

### **Three Cheers for Regionalism**

The verdict of the 09 election will show the full strength of regionalism. Regionalism is much more than the maneuvers and jostling of regional political parties for power. Regionalism is a phenomenon that expresses regional cultures, regional particularities, and regional aspiration. In this sense what we are witnessing is the flowering of regionalism.

Contrary to what Prime Minister Manmohan Singh believes, regionalism complements nationalism. Recently, in a statement he slammed nationalism as harmful to national unity. No regional party or any regional leader who has been a part of the NDA or UPA coalitions has even remotely questioned the territorial unity of India. But if you identify the nation with the Nehru Gandhi dynasty, as the Prime Minister does, then regionalism would appear to you a threat to national unity.

It was the farsighted decision of the Nehru Government in 1956 to reorganize the country along linguistic lines. This spawned regionalism. Nehru initially opposed the move but later acquiesced in it. Having seen the horrors of Partition, his reluctance was understandable. He thought the country

in its formative years needed a strong centralised state, because without it there was the risk of the balkanization of the country.

Linguistic reorganization of the states saved the country of excessive centralization of power and cultural homogenization. We could have gone authoritarian, as so many centuries of Asia and Africa did. We could have also seen the rise of aggressive Hindu chauvinism given the numerical and political importance of the Hindi belt.

Regional political parties are the outgrowth of regional cultures. Old well-developed regionalism like the Tamil and Telegu regionalisms gave rise to DMK and AIDMK parties in Tamil Nadu and the Telegu Dessim in Andhra. They are a part of the Tamil/Telegu cultures and they are here to stay. Even the Communist parties of Bengal and Kerala are basically regional parties drawing for their political sustenance on their distinct regional cultures.

What are called the Mandal parties, SP, RJD, JD(U), Lok Sakti are caste based but the castes they represent are also the castes of a particular region. The Yadavs of Bihar and the Yadav of UP are distinct. Only one outcaste party is now evolving a broad coalition of all castes, the BSP. It claims to

represent the Dalits all over India. Under Mayawati's leadership it has tried to reach out to the Dalits outside UP. So far she had little success in her endeavor. This is because a Dalit in Muzaffarnagar UP and a Dalit in Malegaon, Maharashtra, while sharing a common Dalit identity are still divided by language, customs, dress, habits and jati. Dalit, like the Harijan before, is a modern identity which has yet to transcend old historical regional identities. Hindus divide themselves easily, as one of the most intelligent exponent of Hindutva, Girilal Jain, used to say. 'Bloody Hindus are like the sand of Yamuna, they always drift apart,' he often despaired.

In reality the opposite is true. Sand grains on a river bed loosely cohere, unless you put a heavy weight over it, then they disperse. Had the heavy weight of Emergency applied on us for a long time it's certain the country would have begun to break up.

We can live and even prosper under regionalism, provided we've a political leadership that understands our diversity. I mean here the leadership of our main political parties. Under the banayan tree planted and nursed by the Congress Party under Nehru nothing grew. His daughter, grand son and now his grand daughter in law see to it that any growth however small under it is

promptly destroyed. Witness what Sonia Gandhi did recently to Pranab Mukherjee: he wasn't allowed to wear the crown even for a few days during the temporary absence of the Prime Minister.

The BJP does not have a dynasty but it has an ideology. Its organization is not as rigidly hierarchical as the Congress but its decision-making is greatly influenced by a religion-political organization called the RSS. It simply cannot accommodate any regionalism in its ideological fold. Look at Karnataka, the first state in the South where BJP has established a strong political presence. Its regional Karnataka culture is rapidly Hinduized a la Modi's Gujarat.

Neither the Congress nor the BJP has accommodated regional parties in their organizational fold. But with their decline and the increasing strength of the regional parties in the nineties, the former has to deal with the latter. The BJP forged a coalition with 25 parties by dropping from the coalition programme its ideological platform: a common civil code, Hindi and the Ram Mandir. In other words the party tried to behave like a pragmatic centrist party, but the pretence couldn't last too long. Gujarat violence of March 2002 nearly shattered the coalition. Throughout the years of the

Vajpayee government from 1998 to 2004 there was a tremendous pressure by the parivar to remove its liberal 'muhota' and wear its true ideological face.

The Congress too formed a coalition government with some 23 parties in May 04 but only after it dropped most reluctantly, its demand for a prime minister of its choice. The choice was Sonia Gandhi. Beyond doubt she wanted to be PM just after the Congress victory in May 2004 but the coalition parties opposed her.

There is a strong opposition from the Congress existing and potential regional allies to a Congress nominated Prime Minister Sharad Pawar of NDA, Laloo Yadav of RJP, Paswan of Lok Sakti, not to speak of major regional parties like the AIDMK and BSP oppose the principle of dynastic succession.

The BJP also faces a dilemma. It cannot advance its basic ideology if it does not have a sufficient number of seats, perhaps as large 180 seats that it had in 1999. This is most unlikely. The sooner the BJP realizes that its Hindutva simply cannot become an all encompassing pan Hindu ideology, the better it

is for its survival. As a centre right liberal party broadly professing the ethos of Hindu civilization, it can have an important political space to itself. We simply don't have a genuine conservative party like the Tory party in Britain or the Christian Democrats in Germany.

Like our main parties, the BJP and the Congress, the regional parties too do not have a democratic and transparent process for the electing people to the top leadership. BSP, SP, RJP, AIDMK, DMK, NCP are regional parties with one supremo at the top. Elections for the top leadership position are not transparent and persons elected for leadership are simply by a diktat from above.

With this kind of authoritarian parties, based on personal loyalty, it's difficult to evolve a stable political arrangement between the main parties and the regional parties. What often comes about is a bastardized form of coalition arrangement. A large main party, often the Congress, supports from 'outside' a party or parties in power. Chandrasekhar's Janata, with barely 40 MPs, a seventh of the required strength to be a ruling party, was supported from 'outside' by the Congress – and it withdrew its support on the ground that the ruling party was spying on Rajiv Gandhi. It did this to the

governments of Gowda and Gujarat between 1996-98. Such practices only debase the coalitional form of government which prevails in many countries and which run well.

Regionalism is here to stay. What we need is a better political management of our regionalism. The United States, the only country comparable to our's in size and diversity, manages its regionalism and racial and ethnic diversity well because the political parties there are truly federal and democratic in their workings. What we have here are parties run by the High Command from the top.