

Regional chauvinism of political parties in india



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India, upon independence was divided into various regions and religions. The people of those regions came together and formed the State of India. When such diverse people came together, there had to be instances of regional chauvinism (henceforth referred to as regionalism) and bias for one's own state or region to be specific. The political leaders in such states identified this opportunity and portrayed the regionalist idea to garner the votes of the people and to come to power.

In simple words, regional parties differ from All India parties both in terms of their outlook as well as the interests they pursue. Their activities are focused on specific issues concerning the region and they operate within the limited area. They merely seek to capture power at the state or regional level and do not aspire to control the national government. Some were genuine cases where the aim was the welfare of the people in the region, however more often than not; it was just the means to the aim of achieving political superiority.

The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (hereinafter, DMK) was the first of all parties to do so and parties like Akali Dal and Shiv Sena followed this ideology¹. The Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (hereinafter, MNS) was the newest entrant to this sphere of politics, and has been active in its portrayal of regionalism in the state of Maharashtra.

1. What were the causes that led to the establishment of regionalism in a country? 2. If such regionalism is prevalent in other countries of the world. 3. Should regional politics and regional parties be allowed to exist by the Election Commission of India? 4. In the state of Maharashtra, where the

cause of regionalism has been espoused by parties like MNS, have the parties been able to undertake the welfare of the people or if it is just a gimmick to garner votes?

To state the causes of regional affiliation. To investigate into the existence of this state of society in states around the country To scrutinize the work of MNS in Maharashtra, and its role in the politics of the state.

The MNS has been largely ineffective in its role in Maharashtra, and the cause that it is espousing is only creating differences between the people living in Maharashtra, which has hindered the development of the state.

Adopting a doctrinal approach for research, which will involve a perusal of scholarly articles, this term paper will look to explain regionalism through a detailed discussion on its meaning, answering the basic question of ‘ what is regionalism?’ Further it will discuss the evolution of regionalism in India, and in Indian Politics. Mentioning the causes of regionalism is essential for a holistic commentary on the topic, which will be undertaken after explaining the definition of regionalism. The researcher will undertake a detailed case study of MNS and its politics in the state of Maharashtra, the evolution of the party, the practices adopted by it, their morality, their rationale and the repercussions of its actions.

A region is a defined territorial unit and a nucleus of a social aggregation for multiple purposes² such as language, castes, races, social arrangements, cultural structures, music, etc. It is because of a combination of these factors that people come together resulting into the formation of what we call a ‘ region.’ The region is characterized by a widely shared sentiment of ‘

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togetherness' and 'separateness' from others in the people³, the people living in a particular region have a strong bond amongst themselves and affection to their motherland, which might be an outcome of a common effort, for example the Indian freedom struggle led to the augmentation of the patriotic sentiment in the minds of the people across the nation more than ever before. Regionalism is a form of nationalism. It is a sort of 'Micro-Nationalism⁴.'

The discord occurs at the national level when the question of regional prosperity comes up. At the international level, the people look to advance the interests of the nation as a whole, but when it comes to national matters, people are often concerned about their regional identity and advancement of their regional problems. This is mostly the case in countries with vast cultural and regional disparities; India for that matter is the best example of such a country.

To look at it from an analytical perspective, regionalism has two connotations⁵; it could be the affection of the people towards their culture, territory, language, etc. with the thought of conserving its identity and existence. This type of regionalism is welcome so long as it fosters fraternity amongst the people on grounds of these commonalities. However, the excessive attachment to one's region hampers national integrity and creates conflicts amongst people.

This is promulgated by political leaders who do so to establish their control over a faction of the society⁶. And this form of political regional chauvinism is harmful to the interest of the nation because it just uses the portrayal of

regional chauvinism as a front to achieve the ulterior motive without actually focusing on the cause that they pretend to be espousing. However, there have been parties that have actually worked for the rights of the people of a region, which will be discussed at a later stage in this term paper.

Regionalism, in a modern society, exists in multiple forms, sometimes it is only to present the demands for certain rights and to raise certain issues of concern to the people of a particular region when such a region has been deprived of resources or has been subjected to the continuous neglect of the government. For example, the protest by the people of Tamil Nadu regarding the Mullaperiyar dam in Kerala was a portrayal of such regional chauvinism by the people of both the states. 7

On other instances, it involves ' Demands for State Autonomy⁸, where the people of a deprived region by a particular state led by a political organization come forward and demand the creation of a separate state. This has been seen in the recent protests in Telangana in Andhra Pradesh, 9 for the creation of a separate state of Telangana. This creates imbalances in the region and disharmony amongst the people living in such regions. The third and final type involves volunteering for accession from the country itself due to a feeling of neglect from the central government of the country as has been seen in the case of Catalan region in Spain. 10

India as a nation has existed in the form of many regions, which have been ruled by different rulers. The Mughal rule brought these regions under a common rule, however differences continued to exist between various regions in the Indian sub-continent. Before independence, the British

imperialists promulgated regionalism amongst the people so as to prevent unity amongst the people and to continue ruling over the India¹¹. Thus The Colonial Raj was able to expand itself over a wide area and collectively ruled India for over a period of 150 years.

As the discontentment against the British rule grew amongst the people, they came together and protested against this rule, which led to the development of the feeling of patriotism amongst the people of the country. In the post independence era, the members of the constituent assembly tried to draft a constitution that promoted a nationalist sentiment amongst the people by the establishment of a single citizenship, unified judiciary and a strong central government. ¹² However, in a country like India, the growth of this regionalist sentiment was, in a way, inevitable as much as the drafters of the constitution tried to ensure ‘unity in diversity.’ The leadership began to adopt a ‘Political Mandate¹³’ that was concerned with their advancement.

Rather than fostering patriotism, they utilised their leadership to segregate people into regionally distinct societies. The first such protest was in the case of Potti Sriramulu, who passed away in 1953 after fasting for 52 days, and his death led to the redrawing of the map of the nation on the basis of linguistic lines i. e. the demand for a separate state for Telegu speaking people, which was Andhra Pradesh. ¹⁴

DMK in South India: However, the first example of such regional chauvinism by a Political Party was the DMK in the 1960s. Going back to the journey of Regionalism in India, it is well noticeable that it emerged with Dravidian

Movement, which started in Tamil Nadu in 1925. This movement, also known as Self-Respect Movement initially focused on empowering Dalits, non-Brahmins, and poor people. Later it stood against imposition of Hindi as sole official language on non-Hindi speaking areas. 15 This became a secessionist movement with the demands for a separate nation of Dravida Nadu or Dravidastan comprising the states of south India. The DMK defeated the Congress in the elections of the state assembly and its leader C. N. Annadurai, asserted that the folk of south India were ‘ A stock different from the north’¹⁶

The Shiv Sena in Maharashtra: The other major instance of such chauvinism by a political party was in the state of Maharashtra, where the Shiv Sena promulgated the sentiment of regionalism in the minds of the people. It did not have any separationist ideology but it was opposed to the migrants from south India occupying the jobs and business of the local folk of Maharashtra. It launched its against them in the name of Marathi pride. 17

The party, under the leadership of political supremo Bal Thackeray, did undertake some measures for the benefit of Maharashtra and shouldered the responsibility of its development in its formative years. 18 However, certain measures adopted by the party have been strongly criticized by multiple factions of the society. The party regularly indulged in vandalism and destruction of property for the enforcement of its wishes and took the law into its own hands on multiple occasions, often expressing its disapproval of movies and other expressions of art by obstructing their screening in cinema halls. There have been innumerable instances of migrants being harassed for the sole reason of being migrants¹⁹.

Stir in Assam against the non-Assamese Another intense display of regionalism came to the fore in the state of Assam, where in the mid-1960s, the Assamese marshaled the Lachit Sena on the outlines of the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra. It launched a crusade against the immigrants from other states of the India, specially the Marwaris from Rajasthan who possessed most of the industry in the state. 20

Akali Dal in North India: The last example to be discussed here is the case of the Akali Dal in North India. The Akali Dal voiced demands of a separate state of Khalistan in 1987, comprising the states of Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, New Delhi, parts of the Kashmir, parts of Rajasthan, and parts of Gujarat. 21 Their leader, Tara Singh's insistence on Khalistan was based on ethnic interests and this resulted in relentless activities of terrorism. 22 The people realized that such a demand was unlikely to be addressed by the Indian Government and hence asked for greater autonomy for the state to manage its own affairs.

Having adopted the flag of regional chauvinism in the state of Maharashtra, the Shiv Sena had become a strong hold in the politics of the state under the leadership of Bal Thackeray. As Thackeray was approaching the fag end of his career, his son Uddhav Thackeray seemed to be the obvious successor as party chief. Bal Thackeray's nephew, Raj Thackeray, who had been closely involved in the affairs of the party, and was said to be extremely similar to the supremo in his oration and style of leadership, as observed by political observers, had high ambitions for himself. He wanted to become the leader of the party and espouse the cause of Maharashtrians in the state.

The party hierarchy restrained him from doing so. He left the Shiv Sena on account of differences between him and Uddhav Thackeray. In his words, he stated that the Shiv Sena was ‘run by petty clerks’²³ and as a result it had ‘fallen from its former glory’.²⁴ Thus, he established the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena²⁵ on 9th March 2006, under the motto of ‘Sons of the Soil’, in Mumbai after The party lists itself as a Marathi Nationalist on the website of the Election Commission and has been accorded the status of a state party by the Election Commission of India.

Raj Thackeray claimed to have the purpose of building political cognizance for the development related problems of Maharashtra and to raise them to center stage in national politics. However, the party abruptly changed its stance to adopt an anti-immigrant agenda leading to attacks on North Indians across Maharashtra. This brought the party to the notice of the nation and public attention. Following are some instances of the controversies that the MNS has been involved in, in the few years of its existence:

February 2008: Clash with Samajwadi Party(SP) workers at a rally organized in Dadar, Mumbai where SP leader Abu Azmi made an explosive speech.

February 2008: Petition filed in Patna High Court against Raj Thackeray for his rumored remarks against Chhatth festival in Bihar

February 2008: Attack against north Indian vendors and shopkeepers across Maharashtra and destruction of government property by MNS workers to express their anger regarding the reported arrest of their leader²⁶. September 2008: demanding that signboards on shops and commercial establishments in Mumbai should

be in Marathi Thackeray's simultaneous diktat of a deadline along with the threat for non-compliance became the talking point.

October 2008: MNS activists attacked candidates who came for the railway board examination, creating a ruckus outside the examination center saying that Marathi people should be recruited. 27 He openly challenged the state machinery to arrest him and threatened that the whole of Maharashtra would go up in flames if he were arrested. This not only reflected his characteristic violence stimulating temper but also his self-delusion that he had become the unhindered voice of the Marathi people.

July 2008: MNS workers attacked an engineering college in Pune, vandalizing and damaging the office of the director. Ironically, the director of the college was himself a ' Marathi manoos', but MNS workers did not let him off as they wanted colleges to grant admission to Marathi students. 28 December 2011: MNS activists stood at tollbooths refusing to pay toll stating the exorbitant amount charged by the owners to tax payers and the discrepancies in the collection of toll money.

For all its activities, the MNS has attracted sharp criticism from various factions of the society and the people have abhorred the means adopted by it. Various ministers expressed their discontentment on the activities of the MNS and there were calls for action to be taken against the party and its chief. The government had conceded that Thackeray had become an anti-establishment figure with a legitimate cause. The party has been especially active in Mumbai, the commercial capital of the country and the capital of the state of Maharashtra as well.

Mumbai being a metropolitan city, known as the city of dreams, has thousands of people flocking to it in search of jobs and opportunities, and today Mumbai is what it is because of the people that have come together to form this city. The MNS is trying to kill the spirit of this city in trying to fend off migrant workers. The unhindered attacks on the people have hampered the safe image of the city and instilled fear in the minds of the people. This sort of regional chauvinism is equal to terrorizing the people. In an open letter by CNN IBN presenter Rajdeep Sardesai addressed to Raj Thackeray, he openly expresses his discontentment towards the activities of the MNS and its impact on the society in Maharashtra.

To quote him here seems appropriate: 29But Raj, I must remind you that electoral politics is very different from street agitations. Sure, the round-the-clock coverage of taxis being stoned and buses burnt will get you instant recognition. Yes, your name may inspire fear like your uncle's once did. And perhaps there will always be a core group of lumpen youth who will be ready to do your bidding. But how much of this will translate into votes? Identity politics based on hatred and violence is subject to the law of diminishing returns, especially in a city like Mumbai, the ultimate melting pot of commerce. Your cousin Uddhav tried a 'Mee Mumbaikar' campaign a few years ago. It was far more inclusive, but yet was interpreted as being anti-migrant.

The result was that the Shiv Sena lost the 2004 elections — Lok Sabha and assembly — in its original citadel of Mumbai. Some statistics suggest that one in every four Mumbaikars is now a migrant from UP or Bihar. Can any political party afford to alienate such a large constituency in highly

competitive elections? Thus, the MNS has been largely inefficient in its role in Maharashtra because its main objective seems to be to create fear in the minds of the people by terrorizing them on a consistent basis to win the votes of the 'Marathi Manos'. However, the people have realized the impracticability in MNS' theory of 'Sons of the Soil' and have developed hatred towards the means adopted by the party, which has been unable to peacefully undertake the cause of the development of Maharashtra.