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Concept of regionalism in India: A study

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Abstract

Regionalism was the first and foremost manifestation of the diversity of India. Whereas communalism meant the love of the community in preference to the nation, regionalism meant the love of a particular region in preference to the country and in certain cases, in preference to the state of which the region was a part. Whereas communalism was limited largely to two communities, namely, Hindus and Muslims, regionalism was a country-wide phenomenon and often took the form of well-conceived and well-organized agitations and campaigns. It assumed in the political field, mainly, four forms: demand of people of certain states for secession from the Indian Union, demand of people for separate statehood, demand for full-fledged statehood, inter-state disputes. Each of these was important in it and needed a fuller discussion. This paper try to explain the concept of Regionalism in India.

Keywords: concept of regionalism, communalism meant, political

Introduction

Regionalism is the process of building multilateral institutions to enhance political, security, and economic interaction among states. Around the world, regionalism has been built on the foundations of functional states, at the same time striving to transcend them. Thus while states are the locus of regionalism, regionalism often seeks to overcome the deficiencies of states by erecting mechanisms that diminish the states' salience. This paradox relates to a number of critical dimensions of states and regionalism. The first is the question of timing. Historically, regionalism has advanced only through contested processes where states learn to cede sovereignty over long periods of interactions across a wide range of domains, in particular the functional sphere of economic co-operation. Secondly, regionalism grows out of strong, not weak, states with equally long experience in harnessing the gains from sovereignty. Thirdly, the leadership of strong states (often hegemonic leaders) is frequently pertinent in setting the rules that jumpstart regionalism.

Regionalism

Regionalism is a significant type of sub territorial loyalty. Administrative divisions or provinces at times generate a degree of loyalty separate from identification with the national territory. Seligman and Johnson have identified regionalism with a counter movement to any exaggerated or oppressive form of centralization. The term has also been used to emphasize cultural and economic distinctiveness. Mr. Thomas O. Hueglin has preferred to define it as the persistence of sub-national and transnational differences, identities and commitments.' Regionalism in the Indian context generally refers to assertion of distinct ethnic, linguistic or economic interests by various groups within the nation. Since regional consciousness is based on linguistic, economic, ethnic and cultural identities of people living in a specific geographical area, the political scientists have chosen to treat economic regionalism, linguistic regionalism, political regionalism and even sub-regional movements in the general frame of regionalism. According to Dr. Iqbal Narain, regionalism in the Indian context, as perhaps elsewhere also, is a vague concept. It has both a positive and a negative dimension. Speaking in Positive terms, it embodies a quest for self-fulfillment on the part of the people of an area. Negatively 'Peaking, regionalism reflects a psyche of relative deprivation resulting from specific grievance. Look-gat this phenomenon from a different angle, it can be defined as "a manifestation of those residual elements which do not find expression in the national polity and national culture. And being excluded the centrality of the new polity, express them in political discontent".

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Manifestations in Contemporary India

Given the large number and variety of its manifestations in contemporary India, it is not easy to grasp and systematize regionalism in its entirety. Its main manifestations, however, include: the North/South divide, the growth and consolidation of regional parties, the demand for 'greater autonomy' to the states; the protest movements mobilized round ethnic (Gorkhaland, Nagaland, Mizoram etc.), regional (sons of the soil movements), and communal (Khalistan) cleavages; the linguistic agitations; the territorial and river-water disputes between two or more states; the economic blockades of one kind or another; the fear of the loss of identity and loss of definition in the new polity; the secessionist movements in Tamil Nadu, Nagaland, Mizoram and Punjab. According to Dr. C A. Perumal, "Regionalism, as a countrywide phenomenon, has assumed mainly four forms in India, viz. demand of the people of certain areas for secession from the Indian Union; demand of the people of certain areas for separate statehood; demand of people of certain Union Territories for full fledged statehood; and the demand of certain people for favorable settlement in inter-state disputes. The DMK, the Akali Dal, the Nagas and the Mizos had all demanded secession from the Indian Union at one time or another. The demand for separate states has been a significant feature of the tribal politics in Assam. Himachal Pradesh, Tripura, and Goa have been granted statehood to satisfy the aspirations of the people of these areas. Regionalism was intense on the question of boundary dispute between Maharashtra and Mysore, Punjab and Haryana and Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. Obviously, at the core of each regionalist outburst or movement there is a profound sense of identity; a quest for self image which should satisfy its material and psychological goals and aspirations. The regional elite, in their competition for power and resources, often use language, culture, region and economic advancement as basis of identity. According to Rajni Kothari, "these regional upsurges are in fact various responses to the national crises, emanating both from the failure of the existing system' and mass discontent against it."

Regionalism Vs. Nationalism

The strength of regionalism and its possible adverse effects on national unity has been a controversial political issue in large countries under a single government, whether it is unitary or federal. In India also this issue has been a subject of controversy over the years. Both the regionalists and nationalism have ably presented their views which need a careful examination.

Regionalists

Those who concede that regionalism bears some degree of legitimacy argue that:

- i. In a vast and diversified polity like India, regionalism is a legitimate phenomenon. The grass movements, the ethnic upsurges and the social tensions, despite the look of destructive violence are an expression of the quest of a human identity. They are all a collective yearning for 'g-in society and the good la in human affairs. They turn violent, they become fascist, they on bigotry, fundamentalism etc. According to Rajni Kothari, "the way to deal with them lies in dubbing them anti-national and crushing them with the use of state force but in respecting recognizing their underlying motives and

aspirations and fit them into the larger framework national unity'.

- ii. There can be no two opinions that the establishment of provincial authorities, with power some weight, provides far more meaningful individual participation in government and its decision-making procedures. And motive force for strong democracy is participation.
- iii. It is natural that under a democratic system the individual's consciousness of his distinct interests should find expression in the working of the political process. If we have had debilitating agitations in Assam or in the north east of Bengal, and have had to confront secessionists in Tamil Nadu, Nagaland, Mizoram and Punjab, these frictions are inherent in India's commitment to democracy.
- iv. Ethnic nationalism is a worldwide phenomenon. No society or political system is today immune from its pressures. Communist and non-Communist, old and new, advanced and developing, centralist or federalist states, must all respond to the pressure of this ascendant ideology. One recent survey of regionalism in Western Europe lists 50 active regional movements while another account refers to no less than 187 ethnic activist associations in France alone. Even in the oldest, and hitherto the most stable nation state, the United Kingdom, devolution has become a popular movement. Both the Scottish and Welsh National parties are pressing for Common-wealth status similar to that now enjoyed by Canada, Australia and New Zealand." Under a highly centralized system of the USSR also there are autonomous republics based on the geo-graphical, ethnic and linguistic differences. Canada has often found Quebec a tough proposition, with its demands having overtones of separation.
- v. It is unfortunate that nationalists have a tendency to view regionalism as a negative polarization to national polity, whereas it is doing a positive service to it. Regionalism averts the trend of excessive centralization, usually characterized as apoplexy at the centre and paralysis at the extremities. That apart, the north-eastern India; where regional forces are quite powerful, has developed as an integrated economic region with Gawabati as its entreccote.
- vi. The Administrative Reforms Commission favored a strong centre, but it also observed that concentration of administrative powers at a distant centre tends to breed inefficiency and resentment which in turn sets the minds of the people against the centre.
- vii. The Congress leadership at the centre has always condemned regionalism as a disruptive force. But there is enough evidence to show how the allegedly regional forces have rallied round the centre and offered unstinting support' in times of national crises. The DMK in Tamil Nadu was the earliest to assert the case for regional autonomy. But during the external threats posed by the Chinese attack in 1962 and the hostilities with Pakistan in 1965 and 1971, it was no less ardent than any of the other parties in supporting the national war efforts. Giving expression to regional hopes and aspirations is not an anti-national act. Appealing to local sentiments and a regional identity are not synonymous with separatism.
- viii. Basically the regional parties no longer advocate secession from the Indian Union. Demands to that extent

are-heard only from here and there when the ruling party at the centre is not attentive to the genuine grievances of the regional parties. So far, it is only in Punjab that regionalism has transcended the limits of legitimate regional aspirations and assumed separatist overtones. But such separatist feelings are confined to a small minority.

- ix. It is difficult for the regional upsurges to overpower the central authority. There are more than one limitations within which regionalism has to operate. All regional parties, seeking support from the electorates, fully realize the political importance of the subsidies, educational and health programs and poverty alleviation schemes. For the location and implementation of these schemes, projects or programs, they have to depend on the centre's goodwill and financial support conformity to national policies rather than non-conformity is the ultimate resort of political parties, though they vigorously protest against the centre's taking undue advantage of its primacy under the constitution and using its residuary powers to deny a fair deal to any state.
- x. Regionalism is healthy to the extent that it expresses the collective will of sections of our people who wish for greater recognition of their needs and aspiration and feel that the centre has distanced itself from them. This regionalism, according to Ramesh Thapar, is corrective.

Nationalists

These arguments of the regionalists notwithstanding, the nationalists rebuke their attitude as 'divisive, subversive, tendentious and secessionist'. Their main arguments in this regard are as under:

- a) The regional parties or groups, which operate within a limited geographical area or which represent primordial loyalties, have narrowly defined interests. And these interests of theirs generally stand in sharp contrast to the broad-ranging and diverse concerns of the nation. Since the regional organization work exclusively for their own ends, they ignore the needs and problems of the people as a whole. This, obviously, is undemocratic.
- b) There is sufficient basis for arguing that regional forces threaten the unity and integrity of the country. It is the regionalism of Punjab, mixed with religious fanaticism and supported by extremists resorting to terrorism, that has been agonizing the nation for the last about five years. Foreign interference to destabilize the troubled situation in Punjab has made the problem more complicated. The crises in Assam have amply demonstrated the explosive potential of ethnic identities in politics; the Gorkhaland agitation in Darjeeling district of West Bengal also threw up similar pointers and lessons.
- c) In the past, national leaders of India and the scholars associated with the theories of "nation building" looked upon religious and ethnic minorities as minor irritants. They hoped that with the ongoing process of modernization, these irritants would automatically disappear. This assumption of theirs has been repeatedly disproved. The religious, linguistic and cultural identities have not developed into national identity.
- d) India stands in need of a collective national will to surmount its basic problems of illiteracy, poverty and economic development. The fragmentation of national elite has not proved helpful in the realization of these national objectives. There is enough evidence to prove

that even during Nehru's era the regional interests were given primacy over the national interests by the regional elite. Whether on land reform or on the need to eradicate untouchability or on fair treatment to the minorities, the state ministries often went their way, though this was not in the national interest.

- e) Whatever the justification of the anti-migrant political movements (which have remained active in Assam, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and in the cities of Bombay and Bangalore) they are narrow in their outlook and have a limited program. They aim at maximum appropriation of the new development opportunities without taking into account the total development process. Not only that, they represent a conflict between the regional economy and national economy, the regional elite and national elite, the regional interest and national interest.
- f) In the Anandpur Resolution there was a clear stress on the religious aspect of autonomy and demand for restricting the centre's authority to the major fields of defence, external affairs and communication. Was it not a challenge to the secular character of the Indian polity? Was it in conformity to the quasi-federal character of the Indian Union?

Areas of Conflict

The regionalists and nationalists find themselves in acute conflict in six major areas today. They are (i) educational policy, (ii) resource allocation, (iii) planning, (iv) language policy, (v) electoral competition, and (vi) mass media control. The diversified pattern of education does not provide for homogeneity in educational system. The states tend to exercise maximum control resulting in localization of educational system. The process tends to enhance regional loyalties. Text-books and their contents further strengthen the processes. In many states Kerala, Maharashtra the school children have either refused to sing the national anthem or the national anthem has been replaced by another song. The offence in question is no ordinary one, but no state government is ready to take action against the guilty, because elections are more important for them than the nation. One thing must be clear. We may be Hindus, Muslims Sikhs or Christians but we are Indians before being anything else. The overall result of such developments is bound to strengthen regional personality as opposed to that of the national. This is neither in the interest of national unity nor nation-building.

Though successive Finance Commissions have done an admirable job in so far as feasible transfers for the Union to the States and from the more developed to the less developed states are concerned, there are nevertheless some grounds of discontent in the states. The revenue transfers are insufficient to meet their needs. In spite of the separation of their taxation spheres, the union government does deprive the states of a part of the revenues from taxes assigned to them under the constitution. The Sarkaria Commission has urged the centre to increase the states share in income-tax, corporation-tax, excise duty etc. Excessive centralization in Planning is also a cause of their discontent. After decades of unhappy experience, they expect the centre to allow the states greater freedom and autonomy in the planning of their development. The formation of linguistic states has left in its legacy some such problems as stand unresolved even today. One of them relates to the minority languages within the states. While many states are not willing to fulfill the constitutional requirement that migrant communities be permitted to

maintain an educational system in which their own language is used as the medium of instruction the language policy in some states has been used as a weapon to raise economic value of the language of the politically dominant group. On account of the linguistic chauvinism, even indigenous regional communities are ill at ease in some parts of the country. They have been provoked to seek their own statehood. Cultural regionalism has thus stimulated tribal secessionist movement? particularly in India's north-east.

Mass media is another area of conflict. The regional press has become increasingly region or language oriented and a powerful vehicle for the expression of regionalism and regional sentiments. The English press, on the other hand, mainly reflects the attitudes of the urban elite and urban middle classes. The views, as expressed in English press, have little or no relevance to people oriented towards regional press, and they are, at times, contrary to those that are in the regional newspapers.

Regionalism is, no doubt, still an anathema for our political decision-makers. Mrs. Gandhi described it as 'a threat to the development, progress and unity of the country'. There can be no compromise with regionalism which uses terrorism as a weapon or which attempts to balkanize the country. Excess of localism may ultimately prove disruptive of India's national unity, for the danger of balkanization is inherent in India's federal society where linguistic and cultural particularisms have a highly explosive potential. But, at the same time, it is difficult to justify an outright condemnation of regionalism. All manifestations of regionalism are not necessarily destructive of national unity. That apart, the tremendous progress in communication and transport, the inter-state mobility of labour from Kashmir to Cape Comorin, the installation of huge projects and industrial complexes in different parts of the country which attract labour and engineering skill from all over the country are all antidotal to the ill effects of regionalism and linguist. The Bhilai Steel Plant or Chatranjan Locomotive Factory or the Bhakra Nangal Dam is all the new nuclei, the new anti-regionalistic regimes. As a matter of fact, the basic issue in India is not of regionalism versus nationalism. But one of right ordering of loyalties between the regional and national identities. The two can co-exist in a situation of mutually rewarding partnership. The national interests must certainly be paramount, but the concept of nationalism as a remote mythical entity entrusted with the job of curbing and disciplining the sub-national urges would be hardly acceptable. It would invariably lead to tensions. On the other hand, a symbiotically, and not dichotomous, relationship between the national and sub-national identities is closer to reality and a surer basis for harmonious growth of nationalism and its constituent part. Dr. Iqbal Narain has aptly suggested that a realistic perception of regionalism should be developed at the conceptual level. A differentiated view of regionalism in qualitative terms can enable the ruling elite on one hand and national political parties on the other, to evolve a suitable strategy for handling regional aspirations. Another thing to be noted in this context is that regionalism or cultural pluralism does not mean fragmentation. A real fragmentation is the result of the ruler's inability to effectively deal with the nation's problems. Hence it is right time that regionalism is treated as a cure than a disease, for this perspective would certainly lead to harmonious political development of India.

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