BODHI SPECTRUM
Global Journal of Multidisciplinary Research

The Changing Nature of Regionalism in Indian Politics: Contemporary Trends and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Regionalism has remained a significant feature of Indian politics since independence, reflecting the country's linguistic, ethnic, cultural and territorial diversity. However, its nature has undergone a substantial transformation in recent decades. This paper examines the changing character of regionalism in contemporary India, arguing that it has evolved from a predominantly identity-based phenomenon into a more governance- and development-oriented form of political mobilisation. Influenced by economic liberalisation, the rise of regional parties, and evolving federal arrangements, regional aspirations are increasingly articulated through demands for fiscal autonomy, equitable resource distribution, developmental opportunities and greater participation in national decision-making. The paper analyses the implications of this transformation for Indian federalism, Centre–State relations and democratic governance. It also highlights key challenges, including regional disparities, fiscal conflicts, identity-based mobilisation, resource disputes and migration-related tensions. The study concludes that accommodating regional aspirations remains essential for strengthening democratic participation, federal stability and national integration in India.

Keywords: *Regionalism; Indian Federalism; Regional Parties; Centre–State Relations; Democratic Governance.*

1. Introduction

Regionalism has long constituted one of the most significant and enduring dimensions of Indian politics.[1] As a plural and deeply heterogeneous society characterised by immense linguistic, ethnic, cultural, religious and geographical diversity, India has witnessed the continuous articulation of regional identities and aspirations since independence.[2] The emergence of regional political movements was not merely a consequence of territorial differentiation but reflected broader demands for recognition, representation, autonomy and equitable participation within the Indian Union. Consequently, regionalism has occupied a central place in academic debates on nation-building, federalism, democratic accommodation and political integration.

1 Chakrabarty, M., Datta, A., & Roy, J. (2009). Regionalism: A colonial legacy of the British. *The Indian Journal of Political Science, 70*(3), 691.

2 Raj, H. (2013). Indian Political System (10th ed., Part III), Delhi: Surjeet Publications, 28.

In the decades immediately following independence, regionalism was predominantly understood through the prism of linguistic movements, demands for state reorganisation, ethnic mobilisation and in certain contexts, separatist tendencies.[3] The linguistic reorganisation of states, the Dravidian movement in South India and various autonomy movements in Northeast India exemplified the manner in which regional identities sought political recognition within the evolving federal framework.[4] Consequently, regionalism was frequently perceived by policymakers and scholars as a potential challenge to national unity and political stability, generating concerns regarding the capacity of the Indian state to reconcile diversity with territorial integrity.

However, such an interpretation has become increasingly insufficient for understanding the contemporary dynamics of regional politics. Over the past three decades, regionalism in India has undergone a significant qualitative transformation. While issues of identity and cultural recognition remain important, regional political mobilisation is now increasingly shaped by concerns relating to economic development, governance, fiscal autonomy, resource allocation, infrastructure expansion, environmental sustainability and participation in national policymaking. Rather than seeking separation from the Union, contemporary regional actors largely pursue greater political influence and economic bargaining power within the constitutional framework of Indian federalism. This transformation is closely associated with broader structural changes in India's political economy and institutional landscape.[5] Economic liberalisation, the expansion of market-oriented reforms, the rise of coalition politics, the consolidation of regional parties, evolving patterns of fiscal federalism and increasing demands for decentralised governance have substantially altered Centre-State relations. States have emerged as important sites of economic competition and policy innovation, while regional leaders increasingly derive political legitimacy from their ability to deliver developmental outcomes and attract investment. As a result, regional aspirations today extend beyond questions of identity and encompass demands for economic competitiveness, social welfare, infrastructure development, resource control and greater influence in national decision-making processes.

At the same time, the transformation of regionalism has generated new political and institutional challenges. Persistent regional disparities in development, growing tensions over fiscal transfers and revenue sharing, inter-state disputes over natural resources, migration-related politics, and the continuing salience of ethnic and linguistic identities reveal that regionalism remains a dynamic and contested feature of Indian democracy.[6] These developments underscore the complex interplay between regional assertion and national integration in an era marked by economic globalisation, political decentralisation and increasing interdependence among states.

The present paper argues that regionalism in contemporary India has evolved from a predominantly identity-centred phenomenon into a more complex form of governance-oriented federal politics. While this transformation has strengthened democratic representation, enhanced the role of states within the federal system and facilitated the institutional accommodation of diverse regional interests, it has also generated new tensions relating to fiscal federalism, developmental inequalities, political centralisation and the management of competing territorial claims. By examining these changing dynamics, the paper seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the evolving relationship between regionalism, federalism and democratic governance in contemporary India.

2. From Identity Politics to Developmental Regionalism

One of the most significant transformations in contemporary Indian politics has been the gradual reconfiguration of regionalism from a politics of identity and recognition to a politics increasingly centred on development, governance and economic performance. In the decades immediately following independence, regional mobilisation was largely driven by demands for linguistic recognition, ethnic autonomy, cultural preservation, and political representation. The linguistic reorganisation of states in 1956, the Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu and various ethnic and autonomy movements in Northeast India reflected the centrality of identity-based claims in shaping regional political consciousness.[7] During this period, regionalism was primarily articulated as a response to

3 Singh, A.M. (2020). Regionalism in Indian politics. In A. Kumar, A. Kumar, & A. Nayak (Eds.), *Indian politics: Status quo and the future ahead*, Swaranjali Publication, 110.

4 Raj, op. cit., 30–35.

5 Singh, A. M. (2022, March 26–27). *A shift towards regionalism in Indian politics* [Conference paper presentation]. 59th All India Political Science Conference and International Seminar, Indian Political Science Association, University of Science and Technology Meghalaya, Meghalaya, India.

6 Raj, op. cit., 44–46.

7 Singh, "A Shift towards Regionalism in Indian Politics," op. cit.; Misra, U. (1978). The Naga national question. *Economic and Political Weekly, 13*(14), 521–523; Avasthi, A. (2012). *Indian political system* (7th ed.). Lakshmi Narayan Agarwal, 686.

perceived cultural marginalisation and the need for institutional recognition within the emerging nation-state.[8]

Contemporary regionalism, however, exhibits a markedly different orientation. While identity continues to remain an important source of political legitimacy, regional political competition increasingly revolves around issues such as economic growth, welfare delivery, infrastructure development, employment generation, urbanisation and investment attraction. Electoral mandates are no longer secured solely through appeals to linguistic or ethnic solidarity but increasingly through claims of administrative competence and developmental performance. Consequently, regional leaders are evaluated not merely as custodians of cultural identities but as agents of economic transformation and governance innovation. This shift is closely associated with broader structural changes in India's political economy. The economic reforms initiated in the early 1990s intensified competition among states for investment, industrial growth and fiscal resources. Liberalisation altered the relationship between the Centre and the States by creating new opportunities for state governments to influence developmental outcomes.[9] As a result, states emerged as important arenas of policy experimentation and economic competition. Regional governments increasingly sought to differentiate themselves through governance reforms, infrastructure expansion, industrial policies and welfare initiatives designed to attract both capital and political support. The emergence of developmental regionalism does not imply the disappearance of identity politics. Rather, it reflects the growing convergence of identity and development as complementary dimensions of regional political mobilisation. Regional identities continue to provide the symbolic foundations of political legitimacy, but they are increasingly deployed to secure economic benefits, fiscal concessions and greater bargaining power within the federal system. Contemporary regionalism therefore represents a hybrid political phenomenon in which cultural assertion and developmental aspirations are mutually reinforcing rather than mutually exclusive.

3. Regionalism and the Transformation of Indian Federalism

The changing nature of regionalism has significantly reshaped the functioning of Indian federalism. Earlier debates concerning regionalism were largely framed in terms of national integration, territorial cohesion and demands for political autonomy. Regional assertions were often viewed as challenges to the authority of the Union and were assessed primarily through the lens of state-building and political stability. In contemporary India, however, the principal arena of regional contestation has shifted towards questions of governance, fiscal federalism, policy coordination and resource allocation. This transformation reflects the increasing institutionalisation of federal politics. States have emerged as influential actors in shaping national policy agendas, and regional governments now participate more actively in intergovernmental decision-making processes. The expansion of cooperative and competitive federalism has enhanced the visibility and importance of state governments in areas ranging from economic planning and welfare provision to taxation and infrastructure development. Institutions such as the Goods and Service Tax (GST) Council, intergovernmental forums and issue-based political coalitions have created new channels through which states can influence national policy outcomes.[10] At the same time, contemporary regionalism has become a significant mechanism through which states contest perceived centralisation of political and fiscal authority. Debates surrounding revenue sharing, GST compensation, centrally sponsored schemes, gubernatorial interventions and the distribution of administrative powers have increasingly become focal points of Centre–State relations. Regional governments frequently frame such disputes in terms of federal equity, constitutional balance and democratic accountability, thereby transforming federalism itself into a central arena of political negotiation.

Consequently, the evolution of regionalism has contributed to a broader transformation of Indian federalism from a predominantly centralised and hierarchical structure towards a more negotiated and interactive system of governance. Although asymmetries of power continue to characterise Centre–State relations, regional actors today possess greater institutional capacity to influence policy outcomes and shape the direction of national governance.

8 Medhi, N., & Das, K. (2016). Regionalism and national integration with reference to North-East India. *International Journal of Applied Business and Economic Research, 14*(12), 8409–8410.

9 Sharma, A. (2026). Reconfiguring Indian federalism: The impact of liberalization, privatization, globalization and coalition government. *International Journal of Novel Research and Development, 11*(5), g686.

10 Kendhe, A. (2024, April). Co-operative and competitive federalism in India: An analysis. *International Journal for Legal Research and Analysis, 2*(7).

4. The Rise of Regional Parties and Multi-Level Political Competition

The growing prominence of regional parties represents one of the most visible manifestations of the transformation of regionalism in contemporary India.[11] Unlike earlier regional movements, which often operated through protest politics and extra-institutional mobilisation, contemporary regional aspirations are increasingly articulated through electoral competition and democratic institutions. Regional parties have become indispensable actors in both state and national politics, reflecting the deepening territorialisation of democratic representation.[12]

The expansion of regional parties since the late twentieth century has fundamentally altered the structure of political competition in India. These parties have not merely articulated local grievances but have emerged as influential participants in national policymaking. Their role became particularly significant during the coalition era, when regional parties exercised substantial influence over central governments and contributed to the decentralisation of political authority. Even in periods characterised by the electoral predominance of national parties, regional parties continue to shape debates concerning federalism, language policy, social welfare, resource allocation and state autonomy.

The rise of regional parties also reflects the emergence of multi-level political competition in which political legitimacy is simultaneously contested at local, state and national levels. Voters increasingly evaluate political actors according to different criteria across different electoral arenas, creating opportunities for regional parties to establish distinct political identities independent of national political narratives. As intermediaries between local constituencies and national institutions, regional parties play a crucial role in translating regional demands into policy outcomes.[13] The institutionalisation of regional parties has therefore transformed regionalism from a sporadic form of protest politics into a permanent and structurally embedded feature of India's democratic system. Their continued relevance demonstrates the enduring importance of regional identities and interests within an increasingly complex federal polity.

5. Contemporary Challenges of Regionalism

Despite its contribution to democratic deepening and federal accommodation, contemporary regionalism continues to generate significant political and institutional challenges. The transformation of regional politics has not eliminated conflict; rather, it has altered the arenas and forms through which regional contestation occurs. A major challenge arises from persistent regional disparities in economic development. Significant variations in income levels, industrialisation, infrastructure, educational attainment and healthcare provision continue to characterise the Indian economy. Such inequalities often generate perceptions of exclusion and relative deprivation, encouraging demands for greater state support, fiscal redistribution and political recognition. Consequently, developmental imbalances remain a powerful source of regional discontent and political mobilisation. A second challenge concerns the increasing frequency of Centre-State tensions. Disputes over fiscal transfers, taxation powers, administrative authority, and policy implementation have intensified debates regarding the balance of power within the federal system.[14] These conflicts often transcend technical policy disagreements and acquire broader political significance by reinforcing narratives of regional marginalisation and central dominance.

Third, the growing emphasis on development has not displaced identity-based politics. Linguistic, ethnic, religious and indigenous identities continue to shape patterns of political mobilisation across several regions. In many instances, developmental demands are articulated through identity-based frameworks, producing complex forms of regional assertion that combine material grievances with cultural and political claims.[15] Fourth, inter-state disputes concerning river waters, territorial boundaries and natural resources remain persistent sources of conflict. Increasing pressures on land, water, and environmental resources have intensified competition among states, highlighting the ecological dimensions of contemporary regionalism. Such disputes demonstrate that regional politics is increasingly influenced by questions of sustainability, resource governance, and environmental justice. Finally, migration and

11 Agarwal, R. C. (1981). *Constitutional history (development) of India and national movement*. S. Chand & Company, 349.

12 Kumar, P. (1991). Regionalism and regional parties in the context of state politics. *The Indian Journal of Political Science, 52*(4), 558–565.

13 Joshi, R. (1970). The Shiv Sena: A movement in search of legitimacy. *Asian Survey, 10*(11), 967–968; Chowdhary, R., & Rao, V. B. (2004). National Conference of Jammu and Kashmir: From hegemonic to competitive politics. *Economic and Political Weekly, 39*(14/15), 1521–1526; Fickett, L. (1971). The politics of regionalism in India. *Pacific Affairs, 44*(2), 195–208. https://doi.org/10.2307/2755377; Awasthy, S. (2009). Indian Government and Politics (3rd ed.), New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications Pvt Ltd., 378.

14 Singh, "A Shift towards Regionalism in Indian Politics."

15 Sinha, L. (1987). The politics and government of Manipur. *The Indian Journal of Political Science, 48*(4), 490–503.

demographic change have generated renewed forms of territorial politics centred on employment, citizenship, and cultural protection. The resurgence of 'sons-of-the-soil' narratives in several regions reflects anxieties concerning economic competition, demographic transformation, and the perceived erosion of local identities. These developments raise important questions regarding the balance between regional autonomy, constitutional citizenship and national integration.[16]

The above challenges therefore suggest that contemporary regionalism is neither inherently destabilising nor automatically integrative. Rather, it constitutes a dynamic and evolving political process whose implications depend largely on the capacity of democratic institutions to accommodate competing regional interests within a cooperative federal framework.

6. Managing Regional Aspirations in a Federal Democracy

The management of regional aspirations constitutes one of the most enduring and complex challenges of democratic governance in India. Regional demands are neither episodic political disturbances nor departures from the national project; rather, they are intrinsic to the functioning of a diverse federal polity characterised by multiple identities, uneven patterns of development and competing territorial interests. Consequently, the central question confronting Indian federalism is not whether regional aspirations should be accommodated, but how such accommodation can be institutionalised without undermining national cohesion, democratic stability, or developmental objectives.

The Indian experience suggests that the accommodation of regional demands through constitutional and political mechanisms has generally proved more effective than coercive responses. The linguistic reorganisation of states, the creation of new states such as Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Uttarakhand and Telangana, and the development of various autonomy arrangements in Northeast India demonstrate the adaptive capacity of the Indian federal system.[17] These institutional responses have often contributed to reducing political tensions by providing legitimate channels for the expression of regional aspirations. However, they have rarely eliminated regional grievances altogether. Instead, they reveal that regional aspirations evolve over time and frequently generate new demands relating to representation, resource distribution, and political authority.

A central challenge in contemporary India arises from debates concerning the distribution of power within the federal system. While economic reforms and political decentralisation have expanded the role of states in governance, concerns regarding fiscal and administrative centralisation have simultaneously intensified. Controversies surrounding GST compensation, revenue-sharing arrangements, centrally sponsored schemes and the discretionary role of Governors have generated recurring tensions between the Union and the States.[18] Such disputes are significant not merely because of their constitutional implications but because they shape perceptions of fairness, autonomy and political inclusion among regional actors. The management of regional aspirations therefore depends substantially on the credibility of federal institutions as mechanisms for consultation, negotiation and conflict resolution.

Economic inequalities further complicate the accommodation of regional interests. Despite sustained economic growth and decades of developmental planning, substantial disparities continue to characterise India's regional landscape. Variations in industrialisation, infrastructure, educational attainment, healthcare provision and employment opportunities have produced uneven developmental trajectories across states.[19] These asymmetries frequently translate into political grievances, particularly when regions perceive themselves as disadvantaged within national processes of resource allocation and economic policymaking. In an increasingly competitive economic environment, regional aspirations are therefore often expressed through demands for greater fiscal autonomy, enhanced developmental assistance and more equitable access to economic opportunities.

The persistence of identity-based mobilisation presents an additional dimension of complexity. Although contemporary regionalism is increasingly associated with developmental concerns, issues of language, ethnicity, indigeneity, migration and cultural preservation continue to shape political behaviour in many regions. Developmental and identity-based claims frequently intersect, creating hybrid forms of political mobilisation in which economic

16 Palshikar, S. (2004). Shiv Sena: A tiger with many faces? *Economic and Political Weekly, 39*(14/15), 1497–1507; Sattar, S. A. (2011). Regionalism: A great threat to national unity of India. *The Indian Journal of Political Science, 72*(3), 761–768.

17 Hazary, S. C. (1991). Politics of regionalism: Implications for political development in India. *The Indian Journal of Political Science, 52*(2), 212–219.

18 Singh, "A Shift towards Regionalism in Indian Politics," op. cit.

19 Agarwal, R. C. (1997). *Indian government and politics* (5th ed.). S. Chand & Co., p.120.

demands are articulated through cultural and territorial narratives.[20] This intersection highlights the limitations of approaches that treat identity and development as separate or competing phenomena. Instead, regional aspirations often derive their political strength from the combination of material grievances and symbolic claims to recognition and belonging.

The rise of regional parties has further transformed the politics of accommodation. Regional parties have enhanced the representational capacity of Indian democracy by providing institutional platforms through which local concerns can be articulated and negotiated. Their growing influence has strengthened the bargaining position of states within the federal framework and contributed to the decentralisation of political authority. At the same time, electoral incentives may encourage the strategic amplification of regional grievances, occasionally intensifying Centre-State conflicts or reinforcing territorial divisions.[21] The management of regional aspirations therefore increasingly depends on the ability of political actors to balance regional advocacy with broader commitments to federal cooperation and national governance.

The experience of Northeast India offers a particularly instructive illustration of both the possibilities and limitations of accommodation. Statehood, autonomy arrangements, peace accords, and constitutional safeguards have contributed to mitigating several long-standing conflicts. Nevertheless, demands relating to identity, land rights, migration, citizenship and political representation continue to persist in various forms. This demonstrates that regional aspirations are not static problems susceptible to permanent resolution through a single institutional intervention. Rather, they constitute dynamic political processes shaped by changing socio-economic conditions, demographic transformations and evolving patterns of political participation.[22]

From a broader theoretical perspective, the management of regional aspirations underscores the inherently negotiated character of federalism. Federal systems do not eliminate territorial conflicts; instead, they provide institutional frameworks through which such conflicts can be mediated and managed. The resilience of Indian federalism has depended largely on its capacity to accommodate diversity through constitutional flexibility, political bargaining and democratic participation. In this sense, federalism should be understood not as a fixed constitutional arrangement but as a continuously evolving process of negotiation between national and regional centres of power. Ultimately, the management of regional aspirations remains central to the future of Indian democracy. The sustainability of the federal system depends on its ability to reconcile unity with diversity, autonomy with integration and regional demands with collective national objectives.[23] As regionalism continues to evolve in response to economic change, political decentralisation and social transformation, the capacity of democratic institutions to accommodate competing territorial interests will remain a critical determinant of political stability, federal effectiveness and democratic legitimacy in India.

7. Conclusion

Regionalism in India has not declined but has undergone a significant transformation from a politics primarily centred on linguistic, ethnic and territorial demands to one increasingly focused on development, governance, fiscal autonomy and democratic representation within the constitutional framework of the Indian Union. Shaped by economic liberalisation, the rise of regional parties and the growing importance of state-level governance, regional aspirations are now expressed through demands for greater participation in national decision-making, equitable resource distribution and enhanced autonomy. Nevertheless, persistent inter-regional disparities, Centre-State tensions, fiscal disputes and identity-based concerns demonstrate that regionalism remains a dynamic and contested force. Rather than threatening national unity, the accommodation of regional aspirations has strengthened democratic participation and contributed to the resilience of Indian federalism. However, increasing centralisation and uneven development continue to pose challenges to the balance between national cohesion and regional autonomy. The future of Indian federalism will therefore depend on its ability to accommodate diverse regional interests through an inclusive and responsive framework of governance, ensuring that regionalism remains a constructive mechanism for negotiating power, resources, representation and identity within India's evolving democratic polity.

20 Hazary, S. C, op. cit., 217–219.
21 Singh, "A Shift towards Regionalism in Indian Politics," op. cit.
22 Medhi, N., & Das, K, op. cit., 84012–8414.
23 Singh, "A Shift towards Regionalism in Indian Politics," op. cit.

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