

Federalism, Pluralism, and Indian Democracy: A Critical Perspective

Dr. Kyasaram Kishtaiah

MA, PhD, Assistant Professor of Political Science
Government Arts & Science College (A)
Kamareddy- PIN: 503111, Telangana

Abstract:

India is the world's most populous democracy and among its most plural, yet its Constitution describes it as a "Union of States" rather than a federation, and its federal practice has oscillated between centralisation and negotiated accommodation. This paper critically examines how federalism and pluralism have interacted in Indian democracy since 1950. Drawing on constitutional texts, Finance Commission reports, Census of India data and landmark Supreme Court judgments, and situating the analysis in comparative federal theory, it argues that India is best understood as a "holding-together" federation with a strong unitary bias, which has nonetheless accommodated diversity through three mechanisms: the linguistic reorganisation of states, asymmetric constitutional provisions, and coalition-era bargaining. The paper then shows that these accommodations are under strain from fiscal centralisation, contested gubernatorial powers, the reorganisation of Jammu and Kashmir, language politics and the looming question of delimitation. It concludes that the resilience of Indian democracy depends less on formal constitutional change than on restoring the conventions of cooperative federalism, strengthening independent intergovernmental institutions, and treating plurality as a constitutive value rather than a threat to national unity.

Keywords: federalism; pluralism; Indian democracy; Centre–State relations; asymmetric federalism; fiscal federalism; linguistic reorganisation; cooperative federalism.

1. Introduction

Few democracies ask as much of their federal arrangements as India does. A polity of more than 1.4 billion people, 28 states and eight Union Territories, 22 constitutionally recognised languages and every major world religion has sustained competitive elections and a continuous constitutional order for over seven decades, an outcome that comparative scholarship long regarded as improbable (Lijphart, 1996; Stepan et al., 2011). Yet the Constitution never uses the word "federation." Article 1 declares that India, that is Bharat, shall be a Union of States, a formula that B. R. Ambedkar defended in the Constituent Assembly on the ground that the Indian federation was not the result of an agreement among states and that no state had the right to secede from it (Constituent Assembly of India, 1948/1989).

This wording captures the central puzzle of Indian federalism. The Constitution divides legislative, administrative and financial powers between the Union and the states and assigns the Supreme Court the role of umpire, yet it also equips the Union with extraordinary powers to reorganise states, legislate on state subjects and dismiss state governments. K. C. Wheare (1963) therefore described India as quasi-federal. Later scholars have rejected that label as too static, arguing that the real balance between Centre and states has shifted with the party system, the economy and judicial interpretation (Rudolph & Rudolph, 1987; Saez, 2002; Tillin, 2019).

Pluralism, the recognition that a political community contains multiple, durable and legitimate identities of language, religion, caste, tribe and region, is the second axis of analysis. India's founders treated plurality as a fact to be managed by institutions but also as a value to be protected through fundamental rights, minority safeguards and, eventually, a federal map redrawn along linguistic lines (Austin, 1966; Bhargava, 2010). The relationship between federalism and pluralism is therefore not incidental. Federal institutions are the principal means through which territorially concentrated identities gain political voice, while pluralist commitments constrain how far any single majority, national or regional, can impose uniformity.

The paper asks three questions. First, how does the constitutional design of Indian federalism accommodate, and sometimes constrain, cultural and regional diversity? Second, how has the practice of Centre-State relations changed across the phases of Indian democracy: Congress dominance, coalition politics and the recent return of a dominant party? Third, what do contemporary flashpoints reveal about the prospects of federal pluralism? The study adopts a qualitative, doctrinal-analytical approach, drawing on constitutional provisions, reports of the Finance Commissions and the Commissions on Centre-State Relations, Census of India 2011 data and Supreme Court judgments, read alongside the secondary literature. The tables consolidate published data, and the analysis is current to early 2024.

Section 2 sets out the conceptual framework. Section 3 analyses the constitutional design, Section 4 examines the territorial accommodation of pluralism, and Section 5 turns to fiscal federalism. Section 6 reviews the judiciary's role as federal umpire, Section 7 discusses contemporary stress points, and Section 8 concludes with reform proposals.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 Federalism beyond the American model

Classical definitions emphasised a legal division of powers between two levels of government, each independent within its sphere, under a written constitution interpreted by a neutral court (Wheare, 1963). By that standard India fell short. Riker (1964) treated federalism as a bargain struck to aggregate power against an external threat, while Elazar (1987) stressed the combination of self-rule and shared rule. These definitions, derived largely from the United States, fit poorly with multi-ethnic democracies that federalised in order to stay together rather than to come together.

Stepan (1999) distinguishes “coming-together” federations, such as the United States and Switzerland, in which sovereign units pool sovereignty; “putting-together” federations, such as the former Soviet Union, created by coercion; and “holding-together” federations, such as India, Belgium and Spain, in which a

previously centralised state devolves power to keep a diverse society united. Holding-together federations tend to have unequal representation of units, asymmetric arrangements and a strong centre, since the objective is to prevent exit rather than to protect pre-existing sovereigns. Building on this, Stepan et al. (2011) characterise India as a “state-nation,” a democratic polity that fosters a shared sense of belonging without requiring cultural homogenisation, in contrast to the nation-state model that presupposes it.

2.2 Pluralism, consociation and multinational federalism

Lijphart (1977) argued that deeply divided societies can sustain stable democracy through power-sharing: grand coalitions, segmental autonomy, proportionality and mutual veto. Applying this to India, he later concluded that Indian democracy displayed consociational features, including coalition governments, linguistic-state autonomy and recognition of minorities in public life, despite lacking some formal mechanisms (Lijphart, 1996). Kymlicka (1995) offered a normative complement, contending that federalism can accommodate national minorities by granting self-government rights over territorially concentrated groups. In the Indian context, Bajpai (2011) shows that group rights were negotiated pragmatically rather than derived from a single doctrine, and Bhargava (2010) describes the resulting secular order as contextual, maintaining a principled distance from all religions rather than walling religion out of public life.

Pluralism thus has two dimensions relevant here: territorial pluralism, accommodated through federal units and asymmetric arrangements, and non-territorial pluralism, protected by individual and community rights that federalism cannot itself deliver. A critical perspective must ask where the two align and where they collide. The paper evaluates Indian federalism against three criteria: the constitutional protection of state autonomy; the capacity to accommodate difference asymmetrically without eroding equal citizenship; and the legitimacy of the federal bargain, reflected in fiscal fairness and the credibility of neutral umpiring institutions.

3. Constitutional Design: A Federation with a Unitary Bias

The Constituent Assembly framed the Constitution amid Partition, the integration of more than five hundred princely states and fears of fragmentation. The Government of India Act, 1935, itself a compromise between provincial autonomy and central control, supplied much of the template (Austin, 1966). Ambedkar’s explanation of the phrase “Union of States” acknowledged both aspects: India was federal in structure, but the Union was indestructible (Constituent Assembly of India, 1948/1989). Table 1 summarises the principal federal and unitary features.

Table 1- *Federal and Unitary Features of the Indian Constitution*

Feature	Provision	Character
Written, supreme constitution	Arts. 13, 368	Federal
Division of legislative powers	Arts. 245–254; Seventh Schedule	Federal

Independent judiciary; Centre–State disputes	Arts. 131, 226	Federal
Bicameral Parliament with states’ chamber	Arts. 79–80	Federal (unequal representation)
“Union of States”; no right of secession	Art. 1	Unitary
Parliament may alter state boundaries and names	Arts. 3–4	Unitary
Governor appointed by the President	Arts. 153–155	Unitary
President’s Rule; Emergency powers	Arts. 352–356	Unitary
Union legislation on state subjects in defined cases	Arts. 249–252	Unitary
All-India Services	Art. 312	Unitary

Note. Compiled by the author from the Constitution of India (1950).

The unitary elements are substantial. Parliament may, by simple majority, form new states, alter boundaries and change names (arts. 3–4), so that a state’s territorial existence depends on the Union, in contrast to the United States, where a state’s consent is required for changes to its boundaries. Residuary powers rest with the Union (art. 248), and Parliament may legislate on State List subjects if the Rajya Sabha, by a two-thirds majority, declares it to be in the national interest (art. 249). Governors, who exercise significant discretion during government formation and in relation to legislation, are appointed by the President, in practice on the advice of the Union government. Article 356 allows the imposition of President’s Rule where the constitutional machinery in a state fails, and it was invoked on well over a hundred occasions, frequently against opposition-ruled governments, before the Supreme Court restricted its use (Sarkaria Commission, 1988; *S. R. Bommai v. Union of India*, 1994).

The upper house does little to compensate. Rajya Sabha seats are allocated broadly by population, ranging from one seat for the smallest states to thirty-one for Uttar Pradesh, in contrast to the equal state representation of the United States Senate, and in a joint sitting over an ordinary bill the Lok Sabha’s numbers prevail (art. 108). Most constitutional amendments require no state ratification, apart from those touching the federal provisions listed in article 368(2).

Yet the design also incorporates safeguards that the label “quasi-federal” overlooks. The Seventh Schedule gives states exclusive competence over subjects that shape everyday governance, including public order, police, public health, agriculture and land (Table 2). Local government, initially a state subject, received constitutional status in 1992 through the Constitution (73rd and 74th Amendment) Acts, though the devolution of functions and finances remains at the discretion of state legislatures.

Table 2- Distribution of Legislative Subjects under the Seventh Schedule

List	Original entries	Illustrative subjects
------	------------------	-----------------------

Union List	97	Defence; foreign affairs; currency; railways; atomic energy; banking
State List	66	Public order; police; public health; agriculture; land; local government
Concurrent List	47	Criminal law; marriage; contracts; trade unions; education and forests (since 1976)
Residuary powers	—	Vested in the Union (art. 248)

Note. Entries as at the commencement of the Constitution; later amendments moved subjects between lists. Compiled by the author from the Constitution of India (1950).

Over time the Concurrent List became the principal channel of centralisation. The Constitution (42nd Amendment) Act, 1976 moved education, forests, the protection of wild animals and birds, weights and measures, and the administration of justice from the State List to the Concurrent List, and article 254 gives Union law primacy in a conflict. The Sarkaria Commission (1988) and the Punchhi Commission (2010) both urged prior consultation with states before legislating on concurrent subjects, but consultation has remained a convention rather than a legal requirement.

4. Pluralism and the Territorial Accommodation of Diversity

4.1 Linguistic reorganisation

The founders initially feared that linguistic states would encourage separatism, and the Dar Commission (1948) and the JVP Committee (1948–49) advised caution. That position became untenable after the death, in December 1952, of Potti Sriramulu following a fast for a separate Telugu-speaking state. Andhra State was formed in 1953, and the States Reorganisation Commission (1953–55) then recommended redrawing the map largely on linguistic lines, tempered by considerations of national unity, administrative viability and financial resources (Guha, 2007). The States Reorganisation Act, 1956 created fourteen states and six Union Territories.

The Commission had recommended that Hyderabad State be retained as a separate unit, with merger into Andhra possible after the next general elections if the Hyderabad legislature so resolved by a two-thirds majority. Instead, a larger Andhra Pradesh was created in 1956, and persistent regional grievances eventually produced Telangana in 2014 (Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act, 2014). The episode shows that linguistic reorganisation resolved one form of pluralism while leaving intra-regional inequalities unresolved. Nevertheless, the linguistic principle proved less dangerous than feared. Brass (1990) and Guha (2007) argue that linguistic states channelled regional aspirations into democratic competition, and Stepan et al. (2011) treat this as a defining success of Indian state-nation building. Table 3 shows that the map has been redrawn repeatedly, on linguistic, ethnic, administrative and developmental grounds, through ordinary parliamentary legislation.

Table 3- Major Territorial Reorganisations of the Indian Union

Year	Reorganisation	Principal basis
1953	Andhra State separated from Madras State	Language (Telugu)
1956	States Reorganisation Act: 14 states, 6 Union Territories	Language; administrative viability
1960	Bombay State divided into Maharashtra and Gujarat	Language
1963	Nagaland created	Ethnic and political settlement
1966	Punjab divided; Haryana and Chandigarh created	Language and community
1972–87	Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura (1972); Sikkim (1975); Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Goa (1987)	Ethnic and regional identity
2000	Chhattisgarh, Uttarakhand, Jharkhand	Development; tribal identity
2014	Telangana carved out of Andhra Pradesh	Regional identity; development
2019	Jammu and Kashmir reorganised into two Union Territories	Security; political integration

Note. Compiled by the author from the relevant reorganisation statutes and Guha (2007). India currently has 28 states and 8 Union Territories.

Linguistic pluralism is deep. Census 2011 recorded 121 languages spoken by ten thousand or more people, of which 22 are listed in the Eighth Schedule, and no language commands an absolute majority as mother tongue (Table 4). Even the headline figure for Hindi aggregates many related speech varieties, such as Bhojpuri and Marwari, whose speakers do not always regard themselves as Hindi speakers, a classification that underlies debates about Hindi's national status (Census of India, 2018).

Table 4- Principal Mother Tongues, Census 2011

Language	Share of population (%)	Principal state(s)
Hindi	43.63	Hindi belt
Bengali	8.03	West Bengal, Tripura
Marathi	6.86	Maharashtra
Telugu	6.70	Andhra Pradesh, Telangana
Tamil	5.70	Tamil Nadu
Gujarati	4.58	Gujarat
Urdu	4.19	Multiple states
Kannada	3.61	Karnataka
Odia	3.10	Odisha
Malayalam	2.88	Kerala

Punjabi	2.74	Punjab
---------	------	--------

Note. Adapted from Census of India (2018). Hindi includes mother tongues grouped under Hindi.

Religious diversity is likewise national in scale but, unlike language, lacks a comparable territorial anchor (Table 5). Outside Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab and several north-eastern states, religious minorities are dispersed, and their protection depends on fundamental rights (arts. 25–30) rather than on federal autonomy (Bhargava, 2010).

Table 5- Population by Religious Community, Census 2011

Religious community	Share of population (%)
Hindu	79.8
Muslim	14.2
Christian	2.3
Sikh	1.7
Buddhist	0.7
Jain	0.4
Other religions and not stated	0.9

Note. Adapted from Census of India (2015).

4.2 Asymmetric federalism

Alongside uniform federal provisions, the Constitution provides special arrangements for particular regions (Table 6). Tillin (2007, 2019) argues that asymmetry is not an aberration but a central technique of Indian federalism, deployed both to accommodate ethnic and cultural claims, as in Nagaland and Mizoram, and to address regional backwardness, as in Karnataka's Hyderabad-Karnataka region. Adeney (2007) likewise shows that flexible territorial and constitutional arrangements helped India regulate ethnic conflict more successfully than Pakistan.

Table 6- Selected Asymmetric Constitutional Provisions

Provision	Region	Substance
Art. 370 (abrogated 2019)	Jammu and Kashmir	Special status limiting Parliament's legislative reach; rendered inoperative in 2019
Art. 371	Maharashtra, Gujarat	Governor's special responsibility for development boards
Art. 371A	Nagaland	Parliamentary laws on Naga customary law and land need Assembly approval
Art. 371D	Andhra Pradesh, Telangana	Regional equity in public employment and education

Art. 371G	Mizoram	Protection of Mizo customary law, religious practice and land
Art. 371J	Karnataka	Special provisions for the Hyderabad-Karnataka region
Fifth and Sixth Schedules	Tribal areas; Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Mizoram	Tribal administration; autonomous district councils (Sixth Schedule)

Note. Compiled by the author from the Constitution of India (1950); see Tillin (2019).

Asymmetry, however, is double-edged. It has recognised distinct identities, yet it has also bred resentment among states that receive no special treatment, and it has rested on executive and parliamentary discretion. The abrogation of article 370 in 2019 demonstrates the vulnerability of such arrangements when the political balance changes.

4.3 Limits of territorial accommodation

Territorial autonomy cannot resolve every plural claim. Caste, the most pervasive axis of social hierarchy, is not territorial, and its accommodation has come through reservations in education and public employment and through the competitive mobilisation of backward-class parties within states, not through federal design. Religious minorities dispersed across states depend on the Union and the courts to protect their rights. Tribal communities, whose areas fall under the Fifth and Sixth Schedules, continue to experience tensions between customary governance and state-level development priorities. A federal order that accommodates linguistic majorities in each state may therefore reproduce, at the state level, the very majoritarian dilemmas that it was designed to avoid at the national level.

5. Fiscal Federalism and Cooperative Institutions

Fiscal relations expose the underlying asymmetry of the federal design. States bear primary responsibility for health, education, agriculture and policing, yet the Union commands the most buoyant tax bases, including income and corporation tax (Rao & Singh, 2005). This vertical imbalance is corrected through a Finance Commission appointed every five years (art. 280), which recommends the states' share of the divisible pool of central taxes and the principles governing grants-in-aid. Table 7 traces the states' share across recent Commissions.

Table 7- States' Share of the Divisible Pool of Central Taxes

Finance Commission	Award period	States' share (%)
Eleventh	2000–2005	29.5
Twelfth	2005–2010	30.5
Thirteenth	2010–2015	32.0
Fourteenth	2015–2020	42.0
Fifteenth	2020–2026	41.0

Note. Compiled from Eleventh Finance Commission (2000), Twelfth Finance Commission (2004), Thirteenth Finance Commission (2009), Fourteenth Finance Commission (2015) and Fifteenth Finance Commission (2021). The Fifteenth Commission's share is net of a small adjustment for the new Union Territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh.

The rise from 32 to 42 per cent under the Fourteenth Finance Commission was the largest single increase in the states' share and was widely welcomed as a step toward untied resources and greater state autonomy. Three developments have since complicated the picture. First, the divisible pool excludes cesses and surcharges, which the Union may levy for its own purposes and which have grown as a proportion of gross tax revenue, so that the states' effective share is lower than the headline percentage (Fifteenth Finance Commission, 2021). Second, the abolition of the Planning Commission in 2015 and its replacement by NITI Aayog, a policy think tank without allocative powers, removed a forum in which states negotiated plan assistance, while centrally sponsored schemes requiring state co-financing continue to shape state priorities. Third, the Goods and Services Tax (GST), introduced by the Constitution (101st Amendment) Act, 2016, merged the taxing powers of the Union and states into a jointly governed system.

The GST Council (art. 279A) is often cited as the most innovative institution of cooperative federalism since Independence. The Union holds one-third of the votes and the states collectively two-thirds, and decisions require a three-fourths weighted majority, so that the Union has an effective veto while needing the support of a substantial number of states to prevail. States surrendered considerable fiscal autonomy in return for guaranteed compensation for revenue loss in the first five years, and the end of that period in June 2022 has revived concerns about revenue security. In *Mohit Minerals Pvt. Ltd. v. Union of India* (2022), the Supreme Court held that the Council's recommendations are persuasive, not binding, on Parliament and state legislatures, reaffirming the concurrent legislative competence conferred by article 246A while leaving the political weight of the Council's consensus intact.

Recent episodes also show how competences over agriculture and public health, both State List subjects, can be exercised centrally through concurrent or emergency-related powers. The Union invoked the Disaster Management Act, 2005 to govern the response to COVID-19, and the three farm laws of 2020, enacted under the concurrent entry on trade and commerce in foodstuffs, were repealed in 2021 amid prolonged protests, with critics also arguing that they encroached on state authority over agricultural markets.

6. The Judiciary as Federal Umpire

The Supreme Court has been the principal arbiter of Centre-State disputes, and its jurisprudence has moved from early deference to the Union toward more explicit protection of federal structure (Table 8). In *State of West Bengal v. Union of India* (1963), the Court observed that the Constitution is not federal in the strict sense and that states are not sovereign. In *State of Rajasthan v. Union of India* (1977), it declined to interfere with the Union's dismissal of nine state governments after the Janata victory of that year. *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala* (1973) had begun a shift by identifying federal character among the features of the basic structure, a position consolidated in *S. R. Bommai v. Union of India* (1994),

where a nine-judge bench held that states are not mere appendages of the Centre, that a proclamation under article 356 is subject to judicial review, and that majority support must be tested on the floor of the House.

Table 8- Selected Supreme Court Decisions on Federal Balance

Case	Year	Significance
<i>State of West Bengal v. Union of India</i>	1963	Constitution not federal in the strict sense; early deference to the Union
<i>Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala</i>	1973	Basic structure doctrine; federal character among cited features
<i>State of Rajasthan v. Union of India</i>	1977	Upheld dismissal of nine state governments; limited review of art. 356
<i>S. R. Bommai v. Union of India</i>	1994	Federalism part of basic structure; art. 356 reviewable; floor test required
<i>Government of NCT of Delhi v. Union of India</i>	2018	Elected government's aid and advice binding on Lieutenant Governor in its field
<i>Mohit Minerals Pvt. Ltd. v. Union of India</i>	2022	GST Council recommendations persuasive, not binding
<i>Government of NCT of Delhi v. Union of India</i>	2023	Elected government controls services other than police, public order, land
<i>State of Punjab v. Principal Secretary to the Governor of Punjab</i>	2023	Governor cannot withhold action on bills indefinitely
<i>In re Article 370 of the Constitution</i>	2023	Abrogation upheld; restoration of statehood and elections directed

Note. Compiled by the author from the judgments cited.

Recent years have seen the Court engage directly with the federal balance. In the 2023 Delhi services judgment, a Constitution Bench held that an elected government of the National Capital Territory must control administrative services outside police, public order and land, since democratic accountability requires that the executive answer to the legislature. The Union promptly overrode the ruling by ordinance, later enacted as the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (Amendment) Act, 2023, which shows that judicial victories can be neutralised legislatively. In the Article 370 case, the Court unanimously upheld the abrogation, holding that the provision was temporary and that Jammu and Kashmir did not retain internal sovereignty, but it recorded the Union's assurance that statehood would be restored and directed that elections be held by 30 September 2024. In a dispute from Punjab, it held that Governors may not indefinitely withhold action on bills passed by state legislatures.

These decisions suggest that the Court accepts the Union's constitutional supremacy in principle while insisting on procedural limits. Critics note, however, that the delay in deciding major constitutional questions, including the Article 370 petitions, which were decided more than four years after the abrogation, weakens the Court's role as guardian of the federal balance.

7. Contemporary Stress Points

7.1 Territorial reorganisation and the security of statehood

The Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act, 2019, which converted a state into two Union Territories, established that a state can be downgraded by a simple parliamentary majority under article 3. The Supreme Court left the legality of that conversion undecided in light of the assurance that statehood would be restored. Supporters see the reform as completing integration and enabling equal citizenship and development. Critics argue that it altered a constitutional bargain while the state was under President's Rule, when Parliament itself exercised the powers of the state legislature, so that the consultation contemplated by the proviso to article 3 was, in substance, absent.

7.2 Governors and legislative assent

In several opposition-ruled states, including Kerala, Punjab, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, Governors have withheld assent to bills, delayed appointments or clashed with elected ministries over university governance. The Punjab ruling reaffirmed that an unelected Governor must act within constitutional limits, yet the underlying problem, an appointed constitutional head with discretionary powers in a system of responsible government, remains. The Sarkaria Commission (1988) urged that Governors be eminent persons from outside the state, and the Punchhi Commission (2010) proposed a fixed tenure with safeguards against arbitrary removal, but neither recommendation has been implemented.

7.3 Language and cultural policy

Articles 343–351 designate Hindi in the Devanagari script as the official language of the Union while allowing English to continue, a compromise reached after the anti-Hindi agitations, notably in Madras State in 1965, and secured by the Official Languages (Amendment) Act, 1967, under which English continues as long as non-Hindi states so desire. The three-language formula, articulated in the National Policy on Education of 1968 and reaffirmed with greater flexibility in the National Education Policy 2020, remains contested, and Tamil Nadu has long followed a two-language policy of Tamil and English. Language conflicts illustrate that territorial pluralism is secure only when the Union refrains from using education, recruitment and administration to promote a single language.

7.4 Delimitation and the politics of demography

Seats in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies are still allocated on the basis of the 1971 Census, a freeze imposed by the Constitution (42nd Amendment) Act, 1976 and extended by the Constitution (84th Amendment) Act, 2001 until the first census taken after 2026. Since then, demographic trajectories have diverged sharply (Table 9). Southern states that reduced fertility fear that reallocation on the basis of the next census would reward higher-fertility states and dilute their weight in national politics. The Constitution (106th Amendment) Act, 2023, which reserves one-third of seats for women, is to take effect only after the next delimitation, which links a landmark gender reform to this contested exercise.

Table 9- Fertility and Lok Sabha Representation in Selected States

State	Total fertility rate (NFHS-5)	Lok Sabha seats
Uttar Pradesh	2.4	80
Bihar	3.0	40
Tamil Nadu	1.8	39
Karnataka	1.7	28
Andhra Pradesh	1.7	25
Kerala	1.8	20
Telangana	1.8	17
India	2.0	543

Note. Fertility data from IIPS and ICF (2021); seats allocated on the 1971 Census basis.

The dilemma is real. Representation by population is a basic democratic principle, yet a demographic penalty for states that succeeded in implementing population policy would erode the incentives for cooperation on which federalism depends. Options such as a pro-rata expansion of the Lok Sabha that preserves existing state shares, or greater weight for states in the Rajya Sabha, deserve serious consideration.

7.5 Simultaneous elections and the centralisation of the party system

The High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections (2024), chaired by former President Ram Nath Kovind, reported in March 2024 recommending synchronised Lok Sabha and Assembly elections, followed by local body polls. Proponents cite cost, the administrative disruption caused by repeated model codes of conduct and the need for policy continuity. Critics argue that synchronisation would require curtailing or extending the terms of state assemblies, and that national campaigns may overshadow state issues in a single ballot, weakening the ability of regional parties to voice regional concerns, a core function of federal democracy (Palshikar et al., 2014).

7.6 Majoritarian nationalism and plural citizenship

Jaffrelot (2021) argues that the consolidation of Hindu majoritarian politics since 2014 has pushed India toward an “ethnic democracy” in which minorities retain formal rights but see their equal political standing weakened. Whether or not one accepts this characterisation, and defenders of the present order emphasise cultural rootedness, national integration and welfare delivery, the concern for federal pluralism is that a dominant national party can centralise through informal channels, such as party discipline, the Governor’s office and central agencies, without formal constitutional change. Centre–State relations have tended to be more negotiated in the coalition era from 1989 to 2014, when regional parties were partners in national governments (Saez, 2002; Palshikar et al., 2014), and more conflictual when a single party dominated the Union and many states. The same period has also seen decentralising moves, notably the larger tax devolution and the GST Council, which complicate any simple narrative of centralisation.

8. Conclusion and Way Forward

This paper has argued that Indian federalism is best understood as a holding-together federation that is centralised in constitutional law yet pluralised in practice. It has accommodated diversity through linguistic states, asymmetric provisions and coalition bargaining, and in doing so has lent credibility to the state-nation model in which unity does not require uniformity. The analysis has also identified three enduring tensions: between unity and autonomy, between asymmetry and equality among states, and between territorial and non-territorial pluralism, since federal units protect regional majorities but not dispersed minorities.

Six measures would strengthen federal pluralism without requiring wholesale constitutional change. First, the Inter-State Council (art. 263), which meets rarely, should become a standing body with a secretariat and a regular calendar. Second, the Union should be required by law or settled convention to consult states before legislating on Concurrent List subjects, as the Sarkaria and Punchhi Commissions urged. Third, Governors should be appointed after meaningful consultation with the state and given a fixed tenure. Fourth, cesses and surcharges should be capped or brought within the divisible pool, and the independent dispute-settlement mechanism contemplated by article 279A should be constituted. Fifth, any change to a state's territory or status should require a real process of consultation with its elected legislature, rather than a formality. Sixth, delimitation should follow a formula that does not penalise demographic success, and language policy should preserve genuine state discretion.

Ultimately, federalism in India is not merely an administrative arrangement but a democratic principle. It multiplies sites of accountability and allows citizens to hold layered identities, Kannadiga and Indian, Naga and Indian, without contradiction. Its future depends on treating plurality as a constitutive value, as the framers did when they redrew the map in 1956, rather than as a problem for the Union to manage. The analysis rests on published data and is current to early 2024; the pending delimitation, the restoration of Jammu and Kashmir's statehood and the proposals on simultaneous elections will require continuing scrutiny.

REFERENCES:

1. Adeney, K. (2007). *Federalism and ethnic conflict regulation in India and Pakistan*. Palgrave Macmillan.
2. Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act, 2014 (India).
3. Austin, G. (1966). *The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a nation*. Oxford University Press.
4. Bajpai, R. (2011). *Debating difference: Group rights and liberal democracy in India*. Oxford University Press.
5. Bhargava, R. (2010). *The promise of India's secular democracy*. Oxford University Press.
6. Brass, P. R. (1990). *The politics of India since Independence*. Cambridge University Press.
7. Census of India. (2018). *Census of India 2011: Abstract of speakers' strength of languages and mother tongues – 2011*. Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India.
8. Census of India. (2015). *Census of India 2011: Population by religious community*. Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India.

9. Constituent Assembly of India. (1989). *Constituent Assembly debates: Official report* (Vol. 7). Lok Sabha Secretariat. (Original work published 1948)
10. Constitution (Eighty-fourth Amendment) Act, 2001 (India).
11. Constitution (Forty-second Amendment) Act, 1976 (India).
12. Constitution (One Hundred and First Amendment) Act, 2016 (India).
13. Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023 (India).
14. Constitution (Seventy-fourth Amendment) Act, 1992 (India).
15. Constitution (Seventy-third Amendment) Act, 1992 (India).
16. Disaster Management Act, 2005 (India).
17. Elazar, D. J. (1987). *Exploring federalism*. University of Alabama Press.
18. Eleventh Finance Commission. (2000). *Report of the Eleventh Finance Commission (for 2000–2005)*. Government of India.
19. Fifteenth Finance Commission. (2021). *Finance Commission in COVID times: Report for 2021–26* (Vol. 1). Government of India.
20. Fourteenth Finance Commission. (2015). *Report of the Fourteenth Finance Commission*. Government of India.
21. Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (Amendment) Act, 2023 (India).
22. Government of NCT of Delhi v. Union of India, (2018) 8 SCC 501 (India).
23. Government of NCT of Delhi v. Union of India, (2023) 9 SCC 1 (India).
24. Guha, R. (2007). *India after Gandhi: The history of the world's largest democracy*. Macmillan.
25. High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections. (2024). *Report of the High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections*. Government of India.
26. In re Article 370 of the Constitution, 2023 INSC 1058 (India).
27. International Institute for Population Sciences & ICF. (2021). *National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), 2019–21: India*. IIPS.
28. Jaffrelot, C. (2021). *Modi's India: Hindu nationalism and the rise of ethnic democracy*. Princeton University Press.
29. Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act, 2019 (India).
30. Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala, (1973) 4 SCC 225 (India).
31. Kymlicka, W. (1995). *Multicultural citizenship: A liberal theory of minority rights*. Clarendon Press.
32. Lijphart, A. (1977). *Democracy in plural societies: A comparative exploration*. Yale University Press.
33. Lijphart, A. (1996). The puzzle of Indian democracy: A consociational interpretation. *American Political Science Review*, 90(2), 258–268.
34. Mohit Minerals Pvt. Ltd. v. Union of India, (2022) 10 SCC 700 (India).
35. Official Languages (Amendment) Act, 1967 (India).
36. Palshikar, S., Suri, K. C., & Yadav, Y. (Eds.). (2014). *Party competition in Indian states: Electoral politics in post-Congress polity*. Oxford University Press.

37. Punchhi Commission. (2010). *Report of the Commission on Centre–State Relations*. Government of India.
38. Rao, M. G., & Singh, N. (2005). *The political economy of federalism in India*. Oxford University Press.
39. Riker, W. H. (1964). *Federalism: Origin, operation, significance*. Little, Brown.
40. Rudolph, L. I., & Rudolph, S. H. (1987). *In pursuit of Lakshmi: The political economy of the Indian state*. University of Chicago Press.
41. Saez, L. (2002). *Federalism without a centre: The impact of political and economic reform on India's federal system*. Sage.
42. Sarkaria Commission. (1988). *Report of the Commission on Centre–State Relations*. Government of India.
43. S. R. Bommai v. Union of India, (1994) 3 SCC 1 (India).
44. State of Punjab v. Principal Secretary to the Governor of Punjab, W.P. (C) No. 1224 of 2023 (India Nov. 10, 2023).
45. State of Rajasthan v. Union of India, (1977) 3 SCC 592 (India).
46. State of West Bengal v. Union of India, AIR 1963 SC 1241 (India).
47. States Reorganisation Act, 1956 (India).
48. Stepan, A. (1999). Federalism and democracy: Beyond the U.S. model. *Journal of Democracy*, 10(4), 19–34.
49. Stepan, A., Linz, J. J., & Yadav, Y. (2011). *Crafting state-nations: India and other multinational democracies*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
50. The Constitution of India. (1950). Ministry of Law and Justice, Government of India.
51. Thirteenth Finance Commission. (2009). *Report of the Thirteenth Finance Commission (2010–2015)*. Government of India.
52. Tillin, L. (2019). *Indian federalism*. Oxford University Press.
53. Tillin, L. (2007). United in diversity? Asymmetry in Indian federalism. *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*, 37(1), 45–67.
54. Twelfth Finance Commission. (2004). *Report of the Twelfth Finance Commission (2005–2010)*. Government of India.
55. Wheare, K. C. (1963). *Federal government* (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.