

India: Government Overview

India, a union of states, is a sovereign socialist secular democratic republic with a parliamentary system of government. The constitution envisages a federal state with unitary features. It distributes legislative powers between the union parliament and state legislatures and vests residual powers in parliament. Power to amend the constitution also vests in parliament.

The president of India is the constitutional head of the executive of the union. The real executive power vests in the Council of Ministers, with the prime minister as the head; the council is collectively responsible to the House of the People (lower house of parliament). Similarly, in the states, the governor is head of the executive, but real executive power is vested in the Council of Ministers, with the prime minister as its head.

The constitution offers all citizens, individually and collectively, some basic freedoms in the shape of fundamental rights that are justiciable. These include freedom of conscience and freedom to profess, practice, and propagate religion; the right of any section of citizens to conserve their culture, language, or script; and the right of minorities to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice. By the 42nd amendment of the constitution, adopted in 1976, fundamental duties of citizens have also been enumerated.

The constitution also specifies certain directive principles of state policy that, although not justiciable, are fundamental in the governance of the country. Apart from various provisions for the welfare of citizens, these principles also stipulate that the state shall endeavor to promote international peace and security, maintain just and honorable relations between nations, foster respect for international law, and encourage settlement of international disputes by arbitration.

The constitution provides for universal adult suffrage. Free and direct elections are provided for the union and for the state and local levels of government. A multiparty system prevails throughout the country. The constitution also provides for the independence of the judiciary, the comptroller, the auditor general, the public service commission, and the special commissioners for scheduled castes and tribes, minorities, and languages.

The framework of the constitution is based on ideals of participatory democracy, guaranteed rights of citizens, secularism, egalitarianism, cooperative federalism, rule of law, and independent judiciary.

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