

✦ UNIQUE STUDY POINT BY SUMEET SAHU ✦

Federalism

Class X — Political Science (Civics) — Chapter 2

Democratic Politics – II | NCERT

SECTION 01

Overview

In the previous chapter on Power-Sharing, we learnt that the **vertical division of power** among different levels of government is one of the major forms of power-sharing in modern democracies. This chapter focuses entirely on this form of power-sharing, most commonly referred to as **federalism**.

The chapter begins by describing federalism in general terms — its key features, types, and contrast with unitary systems. It then examines the **theory and practice of federalism in India**, including the constitutional provisions, three-fold distribution of legislative powers, the creation of linguistic states, the language policy, and the restructuring of Centre-State relations. Towards the end, the chapter turns to **local government** — the third tier of Indian federalism introduced through the historic **1992 Constitutional Amendment**.

Key Central Theme of the Chapter

Federalism is a system of power-sharing among different levels of government. India, though it uses the term "Union of States", operates on federal principles with a **three-tier system** — Central Government, State Governments, and Local Governments (Panchayats and Municipalities). The success of Indian federalism lies not just in constitutional provisions but also in the **democratic politics** of accommodation and flexibility.

USP KEY POINTS

- ★ Only 25 of the world's 193 countries are federations, yet they contain 40% of the world's population
- ★ Two routes to federation: "Coming Together" (USA, Switzerland, Australia) and "Holding Together" (India, Spain, Belgium)
- ★ India has a three-fold distribution: Union List, State List, Concurrent List
- ★ Linguistic States, Language Policy, and Coalition Politics strengthened Indian federalism
- ★ 1992 Constitutional Amendment made local government the third tier
- ★ India's local government system is the largest experiment in democracy in the world — 36 lakh elected representatives

SECTION 02

What is Federalism?

Federalism

A system of government in which the power is divided between a central authority and various constituent units of the country. Both levels of government enjoy their power independent of each other.

Usually, a federation has **two levels of government**. One is the government for the entire country — responsible for subjects of common national interest. The other is governments at the level of provinces or states — handling day-to-day administration of their state.

Federalism vs Unitary System

FEATURE	FEDERAL SYSTEM	UNITARY SYSTEM
Levels of Government	Two or more levels with independent powers	One level, or sub-units subordinate to Centre
Power of Centre	Cannot order state government	Can pass orders to provincial/local government
State Powers	Own powers, not answerable to Centre	Derive powers from Central Government
Accountability	Both levels separately answerable to people	Only central government directly answerable
Example	India, USA, Australia	Sri Lanka, UK, France

Key Features of Federalism (7 Features)

🏆 SEVEN KEY FEATURES

- ★ **Feature 1:** Two or more levels (tiers) of government
- ★ **Feature 2:** Different tiers govern the same citizens, but each has its own jurisdiction in legislation, taxation, and administration
- ★ **Feature 3:** Jurisdictions of respective tiers are specified in the Constitution — constitutionally guaranteed
- ★ **Feature 4:** Fundamental provisions cannot be unilaterally changed by one level — consent of both levels required
- ★ **Feature 5:** Courts have the power to interpret the Constitution; highest court acts as umpire in disputes
- ★ **Feature 6:** Sources of revenue for each level are clearly specified — financial autonomy
- ★ **Feature 7:** Dual objectives — safeguard & promote unity of the country while accommodating regional diversity

💡 Ideal Federal System

An ideal federal system has two crucial aspects: **mutual trust** between different levels of government and **agreement to live together**. Both levels should agree to some rules of power-sharing and trust that each would abide by its part.

Two Routes of Federation Formation

FEATURE	COMING TOGETHER FEDERATION	HOLDING TOGETHER FEDERATION
How Formed	Independent states come together to form a bigger unit	A large country divides its power between constituent states and national government
Purpose	Pooling sovereignty while retaining identity to increase security	To accommodate diversity within a large country
State Powers	All constituent states usually have equal power; strong vis-à-vis federal government	Central Government tends to be more powerful; states may have unequal powers
Examples	USA, Switzerland, Australia	India, Spain, Belgium

Jurisdiction

The area over which someone has legal authority. May be defined in terms of geographical boundaries or in terms of certain kinds of subjects.

SECTION 03

IN What Makes India a Federal Country?

The Constitution declared India as a **"Union of States"**. Although it did not use the word "federation", the Indian Union is based on the **principles of federalism**. All seven features of federalism apply to the Indian Constitution.

Why "Union of States" and not "Federation"?

The Constitution makers chose the term "Union" to emphasise that the Indian federation is not the result of an agreement among states (like the USA), but is an indestructible union. No state has the right to secede from the Union.

Three-Fold Distribution of Legislative Powers

LIST	WHO CAN MAKE LAWS	SUBJECT EXAMPLES	RATIONALE
Union List	Only Union Government	Defence, Foreign Affairs, Banking, Communications, Currency	Subjects of national importance needing uniform policy
State List	Only State Government	Police, Trade, Commerce, Agriculture, Irrigation	Subjects of state and local importance
Concurrent List	Both Union & State Government	Education, Forest, Trade Unions, Marriage, Adoption, Succession	Subjects of common interest to both levels

Important Rules

Concurrent List conflict: If Union and State laws conflict on a concurrent subject, the **Union law prevails**.

Residuary subjects: Subjects not in any of the three lists (e.g., computer software) — the **Union Government** has the power to legislate on these.

Unequal Powers of States

Since India is a **"holding together"** federation, all states do not have identical powers. Some states enjoy special status:

SPECIAL PROVISIONS

- ★ **Assam, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram** — enjoy special powers under Article 371 for protection of land rights of indigenous peoples, their culture, and preferential employment
- ★ **Union Territories** (Chandigarh, Lakshadweep, Delhi) — too small to be independent states; Central Government has special powers in running these areas

Safeguards in the Power-Sharing Arrangement

Constitutional Safeguards

Amendment process: Parliament cannot on its own change the power-sharing arrangement. Any change must be passed by both Houses with at least **two-thirds majority**, then ratified by legislatures of at least **half of the total states**.

Judiciary's role: High Courts and the Supreme Court decide disputes about the division of powers.

Revenue: Both Union and State Governments can raise resources by levying taxes.

SECTION 04

How is Federalism Practised?

Constitutional provisions alone are not sufficient for the success of federalism. The real success of federalism in India can be attributed to the **nature of democratic politics** — the spirit of federalism, respect for diversity, and desire for living together became shared ideals.

1. Linguistic States

The creation of linguistic states was the **first and major test** for democratic politics. In 1947, boundaries of several old states were changed to create new states, ensuring people who spoke the same language lived in the same state. Some states were created based on culture, ethnicity, or geography (e.g., **Nagaland, Uttarakhand, Jharkhand**).

Outcome

Although some national leaders feared disintegration, the formation of linguistic states **actually made the country more united** and administration easier. The States Reorganisation Commission (SRC) implemented this on **November 1, 1956**.

2. Centre-State Relations

For a long time, the **same party ruled at Centre and most states** — state governments did not exercise their rights as autonomous federal units. The Centre often misused the Constitution to dismiss state governments controlled by rival parties.

The Post-1990 Transformation

After 1990, the **rise of regional political parties** and the era of **coalition governments** at the Centre created a new culture of power-sharing and respect for state autonomy. A major **Supreme Court judgement** made it difficult for the Centre to dismiss state governments arbitrarily. Federal power sharing is thus **more effective today** than in the early years.

SECTION 05

Language Policy

A second test for Indian federation is the language policy. The Constitution took a very careful approach:

KEY FACTS ON LANGUAGE POLICY

- ★ Constitution did NOT give status of **national language** to any one language
- ★ **Hindi** was identified as the **official language** – but is the mother tongue of only about 40% of Indians
- ★ Besides Hindi, **22 other languages** are recognised as Scheduled Languages (Eighth Schedule)
- ★ Candidates for Central Government exams can opt to take examination in any scheduled language
- ★ Each state has its own **official language**; government work is conducted in that language

The Hindi-English Controversy

According to the Constitution, the use of English for official purposes was to stop in **1965**. However, many non-Hindi speaking states demanded that English continue. In **Tamil Nadu**, this movement took a **violent form**. The Central Government responded by agreeing to continue the use of **English along with Hindi** for official purposes.

Linguistic Diversity of India

DATA POINT	DETAILS
Mother tongues recorded (Census 2011)	More than 1,300 distinct languages
Major languages after grouping	121
Scheduled Languages (Eighth Schedule)	22
Hindi speakers (mother tongue)	About 44% (43.63%)
Hindi (including 2nd/3rd language)	Less than 50% (in 2011)
English as mother tongue	Only 0.02%
English (including 2nd/3rd language)	About 11%

India vs Sri Lanka

Unlike Sri Lanka (which imposed Sinhala as the only official language), Indian leaders adopted a **cautious and flexible** attitude. This helped India avoid the kind of ethnic conflict that Sri Lanka experienced. Promotion of Hindi does **not** mean the Centre can impose Hindi on non-Hindi speaking states.

SECTION 06



Decentralisation in India

Decentralisation

When power is taken away from Central and State governments and given to local government, it is called decentralisation.

States in India are as large as independent countries of Europe. Uttar Pradesh is **bigger than Russia** in population; Maharashtra is about as big as Germany. There is thus a need for **power-sharing within states** — a third tier of government below state governments.

Why Decentralisation?

People have **better knowledge of local problems**, better ideas on where to spend money, and can **directly participate in decision making**. Local government is the best way to realise the principle of **local self-government**.

The 1992 Constitutional Amendment

Before 1992, panchayats and municipalities existed but were under state government control, elections were not regular, and they had no powers or resources of their own. A major step was taken in **1992**:

KEY PROVISIONS OF 1992 AMENDMENT

- ★ Constitutionally **mandatory** to hold regular elections to local government bodies
- ★ **Seats reserved** for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes in elected bodies and executive heads
- ★ At least **one-third of all positions** reserved for **women**
- ★ An independent **State Election Commission** created in each state for panchayat and municipal elections
- ★ State governments required to **share some powers and revenue** with local government bodies

Before vs After 1992 Amendment

ASPECT	BEFORE 1992	AFTER 1992
Elections	Not held regularly	Constitutionally mandatory, regular elections
Powers	No independent powers or resources	State governments share powers and revenue
Control	Directly under state governments	Independent functioning with constitutional backing
Women's Representation	No mandatory provision	At least one-third seats reserved for women
Election Body	No independent body	State Election Commission in each state

SECTION 07



Local Government Structure

Rural Local Government — Panchayati Raj

LEVEL	NAME	HEAD	DETAILS
Village Level	Gram Panchayat	Sarpanch (President)	Council of ward members (Panch) and Sarpanch; directly elected by adult population; decision-making body for entire village; supervised by Gram Sabha
Block Level	Panchayat Samiti (Block/Mandal)	Chairperson	Few Gram Panchayats grouped together; members elected by all panchayat members in the area
District Level	Zilla Parishad	Zilla Parishad Chairperson	All Panchayat Samitis in a district; most members elected; also includes Lok Sabha MPs and MLAs of district

Gram Sabha

All the **voters in the village** are members of the Gram Sabha. It must meet at least **twice or thrice a year** to approve the annual budget and review performance of the Gram Panchayat. It supervises the Gram Panchayat's work.

Urban Local Government

AREA TYPE	BODY	HEAD
Towns	Municipality	Municipal Chairperson
Big Cities	Municipal Corporation	Mayor

Scale of India's Local Government

India's local government system is the **largest experiment in democracy** conducted anywhere in the world. There are about **36 lakh elected representatives** in panchayats and municipalities — a number bigger than the population of many countries!

Challenges

While elections are held regularly and enthusiastically, **Gram Sabhas are not held regularly**. Most state governments have **not transferred significant powers** to local governments, nor given **adequate resources**. India is still a long way from realising the ideal of self-government.

Porto Alegre Experiment (Brazil)

An Experiment in Brazil

Porto Alegre city in Brazil combined decentralisation with participative democracy. Nearly **13 lakh people** participate in making the city budget. About **20,000 people** participate annually. This ensures money is not spent only for the benefit of rich colonies. Buses now run to poor colonies. A similar experiment has taken place in some areas in **Kerala**.



Glossary of Key Terms

Federalism

A system of government where power is divided between a central authority and various constituent units of the country.

Unitary System

A system where either there is only one level of government or sub-units are subordinate to the central government.

Jurisdiction

The area over which someone has legal authority — defined by geographical boundaries or certain kinds of subjects.

Coming Together Federation

Independent states pool sovereignty to form a bigger unit — e.g., USA, Switzerland, Australia.

Holding Together Federation

A large country divides its power between constituent states and national government — e.g., India, Spain, Belgium.

Union List

Subjects of national importance (defence, banking, currency) on which only the Union Government can make laws.

State List

Subjects of state/local importance (police, agriculture, trade) on which only State Governments can make laws.

Concurrent List

Subjects of common interest (education, forests, marriages) — both Union and State can make laws; Union law prevails in case of conflict.

Coalition Government

A government formed by the coming together of at least two political parties, forming an alliance with a common programme.

Decentralisation

When power is taken away from Central and State governments and given to local government bodies.

SECTION 09



Questions, Answers & MCQs

NCERT Exercise Questions with Answers

Q3 Point out one feature in the practice of federalism in India that is similar to and one feature that is different from that of Belgium.

Similar: Both India and Belgium have a multi-tier government structure. Belgium has Central, State, and Community Governments, while India has Union, State, and Local (Panchayat/Municipal) Governments. Both countries use power-sharing among different levels.

Different: In Belgium, the Central Government has equal number of Dutch and French-speaking ministers as a constitutional requirement. India does not have any such requirement regarding linguistic representation in the Union Cabinet.

Q4 What is the main difference between a federal form of government and a unitary one? Explain with an example.

In a **federal** system, power is divided between a central authority and its constituent units (states/provinces), and neither can unilaterally take away the powers of the other. The central government cannot order the state government. For example, in India, the State Government alone can make laws on "Police" (State List subject) — the Union Government cannot interfere.

In a **unitary** system, either there is only one level of government or the sub-units are subordinate to the central government. For example, in Sri Lanka, the national government has all the powers, and provincial governments derive their authority from and can be overruled by the central government.

Q5 State any two differences between the local government before and after the Constitutional amendment in 1992.

Before 1992: (i) Elections to local government bodies were not held regularly. (ii) Local governments had no independent powers or resources of their own — they were directly under state government control.

After 1992: (i) It became constitutionally mandatory to hold regular elections to local government bodies. (ii) At least one-third of all positions were reserved for women, and seats were reserved for SCs, STs, and OBCs.

Q6 Fill in the blanks: Since the United States is a _____ type of federation, all the constituent States have equal powers and States are _____ vis-à-vis the federal government. But India is a _____ type of federation and some States have more power than others. In India, the _____ government has more powers.

Since the United States is a '**coming together**' type of federation, all the constituent States have equal powers and States are '**strong**' vis-à-vis the federal government. But India is a '**holding together**' type of federation and some States have more power than others. In India, the '**Central (Union)**' government has more powers.

Q7 Here are three reactions to the language policy followed in India. Give an argument and an example to support any of these positions.

Sangeeta's position (policy of accommodation has strengthened national unity) is the most well-supported. Unlike Sri Lanka where imposition of Sinhala led to civil war, India's Constitution did not impose any one language. Hindi was made the official language but not national language. When non-Hindi states like Tamil Nadu protested against Hindi imposition in 1965, the Central Government agreed to continue English along with Hindi. This flexibility prevented the kind of ethnic conflict seen in Sri Lanka and kept India united. The formation of linguistic states similarly strengthened unity by allowing people to use their own language for governance.

Additional Important Short Answers

SA1 What is the three-fold distribution of legislative powers in India?

The Indian Constitution divides legislative powers into three lists: (i) **Union List** — subjects of national importance (defence, banking, currency) on which only the Union Government can legislate; (ii) **State List** — subjects of state/local importance (police, agriculture, trade) on which only State Governments can legislate; (iii) **Concurrent List** — subjects of common interest (education, forests, marriages) on which both can legislate, but Union law prevails in case of conflict. Residuary subjects go to the Union Government.

SA2 How has the Centre-State relationship changed after 1990 in India?

After 1990, regional political parties rose in many states and the era of coalition governments began at the Centre. Since no single party got a clear Lok Sabha majority, national parties had to form alliances with regional parties. This created a new culture of respect for state autonomy. Additionally, a Supreme Court judgement made it difficult for the Centre to arbitrarily dismiss state governments. Thus, federal power sharing became more effective compared to earlier years when the same party dominated both levels.

SA3 What is the structure of Panchayati Raj in India?

The Panchayati Raj system has three tiers: (i) At the village level — **Gram Panchayat**, headed by a Sarpanch, supervised by Gram Sabha (all voters of the village); (ii) At the block level — **Panchayat Samiti** (or Block/Mandal), with members elected by all panchayat members; (iii) At the district level — **Zilla Parishad**, headed by a Chairperson, includes elected members plus Lok Sabha MPs and MLAs of the district.

SA4 What are Union Territories? Why do they have a different status?

Union Territories are areas that are **too small to become independent states** but could not be merged with existing states. Examples include Chandigarh, Lakshadweep, and Delhi. They do not have the powers of a state and the Central Government has **special powers** in running these areas. They are directly administered by the Union Government through an appointed administrator (Lieutenant Governor).

SA5 Why is decentralisation important for India?

Decentralisation is important because: (i) A vast country like India cannot be run through only two tiers — states are as large as European countries; (ii) People have better knowledge of problems in their localities; (iii) They have better ideas on spending money and managing things efficiently; (iv) At the local level, people can directly participate in decision making; (v) It helps inculcate a habit of democratic participation and realises the principle of local self-government.

MCQs (NCERT Exercises + Additional)**Q8. The distinguishing feature of a federal government is:**

- (a) National government gives some powers to the provincial governments
- (b) Power is distributed among the legislature, executive and judiciary
- (c) Elected officials exercise supreme power in the government
- (d) Governmental power is divided between different levels of government

Answer: (d) Governmental power is divided between different levels of government

Q9. A few subjects in various Lists of the Indian Constitution are given. Group them: A. Defence; B. Police; C. Agriculture; D. Education; E. Banking; F. Forests; G. Communications; H. Trade; I. Marriages

Union List: A. Defence, E. Banking, G. Communications

State List: B. Police, C. Agriculture, H. Trade

Concurrent List: D. Education, F. Forests, I. Marriages

Grouping as shown above

Q10. Which of the following pairs is NOT correctly matched?

- (a) State government — State List
- (b) Central government — Union List
- (c) Central and State governments — Concurrent List
- (d) Local governments — Residuary powers

✓ **Answer: (d) Local governments — Residuary powers (Residuary powers belong to Union Government, not local governments)**

Q11. Match List I with List II: 1. Union of India → A. Prime Minister; 2. State → C. Governor; 3. Municipal Corporation → D. Mayor; 4. Gram Panchayat → B. Sarpanch

- (a) D, A, B, C
- (b) B, C, D, A
- (c) A, C, D, B
- (d) C, D, A, B

✓ **Answer: (c) A, C, D, B — Union → Prime Minister, State → Governor, Municipal Corporation → Mayor, Gram Panchayat → Sarpanch**

Q12. Consider the statements: A. In a federation, powers are clearly demarcated; B. India is a federation because powers are specified in the Constitution; C. Sri Lanka is a federation because it is divided into provinces; D. India is no longer a federation because powers devolved to local bodies. Which are correct?

- (a) A, B and C
- (b) A, C and D
- (c) A and B only
- (d) B and C only

✓ **Answer: (c) A and B only — C is wrong (Sri Lanka is unitary), D is wrong (decentralisation does not end federalism)**

Q13. Which type of federation is India?

- (a) Coming together federation
- (b) Holding together federation
- (c) Both (a) and (b)
- (d) Neither (a) nor (b)

✓ **Answer: (b) Holding together federation**

Q14. The major step towards decentralisation in India was taken in which year?

- (a) 1947
- (b) 1956
- (c) 1992
- (d) 2000

Answer: (c) 1992

Q15. Residuary subjects are legislated by:

- (a) State Governments only
- (b) Union Government only
- (c) Both Union and State Governments
- (d) Local Governments

Answer: (b) Union Government only

Q16. How many Scheduled Languages are recognised in the Indian Constitution?

- (a) 14
- (b) 18
- (c) 22
- (d) 28

Answer: (c) 22

Q17. The head of a Municipal Corporation is called:

- (a) Sarpanch
- (b) Municipal Chairperson
- (c) Governor
- (d) Mayor

Answer: (d) Mayor

Case-Based Questions

Case Study 1: The Three Lists

The Indian Constitution clearly provided a three-fold distribution of legislative powers between the Union Government and the State Governments. Union List includes defence, banking, and currency. State List includes police, agriculture, and trade. Concurrent List includes education, forests, and marriages. If laws on concurrent subjects conflict, the Union law prevails. Subjects not in any list are called "residuary" subjects and fall under the Union Government.

1. Which government can make laws on defence?
2. What happens if Union and State laws on education conflict?
3. Who can legislate on "computer software" which is not in any list?

Answers: (i) Only the Union Government can make laws on defence as it is a Union List subject. (ii) If Union and State laws on education (Concurrent List) conflict, the Union law prevails. (iii) Computer software is a "residuary" subject — the Union Government has the power to legislate on it.

Case Study 2: Nepalese Citizens on Federalism

Some Nepalese citizens were discussing adoption of federalism. Khag Raj said federalism would lead to reservation of seats. Sarita said Nepal is not a very big country and doesn't need federalism. Babu Lal hoped Terai areas would get more autonomy with their own state government. Ram Ganesh liked federalism because powers enjoyed by the king would now be exercised by elected representatives.

1. Which statements reflect a wrong understanding of federalism?
2. Whose understanding is closest to the actual meaning of federalism?

Answers: (i) Khag Raj's statement is wrong — federalism is about power-sharing among levels of government, not about caste reservation. Sarita's view is also incorrect — even small countries like Belgium and Switzerland have adopted federalism successfully. (ii) Babu Lal's understanding is closest — federalism gives more autonomy to regional units. Ram Ganesh is partially correct about elected representatives but confuses federalism with democracy itself.

Case Study 3: India's Language Policy

India's Constitution did not give national language status to any language. Hindi was made the official language but is spoken by only about 44% of the population. According to the Constitution, English use for official purposes was to stop in 1965. However, when non-Hindi speaking states protested — especially Tamil Nadu where the movement turned violent — the government agreed to continue English alongside Hindi.

1. Why was no language given the status of "national language"?
2. How did India's language policy differ from Sri Lanka's approach?
3. What was the significance of continuing English for official purposes?

Answers: (i) No language was made national language because India is linguistically very diverse — Hindi is spoken by only about 44% and no single language has majority. Making one language national would alienate other language speakers. (ii) Sri Lanka imposed Sinhala as the only official language, alienating Tamil speakers and leading to civil war. India adopted a flexible, accommodative policy. (iii) Continuing English showed democratic flexibility, prevented ethnic conflict, and respected the sentiments of non-Hindi speaking populations.


Exam Tips — Federalism

-  Memorise the **7 key features** of federalism — frequently asked in short answers
-  Know the difference between **Coming Together** (USA, Switzerland, Australia) and **Holding Together** (India, Spain, Belgium) federations with examples
-  Remember all three lists: **Union List** (defence, banking, currency), **State List** (police, agriculture, trade), **Concurrent List** (education, forests, marriages) — appears in MCQs
-  **Residuary subjects** go to Union Government — an important MCQ point
-  Remember **1992** as the year of major decentralisation amendment — asked frequently
-  Key data: **22 Scheduled Languages**, Hindi \approx 44%, English = 0.02%, **36 lakh** elected local representatives
-  The three-tier Panchayati Raj structure: **Gram Panchayat** → **Panchayat Samiti** → **Zilla Parishad**
-  For comparison questions: India vs Belgium (similar multi-tier) and India vs Sri Lanka (federal vs unitary)
-  NCERT MCQs (Q8, Q10, Q11, Q12) are directly asked — practice the matching and statement-based questions
-  For case-based questions, focus on the **language policy controversy** and **before/after 1992 amendment** comparison

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