

# **REGIONALISM IN MEGHALAYA**

BY

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Regionalism is a global phenomenon which seems to have gained importance in recent times. It has assumed different forms in different parts of India. In its extreme form, it has manifested itself as a violent demand for secession of a particular region from the Union of India. While such demands relate to limited parts of India, regional sentiments have been expressed quite often in favour of demanding separate political and administrative units within the existing federal framework and also in the form of demand for decentralization of political power. As far as the situation in North East India is concerned, it appears that large sections of the people of this region have longstanding grievances against the policy followed by successive governments at the Centre regarding extension of various amenities, creation of infrastructures, fixing royalties of raw materials extracted from the region and processed elsewhere and so on.<sup>1</sup> These grievances against the Centre coupled with homogeneous cultural processes among some specific communities have strengthened the urge for autonomy and independent living which in turn has found

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1. For discussion, see B.K. Roy Burman, "Points and Counter-Points in North East India" in Akhtar Majeed (ed). Regionalism: Development Tensions in India (New Delhi, 1984), pp. 72-74.

expression through the formation of political parties for the articulation of regional aspirations. In Meghalaya, for instance, a number of regional parties like All Party Hill Leaders' Conference (APHLC), Hill State People's Democratic Party (HSPDP), Public Demands Implementation Convention (PDIC) and Hill People Union (HPU) have been formed to ventilate regional grievances. In view of this steady growth of regional parties in Meghalaya, it seems interesting to examine the nature of regionalism in Meghalaya as well as to examine the reaction of some of the national parties towards regionalism. In the preceding chapters we made an attempt to understand this phenomenon.

Chapter I has been divided into two sections. In Section I, an attempt has been made to define the concept 'region'. It has been found that an absolute definition of 'region' is not easy to arrive at because the issues raised by the leaders representing a particular territory or group of people seem to determine the size and shape of the region. In our conceptual analysis of regionalism, seven perspectives on regionalism have been analysed. These are - (1) Regionalism viewed as a manifestation of Centre-State relations; (2) Regionalism in contrast with sub-regionalism; (3) Regionalism as a subsidiary process of political integration; (4) Regionalism as a positive and

negative phenomenon; (5) Regionalism with political parties as major actors; (6) Regionalism viewed in terms of elite conflicts, and (7) Regionalism as the outcome of internal colonialism.

Scholars like Paul R. Brass<sup>2</sup> and Rasheeduddin Khan<sup>3</sup> have viewed regionalism in terms of federalism and Centre-State relations. But regionalism is a complex phenomenon and to look at it either as a movement for greater autonomy or as a reaction against federal administrative imbalances is to confine oneself to the superficial aspects of the phenomenon and to oversimplify it. Another perspective emerges from the writings of Duncan B. Forrester<sup>4</sup> who draws a distinction between regionalism and sub-regionalism purely in terms of the size of the area covered by the two. This position cannot be accepted because size of a region need not be the criterion for regionalism and regional movements. A study of regionalism in India has to take into account the formulations of Iqbal Narain who has given the broadest possible definition of regionalism that covers geographical, historico-cultural, economic, politico-

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2. Paul R. Brass, "Pluralism, Regionalism and Decentralising Tendencies in Contemporary Politics" in Wilson and D. Dalton (eds), The States of South Asia: Problems of National Integration (New Delhi, 1982), p. 260.

3. Rasheeduddin Khan, Federal India - A Design for Change (New Delhi, 1992), p. 44.

4. Duncan B. Forrester, "Subregionalism in India", Pacific Affairs, Vol. XLIII, No. 1, Spring, 1970, p. 5.

administrative and psychic factors.<sup>5</sup> But this definition does not enable us to arrive at the general attributes of regionalism because of its diffused focus. This brings us to the definition offered by Kousar J. Azam which reflects an entirely negative perspective on regionalism in the sense that she looks upon regionalism as a manifestation of those residual elements which do not find expression in the national polity and national culture.<sup>6</sup> Academic writings on regionalism also reflect a trend towards viewing political parties as catalysts of regional consciousness.<sup>7</sup> It may be argued, however, that political parties are not always indispensable to the politics of regionalism because movements of various kinds are often found to be quite capable of articulating regional sentiments on behalf of the people of any region.<sup>8</sup> Another perspective on regionalism seeks to explain this phenomenon in terms of elite conflict.<sup>9</sup> But the argument that all regional demands emanate from elite

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5. Iqbal Narain, "A Conceptual Analysis in the Indian Context" in Akhtar Majeed (ed), op.cit.

6. Kousar J. Azam, Political Aspects of National Integration (Meerut, 1984), pp. 167-168.

7. Lewis P. Fickett, Jr. "The Politics of Regionalism in India" in Pacific Affairs, Vol. XLIV, No. 2, Summer, 1971, p. 193.

8. Regional movements launched by All Assam Students' Union (AASU), All Party Hill Leaders' Conference (Not a full-fledged party at the outset), Telengana movement, Uttara Khand movement etc. illustrate this point.

9. M.L. Sharma, "Elite Conflicts, Regionalism and Compatibility Crisis: A Study of the Autonomy Movements in North East India" in Rama Kant (ed), Regionalism in South Asia (Jaipur, 1983).

conflict cannot be substantiated. A very significant approach towards regionalism has been developed by Michael Hechter and has come to be known as the 'Internal Colonial model'.<sup>10</sup> Hechter's contention that regionalism is the outcome of real or perceived sense of 'Internal Colonialism' comes closer to the tentative definition of regionalism that we have tried to develop in course of our work. The essence of the internal colonial model is that the relationships between members of the core communities and the peripheral communities in a State are characterized by exploitation.<sup>11</sup> It is this real or perceived sense of exploitation that seems to lie at the core of regionalism. However, the perceptions of the elite being different in each regional context, it is not easy to arrive at an absolute and comprehensive definition of regionalism. In our tentative definition, we consider regionalism as an organized effort in recognition of the role of the regional elite in shaping regional demands through proper channels and using its hegemony for mass mobilisation. This elite seeks to assert the identity of the community it represents and negotiates with the Central political leadership to secure a better deal than what is available to it under the present arrangement.

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10. Michael Hechter, Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536-1966 (London, 1975).

11. For discussion, see Anthony H. Birch, "Minority Nationalist Movements and Theories of Political Integration" in World Politics, Vol. XXX, No.3, April, 1978, p. 326.

In Section II of Chapter I, we have taken up a detailed analysis of important regional movements all over India such as the Shiv Sena movement of Maharashtra, the Dravidian movement of Tamilnadu, the Punjab turmoil, the Jharkhand movement, the Assam movement and so on. It has been observed that regionalism has become an integral part of the Indian ethos and has been acquiring an ethnic dimension. The trend, it appears, will continue to grow as more and more ethnic and linguistic communities become conscious of their distinct identity and seek recognition as regional entities to preserve the same. This, we have seen throughout this study, does not however, totally nullify the internal colonization thesis. As is seen in Chapters II and III, emergence of an educated elite has been an important prerequisite for the articulation of regional demands. Such forces clamour for more autonomy within the existing political set up and desist from raising secessionist demands. Regionalism thus distinguishes itself from secessionism.

Chapter II begins with a historical account of the political situation prevailing in the hills of composite Assam in the pre-British days. The hills generally presented a picture of lack of political aspiration and consciousness until the British annexation exposed them to

the outer world. It was apparent that new social forces were emerging in the hills\* which consisted of an educated elite.<sup>12</sup> The emerging educated elite not only became politically conscious, but could also articulate their demands and grievances. This was the position in the hills when India became independent. After independence, the educated elite in the hills of greater Assam began to perceive a threat of domination by the non-tribals within the composite State. Although the aspirations of different tribal groups were not identical, the general need to dissociate themselves from Assam seemed to have been felt by the entire tribal leadership of the North East. This was due to the fact that the elite was no longer satisfied with the existing safeguards, but was interested in sharing political power. This aspiration for political power was articulated by the All Party Hill Leaders' Conference (APHLC) which initially launched a struggle for a Hill State, but had to settle for a separate state for the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills only due to lack of support from the Lushai Hills and United Mikir and North

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12. For details, See D.R. Syiemlieh, "Education, Elite and Politicisation in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills" in Ashish Bose, Tiplut Nongbri and Nikhilesh Kumar (eds), Tribal Demography and Development in North East India (Delhi, 1990). It may be noted that this elite comprised Western educated men and women some of whom were drawn also to the world of professions and business.

Cachar Hills. Then our analysis in Chapter II shows that fear of domination by the more advanced Khasis<sup>13</sup> seems to have been an important factor that led to the rejection of the Hill State idea by the Mizos and the Kerbis. But more importantly, absence of an educated elite in these hill districts implied that articulation of political demands could not gain momentum at that stage of democratic politics.

An examination of the nature of demands raised by the APHLC was followed by a discussion of the factors that led to the formation of three other regional parties in Meghalaya, viz., Hill State People's Democratic Party (HSPDP), Public Demands Implementation Convention (PDIC) and Hill People Union (HPU). Divergence of thinking among regional leaders and their personal ambitions seem to have stood in the way of setting up a single, coherent regional platform in Meghalaya. Although the HPU was formed in response to the 'need for a strong regional party to provide a viable alternative to the national parties', there was a setback because a few leaders from the erstwhile HSPDP opted out of the HPU and continued with the

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13. In this regard, we have cited educational statistics from Census of India reports to show higher literacy levels among Khasis which gave them an edge over other tribes of Assam.

HSPDP. It appears from the discussions in Chapter II that regional experiments in Meghalaya have not been very successful because the regional parties have proved their incapacity to mobilize enough support to retain power. Failure of the Meghalaya United Parliamentary Party (MUPP) Coalition of 1990-91 is a glaring illustration of this point.

Our observation in Chapter II has been that a new dimension has been added to regionalism in Meghalaya with ethnic identity assuming preponderance over regional identity. It has also been observed that regional parties in Meghalaya like those in other parts of the country are functioning strictly within the constitutional framework of India and no secessionist voices have been heard so far.

In Chapter III, we have tried to examine the responses of national parties towards the phenomenon of regionalism. In this connection, the views of the Congress (I) and the Communist Party of India (CPI) were taken into account primarily due to the fact that these two national parties have registered their participation in all the Assembly elections held so far in Meghalaya and they seem to have followings of political significance. In course of our analysis, we sought to examine whether regionalism is a threat to national integration, irrespective of the views

of national parties. Since the question of smaller nationalities is intricately connected with regionalism, we also examined the stand of the national parties on the nationality question. Lastly, as regionalism in Meghalaya is associated with the aspirations of 'tribals', it became necessary to examine whether national parties in Meghalaya view the interests of tribals as harmonious with those of non-tribals or not.

The Chapter began with the observation that there are two broad responses to regionalism, viz., that it is a divisive force and hence a threat to national unity<sup>14</sup> and secondly, that assertion of regional identity need not be construed as a threat to national integration.<sup>15</sup> The views of the Congress (I) on regionalism were examined in detail followed by an examination of the views of the MPCC (I). Similarly, the response of the CPI at the national level and that of the Meghalaya unit of the CPI were analysed separately. An important aspect highlighted in the Chapter is the pre-eminence of local tribals in the post-statehood period in Government service, particularly in Class I and

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14. Paul R. Brass refers to this trend in his Language, Religion and Politics in North India (Delhi, 1975), p.5.

15. See A.K. Baruah, Social Tensions in Assam (Guwahati, 1991), p. 4. In fact, in India, both these perspectives have been presented strongly in contemporary social science literature. See, for instance, In Search of India's Renaissance, Vol. II (New Delhi, 1992), Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development, Chandigarh.

Class II gazetted posts, in educational service, mainly in private and Government Colleges as well as in the field of P.W.D. contracts.<sup>16</sup>

It has been observed in Chapter III that the Congress (I) regards 'regionalism' as detrimental to the process of national integration. The Congress (I) also seems to favour centralization of power and is not sympathetic to demands for federal autonomy. However, there seems to exist some dichotomy between the Congress (I)'s stand at the national level and the MPCC (I) stand on the relationship between regionalism and nationalism. While the INC (I) dubs regional aspirations as anti-national, the MPCC (I) refuses to consider regionalism as contradictory to nationalism. As far as the CPI is concerned, it supports regional movements and other centrifugal forces, at least on paper. But in reality, the party's attitude towards certain autonomy movements such as the Gorkhaland movement marks a sharp contrast from its theoretical posture. The Meghalaya unit of the CPI seems to endorse the official views of the Central leadership on regionalism. It appears that the rise of regionalism poses a threat to the support-

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16. The data in this regard has been generated from Meghalaya Government Gazettes and through information provided by the Office of the Chief Engineer (PWD) and by the Principals of prominent Colleges.

base of the Congress (I), thus forcing the party to be apprehensive about regional and centrifugal forces.

In Chapter IV, we have sought to analyse the responses of the regional parties of Meghalaya towards nationalism and national integration. In this connection, an examination of the concept of 'national integration' has been taken up. An attempt was made to analyse the official view of national integration in India with reference to the statements of national leaders expressed at the meetings of the National Integration Council. A general discussion of the views of major regional parties of India has been followed by an analysis of the reactions of the four regional parties of Meghalaya towards nationalism. An enquiry into the issue revealed that there are wide gaps between precepts and practices as far as the regional parties of Meghalaya are concerned.

We have observed in Chapter IV that while all the regional parties of Meghalaya have expressed their commitment to the unity and integrity of India, such commitment is neither a spontaneous response nor is it the product of an emotional attachment to the so called Indian 'nation'. On the other hand, their loyalty to the Indian Union is necessitated by expediency. The regional parties of Meghalaya will prefer to bargain with the Central

Government for more concessions for the tribal people of Meghalaya within India rather than campaign for an independent Meghalaya or opt for Meghalaya's alignment with any of the bordering States adjacent to Meghalaya because neither of these options offer any better prospects for the local tribals. It may be argued, therefore, that politics of regionalism in Meghalaya does not pose any immediate threat to the Indian State.

In Chapter V, an attempt has been made to analyse the support-structures of the regional parties of Meghalaya on the basis of the economic programmes of these parties. In the absence of class polarisation in Meghalaya, it has not been possible to identify the social bases of these parties in terms of 'class'. But the economic programmes of regional parties show their urban or rural bias, agrarian or industrial orientations, concern for or callous attitude towards unemployed youth, concern for or neglect of border constituencies and so on. Apart from an examination of the election manifestoes of the regional parties, budgetary allocations made by Finance Ministers belonging to regional parties as well as general discussions on the budgets have been taken up for an understanding of actual party positions on economic issues.

Our contention in Chapter V has been that none of

the regional parties of Meghalaya has been able to formulate radical economic measures and policies because in the absence of an organized proletariat in Meghalaya, no demand for such policies has been raised. But the leadership of all these parties is composed of an educated elite and therefore, the programmes followed by these parties uphold the interests of this elite. It seems that the elite is not interested in the investment of capital because it does not possess capital. It follows, therefore, that this elite cannot identify itself with the national bourgeoisie since it does not have a bourgeoisie character. The primary interest of the elite seems to lie in the public sector jobs. Protests voiced by the APHLC against the Assam Official Language Bill on the ground that it will restrict the access of the hillsmen to Government Services should lend credence to our argument.<sup>17</sup> Jobs in the Government sector being the most important consideration for the elite, it has been persuading the Government to give preference to local tribals in this sector by declaring Khasi as the official language. In this context, we may argue that regionalism in Meghalaya can perhaps be understood only in terms of the protection of Khasi language and identity. The ultimate objective of the educated elite leading the regional parties seems to be the

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17. See Chapter II for discussion on this issue.

creation of a Khasiland where the Khasi identity can be preserved and protected.<sup>18</sup> If regionalism in Meghalaya is thus viewed in terms of ethnic identity, it may be pertinent to refer to a Report on the attitude of the middle class in Assam to the Kerbi and Bodo demands for political autonomy where it has been observed that while the first generation literates among the Assamese middle class are absolutely intolerant about such demands, the second generation literates are more tolerant and the third generation literates are so liberal and broadminded as to acknowledge the need for safeguarding the identity of these ethnic groups.<sup>19</sup> Whether the same observation applies to the Khasi society is a question that needs to be examined through a survey in the future.

In Chapter VI, the support-structures of the regional parties of Meghalaya have been examined on the basis of their political programmes in terms of issues like preservation of the cultural identity of the tribals, problem of influx in Meghalaya, education, interests of

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18. Formation of the Bri U Hynniewtrep State Movement for the creation of a new state for the Khasis and Jaintias is a step in this direction. For details, see G.W. Pohti, "Vote for Change and Vote for a New State" in The Shillong Times, March 10, 1997, p. 1.

19. See, Smita Khaund, "Middle Class and Ethnic Issues in Assam: A Study of the Attitude of the Lawyers of Guwahati City to the Kerbi and Bodo Demands for Political Autonomy", Unpublished Report on the Project carried out under the Junior Short Term Fellowship Scheme of the Institute of Social Change and Development, Guwahati, March, 1994.

non-tribals, district councils, problems of youth, reservation for tribals, territorial expansion of Meghalaya and innerline regulations. We have noticed striking similarities in the political programmes of all the four regional parties. It appears that the issues raised by the regional parties can be broadly classified as those catering to the interests of the educated elite, those pertaining to rural masses and populist and chauvinistic issues. Our analysis of the election statistics shows that the APHLC has a strong urban orientation while the HSPDP is basically a Khasi-Jaintia dominated party with strong support in West Khasi Hills and Jaintia Hills. The PDIC raises some chauvinistic demands such as reclamation of some areas from Assam, introduction of innerline regulations and 100% reservation of seats for tribals in the State Assembly which are likely to endear the party to the militant sections of the tribal society. But in terms of actual electoral support, the PDIC has fallen far behind the three other dominant regional parties. It appears that the HPU has succeeded in capturing the support of urban voters to a certain extent, but it is premature to comment on the party's support since the HPU has entered the political scene of Meghalaya much later than the APHLC, HSPDP and the PDIC.

We have observed in this Chapter that all the regional parties of Meghalaya are articulating the interests of the tribal educated elite through their political and economic programmes. It may be noted that these parties have expressed their commitment for the 'protection and preservation of tribal identity'. But in reality, each of these parties have sought to extract propaganda mileage over its rivals by raising such slogans. Their political programmes contain a number of pious pronouncements, but the regional parties lag behind when the question of implementing their programmes arises. It appears that the leadership of regional parties suffer from a sense of insecurity vis-a-vis the national elite. This makes them protective of their own distinct interests, even though they pay lip service to the slogan of 'national integration'.

In view of the above, it may be observed that regionalism in North East India has assumed an ethnic dimension. This implies that more and more ethnic groups and communities in this part of India led by their respective elite have been asserting their rights as regional entities who seem to perceive a threat to their identity and seek to protect the same by trying to extract as many concessions as possible from the Central political authorities. It is this process of bargaining with the

Centre for a better deal which appears to be associated very often with the politics of regionalism. To sum up, it may be argued that in order to achieve a genuine political integration of India, it is essential to appreciate the regional aspirations articulated by the elite of different ethnic groups and communities in India. An understanding of regionalism in India, therefore, will require an enquiry into these processes.

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