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Administrative Federalism in India: Constitutional Distribution of Power and the Changing Role of the Union

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Abstract

Indian federalism is frequently analysed through the distribution of legislative and financial powers between the Union and the States. The administrative dimension, however, is equally significant because constitutional government ultimately depends upon the implementation of law through executive institutions operating across the same territory and population. This article examines administrative federalism as a distinct dimension of the Indian constitutional structure. It analyses the relationship between Articles 73 and 162, the administrative relations provisions in Articles 256–263, the role of Article 355 and Article 365, the constitutional position of the All India Services, and the institutional mechanisms of intergovernmental coordination. It further examines the Supreme Court's federalism jurisprudence, particularly State of Rajasthan v Union of India, S R Bommai v Union of India, State (NCT of Delhi) v Union of India and Government of NCT of Delhi v Union of India. The article argues that Indian administrative federalism cannot adequately be characterised either as straightforward centralisation or as an ideal model of cooperative federalism. Instead, the Constitution deliberately combines State administrative responsibility with significant Union powers of coordination, direction, delegation and, in exceptional circumstances, intervention. The changing role of the Union is therefore best understood as a constitutional relationship of differentiated autonomy and interdependence. The article concludes that the durability of this arrangement depends less upon eliminating Union influence than upon ensuring that Union powers are exercised within constitutional limits, through consultation and institutional accountability, while preserving the political and administrative space necessary for meaningful State self-government.

Keywords: Administrative Federalism; Union–State Relations; Indian Constitution; Executive Power; Cooperative Federalism; State Autonomy

1. Introduction

Federalism in India is ordinarily discussed through the constitutional distribution of legislative and financial powers. That emphasis is understandable: the Seventh Schedule allocates legislative subjects between the Union and the States, while Part XII establishes an elaborate framework for financial relations. Yet legislation is only one component of governmental authority. Laws must be

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administered, public programmes must be implemented, public officials must exercise statutory powers, and constitutional responsibilities must be translated into everyday governance. These functions bring the Union and State executives into continuous contact. Administrative federalism is therefore not a secondary question but a central feature of the constitutional design.

The Indian Constitution establishes a Union and a plurality of State governments, each with constitutionally recognised spheres of executive authority. Article 73 generally connects Union executive power with matters upon which Parliament has legislative competence, while Article 162 similarly defines the extent of State executive power by reference to the matters upon which a State Legislature may legislate. The arrangement is nevertheless qualified by specific constitutional provisions governing Union–State administrative relations. Articles 256 and 257 permit the Union, within constitutionally defined circumstances, to issue directions to States; Article 258 permits the Union to entrust functions to States; Article 258A provides for reciprocal entrustment by States to the Union; and Article 263 contemplates an institutional mechanism for coordination. The text thus combines autonomy with interdependence rather than establishing two completely separate administrative systems (Constitution of India 1950).

This architecture creates an important constitutional question. If State executive power is constitutionally protected, why does the Constitution confer express directive powers upon the Union? Conversely, if the Union possesses substantial powers of coordination and direction, what constitutional principles prevent administrative federalism from becoming simple hierarchical government? The question becomes more significant when administrative institutions such as the All India Services, centrally coordinated programmes, Governors, intergovernmental councils and emergency mechanisms are considered alongside the bare constitutional text.

This article addresses that problem by treating administrative federalism as the interaction of four elements: constitutional allocation of executive authority; Union powers of coordination and direction; institutions of shared administration; and judicially enforceable limits on governmental power. The article does not assume that every expansion of Union activity constitutes unconstitutional centralisation. Nor does it treat every form of intergovernmental cooperation as evidence of cooperative federalism. Instead, it asks how the constitutional system distributes responsibility and how that distribution has been interpreted and operationalised over time.

The principal research question is: how has the constitutional framework governing Union–State administrative relations shaped the distribution of executive power in India, and to what extent has the role of the Union evolved within that framework? The article advances the argument that Indian administrative federalism is best understood as a system of differentiated autonomy and constitutional interdependence. State governments retain constitutionally meaningful executive spheres, but the Constitution simultaneously gives the Union tools necessary to secure national legal compliance, protect Union functions, coordinate matters of common concern and respond to exceptional constitutional situations. The constitutional challenge is therefore not to choose between Union authority and State autonomy, but to preserve the conditions under which both can operate consistently with the constitutional distribution of power.

Methodologically, the article adopts a doctrinal and constitutional approach. It analyses constitutional provisions, leading Supreme Court decisions, official materials concerning

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Centre–State relations, and the recommendations of the Sarkaria and Punchhi Commissions. The institutional discussion is used to connect constitutional doctrine with the administrative structures through which Union–State relations operate. The article does not attempt an empirical measurement of all Union interventions in State administration; instead, it develops a legal framework for assessing the constitutional character and limits of such intervention.

2. Conceptualising Administrative Federalism

2.1 Federalism and Executive Power

Federalism is fundamentally concerned with the constitutional distribution of governmental authority. Classical accounts emphasise divided spheres of authority in which the central and regional governments possess constitutionally protected powers. Modern approaches, however, also recognise interdependence: contemporary governments frequently require coordination because public problems cross territorial boundaries and because the same citizens experience policies made at multiple levels. The Supreme Court has acknowledged this conceptual movement. In State (NCT of Delhi) v Union of India, the Constitution Bench discussed both the classical conception of federalism as divided and coordinate government and the more contemporary emphasis on interdependence (State (NCT of Delhi) v Union of India 2018).

Administrative federalism may therefore be defined as the constitutional and institutional arrangement through which executive functions are distributed, coordinated and exercised between different levels of government. It includes more than the formal extent of executive power. It encompasses mechanisms for implementation of laws, administrative delegation, intergovernmental consultation, shared services, directions, financial and technical coordination, and exceptional intervention. The concept is especially important in India because the Union and State governments administer overlapping programmes and operate through institutions that are constitutionally distinct but practically interconnected.

2.2 Autonomy, Coordination and Direction

Three concepts are particularly useful for analysing Indian administrative federalism: autonomy, coordination and direction. Autonomy means that State governments possess an independent constitutional sphere of executive responsibility and are not merely local administrative agencies of the Union. Coordination recognises that separate governments may need to act together to implement laws, manage inter-State problems and achieve common constitutional objectives. Direction, by contrast, involves a stronger form of Union influence in which the Constitution authorises the Union to require specified State executive conduct. The constitutional legitimacy of direction consequently depends upon the scope and purpose of the relevant provision.

This distinction matters because the existence of Union directions does not by itself establish a unitary system. In a federation, limited directive powers can exist where necessary to preserve the integrity of the constitutional order. What matters is whether such powers have constitutional limits and whether States retain meaningful spheres of independent governmental action. The Indian

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Constitution expressly supplies both Union directive powers and State executive authority, indicating that neither principle can be understood in isolation.

3. Constitutional Architecture of Union–State Administrative Relations

3.1 Articles 73 and 162: The Basic Distribution of Executive Power

Article 73 provides the basic constitutional basis of Union executive power, while Article 162 performs the corresponding function for State executive power. The general design is that executive authority follows legislative competence. The Supreme Court has recognised this relationship while distinguishing it from the more specific administrative controls contained in Part XI. The result is not a complete separation of executive functions, particularly because concurrent legislative fields, constitutional exceptions and parliamentary legislation can create administrative interdependence.

Article 162 is particularly important for the conception of State autonomy. It establishes a constitutionally grounded State executive sphere rather than merely delegating administrative authority from the Union. This distinction is fundamental: a State government does not administer State subjects because the Union permits it to do so. Its authority derives from the Constitution. At the same time, the State executive is subject to express constitutional limitations, including those contained in Articles 256 and 257.

3.2 Article 256: Compliance with Parliamentary Law

Article 256 requires every State to exercise its executive power so as to ensure compliance with laws made by Parliament and existing laws applicable in the State. It also extends Union executive power to the giving of directions to a State when such directions appear necessary for that purpose (Constitution of India 1950). The provision demonstrates the Constitution's concern with effective implementation: parliamentary legislation would have limited practical effect if a State executive could simply refuse to implement it within its territory.

The provision nevertheless needs to be understood within its textual purpose. Article 256 does not establish a general power of the Union to direct States on every matter of administration. Its express connection is compliance with parliamentary and existing law. The distinction between a direction necessary to secure legal compliance and a general policy instruction is therefore constitutionally significant. The more closely a direction is connected with implementation of valid Union legislation, the stronger its textual foundation; the further it moves toward unrelated control over State policy, the more difficult its constitutional justification becomes.

3.3 Article 257: Protection of Union Executive Functions

Article 257 provides that State executive power must be exercised so as not to impede or prejudice the exercise of Union executive power. It also authorises Union directions in specified circumstances, including communications declared to be of national or military importance and protection of railways, subject to the constitutional provisions concerning additional costs (Constitution of India

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1950). The provision reflects a second dimension of administrative federalism: States must not exercise their own executive authority in a way that disables the Union from performing its constitutionally assigned functions.

Articles 256 and 257 therefore operate as constitutional interfaces rather than as a general hierarchy. Article 256 links State administration to compliance with parliamentary law; Article 257 protects the exercise of Union executive power. Their significance lies in the fact that they convert certain intergovernmental conflicts from political disagreements into questions governed by constitutional standards.

3.4 Articles 258 and 258A: Administrative Flexibility

The Constitution also recognises that rigid separation of administrative functions can be inefficient. Article 258 allows the President, with the consent of the State Governor, to entrust Union functions to a State government or its officers. Parliament may also confer powers and impose duties upon State authorities through legislation in specified circumstances. Article 258A provides a reciprocal mechanism through which a State may entrust functions to the Union with Union consent (Constitution of India 1950).

These provisions illustrate that federalism is not necessarily synonymous with administrative duplication. Shared implementation can reduce institutional costs and allow one level of government to use the administrative capacity of another. At the same time, the consent requirement in Article 258(1) and Article 258A is constitutionally significant because it distinguishes consensual delegation from unilateral direction. Article 258(2), however, demonstrates that Parliament can create statutory administrative obligations for State authorities even where the State Legislature lacks legislative competence over the underlying subject. The Constitution consequently accommodates both cooperative and compulsory forms of administrative interaction.

3.5 Article 263 and Intergovernmental Coordination

Article 263 provides for the establishment of an Inter-State Council where the President considers that public interest would be served by such a body. Its functions may include advising upon disputes, discussing matters of common interest and making recommendations for better coordination of policy and action (Constitution of India 1950). This provision is important because it shows that the constitutional response to federal tensions is not limited to command and adjudication. Consultation is itself part of the constitutional architecture.

The contemporary institutional picture supports the continuing relevance of this approach. The Ministry of Home Affairs describes the Inter-State Council and Zonal Councils as mechanisms concerned with Centre–State and inter-State issues. The Zonal Councils, created under the States Reorganisation Act 1956, provide forums in which States and Union representatives address regional and intergovernmental issues (Ministry of Home Affairs 2024). These institutions do not replace constitutional allocation, but they can reduce the need to resolve every disagreement through unilateral action or litigation.

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4. The Union's Administrative Reach

4.1 Administrative Direction and the Problem of Centralisation

The strongest argument for describing Indian administrative federalism as Union-tilted arises from the combination of directive powers, constitutional duties and institutional capacity. The Union possesses nationwide administrative resources and may issue directions within the fields recognised by the Constitution. Article 365 further provides that where a State fails to comply with directions given in the exercise of Union executive power under constitutional provisions, the President may consider that a situation has arisen in which the State government cannot be carried on in accordance with the Constitution. This provision connects ordinary administrative relations with the exceptional machinery of Article 356.

Yet the existence of a constitutional connection between non-compliance and possible President's Rule does not mean that every disagreement with the Union can constitutionally justify intervention. The Supreme Court's federalism jurisprudence has placed important limits upon the use of Article 356 and emphasised the constitutional status of State governments. In S R Bommai v Union of India, the Court subjected presidential action under Article 356 to judicial review and treated federalism as a fundamental feature of the constitutional arrangement (S R Bommai v Union of India 1994).

4.2 All India Services and Shared Administrative Capacity

The All India Services occupy a distinctive position in administrative federalism. They create an administrative cadre whose institutional structure connects Union and State governments. Officers may serve within State administrations while belonging to services governed through a national framework. This arrangement gives the Union a continuing administrative presence within State governance while also supplying States with a common professional administrative structure.

The federal significance of the All India Services is therefore ambivalent in constitutional terms. On one hand, shared services facilitate national standards, administrative mobility and coordination. On the other, service control and cadre management can become sites of disagreement concerning the appropriate balance between Union and State authority. The legal question is not whether shared services are compatible with federalism—they plainly form part of the constitutional design—but how their administration should respect the separate democratic accountability of State governments.

4.3 Centrally Coordinated Governance

Contemporary governance increasingly involves programmes in which policy design, funding, standards and implementation are distributed among multiple levels of government. This is visible in fields such as public health, education, infrastructure, social welfare, disaster management and environmental governance. Such arrangements cannot easily be classified as either purely Union or purely State administration. They are forms of intergovernmental administration.

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The constitutional significance of these arrangements depends upon their legal basis, funding structure and administrative conditions. A cooperative scheme in which States participate in policy design is conceptually different from a programme in which Union conditions substantially determine State administrative choices. The difference is therefore not simply whether Union funds or standards are involved, but whether the arrangement preserves meaningful State discretion and institutional accountability.

4.4 Governors as a Constitutional Interface

The Governor occupies a constitutionally distinctive position because the office connects the Union's constitutional authority with the State's elected government. Questions concerning gubernatorial discretion, assent to legislation and reports under Article 356 can consequently have federal implications. The office should not be treated as a simple administrative extension of the Union: the Governor is a constitutional functionary within the State's institutional structure. Nevertheless, the appointment mechanism and certain constitutional functions create potential points of tension between Union and State political authorities.

The federal issue is therefore one of constitutional role fidelity. Where the Governor acts within an independently conferred constitutional discretion, the office performs a constitutional function. Where the office is perceived as transmitting partisan or executive preferences of the Union into State governance, questions of federal accountability arise. The judicial treatment of gubernatorial powers is consequently relevant to the broader question of how constitutional institutions mediate administrative federalism.

4.5 Article 355 and Exceptional Union Responsibility

Article 355 imposes duties upon the Union to protect every State against external aggression and internal disturbance and to ensure that the government of every State is carried on in accordance with the Constitution. The Union's constitutional responsibilities in internal security therefore coexist with the fact that police and public order are principally State subjects. The Ministry of Home Affairs itself describes this relationship as involving Union assistance, intelligence sharing, guidance and support while acknowledging the State responsibility for police and public order (Ministry of Home Affairs 2026).

This illustrates an important feature of Indian administrative federalism: Union responsibility does not necessarily mean Union administration. The Constitution can impose a national responsibility while leaving ordinary implementation to State authorities. The federal question is consequently whether Union assistance remains supportive and constitutionally connected to the Union's responsibility, or becomes a basis for substituting Union administration for State government without the constitutional conditions for doing so.

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5. Judicial Construction of Administrative Federalism

5.1 State of Rajasthan v Union of India

In State of Rajasthan v Union of India, the Supreme Court considered the constitutional relationship between the Union and States in the context of Article 356. The decision forms an important stage in the development of judicial thinking about the limits of Union power. Although the case arose in a political context, its significance extends beyond President's Rule because it illustrates the difficulty of reconciling Union constitutional responsibility with State political autonomy (State of Rajasthan v Union of India 1977).

The case also demonstrates why administrative federalism cannot be reduced to textual analysis of Articles 256–263. The practical significance of Union directions depends upon the broader constitutional structure, including Articles 355, 356 and 365. A direction may have an administrative form while carrying consequences for the survival of an elected State government. The constitutional context therefore matters to the assessment of Union administrative authority.

5.2 S R Bommai and the Constitutional Status of Federalism

S R Bommai is a central authority for understanding the constitutional protection of State governments. The Supreme Court subjected the use of Article 356 to judicial review and rejected the idea that presidential satisfaction was beyond judicial scrutiny. The judgment also treated federalism as a basic feature of the Constitution. The decision therefore changed the legal environment in which Union intervention in State administration operates (S R Bommai v Union of India 1994).

The significance of Bommai for administrative federalism is indirect but profound. If federalism is a constitutional principle, Union administrative powers cannot be interpreted in a manner that effectively reduces States to subordinate administrative agencies. At the same time, the recognition of federalism does not erase constitutional provisions that give the Union legitimate authority over matters of national concern. The judgment therefore supports a model of constitutionally bounded Union power rather than absolute State autonomy.

5.3 State (NCT of Delhi) v Union of India

The 2018 Constitution Bench decision in State (NCT of Delhi) v Union of India provides a particularly useful theoretical foundation. The Court discussed the classical model of coordinate governmental spheres as well as modern understandings of federalism based on interdependence. The judgment emphasised constitutional morality, representative government and the need to interpret institutional powers in a manner consistent with the constitutional distribution of authority (State (NCT of Delhi) v Union of India 2018).

Although the National Capital Territory of Delhi has a special constitutional status and cannot simply be treated as a State, the case has broader conceptual relevance. It illustrates the Court's movement away from a purely hierarchical understanding of constitutional power.

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Administrative authority must be interpreted in light of democratic accountability and the institutional purpose of federal arrangements. Interdependence does not mean subordination; equally, autonomy does not mean isolation.

5.4 Government of NCT of Delhi v Union of India

The Supreme Court's later decision concerning services in the National Capital Territory further demonstrates how administrative control can become the central point of a federal dispute. The case involved the allocation of authority over civil services and therefore brought administrative power into direct connection with democratic accountability. The Court's reasoning reaffirmed the importance of representative government and the constitutional distribution of powers while recognising the special constitutional position of Delhi (Government of NCT of Delhi v Union of India 2023).

For the study of administrative federalism, the broader lesson is that control over officials is not merely an internal managerial question. In a federal democracy, the authority to direct public officials can affect which elected government is politically accountable for administration. Questions of service control, therefore, have constitutional dimensions whenever administrative responsibility is divided between different levels of government.

6. From Centralised Administration to Cooperative Federalism?

6.1 The Sarkaria Commission

The Sarkaria Commission represented a major institutional examination of Centre–State relations. Its work recognised that the Constitution provides both for distribution of executive power and for mechanisms of Union direction and cooperation. The Commission's approach is significant because it did not treat Centre–State relations as a choice between absolute autonomy and central command. Its recommendations sought to make the constitutional structure work through consultation, restraint and institutional mechanisms.

The administrative chapter of the Commission's report begins from the proposition that executive power is distributed between the Union and States and that executive functions ordinarily correspond with legislative competence. It also examines the special mechanisms in Articles 256–263. The report's continuing relevance lies in its recognition that constitutional powers may require conventions and practices of restraint to prevent formal powers from generating unnecessary intergovernmental conflict (Sarkaria Commission 1988).

6.2 The Punchhi Commission

The Commission on Centre–State Relations chaired by Justice Madan Mohan Punchhi was constituted in 2007 and submitted its report in 2010. The Government of India records that the Commission produced seven volumes and 273 recommendations covering constitutional governance, Centre–State financial relations, decentralised governance, internal security, criminal justice,

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environment, infrastructure, socio-economic development and public policy (Ministry of Home Affairs 2021).

The breadth of the Punchhi Commission's mandate is important because it reflects the expansion of administrative federalism beyond the narrow question of Article 256 directions. Contemporary governance requires cooperation across policy fields that do not fit neatly into one constitutional list. The Commission's work consequently reinforces the proposition that intergovernmental relations are increasingly about managing interdependence rather than merely policing constitutional boundaries.

6.3 Inter-State and Zonal Institutions

The Inter-State Council and Zonal Councils provide institutional settings for negotiation. The Ministry of Home Affairs reports that Zonal Councils operate as common forums for States and Union representatives and that their standing committees include Chief Secretaries. Such institutions matter because administrative federalism depends not only upon courts and constitutional commands but also upon repeated interaction among public officials (Ministry of Home Affairs 2024).

Institutional consultation can perform two constitutional functions. First, it can prevent disputes by allowing governments to identify practical difficulties before they become legal conflicts. Second, it can increase the legitimacy of Union initiatives by incorporating State perspectives. Consultation cannot legally transform an unconstitutional exercise of power into a constitutional one, but it can strengthen the functioning of constitutionally valid cooperative arrangements.

7. Constitutional Tensions in Contemporary Administrative Federalism

7.1 National Standards versus State Autonomy

A central difficulty in Indian federalism is that many public objectives require minimum national standards while implementation remains substantially dependent upon State institutions. Health, education, environmental protection, disaster management and infrastructure are examples in which territorial variation must coexist with national policy objectives. The Union may therefore seek uniformity in outcomes while States seek discretion in methods.

The constitutional solution should not be framed as absolute uniformity or absolute diversity. The more defensible approach is differentiated implementation: national law or standards may establish common constitutional or statutory objectives, while States retain reasonable discretion over administrative methods where the constitutional scheme permits it. Such differentiation recognises the value of national coordination without treating State variation as administrative failure.

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7.2 Union Directions and Constitutional Limits

The directive powers under Articles 256 and 257 should be interpreted according to their constitutional purposes. A broad reading that permits directions on any matter of State administration would risk converting the State executive into a subordinate administrative authority. A narrow reading that renders the provisions practically ineffective would, however, disregard the constitutional need for national legal compliance and protection of Union functions.

The appropriate interpretive approach is therefore purpose-based and structurally informed. A direction should have a clear constitutional connection with the provision authorising it; it should pursue the legitimate objective identified by that provision; and it should not be used as an indirect means of controlling matters constitutionally entrusted to State governments. Judicial review provides an important safeguard where the boundary becomes contested.

7.3 Administrative Accountability

Federalism also raises a question of democratic accountability. If a State implements a programme designed substantially by the Union, who is responsible for its success or failure? If State officials are subject to national service structures while performing State functions, to whom are they administratively and politically accountable? These questions demonstrate that administrative federalism is not merely about institutional convenience. It affects the relationship between governmental power and electoral responsibility.

Shared administration should therefore be accompanied by clarity concerning responsibility. Where Union and State governments jointly administer a policy, the legal and administrative framework should identify the respective responsibilities of each. Ambiguity can produce blame shifting, reduce transparency and weaken democratic accountability. Clear allocation of functions, consultation procedures and reporting responsibilities can mitigate these problems.

8. Reconsidering the Changing Role of the Union

The phrase ‘changing role of the Union’ should not be understood simply as a linear movement from decentralisation toward centralisation. The constitutional history is more complex. The Union has always possessed significant administrative and emergency powers. What has changed is the context in which those powers operate. Economic integration, nationwide regulatory frameworks, technological networks, environmental problems, public-health emergencies and inter-State infrastructure have increased the number of policy areas requiring coordination across governmental levels.

The growth of Union involvement can therefore have at least three different explanations. First, it may reflect the exercise of powers expressly granted by the Constitution. Second, it may result from voluntary cooperation and shared programmes. Third, it may arise from institutional or political centralisation that exceeds the functional logic of federal cooperation. These possibilities

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should not be conflated. An increase in Union activity is not, by itself, evidence of constitutional erosion.

The constitutional question is consequently one of institutional balance. Union authority is legitimate where it rests on constitutional or statutory competence and is exercised for constitutionally relevant purposes. State autonomy is protected where State governments retain meaningful authority over their constitutionally assigned functions. Cooperative federalism operates where both levels participate in policy development and implementation without dissolving their separate constitutional identities.

This framework also explains why the judiciary has increasingly emphasised federalism, representative government and constitutional structure. Courts are not required to choose a permanent allocation of power between the Union and States. Their role is to preserve the constitutional boundaries within which political governments can negotiate and administer shared problems. In this sense, federalism is both a legal allocation and an institutional practice.

9. Reforming Administrative Federalism

9.1 Institutionalising Consultation

Consultation should become a routine feature of significant Union initiatives affecting State administration, particularly where implementation costs or administrative burdens will fall substantially upon States. The Inter-State Council and Zonal Councils can provide structured forums for such consultation. Consultation should ideally occur before major policy or legislative decisions rather than only after disputes arise.

9.2 Clarifying the Use of Union Directions

The constitutional provisions on Union directions should be accompanied by transparent administrative practice. Directions should identify their constitutional or statutory basis, the precise objective sought, the expected duration and the consequences of non-compliance. Such requirements would not alter the constitutional power itself but would improve accountability and make judicial and political review more meaningful.

9.3 Protecting State Administrative Space

State autonomy requires more than formal legislative competence. States need practical administrative capacity to exercise their constitutional responsibilities. Cooperative federalism should therefore support capacity building, technical assistance and institutional development rather than treating Union coordination as a substitute for State administration. The principle should be assistance with accountability, not supervision without constitutional basis.

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9.4 Strengthening Intergovernmental Dispute Resolution

Not every Centre–State disagreement should become constitutional litigation. Stronger intergovernmental mechanisms can provide opportunities for negotiation, technical assessment and compromise. This is especially important for administrative disputes involving implementation standards, shared programmes, personnel and infrastructure. Judicial review remains essential where constitutional rights or structural limitations are implicated, but institutional dialogue can reduce the number of disputes reaching that stage.

9.5 Accountability in Shared Administration

Where functions are jointly administered, agreements and schemes should clearly allocate responsibility for funding, staffing, implementation, monitoring and reporting. Public accountability is strengthened when citizens can identify which level of government is responsible for a particular decision. Such clarity is consistent with federalism because it preserves the political identity of each government while allowing them to cooperate operationally.

10. Conclusion

Administrative federalism is a central but comparatively under-theorised dimension of India's constitutional structure. The Constitution does not establish completely separate Union and State administrative spheres. Instead, it creates a differentiated system in which State governments possess constitutionally grounded executive authority while the Union receives specific powers to secure compliance with parliamentary law, protect the exercise of Union executive power, facilitate national objectives and respond to exceptional constitutional circumstances. Articles 256–263 are therefore best understood as mechanisms for managing interdependence rather than as evidence that States are merely subordinate administrative units.

The analysis also demonstrates that the changing role of the Union cannot be measured simply by counting instances of Union intervention. Union involvement may represent constitutional direction, consensual delegation, statutory implementation, cooperative governance or exceptional intervention. Each has a different constitutional basis. The central legal task is consequently to distinguish legitimate intergovernmental coordination from administrative control that exceeds constitutional authority.

Supreme Court jurisprudence, particularly S R Bommai and the decisions concerning the National Capital Territory of Delhi, reinforces the importance of federalism, representative government and constitutional structure. These decisions do not eliminate the Union's constitutionally recognised powers. Instead, they establish a framework in which those powers operate subject to constitutional limitations and judicial review. The resulting model is neither classical dual federalism nor a unitary administrative hierarchy.

The article therefore concludes that Indian administrative federalism is best characterised as constitutionally structured interdependence. State autonomy and Union coordination are not

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mutually exclusive principles. They are designed to coexist, but their coexistence depends upon constitutional restraint, institutional consultation and accountability. The future of administrative federalism should consequently focus not on maximising the power of either level of government, but on maintaining the constitutional conditions under which national coordination can occur without displacing meaningful State self-government.

A durable federal order requires the Union to exercise its powers with regard to the constitutional status of States, and States to exercise their powers with regard to the legitimate national functions of the Union. The constitutional design is strongest when disagreement is addressed through law, consultation and accountable institutions rather than through unilateral administrative expansion. In that sense, administrative federalism is not merely a technical branch of Centre–State relations; it is a practical expression of India's constitutional commitment to divided, representative and coordinated government.

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