



INTEGRAL HUMANISM, GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY AND COOPERATIVE FEDERALISM: RETHINKING CENTRE–STATE RELATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

Dr. B. Dharmalingam

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Author Details:

Former Chair Professor, Pandit
Deendayal Upadhyay Chair, ICSSR
Senior Fellow, Department of
Women's Studies, Alagappa
University, Karaikudi, Tamil Nadu,
India

Corresponding Author:

Dr. B. Dharmalingam

Abstract

Indian federalism has evolved through a continuing interaction between constitutional design, political bargaining, fiscal arrangements, democratic decentralisation and changing patterns of Centre–State relations. While constitutional federalism provides the institutional architecture for the distribution of legislative, executive and fiscal authority, questions concerning the normative foundations of intergovernmental cooperation and grassroots participation remain significant. This article examines whether the philosophical framework of Integral Humanism associated with Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya can provide a complementary normative lens for understanding contemporary Indian federalism, particularly through the principles of organic unity, decentralisation, Antyodaya, self-reliance and ethical responsibility. The study adopts a qualitative, doctrinal and analytical methodology based on constitutional provisions, constitutional amendments, Finance Commission reports, government documents, judicial interpretation and selected literature on federalism, decentralisation and Integral Humanism. The article argues that Integral Humanism should not be treated as an alternative constitutional theory of federalism. Rather, it can be interpreted as a normative framework that draws attention to the relationship between national unity, institutional pluralism, local initiative and welfare-oriented governance. The article develops a conceptual framework connecting Integral Humanism with grassroots democracy and cooperative federal dialogue through subsidiarity as an analytical bridge. At the same time, it critically examines the limits of this interpretation. Decentralisation remains dependent on the actual devolution of functions, finances and functionaries; subsidiarity is not an express constitutional doctrine; and cooperative federalism necessarily coexists with legitimate intergovernmental contestation. The article therefore proposes a balanced interpretation in which Integral Humanism complements, rather than substitutes for, constitutional federalism, democratic accountability and institutional checks and balances.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.260405016>

Keywords: *Integral Humanism; Indian federalism; cooperative federalism; grassroots democracy; decentralisation; Antyodaya; local self-government; fiscal federalism*

Introduction

Federalism in India represents a distinctive constitutional arrangement designed to reconcile national unity with territorial diversity. The Constitution establishes a system in which legislative and executive responsibilities are distributed between the Union and the States, while simultaneously providing institutional mechanisms for coordination, fiscal transfers and constitutional adjudication. Indian federalism, however, cannot be understood solely through the formal distribution of powers. Its operation is also shaped by political bargaining, regional aspirations, fiscal interdependence, administrative institutions, judicial interpretation and democratic participation.

The evolution of Indian federalism has therefore involved both centralising and decentralising tendencies. In the early decades after independence, national integration and developmental planning contributed to a relatively centralised mode of governance. Subsequently, the expansion of regional political forces, coalition politics, economic liberalisation, fiscal reforms and the strengthening of local government contributed to a more complex pattern of intergovernmental relations. Contemporary federalism consequently combines constitutional authority with negotiation, cooperation, competition and contestation (Arora & Verney, 1995; Rao & Singh, 2005; Watts, 2008).

The question of decentralisation introduces another dimension. The Constitution (Seventy-third Amendment) Act, 1992 and the Constitution (Seventy-fourth Amendment) Act, 1992 gave constitutional recognition to rural and urban local self-government.

Part IX and Part IXA of the Constitution established a framework for Panchayats and Municipalities and sought to strengthen democratic participation at the grassroots. Nevertheless, the practical extent of decentralisation remains substantially dependent on State legislation, institutional capacity and the actual transfer of functions, finances and functionaries.

This institutional question can be examined alongside an important stream of Indian political thought: Integral Humanism. Associated principally with Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya, Integral Humanism emerged in the 1960s as a philosophical and political critique of what its proponents regarded as the inadequacies of both individualistic materialism and collectivist approaches to social organisation. Upadhyaya's four lectures on Integral Humanism in April 1965 articulated a conception of the human person as an integrated being whose physical, mental, intellectual and spiritual dimensions should be considered together (Upadhyaya, 1965, as reproduced in Nene, 1988).

Integral Humanism was not formulated as a constitutional theory of Indian federalism. Nor did it provide an institutional blueprint for contemporary Centre–State relations. Nevertheless, certain principles associated with the framework—particularly organic unity, decentralisation, Antyodaya, self-reliance and ethical responsibility—can be examined as normative concepts relevant to multi-level governance.

The central argument of this article is therefore deliberately limited. It does not claim that Integral Humanism caused or historically produced India's federal institutions. Instead, it asks whether Integral Humanism can provide a complementary normative lens for interpreting relationships among the Union, States and local governments. Such an interpretation requires a careful distinction between philosophy and constitutional law. It also requires recognition that federalism involves not merely cooperation but legitimate disagreement and contestation.

The contemporary context makes this inquiry particularly relevant. Fiscal federalism continues to evolve through the Finance Commission system, with the Sixteenth Finance Commission providing recommendations for the award period 2026–27 to 2030–31. At the same time, institutions such as NITI Aayog continue to emphasise cooperative and competitive dimensions of Centre–State engagement. Local governance remains an important component of India's development architecture.

Against this background, the article develops a conceptual framework linking Integral Humanism, grassroots democracy and cooperative federalism while critically examining the institutional conditions necessary for translating normative principles into effective governance.

Review of Literature

Federalism and Centre–State Relations

The literature on Indian federalism has consistently emphasised the tension between unity and diversity. Austin (1966) described the Constitution as an instrument of national integration as well as democratic governance. The constitutional design combines federal features—including a written Constitution, division of powers, an independent judiciary and constitutional supremacy—with provisions that give substantial authority to the Union. Arora and Verney (1995) emphasised the multiple identities accommodated within the Indian state and highlighted the importance of political negotiation in maintaining federal relationships. Their analysis demonstrates that Indian federalism cannot be reduced to a rigid institutional model because political and social diversity continually reshape the operation of constitutional arrangements. Rao and Singh (2005) examined Indian federalism from a political-economy perspective and drew attention to the fiscal and political dimensions of intergovernmental relations. Their analysis is particularly relevant because fiscal arrangements influence the effective autonomy of States and the capacity of governments at different levels to pursue development priorities. Comparative federal scholarship also stresses that federalism is not simply a constitutional division of powers but a continuing process of intergovernmental interaction. Watts (2008) identifies coordination, autonomy, representation and intergovernmental relations as important dimensions of federal systems. Ostrom (1991), from a broader perspective, associates federal arrangements with self-governing institutions operating at multiple levels. Indian institutional experience reinforces this perspective. The Sarkaria Commission and the Punchhi Commission both examined Centre–State relations in terms of constitutional balance, consultation, coordination and institutional mechanisms for managing intergovernmental tensions (Government of India, 1988, 2010). Thus, the literature provides a strong foundation for understanding Indian federalism as a dynamic relationship involving both autonomy and cooperation.

Fiscal Federalism and Intergovernmental Relations

Fiscal federalism is central to the functioning of Indian federalism because expenditure responsibilities and revenue-raising capacities are not distributed symmetrically among different levels of government. Fiscal transfers consequently become important instruments for addressing regional disparities and enabling States and local governments to undertake public responsibilities. Rao and Singh (2005) demonstrate that fiscal arrangements have both economic and political implications. The distribution of financial resources affects the degree of effective autonomy available to subnational governments. The Finance Commission provides a constitutionally established mechanism for addressing aspects of vertical and horizontal fiscal distribution. The Fifteenth Finance Commission addressed the award period 2021–26, while the Sixteenth Finance Commission has submitted its report for the period 2026–31 (Fifteenth Finance Commission, 2020; Sixteenth Finance Commission, 2025). Contemporary fiscal federalism also illustrates the importance of institutional dialogue. The introduction of the Goods and Services Tax transformed the structure of indirect taxation and created the GST Council as an important intergovernmental institution. In *Union of India v. Mohit Minerals Pvt. Ltd.* (2022), the Supreme Court discussed the nature of cooperative federalism in the GST context and clarified that GST Council recommendations do not override the constitutional legislative authority of Parliament and State legislatures.

This judgment is significant for the present study because it demonstrates that cooperative federalism should not be interpreted as the disappearance of constitutional disagreement. Cooperation and contestation can operate simultaneously within a federal constitutional order.

Democratic Decentralisation and Local Self-Government

Democratic decentralisation extends the federal question beyond Union–State relations to the relationship between States and local governments. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments established a constitutional framework for Panchayats and Municipalities. The significance of these provisions lies not merely in creating local institutions but in providing a constitutional foundation for participatory governance. The Gram Sabha, elected Panchayats and urban local bodies potentially enable citizens to participate more directly in decisions affecting their everyday lives. However, constitutional recognition does not automatically guarantee effective decentralisation. The actual assignment of functions, financial resources and administrative personnel remains substantially dependent upon State-level arrangements. Bardhan (2002) cautions that decentralisation can produce varied outcomes depending on institutional capacity, accountability and local power structures. Crook and Manor (1998) similarly demonstrate that democratic decentralisation must be assessed in relation to participation, accountability and administrative performance rather than merely the existence of elected local institutions. The decentralisation literature therefore suggests that the normative value of local democracy depends upon institutional design and implementation.

Integral Humanism as a Normative Framework

Integral Humanism emerged from Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya's lectures delivered in April 1965. The framework emphasises the integrated development of the human person and the relationship between the individual, society, nature and the larger social order (Upadhyaya, 1965, as reproduced in Nene, 1988). The framework rejects an exclusively material understanding of development and gives importance to social responsibility, cultural continuity, self-reliance and human welfare. Its conception of society is not based solely upon contractual relationships among isolated individuals. Rather, society is understood in organic terms, with different institutions and social groups forming parts of a larger whole. For the purposes of this article, five principles are particularly relevant: organic unity; decentralisation; Antyodaya; self-reliance; and ethical responsibility. These principles can be analytically related to contemporary questions of multi-level governance, but such a relationship must not be mistaken for a direct constitutional equivalence.

Critical Synthesis

The existing literature reveals three relatively distinct bodies of scholarship. First, federalism scholarship focuses on constitutional power-sharing, Centre–State relations, fiscal arrangements and intergovernmental institutions. Second, decentralisation literature examines participation, local accountability, institutional capacity and the relationship between elected local government and development. Third, scholarship on Integral Humanism addresses an indigenous philosophical approach to society, development, economics and political organisation. There is comparatively limited systematic work connecting these three dimensions through a single analytical framework. In particular, the relationship between Integral Humanism and the institutional architecture of Indian multi-level governance requires greater conceptual clarification.

The present study addresses this gap by treating Integral Humanism neither as an empirical explanation of federal outcomes nor as a substitute for constitutional federalism. It instead examines its potential as a normative lens through which decentralisation, grassroots democracy and cooperative federal dialogue can be interpreted.

Research Gap

Three principal gaps are identified. First, studies of Indian federalism frequently examine constitutional and fiscal institutions without sufficiently considering indigenous normative approaches to governance. Second, scholarship on Integral Humanism has largely concentrated on its philosophical, political and economic dimensions, with relatively limited systematic analysis of its possible relevance to contemporary multi-level governance. Third, the relationship between grassroots democracy and cooperative federalism is often examined institutionally, while its underlying normative principles receive comparatively less attention. The study therefore develops an analytical framework that connects: Integral Humanism → Normative Principles → Grassroots Democracy → Cooperative and Contestatory Federal Dialogue → Governance Outcomes. The relationship is interpretative rather than causal.

Research Objectives

- To examine the conceptual foundations of Integral Humanism and identify principles relevant to multi-level governance.
- To analyse the relationship between democratic decentralisation and contemporary Indian federalism.
- To examine subsidiarity as an analytical bridge between philosophical decentralisation and institutional multi-level governance.
- To develop a conceptual framework linking Integral Humanism, grassroots democracy and cooperative federalism.
- To critically assess the opportunities and limitations involved in applying a normative philosophical framework to constitutional and institutional governance.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, doctrinal and analytical research design. The primary sources include constitutional provisions, the Constitution (Seventy-third Amendment) Act, 1992, the Constitution (Seventy-fourth Amendment) Act, 1992, Finance Commission reports, reports of commissions on Centre–State relations, relevant judicial decisions and official documents

concerning federal and local governance. The study also draws upon secondary literature on federalism, fiscal federalism, decentralisation and Integral Humanism. The analytical method is thematic. Five principal themes are used: organic unity; decentralisation; subsidiarity; Antyodaya and inclusive welfare; and ethical and participatory governance. These themes are compared with contemporary institutions and practices of Indian federalism. The study does not involve primary fieldwork or statistical estimation. Accordingly, its conclusions are conceptual and interpretative rather than causal or predictive. The framework developed here should therefore be regarded as a theoretical proposition requiring future empirical testing.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Integral Humanism: A Holistic Vision of Governance

Integral Humanism places the human person within a wider social and cultural context. Upadhyaya's approach attempts to avoid both an exclusively individualistic conception of society and an exclusively collectivist conception that subordinates the individual completely to the collective (Upadhyaya, 1965, as reproduced in Nene, 1988). The relevance of this idea to governance lies in its emphasis on balance. Development cannot be understood exclusively in terms of aggregate economic growth; institutional arrangements must also consider social welfare, community relationships and human dignity. For federalism, this provides a possible normative question: How can different levels of government retain meaningful institutional space while contributing to a wider common national purpose? The question is particularly relevant to India because constitutional federalism simultaneously protects differentiated governmental authority and establishes mechanisms for national coordination.

Decentralisation and Subsidiarity as an Analytical Bridge

Decentralisation is one of the most important connections between Integral Humanism and grassroots democracy. However, decentralisation should not automatically be equated with subsidiarity. The term "subsidiarity" is not expressly employed as a general constitutional doctrine in the Constitution of India. It is therefore more appropriate in this study to use subsidiarity as an analytical bridge. In its broad institutional sense, subsidiarity suggests that decisions should ordinarily be taken at the lowest level capable of addressing the relevant issue effectively, while higher levels retain responsibilities that require wider coordination or redistribution. This logic can be compared with India's multi-level governance structure: Union → State → Local Government → Community/Citizen. The analytical value of subsidiarity is that it encourages researchers to ask which level of government is best placed to undertake a particular function. Yet subsidiarity cannot mean that every function should automatically be transferred downward. National defence, macroeconomic policy, inter-State infrastructure and redistribution may require higher-level institutions. Similarly, local governments require adequate financial and administrative capacity before additional responsibilities can be effectively devolved. Subsidiarity should therefore be interpreted as a principle of appropriate allocation rather than an absolute rule of maximum decentralisation.

Cooperative Federalism and Federal Dialogue

Cooperative federalism emphasises coordination between different levels of government. Contemporary Indian institutions illustrate several forms of such interaction. The Finance Commission provides a constitutional mechanism for fiscal distribution. The GST Council provides an institutional platform for Union–State engagement over GST-related matters. NITI Aayog facilitates structured engagement between the Union and States through the Governing Council and other initiatives. At the same time, Indian federalism is not purely cooperative. Federal institutions also accommodate disagreement and contestation. The Supreme Court's decision in *Union of India v. Mohit Minerals Pvt. Ltd.* (2022) is particularly relevant because it illustrates the constitutional significance of preserving the legislative authority of both Parliament and State legislatures while recognising the importance of intergovernmental cooperation. Consequently, the appropriate analytical concept is cooperative and contestatory federal dialogue, rather than cooperation alone.

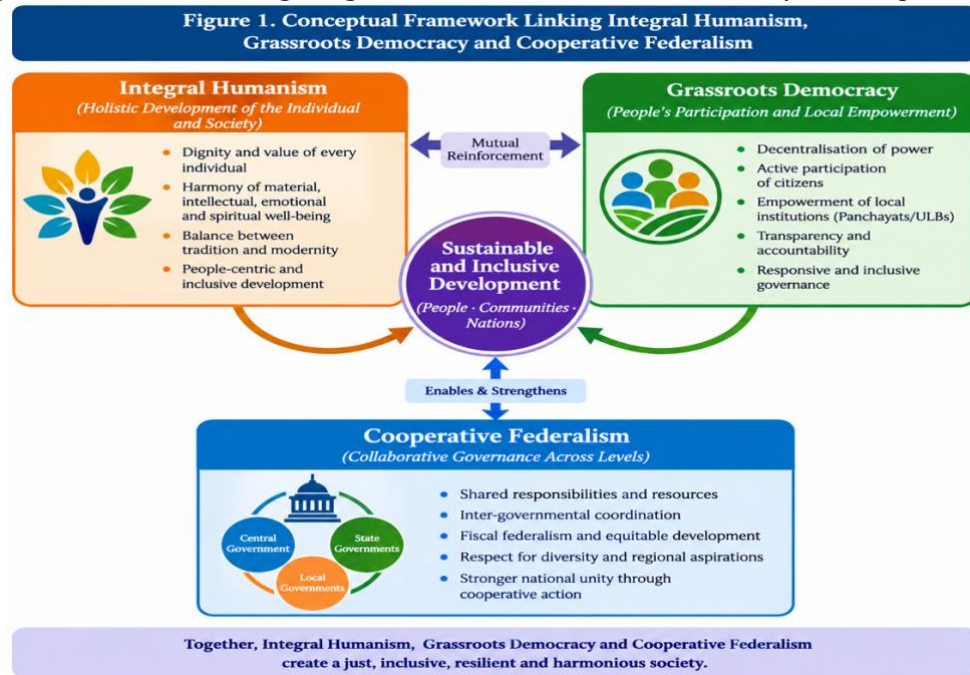
Antyodaya and Inclusive Governance

The principle of Antyodaya directs attention towards the welfare of the person at the margins of society. In a federal context, this principle can be interpreted as a normative concern with whether intergovernmental arrangements ultimately improve the conditions of disadvantaged populations. This has implications for fiscal equalisation, access to public services, rural development, local infrastructure, social protection, women's participation, marginalised communities and geographically disadvantaged regions. However, Antyodaya is a normative principle rather than a legally enforceable criterion for allocating public resources. Translating it into public policy therefore requires measurable indicators, transparent institutional procedures and democratic accountability.

Conceptual Framework: Linking Integral Humanism, Grassroots Democracy and Cooperative Federalism

The conceptual framework developed in this study consists of five interconnected stages. Integral Humanism provides the normative orientation; decentralisation, participation, public welfare and mutual responsibility translate that orientation into governance principles; grassroots democracy provides the participatory institutional arena; cooperative and contestatory federal dialogue connects the Union, States and local governments; and inclusive, balanced and responsive development represents the principal governance orientation. Subsidiarity is positioned between the normative principles and institutional arrangements as an analytical bridge. It is not treated as an express constitutional doctrine, but as a way of examining the appropriate allocation of public functions across levels of government. The framework is intentionally non-causal. The relationship between Integral Humanism and contemporary federal institutions is interpretative rather than empirically established. The figure therefore illustrates conceptual linkage and mutual reinforcement rather than a deterministic sequence.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework Linking Integral Humanism, Grassroots Democracy and Cooperative Federalism



Note: Integral Humanism is treated as a complementary normative lens; subsidiarity is used as an analytical bridge rather than as an express constitutional doctrine.

Grassroots Democracy and Contemporary Multi-Level Governance

Grassroots democracy constitutes the third level of India's governmental structure beyond the Union and States. The constitutional recognition of Panchayats and Municipalities transformed local government from an essentially statutory domain into a constitutionally recognised component of democratic governance. The importance of grassroots democracy lies in proximity. Local institutions are potentially better positioned to identify certain community-level needs because they operate closer to citizens and local conditions. However, proximity does not automatically produce effectiveness. Local governments may face constraints relating to finance, technical expertise, administrative personnel, political capture and accountability.

Bardhan (2002) emphasises that decentralisation can generate both benefits and risks. Local decision-making may improve information and participation, but local institutions may also reproduce existing inequalities when accountability mechanisms are weak. This observation is important for the present framework. Integral Humanism's emphasis on decentralisation should not be interpreted as a claim that smaller government units are automatically more democratic or more efficient. The institutional quality of decentralisation matters. Effective grassroots democracy requires at least four conditions: institutional authority, financial capacity, administrative capability and democratic accountability. Decentralisation should therefore be assessed through the interaction of functions, funds, functionaries and accountability.

Integral Humanism and Cooperative Federalism: Analytical Discussion

Organic Unity and Federal Cooperation

Integral Humanism's idea of organic unity can be interpreted as a normative argument for understanding different institutions as components of a larger social order. This concept has potential relevance to federal cooperation. Union, State and local governments may be viewed as differentiated institutions serving overlapping public purposes rather than as isolated bureaucratic structures. However, the analogy has an important limitation. Federalism institutionalises political diversity. States have constitutionally protected spheres of authority, and disagreement between governments is not necessarily evidence of institutional failure. Therefore, organic unity should not be interpreted as uniformity. A democratic federal system must accommodate diversity of interests, regional priorities, institutional autonomy, political disagreement, judicial review, and constitutional checks and balances. Organic unity can contribute a normative language of complementarity, but it cannot replace federal pluralism.

Decentralisation and Subsidiarity

The principle of decentralisation provides the strongest conceptual connection between Integral Humanism and grassroots democracy. A governance system becomes more participatory when citizens have meaningful opportunities to influence decisions affecting their immediate social and economic environment. The constitutional recognition of Panchayats and Municipalities reflects this broad democratic logic. Nevertheless, actual decentralisation remains dependent on State-level implementation.

The analytical contribution of subsidiarity is to move the discussion from the general claim that “power should be decentralised” to the more precise question: Which level of government should perform which function, with what resources and under what accountability arrangements? This approach avoids two opposite errors: excessive centralisation and indiscriminate decentralisation. Subsidiarity should therefore be understood as a principle of functional appropriateness.

Antyodaya and Distributive Federalism

Federalism is not only about the allocation of constitutional authority. It is also about the distribution of opportunities and public resources. The principle of Antyodaya introduces a welfare-oriented question into this discussion: whether institutional arrangements adequately address the needs of those who are least able to secure opportunities through market or political processes alone. In fiscal federalism, this principle may support attention to regional disparities, rural poverty, vulnerable households, disadvantaged communities, unequal access to education and health, infrastructure deficits and local economic opportunities. However, a normative commitment to disadvantaged groups must be converted into transparent policy criteria. Otherwise, the concept remains rhetorical. Accordingly, Antyodaya can provide a normative orientation, but fiscal equalisation requires constitutional institutions, objective criteria, transparent transfers and accountability.

Ethical Governance and Constitutional Morality

Integral Humanism gives considerable importance to ethical responsibility. This raises an important question concerning the relationship between philosophical ethics and constitutional morality. The two concepts should not be treated as identical. Constitutional morality is rooted in the constitutional order, including equality, liberty, justice, democratic accountability, institutional restraint and respect for constitutional procedures. Integral Humanism emerges from a different philosophical tradition. Nevertheless, they can intersect around broad concerns such as responsibility in public office, human dignity, social welfare, institutional accountability and restraint in the exercise of power. Ethical principles become meaningful only when supported by institutional mechanisms such as transparency, audit, judicial review, legislative scrutiny, social accountability and citizen participation.

Federalism as Cooperation Plus Contestation

One of the most important qualifications to the concept of cooperative federalism is that federalism inevitably involves disagreement. Union and State governments may differ over taxation, expenditure responsibilities, resource distribution, legislative competence, administrative priorities, centrally sponsored programmes and institutional autonomy. Such disagreement is not necessarily contrary to federalism. The Supreme Court's decision in *Union of India v. Mohit Minerals Pvt. Ltd.* (2022) illustrates this point in the context of the GST Council. The judgment recognises the importance of cooperative federalism while also preserving the constitutional position of legislatures. This suggests a more nuanced understanding: Federalism = Cooperation + Coordination + Autonomy + Contestation + Constitutional Adjudication. The conceptual framework proposed in this study therefore deliberately uses the term cooperative and contestatory federal dialogue.

Critical Appraisal: Limits of Translating Integral Humanism into Federal Governance

First, Integral Humanism is not a constitutional theory of federalism. It was not developed as a technical model for allocating legislative, fiscal or administrative powers among levels of government. Any connection to federalism is therefore interpretative. Second, organic unity may be interpreted too strongly. If organic unity is equated with uniformity, it could weaken recognition of legitimate regional diversity. A federal system requires both unity and autonomy.

Third, decentralisation can reproduce inequality. Local institutions are not automatically egalitarian. Existing caste, class, gender and economic inequalities can influence local decision-making. Decentralisation therefore requires democratic safeguards.

Fourth, subsidiarity is not an express constitutional doctrine. Its use in this paper is analytical. It helps interpret appropriate allocation of functions but does not independently determine constitutional competence.

Fifth, Antyodaya requires operationalisation. A normative concern for the last person must be translated into measurable criteria, public expenditure priorities, social indicators and accountable institutions.

Sixth, self-reliance cannot mean fiscal isolation. States and local governments require intergovernmental transfers because fiscal capacity differs substantially across regions. Self-reliance should therefore be interpreted as institutional capacity and local initiative rather than complete financial independence.

Seventh, ethical governance cannot be assumed. No philosophical framework can guarantee ethical conduct. Institutional accountability remains necessary.

Policy Implications

The framework developed in this study has several policy implications. First, strengthening functional devolution requires periodic review of the distribution of responsibilities among State departments and local governments, with appropriate financial and administrative resources. Second, decentralisation should link functions, funds and functionaries. The transfer of responsibilities without financial resources or trained personnel can produce nominal rather than substantive decentralisation. Third, Gram Sabha and local participation can be strengthened through accessible information, social audit, participatory planning, transparent budgeting, inclusion of women and marginalised communities, and digital disclosure of local decisions. Fourth, institutions of Centre-State coordination should continue to provide opportunities for structured consultation. The Finance Commission, GST Council, NITI Aayog, Inter-State Council and other mechanisms serve different institutional purposes; their effectiveness depends upon the quality of information, consultation and constitutional respect underlying intergovernmental relations.

Fifth, the idea of self-reliance can be translated into contemporary local-development strategies through local entrepreneurship, rural skill development, producer organisations, women's enterprises, local value chains, indigenous knowledge, community-based resource management and digital market access. Sixth, development planning can benefit from systematic attention to local knowledge, traditional occupations, indigenous technologies, local ecological knowledge, community institutions, women's knowledge systems and locally appropriate production systems. Seventh, normative principles should ultimately be assessed through evidence. Future institutional assessment could examine fiscal autonomy, proportion of functions devolved, local revenue mobilisation, citizen participation, service delivery, social inclusion, regional inequality, women's participation and local planning outcomes.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The study has several limitations. First, it is conceptual and doctrinal rather than empirical. It does not test whether jurisdictions that display greater decentralisation or cooperation actually produce better development outcomes. Second, Integral Humanism is a philosophically broad framework. Different scholars and political traditions may interpret its concepts differently. The present study focuses specifically on dimensions relevant to governance. Third, the study does not claim that Integral Humanism is the only normative framework relevant to Indian federalism. Gandhian thought, Ambedkarite constitutionalism, liberal constitutionalism, socialist traditions and other approaches offer alternative perspectives that could be examined comparatively. Fourth, the study does not construct a quantitative index of cooperative federalism or decentralisation. Future research could undertake comparative State-level studies examining fiscal decentralisation, functional devolution, local institutional capacity, citizen participation, women's political participation, local entrepreneurship, social inclusion, service delivery and regional development outcomes. A further possibility is the development of an empirical Integral Humanism–Grassroots Governance Index based on measurable indicators of decentralisation, participation, inclusion, local capacity and institutional accountability.

Conclusion

Indian federalism is best understood as an evolving system of constitutional authority, political negotiation, fiscal interdependence, democratic decentralisation and institutional dialogue. Its contemporary character cannot be adequately explained either through a purely centralised model or through an assumption that cooperation has eliminated intergovernmental conflict. This article has explored Integral Humanism as a complementary normative lens for interpreting this complex institutional order. The analysis identifies organic unity, decentralisation, Antyodaya, self-reliance and ethical responsibility as principles that can contribute to a broader understanding of multi-level governance. The principal contribution of the article is the development of a conceptual connection among Integral Humanism, grassroots democracy and cooperative federalism. The framework proposes that normative principles can inform the relationship between grassroots institutions and wider structures of federal governance, with subsidiarity functioning as an analytical bridge. At the same time, the study deliberately avoids treating philosophical principles as constitutional rules. Integral Humanism was not formulated as a theory of Indian federalism, and there is no basis for claiming a direct causal relationship between the philosophy and contemporary federal institutions. Similarly, subsidiarity is used here as an analytical concept rather than an express constitutional doctrine.

The critical analysis also demonstrates that decentralisation is meaningful only when institutions possess appropriate functions, financial resources, administrative capacity and democratic accountability. Likewise, cooperative federalism cannot be understood as the elimination of disagreement. Federal democracy requires both cooperation and legitimate contestation within constitutional boundaries. The resulting perspective may therefore be expressed as follows: Integral Humanism provides normative orientation; grassroots democracy provides democratic participation; subsidiarity provides an analytical allocation principle; cooperative and contestatory federalism provides institutional dialogue; constitutionalism provides the legal framework; and inclusive development provides the principal governance orientation. The significance of this framework lies not in replacing India's constitutional federal structure with a philosophical alternative, but in opening a space for dialogue between indigenous political thought and contemporary constitutional governance. Such dialogue can contribute to a richer understanding of how unity, diversity, decentralisation, welfare and institutional accountability may coexist within India's evolving multi-level democratic system.

Table 1. Integral Humanism and Contemporary Multi-Level Governance

Integral Humanism principle	Constitutional/governance analogue	Analytical contribution	Critical qualification
Organic unity	Cooperative federalism and intergovernmental coordination	Encourages viewing different levels of government as complementary institutions	Unity must not become uniformity; federal autonomy and disagreement remain legitimate
Decentralisation	73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments; local self-government	Brings decision-making closer to citizens	Effective decentralisation depends on actual devolution and institutional capacity
Subsidiarity	Multi-level allocation of public functions	Provides a framework for asking which level is best placed to act	Not an express general constitutional doctrine in India

Antyodaya	Inclusive development, fiscal transfers and social welfare	Directs attention to disadvantaged groups and regions	Requires measurable criteria and accountable implementation
Self-reliance	Local initiative and resource mobilisation	Encourages institutional capacity and community initiative	Cannot imply withdrawal from fiscal equalisation
Ethical responsibility	Accountability, constitutional morality and institutional restraint	Connects governance with responsibility and public purpose	Philosophical ethics and constitutional morality are not identical
Cultural continuity	Context-sensitive local governance	Recognises local knowledge and social institutions	Must remain consistent with equality, rights and constitutional values
Integral development	Sustainable and multidimensional development	Connects economic, social and human dimensions	Requires empirical indicators to demonstrate outcomes

Acknowledgment: No

Author's Contribution: *Dr. B. Dharmalingam:* Data Collection, Literature Review, Methodology, Analysis, Drafting, References

Funding: No

Declaration: The author/s has/have given consent for the publication.

Competing Interest: No

References

1. Arora, B., & Verney, D. V. (Eds.). (1995). Multiple identities in a single state: Indian federalism in comparative perspective. Konark Publishers.
2. Austin, G. (1966). The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a nation. Oxford University Press.
3. Bardhan, P. (2002). Decentralization of governance and development. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 16(4), 185–205. <https://doi.org/10.1257/089533002320951037>
4. Cheema, G. S., & Rondinelli, D. A. (Eds.). (2007). Decentralizing governance: Emerging concepts and practices. Brookings Institution Press.
5. Constitution of India. (1992a). The Constitution (Seventy-third Amendment) Act, 1992. Government of India, Legislative Department.
6. Constitution of India. (1992b). The Constitution (Seventy-fourth Amendment) Act, 1992. Government of India, Legislative Department.
7. Crook, R. C., & Manor, J. (1998). Democracy and decentralisation in South Asia and West Africa: Participation, accountability and performance. Cambridge University Press.
8. Fifteenth Finance Commission. (2020). Report for 2021–26. Government of India.
9. Government of India. (1988). Report of the Sarkaria Commission on Centre–State relations. Government of India.
10. Government of India. (2010). Report of the Commission on Centre–State Relations. Government of India.
11. Ministry of Panchayati Raj. (2025). Annual report 2024–25. Government of India.
12. Nene, V. V. (1988). Integral humanism (Vol. 2 of D. B. Thengadi, Ed., Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya, ideology and perception). Suruchi Prakashan.
13. NITI Aayog. (2025). Annual report 2024–25. Government of India.
14. Ostrom, V. (1991). The meaning of American federalism: Constituting a self-governing society. ICS Press.
15. Rao, M. G., & Singh, N. (2005). The political economy of federalism in India. Oxford University Press.
16. Sixteenth Finance Commission. (2025). Report of the Sixteenth Finance Commission for 2026–31. Government of India.
17. Supreme Court of India. (2022). Union of India & Anr. v. M/s Mohit Minerals Pvt. Ltd., Civil Appeal No. 1390 of 2022 (judgment, May 19, 2022).
18. United Nations. (2015). Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. United Nations.
19. Watts, R. L. (2008). Comparing federal systems (3rd ed.). McGill-Queen's University Press.

Publisher's Note

The Social Science Review A Multidisciplinary Journal remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published data, map and institutional affiliations.

©The Author(s) 2026. Open Access.

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>