

The Politics of Regionalism in India

Author(s): Lewis P. Fickett, Jr.

Source: *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (Summer, 1971), pp. 193-210
Published by: Pacific Affairs, University of British Columbia

The Politics of Regionalism in India

Lewis P. Fickett, Jr.

ONE OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT developments in Indian politics since the 1967 General Election has been the emergence and success of several regional parties. In one sense, this politics of regionalism is not a new phenomenon: since independence many state and regional parties have sprouted in India, usually to wither quickly in the shadow of the Congress banyan tree. Others have continued to exist in a weak or comatose condition, capable of annoyance but little more. What is new is the relative success of these parties. In 1967, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhaghham (DMK) of Tamil Nadu proved for the first time that a well-organized regional party could come to power at the state level in India.¹ Ever since that triumph, a trend in India toward the politics of regionalism has been evident.² Although Mrs. Gandhi's recent landslide victory has obviously slowed this trend, some of the regional parties (the DMK, for example), on the whole, survived the March 1971 debacle better than some of the national parties (the two Socialist parties, for example).³

The regional parties in India today are no longer simply local annoyances to a Congress Party overwhelmingly dominant once again. They continue to play significant roles at the state level in the Indian political system. Given the tremendous heterogeneity of Indian society, the politics of regionalism should not be a surprising development. In a recent issue of the journal *Seminar*, devoted to the problem of Indian nationalism, the fundamental problem facing India was well summarized: "India is not a single nation-state. It is a continent of many communities united through shared experiences but powerfully motivated by parochial and regional considerations."⁴ The politics of regionalism is a manifestation of this reality.

Taken by itself, the DMK victory might well have been considered a unique phenomenon, but it cannot be so interpreted. The emergence after the 1969 Mid-Term Election of the Akali Dal as the dominant partner in an Akali-Jan Sangh coalition government in the Punjab was another harbinger

¹ India, Election Commission, *Report on the Fourth General Election in India (1967)*, Vol. II (Statistical).

² Iqbal Narain, "Democratic Politics and Political Development in India," *Asian Survey*, February 1970, p. 90, and "Revolt of the Region," *Eastern Economist*, February 21, 1969.

³ *Overseas Hindustan Times*, March 20, 1971, p. 1.

⁴ *Seminar* 132, August 1970, p. 11.

of the politics of regionalism.⁵ The pivotal political roles which have been played by the Bangla Congress in West Bengal,⁶ and the Bharatiya Kranti Dal (BKD) in Uttar Pradesh⁷ provide additional confirmation of this trend. Similarly, the present Swatantra Party in Orissa is nothing more than the old Ganatantra Parishad, a regional tribal party which has flourished there since independence⁸ and dominated a coalition government in Orissa from 1967 until the 1971 Election. Indeed, if one ignores the rather superficial national label, the Marxist Communists in Kerala and West Bengal are in effect regional parties.

Taking a longer view, one can see several other groups which have the potentiality of becoming significant and powerful regional parties. Despite their current differences and the debacle which both suffered in the 1971 Election for the Lok Sabha, the two Socialist parties in Bihar may still have the potential for a regional party there—a potential which is evidenced by the reality of the Karpoori Thakur state ministry formed on December 23, 1970, and still in office.⁹ In Maharashtra before the 1971 Election, Bal Thackeray's Shiv Sena appeared to have good prospects. The Sena had managed to secure 40 of the 140 seats on the Bombay Corporation Council in March 1968,¹⁰ and it had elected its first candidate to the state assembly over a broad leftist coalition in a 1970 by-election. The Sena's prospects now seem to have been dimmed considerably, but history cautions us not to discount the potential of militant quasi-Fascist parties too quickly. A more intriguing regional group has emerged triumphant from the 1971 Election—the Telengana Praja Samiti with ten Lok Sabha seats from Andhra Pradesh. Although these seats have been securely pledged to support Mrs. Gandhi in the National Parliament, the regional potential of this group is significant.

Broadly speaking, these regional groups fall into two main categories. First, there are the classic regional chauvinist parties such as the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu, the Akali Dal in the Punjab, the Muslim League in Kerala, the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra. Second, there are several dissident Congress groups which not only survived but succeeded (temporarily, at least) and were beginning to be accepted as significant regional parties. These include the BKD in Uttar Pradesh, the Bangla Congress in West Bengal, and more recently the Telengana Praja Samiti in Andhra Pradesh.¹¹

The purpose of this analysis is to evaluate the recent growth and the

⁵ Dilip Mukerjee, "The Indian Mid-Term Elections," *The World Today*, May 1969, pp. 212, 215-16.

⁶ *Hindustan Times*, February 28, 1967, p. 1.

⁷ *Overseas Hindustan Times*, February 28, 1970, p. 3.

⁸ Rajni Kothari, *Politics in India* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1970), p. 184.

⁹ *The Hindu*, December 23, 1970, p. 1.

¹⁰ *Hindustan Times*, March 28, 1968, p. 7.

¹¹ *Overseas Hindustan Times*, March 20, 1971, p. 1.

The Politics of Regionalism in India

success of these major regional parties of India, and to consider their probable future in a political system undergoing a major transformation.

The most successful of the chauvinist parties, and of all the regional parties in India, is the DMK. Building upon the well-established roots of the Dravidian Movement and its early political predecessors, the Justice Party and the Dravida Kazaghham, the DMK gradually built up to its sweeping electoral success of 1967. As early as 1921, the Justice Party, a DMK ancestor, captured control of the Reformed Legislative Council of Madras running on an anti-Brahmin platform.¹² However, since it was an elitist organization which had failed to organize the masses, the party soon disintegrated. In 1944, the Justice Party was transformed into the Dravida Kazaghham (DK) or Dravidian Federation.¹³ Under the autocratic leadership of E. V. Naicker, the organization became increasingly militant, agitating for a separate Tamil State and denouncing both the Brahmin caste and the Hindu religion. A more liberal wing of the DK led by C. N. Annadurai emerged to challenge Naicker's rigid policies and party autocracy.¹⁴ In 1949, the new modernists seceded from the DK to form the Dravida Munnetra Kazaghham. This new organization marked a milestone for the Dravidian movement, broadening the base of the party and democratizing it. It organized and systematized the loose Dravidian framework. Through a unique mixture of ideology and pragmatism, the DMK emerged as a leading regional contender in Madras politics.

In the First General Election of 1951-52, neither the DK nor the DMK took an active part, although they both supported other parties which were moderately successful.¹⁵ In the 1957 Election, the DMK won 15 seats in the Madras Assembly, polling 14.6 percent of the popular vote, and thereby running second only to the dominant Congress.¹⁶ Beginning in the spring of 1959, the DMK, with Communist support, won a series of municipal electoral triumphs in Madras State, including control of the Madras City Corporation itself.¹⁷ Despite serious defections and Naicker's support of the Kamaraj-led Congress, the DMK emerged as a formidable force in the 1962 General Elections. It captured seven Lok Sabha seats and 50 state assembly seats, polling 27 percent of the vote in the assembly election.¹⁸ Realizing the new strength of regionalism and the DMK, the Congress launched a futile counter-offensive to recapture lost votes.

¹² For an excellent treatment of the Justice Party, see Eugene F. Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict in South India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

¹³ Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr., *The Dravidian Movement* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1965), p. 28.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 32-34.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 61-63.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

Pacific Affairs

In 1967, the DMK swept the boards in Tamil Nadu. Thanks in part to a broad anti-Congress electoral alliance engineered by the Swatantra leader, C. Rajagopalachari, the DMK won a commanding 138 seats in the Tamil Nadu Assembly and 25 seats from the State in the Lok Sabha.¹⁹ The responsibilities of power have since dimmed its image somewhat, as has the death of its founder-leader, C. N. Annadurai.

The DMK survived the "Gandhi tornado" quite well in the 1971 Election. Although it lost two Lok Sabha seats, it still emerged with 23 seats, clearly the dominant party in the Tamil Nadu delegation to the National Parliament. The DMK managed this feat by having concluded a mutually satisfactory "progressive" electoral alliance with the Ruling Congress and five other small parties.²⁰ In the Tamil Nadu State election of 1971, the DMK, riding the crest of a pro-Indira wave, won overwhelming control of the Tamil Nadu State Assembly. Thus, the DMK remains the largest and most successful of the regional parties in India. Its relative success in the face of the Gandhi landslide seems to confirm its stability.

What are the aspirations of the DMK now? In September 1970 the party sponsored an All India States Autonomy Convention, invitations to which were extended to a dozen regional parties.²¹ Only representatives of the Bangla Congress and the Akali Dal accepted and appeared. The stated purpose of the Convention was to push DMK Chief Minister Karunanidhi's concept of an autonomous self-government at the state level and a so-called "compositive government" at the Center. The motives behind the Convention were undoubtedly mixed. The leftist journal, *Link*, speculated that it was an attempt to revive regional chauvinism and to divert attention from serious internal dissensions. Despite the failure of that pre-election effort, the DMK continues to remain a successful model for aspiring regional parties.

Another chauvinist regional group is the Akali Dal (Akali Army), which had its origin in the Gurdwara Reform Movement which began in the Punjab after World War I.²² It was an attempt by the Sikhs to gain control of the *gurdwaras* (joint Hindu-Sikh shrines). The movement lasted for about five years and spread into rural areas. It marked the transfer of political leadership from the landed aristocracy to the Sikh middle classes.²³ Feeling themselves to be an insecure religious minority in India, the Sikhs evolved the goal of the establishment of *Punjabi Suba* (a true Sikh homeland).²⁴ The Akali Dal became the principal vehicle for advancing this cause.

At first the Sikhs organized in the Akali drive advocated *Punjabi Suba*

¹⁹ *Fourth General Election Report, op. cit.*

²⁰ *The Hindu*, November 25, 1970, p. 1.

²¹ *Link*, September 20, 1970, p. 10.

²² Baldev Raj Nayar, *Minority Politics in the Punjab* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), pp. 66-67.

²³ Khushwant Singh, *The Sikhs* (London: Allen and Union, 1953), p. 141.

²⁴ Nayar, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

The Politics of Regionalism in India

on the basis of language, claiming that the Punjabi language would tend to preserve the Sikh religion. Early in 1952, Tara Singh, the chief Akali spokesman, emphasized that *Punjabi Suba* was desired only on a linguistic basis.²⁵ However, it became increasingly evident that the demand was not language-oriented: as the Sikhs became more vocal in their demands, and as Hindu-Sikh relations continued to deteriorate, it became obvious that the Akali Dal wanted a separate Sikh political state. By 1962, even Tara Singh did not bother to conceal his true Sikh political goals behind a linguistic cover.²⁶

To further their cause, the Sikhs have alternated between agitational politics and electoral politics. *Morchas*, *jathas*, and fasts—all have been employed at various times by the Akali Dal, and the accomplishment of the separate Sikh state is an overall tribute to the success of its agitational strategy.²⁷

Nevertheless, in recent years electoral participation has become crucial for Akali success. The Dal had previously entered into opportunistic alliances with the Congress in 1948 and 1956.²⁸ In 1962, the Congress announced that the general elections of that year would be a referendum on the proposed *Punjabi Suba*.²⁹ The Dal accepted the challenge and entered into a series of pragmatic alliances with many dissimilar groups to insure Sikh support for the referendum with only limited success.

The Dal contested the 1967 Election, deeply divided by bitter factionalism between the Master Tara Singh and the Sant Fateh Singh groups. The latter group won 24 seats and the former, only two seats in the Punjab Assembly. The Sant group also won three Lok Sabha seats.³⁰ It was in the 1969 Mid-Term Election that the then united Dal came into its own. Winning 44 seats, the Dal emerged for the first time in February 1969 as the largest party in the Punjab and entered into a coalition ministry with the Jan Sangh.³¹ Although factionalism once again severely shook the party and produced a change in leadership, the Dal remained dominant in this coalition government, and by late November the three warring factions of the Dal had managed to achieve at least a "paper show of unity."³² In the 1971 Election, the Dal, which remained aloof from an electoral alliance with Mrs. Gandhi's Ruling Congress, lost two of its three Lok Sabha seats to Congressmen,³³ but remains in control of the Punjab state government, and a major regional force.

A third chauvinist group is the Muslim League. Following the imple-

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 107-8.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 234-269.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 212-230.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 205-6.

³⁰ *Fourth General Election Report, op. cit.*

³¹ Mukerjee, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

³² *Times of India*, November 26, 1970, p. 1.

³³ *Overseas Hindustan Times*, March 20, 1971, p. 1.

mentation of the States Reorganization Committee Report, the Malayalam-speaking region of Malabar was transferred, in 1956, from Madras to help create the new state of Kerala. Since that time, in the elections held in the state of Kerala, the Muslim League has continually emerged (as Table 1 shows) as a balance-wheel in the unstable politics of that state.

TABLE 1. STRENGTH OF MUSLIM LEAGUE IN KERALA ASSEMBLY³⁴

	1957	1960	1965	1967	1970
Assembly Seats	8	11	6	14	12
Per cent of Votes	4.72	4.90	3.83	6.76	N.A.

Although these statistics may be unimpressive in themselves, the significant fact is that the Muslim League has participated in three of the four coalition governments formed in Kerala since 1957, including the 1970 CPI-led coalition.

The power-base of the Muslim League in Kerala is quite secure. Muslims constitute 18 per cent of the State's population. Moreover, there are local pockets in Malabar on the southwest coast with Muslim majorities. Malabar District of the old Madras State had 34 per cent Muslims, while Kozhikode District of Kerala State (Calicut) has 42 per cent Muslims. "Since the Moplahs who live there have a tradition of devotion to Islam, they are susceptible to the appeals of an avowedly Islamic political party like the Muslim League whose candidates have consistently won state assembly seats in Malappuram and Tirur."³⁵

Although relatively small in size and lacking in growth potential, the Muslim League must be recognized as a successful regional chauvinist party of long standing which will probably continue to play an important stabilizing role in the fragmented politics of Kerala. At the same time, the League has successfully pressed a number of both religious and economic demands, which are directly responsive to the needs of its regional constituency in Malabar.

The Muslim League fared well in the 1971 Election, in which it fielded 20 candidates for the Lok Sabha. Holding its two Lok Sabha seats in its traditional Malabar enclave of Kerala, the League also picked up two new seats in the National Parliament. In West Bengal, the League entered into a mutually satisfactory electoral adjustment with the United Left Democratic Front.³⁶ Since the party also ran candidates in Tamil Nadu, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Haryana, the League seems to be in the process of transcend-

³⁴ Election Commission Statistics and *Overseas Hindustan Times*, October 26, 1970, p. 1.

³⁵ Theodore P. Wright, Jr., "The Muslim League in South India since Independence: A Study in Minority Group Political Strategies," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 60, No. 3, September 1966, p. 580.

³⁶ *Hindustan Times*, February 2, 1971, p. 6.

The Politics of Regionalism in India

ing its original character as a primarily regional force in Kerala and to have become a tiny national party. Significantly, the League consistently supported Ruling Congress nominees where there was no contest between the two parties.

In June 1966, an unsuccessful cartoonist, Bal Thackeray, formed a party called the Shiv Sena (Army of Shivaji) in Bombay. The slogan of this group ("Maharashtra for the Maharashtrians") was originally designed to exploit the frustrations felt by the teeming masses of Bombay against South Indians who allegedly hold more than their fair share of local jobs.³⁷ More recently, however, the Sena has broadened its appeal into a militant anti-Communism. Thackeray, an admitted admirer of Adolf Hitler, has said quite openly, "I'm not ashamed of branding my organization fascist." Democracy has failed in India, he says, and he wants an authoritarian rule in New Delhi, backed by the army.³⁸ Dismissed at first as a frustrated crank, Thackeray has now built his party into a major regional grouping, financed by some of Bombay's wealthy merchants and industrialists, who use the group primarily to terrorize unions.

The Sena was first successfully used by the Bombay Syndicate Congress boss, S. K. Patil, to help defeat Krishna Menon, running from a North Bombay constituency in the 1967 General Election. Then it worked out an electoral alliance with the weakened Praja Socialists (PSP) to contest the Bombay Municipal Elections in March 1968. Although not then officially recognized as a political party, it captured a surprising 40 seats on the 140 member Bombay Municipal Corporation Council. Since then, the Sena—to display its power—has periodically terrorized Bombay; for four days early in February 1969, it let loose a reign of terror upon the city to dramatize its demand for the return to Maharashtra of certain disputed areas now held by adjoining Mysore State (Belgaum District).³⁹

The Shiv Sena followers attacked South Indian shops, murdered, looted, and burned. They felled trees to block the roads, and set a number of buses on fire. The police failed to control the riots for nearly a week. During this time, the city was almost entirely paralyzed.⁴⁰ Again in March 1970, the Shiv Sena ordered a day's *bandh* (a shutdown of all shops and offices) in Bombay to show public resentment concerning the border dispute. Surprisingly, it was obeyed. Large parties of Sena followers roamed around the city on the appointed day, insuring that all shops and offices were actually shut, and that all traffic came to a standstill. The police seemed to be powerless. More recently in the Bombay suburbs, the Sena has allegedly incited attacks on

³⁷ Ram Joshi, "Maharashtra," in *State Politics in India*, ed. by Myron Weiner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 202.

³⁸ Bernard Nossiter, "Fan of Hitler Vows New Order in India," *Washington Post*, March 17, 1968, p. B2.

³⁹ Dom Moraes, "Bombay," *New York Times Magazine*, October 11, 1970, p. 150.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

Muslims and was responsible for the assassination of a Communist MLA, Krishna Desai, on June 5, 1970.

What is the real political power of the Shiv Sena? At the moment, it still holds 42 of the 140 seats on the Bombay Municipal Corporation, making it the largest party in that body since the Congress split. It also holds three of four Corporation chairmanships. More significantly in what may be a watershed election locally, the Sena in late October 1970 elected its first MLA. Triumphant over a broad leftist coalition, the Sena candidate defeated the CPI candidate, Sarojini Desai, in Parel, a working-class constituency in North Bombay.⁴¹ Nevertheless, the Shiv Sena went down to defeat, along with its right-wing allies in Maharashtra in the 1971 Election, losing all the five parliamentary seats it contested.⁴² As long as the party retains its position on the Bombay Corporation Council, it cannot be completely ignored and any final verdict on its fate must await the results of the next Bombay municipal election. But for the present the Sena's rising ambitions and pretensions have been firmly squelched. Still it must be remembered that militant Fascist parties have a record of surviving in the face of overwhelming defeats.

Next to be considered among the regional parties are the Congress dissident groups. As early as December 1966, an attempt to create a dissident Congress Party was made in Delhi.⁴³ At that time Independent MP J. B. Kripalani chaired a large meeting of disgruntled Congressmen, with the express purpose of creating a new so-called Jana Congress Party. Representatives of dissident Congress groups from eleven Indian states participated in this meeting, in the course of which stress was placed upon the deviation of the Congress Government from Gandhian policies. Calls for a more honest administration and special concern for minority groups were voiced. The Delhi meeting served to give vent to the frustrations of the dissidents but little more; they retained their names and separate identities and, of course, decided individually on their candidates and election strategies. This meeting was subsequently characterized by Kripalani as a total failure.⁴⁴

In spite of this, several Congress dissident groups contested the 1967 General Election on their own and proved to be extraordinarily successful. Whereas in previous years, Congress factions either succumbed to party unity appeals or by going it alone were usually defeated, in 1967 dissidence paid off handsomely. In fact, it was one of the principal explanations for the unexpected heavy losses in seats which the Congress suffered.⁴⁵ Between

⁴¹ *Overseas Hindustan Times*, October 31, 1970, p. 1.

⁴² *Overseas Hindustan Times*, March 20, 1971, p. 1.

⁴³ *Overseas Hindustan Times*, December 6, 1966, p. 6.

⁴⁴ Interview with J. B. Kripalani, October 17, 1967.

⁴⁵ Norman Palmer, "The Indian General Election of 1967," *Asian Survey*, May 1967, p. 287.

The Politics of Regionalism in India

February and late July 1967, dissident Congress groups became key components in the non-Congress coalition governments formed in seven of the nine Indian states, over which Congress lost control. In six of these governments, former Congressmen became Chief Ministers. This success story for the Congress dissidents occurred almost immediately in West Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa. Then came substantial Congress "defections" in the Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh, and the formation of non-Congress coalitions in each of these States. In July, a similar pattern was followed when the Congress was overthrown in Madhya Pradesh.

The first of the dissident groups is the Bharatiya Kranti Dal (BKD), created at Patna (Bihar) in April 1967 when many Congress dissidents gathered in a first post-election attempt to create an organization in which they could collectively survive an all-India bias.⁴⁶ At Patna, these dissidents encountered immediate difficulties even in agreeing upon a suitable name for their new party. Many of this group met again at Bhopal (Madhya Pradesh) in September 1967.⁴⁷ Here the great unresolved issue was what their collective attitude should be toward the then existing United Front Governments. Although a consensus was lacking on this issue, it was decided not to disturb these governments, but the issue continued to fester.

Finally, in early November 1967, more than 1,800 former members of the Congress Party convened at Indore in Madhya Pradesh to ratify the creation of the new political party to be called the Bharatiya Kranti Dal (Indian Revolutionary Brigade).⁴⁸ These delegates represented disenchanted Congress groups from all over India. The majority of them, however, came from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal, where their leaders were at that time the Chief Ministers of non-Congress coalition governments in those States.⁴⁹ The purpose behind the formation of this new party was to weld together the heterogeneous groups which had left the Congress just before or just after the 1967 Election, and had enjoyed political success as a result of this maneuver but had not been able to evolve any *raison d'être* for themselves other than non-Congressism. At the Indore meeting, the BKD chose Mahamaya Prasad Sinha, then Chief Minister of Bihar, as its President and D. K. Kunte of Maharashtra as its General Secretary.⁵⁰ Leadership overtures were subsequently made to the Bihar Sarvodaya Leader, J. P. Narayan, but nothing materialized from this gambit.⁵¹ While the great majority of Congress dissidents was represented at Indore, several groups of ex-Congress members who had attended the pre-election meeting of dissidents at Delhi

⁴⁶ *Hindustan Times*, April 12, 1967, p. 1.

⁴⁷ *Hindustan Times*, September 23, 1967, p. 5.

⁴⁸ *Link*, November 19, 1967, p. 21, and *Economic and Political Weekly*, November 25, 1967, p. 204-5.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Hindustan Times*, November 13, 1967.

⁵¹ *Indian Express*, November 19, 1967, p. 1.

Pacific Affairs

in December 1966 ignored the conference.⁵² These included the Kerala Congress Party as well as dissident Congress members from Haryana and Punjab—groups which had lost interest in an all-India party or feared that participation in such a group would be counter-productive to their local interests.

The ideology of the BKD, as it emerged, was neo-Gandhian. Some of its aspects can be gleaned from the Indore address of Charan Singh, who called for a complete reorientation of Indian agricultural, industrial, and foreign policies.⁵³ He argued that collective or cooperative farming was detrimental to the interests of the peasants and did not offer any incentive for higher production. He demanded abolition of the food zones. In the industrial sector, he called for the establishment of an economy based primarily on small units. Major undertakings would be allowed only for goods and services required for defense and research. Moreover, he chastized Indian labor for its high wage-demands, and criticized Indian laborers, peasants, and government employees as “shirkers.” On foreign policy, he was extremely critical of contemporary Indian relations with Pakistan. An independent observer at the Convention later summarized the BKD ideology as follows:

It will stress decentralization of power and work for the real functioning of the federal constitution of the country; and it will lay emphasis upon employment-oriented industries. It will advocate greater investment in medium, small, and village industries producing consumer goods and will want the fourth five-year plan investment in heavy industry to be kept at the level of the second plan.⁵⁴

In a broader ideological sense, the BKD represented an attempt to recapture the flavor of the pre-independence Congress Party, free of the corruption and “bossism” charges which had so tarnished the image of the Party in recent years.

The central problem at Indore was the reconciliation of two types of Congress dissidents: (1) those who had achieved power as leaders of unstable and heterogeneous non-Congress coalitions, and (2) those who still needed a central party organization to project themselves politically either because they played a secondary role in their state units (such as the late Humayun Kabir in West Bengal) or because their state unit was not very important (D. K. Kunte’s case in Maharashtra).⁵⁵ The specific issue involved was the appropriate relationship of the BKD to Congress. Those BKD leaders in power who had succeeded primarily on platforms of uncompromising opposition to Congress were understandably reluctant to dilute this position while the other group wanted to take an ambivalent attitude

⁵² *Overseas Hindustan Times*, December 6, 1966, p. 6.

⁵³ *Hindustan Times*, November 14, 1967, p. 7.

⁵⁴ *Weekend Review*, October 7, 1967, pp. 13-14.

⁵⁵ *Statesman*, November 15, 1967, p. 7.

The Politics of Regionalism in India

toward Congress, "criticizing it for its lapses of omission and commission and yet keeping the door open for a possible coalition."⁵⁶ The "Chief Minister's Group" won the day at Indore and succeeded in keeping the BKD with an uncompromising attitude toward cooperation with the Congress. It proved to be a Pyrrhic victory, for within three months all of the BKD Chief Ministers were out of office and some were understandably more sympathetic to the concept of coalitions with Congress. But it was then too late for the "ambivalent strategy" to be effective.

At the time of its founding, the BKD ranked overall as the fifth largest party in the various state legislatures of India with 180 members, but, as Table 2 shows, this was largely "paper strength."⁵⁷

TABLE 2. STRENGTH OF THE BKD IN THE INDIAN STATES
(November 1967)

State	Name of Local Party	Seats
Bihar	Jan Kranti Dal	26
Madhya Pradesh	BKD	34
Maharashtra	BKD	4
Mysore	Janata Paksha	16
Orissa	Jana Congress	26
Rajasthan	Janta Party	11
Uttar Pradesh	Jan Congress	29
West Bengal	Bangla Congress	<u>34</u>
	Total	180

Following its Founding Convention, the BKD began to disintegrate almost immediately as a national party. In Uttar Pradesh there was a different story. When Charan Singh resigned as Chief Minister of the United Front Government there in February 1968, his prospects and those of the 29 member BKD did not appear promising. In the state municipal elections of April 1968, the BKD fared poorly, winning only three council seats despite the fact that it had fielded a large slate of candidates.⁵⁸ In frustration, the party moved temporarily toward the concept of a national merger with the Praja Socialists (PSP). The BKD and PSP proclaimed that they had decided to work in close cooperation in all fields as a first step toward consolidation of "non-Congress patriotic democratic forces."⁵⁹ But the state unit of the PSP balked at the merger, fearing that it would be swallowed by the larger BKD. Although the hope of merger persisted, Charan

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Official Indian Election Statistics were used to prepare this table.

⁵⁸ *Overseas Hindustan Times*, May 18, 1968, p. 5.

⁵⁹ *Overseas Hindustan Times*, April 27, 1968, p. 3.

Pacific Affairs

Singh finally announced in September 1969 that the BKD had decided to give up merger talks with the PSP and other major parties.⁶⁰

Meanwhile, the BKD prepared to wage a vigorous campaign during the February 1969 Mid-Term Election. The party fielded 408 candidates in Uttar Pradesh, just sixteen less than the Congress and eleven more than the Jan Sangh. When the votes were counted, the BKD had won an unexpected 99 seats, placing second to the Congress which captured 208 seats and eclipsing the Jan Sangh which won only 48 seats.⁶¹ The 1969 election results confirmed the status of the BKD as a major regional party.

How can the BKD triumph in Uttar Pradesh be explained? On the caste level, the BKD represents the successful mobilization of three numerically strong backward castes—the Jats, Ahirs, and Kurmis—against upper-caste dominance in state politics.⁶² On an economic level, the BKD success represented a triumph of the small but better-off landholders who were seeking political power on their own.⁶³ On a sectional level, it is significant to note that of its 99 successful candidates, 61 came from the Western districts of Uttar Pradesh, particularly the districts of Meerut, Agra, and Rohikhand. In the eastern districts of Banaras and Gorakhpur, the BKD won only 16 out of 96 possible seats.⁶⁴

In another sense, however, the BKD victory represented the triumph of one man with a favorable image, Charan Singh. A former member of the Congress, it was he who had brought down the short-lived Gupta Ministry following the 1967 Election when he defected to lead a United Front Government. Whipsawed repeatedly in the coalition by the Samyukta Socialists (SSP) on the Left and the Jan Sangh (JS) on the Right, he nevertheless managed to preserve an image of integrity and strength. By his espousal of high standards of conduct in public life and by his opposition to all forms of civil disobedience, including student agitations, worker *gheraos* or strikes, Charan Singh became a symbol of order in a chaotic and unstable society.⁶⁵

Originally having the choice of forming a minority government in Uttar Pradesh with either Syndicate Congress or Ruling Congress support, Charan Singh and the BKD opted for the backing of Mrs. Gandhi's supporters.⁶⁶ But it was a short-lived honeymoon. After stalling Ruling Congress pressure for merger for seven months, the BKD finally refused. Mrs. Gandhi's support was withdrawn, and the BKD-Congress (R) coalition fell in September 1970.⁶⁷ Following abortive attempts by the Congress (R) to

⁶⁰ *Times of India*, September 27, 1969, p. 5.

⁶¹ *Asian Recorder*, March 12-18, 1969, p. 8815.

⁶² Mukerjee, *op. cit.*, p. 216, and Madhu Limaye, "A New United Party of the Right," *Mankind*, September 1969, p. 13.

⁶³ *The Economist*, February 22, 1969, p. 36.

⁶⁴ *Overseas Hindustan Times*, February 22, 1969, p. 4.

⁶⁵ Madhu Limaye, *op. cit.*, p. 13, and *Overseas Hindustan Times*, March 8, 1969, p. 5.

⁶⁶ *Overseas Hindustan Times*, February 28, 1970, p. 3.

⁶⁷ *Overseas Hindustan Times*, September 19, 1970, p. 3.

The Politics of Regionalism in India

create a new coalition and a resort to President's Rule under questionable circumstances, a new coalition government was formed in the state. Significantly, the BKD was once again a main component in the new government, now allied with the Syndicate Congress, the Jan Sangh, the Samyukta Socialists, and the tiny Swatantra Party.⁶⁸ Thus the BKD, still the state's second-ranking party, became a major factor to be reckoned with in the politics of that sprawling state.

The BKD, however, was the major loser among regional parties in the 1971 Election. Perhaps Charan Singh outsmarted himself by trying to play an independent role in the Election, allying his party neither with the abortive "Grand Alliance" as originally anticipated nor with Mrs. Gandhi. The result was that BKD lost all but one of its ten Lok Sabha seats, primarily in Uttar Pradesh where the party had seemed to enjoy a relatively secure base among the Jat castes in the western part of that State. Although the BKD is still a major participant in the state government of Uttar Pradesh, this disaster must have badly tarnished the party's image and have raised questions as to its continued survival as an independent entity. Only time will show what route Charan Singh will now follow.

Next among the dissident groups is the Bangla Congress Party in West Bengal, formed by Ajoy Mukerjee in the summer of 1966 to fight the Atulya Ghosh-led Congress political machine. After a surprising success in the 1967 General Election, Mukerjee became Chief Minister of a broad United Front coalition consisting of 18 parties. This coalition was doomed to dissension and fratricidal warfare from its very inception. A serious split emerged within the group between the Chief Minister, Ajoy Mukerjee, and the late Humayun Kabir on the issue of cooperation with the Communists in the West Bengal coalition. Papered over temporarily at the Indore Convention, this vital dispute eventually was to open the way to the collapse of the first West Bengal United Front Government in 1967.⁶⁹

The process of fragmentation in West Bengal was continuous. Three members of the Bangla Congress defected to Congress in July 1967. Thirteen more joined P. C. Ghosh when he formed his so-called Progressive Democratic Front in November 1967, bringing down the first United Front Government. Humayun Kabir formed a Lok Dal Party with several of his supporters. Then six more Bangla Congress members defected to form the National Party of Bengal in 1968. Meanwhile, the National Executive of the BKD on April 8, 1968 requested the Bangla Congress as its state unit to sever connections with the Communists. The Bangla Congress twice refused and was duly dissolved on June 4, 1968, by the BKD National Executive.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ *Overseas Hindustan Times*, October 17, 1970, p. 16.

⁶⁹ *Hindustan Times*, November 23, 1967, p. 6.

⁷⁰ *Overseas Hindustan Times*, June 15, 1968, p. 3.

Pacific Affairs

Ajoy Mukerjee accordingly resigned from the national group, thereby ending any role the BKD might have played in West Bengal politics.

Nevertheless, in the 1969 Mid-Term Election, the Bangla Congress proved that it was not insignificant when it won 33 seats in the West Bengal Assembly, to rank third overall.⁷¹ Unsurprisingly, Mukerjee was again chosen Chief Minister of a broad coalition which included the CPI(M). Once more, haunted by a rising crescendo of violence in the state, Mukerjee was forced to yield office in March 1970 and was replaced by the imposition of President's Rule.⁷²

In the 1971 Election, the Bangla Congress was caught between the twin millstones of the very successful CPM and the surprisingly successful New Congress. The result was that it had no place to stand and, therefore, was almost completely eliminated, losing its Lok Sabha seats, and more important, most of its state assembly seats.⁷³ Its leader, Ajoy Mukerjee, lost in one assembly constituency to CPM leader, Jyoti Basu, but just managed to win another seat which he was simultaneously contesting. Nevertheless, it is difficult, even in the complicated morass of West Bengal politics, to visualize much of a future for the Bangla Congress. It has clearly played a transitional role between that of the "Organization Congress" of Atulya Ghosh and the "Reform Congress" of Mrs. Gandhi.

The Telengana Praja Samiti is another group which cannot be ignored as an incipient successful regional party. On June 1, 1969, the Telengana Pradesh Congress Committee broke away from the Andhra Pradesh Congress Committee and sought recognition from the Congress parties. The group also engaged in direct agitation for the creation of a separate Telengana State. Finally disillusioned by the lack of receptivity of both Congress parties, the Executive Committee of the Telengana group decided to sever ties from the Congress and to function independently as a separate party.⁷⁴ The Telengana group also moved into opposition in the Andhra Legislature. Prior to the 1971 Election, the so-called Telengana Praja Samiti (TPS) entered into an electoral alliance with Mrs. Gandhi, pledging to support her government on national issues. This TPS won ten Lok Sabha seats in the election.⁷⁵ Although it may be premature to judge, the initial success of this group may well foreshadow the growth of a significant regional force, unless or until its demands for a separate Telengana State, to be carved out of Andhra Pradesh, are satisfied.

The following figures (Tables 3, 4, 5) summarize the growth of India's regional parties.

⁷¹ *India News*, February 21, 1969, p. 1.

⁷² *Overseas Hindustan Times*, March 7, 1970, p. 3.

⁷³ *Overseas Hindustan Times*, March 20, 1971, p. 1.

⁷⁴ *The Hindu*, February 5, 1970, p. 1.

⁷⁵ *Overseas Hindustan Times*, March 20, 1971, p. 1.

The Politics of Regionalism in India

TABLE 3. REGIONAL PARTY STRENGTH IN STATE ASSEMBLIES

Party	1962	1967	1969/70/71	Gain or Loss over 1962
DMK	53	138	184 ^a	+131
Akali Dal	19	26	43 ^b	+24
BKD	—	29	99 ^b	+99 ^e
Bangla Congress	—	34	4 ^a	+4
Muslim League	11	14	18 ^o	+7
Shiv Sena	—	—	1 ^d	+1
Utkal Congress (Orissa)	—	—	32 ^a	+32 ^f
				<u>+298</u>

^a 1971 General Election

^b 1969 Mid-Term Election

^o 1970 Kerala Election plus 1971 Tamil Nadu Election

^d October 1970 By-Election

^e Since the 1969 Mid-Term, 19 MLAs have defected, but no state election in Uttar Pradesh has been held.

^f The Utkal Congress is a recent Congress dissident group led by Biju Patnaik which is expected to form a state coalition government with the Ruling Congress in Orissa.

TABLE 4. REGIONAL PARTY STRENGTH IN THE LOK SABHA

Party	1962	1967	1971	Gain or Loss over 1962
DMK	7	25	23	+16
Akali Dal	3	3	1	—2
BKD	—	11	1	+1
Bangla Congress	—	5	0	0
Muslim League	2	2	4	+2
Telengana Praja Samiti	—	—	<u>10</u>	<u>+10</u>
			39	<u>+27</u>

TABLE 5. REGIONAL PARTY STRENGTH IN THE RAJYA SABHA

Party	1968	1970	Gain or Loss
DMK	5	7	+2
Akali Dal	3	3	—
BKD	2	3	+1
Bangla Congress	1	1	—
Muslim League	4	4	—
Jana Congress	1	2	<u>+1</u>
			<u>+4</u>

Pacific Affairs

It is clear that the major regional parties of India have made significant gains in recent years, particularly since the 1967 General Elections, although the spectacular success of the DMK accounts for a large portion of the numerical increase in the total number of seats won by these parties. More important than the absolute increases recorded in the strengths of these regional parties are the roles they are now playing in the Indian political system. It is important to note that since 1967 the leaders of all these regional parties, with the exception of the Shiv Sena, have been either chief ministers or pivotal figures in the formation of governments within each of the states where they operate.

TABLE 6. ROLES PLAYED BY REGIONAL PARTY LEADERS SINCE 1967

Party	Chief Minister	Pivotal Figure
DMK	X (2)*	
Akali Dal	X (2)	
BKD	X (2)	
Bangla Congress	X (2)	
Muslim League		X
Telengana Praja Samiti		X

* Figure in parentheses indicates number of times party leader has been chief minister in the state government since 1967.

What is the future of the major regional parties in India? The record of the regional parties in the 1971 General Election was extremely mixed. The DMK in Tamil Nadu, having entered into a local electoral alliance with Mrs. Gandhi's Congress, almost held its own, and the Muslim League in Kerala also did well. Although journalistic commentators called attention to what they described as the rout of the Akali Dal in the Punjab and the BKD in Uttar Pradesh, one should reserve judgement in both of these cases. Significantly, in both of these states no state election was taking place; the result was that both of these parties lost only their Lok Sabha seats, which were not very significant in number at the outset. This is not to ignore the actual drubbing which these two parties suffered, but rather to emphasize that in regard to local state politics, both of these parties remain, at least temporarily, significant local entities. In fact, the results of the election tend to confirm the wisdom of Mrs. Gandhi's strategy of separating state and national elections. Thus, it was possible for voters in Uttar Pradesh to support her candidates for the national parliament without concerning themselves with local or caste interests. On the other hand, in those few states where state elections were taking place, Mrs. Gandhi's Congress had some problems, except where it was able to negotiate a broad electoral alliance as was done in Tamil Nadu. In West Bengal, however, the opposition CPM (a regional party in a sense) did very well, increasing its seat holdings in the Lok Sabha from 19 to 25. Significantly, here Mrs. Gandhi's Congress had

The Politics of Regionalism in India

to go it alone and in the final result trailed the CPM in the number of state assembly seats held. In Orissa, the Swatantra Party (another *de facto* regional party) declined but still remains a significant political force within the State, although it suffered losses in Lok Sabha seats.

In summary, while the 1971 Elections appear to represent a temporary setback for the politics of regionalism in India, one should await the results of the next Indian state elections before writing off the regional parties as a purely transitional phenomenon. Significantly, the "elder statesman" of the regional parties, the DMK, survived well despite its widely publicized internal problems and its recent over-zealous advocacy of the Tamil language. Moreover, *de facto* regional parties, such the CPM in West Bengal and the Swatantra in Orissa, did relatively well in the perspective of the Gandhi "magic." So did the Muslim League.

Despite the impressive and unexpected proportions of Mrs. Gandhi's victory, it is questionable whether, in a country as vast and heterogeneous as India, such a broad consensus will last very long. The eager masses hoping for a miracle from Nehru's daughter may soon become restive and impatient. If and when that happens, the politics of regionalism is likely to flourish once again as a pragmatic response to the realities of a poverty-ridden society, trying desperately to raise itself by its own bootstraps.

The Indian political system is still in such a state of flux as to make long-term predictions extremely hazardous. Two extreme alternatives seem unlikely. Given the nature of Indian society, it is very improbable that regional parties will disappear. They have existed from the very beginning, and they are now prospering. At the other extreme, any major structural alteration in the Indian constitutional system, changing India from a quasi-unitary state to a weak federation along the lines recently proposed by the DMK, seems equally improbable. Indian society is slow to change, and the "compositive government at the center" concept has significantly not been endorsed by any group other than the DMK.

There are two more probable alternatives for the regional parties. At present, it would appear that they may be playing transitional roles in the Indian political system. The DMK MPs have almost consistently supported Mrs. Gandhi at the Center. So, to a lesser extent, have the MPs of the Akali Dal, BKD, and Bangla Congress. At the state level, an electoral alliance between the DMK and the Ruling Congress developed in Tamil Nadu and proved to be extremely successful. Following a brief honeymoon period of cooperation between the New Congress and the Akali Dal, the Dal unwisely decided to go it alone and suffered the consequences in the 1971 Lok Sabha Election. For seven months in 1970, a pattern of cooperation prevailed in Uttar Pradesh until the more numerous New Congress group became restive at the domination of BKD leader Charan Singh. Such patterns of cooperation between the Ruling Congress and some of the significant re-

Pacific Affairs

gional parties may continue for some time to come. Similarly, other regional parties may, from time to time, seek to cooperate with what is left of the national Rightist parties—the Jan Sangh, Swatantra, and the Syndicate Congress.

Another possible pattern is for the major regional parties to play permanent roles in a unique heterogeneous political system which would include several different types of political parties—regional as well as national. In such a system, regional parties might conceivably prove to be more responsive and realistic political mechanisms for India than either a conventional two or multi-party system could provide. Meanwhile, such parties, by cooperating constructively with national parties at the Center, could provide the necessary stability at that level for dealing with foreign affairs, defense, and genuinely national problems. In either event, the politics of regionalism may well constitute a necessary and salutary phase of political development for a society as diverse as that of India.

Mary Washington College, University of Virginia, March 1971

POSTSCRIPT

Two months following the 1971 General Election, the long-term prospects for the politics of regionalism in India seem somewhat improved as compared with the immediate election aftermath. Regional parties or regionally-based national parties remain significant in the Indian political picture. Although the unstable SVD Government (based, in part, on BKD support) collapsed in Uttar Pradesh shortly after the election, elsewhere regional parties and groupings seem to have held their own.

In Orissa, despite the fact that the New Congress is the largest party in the Assembly (51 seats), a Swatantra-dominated coalition government has once again emerged. Biju Patnaik's Utkal Congress Party joined the Swatantra along with the Jharkand Party to make such a government possible. Significantly also the New Congress needed Ajoy Mukerjee's Bangla Congress to put together a strong enough government to keep the CPM out of power in West Bengal.

Despite dire initial predictions, the SSP-dominated government in Bihar also seems to have survived Mrs. Gandhi's avalanche. Likewise, the Akali Dal-dominated government has survived in the Punjab. Achuta Menon's CPI mini-front ministry has meanwhile comfortably survived a no-confidence motion by the Marxists in Kerala, albeit with continuing New Congress support.

In summary, most of the regional parties and the regionally based national parties—with the exceptions of the BKD in Uttar Pradesh and the mercurial Shiv Sena in Maharashtra—seem to have survived Mrs. Gandhi's landslide in reasonably good shape. The DMK appears extremely secure in Tamil Nadu. The Akali Dal is still in power in the Punjab. The Bangla Congress still plays a pivotal role in West Bengal. Moreover, the Socialists in Bihar, the Swatantra in Orissa, and the CPI in Kerala all continue to exercise dominant roles in their respective states. Therefore, if contemporary observations are valid, the politics of regionalism seems likely to remain a major feature of the Indian political system.