

NATIONALISM, SUB-NATIONALISM AND REGIONAL CHAUVINISM

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Since the last many decades, especially marked since the widespread people's movements immediately after 1947 for the linguistic reorganization of States, regional politics and political parties have come to stay in the political landscape of this country. There is nothing surprising or illogical in this development because the country is of sub-continental dimensions with tremendous plurality both in terms of languages and cultural, political histories. The Constitution of India, though formally envisaging a federal system of governance, in practice underscored a unitary system with an imbalanced power sharing between the Centre and States. Centre-State financial relations are not the least irritant in Centre-State relations in the country. Arbitrariness in the political dispensation by the Centre was exemplified in the dismissal of the first elected State government of Kerala and this was repeated many times in the political history of the country.

There was a strong current, dormant and active, prevalent even before 1947 which demanded clear cut political rights for the different linguistic formations. In the Punjab this was articulated in the form of the demand for Sikhistan and in the Tamil land this came up in the form of the demand for Dravidasthan. Soviet Indologists like Dyakov and the Communist Party of India and its mentor the Communist Party of Britain went even a step further and raised the demand for as many constituent assemblies as there are languages which could decide whether any linguistic/national formation should join India or Pakistan or create new federations or even form independent, sovereign countries by themselves. This was an essentially knee jerk reaction to the Pakistan Resolution of the Muslim League in 1942 which took the form of the readymade formulations of Stalin being mechanically imposed on the Indian reality. These demands, except the demand for Pakistan, fizzled out due to their innate weaknesses and the lack of understanding of the concrete conditions existing in the country. But the root causes remained in one form or another.

The linguistic reorganization of States after a hugely popular movement led mainly by regional/linguistic forces subdued the intensity of separatist sentiments, but they could only be subdued and not eliminated. These sentiments broke out in violent forms in the whole of the Northeast, the Punjab, and Kashmir while they remain as an undercurrent in Tamil Nadu. In this context, it is important to note that Tamil Nadu became one of the bigger States where regional politics got deeply entrenched at an early stage and this was mainly facilitated by the rash attempts to impose Hindi by the central government in the 1960s. In other parts of the country the sub-national aspirations found expression in the formation of regional political outfits championing regional rights and formation of newer, smaller States. This latter stream can be said to be exclusively based on the gross inequalities and disparities existing within defined linguistic formations. Thus one can see that by the 1960s and 1970s two different streams of regional aspirations had come to take root in the body politic of the

country. One was the unambi-guous demand for the right to secession illustrated by Punjab, the entire Northeast and Kashmir; the other stream was produced by inequalities and disparities in regions. It resulted in demands for more effective federalism and demands for creating new States like Telengana, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Gorkha-land, Bodoland, Uttaranchal and so on. Subsequently, many of these demands were conceded by the Centre and those which are not yet conceded may, in all probability, be conceded in the coming days.

Another trend also became visible. This was the breakup of the leading all India political party-the Indian National Congress-in several States into region-based political groups. In fact, this trend also infected other all-India parties, and it is this trend that heralded the era of coalitions which first came up in the States and subsequently reached the Centre itself. Now coalition politics representing various regional interests has become an inalienable part of power politics at the central and State levels throughout the country. And it is not a static phenomenon. Because of genuine grievances rooted in structural factors which have become built-in over the past several decades facing the concerned peoples this phenomenon is a growing one and has assumed varying ideological contents ranging from outright reactionary/fascist tendencies to moderately progressive and forward looking ones. The spectrum is really vast and diverse.

It is in this background that one has to look at what happened in Maharashtra during the last couple of months where a newly formed parochial outfit held the whole State to ransom. Though formally speaking this outfit, Maharashtra Navanirman Sena (MNS), is a new one, its ideological orientation has been a well-established one on the soil of Maharashtra. It is the direct descendent of Shiva Sena, a far-rightist Maratha chauvinist party, which owes its origin and strength to pointing at and attacking the South Indians as the "other". The only difference between what is happening now and what happened way back during the formative period of Shiva Sena is that instead of targeting South Indians, now the target group is North Indians whose migration to Maharashtra, especially the metro Mumbai, has become phenomenal during the last few years.

The reasons behind such migration are not far to seek. Entire Bihar, eastern Uttar Pradesh and huge States like Orissa, though rich in resources, are chronically backward in an all-round manner. Droughts and floods are routine in these areas and the peasantry, for the last many decades, is in the vicious grip of near starvation levels of living, facing social oppression and landlordism. When a near-starving peasant or agricultural worker looks at far-off Mumbai from a remote corner of Bihar it is like a Malayalee unemployed youth looking at the oil rich countries in the Gulf. The dynamics of such migrations from the impoverished villages to cash rich metros is nothing but the dynamics of lopsided growth and the spiraling of inequalities on a vast scale. Of course, the industrialists and construction sector in States like Maharashtra stand to gain enormously because the migrants are cheap. In fact, it will not be an exaggeration at all to state that the prosperity of Mumbai owes a lot to the cheap labor of migrants. Then, why has the problem come in this fashion now?

To answer this pertinent question one must go to the development model itself. The current development model based on what is called the neo-liberal economic regime was formally endorsed by the Narasimha Rao government in

Delhi way back in the early 1990s in which the present finance cum prime minister was the finance minister and economic policy strategist. The hallmark of such a regime is the opening up of the whole economy to foreign capital or, in other words, the integration of the Indian economy with global capital. The model which was unfolded in 1990 was essentially one which emphasized on huge capital investments without any corresponding increase in employment and incomes. Reckless exploitation of natural resources and high capital intensity production ventures are the typical characteristics of such a growth model. For the global capital it is a question of super profits because of the incredible cheapness of strategic resources, land, and labor with full protection to the repatriation of profits and enormous tax concessions. Special Economic Zones are telling illustrations of this model of growth. Investments are high but employment growth is negligible. This model of development creates great pressures on the employment market and this is what people are witnessing in the big industrial metros of the country. Mumbai is a classic illustration. Poor Maharashtrians are consistently being pushed out of the labor market by the preponderance of non-Maharashtrian labor which comes cheaper for the capitalists. When huge public sector employers like the Indian Railways, which has been the fiefdom of parochial minded Bihari politicians for quite some time, started discriminating against Maharashtrians in favor of Biharis the fuse was blown.

The grievance of the unemployed Maharashtrians is real and it is because of this reality that chauvinists like Raj Thackeray were able to fan parochial flames not only in Mumbai but in the whole State. This is a golden way for people like him to come to power even in an extra-constitutional manner and no political party-whether it is the Congress or the Left parties, not to speak of the Rightists-is able to effectively oppose or expose such destructive parochialism that is going on under the garb of Marathi nationalism and rights. The field is clear for such elements because there is no cogent alternative in front of the people. Linguistic nationalism or sub-nationalism has degenerated to such low levels mainly because the real content of the national question has been obliterated for long periods of time in modern India.

For truth it was a strategic policy of the government of newly independent India not even to allow the linguistic reorganization of States. Nehru and Sardar Patel were avowed exponents of large multi-lingual States because they thought that the creation of linguistic States was bound to generate fissiparous tendencies which would ultimately lead to the weakening of Delhi and the strengthening of separatism. This was a blatant violation of the pre-independence solemn promises of the Congress party which had guaranteed federalism in the true spirit of the term, and as a first step had organized the party on a regional/linguistic basis. Only when the protests clearly threatened to become an unstoppable avalanche was Delhi forced to demarcate the boundaries of States on a linguistic basis. Because it was an unwilling act many irritants remained. Not only many irritants remained between the newly formed States in terms of the sharing of resources like river waters and ambiguously defined territorial rights, but the major Adivasi communities like the Santhals, Mundas, and Gonds, who were inhabiting contiguous areas were arbitrarily cut up into sometimes as many as

four to five linguistic States. This was a clear conspiracy to weaken and decimate the integrated Adivasi cultures and their ethnic identities.

What people are witnessing in places like Maharashtra is a highly distorted form of national/regional sentiments within the country. The direct impact of the intensification of the neo-liberal economic regime will be to make this distortion even more gruesome. Issues are real but the lack of understanding of the genuine structural reasons, which are inextricably linked to rising inequalities and lopsidedness, can lead only to the so-called solutions becoming more and more vicious and anti-people. Maharashtra is a clear pointer to the shape of things to emerge on a wider scale in the country. At the same time, it states forcefully that regional/sub-national/national identities within the country cannot be simply wished away because the objective developments as well as the cultural pluralism are mutually reinforcing in the present context.

There is a tendency to reduce such developments as what happened in Maharashtra to short-sighted parochialism driven by power hungry, unscrupulous politicians. This may be so on a superficial level. But the problem is much deeper and more complex and by the same index solutions can also not be simplistic. The problem in its totality encompasses not just chauvinism or parochialism, which are actually only truncated manifestations, but a whole range of issues including genuine federalism, protection and promotion of pluralism, development of Adivasi identities and autonomy on their own terms and the regressive characteristics of the economic model that is being imposed from above. To tackle the problem along these lines needs political will more than anything else, and in the absence of such a political will problems can only be compounded. □□□