FEDERALISM

Strong Centre Framework in the Indian Constitution

By **Brajabandhu Mahanta** • July 4, 2026 • 7 min read

The Constitution of India establishes a **federal system of government** while simultaneously creating a **strong Union (Centre)**. Unlike classical federations such as the **United States, Australia, or Switzerland**, where constituent states enjoy extensive autonomy, the Indian Constitution deliberately vests greater powers in the Union Government.

This constitutional arrangement is commonly referred to as the **Strong Centre Framework**. It was designed to preserve **national unity, territorial integrity, political stability, economic coordination, and administrative efficiency** in a country marked by immense geographical, linguistic, ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity.

Consequently, India is often described as a **“federation with a unitary bias”**, **“quasi-federal state”**, or **“indestructible Union of destructible States.”**

Meaning of the Strong Centre Framework

The **Strong Centre Framework** refers to the constitutional design under which the **Union Government enjoys greater legislative, executive, financial, judicial, and emergency powers than the States**. While powers are constitutionally divided between the Union and the States, the Constitution empowers the Centre to intervene in state affairs under specified circumstances to safeguard national interests.

This framework seeks to strike a balance between:

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- National unity and regional autonomy
- Central coordination and state independence
- Administrative efficiency and democratic decentralisation

Why Did the Constituent Assembly Create a Strong Centre?

The framers deliberately rejected a weak federation because of India’s unique historical and socio-political circumstances.

1. Partition of India (1947)

Partition resulted in:

- Large-scale communal violence
- Refugee crisis
- Territorial uncertainty
- Security concerns

A strong Centre was considered essential for maintaining law and order.

2. Integration of Princely States

More than **560 princely states** had to be integrated into the Indian Union.

National integration required a powerful Union Government capable of ensuring political stability.

3. Extraordinary Diversity

India is characterised by:

- Numerous languages
- Multiple religions
- Diverse ethnic communities
- Distinct regional identities

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A strong Centre was viewed as necessary to preserve national unity while accommodating diversity.

4. Economic Planning and Development

Independent India inherited:

- Widespread poverty
- Regional disparities
- Low industrialisation
- Weak infrastructure

Centralised planning and coordinated development were considered essential.

5. National Security

India faces complex security challenges:

- Long international borders
- Cross-border terrorism
- External aggression
- Internal insurgencies

These challenges require unified national leadership.

6. Experience under the Government of India Act, 1935

Although federal in appearance, the Government of India Act, 1935 vested extensive powers in the Governor-General.

The framers retained several administrative features while making them democratically accountable.

Constitutional Basis of the Strong Centre

The Constitution strengthens the Union through numerous provisions.

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1. Larger Union List

The Seventh Schedule distributes legislative subjects into three lists.

List	Present Number of Subjects	Legislative Authority
Union List	100	Parliament
State List	61	State Legislatures
Concurrent List	52	Both Parliament and States

The Union List includes matters of national importance such as:

- Defence
- Foreign Affairs
- Currency
- Banking
- Railways
- Atomic Energy
- Citizenship
- Telecommunications

2. Residuary Powers (Article 248)

Subjects not mentioned in any list belong to Parliament.

Examples include:

- Cyber laws
- Artificial Intelligence regulation
- Space law
- Digital currencies (where legislated)
- Emerging technologies

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Unlike the United States, where residuary powers belong to states, India vests them in the Union.

3. Supremacy of Union Law (Article 254)

On Concurrent List subjects:

- Both Parliament and States may legislate.
- In case of inconsistency, Union law prevails.

This ensures legislative uniformity.

4. Parliament's Power to Legislate on State Subjects

Parliament may legislate on State List matters under several constitutional provisions.

Article	Situation
Article 249	National interest (Rajya Sabha resolution)
Article 250	During National Emergency
Article 252	At the request of two or more States
Article 253	To implement international treaties
Article 356	During President's Rule

5. Emergency Provisions

The Constitution provides three types of emergencies.

Emergency	Article
National Emergency	352
President's Rule	356
Financial Emergency	360

During emergencies:

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- Parliament acquires wider legislative powers.
- State autonomy is significantly reduced.
- Executive authority becomes more centralised.

6. Power to Reorganise States

Under Articles **2, 3 and 4**, Parliament may:

- Create new states
- Merge states
- Alter boundaries
- Change names

State legislatures are consulted, but their consent is not binding.

7. Appointment of Governors

Governors are appointed by the President under Article 155.

The Governor:

- Represents the Union in the State.
- Performs constitutional and discretionary functions.
- Acts as a constitutional link between the Union and the States.

8. Single Constitution

Unlike classical federations:

- States cannot frame separate constitutions.
- The Constitution of India applies uniformly across the country.

Following the abrogation of Article 370 (2019), Jammu and Kashmir’s separate Constitution ceased to operate.

9. Single Citizenship

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India follows the principle of:

- One citizenship
- Equal rights throughout the country

This promotes national integration.

10. Integrated Judiciary

India has a unified judicial hierarchy.

- Supreme Court
- High Courts
- District Courts

The Supreme Court ensures uniform interpretation of constitutional provisions.

11. All India Services

Article 312 provides for:

- Indian Administrative Service (IAS)
- Indian Police Service (IPS)
- Indian Forest Service (IFoS)

These officers serve both the Union and the States.

12. Integrated Election Machinery

Article 324 establishes a single Election Commission of India for conducting national and state elections.

13. Integrated Audit System

The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG):

- Audits Union accounts.

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- Audits State accounts.
- Maintains uniform financial accountability.

14. Fiscal Dominance of the Centre

The Union collects most buoyant taxes.

States rely on:

- Finance Commission transfers
- GST compensation mechanisms
- Centrally Sponsored Schemes
- Grants-in-aid

This creates vertical fiscal imbalance.

Strong Centre Framework: Constitutional Provisions at a Glance

Area	Constitutional Provision	Union Advantage
Legislative Powers	Articles 245–255	Larger legislative authority
Residuary Powers	Article 248	Parliament controls new subjects
State Reorganisation	Articles 2–4	Parliament alters state boundaries
Emergencies	Articles 352, 356, 360	Centralisation during crises
Governors	Articles 155–156	Union appointment
Judiciary	Articles 124–237	Integrated judicial system
Services	Article 312	Common civil services
Election Commission	Article 324	Single election authority
Citizenship	Articles 5–11	National citizenship
Finance	Articles 268–293	Greater financial powers

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Advantages of the Strong Centre Framework

1. National Integration: Prevents separatism and strengthens unity.

2. Political Stability: Facilitates coordinated governance across the country.

3. Uniform Economic Development: Enables nationwide infrastructure projects, fiscal transfers, and development programmes.

4. Effective Disaster Management: Allows coordinated responses to:

- Pandemics
- Natural disasters
- National emergencies

5. National Security: Essential for:

- Defence
- Border management
- Counter-terrorism
- Cybersecurity

6. Uniform Standards: Promotes consistency in:

- Education
- Environmental regulation
- Public health
- Digital governance

Criticism of the Strong Centre Framework

1. Excessive Centralisation: The Centre may dominate states in policy and administration.

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2. Fiscal Dependence: States often depend heavily on Union transfers, limiting fiscal autonomy.

3. Misuse of Article 356: Historically, President's Rule was sometimes imposed for political reasons. The Supreme Court curtailed such misuse in **S.R. Bommai v. Union of India (1994)**.

4. Controversies Regarding Governors: Governors have occasionally been accused of acting in a partisan manner, leading to Centre-State tensions.

5. Reduced State Autonomy: Some states argue that centrally sponsored schemes and national legislation constrain their policy flexibility.

6. Growing Centre-State Disputes: Recent disagreements include:

- GST compensation
- Fiscal devolution
- Governor–State government relations
- National Entrance Tests (e.g., NEET)
- Language policy
- Investigative agencies

Judicial Perspective

S.R. Bommai v. Union of India (1994)

The Supreme Court held:

- Federalism is part of the **Basic Structure**.
- States are not mere administrative units of the Union.
- Article 356 is subject to judicial review.

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This judgment reaffirmed the federal balance while recognising the constitutional role of a strong Centre.

Strong Centre vs Classical Federation

Feature	India	United States
Nature	Federation with unitary bias	Classical federation
Residuary Powers	Parliament	States
Constitution	Single	Federal + State Constitutions
Citizenship	Single	Dual
Judiciary	Integrated	Dual
State Boundaries	Parliament may alter	State consent required
Governors	Appointed	Elected
Emergencies	Extensive	Limited

Conclusion

The **Strong Centre Framework** is one of the defining features of Indian constitutionalism. It reflects the Constituent Assembly's vision of combining **federal decentralisation with national cohesion**, ensuring that India remains united while respecting its diversity. Over time, judicial interpretation, political developments, and institutional innovations have transformed this framework into a model of **cooperative, competitive, collaborative, fiscal, and digital federalism**.

The continuing challenge is to maintain an appropriate balance between **a capable Union Government** and **meaningful state autonomy**, ensuring that the constitutional promise of **"Unity in Diversity"** is realised in both spirit and practice.

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UGC NET & UPSC Examination Highlights

Important Constitutional Articles

Topic	Articles
Union of States	1–4
Citizenship	5–11
Distribution of Legislative Powers	245–255
Residuary Powers	248
National Interest	249
National Emergency	352
President’s Rule	356
Financial Emergency	360
Constitutional Amendment	368
Election Commission	324
All India Services	312
Finance Commission	280
Inter-State Council	263
GST Council	279A

Important Thinkers

- K.C. Wheare – Quasi-federal
- Granville Austin – Cooperative federalism
- Morris Jones – Bargaining federalism
- Ivor Jennings – Federation with a strong centralising tendency
- Alexandrowicz – *Sui generis* federation

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- B.R. Ambedkar – Constitution is federal in normal times and unitary in exceptional circumstances

Landmark Judgments

- **S.R. Bommai v. Union of India (1994)** – Federalism as part of the Basic Structure.
- **State of West Bengal v. Union of India (1962)** – Parliament's supremacy in matters within constitutional competence.
- **Government of NCT of Delhi v. Union of India (2018, 2023)** – Clarified the balance between Union authority and representative government in Delhi, highlighting principles of constitutional federalism within the Union Territory framework.

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