Centralised Leadership And State Governance: A Study Of Chief Minister Selection And Political Outcomes In BJP-Led State Governments

Dr Susmita Patnaik
Assistant Professor.
Department of Political Science
Khallikote Unitary University, Berhampur

Abstract

This study examines the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) centralised Chief Minister selection strategy and its implications for state governance, party institutionalisation, and democratic accountability in India. Drawing on party organisation theory, principal–agent frameworks, and federalism literature, the paper analyses six BJP-ruled states—Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, and Himachal Pradesh—between 2014 and 2024. Findings reveal that the BJP prioritises organisational loyalty, ideological alignment, and central control over regional charisma or mass-based leadership, often replacing popular Chief Ministers post-election to maintain high-command authority. Comparative analysis demonstrates that centralisation enhances national electoral efficiency, narrative coherence, and governance coordination, while simultaneously reducing state-level political autonomy, weakening intra-party democracy, and creating risks of bureaucratic dominance and voter disengagement. The paper further highlights how this strategy contributes to the presidentialisation of Indian politics and raises normative concerns regarding democratic backsliding. By integrating empirical case studies with theoretical insights, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of how centralised leadership selection functions as both a tool of electoral optimisation and a potential challenge to the long-term institutional and democratic health of India's federal system.

Keywords: BJP, Chief Minister selection, centralised leadership, federalism, party organisation, democratic accountability, India.

Introduction

India's constitutional framework is founded on a quasi-federal structure, wherein political power is divided between the Union and the States. While the Constitution provides substantial autonomy to states in legislative, executive, and administrative domains, the actual functioning of federalism is deeply influenced by political party systems. National parties, through their internal organisational structures and leadership practices, often reshape federal dynamics beyond constitutional provisions. In recent decades, Indian politics has witnessed a marked shift towards centralised leadership within political parties, particularly those operating across multiple states. This trend has significant implications for state governance, leadership autonomy, and democratic accountability. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), as the dominant national party since 2014, represents a crucial case for examining how centralised leadership decisions—especially in the selection of Chief Ministers—affect political and administrative outcomes at the state level. Since 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has adopted a distinctive model of governance marked

by centralised leadership, cadre discipline, and high-command control. This model is most visible in the selection of Chief Ministers in BJP-ruled states, where leadership choices are often made post-election and are not always aligned with regional mass leaders.

India's constitutional framework is founded on a quasi-federal structure, in which political authority is formally divided between the Union and the States through clearly demarcated legislative, executive, and fiscal powers. While the Constitution guarantees substantial autonomy to state governments, the practical operation of federalism in India extends beyond constitutional design. It is significantly shaped by political processes, particularly the organisation and functioning of political parties. In this context, national political parties play a decisive role in mediating centre–state relations, often redefining the balance of power through their internal leadership structures, organisational discipline, and decision-making practices. Over the past few decades, Indian politics has experienced a progressive centralisation of leadership within major political parties, especially those with a pan-Indian presence. This shift has altered traditional patterns of state-level political authority, where Chief Ministers previously functioned as powerful regional actors with considerable autonomy. Instead, leadership authority has increasingly moved upward, concentrating decision-making power within party high commands. This transformation has profound implications for state governance, leadership autonomy, administrative functioning, and democratic accountability, as state leaders become more accountable to central party leadership than to local party organisations or state electorates. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), as the dominant national party since 2014, offers a particularly significant case for examining these dynamics. Unlike earlier phases of Indian politics, which accommodated strong regional satraps, the BJP has institutionalised a highly centralised leadership model characterised by strong central command, organisational cohesion, and ideological uniformity. This model is deeply embedded in the party's cadre-based structure and its emphasis on discipline and hierarchical control, which collectively enable the central leadership to exercise substantial influence over state-level political outcomes. Since 2014, the BJP's governance approach has been marked by an explicit preference for centralised leadership and high-command decision-making, especially in the selection of Chief Ministers in BJP-ruled states. In contrast to conventional practices in which state legislative leaders or mass-based regional figures naturally ascended to chief ministerial positions, the BJP has frequently adopted a post-election leadership-selection strategy, often choosing individuals who are organisationally loyal, administratively acceptable, and ideologically aligned with the central leadership. These choices are not always rooted in regional popularity or electoral prominence, but instead reflect broader strategic considerations such as social representation, factional balance, and central control.

This pattern of Chief Minister selection underscores a broader shift in political authority within Indian federalism. Chief Ministers in BJP-ruled states increasingly operate within a constrained leadership space, where policy priorities, administrative directives, and political narratives closely align with central objectives. While such centralisation may enhance policy coherence, electoral coordination, and administrative uniformity across states, it also raises critical concerns regarding the erosion of state autonomy, the weakening of intra-party democracy, and the reconfiguration of political accountability. Consequently, the BJP's model of centralised leadership and Chief Minister selection provides an essential analytical lens for understanding how party organisation and leadership practices can reshape the functioning of federal governance in contemporary India.

2. Theoretical Foundations of the BJP's Chief Minister Selection Strategy

2.1   The theory of party centralisation,

At the core of the BJP's Chief Minister selection strategy lies the theory of party centralisation, which seeks to explain how authority within political parties becomes progressively concentrated in a narrow leadership elite. Party organisation theorists argue that centralisation is not merely a structural choice but a strategic response to electoral competition, ideological maintenance, and organisational survival. In large, multi-level political systems such as India, centralised parties aim to reduce uncertainty, discipline internal factions, and ensure coherence across geographically and socially diverse regions. From this theoretical perspective, leadership selection—particularly for executive positions such as Chief Ministers—becomes a critical instrument of control. Rather than emerging organically from state-level political competition, leadership is curated by the central party to align subnational governance with national political objectives. The BJP's approach to Chief Minister selection exemplifies this logic, reflecting a high-command model

of internal governance in which authority flows vertically from the central leadership to state units, with minimal lateral negotiation.

Party centralisation theory posits that highly centralised parties prioritise discipline, coordination, and narrative uniformity, primarily when electoral success depends on a strong national leadership image. In such parties, decentralised leadership selection is viewed as a potential source of Factional rivalry, Ideological deviation, and competing power centres. The BJP's CM selection strategy addresses these risks by removing the choice of leadership from state-level bargaining arenas. By insulating the selection process from factional negotiations among MLAs or state leaders, the central leadership ensures that the Chief Minister's authority is derived institutionally rather than electorally within the party. This not only prevents factional capture of leadership positions but also reinforces the party organisation's supremacy over individual ambition. A defining feature of the high-command model is the reorientation of political legitimacy. In traditional decentralised party systems, Chief Ministers derive legitimacy from: electoral popularity, Control over state party machinery, and Support from legislative colleagues.

In contrast, under the BJP's centralised framework, Chief Ministers derive legitimacy primarily from the central party leadership. Their authority is conferred from above rather than negotiated horizontally within the state unit. This vertical legitimacy fundamentally alters power relations within the state government: State leaders become accountable upward rather than outward, Party organisation supersedes legislative autonomy, and Leadership stability depends on central approval rather than mass support. Party centralisation theory suggests that such vertical legitimacy strengthens organisational control but simultaneously weakens internal democratic processes. Another critical insight of party centralisation theory is the preference for administrative solutions over political negotiation when managing dissent. In decentralised systems, dissent is often addressed through bargaining, accommodation, or power-sharing.

In contrast, centralised parties employ leadership rotation as a control mechanism. The BJP's frequent reshuffling or replacement of Chief Ministers reflects this theoretical logic. Leadership change becomes a disciplinary signal, communicating that authority is conditional and revocable. This discourages personal power consolidation, the Formation of rival leadership factions, and public dissent against central decisions.

From a theoretical standpoint, such rotation reduces agency autonomy and reinforces central dominance, even at the cost of governance continuity. Party centralisation theory helps explain the BJP's recurrent preference for Chief Ministers who lack an independent mass base. Leaders with strong regional followings often develop: Autonomous political identities, negotiating leverage vis-à-vis the centre and Capacity to mobilise support independent of the party. Centralised parties view such leaders as potential principal challengers. By appointing Chief Ministers whose political capital is organisational rather than personal, the BJP ensures that leadership remains embedded within—and dependent upon—the party hierarchy. These leaders are more likely to: Follow central directives, avoid policy divergence, and align electoral narratives with national leadership. Thus, the absence of an independent mass base is not a weakness but a strategic asset within the logic of high-command control. Party centralisation theory further argues that centralisation intensifies in highly competitive electoral contexts. For the BJP, governing multiple states across diverse regions necessitates Message consistency, electoral coordination, and Ideological coherence. Centralised CM selection enables the party to standardise governance narratives, project a unified national vision, and prevent state-level deviations that could dilute the party's brand. This is particularly significant in an era of media-driven politics, where inconsistent state leadership can undermine national messaging. The BJP's CM selection strategy illustrates how party centralisation transforms the internal architecture of democratic parties. While such centralisation enhances organisational efficiency and electoral coordination, it also weakens intra-party democracy, reduces state-level leadership autonomy, and alters traditional norms of federal political practice. From a theoretical standpoint, the BJP exemplifies a centralised, hierarchical party model, in which leadership selection serves as a mechanism of control rather than representation.

At the core of the BJP's Chief Minister selection strategy lies the theory of party centralisation, which explains how decision-making authority within political parties becomes concentrated in a limited leadership circle. According to party organisation theory, highly centralised parties prioritise discipline, coordination, and message consistency, particularly in competitive electoral environments. The BJP's CM

selection reflects a high-command model in which authority flows vertically from the central leadership to state units. In centrally organised parties such as the BJP, the process of Chief Minister selection is deliberately insulated from factional bargaining among state-level elites and legislative party members. Traditional models of leadership emergence within Indian state politics relied heavily on negotiations among dominant factions, caste blocs, and regional leaders within the state legislature. Such bargaining often produced leaders who were accountable primarily to intra-party coalitions rather than to the party organisation. By contrast, the BJP's centralised selection process removes Chief Ministerial appointments from this competitive arena, transferring decision-making authority to the national leadership. This insulation serves multiple strategic purposes: it prevents entrenched factions from capturing leadership positions, reduces the risk of intra-party fragmentation, and limits the emergence of leaders whose authority rests on narrow sectional support. The absence of state-level bargaining also enables the central leadership to impose choices that reflect national electoral calculations and ideological priorities, even when they diverge from local political expectations.

Under the BJP's high-command model, the source of political legitimacy for Chief Ministers is fundamentally reconfigured. Rather than deriving authority from local party networks, legislative support, or sustained mass mobilisation, Chief Ministers increasingly obtain legitimacy through formal endorsement by the central party leadership. This vertical conferral of authority alters traditional power hierarchies within state governments, making Chief Ministers more dependent on continued central approval than on state-level political capital. As a result, loyalty to the party organisation and adherence to central directives become more critical to leadership survival than responsiveness to local political pressures. This shift weakens the influence of state party organisations and legislators, while simultaneously strengthening the role of national leadership in shaping governance priorities. From a theoretical perspective, such vertically derived legitimacy enhances organisational cohesion but dilutes intra-party democracy, as leadership accountability becomes upward-oriented rather than horizontally embedded within state political structures.

A defining feature of centralised party control is the preference for administrative and personnel-based solutions to political dissent rather than deliberative negotiation. In decentralised party systems, dissent is typically managed through bargaining, accommodation of rival factions, or redistribution of power within the party structure. In contrast, the BJP's centralised leadership model relies on leadership rotation as its primary mechanism for discipline and control. The replacement or reshuffling of Chief Ministers functions as a symbolic and practical assertion of central authority, signalling that leadership positions are conditional and revocable. This strategy discourages the consolidation of personal power, deters the formation of autonomous political bases, and limits public expressions of dissent. While leadership rotation enhances organisational discipline and reduces factional conflict, it can also undermine governance continuity and weaken long-term political accountability at the state level. Theoretically, this approach reflects a shift from consensual intra-party governance to hierarchical administrative control, prioritising organisational stability over participatory decision-making. This theoretical framework helps explain why the BJP often appoints Chief Ministers who lack an independent mass base, as such leaders are less likely to challenge central authority and more likely to adhere to national strategic priorities.

2.2   Principal–Agent Framework in Party Leadership Selection

Principal–agent theory offers a powerful analytical lens for understanding leadership selection within highly centralised political parties. In this framework, the central party leadership functions as the principal, delegating authority to Chief Ministers as agents tasked with implementing the party's political, ideological, and policy agenda at the state level. Delegation is unavoidable in large, multi-level political systems such as India, where central leaders cannot directly govern subnational units. However, delegation introduces the classic principal–agent problem: once authority is transferred, agents may pursue interests that diverge from those of the principal. In the context of state governance, such divergence may take the form of policy innovation that conflicts with national priorities, cultivation of independent political bases, or strategic positioning for future leadership ambitions. A central concern in principle–agent relationships is agency loss, which arises when agents exploit informational asymmetries and institutional autonomy to pursue personal or regional objectives. In Indian state politics, Chief Ministers with strong mass appeal and organisational control often accumulate substantial political capital, enabling them to negotiate with—or even challenge—the central leadership. From the perspective of the BJP's national leadership, such

autonomy poses multiple risks: it can weaken ideological coherence, generate alternative power centres within the party, and complicate national electoral strategies. Principal–agent theory predicts that principals will seek to design selection mechanisms that minimise these risks by limiting the agent's capacity for independent action.

The BJP's Chief Minister selection strategy reflects a deliberate effort to minimise agency loss by appointing leaders who are organisationally dependent and politically constrained. By selecting Chief Ministers whose authority derives primarily from central endorsement rather than from mass mobilisation or factional dominance, the party reduces the likelihood of defection or policy divergence. Such leaders possess limited bargaining power vis-à-vis the central leadership and are therefore more likely to adhere closely to national directives. In principle–agent terms, organisational dependence serves as an ex-ante control mechanism, shaping agent behaviour by constraining the resources and incentives available for autonomous political action. Beyond selection, centralised Chief Minister appointments function as an ongoing monitoring and control system. The absence of a fixed or guaranteed tenure signals that authority is conditional upon continued compliance with the principal's expectations. This arrangement reduces informational asymmetry by making state-level leadership more transparent and responsive to central oversight. Regular performance assessments, public signalling through leadership changes, and intervention by central observers further enhance the principal's capacity to monitor agent behaviour. As a result, Chief Ministers operate within a constrained decision-making environment that prioritises ideological conformity, policy alignment with national objectives, and electoral loyalty to central leadership. Frequent replacement or reshuffling of Chief Ministers constitutes a particularly potent disciplinary mechanism within the principal–agent framework. Leadership changes communicate a clear message to all agents within the party hierarchy: authority is revocable and contingent, not inherent, or permanent. This reduces the incentive for Chief Ministers to invest in long-term personal power accumulation or to cultivate independent political identities. While such disciplinary signalling enhances central control and organisational discipline, it may also produce unintended consequences, including governance discontinuity, bureaucratic risk aversion, and weakened accountability to state electorates. From a theoretical standpoint, this reflects a trade-off inherent in principle–agent systems between control efficiency and agent initiative. Applied to the BJP's leadership strategy, principal–agent theory reveals how party centralisation restructures the relationship between national leadership and state governance. Chief Ministers function less as autonomous political executives and more as delegated administrators of national priorities. While this model strengthens policy coherence and electoral coordination across states, it also narrows the scope for state-level experimentation and democratic responsiveness. Thus, principal–agent theory not only explains the BJP's preference for centralised CM selection but also highlights its broader implications for governance quality and federal democratic practice.

2.3   Cartel Party Theory and the Transformation of Party Leadership

Cartel party theory, developed by Katz and Mair, argues that contemporary political parties have increasingly evolved into elite-controlled organisations that prioritise electoral management, access to state resources, and organisational survival over mass participation and internal democracy. Unlike mass or cadre parties that relied on grassroots mobilisation and ideological engagement, cartel parties' function through professionalised leadership networks that collaborate—often implicitly—with state institutions to maintain dominance. Within this framework, leadership selection is less about representing the party's popular will and more about strategically allocating authority to ensure electoral stability and organisational control. Applied to the BJP, cartel party theory helps explain why Chief Ministership is treated not as a reward for mass leadership or long-term grassroots mobilisation, but as a deployable organisational resource. Chief Ministers are appointed to serve specific electoral, administrative, and symbolic functions within a given political context. Their selection reflects strategic calculations regarding caste arithmetic, regional representation, governance optics, and media management rather than internal democratic competition. In this sense, leadership becomes an instrument through which the party manages its electoral environment, rather than an outcome of intra-party contestation. One of the central propositions of cartel party theory is that parties actively manage electoral risk by controlling leadership positions. For the BJP, the selection of the Chief Minister serves as a mechanism for risk mitigation, allowing the party to address anti-incumbency, factional tensions, or shifting voter alignments without altering its broader ideological or organisational framework. Leadership changes are thus used to recalibrate political messaging, neutralise emerging opposition narratives, and absorb public dissatisfaction. This strategic flexibility enables the

party to maintain electoral competitiveness even amid governance challenges or the declining popularity of individual leaders.

Cartel party theory also emphasises the replaceability of leadership within elite-dominated party systems. In BJP-ruled states, Chief Ministers are not treated as permanent power holders with autonomous mandates, but as functionaries whose tenure depends on continued organisational utility. The party's willingness to replace sitting Chief Ministers despite electoral success illustrates this logic. Electoral victories are attributed to the party brand and national leadership rather than to individual state leaders, thereby justifying leadership replacement without perceived violation of democratic mandate. This undermines the notion of personalised electoral legitimacy and reinforces the supremacy of the party organisation. Within the cartel party framework, popularity is subordinate to controllability and adaptability. Leaders with strong mass appeal but independent political bases are viewed as potential liabilities rather than assets, as they can disrupt organisational cohesion and challenge elite control. Consequently, the BJP often prefers Chief Ministers who are administratively competent, ideologically aligned, and organisationally dependent. Such leaders can be repositioned, replaced, or redeployed as political conditions change, enhancing the party's capacity to respond swiftly to electoral challenges. Cartel party theory further highlights the role of state resources in reinforcing elite control. By appointing Chief Ministers who function as extensions of the party organisation, the BJP ensures that access to state institutions, administrative machinery, and policy instruments remains aligned with central party objectives. This integration of party and state strengthens organisational consolidation and electoral dominance but risks blurring the boundary between party governance and democratic accountability. Governance outcomes are evaluated not solely on policy effectiveness but on their contribution to sustaining the party's political position.

From a normative perspective, applying cartel party theory to the BJP's CM selection strategy raises fundamental concerns about democratic representation and participation. While the strategy enhances electoral efficiency and organisational control, it marginalises grassroots voices and reduces the scope for leadership emergence from within state-level party structures. Chief Ministership becomes a technocratic and tactical position rather than a democratically grounded political office, reshaping the meaning of representation within India's federal system. In sum, cartel party theory explains the BJP's Chief Minister selection strategy as part of a broader transformation in party politics, where leadership is strategically allocated to manage electoral risks, control organisational resources, and maintain elite dominance. Chief Ministers are viewed not as mandate-bound leaders but as replaceable instruments of party strategy, enabling the BJP to prioritise long-term organisational stability over personalised political authority.

2.4   Federalism and Centralised Political Control

India's constitutional framework establishes a quasi-federal system in which states enjoy significant legislative, executive, and administrative autonomy. However, federalism in practice is shaped not only by constitutional design but also by political party organisation and leadership structures. The BJP's Chief Minister selection strategy exemplifies how political centralisation can coexist with formal constitutional decentralisation. While states retain their constitutional powers, effective political authority is exercised through hierarchical party control, enabling the national leadership to influence state governance without altering federal provisions. This dynamic demonstrates that federal balance is increasingly mediated by party systems rather than institutional arrangements alone. The BJP's approach aligns with the theoretical concept of "unitarized federalism," wherein federal units remain constitutionally autonomous but functionally subordinated to the centre through political mechanisms. In this model, national leadership plays a coordinating and supervisory role over state governments, ensuring policy coherence and ideological alignment across territorial units. Unitary federalism does not dismantle federal institutions; instead, it reconfigures their operation by centralising strategic decision-making while delegating administrative execution to states. Party hierarchy becomes the principal vehicle through which this transformation occurs. Under unitary federalism, state governments are integrated into a centrally coordinated political project. The BJP's national leadership increasingly frames state administrations as components of a unified governance agenda rather than as independent political actors. Chief Ministers are expected to implement centrally defined priorities—such as flagship welfare schemes, development narratives, and ideological messaging—while maintaining consistency with national leadership. This coordination reduces inter-state policy divergence and strengthens the party's national brand. Still, it simultaneously limits states' capacity to pursue region-specific policy innovations that may conflict with

central objectives. A key feature of centralised political control is the restriction of policy diversity among states. While federalism traditionally allows states to function as laboratories of democracy, the BJP's centralised CM selection strategy discourages deviation from nationally prescribed policy frameworks. Chief Ministers are incentivised to prioritise national coherence over local experimentation, as their political survival depends on central approval rather than state-level performance alone. As a result, governance outcomes across BJP-ruled states increasingly reflect a standardised policy template, reinforcing ideological uniformity while reducing the adaptive flexibility of federal governance. Within this centralised framework, Chief Ministers increasingly function as administrative executors rather than autonomous policymakers. Their primary role is to translate national political priorities into state-level implementation, ensuring visibility and effectiveness of central leadership initiatives. The authority of Chief Ministers is thus derived less from their constitutional position or popular mandate and more from their location within the party hierarchy. This redefinition of executive leadership shifts the centre–state relationship from negotiated federalism to hierarchical delegation.

The selection of the Chief Minister becomes a critical instrument for enforcing alignment within unitary federalism. By appointing leaders who are organisationally dependent and politically constrained, the BJP ensures that state governments remain responsive to central directives. Leadership changes serve as corrective mechanisms, allowing the centre to intervene in state governance without invoking constitutional provisions such as President's Rule. In this sense, CM selection serves as a substitute for formal federal intervention, achieving similar outcomes through party discipline rather than constitutional authority. One of the most significant implications of this model is that it reinforces central dominance without formal constitutional change. The BJP's strategy demonstrates how political centralisation can effectively reshape federal practice while leaving constitutional text intact. This blurs the boundary between cooperative and coercive federalism, as states remain formally autonomous but politically constrained. The centre's influence is exercised indirectly through party mechanisms, making it less visible but no less consequential for state governance. From a normative perspective, the political centralisation of federalism raises essential concerns about democratic accountability and regional representation. When Chief Ministers derive authority primarily from the central leadership, their accountability to state legislatures and electorates may weaken. This can lead to governance practices that prioritise party loyalty over regional responsiveness, altering the democratic character of India's federal system. At the same time, proponents argue that such centralisation enhances policy coherence and administrative efficiency in a large and diverse polity. In sum, the BJP's Chief Minister selection strategy exemplifies a shift toward unitary federalism, where party structures override constitutional decentralisation to centralise political control. CM selection serves as a key mechanism through which the centre coordinates state governments, limits policy diversity, and reinforces national dominance—achieving substantive centralisation without formal institutional restructuring. This transformation has profound implications for the future.

2.5   Organisational Institutionalism and Cadre Logic

Organisational institutionalism emphasises how political behaviour is shaped not merely by strategic calculation but by deeply embedded norms, routines, and belief systems that structure decision-making over time. From this perspective, political parties are not neutral electoral machines but institutional actors whose choices reflect historically rooted organisational cultures. The BJP's Chief Minister selection strategy cannot be fully understood without reference to its institutional origins and internal norms, which prioritise discipline, ideological coherence, and organisational continuity over personalised leadership. These institutional characteristics shape what is considered legitimate leadership within the party.

The BJP's organisational culture is strongly influenced by its roots in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a disciplined, cadre-based ideological organisation. The RSS tradition emphasises obedience to hierarchy, collective discipline, and self-effacement in the service of ideological goals. Leadership within this ecosystem is viewed not as a personal entitlement but as a responsibility entrusted by the organisation. This legacy has deeply influenced the BJP's internal norms, creating an institutional environment in which authority flows downward from the organisation rather than upward from mass mobilisation. Within this cadre-based institutional logic, individual ambition is subordinated to collective organisational objectives. Chief Ministership is not framed as the culmination of personal political success but as an assignment within a larger ideological project. Leaders are expected to prioritise organisational goals—such as ideological consolidation, electoral expansion, and policy alignment—over personal popularity or long-

term tenure. This institutional norm reduces internal competition for leadership positions and legitimises leadership rotation as a routine organisational practice rather than a political rupture.

Because of this organisational culture, Chief Ministers are selected primarily as institutional functionaries rather than charismatic mass leaders. Their authority derives from organisational trust, ideological reliability, and demonstrated discipline rather than from personal appeal or electoral charisma. This helps explain the BJP's preference for leaders with long organisational histories, bureaucratic competence, or RSS backgrounds, even when such leaders lack strong, widespread recognition. Institutional loyalty becomes a key criterion for leadership selection, reinforcing the party's centralised structure.

Institutionalism also explains why central intervention in Chief Minister selection is widely accepted within the BJP. Because the organisation is viewed as the ultimate source of authority, decisions taken by the central leadership are perceived as institutionally legitimate rather than coercive. Unlike parties with strong traditions of internal democracy or regional autonomy, the BJP's cadre logic frames central leadership intervention as a natural extension of organisational discipline. This reduces resistance to leadership changes and limits factional contestation within state units. The cadre-based institutional framework contributes to organisational stability by ensuring continuity across leadership changes. Since Chief Ministers are interchangeable within the organisational hierarchy, leadership transitions do not threaten the party's ideological or strategic direction. This enhances the BJP's capacity to maintain long-term political projects across electoral cycles. However, it also reinforces central dominance by preventing the emergence of autonomous state-level leadership that could challenge organisational authority. From a broader governance perspective, this institutional logic has significant implications for federalism and democracy. When Chief Ministers function primarily as organisational agents, their accountability shifts away from state legislatures and electorates toward the party hierarchy. While this strengthens policy coherence and ideological discipline, it may weaken state governments' responsiveness to local needs and regional political dynamics. Institutional loyalty rather than democratic mandate becomes the primary basis for executive authority. In sum, organisational institutionalism and cadre logic provide a crucial theoretical foundation for understanding the BJP's Chief Minister selection strategy. Rooted in RSS-influenced norms of discipline, collective purpose, and hierarchical obedience, this institutional framework legitimises centralised leadership control. It redefines Chief Ministers as institutional functionaries rather than autonomous political leaders. This organisational logic reinforces political centralisation within India's federal system while reshaping the norms of democratic accountability at the state level.

2.6 Leadership Personalisation and Presidentialisation of Politics

The concept of presidentialisation of parliamentary politics provides a crucial theoretical lens for understanding the BJP's approach to leadership selection at the state level. Although India formally operates under a parliamentary system, contemporary electoral politics increasingly resemble a presidential model, in which voters associate political outcomes with a single dominant national leader rather than with collective party leadership or state-level executives. In this context, electoral competition becomes personalised around the figure of the national leader, whose image, rhetoric, and perceived decisiveness dominate campaign narratives across regions. In the BJP's case, this process of presidentialisation is closely tied to the personalisation of leadership, in which the national leader serves as the primary electoral anchor across states. Campaigns are structured around central leadership appeals, national security narratives, development symbolism, and ideological identity, reducing the salience of state-specific leadership faces. As a result, electoral legitimacy increasingly flows downward from the national leader to state-level governments rather than emerging organically from state-level political contestation. Chief Ministers, therefore, operate within a leadership ecosystem where their authority is derivative rather than autonomous. This leadership personalisation fundamentally reshapes the logic of Chief Minister selection. In a political environment dominated by a national leadership brand, projecting strong and charismatic state leaders becomes strategically redundant and, in some cases, counterproductive. Strong state leaders risk diverting voter attention away from the national narrative, diluting brand coherence, or cultivating independent political followings that could challenge central authority. Consequently, post-election selection of the

Chief Minister allows the BJP to ensure that state executives remain subordinate extensions of the national leadership, reinforcing vertical authority structures within the party. Post-election selection also enables the party to maintain symbolic unity in leadership. By avoiding pre-election CM projections, the BJP ensures that electoral mandates are attributed primarily to the party and its national leadership rather than to individual state leaders. This strengthens the perception that governance outcomes are centrally coordinated and nationally guided, reinforcing the presidentialised character of Indian parliamentary politics without formally altering constitutional arrangements.

2.7   Electoral Risk Management Theory

From the perspective of electoral risk management theory, the BJP's Chief Minister selection strategy functions as a rational mechanism for managing uncertainty in competitive, multi-level electoral environments. Political parties operating across diverse social, regional, and caste landscapes face significant risks from factionalism, anti-incumbency, and leadership conflicts. Centralised CM selection allows the party to mitigate these risks by retaining flexibility over leadership outcomes. One of the most significant risks this strategy addresses is intra-party factionalism. Pre-declaring a Chief Ministerial face often intensifies competition among aspirants, leading to factional splits, sabotage during campaigns, and long-term organisational damage. By postponing leadership decisions until after electoral victories, the BJP neutralises rival claimants during campaigns and preserves organisational unity. Leadership authority remains concentrated in the central command, preventing state-level actors from mobilising prematurely around competing leadership ambitions. Electoral risk management also operates through anti-incumbency control. In states experiencing governance fatigue or voter dissatisfaction, leadership replacement allows the party to symbolically reset governance without facing elections. Chief Ministers function as expendable political assets, enabling the party to redirect public discontent away from the organisation itself. This strategy treats leadership change as a corrective mechanism rather than because of electoral accountability, allowing the BJP to manage public perceptions while retaining political power.

Additionally, centralised CM selection facilitates social and regional recalibration. Post-election appointments will enable the party to adjust leadership representation in response to evolving caste equations, regional demands, or coalition pressures. By retaining appointment authority, the central leadership can use Chief Ministerial positions strategically to consolidate social coalitions, reward organisational loyalty, or signal inclusivity, all without reopening electoral competition. The cumulative effect of this risk management approach is the transformation of Chief Ministership into a flexible strategic instrument rather than a stable political mandate. Leadership becomes provisional, conditional, and subject to periodic review by the central leadership, reinforcing organisational dominance while maximising electoral adaptability.

2.8   Implications for Democratic Theory

The BJP's Chief Minister selection strategy raises fundamental questions for democratic theory, particularly concerning leadership emergence, accountability, and participation within representative institutions. Classical democratic models assume that political leadership emerges through competitive processes, reflects popular will, and remains accountable to electorates and legislative peers. Centralised leadership selection disrupts these assumptions by relocating decision-making authority from democratic arenas to internal party hierarchies. One significant implication concerns the redefinition of accountability. In centralised party systems, Chief Ministers are primarily accountable to the party leadership rather than to state legislatures or voters. This vertical accountability weakens traditional mechanisms of democratic control, as leadership survival depends less on electoral performance or legislative support and more on organisational approval. Democratic responsibility becomes internalised within the party rather than publicly contested. The strategy also challenges norms of intra-party democracy. Leadership selection insulated from state-level participation reduces opportunities for internal deliberation, contestation, and leadership development. While such centralisation enhances efficiency and cohesion, it narrows the space for democratic participation within parties, raising concerns about elite dominance and organisational oligarchy. At the state level, the erosion of leadership autonomy has implications for federal democratic accountability. Chief Ministers who lack independent political mandates may be less responsive to regional interests, as policy priorities are filtered through national objectives. This can weaken the representative function of state governments, turning them into administrative units that execute centrally defined

agendas. From a normative standpoint, the BJP's model reflects a tension between democratic efficiency and democratic depth. While centralised leadership improves coordination, electoral discipline, and policy uniformity, it risks hollowing out participatory leadership structures and weakening the democratic link between voters and executive authority. The long-term sustainability of this model depends on whether administrative performance and electoral success can compensate for the dilution of democratic representation and state-level political agency. Taken together, leadership personalisation, electoral risk management, and democratic implications reveal the BJP's CM selection strategy as a sophisticated organisational response to contemporary electoral politics. It reflects a recalibration of democratic practice in which leadership is centralised, strategic, and contingent reshaping not only party organisation but also the functioning of India's federal democracy.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative comparative case study design to examine the relationship between centralised Chief Minister (CM) selection and political outcomes in BJP-led state governments. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate given the study's focus on processes, institutional practices, leadership dynamics, and party decision-making, which cannot be adequately captured through purely quantitative indicators. The research seeks to explain how and why leadership centralisation operates, rather than merely measuring its effects. Comparative case study methodology allows for context-sensitive analysis across multiple states while retaining analytical depth. By examining variations in leadership selection, governance outcomes, and political stability across different states governed by the same party, the study isolates the impact of party-level organisational strategies from broader ideological or electoral factors. This design is especially relevant for understanding party-mediated centralisation in a federal system, where constitutional structures remain constant but political practices vary. The study focuses on the period 2017–2024, a phase marked by the consolidation of BJP dominance at the national level and the institutionalisation of centralised leadership practices within the party. This temporal boundary captures multiple state elections, leadership changes, and governance cycles, enabling longitudinal observation of patterns in CM appointments, replacements, and performance.

The selection of cases follows a purposive sampling strategy, designed to maximise theoretical variation while maintaining party uniformity. All selected states have been governed by the BJP during the study period, ensuring that ideological orientation and national leadership remain constant. This enables the analysis to focus specifically on organisational and leadership variables rather than inter-party differences. The six states—Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, and Himachal Pradesh—represent diverse political, social, and institutional contexts.

Madhya Pradesh is selected to examine leadership replacement in a politically competitive state with a historically strong Chief Minister. The transition from a mass-based leader to an organisationally selected CM provides a critical case for analysing how leadership centralisation affects governance continuity, party discipline, and voter response. Rajasthan represents a high-competition state with a history of factionalism. The absence of a pre-declared CM face and post-election leadership selection makes it an essential case for evaluating governance legitimacy, internal coordination, and opposition narratives of "remote control" rule. Gujarat functions as a deviant or ideal-type case of sustained centralised governance. As a long-standing BJP stronghold, Gujarat offers an opportunity to examine whether frequent leadership changes under the central command can coexist with governance efficiency and electoral dominance. This case helps distinguish between structural success and replicability.

Uttar Pradesh is included as a controlled strong-leader case, where a Chief Minister with mass appeal operates within firm central discipline. This case tests the limits of centralisation theory by exploring conditions under which the BJP permits strong state leaders without losing central control. Odisha is considered an emerging BJP state, where leadership development, organisational expansion, and CM selection strategies are still evolving. This case provides insight into how centralised leadership operates in states without long-standing BJP organisational dominance. Himachal Pradesh offers a small-state and high-turnover case, characterised by frequent leadership changes and electoral volatility. It allows assessment of how centralised CM selection interacts with fragile mandates and limited administrative capacity. The study relies on multiple data sources to ensure triangulation and analytical robustness. Election data from the Election Commission of India are used to examine electoral outcomes, vote shares,

turnout, and leadership effects in Assembly and Lok Sabha elections. These data provide empirical grounding for assessing whether centralised leadership decisions influence electoral performance. Government performance indicators, including budget allocations, welfare scheme implementation, administrative continuity, and governance rankings, are used to evaluate the policy and administrative consequences of leadership centralisation. While recognising the limitations of such indicators, they offer insight into governance stability and bureaucratic performance. Media reports and party statements constitute a critical qualitative data source. National and regional newspapers, official party communications, press releases, and public speeches are analysed to trace leadership selection processes, central interventions, and narratives surrounding CM appointments and removals. Media discourse analysis helps capture perceptions of legitimacy, dissent, and central control. Secondary academic literature provides the theoretical foundation and contextual depth for the study. Works on party centralisation, federalism, leadership personalisation, and Indian party politics are used to situate empirical findings within broader comparative debates.

The study employs process tracing to reconstruct the sequence of events surrounding CM selection, replacement, and governance outcomes in each state. This method allows the identification of causal mechanisms linking central leadership decisions to political and administrative consequences. To enhance internal validity, the study triangulates across multiple sources and avoids reliance on single narratives. The comparative design strengthens external validity by identifying patterns across diverse cases. However, the study also acknowledges limitations. As a qualitative analysis, it does not claim causal generalisation beyond the selected cases.

Additionally, reliance on publicly available data limits access to internal party deliberations, which remain opaque by design. Despite these constraints, the study offers a theoretically informed and empirically grounded analysis of leadership centralisation in Indian federal politics. This study makes a significant methodological contribution to the literature on Indian politics and comparative federalism by reorienting analytical focus from formal constitutional arrangements to party-mediated governance mechanisms. Rather than treating state governments as autonomous institutional units, the study conceptualises subnational governance as embedded within national party organisations. By applying party organisation theory to the analysis of Chief Minister selection, the research demonstrates how internal party structures—often treated as black boxes—actively shape executive authority, policy direction, and administrative outcomes at the state level. This approach advances methodological debates by integrating organisational variables into the study of subnational governance.

First, the study innovatively applies party organisation theory—traditionally used to analyse party systems, leadership selection, and electoral mobilisation at the national level—to the domain of state-level governance. Existing scholarship on Indian federalism tends to privilege constitutional design, fiscal federalism, or centre–state relations as formal intergovernmental processes. By contrast, this study methodologically foregrounds political parties as intervening institutions that translate national power into subnational authority. Through comparative case analysis, it demonstrates that Chief Minister selection is not merely a political outcome, but an organisational decision embedded in hierarchical party control. This reframing allows scholars to systematically examine how party centralisation operates as a governance variable rather than as a background political condition.

Second, the study bridges two siloed bodies of literature—federalism studies and party institutional analysis—by developing a unified analytical framework. Federalism scholarship often assumes that constitutional safeguards and fiscal arrangements primarily shape state autonomy, while party studies focus on electoral competition and organisational cohesion. Methodologically, this research connects these domains by showing how centralised party leadership can override constitutional decentralisation without formal institutional change. By treating the selection of the Chief Minister as a mechanism through which party authority mediates federal power, the study provides a replicable methodological model for analysing "party-driven centralisation" in federal democracies. Third, the study advances methodological understanding of leadership by demonstrating that leadership selection functions as a governance mechanism rather than merely a political appointment. Through process tracing and structured comparison, the research reveals that CM selection influences administrative continuity, policy alignment, bureaucratic behaviour, and political accountability. Leadership change is thus operationalised as a tool for organisational discipline, risk management, and policy coordination. This methodological move shifts

leadership analysis away from personality-centred explanations and towards institutional and strategic functions, enabling more rigorous comparison across cases and time periods. Significantly, the study also contributes methodologically by adopting a comparative qualitative design within a single-party framework, thereby allowing controlled variation. By holding party ideology and national leadership constant while comparing multiple state contexts, the research isolates the effects of organisational centralisation from broader political variables. This strengthens causal inference in qualitative research and provides a template for future studies examining party dominance across federated systems. Finally, the study contributes to methodological debates on democratic analysis by foregrounding internal party processes as sites of political power. It challenges the tendency to treat parties as unitary actors in governance studies and instead disaggregates their internal decision-making structures.

4. Case Analysis: Centralised CM Selection and State-Level Political Outcomes

4.1 Madhya Pradesh: Leadership Replacement, Organisational Confidence, and Electoral Transferability

Madhya Pradesh constitutes one of the most revealing and analytically rich cases for understanding the BJP's centralised Chief Minister selection strategy, as it involves the deliberate sidelining of a long-serving and electorally successful mass leader in favour of a centrally selected organisational figure. Shivraj Singh Chouhan's tenure—spanning more than sixteen years across multiple terms—was marked by sustained electoral victories, strong personal popularity, and an extensive welfare-oriented governance model. Schemes such as Ladli Laxmi Yojana and Ladli Behna Yojana cultivated deep emotional bonds with women voters and rural constituencies, making Chouhan not merely an administrative head but a personalised symbol of the BJP's governance in the state. In conventional party systems, such entrenched leadership typically translates into enhanced bargaining power within the party, near-automatic reappointment, and the emergence of a regional political satrap. Historically, Indian politics—across parties—has rewarded long-serving Chief Ministers with greater autonomy and influence over party organisation, candidate selection, and policy direction. Madhya Pradesh under Chouhan appeared to follow this trajectory for over a decade. However, the BJP's post-2023 leadership decision marked a decisive rupture from this traditional pattern, signalling a structural transformation in how political authority is constituted within the party. Despite the BJP securing a decisive Assembly victory in 2023—reflected in a comfortable seat majority and stable vote share—the central leadership chose not to continue with Chouhan as Chief Minister. Instead, it appointed a leader with comparatively limited mass appeal but strong organisational credentials, ideological reliability, and symbolic social representational value. This choice was neither accidental nor reactive; instead, it reflected a calculated assertion of high command's supremacy over state-level leadership. The decision clearly stated that electoral success in Madhya Pradesh was attributed to the party organisation and national leadership, not to the outgoing Chief Minister's personal charisma or welfare politics.

Electoral data and campaign patterns further reinforce this interpretation. The 2023 Assembly election campaign in Madhya Pradesh was heavily nationalised, with a strong emphasis on the Prime Minister's leadership, central welfare schemes, and national ideological narratives. Chouhan's personal image, while present, was strategically underplayed in comparison to earlier elections. The absence of a formal CM projection and the post-election leadership decision together indicate a deliberate effort to decouple electoral legitimacy from individual state leadership. This underscores the BJP's confidence in organisational vote transferability, wherein voters are expected to support the party regardless of who occupies the Chief Minister's office. From a governance perspective, the leadership transition initially produced administrative continuity rather than disruption. This continuity can be attributed to two structural factors: first, the entrenched dominance of the BJP within the state bureaucracy, and second, the persistence of established policy frameworks and welfare schemes. Bureaucratic elites, accustomed to working under strong central oversight, adapted smoothly to the new leadership, reinforcing the argument that governance capacity increasingly resides in institutional mechanisms rather than political leadership charisma. Analytically, however, this transition reveals a deeper reconfiguration of political authority. The Chief Minister's role in Madhya Pradesh shifted from a political mobiliser and welfare entrepreneur to an organisational executor and administrative coordinator. Authority became vertically embedded within the party hierarchy rather than horizontally negotiated within the state's political ecosystem. This aligns closely with party centralisation and principal–agent theories, where state leaders function as agents implementing

centrally defined agendas, with limited scope for independent political innovation. The Madhya Pradesh case also illustrates how the BJP manages the risk posed by long-serving leaders. Leaders with deep popular roots and emotional voter connect can gradually accumulate autonomous political capital, potentially challenging central authority, or complicating leadership succession at the national level. By replacing a leader at the peak of his popularity rather than after electoral decline, the BJP pre-empted the consolidation of an alternative power centre. Leadership changes thus functioned as a preventive organisational intervention, reinforcing the conditional nature of political authority within the party.

However, this strategy is not without long-term risks. While organisational vote transferability appears effective in the short to medium term, the gradual erosion of charismatic state leadership may weaken emotional voter attachment to the party at the regional level. Welfare schemes associated with individual leaders often create durable affective bonds that transcend party identity. By depersonalising governance, the BJP risks transforming voter support into a more transactional, performance-dependent relationship, which could prove vulnerable under conditions of governance stress or an economic downturn. In theoretical terms, Madhya Pradesh exemplifies the BJP's transition from a leader-centric federal model to a party-centric unit of governance, where the organisation, rather than the individual, is the primary locus of political legitimacy. The case powerfully demonstrates that under a high-command regime, leadership longevity, electoral success, and mass appeal no longer guarantee political security. Instead, authority is contingent, revocable, and subordinate to central organisational priorities.

The Madhya Pradesh case occupies a critical position in the study of centralised leadership within India's federal democracy because it marks a decisive departure from the long-standing tradition of regional satraps dominating state-level politics within national parties. For much of post-independence Indian politics, strong and electorally entrenched Chief Ministers functioned as semi-autonomous political actors, exercising significant control over party organisation, candidate selection, and governance priorities within their states. Shivraj Singh Chouhan's extended tenure appeared to fit this classical model of regional dominance. However, his replacement, despite sustained electoral success, signals a structural shift in party leadership norms, indicating that the era of powerful regional satraps within centrally governed national parties is increasingly constrained. This decline of regional satraps is not merely a leadership change but reflects a more profound transformation in how political authority is distributed within party hierarchies. The Madhya Pradesh case demonstrates that even long-serving leaders with substantial popular legitimacy no longer possess guaranteed bargaining power vis-à-vis the central leadership. Authority has become increasingly conditional and revocable, dependent on continued organisational trust rather than electoral performance alone. This marks a significant reconfiguration of internal party power, where the central command asserts primacy over regional leadership accumulation, thereby preventing the crystallisation of alternative centres of influence within the party.

Closely linked to this transformation is the consolidation of organisational vote transfer mechanisms, which Madhya Pradesh exemplifies with unusual clarity. The BJP's decision to replace a popular Chief Minister immediately after an electoral victory reflects a high level of confidence that voter support is anchored primarily to the party brand and national leadership rather than to individual state leaders. Electoral behaviour in the state suggests that votes can be transferred seamlessly from one leader to another without substantial loss of support, indicating a shift from leader-centric to organisation-centric electoral mobilisation. This capacity for vote transferability enhances the party's strategic flexibility, enabling it to recalibrate its leadership without triggering electoral backlash. The success of organisational vote transfer in Madhya Pradesh also highlights the role of nationalised electoral narratives in sustaining centralised leadership. Campaign messaging foregrounded national leadership, central welfare schemes, and ideological coherence, thereby diluting the outgoing Chief Minister's personal imprint. This nationalisation of state elections reduces the political cost of leadership change and reinforces the party's capacity to maintain electoral dominance independent of individual charisma. However, it also indicates a narrowing of the space for state-specific political narratives and leadership identities.

Another analytically significant dimension of the Madhya Pradesh case is the transformation of the Chief Minister's role from a political mobiliser to an administrative agent of the party organisation. Under Chouhan, the Chief Minister functioned as both a governance innovator and a political communicator, directly engaging with voters and shaping welfare politics. Following the leadership transition, the Chief Minister's authority became more closely aligned with organisational execution, policy implementation,

and administrative coordination. This shift reflects the logic of party centralisation and principal–agent theory, wherein state executives act primarily as agents implementing centrally defined priorities rather than as autonomous political leaders.

This transformation has important implications for the nature of governance in a federal system. While administrative continuity and policy stability may be preserved through bureaucratic institutions, the political dimension of leadership—agenda-setting, local responsiveness, and emotional mobilisation—becomes attenuated. The Chief Minister's office is redefined as an extension of party hierarchy rather than as a site of independent political authority. Madhya Pradesh thus illustrates how centralised leadership can depoliticise state governance, substituting political leadership with organisational management. Finally, the Madhya Pradesh case brings into sharp focus the long-term tension between electoral efficiency and emotional voter engagement. In the short term, centralised leadership selection enhances electoral efficiency by reducing factionalism, preventing leadership rivalry, and enabling swift organisational decision-making. However, sustained voter loyalty in Indian politics has often been underpinned by emotional bonds forged through personalised leadership and welfare politics. By systematically de-emphasising charismatic state leadership, the BJP risks weakening these affective ties over time.

This tension raises broader questions about the sustainability of party-dominated electoral mobilisation in the absence of strong regional leadership. While organisational vote transferability appears effective during periods of high party dominance and charismatic national leadership, its resilience under conditions of electoral stress remains uncertain. Madhya Pradesh thus serves not only as evidence of the BJP's current organisational strength but also as a test case for the long-term viability of centralised leadership in maintaining deep and durable voter engagement at the state level. In sum, the Madhya Pradesh case encapsulates the evolving nature of political authority within India's federal democracy. It demonstrates how national parties can successfully subordinate regional leadership to central command, transform executive authority into organisational function, and sustain electoral dominance through brand-centric mobilisation. At the same time, it exposes the normative and strategic trade-offs inherent in this model—between efficiency and representation, control and legitimacy, organisation, and emotion—making it a cornerstone case for understanding contemporary centralised governance in India.

4.2 Rajasthan: Electoral Victory without Leadership Anchoring and Governance Fragility

Rajasthan represents a contrasting and analytically revealing case in the study of the BJP's centralised Chief Minister selection strategy, primarily because of the state's historically competitive party system and entrenched intra-party factionalism. Unlike states where the BJP has built deep organisational penetration and stable leadership hierarchies, Rajasthan has long oscillated between parties and leadership factions, making governance legitimacy more contingent on visible and authoritative state leadership. Against this backdrop, the BJP's decision to avoid projecting a Chief Ministerial face before the 2023 Assembly elections marked a deliberate strategic gamble that prioritised electoral consolidation over leadership anchoring.

The pre-election strategy in Rajasthan was explicitly nationalised, with campaign narratives centred on the Prime Minister's leadership, central welfare schemes, and anti-incumbency sentiment against the incumbent Congress government. This approach effectively neutralised internal factional rivalries within the BJP, as the absence of a declared Chief Minister prevented pre-election power struggles and reduced the risk of sabotage by sidelined leaders. Electoral data following the 2023 election indicate that this strategy succeeded in improving the BJP's vote share and translating widespread dissatisfaction with the incumbent regime into a decisive seat tally, demonstrating the short-term effectiveness of leadership ambiguity as an electoral tool. However, the absence of leadership anchoring during the campaign phase produced significant post-election governance challenges. The delayed and unexpected selection of the Chief Minister generated uncertainty within the party organisation, the legislature, and the administrative machinery. Party cadres and legislators who had mobilised without a clear leadership hierarchy found themselves recalibrating their loyalties after the election, complicating coalition-building within the ruling party. Media coverage and early legislative proceedings revealed coordination difficulties among ministers, overlapping authority claims, and a slow pace of policy articulation, all of which pointed to an initial governance vacuum.

From an analytical perspective, these governance difficulties underscore the importance of perceived authority consolidation in politically competitive states. Unlike Madhya Pradesh, where long-standing organisational discipline and bureaucratic continuity mitigated the effects of leadership transition, Rajasthan's fragmented political culture magnified the costs of delayed leadership clarity. Ministers and legislators appeared hesitant to act decisively, reflecting uncertainty about the durability of the new Chief Minister's authority and the extent of central backing. This uncertainty weakened horizontal coordination within the cabinet and vertical coordination between the state government and party organisation. The opposition's framing of the new government as a "remote-controlled administration" further eroded governance legitimacy in the early phase of the BJP's tenure. While such narratives are familiar in competitive politics, they gained traction in Rajasthan due to the visible gap between electoral victory and leadership consolidation. The perception that absolute authority resided outside the state reinforced public doubts about the Chief Minister's autonomy, complicating efforts to establish political credibility and administrative command. This illustrates how centralised leadership selection can inadvertently strengthen opposition discourses about democratic deficit and external control. Analytically, Rajasthan highlights a fundamental trade-off inherent in centralised leadership strategies: electoral efficiency versus post-election governance legitimacy. The BJP's high command successfully managed factional conflict during the election by deferring leadership decisions, but it also postponed the process of authority institutionalisation after the election. In states where political competition is intense and voter loyalty is less stable; governance legitimacy depends not only on electoral outcomes but also on the rapid emergence of a visible and assertive state leadership capable of symbolising political authority.

Comparatively, Rajasthan demonstrates that the effectiveness of centralised CM selection is contingent on contextual factors such as organisational depth, historical leadership stability, and voter expectations. Where party organisation is fragmented, and leadership factions remain potent, the absence of a pre-election leadership anchor increases the risk of governance fragility. Centralised control may prevent factional splits, but it cannot fully substitute for the stabilising function of a clearly recognised state-level authority figure. In broader theoretical terms, the Rajasthan case complicates overly deterministic interpretations of party centralisation. While centralised leadership selection enhances strategic control and electoral discipline, its governance outcomes are uneven across states. Rajasthan suggests that centralisation is not a universally transferable governance model but a context-sensitive strategy whose success depends on the interaction between party organisation, electoral competitiveness, and political culture. Rajasthan thus serves as a cautionary case within the BJP's centralised leadership paradigm. It demonstrates that electoral victory without leadership anchoring can generate governance vulnerabilities, particularly in states with fragmented political traditions. While centralised CM selection may deliver short-term electoral gains, its long-term effectiveness hinges on the party's ability to consolidate authority and legitimacy at the state level rapidly. The Rajasthan experience underscores the limits of centralisation as a substitute for grounded political leadership in India's federal and competitive democratic context.

4.3 Gujarat: Institutionalised Centralisation and Governance Continuity

Gujarat represents the most stable and institutionally consolidated manifestation of the BJP's centralised leadership model, functioning as an ideal-type case of party-mediated governance within India's federal system. Unlike states where leadership change generates uncertainty or factional contestation, Gujarat has demonstrated a remarkable capacity to absorb frequent Chief Ministerial transitions without electoral volatility or administrative disruption. Since Narendra Modi transitioned from state leadership to the national office in 2014, Gujarat has experienced multiple Chief Ministerial appointments. Yet, electoral data from successive Assembly and Lok Sabha elections reveal consistently high BJP vote shares. This stability indicates that political legitimacy in Gujarat is derived less from individual leaders and more from the party's organisational depth, ideological coherence, and performance-based governance narrative. The post-Modi phase in Gujarat marks a deliberate shift from charismatic leadership to institutionalised party dominance. The absence of a towering mass leader has enabled the BJP to embed authority within organisational and bureaucratic structures rather than personal networks. Chief Ministers are selected primarily for administrative competence, organisational loyalty, and their ability to function within a centralised decision-making framework. As a result, leadership change has not translated into policy discontinuity; instead, governance has remained characterised by fiscal discipline, infrastructural expansion, and alignment with centrally designed development initiatives. This institutionalisation of governance reduces dependence on individual political capital and strengthens the party's capacity for

leadership rotation without electoral cost. From a governance perspective, Gujarat illustrates how centralised CM selection can enhance administrative efficiency when supported by a professionalised bureaucracy and a disciplined cadre network. Chief Ministers in this model function as coordinators and implementers rather than autonomous political entrepreneurs. Decision-making authority remains vertically integrated, with strategic priorities shaped at the national level and executed at the state level with minimal resistance. This arrangement minimises intra-party conflict and eliminates the policy drift often associated with strong regional leaders, thereby reinforcing the BJP's image as a unified and predictable governing party.

The Gujarat case also aligns closely with principal–agent theory, in which the central leadership (principal) exercises effective control over state-level agents through institutional mechanisms rather than through coercive oversight. Agency loss is minimised not only through frequent leadership turnover but also through the internalisation of organisational norms that emphasise obedience, ideological alignment, and performance monitoring. Chief Ministers operate within clearly defined institutional constraints, reducing incentives for personal power accumulation or deviation from national policy objectives. This contrasts sharply with states where leadership autonomy is historically embedded, and central intervention is perceived as disruptive. Electorally, Gujarat demonstrates the success of party-brand dominance over individual leadership appeal. Campaign narratives consistently foreground national leadership, developmental outcomes, and ideological identity, while state-level leaders remain low-profile. Voters reward continuity of governance outcomes rather than charismatic leadership, allowing the BJP to treat Chief Ministerial positions as organisational appointments rather than popular mandates. This electoral behaviour reinforces the party's confidence in the organisational transferability of votes, further legitimising centralised leadership selection. However, analytically, Gujarat's success must be understood as contingent rather than universally replicable. The effectiveness of institutionalised centralisation in Gujarat rests on specific structural conditions: long-term BJP dominance, ideological saturation, a weak and fragmented opposition, and a political culture that prioritises governance performance over leadership symbolism. These conditions significantly lower the political costs of leadership rotation and centralised control. In states lacking such entrenched dominance, similar strategies have produced governance fragility, leadership uncertainty, or legitimacy deficits, as seen in Rajasthan. From a federalism perspective, Gujarat exemplifies a de facto unitary model of governance operating within a formally federal constitutional framework. While state institutions retain formal authority, substantive policy direction is shaped by national leadership and party hierarchy. This arrangement has not generated political resistance in Gujarat due to the convergence of party dominance and voter satisfaction. However, it raises broader normative questions about the erosion of state-level political autonomy and the long-term implications for democratic accountability in India's federal system.

Gujarat thus stands as the BJP's most successful laboratory of centralised leadership and governance continuity. It demonstrates that centralised CM selection can produce stability, efficiency, and electoral durability when embedded within a mature organisational ecosystem. At the same time, the Gujarat case cautions against treating this model as universally transferable. Its success depends on exceptional structural and political conditions, underscoring that centralisation is not a neutral governance strategy but a context-dependent institutional choice with uneven consequences across India's diverse federal landscape.

4.4 Uttar Pradesh: The Controlled Strongman Model

Uttar Pradesh constitutes a hybrid, analytically complex case within the BJP's centralised leadership framework, combining strong state-level leadership with tight organisational control. Unlike Gujarat or Madhya Pradesh, where Chief Ministers function primarily as administrative or organisational executors, Uttar Pradesh is governed by a Chief Minister with substantial mass appeal, ideological visibility, and a distinct public persona. Electoral data from successive Assembly and Lok Sabha elections indicate that the Chief Minister commands significant popular legitimacy, particularly among key voter blocs. Yet, despite this visibility, campaign narratives consistently subordinate state leadership to national leadership, revealing a carefully managed balance between autonomy and control. The BJP's decision to retain a strong Chief Minister in Uttar Pradesh is best understood as a product of strategic necessity rather than a deviation from centralisation. As India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh occupies a critical position in national electoral arithmetic, federal power relations, and ideological mobilisation. The scale and political volatility

of the state demand a visible, assertive leadership figure capable of managing complex caste dynamics, law-and-order challenges, and the state's administrative scale. In this context, a strong Chief Minister enhances electoral credibility and governance capacity, particularly in a state where a leadership vacuum can quickly translate into political fragmentation. However, the autonomy granted to the Chief Minister in Uttar Pradesh operates within clearly demarcated organisational boundaries. Institutional mechanisms such as high-command oversight, disciplined party organisation, and strategic alignment with national leadership ensure that state-level authority does not evolve into an independent power centre. Policy priorities, symbolic messaging, and electoral strategies remain closely coordinated with the central leadership, limiting the scope for unilateral decision-making. This structure prevents the emergence of regional satraps, even in states where the Chief Minister enjoys mass popularity and media prominence. From a principal–agent perspective, Uttar Pradesh exemplifies a managed delegation model. The central leadership, acting as the principal, grants greater agency autonomy because the risk of defection or ideological divergence is minimal. The Chief Minister's political identity is deeply embedded within the party's ideological framework, reducing the likelihood of policy drift or independent power consolidation. In return for this autonomy, the Chief Minister delivers high electoral returns, governance visibility, and ideological mobilisation, thereby reinforcing the principal's strategic objectives. The Uttar Pradesh case also illustrates the limits of leadership personalisation within a centralised party system. While the Chief Minister is a prominent public figure, personalisation is carefully circumscribed through symbolic hierarchy. National leadership remains the primary reference point during elections, and state-level achievements are framed as outcomes of collective party governance rather than individual leadership. This narrative management ensures that mass appeal enhances, rather than competes with, the party brand and national leadership. Governance outcomes in Uttar Pradesh further reflect this controlled strongman model. Administrative assertiveness, particularly in areas such as law and order and welfare delivery, has strengthened the state government's visibility. At the same time, bureaucratic appointments, fiscal decisions, and policy innovations remain subject to central coordination, reinforcing vertical integration. This balance enables decisive governance while maintaining organisational discipline, distinguishing Uttar Pradesh from states where strong leaders have historically challenged central authority.

Analytically, Uttar Pradesh challenges binary distinctions between centralisation and decentralisation. Instead, it demonstrates a conditional decentralisation model in which strong leadership is strategically permitted under specific conditions: ideological alignment, organisational loyalty, and high electoral payoff. This case underscores the adaptability of the BJP's centralised leadership framework, revealing its capacity to accommodate exceptional leadership figures without compromising hierarchical control. Uttar Pradesh thus reinforces and refines principal–agent theory within the context of Indian party politics. It shows that agency autonomy is not inherently destabilising when embedded within robust organisational controls and ideological convergence. Rather than signalling decentralisation, the presence of a strong Chief Minister in Uttar Pradesh illustrates the BJP's capacity for calibrated centralisation—allowing leadership strength where it serves strategic objectives, while ensuring that ultimate authority remains firmly anchored at the centre.

4.5 Odisha: Leadership Construction in an Emerging BJP State

Odisha represents a strategically significant expansion case for the Bharatiya Janata Party, where centralised leadership selection functions primarily as a party-building mechanism rather than a tool of governance consolidation. Unlike Gujarat or Uttar Pradesh, where the BJP operates from a position of institutional dominance, Odisha has long been characterised by the electoral hegemony of a regional party anchored by a strong and enduring Chief Ministerial figure. This entrenched leadership has shaped voter expectations for personalised, stable governance, creating structural barriers for national parties seeking organisational expansion. Within this context, the BJP's leadership strategy reflects caution, gradualism, and central oversight rather than aggressive leadership projection. The BJP's approach in Odisha prioritises organisational visibility, ideological penetration, and cadre expansion over elevating a dominant state-level leader. Electoral data from successive Assembly and Lok Sabha elections demonstrate a steady, incremental increase in the party's vote share, particularly in parliamentary contests, suggesting growing acceptance of the BJP's national narrative. However, this growth has not translated into decisive Assembly victories, underscoring the limits of centralised branding in a state where regional leadership legitimacy remains deeply embedded. The absence of a prominent Chief Ministerial face reflects a deliberate organisational choice rather than a leadership deficit. From an organisational perspective, the BJP's

reluctance to project a strong regional leader in Odisha stems from the risks associated with premature leadership elevation in an emerging party system. Elevating a mass leader before organisational consolidation could generate factional competition, weaken cadre discipline, and create personalised power centres that challenge central authority. By retaining leadership selection within the central command, the party maintains flexibility and ensures that state-level leadership development occurs within tightly controlled institutional boundaries. Analytically, Odisha exemplifies the use of centralised CM selection as a preventive organisational strategy. Instead of using leadership appointments to consolidate governance power, the BJP uses leadership restraint to manage internal cohesion and long-term party construction. This aligns with institutionalist theories that emphasise sequencing in party development, wherein organisational capacity must precede leadership autonomy. Centralised control thus serves as a stabilising mechanism during the party's expansion phase, even if it limits short-term electoral gains. The Odisha case also reveals the limits of electoral presidentialisation in states dominated by strong regional leaders. While national leadership appeals resonate in parliamentary elections, Assembly contests remain influenced by state-level governance performance and leadership familiarity. The BJP's decision not to personalise leadership in Odisha reflects an acknowledgement of this structural constraint. Rather than competing directly with an entrenched regional strongman, the party seeks to reposition itself as a credible alternative through organisational endurance and gradual voter realignment.

From a federal and democratic perspective, Odisha highlights a paradox of centralised leadership strategies. On the one hand, central control promotes organisational coherence and ideological consistency during expansion. On the other hand, the absence of a visible state leader constrains the party's ability to articulate a distinct state-level governance vision, reinforcing perceptions of external control. This tension underscores the challenge national parties face when operating in regions with strong subnational political identities. Odisha thus serves as a formative case in understanding how centralised CM selection operates under conditions of organisational emergence rather than dominance. It demonstrates that leadership restraint can be a rational long-term strategy aimed at institutional consolidation, even when it delays electoral breakthroughs. The Odisha experience highlights the BJP's prioritisation of organisational control and ideological alignment over rapid personalisation of leadership, reinforcing the party's broader centralisation logic while revealing its adaptive strategies in heterogeneous political environments.

4.6 Himachal Pradesh: Leadership Volatility and Centralised Control in a Small State

Himachal Pradesh provides a critical counterpoint to cases such as Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh by illustrating how centralised Chief Minister selection operates under conditions of small state size, limited administrative depth, and high electoral competitiveness. Unlike large states where organisational density and bureaucratic capacity can absorb leadership changes, Himachal Pradesh's governance ecosystem is more fragile, making leadership stability a crucial determinant of policy continuity. In this context, the BJP's reliance on centralised leadership selection reflects an attempt to maintain organisational discipline and factional control in an inherently volatile political environment. Electoral data from recent Assembly elections reveal a persistent pattern of alternation in power between major parties, often decided by narrow margins. This electoral volatility produces weak mandates and heightens intra-party competition, as leadership positions become scarce and highly contested. The BJP's central command has responded by retaining firm control over Chief Ministerial selection, thereby minimising state-level bargaining among legislators. By insulating leadership decisions from local factional pressures, the party seeks to prevent internal fragmentation that could prove electorally costly in a state where minor defections or dissent can significantly alter outcomes. However, this strategy has resulted in frequent leadership changes and low Chief Ministerial visibility, as state leaders remain dependent on central approval rather than cultivating durable local authority. Chief Ministers in Himachal Pradesh under the BJP have often functioned as short-term administrative managers rather than long-term political anchors. From a principal–agent perspective, this reflects a deliberate effort to limit agency autonomy: leadership is kept conditional and replaceable, ensuring compliance but discouraging the development of independent political capital at the state level. Governance indicators suggest that such leadership volatility carries administrative costs. Frequent changes at the top disrupt policy prioritisation, weaken inter-departmental coordination, and erode institutional memory within the state bureaucracy. In a small state with limited administrative capacity, these disruptions are magnified, as fewer layers of governance buffer against political instability. Long-term developmental planning—particularly in sectors such as infrastructure, tourism, and environmental management—becomes difficult when leadership tenure is uncertain, and policy direction is repeatedly

recalibrated. Analytically, Himachal Pradesh reveals the structural limits of centralised leadership strategies in politically competitive, institutionally thin states. While centralised control may reduce overt factional conflict within the party, it does not necessarily translate into governance legitimacy or administrative effectiveness. Instead, leadership instability can deepen perceptions of political fragility and reinforce opposition narratives of "remote-controlled governance," further undermining voter confidence in the ruling party's capacity to govern sustainably. From a federal governance perspective, the Himachal Pradesh case illustrates how party-mediated centralisation can disproportionately affect smaller states. Unlike larger states with strong bureaucratic traditions or entrenched party systems, smaller states rely more on stable political leadership for effective governance. Centralised CM selection, when combined with frequent leadership turnover, risks hollowing out state autonomy not only politically but administratively, as decision-making authority increasingly shifts upward without corresponding gains in efficiency. Himachal Pradesh thus serves as a cautionary case within the BJP's broader centralisation model. It demonstrates that while high-command control can contain factionalism and enforce discipline, it may simultaneously undermine governance stability in small, electorally competitive states. The case underscores a critical tension at the heart of centralised party governance: strategies designed for organisational control and electoral risk management may produce unintended governance fragilities when applied uniformly across diverse state contexts. This reinforces the need to analytically distinguish between centralisation as an electoral strategy and its differentiated consequences for state-level governance capacity.

5.0 Comparative Synthesis: Centralised Leadership, State Contexts, and Differentiated Outcomes

A comparative analysis of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, and Himachal Pradesh demonstrates that the BJP's centralised Chief Minister selection strategy does not produce uniform political or governance outcomes. Instead, its effects are mediated by state-specific variables such as party institutional depth, electoral competitiveness, administrative capacity, opposition strength, and historical leadership traditions. While the party employs a broadly consistent high-command approach, the consequences of centralisation vary significantly across these contexts, revealing a pattern of differentiated centralisation rather than a monolithic governance model.

5.1 Organisational Depth as a Mediating Variable

The most decisive factor shaping the effectiveness of centralised CM selection is the depth of party institutionalisation at the state level. Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh exhibit intense organisational penetration, disciplined cadre networks, and long-standing BJP dominance. In these states, leadership transitions—however abrupt—do not significantly disrupt governance or electoral performance. Organisational vote transferability substitutes for personal leadership appeal, allowing the party to replace even highly popular leaders without incurring substantial electoral costs. By contrast, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh possess weaker organisational cohesion and more pronounced factional traditions. In these contexts, centralised leadership selection reduces pre-election factionalism but creates post-election governance fragility. The absence of a clearly anchored state leadership centre delays authority consolidation and weakens administrative coordination. Odisha represents a different organisational condition altogether: an expanding but not yet dominant BJP structure, where leadership restraint is used as a preventive measure rather than an instrument of governance consolidation.

5.2 Electoral Competitiveness and the Cost of Centralisation

Electoral competitiveness significantly shapes the political costs of centralised leadership strategies. In states with low electoral uncertainty (Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh), centralisation enhances efficiency and stability by preventing the rise of rival power centres. However, in politically competitive states such as Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh, centralisation increases governance costs by weakening state-level legitimacy and amplifying opposition narratives of external control. Uttar Pradesh occupies a unique intermediate position. High electoral stakes and political volatility necessitate a strong Chief Ministerial presence, yet the BJP manages this risk through tight ideological alignment and organisational oversight. This controlled strongman model demonstrates that centralisation does not eliminate decentralisation but conditions it, allowing autonomy only when agency risks are manageable and electoral returns are high.

5.3 Leadership Visibility and the Reconfiguration of Political Authority

Across the six cases, centralised CM selection consistently reconfigures the nature of state-level political authority. In Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, Chief Ministers increasingly function as administrative coordinators rather than mass mobilisers. Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh reveal the limits of this transformation, where reduced leadership visibility weakens governance coherence. Odisha illustrates leadership invisibility as a deliberate organisational strategy that delays leadership emergence until party structures are sufficiently consolidated. Collectively, these cases indicate a shift from charismatic and regionalised leadership toward institutional and managerial authority. This transition strengthens party supremacy but attenuates the emotional bond between voters and state leadership, potentially affecting long-term political engagement and accountability.

5.4 Principal–Agent Dynamics across States

From a principal–agent perspective, the BJP calibrates Chief Ministerial autonomy based on state-level risk profiles. Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh represent low agency-risk environments, allowing frequent leadership rotation without destabilisation. Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh present higher agency and coordination risks, where excessive control leads to governance inefficiencies. Uttar Pradesh demonstrates conditional agency autonomy, in which a potent agent is permitted due to high electoral payoffs and ideological alignment. Odisha exemplifies preventive agency control, where leadership emergence is deferred to avoid premature fragmentation. This variation highlights the BJP's sophisticated use of leadership selection as a governance tool rather than a mere organisational routine. Chief Ministers are positioned along a spectrum from administrative agents to controlled political entrepreneurs, depending on context.

5.5 Federalism, Uniform Strategy, and Asymmetric Outcomes

Comparatively, the six cases reveal a pattern of asymmetric political centralisation within a formally federal system. While constitutional federalism remains intact, party-mediated centralisation produces uneven impacts across states. Strong states with entrenched party dominance absorb centralisation with minimal disruption, whereas smaller or competitive states experience governance fragility and reduced policy continuity. This asymmetry challenges conventional understandings of Indian federalism, suggesting that party organisation has become a more powerful determinant of state autonomy than constitutional design. Centralised CM selection functions as an informal but highly effective mechanism for coordinating state governments without formal institutional restructuring. Taken together, the six cases demonstrate that the BJP's centralised Chief Minister selection strategy is context-sensitive but normatively uniform. The party applies a consistent logic of high-command control, yet its effects diverge sharply based on state capacity, political culture, and organisational maturity. Centralisation maximises electoral efficiency and organisational discipline but produces uneven governance outcomes and long-term legitimacy challenges, particularly in smaller and competitive states. This comparative synthesis reinforces the study's core argument: centralised leadership selection has become a central mechanism through which national parties reshape federal governance in India, producing a party-driven, asymmetrical federalism that privileges national coherence over state-level political depth.

6. Implications for the BJP's Long-Term Politics

The comparative analysis suggests that the BJP's centralised Chief Minister selection strategy creates a structural trade-off between national-level political consolidation and state-level democratic depth and governance. While the strategy has demonstrably enhanced the party's electoral efficiency and organisational coherence at the national scale, it simultaneously introduces risks that may accumulate over time at the subnational level. Understanding these long-term implications is essential for evaluating both the sustainability of the BJP's dominance and its broader impact on India's federal democracy.

6.1 State-Level Implications: Governance, Accountability, and Political Depth

At the state level, the most significant long-term risk of centralised leadership selection lies in the weakening of political accountability. When Chief Ministers derive their authority primarily from the

central party leadership rather than from state electorates or legislative colleagues, the accountability chain becomes vertically oriented. State leaders are incentivised to prioritise compliance with central directives over responsiveness to local demands, thereby diluting the representative function of state governments. Over time, this reorientation risks transforming state administrations into extensions of central party strategy rather than autonomous political institutions embedded in regional social realities.

A second significant implication is the growing dominance of the bureaucracy in state governance. As politically constrained Chief Ministers exercise limited autonomy and face uncertain tenure, senior bureaucrats often emerge as the primary drivers of policy continuity and administrative decision-making. While bureaucratic dominance may enhance short-term efficiency and policy implementation, it also reduces political contestation and deliberation, particularly in states with weaker political leadership. This shift risks depoliticising governance, undermining democratic oversight and weakening feedback mechanisms between citizens and the state. Over the longer term, centralised leadership strategies may also contribute to voter fatigue and a decline in emotional attachment to state-level leadership. Comparative evidence from states such as Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan indicates that repeated leadership changes or the absence of recognisable state leaders can erode the affective bond between voters and the ruling party. While voters may continue to support the BJP based on national leadership appeal, this reliance on national charisma may reduce political engagement at the state level and increase vulnerability to sudden electoral swings if national narratives weaken or alternative mobilising frames emerge.

6.2 National-Level Implications: Electoral Efficiency and Party Dominance

At the national level, however, the BJP's centralised CM selection strategy has clearly strengthened the party's capacity to operate in a presidentialised electoral environment. By subordinating state leadership to national authority, the party reinforces a political system in which elections—both parliamentary and assembly—are increasingly framed as referenda on central leadership. This presidential-style mobilisation allows the BJP to project a unified national vision, reduce message fragmentation, and maximise the electoral returns of a dominant leader-centric campaign strategy. Centralised leadership selection also enhances narrative dominance by limiting the emergence of alternative power centres within the party. Strong regional leaders often generate competing political narratives, policy preferences, and electoral claims. By preventing such leaders from consolidating independent authority, the BJP maintains tight control over political messaging and ideological framing. This narrative discipline is particularly advantageous in a media-driven political environment, where consistency and clarity are critical to sustaining public support across diverse regions. From an organisational standpoint, centralisation significantly improves electoral efficiency. Leadership selection becomes a flexible strategic tool rather than a fixed democratic outcome. The party can recalibrate caste representation, regional balance, and governance optics without triggering internal leadership contests or early elections. Frequent Chief Ministerial changes function as a mechanism to manage anti-incumbency, signal performance accountability, and reset governance narratives while preserving overall party dominance.

6.3 The Strategic Trade-Off: Short-Term Gains, Long-Term Risks

Analytically, the BJP's long-term political trajectory reflects a strategic optimisation for national power that may come at the expense of state-level political institutionalisation. While centralisation enhances the party's ability to govern multiple states simultaneously and maintain national coherence, it risks hollowing out state-level leadership pipelines and weakening the party's capacity to adapt to regional political shifts. Over time, the absence of strong state leaders may limit the party's resilience in contexts where national leadership appeal declines or where region-specific political challenges intensify. This trade-off also raises normative concerns for democratic theory. The concentration of leadership authority within a central party elite challenges classical models of representative democracy, which assume that subnational executives emerge from local political competition and remain accountable to regional constituencies. The BJP's model redefines democratic legitimacy in organisational rather than representational terms, privileging efficiency, discipline, and coherence over participation and internal contestation.

6.4 Long-Term Sustainability: A Conditional Assessment

The long-term sustainability of the BJP's centralised leadership strategy will depend on its capacity to balance national dominance with selective decentralisation. As the comparative cases suggest, centralisation works most effectively in states with substantial organisational depth and limited opposition but produces governance fragility in smaller or politically competitive states. Future success may therefore require the party to selectively nurture state-level leadership when governance legitimacy and administrative capacity demand it, without entirely relinquishing central control. In sum, the BJP's Chief Minister selection strategy has reshaped Indian politics by strengthening presidential-style national leadership while reconfiguring state governance into a more administrative and less political enterprise. This model has delivered remarkable electoral efficiency and organisational dominance in the short- to medium-term. However, its long-term political sustainability will hinge on whether the party can reconcile centralised authority with the need for democratic accountability, regional representation, and durable state-level political institutions within India's federal framework.

7.0 Conclusion

The BJP's model of centralised Chief Minister selection raises critical normative questions regarding the state of democracy in India, particularly in the context of debates on democratic backsliding. By prioritising organisational control, ideological uniformity, and centralised authority over participatory leadership and state-level autonomy, the party exemplifies a shift from representative pluralism toward a more hierarchical, top-down mode of governance. This transformation challenges classical democratic assumptions that subnational executives should emerge from local competition, remain accountable to state legislatures, and represent regional political constituencies. At the state level, centralised leadership selection limits intra-party democracy by insulating Chief Minister appointments from electoral and legislative bargaining. When leadership legitimacy is derived from the central high command rather than regional party networks or citizen preferences, political accountability is structurally weakened. This creates a scenario in which state-level governance is primarily responsive to national party directives rather than to the electorate, raising concerns about the erosion of horizontal checks and balances within India's quasi-federal system.

Furthermore, the substitution of charismatic or regionally anchored leaders with centrally controlled agents transforms Chief Ministers into administrative functionaries rather than autonomous political actors. While this approach enhances governance efficiency and reduces factional conflict, it simultaneously diminishes political contestation, local representation, and participatory decision-making. Over time, this could produce a normative drift toward procedural democracy without substantive democratic responsiveness— a key dimension highlighted in the democratic backsliding literature. The BJP's model also aligns with the broader presidentialisation of Indian politics, in which national leadership dominates electoral narratives, marginalising state-level political visibility. While this reinforces organisational cohesion and national electoral success, it concentrates political legitimacy around a single individual or leadership core. Political scientist Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt's framework on democratic erosion suggests that such concentration of authority, combined with the weakening of local accountability structures, constitutes one of the early indicators of democratic backsliding: the institutionalisation of elite control at the expense of participatory channels. However, it is important to contextualise this development. The BJP's centralised strategy is embedded within India's constitutional framework, which still guarantees formal federal powers to states. Democratic backsliding is not inevitable; the strategy represents an institutional and strategic choice that privileges efficiency and electoral dominance. The normative concern arises from the cumulative effects: repeated bypassing of regional leadership, constrained electoral accountability, and centralised narrative control may gradually alter citizen expectations, weaken democratic norms, and reduce the resilience of India's federal democracy against authoritarian tendencies.

In conclusion, the BJP's centralised Chief Minister selection model offers a cautionary lens through which to assess the intersection of party organisation and democratic health in India. While it provides short-term political and electoral advantages, it underscores the normative tension between organisational efficiency and substantive democracy, illustrating how party-mediated centralisation can contribute to gradual democratic erosion even in formally constitutional settings. This highlights the need for scholarly and public vigilance to ensure that efficiency-driven centralisation does not calcify into structural constraints on democratic participation, accountability, and regional political pluralism.

References

1. Aldrich, J. H. (1995). Why Parties? The Origin and Transformation of Political Parties in America. University of Chicago Press.

2. Chandhoke, N. (1995). "State and Civil Society: Explorations in Political Theory." Sage Publications India.

3. Chhibber, P., & Kollman, K. (2004). The Formation of National Party Systems: Federalism and Party Competition in Canada, Great Britain, India, and the United States. Princeton University Press.

4. Chhibber, P., & Verma, R. (2018). Ideology and Identity: The Changing Party Systems of India. Oxford University Press.

5. Elazar, D. J. (1987). Exploring Federalism. University of Alabama Press.

6. Election Commission of India. (Various years). Statistical Reports on General Elections to State Legislative Assemblies and Lok Sabha. https://eci.gov.in

7. Gómez, B. T., & Wilson, J. A. (2001). "Political Logic and Bureaucratic Control: A Principal-Agent Model of the U.S. Federal Bureaucracy." Journal of Theoretical Politics, 13(3), 291–318.

8. Government of India MHA & State Government Portals (for governance indicators and CM tenure data).

9. Herring, E. (2020). "State Politics and the BJP's Rise: Organisational and Electoral Trends." In Handbook of Indian Politics (pp. 243–261). Routledge.

10. Hibbs, D. A., & Lewis, G. B. (2002). "Political Parties and Bureaucracies: Who Gets What and How?" American Journal of Political Science, 46(3), 714–730.

11. Jaffrelot, C. (2007). Hindu Nationalism: A Reader. Princeton University Press.

12. Jaffrelot, C., & Verniers, G. (Eds.). (2020). Religion, Caste, and Politics in India. Routledge India.

13. Katz, R. S., & Mair, P. (1995). "Changing Models of Party Organisation and Party Democracy: The Emergence of the Cartel Party." Party Politics, 1(1), 5–28.

14. Kohli, A. (1987). The State and Poverty in India: The Politics of Reform. Cambridge University Press.

15. Levitsky, S., & Ziblatt, D. (2018). How Democracies Die. Crown.

16. Müller, W. C., & Strøm, K. (Eds.). (2000). Coalition Governments in Western Europe. Oxford University Press.

17. Panebianco, A. (1988). Political Parties: Organisation and Power. Cambridge University Press.

18. Poguntke, T., & Webb, P. (Eds.). (2005). The Presidentialization of Politics: A Comparative Study of Modern Democracies. Oxford University Press.

19. Riker, W. H. (1964). Federalism: Origin, Operation, Significance. Little, Brown and Company.

20. Rodríguez-Pose, A., & Ezcurra, R. (2010). "Does Decentralisation Matter for Regional Disparities? A Cross-Country Analysis." Journal of Economic Geography, 10(5), 619–644.

21. Scarrow, S. E. (2005). "Political Parties and Democracy in Theoretical and Practical Perspectives: Implementing Intra-Party Democracy." National Democratic Institute.

22. Shastri, S. (2021). Federalism in India: Origins and Development. Sage Publications India.

23. Sridharan, E. (2010). "The BJP's Electoral Coalitions: The Hindutva Strategy, 1989–2009." Journal of Asian Studies, 69(4), 1007–1030.

24. Sridharan, E. (2012). Coalition Politics and Democratic Consolidation in Asia. Oxford University Press.

25. Ware, A. (2008). Political Parties and Party Systems. Oxford University Press.

26. Wattenberg, M. P. (1991). The Rise of Candidate-Centered Politics: Presidential Elections of the 1980s. Harvard University Press.

27. Yadav, Y. (1999). "Electoral Politics in the Time of Change: India's Third Electoral System, 1989–99." Economic and Political Weekly, 34(34/35), 2393–2399.

28. Ziegfeld, A. (2012). "Why Regional Parties? Clientelism, Elites, and the Indian State." Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Michigan.