

A Brief Note on the Character and Trends of Regionalism in the North-Eastern Region

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Since independence, the entire N. E. Region has been witnessing several social movements of various nature. Out of these, the movements advocating regionalism and seperatism are much talked and focussed. These have been seen as a threat to national integration because of the fact of growing influence of chauvinist and violent trend of it. Question arises - what is the basis of regionalism ? Why a section of the population advocates seperation ? What are its basic character and trend ? The answer to these questions are most vital and important to understand the problem.

The present outline is therefore intended to focus on the root of the problem and to assess the character and trend of it.

Roots of Regionalism

Regionalism is not an overnight phenomena. It has historical background. The various factors particularly political and economic are responsible for its growth. The '*sons of the soil*' theory of Myron Weiner is the motive force behind the ideological justification of regionalism. The theory appears to be justified against the background of uneven economic development resulting in general backwardness, growing poverty, unemployment and severe economic competition among the aspirants of different educated middle classes comprising both tribals and non-tribals.

The entire N.E. Region has its own peculiarity too. The whole region is predominantly a tribal one. Out of total population, according to 1971 census, 44 percent are tribals. The percentage of tribal population is nearly 90, except Tripura, Manipur and Assam. Among these, 90.5 percent of population are peasant and lives in villages. The geographical peculiarity also helps this region to maintain a distinct character. The distinct identity of the population, particularly of the hill tribals, was further developed into an exclusiveness resulting in tribal conservatism by the British Policy of administration as per G. O. I. Act of 1935 through division under '*excluded area*' as well as '*partially excluded area*.'

The separatist movement was first originated in Nagaland in 1940 under the direct patronage of the colonial rule. A section of the British administrators prepared a scheme to form a *North Eastern Agency* with the help of the newly educated Naga youths aiming to separate nearly 200000 sq. miles area comprising

Burma, Tibet, China and Chittagong borders from the Indian domination. In 1940, this agency demanded independent Nagaland. However, in 1947, the same colonial administrators persuaded them to be in Indian dominion. Though the Naga youths of the said agency agreed, they demanded to form an interim government within 10 years. The said Naga youths formed Naga National Council in 1947. As their demand was not conceded by the constitution drafting committee, NCC went underground to start armed insurgency since 1950. Since then, the seperatist movements are continuing till now under the leadership of NSCN formed in 1975. Except Nagaland, the seperatist movements of N. E. region did not emerge during the pre-independance period. The seperatist armed insurgency started in Mizoram in 1967 by Lal Denga, under M. N. F. In Manipur, it was in the 1960's under various organisations like U. N. L. F., P. L. A. and *prepak*. In Tripura, it was in the 1970's under T. N. V. In Assam, it is in the 1980's under U. L. F. A.

Side by side with the seperatist trend, a strnog regional nationalist trend is also dominating in the N. E. region. The regional nationalist advocates for regional autonomy either in the form of autonomous district council or autonomous state within the frame work of Indian constitution. This nationalists have been playing an important role to establish a responsible government for maintaining distinct identity of different ethnic groups of relevant areas. In spite of all their sincere efforts to maintain a balance between Pan-Indian Nationalism and Regional Nationalism, it could not be established. In this context, the role and policy of the party in power at the centre is responsible. It is because of its policy of centralisation.

As declared in the constitution, India is a republic constituted by the union of states. Its structure is based on federalism. The concept of federalism has been developed through the experience gathered during the struggle for freedom. But in practice, the party in power at the centre did not follow this principle. With the victory of the opposition parties in the provincial governments particularly since 1967, the party in power at the centre started pursuing a policy of centralisation curtailing federal rights. The deliberate attempt of curtailing such rights was made with the 42nd amendment of the constitution. As a result, the provincial governments enjoy less powers and particularly in the matter of economic, eduction and law and order affairs. In the name of safe guarding national interest, the central government started interfering in the matters of law and order which is exclusively a state affairs by virtue of the article 249. All these factors made the provincial governments to feel being deprived and suppressed. The inevitable result is the outburst of both pan.-Indian and regional social reaction.

Pan-Indian Nationalism Vs. Regional Nationalism

During last four decades, as mentioned earlier, the regional

bourgeoisie, both tribal and non-tribal, have been collaborating with the national big bourgeoisie. But with their growing strength through collaboration, for their own class interests, this bourgeoisie has developed a feeling to ensure full control over regional economy which has already been monopolized by the big national bourgeoisie. Under such situation, the conflict between these two interests becomes inevitable. To rally their respective masses behind their interests, the regional bourgeoisie have articulated the ideology of regionalism reflecting both genuine and emotional grievances of the people. Regionalism, therefore, as a positive ideology has nothing wrong in it. But its separatist chauvinist and anti-minority (both tribal & non-tribal) trend is dangerous and therefore is a threat to national integration. Let us now examine this trends briefly

Separatist Trend and the Imperialist Conspiracy

There is no doubt that the imperialist forces have been actively patronising separatist elements to foment ethnic disturbances on the basis of 'sons of the soil' theory. Under various charity organisations, the imperialist forces have been helping the chauvinist as well as the separatist forces in terms of giving money, foreign tours in the name of higher studies as well as distributing literature relevant to their conspiracy. The Special Operation Research Office (S.O.R.O.) of Washington University is to be mentioned precisely in this context. The planning of '*Project Brahmaputra*' prepared by the C.I.A. is well known.

Regionalism : Chauvinist & anti-Minority Trend

The chauvinist trend of regionalism is dominant in the province of Assam while tribalism has its aggressive reflection in the rest of the region. The linguistic chauvinism pursued by the Assamese bourgeoisie led it to pass the Act in 1960 declaring Assamese as the State (undivided) Language. The very passing of the act resulted in the strong reaction among the non-Assamese citizens. There broke out Assamese-Bengali communal riots. In the hills too, there broke out anti-Assam movements under the leadership of APHLC leading finally to seperation of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills from the state of Assam in 1969. The recent SEBA circular declaring Assamese as a compulsory subject in the schools also provoked much social reaction for which, the circular had to be withdrawn. The anti-minority trend of the Assam Agitation is worthy to be mentioned.

The aggressive tribalism is also significantly emerging in the region under the cover of regionalism. Like Assam, anti-minority activities are active in Manipur.

Summing UP

It is apparently clear that regionalism in the N.E. Region has its two fold trend viz :

- i) Regional Nationalist Trend, and
- ii) Separatist Trend.

However, it is difficult to differentiate these two trends always. It is because of the fact that separatism works under the cover of regionalism. Of course their policy can be identified on the basis of their major demands.

Regional National Trend

This trend reflects in the demand for regional autonomy. The movements under this trend is basically anti-Government (central) and democratic. The methods applied are overall peaceful. But, so far minority is concerned, it is anti-minority and aggressive.

Seperatist Trend

This trend reflected in the demand for creation of an independent state. The movements under this trend is also primarily anti-government but undemocratic. The methods applied are from the very beginning violent through armed insurrection. The movements under the leadership of NSCN, TNV, PLA, ULFA & KJLA are of this trend. In most cases, the members of this organisations indulged in subversive activities.

Suggestions

The whole issue is a political one and therefore, has to be politically dealt with. The solution of the major issue depends on the on the four key questions :—

- (a) To maintain federal structure properly.
- (b) The re-organisation of the centre-state relations.
- (c) To expose imperialist conspiracy and to check their interferences.
- (d) Uniform economic development.