The federal structure of government is a creature of the modern nation state. It has been characterized, in the context of state formation, as a way to share and negotiate divided sovereignty.\[^1\] There are well documented fiscal and political advantages\[^2\] to the current structure for both the central and state governments. At a time when there are calls for a re-evaluation of the founding ideals of the Indian conception of this political formulation\[^3\] in order to make it more equitable in favour of states, it is curious to note the appropriation/usage of the ideas of Babasaheb Ambedkar on federalism as its primary motivator. Ambedkar’s idea of the federal state was not constant. The careful reader can discern a shift in his position between the period from his speech delivered at the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, Pune, in 1937. and his expositions on the Draft Constitution in the Constituent Assembly Debates between 1947-49.

This paper presents Mr. Ambedkar’s views on the federal form of government in three broad strands. The first is Mr. Ambedkar’s views on the relationship between the political units described in the Government of India Act, 1935 known as “British India”, the “Provinces, and the “States”. The paper contends that Mr. Ambedkar’s central role in steering the Constituent Assembly toward adopting a constitutional scheme with a federal structure and a unitary bias represents a natural culmination of his dissatisfaction with the many shortcomings of the previously existing political power-sharing arrangement under British rule. A close reading of the speech reveals Mr. Ambedkar’s robust attempt to formulate a coherent theory of power-sharing in a federal arrangement which may be applied even outside of the Indian context. The second strand of the paper focuses on Mr. Ambedkar’s views on states being arranged on the basis of language. This section will also focus on his views on the organisation of Maharashtra as a linguistic province. I choose to focus on this aspect since the public discourse in the period following Indian independence centered around whether or not to the usage of language to organise states in India was detrimental to the larger project of forging what is considered a national identity for the nascent Indian state.\[^4\] The final part of this paper speculates on the relevance of Mr. Ambedkar’s views on the federal arrangement in the contemporary discourse on the reform of the federal arrangement in India.
References:


