



REGIONAL IDENTITY: A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

In this article looks in to the concept of regional identity and the regional aspirations based on it at global level. It is pertinent to look in to the concept of region and how the identity of region and its people as a potent political force attempts for a specific geo political arrangement. Demands of these arrangements may range from a claim for separate statehood to some kind of autonomy within the bounds of the state where the movement operates.

Keywords: Regional Identity, Cultural And Social, State-Nationalism, Global Economy

Introduction

The idea of cultural and social cohesion has been the backbone of the concept of modern nation state. Compared to the older vast multi cultural imperial states, these nation states are more compact and coherent. The core idea of modern nation state- nationalism, attempts to build a homogeneous identity in a given geo cultural domain, some time by accommodating the plural identities existing in the said domain, in to the broader national frame work and at other times undermining the identities. Thus, nation is not based on pure rationality but is a mix of imagination and dream of a collective consolidated brighter future. A nation-state may be created either by the transformation of an ethnic group in a multi-ethnic State into a self-conscious political identity or by the formation of an inter-ethnic, composite and homogeneous civic national culture, through the elements of a modern State. A nation is "a particular type of ethnic



community politicized, with recognized group rights in the political system" (Brass 1991: 20).¹

Ability to build cohesion is a political, economic and cultural process. Across the globe constant attempts to build unity and dissention against that ideal are visible. The problem of dissention becomes a reality because there is always a possibility building hegemonic structures in the name of unified identity. To build a working unity in a given state, the political and cultural domains have to negotiate constantly. The process of bringing people together on the basis of politico cultural notions like language(s), ethnicity(es) religion(s), has to be worked out with caution and care. The process of building and maintaining togetherness is a dynamic process which has to be revisited frequently when the pluralities are divergent. It is essential to have a careful eye on the fault lines in the structures of unity from time to time and address them suitably.

Unitary and federal forms of governments came in to place existence to address the issue of cohesive nation state building. A strong unitary form of government attempts to build a unified identity by gradually subsuming other identities within its geopolitical boundaries. At the least such governments will attempt to promote one national culture to promote unity. The federal form of organizing the state in principle accepts the plurality of identities and attempts to provide space to them by forming federal and provincial governments with a clear distribution of powers.² Whatever may be the form of the constitution maintenance of coherence and management of different identities is a challenge faced by the modern state.

Management of the pluralities is thus the very important part of maintenance of the cohesion which is much required for the legitimacy of the modern nation state. Right from the times of consolidation of the conception of coherent and compact nation state,

¹ . Brass Paul R. (1991). *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison*. London : Sage. P.195.

² . Mahajan Gurpreet. (2007). *Federal Accommodation of Ethnocultural Identities in India*. In Baogang He, Brian Galligan, and Takashi Inoguchi, (Ed) . *Federalism in Asia*. London: Edward Elgar Publishing. pp.82-101



the question of regionalism also embedded into the system. Regional identities which have a centripetal tendency if are marginalized or perceived to be marginalized in the geo political community have a tendency to raise the banner of separation.

‘New regionalism’, ‘region’, ‘city-region’, ‘cross-border region’, ‘border’ and ‘identity’ have become important catchphrases on the global geo-economic and geopolitical scene. The resurgence of these terms has been part of the transformation of both political economy and governance at supra-state, state and sub-state levels. Across the world, national identities which were consolidated from eighteenth to twentieth century started showing signals of regional expression. Europe, Asia, Africa have seen this development. Identity has become a major watchword since the 1980s. Traditional territorialized battles over democracy, political status/citizenship and wealth have been complicated by the struggle over race, ethnicity, multiculturalism, gender, sexuality, recognition and a new symbolic economy characterized by the production/marketing of images.³

The identity discourse has emerged concomitantly with such arguments that in the world, particularly the Western world, identity is a social process. Della Porta and Diani⁴ suggest that the notions that actors develop themselves are continuously being confronted with images which other social actors (institutions, sympathetic/hostile groupings, public opinion and the media) produce of them. As Hall⁵ states, “identity is formed at the unstable point where the ‘unspeakable’ stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture. The key question in understanding regional identity is not how the individual and the social are integrated in space but how can the socio-spatial be conceptualized in the

³. Paasi Anssi. (2003). Region and place: Regional identity in question Progress in *Human Geography*. 27.4. p. 475

⁴. Della Porta, D. and Diani, M. (1999). Social Movements. Oxford: Blackwell.

⁵. Hall, S. 1993: Minimal selves. In Gray, A and McGuigan, J., editors, *Studying Culture*, New York: Edward Arnold, pp. 134-138.

⁶ Michael, M. 1996: *Constructing identities*. London: Sage



‘production’ of the individual/collective and vice versa.⁶ This ‘dialectics’ introduces action that stems from two intertwined contexts: ‘from above’ in the form of territorial governance, and ‘from below’ in the form of territorial identification and resistance.

Besides, identities are either latent or conscious. When an identity is latent, it serves merely a descriptive purpose. Such an identity is not, politically, very significant (for instance, man, woman, Indian, Scottish, Tamil, Hindu, and so on). When an individual (or a group of individuals) consciously perceives a certain descriptive identity as indispensable to the definition of his/her personal identity and accepts that descriptive identity as predominant and paramount over other such descriptive identities and, further, seeks to acquire political resources on the basis of that identity, that conscious identity becomes politically significant.

Cultural identities can be transformed into political identities when cultural groups are targeted for privilege or discrimination and when economic factors, no matter how impersonal, lead to disproportionate hardships among culturally defined populations. In other words, when economic inequality is such that hardships are imposed on one identity more than another, political actions, such as separatism, may follow. It is further added that strong political institutions promoting social integration can act as a firebreak and reduce the political ‘charge’ on culture.⁷

“Region is homogenous area with physical and cultural characteristics distinct from those of neighboring 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,

⁷ . Crawford Beverly(1998), “The Causes of Cultural Conflict: Assessing the Evidence,” in Beverly Crawford and Ronnie Lipschutz, eds., *The Myth of ‘Ethnic Conflict’: Politics, Economics, and ‘Cultural’ Violence* (Berkeley: International and Area Studies, University of California p. 556.



it is also applied to the scientific task of delimiting and analyzing regions as entities lacking formal boundaries.”⁸

“Regional identity is the feeling of being at home or belonging to an area at the meso-scale, therefore it is somewhere in the middle between local identity and national identity. Regional identity is grounded in the regional history, in the surrounding landscape, in a special language or dialect dominating in the region in question, or in other specific regionally bounded conditions. It can be seen as a part of self-identity and is therefore the personal attachment to a region. But regional identity is also the (positive) feeling of a collective towards a region or formed by a region. People produce and reproduce social cohesion by their practical consciousness and actions and thereby form a regional community. Sometimes this process may lead to regionalism as a political movement. Co-presence is not really necessary to establish that feeling of togetherness. So regional identity is similar to ethnicity, and can be seen as the geographical dimension of inclusion and exclusion within the society”.⁹

Paasi (2002, 2003), differentiates between the “identity of a region” and “regional identity”. The identity of a region refers to those distinguishing physical, cultural and historical features that make one region different from another. Regional identity (or regional consciousness) refers to the extent to which people identify themselves with the region as the whole of institutionalized practices, discourses and symbols. While these exist simultaneously as part of the process of social reproduction, this distinction helps us to understand and analyze both the structure and power elements hidden in discourses on regional identity and individual regional consciousness (Paasi, 2002). As mentioned above, identity is closely interrelated with region formation, and the rise of regional identity must be seen in the broader context of region formation (Simon, 2004). There are two major perspectives regarding the formation of regions: a structurally oriented perspective and an agency-oriented perspective. In structurally oriented perspectives, the rise of the region is considered to be a logical outcome of broader trends and pervasive developments, such as globalization, flexibility of

⁸ (1967). Encyclopedia of social sciences. New York: MacMillan. PP.377-78

⁹ . International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences. (2001). P.12917.



production, state restructuring, and urban expansion (Lagendijk, 2007).¹⁰

In agency-oriented or social-constructivist perspectives, regions are seen as social constructs, defining and shaping themselves as part of, and through, different social and discursive practices (Lagendijk, 2006). Paasi (2002), one of the founders of the constructivist approach, describes region formation as a process of institutionalization. Here, institutionalization is the outcome of four simultaneous and interconnected working forces: i) territorial, ii) institutional iii) symbolic shaping iv) internal and external recognition or identification. Lagendijk (2007) facilitates study of the construction of regional identities by linking both structurally and agency oriented perspectives together in a framework. This linkage is seen as part of an evolutionary process in which the region first becomes privileged, then achieves coherence once institutionalized. It begins with a limited set of pervasive economic, political or social driving forces creating some “windows of change” (structurally oriented perspectives). These various windows are then converted or translated into specific forms of policy-making, as well as practices and performances at both the individual and organizational levels. Finally, these “new” practices and ways of policymaking become regularized and institutionalized in new forms of regional governance (agency-oriented perspectives). Once regions have a recognized position, they receive an established role in the territorial structure, and thus have a regional identity.¹¹

It will be interesting to note the reasons for emergence of the sub national identities that range from identity disparity to cultural specificity. Identity formation or the resurgence of identity is the beginning of sub national aspirations. Sub-national identities usually take two forms of articulation. They may crystallize into a national

¹⁰. Lies Messely, dr. ir. Joost Dessein, and dr. ir. Ludwig Lauwers.(2008). Regional Identity In Rural Development: Three Case Studies, Regional Branding. Budapest: Applied Studies in Agribusiness and Commerce – APSTRACT Agroinform Publishing House. Pp.19-20.

¹¹ Lies Messely, dr. ir. Joost Dessein, and dr. ir. Ludwig Lauwers.(2008). Regional Identity In Rural Development: Three Case Studies, Regional Branding. Budapest: Applied Studies in Agribusiness and Commerce – APSTRACT Agroinform Publishing House. P.20.



identity and seek political recognition (even as a sovereign State) or may end up as one of the many ethnic or sub national identities competing for control of resources in a multi-ethnic State. This does not necessarily imply that all national identities begin as ethnic identities. Undoubtedly, these two identities-the national identity and the ethnic identity-are closely related and often overlap as in the case of nation states that are largely ethnically homogeneous. However, it would not be correct to hold that both kinds of identity articulation are the same.

Expressions of regional identity are currently found all around the world. Whether or not regional ties motivate people into conflict with their respective state (often intersecting their affiliation to 'nations'), belonging to a region may raise a sense of identity that challenges the hegemonic identity narratives.¹² Regional identity has been recognized as a key element in the making of regions as social/political spaces, but it is difficult to elucidate what this identity consists of and how it affects collective action/politics.¹³ The crucial question is how political passions are regionalized, and here institutions constitutive of region-building (economy, governance, language, media, literature) and inherent power relations are significant.

The question of regional identification implies two intertwined contexts: cultural-historical and political-economic. Political ideologies and regionalism/ nationalism do not themselves produce identification, for the latter comes – and here culture and history enter the stage – only if 'it interprets and provides an appropriate attitude for an experienced reality. This experience may be politically manipulated but any symbol/ideology without a relevant experience is meaningless and impotent in terms of evoking identification. Social psychologists in particular have emphasized the motivational dimensions of identity processes. One basis for (regional) identities is that they exist as forms of social and cultural practice, discourse and action, not as abstract slogans.

¹² Radcliffe, S and Westwood, S. (1996). *Remaking the Nation*. London: Routledge.

¹³ Keating, M. 1998: *The new regionalism in Western Europe*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.



Across the world the separatist movements based on identity pin their arguments on aspects of distinction of identity and deprivation, these movement weave a complex web based on culture, difference, relative economic exploitation and discrimination compared to the rest of the collective. Willful or not so willful attempts by the unifying agents to snub the arguments and claims and branding them divisive activities will vitiate the atmosphere further. Instead the unifiers must perceive these claims and analyze them as symptoms of deficiency in the unity building process. Regional identity, opposed combination of this identity and 'regional consciousness' has become a very popular topic in cultural, political and economic geography. Regionalism is generally expresses through the conscious of the people in a specific region. Collective identity is not out there, waiting to be discovered. What is 'out there' is identity discourse on the part of political leaders, intellectuals and countless others, who engage in the process of constructing, negotiating, manipulating or affirming a response to the demand at times urgent, mostly absent - for a collective image.¹⁴

These social and cultural identities are often linked with political and territorial identities. Separatist movements make territorial claims, arguing that a particular territory or region should separate from the state of which it is a part and create for itself a new political identity. The movement may seek full independence or some degree of regional autonomy, devolution, or home rule. We consider movements that do not seek full independence as separatist, because the conceptual distinction between autonomy and independence is best looked upon as a continuum. Furthermore, several movements have historically shifted their goals from autonomy to independence or vice versa. In the case of Quebec, a demand for increased federalism turned over time into a demand for independence. The Sri Lankan Tamils and the southern Sudanese are both examples of moderate autonomy movements turning into savage national liberation struggles. Separatist movements overlap, empirically and conceptually, with unification and reunification

¹⁴ Mc Sweeney, B. (1999). Security, identity and interests. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



movements. In several cases, separatist movements want to separate from one state and unite with another. For example, Irish nationalists in Northern Ireland want to separate from the United Kingdom and unite with the Irish Republic.¹⁵

In the light of the discussion about the region and the formation of identity it will be pertinent to see some illustrative cases of movements for autonomy across the globe. South Asia has been a region in the globe which has seen many inequalities especially manifested in its colonial past and the post Colonial present. The inconsistencies in the formation of modern state in many cases in this region are grappling with the problems of regional identity based movements. From Baluchistan Movement in Pakistan in the east to movements of Karen and Kachin people in Myanmar and plethora of them in India. The conflict which took a very violent turn in Srilanka is gory example for ethnic separatist movement and the inability of modern state to deal with it with less violence and more political processes. The cultural diversity in the subcontinent poses a challenge to the state in maintain the multiple and dissimilar aspirations within its confines.

The politics of South Asia has been dominated by separatist movements that have waged violent struggles to assert their control over parts of existing national states. The precise moment of the outbreak of these movements is influenced by the perception of the geopolitical context by their leaders and the stability of the central state against which they rebel. But their main driving force originates from a shared belief in their unique and distinct cultural identity, which, in their eyes, justifies their right to an exclusive homeland examination of cultural nationalism. Sub nationalism has long been an anomaly for both liberal and Marxist social theorists, who concede its existence but cannot explain it adequately. Sociological and historical accounts of the origins and evolution of sub nationalism in South Asia can be formulated by a political explanation drawing on theories of rational choice and collective action. SK Mitras articles argues that (a) leaders of sub nationalist movements draw on both sentiments and interests, and (b) the

¹⁵ Hewitt Christopher and Cheetham Tom(2000), Encyclopedia of Modern Separatist Movements. Santa Babara: Abc Clío Publications.



direction and pace of these movements are influenced by the political resources that they are able to mobilize. Though the case studies on which the SK Mitras draws are mainly from South Asia, the model that underpins them is applicable to other cultural and temporal contexts as well.¹⁶

South East Asia also is a region which is a host to the movements based on the identity. The specific geography, which has created so many archipelagic states creates isolation and separation in cultures and practices of the people. Ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious diversities are part of the South East Asian region. The key step towards violent separatism is the emergence of ethnic nationalism predicated upon the 'mono ethnic' orientation of the existing state and concomitant tendencies to assimilate policies which disrupted 'communal authority structures', thus displacing local ethnic elites. The process of decolonization gave credence to certain identity groups in the formation of new nation states, but alienated and undermined other, peripheral identities. The existence of socioeconomic grievances among secessionist groups, the overwhelming emphasis is on the historical and political conditions which give rise to alternative nationalisms.

Experiences of three separatist struggles within Southeast Asia – the Indonesian province of Aceh, southern Thailand, and the Mindanao region of the southern Philippines – and a fourth non separatist case, the state of Sabah in Malaysia are some cases in the region. Separatist conflict in South East Asia, Brown argue, takes the form of variations on a theme. Similar historical 'pre conditions' and processes of demographic and socioeconomic marginalization created conditions of severe grievance among nationally peripheral ethnic groups in all these separatist cases. These ethnic groups typically experienced a 'double whammy' of horizontal inequalities, experiencing both relative disadvantage vis-a-vis the dominant ethnic or religious group and broader regional socioeconomic decline

¹⁶ Mitra, S.K. (1995). The Rational Politics of Cultural Nationalism: sub national movements of South Asia in comparative perspective. *British Journal of Political Science*, 25(01), 57-77.



relative to the rest of the country. Yet all these conditions also obtain in the non separatist comparator of Sabah. What drove the turn to violence in Aceh, southern Thailand and Mindanao, Brown suggest, was the politicization of these grievances through state actions at periods of heightened tensions, actions which were perceived as directly discriminatory against the marginalized groups. In contrast, when a similar juncture arose in Sabah with violence looming, the central government in Malaysia chose to make substantial political concessions to the marginalized group.¹⁷

Africa which has seen plunder from the western powers since seventeenth century and the violent scramble among the colonial powers in the nineteenth century is a tinder box of ethnic and cultural separatist aspirations. The formation of the modern state in many African countries is problematic. The central to this paradox is the nature of political boundaries in Africa: there is widespread agreement that the boundaries are arbitrary, yet the vast majority of them have remained virtually untouched since the late 1800s, when they were first demarcated. Herbst.J argues that, contrary to current theories, the present boundary system represents a rational response by both the colonialists and the present-day African leaders to the constraints imposed by the demographic and ethnographic structure of the continent. Using this framework of analysis, the article examines the institutions that formulated the decision-making rules for the creation and maintenance of boundaries in Africa, discusses the conditions under which cooperation among states has occurred, and explores the prospects for future changes in the borders of African states.¹⁸ The civil wars in Congo, the separation of Sudan and the ethnic unrest in Nigeria are some of the examples.

Regions have been particularly significant in the EU where both the making of the Union itself and the ‘Europe of regions’ are

¹⁷. Brown, G. K. (2008). Horizontal inequalities and separatism in Southeast Asia: A comparative perspective. In *Horizontal Inequalities and Conflict*). UK: Palgrave Macmillan. pp. 252-281

¹⁸.Herbst,J. (1989).The Creation and Maintenance of National Boundaries in Africa. *International Organization*, 43(4), 673-692. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2706803>.



concrete manifestations of the re-scaling of states, spaces and the assignment of new meanings to territory. Such re-scaling has also led to increased competition between regions; a tendency that results from both the neo-liberalization of the global economy and from a regionalist response. Regional identity, an idea at least implicitly indicating some cohesiveness or social integration in a region, has become a major buzzword. It has been particularly identified in the EU's cohesion policy as an important element for regional development. In spite of their increasing importance in social life and academic debates, regions, borders and identities are often studied separately, but Anssi Passi aims at theorizing and illustrating their meanings in an integrated conceptual framework and uses the sub-state regions in Europe, and particularly in Finland, as concrete examples. Regions are conceptualized here as processes that gain their boundaries, symbolisms and institutions in the process of institutionalization. Through this process a region becomes established, gains its status in the broader regional structure and may become a significant unit for regional identification or for a purported regional identity. This process is based on a division of labour, which accentuates the power of regional elites in the institutionalization processes.¹⁹

Conclusion:

In this article a glance of the global separatist movements is discussed especially movements such as Baluchistan in Pakistan, Kaven Kachin Movement in Myanmar, Tamil Ealam separatist Movement in Sri Lanka in South Asian region, Ache in Malaysia and Mindanav in Philippines in South East Asia and separatist movements such as Congo and Sudan.

19 Anssi,passi. (2009). The resurgence of the 'Region' and 'Regional Identity': theoretical perspectives and empirical observations on regional dynamics in Europe. *Review of international studies*.35. S1.pp.121-146.