

Dangerous Distraction

At the time of writing Bihar was burning in response to attacks on north Indians by Raj Thackrey's parochial outfit Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) in Mumbai. Earlier Raj Thackrey's alleged denigration of *Chhath Puja*, observed by millions in Bihar, created a lot of furore and a backlash as well. This time candidates appearing for railway recruitment examination from Bihar faced the flak. In a situation of jobless growth limited job opportunities in the Indian Railways have been a bone of contention for many aspirants across the country. Given the depth of job crisis the union railway ministry never really made things transparent fuelling allegations and counter-allegations. Incidentally the union ministry of Indian Railways has been a monopoly of Bihar-based politicians for quite some time. Today it is Lalu Prasad Yadav. Yesterday it was Nitish Kumar, the present chief minister of Bihar. And the allegation of favouritism by the authorities in favour of a particular state led to parochial outbursts elsewhere too in the yester years. So Nitish Kumar had to face the swan song from Assam on the same issue—recruitment in the Railways. Also, it was Mr Kumar who was instrumental in downsizing the Railway establishment by creating a number of zonal fiefdoms. MNS being an offshoot of Shiv Sena which was originally floated to oust South Indians from job market, is targeting north Indians, to have a place in Maharashtra's politics. Regionalism is the easiest way to mobilise and mislead the marginalised. The Mumbai government run by Congress and its ally Nationalist Congress Party, is reluctant, if not hapless, mouthing secular bromides about tolerance and co-existence.

Not a single state is free from regional virus. Those who fail to have graduation in national (or what they call mainstream) parties, immediately launch their state level platform to reach the heaven—legislature. No mainstream (or national) party is serious about the rise of regional political outfits. As coalition culture is gaining popularity, they can always co-opt them or themselves get co-opted within some regional grouping. This has been going on for some decades.

As economic crisis is worsening with every passing day, more and more local aspirants with middle class background resort to sub-nationalism bordering on naked provincialism. Indian National Congress, better known as Sonia Congress these days, has no national agenda to mobilise masses on broader issues while doing nothing to combat regionalism, politically and ideologically. Their sole objective is to somehow survive at the centre and try to cultivate vote bank by way of doling out relief at critical moments. And the Bharatiya Janata Party—the main opposition—is again a 'national' party without a national agenda that matters for all. It has long been trying to disunite the people of India on religious lines while uniting all reactionary forces that subscribe to its ideology of Hindu domination. The collapse of American banks and its impact on Indian economy does not figure in their discussion because they are not bothered about the plight of the people. Their Ayodhya agitation for Ram temple has been kept in abeyance because they have discovered a more lucrative business site in Sethu Samudram—Ram Sethu—in the south. Also, they feel threatened from Christianity. So poor tribal converts are being systematically attacked in backward regions of Orissa and Karnataka.

Strangely, the marxist left is equally impotent in combating regionalism. They too lack ideas to attract people on more pressing national issues that affect all irrespective of their religious belief and geographical identity. They no longer agitate for the peasants; they do not espouse the case of unorganised sector workers. They do not see danger in multi-national capital. Also, they are not averse to the idea of teaming up with right-wing regional outfits if it pays dividends in vote market. So Muslim League, Dravidian parties, casteist outfits—all are their allies in their holy war to storm Indian parliament.

In the absence of popular mass mobilising for economic and social justice, obscurantist ideologies are bound to crop up. It is a tragedy that only individuals and progressives having no party affiliation, are protesting against Raj Thackrey's parochial march against migrant labour from Bihar and other states.

Uneven economic development has created uneven job opportunities for different regions. East migrates to West, domestically and globally in search of job. Then countryside migrates to town for livelihood at a time when village economy is collapsing under the juggernaut of reforms and globalisation. Then contradictions are sharpening at every level. And the marxist left, not to speak of the right and centre-right, has no courage to tell the hard truth about the ditch the country is in and how to get people out. *27-10-2008*