

THE ROLE OF ZONAL COUNCIL AND THE NORTH EASTERN COUNCIL IN INDIA'S FEDERAL STRUCTURE

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DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.5349](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.5349)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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ABSTRACT

India's federal system has evolved significantly, with various institutional mechanisms designed to foster cooperative federalism and address regional disparities. Two such critical entities are the Zonal Councils and the North Eastern Council, which play pivotal roles in promoting cultural unity, resolving regional challenges, and advancing socio-economic development across the country. Zonal Councils, established to facilitate dialogue between states, serve as platforms for addressing issues like resource allocation, linguistic tensions, and inter-state coordination. Their primary goal is to cultivate a collaborative spirit and resolve regional problems, thereby contributing to the overall advancement of India's federal structure. These councils' function across five geographical zones, each with its own unique demographic and economic profiles. Additionally, the North Eastern Council, created in 1971, specifically focusses on the socio-economic development of India's northeastern states, recognizing their strategic importance and ethnic diversity. These states face unique challenges, such as border disputes, linguistic conflicts, and developmental disparities, which the North Eastern Council aims to address through cooperative planning. Both the Zonal Councils and the North Eastern Council play a crucial role in reducing tensions between the center and the states, fostering a collaborative spirit, and promoting balanced regional development. The article underscores the significance of the Zonal Councils, the division of Zones, the composition and functions of these councils, the North Eastern Council, and their role in nurturing a federal character to enhance their efficiency. By grouping states based on their shared demographic and economic characteristics, these councils can enhance coordination and maximize the potential for regional development, ultimately strengthening India's federal framework and promoting balanced growth across the country.

Keywords: Cooperative Federalism, Zonal Councils, North Eastern Council, Regional Development, Inter-State Cooperation

1. INTRODUCTION

The Zonal Councils and the North Eastern Council hold significant roles within India's federal structure, facilitating inter-State cooperation and fostering regional development. The concept of Zonal Councils, first envisioned by India's first Prime Minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, emerged during discussions about the Reorganization of Indian States in the 1950s. Nehru believed that establishing regional councils would enhance communication and collaboration among States, addressing issues of common interest. These councils were institutionalized through the State Reorganization Act of 1956, with the explicit purpose of advancing socio-economic planning, resolving regional disputes, and promoting a spirit of cooperative federalism across India's diverse regions. Zonal Councils were conceived as platforms to discuss common problems affecting neighboring States. The State Reorganization Commission, in its recommendations,

emphasized the need for regional coordination and suggested the formation of five Zonal Councils: Northern, Central, Eastern, Western, and Southern Zones. These councils have a statutory foundation and focus on fostering dialogue, interaction, and cooperation between States on critical matters such as border disputes, resource allocation, and socio-economic planning¹. Their creation was rooted in the understanding that many inter-State conflicts—particularly those concerning linguistic, ethnic, and resource-based issues—could be resolved through dialogue rather than litigation. This forum offers a structured platform for Chief Ministers and other State representatives to meet, exchange views, and find common solutions.

The primary objective of these councils is to foster cooperative federalism. India's federal structure is unique, given the vast linguistic, cultural, and economic diversity across its States. Federalism in India is often strained due to differences in State and central priorities, the uneven distribution of resources, and political divergences. In this context, Zonal Councils serve as essential forums for building consensus, enabling States to engage directly with each other and with the central government. This interaction helps address and mitigate the challenges of center-State relations and facilitates the development of policies that promote the common welfare of the States involved. The role of the Zonal Councils extends beyond resolving inter-State disputes. They also contribute significantly to long-term socio-economic planning. By allowing States to cooperate in developing infrastructure and planning resources, Zonal Councils ensure that projects transcend regional boundaries and benefit multiple States. This cooperative approach has been particularly important in addressing issues such as water sharing, power distribution, and transportation infrastructure—areas where States have often found themselves in conflict. For instance, inter-State River disputes, which are among the most contentious issues in Indian federalism, are frequently discussed in these forums.

Additionally, the North Eastern Council (NEC), established in 1971, represents another crucial component of India's federal structure. The NEC specifically addresses the unique socio-economic needs of India's Northeastern States, a region distinguished by its ethnic diversity, cultural richness, and strategic significance. The northeastern region, consisting of States like Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura, has long faced developmental challenges due to its geographic isolation, difficult terrain, and historical underdevelopment. The creation of the NEC was aimed at addressing these disparities by focusing on region-specific developmental needs. The NEC operates as a statutory body², serving as a nodal agency for the planning and execution of development projects in the northeastern region. The council's focus has been on improving infrastructure, promoting tourism, and enhancing connectivity in these remote areas. Since its establishment, the NEC has played a critical role in fostering socio-economic development in the region. It has overseen the construction of extensive road networks, supported initiatives to boost local economies, and promoted sustainable development practices in one of India's most ecologically sensitive regions. The NEC also plays a vital role in maintaining security and promoting peace in the region, which has been marred by insurgencies and ethnic conflicts. Given the strategic importance of the Northeastern States, which share international borders with China, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar, the NEC's initiatives are crucial for both national security and regional stability. The NEC collaborates closely with State governments and the central government to ensure that developmental initiatives are carried out in a manner that respects local sensitivities while contributing to the nation's overall growth. The council's work aligns with India's broader "Act East" policy, which seeks to enhance trade and cultural exchanges with Southeast Asia, leveraging the northeastern region's geographic position as a gateway to this dynamic part of the world.

Despite the important role played by the Zonal Councils and the North Eastern Council, there have been critiques regarding their structure and effectiveness. One major criticism of the Zonal Councils is that the division of States into zones lacks a scientific basis. For instance, States with vastly different demographic and economic profiles have been grouped within the same Zonal Council, potentially limiting the council's effectiveness in addressing the unique needs of each State. Similarly, the NEC has been criticized for not fully realizing its potential in addressing the deep-rooted socio-economic challenges faced by the northeastern region. The functioning of Zonal Councils and the NEC has also been brought into focus during times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic underscored the importance of robust inter-State coordination and cooperation. During the crisis, Zonal Councils offered a platform for States to share resources, coordinate public health measures, and ensure the smooth flow of essential goods and services across State

¹ P.K. Sharma, 'Zonal Councils in the Indian Federation' (1956) 4(4) EPW <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40735297>> accessed on 7th September 2024.

² Gopal Krishan, 'A Call for Paradigm Shift: From Competition to Cooperation' (2006) 41(10) EPW <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4417933>> accessed on 8th September, 2024.

borders. The NEC, too, played a pivotal role in coordinating efforts to control the spread of the virus in the northeastern States, which faced unique challenges due to their geographic isolation and underdeveloped healthcare infrastructure. Both the Zonal Councils and the North Eastern Council are integral to India's federal system, promoting cooperation and dialogue between States and the central government. These councils provide a forum for addressing the unique challenges faced by different regions, fostering a spirit of collaborative governance. However, there is a need to reexamine the structure and functioning of these bodies to ensure they remain relevant and effective in addressing the evolving needs of India's diverse States. By strengthening these institutions and ensuring that they operate with a clear mandate and adequate resources, India can further enhance its federal structure and promote balanced, inclusive development across the country.

2. ZONAL COUNCILS

In 1956, a statutory and legislative scheme led to State Reorganization Act, prompting the proposal for a Zonal council. This council advocated for cooperative federalism, emphasizing the importance of dialogue, discussion, interaction, and engagement among the States as a means of enhancing individual lives and promoting the country's overall economic growth. That's how it was decided to let Zonal Council be seen as a sort of experiment by looking into the complex issues and how those issues can be effectively addressed through a dialogue. How strain and stress in federal relations can be resolved through a forum where Chief Ministers can interact and they can share their constraints or ideas through a common way out can be found. In the very structure of India, you find a lot of linguistic hostilities and issues with regard to resource allocations, particularly natural resources. for example, an Interstate water dispute, division of States on the lines of language. Therefore, it was thought that the Zonal Council would be an appropriate body to discuss these issues and work towards minimizing the differences. It will serve as a platform for addressing issues that may be more closely related to politics and the sentiments of the people. These issues may have escalated due to sudden events, and these councils can play a role in addressing and resolving them.

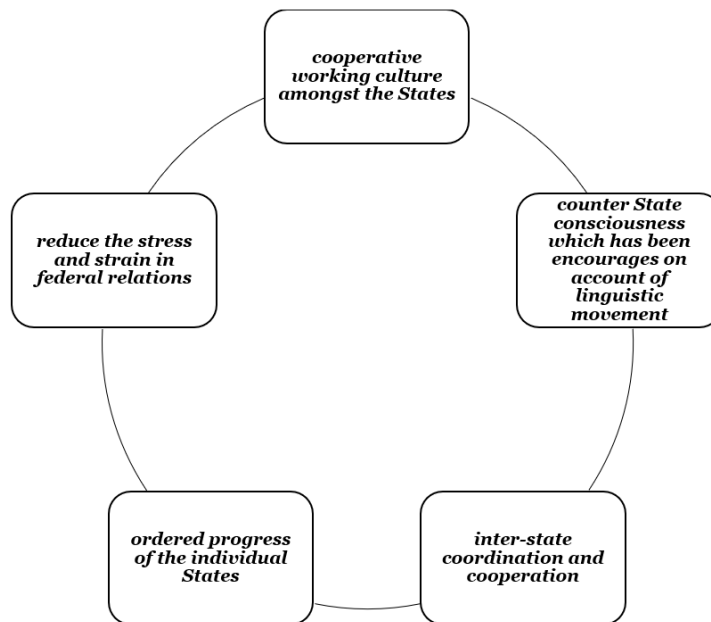


Figure 1 Objectives of the Zonal Councils

The Zonal Councils in India serve as crucial platforms for the implementation of the model of cooperative federalism, where the primary objectives involve promoting cultural harmony, countering State consciousness driven by linguistic movements, and facilitating interstate coordination and cooperation. The underlying premise is that language should be a unifying factor rather than a divisive one, fostering a sense of shared identity and connection among the States. By addressing issues of interstate coordination and cooperation, the Zonal Councils aim to facilitate the ordered progress of individual States, ensuring that they move forward in a collective and progressive manner, supporting and

handholding each other³. This approach stands in contrast to the traditional adversarial and litigative approach, which often characterizes federal-State relations⁴. Instead, the Zonal Councils encourage a focus on mutually resolvable issues, promoting a collaborative spirit that can help reduce the strain and stress inherent in federal relations.

2.1. FIVE ZONES

There are five Zonal councils which are established⁵ under Section 15 of the State Reorganization Act, 1956, i.e., Northern Zone, Central Zone, Eastern Zone, Western Zone and Southern Zone.

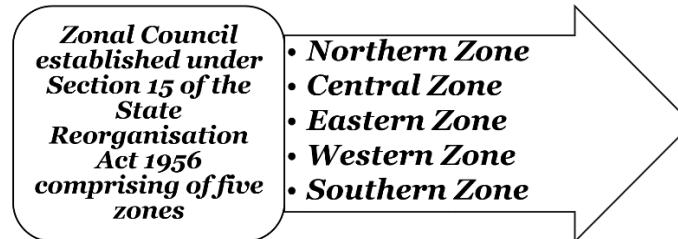


Figure 2 Zonal Councils

India's Zonal Council system, designed to promote coordination and integration among the States, has long been a subject of scrutiny. The current categorization of States within these Councils has been criticized as lacking a scientific basis, with concerns raised about the appropriateness of grouping States with vastly different demographics, topographies, and economic drivers. The diversity of India's regions, both in terms of cultural and economic factors, has been a persistent challenge in the country's political evolution⁶. While the federal structure of India grants significant autonomy to the States, the desire for greater coordination and integration has led to the establishment of Zonal Councils. However, the current grouping of States within these Councils may not be optimally suited to address the unique needs and priorities of each region.

Northern Zone	• Haryana, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan and Jammu & Kashmir, National Capital Territory of Delhi and the Union Territory of Chandigarh
Central Zone	• Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh
Eastern Zone	• Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha and West Bengal
Western Zone	• Gujarat, Maharashtra and Goa and the Union Territory of Dadra & Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu
Southern Zone	• Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Telangana and the Union Territory of Puducherry.

Figure 3 Five Zones

As highlighted in the prompt, the combination of Uttarakhand and Chhattisgarh within the same Zonal Council is problematic, given their distinct demographic and economic profiles. Similarly, the grouping of States like Haryana, Punjab, and the Union Territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh in the Northern Zone may not be the most

³ Nirvikar Singh, 'Governance and Reform in India' (1997) 6(2) The Journal of International Trade & Economic Development <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09638199700000013>> accessed on 7th September 2024.

⁴ Prakash Chandra Jha, 'India's Cooperative Federalism during Covid-19 Pandemic' (2022) 68(2) Indian Journal of Public Administration <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/00195561211072568>> accessed on 7th September 2024.

⁵ The States Reorganisation Act 1956, s 15

⁶ David Stuligross, 'Autonomous Councils in Northeast India: Theory and Practice' (1999) 24(4) Sage Publications Inc. <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40644976>> accessed on 7th September 2024.

appropriate, as these regions have divergent interests and concerns⁷. The need for a more scientific and thoughtful approach to the restructuring of Zonal Councils is evident. Autonomous District Councils have been recognized as a means of granting a measure of autonomy to linguistic and other communities, while maintaining integration into the larger Indian nation⁸. This principle of "integration" rather than "assimilation" could be a guiding framework for the reorganization of Zonal Councils.

Reorganization efforts should aim to ensure that the States within a Zonal Council share a minimum common interest, allowing for more effective coordination and the maximization of benefits from a coordinated approach. As noted in the literature, a stronger, more decentralized, and better-regulated system of governance can foster a greater sense of national identity, as it allows for the recognition of diverse regional identities while promoting a shared, universal social citizenship⁹. The pandemic has also highlighted the importance of intergovernmental institutions, such as the Inter-State Council, in facilitating vertical and horizontal cooperation among the Center and the States. Ideally, the relations between the Center and the States should be guided by the spirit of cooperative federalism, with a similar approach adopted among the States themselves and between the States and local governing bodies. The restructuring of India's Zonal Councils presents an opportunity to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the system, by ensuring that the States within each Council share common interests and priorities. This would facilitate greater coordination, the convergence of ideas, and the maximization of benefits from a collaborative approach, ultimately contributing to the overall development and integration of the nation.

2.2. COMPOSITION OF THE ZONAL COUNCILS

The State Reorganization Act of 1956 established the Zonal Councils as a unique mechanism to foster cooperation and coordination among the States within a given geographical region. The composition¹⁰ of the Zonal Councils, as outlined in Section 16 of the Act, reflects a delicate balance between central authority and State autonomy. At the apex of the Zonal Council is the Union Minister nominated by the President to serve as the Chairman¹¹. This appointment underscores the central government's role in overseeing the activities of these regional bodies. However, the Act also grants the Chief Ministers of the participating States the position of Vice-Chairman, ensuring that the State governments have a direct voice in the council's deliberations¹². Further, the Act mandates that two ministers from each State be nominated¹³ by the Governor to sit on the Zonal Council. This provision allows the State governments to contribute their expertise and perspectives to the council's decision-making process.

<i>Union Minister to be nominated by the President as Chairman</i>
<i>Chief Minister of each of the States as Vice Chairman</i>
<i>Two Ministers of each State to be nominated by the Governor</i>
<i>If there is no Council of Ministers in any such State, three members from that State to be nominated by the President</i>
<i>Two members from each Union territory if Union Territory is included in the Zone</i>

Figure 4 Section 16(1): Composition of the Zonal Councils

In cases where a State does not have a Council of Ministers, the President is empowered to nominate three members from that State, preserving the State's representation¹⁴. The final component of the Zonal Council's composition is the representation of Union Territories. The Act requires the President to nominate two members from each Union Territory that falls within the purview of a given Zonal Council. This intricate arrangement of representation ensures that the Zonal Councils serve as a platform for constructive dialogue and collaboration among the central government, State

⁷ Dossani, Rafiq, 'Reorganization of the power distribution sector in India' (2004) 32(11) Energy Policy Elsevier < [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0301-4215\(03\)00096-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0301-4215(03)00096-X) > accessed on 7th September 2024.

⁸ Prakash Chandra Jha, 'India's Cooperative Federalism during Covid-19 Pandemic' (2022) 68(2) Indian Journal of Public Administration <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/00195561211072568>> accessed on 7th September 2024.

⁹ Divya Pahwa & Daniel Beland, 'Federalism, Decentralization, and Health Care Policy Reform in India' (2013) 2(1) Public Administration Research <<https://ccsenet.org/journal/index.php/par/article/view/26813>> accessed on 7th September 2024.

¹⁰ The States Reorganisation Act 1956, s 16

¹¹ The States Reorganisation Act 1956, s 16 (1) (a)

¹² The States Reorganisation Act 1956, s 16 (3)

¹³ The States Reorganisation Act 1956, s 16 (1) (b)

¹⁴ The States Reorganisation Act 1956, s 16 (1) (b)

governments, and Union Territories. Through this carefully crafted composition, the State Reorganization Act of 1956 has established the Zonal Councils as a unique federal mechanism that balances the interests of the Union and the States, fostering a more harmonious and integrated approach to regional development within India¹⁵.

2.3. ADVISORS OF THE ZONAL COUNCILS

One crucial aspect of the Zonal Councils is the role of their advisers. According to Section 16(4) of the Act¹⁶, the Zonal Council has advisers, one of whom is nominated by the Planning Commission¹⁷. However, since the Planning Commission no longer exists, this role has now been assumed by the Niti Aayog, the government's premier policy think tank. (Dossani, 2004) In addition to the Niti Aayog representative, the chief secretary of each State government within the zone and a development commissioner or any other officer designated by the State government are also included as advisers to the Zonal Council¹⁸. Next, the zone should incorporate the chief secretary of each State's State government, followed by the development commissioner or any other officer the State government designates¹⁹.

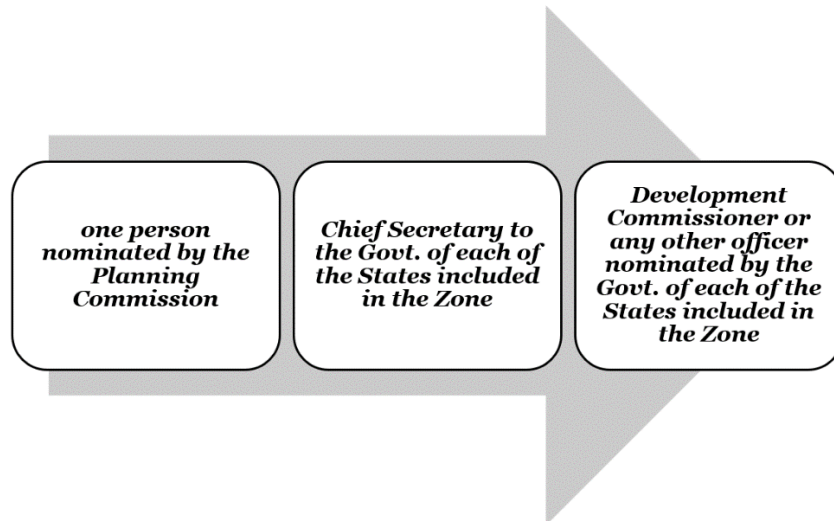


Figure 5 Section 16(4): Advisor of the Zonal Councils

2.4. WORKING OF THE ZONAL COUNCILS

The document stipulates that the council will convene whenever the chairman makes a decision, and the Zonal Council will determine the agenda for the meeting²⁰. However, the decision-making process will rely on voting. If unanimity is not the preferred method for finding a solution, then a majority vote will decide all questions²¹. The central government and the concerned State government within that zone will receive the proceedings of each Zonal Council meeting. It may appoint committees of its members and advisers to perform such functions as may be specified in the resolution passed for the Zonal Council²². So, for example, Zonal Council has established a standing committee on the lines of Inter-State Council, comprising the State Chief Secretaries of the State as well as the members of the Chief Secretary of the member of the State as the standing committee.

¹⁵ David Stuligross, 'Autonomous Councils in Northeast India: Theory and Practice' (1999) 24(4) Sage Publications Inc. <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40644976>> accessed on 7th September 2024.

¹⁶ The States Reorganisation Act, 1956 (Act No. 37 OF 1956)

¹⁷ The States Reorganisation Act 1956, s 16 (4) (a)

¹⁸ The States Reorganisation Act 1956, s 16 (4) (b)

¹⁹ The States Reorganisation Act 1956, s 16 (4) (c)

²⁰ The States Reorganisation Act 1956, s 17 (1)

²¹ The States Reorganisation Act 1956, s 17 (4)

²² The States Reorganisation Act 1956, s 18 (1)

2.5. FUNCTIONS OF THE ZONAL COUNCILS

Zonal Council functions as an advisory body. It is a statutory body; it is not even a constitutional body, like the Inter-State Council. What it can look at under Section 21 of the State Reorganization Act, 1956 is any matter of common interest in the field of economic and social planning, any matter concerning border disputes, linguistic minorities, and Inter-State transport, or any matter connected with or arising out of²³. It is important to note that the 7th schedule in the Concurrent List includes economic and social planning²⁴ as a subject, indicating that both the central government and the States have been tasked with investigating the subject matter of socioeconomic planning. In fact, the ongoing debate on the relevance of a caste census is rooted in this very subject of social and economic planning, with proponents arguing that it is necessary to advance socioeconomic planning, a topic explicitly included in the Constitution.

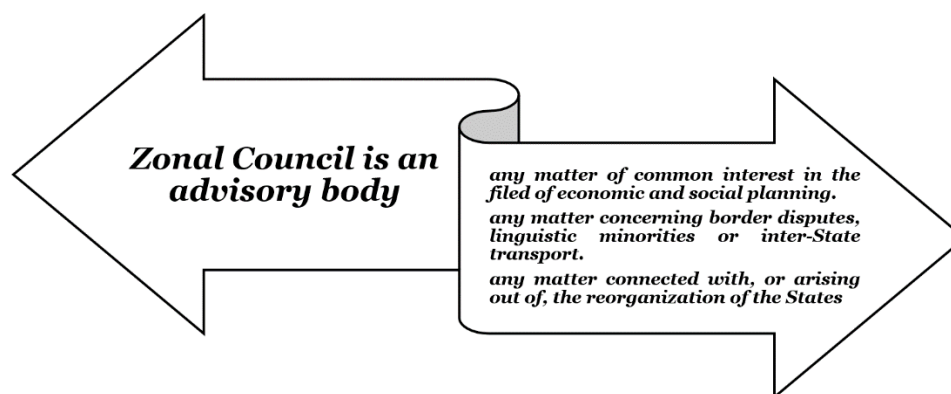


Figure 6 Section 21: Function of the Zonal Councils

The Zonal Council has expressed interest in investigating border disputes²⁵. As you can see from the background, it was suggested by the commission, which was established for reorganizing the State. They expressed great concern about the potential escalation of linguistic divisions within the State²⁶, *as evidenced by the ongoing disputes between Maharashtra and Karnataka over a Maratha region within Karnataka*. So that kind of difference should not get really aggravated; that's why this kind of Zonal Council was envisaged. Upon examining the nature or function of this type of body, it becomes evident that it holds great significance. In a federal system, the code of law cannot settle all disputes due to the judiciary's limitations. Only judicially measurable disputes, which adhere to measurable standards, can the judiciary address. So, there are areas that require a different kind of resolution, and this council can play an important role along the lines of the Inter-State Council.

2.6. ISSUES: ZONAL COUNCIL

In the traditional administrative setup, the functioning of the Zonal Council does not indicate any kind of official relationship. It is not true that one Zonal council has a higher status than the other. Further, the council is not subordinate to the Union; rather, it serves as a collaborative platform where both the States and the Union collaborate to address important issues. For instance, this forum deliberated on crucial matters such as forest clearance for railway projects, land acquisition for infrastructure projects, police modernization, railway safety and security, and migrant worker issues.

Now, let's pose a few questions: given the importance of these councils, *can a recommendation they make have a significant impact? Can this recommendation be of evidentiary value to the court of law in a legal proceeding? How do you see this Council contributing to resolving the dispute between the States?* and then *the union, particularly on an important area, such as the ongoing dispute over the GST distribution of amounts under the GST scheme. Although we have a GST*

²³ P.K. Sharma, 'Zonal Councils in the Indian Federation' (1956) 4(4) EPW <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40735297>> accessed on 7th September 2024.

²⁴ The States Reorganisation Act 1956, s 21 (2) (a)

²⁵ The States Reorganisation Act 1956, s 21 (2) (b)

²⁶ The States Reorganisation Act 1956, s 21 (2) (b)

Council, could it also be taken up by the Zonal Council? This would allow for a more frank and free discussion of the possibilities in a friendly and conducive environment. The significance of the Zonal Council becomes evident when we relate it to a pandemic-like situation, where closer coordination between the States is necessary. How do you see the Zonal Council stepping in and fulfilling the responsibility in giving an effective redress to the crisis that we experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic?

3. NORTH EASTERN COUNCIL

The Northeastern Council is a separate statutory body²⁷ that came into existence in 1971. It is a nodal agency responsible for coordinating the northeastern region's socioeconomic development initiatives. We are well aware that the Northeastern regions hold significant strategic value due to their diverse cultures and large ethnic population. Simultaneously, it is widely acknowledged that the entire region suffers from underdevelopment. Therefore, the Eastern Council has taken a positive step to improve the conditions of all eight States that make up the Northeastern region: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. In 2002, the Northeastern Council Act underwent an amendment, and governors, in collaboration with the chief minister, became members of this council. We clearly understand that the Indian constitutional scheme grants the governors a unique role in Northeastern States, enabling them to directly intervene. The governors have the discretionary power to directly intervene on matters related to tribal welfare. Taking into account that facet of Article 371, we can confidently assert that the constitutional scheme fully recognizes this amendment. The president is responsible for nominating the chairman of the council, not the members among themselves. It is an advisory body like the Zonal Council, and serves as a regional body for undertaking developmental activities for the northeastern region. That's why the council has been interested in the task of discussing the matters in which some States or the Union and one or more States have a common interest. According to their advice to the central government, they may recommend matters of common interest²⁸ in the field of socioeconomic planning (Inter-State, transport, and communications), such as power or flood control projects.

3.1. FUNCTIONS OF THE NORTH EASTERN COUNCIL

When you look at the States in the northeastern region, you will find that they are known for their ethnic and linguistic characters. The northeastern areas are home to over 200 distinct ethnic communities, each with its own unique language. And additionally, Northeastern States are, you know, bordering States, having international borders running into some 5,000 km+, so in that way they become a very strategic part of it. Northeastern States become extremely important from the perspective of the Indian government's Lucas policy. Therefore, the government of India recognizes the Northeastern Council as a crucial entity, granting it statutory status to oversee the execution of projects and schemes aimed at enhancing this region. Indeed, the Northeastern Council's operation demonstrates that since its establishment, it has established an extensive road network throughout the Northeast region, fostered tourism, and initiated infrastructural projects²⁹. Therefore, the Northeastern Council significantly contributes to enhancing the overall development of the region. That's why the council has expressed interest in recommending measures for effective coordination among the States. The council will also review the maintenance of security and public order, recommend measures related to these matters, and strive to ensure the balanced development of Northeastern States.

3.2. NURTURING FEDERAL CHARACTER

In a sense, it fosters the Federal character; a closer examination reveals a greater interest in both horizontal and vertical federalism. They do not view federal issues solely through the lens of a classical federal system centered in the States. They also look at the strengthening bond between the States and the constituent units. Therefore, their purpose is to address the differences that exist between the Center and the States, or among the States themselves. The law envisions a design that involves dialogue, discussion, cooperation, coordination, rather than imposition or dictate³⁰.

²⁷ Gopal Krishan, 'A Call for Paradigm Shift: From Competition to Cooperation' (2006) 41(10) EPW <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4417933>> accessed on 8th September, 2024.

²⁸ North Eastern Council (Government of India), NEC General Guidelines (2020) para 2.6

²⁹ North Eastern Council (Government of India), NEC General Guidelines (2020) para 2.6

³⁰ Nirmal Mukarji, 'Resolving Centre-State Conflicts' (1995) 30(35) EPW <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4403162>> accessed on 8th September 2024.

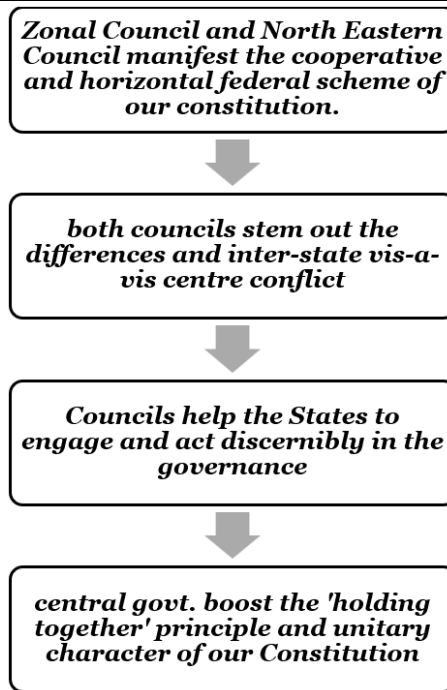


Figure 7 Nurturing Federal Character

That's why, as I mentioned earlier, the design has the potential to provide a lasting solution. When you consider the role of the Union government, it can be likened to a hand that holds everything together, uniting all the units into a cohesive entity that collectively contributes to the nation's growth.

4. CONCLUSION

India's Zonal Councils and the North Eastern Council play pivotal roles in promoting the country's cooperative federalism by addressing inter-state challenges and nurturing regional development. These councils have served as platforms for fostering dialogue, resolving disputes, and advancing socio-economic planning, essential for India's vast and diverse federal structure. The Zonal Councils, established under the State Reorganization Act of 1956, aim to create a forum for resolving inter-state tensions and facilitating dialogue between the central government and the states. In a country where linguistic, ethnic, and regional differences frequently lead to resource disputes, these councils have been instrumental in mitigating such issues through discussions and cooperative planning. As forums that bring together Chief Ministers and other state representatives, they provide a space for the exchange of ideas, coordination on common matters, and long-term planning. Key issues such as border disputes, resource sharing, and infrastructural development have often found resolutions within these councils. By aligning interests and enabling dialogue, the Zonal Councils have advanced the cause of cooperative federalism, ensuring that states with diverse interests work together towards national goals. However, despite their contributions, Zonal Councils face several challenges. The lack of a scientific basis for grouping states into specific zones has been one of the most significant critiques. States with vastly different demographic and economic profiles are often grouped together, making it difficult for the councils to address the unique needs of individual states. Furthermore, while the councils serve as platforms for resolving disputes, they are not vested with binding powers, which limits their ability to enforce resolutions. These structural limitations have been particularly apparent in times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when coordination between states became crucial for the effective management of resources and public health measures.

The North Eastern Council, created in 1971, similarly addresses the developmental needs of the northeastern region, a geographically and ethnically distinct area of India. The council's role in promoting socio-economic development, enhancing connectivity, and maintaining security in this strategically important region has been critical. The northeast faces unique challenges, such as geographic isolation, difficult terrain, and historical underdevelopment, which the NEC aims to address through region-specific initiatives. Over the years, the NEC has overseen significant infrastructure

projects, including the construction of road networks, tourism development, and initiatives to support local economies. By coordinating between the central and state governments, the NEC has played a vital role in fostering socio-economic development in one of India's most underdeveloped regions. Nevertheless, the NEC has its limitations. Despite its statutory status and the importance of its mandate, the council has been criticized for not fully realizing its potential. While it has made progress in addressing the developmental needs of the northeastern states, many of the region's deep-rooted challenges, such as insurgency, ethnic conflicts, and economic disparities, persist. For the NEC to fully achieve its objectives, it requires a more robust and dynamic approach to planning and implementation, with greater resources and clearer mandates.

The role of these councils in nurturing federalism cannot be overstated. By providing platforms for dialogue and cooperation, they have contributed significantly to reducing the tensions inherent in India's federal system. However, as India's socio-economic landscape continues to evolve, these councils must adapt to remain relevant and effective. The Zonal Councils and NEC must re-examine their structures, mandates, and resources to better meet the needs of the states they serve. This could involve a more scientific approach to state groupings within the Zonal Councils, ensuring that states with similar demographic and economic profiles are grouped together for more effective coordination. For the NEC, it may require a stronger focus on addressing the root causes of underdevelopment in the northeastern region, with initiatives that go beyond infrastructure development to encompass education, healthcare, and sustainable economic growth. Additionally, the Zonal Councils and the North Eastern Council are integral components of India's federal system. Their continued relevance and effectiveness will depend on their ability to adapt to the changing needs of the states they serve. By strengthening these institutions, India can further enhance its federal structure, promoting balanced and inclusive development across the country. The councils have the potential to play an even more significant role in shaping India's future, provided they are equipped with the necessary tools and resources to address the complex challenges facing the nation's diverse regions.