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CHAPTER VI

REGIONALISM IN NORTH EAST INDIA: AN APPRAISAL

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Introduction

'Regionalism' as a concept has received the attention of many scholars during the last few decades. The vast literature that exists on the theory and praxis of it broadly indicates: one, the concept is addressed by scholars from many more disciplines than it was done in the 40s and 50s. Two, the concept is for long and by many used in negative, antithetical to 'nationalism', sense (see Chandra 1976, Majeed 1984, Brass 1991). There is some shift in this attitude of scholars towards a more positive view of this concept (see Pakem 1993). Three, whereas the concept was earlier used mainly to refer to 'anti-national' aspirations within nation-states it is now also used to represent a number of nation-states (see Narasimhan 1977, Davidson 1981).

In this paper, I have made an attempt to re-read regionalism in northeast India from anthropological perspective. I argue that the definition of a 'region' is more often than not arbitrary. Whenever a region is identified it involves conscious choice and/or domination of certain criteria over other criteria. The cultural and/or geographical region expands and shrinks according to what criteria have been chosen by the dominant group(s) to define it. In other words, it is a politically created reality. There are strong socio-economic and developmental disparities within the northeast but such disparities are ignored. The region, created thus, is increasingly becoming a political liability and the Ministry of Home Affairs is understood to be getting jittery about it.

Region in Anthropology

The idea of 'region' or 'area' in anthropology is based on culture. Cultures are believed to form regions because (a) cultures which are close to one another develop similarities through inter-borrowing and mutual influence, and (b) certain cultural characteristics are more commonly found within a geographical area than elsewhere. Even when a particular cultural characteristic, such as chewing tobacco, is widely spread the special relationship that it has with a particular region is considered to be different from similar relationships elsewhere. Tobacco is chewed all over India but there are regional styles/patterns of doing so though the boundaries between such regions are not easy to identify. The regional patterns develop because cultural habits are learned and they pass from one generation to another.

The concept of 'culture-area' was first used in anthropology by Clark Wissler on the basis of his work on American Indian cultures, which he could divide into areas like food area, textile area, ceramic area, etc. but when the whole social organisation was taken into consideration, culture-area emerged. Thus, he mapped North America, South America, and Africa into various culture-areas. Further improvisation in the concept was brought about by Franz Boas on the basis of material culture distribution and by Alfred Kroeber on the basis of ecology. Kroeber also added the time dimension missing in Wissler's concept of 'culture-area' (for details see Herskovits 1964).

There was some influence of this interest on Indian anthropologists like Nirmal Kumar Bose, Surajit Chandra Sinha, and P.K. Misra. Bose believed that India was divided into a number of cultural zones. This idea was tested by Sinha through what came to be later known as material trait survey. The result was the publication of the monumental work entitled *Peasant Life in India: A Study in Indian Unity and Diversity* (1961) published by Anthropological Survey of India. The interest in identification of regions based on economic interdependence and symbiosis is central in the works of P.K. Misra on nomads (1974). Similar interest may also be traced in the writings of many other Indian anthropologists.

The Myth of 'North-East' as a Region

One of the most important developments after independence is the construction of a region called 'North-East'. If one peruses the pre-Independence writings the expression 'North-East region' is seldom, if ever, encountered. Even when the expression 'northeast' appeared on the title of such publications, such as the 1884 publication of the book by Alexander Mackenzie it was not prominent as it is today. The same book, when reprinted in 1979, carries 'North-East' prominently.

It appears that the northeast had some identity of its own from time immemorial though its identity has changed over centuries. It was first known as Pragjyotish though we do not know the exact boundaries then. This name was later replaced by Assam, though Tripura and Manipur were politically never under it. Even today many old people elsewhere refer to the 'north-east' as Assam: states like Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh do not yet exist for them. But after Independence 'North-East' comprising the seven sisters is a powerful identity. "We from the North-East", with 'n' and 'e' in capitals, is a common expression heard from the students here when they interact with others in Delhi or elsewhere. It 'exists' not only here for the people of the seven sisters but also for those who live elsewhere. It is even given a symbolic life-form with Siliguri depicted as the chicken neck.

Certain characteristics are already associated with it such as tribal domination, widespread Christianity, insurgency, secessionism, smuggling of drug, timber, and other contraband goods from across the international border, etc. It is considered to be one of the most backward areas from the point of view of infrastructure and communication. The people living here are 'exotic/erotic', the orientals of the orientals. There is some dramatization or exaggeration in almost anything written (by those from outside) on the northeast, including newspaper and television reports. It is mystique to many Indians and creates a lot of inquisitiveness in their minds. There is a lot here to be explored/discovered and there is a rat race among academicians and scholars to outdo each other in 'representing' the northeast. The myth of northeast is thus firmly saddled in its culture.

But what makes the northeast what it is? Does it share some common characteristics to be qualified as a region? Are/ is anything common here? Let me briefly dwell on this.

Defining a region has never been easy. As far as the 'northeast' is concerned it is taken for granted and never subjected to scrutiny even by geographers. In many writings 'region' is found equated with a state (Mathur 1976:177) though more than one region may be found within a state or the state itself may be a part of a wider region. In this context, it may be worthwhile to refer to the national seminar organised by the University of Rajasthan on "Regionalism and National Integration" in January 1970. The problem of defining a 'region' or 'regionalism' was discussed at length there but the experts could only be more aware of the magnitude of it.

As an anthropologist, the first criterion that I would like to bring into play is culture. Does the northeast share the same culture? The answer is no matter how one chooses to define it. The domain of culture may be broadly divided into material and non-material. The material culture of the region shows significant variation depending on the various levels of interaction between culture and ecology. If one takes dress, it not only varies between the valleys and the hills but also within the valleys and within the hills. House architecture, agricultural implements, fishing and hunting implements, etc. also vary significantly within the northeast.

As regards non-material culture I may just cite two: language and religion. The languages of the northeast can broadly be classified into three: Tibeto-Burman, Indo-Aryan, and Mon-Khmer. Mon-Khmer language is confined to the southern state of Meghalaya, the Indo-Aryan languages predominate the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys, and the Tibeto-Burman languages are everywhere in the hills of northeast. And each of these language families has its connections/extensions beyond the political or geographical boundaries of the northeast. Similarly, religionwise, the northeast has broadly four religions: Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, and Indigenous. The Hindu belt of Brahmaputra valley extends beyond northeast and so does the Buddhist area to the north. It is not really possible to associate this region with any one single religion, no matter how dominant it may be. Even associating the hills with

Christianity would alienate Arunachal Pradesh and followers of indigenous faith in other hill states of this region, including Meghalaya.

One aspect of culture which may be considered to be widely shared, particularly by the hill people here is the sense of alienation from the mainstream. The word 'mainstream' is disliked by many and it often arouses a negative feeling in many. They also have the sense of difference from the essentialised 'Indian' identity, represented by Hinduism, Aryan racial and cultural characteristics, cleverness, etc. At the extreme, many hill people feel that they were never a part of India. Indian myths and rituals were never a part of their sacred world as they were in the three valleys of the northeast. But this fact about the valleys, which is contested by many revivalists particularly in Imphal and Brahmaputra valleys, itself destroys the cultural foundation of northeast as a region. Such perceptions are part of the unconscious structures of the people here and therefore a part of their culture.

Let me briefly talk of 'race' before I move on because it has important social and historical significance for the northeast. The people here are predominantly Mongoloid though there are people of Caucasoid and Proto-Austroloid characteristics in the valleys. But Mongoloid people are in no way found only within the seven sisters; the Mongoloid region, if I may use this expression, actually begins here and extends towards north as well as east and covers many countries of what is broadly called South East Asia.

Let me take another criterion — economy. Agriculture is the mainstay of the people but the form of agriculture that is practised here is not the same everywhere in the northeast. Some practise shifting cultivation and some terrace and/or settled. Some harvest their crop once in a year whereas others do it thrice, such as in the valleys. Nor is any particular crop grown throughout northeast. Though paddy is cultivated very widely they do not cultivate the same variety of paddy everywhere. Then there still are people who depend on trade and pastoralism, such as in Arunachal Pradesh. Whereas the economy based on exploitation of timber was quite widespread its future is uncertain after the Supreme Court ban on timber felling in the northeast. Tea economy is confined to Assam

and so is extraction of oil. The relations of production too differ not only according to what is cultivated where but also according to the customary laws of each individual tribe of the northeast.

Conclusion

I may pick up many more criteria and yet show that the 'north-east' is merely a political creation. But the question remains: how did it get created then?

One clue to how it was created is found in the name of this region itself, that is, 'north-east'. 'North-east' of what, whom? This already means that there is an India whose existence and whose boundaries are taken for granted. Therefore, the name of the region has a reference point outside the region: it is 'northeast' only in the context of India. Whereas there are many organisations in the northeast which want 'secession' from India not a single voice has so far been raised against the word 'northeast' itself. The discourse of Indian unity is accepted without accepting the 'Indians' from outside the northeast.

The word 'northeast' has something intimately related to the Centre. Consider for instance, North Eastern Council, North-Eastern Hill University, North Eastern Regional Institute of Science and Technology, North-Eastern Council of Culture, and north-east regional offices of central government organizations like Anthropological Survey of India, Geological Survey of India, Botanical Survey of India, Zoological Survey of India, and the like. There are a dozen organizations seeking secession from India in the northeast and the Centre often appears to have run out of wits about how to contain the 'anti-national' aspirations in this 'region. Between economic packages and the unified army commands there are many a lapse on the part of the Centre in its handling of the northeastern problem.

The real solution lies in bridging our mindscapes. The northeast has for long been culturally outside 'Bharat' and, at best, it is seen as its cultural periphery. The 'Other' of Bharat has transformed into the Other of India. That is all. It is still seen as a region of exotic customs and practices, and other

attractions associated with such world. The mainstream concern for integration of the northeast with the rest of India can perhaps be likened with the concern of a gazer about the object of gaze or a hunter about his game.

Finally, there is no northeastern regionalism here. There is not a single political party or underground outfit that represents the entire northeast. There are regional parties here but where they are not? The regional parties are, however, more based on political expediency than based on some regional concerns and issues. There is always a competition among various political parties for appropriation of regional issues because such issues are better understood and appreciated by the people — the voters. But a political party does not become regional simply by contesting against a so-called national political party or the Centre: it needs to concern itself with the welfare of the region and champion some regional causes as well. The latter is missing in the regionalism of the northeast and an anti-Congressism is still labelled as regionalism. The northeast still lacks northeastern consciousness and is still beset by intra-regional, tribal, or ethnic differences. In other words, the northeast is yet to emerge as a region.

One might ask me here "so . . . what if the northeast is not a region?" I would say "so . . . what if the northeast keeps writing under the debris of its own contradictions? There will be more committees, seminars, meetings and we are optimistic about the future of the region."

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