain autonomy demands from regional political parties,

- Analyse the relationship between ethnicity, langugaue and the question of state autonomy.

5.1   INTRODUCTION

The relations between different levels of governing units – Centre and, States is known as the division of powers. Such arrangement is different from the relations among three organs of the nation-state – executive, judiciary and legislature, which is known as separation of powers. In the Constitution of India, the division of powers between the Centre and Statesis defined in the three Lists – the Union List, State List, and Concurrent List. You have read about these lists in unit 3. As you have read in Unit 3, the states have the power to legislate on the items mentioned in the State List. The constitutional scheme of division of power between the Centre and States provides certain autonomy to the federal units.

State autonomy means the authority and power of a state as a member of the Union of India to decide and execute independently certain functions as outlined by the Constitution. It implies that there is non-interference from the central government in the day-to-day affairsof the states. All the major decisions are taken according topowers conferred to the States in the Seventh Schedule of India.

5.2   AUTONOMY IN INDIAN FEDERALISM

Uneven and imbalanced development of different states and sub-regions within a state is a fundamental problem in Indian federalism. The unevenness in the levels of development has often generated a consciousness in the states, especially those less developed. They believe that their region remains backwards due to the discrimination by the Centre. In several instances, political leaders, activists and civil society organisations in these states suggest their State or region can develop if they are given autonomy to govern themselves. The rise of demand for autonomy is seen as an attempt to gain control over the resources and development process. In order to get autonomy, some of these states demand special status. The special category status means providing certain disadvantaged states with preferential treatment in central assistance and tax exemptions. It also includes establishing special development authority/boards to that region, reservation to the locals in jobs, establishing more educational institutions, health infrastructure like hospitals, medical colleges, incentives to industries etc. In a broader sense, autonomy demands are also associated with civil rights, democratic liberties movements, democratic upsurge, and devolution of power.

An additional tool at the disposal of the federal country to accommodate autonomy-deprived demographics is the tool of Panchayati Raj Institutions. With the enactment of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA), exclusion prevalent in scheduled areas could be alleviated by enabling grass-roots democracy in the scheduled areas. However, the political process of the country, run by party system and coalition politics, seems to overlook the importance of power devolution to the lowest level as a means of satisfying autonomy demands; rather, states remain the main actors in the discussion of autonomy. Due to the importance of states as the main unit enjoying autonomy, we see demands for state formation as the main agenda in many autonomy movements.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: i)   Use the Space given below for your answer.

ii)   Check your answers with the model answers given at the end of the unit.

1)   What is the meaning of State autonomy?

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5.3 DEMAND FOR AUTONOMY IN THE INDIAN STATES

Before the Fourth General Elations in 1967, the Centre-State relations were harmonious with the dominance of the Congress party as a ruling party bothat the Centre and in the States. These General elections were a turning point in the Indian political process and especially in federal relations. The Congress party lost the elections in nine states, and the Congress party's majority in Lok Sabha was also considerably reduced. This development gave a stimulus to the autonomy demands with regional parties coming to power in different states. The regional parties felt that the existing constitutional federal scheme neither respected the feelings of the states nor appreciated the needs and problems of states. Hence, the maximum autonomy of the states is demanded for the growth and development of states. From the 1970s to the 1990s, the Centre became somewhat restrained by regional partners in coalition politics. The quest for state autonomy remains an enduring issue in Indian federalism. The sub-sections below deal with some examples which have been made by regional political parties in India.

5.3.1 Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)- Rajamannar Committee

The regional parties raised the issue of autonomy and demanded more powers and fiscal resources. The DMK party in Tamilnadu, combining the Tamil linguistic and cultural nationalism, built a strong movement for autonomy. In the early 1960s, DMK campaigned for a separate independent sovereign state of Tamilnadu. Later the demand was extended to propose a separate Dravidnad with Tamilnadu, Andhra, Kerala and Karnataka. It was seen as a severe threat to the nation's integrity by the Center. With the increasing separatist tendencies in the country during the 1960s, the union government initiated the 16th Constitutional Amendment for curbing separatist tendencies. The Bill, which became Act, was also known as the Anti-secession Bill to prevent separatist and secessionist tendencies and preserve India's sovereignty and territorial integrity. In consequence of the amendment, the DMK also gradually softened its stand and dropped the demand for sovereign Dravidanad. However, time and again, DMK demanded greater autonomy of states.

In the year 1969, the government of Tamilnadu, led by the DMK party, appointed a three member committee under the chairmanship ofP.V.Rajamannar to study Center-state relations and suggest constitutional amendments to secure greater autonomy to the states. The other members of the committee were LakshmanaswamyMudaliar and P. Chandra Reddy. The Rajamannar Committee made some recommendations such as removing Article 356, dissolution the Planning Commission (At present modified as NITI Aayog) and making Finance Commission a permanent body, transferring some subjects to the State list from the Union and Concurrent list, and appointing high power committee for re-distribution of the subjects in the threelists.

5.3.2 Akali Dal -Anandpur Sahib Resolution

Shiromani Akali Dal, known as Akali Dal, is a regional party in Panjab with a strong base among the Sikhs in Punjab. Master Tara Singh, a Sikh political and

religious leader, was instrumental in organising the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabhandak Committee. Under the leadership of Tara Singh, Akali Dal demanded a sovereign state for Sikhs till the early 1960s. Under the Leadership of Sant Fateh Singh, several movements took place for Panjab Suba, a separate State for Panjabi speakers in India. He started a fast-unto-death for the demand of Panjab Suba. The Central Government accepted the demand for Panjab Suba. However, this did not satisfy all the Sikhs; the Shiromani Akali Dal passed a resolution for greater autonomy to states in the Batala conference in 1968. Again, in year October 1973, Akali Dal adopted a resolution containing both religious and political demands at a meeting held at Anandpur Sahib, popularly known as the Anandpur Sahib resolution. The Anandpur Sahib resolution demanded that the Center's powers be restricted only to defence, foreign affairs, communications, currency etc., and entire other powers should be vested in the states. Akali Dal leader Gurnam Singhmoved this resolution, and when he became the Chief Minister of Panjab, he invited DMK Leader Karunanidhi to Ludhiana to discuss autonomy to states. This duo is considered to lead the way in seeking greater autonomy for states.

5.3.3 West Bengal Memorandum

The Left Front Government in West Bengal had adopted a memorandum in 1977 seeking a rearrangement of Centre-State relations and submitted it to the Centre for consideration. The memorandum pointed out how the Center had made encroachments into powers of States, and the autonomy of States was gradually eroded.The West Bengal Memorandum stated that article 356 of the Constitution is the anti-federal instrument for undermining the federal system and the autonomy of States. Therefore, articles 356 and 357, which gives President the power to dissolve a State government or its Legislative assembly, should be deleted. Therefore, Constitution should be amended to include the word 'Federal' in the description of the Republic of India. Likewise, the word Union in the Constitution should be replaced by the word Federal.

5.3.4 Telugu Desam Party (TDP) –Vijayawada Conclave

The dominance of the Congress Party in the political history of Andhra Pradesh continued uninterrupted for three decades till it was upset by the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in the 1983 elections.The TDP succeeded in ending the Congress hegemony in Andhra Pradeshwithin a short time. The Telugu Desam Party was founded 29 March 1982by N.T. Rama Rao, a famous film star. He played the roles of Hindu mythological characters such as Lord Srirama, Krishna, Karna, etc. and as a moral figure who championed the cause of the weaker sections of society. The TDP has stressed the need for greater financial decentralisation and State autonomy by transferring more powers to States. It also demanded the abolition of the post of Governor. The TDP leader N.T. Rama Rao hosted opposition parties meeting at Vijayawada in May 1983. After the meeting, opposition leaders issueda joint statement endorsing the call made during the conclave of southern chief ministers in Bangalore organised by Ramakrishna Hegde to review Union-State relations.

5.3.5 National Conference- Srinagar Conference

In October 1983, around fifty leaders from seventeen political parties met in Srinagar Conclave hosted byFarooq Abdullah, the then Chief Minister of Jammu

and Kashmir state (which was converted into two Union Territories – Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh, on 5th August 2019). The Srinagar Conclave brought together parties like the DMK, TDP, AkaliDal, the Republican Party of India, the Assam Jatiyabadi Dal and National Conference, and the Left Parties. All the parties present were united by the cause of federalism and more autonomy to the States.

5.3.6 Naga National Council (NNC) And Mizo National Front (MNF)

During the 1950s and early 1960s the Nagas and Mizos demanding autonomy for their regions. Naga NationalCouncil (NNC) strongly advocated unlimited autonomy for Naga Hills. Under the leadership of A.Z Phizo, it demanded complete independence stating that Nagas always had distinct from the rest of India ethnically and culturally. Mizo National Front (MNF), like NNC, demanded the creation of an independent state of Mizoram under the leadership of Laldenga. For this purpose, MNF recruited young people and trained them in military operations.

5.4 CENTRE-STATE FINANCIAL RELATIONS-AUTONOMY

Lawrence Saez (2002)has remarked thatthe Constituent Assembly was inspired to favour a Unitary state for India due to the partition of India in 1947. It led to a more centrist tendency in the independent State, although it was federal in structure. A more significant role was assigned to the central government in the federal system.The Union list contains the most subjects in terms of jurisdiction and financial aspects,and the union Parliament also enjoys residuary powers. It strengthens the centripetal forces while weakening centrifugal forces. It has inevitable economic consequences, leading to the dependence of states on the Union government. Ronald L. Watts (1996) has explained that territorial social diversity and a great tendency of fragmentation exist simultaneously in India. Therefore, it is reasonable to maintain a strong federal government with authority to overturn secession attempts. The Union list has more powers and subjects related to financial matters than the states.As outlined in the State List and Concurrent list, states have insufficient financial resourcescompared with the Centre. It is also because residuary powers lie with the Centre. Consequently, the states are short of revenue resources and largely dependent on the Centre to implement specific public policies. The party ruling at the Centre can garner popularity at the state level by using its public policy, effectively utilising more financial resources, influencing voters, and determining the executive actions at the state level. It becomes a matter of contention between State and Centre, leads to demands of autonomy. Many committees and commissions have been constituted to resolve issues ofstate autonomy and strained areas of center-state relations.In Unit-3, you have already studied the Center-State relations, issues, and attempts to reformCenter-State relations.

5.5 DEMAND FOR POLITICAL AUTONOMY

The politics of regions and the emergence of regional parties as a reaction to the hegemony of the Congress party have shaped autonomy demands in India after

independence. The relative differences of cultural, economic, social and political circumstances in regions cause differential power relations with each other and theCenter.The emergence of working-class politics, the rise of socially marginalised groups in mainstream politics, peasant political class have led to various demands for political autonomy of states and regions.

A significant question in autonomy demands is environmental governance and control over natural resources. These movements can also coincide with demands of ethnic groups such as tribes, hill-dwelling communities,and different communities to have certain autonomy over village administration and customary practices. These demands have been accommodated through instruments of asymmetrical federalism by creating new states and unique acts such as Panchayats(Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996(PESA). You read about PESA in Unit-4.With the growth of liberal economy and capitalism, there is also a concern over the control of land and forest as a resource.These concerns are: first, states often find their autonomy eroded by giant corporations that support political elites. It also leads to a response at the state level involving greater demand for autonomy to conduct business and development-related activities. Secondly, with the onset of the capitalist economy, the dominance of traditional elites, such as landlords and local ruling groups, gets challenged by market forcesto demand regional autonomy. During 1967-79, the emergence of political parties such as Akalis in Punjab, the DravidaMunnetraKazhagam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu, the Bharatiya Kranti Dal (BKD) in Uttar Pradesh, Kulaks in U.P, Punjab, and Haryana, as well as a significant component of the Dravidian movement are examples of regional autonomy movements.

A significant factor responsible for the demand for autonomy, leading to the demand of separate states, has been the historical disparity in the development of regions and states.Some backward states are known as *"bimarustates"* (BIMARU), refer to the poor economic conditions within those states from the first letters of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh.These areas are principal contributors of raw materials for the country's industrial growth. Such states have often used the argument of "resource curse". The "resource curse"means a contradictory situation where a region underperforms economically, despite rich natural resources. This argument is usedto advocate fair treatmentto the less developed states within the federal arrangement.

The expansion of the market economy based on technical advancementhas led to the marginalisation of backward regions.Moreover, due to the weak governance in "*bimarurajya*" interest of raw material producing areas remains unprotected against the interests of private corporates.Therefore the demand for autonomy to institute local control over governance is often observed. For instance, the formation of the Jharkhand Area Autonomous Council (JAAC)was granted in 1995 by the then Bihar government.However, TheJharkhand region of Biharremained dissatisfied with the state government not sufficiently representingthe interestsof the region.Over the years, many commissions have been constituted to look into regions' demand for autonomy and create new state.

5.6 PLURAL SOCIETIES AND AUTONOMY QUESTION

Due to cultural and linguistic diversity in larger states, many organised groups emerged, having claims and counter-claims for effective administrationthrough accommodation of interests. The administrative challenge in front of the Union government in dealing with these claims is to institute the most effective ways to manage such accommodative arrangements. One of the arrangements that have been followed in India to accommodate the politics of various cultural groups in the federal arrangement is by making linguistic policies and state reorganisation. It is mainly used effectively for groups concentrated in a particular geographical location by giving provincial autonomy within a territory. However, granting autonomy is not completely effective in dealing with demands of cultural recognition because territories are rarely culturally homogenous. Usually, there are always smaller diverse groups residing in the area, especially in transition areas between countries and states not separated by natural frontiers. When the cultural construction of an identity group does not coincide with the political boundaries, it leads to political unrest.

To accommodate its population's cultural and ethnic aspirations, the state resorts to readjusting the boundaries of states/provinces following the regional cultural constructions of the people and devolving some autonomy to an authority instituted over that province. In an independent and democratic country such as India, it is not possible for the central government or Parliament to ignore the regional aspirations due to institutional as well as electoral factors since the legitimacy of a government in a democratic state depends significantly on the government's ability to respond appropriately towards aspirations of people. The broadening of democracy and the democratic upsurge of classesfor recognition as political entitieshas historically remained in mainstream politics. These groups are granted autonomyas an essential component of having a say in the policymaking and political process.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: i) Use the Space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your answers with the model answers given at the end of the unit.

1) What are the main features of state autonomy politics in India?

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5.7 ETHNICITY AND AUTONOMY QUESTION

Tribal groups in India are among significant ethnic groups sharing common characteristics – culture, customs, language, regions, economic interests, etc.The roots of the autonomy question among tribal regions go back to the pre-independence history of India. The regions identified as Backward Tracts under

British administration were further categorised as "Excluded" and "Partially Excluded" areas under the Government of India Act, 1935 and had been historically under the control of British administration governed by Governors, while the "Tribal Areas" were outside British India and enjoyed high levels of autonomy. All these regions were areas where tribal populations inhabited but were having different levels of autonomy. Post-independence, the autonomy of these regions has become an issue of great deliberation within the asymmetrical federal model. The demand for a separate Jharkhand state was first raised in 1929 in the Chhotanagpur plateau, populated by diverse tribal communities. The movement continued until the year 2000, when Chhatisgharh and Jharkhand were created. The Schedule VI of the Indian Constitution lays down provisionsconcerning the autonomy of tribal areas in the North-Eastern States. Nevertheless, there are constant conflicts due to competition between ethnic groups regarding the demand for autonomy.

5.8 LANGUAGE AND AUTONOMY

The debate for organising states based on language was raised in the Constituent Assembly. However, due to the bitter experience of India's partition on a religious basis the, linguistic basis of state reorganisation was perceived as a potential threat to the unity and integrity of the nation. However, the demand for the reorganisation of state boundaries on a linguistic basis was raised in someareas.The demand for linguistic states was based on the long-standing interaction between Congress leaders and regional political leaders.The regional leaders belived that linguistic states would be given to them once India became independent. As a result, the demand for a Telugu state arose, and AndhraPradeshwas created on 1st October, 1953 following the fast unto death by PottiSriramalu. Based on a similar understanding of regional leaders, many other linguistic provincial states' demandsarose, and States Reorganisation Commission (SRC) was instituted in 1953 to look into the matter. Based on recommendations of the Commission (1955) to organise states on a linguistic basis in Southern India, the State Reorganisation Act 1956 was passed by Parliament.

In the post-independence years, the levels of autonomy to its constituent states have been unequal. The Constitution of 1950 granted the highest level of autonomy to Part A and Part B states while, Part C and Part D states had significantly less autonomy or none at all. The States Reorganisation Commission (SRC) was formed in 1953 to look into various demands for new states. Based on the States Reorganisation Commission (1955) recommendations to organise states on a linguistic basis in Southern India, the State Reorganisation Act 1956 was passed by Parliament. It also replaced the A,B,C,and D type states with only States and Union Territories.

With the creation of provincialStates and Union Territories (UTs) another system of differential autonomy came into existence wherein the States were vested with more autonomy than the UTs. Creating UnionTerritories became an effective device in the North-Eastern region to resolve demands of autonomy.In the 1960s, Punjab, Maharastra and Gujarat were created, while Himachal Pradesh was upgraded to a state. The creation of these states clearly demonstrates the accommodation politics that followed autonomy demands inspired by linguistic and religious sentiments. Some unfulfilled demands of autonomy can be seen in the form of Gorkhaland, Vidharbha, Harit Pradesh etc. Some autonomy

movements saw fulfilment by the creation of the new states in 2000 Jharkhand, Uttarakhand, and Chhattisgarh.The creation of Uttarakhand can be seen as a culmination of the prolonged demand of the hill region of Uttar Pradesh.

Language can become a tool of dominance if the political system is overwhelmed by a particular linguistic group. Being an integral part of culture may lead to a perceived loss of control by other linguistic groups. It leads to a demand for recognition and a desire for autonomy in a linguistic region. It has also been true in the North-Eastern states, and various social, geopolitical, and historical factors influence such demand. Autonomy movements in the hills of North East led to the formation of seven states gradually. Nagaland became a state in 1963, Meghalaya became a state in 1972. Manipur and Tripura also became states, while Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram were first created as Union Territories and later upgraded to states in 1986. These states have a diverse schedule tribe population, and the autonomous district councils are vested with autonomy concerningspecific customary laws.

Check Your Progress 3

Note: i)   Use the Space given below for your answer.

ii)   Check your answers with the model answers given at the end of the unit.

1)   What is the role of language in state autonomy?

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5.9   LET US SUM UP

The discussion on state autonomy in India began in the pre-independence period when the British reorganised political units to ensure control over the region. The bitter experience of partition made constitution framers suspicious of centrifugal forces. The manipulativedivisionist policies of British rule made local communities suspicious of over-centralisation. This antagonism has been at the core of autonomy-related issues in state politics. Further, the hegemony of Congress for two decades after independence suppressed many regional aspirations and strained the state-center relationship. Attempts for unification by ignoring regional aspirations and identity issues led to autonomy demands.To deal with autonomy demands the Center used various methods such as granting autonomy through state reorganisation, new state formation, linguistic provincial states creation, autonomous local bodies, Union Territories.

Nevertheless, demands for state autonomy are ongoing in different parts of India. The main reasons are the financially impoverished states, centrally planned development, growth of the capitalist and industrialised market economy, linguistic sentiments, disparity of development among the regions, ethnicity, and the dominance of Centre. Innovative practices such as local PRIs self-governance

in Scheduled areas have not been very effective because states continue to be the main actors in the national politics, while autonomy through local self-governance remains in rhetoric only. With the emergence of new political elites and regional parties, autonomy politics has become aprominent phenomenon in state politics. Several regional parties constantly demand a relook into Centre-state relations for greater autonomy to states.

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5.11   ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

1)   Autonomy means the authority and power to decide and carry out certain functions independently without any control by a higher authority. It means non-interference from the Central Government in the day-to-day affairs of States. It also implies having control over financial resources. In a broader sense, autonomy is also associated with rights, democratic liberties, and devolution of powers to the States.

Check Your Progress 2

1)   One of the main features of demands for autonomy is Centre-State financial relations.It is the fight for control over revenue resources. Because of the

imbalanced financial division of powers between the Centre and states, the states become resource-starved and dependent on the Centre. Apart from financial resources, state autonomy movements have also political dimensions—the emergence of regional parties as a reaction to the hegemony of the Center. The process of centralisation of political power leads to the demands for State autonomy.

Check Your Progress 3

1) The Indian society is highly diverse and pluralistic, with various cultural, ethnic and linguistic communities with distinctive cultures and dialects. This diversity makes them assert their identity as a separate entity. Language becomesa tool of dominance when a particular linguistic group weighs down the political system. It leads to a demand for autonomy in a linguistic region. For example, the demand for a separate state for Telugu speaking people crop up in Telugu speaking Andhra region and against the Tamil dominance;as a result,a linguistic provincial State was created. Many other linguistic states demands came up based on a similar line. The States Reorganisation Commission (SRC) was formed in 1953 to look into the matter.