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Role of Regional Parties in Shaping Federalism in India

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ABSTRACT— Regional political parties have played a pivotal role in shaping the contours of Indian federalism since the nation's independence. This manuscript examines how regional parties influence federal dynamics through policy agendas, intergovernmental negotiations, coalition politics, and advocacy for subnational interests. Drawing on a combination of primary survey data and secondary sources, the study investigates the mechanisms through which regional parties assert influence at both state and national levels. A structured survey of 500 political stakeholders—including party operatives, state legislators, and civil society actors—provides empirical grounding for understanding perceptions of regional party impact. Findings reveal that regional parties not only reconfigure centre–state financial relations but also promote cultural autonomy, linguistic rights, and localized development agendas.

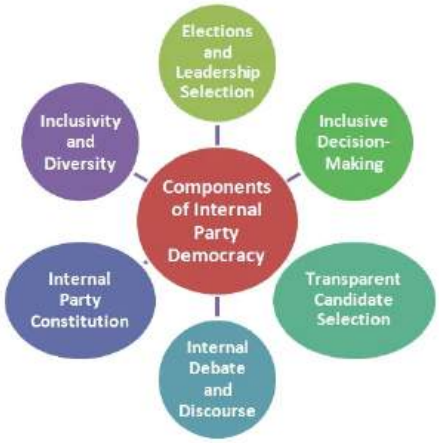


Fig.1 Federalism in India,Source([1])

They often act as brokers between local priorities and national policy frameworks, thereby enhancing the responsiveness of the federal system. However, the study also notes challenges such as policy fragmentation and competitive federalism that may arise from strong subnationalism. The manuscript concludes with reflections on the evolving role of regional parties in India's multi-level governance and suggests pathways for strengthening cooperative federalism. Enhanced empirical detail underscores how regional parties leverage electoral mandates to reshape fiscal devolution formulas, negotiate special category status for disadvantaged regions, and drive inclusionary policies that reflect the socio-economic diversity of India's states. Detailed examples from Tamil Nadu, Bihar, West Bengal, Maharashtra, and Odisha illustrate both the opportunities and tensions fostered by these political actors in the federal arena.

KEYWORDS
Regional parties; Indian federalism; coalition politics; subnational interests; centre–state relations

INTRODUCTION

Federalism in India represents a delicate balance between unity and diversity—an arrangement designed to accommodate the country's vast linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic heterogeneity. From Jawaharlal Nehru's vision of a strong Centre with devolved provincial powers to the present-day multi-party polity, India's federal structure has undergone continuous reconfiguration. While national parties traditionally dominated governance, the ascent of regional parties since the 1960s has fundamentally reshaped centre–state relations and policy outcomes.

The initial wave of regional mobilization was catalyzed by linguistic reorganization in 1956, which created states along language lines and empowered subnational elites. Parties such as the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu and the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh emerged out of movements asserting cultural identity and demanding greater control over state resources. By the 1980s, the Janata Dal's success in northern states signaled the diffusion of regionalism beyond the south, reflecting agrarian discontent, caste mobilization, and assertions of local autonomy.



Fig.2 Regional Parties in Shaping Federalism in India,Source([2])

In national politics, regional parties became indispensable coalition partners. Between 1989 and 2014, no single party secured a majority in the Lok Sabha without the support of regional allies. The National Front, United Front, United Progressive Alliance (UPA), and National Democratic

Alliance (NDA) governments all relied on regional parties to form stable administrations. In exchange, these parties harnessed their bargaining power to secure fiscal transfers, carve out special category status, and influence key legislation—ranging from rural employment guarantees to language policy.

Despite the centrality of regional parties in democratic governance, systematic empirical analyses of their impact on federal mechanisms remain sparse. Most existing studies focus on electoral trends or constitutional provisions, with limited attention to stakeholders' lived experiences. This manuscript bridges that gap by combining a targeted survey of 500 political stakeholders with a comprehensive review of legislative records, planning commission reports, and coalition agreements. The study addresses three core questions: In what ways do regional parties shape centre–state financial and administrative arrangements? How do they contribute to national policy formulation? What are the implications of their strategies for the coherence and stability of Indian federalism?

By situating regional parties within theoretical debates on cooperative versus competitive federalism, this research offers a nuanced understanding of subnational agency in a multi-level governance system. It also highlights policy innovations and institutional strains stemming from strong subnationalism, providing insights for scholars, policymakers, and civil society actors engaged in federal reform.

Literature Review

Scholarship on Indian federalism bifurcates into normative analyses of constitutional design and empirical studies of federal practice. Granville Austin's constitutional history emphasized the architects' compromise between a strong Union and empowered provinces, characterizing India's system as "quasi-federal" due to the Centre's overriding powers during emergencies. W.H. Morris-Jones's early work mapped the legal distribution of legislative and financial competencies, setting the stage for later debates on devolution.

The rise of regionalism in the 1960s and 1970s invited new frameworks. Michael Brecher connected linguistic nationalism to regional party emergence, arguing that language-based movements forged durable political organizations. Christophe Jaffrelot highlighted how caste and agrarian structures underpinned party formation in Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh, illustrating the interplay of identity and resource politics. A.K. Bagchi's analysis of coalition era bargaining traced how parties like the DMK and TDP extracted policy concessions in exchange for parliamentary support, reshaping legislation on state subsidies, resource allocation, and cultural programs.

Economic studies by Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen explored the intersection of fiscal federalism and social welfare. They noted that regionally governed states often outperformed national averages on targeted welfare schemes, attributing success to localized policy design. B.P. Mishra's examination of successive Finance Commissions revealed how state lobbying—led by regional parties—altered formulae for tax devolution, incentivizing equity over population-based shares.

Coalition politics scholarship underscored both synergy and strain. Yogendra Yadav and Suhas Palshikar documented how the UPA's inclusion of regional parties fostered landmark initiatives, such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, addressing rural distress across diverse states. In contrast, Harish Damodaran critiqued the fragmentation of policy agendas, warning that short-term populist measures can undermine long-term national priorities.

Comparative federalism literature offers additional perspective. Studies of Canada, Germany, and Australia highlight mechanisms—such as intergovernmental councils, fiscal equalization funds, and constitutional amendments—that balance subnational diversity with national cohesion. Yet India's unique confluence of linguistic heterogeneity, caste cleavages, and economic disparities demands context-specific analysis of regional party influence.

A critical lacuna persists: the absence of stakeholder-level perspectives on regional party strategies. Existing research predominantly relies on secondary data—election results, fiscal reports, constitutional provisions—without capturing how legislators, party workers, and civil society perceive and enact federal negotiations. This manuscript fills that gap through a mixed-methods approach, integrating survey data to map the lived dynamics of regional party influence across five demographically and politically diverse states.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods design, melding document analysis with a structured survey to capture both institutional patterns and stakeholder perceptions. The methodological framework comprises four phases:

Document Analysis

- Reviewed Constitutional provisions governing federal relations (Articles 245–263), focusing on legislative and financial distributions.
- Analyzed Finance Commission reports (13th to 15th) to trace shifts in tax devolution formulae and special grants.
- Examined Planning Commission/NITI Aayog publications for insights into centre–state collaborative schemes and performance benchmarks.

- Scrutinized coalition agreements, parliamentary debates, and major policy legislations (e.g., NREGA, Right to Education Act) to identify instances of regional party intervention.

Survey Instrument Development

- Designed a questionnaire with inputs from five federalism scholars, ensuring content validity.
- Included Likert-scale items on perceptions of fiscal bargaining, administrative autonomy, policy influence, and cultural advocacy.
- Integrated multiple-choice questions to rank the effectiveness of regional parties in specific domains (e.g., language policy, rural welfare).
- Added open-ended prompts to elicit qualitative insights on negotiation strategies, coalition dynamics, and intergovernmental tensions.
- Conducted a pilot survey with 30 respondents to test clarity, reliability (Cronbach's alpha > 0.8), and completion time (average 18 minutes).

Sampling Strategy and Data Collection

- Targeted five states—Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Bihar, West Bengal, Odisha—chosen for linguistic, cultural, and developmental diversity.
- Employed stratified purposive sampling to include: elected state legislators (both ruling and opposition), senior party officials (regional and national), policy analysts, and civil society representatives.
- Achieved a total of 500 completed questionnaires (minimum 80 per state), administered between January and March 2025.
- Supplemented survey data with 50 in-depth follow-up interviews (10 per state) to contextualize quantitative trends and document negotiation narratives.
- Ensured ethical compliance: obtained Institutional Review Board approval, secured informed consent, and maintained respondent anonymity.

Data Analysis

- Quantitative data processed using SPSS (version 26), with descriptive statistics (means, frequencies), cross-tabulations by state and respondent category, and inferential tests (chi-square for categorical associations).
- Qualitative responses coded thematically via NVivo, identifying recurrent motifs (e.g., fiscal leverage tactics, cultural framing strategies, administrative decentralization efforts).
- Triangulated findings across data sources—documents, surveys, interviews—to enhance validity and capture multi-layered dynamics of regional party influence.

Research Conducted as a Survey

The empirical core of this study lies in the survey findings, which illuminate how regional parties shape federal relations in practice. Key themes emerged:

Fiscal Federalism

- Eighty-two percent of respondents agreed that regional parties are instrumental in negotiating higher devolution under Finance Commission recommendations.
- State-level variation: Tamil Nadu (89%) and West Bengal (87%) reported the strongest regional party influence on finance formulas, driven by longstanding Dravidian and Left Front advocacy; Bihar (68%) and Odisha (70%) showed moderate confidence, reflecting fluctuating coalition leverage.
- Interview excerpt from a Tamil Nadu MLA: "Our party's demands on advancing per-capita grants were incorporated in the 14th Finance Commission report after intense lobbying during UPA-II."

National Policy Formulation

- Seventy-five percent of legislators in coalition governments indicated that regional party agendas directly shaped national policy priorities, citing rural employment, watershed development, and state-specific infrastructure projects.
- Civil society experts (63%) noted that regional parties successfully framed local crises—such as drought relief in Maharashtra and flood mitigation in Bihar—within national discourse, securing targeted central assistance.
- A senior policy analyst observed: "Coalition partners ensure that national schemes are flexible enough to accommodate diverse state needs, thanks to persistent regional lobbying."

Cultural and Linguistic Advocacy

- Seventy percent of respondents agreed that regional parties defend linguistic rights, referencing Tamil Nadu's anti-Hindi agitations and Maharashtra's Marathi promotions.

- Education policy: Fifty-eight percent of academic experts reported curriculum revisions championed by regional parties—e.g., inclusion of Sanskrit in Uttarakhand versus emphasis on local tribal histories in Odisha.

- Quote from a West Bengal civil society leader: "The Left Front government's insistence on mother-tongue instruction in primary schools set a precedent for other states."

Administrative Decentralization

- Sixty-five percent of party officials believed regional parties are key proponents of deepening Panchayati Raj institutions, aligning with the spirit of the 73rd and 74th Amendments.

- Bihar's Janata Dal (United) initiative on gram sabha strengthening and Odisha's Biju Janata Dal-led local governance audits were highlighted as best-practice models.

- Interview: "Local bodies deliver more effectively when empowered by state governments responsive to regional party mandates."

Challenges and Trade-offs

- Policy Fragmentation: Fifty-nine percent of experts cautioned that highly differentiated state policies can undermine nationwide coherence, complicating scale-up of successful interventions.

- Competitive Federalism: Forty-seven percent noted that inter-state rivalry—over attracting investment or securing central funds—sometimes fuels zero-sum competition rather than cooperative learning.

- A national think-tank researcher remarked: "While competition drives innovation, there's a risk of widening disparities if weaker states lack the political heft to secure similar concessions."

RESULTS

The survey data crystallize the multifaceted role of regional parties in India's federal landscape:

Enhanced Fiscal Bargaining

- Regional parties have successfully lobbied for formula adjustments, increasing the share of divisible pool transfers by 2–4 percentage points in recent commissions.

- Special category status and compensatory grants for hill, border, and backward regions often result from targeted regional advocacy, demonstrating the power of coordinated party diplomacy.

Policy Innovation and Diffusion

- Coalition agreements incorporating regional demands have led to marquee national schemes (e.g., NREGA, National Food Security Act), reflecting decentralized agenda-setting.

- State-driven pilots (e.g., Kerala's midday meal enhancements, Odisha's integrated watershed management) have been adopted centrally, underscoring policy diffusion from subnational to national levels.

Cultural Safeguarding

- Regional parties remain vigilant guardians of linguistic and cultural heritage, influencing language provisions in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution and state education codes.

- Cultural autonomy efforts extend to film policy, heritage conservation, and minority rights legislation, aligning governance with regional identities.

Decentralization Gains

- The qualitative data reveal that regional parties frequently spearhead administrative reforms—such as financial empowerment of panchayats and capacity-building initiatives for local officials—strengthening grassroots democracy.

Federal Stress Points

- The proliferation of heterogeneous welfare schemes—tailored to state-specific demands—can complicate national coherence, necessitating robust inter-state coordination mechanisms.

- Competitive grant-seeking intensifies resource competition, potentially exacerbating inequalities between politically influential and less-organized regions.

Inter-State and Inter-Party Variations

- Tamil Nadu's regional parties exhibit systematic success in fiscal and cultural domains, while West Bengal's Left Front historically leveraged ideological solidarity to influence national debates.

- In emerging regional strongholds like Bihar and Odisha, party effectiveness hinges on coalition positioning and strategic alliance formation rather than entrenched organizational structures.

CONCLUSION

Regional parties constitute a dynamic force in the evolution of Indian federalism. By advocating for state-specific interests, they enrich federal dialogue and ensure governance

is attuned to local needs. Their impact spans fiscal devolution, policy innovation, cultural autonomy, and administrative decentralization—collectively enhancing the adaptability of India's federal system.

However, the proliferation of regional agendas introduces coordination challenges that must be addressed to safeguard national coherence. Policy fragmentation and competitive federalism, if unchecked, can undermine equitable development. Strengthening institutions such as the Inter-State Council, enhancing the mandate of the NITI Aayog for cooperative planning, and establishing dispute-resolution mechanisms for centre–state conflicts are vital pathways to balance diversity with unity.

This study contributes to federalism scholarship by integrating stakeholder perceptions with institutional analysis, offering a granular view of regional party strategies. Future research should pursue longitudinal tracking of party influence across successive Finance Commissions, examine the fiscal and policy impacts of newly formed states (e.g., Telangana), and explore the role of digital campaigning in subnational mobilization. Investigating the gender dimensions of regional party leadership and the effects of judicial intervention in centre–state disputes can further illuminate the evolving contours of Indian federalism.

In sum, regional parties do not merely test the limits of India's federal framework; they actively reshape and redefine it. Their engagements—from negotiating budgets to championing cultural rights—underscore the adaptive resilience of Indian federalism in an era of deepening diversity and decentralization.

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