Historical Research
Journal of History and Archaeology
www.hrjha.lexarcheus.com
Vol.-02, No.-02 (Apr-Jun, 2024)

Development of State Politics in India

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History

Received	23 Apr, 2024
Revised	24 May, 2024
Accepted	30 Jun, 2024
Available Online	30 Jun, 2024

ARTICLE ID
HRJHA0202005

KEYWORDS

Federalism, Regional Parties, Identity Politics, Decentralisation, Coalition Governments, State Autonomy.

OPEN ACCESS

ABSTRACT

The study traces the evolution of state politics in India from the post-independence era to the present, highlighting its growing significance in shaping the federal structure and democratic processes. Initially sidelined in favour of national politics, state-level politics gained scholarly and political attention by the 1960s, catalyzed by regional insurgencies, caste-based mobilisations, and intra-party conflicts. The rise of regional parties and identity-based movements reshaped the political landscape, especially in the wake of the Congress Party's decline. Institutional reforms—such as the formation of the Sarkaria and Punchhi Commissions, the introduction of GST, and the 73rd and 74th Amendments—deepened Indian federalism, decentralising authority and expanding subnational autonomy. The article also explores the impact of globalisation and identity politics, especially in states marked by linguistic, caste, or religious assertion. Ultimately, it argues that Indian democracy today is significantly defined by the interplay between national imperatives and dynamic state-level political developments.

Historical Research: Journal of History and Archaeology
ISSN: 2583-9764
Vol. 02, No. 02, Apr-Jun, 2024
www.hrjha.lexarcheus.com

INTRODUCTION

The development of state politics as a distinct area of inquiry in India emerged gradually in the decades following independence, driven by structural reconfigurations and political shifts. The formal reorganisation of states in 1956 provided a new administrative and political foundation for the Indian Union, granting individual states clearer identities. This reorganisation replaced the earlier categorisation of states into A, B, C, and D types and marked a turning point in how scholars and political practitioners viewed subnational governance (Weiner, 1968).

Despite the structural transformation in the 1950s, political science as a discipline did not immediately direct its attention to the study of state-level politics. It was only in the 1960s that scholars began recognising state politics as a distinct academic field. The growing instability and divergent political patterns in several states during that period made it apparent that state-level dynamics could no longer be subsumed under the umbrella of national politics (Chaube, 1997). The shift was academic as well as empirical. Myron Weiner played a central role in catalysing this change through seminars held in the United States—in 1961 at the University of Chicago and in 1964 at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. These forums provided the first scholarly platform to examine subnational political developments in India. Researchers presented studies covering nine of the then seventeen Indian states, and the collected outcomes were later published in *State Politics in India* (1968), edited by Weiner. Unlike Weiner's work, which was selective, Iqbal Narain's edited volume of 1976 attempted to cover all Indian states, including Assam and Jammu & Kashmir, making it a broader and more inclusive survey.

This academic attention coincided with transformations in the political structure of the Indian federation. Initially, the centre exercised substantial control, and state politics largely mirrored national trends. The central government under Nehru pursued a model of top-down nation-building, and the Congress Party's dominance at both the national and state levels reinforced uniformity. In this framework, state-level leaders were often viewed as extensions of national figures. Governors, appointed by the central government, largely functioned without controversy due to political alignment. Policy initiatives like land reforms and community development were directed by the centre, and state governments implemented these within a narrow margin of autonomy (Weiner, 1968).

However, this uniformity was soon tested by both internal dissent and ideological alternatives. Insurgencies in Nagaland and Mizoram, the Plebiscite Front movement in Jammu and Kashmir, and the linguistic demands in southern India challenged the centralist model (Chaube, 1997). Political formations outside the Congress—such as the Socialists and the Left in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Kerala, and West Bengal; the Jana Sangh in the Hindi heartland; and the Akali Dal in Punjab—emerged as organised forces opposing Congress-led politics. These groups mobilised local grievances ranging from language and religion to caste-based discrimination, laying the groundwork for an increasingly pluralistic political arena.

The early assertion of Dalit groups also reshaped the terrain of state politics. In Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh, the Republican Party of India (RPI) galvanised support among Dalits, as did the Dalit Panther movement. At the same time, conservative parties like the Swatantra Party found traction in states such as Gujarat and Rajasthan, appealing to property-owning classes and opposing

Congress' socialist policies. These developments fractured the earlier perception of political homogeneity and drew scholarly attention to the shifting ground beneath the Congress' feet. Selig Harrison's label of the 1950s as India's "most dangerous decade" captured the mounting unpredictability of this period (Dasgupta, 1985).

Internal schisms within the Congress Party further deepened this process. Faction leaders began establishing their own political bases within their respective states, often relying on caste and class coalitions. Charan Singh in Uttar Pradesh is a pertinent example. As a member of the Congress, he had already developed a strong support base among intermediary and backward castes. His conflict with other party leaders contributed to the fragmentation of the party in the state and led to the rise of an independent rural political force. These internal divisions culminated in the Congress' defeat in several states during the 1967 general elections and paved the way for coalition governments by 1969, signalling a turning point in India's federal democracy (Weiner, 1968).

Since the 1990s, state politics has transcended its earlier secondary role and now shapes national policy and political agendas. The emergence of coalition governments at the central level has elevated states from passive administrative units to active political stakeholders. Regional parties, often born out of state-specific movements, now play decisive roles in central governance. Their ability to set legislative priorities and negotiate policy positions reflects a redistribution of power within the Indian federal structure. These parties embody varied regional and social interests, making them indispensable to the functioning of coalition governments.

RISE OF REGIONAL FORCES AND STATE

The transformation in the patterns of state politics in India during the 1960s and 1970s can be traced to a convergence of political shifts following the death of Jawaharlal Nehru and the internal reconfiguration of the Congress party under Indira Gandhi. With the erosion of the original Congress system, Indira Gandhi's rise marked a new phase in which political power became increasingly centralised and personalised. The result was a sharp divergence from Nehruvian institutionalism and a recalibration of how the states interacted with the central government (Palshikar, 2003).

The agrarian restructuring of this era, particularly in the Green Revolution belt, reshaped power dynamics within states. The emergence of a rural elite—commonly referred to as kulaks—offered a strong social base for the evolution of regional leadership. Examples include the rise of Jats in Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, and Punjab; Yadavs and Kurmis in Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh; Reddies and Kammas in Andhra Pradesh; and Lingayats and Vokkaligas in Karnataka. These groups did not merely seek economic advancement but mobilised politically to protect and expand their interests. Charan Singh's formation of the Bharatiya Kranti Dal illustrates this shift. His consistent emphasis on agrarian priorities allowed him to wield influence in northern Indian politics from 1967 to 1987. In states such as Bihar and Haryana, comparable figures emerged, reflecting a broader trend in which state politics became rooted in caste-aligned, class-conscious rural movements (Dasgupta, 1985).

As these state-level leaders gained prominence, they began challenging the unitary tendencies of the central government. Demands for a reassessment of centre-state relations gained traction. Suspicion over the role of governors, seen as central government emissaries loyal to the Congress,

fed into growing discontent. Regional leaders began asserting autonomy in legislative and executive matters, shifting the balance of power away from the centre (Deka et al., 1984).

The political turbulence of the 1970s deepened the divide. The Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi from 1975 to 1977 served as both a catalyst and a crucible for opposition forces. Leaders from across ideological and regional spectrums coalesced to form the Janata Party, combining regional and national agendas into a single political force. Once in power, the Janata-led coalition initiated policy shifts that further empowered backward classes and challenged Congress dominance. The appointment of the Mandal Commission and implementation of backward class reservations in states such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh laid the foundation for the emergence of caste-based identity politics that redefined both electoral and administrative arrangements (Palshikar, 2003).

Challenges to Indira Gandhi's authority came not only from electoral opposition but also from grassroots agitation. The JP Movement and the Gujarat protests exposed growing dissatisfaction with centralised governance and set the stage for mass mobilisation beyond parliamentary frameworks. The resulting imposition of the Emergency and the subsequent return to democracy created space for leaders like Charan Singh, Karpoori Thakur, Devi Lal, and others to transition from regional bases to national leadership roles. These figures brought state-level agendas into national discourse, making state politics a central factor in shaping the country's overall political direction (Deka et al., 1984).

From the 1980s onward, the assertion of multiple social identities further diversified the political terrain. Caste-based movements among Dalits and backward classes in north India, particularly through entities like the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and various formations of the Janata Dal, responded to state policies that had previously excluded them. These developments were not isolated. Their roots lay in similar assertions in southern India, where caste mobilisation had already altered state politics decades earlier. The shift was not limited to formal political parties. Non-party caste associations and religious fronts began to influence the political discourse in parallel, further fragmenting the social base of electoral politics (Dyson, Cassen, & Visaria, 2004).

The same period witnessed the resurgence of farmer-based organisations. Groups such as the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) in Uttar Pradesh and Punjab, Shetkari Sangathan in Maharashtra, and Khedut Samaj in Gujarat transformed into pressure groups capable of influencing state-level policies. The earlier generation of rural elites had campaigned for political representation and agrarian reform; their successors now focused on issues tied to market access, procurement prices, and economic liberalisation. The priorities had shifted from state-centric governance to economic justice within a liberalising economy (Dyson, Cassen, & Visaria, 2004).

The onset of globalisation in the 1990s introduced another layer of complexity. The liberalisation policies of the central government weakened its ability to dictate uniform economic agendas. States were now in a position to negotiate their own developmental strategies, particularly in attracting foreign investment. However, the impact of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) was uneven. States with better infrastructure, skilled labour, and administrative stability attracted investment, while others lagged behind. This disparity intensified regional inequalities and created new forms of competition among states (Observer Research Foundation, 1996).

Lawrence Saez's analysis in *Federalism Without a Centre* illustrates how globalisation shifted authority away from New Delhi. States began engaging directly with international agencies, albeit with central approval, a practice virtually unknown in the earlier decades. At the same time, inter-governmental cooperation eroded, replaced by jurisdictional rivalry. The result was a federal structure marked by both decentralisation and discord (Palshikar, 2003).

Political fragmentation followed suit. In most states, no single party retained dominance, leading to the emergence of bipolar or multipolar competition. West Bengal stood as a rare exception where the Left Front retained dominance through coalition-building. In contrast, states across the north, south, and east witnessed the rise of regional parties oriented around caste, religion, and linguistic identities. The Samajwadi Party, Rashtriya Janata Dal, AIADMK, DMK, Shiv Sena, Biju Janata Dal, and Akali Dal, among others, began playing decisive roles at both state and national levels through strategic alliances. These formations used electoral and non-electoral mobilisation strategies to ensure representation of their constituencies (Observer Research Foundation, 1996).

The era also saw the entrenchment of insurgencies and movements demanding self-determination. In regions such as the North-East, Punjab, and Jammu and Kashmir, insurgent demands emerged as counter-narratives to the homogenising project of nation-building pursued by the centre. While insurgency had existed since the early years of independence—such as the Naga and Mizo movements or the Plebiscite Front in Kashmir—it expanded dramatically in the 1980s. These movements often splintered from earlier mass agitations, such as the All Assam Students Union (AASU), giving rise to organisations like the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and the Bodo and Karbi movements (Observer Research Foundation, 1996).

These insurgent actions cannot be reduced to law-and-order issues alone. They represent deep-seated dissatisfaction with developmental neglect, cultural marginalisation, and resistance to the centralised imposition of national identity. At times, such insurgencies have demanded full sovereignty; in other cases, they have sought autonomy within the Indian union. In either case, the politics of insurgency intersect with state politics and shape the federal discourse (Palshikar, 2003).

INSTITUTIONAL REFORMS AND THE DEEPENING OF FEDERALISM

The Indian federal system has evolved considerably since independence, moving from a quasi-federal, highly centralised framework to a more negotiated and participatory form of federalism. This transformation has not occurred automatically but through a series of institutional reforms that have reshaped the distribution of power, resources, and responsibility between the Union and the States. These reforms, both formal and informal, have influenced governance, fiscal arrangements, and intergovernmental relations. This essay analyses the key institutional reforms that have deepened Indian federalism, focusing on constitutional commissions, administrative shifts, fiscal decentralisation, and the growing role of state governments in shaping national policy.

Institutional Reforms and the Deepening of Federalism in India

The evolution of federalism in India has not been a mere constitutional inheritance, but a dynamic and contested process shaped by institutional reforms, political shifts, and administrative innovations. At the time of independence, the Indian Constitution deliberately opted for a federal structure with a strong centralising tendency. This design was influenced by concerns about national

unity, administrative efficiency, and the trauma of partition. In contrast to classical federal models such as the United States, India's federalism was often described as "quasi-federal," where the Union enjoyed substantial supremacy over the states, especially in legislative, fiscal, and emergency matters. However, over the decades, this centralised framework has undergone critical transformations due to both formal institutional interventions and evolving political practices that have deepened the federal structure.

One of the earliest and most influential institutional reforms that attempted to redress the central bias was the establishment of the Sarkaria Commission in 1983. Chaired by Justice R.S. Sarkaria, the Commission was tasked with reviewing Centre-State relations and recommending measures for better coordination and balance. The Commission's report, submitted in 1988, was a watershed in federal discourse. It acknowledged the overreach of the Union in various domains and called for greater decentralisation. Among its significant recommendations were the strengthening of the Inter-State Council under Article 263, curbing the misuse of Article 356 (President's Rule), and advocating for greater financial and functional autonomy to states, especially in the Concurrent List where the overlap of jurisdictions often led to conflict. Although many of these recommendations were not formally adopted as law, they created a normative framework that has influenced subsequent reforms and judicial interpretations (Palshikar, 2003).

Two decades later, the Punchhi Commission (2007–2010) was constituted to revisit federal relations in the context of new realities—economic liberalisation, coalition politics, and globalisation. Unlike the Sarkaria Commission, the Punchhi panel was more vocal in highlighting the growing asymmetry in the federation. It recommended fixed tenures and depoliticisation of governors, who were increasingly seen as instruments of central influence in opposition-ruled states (Observer Research Foundation, 1996). Furthermore, the Commission suggested that state consent be made mandatory before deploying central forces, and that centrally sponsored schemes (CSS) should be rationalised to reduce fiscal dependency. It also took a more radical stance by suggesting constitutional amendments to empower states in critical areas such as education, health, and local governance. The Punchhi Commission reflected a deepening awareness that federalism in India needed continuous updating, especially as political diversity and economic differentiation among states intensified (Srinivasulu, 2003).

Parallel to these commissions, a more collaborative intergovernmental architecture began to take shape. The Inter-State Council, though recommended by the Constitution in Article 263, was set up only in 1990. This delay underscores the reluctance of the Union to share decision-making space. Once operational, the Council emerged as a forum for discussion on subjects of common interest, especially those involving policy overlaps or administrative disputes. However, its advisory nature and irregular meetings limited its potential. Similarly, the Zonal Councils established under the States Reorganisation Act of 1956 facilitated inter-state cooperation on issues such as border disputes, law and order, and economic development. While useful, these councils function more as administrative platforms rather than decision-making bodies, and their efficacy remains largely dependent on the political will of the Union government.

Perhaps the most consequential institutional reform in the realm of fiscal federalism has been the periodic recommendations of the Finance Commissions. Tasked with allocating the divisible pool

of taxes between the Union and the States, these commissions have gradually increased the fiscal space for states. The 14th Finance Commission (2015–2020), for instance, raised the states' share from 32% to 42%, a move hailed as a substantial gesture toward fiscal autonomy. Yet, this devolution was offset by a simultaneous reduction in the number and volume of centrally sponsored schemes. In effect, while states received a greater share of tax revenue, they were also expected to shoulder more developmental responsibilities without adequate central support. The 15th Finance Commission continued this trend but also added performance-based incentives, further introducing conditionalities into fiscal transfers. This conditionality framework has sparked debate about whether such performance metrics erode or reinforce federalism, particularly for less developed states with fewer institutional capacities (Srinivasulu, 2003).

Another critical transformation occurred in 2017 with the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) and the formation of the GST Council under Article 279A. The Council is perhaps the most innovative institutional reform in post-independence Indian federalism. It includes the Finance Ministers of all states and is chaired by the Union Finance Minister. Unlike most intergovernmental bodies, the GST Council operates on a consensus-based decision-making process. It deliberates and decides on tax rates, exemptions, and revenue-sharing formulas. The Council has, despite some disagreements, functioned as a cooperative federal mechanism, where states have real bargaining power. However, delays in compensation payments, central dominance in decision-making, and the pandemic-induced revenue shortfalls have exposed the fragility of this arrangement. Still, the GST Council remains a vital institutional experiment that reflects a maturing federal democracy where economic integration and state autonomy must be balanced.

The judiciary, too, has been instrumental in institutionalising and defending federalism. The Supreme Court's landmark decision in *S.R. Bommai v. Union of India* (1994) laid down strict guidelines for the imposition of President's Rule under Article 356, effectively curbing its misuse. The Court held that the majority enjoyed by a government must be tested on the floor of the House and that arbitrary dismissal of state governments was unconstitutional. Similarly, in *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala* (1973), the Court introduced the 'basic structure doctrine,' identifying federalism as an inviolable element of the Constitution. While the judiciary has occasionally upheld central prerogatives, especially in security and fiscal matters, it has consistently underscored the need to maintain the federal balance. These judicial interventions form an important institutional layer that protects the spirit of decentralisation from political manipulation (Srinivasulu, 2003).

The changing landscape of Indian politics since the 1990s has also contributed to the deepening of federalism through informal but significant institutional shifts. The rise of coalition governments at the national level made it imperative for the Union to accommodate the interests of regional parties, many of which emerged from strong subnational movements. Parties like the DMK, TMC, Shiv Sena, RJD, and BJD began to wield influence disproportionate to their numerical strength, shaping policies and appointments at the Union level. This "coalition federalism" introduced a culture of negotiation and compromise that had previously been absent from India's political system. While it did not alter the constitutional design, it added a layer of federal bargaining that further decentralised political power.

The abolition of the Planning Commission in 2014 and the establishment of NITI Aayog marked a paradigmatic shift in federal planning. Unlike the Planning Commission, which allocated funds and imposed plan targets, NITI Aayog serves as a policy think tank and advisory body. Its mandate is to promote cooperative federalism by engaging states in policy formulation. Through mechanisms like state rankings on health, education, and infrastructure, NITI Aayog has introduced a new model of "competitive federalism." States are now encouraged to innovate and perform better to attract central incentives and private investment. While this encourages efficiency and accountability, it also risks deepening regional inequalities, as poorer states may lack the capacity to compete effectively. The absence of financial devolution through NITI Aayog, unlike the Planning Commission, has also reduced the states' leverage in central policymaking (Srinivasulu, 2003).

Another layer to India's evolving federalism emerged through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1992, which institutionalised local self-governments in rural and urban areas respectively. These amendments mandated regular elections, the creation of State Finance Commissions, and the devolution of powers, responsibilities, and resources to local bodies. While primarily seen as a move toward grassroots democracy, these reforms added a third tier to India's federal structure. In states like Kerala, Karnataka, and West Bengal, decentralisation has facilitated participatory governance and local-level planning. However, in many states, the implementation remains symbolic due to the reluctance of state governments to share power with local institutions. Nevertheless, this decentralisation has contributed to a broader and deeper understanding of federalism as not just Union-State relations but as a multilayered structure of power-sharing.

However, not all developments in recent times have strengthened federalism. The increasing centralisation of power under a dominant political regime has raised questions about the erosion of federal values. Legislative overreach through ordinances, weakening of parliamentary federal institutions such as the Rajya Sabha, and the use of central agencies to target opposition-ruled states have sparked concerns about democratic backsliding. Efforts to implement one-nation-one-election, centralise education curricula, or pursue a Uniform Civil Code without state consultation are seen by critics as attempts to homogenise the diverse federal mosaic of India. These trends underscore the importance of reinvigorating institutional mechanisms like the Inter-State Council and the Finance Commission to ensure that federalism remains vibrant and participatory.

Identity Politics and the Reshaping of Subnational Democracies

The evolution of subnational democracies in India has been significantly influenced by the assertive politics of identity. Unlike the nationalist narrative that often projects unity through a singular cultural or political lens, identity politics stems from a recognition of India's deep-seated diversities—caste, language, religion, ethnicity, and region. This multiplicity has historically existed alongside India's constitutional promise of equality and representation. However, it is through the democratic processes at the state level that these identities have found potent expression, challenging the centralising tendencies of the Indian polity and redefining the very nature of governance and democratic participation within states (Srinivasulu, 2003).

The term "identity politics" in the Indian context refers to the mobilisation of social groups—be they caste-based, linguistic, religious, or ethnic—around a shared sense of marginalisation, aspiration, or cultural pride. In a country as heterogenous as India, this phenomenon is not a deviation

from democratic functioning but rather an intensification of it. Subnational democracies—political regimes operating at the level of states—have become laboratories where these identity-based claims are negotiated, institutionalised, and contested. The emergence and success of regional parties such as the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), Shiv Sena, All India Trinamool Congress (AITC), and the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) illustrate how identity politics has transformed state-level governance, giving voice to groups historically excluded from power (Vinayak, 1997).

Caste has been one of the most enduring axes of identity politics in India. While the Indian Constitution outlawed untouchability and aimed to create a casteless society through affirmative action, political movements throughout the post-independence era have revealed that caste identities remain deeply embedded in socio-economic life. In subnational democracies, caste-based mobilisation has provided an avenue for political assertion, particularly among the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), Dalits, and Adivasis. The Mandal Commission's implementation in the early 1990s marked a watershed moment in this regard, as it institutionalised OBC reservations in public employment and education. State governments, particularly in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, saw the emergence of parties rooted in backward caste mobilisations, such as the Samajwadi Party (SP) and RJD. These parties not only restructured electoral politics but also redefined the administrative and cultural tone of the state, prioritising caste-based justice, symbolic representation, and policies targeting social equity (Vinayak, 1997).

Language and regional nationalism have also been foundational to the growth of subnational identities. The linguistic reorganisation of states in 1956 provided administrative recognition to language as a basis for state formation. However, this did not dilute linguistic pride; rather, it reinforced it within democratic structures. In Tamil Nadu, the Dravidian movement led by the DMK and later the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) constructed an alternative narrative of Tamil identity that resisted Hindi imposition and projected a distinct cultural ethos. Language in this context became not only a tool of communication but a vehicle of political mobilisation and governance philosophy. Tamil identity politics emphasised rationalism, anti-Brahminism, and regional autonomy, which sharply contrasted with the homogenising project of the Hindi heartland. In states such as Maharashtra, similar currents found expression through the Shiv Sena, which mobilised Marathi pride against perceived north Indian domination in employment and urban spaces like Mumbai.

Religion-based identity politics has also left a deep imprint on subnational politics. In Punjab, the rise of the Akali Dal and the later emergence of Khalistani separatism were grounded in a Sikh ethno-religious identity that contested central policies, particularly during the Emergency and Operation Blue Star. While the violent phase of separatism has largely receded, the legacy of religious identity politics continues to shape state-level debates on autonomy, cultural rights, and minority protections. In Jammu and Kashmir, religious identity has been central to both electoral politics and insurgent mobilisations. The special status of the state under Article 370 (now abrogated) reflected an institutional recognition of this distinct identity. Its revocation in 2019 has re-opened questions about the role of identity in federal arrangements and the future of subnational democracies under increasing centralisation (Vinayak, 1997).

Northeastern states such as Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, and Mizoram represent another complex dimension of identity politics. These states have witnessed prolonged ethnic and tribal insurgencies rooted in historical grievances, demands for self-determination, and assertions of cultural autonomy. In Assam, the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and later the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) emerged from movements against illegal immigration and for the protection of Assamese identity. In Nagaland and Mizoram, armed struggles led to political settlements that gave rise to locally dominant parties like the Naga People's Front (NPF) and Mizo National Front (MNF). These movements and their political outcomes illustrate how subnational democracies are often shaped by the need to accommodate multiple and sometimes competing identity claims within a constitutional framework.

Importantly, identity politics has redefined the nature of representation in Indian democracy. Traditional liberal models of representation based on individuals and ideologies have been supplemented, and in many cases replaced, by group-based representation. In subnational democracies, this has meant that electoral success often depends on the ability to aggregate and articulate group interests. Leaders like Kanshi Ram and Mayawati in Uttar Pradesh, Lalu Prasad Yadav in Bihar, and M.G. Ramachandran in Tamil Nadu understood that political legitimacy and power could be derived from collective identities rather than abstract principles. While this shift has been criticised for promoting narrow sectarianism, it has also democratised political space, enabling historically silenced voices to find platforms and policies that speak to their lived experiences (Vinayak, 1997).

CONCLUSION

However, the rise of identity politics has also generated tensions and contradictions within subnational democracies. One major concern is the tendency toward political fragmentation and the weakening of pan-state solidarities. In states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, the entrenchment of caste-based parties has sometimes led to polarised governance, where developmental agendas take a back seat to symbolic politics and clientelism. Moreover, identity-based mobilisation can create exclusionary narratives that pit one community against another, thereby undermining the secular and inclusive fabric of Indian democracy. This is particularly evident when dominant caste or regional elites use identity politics to preserve their privileges rather than challenge systemic inequities. Despite these limitations, identity politics has compelled the Indian state to engage with questions of justice, dignity, and inclusion in more grounded ways. Welfare schemes, educational reforms, and political quotas have increasingly been shaped by the demands of identity-based movements. For instance, the rise of the BSP led to policies aimed at Dalit empowerment, including the erection of monuments, the renaming of public spaces, and a focus on Scheduled Caste-targeted development programmes. While such measures may appear symbolic, they carry significant affective weight in a society where historical erasure and humiliation have long been part of marginalised lives.

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