

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Regionalism in Meghalaya An Analysis of the Perception of National Political Parties

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Regionalism seems to have become an integral component of the Indian ethos and is likely to grow stronger as more and more ethnic and linguistic groups become conscious of their distinct identity and seek recognition as regional groups to preserve the same. In North East India, in particular, it appears that regionalism has assumed a distinct ethnic connotation in the sense that ethnic groups in this part of India led by their respective elite have been asserting their rights as regional entities 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 seems to be associated very often with the politics of regionalism.

In Meghalaya also, regionalism has acquired an interesting dimension with ethnic identity becoming preponderant over regional identity. The present paper aims at examining the responses of two major national parties to the phenomenon of regionalism in general and to regionalism in Meghalaya, in particular. Since the question of smaller nationalities is intrinsically connected with regionalism, we would like to examine the stand of the national parties on the nationality question. The most pertinent question sought to be examined in the context of Meghalaya is whether national parties in Meghalaya regard nationalism and regionalism as complementary or contradictory.

Broadly, the responses to regionalism are supported by two different types of arguments. One argument is that the phenomenon of regionalism goes against a well-integrated political system. This approach is based on the assumption that regionalism is a divisive force and hence a threat to national unity because it leads to separatism, parochialism, isolationism and secessionism.¹ Diametrically opposite to this approach is the view that particularistic identities are necessary for national integration.² The various cultural and ethnic communities inhabiting India have their own distinct cultures and tradi-

tions which make them assert their identity as separate nationalities. As A.K. Baruah rightly argues, that this assertion of identity by smaller nationalities need not be construed as a threat to the Indian nation state because it is possible to accept the existence of more than one nationality within a state without expecting them to assimilate with the dominant one of the state concerned or suspecting them as secessionist and leading to the disintegration of the present state.³ This approach distinguishes between the state and the nation, but national parties in India do not make this distinction.

It appears that the bogey of nationalism has often been raised to suppress even legitimate regional aspirations. In India, for instance, the political mainstream constituted by the Congress party considers any challenge to the state authority at the Centre as an onslaught on the very existence of the nation state.⁴ In this context, it becomes necessary to examine the nature of nationalism and its relationship with regionalism. We propose to classify the available perspectives on nationalism as the Marxian and non-Marxian views of nationalism. The latter will include the formulations of Ernest Gellner, Paul Brass, Karl Deutsch and Hans Kohn. We shall begin with the non Marxian perspective.

An important perspective on nationalism emerges from Ernest Gellner. According to him, mankind is irreversibly committed to industrial society and the kind of cultural homogeneity demanded by nationalism is one of the essential concomitants of industrial society. The age of transition to industrialism coincided, according to Gellner's model, with a transition to the urge of nationalism.⁵ It must be noted, however, that this theory of Gellner is concerned mainly with the nationalism of the twentieth century and with what are claimed to be its roots in the social, cultural and political changes which occurred in Western Europe during the 19th century. But it appears that the development of the idea of a 'national' and the formation of nation-states in Europe began at a much earlier point of time and Gellner's theory cannot be applied to explain the earlier developments.

The next perspective we propose to discuss is, in fact, combination of two approaches, viz. the subjective and the objective. The objective approach seeks to identify nationalism and the nation state in terms of quantifiable characteristics such as territory, language, culture, religious uniformity, volume of economic and social communication and so on.⁶ The subjective approach, on the other hand, views nationalism and the nation-state as a set of emotional and ideological bonds between an individual and community. Subjective and objective definitions can be misleading, however, if they are used separately. For instance, the population on both sides of a political frontier may possess a common national ethnic identity – the objective test and at the same time be politically and legally divided between two or more states, e.g. the overseas

Chinese of South East Asia. There may be other situations where most of the objective criterion are found to be missing and yet the community feels itself to be a nation. For example, ethnically heterogeneous population of Belgium and Switzerland exhibit a strong emotional attachment towards the state. Such a confusing picture emerging from the separate application of subjective and objective tests makes it an unreliable paradigm for the understanding of nationalism.

An altogether different perspective on nationalism emerges from Paul Brass who argues that ethnicity and nationalism are creations of elites, who draw upon, distort and sometimes fabricate materials from the cultures of the groups they wish to represent in order to protect their well-being or existence or to gain political and economic advantages for their groups as well as for themselves. According to him, nationalism and ethnicity are modern phenomena inseparably connected with the activities of the modern centralizing state. We agree with Brass that nationalism is the product of manipulation of culture by an elite, although it is arguable whether nationalism is a recent development completely unknown in the past centuries.

Inadequacies of the non-Marxist views on nationalism brings us to an examination of the Marxist perspective. Karl Marx perceived nationalism as the sole ideal of the bourgeoisie and supported the incipient national movement because he saw in the emergence of the nation-state the consolidation of the local bourgeoisie against outmoded feudal forms, which he believed to be a pre-condition for the growth of socialism.⁹ In India, scholars like Niharanjan Ray,¹⁰ Partha Chatterjee¹¹ and Irfan Habib¹² fundamentally subscribed to the theoretical format of Marx and Stalin that the nation was built in western Europe in the era of capitalism. But Barun De¹³ disagrees with this formulation and argues that national consciousness or national movements existed even prior to the era of capitalism. Jayantanuja Bandyopadhyaya, another Indian scholar with Marxist orientations, argues that the replacement of capitalism by same form of socialism is an essential pre-condition for the eradication of the nationalist ideology, although it is not a sufficient condition.¹⁴ However, this argument cannot be substantiated by ground realities in the socialist countries like the former USSR, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia where aggressive nationalism of the respective dominant communities like Russians, Slovaks and Serbs unleashed the forces of disintegration because such nationalism threatened the peripheral communities.

Having reviewed the available literature on nationalism, we may proceed to examine the perceptions of major national parties in India about the phenomenon of regionalism. For the purpose of our present analysis, we propose to focus on the positions adopted by the two major, national parties, viz. the Congress and the Communist party of India which are not only distinguished

by their ideologies in the political spectrum, but which seemed to have acquired a measure of prominence in the politics of Meghalaya by their participation in all the Assembly elections held in the State.

The reaction of the Congress to the growth of regional consciousness seems to have been conditional to a great extent by the appreciation of its own role as the upholder of national integration. In fact, at one stage, the party started identifying itself with the national and considered criticism of its leaders and its policies as anti-national and unpatriotic. The failure and reluctance of the Congress to grasp the reality of a basically pluralistic Indian polity has led the party to adopt policies such as nationalization of political issues, political destruction of the state, resulting in disintegration of the Congress organization in the districts and the selection of Chief Ministers in the States who lack independent bases of power.¹⁵ Paul R. Brass argues that deliberate interference of the Congress with the State's legitimate jurisdiction and attempts to lower the prestige of state leaders have encouraged state autonomy movements and the growth of regional feelings throughout India.¹⁶ It appears that the Congress party views the regional movements with dismay and regards these as a threat to its own authoritarianism mode of functioning. To Mrs Indira Gandhi, regionalism was as poisonous as casteism or communalism — 'a very serious threat to development, progress and unity of the country'.¹⁷ But compulsions of political regional parties like the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIDMK) in Tamil Nadu and with the National Conference of Farooq Abdullah in Kashmir.

A look at the 1984 Election Manifesto of the Congress(I) shows the party's determination to fight with all its strength those elements and forces which are trying to reverse the historical processes which have led to the unification of India. The party also claims to transcend narrow religious, linguistic, regional and parochial affiliations.¹⁸ This clearly reflects the Congress(I)'s antagonism to regional loyalties which the party treats at par with parochial affiliations. Such antagonism seems to have originated from a sense of insecurity in its leadership. After all, the Congress faces a very real threat to its domination over the state governments due to a mushroom growth of regional parties and rise in their popularity and widening of their power bases.

As far as the Meghalaya Pradesh Congress(I) Committee's response to regionalism in Meghalaya is concerned, the party claims to have championed all along the cause of the tribal people and the weaker sections and promises to ensure that their identity and culture are retained.¹⁹ This claim seems to be based on the fact that it was the Congress Government at the Centre which conceded the demand for the formation of Meghalaya. The party considers regional forces as nothing but the manifestation of selfish vested interests.²⁰ By adopting this stance, the MPCC(I) fails to take cognizance of the fact that

some measure of autonomy for regional forces will act as a safety valve for discontent and strengthen the forces of intergration in the long run. The MPCC(I) seems to regard regionalism as a narrow ideology which is sustained by communal consciousness and is incompatible with the national consciousness.²¹ In this respect, the MPCC(I)'s stand fully conforms to the party's national posture.

As far as its assesment of regionalism and regional parties is concerned, the MPCC(I) declares,

... notwithstanding what the protagonists of "regionalism" and "regional or state parties" for selfish vested interests of a few individuals may say, the fact remains that it has all along been leaders with selfless national vision, initially the members of the Constituent Assembly who, having fully and carefully comprehended the needs, the fears and the aspirations of the tribals and other weaker sections of the society, provided for adequate constitutional safeguards²²

However, in spite of its attempt to underplay the role of regional parties, the MPCC(I) does not consider regionalism as contradictory to nationalism. The party acknowledges the role of the All Party Hill Leaders' Conference in the struggle for the Hill State, but goes on to add that immediately after the formation of Meghalaya, the APHLC had to turn to the Congress for seat adjustments and decided to work with the Congress at all levels.²³ In reality, it appears that the APHLC's decision to work with the Congress was influenced by the desire to extract concessions from the Central Government which was then headed by the Congress party.

On the issues of centre state relations, the MPCC(I) almost echoes the voice of the party High Command when it envisages a strong centre to guide the states in India. In this regard, the official position of the INC(I) is that the states should be strong to effectively discharge their obligations to the people for social, economic and cultural development.

... At the same time, a strong centre is required to safeguard the country's unity and integrity to ensure the success of the planning process and to direct the nation's endeavour for a social and economic order based on socialism. There is no contradiction between a strong centre and strong states. The two reinforce each other²⁴

The MPCC(I) follows the same perspective when it asserts that a firm central government is in a position to discipline any recalcitrant states or party. The party visualizes total chaos and collapse of law and order in the ab-

sence of Central guidance. The MPCC(I) concedes, however, that the Central government should consider decentralization of power at certain levels, leaving the states alone in the matter of collection of revenues, extraction of minerals, etc.²⁵ One wonders whether this is a genuine concern for decentralization or whether the party pays only lip service to deprive the regional parties of propaganda advantage in this regard.

As far as the interests of non-tribal minorities in Meghalaya are concerned, the MPCC(I) promises to ensure that minorities in the state are protected and they get their due shares.²⁶ In reality, however, the Congress(I) in Meghalaya played a less than commendable role in protecting non-tribal minorities during the ethnic disturbances in 1987 and 1992 when the party happened to be in power.²⁷ In spite of its passive role during ethnic disturbances, the MPCC(I) expresses its concern about the erosion of communal harmony in the state. The party seems to share the views of regional parties when it traces the roots of communal tension from the phenomenon of influx. But in reality, non-fulfilment of popular expectations after the achievement of statehood appears to be one of the important factors which seems to have led to communal riots in Meghalaya.

It may be noted that protection of tribal ethos is a favourite catchword for all political parties in Meghalaya, whether regional or national. The MPCC(I) also promises to take necessary steps to maintain the population structure of the State with the cooperation of the local democratic institutions like the Syiemship, Lyngdohship, Nokmaship, Doloiship and other village institutions.²⁸ But the fact that only the male adults of the village participate in the election of the Syiem shows the undemocratic character of Syiemship²⁹ and of institutions like Wahadadarship³⁰ and raises doubts about the capability of these institutions to protect the interests of the people. In this context, therefore, the MPCC(I)'s claim to maintain the demographic balance in the state with the help of these political institutions does not carry much conviction.

Regarding the establishment of industries in Meghalaya, the MPCC(I) shows preference for agro-based industries and industries based on other local products and calls for imparting training to the local youth to man these industries.³¹ In reality, however, the Congress(I) remains apprehensive of measures for industrialization of the State lest the population structure of the state is disturbed. While the Congress(I) manifesto of 1983 makes a casual reference to the development of small scale and cottage industries, the 1989 party manifesto does not spell out the party's industrial policy at all. This may be interpreted to mean that the MPCC(I) is neither convinced about the prospects of industrialization in Meghalaya nor has the party been able to allay popular misgiving in this regard through effective propaganda.

To sum up the views of the Congress(I) on various issues, it may be ob-

served that some dichotomy exists between the Congress(I) stand at the all India level and the MPCC(I) stand on the relationship between regionalism and nationalism. While the MPCC(I) President emphatically states that his party does not regard regionalism as contradictory to nationalism, the INC(I) openly dubs regional aspirations as anti-national. The MPCC(I) expresses its concern for the preservation of the tribal ethos and proclaims its determination to maintain the existing demographic balance in the state. But the sincerity of the party in the attainment of these goals remains open to scrutiny.

The Communist Party of India's response to regionalism marks a sharp ideological contrast from that of the Congress(I). The Communist had advocated the theory of multi-national India and maintains that the right of self-determination is an essential condition for the unity of India.³³ It is this ideological specificity of the CPI which accounts for its relevance for our present analysis.

The basic thrust of Lenin's thinking was to see nation, nationality and nationalism as economic and political phenomena the result of the centralizing tendencies of capitalist modernization.³⁴ It is this methodology that has dominated the thinking of the Indian Left on the 'nationality' question where this question now refers essentially to the internal political arrangements of an Indian Union comprising a number of linguistic territorial state units and confronted with a variety of regional pressures.

As guided by their ideology, the Marxists would make every effort to promote integration and to break down the barriers separating people, particularly the working classes. This general principle would entail respect for the equality of all languages and culture. It would mean rejecting privileges for any particular ethnic group while safeguarding the interests of minorities.³⁵ Tribal movement for autonomy would, in general, be supported by Marxists because these are quite often perceived as the result of non-tribal exploitation and displacement of indigenous tribals. The CPI even advocated the formation of tribal states on district level.³⁶ The party looks at the various linguistic groups in India as national groups and has been advocating their linguistic cause as the nationality cause. This doctrinal commitment on the part of the communists has enabled them to support all regional and autonomy movements by linguistic groups irrespective of their political desirability.³⁷

Speaking on his party's position on regional issues, the veteran CPI leader of Meghalaya Prafulla Misra argues that championing the cause of a particular ethnic group should not be branded or dubbed as 'regionalism' because India being a homeland of various nationalities, the rights of every segment of the population must be guaranteed and this alone will ensure the unity of India. The Meghalaya unit of CPI concedes that regional parties champion the cause of their own people, strive to safeguard their identity as small na-

nationalities and to ensure that they may develop according to their own historical tradition and genius.³⁸ It is striking to note that while the MPCC(I) looks upon regionalism as a narrow ideology, CPI adopts a less strident and more sympathetic posture towards this phenomenon in conformity with the Marxist doctrine. The CPI does not seem to regard regionalism in Meghalaya as antagonistic with nationalism. Misra justifies his party's stand in this regard by citing B.B. Lyngdoh, an erudite APHLC leader's declaration that "Ours is a regional party with a national outlook".³⁹

Speaking about CPI's stand on the clashes between the tribals and non-tribals in Meghalaya, Misra observes that competition between tribals and non-tribals in the field of trade and business is responsible for such clashes.⁴⁰ It may be noted that the CPI in Meghalaya does not explain the tribal non-tribal divide in terms of class struggle. This is because class polarization in the Marxist sense has not taken place in Meghalaya and the friction basically concerns the same class with different ethnic affiliations. It is, therefore, a case of intra-class and not inter-class conflict that marks the politics of Meghalaya today.

Citing the party's programme on the tribal problem Misra emphasized the CPI's deep concern for the tribal cause.⁴¹ The CPI's stand is that every nationality or ethnic group, whether big or small, must be given same political rights in his or her homeland. Thus, the Meghalaya CPI's views on the tribal issues follow from the general party doctrine of recognition of the rights of different nationalities and ethnic groups.⁴²

The CPI favours the establishment of industries in Meghalaya. The party urged the Government to select some industries and arrange necessary training for the local people to man these industries.⁴³ The establishment of industries seems to be one major issue on which the CPI's position is fundamentally different from that of the regional parties who make no secrets of their opposition to industrialization.

The CPI's stand on the issue of the Hill state reflects the party's attitude towards regional aspirations in the hills. According to the CPI, the hills people wanted full opportunities for self-expression and therefore, the fulfilment of genuine aspirations in the hills had become urgent to promote integrity of the nation and prosperity of the region.⁴⁴ The CPI was the first national party to welcome and support the formation of Meghalaya to enable the tribal people to develop according to their tradition and culture.⁴⁵ It must be noted, however, that although the CPI stands for the preservation of tribal identity, the party finds no contradiction between the legitimate rights of the tribal majority and the non-tribal minorities who are permanent inhabitants of Meghalaya.⁴⁶ This is certainly a significant point of departure from the position adopted by the regional parties.

On the whole, it may be observed that the CPI supports regional movements and other centrifugal forces, at least at the theoretical level. In conformity with the views of the national leadership, the Meghalaya unit of the CPI also endorses its support of regional aspirations. The Congress(I)'s response in this regard appears to be fundamentally different from that of the CPI. As the rise of regionalism poses a threat to the support base of the Congress(I), the party which once dominated the Centre seems to have few options but to resort to repression of regional and centrifugal forces.

Notes

- 1 Paul Brass notes a tendency in the literature on political development and modernization to focus upon 'national integration' as a process of state-building and to treat all other loyalties except those of the state as 'parochial' or 'primordial' loyalties detrimental to national integration. This tendency noted by Brass is, of course, one trend only. For discussion, see Paul R. Brass, *Language, Religion and Politics in North India* (Delhi, 1975), p.5.
- 2 See, for instance, Lewis P. Fickett Janior, "The politics of regionalism in India" in *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. XLIV, No. 2, Summer, 1971, p.210.
- 3 Apurba Kr. Baruah, *Social Tensions in Assam – Middle Class Politics* (Guwahati, 1991), p.4. In India, we have both the perspectives presented very 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.
- 4 See T.K. Dommen, "Social movements and nation-state in India: towards relegitimization of cultural nationalisms", *Journal of Social and Economic Studies* (N.S.) 3,2 (1986), pp.107-129.
- 5 Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford, 1983) pp.39-40. For discussion on both the approaches, see Jaroslav Krejci and Vitezslav Velimsky, *Ethnic and Political Nations in Europe* (London) 1981, pp.44-45.
- 6 The objective approach is best represented by the pioneering work of Karl Deutsch. See especially his *Nationalism and Social Communication: An Enquiry into the Foundations of Nationality*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 1966). Also see his *Nationalism and Its Alternative* (New York, 1969).
- 7 For representative writings on the subject, see Rupert Emerson, *From Empire to Nation: The Rise and Self-Assertion of Asian and African People* (Boston, 1960), Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism: A Study of Its Origins and Background* (New York, 1951) and *Prelude to National-States: The French and German Experience, 1789-1815* (Princeton, 1967).
- 8 Paul R. Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism – Theory and Comparison* (New Delhi, 1991), p.8.
- 9 For details on the Marxist standpoint, see J.V. Stalin, "Marxism and the National Question", *Collected Works*, Vol. 2, 1907-13 (Moscow), 1953. Also see, V.I. Lenin, "Critical remarks on the national question", *Collected Works*, Vol. 20 1913-14 (Moscow, 1964), p.36.
- 10 Niharanjan Ray, *Nationalism in India* (Sir Syed Hall Publication No.4), p.9.
- 11 Partha Chatterjee, "Bengal: rise and growth of nationality" in *Social Scientist*, August, 1975. pp.67-82.

- 12 Iran Habib, "Emergence of nationalities", *Ibid*, p.14.
- 13 Barun De, "Complexities in the relationship between nationalism, capitalism and colonialism" in Debi Prasad Chattopadhyay (ed.) *History and Society* (Calcutta, 1976), p.481.
- 14 See Jayantanuja Bandyopandhaya, *Nationalism Unveiled* (New Delhi, 1990).
- 15 Paul R. Brass, "Pluralism, regionalism and decentralizing tendencies in contemporary Indian politics" in A.J. Wilson and Denis Dalton (eds.), *The States of South Asia: Problems of National Integration* (New Delhi), 1982, p. 255.
- 16 *Ibid*.
- 17 *Selected Speeches of Indira Gandhi, January 1966-August 1969* (New Delhi, 1971), p.85.
- 18 *Election Manifesto of the INC(I), 1984*, pp.4-5.
- 19 *Election Manifesto of the Indian National Congress(I) in Meghalaya*, 1983, pp.1-2.
- 20 For details, see *Congress(I) Manifesto, Meghalaya Elections, 1988*, p.3.
- 21 Discussions with D.D. Lapang on 3rd January, 1991 in Shillong.
- 22 See *Congress(I) Manifesto, Meghalaya Elections, 1988*, pp.3-4.
- 23 Discussions with D.D. Lapang, President MPCC(I) on 3rd January 1991 in Shillong.
- 24 Indian National Congress(I) Election Manifesto, 1984 (New Delhi), p.23.
- 25 Discussions with D.D. Lapang, *op.cit*.
- 26 *Ibid*.
- 27 See the editorial titled "A suicidal course", *Meghalaya Guardian*, Shillong, Friday, October 9, 1992, p.4.
- 28 *Congress(I) Manifesto, 1988*, *op.cit.*, p.12.
- 29 Hamlet Barah, *History of the Khasi People* (Shillong, 1967), p.270.
- 30 For details, see P.N. Dutta, "Wahadadarship of Shella: origin and rise" in S.K. Chattopadhyay (ed.), *Tribal Institutions of Meghalaya* (Guwahati, 1985), pp.81-96.
- 31 For details, see *MPCC(I) Election Manifesto, 1993*, pp.6-7.
- 32 See *Election Manifestoes of the Congress(I) in Meghalaya, 1983 and 1988*, *op.cit*.
- 33 Overstreet and Windmiller, *Communism in India* (Berkeley, 1958).
- 34 For details, see V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol 24 (Moscow, 1964).
- 35 V.I. Lenin, *Questions of National Policy and Proletarian Internationalism* (Moscow) 1970, pp.32-37.
- 36 See Kusar J. Assam, *Political Aspects of National Integration* (Meerut, 1981), p.226.
- 37 But the dichotomy in the Communist stand becomes evident when in specific situations like the Assam movement or the GNLf movement, the communists fail to live up to the aspirations of smaller nationalities. See A.K. Baruah, *op.cit*.
- 38 Discussions with Prafulla Misra, CPI leader, on 4th January 1991 in Shillong.
- 39 *Ibid*.
- 40 *Ibid*.
- 41 *Ibid*. Also See *CPI on Burning Problems of Meghalaya* issued by the Meghalaya State Council, CPI, October 20, 1983 and *Draft Programme* of the Meghalaya Co-ordinator Committee of the CPI.
- 42 *Ibid*.
- 43 Discussions with Prafulla Misra, *op.cit*.
- 44 *Shillong Observer*, August 1, 1967, Vol. IX, No 8., p. 1.
- 45 *CPI on Burning problems* . . . *op.cit.*, p.5.
- 46 *Ibid.*, pp.4-5.