

## Growing Significance of Regional Political Parties and their Impact Upon Indian Party Politics

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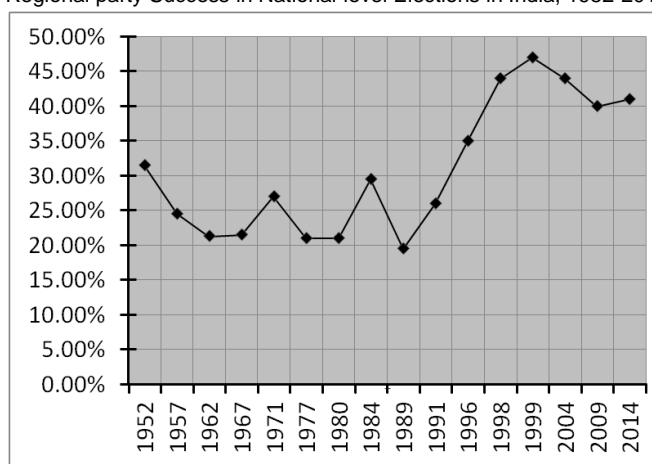
The regional parties, which number has increased to a large extent in the country, are generally confined to a particular region or a state, but their endeavour is to improve their image by establishing link with all-India parties either for the sake of bettering of their electoral prospects or for having a mark of national recognition. Since most of regional parties operate in a single state, Morris Jones calls them as 'one-state party'. The regional parties successfully exploit the local, regional and parochial grievances and thrive on the propaganda of 'regional imbalances in respect of economic development'. They represent not only the newly emergent elites but also the total complex of regional values and regional ambitions. By successfully transmitting the parochial and local discontent of the people they have carved out a significant space for themselves in the political system of the country. They have registered their presence not only in the state politics but also in the national politics. With the development of coalition system in the Indian politics the values and significance of the regional parties has increased. It has been established that the government either of the national or state may not be formed without cooperation and participation of regional parties. For last three decades, coalition government which is getting permanent feature in Indian politics has provided enough scope to the regional parties to share power with the national parties both at the centre and in states. This article discusses about the growing significance of role of regional parties and critically examines their impact upon the Indian party politics.

There has been a mushroom growth of regional parties over years. In 1952, 74 parties contested the election, whilst in recent years this number has swollen to more than 177. Presence of some of the regional parties has been an established fact today. As a result, the national parties, today, neither dare to jump into the fray of electoral politics by their own merit without making electoral alliances with the regional parties, nor did they even think of capturing political power by side tracking them. The regional parties now have come to become a force to reckon with in the political system of the country. They have stayed like a "prominent and durable feature of India's political endoscope."<sup>1</sup> Their modus operandi can have a deep impact upon national, state and local politics. No academic endeavour to analyze and evaluate the dynamics of Indian politics today can be valid if one ignores what may be described as the regional perspective and fails to take adequate account of the increasingly critical role played by the regional political parties.<sup>2</sup> From the very birth of regional political parties they exercise tremendous influence upon the national parties and shape the national politics to a significant extent.

For two decades, after India's independence the regional parties were either non-existing or out of the main play of

politics. It is all because the Indian National Congress was the only national party that had political influence all over the country. From 1967 onwards with the declining strength of Congress the pattern of Indian party politics changed where the regional parties began to register their appearance and existence. With the growing strength of regional parties the so called national parties were bound to rely upon the support of the former to form the government both in the centre and the state.<sup>3</sup> Jena is also of the view that "Realizing the crucial role of regional political parties (in Indian politics) the Congress also started taking recourse to regional perspective in various states and clamoured to ride to electoral alliances with respective regional parties in different states in order to adjust and correct its fractional balance to recoup its losses and revive its strength."<sup>4</sup> The leaders of the regional political parties who had developed interest in power sharing left no stone unturned to develop link with the national leaders and obtain their patronage. Thereafter; the marriage of convenience began between major national parties and regional parties. Meanwhile the politics of defection appeared on the political scene of the country where new parties were formed now and then and political leaders began to shift their loyalties from one party to another one just in search of power and prestige,<sup>5</sup>

Regional party Success in National-level Elections in India, 1952-2014



Source: Author's calculations based on national-level election results from the Election Commission of India (ECI).

The Chart presented above clearly indicates that in India the rise and growth of regional parties went up as the years rolled down. During the period 1952 to 2014 the position of the regional parties remained weak till 1967. After the declining strength of the Congress, the formation of regional parties came into being and its strength went up. From 1980 the growth of regional parties continued sharply upwards where as the strength of national parties could hardly improve. Though

the Congress during in 1989 improved its status by winning more seats in parliamentary elections, it failed to achieve absolute majority with the result that it was bound to take the support of regional parties for formation of government in the centre.

The day for uncertainty of the governments both at the centre and in states began. In recent years one has witnessed a succession of unstable governments both at the centre and in states owing to the archaic and chaotic function of political parties. Today, alliances and coalitions are made, broken and changed at whims, and the balance of power in this process seems to be held by the regional parties in the fringes. The leaders of these political parties skillfully posed themselves as a 'savior of common people'.

It is therefore, interesting to note that while some of the listed national parties have failed to win the requisite percentage of vote nationally, some of the regional parties like RJD, BSP, LJP, JSD, SP, TRS and DMK, AIADMK, NC, etc. have won a large percentage of National vote, despite their having a limited support base. As a matter of fact, every national party in general and the central leadership in particular has got to feel concerned about local and regional issues as their own power as more dependent upon the support drawn from regional parties.

Regionalism in Indian political system has taken deep root today due to growing people's political consciousness and their active participation in political activities. India practices parliamentary system of government where various political parties both national and regional have been allowed to compete for the power having their particular objectives and ideologies. In India regionalism is one of the heavy weights on country's political system. Not only regionalism, even sub-regionalism is playing vital role in formation of ministries and sharing political powers. Even in the appointment of government servants the base of regionalism is getting remarkable place. Sub-region clamours that within available resources whereas one era is being developed, is being ignored. In this way regionalism is getting more and more strength as well as roots and "it is being so deep, rooted that its uprooting is becoming an uphill task."<sup>6</sup>

The term 'region' lends itself to a multiplicity of meaning, the only common thread which runs through them is a basic cultural assumption that it is relatively smaller in size than the area in the context of which it is used.<sup>7</sup> It may mean a part of , a district, a part of a state but more than a district, a state or even a zone.<sup>8</sup> It also means a large tract of land, a more or less defined portion of the earth's surface specifically distinguished by certain natural features, climatic conditions, a spatial fauna or flora or the like; an administrative division of a city or a district.<sup>9</sup> The essential point is that a region is characterized, more than anything else, by a widely shared sentiment of 'togetherness' in the people, internalized by a wide variety of sources which might even include common prosperity, camaraderie developed in a common struggle etc, and what is more a separateness from others.<sup>10</sup>

The regional parties have now come to become a force to reckon with in the political system of the country. They have stayed like a "prominent and durable feature of India's political landscape."<sup>11</sup> Their modus of operendibear a deep impact upon national, state and local politics. The weight and values of regional political parties have multiplied today. Both the

regional parties and non-congress national parties here headed an anti-congress movement and struck a posture of hostility towards the Congress and thrive on whipping up the local pride and anti-centre sentiments."<sup>12</sup>

The number of regional parties has been consistently increasing since 1989. Frequent party splits, merger, and counter-splits have dramatically increased the number of regional parties on the one hand and paved the way for growth of coalition government on the other. By 2005, The Election Commission of India has recognized 7 national parties and 42 regional parties operating in India. Besides that, there are many unregistered regional political parties. Result is that the role of regional political parties in the Indian political system has become not only important but unavoidable also. In India, there are several states where the regional parties have come in power by wining majority votes or sharing coalition government. Thus, the regional parties in India have got upper hand in the Indian politics.

The finding of the survey indicates that there has been a popular support in favour of regional parties. More people tend to believe that regional parties are better than national parties when they come in power to run the government in states. What is interesting to note is that over the years support for such an opinion has increased. Support for regional parties indicates that these regional parties have not come up on their own or only on the whims of political leaders. But people also want that states should be governed by regional parties because they will bring more benefits to them in comparison to the central or national parties.

Of late, coalition politics has been the norm where one 'national' party joined forces with 'regional' parties to form the government at the center. Many a times, the national party had to bow down to the whimsical and parochial demands of regional parties. They were hijacked and held at gun point constantly. Governments fall before they could complete their full term. Policies could not be implemented and decisions could not be taken all because of coalition politics that included many ragtag elements with conflicting interests.

The trends of regionalism became so dominant in the country that it paved the way for practice of coalition government on the one hand and encouraged the politics of defection on the other. After 1980, it became obvious that no government could be stable without the support of the regional parties. At the same time there was hardly any certainty to complete full tenure of a democratically installed government due to growing elements of coalition and defection. The situation became so serious that before 1980 elections results were out, it was speculated all over India that era of coalition politics at the centre had ushered and at the national level, region alism would play a very pre-dominant and really effective role.

The trends that developed in India political system after 1996has been the polarization of parties into two groups-one led by BJP and another led by the Congress (I). The first became the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and the second one is called the United Peoples Association (UPA). It led to the formation of a polarized multy-party system with BJP and its allies on one side and other allied with non-left parties on the other side. In such alliances the value of the regional political parties multiplied. Their leaders noted that no government can be formed without the support and

cooperation of regional political parties. In such a situation, it became very much difficult to uphold the national government for full tenure with the result that the people of India witnessed formation and deformation of governments again and again causing untimely parliamentary elections. The regional political leaders while participating in the national coalition government began to behave as if they were not less than the prime minister of the country. The dashing leaders of the regional political parties while sharing power became so dashing that they began to serve frequent threats to the coalition prime ministers of withdraw their support in case their view-points were not given due consideration.

Thus, the growth of regional political parties and their growing influence due to declining strength of national parties have provided ample opportunity to them to take part in

national politics, no doubt, but at the cost of instability of the government and integrity of the nation. Today, the coalition politics has become stable in the country and it is the hard fact that no government either in the centre or in most of the states can be formed without coalition partnership. This has definitely emboldened the courage and spirit of leaders of regional political parties in India and made their mental attitude more and more stiff and hard. In such circumstances they have become hard bargainers to have power and coalition government has to function having a dagger over its head. The growth of regional political parties and their significance and influence in Indian politics have definitely brought about new trends in party politics of the country. The pattern of voting behaviour of the Indian electorate has changed where local problems and issues attract them more.

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