

## THE IMPACT OF RECENT POLITICAL ALIGNMENTS ON INDIA'S FEDERAL STRUCTURE

**Dr. PRAKASH L**

Associate Professor Department of Political Science SSSS Govt. First Grade College and P.G. Centre Channagiri, Davanagere District.

### **Abstract:**

This study examines the impact of recent political alignments on India's federal structure. India's Constitution envisions a quasi-federal framework, balancing a strong Centre with autonomous states. However, political developments since 2014, including the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as a dominant force, have altered this equilibrium. Key issues analyzed include the implementation and functioning of the Goods and Services Tax (GST), the proposal for One Nation, One Election, the pending delimitation exercise, and the increased role of governors and central agencies in state affairs. Splits within regional parties, such as the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) in Maharashtra, have further shifted power towards the Centre, weakening coalition politics that once supported a more cooperative federalism. While proponents argue that centralization fosters policy uniformity, efficiency, and national security, critics warn of diminishing state autonomy, reduced regional representation, and erosion of competitive federalism. This paper reviews scholarly perspectives, fiscal policies, and constitutional developments to understand how these alignments shape Centre-state relations. It argues that while India's federal framework remains constitutionally intact, its practice increasingly reflects a centralizing trend. The findings highlight the need for institutional reforms to strengthen intergovernmental mechanisms and ensure equitable representation, particularly as the country faces future challenges like delimitation and synchronized elections. The study contributes to ongoing debates on whether recent changes represent a temporary political phase or a deeper restructuring of Indian federalism.

**Key words:** Impact, Recent Political Alignments, India, Federal Structure etc.

### **Introduction:**

India's federal structure has its roots in the colonial period, evolving through a series of constitutional and political developments. The idea of dividing powers between central and provincial authorities began with the Government of India Act of 1935, which introduced provincial autonomy and laid the groundwork for federal governance. However, this system was limited under British rule, as the Governor-General retained overriding powers. After independence in 1947, the framers of the Indian Constitution debated whether to adopt a federal or unitary model. Given the country's vast diversity and recent partition, they opted for a "Union of States" rather than a traditional federation. The Constitution of 1950 established a quasi-federal system with a strong Centre, distributing powers between the Union and the states through three lists: Union, State, and Concurrent. It also included provisions like Article 356 (President's Rule) and the role of governors to ensure central control in times of crisis.

Over the decades, federal relations evolved with the rise of regional parties, particularly from the late 1960s onwards, leading to an era of coalition politics that strengthened state influence. Reforms such as the establishment of the Inter-State Council and Finance Commissions further institutionalized cooperative federalism. However, the system has always been marked by tensions between central

authority and state autonomy, influenced by political alignments, economic policies, and constitutional provisions. Today, India's federal structure continues to adapt, oscillating between phases of centralization and decentralization in response to changing political dynamics.

### **Review of Literature:**

Understanding the impact of recent political alignments on India's federal structure has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Researchers have examined the evolving Centre-state dynamics, the rise of dominant-party politics, and the tension between cooperative and competitive federalism. This review synthesizes the perspectives of five prominent authors who have contributed to this field, highlighting their analyses and critiques.

1. Louise Tillin (2020), has written extensively on the changing nature of Indian federalism, particularly under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In her works, Tillin argues that India's federal design has always been asymmetrical, allowing the Centre to retain significant powers, especially in times of political dominance by a single party. She identifies the post 2014 period as a return to "strong Centre federalism," where central policies are framed with limited consultation with states. Tillin underscores that while mechanisms like the GST Council reflect cooperative structures, their functioning often reveals underlying centralizing tendencies. Her analysis suggests that the increasing dominance of one party weakens the negotiation capacity of states, especially those ruled by the opposition, creating a more hierarchical federal structure.

2. M.P. Singh (2019) provides a constitutional perspective on federalism in India, emphasizing how recent alignments have tested the limits of the Constitution's federal provisions. Singh argues that the Indian Constitution grants the Centre overriding powers in legislative, fiscal, and emergency matters, but these powers were historically tempered by coalition politics. The BJP's dominance, he notes, has exposed this latent centralization, particularly in the use of the governor's office, the implementation of central schemes, and the application of Article 356. Singh warns that without robust checks, such centralization risks undermining the "federal spirit" even if it remains constitutionally permissible. His work calls for strengthening institutions like the Inter-State Council and revisiting the balance between Union and state powers to restore cooperative federalism.

3. Subrata K. Mitra (2020) explored how India's party system shapes federal practices. He contends that the decline of coalition-era politics and the emergence of a dominant-party system have shifted the federal equilibrium. Mitra's research highlights that regional parties have historically acted as brokers of state interests, ensuring that national policies reflect diverse regional concerns. However, the recent fragmentation of opposition parties and the co-option of regional factions—such as seen in the Nationalist Congress Party split in Maharashtra—have weakened this balancing role. Mitra emphasizes that federalism is as much a product of political practice as of constitutional design, and when the political landscape favors a dominant national party, the federal bargain becomes increasingly asymmetrical.

4. Niraja Gopal Jayal (2021) focused on the democratic dimensions of federalism, arguing that the recent political realignments have reduced accountability at the state level. She highlights the growing trend of central agencies, such as the Enforcement Directorate and the Central Bureau of Investigation, being used in ways that influence political alignments within states. Jayal also critiques the proposed "One Nation, One Election" reform, viewing it as a potential threat to regional political discourse by subordinating state-level issues to national campaigns. Her scholarship stresses that federalism in India is not only a constitutional mechanism but also a democratic safeguard that ensures diverse voices are represented in governance. The erosion of this diversity, she argues, weakens both federalism and democracy.

5. Rohan Samarajiva (2021) though primarily known for his work in South Asian governance, has contributed to the debate on fiscal federalism in India. He analyzes how mechanisms like the Goods

and Services Tax (GST) and central grant allocations influence the autonomy of states. Samarajiva argues that while the GST was initially seen as a success of cooperative federalism, delays in compensation payments and unilateral decisions by the Centre have strained Centre–state relations. He points out that fiscal dependence often forces states to align politically with the Centre to secure resources, a dynamic that undermines the competitive element of federalism. His analysis calls for reforms to ensure predictable, rule based fiscal transfers that respect the autonomy of all states, regardless of their political alignment.

**SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY:**

The study highlights how recent political alignments in India have reshaped the balance between the Centre and the states, influencing fiscal relations, legislative authority, and regional autonomy. It is significant because it examines the long-term implications of dominant-party politics, regional party fragmentation, and central interventions on India’s federal framework. By analyzing policies such as the GST, delimitation proposals, and One Nation, One Election, the study offers insight into whether current trends strengthen or weaken cooperative and competitive federalism. Its findings are valuable for policymakers, scholars, and citizens seeking to preserve democratic pluralism in a diverse and evolving political landscape.

**OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:**

This study examines the impact of recent political alignments on India’s federal structure.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:**

This study is based on secondary sources of data such as articles, books, journals, research papers, websites and other sources.

**RESURGENCE OF DOMINANT-PARTY FEDERALISM UNDER BJP:**

India’s federal structure was designed to balance the autonomy of states with the power of a strong Centre. Since 2014, however, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has established a form of dominant-party federalism that significantly shifts this balance. Historically, India functioned under a form of cooperative federalism where coalitions were common, and regional parties wielded substantial influence in policymaking. This ensured that diverse regional aspirations found representation at the national level. The rise of the BJP as a single-party majority in the Lok Sabha disrupted this equilibrium. Under its leadership, the Centre has been able to push a series of national policies with minimal need for regional consensus. Initiatives such as the replacement of the Planning Commission with NITI Aayog were presented as mechanisms to enhance cooperative federalism. However, critics argue that NITI Aayog lacks the constitutional status and financial powers that the Planning Commission once held, reducing its ability to empower states meaningfully.

Similarly, the implementation of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) in 2017 was touted as a landmark of cooperative federalism. The GST Council brought together state finance ministers to negotiate tax structures and rates. However, over time, delays in GST compensation payments and the central government’s unilateral decisions on rate changes have strained Centre-state relations. Opposition-led states like Kerala, Punjab, and West Bengal have repeatedly voiced concerns over what they perceive as an erosion of fiscal autonomy. The office of the governor has also become a significant lever for the Centre. Governors, appointed by the President on the advice of the central government, have increasingly been accused of acting as agents of the Centre rather than neutral constitutional heads. Cases of governors delaying assent to bills, calling floor tests at politically strategic moments, or refusing to summon assemblies as requested by state governments have been documented in Tamil Nadu, Telangana, and West Bengal.

Moreover, the use of Article 356 to impose President’s Rule, though less frequent than in the past, remains a tool that periodically tilts the federal balance in favor of the Centre. The abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir in 2019 and the bifurcation of the state into two union territories

further exemplify this trend toward centralization. The move, executed without the consent of the state legislature (which was under President's Rule at the time), set a precedent for unilateral central actions in sensitive federal contexts.

This resurgence of dominant-party federalism is not without its supporters. Proponents argue that a strong Centre ensures national security, uniform economic reforms, and efficient governance, particularly in times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. They highlight how central coordination enabled vaccine distribution and relief measures to reach even the remotest states. However, detractors warn that this model risks alienating regional identities and diminishing the constitutional promise of a union of states. The spirit of federalism, they argue, lies not merely in constitutional provisions but in political practice. When the ruling party at the Centre also controls a majority of states, the mechanisms of dialogue and negotiation can give way to unilateral imposition.

### **Regional Splintering and Realignment: NCP Case Study**

One of the defining features of Indian federalism has been the strong presence of regional parties, which act as counterweights to central dominance and bring state-specific concerns to the national stage. However, recent political developments have witnessed significant splintering within regional parties, leading to realignments that often favor the ruling party at the Centre. A prominent example is the split in the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) in 2023. The NCP, historically led by Sharad Pawar, held considerable sway in Maharashtra, a politically influential state with a robust economy. Its influence was particularly significant because Maharashtra's politics often set the tone for wider opposition strategies at the national level. In 2023, the party faced an unprecedented split when Ajit Pawar, Sharad Pawar's nephew, broke away with a significant faction of legislators and declared allegiance to the BJP-Shiv Sena coalition that was already in power in the state.

The Election Commission of India recognized Ajit Pawar's faction as the legitimate NCP, granting it the party symbol and effectively sidelining the Sharad Pawar-led group. This development altered the state's political balance overnight, enabling the ruling coalition to consolidate power further without having to go to the polls. For the federal structure, this incident is illustrative of how internal fractures in regional parties can have broader implications for Centre-state relations. The Centre's role in facilitating or at least benefiting from such splits has been a subject of debate. Opposition parties allege that investigative agencies, legal pressures, and selective enforcement of anti-corruption cases are used to coerce or encourage defections. While this may not always be verifiable in legal terms, the perception of central overreach undermines the credibility of federal autonomy.

Maharashtra is not an isolated case. Similar patterns have been observed in other states where opposition alliances have fractured, leading to the installation of governments that are more closely aligned with the Centre. This trend diminishes the bargaining power of regional leaders and reduces the diversity of voices that shape India's democratic discourse. For federalism, the long-term consequence of such splintering is twofold. First, it weakens the institutional robustness of regional parties, making them more susceptible to central influence. Second, it reduces the scope for genuine coalition politics, which has historically acted as a balancing mechanism in India's federal design. Proponents of these realignments argue that they bring political stability and remove the obstacles posed by fragmented mandates. From this perspective, aligning with a dominant central party allows for smoother implementation of policies and access to federal resources without prolonged political deadlock. Supporters also contend that splits often reflect genuine ideological or leadership differences within regional parties and not merely external pressure.

However, critics see this as a worrying erosion of the principle of competitive federalism. When opposition parties are systematically weakened through internal engineering, the federal equilibrium shifts toward a unitary model in which state governments act more as extensions of the Centre than as autonomous entities

**One Nation, One Election – Threat to Regional Autonomy?**

The concept of “One Nation, One Election” (ONOE) has become a prominent topic in India’s recent political discourse. Proposed as a measure to synchronize elections for the Lok Sabha and all state assemblies, it is presented as a reform to reduce the cost and disruption of frequent elections. While the idea appears administratively efficient, its implications for federalism and regional autonomy are significant and controversial. Historically, India began with synchronized elections in the 1950s and early 1960s, but the cycle was broken due to premature dissolutions of state assemblies and the Lok Sabha. Since then, staggered elections have become the norm, enabling regional parties to contest and shape local politics independently of national electoral trends. This separation has been critical in ensuring that state-level issues—ranging from agrarian distress to regional identity and language rights— are not overshadowed by national campaigns. The ONOE proposal seeks to return to a synchronized model, citing reasons such as reduced public expenditure, uninterrupted governance, and improved voter participation. Advocates argue that the current system leads to a perpetual election mode, distracting governments from policymaking and encouraging populist measures over long-term planning. However, critics contend that this reform could marginalize regional voices and weaken the federal balance. When state elections coincide with national elections, the latter’s narrative often dominates. National parties with greater resources and visibility, such as the BJP and Congress, would likely gain a disproportionate advantage. Regional parties, whose electoral success often depends on mobilizing state-specific issues, fear being drowned out by larger national campaigns. Moreover, implementing ONOE would require substantial constitutional amendments and logistical changes. Articles related to the duration of state legislatures and Parliament, provisions for President’s Rule, and election scheduling would need revision. There is also concern about what would happen if a state government collapses mid-term—would it lead to President’s Rule for the remaining period, or would it force a nationwide election? Either scenario risks compromising the autonomy of state governments.

Opposition parties, particularly those in southern and eastern India, have criticized the proposal as a step toward centralization. They argue that federalism is not merely a constitutional structure but a living process that thrives on diversity in political timelines and priorities. Synchronizing elections, in their view, imposes a uniformity that India’s vast and varied polity cannot sustain without eroding regional agency. Supporters counter that ONOE does not inherently prevent regional parties from competing; it merely aligns electoral timelines. They point to the potential benefits of reducing election-related violence, administrative burdens on security forces, and economic slowdowns caused by repeated enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct. Yet, the broader concern is not logistical but structural. The repeated emphasis on efficiency and uniformity risks prioritizing central interests over regional aspirations. In a system where the Centre already wields significant fiscal and legislative powers, further synchronization of political processes could tilt the balance even more. If ONOE were to be implemented, its long-term impact on India’s federal structure could include the diminished salience of regional parties, reduced policy experimentation at the state level, and the consolidation of power in the hands of dominant national parties. Such a shift would run counter to the vision of competitive and cooperative federalism envisaged by the framers of the Constitution.

**Delimitation and the North–South Electoral Divide**

Delimitation, the redrawing of parliamentary and assembly constituencies based on updated population data, is a constitutional requirement intended to ensure fair representation. However, its pending implementation after 2026 has sparked a heated debate about its potential impact on India’s federal structure, particularly concerning the balance of power between northern and southern states. The root of the controversy lies in the demographic divergence between India’s regions. Southern states such as Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Karnataka have, over

decades, successfully implemented family planning measures, resulting in lower population growth rates. In contrast, several northern states, including Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan, continue to experience higher population growth.

Under the current system, based on the 1971 Census, representation in the Lok Sabha has remained frozen to encourage population control measures. If the freeze is lifted and delimitation is conducted using more recent census data, northern states stand to gain a significant number of seats in Parliament due to their larger populations, while southern states could lose relative influence despite their better performance in population management and socio-economic indicators. This prospect raises concerns of inequity and perceived punishment for success. Leaders from southern states argue that delimitation based solely on population would undermine the principle of cooperative federalism by redistributing political power toward states that have not achieved the same demographic transition. They contend that such a shift would erode their ability to influence national policy, particularly in areas like fiscal transfers, language policy, and resource allocation.

Northern leaders, however, maintain that representation must reflect demographic realities to preserve the principle of one person, one vote. They argue that overrepresentation of less populous states undermines the democratic ethos of equal representation for all citizens. The federal tension here is not merely about seat allocation but about the broader question of how India balances equity and efficiency in its governance model. Southern states contribute disproportionately to India's tax revenues, yet they fear that an increased northern representation could lead to policies that favor higher-population states at their expense. This includes concerns over central allocation of funds, centrally sponsored schemes, and future resource-sharing agreements.

Implementing delimitation without addressing these concerns risks deepening the already visible north-south divide in Indian politics. Regional parties in the south have begun framing this issue as one of federal injustice, with some even hinting at the possibility of greater regional assertion if their political influence is curtailed. One potential solution discussed by policy experts is a two-tiered representation formula that considers both population and performance indicators such as literacy, healthcare, and economic contribution. This would reward states that have managed their population growth effectively while still respecting demographic representation. Another dimension is the role of the Rajya Sabha, where states are represented equally regardless of population. Strengthening its influence could act as a counterbalance to the population-based redistribution in the Lok Sabha. The Centre's handling of this process will be crucial. A heavy-handed or unilateral approach could exacerbate regional alienation, while a negotiated, inclusive method may help maintain the delicate balance of India's federal compact. Transparent consultation with states and a phased approach could mitigate fears and allow time for political adaptation.

#### **CONCLUSION:**

The evolution of India's federal structure reflects a constant negotiation between central authority and state autonomy. Recent political alignments have tipped this balance in favor of the Centre, primarily due to the emergence of a dominant-party system and the strategic weakening or realignment of regional forces. Central tools such as the governor's office, GST Council mechanisms, and proposals like One Nation, One Election illustrate how the constitutional design has been used to consolidate central influence. While this trend has enabled policy standardization and more decisive national governance, it risks marginalizing regional identities and undermining competitive federalism, which has historically acted as a stabilizing force in India's democracy. States that contribute significantly to the economy, particularly in the south, express growing concerns over losing both political representation and fiscal equity, especially with impending delimitation. The path forward requires reinforcing cooperative federalism through transparent fiscal transfers, stronger intergovernmental bodies, and safeguards against politically motivated interventions in

state politics. India's diversity demands a federal model that is flexible, equitable, and consultative rather than one dominated by demographic or partisan majorities. The study concludes that the resilience of India's federalism will depend on the willingness of central and state actors to restore a culture of shared governance.

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