

Regionalism in India

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Abstract

Regionalism in India appears in four forms, e.g. demand of the people of certain areas for separate statehood, demand of people of certain Union Territories for full-fledged statehood, demand of certain people for favourable settlement of inter-state disputes, and the demand of the people of certain areas for secession from the Indian Union. However, it is agreed that the rise and growth of regionalism is rooted in the failure of the national political system to meet the aspirations of the people. To some extent, these have also taken the shape of violent movements galvanizing the popular participation.

Keywords: Regionalism, India, demand and Union Territories

Introduction

It is the first and most legitimate kind of regionalism which is often in the form of the demand of a separate space or state of one's own, for the purpose of resting securely within the Union of India. This was spearheaded by the Telugu-speaking residents of the erstwhile Madras Presidency. The forms of protest it involved were attacks on state property, and the hunger-fast, most definitively in the case of Potti Sriramulu, who in 1952 died after not eating for 52 days, his death leading, in the short term and as a result of this, the creation of the state of Andhra Pradesh and, later redrawing of the map of India on linguistic lines took place. With the same token, some of such protests for the creation of a separate state gave birth to leading regional parties like the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam in Madras, which was later emulated by the Akali Dal in Punjab, the Telugu Desam Party in Andhra Pradesh, and the Assom Gana Parishad in Assam. All of such parties won state elections by successfully claiming that they stood for the rights of their regions. These parties proclaimed themselves regional by their very names. This category also includes sub-regionalism, which pertains to the groups, which are in minority within the states based on language, who also occupy a definite territory within these states, and by virtue of language or ethnicity, they have enough to bring them together and to bind them against the majority community in that state. Prominent examples being, the Nepalis in West Bengal and the Bodo-speakers in Assam, both of whom organized movements for separate states of their own. The successful protests include those which were raised by the hill people of Uttar Pradesh, which delivered to them a new state called Uttaranchal (now Uttarakhand), and the tribal and other residents of the Chhotanagpur Plateau, whose claim from a reluctant Bihar was the state of Jharkhand for which they had been fighting from well before Independence.

Parochialism

Another form of regionalism has been termed as parochialism. This can be benevolent, as in evident in form or pretensions of the Bengali Bhadrakol, who claim that their literature, music, dress and cuisine are superior to others in India. However, sometimes it has also taken the form of blood shade, as evident in the attacks on Bihari labourers by the Ulfa cadre, in

which the belief rests that only Assamese speakers have the right to live in Assam. This kind of blood shade was committed by the Shiv Senagoons in mid-sixties, who in Bombay began to attack South Indians entitling them as outsiders to the city. Even Udupi restaurants were torched, and offices and factories threatened not to employ south Indians in their establishments. Recently, the Shiv Senas kept the Bengalis and Biharis at its target. Following the same, the MNS has made the North Indians its target. The recent attacks on Bihari labourers by the United Liberation Front of Assom (Assam) are criminal acts, and deserve to be treated as such by the security forces, and by the people of Assam. But they also need to be viewed historically, as an undoubtedly perverted manifestation of a popular sentiment that has existed since the beginning of the Indian Republic, and which has indeed shaped and reshaped that republic. This is a sentiment based on the attachment to one's language and locality. It can be classified as the most violent and dangerous form of regionalism as it is based on the desire, or hope, or fantasy, to divide the Republic of India and form a separate nation of one's own. This form of regionalism evolved with A. Z. Phizo's Naga National Council, and T. Muivah's National Socialist Council of Nagaland. In the similar way, militants in Kashmir can also be said to follow this form of regionalism as they are persistently committing bloodbath in pursuit of their dream of a separate state. The movement of Khalistan, spearheaded by the Sikh extremists during 1980s also hoped to form their own nation-state. In fact, even the Dravidian movement for many years demanded a separate nation out of India. The DMK in Tamil Nadu, the Akali Dal in Punjab and the Mizos and Nagas in Northeast India and more recently the supporters of Khalistan movements have been demanding secession from India.

A. Demand for Tamil Nadu

In 1960 the DMK and Tamil organized a joint campaign throughout Madras state demanding its secession from India and for making it an independent sovereign state Tamil Nadu. In 1961, another organization by the name of Tamil Arasu Kazhagam lunched an agitation for the renaming of Madras state as Tamil Nadu. DMK proposed that the states of Madras, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Mysore should secede from

Indian Union and form on independent republic of Dravida Nadu. In 1963 Parliament adopted the constitution bill which made laws providing penalties for any person questioning the sovereignty and integrity of the Indian Union. As a result, DMK dropped from its programmed the demand for a sovereign independent Dravidian federation and its secession from the Indian Union.

B. Demands for Sikhistan

In Punjab there was a demand for Sikhistan. As early as 1949 the Sikhs under Master Tara Singh declared that the Hindus of Punjab had become highly communal and that the Sikhs could not hope to get any justice from them. The Sikhs under the Akali Dal put a demand for a separate Punjabi speaking state. The Akali Dal leadership being aware that it is not possible to have Sikhistan, as separate independent state outside the Indian union. They therefore started demanding like the DMK in Tamil Nadu that the states should be given more powers and autonomy.

C. Demand for Khalistan

Since April 1987 the Akali extremists have been taking a hardliner approach for establishing a new all Sikhs nation called Khalistan, a demand originally voiced by a former member of the Akali Dal, Jagjit Singh in June, 1990.

D. Demand for Mizoram

Mizo's demanded a separate state of Mizoram outside the Union of India and in order to Press their demand they organized themselves in a political forms known as the Mizo National front. The Mizos organized armed agitation and commenced guerrilla war fare. In the wake of the Chinese aggression the MNF was banned.

E. Demand for Nagaland

Another tribe that fermented secession from Indian Union and agitated for an independent state was the Nagas of Assam. The Nagas formed the Naga National Council under Z. Phizo to carry on an agitation for the grant of independent status. In 1952 he organized a boycott of the general election and this was a great success. The Naga National council even proposed to take the issue of Naga independence to the United Nations. This form of regionalism is the most dangerous one as it has claimed some 60,000 lives in Kashmir and several thousand lives apiece in Nagaland since 1950s, and in Punjab in the 1980s and 90s. Another form of regionalism in India has found expression in the form of Interstate disputes. There is a dispute over Chandigarh between Punjab and Haryana. There are boundary disputes, for example, between Maharashtra and Karnataka on Belgaun, where the Marathi speaking population is surrounded by Kannada speaking people between Karnataka and Kerala on Kasargod and several other border areas between Assam and Nagaland on Rangma reserved forests in Ram Pagani area. The first important dispute regarding use of water resources was over the use of water resources of four important rivers namely Yamuna, Narmada, Krishna and Cauvery in which the states of Delhi, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra were involved. There were many other disputes involving the distribution of the waters of other rivers, but those were of minor importance. In all these cases the state Chief Ministers

behaved, like spoke's men of independent nation and endeavored to obtain the maximum for their own states. It appeared as if for their own states. It appeared as if India was a multi-national country.

Rashiduddin Khan in his book "Political and Socio-cultural determinants of Federalism" says "Special economic situation makes establishment of states and regionalism born out that."

Kothari believes that analyses of India's federal structure and processes have for too long been dominated by accounts of the workings of the Union and its constituent units. He strongly suggests that we must go beyond these Centre-State debates, which can present a sterile and overly 'mechanistic' view of federalism, and move towards an analysis of the more fundamental dialectic between the state and society.

This is supported by a more 'organic' view of federalism which would argue that Indian society is itself federal, and locates the weakness of the system in the poor politicizing of that federalism. From this perspective, the regional movements of postcolonial India can be seen as one expression of the increasing political engagement of different, and often marginal, social groups, who are demanding a more participatory and decentralized polity. Both Rasheeduddin Khan and Rajni Kothari recognise, as Graham Smith argues, that 'there is no basis in political theory for claiming that smaller territorial units are necessarily more hospitable to democratic politics' (Smith, 1996:398). Neither is smaller territorial units necessarily going to be more administratively efficient or 'developmentally' effective. But there is much that is positive and plausible in the arguments for smaller States, both for the specific regions under review, and even, arguably, as an agenda for a second States reorganization. Many of the current States of India are administrative leviathans, and the sheer physical distance ordinary people, politicians and government officials have to cover can act to alienate groups and regions, and hinder sensitive or well-managed development planning and initiatives. Smaller States may well provide a more propitious environment for more manageable administrative loads; greater understanding of and commitment to the local region; and more proximity between people and political and institutional centers of power.

According to Marachell E. Dimock, regionalism is a clustering of environment, economic, social and governmental factors to such an extent that an identity within the whole, a need for autonomous planning, a manifestation of cultural peculiarities and a desire for administrative freedom, are theoretically recognized and actually put into effect. Regionalism in India may be viewed from two dimensions-positive and negative. In positive terms regionalism embodies a quest for self-identity and self-fulfillment on the part of to domiciles of a region. In negative terms, regionalism reflects a psyche of relative deprivation on the part of people of an area not always viable in terms of national economic analysis. In this way regionalism is a concept that shows narrow vision of social life.

R. C. Pandey says – "Hindi speaker and non Hindi speaker's area is more affected as Assamis versus North Indian in Maharashtra, Telangana movement can be seen, this is because of regionalism. Unaffected area also demands for local demands.

Mr. Pannikar has referred to this aspect of the case. In his dissenting minute he says: "The consequence of the present imbalance, caused by the denial of the federal principal of

equality of units, has been to create feelings of distrust and resentment in all the States outside Uttar Pradesh. Not only in the Southern States but also in the Punjab, Bengal and elsewhere the view was generally expressed before the Commission that the present structure of government led to the dominance of Uttar Pradesh in all-India matters. The existence of this feeling will hardly be denied by anyone. That it will be a danger to our unity, if such feelings are allowed to exist and remedies are not sought and found now, will also not be denied."

Babasaheb Ambedkar views on smaller states: 'one State-one language' and not 'one language-one State': The observations of B.R. Ambedkar, the principal architect of our Constitution, on the desirability of smaller States are prophetic. He welcomed the recommendation of the States Re-organisation Commission in 1955 for the creation of Hyderabad State consisting of Telangana region and creation of Vidarbha as a separate State. Further, he envisaged the division of Uttar Pradesh into three States (Western, Central and Eastern); Bihar into two (North and South or present Jharkhand); Madhya Pradesh into two (Northern and Southern); and Maharashtra into three (Western, Central and Eastern). He was for linguistic homogeneity of a State in the sense of 'one State-one language' and not 'one language-one State'. He thus envisaged two Telugu speaking States, three Marathi speaking States and a large number of Hindi speaking States. While arguing for smaller States, Ambedkar was guided basically by two considerations. One, no single State should be large enough to exercise undue influence in the federation. Drawing from the American experience, he thought that smaller States were in the best interests of healthy federalism. On this issue, his views were similar to those of K.M. Panikkar, set out in his note of dissent to the Report of the States Re-organisation Commission. Second, he thought that socially disadvantaged sections are likely to be subjected to greater discrimination in bigger States because of the consolidation of socially privileged or dominant groups. He writes in his Thoughts on Linguistic States: "One State, one language" is a universal feature of almost every State. Examine the constitution of Germany, examine the constitution of France, examine the constitution of Italy, examine the constitution of England, and examine the constitution of the U.S.A. "One State, one language" is the rule. In short, Dr. Ambedkar believed that tension between two linguistic groups is created by forcing them to come together in "common cycles of participation" such as Government. This very powerful insight which Dr. Ambedkar brings has the ability to explain the tension between any two linguistic groups anywhere, including in India.

The following four measures may be considered while looking at an appropriate policy framework to address the present impasse. First, a permanent entity called the Second State Reorganization Commission may be constituted as a constitutional body with quasi-judicial power. The commission may be asked to ascertain a set of objective and coherent criteria to consider the demand for a new state. The Second Centre-State Relations Commission or Inter-State Council may also be involved. Second, popular support can be ascertained by amending the Constitution so that any legislative measure to alter/diminish/ increase the territory or creation of a new state should emanate from the state

legislature and not at the centre. The minimum would be that the view of the parent state legislature be necessarily ascertained. Federalism as an idea and a process enriches democracy in a multinational/cultural country like India, as it tends to promote democratic values and temperament by recognizing, accommodating and protecting diverse regional identities and rights. The creation of smaller states would contribute to the federal agenda of enhancing democratic development based on decentralized governance and greater autonomy for units.

The mixed economy of India, consisting of large state sector and corporate sector, miserably failed to generate job opportunities for majority of people who are forced to live a life of poverty, illiteracy and starvation. Large portions of the population are under housed and live a life without benefits of rudimentary health care. In this situation in which the teeming millions languish under the crushing burden of poverty, only about twenty per cent of the populations enjoy the benefits of development. This ever widening gap between the two groups of India constitutes the root cause of inter-ethnic, inter-communal and inter-regional conflicts-various manifestation of regionalism. Regional parties play a prominent role in the spread of regionalism and in creating regional consciousness. Since these parties have their political existence in regional support, they arouse it to gain its benefits to serve their end. It is a well-known strategy of the regional leadership to launch their agenda against the Centre, i.e. the opposition party for discriminating against the state with political motives. Besides, the regional press, which is primarily language-oriented, immensely contributes in the emergence of regionalism. It is a powerful vehicle for the expression of regionalism and regional sentiments.

The views expressed in them are, often quite contrary to those in the English media, i.e. national media. In an age of coalition governments, where regional forces in the country are strengthening, vernacular press has become more vocal and articulates. Naturally, it has strengthening effect on regional sentiments. Thus, the need of the hour is to develop a realistic perception of regionalism at the conceptual level focusing on righteousness and judicious outlook on the part of the political parties. If this objective is achieved, then the realization of the idea of different communities, speaking diverse languages and each linked with particular cultural expression, "thinking globally, acting globally and seeing human unity in diversity in practical terms" too would become a distinct possibility. The demand for new States has once again emerged as a major issue in India. In certain areas, often, although not always, characterized by economic and/or social marginalization, and possessing a sense of geographical, ethnic, cultural and/or linguistic regional identity,¹³ the struggle for a political voice and access to the state has been channeled into the desire for a separate State within the Union of India. These trends can be set within the politicization of society observed by Atul Kohli and many others, and the related growth of social movements over the last twenty years or so. These 'changes from below' are, of course, reflexively bound up with 'changes from above' and the broader trends within India's political economy in relation to internal border changes have been the focus of this paper. This macro-political context is a key 'field of opportunity' within which these non-secessionist regional movements articulate and must be understood. The analysis presented here helps explain why

a number of these demands (some of which go back decades) finally appear to be experiencing success. In a polity in which the Central Government has absolute Constitutional power over changes to federal boundaries (even if, theoretically, the State Legislatures do not approve the changes), the shift in political attitudes in New Delhi is critical.

However, there are a number of problems with this agenda for a more 'rationally' organized map of India. First, under present administrative and government structures, the new States would require an expensive multiplication of capitals, Assemblies (State parliaments), Ministries, Courts and other accoutrements of government. The ideal scenario would envisage that the reorganized States would facilitate enhanced economic growth through more effective and efficient development measures - an expectation that is by no means assured. Second, in terms of democratic functioning, these regional mobilizations, like other social movements, can mask partial and elite interests and manipulations, even, or especially, in marginal areas. Again there can be no automatic assumption that a new State would lead to greater social or political justice.

A third problem concerns the impact that the creation of smaller, more culturally and linguistically homogenous States might have on fanning regional or ethnic chauvinism. India has a long history of 'sons of the soil' movements, which although diverse in form and nature, usually aim at the exclusion of 'outsiders' from the State/region through expulsion, or privileging the 'native' population through the setting up of a system of preferential politics to guarantee their 'rights' to employment, land and political power (Weiner, 1978; Das Gupta, 1988). None of these problems are inevitable or inexorable, and the various outcomes of territorial reorganization would be highly place specific and context-dependent. However, these general concerns suggest caution must be exercised.

K. C. Wheare made one of the first authoritative comments on Indian federalism and described the Indian constitution as "a system of government which was quasi-federal...a unitary state with subsidiary federal features rather than a federal state with subsidiary unitary features".

But in the subsequent fourth edition of his work in 1963 he was still doubtful of the federal nature of the Indian constitution, and described it as 'quasi-federal' but added that it was not meant to be a criticism of the constitution or the government since "A quasi-federal system may well be most appropriate for India". Ivor Jennings accepted India to be a "federation with strong centralizing tendencies". The states' rights issue, as we have seen above, was hardly debated in the Constituent Assembly. But it was taken up already in the early 1950s by observers as a critical area of judging the federal character of the Indian polity.

K. V. Rao (1953) in a paper on "Centre-State Relations in Theory and Practice" took an extreme view to show how the centre was usurping the rights of the states. In his subsequent work too he maintained strong reservations about Indian federalism: "We can now sum up our impressions about Indian federalism. There are federal features, but they are not strong enough to make India a federation on par with any known federation so far".

At the other end of the intellectual spectrum, there were scholars like Paul Appleby, N. Srinivasan and Charles Alexandrowich who were inclined to take a more positive

view of Indian federalism. In view of the fact that the federal legislation get implemented only at the state level and by the states, and from the administrative point of view which makes the centre dependent on the states, (in a situation in which the central government meant "all staff and no line"), Appleby was doubtless about the federal character of the Indian polity. Both Srinivasan and Alexandrowich considered the federal character of the Indian constitution as indisputable on the ground that the Indian federalism was a case sui generis. Against the backdrop of the first major and successful federal territorial reorganization of India in the late 1950s (mostly on a linguistic basis), on the one hand, and the first major Congress's electoral defeat (since independence) in India's fourth general elections in 1967, which returned regionally oriented non- Congress governments to majority of India's states, on the other hand, the Indian federalism began to receive serious academic attention from the 1960s onwards. Indian politics witnessed from the mid-sixties onwards a growing assertion of state and regional identities formulated often in demands for more autonomy for states, and a restructuring of 'centre-state' relations. The India- Pakistan war of 1962, the death of Jawaharlal Nehru, the architect of India's postcolonial state, in 1964, and the growing organizational weaknesses in the INC which split in 1969 added to the challenges to Indian democracy and federalism. However, such tendencies and changes were enough bases for taking India into the federal club: "India must, however, be put alongside other federal states; it must also be properly put in relation to its own past. Now this entails seeing that neither the period of alien rule nor the first years after independence can be at all reasonably taken as the norm...This means first that India must be judged as a federal state." Marcus Franda also believed in the federal character of the Indian polity, and argues that on the whole the Centre had been respectful of states' rights (Franda 1968). This, but also uneven distribution leads to express through the demand of creation of new states. Uneven distribution also leads to create relative deprivation of some groups and regions and consequently, leads to the birth of some militant groups like ULFA (Assam), Maoist, Naxalist are active in Chattisgarh, UP, Bihar, Jharkhand etc. Their main demands range from reform the governing and economic system of India.

In the sixties, the most thorough political scientific account of Indian federalism was offered by Watts (Watts 1966). Going beyond the many reservations of observers since the inauguration of the republic, Watts concluded: "India may, therefore, be best described as a predominantly federal system with some unitary features" (Watts 1966: 356). The founding fathers of the Indian Constitution were very much pragmatically determined in devising the model for India because for a vast, diverse country with many special problems and peculiarities, no single theory or model borrowed from abroad was useful. Also, the Indian federal model was made to be flexible in order to adapt to changing circumstances. Watts quoted approvingly Dr B R Ambedkar, the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution who said: "The Draft Constitution can be both unitary as well as federal according to the requirements of the time and circumstances. In normal times, it is framed to work as a federal system." (Watts 1966: 356). This has equipped the federal polity with the mechanisms, and the capacity to adapt to changing circumstances. The Indian federalism's success as

an institutional solution to intra-societal conflicts and tensions in a diverse society has also been noted by Bombwall (Bombwall 1967; ed. 1978).

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