

REGIONALISM AND NATIONAL INTEGRATION WITH REFERENCE TO THE NORTH-EAST INDIA

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Abstract: *Regionalism has been an important concept in the study of political system in India. It has emerged to be a significant feature of Indian politics ever since the independence of the country. Starting from the south, the north, the east and the north-east, India has seen the growth and development of regionalism in one form or the other.*

In India, regionalism has often been discussed as a factor which disturbs the growth of national integration. In the North-East, regionalism has emerged mainly for protection of identity of different tribal groups, backwardness of the region in comparison to other regions, the feeling of negligence from that of the central government and the failure of the national parties to deal properly with the aspirations of the people of the region. Though, sometimes, regionalism in the North-East takes violent form and secessionist elements permeate into it, yet regionalism, here, in general, can't be regarded as a threat to national integrity. The regional parties which have mainly been formed in order to protect and enhance social, cultural, economic and political interests of the states they represent, are working with due respect to the Constitution of the country. They have formed governments in states as well as become parts of coalition governments both in states and at the centre by peaceful and constitutional means. Regionalism, in the North-East, should not always be identified with that of terrorism.

Key words: regionalism, national integration, regional political parties, the north-east India

INTRODUCTION

Regionalism has been an important concept in the study of political system in India. It has emerged to be a significant feature of Indian politics ever since the independence of the country. Starting from the south, the north, the east and the north-east, India has seen the growth and development of regionalism in one form or the other. Regionalism has often been discussed as a factor which disturbs the growth of national integration in the country.

The term regionalism refers to the feeling of oneness among the people living in a particular region of a country or of the globe. Territorial integrity may not be the only reason for the emergence of regional feeling. Commonness in matters of race, culture, religion, language, etc. may also give rise to regionalism. This feeling of oneness becomes intense when the people realize same sense of

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underdevelopment, deprivation, identity crisis, threat to one's own culture, language, etc. Regionalism is beneficial if it aims only at the well-being and development of the people of region and does not imbibe any sense of hatred and ill feeling towards others. However, it will turn harmful if it sows the seeds of differences and encourages violence to achieve its aim.

The concept of national integration, on the other hand, refers to the unity and integrity of all the people of a nation without having any distinction on the basis of religion, language, culture, region, etc. National integration refers to the feeling of oneness among the people on the basis of a nation. It involves political unity with that of emotional unity. National integration can be defined as a positive concept as it tries to integrate people by removing differences of any kind between them. Achievement of national integration is a challenge in a country like India which has a population of maximum diversity.

Centrifugal forces do exist in India which have developed on the basis of caste, creed, religion, language, region, etc. These forces exert their divisive influence in the working of the political system and sometimes threaten the very unity and integrity of the nation. Regionalism, which is an important feature of the Indian political system, is also considered to be one of such forces. However, regionalism should not always be discussed as a divisive force because it is mainly concerned with development and growth of interest of a region or a group of people.

In the following paragraphs, we will attempt to study development of regionalism and the question of national integration in India with reference to North-East India.

METHOD OF STUDY

The method of study of this paper is analytical. Data for the study have been collected from secondary sources like books, journals, newspapers and internet.

The area of this study is North-East India. This study has been carried out with the following objectives:

- i) to find out the main causes of regionalism in North-East India,
- ii) to understand the emergence and working regional parties in this part of India,
- iii) to analyse whether regionalism here is posing a threat to national integration, and
- iv) to find difference between regionalism and terrorism in the North-East.

The causes of emergence of Regionalism in North-East India

India has seen the emergence of regionalism since the time of independence. Different parts of the country have different reasons for the growth of regional

feeling and sentiments. Political scientists have found out that regionalism has emerged in India because of economic backwardness, regional diversity, linguistic protectionism, tribal identity, religious fanaticism, social inequality and last but not the least the centralizing tendencies of the Indian Constitution.

The factors which have mainly been responsible for growth of regionalism in the North-East India can be discussed as: protection of identity of different tribal groups, backwardness of the region in comparison to other regions, the feeling of negligence from that of the central government and the failure of the national parties to deal properly with the aspirations of the people of the region.

The North-East India is primarily a tribal dominated area. It is known as "the land of tribes". These tribes are very much conscious of their own identity. They are concerned to protect and preserve their culture, tradition, language, etc. So, political parties have grown in the North-East in order to protect ethnic identity of different tribal groups and to work for the promotion of their specific interests.

The Constitution makers in India, looking at the situation in the north-east, incorporated the provision of the Sixth Schedule in the Constitution which chiefly aims at safeguarding the tribal people of the North-East. This provision of the Constitution enables the people of this area to lead their lives in accordance with their own concept of welfare and development. The District Councils have been established and have been given wide range of powers to ensure development in these areas.

However, the pace of development in this region is not in tune with the political and economic aspirations of the people. There is wide spread feeling of neglect in the region. There have been discontent and dissatisfaction among the people. This region is lagging behind the other regions of the country in case of progress in education, communication, health, economic prosperity and others. So, in order to press for demand for removal various bottlenecks and to bring the region to the path of development, regional parties have emerged in the north-east.

The workings of the governments both at the Centre and the states led by national parties have failed to respond to the specific needs of the people of the region. The central leadership of the national parties could not respond properly to the problems of the region and the state leaders also failed to make them realize this. This region needs special attention to deal with its special problems which are different from other regions of the country. The national parties with their national outlook, therefore, failed to a great extent to satisfy the people. This led to the emergence of regional leaders who formed different political parties with a view to deal with the problems sincerely and to remove them earnestly.

Regional parties have also emerged as the people been dissatisfied or frustrated with the manner how the political stalwarts and the national planners deal with the needs and the demands of the people. Regional sentiments have been gaining ground

and regional political parties have evolved. They are rising with regional ethos and local aspirations. They emerged to be the protector and the promoter of the cause of the people of the region. The governments have failed to ensure proper utilization of the resources available in the region both natural and human for its progress.

REGIONAL POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE NORTH-EAST

If we trace the emergence of regional political parties in the North-East, then we find that some parties came into existence before independence of the country as well. Mention can be made of the Naga National Council which was formed in 1946. However, this party came into existence with the official support of the British Government.

The political parties which have been formed with ethnic sensitivity and local aspirations in the North-East emerged mainly after the independence of the country. The first among them was the All Party Hill Leaders Conference which was formed in the then composite state of Assam. This party was formed to protest against the decision of imposition of Assamese language as the official language of the state. Then the Plains Tribals' Council of Assam emerged in 1970s and played an important role in electoral politics of till the mid of 1980s. This party was formed in order to protect the interests of the tribal people of the plain areas of Assam.

In recent politics, after the signing of the Assam Accord, two important political parties emerged – Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and the United Minorities Front (UMF). AGP is the culmination of the nationalist forces which fought the anti-foreigners movement for six years from 1979 to 1985. The party emphasizes on secularism, democracy and socialism. The party ruled the state for two terms in 1985 and 1996. Still, this party has been a part of the Bharatiya Janata Party led coalition government in the state. UMF was formed in order to protect the interest of minority community. This party has lost its significance soon after in 1990s. A new party emerged namely All India United Democratic Front in 2005 which has now become a national party. Another important regional political party is the Bodoland People's Front. It has come into existence in 2003 with left-wing populism and secularism as its ideology. This party has been ruling the Bodoland Council for the last decade and now, it is a partner in the ruling coalition. Two important political parties which operate in the hill districts of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar are the Autonomous State Demand Committee and the Karbi Anglong North Cachar Autonomous State Demand Committee.

The history of regional political parties in Meghalaya starts with the Hill State People's Democratic Party, the Hill People's Union and Public Demand Implementation Convention. These three parties in 1997, organized themselves in a new platform called United Democratic Party. This party has been the part of the Meghalaya Democratic Alliance which was in power from 2003 to 2008. This party

works for peace and prosperity of the people of Meghalaya. Other regional parties of Meghalaya are Meghalaya Democratic Party and Khun Hynniewtrep National Awakening Movement.

In Nagaland, the first regional political party was the Naga National Council formed in 1946. But it took violent path for establishing an independent Naga state outside India. However new regional parties have emerged in Nagaland like the Naga Nationalist Organisation. This party had formed the government in Nagaland after winning 33 seats out of 46 seats in Assembly elections. This party aimed at peace and advancement for the people of Nagaland. Other regional parties of Nagaland are Democratic Party of Nagaland, United Front of Nagaland, United Democratic Front, Naga National Political Party and Nagaland People's Party. At present, the Nagaland People's Front has been in power for third consecutive term. This party stands for regionalism, democracy and fraternity.

The Mizo National Front is the most important regional political party in Mizoram. Formed in the year 1961, this party took arms to fight for an independent Mizoram for a long time. But after signing a peace accord with the central government in 1986, this party accepted the democratic process. The MNF came to power in Mizoram in the 1987 Assembly elections by winning 24 out of 40 seats. Still, the MNF has been playing an important part in political life of the state. It has been working for safeguarding the identity, customs, culture and overall interests of the Mizo people.

The Manipur People's Party has been playing an important role as a regional political party in Manipur. The MPP was formed in 1968 with the aim of upholding the identity and ethnicity of the Manipuris. This party had been able to form governments for two times in the state. But in 2013, the Election Commission derecognised the party as it has failed to secure any seat in the Manipur Assembly elections in 2012 or the Lok Sabha elections in 2009.

Sikkim is one state in the north-east which has the distinction of being ruled by regional parties for maximum period of time since its inclusion into India in 1975. Sikkim has been ruled by the Sikkim National Congress, the Sikkim Janata Party and now by the Sikkim Democratic Front since 1999. The SDF has been working for social and economic uplift of the people and to bring about communal harmony between all sections of the society.

The most important regional party in Arunachal Pradesh is the People's Party of Arunachal. It was formed in 1977 with the aim of protecting the interests of the people of the state. This party had been in power at different times and at present, when the 43 MLAs of the Indian National Congress joined this party, it has come to power again with its original 5 MLAs.

The Tripura Upajati Juba Samity came into existence in 1967 as a regional political party in Tripura to fight for the cause of the tribal people of the state. It

also participated in the coalition government in the state with an alliance with the Congress (I). However, the strength of the party has declined recently. Other parties which are working on regional basis in the state are Indigenous Nationalist Party of Tripura, Revolutionary Socialist Party, Amra Bangalee, and Lok Jan Sakti Party.

REGIONALISM IN THE NORTH-EAST INDIA AND THE QUESTION OF NATIONAL INTEGRATION

The regional political parties which have emerged in the North-East part of the country are working on democratic principles. They have been formed, no doubt, to enhance the particular interests of the people of their respective states. However, none of them has been encouraging division in true sense of disintegration. These political parties have been formed not to secede from the Indian union, rather to fight for protection of the distinct interests of the people of the states. They have showed their faith to the spirit of the Indian Constitution and have been working as per the provisions of the Constitution.

The regional political parties of the North-East do not believe in disintegration. They want, on the other hand, to remove the isolation or the feeling of neglect which have been persisting among the people of the north-east. These parties have been formed in order to remove the backwardness which the states of this region have been experiencing since the independence of the country. They want to bring about development of the region in various fields.

These regional parties which we discussed above have been the recognized political parties of the Election Commission of India. They work as per the Constitution and are committed to it. They can't be regarded to the forces of disintegration in the nation. They work for the protection and preservation of the socio-cultural, economic and political interests of the people of the region. They have come to prominence when the national political parties have failed to satisfy the demands and aspirations of the people of the north-east.

In a country like India where there is a diversified population, the emergence of regional political parties should be regarded as a natural phenomenon. The regional political parties represent different ethnic, linguistic, religious or regional interests and thus provide a healthy ground for the working of democracy. The multi-party democracy in India has become more vibrant and inspiring with the emergence and active participation of regional parties in the political process and the regional political parties from the North-East are no exceptions from it.

REGIONALISM AND TERRORISM IN NORTH-EAST INDIA

The emergence of regionalism in the north-east should not be identified with that of terrorism. The regional political parties which are working in this part of the country are not encouraging terrorism. They believe in the Constitution and want

change through peaceful means. These political parties are formed to protect and promote the specific interests of different groups living in different parts of the region. They have broad based support and have even won elections both assembly and parliamentary with clear acceptance of the people. They don't need to terrorise the people to gather support. They are directly linked to the people and work among people.

The term, regionalism, refers to the feeling of oneness among the people living in a particular region of a country or of the globe. Territorial integrity may not be the only reason for the emergence of regional feeling. Commonness in matters of race, culture, religion, language, etc. may also give rise to regionalism. This feeling of oneness becomes intense when the people realize same sense of underdevelopment, deprivation, identity crisis, threat to one's own culture, language, etc.

Regionalism is not terrorism. The term, terrorism, has different meaning. Terrorism can be defined as a strategy of a group of people to achieve certain goals by using violence and ruthlessness for inducing fear among people for getting publicity and recognition. Terrorism is against peace and tranquility in the society as it intimidates people by using various terror means.

The regional parties have come to power in different states of the north-east on different occasions by following constitutional means. They have become constituent parts of coalition governments led by national parties both in the states and at the centre. They do not believe in capturing power by forceful or violent means. They are integral parts of the democratic process of the country. They do not pose a threat to integration of the nation.

The organizations which are considered to be terrorist organizations are different from that of the regional political parties. They do not find identity with that of the political parties. They use various means of terror, such as, extortions, kidnapping, killings, bomb blasting and threatening to get their objectives achieved. They have no faith in the Constitution and peaceful methods of change. On many occasions, the regional parties of the north-east had to face the brunt of ire of the terrorist groups. These groups can not be regarded as regional political parties. Mostly they remain underground. They do not aim at capturing power by following constitutional means. They believe in violence and want to establish a separate state within India or secession from the country by adopting violent and terrorist means. They are destructive while the regional parties believe in constructive development and progress of the society.

Among the terrorist groups which are operating in the North-East, the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN) of Nagaland is regarded as the most influential till date. In Assam, we have three major insurgent groups, namely, ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam formed in 1979 with the aim of an independent Assam),

NDFB (National Democratic Front of Bodoland formed in 1986 aiming at a sovereign Bodoland), and KLNLF (Karbi Longri North- Cachar Hills Liberation Front formed in 2004 for greater autonomy to Karbi-Anlong and North-Cachar Hills area).

The insurgent groups which are active in other states of the North-East are in Manipur, UNLF (United National Liberation Front); PLA (People's Liberation Army); PREPAK (People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak); in Tripura, NLF (National Liberation Front of Tripura); TLF (Tripura Liberation Front) and All Tripura Tigers Force; in Meghalaya, ANVC (Achik National Volunteer Council); HNLC (Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council); and GNLA (Garo National Liberation Army); in Mizoram, HPC(D) (Hmar People's Convention-Democratic) and BNLF (Bru National Liberation Front). They are carrying out terrorist activities threatening life and property of the people.

CONCLUSION

India has seen the emergence of regionalism since the time of independence. Different parts of the country have different reasons for the growth of regional feeling and sentiments. In the north-east India, protection of identity of different tribal groups, backwardness of the region in comparison to other regions, the feeling of negligence from that of the central government and the failure of the national parties to deal properly with the aspirations of the people of the region, have been the main causes of growth of regionalism.

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