

The Politics of Power and the Power of Politics: Centralization Trends in Contemporary India

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Abstract

This article examines the evolving contours of Indian federalism in an era marked by the growing centralization of political, fiscal, and administrative power. India's constitutional design has always leaned toward a strong Centre, but recent developments suggest a shift not merely in degree rather in the nature of federal practice itself. Through a four-dimensional framework (political, fiscal, administrative, and judicial), this study traces how institutions that were once intended to mediate power are increasingly being sidelined. Drawing on the lens of historical institutionalism and federal theory, this analysis situates contemporary developments within a longer history of institutional drift and central dominance. In doing so, this article reveals how federalism is being hollowed out through executive practices, policy instruments, and a shrinking culture of intergovernmental consultation. To extend the analytical lens, this article also offers a comparative perspective by engaging with Turkey's experience under executive consolidation. While structurally distinct, both countries illustrate how centralization can unfold through the logic of majoritarian democracy, altering the spirit of federalism and retaining its formal shell.

Ultimately, this article argues that if India is to sustain its pluralist and democratic character, federalism must be reimagined as a lived political ethic rooted in dialogue, diversity, and shared sovereignty.

Keywords: Federalism, centralization, institutional drift, executive dominance

Introduction

India's federal structure, often described as "quasi-federal" (Basu, 2013), represents a delicate constitutional balance between the centrifugal aspirations of a vast, diverse polity and the centripetal imperatives of national unity. Designed in the shadow of Partition and secessionist anxieties, the Constitution empowered the Union government with overriding authority in times of crisis, all the while acknowledging the need for state autonomy and pluralistic governance (Singh, 2020; Rao & Singh, 2005). This design, although theoretically federal, has always carried within it a centralizing bias which has always been justified through the lenses of stability, security, and developmental urgency.

Long before the rise of current majoritarian centralism, India's federalism had already been shaped by a different kind of dominance by the Indian National Congress. For nearly three decades after independence, the Congress operated as both the Centre and the state, rendering federal frictions largely invisible. But this one-party hegemony masked an underlying asymmetry. States were reduced to administrative outposts of a monolithic national vision. The Centre's ability to dictate terms, dismiss governments through Article 356, and override regional aspirations was routinely exercised, albeit under the veneer of party unity. Thus, the Congress era sowed the seeds of a centralized political culture which normalized vertical power flows and muted the power of negotiated federalism long before coalition politics carved a space for plural voices.

Over the decades, the practice of Indian federalism has undergone multiple recalibrations. The post-Emergency years and the rise of coalition politics in the 1990s enabled a more decentralized and participatory model, often referred to as "negotiated federalism" (Chhibber & Kollman, 2004; Sinha, 2004). However, the post-2014 political

climate has witnessed a reversal of this pattern. With the emergence of a dominant party at the Centre, Indian federalism appears to be shifting toward an era of executive centralism again, being marked by increasing concentration of power, erosion of intergovernmental consultation, and the deployment of central agencies in state-level governance (Sharma, 2018; Kumar, 2021).

This resurgence of centralization manifests across multiple dimensions viz., the fiscal realignment under the Goods and Services Tax (GST) regime (Rao, 2017), weakening of institutional platforms like the Inter-State Council, marginalization of the Finance Commission in favor of extra-constitutional bodies such as the GST Council and NITI Aayog (Singh, 2012; Rai, 2018), and strategic use of gubernatorial powers and investigative agencies like the CBI and ED to influence state-level political dynamics (Kumar, 2020; Sharma, 2016). Together, these developments suggest a paradigmatic shift which manifest as a tactical reassertion of power and structural transformation of India's federal content.

The centralization of political authority is also evident in the legislative domain. The increasing use of Article 123 (ordinance-making power) and Article 256 (Centre's directions to states) has created a vertical imbalance wherein state governments are being frequently compelled to implement centrally devised schemes without adequate consultation or customization to their needs (Chakrabarty, 2007). Furthermore, the consolidation of power in the Prime Minister's Office and the increasing marginalization of the Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs have disrupted the horizontal balance within the Union itself, leading to the rise of what scholar term "presidential-style" governance within a parliamentary framework (Sharma, 2017).

Simultaneously, fiscal federalism which has long been considered the bedrock of functional autonomy for states has experienced a subtle but significant transformation. The

introduction of the GST was projected as a move towards cooperative federalism; however, its operational reality reveals an erosion of state-level fiscal discretion (Purohit, 2010; Bagchi, 2006). States now depend heavily on GST compensation from the Centre, and delays in disbursements exacerbate fiscal stress. As Rao (2017) observes, the institutional design of the GST Council disproportionately favors the Centre, thereby undermining the fiscal sovereignty of states. Similarly, the recommendations of the Fourteenth Finance Commission, which increased the vertical devolution of taxes, have been counteracted by reduced Union support for centrally sponsored schemes, effectively neutralizing the intended gains for state finances (Singh, 2012).

Institutionally, the decline of planning Commission and its replacement by NITI Aayog has started altering the federal dynamic. While the former functioned as a platform for intergovernmental dialogue and long-term planning, the latter serves as a policy think tank with limited statutory powers (Kumar, 2018). The shift from plan-based to market-based federalism places performance metrics over equity considerations and works in sidelining the developmental needs of backward states. Moreover, the lack of formal consultative mechanisms has diluted the spirit of cooperative federalism and reducing the state governments to the status of mere implementing agencies (Rai, 2018).

The administrative dimension of centralization is visible in the increasing deployment of All-India Services and centrally mandated missions like the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, Digital India, and Ayushman Bharat, which ultimately leave little room for contextual adaptation by state governments (Sharma, 2011). Moreover, central investigative agencies which were traditionally expected to function independently have been drawn into partisan conflicts by often acting at the behest of the Centre in politically sensitive states (Kumar,

2020). This “agency federalism,” as Sharma (2015) terms it, disrupts the checks and balances essential for maintaining a democratic federation.

In the judicial realm, the courts have historically acted as arbiters of the Centre–state disputes. However, recent rulings on Article 370, abrogation of special status to Jammu and Kashmir, and the delimitation exercise in the Northeast indicate a judicial posture more aligned with majoritarian interpretations of national interest rather than with the pluralistic spirit of the constitution (Sharma, 2023). This juridical centralism when coupled with a passive Parliament and an assertive executive contributes to the shrinking space for state dissent and regional autonomy.

The significance of studying these transformations lies in their long-term implications for the federal equilibrium. Federalism is not merely an administrative convenience but a democratic imperative in a pluralistic polity. It accommodates diversity, prevents the tyranny of the majority, and fosters innovation in public policy. The current pattern threatens these foundational values by subordinating the states' constitutional status to the political logic of centralized control.

This article seeks to answer the following research question: *To what extent is the contemporary Indian state experiencing structural centralization, and what are the implications of this shift for cooperative federalism and democratic governance?* It examines the nature, extent, and consequences of centralization across four critical axis: political, fiscal, administrative, and institutional and draws comparative insights from Turkey, where similar dynamics have eroded federal principles under a presidential regime (Tansel, 2018; Tanyeri-Erdemir, 2022).

This article further argues that India’s evolving federalism is witnessing a systemic centralization of power characterized by fiscal consolidation, administrative overreach, and

political domination by the Centre. This shift, while often justified on developmental and national security grounds, undermines the principles of cooperative governance, weakens institutional federalism, and facilitates a transition toward what scholars term “centralized federalism” which is a model in which the autonomy of states is significantly constrained and subnational diversity is managed through unilateral executive authority rather than negotiated consensus.

By situating the Indian case within broader federal theory and practice, this article contributes to the emerging discourse on the recalibration of Centre–state relations in the era of rising majoritarianism, technocratic governance, and populist centralism. It also interrogates the normative consequences of these trends for India's constitutional democracy and its capacity to accommodate multiplicity within unity.

This article adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology which is grounded in the traditions of historical institutionalism and comparative federal theory to analyze the contemporary methods of centralization within the Indian federal system. By triangulating legal-constitutional analysis, institutional evolution, and political developments, this study seeks to unravel the layered dynamics that underpin India’s shifting federal equilibrium. The methodological emphasis is on interpretive analysis while also relying on secondary sources, legal texts, and empirical data derived from government reports, Finance Commission documents, RBI bulletins, parliamentary proceedings, and peer-reviewed academic literature.

This research is structured around a multi-dimensional analytical framework that segregates centralization into four interconnected domains: political, fiscal, administrative, and institutional. This segmentation allows for a minute assessment of the mechanisms through which the Union government consolidates power vis-à-vis the states and highlights

both de jure (constitutional and legal) and de facto (operational and behavioral) dimensions of federal restructuring.

The primary theoretical lens employed is historical institutionalism which is a system that emphasizes how institutional legacies, critical junctures, and path-dependent developments shape political outcomes (Sinha, 2005; Sharma, 2010). India's federal design although formally symmetric has always embodied in asymmetric operational dynamics, stemming from its historical genesis amid Partition and ethno-regional cleavages. This paper builds on Sinha's (2004) assertion that federal outcomes in India are best understood not as static constitutional configurations but as evolving institutional settlements shaped by political bargaining, coercion, and institutional drift.

In mapping the nature of India's contemporary federalism, this article further engages with typologies from the broader federal literature. It draws upon Riker's (1964) foundational claim that federal systems are sustained by a "bargain" between multiple levels of government and survive only so long as subnational units retain meaningful autonomy. However, India's setup challenges this classical conception. As Sharma (2018) and Singh (2020) note, Indian federalism has mutated into a "centralized federation," where the rhetoric of cooperative federalism is belied by substantive asymmetries in power and fiscal capacity.

This study also employs Chhibber and Kollman's (2004) "nationalization of party systems" framework to understand how the homogenization of electoral politics and the dominance of a single party at the Centre have eroded the pluralist character of intergovernmental relations. The use of this framework helps in explaining the transformation from a competitive, multi-actor federation to a "dominant-party federalism" where political centralization reinforces institutional centralization.

Additionally, this article engages with concepts of coercive federalism, executive federalism, and fiscal dependency traps to conceptualize the evolving power traps. These terminologies, prominent in the works of Sharma (2015, 2018), Rao and Singh (2005), and Bagchi (2006), help in articulating how central control is exercised through financial leverage, bureaucratic command structures, and legal ambiguities, thereby recasting the Union–state relationship not as cooperative, but as hierarchical and asymmetrical.

To enrich the conceptual analysis, this paper incorporates a comparative case study of Turkey’s experience with the executive centralization under its presidential system (Tansel, 2018; Özkan, 2015; Tanyeri-Erdemir, 2022). Although Turkey does not operate a federal system, its democratic erosion through hyper-centralization offers some instructive parallels for understanding how majoritarian logics can displace pluralist institutionalism. Drawing on this parallel we highlight the potential normative and institutional consequences of India’s centralizing drift, especially in relation to regional autonomy, institutional checks, and civil liberties.

By juxtaposing India’s formal federalism with Turkey’s centralized unitary state, this article shows the functional convergence of authoritarian-centralist tendencies across divergent constitutional regimes. This comparative lens is not meant to suggest structural equivalence, but rather to provide insight into the mechanisms of power consolidation under conditions of electoral dominance and executive aggrandizement.

The analytical approach used here is both descriptive and interpretive i.e., descriptive in documenting empirical developments and institutional changes and interpretive in decoding the political logic and constitutional implications of centralization. This method allows our article to move beyond normative debates and engage in evidence-based

theorization and help in providing a robust conceptual foundation for critiquing contemporary federal transformations

Political Centralization: Executive Dominance and Erosion of Pluralism

The most visible and consequential dimension of India's contemporary centralization lies in the political domain. This transformation is characterized by the consolidation of executive authority within the Union government, personalization of power in the Prime Minister's Office and the systematic marginalization of opposition-led state governments. Political centralization operates through the apparatus of formal constitutional provisions and a complex interplay of electoral dominance, party system restructuring, gubernatorial overreach, and instrumentalization of central institutions.

From Coalition Federalism to Dominant-Party Rule

Post-1990s India witnessed the emergence of coalition federalism, wherein no single party commanded an absolute majority at the Centre. This fragmentation necessitated greater bargaining with regional parties, fostering a more negotiated and pluralist model of Centre–state relations (Chhibber & Kollman, 2004; Sinha, 2004). However, the electoral landslides of 2014 and 2019 fundamentally altered this equation. The resurgence of single-party dominance at the Centre once again has re-introduced what scholars describe as “dominant-party federalism” (Sharma, 2018; Singh, 2020) a system where a hegemonic central regime exercises outsized influence over subnational politics.

This dominance has had its systemic implications. First, there has been a discernible collapse of intergovernmental bargaining mechanisms, such as the Inter-State Council and the National Development Council, both of which remain largely dormant now (Singh, 2012; Rai, 2018). Second, political alignment has become a precondition for fiscal and

administrative cooperation, as observed by and in the differential treatment of opposition-ruled states during the pandemic and the disbursal of GST compensation (Rao, 2017; Sharma, 2023). Third, the Centre has increasingly bypassed the states through direct beneficiary-centric schemes (DBT transfers, PM-KISAN) by undermining the principle of subsidiarity.

Executive Aggrandizement and Institutional Deactivation

The centralization of political authority has been reinforced by the growing executivization of governance. The PMO has started functioning as a super-cabinet and has emerged as the principal nerve of policymaking by often sidelining consultative forums such as the Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs and the Group of Ministers (Sharma, 2017). This concentration of authority within the PMO has enabled a style of governance that mirrors presidentialism within a formally parliamentary system.

Concurrently, parliamentary scrutiny has weakened. Ordinance-making under Article 123 has become a routine instrument of law-making and has resulted in eroding legislative deliberation. The use of ordinances to enact significant reforms, such as the three controversial farm laws in 2020 without adequate intergovernmental consultation reflects the Centre's unilateralist posture (Chakrabarty, 2007). Moreover, legislative federalism has been bypassed through centrally imposed regulations on matters falling within the Concurrent List, further eroding the autonomy of state legislatures.

Gubernatorial Partisanship and Constitutional Subversion

The office of the Governor was envisioned as a neutral constitutional arbiter has increasingly become a conduit for partisan intervention. Appointments to Raj Bhavans are frequently drawn from former bureaucrats or party functionaries loyal to the ruling party at the Centre thereby undermining the spirit of federal neutrality (Chandhoke, 2010; Sharma,

2016). As Kumar (2019) documents, recent gubernatorial interventions in Maharashtra, West Bengal, and Tamil Nadu highlight the subversive use of discretionary powers to destabilize opposition governments, delayed assent to bills, or impeding the legislative processes.

The Governor's power under Article 356 to recommend President's Rule has historically been controversial, and while its invocation has declined since the S R Bommai judgment (1994), the non-cooperative gubernatorial behavior has emerged as a substitute strategy for political interference. These developments have not only violated constitutional morality but also have delegitimized the federal contract envisioned in the Constituent Assembly debates.

Central Agencies as Instruments of Political Control

Political centralization has also been facilitated through the strategic use of central investigative agencies such as the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), Enforcement Directorate (ED), and Income Tax Department. Usually structurally autonomous, these institutions have been repeatedly accused of functioning as tools of political vendetta, particularly against opposition parties and regional leaders (Kumar, 2020; Sharma, 2023). The controversial invocation of the Delhi Special Police Establishment Act to override state governments' withdrawal of general consent to the CBI further exemplifies this agency centralism (Sharma, 2015).

Such weaponization of federal institutions corrodes the principles of cooperative federalism and erodes public faith in the neutrality of regulatory and enforcement bodies. It also generates a chilling effect on subnational dissent and policy experimentation, leading to a homogenizing governance styles across states to align with central directives.

Electoral Uniformity and Party System Restructuring

The transformation of India's political federalism is also evident in the homogenization of electoral competition. The nationalization of political narrative by the centralized electoral machinery and high-decibel media campaigns, have weakened the role of regional issues and identities in state elections. As Chhibber and Kollman (2004) argue, when party competition becomes increasingly centralized, federalism loses its capacity to serve as a buffer against authoritarian tendencies.

Similarly, the proposal to implement simultaneous elections (One Nation, One Election) although normatively appealing in terms of cost and efficiency poses significant risks for federal democracy. As critics argue, this synchronization of electoral cycles would further amplify national-level issues, reduce space for regional agenda-setting, and exacerbate the asymmetry between the Centre and the states (Sharma, 2023)

Fiscal Centralization: From Cooperative to Conditional Federalism

While political centralization is the most conspicuous, fiscal centralization forms the bedrock upon which the blame of power asymmetry rests in federal systems. In the Indian context, the fiscal domain ostensibly designed for cooperative federalism has witnessed a subtle but profound shift toward conditionality, asymmetry, and vertical dependence. The Indian Constitution already grants the Centre a pre-eminent role in mobilizing revenues, but the last decade has seen a consolidation of this role into a more commanding and less consultative fiscal regime.

Constitutional Asymmetry and Structural Vertical Imbalance

At the heart of India's fiscal federalism lies a vertical fiscal imbalance and a condition where Centre holds a disproportionate share of taxation powers while the states bear the bulk

of expenditure responsibilities (Rao, 2013). As per Article 268–293 of the Constitution, most broad-based and high-yielding taxes such as income tax (excluding agricultural income), corporate tax, and customs duties are collected by the Centre, with states relying heavily on shared taxes and grants-in-aid.

These structural imbalance were originally mitigated through institutions like the Finance Commission, have now been accentuated by the advent of the Goods and Services Tax (GST). The GST which was touted as a hallmark of cooperative federalism, paradoxically centralized tax administration. Although implemented via a consensus-driven GST Council, the institutional design and voting structure of the Council are skewed in favor of the Centre with the Union government holding one-third of the vote share and a veto power over critical decisions (Rao, 2017; Bagchi, 2006).

GST and the Illusion of Fiscal Cooperation

The shift to GST subsumed numerous state-level taxes and deprived states of autonomous fiscal instruments. The states were promised compensation for potential revenue losses for five years under the GST (Compensation to States) Act, 2017 but the delays in compensation transfers especially during the COVID-19 crisis exposed the Centre's fiscal leverage and the states' vulnerability (Purohit, 2010; Sharma, 2023). Some states were even asked to borrow on their own credit and thus deepening debt burdens and undermining fiscal sovereignty.

Similarly, the Centre's increasing reliance on cesses and surcharges which are not exactly a part of the divisible tax pool has further diluted the spirit of fiscal federalism. According to Finance Ministry data, cesses constituted nearly 20% of the Centre's gross tax revenue in recent years, yet these amounts remain outside the purview of Finance Commission mandated transfers (Singh, 2012). This practice results in what Rao (2013)

terms a “fiscal illusion” where nominal devolution increases but real resource flows to states stagnate.

The Disempowerment of Finance Commissions

Historically, the Finance Commission served as the principal mechanism for vertical and horizontal devolution while balancing equity and efficiency. However, recent trends reveal a marginalization of its authority. The recommendations of the Fourteenth Finance Commission which raised the states’ share in the divisible pool to 42%, were initially lauded. Yet, the Centre simultaneously cut down on its contributions to centrally sponsored schemes (CSS), thus neutralizing the fiscal space that was ostensibly created for the states (Singh, 2012).

Furthermore, the role of extra-constitutional bodies such as NITI Aayog which lack statutory authority, has already expanded at the expense of the Finance Commission. As Kumar (2018) and Rai (2018) point out, this shift has eroded the legitimacy of institutionalized intergovernmental transfers and replaced it with a performance-based model of funding that places compliance and alignment with central schemes over local developmental priorities.

Conditionality and the Rise of Fiscal Discretion

A key element of fiscal centralization is the imposition of conditionalities on financial transfers. Centrally sponsored schemes now dominate public expenditure in critical sectors like health, education, and rural development. States are expected to co-finance these schemes, adhere to uniform guidelines, and then implement them through centrally approved agencies. The rise of “conditional federalism”, where grants are contingent upon ideological,

political, or administrative compliance have replaced the earlier paradigm of negotiated cooperative federalism (Rai, 2018).

This conditionality is also manifested in the use of performance metrics, which are criticized for failing to account for regional disparities and capacities. For instance, backward states like Bihar or Odisha, despite facing structural developmental challenges, may receive fewer incentives under schemes linked to outcome-based assessments than more developed counterparts (Purohit, 2010).

Emergency Fiscalism and Pandemic Politics

The COVID-19 pandemic further amplified these trends. This crisis required robust Centre–state cooperation but the centralization of disaster management funds, lack of transparency in the allocation of the PM-CARES Fund, and delays in GST compensation all reflected a continuation of fiscal unitarianism. As Sharma (2023) notes, politically non-aligned states faced greater procedural delays and fund cuts, reinforcing the Centre’s ability to discipline opposition-led governments through fiscal means.

In addition, the absence of a constitutional debt management framework for states exacerbates the asymmetry. The Centre can run larger deficits and access capital markets with sovereign backing, states are restricted by borrowing limits under Article 293 and Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) guidelines. This entrenches a regime where fiscal autonomy is functionally curtailed, and the states remain perpetually dependent on central patronage.

Administrative and Institutional Centralization: Bureaucratic Overreach and Erosion of Federal Platforms

The transformation of India's federal infrastructure is not only fiscal or political; it is also deeply rooted in the institutional and administrative fabric of governance. A closer scrutiny reveals a profound administrative centralization, in which the Union government consolidates its influence over the executive machinery of the states by bypassing the constitutionally mandated forums for intergovernmental coordination. This process, what some scholars term "administrative federalism" (Sharma, 2015) has been recast in the post-2014 period as a regime of bureaucratic overreach and resulted in diminishing the state discretion in critical policy domains.

The Erosion of the Inter-State Council and Federal Deliberation

A key casualty in this process has been the Inter-State Council (ISC) which was envisaged under Article 263 of the Constitution as a forum for structured dialogue between the Centre and the states. Although reconstituted periodically, the ISC has met rather infrequently and remains functionally marginalized. Its limited convening, only 11 times since its inception in 1990 testifies to the decline of deliberative federalism (Sharma, 2010). The ISC's subordination to executive discretion has made it an ad hoc consultative body rather than a sustained platform for cooperative governance.

This crisis of federal institutions also extends to the Zonal Councils, which were supposed to bolster regional coordination. Despite their constitutional and statutory standing, these councils have become largely ceremonial, with their agendas dictated by central ministries, rather than being driven by state priorities (Chandhoke, 2010).

Planning Commission to NITI Aayog: From Dialogue to Directive

The replacement of the Planning Commission by the NITI Aayog in 2015 was marketed as a reformist move toward cooperative federalism. However, its structural design

and functional scope reflect a shift from participatory planning to policy advocacy. Unlike the Planning Commission, which had financial allocation powers and state-level consultations, NITI Aayog functions as a central think tank reporting to the Prime Minister and largely bypasses state-specific developmental negotiations (Kumar, 2018; Rai, 2018). Where the Planning Commission provided five-year plans based on state inputs, the NITI Aayog issues policy blueprints without binding obligations or mechanisms for state-level ownership. As a result, states are being increasingly treated as implementation agencies not equal partners in development. This transformation underscores what Rai (2018) calls a “central technocracy” replacing federal negotiation with unilateral policymaking.

All-India Services and the Diminishing Autonomy of State Cadres

A critical instrument of administrative centralization is the Union’s control over the All-India Services (AIS) most notably the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), Indian Police Service (IPS), and Indian Forest Service (IFoS). Even though the AIS officers are allotted to state cadres, their appointments, promotions, and transfers are usually influenced by the central ministries. More recently, the Centre has invoked rules enabling the unilateral deputation of AIS officers, even without the consent of state governments. (Sharma, 2016).

This not only undermines state autonomy in personnel management but also creates dual accountability for officers, many of whom prioritize central affiliations over state responsibilities. Sharma (2015) refers to this as the “dual loyalty dilemma,” where bureaucratic impartiality is compromised by political centralism.

Central Agencies and the Rise of “Agency Federalism”

Another salient feature of administrative centralization is the increasing deployment of central investigative and enforcement agencies such as the Central Bureau of Investigation

(CBI), Enforcement Directorate (ED), and National Investigation Agency (NIA) in matters that constitutionally fall within the states' domain. These agencies although technically autonomous, are seen as instruments of political coercion who are targeting opposition-ruled states through selective investigations and raids (Kumar, 2020; Sharma, 2023).

This trend has led to what Sharma (2015) describes as “agency federalism”, where the autonomy of state institutions is encroached upon through centralized bureaucratic and enforcement mechanisms. Several states have withdrawn general consent for the CBI to operate within their jurisdictions by citing misuse of authority. Yet, under Section 6 of the Delhi Special Police Establishment Act, the Centre continues to bypass state objections through case-specific consent, further exacerbating institutional mistrust.

Scheme-Based Governance and the Marginalization of Local Innovation

Flagship schemes such as Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, Ayushman Bharat, Digital India, and PM-KISAN illustrate how central schemes dominate the developmental landscape. These programs implemented for addressing key socio-economic sectors circumvent state legislative assemblies and bureaucracies and are being routed directly through central ministries and district-level administrators.

The Centre sets the design, targets, timelines, and funding patterns for these schemes, leaving little room for contextual innovation. As Sharma (2011) argues, this “template governance” model erases subnational specificities and reduces governance to a one-size-fits-all matrix. The credit attribution for developmental success is monopolized by the Centre, even when states bear a substantial share of the implementation burden.

Hyper-Centralization in Emergency and Disaster Governance

The pattern of administrative centralization became particularly acute during the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of the National Disaster Management Act (NDMA), 2005 to impose nationwide lockdowns without state consultation illustrated the unilateral invocation of emergency powers (Sharma, 2023). State governments were expected to comply with centrally issued guidelines under resource constraints and legal ambiguity. This vertical control was effective in short-term crisis management was then used to set a precedent for executive bypass of federal norms under the pretext of national exigency.

Similarly, the management of the PM-CARES Fund, a central corpus not subject to public audit or parliamentary scrutiny exemplified the parallel institutional channels the Centre can deploy to consolidate administrative control even in domains of shared responsibility.

Judicial Centralism and Constitutional Interpretation: The Courts and the New Hegemony

The judiciary in India has historically served as a mediating institution between the Centre and the states by playing a pivotal role in arbitrating federal disputes and upholding the constitutional balance. However, in the recent years, this role has undergone a discernible transformation. Rather than functioning as a counter-majoritarian check, the higher judiciary, particularly the Supreme Court has increasingly aligned itself with the hegemonic tendencies of the executive by contributing to the consolidation of central authority. This development termed “judicial centralism,” signifies a paradigmatic shift in the constitutional discourse of Indian federalism.

From Federal Arbiter to Nationalist Interpreter

The Indian judiciary has traditionally oscillated between centralist and federalist interpretations. Seminal rulings such as *State of West Bengal v. Union of India* (1963) and *S.R. Bommai v. Union of India* (1994) showcased the court's ambivalence in which the former affirmed the unitary tilt of the Constitution and the latter constrained the arbitrary use of Article 356 and reaffirmed the federal spirit. However, in the last decade or so, there has been a jurisprudential recalibration toward executive-aligned nationalism, particularly in cases involving national security, emergency powers, or constitutional restructuring.

A telling example is the 2019 abrogation of Article 370, which revoked the special status of Jammu and Kashmir. The judiciary's delayed adjudication and eventual endorsement of the move in 2023 not only validated the Centre's unilateralism but also undermined the federal principle of asymmetric accommodation (Sharma, 2023). The judgment was couched in the rhetoric of integration and development and paid scant attention to constitutional morality, procedural propriety, or the consent of the federal unit.

Judicial Minimalism and Executive Maximalism

The passivity of the judiciary in engaging with the contentious federal questions has created a vacuum that the executive has filled with increasing assertiveness. For instance, the judicial silence on the delimitation exercise in the Northeastern states reflects a deferential judicial posture under the guise of policy non-intervention. Similarly, the reluctance to entertain challenges to the use of central agencies in state jurisdictions reflects what Tanyeri-Erdemir (2022) observed in the Turkish context ie., the judiciary's transformation into a procedural rubber stamp rather than a substantive bulwark against central encroachment.

This abdication of responsibility results in what Choudhry (2006) describes as a "democratic deficit in constitutional interpretation," where courts adopt a textual literalism that legitimizes central dominance at the cost of normative federalism.

Majoritarianism, Federal Retreat, and the Politics of Interpretation

Judicial centralism is also propelled by the interplay between majoritarian electoral mandates and constitutional interpretation. The judiciary usually aware of the political zeitgeist and wary of public backlash defers to the will of the executive, especially in matters framed as national interest. In such cases, constitutional doctrine is reframed through majoritarian logic and by reducing federalism to a technical arrangement rather than a democratic safeguard.

This phenomenon mirrors trends in other centralized regimes. As Tansel (2018) notes in the Turkish context, judicial interpretations that privilege executive unity over subnational diversity often signal a “convergence of institutional docility and populist centralism.” In India too, judgments increasingly reflect a “hegemonic constitutionalism” where the Centre's prerogatives are normalized and the dissenting voices of states delegitimized.

The Silence on GST and Fiscal Federalism

Notably, the judiciary has also remained circumspect on matters of fiscal federalism. The institutional design of the GST Council which heavily favors the Centre in terms of voting power and agenda setting, has been critiqued by scholars (Rao, 2017; Bagchi, 2006) for undermining the financial sovereignty of states. But judicial engagement with these issues remained minimal. Legal challenges to compensation delays, unilateral cess impositions, or the erosion of state taxation powers have not received decisive judicial attention, thus reflecting a broader reluctance to contest the fiscal centralization now embedded in the new economic regime.

Constitutional Morality and the Federal Compact

The Indian Constitution though centrally biased in structure is underpinned by a federal morality that seeks to accommodate regional pluralism, participatory governance, and subnational autonomy. Judicial interpretations, especially in federal disputes, must therefore embody “constitutional fidelity” not merely to the letter, but to the spirit of cooperative governance. However, the judicial embrace of majoritarian stability over federal dissent erodes this normative core.

As Chandhoke (2010) argues, a federation is not sustained merely by institutional arrangements but by habits of constitutional restraint, deliberation, and power-sharing. This increasing tendency of the judiciary to side with the executive not only weakens these habits but also signals a “juridical convergence with central authority” and diminishing the federal vitality of Indian democracy.

Comparative Perspectives: Lessons from Turkey

Comparative federalism offers a valuable analytical lens to examine the evolving dynamics of centralization in India. Even though India is constitutionally a federal republic and Turkey is formally a unitary state, both countries share several commonalities in terms of political centralization, erosion of institutional autonomy, and the rise of executive dominance. The Turkish experience, particularly in the post-2010 period under the Erdoğan regime, provides a compelling parallel to India's contemporary trajectory, especially in how centralization unfolds through ostensibly democratic means.

Executive Consolidation and Erosion of Horizontal Accountability

One of the most striking parallels between India and Turkey lies in the consolidation of power in the executive branch. In Turkey, the transformation from a parliamentary to a presidential system through the 2017 constitutional referendum dramatically reshaped the

political architecture, concentrating authority in the presidency while undermining parliamentary checks (Tansel, 2018). The erosion of the separation of powers, especially the subordination of the judiciary and the bureaucracy to executive will, created a centralized governance structure characterized by weak horizontal accountability.

India not undergoing a formal systemic shift has witnessed a comparable *de facto* centralization. The increasing dominance of the Prime Minister's Office, marginalization of the Union Cabinet and parliamentary committees and selective deployment of constitutional and extra-constitutional instruments such as the use of the Governor's office, central agencies, and ordinance powers reflect a similar logic of executive centralism (Sharma, 2017; Kumar, 2020). In both the countries, centralization has not been imposed but engineered from within the democratic framework by using popular mandates as legitimating cover.

Marginalization of Local Autonomy and Regional Dissent

Turkey's experience under authoritarian neoliberalism has seen an aggressive dismantling of local autonomy particularly in Kurdish-majority municipalities. The appointment of trustees (*kayyum*) to replace elected mayors, suppression of regional parties, and the invocation of national security concerns to justify executive interventions all illustrate a pattern of the state restructuring under centralized command (Özkan, 2015; Tanyeri-Erdemir, 2022). These measures not only delegitimize regional political movements but also render local governments dependent on Ankara for resources and recognition.

In India, the constitutional scheme provides for elected state governments, similar patterns are visible. The partisan use of central agencies like the ED and CBI, frequent imposition of President's Rule in opposition-ruled states, and denial of fiscal support or clearance for centrally sponsored schemes reflect a politics of coercive federalism (Chandhoke, 2010; Sharma, 2015). States ruled by parties in opposition to the Centre usually

face fiscal discrimination, bureaucratic obstruction, and political delegitimization. As in Turkey, the dissent is increasingly interpreted as a challenge to national unity.

Technocratic Governance and Depoliticization of Federalism

Another commonality is the turn toward technocratic centralism where institutions are restructured to prioritize managerial efficiency and performance metrics over democratic deliberation. In Turkey, the educational and cultural sectors have been reshaped under presidential directives, with centralized standardization replacing local curricular autonomy (Tanyeri-Erdemir, 2022). The bureaucracy is expected to function as an extension of the executive, diminishing the role of independent agencies or autonomous local bodies.

India's replacement of the Planning Commission with NITI Aayog illustrates a similar shift. Although framed as a move toward cooperative federalism, NITI Aayog lacks statutory authority and primarily serves as an instrument for policy dissemination from the Centre (Kumar, 2018; Rai, 2018). The GST Council, similarly, has institutionalized fiscal federalism through formulaic consensus-building, but the design and voting mechanism structurally favor the Union government and reducing the space for genuine fiscal negotiation (Rao, 2017). This form of governance prioritizes efficiency over equity and centralization over coordination.

The Judiciary as a Centralizing Force

In both India and Turkey, the judiciary has ceased to function as a neutral arbiter of federal tensions. In Turkey, the post-2016 purges and reorganization of the judiciary have made it a compliant organ of executive power which is willing to justify repressive laws, curtail dissent, and endorse centralization (Chatham House, 2024). Judicial independence has

eroded, and constitutional interpretation has been harnessed to legitimize majoritarian centralism.

India's judiciary which is institutionally more independent but is witnessing a slow transformation in posture and ideology. As previously discussed, the delayed and deferential judgments in cases like Article 370, GST implementation, and the delimitation exercise in the Northeast signify a shift toward nationalist jurisprudence. This results in a form of "constitutional centralization" where the judiciary becomes a passive enabler of executive dominance.

Implications for Democratic Pluralism

The Turkish case provides a sobering lesson in how centralization when normalized through legal-rational frameworks can produce authoritarian outcomes within a formally democratic structure. The fusion of executive authority, marginalization of regional voices, and depoliticization of institutions undermines not just federalism but also deliberative democracy.

For India, the pattern is not yet irreversible, but the warning signs are unmistakable. As Sharma (2023) notes, the subversion of cooperative federalism through constitutional, administrative, and discursive means threatens the very ethos of India's democratic experiment. Drawing on the comparative insights from Turkey helps to contextualize these developments as part of a global trend where populist majoritarianism coexists with technocratic governance to centralize power while eroding accountability.

Conclusion and the Future of Federalism in India

The arc of Indian federalism which used to oscillate between central dominance and cooperative negotiation now appears to be entering a new phase which is characterized by the

normalization of centralizing impulses. This article has traced the multifaceted nature of this transformation across fiscal, political, administrative, and institutional dimensions by highlighting how each vector contributes to the cumulative erosion of the federal ethos enshrined in the constitution. The trend toward centralized federalism, an oxymoronic formulation in theory but an empirical reality in practice is neither incidental nor transitory; it is structurally embedded in the political economy and institutional architecture of contemporary India.

This conclusion synthesizes these insights and offers a critical reflection on their implications, both for the theoretical understanding of federalism and for the future of Indian democracy. It further explores possible pathways for rebalancing Centre–state relations in a manner that upholds constitutionalism, pluralism, and subsidiarity.

Recalibrating the Constitutional Grammar of Federalism

The Constitution of India envisioned a Union of States that would function through “cooperative federalism” in a system where the Centre and the States operate in concert within their respective domains. However, what we observe here is an expansion of “command federalism” (Sharma, 2018), where the Centre does not merely coordinate but directs the course of state action. This transformation is a matter of political style and structural design, where constitutional provisions like Article 356, Article 256, and Article 360 (Financial Emergency) are increasingly interpreted to reinforce central dominance rather than equilibrium.

The existing asymmetry in power is compounded by the overuse and, at times, misuse of gubernatorial discretion, especially in opposition-ruled states (Sharma, 2016). Governors have emerged as political agents of the Centre, reducing the sanctity of federal comity. The discretionary space for states is shrinking due to the Centre's monopolization of digital

infrastructure, social welfare system, and disaster management mechanisms, all under the rubric of national unity and efficiency.

Unless the constitutional procedure is recalibrated to reaffirm the autonomy of state as administrative units and as co-equal partners, the spirit of federalism risks becoming an anachronism in India's democratic project.

Reclaiming this vision requires a constitutional reimagining and a democratic recommitment to the pluralist ideals of the Indian Republic.

Pathways Forward: Toward a Cooperative and Empowered Federalism

A reconstitution of Indian federalism must proceed on several fronts:

- **Reinvigorating Constitutional Mechanisms:** The Inter-State Council and the National Development Council must be revitalized, given statutory authority, and insulated from executive whim.
- **Judicial Safeguards:** The Supreme Court must proactively uphold the federal responsibilities by resisting the tendency to privilege national unity over regional autonomy in its jurisprudence.
- **Institutional Equity in Fiscal Federalism:** The Finance Commission must be empowered to ensure horizontal and vertical equity, and its recommendations should not be undermined through executive discretion in centrally sponsored schemes.
- **Transparent Federal Dialogue:** The Centre must adopt consultative procedures in policymaking that respect the principle of “concurrent competence” in shared domains like education, health, and agriculture.

- **De-weaponization of Central Agencies:** Institutions like the CBI, ED, and NIA must be depoliticized and made accountable to parliamentary committees to prevent misuse against opposition-led states.
- **Democratizing NITI Aayog:** It must be reconstituted to include state representatives with decision-making powers, transforming it from a think tank to a federal planning body.
- **Fiscal Autonomy for States:** GST compensation mechanisms must be strengthened, and states should be given greater leeway to impose and manage local taxes.

Conclusion: The Federal Future at a Crossroads

As India marches into the third quarter of the 21st century, its federal future stands at a critical crossroads. The current model of centralized federalism, efficient in appearance but exclusionary in practice may deliver short-term policy coherence, but it undermines the long-term resilience of Indian democracy. A truly democratic federalism is not one where all states speak in a single voice, but where multiple voices are heard, respected, and harmonized.

The test of Indian federalism lies not in uniformity but in unity amidst diversity, not in central command but in collaborative governance, and not in efficiency alone but in the legitimacy derived from plural consent. It is only by embracing the full promise of cooperative federalism, grounded in constitutional fidelity and democratic ethics that India can realize the potential of its plural polity.

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