

## Reducing regional disparities essential for federations: PM

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh Monday made a strong pitch for reducing inter-regional disparities and for promoting unity in diversity in a federal polity as he opened a three-day global conference on exchanging experience in federalism.

'A major challenge for large federations is that of inter-regional disparities. Reducing such disparities is essential for the success of a federation. This has been an important challenge in India,' he told delegates at the fourth International Conference on Federalism at Vigyan Bhavan.

'Both the Planning Commission and the Finance Commission, through a system of transfer of resources from the centre to the states, have played a constructive role in reducing inter-regional disparities and promoting balanced, social and economic development across the country,' he said.

'Even then, inter-regional disparities in the level of development persist and constitute a major challenge for our federal polity,' the prime minister said.

Manmohan Singh also outlined unique problems faced by coalitions at the centre that comprise regional parties - a veiled reference to regional pulls and pressures his government is subjected to in evolving major policies.

'This political dimension of the centre-states relations is yet another challenge facing a federal polity like ours,' he said, alluding to a situation where 'parties with varying national reach and many with a very limited sub-national reach, form a coalition at the national level'.

'Sometimes the resolution of problems acquires an excessively political hue, and narrow political considerations, based on regional or sectional loyalties and ideologies, can distort the national vision and sense of collective purpose,' he said while hinting at the problems faced by the ruling coalition that comprises some leading regional players.

'We may have a lot to learn from the experience of other countries in this regard,' he said.

Around 1,000 people from the world, including heads of states, experts and activists, are participating in the three-day conference.

The conference, organised by the Canada-based Forum of Federations and the Inter-State Council Secretariat of the Indian home ministry, aims at promoting an exchange of ideas on federalism that can help countries wracked by ethnic violence like Sri Lanka.

Besides Manmohan Singh, the Indian delegation includes Congress president Sonia Gandhi, opposition leader L.K. Advani and Home Minister Shivraj Patil.

Swiss President Micheline Calmy-Rey of Switzerland and Ahmed Abdallah M Sambu, president of Comoros, Nigerian Vice President Goodluck Jonathan and Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi are participating in the conference.

High-level teams from Bosnia, Canada, Germany, Mexico, Austria, Pakistan and Nepal. Iraq, Sudan, Malaysia, South Africa, Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Libya and the United Arab Emirates will also take

part.

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