



The Concept of Symmetry and Asymmetry in Federalism with a brief sketch of Economic Federalism

Muhammad Tariq*

Abstract *Asymmetrical federalism is an important concept in the constitutions of Belgium, Canada, Germany and India. This concept has recently given way to a much more sustained intellectual inquiry of philosophical, theoretical, and empirical foundations. It incorporates two different connotations; to some it signifies a positive instrument designed to strengthen the federal values while to others, it carries the meaning of threat and danger to the stability of the state. In symmetry each state is a miniature reflection of the whole political system, the question of differences on any major issue does not arise. Since there is always an equal representation of the states in the spheres of the government, it does not allow any room for special social, economic, or political privileges. The paper also dilates on economic federalism under centralized and decentralized forms within the parameters of three constitutional indicators.*

Key Words: Symmetry, Asymmetry, Federalism, Centrifugal, Centripetal, Economics

JEL Classification:

Introduction

Symmetry and Asymmetry are two important aspects of federalism that convey the idea of two different approaches in the field of Political Science. The former signifies the extent to which the federating units participate in the affairs of the federation and the considerations more or less common to the federal system. The latter connotes the meaning in which the constituent units don't contribute towards sharing in the common texture ([Tarleton, 1965](#)). Both concepts carry totally opposite connotations in the realm of federalism. This concept takes into consideration a much more sustained intellectual depth of philosophy, theory and empiricism regardless of whether the relationship of the state is based on symmetry or asymmetry. It addresses the question of partaking of the values of social, cultural, economic and political features of the federal system of which it is a part ([Burgess, 2006](#)). It carries double meanings; to some it refers to a positive device designed for strengthening and supporting the federal values while at the same time to others it represents threat and danger to weaken the stability and integrity of the state. Regardless of being harmful or beneficial, it carries a conceptual distinction between federalism and federation. Asymmetry is a normative theory in the realm of federalism which plays a very significant role in determining the intergovernmental relations. The concept of asymmetry mostly concerns 'what ought to be' or bases its foundations on the future predictions of the term. The concept of symmetry makes a

* School Teacher, Elementary & Secondary Education Department District Mardan, KP, Pakistan. Email: tariqawkum252@gmail.com

clear distinction from that of the asymmetry in so far as the sharing of the component units is concerned in the affairs of the federal government.

The Concepts of Symmetry and Asymmetry

Tarleton's article of 'Theoretical Speculation' in 1965 appeared in the period of great turbulence. This period is also known as 'the behavioral revolution' whereby people asked new questions about human behavior, present new hypothesis, and create new concepts and test them as a criterion for the determination of their intellectual validity. This approach of inquisitiveness not only dilated upon the complexity of federalism but also pondered over the entire subject area as a whole. People got encouraged in getting their motivation towards the anatomic study of federalism and related complexities as it was an age of Renaissance in social sciences. In his Article, he refers to symmetry whereby the constituent units provide their share in the state of affairs which helps in contributing towards federalism as a whole (Tarleton, 1965). This definition was further elaborated which adds, the extent of conventionality and consistency in conformity to each political unit of the system as a whole and other component units (Tarleton, 1965). Livingston explains Tarleton's view by saying that 'the specific elements' and 'the degree of symmetry' in the relations of a single member state to 'the system and to other states and the total pattern of federalism throughout the system' are equally important in assessing 'the quality of federalism' (Tarleton, 1965). An ideal symmetrical system must show that it is the miniature reflection of the entire system and leaves no room for special peculiarities of different classes such as socio-economic, socio-political or individually social class, economic class or political class since this will lead to special forms of depiction and fortification (Tarleton, 1965). In the symmetrical federalism, the component units must show resemblance to the central government in the formation of structure, exercise of powers and authority. It leaves no room for special peculiarities for any class or unit. Each component unit reflects the whole system on a smaller scale to make it easier for the understanding of the whole system of federalism. For the proper understanding of the terms of both symmetrical and asymmetrical federalism, it is necessary to describe both of them in the form of models.

The Symmetrical Model

An ideal symmetrical model is one which comprises political units constituting equality in terms of territorial area and inhabitants, semblance in economic condition, social assemblage, and various institutions of the state concerning politics. This model is based on the replication of each of the separate political unit as a minuscule manifestation of the entire political system. Each state shows concerns for the solution of the problems of the same nature by developing the same type of potential. This model disallows of significant differences among the states regarding the important issues which fall under the direct domain of the state. Similarly, the question of disagreement of opinion on any major issue does not arise since this approach believes in the complete coherence of the various institutions of the state. It stands for complete cohesion of all the units of federation and discourages fragmentation and segmentation with regard to any issue of utmost importance.

This model presents a form of government in which component units are likely to show the same allegiance to the state. Similarly, the distribution of power between the center and the federating units would be the same everywhere in federation. No state

would feel a sense of alienation and discrimination where one or more states would be given special privileges. This would result in a system of equality and understanding between the central government and the constituent units and among the various units of the federation. All the federating units would have equal representation in the central legislature by showing their share up for the activities of the federal government so as to distribute their resources among the units in a just and harmonious way ([Tillin, 2007](#)).

Since this model believes in the equal representation of the federating units in the sphere of governmental activities, there would not be special social, economic or political peculiarities that may make demand for special forms of representation and security. Autonomous political existence grows into a self-explanatory agreement as political liabilities allowed to local governments develop into the permanent characteristics of the prevailing political ideology. The central jurisdiction remains confined to concern itself to those problems which are either common to the federal system or requiring system-wide concentration and resources for resolution of the issues.

The Asymmetrical Model

An asymmetric model comprises political units that correspond to differences of interest, character, and the structural composition that exist within the whole society ([Bolaji, 2010](#)). In such a system, the diversities in the larger society express their political representation through the system of local government having varying degrees of autonomy and power. Livingston, also shares the same view by stating that a government based on the doctrine of asymmetry is that one where all the political units show close correspondence to the real social federalism falling within its jurisdiction. This model presents the constituent units in a way that will have the exceptional characteristics or set of characteristics having a particular individuality in significant ways.

Asymmetrical federalism is of two types, *de facto* and *de jure* federation (Berg, 2007). The former is the type of political asymmetry which emerges from the cultural, social, political, and economic essentials as size of population and concentration of wealth. This leads to the *de jure* aspect of asymmetrical federalism when the federating units gain inequalities in power and function under the constitutional structure due to population, area, economic, social, and cultural differences in the natural structure ([Burgess & Gress, 1999](#)). The asymmetry arising in case of constitutional inequalities is called *de jure* constitutional asymmetry. It is through this type of federalism that the constitution permits unequal powers to the federating units, embodied in the framework of constitutionality and legality while treating the federating units in a different way as per the existing law ([Zheng, 2006](#)). Ronald L. Watts describes the difference between the *de facto* and *de jure* asymmetry in these lines, “Two kinds of asymmetry; one, which is characteristic of all federations and might be described as political asymmetries, arises from the impact of cultural, economic, social and political conditions; the other, which exists in some but not all federations, and which might be labeled constitutional asymmetry, relates specifically to the degree to which powers assigned to regional units by constitution of the federation are not uniform” (WATTS Comparing Federal Systems).

The concept of asymmetry is not a new phenomenon in federalism; it has always been there in the constitutional writing of the federations. The sole aim main of asymmetry is to bring unity among the units and between the center and the federating units without ignoring the diversities of different types among units for acquiring

political stability. So, asymmetry is used as a unifying force between the center and federating units without ignoring the diversities of the various units.

On the basis of the above discussion over the symmetrical and asymmetrical models of federalism, the following points of differentiation can be pointed out; (i) symmetry refers to the extent to which constituent units in the federal state share common features while in asymmetric models they do not share any common features (Tarleton, 1965). This description fits in the traditional or classical approach of federalism in which the two important incorporating cardinal principles are 'coordination' and independence'. (ii) Another point of differentiation is that symmetry is a substitute term for equality while asymmetry is synonymous with inequality ([Leary, 2011](#)). In this perspective, symmetry is more convenient for the existence of federation as it provides coverage for all the federating units and substantiates equality among the federating units in the distribution of powers. This also supports the view that a harmonious federation cannot be developed if the system is asymmetric to a great extent. In other words, asymmetry stands for the disunity of the federating units or even of separation of federating units ([Zwiling, Kossler, Requejo, Nagel, & Dosenrode, 2009](#), [2013](#)). It is also significant to note that symmetry may be linked to the uni-national entities and to their processes of nation building by the traditional federal theory ([Roqueio, 2001](#)).

Regulating the relations between the central government and the component units of the federation is an important aspect of federalism ([Tariq, 2018](#)). This can be described in three different ways; the vertical dimension, the horizontal dimension and the sectoral dimension. Sometimes a fourth dimension can also be added in the shape of formal and informal dimensions. Each dimension presents the inter-governmental relations in its own way.

Vertical Dimension

This model describes the relations between two sets of government in a vertical way; the center and the component units in a well organized manner. It uses two different terminologies for both the unitary and the federal form of governments. In the former case, they are termed as the governments at the national level and the local level, while in the latter case they are described as the federal government and the federating units ([Phillimore, 2013](#)). Even in the federal form of governments, the component units are given different names, for example in Australian, Indian and the United States, they are termed as the 'States', in Canada and Pakistan, they are called 'Provinces' in Germany they are known as 'Lander' while in the case of Switzerland, they are termed as the 'Cantons'. Not all federations need to have two levels of government. Some countries have different tiers of government, for example, China has four tiers of government comprising the central, the provincial, the county, and the township, while a fifth-tier has been introduced between the provincial and county level. Similarly, the structure of Vietnam's government is based on the principles of four levels of the government; comprising the central, the provincial, the district and the commune. In such a type of government, the center may be responsible for dealing with all the component units, a few or just one, depending on the issue. Here, the intergovernmental relations may be bilateral or multilateral depending upon the nature of the government. It is necessary that all the component units may be treated on equal terms by the central

government, which signifies the view that asymmetry, is possible and common ([Watts, 2008](#)).

As has been pointed out, the federal form of government may have three or more tiers of the government as in the case of Australia and Vietnam. But the main focus of the intergovernmental relations is between the center and the federating units ([Fenna, 2012](#)). Local governments mostly owe their establishment under the legislation of the state government and are termed as the formation of the same. The local governments are popularly elected and are responsible to the state government. The powers and functions of the state government are supreme over the powers and functions of the local governments.

Horizontal Dimension

The horizontal dimension of intergovernmental relations can represent itself in many forms and may take into account some or all of the component units. Normally such relations may emerge among the component units of the federation and concern the geographic trans-border issues such as rivers, transportation, general excise duty, and service provision ([Phillimore, 2013](#)). In case of any inconsistency or deadlock between the constituent units on matters of common importance, joint committees from amongst the leaders of the constituent units are usually formed to deal with issues that do not fall in the purview of the central government. Even here, matters of controversy are decided by the representatives of the units and not by the center ([Tariq, 2018](#)). These joint committees even act as pressure groups upon the powers of the center while dealing with issues that are of joint significance. Such committees have their existence in the countries of Canada and the United States while the existence of these committees in the Australian federation is not as common as in the former cases. But it is also an important feature of the Australian federation that can result in the formation of alliances among the smaller states or among the resource-based jurisdictions ([Phillimore, 2013](#)).

Sector Dimension

The third dimension of intergovernmental relations in the federal form of government is the sector dimension. In the United States it is called, 'picket fence federalism' which dilates upon the fact that each sector of the government remains concerned with its respective intergovernmental functions and human resources ([Radin, 2102](#)). The Australian federation is the best example where it finds its manifestation through the establishment of Councils of Minister comprising the ministers both at the federal and state level officials ([Council of Australian Governments, 2013](#)). The capacity, rate of recurrence and application of interface among the various policy sectors can vary depending upon the dependence of states in matters of finance, powers of constitutional legacy, managerial know-how and technical knowledge. It also connotes the competency and political significance of the issues and the extent of trust which is shown by each level of the government within the domain of the community concerning the specified policy area ([Phillimore, 2013](#)).

Formal and Informal Dimension of Asymmetry

Formal dimensions of intergovernmental relations may include the constitutions,

statutes, or by way of non-statutory institutions, agreement and processes. Informal intergovernmental relations can be observed more difficultly while equal importance like the formal mechanism. It is the informal mechanism that usually holds the system together. Besides, verbal rules and regulations, conventional usages and principles have great relevance and significance in the usefulness and regulations of the relations at the level of the intergovernmental domain ([Harwood & Phillimore, 2012](#)). The cases of Australia, Canada and the United States show that constitutions have very little to do with the intergovernmental relations between center and the constituent units. The outcome of this is the coordinate government. The cases of federations that have recently been emerged comprising Germany, India and South Africa have embarked upon the creation of a new dimension known as the concurrency that promotes better results in establishing intergovernmental relations and more productive outcomes ([Poirrer & Saunders, 2010](#)). The presence of the explicit principles, in some federations helps in governing the character of the intergovernmental relations between the center and the federating units which ultimately result in avoiding the conflict, opportunism, coercion and reduction of tension ([Wanna, Phillimore, & Harwood, 2009](#)).

Preconditions for Asymmetry

Asymmetry occurs as a result of combination of cultural, economic, social, and political factors that affect the power and influence of the constituent units ([Watts, 2005](#)). A few preconditions have been pointed out by both Watts and Burgess, which are a set of objective empirical criteria serving to classify various features leading to asymmetry. Michael Burgess refers to two categories of preconditions, socio-economic and cultural-ideological. More specific preconditions can be found under these two headings ([Burgess & Gress, 1999](#)). These are given below;

Political Cultures and Traditions

This focuses on the habits or customs reflecting a particular culture and its traditions that bear a direct stamp on the way a polity functions on the basis of philosophy, politics and legal perspective irrespective of any creed, religion, cultural perspective, language and ethnicity. These factors play an important role in the formation of federalism and are called the cultural factors. Their main function is to work for the resolution of regional disparities and providing subsistence opportunities for the people.

Social Cleavages

A social cleavage is a very broader term and covers such cultural factors as religion, language, and ethno-nationalistic pluralism. This social pluralism varies among the federations: the constellation of cleavage patterns is a constantly moving, shifting matrix of complex interlink-ages. The legitimacy and overall political stability of the federation depend upon the interplay of these forces. It is on account of these forces that a federation functions harmoniously and vividly as a result of the interplay of these forces. If these factors work in the same direction then the product is a sound federation while in case of disjoint nature, the result will be a loose federation.

Territoriality

It encompasses the way politics is affected by the space and by relationship between

different areas. The cleavage territoriality includes center-periphery relationship, urban-rural contacts and the strains and tensions associated with metropolitan developments. In a true federation there must be soundness and harmony of relations between the inhabitants of people residing in different territories.

Socio-Economic Factors

This refers to economic disparities between the various component units of the federation. The needs, requirements and expectations arising from these disparities also fall within the ambit of this precondition. Economic disparity is one of the major causes of the disintegration of the federation. The case of East Pakistan, now Bangla Desh may be taken as a good example of this category. The absence of economic disparity may result in the soundness of a good federation where all the component units will have a due share in all the resources of the country irrespective of geographic location and production of the resources.

Demographic factors

This factor is mainly objective in nature but affects the overall structure of the federation as the economies of the center and the federating units are affected by it. Many factors contribute towards the demographic factor such as the rate of fertility, patterns of immigration and labor market structures. Equally important is the issue of representation since the demographic factor may cause unequal representation of citizens throughout the federation ([Funk, 2010](#)).

Economic Federalism

Economic federalism is an important aspect of federalism in which the primary task of the government is to solve the problems related to the collapse of the private markets by satisfying the demands of citizens for the provision of goods and supply. The collapse of markets emerges whenever joint venture is required for ensuring the availability of goods and services at the lowest cost. This may include the example when all goods in case of sharing a fixed resource are efficient, as with the theory of public goods (Samuelson, 2015) or where one competitor generates external benefit at the cost of others ([Inman & Rubinfeld, 2014](#)).

The most important function of economic federalism is to provide resources for addressing the collapse and failure of the market mechanism. For the realization of this provision, the perspective of economic efficiency helps in determining the level of government which may be best suited for managing the functions of the government. This will maintain a balance between the decentralized and centralized governments as per the parameters of three constitutional decisions. Firstly, the partition decision caters for dividing the single citizenry into states or localities. Secondly, the establishment of a national government based on the representation of each state or locality through elected representatives, will help in restoring the collapsed market economy. In such a case, the elected representatives decide about the representation of the states or local units. Much depends on the constitutional provision of the federation as it may allow a single person nationally elected such as the president or it may do so by allowing each local government or state to be represented through a national assembly or legislature (Bagnoli & McKee, 1991). Thirdly, the assignment decision helps in allocating the final

political responsibility for policy choices to either the president or legislature of the central government or to the respective local governments.

It is very important to mention that the essential federalist structure of the government is defined by these three constitutional decisions. For these, the three alternative choices may be the economic federalism, cooperative federalism and democratic federalism. The economic federalism provides two dimensions for the economic efficiency ([Inmam & Rubinfeld, 2014](#)). The inter-jurisdictional efficiency believes in the appropriate allocation of resources and individual among different jurisdictions. It is achieved when the public activities of these interacting governments cater to the collective demands of the individuals at minimum cost. The choice of public activities satisfying the collective demands within a particular jurisdiction is the prerequisite for inter-jurisdictional efficiency. Thus, appropriate allocation of individuals and other resources among different jurisdictions are the two cardinal principles economic federalism.

Economic federalism works for the collective betterment of the individuals by safeguarding the market from being collapsed. The most significant function of this is to help survive the market mechanism through mutual cooperation. Surviving market mechanism and solving the problems of the individuals under the centralized and decentralized federalism can be done in three ways. The first one aims at partition decision that divides the individual on the basis of identity of the state or the locality. The second one aims at the creation of an elected government based on the representation of either single representative or collective legislature as in the form of national assembly. The third one takes into consideration the assignment decision of policy preferences by allocating it to either the president or respective legislature whether central or local.

Conclusion

Asymmetry is a theory of federalism that plays a significant role in the intergovernmental relations between the center and the component units. It finds its expression in the constitutions of Canada, Belgium, Germany and India. Tarleton is said to be the founder of asymmetrical federalism in social sciences. The symmetrical federalism refers equality in terms of territorial area and population, similarity in the economic features, conditions of climate, patterns of culture, grouping of people on societal basis and political institutions. Since in the symmetry each state refers to the miniature reflection of the whole political system, there would be no differences among the states on major issues. In this system, each state maintains the same relationship to the center and hence same relationship gets established among the states. So, it believes in the equal representation of the component units in all the spheres of the government.

An Asymmetrical system is one where the local governments play an important role in the formation of the federation. It is through them that the federations find their political expression having varying degree of autonomous nature and power. In this system, political institutions correspond to the real social federalism beneath them. It can be categorized as *de facto* asymmetry and *de jure* asymmetry. The former refers to political condition emerging from cultural, social, political, and economic essentials such as size of population and wealth- concentration. The latter refers to asymmetry when the federating units gain inequalities in power and function under the constitutional

structure due to population, area, economic, social, and cultural differences in the natural structure. Asymmetry is very important in bringing unity among the units and between the center and component units without ignoring the element of diversity which is meant for acquiring political stability. Intergovernmental relations between the center and the federating units can better be explained in three different dimensions; the vertical model, the horizontal model and the sector model. The vertical model discusses the relations between the center and the federating units in a harmonious way. In some cases, the system shows its uniqueness of having four or five tiers-system but those states are also dealt with through vertical model. The horizontal model describes the relations among the component units of the federations. In the sector model, each policy sector concentrates on having its own governmental network and personnel. Formal and informal is another dimension for describing intergovernmental relations. The formal dimension comprises the constitutions, statutes, non-statutory institutions, arguments and processes that govern the relations between the center and federating units and among the various units of the federations.

As far as economic federalism is concerned, it believes in the primacy of solving the problems related to the failure and collapse of private market mechanism. Its important function is to take measures for the survival of market mechanisms through two cardinal principles of appropriate allocation of resources and individual among different jurisdictions. Economic federalism is an important aspect of federalism that helps in determining the market mechanism of country. It caters to the survival of the market mechanism through various measures and adopting policies that align with the interest and benefit of the local population.

References

- Roqueio, F. (2001). 'Federalism and the Quality of Democracy in Plurinational Contexts: Present Shortcomings and Possible Improvements' Paper prepared for the ECPR Joint Session of Workshops 2001. Workshops: Centres and Peripheries in a Chicago World 26, 12.
- Bolaji. (2010). Shari'ah in Northern Nigeria in the light of Asymmetrical Federalism. *The Journal of Federalism* , 40 (1), 114-135.
- Burgess, M. (2006). *Comparative federalism: theory and practice*. New York : Routledge 290 Madison Ave, New York NY 10016.
- Burgess, M., & Gress, F. (1999). "Symmetry and Asymmetry Revisited", in *Accommodating Diversity: Asymmetry in Federal States*. (4. c. ed. Robert Agganoff (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, Ed.)
- Council of Australian Governments, C. C. (2013). *Broken time to trade it in* . Retrieved Council Assessed 19 June 2013>, from < <http://www.coag.gov.au/coag>
- Fenna, A. (2012). *Federalism and Intergovernmental Coordination*. Los Angeles: In B.G Peters and J.Pierre eds.), THE SAGE handbook of Public Administration, Los Angeles.
- Funk, A. (2010). Asymmetrical Federalism: A Stabilizing or Destablizing Factor in the Multinational Federation ? A Comparative Study of Asymmetrical Federation in Canada and Spain.
- Harwood, J., & Phillmore, J. (2012). *The Effects of COAG's National Reforms Agenda on Central Agencies: Australia and New Zealand School of Government*.
- Inmam, R. P., & Rubinfield, D. L. (2014). ECONOMICS OF FEDERALISM . 1-3.
- Leary, B. O. (2011). "Thinking About Asymmetry and Symmetry in the Remarking of Iraq' in M. Weller and K. Nobbes (eds). *Asymmetric Autonomy and the Settlement of Ethnic Conflicts*. 184.
- Phillimore, J. (2013). Understanding Intergovernmental Relations: Key Features and Trends. *Australian Journal of Public Administration* , 72 (3), 230.
- Poirrer, J., & Saunders, C. (2010). ' *Comparative Reflections on Intergovernmental Relations in Federal Countries* (Vol. 8). ((eds.), R. Chattopadhyay, & K. Nerenberg, Eds.) Ottawa: Booklet Series, Forum of Federations and International Association of Centers for Federal Studies.
- Radin, B. (2102). 'The Instruments of Intergovernmental Management' In B.G. Peters and J. Pierre (eds.) *The SAGE Handbook of Public Administration*. Los Angeles. Los Angeles.
- Swenden, W. (2002). "Asymmetric Federalism and Coalition Making in Belgium". Retrieved October 16, 2016, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3330967>
- Tariq, M. (2018). An Analysis of Major Theories of Federalism . *Global Social Sciences Review (GSSR)* , 3(4), 400-412.
- Tariq, M. (2018). Prospects of Federalism in Pakistan. *Global Social Sciences Review (GSSR)* , 356-364.
- Tarleton, C. D. (1965). SYMMETRY AND ASYMMETRY AS ELEMENTS OF FEDERALISM: A THEORETICAL SPECTULATION. *The Journal of Politics* , 27(4), 861-874.
- Tarleton, C. D. (1965). Symmetry and Asymmetry as Elements of Federalism: A Theoretical Speculation. *The Journal of Politics* , 27 (4), 867.

- Tillin. (2007). United in diversity ? Asymmetry in Indian Fderalism. *The Journal of Federalism* , 37(11), 45-67.
- Wanna, J., Phillimore, J., & Harwood, J. (2009). Common Cause: Strengthening Australia's Cooperative Federalism.
- Watts. (2005). *A Comparative Perspective on Asymmetry in Federations*.
- Watts, R. L. (2008). Comparing Federal Systems.
- Zheng, y. (2006). Explaining the sources of de facto federalism in reform China: Intergovernmental decentralization, globalization, and central-local relations . *Japense Journal of Political Science* , 7(2), 101-126.
- Zwiling, P., Kossler, Requejo, P. F., Nagel, K. J., & Dosenrode, P. S. (2009, 2013). Aymmetries in Constitutional Law: Recent Developments in Federal and Regional Systems, 'Decentralization and Federal and Regional Asymmetries in Comparative Politcs' , *Federalism beyond Federations: Asymmetry and processes of Resymmetrisation in Europe*. 2.