

# Regional Parties in the 16th Lok Sabha Elections Who Survived and Why?

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This paper attempts to explain why some regional parties flourished and others fizzled out in the 16th general elections to the Lok Sabha. To explain this variation, it makes a distinction between regionally-located parties and regionalist parties. While both are regional parties in the sense that they have territorially limited arenas of operation they are different in terms of their programme and agenda. In the 2014 elections, the regionally-located parties fared relatively poorly compared to regionalist parties. This paper argues that success and failure often depend on the efforts, strategies and tactics of competitors. It concludes that the strategy of the Bharatiya Janata Party was favourable to the electoral fortunes of regionalist parties and disadvantageous to the regionally-located parties.

Post the era of party fragmentation in India, there has been an exponential rise in the number of regional parties. Many of them have been coalition partners of national governments since 1996. Some have declined in importance or have become “bit players” while others have survived (necessitating coalitions with them). We examine why some regional parties have remained salient while others appear to have lost their heft.

In the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, while parties like the Shiv Sena (SHS), All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), All Indian Trinamool Congress (AITC) and Biju Janata Dal (BJD) among others prospered, the stock of the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) diminished. What explains this variation in electoral success especially since all of them are fairly long-standing parties with solid support bases in their respective states? The dominant explanatory frameworks used to study parties and party systems revolve around socio-economic cleavages, nature of the institutional framework or a combination of cleavage based and institutional variables together. Popular explanations for the variations point to fluctuations in electoral support. While fluctuations and socio-economic changes are useful explanatory variables they inadequately explain the variation in electoral success as well as the pattern of success and failure across states. They cannot explain for instance, why the so-called regional parties succeed in some states and not others. Similarly, institutional explanations are unhelpful especially when there is no change in the institutional environment. It cannot show why some parties are able to sustain themselves, whereas others lose relevancy.

I argue that any explanation for the relative tenacity and electoral success of some and susceptibility of others to poor performance will have to account for the “behaviour of the competitors” (Meguid 2008: 22). Parties are components of a party system and this necessarily means that the actions and strategies of the other elements in the system will count. Popular explanations are partial because they commonly examine success and failure by focusing only on a particular party, ignoring other actors in the party system.

In a federal polity, parties with a polity-wide presence cannot battle with a one size fits all strategy. As the patterns of party competition, both in terms of actors and issue dimensions vary from state to state, they will have to tailor their programme depending on the territorial unit of competition.

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While they could highlight certain issues in some units they may be constrained to do the same in others. This is because polity-wide parties have to appear as cohesive entities while simultaneously catering to multiple interests. It follows that their pitch will be effective in some states but not others and consequently some competitors will find more space to manoeuvre as compared to others. This paper shows that the strategic choices exercised by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) made a difference as to who slipped and who remain relevant.

The rest of this paper is as follows. The first section underlines the importance of making a distinction within the category of regional parties to explain the varied success of parties. The next section reviews the major approaches used to study parties and party systems in India and highlights the importance of strategy as an explanatory variable. The third section examines how the growth of some of the so-called regional parties has been checked and how others have obtained a greater leverage as a result of the divergent strategy of the BJP. The final section summarises and concludes.

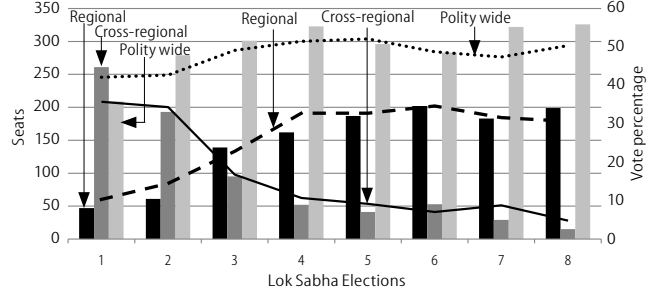
**Distinguishing Regionally-Located and Regionalist Parties**

The term regional is commonly used very loosely to denote a wide variety of parties, often very different from each other. While some within this category trace their lineage to the period before Independence others are of more recent vintage. Significantly, many in the grouping do not necessarily have a “regional” agenda or programme. While some distinctly claim and cater to particular state interests and identities, others are regional because they are relevant only in a particular region. As a first step to understand why some regional parties have been able to sustain themselves and others are vulnerable, it is useful to separate the two meanings of regional that are frequently used synonymously.

Aggregate seat and vote shares do not reveal the territorial character, variance and the fluctuating bases of support of political parties. In an early study which attempted to map the Indian electorate, Sisson and Vanderbok (1984) found clear regional trends of party support. While the Congress, the then dominant party, did not receive uniform support across the polity, the opposition to the Congress also varied from state to state. It follows that all parties are territorialised or regionalised and what differentiates them is only a matter of degree. Here regionalisation is understood in terms of spatial location. So while some parties locate themselves across the polity, others are relevant in limited pockets.

The zone-based classification schema (north, south, east and west) which implicitly combines insights from both institutionalism and political sociology is a useful analytical tool to map party support patterns (Sisson and Vanderbok 1984; Arora 2000). It brings together states which share a common history, geographic space and language family (Arora and Kailash 2012). In this paper, I make a distinction between three types of parties on the basis of their electoral performance (in Lok Sabha elections) across zones – north, south, east and west.<sup>1</sup> Polity-wide parties are those parties which contest

**Chart 1: Seat-Vote Share of Parties (1989-2014)**



Seats are represented on the primary axis and vote percentage is on the secondary axis. 1: 1989, 2: 1991, 3: 1996, 4: 1998, 5: 1999, 6: 2004, 7: 2009, 8: 2014. Source: Election Commission Reports.

and win seats across all the four zones. Cross-regional parties are those that win seats in more than one zone (Bombwall 1988; Pai 1990). Finally, the regional parties win seats only in one zone.

Of the 86 registered parties which contested Lok Sabha elections between 1989 and 2014, 64 continue to exist in 2014. While some dropped off, others have merged with other parties. With the fragmentation (Chhibber and Nooruddin 2000; Sridharan 2002) and/or federalisation (Arora 2000) of the party system, there has been a substantial increase in the number of parties contesting and winning seats (Table 1). The category of regional parties has seen a substantial increase. From 19 parties representing 11 states in 1989, there are 31 parties representing 18 states in the 16th Lok Sabha formed after the 2014 elections. At their peak in 1999, there were 33 parties which represented 28 states. While the number of polity-wide parties and cross-regional parties has remained stable, there has been substantial decline in the number of states represented by cross-regional parties. The seat-vote share of the respective categories also reflects the same trend (Chart 1).

**Table 1: Types of Parties (1989-2014)**

Party-Type	1989	1991	1996	1998	1999	2004	2009	2014
Regional	19 (11)	19 (15)	22 (16)	33 (18)	33 (28)	33 (21)	32 (17)	31 (18)
Cross-regional	3 (15)	3 (14)	4 (11)	4 (9)	3 (9)	2 (6)	3 (7)	2 (6)
Polity-wide	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Total	24	24	28	39	39	37	37	35

Figures in parentheses denotes states. Union territories have also been counted as states. Source: Calculated from Election Commission reports.

However, besides the spatial-locational usage, the nomenclature of regional has also been used for parties whose programmatic appeal and organisational arrangement is limited to a particular state/region (Fickett 1971). It may be more appropriate to designate these parties as regionalist, as they not only have a strong linkage with particular territory but their main claim is also to defend the identity and interests of particular states.<sup>2</sup> Centre-state relations are a key issue on the agenda of regionalist parties.

Regionalist parties essentially make three types of claims. One, the so-called national parties are not addressing the interests of particular states and they can do it better. Two, regional or state pride, honour, culture and so on must be protected. Three, they make demands on the centre to relinquish

power on certain subjects and areas. Regionalist parties essentially vary on the degree of their claims, especially the third. While some parties make strong claims in terms of challenging the existing state structure, suggesting radical reordering of the existing centre-state framework and demanding greater autonomy, others make soft demands like protection, greater devolution and/or decentralisation.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, parties have also moved along the strong-soft continuum depending on the exigencies of competitive politics and their own aspirations.

If regionally-located parties do bring up the issue of tweaking centre-state relations, it is in more general terms rather than with respect to any particular state (Table 2). Regionalist parties on the contrary, invoke loyalty and emotion to a particular identified territory. While all regionalist parties are regional in spatial-locational terms, all regional parties do not necessarily have a regionalist agenda. Another distinction is that some regionally-located parties aspire to be polity-wide parties, while the regionalists do not have such ambitions.

**Table 2: Party Types (1989-2014)**

Polity-wide	Regional		
	Cross-regional	Regionally-located	Regionalist
INC, BJP, CPI (1989), CPI(M) (1991)	BJP (1989, 1991), CPI(M), CPI, NCP, JD, RSP (1996, 1998)	SP, BSP, JD(U), JD(S), RJD, RSP, CPI (2014), NCP (2004), SAP, AD, LJSP, AAP, RLSP, RPI/RPI(A), RLD, AIFB, SWP, INLD	AIADMK, DMK, PMK, VCK, DMDK, MDMK, TDP, TRS, MUL, KCM, KEC, JKPDP, JKN, SAD, AGP, SHS, JMM, JVM, PMK, SDF, SSP, MPP, MNF, GNLF, AINRC, WBTC/AITC, NPF/NPC, UGDP, UMFA, MIM, BJD, AUDF, YSRC, MAG, HJC(BL)

Author classification based on secondary literature review. Figure in parentheses represents election year. Only parties that have moved across the spectrum have figures in parentheses.

At the same time, what parties can do depends on certain subjective and objective conditions. In some states and/or regions there exists a common subjective perception or consciousness of difference from the rest of the country. Compared to other zones, the northern zone has seen a relatively lower number of regionalist parties. Even within the zone, it is in the peripheral regions of the zone, where regionalist sentiments have found space. Moreover, the “centre” has always been associated with the north. The relatively greater homogeneity of the north in terms of language, history, culture, politics, social and economic background has also not allowed the idea of being different to be manufactured.

The other zones geographically distanced from the centre have witnessed a greater number of regionalist movements. Historically, the other zones have not only been away from locus of power but are also culturally and linguistically different from the north. Pai (1990: 396) for instance, notes that some regions like Punjab and Madras developed a “self-identity” of their own by the time of Independence. Similarly Nag (2003: 341) argues that the north-eastern states including Sikkim but barring Assam, had no direct “part of the political development that took place in the rest of India during the national movement.” It has consequently been relatively easier for

parties in other zones to politicise differences and use it as a mobilisational tool. Based on this difference between zones it is possible to make a distinction between states with space for a regionalist political agenda and non-regionalist states (Table 3).

**Table 3: Types of Competition Space in States**

Regionalist	Non-regionalist
Tamil Nadu (39), Puducherry (1), Andhra Pradesh (25), Telangana (17), Kerala (20), Karnataka (28), Jammu and Kashmir (6), West Bengal (42), Assam (14), Sikkim (1), Maharashtra (48), Manipur (2), Meghalaya (2), Nagaland (1), Mizoram (1), Tripura (1), Jharkhand (14), Odisha (21), Goa (2), Punjab (13)	Bihar (40), Rajasthan (25), Uttar Pradesh (80), Gujarat (26), Himachal Pradesh (4), Haryana (10), Uttarakhand (5), Madhya Pradesh (29), Chhattisgarh (11)

Source: Author’s classification based on secondary literature review. Figure in parentheses represent the number of Lok Sabha seats.

The unpacking of the two meanings of regional is crucial to understand why some parties have thrived and others have floundered. The dominant literature has rarely made this distinction and has used the term regional for both types of parties. A more recent formulation, state-level parties (Palshikar 2004a) used to denote parties without a polity-wide presence is value-neutral, however it too does not help us again to distinguish between regionally-located parties and parties with a regionalist agenda, both of which may have limited territorial reach. It is clear that these two distinct categories of parties are a result of different causes and they naturally have different consequences.

**Strategy and Competition Space**

The two dominant approaches in party and party system research in India, the sociological and the institutional traditions are not very helpful in explaining short-term swings in party support. The two perspectives are essentially static, assume that parties are constrained by the context and downplay the fact that parties as agents continually evolve strategies to win policy, office or votes (Müller and Strøm 1999). Furthermore, they do not account for other actors (parties) in the party system.

More recent theoretical and empirical studies focusing on strategies bring the role of parties as agents to the centre of analysis (De Vries and Marks 2012; De Vries and Hobolt 2012; Rovny 2012). In her study of “niche” parties, Meguid (2008) showed that strategy and tactics could be a useful explanatory variable. She found neither the institutional framework nor sociological conditions could account for the competitiveness of niche parties as much as the strategy of mainstream parties. Mainstream parties often amplified or ignored issues raised by niche parties to hurt other larger parties and in the process they either increased or decreased the leverage of niche parties.

Similarly, parties could structure political competition itself by highlighting or downplaying issues. Rovny (2012) found that parties often increase the salience of those issues on which they have better credentials and an advantageous position while downplaying or ignoring those issues that do not benefit them. By emphasising one issue over others, parties increase

the dominance of one dimension over others, making the spatial distance over this more important than others. What is emphasised or blurred depends on their stakes on a particular issue dimension. This is a very useful insight in the context of federal polities, as it indicates that parties could vary issue emphasis depending on territory.

In the context of India, there has not been any significant work on strategy to my knowledge, barring Sridharan's (2013) study of the BJP's rise and geographical expansion. He demonstrated that the BJP strategically exploited coalition opportunities by leveraging its pivotal position as third party and offering a share of power at the centre to expand itself in states where it was weak. This strategy fulfilled the needs of those in the coalition (or those who sought one) who wanted a say in national-level decision-making and also helped bridge territorial deficits of the coalition-maker. While this alliance strategy has played a key role in the expansion of the BJP, it does not address how the party handles the agenda of its alliance partners. At the same time in India, political competition over issues has seldom been analysed primarily because the standard left-right continuum does not work. Therefore, instead of trying to examine spatial distances between parties, I propose to examine how parties compete on different issue dimensions. I will explore how the BJP incorporates issue dimensions in its "bridging alliance" (Sridharan 2013) strategy and how this in turn impinges on the electoral fortunes of regional parties.

The competition space in regionalist and non-regionalist states is very different. A regionalist agenda which gives importance to a particular state, region, language, culture and so on is often at odds with the framework of a polity-wide party. While the latter emphasises on commonalities and attempts to play aggregator, the former stresses on differences. Consequently, competing in a regionalist agenda space is tricky business for the BJP for two reasons. First, an alternate line might not find any takers especially when the existing competition in a state is only about different degrees of the regionalist agenda. Second, endorsing the agenda and/or alliances with regionalist parties may expose contradictions and lead to loss of credibility in other states. In a non-regionalist space, polity-wide parties may actually have an advantage by leveraging its weight, spread and influence.

A polity-wide party like the BJP will therefore constantly have to juggle with multiple and often contradictory demands that come up from different states while attempting to appear as a cohesive unit (Kailash 2011). What probably gives it room to manoeuvre is the fact that the party agenda has both core and secondary issues. The core set of issues is what a party is often known for and also differentiates it from others. At the same time, there will also be issues of secondary importance. While the party is unlikely to compromise or move too far away from the core, secondary issues may be more expendable.

I argue that in a regionalist competition space the BJP will tactically emphasise and blur issues to suit its agenda. While it will not outrightly oppose the regionalist agenda, it will not

endorse it either. Most often it is likely to press mute on the regionalist dimension so that it does not contradict its own position. At the same time, it could also shift its attention to other issues on which it has an advantage and downplay the regionalist agenda.

The regionalist space has been the BJP's Achilles heel and past experience shows that it has done well only in an electoral alliance (Sridharan 2013). Whether in an alliance or not, it faces a double constraint here. On the one hand, the party has to maintain unity of purpose and hence cannot embrace or seem to be going along with a regionalist agenda. Consequently, even in an alliance, the party is likely to maintain a distance from the regionalist agenda. On the other hand, given the increased competitiveness and uncertainty of electoral verdicts, it cannot appear to be critical of regionalist parties and their agendas especially when it is not in alliance, as it may have to turn to them in a post-election scenario if it falls short of numbers.

The competition space in non-regionalist states with regionally-located parties is very different and it primarily revolves around caste and community identities. They have witnessed roughly similar trajectories. Since the late 1980s and through the 1990s, there was an upsurge of backward and lower castes in the northern states of India, almost similar to that of what Tamil Nadu and Kerala had witnessed in the late 1950s and 1960s (Yadav 1996; Varshney 2000). New parties representing backward and lower-caste groups soon emerged and they not only brought a new style but also made social justice and dignity an integral part of the lexicon of Indian politics.

While their rise inaugurated a new era in Indian politics, their own fragmentation has become an integral feature of the post-Congress polity. This is because there has been constant fission within caste groups. The broad overarching groups have gradually broken up into smaller single-caste groups. As the rates of social, cultural and political mobilisation varies across groups, the group which moves first in temporal terms is likely to be better placed than others. Newer entrants often find paths to upward mobility blocked and are likely to look for alternative political vehicles to champion their cause as groups mobilised earlier are unlikely to yield space (Burger 1969). This aspirational surge opens space for new political vehicles especially when the old are unable to accommodate new demands.

This is a distinctive feature of the political competition in non-regionalist states and it incentivises parties to constantly work towards attracting new support, especially from groups that feel left out. Parties are constantly attempting to wean away groups and build new social coalitions. Here like other parties, the BJP will have to make concerted efforts to maintain its own support base while at the same time address the concerns of smaller and leftover backward and lower-caste groups, either by absorption or through alliances. This strategy has a direct impact on the competitors as it finally boils down to who manages to keep their social coalition intact.

Strategy could be an important explanatory variable to understand why some parties appear to have fizzled out. The BJP, I argue, is constrained to act in regionalist states and this has favoured the electoral fortunes of certain parties. In non-regionalist states, in sharp contrast, it is a more equal contest and there is no concession to the competitors.

**The BJP and ‘Regional’ Parties**

In the 2014 elections, though regional parties as a whole obtained as many seats as they did in the previous elections, there has been a marked internal change within the category. In 2009, both the regionalist and the regionally-located parties were almost evenly placed. However in 2014 while the seat share of regionalist parties increased from 105 to 168, regionally-located parties slumped to a mere 46 (Tables 4 and 5). This section examines how the strategy of the BJP gave greater leverage to the regionalist parties as compared to the regionally-located parties. To examine strategy I primarily rely on media reports of election campaigns and specifically focus on election rallies addressed by Narendra Modi, the BJP’s prime ministerial candidate. For non-regionalist states, I rely on secondary literature as well as survey data.

**Table 4: Regionalist Parties across Three Lok Sabha Elections (2004-14)**

Party	2004			2009			2014		
	Seats Won	AV	CVS	Seats Won	AV	CVS	Seats Won	AV	CVS
AGP	2	0.53	23.53	1	0.43	32.96			
AITC/WBTC	2	2.07	29.97	19	3.2	38.52	34	3.84	15.26
AUDF				1	0.52	9	3	0.42	11.21
BJD	11	1.30	51.15	14	1.59	43.73	20	1.71	44.08
BNP	1	0.04	9.25						
BPF				1	0.16	32.77			
BVA				1	0.05	30.47			
MNF	1	0.05	52.46						
NLP	1	0.09	2.81						
NPF/NPC	1	0.18	31.77	1	0.2	69.96	1	0.18	54.92
NPP							1	0.10	8.9
SDF	1	0.04	69.84	1	0.04	63.3	1	0.03	52.98
HJCBL				1	0.2	10.01			
JKNC	2	0.13	22.02	3	0.12	47.8			
JKPDP	1	0.07	39.29				3	0.13	21.24
JMM	5	0.47	28.43	2	0.4	4.97	2	0.30	7.74
JVM				1	0.23	9.33			
SAD	8	0.90	43.42	4	0.96	43.35	4	0.66	33.56
AIADMK				9	1.67	39.07	37	0.12	43.80
AINRC							1	0.05	34.57
DMK	16	1.81	58.24	18	1.83	44.88			
JD(S)	3	1.47	15.67	3	0.82	12.57	2	0.67	10.00
KCM				1	0.1	50.13	1	0.08	51.01
KEC	1	0.09	48.52						
MDMK	4	0.43	58.23	1	0.27	36.46			
MIM	1	0.11	21.29	1	0.07	42.14	1	0.12	11.41
IUML	1	0.20	9.61	2	0.21	16.53	2	0.20	4.09
PMK	6	0.56	51.66			34.74	1	0.33	19.83
TDP	5	3.04	42.75	6	2.51	33.55	16	2.55	40.26
TRS	5	0.63	13.09	2	0.62	29.65	11	1.22	34.67
VCK				1	0.18	30.01			
YSRC							9	2.53	31.87
SHS	12	1.81	17.90	11	1.55	18.51	18	1.85	17.90

AV: actual vote in %; CVS: votes in seats contested in %.  
Source: CSDS-Lokniti Data Unit.

**Table 5: Cross-Regional and Regionally-Located Parties across Three Lok Sabha Elections (2004-14)**

Party	2004			2009			2014			
	Seats Won	AV	CVS	Seats Won	AV	CVS	Seats Won	AV	CVS	
AIFB	3	0.35	18.81	2	0.32	8.62				
RSP/RSP (KL)	3	0.43	33.5	2	0.38	11.85	1	0.30	25.6	
AD							2	0.15	12.12	
AAP							4	2.05	2.61	
BSP	19	5.33	6.66	21	6.17	6.63				
JD(U)	8	2.35	17.73	20	1.52	16.06	2	1.08	6.73	
LJNSP	4	0.71	10.02				6	0.41	37.02	
RJD	24	2.41	31.27	4	1.27	19.23	4	1.34	27.57	
RLD	3	0.63	11.08	5	0.44	30.14				
RLSP							3	0.19	32.09	
SJP(R)	1	0.09	5.32							
HLD (R)/INLD							2	0.51		
SP	36	4.32	10.26	23	3.42	10.04	5	3.37	9.48	
IFDP	1	0.07	34.38							
RPI/ RPI(A)	1	0.09	6.31							
CPI	10	1.41	23.7	4	1.43	14.27	1	0.78	6.59	
CPI(M)	43	5.66	42.31	16	5.33	31.84	9	3.25	18.16	
SWP					1	0.12	49.17	1	0.20	48.71
NCP	9	1.80	33.98	9	2.04	17.18	6	1.56	25.66	

AV: actual vote in %; CVS: votes in seats contested in %.  
Source: CSDS-Lokniti Data Unit.

**Regionalist Parties**

In the 2014 elections, the BJD, AIADMK and the AITC were among the most successful larger (contesting more than three seats) regionalist parties. Incidentally, all three of them were not part of any major alliance. The BJP unlike in the past could not leverage its third party status in these states as the threat posed by the Congress, the Left and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) had substantially declined.

Historically the BJP has been weak in these states and it is not surprising that it did not engage with the regionalist agenda. In fact, it has not done so after it found itself isolated in 1996 and has since then softened its “one nation, one people, one culture” principle to make itself “coalitionable”. In regionalist states, the party effectively disguised its nationalistic, unitarian bias to appear as one among the other parties and highlighted relatively “harmless” issues like development, leadership and governance and kept the door open for post-election alliances with the dominant players. In Odisha and West Bengal, for instance, it accused the ruling parties without directly attacking their leaders of neglecting development.<sup>4</sup> In Bengal, Narendra Modi spoke of a “double *faida*” (double gain) of having the BJP in Delhi, to pressurise the state government to work efficiently. At the same time, the party only invested symbolic value in regionalist sentiments.<sup>5</sup>

Tamil Nadu is the classic state with the political landscape dominated by regionalist parties. The main competition is between the DMK, one of the oldest regionalist parties, and the AIADMK. The other smaller regionalist parties combine with the regionalist axis, a caste dimension. They basically represent smaller caste groups who have not found space within the dominant parties. In these elections, the BJP opened a new line aligning with the smaller regionalist parties. Its campaign focused on issues close to the regionalist agenda but

which had a wider resonance. These included centre-state relations and relations with neighbouring countries, two salient issue dimensions in Tamil Nadu politics. The Tamil parties have not only treated the centre with suspicion and are wary of any move which appears to reduce state autonomy but have also wanted to have the final word about India's relations with Sri Lanka.

Modi in his campaign assuaged regionalist concerns but at the same time shrewdly blurred the party's own strong-centre thesis. The BJP's position on the centre-state dimension was crafted in very general terms of "adherence to the federal structure", need to respect it in "letter and spirit", misuse of the office of governor and central machinery like the income-tax department and so on.<sup>6</sup> On the foreign policy dimension the party only expressed concern about Tamil fishermen and wanted the centre to be more sensitive. While this broad non-committal position resonated with the regionalist agenda and ensured that the party did not displease its allies or lose votes, it did not make any strong commitments which might contradict its own agenda.

At the same time, the regionalist parties who had an alliance with the BJP also did well. For instance, the SHS and the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) considerably improved their tally from the 2009 elections. Similarly in Punjab, the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) was able to retain its seat share (Table 5). An alliance did not mean endorsing the regionalist position; instead the BJP party effectively used the strategy of blurring particular dimensions on the agenda of the regionalist party while highlighting the other aspects to gain tactical advantage. This stand has helped it both to be on the right side of its allies as well as not dilute its own agenda.

In Maharashtra, the main competition has been between two coalition fronts, the Congress-Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) and the BJP-SHS (Palshikar, Deshpande and Birmal 2014). The SHS' regionalist agenda has always had a strong communal-nationalist dimension and has therefore gelled with the BJP's own project (Palshikar 2004b). Strategically, the BJP has either acted deaf or been soft in its response to SHS's almost violent promotion of its sons-of-the-soil agenda. This position has not only kept its ally in good humour but has also allowed the BJP to maintain its own nationalistic credentials. By downplaying issues which are secondary to its own agenda, muffling issues which put it in a disadvantageous position and by turning the political focus to its areas of strength, the BJP played a tactical game to gain space in Maharashtra. So much so that today it is actually in a position of strength and can actually choose between the two regionalist parties.

In Punjab, the SAD-BJP alliance has been mutually beneficial (Kumar 2004). The SAD is probably the oldest regionalist party in the country and held strong views on the restructuring of centre-state relations at one point of time. The BJP has consistently been silent on the religious and political autonomist demands that the SAD has put forward from time to time. In Modi's Punjab campaign the focus was limited to neutral and symbolic regionalist issues. For instance, he spoke of how the Congress glorified their own family and forgot local leaders.

Similarly, he acknowledged the contribution of Punjab in the domains of agriculture and national security. Emphasising a nationalist dimension which struck a regionalist chord, he spoke of the "veer bhoomi" of Punjab and also raised the issue of "One Rank One Pension".<sup>7</sup> The pension issue has resonance in the neighbouring hill states of Himachal and Uttarakhand as well.

Similarly in Andhra Pradesh too the BJP campaign was high on symbolism when it came to the regionalist agenda. In his speeches, Modi not only referred to the former chief minister and regionalist leader N T Rama Rao but also highlighted the neglect and insult of local leaders including, the former Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao. Focusing on development and employment he also spoke of a "Swarnim Andhra".<sup>8</sup>

The AGP's poor results compared to other regionalist parties needs explanation. In Assam, the BJP in fact hijacked the AGP's regionalist stand by turning it on its head into a nationalist agenda project. The primary competition in Assam has been between the Congress and the AGP, while the BJP had over time emerged as a third party. The regionalist Assam movement launched in 1976 called for the identification and extradition of foreign nationals and since then the issue of illegal immigration has been a major political issue in the state (Goswami 2013). The AGP's claim to power has been protection of the Assamese identity, but its performance both in government and opposition left much to be desired and it has been losing its credibility since the mid 1990s.

The BJP has constantly highlighted the problem of influx, and with the AGP's waning appeal, the BJP was able to capture both its cadre as well as mind space occupied by the regionalist party. In this election, it tactically emphasised the foreigner issue and the land swap deal with Bangladesh but muted the Assamese identity dimension, the other fork of the AGP's regionalist agenda.<sup>9</sup> The illegal migrants and foreigner issue fits with its overall nationalistic perspective, whereas the Assamese identity dimension does not. As in other regionalist states, the regionalist chord was touched, but only symbolically in terms of Modi beginning his speeches with "Joy Aai Asom" – a slogan of the Assamese agitation,<sup>10</sup> paying tributes to those who lost their lives in the creation of Assam,<sup>11</sup> and extending local festival greetings.<sup>12</sup> Besides the symbolic gestures, the party did not go very far and chose to focus substantially as in other states, on issues like corruption and development.

### Regionally-Located Parties

Regionally-located parties are primarily concentrated in Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Bihar and they did relatively poorly compared to the 2009 results (Table 5). In both UP and Bihar, political competition since the late 1980s has primarily revolved around building viable social coalitions. Ideology and issue-based appeals have not been able to hold their ground. Political parties have been constantly drawing and redrawing caste and community lines to find a social combination that holds. Consequently, there has been a periodic fragmentation of both caste groups and political parties in the two states. In both states, the BJP while consolidating its own social base has been strategically targeting the groups left out by the

main regionally-located parties, the BSP and SP in UP and the RJD in Bihar. Its alliance with the JD(U) and now with the Lok Janshakti Party (LJP) and Rashtriya Lok Samata Party (RLSP) in Bihar have to be seen in this context.

This is almost a replay of the non-Congress parties' strategy in the Congress system (Burger 1969). The then opposition creatively used the tensions related to social mobilisation to build their base, by providing channels for the recently mobilised or groups left out. The BSP's attempted *bahujan* to *sarvajan* shift in 2007 was designed to attract the brahmins who by then had begun to feel left out with the two lower-caste parties fighting it out (Pai 2011). It is therefore not surprising that there are sharp swings in the support of the clearly "unaligned" groups.

In UP, while the Yadavs dominate the SP, the BSP has been captured by the Jatavs (Beg, Kumar and Verma 2014: 250). An examination of caste-based voting patterns across three Lok Sabha elections (Table 6) reveals that the BJP has been significantly attracting the support of non-Yadav Other Backward Classes (OBCs), though it has not been as successful when it comes to the non-Jatav scheduled caste (SC) voters. This is probably because there is greater fragmentation of OBCs as compared to the SC. The BJP has been making use of this division by giving greater space to the non-Yadav OBC groups like Kurmis and the Lodhs who resent the Yadav domination (Zerini 2009: 60-61). The party has been successful in presenting itself as vehicle for the non-dominant lower-caste groups, while holding on its own base among the upper castes.

**Table 6: Voting Pattern of Select Caste Groups for BJP, BSP and SP across Three Lok Sabha Elections in Uttar Pradesh: 2004-14** (vote figures are in percentages)

Caste	Party	2014	2009	2004	N
Yadav	BJP	26	6	5	2014:260
	BSP	3	4	9	2009:322
	SP	54	70	71	2004:130
Kurmi+Koeri	BJP	52	19	29	2014:158
	BSP	4	19	19	2009:194
	SP	18	18	12	2004:106
Other OBC	BJP	58	27	28	2014:462
	BSP	11	18	15	2009:363
	SP	15	25	28	2004:287
Jatav	BJP	17	4	1	2014:377
	BSP	69	79	85	2009:421
	SP	4	5	8	2004:225
Other SC	BJP	40	8	10	2014:95
	BSP	31	57	43	2009:173
	SP	13	9	18	2004:107

Source: CSDS-Lokniti Data Unit.

The BJP has followed the same strategy of targeting the non-dominant lower castes in Bihar to widen its own support base. However, unlike UP it is difficult to establish a clear pattern as the BJP has been in alliance with the JD(U) for nearly 17 years, till the JD(U) decided to walk away in June 2013. Previous studies have however shown that the lower OBC votes have decisively shifted from the RJD to the BJP-JD(U) alliance (Kumar and Ranjan 2014: 278-79). Its alliance with the RLSP which has its base amongst the Koeri caste, another

lower OBC group, was intended to make good the loss of the JD(U) alliance.

In non-regionalist competition spaces like Bihar and UP, parties have to constantly be on an identity-mobilisation treadmill to be ahead of their competitors. The BJP's existing support groups are unlikely to make way or share the spoils with the newly mobilised groups. Additionally, there is nothing that prevents the non-regionalist parties from attempting to attract similarly dissatisfied groups from the BJP, something the BSP tried in 2007. In 2014 the BJP may have got its social alliances right. However it will have to do much more to maintain it.

**In Conclusion**

This paper attempted to explain why some regional parties flourished and others fizzled out in the 16th general elections. To explain this variation, it made a distinction between regionally-located parties and regionalist parties. While both are regional parties in the sense that they have territorially limited arenas of operation they are very different in terms of their programme and agenda. Regionalist parties are tied to particular states and endeavour to promote the interests of the unit they represent. Regionally-located parties do not necessarily have a regionalist agenda and may even aspire to be or assume they are polity-wide parties. Yet, they are relevant only in a limited territorial zone. In the 2014 elections, the regionally-located parties fared relatively poorly compared to the regionalist parties.

While the strategy of the BJP was favourable to the electoral fortunes of regionalist parties it was disadvantageous to the regionally-located parties. At the same time it also clear that parties are conscious of "ideological incompatibilities" unlike previous work which argued that parties indiscriminately build alliances to win a plurality (Sridharan 2013: 143). The BJP's strategy of blurring and muting regionalist aspirations indicates that polity-wide parties' also want to be seen as a cohesive programmatic unit.

In regionalist states, the BJP focused more on issues like development, good leadership and corruption rather than positional issues like restructuring centre-state relations and regional pride. If it spoke on the issue of federal relations, it was in neutral and non-committal, vague terms of better centre-state relations. At the same time, in some states it turned regionalist agendas into a nationalist one. In Assam for instance, the party appropriated the AGP plank of stopping illegal immigration but said nothing about Assamese identity dimension. Similarly it associated itself with the nationalist plank of the SHS, while pressing mute on the latter's regionalist stand.

This selective emphasis and muting of issues depending on how it fitted with its overall programme opened up enormous possibilities for the BJP. One, it allowed it to make inroads in some states like Assam and also consolidate itself in states like Punjab, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra. Two, it did not antagonise regionalist parties, almost as if preparing for a post-election scenario, where their support may be required.

This differentiated campaign strategy gave regionalist parties greater space as compared to regionally-located parties. In the regionalist competition space, the party campaign was tangential and there was a conscious attempt not to hurt regionalist sentiments as well as parties, whereas in non-regionalist states the BJP was relatively unconstrained. The

party aimed to consolidate its own social coalition while weakening that of the others. Though non-regionalist parties may have done relatively poorly in 2014, it is probably not the end of the road. The BJP will have to work very hard to maintain its newly stitched social coalitions, if past experiences are anything to go by.

## NOTES

- The north includes Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Punjab, Chandigarh, Chhattisgarh, Haryana, Delhi, Jammu and Kashmir, Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh. The east includes West Bengal, Odisha, Assam, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Tripura. The west includes Maharashtra, Gujarat, Goa, Dadar Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu. The south includes Tamil Nadu, Puducherry, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Telangana, Andaman and Nicobar and Lakshadweep, see Arora and Kailash (2012).
- I borrow the term regionalist from Balveer Arora (1989) who made a distinction between centralist and regionalist parties based on the centre-periphery cleavage. Subsequently, the term regionalist has been used by others including Palshikar (2003) and Kumar (2003).
- As the Election Commission rules (sub-section (5) of Section 29A of the Representation of the People Act 1951) for registration of political parties prohibits advocating secession, this extreme position which parties could take is not visible. However, parties like the DMK and JKN did "entertain secessionist aspirations" in their initial years (Suri 2013: 168).
- See <http://tinyurl.com/pfbaryh> (accessed on 4 August 2014); <http://tinyurl.com/lep4uhr>, accessed on 4 August 2014.
- See <http://tinyurl.com/mzx9h8x>, accessed on 4 August 2014.
- See <http://tinyurl.com/qxun8or>, accessed on 4 August 2014.
- See <http://tinyurl.com/mjgvvyvz>, accessed on 4 August 2014.
- See <http://tinyurl.com/nqvhhz6>, accessed on 4 August 2014.
- Speaking at an election rally in Dhemaji in March, Narendra Modi is reported to have said "Aren't rhinos the pride of Assam? These days there is a conspiracy to kill it. I am making the allegation very seriously. People sitting in the government...to save Bangladeshis... they are doing this conspiracy to kill rhinos so that the area becomes empty and Bangladeshis can be settled there", <http://tinyurl.com/ohfwe2q>, accessed on 3 August 2014.
- See <http://tinyurl.com/md9szyf>, accessed on 4 August 2014.
- See <http://tinyurl.com/pnpg2wzf>, accessed on 4 August 2014.
- See <http://tinyurl.com/k3a6jrl>, accessed on 4 August 2014.

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