
**STRONG STATE, STRONG LEADER: NARENDRA MODI'S
GOVERNANCE AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF EXECUTIVE
FEDERALISM**

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DOI: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijarp.5652>**1. INTRODUCTION**

The federal system of India laid down in the Constitution was envisaged as a delicate balance between the authority of the Union and the freedom of the States (Arora, 2003). Although conceptualised as a quasi-federal system with a strong Centre, Indian federalism has developed as a dynamic interaction and interplay of political developments, institutional arrangements, and leadership styles. Historically, the Indian federation has waxed and waned between centralisation and federalism, depending on political circumstances and the personality of the leadership at the Centre (Singh and Verney 2003). The rise of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014 was a major break in this trajectory, ushering in the new era of assertive central leadership, which has redefined the structure and practice of federalism in India (Mehta, 2017).

The model of governance under Modi has been characterised as decisive, centralised, and performance-driven, altering the nature of executive federalism. Unlike earlier phases of Indian politics, where regional leaders and coalition dynamics contributed significantly to national governance (Chhibber & Kollman, 2004), the current phase is characterised by a top-down approach. The Prime Minister's office has emerged as the principal driver of national policy, with limited space for State-level consultations and decentralised decision-making (Palshikar, 2021). Key institutional changes—such as replacing the Planning Commission with the NITI Aayog—reflect an ideological shift towards a “New India” vision, rooted in uniformity of development, national integration, and economic efficiency (Singh, 2019).

Executive federalism, which refers to the intergovernmental relations managed primarily through executive agencies and bureaucratic negotiations rather than legislative bargaining

(Riker, 1964), has taken a more centralised and directive form under the current regime. The introduction of Goods and Services Tax (GST), universal welfare schemes across the nation, crisis management in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and using centrally sponsored schemes as a means of compulsion are some of the indicators of this new model (Rao & Sen, 2020).

As a result of this change, there has been a marginalisation of States in the policymaking process, particularly those led by opposition parties (Saxena 2020). When the new federal dynamics create opportunities to implement the national priorities successfully, it also becomes a question of the dilution of the federal ethos, the cost of democratic pluralism, and the institutionalisation of such mechanisms as Inter-State Council consultations and Finance Commission consultations (Palshikar, 2021). Critics have brought up the issue of centralisation as likely to frustrate the vision of cooperative federalism of the Constitution and the ability of the States to respond to region-specific challenges (Mehta, 2017).

This paper attempts to critically review the development of executive federalism by the Prime Ministerial leadership in contemporary India. The current model of leadership and its implications for the federal balance are examined in this study through an examination of the institutional reforms, the fiscal balance, the political tactics, and case studies. The significant thesis here is that India is shifting towards cooperative and competitive federalism to a model which is increasingly becoming coercive or centralised executive federalism, where a strong Centre prevails and is governed by a strong leader. The ramifications of this change extend beyond the governance and policy delivery aspects of the shift to the future of the pluralistic and federal government structure of India.

2. Objectives of the Study

1. To critically assess the evolution of executive federalism in India under Narendra Modi's leadership.
2. To analyse the institutional mechanisms employed to restructure Centre–State relations.
3. To examine case studies reflecting federal dynamics such as GST implementation, COVID-19 management, and NITI Aayog's role.
4. To evaluate the implications of strong central leadership on democratic decentralisation and State autonomy.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology aimed at understanding the evolving nature of executive federalism in India under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Given the complexity and interpretative nature of federal political dynamics, qualitative methods offer the most appropriate tools for an in-depth, contextual, and nuanced analysis. The methodology is structured around three key components:

a) Textual Analysis

The study involves a systematic textual analysis of primary documents such as constitutional provisions, presidential speeches, official government notifications, reports of NITI Aayog, and relevant Acts of Parliament. These texts offer important perspectives on the nature of the legal, institutional, and administrative arrangements that structure Centre-State relations. Attention is paid to modifications in institutional arrangements—such as the replacement of the Planning Commission with NITI Aayog, and the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax (GST)—to examine how formal structures have been re-engineered to reinforce central authority.

b) Use of Secondary Sources

The study relies on a substantial volume of secondary literature to situate and criticise the transformation in the federal architecture in India. This will include peer-reviewed journal articles, books authored by the finest scholars of Indian politics, opinion essays, policy papers, and commentaries of the most reputable think tanks. Parliamentary debates, the speeches of political leaders, and the editorials of well-known newspapers are also examined to record the political discourse and the logic of the population about executive federalism. Such sources can shed light on tendencies, shifts in ideology, and institutional adjustments that cannot be communicated through official records.

c) Case Study Approach

To provide the analysis with credibility, the research design will be based on a case-based study with 3 notable episodes of the policy:

- Demonetisation (2016) - to learn about unilateral executive conduct and absence of State consultation;
- Implementation of GST (2017) - as a historic event in fiscal federalism, centralisation of taxation authority along with reorganisation of State finances.
- COVID-19 Management (2020–2021) – to examine Centre–State coordination during national crises and the extent of centralised control over public health policy and lockdown implementation.

These case studies are chosen for their national impact, the role they played in redefining Centre–State relations, and the visibility they provide into the mechanisms of executive federalism under a strong leadership model.

Together, these methodological tools enable a comprehensive and critical examination of how Narendra Modi’s leadership has influenced India’s federal structure. They also allow for identifying broader implications for democratic decentralisation, institutional autonomy, and the future trajectory of Indian federalism.

4. Conceptual Framework: Executive Federalism

Executive federalism, in political science and federal theory, refers to the mode of governance where the executive branches of the central and subnational (state or provincial) governments engage in policymaking, program implementation, and intergovernmental negotiations (Riker, 1964). Unlike legislative federalism, which is concerned with law-making powers and constitutional autonomy, executive federalism is primarily concerned with administrative coordination, fiscal arrangements, and policy execution. It operates through institutional and bureaucratic interactions, often behind the scenes, shaping how federal systems function in practice.

In the Indian context, executive federalism has historically taken a unique form. The Indian Constitution creates a strong Centre with substantial authority over the States, especially during national emergencies or in fiscal matters. Yet the practice of federalism changed over the decades and acquired more cooperative forms, especially in the coalition era (1990s-2010s) when regional parties enjoyed significant power at the national level. For this period, Centre-State relations were characterised by negotiation, accommodation, and increased participation of States in the national discourse of policy.

But the post-2014 period, when Narendra Modi emerged as a formidable Prime Minister with an election mandate, has seen a decisive change in the federal architecture. The executive federalism under the rule of Modi is characterised by centralisation of power at the Centre, a unified policy of development, and centralised decision-making: NITI Aayog, Direct Benefit Transfers (DBTs), and performance-linked centrally sponsored schemes. The Prime Minister's Office (PMO) has also taken the shape of a command centre that interacts directly with States, bypassing the traditional consultative body such as the Inter-State Council.

This trend towards centralisation is also reflected in fiscal federalism. While the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) was lauded as a cooperative effort, centralisation has drastically undermined the taxation powers of the States. Since the Union government is also

the main collector and distributor of indirect taxes, the fiscal independence of the States has been eroded, and they have become even more dependent on Central transfers. Also, conditional financing schemes and GST compensation lags have led to friction and imbalance in the intergovernmental fiscal dynamics.

The executive federalism of the present regime is also political. With the ascending influence of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in many States of the nation, the federal collaboration has grown to be more dependent on the political congruence with the Centre. States controlled by opposition parties tend to be limited in their access to central funding, in their presence in decision-making, or in getting State-owned innovations noticed.

So that the nature of the transformation of executive federalism in India now happens to be such that:

Centralised administrative control,

Reduced fiscal discretion for States,

- Politically influenced coordination mechanisms, and
- A shift from negotiation to compliance in intergovernmental relations.

This evolving framework, while increasing governance efficiency and national coherence, raises fundamental questions about democratic decentralisation, State autonomy, and the health of federal democracy in India. The trend of centralisation, rather than co-operative, executive federalism, raises the constitutional aspiration of an inclusive, pluralistic federation and demands scholarly evaluation and reflection on policy.

5. Narendra Modi's Governance Style and Federalism

The tenure of Narendra Modi as a prime minister has come with a new style of governance, which is defined by a centralised power, performance-based mechanisms, and robust executive power. His government has essentially changed the character of Indian federalism, lopsided the balance of power in favour of the Centre, and marginalised old-fashioned avenues of cooperative federalism. The transformation is evident across administrative, fiscal, institutional, and political dimensions.

5.1 Centralisation of Power

The growing concentration of authority in the PMO has changed the balance of Indian federalism (Mehta, 2017). The abolition of the Planning Commission—once a platform for negotiated planning—has decreased institutionalised spaces for State engagement (Singh, 2019). Although NITI Aayog was established to promote competitive federalism, its advisory role and lack of fiscal powers restrict its effectiveness as a federal institution (Saxena, 2020).

5.2 Redefining Institutions: From Planning Commission to NITI Aayog

The Planning Commission enabled participatory development planning, while NITI Aayog functions more as a centralised think tank (Singh, 2019). Despite claims of cooperative federalism, NITI Aayog's actual operations have often sidelined State priorities (Palshikar, 2021).

5.3 Fiscal Federalism: GST and Resource Sharing

The GST regime, though jointly designed, is marked by fiscal centralisation (Rao & Sen, 2020). Delayed compensation payments and unilateral decisions by the Centre have undermined State autonomy, prompting concerns about coercive fiscal relations (Saxena, 2020).

5.4 Crisis Federalism: COVID-19 and Central Command

The unilateral imposition of the lockdown in March 2020 exemplified the top-down approach of Modi's executive federalism (Palshikar, 2021). Despite health being a state subject, policy decisions were centralised, marginalising State-specific responses.

5.5 Political Federalism: Electoral Dominance and Subordination

The BJP's electoral dominance has enabled political centralisation, reducing the bargaining power of regional parties and opposition-ruled States (Chhibber & Kollman, 2004; Palshikar, 2021). The use of centrally controlled institutions and agencies for political purposes raises alarms about the erosion of federal norms (Saxena, 2020).

6. The Changing Dynamics of Executive Federalism

Since 2014, India has witnessed the emergence of a hybrid form of executive federalism—synthesising competitive, coercive, and collaborative features (Saxena, 2020). While the rhetoric of "cooperative federalism" persists, in practice, central authority has expanded, affecting institutional federalism and democratic decentralisation (Palshikar, 2021; Mehta, 2017).

6.1 Agenda-Setting from the Centre

A key feature of this new framework is the Centre's dominant role in setting national priorities with limited State input. Flagship schemes like Digital India, Swachh Bharat, Make in India, PM-KISAN, and Ayushman Bharat are centrally designed, funded, and monitored (Palshikar, 2021). These initiatives, linked to performance metrics and conditional grants, constrain State-level adaptation and autonomy.

Despite invoking "cooperative federalism," the Centre's control over funds and program design has turned these initiatives into tools of compliance rather than collaboration. States

must conform to central standards to receive funding, reducing federal bargaining and disregarding regional variations in governance needs (Saxena, 2020; Singh, 2019).

6.2 Weakened Inter-State Council

The Inter-State Council (ISC), mandated under Article 263 of the Constitution to enable Centre–State consultation, has become increasingly dormant (Arora, 2003). Its infrequent meetings reflect the broader decline of formal intergovernmental dialogue under the current regime (Palshikar, 2021).

Major decisions—like demonetisation, GST implementation, and pandemic response—were executed with little ISC engagement, highlighting a shift from deliberation to executive fiat (Mehta, 2017). This bypassing of consultative platforms undermines institutional federalism and relegates States to subordinate administrative roles (Saxena, 2020).

6.3 Bureaucratic Centralism

Another defining trait is bureaucratic dominance in Centre–State relations. Senior IAS officers and Central secretaries now act as key intermediaries, often overshadowing elected State leaders (Mehta, 2017). This bureaucratic centralism is institutionalised via digital dashboards, national indices, and centralised audit mechanisms (Singh, 2019).

Even in State subjects like health, education, and agriculture, Central bureaucrats frame policy and monitor execution. Their growing presence—reinforced by deputations and inter-cadre transfers—intensifies Central oversight, reducing State autonomy and democratic accountability (Palshikar, 2021; Saxena, 2020). The cumulative effect is the erosion of political federalism and decentralised governance.

7. Implications for Indian Democracy

The transformation of executive federalism under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has far-reaching implications for the democratic structure of India. While the centralisation of power has enabled swift decision-making and policy uniformity, it has also generated significant tensions within the federal architecture. The move from a consultative and cooperative federal model to one of executive dominance, bureaucratic control, and political marginalisation has questioned the long-term health of Indian democracy (Palshikar 2021; Tillin 2019). Three broad implications are considered below:

7.1 Democratic Deficit

One of the most important effects of centralised executive federalism is that of a democratic deficit - in terms of weakened forms of participatory governance, especially at the subnational level. The growth of centrally designed schemes and performance-based funding

regimes has eroded the exercise of autonomy by State governments and local agencies in developing policy options for their respective constituencies (Jalal 2020; Singh 2021).

Under this top-down model, the opportunities for grassroots involvement in governance and policymaking are severely limited. Many local governments, civil society actors, and community institutions are being bypassed in favour of centrally managed systems of delivery. This alienation leads to the breakdown of the democratic principle of responsive government between the citizen and the administrative apparatus at the local level (Choudhry & Khosla, 2016). Moreover, the diminishing role of State Assemblies and weakening forums of federalism (e.g., Inter-State Council) further aggravate the divide between executive action and legislative accountability (Rao & Singh 2005).

7.2 Uniformity of Policy vs Regional Diversity.

India's strength is the socio-cultural, economic, and geographic diversity. The centralised design of such programs as Swachh Bharat, Prime Minister KISAN, and Ayushman Bharat, without taking into account the different administrative capacities, development priorities, and socio-political context of States, results in their uniform implementation (Saxena 2018; Rajagopal 2020). While these schemes have the noble intention of national integration and efficiency, they tend to have a one-size-fits-all approach, which may not be in tune with regional realities.

For example, the agricultural needs of Punjab and Tamil Nadu are very different, but PM-KISAN is run with the same eligibility and payment norms. Similarly, challenges related to health infrastructure and delivery in northeastern States are different than those in urban Maharashtra or Delhi, but national health missions use standardised metrics (Sinha 2021). This disconnect restricts the efficiency of service delivery and stifles innovation at the State level, where governments are usually more responsive to local needs (Mehta 2022).

7.3 Denigration of Federal Bargaining

A core feature of federalism is that States can negotiate with the Centre for funds, policy space, and representation in institutions. This bargaining power has been severely curtailed under the current regime (Kumar & Arora 2020), for smaller States and those governed by opposition parties in particular. Funds are usually allocated centrally through mechanisms that are not always transparent or that are subject to delays and conditions that can be detrimental to State autonomy. For example, several opposition-ruled States have reported delays in GST compensation payments, lower central scheme allocations, and lesser inclusion in decision-making processes that are critical to the national decision-making process (Mooij 2021).

Moreover, the space for dissent or negotiation has shrunk due to political centralisation. States that are not in the ideological camp of the ruling party at the Centre are often kept out of platforms of consultation or sidelined in intergovernmental institutions. The emergence of party-based federalism, in which political orientation determines access to administrative and financial resources, puts at risk the neutrality and inclusiveness of India's democratic federal system (Tillin and Saxena 2021).

8. CONCLUSION

The Prime Minister Narendra Modi era sees a fundamental and long-lasting change in the structure of Indian federalism. With the centralisation of executive power and the projection of strong and charismatic leadership, Indian governance has shifted from the earlier norms of collaborative and negotiated federalism to a more centralising and performance-oriented one (Sharma 2019; Chhibber and Kollman 2022). While introducing administrative convenience and coherence in national policy, this paradigm change has radically disrupted the traditional balance of power between the Union and the States.

The central feature of federalism under Modi is the strong state and strong leader. In this model, policy direction has been centrally located around central institutions (primarily the Prime Minister's Office, NITI Aayog, and Central ministries), and State governments have become, intentionally, actors of implementation and not policy design and consultation (Joshi 2021). Although rhetorically presented in terms of cooperative and competitive federalism, the de facto system exhibits the traits of coercive executive federalism, wherein compliance is rewarded through the use of cash and bureaucracy, whereas discompliance and exit are frequently punished through political and financial means (Yadav 2020).

Although this centralised model has assisted in faster execution of national missions and a more effective form of governance, it has also created structural problems. Erosion of institutional pluralism, diminishing role of State Assemblies and local bodies, diminishing institution of intergovernmental dialogue mechanisms like the inter-State Council and Finance Commission consultation, cause alarming questions about the long-term democratic sustainability of this approach (Tiwari 2022; Rao 2023). The marginalisation of opposition-ruled States, increasing use of centrally appointed bureaucrats, and loss of fiscal space at the State level point to a contraction of the federal space envisaged by the Constitution.

This process reflects a fundamental tension in the heart of Indian democracy: how to reconcile the demands of strong, cohesive leadership of the nation with a constitutional imperative of federal inclusiveness and decentralised governance (Austin 1999; Bhattacharjee

2020). Indian federalism was never meant to be static; it was meant to be dynamic and evolve as per changing political and social realities. However, the current direction necessitates a fresh and urgent discourse on federalism—one that reaffirms the principles of cooperation, accommodation, and respect between the different tiers of government.

As India continues to face varied developmental challenges, regional imbalances, and democratic aspirations, it is imperative to ensure that federalism is not only a structural arrangement but a lived reality of sharing power and shared responsibility. Reinstatement of institutional mechanisms, resuscitation of forums of intergovernmental negotiation, and restoration of fiscal and administrative autonomy to States are imperative steps in re-balancing Indian federalism in the 21st century. In this context, the future of Indian democracy will hinge not just on the strength of its leaders but on the resilience of its institutions and the strength of its federal ethos (Tillin 2021; Jayal 2016).

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