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**EVOLUTION AND CHALLENGES OF FEDERALISM IN THE USA,
CANADA & INDIA: A COMPARATIVE CONSTITUTIONAL
PERSPECTIVE**- Nayela Raies¹

“Federalism is the distribution of power in an organisation between a central authority and the constituent.”

- Merriam Webster Dictionary²**Abstract**

Federalism is a constitutional system in which powers are divided between the central government and regional governments to maintain a balance between national unity and regional autonomy. The United States, Canada, and India represent three important models of federalism, each shaped by different historical, political, and social conditions. This study examines the evolution and challenges of federalism in these countries from a comparative constitutional perspective.

The United States follows the classical model of federalism where powers are clearly divided between the federal government and the states. Canada adopted a centralized federal structure under the Constitution Act, 1867, but over time judicial interpretation strengthened provincial autonomy. India adopted a federal system with a strong central orientation under the Constitution of 1950 to maintain unity in a diverse society.

The study analyses constitutional provisions relating to the distribution of powers and examines the role of the judiciary in interpreting federal principles through landmark decisions such as

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²Information Technology Act 2000, India, available at: <https://www.merriam-webster.com> (last visited on May 10, 2026).

*McCulloch v. Maryland*³, *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala*⁴, *S.R. Bommai v. Union of India*⁵, and *Reference re Secession of Quebec*⁶. These judgments have significantly influenced the functioning of federalism.

The paper also discusses major challenges faced by federal systems, including centralization of power, fiscal imbalance, political conflicts, misuse of constitutional provisions, and issues relating to cooperative federalism. The study concludes that federalism is a dynamic system that must continuously adapt to changing political and social conditions. Effective federal governance requires cooperation, constitutional balance, and mutual respect between the Centre and the States to ensure stability, democracy, and national unity.

Introduction

'Federalism is a political organization where governmental activities are divided between central and regional governments, with each having constitutionally guaranteed autonomy.'—William H. Riker⁷

Federalism is a system of government in which powers are divided between a central authority and regional units such as states or provinces. It aims to achieve a balance between national unity and regional autonomy. In a federal system, both levels of government derive their authority from the Constitution and function within their respective spheres.

K.C. Wheare defines federalism as 'the method of dividing powers so that the general and regional governments are each, within a sphere, coordinate and independent'. This definition highlights the principle of division of powers and constitutional supremacy which are essential features of federal governance.

³17 U.S. 316 (1819).

⁴AIR 1973 SC 1461.

⁵AIR 1994 SC 1918.

⁶(1998) 2 SCR 217.

⁷Information Technology Act 2000, India, available at: <https://academic.oup.com> (last visited on May 10, 2026).

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The modern concept of federalism was first successfully adopted in the United States through the Constitution of 1787. The American model is often regarded as the classical form of federalism where the powers of the federal government are limited and clearly defined.

Federalism has evolved differently across countries depending on their historical and political conditions. Canada and India are examples of “holding together” federations, where federalism was adopted to maintain unity in diverse societies. In Canada, the Constitution Act, 1867 established a federal system with a strong central government and residuary powers vested in the Centre. In India, the Constitution of 1950 describes the country as a ‘Union of States’ under Article 1, indicating a federal structure with a unitary bias.⁸

Indian Federalism is constitutionally structured but deliberately designed with a strong central orientation. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar explained the nature of Indian federalism by stating that the Constitution is ‘federal in normal times but unitary in times of emergency.’⁹ Thus, federalism is not a rigid concept but a dynamic system that adapts to changing circumstances. The comparative study of federalism in the USA, Canada, and India helps in understanding how different constitutional systems manage diversity, maintain unity, and address emerging challenges in governance.

1. Research Problem

Federalism aims to maintain a constitutional balance between the central government and regional governments by dividing powers and responsibilities. However, in practice, maintaining this balance has become a major challenge in federal countries such as the United States, Canada, and India. Increasing centralization of powers, fiscal dependency of states, political conflicts, and constitutional disputes often weaken the spirit of federalism and affect cooperative governance.

In India, issues such as misuse of Article 356, financial dependence of States, and controversies relating to the role of Governors create tensions in Centre-State relations. In the United States, the expansion of federal authority has raised concerns regarding state autonomy, while in Canada,

⁸D.D. Basu, *Commentary on the Constitution of India* 45 (LexisNexis, Haryana, 24th edn., 2022).

⁹Constituent Assembly Debates on November 25, 1949 available at: <https://eparlib.sansad.in> (last visited on May 10, 2026).

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demands for greater provincial autonomy, particularly from Quebec, continue to challenge federal unity.

Although several studies discuss federalism separately in these countries, there is limited comparative analysis examining their constitutional evolution, judicial interpretation, and contemporary challenges together from a comparative constitutional perspective.

2. Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is:

1. To analyze the concept of federalism and its evolution in the United States, Canada, and India from a comparative constitutional perspective.
2. To examine the constitutional provisions relating to the distribution of powers between the Centre and the States and to understand how these provisions operate in practice.
3. To analyze the role of the judiciary in interpreting federal provisions through landmark and recent case laws in all three countries.
4. To identify the major challenges faced by federal systems and to examine how these challenges affect the balance between the Centre and the State.

3. Research Questions

The present study seeks to examine the following research questions:

1. What is the concept and constitutional basis of federalism in the United States, Canada, and India?
2. How has federalism evolved differently in these three countries?
3. How are powers distributed between the Centre and the States under their respective Constitutions?
4. What role has the judiciary played in interpreting and protecting federal principles?
5. What are the major challenges faced by federal systems, including centralization of power, fiscal imbalance, and political conflicts?

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4.Literature Review

Scholars like M.P. Jain and D.D. Basu explain Indian federalism as a flexible system with a strong central bias, emphasizing the need for unity in diversity. H.M. Seervai highlights the constitutional balance and judicial role in preserving federal structure, while K.C. Wheare classifies India as quasi-federal. Peter Hogg discusses the evolution of Canadian federalism towards decentralization, and A.V. Dicey explains classical federalism in the USA.

Recent studies in *IJIRL* and *ILI Law Review* focus on cooperative federalism and contemporary challenges.

However, there is a gap in comprehensive comparative analysis integrating recent judicial developments and fiscal federalism across all three countries.

5. Research Methodology

The present study is doctrinal and comparative in nature. It is primarily based on secondary sources such as constitutional provisions, books, journal articles, research papers, judicial decisions, and government reports relating to federalism in the United States, Canada, and India. The study adopts an analytical and comparative approach to examine the evolution, constitutional structure, judicial interpretation, and challenges of federalism in these countries. Relevant case laws including *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala*¹⁰, *S.R. Bommai v. Union of India*¹¹ and *McCulloch v. Maryland*¹² have also been analyzed. Online legal databases and authentic websites have been referred to wherever necessary.

6. Concept of Federalism

'Federalism isn't about states' rights. It's about dividing power to better protect individual liberty.' -Elizabeth Price Foley¹³

Federalism, at its core, refers to the systematic sharing and distribution of governmental power across different levels usually the centre and the states as laid down by a nation's constitution.¹⁴

¹⁰AIR 1973 SC 1461.

¹¹AIR 1994 SC 1918.

¹²17 U.S. 316 (1819).

¹³ Information Technology Act 2000, India, available at: <https://www.britannica.com> (last visited on May 10, 2026).

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The word itself traces back to the Latin term *foedus*, meaning agreement or contract, which is fitting given that federalism is essentially a negotiated arrangement between different units of governance. In many countries, this arrangement also becomes a way of granting autonomy to provinces that differ vastly in size, geography, or population.¹⁵

William S. Livingstone offers a particularly useful definition, describing federalism as a form of political and constitutional organisation that brings together several diverse groups or component polities into one larger political unit - while still preserving the individual identity and character of each constituent part. The Cambridge Dictionary puts it more simply: federalism is a system where states unite and surrender some of their powers to a central authority.¹⁶

Cambridge Dictionary defined “federalism as a system of government in which states unite and give up some of their powers to a central authority”

Broadly speaking, federations tend to emerge through one of two routes - centripetal or centrifugal. In the centripetal process, previously independent states voluntarily come together, usually because they believe that unity offers better security and greater economic prosperity than standing alone. The United States remains the textbook example of this kind of federal formation.¹⁷

The centrifugal process works the other way around - here, a strong national government decides to devolve specific powers to its provinces or states. India's federal structure is typically cited as an example of this second model.¹⁸

In many ways, federalism functions like a bridge - one that connects, balances, and holds together the different parts of a nation, while still allowing each part to retain its own identity. Rather than imposing a single rigid structure, it creates space for both national unity and regional

¹⁴Sukhpreet Kaur Rihan & Sanchit Kumar Sinha, “Challenges of Federalism: A Comparative Study between India and Canada” 4 *Indian Journal of Integrated Research in Law* 326 (2019).

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶Information Technology Act 2000, India, *available at*: egyankosh.ac.in (last visited on May 10, 2026).

¹⁷Information Technology Act 2000, India, *available at*: egyankosh.ac.in (last visited on May 10, 2026).

¹⁸*Ibid.*

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autonomy to exist side by side, allowing the centre and the states to function not in competition, but in collaboration.¹⁹

6.1.Federalism in India: It's Evolution

India functioned under a largely unitary system right up until 1935. It was the Government of India Act, 1935 that first introduced the idea of federalism into Indian governance, and it was also the first piece of legislation to formally use the word "federation" in this context. That said, the groundwork for decentralisation had actually begun earlier, with the Government of India Act, 1919, which had already started devolving some powers away from the centre.

Unlike many federations around the world, India's federal structure was not born out of any treaty or mutual agreement between previously independent states coming together. Instead, the framers of the Constitution consciously chose federalism as a suitable model for governing a country as vast and socially diverse as India. When it came to actually drafting the Constitution, the Constituent Assembly had several federal models from around the world to consider - yet it deliberately chose the Government of India Act, 1935 as its primary reference point.²⁰

The words 'federation' and 'federal' do not appear in any article of the constitution of India. The framers used the word 'union.' The constitution describes, 'India, that is Bharat, shall be a Union of States'.²¹The Union Constitution Committee had used the word 'federation', but the Drafting Committee of the Constituent Assembly substituted it with the word 'Union'. Moving the Draft constitution for the consideration of the Constituent Assembly on November 4, 1948, B.R. Ambedkar, Chairman of the Drafting Committee explained the significance of the use of the expression Union instead of the expression Federation.²²

"It is true that South Africa which is a unitary State is described as a Union. But Canada which is a Federation is also called a Union. Thus, the description of India as a Union, though its constitution is federal, does no violence to usage. But what is important is that the use of the

¹⁹Harshawardhan Dhananjay Dixit, "Indian Federalism- Challenges and perspective" 5 *Indian Journal of Legal Review* 220 (2025).

²⁰M. Asad Malik, "Changing dimension of federalism in India: An appraisal" 2 *ILI Law Review* 89 (2019).

²¹ The Constitution of India, art. 1(1).

²² Constituent Assembly Debates on November 04, 1948 available at: <https://journal.fac.ac.in> (last visited on May10,2026).

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word “Union” is deliberate. I do not know why the word “Union” was used in the Canadian constitution. But I can tell you why the Drafting Committee has used it. The Drafting Committee wanted to make it clear that though India was to be a federation, the federation was not the result of an agreement by the States to join in a federation, and that the federation not being the result of an agreement, no State has the right to secede from it. The federation is a Union because it is indestructible. Though the country and the people may be divided into different States for convenience of administration, the country is one integral whole, its people a single people living under a single imperium derived from a single source. The Americans had to wage a civil war to establish that the States have no right of secession and that their federation was indestructible. The Drafting Committee thought that it was better to make it clear at the outset rather than to leave it to speculation or to dispute”.

Andrew Heywood makes an important observation here - federal systems, he argues, give regional and local interests a political voice that is constitutionally protected, not merely granted at the discretion of the centre. Under such systems, states are able to exercise a certain degree of autonomous power, while also securing representation at the central level, typically through a Council of States.²³

No federal system can really function without a clear division of powers between the central and state governments, and the Indian Constitution addresses this through Part XI, read together with the Seventh Schedule. Articles 245 to 255 deal specifically with how legislative powers are distributed between the Union and the states, while Articles 256 to 261 cover the distribution of administrative powers. At its heart, this decentralisation of administration is really what federalism is all about — power being shared, rather than concentrated entirely at the centre. Interestingly, this structure was expanded further with the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, which introduced Panchayats and Municipalities as an additional layer of governance. Many scholars now regard this as effectively a third tier of government in India, alongside the Centre and the states.²⁴

²³ Andrew Heywood, *Politics* 168 (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 3rd edn., 2007).

²⁴ Brij Kishor Sharma, *Introduction to constitution of India* 42 (PHI, Delhi, 8th edn., 2011).

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In *State of West Bengal v. Union of India*²⁵, the Supreme Court upheld the supremacy of Parliament over states.

In *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala*²⁶, the Court held that federalism is part of the basic structure of the Constitution, thereby protecting it from amendment.

In *S.R. Bommai v. Union of India*²⁷, where the Court restricted the misuse of Article 356 and emphasized the importance of federalism.

In *NCT of Delhi v. Union of India*²⁸ have highlighted the importance of cooperative federalism and clarified the distribution of powers between the Centre and Union Territories.

6.1.1. Challenges to Indian Federalism

Indian federalism, though constitutionally well-structured, faces several practical and structural challenges which affect the balance between the Centre and the States. One of the primary challenges is the centralization of power. The Constitution vests significant authority in the Union, including residuary powers, control over All India Services, and the ability to legislate on State subjects under certain circumstances.²⁹

Another major challenge is the misuse of Article 356, which allows the imposition of President's Rule in States. Although this provision was intended as a safeguard against constitutional breakdown, it has been used for political purposes in the past.³⁰ The Supreme Court in *S.R. Bommai v. Union of India*³¹ attempted to curb such misuse by laying down strict guidelines yet concerns regarding its political application still persist.

Fiscal federalism also poses a serious challenge. The financial dependence of States on the Centre limits their ability to function independently. Although the Finance Commission and

²⁵ AIR 1963 SC 1241.

²⁶ AIR 1973 SC 1461.

²⁷ AIR 1994 SC 1918.

²⁸ 2023 SCC Online SC 606.

²⁹ M.P. Jain, *Indian Constitutional Law* 400 (LexisNexis, New Delhi, 8th edn., 2018).

³⁰ H.M. Seervai, *Constitutional Law of India* 300 (Universal Law Publishing, Nagpur, 4th edn., 2015).

³¹ AIR 1994 SC 1918.

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Goods and Services Tax (GST) Council aim to promote fiscal balance, States often argue that GST has reduced their financial autonomy and increased reliance on central transfers.³²

Another important issue is the role of the Governor, which has been a subject of controversy in Centre-State relations. Governors, being appointed by the Centre, are sometimes perceived as acting in favor of the Union government. This affects the spirit of cooperative federalism.³³

Further, political conflicts between the Centre and States often disrupt federal harmony. Differences in political ideologies between ruling parties affecting governance and development.³⁴

6.2.Evolution of Federalism in USA

Federalism in the United States originated with the adoption of the Constitution of 1787, which established a division of powers between the federal government and the states. The Constitution grants enumerated powers to Congress under Article I, while the Tenth Amendment reserves residual powers to the states, thereby creating a system of dual federalism.³⁵

In its early phase, American federalism was characterized by a clear separation of powers between the federal and state governments, often referred to as 'layer cake federalism.' This model emphasized limited federal authority and strong state autonomy. However, during the 1930s, the federal government expanded its role in economic and social policies, leading to the emergence of cooperative federalism.³⁶

Judicial interpretation has significantly influenced the evolution of federalism in the United States. In *McCulloch v. Maryland*³⁷, the Supreme Court upheld the doctrine of implied powers and federal supremacy, thereby strengthening the authority of the federal government.

Subsequently, in *United States v. Lopez*³⁸, the Court imposed limits on federal power, reaffirming the importance of state autonomy.

³²Information Technology Act 2000, India, available at: egyankosh.ac.in (last visited on May 10, 2026).

³³*Supra* note 1 at 45.

³⁴*Id.* at 46.

³⁵ Information Technology Act 2000, India, available at: <https://american-history.net> (last visited on May 11, 2026).

³⁶ A.V. Dicey, *Introduction to the Study of the Law of the Constitution* 145 (Macmillan & Co. Ltd., London, 10th edn., 1959).

³⁷ 17 U.S. 316 (1819).

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Thus, American federalism has evolved from dual federalism to a more flexible system balancing federal authority and state autonomy.

6.2.1. Challenges to USA Federalism

Federalism in the United States faces several challenges that affect the balance between federal authority and state autonomy. One major issue is the expansion of federal power, particularly through a broad interpretation of the Commerce Clause. Over time, the federal government has increased its role in areas traditionally reserved for the states, leading to disputes over constitutional limits.³⁹

Another important challenge is political polarization between federal and state governments. Differences in political ideologies often lead to conflicts in policy implementation. This weakens the spirit of cooperative federalism.⁴⁰

Fiscal dependency also affects federal relations. Although states have taxation powers, they often rely on federal funding for welfare and development programs, which limits their financial autonomy.⁴¹

Further, judicial intervention in federal disputes sometimes raises concerns about judicial overreach, as courts play a significant role in determining the balance. Thus, American federalism continues to face challenges arising from centralization, political conflict, and economic dependency.

6.3. Federalism in Canada: Evolution & Challenges

Federalism in Canada was established through the Constitution Act, 1867, which created a division of powers between the federal government and the provinces. Sections 91 and 92 of the

³⁸ 514 U.S. 549 (1995).

³⁹ A.V. Dicey, *Introduction to the Study of the Law of the Constitution* 150 (Macmillan & Co. Ltd., London, 10th., 1959).

⁴⁰ Dhruv Goel, "Federalism in India and USA: A Comparative Analysis" 3 *Indian Journal of Integrated Research in Law* 70 (2022).

⁴¹ William Berenson, "Fiscal Federalism in the USA" 2 *Review of International & European Economic Law* 45 (2023).

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Act allocate legislative subjects, with residuary powers vested in the federal government. This reflects a centralized model of federalism, designed to ensure national unity.⁴²

In its early phase, Canadian federalism was highly centralized, with the federal government exercising significant authority over provincial matters. However, judicial interpretation played a crucial role in decentralizing the system by expanding provincial powers, especially under “property and civil rights.” This marked a shift towards a more balanced federal structure.⁴³

Over time, Canada has developed a model of cooperative federalism, where both levels of government collaborate in areas such as healthcare, taxation, and social welfare. The Supreme Court of Canada, in *Reference re Secession of Quebec*⁴⁴, recognized federalism as a fundamental principle necessary for accommodating diversity and maintaining unity.

Despite its evolution, Canadian federalism faces several challenges. One major issue is Quebec separatism, which raises concerns about national unity and demands for greater provincial autonomy.⁴⁵

Fiscal imbalance among provinces is another challenge, as economically weaker provinces depend heavily on federal transfers, leading to political tensions. Additionally, the recognition of indigenous rights and demands for self-governance complicate the federal structure.⁴⁶

Thus, Canadian federalism has evolved from a centralized model to a cooperative system, but it continues to face challenges relating to unity, fiscal balance, and diversity.

6.4. Comparative Analysis

A comparative study of federalism in the USA, Canada, and India reveals both similarities and differences. The United States represents a classical model of federalism with strong state autonomy, while Canada initially adopted a centralized model but later evolved into a

⁴² Peter W. Hogg, *Constitutional Law of Canada* 120 (Thomson Reuters, Toronto, 5th edn., 2012).

⁴³ Peter W. Hogg, *Constitutional Law of Canada* 121 (Thomson Reuters, Toronto, 5th edn., 2012).

⁴⁴ (1998) 2 SCR 217.

⁴⁵ Sukhpreet Kaur Rihan & Sanchit Kumar Sinha, “Challenges of Federalism: A Comparative Study between India and Canada” 4 *Indian Journal of Integrated Research in Law* 68 (2019).

⁴⁶ Information Technology Act 2000, India, available at: egyankosh.ac.in (last visited on May 11, 2026).

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cooperative system. India, on the other hand, follows a mixed model combining federal and unitary features.⁴⁷

In terms of evolution, all three countries have moved towards cooperative federalism. However, the degree of centralization varies significantly, with India having the strongest central authority among the three.⁴⁸

The United States represents a classical model of federalism, where the Constitution of 1787 establishes a clear division of powers between the federal government and the states. The federal government exercises only enumerated powers under Article I, while the Tenth Amendment reserves residual powers to the states, ensuring strong state autonomy.⁴⁹

In contrast, Canada follows a centralized model of federalism under the Constitution Act, 1867, where residuary powers are vested in the federal government. Although initially designed to create a strong Centre, judicial interpretation has gradually expanded provincial autonomy, resulting in a more balanced and cooperative federal system.⁵⁰

India adopts a unique model of federalism with a strong unitary bias. The Constitution of 1950 provides a division of powers under Articles 245–254 and the Seventh Schedule, but residuary powers and emergency provisions strengthen the Centre.⁵¹ The Supreme Court has recognized federalism as part of the basic structure in *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala*.⁵²

7. Self Analysis & Suggestions

The comparative study of federalism in the United States, Canada, and India shows that federalism is not a fixed concept but a dynamic system that evolves according to political, economic, and social conditions. While the United States emphasizes state autonomy, Canada reflects a balance between unity and diversity, and India adopts a flexible model with a strong

⁴⁷ K.C. Wheare, *Federal Government* 50 (Oxford University Press, London, 4th edn., 1963).

⁴⁸ Sukhpreet Kaur Rihan & Sanchit Kumar Sinha, “Challenges of Federalism: A Comparative Study between India and Canada” 4 *Indian Journal of Integrated Research in Law* 72 (2019).

⁴⁹ *Supra* note 25 at 145.

⁵⁰ *Supra* note 31 at 120.

⁵¹ M.P. Jain, *Indian Constitutional Law* 325 (LexisNexis, New Delhi, 8th edn., 2018).

⁵² AIR 1973 SC 1461.

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Centre. This analysis indicates that excessive centralization, though sometimes necessary for national unity, may weaken the autonomy of states and disturb the federal balance.

It is also evident that judicial interpretation plays a crucial role in maintaining the balance between different levels of government. However, over-reliance on the judiciary may lead to concerns regarding judicial overreach.

To strengthen federalism, there is a need to promote cooperative federalism through effective coordination between the Centre and the States.

Further, states should be provided greater fiscal autonomy to reduce their dependence on the Centre, and the role of constitutional authorities such as Governors should be clearly defined to prevent misuse. Thus, a balanced approach between central authority and state autonomy is essential for the effective functioning of federal systems.

8. Conclusion

“Federalism means the distribution of force of the state among a number of coordinate bodies each originating in and controlled by the constitution”. - Dicey⁵³

Federalism in the United States, Canada, and India demonstrates how constitutional systems adapt to diverse political and social realities. While the United States emphasizes state autonomy, Canada reflects a balance between unity and diversity, and India adopts a flexible model with a strong Centre. Despite structural differences, all three systems face common challenges such as centralization, fiscal imbalance, and political conflicts. Effective functioning of federalism requires continuous cooperation, mutual respect, and constitutional balance between different levels of government. Thus, a dynamic and cooperative approach is essential to ensure stability, unity, and democratic governance in federal systems. Strengthening institutional mechanisms, ensuring fiscal decentralization, and respecting the autonomy of states are essential for maintaining federal harmony. A responsive and evolving federal structure can effectively address emerging challenges and promote inclusive development.

⁵³Information Technology Act 2000, India, available at: <https://www.cambridge.org> (last visited on May 10, 2026).

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