

REGIONAL POLITICAL PARTIES IN NORTHEAST INDIA: ORIGINS, ELECTORAL DYNAMICS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIAN FEDERALISM

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DOI: 10.46609/IJSSER.2026.v11i02.001 URL: <https://doi.org/10.46609/IJSSER.2026.v11i02.001>

Received: 10 January 2026 / Accepted: 5 February 2026 / Published: 15 February 2026

ABSTRACT

Regional political parties have been a defining feature of India's multi-party democracy, particularly in Northeast India—a region marked by ethnic diversity, historical marginalization, and strategic importance. Emerging from movements for autonomy, identity assertion, and self-rule, these parties have articulated region-specific aspirations while negotiating accommodation within India's federal framework. This article offers a comprehensive and original analysis of the evolution, ideological foundations, electoral dynamics, and governance role of regional political parties in Northeast India. Using a qualitative and analytical methodology based on secondary sources such as Election Commission of India data, census reports, and scholarly literature, the study situates regional parties within broader debates on federalism, party systems, and identity politics. It argues that despite growing competition from national parties and increasing centralization, regional political parties continue to play a crucial role in democratic representation, centre–state bargaining, and political stability in the region. The article contributes to the literature on subnational politics by highlighting the adaptive strategies and continuing relevance of regional parties in India's northeastern frontier.

Keywords: Regional political parties; Northeast India; federalism; identity politics; party system; centre–state relations

1. Introduction

India's political system is characterized by an exceptional degree of social diversity and institutional complexity, which is reflected in the nature of its party system. Unlike many democracies that exhibit stable two-party or dominant-party systems, India has evolved into a competitive multi-party polity where regional political parties exercise substantial influence. The

rise and consolidation of regional parties have transformed both state-level politics and national coalition dynamics. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in Northeast India, a region comprising eight states—Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim.

Northeast India occupies a distinctive position within the Indian Union. The region is marked by pronounced ethnic and linguistic heterogeneity, strong tribal institutions, geographical remoteness, and a history of late and negotiated integration into the Indian state. These structural features have shaped unique patterns of political mobilization, leading to the emergence of regional political parties as key actors in articulating local interests and mediating relations with the central government. For many communities in the region, regional parties have served as platforms for asserting identity, demanding autonomy, and addressing perceived political and economic marginalization.

This article provides a detailed examination of regional political parties in Northeast India. It seeks to address three interrelated questions: first, what historical and structural factors explain the emergence of regional political parties in the region; second, how have these parties shaped electoral politics, governance, and centre–state relations; and third, what challenges and transformations do they face in the contemporary political context. By situating the analysis within broader theoretical debates on federalism, party systems, and identity politics, the article aims to contribute to the growing scholarship on subnational politics in India.

2. Methodology and Data Sources

The study adopts a qualitative and analytical research design, relying exclusively on secondary data sources. The primary sources of data include official reports and statistical publications of the Election Commission of India, Census of India documents, and government publications related to federal arrangements and state governance. In addition, the study draws upon an extensive review of existing scholarly literature, including books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and research reports on Indian politics, federalism, and Northeast India.

The analysis is historical as well as comparative in nature. It traces the evolution of regional political parties over time and compares their roles across different states of Northeast India. Content analysis of party manifestos, policy statements, and electoral outcomes is used to identify ideological orientations and patterns of political behavior. The study does not involve primary fieldwork or human participants and therefore does not require ethical clearance. The methodological approach is consistent with the expectations of descriptive–analytical research commonly published in social science journals.

3. Conceptual Framework: Regional Parties and Federal Democracy

Regional political parties are commonly understood as political organizations whose electoral support and organizational strength are largely confined to a specific state or region, and whose political agendas are shaped primarily by regional concerns (Chhibber & Kollman, 2004). In the Indian context, regional parties are not merely subnational variants of national parties; rather, they represent distinct political formations rooted in region-specific social cleavages and historical experiences.

Federalism provides an important theoretical lens for understanding the emergence and persistence of regional political parties. Federal systems, by constitutionally recognizing territorial diversity, create institutional opportunities for regionally based political mobilization (Stepan et al., 2011). India's federal structure, characterized by linguistic states and asymmetric constitutional provisions, has facilitated the rise of regional parties that articulate demands for autonomy, recognition, and policy responsiveness.

Identity politics constitutes another crucial explanatory framework. In multi-ethnic societies, political mobilization often occurs along lines of ethnicity, language, tribe, or religion, particularly where such identities are linked to access to resources and political power (Chandra, 2004). In Northeast India, where ethnic identity is closely associated with land rights, customary institutions, and collective memory, regional parties have emerged as key vehicles of identity-based representation.

From a party system perspective, the proliferation of regional parties has contributed to the fragmentation and regionalization of Indian politics. Scholars note that since the late 1980s, India has witnessed a transition from a Congress-dominated system to a competitive multi-party system in which regional parties play a pivotal role at both state and national levels (Yadav & Palshikar, 2009).

4. Historical Evolution of Regional Political Parties in Northeast India

The historical roots of regional political parties in Northeast India can be traced to the colonial period and the early decades following independence. During British rule, large parts of the region were administered through special arrangements such as the Inner Line Regulation and the classification of areas as excluded or partially excluded. These arrangements limited political integration with the rest of British India while reinforcing distinct administrative and cultural identities (Baruah, 2005).

Following independence, the extension of electoral democracy and the process of territorial reorganization generated new forms of political mobilization. In several states, demands for

autonomy and statehood preceded the formation of formal political parties. In Nagaland and Mizoram, prolonged political movements and insurgencies initially challenged the authority of the Indian state. Over time, peace accords and constitutional accommodations facilitated the transition from armed movements to electoral politics, leading to the institutionalization of regional political parties.

In Assam, regional political mobilization was shaped by linguistic nationalism and concerns over migration and demographic change. The Assam Movement (1979–1985) represented a critical moment in the articulation of Assamese sub-nationalism and contributed to the emergence of regional political formations that sought to redefine the state's political priorities within the Indian Union (Goswami, 2014).

In states such as Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur, regional parties emerged in response to anxieties over cultural preservation, uneven development, and perceived neglect by national political elites. Across the region, therefore, regional political parties evolved not merely as electoral alternatives but as institutional expressions of historical struggles over identity, autonomy, and governance.

5. Ideological Foundations and Social Bases

Regional political parties in Northeast India exhibit considerable ideological diversity, shaped by the specific social and cultural contexts of individual states. Unlike national parties that adhere to relatively coherent ideological platforms, regional parties often display pragmatic and flexible ideological orientations. Nevertheless, three broad ideological strands can be identified.

First, identity politics constitutes a foundational element of many regional parties. Ethnicity, tribe, language, and religion frequently serve as key markers of political mobilization. In states such as Nagaland and Mizoram, Christian identity and tribal solidarity play a significant role in shaping political discourse, while in Assam and Manipur, linguistic and ethnic plurality forms the basis of party narratives (Hausing, 2017).

Second, demands for autonomy and self-governance occupy a central place in regional party ideologies. These demands range from greater fiscal and administrative devolution to the protection of customary laws and traditional institutions. Constitutional provisions such as the Sixth Schedule have been critical reference points in these political claims (Singh & Saxena, 2013).

Third, developmental concerns have assumed increasing importance in recent decades. Issues related to infrastructure development, connectivity, employment generation, education, and

healthcare have become central to regional party agendas, reflecting changing voter expectations and the growing salience of performance-based politics.

The social base of regional political parties is often rooted in specific ethnic or tribal communities. However, in states characterized by high levels of ethnic diversity, electoral success has required coalition-building and inclusive strategies. As a result, several regional parties have expanded their appeal beyond narrow identity bases to accommodate broader social coalitions.

6. Electoral Dynamics and Party System Patterns

Regional political parties have played a decisive role in shaping electoral outcomes in Northeast India. At the state level, regional parties have frequently formed governments either independently or in coalition with national parties. States such as Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya, and Sikkim have experienced prolonged periods of regional party dominance, underscoring the importance of subnational political formations.

At the national level, regional parties from Northeast India have exercised influence disproportionate to their numerical strength in Parliament. During the era of coalition governments at the Centre, their support became crucial for government formation and stability. This strategic position enabled them to negotiate policy concessions, financial assistance, and institutional safeguards for their respective states (Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2020).

However, the regional party system in Northeast India is characterized by high levels of volatility. Frequent party switching, factionalism, and leadership-centric organizations reflect weak institutionalization. In recent years, the expanding organizational reach of national parties has intensified electoral competition, compelling regional parties to adopt flexible alliance strategies and pragmatic political positioning.

7. Regional Parties, Governance, and Development

The role of regional political parties in governance and development remains a subject of debate. Proponents argue that regional parties, being embedded in local contexts, are better positioned to represent marginalized interests and address region-specific challenges. Their familiarity with customary institutions and local governance structures can facilitate more responsive and context-sensitive policymaking.

Critics, however, highlight limitations such as patronage politics, elite dominance, and weak internal democracy within regional parties. In some instances, excessive reliance on identity-based mobilization has constrained policy innovation and inclusive development strategies.

Empirical evidence from Northeast India presents a mixed picture. While certain regional party-led governments have demonstrated relative political stability and responsiveness, others have struggled with governance deficits. Nonetheless, regional parties continue to play a crucial role in negotiating development priorities with the central government, particularly in securing infrastructure projects, special financial packages, and welfare schemes.

8. Centre–State Relations and Federal Bargaining

Regional political parties in Northeast India occupy a strategically important position in centre–state relations. Given the region’s geopolitical sensitivity and history of political conflict, the central government has often relied on regional parties to maintain legitimacy and stability.

Through coalition bargaining, parliamentary participation, and informal negotiations, regional parties have influenced federal decision-making processes. Their participation in national alliances has facilitated access to central resources and policy attention. At the same time, dependence on central support has sometimes constrained their autonomy, leading to concerns about co-optation and the dilution of regional political agendas.

The evolving nature of Indian federalism—marked by simultaneous tendencies toward centralization and accommodation—continues to shape the strategies and relevance of regional political parties in Northeast India.

9. Contemporary Challenges and Future Trajectories

In the contemporary political context, regional political parties in Northeast India face several challenges. The growing dominance of well-organized national parties, changing voter preferences, and the increasing emphasis on governance and development outcomes have altered the political landscape. Younger voters, in particular, tend to prioritize employment opportunities, infrastructure, and service delivery over purely identity-based appeals.

Organizational weaknesses, leadership fragmentation, and frequent defections have further undermined the coherence of several regional parties. At the same time, some parties have demonstrated adaptability by embracing coalition politics, modern campaign strategies, and development-oriented narratives.

Rather than becoming obsolete, regional political parties are undergoing transformation. Their future relevance is likely to depend on their ability to balance identity-based representation with inclusive governance and effective policy performance.

10. Conclusion

Regional political parties have been integral to the political evolution of Northeast India. Rooted in the region's distinctive historical experiences and social diversity, these parties have provided platforms for representation, articulated local aspirations, and mediated relations between the Centre and the states.

Despite increasing competition from national parties and internal organizational challenges, regional political parties remain relevant due to the enduring need for region-specific representation and negotiation within India's federal system. A nuanced understanding of their role is essential not only for comprehending the politics of Northeast India but also for appreciating the broader dynamics of Indian democracy.

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