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# Regionalism: It's Nature

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## Abstract

Regionalism in the ordinary usage refers to particularism or regional patriotism. The Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences describes it as a manifestation of federalism and an intermediate stage between administrative decentralization and federalism. It involves such diverse problems of modern political and cultural life as those of minorities, administrative decentralization, local self-government and autonomy, the cult of homeland and earth and local patriotism. It is not immediately related to particularism and opponents make the charge that it leads to separatism. In a very general way regionalism may be defined as a counter movement to any exaggeration or oppressive form of centralization. It must not however, be considered solely from the view of political control as governmental administration. Regionalist problems arise only where there is a combination of two or more such factors or geographical isolation, independent historical traditions, racial, ethnic or religious peculiarities and local economic or class interests.

Regionalism is derived from the word region. A region is homogeneous area with physical and cultural characteristics distinct from those of neighbouring area, as part of a national domain. A region is sufficiently unified to have a consciousness of its customs and ideals and thus possesses a sense of identity distinct from the rest of the country. The term "regionalism" properly represents the regional idea in action as an ideology or as a social movement or as the theoretical basis for the regional planning, it is also applied to the scientific task of delimiting and analyzing regions as entities lacking formal boundaries."<sup>1</sup>

Regionalism can be conceptualized as a multi-dimensional composite phenomena as well as a built-in process within nationalism. Regionalism generally speaking is regarded as a divisive trend detrimental to national unity.<sup>2</sup> Regionalism is an ideology. Regional consciousness is based on linguistic, religious, ethnic and cultural identity of the people residing in a specific geographical area. The ideology of regionalism is manufactured by the elite belonging to these groups. In a culturally heterogeneous society the factors like language and religion which demarcate the differences between the people are always existent though mostly in a dormant form ... Regional movement is initially based on some vague ideas. Later on in the course of the movement, certain more or less defined set of arguments or justification are developed by the key personalities of the region.<sup>3</sup>

Regionalism is in fact a conflict between national elites and regional elites. A regional movement which is the manifestation of regional ideology is an attempt by regional elites to acquire larger support so that they could increase their competitive strength vis-a-vis the national elites.<sup>4</sup>

Nationalism and regionalism are often termed as antonyms. Whereas the former represents forces of cohesion and tries to assimilate the minorities, the latter strives to keep the identity of such groups alive. The maintenance and preservation of such separate and independent identities

become more desirable and crucial when a particular minority is linguistic or religious. Any religious minority is bound to become the victim of a fear psychosis that if merged completely into the national or cultural mainstream, it might have to pay a heavy price and consequently lose *raison de etre* of its distinctive identity. Such kind of minority fear psychosis is more relevant in a society like India where in spite of the existence of a number of cultures and sub-cultures, the Hindus represent the dominant religious majority. Any attempt to assimilate the minority in such a set-up is sure to give rise to certain misgivings. Thus, regional consciousness is generated by the euphoria created by the establishment of nation state.<sup>5</sup>

Regionalism is a nebulous concept. It has both a positive and a negative dimension. Speaking in positive terms, it embodies a quest for self-fulfillment on the part of the people of an area. It is worthwhile to emphasize that the positive thrust of regionalism has more often than not, been ignored by political analysis of the Indian situation. Every regional movement thus becomes suspect and is taken as an earnest of the balkanization of the country.<sup>6</sup>

It is obviously an advantage that constituent units of a federation should have a minimum measure of internal cohesion. Likewise, a regional consciousness, not merely in the sense of a negative awareness of absence of repression or exploitation but also in the sense of scope for positive expression of the collective personality of a people inhabiting a state or region may be conducive to the contentment and well-being of the community. Common language may not only promote the growth of such regional consciousness but also make for administrative convenience. Indeed, in a democracy, the people can legitimately claim and the government have a duty to ensure that the administration is conducted in a language which the people can understand.<sup>7</sup>

Negatively speaking, regionalism reflects a psyche of relative deprivation on the part of a people of an area not always viable in terms of rational economic analysis, let alone prone to rationalization. More often than not, it is also believed, whether correctly or not, that deprivation is deliberately inflicted by the powers that be and this leads to acuteness of feeling on the part of those who carry the psyche of deprivation. The belief is easily cultivated in a milieu characterized by politics of scarcity as in India. The redeeming feature, however, is that to the extent the psyche of deprivation is the consequence of specific grievance, its growth could be halted and even the process reversed if the grievances are remedied. It is here that the politico-bureaucratic elite have to be up and doing. If they earnestly work and succeed, the quest for regional identities may ultimately mean areas of relative autonomy and partial dependence and not result in demands of secession.<sup>8</sup>

A distinction has to be made between regionalism and sub-regionalism. Regionalism is a kind of political counter movement aiming to achieve greater autonomy for the region through greater degree of self-government within the federal structure of a nation. Regionalism may also manifest in the form of a movement for special privileges for the 'sons of the soil' as against the 'outsiders' a phenomenon resulting from native-migrant conflict.

Though sub-regionalism shows similar signs, there are some differences. It is a movement by sub-regional elites for the assertion of sub-regional identity based on common history and grievances emanating from an underdeveloped economy of that sub-region. The main considerations behind the sub-regional movement however, are economic development and an anxiety for a proper share in political power. It cuts across the linguistic loyalties and other cultural similarities, and emphasizes the finer and subtle differences in the historical background and cultural patterns. It stresses on an independent identity transcending the linguistic unity with the other groups of the region.<sup>9</sup>

But whatever the nature of the sub-regional movement, it is usually triggered off intentionally by the sub-regional elites. The movement, especially its violent eruption is meant for exhibiting strength by sub-regional leaders to the regional leaders and strengthens their claims to the share of power.<sup>10</sup>

Region represents more of an analytic category than geographical entity. The region is a socio-cultural concept. Man is born with a territorial loyalty. He imbibes loyalty from the soil of his birth. Several variables when remain in operation for a long period of time, in a certain territory form the concept of regionalism, such as geography, topography, religion, language, customs and mores, political and economic stages of development, way of living and commonly shared historical experiences etc. Regionalism to be sure needs all these ingredients but the concept is much more inclusive and even when is said and done, it remains at least partially elusive. The essential fact is that a region is characterized more than anything else, by a widely shared sentiment of 'togetherness' in the people, internationalized from a wide variety of sources, which might even include common prosperity, comrades development in a common struggle.<sup>11</sup>

Regionalism as phenomena emerges out of the cumulation of variations pertaining to the socio-cultural, economic and political spheres. The extent to which regionalism has the potentiality of determining the cleavages and unity within a nation in terms of the balance between the centripetal and centrifugal forces emanating from it, depends on the nature and intensity of these variations. Two sets of components, subjective and objective, determine the nature of regionalism. The subjective components are ways of living, customs and traditions, art forms, language and literature, social heritage, beliefs, attitudes and values as related to a group of the people termed as a regional group. The objective component includes the territorial region and the accompanied man environment complex within which the regional group lives together with others, these components are the determinants of regionalism.<sup>12</sup>

From the theoretical point of view, regionalism has often been characterized both as a doctrine as well as a tendency implying many things, for example;

- a) Decentralization of administration on a regional basis within a nation where there is excessive centralisation and concentration of administrative and political power;
- b) A socio-cultural counter-movement against the imposing of a monolithic national unity by imposing a particular political ideology, language as cultural pattern to foster national integration;
- c) A political counter-movement aiming to achieve greater autonomy of subcultural regions through greater degree of self-government within the federal structure of a nation;
- d) A tendency for separatism to fulfill the political aspirations of a regional group living in a specified sub-cultural region.

The objectives of regionalism in this instance are mainly four: -

- 1) Revival of regional cultures and rebuilding of such sub-cultural regions having distinctive identity within a nation;
- 2) Administrative and political devolution;
- 3) Devising principles to solve centre-state confrontations and confrontations between two or more sub-cultural regions;
- 4) To maintain economic and political equilibrium between the centre and the states; nation and sub-cultural regions.

It can be inferred from these objectives that regionalism involves many kinds of problems, socio-cultural, economic and political etc.<sup>13</sup>

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