



The Rise of Regional Parties: Transforming Indian Federalism

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Abstract

This article explores the pivotal role of regional parties in shaping the federal structure of India, emphasizing their influence on electoral dynamics and governance. It begins by discussing the fundamental importance of political parties in a democracy, particularly within the context of India's multi-party system. The rise of regional parties from the late-1980s till date highlights how these parties have strengthened bargaining power of states and contributed to the decentralization of power. It also addresses the challenges and criticisms associated with regionalism, including the potential for political fragmentation and conflicts between regional and national interests. The article provides a comprehensive understanding of the dual role regional parties play in reinforcing federalism while navigating the complexities of Indian democracy. The conclusion offers insights into the future trajectory of regional parties and their continuing impact on India's political landscape.

Keywords: Regional Parties, Federalism, Governance, Democracy, Decentralisation

Introduction

India's democracy is underpinned by a complex and diverse political system, where political parties serve as crucial conduits for translating public opinion into governance. With a population characterized by varying linguistic, cultural, and regional identities, India's multi-party system has evolved to accommodate both national and regional interests. Over the decades, regional parties have gained prominence, particularly in states where local issues and identities differ from the broader national narrative. This shift is not just a testament to India's diversity but also to the flexibility of its federal structure.

The emergence of regional parties has significantly altered the political landscape, making them key players in both state and national politics. Their influence has grown to the extent that, as seen in 2024,ⁱⁱ India is once again governed by a coalition government at the centre.ⁱⁱⁱ This recurrence of coalition politics^{iv} underscores the increasing importance of regional parties in shaping not only regional, but also national governance. As regional parties assert their power and negotiate for their states' interests within the central government,^v their role in deepening federalism and democratic engagement becomes ever more relevant.

This article argues that regional parties have fundamentally transformed Indian federalism by bringing regional issues and identities to the forefront of political discourse.



Through their advocacy for state autonomy and local governance, these parties have not only decentralized power but also enriched India's democratic fabric. They have educated voters on the distinct roles of national and state governments, leading to more informed and differentiated voting patterns in Parliamentary and state legislative elections.

The resurgence of coalition politics in 2024,^{vi} driven by the pivotal role of regional parties, highlights the continuing relevance of these parties in Indian democracy. By emphasizing regional identities and local concerns,^{vii} regional parties have deepened democratic engagement, ensuring that diverse voices are represented in the governance of the country. This article examines how these dynamics have shaped Indian federalism, offering insights into the dual role regional parties play in reinforcing the country's federal structure while navigating the complexities of a diverse and democratic society.

Role and Recognition of Political Parties in Indian Democracy

Political parties are fundamental to the functioning of a democracy, providing a platform for society to consolidate diverse views on various issues and channel them into government policies. Alexis de Tocqueville placed significant emphasis on political associations and parties, recognizing them as fundamental institutions within civil society.^{viii} E. E. Schattschneider even claimed that political parties created democracy, and modern democracy is inconceivable without political parties.^{ix} In India, political parties bring together representatives who work collectively to form a responsible government, offering mechanisms to support, challenge, and shape the governance process. They play a crucial role in policy-making, advocating for or opposing legislation based on their ideologies and the interests they represent.

India operates under a multi-party system, which allows a variety of political parties to co-exist, representing different regions, communities, and ideologies. This diversity is key to India's vibrant democracy, where both national and regional interests are addressed. Parties in India can be recognized as either a 'national party'^x or a 'state party' based on their electoral performance and representation in the Lok Sabha or Vidhan Sabha.^{xi} The recognition brings several advantages, including the right to use a reserved election symbol across the country or state, access to dedicated broadcast slots on public broadcasters, reduced requirements for proposers when filing nomination papers, and the ability to nominate a greater number of leaders as star campaigners, whose travel expenses are exempt from the candidate's total expenditure limits, as per the Representation of the People Act, 1951.^{xii}



Federalism and Regionalism

Federalism in India is designed to accommodate the country's immense diversity by distributing power between the central government and the states. This structure allows states to have control over certain areas of governance, enabling them to address local needs and priorities while still being part of a larger national framework. The Indian Constitution envisions a strong centre, but over time, the practical application of federalism has seen significant shifts, especially with the rise of regional parties.^{xiii}

Regionalism in India refers to the advocacy for the interests of specific regions, often driven by cultural, linguistic, economic, or historical factors. Regional parties have emerged as the political expression of these regional aspirations. Unlike national parties, which often promote a broader, more homogenized vision of India, regional parties focus on the specific needs and issues of their respective states or regions. This has led to the strengthening of state autonomy, as regional parties have increasingly demanded greater control over resources, policies, and administrative matters at the state level.

The interplay between federalism and regionalism has resulted in a more dynamic and responsive political system.^{xiv} Regional parties have played a crucial role in decentralizing power, ensuring that governance is more attuned to the unique conditions of each state. This decentralization has not only empowered states but also led to the creation of policies that are more reflective of local realities. The increasing influence of regional parties in national politics, particularly through coalition governments, has further emphasized the importance of regionalism in Indian federalism.

Characteristics and Classification of Regional Parties

Regional parties in India typically operate within a specific state or region, with their electoral base confined to a particular area. These parties articulate regional interests and often align themselves with distinct cultural, religious, linguistic, or ethnic groups. Their primary focus is on addressing local grievances and preserving the demands of specific language, caste, community, or regional identities. Regional parties concentrate on state-level issues and seek to capture political power within their own regions, rather than aspiring to influence or control the central government. They are also driven by a political desire for greater regional autonomy within the Indian Union. They exhibit a rich diversity, shaped by varying cultural, ethnic, and political factors. They can be classified into several categories based on their origins, focus, and electoral strategies:



1. Parties Based on Regional Culture and Ethnicity

These parties are primarily rooted in the cultural and ethnic identities of specific regions. They aim to represent and promote the interests and aspirations of their respective communities. Examples include:

- **Shiromani Akali Dal^{xv}**: Representing the Sikh community in Punjab.
- **National Conference^{xvi}**: Focused on the interests of the people of Jammu and Kashmir.
- **Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)^{xvii}** and **All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)^{xviii}**: Centered on Tamil identity in Tamil Nadu.
- **Telugu Desam Party (TDP)^{xix}**: Advocates for the interests of the Telugu-speaking population in Andhra Pradesh.
- **Shiv Sena^{xx}**: Primarily focused on Marathi-speaking people in Maharashtra.
- **Asom Gana Parishad^{xxi}**: Representing the aspirations of the Assamese community in Assam.
- **Mizo National Front^{xxii}**: Addressing the concerns of the Mizo people in Mizoram.
- **Jharkhand Mukti Morcha^{xxiii}**: Aims to represent the interests of the tribal communities in Jharkhand.

2. Parties with an All-India Outlook but Lacking a National Electoral Base

These parties have a broader vision and aim to address issues beyond regional concerns but have not established a significant national presence. They include:

- **Indian National Lok Dal (INLD)^{xxiv}**: Predominantly active in Haryana.
- **All India Forward Bloc^{xxv}**: Originating from West Bengal with a focus on leftist ideology.
- **Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP)^{xxvi}**: Known for its presence in West Bengal and Kerala.
- **Samajwadi Party (SP)^{xxvii}**: Based primarily in Uttar Pradesh but with aspirations for wider influence.
- **Nationalist Congress Party (NCP)^{xxviii}**: Active in Maharashtra and other states, yet lacking a broad national base.



3. Parties Formed by Splits in National Parties

Some regional parties have emerged from schisms within national parties, often driven by internal disagreements or ideological differences. Examples include:

- **Telangana Rashtriya Samithi^{xxix}**: Formed as a splinter group advocating for Telangana's statehood.
- **Trinamool Congress^{xxx}**: Established by Mamata Banerjee as a breakaway faction from the Indian National Congress in West Bengal.
- **YSR Congress^{xxxi}**: Founded by Y. S. Jagan Mohan Reddy after a split from the Indian National Congress in Andhra Pradesh.

4. Parties Formed by Individual Leaders Based on Charismatic Personalities

These parties are often driven by the personal charisma and leadership of individual figures. They are typically short-lived and highly dependent on their founders' influence. Notable examples include:

- **Lok Janshakti Party^{xxxii}**: Founded by Ram Vilas Paswan, focusing on the interests of the Dalit community.
- **Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS)^{xxxiii}**: Founded by Raj Thackeray in 2006 after breaking away from the Shiv Sena, the MNS was built around his personal appeal and political ideology.

This classification highlights the multifaceted nature of regional parties in India, illustrating their diverse origins and roles within the national political framework. Each category reflects different aspects of regional and national politics, contributing to the complex political tapestry of India.

The rise of regional parties can be seen as a response to the perceived inadequacies of national parties in addressing the specific concerns of various identity groups. For instance, linguistic identity has been a significant factor in states like Tamil Nadu, where the Dravidian movement, represented by parties like the DMK and AIADMK, has championed the Tamil language and culture. Similarly, ethnic identity plays a crucial role in states like Assam and the North-eastern region, where regional parties have emerged to protect and promote the interests of indigenous communities.

Identity politics, driven by regional parties, has had a profound impact on Indian federalism. It has compelled the central government to be more sensitive to the needs and aspirations of various identity groups, leading to policies that are more inclusive and representative. At the same time, it has also posed challenges to national unity, as the emphasis



on regional identities can sometimes lead to tensions between different regions or between the centre and the states.

In the context of Indian federalism, identity politics has both strengthened and complicated the federal structure. On the one hand, it has empowered marginalized communities and ensured that their voices are heard in the political arena. On the other hand, it has sometimes led to fragmentation and a focus on parochial interests, challenging the idea of a cohesive national identity. Nevertheless, the role of identity politics is an essential aspect of understanding the dynamics of Indian federalism and the transformative impact of regional parties.

Historical Evolution of Regional Parties

The rise of regional parties in India can be attributed to a range of factors.^{xxxiv} The country's cultural and ethnic pluralism has played a significant role, as diverse communities seek representation and autonomy. Economic disparities and regional imbalances in development further fuelled the demand for parties that address local issues more effectively. Historical factors, including the desire of certain regions to maintain separate identities, also contributed to the emergence of regional parties. Additionally, the self-interest of deposed Maharajas and dispossessed Zamindars, combined with the failure of national politics to adequately address regional aspirations, created a fertile ground for regional political movements. The reorganization of states based on linguistic lines, the charismatic leadership of regional figures, and factional disputes within larger national parties further propelled the rise of regional parties. The centralizing tendencies of the Congress Party and the absence of a strong opposition at the central level also played a role. Moreover, the influence of caste and religion in the political process, along with alienation and discontent among tribal groups, has reinforced the appeal and necessity of regional parties in India's political landscape.

In the pre-independence era, the political landscape of India was characterized by a diverse array of political parties, each representing different regional and communal interests. The political environment during this period was shaped by various legislative acts, including the India Council Act of 1909, the India Council Act of 1919, and the Government of India Act of 1935. These acts provided limited opportunities for political participation and set the stage for the emergence of political parties that sought to address the aspirations of different sections of society.

During the national movement in India, two distinct forms of political mobilization emerged: horizontal and vertical. Horizontal mobilization involved the widespread participation of large masses across various regions of the country. In contrast, vertical mobilization focused



on the integration of specific regions, driven by the growing influence of regional linguistic middle classes. The origins of this vertical mobilization can be attributed to the centralization of power during the colonial era, which was subsequently delegated to the regional middle classes, thus fostering regional integration and political engagement.^{xxxv} Among the notable political entities of this period were the Indian National Congress, which sought to unify diverse Indian communities under a nationalist agenda; the Muslim League, which advocated for the interests of Muslims; the Hindu Mahasabha, which focused on Hindu identity; and regional parties like the Justice Party, Indian Labour Party, and Unionist Party, which represented specific regional and socio-economic interests.

From Congress System to the Emergence of Other Parties

Rise of regional parties are end-product of complex interplay between regional consciousness which began in 19th century and social, political and economic development which has taken place since Independence.^{xxxvi} The reorganization of states in India has led to what can be described as a “localization and democratization of provincial politics,” significantly boosting the development of political cultures and amplifying the political roles of caste and educated regional elites. As the constitutional process began, a “process of regionalization based on foundational identities” took shape.^{xxxvii} The creation of multi-lingual states marked a shift from English as the primary link language to the increased prominence of vernacular languages, benefiting regional elites. This shift was further supported by regional movements spearheaded by local leaders. Post-independence India initially witnessed the dominance of the Congress Party, which enjoyed widespread support across the country. This period, often referred to as the “Congress System,”^{xxxviii} saw the party’s near-monopoly on political power both at the centre and in most states. The Congress party’s dominance was rooted in its ability to represent a broad spectrum of interests and its role in the independence movement.

However, the centralization of power within the Congress Party and its tendency to impose a uniform national agenda began to alienate various regional groups. This discontent led to the rise of regional parties that articulated distinct regional identities and grievances. The reorganization of states along linguistic lines was a pivotal moment in this process. This reorganization fostered the development of unique political cultures within states, with regional elites gaining increased political influence. The emphasis on vernacular languages^{xxxix} over English further empowered regional leaders and facilitated the rise of regional movements.

During the 1960s and 1970s, regional parties such as the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu and the Akali Dal in Punjab began to challenge Congress’s dominance.^{xl} These parties, deeply rooted in regional identities, emerged as significant political forces by advocating for the rights and interests of their regions. Additionally, changes in the caste system



and the introduction of adult franchise and Panchayati Raj contributed to the emergence of new power centres and a diversification of political representation.

The decline of the Congress Party, particularly after the 1967 elections, also played a crucial role in the rise of regional parties. As Congress's dominance waned, smaller groups and movements sought to assert their identities independently. This fragmentation led to the formation of new political organizations that prioritized regional concerns. By 1967, the failure of Congress to secure majority in several states marked the beginning of an era where regional parties began to redefine India's federal structure. The 1977 elections in India, where the Janata Party secured 41.32 percent of the national vote—nearly seven percentage points ahead of the Congress Party—demonstrated a notable shift in the political landscape. The combined vote share of the Janata and Congress parties approached 85 percent, prompting some analysts to describe the emergence of a de facto two-party system.^{xii} This electoral outcome reflects a broader process of regionalization in Indian politics since Independence, which has significantly influenced the evolution of the party system.

Post-Liberalization

The post-liberalization era, which began in 1991, marked a significant turning point for regional parties. Economic reforms during this period led to substantial changes in India's political and economic landscape.^{xiii} This period coincided with a major change in the nature of Indian federalism.^{xiii} Moving away from the confrontational dynamics of the 1970s and 1980s,^{xiv} the relationship between different levels of government during this period came to be characterized by increased cooperation, collaboration, and even consensus on various issues. The decline of Congress's dominance and the rise of coalition politics created a favorable environment for regional parties.

The death of Rajiv Gandhi, the Bofors corruption scandal, and the economic crisis paved the way for a new era of coalition politics that spanned nearly twenty-five years. This modern phase emerged with the rise of the multi-party system, but it was often marked by the challenges and compromises inherent in coalition governance. The growth of regional parties also contributed to the formation of "rainbow" coalitions, named for their brief duration, much like the fleeting nature of a rainbow. The period from 1996 to 1999 saw three general elections, resulting in significant public expenditure.

It was within this context of instability that both Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh played pivotal roles in stabilizing coalition politics in India, a significant aspect of the country's federal evolution, during their respective tenures. Under their leadership, the political landscape saw an unprecedented shift, where coalition governments became the norm, and regional parties gained a foothold in national politics.



Vajpayee's tenure (1998–2004) marked a new era for coalition governance, with his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leading the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). The 1990s were marked by political instability, with frequent changes in government and fragile alliances. Vajpayee, however, with his charismatic leadership,^{xlv} successfully navigated the complexities of managing diverse regional interests. His ability to build consensus across regional parties helped solidify the NDA's multi-party arrangement. His governance style was inclusive, often accommodating regional aspirations while maintaining a national focus. Notably, Vajpayee's coalition included parties from across the ideological spectrum, showcasing the adaptability required to manage India's diverse political terrain. This laid the groundwork for a stable coalition era, which became a defining feature of Indian politics post-1999. The BJP-led coalition government at the centre adopted a more federal approach in its governance, significantly reducing the use of Article 356 compared to the earlier era of one-party dominance in India.^{xlvi}

Manmohan Singh, who led the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) from 2004 to 2014, further institutionalized coalition politics. Singh's leadership represented a different style of managing coalitions—one grounded in economic pragmatism and quieter diplomacy. The UPA coalition, driven largely by the Congress Party, encompassed a broad array of regional players, from the DMK in Tamil Nadu to the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal. Singh adeptly balanced regional demands with the Congress' national agenda, leveraging the support of regional leaders to pass critical reforms. His era witnessed significant economic reforms, welfare programs, and social policies that benefited from regional party participation. Both Vajpayee and Singh transformed coalition politics from an unstable arrangement into a durable feature of Indian federalism, ensuring regional voices were heard while maintaining the integrity of the Union government.

Changes in the caste system have also contributed to the emergence of regional forces. Adult Franchise and Panchayati Raj brought about changes in the superior-subordinate caste relationships and subsequently in the power structure in rural and urban areas. The electoral process brought into existence new aspirants who posed a challenge to established groups. As a result, dominant (upper) castes could not retain their power over lower caste groups.

Economic liberalization exacerbated regional disparities, with some states benefiting more than others from market-oriented policies. This uneven development fuelled demands for greater state autonomy and control over resources, which regional parties capitalized on by positioning themselves as defenders of their states' interests. The rise of coalition governments at the centre further enhanced the influence of regional parties, as they became crucial to forming stable governments and negotiating favourable terms for their states.



Additionally, the post-liberalization period saw the emergence of new regional parties such as the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Uttar Pradesh, Rashtriya Janata Dal and Samata Party in Bihar and the Samajwadi Party (SP) in Uttar Pradesh. These parties, while focused on regional issues, began to play a significant role in shaping national policies, further blurring the lines between regional and national politics.

The general elections of 2014 and 2019 marked a significant shift in India's political landscape, with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) securing an outright majority on its own, breaking the 25-year period characterized by coalition politics. Despite this majority, the government continues to be formed through alliances with various political parties, reflecting the enduring importance of coalition dynamics. However, the role of regional parties has evolved. While they once operated in conflict with the central government, there is now a noticeable shift towards cooperative bargaining in centre-state relations. Financial issues between the centre and states have become a central focus, with regional parties playing a crucial role in addressing these concerns. In this context, regional parties have added a new dimension to national integration and nation-building efforts. Their influence on centre-state relations underscores their importance as a natural outcome of a democratic system in a country as diverse as India, where multiple ethnic, racial, religious, and linguistic identities coexist. Thus, the growth of regional parties aligns with and enhances the democratic spirit of the nation.

The evolution of regional parties in India reflects a complex interplay of historical, social, and economic factors. From the early phase of diverse political entities to the dominance of Congress and the subsequent rise of regional parties, India's political landscape has continually adapted to address the changing needs and aspirations of its diverse population. The post-liberalization era has further transformed this landscape, with regional parties playing a crucial role in shaping both state and national politics.

Impact on Indian Federalism

The rise of regional parties in India has brought several notable advantages to the country's political landscape. Firstly, these parties have empowered regional interests^{xlvii} by providing a platform for diverse local concerns and aspirations to be addressed within the national framework. This empowerment has allowed for a more nuanced and representative approach to governance, ensuring that regional issues are not overshadowed by a centralizing national agenda. Secondly, the prominence of regional parties has significantly promoted federalism, reinforcing the balance of power between the central and state governments.^{xlviii} This reinforcement has ensured that states have a greater say in national matters, thereby supporting a more equitable distribution of power. Additionally, regional parties have played a crucial role in protecting the rights and interests of minority communities by advocating for their specific needs and ensuring their representation in the political sphere. Through these efforts, regional parties



have contributed to a more inclusive and balanced political system that respects and upholds regional diversity and minority rights.

Strengthening State Autonomy

The rise of regional parties has significantly strengthened state autonomy within the Indian federal structure. Traditionally, India's federalism has been characterized by a strong centre, with the central government holding substantial powers over states. However, as regional parties gained prominence, they increasingly challenged this centralized model, advocating for greater control over their states' resources, governance, and policy-making. The coalition politics has led to empowerment for regional parties from the states and has added to India's search for true federalism. Thus, it paves the way for a kind of 'electoral federalism'. Since 1996, twenty three regional parties have been sharing power at the national level.^{xlix}

Regional parties have played a critical role in asserting state rights, particularly in areas such as fiscal federalism, land use, and cultural policies. For example, states with strong regional parties have often pushed back against central policies perceived as infringing on state rights, demanding a greater share of national resources and more say in how these resources are allocated and utilized within their territories.¹ This has led to a more balanced distribution of power, where states have gained greater autonomy to govern according to their unique needs and priorities.

Moreover, regional parties have been instrumental in negotiating terms with the central government, especially in coalition setups, where their support is crucial for the survival of the government. These negotiations often result in the devolution of more powers to the states, thereby enhancing state autonomy. The ability of regional parties to influence central decision-making has empowered states to resist central mandates that do not align with their regional interests and has led to a more federalized governance structure in India.

Decentralization of Power

The influence of regional parties has also contributed to the decentralization of power in India, making governance more participatory and reflective of local needs. Decentralization in this context refers to the distribution of political, administrative, and fiscal powers from the central government to the state governments, and further down to local bodies.

As regional parties gained control of state governments, they began to advocate for the decentralization of power^{li} to ensure that governance is more closely aligned with the local context. This shift has allowed for the development and implementation of policies that are more responsive to the specific challenges and opportunities within each state. For instance, states



have been able to tailor their economic policies, welfare programs, and development projects to better address local conditions, leading to more effective governance.

Additionally, the success of regional parties in state politics has often led to greater devolution of powers to local governments, such as municipalities and panchayats. This further decentralization has empowered local communities, giving them a greater voice in decision-making processes and improving the delivery of public services. The emphasis on local governance has also fostered greater accountability and transparency, as local officials are more directly answerable to the people they serve.

The decentralization of power, driven by the rise of regional parties, has thus played a key role in enhancing the efficiency and responsiveness of the Indian federal system. It has allowed for a more nuanced approach to governance, where local realities are given due consideration, and has helped to bridge the gap between the government and the governed. This decentralization has not only strengthened Indian democracy but has also reinforced the federal structure by ensuring that power is more evenly distributed across different levels of government.

Differentiation Between National and State Elections

The rise of regional parties has significantly influenced the electoral dynamics in India by creating a clear differentiation between national and state elections. Voters have increasingly come to recognize that their choices in national Parliamentary elections and state legislative elections serve different purposes and reflect different priorities.^{lii}

In national elections, voters tend to focus on broader issues such as national security, economic policies, and leadership at the central level.^{liii} These elections often revolve around the performance of the central government and the leadership of national parties. However, in state elections, voters prioritize regional issues such as local governance, development projects, and state-specific concerns. Regional parties, with their focus on these local issues, have been successful in capturing the electorate's attention by addressing concerns that national parties might overlook.

This differentiation has allowed voters to make more nuanced choices, supporting a national party for the central government while backing a regional party in state elections to ensure that local interests are effectively represented. This dual voting behavior reflects the maturity of the Indian electorate, who increasingly understand the distinct roles that national and state governments play in their lives. The success of regional parties in state elections has also demonstrated that voters are willing to support parties that may not have a significant presence at the national level but are seen as more capable of addressing state-specific issues.



Regional Issues in National Politics

The influence of regional parties has extended beyond state elections, as these parties have increasingly brought regional issues to the forefront of national politics. In coalition governments, where regional parties often hold the balance of power, they have used their position to ensure that the concerns of their respective states are addressed at the national level.

For instance, regional parties have been instrumental in securing favorable policies for their states, such as increased financial allocations, special status, or exemptions from certain national laws. These parties have also used their influence to advocate for policies that reflect the cultural, linguistic, and economic priorities of their regions. As a result, national politics has become more attuned to the diverse needs of India's states, with regional issues playing a significant role in shaping national policy agendas.

The integration of regional issues into national politics has also led to greater diversity in the political discourse at the central level. National parties, recognizing the importance of regional concerns, have increasingly tailored their platforms to appeal to regional sensibilities. This has led to a more inclusive approach to governance, where the needs of different states and regions are given due consideration in the formulation of national policies.

Overall, the electoral dynamics shaped by regional parties have not only transformed the way voters engage with national and state elections but have also ensured that regional issues are given the prominence they deserve in national politics. This has contributed to a more representative and responsive political system in India, where the voices of all regions are heard and respected.

Challenges and Criticisms

The emergence and rise of regional parties in India have significantly influenced the political landscape, but they have also attracted several criticisms. These criticisms reflect the challenges and complexities associated with the growing prominence of regional parties.

1. Promotion of Intense Political Rivalries

The ascendancy of regional parties has intensified political rivalries, often exacerbating conflicts and leading to a competitive and, at times, adversarial political environment. The pursuit of political power by these parties has, in some instances, involved the use of questionable methods, including the employment of muscular force and substantial financial resources. Such tactics have been evident during state elections across India, where instances of violence and intimidation have occurred as regional parties vie for dominance.

2. Complications in Foreign Contracts and Procedures



The increasing influence of regional parties has created challenges in the execution of foreign contracts and procedures.^{liv} The prioritization of regional agendas and the complex political dynamics introduced by regional parties can complicate and delay the implementation of international agreements and processes. This interference can affect India's international relations and its ability to meet foreign commitments in a timely manner.

3. Risk to National Interest

Regional parties are often criticized for prioritizing narrow regional interests over broader national concerns.^{lv} This focus on regional objectives can sometimes come at the expense of national unity and cohesion, potentially jeopardizing the overall national interest. The emphasis on localized issues may lead to policies that are detrimental to the country's collective goals and national development.

4. Instability of the Government

The fragmentation of the political landscape due to the rise of regional parties has contributed to the instability of the central government. The weakening of national parties has resulted in a more fragmented political environment, where coalition governments are often necessary. This fragmentation can lead to frequent changes in government, policy inconsistency, and difficulties in governance.

5. Promotion of State Divisions Along Ethnic and Cultural Line

Regional parties have also been implicated in promoting divisions within states based on ethnic, racial, and cultural lines, such as caste, tribe, and language. The emphasis on such divisions can lead to further polarization within states and contribute to social fragmentation. This trend of state division along these lines has been criticized for undermining social harmony and exacerbating existing societal cleavages.

6. Focus on Populist Measures

Many regional parties are accused of focusing on populist measures to expand their support base. This includes implementing policies such as widespread loan forgiveness and other financial incentives that may provide short-term political gains but can adversely affect the government's revenue balance. These populist initiatives, while appealing to voters, can strain public finances and undermine long-term economic stability.

So, while regional parties have played a crucial role in representing diverse regional interests and shaping India's political landscape, they have also faced criticism for fostering political rivalries, complicating foreign relations, prioritizing regional over national interests, contributing to governmental instability, promoting social divisions, and focusing on populist measures that



impact fiscal health. Addressing these criticisms requires a nuanced understanding of the interplay between regional and national politics and efforts to balance regional aspirations with broader national objectives.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that the rise of regional parties has contributed to the breakdown of the one-party dominant system at the centre, increasingly pushing the Congress Party into more limited regional strongholds. This shift has also impacted the federal structure of the nation. However, this development should not be viewed negatively but rather as part of the democratization process within a federal polity. It is important to acknowledge, though, that the rise of regionalism reflects uneven economic development and, in some regions like Punjab, is sometimes evolving towards communalism. Regional parties, nonetheless, have proven to be enduring elements of the political landscape. In the long run, India need not follow a model similar to the two or multi-party systems seen in the USA or Britain. Instead, within our federal polity, region-based parties can compete for power at the national level. The party system, particularly at the state level, is currently in a state of flux or transition due to the disintegration of the old Congress system. Yet, the long-term trends indicate a movement towards regionalism and decentralization, shaping the future of India's political dynamics.

The emergence and rise of regional parties in India have significantly reshaped the nation's federal structure and its electoral dynamics. These parties, born out of the need to address specific regional aspirations and concerns, have managed to carve out a substantial space within India's political landscape. By championing state autonomy and bringing regional issues to the national stage, regional parties have played a critical role in ensuring that India's diverse socio-cultural and economic landscape is adequately represented in governance. The differentiation between national and state elections is a testament to the maturity of the Indian electorate, which increasingly understands that the issues and policies that resonate at the national level may differ significantly from those at the state level. This has enabled voters to make more informed choices, supporting national parties in the Lok Sabha elections while favoring regional parties in the state legislative elections to address more localized concerns. The rise of regional parties has contributed to the breakdown of the one-party dominant system that the Congress once maintained at the centre. As regional parties have gained ground, the Congress Party has increasingly been pushed into limited regions, affecting the federal structure of the nation. While this development may be viewed as part of the democratization process in a federal polity, it also brings certain challenges. The fragmentation of national politics, often resulting in coalition governments, has brought about issues such as policy incoherence and the need for compromises that might dilute national policy agendas. Additionally, the tension between regionalism and the national interest poses a critical challenge to maintaining a cohesive



national identity, as regional parties sometimes prioritize state-specific interests over broader national goals.

The role of regional parties in India's political system cannot be understated. They have deepened democratic engagement by giving a voice to regional identities and concerns that might otherwise be overlooked by national parties. Their influence in coalition governments has ensured that regional issues are considered in national policy-making, thereby contributing to a more balanced and representative federal system. As India continues to evolve politically, the role of regional parties will remain crucial, both in representing regional identities and in shaping the future of Indian democracy.

In conclusion, the electoral influence of regional parties in India has demonstrated considerable variability over the years. For the first time in 1996, regional parties achieved a notable milestone by surpassing the 50 percent mark in vote share. This momentum, however, experienced a decline by 1999, with their vote share falling to 48 per cent. By 2004, regional parties managed to recover to their previous high of 51 per cent, a level they maintained into the 2009 elections. Despite these fluctuations, regional parties face challenges distinct from those encountered by national parties like the Congress and the BJP, particularly regarding internal party democracy and leadership succession. Regional parties often lack a well-established second-tier leadership beyond their party presidents, which can make their stability precarious. This reality was starkly illustrated in Bihar in 2010, where a voter's frustration with the Janata Dal (United) was evident when they remarked, "My vote is for Nitish Kumar. Besides Nitish, what is [Janata Dal (United)]? If I woke up tomorrow and there were no Nitish—there would be no [Janata Dal (United)]." This highlighted the party's reliance on the prominence of individual leaders rather than a robust organizational framework.

Looking forward, the influence of regional parties in Indian politics is expected to persist and possibly increase, especially with the growing prevalence of coalition governments. The return of a coalition government at the centre in 2024, after a decade of majority rule, has reaffirmed the crucial role of regional parties in shaping national political discourse. This trend suggests that regional parties will remain significant players in India's governance, particularly as the country continues to navigate its vast diversity. As regional parties advocate for greater decentralization and policies tailored to their states' unique needs, they will face the challenge of balancing regional aspirations with broader national interests. Their success will depend on their ability to navigate this balance while contributing to the unity and stability of the nation. The evolving political landscape indicates that regional parties will remain indispensable to India's federal structure, not only as representatives of their states but also as integral components of the national governance system. Their capacity to adapt to changing dynamics while staying true to



their regional roots will be pivotal in shaping their future role in Indian democracy and the preservation of its federal character.

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