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CONTOURS OF POWER: UNDERSTANDING REGIONAL HISTORIES AND POWER STRUCTURES IN INDIA

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Abstract:

This paper explores how power has been exercised, contested, and reshaped through various regional histories in India. It delves into the medieval, colonial, and post-independence periods to understand the complex interplay between local authorities, social structures, and broader political frameworks. By focusing on case studies from regions like the Deccan, Tamil Nadu, Assam, and Telangana, the paper highlights how regional dynamics offer deeper insights into India's national narrative.

Key Words: Deccan, Tapestry, Kakatiya Dynasty, Sovereignty, Colonialism, Ryotwari

Introduction

Indian history is not a monolithic account of events driven by centralized power but rather a tapestry of regional narratives, each reflecting unique expressions of authority, resistance, and adaptation. Regional histories demonstrate how local rulers, communities, and movements shaped power structures long before and after the rise of nation-states. This paper investigates how power operated in different regional contexts and how these interactions contributed to the shaping of Indian history.

1. Power and Governance in Medieval Regional Kingdoms

During the medieval period, India witnessed the emergence of powerful regional kingdoms that played a crucial role in state formation, military expansion, and cultural development. These states were not only political units but also cultural hubs where the relationship between rulers and the ruled was negotiated in diverse ways.

1. The Kakatiya Dynasty (Andhra Pradesh and Telangana)

The Kakatiyas (12th–14th centuries) played a crucial role in consolidating the Telugu identity through their promotion of the language, temple architecture, and irrigation systems. They established a decentralized feudal structure, empowering local chiefs known as nayakas, who were crucial for administration and military recruitment. This distribution of power was a double-edged sword—while it allowed expansion, it also led to fragmentation.

2. The Cholas (Tamil Nadu)

The Chola Empire (9th–13th centuries) exemplifies the sophisticated use of bureaucracy and temple patronage as instruments of power. The Cholas maintained meticulous land records and a robust local self-government system, including the village sabhas. Temples acted as economic centers, solidifying the king's power through religious and economic control.

3. The Ahoms (Assam)

The Ahoms ruled Assam for over 600 years, maintaining a unique system called the Paik system, where every adult male was bound to serve the state in exchange for land. Their adaptability to local traditions, language policies, and resistance against Mughal invasions highlights the regional assertion of sovereignty.



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II. Colonialism and Restructuring of Regional Power

The arrival of European colonial powers, especially the British, marked a radical transformation in regional power structures. The British often co-opted or dismantled existing local institutions to consolidate their rule.

1. Permanent Settlement in Bengal

Introduced in 1793, this system gave zamindars (landowners) ownership of land in perpetuity, marginalizing peasant rights. It altered traditional village-level power balances and created a new landed elite loyal to British interests.

2. Ryotwari and Mahalwari Systems

In southern and central India, systems like Ryotwari directly taxed the peasant (ryot), leading to new forms of debt and dispossession. The colonial bureaucracy penetrated deep into rural areas, replacing localized autonomy with administrative centralization.

3. The Role of Princely States

Colonial power maintained indirect control over hundreds of princely states, allowing them nominal autonomy while limiting their military and economic freedom. This dual system of governance further complicated regional dynamics and sowed seeds of discontent, especially as the nationalist movement gained ground.

III. Power, Identity, and Regional Movements in Post-Independence India

After independence, India's constitution adopted a federal structure, but the early dominance of the central government led to tensions with regional aspirations. Over time, the emergence of regional parties and movements reshaped the political landscape.

1. Dravidian Movement in Tamil Nadu

Initially a cultural and anti-Brahmin movement, the Dravidian ideology evolved into a powerful political force challenging Hindi imposition and central dominance. The DMK and AIADMK became dominant players, advocating for state rights and social justice through affirmative action and regional language policies.

2. The Telangana Movement

A classic example of a power struggle within a linguistic state, the Telangana movement emerged due to perceived neglect and discrimination by the Andhra-dominated administration after the formation of Andhra Pradesh in 1956. The culmination of the struggle was the formation of Telangana state in 2014, reflecting regional assertion within the constitutional framework.

3. Punjab and Assam Movements

Both regions experienced agitation due to linguistic, ethnic, and economic grievances. In Punjab, the Anandpur Sahib Resolution demanded greater autonomy, while in Assam, the anti-foreigner agitation of the 1980s called for the protection of indigenous identity and resources.

IV. Power and Caste in Regional Contexts

Power in regional India has always been linked with caste hierarchies. However, the post-independence era witnessed



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the rise of subaltern voices challenging dominant caste structures.

1. Maharashtra – Dalit Panther Movement

Inspired by Ambedkarite thought, the Dalit Panthers of the 1970s advocated for social justice, land redistribution, and an end to caste-based violence. Their influence redefined the power discourse in Maharashtra and inspired similar movements across India.

2. Uttar Pradesh and Bihar – OBC Mobilization

Movements led by backward caste leaders like Mulayam Singh Yadav and Lalu Prasad Yadav transformed the political landscape, creating a counter-narrative to upper-caste domination. They mobilized the rural poor and backward castes through promises of social justice and political representation.

V. Conclusion:

Reclaiming Regional Histories of Power

The study of regional power structures reveals that India's political history cannot be fully understood through a national lens alone. Regions have not merely followed central trends but have often set them. Whether through cultural assertion, political resistance, or social reform, regional movements and powers have shaped the idea of India.

Power in regional contexts was and continues to be negotiated across caste, class, and community lines. Revisiting these histories challenges us to appreciate India's plurality and the decentralized dynamics of governance, identity, and resistance.

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