

## CHAPTER VII

### REGIONALISM IN INDIA - A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

Regionalism means love of a particular region or state in preference to the country as a whole. This feeling may arise either due to the continuous neglect of a particular area or region by the ruling authorities, or it may spring as a result of increasing political awareness of the henceforth backward people that they have been discriminated against.

From the theoretical view point regionalism has often been characterised both as a doctrine as well as a tendency, implying many things, for example:<sup>1</sup>

- i) decentralization of administration on a regional basis within a nation where there is excessive centralization and concentration of administrative and political power;
- ii) a socio-cultural counter movement against the imposing of a monolithic national unity by imposing a particular political ideology, language or cultural pattern to foster national integration;
- iii) a political counter-movement aiming to achieve greater autonomy of sub-cultural regions through greater degree of self-government within the federal structure of a nation;
- iv) a tendency for separatism to fulfill the political aspirations of a regional group living in a specified sub-cultural region.



Besides, regionalism has certain objectives also, namely;<sup>2</sup>

- i) revival of regional cultures and rebuilding of such sub-cultural regions having distinct identities within a nation;
- ii) administrative and political devolution;
- iii) devising principles to solve Centre-State confrontation and confrontation between two or more sub-cultural regions;
- iv) to maintain economic and political equilibrium between the Centre and the States; nation and sub-cultural regions.

Furthermore, Aruna Mudholkar and Rajendra Vora<sup>3</sup> say that:

"Regionalism is an ideology. Regional consciousness is based on linguistic, religious, ethnic and cultural identity of the people residing in a specific geographical area. The ideology of regionalism is devised by the elite belonging to these groups. In a culturally heterogeneous society the factors like language and religion which demarcate the differences between the people always exist, though mostly in a dormant form. In the process of nationality-formation or regional identity-formation it is the elite who articulate them and later on manipulate them from their own legitimat- ion. Regional movement is initially based on some vague ideas. Later on in the course of the movement certain more or less defined set of arguments or just- ifications are developed by the key personalities of the region."

They further maintain that:

"regional elite legitimise their power and domination by using an instrument of regional ideology. It is they who emphasise the socio-cultural differences between the different groups. A distinction between 'we' and 'they', between regional 'outsiders' and

'sons of the soil' is brought to the surface by them, transforming the latent emotions lying behind such phenomena into a regional and sub-regional ideology to serve certain political ends."

"Regionalism is in fact a conflict between national elites and regional elite. A regional movement which is the manifestation of regional ideology is an attempt by regional elite to acquire larger support so that they could increase their competitive strength vis-a-vis the national elite".<sup>4</sup>

Regionalism is a powerful factor in Indian politics.<sup>5</sup> Regionalism, generally speaking, is regarded as a divisive trend detrimental to national unity. In popular parlance it is supposed to be a synonym of provincialism which breeds localism, isolationism and separatism.<sup>6</sup>

As a historical factor in Indian polity, regionalism has been treated differently by Indian scholars under different compulsions.

"Regionalism in Indian politics has generally been regarded as something that is anti-system, anti-federal and against the basic interests of a well-integrated and well developed polity. This negative thinking and reaction towards a phenomenon, which is essential to the normal growth of any healthy federal political system anywhere in the world, could only be understood in the perspective of the ambition and assertion of centrifugal forces in India - of forces that have continually been aspiring for the capture of executive authority and power."<sup>7</sup>

The non-juridical, non-statutory, primordial and parochial factors in the growth and development of regionalism in India were sadly ignored by the Constitution. As

a result with the initiation of the constitutional process, a process of regionalisation along primordial lines also commenced.<sup>8</sup> This non-constitutional regionalism was not merely inspired by primordial factors like caste, and perhaps the most significant among these, by the prevailing economic conditions of the different regional communities. The process, however, acquired caste overtones in the South, while in the North, it was expressed either in the Hindu-Muslim-Sikh antagonism or linguistic animosity.<sup>9</sup>

It is wrong to assume that there was no regionalism in the pre-independence period, though it was much more dormant than what it came to be in the post-independence period. This was the case largely because of scarce opportunities for economic development, limited avenues for political participation, obsession with communal politics, and the primacy of a common national objective—liberation from colonial rule. Regional simmerings however, had started in the wake of the implementation of Constitutional reforms under the Acts of 1909, 1919, and 1935. The establishment and role of the Justice Party in Madras and, to a lesser extent, of the Akali Dal in the Punjab in the pre-independence period are concrete examples of emerging regionalism in India.<sup>10</sup>

"Parochialism and regionalism is a conspicuous phenomenon of India's political life. The mushroom growth of private political armies in the form of Gopal Sena in Kerala, Lachit Sena in Assam, Subhas Sena in West

Bengal and, above all, of the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra, in addition to many other similar organisations, big or small, operating in different states of the Indian Union reflected "parochialism" run mad".11

Regionalism is a country-wide phenomenon, and often, it took the form of well conceived and well organised agitations and campaigns. Regionalism in India has assumed various forms and found expression in more than one way. It assumed four forms in the political field: (i) Secession from the Indian Union; (ii) demand for separate statehood; (iii) demand for full-fledged statehood and (iv) inter-state disputes.

(1) Demand for Secession:

The demand for secession from the Union is the most serious form of regionalism, which even poses a serious threat to the national unity. This type of regionalism has found expression on a number of occasions. Let us examine some of the instances in brief.

(a) Demand for Sikhistan:

The first such demand for secession from Indian Union was made by the State of PEPSU (Patiala, and East Punjab States Union), predominantly a Sikh region. 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. Tara Singh demanded a "Sikh State" consisting of the Gurgaon

district of Punjab and PEPSU. This demand grew stronger after the Reorganization of the States on linguistic basis in 1956, when the demand for Punjab for its reorganisation on unilingual basis was not conceded. The Sikhs under Akali Dal put up a demand for a separate Punjabi-speaking state.

This demand for Punjabi-speaking State by the Sikhs was matched by a demand for Greater Punjab consisting of Punjab, Himachal Pradesh and the State of PEPSU by the Arya Samaj and Jan Sangh leaders. The demand for a separate Punjabi speaking state assumed serious dimensions after the Akali Dal leader Sant Fateh Singh announced his plan to burn himself alive if the demand of Punjabi Suba was not conceded by 25 September 1966. In view of the serious repercussions of this threat being implemented, the Government of India conceded the demand for a Punjabi speaking state.

The creation of separate Punjabi Suba did not satisfy all Punjabi leaders. Certain leaders of the Sikhs continued the agitation for the establishment of a "Socialist Democratic Sikh State". Dr. Jagjit Singh, former General Secretary of the Akali Dal, undertook a tour of a number of foreign countries to mobilise world opinion in favour of this demand. During this tour he tried to enlist the support of the members of the Sikh community living abroad for the purpose. He also prepared a plan for the setting up of a "Rebel Sikh Government", at Nankana Sahib, the birth place of Guru Nanak in West Pakistan.

Though the Akali Dal leadership is well aware that it is not possible to have Sikhistan, as a separate independent state outside the Indian Union, however, there is a fragment of the Sikh population which feels that their interests are not safe in the hands of the so called secular and national Government, and insist on a separate 'Sikh Homeland'.

(b) Demand for Khalistan:

Since April 1981, the Akali extremists have been taking a hardline approach for establishing a new all Sikh nation called Khalistan, a demand originally voiced by a former member of the Akali Dal, Jagjit Singh in June. This was taken up in various milder forms by officially recognised and influential bodies such as the <sup>Shiromani</sup> ~~Sikh~~ Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC). Even a purely educational organisation known as the Chief Khalsa Diwan, at its 54th Sikh Education Conference in Chandigarh in March 1981, passed a resolution demanding Khalistan and seeking associate membership of the United Nations. Later, moderate members of the community withdrew <sup>their</sup> ~~its~~ demand for United Nations membership but stood by the Sikh Nation theory. The Chief political organ, the Akali Dal, clearly split over the issue, with the extremist group headed by Jagdev Singh Talwandi demanding a separate nation, and middle of the road Akali leadership led by Sant Harchand Singh Longowal, President of the Akali Dal, bemoaning the "Pariah Status, of the Sikhs."

This demand for a new Sikh nation has already taken two lives. Firstly, in order to curb unrest in Punjab Mrs. Gandhi took action with the help of army i.e., by sending troops into Golden Temple Complex (the holy place of Sikhs). This action hurt the feelings of Sikhs and as such vengeance was taken by shooting Mrs. Gandhi to death.

Subsequently, Shiromani Akali Dal leader Mr. Longowal, was also shot dead because he was the party to the Memorandum of understanding (which was signed both by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Mr. Harchand Singh Longowal). The Memorandum was signed on 24 July 1985, paving the way for stability and peace in the state of Punjab.

(c) Demand for Dravida Nadu:

Another state where the feeling of regionalism has been very strong is Tamil Nadu. As early as 1960 the DMK launched an agitation for the secession of the erstwhile State of Madras from the Indian Union and the formation of an independent Sovereign State of Tamil Nad. Subsequently the leaders of the DMK tried to win the support of the other States of South viz., Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Mysore (Karnataka), for the formation of an independent Republic of Dravida Nad. However, this proposal did not receive a favourable response outside the State of Madras.

In view of the growing disintegrating forces in the Country, the Parliament in early October 1963 adopted the Constitution (Sixteenth Amendment) Bill which enabled it to make laws providing penalties for any person questioning the sovereignty and integrity of the Indian Union, and declared secession demand a treason.

After the adoption of the above bill the DMK made modifications in its demand and made necessary changes in the Party's Constitution. The demand for a Sovereign Independent Dravidian Federation (Dravid Nad) seceding from the Indian Union was abandoned. Instead, the party's objectives, thereafter, were declared to be the formation of a "Dravida Union" of Madras, Mysore, Andhra and Kerala within the framework of the sovereignty and integrity of India. The agitation went on unabated. The DMK party continued its agitation for grant of more autonomy and financial resources to the States. In September 1970, the DMK convened a "State Autonomy Conference" in Madras. In April 1971, Chief Minister Karunanidhi threatened that separation of Tamil Nadu from the Indian Union would become "unavoidable" if the demand for State autonomy continued to be neglected for long.<sup>12</sup> Even today there is an anti-Hindi agitation by the DMK party members in Tamil Nadu. The DMK has also gone to the extent of burning publicly some of the excerpts of part Seventeen of the Constitution which deals with Official Language.

However, over all these years the demand of DMK for secession of the State from the Indian Union has cooled down and there is no such demand at present.

d) The Mizo demands in Assam:

The hill districts of Assam have also displayed great regional feeling and demanded the formation of an Independent Mizo State. They demanded a separate State of Mizoram outside the Union of India and in order to press their demand they organised themselves in a political front known as the Mizo National Front (MNF). The Union Government, naturally, turned down this demand and sought to suppress the movement. The Mizos organised armed agitation and commenced guerrilla warfare and took support from foreign powers like China.

In course of time the Mizo leaders realized the futility of the agitational and violent approach and submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi expressing their dissatisfaction with the existing arrangements. A three-member delegation headed by MNF president Chunga met the Prime Minister in January 1971 to impress upon her the genuineness of their demand. By this time, the Mizos had given up their demand for secession from the Indian Union and instead demanded a referendum on the question of granting separate statehood to the Mizos. The Union Government keeping their aspirations in view decided to make Mizo Hill area a Union Territory, which was inaugurated by the Prime



Minister herself on 21 January 1972. It was named Mizoram.

This arrangement however did not satisfy the Mizos and as such they under the leadership of Laldenga continued their agitation to achieve their objective of a separate Mizo state outside the Indian Union. However in July 1976, an agreement was signed between the Central government and Laldenga which decided to solve the Mizo's problems through non-violent means. But in March 1977 this agreement was violated by Laldenga by adopting violent means.

Peace at last is peeping into the forests of Mizoram, after two and a half decades of Mizo insurgency and brutal repression. With the agreement that the Rajiv Gandhi government has signed with Mizo National Front of Laldenga, a farewell to arms by the outlawed Mizo National Army and an end to the total neglect of the aspirations of a highly literate people by the Centre are expected. And as such, Mizoram was elevated to the status of a State from the Union Territory in the Indian Union.

e) Demand for Nagaland:

Similarly, another tribe (Nagas of Assam) fomented secession from the Indian Union and agitated for an independent state. The Nagas formed the Naga National Council under Zapo Phizo to carry on an agitation for the grant of independent Status. In February 1950, Phizo held a plebiscite on the issue of Naga independence and 99 per cent

of Nagas were said to be in favour of a sovereign independent state.

Several attempts by the Centre were made to find a solution to the Nagaland problem, but nothing concrete emerged. The rebels continued to be on war path, although a vast majority of the Nagas has, however, now come within the peace movement and have agreed and reconciled themselves to the idea that all efforts to create a separate independent state of Nagaland outside the Indian Union will be a futile attempt and of no avail.

(ii) Demand for separate statehood:

The regionalism in India has also made its appearance in other shape viz., the demand for the establishment of separate state within the Indian Union. This demand is mainly raised with a view to attain a distinct political entity for the people of a particular region. This type of regionalism gained momentum after the Reorganisation of the States on Linguistic basis. The States Reorganisation Commission had made certain recommendations about the reorganisation of States on linguistic basis, but these recommendations created several serious problems and those regions which were not satisfied with its reports became violent and in many parts of the country there were violent demonstrations and some people demanded the creation of separate states for their linguistic areas.

The SRC recommended that Telangana should be a separate state, but that a provision should be made for its Union with Andhra Pradesh after the third general elections "if a two - third majority of the legislature of Telangana expressed itself in favour." But the Union government decided to unite Telangana with Andhra on the ground that the resultant uncertainty would retard Telangana's economic development. As a condition for Union there was an agreement between Congress leaders of Andhra and Telangana in 1956.<sup>13</sup> The agreement did not work well, and the people of Telangana expressed their dissatisfaction and commenced an agitation.

The agitation highlighted the fact that language as a decisive force had failed to keep the State intact.<sup>14</sup> The Telangana agitation had unfolded the truth that the region was neglected in matters of development in the integrated set-up of Andhra Pradesh and as such the dominance of Andhra leadership is brought to the surface.

Similarly, there were agitations in different parts of the country. Bifurcation of Bombay State, Punjab, Demand for separate Vidarbh State and Reorganisation of Assam State are cases in point.<sup>15</sup>

The Gorkha National Liberation Front under Subhash Ghising's leadership has been demanding for the bifurcation of Gorkha Land (Darjeeling) from West Bengal and it to be treated as a State is a living case in point.

All these demands for separate states, raised from time to time in different parts of the country, are nothing but pure demonstration of regionalism.

(iii) Demand for full-fledged Statehood:

The regionalism in India has made its appearance in another form like the demand for a full-fledged State-hood. After the passing of the States Reorganization Act, there were two categories of units in the country, viz., the States and Union Territories. Regionalism found its expression in the latter also when Union Territories demanded that they should be given the status of a full-fledged State. The agitation in these Union Territories became so intense that with the passage of time the Union Territories of Himachal Pradesh, Manipur, Tripura, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh got full statehood. The Union Territory of Delhi also raised a cry that in view of its large population and financial viability, it should also be made a full-fledged State. But the Union Government turned down their demand, mainly on the ground that Delhi was the Country's capital and separate statehood for it would not be in the national interest.<sup>16</sup> Today, this demand for fullfledged statehood is raised even by the Union territory of Goa and this has taken a violent turn in Goa, which led to the deployment of army there. But now Goa has been conferred statehood.

(iv) Inter-State Disputes:

Finally, the regional tendencies in India have manifested themselves in the shape of inter-state disputes. There are some of the prominent inter-state disputes which still remain unsolved. For instance, dispute over Chandigarh between Punjab and Haryana; and the Maharashtra and Karnataka boundary dispute. Besides these, there are other disputes also like the dispute regarding the use of water resources of the three rivers namely, Narmada, Krishna & Cauvery, in which the States of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra were involved. Another dispute arose among the states of Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh over the use and distribution of waters of the Krishna river ~~and~~ etc. And at present, there has been a rift between Karnataka and ~~Andhra~~ Pradesh over Telugu Ganga Project.

In all these cases it is said that the State Chief Ministers behaved like spokesmen of independent nations and endeavoured to obtain the maximum for their own state. It appeared as if India was a multi-national country. This was and has been the attitude (narrow regionalism) of states in India which poses a serious threat to the Unity of the country.

Besides these four forms of regionalism in above analysis, regionalism in the Indian context is related with continuation of linguistic and religious minorities within

the states. Mr. Fadia points out that the problem has not caused much trouble except in areas where the "outsiders" occupy important administrative or industrial positions and are perceived as "exploiters" as in the case of Gujaratis and South Indians in Maharashtra, Bengalis in Assam and Orissa, and Marwaris in West Bengal. Militant movements of the "Sons of the Soil" against these outsiders have emerged in the urban areas of those States notably Shiv Sena in Maharashtra and the Lachit Sena in Assam. Thus, such movements led by highly obscurantist elements and employ the symbolism of extremist chauvinism and a para-military appeal, they pose a source of great danger.<sup>17</sup> To reiterate the point in this context, the DMK's challenge for a separate state outside the Indian Union, the Akali Dal demanding 'Sikhistan' or 'Khalistan' and for greater decentralization to the State, the Mizo National Front's organized armed agitational campaign for an Independent Mizo State, the Nagas in Assam and the formation of Naga National Council to carry on the agitation for an Independent State, the independent status accorded to Jammu and Kashmir under Art. 370, also the present movement that is of Gorkha National Liberation Front and host of other examples are some of the cases in point.

The foregoing account, however, discloses that regionalism is at present a fairly widespread phenomenon in the Indian Political System. Moreover, it is not likely to lose its sway over people's minds, at least in the foreseeable

future. Further, Shriram Maheshwari aptly points that on the contrary, as the various developmental programmes are carried out, regional disparities are already becoming more marked and widespread engendering a sense of cumulative deprivations in the people of certain regions. This coupled with increasing politicization in the community is sure to impart sharper focus to regionalism which would emerge more prominently as a factor of no small significance in Indian polity.<sup>18</sup>

Pessimists argue that India faces the "dangerous" alternatives of either balkanisation or authoritarian rule as the movement for regional autonomy gains ground.<sup>19</sup> There have indeed been such movements in the past as well as today. Once Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi also emphasized that for our political decision makers, regionalism is still an anathema, "a very serious threat to the developmental progress and unity of the country".<sup>20</sup> In fact, Arba Dutta Pant says:

"regionalism or cultural pluralism does not necessarily impede the process of national integration. He further says, such pluralism at the regional level does not mean fragmentation. A real fragmentation is the result of the rulers' inability to effectively deal with the nation's problems or is the result of their using the method of exploiting one unit against the other. In an accomodative political system, demands of regional cultural units are properly met and there is no threat to national integration where all the Constituents are equally valid and mutually inter-dependent while retaining the viability of the national system, that process is national integration".<sup>21</sup>

But Dr. Iqbal Narain remarks that,

"Politics does not create regionalism but it certainly accentuates and exploits regional loyalties." Regionalism, he adds, is an important factor in party-building and unless alternative secular loyalty bases are discovered or created regionalism shall continue to flourish. The problem of regionalism could be tackled only with the adoption of a macrovision which took within its sweep the micro-variations at regional levels within the nation. In this connection, he posed the problem of depoliticization of the planning process and allocation of resources and emphasised that politics can be secularised only if the political parties follow a policy of ideological polarisation in relation to problems of caste and tribe loyalties vis-a-vis the nation."<sup>22</sup>

Regionalism is an essential coordinate of federalism.

It is, therefore, a natural phenomenon in a society that is not only plural but also federal in its organization. It is however, the operation of regional parties that provides strength to the various forces of regionalism. It is in this context our next Chapter will be on the regional parties and their impact on Indian federalism.



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