

Covid-19 and Indian Federalism with Professor V. N. Alok on 15 December 2020

India is the most populated, and potentially the most diverse federal country in the world. With 1.3 billion inhabitants, 22 official languages and over 200 religions, it has nevertheless managed to remain a federal democracy since independence in 1948. This was achieved through a clear of competences between the Union and the 28 States, as well as through the application of additional diversity management mechanisms, such as allowing the creation of new States and recognising new languages as official at a regional level. When the Covid-19 pandemic hit India at the end of January 2020, it became quickly obvious that the country was ill prepared to deal with such a pandemic. There was a lack of strategic planning on how to address this health crisis, and basic protective equipment, including sanitizers, were lacking across the country. What is more, with nearly 10 million migrant workers across India, the announcement by the government of a move towards a general lockdown had severe social consequences. The government of prime minister Narendra Modi activated the following legal acts in order to deal with the emerging health crisis: (1) The Disaster Management Act, 2005 (Used for graded lockdowns and other advisories); (2) The Epidemic Act, 1897 (Used to address health aspects and security of health workers; (3) and the Indian Penal Code, 1860 (Used to charge people violating lockdown orders). In addition, an economic package in the

size of 10% of India's GDP was developed by the government and the Central Bank of India in order to support businesses and citizens throughout the pandemic. In addition, additional measures were taken by the States, many of which were seen as quicker and more efficient than the measures of the central government.

Yet, India remains one of the most affected countries of the coronavirus pandemic. Not only has the country seen a tremendous loss of life, but its economy has shrunk substantially, as a result of the lockdown as well as a complete breakdown of the tourism and hospitality industries in 2020. The country has seen its debt level increase enormously, and questions over the financial sustainability of India will become more important. Further, the current crisis has demonstrated that a reform of the current disaster management act is needed, to separate global pandemics and health crises from other disasters such as earthquakes and flooding. In some states, such as Kerala, Odisha and Rajasthan local task forces have played an important role in managing the health and social impacts of the crisis. Nevertheless, further financial and political decisions will be needed. Discussions about a new health emergency law, as well as a substantial increase in health spending across India are required in order to deal with the ongoing crisis and prepare the country for any future pandemic or other health emergency.

Soeren Keil, 50 Shades of Federalism