India’s Cooperative Federalism during Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract
The role of cooperative federalism in India in dealing with the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic and its effects such as economic crisis and large-scale human migration, among others, is put to test. The initial stages of the pandemic response highlighted the unitary tilt in the Indian federal structure. At the later stages of this crisis, cooperative federalism also appears to be visible. Nevertheless, the lack of cooperation between the States, and the Centre’s failure to facilitate horizontal federalism without invoking any intergovernmental agency for the purpose has made the lives of migrant workers miserable. An intergovernmental institution such as Inter-State Council (ISC) could have been used as a common forum for the Centre and the States for the purpose of both vertical and horizontal cooperative federalism. The pandemic has also brought to the fore the importance of India’s grassroots level of government, though, unfortunately, their potential remains underutilised.

Keywords
Covid-19, cooperative federalism, local government

Introduction
Ideally, the relations between the Centre and the States should be guided by the spirit of cooperative federalism, on the one hand, among different States, and on the other, between the States and the Panchayati Raj Institutions and the Urban Local Bodies. It is ironic that States in India are very possessive of their constitutional rights protected under the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution and are often heard invoking the principle of federalism in case of central intrusion in

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their domain. But when it comes to sharing power with local governments, States forget all principles of federalism. In fact, State–local governments’ relations in India are devolutionary and are not based on the principle of federalism. There is hence the need for research pertaining to interstate relations and State–local relations. Oommen (2020) notes:

The Constitution also provides for functional decentralisation of public services like drinking water, primary healthcare, primary education, and link roads, amongst many others. Partly due to the neglect by the union and mainly because of the deliberate refusal of several states to carry forward the mandated functional, financial, and administrative decentralisation during the last quarter century, the much-needed democratic process for deepening local democracy has suffered a grievous setback. Except in a few states like Kerala, the progress of local democracy has been halting and haphazard.

Harmonious and cooperative relations between different States are as important as that between the Centre and the States for the healthy functioning of our federation. Various problems have been cropping up in inter-State relations from time-to-time—the coronavirus outbreak being the latest one. Lack of cooperation between the States, and the Centre’s failure to facilitate horizontal federalism in the absence of a strong interstate agency has made the lives of migrant workers miserable. These challenges appear to have magnified due to the absence of intergovernmental institutions. Informal interstate interaction has no doubt increased during the pandemic. Some scholars suggest that an intergovernmental institution such as the Inter-State Council (ISC) could have been used as a common forum for the Centre and the States for the purpose of both vertical and horizontal cooperative federalism. But it has never been used in a meaningful way. K.K. Kailash (2019) has observed: ‘Though the BJP promised to revive the Inter-State Council (ISC), it has not kept its word. The ISC met once during the term of this government and only eleven times over the last three decades of its existence’.

The Constitution has clearly demarcated the jurisdictions, powers and functions of the Centre and the State governments, and has spelt out in detail the legislative, administrative and financial relations between the Centre, States and local bodies. This will be dealt with in brief in the next section.

**Constitutional Context**

The Seventh Schedule of the Constitution of India lists legislative and executive powers between the Union and the States. The Central government has exclusive power over the subjects in the Union List, and the State over subjects in the State List. Both the Centre and the States have jurisdiction over subjects in the Concurrent List. Public health and sanitation are in the State List. The Union List includes railways, shipping and navigation, and airways—all of which affect economic activities including the movement of people across State boundaries. In areas such as education/training, both the Centre and the States/UTs have the authority to make laws. However, in case of conflicts, the law made by the Centre would prevail over the States. The Centre for Disease Control and the Indian
Council of Medical Research are central institutions that also play important roles. Some of the legislations such as the colonial-era Epidemic Disease Act (1897) and the National Disaster Management Act (2005) strengthen the hands of the Central government in times of crisis (James, 2020).

As far as epidemics are concerned, several subjects across the three lists are potentially relevant. These include the Union List subjects on port quarantine and on interstate migration and quarantine, the State List subject on public health and the Concurrent List subject on the spread of infectious diseases from one State to another/other State/s.

Following the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1992, States are also expected to strengthen the third-tier governments on a range of matters including health (although this is not a mandatory requirement). This is reflected, for instance, in specific State municipal laws that empower the Municipal Commissioner to address the spread of epidemic diseases. It can be argued that our Constitution envisages a role for all the three tiers of government to address Covid-19. With public health being a State List subject, and the aforesaid Union List and Concurrent List subjects referring only to ports and interstate matters, a law that gives a primary role to States and a coordinating role to the Centre would likely reflect the constitutional scheme most accurately. States manage public health and sanitation matters, including developing and implementing public health strategies such as containment (surveillance and contact tracing, and quarantining) and mitigation efforts. In most States, as part of the administration, a Central government employee, the health secretary, is responsible for coordinating anti-Covid-19 activities. Healthcare services are delivered through State hospitals and clinics (James, 2020).

Moreover, under Article 242 of the Constitution of India, local governments are authorised to conduct several functions in urban areas—one of these is public health, but the specific functions of local governments are determined by State-level legislation. Thus, local governments are an integral part of the effort to combat Covid-19, although the degree of autonomy they possess varies from State to State (James, 2020).

Thus, the Indian Constitution provides for a cooperative federal model. At the time of the first lockdown, the situation of migrant workers and fiscal issues associated with the pandemic has called into question the meaning of cooperative federalism. However, since the second phase of the lockdown, the Centre, to some extent, understood the sensitivity of States, and the autonomy of States in terms of taking measures against the epidemic was restored. Before discussing the challenges of cooperative federalism, the next section throws some light on cooperative federalism during the Covid 19 pandemic.

**Cooperative Federalism and the Covid-19 Pandemic**

India exercised a strong Central leadership in dealing with the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic successfully. Strong Central leadership, however, did not mean weak States and local governments. The role of federalism in India as a tool to deal with the growing complexity of a multilevel constitutional space and the new challenges posed by the economic crisis, globalisation, Covid-19 pandemic,
Indian Journal of Public Administration 68(2)

and large-scale and human migration is put to test. The initial stages of the Covid-19 response highlighted the unitary tilt in the Indian federal structure. At later stages, cooperative federalism was also visible at the vertical level. At the horizontal level, the lack of cooperation and coordination among the States made the lives of migrant workers miserable. The Centre’s role as a facilitator of horizontal federalism was also questionable.

Without the cooperation of the Centre, States and local governments, it would not have been possible to take on the outbreak in the world’s second-highest populated country—with high density, where social, religious and political gatherings is a norm of life and where there is large-scale interstate migration. India defied the fears of the world’s topmost experts in this regard. When the Covid-19 outbreak started spreading by the middle of March, Centre and State governments took several measures to contain the outbreak. Many State governments moved with imposing partial lockdowns and closing their borders. On 24 March 2020, the Centre announced a three-week nationwide lockdown, thereby restricting the movement of the entire 1.35 billion people in India. Surprisingly, the national lockdown was imposed with only four hours’ notice, leaving most States unprepared. This led to a chaotic situation for migrant workers who were forced to return to their home States. However, the unprecedented action by the Central government, which would have created a major political flashpoint in normal times, was not opposed by State governments. Throughout May, June and July, subsequent lockdowns with varying degrees of restriction were imposed by the Centre and State governments (Sahoo, 2020).

Rekha Saxena argues:

A key feature of India’s response to the Covid-19 outbreak has been the close collaboration and cooperation between the Union (Central) and State governments. The pandemic has underlined the necessity for strengthening cooperative federalism since no single jurisdiction or level of government has the capability to deal with the crisis on its own. (Saxena, 2020)

Though the Covid-19 outbreak was an apt opportunity for a true display of this cooperative nature of federalism, unfortunately, this was not the case during the initial phases of the lockdown. Rather, a top-down approach seemed to have been followed. The Central government, in fact, faced considerable criticism for this move. Later on, however, things changed a bit. The PM began holding consultations with the chief ministers of various States, before issuing orders for extension of lockdown. States got more and more say in decision-making. It was finally up to the State governments to decide which area would be declared a containment zone and which would not be.

The pandemic brought two arch-rivals on the political field: Home Minister Amit Shah and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal who had meetings more than once to discuss and check the spread of Covid-19. After meeting with Shah, Kejriwal tweeted: ‘Extremely productive meeting between Delhi government and Central government. Many key decisions were taken. We will fight against corona together’ (The Hindustan Times, 2020a). Even a Congress-ruled State like Rajasthan
appreciated the effort made by the Centre. This is evident from the letter written by Rajasthan chief minister Ashok Gehlot to Prime Minister Modi:

In such a difficult and challenging time you had meaningful dialogue with the Chief Ministers of the states through video conferencing in the last few months, which is commendable. Along with the ideals of collaborative federalism, such dialogues help in exchange of knowledge, knowledge of better strategies being adopted in various states and establishing mutual coordination. (*The Hindustan Times*, 2020b)

Jharkhand CM Hemant Soren lauded the ‘strength of federalism’ displayed by the cooperation among different States, especially in dealing with the migrant crisis, engendered by the announcement of a twenty-one-day national lockdown (*ibid*).

Prime Minister Modi also sought the cooperation of States, beginning with his video conference with chief ministers before the second lockdown. States reciprocated the call for cooperation, leading to an improvement in the healthcare facilities. Earlier, India used to import most of its Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) kits, N-95 masks and ventilators, but now has become almost self-reliant and in a position to export them. All States with their full strength and resources tried to stop the spread of Covid-19. At the same time, financial support was provided to needy people who had lost their means of livelihood during this epidemic. It appears that rather than resorting to confrontational politics, the Centre remained committed to cooperative federalism. The PM held numerous meetings with chief ministers over the nine months of its incidence to ensure their productive engagement. The Centre also claimed to have provided all necessary guidance and support to the State governments.

It can be argued that governments at all three levels were involved in responding to the pandemic, with varying degrees of effort and organisation. First, the capacity of States/UTs, especially their public health infrastructure, was critical. States with relatively smaller populations, such as Kerala, Karnataka and Orissa, were able to manage their resources effectively. Their previous experience with virus outbreaks or natural disasters, such as the Nipah virus outbreak of 2018–2019 (in Kerala and Karnataka) or natural disaster preparedness (in Orissa, Kerala), came in handy.

Some local governments also played a notable role. For example, Brihan Mumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) in Mumbai is an outlier in the Indian context because it had complete control of public health functions in the metropolitan area, which likely accounted for its success. BMC’s successful intervention in Dharavi (slum)—a densely populated locality in Mumbai—in containing the outbreak was well appreciated both nationally and internationally by WHO and the US daily *Washington Post* as the ‘Dharavi model’. This was a display of good State–local relations. It should be noted, going forward, that more research on pandemic-related responses across different States and local governmental entities needed to be conducted (Parab, 2020).

On account of cooperation between Centre and States, India had a number of milestone achievements: Conducting over twelve crore tests, second only to the United States in the world. An analysis of the Covid-19 diagnostic labs across the
country throws up surprising results. Even Jharkhand, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, which are considered lower income States, have managed to improve their infrastructure and established Covid-19 labs in every district. Now India is undertaking about twelve lakhs tests a day. As against the death rate of 749 individuals per million in the United States and over 750 per million in European nations such as the United Kingdom, Italy and Spain, the rate of fatalities in India is 93. (Worldometer, 2020) Lauding India’s efforts in fighting the pandemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) noted:

Over a period of five months, the number of laboratories in the country rose from 14 in February to more than 1596 in August. The testing rate has been ramped up significantly over the last few months with the introduction of the rapid antigen detection test in addition to the molecular tests, which remain the mainstay of diagnosis. (WHO, 2020)

By and large, there was cooperation at all levels of government. But there were exceptions: a notable one was the announcement of the nationwide lockdown on 24 March 2020 with little advance consultation or notice. State/UT and local governments were trying to contain the virus while simultaneously dealing with the economic consequences of the lockdown. The Central government eventually stepped in after several weeks. The lockdowns, the situation of migrant workers and the fiscal issues associated with the pandemic also called into question the very meaning of ‘cooperative federalism’. The next section will delineate these issues in some detail.

Challenges to the Cooperative Federalism in India

Major challenges of cooperative federalism during the Covid-19 pandemic include the following: the imposition of pan-India policies on subjects strictly within the States’ domain, prohibiting the sale of alcohol, withholding of GST compensation, the irregular supply of essential medical equipment during the initial phase of lockdown, denial of State disaster funds from the benefit of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) contributions, terms of reference (ToRs) for the 15th Finance Commission (FC) and failure to coordinate with States with regards to migrants return to their States initially. Several States couldn’t ramp up testing earlier due to the unavailability of testing kits from the Centre. Many of them reportedly had to procure these from the market/abroad. The classifications of a zone into ‘red’ and ‘orange’ evoked vehement criticisms from several States. The States had asked for more autonomy in making such classifications. However, subsequent attempts of forging coordination between the Centre and the States mitigated the chances of political acrimony and policy ambiguity.

To many critics, the nationwide lockdown, preceded by a day-long curfew, was hastily initiated by the Central government on 24 March 2020, at a time when there were only a relatively small number of confirmed Covid-19 cases daily (J. Ghosh, 2020). This lockdown, with relatively minor adjustments, lasted ten weeks; it affected most economic activities and restricted the mobility of persons, resulting in extreme hardship. With the closure of transportation systems initially, migrant workers in large metropolitan areas had no travel options back to their home States.
As was well-publicised, many travelled thousands of kilometres literally on foot to reach home. Visuals of men, women and children undertaking days-long walks to reach home have raised questions about the Centre’s preparedness before the announcement. Scenes of the countless migrants sleeping on tracks, and the sufferings of pregnant ladies and children were quite disturbing. The poor had been left behind, at their own peril. It had been extremely unfortunate to have seen and read about many cases of deaths and sufferings of migrant workers. The Centre was not able to come up with any policy to help the thousands of people on the roads. This was a major failure of India’s cooperative federalism.

At short notice, in most instances, State/UT and local (both municipal and PRs) governments had to step in, aided by civil society, to provide temporary relief measures such as housing, food and other assistance to both local residents and migrant workers. The Rajasthan government alleged that some States delayed their consent for buses to enter (Beg, 2020). The Centre subsequently organised Shramik special trains. These trains operated with limited stops from May through July to transport migrants back to their home States.

Though there was cooperation between the Centre and the NDA-ruled States, the same was not true in the case of opposition ruled States. For example, the Shiv Sena-led coalition government in Maharashtra blamed the BJP for politicising the outbreak. NCP’s Jayant Patil said if the BJP blamed the Maharashtra government for the spread of the virus in the States, should the Centre be blamed for the failure to check the spread of Covid-19 in the country (The Hindustan Times, 2020a).

Some States took arbitrary decisions in sending back migrants to their home States by bus. Thus, the return of migrants became a major concern for fragile health systems, especially in rural areas facing the possibility of new infections. Bihar CM Nitish Kumar disapproved of some States sending back migrant workers to Bihar in buses. He argued: ‘Very purpose of the lockdown will be defeated if thousands of migrants are sent to Bihar by busses’ (Kumar, 2020).

Maharashtra CM Uddhav Thackeray demanded that the Central government allow special trains to send migrant workers to their homes. Some States demanded that since migrant workers had been working in different States, it was the responsibility of those States where they worked to look after them. That did not happen, however. Some States such as Haryana, Kerala and Telangana treated them well by organising camps for them. Some States like Rajasthan felt that the lockdown Phase 1 should have been enforced with a four–five-day advance warning so that maximum migrants would have reached their homes. Another important issue highlighted by some States was why special trains were started so late and were so few in number. Some States deployed cost-free special Shramik buses to mitigate the problems of movement of migrants. It was widely reported in the media that workers were not transported keeping the social distancing norms in mind, thereby increasing the risk of their infections.

Initially, it appeared that neither the Centre nor the States were sensitive to the problems of vulnerable migrants. It was only after migrants gathered in large numbers at the railway and bus stations and in absence of transportations when they started walking thousands of kilometres towards their home that Shramik Special trains were started. But those trains too fell victim to the lack of coordinated national planning.
Even with regard to interstate travel, accusations kept flying about restrictions over entry at the States’ borders. For instance, in May, the Uttar Pradesh Government did not allow buses from Rajasthan and Haryana to enter its borders. Karnataka prevented the entry of people from Gujarat, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. Thus, interstate restriction in the wake of lockdowns resulted in agony to the passengers. The need for a robust and responsive system of co-ordination amongst the States and the role of the Centre in facilitating such coordination at the grassroots level cannot be emphasised enough (Agarwal, 2020).

As Assam’s Covid-19 cases rose, the State government pointed a finger at Rajasthan. The spat started after 6 May, when a bus packed with forty-three passengers returned from Rajasthan’s Ajmer Sharif, which was a red zone, bringing five more cases to Assam (Kalita, 2020).

While West Bengal Chief Minister Mamta Banerjee declared on 23 April that it would do everything to bring back the lakhs of migrant workers stuck across the country, the State reportedly did little to make good on this promise. Despite the Centre’s notification, Bengal, which has shown a high fatality rate for the virus, was slow to open up its borders (Ghosh et al., 2020). Both Maharashtra and Karnataka, host to a large number of workers from Bengal, complained that the State was refusing to give consent for trains ferrying them home. The Gujarat government fumed about a communication breakdown, alleging that Bengal officials did not even respond to its requests to accept migrant trains. Buses from Jharkhand were turned back at the Bengal border, with the latter claiming it had no standard operating procedure to receive migrants (Mukesh, 2020). Kerala sought urgent help from the Centre when Karnataka closed its border, cutting off essential supplies of food and medicine for the people of North Kerala (Smitha, 2020).

The matter of who was to foot the transport bill of migrant workers also caused tension among States. Delhi and Bihar got into a heated exchange after the former demanded reimbursement for sending migrants on a special Shramik train to Muzaffarpur. Delhi claimed that the Bihar government must reimburse it for buying tickets in bulk for returning migrants. The Bihar government shot back that migrants would be compensated for train fare at the quarantine centres once they returned (Chakravarty, 2020).

The political war of words over the movement of migrant workers on Shramik special trains continued as the Union Railways Minister Piyush Goyal (BJP) accused the governments of West Bengal, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan—all Opposition-ruled States—of not giving permission to receive the trains, drawing strong rebuttals from the States (Dastidar, 2020).

Most of the States, including major Opposition-led States such as Maharashtra, Punjab, Rajasthan, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Delhi, Telangana and West Bengal, found it difficult to fund basic relief measures in this crisis and requested the Centre to release the money urgently. Many States faced a financial crunch because they were not able to get their due share from the GST revenue collected by the Centre.

Some observers question centralising the motives of the Centre culminating into the ToRs of the FC where, among other things, the FC was asked to examine whether revenue deficit grants should be provided at all for the State governments (ToR 5), and to recommend measures for controlling ‘populist measures by the States’ (ToR 7 (viii)). Such mandates not only compel the FC to go beyond its constitutional
mandate but also reveal how non-elected bodies are being misused to constrain the fiscal space of the States. This not only weakens the foundations of fiscal federalism but also runs against the tenets of cooperative federalism (K.S. Ghosh, 2020).

Further, even as States were then being granted more powers to shape their own Covid-19 approach, the impact of the top-down approach adopted during the early stages of the lockdown has hampered their ability to successfully formulate their own policies. For instance, during the early stages of the outbreak, the Centre adopted a policy that allowed the Centre’s disaster management funds to benefit from corporate social responsibility contributions. However, this same privilege was denied to the States.

The Centre and the States must understand the huge potential of local self-government to fight the Covid-19 pandemic and restore India’s economic health. There are about thirty-two lakh elected representatives in the panchayats and about two lakh more in the municipalities. About ten–twelve lakh are drawn from the SCs and STs. They are the ones in touch with the neediest, the most destitute in every village and town. Then, there are some fourteen lakh women leaders in villages. They constitute the largest body of democratically elected women in the world (Aiyar, 2020).

**Future of Cooperative Federalism in India**

As has been discussed earlier, there was both cooperation and conflict between Centre and States and among States. The Central government’s attempts of forging coordination with the States mitigated the chances of political acrimony and policy ambiguity that occurred in the first phase of lockdown. However, subsequently, the Central government took several measures post-lockdown such as GST compensation, farm laws and ToRs of the FC among others, which goes against the tenets of cooperative federalism. Opposition-ruled States’ unease with those measures was evident in their locking horns with the Centre. PM Modi, himself having been chief minister of a state for a considerable time period, should have better understood the sensitivity and interests of States.

Many observers have almost written off the workability of federalism under the six years of Modi government in general and during the post-Covid-19 outbreak in particular. There is a great deal of cooperation between the NDA-ruled States and the Centre, though not on a level playing field during the lockdown in confronting the challenges emanating from the coronavirus pandemic.

GST was considered one of the best examples of cooperative federalism, but it is getting discredited because of the Centre not involving States in decision-making over GST allocation and denying States their due. This is a worrisome development for Indian federalism because it has thrown into doubt the ability of even an organisation like the GST Council to manage Centre–State tensions. The Council was touted as an ideal model of Indian federal institution-building—one that ought to be replicated in other policymaking verticals that require coordination (Chokkakula, 2020).

In times of pandemics like Covid-19, the relationship between the State and the people needs to be strong, trustworthy and organic. This will not be possible in a
centralised system of governance. The prime role in this is to be discharged by the local governments with community participation. M.A. Oommen (2020) argues:

Covid-19 has brought home sharply the significance and need of the local government, the gram sabha, and all the participatory institutions that the 73rd/74th Constitutional Amendments, 1992, have given to the people of India. These amendments have endowed the panchayats and municipalities with such authority and power to deliver economic development and social justice at the local level. (Articles 243G and 243W)

In their recent study, Acharya and Porwal have found that despite the Indian government’s efforts to contain the disease in the affected districts, cases have been reported in 627 (98%) of 640 districts. They have underlined the need for devising a tool for district-level planning and prioritisation and for effective allocation of resources (Acharya & Porwal, 2020).

Dutta and Fischer made the case for the critical role of local governance in coordinating pandemic response by examining how State authorities have attempted to bridge the gap between the need for a rapid, vigorous response to the pandemic and the local realities in three Indian States—Rajasthan, Odisha and Kerala. Through a combination of interviews with mid-and low-level bureaucrats and a review of policy documents, they show how the urgency of Covid-19 response galvanised new kinds of cross-sectoral and multi-scalar interactions between administrative units involved in coordinating responses, as local governments assumed crucial responsibility in the implementation of disease control and social security mechanisms.

The Centre increasingly accepted the fact that without States’ cooperation, Covid-19 problems could not be dealt with. Repeated teleconferences between the prime minister and the chief ministers were testimony to the fact. Thus, a notable acknowledgment of the need to evolve solutions through a consultative process involving the States and offering flexibility to States to adapt guidelines to their respective circumstances, and the States accepting the need for guidelines from the Centre to meet the challenges from the pandemic were good signs of cooperative federalism. Central leadership must understand that the ‘more powerful the states became, the lesser would be the governance problems for the nation as a whole’. As Varshney has argued, ‘This binary—that a strong Centre requires weak States and vice versa—is conceptually flawed’ (Varshney, 2013).

States should be seen by the Centre as drivers of India’s growth. A great deal of understanding should be developed between the Centre and the States over the introduction of GST and the creation of a common market. As for the recent controversy over GST, the Centre needs to respect the commitment made to the States with regard to the payment of their due GST compensation. New challenges emanating from Covid-19 infection call for new intergovernmental institutions or operationalisation of such dormant institutions contemplated in the Constitution.

**Concluding Observations**

India is fighting a war at several fronts: the Covid-19 pandemic, an economic downturn made worse by the lockdown, a migrant workers’ crisis and China
threatening Indian territory in Ladakh. The breakdown in trust and coordination between Centre and States has the potential to magnify these challenges. Hence, cooperative federalism is the only panacea. As has been explained, we have witnessed both cooperation and conflict between the Centre and States in recent times. The Covid-19 outbreak and the prolonged lockdown have led to unprecedented policy challenges, necessitating genuine cooperation and coordination amongst the States. There is a pertinent need to rejuvenate the existing institutional mechanisms like the ISC which has remained largely moribund. The ISC could have coordinated with States to address several problems that occurred between two or more States due to the pandemic.

The nationwide lockdown witnessed Centre–State conflicts as well as conflicts among States over a range of issues. However, subsequent attempts of forging coordination between the Centre and the States, and amongst the States mitigated the chances of political acrimony and policy ambiguity. Regular consultation with the States should be ensured, treating them as equal partners in the federal structure. There cannot be a better time than now for the Centre to honour its GST-related commitments to the States. Many observers have noted that the Covid-19 pandemic could have been handled in a better manner if the Centre would have followed a bottom-up approach and allowed States to make decisions about the lockdown. It is essential for both the Centre and the States to rise above party politics and take the pandemic head-on. India’s ability to fight the Covid-19 pandemic largely rests on how well the country manages its intergovernmental relations—both vertical and horizontal. The future of cooperative federalism in India requires local government to be treated on an equitable footing as one of three tiers of the federal structure.

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