



ASIA MAIOR

Vol. XXX / 2019

Asia in 2019: Escalating international tensions and authoritarian involution

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Nicola Mocci
Filippo Boni

viella

A large, faint, light-colored mandala graphic is positioned on the right side of the cover, partially overlapping the text area. It features intricate geometric and floral patterns.

CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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ISBN 978-88-3313-490-1 (Paper) ISBN 978-88-3313-491-8 (Online)

ISSN 2385-2526 (Paper) ISSN 2612-6680 (Online)

Annual journal - Vol. XXX, 2019

This journal is published jointly by the think tank Asia Maior (Associazione Asia Maior) & the CSPE - Centro Studi per i Popoli extra-europei «Cesare Bonaccossa», University of Pavia

Asia Maior: The Journal of the Italian Think Tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989 is an open-access journal, whose issues and single articles can be freely downloaded from the think tank webpage: www.asiamaior.org.

The reference year is the one on which the analyses of the volume are focused. Each *Asia Maior* volume is always published in the year following the one indicated on the cover

Paper version	Italy	€ 50.00	Abroad	€ 65.00
Subscription	abbonamenti@viella.it		www.viella.it	

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When this Asia Maior issue was finalized and the Covid-19 pandemic raged throughout the world, Kian Zaccara, Greta Maiorano and Giulio Santi, all children of Asia Maior authors (Luciano Zaccara, Diego Maiorano and Silvia Menegazzi), were born. We (the Asia Maior editors) have seen that as a manifestation of Life, reasserting itself in front of Thanatos. It is for this reason that we dedicate this issue to Kian, Greta and Giulio, with the fond hope that they will live in a better world than the one devastated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

FEDERALISM IN INDIA:
QUESTIONS ABOUT STATE CAPACITY AND NATIONAL POLICY

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Louise Tillin, *Indian Federalism*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2019, 184 pp. (ISBN 978-0-19-949561-0).

This is an indispensable introduction to the phenomenon of Indian federalism. The drafters of the constitution made no mention of federalism; in the tragic circumstances of partition they preferred an explicitly strong Union. But trends in subsequent practice have been visibly federal. As the author makes clear, they have also been anything but linear. A description in the book from a serving Union minister is apt: «Comprehensive, Cooperative, Collaborative, Competitive, Consensual and Compassionate Federalism». Readers will find that even such a wide ranging characterisation is by no means exhaustive.

The book has four main strands: India's federal model and constitutional design; federalism and diversity; centre-state relations; and federalism and the economy. Examination of these strands raises significant questions about state capacity and approaches to the development and implementation of authoritative national policy.

The book starts with an insightful account of the impacts of the extensive concurrent central and state responsibilities set out in the constitution. The sharing of responsibilities was intended to encourage both levels to work together. Measures such as the design of the all India civil service cadres, in which officials are allocated to particular states but also available to be called to the centre, were intended to reinforce links between levels of government.

The approach is described as «cooperative federalism». But as other federations have also found, cooperation depends on more than constitutional design. A second dimension of «cooperative federalism» includes measures to complement constitutional design by regulating vertical and horizontal interaction between units of government. The book's exploration of this dimension includes the roles of the former Planning Commission in setting national goals, approaches of the periodic Finance Commissions in managing fiscal federalism, and the management of linguistic and other diversity by adjusting state borders.

However, readers familiar with intergovernmental relations in other federations will notice an absence. The Inter-State Council, GST Council and NITI Aayog, each with heavy-weight representatives from both levels of government, flit through the narrative like wraiths. The reason is that

the latter two are still feeling their way and the Inter-State Council, set up pursuant to the constitution by a short lived non-Congress government, has rarely had sustained political support.

It is argued persuasively that for much of the time the most influential agent of coordination has been the party system. When the governing party in the centre holds sway also in many of the states, as Congress did for many years, intergovernmental relations has tended to be handled as an internal party matter. But as the book shows, too firm a hand at the centre can promote defection in the regions. This was a factor in the decline of the Congress Party. The prominence of central control in the BJP together with its patchy performance in recent state elections make questions about the efficacy of the party system in federal coordination of continuing relevance. In these circumstances a trend to watch out for will be the emergence of one or more of the bodies mentioned above as authoritative forums for inter-governmental negotiation.

The chapter on federalism and the economy brings into sharp relief the sheer variety of trends and tensions in federal practice. In contrast to the rest of the book it is unruly. However this reflects no discredit on the author. The subject matter is hard to pin down. Instances of centralisation, devolution, liberalisation, bureaucratic regulation, incentives, standard setting, evaluation, rankings, coercion, competition, negotiation, rent seeking, bypassing, backflips and recourse to the courts are prominent in patterns that do not stand still.

Liberalisation of industrial licensing by the centre in the 1990s has not been followed by policy directions in which both levels of government have a stake. Nor have experiments in which states go their own way proved sustainable. Although the states have responsibilities for topics critical for social and economic development, the centre continues to promulgate schemes which the states are supposed to implement. However, as the author tellingly demonstrates, while states have limited opportunities and capability to influence central schemes they retain the ability to «interpret» how they go about implementation. Issues of diversity and asymmetry elided in New Delhi tend to re-emerge in how officials apply and citizens experience centrally mandated policy in the regions.

Two approaches to the gap between formulation and implementation stand out. One, is to redouble efforts to specify, control and evaluate what state administrations do. This is often visible in the initiatives of central ministries and authorities. Another is to bypass state administrations by using digital technology to deliver benefits direct to citizens. The Modi government has made extensive use of this approach. However other conclusions are also possible. They include rethinking policy making so that the people in the states who have to implement decisions have a say in expected results and how they are to be achieved. They include also providing opportunities for citizens and stakeholders to contribute to how policy is made.

The analysis in the book suggests that for such conclusions to be drawn there would have to be radical departures from existing federal practice. However the book's probing of questions of state capacity and approaches to national policy suggests also that the case for such departures cannot be ignored.