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## A Republic of Regional Egos

BY INVITATION

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India has once again discovered its oldest political hobby: drawing lines across itself. The argument is familiar. The North fears loss of political dominance. The South fears punishment for having governed itself better.

Reading *The Paradox of India's North-South Divide* by Samuel Paul and Kala Seetharam Sridhar, I was reminded that nations rarely collapse because of their differences. They decline because they become prisoners of the stories they tell about those differences. Having spent four decades teaching and working across India—from Lucknow in the North, to Kolkata in the East, Pune in the West, and Kozhikode in the South—I have learnt that places shape our perspectives, but people shape their own destinies. Geography changes. Human vanity does not. Every region quietly believes it represents the best of India. Travel abroad only sharpens the absurdity of this habit. Japan worships punctuality with almost religious devotion. Italy has elevated leisure into civilisation. America glorifies the restless individual; Scandinavia quietly perfects collective trust and reduces the need for surveillance. The wise traveller

returns home with fewer opinions and more questions.

I notice a similar tendency in organisations. Departments compete, functions defend their territories, and meetings become miniature border disputes. Yet the best institutions succeed when marketing learns from finance, finance listens to operations, and everyone eventually discovers that customers do not care about internal rivalries. Nations are not very different. Mature societies do not waste their energy asking who is superior. They borrow good ideas from one another without embarrassment.

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India, however, prefers emotional accounting when it comes to the North-South divide. The real question before India is not whether the North resembles the South, or whether the South should apologise for succeeding. The question is whether each possesses the humility to borrow from the other. Civilisations decay not because they stop producing wealth. They decay because they no longer spark curiosity. Certainty is often the first symptom of decline. The South did not become more prosperous because history smiled upon it. It invested for decades in schools before stadiums, in public health before political spectacle, in local institutions

before personality cults. Literacy was not a cultural ornament. It became economic infrastructure. Human capital created financial capital. This is not ideology. It is arithmetic. The North possesses strengths that statistical tables rarely capture. Its entrepreneurial instinct, demographic confidence, commercial resilience, and astonishing capacity to survive chaos, remain among India's greatest national assets. The East continues to produce intellectual restlessness disproportionate to its economic weight. The West has shown how commerce can create institutional confidence.

Triumphalism is as dangerous as neglect. Every region possesses a fragment of India's future. The tragedy is that each insists on marketing its fragment as the whole. As India approaches the centenary of Independence in 2047, we speak confidently of becoming a five-trillion or ten-trillion-dollar economy. Economic ambition is necessary. Civilisational ambition is harder. It demands that we become a country where ideas travel more freely than prejudices; where excellence is copied instead of resented; where success in one state becomes a national template rather than a regional grievance.

India has never been a finished argument. It has always been an unfinished conversation. The day the North learns without insecurity, the South teaches without superiority, the East questions without nostalgia, and the West prospers without arrogance, the compass will finally stop dividing us.

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