



Political Dimensions of Regionalism and Pathways Toward Inclusive Development

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ABSTRACT

Regionalism has become a significant political, social and economic phenomenon affecting governance and development all over the world. It is associated with the aspirations of regions regarding their representation, culture, economic development, and autonomous administration. The present review paper discusses the political dimension of regionalism and its relationship with inclusive development in the international as well as in Indian scenario. The current research explores various dimensions of regionalism like political regionalism, economic regionalism, cultural regionalism, cooperative regionalism, competitive regionalism, separatist regionalism and developmental regionalism. Furthermore, different theories such as Federalism Theory, Identity Politics Theory, Dependency Theory, Decentralization Theory, and New Regionalism Theory are discussed in the research. The research also highlights the historical evolution of regionalism in various regions of the world like Europe, Africa, Latin America, South Asia, and India with respect to linguistic identity, sub-nationalism, regional parties, and demand for autonomy. It is essential to discuss the concept of inclusive development and its importance through social justice approach, human development perspective and participatory governance strategy. Literature findings reveal that regionalism could contribute to balanced regional growth, decentralization and social inclusion in the process of development when it is governed in an effective manner through sound policies. On the other hand, extreme regionalism could lead to challenges like separatism and political fragmentation.

Keywords: Regionalism, Inclusive Development, Political Decentralization, Identity Politics, Federalism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Regionalism is one of the most significant political, social, and economic trends emerging in the contemporary global setting [1]. It represents a phenomenon when certain regions express their regional identities, aspirations, and interests by seeking more political recognition, greater administrative autonomy, cultural preservation, and economic development in the context of a nation-state. The development of regionalism has been largely associated with language plurality, ethnic identity, culture difference, uneven economic growth, and political alienation. The trend has significantly influenced the politics of governance, decision-making, and development in both



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developed and developing countries. Though the phenomenon of regionalism could cause certain challenges, it could also promote democratization and decentralization.

The history of regionalism can be traced back to the period of colonialism, industrialization, globalization, and nation-state formation. The movement has emerged as a response of regions to cultural discrimination, uneven resource allocation, political marginalization, and economic inequality throughout Europe, Africa, Latin America, and South Asia. The Indian context provides many examples of regionalism, especially owing to the diversity of language, cultures, ethnic groups, and geographic regions in the country. The language reorganization of states, development of regional political parties, subnational movements, and demand for autonomy or separate states illustrate regional aspirations shaping the development of Indian federalism.

However, inclusive development became an increasingly relevant notion in recent decades. Inclusive development implies equality of opportunities, social justice, balanced growth of regions, and participation of different societal sections in progress of the economy, politics, and society. Human development, participatory governance, decentralized development, and equitable resource distribution represent some major strategies that help achieve sustainable development. Therefore, there is a strong link between regionalism and inclusive development as regional movements typically originate because of developmental neglect, poor governance, underdeveloped infrastructure, high level of unemployment, and uneven distribution of resources. Thus, the issue of management of regionalism is very important for any country, including India, and is strongly connected to inclusive development. In many cases, regionalism emerges and grows because of neglect of backward regions. Regional autonomy and decentralization should become means of fostering balanced development of regions. Management of regionalism should include participatory governance, region-specific approaches to development, and cooperative federalism as means of fostering political stability and democratization.

1.1 Background of the Study

Regionalism is a significant political and socio-economic concept where regions strive for greater autonomy, acknowledgment, development, and political representation based on linguistic, cultural, ethnic, and economic identities. Historically, regionalism evolved because of linguistic, cultural, religious, economic, and centralized differences. During the colonial and postcolonial eras, there were various movements in different parts of the world due to regional disparities in politics and economics. The colonial governments neglected the regions' economic and political aspirations, leading to political and social unrest in those areas [2].

In a multicultural nation-state, regionalism has greatly impacted politics, electoral democracy, and constitutional reforms. Developed nations focus on regionalism in terms of cultural autonomy, economic competitiveness, and decentralization, whereas developing nations view regionalism as a result of poor economic performance and unemployment rates. India, Nigeria, and Pakistan are

notable examples of developing nations where regional groups demand equal development opportunities and political representation in governance.

With the advancement of globalization, there has been growing regionalism in the world due to economic liberalization and uneven regional growth. While some regions have been favored by economic development and investments, others remain backward, prompting calls for balanced development and resource distribution. In today's globalized world, regionalism has taken on new meanings as both a political and developmental issue.

1.2 Concept of Inclusive Development

Firstly, it is essential to define the term 'inclusive development'. In simple terms, inclusive development is a type of developmental strategy that involves all segments of society in the process of development and ensures equal benefit from it. While traditional models of development are mostly concerned with economic factors, namely GDP growth, industrial progress, and urbanization, inclusive development pays close attention to equality and social justice. This kind of approach promotes opportunities for underprivileged groups such as women, minorities, tribals, the economically weaker section, and rural residents.

One of the most critical features of inclusive development is social inclusion. Social inclusion implies equal access to the opportunities and services that can provide social empowerment. It means eradicating any form of discrimination according to people's castes, genders, races, religions, or territories. It includes improving education, healthcare, sanitation, infrastructure, housing, and social protection systems through the implementation of policies and welfare programs. Thus, social inclusion contributes to creating a more harmonious and socially stable society where everyone enjoys the same rights and benefits.



Figure 1: Inclusive Development [3]

Moreover, economic inclusion is another crucial element of inclusive development since it ensures poverty reduction, employment creation, financial inclusiveness, and the active participation of weaker sections in economic activity. Economic growth does not always benefit underprivileged



classes. Therefore, it is vital to involve weaker sections in economic processes by providing them opportunities for entrepreneurship, training, rural employment, easy access to credits, and livelihood support. Furthermore, economic inclusion provides for equal distribution and balanced development of industries in different regions.

Besides social and economic inclusion, it is necessary to mention political and territorial inclusion. Political inclusion means involvement in decision-making, governance, and political processes of different social or regional groups. The strengthening of political inclusion may include democratic decentralization and empowering local self-governance bodies. At the same time, territorial inclusion helps reduce economic disparity between urban and rural or developed and backward regions. Usually, in developing countries, there are significant differences between metropolitan areas and remote regions when it comes to investment, economic growth, infrastructure, and development opportunities. Inclusive development seeks to overcome these inequalities.

Today, inclusive development became a crucial part of governance and a tool that allows reducing numerous issues associated with inequality and lack of opportunities for different social groups. Due to global inequality, unemployment, migration flows, and regional disparities, countries need to develop a more effective strategy for development that will contribute to social stability and progress. Thus, the concept of inclusive development appeared to be very relevant to current times. In fact, nowadays, inclusive development and sustainable development are interrelated since the former became an important part of the latter.

1.3 Link Between Regionalism and Development

In this context, there exists a correlation between regionalism and development due to socio-economic and political factors in a given country. Regionalism usually occurs as an answer to the neglect of development, unfair distribution of resources, lack of adequate governance, and cultural discrimination in some regions. Thus, residents of such regions require self-determination and proper development. Consequently, regionalism can be considered an important aspect related to social and political developments.

In most cases, regional aspirations arise because of the need to ensure balanced development and a better life for people residing in a particular territory. Absence of good infrastructure, employment issues, inadequate health care, and insufficient education encourages locals to join political parties or movements and advocate for changes. Thus, political activities of regional parties and movements can lead to regional planning, decentralization, and federalism to promote development.



Figure 2: Regional Development [4]

In addition, decentralization and federalism can enhance the connection between regionalism and development since local governments take part in decision making and development plans. Thus, regionalism can be helpful for promoting democratic values, representation of political ideas, development of welfare policies, and ensuring accountability. Nevertheless, excessive regionalism may pose threats such as separatism, ethnic conflicts, and political fragmentation.

Moreover, the age of globalization makes regional inequality more acute and leads to calls for balanced development. In this way, the relationship between regionalism and development requires cooperation, federalism, decentralization, and equal allocation of resources between regions. Regionalism should not cause any problems since it can be used as a positive factor for promoting inclusive development and social justice within the country.

1.4 Objectives of the Paper

Possible objectives:

- To examine the political dimensions of regionalism
- To analyse the impact of regionalism on inclusive development
- To explore governance challenges associated with regional politics
- To identify policy pathways for balanced regional development

2. CONCEPT OF REGIONALISM

Regionalism is defined as the representation of any political, economic, cultural, or social interests from a certain geographical region in a country or in neighboring countries. This concept arises when people belonging to a particular geographical region have some shared identities like



language, culture, ethnicity, religion, and history. The reason behind this kind of identity could be anything like economic, political, administrative, or cultural. In the current age of governance, regionalism has played an important role in the world of politics, policies, and development.

Political regionalism is concerned with the quest of political autonomy or self-rule or self-government or representation within the political framework of the state. It is generally seen in situations where people of certain regions consider themselves neglected by the central government. On the other hand, economic regionalism is concerned with efforts for the reduction of economic inequalities among regions. Linguistic and cultural regionalism is concerned with protecting languages and cultures from neglect or dominance.

2.1 Types of Regionalism

Regionalism takes various shapes based on the purposes and nature of its relation to the state. In the case of cooperative regionalism, cooperation between the central and regional administrations becomes imperative for balanced development and good governance. It includes coordination, joint responsibility, and national unity. Competitive regionalism involves the rivalry amongst regions in securing industrial and economic advantages such as industries, investments, infrastructures, etc. It encourages innovation and administrative efficiency.

However, it increases disparity between the economically developed and underdeveloped areas. Separatist regionalism represents a drastic approach that entails the secession of a region from the state or a call for self-rule due to prolonged neglect, cultural differences, and economic exploitation. This kind of regionalism may cause social tension and pose a threat to national integrity. Developmental regionalism seeks to reduce regional disparities through planned regional development [5].

Types of Regionalism

- **Cooperative Regionalism:** Cooperative regionalism refers to collaboration between central and regional governments to achieve balanced development, effective governance, and national unity through shared responsibilities and coordinated policies.
- **Competitive Regionalism:** Competitive regionalism involves competition among regions or states to attract investment, industries, and economic opportunities in order to promote growth, modernization, and administrative efficiency.
- **Separatist Regionalism:** Separatist regionalism is a form of regionalism where a region demands political separation or independence due to political neglect, economic inequality, cultural discrimination, or lack of representation.
- **Developmental Regionalism:** Developmental regionalism focuses on reducing regional inequalities through balanced development, equitable resource distribution, infrastructure growth, and welfare policies for backward regions.

2.2 Theories Related to Regionalism



Various theories address the reasons behind regionalism and its effects. The Federalism Theory addresses regionalism in terms of the separation of powers within the national and regional levels of government. This theory favors decentralization and regional autonomy along with the maintenance of the unity of the nation. The Identity Politics Theory points out the significance of linguistic, ethnic, religious, and cultural elements in developing regionalism and politics.

The Dependency Theory is based on the unequal economic relations between the developed and undeveloped regions, explaining regional disparities in terms of the economic exploitation of weaker regions by dominant regions. This results in underdevelopment and regional discontent. The Decentralization Theory promotes decentralization of powers to local administrations to enable proper governance and development. Finally, the New Regionalism Theory arose during globalization and deals with regional cooperation and integration, technological interconnectivity, and international partnerships.

Important Theories

- **Federalism Theory:** Federalism Theory explains regionalism through the division of powers between central and regional governments. According to this theory, federal systems help manage regional diversity by granting political and administrative autonomy to states or regions while maintaining national unity. Federalism allows regional governments to address local needs, cultural identities, and developmental priorities more effectively. It promotes democratic participation, decentralization, and balanced governance in multicultural and multilingual societies.
- **Identity Politics Theory:** Identity Politics Theory emphasizes the role of language, ethnicity, religion, culture, and historical experiences in shaping political behavior and regional movements. According to this theory, people organize politically to protect and promote their distinct identity when they feel marginalized or threatened. Regional movements often emerge because communities seek recognition, representation, cultural preservation, and political rights.
- **Dependency Theory:** Dependency Theory explains regional disparities as the result of unequal economic relationships between developed and underdeveloped regions. The theory argues that economically dominant regions control resources, industries, and investments, while weaker regions remain dependent and underdeveloped. This unequal distribution of wealth and opportunities creates poverty, unemployment, and economic backwardness in marginalized regions.
- **Decentralization Theory:** Decentralization Theory supports the transfer of political, administrative, and financial powers from central governments to regional and local institutions. According to this theory, local governments better understand the needs and problems of their regions and can therefore provide more efficient governance and public



services. Decentralization strengthens democracy, accountability, transparency, and citizen participation in decision-making processes.

- **New Regionalism Theory:** New Regionalism Theory emerged in the era of globalization and focuses on regional cooperation, economic integration, and transnational partnerships. Unlike traditional regionalism, which mainly focused on political autonomy and identity, new regionalism includes trade cooperation, technological connectivity, environmental governance, and global economic integration. This theory explains how regions increasingly collaborate to improve competitiveness, economic growth, and development in a globalized world.

2.3 Conceptualizing Inclusive Development

Inclusive development refers to a development process that ensures equal opportunities, social justice, and participation of all sections of society in economic, political, and social progress. The human development approach emphasizes improving education, healthcare, employment, and overall quality of life rather than focusing only on economic growth. It aims to expand human capabilities and freedoms.

The social justice perspective focuses on equality, fairness, and protection of marginalized communities. It seeks to reduce poverty, discrimination, and social inequalities through welfare policies and equitable resource distribution. The participatory governance model emphasizes citizen participation in governance and development planning. It promotes transparency, accountability, decentralization, and community empowerment to ensure that development policies address the real needs of people. Inclusive development therefore combines economic growth with social equity, political participation, and balanced regional development.

Table 1: Review of Literature on Regionalism and Inclusive Development

Author(s) & Year	Title of the Study	Key Focus/Objective	Major Findings/Arguments	Relevance to Present Study
Philip McCann & Raquel Ortega-Argilés (2018) [6]	Smart Specialization, Regional Growth and Applications to European Union Cohesion Policy	Examines the role of smart specialization strategies in promoting regional growth and reducing inequalities within the European Union.	The study highlights that place-based development policies and regional innovation strategies can strengthen regional competitiveness and balanced economic growth.	Useful for understanding the relationship between regional development policies and inclusive economic growth.

Elisabetta Lucia (2019) [7]	Unpacking the Politics of Regionalism: What to Expect from a Socio-Political Economy of Regionalism?	Explores the political and socio-economic dimensions of regionalism in global politics.	The study argues that regionalism is shaped by political power, economic interests, and social identities, influencing governance and development processes.	Helps analyze the political dimensions and governance aspects of regionalism.
Igor Calzada (2018) [8]	Political Regionalism: Devolution, Metropolitanization and the Right to Decide	Discusses political regionalism, decentralization, and regional autonomy movements in modern states.	The author explains how devolution and metropolitan governance influence regional identity and demands for self-determination.	Relevant for examining autonomy movements and regional political mobilization.
Helen E. S. Nesadurai (2022) [9]	The Politics of Developmental Regionalism	Analyzes the connection between regionalism and development within international and regional political frameworks.	The study emphasizes that developmental regionalism promotes economic cooperation, policy coordination, and inclusive development among regions.	Supports the discussion on regionalism as a pathway toward inclusive and balanced development.
Susan L. Robertson, Mário Luiz Neves de Azevedo & Roger Dale (2016) [10]	Higher Education, the EU and the Cultural Political Economy of Regionalism	Examines the relationship between higher education, regional integration, and cultural political economy in the European Union.	The study shows that higher education institutions contribute to regional integration, knowledge economies, and socio-cultural cooperation.	Relevant for understanding the socio-cultural and institutional dimensions of regionalism and development.

The literature reviewed in Table 2.1 highlights that regionalism is a multidimensional concept closely associated with political governance, economic development, cultural identity, and



institutional transformation. The selected studies collectively emphasize that regionalism is not limited to demands for autonomy or identity recognition, but also plays an important role in promoting balanced regional development and inclusive governance. The studies by Philip McCann and Raquel Ortega-Argilés (2018) and Helen E. S. Nesadurai (2022) focus on developmental regionalism and demonstrate how region-specific policies, economic cooperation, and smart specialization strategies contribute to regional growth and reduction of inequalities. These studies suggest that regional planning and policy coordination are essential for achieving inclusive and sustainable development.

The works of Elisabetta Lucia (2019) and Igor Calzada (2018) emphasize the political dimensions of regionalism. Their studies explain how political power, decentralization, devolution, and identity politics influence regional movements and governance structures. These findings indicate that regionalism is deeply connected with demands for representation, autonomy, and democratic participation. The study by Susan L. Robertson, Mário Luiz Neves de Azevedo, and Roger Dale (2016) highlights the socio-cultural and institutional aspects of regionalism. It shows that educational institutions and cultural cooperation can strengthen regional integration and knowledge-based development.

3. HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF REGIONALISM

Regionalism has evolved over time as a significant political, social, and economic phenomenon across the world. It developed due to differences in language, culture, ethnicity, historical experiences, economic inequalities, and political aspirations among regions. The growth of modern nation-states, colonialism, industrialization, globalization, and democratic movements contributed to the emergence of regional identities and regional political demands. While regionalism has sometimes strengthened democracy and local governance, it has also created challenges related to national integration, separatism, and uneven development [11].

3.1 Regionalism in the Global Context

Regionalism has evolved differently across various parts of the world based on historical, political, cultural, and economic conditions. In Europe, regionalism developed due to linguistic and cultural diversity, leading to movements for autonomy in regions such as Catalonia and Scotland. After the Second World War, economic and political integration through the European Union (EU) strengthened regional cooperation and economic regionalism.

In Africa, regionalism emerged mainly during the colonial and post-colonial periods because colonial boundaries ignored ethnic and cultural divisions. After independence, many African countries experienced regional conflicts, demands for autonomy, and developmental inequalities. Regional organizations such as the African Union (AU) were formed to promote unity, trade, and development, although challenges like ethnic tensions and weak governance still remain [12].

Regionalism in Latin America has been influenced by colonial history, economic dependency, social inequality, and centralized governance. Many regions demanded greater autonomy and



balanced development due to economic disparities and political instability. Regional cooperation increased through organizations such as MERCOSUR, which aimed to strengthen trade and economic integration among countries.

In South Asia, regionalism is strongly linked with linguistic, ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity. Countries such as India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Nepal have witnessed regional movements based on identity, autonomy, and developmental grievances. Organizations such as SAARC were established to encourage regional cooperation, but political conflicts, border disputes, and economic inequalities have limited regional integration in the region [13].

3.2 Evolution of Regionalism in India

Regionalism in India developed due to the country's linguistic, cultural, ethnic, and geographical diversity. After independence, India adopted a federal system to manage regional diversity while maintaining national unity. However, regional aspirations, economic inequalities, and demands for political representation led to the growth of regional movements and regional politics [14].

One of the major developments in Indian regionalism was the linguistic reorganization of states. Demands for states based on language and cultural identity led to the formation of Andhra Pradesh in 1953 and the States Reorganization Act of 1956. This process recognized linguistic identities, reduced regional tensions, and improved administrative efficiency.

The rise of regional political parties further strengthened regionalism in India. Parties such as DMK, Shiv Sena, TDP, and Trinamool Congress emerged to represent regional interests and developmental demands. These parties played an important role in coalition politics, decentralization, and welfare-oriented governance [15].

India also witnessed several sub-national movements based on ethnic, tribal, and cultural identities. Movements such as Gorkhaland and Bodoland emerged due to political neglect and economic backwardness. Similarly, demands for autonomy and separate statehood led to the creation of states like Uttarakhand, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Telangana. These developments show that regionalism in India is closely linked with governance, development, and identity politics.

4. CONCLUSION

The present review paper concludes that regionalism is a multidimensional phenomenon closely associated with political identity, governance, economic development, and social inclusion. Across the world and particularly in India, regionalism has evolved due to linguistic, cultural, ethnic, political, and economic factors, significantly influencing federalism, regional political movements, decentralization, and demands for autonomy and balanced development. The study highlights that regionalism can positively contribute to democracy, political participation, local governance, and inclusive development when supported through equitable policies and cooperative governance mechanisms. It also emphasizes that inclusive development, based on human development, social justice, and participatory governance, is essential for reducing regional disparities and ensuring equal opportunities for all sections of society. The reviewed literature suggests that effective



regional planning, cooperative federalism, policy coordination, and equitable resource distribution are necessary for achieving sustainable and balanced growth.

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