

The Emergence of Regionalism in Modern India: Historical Roots and Contemporary Implications

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Abstract: This article explores the emergence of regionalism in modern India, tracing its historical roots and examining its contemporary implications. By analyzing key historical events and socio-political movements, the study highlights how colonial legacies, linguistic diversity, and cultural identities have shaped regional consciousness. The rise of regional parties and the demand for autonomy reflect the complexities of federalism in India, challenging the central government's authority while reshaping political dynamics. Furthermore, the article discusses the implications of regionalism for national integration, social cohesion, and governance, emphasizing the need for a nuanced understanding of regional aspirations in the context of a diverse and pluralistic society. Ultimately, this examination sheds light on the interplay between regional identities and national unity, offering insights into the future trajectory of Indian politics.

Key words: Regionalism, Implications, Identity, Multiculturalism, Diversity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Regions are integral to understanding the complexities of political processes in modern India. Regions have deeply etched identities in Indian society, and regional identity has acquired further salience because of the concerted efforts to standardize the country. In the multilingual and multicultural Indian society, regional identity often transcends that of the nation and contributes to shaping diverse and somewhat contesting interests between the Centre and the regions. For most of Indian history, regions have been the primary territorial and cultural units of political organization. Regions are the focal point of political processes, identities, and interests, which in turn connect with intra-regional power blocs and lobbies. The significance of the regional roots of political and administrative processes makes it critical to come to a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of regionalism and regional consciousness.

The historical roots of regionalism in India are a product of multiculturalism. India has lived with a plurality of cultures throughout its history. After

independence, the legacy of multiculturalism and its conflict with Indian nationalism has continued to spur regional emotions and movements. Both socio-cultural and political determinants of regional identity have propelled the demand for the demarcation of new linguistic states in the country. Since the 1950s, because of these historical and contextual socio-political dynamics, any issue in India is immediately labeled and identified as a regional problem or an issue. The manner of its identification as a regional problem shapes the impact of that issue and affects the individual to develop regional consciousness or seek its protection from regional forums. The region today determines Indian society and polity at various levels and shapes Indian development through economic and social consequences. Socially, it affects the fellow feelings, attitudes, motivations, and conduct of people. Economics is strongly correlated with region in India; thus, earning a livelihood, place, and occupation determine regional movements.

1.1. Background and Significance

The lack of a natural boundary for India resulted in continuous state formation and invasions throughout history. The arrival of Aryans and the large-scale migrations of the sixth century led to further mixing of races. However, the Muslim invasion and colonial rule were the last encounters that had far-reaching consequences. The Mughal era and the Muslims in the south led to social, political, and cultural changes. The development of these regional languages accelerated under the British, who also helped in developing democratic institutions. Several areas came under British rule at different times and continued to maintain strong regional sentiments. It is often overlooked that renaissance and resurgence movements also contributed to the growth of regional identity. The significance of this historical underpinning is that the rise of regionalism is not a response to socio-economic issues but flows out of the historical experience and cultural diversity. Further, this understanding subverts the argument that Indian nationality was a British creation wherein the British

artificially grouped several territories into one administration. Finally, it also underscores that regionalism and regional identities are not particular responses to the contemporary socio-economic crisis that India faces but a perennial feature of the Indian socio-political landscape. For centuries, several instances can be provided where regional sentiment has come to the fore in different parts of India. Medieval India, the Mughal era, the British era, and post-independent India all have numerous examples to be quoted across different regions. This proves the point that if the regional factors continue to shape the Indian polity today, they were at no point in time ever absent from India's polity.

1.2. Scope and Objectives

One of the most intriguing aspects of India has been the psychological and emotional rootedness of the Indian people in their own distinctive region. This study aims to shed historical and contemporary light on the phenomenon of regional identity. It examines regionalism both as a historical phenomenon and in its present-day context. In other words, it asks whether regional sentiments have a tradition in India and, if so, what relationship has operated between regionalism and national integration.

The study confines itself within the temporal framework of the making of modern India, beginning with the renaissance movement towards the end of the last century and ending with the Emergency, a period to which the term regionalism has been specifically applied. The twin objectives that we are pursuing in this study, to which we shall direct our critical attention at different points in the paper, may be summed up in the following proposition. First, to read sectional aspirations as justification enough for the anxiety and pessimism about the future of politics in India can lead to two kinds of caricature. On the one hand, there is a tendency among some scholars to dismiss regional politics as anarchic, venal, and constitutive of the pathology of policy-making. This is premised upon an understanding of regionalism as the domain of the parochial, the egoistic, and the truculent. The logic here seems to suggest a direct and irreversible relationship between fragmented collective selfhood and a truncated political process. The other inclination, however, is to see regionalism as an index of a basic malaise, the symptom of the malaise of the modern state, and even as a certain index of that social unease which transcends the political. This approach, which will engage our

attention from a somewhat different angle, necessitates a whispering of a certain nostalgia for the regions. Much of this literature tends to engage in crystal ball gazing into the nostalgia of the Indian past. But unnuanced readings of regionalism could stand in the way of bringing back the regions into the cynosure of Indian politics.

2. HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF REGIONALISM IN INDIA

The emergence of regionalism in India has ancient and medieval roots. During the pre-British period, a number of agitations, arising out of common interest and identity, were effectively directed against the center. The Bhakti and Sufi movements, which propagated cultural uniformity, contributed directly to the consolidation of local languages and administration. Historical grievances, real or imaginary, and the successive processes of centralization shaped new demands for regional recognition and autonomy. In the 19th century, the tribal and peasant rebellions posed formidable challenges to the authority of the colonial state in the isolated interior of the Indian subcontinent. They were direct assertions of local social and political symbols against a system that drew its inspiration from liberalism, rationalism, and industrialism. Virtually, these local uprisings had not struck any modern note, nor were they based on any demand for a separate administration.

The formal emergence of regionalism, as we understand it today, took place in India in the immediate wake of political freedom, when the spirit of separatism had almost reached its climax. This has evoked analytic fascination. At the time of amalgamation, excessive centralization induced intense resentment in regions, both from linguistic and cultural perspectives. There is nothing new about regionalism; there seems to be a continuity with the regulation of force and the responses to demands that have been made since the post-amalgamation scenario. However, in the two later stages, India moved away from the unifying effect of regional nationalism, which occurred after imperial integration, when a significant few broke away from the majority group as a result of political distinction and the freedom struggle. The change was indeed sharp from the initial integration to the next two phases, which followed thereafter. The three stages show the shift away from a unified identity with provinces and princely states merging and working (initial integration) with people

in Central Provinces and United Provinces to the second phase, which is characterized by the people diverging more from the unity corresponding to pan-Indian identity to the last phase with the Marathi areas asserting a different non-Indian and some ethnic self-identity. The doctrine of the call to the minorities is significant in this regard. The provinces, on the one hand, and the princely classes, more effectively, could mount their separate pressures once the freedom struggle was allowed to gather with full vigor. The provincial Muslim parties and princely region leaders, more than the nationalist Muslims, later created a political uproar according to the opinion of some distinguished constitutional experts.

2.1. Pre-Independence Era

At the early phase of imperialism, colonial influence in society and the economy, as well as urbanization, had the principal effect of accentuating internal disparities, not diminishing them, in relation to regions' social, economic, and political interactions. The colonial imperialism often created regions of poverty before India was unified by the same policy into a common subsistence crisis. In the first half of the 20th century, internal disparities in levels of urbanization, industrialization, literacy, and educational status continued to intensify and further embittered people in some regions, such as Bengal, Maharashtra, and Andhra. Both urbanizing trends and the homogeneity-seeking integrationist trend of the expansion of European economic activity simultaneously helped to produce regional consciousness as well as claims and movements at the sub-provincial, linguistic community level.

Resistance broke out in different regions throughout the period, initially against the subversion or supplantation of the then prevailing authority and the exclusion of landed intermediary interests in the economy by the regime. At the internal level, this socio-economic pressure was felt in the entrenchment of regional identity and the raising of claims in the name of that—for special rights, for our land and our separate language, and making special demands of the rulers for the area—a Maharatta country. Since regions were formed on linguistic, cultural, economic, social, and political factors, it is quite understandable how opposition, discrimination, and regional aspirations were often intermingled over time. For example, in the Poligars or polygar Watanden, grievances against British rulers, the sensation of injustice mingled with sub-national emotions, and the

new rulers were called upon to prevent unjustifiable interlopers in the administration and also to recognize the just rights of the victimized people. These factors led to the comment that antagonism on socio-political issues converged in the quest for autonomy. Such a process was characteristic of the development of Indian polity.

2.2. Post-Independence Period

The first fifty years after independence did not eliminate regional disparities or diminish regional consciousness in India. National resources have not significantly reached the interior of many states, nor have regional parties been fully marginalized within a national consensus. Constitutional amendments played a crucial role in redefining the balance between regional and national interests, facilitating new economic, political, and cultural networks that accommodate regional aspirations within the broader political landscape. "Regional politics" refers to a segment of the national political arena, primarily focused on state-level activities. In India's pluralistic polity, political parties are often shaped by caste and class dynamics, leading to the emergence of regional parties that represent specific territorial interests. Such parties reflect local needs while aligning with the national framework, acting as microcosms of national parties. Typically, regional parties aim to reduce social cleavages and rivalries, pursuing the region's interests constructively while recognizing their alignment with state-level goals rather than advocating for a purely harmonious model.

3. FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE RISE OF REGIONALISM

Discontent over regional disparity is growing in different parts of India. The regional imbalances represent inequities in the pattern of growth, leading to the political mobilization of the people in backward states or regions, seeking to reformulate fiscal policy in favor of neglected regions. The existing literature variously identifies economic, demographic, environmental, political, social, and structural factors such as lack of governance, defective leadership, conduct of business, and policies of the centralizing state, among many others, as the roots of the relative impoverishment and backwardness in some parts of the country. Diversified though they are, they are regarded primarily as political analyses that fail to gain a comprehensive understanding of the reported phenomenon.

The causes for the development of 'regionalism' are certainly compact, being simultaneously the product of coalescing variables from three groups: a. the cultural or socio-linguistic, b. the economic disparities, and c. the political motivations. The present stress on only one of the three might tend to defy proper comprehension. There is little doubt that the most important and easily identified factor contributing to the widespread feeling of regionalism is the existence of several development, or rather 'underdevelopment,' oriented disparities within India. In particular, it keeps researchers wondering what made these sections seek a separate identity within the Indian nation-state. Some of the facts that interest researchers are that 'outsiders' come, dominate within society, and consequently exploit local resources because of the 'centre's skewed developmental priorities' in respect of the state under reference.

3.1. Economic Disparities

It is often taken for granted that in the age of free media and manufacturing consent, it is primordial ethnic identities that tend to become the cause of conflict in states. However, this might be true only in a relative sense because at the root of this rising ethnic identity is, in fact, the degeneration of the classical historical identity, which was grounded on the principle of area culture. The generation of ethnic historical identities in many regions, especially in India, might be caused mainly by the feeling of regional deprivation on political, economic, and cultural grounds. Drawing on this premise, this chapter seeks to consider various economic perspectives of regionalism that have emerged in modern and contemporary India and their implications for the country. Regionalism in India has largely emerged due to the political neglect of certain regions. One of the principal reasons has been that such areas are economically backward and hence seek to escape their poverty, not only by forcing the central government to give them economic welfare but also by making efforts to transform their economies. Those trying to bring about such a change are often resentful about their state boundaries and national policies. The regional elite use the political struggle in order to determine the settlement politically. Given that, development becomes a motive for demanding autonomy. The Indian Union saw such a demand fairly early in the case of Assam, where the economic neglect was the substance of the political movement. In the contemporary phase, what has again led to the crystallization of regional feelings of discontent in

various areas of India is the so-called neoliberal economic policy whereby the state has been making a retreat with regard to the promotion and control over the economy. Globalization and liberalization have led to faster economic growth, but the gains have been unequal. There have been regional disparities and even intra-state disparities. In a federation like India, any movement at the cost of a less developed state or group of states has significant national implications.

3.2. Cultural and Linguistic Diversity

This section will explore the significance of cultural and linguistic diversity in shaping regional identities in India. Over recent decades, linguistic and cultural divides have intensified. Language serves multiple functions: it reinforces native identity amid homogenizing pressures, provides a foundation for historical and administrative goals, unites diverse social groups, and facilitates democratic movements. In India, cultural and linguistic identities are closely tied to territorial spaces and subaltern identities, forming an essential part of the political community. India boasts 121 major languages, 1,599 other languages, and around 6,400 dialects, many of which are mutually unintelligible. Discussions around cultural differences—such as skin color, food habits, dress, and religious practices—often lead citizens to seek out their local cultures. The concept of "Indianness" is expressed through region-specific phrases, such as Bharatbarsha and New India, each highlighting regional characteristics. In contrast to the tribal system, where identity is more individualized, cultural homogenization occurs over larger territories. As communities assimilate into a dominant culture, aspects of their unique histories can be lost. Celebrating local pride can be seen as an act of indigenization rather than chauvinism, reflecting the desire for social legitimization and political recognition. Such expressions aim to preserve cultural heritage amidst various challenges, including social and political upheaval.

3.3. Political Factors

The prevalence of elections and electoral politics in India has significantly contributed to the rise of various regional movements. Through electoral participation, political parties empower individuals and leaders to influence decision-making within the federal system. As electoral competition allows regions to assert their rights and demands for greater resources, the legitimacy of these claims grows. This

shift has been facilitated by the coalition politics that have dominated the Indian political landscape since the late 1980s, enabling regional parties with localized bases to gain bargaining power on the national stage. Efforts by regional interests have prompted New Delhi to address public sentiments of neglect and discrimination. Since the 1960s, numerous movements have emerged, some seeking justice through the judiciary and others advocating for complete independence. These movements highlight the challenges of the federal experience in India, which are often fueled by anti-Central sentiments and identity politics. The demand for smaller states can also arise from aggressive social movements, demonstrating that regionalism and caste politics can fill the void created by political instability. Several significant movements have shaped contemporary India, including the demand for a separate state of Andhra, the Gorkhaland agitation, calls for a centric link state in Uttar Pradesh, the claims of the Samyukta Maharashtra Parishad, and the separate Kannada demand. These movements reflect the collective will of diverse groups within clearly defined geographical areas, underscoring the participatory nature of regional aspirations.

4. CONTEMPORARY REGIONALISM IN INDIA

The contours of regionalism in India have evolved over time, and contemporary region-based politics is qualitatively different from the regional political movements of the past. Several region-based political movements have declared their emergence in the last few years: from Telangana to Gorkhaland, Assam to Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra to Punjab. The birth and likely future trajectory of such movements have conjured various speculations in academic and political circles in India. Some predict the decline or premature death of the contemporary regionalist movements in India. Others note the deeply structural basis of contemporary regionalism in India – being a byproduct of democratic governance, fueled by communication technological developments and inspired by diverse regional identity. There are a number of conceptual and theoretical reasons for regionalism to assume a salient, if not hegemonic, discursive and political position in the contemporary Indian political landscape. On the practical plane, regional movements have managed to capture the popular socio-political imagination by introducing innovative socio-political strategies of communication. While they have attempted to use a variety of means of political mobilization, from

elections to protests, they have increasingly relied on the use of information communication technologies to further their political aspirations. In particular, regional movements have capitalized upon the ever-growing popularity of social media networking sites, which afford new opportunities for political mobilization.

4.1. Key Regional Movements and Parties

India is currently experiencing a surge of regional movements advocating for the recognition of regional rights and identities, as well as the equitable distribution of resources. These movements aim to enhance their regions' representation in the federal framework, with proponents asserting their cultural values and demanding fair compensation for the exploitation of their ecological resources. Issues of socio-economic inequality and the quest for human development drive movements like Gorkhaland in West Bengal and the Uttaranchal movement in Uttar Pradesh, reflecting deep historical roots and a living tradition. Key regional movements reveal how regions have been shaped by the leadership and entrepreneurial spirit of their advocates. Significant movements include the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference, Telugu Desam in Andhra Pradesh, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam in Tamil Nadu, Left Front in West Bengal, and Shiv Sena in Maharashtra. The separatist movement of the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam has seen turbulence since the passing of its prominent leader, while in Karnataka, the demand for the inclusion of Telugu-speaking regions into Andhra Pradesh has emerged following the creation of Telangana. Additionally, movements like the Mizo Uprising and the general Mahratta uprising against British rule exemplify efforts to restore democratic norms and highlight the leadership qualities of regional figures. These movements not only underscore the historical significance of regional aspirations but also contribute to the broader narrative of Indian national history, showcasing the interplay of local leadership and national identity.

4.2. Impact on Governance and Policy Making

The contemporary phase of regionalism in India significantly influences governance and policy. In recent years, as regional movements have gained prominence, the central government has been compelled to address regional grievances, adjust policies, and devolve economic and political powers

to states through various reforms. Despite a common commitment to neo-liberal economic policies, state governments have utilized their autonomy to tailor policies to local needs. The rise of regional parties has made them essential players in shaping public policies and welfare programs, often leading to changes in national policies to accommodate regional requirements.

However, tensions arise when national policies are perceived as favoring one region over another, highlighting the complexities of managing diverse regional interests within a unified framework. Scholars argue that inclusive governance requires balancing regional aspirations with centralized decision-making. At the administrative level, state administrations recognize the importance of responding promptly to local needs, often initiating policy changes under the direction of political leaders. This dynamic emphasizes that while political oversight is crucial, effective governance also depends on addressing the specific demands of diverse regions.

5. CONCLUSION

In summary, the study of regionalism in modern India is not just about the singularity, or even the exclusivity of cultural roots. The economic and, historically, the political processes that shaped the Indian subcontinent have fostered an intricate diversity both of mobilizational resources and of leaderships and followerships of resistance against distant and overbearing authorities. These varieties coalesce in a call for varying degrees of autonomy precisely because the dividing line between economic and cultural attributes in the past, for example – between highland and lowland, plains and mountains – are often mirrored now in cultural orientations, grievances and forms of political mobilization. The depth and spread of India's regionalism, of course, is not either entirely determined by a past that is always subject to a variety of mythologizations. But, even if there were an essentialist cultural essence, we could never be sure whether it would always dominate other economic considerations. Rather, regional cultural very often intertwines with the political and entrepreneurial mobilization behind it – and politics and economics take over in shaping such supposed traditional commonalities and cultural peculiarities. The historical roots, then, in the modern historical context, are the main reasons why the interlockings of poverty, economic backwardness, and marginalisation, ethnic pride and cultural injury; nationalism, regionalism and

factionalism define the spirit of the subcontinent that is often so focused are: the fundamentals of regional identity and economic and cultural aspiration that came to be crystallized somewhat earlier in the modern Indian states; the ideology of hidden exploitation and real if less hidden fiscal disaggregation embedded in two centuries of colonial rule; the politics of policy benefits and transfers, of governance and development, capable of reaching ever closer into the hinterlands of the Indian subcontinent given the now ancient and ongoing political economic desires of local empowerment.

The paper concludes that the idea of the region in the Indian social and political process seems morbid in discussion but vital in practice. It is connected with the lives of millions of Indians. The paper suggested that mainstream governance and politics should articulate the regional concern within the framework of perceived national political goals and socio-economic development. Enriched with the findings based on the period of 1947–2011, the paper offers a number of future areas of research. Evidence-based assessment of the transformation of the progress of the regions could help to revisit the question of governance. The database may also help to examine the mechanism that links the regional party or regional elite with regional aspiration and governance and patronage. A lot of literature is available on party behavior, but what and how the programs and policies of the national parties have reflected the regional movement can be explored.

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