

Unveiling The Complexities: Regionalism And Secessionism In India - Crafting A Theoretical Framework

* Dr. Tirthankar Chakraborty

Assistant Professor, Department Political Science, Surya Sen
Mahavidyalaya, Siliguri, West Bengal, India, 734004. Email. Id.
tirthankarko@gmail.com

Abstract

It has been observed that in studying social and protest movements; enquiry is almost involuntary pursued on a line of rhetoric highlighting local and regional identities. Presumably, the act is induced more by pragmatism and by the legitimacy of a political will than by any serious resolve to address the theoretical disputes occurring in this enterprise. It had started off with smaller projects such as how the freedom/resistance movement had been conceived by the local icons and how soon than others. This line of argumentation finally matured into a quarrel to morally legitimise little nationality as a competitive proposition to nation, nationalism and statehood. The present century, however, witness to some pro-autonomy phenomenon in all along the globe. Hence, many theories seek to explain separatist or regional attitude in general and situation specific in particular. These theories are wide ranging and many times overlapping with each other. My purpose here is to highlight the separatist or regional movements either ideographically or within the theoretical rubric of nomothetic or nativistic considerations. Significantly the greatest levels of regional mobilization have occurred precisely during the period of intense state-building, urbanization and modernization. Far from being a post-materialist revival of folklore in the name of 'small is beautiful' ¹ therefore seems to be a more important phenomenon in this context.

Key Words: Regionalism, Protest Movement, Nationalism, Communitarianism.

1. Introduction:

A serious theoretical issue has encumbered research in the social science in general; it can be posed as a question: How

could a congruent isomorphic relation is to be established between the different approaches for the appropriation of 'meaning' from a social phenomenon? In fact, the problem is embedded in the volatility of the theoretical comprehension of the 'structure' of social science revolution. Hence, it is often observed that the argument which is engaged to operate empiricism is largely based on perception and analogy. Being devoid of inference-function the argument may help, at the best, to contrast faulty paradigms, and at the worst, it ends in the epigraphy of narrativity.

On the contrary, rejection of historicism by Popper either on the grounds of methodological inadequacy of essentialism, or for reason of definitional indeterminacy in nominalism may be taken for some serious consideration to configure the issue. But, interestingly, the argumentations for the rejection of this methodological censure is also laid in the bigottedly held faith that scientific investigation is not paradigmatic and further take admission in the social science methodological debate. Thus, the role of theory is perceived to be inalienable from analysis to understand phenomenon and express it, whatever be its weakness, logical or ontological, its importance admitted in contemporary thinking. In this context one may indeed look upon the issue in terms of Weberian tradition, which may primarily interest in a reconstruction of social reality in a historical perspective and works *ex post facto* with different typologies and ideal types. After the emergence of inter – disciplinary studies, political science takes little comfort, either in new tendencies or in the natural science. Abounding Baconian optimism, many social scientist have belatedly come to think similarly that theoretical predictions are little more than informed guess – work and the 'heterogeneity' has been greatly nourished by exchange with neighbouring disciplines through the building of bridge between specialization fields of the various social sciences. This process of cross – fertilization is achieved by hybridization.² The evolution of events can be reconstructed only *ex post facto* and the task of theory is to keep open various options.

Survey of literature on regional movements should begin with the idea that there might be reasons behind such movements – the prominent of them are regional imbalances, sense of deprivation and feeling of ethnic assertiveness against the pre – dominant position of other groups. In the words of Rajeev Bhargava, the problem can be elucidated in the context of majority – minority syndrome. Hence, there are two

alternative ways to explaining the notion, one is from within the framework of communitarianism and nationalism and the other from the vintage point of a certain conception of democracy. The most familiar democratic notion of 'majority – minority' rests on the role of preference aggregation.³

2. Theoretical Framework:

Hence, there are a number of theoretical frameworks that claim to explain the structural conditions and motivational forces that give rise to Regional movements. The most important of these are: ⁴

- (1) Theory of Relative Deprivation;
- (2) Theory of Strain, and
- (3) Theory of Revitalisation.

The theory of relative deprivation centres around two different parameters – social mobility and social conflict. The basic thrust of the theory is that where a group of people begin to feel deprived of perceived legitimate share compared to the rest they resort to protest. Scholar like, Aberle,⁵ considered relative deprivation as a negative discrepancy between legitimate expectations and actually, treated it as the bedrock for the study of different political assertions. Thus, according to Gurr,⁶ relative deprivation as a gap between expectations and perceived capabilities involving three general sets of values - economic conditions, political power and social justice. To him, this gap originates three levels, like when expectations remain stable but capabilities decline which he called decremented deprivation, secondly, expectations rise but capabilities decline it is marked as a progressive deprivation; and lastly, expectations rise but capabilities remain stable which he understood as aspirational deprivation. Nevertheless, for him, deprivation is primarily psychological; therefore he does not deal with the socio-economic and political structure which is the actual source of deprivation.

However, the relative deprivation theory is limited on that the structural conditions of relative deprivation provide only the necessary conditions. Sufficient conditions are provided by perceptions of a situation and by the estimates of capabilities by the leaders that they can do something to remedy the situation.⁶ The theory ignores the importance of consciousness and the ideological aspects of the participants.⁷ Similarly, the theory assumes movements as temporary aberration rather than as 'ongoing process of change'.⁸

In contrast to the theory of relative deprivation, the Strain Theory propounded by Neil Smelser ⁹ treats strain as the underlying factor leading to mobilization and collective behaviour. He considered, from the structural – functional framework, strain as the important of relations among parts of a system leading to the malfunctioning of the system and thus finds deprivation under strain. To him, structural strain occurs at different levels of norms, values, mobilization and situation. Thus, strain provided the structural condition for dissent and the crystallization of a generalized belief marks the attempts of persons under strain to assess their situation as well as to explain the situation by creating or assembling a generalized belief. When strain and generalized belief are accompanied by participating factors a movement is triggered off.

On the other hand, the theory of Revitalisation was popularised by Wallace.¹⁰ According to the theory, people seeking cultural revitalization usually first of all realize the culture as a whole and move gradually towards a movement for cultural change. Wallace argues that protests develop out of a deliberate, organized and conscious effort on the part of members of a society to contrast a more satisfying culture for themselves.¹¹ He observes the dynamics of protest movements for cultural revitalization in four phases: period of cultural stability, period of increased individual stress, period of cultural distortion and consequent disillusionment, and period of revitalization.

Paradoxically, in all these theories, what is common is the prime emphasis on the participants of protest movements. The assumption is that if the people feel deprived of, or are under strain, or feel the necessity for the cultural revitalization, assertions emanate, as if other factors and conditions will automatically follow. To accept this analytical framework in its totality is to oversimplify the reality. May be that there exists the objective conditions for protests, namely, deprivation, strain and / or the urge for revitalization but mere presence of these necessary conditions will not lead to protest assertions unless driven by a driving force – leadership, ideology and organization. Paradoxically, the assumptions in all these theoretical frameworks have not been properly covered in any of this framework because the subjective factors did not attached with these frameworks.¹²

Similarly, there are also some flawed understanding to the origin of protest assertions in general as if the assertions are made to originate and thus, artificially cultivated for narrow

sectional interests under the grab of universal community interests.¹³ This mode of understanding is flawed because unless objectives social, economic and political conditions pose threat to consciousness and identity of a section of the community leading to a perception of deprivation in social, economic or political spheres of life, passive common masses cannot be mobilised for protest.¹⁴ Hence, this movements cannot be made to originate; they originate if the social, economic and political parameters of the society demands. Thus, whatever be the theoretical position; proper care should be taken to locate the issue in the context of ethnographical canvas, non – grammatical cultural variations, economic demands and political dynamics against the over all nature of political process at the contextual level.

3. Regionalism and Nationalist Discourse:

Regionalism having plentiful connotations, some writers refer it in most of the cases coincided with nationalism and ethnicity. In view of geo – political and historical nature, regionalism is special kind of obligation to a specific geographical area in which the inhabitants of that area posses a special type of identity. Iqbal Narain in his book, 'Regionalism: A Conceptual Analysis in the Indian Context' stated that regionalism is an ambiguous concept. It has two different inferences, one is negative and other is positive. In negative sense, regionalism is a concept developed among the inhabitants who considered themselves as the deprived sections of the country in relation to the whole country. On the contrary, in its positive sense, regionalism implies an idea of searching the self identity of the people of that particular area. Thus, regionalism may be understood with some degree of nationalism and ethnicity at the centre to the problem and issues, sometimes, contradictory in nature. Therefore, scholars must develop an integrated theoretical approach to inspect the phenomenon.

Generally speaking, nationalism is both an 'ideology' and 'a form of behaviour'. The political aspect of nationalism is commonly seen in the demand for national self – determination or home – rule.¹⁵ The study of human nature gives the idea why ethnicity and ethnocentrism have been so pervasive and powerful in human history. In this connection, the study by the historian Miroscav Hroch seems to be a great relevance since he has shown how the nationalist movements in Europe in the 19th century could drew support from different social groups. This issue may be seen from two different angels, the 'bottom up' and 'top down' views. While

in the former, the nationalist and the ethnic movements provides the necessary resources, in the later their capabilities is determined by the entire historical, social, political and economic environment.¹⁶

According to Kohn, nationalist's especially ethnic nationalists in many cases engage in pressure group politics. Ethnic groups are essentially 'exclusive' or 'ascriptive' in their nature. It connotes that membership in such groups is confined to those who share certain in – born attributes. Therefore, Nations are more inclusive and culturally or politically defined. Further, the retrospectively constructed official nationalisms of India and Pakistan, writes historian Ayesha Jalal, 'have sought to ignore, if not altogether delegitimate, the multiple alternative strands of popular nationalism and communitarianism that lost out in the final battle for state power'.¹⁷ Indeed, the fundamental myths of India and Pakistan deliberately obscure the fact that these two national projects developed in explicit opposition to alternative regional imaginings.

In similar vein, the fate of 'punjabiyat' or Punjab regional identity under the pressures of the politics of the Partition of 1947 illustrates the tension. Western Punjab today is the core of Pakistan, providing 'a sharp counterpoint to any conception of Punjabi identity founded on regionalism'.¹⁸ Hence, in order to explain the difference in attitudes among states towards separatism, Wayne Bert points to a distinction made by Richard Rosecrance between traditional states 'anchored in the 19th century and focused on territory, sovereignty, material production, nationalist rhetoric and national defence' and virtual states that are 'based on mobile capital, labour and information, or a 'negotiating entity' that depends as much on economic access abroad as on economic control at home'.

Further, a classification that might deal better with the difference is perhaps Robert Cooper's categories: 'postmodern' states that perceive no security threats in the traditional sense, traditional 'modern' states that 'behave as states always have, following Machiavellian principles and *raison d'état*', and the failed states in the 'premodern' zone. None of these taxonomies actually are satisfactory. In hitherto the need for such distinctions suggests that a convincing rationalization must take the national identities of states seriously and that 'they cannot be stipulated deductively. They must be reviewed empirically in concrete historical settings'.¹⁹

4. Regionalism in Indian Context:

Students of regionalism in India cannot entirely exclude from their consideration of the element of historical legacy. It is important to note that the Puranas are considered as the important source of ancient Indian history. In the Puranas, it is stated that there were different Janapadas which were territorially divided into several large regions. These Janapadas were composed of different race, language, culture and heritage. Historically, it is also found that there were constant struggle and battles among this Janapadas for supremacy. As a result, a large number of Janapadas gradually became 16 Mahajanapadas, having different race, language, culture and heritage.

Naturally, the diversity in race, language, culture was common in Indian society from the very beginning. But after the penetration of Raj, the whole scenario was changed. The era was marked by the colonial exploitation and plundering of the national wealth for the sake of economic development in their own interest. Dadabhai Naoroji's 'Un – British Rule in India' and R.C Dutt's 'Economic History of Bengal' exposed the economic character of British Rule in India. So, it may easily be said that the post – colonial state of regionalism is basically a colonial legacy because the process of regional disparities was consciously manipulated by the Raj to divide the country inherently from within.²⁰

After independence, the regional sentiments as it was created by Raj raised its ugly heads over the secular forces of the Indian nation. First of this kind of movement was the demand for the reorganization of the Indian states on linguistic basis. In chorus, the separatist attitude erupted in India in those states which had long standing grievances related to unbalanced growth. At present, India is pregnant with various separatist upsurges like in Assam, AASU, AGP, ULFA, in West Bengal, GNLf, GJMM, KPP, GCBM, the NSCN in Nagaland, RMNF in Mizoram etc, all of them are demanding either self –rule or special privileges for their development.²¹

Nevertheless, the one primary cause of these types of movements as identified by the scholars is that even after the independence, the introduction of the republican attitude of Indian constitution and establishment of an egalitarian society could not succeed due to the actual unequal economic structure of Indian society. Scholars like Narang, V.P Gupta and others point out that after the independence the Indian polity is marked by her increasing centralization and intervention of

the central governments which create cultural/ethnic minorities in particular apprehensive. Paradoxically, regional movements in post – independence India may be characterized as a response to the imposition of alien process of nation – building in the frame work of a single political community.

To Prof. Oommen there are some crucial features of alienation in India. These are as - (a) the units of alienation are collective and not individuals, (b) alienation is mainly from the state and polity and not from economy and society, (c) the chief manifestation of alienation is to be located in the emergence of numerous collective actions challenging the legitimate and authority of the state and polity, (d) the main sources of alienation can be traced to cultural manifeststream and the Indian state itself and (e) the fact is that Indian nation – state is constituted by multitude of Societies and Cultures moulds the very nature and content of alienation.²²

However, regional movements in India as is observed by Atul Kohli, have followed an inverse ‘U’ curve. Heightened mobilization of group identities are followed by negotiations, and eventually such movements decline ‘as exhaustion sets in, some leaders are repressed, others are co- opted, and a modicum of genuine power sharing and mutual accommodation between the movement and the central state authorities is reached’. Whether particular regional movements have gone through this inverse ‘U’ curve has been a function of the level of institutionalization of the authority of the state, and whether leaders have been secure enough to seek accommodation and compromise. To him, the different trajectories of the Tamil, Sikh, and Kashmiri movements – the first being accommodated, and the latter two turning into violent confrontations between the state and militant regionalists – is the result of changes in the level of institutionalization of the Indian state, and the sense of security of leaders at the helm.²³

5. Conclusion:

In conclusion, one may indeed look upon a space for argumentation that is likely to provide a sense of collective validity in a direction and persuasion about the validity of not overstretching the notions of theoretical considerations of regional or separatist realm. Ominously, survey on Indian politics, the terms region and regional are sometimes used quite loosely. It is important to find a more precise way of defining terms like ‘region’ and ‘regional’. Therefore, it may be

useful to distinguish regional spaces and spaces of regionalism. A good example of a regional space may be the category northeast India, which points to little more than directional location.

Following Peter Sahlins insight, it can be said that this official naming has not stuck as vernacular practice. Therefore, northeast India is a regional space, but not a space of regionalism. When state identifications do not 'stick', insurgent spaces of regionalism can thrive in civil society. This has been clear in northeast India. For the state is not the only actor in the territorialisation of political life. Regional projects often originate in society and in order to 'stick', state identification has to resonate in society.²⁴ But the states have an interest in stabilizing territorial identifications, and such a territorialisation of political life can be the foundation for a federal polity capable of generating legitimate policy outcomes.

On the other hand, state attempts at stabilizing territorial identification are always open to challenges.²⁵ So, a general type of formulations may not be adequate to explain the character of any such manifestation. A review of stands on such issues in mediation will review the need of conviction about the validity of both universal and moral questions in particular state of understanding. That is perhaps, the reason why consociationalism as developed so comprehensively by Lijphart, could not provide as accepted basis for formulating an all – comprehensive conceptual framework.²⁶

Note and References:

1. Narang A.S: 'Regionalism, Alienation & Federalism', in Rasheeduddin. Khan, 1997, 'Rethinking of India's Federalism', Indian Institute of Advanced Study – Shimla, p.199.
2. Dogan. Mattei: 'Political Science & the Other Social Science', in (ed.) Goodin & Klingemann, 1996, 'A New Handbook of Political Science, Oxford, p. 97.
3. Bhargava. Rajeev: 'Democratic Vision of a New Republic: India 1950', in (ed.) Frankel R.F, Hasan Z, Bhargava R & B. Arora. 2005, Transforming India, Oxford, pp. 26 – 55.
4. Yasin. Mohammad & Pradip K. Sengupta, Indian Politics: Processes, Issues & Trends, Kanishka Publishers, New Delhi, 2004, pp. 161 – 163.

5. Aberle, D.F, *The Peyote Religion Among the Navaho*, New York: Wenner Gren Foundation, 1966.
6. Gurr, T. R., 'Why Men Rebel', Princeton: Princeton University Press, (1970).
7. Rao. M.S.A. (ed.), *Social Movement in India*, Vol. 1, Delhi, Monohar Publishers, 1979, p. 5.
8. opt. cit, p. 162.
9. Oommen. T.K, *Sociological Issues in the Analysis of Social Movements in Independent India*, in *Sociological Bulletin*, Vol. 26, No.1.
10. Smelser. Neil, *The Theory of Collective Behaviour*, New York, Free Press, 1963.
11. Wallace. A.F.C, *Revitalization Movement in American Anthropologist*, 58, April, 1964, pp. 264 – 81.
12. Ibid, pp. 264 – 81.
13. opt. cit, pp. 162 – 163.
14. opt. C
15. it, p. 176.
16. Yasin. Mohammad & Srinanda. Dasgupta, *Indian Politics, Protests and Movements*, New Delhi, Anmol Publications, 2003.
17. Banerjee. Swati & Dr. P.K Sengupta: 'Understanding Regional Movements' in *Journal of Political Studies*, Vol – 1, No – 1, 2007, pp. 41 – 42.
18. Ibid. 41 – 43.
19. Jalal. Ayesha: 'South Asia: Encyclopaedia of Nationalism: Fundamental Themes, Vol – 1, San Diego, CA: Academic Press, pp.737 – 56.
20. Singh Gurharpal. 2006. 'Beyond Punjabi Romanticism', *Seminar*, vol. 567 (Issue on 'Re-Imagining Punjab'), pp. 17-20.
21. Baruah. Sanjib: 'Regionalism & Secessionism', in (ed.) Jayal, N.G & P.B Mehta, 2010, *The Oxford Companion to Politics in India*, Oxford University Press, p. 181.
22. Datta, A.K, Roy. J & Dr. Manas Chakraborty: 'Regionalism: A Colonial Legacy of British', in *Indian Journal of Political Science*, Vol – LXX, No – 3, 2009, pp. 693 – 704.
23. Ibid. 694 – 704.
24. Narang A.S: 'Regionalism, Alienation & Federalism', in Rasheeduddin. Khan, 1997, 'Rethinking of India's Federalism', *Indian Institute of Advanced Study – Shimla*, pp. 208 – 211.

25. Kohli. Atul. : 'Can Democracies Accommodate Ethnic Nationalism? Rise & Decline of Self – Determination Movements', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 56 (2), pp. 325 – 344.
26. Jones, Martin and Gordon MacLeod. 2004. 'Regional Spaces, Spaces of Regionalism: Territory, Insurgent Politics, and the English Question', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 29(4), pp. 433-52. And also see, Baruah, Sanjib, 'Regionalism & Secessionism', in (ed.) Jayal, N.G & P.B Mehta, 2010, *The Oxford Companion to Politics in India*, Oxford University Press, p. 184.
27. Sahlins, Peter. 2003. 'Response Paper', American Council of Learned Societies Project on 'Official and Vernacular Identifications in the Making of the Modern World',
http: // www.acls.org/crn/network/meetings_nyc_sahlins.htm
28. Banerjee. Swati & Dr. P.K Sengupta: 'Understanding Regional Movements' in *Journal of Political Studies*, Vol – 1, No – 1, 2007, p. 44