

# Emerging Role of Regional Political Parties in India



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## Abstract

India is a land of diversity woven together as a complex culture. We see marveling at the incredibly harmonious co-existence of various religions & culture; its varied landscapes from Kashmir to Kanyakumari and from Gujarat to Arunachal Pradesh, India is a jigsaw of people - of every faith and religion, living together to create a unique and colorful mosaic. There is a festival for every reason and every season. The various diversities are rooted in the history of the country. India is a heterogonous and plural society both in letter and sprit. It is rightly characterized by its unity and diversity. A grand synthesis of cultures, religions and languages of the people belonging to different castes and communities has upheld its unity and cohesiveness despite foreign invasions.

The continental size of the country, the diversified character of Indian society, the adoption of universal adult franchise, the peculiar type of political process, and other factors have given rise to a large number of political parties. India, acclaimed as the largest democracy of the world is also a nation with a very large number of regional parties with huge memberships. At present about 180 million of India's population are governed by regional parties.

**Keywords:** Patriotism, Geographical diversity, Separatism, Ethnicity, Grassroot, Local area, Decentralization, Alliance, Umbrella party, Power sharing, Lopsided, Multi-dimensional, Re-organization, Anti-congress, Regional imbalance, Backwardness, Marginalization

## Introduction

*"Though the country and the people may be divided into different states for convenience of administration, the country is one integral whole, its people a single people living under a single imperium derived from a single source.*

### Dr. B. R. Ambedkar

Human beings have strong carving of identity. This identity can be expressed into various forms and regionalism is one of them. Regionalism in simple words, is a feeling or an ideology among a section of people residing in a particular geographical space characterized by unique language, culture, religion etc. It is a situation in which different religious or ethnic groups with distinctive identities coexist within the same state boundaries, often concentrated within a particular region and sharing strong feelings of collective identity. Regionalism stands for the love of a particular region or an area in preference to the nation or any other region. It often involves ethnic groups whose aims include independence from a national state and the development of their own political power. Regionalism means excessive attachment for a particular region or state as against the country as whole. Such feelings may arise either due to the feelings of continuous neglect of a particular area by the government or it may arise because of increasing political awareness among the people of a particular area which was one backward. Regional feelings may sometimes give rise to the regional political parties and demands for autonomy.

According to Marachell E. Dimock, Regionalism is a clustering of environment, economic social and governmental factors to such an extent that a identity within the whole, a need for autonomous planning, a manifestation of cultural peculiarities and a desire for administrative freedom, are theoretically recognized and actually put into effect. Regionalism involves such diverse problem as those of minorities administrative decentralization and local self government and autonomy the cult of homeland and earth and local patriotism which very often lead to separatism. In a general sense it may be viewed as a reaction against any exaggerated or oppressive form of centralization. Perhaps the best explanation for continuing pressure of regionalism has been explained by Iqbal Narain, "regionalism is an important factor in party building and

unless alternative secular loyalty bases are discovered or created regionalism shall continue to flourish.”<sup>1</sup>

Regional parties are those which generally and exclusively operate within a limited geographical area within a state or which represent the interests of particular, linguistic, religious, ethnic or cultural groups whose population may be concentrated in an area as small as a single assembly constituency or as large as an entire state or region. In respect of their narrowly defined interests regional parties stand in sharp contrast to the broad-ranging diverse concerns of national parties<sup>2</sup>.

The programmatic focus of regional parties is usually restricted towards specific issues of concern to their membership only or at best to their region. Regional parties do not generally aspire to secure control over the country's national government. It may be because they are mostly confined to a limited geographic area. The regional parties are also relatively homogeneous in their policy preferences. These may be the reasons why they aim at securing control over the state governments or over certain policies that have special significance for their constituencies<sup>3</sup>.

### Conditions for Recognition as a State Party

At present, a party is recognized as a state party in a state if any of the following conditions is fulfilled:<sup>4</sup>

1. If it secures six per cent of the valid votes polled in the state at a general election or to the legislative assembly of the state concerned and in addition it wins two seats in the assembly of the state concerned, or
2. If it secures six per cent of the valid votes polled in the state at a general election to the Lok Sabha from the state concerned and in addition it wins one seat in the Lok Sabha from the state concerned, or
3. If it wins three per cent of seats in the legislative assembly at a general election to the legislative assembly of the state concerned or three seats in the assembly, or
4. If it wins one seat in the Lok Sabha for every twenty five seats or any fraction thereof allotted to the state at a general election to the Lok Sabha from the state concerned.

### Support Base and Areas of Influence of Regional Party

The emergence of increasingly vigorous regional parties is no doubt a significant catalyst of the participation explosion in the country's political process. Though the regional parties operate within very limited area and pursue only limited objective, they have played significant role both in the State as well as national politics. The regional political parties formed governments in several states and tried to give concrete shape to other policies and programmes. Some of the important regional parties which formed governments in various states include DMK and AIADMK in Tamil Nadu; National Conference in Jammu and Kashmir, Telugu Desam in Andhra Pradesh, Asom Gana Parishad in Assam; Maharashtrawadi Gomantak Party in Goa; Mizo National Front in Mizoram; Sikkim Sangram Parishad in Sikkim; All Party Hill Leaders Conference in

Meghalaya and Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) in Haryana, AAP In Delhi and KJP in Karnataka. Some of the regional parties were also partners in the coalition governments formed in several States after the fourth general elections of 1967. At the Centre also, of late the Regional Parties have been able to play critical role in helping formation of Congress government. DMK, a regional party, supported Mrs. Indira Gandhi's government after split in the party in 1969 and enabled her to carry on government despite loss of majority in the Parliament. Telugu Desam was the pillar of strength for the United Front and later the National Democratic Alliance. The representatives of the regional parties focus the attention of the Parliament on issues in their region and try to influence the policies of the Government to promote their own interests<sup>5</sup>.

Regional parties with strong social and emotional bases in their communities have been a feature of Indian politics since independence. Some regional parties however have sprung up from time to time exploiting some specific grievances. Regional parties of this category were active in the mid 1950's when there was widespread agitation for the creation of new states. After the reorganization of states in 1956, most of them merged into the national parties. But since 1967, with the end of dominant party system, powerful regional parties have emerged, by and large, to introduce a system of competitive dominance. They are not to be looked upon simply as discrete locally placed political entities, but as important mechanism for interest articulation and interest aggregation in the area where they are placed and thereby enter into an interacting process of governmental penetration, performance at various levels and society's response to such penetration and performance<sup>6</sup>.

One party dominance was yet another factor for the emergence of regional parties. Initially, the congress, which successfully led the nationalist struggle, was able to preempt the emergence of regionalist parties by offering concessions to regional sentiments. It is important to remember that most state-based parties have risen to prominence by building anti-congress coalitions. According to James Manor, in most federal systems, state based parties have historically preceded the development of powerful national parties, while in India it was the anti-congress rhetoric, which paved the way for state based regional parties.

By mid seventies, congress adopted some coercive measures like the emergency and to some extent the 42<sup>nd</sup> amendment. In the meantime, regional parties in the states continued to grow in strength and at the Centre, a non congress alternative i.e., Janata party was materialized in 1977. The Janata party government (1977-1979) also resisted all demands for transferring more powers to the states, which resulted in few prominent trends. Firstly, it indicated the breakdown of the dominant party system, as the capacity of the congress to absorb or contain the various movements and smaller groups had declined. Thus, the perception of inability of national parties to protect the interests of local people encouraged the growth of regional parties. Secondly, strong regional parties had emerged as natural consequence of the

operation of the democratic system based on adult franchise in a multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multi-linguistic and multi-religious milieu. The background of lopsided economic development and regional imbalances, altogether, provided a strong base for the inter-ethnic and inter-cultural conflicts. Thirdly, the centralist approach of Indian federalism resulted in widened gap, between the center and the states certain actions of centrist parties, suspension of inner party democracy, the decline of power sharing arrangement, wide spectrum of power and responsibility, including forests, wildlife, mineral resources development etc, which are more suited for the initiative at the state or local level. A feeling of marginalization and alienation the states followed all this. Fourthly, de-linking of parliamentary elections with assembly elections reflected two distinct functions flowing from two separate electoral contests. State elections were gradually viewed as concerned with local issues, while the parliamentary elections were more associated with national and international dimensions. Fifthly the emerging dual perceptions of national interest, as defined by centrist parties on the one hand and by protagonist of regional aspirations on the other became more concretely visible. In case of Tamil Nadu, Punjab Kashmir and Assam, anti-centre rhetoric, power sharing aspirations and electoral calculations encouraged regional aspirations and regionalist parties. Moreover, to meet the challenges projected by regional parties and forces at the state level, the highly centralized system of governance, central implementing agencies, all India administrative network, centrist redressed instruments, all collectively encouraged regional elements to resist centrist designs<sup>7</sup>.

The secularization of caste also catalyzed the rise of regional parties based on primordial lies. The crystallization of electoral process as a result of universal adult franchise, spread of literacy, land reforms and Panchayat Raj led to a tussle between the elite upper caste and the numerically preponderant middle and lower castes which redefined the superior subordinate caste relationship. On the other hand the lower peasantry and lower caste got dissatisfied with the new emergent middle castes who defied the prevalent system of patronage through the vulgar display of wealth and political strength. They felt that they are the deprived lot. They started uniting under those regional and local parties who were airing the local grievances of lower caste and peasantry<sup>8</sup>. Apart from these, the notion of uneven economic development of many regions led to the formation of many regional parties. The regional parties which are deeply rooted in regional issues and grievances projected the regional imbalance and protested against it. They demanded separate state status to the economically underdeveloped regions and also demanded more resources for the development of these regions. Some regional parties also protested against the perceived economic exploitation of their local resources by the outsiders thereby demanding the ouster of the outsiders.

The presence of distinct cultural, ethnic, religious, linguistic and caste groups within India has greatly helped the process of growth of regional parties. Lopsided development, Religious factor,

regional imbalances, anti centralism, political splits etc. are other factors responsible for the emergence of regional political parties in India.

Further within the multiparty character of the party system, the space occupied by the regional political parties in terms of vote and the elected members has increased. For instance, the percentage share of votes of the national parties is on the decline. Their share of votes was around 78 per cent in the 1984 parliamentary elections, which declined to 64 per cent in the 2009 parliamentary elections. In comparison, the share of the regional parties increased from 12 per cent to 31 per cent during the same period. Further, the share of the national political parties in the elected members of parliament has decreased from 85 per cent to 69 per cent and that of the regional parties increased from 12 per cent to 29 per cent in the 1984 and 2009 elections, respectively. From 1989 onwards, the congress party's hegemony of being an umbrella party became questioned and the space thus vacated was appropriated by regional political parties. In 1991, 1996, 1998 and 1999 elections to the Lok Sabha, the regional parties secured 36, 85, 90 and 105 seats respectively which show that their strength is growing with simultaneous decline of popularity of national parties<sup>9</sup>.

#### **Vote Share of National and Regional Parties: Lok Sabha Elections 1984-2009**

<b>Party wise representation among elected members</b>					
<b>Party</b>	<b>1984-85</b>	<b>1998</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2009</b>
National	85.40	71.27	67.96	67.03	69.24
Regional	12.20	27.62	30.94	32.04	29.10
Independents	2.40	1.10	1.10	0.92	1.66
total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

<b>Percentage vote</b>					
<b>Party</b>	<b>1984-85</b>	<b>1998</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2009</b>
National	77.86	67.98	67.11	62.89	63.58
Regional	12.73	29.66	30.15	32.87	31.23
Independents	9.41	2.37	2.74	4.25	5.19
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

#### **Source: Statistical Reports on General Elections From 1984-2009, Election Commission of India New Delhi**

In states where the electoral contest is between the Congress and the BJP, the vote share of the Congress increases by few percentage points (except 16<sup>th</sup> loksabha), and this pattern has been consistent over the last seven Lok Sabha elections. During the same period, the vote share of the Congress declined in states where Congress is pitted against regional parties, whether independent or in alliance. The very fact that the Congress had to form alliances with regional political parties in states like Bihar, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra indicates that the Congress is no longer a dominant political force in these states. For example, Mr. Chandra Babu Naidu in Andhra Pradesh, Ms. Jayalalitha in Tamil Nadu, Mr. Laloo Prasad Yadav in Bihar, Ms. Mamatha Banerjee in West Bengal, Dr. Farooq Abdulla in Jammu and Kashmir etc are some of the leaders of the regional leaders who came to be regarded as new power centers in the emerging configurations of the national politics. Though on a different plane Mr. Jyothi Basu and Mr. Mulayam

Singh Yadav have also attained the status of power centers because of the strength and importance of

their respective parties at the national and regional levels<sup>10</sup>.

Vote share of Congress	1989	1991	1996	1998	1999	2004	2009
All India	39.5	36.6	28.8	25.8	28.3	26.5	28.6
In states where Congress in two-party contest against BJP	40.8	40.8	33.8	38.6	44.4	39.6	42.3
In states where Congress is Against regional parties	37.7	32.0	26.7	18.9	22.5	22.5	24.9 in contest

Source: CSDS Data Unit

#### Majority Party in Parliament from 1952-2014

Year	Leading party	Vote %	Seats won
1952	Congress	45.0	364
1957	Congress	47.8	371
1962	Congress	44.7	361
1967	Congress	40.8	283
1971	Congress	43.7	352
1977	BLD	41.3	295
1980	Congress	42.7	353
1984	Congress	48.0	415
1989	Janata Dal	17.8	143
1991	Congress	36.6	244
1996	BJP	20.3	161
1998	BJP	25.6	182
1999	BJP	23.8	182
2004	Congress	26.5	145
2009	Congress	28.6	206
2014	BJP	31.1	282

Source: Centre for the Study of Developing Societies Delhi

#### 16<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha Election Data

Party	Seats won	Seat %
NDA	338	62.25
UPA	48	8.84
CPI	10	1.84
Regional political parties	143	26.34
others	4	0.73
Total	543	100

Source: Election Commission of India 2014

The share of votes won by regional parties cracked the 50 percent mark for the first time in 1996. Then the engine sputtered somewhat. By 1999, vote share of regional parties had dipped to 48 percent. By 2004, their vote share crept back up to 51 percent, the same level it had been eight years earlier, before modestly rising again in the 2009 elections. People repose confidence in regional parties because they believe that they alone can safeguard the interests of the State concerned and can fight for the legitimate rights and powers of the States without being hamstringed by their association with a national party. Regional parties naturally concentrate on safeguarding and promoting regional interests. Not only this, as we see India is a country with diversity. Diversities are based on various criteria such as, geographical, historical, cultural is social. The diversities lead to politically different ideologies and give rise to regional political parties to protect and preserve specific interest of a region. In 90s this trend gets a tremendous boost. Today's growing importance of regional parties has become a big hurdle in two party politics and stable government. Neither of the two main political party (Congress and BJP) is able to form a government single handedly,

either in Centre or in the states. As a result, the system of coalition government has started in India which has the demerit of political blackmailing. Allied parties in the government pressurizes the national party to tilt its policies in the interest of any specific regions. Many times it, subsidizes national interest. It is the gift of regionalism and the regional parties that in 1990s we experienced a restless polity in India<sup>11</sup>. That explains why more State-based parties have been formed in various regions and are quite successful in their aims.

In terms of seat share, regional parties dominate nine states since half of the MPs from these states belong to regional parties. These include the smaller states of Manipur, Meghalaya and Sikkim. Besides these, other states in this category are Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Orissa, Maharashtra, Haryana, and Jammu and Kashmir. Another test of the prominence of regional parties would be their vote share. In thirteen states, regional parties had thirty per cent or more share of the votes in 1999 election. They include the smaller states mentioned above. In Manipur and Sikkim, regional parties polled 67 and 95 per cent votes respectively. Other states where regional parties polled around thirty per cent or more votes are J&K, Haryana, Punjab, Maharashtra, AP, Tamil Nadu, Orissa, W. Bengal, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. In Tamil Nadu, various regional parties together polled 75 per cent votes. In Maharashtra and Andhra, regional parties polled 44 and 42 per cent votes respectively. The vote share of regional parties in W. Bengal, Punjab, Orissa and Haryana was between 33 and 35 per cent in the 1999 elections while in other states regional parties polled between 29 and 31 per cent votes. Considering multipolarity of electoral contests, this performance is certainly impressive<sup>12</sup>.

#### Conclusion

Emergence and growing number and popularity of regional political parties have helped in a new thinking which admits a positive role that regional parties can play in the process of nation building. Participation of regional political parties in national politics has been a new factor of Indian politics and federalism. It can be concluded that the role of regional political parties in the Indian political system has been enormous. On the one hand they have helped in the development of participatory political culture and provided a check against the overshadowing tendencies of the Central government; on the other they are also a source of strength for the development of the federal process in India.

The regional parties are more concerned with the interests of certain groups than with the general welfare of the nation. They are limited in their aggregative potential by being identified with the

interests of a particular ethnic, linguistic or religious groups. The growing presence and salience of regional parties is, undoubtedly, the most outstanding aspect of political development in India over the past few years. They have catalyzed a realignment of political process and their impact on the structure and process of politics have been multi directional and far reaching. The changing political landscape has brought into focus the new emerging role of regional parties. Mr P.Chidambaram recently highlighted this fact before a distinguished group of international business leaders by observing that the regional parties are "close to the people and impatient to develop India". Not only this, the chief ministers, who represent the regional parties and aspirations are "actively involved in deciding national affairs"<sup>13</sup>. Regional parties can be said to have made politics more competitive and popular participation in the political process more extensive at the grassroots.

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