

Recasting Regionalism: Between Nationalism, Populism, Clientelism and Competitive Federalism in Post-2014 India

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Abstract:

This article examines the transformation of regional politics in India since 2014, analysing its intersections with populism, nationalism, welfare politics, leadership dynamics, and evolving regional identities. Using Progressive Negation Analysis (PNA), it systematically challenges pre-2014 assumptions of regionalism as purely defensive, identity-driven, and coalition-dependent. The study identifies the emergence of a new model—Competitive Sub-National Populism (CSNP)—where regional leaders blend sub-national pride with elements of national populism, positioning themselves as both defenders of state identity and performance-driven welfare providers. Post-2014 regionalism is characterised by heightened leader-centric mobilisation, symbolic confrontation with central narratives, and welfare branding as an electoral strategy. In contrast to pre-2014 patterns, today's regional parties actively compete for narrative dominance, engage in performance-based legitimacy battles, and influence national political discourse beyond state boundaries. The analysis also explores the implications of CSNP for federalism, opposition politics, and governance sustainability. It argues that far from eroding, regionalism has adapted to the nationalised political environment, becoming more competitive, leader-driven, and populist in nature. The article concludes by outlining future ramifications, including intensified Centre–state confrontations, escalating welfare competition, and the growing importance of narrative politics in shaping India's democratic trajectory.

Keywords: Regionalism in India; Competitive Sub-National Populism; Progressive Negation Analysis; Populism; Nationalism; Welfare Politics; Leadership; Federalism; Post-2014 Politics; Centre–State Relations

Introduction:

The trajectory of regional politics in India has always been deeply intertwined with the country's complex social fabric, linguistic diversity, caste hierarchies, and uneven patterns of economic development. Regionalism, as a political phenomenon, has historically acted as both a vehicle for asserting local identities and a mechanism for negotiating with the Centre in

a federal framework. Prior to 2014, regional parties were widely seen as essential components of coalition politics, their influence amplified by the absence of a dominant national party. These parties derived their legitimacy largely from identity-based mobilisation—whether linguistic, ethnic, caste-based, or rooted in regional pride—and often positioned themselves as defenders of their state's autonomy against perceived centralising tendencies. Their political strategies were primarily defensive, shaped by demands for special status, enhanced fiscal transfers, and state-specific development priorities.

The post-2014 political landscape, however, presents a markedly different context. The ascendance of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under the leadership of Narendra Modi has not only consolidated a strong central government but has also infused the national discourse with a renewed emphasis on nationalism, cultural identity, and centralised welfare delivery. This shift has compelled regional parties to recalibrate their political strategies. No longer can they rely solely on traditional identity politics or coalition leverage; instead, they must navigate a political field where the Centre has the capacity to dominate both narrative and governance delivery. The once clear distinction between national and regional political strategies has blurred, giving rise to new hybrid forms of political mobilisation.

Central to this transformation is the rise of populist politics at both national and regional levels. Populism, characterised by leader-centric mobilisation, direct appeals to the people, and welfare politics framed as a personal gift from the leader, has become a defining feature of Indian politics. Regional leaders have increasingly mirrored this style, positioning themselves as singular protectors of their state's interests, capable of defending their people from an overbearing Centre. This leader-driven politics is reinforced by the intensification of welfare and freebie culture. While pre-2014 welfare politics was often tied to long-term social policy initiatives or class-based redistribution, post-2014 welfare politics is increasingly personalised, immediate, and highly visible—crafted to enhance the leader's image rather than institutional credibility.

In this evolving scenario, nationalism no longer remains the exclusive ideological domain of national parties. Regional parties now actively negotiate with the nationalist narrative, either integrating their sub-national identities into a broader vision of the nation or reinterpreting nationalism through the lens of federalism and cultural pluralism. This dynamic has led to the emergence of a competitive relationship between the Centre and regional actors—not merely over electoral control, but over the very definition of political legitimacy in the Indian context.

The post-2014 phase of regional politics is therefore best understood as a period of adaptation rather than decline. Through a complex interplay of populism, welfare politics, leadership charisma, and narrative competition, regionalism has redefined its role in Indian democracy. This article seeks to trace that transformation, interrogating the structural and ideological shifts

that distinguish post-2014 regionalism from its earlier forms, and offering a new theoretical lens to understand its contemporary manifestations.

Reassessing Regionalism – From Old Assumptions to New Realities:

For decades, regional politics in India was viewed through the lens of identity assertion and federal bargaining. The dominant understanding portrayed regional parties as political actors rooted in sub-national identities—linguistic, ethnic, caste-based, or tied to historical movements—whose principal objective was to secure greater autonomy and resources for their states. Their power was magnified in coalition eras, when no single national party could secure a parliamentary majority. In such a scenario, regional parties could negotiate from a position of strength, extracting concessions from the Centre in exchange for political support. This understanding carried with it the implicit assumption that the vitality of regional politics was tied to the weakness of national parties.

However, this conceptual frame began to fray after 2014. The decisive parliamentary majority won by the BJP, coupled with a strong central leadership, created an unprecedented situation in post-liberalisation Indian politics: the revival of a dominant-party system alongside the persistence of multiple regional forces. The expectation in many quarters was that regional parties would be weakened, either absorbed into the nationalising momentum of the BJP or rendered irrelevant by the erosion of coalition politics. Yet, this assumption underestimated the adaptability of regional political actors.

In the immediate years following 2014, it seemed plausible to imagine that regional politics would be subsumed under a unifying nationalist discourse. The BJP's narrative of cultural nationalism, combined with its ability to directly reach voters through centrally administered welfare schemes, challenged the foundations of sub-national mobilisation. Central schemes like PM-Kisan, Ujjwala Yojana, and PMAY carried a strong element of leader branding, enabling the Prime Minister to connect with beneficiaries across states and bypass traditional party structures. Many observers predicted that such developments would make regional welfare politics redundant.

Over time, however, these predictions proved to be overly deterministic. While it is true that national-level welfare schemes created a new form of direct political connectivity between the Centre and the voter, regional parties did not disappear. Instead, they evolved. Rather than abandoning welfare politics, they intensified it, tailoring schemes to their own political brand and ensuring that beneficiaries associated these programmes with state-level leadership. This was not mere replication; it was strategic adaptation. In states like West Bengal, Delhi, and Tamil Nadu, local welfare schemes became intertwined with leader image-building, reinforcing political loyalty at the grassroots.

Similarly, the expectation that nationalism would flatten regional iden-

tity politics proved unfounded. Regional leaders began to reinterpret nationalism through their own frameworks—sometimes integrating it with their sub-national narratives, sometimes challenging it by asserting a plural, federal vision of India. This enabled them to compete within the nationalist frame rather than simply opposing it from the outside.

Thus, the old model of regionalism as purely defensive and coalition-dependent no longer captures the reality of post-2014 politics. The new reality is more complex: regional parties are not only surviving but thriving in many states, leveraging welfare politics, leader-centric charisma, and narrative competition to remain electorally relevant even in the shadow of a dominant central party. What has changed is not the existence of regionalism, but the way it is imagined, performed, and sustained in contemporary India.

Intersectional Analysis: Populism, Nationalism, Welfare, Leadership:

The transformation of regional politics in India since 2014 cannot be understood in isolation from the interlocking dynamics of populism, nationalism, welfare politics, and leadership. These forces have interacted in complex ways, producing a hybridised political environment where state-level politics is shaped not only by local identities and developmental needs but also by broader national narratives and the personalised appeal of charismatic leaders. This intersectional dynamic has fundamentally altered the style, strategy, and substance of regional political mobilisation.

Populism provides the overarching framework through which contemporary regional politics is increasingly conducted. At the national level, populism since 2014 has been marked by leader-centric politics, direct engagement with the masses, the projection of a singular will of the people, and a tendency to bypass intermediary institutions. Regional leaders have absorbed and adapted these methods. They present themselves as the singular voice of their state, capable of cutting through bureaucratic inertia and central dominance to deliver results. In this style of politics, leaders construct a personal bond with the electorate, often framing themselves as protectors of the state's dignity and well-being. This allows them to counter the political authority of the Centre while simultaneously mirroring aspects of its populist appeal.

Nationalism has become an inescapable part of this regional populist strategy. Under the dominant central leadership, nationalism has been framed in majoritarian cultural terms, emphasising unity, central authority, and a singular civilisational identity. Regional parties, however, do not simply reject this nationalism; they engage with it in selective and strategic ways. Some seek to integrate their sub-national identity into the national narrative, portraying their state as an essential contributor to India's greatness. Others use the language of nationalism to highlight federalism, cultural diversity, and pluralism as defining features of the Indian project. In both cases, regional actors are compelled to negotiate with the nationalist dis-

course rather than ignore it, because it is now a central axis of political legitimacy in the country.

Welfare politics serves as the most tangible manifestation of both populism and leadership appeal. Since 2014, the Centre has pursued large-scale welfare initiatives, many of them branded to highlight the role of the Prime Minister. These centrally designed schemes have been highly visible and often directly linked to the national leadership in the public imagination. Regional leaders, recognising the power of this approach, have developed their own parallel systems of welfare delivery. The competitive dynamic between central and state welfare initiatives has become a crucial battleground for political credibility. In states such as Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, and Delhi, regional parties have pioneered targeted schemes in education, health, women's welfare, and food security, carefully branding them to ensure that the benefits are directly associated with the state leadership. This form of personalised welfare politics serves not only developmental needs but also the political imperative of reinforcing the leader's bond with the electorate.

Leadership is the thread that binds these elements together. The shift towards hyper-personalised politics means that the identity of the leader increasingly overshadows the organisational and ideological character of the party. In earlier decades, while charismatic leadership mattered, it was embedded within party structures and ideological traditions. Today, in many regional contexts, the leader is the brand, the face of governance, and the embodiment of the political project. This has two significant consequences. First, it allows for rapid narrative shifts, as leaders can pivot their rhetoric and strategy without the constraints of deep organisational consensus. Second, it makes political competition more personality-driven, with contests framed as battles between individual leaders rather than between party platforms.

The interplay between populism, nationalism, welfare, and leadership has also reshaped electoral strategy. Campaigns are increasingly designed around the personal image of the leader, the emotive appeal of state pride, and tangible promises of welfare benefits. These strategies often bypass traditional political intermediaries such as party workers, relying instead on direct leader-to-voter communication through mass rallies, social media, and state-controlled communication channels. This directness enhances the leader's ability to shape the political agenda but can also weaken institutional mechanisms of accountability.

Furthermore, this intersectional dynamic has altered the relationship between the Centre and the states. While the Centre continues to assert its authority through centralised welfare, regulatory interventions, and cultural narratives, states under strong regional leadership actively resist this dominance. They do so not only through legal and institutional means but also by mobilising public sentiment, framing their resistance as a matter of state dignity and people's rights. This emotional framing allows regional leaders

to convert institutional disputes into political capital, further entrenching their position in the state's political imagination.

However, the convergence of populism, nationalism, welfare politics, and leadership also carries inherent risks. The hyper-personalisation of politics can undermine collective party decision-making and weaken institutional continuity. Excessive reliance on welfare promises without sustainable fiscal planning can strain state budgets and create long-term economic vulnerabilities. The competitive dynamic between central and state narratives can, at times, deepen political polarisation and disrupt cooperative governance. Yet these risks are often outweighed, in the short term, by the electoral gains such strategies produce.

In essence, the intersection of populism, nationalism, welfare politics, and leadership has created a new paradigm of regional politics in post-2014 India. This paradigm is characterised by its adaptability, its ability to negotiate with dominant national narratives, and its emphasis on performance-based legitimacy reinforced by personal charisma. It ensures that regional politics remains vibrant, competitive, and deeply embedded in the democratic life of the nation, even in an era of strong central dominance.

Changing Nature and Appeal of Regionalism – From Past to Present:

The evolution of regionalism in India from the pre-2014 era to the present reflects a profound shift in both its operational strategies and its ideological framing. In the earlier decades, regional parties derived their political strength from their ability to act as custodians of sub-national identity, often rooted in long-standing cultural, linguistic, or caste-based mobilisations. Their appeal rested on the claim that they were the authentic voice of the state, distinct from the homogenising tendencies of national politics. Electoral success was tied to sustaining these identity narratives while bargaining with the Centre for material benefits. The coalition era provided fertile ground for such politics, allowing regional actors to wield disproportionate influence over national decision-making by making their support contingent on the fulfilment of state-specific demands.

In this earlier phase, welfare politics existed but was largely embedded in broader developmental narratives rather than being the central instrument of political legitimacy. Leaders were important, but leadership charisma was often tempered by party organisation and ideological lineage. The emphasis was on sustaining movements and ensuring the continuity of state-specific political traditions. Even in fiercely competitive states, politics retained a measure of programmatic orientation, with manifestos reflecting longer-term policy priorities alongside identity assertions.

The post-2014 phase marks a decisive break from this pattern. The emergence of a strong national government with a charismatic prime minister altered the competitive environment for regional parties in fundamental ways. The centralisation of political communication, the national branding of welfare schemes, and the overarching presence of a majoritarian nation-

alist discourse reduced the space for purely defensive regional politics. Regional actors were confronted with a choice: either accommodate themselves within this new framework or reinvent themselves to compete directly with it. Most chose reinvention.

One of the most striking features of this reinvention has been the embrace of leader-centric populism. Whereas earlier leaders were prominent figures within a broader party structure, many contemporary regional leaders have become synonymous with their parties. Their personal image is crafted as the embodiment of the state's aspirations, with political messaging revolving around their capacity to deliver tangible benefits to the people. This has elevated welfare politics to a central electoral strategy. Freebies and targeted benefits are no longer merely social policy tools; they are carefully branded acts of political generosity, linking the leader directly to the citizen. In this transformation, welfare has become as much about symbolism and narrative as about material delivery.

Nationalism, too, has been reworked within regional frameworks. Some leaders integrate aspects of the national discourse into their state-specific identity politics, reframing themselves as both proud representatives of their region and loyal contributors to the Indian nation. Others challenge the centralising version of nationalism by advancing pluralist and federalist interpretations. In both cases, nationalism is no longer ignored or dismissed; it is actively engaged with, contested, and reinterpreted to suit regional political needs.

The result is a hybrid form of regionalism—dynamic, competitive, and deeply personalised—capable of surviving and even thriving in the shadow of a dominant national party. It represents not the retreat of regional politics but its strategic transformation to meet the demands of a new political age.

Theorising Contemporary Regionalism – Competitive Sub-National Populism:

The post-2014 transformation of India's regional politics invites a re-framing of its conceptual foundations. Earlier models, which saw regionalism primarily as an expression of sub-national identity and federal negotiation, cannot adequately account for the hybridised, performance-driven, and leader-centric politics now visible across multiple states. What has emerged is a distinct pattern that blends elements of sub-national assertion with the stylistic and strategic features of national-level populism. This synthesis produces a political formation that is neither purely defensive nor entirely subsumed within centralised nationalism. Rather, it is competitive, adaptive, and intent on shaping the political agenda within and beyond the state's borders.

This new pattern can be described as competitive sub-national populism, a formation in which regional leaders embody both the symbolic representation of their state's identity and the practical delivery of tangible benefits, while simultaneously engaging in a contest with the Centre over

narrative control and political legitimacy. In this formation, the leader is not merely the political head of a party but is presented as the personalised protector and benefactor of the people. The legitimacy of this role is sustained through a cycle of targeted welfare initiatives, symbolic acts of defiance or accommodation towards the Centre, and the careful crafting of a narrative that links the leader's personal stature to the well-being of the state's population.

The competitiveness of this model lies in its refusal to cede political ground to the Centre's dominance, even as it borrows heavily from the central populist playbook. In welfare politics, regional actors often adopt the logic of central schemes but localise and personalise them to reinforce their own leadership brand. In narrative politics, they accept that nationalism is an unavoidable reference point but insist on interpreting it through their own lens, whether by emphasising cultural diversity, historical pride, or state-specific contributions to the Indian union. This competitive posture is not confined to electoral contests alone; it plays out in the media sphere, in symbolic acts of protest or celebration, and in the framing of state–Centre relations as a drama in which the regional leader is the protagonist.

Crucially, competitive sub-national populism thrives on the fusion of performance-based legitimacy with emotive appeals. Electoral support is maintained not simply through promises but through visible delivery of benefits that can be directly attributed to the leader. This delivery is then embedded within a story of resistance, pride, and identity that strengthens the emotional connection between the leader and the electorate. By integrating welfare with identity politics in this way, regional leaders create a durable political narrative that can withstand the pressures of central dominance.

The implications of this theoretical framing are significant. It suggests that regional politics in contemporary India is not a residual phenomenon awaiting absorption into national politics, but a robust and evolving arena that competes with the Centre on its own terms. Far from being a passive recipient of political change, regionalism in the post-2014 era has become an active force shaping the trajectory of Indian democracy itself.

Impact of the New Regionalism:

The emergence of competitive sub-national populism has reshaped the political and institutional landscape of India in ways that extend beyond electoral calculations. Its impact is visible in the altered dynamics of federalism, the changing role of opposition politics, the reconfiguration of welfare priorities, and the intensification of narrative politics at the state level. The traditional model of cooperative federalism, in which states and the Centre engaged in structured negotiation and policy coordination, has given way to a more confrontational and competitive form. States led by assertive regional leaders increasingly frame their relationship with the Centre as one of political rivalry, using disagreements over resource allocation, administrative control, or legislative authority to project themselves as defenders of

state interests. This has produced both friction and innovation: while disputes over fiscal transfers and central oversight have grown sharper, states have also devised new ways to showcase their policy autonomy, particularly in the realm of welfare delivery.

Opposition politics has also been deeply influenced by this transformation. In the absence of a unified and credible national opposition to the BJP, regional parties have become the primary sites of resistance, often assuming the mantle of leadership in broader anti-Centre coalitions. Yet this resistance is fragmented, as each regional party's priorities are anchored in its own state-specific context and political calculations. The result is an opposition space that is vibrant but decentralised, where national coordination remains secondary to the imperatives of local survival and dominance. This has weakened the possibility of sustained collective action against the ruling party at the Centre, but it has also ensured that political contestation remains alive and diverse across the country.

The reorientation of welfare politics under the new regionalism has had significant social and economic implications. Welfare schemes are now as much instruments of political branding as they are mechanisms of social support. While this personalisation has enhanced the visibility of state-led welfare, it has also intensified competition between states and the Centre to claim credit for developmental outcomes. In many cases, this has spurred innovation in welfare design and delivery, as regional leaders strive to outdo central initiatives with locally tailored programmes. At the same time, it has contributed to a fiscal arms race in which promises of subsidies, freebies, and targeted transfers escalate with each electoral cycle, raising questions about long-term economic sustainability.

Narrative politics, too, has been transformed. Regional leaders actively engage with and reinterpret the national discourse to suit their own political objectives. This has produced a multiplicity of nationalist narratives within India, ranging from pluralist and inclusive visions to more assertively regionalist interpretations that seek to redefine the terms of belonging to the Indian nation. In doing so, these leaders have kept alive the federal idea, but in a form that is more politically charged and less institutionally mediated. The cumulative effect of these developments is a polity in which regionalism is no longer a counter current to national politics, but a central arena in which the future shape of Indian democracy is being contested and reimagined.

Possible future ramifications:

The trajectory of regional politics in India after 2014 suggests that competitive sub-national populism is likely to remain a central force in shaping the country's political future. The growing assertiveness of regional leaders, their capacity to blend populist charisma with targeted welfare delivery, and their willingness to challenge the Centre's narrative indicate that regionalism will not wither under the weight of central dominance. Instead,

it will continue to adapt, producing a political environment defined by sustained competition between state-level and national-level populisms. One likely consequence is the further intensification of Centre–state confrontations, both in formal arenas such as legislative disputes and fiscal negotiations, and in the symbolic domain of public political messaging. States will increasingly frame themselves as distinct political spaces whose aspirations and needs cannot be fully subsumed under a single national vision, leading to more frequent public disagreements on governance models, welfare priorities, and cultural representation.

The fiscal dimension of this competition could become especially pronounced. As regional leaders seek to maintain their political advantage through expansive welfare promises and subsidies, the pressure on state finances will mount. While some states may innovate to sustain these schemes through targeted taxation or efficiency gains, others could face mounting deficits, leading to potential financial instability. This tension will test the resilience of India’s federal fiscal framework, especially if states perceive the Centre’s resource distribution policies as politically motivated or insufficiently responsive to local needs. The politics of credit-claiming will become sharper, with both the Centre and states seeking to position themselves as the primary benefactors of the citizenry, potentially leading to duplication of schemes and wasteful overlaps.

The ideological terrain of Indian politics will also be affected. The multiplicity of nationalist narratives emerging from regional politics will continue to challenge the centralising tendencies of the ruling party at the national level. These contestations will keep alive the debate over the meaning of Indian identity, the balance between unity and diversity, and the extent to which the Centre should dictate cultural and political priorities. In the long run, this could lead to a rearticulation of federalism in India—one that moves away from the older cooperative model towards a more competitive and negotiated federalism, where both sides actively seek to shape the terms of the relationship.

Electorally, the persistence of competitive sub-national populism will ensure that regional parties remain formidable in their strongholds, even if their influence at the national level is fragmented. This could result in a paradoxical scenario: the continued dominance of a single national party at the Centre, alongside a robust set of state-level actors capable of shaping governance and political discourse in their territories. Such a landscape may limit the possibility of cohesive national opposition but will preserve a decentralised pluralism in political representation.

Ultimately, the future of Indian democracy will be shaped by how this interplay between national and regional populisms evolves. If it leads to constructive competition and policy innovation, it could enrich federal governance. If it degenerates into fiscal imprudence and perpetual confrontation, it could strain both democratic institutions and the economic foundations of the republic.

Conclusion:

The evolution of regional politics in India since 2014 reveals a political transformation that cannot be adequately explained by older frameworks of sub-nationalism and federal bargaining. While many analysts initially assumed that the rise of a dominant-party system under the Bharatiya Janata Party would inevitably erode the space for regional political actors, the evidence of the past decade demonstrates a far more nuanced reality. Regional parties have not merely survived; they have adapted to an altered political environment by reimagining their strategies, recalibrating their ideological positions, and embracing a more leader-centric form of mobilisation. In doing so, they have developed a hybrid political formation that blends the emotional appeal of identity politics with the delivery-focused legitimacy of populist governance.

The emergence of what can be described as competitive sub-national populism has ensured that regionalism remains a powerful current in India's democratic life. This model thrives on a delicate balance: it competes directly with the Centre for narrative control and welfare delivery, yet it also borrows elements from the centralised populist style it seeks to resist. In this sense, contemporary regionalism is not a rejection of national political trends but a sophisticated adaptation that allows state-level leaders to assert their relevance in a highly centralised political system. Through personalised welfare schemes, emotive symbolic politics, and strategic engagement with nationalist discourse, regional actors have crafted a durable mode of political survival that resonates deeply with their electorates.

The impact of this transformation is visible in multiple spheres. Federalism has become more competitive and confrontational, as state leaders position themselves as both defenders of local identity and capable managers of state resources. Welfare politics has intensified, with states innovating in delivery while also facing mounting fiscal pressures. Nationalism has become a contested field rather than a monopolised domain, as regional leaders reinterpret its meaning in ways that protect their political space. In opposition politics, regional parties now carry the primary responsibility for resisting central dominance, even though their fragmented nature limits the emergence of a cohesive national alternative.

These developments carry important implications for the future of Indian democracy. On one hand, competitive sub-national populism preserves the pluralism and decentralisation that are essential to the federal spirit of the republic. It prevents the homogenisation of political discourse and ensures that multiple visions of governance and identity coexist within the national framework. On the other hand, it risks entrenching hyper-personalised politics at the state level, encouraging fiscal populism that may be economically unsustainable, and deepening political confrontation between the Centre and the states. The long-term consequences will depend on whether this competitive dynamic fosters constructive policy innovation or descends into perpetual political brinkmanship.

Ultimately, the post-2014 transformation of regional politics underscores the adaptability of Indian democracy. Regionalism has not been eclipsed by central dominance; it has evolved into a sophisticated, performance-oriented, and populist form that is likely to remain central to the political landscape for years to come. The ongoing interplay between national consolidation and regional assertion will be one of the defining features of India's democratic trajectory in the coming decades.

Endnotes

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