



REFORMING THE GOVERNOR'S ROLE IN INDIA'S FEDERAL FRAMEWORK: LESSONS FROM COMMISSIONS AND JUDICIAL PRACTICE

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Abstract

The office of the Governor in India occupies a uniquely ambivalent position within the federal structure, combining ceremonial authority with discretionary powers that have occasionally generated conflict between the Centre and the states. This paper critically examines the recommendations of key committees and commissions—including the Rajamannar Committee, the Administrative Reforms Commission, the Venkatachaliah Commission, the Sarkaria Commission, and the Punchhi Commission—focusing on proposals to reform the Governor's role, appointment process, discretionary powers, tenure, and use of Article 356. By analyzing recurring flashpoints such as government formation in hung assemblies, reservation of bills, and the imposition of President's Rule, the study highlights the persistent gap between normative prescriptions and actual practice, shaped by constitutional design, political incentives, and institutional limitations. Drawing upon comparative insights, this paper proposes a reform agenda that emphasizes statutory consultation protocols, time-bound procedures, transparency requirements, parliamentary review mechanisms, and professionalization of Raj Bhavans. It argues that incremental, legally feasible reforms grounded in conventions and administrative rules can strengthen federal balance, reduce partisan misuse, and preserve democratic accountability without requiring constitutional amendment. The study contributes to the ongoing discourse on cooperative federalism by offering practical, politically plausible measures to enhance the Governor's office as a neutral constitutional authority while safeguarding state autonomy and national unity.

Keywords: Governor, Federalism, Centre–State Relations, Sarkaria Commission, Punchhi Commission, Article 356, Constitutional Reform, Discretionary Powers, Cooperative Federalism, India

Introduction

The Indian Constitution assigns the office of Governor a uniquely ambivalent character. This structural duality is the root cause of persistent federal friction. Article 154 clearly establishes the Governor as the executive head of a state, vesting all executive power in their office. However, this power is largely nominal, as Articles 163–167, read in conjunction with established constitutional practice and judicial precedent, decisively situate real executive power in the Council of Ministers headed by the Chief Minister. The Governor is, therefore, expected to act almost invariably on the 'aid and advice' of the cabinet, functioning as a constitutional figurehead *pari passu* with the President at the Union level.

The Built-in Federal Tension

This built-in constitutional tension is fundamentally compounded by the mechanism of appointment: Governors are appointed by the President (which means, in practice, by the Union government on the advice of the Prime Minister and the Union Cabinet). This appointment mechanism injects a distinct Union element directly into the structure of State administration. This reality often creates an incentive structure that blurs the critical boundary between constitutional impartiality (required by the oath of office) and partisan intervention (expected by the appointing authority). When the party ruling at the Centre differs from the party ruling the State, this divergence often escalates into accusations that the Governor is acting as an "agent of the Centre" or a political appointee, thereby undermining the autonomy and democratic mandate of the elected State government.

The Quest for Reform: Sarkaria and Punchhi

To address these profound structural and political problems threatening the stability of India's federal democracy, the Union Government instituted two major high-level commissions. The Sarkaria Commission (1983–87) undertook the foundational comprehensive review of Centre–State relations during a period marked by rising regionalism and increasing central intervention. Decades later, the Punchhi Commission (2007–10) was tasked with re-examining the relationship in the context of emerging political realities, specifically the rise of coalition politics and defining judicial limits on central power. Both commissions produced detailed, influential recommendations concerning the Governor's appointment criteria, functional limits, and exercise of discretionary power.

Scope and Objective of the Paper

This paper undertakes a rigorous analytical and comparative study of these landmark recommendations. It analyses the specific proposals concerning the Governor's role, compares their respective emphases—from Sarkaria's focus on consultation and impartiality to Punchhi's emphasis on institutional safeguards and fixed tenure—and critically reviews how actual constitutional practice has consistently diverged from the ideals they articulated. Ultimately, this research aims to advance concrete, actionable reform proposals that are not

only grounded in the principles of constitutionalism but are also informed by the necessary political realism required to maintain the delicate balance of India's robust, yet often strained, federal framework.

Historical and Constitutional Background

The Indian Constitution establishes a federal structure that combines state autonomy with a pronounced central bias. While legislative, executive, and financial powers are distributed between the Union and the states, the overall framework reflects a conscious decision by the Constituent Assembly to prioritize national unity and administrative cohesion. This design is often described as quasi-federal, as it allows the Union to exercise overriding authority in situations deemed necessary for constitutional governance.

Within this framework, the office of the Governor occupies a pivotal constitutional position. Drawing inspiration from the provincial governors of the colonial era, the framers reconfigured the role to function as a constitutional head rather than an executive authority. The Governor was intended to act on the aid and advice of the elected Council of Ministers, serving primarily as a link between the Union and the state while safeguarding constitutional norms. In the early decades after independence, this vision was largely respected, and the office remained relatively free from political controversy.

However, the expansion of competitive party politics from the late 1960s onwards altered the operational dynamics of Indian federalism. The emergence of strong regional parties and frequent instances of non-congruent governments at the Centre and in the states intensified institutional friction. In this context, Governors increasingly became involved in contentious decisions, particularly during government formation in hung assemblies, the reservation or delay of state legislation for Presidential consideration, and the submission of reports recommending the imposition of President's Rule under Article 356. These developments generated widespread criticism of the perceived politicization of the Governor's office and highlighted structural ambiguities in its constitutional role. The growing frequency of such conflicts ultimately prompted the Union Government to establish the Sarkaria Commission to conduct a comprehensive examination of Centre-State relations and propose reforms aimed at restoring federal balance.

Sarkaria Commission: Principles and Recommendations

The Sarkaria Commission, constituted in 1983 and submitting its report in 1987–88, represented the first comprehensive attempt to systematically reassess Centre-State relations in independent India. Tasked with examining constitutional, administrative, and political dimensions of federal governance, the Commission issued 247 recommendations, several of which directly addressed the functioning of the Governor's office. Its approach was guided by the belief that many federal tensions arose not from constitutional defects but from deviations in constitutional practice.

With regard to appointments, the Commission emphasized that Governors should be individuals of integrity, public standing, and political detachment. It strongly discouraged the appointment of active politicians, particularly those with recent or direct affiliations to the state concerned. To enhance legitimacy and trust, the

Commission recommended that the Union government consult the Chief Minister of the concerned state prior to making an appointment, thereby reinforcing the spirit of cooperative federalism.

On tenure and removal, the Sarkaria Commission acknowledged the constitutional principle that Governors hold office at the pleasure of the President. However, it cautioned that frequent or arbitrary removals undermine the independence and dignity of the office. Accordingly, it advocated a convention whereby Governors are ordinarily allowed to complete their five-year term, except in cases of proven misconduct, incapacity, or clear constitutional impropriety.

Regarding the exercise of discretionary powers, the Commission urged extreme restraint. It stressed that discretion should be invoked only in constitutionally unavoidable circumstances, such as government formation in hung assemblies or situations of constitutional breakdown. Even in such cases, the Governor was expected to act transparently, maintain proper records, and rely on objective criteria, including floor tests, rather than subjective assessments. Overall, the Sarkaria Commission sought to curb arbitrary central intervention while preserving the constitutional tools necessary to safeguard national unity and democratic stability.

Rajamannar Committee: Strengthening Federalism and Re-defining the Governor's Role

The Rajamannar Committee was constituted in 1969 by the Government of Tamil Nadu under the chairmanship of Justice P. V. Rajamannar, the former Chief Justice of the Madras High Court. Formally known as the Centre–State Relations Inquiry Committee, it was the first major state-initiated effort to critically examine the functioning of Indian federalism. The Committee emerged in a political context marked by increasing centralization of power and growing dissatisfaction among states regarding the erosion of their constitutional autonomy.

A central concern of the Rajamannar Committee was the role of the Governor within the federal structure. The Committee argued that the office had deviated significantly from its intended constitutional function as a neutral and ceremonial head of the state. Instead, it observed that Governors were increasingly perceived as agents of the Union government, particularly in matters such as the reservation of state legislation for Presidential assent and the recommendation of President's Rule under Article 356. Such practices, the Committee contended, undermined the autonomy of elected state governments and weakened the federal balance.

The Committee strongly emphasized that the Governor should act strictly on the aid and advice of the Council of Ministers, except in narrowly defined constitutional situations. It criticized the discretionary powers exercised by Governors as being vague, expansive, and susceptible to political misuse. To address this, the Committee recommended limiting the Governor's discretionary authority and insulating the office from partisan influence through conventions and constitutional safeguards.

More broadly, the Rajamannar Committee advocated a reorientation of Indian federalism towards greater decentralization. It called for a clearer demarcation of Union and State powers, reduced central intervention in state affairs, and respect for the democratic mandate of state legislatures. Although its recommendations were not implemented, the Rajamannar Committee laid the intellectual foundation for later national-level inquiries, including the Sarkaria and Punchhi Commissions, and remains a significant milestone in debates on federalism and the constitutional role of the Governor.

Administrative Reforms Commission (1968 and 2005): Non-Partisanship and Institutional Restraint in the Governor's Office

The Administrative Reforms Commission (ARC) played a significant role in shaping debates on governance and federal relations in India, particularly through its First Commission (1966–1970) and the Second Commission (2005–2009). Although the ARC's primary mandate focused on administrative efficiency and institutional reform, its observations on Centre–State relations and the role of constitutional authorities, including the Governor, have had lasting relevance.

The **First Administrative Reforms Commission (1968)** emphasized the importance of preserving the constitutional neutrality of the Governor. It recommended that Governors should be appointed from among individuals of proven integrity, administrative experience, and public stature, rather than from active political life. The Commission expressed concern that politically motivated appointments eroded public confidence and distorted the Governor's role as an impartial constitutional head. It stressed that the effectiveness of the office depended not merely on formal powers but on adherence to conventions of restraint and non-partisanship.

The **Second Administrative Reforms Commission (2005)** revisited these concerns in the context of increasing federal complexity and political competition. It underscored the need for clearly articulated guidelines governing the exercise of the Governor's discretionary powers, particularly in sensitive areas such as government formation and constitutional breakdown. Recognizing the limitations of unilateral executive control, the Commission proposed that the **Inter-State Council** be strengthened as a forum for developing consensus-based norms and best practices relating to the conduct of Governors.

Both Commissions highlighted the dangers posed by vague discretionary authority exercised without accountability. They argued that codified guidelines, combined with institutional oversight, could reduce arbitrariness while preserving the Governor's capacity to act in genuine constitutional emergencies. Collectively, the ARC's recommendations reinforced the broader federal principle that constitutional offices must function within a framework of transparency, experience, and political neutrality. Although many of these recommendations remain unimplemented, they continue to inform later reform efforts and scholarly debates on strengthening cooperative federalism and restoring credibility to the Governor's office.

Venkatachaliah Commission (2002): Reassessing the Governor's Role within Constitutional Governance

The Venkatachaliah Commission, formally known as the National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution (NCRWC), was constituted in 2000 under the chairmanship of Justice M. N. Venkatachaliah and submitted its report in 2002. Unlike earlier commissions that focused primarily on Centre–State relations, the NCRWC undertook a broader evaluation of constitutional institutions, including the office of the Governor, in light of five decades of constitutional experience.

The Commission reaffirmed that the Governor is fundamentally a constitutional authority rather than an executive decision-maker. It emphasized that the Governor must ordinarily act on the aid and advice of the Council of Ministers and that discretionary powers should be narrowly interpreted and exercised only in exceptional circumstances expressly contemplated by the Constitution. The report expressed concern that expansive interpretations of discretion had contributed to political controversies and weakened federal trust.

With regard to **appointments**, the Commission underscored the importance of selecting Governors who possess integrity, administrative experience, and a reputation for impartiality. It cautioned against appointing individuals with recent political affiliations, noting that such appointments undermine public confidence and compromise the perceived neutrality of the office. The Commission also stressed the need for security of tenure, observing that arbitrary removals diminish the independence and dignity of constitutional functionaries.

On the issue of Article 356, the Venkatachaliah Commission aligned itself with judicial developments following *S.R. Bommai v. Union of India*. It supported the principle that legislative majority should be tested on the floor of the assembly and that the Governor's report must be objective, fact-based, and subject to judicial scrutiny. Overall, the Commission sought to reinforce constitutional morality, restraint, and accountability in the functioning of the Governor, viewing these qualities as essential for preserving the federal balance and democratic legitimacy of the Indian constitutional system.

Practice versus Prescription: Explaining the Implementation Gap

Although there is substantial agreement among expert commissions, constitutional scholars, and judicial bodies regarding the need to reform the office of the Governor, the translation of these recommendations into practice has remained uneven and limited. The persistent gap between normative prescriptions and actual institutional behavior can be attributed to a combination of constitutional design, political incentives, and structural limitations inherent in the reform process.

A primary constraint arises from the constitutional framework governing the appointment and removal of Governors. Under Article 155 and Article 156 of the Constitution, Governors are appointed by the President and hold office at the President's pleasure. This arrangement vests significant formal authority in the Union executive and leaves limited scope for insulating the office from political influence without a constitutional

amendment. Recognizing the political difficulty of altering the constitutional text, both the Sarkaria and Punchhi Commissions emphasized conventions, consultative practices, and administrative guidelines rather than legal compulsion. However, conventions lack enforceability and tend to erode in highly competitive and polarized political environments.

Equally significant are the political incentives confronting governments at the Centre. Control over gubernatorial appointments offers a strategic advantage in states governed by opposition parties, particularly in periods of coalition politics or narrow legislative majorities. Governors can influence critical moments such as government formation, legislative assent, and the initiation of constitutional emergencies. As a result, successive Union governments—regardless of ideological orientation—have frequently replaced Governors following changes in political leadership at the Centre. This pattern, widely noted in academic and policy literature, reinforces perceptions of partisanship and weakens institutional neutrality.

A third factor contributing to limited implementation is the institutional weakness of commission-based reform mechanisms. While bodies such as the Sarkaria and Punchhi Commissions produced detailed, well-reasoned reports, their recommendations are advisory in nature. They lack automatic legal force and depend entirely on executive and legislative action for implementation. In the absence of sustained political commitment, statutory backing, or parliamentary oversight mechanisms, many proposals remain confined to policy discourse rather than institutional practice.

Collectively, these factors demonstrate that the problem lies not in the absence of reform ideas but in the structural and political conditions that inhibit their realization. Bridging this gap requires not only constitutional imagination but also political will, statutory reinforcement, and strengthened accountability mechanisms capable of translating principled recommendations into durable institutional norms.

Case Studies: Recurring Flashpoints in the Exercise of Gubernatorial Power

Recurring conflicts involving the office of the Governor reveal how constitutional ambiguities, when combined with political competition, generate persistent federal tensions. Three areas in particular—government formation, legislative assent, and the invocation of emergency provisions—have repeatedly emerged as flashpoints in Centre–State relations.

One of the most contentious arenas is government formation in hung legislative assemblies. In the absence of a clear majority, Governors are required to exercise discretion in inviting a party or coalition to form the government. However, the Constitution does not prescribe a uniform method for determining which political formation should be given the first opportunity. As a result, different Governors have relied on varying criteria, such as inviting the single largest party, recognizing pre- or post-poll alliances, or assessing claims of majority support. These divergent approaches have often led to allegations of bias and have triggered judicial intervention. Courts have consistently emphasized the primacy of floor tests to determine legislative confidence, yet the absence of codified conventions continues to allow scope for subjective decision-making.

A second flashpoint concerns the reservation of state legislation for Presidential consideration or the withholding of assent. In several instances, Governors have delayed or declined assent to bills duly passed by state legislatures, effectively suspending the implementation of state policy. Such actions, while constitutionally permissible, raise serious concerns about democratic accountability when exercised without clear justification or timelines. The Punchhi Commission's recommendation for time-bound decision-making sought to address this imbalance by preventing indefinite legislative paralysis.

The use of Article 356 remains the most controversial aspect of the Governor's role. The Governor's report forms the basis for the imposition of President's Rule, a measure that directly affects the autonomy of states. Although judicial review, particularly after *S.R. Bommai*, has imposed procedural safeguards and emphasized objective assessment, the political use of this provision has not been entirely eliminated. Together, these flashpoints underscore the urgent need for clearer norms, procedural constraints, and institutional accountability to prevent misuse of gubernatorial discretion and to preserve the federal balance.

Reform Agenda: Principles and Practical Measures

Drawing upon the cumulative insights of the Sarkaria, Punchhi, Venkatachaliah, and Administrative Reforms Commissions, as well as contemporary constitutional scholarship, a coherent reform agenda for the office of the Governor must balance constitutional fidelity with democratic accountability. Rather than advocating sweeping constitutional amendments, this framework emphasizes incremental, institutionally feasible measures capable of strengthening conventions, enhancing transparency, and reducing partisan misuse.

Appointment and Tenure

A central reform priority concerns the appointment and security of tenure of Governors. A statutory consultation protocol should be introduced requiring the Union government to consult the Chief Minister of the concerned state prior to appointment. While such consultation may remain recommendatory in formal terms, mandating a publicly recorded process would enhance transparency and generate normative pressure for compliance. The involvement of an advisory panel comprising eminent public figures or former constitutional authorities could further reinforce the non-partisan character of appointments without undermining executive prerogative.

Equally important is the stabilization of tenure. Frequent transfers and premature removals undermine the independence and credibility of the office. A statutory guideline or convention endorsed by a parliamentary resolution could establish a minimum expected tenure, such as two years, except in cases of proven misconduct or incapacity. Requiring publicly stated reasons for early removal would discourage arbitrary action and strengthen constitutional accountability.

Limiting and Guiding Discretion

The reform agenda must also address the **scope** and exercise of discretionary powers. One of the most persistent sources of conflict involves delays in gubernatorial action on state legislation. Implementing the Punchhi Commission's recommendation for time-bound decision-making through subordinate legislation or executive rules would help prevent indefinite withholding of assent. A defined period—such as six months—within which Governors must assent to, return, or reserve bills would preserve constitutional discretion while preventing legislative paralysis. Exceptional cases involving urgency or national interest could be accommodated through narrowly framed exemptions.

Transparency is essential to restraining discretion. Governors should be required to provide written reasons whenever they exercise discretionary powers, including the reservation of bills, refusal of assent, or recommendations under Article 356. These reasons should be laid before Parliament and the concerned state legislature, enabling informed political debate and judicial scrutiny.

Safeguards for Article 356 and Emergency Powers

Given the disruptive consequences of President's Rule, additional procedural safeguards are warranted. Prior to parliamentary approval, the imposition of Article 356 could be subjected to review by a joint parliamentary committee, accompanied by the publication of the Governor's report and the Union government's justification. Such measures would increase the political cost of misuse while preserving the Centre's ability to respond to genuine constitutional breakdowns.

Professionalization and Role Reorientation

Finally, reform requires a reorientation of institutional culture. A Governor's Code of Conduct should clearly delineate ceremonial, constitutional, and discretionary functions, emphasizing neutrality, restraint, and consultation. Professionalizing Raj Bhavans through permanent, non-partisan secretariats and strengthened legal and policy advisory capacity would reduce dependence on political intermediaries and enhance institutional competence. Collectively, these reforms offer a pragmatic pathway to restoring trust in the Governor's office and reinforcing India's federal equilibrium.

Legal and Political Feasibility of Reforming the Governor's Office

Reforming the office of the Governor requires careful calibration between constitutional idealism and political practicality. While many scholars and commissions have advocated structural changes to appointment and removal mechanisms, amending the Constitution in this domain remains politically contentious and procedurally demanding. The entrenched nature of Articles 155 and 156, coupled with the requirement of broad parliamentary consensus and state ratification for federal amendments, renders such reforms difficult to achieve in the short to medium term. Consequently, a pragmatic reform strategy must focus on legally permissible measures that operate within the existing constitutional framework.

One viable approach lies in strengthening constitutional conventions through statutory and administrative instruments. Although conventions lack formal legal enforceability, they play a critical role in shaping institutional behavior when reinforced by transparency and political accountability. Statutory guidelines governing consultation in appointments, minimum tenure expectations, and time-bound gubernatorial decisions can be enacted without altering the constitutional text. Such measures would not eliminate executive discretion but would structure it in ways that make departures from established norms more visible and politically costly.

Parliamentary resolutions and procedural rules offer another feasible reform avenue. While not legally binding in the strict sense, resolutions expressing legislative consensus on the appropriate conduct of Governors can influence executive practice and judicial interpretation. Similarly, rules requiring the tabling of gubernatorial reports, reasons for discretionary actions, and justifications for invoking Article 356 can enhance oversight without encroaching upon constitutional prerogatives.

Judicial review constitutes an additional safeguard that complements these reforms. Courts have consistently affirmed their authority to scrutinize gubernatorial actions that affect democratic governance, particularly in matters of legislative confidence and emergency provisions. Codifying procedural requirements and transparency obligations would provide clearer standards against which courts can assess the legality and propriety of executive conduct.

Importantly, these reforms are politically plausible because they do not fundamentally redistribute constitutional power between the Centre and the states. Instead, they aim to regulate the manner in which existing powers are exercised. By raising the procedural and reputational costs of partisan misuse, time-bound procedures, transparency mandates, and parliamentary scrutiny can mitigate perverse incentives while preserving the flexibility necessary for constitutional governance. In this sense, incremental reform offers a realistic pathway to strengthening federal balance without triggering constitutional deadlock.

Conclusion

The office of the Governor occupies a uniquely sensitive position within India's federal structure, serving as both the constitutional head of a state and the Union's representative. Historical experience and the analyses of multiple commissions—including the Rajamannar, Sarkaria, Punchhi, Venkatachaliah, and the Administrative Reforms Commission—highlight recurring tensions arising from the Governor's discretionary powers, tenure insecurity, and perceived partisan alignment. While these commissions converge on principles such as non-partisanship, transparency, time-bound decision-making, and consultation with state authorities, the practical implementation of their recommendations remains partial due to constitutional constraints, political incentives, and the advisory nature of commission reports.

A pragmatic reform agenda, as outlined in this paper, emphasizes procedural and institutional measures—such as statutory consultative protocols, tenure stabilization, transparency obligations, codified time frames for legislative action, and parliamentary oversight of Article 356 interventions—over constitutional amendments. These reforms respect the constitutional framework while mitigating the risk of political misuse. By professionalizing Raj Bhavans, clarifying discretionary powers, and strengthening accountability mechanisms, India can restore credibility and neutrality to the Governor's office. Ultimately, such calibrated reforms offer a feasible pathway to reconcile federal autonomy with national unity, reinforcing both democratic governance and cooperative federalism.

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