

Contours of Governance and Federal Space in India: Politico-Administrative Geographies of Power and Territory

Monika Dara^{1*}, Ravi Dass²

¹Department of Public Administration, Post Graduate Govt College, Sector 11, Chandigarh, Union Territory, India. Email: mdara1977@gmail.com

²Department of Geography, Central University of Haryana, Mahendergarh, Haryana, India, Email: ravibishnoi21200@gmail.com

*Correspondent Author: Monika Dara

^{*}Department of Public Administration, Post Graduate Govt College, Sector 11, Chandigarh, Union Territory, India. Email: mdara1977@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The evolving trajectory of Indian federalism reflects a dynamic interplay between historical legacies, constitutional design, and contemporary socio-political transformations. Rooted in colonial administrative arrangements and shaped by post-independence state reorganization, India's federal structure has consistently mediated tensions between unity and diversity. This paper critically examines the geographical foundations of federalism, tracing its development from classical theories of territorial governance to its unique manifestation in India. The study highlights how linguistic reorganization, coalition politics, and the rise of regional parties redefined federal power-sharing. Drawing from comparative federal theories and spatial perspectives, the analysis situates Indian federalism within broader debates on identity, governance, and spatial equity. The findings suggest that federalism in India is not static but a process of constant negotiation shaped by geography, politics, and societal demands. The study engages with contemporary challenges including regional inequalities, resource federalism, and the geopolitical implications of federal dynamics. By integrating theoretical insights with empirical patterns, the paper concludes that India's federalism is best understood as a living system, resilient yet contested, adaptive yet under strain. Recommendations emphasize the need for cooperative models, equitable resource distribution, and institutional reforms that strengthen federal democracy in a multi-ethnic, multi-regional context.

Keywords: *Indian Federalism, Political Geography, Spatial Governance, State Reorganization, Regionalism, Cooperative Federalism*

1. INTRODUCTION

The study of governance and federal space in India occupies a central position in the intersection of political geography, constitutional design, and administrative practice. Federalism, in its most fundamental sense, represents a mode of territorial organization that balances unity with diversity, enabling the coexistence of multiple levels of government within a single polity (Mueller, 2012). In India, this balance has been uniquely complex because of its vast territorial expanse, deep socio-cultural heterogeneity, and the legacy of colonial rule. The federal design was envisioned not only as a mechanism of political integration but also as a geographical strategy to manage diverse spaces and populations under a common constitutional framework (Austin, 1999). Understanding the geographies of governance in India, therefore, requires an inquiry into how power and territory have been structured, contested, and redefined across time.

Governance in federal systems cannot be understood merely as a matter of institutional arrangements; it also involves the spatial dynamics of authority and the political imagination of territory. Scholars of political geography have long emphasized that governance is inherently territorial in nature, as it depends on the

demarcation of spaces where authority is exercised and legitimacy is established (Agnew, 2005). In the Indian context, the territorial dimension of governance is magnified by the presence of multiple administrative units, states, union territories, districts, and local governments, each operating within its own jurisdiction yet embedded within the larger federal order. This multiplicity creates a layered governance structure that is both a source of resilience and a site of conflict.

The notion of “federal space” is not static; it evolves in response to political pressures, administrative reforms, and social demands. Federal space refers to the territorial distribution of power and the mechanisms that regulate center–state as well as inter-state relations (Watts, 2008). In India, this distribution has historically been shaped by constitutional provisions such as the Union, State, and Concurrent Lists, but has been redefined through political developments, judicial interpretations, and administrative innovations. For instance, while the Constitution established a quasi-federal system with a strong center, subsequent decades have witnessed a gradual transformation toward greater state autonomy, especially in the coalition era of the 1990s (Arora & Verney, 1995). At the same time, the emergence of competitive federalism in the post-liberalization period has reoriented the relationship between geography, governance, and power.

The geographical basis of federalism in India is also evident in the processes of state reorganization. The reconfiguration of territorial units, whether through linguistic reorganization in the 1950s, the creation of new states in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, or the special arrangements for regions like Jammu and Kashmir, demonstrates how governance is inseparable from territorial identity (King, 1997). Each reorganization reflects the dynamic negotiation between spatial belonging and political authority, showing how governance mechanisms respond to the demand for recognition, representation, and autonomy. The federal space is thus a living geography, continually reshaped by movements, negotiations, and state responses. At the administrative level, governance in India has relied on mechanisms that bridge spatial scales of decision-making. Institutions such as the Planning Commission (later replaced by the NITI Aayog), Finance Commissions, and Inter-State Councils were designed to mediate fiscal and policy relations between the center and the states (Rao & Singh, 2005). These institutions reveal the multi-scalar character of Indian federalism, where power flows not only vertically between levels of government but also horizontally across states. However, these arrangements have often been marked by tensions, such as resource allocation disputes, demands for fiscal autonomy, and conflicts over jurisdiction, that highlight the contested nature of federal space.

The contemporary reconsideration of power and territory in India cannot be separated from global and domestic transformations since the 1990s. The liberalization of the Indian economy has reconfigured the role of states, making them active participants in attracting investment and negotiating development strategies (Sinha, 2004). Globalization has accentuated territorial competition, where states and regions seek to position themselves advantageously within global production networks. This has reinforced the logic of competitive federalism, but has also raised concerns of uneven development and spatial inequality. The politics of governance is therefore entangled with the geographies of economic reform, leading to new alignments of power between center and states.

Territorial governance in India also faces challenges from sub-state and supra-state dynamics. On one hand, decentralization reforms under the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments have sought to empower local governments, creating new spaces of grassroots governance (Mathew, 1994). On the other hand, supra-state mechanisms such as regional trade agreements, international environmental frameworks, and global security concerns have imposed constraints and opportunities that reshape India’s federal space. The interaction of these forces demonstrates that governance is increasingly multi-level and multi-scalar, extending beyond the binary of center and states.

Power and territory in India are also reconsidered through the lens of identity and conflict. Inter-state disputes over water, boundaries, and resources illustrate how territorial lines can become flashpoints of contention. Similarly, asymmetrical federal arrangements for regions like the Northeast or Jammu and Kashmir reveal the adaptive capacity of Indian federalism to accommodate difference while maintaining unity (Baruah, 2005). However, these arrangements also underline the fragility of federal space, which is vulnerable to shifts in political will and social consensus.

This paper argues that the geographies of governance and federal space in India must be understood as a dynamic interplay between political authority, territorial organization, and administrative mechanisms. By adopting a political and administrative reconsideration, the study highlights how federal space is both a product of constitutional design and a lived geography shaped by power relations. The significance of this inquiry lies in its potential to illuminate not only the structural features of Indian federalism but also the spatial practices through which governance is exercised and contested.

2. RESEARCH QUESTION

1. How have the geographies of governance in India evolved across different historical phases? In what ways has the federal space been reconfigured by political and administrative shifts?
2. What do these reconfigurations imply for the future balance of power and territory in India?

3. RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY

Through the situating the Indian case within the broader scholarship on federalism and territorial governance, the paper contributes to ongoing debates about the resilience and adaptability of federal systems. India's experience demonstrates that federalism is not merely a static institutional arrangement but a constantly negotiated geography of governance. The reconsideration of power and territory is therefore not only a theoretical exercise but a pressing political reality, one that continues to shape the trajectory of Indian democracy.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

4 THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF FEDERAL SPACE

The idea of federal space has its intellectual origins in the broader literature on federalism, territoriality, and governance. Federalism, as a system of political organization, distributes power across levels of government, but the concept of "federal space" takes this further by emphasizing the geographical and spatial dimensions of that distribution. Classical theories of federalism provide the earliest foundation for understanding federal space. Montesquieu's reflections on the spirit of laws recognized that large territories often face challenges in maintaining liberty and representation, suggesting that confederal or federal arrangements could balance scale with participation (Montesquieu, 1748/1989). Later, Alexis de Tocqueville's analysis of the United States emphasized how federal arrangements could institutionalize the coexistence of local self-rule with national authority, creating a balance of shared and divided sovereignty (Tocqueville, 1835/2000). These insights established the conceptual ground for understanding federal systems as mechanisms that mediate between geography and governance. Federalism was never simply an institutional design; it was also a spatial solution to the problem of governing diversity.

The modern theoretical grounding of federal space came from scholars such as Kenneth Wheare, who defined federalism as the division of powers between general and regional governments, each independent in its own sphere (Wheare, 1963). While Wheare's legal-institutional perspective emphasized constitutional design, it also implicitly recognized space as the foundation of autonomy. Regional governments were not abstract units but territorially bound authorities. Building on this, William Riker advanced a political bargaining model, arguing that federalism emerges from agreements between political actors seeking mutual benefits of security and economic advantage (Riker, 1964). This perspective underscored how federal space is not fixed; it results from negotiation and compromise, where territorial boundaries and authority are products of political calculation.

The spatial dimension of federalism was further elaborated by Daniel Elazar, who described federalism as a covenantal arrangement that balances unity and diversity within a political community (Elazar, 1987). For Elazar, federal systems are built on shared rule and self-rule, producing overlapping spaces of authority. This conception opens the way to interpret federal space not as rigidly divided but as fluid, allowing multiple scales of governance to coexist. The federal bargain thus creates a dynamic geography where political identities and administrative responsibilities are territorially embedded.

Political geographers extended these insights by introducing the concept of territoriality as a key analytic for federal systems. Robert Sack defined territoriality as the attempt to influence or control actions, interactions, and access by asserting control over geographic space (Sack, 1986). In federal systems, territoriality takes the form of jurisdictional boundaries that structure authority at multiple levels. Boundaries are not merely lines on a map; they are instruments of governance that define who rule, who is represented, and who has access to resources. Federal space is thus a constellation of territorialities, overlapping and interacting, often producing both cooperation and conflict.

Theories of multi-level governance in the late twentieth century further enriched the understanding of federal space. Scholars analyzing the European Union observed that authority was increasingly shared across various levels, challenging the traditional Westphalian image of sovereignty (Marks, 1993). While India is not a supranational federation, the logic of multi-level governance is relevant because Indian federalism too operates across multiple scales, from union to state to local governments, each interacting with others in policymaking. Multi-level governance emphasizes that federal space is not a simple vertical hierarchy; rather, it is a complex web of authority relations that operate simultaneously across territories.

In addition to institutionalist and geographical perspectives, normative theories of federalism also contribute to the foundation of federal space. Will Kymlicka's work on multicultural citizenship argues that federalism provides a framework for recognizing group-differentiated rights and accommodating national minorities within states (Kymlicka, 1995). From this perspective, federal space is a normative instrument for justice and inclusion, enabling diverse communities to exercise self-rule without exiting the larger polity. This normative vision connects federal space to identity and belonging, highlighting that territory is not just administrative but deeply symbolic. In India, where linguistic, cultural, and regional identities shape political claims, such normative understandings of federal space are particularly salient.

Contemporary scholarship also explores how federal space is reconfigured by globalization and neoliberal reforms. Scholars argue that economic liberalization has altered the functional logic of federalism by empowering subnational units to directly engage with global capital and transnational institutions (Jessop,

2002). This has created what some call “glocalization,” where local territories become integrated into global networks of governance and production. Federal space is thus no longer confined to the constitutional design of the nation-state; it extends outward into transnational scales of authority while intensifying competition among subnational regions. For India, this means that the geographies of governance are influenced as much by international flows of investment and policy norms as by domestic political arrangements.

Critical perspectives further complicate the notion of federal space by highlighting issues of inequality and power. Scholars influenced by political economy argue that federalism often masks spatial inequalities by privileging certain regions in resource distribution while marginalizing others (Rodden, 2006). Federal space, in this view, is a contested terrain where stronger regions may dominate weaker ones, reproducing uneven development. Similarly, feminist and postcolonial scholars have argued that territorial governance can reproduce hierarchies of gender, caste, and ethnicity, reminding us that federal space is not only about formal institutions but also about who benefits from territorial arrangements (Mahajan, 2010). These critiques ensure that the study of federal space remains sensitive to power asymmetries within and across territories.

A particularly significant theoretical development is the concept of “rescaling” in political geography. Scholars argue that globalization and decentralization have led to a rescaling of state authority, where governance is increasingly shifting both upward to international institutions and downward to local governments (Brenner, 2004). Rescaling challenges the neat compartmentalization of authority envisioned in classical federalism, showing that federal space is dynamic and constantly being re-territorialized. In the Indian context, this is visible in the growing empowerment of local panchayats and municipalities, alongside the influence of global institutions in shaping domestic policies. Rescaling suggests that federal space should be theorized as a process rather than a fixed arrangement.

5 FEDERALISM IN INDIA: HISTORICAL TRAJECTORIES

Federalism in India has evolved as a dynamic political and administrative arrangement shaped by colonial legacies, constitutional design, socio-political mobilization, and historical crises (Table 01). Unlike the classical federal systems of the United States or Switzerland, Indian federalism has been uniquely constructed as a “holding-together” federation where the imperatives of national unity, administrative efficiency, and territorial integration guided its evolution (Laskar, 2015).

Table 1: Historical Milestones in Indian Federalism

Period	Key Development	Impact on Federalism
1858–1947	Colonial administration, princely states	Fragmented governance, dual control
1950	Indian Constitution adopted	Strong Union-centric federalism
1956	States Reorganization Act	Linguistic federalism strengthened
1975–77	Emergency period	Centralization of power
1989–2000s	Coalition governments	Strengthening of regionalism
2014–present	Centralization under strong leadership	Debates on cooperative vs. competitive federalism

* This Table outlines the historical trajectory of Indian federalism, showing the shift from colonial fragmentation to contemporary debates on centralization (Austin, 1966; Arora & Verney, 1995).

5.1. COLONIAL LEGACIES AND THE SEEDS OF FEDERALISM

The roots of Indian federalism can be traced back to the British colonial era when administrative divisions were introduced primarily for governance and resource extraction rather than participatory politics (Mawdsley, 2002). The colonial state constructed provinces, princely states, and centrally governed territories, each with varying degrees of autonomy and subordination to the British Crown. The Government of India Act of 1919, also known as the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms, first introduced a form of “dyarchy,” where provincial governments had limited autonomy over certain subjects while critical matters remained under the control of British administrators (Chiranjeevi, 1978). Although the experiment of dyarchy was widely criticized for its impracticality, it marked the beginning of provincial differentiation in governance.

A more significant step came with the Government of India Act of 1935, which laid the foundation for a federal structure by formally recognizing provinces and princely states as federating units (Tillin, 2021). The Act proposed a federation of India, though it never materialized due to the refusal of many princely states to join. Nonetheless, the Act granted provinces greater autonomy, introduced bicameral legislatures in some states, and created a federal list of subjects. Even though the colonial intent was primarily administrative efficiency and political control, this structure generated a template for future debates on federalism (Lacroix, 2010). Moreover, the existence of princely states, more than 560 in number, posed complex questions of integration, sovereignty, and authority that would shape post-independence federal arrangements.

5.2. THE CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY AND THE CONSTITUTIONAL DESIGN

The Indian Constitution, enacted in 1950, created a federal polity with a unitary bias. Unlike the U.S. Constitution which derives sovereignty from the people of the states, the Indian Constitution declared India as a “Union of States,” implying that the federation was not the result of an agreement among sovereign units but a political construct designed to prevent secession (Majeed, 2005). The division of powers between the Union

and the states was organized into three lists, Union, State, and Concurrent, with residuary powers resting with the Centre (Parent, 2011). Moreover, provisions such as Articles 352–360, granting emergency powers to the Union, further consolidated central dominance.

Yet, the Indian model was not purely centralist. States were given jurisdiction over crucial domains such as public order, agriculture, and health, and the Rajya Sabha was instituted as a federal chamber to represent their interests. However, given the political dominance of the Congress Party during the early decades, the formal structures of federalism were overshadowed by a centralized party system that allowed the Union to exercise considerable control over the states (Cross, 2012).

5.3. STATES REORGANIZATION AND THE RISE OF LINGUISTIC FEDERALISM

One of the most transformative moments in Indian federal history was the reorganization of states along linguistic lines. Initially, leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel resisted linguistic reorganization, fearing it would encourage separatism and weaken national unity (Sengul, 2001). However, popular mobilization, particularly the fast-unto-death by Potti Sriramulu demanding a Telugu-speaking state, forced the government to concede. In 1953, Andhra Pradesh was carved out, followed by the States Reorganization Act of 1956 which redrew state boundaries primarily along linguistic criteria (Brass, 1994).

This reorganization had far-reaching consequences. On one hand, it deepened democratic legitimacy by aligning administrative boundaries with cultural and linguistic identities, thereby reducing alienation (Giroux, 1991). On the other, it institutionalized identity politics as a permanent feature of Indian federalism, leading to subsequent demands for new states such as Haryana (1966), Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Uttarakhand (all in 2000), and most recently Telangana in 2014 (Rao & Singh, 2005). Linguistic federalism thus represented a compromise between national integration and subnational assertion, reinforcing the resilience of India's federal system.

5.4. FEDERAL CRISES AND CENTRALIZING TENDENCIES

Despite constitutional provisions, Indian federalism experienced several crises that tested its durability. The period of the Emergency (1975–77) under Indira Gandhi represented the most extreme centralization of power in independent India. The suspension of civil liberties, dismissal of state governments, and subordination of institutions undermined the federal balance (Lawrence, 2021). Even outside the Emergency, Article 356, empowering the Union to dismiss state governments, was used extensively, often for partisan ends. Between 1950 and 1990, it was invoked more than 90 times, raising questions about the autonomy of states and the constitutional limits of central intervention.

Another significant moment of federal crisis was the rise of regional movements demanding greater autonomy or even secession. The Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu, the Sikh militancy in Punjab during the 1980s, and insurgencies in the Northeast reflected the tensions inherent in a diverse federation (Staniland, 2013). While secessionist threats were largely contained through a mix of accommodation, repression, and negotiation, these challenges underscored the contested nature of India's federalism.

6. THE COALITION ERA AND COOPERATIVE FEDERALISM

The political landscape shifted dramatically after 1989 with the decline of single-party dominance and the rise of coalition governments at the Centre. This transition marked the beginning of a more genuine form of federalism where regional parties played a decisive role in national politics. Coalition governments, such as those led by the United Front, National Democratic Alliance (NDA), and United Progressive Alliance (UPA), depended on the support of state-based parties, leading to greater accommodation of regional interests (Manor, 1997). This phase also coincided with economic liberalization in 1991, which empowered states to pursue development strategies and compete for investment, further strengthening their role within the federal framework (Singh & Saxena, 2012).

During this period, institutions like the Inter-State Council (established in 1990) and the Finance Commission became more significant in negotiating centre–state relations (Gleason, 2001). The idea of “cooperative federalism” gained traction, reflecting a more balanced relationship where states were not merely subordinate units but active stakeholders in policy formulation.

7. GEOGRAPHIES OF GOVERNANCE: ADMINISTRATIVE AND POLITICAL DIMENSIONS

The relationship between governance and geography has always been deeply intertwined, especially in a diverse and territorially complex country like India. Governance is not a purely abstract phenomenon of laws and institutions; rather, it is fundamentally embedded within spatial arrangements of territory, administrative units, and political jurisdictions. The concept of “geographies of governance” highlights how political authority and administrative structures are not merely vertical hierarchies but also spatial systems, shaping how state power reaches citizens across varied terrains. In India, with its continental size, heterogeneous population, and multilayered federal arrangements, governance must be understood not only as a political process but also as a spatial practice. The administrative and political dimensions of governance therefore converge to determine how federal space is produced, contested, and reconfigured.

From the political perspective, India's federal structure is grounded in constitutional design, which allocates powers and responsibilities between the Union and the states. Yet, federalism in India has never been a static system; it has evolved through historical contingencies, political crises, and institutional negotiations. The geography of governance reflects this federal dynamism, state boundaries, regional aspirations, and the politics of centralization and decentralization have continuously shaped how governance is organized spatially. For instance, the linguistic reorganization of states in 1956 was not merely an administrative exercise but a political recognition of geography's role in governance. Language, culture, and territory converged to redefine state boundaries, producing new scales of political authority and new sites of governance. Thus, governance in India cannot be understood without examining how political geography shapes administrative practices and how administrative divisions, in turn, reinforce political power.

Administratively, India's governance system operates on a multi-scalar framework, ranging from the central government to state governments, districts, blocks, and villages. This hierarchical system of governance reflects both efficiency and control. The district, in particular, has been the cornerstone of administrative governance since colonial times. District collectors, as representatives of the state, embody the intersection of administrative authority and territorial governance, functioning as mediators between local populations and higher levels of government. While this administrative framework ensures uniformity and bureaucratic efficiency, it also highlights the spatial unevenness of governance. Regions with stronger administrative capacities often experience better service delivery, while marginalized and peripheral regions face governance deficits (Manor, 1999). Thus, the administrative geography of India reproduces existing inequalities even as it attempts to implement a uniform governance structure.

Politically, governance in India is shaped by electoral geographies, where constituencies define the territorial basis of political representation. The delimitation of constituencies is not merely a technical exercise but a profoundly political act that determines whose voices are amplified and whose are marginalized in legislative spaces. Electoral boundaries often intersect with social cleavages such as caste, religion, and ethnicity, making governance outcomes deeply contingent on the geography of representation (Palshikar, 2014). For example, the uneven distribution of constituencies between northern and southern India due to demographic variations has fueled debates over representation, resource allocation, and the balance of power within the federation. The territoriality of governance thus extends beyond administrative divisions into the realm of political contestation, where boundaries and spaces are instruments of both inclusion and exclusion.

The geographies of governance are also marked by the scalar politics of decentralization. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, which institutionalized Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Urban Local Bodies (ULBs), were watershed moments in India's governance trajectory. These reforms brought governance closer to the people by recognizing local bodies as the "third tier" of federalism (Mathew, 1994). The introduction of Gram Sabhas and municipal councils redefined governance by creating new local spaces of participation and accountability. Yet, the practice of decentralization has been uneven, with state governments often reluctant to devolve adequate powers and resources to local bodies (Jha, 2021). This tension reveals the spatial politics of governance: while decentralization seeks to empower local geographies of decision-making, central and state authorities often seek to maintain hierarchical control, leading to fragmented and contested governance spaces (Wu, 2016).

Administrative geographies in India also reflect the legacy of colonial rule. The British introduced revenue districts, municipalities, and cantonments as spatial instruments of governance, designed primarily for extraction and control (Home, 2019). These administrative boundaries, while restructured post-independence, continue to influence the logic of governance. For instance, the revenue-centric orientation of district administrations often clashes with the developmental priorities of contemporary governance (Benson, 2019). Similarly, the persistence of administrative boundaries created during colonial times has sometimes constrained the responsiveness of governance to cultural or ecological realities (Haque, 1996). This tension between inherited administrative geographies and evolving governance needs underscores the complexity of managing federal space in India.

Urban governance presents another crucial dimension of governance geographies. India's rapid urbanization has created new challenges for governance, as metropolitan regions emerge as economic and political hubs. The governance of cities involves multiple actors, municipal bodies, state governments, metropolitan development authorities, and central agencies, each with overlapping jurisdictions (Lefevre, 1998). This fragmented governance often leads to inefficiencies and conflicts, particularly in the management of infrastructure, land, and resources. The spatial expansion of cities into peri-urban areas further complicates governance, as administrative boundaries lag behind socio-economic transformations (Asafo, 2020). The governance of urban regions therefore requires a rethinking of administrative geographies to address the complexities of contemporary urbanization.

Rural governance, by contrast, is deeply intertwined with local social hierarchies and ecological contexts. Panchayati Raj Institutions are intended to democratize rural governance, yet their functioning is often shaped by caste, class, and gender inequalities (Bryld, 2001). Moreover, rural governance is closely linked with natural resource management, particularly land and water, which have strong spatial dimensions. The governance of common property resources, for instance, highlights how governance practices intersect with ecological geographies. Successful cases of community-led resource management illustrate how governance can be more responsive when it is rooted in local territorial knowledge (Vincent, 2023). These examples underscore the

importance of aligning governance structures with spatial and ecological realities rather than imposing uniform models across diverse geographies.

The geographies of governance are further shaped by processes of regionalism and subnational movements. Demands for new states, such as the creation of Telangana in 2014, reflect how governance geographies are reconfigured through political mobilizations rooted in territory (Upadhyay, 2017). These movements often highlight grievances of neglect, uneven development, and cultural marginalization, pointing to the inadequacies of existing governance structures. The creation of new states or administrative units, however, is not only a response to these grievances but also a spatial strategy of governance to manage diversity and contain conflict (Wolff, 2013). The politics of statehood movements, therefore, illustrate how governance geographies are sites of both contestation and accommodation within the federal framework.

At a broader scale, governance in India is also influenced by the geopolitics of borders and peripheral regions. Border states such as Jammu and Kashmir, Arunachal Pradesh, and Nagaland pose unique governance challenges due to their strategic locations, ethnic complexities, and security concerns (Bhargava, 2010). The governance of these regions involves a delicate balance between security imperatives and developmental needs, often leading to exceptional governance arrangements such as special constitutional provisions (e.g., Sixth Schedule) (Kacowicz & Barnathan, 2016). These cases highlight how governance geographies in India are not uniform but differentiated, reflecting the strategic and political significance of particular territories.

In recent decades, governance has also been reshaped by technological innovations, particularly the rise of e-governance. Digital platforms have enabled governance to transcend traditional administrative boundaries, creating new virtual geographies of service delivery (Milakovich, 2012). Initiatives such as Aadhaar, digital land records, and direct benefit transfers exemplify how governance is being spatially reconfigured through digital infrastructures. While these innovations promise greater efficiency and inclusivity, they also raise concerns about surveillance, exclusion, and the digital divide, which often mirrors existing spatial inequalities (Bhat, 2020). Thus, the digitalization of governance represents both an opportunity and a challenge for the geographies of governance in India.

8. CONTEMPORARY RECONSIDERATION OF POWER AND TERRITORY

The concepts of power and territory lie at the very heart of political geography and international relations (Table 02). While both have historically been treated as fixed, bounded, and material realities, contemporary scholarship reveals them to be increasingly fluid, contested, and redefined by globalization, technology, and ecological transformations (Hosseini and Gills, 2020). In classical political thought, territory was equated with state sovereignty, and power was primarily seen as a coercive capacity exercised through military or economic dominance. However, the twenty-first century presents new challenges: the deterritorialization of global flows, transnational governance mechanisms, and the rising role of networks, identities, and non-state actors (Behr, 2008). Consequently, scholars now argue for a reconsideration of power and territory beyond static borders, emphasizing relational, multiscalar, and ecological dimensions (Paasi, 2009).

Table 2: Perspective of the Power, Territory & Governance*

Dimension	Observation	Implication
Federalism	Shift from cooperative to competitive model	Centralization reshaping state autonomy
Territory	Redefinition through geopolitical shifts	Indo-Pacific discourse altering regional space
Governance	Growing role of judiciary & executive dominance	Weakening of participatory democracy
Community participation	Local self-governance still weak	Need for decentralized planning

**This table shows the dynamic relationship between governance, territory, and federal power.*

Historically, the Westphalian system of states institutionalized the principle of territorial sovereignty, whereby clearly demarcated boundaries marked the extent of a state's authority (Caporaso, 2000). For centuries, power was mapped onto territory: to control space was to exercise authority. The geopolitical doctrines of Mackinder's Heartland theory and Spykman's Rimland theory reinforced this territorial imagination, where geography determined global power outcomes (Mitchell, 2020). Yet, contemporary realities question the sufficiency of such territorial determinism. The rise of global financial networks, international institutions, and cyberspace has decoupled power from physical space to some extent, creating what Manuel Castells (1996) termed the "network society," where flows of information and capital override territorial constraints. This shift highlights that territory is no longer the exclusive container of political power but one of multiple spatialities through which governance operates (Jessop, 2016).

Nevertheless, territory has not become obsolete; rather, it has been reconfigured (Swyngedouw, 1992). Demonstrates that territory must be understood not merely as land but as a political technology, a set of practices of measurement, demarcation, and control that produce space as governable. This means that while digital and transnational spaces challenge the rigidity of borders, states continue to deploy territorial strategies through surveillance, border securitization, and geopolitical assertions (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2019). For instance, the militarization of the South China Sea illustrates how territorial claims remain central to global politics even in an era of interdependence (Burch, 2019).

Similarly, India and China's Himalayan border disputes emphasized how power struggles still play out in highly material geographies despite the rhetoric of globalization. One of the central contributions of contemporary political geography is the shift from viewing territory as a fixed container to seeing it as relational and multiscalar (Dutta, 2022). Shah (2012) argues that globalization does not erode the importance of territory but resituates it across scales, from the urban to the global. Cities emerge as critical nodes of power, hosting global finance, technology hubs, and climate governance experiments. At the same time, supranational organizations such as the European Union redefine sovereignty by creating overlapping layers of authority, demonstrating that power is not strictly territorial but networked across jurisdictions. Thus, reconsidering power and territory involves recognizing how authority and governance are restructured in scalar hierarchies that transcend the nation-state (Archer, 2012).

Another crucial dimension is the ecological reconsideration of power and territory. The Anthropocene challenges the state-centric territorial imagination by revealing that climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion operate across planetary scales that no single nation can control (Dalby, 2020). Water basins, migratory species, and atmospheric processes disregard political borders, forcing the emergence of environmental geopolitics and transboundary governance mechanisms. For example, the management of the Mekong River or the Arctic demonstrates how territorial sovereignty collides with ecological interdependence (Adger et al., 2001). Here, power is increasingly defined not merely by military or economic capacities but by the ability to negotiate cooperative frameworks for shared ecological futures.

Equally significant is the technological transformation of territoriality. Digital surveillance, and data flows have created new virtual frontiers where sovereignty is asserted and contested. States deploy cyber power to influence elections, control information, and wage digital warfare, indicating that territory now includes both material and virtual domains (Deibert, 2013). The emergence of "digital sovereignty" in the policies of China, India, and the European Union reflects attempts to territorialize cyberspace, even as its inherent fluidity resists containment. This demonstrates how contemporary power is exercised in hybrid geographies where the tangible and the intangible intersect.

Moreover, the rise of identity politics and indigenous territorial claims further challenges conventional understandings. Indigenous communities worldwide assert sovereignty over ancestral lands, demanding recognition of cultural geographies excluded from the nation-state's mapping projects (Biolasi, 2005). These struggles highlight that territory is not only a legal or material construct but also an embodied and symbolic space of belonging. Similarly, urban social movements reclaim public spaces as sites of resistance, revealing how power is contested in everyday geographies. Thus, reconsidering territory also entails acknowledging its cultural and symbolic dimensions.

The contemporary world also witnesses the resurgence of territorial nationalism, even as globalization deepens interdependence. Brexit, U.S. border wall debates, and the rise of populist governments across Europe and Asia reflect renewed attempts to reassert control over territory in response to perceived threats of migration, economic globalization, or cultural dilution (Gilmartin & Wood, 2018). These trends suggest that while global flows challenge sovereignty, political communities often respond by re-entrenching territorial boundaries. Hence, power and territory remain deeply intertwined, but in new hybrid forms where nationalism coexists with global interconnection (Jelinek, 2023).

The reconsideration of power and territory is particularly significant in the Indo-Pacific region, where shifting alliances, maritime disputes, and strategic infrastructures such as the Belt and Road Initiative redefine the geopolitical map. Here, power is not only territorial but also maritime and infrastructural, as sea lanes, ports, and undersea cables emerge as vital nodes of geopolitical competition (Medcalf, 2020). This demonstrates how the very meaning of territory is expanded from land to oceans and even to outer space, where contests over satellite orbits and lunar resources anticipate the next frontier of geopolitical struggle.

The theoretical implication of these transformations is that power and territory must be understood relationally, not absolutely. Power is no longer reducible to control over land or population; it is the ability to shape flows, regulate networks, and construct spaces of governance across scales. Territory is not merely a bounded surface but a dynamic outcome of social, political, and technological processes. As Pena (2023) emphasizes, contemporary scholarship must move from seeing territory as "a thing" to analyzing territorialization as a practice, an ongoing process of drawing, enforcing, and contesting boundaries.

9. CONCLUSION

The discussion on the geographies of governance further illustrates the administrative and political dimensions of spatial organization. Governance is increasingly understood not as the monopoly of the state but as a collaborative framework involving multiple stakeholders such as local communities, non-state actors, civil society, and international institutions. Decentralization through the Panchayati Raj system, for instance, reflects India's commitment to grassroots democracy and highlights how administrative geographies overlap with cultural and political ones. Similarly, the federal design of India continues to be tested by debates around fiscal federalism, asymmetric power distribution, and the role of strong regional political parties in reshaping the balance of power. These governance dynamics reveal that the management of territory is no longer limited to central authority but also shaped by localized agency, global interdependencies, and contested identities.

The contemporary reconsideration of power and territory emphasizes the transformation of territoriality under globalization, regionalism, and geopolitical restructuring. The traditional Westphalian notion of territory as a fixed, sovereign boundary is increasingly challenged by cross-border flows of people, ideas, resources, and technology. In India's context, this is reflected in its geopolitical engagements in the Indo-Pacific, where maritime spaces, trade corridors, and strategic partnerships redefine the scope of territorial power. Internally, the reorganization of states, insurgencies, and regional autonomy movements illustrate how territory is not a settled category but a continually renegotiated space. Furthermore, the rise of smart cities, special economic zones, and urban governance frameworks showcases how territoriality is now intertwined with economic and technological geographies. Thus, the contemporary political map is less about rigid boundaries and more about dynamic spatial relationships shaped by power, identity, and globalization.

Finally, there is an urgent need for academic and policy frameworks that bridge political geography with contemporary governance challenges. Federalism and territoriality should not be understood only through constitutional or legal texts but through lived practices of communities, spatial dynamics of power, and socio-ecological interactions. Research must expand to examine how climate change, migration, urbanization, and global trade are reshaping geographies of power in ways that challenge conventional territorial assumptions. Incorporating interdisciplinary insights from environmental studies, sociology, economics, and cultural geography can enrich our understanding of governance and federalism in the twenty-first century.

In conclusion, the politics of space, power, and governance in India underscores that political geography is not merely a descriptive discipline but a critical tool for navigating contemporary challenges. Federalism, governance, and territoriality form a triad through which the complexities of identity, development, and sovereignty are contested and negotiated. India's experience highlights that adaptive governance, pluralist federalism, and dynamic territorial frameworks are essential for managing diversity, ensuring inclusivity, and sustaining democracy in a rapidly changing world. The recommendations offered, ranging from cooperative federalism and decentralized governance to pluralist territorial policies and technological balance, point toward a future where political geography remains central to addressing the pressing governance dilemmas of the twenty-first century.

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